

NEVER
KISS
A
FAE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LEXI C. FOSS
J.R. THORN

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Elemental Fae Academy: Book One

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Elemental Fae Academy: Book Two

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Elemental Fae Academy: Book Three

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Elemental Fae Queen (original title Elemental Fae Holiday)

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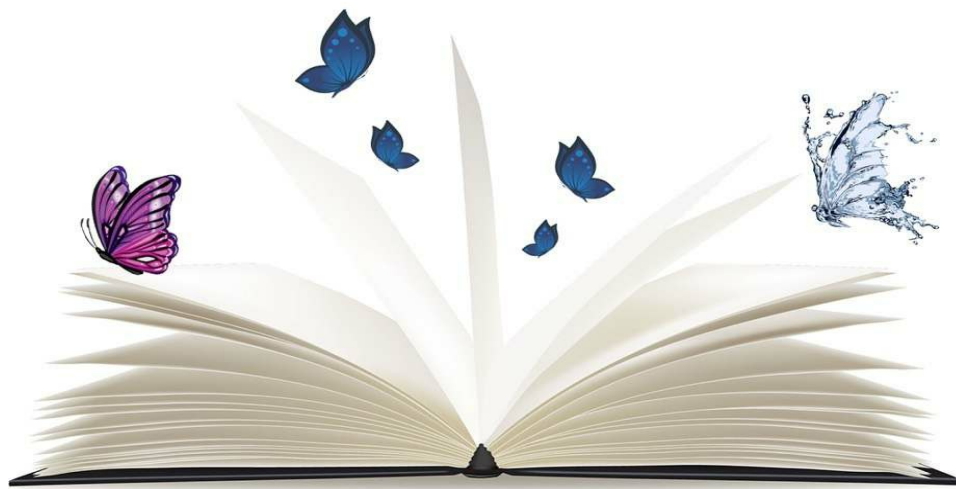
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GELEMENTAL
FAE ACADEMY
BOOK ONE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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My one piece of advice: Never kiss a stranger.

See, I kind of kissed this sexy man at the bar on a dare once, and it turns out he's a Royal Fae destined to be my mate. Now I've been dragged to the Elemental Fae Academy to control the powers I unlocked that night.

So kissing? Yeah, that won't happen again. Nope.

Lesson learned.

Except, I kind of kissed Titus, too. And, well, now, I'm in a world of trouble. I keep burning things down, flooding dorms, and I've attracted the campus mean girl brigade.

This Fae Realm is a nightmare come to life. Truly.
But there are dreams here, too.

Sexy ones.

And they're in the form of five Elemental Fae mentors. They're supposed to help me control my powers, but who's going to keep the elements from controlling me?

Part One



Prologue

Exos



“Her birthday is next week.” Elana sat back in her chair at the head of the council table, her silver-gray eyes brimming with expectation. “Allowing her to stay in the mortal realm is a risk we cannot allow.”

“Then kill her,” Mortus suggested, his tone flat. “She’s an abomination.”

“Hear, hear,” Zephys agreed. “It’d solve several of our issues.”

“But what if she’s the one?” Vape was always the voice of reason in these meetings. He sat opposite Elana, his white hair pulled back in a bun, the lines adorning his face showing his near millennia of life.

“Oh, this again.” Mortus shook his head. “The curse is a myth.”

“Say that to the nearly extinct Spirit Fae,” my brother said from his seat at the table. I stood behind him, leaving my seat at his side vacant. There were many who wanted me to join the Royal Council, to take my place in the Fae Court, but I never desired that life. I was a warrior by nature. Not a king, even though my blood indicated otherwise.

“Her mother caused that.” A flame played over Blaize’s fingers while he spoke. “Just thought I’d point that out. Again.”

“We don’t know that for a fact,” Vape reminded, his tone stern yet gentle. Because this was a delicate topic, one several at the table felt strongly about. Especially Mortus—the fae who fought Ophelia Snow to the death. Ninety percent of the Spirit Fae perished on the same day. Some argued it was a coincidence. Others accused Ophelia of being the destructive force, her betrayal shaking the entire Fae Kingdom.

My instincts told me there was more to the story than met the eye, but I didn’t know what.

“Oh, come on. We all know Ophelia was the cause, and this little terror is going to be just as much trouble.” Zephyr stood. “I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation. It’s a waste of bloody time.”

“Sit. Down,” Elana commanded, her place at the head of the table affording her the authority of the room. As the eldest, and arguably the most powerful of the fae, she carried significant weight in this discussion. Despite the fact that she used to mentor Ophelia personally, providing her with a somewhat biased opinion.

Still, I believed everyone deserved a chance. Even Claire. “She should not have to pay for her mother’s sins,” I murmured, knowing my brother would agree. “I vote we give her a chance.”

“Good thing your vote doesn’t count, then,” Mortus sneered.

“But mine does,” my brother replied. “And I stand by my brother’s words. Claire should not be punished for something she had no control over. We should bring her into the Fae Realm.”

“And do what with her?” Blaize demanded. “Keep her in a cage? She’s a Halfling. We don’t even know what elemental skill she’ll possess.”

“Clearly spirit,” my brother replied, his voice calm. “And likely one other.” That was what set our kind—the Spirit Fae—apart from the others. While spirit was our primary element, the majority of us maintained a secondary affinity. For me, that was fire. For my brother, water. Our kind used to hold the most power in the Fae Realm as a result, and still would if the majority of our species hadn’t mysteriously collapsed and died in a single day.

Mortus snorted. “Right. She’ll be weak with that mortal blood pumping through her veins.”

“Or incredibly strong,” Vape said in his raspy, old voice. “There’s a prophecy depicting a Halfling of five elements. It could be her.”

“You and your curses and prophecies,” Mortus grumbled, shaking his head. “Show me the proof, old man.”

“It’s written in the stars” was his cryptic reply. Despite being a water elemental, he seemed to have a foresight ability, something no one else possessed. But for someone of his age, and with his experience, it almost made sense that he would be able to depict patterns in time, to predict an event before it happened.

“We should vote,” Elana said, eyeing the parties at the table. Each element had three representatives, which mainly consisted of the royal

bloodlines and a few high-ranking fae with stronger affinities to others.

Placards appeared, courtesy of an air elemental carrying them in off a subtle wind and scattering them around the long, oval surface.

“Should we bring her to the Fae Realm?” Elana asked.

Purple meant affirmative. Gold for negative.

My brother tilted his to the violet side, Mortus and Zephyr immediately flipping to gold. Blaize surprisingly chose purple. “Call me curious” was his explanation. Several others followed suit, all maintaining a similar opinion, bringing the room to a unexpected agreement on allowing her into the Fae Realm.

“All right, then.” Elana clasped her hands over the hard surface. “What will you do with her when she arrives?”

“Send her to the Academy.” My brother’s suggestion seemed to shock the room.

Mortus’s cheeks actually tinged red. “To corrupt our youth? No.”

Youth? I thought, nearly laughing.

The fae grew up faster than humans and didn’t start attending the Academy until age nineteen. She’d fit right in with the crowd, apart from having grown up without access to her gifts for the last two decades.

Most fae began using their gifts earlier in life, but Ophelia had cast a charm over Claire to stall her elemental progression. It’d been one of the many atrocities the female fae had inflicted on others before her death. And had also been the reason the Council chose to let Claire remain in the mortal realm. She couldn’t defend herself here, and there were many who wanted her dead.

Case in point, the furious Spirit Fae to my left—Mortus. I could feel the malevolent intents pouring off his aura. If allowed, he’d kill the Halfling himself.

Claire would need a protector, or several, to survive here. And unfortunately, if her powers manifested as they should, she’d be too dangerous for the mortal world as well. Leaving her rather... stuck.

“The Academy.” Vape scratched his jaw, considering. “That would provide her with the ability to learn more about her gifts. She’s enrolled in human university now, yes?”

“Yes,” Elana confirmed. “But what sector would she attend? Spirit was disbanded after...”

“Her mother destroyed everyone?” Mortus offered. “You can’t admit it

out loud, but you'll allow her abomination to attend the Academy? To play with the impressionable minds of our realm?" He stood. "This is ridiculous and you know it. I can't be a part of this conversation."

"Then leave," my brother said, his voice hard. Despite Mortus being the elder of our kind, my brother's royal blood superseded the elder male's authority. "My brother and I will represent our kind in your stead."

"You'd like that," Mortus said, his beady black eyes landing on me. "*Your Highness.*" He bowed mockingly. "Enjoy playing with fate. Don't be surprised when she bites back." He stalked out of the room, leaving me sighing in his wake.

That bastard saw me as a constant threat to his position. As he probably should since he clearly couldn't behave as an adult of three hundred years. I wasn't even a tenth of his age, and I behaved more appropriately.

"What do you think, Exos?" Elana asked. "Should she attend the Academy?"

"It would provide her with the tools she needs to hone her elemental gifts," I said slowly. "But Mortus brought up a reasonable point. Who will help her learn about the most important ability of all—Spirit?"

She nodded. "I have an idea for that." A mischievous twinkle entered the elder fae's gaze, one that warned me I was not going to enjoy her suggestion in the slightest. "I'd like you to train her. In fact, I also think you should be the one to retrieve her."

"Why?" I blurted out, unable to hold the word back.

Elana's lips curled. "Because you're the most powerful Spirit Fae I've ever met. And if anyone can protect her, it's you."

"She's right," my brother agreed, glancing up at me with his piercing blue eyes—the same shade as my own. "You're the strongest amongst us. If anyone can control her, and train her, it's you." He lifted his hand to rest over mine on the back of his chair. "She needs you, Exos."

"It's a good pairing," Vape added. "Protection coupled with teaching. Assuming you're up for the challenge?" He raised a white eyebrow, his bottomless gaze boring into mine. The old elemental knew I couldn't turn down a summons, especially when he endorsed it.

I sighed. "Fine. I'll fetch her from the Human Realm. We'll discuss the mentorship when I return."

"Excellent." Elana held out her hands. "Then I believe we're adjourned for now?"

“When this all goes to hell, remember that I voted against everything,” Zephys said, walking away from the table. “And if she dies, I didn’t do it.”

My brother squeezed my hand before releasing it. “You’re going to need all the luck you can get, Exos. Try not to die on me.”

I smirked. “Anyone who tries deserves their fate. Right, Cyrus?”

He returned my grin. “Right.” We bumped fists as he stood. “Happy vibes.”

“Happy vibes,” I returned.

I’d need them, especially for the road ahead. Because there were very few places worse than hell, and the Human Realm was one of them.

Yeah, lucky me.

Chapter 1

Claire



“**T**ruth or dare?”

I nearly spit out my drink—some sort of fruity concoction my bestie had given me. Like strawberries or something. Really sweet. Totally not the point. “We’re not playing this game, Rick.”

“Oh, Claire Bear, we are so playing this game.” Amie’s lips pulled into a wide grin. “And the birthday girl goes first.”

I tried to roll my eyes, but the room was already spinning. I wasn’t drunk exactly. Just very tipsy. Or I thought that might be my current state. Honestly, I just felt really, really good. Like untouchable. Powerful. *Happy*. But this fruity drink in my hand was so blah. I needed something with more punch, like a shot or something. Maybe—

“Truth or dare, birthday baby?” Rick asked, flashing me one of his sexy-as-sin grins. Alas, he and I shared a preference for men. Not each other.

“Nope,” I said. “Not playing.”

“But I have the best dare for you,” Rick said, a wicked glint in his dark eyes. I’d been on the receiving end of his dares several times over and knew better than to accept.

“Nope,” I repeated. “My birthday, my rules.” That was a thing, right? Yeah, it should be. “I’m making it a thing.”

“What thing?” Amie asked, then shook her head, waving me off. “Ignore her, Ricky. She’ll play. You know she will. Our Claire Bear can’t deny a dare.”

“Oh my God.” I couldn’t believe we were even talking about this. “We’re twenty-one, guys, not sixteen.”

“Are you saying we’re too old for truth or dare?” Brittany sounded

aghast. “I’m *not* too old for anything.”

“Oh, we know, B,” Rick said, patting her hand. “We know.”

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?” she demanded, giving me a headache.

“You know what it means, baby girl.” He pretended to toss his nonexistent hair, the gelled spikes on his head not moving an inch.

“No, I don’t kn—”

“All right,” I cut in, not wanting to be in the middle of a banter-fest on my birthday night. “I choose dare.” Because it was the only way these two would shut the hell up. “What do you want me to do, Rick?”

“Him.” He pointed to a boy—no, a *man*—in a leather jacket at the bar.

My jaw actually dropped. “*What?*” He was so out of my league that we weren’t even playing in the same field. And I didn’t feel that way due to a lack of confidence. No, I considered myself pretty enough, a solid B on the charts. But that man was drop-dead gorgeous in a bad-boy-rocker kind of way. Strong shoulders, lean waist, gorgeous white-blond hair.

I drew my thumb against my lower lip. Yeah, he was the kind of male women dreamed about, the type who could wreck some lady parts in the bedroom. Or, at least, that was what his confident exterior exuded.

As if he sensed my perusal, he glanced my way, causing me to duck my head.

“Yeah, him,” Rick said, a grin in his voice. “He’s been checking you out all night, Claire baby. You need to go lay one on him. That’s my dare.”

“You want me to kiss him?” I couldn’t help the squeak in my voice. “At the bar?”

“Wouldn’t be your first time,” he pointed out. “What was the guy’s name? Justin? Jack?”

“Jeremy,” Amie supplied.

Rick snapped his fingers. “Jeremy. That’s it. You had no problem sucking his tongue right out of his mouth. I want to see you do that to our gorgeous dude over there. Mainly because I want deets. I’m betting he’s the dominant type, the kind who takes charge of the kiss and teaches your mouth a good lesson or two.”

“Oh God.” My face was on fire, my head already shaking back and forth. “Give me a truth instead.”

“Nah, this is a good dare.” He took a swig of his beer and relaxed into the booth, his free arm going across the back over Brittany’s slender shoulders.

“I dare you to kiss the blond bad boy. And then report back.”

“If you don’t do it, I will,” Amie cut in, my bestie’s eyes taking on an adoring gleam as she studied the bar. “He’s *hot*.”

Rick snorted. “I love you, A, I do, but the only one at this table with a shot is our Claire Bear. He’s had a hard-on for her all night. Trust me. I’ve been watching.”

“Really?” I asked, suddenly feeling far too sober. “He’s noticed me?”

“Oh, yeah, constantly.” Another sip. “Seriously, go over there and say *hi*. See what happens. It’s not like you’re dating anyone, C.”

I pressed my clammy palms to my exposed thighs, my skirt feeling a bit too short for comfort. The man had returned to his drink, his broad back to me again. Even from behind, the guy oozed sex appeal. Amie was right. He was definitely hot with a capital *H*. “I don’t know,” I said. “I need another drink or five for that.”

The hoop through Rick’s brown brow glistened as he arched it. “Since when is this sort of dare an issue for you?”

Since you asked me to kiss what appears to be a god in a leather coat. “I got this,” I replied instead. “I just need some more liquid courage. And it’s my birthday. I shouldn’t even have to ask, right?”

His gaze was knowing. “Yeah, yeah.” He lifted his hand for the waiter—a male who’d been eyeing Rick with interest all night. They were totally going to fuck later. “My too-sober friend here needs a round of shots.”

“Tequila?” the cute waiter—Drew—suggested.

“Perfect,” Rick replied, looking him over. “Definitely perfect.”

Drew smiled, his hazel eyes gleaming with interest. “Be back in a moment.”

“I hope so.”

Brittany scowled as Drew disappeared. “How do you always do that?” she demanded, sounding disgruntled. “Like, he’s totally going home with you tonight, and you’ve barely said anything to each other outside of ordering drinks.”

Rick shrugged. “The power of a glance, sweetheart.” He winked at her. “Learn how to use your best assets, and maybe you’ll perform better.”

She grabbed her breasts. “Trust me, I’m using them. This top couldn’t be any lower cut.”

He eyed her substantial cleavage. “Sometimes revealing less is more. Take Claire Bear. That graphic T-shirt is clingy, showing off the curves

without displaying them for the world. And she's grabbed the attention of several men tonight."

"Because she's blonde," Brittany said, gesturing to my long hair as if it were my only asset.

"She's also gorgeous," Amie added. "And tall, with those killer legs."

"That she's exposed beautifully in that skirt," Rick agreed.

My cheeks warmed. "Guys, I understand it's my birthday, but this is starting to get weird. Are you all hitting on me right now? Because I gotta say, none of you are my type."

"I'm totally your type," Rick argued. "You just can't handle my D."

I scoffed at that. "Yeah, that's the reason."

Another wink, this one for me just as our drinks arrived. "Another round, if you don't mind," Rick said before Drew had finished distributing the glasses. "Actually, two."

"On it." Drew was apparently more than happy to continue serving our table—exclusively.

Amie was right.

Rick had a magic touch, or look, or *something*, because this always seemed to happen when we went out.

He clinked his glass against mine, a devious smile flirting with his lips, and I shot the liquid into the back of my throat. It burned so good. I may have just turned the legal age to drink, but this was not my first time in a bar. Most of the clubs near Ohio State University's campus were eighteen plus, and several of them didn't card.

Two more rounds later, a warm, fuzzy feeling settled over me again, easing me back into a comfortable state, one where my reservations dwindled. Mr. Hottie still sat at the bar, not talking to anyone.

Hmm.

Okay. I could do this.

Just walk up to him, flirt a little. How hard could it be?

"Just a kiss, right?" I asked, taking a sip of the water Drew had brought for me.

"Preferably with tongue," Rick replied. "But you do you, boo."

I nodded. "I got this."

"Damn right you do." He grinned. "Go get him, Claire Bear."

I swallowed some more water and stood, testing my heels.

The world spun just a little, but otherwise good. Adding three inches to

my five-foot-eight height gave my legs a sexy appeal, lengthening my overall appearance. It also had the skirt at my hips looking indecently short, but it covered the right amount.

Unless I bent over.

Well, that would be one way to draw Mr. Hottie's attention.

I giggled to myself as I approached him. The stool beside him sat empty, giving me the opening I needed. I squeezed in beside him and the vacant seat, resting my elbows on the counter as if I wanted to flag down the bartender. My arm purposefully brushed his in my ploy, sending a zing of electricity across my skin.

Frowning, I glanced at him and met a pair of gorgeous sapphire eyes dusted in golden lashes. Wow, his face up close was a sight to behold. Chiseled perfection. His mouth seemed to beg me to taste him, drawing me in, consuming my vision.

Rick's dare appealed far more than it should.

What would this stranger do if I just laid one on him? Would he kiss me back? Push me away? Gasp?

I leaned closer, enthralled by the mystery of his reaction, addicted to the allure of his lips. He hadn't even said a word, barely even met my gaze, and already I would beg him for a night in bed.

"Who are you?" I marveled, completely in awe of his existence. I trailed my fingers up his jacket-clad arm, needing to touch him, to be near his energy, his pure presence.

He appeared equally as captivated, his throat working as he swallowed. His ocean-blue gaze ran over my features, his tongue sliding out to slick the seam of his mouth. I eyed the movement like a woman starved, desiring him more than I desired to breathe.

What is happening to me?

This instant draw, this attraction, floored me, forcing me to lean in, needing him, *craving* him. I brushed my lips against his, enthused by the feel of him at first touch.

Oh God...

He grabbed my elbow, his grip tight, pulling me closer. Energy hummed between us as my side aligned with his, his warmth a blanket I didn't know I needed.

"Do you often kiss men you hardly know?" he asked against my mouth, his voice deep, seductive. *Sexy as fuck.*

I shook my head. “No.”

“Well, that’s something, at least,” he whispered darkly, his peppermint breath hot against my tongue. I leaned in for another taste, but his grip on my elbow held me in place beside him. “You want to take a walk?”

The words came off as a demand despite the intended question behind them. “Where to?” I asked, completely under his thrall regardless of the warning bells sounding my head.

He’s a stranger. Don’t leave with him!

But he feels so familiar, so right...

That’s the alcohol talking, sweetheart.

Or something else entirely.

Because I didn’t feel drunk at all. The daze and confusion of the shots had already worn off, leaving me hot and needy against this too-strong male. His intoxicating scent was like a drug, infusing me with these urges I didn’t understand.

“Outside,” he suggested, his bottom lip teasing my mouth by remaining just a hairsbreadth away. I clenched my thighs, his deep tenor sending me into a pit of arousal only he could save me from.

“Who are you?” I asked again, completely lost to him. My gaze held his, my breathing erratic. “What are you doing to me?”

“I could ask you the same, princess,” he replied, his hand a brand against my elbow. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Definitely not a question now.

Yet I found myself nodding, accepting this bizarre proposal despite every logical instinct inside me rioting and demanding I say no.

It’s just a walk.

You’ve lost your mind.

It’s the right thing to do...

There was just something about him, something I couldn’t quite identify. And my friends wouldn’t let me go too far, right?

“Just a walk,” I whispered.

“Yes.” The word was a promise against my mouth, followed by the briefest of touches that left me *needing* more.

“For a kiss,” I all but begged.

He arched a perfectly sculpted brow. “Another one?”

“The other didn’t count.” We’d barely brushed our mouths, let alone *kissed*.

His hand slid up my arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps in its wake. My chest burned with expectation, my legs shaking in anticipation. He wrapped his palm around the back of my neck, holding me tightly as if he owned me, and firmly pressed his lips to mine.

Fire licked through my veins, heating my body in a way I'd never experienced, the energy inside me roaring to the surface to meet his in a foreign mating I couldn't describe, only *feel*. His touch inflamed my very being, his hand anchoring me to him in the most delicious manner.

And then he cursed.

Loudly.

People around us were screaming.

I blinked, confused. Startled by the chaos erupting throughout the bar.

Then I noticed the scorched walls.

Smelled the scent of burning wood.

Felt the hot wave traveling over the crowd as an inferno surged across the room.

My lips parted on a scream, the stranger wrapping his arms around me, sheltering me from the tornado of sensation beating down upon us just as the world went black.

Chapter 2

Exos



“**S**he burned down the bar?” Elana’s question felt weighted, accusatory. “What did you do to her?”

Oh, it wasn’t what I did to her but what *she* did to *me*. “Nothing.” I couldn’t bring myself to tell the truth, to admit that I’d let her kiss me.

What the hell had she been thinking, anyway? Kissing a complete stranger? For fuck’s sake.

Right, more importantly, why had I allowed it?

Because she was gorgeous.

Because she seduced me with her elemental gift for spirit.

Because I’d wanted to taste her plump lips all night despite knowing it was wrong.

I shook my head. “I managed to help most of the mortals survive, but there were a few casualties.” Including one of her friends, which I imagined would not go over well when Claire awoke.

Shit. I scrubbed my hand over my face, exhausted. It’d taken every ounce of my strength to mitigate the damage. My affinity for fire was negligible at best. And Claire had done a number on that bar, her power exploding out of her and diminishing the establishment to ash.

“Well, on a positive note, we have an adequate cover story for her disappearance.” Vape lounged in a chair near the floor-to-ceiling windows of Elana’s living area, his casual slacks and button-down shirt suggesting he’d been about to retire for the evening when I’d called.

I hadn’t known where else to take Claire, Elana being the only Council member I truly trusted with her safety and the story of the bar. She’d brought

in Vape, but no one else, and allowed me to lay Claire upstairs in one of the myriad of guest rooms.

Being one of the oldest fae, Elana owned an exquisite piece of land, her manor adorned in flowers and greenery, all animated by her inner Spirit. Our kind controlled life and death of all beings, including the fae. Unlike the others, like Vape, who mastered a specific element, such as water.

“Yes, we’ll spin the bar story to claim her as one of the victims of the tragedy. That’ll ensure no one searches for her.” Elana stood near a master piano, her hip resting against the hard surface. Her youthful appearance belied her ancient aura. A human would think her maybe thirty, but I knew her to be closer to a thousand years old. It was her ties to Spirit that kept her looking younger, unlike Vape, who showed his age in the creases of his pale skin and the white coloring of his long hair.

“Can you train her?” he asked, his midnight gaze resembling a black pit of wisdom. “Or is she too dangerous for the Academy?”

Goose bumps threatened to pebble over my skin at the memory of Claire’s energy. I’d never felt anything like it. “She’s powerful,” I admitted, palming the back of my neck to diffuse the chill rising at the top of my spine. “But my Spirit can tame hers.” It’d taken a great deal of strength—more than I’d ever used before—to temper her gift, but I’d managed it. “I can train her.”

What I really meant to say was, *I’m the only one who can train her.*

Elana might be my elder, but my pure royal blood elevated my status, making me far stronger than she could ever be.

Unfair, yes.

But such was life.

Not even my brother could stand up to my affinity for Spirit, which was why the Royal Crown technically belonged to me. However, I’d chosen to abdicate my throne in favor of a warrior life, providing Cyrus with the opportunity to lead.

The arrangement suited us both.

“Then it’s settled,” Elana murmured, her silver-gray eyes glittering as she smiled. “I recommend the Fire Quad since that’s her secondary strength, as well as your own.”

“You wish for me to reside with Claire?” I asked, uneasy.

“She needs a protector. I think you’re the only one suitable for the job.”

I sighed, my hands in my pockets as I leaned against the tree in the middle of her living room. “I’ll make the arrangements.” Because she was

right. Not only was I the only one who could keep Claire's abilities in check, but I also happened to be one of the few who preferred her alive. Most others would use the opportunity to kill her for the sins of her mother.

"She needs more than a single protector," Vape said as if reading my mind. "The girl requires an army of bodyguards."

"Which we don't have." Elana sounded frustrated, likely because our fae brethren were refusing to acknowledge and accept one of our own. She advocated for peace and harmony among the Fae Kingdoms, which was why she'd created the Academy—a place where all the Elemental Fae were forced to bond. Yes, they had separate quads and specific core classes, but there were numerous activities that brought the fae together, such as sporting events where gifts were not allowed and general education courses covering human studies and other useful, employable skills.

"That's a lot to put on one fae." Vape's tone suggested how he felt about that—unconfident. "An important fae at that."

"I volunteered for the job." Not exactly true—more that I was the only one capable of handling this task and wouldn't wish it on another. "I'll keep her safe."

"And what about you?" Vape countered. "Who will keep you safe as one of the two remaining royals of the Spirit lines?"

My lips curled. "I keep myself safe." And I dared anyone who thought otherwise to try to fuck with me. "I'm not concerned."

Elana smiled. "You're so much like your father, Exos. He'd be proud to —"

A shriek upstairs had all three of us straightening.

"Seems Sleeping Beauty is awake," Vape drawled, amusement in his expression.

Crash.

I darted to the windows, peering out into the early morning surroundings, the sun a distant pink on the horizon.

"She knocked down a tree," I said, my brow furrowing. "How the hell did she knock down a tree?" I would have felt her use of Spirit, my own energy having tied itself to hers days ago when I started tracking her. A whirlwind of water and air formed outside, uprooting several trees in its wake and heading toward the house. "Oh, *fuck.*"

I ran up the stairs without a backward glance, vaguely aware of Vape and Elana on my heels, and shoved open the door to the guest room.

Claire stood in the center of a room of roses and vines, her blonde hair tangled, her blue eyes wild as they darted around what she likely perceived as a garden of sorts. She stilled when she caught me standing in the doorway, her hands curled at her sides, her full lips falling open.

My Spirit reached for hers, stroking her with soothing vibrations meant to calm her inner turmoil. This was one of my personal skills—my ability to manipulate and persuade others, to lull them into a state of my choosing.

Calm down, I urged, eyeing the dissolving tornado outside.

Thank. Fuck.

It was working.

Her essence was, slowly but surely, responding to mine.

“Is this a dream?” she asked, her soft voice filled with wonder as her shoulders relaxed. She took in the life of the room again, the blooming flowers and the vines slithering up the walls and covering the ceiling in an earthy glow.

I glanced over my shoulder at Elana and Vape. “I’ll talk to her.”

Elana nodded, understanding that this required delicacy, or we risked overwhelming Claire. Again. “We’ll be downstairs, should you need us,” the elder murmured.

Vape tilted his head to the side. “One thing first. I sense water. And air.”

Yes, I did, too.

And it seemed to be coming from Claire.

She blinked those big blue eyes at me, her brow furrowing. “Who are you?” she asked, her tone holding a hint of marvel. “Why am I dreaming this?”

Yeah, time to have a chat. “We’ll be down in a bit.” I didn’t wait for Vape or Elana to reply before softly closing the door and locking myself in the guest room with Claire. We needed privacy for this discussion.

Claire twirled, her skirt riding high on her long, sexy legs, her arms loose at her sides. She tilted her head back on a smile filled with wonder and excitement. “Oh, it’s beautiful here. I feel so alive. So... happy.” More dancing, her Spirit clearly drunk on mine. Apparently, I’d soothed her a little too much.

Right. Time to ground her.

“Claire,” I murmured, sitting on the bed of flowers she’d awoken upon. The mattress beneath was made of earth, the bed frame crafted from the trees outside. I preferred more modern accommodations, but every fae embraced

the elements differently. It seemed Claire liked this style of décor. She bent to touch the roots decorating the floor, her skirt lifting to reveal the curves of her ass.

“Claire.” Her name came out a bit strangled this time, my need for her to, well, *stop*, taking over. “Can you look at me, please?”

“Oh, yes.” She turned, her gaze traveling over me with unveiled interest. “I will happily look at you. But as it’s my dream, I’d really prefer you without clothes so I know what I’m working with here.”

I coughed as a jolt of heat seared my insides. “Okay, well, first things first. You’re not dreaming.”

“Riiiiighhhht,” she drawled. “We’re playing hard to get. Is that it?”

“No, we’re not playing anything. You’re not dreaming. This is the Fae Realm, where I brought you after the fire.”

Her brow furrowed. Then she burst out laughing and folded over from the force of it.

I supposed, in her shoes, I’d react similarly. The world around her was nothing like the one she’d grown up in, her version of a forest a destructed beast due to humanity’s lack of understanding. Fae, however, embraced the wilderness, allowing it into our homes and living peacefully with nature rather than against it.

“Claire, I’m telling you the truth,” I tried again, my voice soft. “I meant to ease you into this, to bring you here of your own free will, but burning down the bar forced my hand. Your powers are awakening now that the charm has finally worn off, and you need to be among your kind.”

She laughed harder, sitting on one of the roots on the floor, her arms wrapped around her middle. “Oh God, seriously. This is the most fucked-up dream I’ve ever had.”

“Because it’s not a dream,” I replied through my teeth. “You’re in the Fae Realm.”

“Uh-huh.” She wiped at the tears beside her eyes. “Because fairies are real.”

“Not fairies. Fae.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Yes. Fairies are a myth. Fae are real.”

“Oh. Okay. That clears it up.” She fought a smile and lost, her lips curling again as another laugh fell from her mouth.

Gods, give me strength and patience; I’m going to need it. “Let’s try a

new path,” I suggested, thinking out loud. “Tell me about your parents, Claire.”

All signs of mirth disappeared, her brow furrowing. “What? No. I don’t want to talk about that at all.”

“Too bad. I want you to tell me about them.”

“And I don’t want to,” she countered. “Fuck off.”

“Not a dream, Claire,” I told her, yet again. “Can’t just make me disappear. Tell me about your parents.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to,” she repeated.

“That’s a shitty reason. There are a lot of things in this life I don’t want to do, such as be here with you now, but we all have a sense of duty, a purpose we can’t ignore. And I want to talk about your parents. Specifically, your mother, Ophelia.” A cruel tactic, yes, but it seemed to be breaking through some of the fog in her mind, because her pupils contracted, her focus astute.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” she whispered.

“What do you know about your mother?” I wondered, ignoring the petulant turn of her mouth. “I’m guessing not much since you grew up in the Human Realm.” And her father died shortly after Ophelia’s demise. “What did your grandparents say about her?” That was who had raised her in Ohio, the mortals seemingly oblivious to Claire’s natural birthright. “Because you look just like her, Claire. Did they tell you that?”

“Stop.”

I didn’t. She clearly needed a push to realize this wasn’t a dream, to truly grasp her surroundings and purpose. *To grow the fuck up.* “She placed a charm on you, a hex of sorts, that dismantled your true nature. It finally unraveled yesterday, on your twenty-first birthday. Do you feel it? The gift of energy flooding your veins? Your affinity for the elements? You asked me at the bar who I am, remember? *You recognized my essence.* Because you’re one of us. You’re a fae. Your mother—”

“*Stop.*” She balled her hands into fists, her gaze narrowed. “Just. Stop.”

“I can’t.” And I wouldn’t even if I could. “You need to hear this, Claire. You need to understand *who* and *what* you are. And unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of time to ease you into this since you’re already in the Fae Realm. Your mother—”

A blast of wind blew me backward into the wall, my head knocking

against the vines with a snap that I felt all the way down my spine.

Claire gasped, her hand flexing before her. “Oh God, oh God, oh God.” She jumped to her feet, tripping over the root behind her and landing on her ass. “Oh God!”

I wheezed, pushing away from the wall. *Definitely has an affinity for air, too.*

“This... this...” she stammered, her hands feeling around on the floor, her eyes taking on a wild gleam. “This can’t be happening. This isn’t real. I need to wake up.” She pinched her side, causing me to frown.

“Does that ever actually work?”

“Stop talking to me,” she demanded, hurling another blast of wind at me with her fingertips.

My jaw snapped to the left from the localized blast, reminding me of a punch to the fucking face. “Ow.”

“Oh, fuck! I’m... Shit!” She scrambled toward me, then backward, then froze with her hands beneath her. As if that would stop her.

A knock on the door had her petrified gaze flying sideways as Vape’s deep tenor floated through the wood. “Everyone all right in there?”

“Just getting acquainted,” I replied through my teeth.

“Sounds like she’s kicking your ass, son” was his reply.

I snorted. “Because I’m fighting with both hands tied behind my back.”

Claire’s eyebrows shot up. “Where am I?”

I couldn’t help my resulting sigh. It wasn’t like I hadn’t said this about a hundred times already. “The Fae Realm.”

“The *what?*” she squeaked, shaking her head. “That’s not a thing. That’s not real.”

“It’s very real and you’re currently inside it.” I massaged my jaw, stretching my neck to loosen it. She lifted her hand again, forcing me to add, “Hit me with another blast of air, princess, and I’ll retaliate.” I wouldn’t hurt her, but I would pin her. Our first lesson? Control.

Her lower lip trembled, but her teeth audibly clenched. “What the fuck is going on?”

Did this woman have a hearing problem? Because I swore we just went through this. “It all relates back to your mother, Cl—”

Energy quaked around me, causing the bed to collapse to the floor, the headboard disappearing into a pile of ashes as flames erupted around us.

Claire screamed.

I cursed.
And tackled her to the ground.

Chapter 3

Claire



This isn't real.

This isn't happening.

Everything will be fine when I wake up.

I just need to—

“Claire!” The furious growl came from the man on top of me, his striking blue eyes glowing with fury. “Focus on me, on my voice.”

I'd really rather not.

I just wanted to go home.

To wake up.

To escape.

To be anywhere other than here, with this man who kept talking about my mother, the woman who abandoned me as a child, who shattered my father's spirit. Grandma always said she killed my dad when she broke his heart. He never recovered.

I hated my mother, couldn't stand to hear anything about her. Childish, yes, but it was how I survived, how I escaped my reality.

My memories of my parents were nonexistent, having been too young when she left us, too young when my father *died*.

I shook, tears of the past clouding my eyes. Remembering hurt. Thinking about them *hurt*. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to hear about *her*. I just wanted to wake up, to be done with this horrible nightmare.

“Breathe,” the man on top of me demanded. “Come on, princess. Listen to me. I need you to calm down, to breathe, to *focus*. Search for the tranquility inside you, call on it, pull it into you and use it.”

What the fuck is he even talking about? It could be a different language,

for all I knew or cared.

“Claire,” he whispered, his lips dangerously close to mine. “Please, sweetheart, I need your focus, or you’re going to burn the house down. I’m still exhausted from earlier. Just close your eyes and think of a peaceful place. Describe it for me.”

A peaceful place? I thought hysterically, nearly laughing. “Not fucking here!” I shouted, warmth flooding my insides, spilling through my fingertips and raging around me. “Let me go!”

“I can’t do that,” he said, his palms on my face, forcing me to look at him, to *see* him.

My eyes widened. “You’re on fire!”

“I’m aware,” he gritted out, wincing. “Just... breathe, Claire. Breathe for me. Slowly.”

“You’re on fire,” I repeated, my heart galloping in my chest. How was breathing going to help? If anything, it’d make this worse, right? Smoke inhalation?

Except, nothing but clean air met my nostrils and mouth.

My brow furrowed.

How is that possible?

And why am I not burning?

I actually felt quite cold, not hot. Because the flames were so intense I was freezing? No, that couldn’t be it.

“That’s it,” he whispered, his forehead falling to mine. “Relax.”

“Relax?” Some strangled combination of a laugh and a cry escaped my mouth. “This is... *insane*.”

“You’re an Elemental Fae coming into her abilities for the first time.” The words were low, his voice utterly calm despite the inferno soaring around us. “It’s not normal for someone this age to access her elemental gifts. Most fae are taught as children. But I can help you, Claire.”

I shivered beneath him, my skin slick, my throat dry. “Help me?” I whispered, my gaze flickering to the wildfire behind him and back to his face. “This is a nightmare. It has to be.”

“It’s not.” The words were a breath against my lips, his body hard and heavy on top of mine. “Please, Claire. Let me help you.”

“How?” I asked, unsure of all of this. Of him. Of this place. Of the erratic energy threatening to burst out of my chest. “*How?*”

His nose brushed mine, his fingers sliding into my hair, his mouth trailing

over my cheek. His gentle caress set off a flurry of butterflies in my abdomen, a direct conflict from the warning rioting in my mind. The man was *on fire*. Yet he seemed perfectly at ease, his strong form a comforting blanket over mine.

What is happening to me?

My eyelids drooped, exhaustion taunting the edges of my thoughts.

I don't want to sleep.

“Picture your happy place,” a deep voice whispered against my ear. “Somewhere that makes you feel calm, at peace. For me, it’s the lake behind my old home. So warm and tranquil, and I swear the water tasted of the finest spring you could ever imagine. Swimming is my serenity, where I go when I need to think. What about you, Claire? Where do you go?”

“I...” I swallowed, hesitant. “Camping. Beneath the stars. I love the night sky.” *Why am I telling him this?*

“The stars here are beautiful, too. You’ll see them tonight.” His lips touched my throat, my pulse soaring in response. “Where did you go camping, Claire?”

“In Ohio,” I whispered, frowning. My grandparents used to take me to the woods, saying I needed to be closer to nature, to enjoy the fresh air and clear my head. I always loved it, feeling almost at home surrounded by the elements.

Wasn’t that what this man had called me? *An Elemental Fae?*

“What’s an Elemental Fae?” I asked out loud, my limbs tensing.

“It’s what we are.” He went to his elbows on either side of my head, causing my eyes to flutter open. He was no longer on fire, the room around us just as green as before.

What the hell is going on?

“Shh, stay in that calm place,” he said, his thumb drawing a line across my cheekbone and down to the column of my neck. “I’m strong, but you... You’re exhausting me, Claire.”

My brow furrowed. “*I’m exhausting you?*”

“Yes.” He cocked his head, his blue irises taking on a heady glow that stole my breath. “Your... *Ophelia*... was a fae. A pureblood of Spirit. That makes you a Halfling. A very, very strong Halfling.”

“Ophelia?” I repeated, frowning.

“The given name of your...” He trailed off, raising a brow.

My mother, I realized. “My mother was a fairy?”

“A fae,” he corrected, his lips curling down. “Fairies are tiny little figments with wings, and they don’t exist. You’re a *fae*. As am I.”

“And fae are...?”

“Supernatural beings with affinities for the elements.” He sounded so nonchalant, as if this type of topic were discussed every day. “Ophelia was a Spirit Fae, like me. And—”

“Spirit Fae?” I repeated. “What the hell does that mean?”

“A fae who connects with life and death.” He balanced on one arm, lifting his palm. “Try not to freak out.”

“Okay...”

He eyed me for a long moment, then refocused on his hand. It glowed, energy shivering over my skin, as a gorgeous lily appeared, blossoming into the size of my head, with big white petals.

“How did you do that?” I marveled, awed.

“Life,” he said, tucking the flower stem behind my ear. “You, too, have access to the same gift. And with time, I’ll teach you how to use it.”

Uh, right. He’d lost me again.

“You’re saying I can do that?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “In addition, it seems, to several other things.” He stared down at me for a long moment, his gaze dropping to my mouth before flicking back up to my eyes. “I’m going to roll off of you now. Can you try to stay calm?”

He really enjoyed that word. *Calm. Relax. Breathe.* “Sure.” I could feign calm if it kept the crazy man content.

A flower just blossomed in his fucking hand.

And I’m in a room shrouded in... forest.

I pinched my side again.

Nothing.

This can’t be real.

But it certainly *felt* real.

“You’re not dreaming,” he said softly, clearly catching my not-so-subtle pinch.

I slid away from him, bracing my back against the tree—*yes, a fucking tree*—in the center of the room. “Fae Realm.”

“Yes.” He drew his knees upward, wrapping his forearms around them. “I know it’s a lot to take in, and you still don’t believe me, but you’ll see.”

“And if I want to go home?”

He shook his head. “You can’t, Claire. Your powers are too much for the mortal realm. You destroyed that bar.”

My brow furrowed. “What bar? When? I don’t...” A vision tickled my thoughts. One of him in his leather jacket, sitting on a stool, his lips a hairsbreadth from mine. And then flames, like the ones that had adorned his back only moments ago, encircling us and expanding. “No... That... *No.*” That couldn’t have happened. It couldn’t be real. “Tell me...” I paused, swallowing. “Tell me that’s not... Tell me it didn’t...” But I felt the truth of it somewhere deep inside, heard the reminiscent screams as everyone bolted into the night.

Oh God...

“Tell me I didn’t...” I couldn’t finish, my hand covering my mouth. *Rick, Brittany, Amie...*

“I’m sorry,” the stranger whispered, his expression one of sorrow. “Your power burst out of you too suddenly for me to anticipate. I tried to save as many of them as I could, but the destruction was too much.”

“I destroyed the bar?” I whispered.

He hung his head, as if he blamed himself. “Yes.”

“And my friends?”

His eyes lifted to mine, the answer lurking in his gaze.

“Who?” I demanded. “*Who?*”

“The boy,” he said.

“*Rick?*” *Oh God...* I pinched my side again, but it was futile. I would never dream this. Not even in a nightmare. “I killed Rick?”

“It’s not your fault, Claire. You didn’t—”

“*Not my fault?*” I shrieked. “You said I burned down the damn bar!” I jumped to my feet, mindful of the roots in this stupid, tiny, forest-laden room. Such a lie. It felt like I was outside, but I wasn’t. And the air closing in around me proved it.

I needed to be free.

To run.

To be in the clean air.

Not locked in this little greenhouse with...

Fuck, I don’t even know his name!

Fae Realm.

Powers.

Fire.

Burned-down bar.

I spun, not hearing whatever he was trying to say beside me. Not caring to hear another word. This was too much.

I killed Rick.

Did I? What if he's lying?

Why would he lie?

I don't know. I don't fucking know!

His palm was too hot against my forearm. I twisted out of his grasp, needing space, needing *air*. And as if hearing my call, it whirled around me, blowing him into the wall again with a grunt. His pained expression struck me in the heart, causing me to falter.

I don't know him.

I don't belong here.

"I can't," I breathed, staring at the window, watching as the glass blew out with a breath from my lips. "I'm sorry." I followed the breeze on instinct, letting it carry me down to the grass below, not pausing to think about the how or the why, just needing to *run*.

There had to be a way home. A way back to the bar. A way back to Rick. To my friends. My family.

I couldn't stay here. This wasn't my place. This foreign land of endless trees and flowers and vines. *Oh God, where am I even going? It doesn't matter. Just run.* And I did, sprinting through the fields and beneath the canopy of leaves, then across and more fields, past lakes, and continuing into unending nature.

The sun moved overhead, illuminating my journey, aiding my attempt to escape.

But nothing new crossed my path. Only more and more trees, denser with every step.

I whirled around, mystified, tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Where am I?" I breathed, falling to my knees in the thick underbrush. "*Where the fuck am I?*"

I collapsed to my side, my exhaustion finally overcoming me. My legs were bleeding, my feet aching, my heart... *broken*.

"I don't belong here," I whimpered, curling into a ball of despair. Leaves seemed to fold around me, cocooning me from the elements, soothing my spirit in a way I could hardly comprehend. But I allowed it. Because what else was I supposed to do?

“Who am I?” I asked, a sob ripping from my chest.

Claire... My name whispered on the wind, my vision blurred by the flutter of butterflies overhead. *Claire...*

I closed my eyes, not wanting to hear another word, refusing to acknowledge this insanity any longer.

This is not my home.

Chapter 4

Titus



What a fucking morning. My head spun from the aftermath of what felt like a dream that had me in a fog for hours.

Something strange was happening, causing the campus to come alive in excitement. And I wasn't in the mood for excitement, something most would say was out of character for me.

However, after my fuckup with Ignis last night, I had good reason. Sleeping with her had been a huge fucking mistake—not that I'd had much choice in the matter—and now she refused to understand the words *never happening again*. I didn't do relationships, especially not with the likes of her. I just wanted to be alone. Heading to the gym and isolating myself in the guys' locker room seemed to be the only place of solace I could find in this damned school.

Normally, I enjoyed the challenge a Fire Fae like Ignis would bring, maybe even indulge her with a round or two before I moved on, but I'd fallen into a temporary funk that I couldn't explain.

I leaned back against the lockers and let my head *thump* against the unforgiving steel. It was the only place on the premises that wasn't covered in nature and shit. I needed metal and grounding. I needed to focus. Closing my eyes, I focused on the flames licking at my insides and threatening to burst out of me. The air around me wavered, and I knew I risked melting school property if I didn't get my shit under control.

"You okay, man?" River asked, wiping both the sweat and conjured water from his face with a towel.

As a Water Fae, he was the only guy who'd dare approach me in an enclosed locker room. That was predominantly why the shy fae and I had

become friends over the past year. In some ways, I seemed to be even more isolated than him. A side effect of being the Powerless Champion—winner of the ring where fighting to the death was common and the use of powers meant execution in the most fantastical manner.

One rule: no powers—hence the title the “Powerless Champion.”

It took a certain kind of mental state for me to win in that kind of fighting ring, but that had been me for quite a few years. That was before the accident. Before the Academy. Before a friend like River.

Another spasm rushed through my body that left me feeling nauseous. I felt as if I were being pulled somewhere off campus, like my whole body wanted to run. I never ran from my problems, no matter how big or irritating they were.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I suppressed a groan. Everything hurt as if I’d been back in the fighting ring for weeks, but the days of bashing skulls were behind me. I was trying to turn over a new leaf and control my powers instead of pretending they didn’t exist—which had gotten half of my family killed when they finally demanded acknowledgment.

Fuck if that was going as planned.

“I must be sick,” I replied to River. I showed him my palm. Instead of veins, embers writhed under my skin like possessed snakes. After so many years of denying myself my powers, they were coming through with merciless greed—or something was calling them to the surface.

Instead of fear, River looked amused. “Must be the curse,” he said as he flicked his wrist and sent water splashing onto my skin. Steam hissed immediately and fogged the air, but it felt good.

Waving away the mist, I glowered at him. “Don’t tell me you believe in that bullshit, too.”

He cocked his brow and strapped the towel around the back of his neck. “So you heard about her?”

Of course I’d heard about her. News of the Halfling was spreading faster than any wildfire I could create. Maybe it was the anxiety surrounding her arrival that set me on edge.

“I have no interest in humans,” I said flatly, although the surge of heat in my core suggested otherwise, as if she were somehow the source of all my power trying to burst out of me. Ignoring it, I popped open the locker and snatched my fireproof shirt, stretching the fibers before pulling it over my head. “Why don’t you go take a shower?”

It was a poor attempt at tricking River into leaving me alone. The Water Fae didn't need a proper shower, not with his powers fully under control.

Showing off, River spritzed himself with a splash of water and stepped closer to me to evaporate the excess. He grinned before pulling his shirt over his head.

"You know the Halfling is a female... right?" River waggled his brows, no doubt hoping to entice me to go check her out for ourselves. He would be far too shy to approach her, but he was always fascinated by humans. He took every elective and training session he could get his hands on to study the short-lived race.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't care what she is. I don't want to see another girl right now."

Just when I was about to lean back onto the lockers again, River took me by the wrist and yanked hard. He flushed his grip with water that sent fresh steam into the air and protected him against my burning skin. "Stop pouting," he said. "We both know Ignis is waiting right outside, and you've been avoiding her. It's time to confront her and get the bullshit out of the way. Then we can go sniff out the Halfling and see if she's put a curse on you," he added with a smirk.

I narrowed my eyes but allowed River to drag me out of the locker room. He was right. The sooner I faced Ignis and told her to fuck off, the sooner I'd feel better. Something was wrong with me, and I didn't need to be stressing about her right now.

Sunlight made me wince when we stepped out into the cool exterior of the gym. It wasn't like my pad back in the Fire Kingdom, with iron and walls that blocked out the elements. The Academy encouraged all elements to play freely, meaning an exercise and training building would be open for all. Enormous windows spanned the ceiling, allowing wind and light to slip through to caress the great oaks and vines that acted as climbing walls with shifting footholds. I let my eyesight adjust, and three female fae came into focus.

Ignis glowered at me, tall and furious. Her red hair curled around her cheeks in a way that could have made her look innocent if it hadn't been for the tiny flames that licked across her fingertips.

I groaned when I saw that she'd brought reinforcements. The Water Fae, Sickle, and the Air Fae, Aerie, stood on either side of her with hatred blazing in their eyes.

“Thank you, River,” Ignis said curtly and waved him away as if she’d ordered him to retrieve me, which she likely had.

River ducked his head and let go of my wrist, but I spotted the mischievous glint in his eyes as he glanced up at me through the shaggy hair covering his face. The bastard thought this was immensely entertaining. “I’ll catch up with you at the entrance,” he muttered, stuffing his hands into his pockets and shuffling out of sight.

I sighed. “Look, Ignis—”

She stormed up to me and slammed a crooked finger into my chest. Any other fae would have gotten burned by an act like that, but her fire seemed to have grown overnight—after she’d tricked me into sleeping with her.

Damn it.

I was a moron.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” she snapped. “You’re mine now, Titus. You and I fucked, which is a binding contract between Fire Fae for at least a month’s time.”

Well, she wasn’t going to beat around the bush about it, was she?

She grinned, no doubt thinking she had me right where she wanted me. I was going to be her trophy for a month? No fucking way was that going to happen.

I matched the fire in her eyes with my own. Maybe if we’d been back in the Fire Kingdom, I’d have to indulge her—no matter if she’d poisoned me with seduction magic or not—but not here, not in the Academy, where freedom was encouraged and elemental customs wavered.

That didn’t make my predicament much better. She would fight for this particular custom to be enforced if only to imprison me to her side and add to the growing reputation as a Fire Fae not to be messed with. Taming the Powerless Champion no doubt was on the top of her list of recent achievements and would reduce my pride to the most withering of embers when she was done with me.

The most logical prevention would have been to not sleep with her, and of course I knew better than to stick my dick in this crazy bitch. Just because I had a playboy reputation didn’t mean I always acted on it. No one would believe me if I told them that she’d tricked me into sleeping with her.

Seduction magic was a black-market commodity and not permitted on Academy premises, but I still had the sour aftertaste of its recognizable compulsion in my mouth. The bitch had stoked flames that weren’t intended

for her, which was likely what had left me feeling so off right now. She might have gotten a taste, but never again.

Growling, I gripped her fingers and forced her arm to bend backward. Like most fae, she was graceful and lean, but she was still of the fire element. With the amount of power coursing through her right now, I suspected she might even be a suitable match if we really went head-to-head. I'd already gotten dinged for fighting this year and couldn't afford another mark.

"I'm not interested in entertaining your fantasies, Ignis. You might have tricked me into your bed, but in the light of day, I see you for what you really are." I leaned in, enunciating my words carefully. "Not. My. Type." I let go of her arm. "I'll watch my drinks with a closer eye from now on. Don't think you can trick me again."

Ignis stumbled, overacting the motion as if I'd hurt her. Her eyes brimmed with crocodile tears, and her friends rushed to her side. "You would accuse me of spiking your drink?" she shrieked.

"You brute!" Sickle snapped at me, her voice grating against my ears with the icy edge of her power, making me wince. "How could you treat a kindred fae like Ignis so poorly? What a horrid accusation!"

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest, which was more of a motion to try to keep the growing inferno contained than anything else. "When she acts like a kindred fae, perhaps I'll treat her in the manner worthy of her station."

Ignoring them, I flared my heat, allowing enough of it to singe the air until the fae instinctually backed off, allowing me through.

Normally, I would have been flattered that a powerful Fire Fae would have thought me untouchable enough to have to spike my drink to procure a night with me, but now I just felt angry, manipulated, my pride bruised. Seduction magic might not be permitted on campus, but it wasn't entirely illegal generally because it couldn't force someone into bed unless an ember of desire existed in the first place. It grew passions; it didn't create them.

But I didn't even *like* Ignis, let alone find the devilish female attractive.

No, something felt wrong. My powers were stirring restlessly inside of me, as if on the brink of chaos. And it had started late last night.

Which, from what I had heard, was when the Halfling had arrived in our realm.

Whispers reached my ears, all of the other fae talking about her.

"I heard she's killed already. Should she really be here?"

“Is she bound?”

“Who is her mentor?”

“I heard she’s hot!”

Growling, I found River leaning against the entrance and brushed past him. “Since when do you play lapdog to Ignis?”

He shrugged, a little sheepish. “She’s a little scary, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” Damn female had bitten me last night, too. Leaving her claim proudly on my neck. “She’s—”

“You,” Exos interrupted, his sapphire eyes trained on me. From the state of his shredded clothes, he’d been in a battle or two—on the losing end, for sure.

My eyes widened. The Royal Prince of Spirit Fae was a legend, his connection to Spirit magic the strongest anyone had ever seen, his affinity for fire besting several of my brethren. “Yes?” I asked him, unsure if I should bow or refer to him formally. “Uh, Your Highness?” *What are you doing here?* I wanted to ask.

Then it struck me.

He’s here because of the Halfling.

Exos leveled me with a powerful gaze. “I need you to come with me.”

I didn’t ask questions. When a Royal Fae issued a demand, everyone adhered to it. Especially when that Royal Fae was a legendary Fae Warrior. Like Exos.

He led us—me and River, who had insisted on tagging along—deep into the forest surrounding the Academy, having already shown us the destruction at Chancellor Elana’s home just off campus. In a quick debrief, Exos had informed us that he’d been put in charge of the Halfling’s protection, and lost her.

Which was why he needed me.

The girl’s affinity for fire had left a string of smoky notes in the air, too faint for him to catch. And I was the strongest Fire Fae within immediate reach.

“Keep up. I need your proximity to sense her,” Exos said, his feet moving quickly over the exposed roots and fallen leaves.

Great, giant boughs seemed to sway away from Exos as we followed the faint scent of the most powerful fire magic I’d ever felt—and that was saying something. “You’re sure she only just came into her powers?” I ventured,

struggling to keep myself from sprinting past the fae. Not only was I strong, but I was fast, too, and now that I had her trail, I wanted to follow it.

“Yes, and so far, I sense multiple elements from her. Spirit and Fire, of course, but also Air and Water.” He glanced back at River, who trailed behind us. “Is he going to be up to the task? The Halfling is powerful.”

I nodded, confident in River’s ability. When his head was on straight, he was strong—stronger than even he realized. “He’ll be able to help.”

Exos gave a curt nod before reaching out a hand to stop us. “Good, because she seems to enjoy playing with fire.” He sounded disgruntled over that, which explained some of his singed attire.

“Hold on,” I said, my nostrils flaring as I picked up the tendrils of her smoky power. “She’s near.”

“Lead us” was Exos’s reply, his vigilant gaze sweeping the grounds.

My eyes darted across the clearing we’d stepped into. It presented a calm facade, an oasis that now descended into dusk with the softness of purple butterflies lazily lingering over the sleepy meadow. But I sensed the Halfling, her exquisite aura of molten iron mixed with a tornado of power that dared me to take a single step closer.

Exos eyed me warily as I followed the tug that seemed to grow straight from my chest toward a heap of flowers with the shadow of a curled form hidden beneath the colorful earth. Was that her?

I inched closer, studying the sleeping Halfling lying on a makeshift bed of roses. Her skin glowed with inner embers that seemed to react to my presence, making me suck in a breath at her beauty.

Fuck.

I’d never seen a creature quite like this. Soft blonde strands draped over a delicate face marred by little brown spots that gave me the peculiar urge to stoop down for a closer look. Fae didn’t have flaws, but humans did. It made her endearing, gorgeous, and exotic.

Without thinking, I crouched beside her and trailed my fingers up her arm, smoothing over the volcanic heat that called to me. She shifted in her sleep, her eyebrows knitting with a surge of discomfort before she quieted again, seeming to accept me. My touch went up to her rounded ears, so different from my own.

Then her eyes opened and the most alluring blue irises trapped me in a piece of heaven.

“Hi there, beautiful,” I whispered, smiling.

Her pupils shrank like I'd given her a shot of adrenaline, and the ground rumbled.

She screamed in utter terror and surprised me with a gust of wind, sending me flat on my ass. Exos and River shouted something, but I lifted a hand to stop them.

Just in time, too.

A ring of fire erupted around us as the Halfling shot to her feet. Her chest heaved like a bird trapped in a cage, and she flung her face left and right, trying to gather her bearings. "Fuck, I just woke up, so either this is one of those trick dreams or..."

"Not a dream!" Exos shouted unhelpfully from the other side of the flames.

Sighing, I examined the flames the Halfling had sprung into existence. Powerful, yes, but manageable. Sensing the ignition she'd established, I snapped my fingers and sent the fires fizzling into ash.

She startled, blinked at me, then took a step back. "Did you just...?"

"Exterminate your little fire frenzy? Yeah, sweetheart." I grinned. "You're not the only one who likes to play with fire."

"We need to get her back to the estate," Exos growled.

Again, not helpful.

The Halfling seemed stressed by his voice, and energies hummed around her, threatening to explode again. If she called on one of her other elements, I'd be useless.

"Hey," I said softly, lowering myself to one knee. I knew I could be intimidating at my full height, but I wouldn't wish any harm to come to this creature. "We're not here to hurt you, sweetheart."

"Yeah? Tell that to *him*." She pointed at Exos, causing me to fight back a smile.

"I'm not him," I told her, offering her a conspiratorial glance. "I barely know him, actually. But I can see the lack of appeal." Dangerous words to say about a Royal Fae, but I'd deal with the consequences later.

She blinked, startled. "What?"

I cocked my head to the side, allowing my lips to tilt in a way I knew charmed most of the female fae at the Academy. "He demanded I help find you. I'm Titus."

Another blink, this one slower. "Titus?"

"That's me."

She swallowed, looking at Exos and River, then took in her surroundings again. “Where the hell am I?”

“The enchanted boundaries,” I informed her, still on my knee, staring up at her. It left me in a far more vulnerable position that seemed to be easing her nerves at least a little.

“I don’t know what that means.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what any of this means.”

Exos hadn’t given me a lot of insight into what she knew, just that she was a powerful Halfling and her name was Claire, but her knowledge of our world seemed to be very little. “They’re the protective borders around the Academy. It’s the only area in the Fae Realm where all the elements are allowed to play together, and we learn how to coexist.” A load of shit, really. It was all a political game to force the different elements to get along, to live in harmony.

“Fae Realm,” she repeated on a breath, her shoulders beginning to shake. “It’s all real.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Exos said, his fingers combing through his ash-blond hair.

The pixie of a woman took a step backward, her gaze snapping to his, then to mine, then to his again. “I-I didn’t mean to... to...”

“Blow me into a wall? *Again?*” he asked.

Tears gathered in her eyes, her lower lip trembling. “This can’t... I don’t...”

“How did you blow him into a wall?” I asked, genuinely curious. “Can you do it again? Maybe into a tree?”

“Wh-what?” she asked, her big blue eyes refocusing on me.

“Sorry, it just sounds amusing as hell. Can you do it again?” I didn’t really want her to, but I did want to distract her. “Not many fae can take on someone as famous as Exos, so you’ve intrigued me.”

“Exos?” she repeated, her brow furrowing.

“Dude, you didn’t even tell her your name?” I asked, shocked and dismayed. “No wonder she kicked your ass.”

“I brought you here to help, kid. Not to be a pain in my ass.”

“Kid?” I repeated, raising my brows. “I’m twenty-two, *Your Highness.*”

He gave me a look that said he couldn’t care less. “Fine. *Man.*”

“Better,” I agreed, shifting my attention back to the girl who was observing us with a furrowed brow. Much better than the terrified-little-

mouse expression. “Seriously, can you blow him into a tree for me? All I can do is light him on fire, and he’ll just extinguish the flames.” Not exactly true. I could burn him if I tried hard enough.

“Fire,” she whispered, her expression pained.

“Yes,” I said slowly, confused. “I’m a Fire Fae.”

“She’s thinking about the bar.” Exos folded his arms. “Which I already told her wasn’t her fault.”

She crumpled to the ground, her knees giving out beneath her, tears tracking down her face. “A bar?” I asked, inching toward her. “What about it?”

“R-rick,” she breathed, her palm covering her heart.

“Her friend,” Exos translated. “He... He didn’t make it.”

The woman let loose an agonized scream, flames singeing the air and igniting my soul. I caught the embers before they could cause any damage, blanketing her in my essence and forcing her fiery abilities to behave as she broke down before my eyes.

“What the hell?” River asked, taking the words right out of my mouth. “What friend? What bar?”

Exos blew out a breath. “Short version: Her powers exploded in the Human Realm. She burned down a building—with her friend inside.”

And he couldn’t have told us that *before* we found her?

“Fuck,” I breathed, rubbing my hand down my face. “*Fuck.*”

Chapter 5

Claire



I couldn't see.
 Couldn't breathe.
 Couldn't think.

Rick's dark eyes flashed before me, his sexy-as-sin grin, his ridiculously spiky hair. I cradled my chest, the burn radiating throughout my body intense. I wanted to scream. To cry. To run. But my limbs refused to move, some invisible weight holding me captive in my cocoon of flowers.

Oh God, I'm covered in... in pollen!

None of this made any sense. The surroundings. The colors. The endless forest. The too-orange sun illuminating the field. The male crouching a few feet away...

His dark green eyes reminded me of the trees framing his muscular form.

I shuddered, curling in on myself, wishing that this would all just go away. That my world would return to normal. That this was all just a drunken nightmare.

Maybe I died in the fire?

I startled at the thought. Was this heaven? That would explain the magic, the odd scents, my bizarre connection to the elements.

"Claire," the one closest to me murmured, his voice deep and soothing and sending a shiver down my spine.

Titus, he'd called himself.

What kind of name is Titus?

"Everyone will tell you it wasn't your fault," he murmured, lying down on his side and bringing our heads to the same level, about five feet of flowers separating us. "But I know those words don't help. I used to hear

them all the time. It made me so angry because no one understood. The guilt is suffocating. The agony of loss soul-destroying. And you feel so lonely, so incredibly alone.”

Sadness tinged his handsome features, pulling down his brow and his full lips. Dark memories tainted his green gaze, his history etched into the rigid lines of his long, lean body. His elbow drew up to pillow his head of thick, auburn locks, his presence somehow soothing rather than terrifying.

I didn't know him at all.

Yet I felt that strange draw to him, just like I had with the other one. An inkling to trust, to fold myself against him, to escape in the heat of his skin.

“I'm losing my mind,” I whispered. “Completely losing my fucking mind.”

Titus chuckled. “Yeah? Me, too, sweetheart. Me, too.”

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me. Here this man was, an utter stranger, lying on the ground with me, commiserating over our fall into the land of insanity.

“That's a lovely sound,” he murmured. “If a little broken.”

“This is crazy.” I shook my head, rolling to my back to stare blankly up at the cloudless sky. “I... I don't...” No other words came to me, my mind completely shutting down. I had nothing. No comeback. No comment. Probably about a million questions I had no energy to voice. Just... *nothing*.

“I can't even begin to imagine how alarming this must be for you, to have no idea you're part fae while growing up in the Human Realm. Honestly, I don't know much about it, having spent my whole life ingrained in fae society. I mean, I didn't even want to attend the Academy. The Council forced me, which, it seems, they're going to do to you, too. So, I guess I understand a little bit, but to be raised as a human and stolen to this land, I don't blame you at all for thinking it's crazy.”

His tenor, soft and calming, lulled me into a strange sense of comfort. I looked at him again. *Really* looked at him.

He resembled a model sprawled out for a photo shoot, apart from the slight downward curve of his mouth. But he truly resembled perfection in an almost inhuman way. There was a powerful air around him, a humming energy that seemed to sizzle between us as I held his darkening gaze.

Then I noticed his ears.

Not round like mine, but slightly pointed.

My brow furrowed. “Why do you look like an elf?”

His eyes widened. “An elf?” A laugh bubbled out of him, deep and humorous and beautiful. Hmm, yes, I did like the way he sounded, both his voice and his chuckles. “I’m a fae, sweetheart. Not an elf.”

“Do you all have pointy ears?”

“We do.”

“I don’t.”

“Because you’re a Halfling,” he said, smiling. “Your mum was a fae. Your da a human.”

The way he said *mum* and *da* had my lips twitching again. *Now he sort of sounds like a leprechaun.* But he was missing the trademark red beard.

“What’s funny?” he asked, a smile in his voice.

I shook my head. “Nothing.” I couldn’t call him a leprechaun. He’d just find me even more nuts. Which, of course, I was, considering my surroundings and the fact that I was starting to believe all this nonsense.

Ugh. What choice did I have? Clearly, I wasn’t going to wake up. And I couldn’t deny the strange sensations coursing through my veins or the slight memory of the bar flickering in my thoughts.

I burned it down.

I killed Rick.

My gaze fell, my shoulders rounding as another spike of pain splintered my chest.

“Hey,” Titus said softly. “Stay with me, sweetheart. We’ll get through this.”

That sensation to laugh again hit me in the gut, my eyes filling with tears. “I don’t even know you. You don’t know me. I don’t know anything or anyone or what the hell is...” I trailed off, tired of repeating the same words over and over. They did nothing to improve my situation, just leaving me to wallow in the same endless cycle of pity and despair.

“I think you’ll find you know me quite well,” Titus murmured. “Perhaps not about me, or who I am, but your Fire recognizes mine.”

“What?” That didn’t make any sense. “What Fire?”

“Your inner flame, Claire.” He held out his hand, a flicker of light dancing over the tips. “You’re strong. Much stronger than you should be.”

“I don’t understand.”

His smile was sad. “I know, sweetheart. But you will.” The flames flickered out, his hand falling to the ground. “We want to help you. To teach you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re fae. We take care of our own.”

“But I burned down the bar...”

“Which wouldn’t have happened if you’d been properly trained,” he whispered. “I know what it’s like to come into your power too early, to not be prepared. It’s terrifying. It’s consuming. It kills.”

“Yes,” I agreed, my voice equally quiet.

“I can help you.” He reached for me again, his hand so close but not near enough to touch. “Let me show you.”

“How?”

“Lift your hand toward mine,” he encouraged me. “You’ll see.”

Somehow I doubted that but found my arm lifting of its own accord, my sense of curiosity piqued. What did he intend to do? Grab me? He could have done that already. It was three against one. I stood no chance here, even with my bizarre... *gifts*.

“Here.” He wiggled his fingers, the tips brushing mine as I rolled closer to him. They were warm. Welcoming. Oddly familiar.

Electricity sizzled between us, sending a zap up my arm that had me pulling back.

“Come on, Claire,” he urged, amusement flirting with his mouth. “Let me show you.”

“That wasn’t it?”

He chuckled. “No. That was mutual attraction, not fire.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What?” He couldn’t mean that we found each other attractive, right? We didn’t *know* each other. I mean, sure, he was good-looking. Actually, no, he was *hot*. But... No. I was not attracted to anything or anyone right now, least of all a pointy-eared man with a too-sexy grin.

“It’s a fae thing,” he said, a pair of adorable dimples flashing. “Our elements sing to each other when we find a potential mate. That’s what you felt. Now come on, don’t hide.” He held out his hand again, but I was too busy gaping at him to move.

Potential mate? What in the fuck? No. Hell no. “Mate?”

“Elements bond for power,” he explained. “No more stalling, sweetheart. Let me show you what I really mean.”

“You want to be my... *mate*?”

He sighed. “No. I don’t want to be anyone’s mate. It’s just a part of society. You’ll feel it with others, especially since you’re multi-elemental.

It's about matching power to power. And right now, all I want to do is show you how our essences are linked to one another. Please?"

The way he said that final word, the slight dip in his tone, had me feeling warm all over. None of this made any sense, but somehow, for some peculiar reason, I wanted to trust him. To let him show me whatever it was he desired to show me.

Because I found him likable.

Not in a *mate* kind of way—that sounded too permanent and weird and not at all appropriate for a girl my age.

But in a potential date kind of way. Well, apart from the whole Fae Realm, stolen from my home and life, nonsense.

Okay, so maybe not a *date*.

Just stop thinking, I told myself, exhausted. *See what he wants to do.*

What could it hurt?

Nibbling my lip, I extended my arm, laying my hand palm up in the flower bed. His smile reached his gorgeous eyes as he shifted a little closer to link his fingers over mine. More of that electric energy sizzled up my arm, shocking my system and sending a bolt of heat directly to my lower abdomen.

Okay, he's not kidding about the mutual attraction thing. Because wow.

A totally inappropriate and inexplicable reaction.

Just like I had to that guy at the bar.

My gaze darted across the clearing to the leather-clad bad boy, the one Titus had called Exos. He observed us with no expression, his arms crossed as he leaned against a tree along the edge of the field. Another boy stood beside him, his gaze wide with curiosity.

"Why are they watching us?" I asked, my insides tingling with nerves.

"They're watching you," Titus whispered, his fingers lightly tracing mine. "Your power is a marvel, Claire. It's considered a miracle that Spirit Fae—like Exos—can access two elements."

"Okay." I swallowed, refocusing on his alluring features. "I have fire and air?" A guess because I couldn't remember everything Exos had told me, our time together an emotionally laden blur of moments.

"No." Titus drew a line of fire across my skin, the heat causing me to flinch and gape at the same time.

"That... It doesn't hurt."

He chuckled. "Because your fire responds to mine."

“But you just said I don’t have Fire.”

“Oh, you have Fire.” His irises lifted to mine. “An incredible amount of it, too.” He shifted even closer, leaving maybe a foot between our prone forms. He continued his path up my arm, the flame dancing upward, heating me in the most amazing way.

“I like that,” I admitted.

“I know.” He smiled, continuing his touch over my clothed shoulder to my neck, branding my pulse. “Do you feel the connection between us, Claire? The way my fire flirts with yours? Taunting it to the surface? Warming the air around us?”

I swallowed, my lungs feeling a bit tight. “Y-yes.”

“That’s your power.” His voice dropped to a husky tone that caused my heart to skip a beat.

“What about Air?” I asked.

“Hmm, I’m not an Air Fae.” He slid an ember across my jaw and upward into my hairline where he pulled the flower from behind my ear—the flower Exos had put there. “I’m not a Spirit Fae, either.” He brought the petals to his nose and inhaled. “But you’re both.”

“That’s three elements.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “You asked why they’re staring at you?”

I nodded, my heart thudding roughly in my chest.

“It’s because you don’t have access to just two elements, Claire.” He palmed my cheek, his gaze kind. “You have access to all five.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “All five?”

His lips twitched. “Trust me, I’m just as shocked as you are, but I can feel it in your essence. You manipulated this field, bringing all these flowers to life to provide you with a bed to rest upon. The air sings your name. My fire is drawn to your fire, just as Exos’s spirit is drawn to your spirit, and I can feel the layer of humidity—water—softening your skin. You’re very special, indeed.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” He drew his thumb across my cheekbone, his caress warm and far too welcome. “But I can help you. That’s all we want to do.”

“Help me how?”

“By teaching you.” His fingers slid into my hair, threading through my tangling blonde strands and drawing them down to my shoulder. “Control is the only way to live with all that power inside of you. I realize you have no

reason to trust me, or any of us, but I'm speaking from experience. If you don't allow anyone to train you, those gifts will consume you beyond reason."

I'd always been one to listen to my instincts, and they told me now that he was speaking the truth. Still, something nagged at me. Not about him, or Exos, or even the other boy, but about this place. This *realm*.

It felt as if I didn't belong. Which was likely related to having been brought here without my permission.

But it went beyond that.

Something about this place seemed *dangerous*.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his tone genuine and curious. "What caused this frown to form?" He pressed his thumb to the edge of my mouth, his comfort with touching me a little unsettling even while feeling right.

We don't know each other.

But I sort of want to know him.

I shook the thoughts from my head, confused by all the sensations and sounds and *sparks*. "This is all, uh, overwhelming." Not a lie. I just left out the sense-of-danger part. How could I confide that in an essential stranger? In this strange land?

"How about dinner," he suggested.

"Dinner?" I repeated, dubious.

"When's the last time you ate?"

"Uh..." I blinked several times. "I... I don't know."

"Then I'd say dinner is a must." His dimples appeared again, but rather than turn his features boyish, they only seemed to solidify his incredible beauty. "Then maybe we can tour campus together. It'll be quiet, most of the students in their dorms. Maybe you'll see that it isn't too bad here and decide to stay."

Campus? Dorms? Where am I? "Do I even have a choice?" I wondered out loud, referring to dinner and the aforementioned *tour*.

He chuckled. "Depends on your definition of the word. How about we reach that bridge when we're ready to cross it and just take this one step at a time? Dinner first. And I'll answer any and every question you throw at me."

I nibbled my lower lip, considering his proposal. He was right about the *choice*. Did I truly have one when there were no other options?

"Can I, uh, change first?" I asked, noting my soiled state. A long shower sounded appealing. And then maybe some coffee followed by a decent meal.

“Exos can help us arrange that,” he said, smiling.

“Exos,” I repeated, glancing at the still-emotionless male across the clearing. “Uh, will he be going to dinner, too?”

The man cocked a brow at that, clearly having heard me even from a distance. Which meant he’d heard everything. “Would you prefer I not join you?” he asked, sounding slightly offended.

“Depends on whether or not you’re going to be an ass,” I said, feeling oddly defensive. He hadn’t exactly broken all these details to me in the politest manner, and it was *his* fault I ended up here. And while I was on that path, I could also lay some of the blame for the bar at his feet because he’d been the one to entice me into that kiss.

No, that wasn’t fair.

I couldn’t blame him for everything. Only a coward would deny all culpability.

But that didn’t mean I had to like him.

He snorted as if hearing my thoughts, or perhaps reading them on my face. “Whatever you want, princess,” he said. “Just don’t fucking blow me into a wall again.”

I winced a little at that, feeling bad again. It wasn’t like I meant to shove him with my power; it just sort of happened.

“Can we go now?” he asked, his gaze going to Titus. “Because I’ve had the day from hell and would love a shower.”

And I didn’t feel bad anymore. “Ass,” I muttered.

Titus chuckled beside me. “You know, Exos, I’m starting to see why all this happened. Your bedside manner sucks.”

“Do you speak to all Royal Fae in this manner, or am I a special case?”

Titus paled a little. “I... I’m...”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Exos said, turning away from the field. “Let’s go.”

Titus cursed softly, his hand falling from my skin and leaving me cold without him. “We, uh, need to follow him.”

“Why?” I asked, not understanding the power play here.

“Because Exos says it’s time to go.” He stood and held out a hand for me.

“And we have to do what he says?” I asked as I accepted his help up from the ground—mostly because I wanted to touch him again.

“Yes.” He linked his fingers through mine, something that seemed a little unconscious on his part. His focus was on the third male, with the floppy

hair, waiting for us near the tree line.

“Why?” I pressed as we started forward. “Why do we have to do what he says?” Because a part of me *really* wanted to disobey him.

“He’s a Royal Fae,” Titus replied.

“Okay?” That meant little to me.

He glanced at me. “He’s the Royal Prince of the Spirit Fae, Claire.”

I nearly tripped over the flowers beneath my feet. “Wh-what?” Was that like... like a European prince or something?

“Technically, he’s King of the Spirit Fae,” the other man mumbled, his cheeks flushing pink. “He, uh, renounced his throne to his brother, preferring the warrior life. But, well, Exos and Cyrus are the last of the royal line. At least until Cyrus finds a mate, which isn’t likely since, uh, yeah, you know, most of the Spirit Fae are dead.” He didn’t look at me the entire time he spoke, his gaze on my bare feet.

“This is River,” Titus said, grinning. “He’s a Water Fae.”

“Hi.” He waved, his focus still on the ground.

“Hi,” I replied, concerned that I’d offended him somehow. Or maybe he was just shy? “I’m Claire,” I hedged, trying to see him through his mop of dark curls.

“I know.” He peeked up at me, his eyes widening when he realized I was staring directly at him. He stumbled backward, almost falling, except Titus caught his wrist and yanked him upright.

“She’s not going to bite you, dude.”

“I-I know,” he repeated. “It’s j-just that, well, she’s... she’s *human*.”

Titus sighed. “River has an obsession,” he told me, glancing sideways.

“And I need a fucking shower,” Exos snapped, appearing again on the path. “Can we please go back to Elana’s now?”

Titus straightened, his gaze narrowing. “This woman has been through hell, Exos. Cut her some slack.”

“Yeah? She’s also put me through hell. What a coincidence.” He didn’t pay me a glance as he turned to lead the way—again.

“I don’t want him to go to dinner,” I decided.

“Something tells me he won’t be giving us much choice,” Titus muttered. “He’s been assigned as your protector.”

“My protector?” I frowned. “Why?”

Titus just shook his head. “Let’s just follow him. We can talk about more over dinner, okay? I promise.” His words sent a tingle down my spine as if

his vow held power and purpose. Maybe it did.

“Dinner,” I repeated. A meal. Followed by a tour. And more information. “Okay. Yeah, I can do that.”

Because, again, what other option did I have? Hide here in the meadow forever? Hope for some miracle to take me back to Earth?

An idea nagged at me.

Actually... Maybe I could use this all to my advantage to find a way back home. Play along for a while, learn more about these so-called fae, this realm, my supposed gifts, and perhaps escape.

Assuming that was what I wanted.

I frowned. Oh, hell, I had no idea *what* I wanted anymore.

But I did like the sound of a shower and food.

So, yeah. Going with Titus made sense. At least for now.

“I can sense your indecision,” he whispered, his lips against my ear. “Just give me the evening, sweetheart. You’ll see.” A soft flame warmed our clasped hands. “And if you want, I’ll show you how to create fireballs. Maybe you can accidentally throw one at Exos.”

A snort from the forest ahead said he’d heard that. He must have just disappeared from view but was clearly still waiting on us to follow.

“A fireball,” I mused, pondering the possibilities. “Yeah, I think I like that idea.”

“Just try not to burn down any more buildings” was his dark reply.

My amusement died.

Yeah.

Okay.

Maybe no fireballs.

Titus sighed beside me. “Spoilsport,” he muttered. “I’ll show you how to control it, Claire. You have my word.”

I nodded mutely, unable to say anything else.

A shower.

Some clothes.

Food.

Hopefully, one of those things would help me feel human again.

Except I wasn’t human, not according to these men.

I’m part fae.

Whatever the hell that really means.

I was too exhausted to dwell on it, my limbs aching, my heart shattered.

Titus squeezed my hand again, a jolt of heat sliding up my arm to dispel the ice coating my veins. No words, just a touch, one that seemed to thaw some of the pain. He pulled me close, the warmth from his body a comforting blanket over my skin. I leaned into him, absorbing his essence, his kindness, his strength, and allowing it to fuel my steps.

Maybe I really had lost my mind.

Because some foreign part of me trusted him despite our brief acquaintance. Possibly because he felt like the only friend I might have in this strange land.

Or perhaps something more powerful was at play...

Chapter 6

Titus



Claire clutched my hand tightly, her body rigid beside mine. Exos had led us back to Elana's estate and disappeared after showing us to one of the guest suites.

"I... I d-don't understand," Claire stammered. "I blew out that wall."

Ah, that explained the elemental essences lurking in this room. I'd felt it all over the property when we arrived, but it grew stronger as we moved upstairs. "Chancellor Elana must have repaired it."

"Chancellor Elana?" Claire repeated, glancing up at me. "How?"

"She's a very powerful fae and the leader of the Academy." I gave her a small smile. "This is her home." And actually quite rare for a student to visit. In fact, this was my first time entering these famous walls.

Claire frowned. "But I destroyed that wall."

"And I fixed it," a voice murmured from down the hallway. Elana appeared with her light hair wrapped up in a bun atop her head and threaded with flowers. She was a gorgeous woman, the awe of many men, and completely unattainable due to her high status. Rumors said she never mated because she didn't want to share her powers. But it was not for a lack of trying by the male fae.

I bowed my head in reverence. "Chancellor Elana."

"Titus," she returned. "Thank you for helping Exos today."

"It was my pleasure." Not a lie. I rather enjoyed lying in that field with Claire. Wrong, yes, but being near her intrigued me. The power brewing under her skin called to my own, marking her as a potential mate. She wasn't the first to call to my inner gifts, but she was the first to excite me by the prospect. "I was just helping Claire change for dinner."

“Ah yes, it is that time, isn’t it?” She stopped in front of us, her slender hands clasped before her. “Why don’t you and River stay for dinner? I think it may help Claire feel more comfortable.”

Oh. I’d meant to take Claire somewhere on the fire campus and give her a tour as well, but if the Chancellor wanted us to join her here, then we didn’t have much choice.

The death grip on my hand suggested Elana’s words regarding comfort were true. It seemed I’d become Claire’s anchor. “We’ll stay,” I said, the words meant for both of them.

“Excellent.” Elana’s smile crinkled the edges of her silver-flecked eyes. “I look forward to getting to know you better, Claire. Once upon a time, your mother was one of my favorite students.” Sadness filtered through her softening expression. “Well, we’ll catch up over dinner. Oh, and I left you something suitable to wear.” She tilted her lips again before floating down the hallway in her long, elegant gown.

“Who is that?” Claire whispered, her eyes rounded.

“Chancellor Elana.”

“No, I got that part.” She shook my head. “I meant... I... I don’t know what I meant. She’s beautiful.”

“Yes. And very powerful.” I’d already said that, but it was worth repeating. “She’s a Spirit Fae, like you.”

“And she knew my mother?”

“Yes. She was your mother’s mentor.” A very famous history, considering everything that had transpired after the Academy. But now wasn’t the time to discuss all that. “Do you need any help? Or do you want to meet me downstairs?”

“I...” She nibbled her lip and glanced at the dress lying on the bed and then at the doorway beyond that led to the en-suite bathroom. “I, uh, should be all right. But you promise to stay?”

Warmth touched my chest at her show of trust. We hardly knew each other, but her inner flame recognized mine already whether she realized it or not. I drew a line of fire across her cheek with my index finger and smiled. “Yes. I’ll be here.”

Her shoulders seemed to fall on a sigh, her relief palpable. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed her wrist. “See you then, Claire.”

Her lips parted in wonder as I released her. I took a few steps backward,

wanting to give her space before I did something stupid like follow her into that bedroom. Her essence was so strong, almost intoxicatingly so. It fucked with my head.

“Titus?” she called after me, concern in her voice.

I faced her at the top of the stairs. “Yes, Claire?”

“Uh, how will I find the dining room?”

I almost told her I’d wait at the bottom for her, but a better idea came to me. A way to test if she felt this connection the way I did. “Follow the heat.”

“The heat?” she asked, her brow puckering.

Embers danced over my fingertips as I lifted my hand. “Yes. I’ll leave you some hints in the air, and you’ll find me.” I was sure of it, even if she looked completely baffled by the idea. “You’ll see, sweetheart.”

I left her gaping after me in the hallway, a smile on my face the whole way down the stairs.

River waited for me at the bottom, his eyebrow raised knowingly.

“Just the lingering effects from Ignis,” I said, blaming my peculiar behavior on the seduction magic even if it had worn off long ago. Maybe I was more susceptible to it, or Ignis had given me a double dose. Wouldn’t have put it past the bitch. “Where’s Exos?” I had a few things I wanted to say to him about his treatment of Claire.

“Changing,” River replied. “We’re supposed to meet him in the dining room.”

“So you know about our dinner plans?”

“You mean the dining edict? Yes.” River’s voice was soft so as to not be overheard. “I’m not dressed for this.” He gestured to his casual attire. “Not for dining with the Chancellor.”

“I think her focus is more on Claire more than our jeans,” I said, following the aroma of food while leaving a subtle trail of my essence behind for Claire to follow. Sensing that, coupled with the finer scents in the air, she should find us without any problem.

“Um, aren’t you worried the human might run again?” River whispered.

“No.” I didn’t even need to consider it. My instincts seemed to be tied to hers after that little flirtation in the field. I’d sense it if she wanted to run, and that wasn’t the vibe I received from her at all. “She’s too intrigued to—”

I froze on the threshold of the dining area.

The room was buzzing with *pixies*.

Even though *pixies* and *fairies* were myths, elder Spirit Fae like Elana had

enough magic to conjure their very own army of servants in whatever form they chose. But to choose a swarm of mythical creatures as house servants sent a message, one I was keen to listen to. Elana was powerful, and she wanted everyone to know it.

A pixie hurried past me, its tiny wings brushing my cheek and leaving behind a kiss of humidity, betraying a hint of water magic mingling with Elana's powers.

Odd.

Everyone knew Elana only had access to spirit. It was her notorious weakness, being the only Spirit Fae without a secondary element. I must have imagined the intrusion.

The tiny creatures chattered at each other like squirrels while they set the table with gleaming silverware, and several of them teamed up to supply bowls of soup, trays of delicacies, and finely cut slabs of meat that made my mouth water.

"Uh..." A horde of pixies tugged on one of the massive chairs until it was far enough away from the table for me. "Thank you." I glanced back at River as I took my seat, all the while hoping I didn't squash any of the poor things.

River sat beside me, his mystified gaze likely rivaling my own. "I've, erm, never eaten with an elder before," he mumbled, anxiety creeping into his voice. Being in Elana's esteemed presence had me on edge as well, so I could only imagine what River was feeling right now.

I cleared my throat and accepted a glass of golden, sparkling liquid from a trio of pixies. "You're the one who insisted on tagging along," I reminded him. I took a long sip, my eyelids fluttering as sweetness and heat slipped down my throat. Fire water—literally liquid infused with the elements of air and fire—made me feel at home.

Until I remembered my surroundings.

We were about to dine with an elder and a royal. Who knew what sort of edicts would follow? Not to mention this strange connection I felt to Claire. I shivered, the memory of her touch embedded in my skin. It had felt right—*too* right.

A shift in the air had me glancing at the doorway just as Exos made his entrance, his white-blond hair draped across his forehead in an absurdly regal manner. The pompous style matched his all-black suit.

Definitely a prince.

"Glad you're comfortable," Exos said smoothly as he sat directly across

from me. He didn't seem the type to often smile, but the way he looked at me now said he was about to drop some serious bullshit in my lap. "I have some things to discuss with you before Claire joins us."

Great.

"Of course," I replied, keeping my voice controlled and respectful. Part of me still wanted to shake some sense into him for his behavior back in the field with Claire, but I knew better. He didn't seem to understand that she needed a tender hand, not a harsh one.

Exos eyed the delicacies as a pixie settled a glass of fire water in front of him, but he only stared at it. "The Halfling needs more boundaries than I'm able to impose," he said, folding his hands and getting straight to the point. "She's stronger than any of us realized."

He held my gaze, his ocean-blue eyes so deep that I could almost sense the power that rested underneath the surface. If the Halfling bested this guy, then I knew I didn't stand a chance if I ever lost her trust.

I rested my elbows on the table, leaning forward, and opted for a different approach. "If you don't mind me saying, Your Highness, I think you're treating her too harshly. She's not one of your warriors that you can just bark orders and expect to be obeyed. She grew up in the Human Realm without knowledge of our practices and policies. Obedience won't come as naturally to her as it would to others." There. That was politically correct enough, right?

River nodded beside me in agreement, seeming to find his confidence. "Humans are notorious when it comes to equality and free will, especially in certain regions."

Exos sighed, relaxing in his chair. "Yes, she adopts not only the strong personality of a Spirit Fae but human traits as well. However, she is still *fae*. She will learn to obey her betters."

I agreed with him until that final sentence.

Betters.

All my life I'd been told that had I been born with royal blood, I might have possessed the strength to control my unruly fire. But I wasn't royal-born. I wasn't even high-born. My lineage came from a long line of fae who fought for sport and worked in the hot mines of the Fire Kingdom.

Embers crawled through my veins and singed the tablecloth, demonstrating my frustration. Exos raised a brow in response, noticing my inability to hide the annoyance bubbling within me.

I drew in a deep breath before speaking. “She holds elements you can’t control,” I reminded him. “Forcing her into obedience won’t end well.”

He nodded. “That’s why I can’t train her alone. I need help.” He paused, his lips twitching. “Starting with you.”

I raised a brow at him. “I’ve already agreed to help her with dinner. I’m here, right?”

“You are,” Exos agreed, finally taking the fine flute of his glass and swirling it, activating the embers lingering in the liquid. “But that’s not what I meant. I already spoke with Elana, and she agrees. You’re being assigned as one of Claire’s bodyguards, and you will mentor her on fire.”

Not a request.

An order.

No subtlety to see if I would be up for the task or if I had other plans for my time at the Academy. Just a straight edict that Exos expected me to follow. And apparently, Elana did as well.

My blood boiled with the arrogance of his *demand*, and more so, the power behind his blood that allowed him to lord over me.

“It makes sense with you being the most powerful Fire Fae at the Academy, not to mention your uncanny ability to encourage her cooperation.” He glanced at me over his glass. “It’s also a unique opportunity to appease the Council. You could consider it an internship of sorts.”

“And if I don’t want an internship?” I couldn’t help the growl in my voice. This prick thought to own me, to force me into a position of his own choosing without any regard for what *I* wanted.

“We both know what you want,” Exos replied, his gaze knowing. “You won’t say no, Titus.”

To putting my reputation on the line for a Halfling? To having to protect her from what had to be an army of fae who wanted to kill her? To training her how to use her fire?

Well, that last bit appealed to me. But the other parts? I started to shake my head, but a buzzing of excitement caused all of us to glance at the doorway.

“Ah, here we are.” Elana clapped as she entered the room, drawing the pixies to her in a flourish of a grand greeting. “The dining area is lovely, thank you.” The pixies chirped in happiness, leading her to the head of the table beside Exos’s seat.

“Have you discussed our plans?” she asked, her focus on Exos.

“Yes.” He set his flute down. “Titus was just accepting.”

Accepting, my ass.

“Excellent,” Elana replied, her kind eyes lifting my way. “After observing your interaction upstairs, I do think this is best. Claire clearly likes you, and she needs someone she can trust and rely on at her side. You’re a good match for her fire as well.” The knowing way she said that last bit had a chill running up my spine.

Spirit Fae were powerful beings. They could sense and control all aspects of the life cycle. And she’d clearly noticed the mating potential between me and Claire. Which meant Exos had as well.

I cleared my throat. “If that’s—”

A shriek from the other room had me on my feet in a second, the explosion of fire a seduction to my inner flame.

Claire.

I ran into the foyer to find her curled in a ball, the walls around her ablaze with light. River extinguished the inferno with a mist of power while I clamped down on her gifts with my own, calming them on instinct.

She trembled, a cry escaping her throat as a pixie squeezed out of her grasp with an angry chirp. Another wave of fiery power spiked across the room in response, Claire quivering violently on the ground. “This isn’t real,” she whispered on repeat. “This isn’t real. Fairies don’t exist.”

Exos snorted. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He gestured to her as if to say, *This. I can’t deal with this.* And returned to the dining room.

I sighed. His lack of patience made him a shitty mentor. No wonder he needed me.

Crouching beside her, I murmured, “They’re not real, Claire. Elana conjured them to help with dinner.”

“Wh-what?” Glassy blue eyes met mine. “C-conjured?”

I smiled. “Yes, fae magic.” I held out my hand for her. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

She swallowed. “I... I don’t...”

“They’re harmless,” I promised. “Just little pixies. You’ll see.”

“Sh-she tried t-to pull my dress, and I... I...”

“You reacted,” I finished for her. “But everything’s fine.” I gestured around the foyer. “Not even a charred mark.” Thanks to River’s hasty reaction. And likely Elana’s, too. “Come on, sweetheart. I think you’ll like the little fairies once you see them in action.”

“Exos s-said f-fairies weren’t real.”

“Because they’re not,” he called from the other room.

Her eyes widened. “But it *touched* me.”

“Yes, I told you. Elana’s powerful.” I wagged my fingers. “Will you come to the dining area with me?”

She slowly lifted her palm to mine, allowing me to help her up from the floor. The pretty purple dress she wore fluttered around her knees, her hair damp and combed over one shoulder. I tucked a stray strand behind her ear and caught the fiery ember drifting up her neck in response.

The power inside her seemed ready to explode.

“Hey, do me a favor,” I whispered.

Her beautiful blue eyes held mine, her lashes thick as she blinked. “Wh-what?”

“Put your hands up like this.” I held mine in front of me, palms outward to face her.

She copied the motion with a frown. “Okay.”

“Now I want you to think about everything that’s bothering you, all the pain, the anger, the frustration and confusion. And I want you to channel it into your hands like you want to hit someone.” At her incredulous look, I smiled. “Trust me. Just pull all that energy into your arms and let it fly through your palms. Like you’re gearing up to punch someone in a fight.”

“I don’t fight,” she mumbled.

“But you’re angry, right?” I pressed. “Upset? Confused?”

“Of course I am.”

“And wouldn’t it feel really good to just hit someone?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. “But not you. I’d rather hit Exos.”

I couldn’t help my chuckle. “Well, we’d all enjoy that. But I want you to try to hit me. Pretend I’m him.”

She shook her head. “You’re not. You’re actually nice to me.”

Exos entered the foyer, his hands in his pockets. “Then hit me,” he said, coming to stand beside me. He must have figured out what I wanted to do, or perhaps realized he deserved her annoyance. “Come on, princess. Let me have it.”

Her gaze narrowed. “*You*.” Energy hummed inside her. “You made me destroy the bar.”

“You’re the one who approached me,” he reminded her, an edge to his voice. “*You* destroyed the bar. I *saved* people.”

Her hands balled into fists, her gaze narrowing to slits. “You could have stopped me!”

Exos shrugged. “I had no idea you were going to light the damn place on fire, Claire.”

“Rick’s dead,” she continued, not hearing him. “He’s *dead!*”

“Yes.” Exos didn’t flinch, just continued to stare her down. “Come on, princess. Hit me.”

“I *hate* you,” she said, tears glistening in her eyes. She opened her palms, unleashing an impressive stream of fire that I caught and absorbed before it could hit Exos. Another blast left her hands, weaker than the first one, followed by a third and a fourth until her knees gave out beneath her on a cry. I grabbed her before she could fall, catching her against my torso and holding her tight.

Exos met my gaze, his expression unreadable. “Welcome to the team, Titus.”

Chapter 7

Titus



“**Y**ou’ll fit right in at the Academy,” Elana said, smiling from the entryway. “Shall we eat? The food is getting cold.” She gestured for us to follow her, but Claire seemed unable to move.

“In a minute,” I replied, running my fingers through her hair.

Elana’s eyes grinned as she nodded and disappeared.

“What just happened?” Claire whispered, shaking against me.

“You expunged some built-up power.” My lips brushed her forehead, something that seemed to happen without my permission but felt right. “And I absorbed it.”

She gasped, pulling back to look me over, her gaze wild. “D-did I hurt you? Exos?”

“We’re fine.” I cupped her cheek. “I just wanted to show you how to channel your emotions into your gifts, to control it better.”

She shook, more tears glistening in her eyes. “I don’t understand what’s happening to me.” She swallowed, clearing her throat and letting out a sad little laugh. “God, I’ve never felt so emotional in my life. You must think I’m a wreck.”

“No, I think you were stolen from your world and placed in a land you never knew existed. Pretty sure I’d feel the same if someone put me in the Human Realm.” I chuckled at the thought and shook my head. “I’d destroy, like, everything.”

She blinked. “You would?”

“Oh yeah. My power is barely contained here. Around mortals? I’d be like a firestorm.”

Her lips twitched, a funny look gleaming in her eyes.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” But that look didn’t go away. If anything, it intensified.

“Tell me,” I encouraged her, curious as hell.

“You... You sound like a superhero from one of those movies.” She giggled, her palm lifting to cover her lips, but a laugh escaped between her fingers. “*Firestorm*.” Her eyes crinkled, her shoulders shaking. “Oh God.” A burst of sound came from her, something I enjoyed much more than her shrieking and crying. And I couldn’t help joining her even though I didn’t quite grasp the joke. I just really, really liked that sound.

“Sorry,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “God, I feel insane. All of this. I just don’t even know what to do, how to react... anything.”

“Well, I vote we start by trying to eat dinner,” I suggested, gesturing to the dining area. “Unless you’d prefer fighting more pixies?”

“Pixies?” she repeated.

“The fairies that tried to guide you to the dining room.”

“Oh.” She scrunched her forehead. “Is that what you meant about a path to follow?”

I shook my head. “No, I meant for you to trace my essence of fire.” I trailed a line of fire along her forearm to her hand, causing her lips to part on a big O. “But it seems the pixies were eager for you to join us. They don’t want the food to get cold.”

“Right,” she whispered. “Okay.”

“Okay, you want to eat? Or okay, you understand?”

“B-both,” she stammered. “I’m... hungry.”

I looked her over with a smile. “Yeah, me, too.” I held up my palm one more time. “Shall we, Claire?”

She pressed her palm to mine, nodding. “A room of fairies and food. Sure.”

I chuckled. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m afraid of,” she said so softly that I barely heard her. The poor girl clearly thought she was going mad, but after a few days in this realm, she’d realize the reality of her situation. Hopefully.

The seating arrangements in the room had changed with River joining Exos on the opposite side of the table, Elana still at the head, leaving two open seats for me and Claire—beside each other. I pulled out her chair, causing her to smile shyly as she sat, and joined her quickly, my hand finding hers beneath the table to give it a squeeze.

She tightened her hold as the pixies fluttered in to begin delivering food. It seemed they'd replaced the soup with fresh bowls, likely because the old had grown cold. They continued swapping out the dishes until a blend of fresh aromas wafted off the table, the array of foods causing my stomach to grumble in want and my heart to beat in admiration.

Elana was controlling all of this, her power an almost magnetic energy that called to my inner fae and required submission. Because not many could boast such a feast in their homes, especially after repairing the walls.

Claire didn't appear nearly as enthused.

"It's a bit much, huh?" I teased, eyeing the magic sprinkling across the room.

She relaxed, then gave me a small smile of her own. Fuck, she was beautiful. I wanted to make her smile every moment of every day.

Exos remained stoic, his focus shifting to Elana as he asked her something about Claire's schedule. This caused the woman at my side to glance between them, her brow furrowing as they discussed her life without her input.

"Eat, dear," Elana said when she noticed Claire staring at her.

My companion didn't reach out for the food but eyed it hungrily. When she refused to pick her own course, I released her hand to pick up her dish and then plucked a little bit of everything for her to try before setting it in front of her.

"I recommend that one first," I told her, gesturing to the dried pieces of meat. "I love those." I punctuated the statement by heaping several spoonfuls onto my own plate, as well as a few nibbles from other dishes.

When Claire still didn't touch her food, I took a bite of mine to demonstrate that it wasn't poisonous. And then I made an exaggerated moan of approval that caused her lips to twitch.

"Try it," I encouraged her. "It's really, really good."

She shifted in her seat, her mouth pinching to the side. Then she took one of the dried pieces of meat I suggested and nibbled on it, her eyes going wide. She took a larger bite.

I chuckled. "Told you."

She didn't reply, too lost in the flavors of the foods.

"Yes," Elana said quietly. "I think that's best. One day at each campus, and I'll work with the professors tomorrow on her schedule. We should start her in the Fire Quad."

Exos nodded. "I agree. Are her quarters ready?"

"No, you'll stay here tonight. I didn't have enough energy to finish rebuilding the Spirit Dorm."

"You're putting her on the Spirit Quad?" I asked, setting my fork down. River cleared his throat, but I ignored him. He must not have liked my tone, but this was a horrible idea and I wanted them to know it. "It's empty and void of life."

"And therefore safe," Exos added.

"For who? Her or the others?" I shook my head. "If you want her to attend the Academy, you need to have her around other fae. That's how you introduce her to our world. By showing her what the Fae Realm is like and introducing her to fae her own age."

Claire had stopped eating, her eyes dancing between us. "You keep mentioning the Academy and a campus, but what is it? Like a college?" she whispered.

"The Elemental Fae Academy, dear," Elana said, her voice warm. "And yes, it's similar to your university life, but for fae. Everyone in this realm attends from age nineteen to twenty-three, unless there are extenuating circumstances. Like Titus, for example."

"Titus?" Claire glanced at me, frowning. "I don't understand."

"She means I started the Academy late. I'm twenty-two but didn't begin until this year."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I was born and raised to fight in the Powerless Champion circuit." I shrugged. "I retired and now I'm here."

"After winning," River put in, pride in his voice. "He's the Powerless Champion."

"Like... boxing?" she guessed.

"Nah, that's a boring human sport. Fae fight to the death. And Titus has killed, like, well, everyone who challenged him. His numbers are—"

Exos cleared his throat, cutting off the Water Fae. "What River is trying to say is that Titus started the Academy a little later because of an extenuating circumstance. Just as you will start a little later because of your, well, circumstances."

"You mean my kidnapping?" Claire asked. "Because that's what this is, right? I mean, you *kidnapped* me from my home."

"This is your home," Exos replied. "Your true home. And the Academy is

your future.”

“And I have no say in this?” Claire pressed. “Because where I come from, that’s kidnapping and forcing someone to do something against her will.”

“And where I come from, it’s rude to argue with your betters.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Bettters? Like what? My parents? Because you’re not even ten years older than me. And neither is she.” She gestured to Elana. “Which is totally irrelevant, by the way, because I will argue with whoever I damn well please.” The fire in her had my lips twitching. I much preferred this to the weeping girl I found in the field earlier.

“Exos is royalty,” Elana explained softly. “And I’m Chancellor of the Academy. Therefore, in our society, we are considered your betters.”

“Because you were promoted at the ripe young age of, what, thirty? That makes you better than me?” Claire snorted. “Yeah, no. That’s not happening. Not least of all because you kidnapped me. And now you want me to attend an academy against my will? Yeah, hard pass.”

River choked on his food while I held back a grin.

“You seem to think there’s a choice here.” The calmness in Exos’s voice sent a chill of foreboding down my spine. “Of which, I suppose, there is. Would you like me to explain it to you, Claire?”

“Exos,” Elana warned.

“No, no.” Exos waved her off, his status coming out in that small gesture. Elana might be the Chancellor, but he was heir to the Spirit Kingdom, making him *her* better in our fucked-up political system. “She wants to hear her choices. Don’t you, Claire?”

“I do,” she agreed. “Since it’s my life, it’s my decision. Not that you’ve given me much of one by forcing me to come here.”

He smiled, but it lacked humor. “Yes, well, that’s because you can no longer live in the Human Realm without being a threat to everyone around you. The bar proves that.”

Her face paled, causing me to curse internally. He had to go there, didn’t he? This was clearly a tense subject for her, not that the Spirit Prince seemed to give a fuck.

“I-I didn’t mean to do that,” she whispered. “I don’t even know if it’s true.”

“If you care for proof, I’ll provide it,” Exos replied, his voice flat. “But the fact remains that you cannot reside in the Human Realm. You’re too powerful, so much so that we can hardly contain you here. Which brings me

to your choices, Claire. Are you listening?”

She nodded, her lip between her teeth, her shoulders hunched. “Yes.”

“You can attend the Academy and learn how to control your abilities, at which point you may be permitted visitor rights back to the Human Realm. Or, you will be banished to the Spirit Kingdom—the same kingdom your mother single-handedly destroyed in her battle with Mortus. It’s void of life and essence, leaving it impossible for you to hurt anyone with your lack of control.” He dabbed his mouth with his napkin in a casual gesture as he shrugged. “The third option, of course, is death. Because we can’t have a powerful rogue fae wandering the realm. Especially one who lacks training and understanding of our ways.”

Claire’s mouth opened and closed, her eyes wide, no words coming from her lips.

But of course, what the hell could she say after that calmly delivered edict?

Fucking royal blood, not thinking at all about the consequences of his words. Just uttering them as if he were speaking to a fellow warrior, not a female who had clearly been through hell over the last day or two.

“So what would you choose, Claire? Because I thought the Academy route to be the most humane and practical of options, but if you prefer I drop you in the Spirit Kingdom, we can leave tonight.”

“How about we provide Claire with a tour tomorrow of the Academy and let her see what life here would be like before you force her to choose,” I suggested, my teeth grating over every word. “And maybe give her a chance to understand the Fae Realm as well while you’re at it.”

Exos met my gaze, his blue eyes simmering. “Just because I’ve tagged you for her team does not mean you may speak out of line.”

“My job is to protect her. Consider that my current goal.” I narrowed my eyes. “Unless you think threatening her life is something I should be overlooking?”

His lips actually twitched. “You are to protect her from others, not from me.”

“Maybe she needs protection from you the most,” I countered, flames inching beneath my skin.

Elana coughed, dispelling the mood with a wave of her hand. “I think a tour is a great idea. Claire can remain here tonight, then Titus can provide a tour in the morning of Fire Quad. And we’ll work out dorm arrangements

afterward.”

Meaning she wanted to see Claire’s reaction to the world before she assigned her sleeping quarters.

“Assuming that is okay with you, dear?” Elana asked, her benevolent gaze finding Claire. The woman was the peacekeeper of our race for a reason, and it showed as she smiled. “Would you like to see the Academy? I think you might find it enlightening. And Titus could take you to the game this weekend, to see the competition of elements. Assuming he’s up for it.”

I hadn’t planned to go, but if it was something Claire wanted to see, I’d take her. “Sure.”

Claire glanced sideways at me, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “Y-you’re a student.” Not a question, but a statement.

Still, I nodded. “First year, yep.”

“A-and I would be near you on the tour?” she asked, her throat working over each word. I rather enjoyed the hopeful glint in her eyes.

“I’ll happily show you around campus.” I reached over for her hand. “It’s really beautiful. You’ll love it. Lots of trees and flowers and nature.”

She nibbled her lip. “Fairies?”

I chuckled. “No. Those are just here.”

“Anything else magical?”

“All sorts of elemental magic, sweetheart.” I squeezed her hand. “We’re fae. We live and breathe our powers. But the purpose of the Academy is control, so you won’t have to fear anyone or anything. Everyone is learning.”

“Like a university,” she said, repeating Elana’s sentiments.

“Yeah, except we learn how to hone our gifts for the betterment of society, while you attended college for, like, a job. And half of the crap you all study is worthless.” River’s cheeks pinkened as Claire met his gaze. “Sorry, I’ve studied some of the Human Realm. It’s, uh, fun to me.”

“What kind of fae are you?” she asked, eyeing him with curiosity. “I can’t sense your energy like I do Exos’s and Titus’s.”

Her words had my gaze snapping up to Exos, who merely smirked. Those words, so innocent on her lips, meant far more than she realized. If she sensed Exos the way she did me, it meant he was a potential mate for her as well.

And the slight curve of Elana’s lips confirmed she knew it all along.

As did the startled expression River wore.

Fae mated once, for life. But only with one person and always of their

element.

That Claire had found a potential connection with two fae, of different elements, was unique. No, it was unheard of.

Maybe she meant she felt Exos's aura the way I felt other Fire Fae who were a potential match to my own magic?

"I, uh, control water," River said, swallowing. "I'm a Water Fae."

"Oh," Claire murmured. "So would you be on the tour?"

He snorted. "Not of the Fire Fae Quad, no. We keep our own quadrants. Too many complications when you mingle the elements."

Her brow furrowed. "But... but I have some?" She looked to Exos. "Right?"

"You have all five," he confirmed, not meeting her gaze yet somehow knowing she'd leaned on him for the detail. "Which is why I suggested the Spirit Quad." Now he raised his gaze to mine. "Because it would be too dangerous to assign her another place to stay."

"Let's see how the tour goes," Elana interjected, playing peacekeeper yet again. "Then we can decide where she might want to reside. And for tonight, Claire will remain here. Is that all right, dear?"

Claire blinked. "I, uh, okay." She glanced at me. "Are you staying, too?"

"Uh." I glanced at Exos, who nodded. "Yes. I can stay."

"The two of you can work on control," he added. "Might as well start now. I would hate for Claire to blow up a building on campus the way she did earlier." He pushed away from the table. "I need to phone an update to my brother, so if you all will excuse me."

"Is he always this abrupt?" Claire asked as the Spirit Fae left the room.

"I don't know. I hardly know him," I admitted.

"You're not friends?"

I snorted. "He's a royal. He doesn't *befriend* fae like me."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It'd be like the Queen of England befriending a peasant," River interjected helpfully. "That'd be rare, right?"

"I, well, yes." She frowned. "So he's, like, important?"

"He's the most powerful Spirit Fae in existence," I confirmed. "And heir to the Spirit Kingdom."

"He's, like, thirty," she replied.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Elana chimed in, reminding me that she still sat with us. "Well, I'll leave you to your sleeping arrangements. River,

you're welcome to stay as well, if your curiosity continues to get the best of you." She winked as she stood. "I require a bit of sleep after all the festivities of today." She paused on the threshold, her eyes going to Claire. "It is lovely to have you with us, dear. I hope you enjoy your tour tomorrow."

Chapter 8

Claire



River stood, shuffling from foot to foot while nibbling his lip. “I, uh...”
“You don’t have to stay,” Titus told him, a smile in his voice. “You can go back to your dorm.”

Relief flooded the Water Fae’s gaze. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, man. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” He started away from the table, then paused to glance back at me. “It, uh, was good to meet you, Claire.” He immediately dropped his focus to the ground and shuffled some more.

“You, too,” I replied, confused by his bashfulness.

He gave a little wave and practically ran out of the room.

I frowned after him. “Is he afraid of me?” I asked, a little hurt. It wasn’t like I meant to keep setting shit on fire.

Titus chuckled. “No. It’s being in the Chancellor’s place. It’s, uh, sort of a big deal. She might not be royalty like Exos, but she’s very important in our society. Her home is thriving with elements as well, likely a result of her being a Spirit Fae. He probably senses water somewhere.”

“Wait, so she has two elements?” Didn’t they just say it wasn’t normal to mingle elements? Or did I misunderstand what that meant?

“Uh, no. Well, all Spirit Fae do.” He palmed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. “Elana actually doesn’t, which is considered very rare. But, like, Exos has spirit and fire. And his brother, Cyrus, is a notorious water elemental with a strong affinity for spirit. And you, it seems, have access to all the elements.”

“And that’s not normal.” It was a guess—an educated one based on the last twenty-four hours or however long I’d been here.

“No. It’s, uh, unique.”

“Sort of like Elana only having one element as a Spirit Fae?”

“Sort of. There’s probably been other Spirit Fae in history with access to only spirit; I just don’t know of any.” His lips twisted to the side. “But you, uh, you are the first and only fae to control more than two elements.”

“More than two?” I squeaked, repeating his words.

“Yeah, as I said, Spirit Fae have two. That’s the most there’s ever been.”

And I had five. I blinked. *Five*. “I.. What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “I don’t actually know,” he admitted softly. “But what I can tell you is that the Academy is your best course. They’ll teach you how to control the gifts, Claire. And it sounds like you’ll be rotating between campuses throughout the week.”

I sat back in my chair, flinching as a horde of those colorful insects fluttered into the room. My instinct to kill one earlier, like one would a fly, had overwhelmed me in the lobby. And then I’d screamed when the thing started *yelling* at me.

That kind of shit did not happen in, well, reality.

Except I’d given up considering any of this to be a dream. It was far too fucked up for even me to fathom.

Especially the bits about my mom.

“What, uh, did Exos mean when he said my mother destroyed the Spirit Kingdom?” I asked. He’d mentioned her a few times today, but I hadn’t been in the right frame of mind to hear him, let alone understand him.

“You don’t know?” Titus asked, sounding surprised.

I gave him a look. “In case it’s not clear, I was celebrating my twenty-first birthday at a college bar just... whenever ago. And I knew nothing about fae or fairies or pixies or elemental magic. Until, like, whenever I fell here.” My English professor would be appalled by the way I just explained all that, but who could expect any sort of clarity after throwing me into this insanity?

Titus nodded. “Right, yeah. Okay. Are you done eating?”

I eyed my partially finished plate. “Uh, yeah.” I couldn’t eat any more even if I tried. Not with the gymnastics going on inside my belly. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“I know,” he said. “I was just trying to figure out if we should have that conversation here or, uh, elsewhere.”

“Like upstairs?” I suggested, liking the idea of being somewhere less out in the open and away from those sparkly, chattering bugs.

“If that’s where you want to go.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know where else to go, actually.”

“You mean you don’t know where else I’m allowed to go,” I translated. “I’m not going to run again.” At least not yet. Not until I knew more about this place. Otherwise, it was a waste of effort, and Exos’s ultimatum about my *options* didn’t leave me all that enthusiastic to act out again. Because I didn’t doubt for a second that he meant his threat. He very clearly did not like me, and the feeling was mutual.

Well, mostly mutual.

Aside from the fact that I still sometimes wanted to kiss him.

I shook my head. “Let’s go upstairs,” I said, standing. Because, unlike Exos, I actually *liked* Titus. And also found him hot as hell.

A Titus and Exos sandwich would be, well, amazing. Two powerful bodies thrusting, tongues dancing, hands roaming...

And, oh my God, I needed to stop that line of thought.

Wow.

No.

Not happening.

Ever.

And, Jesus Christ, what was wrong with me to even begin to imagine that? Very clearly losing—

“Claire?” Titus asked, his brow furrowed. He’d stood with me and seemed to be waiting for me to lead.

“Right.” I turned and started toward the stairs. To lead him to my room. Which, after that last thought, probably wasn’t the brightest of ideas, but it wasn’t like Exos would be joining us. Although, I wouldn’t exactly complain if he did.

No, wait, yes, I would.

I didn’t like Exos.

He was a dick. A dick who just happened to be one of the sexiest men I’d ever seen. As well as Titus, but in entirely different ways.

I groaned, frustrated by the onslaught of images abrading my mind, each of them more graphic than the next.

“Are you okay, Claire?” Titus asked, sounding concerned.

No. “Yes. Just, uh, confused.” Not exactly a lie.

His hand caught mine at the top of the stairs, pulling me back to him as his other palm went to cup my face. Eyes the color of an evergreen gazed

down at me.

“It’s going to be all right,” he whispered, his thumb tracing my cheekbone. “I know it’s all overwhelming right now, that you feel completely off-kilter in this realm, but I think you’ll like it here. Minus maybe the pixies.” He tried for a smile that I felt resonate inside of me.

Titus had completely misunderstood my awkwardness, yet his words were exactly what I needed to hear. “Thank you,” I said, pressing my hand over his.

“You’re welcome.” His gaze dropped to my lips, heat flaring between us. It felt different from earlier, his comfort evolving into something more intense. Energy purred beneath his skin, lifting to stroke my own, inflaming a need inside me I didn’t understand. It pulled me toward him, hypnotized me, excited me, made me fly. “Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he whispered, his awe rivaling my own.

I swallowed, tilting my head back—

The clearing of a throat had us jumping apart, my feet causing me to trip right into Exos’s hard chest. He caught me with a hand on my hip, steadying me between them.

And what do you know—I’d suddenly become the center of an Exos and Titus sandwich.

My cheeks warmed at the thought, my throat going dry.

“I, uh, I mean, we were just going to my room, to, well...” Realizing how bad that all sounded, I stopped talking and gulped at Exos’s arched brow.

“Talk,” Titus said. “She wants to know about her mother, something apparently you haven’t told her yet.”

“When I tried, she blew me into a wall.” Exos tilted his head at me. “Twice.”

Flames seemed to lick across my skin. Perhaps literally. I couldn’t tell because I couldn’t seem to stop staring into Exos’s ocean-blue eyes. That magnetic pull held me in place, paralyzing me before him. Then Titus grabbed my other hip, his chest hot against my back.

Oh, fuck...

I leaned against him, then swayed forward, and back again, unable to decide whom I wanted to touch more.

What is happening to me?

“Are you finally up for listening, princess?” Exos murmured. “Or will you use that impressive wind power of yours on me again?”

“Impressive?” I repeated.

“Very,” he admitted, his gaze softening the slightest bit. His thumb swept over my lower lip, his opposite hand tightening on my hip. “So much power.” He released me from his gaze as he lifted his eyes to Titus. “Where do you want to sleep?”

“I have no idea,” he said, his warm voice tickling my hair. “We were only heading up here to talk about her mother.”

“Yes, I heard that the first time.” His thumb continued to caress my lip, as if memorizing the feel. “I was asking if you plan to sleep in her room.”

“We hadn’t gotten that far in terms of arrangements,” Titus replied.

“Hmm. Well, I’ll be down the hall. If you need a room, the one beside my guest suite is open.” His gaze dropped to mine, his mouth curling into a beautiful grin. “And, Titus?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful with this one.” His thumb pressed between my lips, lightly catching my tongue before withdrawing and letting his hand fall to his side. “Claire has a penchant for kissing strangers. Don’t you, sweetheart?”

My face went up in flames, or at least it felt that way. A vivid memory of the bar pierced my thoughts, taking me back to his first words. *Do you often kiss men you hardly know?*

Exos smiled. “Night, princess.”

“N-night,” I stammered, my hip tingling as he released me. He didn’t turn around as he sauntered down the hallway, his suit clinging to his muscular form and leaving me salivating for the body beneath.

This is seriously fucked up.

I shouldn’t be lusting after him. I shouldn’t be lusting after anyone. I should be focused on finding a way home.

“You, uh, kissed Exos?” Titus asked, his palm sliding away from me as he moved around to face me, his expression unreadable.

“Um.” I cleared my throat. “Sort of. It was a dare.”

“A dare?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Like in truth or dare.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a game. You’ve never played?”

He slowly shook his head, causing me to smile.

“It’s dumb. You’re not missing much. But essentially, it’s played with a group of friends, and you pick a truth or a dare. A truth might be, like, what’s

the craziest place you've had sex? And you have to answer honestly. A dare could be something like, go kiss that guy at the bar. That was my dare—to kiss Exos. Rick can be..." I trailed off, the thought of my friend sending a jolt through my heart.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Just whisked away to this other realm, without a thought of my past.

Would my friends miss me? Would they come looking for me? My grandparents died last year, leaving me enough money to make it through school. But I had no other family.

Titus cupped my cheek, his forest-green eyes full of emotion. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Me, too," I whispered, clearing my throat again. "C-can you tell me about my mom?" I asked, needing the distraction. "Tell me why I'm here? How I'm here?"

His throat bobbed as he nodded. "Yeah. Of course." He glanced at the corridor of doors before us. "Uh, in your room?"

"Yes, please." I didn't want to be out in the open any longer. I led the way with him trailing behind me, his hands tucked into his jeans as if he were trying not to touch me again. Probably because of Exos's little reveal. The kiss hardly counted, but yeah, I'd been pretty inappropriate that night. Then again, so had he, since he let me kiss him.

I pushed the memory from my head, focusing on the present.

Titus followed me into the room, his demeanor reserved as I closed the door.

He glanced around the flowery space, eyeing the tree in the center of the room and the vines climbing over the walls. "It's definitely Spirity in here."

"What's your place like?" I wondered.

"Black." He smirked. "I like to burn things."

"Apparently, so do I," I grumbled, lowering my gaze. How much damage had I caused without meaning to? Not that I could entirely blame myself. It wasn't like someone had trained me on how to be a... a... *fae*.

Fuck, I really do believe this, don't I?

I shivered, not wanting to admit to the logic flowing through my mind. This sort of shit was impossible. Or it should be. Yet, I couldn't deny all the magic flowing around me, the fact that flames literally shot out of my hands, that I'd destroyed a wall of, uh, vines? I shook my head, trying to clear it.

Titus caught my chin, tilting my head back to stare warmly down at me.

“You’ll learn to control it, Claire.”

“Will I?” I countered. “I didn’t even know any of this was real until today, or yesterday, or whenever it was that Exos kidnapped me.” It felt like a lifetime ago, my existence forever changed by this new world. “I don’t even understand why these powers, or whatever they are, didn’t manifest until recently. Or how to begin controlling them.”

“It’s rumored your mother hexed you,” he replied, his fingers gliding along my jaw and down my neck before dropping down to his side. “Exos would be much better at dictating the history, as he sits on the Council of Fae, but I can tell you what I know.” There was an edge to his voice when he spoke of Exos, but it didn’t reflect in the kindness of his features.

“I’d rather you tell me,” I admitted. Something told me Exos would be blunt, and perhaps purposely harsh. And I couldn’t handle that right now. I needed someone who would break me into this gently. Someone like Titus.

He palmed the back of his neck and let out a breath. “What all do you know?”

I sat on the bed, which was admirably soft considering the base was made of a tree trunk. “Uh, well...”

I considered the minimal information my grandmother gave me, while toying with the charm dangling from the chain around my neck. An old habit whenever I thought of her, as it’d been one of the last gifts she’d given me before she died.

Pinching my lips to the side, I shrugged. “Honestly, not much. I don’t remember her at all. My grandmother said she left when I was a baby and never came home. Then claimed my father died of a broken heart.”

He grimaced and leaned against the tree trunk across from me. “Right, we’ll need to go back to the beginning, then.” He crossed one ankle over the other, his hands tucking into his jean pockets. “So your mother—Ophelia Snow—was a Spirit Fae. Very powerful, as is the case with most female Spirit Fae of a certain birthright. Mortus, another Spirit Fae, was her chosen mate. They never completed the vows because she met your father soon after and created you.”

He looked extremely uncomfortable when he finished, but I had to ask: “Chosen mate? Like my mother cheated on this Morty guy?” That didn’t sound good.

“Mortus,” he corrected. “And basically, yes. When fae mate, we mate for life. There’s a power exchange that essentially binds the essences together,

and she'd begun that process with Mortus before she met your, uh, father. The rumors say she ventured into the Human Realm on some sort of assignment, then refused to come home after meeting your father. Mortus, being her intended mate, issued an edict that she return and atone for her crimes. So she did, and then she fought him."

A chill shivered down my spine. "And...?" I prompted, my voice barely a whisper.

Titus ran his fingers through his auburn strands and sighed. "When fae agree to a power binding, it's irreversible. To do so causes a disruption in the balance. That's why he called her home, to finish the bond because the elements were already fracturing due to their unresolved vows. Of course, this is all hearsay. I wasn't there when it all happened. But my familiarity with the rituals suggests the truth behind this."

"Rituals?" I repeated. "I don't understand the *bond* part."

He seemed thoughtful, as if searching for the words. Then he pushed off the tree to stand before me, holding out his hand. "Touch me."

I wasn't sure what this had to do with anything, but I pressed my palm to his, curious. "O-okay."

Titus slid to his knees, his gaze kind as he stared up at me. "Close your eyes and just describe the sensations rolling over your skin."

Swallowing, I allowed my lids to fall, confused as to why he'd derailed our conversation. But he clearly had a point to make about something.

"What do you feel, Claire?" he asked, his voice soft. "Tell me what you sense."

"I..." I licked my lips, focusing on the heat spiraling up my arm, the caress oddly familiar after only a few hours of knowing him. "Hot," I whispered. "And..." I bit my cheek, fighting the urge to lean into him, to seek comfort from his known intimacy. Some foreign part of me trusted him despite my mind rebelling against the notion.

I don't really know him.

But I want to.

I like him.

"It feels... natural... to touch you." My cheeks warmed from the admission. It also felt natural to touch Exos.

"Because you feel the connection blossoming between your essence and mine," he whispered, his opposite hand cupping my cheek. "Fae are essence-based. We rely on our links to the elements to guide us, and when we find

someone we are compatible with, we gravitate toward that person. My Fire calls to yours, and vice versa. Just as it seems your Spirit is intrigued by Exos. Definitely not common, but nothing about you is ordinary.”

“O-oh,” I breathed, unable to say more. While his words made sense, they also didn’t. He’d essentially just implied that I was attracted to two men.

Two men I hardly knew.

Two men who couldn’t be any more different.

Two men who turned me on like no other.

This realm is fucking with my mind, and apparently my libido.

Titus tilted his head to the side, his hands still on me. “Ophelia, your mother, had allowed her affinity to bind itself to Mortus through a series of rituals that the fae undergo when solidifying a mating. But she didn’t finish it. Instead, she went to Earth, created you, and only returned when Mortus threatened to go after her. And then she fought him. I don’t know the specifics, but I know the outcome.”

I gazed into his eyes, waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t, I said, “Tell me.”

His expression fell, his touch turning cool against my skin. “Ninety percent of the Spirit Fae died of unknown causes that day, destroying the kingdom. Your mother died with them. Mortus lived. And it seems to have awoken a curse, or that’s the myth, anyway.”

“A curse?” I repeated, my gaze darting back and forth across his face. “What curse?”

“No Spirit Fae has been able to procreate since that day. It’s said your mother’s betrayal cursed the Spirit Fae, sentencing their species to death.”

I gasped. “What?”

“There’s more.” He looked away, staring at the vines on the wall beside us. “Spirit Fae are life and death, the balance between all the elements. Without them...” He paused, clearing his throat and finally glancing back at me. “Without them, we’re expected to die.”

Chapter 9

Claire



I stared at the vines above me, Titus's words repeating over and over in my mind.

My mother cheated on her betrothed with my dad and created me.

Then fought her betrothed to the death.

And created a curse that would apparently kill fae kind.

I blinked. Numb. Cold. Alone. How did one just accept all that information? It wasn't as if I cared much for my mother, having been abandoned by her at birth. But holy shit, what kind of person did this to other people? Er, fae, or whatever. It didn't matter.

My mother had caused a pandemic. On purpose? By accident? I didn't know. But that sort of legacy painted my mom in a horrid light.

It made her sound evil.

"Claire?" Titus murmured, having moved to sit beside me on the bed.

"Still processing," I replied.

"Maybe we should talk about it more tomorrow?" he suggested.

I nodded mutely, not sure I could handle any more tonight. Hell, I couldn't handle any more, period. "You must hate my mother," I realized. "Oh God, everyone will hate me, too." My chest ached at the sudden understanding. I would be condemned with her as the result of her infidelity, not just to Mortus, but to fae kind.

"Depends on their opinion of the prophecy," Titus muttered, blowing out a breath. "But yeah, I think sleep is probably a good idea."

"What prophecy?" I asked, ignoring his idea despite knowing I was at my limit for information.

"It's a tale, Claire. A myth. It's not true. Honestly, I think the whole curse

thing is bullshit, too.”

“Then what is it?” I pushed. “Why would it impact someone’s opinion of me?”

“Because the prophecy says a fae with access to all the elements will break the curse,” he replied flatly. “Or doom us all.”

“Oh.” I started nodding. “Yeah, that’s brilliant. So I’m the daughter of a woman who destroyed the Spirit Fae, and possibly all fae. And I have access to all the elements, which could either rectify the situation or kill you all.” I gave a hysterical laugh that bubbled into a sob as I curled into myself. “This is just too much.”

I’d never experienced an easy life, having lost my parents before I could walk and being raised by two aloof grandparents who saw me as more of a burden than a gift. But this definitely took the cake.

“And you all want me to go to an Academy tomorrow? With a bunch of people who will clearly hate or fear me?” Another chuckle burst out of me. “Yeah, that’s going to go well.” Fuck. “*Fuck.*” I wanted to scream. To rant. To run. To fly. To *something*.

“Claire,” Titus murmured, his hand on my shoulder.

I brushed him off, but he gripped me harder, tugging me to him.

“*Claire.*”

I ignored him, too busy shaking my head back and forth as I laugh-cried at the insanity of this entire situation. It was as if I’d fallen into a wonderland of crazy people with stories and expectations that made no sense. And this bizarre *energy* that I couldn’t control. It swam around me, urging me to use it, to destroy, to create, to *burn*.

“Claire!” Titus yelled, his arms wrapping around me. “*Stop.*”

“Stop what?” I asked on a giggle that sounded maniacal to my ears. The entire world was crashing around me, and he wanted me to, what, relax? Breathe? Focus? Were those the words he was saying? No. It sounded like Exos. In my head. No, my ear. Whatever. I just wanted to hide, to never come out, and ignore everything around me. To disappear.

To leave.

A punch to my gut had me cringing, the power strong and encompassing, yanking me out of my state and back into the present to stare into two glowering blue eyes. Bright with power. Consuming me. Forcing me to yield. To submit. I didn’t understand it, tried to fight it, but the magnetic pull was too great, overwhelming every part of my mind and grounding me in the

present. His hands were on my cheeks, bands of muscular steel were around my waist, a hot body pressed to my back.

I blinked several times, confused. When did Exos get here? And why was Titus holding me so tightly?

“That’s it,” Exos breathed, his mouth dangerously close to mine. “Most fae come into their power slowly, but the hex your mo—” He cleared his throat. “You have twenty-one years of pent-up elements slamming into you at once. That you’re even conscious is a miracle. It shows a strength very few possess, a strength I admire. But I need you to use that strength to control yourself, Claire. This volatile behavior is what the Council is afraid of, why they don’t want you to attend the Academy. But I pushed for you to be allowed, have volunteered to train and guard you myself. And I will not fail. Do you understand me?”

Glittering waves. That was what his gaze reminded me of, so intense, so powerful, so alluring. I fell into him as one would an ocean, allowing the tide to pull me under with a force that stole my breath, and found peace beneath the roaring wake. Blissful and dark and mine.

Another strength came from behind in the form of an inferno, jerking me backward as my soul seemed to fight for control over them both.

Exos had asked if I understood.

But I didn’t.

None of this made sense, my mind and body overwhelmed by the dueling sensations and my heart ripping in two. How could I desire two men? Now? Here? In this foreign place?

“She needs sleep,” the fiery one said.

“I know,” Spirit replied. “Guard her?”

“With my life.” A hot vow spoken into my hair.

“I’ll be nearby,” Spirit whispered, warm lips brushing my forehead. “Try to rest, Claire. We have a lot to discuss tomorrow.”

Someone mumbled. Maybe me. I didn’t know, couldn’t grasp the silky strands of reality floating around me. But oh, my ocean was leaving. That peace. I reached for him, hitting air instead, but a breath into my mind put me at ease.

Still there.

Still with me.

Still easing my pain.

My Spirit.

My other half.

The flames dancing inside me cooled, soothed by the presence of yet another, the one who called to the embers of my soul. I stopped trying to decipher the meaning and gave in to the sensation, trusting those around me to keep me afloat, to never let me drown.

“Good night, Claire,” the voice behind me whispered, arms holding me tight. Somewhere in my mind, I noted the lack of clothing, my dress singed into ash around me. But I was too exhausted to verify, too consumed with the need to rest to validate my modesty.

Sleep sounded nice.

Maybe when I awoke, it would be to reality.

Yet somehow I knew this was my life now. My present and future. A fae teetering on the brink of disaster while trying to master elements I couldn't possibly understand.

I might die here.

But I also might live.



Ugh. Someone had left the heat on too high again. It felt as if I were wrapped up in a scorching blanket, singeing my hairs and leaving a trail of sweat in its wake. This was why I preferred a fan at night, a subtle breeze to help shift the hot air.

Ah, there it was, subtly brushing over my sweltering skin. *More*, I urged, craving the icy chill to cool the flames inching around me, consuming the room.

Wait... I flew upward, my mouth gaping wide at the swirl of power overwhelming the suite.

In the fae world.

Where I now resided.

Surrounded by chaos.

“Titus!” I shrieked, slamming my palm into his bare chest. His eyes flew open, his body going on alert as fast as mine.

He frowned at the maelstrom of elements. “Well, that’s, um, different.”

“Different?” I repeated on a squeak.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen anything like that.” He shook his head, then grabbed my hand. “Okay, crash course. I need you to concentrate on pulling the elements to you. Think of it like the hop game where you catch the flurries.”

I gaped at him. “What?” *Flurries? Hop game?*

“Er, right.” He winced. “Uh, do you have an activity where you try to grab things with your mind?” At my blank stare, he sighed. “Okay, focus on the core of the fire, that blue flicker in the middle, and call it to you.”

“Call it to me,” I repeated. “Right.”

“Come on, sweetheart. Trust me and try.” His dimples flickered. “Please?”

I must still be dreaming, I decided, giving in to the lunacy of the moment. “All right.” I focused on the bright blue of the flame, as he suggested, and bit my lip. *Now what?* Titus had said to call the fire. Okay. But how? Like, was I supposed to talk to it?

Pinching my mouth to the side, I shrugged. *Come here.*

Nothing.

Well, of course nothing. Why would it listen to me?

Except I felt a flicker of something in response. An odd sort of heated string, invisible to my eye but tangible against my finger.

Weird.

I tugged on it, my eyebrows lifting as the flame danced a little in response.

No way...

I tried again, my jaw dropping as the inferno definitely responded. With a twirl of my finger, the blazing colors rotated into a sphere, shrinking as I willed it to resemble the size of a baseball, and landed in the palm of my hand.

“Excellent,” Titus praised. “Now use that mist over there to put it out.”

Mist?

Oh.

There was a shower happening in the corner of the room, watering what appeared to be a bed of flowers that reminded me of the ones I’d lain on in the field. Coincidence? Maybe.

Another strand tugged at my being as I willed the water to condense and blow toward my hand. My palm sizzled as the elements met, a deep-seated

peace overwhelming my senses as all three elements—air, water, and fire—mingled together over my skin.

“Beautiful,” Titus breathed, running a finger through the aftermath of my miracle. “I think the flowers can stay.”

I gazed at the patch in question, frowning. “Are you saying I did that?”

“You did,” he replied, grinning. “Earth and spirit, mingled as one. Not only did you create them, but you also used the soil to help the flowers grow and water to make them bloom.”

“And the fire?” I prompted.

“A natural defense. You protected us in your sleep, the air keeping it from burning us or the walls. I’m actually really impressed.” He tucked a strand of unruly hair behind my ear. “Exos was right. You’re very powerful.” He studied my face, as if memorizing my features, his awe a palpable emotion floating between us. “So gorgeous.”

“Me or the flowers?” It came out huskier than I intended, my body alight with a different awareness now that the panic had subsided. The intimacy of what I’d just done, with his coaching, stirred something inside me. A dark yearning, utterly inappropriate and yet satisfyingly right.

“You,” he whispered, his green irises lowering to my mouth. “You’re gorgeous.” His gaze continued downward, his pupils enlarging, his lips parting in awe.

It took me a moment to realize why.

My dress had definitely disappeared last night, leaving me naked beside him. And while that should have alarmed me, it didn’t. Somehow I trusted him not to act on it, perhaps because he’d held me for the last however many hours without harm. Or maybe because I *wanted* him to see me.

“Titus,” I breathed, my fingers running up his bare, muscular arms to his shoulders.

“Claire,” he replied, my name a husky melody that seemed to center between my thighs.

“Is this pull normal?” I asked, threading my fingers through his auburn strands. “This instant connection that makes me want to kiss you?”

“It’s the fire,” he explained, his emerald gaze smoldering as it lifted to mine. “Your element is calling to mine.”

“To mate?”

“To test the potential for mating.” His palm slid to the back of my neck, branding my skin and causing me to lean closer to him. “It’s a call to play, to

explore the boundaries and the potential between us.”

“What happens if we give in?” I whispered, my lips angling toward his.

“We’re bound for a month, where your power tastes mine and vice versa.” The words were warm against my mouth, a flicker of fire dancing between us and kissing the air with unspoken promise.

“A month?” I repeated, deciding I liked the sound of that.

“A trial period, yes.”

“Like dating?” I surmised.

“Yes, I believe that’s what you call it in the Human Realm. A courtship period where we’re exclusive to one another.”

I frowned. “Just from a kiss?”

He nodded, his free hand going to my exposed hip, holding me. “You would not be able to touch another Fire Fae until our courtship wore off.”

“That sounds...”

“Binding,” he murmured. “Yes. That’s what you’ve done to Exos.”

His words startled me from the stupor overwhelming my mind. “What?”

“You kissed him, thereby initiating the trial.” He swallowed, his grip tightening. “And because you are made of various elements, you can entertain more than one courtship at a time.”

“Oh,” I whispered, my eyes widening. “Is that normal?”

“No.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “Not at all.”

“Oh,” I repeated, my voice hoarse. “Is that why I want you both?”

His deep chuckle vibrated the sensual atmosphere around us, scattering goose bumps along my limbs. “Your elemental gifts crave us both, yes.”

“And a kiss binds us?”

“Temporarily, yes. If it’s desired and agreed upon by both parties.”

Meaning Exos wanted the bond, too. Or had he only yearned to kiss me? I pushed away the thought, preferring to focus on the now, on the way Titus’s hands felt against my skin. His breath, a fiery intoxication warming my lips, urging me to close the gap between us, to take what I desired and more. To bind us. To explore him. To taste him. To *feel* him.

I slid onto his lap, my legs straddling his own, my arms wrapping around his neck. “Kiss me, Titus,” I whispered, my mouth brushing the words against his. “Please kiss me.”

He smiled, his fingers threading through my hair, taking control by angling my head to his liking. “Try not to light the room on fire, sweetheart.”

“No promises,” I mouthed, the embers already coiling in my stomach.

The erection seated firmly between my thighs didn't help, nor did the way his chest burned mine as he tugged me closer, his arm a brand around my lower back.

He led with his tongue, not bothering to ease me into our embrace. It wasn't needed. One touch unleashed the passion between us in an explosion of sensation and lust. My nails dug into his shoulders, anchoring me to him as he dominated my mouth in a way no other man had. It left me breathless, needy, and moaning for more, his experience in this arena detonating all my expectations and laying a new foundation in his path.

Hungers only he could satiate.

A passion only he could cool.

Such fire.

A blaze that trembled over my skin, lighting up every fiber of my being.

"Titus," I moaned, his body owning mine in that moment. He could do whatever he wanted, however he desired, and I would let him. I'd never felt more alive, more energized in my entire life. It was as if he'd introduced me to a new level of existence, one aflame with endless heat and fiery sensations.

And all he'd done was kiss me.

Deeply.

Devouring me to my very soul.

"More," I urged. "Please."

He groaned, the arm around my lower back pulling me closer. "You're killing me, Claire." He tugged my lower lip into his mouth, sucking hard, the hand in my hair tightening. "We need to take this slow."

"Why?" I shifted to press my heated center to his cock, loving the way he felt between my legs. So right. So perfect. So *mine*.

The possessive urge to claim him swept over me, sending a jolt to my system and causing my eyes to widen. I never did this with men I wasn't dating steadily, let alone one I just met. A kiss, yes.

But I required monogamy before sex.

I needed to know the man.

Which was why I'd only been with two—my high school boyfriend and Tucker from last year. And I'd made both of them wait almost six months.

Not six hours, or however long it'd been.

Titus pressed his mouth to mine, slower, less demanding than before. "It's overwhelming," he whispered, his lips touching mine with each word. "You have to ease into it, or the elements will take over. They're very much a

part of us, of who we are, of the decisions we make. And nature doesn't always listen to reason. We rely on our minds for that."

Another kiss, softer, coaxing, his tongue gently tracing mine.

I fell into the sensation, my body igniting from within and sending another wave of warmth through my belly.

Fuck, I wanted him.

But I didn't know him.

It was all so confusing, so consuming, so empowering. I shook beneath the onslaught of emotions, my grip on him tightening, my breathing quickening in my chest.

"Titus..."

"It's okay, Claire," he whispered, shifting us so I lay on my back, his lower body settling between my thighs.

His lips remained firm, his tongue a dominant presence in my mouth. Embers seemed to dance over our skin, his palm trailing a fiery path down my side before grabbing my hip to still my movements. I hadn't even realized I was lifting myself against him until he stopped me, his touch a welcome claim.

"You feel like heaven beneath me," he murmured, his lips tasting my cheek before moving to my neck. "Fuck, Claire." He nibbled my racing pulse, sliding down to my collarbone and then back up to my mouth. "We need to sleep, sweetheart."

"I'm not tired," I replied, arching into him on a luscious sigh.

He chuckled, his lips brushing mine. "Trust me, I wish that were true. But we both know you're exhausted, and pushing this any further wouldn't be right."

"It feels right." The words were a soft exhale, my body melting beneath his. "It feels amazing."

"It does," he agreed, his voice husky and hot. "Too damn right." His tongue slid into my mouth again, the taste of him searing me from the inside out. I couldn't think beneath his onslaught, the sensations too great, the fire brewing inside us a combustible element awaiting our permission to erupt.

I whimpered and writhed beneath him, a wanton woman unleashed beneath a passion I didn't fully understand. His name fell from my lips, a chant and a plea, my nipples chafing against his hot, hard chest. I needed more. I needed him. I needed *this*.

"Enough," a deep voice said, reverberating the walls around us, yanking

me from the chains of desire. Dark blue pools met mine as I glanced upward into a face so beautiful my heart threatened to combust.

Exos.

“I told you to train her, not fuck her,” he growled, his words dousing me in a wave of cold water. “She doesn’t understand our rules, our world, or the bonds that bind. Think with your head, Titus, not your dick.”

Titus cursed, his face falling to my neck as Exos stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. “*Fuck.*”

I suddenly felt cold despite the blanket of heat on top of me and shivered as he rolled away, his palms digging into his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Claire,” he whispered. “I... I... I wasn’t thinking.”

Neither was I, I wanted to say back to him, but couldn’t, too flabbergasted by what just happened. I’d almost begged him to take me. Had wanted him to more than anything in the world. It’d been a temporary escape from the craziness of this realm, of this new life, and he’d almost given it to me.

Except Exos had interrupted.

I didn’t know if I wanted to thank him or punch him.

Confused and overwhelmed, and slightly embarrassed, I curled into a ball, tucking my knees to my chest and fighting for the heat of seconds ago to flicker through my veins.

Titus responded by pulling the blankets up around me, his silence a burden at my back.

I didn’t know what to say to him. Did he want an apology as well? A compliment? A request for that to happen again?

I had no idea because I didn’t *know* him.

Yet I’d been about to let him inside me in the most intimate way.

All to escape a reality I wasn’t ready to face.

And because it had felt all too right.

He pressed a kiss to my spine, right between my shoulder blades, then higher against the back of my neck, and slowly slid his arm around my waist. “Is this okay?” he asked softly, a hint of wariness in his tone. “Or do you prefer not to be touched?”

I swallowed, considering his words, another shudder rattling my limbs. How had I gone from feeling so hot to so cold?

Because he took away his heat, I realized.

He began to remove his arm again, taking with him the last vestiges of

warmth around me, and I dug my fingernails into his forearm, desperate to keep him close. Needy, yes. But I couldn't stand the thought of being frozen and alone.

Titus provided a comfort that felt familiar while also serving as a new experience. And I craved both.

"Stay," I whispered. "Please."

He guided me into his body, his arm folding around me in a protective manner as his heated chest enveloped my bare back.

A temporary heaven.

Or maybe it qualified as hell.

I neither knew nor cared, too comforted by his touch to debate any further.

"Sweet dreams, Claire," he whispered.

Dreams, I thought. Do those even exist anymore?

My eyes fell closed, the nightmares of my existence sprouting to life behind my eyes in the vision of my mother. A cruel woman destined to destroy the fae.

Except, when I looked her in the eyes, all I saw was a vision of myself.

No, there were no dreams here.

Not for me.

Only delusions of fate.

My fate.

Chapter 10

Titus



I *'m an asshole.*

Tightening my grip on Claire's hip while she slept, I tried to think of any angle in this situation where I wasn't a bastard, but came up with ashes. Exos had done the right thing by stopping me before I went too far. Claire didn't know me—didn't know this world. I didn't mean to take advantage of her, but damn, the pull between us was so strong.

She destroyed our clothes. That shouldn't have been possible. My wardrobe was customized for Fire Fae. Yet she'd demolished the fibers with the ease of a millennia-old fae. And fuck if that hadn't turned me on even more.

Her power was an aphrodisiac, seducing my fire and exciting a need I could hardly control. Not an excuse or even an explanation, just a fact. But I needed to do better.

She deserved better.

Embers flickered where my skin touched Claire's, reacting to our newly established bond—a bond that would awaken the deepest fiery passions innate to the carnal Fire Fae. Claire wasn't my first courting, but it felt different with her. Almost like I couldn't keep my thoughts straight and our dancing elements went straight to my dick.

Fuck it. Exos was right. I couldn't trust myself to be this close to her. We needed to get up, anyway.

I eased away from Claire and grimaced when she curled into herself and whimpered in her sleep.

"So cold," she mumbled.

"Shh," I whispered, drawing a finger down her cheek and sending more

of my fire into her. “Today’s a big day. We can’t cocoon in our element all morning.”

She groaned but didn’t open her eyes, as if fighting the urge to wake up. She clutched the charred blanket closer to her chin and turned her face into the pillow.

Holding her through the night had been a selfish pleasure for me. I’d tried to be strong and give her the space she needed, but she’d demanded my touch. Perhaps I’d been weak to oblige her, or maybe I needed her, too.

I wasn’t going to fool myself into thinking I meant more to her than what I was: an ally in a world of strangers. Maybe our connection would only make things more difficult for her, or maybe it was the anchor she needed right now.

Or a distraction.

I shoved that thought aside and forced myself out of bed. Elana’s guest room of vines and mist and foreign elements seeped into me. I shivered, missing the warm embrace of the Fire Dorms.

Looking down, I smirked as ash fell from my naked body. So much power in the fireball that was Claire. *How did you do it?* I wondered again.

A soft touch across my shoulder blade made me stiffen.

Damn, I hadn’t even heard her move.

“Where, uh, are your clothes?” she asked softly, as if reading my mind.

Her fingers continued to explore my back, running over the long scars I’d earned during my time in the ring. Fighting without powers didn’t protect me from the harsh edge of a blade.

“You burned them off, sweetheart,” I said with a grin, making sure not to turn around. She didn’t need to see all of me. Yet. “I don’t suppose Elana keeps extra pairs of pants around here?” It was more of a rhetorical question since I doubted Claire knew.

She drew in a soft gasp, and then I realized she was laughing. “Are you going to have to walk out of here naked?”

I finally turned enough to peer over my shoulder and raised a brow. “You sound far too pleased by that idea.”

Her gaze dipped, and I knew she wanted to see what I’d been keeping from her last night, but that was our intimate link pushing her—or her grief. I wouldn’t take advantage of her again, even if I thought for just a moment that I could help her forget everything.

That maybe she could help *me* forget everything.

Clearing my throat, I forced myself to bring up the one topic that would dispel the moment, to remind her of our predicament.

“Exos might have some clothes I can borrow.” The words hurt, but they had to be said. This was the connection between us driving her emotions and reactions. She was too inexperienced as a fae to understand that. Taking advantage of that would be wrong.

She hesitated before her touch retreated, leaving me cold. The impulse to lean back into her overwhelmed me for just a moment before I doused the growing flames in my chest.

“Exos.” She repeated the name as if she’d just remembered last night. “I... I’m connected to him, too.”

The raw emotion in her voice had me glancing back to find her cheeks flushing pink. Her blue eyes snapped up to find mine, reminding me that she was a Spirit Fae, better suited to one of her own kind.

No.

The very thought of leaving her to fend for herself against Exos—one of the only potential mates left among the Spirit Fae—made me cringe. She may have linked with him, but she needed me to keep him in line.

Gods, I didn’t care if she bonded with a fae of every element, as long as I could stand by her side. We shared fire. That was the hottest of all the matings, one no fae could share with her, apart from me.

Taking her hand in mine, tiny flames sparked between us, causing her eyes to widen. “Yes, you’ve created a connection with him. But *our* bond is strong, even for a courtship,” I admitted.

She smiled, making something inside me flip a switch. “Stronger than my bond with Exos?”

She meant it as a tease, but I sensed the tension beneath her words. Even though she couldn’t possibly know what it really meant, she clearly felt some guilt at having bound both of us at the same time. Her eyes searched mine, pleading for my approval and assurance.

“Not stronger,” I said, drawing the words out slowly as I ran my fingers up the soft curve of her elbow. “Just different.”

Her gaze dropped. Not the answer she wanted to hear. “He barged in last night. How did he...?”

I lightly traced her shoulder before cupping her cheek. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she leaned into my touch. She wasn’t going to like my response, but Claire deserved the truth. She needed to know what it meant to

be bonded.

“He sensed your desire,” I said softly. “Whenever you are, well, *aroused*, he’ll know. As will I.”

She flinched away. “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

Chuckling, I wrapped a blanket around my waist. I was so busy trying to cover myself to prevent tempting her that I forgot she was completely naked as well. She allowed the charred fabric to pull away from her, revealing lush, sensual skin that glowed with the heat of our connection. She watched me, waiting to see what I would do.

It took every ember of willpower to look away from her. If I indulged myself even for a moment, I’d toss away all my reservations and take her right now.

She’s grieving.

She’s scared.

She needs you to be strong.

She doesn’t understand the bond.

I reminded myself of all the things the Halfling was likely going through right now. Today was going to be rough for her. She needed to see the Academy, and more so, she needed to understand how important it was for her to be here. The alternatives weren’t choices at all.

Isolation...

Death...

The sooner she faced the Academy and fae society, the sooner she would be equipped to deal with her new life. My needs were nothing compared to hers.

Before I could look at Claire again and spiral into the depths of our newfound bond, Exos blundered into the bedroom.

Claire snatched her knees to her chest and cried out. “Exos!”

I would have offered her the blanket to cover herself, but there was something in Exos’s eyes that said our nakedness was the least of his problems right now. “You two. Get dressed.” His gaze flickered to the doorway, and I sensed the low boom of the ground I’d missed a moment before. “Now.”



“News has spread that the Halfling is here.” Elana folded her hands in front of her dress and let out a long sigh. Vines budding with blue flowers wound through her hair, a living ornament that made her look ethereal and regal.

I frowned and bit my tongue—hard. The rumor was already on campus. River had been the one to tell me about the Halfling, but the fact that a bunch of unruly students were causing a scene right outside Elana’s estate? That didn’t just happen. Someone had told them Claire was here.

Not River, because I knew him and he would never do that, but *someone* had.

“What do they want?” Claire asked, her voice taut as her fingers clenched around mine. I shouldn’t be indulging her need to touch me, or my need to touch her, but somehow our hands kept finding one another without my permission.

Elana stared at Claire, her expression soft and wise. “Forgive my bluntness, but they’re protesting.”

“Protesting?” she squeaked and dug her fingernails into my skin.

I tugged at my borrowed clothes with my free hand. They were far too tight around my biceps and chest, and the agonizing frills ruffling around my elbows made me feel like a complete moron. Which, I supposed, was Exos’s goal when he gave me this pompous outfit.

His wry smile confirmed it. “Don’t worry, Claire. Everyone will be so taken aback by Titus in royal garb that you’ll be yesterday’s news.”

I suppressed a retort for the jackass, but Exos was right. This would help take some of the attention off of Claire, which was the least I could do considering her situation.

However, even my comical attire couldn’t win Claire’s attention. Her gaze was locked on the hall that glittered with motes that had drifted in with the morning sunlight. Low chanting sounded outside the door in our old language, which Claire wouldn’t understand, the words making my teeth clench.

Dooms-bringer.

Finish what your mother started.

Fae killer.

“What are they saying?” Claire asked as she tilted her head to the side.

Exos plucked Claire’s hand from mine and gave her knuckles a kiss, startling all of us out of our unease. “Nothing of importance, princess.” His eyes held hers for a beat before he bowed, releasing her as quickly as he’d grabbed her. “I, uh, need to ready our future accommodations.” He refocused on me. “I trust you’ll be able to give Claire a proper tour and bring her to the Fire Quad?”

“No one will touch her,” I vowed, not because Exos had ordered me to play guardian, but because my blood boiled knowing how many fae wanted Claire dead. Maybe it was just the courtship bond, but instinct told me to shred apart anyone who dared to whisper a threat within her vicinity.

Which was apparently half the entire fucking Academy, if the chants outside were anything to go by.

Exos leaned in, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Don’t kill anyone. Just show her around campus. Keep your head on your shoulders.” He gave me a once-over. “And your dick in your pants.”

That last part was totally unnecessary.

Okay, maybe a little bit necessary after last night.

But for fuck’s sake, the jackass really needed to cool it with all the damn orders.

“Come on, Claire,” I said, unable to muster anything more respectable than a slight bowing of my head to Exos. “We’ve been given our *instructions* for the day.”

She swallowed hard, but I felt the heat of her trust where her skin touched mine, our hands instinctively finding each other again. It told me that as long as I was with her, perhaps she could face anything, even a protesting crowd of fae.

Elana waved her hand, causing the bangles on her wrist to jingle. The wide doors of her estate opened with low groans, reminding me of ancient trees bowing in the wind.

Sunlight poured into the foyer and illuminated the golden spirals around Claire’s face. I wanted to reach out and run my fingers through her silky strands, gather her hair in my fist, and kiss her.

Again.

Fuck. This uncontrollable need to take her was going to be the death of me if I didn’t learn how to tamper it. A tour would help. Assuming we could

make it through the masses.

“Now or never,” I said, more to myself than to Claire.

“I’d rather get the shit show over with now,” Claire replied, surprising me with the vigor of her words. She shrugged. “Beats staying in this, uh, forest of a house. Show me your fae world, Titus.” She squeezed my hand, her gaze warm and trusting.

A smile twitched at my lips as we stepped out onto the dried leaves in front of the estate. The chanting near the front gates ceased, students’ eyes going wide. “Here we go,” I said, pulling Claire along at my side.

“There’s a lot of them,” she whispered.

I snorted. “Yeah. I’m not concerned.” I created a fireball in my hand and threw it up in the air, before catching it. Many of the fae at the gates took several steps back, some even going as far as to leave. They all knew me, understood my gifts and how powerful I could be in a full rage.

Begrudgingly, I also had to admit that borrowing Exos’s royal attire helped matters. Because they would see *his* symbol on my clothing, which boldly announced my actions to be official orders. And fucking with those orders was a good way to end up in the fire pits.

I tossed a ball at the gates for fun, smirking as several more fae dispersed.

Another flame appeared along the periphery, the signature belonging to Exos, who stood behind us in the doorway wearing a stoic mask.

That caused almost the entire crowd to die, the students not wanting to mess with me or the notorious Spirit Royal.

“Yeah, you’ll be fine,” I told Claire, winking.

She gaped back and forth between me and Exos. “Did he just...?”

“Yep.” I glanced back at him with a nod that he returned before disappearing into the house. “He’s just throwing his weight behind mine, not that it’s needed with this ridiculous outfit.”

Claire giggled, her cheeks pinkening. “You look...”

“Handsome?” I prompted, waggling my brows. “Hot? Sexy as fuck?”

Her laugh was music to my ears, even as she shook her head. “You look hideous.”

I covered my heart, feigning a wounded expression. “Claire... How could you? You know my ego is fragile.”

She snorted. “Somehow I doubt that.”

I slung my arm around her shoulders, tugging her into my side. “You’re right. I’m pretty sure even I make this outfit look good.”

She patted my abdomen. “Pretty sure you don’t.”

“Yeah, yeah. You want this tour or not?” I teased. The majority of the onlookers were gone, leaving Claire much more at ease beside me.

“Yeah, I do.” She gave me a small smile. “I’m actually a little curious.”

“Just a little?”

She ducked her head shyly, her blue eyes sparkling with power. “Scared, too. But mostly curious.”

“You have nothing to fear, sweetheart. I’ve got you.” I kissed her forehead, the action so natural, as if we’d been doing this for years, not hours. Not wanting to dig too deeply into that realization, I released her shoulders and held out my hand. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” she whispered, placing her palm in mine.

The beautiful day unfolded around us as we moved, trees seeming to bow to Claire in her wake. She had no idea what kind of power she exuded in this world, how palpable her essence was to the kingdom surrounding us. Yet, she seemed quite taken with the atmosphere, her free hand curling into the air with each step, her eyes dancing with wonder.

“It’s so enchanting,” she breathed.

“And you’ve not even seen the Academy yet,” I replied, smiling.

“How far is—” Her mouth fell open as the famous iron gates came into view down the flower-laden hill. “Holy shit, we are not in Kansas anymore.”

I blinked. “What?”

“You know, the…” She trailed off and shook her head. “Never mind. It’s a line from a well-known movie.”

“Oh, human cinema.” I smiled. “We don’t really have that here, preferring to spend our time outdoors and whatnot.” Or at the gym. Or in a fighting ring. “Although, I guess they kind of televise some of our sporting events, but it’s not the same. It’s all carried by elemental magic, sort of unfolding in replays. And yeah, I’m boring you. Let’s head that way.”

I pointed to the main entrance, charmed by four of the elements dancing around it. Beyond it were the renowned stone structures of the school, all laced with greenery and adorned in flowers. At least, the main buildings were. Each quad catered to the various elementals. I’d show her the charred towers of the Fire Quad first. It wouldn’t be as lively as the Chancellor’s home, but just as captivating.

“Are you, like, supposed to be in class right now?” she asked as we walked.

“Nah, you arrived at a good time. It’s our downtime right now between courses. Everything starts back up tomorrow.”

“Like a weekend,” she surmised.

“Similar, yeah. But we do six days on, six days off. Helps keep up the creative flow and allows us to participate in the mandatory intramurals.”

“Intramurals?” she repeated, her gaze on the water dancing with fire along the gate as we passed beneath it.

“Fae mingling.” I smirked. “It’s Elana’s way of trying to make all the fae get along, by forcing us to engage in physical activities and other general education courses together. Like Human Studies. We also have a morning or afternoon of obligatory gymnasium activities during our six days on—which, again, includes all the fae.”

Her brow puckered. “You don’t get along otherwise?”

I shrugged. “Some of us do. Some of us don’t. There’s a council that guides us, but each kingdom has its own governing structure.”

“So... you’re like different countries?”

“From what I understand of your world, it’d be more similar to continents.” I took a right through a long woodsy corridor between two of the stone buildings. “This is the main campus, by the way. Where the intramural courses are that I mentioned. Then each quad caters to the specific fae, so I’ll show you Fire Quad first since I’m most familiar with it.”

We stepped into a courtyard where several fae were mingling, all of whom went silent upon spotting us.

Claire gave a little wave that had them all taking several steps backward, their eyes going wide and whispers in the ancient language taking over.

It’s her.

I heard she caused the quake last night.

Evil.

Why would they allow her here?

She’s going to kill us all.

Claire’s cheeks pinkened, her inability to understand their words not mattering. Their tones said it all.

“Enough,” I said, irritated.

“It’s fine,” Claire whispered. “I get it.”

“It’s not fine.” I pulled her across the courtyard, only to find a row of fae waiting along the pathway that led to the Fire Quad.

Fuck.

A trio of fae approached us, their hips swaying and merciless eyes gleaming with mischief.

Ignis and her bratty friends.

“Well, I must say, the Halfling is not what I expected,” Ignis said as she curled writhing fire around her fingertips in a blatant display of aggression. “She’s so... *blonde.*”

Claire narrowed her eyes, but she didn’t seem intimidated. Her gaze dipped slightly to the flames, betraying her moment’s hesitation that she’d noticed anything amiss.

“Ah, yeah. I know girls like you,” she said, her voice low and full of foreboding. She raised her chin and peered down her nose at Ignis. “You think you have everyone wrapped around your little finger. Well, luckily, there are bitches in the Human Realm, too, and I don’t have time for them.” She tugged at my hand. “Come on, Titus. I’d much rather watch you play with fire.”

Sickle sent a stream flooding in front of Claire, and I jerked her back before she could step into it and get caught in the trap. Aerie laughed, sending a breeze to splash the water onto Claire.

It sizzled on contact.

Good, Claire was pissed.

That meant she would focus on her fire abilities—abilities I could help her with.

Ignis chuckled and stepped close enough to reach me. “Oh, Titus, are you going to let her boss you around like that?” She moved to wrap her fingers around my bicep but hissed when the contact burned her. “Fuck, Titus!” Her eyes went wide, and she bounced her gaze between us, her wild auburn curls fanning out as heat spread across her face. She let out a rude laugh and covered her mouth. “Oh, seriously? You and I fuck, and then the next day, you initiate a courtship bond with a Halfling? Oh, this is too good.”

Gods. I’d almost forgotten about the other night, with Claire being so close. Ignis had tried to force the bond, which, by fae custom, meant I owed it to her to try to reciprocate. But clearly, I broke that rule.

“*What?*” Sickle screeched, her voice like nails on a chalkboard. “That’s a violation!”

I sighed. *Here we go.*

“Can’t expect much from him,” Aerie put in. “I mean, you knew he was a player before you let him lure you into bed, Ig.”

“He said he loved me.”

“Oh, for the love of the gods, cut that shit out,” I demanded. “You know I didn’t.”

Her lower lip wobbled. “And now you deny it?” She shook her head, real live tears popping into her eyes. “Three times, Titus. We made love three times.”

“I thought we fucked,” I countered, livid. “Which is it, Ignis?”

“How can you be so cold?” She perfected the art of woman hurt. “Oh, because you went and tricked the Halfling into bonding with you. Is it some sort of bet?” Her eyes narrowed. “That’s it, isn’t it? You’re in on the bet on who can fuck her first?”

“Oh, you know he is,” Sickle said, confusing the hell out of me. “I heard the stakes are high, too. But initiating an elemental link is a bit of a cheat, if you ask me. The others will disqualify you for it.”

“Bet?” Claire repeated, her voice far softer than it was a few minutes ago. Her hand felt like ice in my hand, her arm brittle.

“They’re lying,” I promised. “I don’t even know what they’re talking about.”

Ignis snorted. “I bet you’ll say the same about how you fucked me two days ago, but I have elemental proof.” She lifted her shirt to reveal a red handprint on her abdomen. “What can I say? Things heated up.”

Claire pulled away from me, her arms folding around herself.

“Aww, not so tough now?” Ignis continued, her tone frigid. “And here I thought you’d be as ballsy as your mum.”

“That’s enough, Ignis,” I growled.

She shrugged. “I don’t think she cares. Elements knows her mother didn’t when she destroyed the fae race.”

“Ignis!”

“What? She’s a whore just like her mother, and you’re going to stand there and defend her?” She scoffed, tossing her long red hair over one shoulder. “You deserve better, baby. You know you do.” She tried to stroke my arm again, but flames erupted around us.

Not from me.

Not from Ignis.

But from Claire.

Tears shone bright in her eyes as flames poured from her hands, sending fae scattering down the pathway to avoid being caught in her emotional

outburst.

“Claire,” I murmured, reaching for her.

“No,” she snapped. “Do not touch me.”

I sighed. “Come on, sweetheart. Ignis is just being a bitch.”

“Just being a bitch? One you slept with right before...?” She shook her head, unable to finish.

“It didn’t mean anything,” I vowed. “Not like with you.”

Ignis laughed, the sound mean and cold. “Pretty sure you said the same thing to me about, who was it?” She snapped her fingers. “Mae?”

Fucking flames! “Would you just shut the fuck up?”

“What? Worried she might learn about your reputation, lover? A little late for that.” She sounded so pleased with herself. If Claire hadn’t looked ready to lose her shit, I might have considered teaching Ignis a lesson with my fire.

“Claire.” I kept my voice soft. “Can—”

The entire wall went up in flames.

As did the path.

And the courtyard.

Fuck.

Chapter II

Claire



I had let my guard down. Stupid. So fucking stupid. I knew better.
Titus tried to bond with me over a bet?
He fucked that bitch? Before me?

Everyone hates me.

What am I even doing here?

The fire raged around me, scalding my skin, so foreign and unfamiliar compared to the other flames I'd cast over the last few days. It actually burned me in places, singeing the dress Elana had given me to wear and searing my side.

I jumped away from it, confused.

Why is it hurting me?

Titus roared on the periphery, his body hidden behind the orange-and-yellow wall dancing before me. He seemed to be yelling at me to stop, but I couldn't. I didn't know how. The fire didn't feel right. I tried to call it to me the way he instructed, but all that did was cause it to flare upward toward the building.

Oh no...

People started screaming, the flames climbing and shifting, destroying the vines along the stone walls and creeping into open windows. It reminded me of a snake—lethal and fast.

And I had no control over it.

A hand on my shoulder yanked me backward. I screamed, only to realize I recognized the arm encircling my waist. "Focus for me, princess," Exos whispered, his lips against my ear. "Breathe."

"I-I'm trying."

“I know, and you’re doing so good, Claire. I just need you to try a little more, okay?” The words were warm and soothing, causing my shoulders to relax back against him. He kept one arm around me while he used his opposite hand to grab my wrist and pull my hand upward. Then he yanked it back when the fire burned us both.

“It doesn’t feel right,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t even know what I’m saying.” Or what any of it meant. It was pure instinct driving my senses and telling me that I didn’t recognize the energy before us.

“Let’s try to push against it.” He cradled my hand in his, guiding it at an angle. “Right there, baby. I want you to call water and wind, and blast the focal point.”

“How?” I asked, exasperated.

He shifted his grip around my waist to tap my heart. “It’s right here, Claire. Inside you. Look for it, like you do your fire, and call it to you.”

Tears pooled in my eyes, frustration taking over me. He made it sound so simple, but he wanted me to unlock a door I didn’t possess the key to. “Exos, I can’t.”

“You can,” he promised, his tone coaxing. Then he yanked my hand back as the flame reached out at us, the heat scorching our skin. Exos’s grip tightened, his back hitting the wall behind us as the flames turned our way in a threatening sweep. He started muttering, his own flame glowing in his hand as he threw it at the approaching inferno.

But all that seemed to do was exasperate it.

The blaze yawned, blowing hot air toward us that slick sweat across my skin and caused Exos to shiver behind me.

“We need to find a way out,” he said, his voice holding a sense of urgency. “Or that thing is going to destroy us.”

I honestly couldn’t believe we were even still standing. The fifty-foot tower of fire should have killed us just for being this close.

But something kept it at bay.

Something *protected* us.

I frowned, identifying the thin barrier with my mind while Exos spoke behind me. His statement went over my head, my attention on the odd film of mist that seemed to be pushing against the flames.

When I called to it, the essence responded.

That’s mine, I realized, my lips parting. *What can I do with it?*

Exos said I needed air and water. To focus on that cavernous hole above,

the source of the flames. I could see it now, the way it swirled dangerously like a whirlpool of lava.

There, I urged, shooting the water upward with a gust of wind, the power roaring out of me from someplace deep within my soul.

Exhilarating.

Powerful.

Lively.

I stole a deep breath, my lungs filling with fresh air, and blew the contents upward with the water, creating a twirl of my own—A breeze infused with cool springs that doused the flames—causing them to sizzle. I repeated the action, a sense of peace falling over me with each exhale, until the inferno fizzled into ash.

Ignis stood across from me, her eyes glowing red, her expression one of abject horror. “That bitch tried to kill me!” she accused while trying to grab Titus’s arm. It must have shocked her again, because she flinched away from him, but it was Titus’s expression that I couldn’t stop staring at. He appeared just as horrified as Ignis.

Her friend with the bluish-blond hair heaved a huge sigh, a sheet of ice melting beneath my water. “I thought we were gonna die. Not even playin’. Like, I’m fucking exhausted.”

“You saved our lives, Sickie,” the other girl said, her skirt indecently high as she collapsed against the wall. “Dear Elements...” She shuddered as she put her head on her knees.

“What are you all just standing here for? That bitch needs to be banished!” Ignis went on. “Or did you all just miss that fire tornado that tried to *kill me*! This is mutual ground, Your Highness. You know the rules.”

“You provoked her, Ignis,” Titus growled.

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did!” He threw up his hands. “You know she’s volatile and you pushed all her buttons!”

I winced at his description. *Volatile.*

“She shouldn’t even be here anyway! Or have you forgotten what her whore of a mother did? You wait until my daddy hears about this. He will not be happy.” She folded her arms, her expression haughty as she stared down her nose at me. “Your days here are numbered, *Halfling*. Mark my words.”

Exos’s arm tightened around me. “Is that a threat, Fire Fae? Because as you already pointed out, violence on the Academy premises is frowned upon.

I would hate to have to report your behavior to *your father*, who happens to sit on the Council. With me.”

Her face paled. “He’ll never believe you.”

“I think you’ll find that I am quite convincing,” Exos replied, all arrogance. His hold loosened, his hand falling to my hip. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I need to escort Claire to her sleeping quarters.”

“Exos—”

“I think you’ve done enough for the day, Titus,” he said, cutting him off. “I’ll follow up with you later.” His dismissive tone pissed me off before, but right now, it was what I needed. I wasn’t ready to talk to Titus, not after everything Ignis had said.

He was with her right before he met me.

It wasn’t fair to hold that against him, but I couldn’t help it. The woman was an utter bitch, and he’d slept with her.

Right after someone named Mae.

Did he just sleep with all the females on campus?

Was I just a conquest to him? Something new?

No, a part of me whispered.

But what did I really even know about him? He’d almost fucked me last night. Exos was the one who stopped him. Clearly, Titus had a control problem when it came to sex.

Part of me knew the assessment was unfair.

The other part was too exhausted to care.

“Take me to the dorm,” I said, voice low, my gaze falling to the ground. I didn’t want to see Titus’s expression, didn’t want to know what he thought. I just wanted to lie down. Fighting those flames had taken a lot out of me. So had this entire morning, or day, or however long it’d been. Actually, no, this whole fucking week had exhausted me.

Exos pulled me with him, away from a sputtering Ignis and her two insipid friends.

Away from the warmth of Titus.

“I don’t know what happened,” I mumbled, Exos’s palm a brand against my hip as he led me through yet another courtyard. *The fae really like being outside.* Except this one was vacant save for a few heads poking out of windows, all eyes on me. When I glanced at a few, they ducked. Afraid.

They all hate me.

“Your emotions created an inferno,” Exos murmured. “But you were able

to contain it.”

“Why did it burn me? It’s never done that before.” Sure, it singed my clothes to ash, but it didn’t *hurt*.

“I don’t know,” he replied, taking me through a set of black gates lined in fire. The buildings took a drastic architectural turn, the landscape black and charred, all signs of flowers and trees gone. But it wasn’t so much barren as it was intriguing, the fountains in the yard flowing fire instead of water. And little flickers that reminded me of lightning bugs buzzed about.

“Wow,” I whispered, awed by the sight. “This is...” I had no words.

“Fire,” he supplied. “I’m heeding Titus’s point that you need to be near the students, and have procured you a dorm here. I’ll be staying with you.” I missed a step at his proclamation, but he caught me with ease, his lips curling. “Surprised, princess?”

“Y-you’re staying with me?” I stuttered.

“Yes.” He gave me a wry glance. “You need supervision. No more burned-down buildings. But hey, the Fire Quad is actually fire-retardant, so that’s a plus.” While he spoke the words in a teasing manner, they didn’t lighten my feelings in the slightest.

Because he was right.

I kept hurting people and destroying everything around me.

Rick.

The bar.

Elana’s house.

The path.

I really am volatile, just as Titus said.

“Hey,” Exos murmured, gripping my chin and drawing us to a halt outside one of the buildings doors. “I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad, Claire. I actually meant it as a positive thing—that we’ll be safe here.”

I swallowed, trying to look away from his too-blue eyes, but he held me in place, his pupils flaring. “I... I know you didn’t. But you’re right.” The last part was said on a whisper, my throat suddenly tight. “I don’t mean to keep hurting people, Exos.”

“Oh, darling, I know.” He cupped my cheek, pulling me to him. “I can’t begin to understand, Claire. Our upbringings are so different. But I can tell you one thing.”

I clung to his suit jacket, allowing his comfort, seeking something, *anything*, to make the pain go away. “What?” I whispered.

“Watching you handle that fire was one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen.” The words were against my ear. “Whether you caused it or not remains to be seen. That you were able to dispel it, that’s what counts, Claire. It means you’re learning control, and far faster than anyone I’ve ever known.” He shifted back to stare down at me. “You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

“I don’t feel okay,” I admitted.

“I know.” He pressed his lips to my forehead. “But you will. Let’s go up to the room. I’ll make us something to eat, and maybe you can show me how you created that mist tunnel.” He didn’t wait for the answer but instead linked our fingers together and slowly led me inside.

Several students with pointy ears poked their heads into the hallway, their mouths gaping wide at seeing Exos. Then freezing as they spotted me behind him.

I didn’t try to smile or wave this time. I learned my lesson in the quad.

No one wanted me here. That much was clear.

Well, I don’t want to be here, either, I thought at them, my heart skipping a beat in my chest. *None of this was my choice.*

Not Exos.

Not Titus.

Not this entire damn world.

My mother did this to me. A warning would have been appreciated. Some sort of note that said, *Oh, by the way, you’re part fae,* would have been great.

But I received nothing. Not even a warning call from the Fae Realm. Just Exos showing up at the bar, kissing me, and stealing me into this world.

Now they wanted me to attend an academy where everyone hated me. Fan-fucking-tastic. Oh, and I had bound myself to two men. One of which was apparently a man-whore, and the other, a dick.

Well, he wasn’t acting mean right now.

And Titus, I really didn’t know. Maybe he had an excuse? He didn’t know me when he slept with her.

Oh God. Of all the fae to sleep with, he chose *her*? What did that say about me? I was nothing like Ignis. Was that his usual type?

Why am I beating myself up over this? I hardly know him.

Yet, I almost slept with him.

“Here we are,” Exos said, pushing through a door into a modern living area with all-black walls and furniture. Even the kitchen was painted in ebony

shades. However, it maintained a clean feel, the marble beneath my feet reminding me of granite.

Exos closed the door behind me, pressing his thumb to some sort of high-tech lock that shifted beneath his touch. The shades in the room lifted to reveal a view of the forest lining the property, the leaves almost beckoning me out to play.

“Your bedroom is through there.” He pointed to an open threshold that revealed a decent-sized bed and dresser. “I’ll be in the one here.” He gestured to the room across the hall. “I, uh, didn’t know what clothes you wanted, so I ordered a selection. And of course your uniforms.”

“Uniforms?” I repeated, frowning.

“Yeah, you know, traditional plaid skirt, sweater thing.” He shrugged. “Guys wear slacks and button-downs. Pretty standard.”

“For a private high school, maybe. But this is supposed to be like a university, right?”

He palmed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. “Elana thinks the uniforms help give the fae a united feel. The less competition the better.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“Because our elements can either exist peacefully or negatively.” He dropped his hand and cocked his head toward the kitchen. “I’m going to fix us some sandwiches. Why don’t you go check out your room?”

“Uh, sure,” I said, staring at his back as he walked away, dismissing me.

Because he’s Exos. A Royal Fae Prince.

And I’m just Claire, a volatile firecracker.

My lips curled down at the side. This whole pity thing wasn’t me. I always fought through my hardships. My grandmother used to say I had a spine of steel.

But I didn’t feel like that right now.

I felt more fluid. Bendy. Breakable.

And I hated it.

I wanted to fight yet didn’t know what to fight against. Or how. Or even who.

Well, I knew one thing. Moping around in this state of hopelessness wasn’t going to fix a damn thing. It wasn’t me. I didn’t just give up. I struggled until I won.

Stubborn to your very core, my grandmother used to say.

I am, I agreed, walking into the room Exos stated was mine. I just need to

accept what is and move forward.

In this very strange bedroom...

My brow furrowed as I eyed the charcoaled furniture and black sheets. Not my usual style, but being immune to fire was certainly a plus. I brushed my fingertips across the quilt, finding it surprisingly soft. *What is this made of?* I marveled. It reminded me of silk.

I went through the drawers and then the closet. The uniform consisted of a plaid skirt and a sweater, just as Exos had described. But the pinks and purples were beautiful and unlike anything I'd ever seen. I plucked it off the hanger to hold it up to myself in the mirror, enjoying the way it popped against my skin and hair.

"The Fire Fae have special outfits that are flame-retardant for, well, obvious reasons." Exos stood just inside the walk-in closet, a mug in his hand, his shoulder braced against the door frame.

I'd not heard him approach, too lost in the mirror against the wall. "I, uh, okay." My cheeks pinkened to match the fabric in my reflection. "I was just seeing if it would fit."

He grinned. "It'll fit." He held out the mug. "I made you some hot chocolate, if you want it. The sandwiches are baking."

Baking? I pushed that thought away in favor of the item in his hand. "Hot chocolate?" My heart skipped a beat. "I... I would love some hot chocolate." I couldn't remember the last time I'd indulged in a hot chocolate. My grandmother used to make it for me as a child.

After hanging up the uniform, I accepted the warm gift and let the heat seep into my cool fingertips. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear and took a step backward into the bedroom. "Is this okay? The accommodations, I mean."

"Yeah, it's, well, different. But it's fine."

"Okay, good."

I followed him and sat on the bed with my back braced against the headboard, my dress flaring over my legs. My shoes were in the closet already, leaving my feet bare. I blew across the mug before allowing myself a sip and groaned at the flavors bursting on my tongue. This wasn't like any hot chocolate I'd ever tasted, the whipped goodness decadent and empowering.

He smirked and sat beside me on the bed, crossing his feet at the ankles to

reveal a pair of dress socks that matched his elegant attire.

“Do you always wear suits?” I asked, trying for simple conversation.

He shrugged. “Depends on the situation.”

“Yeah?” I eyed him sideways. “And when does the situation require you to wear that hideous royal garb you forced on Titus?”

Exos chuckled, shaking his head. “I can’t believe he actually put that shit on. I had a pair of jeans and a shirt waiting for him in the other room.”

“He was in a hurry after you told us to head downstairs.”

“Not *that* much of a hurry,” he said, laughing again. “It’s a formal outfit that hasn’t been worn in probably two or three hundred years. He’s probably going to destroy it, which might disappoint Cyrus.” He shrugged. “Was totally worth seeing Titus in it, though.”

“You’re mean,” I accused, smiling. Who knew this man had a sense of humor?

He gave me a look. “You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy seeing him in that atrocious outfit?”

I hid my amusement behind my mug. “Maybe a little.”

“Uh-huh.” He nudged me with his shoulder and reached over to press his palm against my mug. Heat flared against my fingertips as he used fire to keep the contents warm.

My lips parted in awe, my own fire igniting to do the same and bringing the liquid to a boil. “Wow,” I whispered, staring down at the bubbling chocolate.

“Try stirring it,” he murmured, releasing the mug.

“With what?” There was no spoon.

“Air.” He studied the drink, his head tilting. “Perhaps water, too, as I added some to the mixture.”

I considered his suggestion and exhaled over the top of the rim. It created a tiny ripple that I tugged on and swirled with my mind, the contents shifting with my mental command. “Oh...” It was working. The bubbles smoothed as I whirled the chocolate with another breath, the sweet aroma tickling my nose.

“It’s all about control,” Exos said softly, his blue eyes simmering as he observed.

“Why is fire so much easier?” I asked, calling for it again to heat my cup and infusing more air to twirl it through my drink.

“It seems to be tied to your emotions. Calling the flames is a natural

defense. It's also the most passionate of the elements." Embers danced along his fingertips, jumping into my hot chocolate and joining my atmospheric storm.

I smiled as I absorbed his energy with mine, the feeling so incredibly natural. "Maybe I'm more Fire Fae?"

He shook his head. "No, you're very much a Spirit Fae."

"But I don't seem to be doing much with spirit."

"Because you don't know how to use it yet." His expression darkened a bit. "It's the most powerful element in existence and therefore the most important to understand before you access it. You literally hold the lives of those around you in your hands when you play with spirit."

I stopped playing with the hot chocolate, his words chilling me. "What do you mean?"

"When you have the power to create life, you can also take it. Or..." He met my gaze. "Or you can manipulate it."

"Like telling people what to do?"

He nodded. "But it's more than that. Spirit gives us access to the souls of every living, breathing thing, from the trees outside to the fae in this dorm. And the more powerful the Spirit Fae, the stronger the ability to take control. It's considered a very dark gift, Claire. Most of my kind only use it on a superficial level as a result."

"And you?" I asked.

His expression hardened. "I use it as required as the strongest Spirit Fae in the realm."

"By taking lives," I translated. "Or repurposing them."

"Only in very dire situations. But yes."

I swallowed, finally understanding his purpose here. "That's why you've been assigned to me. To rein me in, or kill me, as required."

"Yes." No hesitation or guilt or apology. "However, my goal is to help you thrive, Claire." He drew his finger across my cheek and down my neck as an alarm sounded in the other room. "Sandwiches." He gave me a small smile before sliding off the bed to leave me with the hot chocolate. It'd gone cold in my hands, my fingers turning it to ice at his words.

If Exos couldn't help me find control over these wayward powers, he would be forced to hurt me.

No, to kill me.

Or worse—possess me.

I shivered. *What if I can't master these abilities?*

Focusing again on my cup, I brought the drink to a boil and tried to access the water inside to stir the contents. When nothing happened, I blew again, re-creating the action from earlier. Then I tried something different by pulling the liquid up with my mind to create a funnel over the rim.

It resembled a tornado of molten chocolate.

I tried tasting it and found the flavor to be the same as it was before, but even more potent. *Magical*. And so, so delicious.

After a few more sips, I coaxed the liquid back into my cup and noticed Exos watching from the doorway with two plates, one in each hand. "I didn't want to interrupt you," he said, his voice huskier than before.

My cheeks heated as I set the mug aside. "I was playing."

"I know." He settled beside me again, handing me one of the dishes. "Your knack for air is growing. I don't have an advisor for you in that element yet, but I'll work on one. Elana mentioned a Vox; apparently, he's tutoring an Earth Fae already and doing a good job with him." He took a bite of the strange green thing in his hand and shrugged. "A task for tomorrow."

I was too busy staring at his food to really hear and comprehend his words. "What is that?" I had one on my plate as well. It reminded me of a lettuce wrap, except cooked. And the stuff inside was definitely not anything I'd seen before.

"Take a bite and find out," he taunted. "You'll see."

I poked the foresty globe on my plate. "Eh..."

"Live a little, princess." He winked and took another bite, then reached around me to grab my hot chocolate and took a swallow before returning it.

The act felt intimate somehow, as if we did this every day.

Yet this was the first time he'd ever been normal with me. Well, as normal as a fae could be, anyway. This sandwich didn't qualify. Neither did the elemental magic tricks.

He arched an eyebrow at me. "If you don't at least try it, I'm going to be offended, Claire. It's not as if I go about cooking for just anyone, you know."

Because he was a Prince. He probably had manservants. Or maybe more of those pixie things that Elana had used.

"Fine." I could at least taste it. The hot chocolate was one of the best I'd ever tasted. Maybe this *sandwich* would join the list? I eyed the globe and picked it up with my hands—like Exos had. The texture reminded me of a moist tortilla, only it was leafy like lettuce.

And so, so *green*.

I took a small bite, expecting the worst, and raised my eyebrows when the taste exploded in my mouth. Spicy but sweet, and delicious.

Yet, mushy.

And not at all what I would call a *sandwich*.

It was more like hummus mixed with crunchy vegetables and beans, heated into a spinach casing with a gooey texture.

Exos waited until I swallowed to ask, “Like it?”

“It’s... different.”

“It’s a sandwich,” he replied, acting as if I’d lost my marbles.

“This is not a sandwich,” I assured him. “It’s like a, uh, melted salad in brick form. There’s not even meat on it. Or cheese.”

He gave me the most offended look imaginable. “Why the hell would you put meat and cheese in a sandwich?”

I gaped at him.

And giggled.

“Meat and cheese in a sandwich.” He shuddered. “Gross.”

My giggle blossomed into a laugh that shook my shoulders, the goop on my plate forgotten as I keeled over in a humorous fit. He sounded so displeased by my comment, as if I’d made the most ridiculous suggestion. And hey, maybe to him, I had. Because he wasn’t human.

He was a fae.

A fae meant to be my protector and executioner.

I couldn’t stop laughing, the hilarity of the moment and situation unraveling inside me. I burned down a bar. *Me. Claire*. What were the chances? Oh, apparently good because I was a fae, too. I battled an inferno today—one I seemingly created. And I fought it with my *breath*.

My body vibrated with uncontrollable mirth. I couldn’t stop, the burst of emotion requiring an escape. An outlet. *Something*.

Exos said something, but I couldn’t hear him over the thoughts pelting my brain.

I’m a fae.

I control fire.

Wind. Er, air. Whatever.

Water.

Hot chocolate.

And I’m eating goo for lunch. Is it even lunch? Oh, who the hell knows?!

I lost it. Completely lost it. Tears sprouted in my eyes from laughing so hard, tears that turned to sobs. Sobs that *hurt*.

But I deserved it. Because I hurt people.

Rick.

Those girls outside. They may have provoked me, but that didn't warrant me burning them alive over some petty jealousy. Jealousy over a man I hardly knew, yet almost fucked last night.

Oh God... I couldn't stop crying. Couldn't stop laughing. Couldn't stop *being*.

So much for being strong and fighting through my shit, because all I wanted to do right now was curl into a ball and hide.

And I did just that, tucking my knees into my chest while burying my face against my forearms, and let it all out. Every ounce of fear, agony, and sadness, that I'd harbored for days, flew from me in a cacophony of sobs mingled with strangled laughs.

The plate clattered to the floor.

I didn't care.

Exos wrapped his arms around me, his chest to my back, his face in my hair.

I didn't care.

He whispered words of encouragement, his comfort an undeniable force behind me.

I didn't care.

The sun fell outside my window, the tears still flowing.

I didn't care.

I was broken.

Shattered.

Irreparably lost.

And...

I didn't care.

Except that was all a lie. I cared about every minute detail. Which was precisely the problem. I cared entirely too much.

That was what destroyed me.

My actual inability to let it all go, to just accept my fate. And maybe I would eventually. But not tonight.

Tonight, I mourned.

For Rick. For the bar and anyone else I hurt. For my friends that I would

never see again. For Elana's house. For the girls I almost hurt outside hours ago.

And most importantly—I mourned for myself.

For Claire. For the woman I used to be. Because she didn't exist here.

It's only me.

Chapter 12

Exos



Water.
Why am I in water?

I tried to shake off the strange dream, my nose catching in Claire's lavender-scented hair. My arms tightened around her reflexively, some ancient part of me pleased by her nearness—the part that called for our bond.

Falling asleep with her body pressed up against mine had felt natural. Almost *too* natural. But she needed comfort, and I wasn't strong enough to reject her. The spirit essence inside me recognized his mate, whether I liked it or not.

No other Spirit Fae had connected to me the way Claire had, and all through a meager kiss. She'd floored me, knocked me off-kilter, and ruined me for anyone else.

What made it worse was it seemed she required a mate for each element. It wasn't necessarily unheard of for Spirit Fae to have two mates because of our ties to two elements, but most only bonded with one fae. However, on the occasion when a Spirit Fae took two mates, it was one for each element.

And Claire had access to five.

Fuck.

I never saw myself falling into the mating rites, having opted for a life of guardianship. My brother was the one meant to settle down with another and try to create more Spirit Fae.

If he saw me now, he'd laugh. *Cuddling*. An activity I never engaged in, even post-sex.

I almost laughed, then remembered how Claire had giggled over the

sandwich and broke down in sobs. Her emotions were all over the map, making it very difficult to predict her reactions. Holding her as she slept was the only comfort I could offer her, and I worried it wasn't enough.

Nuzzling her hair, I sighed. She felt so incredibly right in my arms. I never wanted to let her go, or wake from this strange, warm cocoon. But something nagged at me. The reason I woke up.

I squinted into the darkness, her shutters closed for the night.

Everything seemed all right. So what caused me to stir? Had she moved? Was it a strange dream? I glanced around, searching for the culprit of our disturbance.

Then I *heard* it.

Water.

Had I left the faucet running in the kitchen? Damn. That was exactly what it sounded like.

Easing away from Claire, I made my way into the living room and frowned at the quiet sink. *Where is that noise com—*

The front door began to bow, trickles of water flowing in through the cracks.

“What the fuck?” I breathed, inching closer. Then my eyes widened at the crashing sound just outside. “Oh, shit!” I ran back toward the bedroom, only to have the door slam into my back as a tidal wave swept into the room, throwing me to the ground and then up into a tornado of water.

Claire!

The room filled quickly, my access to air gone before I could utter a word or a warning. I swam toward her, my dress pants and shirt weighing me down. Kicking off my socks as I moved, I managed to meet her halfway, her eyes wild beneath the water.

I gestured at the window and blew a bubble.

She frowned.

Air, I mouthed. *Use your air!*

Because if she didn't burst the glass, we were both going to drown.

Unless I forced her... My spirit drove to the surface, my fight-or-flight responses kicking in, ready to dive into her and take hold of her powers. I hated doing this, the darkness of manipulating others not something that appealed to me, but this was life or—

Claire grabbed my hand and sent an explosion of air at the glass, shattering it. The water pushed us through the opening, sending us sprawling

out across the charred ground outside with her on my chest, sputtering.

Several other students were already outside, soaking wet, most in little to no clothing due to the midnight hour. Many were crying. Others gulping in air, terror rendering them speechless.

Fire and water did not mingle well together given their opposite properties.

“Wh-what happened?” Claire asked, her soaked dress clinging to her curves.

“I don’t know.” I pushed her damp hair away from her face and pressed my lips to her forehead before guiding us both upright. The water seemed to have evaporated, several of the Fire Fae using their gifts against the tidal waves. But the damage was already done.

And from what I could sense, we’d lost at least one life inside. Perhaps two.

“You!” A shriek came from across the yard, the bitchy female from earlier pointing her manicured nail at Claire. “You did this!”

Everyone turned to stare at us, several jaws dropping at the realization of just who had appeared outside.

“I... I didn’t,” Claire said, her voice soft, barely audible.

“First you try to fry me with my own essence, and now drown me?” the bitch continued, stalking toward us in a tiny pair of shorts and a completely translucent tank top, her fiery hair a mess over her shoulders. “If you want to duel, bitch, let’s do it. Right now. Right here.”

Gasps fluttered through the air, the challenge a lethal one.

“Sit down and shut the fuck up,” I said, pushing to my feet to stand between her and Claire.

“No!” This girl—*Ignis*—clearly had an issue with authority, because she popped her hands on her hips and stared me down. “I’m not standing for this bullshit. That bitch tried to kill me today. *Twice*.”

“It’s true,” her blue-haired friend said, coming to stand at her side. “I recognize water when I feel it, and that essence came from her.” She pointed a finger at a now-standing Claire, her gaze oozing malevolence.

“But I didn’t,” Claire whispered, her face falling. “I-I don’t think I did, did I?”

Ignis snorted. “Oh, brilliant. She doesn’t even know if she did it or not? Yeah, like I’m buying that shit.”

The blue-haired Water Fae folded her arms and tapped her bare foot on

the ground, her gaze narrowed. “You totally did. I can still feel the power rolling off you. So don’t bother denying it.”

I frowned. While I felt the power still swirling in the air, it didn’t remind me of Claire. Just like with the fire earlier. Neither reminded me of her inner spirit, confusing my instincts.

Was she accessing power from a place I couldn’t sense?

Was our bond not as deep as I thought?

“What the elements is going on out here?” a deep voice demanded.

Ah, fuck...

The crowd parted to allow Mortus entry, his silk robe cinched around his slender waist. A flicker of surprise entered his elegant features at spying Claire, then his gaze narrowed into tiny black slits. “What the fuck is she doing here?”

“Elana made arrangements for her to stay in the Fire Quad,” I explained, my tone flat. I moved subtly in front of Claire, hiding her from Mortus’s view. “I’ll handle it.”

“You’ll handle it?” he repeated mockingly, glancing around the water-laden courtyard, the shattered glass windows, and the disheveled state of all the Fire Fae around us. “You’re doing a great job of that, *Your Highness.*”

Ignis and her friend smirked, causing my eyes to narrow at them. “What are you even doing in the Fire Quad?” My query was meant for the Water Fae. I didn’t know her name. She reminded me of a troll with her made-up eyes and wild blue hair.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” she snipped. “But I was staying with Ignis after her traumatic experience earlier.”

“Traumatic experience?” Mortus echoed.

“Yes. The Halfling tried to kill me,” Ignis said, her tone breaking at the end and causing me to roll my eyes.

“Oh, cut the crap,” someone snapped before I had a chance to speak. Titus appeared in a pair of pajama pants and slippers. He resided in one of the other dorms. Either the commotion awoke him, or Claire’s distress. Likely the latter, as I felt it trickling through our bond like an alarming beacon. “You provoked her and she defended herself. And how do we know Sickle didn’t cause the dorm flood?”

Sickle. That must be the Water Fae’s name.

She looked positively affronted by the accusation. “Are you frigid kidding me? I was asleep, you jackass.”

“So was Claire,” I pointed out.

Sickle carried on with another ear-piercing squeal of an excuse while Ignis fed into the bullshit, and several others started speaking up on their behalves, siding with the mean-girl brigade. Mortus gave me a smug look as the tongue-lashing continued and calls for justice wrung out.

Claire’s spirit diminished before me, her emotions turning dark, her shoulders hunched.

I ran my fingers through my hair, irritated as fuck. This had all gotten out of hand far too quickly. It would be a miracle to keep Claire at the Academy now after the two incidents today.

The fae were out for blood—*her* blood. Her innocence would matter little to them all.

“Enough!” Titus shouted, punctuating the command with a roar of fire that hummed over our heads and disappeared into smoke. “Go back to your fucking rooms, dry your shit, and go to bed.”

Ignis smirked. “As if I will ever obey your command to go to bed. Again.”

He took a step toward her, but I caught him by the arm and pulled him back. “You will do what he says. Now.” I allowed her to see the power lurking in my gaze, the ability to force her to do just that, and smiled inside as the color drained from her perky little face. “I won’t be repeating myself.”

She took a step backward, tears gathering in her eyes.

“Don’t even start,” I snapped, tired of women crying today. “Go.” The word echoed across the quad, sending several fae running toward their dorms, including Ignis and her frigid bitch of a friend.

But Mortus stayed, his beady black eyes blazing with fury. “I told you this would happen. She shouldn’t be here, Exos. This little experiment of yours is doomed to fail.”

“Thank you for the input.” I infused a hint of dismissal in my words, which, of course, infuriated him more.

“You’re a pompous little prick, just like your father.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You may be my senior in age, but make no mistake.” I took a step toward him. “I am your superior in all ways. Now, fuck off before I make you fuck off.” While I gave Ignis a glimpse of my power, I allowed this asshole to see it all. My gaze swirled with it, the aura of energy swimming between us and belittling his to ash.

He didn’t bow, as one should, but instead stalked off, his shoulders stiff,

in the direction of Elana's home rather than in the direction of the Fire Quad faculty quarters.

I sighed, glancing at a still-fuming Titus, who stood beside a shaking Claire. She wasn't crying—thank the gods—but her pale expression and curved shoulders indicated her to be on the verge of it. Or maybe shock.

"I-I didn't..." Her blue eyes flickered to mine, feeling my gaze upon her. "Exos, I-I'm sorry. I..."

I gathered her in my arms before she could finish, my lips in her hair and then pressing to her ear. "It's going to be okay, Claire."

She trembled against me, her head swaying back and forth. "B-but I almost killed you," she mumbled. "A-and I don't even r-remember doing it. Then the fire earlier, it was out of my control, and now this. And I can't do this, Exos. I'm so sorry. I'm making this all worse. Even when I try, I just hurt people. I hurt you." The last three words were a whisper, her broken voice fracturing my heart.

Something was happening here, something nefarious, because I would swear on my life that the flood had nothing to do with Claire. The signatures didn't match. Just like the flames. I *felt* her power in that bar. It didn't match what I sensed today.

Shaking my head, I cupped her cheeks, forcing her to meet my gaze. "We're going to figure this out, baby. I promise."

Her face crumpled. "I heard what they were saying, Exos. They hate me. Because of what my mother did, what I keep doing." She inhaled slowly, as if striving for control not to cry. "You shouldn't have to do any of this for me, not after, well, everything."

"Oh, Claire. I *want* to do this for you." I brushed my lips against hers, knowing like hell that I would regret this later and not giving a damn right now. "You're mine to protect, sweetheart."

"You barely know me," she replied so softly I almost missed the statement.

"You're thinking like a human, not a fae." I nuzzled her nose, smiling at our ridiculous situation. She had no idea what it meant to initiate the bonds, yet she'd fallen headfirst into our connection. While she might not think she knew me, her spirit did. And that was what I called to me now—her inner strength—the need to embolden her taking hold of my instincts. She needed to know I had her back, that I believed in her, that I knew she could do this.

Stop fighting it, I told myself. Let her see.

My mouth sealed over hers, my fingers sliding into her hair to tilt her head to the angle I desired. She grabbed my shirt, her surprise evident in the way she parted her lips. I slid my tongue inside, my grip tightening as I took control and truly kissed her. None of that truth-or-dare shit from the bar. This was a real embrace, the kind of lovers, not acquaintances.

I wanted her to know me, to have my taste in her mouth for the rest of the week, to truly experience our connection and yearn for more.

And most importantly, I wanted her to believe in herself the way I believed in her.

My comments about dropping her in the Spirit Realm were all empty threats, words meant to piss her off and embolden her. But that tactic had not worked as I wanted it to. So this was my new path, my way of showing my support and allowing her to know a piece of me I never revealed to anyone else.

Her spirit brushed mine, the energy warming between us and flourishing into the night. *Yes, I urged. Dance with me.*

Power erupted around us, our souls mingling on a wave of existence only Spirit Fae could access. Wonder traveled through the bond, her surprise palpable and sweet and causing me to smile against her mouth.

“There’s your spirit, baby,” I whispered. Then I deepened our kiss before she could reply and showered her in adoration and encouragement in the only way I knew how—by allowing her access into my heart. It was where our bond originated and anchored, where the elements lived inside a fae. A private resource only mates could access and I granted her entrance into mine, providing her with the most intimate experience known to our kind.

But she needed this to ground her. She needed to *feel* my courage to bolster her own, to borrow some of my faith in her, to see how deep this connection could go if we allowed it.

You’re going to be all right.

You can do this.

I’m here to help you.

Trust me.

Let me cherish you.

She couldn’t hear my thoughts so much as sense them, the emotion behind them causing her to relax in my arms and return my embrace. So sweet and tentative, but addictive. If we weren’t standing outside, drenched from head to toe, I’d take this a step further. But I could already feel the tug

from Elana requesting my presence. Just a subtle nudge, one she could do as a Spirit Fae.

There would be another meeting.

And I needed to be there to protect Claire.

I pressed my forehead to hers, breathing deeply, my tongue already missing hers. We would pick this up later, after I assured her safety. “You’re going to be all right,” I vowed. “But I need to go handle Mortus.”

“Why do I know that name?” she asked, her brow crumpling.

I cleared my throat. Titus must have provided her with the history. “Mortus is the fae your mother fought.”

Her blue eyes flashed, her body going rigid all over again. “That’s who...?” Her mouth dropped. “Oh God...”

I cupped her cheek again, pressing my lips to hers and then to her forehead. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll handle him.”

“But he must hate me.” Her gaze snagged mine. “I’m the product of her infidelity.”

“Which isn’t *your* fault,” I said, wrapping my palm around the back of her neck. “You will not feel bad about actions and decisions that were out of your control. Do you understand?”

She swallowed, but nodded, her pupils dilating.

“Good.” I kissed her temple before glancing at Titus. Fire blazed in his eyes, having witnessed the entire exchange between us.

Now you know how it feels, I told him with a look, understanding exactly how this appeared to him. Because I’d experienced the same pang of jealousy and annoyance when I found them naked in bed together. But unlike him, I already understood that Claire may need more than one mate to balance her power. That had happened to my mother, after all—hence Cyrus and I having different fathers.

Of course, that didn’t mean I had to accept the same fate for myself.

Regardless, we didn’t have time to waste on fighting over her. She needed our protection first and foremost, and right now, he was the only one I trusted who could help keep her safe.

“Can she stay with you for the rest of the night?” I asked.

He didn’t hesitate, his response immediate. “Yes.”

“This may take a while, which means you’ll likely miss your classes today. Claire isn’t ready to attend until we lay some ground rules for student interaction.” Not to protect her classmates, but to protect *her*. The vicious

things that were said to her over the last twenty-four hours were unacceptable and needed to be addressed.

Gods, I did not miss my time here. At all.

“Okay,” Titus replied, his gaze falling to a frozen Claire. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“I know.” And I did. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be handing her over to him. But Claire seemed to need more convincing.

Oh, how the tides had turned.

I shook my head, amused.

And decided to throw Titus a bone.

“Ignis is a bitch, Claire.” I tilted her chin upward, forcing her to focus on me. “She used an illegal potion to seduce him. I could smell it the second I found him yesterday. So try to take it easy on him. He’s not a complete jackass.” I winked to soften the insult.

She blinked. “A potion?”

“I’ll let him explain.” I pressed my mouth to hers once more—because I could, and wanted to—then finally released her. “Stay with Titus until I return, okay?”

She licked her lips, her gaze bright. “Uh, yeah. Okay.”

I smirked, enjoying that dazed look on her face far more than I should. “Try to behave, princess. I’ll be back soon.”

Hopefully.

It all depended on the Council and how much begging I had to do. No one would believe me if I said it didn’t feel like Claire. Which meant I needed a different approach.

Fortunately, I had one.

I just needed them all to accept it.

Chapter 13

Claire



My lips tingled as I followed a silent Titus to his dorm.
Exos kissed me.
Like, well and truly kissed me.

And holy wow, was it good.

He'd awoken something inside me, something lively and buoyant—my spirit. I could feel it thriving through every step, the energy warm and familiar and strengthening my every breath. So much power. So much *life*.

It had shocked me at first, then floored me. He'd allowed me inside him in a way I didn't really comprehend, but I *saw* him. It felt as if I'd known him my entire life, my heart automatically trusting his to guide me.

For once in my life, I didn't overanalyze *why*. I just allowed it. Embraced it. *Enjoyed* it. Perhaps not the right place or time, but what did it matter? It'd happened. It was done. And I didn't regret a second of it.

Except for a little bit now as I stared at Titus's broad back. Mostly because just seeing all that expanse of tanned skin reminded me that I'd spent the previous night in bed with him. Then kissed Exos tonight as if he were my only lover.

Yet, I'd been upset over Titus having fucked Ignis the night before we met?

Yeah, that makes me a hypocrite.

Shit. I needed to say that I was sorry. However, I couldn't find the words. Because I didn't feel bad about kissing Exos. It felt too right for me to belittle it with an apology.

This was all so damn confusing. Especially considering my still-brewing attraction to Titus, something that remained evident as I moved past him in

the entryway while he held open the door. The bare skin of his abdomen practically burned my arm, the intense heat causing me to trip over my own feet.

He caught my elbow, steadying me, his touch a brand against my arm.

I just kissed Exos. Passionately. I should not want to lean back into Titus now.

Swallowing, I pulled away and waited for him to lead, unable to meet his gaze. Not because I was upset with him, but because I couldn't trust myself not to react.

He made an irritated noise and pushed past me. My elbow felt cold without him, yet my mouth continued to hum with electricity.

I can't have them both.

But I sort of want to have them both.

This is so damn confusing.

Just follow Titus!

I shook off the war waging in my head and trailed after him, my hands clasped tightly before me. We walked up two flights of stairs to the top floor and stopped at the second door.

He didn't say anything as he waved me inside.

Then I couldn't utter a word, too captivated by the view.

His room boasted floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a new part of campus, one I hadn't seen yet, all lit up by the moon and stars above. A majestic garden of sorts filled with glowing plants and flowers.

I padded over to the glass, staring down at the enchanted vines curling and growing at impossible speeds and then trimming to allow more flowers to bloom. Every second was a new evolution, the garden shifting and changing at impossible swiftness.

"This building backs up to the Earth Quad," he said, moving to my side. "The vast garden separates us, but there are pathways between. Of course, they're constantly moving to adapt to the greenery, so it's easy to get lost."

"Wow." I stroked the glass as if to touch one of the glowing flowers, entranced by the magic sprinkled throughout the immense field. I couldn't even see the dorms beyond. "This is..." *Amazing? Nothing like home?* I had no adequate words.

"Yeah, it's something," he replied, running his fingers through his hair and taking a step back. "Do you, uh, need something to wear?"

I glanced down at my soaked clothing, my cheeks pinkening at the

realization of how revealing this dress had become. “Er, yes. Please.”

He nodded and disappeared into a bedroom off the living area. The rest of his space reminded me of the dorm room Exos had taken me to—all modern appliances done in black, stone floors, charred walls, and fireproof furniture.

Titus returned carrying a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. “Here. Bathroom is through there.” He pointed to his bedroom.

“No roommate?” I asked, noticing it was the only door.

“No. I don’t play well with others.” His flat tone had me biting my lip and nodding.

“Right. I’ll just go change.” I walked quickly through his room, not wanting to invade his private space any more than I already had.

And found him waiting for me on his bed when I exited. His gaze ran over my shirt and shorts, his lips curling at the edges. “You look good in my clothes, Claire.”

Oh. My face heated from the dark gleam in his green eyes. “I, uh, thank you?” The last word came out as a squeak, sending another wave of warmth over my skin.

I’m in so much trouble, I realized, my breath catching in my throat. *I really do want them both.* It was so wrong. I couldn’t do this, couldn’t be torn between them. But they each called to a different part of me. Parts I didn’t understand. *My elements.*

Titus exhaled slowly, running his fingers through his thick, auburn hair. “Look, I know I fucked up. Well, sort of.” He shook his head. “Look, Ignis is a bitch. She tried to force a bond on me with this seduction potion. And because her power is a reasonable match for mine, she managed to get me into bed. But I can’t stand her. I’d never want to be with her, Claire.”

I clasped my hands before me, unsure of what to say. It wouldn’t be fair of me to judge him, not after my own behavior. Yet hearing his explanation put me slightly at ease. Until I remembered the rest of it. “What about the bet?”

His gaze narrowed. “You honestly think I’d be doing all this just to win some fucking bet?”

Did I? My lips twisted to the side as I considered, which had his face reddening.

“I realize you don’t know me very well, but you should at least be able to discern my intentions. I mean, for fuck’s sake, Claire. I willingly bonded with you. I’m a competitive man, but not *that* competitive.” He pushed away from

the bed to walk over to the windows, his shoulders tense as he shook his head. “I might kill Ignis.”

For some reason, that last sentence made me smile. I rather liked the idea of throttling her myself. “She’s a bitch,” I agreed, joining him by the glass.

A horde of violet flowers had formed, each of them releasing crystals into the air that danced around the ever-evolving vines.

We stood in silence for a while, something I hadn’t realized I needed until right then. But it gave me a moment to ponder everything and sort through my thoughts. About Exos. About Titus. About this place. About *me*.

I called a flicker of fire to play over my fingertips, smiling at how different I felt—powerful and real.

Ever since I’d arrived, I’d been battling this new reality, fighting Exos, and wanting nothing more than to hide. I lost myself last night to misery. And woke to even more pain. But Exos had done something to me, had awoken some aspect of my being that I hadn’t known.

And now everything felt right.

I watched the flame dance across my skin. This truly was a beautiful, unique world. I could be someone brand new here. Someone important. I had the opportunity to prove everyone wrong. The ultimate challenge. I just had to be strong enough to accept it. Fierce enough to master these elements. Wise enough to trust the right mentors.

Such as the male beside me. “I don’t believe there even is a bet,” I told him, speaking my thoughts out loud. “I think Ignis made it up.”

He snorted. “I know she did. I tracked down over a dozen fae who are idiotic enough to consider such a ploy, and none of them had heard a word about it. She’s full of shit.”

“I’m not sure whether I should be offended by her tactics or flattered. She seems to be going out of her way to ruin me without knowing me.”

“She’s had it in her head for months that we’re going to be a thing. Me and her, I mean. And it’s never going to happen.” He shivered, clearly repulsed by the idea. “I’m not a saint, Claire. I’ve dated a lot. But I’m not a cheater.” He met my gaze. “I’m devoted to our courtship. Until you tell me otherwise, I mean.”

My heart skipped a beat. *Oh God*. “But I kissed Exos.” I winced, not meaning to just sputter the words out like that. “I mean, it’s... Well, I...” I shook my head, irritated with my inability to form a sentence.

Titus chuckled. “He kissed you, sweetheart.” He took a step closer, the

heat from his body warming mine as he crowded me against the window. “I accepted that he initiated a connection with you already, Claire.” His palm went to the glass beside my head, his opposite hand grabbing my hip. “Just as he’s accepted my courtship.”

I swallowed. “Oh.” It was all I could say, the only word I seemed to know. First, Exos. Now, Titus. These men were going to send me into cardiac arrest if they kept up these seductive antics.

He grinned and leaned into my personal space, his irises capturing mine. “Did you think his kissing you thwarted my claim, Claire? Because I’ll take you right now and prove how wrong you are. Your fire is all mine, sweetheart, and that’s a part of you that I’m not sharing.”

Goose bumps trailed down my arms, my mouth suddenly dry. “So, uh, you don’t care that I kissed Exos?”

“Oh, I care.” He inched closer. “What I’m saying is I understand and respect your need to date us both. Because what we have isn’t comparable. We’re fire, sweetheart. And fire is all passion.” He licked my lower lip, a trail of flames following in his wake. “Do you forgive me, sweetheart? Or do you need me to grovel?”

Shouldn’t I be the one begging for forgiveness here? For almost burning him and Ignis alive? For kissing Exos in front of him after our intimate night together?

“I’m so confused,” I admitted.

“May I make a suggestion?” he countered, his hips leaning into mine.

“Y-yes.” I swallowed. “Please.” I’d do anything to solve the puzzle in my thoughts.

“Stop thinking,” he whispered, embers flickering between our mouths. “Just feel.” He pressed his lips to mine. So different from Exos’s. Not that I should be comparing them, but it was hard considering the short time span that had passed from earlier to now.

Yet, as Titus slid his tongue inside, all my worries vanished. His skilled strokes consumed me, his heat absorbing mine and causing me to arch into him for more. He groaned, his grip on my hip tightening.

“Titus,” I breathed, flames erupting over my skin.

He lifted me into the air, bracing my back against the glass as he wrapped my legs around his waist. Then his fist was in my hair, holding me to him as he devoured my mouth, stealing all the air from my lungs.

So hot.

But even as my fire brewed out of control, his tempered the inferno, creating an erotic dance of elements around us. He was right. No one could touch this part of us, not even Exos.

My fire belonged to Titus.

Just as my spirit belonged to Exos.

Acceptance washed over me, my mind too exhausted to fight the truth any longer. I wanted them both, and I would have them both, so long as they would have me. Titus was right. I needed to stop thinking and just live in the moment.

I wound my arms around his neck, my fingers threading through his auburn strands and giving them a tug. He growled against my mouth, deepening the kiss and stirring an inferno in my lower belly.

Exos had ignited a need in me.

Titus was stoking that need to a whole new level.

It left me feeling dizzy and so incredibly aroused. Both of these men touched me in entirely different ways, yet it was all so interconnected inside me in a complex web of elements. It left me craving an outlet, a way to expel some of my pent-up power in a safe environment. And Titus provided me with that, by calling out my fire and wrapping it up in his own. The entire room was alive with light—*our* light.

I felt safe here.

Protected.

Alive.

“More,” I whispered, sliding my palms over the bare skin of his back. “I need more, Titus.”

He smiled against my mouth. “You want to play with fire, sweetheart?”

I nodded. “Yes.” He was my outlet and I needed him. “Please.”

“Mmm.” His hands fell to the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, causing my nipples to stiffen despite the warm air. He kissed me as he lowered my feet to the ground, his grip falling to the shorts at my waist. “Are you sure?”

I didn’t know if we were still talking about playing with fire or if he wanted to know if stripping me was okay. Either way, my answer was “Yes.”

Warmth caressed my legs as he tugged the fabric down, causing it to pool on the ground at my feet and leaving me naked before him. His gaze ran over me, his pupils dilating. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.” He lifted me again before I could reply and laid me out over the bed.

My pulse thundered in my ears, my nipples tightening to painful points of anticipation. *What is he going to do now? What do I want him to do?*

I licked my lips, arching as need coursed through me, only to have him walk to the end of the bed to rest his palms on the quilt beside my ankles.

Not what I expected at all. “Titus?”

“Shh,” he murmured, trailing his finger over the arch of my foot. “Just feel.” A line of fire sizzled along my ankles, sending warmth into my veins and calling my own element out to play. “It’s all about the dance.” Molten sensation swirled over me, climbing up my legs, each kiss a sizzle against my skin.

“Oh...” I squirmed, my thighs clenching as the flames crept higher. “This is...”

“Fun?” he suggested, leaning over to lick the side of my knee. “Hot?” He knelt on the bed, his mouth trailing the embers up my thigh. “Arousing?” The warmth reached my center, sliding over my slick heat and cascading a series of tremors through my limbs.

This was so *new*. Most boys just fumbled around, touching me as they saw fit, but Titus’s movements were deliberate. Skilled. Erotic as fuck.

And the use of our shared element only heightened the moment, eliciting a passion inside me that required release. His name left my mouth on a plea, a worship, a prayer for more. He intensified the pressure of his gift, creating an inferno that encased my body, inflaming the room and igniting my very soul.

“You look gorgeous like this, drenched in my power,” he whispered, his lips against my hip and sliding across my lower belly. “I want to taste you, Claire. Can I taste you?”

I swallowed, my heart in my throat, my entire form literally alive with fire and energy. “Yes,” I hissed. “Yes.” The need to unravel tightened within me, my stomach a bundle of nerves with no outlet, and oh, fuck, was it hot. I could hardly breathe, could barely think.

Just Titus.

Just the feel of his heat caressing my skin, and his lips touching me *there*.

I bowed off the bed, his palm landing on my belly to hold me down with a growl. And all hell broke loose around us. So much fire. So much heat. So much *Titus*.

His tongue slid up and down my slick flesh, his mouth a miracle between my thighs. I wove my fingers into his hair, holding him there as embers drifted up my abdomen to my breasts. Some part of me registered how much

this should hurt, but my elements pushed back, creating a sensation unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

Hot and cold.

Lava and ice.

Euphoria mingled with excitement, stirring a catastrophic force inside me that begged to be released. He caught my clit between his teeth, nibbling just hard enough to send a jolt through my limbs and force my gaze to his. The hunger reflected in his forest-green irises sent me flying, my orgasm ripping out of me on an animalistic scream that could likely be heard across the Fae Realm.

And I didn't care, too consumed by the rapture flooding my veins to focus on anything other than trying to remember how to breathe. Ashes seemed to coat my tongue, fire crawling down my throat, and then Titus's mouth was there, possessing me, teaching me how to exist beyond the elements. Helping me to overpower the inferno, to control it, to pull it all back inside and soothe it with a few calming strokes.

Out of this world did not begin to cover what just happened.

I blinked into the dark room, shocked. It felt as if a bomb had gone off inside me, rattling the foundations of the world. Yet, his room remained undisturbed, the garden still glowing outside the windows. "That was..." I cleared my throat, my voice hoarse from screaming. "That was..." Nope. Still didn't have the right word. "*Amazing* seems too dull a description."

He chuckled. "I'm taking that as a compliment." He gathered me into his arms and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Let me know when you're ready to play again."

"Again?" I could barely feel my arms and legs. Oh, but I hadn't repaid the favor yet. That was what he meant. Rolling to my side, I pressed my palm to his hard abdomen, exploring the muscular dips down to the top of his pants. He caught my wrist in his hand and brought it up to his lips, giving me a kiss.

"When I mentioned playing again, I meant with you, sweetheart. And after you've gotten some sleep." He placed my hand on his chest, over his heart. "It's only three in the morning. I could use a little rest." He brushed his lips against my hair, easing me into contentment.

"Are you sure?" I asked, yawning.

He chuckled. "Yeah, sweetheart. I'm sure." He pulled the blankets up over us, his shoulder acting as my pillow as I snuggled into his side.

“’Kay. ’Cause sleep sounds good,” I admitted.

“I know.” Another kiss, his arm tightening around my upper back. “Good night, Claire.”

“Good night, Titus,” I whispered, my eyes drifting closed in a blissful state. I’d wake him later by repaying the favor. But for now, I’d take the reprieve and just... rest.

Chapter 14

Claire



Something soft drifted over my lips, causing me to stir from my cocoon of heat. Piercing blue eyes smiled down at me, causing me to grin in response. *Exos.*

He tilted his head, the motion endearing. “Morning,” he whispered.

“Morning,” I replied, stretching my legs.

Legs that were intertwined with Titus.

Who was asleep behind me with his chest pressed up against my naked back.

Oh, shit.

Exos knelt beside the bed, placing us at eye level. He brushed a curl away from my face before palming my cheek. “It’s okay, Claire.” His low murmur scattered a flurry of goose bumps down my arm. “But I am a little jealous that you sleep naked with him and fully clothed with me.” His gaze dipped down to where Titus’s arm was wrapped around my upper abdomen, my breasts completely revealed thanks to the fallen sheet.

I bit my lip, wincing. “I...” I wanted to apologize but didn’t know how. Because I didn’t feel remorse for spending the night with Titus, but I did feel bad about doing it so soon after kissing Exos. “I...” I cleared my throat, uncertain of how to proceed. “Sorry.”

He leaned closer, his blue eyes smoldering as he refocused on my face. “There’s nothing to forgive,” he murmured, his mouth brushing mine. “You have five elements, Claire. Powerful elements. You need a balance.”

I frowned. He couldn’t possibly be implying that I needed five fae to help balance my elements. Right? Because that’d be insane. I could hardly handle the two of these men, let alone *five*.

He pressed his lips to mine once more, his kiss soft and coaxing, while Titus stirred behind me.

Uh-oh...

“How’d it go?” he asked, his voice deep with sleep and sounding sexy as sin against my ear.

“We’ve reached an agreement,” Exos replied, the words fluttering over my lips. “The Council has granted my request to train Claire on Spirit Quad and prepare her powers for the Academy. If we can prove to them that she’s stable, they’ll allow her to attend classes.” He kissed me softly before shifting to glance over my shoulder. “You’ve been excused from classes due to temporary reassignment.”

“Good.” Titus’s arm lifted from my stomach, his hand shifting to my hip beneath the blankets. “I assume the three of us are relocating today?”

“Yes. The new quarters are being assembled right now.” Exos cocked his head, his nose brushing mine as he gave me his undivided attention. “Spirit Quad is abandoned, but that gives us plenty of room to practice. Okay?”

I swallowed, a little hot and bothered by being sandwiched between two incredibly good-looking men. And now they wanted me to live with both of them?

“I think you rendered her speechless, Your Highness,” Titus murmured, his lips against my hair. “Perhaps you need to help her find her voice.”

“Hmm, yes, I think she’s feeling quite shy at my finding her naked in bed with you. Again.” His gaze lowered to my chest, causing my nipples to harden in response, my body alight with wonder and sensation and confusion. “Any suggestions?”

“Several.” Titus’s palm slid across my lower belly, the touch a brand against my skin as he pulled me backward. “I introduced Claire to fire play.”

“Did you?” Exos stood, his fingers playing over his dress shirt, popping open the buttons with nimble fingers.

This can’t be happening.

It has to be a dream.

“You two don’t even like each other,” I blurted out, then winced at allowing my thoughts to grace my lips. *Are you trying to ruin this?*

Exos grinned. “Maybe not, but we both like you, Claire.” The fabric parted around his torso, revealing the toned physique beneath. He was leaner than Titus, but just as muscularly defined, almost in a regal sort of way. Fitting, considering his title. “It’s not common for a Spirit Fae to take two

mates, but it's not unheard of. Sometimes our affinity for a secondary element is strong, requiring an outlet. Clearly, you have a lot of fire in you." He finished removing his shirt, folding it and setting it on the nightstand beside the bed.

"I'm willing to work with it if you both are," Titus added, his thumb drawing a hypnotic circle around my belly button.

I resisted the urge to pinch myself, certain this had to be my unconscious mind indulging in this inappropriate scenario. But as the mattress dipped beneath Exos's weight, his eyes darkened with desire on my breasts, I realized I'd never felt more alive.

"You have a lot of power in you, princess. This is one way to help expel some of your energy. We'll absorb it for you. If it's what you want." He lay down beside me and fondled a strand of my hair that had fallen across my cheek. "I felt you come undone through our bond, Claire. Now I want to see it with my own eyes."

My lips parted, my blood heating. "I'm really starting to think this is real," I whispered.

Titus and Exos chuckled, their collective warmth searing me from both sides. Titus's hand slid lower, exploring the apex between my thighs. "Definitely real, sweetheart," he said against my ear.

I shivered, licking my lips. Exos tracked the movement with his gaze before leaning in to trace the same path with his own tongue. *Oh, fuck...* It served as an invitation, one I was hopeless to turn down.

Tilting my head, I accepted his offer and moaned as Titus dipped his finger into my weeping sex. Exos took advantage of my groan, his tongue sneaking inside to begin a dance that set my body on fire. Not in the way Titus had last night, but in an entirely new way. This touch was underlined with spirit, energizing me in a way no one else could.

The combination of elements left me wired and hot and rejuvenated. I felt unstoppable, protected, adored.

How is this my life?

Oh, who the hell cares? Stop thinking!

I had no idea where that last voice came from, but I listened to it and indulged in the sensation flourishing between the three of us. I thread my fingers through Exos's thick, ash-blond hair, holding him to me as he devoured my mouth. My other hand went to lie over Titus's as he explored me intimately, his fingers knowing and sizzling against my flesh.

Fire and spirit dueled inside me, both tugging on different nerves and exciting a maelstrom of activity throughout my body. I shook beneath the onslaught, overwhelmed and consumed by both men and the gift of their touch.

Exos cupped my breast, his thumb brushing my nipple and sending a jolt of electricity through my bloodstream. Then he nipped my lower lip, his eyelids lifting to reveal a pair of glowing irises. “Your arousal is invigorating,” he whispered. “I’ve never felt anything like it.”

He kissed me again before I could reply, his fingers pinching my nipple. I arched back into Titus, gasping at the fierce contact. His lips went to my neck, kissing and nibbling, while his hand continued to work beneath mine, his fingers stroking a desperate need between my legs. “Are you going to show Exos how beautiful you are when you come, sweetheart?” he asked against my skin, his voice husky and dark. “I think he’s jealous that I saw it first.”

I shuddered, the flames inside dying to be released.

Then Exos shifted, his mouth leaving mine to kiss my jaw and then lower to my breast. His hand went to my thigh, lifting it to rest against his hip.

I gasped as his lips closed around my nipple, the heat of his tongue a brand against my skin.

Fuck.

I squirmed between them, the dual sensations sparking a volcano inside my core that throbbed for release. “Exos,” I breathed, my grip tightening in his hair.

Titus nipped my neck, his finger driving deep and eliciting a scream from me that resembled his name. I panted both of their names in succession, confused and aroused and needy as hell. I didn’t know whom to focus on—Exos at my breast or Titus’s hand between my thighs. Both were so, so good. So perfect. So *mine*.

I gave in to that little voice that told me not to think, not to consider the complications of the moment. And I let go completely, enjoying the way they handled me, the way they encouraged my power to flourish between us.

Exos skimmed his teeth across my stiff peak, forcing my gaze to his. A knowing gleam blazed in his irises, his soul seducing mine into an intimate dance that forced me out of this plane of existence.

The tension building inside me unraveled, sending me spiraling into an oblivion of elements that thundered through the room. Incomprehensible

words left my mouth, my limbs locking in pleasure, stars bursting before my eyes.

Intense.

Perfection.

Addictive.

I wanted more. I craved a deeper outlet, a more passionate understanding, a *mating*. The realization caused me to tremble, my heart skipping a beat. *What are they doing to me?*

“Balancing you,” Exos whispered, licking a path back up to my lips. I must have spoken the words out loud. Or maybe he read them from my eyes. “We’ll help you learn how to fly with steady wings, beautiful, when you’re ready. But for now, we’ll keep you grounded in the only ways we know how.”

“I can feel the bond,” I marveled, finally sensing it for the first time. “It makes me want more.”

“I know.” He kissed me softly while Titus slowly drew his hand from between my legs, the dampness of my arousal creating a wet path across my skin. It left me quivering, stirring a desire for another round. I felt insatiable, needy, and undeniably smitten.

“We’ll take it slow,” Titus spoke against my ear. “Teach you about our world, our customs, our powers. To make sure it’s what you really want, Claire.”

“Handling both of us won’t be easy,” Exos agreed, his lips moving against mine. “That’s what the courtship is about—learning about the other and deciding if it’s what both parties want. For that, you need a stronger comprehension of your abilities and this world. But we have time. And we’ll start training immediately.”

Titus kissed my shoulder. “He means after a shower.”

Exos’s lips twitched. “No, I meant now.” He kissed me again, his aura calling to mine on an intimate level that left me shaking against him. “Create something with me, princess.”

“Like what?” I breathed, captivated by the swirling blue of his irises.

“Anything.” He lifted his hand from my leg, holding it between us.

I pressed my palm to his and marveled at the stimulating connection. “More flowers?”

“If you want.” An electrical charge caressed the air, causing Titus to shift at my back. He didn’t leave but gave me space, allowing me to focus on the

energy breathing life into my being.

The energy of Exos.

His spirit enticing mine.

“Think about something you want,” he encouraged. “And show me with your hand.”

“Anything?”

He grinned. “Within reason.”

“Okay.” I fell into the ocean of his gaze, drowning in all things Exos. Every inhale belonged to him. Every heartbeat. Every thought. He wanted me to create life. What would he enjoy? A pixie like Elana’s?

Or maybe something from my home.

Like a butterfly.

I pictured a winged creature, giving it pink wings with my mind, and felt my heart warm at the idea as my fingertips tingled.

Exos smiled in approval as a butterfly fluttered above our joined hands.

“What is that?” he asked softly. “Your version of a fairy?”

“It’s a butterfly.” I urged it to fly around the room, its wings glistening with life. “It likes flowers.”

“It’s beautiful.” He released me to tuck my hair behind my ears. “Just like you.” He pressed his lips to mine once more, the kiss a possession and a promise wrapped up in one. “See how long you can keep it flying around. My record for a conjured spirit is three months, if you want a goal.”

My lips parted. “Three months?”

He waggled his brows. “Consider it your first assignment, princess.” He nuzzled my nose and glanced over my shoulder at Titus. “I think I might enjoy playing professor for a few weeks.”

“We can teach her all sorts of things,” Titus agreed, drawing a finger down my spine. “But I do want a shower first.”

“You and me both,” Exos said, some sort of understanding passing between them.

I gasped, understanding dawning. *They’re still turned on.* “Wait, are you ___”

Exos silenced me with his mouth, his tongue a familiar presence that scattered my thoughts. “Pleasuring you in the presence of another, I can handle. Watching you return that pleasure to a man who isn’t me? Absolutely not.”

“I agree,” Titus said. “And I can’t just leave the room, either.”

Exos nodded. “We’ll come up with a way to handle this. For now, I’ll settle on a shower.”

“There’s only one here,” I pointed out.

“Titus will go first while you show me what your butterfly can do. Then I’ll shower.”

“And me?” I asked, raising a brow. “When do I shower?”

Exos nodded. “You’re right. You should shower first while we watch, then Titus can go after you, and I’ll go last.”

I slapped his shoulder. “That’s not funny.”

“I didn’t say I was joking.”

“For once, I actually like your demand,” Titus added. “Up you go, Claire.”

I scowled over my shoulder. “No.”

“You can’t turn down a royal,” he said, smiling. “And he wants you to shower first.”

“I thought you wanted a shower?” Exos gripped my chin to pull me back to him, a smile in his eyes. “Or was that you being difficult?” He kissed me before I could retort, causing Titus to chuckle as he rolled out of the bed.

“I’ll let you know when I’m done,” he said on his way out of the room.

Exos ignored him and continued kissing me, the moment intensifying now that we were alone. He pushed me to my back, his hips settling between mine. “I’m going to kiss you until he returns, Claire.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“And I’m going to make you come again.” The dark promise sent my heart into overdrive. “With my tongue.” He nipped my jaw on his way down, his gaze oozing sin as he looked up at me. “Consider it an introduction to the courtship bond, princess. And you have two of us vying for your attention.”

Oh God...

I might not survive this.

Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to worry, not with Exos drawing a hot path with his tongue through my slick folds.

This is my new life.

Best to just embrace it.

And I did.

Twice.

Part Two



Chapter 15

Titus



Two weeks.

Two... fucking... weeks... well, *not fucking*.

I was about to lose my damn mind.

Claire moved beyond the thin veil of the opaque windows as she dressed for our training session. I coveted our lessons together because it provided us with alone time—just us and our fire.

Watching her as she slipped the tight-fitting fireproof garments over her head made the embers in me burn hotter. A feat, considering they were constantly smoldering in her presence.

She glanced in my direction, likely feeling my eyes on her, memorizing every inch of her body. Then she disappeared from view, leaving my fingers curling into fists as the raw need in me demanded an outlet.

As if on cue, Exos appeared at the other window that overlooked the training courtyard just outside the Spirit Quad. He arched a brow as if to remind me that I wasn't the only one with a claim on Claire's body.

Yeah, yeah.

Neither of us could stand the idea of Claire fucking the other, so we'd come to a painful truce. Giving her pleasure took the bite out of our need, but it wasn't enough anymore. And I knew he felt it, too.

Exos's eyes narrowed as though he suspected I might take Claire right here in the courtyard—while he watched.

Not a bad idea, I thought darkly.

A part of me didn't care anymore, but I also knew it would cause a divide that would echo throughout all the kingdoms. I couldn't have Claire—not yet—not until we'd established an understanding of how to make this work.

Sex wasn't necessarily a trigger to deepening a bond, but something told me if either of us fucked Claire, it would deepen our connection to something far more permanent.

Which meant I couldn't touch her. Not like that. Not yet. Not until we all came to a mutual agreement, because it was very clear that Claire would require more than one mate. Perhaps up to five.

She entered the courtyard twirling a baton I'd given her last week. The way she handled it now showed her improvement. The tips bled with tiny flames as she gave me a seductive, mischievous grin.

"If you keep glaring up at Exos like that, he's going to jump down here and join our sparring session. And something tells me it'll be your face he uses for a physical demonstration." Her words were a bit too matter-of-fact for my liking.

I rolled my shoulders back and cracked my neck, making a show of it. "I'm not afraid of the scrawny royal."

I slipped my arm around her waist as she stepped within my reach, and brought her hips against mine so she could feel how hard she'd made me just by standing there showing off the fire that connected us.

Her eyes widened. "I thought you, uh, just took a shower."

As if a hand job could possibly reduce the excruciating need that screamed in me. I let my voice drop, and I didn't care if the demanding huskiness of my tone came off too rough. "I'm tired of showers. Of this place. Of Exos spying on our training." I shot him a look while I said it, which earned me a smirk in response. This was supposed to be my time with Claire, and the bastard knew it.

But he clearly didn't trust me not to take this to the next level. Which I couldn't truly blame him for, as I felt the same way about him.

Claire pouted, her adorable bottom lip plumping out. She thumped her baton against my leg, causing the flames to lick up my sides. "You don't really mean that, right?"

Ah, she didn't understand.

"I would never leave you, Claire. It's just... *hard*." I nuzzled into the groove of her neck.

"Oh," she said, breathless. She arched against me, pressing her breasts into my chest as my teeth grazed her pulse. Her resulting groan caused my cock to throb between us.

"Fuck, Claire," I whispered, my body on fire—literally.

She twisted in my grip to glance to where Exos tracked our every movement. “Exos is watching.”

I know. I can feel his presence.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with that last night,” I said instead, grinning when flames erupted around us. She sucked in a breath, the memory of her naked and crying out for more, painting her cheeks a delicious pink. That’d become our nightly routine. And sometimes a morning activity as well.

Claire dropped the baton and gripped my shoulders, her strength surprising me as she pushed me away. The echo of flames burned in her eyes, slowly overtaking the blue that marked her as a Spirit Fae.

Yes, give me your fire, sweetheart.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said as she narrowed her eyes. “You’re trying to distract me, but I’m ready.” She retrieved her baton and twirled it before crouching into the battle stance I’d taught her. “I’m going to prove to all the fae that I am not my mother.”

A grin stretched across my face as I took a defensive position. Pride swelled in my chest. Yes, Claire was definitely ready to face the Academy.

But was I ready to let her face them without me by her side? Her first class would be on Air Quad—with Exos.

A fireball caught me on the chin, causing me to grunt before stumbling to my knee. I snapped my head back just in time to see Claire’s baton coming straight for my face. She’d caught me off guard, but that was because I wasn’t accustomed to elements being used against me in a fight. The one handicap of being a Powerless Champion was, well, real fae fought with their powers.

I caught the baton in my grip with ease and smiled at Claire’s surprised expression. “Well done, sweetheart, but you’ll have to do better than that to beat me.”

I intended to yank Claire closer and seduce her some more, when she twisted from my grip in a maneuver I hadn’t taught her. One glance up at a smug Exos told me I wasn’t the only one who’d helped Claire grow.

My gaze dropped down to Claire, who held her palms together, her brows knitted with concentration as she summoned a new fireball—but it wasn’t quite a fireball.

“Claire,” I cautioned, hoping she wasn’t attempting to combine her elements. She wasn’t ready, even if Exos encouraged her. He didn’t

understand how raw and explosive her emotions were or how they impacted her powers.

Her jaw flexed as she worked on the ball of power. Its gleaming red flames licked around the edges of her fingertips before the other elements came into play in tufts of living color. A magical breeze kicked up and sent her hair flinging over her face, but she didn't move to push the strands away.

A sizzle of water fought against the flames, winning and morphing into something dangerous as an external, circular vortex crashed at her feet and wound circles up her body. It seemed to be climbing an invisible wall, threatening to cut her off from me. Permanently.

"Claire," I tried again, readying myself to intervene.

Except tight roots had bound my ankles to the spot.

Claire had used her spirit to create life, causing the ground to shift beneath us to secure her new creations.

"I'm okay," she said through gritted teeth, her voice distorted by the heavy magic weaving its way up her arms. "I can control it."

No. You can't.

I glowered up at Exos, who merely shrugged, clearly at ease with this display.

Jackass, I growled in my mind. Not that he could hear me. Not that he even mattered.

I refocused on Claire. I wanted to yell at her, strangle her, crash my mouth against hers and distract her from this nonsense, but I knew better. She possessed a fire that rivaled my own, and a passionate ambition that no one could take away from her. I would be a hypocrite to try.

My fingers curled into fists as she worked the fireball and tried to rein in the elements. A small smile played on her plump lips. "I think I'm doing it."

Exos joined us, his blue eyes glimmering in triumph. "That's beautiful, Claire."

Of course he approved.

"Yes, let's encourage her to work with elements we have no power over." Claire's fire might be mine, but the rest of her did not belong to me. If she lost control now, I would be useless to help her.

I did not like to feel useless.

"What's going on?" an approaching voice asked from the edge of the courtyard.

Exos frowned, eyeing the monstrosity growing around Claire. "Prepare

yourself, River. We may require your affinity for water in just a moment.”

I glanced over my shoulder at a gaping River, having forgotten about Exos inviting him over today. Claire was steadily gaining control over her powers, and while River couldn't reach her elements the same way Exos and I could—thanks to our bonds—he could still help guide her when it came to water.

Good thing, too, because that was the first element to rip free from Claire's careful grasp.

Her smile faded as the churning water around her intensified, spiraling up into the sky like the ground had erupted in a geyser.

“Claire!” I shouted, straining against the vines, which only dug deeper into my skin in response. I winced as the prick of thorns threatened to make my imprisonment even worse.

Of course, I was a stubborn son of a bitch, so instead of obeying Claire's magic, I sent my fire writhing over the vines.

“Don't,” Exos bit off.

A single word—a command, one that needed to be obeyed.

My teeth grated together in defiance, but I dispelled the flames only because Exos had an edge to his voice. One I wasn't used to hearing—panic.

Claire had stumbled backward, her body blurring behind a waterspout mingling with violent gusts of air that would soon turn into a full-fledged tornado if not brought under control.

“Now, River,” Exos said.

River grunted as he thrust his arms out. An invisible force shifted, twisting the geyser the wrong way to make it lose momentum. A sound of pain came from inside the vortex, making me jerk against my restraints.

“Claire!”

The vortex thinned enough for us to finally see her, causing the blood to drain from my face. Her skin glowed with a silver hue while white flowers came to life and died over and over again at her feet in a panicked cycle of renewal.

Exos stepped inside, braving the whirlwind of power, and gently took hold of Claire's arms. I couldn't hear what he said to her, but her eyes flashed up to him, full of silver and blue power that swirled with distress. He calmed her, then she looked at me and the fireball still in her hand grew.

She let out a long breath before she set the vortex on fire. It was a terrifying sight as the very air around her burst into a swirling inferno, but I

immediately understood what Exos had told her to do. By allowing fire—the power she maintained the most control over—to engulf the other elements, she could mingle everything together and draw the energy back into herself.

Clever.

I watched, both with pride and unease at her raw, barely trained strength as she closed her eyes and calmed the storm. The elements slowly drained away and drifted like ash to the ground, sprouting up more white flowers in their wake.

By the time she finished, the entire courtyard was covered in the beautiful blooms.

River let out a long breath. “By the Elements, I almost wasn’t able to break through her vortex.” He glanced at me, a shaky smile mixed with worry on his face. “I don’t know if I’m cut out to be her water mentor, Titus. I’m not able to help her, not like you.” His gaze returned to Claire, mesmerized with her just as all the fae should be. “Your bonds are strengthening her far more than I ever could.”

Hmm, no, River was definitely not suited to mentor Claire. Nor did they possess a bond-mate compatibility like Claire had with me and Exos. Which, unfortunately, implied she would eventually need a water mate.

Exos already speculated she’d need one for each element.

I sort of hated that he was right.

Claire sank to her knees, her smile indicating it to be from exhaustion, not emotions. Her gaze danced with delight. “I did it. I brought it under control with minimal help.”

Just barely. But yes, she did. “Please don’t attempt that again, Claire. Not until we’ve found more mentors to help sharpen your elements.”

“Hmm, yes, on this I agree with Titus. We need to find you an air mentor. Fortunately, I have someone in mind.” Exos flicked a wrist at me, sending the vines binding my legs unwinding.

My eyes went wide. “Don’t tell me you could have done that this whole time.”

His resulting smirk said it all.

Royal bastard.

“River,” Claire said, ignoring my banter with Exos. “I’m so sorry for losing control like that. Thank you for helping me.”

He ducked his head as his face turned pink. “It was nothing, Claire. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to do more.” He glanced at me. “I’m not like your other

mentors.”

Her grin widened. “No, I suppose not.”

“Yes, as I said, we need to find a suitable mentor for air.” Exos glanced up at the sky that had been green and angry just moments ago. “We’ll be meeting the candidate I have in mind tomorrow when we visit Air Quad. He’s in your first class.”

Claire blushed. “Just a mentor, right?”

Exos grinned and brushed his lips against her temple. “That’s not up to me, princess.”

She leaned into him, her comfort with his presence evident in their interaction. I waited for the spike of jealousy to come, but it didn’t, surprising me. Over the last two weeks, I’d sort of learned to accept her bond with Exos. Maybe because it was different, more subtle and mischievous. While with me, she burned with passion and need.

Intriguing.

Exos folded his hands behind his back and straightened, the Royal Fae returning for duty. “The candidate will be tested, of course.” His gaze locked on Claire. “As will you. Do you feel truly prepared to face the fae and the Academy tomorrow?”

She smiled and slipped her arm through his, forcing him to buckle against her. “You’ll be with me.” Her gaze fluttered my way. “I just wish Titus could come, too.”

“He has classes,” Exos reminded her. “Don’t you, Titus?”

I sighed. “I do.”

As much as I wanted to be by Claire’s side night and day, Exos was right. I had my own classes to attend now that I had permission to resume my academic schedule. So I buried my feelings and the need to protect her, finding the strength in myself to give my trust over to Exos to do that for me.

No matter what conflicts there were between Exos and me, he wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Because his feelings for Claire rivaled my own.

He’d give his life to protect her.

Same as I would.

So, this new Air Fae had a lot to live up to. And, as Exos planned on testing him, all I could think was, *Good fucking luck, buddy.*

Chapter 16

Vox



“**Y**ou’re the one in charge here,” I reminded myself, not caring if anyone heard me. Sometimes I needed a little pep talk before approaching Sol in the morning. The damn Earth Fae liked to forget that I was his mentor and he was only permitted in the guest room as a boon. He didn’t get along with the Earth Fae—or any fae—but that was why I was his mentor. He needed me.

Right now, he was pissing me off.

Rolling my shoulders back, I inhaled a long, deep breath, held it, and then released it in a drawn-out gust that rattled his door.

Or, should have rattled it.

The damn Earth Fae had made a wall of stone around himself. I could feel it. A weight in the air made me want to sneeze, and my nostrils flared.

“Sol!” I shouted, then reduced myself to beating against the door with my fists. “You’re going to make me late for class!” I couldn’t just leave him in the Air Dorms unattended. He had to leave.

“Not going!” came the muffled reply of my earthy subordinate. “There’s a wild Halfling on campus today!”

As if I didn’t fucking know that. That was *precisely* why I needed to be bright and early for class.

I’d heard a rumor that she would be starting on Air Quad today, which meant I didn’t have time for Sol’s shit. No way was I going to miss this.

I stroked my short beard while I contemplated the best way to beat Sol at this idiotic game. He rarely walled me out like this, but when he did, it really drained my air magic to force him out. My powers needed to be at their height today.

Running my fingers to the back of my neck and securing the loop at my warrior's ponytail, I decided on a new tactic. "Are you telling me you're afraid of a girl?" I leaned in closer, knowing that Sol was right on the other side hanging on every word. "Or are you afraid of the royal?"

A hiss of sound, then a grating of stones as the wall shifted. I grinned.

"Not fucking afraid of that dirtbag!" was the reply.

I let out a low whistle, my powers over air sending the shrill notes vibrating through stone. "Oh really? Because it looks like you've spent the majority of your power making yourself a bunker in order to stay away from the royal. That's not the Sol I know."

I waited, then grinned when the stones shifted again and the slightest sliver of light came through the door. "Nice try, windbag. Not coming out."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't you have any more intelligent insults? Come on, Sol. The Air Quad is the last place you want to be today. They're saying the Halfling will be starting classes here, and if you want to be out of sight, then going back to the Earth Quad is your best bet to stay out of their path."

The wall crumbled, leaving the door to break off its hinges. I jumped back just in time for it to slam down on the place I'd been standing, leaving a very large and pissed-off Earth Fae on the other side. He wore his standard Earth Fae trousers that had gotten wrinkled from him sleeping in them, along with the loose tank around his broad shoulders. He intimidated most fae, but I knew Sol. He was all bark and no bite.

"You know why I can't go back there," he said, his words grating against the marble floors.

Not this again.

I threw my hands up and let them fall, releasing a gust of wind that blew away the dust from Sol's tantrum. Every time I indulged him and let him stay in the Air Quad, he thought he could just wall himself up here and not face the world.

Most fae would have kept their distance from Sol, but my powers made me fast and lithe, enough that I could move out of the way of his brutish strength as needed. Fighting an Earth Fae head-on was the mistake of many. I knew how to dodge, escape, and survive. It was what made me stronger than Sol in any match.

Moving to him, I rested a hand on his shoulder, only to brush aside the loose pebbles that had gathered in the crook of his collarbone. "Listen, Sol. Let's make a deal. I'll find out the Halfling's schedule and make sure you

won't be anywhere near her or the royal guarding her, all right?" I gripped him and gave him a light shake. "Oh, also? Use what I have taught you. Don't wall yourself up when they come at you. Evade their attempts to rile you up. You can do it."

Sol set his jaw and looked like he was going to punch me. I angled my feet just in case he did, but then his face erupted in a wide grin and he crushed me to his chest in a hug. "You're right, Vox. You're right."

"Too... tight. Can't... breathe," I managed to squeak out of my crushed windpipe.

Sol laughed and released me, setting me back down. I was a tall fae, but Sol was a titan.

Coughing, I patted him on the arm again. "Okay, so, off with you."

I knew the Earth Fae didn't want to leave. The Chancellor had forced us into this collaboration, avid about multi-element partnerships, and Sol and I certainly had our ups and downs. I might be good for him, a little bit of air in his stubborn sails, but I was also a member of this Academy and needed some time on my own.

"Fine, Vox," Sol said reluctantly and marched past me, sending the walls shaking. He had so much trouble reining in his gifts. It was what made other Earth Fae afraid enough of him to bully him.

I could relate.

I had a history of my own, but I did better than most keeping that under tight wraps. It would take a tornado to reveal what had driven me to the Academy in the first place.

When blessed silence engulfed me after Sol's departure, I let out another long breath, wishing I could spend some time in meditation before starting the day. Today, however, there was no time for contemplation or reflection.

Excitement drifted through the air, palpable and enticing. Whatever energies this Halfling brought with her, it was realm-changing, and I wanted a front-row seat.



In spite of Sol's delay to my morning, I still arrived early to my conjuring

class. This being a more advanced class, I didn't expect to see the Halfling. It made me want to wander outside and see if I could spot her.

"Did you hear we have a new student?" Aerie asked me, one of the Air Fae who often indulged in the latest gossip.

"Quit stirring up motes," I replied. Everyone on campus had heard about the new student. I didn't live under a rock.

"She's tried to kill Ignis twice now. First with her little show of fire power. *Then* by trying to drown her and Sickle and several others in the Fire Dorms. If Sickle hadn't been there, she would have killed Ignis. I saw it all. Well, the first incident, anyway. The second one, I was in the Air Quad."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Sounds terrifying," I said, placating her. Last thing I wanted to do was goad a fae known to stir up trouble.

"It was!" She kept jabbering, but other students thankfully indulged her bullshit, giving me a chance to meander away.

Pretending to be engrossed in a piece of lint on my suit, I brushed it off before I took my seat, a floating pedestal three desks down that gave me a perfect view of the door. I liked to see who came in and out. Conjuring took place in an enclosed orb where anything summoned—intentionally or accidentally—couldn't escape. It left the doorway as the sole entrance and exit.

With the clock nearly at the late-morning dial, the students started to stream in. Dark hair and uniforms made all the Air Fae look almost the same, but I could spot the small traits that set them apart. They liked to keep their hair short, which was why I'd let mine grow out. The last thing I wanted to be was just another Air Fae.

Then, there she was. I'd been talking myself out of the possibility of seeing the Halfling up close, but she was actually here. A bright glimpse of sunlight and golden hair as she eased into the room with her hands clasped in front of her thighs. The standard Academy uniform clung to her curves, which were far more sensual than an Air Fae's and immediately made my eyes wander from her head to her toes. I could write a song about her grace, undoubtedly innate in the lithe movements of one who wielded the element of air, but there was so much more to her that had me mesmerized.

A flash of dangerous dark-blue eyes broke me from the spell. Exos, the notorious Royal Spirit Fae, instantly took note of me and glowered. "Eyes to yourself."

An order.

I wasn't used to those, but I knew better than to challenge the royal, especially after what he'd done to Sol. The Spirit Fae could manipulate one's very will, and I had no interest in testing the strength of this particular royal's ethical qualms about doing that inside the classroom.

The Halfling fidgeted while the Air Fae took their seats. I tried not to watch her, but it was damn near impossible. She was so utterly fascinating with her round ears and beautiful blonde hair.

Everyone took their assigned seats, leaving the usual circle of empty pedestals around me open. The Halfling took one of the chairs closest to me before glancing between Exos and me, murmuring something I couldn't hear—which was impressive, given that air currents normally obeyed me and I could hear any whispered secret within my vicinity.

“Yes. That's him.” The royal nodded, his words soft as he sat behind her, providing him with a clear view of her back and the entryway.

“Hi,” the Halfling said, startling me when I realized she was actually talking to me.

“Oh, uh, hi,” I said, resisting the urge to glance at the powerful Spirit Fae that was just at the edge of my sight. I didn't care for his proximity, but based on the light tremors of power in the air, that was exactly what he wanted—for everyone to feel uneasy.

Definitely a warrior.

The Halfling smiled shyly, and it felt like sunlight was exploding all around me again. A warm breeze swirled around her that immediately called to my innate element, coaxing me to lean closer, so I did.

The royal cleared his throat. “Distance, Air Fae.”

Before I could reply—and with what, I had no idea—the professor entered and tapped a staff against the ground, sending light bursts of air fluttering through the enclosed room.

Professor Helios, one of the more ancient Air Fae, was considered a master of conjuring. He wore his dark hair long, a customary style for one of his age. The thick strands swept around him on an invisible breeze, giving him the illusion of floating. Lengthy robes added to the effect, and he surveyed the class with his inky eyes. Most Air Fae had darker-hued eyes, but not dark enough to overtake the pupil. Professor Helios, however, was powerful—and *old*—so he had an eerie kind of gaze that made it difficult to look directly at him.

He wasted no time and conjured an air sprite to his side. The Halfling let

out a soft gasp that made something in me unhinge, but I managed to keep myself in one piece.

The small creature immediately began chittering and buzzed around the Air Fae's head.

"Class, as you can see, we have a new student," Professor Helios said with a sweeping motion. Wind was normally invisible, but when scented with power, it could send color through a controlled breeze. Helios's power was dark, and a shadow swept over the Halfling, making her stiffen. The royal subtly reached out to stroke his fingers through her hair, whispering secret words that I couldn't hear.

Strange. Exos was a Spirit Fae with an affinity for fire, not air. I should be able to hear them.

Unless...

Oh.

Now I saw it. He and the Halfling had initiated a courtship bond. That was what allowed them to speak to one another beyond my intrusion. Fascinating.

An odd surge of jealousy burst through me, causing me to frown. I had no interest in starting a courtship bond with any fae, much less the fabled Halfling. But there was something about her air that called to me.

"Vox," Professor Helios barked, the slice to his words cutting across my ears and making me wince. "You will partner with the Halfling for today's exercise."

A collective gasp, both of shock and relief, swept through the rest of the class.

I hadn't realized I was staring, but the Halfling caught my gaze and offered me a slight smile. *Wait, does she know who I am already? That the professor had just assigned me to her?*

"Vox?" Professor Helios repeated, impatience coloring his tone. "Do you think you can bring our new student up to speed?"

"Yes," I said, clearing my throat as I undid the top button to my suit jacket, hoping I'd feel less suffocated. "Of course."

Professor Helios stabbed his staff into the ground twice, signaling that today's exercises were to begin. "We will pick up where we left off last time. Conjuring figments of our imaginations are great displays of power, and useful, but it all starts with a flicker of our element. Today you will conjure controlled spirals of air at your desk." The creature complained as it flitted

around his staff. The professor ignored it. “Keep them controlled, or else this little figment of my imagination will punish you.” The air sprite cheered its approval at being involved.

The Halfling’s eyes went wide. “Punish?”

I smirked. “Don’t mind him,” I said, turning to face her as I tried my best to ignore the narrow-eyed royal behind her. “Professor Helios just likes to rule by fear. Thinks that’s what’ll motivate the students. If you mess up, the worst the air sprite can do is bite you.”

She let out a soft gasp. “Bite? Like a mosquito?”

I raised a brow. “Not sure what that is, but yeah, let’s go with that.”

“Vox,” the royal said, startling me. I shifted on my floating pedestal to give him more of my attention. Sunlight struggled to shine in through the translucent barrier to the classroom, but it seemed to bow and waver uncertainly around him, his power a little too *wrong* for this place. He shivered as if sensing how much he didn’t fit in here.

“I asked the professor to pair you with Claire. Consider this an audition.”

Claire. I’d only heard her referred to as “Halfling” on campus, but I rather liked her unique name.

However, what I didn’t care for were Exos’s words.

“An audition?” I frowned. “For what?”

He didn’t elaborate, instead reaching out to the Halfling to stroke her wrist. “Air was one of the first elements she manifested. After fire, of course. We’ve been working on controlling her elements, but with her access to all five...” He shrugged, leaving the rest unsaid.

Gods. All five elements in one beautiful, fragile package? I couldn’t even begin to imagine how this Halfling had managed to stay in one piece this long.

He couldn’t possibly mean for me to be her mentor during her classes on the Air Quad. I must have inferred that wrong. After mentoring Sol for so long, I should have felt like I was capable of anything, but this? Surely not.

My hesitation didn’t go unnoticed. Claire moved away from me, just the slightest fraction that most wouldn’t have caught, but I did.

“Exos, if he’s not comfortable partnering with me, we can find another,” Claire mumbled. “Or I can work alone.”

Her uncertainty and distrust gave me pause. I didn’t know what she’d been through, but I’d never seen such torment in someone’s eyes.

Okay. I could handle one class. Maybe not an audition for the future, but

today was fine. We'd discuss the rest afterward.

"Claire, is it?" I asked, closing the gap she'd created and rolling my hands on my knees so that they were palm up. A nonthreatening posture to help her feel at ease. "I've heard a lot about you."

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say.

Heat flared on an invisible breeze that made her golden hair fly back over her shoulders, and her vibrant blue eyes danced with the dangerous spirit powers that sang with the royal's. I sensed that she couldn't manipulate will—or perhaps the royal kept that part of her powers dampened—but a wave of nausea swept over me as she shared a taste of her emotions through the fragile look she gave me.

Pain.

Guilt.

So much *guilt*.

Gods, how was she not splitting at the seams?

"I meant to say, I've been looking forward to meeting you," I amended, realizing the poor girl had likely been swamped with threats and cruelty. While I didn't believe a daughter should be held accountable for her mother's actions, I knew it was a popular opinion.

She narrowed her gaze at me, distrust in every line of her beautiful face. "Why is that?"

I didn't have a good answer for her. For over two weeks, something had put me on edge, so much so that I'd sought out the latest Academy rumors, only to find that there was a Halfling on campus. Ever since I'd known about her, I'd wanted to find her. For what purpose, I couldn't say; I just knew that I had to learn more about her.

That sounded so pathetic. I couldn't tell her the truth, so I opted for what I was best at in these situations.

Divert.

Evade.

Escape.

The class assignment was to conjure air spirals, so that was what I did. The task was easy enough for a fae with my power and control. I let out a soft whistle, and a spiral of air scented with my innate gift colored the element blue. Each Air Fae favored different hues when they worked their powers, but mine seemed to fluctuate with my mood.

This shade of blue meant I was intrigued. And not in a platonic sort of

way.

My power is attracted to Claire.

Fuck.

I glanced at the royal to see if he somehow knew. Maybe he could read my mind. I mean, who knew what kind of powers a Spirit Fae like him truly possessed.

However, he didn't react other than to glance at the air spiral flitting around my hand before looking back to Claire.

Her wide gaze was locked on the spiral. I expected her to be afraid, but she seemed fascinated.

An unwanted heat crept over the back of my neck, making me grateful for my warrior's tail and beard. Displaying her effect on me, even if she didn't understand it, was far too intimate for two strangers such as us.

"Go on, you make one," I offered, taking the opportunity to disperse the air spiral.

Her eyes snapped up to mine, making me suck in a breath. Her powers rested just underneath the surface as if they could burst out of her at any moment. So many elements tangled with the beautiful swirling power that was kindred to my own. I sensed her wavering control over her air element and tugged at the wild, snapping strands before I could stop myself.

Her chest leaned forward at the motion as if I'd pulled on her heart. "Oh," she said, the sound more of surprised pleasure than pain. "That's, uh, pleasant."

"What are you doing?" the royal demanded.

Now that I had ahold of her wild power, I didn't dare let go. Each strand was so frayed on the end that I wondered how she wasn't in acute pain.

"Why didn't you come to Air Quad sooner?" I asked before I realized that I was chastising an all-powerful Spirit Fae who could make me squawk like a chicken if he wanted to. "She needs guidance," I clarified.

The royal straightened his spine and narrowed his eyes, then surprised me by uttering a single word. "Continue."



“Does that feel better?” I asked, hoping Claire could sense what I was doing.

She shifted closer to me until our knees touched. Her skirt ran up her thighs from the motion, giving me a better view of her skin that glowed with power.

Not just power, but also the sweeping blue electricity that was scented with my magic.

Imagining her skirt inching up just a little more had the aura turning a deeper shade of blue that matched her eyes. She sighed, making me slightly dizzy. “Yeah. Actually, it does.”

I cleared my throat, my hold on her power tightening. If I let go now, her control would snap, hurting us both. However, the only way to truly strengthen her grasp on air was to provide her with an anchor. She needed an Air Fae in her circle, likely as a mate, to truly master her powers.

Someone strong enough to balance her.

Someone like me.

And, uh, yeah, that was not going to happen. I’d never been interested in courtship, and I barely knew this girl. Attraction was one thing. A mating, entirely another.

She needed another fae. Someone who wanted that kind of connection. I’d mention it to Exos after class.

“Try to conjure an air spiral like I showed you,” I said, hoping my tone sounded encouraging. We’d been trying this for several minutes, but she’d yet to create one.

Claire hummed as her eyes fluttered closed.

My power coiled around hers on instinct, the contact intense.

She leaned forward, her shirt dipping with her and providing me with an agonizing view of her graceful neck and cleavage. A better fae would have averted his gaze, but I was weak when it came to a fae who tugged at my strings like this one did. She demanded my full attention.

Then I noticed it—a fire brand.

Fuck, I knew I’d sensed something else off about her. Her fire was too passionate, too practiced and perfected for a Halfling who’d been rumored to kill and injure multiple fae.

She’d bonded with a Fire Fae as well.

Two courtship bonds, one for each element.

That wasn’t unheard of for a Spirit Fae, but it was definitely rare. Given what I’d seen of her powers, it seemed necessary to maintain her balance and

control. However, I didn't know of a single Air Fae who would be willing to go up against such competition.

Yet, I also knew she required one. Exos had one hell of a challenge set out before him.

"Just focus on that place inside," she said to herself. "I'm a fae," she continued, half chuckling. "I have magical powers. I can summon little air spirals."

"Like the hot chocolate," the royal offered. He kept his touch light and coaxing across her arm. "You're doing great, Claire."

Her brow wrinkled as she focused, and her powers fluctuated beneath my senses. Something new blossomed, a strange, dark force that felt wrong, corrupted.

What is that? Or better yet, who is that? It wasn't a power I recognized, the taste of it bitter on my tongue.

Wait, no, I do know that power. It's familiar.

I frowned, trying to identify the owner because it wasn't Claire. "Hold—"

She summoned the air spiral before I had a chance to stop her. I immediately latched on, trying to quell the conjuring, but the angry power reared at the scent of my magic. It was as if the power multiplied by a thousand, hell-bent on wreaking death and destruction to any who dared to get too close to the Halfling.

This wasn't right. I'd mentored other fae before, and I was good at it because I could visualize their inner strength, contain it, and hold on to it until they could contain themselves. Yet when I reached out to grasp the strand of power that burned hot and angry, it wouldn't listen to me.

This magic doesn't belong to Claire.

The air spiral danced over her hand, causing her to smile at the perceived achievement. An innocent expression that morphed into horror as the energy sprung from her grasp.

"Dispel it," I commanded. "Dispel it now!"

Claire's eyes widened and snapped up to mine in confused terror, but it was too late.

The spiral exploded.

Shrieks sounded, and the pathetic air pixie was the first to be sucked in by the wild vortex that crashed through the classroom, sending delicate pedestals catapulting through the thick glass meant to contain even the worst projectiles.

Professor Helios cast a wave of power to try to contain the vortex, but even the ancient fae was no match for whatever the horror had unleashed.

“*You!*” the Professor shouted as his black eyes trained on Claire. “I will not tolerate violent elements in my classroom!”

As if Claire had a choice in the matter. This wasn’t her. I was certain of it.

Despite her lack of involvement, I’d seen the kind of power she possessed. She could dispel this, if only I could guide her on how to use it.

The royal braced himself against the winds, and power shimmered around him as he anchored himself to the ground with invisible threads of life. My lips parted at the display of power. I’d known he was strong, but not that he was creative.

“Claire!” he shouted over the roar of the whirlwind that rained down chaos on the classroom. Determination was etched into every line of his face as the cyclone spiraled out of control.

Professor Helios grunted, trying to shove the winds back as a projectile flung dangerously close to his head.

“Claire!” Exos tried again, this time winning her wide-eyed stare. He braced a hand on her shoulder. “Remember what we taught you.”

A desk soared through the air and caught him against the shoulder, throwing him to the ground, silencing him.

Ah, shit...

Chapter 17

Claire



E *xos!* I'd been so careful, so determined to master my fae elements. But of course, I fucked up again.

And now I'd injured Exos.

I started to kneel, to check on him, when the Air Fae—Vox—grabbed my shoulder. “We can dispel it. But I need you to focus.”

Exos had told me this Air Fae might be a good mentor, his ability to control elements and help others noted in his academic records.

The wind whirled around us, catching Exos in its tunnel and dragging him across the floor. *No!* I latched onto him and yanked him back with a strand of fire that had Vox jumping away from me.

The professor screamed words I couldn't hear, causing the tornado to whirl toward him, plunging straight ahead, as though vexed by the command.

What the hell am I going to do?

“Exos!” I shouted, shaking him.

Vox was suddenly there, kneeling beside me. *When had I fallen to the ground?* I'd somehow landed beside Exos, my arms tight around his neck to keep him away from the destructive windstorm roaring through the room.

Oh God...

We're going to die here.

Air was the one element I couldn't seem to master. It always threw me off, always—

“Take my hand,” Vox demanded, holding out his palm. “We need to stop it before it destroys the building.”

“How?” I asked, raising my voice above the bellowing vortex. The

professor seemed to have it contained to an extent, but it was throwing projectiles left and right.

And if one hit the professor...

“Claire!” Vox shouted. “I need you to trust me. You have the power to kill that thing, and I can help you harness it.”

Of course I did. Because I fucking created it.

Damn it!

I’d been doing so well with Titus and Exos, and now—

Vox grabbed my wrist. “*Claire.*”

I blinked at him, startled. “What...?” I swallowed, my throat tight. “What can I do?”

“Can you feel the darkness?” he asked, his voice too calm for the chaos flourishing around us. “The power? Can you locate and isolate it?”

More shouts came, then screams followed by a crash, and I winced.

“Claire,” Vox insisted, demanding me to focus on his voice. “Try to latch onto it. Together, we can destroy it, but I’m not strong enough to do it alone. I need you to try to lasso it with me.”

Lasso a tornado.

Right.

Yeah, a walk in the park.

“It’s picking up speed!” someone screamed.

“Shit!”

“Run!”

“It’s going to take the building down!”

My blood ran cold, the insanity spiraling out of control and trying to tug Exos from my grasp. “No!” I shouted, but the word was lost to the howling winds. My hair tangled before my eyes, the lethal tunnel sucking everything into its inky abyss.

Like a black hole, I realized. Oh God...

Vox screamed something over the roar of sound, but I couldn’t hear him.

I need to focus.

I need to stop this.

By calling the elements to me.

Just like Exos and Titus always say.

I can do this.

I have to.

Or I’ll lose my Spirit, my Exos...

Closing my eyes, I searched within myself—the way Titus and Exos had shown me—and called forth my connection to air. Only, I didn't recognize the whirl of power dancing before me. It felt foreign, tasted wrong, as if it hadn't come from me at all. Not like in the courtyard yesterday when Exos helped me calm my out-of-control elements.

This didn't feel like *me*.

But my power located it, caressed it, explored it, searching for a way inside, trying to find a weakness to exploit.

There, my instincts whispered. *Punch a hole there*.

Using a gust of wind shaped like an arrow, I sent the sharp end into the core, locking onto the heart of the darkness, and gave it a tug.

Sweat dampened my brow from the effort, my breathing escalating, but my gifts took over, leading my every move. I punched another hole with a second arrow, then a third, all while keeping a mental rope tied to each.

Then I yanked them simultaneously with the force of all my power, shredding the vortex from the inside out.

I collapsed from the intensity of it, the back of my head somehow landing on Exos's chest. We'd whirled around from the force of the tornado, landing on the opposite side of the room.

Only, it wasn't my arms around him but his arms around me.

His breath rattled out of him on a sigh that sounded like my name, but the voice was wrong.

I glanced backward to find a handsome face with ebony eyes and a head of long, dark hair. The silver edging his irises was distinctly different. *Definitely not Exos*. The arms around me were leaner, too, but still strong.

What in the world?

I tried to move, to shift away from Vox and find Exos, except something heavy held me down. My hands fluttered over the solid muscle, relieved to find my Royal Fae. He didn't move, still unconscious, but breathing.

I sighed, relaxing my head, causing Vox to inhale sharply.

Shit.

How did I keep finding myself in this position? Sandwiched between hot men?

"Exos," I muttered, giving him a shake.

He didn't move.

Vox's arms loosened beneath my breasts, sending a wave of heat through my body. "Are you okay, Claire?" he asked, his deep voice a rumble beneath

me.

“I, uh, yeah. But Exos is—”

“Suffering from a splitting headache,” Exos finished for me, his voice low. “While also rather enjoying lounging between your legs, princess. I think I’ll stay.”

Vox chuckled beneath me. “I think he’s fine.”

“More than fine,” Exos murmured, slowly sitting up and cracking his neck.

It granted enough room for me to squirm out from between the two men, not that either of them seemed too keen on moving, if their matching smiles were anything to go by.

Smiles that quickly shifted to frowns as shrieks sounded from across the room.

Vox was on his feet in a second, his long hair loose around his shoulders. Whatever tie he’d used to secure that thick mass of beautiful brown strands was long gone, thanks to the tornado. Now it billowed in the breeze being cast from Professor Helios—a breeze aimed at me and carrying words of accusation.

“Your Highness,” he said slowly. “I suggest you get Claire out of here.”

Exos joined him, surveying the mess of the room before holding a hand out to help me up off the floor. My limbs shook with the effort, causing me to frown. Taking down that vortex had exhausted me more than I realized. I actually felt a bit woozy now that the adrenaline of the moment had subsided.

The nausea only worsened as I took in the massacre of the room.

“Oh God...,” I whispered, finally *seeing* the destruction. Bodies littered the floor. Some of them were moving. Most were not.

And the one screaming was Ignis’s friend. The one with wiry blonde hair who’d joined Ignis in the courtyard where I caused the fire.

Her violet eyes found mine and widened in horror. “*You!*”

Great...

“She didn’t do it, Aerie,” Vox said, startling me. “It wasn’t her magic.”

Exos glanced at him in question while my eyebrows rose. *Vox felt that, too?*

The Air Fae—Aerie—screamed, the sound causing me to flinch and my knees to buckle beneath me. Exos caught me by the waist as I pressed my palms to my bleeding ears.

What is that? The shriek had knocked me off-kilter, splitting my head in

two, and worsened the ache in my gut. It left me dizzy and unstable, Exos's arm around me the only thing keeping me upright. And even then, the room seemed to be spinning.

I winced as the shriek deepened, worming into my mind. It knocked the air from my lungs, leaving me floating in a cloud of confusion and deafness.

My hands fell as I tried to find them with my eyes.

Why is everything so fuzzy?

I blinked, trying to focus.

"Enough!" Vox roared, a whoosh of wind following the command and sending Aerie into the wall. Or, at least, that was what appeared to have happened. I couldn't really tell. It was as if my vision had shrunk into a teeny, tiny point.

"I'll talk to Professor Helios, but you need to get Claire out of here." Vox's voice registered, but it rang with an authority that surprised me. He seemed like such a nice fae. Not a bossy one. Not like my Exos.

"You and I need to have a conversation," Exos replied, causing my lips to curl. That was my bossy fae. And why did I find that so amusing?

Vox sighed. "Oh, we'll be talking all right. But for now, focus on Claire. She's about to collapse."

I am?

Oh.

Exos hadn't just put his arm around me but had also lifted me into the air. No wonder it felt like I was floating.

Dude, I'm drunk, I realized. Like the entire world was spinning in a mist of intoxication. When did that happen and how?

"Relax, Claire. I have you," Exos vowed.

"Oh, I know," I replied, smiling. "You definitely have me."

"It's the wind tunnel," Vox said, his voice warm and far away. No, close. Wait, where was he standing, again? "Fucks with the sense of balance and thought. She'll be fine in an hour. Just get her some water." Another whoosh followed his words. "Do not move, Aerie."

I swore she growled in reply. Or someone did. And then more yelling ensued, but I couldn't see any of them or anything. The carnage of the windstorm lay dormant beyond my vision. Or perhaps not so quiet. Panic filtered through the air, words I couldn't understand, and chants.

I curled into Exos, craving his familiarity, his security. I didn't want to be drunk anymore, but I couldn't see beyond the fog of my mind. Everything

mingled in shades of blacks that were riddled with sounds.

I whimpered.

Lips pressed against my temple. “You’ll be okay.”

Exos?

Yes. I snuggled into his heat, his scent, his strength.

“What happened?” a new voice demanded, one I recognized immediately as my Titus. I couldn’t say when I started thinking of these two men as mine, but I did. They were mine, and I intended to keep them if they let me.

Their tongues and hands, mmm...

“Is she drunk?” Titus demanded.

“Yes, I took her to the bar to celebrate her destruction on Air Quad today. Sorry for not inviting you.” Exos set me on a cloud of amazingness. So, so soft. But not warm enough. I reached for his hand, longing for his heat, and found Titus’s instead. My lips curled, my fire instantly engaged, and I tugged him toward me.

“Fuck, Claire,” he muttered, collapsing on top of me. Or maybe beside me. I really couldn’t tell, this wave of confusion shadowing my judgment.

“Yeah, you entertain her there while I go find some water. According to Vox, that’ll help cure this wind tunnel messing with her mind.” Exos sounded amused, which made me giggle. I liked him amused. He had the best smile. Like the sun. Except he rarely showed it. Maybe he lived in a cloud, too. Like me. Because I couldn’t see a damn thing. But I could definitely *feel*, and I really liked the heat coming from Titus. So muscular. Hard. *Hot*.

“You and I are going to have a long talk about your conversational skills, Royal,” Titus growled. “Claire, sweetheart, can you stop—No. Stop that.” He grabbed my wrists, causing me to pout. I wanted to pet him. To revel in his *fire*.

No more of this kissing and orgasm crap. I wanted more. To really, truly *feel* him.

To fuck... yes!

“Claire,” he warned. His voice turned to a hiss as I arched into him, signaling with my body what I craved since apparently my mouth no longer worked. Or my eyes.

What is wrong with my head?

So fuzzy.

Oh, but the heat...

“*Claire.*” The pain in Titus’s voice had me stilling against him. Had I hurt

him in some way? All I wanted was to roll in his flames, to let them bathe over my skin and light my way out of this insane darkness.

“Here.” Exos was back. My Royal Fae. My spirit half.

These men were my fae. My Titus and my Exos. Forever mates. Lovers. Oh, but without the fucking. I scowled at that; they really needed to sort this out—

Oh.

Cool liquid slipped over my tongue, exciting my nerves and calming me at the same time. I sighed, my head pillowed against Titus, my hands now being held by Exos.

Sandwiched yet again between two men.

How had this become my life?

“Maybe we should invite Vox,” I mused. *Wait, had I said that out loud?*

“He’ll be by later,” Exos said softly.

Yeah, said that out loud.

Oh, but hey! I had a voice again.

Still can’t see, though.

“What the hell is this?” Titus asked as more water slid over my tongue. “Start talking, Exos.”

“In case it’s not clear, I’ve had a very rough afternoon and I’m not in the mood for your petulant demands.”

“Oh? I’m sorry. You bring home a very drunk Claire, who seems hell-bent on fucking me, and you’d like me to just accept that. All right. Care to leave while I indulge her?”

“Fuck you.”

“No, *fuck you*. Now tell me what the hell happened.”

I giggled, their banter amusing the hell out of me. And they kept saying *fuck*, which was exactly what I wanted to do. But they had some sort of no-fucking rule going on between them that was driving me *crazy*. Like, how many nights could a girl go to bed naked between two hot men and *not* get fucked?

“Try being one of those males and having to rely on your hand for weeks,” Titus growled.

Oh, I said that out loud... My brow crinkled. No. I didn’t feel bad about it. “I want sex.”

“Dear Elements, we are not having this conversation in your current state,” Exos snapped.

“Then busy us both by telling me what the hell happened,” Titus suggested, his tone doing this sexy, deep, demanding thing that made my lady parts tingle. “Claire, stop doing that.”

Exos sighed. “Here.” He gently began massaging my temples, which sparked glimpses of light in the darkness but didn’t relieve the ache building between my thighs. I’d much rather have his attentions focused elsewhere. I opened my mouth to say just that, when a tongue slid between my lips, eliciting a groan from deep within.

Which one of them was kissing me?

Exos, my spirit whispered.

Yes... I recognized his dominance, his minty taste, his command.

But rather than excite my nerves and caress the heat building inside, it made me sleepy. Oh, how he drained me. Such a virile, powerful man. I pressed into him, accepting his gift, his presence, his being, and felt my limbs relax.

Such a soft, fluffy world.

Warm.

Safe.

Mmm.

Yes, I would sleep. Just for a little bit. And when I woke, hopefully I’d be able to see again.

Chapter 18

Vox



Exhaustion weighed heavily on me. Dealing with Aerie had been child's play.

Professor Helios, however, had been another matter. Once he'd regained consciousness, he'd been hell-bent on seeking justice for his classroom. And Claire had been the focus of his wrath. Thankfully, Exos had whisked her off to the safety of the Spirit Quad before that could happen.

Of course, now the Royal Fae would have to deal with the repercussions and face the Council. Which meant I'd need to intervene.

That tornado did not belong to Claire. I felt it in every fiber of my being, and not just because my inner air considered her to be a potential mate.

Not happening, I told myself for the thousandth time. Helping her I could do. Falling for a woman with two other mates already? No.

Except all I could think about was how her essence had called to me.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I was mad to even be thinking of her right now. The entire Academy was in an uproar after yet another series of deaths surrounding the Halfling.

Except this wasn't her fault.

"By the Elements," Sol huffed as he stormed into the Earth Dorms carrying a bag. "Vox, what are you doing here?"

Yeah, about that...

I squirmed on Sol's unforgiving excuse for a couch and glowered at the dusty layers of glass that needed a cleaning. There should have been a beautiful view of the shifting gardens, but Sol sucked at housekeeping.

“You really need to get a more comfortable couch,” I complained, ignoring his question. “It’s not inviting at all.”

Sol rolled his eyes and plopped the cloth bag onto the table and began to unfurl it. Steaming, leafy edges of meat pie made my mouth water. Sol tore one of the leaves and broke me off a chunk, handing it to me with a knowing look. “You don’t often mope, Vox. Didn’t see the Halfling today like you’d hoped?”

I glared at the offering and took a small nibble, not having much of an appetite even though my stomach was roaring for sustenance after the power I’d expensed kicking Aerie’s ass. “Quite the opposite,” I admitted around the small mouthful.

Sol’s brown eyes raked over me as if noticing for the first time that my usually kempt suit was tattered and torn. “Don’t tell me you were there for the maelstrom?” His eyes widened when I didn’t respond. “Elements, Vox, you could have been killed!” He leaned in and lowered his voice, glancing around as though someone might somehow hear us in the room of solid rock. “Was the royal there, too?” He wagged his fingers at me. “Did he mind-control her to do it?”

I nearly choked on the morsel. “Fuck, Sol. No.”

Sol distrusted all Spirit Fae, but Exos more than most. I still didn’t know why, but tonight wasn’t the night to ask. Nor did I have the energy to prove his thoughts wrong. It would require talking about what happened with Claire, and I wasn’t ready to face that yet.

My best friend scoffed at me and wrapped a leaf around a larger chunk of meat, then tore it off with his teeth. He gazed out through the dirtied window, not seeming to care that he couldn’t really see through it. “Well, it won’t matter much either way,” Sol said.

“Why’s that?”

He chewed thoughtfully before answering me. “I heard that if there was one more fae death at the Academy, then the Halfling would be expelled and banished to the Spirit Kingdom.” He shrugged. “Not a bad thing, because that bastard royal will go with her and I won’t have to keep tiptoeing around my own damn campus. She has power over all five elements, you know so she would eventually have earth classes.” He shuddered as if horrified by the idea.

My heart skipped a beat. *Banished? Spirit Kingdom?
No fucking way.*

She's innocent.

And fuck if I was going to let anyone send an innocent girl to a damn wasteland.

I slammed my fist on the table, sending dust flying. “For one, *Sol*, you don’t fucking tiptoe anywhere. You shake the ground like a beast that can’t be contained.” I held up two fingers. “And secondly, don’t judge someone you’ve never even met. The Halfling is innocent.”

I didn’t give *Sol* a chance to digest my outrage. Instead I caught a glimpse of his wide eyes—and perhaps a little hurt in his gaze—before I tore open the front door with a gust of wind and marched out of the Earth Dorms.

I should have returned to my own quarters, but I found the breeze taking me straight to the Halfling, who I knew would never harm another living soul and didn’t deserve the fae’s wrath.

Everyone on campus knew she was living in—or rather, *banished to*—the Spirit Dorms. Now I just had to figure out which room she’d chosen in a wasteland of nothing.



No one ever encroached on the Spirit Quad, and for good reason. The wasteland looked like a scar across the otherwise beautiful grounds. A stark line grooved out in the dirt where the barriers between majestic energies bordered each other. The lively, shifting rock of the Earth Quad kept its distance from the cold, gray, and lifeless dirt that made up the majority of the Spirit grounds. I drew in a deep breath, as if I could gather my air element inside of me in a protective bubble, before braving a step forward.

There.

Ouch.

Okay, yeah, it hurt. It felt like crossing over from life to death because I wasn’t meant to be on the Spirit Quad. I hadn’t received an invitation, and there wasn’t even the slightest breeze here to make me feel at home.

Lifeless, colorless buildings wrapped in dead vines boasted what had once been classrooms teeming with bright-minded students. There was, however, one pop of color that stood out against the corpse-like dirt.

A white flower.

I leaned down to inspect it and grazed it with my fingertips.

Claire.

Another flower marked the path just a few paces down, so I went to it and squinted until I spotted another. Then another still, until I was so deep into the Spirit Quad that I swore I was starting to hear the voices of the dead that had once roamed these grounds.

Oh, not the dead—that's a fae.

I tilted my head to the side and allowed a sliver of my power to carry a breeze to catch the sounds.

There, the dorms.

I ventured in without knocking, not because I meant to intrude, but because I was so intent on discovering what kind of fae might be here other than Exos and Claire.

“You have to fucking do *something*,” a muscular fae demanded. Auburn locks licked with tiny flames, and embers burned in the fae’s eyes as he challenged the royal that leaned heavily against the wall. He was shirtless, his hair damp, maybe from a recent shower.

“And *you* need to calm down,” Exos ordered. He pushed off from the wall and startled me by pinning me with his gaze. “Ah, Vox. Finally, you’re here.” He waved me over as if he’d summoned me here. “Come in and make yourself at home.”

My eyes widened. I was an Air Fae adept in the skills of stealth. I’d passed every shadowstep and secrecy class with outstanding marks, to the point that I was well on my way as a spy for Air Kingdom if I so wanted, yet the royal had noticed me without any effort at all.

The Fire Fae glared at me, causing me to reconsider coming here. I recognized him. Everyone on campus would. He was a renowned fighter. A champion. And lethal as fuck. “Well, you heard Exos,” Titus said. “Don’t just stand there, Vox. Join us.”

Swallowing hard, I entered and awkwardly adjusted my ruined suit. I probably should have changed into something more presentable before venturing over here. “Ah, so, is Claire okay?” I asked.

Smooth, Vox.

“Yes, she’s having a nap,” Exos said, then gave Titus a raised brow. “And shouldn’t be left alone, Titus.”

“Should I expect her to wake up intoxicated? Or did your little mindfuck

fix that?”

Exos narrowed his gaze. “Did you prefer the alternative?”

Titus growled. “This isn’t working.”

“I know.”

“Then fucking do something about it, *Your Highness*.”

Exos sighed and ran his fingers through his light hair. “Sorry, Vox. You’ve caught us in a rather *heated* moment, one Titus can’t seem to let go.” Those last two words were directed at the Fire Fae.

Titus flipped him off in response.

Okay, then. I’d clearly interrupted something. “I can come back...”

“No,” they both said at once.

“We have to talk about what happened,” Exos added. “About what went wrong.”

“She didn’t kill anyone,” I blurted out, feeling the weight of their stares. “I mean, I felt it. I’m a mentor, and I can sense energies. The energy that created that maelstrom wasn’t Claire’s.”

Exos smiled. “I know. But thank you for confirming my suspicions.”

“Again, that whole communicating thing?” Titus waved between himself and Exos. “Still sucking. Now tell me about these *suspicions*.”

“Had you given me a moment earlier instead of throwing a fit, I would have.”

“Well, fucking tell me now.”

“Who is the royal here, Titus?” Exos asked, cocking his head to the side. “Me or you?”

“Oh, this again.” Titus threw his hands up in the air. “Claire is passed-out drunk—from something you’ve still not explained, by the way—and you want to play the superiority game instead of telling me what the hell is going on. Typical.”

“What’s typical is you losing your temper over nothing.”

“*Nothing?*” he repeated, pointing to a door at the end of the room. “*That* is not nothing.”

“Aerie sent a target shriek of air into Claire’s mind. Specifically, the frontal lobe, causing temporary, well, incapacitation,” I explained, hoping to dispel some of the tension. “It’s a classic Air Fae attack mechanism. Renders your opponent incomprehensible for an hour or two. Essentially, it makes the victim feel very, very intoxicated.”

Titus gaped at me while Exos scratched his chin.

“She’ll be fine,” I added. “Sleeping it off is the best for her.”

“Who do you think manipulated her spiral?” Exos asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t know. But I can help you find out.”

He arched a brow. “How?”

“By tracking the energy source.” It wouldn’t be hard. After trying to dismantle the maelstrom myself, I had a pretty good understanding of what it felt like. “As I said, I have a knack for sensing energy.” It was what allowed me to help Sol with his affinity for earth.

“You’re saying you want to help,” Exos translated.

“I’m saying I can, if you need it.” I wasn’t about to assume a powerful Spirit Fae required my assistance. As he already pointed out, he suspected Claire wasn’t the source of power.

He nodded, then glanced at Titus. “I think we found our Air Fae.”

“You’re assuming he can keep up.” Titus folded his arms and looked me over. “You up for the task?”

“Of tracking the energy source? Yeah.”

“No.” Titus smirked. “I meant, are you up for the task of managing Claire?”

“Oh, uh...” I swallowed. “To help manage her air?”

Titus nodded.

Exos said nothing, his gaze assessing me.

“I just came by to tell you it wasn’t her and to offer assistance in tracking down the culprit.” No, that wasn’t entirely true. A part of me had longed to check up on her. But that was just my mentor side requiring me to make sure the student I’d failed earlier today was all right. “However, yes, she needs a mentor.” I’d meant to say that to Exos as well, but the banishing comments from Sol had derailed my focus. All I’d cared about was expressing her innocence so they didn’t send her away.

Why do I care so much?

Because she’s innocent.

Right.

“She needs *you* as a mentor,” Exos replied. “You’re a good match for her. I felt it during class. And so you’ll mentor her.”

He uttered the words as if they were a done deal. “I’ll help you find one,” I offered. “A mentor, I mean.”

“No need.” Exos turned, walking down the hall. “She already has one,

Vox. You.” He paused on the threshold, his blue eyes meeting mine. “Don’t leave. I’m just going to grab some proper clothes for us to hunt in.”

“But—”

“And I need to wake up Claire. Give me twenty minutes, Vox.”

I gaped after the Royal Fae as he disappeared through a door, leaving me unable to argue.

Titus chuckled. “Yeah, he does that. But you’ll get used to him.”

“I can’t mentor her,” I blurted out.

“And why’s that?” Titus asked, cocking his head to the side.

“I... It’s just... I have Sol and classes and...”

He arched an auburn-tinged brow. “I don’t know what a Sol is, but so far, all I’m hearing are weak excuses. Sort of disappointing, if you ask me. Exos is clearly wrong. Claire requires someone stronger. Don’t worry; I’ll talk to him. I mean, he won’t fucking listen, but if you’re not up for the task, then he’ll have no choice. Right?”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” *Fuck. He’s right. They’re all just idiotic excuses.* I shook my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Her power calls to mine.” The truth sort of fell out of my mouth on a breeze of words I couldn’t catch. But what else could I say? Another bullshit excuse? No. She deserved better than that. And so did I.

Titus smiled. “Well then, welcome to the team, Vox. I hope you enjoy cold showers.”

Chapter 19

Exos



I ran my fingers through Claire's thick hair, reveling in the silky texture while I slowly removed my hold over her elements. Manipulating others was the darker side of my ability, and that included being able to put someone to sleep at will.

For Claire, it'd been necessary. Her eyes had been unseeing—*wild*—and her powers had taken on a will of their own. She probably didn't even realize the sheer force with which she'd pulled Titus down onto the bed or the way her fire engulfed him in a sea of hot desire.

Clearly, all of us had some pent-up passion issues at the forefront of our minds.

I sighed and joined Claire on the bed, wrapping my arms around her as she began to stir beside me. Hopefully, her nap had cured the drunken spell Aerie had woven through Claire's mind.

I could kill that Air Fae, I thought, furious. She'd attacked Claire in a moment of weakness, after she'd taken down that maelstrom.

A maelstrom Claire absolutely did not create.

I'd felt the presence of another just before it erupted, stirring chaos throughout the room. There'd been a dark note to it, a sense of spirit that I didn't recognize.

But I knew with certainty that it didn't belong to Claire. My power had tuned into hers over the last few weeks, braiding our essences together and merging our spirits. I *knew* her now. And that destructive energy dancing through the room had possessed an entirely different elemental pattern.

"Exos?" she murmured, her eyes still closed.

"I'm here, princess." I pressed my lips to her forehead and held her

tighter. “How do you feel?”

She seemed to consider for a moment before saying, “Hungover. Like, really, really hungover.”

I chuckled and reached for the water I’d left on the nightstand for her. “Here.” I pressed the rim to her lips and helped her take a few sips while brushing my spirit over hers in a way that had become second nature these last few weeks.

She stretched beside me, a low moan of approval emanating from her throat. “Thank you,” she whispered, snuggling into me more.

I returned the glass to the table and folded my arms around her again. “You did well today, Claire.” Unfortunately, while I believed that, the Council would disagree. The incident on Air Quad had Claire’s fingerprints all over it, which they would most likely use to banish her from the Academy.

“Today?” she asked, her voice sleepy. Then she went stiff. “Oh no...”

“Shh,” I soothed. “It’s going to be okay.” *Because I’m going to figure out who actually created that spiral and break the culprit’s neck.*

It occurred to me as well that the other incidents may not have been Claire at all, but the person who had interfered today. The fire and water episodes happened before I fully understood the extent of her powers, so it was hard to say for certain. But given the events on Air Quad, it seemed likely.

“I didn’t do it,” she blurted out, squirming backward to stare at me. “I mean, I thought I did. I created the spiral, but I don’t know how it blew out of control. And when I tried to stop it, I couldn’t find my essence inside of it. Like... like... you know, yesterday? With that energy ball in the courtyard? You told me to wrap my fire around it, remember? And I could because I recognized my own powers. But this time...” She trailed off, her expression falling. “I sound crazy, I know, but I swear it wasn’t me, Exos.”

I touched her chin, gently nudging it upward to capture her gaze. “I know, baby. I felt it, too.”

She must not have remembered the part where Vox also claimed it wasn’t her. How fascinating that he could sense it without a bond. Either it proved him to be a potential mate for Claire or it was related to his own incredible gifts.

Regardless, it made him perfect for her team.

Which was why he would be joining—with or without his approval.

“You did?” she whispered.

I kissed her softly before pressing my forehead to hers. “My spirit knows yours, Claire.”

“Because of the bond,” she translated.

“And the last few weeks of training. But, yes, mostly as a result of our connection.” I licked her bottom lip and continued to stroke her spirit with mine, eliciting a contented sigh from her. “It’s deepening,” I told her on a hush of sound. “Can you feel it?” There were different levels to the mating bond, and ours was teetering on the edge of something more permanent.

“I don’t really understand it,” she admitted softly. “But yes, I can feel it. Is sex what pushes it over the edge?” Her cheeks flushed beautifully with the query, her blue eyes sparkling with life. “That came out wrong. I just... I’ve wondered if that’s why you and Titus are holding back—so we don’t accidentally intensify the link.”

Her confession surprised me. “You think we don’t want to take this to the next level?” It applied to both sex and the mating.

“I, uh, well, yeah.” She swallowed. “I mean, I get it. There are two of you, and that just makes this even more confusing, right? And you never really had a choice in our bond, since I kissed you without permission. Not that I knew this would happen. Oh, wait, that came out wrong, too. I don’t regret it. What I mean is—”

I captured her mouth with my own, silencing her little rant. While it was adorable, I didn’t want to hear her second-guessing the nature of our connection.

Was it my choice? No.

Did it bother me? At first, yes. But now? No.

No, now I wouldn’t have this any other way. Her gift for spirit rivaled mine, making her an ideal princess in my court. Apart from the other competing elements, what we had was so unique, so different, so much more powerful than anyone would ever understand.

And it was with that knowledge in mind that I rolled her to her back and worshiped her with my mouth. I unleashed all the emotions I hid from the world, including how I felt about her. Oh, Titus had an idea of how badly I ached for her. But his knowledge only skimmed the surface to the depths of what I kept locked away inside.

A warrior couldn’t afford a weakness.

Yet, at some point, Claire had become mine.

She gave new meaning to my heart.

My hips settled between hers, my cock throbbing against her hot center. “Sex is a merging of the bodies,” I murmured, my lips moving across her cheek. “The connection is between the elements, and ours is a dance between our souls.” I pressed my arousal into the sanctuary between her thighs, providing an introduction to my lustful cravings, and smiled at her resulting moan. If only we were naked, then I could truly demonstrate my yearnings.

Alas, I had a task to complete. One that would hopefully secure her place here and pacify the Council.

To find the one framing my Claire.

My teeth grazed her pulse on my way up to her ear. “You can deepen a bond without sex, Claire. It just has to be a mutual agreement between the fae to continue exploring opportunities. I think, in your terms, it would be the equivalent of going from a few casual dates to dating seriously, or maybe even an engagement. Because once our elements move on to the next phase, it’s showing a promise for the future and speaks of a serious intent to mate for eternity.”

“How many levels are there?” she asked, her nails scratching down my back as she arched up into me.

I smiled against her neck. “Four.”

“And we’re on the first?”

“Yes.”

“But close to the second?”

“Yes.” I took her mouth again—because I could—and slid my tongue deep inside, possessing every inch of her. She groaned, her body vibrating with need beneath mine. I longed to give in, just for one more moment, and so I did.

I gave her everything.

My frustration.

My yearning.

My adoration.

My worries.

The Council would be meeting later tonight, and if I didn’t give them a sound argument against expulsion...

No.

I refused.

That was not going to happen on my watch.

Claire's arms wound around my neck, holding me tightly as she reciprocated in kind, her feelings exploding across her tongue. I felt her confusion, her strength, and, most importantly, her craving not just for a physical connection but also for an emotional one.

With me.

A sign of her mutual affection.

She couldn't know that was what it meant, but my power reacted in kind, dancing with hers on a plane only spirit had access to. "That's it, isn't it?" she whispered, awe in her voice.

"Yes." Apparently, that was my word of the night because not only did I keep saying it out loud but my soul repeated it as well.

Claire's energy swirled around mine, causing the hairs along the nape of my neck to stand on end. This was why we didn't need sex to graduate to phase two. The bond required elemental compatibility, coupled with the passion for more.

And there'd never been another fae more for me than Claire. "You're sure?" I asked her softly, nuzzling my nose against hers. "Because if we push this one inch forward, we'll be in the next level, Claire."

"Dating exclusively, right?" she asked, sounding dreamy. Then the words seemed to register, because she froze. "Meaning I can't see Titus..."

"No." I cupped her cheek, pulling her back to me before panic could truly set in. "It would mean you can't see another Spirit Fae. This is about elemental bonding, Claire. You would essentially be declaring your spirit as betrothed to mine."

"Like marriage."

"It's similar, but different. Consider it more of a long-term commitment to ensure that our pairing is what we truly desire. By escalating to the next phase of the bond, you'll have more access to *me*. To my mind. It requires trust, Claire. And then from there, you move into the third stage, in which our elements mingle and flourish off one another—where you could borrow energy from me as I could from you. And the final level is eternity."

She swallowed, some of the alarm melting into curiosity. "Were my mother and Mortus a three or a four?"

"A three," I murmured. "When you reach that phase, there's no going back. The elements are locked into one another—indefinitely."

"Then why the fourth stage?" she asked.

"It's more of a formality, a pledge of fealty that binds the souls. To join

your elements, but not the souls, can be quite painful.” Which explained Mortus’s rage. But I didn’t add that part. I could see from the flare of her pupils that she inferred it anyway.

“The third step is binding, similar to an engagement without an escape route if you get cold feet,” she surmised. “And the second is a more serious level of seeing someone, like moving in with them. While the first is temporary—like dating—to see if the person your power is attracted to is someone you might like as well.”

I kissed her gently, loving the way she’d gone pliant and soft again beneath me. “Very accurate summarization, princess.”

“And we’re already living together,” she continued, her mouth moving against mine. “So, we should move up a level.” Her tongue licked across my lower lip. “Right?”

“If that’s your desire.”

“Is it yours?”

I pulled back to meet her eyes, my palm still resting against her cheek. “Yes.” *There’s that word again.*

Her blue eyes brightened. “Really?”

I pressed my arousal into her hot center and cocked my head to the side. “You can feel how much I want you, right?”

She slapped my shoulder. “You said this is about emotions.”

“It’s about everything, Claire,” I replied with a laugh. “Do I want to deepen our bond? Yes. Absolutely. But I also very much want to fuck you. The two are not mutually exclusive, but again, the connection isn’t about sex. It’s about power. And it also happens to heighten the sensations, or so I’ve heard.”

“You’ve never connected with anyone?”

“Only you, Claire. On any level.” I went to my elbows on either side of her head, wanting her to see the sincerity in my expression as I gave her the ultimate truth. “I never wanted to bond with anyone. Nor did I think I would actually find someone who suited my power. I’m one of the strongest fae in the world, and that’s not me boasting; it’s a fact. Finding a partner who can handle my gift, one my spirit is actually attracted to, was a very impossible notion. Until you.”

Tears pricked her eyes, causing me to frown.

That was *not* the response I wanted. At all.

But she pulled me down to kiss her, and the sensation she poured from

her mouth to mine floored me.

She didn't just accept the bond; she kicked the fucking door down and yanked me into the next level with her. I felt it in the way our powers snapped together, as if a lock had tied her spirit to mine, securing her place in my heart and mine in hers.

"Claire," I whispered, returning the embrace and worshipping her with my tongue. She clung to me as if she needed me to breathe, her legs winding around my hips, her fingers in my hair.

This kiss sparked a new beginning.

It carved her name into my very being, marking my element as hers and hers as mine. Flowers blossomed around us, the creation of life filling the room with the fragrance of our heightened connection and shaking the very foundations of the building.

That it occurred on Spirit Quad only intensified the moment, bringing all ounces of life back to the formerly dead campus.

The trees rejoiced.

The grounds cried out in pleasure.

And the meadows bloomed.

That was the power we possessed together—a life energy no one could ever touch. *Ours*.

Claire shuddered beneath me, her blue eyes luminescent with vitality. "That's..."

"Amazing," I finished for her softly. "And something we will definitely be exploring more." I laved her plump lip before pressing a kiss to her cheek. Now more than ever I felt a duty to protect her, and that required me to leave her, to find the one trying to cause her harm. "Vox is here," I whispered.

"Why?" she asked, her voice breathy, her expression soft.

"He knows you didn't create that windstorm today, and he thinks he can track the energy signature back to its owner." I drew my thumb beneath her eye, catching the tear she'd shed only moments ago.

Tears of joy, I realized. I sort of liked that. I licked the drop, deciding to taste her emotional gift—*mine*. *Just like Claire*.

Her gaze widened. "He thinks someone created that thing on purpose?"

"Yes, to frame you. And I suspect the first incident in the courtyard, as well as the water in the dorms, may not have been you, either. So I'm going to go with him to see if we can find the person who created the tornado."

"Me, too," she said, her hands on my shoulders as if to push me away.

I refused to move. “No. You need to stay here with Titus.” I pressed a finger to her lips before she could protest. “Claire. He needs you.”

This wasn’t about my trying to shelter her. If anything, it would be a good lesson for her to learn how to identify the essence of others—especially as Spirit Fae could control them.

No.

This was about Titus.

“He’s on edge,” I continued. “And to properly protect you, I need him focused. There’s only one way to fix it.” I’d realized it this afternoon after witnessing the true pain in his features, the barely concealed fire.

While I, too, felt the aching need inside me to claim Claire, my elemental control far outweighed his, and I didn’t have a tendency to burn shit down when in a rage.

If we were going to go up against someone powerful enough to manifest powers on Claire’s behalf, then I needed everyone focused. Not to mention the general security required to keep our little fae princess alive. Too many people wanted her dead.

I almost liked that she needed more than one mate. *Almost* being the key word. But I couldn’t deny that it helped from a bodyguard standpoint.

“Are you telling me to...?” She trailed off, her brow pinched.

I bent to kiss the pucker between her eyebrows before dragging my lips lower to her mouth and whispering, “Yes, Claire. I’m telling you to indulge him while I’m gone. I don’t want the details. Although, I’ll likely feel it through the bond.” I flinched at the thought but quickly swallowed my instinctual reaction.

No one could touch our spirit bond.

Not even Titus.

“It feels... wrong... after we just...”

I silenced her with another kiss, this one coaxing and holding a promise. “You’re still mine, Claire. But you’re also his. And I respect that, just as I know he’ll respect our bond. It’s the way of life.” I tilted my head to the side, amusement touching my chest. “You’re not in the human world anymore, darling princess. We’re fae. Our rules are different.”

She stared at me for a long moment before yanking me to her once more and rewarding me with her mouth. “Don’t do anything without me,” she said softly. “If you find the person doing this, I want to know. I want to be there.”

“Of course.” I brushed my nose against hers. “Reconnaissance only.”

“Promise?”

“I vow it.” I pecked her lips once more and shifted back to my knees as I sensed a new presence enter the room. I ignored him and decided to have a little fun instead. “Now that I’ve let Titus and Vox get to know each other, I think it’s time we join them to make sure they’re both still alive.”

Her eyebrows rose, the innocence in her features telling me she’d not sensed Titus’s entrance yet. Likely because I’d distracted her with our bonding and other more arousing activities.

“They don’t like each other?” she asked.

I lifted a shoulder. “As I said, Titus has some pent-up anger issues. But Vox strikes me as the calm, collected type. Maybe they can be friends.”

“As he doesn’t harbor a penchant for bossing me around, I think we’ll get along just fine,” Titus deadpanned.

Claire froze while I chuckled. “Our Claire is awake, by the way.”

“I can see that,” he replied, the possessive growl in his voice no better than before. The Fire Fae seemed ready to combust, and while I trusted him not to harm Claire, I didn’t necessarily trust him not to hurt me.

Leaning down to kiss her one last time, I rolled off the bed and grabbed a shirt from the closet. She hadn’t moved, her wide gaze on a glowering Titus. He clearly sensed the heightened bond within her, and his clenched hands said how he felt about it.

I pressed my palm to his chest to back him up a few paces into the wall and caught his fist before it could meet my face. “Vox and I are leaving to track the energy signature. Claire wanted to join us, but I suggested she spend some time here with you. *Alone.*” I lifted an eyebrow with the final word, ensuring he followed my insinuation. “Does that work for you?”

Flames danced in his gaze as he studied my features. Then his shoulders seemed to relax as he gave me a stiff nod.

“I promised Claire we won’t act on any information without her. And I imagine we’ll be back in a few hours.”

Another nod. “Okay.”

“Okay.” I released him and went to retrieve my shoes. Claire had sat up on the bed during our discussion, her lower lip snagged between her teeth. I bent to tug it between my own, giving her a little nibble. “Try not to burn the dorm down, baby.”

Her cheeks flushed an adorable shade of red, causing me to chuckle. It physically pained me to leave her in the hands of another man, but while

Titus might not be my favorite fae, I couldn't deny his compatibility with Claire.

And as such, I trusted him implicitly with her life.

He stopped me with a hand on my forearm, his green eyes holding a touch of gratitude in them as they captured mine.

No words were spoken.

Not even another nod.

Just a brief look of understanding before he released me.

"Be careful," Claire called after me, causing me to pause on the threshold.

I glanced back at her, amused. "I'm a Royal Fae, baby. There's no one on this campus who can touch me. Except you." And with that, I met Vox in the hallway. "Let's go, Air Fae. I want to see what you can do."

Chapter 20

Claire



Two men.
Fae.

Both mates.

Watching them interact was... *hot.*

Mainly because Titus had this sexy glower thing going on while Exos still managed to alpha him with that shove against the wall. It provoked all manner of inappropriate thoughts, ones that only seemed to intensify as Titus gazed at me from across the room.

“Are you hungry, Claire?” he asked, his voice low.

I couldn’t tell if he meant for food or for him. But the answer was a resounding “Yes” either way. Mostly for something of the sexual variety, considering Exos had spent the last however many minutes heating me up, just to leave.

His essence seemed to swim through my veins, his scent forever clinging to me. Because of the bond. He’d been right about it deepening our connection. I could almost sense him in my mind, his resounding amusement at leaving me hot and bothered in his wake.

Or maybe that was my imagination. But it didn’t seem too far-fetched a notion.

Titus leaned against the wall. “Are you going to assault me again if I come over there?”

“Again?” I asked, confused.

“You don’t remember pulling me onto the bed and rubbing that delicious body all over me while mewling?”

My jaw dropped. “*What?*”

He snorted. “I see Exos failed to mention that part of your drunk little episode.” He straightened. “You should eat something.”

I frowned as he left. “Okay...”

Is he mad at me? Because of the bond with Exos?

Shit.

I slid off the bed and trailed after him toward the apartment kitchen. Titus stood by the refrigerator, his ass looking mighty fine in a pair of snug jeans. He’d changed out of uniform attire and into casual garb, while I still wore my skirt and sweater—two things that were slightly worn and torn from the Air Quad incident earlier.

My mouth twisted to the side. I remembered taking down the monstrosity and that it wasn’t something I created, but I couldn’t recall anything after that. *How did I end up passed out in bed? And what did Titus mean about assaulting him?*

“Have I done something to anger you?” I blurted out when he didn’t acknowledge my presence.

He glanced over his shoulder with his eyebrows raised. “Do I feel angry to you?” he asked, the question holding a hint of genuine curiosity.

“Uh, well, no, but you’re being all... *stiff.*” I couldn’t come up with a better term.

His lips curled. “That, yes, I definitely am.” He returned to his task of placing odd items on the counter. The food in this world was foreign and leafy, and while none of it appeared appetizing, it was mysteriously delicious.

I hopped up onto the counter beside his preparations, wanting to see his expression while we spoke. “What did I do? I don’t remember anything after the, uh, tornado.”

His emerald eyes flickered up to mine briefly before he pulled a knife from the block behind my back. “Aerie sent a targeted blast of wind into your head. It’s meant to incapacitate an attacker.”

“Oh.” I noticed her in the class earlier, just hadn’t realized what she’d done. I almost asked him why she targeted me, but I already knew. “She thought I created the tornado.”

“That, and she’s just a bitch. She’s lucky Exos was there and not me. I’d have lit her ass on fire.” The conviction in his tone had me grinning. “Vox said she targeted your mind, something about the frontal lobe. It essentially made you very drunk.”

“And I assaulted you?” I pressed, wondering what the hell he meant by

that.

His dimples flashed as he finished slicing up the items on his board. “You practically forced me to join you in bed.” He tapped me lightly on the nose with the edge of his blade before turning to deposit it in the sink. “Which is why, Claire”—he rotated once more and grabbed my hips—“I’m *stiff*.” He tugged me to the edge of the counter, forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist for balance.

I moaned at the feel of his hot arousal aligning with my center and clung to his shoulders as he rocked against me.

“I thought you were mad at me,” I admitted, arching into him.

“Oh, I am,” he said, his mouth brushing mine with the words. “You drive me crazy, sweetheart. Grinding all over me, telling me to fuck you when you know I can’t. It makes me very, very mad. For you.”

“I... I told you to fuck me?” It came out on a squeak.

“More like demanded.” He nipped my lower lip, then dipped his tongue inside to seduce mine in a dance that left me writhing against him. “Mmm, I’m going to drive you wild, Claire. Taunt you until you beg me to slide inside your slick heat and claim you in a way no other fae has.”

Fire licked up and down my arms, eating through my Academy sweater and wasting the fabric away to ash. I gasped as the flames reached my breasts, destroying the fibers along the way until I sat topless on the counter before a smirking Titus. Even my bra was gone.

“Shall we begin, sweetheart?” he asked softly.

“That wasn’t the beginning?”

“Not even close,” he murmured.

Embers swirled around my nipples, causing them to stiffen beneath the heat. Part of me recognized that it should hurt, but my inner fire caressed the one Titus created, and welcomed the resulting singe.

Just like with Exos, I felt our connection teetering dangerously on the edge of something more. I couldn’t explain it, not outwardly. It simply existed. A tangible presence between us, an unspoken contract of fate, just waiting for my mental stamp of acceptance.

“Titus...” I grasped his shoulders, my skin prickling with energy from the wisps of smoke smoldering against my skin. His hands remained on my hips, holding me tightly against his groin.

He smiled. “More?”

I didn’t get a chance to reply.

My skirt and panties went up in a whirling blaze of heat—gone in a flash.

I gasped. He'd undressed me before, but never like this. Never with his power roaming over my body, prickling at my nerves, caressing me in sensuality, and destroying all the fabric on me. Even my socks were gone.

"Mmm, that's better." He slid me backward on the counter. "Don't move."

His index finger brushed my knee as he stepped out from between my legs. I shivered at the sensation of electricity humming over my thighs from that little touch, then noticed the flickering energy slowly crawling up my skin.

It held me captive, my eyes refusing to lose focus.

What is he doing?

He's not...

No.

He can't be...

Oh God...

The heat slithered along my inner thigh, the intent clear. And then it caressed my sensitive, damp flesh, inflaming my insides. "Titus..."

"No moving," he repeated, having returned to his food preparations.

"But—" *Fuck, that's intense.* I grabbed the counter to keep from falling over, or running, or jumping, I didn't know. But that little flame circled my clit in the most dangerous kiss, calling my own fire out to play and creating an inferno in the last place I ever thought I'd desire it.

"Beautiful," Titus praised, his green eyes burning with unrestrained desire. "But you need more, sweetheart. I want you so hot that you can't see straight."

I opened my mouth to protest, when the embers grazing my breasts whirled into fiery clamps that pinched my nipples. A scream left my throat, one born of fierce pleasure. Titus's hand against my lower belly was all that kept me upright, my eyes glazing from the rapture his fire had unleashed on me.

"Don't combust on me yet, Claire. I have plans for you." He pushed me backward to prop me against the wall, then returned to his preparations while flames hummed over my skin, skirting over all the places I desired it most without providing any sort of relief.

"You're killing me, Titus."

"Good." He threw everything into a bowl, then drizzled some kind of

dressing over it. “You need to eat first.”

“Fuck food.”

He smirked. “I’ll fuck you after food, sweetheart. Trust me.” Heat sizzled between my legs, stroking me in a way that reminded me of his tongue and stirring stars behind my eyes.

This was nothing like the other fire play I’d experienced. This was *hot* and full of promise. One that equaled the very heavy erection barely concealed by the zipper of his pants.

Which gave me an idea.

Two could play this game.

I locked onto my elements—an action that was beginning to feel like second nature to me—and pulled my inclination for flames to the forefront.

Subtle, I whispered to the energy swirling inside. *Let’s sweep over the jeans and incinerate in one warm wave.*

Titus froze as my power rolled over him, eating through his pants in a thorough sweep and incinerating the fabric to ash. His boxers disintegrated with it, revealing his gorgeous cock.

His eyes narrowed. “Claire...”

“What?” I asked innocently, my flames dancing across his silky skin to form a grip around the base. He nearly dropped the bowl as I stroked upward with my mind.

“*Fuck.*”

Heat spiked in my center as he returned the sensual assault against my sex. I gripped the counter for balance, my vision blacking out for a moment, and then his lips were on mine.

Hungry.

Punishing.

Devouring.

I returned the ferocity in kind, nipping and sucking and moaning. My arms looped around his neck, my legs closing around his waist. He lifted me against him, then slammed my back into the wall beside the fridge, placing his erection right where I wanted it.

“Naughty little fae vixen,” he accused, his voice harsh. “You’re going to regret not letting me feed you first.”

I slid my center against his hardness and sighed, “I doubt it.” The last few weeks felt like unending foreplay. Yes, Exos and Titus had gotten me off—a *lot*—but not being able to return the favor had been the ultimate tease.

This was my first time seeing or feeling Titus bare down there.

And oh, how he didn't disappoint.

I clawed at his shirt, needing him to be completely nude, and dropped it on the floor.

Solid muscle pressed against my curves. So hot. So strong. So *mine*.

The connection between us snapped into place without thought, a feeling of finality settling over me as Titus's fire welcomed mine with open arms.

It sent a shudder through him.

Through me.

Through our bodies where they almost joined.

And then he was there, sliding home without warning and completing us on a level of existence foreign to us both.

His name left my tongue to travel over his, and he returned the favor, whispering words of worship out loud and directly into my mind.

What I felt with Exos was incredibly different from this. Still amazing. Still absolutely perfect.

Yet, Titus carried a note of finality, of unbridled promise for always, and I accepted him with a flourish. It felt right. Perfect. Absolute.

Oh, and the manner in which he moved within me... *Mmm*. My head fell back on a groan, the sensation of utter fulfillment thriving through my veins.

Titus's lips fell to my neck, his hands roaming my sides, tweaking my breasts, memorizing every inch of my skin. My nails raked down his back, slipping back up to touch the tendrils of his thick auburn hair.

This was so much more than sex.

Passion fueled the air, our breaths mingling in hot pants, an inferno engulfing us both. But fuck if I could stop it. I let it overwhelm me, shoot me over the edge into a field of stars and light and *bliss*. A place where only Titus and I existed. An embrace overflowing with our kindled energy.

"Claire..." His mouth found mine again, his tongue a benediction against mine, his touch the life connection I craved.

The eruption building inside me seemed tied to him in an impossible way, as if I couldn't explode without him. But his continued thrusts, his strokes, his ministrations, built a maelstrom of sultry power that vibrated through my limbs.

"Please," I whispered, needing a release. He'd created this insanity, this blaze of ecstasy that lurked on the precipice of *more*.

His teeth sank into my lower lip, his hips driving harshly into mine.

Oh, there would be bruises.
My back bore the brunt of his force.
But my legs clamped even harder around him, begging him to increase his speed and drive even deeper.
And he did.
Oh, how he did.
I clutched his shoulders, my body screaming with the need to ignite.
One. Two. Three more...
“Titus,” I breathed, detonating from within into the hottest orgasm of my life.
Fire. Everywhere.
A sea of red and orange and some blue.
Amazing.
Overwhelming.
Consuming.
Titus joined me, the force of his eruption sending me into another state of being. Rapture unlike anything I’d ever felt poured over me, spiking my heart rate, cascading my vision into darkness, and sending me down a black hole of oblivion.
Something soft touched my back several seconds, minutes—hours?—later.
A warm voice cooed in my ear.
My heart thumped in time with another.
Complete. Mine. Fire mate.
Cool air flooded my lungs. Warm lips brushed my cheek. And a tear slid from my eyes. *Home*, I realized. *I’m finally home.*
But not in the home I thought I desired.
Not Ohio.
Not with humans.
But with my fire. With my Titus.
“I love you, too, Claire,” he whispered, his lips against my ear. I didn’t know if I claimed to love him out loud or if he gathered it from my mind. Either way, his resulting endearment made me smile. “Rest, sweetheart. I’ll bring you something to eat, and we’ll do that again.”
Yes, I thought back at him. *Yes, please.*

Chapter 21

Exos



My lips curled. “Mmm, Claire’s happy.” I could almost taste her joy on my tongue, something that warmed me from the inside out.

Vox glanced at me, his hands loose at his sides as we walked. A natural warrior. He arched a brow. “She’s happy?”

“Yes.”

“You can feel her? Even from here?”

We were wandering the Air Quad, searching for the familiar energy signature. “I can always feel her,” I confessed. “Our spirits are intertwined.”

“And you’re not bothered by another male, uh, you know... making her *happy*?”

“Maybe at first,” I admitted. “But she has five elements. I can’t satisfy them all, and her fire calls to Titus.” As was evidenced by the fact that I’d just felt their very permanent bond snap into place. They’d skipped the second level entirely, landing squarely on the third.

“I guess it’s not unheard of for a Spirit Fae to take more than one mate,” Vox said. “It’s just never something I’ve considered, and you’re a Royal Fae, too. Like, you’re expected to, well, you know.”

“Procreate?” I offered, smirking. “Claire can still have children, Vox.” Although, he did bring up a good point. It was one I intended to discuss with her at length, including all the other complexities that accompanied a Royal mating. Fortunately, I had my mother’s experience to lean on when it came to managing multiple mates in a Royal setting. She may have passed years ago, but I remembered the toll it took on her, especially after Cyrus was born.

“Right. Of course. I know. It’s just—”

“Becoming my betrothed impacts more than just her,” I finished for him.

“Yes, I know. That’s precisely why she and I won’t be moving into the betrothed state anytime soon.” I envied Titus for being so much easier on her senses. She would have nothing to consider where he was concerned, and everything to worry about with me.

“And Titus?” Vox pressed.

“Is officially engaged to her fire,” I said, smiling. Around anyone else, I would have kept that detail to myself. But as I suspected Vox to be one of Claire’s future mates, I divulged the detail.

“Like, as in, right now?”

I turned the corner of the Air Quad and nodded. “Yes.”

“You can sense that?”

“Yes. Her spirit is linked to mine, which means I can see her potential bonds to all fae.” I narrowed my gaze at him. “Such as you, Vox.”

His light eyes widened. “Oh, no. I’m not. I mean, yeah, her air is similar, but I’m not getting involved in that mess. I’ve never... It’s just not... Look —”

“What’s more, I feel a duty to vet any potential mates for her other elements. Because only those who are strong enough to protect her should be allowed into the inner circle. I’m sure you understand, right?” I didn’t give him a chance to reply, my mind already made up where Vox was concerned. He could try to fight it all he wanted, but we both knew his power had flirted with hers earlier today. And the Air Fae had liked what he felt. “Now, tell me about this energy signature.”

We’d been tracking it for almost an hour, but it kept coming and going. Vox had commented on how it didn’t feel right.

Based on what I sensed earlier, I agreed. Something about the essence seemed manipulated or forged, yet familiar. I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

He cleared his throat and pointed at a nearby dorm. “It honestly reminds me of Aerie’s affinity for air. But not quite. As I said—”

“It’s been manipulated somehow,” I interjected. “I know.”

“But that’s not possible, right? Like, I should be able to follow it back to the source.”

“Could you identify it earlier?”

He shook his head, his long hair escaping the clasp at the back of his neck. “It was dark and ominous.”

“And not at all like Claire.”

“Exactly.”

“But you couldn’t determine the source?” I pressed.

“No. Not exactly. But I memorized it.”

“Because you intended to hunt it later?” I would admire him greatly if that was his plan. It would show promise in his intentions for Claire.

He pinched his lips to the side. “No, more because I am constantly mapping out signatures.”

Ah. Well. Still a useful trait. “Which is why it reminds you of Aerie.”

“Right. She has this spirally air wave around her that I sensed in the vortex, but she’s not strong enough to have created it. Her aura is also not that *black*.”

I leaned against the wall of the dorm he’d pointed at moments ago, scratching my jaw. “Maybe she’s working with someone?”

“It’s possible, but she seemed just as alarmed by that tornado as everyone else.”

“Could be an act,” I pointed out. “Gave her cause to attack Claire.”

“True. But...” He shook his head again. “It’s not completely right.”

I understood what he meant. My instincts said we were missing something important, some key component to the explanation. “We need a trap,” I decided, thinking out loud. “Now that we know we’re dealing with someone manipulating the elements to frame Claire, we need some sort of event to prompt them to act while we observe.”

“You want to use her as bait.”

“She’ll have guards.” I looked pointedly at him. “Right?”

“You’re really not going to take no for an answer, are you?”

“I only accept viable responses,” I told him. “*No* is not reasonable.”

He pulled out his hair tie and shook out his long mane of dark strands. Then fixed it up again. A nervous tell, one he seemed to be using to buy time while he puzzled over a response. We both knew he’d already made up his mind. Why else would he be curious about the dynamic between me, Claire, and Titus?

Oh, they might not have an initial bond yet, but their powers had already begun dancing around each other. “You’re interested,” I said, amused. “You just have to embrace it.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Yes. And fun.” I pushed off the wall and glanced up at the star-dotted sky. “Our elements drive us, Vox. Listen to your air, see how it feels, go from

there. But in the interim, I need your help in setting up a trap.”

“What kind of trap?” he asked warily.

“One where we entice the guilty party to come out to play, then nail his or her ass to the ground. You game?”

His pupils dilated. “You’re giving me a choice?”

“No, I just want to know if I need to make this a command or not.” Because he would help either way. But I’d prefer him willing. If he had a stake in this game, he’d care more, and I needed to surround Claire with those who *wanted* to protect her.

Vox considered me for a long moment, his expression radiating a mixture of uncertainty and concern. Then he sighed and resolve settled over his features. “All right, Royal Fae. What do you need me to do?”

“So you’re in?”

He gave me a look. “I think it’s pretty obvious I joined whatever the hell this is when I showed up at the Spirit Quad tonight.”

I smiled. “I knew I liked you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me what you need.”

“For you to whistle around a rumor,” I replied simply. Then gave him the words I wanted him to repeat. “Tell everyone. Or better yet, say it in front of Aerie and let her weave the web for you.”

“That’s one hell of a tale to be telling.”

“It’s what convinced you to venture over to the Spirit Quad, right? A rumor about Claire’s upcoming expulsion?” I hadn’t actually spread that one, the students doing it for me. But when I heard the rumor flying about, I wondered how Vox would react. And he had sought me out, as I’d hoped he would, proving he cared and wanted to protect Claire.

“You did that?”

“No, I was too busy caring for Claire. But I was aware of the comments flying around, and I saw the panic in your expression when you arrived. You thought the Council voted to expel her.” Which wasn’t the case at all. We hadn’t even convened yet. Although, a few of them were definitely sending notes of wrath and consequence through the air.

“That’s what I heard, yes.”

“And you rushed over to proclaim her innocence.” Not a question, but a statement. Because that was exactly what he’d done.

He stared at me for a long moment, then laughed without humor. “You’re good, Exos. I’m not sure if I like that skill or fear it.”

“Stay on my good side and you’ll have no reason to fear it.” End up on my bad side, well... that’d be another conversation entirely. “So you’ll spread the gossip?”

His lips twitched. “Yeah, I’ll get it to the right ears and meet you at the gym tomorrow.”

“Excellent.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Good to have you along for the ride, Vox. I think you’ll make a fine air mate for Claire.”

“That’s not—”

“Spread the rumors elsewhere, Vox. We both know the future here, and there’s no sense in denying it. But good luck with your inner fight. I give you a week, tops, because you will cave.”

His spine straightened. “You know nothing about me or my resolve or my desires in life.”

“I don’t need to, Air Fae.” I leaned in, lowering my voice. “All I need is to know Claire, and trust me, you don’t stand a chance. None of us do.”



Claire’s bare breasts peeked up at me from the sheets as I entered the room, her eyes closed in blissful unawareness. Titus lay behind her, lazily alert and observing my entry.

“Find anything?” he asked softly.

I shrugged out of my shirt and tossed it onto a chair in the corner. “Not really, no. We’ll discuss it more in the morning. Did she eat?”

He pressed his lips to her neck and nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” I unbuttoned my slacks and kicked off my shoes. “Congratulations, by the way.”

His green eyes met mine. “You feel it?”

“Yes.”

No hint of guilt or regret entered his features, only pure male pride. “She’s amazing, Exos.”

“I know.” I pulled off my socks and finished removing my pants just as her eyes opened. “Hello, princess.”

Her nostrils flared as she took in my black boxer briefs, her lips parting in

appreciation. “Exos.”

I smiled as I slid into the bed beside her, cupping her cheek. “There are burn marks in the kitchen.” I’d noticed them immediately. “But well done on not destroying the dorm.”

Claire’s skin darkened to a delectable shade of pink. “Thanks, I, uh, think.”

Pressing my mouth to hers, I indulged her in a deep kiss meant to arouse. She responded with her tongue and wrapped her palm around the back of my neck to hold me to her.

Titus chuckled, his palm sweeping up her side and back down. “I told you—amazing.”

“Mmm,” I agreed against her lips. And kissed her again, this time with more fervor than before, allowing her to feel my approval at bonding with Titus and also to provide her with a glimpse into how much I craved her. She needed to know that this arrangement worked for me, that I accepted her as my Claire regardless of the others.

Her spirit was mine.

And only mine.

Just as my spirit was hers.

“How did it go?” The words were a breath into my mouth.

I slid my fingers into her hair, holding her to me. “Vox will make a fine mate when you’re ready for him,” I admitted. “But I didn’t come to bed to talk. We’ll do that in the morning.” I met Titus’s gaze over her shoulder. “You’re welcome to stay, but I’m going to kiss her until she falls asleep.”

He drew a line of fire down her bare arm, sending a flicker across her skin. “That’s fine. I don’t mind finding other ways to relax her while you do that.”

“Careful, Titus, or I’ll start to think we make a good team.”

He chuckled and pressed another kiss to her neck. “Where Claire is concerned, I believe we do.”

I smiled, pleased by his reply. It proved my suspicions from earlier accurate. All he needed was a little alone time with our Claire to work himself out. Now that he’d regained his focus and staked his true claim, he would be a formidable ally in protecting our heart. I approved.

“I like it when you two get along,” Claire said, a grin in her voice.

“Yeah?” I kissed her again—long and deep. “Shall we show you just how well we can get along where you’re concerned?”

She shivered, her blue irises glazed with lust and adoration. “Only if you let me play in return.”

“Maybe,” I whispered, knowing full well it wasn’t our time yet. Not until she fully understood what it meant to mate with a royal. “But I should warn you, Claire. My goal is to make you come so hard you can’t do anything other than sleep afterward. As Titus has you all warmed up, it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

His flames intensified, sliding downward to the apex between her thighs. “I approve, Your Highness.”

I nibbled her lip, then started licking a path downward toward her breasts. “Teamwork, Titus. Now let’s make our princess scream.”

Chapter 22

Claire



“**Y**ou want me to go to gym class?” I asked, incredulous.

Titus and Exos were sitting at the breakfast table wearing severe expressions. So very different from the ways they looked at me in the bedroom.

My seducers were gone, and in their place were two sexy-as-fuck warrior fae males.

Both taunted my hormones, driving me wild beyond my craziest desires. Just thinking of all the orgasms these two had given me had my face going up in literal flames.

Titus arched a brow. “Does the idea of finding your captor turn you on? Or is it thoughts of last night?”

“Could be this morning,” Exos pointed out.

And now my entire body was on fire. “Stop.”

“But we like you wet, Claire,” Titus replied.

“It’s true. We also enjoy your screams.”

I gripped the counter and glowered at them. “You were talking about gym class,” I reminded them through gritted teeth.

“Your mind went to the bedroom,” Titus replied, smirking. “Can’t fault us for following.”

“Oh my God, you two are impossible.” I pinched the bridge of my nose while they both chuckled. Only seconds ago I’d been thinking about how stern they appeared and almost longing for my playful fae mates. Now I wanted to go back to the serious topic. “Tell me again why this is a good idea.”

“Fucking you? Or the trap?” Titus teased.

Exos took pity on me and replied, “Because now we know what we’re looking for. By luring the culprit into an arena where you can be framed, we can in turn catch the guilty party in the act.”

“What if all hell breaks loose and it comes back on me again?” I pressed.

“That’s where this comes in.” Titus lifted a bracelet. “You’ll wear this the entire time. No one will be able to accuse you as a result.”

“And what is that?” I asked, eyeing the silvery metal.

“It’s what all Powerless Champion fighters wear in the ring.” He slid it across the breakfast bar. “The metal works similarly to cuffs in fae prisons—it dilutes your power.”

“Meaning you can’t create a tornado or firestorm,” Exos translated. “So if one occurs at the gym, which I highly anticipate will happen, no one can blame you.”

“Okay, but doesn’t that also mean I can’t stop it,” I pointed out.

“Yes. That’s why you’ll have a team of fae with you during class. Some will be more obvious than others.” He smiled. “River and Vox will be incognito but helping.”

“And if we have to, we can remove the bracelet,” Titus added. “Trust us, nothing is going to happen to you.”

Exos folded his arms, eyes narrowed. “However, the same cannot be said about the person framing you.”

Titus snorted. “No shit.”

“So you want me to attend a gym class and—”

“It’s technically an intramural sports activity,” Titus corrected. “It’s one of the few classes where all fae mingle.”

“Right. So gym class,” I said again. “And I’m just supposed to roll with it? Go along with whatever we’re doing?”

“Yes, but I also want you aware of your surroundings. It’ll be a good lesson in defensive magic.” Exos pushed away from the breakfast bar and rolled his shoulders. “Ready?”

My eyebrows flew upward. “We’re going now?” We’d just finished eating some sort of fried pancake thing. I thought we had at least a few hours to work out the full plan, not minutes.

“We overslept,” Titus murmured.

“Is that still the right term when we weren’t sleeping?” Exos asked.

“Fair. We overfucked?” he offered.

“Oh my God...” My face was on fire again. “Can we stop?”

“Is that what you want? To sleep alone tonight?” Exos asked, sounding far too serious.

“Ugh!” I threw my hands up in the air. “You know what? You’re right. Let’s go to gym class.”

“See, now I knew she’d be eager for this,” Exos said conversationally.

Titus started nodding enthusiastically. “You did. You really did.”

“She’ll be great.”

“Because she’s amazing,” Titus added.

“Very, yes.”

“Are you two done acting like I’m not standing in the same room with you?” I demanded, hands on my hips. “Or are you trying to give me a reason to sleep alone tonight?”

Exos gave me an indulgent look that made me want to punch him. “Oh, baby, you know that’ll never happen. If this morning’s performance is anything to go by, you’ll be begging us to come by midnight.”

“I’m leaving now.” I started marching toward the front door of the building, their laughter trailing along behind me in a taunting wave of heat and sound.

These men—*fae*.

My mates.

Why had I agreed to this madness, again?

Oh, right. The pleasure. Their sexy energy. The way they knew how to touch me perfectly. Their hypnotic eyes. Gorgeous smiles. Teaching skills. Irresistible bodies. And well-endowed—

I shook my head, needing to clear it before I marched back into the Spirit Dorm and guided them both to our bedroom.

Finding the asshole trying to get me expelled was far more important.

Right. Yes. Focus.

Time to make a fae pay.



Fae kickball, I thought with a snort. That was essentially what they wanted us to play in gym class today. Except no one wanted me on their team.

It reminded me of a first-grade popularity contest.

With a glare at Exos and Titus—who stood off to the side, watching with those damn serious expressions again—I joined the blue team with Vox and River. Neither of them acknowledged me, which, I suspected, was all part of the plan.

Or, at least, I hoped it was.

It took considerable effort not to pull Vox aside and apologize to him for yesterday. Though it wasn't my fault, but I felt obligated to say something. Maybe even to thank him for believing in me enough to visit last night and going out to search with Exos.

Yeah, that would be good.

I could express my gratitude for what he'd done, for helping again today, and for supposedly joining my mentor team.

All normal-ish things to say. Nothing too emotional or strange, just typical conversation.

Why am I nervous about talking to Vox?

I glanced at his profile. His crisp features definitely drew the female eye, and while I didn't usually like long hair on a man, he definitely wore it well. Lean, athletic lines. Handsome. Okay, so maybe I found him a little attractive, but that shouldn't deter me. I had two equally good-looking men watching from the sidelines. Clearly, my docket was a little full.

But something about Vox's energy called to mine. Like he soothed me in a way the others didn't. Because he understood my chaotic affinity for air? That seemed to be the one element I couldn't master. It ebbed and flowed and fought me at every turn.

Yet, I'd managed to hone the energy under his guidance just yesterday.

That had to be it. I felt a strange connection to him as a result, sort of like he resembled an antidote to the insanity building—

A ball slammed into the side of my head, sending me sideways a step.

“Ow!” I shouted, glowering at the approaching blue-haired bitch to my left. Sickle, if I remembered her name right. “What the fuck?”

“Earth. To. The. Halfling.”

Seriously? “What?” I demanded, half tempted to pick up the ball and throw it at her bitchy little face.

Her resulting smile was all teeth. “I asked if you're ready to go to the Spirit Kingdom, where you belong.”

I blinked at her. “Wow. That's your taunt?” I glanced around, meeting the

gaze of several of my *teammates*. They all appeared as welcoming as she did. Great. I shook my head on a laugh, deciding to play this one low-key and not let her get to me. “Sorry, I just expected more originality in the Fae World. But that wasn’t much better than my high school bully.”

“You’ll wither and die there,” she continued.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay.”

“And disappear for good.”

“Uh-huh.” I refused to let this bitch bother me. “Still not impressed. But please, continue. I could use some entertainment.”

Ice clouded her blue eyes. “You tried to kill my friends, and you think this is funny?”

“I haven’t tried to kill anyone.” I folded my arms, bored. “I’m just trying to learn about my fae heritage. That’s it.”

She snorted. “Your mother was a whore who fucked a human and caused a plague that killed off most of the Spirit Fae. An abomination. And you’re the product of it all, a walking reminder of Ophelia’s atrocities.”

Okay, those words stung a bit. Mostly because they were right. But... “I’m not my mother.”

She spit at my feet. “You’re right. You’re worse. Taking a Spirit Royal for yourself to, what, destroy him, too? And Titus? And how many others? You’re an even bigger slut than your mother!”

My palm itched to meet her face, but I swallowed the urge and forced a smile. “Anything else?” I learned a long time ago that the best way to deal with a bully was to not react.

“Yes. I hope they banish you,” she seethed, ice forming around us. It prickled against my skin, raising goose bumps along the way. A few of the students stepped back, eyes widening. River, however, stood firm, gaze narrowed.

It couldn’t be Sickle.

That would be too obvious.

And she couldn’t control air or fire.

Although, the two girls glaring daggers at me from across the gym were capable of controlling those elements.

No.

That couldn’t be it.

I’d literally done nothing to them, apart from apparently stealing Titus from Ignis. But he claimed they were never in a relationship.

Hmm, though, she did try to drug him into one. So she clearly has a thing for my mate.

The whistle blew loudly, calling all the players to their respective locations. Our team was in the field first. And that, apparently, was a literal location because grass grew across the floor with each step, bathing the gym in an exterior appearance.

Lily-pad-shaped bases formed a diamond configuration, denoting our field positions, and another whistle sounded.

Sickle maintained a distance—thankfully—leaving me to guard third base. My competitive drive was piqued as a ball shot over my head. I jumped to catch it, then threw it to the first baseman.

He caught it with a surprised look, then grinned at the growling fae who halted mid-run.

“Nice,” Vox praised, having skipped over to my side in anticipation of the kick.

“Thanks.” Maybe this would actually be fun.

We went a few rounds with me catching more balls, completing several throws, and generally pissing off the other team while entralling my own.

Several fae even smiled in my direction.

Considering how this started out, I took that as a reasonable sign that at least a couple of fae might actually begin to like me.

At least, until Ignis nearly slammed into me during a field-to-base transition. She tossed her long red hair over her shoulder and sniffed. “You reek of Titus.”

“Thank you,” I replied, smiling. He winked at me from across the room. “As I’m very familiar with his scent, I’m taking that as a compliment. Now, if you’ll excuse—”

She shoved me back with her hand on my shoulder, causing me to stumble. “You might have him fooled, but I see right through your little innocent act. Your mother’s blood runs thick through your veins. And soon, you’ll end up just like her. *Dead* in the Spirit Kingdom.”

My lips parted on a reply as ice drizzled across my skin, forming a ball in my palm.

I gaped down at it, confused.

This isn’t mine.

I glanced around, searching for the culprit, and found several people backing away. Including Ignis.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her eyebrows rising. “Stop that.”

“I’m not—”

“You’re insane!” she jumped backward, her hands up. “Everyone sees this, right? She’s an abomination that needs to be banished!”

“What are you doing, Claire?” some random chick in a skirt demanded.

“Noth—”

“This is how it started yesterday!”

“In the courtyard, too.”

“She’s unstable.”

“A monster.”

Energy crawled over my skin, foreign and cold, and began to spiral into a voracious ball of energy.

“River...” I searched for him, finding him too far for comfort.

The mean girl brigade began to approach their team captain, their expressions alarmed, but a sheet of ice blocked their path. Ignis leapt sideways on a yelp, her terrified gaze flickering over her shoulder at me. I did nothing but watch as frozen blades appeared around the room, spiking up from the floor.

Fae screamed.

The instructor—whose name I didn’t even remember—shouted.

My name rent the air.

Accusations flew with a fervor.

Stay calm, I told myself. *Exos and Titus are here. It’s fine.* I stole a deep breath from within and willed my body to remain warm despite the arctic drop in temperature flooding the room.

Vox was suddenly at my side, his palm on my shoulder. “Do you feel it?” he asked softly. “The negative presence?”

I swallowed, trying to search for whatever he meant and shook my head. “I can’t feel anything.”

He glanced down at the metal bracelet clamped around my wrist and nodded. “Then the cuff is working.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked, shivering as a frozen sheet blanketed the ceiling of the gym.

“Yes.” He nodded toward Elana standing just inside the door beside a man with shockingly white hair. “Looks like Exos invited some of the Council members to the show—Elana and Vape.”

Vape. That must be the lanky male with the long, stark strands. Power

seemed to emanate from the male's gaze as he studied the room with a serene expression. He said something to Elana before glancing at Exos and giving him a nod.

Something seemed to pass between them. An understanding. Unspoken words. I opened my mouth, ready to ask Vox if he knew what was happening, when an ominous crack sounded through the air.

Golf ball-sized hail fell from the ceiling, crashing into the ground around me. I screamed, falling to my knees, and covered my head just as a lethal ice pick sliced through the air toward Exos's head.

"No!" I made to move, but a wave of fire went up in a flash, incinerating the approaching weapon and leaving a very livid Royal Fae in its wake. He sent waves of power through the gym in a show of dominance unlike any I'd ever seen or felt.

Fire mingling with spirit—the royal declaring his right to the throne.

Everyone froze.

Then several fae fell to their knees on a whisper of sound, his name a chant on the wind.

Chapter 23

Claire



I stood gaping at Exos, unable to speak, unsure of what to do. “Who dares to threaten me?” he demanded, his blue eyes scanning the gym. “The last of the Spirit Fae line. A royal.”

Several heads turned in my direction, causing him to scoff.

“You all discredit my ability to sense my own mate’s power? You think I wouldn’t be able to feel any malevolence coming from the future Princess of the Spirit Kingdom?” He tsked. “Such an insult requires punishment, perhaps in the form of a reminder of what a Spirit Fae can truly do.”

Shudders rolled through the room, palpable and fear-driven.

“She did it!” someone shouted.

“Who?” Exos demanded.

A petite male with curly dark hair stood slowly and pointed at Sickie. “I felt her water energy roll over me just before it surrounded the Halfling.”

“He’s right,” Vox added, still standing at my side. “I felt it, too.”

“Same.” The high-pitched voice came from the fae I’d first thrown the ball to at the beginning of the game.

Sickie was frozen on her knees, her expression one of shock. “I... I...”

“I recognized the signature as well,” the white-haired male said from the doorway, his voice carrying over the crowd. “It flooded the room. And as you’ve put the distinctive Powerless Champion cuff on your mate, Titus, it most certainly did not come from Claire.”

Several gasps filled the air as Vox lifted my arm. He tugged up the sleeve to reveal the bracelet underneath while I stood stock-still beside him, unable to properly breathe.

Sickie did this?

That just seemed too obvious somehow.

“I didn’t do this,” Sickle said, her head rotating back and forth. “I would never... I mean... I’m not... This can’t...”

“What about the vortex?” Aerie asked, her wiry form shaking beside Sickle. “And the fire? Sickle didn’t do those.”

“Yet they targeted both me and Exos,” Titus broke in. “Odd, considering we’re the only two fae helping Claire. Why would she try to harm us?”

“Because she’s insane,” Ignis muttered from across the room.

“No, I suspect something else is at play.” Elana stepped forward in a pristine white outfit, her hands clasped before her. Energy seemed to ripple around her as she moved, the air shifting beneath her, the grassy floor rekindling with life beneath her feet.

Several in the room gave her a wide berth, their reverence palpable as they kept their heads bowed for both Elana and Exos. Even Titus and Vox appeared to defer to them, making me wonder if I was supposed to be kneeling or bowing instead of gaping.

But I couldn’t stop.

I couldn’t look away.

I needed to see what the hell was about to happen, hear whatever she intended to say. This woman—the Chancellor of the Academy—held my future in her hands. Exos never said that; it was just something I *knew*. And now she seemed to be considering her options, weighing the events of the room in her mind, and stroking the guilty parties with her spirit.

It slithered over me, a darkness that surprised my senses—there and gone in a flash. But it left an inky texture in her wake, confusing my ties to my inner elements.

Wrong.

Intrusive.

Reject.

Exos moved to stand beside her, his hands tucked behind his back, his spine erect in a distinctly regal manner. Titus remained at his station near the side of the room, unmoving, gaze downcast.

But the white-haired one strode forward with purpose, his eerily light gaze sweeping over everyone he passed.

“Stand.” Elana’s command sent a shiver through the air, but only three obeyed.

Ignis.

Aerie.

Sickle.

“Chancellor El—”

Elana silenced Ignis with a wave of her hand. “No speaking unless I ask you to.” She strode around the trio, the atmosphere moving with her as a twirl of pixies appeared on her shoulder. “Mmm, yes, do.”

They took off in a swarm, dancing over the three girls who appeared frozen in time, unblinking. I gaped at the display, concerned and confused, while everyone else in the room appeared to be incapable of observing.

What is happening? I wondered.

She’s searching their minds for memories, Titus whispered back, causing my head to whip toward him.

What?! She can do that?

As a Spirit Fae, you possess the same ability.

I gaped at his prone form. He’d remained tucked into a revered pose, his eyes hidden from my own. I learned last night that we could somehow communicate in our minds now that we’d mated, but I didn’t realize how clear our conversations could be.

Am I supposed to be bowing? I asked, wiping my palms against my skirt.

If you were, you would be. She’s controlling the entire room right now, apart from you and Exos.

Why? I wondered. And how did he know she wasn’t controlling me? I’d felt her energy slither over my skin. Just thinking about it made me tremble in foreboding. I never wanted to feel that again.

Because she can and she’s pissed, Titus replied. *But most importantly, because it’s a way of exerting power.*

Oh. And you’re telling me she’s able to search everyone’s memories? Why didn’t she—or Exos, for that matter—do that before? It would have saved us a lot of trouble, and me a lot of grief.

Who’s to say they haven’t? he countered. *But from what I understand, it takes a lot of energy. And to dive into someone’s mind requires a conflict worthy of the intrusion—such as witnessing a fae using elements inappropriately.*

Hence, today’s trap, I realized.

Exactly.

“Interesting,” Elana said as her pixies began to chatter. “Very interesting.” She clapped and the creatures disappeared. “It would appear

none of the incidents were Claire at all, but the three of you trying to sabotage the new student out of petty jealousy.”

“That’s not—”

“Silence!” Power thundered through that softly spoken word, making even me want to think twice about ever speaking again. Ignis visibly shuddered, her fiery hair falling in a wave over her shoulders as she bent even lower. “What was it you three desired? Oh, yes. For the Halfling to be banished to the Spirit Kingdom. Well, I do find that to be a suitable punishment for knowingly trying to destroy the reputation of an innocent student. Thoughts, Exos?”

“Perhaps a temporary visit,” he suggested flatly. “They are students, after all. And the Spirit Kingdom is not kind to outsiders.”

“Temporary,” she mused, tapping her lip. “Vape?”

The white-haired male lifted a shoulder in a slight shrug. “As it is an affront on the Royal Fae and his intended, I would defer to his choice on the matter.”

“And you, Mortus? I sense you lurking in the corridor. What say you?” she called.

My heart skipped a beat as the tall male with familiar dark features entered the room, his hands tucked behind his back in a similar fashion to Exos. “Does my opinion even matter?” he asked, his tone emotionless.

“As I request it, yes.” She gave him her full attention. “Ignis is one of your students, after all.”

He glanced at the redhead. “One of many.”

“Then you should care what happens to her.”

“As I said, one of many.” He considered Ignis as one would an inconvenient mosquito. “Well, I suppose a temporary punishment would be adequate. Though, I’ll also note that I surmised something like this would happen. The Halfling is not necessarily well liked, and if she is to survive in this world, then she should get used to being attacked.”

Ice slithered through my veins at his callous words. Even Vox flinched beside me. But Exos merely chuckled. “I wish anyone luck who attempts to touch my intended betrothed. Not only will they have me to contend with, but also Titus. In fact”—he paused to address the room—“allow this to be a warning to you all. For while I may suggest a temporary sentence to be served in the Spirit Kingdom, I’m also requesting they be stripped of their elements during their stay. As they’ve proven to use them wrongly, it only

seems fitting. Wouldn't you agree, Elana?"

The girls began to cry—silently—while the elders observed, and I wondered what all that would entail. Cuffs like my own? Or something more dire?

"Yes, that suits the crime, indeed," she agreed, a note of admiration in her voice. "Care to do the honors?"

"I do." He shifted forward, hands still behind him but gaze focused on the three bowing females. "As I said, consider this an introduction, for I will not be so lenient on a second offense."

Swirls of energy laced through his words, stringing through the air and wrapping around the women in wispy vines of magic. Their mouths opened on soundless shrieks at the contact, tears streaming from their eyes as Exos weaved the power through them and over them and around them.

Can you see that? I asked Titus, then remembered he couldn't look up.

No, but I feel it.

What is he doing?

Binding their elements, he whispered back to me. *He's essentially making them human.*

I flinched. *Fae can do that?*

Spirit Fae, yes.

Which meant *I* could do that to someone. Take away their will. Control them. Which, of course, made sense. Spirit represented life and death, and apparently, that included a fae's essence as well.

The girls collapsed as he finished, their tear-streaked faces leaving me slightly unsettled. Not that they didn't deserve it. With their little tricks, they'd almost sentenced me to an entire existence alone. And they'd tried to hurt Exos and Titus.

Yes, they more than earned this fate.

"Mmm, I believe justice is to be served, then," Elana murmured, calling on her pixies again. "Take them to the house. I'll escort them personally to the Spirit Kingdom later." She flicked her fingers with the words, and the horde of little fairy things took hold of the trio. They practically dragged the three fae from the room by their hair and clothes while Ignis pleaded after them with her eyes. When she met mine, there was a note of urgency in them that I didn't understand.

Panic that she'd been caught?

Frustration?

A hint of revenge?

But it was too quick for me to study, the girls yanked from the gym with a vengeance.

Elana sighed dramatically. “Well, now that we’ve settled that, I believe apologies are in order. Claire has been wrongly accused and should actually be commended for her efforts in *stopping* the dangerous elements. I witnessed each account with my mind now, through the eyes of the guilty, and I must say, I’m impressed with your control.” She smiled at me. “You’ve come a very long way in such a short time. I suspect there will be great things in your future, young one.” She cocked her head to the side, then peered at Exos. “I have an idea.”

“Yes?” he prompted, his expression one of deep admiration. This woman was clearly well loved by the fae. It seemed appropriate. From what little I’d observed of her, she’d earned her status.

“How would you feel about me helping with some of her instruction? Given your recent bond and her attraction to all five elements, she has the potential to help—if not *lead*—our elemental peace initiatives. Thoughts?”

Gasps filled the room, including one from Vox.

But I was too busy trying to figure out what she meant by *peace initiatives* to comprehend the entirety of that statement.

“I think it’s up to Claire,” Exos replied. “But I agree that it would be an excellent—and very generous—opportunity.”

“Might help make up for her rocky start as well,” she mused before grinning at me again. “I’ll touch base with you next week on what a tutelage beneath me would require, then you can decide for yourself if you’re interested. Yes?”

I swallowed. “Um, thank you. Yes, I would be interested.” *I think...?* This was not at all how I expected the day to go. But I couldn’t necessarily complain about the turn of events, and from the awed noises in the room, she’d just offered me a status of some kind. I only wished I understood what.

“Excellent.” Elana clapped her hands once more, eliciting several sighs of relief throughout the gymnasium. “Well, it’s been lovely, my beautiful children. I hope we all learned great things today. Should anyone require an audience with me to discuss today’s events, you know where to find me.”

She left with a flourish of vitality, the ground sprouting wildfires in her trail and a clutter of those pixies forming around her like a guard.

Vape smiled and followed, but not before nodding once at Exos.

And Mortus merely slinked back into the shadows, his presence an ominous shade in the back of the room as everyone seemed to bounce back to life.

I met his dark gaze, felt a chill of ill intention traverse my spine, and suddenly found myself wrapped up in Titus's arms. "You did it," he whispered, his lips at my ear.

"I didn't do anything."

"You remained calm, sweetheart. You didn't let them goad you. And you're one hell of a Faeball player." He cupped my cheeks in his hands and kissed me lightly. "Why didn't you tell us you knew how to play?"

"You mean kickball?" I asked. "Humans play that in, like, elementary school."

His eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"I told you that," River put in, joining us. "I've said that, like, ten times."

"You did?" He gave him a look. "When?"

"One of the many times you were apparently ignoring my comments about the human world," River grumbled.

"Hmm. Fair." Titus draped his arm across my shoulders, pulling me to his side. "Well, Claire's a natural at it."

I snorted. "It's not a hard game."

"She's really good," someone agreed from the side.

"Yeah, she is," another said.

I frowned after them. "I don't know them."

"Ah, but they know you." Titus pressed his lips to my temple. "Actually, I think your position around here is about to change."

Exos joined our circle, his gaze brimming with pride. "Mortus just gave us permission to move back to the Fire Quad, if you want."

"He did?" I glanced around, trying to find that ominous energy, but he'd disappeared.

"He did," Exos confirmed. "But I told him we're having too much fun on Spirit Quad to move." He lifted a brow. "Unless you disagree?"

I considered it and smiled. "I think the Spirit Quad could use a little life."

His lips curled. "My thoughts exactly." He stepped in to brush his lips over mine while Titus's arm remained solid across my shoulders.

My two fae.

It felt good here.

Felt even better that Vox remained on my other side. I didn't know what

that meant, but I would investigate later. For now, I was just glad to have my name cleared of wrongdoing. I still had a lot of work to do to get my elements under control, but at least I could do so without worrying about hurting others.

As Elana said, I'd helped.

No, I'd more than helped. I'd dismantled the bad energy with my own gifts.

"I want to know more about the internship," I whispered to Exos. "What does it mean?"

"It means Elana wants to tutor you personally. Like she did with your mother." He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear and pressed his forehead to mine. "It would be good for you to have a second spirit instructor, and she's extremely powerful. She could also tell you more about Ophelia."

My heart slid into my throat. "Because she mentored my mom." The gravity of that realization floored me, making me uncertain of how to proceed.

Part of me didn't want to know my mother at all, especially after everything I'd learned. The other part desired more information on what happened, who she was before her relationship with Mortus took a turn, and what similarities I had to her that I should avoid.

"Yes." Exos pressed his palm to my neck, angling my head back to meet his kiss. "Think about it, princess. You don't have to decide now."

"Okay," I whispered. Although, in my heart, I already knew my decision. Yes. Because I had to know what she was like, to avoid ever becoming her.

I refused to ever hurt Titus in that way. Exos, too.

"Mmm, we'll discuss it more tonight," he murmured. "I need to go call my brother to update him on our situation, but I'll be quick."

"Promise?" I asked, gazing up at him. "Because I was hoping to get a few sparring lessons in this afternoon."

"Sparring, hmm?" He glanced at Titus. "Seems she wants an upgrade."

Titus snorted. "She just wants to play with spirit because I gave her too much fire last night."

My eyes rolled upward. "Please don't."

"That sounds like a challenge, Fire Fae," Exos replied, looking over him. "Let's see how exhausted my spirit makes her tonight."

"Ugh, seriously—"

“You’re on, Royal.” Titus smiled. “We can make a game of it—who can exhaust Claire more.”

My cheeks were officially inflamed. “Guys...”

“Sounds like a fun way to spend the rest of the week,” Exos agreed, his grin positively wicked. “You ready to join yet, Vox?”

Oh God...

The Air Fae merely shook his head. “I’m just here to teach.”

“Teach,” Titus repeated. “Right.”

“I am.”

“Uh-huh. Exos is just here to lay out commands. I’m here to light Claire on fire. And you’re going for professorship.” Titus shrugged. “Works for me.”

“You’re incorrigible,” I growled, shrugging out from under his arm. “And if you keep it up, I’ll be sleeping alone later.”

“Sure, sweetheart,” he said, snagging my waist and pulling me back to him. “Then you’ll just dream about us, but I assure you reality is better.”

Reality, I thought with a laugh. What a strange word. Because my reality? Yeah, it was nothing like my dreams, or even my fantasies.

No, this was better.

Even with the teasing, the sharing, the constant confusion, I wouldn’t trade my current existence for anything in the world.

Exos winked at me, either hearing my thoughts or seeing them in my expression. “See you in a bit, princess.”

It was as he disappeared from view that I pondered over his words. *Call my brother...*

Using what? I wondered. I hadn’t seen any phones in the Fae Kingdom. Probably some sort of tree or a bird.

“You ready to go home, sweetheart?” Titus asked, his arms tightening around me.

Home. I smiled. “Yeah.” I liked the sound of that. “With you.” *And Exos.*

My new world filled with odd mating rules, elements, and, most importantly, love.

A girl could get used to this life.

A girl like me.

Epilogue

Exos



I didn't want to leave Claire, but I needed to talk to my brother. Something about the setup felt off. Too easy. Too obvious. And the energy signatures felt tampered with and wrong somehow.

With quick steps, I ventured across campus toward the nearest communication tower. Fae didn't have technology the way humans did. We used something simpler—our minds. But it required the right condition, hence the tower.

I took the stairs two at a time, the air calming with each step upward. So much energy on campus, all spiked by the mingling of elements. Moments like this, I missed the simplicity of the Spirit Kingdom.

The thought had my instincts itching again.

Did those girls deserve their fates?

Yes, I'd made an example out of them, wanting everyone to know what fate lurks for them should they decide to fuck with my mate. But my spirit had sensed something foul inside them as I wove my energy through their skin—a presence that didn't belong.

One that reminded me of someone.

But who?

I glanced around, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

An essence had just joined mine. Subtle. Dark. Familiar again.

No one stood on the stairs. So where was it coming from?

I turned in a circle.

Nothing.

What is that? I crept upward, already reaching out to Cyrus with my mind. He wouldn't answer me right away, would require time to find an

appropriate location, but the subtle shimmer of his mind told me he'd received my message.

While I waited, I took in my surroundings once more.

That nagging energy of wrongness thickened. Was it all in my mind? A consequence of that gymnasium? Had I banished those girls wrongly?

No, they were awful beings. I knew that, had sensed it in their auras as I disintegrated their bonds to the elements—one of the worst punishments known to fae kind.

That had to be it. I just felt bad about hurting another, even though those women deserved it. The Spirit Kingdom would not be kind to them—a fate they more than warranted.

Exos? Cyrus whispered through my mind. *Is everything all right?*

I'm not sure, I answered him honestly. *We discovered who was targeting Claire, but I have this odd feeling we accused the wrong fae.*

How so?

I told him about the setup, how Elana used her magic to extract the truth—an exhausting form of spirit magic—and how I sensed a falsehood. *Something isn't right, Cyrus.*

Do you need me?

I think... I trailed off as the dark essence grew around me. No one stood nearby. The sky remained clear. But I *felt* the menacing presence like a scar against my back. *Someone's here.*

Listening?

No. My mental walls were impossible to breach. *But here with—*

A flash in my vision sent me stumbling backward. Harsh. Strong. Quick.

The culprit moved too fast, too unexpectedly. My energy was exhausted after the gymnasium, not yet replete enough for defense. I threw up a wall, but he ghosted through it, startling me. Then struck me upside the head so hard my vision clouded behind a sea of black dots. A second strike forced me to my knees. And a third sent me face-first to the ground.

Exos! someone screamed. Maybe Cyrus. But it sounded mysteriously like my Claire...

Only then I did I realize *who* had joined me up here, the smoky figure taking corporeal form.

But it was too late.

The assailant's name was but a mere whisper in my mind just as everything went dark.

Run, my Claire...
Run.

GELEMENTAL
FAE ACADEMY
BOOK TWO



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LEXI C. FOSS & J.R. THORN

Someone wants me dead.

Worse yet, my link to Spirit is dying. Why? Because Exos has been taken by a new enemy. Now I have to rely on my other elements to find my missing link before it's too late.

Oh, and I need a guard to protect me while I learn how to defend myself. No big deal. Master the elements, find my lost Spirit, and identify the bad guy.

Yeah. Easy.

Except Titus is tired of playing by the rules of others.

Vox just wants to be friends.

Sol is pissing everyone off.

And Cyrus, well, he's a force of nature and very much in charge.

I'd better solve this puzzle quickly before my heart starts making choices on my behalf. Because all of these fae are beautiful, cunning, and perfect in their own ways.

But how can I feel complete without my Spirit?

The hunt is on, and whoever is out to hurt me and mine will pay.

Chapter 1

Claire



Titus’s mouth captivated me. So smooth, perfect, and delicious. My tongue craved to meet his, to engage in a sensual dance that would lead to more. But he kept the kiss slow and teasing, his lips tantalizingly tender.

He smiled, the motion knowing. “You said you wanted to wait for Exos to begin our celebrations.”

“I did,” I admitted, my thighs clenching around his. Climbing onto his lap and straddling his thighs hadn’t been part of the plan, but his smoldering green eyes had become a beacon I couldn’t ignore. “He’s taking too long.”

After the episode in the gym—where we finally discovered who was framing me for all the incidents at the Academy—Exos went off to call his brother. Whatever that meant. I had yet to see a phone in this realm. Maybe I’d ask him when he returned.

Titus chuckled and tapped my nose. “So eager.”

“I feel liberated. Free. Like I could fly.” I threaded my fingers through his thick auburn hair. “And I’m tired of waiting.” At this point, Exos could just join us whenever he arrived. It wouldn’t be the first time he walked in on me naked with Titus. “Kiss me.”

“Mmm, I was,” he murmured.

“*Really* kiss me.”

He didn’t. “When did you become the demanding one?”

“When I acquired two fae mates.” One for spirit, one for fire. Apparently, it wasn’t unheard of for a Spirit Fae to require multiple connections, as all Spirit Fae bonded to two elements—spirit and another.

Except I wasn’t normal.

Somehow, some way, I had access to all five elements.

And I wasn't even a full-blooded fae but a Halfling with a fae mother and a human father.

I still hadn't wrapped my mind around all of it, but I was learning to take it one day at a time and to focus on controlling all my abilities. Something a horde of mean girls had tried to ruin by making me appear unstable to the other fae.

Fortunately, we'd stopped them.

Hence the reason I wanted to celebrate.

I kissed Titus again before he could reply, this time with tongue, and he responded with a growl. His grip on my hips tightened, his leisurely movements disappearing as he took control of the embrace and reminded me of his inner strength.

Fire.

I reveled in it, bathed in the glory of his heat. It soothed mine in a way no one else could because he was my chosen mate. For eternity. My flames called to his, engaging him in a passionate gyration of power that warmed the room. Embers floated around us, kindled by our coupling, and stirred a smoky flavor in the air around us.

"Fuck, Claire," he whispered.

"That's the idea." I tugged his lower lip between my teeth, sucking hard. "Take me to bed, Titus."

I didn't want to do this in the living area, not when others could interrupt us. Not that many would. The Spirit Quad was a wasteland—a consequence of ninety percent of the Spirit Fae dying after my mother—*No*. I refused to think about it. Not now. Not while Titus was doing *that* with his hands.

Traveling up my sides.

An inferno trailing in their wake.

Oh, for the love of the fae... I loved when he did this, displaying complete control over his power and incinerating my clothes along the way. It showed restraint. It seduced and taunted my fire to come out to play. And it heightened the moment.

Titus's palms went to my ass as he stood. My legs tightened around his waist, my lips never leaving his. He kissed me back with a fervor, his excitement hot and evident between my thighs.

We'd only just moved to the next level of our relationship, a place where our fiery souls promised each other eternity. There was still a step beyond

this one, something about a ritual with words similar to wedding vows. I didn't know, would reach that stage when we were both ready. But for now, I would delight in the present and learn everything I could about my intended fire mate.

Such a stark contrast to Exos.

And yet, I adored them equally. For entirely different reasons.

By the time my back hit the mattress, my clothes were already gone, thanks to Titus's precise use of energy. He'd burned away every inch of the fabric from my body. I began to return the favor, when power sliced through my heart, eliciting a sharp cry from my mouth.

Titus pulled back, his gaze full of alarm. "Claire?"

The pain struck again, this time to my mind, cascading my vision in shades of white and black as if someone had slammed a fist into my head.

I pressed my palms to my temples, fighting to understand, but the ache only grew. An emptiness formed a cavern deep inside, creating a black void of nothing.

"Claire!" Titus shouted, his hands on my shoulders. But I couldn't see him. Could hardly feel him. All I sensed was this immense torment of loss. As if something had been ripped from my very spirit.

Oh God... "Exos!" I sat up abruptly, my head connecting with Titus's hard chest. I still couldn't see, the fog behind my eyes a mist my senses refused to navigate. "He's... *Oh...* Something's wrong. Something's wrong with Exos, Titus. Something's... I don't... It hurts!" I clutched my head again, whimpering as fractures of light pierced my pupils. "He's *hurt.*"

"Claire..." Titus cradled my face, his familiar presence cascading heat over my quivering form. Exactly what I needed, a call to return to the present, to the bed, to his mostly naked body.

I blinked at him, my cheeks damp from tears I hadn't realized I'd shed. Somehow I *knew* time had passed without my knowledge, as if I'd lost consciousness when something hit me—no, *Exos*—upside the head. I tried to reach out to him, to sense his presence, our link, but I felt empty and alone. My heart raced. "He's... he's *gone.*"

What does that mean?

Did he sever our bond?

No. He wouldn't do that. I had felt his emotions, strong and vibrant and true.

So what happened?

“Where is he? Where did he go?” Frantic sparks clawed over my skin, scattering goose bumps up and down my body. Coldness unlike any I’d ever experienced solidified in my veins. “He’s... Titus... *Where is he? Why can’t I feel him?*”

A sob caught in my throat, worry and panic overwhelming whatever he said in reply. Pounding flourished in my ears, and the room began to spin again, my entire existence being swallowed up into a void of confusion and despair.

“*Where’s Exos?*” I repeated again and again and again. He wouldn’t leave me. Not after everything. Right? Our spirits were bonded, not quite as deep as the one I had with Titus, but still just as powerful.

“*Claire.*” Titus’s voice finally penetrated the rhythmic beating clogging my ears. “Breathe.”

I inhaled sharply, my lungs weeping with joy from the much-needed air. I swallowed, exhaled, and repeated. It overwhelmed me, sending shudders through my limbs, eased the dark edges of my vision, and grounded me once more in the present.

The torment inside lessened to a dull ache, my connection to Exos wounded and almost completely dissolved. More tears came, the pain of loss destroying my heart.

I couldn’t control it, couldn’t stop it. Like a dam had opened and refused to be sealed off. My limbs were stiff, and my body strained in an anguish my mind hardly comprehended.

Part of me wanted to fight. To go find Exos. To figure out what the hell had happened.

But the other part of me—the one that drove my motivations—just felt broken.

Because my spirit is gone.

My soul.

My other half.

Flames roamed over me, Titus reminding me of his presence, his adoration, his *love*. I collapsed into him, and his lips went to my hair, his arms a cage of comfort around me.

Seconds, minutes, hours, later, I finally remembered how to think, how to *exist* again, and I looked at him once more. Concern radiated from his handsome face, his gorgeous eyes flooded with protective energy I longed to bathe in.

“Can you feel him at all?” Titus asked, his deep voice soothing and soft. I shook my head. “I... I don’t think so.”

He massaged my wrists, considering. “Sometimes those Powerless Champion cuffs can leave a residual essence behind that hinders your ability to connect properly to your elements. It’s one of the downsides. Maybe that has something to do with it?”

“But I took them off right after we left the gym.” I’d only worn them to gym class because we had suspected someone might try to frame me again. And they had. However, this time I’d worn physical proof of my innocence—the cuffs that blocked me from my powers. “They didn’t make me feel weird at all, just human again.” Something I admittedly indulged in, at least temporarily. The elemental fae world was overwhelming, strange, and not at all like the reality I grew up experiencing.

I shook my head, clearing it and focusing. “It’s not the cuffs,” I said, certain. “Something... something has happened.”

Titus considered for a long moment, then nodded. “All right. You said he was going to call his brother, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go to the tower. I doubt he’s still there since it was hours ago, but we can see if you can pick up on his essence. Okay?”

“Hours ago?” I repeated, my eyebrows lifting.

“Yeah... It’s almost midnight, Claire. You lost consciousness for a while, then woke up screaming before passing out again. It’s been, well, an eventful afternoon and evening.”

So I’d been right about time escaping me. I swallowed. “What do you think happened?”

“I’m not speculating. Not until we go to the tower.” He slid off the bed, fully clothed and more than proving that we’d lost several hours. “Vox is here, so he can probably help. He brought an Earth Fae with him—Sol. River is here, too.”

Oh, good. An audience for my breakdown.

I groaned, feeling like hell turned over. Titus must have been worried if he called everyone here. Not that I blamed him. A part of me felt, well, *dead*. I shivered at the realization, refusing to accept that fate for Exos.

He can’t be... He was too strong. Too otherworldly. No, there had to be another explanation. I just didn’t know *what*.

“Uh, Titus?” Vox’s familiar tone came through the door. “You need to

—”

“Move.” The deep tenor sent a chill down my spine. It reminded me of Exos, but not quite. And the face that appeared in the doorway a second later was a near spitting image of my Spirit Fae, only with lighter blue eyes that glistened with a silvery hue in the light.

Titus immediately fell to his knee, his head bowed. “Your Highness.”

The fae didn’t even look at him, his enigmatic focus entirely on me. “Hello, Claire.”

I pulled the sheets up to cover my bare breasts, my throat working as I attempted to formulate a response. His athletic build, light hair, and aristocratic jaw told me exactly *who* this was even before Titus knelt.

Cyrus.

King of the Spirit Fae.

Exos’s younger brother.

There was only one reason he could be here, and it wasn’t to deliver good news.

Chapter 2

Cyrus



“**W**here is he?” the Halfling demanded. “Where’s Exos?”
“Claire,” the Fire Fae beside her whispered urgently. “*Bow.*”
Titus. Powerless Champion.

The famous fae appeared less menacing than I anticipated, perhaps due to his position on the ground. Still, I knew of his speed and strength. He was certainly not one to be underappreciated.

“Where’s Exos?” Claire repeated, her vivid blue eyes boldly holding mine.

“Forgive her, my liege. She’s unaccustomed to our ways and hasn’t been fully trained on formalities.” Titus maintained his formal position, as I assumed those in the other room did as well. But Claire remained unmoving, her gaze imploring mine for an answer.

I could see why Exos fancied her—golden locks, a gorgeous face, and curvy assets designed for a male’s hands to pet and squeeze. Yet it wasn’t like my brother to be so careless. Rather than telegraph his coordinates through our familial bond, he’d sent me here. To *her*.

Which suggested he put her above his birthright.

Fascinating.

And equally disturbing.

“Can you locate him through the bond?” I asked, ignoring her question and Titus’s apology. In this situation, we could ignore the formalities.

“The connection broke,” Titus replied.

Claire’s lower lip wobbled, her dismay over the abrupt loss evident. I folded my arms, unimpressed by the useless emotion. “So reestablish it.” My brother wasn’t dead, just unconscious. I could feel his spirit thriving through

the links, and as they were clearly beyond the first level of courtship, she should sense him, too. “Get over the shock, pull yourself together, and find him. Now.”

She gaped at me. “But he’s gone.”

“No, he’s not. He’s taking a fucking nap.” Not by choice, it seemed, but that didn’t matter. “But I’ll be sure to let him know how little faith you had in him to survive after we find him.”

Her full lips parted on a gasp, her eyebrows lifting. “You know nothing about me or what I just felt. He’s not *napping*; he’s gone.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re not worthy of him at all, are you?” I finally looked at the Fire Fae, whose hands were fisted at his sides, his annoyance evident in the tension lining his muscular form. “Why do you allow her to act this way? She’s an emotional mess and useless.” Better yet, why the hell had my brother fostered such behavior? “You’re unfit to be his mate.”

Her palm cracked across my cheek so fast I was almost impressed. “Fuck you!”

“Claire!” Titus was on his feet, his hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her back.

I massaged my jaw, intrigued by both her reaction and the lack of a sheet covering her breasts. All right, so I could definitely see why Exos had chosen her. At least physically. Because she was perfectly proportioned in every way, and well groomed, too.

“Let me go!” she shouted, squirming in the Fire Fae’s grip. “I’ll show him unfit. And how dare you judge what you don’t know, asshole. You don’t know anything about me or Exos or what we had. You—”

“*Have*,” I corrected her, bored again. “Past tense implies something is irrevocably broken. Your bond is very much present.” I could feel it in the air swirling around her in a protective pattern.

Which was precisely why my brother had sent me here.

Ah, Exos, I thought, understanding dawning. My brother could have given me his last location but instead sent me to guard his mate. Fuck. She must be in danger if he used the final reserves of his energy to point to her.

“He’s alive?” Some of the fight had left her posture and tone.

“Clearly, you’re useless to me,” I surmised, irritated.

“She’s new to all of this,” Titus replied, his jaw clenched so tightly the words came out stilted. “Have some compassion.”

I laughed. “Is that what this coddling behavior is called? How quaint.”

Claire growled, the sound adorably erotic coming from her mouth. “You’re an asshole.”

“Fuck,” Titus breathed, looking heavenward. “Please, she doesn’t understand our—”

“Is she incapable of owning her own actions?” I wondered out loud. “Is that why you continue to speak and apologize on her behalf?”

Emerald fire glowed in the depths of Titus’s gaze. “She’s my mate.”

“That’s clear,” I replied flatly, the depth of their connection heavy in the air. “I asked why you continue to treat her as an insignificant fae who can’t speak for herself.”

“If Exos is alive, then where is he?” Claire cut in, her eyebrows arched in challenge. “I can’t feel him, even though you say I should be able to, so where is he?”

“That’s precisely why I’m here, little queen.” I cocked my head to the side. “And you’re the only one who can answer that question.”

“How?”

“By finding your spirit.” What the hell had my brother been teaching her all these weeks? How to fucking cry?

She held my gaze, the action unprecedented. “You can feel him.”

This was growing tiresome. “Have you not been listening to a word I’ve said?”

“I’ve heard every damn one,” she snapped, the tone one I wasn’t accustomed to hearing from a female. “I want you to tell me that you can feel him.”

“Of course I can. He’s my damn brother.” I took a step forward, ignoring the tensing Fire Fae at her side, and grabbed her chin. “And he’s your fucking mate. So honor him well, little queen, and *find him*.”

She shook off my hold with a glower. “You’re nothing like him.”

I snorted. “Three weeks ago, I would have disagreed wholeheartedly. But seeing how weak he’s allowed you to be has me wondering otherwise.”

“Get out of my room.” She pointed to the door. “Now.”

Titus appeared to be readying himself for a fight. It would be one he’d lose, but male fae were protective of their mates. Hence, my current location.

Fucking Exos.

“Get dressed and meet me in the living room. You have five minutes before I come back in here and carry you out—naked or not.” I allowed my eyes to roam over her once more, this time in a slow perusal that caused her

skin to flush in the wake of my gaze. “Well, at least you offer my brother something for his trouble.”

“Out!” she shouted, scrambling for the sheets.

I chuckled and left her growling obscenities behind me. Exos would be furious when he found out, but I didn’t care. All I wanted was his safe return, and someone needed to rouse the spoiled princess from her worthless emotions.

The three fae I’d stormed past in the living area all leapt up and knelt again, causing me to shake my head. “You’re supposed to be her guardians?” *Pathetic.*

“No, Sire,” the Air Fae replied, his lean, athletic form rising from the ground first. “Prince Exos requested I mentor her air abilities, but I haven’t agreed yet. Sol is one of my other mentees, and River is a friend of Titus’s.”

“And your name?” As he appeared to be the most important of the fae in this room, I wanted to know his identity. It would help me discern why Exos had entrusted him with Claire’s safety.

“Vox,” he replied.

Ah, yes. “You’re a royal descendant.” And one of the top students in his class. Exos had mentioned him briefly.

He grimaced. “I am, but I’ll never vie for the throne.”

“No, you won’t,” I agreed, sensing his power level. It was impressive, yes, but nowhere near that of the ruling king. “And you?” I glanced at the Earth Fae, whose presence rumbled the earth with slight vibrations. “You’ve not been assigned to Claire?”

“No,” he gritted out, not looking at me.

I nodded. “Well. It seems my brother was more concerned with bonding than establishing appropriate guardians.” My gaze fell to the Water Fae. “Your power is no match for Claire’s.”

He shook his floppy hair, his demeanor underlined in fear and frailty. “I’ve only helped temporarily; Exos has not assigned a water mentor to her yet.”

Because he was too busy getting his dick wet.

When I found my brother, I’d throttle him. This behavior wasn’t like him at all. Sure, he’d entertained females before—several, in fact. But not like this.

And to bond to one?

I sighed, irritated beyond measure. Perhaps fate had worked in our favor,

because the Halfling's life obviously required order.

As if hearing my thoughts, she appeared in the living area in a pair of jeans and a tank top, her close proximity to Titus telling. She trusted the Fire Fae more than anyone else in the room, which I expected considering their bond.

"All right, let's get a few things straight," I said, needing to seize control of this tenuous situation. "Vox? Your consideration is over. You're officially one of Claire's guardians and her air mentor."

The Air Fae bristled, clearly not used to taking orders, which confirmed my suspicions. "Surely there's another who could—"

"I sense your power, Vox," I said, cutting him off. "You're a suitable match and you will begin immediately. Starting by relocating to the Spirit Quad. Tonight."

"You can't just decide that for him," came a rumbling voice.

I turned all of my attention to the source of rebellion, finding an insolent Earth Fae staring me down. I hadn't received this much resistance since, well, since Exos turned down the crown. I'd slipped into my royal role after a volatile calamity hit our people and they needed a leader. I wasn't questioned—ever.

"And who are you to question my authority?" I snapped, storming up to him and letting my spirit energy roll over my skin. Thanks to my secondary affinity for water, a wave was exactly what it looked like, and I didn't pull back the cascade of power that washed over me. I didn't get angry often, but my brother was missing, unconscious, and our only hope of finding him before something worse happened rested in the incapable, beautiful hands of a Halfling who didn't have proper guidance. Or a suitable guard.

Brown eyes that swirled with the copper of the earth narrowed up at me, followed by a rumble of power that soothed my inner ire.

Well, hello there, traces of a third royal line.

Maybe my brother wasn't such a moron after all.

"Sol, *Your Highness*," he grated in reply.

My spirit energy probed him, causing him to flinch.

I immediately withdrew, sensing the damage in his spirit.

By the Elements...

This Earth Fae had been hurt by my kind, and badly, too. Raised scars tore across his core, a place only a fae of my skill could sense without being bonded.

How are you alive? I wondered, awed. These wounds came from the womb, meaning Sol had lived with this pain his entire life. Most fae would go mad from such an assault, yet he remained intact. Strong, even.

Yes, you'll do just fine.

But I couldn't establish my authority over him in the same manner as I had with Titus and Vox. No, commanding a fae like Sol would backfire in an instant.

I took a step back, giving him room and noting the cracks along the ground that had formed beneath our feet. Yes, this one was strong, and the way he'd stood up for Vox was a testimony to the fae's character.

"Sol," I repeated his name, making sure to slightly bow my head. Earth Fae reacted to subtle body language. I wasn't going to try to control him. Only a moron would try to squeeze blood from a stone. No, I had to nudge this fae in the direction I wanted him to go and allow his own momentum to do the rest. "Why are you being mentored by an Air Fae?"

"Because my control is absolute," Vox replied. His tone and posture indicated a hint of insolence, one I only allowed because I could. "If I'm going to be living here, then I still need to be able to maintain my duties to Sol."

I didn't have to ask what he meant by that. Clearly, the two fae had worked together for quite some time, and if Vox was the reason Sol had healed so spectacularly, then I would be a fool to separate them.

Turning to the Air Fae, I crossed my arms and arched a brow. "Does that mean you agree to become Claire's mentor and guardian?" I asked. He didn't have a choice, but I'd pretend for Sol's sake.

Vox stared at me for a long time before he answered. "If you agree to let Sol stay with me, then yes."

I almost smiled. *Excellent.*

"Very well," I said instead, acting as though it were a concession on my part. I wouldn't have to give the Earth Fae orders at all. He had enough power to keep Claire in check if her earth element got out of control. "Do you agree to help protect the Halfling?" I asked Sol, inserting a hint of boredom into my tone.

Sol mimicked my pose, his thick arms crossing over a broad chest. "I agree to protect Vox, who will be helping Claire."

"And protecting her," I added, glancing at the long-haired Air Fae. "She needs guardians."

Vox sighed. "She's safe on campus."

"Is she?" I countered. "Because Exos would probably state otherwise."

"Ignis and her friends tried to kill her," the Water Fae added quietly.

"They've been detained," Vox pointed out.

"Yet my brother has gone missing. How?" I gave the Air Fae my most condescending stare. "You and I both know the Academy isn't safe at all; it's just a guise of friendship crafted by Elana on her holy quest for peace." I looked at the Earth Fae. "Do you feel we're at peace, Sol?"

He scoffed at that. "Fuck no."

"I stand validated," I murmured, shifting my focus to the Water Fae. "You're dismissed. I'll handle her water training from here on out."

My secondary affinity for water wasn't unknown. My Spirit Fae mother had notoriously mated with a Spirit Royal and a Water Royal. I was the product of her mating with the latter, which gave me a uniquely powerful ability to manage two elements. If anyone could help train the little Halfling, it was me. And as I required her cooperation to find my brother, it seemed I had no choice.

Which left me with one final task for the evening. "While the rest of you prepare your new quarters, I will work with Claire. It seems she requires a lesson in the bonds and how to appropriately use them."

Cerulean fire licked through her irises. "I'll work with Titus, thanks."

I smiled. "Oh, no, little queen. You'll be working with me. Because unlike Titus, I won't go easy on you. Now follow me." I wrapped a rope of water around her waist and gave her a firm tug that elicited a squeal from her lips.

Titus took a step forward as if to catch her, but I cut him off with a glance. "You've done enough. It's my turn now, Powerless Champion. Be useful and help Sol and Vox find a room." The auburn-haired male knew better than to question my authority, even if the fiery energy rolling over his skin said he felt otherwise.

"It's fine," Claire said, her palm on his chest. "I've got this."

The queen coming to the aid of her knight.

Hmm.

Perhaps there's hope for you yet, little Claire, I thought, pleased. "Now." I gave her another tug for emphasis and grinned at her resulting growl. *Oh, yes, I'll make a worthy queen out of you if it's the last thing I do.*

Chapter 3

Claire



E xos, if you can hear me, I hope you'll forgive me because I'm about to murder your brother.

He didn't reply.

Because I couldn't feel him.

But this jackass in front of me seemed to think I could, so I stomped after him into the late-night hours outside while using a flame to incinerate his water into steam.

Cyrus eyed the power exchange with interest, his lips quirking at the side. "Impressive, little queen."

"My name is Claire," I told him flatly, hands on my hips.

"I'm aware," he replied, glancing up at the stars littering the sky. "I need you to close your eyes and focus on your bond with Titus. Tell me what he's doing."

"He's helping Vox and Sol find their room, as you commanded, *Your Highness*."

His mouth flattened into lines of disapproval. "I'm trying to help you, *Claire*. Shut your fucking eyes, search for Titus, and tell me exactly what he's doing."

Gah, I wanted to smack him again. Kick him. *Hurt* him. "You're such an asshole."

"And you're a weakling, but here we are. I need you to find my brother, and the sooner you do that, the sooner I'm gone. So shut your damn eyes and focus on Titus."

A scream built in my throat, one underlined in profanities and insults all designed for this *Royal Fae* jackass. I was *not* weak. *Fucking prick*. I

slammed my eyes closed and found Titus, his emotions a tangle of concern and annoyance. He wanted to peek out the windows to check on me but was instead helping Vox and Sol find a room near mine. A part of him was thankful that Exos had sent a cleaning crew through the dorm, readying several beds in preparation for others to move in.

He'd wanted to grow my mentorship team and find guards, something I knew, and Titus seemed to respect the decision.

"He's two doors away from my room, showing Vox the bathroom that connects to another room, which he's recommending for Sol." I opened my eyes. "And he's considering whether or not he needs to come out here and flame your ass."

Cyrus chuckled. "I wish he would. It's been a while since a worthy fae challenged me. I'm honestly bored."

Flames flickered over my fingers, the urge to send a fireball into his chest consuming. But a wave of his hand cooled my fiery energy, water perspiring over my skin in the shadow of his power. "Save your rebellion for someone in your league, little queen," he said, his gaze holding a touch of ice that sent a shiver down my spine.

While Exos's gaze resembled the darkest depths of the ocean, Cyrus's irises were coated in a glimmering silver blue that painted him in an almost otherworldly glow.

Gorgeous, my brain supplied. *But only on the outside.*

"I want you to repeat what you just did, but locate Exos," he said, tucking his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. "Tell me where he is."

"Did you mishear the part where I told you the connection is broken?" I asked, irritated beyond belief by this male's arrogance and lack of regard. Okay, yes, crying all evening had been a poor use of time, but I *felt* Exos's spirit disappear. It had destroyed me. What the fuck did he expect me to do? Run around looking for an enigma?

God, I hate this, I thought, suddenly exhausted. *Where are you, Exos?*

"Try" was all Cyrus said.

Try, I repeated sarcastically. *Yeah, fine. I'll try.*

I shut my eyes for show, then focused on the part of me tied to Titus. His warmth flowed back, caressing me with his energy and love and basking me in the familiarity of his fire. My lips almost curled, the relief he provided palpable.

But I needed to prod a little deeper, search for the distorted link that left

an anchor of pain in my heart.

Exos, I whispered, my relief dissipating into agony. The jagged edges of our connection cut deep, the pain spiking inside me and shredding my spirit into two halves.

Tears gathered in my eyes, threatening to fall as I tugged on the snapped tether binding our spirits. Only, the rope didn't slacken the way I expected it to, didn't reveal the frayed end I'd anticipated.

No, it held.

My lips curled down, confused.

What was it holding on to?

I followed the thin line with my mind, creeping across the dark chasm of my soul, to the obsidian that lay beyond, unmoving.

Unconscious, my mind supplied. *Exos is unconscious.*

What was it Cyrus had said? His brother was taking a nap?

Well, not exactly.

"It's like he's locked in a coma," I whispered. "Unmoving. Unthinking. Asleep, but not by choice." I poked a little harder, trying to nudge him to alertness, but his spirit remained curled into a ball, soundless and alone.

"Can you see anything around him?" Cyrus's deep voice penetrated my thoughts, an unwelcome twinge that caused me to grimace.

I really dislike your brother, I told *Exos*.

No reply.

Sighing, I glanced around the depths of our connection, searching for any kind of clue as to where he was resting. "It's too dark," I said, shaking my head. "Like he's underground."

"Good. Can you smell anything? Hear anything?" Cyrus had lowered his voice into a soothing tone, one he probably thought helped, but only served to irritate me more. Introducing my fist to his face would be a remarkable experience and far more fulfilling than the slap against his cheek.

Regardless, he was right.

Exos is alive.

And knowing that settled my soul.

I sighed, content with his known existence while also worried about where he might be.

Damp.

Dark.

Dungeon.

I shook my head, not recognizing anything from the sights to the smells to the sounds. “He’s definitely underground.” My nose twitched, the scent of moss and rust apparent. The murmur of machinery followed, some sort of constant crank, and the cackle of a male voice. I pressed deeper, trying to hear more, only to be shoved out by an unseen force so heavy it sent me to the ground in a whoosh.

Cyrus grabbed me, his hands foreign on my exposed shoulders, his words gibberish over the rising volcano inside me. *So hot. Too hot.* I gasped, energy swimming over my skin and clawing at my being. I couldn’t discern what was happening, the inferno overtaking me until a sudden wave took me deep under water.

Choking, I sputtered, coughing up a mouthful of the sea, Cyrus’s palm a steady beat against my back.

“*What the fuck?*” Titus demanded.

I couldn’t stop gagging, ice suffocating me from the inside out. If Cyrus answered, I couldn’t hear him, the sounds of the ocean thick in my ears. Everything swam before me—the moon, the stars, the buildings.

Exos’s spirit brushed mine, a brief hint of concern in that soft touch, only to disappear behind a wall of ivy I couldn’t penetrate.

Someone is trying to break our link, I realized, my eyes flying open. My mouth tried for words, but all that came out was more water.

Titus was shouting.

Cyrus was hitting my back.

Chaos, I thought deliriously, trying to regain control of myself and my surroundings.

Deep breath, someone said.

I listened.

Now exhale.

I did.

Cyrus appeared above me again, his irises glowing with power and determination. His spirit felt foreign, unwelcome, his charming face one I never wanted to see again.

He smiled as if hearing my thoughts, his thumb brushing over my cheek. Only then did I realize I was in his lap, cradled against him like a baby.

Ugh. Not where I wanted to be. At all. I tried to squirm, but his arms were too strong, his grasp harsh.

“You tried to burn me alive, little queen,” he murmured, amused.

What? I did no such thing.

“So you tried to drown her in response?” Titus demanded, sounding furious. “You almost killed her!”

“I merely reminded her of her place,” Cyrus replied, his eyes still on mine. “Or rather, I informed whoever attempted to control her that I won’t be going down so easily.” He searched my face, spirit swirling in the depths of his gaze. “Whoever has my brother is tied to spirit and is very powerful indeed.”

I blinked. Was that what I felt force me out of Exos’s mind? The person trying to distort our link?

Cyrus nodded. “Yes, someone tried to use your bond to get to me.” Had I spoken out loud? Or were the comments in my eyes? “Which explains why my brother tried to cut you off,” he continued. “That’s the pain you felt hours ago—Exos trying to close the link, to keep you safe.” He ran his fingers through my hair and sighed. “That’s going to make it more difficult to find him, but I understand his choice.”

“So a Spirit Fae has him,” Titus translated.

“It would appear so, yes. A powerful one.” Cyrus continued to pet me, confusing me greatly. Mostly because I *liked* it.

No. No way. I would *not* be attracted to this jackass.

First, he was Exos’s brother.

Second, he was a dick.

Third, I really needed him to stop looking at me as if he cared. As if I amused him in some way.

He chuckled. “I’m starting to see the appeal,” he murmured, that head of his tilting. “She’s much more pleasant when silent.”

Yeah, I hate him. I started to squirm again, but those arms of steel held me in place. “Let me go,” I managed, my voice a rasp I hardly recognized.

“No.” He glanced up at Titus. “There are very few Spirit Fae in existence who could subdue my brother and reach me through her bond.”

“Mortus,” Titus replied.

Cyrus nodded. “He is a potential candidate, yes, but he’s not strong enough on his own. Regardless, I suggest we keep an eye on him.”

“Or corner him and demand he tell us what he knows.”

“That would be the rookie approach, of course. But I play in the land of fae politics, Fire Fae. We need to go about our business as if everything is normal, continue training Claire, and prepare her for the battle to come. If we

accuse anyone too early, we risk Exos's life, and that's not a mistake I'm willing to make."

"How is tracking down Mortus and demanding Exos's location going to risk your brother's life?" Titus demanded, taking the words right out of my head. Well, sort of. I had a few additional curses and commands woven between my thoughts. Like, *Let me go, you asshole. I'll talk to Mortus myself and get Exos back.*

"Mortus is old and wise and won't break easily. By the time we learned anything from him, Exos could be dead. There's also the possibility he's innocent and knows nothing at all."

"Can't you just mind-fuck him like Elana did to the mean girls?" I asked, my voice slowly recovering from whatever the hell had happened.

"Mortus is too powerful. While I could break him eventually, it would take weeks, if not months, and a lot of energy." Cyrus shook his head. "Going about our business and putting him at ease is the smarter play, because ultimately, he'll lead us to Exos. Assuming he's the culprit, of course."

"I heard a man laughing," I whispered, recalling the cackle of sound.

"Another clue, but not enough for us to be certain. And as I said, he won't break. So even if I charge him with kidnapping my brother, we still risk not finding Exos in time."

Which meant fae could die. I'd never actually asked how that happened, too busy trying to learn all about this new world. "Is that why I could smell rust?" I wondered aloud, more to myself than to Titus and Cyrus. "Fae don't like iron, right?"

Silence met my query, followed by a soft voice saying, "It's a common myth on Earth."

River. He must have felt the use of water outside.

I finally looked around, noting the destruction Cyrus and I had caused. Singed ground, a new pond in a formerly dried-up crater, all the flowers destroyed, and the buildings charred.

Well, shit.

"Iron does not kill fae, little queen," Cyrus said, his voice oddly gentle. "A fae dies when the spirit dies, which will happen to Exos if he's left underground too long without a lifeline."

"How long?"

"A few months. For a fae as strong as Exos, maybe a year," he admitted

as he finally shifted me off his lap.

I scrambled backward to get away from him as fast as I could and didn't stop until my back met Titus's legs. Instant satisfaction rolled over me, the rightness of his touch causing my shoulders to slump.

"Well, I think that was enough for one night," Cyrus said, not looking at me. "You'll take her to classes tomorrow. Resume her schedule. In the meantime, I'll keep an eye on Mortus." His demeanor seemed to shift, as if I'd hurt his feelings with my stark rejection.

Impossible, obviously. Because the fae was a colossal jerk.

Titus bent down to help me stand, his arms circling my waist. "Are you okay?" he whispered, his lips at my ear.

"She's fine," Cyrus replied, some of his earlier distaste returning. "Stop coddling her, Fire Fae. She needs to learn how to fight, not cower." His cold gaze met mine. "You're powerful, Claire. Hiding from it only makes you weak, and weakness will get you killed. It's time to grow up and assert your place in our world. Otherwise, you'll die."

With that beautiful proclamation, he stalked off toward the Spirit Dorm.

"I really don't like him," I muttered when he was out of hearing range.

"Yeah, I take back every negative thing I ever said about Exos. He's definitely the more likable of the two." Titus brushed his lips against my temple. "Come on. Let's get you dried off."

The Earth Fae and Vox stood just inside the entrance, their expressions grim.

"Why don't you go grab some of your things," Titus suggested softly. "We can regroup after class tomorrow."

Vox nodded. "Is she going to Fire Quad?"

"Yes." Titus ran his fingers down my spine, causing me to shiver. "I'll be with her all day."

The Earth Fae snorted. "Good. That means we don't have to worry about her."

I frowned, unsure of how to take that. We hadn't even met yet. Not formally, anyway. "Sol, right?"

His brown eyes met mine, a hint of hesitation in his gaze. "Yes." No elaboration. No welcoming comment. Nothing to go on. Just a flat response accompanied by a grimace.

Great.

"I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances," I told him softly.

“Hopefully, I can improve your opinion of me later. You know, when I don’t resemble a drowned rat.” I pointed at my head for emphasis.

Vox’s lips twitched. “It’s not your best look.”

“Thanks,” I replied, returning his grin. “But I like leaving lasting impressions. Obviously. I mean, I created that disaster of a vortex when we met the other day. Tonight, I met Sol after surviving what felt like a tidal wave. So tomorrow, maybe I’ll just go up in flames during class and burn off all my clothes. Should be fun, right?”

“Your uniform for Fire Quad is fireproof,” Titus reminded me, smiling. “But I would enjoy that show.”

Sol didn’t seem nearly as amused.

But at least Vox chuckled. “Never a dull moment with you, Claire,” he said softly.

I nodded. “Well, thank you both for, I guess, moving in.”

“Not by choice,” Sol pointed out, his arms folding across his thick chest. The fae was built like a linebacker, his well-over-six-foot height dwarfing mine.

I swallowed thickly, glancing up to meet his gaze again. “I... I can talk to Cyrus and excuse you from the guard, if tha—”

“That’s not going to happen,” Cyrus said, walking in with just a towel wrapped around his hips.

Yeah, he and Exos were definitely brothers.

Chiseled.

Perfection.

With a dusting of hair that led—

“My brother may have allowed you to make the rules before, but I can assure you, I am not Exos.” His icy gaze captured and held mine, a warning radiating from his pupils. Leaving me speechless, he shifted his focus to the others. “Sol and Vox, go grab your shit. I expect you back in an hour. We’ll go over some things for tomorrow. Titus, give Claire a bath, fuck her, do whatever it is you need to do to feel content with your mate. I don’t want to see her again until after her classes.” He gave a wave as if he expected us all to follow his orders.

And shockingly, the fae did.

Sol muttered under his breath, yanking Vox out the door without saying goodbye, and River trailed along with them.

Titus gave me a calculated look, his vexation stirring embers between us.

“The sooner we find Exos, the sooner that jackass leaves.”

“It’s like you read my mind,” I replied.

“I did,” he admitted. “Now, how do you feel about starting a fire in the bedroom? One that might spread a few doors down?”

My lips curled. “Seriously, it’s like you’re in my head, Titus.” Because that sounded like a fantastic idea.

“Glad we’re on the same page, sweetheart.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s give him a shower. One littered in ash.”

“I love you, Titus.”

“I love you, too, Claire.”

Chapter 4

Sol



“I told you that you should have stayed away from the Halfling,” I muttered as I ripped clothes out of his dresser and tossed them onto the bed. “Now we’re stuck in the thick of it. She’s a loose cannon, and the Spirit Fae she attracts are no better.”

Vox sighed and cast a breeze over his tousled things, brushing away loose stones I’d managed to conjure. I tried not to irritate him with debris everywhere, but my power and I never got along very well. It was part of an illness I’d been born with.

An illness caused by the Spirit Fae.

And by the Halfling’s mother.

Vox’s black eyes glimmered with a ring of silver that made him stand out from other Air Fae. “You’re just being possessive. Now I have another student, but you want me all to yourself.”

I frowned because that was partially true. I didn’t like the idea of sharing Vox. He’d helped me come so far, and more than that, I was on a mission to help him as well. “If you graduate with honors, you’ll be able to clear your family name.”

Vox flinched. He did not like to talk about his royal ties—much less how an entire side of his family had been shunned and denied their heritage. He insisted that he wanted nothing to do with the royals, didn’t care about his heritage or fortune. All he wanted was to prove his place in society and become a professor at the Academy someday. It was a lofty goal, but it would take more than graduating with honors for that to happen. It was a miracle he’d been accepted into the Academy at all.

It was why he’d been stuck with me in the first place. What better way to

sabotage a disgraced fae from graduating with honors and making his dreams come true than by pairing him up with an impossible case?

Except, Vox actually helped me and we made a good team.

Vox ignored me while he carefully folded each shirt before placing them into a neat suitcase. It drove me mad how meticulous he was with everything. We shouldn't even be packing. We should be telling the king to go shove his orders up his ass.

But he hadn't ordered me.

No, he'd ordered Vox, making this the Air Fae's decision.

Of course, that didn't mean I had to be quiet about my disapproval. "You know that no good can come of this."

Vox shrugged. "Maybe you're wrong. Claire isn't so bad."

I rolled my eyes. "You're attracted to her. I get it, but I'm not talking about Claire. I'm talking about the king."

"I'm not attracted to her, even if my magic thinks I am," Vox mumbled, plucking another stone that had somehow made its way into the suitcase. Perfection ruined, he took out one of the shirts he'd already folded and started over, making a low scream build in the back of my throat. "She's just vulnerable, Sol. If she uses earth power around you and you're forced to step in, then you'll see what I'm talking about." A wry grin took over his face. "I'll bet you an entire month of credits that when that happens, you'll fall for her—hard. You know what they say." He winked. "The bigger the Earth Fae, the harder they fall."

I snorted. "That's an easy bet. My magic isn't a wimp for a pretty face like yours is. You're on." I thrust out my hand.

Vox took it and we shook on it, my crushing grip encasing his lithe fingers. The Academy gave out credits once a day for standard purchases—namely, meals, amenities, and frivolous purchases I never bothered to save up for. I preferred to spend my credits on food and more food. Credits could also be earned through high scores in classes and winning intramural games between fae, although I never wasted my time on either of those. I had plenty of food to keep me happy.

Speaking of, I was starving. "Are you done packing yet? We can hit the cafeteria for a snack on our way back." It was open twenty-four hours a day and would be pretty much vacant right now. Especially on a school night.

Vox groaned. "Really, man, the cafeteria is for those who can't afford their own ingredients or kitchen supplies. I have more than enough credits to

feed both of us.”

I eyed the damage I was already causing to the bedroom floor. “Maybe we should eat at the cafeteria today, since I owe you for property damage again.”

Vox glowered at me. “What’s the point of making a bet with you if I have to spend all of my credits on you anyway? Let’s get out of here so that the tab is on the Spirit King’s bill and not mine.”

Finally, he was talking sense.

My earth magic was raging inside of me, dying to get out. Doing some damage that the king would have to pay for sounded like fun to me.

After a snack, of course.

Chapter 5

Exos



Fuck. My head ached, the world spinning behind my closed eyes.
I sensed *him* lurking in the darkness, waiting for me to wake.
No, that wasn't right.

Not *him*. Except, yes, it was a male, but something wasn't—
“He's stirring,” a voice said.

I know that voice.

Why do I know that voice?

Fuck, I was dizzy. *What have they done to me?*

They, yes. Focus on the they.

Where's Claire?

I tried to reach her and frowned. She was far away, her soul cut off from mine. *Why? Oh, because I built a wall. Why did I do that?*

My mind spun, searching for a reason, the voices growing outside my cell.

Dungeon.

I'm underground.

Why?

Because someone had knocked me out.

My eyes fluttered, my brain working, memories surfacing.

Oh, fuck...

I shot upright, needing to warn her, to tell her what I'd learned. “Claire!”

A blast of spirit energy hit me square in the chest, knocking me backward into the stone, my head landing harshly against the rock.

Claire, it's not who we thought. It's—

Chapter 6

Claire



E *xos!*

I flew upward, hand to my racing heart.

Titus stirred beside me, his abdomen rippling as he stretched in his sleep. He murmured my name and sighed, his lips curling.

God, he was beautiful.

For a few blissful hours, he'd helped me forget, provided me with a pleasure that still hummed through my being.

Until Exos called to me.

I rubbed my chest, tentatively plucking at the wounded bond and wondering what he'd been trying to tell me. It sounded like a warning, a sharp plea for me to listen, only to be silenced by something harsh.

The connection between us thrived, more alive than before but still tainted by a dark, disturbing presence. *Who are you?* I wondered, careful not to provoke the essence. It weighed over our bond like a thick cloud, menacing and cruel and filled with malicious intent.

Something about it seemed familiar, reminding me of the out-of-control vortex from Air Quad earlier this week. But that was impossible. Aerie had cast that havoc, laying the blame falsely at my feet.

So how do I know you? I slid from the covers, my skin tender from Titus's affection. A glance at the clock had me swallowing a groan. I'd slept for maybe two hours. It would have to be good enough because I was wide awake now.

But Titus could sleep another ninety minutes or so before he had to wake for class.

Maybe I'd have breakfast ready for him.

I smiled at the thought of something *normal* to do. Then remembered there was nothing *normal* about fae food. Frowning, I put on a pair of silky shorts and a camisole top, then wandered into the shared kitchen of the dorm to see what I could find.

No eggs.

No bacon.

Not even potatoes.

“What the fuck am I going to make without the staples?” I grumbled, unfamiliar with pretty much every item in the fridge. *What I wouldn't give for some cheese and peppers to put in an omelet.* Ugh, my stomach rumbled in agreement at the thought.

“Uh, want some help?” a soft voice asked from behind me.

I whirled around to see Vox standing in the doorway in a pair of pajama pants, his long hair mussed and hanging around his bare shoulders. I blinked twice, stunned by the sight of his surprisingly ripped torso. His slender appearance had placed my expectations on the scrawny side, but Vox possessed the body of a runner—lean and athletic, without an ounce of fat on him.

He raised a dark brow. “Claire?”

I shook my head, clearing it. “Sorry, you startled me.” *Understatement. More like he shocked the hell out of me.* I coughed to unblock my suddenly thickened throat. “I, uh, wanted to make an omelet. But there aren't any eggs.”

“Eggs?” he repeated, his brow furrowing. “In the morning?”

“When else would you eat them?” I wondered aloud.

He stared at me for a long moment and shrugged. “Not in the morning, but all right.” He started shuffling through cabinets until he found two cartons and set them on the counter. He inspected the inside and smiled. “These'll do. They're fresh, too.”

“Why aren't they in the fridge?”

“Why would you put eggs in a fridge?” he countered.

I considered and finally sighed. “I've heard it's not common in Europe. I guess it's like that.” Whatever. I wanted eggs and he provided them. “What about cheese?”

“Why would you pair eggs and cheese?”

“Because it's delicious?” I suggested.

With a dubious expression on his face, he opened the freezer and found a

bright orange brick. “Here.”

Gross. “That’s not cheese.”

He glanced at it. “Uh, yeah, it is.” He set it on the counter. “Anything else?”

“Mushrooms, onion, and bacon.”

“That’s disgusting,” he accused, looking appalled. “Not that I know what bacon is, but why the hell would you defile a mushroom with cheese and eggs?”

“Have you tried it?” I asked.

“Of course not. It sounds awful.”

A laugh bubbled past my lips, causing my shoulders to shake. And then I erupted in a fit of giggles I couldn’t seem to stop.

He thought an omelet sounded awful. This fae. One who probably ate that hideous-looking green mush that Exos favored. I couldn’t stop laughing, the humor of it all bursting inside me in a wave of much-needed release.

This entire world, all these men, were completely unfathomable, yet real. And they didn’t want to eat an omelet.

“What the hell did you do to her?” a gruff voice demanded, causing the cabinets to shake around us. “Did you break her?”

“She wants to make some sort of atrocity with eggs and cheese,” Vox explained, shuddering.

I laughed harder in response.

“Why the fuck would you put eggs and cheese together?” Sol demanded, sounding affronted by the very idea.

“Oh, and she wants to add mushrooms and onion, and something called bacon.” Vox gagged at the notion and Sol joined him.

I swiped the tears away from my eyes, thoroughly amused. “Get me some mushrooms and onions, then park your asses there.” I pointed to the stools by the bar. “I’m going to blow your mind.”

“Park my ass?” Sol repeated, glancing at Vox. “Can you believe this chick?”

The Air Fae’s lips twitched. “I gotta admit, I’m officially curious.” He started rooting through the kitchen and handed me a single mushroom that was the size of a head of lettuce. “Onion, onion, onion,” he repeated, searching the freezer. “Nope. No onion. But I can add it to my grocery list for later today.”

“Maybe check the pantry?” Wasn’t that where onions went?

Both men looked at each other, then at me. “What?” they said in unison.

“Never mind,” I sighed. “What about pepper? Like, the vegetable, not the spice.”

“Why would pepper be a spice?” Vox asked, already looking.

He handed me two orange bell peppers a moment later, causing me to smile. “Finally, something normal.” It wasn’t cold, but it smelled right. “And pepper can be a spice on Earth.”

“Humans are weird,” Sol muttered, taking his seat at the counter. “Pretty, but weird.”

My lips quirked. “You think humans are pretty?” I found a knife and started chopping the pepper, much to the horror of Vox observing.

“Well, you’re the only one I know,” Sol said, lifting one broad shoulder in a shrug. Unlike his counterpart, he wore a shirt, but something told me he’d be a solid brick of muscle under those clothes.

Not that I wanted to think about it.

Or about Vox.

I had a beautifully sculpted Titus waiting for me in the other room. Hopefully, he didn’t mind my making breakfast for them all.

“How do I melt this cheese?” I asked, looking at Vox.

He visibly gagged again. “In a pan?” He grabbed a skillet from under the stove. The presence of familiar items lightened something inside of me, as did the familiarity of being in a kitchen surrounded by foods I mostly recognized.

Well, except the eggs had a strange purple consistency to them as I cracked them open.

And the cheese was very much not cheddar.

Sol and Vox both watched in obvious disgust as I mixed all the items together in the skillet, neither of them saying a word.

Right, so it didn’t look like an omelet at all when I finished. More of a purple hash with the strong aroma of vegetables. But the gooey cheese made me smile.

“Do you have any tomatoes?” I asked.

Both men looked ready to vomit.

“Never mind,” I said slowly, twisting my lips to the side. “Humans would call this—”

“What the hell is that smell?” an aristocratic voice demanded as Cyrus came into view wearing a suit from Exos’s wardrobe. Of course they wore

the same size.

“Claire made breakfast,” Vox whispered, his nose scrunched up in clear disgust.

Cyrus came around the counter to study the pan. “That’s repulsive, Claire.”

“Then it’s a good thing I didn’t make it for you,” I snapped, my amusement melting into immediate annoyance. “Actually, if none—”

Sol tapped the bar, cracking the solid granite. “I want to try it.”

Vox swung around on his stool and gaped at his best friend.

“What?” the Earth Fae said, looking a smidge chagrined. “It’s food. I like food.”

Cyrus snorted. “Such a simple-minded creature. I’ll pass.”

“Considering I didn’t make you any, that’s perfectly fine.” I grabbed a plate and cut a piece of the omelet off for Sol, then slid it across the counter to where he waited with a napkin.

He stared at it and shrugged. “Cool.” Then picked it up with his hands to take a bite.

“Uh, you’re supposed to use a fork...” I pinched my lips to the side, unsure of where they were located, but Sol seemed to be doing fine without a utensil.

In a blink, half the portion was gone. “It’s fucked up, but oddly good.” He held it out for Vox to take a bite.

And much to my surprise, he did, his wariness disappearing into one of wonder. “Huh. I never would have put those ingredients together.” He glanced at me. “Okay, Claire. I’ll have a plate.”

Pride prickled my chest as I cut him a slice and handed it to him—with a fork.

Except, like Sol, he ignored it.

The last two pieces were for me and Titus, leaving Cyrus alone. Where the jackass belonged. Not that he seemed to care as he prepared himself some sort of green, leafy shake. “Now that is *repulsive*,” I muttered, watching him feed a variety of plants into the blender.

“Then it’s a good thing I didn’t make it for you,” he parroted, narrowing his eyes.

I snorted, picking up the two plates I’d just prepared for myself and Titus. “Charming, as always.”

“Oh, you’ve hardly gotten to know my charm yet, little queen.” His gaze

dipped to my cleavage and lower. “I suggest you wear something more appropriate for class.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I replied in a sugary tone.

Vox and Sol observed the exchange, their expressions ones of dread and shock. I smiled at them, noting their clean plates. “See? Eggs and cheese can be good, right?”

“Not my first choice,” Vox admitted softly. “But not nearly as horrible as I anticipated.”

Sol lifted one of those big shoulders. “I don’t know. I liked it. Better than cafeteria food.”

Cyrus snorted. “Not a resounding compliment, in my opinion.” He backed me into the counter behind me, then reached around for a straw, his gaze holding mine the entire time. “If domestication is your preference, I’ll have some of my mother’s recipes sent over so you can do your job properly.”

If my hands weren’t full of food, I might have slapped him again. “Move,” I demanded.

He cocked his head to the side. “Say ‘please,’ little queen.”

I smiled, another idea coming to mind as I sent a blast of energy into his chest, knocking him into the counter where Vox and Sol sat with open mouths. “*Please*,” I said, my voice sickly sweet.

Cyrus didn’t appear annoyed or angry, just amused. “Careful, Claire, or I’ll have to tell Exos you were flirting with me.”

I scoffed at that. “Assuming you’re alive when we find him.”

Vox gasped, while Sol chuckled.

“Yeah, okay. I like her,” the big guy murmured. “This’ll do.” He pushed away from the counter. “Don’t forget onions for tomorrow, Vox. I want to try the human’s version of an egg pie again, but to her requirements. So find that con stuff, or whatever you called it.”

“Bacon,” I supplied.

He snapped his fingers, causing the entire building to shake around us. “That, yes. Whatever bacon is.” He clapped Vox on the back. “I’m going to get ready for class.” He disappeared down the hall, whistling as he walked.

His size had intimidated me at first, but now I kind of liked the giant. I stared after him fondly until Cyrus stepped into my view. “Go feed your mate, little queen.”

“Claire,” I corrected him, angry all over again. *I’m not fucking little.*

“Sure,” he replied, sipping his green slush. “Have a good day, *Claire*.”

“Eat shit, Cyrus,” I returned with a smile and rotated on my heel.

Rather than rise to the bait, he chuckled, the sound following me all the way to my room. I hated how it warmed my skin and caused my belly to tighten. The asshole could at least have the common decency to be ugly. But no, he had to go around looking like Exos in his three-piece suit and ooze sex appeal.

Bastard.

“Enjoy class,” Vox murmured as he passed me, his control of air seeming to send the words to my ears alone. “And nice gust in the kitchen back there,” he added, his dimples flashing. “I couldn’t have done it any better myself.”

My cheeks heated at the compliment. I’d sent that wave of energy out of me without thinking, wanting the jackass royal to move. But it was nice to know I’d done it correctly. “Thanks,” I said softly.

He reached around me to open the door, something I hadn’t tried to do yet, thanks to the plates in my hands. “Don’t tell Titus what’s in that if you want him to eat it,” Vox advised. “Tell him afterward.”

“Will do,” I replied. “See you later today.”

“Yep.” He gave me a nod and a wink, leaving me to my plans for breakfast in bed.

Titus sat waiting for me, his back against the headboard, his auburn hair mussed with sleep. I’d wanted to give him more time to rest, but in reality, cooking had gone by faster than I realized. Still, he didn’t appear all that fazed, his green gaze tracking me across the room as I approached. “I don’t like waking without you in my arms,” he said, his voice deep and sexy.

I set the plates on the nightstand and crawled into the bed, straddling his strong hips. “I wanted to cook for you.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s an activity I used to enjoy doing and I needed a distraction.”

Some of his seductive energy slithered away. “Exos?”

I nodded. “He reached out to me, but before I could reply, he was gone.”

Titus reached up to cup my cheek, his thumb tracing the hollows beneath my eyes. “We’ll find him,” he vowed. “But Cyrus is right about keeping up appearances. We need to go about our business as usual and lull Mortus, or whoever has done this, into a false state of comfort.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” I asked, biting my lip.

“You’ll continue to search for him through the bond, but more carefully

than last night.” He pulled me closer, his lips brushing mine. “Next time, I’ll help instead of that royal prick.”

I smiled. “I would like that much more, yes.” I kissed him again. “Mmm, there are a great many things I would like, actually.”

“Yeah?” he asked, his tongue sliding into my mouth for a taste. “Like what, Claire? What would you enjoy right now?”

“Mmm.” I sucked his bottom lip between my teeth and released it with a pop. “I made you breakfast.”

His brow furrowed. “I know.”

“I want you to eat it,” I whispered, kissing along his jaw to his neck. “Please.” I licked the column of his throat, creating a wet path that led to the strong planes of his chest. “You eat while I indulge myself in an appetizer.” I gazed up at him as I continued my trail, kissing and nipping and memorizing the ripples of his abdomen on my way down to the prize below.

“Claire,” he whispered, embers flickering in his pupils. His thick arousal sat heavy between his legs, the crown beading with liquid welcome.

“Eat your breakfast, Titus,” I said, my lips hovering above his cock. “And I’ll enjoy mine.”

I sampled his excitement, moaning at the salty taste of him, and took him deep into my mouth. He cursed, his fingers threading through my hair as he encouraged me to continue. Titus and Exos had tasted me so many times, but I’d never returned the favor. And this morning seemed like a perfect opportunity to do so.

“*Fuck,*” he breathed, his grip tightening as I swallowed more of him. He was too big for me to take completely, so I wrapped my hand around the base and squeezed. Rather than eat his breakfast, he stared at me with admiration and desire, his stark need soaking me between my thighs.

This was supposed to be about him, but my body reacted accordingly, stirring a moan deep in my throat that vibrated his shaft.

Titus growled, thrusting upward and forcing me to take more of him. He cursed, his lack of control evident in the way he tried to pull away, but I refused to allow it, needing to feel the empowering motions of his hips. I raked my nails across his thigh, my opposite hand still wrapped around the base, and groaned as he shot upward again.

“Your mouth is fucking divine, Claire.” The harsh texture of his voice stirred a sensation in my lower stomach that only he could satisfy, but I ignored it in favor of providing him pleasure, my thighs squeezing together to

keep my own needs in check.

Fire slowly trickled from his being to mine, the flames heating my skin and taunting my own to come out and play.

Passion smoldered between us, an inferno rising as it always did when Titus touched me. My pajamas disintegrated while the sheets remained, a show of fiery control from my mate, one that turned me on even more.

He tugged on my hair, pulling his hardness away from my mouth and yanking me upward to meet his kiss. My back met the mattress, Titus's hips settling between my thighs, and in one thrust, he filled me to completion. I groaned, my nails digging into his shoulders to hold him to me as more flames painted the air.

He set the pace—a bruising, hard, punishing one that had my back bowing upward to meet him in our frenzy to fuck.

Blissful escape.

Ecstasy.

Hot.

Fuck, he mastered me as easily as his flames, his body knowing mine in a way no one else could. He used our shared element to intensify the sensations, covering my skin in a blanket of heat that left me screaming beneath him in the best way.

Harder.

Faster.

More.

My chants were a litany he returned in kind, giving me what I wanted until an explosion erupted between us and caused white lights to dance behind my eyes. His name was a curse and a blessing, his presence mine to adore, and our mating bond rejoiced between us.

“My Claire,” he whispered, his lips soft against mine, his tongue an addiction inside my mouth that I would never get enough of. He kissed me tenderly, adoringly, lovingly. His palms stroked up and down my sides, his cock an inferno inside me, and so damn hard despite our shared orgasm.

“I’ll never get enough of this,” I said, drawing my nails down his back and scoring his skin with fire, claiming him as mine.

He chuckled, his mouth falling to my ear. “Claiming me, Claire?”

“Yes,” I hissed, arching into him once more. “You’re mine.”

“And you’re mine,” he murmured, nibbling my pulse. “We have time for another round before class. Unless you still want me to eat?”

“You can eat on the way to class,” I decided, no longer caring about my omelet. I’d make him another tomorrow. “Fuck me again, Titus.”

“As you wish, my Claire.”

Chapter 7

Titus



I ran my fingers through my hair, a strange sensation churning my gut. If I didn't know better, I'd call myself nervous. But I was never nervous. Not even for my Powerless Champion matches.

Yet sitting here, beside Claire, and knowing I was the only guardian in her presence for class, did something to me. It put me on high alert, inspecting everyone in the room with a regard I never considered before.

I almost missed Exos and his constant vigilance.

Not that I would ever admit it.

I needed a distraction, and the lecture at the front of the room was not cutting it. Although, Claire seemed to be enjoying it. She sat on her little stone pedestal in the middle of the cement yard, her fingers clasped over the desk before us.

An angel dressed in a sinfully perfect uniform. I'd never noticed it before, having not cared that everyone wore the same outfit. But Claire, mmm, her legs looked amazing in that skirt.

Providing me with the perfect idea for a distraction.

I sent a heat wave to the beautiful apex between her thighs—a part of her I was never going to grow tired of, even if I did fuck her twice this morning.

Her eyes widened, as she clenched her legs together and shot me a glare. I grinned and pointed at Professor Vulcan, who was droning on about how to use fire in controlled bursts.

Pay attention, I mouthed.

She thrust her middle finger up at me in response. I frowned, unsure of what that meant. I would have to ask River about human gestures.

The class itself was mind-numbingly boring, at least to me. Neat piles of

straw dotted the outdoor arena with a marker for difficulty. I could set them all ablaze in two seconds flat, but the goal of the exercise was to burn a particular target without igniting the surrounding ones.

Control Concentration was my least favorite course.

Hmm, but how would Claire perform with the task? Would she be able to do it while distracted?

I smiled, intrigued by my own wickedness.

Normally, this would be a good exercise for her—without the distraction. But if she really needed to conjure a controlled flame, it wouldn't be in an environment of complete silence where she could focus. Someone had taken Exos and was powerful enough to keep him sedated, and if they came after her, she would need to be ready for them.

I'd been training with Claire for weeks. Power came easily to her, but control? Not so much. And while I loved to make her lose control, it was time she learned how to master her powers.

"Claire," Professor Vulcan said, making her flinch. "Why don't you and your guardian take point and make the first attempt."

Claire's face paled as she glanced at me. I knew that look. She definitely didn't want to be in the spotlight, much less go first in an exercise she'd never done before.

The rest of the class had been curiously watching us the entire time, a sea of Fire Fae who were edges and hardness against Claire's delicate form. She surveyed the group, most of them with tattoos or spiked hair that might come off as intimidating to a human. I liked my people; they were blunt, real, and passionate. Claire would learn more about them, and they'd get to know her and love her like I did. All she needed to do was be her beautiful self.

I took her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll show you the exercise. It'll be fun."

Professor Vulcan glowered at us. He resembled a flame himself, his hair standing straight up with a red streak down the middle. He stepped aside and crossed his muscular arms. "Only one demonstration, Titus. I need to assess the Halfling's control before I place her in more classes."

Claire swallowed hard. "So, this is a test?"

I sent a trickle of flame behind her ear, and she swatted at it.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You can't fail a test here. This is about embracing your fire." I kissed her on the cheek and she stiffened, her eyes darting to our audience.

Everyone was staring.

Most of the students had done this exercise before, but they wanted to see what Claire could do. She suffered from a bad reputation born of her mother's doing and was then framed for stirring elemental chaos on campus. But she was innocent, proved to be a victim herself, and she'd survived. What she didn't realize was the respect that came with her survival. I saw it in the eyes of our fellow fae. They wanted to admire her for coming through the firestorm alive.

I needed to give Claire all the courage to feel accepted here. All she had to do was believe in herself.

I pointed at a distant patch of straw with a red flag poking out the center of it. "See that middle marker? I'm going to ignite it without touching any of the other piles nearby. The goal here is control, Claire." I teased her skin with a caress of heat, causing her to arch an eyebrow at me.

"You? Control?" She glanced pointedly at the goose bumps creeping across her arm. "Uh-huh."

I responded with another brush of warmth, stirring a shiver from her. "Doubting my ability already, sweetheart?"

Her eyes narrowed, her focus falling to me instead of our audience. "Show me what you can do."

"We both know what I can do," I said, flexing my mental muscles and locating the marked pile. "Ready?"

"Stop teasing and do it," she said, her feistiness coming through.

I wagged my brows and ignited the straw with barely a thought.

She eyed the field and nodded. "Not bad. So I'm supposed to light another on fire?"

"Yep," I said, withdrawing my flames. "Any pile you want, just make sure it's one of the marked ones and nothing else."

She sucked her lip between her teeth, her gaze wandering the field and the various targets.

I wondered which one she would pick. She should be conservative and choose the closest marker for her first try, but of course, that wasn't my Claire.

She extended her hands, and flames licked at her fingertips. Stripes of blue wound through her fire like an elemental rope, sizzling with barely contained power.

That's new, I thought.

The other fae murmured in reaction to the display. I leaned in closer to Claire and pressed my lips to her ear. “Is that water?”

She glanced at the flicker and frowned. “Yeah.”

“Can you rein it in and use just your fire?”

Her lips twisted to the side. “I don’t know.”

That was the problem—Claire’s powers controlled her, not the other way around. Which created an issue when she engaged non-fiery elements while surrounded by Fire Fae. If her water magic grew out of hand, I couldn’t help. And it would likely take the entire class to restrain her if she unleashed whatever was dwelling inside.

Which meant I’d have to speak to Cyrus about it since the element taking control of her now appeared to be water.

Great.

If only he hadn’t dismissed River...

Except we all knew that was the right move. Cyrus’s renowned familial ties to the Water Fae King made him exceptionally powerful and proficient in the element. Even if it wasn’t the side of his nature he chose to acknowledge most. He was too busy serving as the Spirit King.

Alas, he’d volunteered to take on her water mentorship, and given the strengthening blue swirl around her fire, he’d better get started sooner rather than later.

“It’s all right,” Claire murmured, her voice low and taut with renewed concentration. The winding strands of water extended over her flame, making a sort of tunnel for her to aim with.

Is that supposed to be an elemental gun?

Well, shit.

She pointed to the final marker in the distance, one even I would have had trouble hitting, much less without burning anything around it.

“That one,” she said, marking her target, and then heat emanated from her in a building storm that made my eyes widen and very inappropriate sensations run straight down to my groin. Damn, she was hot. *Literally.*

The inferno built until she was satisfied with her aim, and an explosion rocked the ground, sending a ball of fire directly at her target. It streaked across the arena, bypassing all of the other piles of straw without harming them. The tight collection of flames hit the final target, making the straws explode in a vertical strike that lit up the sky.

A hush fell over the Fire Fae students.

Then they roared their approval, making my chest swell with pride.

“Holy shit!”

“Did you see that?”

“She’s fucking amazing!”

Claire beamed and lowered her hands, her powers retreating inside of her with a measure of control I hadn’t expected. “I did it,” she breathed with relief as if she hadn’t anticipated a positive outcome. She shook her head as a low chuckle escaped her. “Every time I used my powers in public before, it felt like they always swept out of my control, but that wasn’t really my fault, was it? It was Ignis and the other girls messing with me.” Her blue eyes glimmered with a hope I hadn’t seen in her before. “Maybe I *can* do this.”

I gripped both sides of her face and pulled her in for a kiss. Hovering my mouth over hers, I tasted her embers and licked my lips in anticipation. “You can do anything, Claire. Anything you want, and I’ll be right by your side admiring every inch of you.”

I no longer cared who was watching. I crushed my mouth to hers, and she parted for me, allowing my tongue to slide inside and taste the lingering effects of her power and her elation.

When I released her, the Fire Fae had gotten even more out of control. They loved passion and clapped their hands, cheering us on for more.

“All right, that’s enough,” Professor Vulcan griped, even though I could see a gleam of approval in his eyes. “Claire, I’ll discuss a schedule with Elana in the morning. You need advanced training, not intermediate. Well done.”

Chapter 8

Vox



Bacon came from pigs.
Pigs.
Fuck. That.

Why would anyone want to eat a pig?

River had assured me it was a delicacy in the Human Realm after I asked him about it, but I would not be entertaining that in our shared kitchen, no matter how adorable Claire may have looked earlier in those little shorts and tiny tank top.

Or the way I'd felt after she used magic on Cyrus.

The feeling of her element brushing against mine had stuck with me all day. Not only did we share magic, but she seemed to like cooking, too. I had to admit sharing a joy of cooking—even if her tastes were questionable—made me want to like her.

But yeah, nope, not going there.

I only went to River to ask about bacon because Sol wanted to try a proper egg pie in the morning. Not because I wanted to please Claire. And fortunately, we didn't have *pigs*. But we did have fatty meat from the hide of a troll, something River assured me would be similar. Although, he also suggested I not tell Claire what it was and just call it bacon.

It's an innocent lie, he'd promised.

Well, we'd see tomorrow morning when she cooked another monstrosity for breakfast.

Sol's eyes lit up when I stumbled into the Spirit Dorm. "You brought food!" he cheered, sending the floor cracking as he stormed over to me and snatched up the weight as effortlessly as if I'd been carrying feathers.

“Careful with that,” I grumbled as he threatened to rip the bags and send the ingredients scattering.

Sol whistled as I sent a wave of magic to brush the pebbles of the broken floor he’d left behind over the threshold. I was used to cleaning up after the Earth Fae, and I knew how to keep him happy.

There were five mouths to feed now, and no one else seemed to know how to cook. Except maybe Claire. But all I’d seen in the kitchen were ingredients for quick meals like shakes and finger patties. Sol would become intolerable without a real meal, and I needed him to cooperate when it was time to teach Claire some earth magic.

Proving my decision to buy some real food a good one, Sol began plucking out the ingredients, stopping when he saw the troll fat. He gave me a raised brow.

I put it in the icebox. “It’s for the Halfling’s experiment tomorrow,” I offered with a shrug. “River said it was like bacon.” I pointed at him. “But don’t tell her what it is.”

Sol hummed and went back to rummaging through the groceries. “More egg pie sounds good to me.” He held up a salted red weed most fae hated. “Oh, good, you bought some scurbuttle snacks!”

“Do I want to know what that is?” Claire asked, sweeping into the kitchen with a smile on her face. Titus trailed in after her, both of them looking pleased.

Seeing their shared glance of satisfaction reminded me of my interaction with Claire this morning, how we’d shared a moment of air magic, whispers, and then...

Then I’d heard the way Titus had made her scream.

“You definitely don’t want to know what that is,” Titus informed her, slipping his arm around her waist.

She leaned into him just enough that her body formed to his. I wondered if she was aware of how sensual she was in the subtle movement.

Claire’s bright gaze found mine, and then her smile dimmed. “Everything okay, Vox?”

Shit, I sucked at hiding my emotions. I cast my gaze down and continued to unpack the groceries as I tried to think of a response. Every time she opened her mouth, all I could hear were those delicious sounds she’d sent filtering through the air currents just for me. I knew she hadn’t done it on purpose; it was her air magic reacting to mine. It was natural. We were

compatible, at least in our elements, but that didn't mean I had to give in to my primal instincts like some kind of animal.

"I think he heard us this morning," Titus supplied, his smug grin saying he was damn proud of that. "You weren't exactly quiet."

Claire turned as red as the scurbuttle weed. "Oh God," she said, covering her full lips with her hand. "I'm so sorry, Vox. I didn't even think—"

Titus cut her off with a kiss and sent a lingering flame running down her shirt, making Claire squeak with surprise. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"You're not helping," she whispered loudly.

"I'm not ashamed, sweetheart," Titus replied. "And neither are they."

"Oh God..."

"Hey, why don't you help me cook dinner," I offered, trying to put her at ease and to prove I was fine. That everything was fine. That this whole fucked-up situation was, well, *fine*.

Besides, Claire and I were going to be spending a lot of time together—Titus included. I knew better than to try to dampen a Fire Fae's passion, and by the look on Claire's face when she'd walked in those doors, he was what she needed right now with Exos missing and his ass hat of a brother coming in and ruining all of our lives.

Oh, fuck, I hope he doesn't join us for dinner.

Claire brightened, the light in her eyes returning. "Okay, that sounds fun." She looked to Titus and he laughed.

"Don't need my permission, sweetheart." He stretched, making a show of putting his arm around her shoulder. "I'll go shower before dinner and leave you all to it." He grinned at me with a knowing glance. "Didn't get a chance to this morning."

Right, because Sol had been in our shared bathroom, so in a moment of desperation, I'd stolen Titus's shower in order to take off the edge Claire's screams had given me. The Fire Fae had warned me there would be a lot of cold showers included with this job...

Fuck.

If Claire had put two and two together, she didn't comment.

"So, what's for dinner?" she asked.

I was grateful for change the subject. I pulled out the largest item from the sacks and used my air magic to lift it up.

"Dragon steak," I announced with a grin. River had said this would

impress Claire, and after the way Cyrus had treated her, I wanted to do something to take her mind off things.

Her eyes went wide. “Dragon?”

I nodded. “It’s supposed to taste like something you call beef,” I said, sending a wave of air to settle the slab onto the cutting board on the counter.

“Are you going to add eggs and cheese to it?” Sol asked around a mouthful of his snack.

Claire smiled. “I think we can save that for breakfast.”

I gave her simple tasks of cutting vegetables and grinding fresh spices. She seemed to enjoy the job, and I felt a pang of regret for her. All of this was so new and different for the Halfling, but I was able to give her something that maybe made her feel like she was back home, doing monotonous things she used to do as a human, such as chopping up ingredients in a kitchen. I supposed it didn’t matter what world or race one was a part of—food still needed preparing.

It wasn’t until I had closed the oven door on a decorated pan of dragon steak and gotten to work on a patty salad that I felt Claire’s magic testing mine. I stopped folding the leaves over strips of filling to glance at her.

“I understand if you don’t want to be here,” she said, her words soft and for my ears alone. Her bright eyes fixated on me, rooting me to the spot. “I didn’t mean to uproot you and Sol, and I’m sure when Exos comes back, I can explain that Cyrus made a mistake.” Something in her gaze said she hoped I would disagree with her, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to.

I glanced at Sol, but she’d done the trick skillfully enough that he hadn’t heard her. He chomped down on the last of his snack and fluttered his eyes closed, blissfully enjoying the simplicity of a tasty treat.

Yes, I knew what Sol needed. He needed to be around fae strong enough to help him. Fae like me...

Fae like Cyrus and Exos with royal lines stronger than mine.

Perhaps even a fae like Claire.

She edged closer to me, her fingers grazing my arm in a way that made my magic snap taut against hers. She sucked in a breath but didn’t back away.

“The king’s orders are never disobeyed,” I said, trying to put ice and steel into my tone like Cyrus was so good at doing. He seemed to have a knack for pushing the Halfling away, and that was one skill I needed to work on. If I was going to be her guardian, I didn’t want to end up mating with her. Not

because I disliked her, but because it was just too complicated.

She flinched at my tone, and even though she backed away and left me feeling guilty, I knew it was the right thing to do.

“Right,” she said, her teeth grating at the mention of Cyrus. “Well, at least he won’t be getting any dragon steak. Right?”

I nodded. “I didn’t get enough for him.” A lie, but Sol would help cover that up with his mighty appetite.

She crossed her arms and seemed pleased by that. “Honestly, I vote we never let him have any of the meals we cook together.”

Together.

Why do I like that?

I cleared my throat and continued folding the salad patties. “Agreed.”

We worked on the last of the meal in amiable silence, Sol displaying one of his rare bouts of patience until the dragon steak and patties were done.

We all sat around the table, and Titus joined us, his skin steaming as he used his magic to dry himself. He grinned as he settled next to Claire and gave her a kiss. “It smells delicious.”

Claire laughed and leaned into him, but her eyes were on me. “It was all Vox, really.”

Sol grabbed his steak with both hands and ripped into it. He chewed and swallowed the enormous bite, then smacked his lips. “Delicious,” he agreed.

I took one of the leaves from my salad patty and used it to pick up my portion of steak. “Bon appétit,” I said with a grin.

We dug into our food, and for the first time in a long while, I didn’t feel uncomfortable around other fae. Food always had a way of bringing everyone together, which, I guessed, was why I’d learned to cook in the first place. I didn’t exactly have the most stellar social skills, so I let a good meal do the work for me.

By the way Claire looked at me—like I’d just given her a piece of her life back—maybe it worked a little too well.

“So, tomorrow,” Titus said, putting down the last of his leaves with a satisfied sigh. “I’m off to Fire Quad without you, sweetheart.”

She appeared slightly uneasy at the notion. “And where am I going?”

He lifted his glass and gave Sol a salute. “Earth Quad.”

Sol’s eyes went wide. He was well into his second slab of dragon steak, and he paused midbite. “What?” he said, his mouth still full.

I chuckled and began clearing the table. “Titus is right. Claire hasn’t had

any earth training, and you're the only one who can show her around the Earth Quad." I grinned at Sol's open horror. "Welcome to escort duty, big guy."

"Well, fae on a spit," he cursed, dropping the tainted piece of meat. "That's why you brought home dragon steak."

"No." Because I didn't know her schedule. "But I assumed you'd need something positive in order to remain here."

"Damn it. I knew a great meal was too good of a thing coming from you, Vox." He crossed his arms and glowered at me.

I sent him a whisper of wind so my words only made it to his ears. "Remember, a month of credits!"

Excitement lit his eyes. Even if it was a silly bet that Claire would make him admit he'd met his match, it was one way to get him to agree to take the Halfling to class.

He nodded.

Challenge accepted.

Chapter 9

Claire



Earth class was not what I expected.

Sol had painted a picture with his size, giving me the impression that all Earth Fae were, well, ground shattering. I mean, the man's fist could crack stone.

So when we entered the outdoor arena surrounded by trees and buzzing life, I blinked. And as the students who were half of Sol's size began to stroll inside, I blinked again.

Several of the girls glanced at him and blushed while saying hello. He engaged in pleasantries, but I sensed his unease and wondered why he kept himself apart from the group who clearly wanted to engage with him.

However, I followed him as he meandered along the outskirts, each step shaking the ground beneath him. No one else seemed to carry such weight or energy, some of the other males appearing downright petite compared to Sol. Almost sickly.

How strange.

"Hi, Sol," another female fae said, her dark hair the color of midnight stones and her eyes a gleaming azure shade.

"Aflora," he returned, his lips curling fondly.

"Have you decided about the Solstice Ball yet?" she asked, her hands tucked behind her as she swiveled on her feet.

"You know I hate those events." He said the words with a smile, his affection more brotherly than flirtatious. "But I've heard Glacier wants to take you. Say yes to him."

"I'll wait for you," she said instead and gave him a little giggle before flouncing off through the flowers with a jump in her step.

Sol sighed, shaking his head. "Damn Solstice Ball."

"What's a Solstice Ball?" I asked.

"This big holiday dance where everyone gets dressed up. Happens around the Festivus season, seven weeks from now." He sounded completely disgusted by the idea. "It's like couple purgatory."

"Why?"

He cut me a sideways glance. "Did you miss the part about dressing up?"

"That sounds fun to me."

He looked me over and snorted. "Yeah, I suppose you'd enjoy wearing a ball gown and slippers. But me in a tux? No, thanks."

"Then wear normal clothes," I suggested.

He chuckled. "That would certainly shock the masses."

"Then do it," I encouraged him, smiling. "I'll go with you. And I'll wear jeans."

His amusement melted into shock. "You want to go to the ball with me?"

"Sure." It seemed like the least I could do after all this forced guardian crap. And it hadn't taken a genius last night to determine how much he didn't want to take me to class today. Maybe something like the ball would show him I wasn't so bad. And besides... "It sounds fun."

"Fun," he repeated, sounding dubious. "You really want to go?"

"Yeah, why not?" I smiled. "I mean, only if you want to."

"What about Titus?" he asked. "Wouldn't you prefer to go with him?"

"He's not mentioned it." But perhaps that wasn't what Sol meant. Was he trying to come up with an excuse for us not to go? I glanced at the girl with dark curls, watched as she laughed with a beauty most men would adore. "Do you want to go with Aflora?" I wondered out loud. Because if he did, I'd understand. I mean, we weren't dating. We were hardly even friends. But I sort of wanted to be friends. Maybe.

Sol followed my gaze, his expression turning into one of adoration as he slowly shook his head. Not necessarily the kind of look a man gave a woman he wanted to fuck, but perhaps Sol was different?

"Nah. Aflora has a childhood crush on me, but I'm not right for her. It's because she was one of my sister's best friends," he explained, running his fingers through his copper-colored strands. His earthy brown eyes flitted shyly to mine, then dropped to the ground. "I, uh, lost my sister a few years ago."

"Oh, Sol, I'm sorry." That wasn't at all what I expected him to say.

He lifted a shoulder. “It’s the plague, you know. Spirit Kingdom is next to Earth Kingdom, so, uh, it spread.” His mouth twisted. “That’s why everyone looks, uh, small.”

“You mean this isn’t normal?”

“It didn’t use to be.” He grimaced, palming the back of his neck. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to talk about this, just thought you might want to understand why I’m so much larger.”

“I was wondering,” I admitted. “I... I don’t know much about the plague. But I know my, uh, mother somehow caused it.”

He nodded. “That’s the story, but I think it was general corruption amongst the Spirit Fae.”

“What do you mean?”

Sol shoved his hands into the pockets of his navy slacks, his shoulders hunching. “I shouldn’t talk about it.”

“Why?” I wondered. “Because it’s me? Or in general?”

His mouth twisted. “It’s, well, both.” His earthy gaze met mine, the light green flecks hidden in his brown irises coming to life beneath the sun above. “We’re not supposed to talk about it.” That last part was a whisper, his expression contrite. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’m glad you did,” I admitted. “No one will talk to me about my... what happened. I mean, Exos gave me the basics, told me how my mother left Mortus during the third stage of the bond and then refused him after returning to the fae world all those years later. And somehow that started a plague. But that’s all I know.”

Sol lifted his face to the sky, the glow tanning his features and lending him a handsome appearance. I could see why many of the Earth Fae females wanted his attention. He seemed completely oblivious to his charming looks, which made him all the more attractive.

“That’s the story they want us to believe,” he said quietly. “But my mother told a very different tale.” He glanced at me, then at the students assembling on a variety of tree trunks throughout the courtyard—tree trunks that weren’t there seconds ago. “Class is starting.”

Meaning he didn’t want to talk about this anymore. I understood. We hardly knew each other, and he didn’t trust me. Given my introduction to this world and the events of the last few weeks, I couldn’t fault him for disliking me. Maybe I’d read his responses to the ball completely wrong. It wasn’t so much shock at going as it was shock at me asking him to go.

Note to self: don't bring it up again.

“Okay,” I said, recognizing that he needed space. “I’ll go find a, uh, seat.” I took a step and tripped over a piece of earth that wasn’t there a second ago.

Sol caught me by the arm before I could hit the ground and yanked me upright. “Shit, my bad. I thought you sensed that.”

I frowned, looking down at the two tree stumps that had magically appeared without my knowledge. “How...?”

“This is where I usually sit. I made you one, too, thinking you wanted to, well, you know, but you can join the others. That’s cool. I mean, you can do whatever you want. I’m not, this isn’t, well...” He palmed the back of his neck again and shook his head. “Yep.”

My lips threatened to curl at his stammering, my heart warming in his presence.

He’s nervous, I realized.

That made two of us.

“I’d like to sit with you, if you don’t mind.” I gave him a small smile. “You’re the only one I know, and I’m not very familiar with earth magic yet.”

He nodded and considered me for a long moment. “This class is all about creating life from the soil. It’s a self-educated course, which is why everyone is spread out. Most work in pairs or quads, learning the feel of the earth and producing art.”

“There’s no professor?” All the courses I’d attended so far had someone in charge, but looking around, I saw none.

He shook his head slowly. “Most of our elders are, well, sick. There are a handful on campus who lead the more advanced courses, but you have to pass the intermediate levels—like this class—before you can join. And most don’t make it that far. But I’m close.” His brow furrowed. “I just need better control.”

I glanced at the pair of tree stumps and chose the one closest to me. “Well, you seem to be doing okay.”

“That?” He snorted. “That’s simple.” He pulled a paper from his bag and handed it to me. “That’s what you have to create to pass.”

I stared at a sketch of an intricate tree with fruit hanging from the limbs and vines wrapping around the base. Then I glanced around to see other students had already started growing their trunks while sitting on top of them. “Is this the first day?”

He chuckled. “No, we’re halfway through the semester.”

What? “Then where are all the trees?”

“Oh, we move them after class to the nearby acres.” He gestured to the forest around us. “They’re all thriving in their own way.”

“But why?” I asked, baffled. “I thought the purpose was to create the drawing.”

“You have to make it within the course hour,” he clarified, smirking. “Anyone can make that with enough time. It’s the speed that matters, and the tree in that drawing has close to a hundred or so years of existence on it. Not an easy task, especially when you lack control.” He sat across from me and pointed at the ground. “Let’s start with the basics. Press your palm to the earth and tell me what you feel.”

I immediately felt guilty. I’d expected a professor or someone to teach me, not Sol. He had his own work to do. “You don’t have to waste time on me. If you just point me to where the textbook is, I can start reading. I clearly have a lot of catching up to do.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Put your palm on the ground, Claire.”

I swallowed and did what he said, mostly because he was a muscular giant and that look on his face brooked no argument. And his tone, well, it sort of reminded me of Exos’s tone.

My heart gave a pang at the thought, my connection to him humming in response.

Still alive.

I closed my eyes, wishing I could follow the path to him, to find—

“What do you feel?” Sol asked, his deep voice drawing me back to him and the task I’d been assigned.

Heartbroken, I wanted to tell him. But I knew that wasn’t what he desired to know.

So I pushed my reservations aside and allowed him to help me. It was the least I could do since he’d chosen to take the time to help me when he didn’t have to.

Life fluttered beneath my hand, the tickle of grass against my skin a tease to my senses. I tilted my head, following the thread of the element into the soil beneath and luxuriated in the earthy notes filling my nostrils.

It felt almost refreshing. Cool. Hypnotic.

I sighed in contentment.

Fire breathed passion. Air stirred sensation. Water encouraged tranquility.

Spirit warmed my heart.

“Earth is invigorating,” I breathed, swimming in the undercurrents of power.

“Yes,” Sol agreed, his voice thick with an emotion I couldn’t see because my eyes were still closed. I had the picture of a tree in my head, the one with fruit dangling from the limbs. Mmm, what I wouldn’t give for a peach. That wasn’t what I’d seen in the photo, but I craved the sweetness of summers past. My grandmother used to bake the most delectable pie. I could almost remember the smell if I concentrated enough.

My lips curled as I found the ingredients in the earth, not for the dessert, but the core ingredient—a peach pit.

It seeded beneath my palm, growing roots to secure itself to the soil, and pushed through the grass. “I miss peaches,” I whispered, my brow furrowing. “I miss home.”

“Me, too,” Sol agreed, his words a breath on the wind. “But I can never go back.”

“Why?” I asked, my creation growing in my mind, boasting vitality and scenting the air around us. “Why can’t you go home, Sol?”

“Because there’s nothing left,” he grumbled. “The plague has taken everyone I love. There’s no one for me to go back to.”

“Why is it spreading?” I asked, not understanding. “If Ophelia is dead, how are more fae falling ill?”

“Because it’s not her.” Sol’s tone sounded pained, causing my eyes to flutter open in concern. His eyes were on the tree I’d unknowingly blossomed, the leaves budding as if in the heat of spring. Several other students were gaping at my creation, most of them staring in awe. “That’s very impressive, Claire. But it’s not the assignment.”

My branches sprouted with life, my desire to taste a peach taunting my tongue. It all came so naturally, so unexpectedly, that I giggled when the first hint of little green pits developed on the tree.

“What is it?” a soft voice asked.

Aflora.

Her wide blue eyes gazed lovingly at my creation, her lips parting as a peach fully developed before her.

“A fruit tree from my childhood,” I said.

“It’s beautiful,” she praised. “May I touch it?”

I nodded, biting my lip, uncertain of what else to say. But the petite fae

seemed too lost in the masterpiece hanging over my head to care for words. She stroked the tree with adoration, several others wandering over to join her.

Sol watched without a word, a strange spark of energy in his earthy gaze.

Had I messed this up? I wasn't trying to garner attention, or to even create a tree; it just sort of happened. "My control needs work, too," I mumbled, wringing my hands in my lap.

He didn't reply but stood to reach the highest branch and plucked a fresh peach. Several fae watched as he sampled the fruit of my labor, their expressions anticipatory. He took another bite, chewing, his brow furrowed. "It's sweet."

"It's a peach," I replied, confused.

"I like it." He shrugged and grabbed another to toss to Aflora. She caught it with a furious blush and skipped away, her long black hair waving in the wind. A few others held out a hand, and he tossed each of them a peach from the branches above, then dropped one into my lap before taking a second for himself. "The fruit in the assignment is supposed to be dry and bland, not sweet. I prefer your creation."

"Why would anyone want to eat a bland fruit?" I wondered aloud, taking a small bite of my peach.

So, so good.

I sent up a request for more, and the tree responded immediately.

This is so much better than a vortex, I thought.

"Apparently, it's good for cooking," Sol said, grimacing. "Not my favorite. This is much better."

His magic brushed mine as he took control of one of my branches and forced it to lower to him so he could pluck several more peaches. The tree groaned as he released his mental hold, the leaves and sticks flying upward with a snap that shook the earth.

He cringed. "Sorry."

I soothed the earth, healing the fractures he'd caused within my creation, and smiled. "You're powerful."

"Yeah." He waved his hand, causing a new stump to form and grow. "Vox is helping me learn how to foster and maintain it, but I grow stronger every day. It's like I'm constantly absorbing energy, but I'm only one fae and I don't have anywhere to release it all."

My element reached out to his without thinking, blending into his life force as if searching for a way to ease him like I did the tree.

He flinched, his gaze widening. “What are you doing?”

“I-I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s just sort of... I fixed the tree and now...”

“You can’t fix me, Claire,” he snapped. “Stop.” The ground quaked as he shoved my element away from his, the power of his strike sending me backward off my stump. He cursed. “Shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—”

“Well, that’s one way to train the little queen,” a haughty voice interrupted. “Intruding on one’s elements without permission is a punishable offense. I’d have knocked her out for it.”

Gasps littered the air in his wake, the Spirit Fae having just appeared out of nowhere.

How did he do that?

Sol stood, his arms folding across his chest. “What the hell do you want, Royal?”

Tremors traversed the earth, the other fae backing away with fear in their eyes. *Fear for Sol*, I realized. Because he’d just squared off with the King of Spirit Fae.

Damn it.

I jumped up and brushed the grass from my hair and uniform. “Why are you here, Cyrus?” I demanded, wanting the focus on me, not on Sol.

“I need you to sign some documents,” he said, not taking his gaze away from Sol. “Your challenge is noted and not accepted, Earth Fae. When you have better control, we’ll talk.”

What? How had Cyrus interpreted a challenge from Sol’s question? I’d essentially demanded the same thing, albeit with a tad more respect, but still. “What challenge?”

Cyrus finally glanced at me. “He’s proving I chose the right Earth Fae guardian for you, is all.” He glanced back at Sol. “Isn’t that right?”

The giant of a man merely glowered at him. “I make my own choices, Spirit King.”

“Good. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Cyrus reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a few pieces of paper. “I need you to sign these, Claire.”

“What are they?”

“Documents for your internship with Elana.”

I frowned. “But I haven’t decided to do that yet. I was supposed to talk to Exos before he, uh, left.” The last word was a whisper. I couldn’t say *disappeared*. We’d agreed to not tell anyone what really happened, although I

still didn't agree with why.

"There's no decision to make. You're going to work with Elana." Cyrus held out the papers. "Sign."

I mimicked Sol's stance and folded my arms. "No."

He cocked a brow. "So you don't want an opportunity to learn more about your mother? To discern truth from fiction?" His gaze flickered to Sol. "To find out why the Earth Fae believes it's a corruption of my people that created the plague, and not Ophelia?"

Sol blanched, his demeanor shifting from shock to fury in a blink. "Get the fuck out of my head!"

He took a menacing step forward, only for Cyrus to send up a waterspout between them. "I'm not in your head. I just happened to be observing Claire's course today and heard every word you said."

Sol raged behind the water, his words cut off by the increasing flow that kept Cyrus safe from the wrath the Earth Fae unleashed. Except then the ground began to shake in earnest, a sinkhole pulling the geyser underground and spreading to the tips of my shoes.

"You'll hurt Claire," Cyrus warned, his words underlined in power. "I don't wish to fight you, Earth Fae, but I will if you continue to endanger the future queen. *Control it.*"

I grabbed my tree, terrified of the show of power and the violent energy swimming between Cyrus and Sol. Then I met the big guy's sorrowful gaze over the water and saw his shoulders collapse. The ground calmed, his expression falling as he turned.

"Sol..." I started but didn't know how to finish. Not that he was intent on listening to me anyway. He disappeared into the trees lining the courtyard where several others waited for him. Aflora wrapped an arm around him, guiding him away without a backward glance.

"He has a lot of potential," Cyrus mused, staring after him. "He's one of the strongest of his kind left. He just requires control."

"Why does he think Spirit Fae are corrupt?" I asked. It wasn't like I could break Sol's confidence since Cyrus had eavesdropped the entire fucking time.

"Everyone believes your mother incited the plague by breaking one of the most sacred vows between mates, but there are several—myself included—who think it was a cover for something far more sinister. And it seems Sol is one of the enlightened few who suspect similar foul play. His kind are dying, and your mother is the source of blame. But she's dead. So how can that be?"

He raised a brow at me as if I might hold all the answers.

I swallowed, uneasy. "Are you saying I might be the cause?"

He stared at me for a long moment, all traces of arrogance fleeing his expression. "I'm saying it's an unsolved mystery that holds a variety of possibilities, including ones involving you." He held out the papers and shrouded us in a wall of mist. I opened my mouth, ready to ask him what he was doing, when he softly said, "I need you to accept this internship, Claire. Not just because of what Elana can teach you, but because of what you might observe under her tutelage."

My eyebrows lifted. "You want me to spy on Elana?"

"And anyone who crosses her path, yes." A blunt reply, one I could appreciate. His gaze drifted to my tree and then back to me. "She mentored your mother. Now she wants to mentor you. I find the correlation between the two to be suspect, don't you?"

I hadn't until now. "I thought it was my access to all the elements that intrigued her."

"Oh, most definitely that. But the question we need to ask, little queen, is *why*? Wouldn't you like to discover the answer? Because I know I would." He leaned closer. "Someone powerful enough to subdue my brother is holding him hostage, and as powerful as Mortus is, he's no match for Exos."

"But Elana has the ability to overpower him," I translated in a whisper.

"Indeed," he replied, studying me intently. "Did you sense her in his spirit?"

I shook my head. I hadn't, but I wouldn't know what I was looking for even if I tried. "She exonerated me," I said instead, confused. "Why would she do that if she wanted to hurt Exos?"

"A better question would be, why didn't she use her gifts to exonerate you before?" he countered, arching a brow. "Something isn't adding up, Claire. And this internship provides you with an opportunity to learn more. If you're up for it."

"If she's the culprit, isn't giving her access to me dangerous?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "Which is why a guard will escort you to every session."

"Yeah, but if she could subdue Exos..."

"They don't stand a chance against her," he finished. "But it might give you just enough time to escape should you require it." He sighed then, leaning back against my tree and gazing upward at the branches. "It's all

conjecture on my part, Claire, but I have to consider everyone as a suspect. And you're the only one being provided direct access to Elana. She's very likely innocent. However, I learned a long time ago not to trust anyone except family."

Which meant he didn't trust me, either. Hence his comment earlier about all the possibilities of the plague.

I'm a suspect in his eyes. How many others felt the same?

The icy gaze that fell upon me said he knew what I was thinking and refused to put my thoughts at ease in any way. "What'll it be, Claire? I'm late for a meeting."

Did I really have a choice? If Elana had Exos—which I strongly doubted—then I had to at least try, right? If anything, I'd learn more about myself and my mother and the history of this world. And maybe I'd garner stronger control.

Nothing to lose, really.

I cleared my throat and nodded, taking the documents and his pen. "All right."

"Good girl." He eyed my tree again and snagged a peach from a lower branch. "Thanks for lunch, little queen. I'll see you after the Council meeting."

I signed where indicated and handed the papers back to him. "Council meeting? Like the ones Exos attends?"

"Mm-hmm." He smirked. "I'll take you one day. You'll hate it."

"Are you going to tell them about Exos?" I asked, hopeful that maybe they could help us.

His gaze shuttered, darkness shadowing his light eyes as the watery wall collapsed around us. "Absolutely not."

With that, he disappeared as quickly as he'd appeared, leaving a trace of mist in his wake.

How did he do that?

Chapter 10

Cyrus



“**W**hat news do you bring us?” Elana asked, her place at the head of the council table brimming with power.

I’d debated all day if I wanted to announce Exos’s disappearance and ultimately decided against it. With Mortus sitting across from me, it seemed even more prudent I say nothing at all and play along. They all believed I’d tasked my brother with something spirit related, temporarily taking his place by the Halfling’s side.

Showing weakness to these fae would be detrimental indeed.

So I relaxed into my chair and shrugged, feigning boredom. “Claire is progressing in her classes as expected. She’s proven quite capable with fire, her spirit is growing, and the other three elements are not far behind.” I didn’t bother mentioning she was one of the most powerful water elementals I’d ever felt or that she’d managed to shove me across the room with a single gust of wind.

This Council was out for blood.

I would not be offering up Claire’s for sport.

“All five elements,” Vape marveled, his shock of white hair cascading around his shoulders like a waterfall. “The prophecy—”

Zephys slammed his hands on the table. “Don’t bloody start about the prophecy again.” He glared at Vape, then turned his attention to me. “And your brother? Why did he choose now to leave her? Haven’t they bonded?”

I tilted my head, keeping Mortus in my line of sight. “I’m not my brother’s keeper,” I replied flatly. It was the truth, after all.

Blaize watched me expectantly as he played with a flame over his fingertips, rolling the element with a gentle control that took a Fire Fae years

to master. “Yet, you sent him on an errand of some kind. Yes?”

“A family matter required his attention. In return, I offered to help Claire improve her affinity for water.” I lifted a shoulder, my gaze sliding to Mortus. “I’m sure he’ll return soon.”

“Excellent,” Elana said with approval, ignoring the brewing tension between the Council members. “I’ve had the pleasure of witnessing her powers firsthand, and I’m thrilled at her development.” She grinned and splayed open her hands expectantly. “And the tutorship I offered?”

I slid the signed document across the table. “Claire will be meeting you once a week. Thank you for offering her your mentorship. She’s thrilled.” Or she would be when I informed her that I’d finalized the opportunity.

Mortus scoffed. “No good is going to come of this. If she’s anything like her mother—”

“You’ll kill her, too?” I asked, arching a brow.

The Spirit Elder wasn’t used to me talking back to him so directly, but I wanted to surprise him. I needed him to drop his guard just for a second.

“If she poses a threat, yes, I will do what I must for fae kind.”

“And I’ll be right there beside him,” Zephys agreed. “I voted against this. You have nothing to lose, Cyrus. Your people have already been obliterated by the curse Ophelia unleashed upon us, but what about Obsidian’s people?”

The Earth Fae Elder rolled relaxation stones across her palm. “We have managed to stifle the illness expanded from the Spirit Kingdom. It will breed out in a generation or two.”

Obsidian didn’t like to take sides or vote and often opted out of decisions for things she felt were out of her control. She dealt with problems as they came to her.

“You should be more concerned,” Zephys growled. “This Halfling will bring about the curse again, and it could be your people who suffer.” She shrugged, which only enraged the Air Elder. “Come on, Obsidian. Get your head out of your arse.”

She narrowed ebony eyes at him. “Trying to predict the way the earth moves will not help us prepare for tomorrow. If the curse hits us, we will respond to it.”

Mortus snorted. “She’s right about one thing. We are ready for whatever comes.” His black eyes flashed with challenge. “I hope you’re keeping an eye on the Halfling when you return to the Academy, because there are others who know what trouble she’ll bring.”

There you are, I mused.

I tilted my head in mock innocence. “Is that a threat, Mortus?”

He launched to his feet. “If I was threatening you, then you would know it, you insolent—”

I slammed my hands on the table, standing and leaning toward him. “You’d what?” I demanded, wanting him to snap, to provide me with the opportunity to shred apart his soul and find my brother. “Come on, Mortus, what would you do?” I pressed on him with my spirit, allowing him to *feel* my challenge deep inside. “*I am your king*,” I reminded him, my words underlined with enough power to make the entire room cringe.

My spirit wove around his, prodding, sensing for a weakness, anything that could tell me what he’d been up to. His enlarging irises told me he felt it, knew what I was doing, and the shiver that rolled across his skin said it scared him.

Good.

Unfortunately, Elana ruined the moment by sending a fine mist of water over the table as if she were spraying a herd of cats for misbehaving. Interesting timing for her to intervene, as if she sensed I was closing in on something important.

And since when could she create water? Elana was notoriously powerful in spirit, but she had no other elements under her control. A very rare state for a Spirit Fae, but a well-known fact where Elana was concerned.

Did I imagine it? Because it was already gone. *Maybe it was pixie dust, not water?*

“This meeting is meant to be informative,” she stated flatly. “I will not have bickering.”

“Then what purpose does this meeting truly serve, Elana?” I inquired, over the charade of this bullshit. “None of us like each other. It’s all a power play, and as I sit at the top, I’m a constant opponent.” I moved away, pushing my chair in. “If there’s nothing else of import, I’ll get back to my temporary assignment.”

She sighed. “Cyrus...”

“I understand what you’re trying to accomplish here, Elana, and I admire you deeply for it. But not everyone on this council feels the same.” I glanced pointedly at Mortus and Zephys and finally at Blaize. “You all want to condemn an innocent woman for the atrocities of her mother. Perhaps you should consider investigating the sins of your own parents to determine your

ability to lead.”

My name trailed behind me as several argued my words, but I didn't listen.

I'd attended the council as a formality and to remind Mortus of my place.

Task accomplished, I had a new item on my list. *Protect Claire.*

Because I'd seen the indignation in the Councils' eyes. One slip and she'd pay the price with her life. I refused to allow that to happen on my watch.

Where are you, Exos? This power game grows tiresome without you. And your little queen is quite the handful.

Just thinking of Claire had my lips curling. Oh, she loathed me, and I, of course, encouraged it. But she needed the tough love to grow.

All this coddling bullshit would destroy the woman. She needed to realize her potential, and the only way to do that was by pushing her to achieve greatness. As no one else seemed keen to do it, I'd taken on the task.

And when we found my brother, he'd take over what I'd started.

Easy. Hopefully. Maybe...

I shook my head. There was no alternative. I needed her to be strong so I could use her to find Exos. Whatever she did with that strength was her choice and didn't impact me in the slightest. Not even a little bit.

If I told myself that enough, I'd grow to believe it. Because she wasn't mine, and she never would be. Exos owned her spirit, and I refused to interfere with that. But even I could grudgingly admit as I tilted my head up to observe the stars above that my brother had chosen well. I didn't get it at first, but two days with her showed me why.

She's a good mate for you, Exos, I thought to him. *I vow to keep her safe. Always. For you.*

And maybe a little bit for me.

But Exos didn't need to know that part.

No one did.

Chapter II

Exos



Claire... I could feel her trying to find me, her essence an intoxicating presence in my soul that I longed to stroke. But I had to push her away. It was the only way to fight the shadow holding me hostage.

A shadow whose thirst for Claire crawled inside me, sinking its inky claws into our bond and inching ever closer to my mate.

No! I shoved it back, but it grew more powerful—*hungrier*—with every second. It reminded me of a black hole, spinning and sucking, *needing* to feed off the spirit energy thriving around us.

If that thing hurt Claire, I'd never forgive myself.

And I needed all my strength to battle the presence overtaking my being.

I will not become your puppet, I growled, determined.

We'll see, the foreign presence taunted, pressing deeper.

Fuck you, I seethed.

Laughter filtered through my conscious, the perpetrator amused.

Are there two? I wondered, dazed. *It* felt too energized to be a lone entity. Too consuming. Too... *familiar*.

The identity kept swirling in and out of my thoughts, too powerful for me to hold on to for long. Which was precisely why I had to close myself off from both Claire and the evil being threatening to take control of my spirit.

I slid into the recesses of my mind, preparing my blockade, hell-bent on strengthening my reserves before I came out swinging.

But it would take time.

Days.

Weeks, maybe.

A month.

And I had to say goodbye to my Claire. At least for a little while.

I sighed as the last ledge of the barrier began to form, my heart aching for the bond I had to lock away. Not broken, just closed. For now. Until I was strong enough to protect us both.

Don't give up on me, Claire, I whispered to her. I'll reach out again soon. I promise.

Darkness descended on the message, following the chain to the woman I'd allowed into my heart. I screamed in rebellion, using the last vestiges of my power to cut the fae off and blast the asshole backward.

An "Oomph" followed, telling me I'd won.

For now.

A temporary victory, one that would only enrage the being more.

Who are you? I wondered, infuriated that I couldn't identify the familiar brush of power.

Ah, it didn't matter.

As soon as I recharged, I'd destroy whoever tried to subdue me. I was the rightful heir to the Spirit Kingdom. I'd denied it all my life, but now it was time to embrace it. All I needed was to harness that strength and use it.

Soon, I swore. Soon.

The last vestiges of my cage assembled, I shut my eyes and closed myself off from everything and everyone.

The battle had not yet begun.

But when it did, I'd land on top.

I always did.

Chapter 12

Claire



A LITTLE OVER A MONTH LATER...

The pixie chirped at me in delight, causing my lips to curl. “I have no idea what you’re saying,” I told it. That only seemed to make the little fairy more excited. She began to dance, her dust flying around her and causing me to laugh.

A second appeared beside me, this one conjured by Elana, and the two began chattering in their little language while flying in hypnotic circles across the dining area.

This had become my favorite part of our sessions—the creation of life through magical means.

Elana’s energy warmed mine, her smile one of approval as I called another pixie into formation with my mind, this one a male. The two females immediately drew near, their intrigue evident.

“That’s new,” Elana murmured.

I lifted a shoulder. “I have a few males to draw on for inspiration.” Five, to be exact. Six if I included River. Sol, Vox, Titus, and Cyrus had become permanent fixtures in my life, with Exos a nightly feature in my dreams. The only female I’d grown close to over the last month was Elana, but I couldn’t exactly call us friends. She was more like the fairy godmother I never knew I needed.

She laughed as the females began to chase the male around the room. He squeaked out some kind of command they didn’t appear interested in following, and beat his wings harder to get away.

“Is that how you feel daily?” Elana mused. “With all those male fae

circling your powers?”

My cheeks reddened. “They don’t chase me around.” They just, sort of, followed me everywhere. Titus waited downstairs for our session to end, and we’d likely be intercepted by Vox or Sol on the way back to Spirit Quad. “They’re a little protective.”

Not in an overbearing kind of way, but in a responsible manner.

Their defensive energy had heightened over the last month while I continued to master my elements. It was as if they didn’t like the attention I brought upon myself, but I couldn’t help it. The whole point of the Academy was to learn.

“You have five elements,” Elana murmured. “It’s not surprising you’re attracting mates from different sides.”

“Oh, it’s not like that.” At least, I was trying very hard for it not to be like that. Titus kept me well satisfied, and my spirit still very much belonged to Exos. “We’re all just friends.”

The words came out stilted, but I had to believe them.

While Exos once said I’d likely need a mate for each element, I was determined to prove him wrong. Five men? I almost laughed.

Or maybe I wanted to cry.

Shaking my head, I focused on the pixies and created another male to join the foray, which caused all three to halt their dance about the room.

Louder chirping sounded as the original male squared off with the newcomer.

Hmm, seemed the little guy didn’t like competition.

It made me frown. Titus never acted like that. Actually, none of the guys did.

So yeah, just friends. That was why Sol never brought up the Solstice Ball again and why Vox seemed to only open up to me while in the kitchen. And Cyrus, well, he was just an ass. Nothing new there.

The pixies continued yipping while I yawned.

“Tired?” Elana asked, her gray eyes holding a touch of motherly concern.

I nodded. “I didn’t sleep well last night.” *Or the night before. Or the night before that. And, well, for the last four or five weeks.*

Exos came to me every night, causing me to awaken with a broken heart every morning. I could feel our connection wilting with each passing day, the bond corroding over time. Cyrus said it was a result of Exos closing me off, that if we didn’t rekindle the relationship soon, it would wither and die and

we would never be linked again.

My chest ached at the thought.

But I had no idea how to find him. He'd shut me out with a few whispered words about not giving up on him. Well, that would never happen. However, it would have been nice to be given a clue about his situation.

"Are you all right, Claire?" Elana studied me in that uncanny way of hers. "You're making great strides in your control. I mean, that evidence is dancing on the table."

I forced a smile at the show and shook my head. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just been a long month."

"Exos," she said, giving a knowing nod as my gaze flew upward to hers. "I had wondered why he would leave in such a crucial time of your relationship. Perhaps you should call him home?"

Such an innocent question underlined in genuine concern.

Cyrus thought she might be behind Exos's kidnapping, but after five sessions with her, I knew he was wrong. This woman cared too much about peace and finding harmony among the fae to harm another. She often cried when we had to dismiss the pixies, and they weren't even real.

I sighed. "I miss him." *But I can't tell you why or where he is.* Because even if I knew her to be innocent, I couldn't bring myself to betray Cyrus's trust. He was busy working this case from other angles, not that he seemed to be getting anywhere.

But if anyone cared for Exos as much as I did, it was Cyrus.

So I would trust him until he gave me a reason not to.

"Call him home," she said again. "Or tell Cyrus to." A knowing glimmer creased her eyes into a smile. "Or I can tell him to, if you prefer. I know how intimidating Cyrus can be."

"Oh? I think he's positively charming," I deadpanned.

She laughed outright. "Isn't he just?" She swiped a tear from the edge of her gaze and shook her head. "He's a stubborn one; that's for sure."

"Understatement," I muttered. "I'm sure he means well, but yeah, he's a force of nature."

Elana nodded. "Yes. He's definitely his father's son. Strong-willed and dominant and unfailingly loyal." She finished her tea and set it off to the side with an indulgent smile. "You may not want to hear it, but you're very much like your mother, Claire. The history everyone speaks about her is tainted in so many ways." She lost some of her sparkle, her features falling. "The

Ophelia I knew was determined, smart, and so very talented.”

I leaned forward, intrigued to hear more about the mother I didn't know. Elana had mentioned her in passing a few times but never provided much context. This was the first time she'd indicated any doubts about my mother's legacy. “What do you mean by ‘tainted’?” I asked.

She sighed, waving her hand and dissolving the pixies to dust on the table. Normally, this was when she shed a tear, but she seemed too distracted by the past to see the present.

“There's so much about those days that remains unclear. I mean, for one, they never found your mother's body. And Mortus sometimes swears he can sense her.”

“Wait... I thought he killed her?” Why would he talk about sensing her if he knew she was dead? Did he believe in ghosts or something?

“Oh, he claims to have killed her, yes. But no one actually found her remains.” She pinched her lips to the side, and then sighed. “Honestly, I don't know why I even bother speculating. It was an impossible fight for her to survive, and her body likely dissolved beneath the energy backlash of a failed bond. But the plague that followed doesn't really make any sense. Fae dropped to the earth in waves, their souls snatched from their bodies as if sucked up into the clouds. It was all very *suspicious*, for lack of a better term.”

Elana swallowed, her hands clasping tightly over the ornate table of her dining room. Ghosts danced in her gaze, painting a haunting history one had to live through to understand, and it scattered goose bumps down my arms.

“Chaos rained down upon us, Claire. For weeks. It's truly hard to say what did and did not occur.” Her silver eyes met mine, her expression grim. “Your mother's infidelity is absolute and you're living proof, but circumstances of that decision seem, well, harsh.”

“The plague is spreading to the Earth Fae.” I'd witnessed it with my own eyes. Two Earth Fae students had gone home ill in the last month, leaving Sol even more aloof each time. He seemed to blame himself for surviving, and I saw the worry in his gaze for each of his classmates. I wished there was something I could do, even if it was just to talk to him, but whenever I brought it up, he changed the topic to training or some sort of instruction. Then he'd find a way to excuse himself.

“It is spreading, yes,” Elana confirmed quietly. “They blame the Spirit Fae, but there's not many of us left to take credit. Which is why I'm so

focused on harmony—because I believe the cause isn't a shattered bond at all, but distrust amongst fae kind. Rather than work together to survive, we've divided our elements into kingdoms and fight for power amongst ourselves. It's why you're so important, Claire. You hold the key to bring us all together."

"Because I have all five elements," I whispered.

"Exactly." Her shoulders relaxed, her lips curling. "It's not a discussion for today, dear Claire, but you must see your potential. There are those who wish to destroy it. I would prefer we cultivate it. It could be the key to saving us all."

I wasn't sure how I felt about either alternative. One clearly equated to death, while the other hinted at the possibility of being used.

"Chancellor." Titus's voice came from the doorway, his tone modest, while his fire warmed my skin.

"Yes, yes, it's time." Elana waved her hand, standing.

"I didn't mean to rush you," he said, sounding contrite.

"Oh, no, we've already gone over. It seems to be a continuous habit." She winked at me. "Same time next week?"

I nodded. "Yes, please."

"Excellent." She beamed at Titus. "You can have your mate back now, Fire Fae. Be good to her."

"I will, ma'am," he promised, his arm settling around my lower back as I stood.

Elana gave a wave, showering the room in dust that grew into an army of new pixies. "We have a dinner to prepare, little ones," she announced, her focus having already shifted to the next task at hand.

Titus and I left in the middle of her instructions, his lips curled in amusement. "You should do that in the Spirit Quad. They could cook all our meals."

"I think Vox enjoys the kitchen too much to allow that to happen," I teased. "But maybe they could help us clean?" The boys were messy. Especially Sol, who seemed to track loose stones everywhere he went.

"True." He brushed his lips against my temple, guiding me out of the house and down to the trail that led us back to campus. "How was your lesson?"

"Good." I frowned, thinking about what Elana had revealed. "Actually, it was enlightening."

“How so?”

“I don’t think she has Exos.” I’d told Titus about Cyrus’s suspicions last month, not wanting to keep anything from him. He’d agreed with the logic, saying that, while dangerous, it made sense to get closer to her to see what I could learn. And today seemed to have taught me more than the last several weeks combined. “Did you know my mother’s body was never found?”

He considered for a long moment and slowly shook his head. “I’ve never heard that.”

“Elana said Ophelia’s body was never found and that Mortus claims to sense her sometimes,” I said, thinking out loud as I played the scenario through my thoughts. “What if Ophelia is still alive?”

Cyrus chose that moment to materialize, his water element heavy in the air. “Well, that’s an interesting theory,” he replied, causing Titus to scowl.

“I fucking hate when you do that,” he muttered.

“Ditto,” I agreed.

Both men cocked their brows.

“It means I agree with Titus,” I clarified.

“Of course you do,” Cyrus said, smirking. “Regardless, I need you to come with me, and we can continue discussing your little theory along the way.”

Little theory. What an ass. “Titus and I have plans.” We didn’t, but it was the principle of the matter. “So go mist off somewhere else.” I started walking again, but Cyrus’s response froze me midstep.

“I have a lead on Exos, Claire.”

Chapter 13

Cyrus



Claire rotated so quickly that Titus had to grab her hip to keep her from falling over. “*What?*”

“I don’t like repeating myself.” She’d heard me just fine. “Will you come with me or not?”

“We will come with you,” Titus said while Claire’s mouth moved silently over words I couldn’t hear.

“No.” I met the Fire Fae’s gaze. “Only Claire.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because we need to go to Spirit Kingdom.” And only a Spirit Fae could survive there without lasting consequences.

Titus’s answering expression said he knew it, too, his face going white at the prospect. “You can’t be serious,” he breathed.

“It’s a solid lead.” Mainly because I’d followed Mortus there the other night and there could only be one reason he’d chosen to venture into the dead kingdom—Exos. “We’ve searched the Academy grounds, and we’ve even combed through the enchanted forest. Where we haven’t been is the Spirit Kingdom. And it would explain how my brother was able to cut himself off from everyone.” There were elements in the dead realm that could facilitate such a trick. It would also mean he might be harvesting leftover energy to put up a fight.

“You need her to help you sense his presence.” Titus sounded horrified.

“I do,” I admitted. “I tried myself last night and came up empty-handed. Maybe Claire will find something different.”

“At the risk of her own life,” Titus managed to say, his teeth clenching. “The Spirit Kingdom is a wasteland.”

“True.” *On both accounts.* “So I guess the question is, how much is the little queen willing to risk for her spirit mate?” I arched a challenging brow at her. “Are you strong enough, Claire? Or would you rather leave him to suffer until it’s too late?”

“That’s not fair,” she whispered.

“What’s not fair is my brother lying in the ground somewhere,” I argued. “He’s dying, Claire. And every day we pretend he’s fine is another day closer to his demise. So either—”

“You’re the one who said we should go on like nothing happened,” she snapped, squaring off with me. “*You* won’t go to the Council. *You* won’t corner Mortus. *You* are the one killing him, Cyrus. Not me.” She sent a blast of air straight into my chest, sending me a step backward. “Don’t you *dare* talk to me about his death as if I’m the one causing it. You’re not the one going to bed every night and dreaming of him and waking every morning trying to find him in the connection he turned off.”

I rubbed the spot where she’d assaulted me and grimaced. “You might not agree with my methods, but I—”

“I don’t agree with you popping up and acting like I won’t do everything I can to save him. You want me to go to the Spirit Kingdom? Fine. I’ll go. But I don’t need you to provoke me into it. I want to save him just as badly as you do, if not more. So fuck you and your mind games, Cyrus. Either take me or mist off.”

Titus gaped at her, shocked by her outburst.

But all I could do was smile.

That was the fighter I required. The woman beneath the elements who would do what was needed to save those under her care. No tears. No excuses. Just a warrior ready for battle.

And maybe my methods made me an asshole, but they’d worked.

“All right,” I said, holding out my hand. “We need to go now.”

“Fine.” She glanced at Titus and sighed at his expression. “I’ll be fine.”

“You have no idea what you’re walking into, Claire,” he said, his anger creating a line of invisible fire across his aura. “And you just allowed Cyrus to bait you into going.”

“He had me at ‘Exos,’” she replied, her smile sad. “If he has a lead, I have to follow it. And I would do the same for you.”

“I’d never ask you to.”

“And neither would Exos.” She cupped his cheek and went to her toes to

kiss him deeply, the moment one meant for two lovers. I found it oddly satisfying. A strange sensation, since she wasn't mine to care for, but I rather liked seeing her content. Something told me Exos would approve, too. "I'll be okay."

"It's a death trap," Titus whispered. "The Spirit Kingdom is where they send fae to die."

"Then it's a good thing I'm brimming with life." She kissed him again, then stepped back. "And I have the Spirit King as my guide."

A smart-ass remark about her trusting me graced my tongue, but I didn't allow it to escape. I really did need her cooperation if this was going to work, and as I had it, I wasn't about to lose it.

"If anything happens to her—"

"You won't have to worry about killing me, Titus," I interjected. "My brother will do that for you should harm befall her."

He stared me down for a long moment before nodding. "Bring her back, Spirit King."

I held out my hand for hers and smiled. "If I have it my way, it'll be Exos who brings her back."

Chapter 14

Sol



“**S**he’s so small,” I muttered. Not necessarily as small as Aflora or my little sister had been, but definitely smaller than me.

“Who?” Vox asked as he worked on fixing my latest damage to the Spirit Quad.

What had once been a dining table was now a pile of splinters that Vox meticulously worked to reassemble. It took incredible power and concentration for the Air Fae to align each broken shard back together.

I hadn’t meant to break it. Frustration had gotten the better of me, and, well, yeah.

“Who?” Vox repeated, a hint of impatience in his tone.

“Oh. Claire.” Who else could I be talking about? “She’s just so much smaller than me.”

“And?” he prompted, finally looking at me.

“I just...” I palmed the back of my neck, uncertain of how to word it. Maybe it was easier if I just said nothing at all. I mean, Vox didn’t need to know. He probably had his own issues to deal with where Claire was concerned. “Never mind.”

“Oh, no. I want to know why you said that. Why are you thinking about her height?”

“It’s not so much her height as it is her overall size,” I huffed. “She’s so small.”

“Yeah, you said that.” He folded his arms. “Why do you care?”

“Don’t you?” I demanded. “I mean, you hear her at night just like I do. You have to think about it.” And there were the words I didn’t mean to say. By the shock on Vox’s face, they also weren’t the ones he expected.

“You’re talking about... like...” He made a gesture that left me frowning.

“What the fuck is that supposed to be?”

“You know.”

“No, I really don’t.” It had looked like... well, I didn’t know. He’d scissored his fingers like he wanted to give her a haircut. “You’ve had sex before, right?”

He blanched. “Sol!”

“What?” I demanded. “Come on, with that little gesture, it’s a valid question.”

“We’re not having this conversation.”

“You’re the one who asked me what I was thinking about. Now you have an answer.” One he appeared to be judging me for, which was completely unfair. “You can’t tell me you’ve not thought about it, because I’ve noticed the abundance of showers lately.”

“Oh, Elements,” Vox said, looking up at the ceiling.

“All I said is she’s small, okay?” I grumbled. “I realize you don’t have to worry about that, but I do.”

“What happened to not wanting to mate with her?” Vox prompted.

“I... I don’t want that.” *I think. Maybe. Fuck. I don’t know.* I shook my head. “It was just a thought, okay?”

“About her size in bed.”

“And how I could break her,” I growled. “Never mind. Just keep doing whatever you’re doing.”

“Whatever I’m doing is cleaning up the damn mess in the kitchen,” he snapped. “Because *you* broke the table. I suppose that’s fitting, considering your concerns.”

“Hey, that’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” Vox demanded. “You know what? You should fix it.”

“Why are you being such a dick?” This wasn’t like my best friend. Sure, he had bouts of temper in the past, but this seemed deep-rooted, as if there was something else going on. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t fix dinner, Sol. Because we have nowhere to eat it. *That* is what’s wrong.” He waved at the mess, creating an air vortex that swept it all away and out the open door. “And why in the fae are you thinking about fucking Claire?”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Are you telling me the thought hasn’t ever crossed your mind?”

“Of course it has,” he replied, his cheeks darkening. “I mean, I hear the same things you do.”

“So why are you giving me a hard time about it?”

“Because neither of us wants to mate with her!” Vox exclaimed, a gust of wind amplifying the lie he was trying to tell himself. I hadn’t been exaggerating about the showers, and he knew it.

“We don’t?” I asked, testing the thought aloud. “Because if you wanted to, and I wanted to, then maybe it could work.”

And maybe Vox would stop being such an uptight dirtwad and I could get my head on straight again. The Spirit Quad would be grateful; I’d certainly done enough damage to it over the last month.

Vox balked at me, making me frown. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He threw his hands up. “It’s weird, okay?”

“Weird,” I repeated. “Mating with a gorgeous woman is weird. Okay,” I grumbled and turned to face the swirl of air that was keeping the table somewhat assembled in the shape it should have been. Fine cracks lined its broken seams, and I forced my earth magic to reach out and command it to remember its form. It was once wood, born of the earth, and had known life and seasons long before it’d been smashed by my careless whims of power.

“We’d be sharing her,” Vox said after a long bout of silence, his voice softer than before. “Don’t you think that’s weird?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, no.” Did I want to be intimate with other men? Not really. But if I trusted anyone to share a woman with, it was Vox. “If anything, you’d help me with my control so I wouldn’t hurt her.” The words came out on a mumble meant mostly for me, but Vox’s affinity for air would have made them loud in comparison.

My best friend froze. “What?”

I sighed. “You heard me just fine.”

“You’ve thought about... the three of us?” He sounded so alarmed I had to laugh.

“Dude, it’s not like I fantasize about you. Just, you know, how it would all—” I shook my head. “You know what? Forget I ever brought it up.”

“Forget that you want to have a threesome with Claire?” Vox asked, the wheeze in his tone irritating me.

You know what? Fuck this table. I smashed it into little bits, much to Vox’s horror, and created something from the ground instead.

Something I knew Claire would love.

Recalling her magic from class, a tree not of this world rooted into the floor, its earthly spirit thriving as I searched the fine grains. It grew, reaching out fresh limbs and blooming with some of Claire's impossibly fuzzy, sweet fruit. What had she called them?

Peaches.

I re-created their essence in my palm and sent several seeds scattering, telling them to remember Claire's element.

"Sol!"

Vox had been yelling at me for quite some time, but it was only when he slammed a wall of air into my chest that my eyes flung open, my energy ripped free from the magic and peaceful thoughts that had taken me under.

I stared at the result of my creation. What was supposed to be a dining table was now a long slab of wood with branches sticking out of the ends. Long roots burrowed into the broken tiles of the floor, and an engraving of Claire's peach tree decorated the polished surface. Sister trees sprouted out of the sides and leaned against the ceiling, heavy with fruit.

I smiled.

Vox balked at me. "What in the five elements has gotten into you, Sol? Now the entire floor is ruined and we have trees in our kitchen."

Titus chose that moment to walk in, sparking embers across his fingertips that looked like tiny explosions. He'd already been wearing a scowl when he'd entered, but when he saw my handiwork, he stopped midstride. "Well, somebody's redecorated."

Heat scalding my skin from embarrassment, I took a seat at one of the overgrown stumps at the table and plucked a peach from a lower branch. "You were making dinner, weren't you, Vox?" I reminded him. "You wanted me to fix the dining room, and, well, I did." Simple as that. I sank my teeth into the delicate fruit, relaxing instantly.

Vox glowered, then deflated—literally. A puff of air sent his loose hair floating around his head, the band having broken free in his attempts to reassemble the table. "Fine. I'll cook. Maybe some food will calm down whatever's gotten into you." He glanced at Titus, who had steam wafting off of his skin. "And you, too, apparently."

Titus took a nearby stump and glowered. "I don't want to talk about it." Flames slithered over his skin like snakes, making me flinch.

"Don't burn down the trees," I chided. "I made it for Claire because she

likes peaches. And I do, too.”

Titus hummed in approval, some of his fire dying. “Assuming she makes it back, I’m sure she’ll love them.”

There was so much resentment in his voice that I stopped eating. Juices from the peach ran down my wrist, and I wiped it on my pants. “Assuming she makes it back from where?” It struck me then that if she wasn’t with Titus, she had to be with Cyrus. Or maybe Elana.

Titus growled and clasped his fist in his hand. “Cyrus took her to the fucking Spirit Kingdom.” His eyes flashed with rage. “He claims to have a lead on Exos, but I call pixie shit on that.”

“But classes start up again in a few days,” I said, confused. “Why would he take her there? She could be gone for weeks. And then she’ll miss the ball.” That last part wasn’t meant to escape, but I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it for over a month. I never actually said *yes*, and she’d not brought it up again, so I didn’t know if we were going or not. But I sort of wanted to take her.

No, I *really* wanted to.

Which was definitely a problem because we were supposed to be just friends.

Except my fantasies were decidedly *not* friend-based.

The silence overwhelming the kitchen had me looking to Vox and Titus. They were both gaping at me.

“Claire’s been dragged off to the undead wasteland of a realm, and you’re worried about the ball?” Vox asked, sounding incredulous. “Since when do you care about those things?”

I creased my lips together and frowned. I’d already said too much, and Vox was right. Claire was in danger, although I highly doubted even the Spirit Kingdom could dampen her life. Still, this was no time to worry about stupid Academy social events.

Even if I was starting to look forward to it.

“Yeah, Sol,” Titus said, his flames receding as a spark of amusement flashed across his face. “Why do you care about the ball?”

“Did she ask you?” Vox interrupted, an odd note in his voice.

“So what if she did?” I demanded, taking another bite of the peach. “Titus didn’t ask her to go, and she said she’d go with me and we’d wear jeans.” We just never finalized our plans, but she still planned to go with me. *I think*.

“Formal attire is required,” Vox reminded me. “You can’t wear jeans.”

“Well, she said we’re wearing jeans, and I’m good with that.” And there wasn’t shit he could do about it.

Vox’s brow furrowed. “I’m going to win our bet. You’re falling for her.”

I snorted. “Dude, I haven’t lost yet. We’re not mated, just friends. Besides, what was I supposed to do? Tell her she can’t go to the ball?” Even I could hear the defensive quality of my tone, but fuck if I would admit it out loud. It was a ball. Who cared if I wanted to take her?

“If you don’t want to adhere to the social customs, you should let someone take her who actually wants to dress up,” Vox grumbled, slamming his knife down into the slab of meat with a gust of wind. He cursed when he couldn’t get the blade free from the cutting board.

Titus leaned back against one of the peach trees and smirked. “Are you two seriously bickering over who gets to go to the ball with Claire? Why don’t you just both take her?”

Vox stopped trying to yank his knife free, and I stared at the Fire Fae. “You’re not upset?” It was his mate, after all.

Titus shrugged. “Look, when she gets back from whatever nightmare Cyrus puts her through, she’ll need a distraction. I think the Solstice Ball is a great idea, but I can’t go. Banned, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” Vox chuckled. “You burned down the pixie orchestra at the last ball. That was hilarious.”

Titus frowned. “Only because some Water Fae were being dicks. I wasn’t in the mood for their shit.” He shuddered as if the idea of any Water Fae revolted him. I wanted to remind him that Claire had control over water as well, but I didn’t want to be the next thing he burned. “Anyway, you both should take her. It’ll help get her mind off things after Cyrus inevitably comes back empty-handed.” His jaw flexed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this is all a ruse on his part to make her stronger. He’s been a complete ass since day one.”

None of us were about to disagree with him, but the idea of both Vox and me taking her to the ball had me distracted. I couldn’t dance—not without destroying half the ballroom—and Vox could pull off a ballroom suit a lot better than I could. He could show her the good time she deserved without me trying to turn her down and probably hurt her feelings in the process.

“So, what are we supposed to do while they’re gone?” I asked, having grown accustomed to teaching Claire at earth class. The other students looked forward to watching her magic. It had been so long since we’d had an Earth

Fae with her kind of power and control—she didn't realize it, but we were learning from her.

Titus glanced up at the peach tree. "I think I have an idea."

Chapter 15

Claire



“**T**his is your childhood home?” I asked, marveling at the white marble walls and obsidian floors. It was so clean. So stark. So *bare*.

Cyrus leaned against one of the pristine pillars, his icy gaze holding me captive. “This isn’t just our childhood home; it’s our current one, too. It’s the Royal Palace of the Spirit Kingdom, Claire.”

I’d gathered the royal part by the grandiose appearance outside, but it seemed so unlively. Even the moats along the stone walls seemed still. “There’s no one here.” I grimaced as soon as the words left my mouth. “I mean, it’s—”

“Death,” he finished for me. “Yes.” He pushed away from the stone column and walked toward a balcony overlooking the grounds, his hands tucked behind his back.

I glanced at the old paintings hanging from the walls as I followed him, noting the portraits of all the stoic fae. That seemed to be where Exos and Cyrus obtained their hardness from, or maybe it was a result of growing up in this massive home alone.

Wisps of dead trees, still waters, and vapid land met my perusal outside. Even the setting sun seemed dim, the world around us awash in blacks and whites and little splashes of color. Except for what appeared to be a city in the distance, the glowing embers of a fire catching my gaze.

“Springfall,” Cyrus murmured, following my gaze. “It’s the only Spirit Fae community left in existence.” His hands had slid into his pockets, his expression closed off. “We have a residence there, one in the heart of the court, but Exos and I prefer staying here. It keeps us focused, reminds us of our failures and the journeys that rest ahead.”

“Sounds lonely,” I admitted.

He nodded. “It is, but it’s also necessary.”

“How do you help your people by living in isolation?” I wondered out loud, not following the logic. “Surely they would prefer to see you. And why are there no Spirit Fae at the Academy?” I’d started to assume there were no Spirit Fae left, but the colony of light appeared sizable, even at a distance.

“There are no fae of age to attend the Academy, Claire.”

I frowned. “Are they too young?”

“Claire,” he said, forcing my attention back to him. “You’re the youngest Spirit Fae in existence. No others were born after you.”

My lips parted. “Because of the plague.”

He nodded. “Yes.” He tilted his head. “Has my brother not spoken of this? Of the importance of your mating and what it means for our people?”

I swallowed and slowly shook my head. “We’ve... It’s been... Well, I mean—”

“A simple *no* would suffice,” he interjected, his tone suggesting his displeasure at my rambling.

But it wasn’t like there’d been an abundance of time for Exos and me to discuss all of this. Between my recruitment—if I could even call it that—into the Academy, and all the insanity that followed, plus his disappearance, we hadn’t gotten around to what it meant for him to be a royal. Or, really, anything about Spirit Fae history other than my mother’s impact.

“My people will pray for your fertility, Claire,” he said, his gaze returning to the glow of Springfall. “You’ll be our only hope at creating an heir to the Spirit Kingdom.”

My mouth worked without sound, his words not at all ones I expected to hear.

Fertility?

Heir?

“What?”

He glanced at me, his lips curling down. “Why else would you mate with my brother if not to perform royal duties?”

My eyes widened, my head moving back and forth. “You can’t be serious. I just met your brother.”

“And yet, you’re in the second stage of mating with him.” He faced me fully, his annoyance evident in the lines of his handsome face. “Are you truly so selfish that you would only engage in the bond for your own self-

fulfillment?” His blue eyes raked over me in disgust. “Never mind. Of course you are.”

He turned again, as if to walk away, but I grabbed his arm and yanked him back to me. “At least give me a second to process your accusations before giving up on my reply,” I snapped. God, this fae was such a fucking prick! “What is your problem with me?”

His perfect eyebrow arched. “Would you care for a list?” He didn’t give me a chance to reply before he started in on me. “You’re weak. You’re a Halfling, not a full-blooded fae. You’re not of the royal line. You’re unfaithful and parading around like a regular whore. You’re—”

My palm cracked across his face, my anger erupting into a fire along my skin and threatening to singe him to ash.

“You know nothing about me!” I shouted, done with all of this. “You asked me here to find Exos. So why the fuck are we here? What lesson are you trying to instill in me before we search for your brother? Because I’m done with your very wrong analysis of my character. Yes, I’m a Halfling—one with access to *five* elements. Fuck your bloodlines and imperious notions on what is best for your brother. Because he chose me, too, or did you forget that little detail of our bond?”

Fuck, I was furious.

I wanted to smack him again.

Kill him.

Something.

It took serious effort to take a step back from him. For I didn’t trust myself not to burn him alive for his crude evaluation.

“I am not a whore,” I whispered, the words costing me severely in emotion. Never had I felt so belittled in my life, and after everything I’d been through in the last few months, that was saying a lot. “You don’t know me at all, *Your Highness.*” I mock-bowed and left him on the balcony.

Only, he caught me after a few feet, his arm wrapping around my lower abdomen to yank me backward into his chest. “You’re wrong.” His lips were at my ear. “I’ve done nothing but study you for the last month, Claire. I *know* you.”

I slammed my foot back into his shin and tried to sweep his legs out from beneath him in the way Titus had taught me. Cyrus released me, but just long enough to whirl me in his arms and capture me again.

My fiery handprint on his cheek pleased me greatly, and I wanted to add

another.

So I fought him with all I was worth to hit him again. But he blocked each punch, his skill admirable and infuriatingly good.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded, enraged and exhausted and confused as hell. “Where’s the lead on Exos?”

“I’m preparing you for it,” he said, catching my fist again with ease and shoving me backward.

I charged him with a growl and almost clocked his face, only to find myself pinned yet again by his arms. Dropping low, I went for his knees and grunted as my back hit the ground. Cyrus landed on top of me with ease, his hands catching my wrists above my head.

My chest heaved beneath him, exerted from the impromptu battle. Yet he wasn’t even sweating. The damn fae barely seemed fazed at all!

“I fucking hate you,” I told him, squirming in earnest and not moving his body a fucking inch. *Gah!* “I wish they’d taken you instead of Exos!”

“Me, too,” he admitted softly. “I wish it every day, but it’s a waste of time and energy. What we need to do is find him.”

“Then find him,” I snapped. “Stop wasting *my* time with all this bullshit and look for him.”

“I’m not wasting your time, Claire.”

“Like hell you’re not,” I seethed, writhing beneath him to drive the point home. “Calling me a whore, telling me I’m not worthy, and criticizing—”

His mouth sealed over mine, silencing me.

I was so shocked at first that I didn’t react, my brain frying beneath the onslaught of power in that single brush of his lips.

What...?

No.

I bit him. *Hard.*irate that he thought to take such a liberty with me.

He hissed, his grip tightening on my wrists.

“Fuck you,” I snarled. “If this is your way of proving I’m a whore, then seriously, *fuck you.*”

He had the good grace to look chagrined, but only for a second. And the asshole still didn’t move. “I followed Mortus last night into the death fields. I think that’s where he’s keeping my brother. But what you need to understand is those grounds harbor tortured souls who play on fears and are notoriously degrading. They thrive on making a fae feel so small that he wishes for death. All the tormenting thoughts you’ve had about yourself will come to life out

there. Consider my words an introduction to the experience.”

He finally released me, popping to his feet before I could try to hit him again.

“I don’t think you’re a whore, little queen. But I know all about the social standards on Earth and how they’ve programmed your mind. Don’t let the death fields use those thoughts against you, or you may never recover.” He straightened his jacket, his stance stiff. “We leave in an hour.”

I gaped after him, deflated.

That had all been a test? No, a preparation of sorts. Including the kiss?

What the hell?

I shook my head, dazed.

Why does your brother have to be such a fucking dick? I asked Exos. *I mean, for fuck’s sake!*

Of course, he didn’t reply.

I ran my hand over my face. Only then did I feel it—the stirring of another bond. A seduction of sorts, my element reacting to a potential match. The liquid sensation settled over me, followed by a bolt of horror as I realized what had just occurred.

That hadn’t been any ordinary kiss.

No.

Cyrus had just tied me to him under stage one of the courtship.

Fuck!

Chapter 16

Cyrus



Why the fuck did I just kiss her?
To shut her up.
No.

Damn it.

I blew out a breath and glowered at my reflection in the mirror. I kissed her because I hated the agony in her expression that my words had caused. But it wasn't like I *meant* them. I just wanted to prepare her for the task ahead. Warning her would have defeated the purpose. She needed to feel those comments like a punch to her gut to understand the weight of the death fields. Otherwise, they'd destroy her.

But kissing her had not been part of my plan.

And now, my water element was rejoicing.

Not spirit, because my brother owned that part of her. So I'd taken the one that called to me most, the hot liquid boiling throughout her gorgeous form.

I gripped the counter, livid with my lack of restraint. I knew better than to indulge a female of equal power. Yet, I'd given in to the urge and taken what wasn't mine to take.

"I'm an ass," I said, shaking my head. Especially because I rather liked the way it felt to be connected to her.

I frowned at the foreign bond, evaluating it. Being a descendant of two royal bloodlines, I possessed equal power in both spirit and water. So establishing a bond with my water element didn't shock me, but it was far more fluid than I anticipated. I could *feel* her links to the others, the way her fire burned for Titus, how her spirit mourned for Exos, the intrigue her earth

had in Sol, and the admiration her air felt for Vox.

Am I supposed to be able to sense all of that? I wondered. *More importantly, can I use it to access Exos?*

The thought had me freezing in place.

A practical course, yes.

But how would that impact Claire? She already loathed me. I could sense that much in our initial bond. Oh, her water element was very attracted to mine. But the woman, well, I'd done myself no favors by kissing her.

"Fuck," I muttered, my shoulders hunching again.

Pragmatism nagged at me, whispering the rightness of the situation, how I could use it to my advantage in locating my brother. It was only an initial bond. Temporary, at best. Once I completed the task and saved him, I would release her of our obligations to one another, and she'd be free to mate with another Water Fae.

That sounded easy enough. And she'd be so thrilled with having Exos back that she wouldn't care. In fact, she'd be relieved to see me gone.

So how do I use this link? I wondered, exploring it further. If she felt me prodding around, she didn't react, but I certainly felt her fury at what I'd done.

I sighed.

This was going to be painful.

The things I did for my brother.

Chapter 17

Titus



I dropped the peach to the ground, stunned.
What.

The.

Fuck.

Was.

That?

“Titus?” Vox asked, hovering over another tree that Sol was struggling to get to twist just right into formation. We’d been at it for hours. When Claire came back home, she’d have a peach orchard of a paradise in the back of the Spirit Quad.

If Cyrus would give her death, then we would give her life.

“Did you guys feel that?” I asked, stumbling back into one of the finished trees. A few peaches thumped to the ground and burst a sweet scent into the air. My flames had a mind of their own and threatened to burn the precious life pressing against my spine.

Sol grabbed me by the arm, abandoning his project and making Vox curse as the boughs slapped him in the face. “Something’s wrong with you,” the giant observed.

No shit.

“It’s like... she’s *drenched*.” Claire was always my burning flame, but now something had doused her with an unexpected tidal wave that had hit me just as hard.

And she was pissed off about it, fighting it as hard as she could as her flames called for me, seeking for anything to evaporate the hopeless ocean that threatened to consume her.

But there was something even I could feel that made her hate herself. She had allowed it, even if it was brief. It'd been enough.

Sol frowned, dropping me to a sandy spot of the courtyard where I'd been working to make the soil fertile with touches of fire. My flames immediately spiraled out and sank into the ground, crystalizing the fine grains. It was as if my element was trying to reach out to her, to protect her from...

Him.

"Is Claire okay?" Vox asked, sweeping his hair back into a warrior's tail and securing the strands. "Do we need to go after her?"

It warmed my fiery heart that the Air Fae wouldn't think twice about marching into the Spirit Kingdom. I shook my head. "Even if we could survive in that shithole, it wouldn't be for long. And..." My eyes narrowed as my fingers curled into fists. "As pissed off as Claire is, she won't need our help."

"Why's she pissed off?" Sol asked, crouching to look me in the eye.

Just saying the words aloud made me want to set the world on fire.

"Cyrus pushed the first stage of a mating bond on her. And I'm going to fucking kill him."

Sol's eyes went wide.

Vox looked stunned, then a slightly hysterical laugh escaped him. "Even the Spirit King can't resist her," he mused, shaking his head. "I feel for Claire. She has her work cut out for her if she really is going to put up with a mate like Cyrus."

"What if he's not just trying to mate with her?" I snapped, embers sparking from my fingertips and threatening to catch the nearby brush on fire. "That asshole is up to something, and if he uses her, or hurts her in any way..."

Sol slammed a fist into the ground, sending a quake thundering through the entire quad. "I'll help you smash him," he said, a wide grin spreading across his face. The Earth Fae looked overjoyed by the idea of finally getting to challenge the prick. "Together, we'd be a match for him."

I'd been tolerating the ass until now, but if the Spirit King thought he could use Claire and throw her away, I would take Sol up on his offer.

Assuming Claire didn't murder him first.

Chapter 18

Claire



Fire licked across my knuckles, my ire at Cyrus growing with every step. He had barely said a word since we left the palace, only telling me to keep my head high.

Prick.

He bonded with me without permission.

And now he wanted to act like it hadn't happened?

Well, fuck him.

Titus once told me this stage lasted a month. I'd have to ask him if there was a way to reject the link sooner. Maybe it would hurt. Oh, I hoped it would. Cyrus, specifically. Because the bastard—

“You can only sever a connection early when both parties are willing,” Cyrus murmured. “Just as, coincidentally, you can only create one between willing partners.” He glanced over his shoulder at me as he led me down a gravel path toward the darkness beyond. “So what angers you more, little queen? That I bonded with you without asking? Or that you accepted the bond?”

I glared at him. “Don't read my mind.”

“Then stop telegraphing so loudly,” he returned.

If I had a gun, I'd shoot him in that perfect ass of his. Maybe I could set fire to his pants instead. After we found Exos.

Which reminded me... “How do you think your brother is going to feel about this?”

He shrugged. “I assume he'll be too relieved at being freed to care. Besides, you wouldn't be the first fae we've shared.”

I stumbled over the flat ground, causing him to whirl around and catch

me by the waist before I fell on my face. We stayed like that for a long moment, him holding me precariously in the air while I remembered how to breathe.

You wouldn't be the first fae we've shared.

Oh God.

Fuck.

I didn't like the picture that came into my thoughts with that comment. Mainly because it was one of me sandwiched between them. And no.

No. No. No. No.

My head was shaking with the thought, eliciting a deep chuckle from Cyrus. "You humans and your sensibilities. I've always found it amusing. Fae are far more passionate creatures, little queen. Why else do you think Exos approves of your mating with other males?" His lips feathered over my temple as he righted me beside him. "We'll talk more about that later. I need you focused."

Focused.

Yeah.

Like that was going to happen.

He'd just admitted to *sharing* women with Exos. Which... was fucking hot. And so, so, so wrong.

"Stop fretting," he whispered, his palm sliding to my lower back. "Do you see the dark patch up there?" He pointed with his opposite hand, highlighting a particularly ominous-looking hole in the landscape ahead. "That's the entrance to the death fields."

I swallowed. "Okay. What exactly is a death field?" He'd mentioned the taunts, but that really didn't tell me anything. I mean, how did a field *talk*?

"I believe you would call them cemeteries," he murmured, his touch a brand against my spine. "But these are Spirit Fae tombs. Tormented Spirit Fae."

"The plague," I whispered.

"Yes. It's where we buried the dead."

Hence, death fields, I translated. *Right*. "But their souls still live?"

"To an extent." He started walking again, the pressure along my lower back forcing me to move alongside him. "Most fae live several hundred years, but Spirit Fae are known to live longer. We embody life and death, after all. But most of the victims lying in that field died far too young, long before their spirits were ready to leave."

He continued in silence, his heartache a palpable presence in the link we'd forged. Deep inside, he felt responsible, like he'd let his people down. The guilt of it washed over me, the hardship of having to lead a dying breed and the helplessness that accompanied it. He and Exos were the last of their kind, the last Royal Fae, and if they didn't continue their legacy, his entire kingdom would die.

"It does something to a fae to have their bodies die before their souls are ready to move on," he added, his voice gruff. "And that's what the death fields have become. That's what Titus feared, what everyone fears. The words I said to you are just a taste of what you'll hear here, Claire. These spirits are desperate and deteriorated, and all they do is writhe in a sea of despair."

"Can nothing be done for them?" I asked, feeling the desolation creeping over me with every step closer to the vapid hole before us. Maybe it was all in my mind, maybe it was from the link with Cyrus, but I suspected it was more. I could almost hear their screams.

"We've tried." His palm flexed against my back, his demeanor shifting. "They were originally buried in family plots, but the darkness spread, infecting those nearby and driving what few remained insane. It's why we created this place, why we reburied them all here, as far away from Springfall as possible. But they've only grown harsher, more restless, and there are those who believe the sickness will spread once more."

I stopped midstep, glancing up at him. "Am I putting myself in danger by crossing that threshold? Can I become sick?"

"Yes." He didn't hesitate, the answer certain. "As can I. But if you ignore the taunts, realize they're just words and not reality, you'll be okay."

"I don't understand."

He fully faced me. "The sickness they carry is a darkness of spirit, one that corrupts and controls, but if you ignore them and the cruelty they spread, you won't fall victim to their plight."

"So it's not like a contagious disease," I clarified.

"Not like your human world, no. It's a corrosion of life." He glanced at the paling sky, his expression thoughtful. "Think of it like being told you're worthless your entire life and finally believing it. What happens?"

"You become depressed."

"Well, yes, but I mean beyond that. Surely you've heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Where if you believe something enough, you'll make it

happen.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“That’s what these tormented essences do. They warp you into believing you’re evil, despicable, a failure, until all you want to do is die. And then maybe you forget to eat. You forget how to *live*, thereby killing your body while your spirit remains.”

“That’s a horrible way to go,” I whispered.

“It’s a horrible thing to observe,” he countered.

“But I thought the Spirit Fae all died in one day,” I said, recalling the story Exos once told me. “That my mother and Mortus fought, and nearly ninety percent of the Spirit Fae died as a result?”

He tilted his chin once. “Yes. But it was as if they all lost the will to live at once, and just stopped. Their spirits rose, leaving their bodies to rot, and that’s what we buried. Only, the souls eventually came back, but their hosts were no longer viable, leaving them in this constant state of turmoil.”

“So could they ever be rejoined?” I asked, picturing hundreds of zombie bodies being repossessed by dead spirits. That sounded... bad.

Fortunately, Cyrus negated the idea with a swift shake. “No. There’s nothing that can be done for them now. We just have to wait for their spirits to move on, except they seem unable to, as the circle of life has been so vastly disrupted. As I said, you’re the youngest of our kind. No other females have been able to conceive since that day, and what’s worse, it’s spreading.”

“To the Earth Fae.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, giving me a nudge to move forward again. “One trip to the death fields won’t hurt you, Claire. You just have to remember to tune them all out, and don’t believe anything you hear.”

I took several steps before a thought struck me so hard in the chest I stumbled again. “You think Mortus has been keeping Exos here?” The words came out on a gasp, Cyrus’s grip on my hip the only thing keeping me upright.

He gazed down at me with a tired expression, one that bespoke of his own fears—ones he’d clearly been hiding even from himself.

“You tried to find him last night,” I realized out loud, reading the true exhaustion and knowledge in his gaze, felt it creeping along our bond as he fought futilely to hold it back. “You couldn’t sense him above the chaos of the voices.”

He didn’t reply because he didn’t have to. I sensed everything I needed to

through our fresh link—the guilt, the exasperation, the utter notion of failure, and the most important one of all, regret.

“You don’t want me to have to do this.” It was right there at the forefront of his thoughts, the hatred at what he needed to do, but his loyalty to Exos outweighed his regard for me. And it was something I had to respect, to understand, and I did. “You’re doing the right thing, Cyrus.”

“Am I?” he asked, cupping my cheek. “Was binding us the right thing?”

It provided me with fresh insight into his decisions, helped me respect some of his choices even if I didn’t agree with them. “I guess we’ll find out,” I said, placing my hand over his. “Take me into the death fields, Cyrus. I’ll let you know what I sense.”

He dipped his head to whisper his lips over mine. “Thank you, Claire.”

A tenuous agreement formed between us, one founded in a like-minded goal—to find Exos.

As we walked, I wondered if this openness between our minds was normal, because I hadn’t felt that way with Titus during our first stage. Same with Exos. But I could read Cyrus clear as day, and he’d made it obvious he could access me just as easily.

“It’s not,” he admitted, again hearing my thoughts, or perhaps openly assessing them. “But water is a fluid element; it’s clear and concise and always consistent. It makes sense that our bond would resemble those qualities.”

I could understand that—the purity and clarity of water thriving between us.

It was the complete opposite of the opaqueness at the end of this path, standing maybe ten feet away. I gulped at the sight of it, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Power lurked beyond that threshold.

Not the good kind, but the bad. I could feel the inky quality rubbing along my skin, giving me the sensation of wrongness and urging me to turn around.

Something isn’t right here, I thought to myself. But still I kept moving, my need to see if I could even pick up a trace of Exos forcing me onward. Because if he resided in this field, it was a wonder he still breathed.

“He’s strong,” Cyrus whispered. “He always has been. But if he pushed you out, it was for a reason.”

“And you suspect this is why.”

“Yes.”

“Where did you follow Mortus to?” I asked, needing to focus, to ground myself. Because already I could feel my soul being twisted as if invisible hands had entered my being to stroke me from within.

And we weren’t even inside yet.

“I’ll show you,” Cyrus said, his touch falling away from my back, to my arm, and down to my palm, where he linked our fingers. “Don’t let go of me, Claire.”

“I won’t.” I squeezed his hand for emphasis and allowed him to lead me over the threshold. Moss instantly encased my feet, sliding over my shoes and up my socks. Yet when I looked down, I saw nothing but gravel.

Strange.

Cyrus continued moving, and I struggled alongside him, my ears clouding with a buzzing energy that hummed inside my mind.

Not words, no.

Just a constant sizzling that left me squinting into the foggy chasm. I blinked to clear it, but that didn’t help. All I saw were writhing creatures, smoke and brimstone, and a darkness that threatened to swallow me whole.

I tried to ask Cyrus to explain but found myself alone, his hand no longer in mine.

Whirling around, I sought his presence, only to see miles and miles of clouds in all directions. The ground began to shake, my name a chant on the wind.

Cyrus...

I couldn’t sense him.

Couldn’t breathe.

What’s happening?

The moss was climbing again, still invisible, but there. It drove through the fibers of my clothes, seeping into my veins and painting my blood in shades of black.

I shook in time with the ground, my soul screaming at me to run. But I didn’t know where to go. I couldn’t remember where I’d entered, couldn’t focus on anything other than the impending doom surrounding me.

Tears streaked down my face.

My heart raced.

The world blinked in and out.

And all I could do was fall, fall, fall... into nothingness. And everything. And bittersweet darkness.

My home.

Chapter 19

Cyrus



Fuck!

Now I knew what Mortus had been up to last night. He'd set a fucking trap. And not for me, but for Claire.

I wrapped my arms around her, tugging harshly against some unknown force. It seemed to be sucking the elements right out of her, as if starving for her life. And it was fucking killing her.

Her skin turned ashen, her breath stuttering between blue lips. It'd all happened so quickly, her body whirling around in a violent circle as her life drained before my eyes.

"Claire!" I shouted.

Nothing.

Not even an acknowledgment.

Just a limp, boneless body collapsing into mine.

I had to get her out of here. But that force had its claws so deep into her, preventing me from moving. So I did the only thing I could think to do. I misted.

Water overwhelmed my senses, transforming me into a breeze that allowed me to traverse kingdoms via magical means. Only, I'd never taken another being with me before.

Come on, I urged, thickening my energy and forcing it to overwhelm Claire. A hint of her water responded, as if a hand was forming from within her and reaching for me. I grasped it with my mind, locking our element together in a whirlpool of power.

My chest ached beneath the force of it, a connection forming that surpassed time and space, but it was the only way to free her from that

violent hold.

I felt it now. The inky abyss sucking her into a black hole of malevolence, stripping her of her gifts, and cascading her to the darkest depths of the ocean floor.

Not on my watch, asshole! I shoved the shadow back with a tidal wave so strong that the being—trap—*thing*—unlatched, releasing Claire to my superior strength, causing me to stumble backward in mist form.

I didn't think; I acted.

My power wrapped around her in earnest, forcing her to disintegrate into water molecules that I could manipulate, and I took her with me to the only place I knew would help.

We collapsed in a bedchamber I never used.

In a kingdom I rarely visited.

The cascade of falls graced my vision, a fountain running in the corner with renewed vigor at my presence, as an unconscious Claire lay in my arms.

Crashing booms echoed outside the chambers, the guards sensing the presence of a powerful fae and rushing to defend their territory. The doors flew open, a Water Fae with broad shoulders and thick thighs plowed inside.

“Who are—” His mouth actually fell open at the sight of me on the floor with a nearly dead female clasped tightly to my chest. “My Prince.” He dropped to his knee, head bowed. Most referred to me as their *king*. Here they called me *Prince* for my water birthright, one I'd rejected. But today I needed *his* help.

Everyone followed suit, their dismay clear.

But none of them possessed the presence or power I needed.

“My father,” I rasped. “I need my father.”

Chaos erupted around us. Shouts ensued. But all of my focus was on the too-cold woman in my arms.

Guilt pounded through my thoughts. I should have known Mortus wouldn't lead me to Exos so easily, that he knew I was following him last night.

Damn it to the Elements!

“Claire,” I whispered, rocking her helplessly and feeling her life escape between my fingers. This wasn't supposed to happen. Exos trusted me to guard her, to *protect* her, and I'd led her to her own fucking slaughter.

And I still didn't know what caused it or how that shadowy thing had sucked the life from her. The death fields embodied so many nightmares, but

nothing like that. It had reminded me of a vampire, something so starved for the elements that it'd hooked itself into Claire and drank freely of her power.

How?

What monstrosity had Mortus created? And why had it only attacked Claire?

"Son?" My father's voice held a note of concern, his confusion written into the lines of his face. His formal attire suggested I'd interrupted something important, but the way he came to his knees before me said he didn't care. "Is this...?"

"Claire," I breathed. "I took her to the death fields, looking for Exos, and something attacked her. It sucked the elements right out of her. I don't... I don't know what to do."

He placed his palm on her forehead and closed his eyes. "She's weak," he agreed.

An understatement. I could see the tendrils of her soul threatening to leave her body, the fear etched into her essence palpable. *Hang on, little queen,* I whispered. *I'm going to fix this.*

Somehow, some way, I would uphold that promise to her. I had to. Exos was counting on me. Claire, too.

"Your bond is strong," he marveled, tilting his head to the side. "Very strong for being so fresh."

"It was an accident," I admitted, ashamed now more than ever. She deserved so much better. "We briefly kissed and it formed."

His blue eyes—the same color as my own—focused on me, his brow crinkling. "You're in the third stage, son."

I blinked. "*What?* No. We just... It's new... I mean..." *What?* I checked the connection, mortification and horror swimming through my veins. "Oh, Elements..." He was right. When I grasped for her element to mist her here, we'd *bonded*. Irrevocably binding our souls, proclaiming unspoken vows of eternity.

It was deeper than her link to Exos.

He's going to kill me.

Fuck, Claire is going to kill me.

"You must finish it," my father urged. "It's the only way. I can feel the others she's reached out to, but there's no time to bring them here. She'll die."

"Finish it?" I repeated, my heart skipping a beat. "Finish the bond?"

Without her permission?

“She needs your strength, Cyrus. Without the lifeline, she’ll never recover. It might already be too late.”

Sprites, this is bad. Very, very bad.

“You don’t have time. Either you save her or you don’t. But wallowing in your fate will cost the girl her life.” There was the father I knew—direct and to the point without a hint of remorse. He might as well have said I dug my own grave by initiating this link to begin with.

Which, yeah, he’d be right.

“What if she rejects it?” I asked, noting the very real chance of that happening.

“Her elements rule her now, and there’s no better water match in this world than the rightful Water King,” he replied, a challenge in his tone, daring me to contradict him. For once, I didn’t take the bait. This wasn’t about my conflicting destiny or the fact that my power outweighed his and all other Water Fae. This was about saving Claire.

“Tell me what I need to do,” I said, my choice already made.

I couldn’t leave her to suffer, couldn’t allow her to die because of my mistake.

Maybe I deserved a future of unrequited love.

At least Exos would be happy.

And Claire.

This was not the right recourse—bonding an unconscious female was the epitome of taboo—but what choice did I have? She needed a lifeline, and I was the only one available.

“Prepare the ceremonial chambers,” my father demanded, causing fae to scatter. “This has to be done right and quickly.”

I nodded, knowing what he meant. The best way to guarantee that Claire’s element accepted mine was to make her feel at peace.

She was so cold and small in my arms, her skin a now bluish tint.

I hated seeing her this way, hated more that I’d caused this through my own urgency to finish this task. Mortus may have set the trap, but I knew better than to step into it.

I’m sorry, Exos, I thought, knowing full well he couldn’t hear me.

He wasn’t anywhere near those death fields. I felt it now through the bond with Claire that Exos remained somewhere safe and untainted. Had I taken two minutes to prod her a little deeper earlier, after our initial

connection, I would have sensed that.

But instead I'd led her astray.

"Come," my father said, his palm a brand against my shoulder.

I cradled Claire against my chest and stood, following him without a word, knowing what this meant.

Not only would I be taking on an unwilling queen, but we were mating under the element of water. Which stirred an entirely different problem, one I would acknowledge later. Because if I thought about the ramifications now, I'd run. And Claire didn't deserve that.

Fuck, she didn't deserve any of this.

She was not the son of two powerful bloodlines. My future was never hers to bear.

Although, now she would have no choice.

And I hated myself all the more.

I'd wanted to push her to greatness, but not like this, not by forcing her to become the Water Fae Queen.

My father's mate—Coral—met us in the hallway, her black hair spun high on her head and clipped with pink shells. A beautiful woman, one admired by many. But the way she looked at me bespoke of our history, her trepidation of getting too close to the true heir of the Water Kingdom throne.

She was my mother's replacement after the plague took her life.

And I'd never given her a chance to be anyone else.

"Cyrus," she said, bowing her head in a manner of respect she bestowed on few others.

"Coral," I returned, the usual acid in my tone gone in favor of the female curled into my core.

She eyed Claire with interest, her lack of questions suggesting she'd already been informed of what was happening.

Time seemed to be escaping me by the minute, Claire's life hanging on by a thread I desperately held on to. I could feel the presence of the others, all lending their elements to her in a vain attempt to bolster her reserves. With every passing moment, I sensed the veracity of my father's claim.

Claire needed a fully bonded mate to provide her with the strength she required to survive.

And while she'd probably prefer it to be Titus, not even he could bring her back now.

She needed royal blood.

My blood.

A room adorned in plants and life opened before us, the altar situated at the foot of a giant waterfall. I'd only been here once—the day my father took his new bride in the mating-bond ceremony.

It was one of the worst days of my life, rivaling the funeral of my mother. And I'd not set foot in these palace walls since.

That would change today, my obligation to the Water Kingdom bearing down on me with the weight of a thousand waves.

I laid Claire on the podium, brushed the blonde hair from her face, and bent to press my forehead to her icy one.

“Hang on, little queen.” There were preparations required, the need for a fae priestess to initiate the ceremony. All I could do now was pray we weren't too late.

Because my father was right. I could feel it now, the need to finish this, to give her what she required. But it was on Claire to accept it. To accept *me*.

And after our tenuous relationship, I wouldn't be surprised if she told me to mist off.

In which case, Elements help us all...

Chapter 20

Sol



What the hell was that? I thought, bleary-eyed and dazed. I slept like a rock—literally—but the explosion that flashed behind my eyelids had me shooting straight up in a cold sweat.

Heat raked across my skin, making my element react and crust over a protective layer of earth.

Where is it coming from?

I rushed to the source, my entire room bathed in a glow of red, and found an inferno shooting into the sky in front of the Spirit Quad.

Titus.

I knew the Fire Fae was powerful, but he roared with terrifying fury with arms outstretched and muscles taut as his element left him all at once, seeking and devouring everything in its wake.

Something pinched inside my chest, and I grabbed at it as if a needle had just pricked me. Then it struck again, this time harder, and cracks spread out at my feet in protest.

“Sol!” Vox came billowing from the house in a rush of wind that caught the inferno and sent tiny tornados swirling across the destroyed landscape. “What’s happening?” His wild black eyes with that distinct ring of silver grew wide as he took in the scene. “Sol, you have to stop Titus from whatever he’s doing. He’s going to die if he keeps that up!”

This had to be the same force that took Exos, that wanted Claire dead, and now it was after us.

“I’ll get to him,” I promised and set my feet apart. I’d never done this before, but now was not the time to fear what I was capable of. I opened the gate that I kept tightly locked on my talent. No hesitation. No fear at what I

might destroy. If I didn't stop Titus, his flames would consume him and then melt us all.

My power rushed out of me and made the world tremble, but Titus wouldn't be deterred. His inferno lifted him up and made him throw his head back, and he pushed even harder on a scream, his skin turning white-hot and his eyes ablaze when they flung open to take note of me.

"Claire!" he roared, the name a plea.

My gut twisted that something might have happened to her, but I couldn't help Claire right now. Titus was the one about to rip himself in half, and I had to get him under control.

Control, the one thing I feared losing, slipped over me like a breeze, and I glanced back to see Vox with his arms spread and his hair flung out around him like an ancient god of the fae. Few knew his true power, but I did. It was why he'd been assigned to me and also why I trusted him.

He wasn't afraid to contain the earth.

The wind listened to him, swirling the fires aside and giving me the energy I needed to keep my own unruly power in check.

Bless you, Vox.

My skin took on an impenetrable armor, and the heat lessened to a manageable level. I stormed up to Titus and grabbed him by the neck. "You need to stop!"

"Claire!" Titus repeated, the name a vow.

Then I felt it.

I felt *her*.

That ache inside my chest grew and became a clawing need. It was coming from Claire.

My eyes went wide. *She's dying.*

"Impossible," I breathed. Claire and I hadn't made a connection, hadn't bonded even on the lowest level, but she was inside my soul, reaching out to me, begging me for my element.

No wonder Titus was losing his shit.

I turned to see Vox concentrating on keeping the inferno in check, as well as stabilizing my energy, but Claire could do that for me.

If I just gave in, we could help each other.

The fires loomed, building walls that crept closer to the edges of the quad and threatened to reach the trees bordering Earth Quad. These weren't normal flames. They would consume everything in their path, and nothing would

stop them. Titus had lost control, being the only bonded mate that Claire could reach out to, and she'd taken too much.

It was as if something had sucked the very life out of her, forcing her to latch onto those closest to her, to help her reinforce her elements.

Without the added strength, she'd die. I could feel it in my very soul. There was no choice here. Either I let her in or I allowed her to perish.

And damn it, I couldn't let that happen.

"Vox!" I yelled, sending my voice booming across the distance between us. "It's Claire! Let her in!"

He flinched and his winds twisted. "Are you insane? I can't let you go; you'll be even worse off than Titus!"

I knew Vox's fears. If my control slipped, even for a second, I could split the world in two.

Titus grabbed my shoulder and squeezed, his hot fingers a brand even against my armor. His eyes glowed with rage and fury and desperation. "Give her what she needs," he begged. "She's dying. I can't give her enough." He sounded so broken. So alone. So anguished.

And it was all the encouragement I needed. I closed my eyes and felt her spirit slip inside as if it had always meant to be there. The sweet flush of peaches filled my senses, and her earth warmed over me like an embrace. I fell to my knees, relieved when Vox's steadfast control retreated as he followed suit.

The world trembled, burned, and my ears suffered the howl of a thousand hurricanes.

But Claire would live, if only for just a few moments longer.

It would have to be long enough.

Because I felt it now, the water energy joining the others.

You better save her, Cyrus, I thought. Or there will be hell to pay when you return.

Chapter 21

Cyrus



Claire was no longer breathing, her body limp on the altar. Warm water flowed around her, most of it controlled by my magic, as I fought to keep her alive long enough to complete the ceremony.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

She should be awake and willing, not knocking at death's door. Fuck, my betrothed should at the very least *like* me, but we were nowhere near that level of comfort. I was just a means to an end for her. A nuisance she wanted to get rid of at her earliest opportunity.

And I couldn't blame her for that.

Yet I wouldn't change a thing.

Other than not taking her into the death fields.

But her training? The way she'd strengthened under my harsh treatment? That was my doing by being the enforcer she needed. The others were too soft on her, drowning the fighter inside. I provoked her to the forefront, and I hoped like hell that little warrior met me now.

"We must begin," my father said as the priestess arrived.

"This is unprecedented," the petite fae replied, taking in the scene before her. "We value consent as one of the highest principles."

"With life right above it," I told the tiny, white-haired woman. "If it's not meant to be, her element will reject mine. Now stop delaying."

I stroked my thumb across Claire's frozen cheek, willing the hot springs around her to heat her blue skin. It didn't work. Because that wasn't what she needed.

Her elements were drowning, seeping from her body to the netherworld. She needed an anchor.

I would be that anchor if she accepted the bond.

The priestess took her position before us, her frail hand lifting to hover over Claire's heart. A chant began, one hummed in the old language. I closed my eyes, allowing the whispers to infiltrate my being, taking me to a place in the fae heavens where energy pulsed bright and consuming.

Claire, I breathed, searching for her spirit, willing her to come forth, to join me in the plane and allow me to give her what she required to survive. *Come to me, little queen.*

I clasped her hand in the ceremonial room, squeezing tight, while my soul roamed the fields in pursuit of her. She wasn't gone yet. I could feel her life hanging in limbo, her fae half striving to hold on just a little longer as if it knew what I would offer.

And there.

Sitting by the spring, her eyes a gorgeous blue, I found her.

She played her fingers across the water, watching it form on her fingertips before floating up to the beaming sun. *It's beautiful*, she marveled, oblivious to the chaos looming over her prone form.

You're beautiful, I admitted, swallowing. *Do you know why you're here?*

She shook her head, sending those alluring golden curls in waves down her exposed back. This flowy dress she wore was unlike any I'd seen her in, but I wanted to buy her hundreds just to see it again. Because she was stunning. Strong. Luminescent.

I like it here, she whispered as if the words were a secret only for me. And maybe they were.

It's one of our most sacred places, Claire. Not even I have ever set foot here.

Why now? she wondered, her voice holding a musical quality I longed to hear from her icy lips.

The priestess guided us here for our vows.

Mmm. She looked around, her expression one of awe and expectation. The water element in her was taking over and driving her instincts, knowing the reason for all of this even while the human inside had no idea.

I need you to repeat the vows, I told her, hearing them from the priestess now. *Can you do that for me?*

She murmured her approval, her bright blue eyes smiling up at me. The utter devotion in that gaze nearly undid me. I had to remember it was her element staring at me like that, not Claire. Because she never gazed at me in

that manner. And likely never would.

“I, Claire...,” the priestess started.

And I began translating each word for my betrothed, needing her to hear them from my lips, not from those of a stranger.

I, Claire, accept the power that binds me to Cyrus, born of Spirit and Water. To cherish and respect, through all of the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part. I give unto him my fluidity, my grace, my tranquility, and accept his in return. My element is now his just as his is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake him for another, my water forever belonging to him and to him alone.

She repeated each word, the pledge engraving her name into a piece of my heart that I would never get back. Tears filled my eyes by the end, the very real ramifications finally settling over me as my own oath began.

I, Cyrus, former King of Spirit and heir to the Water Kingdom, accept the power that binds me to Claire, future Queen of the Water Kingdom. To cherish and respect, through all of the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part. I give unto her my favor, my serenity, my purity, and accept hers in return. My element is now hers just as hers is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake her for another, my water forever belonging to her and to her alone.

A binding energy flourished around us, swimming through our veins, flooding my thoughts and my heart, and forever tying me to a woman who never wanted me. And to a kingdom I never desired.

But I wasn't given time to consider the future, the spring around Claire bubbling over into a wave of molten lava that threatened us both. I grabbed her and misted back to my quarters, the ceremony complete, and held her against me as her energy consumed mine.

Take what you need, I encouraged her, feeling her lethal yearning.

My heart raced as our elements locked, her water greedily absorbing mine as I cocooned us in a sea of warmth and allowed the waterfall in my chambers to soothe her ears and lull us both into a comatose state.

I'd done my part.

Now it was on Claire to survive.

But a warrior lurked within her, one my presence seemed to provoke best. And that warrior was now raging in my head, seeking out every reserve and drinking me dry.

I succumbed to the darkness, my last thoughts for Claire. *You'll have to*

do better than that, little queen. Take everything. Take more. And don't stop until you can breathe.

Chapter 22

Exos



Magic stirred around me, a desperate pull at my senses, and yanked me from my hole with a fierceness few others could possess.

Claire.

She was all around me, her spirit weeping with words I couldn't understand. I flew upright, the barren cell around me unfamiliar and cold. *Where am I?*

Another wave of need hit me hard in the chest, sending me to the floor on a groan. It felt as if my heart were splitting in two.

No. My spirit.

My eyes flew open. Something had happened to Claire. Her death slithered around me, her need for my energy clawing at my insides and begging me to save her.

Only, another was there instead of me.

Water.

The hot spring scented the air, a new bond falling into place.

Cyrus.

I would recognize that power anywhere. He'd taken his rightful place in the Water Kingdom. And it seemed Claire was his chosen queen.

Fuck.

My throat refused to work. My body stiff from disuse.

What's happening?

I felt it then, the fraying link to Claire, unraveling from being without one another too long. A tear fell from my eye, a foreign concept, one I'd never experienced, not even at my parents' funeral.

But for Claire...

I collapsed in anguish, my spirit withering at the erosion between us. *Claire...* I needed to find her, to rekindle our bond.

I'd waited too long to escape. Hid from that dark essence for far more time than I'd anticipated.

Where is it? I wondered, searching the shadowy recesses of my cell, noting the low lighting in the dingy corridor. No one spoke. Nothing moved. *I'm alone down here.*

I stood, my legs protesting beneath me, and shook the iron bars. They didn't move. *But I'm awake*, I realized. *That gives me an advantage.*

All I had to do was wait. Someone would come by soon, and I'd manipulate that person into releasing me.

Don't forget me, Claire, I whispered. *I'm coming for you.* Because I had to warn her. I just couldn't remember about who or what. But someone, *something*, was down here with me. *Who?*

I shook my head, dazed from several weeks—over a month—of shutting everything down.

Why had I done that? Better yet, why can't I remember anything of import?

I swallowed, my throat parched from disuse. I just had to escape, then everything would be fine. It had to be.

Another ache settled over me, Claire's essence drawing on mine, and I allowed it. Whatever had happened, she needed it more, and I had enough left to fight.

Whoever put me down here was going to die. Horribly.

And I couldn't fucking wait.

Chapter 23

Claire



SEVERAL DAYS LATER...

Exos stroked my cheek, his breath warm against my neck. I snuggled closer, adoring his strength and the crisp scent of water clinging to his skin. *Mmm, that's new.* He usually smelled of sunshine and man, but today he held a cleaner scent, reminding me of the rain forest.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice huskier than usual.

I smiled. “Refreshed.” Oh, how my throat burned.

A straw slid between my lips as if he knew. “Drink, little queen.”

My brow furrowed even as I complied. *That's a new nickname.* Exos usually called me *princess*, sometimes *baby* when he was turned on. My thighs clenched at the prospect, missing his touch and the way our element danced when together.

I drew my finger down his bare abdomen, creating a stream of water along his skin. I'd meant to use fire, but this worked, too.

Exos groaned as I pushed him back, my tongue already traveling downward to lick up the mess I'd made.

“Claire...,” he cautioned.

“Shh.” I needed this. Needed *him*. My body ached with weakness, my heart not fully whole.

I don't want to think, I decided, indulging in the motions instead of my thoughts. I could analyze my body later. For now, I wanted to mate. To complete the bond we'd started. To consummate our link.

Some part of me questioned that logic.

A hint of the Claire of old.

But the Claire of new pushed worry and concern out the window, the fae inside me flourishing to the forefront.

“*I need,*” I said, not necessarily understanding what I required, just that I did.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded, that voice harsher than Exos’s usual tone. He pushed me to my back, his lower body settling between mine and causing me to arch up into him.

Something was different.

A fluidity in our movements I’d never felt before.

Oh, I *liked* it.

“More,” I begged.

“Look at me first.” He trapped my hips as I tried to move upward, his hands on my face, a trace of cool water sliding across my lips that I licked off on a moan.

My eyelids fluttered, a dull light illuminating the male above me. So cruelly handsome with aristocratic lines etched into his stern jaw and perfect nose.

But the eyes were all wrong.

Not Exos.

“Cyrus,” I breathed, confused, but not alarmed. A sense of safety fell over me, his essence so well known and welcomed that I could never push him away. I cupped his cheek and tilted my chin enough to brush my mouth against his. “Kiss me.” Two words I never thought I’d say in his company, but they fell from my lips like a prayer.

It wasn’t Exos I needed, but Cyrus. I felt incomplete without him, a puzzle piece missing from where we were joined.

“Oh, Claire,” he whispered, his forehead falling to mine. “You don’t understand yet.”

“Make me understand. Show me.” I drew my nails down his bare back, adoring the way his muscles flexed beneath my touch. “Please, Cyrus.”

“You’re killing me.” He swallowed, his arousal thickening between my thighs. “The urge to... It’s wrong, little queen. So fucking wrong.”

“Then make it right.” I kissed him again, this time with more force, and licked his bottom lip. “I need you.”

I couldn’t explain why.

Didn’t understand how I’d ended up in bed beneath him.

But fuck my mind. My body ruled me now. And water.

I wrapped him in a sheet of my power and smiled as he caressed me in kind. So much peace in that seductive touch. It elicited a sigh so deep that I swore I left the world for a moment before I returned.

“Cyrus,” I breathed, arching into him once more. *“Please.”*

His growl vibrated my chest, causing my nipples to bead against him beneath the shift I wore. I wiggled, wanting it off, yearning to *feel*.

And then his mouth took mine in a kiss unlike any other. It subdued me in a way that left me whirling beneath him. His tongue became my new addiction, my only way to breathe, as he took me underwater and caressed me with his very soul.

“I’m going to hell,” he whispered.

“Only if I can go with you,” I replied, wrapping my arms around his neck as he ripped the gown from my body. His clothes soon joined the torn garments on the floor, allowing me my first glimpse at the beauty that was Cyrus.

All seamless lines of perfection, a swimmer’s body encased in a power I longed to stroke.

I went to my knees with him, both of us naked and admiring and petting and memorizing. His fingers wove into my hair, his lips capturing mine once more, as his opposite hand dipped between my legs. “So fucking wet,” he praised.

I gripped his shaft, marveling at the size and girth, and smiled. “So damn hard.”

He chuckled, his teeth running over my bottom lip before he sucked it deep into his mouth. “I’m sorry, Claire.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I just am,” he murmured, his mouth taking mine again and silencing my reply.

He released my hair to grasp my hips, yanking me forward and returning me to my back. His tongue slid across my cheek, to my ear, and down my neck to my breasts. I wove my fingers through his hair, reveling in the sensations his mouth unleashed on my stiff peaks. He used his teeth, causing me to writhe, while his hand disappeared between my legs again.

Gentle wasn’t in Cyrus’s nature.

And yet, every touch was smooth and thorough, reminding me of waves caressing my skin.

A sense of rightness overwhelmed me, causing my water element to

dance to the surface and play with his. Raindrops prickled our skin, vacillating between hot and cold, each one eliciting a new sensation between my legs.

“Cyrus...” Each pelt against my being churned the ache inside me, creating a whirlpool I couldn’t control. It kept building and building, overtaking me and consuming my every breath. “*More.*”

He kissed his way up my body, each brush of his mouth stirring a moan from my throat, until I swore I would scream.

“I can’t say no to you,” he said against my ear, his arousal aligning with mine. “I’ll give you what you need, Claire.”

“Yes,” I hissed, bowing off the bed as he slid inside me.

So slick.

So wet.

So perfectly *us*.

I wrapped my arms around him, holding him possessively and swearing to never let him go. His head fell to my neck, his harsh curse fueling my desire. My legs wound around his waist, my body pumping in time with his, as he edged us closer to the waterfall of oblivion.

Threading my fingers in his hair, I forced his mouth back to mine, kissing him as if I required him more than oxygen. And maybe I did. Because I swore we were swimming underwater.

All I could hear were our hearts beating in tandem with one another.

The slide of his body over mine.

And the consuming warmth building between my thighs.

His name fell from my lips, only to be caught by his. One of his hands fell to my hips, urging me to keep up with his quickening pace, while the other cupped my cheek.

Icy blue eyes met mine.

Pain blending with pleasure.

And that look alone sent me cascading over the falls into the blissful waters below. He followed on a bellow, my name a hum within his mind, as something powerful snapped into place.

Contentment settled over me.

Complete, my heart whispered. *We’re now complete.*

You own me, Claire, I heard him say in my mind. *Until the end of time.*

I yawned, too exhausted to reply, and kissed him softly instead. His tongue played over mine in lazy strokes, our bodies still joined below. The

rightness of it all lulled me into a slumber, a smile permanently etched into my lips.

Peace.

I finally knew peace.



I woke two more times to the same treatment. Cyrus's body a healing solvent I didn't know I needed. Each session I felt stronger, invigorated, and pleased.

But I sensed unrest deep within. My other elements dissatisfied by my prolonged slumber.

Soon I would emerge from this watery cocoon.

Someone needed me.

I only wished I knew who.

Rest, I heard someone say. You'll find me when you're ready.

Mmm, I loved that voice. *Okay.*

I'll be waiting...

Okay, I repeated, snuggling into the hot male at my side. I miss you.

I miss you, too, princess.

"We'll go back to them soon," a deep voice murmured, lips close to my ear. "Maybe even tomorrow. Sleep and we'll evaluate your strength then."

"Mmm, 'kay." I nuzzled his skin, adoring the fresh scent and allowing it to overwhelm my senses. "I trust you."

And I did.

Because he was mine.

And I trusted what was mine.

"We'll see" was his reply. "Sleep, little queen."

I yawned, nodding. Who was I to argue with a king?

Chapter 24

Cyrus



My father joined me on the balcony of my rooms, his light hair tied back at the nape. Most Water Fae preferred to wear their hair long, enjoying the way it flowed like water over their shoulders. I preferred to keep mine shorter, as was customary of my spirit side. That might have to change in the years to come.

Another concession, I thought. All for a female I never desired to love.

Yet glancing over my shoulder now to see her blonde curls against my navy pillows had me thinking otherwise. Claire was special. Very, very special.

“How is she?” my father asked, following my gaze.

Well fucked, I mused, eyeing her swollen lips and resting form. The silky sheets hid her body from view, but I knew the rest of her was just as well sated as her mouth. “She’s recovering,” I said out loud instead. “Slowly, but steadily.”

He nodded. “Her healing will improve and strengthen even more once she’s near her other elements.”

I agreed. “Yes. I’m thinking of moving her tomorrow.” While she still slept most of the day, her moments of lucidity were powerful. And, well, demanding. Every time she opened her eyes, she reached for me and wouldn’t focus on anything else—like eating—until I fucked her senseless. “I had no idea the mating bond could be so... stimulating.” Not that I was complaining. I rather benefited from Claire’s neediness.

“Your bond is making up for what should have been months of courtship,” he murmured. “I’m not surprised it’s asserting certain requirements on you both.” His expression lacked the amusement in his tone,

his gaze taking on a faraway gleam as he rested his elbows on the balcony railing. "I'll save you the lecture, son. We both know what this means."

I appreciated him not wasting my time with words. My mind was littered with enough of them already. "I can't ascend until I've found Exos." Because I couldn't rule two kingdoms.

He remained quiet for a long moment, the breeze from the seas below ruffling the collar of his suit and blowing the fabric of my loose pants. It felt nice being surrounded by life and energy. Yet my duty to the Spirit Kingdom hung over my head, weighing me down. I couldn't just turn my back on them. Even after I accepted my rightful place here, I'd advocate for the kingdom I considered my true home.

"I wish you would have come to me," he finally said. "About Exos, I mean."

"You know why I didn't."

"Yes. But you know I can keep a secret from the Council, Cyrus." He glanced sideways at me. "I think this week proves it, don't you?"

I swallowed, bowing my head in agreement. "Yes." While the news of my mating with Claire had spread on a tidal wave throughout the kingdom, the circumstances that required it were never mentioned. And my father had even gone as far as to tell Elana that we were on a honeymoon of sorts, which was why Claire needed to miss her internship and some school.

I supposed it wasn't entirely a lie. We'd spent all week in bed together, after all.

But my father had done what he could to protect us both, and I appreciated his loyalty. Even more so because he didn't tell anyone about Exos's disappearance.

"Do you still believe him to be in the death fields?" he inquired.

I shook my head. "No. He's awake now." I'd felt him through Claire, a thriving presence pacing in a cage, waiting. It took serious effort not to request she communicate with him, or allow me to penetrate her spirit to find him, but her rest came first. Both to me and to Exos.

And my brother would kill me if I broke that unspoken pact.

Never in my life could I have imagined putting another before my kin, but Claire changed everything.

She's my mate.

I vowed to protect her, to cherish her, to comfort her in times of sickness, and most importantly, I promised to put her needs above my own.

“When she’s in a better mental state, I’ll ask her to reach out to my brother,” I said, having decided this days ago. “What’s important is that he’s alive. He’ll be able to assume his duties as the Spirit King once we’ve found him, and then I’ll face the consequences of my mating.”

“Consequences,” my father repeated, snorting. “Still so reluctant to accept your true place.”

“The Spirit Fae need me more than the Water Fae.” It was an old argument, but still relevant. “You’re not even two hundred years old. They’re fine beneath your rule.”

“But there will always be contention until the most powerful rises to the top, son. That’s what you fail to understand. You worry about your spirit half while neglecting your fae here, and while many may understand the choice, fae will always respond to power. And you possess the strongest water element of any in the history of our kind.” He glanced again at the beauty in my bed. “With Claire being a close second.”

Those were the right words to say. I liked that he acknowledged her gift. Even ungroomed she surpassed the royals in this palace. “She’s amazing, isn’t she?”

“I had my doubts,” he admitted. “But I can feel her potential now. If you’re not careful, she’ll surpass even you.”

“And wouldn’t that be a wonder for the Fae World to see?” I mused, intrigued by the prospect while also knowing it to be impossible. Oh, Claire possessed superior abilities to most. However, her connection to water didn’t quite rival mine. Even with training, I’d still remain the king of this kingdom.

Oh, but Claire would become queen to several kingdoms. And *that* was what made her more powerful than even I was.

“When do you leave?” he asked, again staring at the incoming waves crashing into the black sand beach below.

“Tomorrow,” I decided out loud. “Being around Sol, Vox, and Titus should improve her health enough for her to hear Exos clearly.” It would also lessen some of the tension I felt building in the bonds, her other mates longing for their Claire. She still didn’t yet understand that she’d bonded with Sol and Vox in her desperation for survival, her elements reaching out to those she trusted most and latching onto their reserves to bolster her own.

When she awoke, she’d be controlled by her fae half.

I truly hoped the human beneath could accept it.

I knew enough about her former land to understand how hard it would be

for her to embrace. But her elements would give her no choice. She needed a mate for each element, and she officially had them.

A circle of nature.

One I never thought to be a part of, but I had no choice now. As a fully bonded partner, I would remain no matter what the recourse.

And my heart would always be faithful to her, even if we'd never exchanged the emotional platitude of words. This was how our kind functioned. And as long as she welcomed it with an open mind, our unit would function seamlessly.

"We'll talk after you find your brother," my father said, clapping me on the shoulder. "I'll handle the politics here in the interim."

"Thank you." I looked at him then, needing him to see the full extent of my gratitude. "I mean that. Thank you for everything."

"You're my son," he replied, his lips curling faintly at the edges. "Thank you for trusting me with this."

I tilted my chin, acknowledging his concession.

Our relationship was tenuous at best. But we were about to get a whole lot closer.

Oh, Claire, I thought, turning back to the bedroom and her stirring form. *You have no idea how complicated this is about to become.*

Her beautiful blue eyes blinked open, the sleepy quality inside stealing my breath for just a moment.

And then she reached for me, that sultry purr in her throat telling me exactly what she desired.

My father excused himself silently as I lowered myself over my bride and captured her mouth in the kiss I knew she craved.

One more night alone.

Then I'd share her once more.

But for tonight, she was mine.

My Claire.

Chapter 25

Vox



A week.

A fucking week and we still hadn't heard anything.

My fingers went to my chest, the ache still there, reminding me that I hadn't imagined the horrible night where Titus had gone supernova in front of the Spirit Quad and Sol had very nearly lost control of his power.

The night Claire had taken over.

Her presence a breath inside me, begging me to help her, to let her in. And I—

“Vox!” Professor Helios snapped, making me flinch. His bushy brows furrowed with impatience. My reputation as his best student had taken a hit over the last month. I'd been too damn distracted.

She's ruining me. In the best way. And the worst.

My half-hearted attempt at today's exercise resembled exactly how I felt. A weakened air pixie floundered on my desk, sending dust motes drifting around her head as she feebly squeaked up at me in protest. She shuddered, wilted, and then disintegrated into ash.

“I didn't say you could dismiss your project,” the professor deadpanned, but I recognized the note of concern in the way the air flitted around him.

The other students whispered, their magic sending words flying all over the classroom in wisps I shouldn't have been able to hear, but everything had changed since that night with Claire. Aside from the obvious—our forced bond. But in addition to that, my powers seemed to be going haywire. Claire had weakened me by absorbing so much of my element, and it left my magic clawing at me with a lack of control I wasn't used to experiencing.

Is this how Sol feels all the time?

“Vox. What in the motes has gotten—”

A knock at the door interrupted the professor’s reprimand, and I was relieved until I spotted Elana’s bright eyes and friendly smile.

Shit.

“May I speak to Vox for a moment?” she asked.

The stunned professor bowed. “Of course, Chancellor.”

The whispers started up again, and I tried to ignore them, but my magic wouldn’t allow me a moment’s peace. It was as if the elements wanted me to be on full alert until Claire returned and finished what she’d done to me.

“Do you think it’s about the Halfling?”

“Didn’t you hear? She’s the Water Queen.”

“Oh, I know. It’s insane. Cyrus and Exos?”

“Well, Vox mentors her, too. And I swear I sense her on him.”

“Does anyone know what that explosion last week was about?”

“I heard...”

I rolled my shoulders, shrugging off the murmured rumors, and met Elana outside.

She shut the door with a soft *click* before turning to me and giving me that too-friendly smile again.

“Vox,” she greeted, her gaze sweeping over me and no doubt taking note of the dark circles under my eyes, my loose hair, and the way air seemed to distort around me with my uncustomary lack of control. She took a step closer, invading my air currents in a way that made me stiffen. “I’ve mitigated most of the rumors about last week’s incident, but you’re going to have to tell me what’s going on. It’s getting worse and, forgive me, but you all look like rocks uprooted after a storm.”

Everyone had seen Titus shooting fire into the sky, the tornados I’d conjured to contain him, and Sol’s quakes that had shaken the entire Academy. There was no way we could hide what had happened—but we couldn’t explain it. Not without consulting Cyrus and Claire first.

“When the Spirit King returns, we’ll give you an update,” I assured her for the millionth time.

Her head tilted. “You’re tired, Vox. Is Claire all right? Is there anything I can do?”

Elana’s eyes were kind, but I sensed her frustration. It rivaled my own. Claire wasn’t here at the Academy, where we could keep her safe. And the only news we’d received were rumors on the whispering winds that she’d...

I couldn't even repeat the offense in my mind.

Water Queen, my conscious said anyway.

A sharp pain jolted through my skull, and I pressed my thumb to my temple.

Elana moved closer, motioning to rest a hand on my arm, but my air shoved her away. She flinched, a hurt expression crossing over her eyes.

"Sorry," I breathed and let out a long breath. "I think I should just go back to the Spirit Quad and rest."

She considered me for a moment as she absently tested my air currents with her own magic, tiny dew droplets riding the breeze and glimmering around us like crystals. The effect seemed unconscious on her part, just an extension of her ever-growing power. Which perplexed me because I didn't know she had an affinity for water. It was well known that Elana only had access to spirit, unlike the other of her kind, who all maintained two elements.

"If I don't see improvement in the next few days, I will need to intervene," she warned. "Whatever it is you all are going through, you do not have to do it alone."

Wrong. This had nothing to do with her. This was between Claire and her guardians.

However, I nodded to appease her. "We'll get it under control," I promised, uncertain of how we would accomplish it, but knowing we needed to.

The tension in my chest stung again and I rubbed at it. Whatever Cyrus was doing to Claire was strengthening her, and I hoped that meant she'd return soon.

Because when she did, she had some damn explaining to do.



If I'd hoped to get some reprieve by returning to the Spirit Quad, I was in for a disappointment.

Without Claire, the place seemed to fit its reputation. The Spirit Quad had lost what little bit of life she'd sprung back into it, the ground outside a

desolate wasteland of cracked, burnt soil and overturned stones.

My affinity for air cleared my path, flinging away debris as I approached the front door and made my way inside. I found Titus brooding over a cooling plate of leftovers.

I winced. Admittedly, my cooking had taken a hit ever since that night. I just didn't have it in me. "Not hungry?" I asked him, leaning against a darkened stump that had once been a dining table.

Titus didn't look up. Instead, he glowered at the tepid soup. "It's too cold." Meaning he couldn't heat it up.

I sighed and rubbed at my chest again. "My powers are on the fritz, too. Whatever Claire did to us—"

Titus was in my face, eyes wild with awakened embers, before I had a chance to even think about finishing that sentence. "This isn't Claire's fault," he snapped.

Normally, I'd find the Fire Fae intimidating, but I didn't have the patience for his short temper today. I sent a gust of wind reeling and aimed at his chest.

He grunted as the force knocked him back. My powers didn't seem to work unless I was emotionally invested, like right now with Titus in my face, which wasn't like me at all. I wouldn't admit how much that lack of control unsettled me.

"Where's Sol?" I asked. "Perhaps he's better company right now."

Titus ground his teeth before replying. "Out back. But if you think he's better company than me, good fucking luck." Titus shoved past me, his embers burning my Academy robes as he went.

I doused the tiny flames with a snap of wind and thought about going after the Fire Fae, but a fight was what he wanted.

Actually, you know what? Fuck it. I want a fight, too.

My vision went white, and with it, a tornado burst into existence. Every display of weakness I'd had over the past few days transformed into what was really hiding under the surface. My royal lineage had been dormant, suppressed under years of careful control, but something had cracked, allowing it to escape.

Titus bellowed and didn't have time to stop the force from launching him into the air. He hit the wall—*hard*—and landed with a thud. He popped back onto his feet and grinned.

"A challenge? Who knew you had it in you?" His smile was feral. "Let's

take it outside and burn off some steam. Or better yet, let's go *find* her."

The fae wasn't even fazed by my attack.

He just wanted a sparring partner. A way to let loose.

I dismissed the tornado with a flick of my wrist, sending siding and damaged wood crashing to the ground. Our kitchen was even more hopelessly ruined. Not that I cared.

Okay, maybe I did a little.

Damn it!

"We can't just go barreling into the Water Kingdom without permission. We are Academy students," I reminded him. "We don't have the clearance or the right to trespass." It was Elana's dream to unite the fae, the Academy being a grand gesture in that regard, but borders were tighter than ever since the plague hit.

Titus growled. "I'm so fucking tired of these excuses." Fire burst up his arms, then quelled, and then flamed again. "Claire is stuck there, and if Cyrus isn't going to tell us what the fuck is going on, he can't blame us for going after her. Can't you feel that she needs us?"

Yes, of course I could feel her.

That was the problem.

"I'm not going anywhere without Sol," I said, my air rumbling over the ground in tiny somersaults.

"I think you'll find him far more willing than you realize. Ask him." Red veins spidered down Titus's arms as if a volcano built inside of him and was just itching to get out. "Actually, you know what? Fuck that. If you and Sol aren't at the front door in five minutes, I'm leaving without you assholes."

Cursing under my breath, I snatched up the tepid soup—which had remained miraculously untouched—and marched toward the back of the quad. Even if it was pathetic food, it was still food. And I needed something to bargain with.

"Sol!" I bellowed.

I hadn't checked on the peach orchard since that night, but stopped, alarmed, when I saw the unexpected decay. What Sol had spent days putting his energy into, a thriving forest of life and sweet fruit, was now a graveyard. Wilted trees hung with rotten fruit, and a sour scent spiked the air.

I found Sol slumped against one of the larger trees that had a scar down its center and leaned precariously to the side with half of its roots upended. Sol didn't seem to notice and tossed pebbles across the dirt.

“Sol,” I tried again, my voice softer as I approached him. “You all right, buddy?”

He glanced up at me, and he looked just as tired as I felt. “It’s all ruined,” he lamented. “When Claire gets back, she’s going to be so disappointed. She didn’t get to see what it looked like... before.” He turned his attention back to the ground, and his shoulders sagged.

I set the bowl of soup next to him. “You sure you don’t want to eat something?”

He wrinkled his nose at the bowl. “I’m good, thanks.”

Sitting down, I sighed. “Well, we’re a sorry pair, aren’t we?”

Sol scoffed. “That’s what happens when we find a beautiful mate and Cyrus keeps her all to himself.”

My fist curled at the thought. I forced myself to loosen my fingers. “We didn’t find a mate.” I palmed the back of my neck, noting the knots there and wincing. “She didn’t give us much of a choice.”

Sol’s eyes, the color of the earth with flecks of green, glanced at me, full of disdain. “Is that what you really think? She chose us, Vox.”

“Actually, she didn’t.” The memories of the last few weeks had me jumping to my feet. I started pacing, my air working overtime to brush aside the countless stones Sol had scattered across the courtyard. The pungent smell of rotting fruit wasn’t helping my mood, either. “Maybe she chose you, but she didn’t choose me,” I continued, needing him to understand. “Think about it, Sol. She asked you to the ball. I’m just a convenient Air Fae for her to suck dry. I’m a fucking mentor with benefits.”

And I was not pleased about it.

“Don’t talk about her like that,” Sol warned as the ground trembled. “She was dying, Vox. And she would never force a mating bond. Claire isn’t like that. She needs us just as much as we need her, and I know you can feel her inside of you.” He rubbed a fist over his heart, in the same spot where my own chest ached with a need I couldn’t understand. “Trust your soul for once, not your head.”

I scoffed and opened my arms at the expanse of destruction around us. “You mean you’re taking it so well?” I marched over to him and bent to stab a finger into his chest, which hurt when my knuckle popped, but I didn’t care. “Look at this place, Sol. You’re falling apart without her because *she* bonded to *you*, and she’s not even fucking here!”

“Enough!” came a voice with enough power to make both Sol and me

flinch.

Authority.

Demand.

I turned, only to have every air molecule inside of me wilt with both relief and fury.

Cyrus stood with an unconscious Claire in his arms, and all I wanted to do was punch him in the face.

Chapter 26

Cyrus



What a fucking mess, I thought while laying Claire down in her bed. The silky blue robe she wore contrasted with the cotton surrounding her. I slid it from her shoulders, removing it entirely, and allowed her to nest into the familiarity of her own sheets.

She murmured something unintelligible, lost to her dreams, but I immediately felt her content at the energy strengthening around her. Returning her to the Academy had been the right call.

Even if I had three very angry fae at my back. They were oblivious to Claire's nakedness, mostly because I blocked their view of it.

Once the blankets covered her completely, I turned to face the fuming mob.

Titus seemed ready to push forward, to take over, but I shoved him back with a water punch to the chest. "Outside," I demanded, not wanting to disturb Claire. She needed more rest.

All three of the men appeared ready to argue, but one pointed glance over my shoulder at the sleeping beauty had the trio marching toward the exit.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Titus snapped as soon as we exited the building.

"What the hell did you do to the kitchen?" I asked instead, having noted all the destruction along the way. At least Claire's bedroom appeared safe and clean.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Titus was apparently ready to kill me. I couldn't blame him. It wasn't like I'd explained much yet. "What the hell happened to Claire?"

"That's an excellent question," I replied, folding my arms. "One I'm still

trying to figure out myself. Some sort of entity latched onto her in the death fields and drained her elements.” What perplexed me most was that it hadn’t touched me at all, only Claire. “It nearly killed her.”

“Clearly.” Vox rubbed his chest, his brow furrowing. “She mated with all three of us.”

“I know.” I’d felt it. “She required the strength. Without it, she would have died.”

“Which is why you mated with her as well?” Titus pressed, clearly sensing our intense connection.

I nodded. “You were too far away to help, and Exos, well, he’s still missing. So I completed the ceremony and lent her my elements.” It had left me drained, but functioning. Unlike these three. They all appeared to be swept away with the waves, their exhaustion palpable. “What the hell have you been doing all week?”

A laugh burst from Titus, one born not of amusement but of disbelief.

And Sol followed suit.

Same with Vox.

“Have you all lost your minds?” I demanded, alarmed.

“You’re joking right?” Titus chuckled again, the sound broken and oddly maniacal.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded.

“Oh, fuck you,” Vox said, uncharacteristically confrontational. I saw it then, the anger lingering in his gaze. Sol’s eyes held a glimmer of it, too.

They all appeared desperate.

No... they were furious.

Titus lost his cool first, the fire bursting out of him and nearly hitting me square in my chest.

“Seriously?” I shouted, infuriated by the ridiculous attack. Even though I was weakened by Claire, he was no match for me. Except Vox joined him next with a howl of wind that swept my hair back and pushed me several feet into the dead courtyard.

A courtyard that was sinking quickly into a hole created by the Earth Fae.

“Okay,” I said, calm despite the three-way attack. “I can see we have some aggression issues to work through.” I shoved them all back with a wave that swept the three of them off their feet. “You want to play with me? Let’s do this. But I expect your best, not this cockamamie bullshit attempt.” I lifted my hand in a *come get me* gesture. “And when I win—which I will—I expect

a little more respect while we discuss next steps.”

None of them acknowledged me.

They just attacked.

Idiots.

But I supposed I deserved it. I hadn't exactly been forthcoming over the last week, what with being too busy saving Claire. And fucking her senseless.

Yeah, all right, I'd be mad, too.

So I allowed Titus to get one good fire punch in, the stroke of it singeing my cheek. I gave Vox his chance to slap me with a clap of wind. And I granted Sol one powerful shake beneath my feet.

Then I went to work, schooling the three of them simultaneously with a shock of water that temporarily doused their fight. It wasn't good enough to knock some sense into them, though, because they came at me with a renewed vigor, determined to drown me in their anguish and frustration.

And while I may have deserved some of it, I wasn't about to accept all of the blame.

“I saved Claire,” I reminded them all. “Without me, she would have died.”

“Without you, she wouldn't have been in danger to begin with,” Titus tossed back over the roaring winds. “*You* are the reason she almost died!”

“And you left us here with no word,” Vox added. “No idea of how she was doing, while expecting us to give her everything.”

“What they said,” Sol agreed.

Well, at least they were all working as a unit.

“I didn't almost kill her. Whatever trap Mortus left for us was the culprit.” That was the argument I'd given myself for the last week. It almost satisfied me. Almost. “How is our fighting benefiting Claire?”

“I don't know, but I feel a hell of a lot better right now.” Sol's words vibrated the earth, the giant finally allowing his powers out to play.

While I appreciated the show of force, I would have preferred it to not be directed at me.

“You feel better because Claire is back,” I informed them, my words carried over the wake of another wave that sent them all to the ground. *Again.* “Now stop wasting my time and let's talk about this like—”

A blast of fire knocked me backward a few feet, the flames burning a hole in my suit.

“Okay.” I brushed off the embers. “Right. We'll work this out the

unintelligent way, then.” I showered them all with hail, which earned me a whip of sound to my ear—Vox attacking strategically. “Remember, I tried to warn you,” I said, infusing a hint of disappointment into my tone.

And then I let them truly feel the brunt of my power.

They would all bow by the time I finished.

I was, after all, a Royal King, and they were about to find out what that meant.

Chapter 27

Exos



Claire, I whispered, sensing her stronger state. *Baby, I need you to hear me now. I can't wait any longer. You feel it, don't you? Our connection fraying? Another day or two and it'll be too late. I need you to find me now.*

Silence.

I paced in my dark cell, frustrated. I'd hoped by now that someone would check up on me down here. Alas, no. I was just as alone as the first day I awoke—whenever that was.

At least the inky presence had disappeared. Well, mostly. The culprit had left some residue in my mind, blocking the memories I desired most. While I recognized the energy signature, I couldn't recall the owner, and it was pissing me the fuck off.

I couldn't even recall who knocked me out to begin with, yet I firmly remembered the sensation of being blasted from behind.

Claire, I tried again. Baby, please.

Still nothing.

I growled and kept moving, doing everything I could to keep my body in prime condition. A month of lounging had resulted in slight deterioration, but not much. Fae could withstand far worse treatment, including an extended time period without food.

Of course, that didn't make me any less hungry or thirsty.

Fuck, what I wouldn't give for a crackle pie right now. Juicy, thick, and oh-so decadent. I sent images of it to Claire for fun, wondering if I could wake her with thoughts of food.

Or even better...

I thought about running my hands over her body, our spirits dancing on a plane only we could reach, and drew kisses down her sternum to the sweet place between her thighs. *I love the way you taste*, I whispered. *Mmm, I miss it, Claire. When I see you again, I'm going to devour every inch of you and kill anyone who gets in my way.*

A flicker of something came back to me.

Intrigue.

I smiled. *So sex is how I get you to talk to me, is it?*

A sleepy unintelligible murmur traveled through our link, amusing me despite my surroundings.

You want me to continue? I taunted. *Talk to you about how I plan to fuck you for the first time? How I intend to make you scream for hours upon hours?*

Exos... She sounded so tired.

Yes, baby, I'm here, I whispered to her. *I'm sorry for waking you, but I need you to find me. Can you do that for me, Claire? Can you track me by using our link?*

No reply.

"Fuck," I groaned, slamming my fist into the wall. If I didn't get her up soon, our link would die. Permanently.

So I tried again.

And again.

Her name blossoming into a prayer inside my mind, my heart begging her to hear me, to focus, to come for me.

I'm not giving up, I told her. *You will hear me. Now wake up, Claire. Wake. Up. Right. Now.*

Chapter 28

Claire



Mmm, I loved this dream.
Exos's hands swam over my skin, heating my sides, my breasts, my throat. And Cyrus remained a cool presence at my back, his fingers trailing along the warmth to leave ice in their wake.

Hot and cold.

A torture underlined in delicious energy and followed by lips tracing every inch of my form. Both men were powerful, their elements playing with mine and building an inferno between my thighs.

They wanted to enter me at the same time.

Oh, it was wicked.

Could I let them?

Would I enjoy it?

Yes, they whispered in unison.

Oh God... I shuddered, the sensations overwhelming my mind and forcing me into awareness as I exploded in the silence of the night.

Alone.

With my hand between my legs.

“Shit,” I breathed, convulsing wildly from the orgasm I hadn't expected to be real. “That's new...” I collapsed onto the bed, the black sheets familiar and scented of Titus, not Cyrus or Exos.

I frowned. Why did that feel wrong? I'd dreamt of silky blue sheets, a stream running near the foot of the bed, and a handsome Water Fae with a talented tongue.

And Exos.

My heart panged at the thought, our connection hanging on by a bare

thread. What happened when it severed?

Once broken, it cannot be reengaged, Exos's voice was fluid in my mind and underlined in sadness. *You have to find me, Claire. Before it's too late.*

But where are you? I wondered, terrified at the thought of losing him. *You cut me off. I can't feel you anymore.* It hurt so much to say, to know that this was just another dream. *I hate this.*

I'm here, baby. I've been here all week.

I frowned. *What? All week? When? How? Where?*

And why did I smell like Cyrus?

I looked around the familiar room, searching for something, a hint, anything to explain the last few days and why I felt so weak.

Use our connection, Claire, Exos demanded, his royal tones causing my lips to twitch with the familiarity. *I'm not far. I feel you. Which means you can feel me. Follow the link. Find me.*

I pinched my side, needing to ensure that I was actually awake. Because everything seemed foggy, as if I'd been living underwater for days or weeks.

So strange.

Claire. Exos's voice sounded strained. *Please. I need you to find me.*

I will, I vowed, sliding from the bed. *I just need to tell the others that I can hear you again.* And to confirm that this was real, not a dream.

Cyrus can help, he replied. *I can sense his bond, which means he can sense mine.*

Bond? I froze with my hand on the doorknob, the memories crashing over me in a wave that left me shaking. *Oh, fuck...*

I hadn't just bonded to Cyrus, we'd *mated.*

And then we fu—

I shook my head, clearing it.

Except that didn't help at all. Vivid images of how he took my body assaulted my conscious all at once and had my thighs clenching with need despite the orgasm that had awoken me.

I have a serious problem, I decided. *I'm addicted to sex.*

I'm very much okay with this problem, Exos returned, sounding amused.

That wasn't meant for you, I said, my cheeks flushing red.

But I heard it anyway. And he didn't sound at all apologetic about it.

Who else had heard it? Cyrus? Titus? And what else was happening? *Is that Sol and Vox?* I asked, a tiny shriek in my head. *Don't answer that.*

Because I didn't need him to.

I felt all five of them inside me, their elements soothing mine and replenishing my energy reserves. Something had happened that caused me to establish connections to all of them. I just couldn't remember *what* brought me to that point.

I definitely recalled the outcome, though. All the nights and mornings and days in bed with Cyrus. The petting. The kissing. The pleasure.

It made no sense. I hated him.

And yet, deep down, I cared for him.

Talk about a conundrum. My emotions were all over the place, yet my elements had never felt more stable. For once, I actually felt a semblance of control. Like my powers were finally grounded and just awaiting my command.

Claire, baby, I love that you're finally embracing your fae half, but I need you to find me, Exos urged. *Please.*

Right. I could play with these sensations later.

For now, I needed to focus on Exos and how to locate him. Which required a better understanding of how to track the link.

I closed my eyes to envision my connections—all five of them.

Insanity, I marveled while prodding each one tentatively. Four were in a cluster, suggesting them to be nearby. The fifth was close, but not with the others.

You're not far, I whispered to him. *But I don't recognize the land you're in.*

Show Cyrus. He'll help.

Okay. I never thought I'd want Cyrus's help with anything, considering our tumultuous relationship, but I sensed his adoration now through the bond.

Totally unreal.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this.

And yet, here I was, bonded to *five* men.

I had no choice but to embrace it. Primarily because it gave me a sense of completion I hadn't realized was missing before. Now I didn't want to go back. I *liked* this semblance of control, this power, this flourishing energy surrounding my soul.

You were destined to be a queen, Exos agreed, his voice soft. *Now go find Cyrus.*

I twisted the handle on the door and went into the living area, searching for the four elements I felt nearby. *Outside,* my mind prompted. A strange

place for them all to be while I rested inside, but maybe they were having a meeting of sorts.

Or maybe they were trying to kill each other.

I gaped at the scene before me—Cyrus with a wall of water protecting him from the fire and air Titus and Vox were throwing at him, and a stream beneath his feet to keep him elevated above the hole in the ground.

“What in the world are you all doing?” I asked, my voice far raspier than I intended. I cleared my throat and tried again, but my words were mere whispers despite my alarm.

I sent a note of panic through the links—an instinctual response that had four pairs of eyes swinging my way, all of them rounding at the sight of me standing outside.

And the elemental battle ceased.

“What the hell was that?” I demanded on a hoarse whisper of sound.

A fountain of water appeared before my lips, Cyrus offering me the drink I hadn’t realized I needed. I sipped from the cool spring and sighed, content, and tried again. “What’s gotten into you guys?”

“Uh, Claire...” Chagrin painted Titus’s features, his voice trailing off.

Vox and Sol appeared too speechless to explain.

And Cyrus just seemed to be amused.

Whatever these fae had been up to, no one wanted to speak. Okay, fine. I’d focus on the more important task at hand, then. “Exos is awake and talking to me, and I have a hint of his location. He’s close, but not on Academy grounds.”

All traces of enjoyment left Cyrus’s features. “What did he say?”

“That if I don’t find him soon, the link will be broken.” I cringed with the words. “We need to find him today.” And given the location of the moon overhead, I estimated we had about twelve hours. How I created that timetable, I didn’t know. I just knew it was right.

“Has he mentioned Mortus?” Cyrus asked, seeming to be the only one capable of speaking.

“No.” I thought the question at Exos and heard a snort travel through the line.

Yeah, I sense his presence down here, but something’s not right. Tell Cyrus I think Mortus is being influenced.

I conveyed the message.

Cyrus scratched his jaw. “Interesting. I imagine Exos doesn’t know by

who, or he would have said.” He glanced at the trio of gaping fae. “Seriously. It’s like the three of you have never seen a naked woman before. Pull yourselves together. We have work to do.”

I frowned at his statement. It seemed to come out of—

Wait...

I glanced down, a gasp leaving my throat. “Oh, shit.” I’d wandered out here without clothes on. Heat climbed up my neck, a squeak leaving my lips. “Oops.”

“Not complaining,” Cyrus said, lifting a shoulder. “And these guys aren’t, either. Or they wouldn’t be if they had enough brains to fucking talk.”

Vox and Sol spluttered.

Titus merely smirked. “You look healthy, Claire.”

“Doesn’t she?” Cyrus mused, his icy gaze roaming over me knowingly and stirring a warmth deep inside.

Oh God. I’d practically mauled him this week in my *need*. Who knew sex could be so healing? Even now, I craved more.

With all of them.

This is bad.

“I’m going to, uh, yeah.” I ran back inside, the desire to roll myself up in a sleeping bag and never come out overwhelming my thoughts.

Five traces of arousal mingled with enjoyment inside of me.

Even Exos knew.

You men are going to be trouble, I growled.

And you’ll love every minute of it, Exos returned.

We’ll see, I grumbled, finding one of Titus’s robes that hit me well below my knees.

Can you be naked when you find me? Exos wondered, a teasing note in his voice. *Because I could use a little relief, Claire.*

My face went up in flames. *Exos.*

Claire.

I puffed out a breath. *You’re incorrigible.*

No, princess. I’m bored and I miss you.

I miss you, too, I said, my shoulders falling. *I’m coming for you, Exos. I promise.*

Oh, I know, baby. And soon you’ll use those words beneath me in bed.

One-track mind, I accused.

Says the woman who ran naked into an elemental battle between four

males. But hey, at least you captured their attention.

I'm going to start ignoring you now, I lied, my lips twitching despite my mortification.

Then I'll just speak louder, he vowed. I'm not going to stop until this link dies or you find me.

I flinched. It won't die. It can't.

Then start searching. Because we're running out of time.

I nodded, hand on the doorknob yet again, this time with my body properly clothed. *Don't give up on me, Exos.* I spoke the words with purpose, recalling the night he said the same thing to me. Now it was his turn to trust me, to have faith in me to locate him before it was too late.

Never, he whispered. I'll never give up on you, Claire.

Chapter 29

Titus



Seeing Claire again had taken an entire week's worth of frustration and rage right out of me, but seeing her like *that*...

Fucking fires.

Resisting the urge to burn down the door, I waited for Claire. In spite of what Cyrus believed, I wasn't an idiot. I sensed the change in her—a big one—perhaps a change I would enjoy exploring, but she wasn't just mine anymore.

She belonged to all of us.

Claire appeared and paused, taking me in with those bright blue eyes that now glittered with an overflow of Cyrus's power.

I wanted to fall to my knees and worship her.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered, awed.

She slipped into my arms, and every muscle in my body relaxed, knowing her as my mate. She tilted her head back and smiled.

"Titus," she said, my name having a new flow on her lips that made my core tighten.

I wanted to give her space to adjust to the fae inside her overriding her human half, but I couldn't resist as she tugged against my flame from somewhere deep in my soul.

My lips found hers on instinct, the taste of her grounding me as her mouth parted for mine.

Safe.

Home.

Mine.

A wave of heat slammed into me, showering me in a deep-seated craving

we shared—our fire yearning to complete what we'd begun.

Soon, I vowed. Soon.

Her teeth sank into my lip, and her nails ran down my back, leaving a trail of embers that deliciously burned and danced with my own magic.

“While I appreciate that you’ve stopped throwing fireballs at my head, can we focus?” Cyrus rudely interrupted. “Claire’s vitality is what needs to be rejuvenated, not your own.”

He was right. Claire’s hand already dipped to my pants, sensing the need in me for her touch. I grabbed her wrist before she could slip her fingers past the waistband.

She pouted and narrowed her eyes at Cyrus. “It’s not all about me.”

The amused smirk on Cyrus’s face said otherwise, not that I doubted he hadn’t enjoyed their past week together. The residual impact from full mating rituals was well known, and while I was envious, I also knew Claire would have been ravenous in her near-death condition. It was a tall order for any man to take on.

Cyrus responded with his element instead of his typical smart-ass retorts. A glimmer of liquid swept across Claire’s lips like a kiss, a show of power that surprised me in both its precision and gentleness. Her tongue slipped out to taste it, and she fluttered her eyes closed with delight.

Not to be outdone, I followed the trail of magic with my own, concentrating to sweep blue heat across her delicate skin. She gasped, her lashes lifting as the steam mixed with our breaths, her blue irises flashing with a knowing flame that absorbed my energy. My hand fisted in her hair, angling her to my desire to give her everything she wanted—everything she needed.

“Yes,” Cyrus said, his tone approving as Claire stopped trying to give me what I yearned for and greedily drank in the elements swirling around her. “Just like that.”

A blush crested Claire’s cheeks and she smiled.

Energy danced in her gaze, and I realized I’d never seen her like this—balanced, like a new fae born into the world who understood her powers and how to control them.

No hesitation.

No emotions running her into the ground.

Just knowledge and acceptance.

Cyrus had done what none of us had yet to accomplish—he’d given her

what her elements craved. And while she was sated with regard to water, she needed *more*.

Challenge accepted.

I poured my flames through the bond, adoring the way it lit up her features and the sigh that feathered from her beautiful mouth. But I wasn't enough, and the flicker of her gaze to the hall told me as much.

Claire craved her circle and the balance it provided.

"Sol and Vox are in the kitchen," I murmured, guiding her away from the bedroom before I yanked her inside and burned her clothes off.

If we—her mates—did this right, it would prove far more satisfying in the long run.

Claire glided beside me, her movements graceful as water mixed with fire along her footsteps.

Elements, she has no idea how powerful she is. She's intoxicating.

Sol's arms were crossed, his large form leaning against a broken peach tree that had grown from what was left of the dining table, while Vox stood with both fists knuckled down onto the cracked wood.

They both stopped midsentence and locked gazes on Claire the moment I brought her into the room. If it hurt me in my soul not to be fully mated with her, I couldn't imagine what her call was doing to them.

By the look of utter conflict on Vox's face, he was fighting it hard. Sol, on the other hand, loosened his stance and gave Claire a warm smile.

With a small nudge to her back, I sent her toward the Earth Fae. "Go on, sweetheart. Don't be afraid."

She gave me a playful nip of fire that ran over my lips. Her fae side was powerful, dominating her in the best of ways, and she was rolling with it.

Fucking finally.

"Sol," she said, marveling at the peach tree. "Did you do this?" If she felt embarrassed by her earlier display of nudity, she didn't show it. Had perhaps forgotten it beneath the onslaught of elements cascading over her skin. Or maybe she was just embracing it, like everything else.

"Uh." He cleared his throat, then shuffled his feet. "Yeah. Actually, I made some more outside, but they kind of, well, didn't do well this week." He grimaced, causing Claire to frown.

"Because of me?" she asked, so quiet, her steps retreating backward toward mine. "Did I hurt you all?" She glanced at me, then at Vox and Sol, and finally at Cyrus.

“You required a lot of energy to heal, little queen,” Cyrus replied. “But we’re all fine and ready to give you more of what you need now.” He ran a rope of water over her neck for emphasis, one I trailed with fire.

Sol glanced at Cyrus as if seeking permission to participate. The royal nodded, and the scent of peaches filled the air as earth energy rolled over her skin.

Claire sighed, her eyes falling closed beneath the abundance of power. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her to me while pouring more fire through our bond. She absorbed it with ease, thriving on the balance we represented.

Vox watched the exchange with guarded interest. His magic hummed at the ready, waiting to reel Sol in at the slightest hint of danger. No matter his reservations, he wouldn’t allow Claire to be hurt.

Hmm, perhaps we would convince the Air Fae to come around after all.

The kitchen and dining area shifted around us, repairing itself as Sol drenched Claire in more power. He shuddered, whispering, “Claire, I feel you.”

“Me, too,” she hummed, the element intensifying until she focused on Vox. He was the only one not adding his elements to the melody. It felt like an incomplete song without him and Exos to add the final notes to the balance.

“Vox,” I said, irritated. “Stop being stubborn.”

Claire shook her head. “No. Don’t force him, Titus.” Even though her words said that she permitted his insolence, I felt her tugging on his elements, making his mouth part ever so slightly. I would have missed it had I not sensed his desire twist in response through the bond that linked all of us.

I grinned. That was my Claire. She wouldn’t be denied over a little bit of stubbornness, especially when she could feel that Vox wanted her.

Cyrus added another flurry of water to the air, easing some of the tension. “This is exactly why we returned,” he said, regarding all of us with an air of authority.

The royal seemed... different. Still pompous enough that I swore a stick was permanently lodged up his ass, but there was a softness to him that hadn’t been there before. Or perhaps it had been, and he’d just buried it so far that even he hadn’t known it existed.

He shifted his focus to me, all of the authority of a king in his eyes, but which king? He didn’t seem to fit the cold hardness of the Spirit Kingdom

anymore. “How do you feel, Claire?” he asked softly, still holding my gaze.

She ignored him, her attention on Vox. Whatever she was doing seemed to have the Air Fae entranced. He took a step forward to graze his fingers across her cheek. She didn’t move a muscle, as if she would scare him off if she so much as breathed.

The moment his magic brushed her skin, her eyes fluttered closed and she shivered. “More,” she whispered.

He complied, stroking a breeze through her hair and then down along my robe.

Silence fell.

The four of us exchanged elements, with Claire at the center. She took it all, energy vibrating around her in a powerful wave that reminded me of an impending inferno.

And then her eyes flashed open. “Exos.” She whirled in my arms, the look of victory on her face making me want to kiss her. “I feel him, Titus. I *really* feel him.”

Cyrus nodded as if he wasn’t surprised. “The elements are grounding you and building up the circle that binds all of us to you, including Exos. Your fae side craves the elements, craves completing what’s begun. Now where is he?”

Her gaze became distant, and a flutter swept through our connection. She turned to Cyrus, my arms still wrapped around her. “He’s safe. And close.”

Cyrus’s eyebrows lifted. “At the Academy?”

“No. But nearby.” Her nose scrunched. “Beyond the enchanted trees, I think. If I follow the link, I can find him. He’s calling to me. Strongly.”

None of us could disagree with that. Her need for all of us to be with her burned, and her connection to Exos was so precious, yet it had become so fragile. Even I could hardly feel the faint strand that should have been strong, a united front with Claire as our common anchor.

“Then let’s go,” I said, indulging in the deluge of magical energy that tingled against my skin. Every part of me thrived, flexed, and purred, ready to fuck or to fight. Perhaps both. And if I felt like this just being near Claire and four of her elemental mates, I couldn’t imagine how glorious she’d be when Exos completed the circle.

“No.” Claire’s blue gaze blazed with an authority I hadn’t seen in her before. Droplets teased along her hairline as she shifted her attention to Cyrus. “Exos says you need to distract Mortus. While he doesn’t think

Mortus is the actual culprit, his essence is all over the cell. So he's suggesting you distract him so I can reach Exos without interference."

Cyrus hummed in thought. "Could be fun." The bastard clapped me on the back, his water magic sizzling against my heat and sending a plume of steam into the air. He grinned. "Titus?"

Irritation prickled along my spine. Cyrus had far too much confidence in Claire. Yes, she was powerful. Yes, she was amazing, but if that bastard of a fae thought I'd let her leave my sight again, he was a moron.

"Fuck off," I snapped, shoving him away and wrapping myself around Claire once more. I ran my fingers up her jawline and cupped her face. "I'm going with Claire."

"Because that won't draw attention at all," Cyrus drawled, sounding unamused and somehow saying I was an idiot without even trying. "Everyone knows you're one of her mates. Mortus will be watching you just as much as me. No, we're going to have to stick together." A gush of water pushed me away from Claire and doused me with cold reality, making me growl.

Ignoring me when I sent flames scalding over my body, he narrowed his gaze on the remaining two fae. "Vox. Sol. You're our secret weapons. Mortus doesn't know Claire has bonded to you, so he won't be tracking you yet. Not like he'll be doing with Titus and me, anyway. And besides..." He met my gaze once more. "We'll keep him distracted, right?"

Vox stiffened. "Weapons?" he repeated, apparently focused on that part of the equation, not the ridiculous plan Cyrus had just crafted.

"Yes," Claire agreed, a smile in her voice as she slid out of my arms to stand in the center of the ring, her back to me as she faced Vox and Sol. "My guardian weapons, right?"

The Air Fae's obsidian gaze swirled with that ring of silver, a light breeze rushing from him to Claire as if she'd called for his magic touch. If he noticed it, he didn't react. Instead, he nodded.

Finally. She's tamed the Air Fae.

Except I still felt his resistance. Which meant Claire did, too.

"You're really going to let her go off with two barely bonded fae?" I challenged Cyrus, not liking this idea one bit. Sol could handle it. Vox? I had my doubts. "This is reckless."

Claire spun around, her eyebrow arching. "Let me?"

Growling, I couldn't contain my flames anymore. A line shot across the

floor, aimed at the source of my problems. *Cyrus*. If he wanted to force Claire to stay here, with us, where it was safe, I had no doubt he could. Letting her go off with Vox and Sol was a bad decision.

He swept his hand through the air, dousing my flames. “Stop. Coddling. Her.” His magic shoved me, sending me skidding back a few steps. “But I appreciate the challenge, Fire Fae. It gives me an idea as to how we’ll distract the masses. Let’s see what the Powerless Champion is capable of against a Royal Fae.” His blond brow arched high. “Unless you’re afraid?”

Sol’s entire countenance brightened. “Did you just challenge Titus to an elemental duel?” Then his brow furrowed. “Wait... We’ll miss it.” The big guy shrugged. “Ah, well, I must like you, Claire, because that’s a sight I’d love to see.”

Claire seemed conflicted, but a whisper through the connection from Exos put her at ease, and she shook her head. “You two behave,” she said, looking at me and Cyrus. Then she smiled at Sol. “And I like you, too, Sol.”

The Earth Fae seemed quite pleased by that pronouncement. “Yeah, totally worth missing the fight. We all know Cyrus will win anyway.”

“Hey.” A fireball formed over my palm. “I can take him.”

“Prove it,” Cyrus replied, sounding bored.

He was goading me and I knew it. But I couldn’t resist an opportunity to put the bastard in his place. “All right. You’re on, jackass. But don’t get too cocky. I’ve never lost in the arena.”

The only place in all the realms that I felt at home, other than in Claire’s arms, was in those bloody, dusty pits where the crowds chanted my name.

Cyrus wouldn’t know what fucking hit him.

Chapter 30

Claire



They'll be fine, I told myself for the hundredth time. Exos had promised as much when he suggested I let them burn off some steam and have some fun.

Hopefully, he was right.

I am, he murmured now, his voice a caress against my spirit.

Energy hummed over my skin, causing my lips to curl as I walked with Sol and Vox through the outskirts of the forest that lined the Academy. I felt invigorated, full of life, *happy*. All strange sensations for someone who had almost died, but for the first time in my existence, I was at ease.

Balanced, Exos whispered. *You're balanced, Claire*.

Yes, I agreed, feeling the veracity of his proclamation in my blood. My links to all the elements had grounded me, providing me with a newfound existence.

Except for that sense of unease coming from air.

No, from Vox.

I glanced at him as we walked, noting his stiff posture. There weren't any threats nearby. Titus and Cyrus were making sure of that by causing diversions on campus. I just hoped they were getting along.

Well, while the Air Fae didn't seem thrilled by our new connection, Sol appeared to be content enough. The ground wasn't even shaking beneath his steps. If anything, he appeared lighter, too.

His lips curled as he caught me looking at him. My cheeks pinkened a little, embarrassed to be caught staring, but it really was a wonder to see him moving so fluidly over the grass.

"You haven't broken anything," I murmured.

He chuckled. “No, and it feels damn good.” He rolled his shoulders and glanced up at the sun overhead. “Actually, I feel incredible.”

“Me, too,” I admitted, smiling in earnest now. “Like I could fly.” I skipped into the field on a whirl, the elements dancing to my steps and stirring a mixture of power into the atmosphere around me. It left me sighing in fulfillment.

Apart from my link to Vox. That felt brittle, as if a slight miscalculation in movements would shatter the tentative link.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly feeling very conscious of his discomfort. “Have I hurt you?” Because I knew I’d drained the others while trying to climb back into existence. Poor Cyrus had taken the worst of it, then nursed us both back to health in the waves of passion.

Did I just pity the man for having to fuck me all week? I thought, snorting to myself. *Yeah, that’s a hardship.*

Although, I’d been pretty demanding.

But none of that was the point right now.

What I wanted to know was why Vox hadn’t looked at me once since we started this walk. Why his shoulders remained tense. Why his mouth was compressed into that hard line. Why he still hadn’t answered me despite my asking him a direct question.

“Vox,” I tried again. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He kept moving, ignoring me completely.

Our link determined that single-worded reply to be a lie.

I blinked at Sol, arching a brow. “You’re okay, right?”

“Never been better, little flower,” he replied, his brown-green eyes gleaming with adoration. “I mean, the last week wasn’t easy, but having you back, it’s like…” His lips slid to the side and he shrugged. “It’s like you returning has completed a part of me I didn’t know was broken.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” I marveled, relieved he sensed it, too. “Exos says it’s because I’m balanced. Like all my powers are finally aligned, allowing me to see them all clearly.” I created a butterfly in my palm to demonstrate and encouraged it to flutter away with a slight breeze. Only, it turned into a gust that caused me to grimace. “Okay, so not perfect, but you get the idea.”

Sol held out his hand and created a pile of dirt, then threw it at Vox, who was walking several steps ahead of us.

“What the fuck?” Vox snapped, turning around to glare at the giant.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did that hit you?” Sol asked with false innocence.

Vox narrowed his silver-rimmed gaze and sent a gust of wind over Sol’s shoulder, which only seemed to enrage him more.

“You missed,” Sol said, a study in nonchalance.

“Uh, guys...,” I interjected, wanting to steer us back onto the path of finding Exos. With every step, his essence grew closer. This was definitely the right way, even though I had no idea where we were in this field. It was somewhere beyond the enchanted forest, in what Cyrus had called “neutral territory.” Apparently, these lands separated the Academy from all the kingdoms, which left them often vacant and not commonly traversed. Hence the overgrown grass, which really resembled out-of-control weeds.

Another whirl of wind went sailing through the air, knocking me on the shoulder and causing Sol to growl. The earth shook beneath us as he retaliated in kind and sent the Air Fae to his ass.

My eyes widened.

I was used to Vox schooling Sol in powers. Not the other way around.

“I see,” Vox said, jumping up to his feet in a lithe motion and wiping the dust from his pants. “So you get a little control and turn your back on the one who’s been helping you for the last two years. Fine. Maybe I should just go and let you two chatter on about your newfound *balance*.”

Wow, I’d never heard Vox like this. He sounded so bitter and almost cruel. “Seriously, what is your problem?” I demanded. “Is it because I forced the connection on you?”

I didn’t remember doing it, had no say in my elements trying to save my life, but I could understand that upsetting him. I just hadn’t realized how much it would bother him.

“I mean, I’m sorry. To you both, I mean. I... If I’d known what was going to happen...” Would I change it? I bit my lip. *No*, my elements all said in unison. No, I wouldn’t change it at all. Which meant my apology really meant nothing because it lacked truth.

Well, this is fun. I wiped my palms against my jeans and stared off into the distance while the two males observed me in silence. *Really helpful, guys.* Although, yeah, they deserved an explanation. Not that I really had one, but I could at least try.

I cleared my throat, opening my mouth but then closing it, and considered how I wanted to say this.

Then I caught sight of Vox’s irritated expression.

And Sol's hurt one.

Right.

No more thinking.

"I-I don't remember what happened," I started and immediately regretted the words as their faces fell. "But I understand *why* it happened," I quickly assured them. That seemed to intrigue them both. "When Exos first brought me down here, I was a mess. He told me fae existed, that I had access to all these elements, things kept happening around me that I didn't understand, and I kept feeling these inappropriate feelings for multiple men."

I shivered as I recalled those early days between Titus and Exos, and felt their responding warmth through the bonds.

"It had terrified me," I admitted. "Where I come from, you don't date more than one guy. There are actually some pretty horrible names associated with human women who date around. And that's the world I grew up in." This was something Cyrus seemed to understand more than the others. He'd made a comment about it before the death fields, one that resonated with me.

"I don't think you're a whore, little queen. But I know all about the social standards on Earth and how they've programmed your mind."

He was right.

My upbringing dictated my outlook.

But now that I felt the connections, allowed my fae half to reign while healing my body, I understood.

"Things are different here," I continued, swallowing thickly. "My feelings for you all are more accepted. And so, it makes sense to me why my elements reached out to you both. My energy recognizes both of you as potential mates, and moreover, I've developed a trust with each of you. So in my time of dire need, my elements called to yours." The connection couldn't be entirely one-sided—something Cyrus's bond had taught me. So if Vox and Sol hadn't craved the link on some level, they wouldn't have been open to it, and they certainly wouldn't have reciprocated.

I met Vox's gaze, noted the closed-off nature of his expression, and sighed. "If you don't want this, I'll understand, and we can end our bond after the preliminary time requirement." Which, I knew, was around a month. "I won't push you into something you don't want." I glanced at Sol. "Either of you." I pinched my mouth to the side, debating what else to say. "I can't really apologize because I acted on instincts alone, and, well, I don't regret it, even if I probably should."

“You better not,” Sol said, folding strong arms over his muscular chest. “Because I don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I asked, confused.

“Regret it,” he clarified. “Once I realized what was happening, I let you in. It felt right.” He lifted a shoulder. “And it still feels right. I don’t need to know more than that.”

So accepting and honest. Sol might be a giant of a man, but inside existed the biggest of hearts, and I felt it now, beating in time with my own.

None of this was what I expected for myself.

But something happened to me this week. I just woke up ready to embrace it all. No more chaos. No more fighting. Just feeling and reality and an unequivocal need to accept it.

That’s your inner fae, Claire, Exos murmured, his presence thriving around me. You’re finally allowing her to breathe.

And it feels amazing, I admitted, smiling. But Vox didn’t seem to agree.

“Tell me what you need,” I said to him. “An apology? A better explanation? I can’t promise either, but I can try.”

“Is this still about the ball?” Sol demanded, his dark eyebrow arching. “The fact that she asked me and not you?”

Irritation tainted the air surrounding Vox. “It’s not the ball. It’s everything. She mated with Exos and Titus because she wanted to. Even with Cyrus, it seems. And she at least asked you to the ball. I’m just a mentor, the one she latched onto in a time of need. Which I get, and it’s fine, and it’s my own damn fault for not embracing the connection sooner. But it is what it is. Can we find Exos now?”

His assessment left me reeling.

Because, for one, I didn’t mate with Exos because I wanted to. It’d been on accident. Same with Cyrus. And I hadn’t chosen Vox only out of *need*. Although, I could see why he felt that way.

Who knew the Air Fae was so emotional? Exos drawled. Kiss him, Claire. That’ll solve it.

I nearly fell over. *What?*

You heard me, princess. Kiss the man. Exos spoke the words as a demand, but a hint of amusement underlined them.

I don’t—

Claire, male fae thrive on action. And all of yours thus far have Vox feeling left out. Just kiss him. Trust me.

Had my behavior made him think I wasn't interested? Maybe. I had been quite reluctant. A brat, really, considering how patient all these men were with me.

All right. Time to fix that. To put all the confusion to rest and move forward.

I stepped closer to Vox, caught the wild frays of his energy, the uncertainty swirling around him, and the general hurt beneath the surface. My element reached out to soothe his, to brush the harsher strands and mingle our elements in an intimate manner. "Vox," I murmured, moving into his personal space. "I initiated the bond with you because our powers are a match. And"—I took a final step—"I like you." Perhaps we weren't at the same level as I was with Exos or Titus, but I sensed the potential. If he'd let me in and gave me a chance.

Which meant I needed to show him my interest, to ground him the way he'd grounded me last week. I went to my toes and brushed my lips over his. Just a tender stroke, one meant to entice and invite, and wrapped my arms around his neck. The second kiss was a little more forceful on my part, begging him to react. And by the third, his lips finally reciprocated, the shock of my touching him receding into a passionate flurry of wind.

"Claire?" he questioned, his mouth against mine.

"Vox." I smiled. "Please kiss me." I could feel his desire to thrumming through my veins; otherwise, I would have backed off by now. But it was a tangible presence, tangling with my aura in the most alluring of ways.

Vox and I were more alike than he likely wanted to admit. He seemed to fear his magic overruling him, just as I had feared my fae half.

"Give in to your instincts," I whispered. "I did." Sometime over the last week, with Cyrus's help, I'd accepted my magic and my nature, my most inner desires, and my passion. And it'd only made me stronger.

One of his hands fell to my hip, gripping tightly. The other thread through my hair, tugging my strands into his fist as he positioned me where he wanted.

And then he took me.

Not hard. Not rushed. Not fast. Just thoroughly. Expertly. As if his mouth was designed just for mine, his tongue knowing and skilled, and stole my breath away. It was the perfect kind of embrace, one where the wind lightly brushed us both, whirling us into a cloud of perfection and yearning. Only, a hungry presence at my back confused my senses, earthy tones mingling with

mine and heightening the moment to one of irresistible lust.

Vox turned me in his arms, right into Sol, who was waiting to catch me—with his mouth.

My heart skipped a beat at the synchronization, at the feel of having two strong and capable men holding me as if I were their reason for being, and at sensing their undeniable longing for more.

I shuddered, my elements flourishing to life.

This was what I needed. How I wanted to exist. What I required for breath.

My mates.

All five.

Creating a harmony of energy inside me, begging to be stroked and tempered, and my fae reacted in kind, each of them sending me what I needed to harness my control and allow me to just be.

I lost track of time between Sol and Vox, their rotating mouths and hands leaving me hot and bothered in the middle of nowhere. But my missing link pulled me from the haze, my elements even more honed and alive and ready.

“He’s near,” I whispered, opening my eyes to find Vox’s striking eyes glazed with passion. With his willingness traveling through the bond, I felt even more empowered, everything around me falling into sharper focus.

“Where?” Vox asked, his palm running up and down my arm, as if addicted to my energy.

And maybe he was. I felt the same about him, my fingers still woven through his thick, long hair. My other palm had reached up behind me, clasping Sol’s neck, his palm around my throat, not in a threatening manner but in a protective one. I relaxed back into him, absorbing his strength, and closed my eyes to *feel* the earth and search for the presence beneath the ground that should not be there.

The elements responded, bowing to my growing power, their worship intensifying with every breath.

This world is mine now, I thought, authority thickening my veins and rooting me in my power. It surpassed everything around me. Everyone. “I can feel so much,” I whispered, sensing the expanse of land beneath my feet, stretching all the way to the Academy grounds and beyond, to where Cyrus and Titus were creating havoc of their own.

I smiled.

Cyrus was certainly enjoying himself.

And Titus, well, he was done playing nice.

Exos, my soul breathed, venturing in the other direction, to the ancient crypts few knew existed. When I spoke the words out loud, Sol and Vox looked at each other in confusion, but I didn't doubt my instincts. "This way," I said, allowing the energy to guide me.

See you soon, *Exos* murmured, pride sliding through our bond.

Yes, I replied. *Very soon*.

Chapter 31

Cyrus



I wanted a challenge.

And the best way to earn a Fire Fae's respect was through violence. So I'd give him what he desired—an ass beating.

Crystalline lights sprung to life, Earth Fae working with Water Fae to conjure what would normally be underwater plants that glowed bright enough to light up the entire arena. Despite classes being in session, it hadn't taken long to gather a crowd. Word of the challenge had spread quickly.

Elana was going to be furious.

A double bonus in my mind.

That old fae was hiding something, as she always seemed to be doing, but one of these days, I'd get to the bottom of it.

Chatter and anticipation swam around us, creating tidal waves of excitement throughout the Academy's small stadium. It was large enough to house the current active students but paled in comparison to a proper arena—something Titus had already commented on.

Bets were being made throughout, the fae engrossed in the battle before them.

And wouldn't you know? Mortus stood among them with several Academy teachers at his side. They'd no doubt recruited their fellow professor to join in on the fun. It wasn't every day a royal fought a Powerless Champion.

His snarl told me how much he disapproved.

I winked at him in response.

"As far as a diversion goes, this isn't half bad," Titus conceded under his breath.

“Was that a compliment, Fire Fae?” I asked, arching a brow at him.

He snorted. “Just a concession before I hand you your ass.”

“We’ll see,” I replied, amused. “Ready?”

“I’ve wanted a reason to destroy you since you set foot on Spirit Quad.”

He grinned at me, a blaze already burning in his eyes. “Trust me when I say, I’ll enjoy this.”

“Too bad those magical barriers above have to remain.” They were what kept fae from killing each other. This wasn’t a true Powerless Champion ring, and Elana valued the lives of her students.

Except she still hadn’t arrived.

Interesting.

“Consider them your only protection,” Titus replied, smirking. “Let’s do this, Royal Ass.”

I smiled. “Aww, you’ve given me a nickname. How adorable.”

He made a rude gesture that had several fae gasping and left me chuckling.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

A hush fell over the crowd as a petite Water Fae hurried over to hand me a selection of bracelets. She bowed formally, causing the tiny shells dangling from her pointed ears to bounce.

“It’s the rules,” she whispered apologetically, her words barely audible. This was a true element-on-element duel, which meant I couldn’t use my spirit energy against Titus. One element in direct opposition with the other was required—a true test of magical power.

Water against fire.

Perusing the selection, I chose the strongest bracelet that would seal my spirit energy with its merciless diamond cores. Even that would only dull my ability, and I suspected it would do absolutely nothing to Exos.

Still, it resembled a cuff of sorts that diluted my strength and brought my affinity for water to the forefront. Which had admittedly already been there, waiting for me to take my rightful place as king.

And maybe I could be ready—soon—with Claire at my side.

Snapping the bracelet onto my wrist, my vision jolted with a flash of red, then waves crashed in on my senses as my spirit energy retreated, leaving me dazed. The crowd cheered, sensing the shift of energy and signaling that the show was about to begin.

A single moderator hovered at the edge of the arena, raising his voice for

the crowd to hear with a gust of air elemental power. “We have an unprecedented duel today! I present Cyrus, King of the Spirit Fae, Prince of Water, pitted against Titus, our very own Powerless Champion in his first Elemental Duel!”

The crowd cheered, making my ears throb as I fought to adjust to the utter lack of spirit in my chest. It felt wrong, and yet, oddly right. Especially as oceans of warmth rushed in, reminding me of how Claire had drowned me in the most delicious of ways.

“May the victor earn this quarter’s title of Academy Elemental Champion! Begin!”

Really? I don’t even qualify, I thought with a snort. *Not a student, remember?*

But then a horn sounded, forcing me to focus on the task at hand while my senses struggled to adjust to my lack of spirit. This was my first time shutting out the element, and I hadn’t expected it to be so... overwhelming.

Titus took advantage of my disorientation and sent an inferno barreling toward me at full speed.

My magic reacted before I did, rushing out of me all at once and meeting Titus’s flame with a raw power of my own.

The arena’s magic hummed to life, monitoring our life signs and extent of power. Elana and I, and the other Council members and Academy professors, had erected this barrier, so I knew it could contain even my magic at full force.

An ocean with rising elemental seahorses that rode the waves erupted from my fingertips, spilling out to fill the stadium in seconds and dousing Titus’s flames in a single sweeping motion.

The Fire Fae gaped at me but only allowed his shock to settle for a moment before he crouched and drew his magic into himself, building a blazing tornado that sizzled against the mass of water and burned his pants—pants that should have been fire resistant. Yet it left his bare torso alone, suggesting his ultimate control of the raging energy.

Titus wasn’t a royal, but his magic had Claire’s passion infused into him, making him far more powerful than I would have given him credit for. He looked like the ancient god Vulcan, erupting molten lava that billowed from his feet in a wave of its own that rivaled my oceans, making my seahorses neigh in dismay before steaming into nothingness.

“That all you got, little king?” Titus taunted, twisting my nickname for

Claire against me. I wasn't the Water King yet, and if I was defeated in the arena by a Fire Fae, I'd never hear the end of it from my father.

But it would make for a better show.

And it just might give Mortus, and anyone else watching, the false opinion that my link to Claire had somehow weakened me.

Hmm.

Perhaps we needed to use this duel to our advantage and paint some false perceptions.

I grinned as his lava crept toward me. The soft red glow made the air turn bloody and gave Titus a terrifying appearance. By the gleam in his emerald eyes, he blamed me for putting Claire in danger.

Maybe I blamed myself.

Still, I had to make this look good. To ensure that everyone believed Titus had earned this win.

I changed up my attack, twisting my body to create a current that swept against Titus's lava and forced it to harden. He grunted from the blow as fine whips of water lashed against his bare chest, leaving trails of bright blood in their wake. He took the punishment, growling as flames erupted and threatened to consume him in his rage.

That's it. Lose control. See how that works out for you.

Titus should have sidestepped my onslaught and let me wear myself out. The strain was already pounding in my skull, my reserves threatening to admit they were empty, but that wasn't Titus's style. He rushed at me head-on and barreled through the thickest part of my waves, expending his energy as he billowed fire to evaporate a path directly at me.

His fist, a ball of flames, aimed straight at my face.

I dodged his punch and allowed his momentum to slam him into the wall of water at my back, making him buckle and lose his balance.

I pinned Titus to the soaked, sandy pit. His heat glazed the surface with raw energy until it melted smooth, and he clawed against it, my waters rushing in, targeting his flames and making his fingers slip against the fresh glass. "You better make this look good, Titus."

"What?"

"You heard me." I released him, only to be surprised as he shut off his flames completely. Without heat for my waters to target, the resulting wave crashed over both of us, causing me to lose my balance.

Titus moved fast—too fast—and swept my legs out from under me,

sending me to the ground.

I raised a hand to send my waters crashing into him, but did so halfheartedly. Oh, to the audience, it would look like I tried, his armor of fire sizzling against my element. And that was all that mattered.

He rushed in, hard and fast, and his fist connected with my jaw, leaving a sharp crack to ring through the arena.

A hush settled over the crowd, stunned.

The king had been struck.

The unfamiliar pain that jolted through my body made me feel alive. No one ever got close enough to strike me, much less do any real damage—no one except my brother.

I twisted and sent one last rope of water at Titus, flinging him away from me, but it was more for show than anything else.

Mortus's obsidian eyes gleamed from the audience, exactly as I desired. If the pompous prick thought he could find my weakness by watching me fight Titus, then he was in for a disappointment.

My only weakness was my greatest strength, and she was far away, saving my brother from darkness.

Exos, I hope Claire is in your arms now and you're safely on your way back to us.

Without my spirit, I couldn't sense him, but I sensed Claire. Her healthy glow caused me to smile, which probably resembled a grimace to the crowd.

I wiped the back of my hand over my mouth, and it came back bloody.

Staggering to my feet, I crouched into a warrior's stance and grinned. "Powerless duel?" I taunted him.

Titus rolled his fingers into fists and readied himself, all signs of his embers dying in the wind along with my water. "You want a beating?" He shrugged his shoulders. "All right."

He came at me, fast and without mercy, blow after blow landing, but I got in a few of my own.

"That all you got?" he taunted.

"I could do this all night," I replied, meaning it.

I dodged and then blocked, taking the hit hard on my forearm before connecting my elbow with his jaw. Titus's entire body jerked up against the blow. It would have left any other fae reeling, but he recovered with impressive speed. My admiration for him grew by the second.

His eyes glowed with embers, but he didn't use his fire on me. Instead, he

took the next hit in the gut, his core clenching hard to absorb the blow, and used the opening to wrap his fingers around my throat, twisting me so that my back arched and put me off balance.

“Having fun yet?” he growled, his rage palpable.

Whether it was from the fight, or at me, I didn’t know. Likely both.

It didn’t take a genius to understand his fury. I’d mated with Claire, and in his mind, I didn’t deserve her.

And maybe he was right.

But I couldn’t change what happened, nor would I want to.

I clawed at his fingers and spat, then crashed my arm down hard against his wrist and broke his hold. He cursed when I retaliated and swept behind him, wrapping an arm around his neck and putting him in a chokehold of my own. It would be so easy to call for his defeat as I weakened his airway.

Alas, I needed him to win.

So I said something I knew would set him off.

“You realize I only mated with Claire to save Exos, right?” I spoke the words without any emotion, needing him to believe them. And I infused the knowledge that I had considered that tactic several times into my expression. “Seems I’ve won.”

Titus roared, his fury snapping at the reins as his fire ignited, forcing me to release him. His elbow connected with my rib cage and sent all my air rushing out of me. I stumbled back and fell right along with Titus as he launched over me, knee on my chest and hand on my throat again. “Submit,” he demanded. “Or I’ll *end* you.”

Not bad, I thought. And as his fist nailed my jaw, igniting a series of lights behind my eyes, I decided this was good enough.

Conceding to him served so many benefits.

Including enhancing our elemental circle, something Claire badly needed.

And so, for her, I smiled. “I submit.” The words triggered the arena’s magic and froze us both in place, signaling the end of the battle.

Titus’s gaze narrowed, his palm releasing my throat. “You goaded me. Again.”

“Did I?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“Bastard.”

I lifted a shoulder. Or tried to, anyway. The Fire Fae was big and on top of me.

“You let me win,” he added, a hint of respect coloring his features.

“Why would I do that?” I infused a bit of innocence into my tone, but it really came out as more of a rasp.

He shook his head, amused. “Next time, don’t hold back.”

“Next time?” I wasn’t sure I wanted another public duel. But sparring, I could do.

“Oh yeah. Next time I’m beating you in earnest, Royal Fae.”

“Wait, I thought I was your little king?” I managed to sound hurt. “I mean, here you are, straddling me and all...”

He punched me again for good measure, causing me to laugh as he practically leapt off me. “If I wasn’t exhausted, I’d challenge you again.”

I bounced up to my feet, grinning. “It’s like you’re flirting with me, Titus.”

“For fuck’s sake, man.” Vehemence colored his tone, but he was grinning, too. “Seriously, we’re doing that again.”

“Sure.” I gave him the requisite bow to acknowledge my defeat. “I look forward to it.”

Movement in my peripheral vision showed Mortus backing away as if he’d seen enough—or perhaps he finally sensed what we’d been trying to distract him from.

Claire had found Exos, his location just beneath her feet. And Mortus was already too late. He couldn’t mist, the power purely my own.

But what bothered me more was Elana’s absence.

This seemed like the kind of event she’d try to stop.

Alas, she was nowhere in sight.

Where are you, Chancellor? I wondered. *And what have you been up to?*

Titus clapped me on the back. “If you ever claim to have mated with Claire to save your brother again, I really will fry you.”

I met his burning gaze with a grin. “Don’t worry, Powerless Champion. Exos would kill me first.”

Chapter 32

Exos



Claire's vitality grew with every step, my spirit soaking her in and allowing it to fuel my being. That was the sustenance I needed. Not food. Not water. Just *her*. It brought my spirit to the forefront, dousing me in an energy that thrived through my veins.

I'd channeled so much into our bond these last few days, locking onto the frays of our connection and holding desperately to the ends. Now that she was nearing my position, I felt the link strengthening again, remembering the beauty of her presence.

It made me come alive in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

As soon as she was close enough to touch, I would deepen my hold on her and encourage us to the third level so nothing like this could happen again. Oh, it could still shatter—Ophelia and Mortus had proven that in the harshest ways—but I wouldn't have to fear time or space deteriorating our connection.

I agree, Claire whispered through my mind, her spirit so attuned to mine that it was as if we were one being now. Part of it stemmed from the energy I'd forced into our bond while begging my mate to find me, but a larger reason for our enhanced connection was Claire's acceptance of her fae half.

She felt complete. I could sense it in her spirit, her contentment with grounding all her elements. She may not have meant to bond to the Earth Fae or Vox or Cyrus, but there wasn't an ounce of regret within her. Not even her human half—the one gaping in horror at the idea of *five* mates—could overcome her fae mind now.

And I fucking loved it.

You're close, I murmured, sensing her above me.

Yes. She went silent for a moment, her other elements taking over as she focused. My lips curled as the walls shook around me, Claire using her affinity for earth to manipulate the ancient tombs. A blast of energy—air—shook the foundation above.

Found the door, she said, a hint of pride in her tone.

I felt that. I smiled. *Try not to collapse the roof over my head, princess*.

Her amusement trickled through her spirit, as did Vox's astonishment at her display in power. Having such a close connection to the Air Fae was a bit strange, but as a Spirit Fae, I often connected to the auras of others.

But the Earth Fae was very new to me.

Sol.

I only knew his name because of Claire. The power beneath his tough exterior rivaled some of the strongest fae in existence. This must be the fae Elana mentioned that Vox was tutoring in control. Interesting.

From a guardian standpoint, I approved. And I imagined Cyrus did as well, hence his presence in Claire's life.

I ran a palm over my face, thinking of all the things I needed to discuss with my brother. He would want to know who knocked me out and put me down here, but I couldn't remember. My memories were hidden beneath a thick wall of ink, one I hoped Cyrus could help me demolish. Because the answers were right there, at the back of my mind, hidden behind that mossy black substance. I'd prodded at it all week, trying futilely to demolish the block. Whoever had put it there was powerful in the darkest way.

Mortus seemed too likely a suspect, even though I sensed his presence all around this place.

No, I suspected something more sinister.

Someone had been using him as a puppet.

But the question remained: *Who?*

A gust of wind sailed through the room, blowing out the torches on the walls. I relit them with a wave of my fingers, the fire second nature. Claire's presence hummed on the breeze, her eagerness thickening my blood.

"Exos?" she called, her voice the most beautiful sound in my existence.

"Over here, baby." I clasped the iron bars, hoping she could at least see my hands from where she stood.

Her energy warmed my being as she approached.

So close.

Almost there.

My Claire.

My breath stuttered out of me at the sight of her, all those golden locks illuminated by the flame in her palm. Her blue eyes seemed lit from within, her smile rivaling mine. “There you are,” she breathed, studying my prison cell. “Back up.”

Vox and Sol came to stand behind her, their postures protective. Especially the Earth Fae’s. And the look he directed at me said I was the threat in his mind.

I tilted my head as I stepped away from the bars—per Claire’s request—and met the male’s gaze. “You’ve been hurt by one of my kind.” I could see it in the scars lurking in his spirit.

“Understatement,” he grunted.

My lips curled. “I bet you and Cyrus get along famously.”

Both Sol and Vox snorted at the mention of my brother, which only amused me more. Cyrus only knew how to rule, his royal blood providing him with the authority and power to do so. And he excelled at it by not putting up with petty bullshit.

Like past grievances that didn’t apply to either of us.

Hmm, but with Sol, I bet he took a measured approach, not demanding he do anything at all while allowing him the false perception of making his own choices.

I shook my head. Cyrus was good. Very, very good.

Claire’s elements whirled around her, a mixture of water and air building in her palm. “I’m going to blast the hinges,” she said, focusing.

“Damn,” Sol replied, arms folded. “I’d sort of like to see you burst through this door like you did upstairs.”

“And hit the Spirit Royal in the face?” Vox asked, arching a brow. “Would definitely leave a mark.”

Sol smiled. “Exactly.”

“We’ve only just met and already you’re making threats.” I tsked. “And here I hoped we could function as a happy unit.”

“Yeah? Talk to your ass of a brother about that.” Sol’s animosity clouded the air, suggesting I’d missed some sort of altercation.

“Shh,” Claire murmured, her eyes closing. “I need to *hear*.”

Energy singed the air, blowing her hair away from her face and painting her spirit in a warm glow that rivaled my own. I braced myself against the wall, sensing the building power, and grinned as she expertly honed in on the

hinges of the door with a shock of ice. They froze instantly, then rattled beneath her onslaught of wind, cracking and inevitably shattering to the floor.

Sol reached over her with an open palm and sent the door crashing to the ground with a harsh shove.

Claire jumped over the iron and ran right for me. Her lips were on mine before I could speak, her arms winding around my neck and yanking me down to her for a hungry kiss. Our bond sparked to life, humming in approval at our shared touch and solidifying once more. We both knew how close we'd been to losing one another, how our connection nearly faded away into nothing. But neither of us had dwelled on it, too determined to fix the problem.

And that was the way it should be.

The way I always wanted it to be.

Claire responded in kind, accepting the third stage of our link with a bold thrust of her tongue into my waiting mouth. We had so much to go over, so many items to discuss, but it all paled in comparison to the near sense of loss.

Never again, she whispered. I'm never losing you again.

Took the words right out of my mind, baby. I deepened our kiss and grasped her hips to lift her into the air. Her legs wrapped around my hips as I braced her back against the wall and well and truly devoured her.

I missed you. The words were spoken by us both, simultaneously, over and over and over. Her body sung to mine, her mouth openly receiving my worship. Each swipe of her tongue invigorated my soul, giving me the strength I hadn't realized I needed and bringing me back to full health in an instant.

"Claire," I whispered, reverent. I wanted to do so much more than kiss her, but this wasn't the place. And we had an audience.

A hungry audience.

I could feel their desire for her through the bond. They were only in the initial stage, their courtship fragile, while her other three mates were already promised for eternity. That had the potential to create another imbalance, one Claire had only just fixed. But it was too soon for her to promise herself to them as well. I could sense it in her mind that she wanted more time to get to know them, to make sure it was what *they* wanted.

And with Sol, I could feel his absolute craving, his unwavering loyalty crafted over the last month of knowing who he considered to be his *little flower*. I rather liked that nickname and wondered if he'd spoken it out loud

to her yet or not, because it seemed to be a recent blossom in his mind.

Hmm, but Vox, he remained uneasy. While he liked Claire, he wasn't yet satisfied with her motives. Primarily because he'd spent their entire relationship pushing her away, and he seemed to think he'd done too good a job.

I almost laughed.

It definitely showed he needed more time to get to know Claire, because once he did, he would see the stubborn female that lurked beneath.

She sighed against me, her sense of rightness palpable. "Take me back to our bed, Exos," she whispered. "Please."

My lips curled against hers. "Not even going to let me eat first?"

She froze, her eyes flashing wide, her nails an anchor against my shoulder. "Oh... Oh *God*, you're right! I'm mauling you when you probably —"

I silenced her with my mouth, pressing her harder against the wall and aligning my thickening arousal with the sweet spot between her legs. "Baby, I'm fine and only teasing."

A whine left her as I kissed her again, this time with all the fervor built up from the months of knowing her and *not* consummating our relationship. Oh, I'd tasted her—several times—but I'd yet to experience the sweet bliss of my cock sliding into her waiting heat.

And unfortunately, I had to wait even longer before I could fuck her.

Because I needed to work with Cyrus to determine the real threat.

It wasn't the mean girls who set up our Claire and made her appear too unstable to exist, but someone else. And the presence was at the tip of my thoughts, still hiding behind that sticky wall that didn't belong there.

Claire palmed the side of my head, her lips leaving mine, her gaze narrowing. "I feel it," she said, clearly having followed my thoughts. "It's..." She prodded it with her spirit, her brow furrowing. "I think—"

A piercing shriek had me flinching and almost dropping her.

Sol was suddenly there, his hands on Claire, trying to rip her from my arms.

I shook my head to clear it, holding on to her tightly, as the sound continued.

And then I realized it was coming from her.

"Let go!" Sol shouted.

I did immediately, my palms going to my aching skull as I doubled over

from the negative energy scalding our connection.

Claire wept against Sol, Vox's hands roaming over her form for signs of injury.

"What did you do?" Sol demanded.

Even if I could have managed to speak, I'd have had no response to that. Because I didn't know. She was fine, and then she wasn't.

And *fuck* my head hurt.

I gripped my hair and fell to my knees, trying to solve the chaos going on in my mind. It felt as if I'd been splintered, the dark mass thriving inside and hissing in fury.

No. Not fury.

Hunger.

What. The. Fuck.

A hand on my shoulder had me flinching, but Vox held on tighter, his mouth moving with soundless words. All I could hear were Claire's screams.

Was that an apology on his lips?

I didn't—

His fist connected with my skull, sending me into a pit of darkness that was all too familiar.

Claire...

No response.

She'd cut me off.

And I had no idea why.

Chapter 33

Sol



“**W**hy did we come all this way to save this Spirit Fae bastard again?” I asked on a growl.

Vox rubbed his knuckles where he’d punched the royal in the face, knocking him out cold. The force needed to knock Exos out had required the use of Vox’s wind.

Too bad I hadn’t been able to get in my own hit.

The Spirit Fae would look awesome with an earth-infused blemish.

Yet one glance at Claire’s pained expression as she rested against my chest, unconscious, stilled my violent desire. Whether I liked it or not, this was one of her mates.

Which meant I could never kill him.

“Because you believe in this mate circle-of-elements thing, right?” Vox muttered flatly, replying to my comment about retrieving Exos. “I doubt he did that on purpose. Whatever that was, it felt... wrong.”

I nodded, having sensed it, too. An inky, dark void that had reached out just for Claire, clawing over my connection to her to embolden its strides. I hadn’t liked how it felt at all, especially with my complete inability to stop it.

“We need to get them both back to the Spirit Quad,” Vox surmised, glancing at me with that silver-rimmed gaze that burned with determination. He’d finally opened up to Claire, even if just enough to feel what he could be for her, what she was to all of us. True mates compatible on the most intimate of levels.

He glanced down again at Claire in my arms. My grip on her instinctually tightened, wanting to protect her by using my own body as a shield against anything that would try to come at her again. “You’re going to have to let her

go,” Vox murmured, giving me a sidelong smirk. “Before you crush her, that is.”

I loosened my grip. “I can carry her. She hardly weighs anything.”

Vox chuckled and pointed at the lopsided royal on the ground. “Well, he doesn’t, and I’m not carrying him all the way back to the Spirit Quad.” He glowered at me until I cursed.

“Then drag him,” I suggested through my teeth.

Vox narrowed his eyes. “When Claire wakes up, she’s going to expect Exos in one piece, and if I drag him through a day’s worth of forest, she’s not going to be very happy with us. Especially if she knows you refused to carry him.”

Shit. He had a point.

“Fine,” I grumbled and shifted Claire into his arms.

Vox used his air currents to settle her weight against him, making me envious of how, even in sleep, she wrapped her arms around his neck and nestled under his chin. Vox’s breath caught at the movement.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” I warned him. “Whatever that thing was, it was waiting here for us. And whoever put it in Exos’s head might be back to finish the job.”

Vox glanced into the darkness around us and shivered. “Right. Let’s go.”

I stormed on ahead with Exos slung over my shoulder, making no attempt to still my power or make the royal comfortable.

He would already have a headache when he woke up. No one would question a few bruises.

Chapter 34

Cyrus



A trap. The scent of it soiled the air as the Earth Fae dumped my brother's body at my feet. I cocked a brow at the giant. "You know, at some point, we're going to need to work through your Spirit Fae issue."

He snorted, but it lacked heat as his eyes were on Claire in Vox's arms. Her head rested against the Air Fae's chest, her eyes closed in a fitful sleep.

I'd felt her panic as if it were my own, the terror an ice cube down my spine. It had sent me misting back to Spirit Quad with Titus hot on my heels, only to find the dorm empty.

Once I'd pinpointed her location, I sensed Vox and Sol already on their way back and advised the fiery redhead to calm down and wait.

He'd responded with a fireball to my head.

One that I'd doused in a tidal wave that had left him sputtering.

If I'd learned anything from today's experience, it was that Titus served as an excellent sparring partner. Once Exos woke up, I would share the news.

Hmm, but this trap...

I crouched before his prone form and palmed the side of his head.

"I wouldn't do that," Vox warned. "That's exactly how Claire ended up unconscious."

Well, I'm not Claire, I thought, ignoring his caution and driving my spirit essence into my brother's psyche to have a look around. Something in his essence stirred a foul note in the air, adding a hint of pollution in his aura that shouldn't be there. Claire must have gone searching as well, her instincts driving her to heal her mate. But unlike my little queen, I knew not to touch things that didn't belong.

Like that inky abyss crawling about in my brother's mind.

"Hmm," I murmured, assessing the scathing energy hissing about at my presence. It almost appeared to have scales, the dark magic reaching out with claws, searching for the spirit it truly craved.

Claire.

"Exos was left alone on purpose," I said, my eyes closed as I continued to dance with the foreign presence inside my brother's mind. "The culprit wanted Claire to find him."

Which explained why she'd been able to suddenly pick up his location when she couldn't only a month ago. I'd wrongly assumed it was the enhancement of her elements. But no. It was all part of this wicked being's plan.

That was two traps I'd fallen for.

There would not be a third.

"My brother's mind has been infected with the same essence that attempted to overcome Claire in the death fields. That's why she reacted. And from what I can see, she fought back when it tried to grab on to her again." The evidence lurked in the bubbling texture—they appeared to be wounds of a sort, similar to the ones marking Sol's aura. Only, unlike Sol's, these weren't scarring. "I think she damaged it permanently"—which impressed me a great deal—"but she also hurt Exos."

"Can you blame her?" Vox demanded, sounding defensive.

"Not at all." I unwove myself from Exos's essence and opened my eyes. "And he won't, either." The harm to the foreign presence might be irreparable, but Exos would be fine. Once I helped him remove that entity, anyway. I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. "I need to take Exos home to deal with this. We can't risk that infection spreading to Claire."

"Infection?" Sol repeated, his skin losing color. "Like the plague?"

I'd not really considered the similarities, but I supposed they were there.

Unknown essence.

Element devouring energy, rendering the body useless.

But it worked slower, didn't deteriorate the shell so much as the soul within.

"Not quite," I said slowly, still considering. "But I see what you're saying." I really needed Exos back up and running to bounce some ideas off of. He was the one who tended to see through puzzles; I merely dictated how to unravel them. "It's not the same, because I can remove it," I added. "But I

need to do that away from Claire.”

Because I didn’t want to risk it seeking her out again.

Wait...

“It’s attracted to Claire,” I continued, rubbing the back of my neck. “That thing in the death fields only attacked her, not me. And it just did it again through Exos’s mind. So no, it’s not the plague but seems to be something designed just to hurt her.” Which sounded insane, but the facts were right there before us. “It’s not even hurting Exos, just appears to be muddling his memories.”

“So get it out of his head and report back with whoever did this to him.” Titus—the man of profound reason—repeating what I essentially already stated.

“That’s the idea,” I replied. “But I can’t guarantee it won’t seek Claire out again as soon as Exos wakes up. I mean, it didn’t before, but now that they’ve enhanced their connection, it’s possible it will go straight for her.” Which—of course—was why Exos had closed himself off for so long. To protect Claire from that foreign essence. He must have thought it was gone, thereby reaching out to her.

“Do you need him awake to remove it?” Vox wondered, still holding Claire tightly to his chest.

“Yes.” Whatever black magic put that thing in my brother’s mind was going to take a lot of elemental fae power to remove. “But if you keep Claire occupied with her other elements, then it won’t be able to access her as easily.”

Titus folded his arms. “Occupied?”

“Distracted,” I tried again. When all three males stared at me for more, I muttered a curse under my breath and tried for the third time. “Ground her in air, earth, and fire, guys. Fuck her. Spar with her. Make her use magic. I don’t care how you do it, just consume her in her non-spirit elements so she’s too busy to reach out to Exos. Got it?”

Sol’s jaw was on the ground.

Vox appeared as brittle as a glass vase.

And Titus merely smirked. “Yeah, that I can do.”

Well, at least one of them had the confidence to satisfy her appetite for the elements. “When she wakes, comfort her and tell her Exos is fine. Explain what we’re doing. Then initiate whatever *distraction* you want, but make it good.” I met Titus’s gaze on that one. “I’m going to need time. You

feel me?”

“We can exhaust her,” Titus promised, a wicked gleam in his emerald gaze. “You weren’t the first to taste her, Fae King. I’m very familiar with her appetites.”

If he meant to bother me, he didn’t. My mother had two mates. My father had re-mated after my mother died, but not after several potential bonds crossed his path first. I was not shy when it came to sex or sharing a woman. And I went into this fully aware that Claire needed five mates.

So all I could do was smile. “Good. See that it’s done. And help these guys, would you? They’re still gaping at me like fish out of water.”

Sol growled. “I know how to handle a female.”

“Excellent,” I replied, bending to pick up Exos and tossing him over my shoulder before meeting the big guy’s gaze. “Then handle Claire. She’s quite fond of oral sex. Start there.”

Of course those were the words she chose to stir on.

I shook my head with a laugh. “See? Even the comment causes her to wake.” I started walking, needing to get my brother away from her before she reached full consciousness. “Have fun, boys.”

Chapter 35

Claire



The fresh scent of the ocean tickled my senses. *Cyrus*, I sighed.
Yes, little queen, he murmured, his amusement a seductive stroke against my inner thighs.

I never thought we'd be in this situation, where I desired him, but I didn't see the point in fighting it. Did he piss me off? Yes. But he also made me scream for hours on end in the best way. And I craved so much more.

Ah, alas, you'll need to rely on your other mates tonight, he whispered. *I need to tend to Exos.*

My eyes flew open. *Exos?*

He's okay, *Cyrus* promised. *Whoever captured him planted a trap in his mind, similar to the one in the death fields.*

Yes. I blinked up at *Vox*, who was gazing down at me in bemusement. "Hi," I squeaked, confused. *Titus* stood at his side, with *Sol* behind me, but it was *Vox's* arms holding me in the air.

Let them take care of you, *Cyrus* urged. *I'll look after Exos.*

How? I wondered.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" *Titus* stroked a flame across my cheek, heating my cool skin.

By destroying the foreign entity in his mind, *Cyrus* replied. *Go be with your mates, little queen. We'll return to you soon.*

"*Claire?*" *Titus* sounded concerned.

I cleared my throat. "I... hold on." *Don't let that thing attack you, Cyrus. It's strong.* The second I'd felt it trying to tug me under, I'd lashed out at it with everything I could. That it'd left me unconscious afterward had me a bit concerned. *I need more training on defensive elements.*

Hmm, yes, you do. But in this case, the essence appears to be designed for you, Claire. It merely hissed at my presence in his mind.

Designed for me? I repeated, my skin heating from where Titus caressed my face and down to my neck, his gaze holding mine. *This is confusing.* Because I felt Cyrus in my head, but Titus, Sol, and Vox were very much here, their hands all on me now.

Go engage your other elements, Cyrus said, his tone holding a demand. *We'll update you when we know more, but for now, I need you to focus on the others while I help my brother. Trust me, little queen. Trust me to fix this.*

I do. I meant it. If I trusted Exos's fate to anyone, it was Cyrus. *I just...*

Don't think, just do, he encouraged. *Embrace your fae, Claire. You'll enjoy it more.*

"Is she talking to Cyrus?" Sol's rumble vibrated my back, his palm clasp the side of my neck. That was the second time he'd caught me in a protective stance. I rather liked it.

"Yes," Titus replied. "I can't hear them, but I feel his water bond heavy in her mind."

"He's telling me about Exos," I explained, swallowing. "Whatever that thing is, it tried to suck me back into a black hole again, but I fought it."

And you did so well, Cyrus whispered, pride evident in his tone. *I'm going to leave you now and tend to Exos. I'll be thinking of you, my little queen, and how you sound when you come.*

Heat suffused my skin. *Cyrus.*

His chuckle slid up and down my spine, sending splashes of yearning to every nerve receptor before he pulled away from my thoughts.

My thighs clenched as a surge of warmth ruined my panties.

Damn Water Fae.

Whoever claimed hate and lust were related emotions deserved an award because, boy, were they right. I didn't want to be attracted to Cyrus, and I sensed he felt the same way, but here we were, mated for life.

You adore me, he teased.

I thought you were leaving, I grumbled.

I am, but I had to make sure you were in the right frame of mind to indulge your other elements. And now that you are... enjoy.

Another hot flash graced my skin, setting me on fire—literally. Vox dropped me into Titus's waiting arms, where he soothed the flames with a few of his own. I doused myself in water in an attempt to cool myself off, but

it didn't help. If anything, it made me burn hotter.

I groaned into Titus's chest.

"Claire?" Sol's grip on my nape tightened, his earth essence somehow blocking the inferno cascading along my spine.

"I just need a moment," I managed, my throat dry.

"I think you need longer than a minute," Titus whispered, his lips at my ear. "Let us take care of you, sweetheart."

Ugh, it would be so easy to give in to him. But what about Exos? It seemed wrong to, well, *play*, while he suffered from whatever had corrupted his mind.

I'll be fine, he whispered, his conscious barely brushing mine. *Let them distract you, princess. Only Cyrus can help me now, and we will destroy this thing. See you soon.*

He left before I could reply, his essence stroking my heart along the way.

A *distraction*, I realized. That was what they were trying to do, to keep me occupied while Cyrus and Exos worked through his mind. Because whatever had consumed him was a threat to me.

I understood now.

They needed me otherwise engaged, to prevent my links to them both from interfering.

"Maybe you should take her back to your room?" Vox suggested, his lips twisting, his uncertainty written in the lines of his shoulders.

Sol grunted. "Not a chance. We're in this together and I need you. Remember?"

Vox met the eyes of the Earth Fae, who seemed to be forever at my back—a protective rock who wouldn't budge.

How times have changed, I thought, a little delirious but also extremely intrigued. *What would the three of them do to me in bed?*

My thighs squeezed together again, tighter, and Titus's knowing gaze twinkled with interest.

"She's not ready," Vox replied. "I mean, this is all so new. And three of us? Let's just let her do what she's used to and play this slow."

I frowned. *Why is he rejecting me?* "Who are you to tell me I'm not ready?" I poked him in the chest.

"I think he's still sour over the ball," Sol said, a teasing note in his voice.

Vox narrowed his gaze. "Could you not bring that up right now?"

"What's the big deal about this ball?" I asked, flabbergasted. "I mean, I'll

take you both. Heck, I'll take all three of you."

"Not me," Titus replied, his tone amused. "I'm banned, but you should absolutely take Vox and Sol."

"Banned?" I repeated. Then shook my head. That wasn't the point. Vox kept rejecting me, and I didn't understand it. "We'll all go."

"Oh, don't change your plans on my account," Vox drawled, clearly unimpressed with my offer.

Seriously? What more does this guy want?

I kissed him earlier. Wasn't that enough to prove I liked him? Or did I need to do more to convince him this wasn't just a temporary thing for me?

The realization of this being *it*, our circle finally being complete, sent my heart racing.

I don't want anyone else. These are my fae. And damn it, I'm keeping them.

My fire died, replaced by wind. Vox's nostrils flared as my power wrapped around him, forcing him to acknowledge me. I reached for him, my fingers sliding into the loose strands of his thick hair as I yanked him down for a kiss.

Mine, I thought at him. *You're mine.*

Chapter 36

Vox



Claire had kissed me before, but not like this, not with complete abandonment of her other elements. She might as well have dropped all her clothes for the impact it had on me, leaving me stunned.

Titus and Sol both stiffened at the sudden change, but they didn't interfere. Instead, they encouraged her, their touches soft against her back as she embraced magic that sang only for me.

Her melody whispered through my senses, singing a song of the ancients that called to my element and made me ache for her.

Her magic knocked at my soul, and this time, I let her in as I gave in to the need to taste her. I would have been a fool not to graze my tongue across hers and indulge in the song she played so sweetly just for me.

"You're mine, Vox," she whispered, tangling her fingers into my hair as she pulled me down to her again. "You. No other Air Fae, Vox. You are who I trust and who I want. I choose *you*."

My lips hovered over hers as her breath mingled with mine, but she didn't close the gap. Instead, she waited for my move.

I chose to explore what she offered. This was a true mate bond, one unlike anything I'd felt in all my years. I'd come across a handful of fae who'd tried to tempt me, who might have guessed at the raw power I hid from the world, but the truth was that I didn't trust anyone enough to set it free. I had royal blood in my veins, and that made me dangerous. I stayed in control because I kept that power in check, but what Claire offered me was a life without restraint.

Freedom.

Her air flirted with mine as her fingers went to my school robes, coaxing

them past my shoulders with a breeze that had my skin pebbling.

“You’re not the only one who’s afraid,” she murmured, the blues of her irises darkening. She was allowing her affinity for air to come out and dominate her, pushing her fae half to the surface. The element felt hungry, starved even, and was entirely focused on me.

A gust of wind lifted her golden hair, sending the curls sweeping away to reveal her nape before lashing out to rattle the walls with warning. Titus glanced at me, but the power wasn’t mine, and I was afraid to add more of my element to her reserves. While she craved it, I recognized the same lack of control I’d seen in Sol. I’d always treated that as a weakness, something to be contained and monitored.

Reaching around her, I gripped Titus by the wrist and brought him closer, placing his hand on her hip. I did the same with Sol and watched her visibly relax as their touch worked magic into her, grounding her with balance.

This was how ultimate power was meant to be controlled—not contained, but sated.

“I’ve been wrong all this time,” I marveled, reevaluating all my previous notions. “Power isn’t meant to be suppressed.”

“It’s meant to be set free,” Claire finished for me, smiling as her fingers swept loving touches over my face.

“What do you want to do, sweetheart?” Titus whispered, his fire roaming over the thin fabric of her tank top.

“I...” She swallowed, her gaze holding mine. “This is new for me.”

“Us, too,” Sol replied, a chuckle in his voice. “I mean, not the female part. The, uh, group part.”

His slight hesitation seemed to put her at ease, because her eyes twinkled. “I like the way you all make me feel,” she admitted, glancing around before refocusing on me. “I want to explore more.” Her fingers returned to my face as she kissed me again, her nails sliding to the back of my neck to hold me as if she thought I might let her go.

Not that I ever could.

Not with her tongue stroking mine like *that*.

But she was right.

I wanted more, too.

I deepened our embrace, allowing her to feel my yearning, and smiled as Titus’s fire slowly tracked down her spine—singeing the fabric in his wake.

Claire didn’t shy away from it, or perhaps didn’t notice it. And when Sol

gripped the loose strap on one shoulder, she didn't stop him. Titus took the other, and together they unveiled her perfect breasts to my view.

I exhaled slowly, feathering my breath across her skin to swirl around her dusky nipples.

“Vox,” she whispered, the word a plea.

This time, I obeyed.

My lips followed the traces of my exhale, running a wet line down her nape and over the crest of one breast. She arched into me, and I sucked her taut peak into my mouth, eliciting a cry from deep within her throat.

An explosion of air followed, whirling around us.

She needed more. So. Much. More.

My hands fell to her hips, pushing her back into Sol's solid form. He immediately grasped her shoulders, causing her lids to flutter closed.

Power.

The best kind of distraction.

“Titus,” I said, running my fingers along the top of her jeans.

He smiled, sending a flicker of flame down the seams on either side of her legs. She sighed beneath the energy, completely unfazed by him undressing her. She'd tilted her head back to receive Sol's kiss, her mouth parting for him. One of his palms slid to grasp her throat, holding her to him as he indulged her thoroughly.

I concentrated on her exposed curves, swirling energy around her stiff peaks and teasing her pale skin. Then I sent the breeze lower to peel away her now loose pants.

“Claire,” I breathed, shocked to find her bare beneath.

Beautiful.

Smooth.

Perfection.

She shivered, only to sigh as Titus ran a wave of heat over her skin. His power mingled with mine over her breasts, an indication for me to move lower—and I did.

I went to my knees, kissing her along the way.

Her fingers wove into my hair again, her opposite hand seeming to reach for Titus.

A cohesive unit, coming together, in one elemental tornado.

I never would have expected this. Never thought to desire it. But now I knew that I'd never dream of anything but this.

“Taste her,” Titus urged me, then took her away from Sol for a kiss of his own.

I met the Earth Fae’s burning gaze over her shoulder, saw the raw need flourishing inside him, the desire for him to watch me indulge Claire.

And I couldn’t resist.

Both for him and for me, and even for her.

Fuck. She tasted like those fruit trees he kept planting. *Peaches.* And, oh God, I needed more. I slid my tongue through her folds, drinking my fill of her sweetness and reveling in the tremors my strokes elicited from her core.

Her moan thickened my cock.

Her throaty purr excited my heart.

And the way she gave herself over to the three of us had my soul soaring.

For the first time in my life, I felt free.

Complete.

Where I needed to be.

And it was on my knees, worshiping this goddess of a fae with my tongue.

Chapter 37

Claire



I'd never felt anything like this before. So many elements tugged at me, begging me to devour and to be devoured.

Titus caressed me with licks of tantalizing flames across my bare chest.

Sol kissed me again, this time harder, his palm locked around my neck.

And Vox.

Oh, *fuck*, Vox.

His tongue unraveled me below, causing my hips to undulate in the most wanton of ways. And while part of me couldn't believe I'd just indulged myself in a foursome, my fae side overruled.

This was my life now. Where I should be. With these males. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The world around me began to crumble, pleasure overcoming right and wrong, as Vox's mouth sent me soaring into the clouds of ecstasy. So different from the others, and yet just as consuming in an entirely unique way. His air magic caressed mine, intensifying our connection and amplifying the moment, and when I finally opened my eyes, it was to find him grinning up at me. The silver band around his irises practically glowed, so full of power—power I felt bolstering my own.

And then I was kissing Sol again. His grip felt possessive and right around my throat, but I craved more. His opposite palm finally went to my breast, his hips pressing into my backside. The impressive length of his erection sent a thrill down my spine, spiking my curiosity. He was a big man. Rock hard, too. And I wondered how far that trait stretched...

My palm slid backward, exploring his muscled thigh, making me wish the

men were as naked as me.

Titus seemed to sense my unspoken desire, because I *felt* him remove his shirt, the heat of his skin basking against mine. Then he took one of my nipples into his mouth while Vox continued to play between my legs, and the room spun once more.

So much pleasure.

So much sensation.

So much *power*.

I felt it swirling around me, the energy invigorating my soul. *I no longer feel human*, I realized. I felt... *fae*.

And I... I loved it.

Sol released me to Titus, his tongue sliding inside as his hand replaced the one previously grasping my throat, and Vox's mouth left my warmth below.

They didn't give me a moment to question it, all three of them guiding me toward the bedroom. Clothes seemed to be disappearing as we moved. And it should have terrified me, but I didn't feel an ounce of fear. Only acceptance.

My mates.

It had to be fae magic overruling reason. But Cyrus was right. In this world, I could indulge without judgment.

Yes.

The soft mattress of my bed met my back, Titus stepping away to unfasten his jeans without removing them.

Sol had lost his shirt.

Vox, too.

But all of them still had on their pants, their hungry gazes roaming over my body.

"This feels unfair," I said, narrowing my gaze.

Sol's lips quirked upward. "Not from where I'm standing, little flower." He pressed his palms to my knees, spreading them wide. "It seems more than fair to me."

"Yeah?" Titus tried to play a similar game with me in the kitchen once. He'd lost. And Sol would, too.

He jumped as I sent a shower of fire over his pants, destroying the fabric while leaving his skin unscathed.

I started to smile until I realized I'd removed *all* of his clothes.

Oh. My. God.

I had expected him to be large, but... *damn*.

Sol made no move to cover himself. Nor did he seem put off by my expression. If anything, it only deepened his smirk as he crawled onto the bed—directly over me.

“Rushing things?” he asked, his lips brushing mine.

“She does that,” Titus said, kneeling on the bed beside us while Vox circled to the other side.

Vox ran a finger across my cheek, his gaze kind. “Don’t be afraid.”

Oh, I wasn’t afraid.

I was in awe.

My hand slid between me and Sol, unerringly finding his shaft and giving it a sturdy stroke. His smirk fell on a hiss, his forehead dropping to my neck. “*Claire*.”

“As I said, she’s good at rushing,” Titus murmured, his flame dancing along my lips. “And here I thought the three of us could indulge you for hours.”

Oh, yes, please. “Who says you can’t?” I asked, batting my eyes at him.

His lips curled. “So needy, my *Claire*.”

“*Our Claire*,” Vox corrected, a stroke of cool wind meeting my wet flesh below.

I arched in response, my grip on Sol tightening and eliciting a growl from deep within his throat. “*Fuck*.”

Vox’s energy slithered through the bonds, his protective instincts warming the connection between me and Sol. *Testing his control*, I realized, marveling at how attuned the two of them were to one another. I explored the link, curious, and paused as Sol’s intense need consumed my senses.

Oh, wow...

He needed a lot more than my stroke.

Which gave me a wicked idea.

Because that cock... *mmm*.

I nudged him to his back, which took some effort considering his size, and kissed a path down the muscular planes of his chest and abdomen. His copper eyes watched my progression, his irises inflaming into dark pools of need as he realized my intent. Even Vox watched, transfixed by my motions, his own desire palpable.

And Titus.

My beautiful Titus.

He stood naked now by the bed, his palm lazily stroking his erection as he observed my descent.

I held his gaze for a long moment, recalling a conversation between him and Exos about them being okay with sharing me so long as they didn't have to watch me provide pleasure to the other.

But he seemed fine now. Aroused, even. More so than I'd ever seen him. And his smile gave me the courage I needed to continue.

This is... amazing.

I had no other word for it.

Maybe *dream* would do. Because for a moment, I struggled to believe any of this was real, until my mouth closed around the bulbous head of Sol's cock. Because that had to be real. It was too big, too thick, to be fake.

And, oh my, this would be fun inside me later. Maybe not tonight, but at some point. Hopefully.

For now, I indulged in tasting him.

Stroking my tongue up and down his massive length and trying to take as much of him as I could into my mouth.

He groaned, my name a warning on the air as energy sizzled around us. Vox was already there, stroking the power, issuing his brand of control, but it wasn't what Sol needed.

I met his gaze—a gaze that had turned a metallic copper as his element seeped from him in broken, golden tendrils. I'd opened some sort of deeper connection, one tied directly to our consummating of the first level of our bond, and he seemed to be struggling to maintain it. The ground trembled, warning that if Sol didn't find an outlet soon, he would release the magic into the world.

Magic meant for me.

With a firm grip on his shaft, I ran my tongue up the length of him, eliciting a deep noise that made my insides curl with pleasure. His hands fisted at his sides as he struggled to keep control, tugging hard on Vox's energy that kept that door latched closed and not blown wide open.

Hmm, that won't do.

I sensed what he needed, understood it on a supernatural level after bonding with water, spirit, and fire.

Sol needed to unravel.

To push his element into mine and receive some of my earth magic in return.

And the only way to do that was to make him feel comfortable. To ease him into the earthquake waiting to erupt.

I took as much of him in my mouth as I could fit, running the length of him into my throat and then licking my way up and over the head, lapping at the salty droplet that formed.

“Claire,” he warned, his control slipping as the ground shook again.

Not enough, some part of me whispered. *More*.

And not just from Sol.

No.

I needed Vox.

His wild eyes met mine, his thirst palpable. He *liked* what I was doing to Sol, and given the way he stroked himself through his pants, he was imagining me doing the same to him.

Only, that was not where I wanted him.

Fuck, this is wanton, I thought. But I pushed the human voice down, chasing my elements through the fae realm instead.

And said what I needed to say.

“I need you inside me, Vox.”

His eyes flashed with hesitation, but Titus sent a gust of heat to slap some sense into him. “Trust her,” he said, no doubt in his voice. He knew what I wanted to do. He sensed how my elements were screaming at a fever pitch, and I could leash all of my mates to my desires if they just gave in to me. It didn’t matter how powerful they all were.

I could show them freedom like they’d never known.

How, I couldn’t say.

I just knew I could.

Vox swallowed but slipped out of the remainder of his clothes, revealing a lithe, muscular body that made my mouth water. Dark hair unfurled over his shoulders, and dark eyes watched me with unmatched attention. Even his cock was graceful, arching just slightly at an angle that I knew would feel heavenly inside of me.

He joined us on the bed, his hands clasping my hips. “You’re sure?” he asked, his eyes alight with a fresh need that rivaled Sol’s.

Sol, who was looking down at me in awe as he balanced himself on his elbows.

Oh...

Could I contain them all?

“Yes,” I breathed, pressing my backside into Vox as I took Sol deep into my mouth.

“For the love of the fae,” Vox whispered, his arousal meeting mine.

And then he was there.

Entering me.

Filling me to completion.

And unleashing a pleasurable storm inside of me, reminiscent of a hurricane. His knowing fingers found my clit as he set a rhythm, one that rivaled my mouth. He breathed out a gust of rapture, his magic sweeping over me and sending my hair flying.

I captured that power and pushed it into Sol.

The giant of a man groaned when I stroked down hard, following my fingers with my mouth. I reached for Titus as my tongue tasted the earth, copper and peach mixing with the blissful motes of air that fueled my body as Vox increased his thrusts, sliding in and out of me, his control losing its distinct edge as he panted, his pleasure slipping through our bond as he let go and trusted me to hold on to the three strands of elemental power that sank their teeth into me.

Yes.

I found Titus’s cock ready for me, hot against my fingers that had been cooled with Vox’s power. I pumped him hard, twisting to follow my movements with my mouth. Titus groaned and his fire burst into the air, engulfing all three of us in a cocoon of warmth and making my skin glow red.

Vox reached around my middle and hauled me against his chest, his lips going to my neck as he continued to thrust into me, his pants hot against my ear as his air took on Titus’s element.

With me as the conduit, they could share their power and gain the balance that settled into my very being.

Sol sensed what I was doing and loosened his control another fraction, stirring a quake in the most intimate of places between my legs and forcing me closer to the edge of oblivion. His fingers wove through my hair as he joined me on that ledge, his yearning taking over, and danced with me on the precipice.

So close.

My body screamed with the need, my elements roaring through my system.

But it was Titus grabbing my breast that sent us all crashing over into a maelstrom of euphoria. Male groans rent the air, the ground literally shifting around us as fire consumed the room, only to be wrapped up in Vox's tornado of an element, and grounding us in a heaping pile on the bed.

I shook, my limbs practically numb from the intensity. My lips swollen. My body well used.

"Claire," Titus breathed reverently, pulling me toward his sweaty chest. "You're..."

My skin glimmered with a contortion of elements. Fire, wind, and earth sent a rainbow of color cascading through the room, and my breath misted the air with sparkling power. My ears itched at the tips, and I palmed at one absently, finding it pointed.

My inner fae had finally taken over.

I'm no longer Claire.

I was passion, wild, taming the three elements that threatened to explode.

And I craved more.

I wanted Sol inside me next. Titus in my mouth. And Vox in my hands.

I said as much out loud, eliciting masculine chuckles through the bedroom, which gave way to heated gazes and warm touches. Because they wanted it, too.

Mine.

You are all mine.

Chapter 38

Exos



I’m really fucking tired of being knocked out and manipulated by other entities in my head. I glowered at my reflection, talking to the foreign essence maintaining residence in my skull.

“Yes, that helps,” Cyrus drawled, sounding bored.

“You’re not the one with black magic in your damn mind,” I reminded him, my voice a low growl of annoyance.

We’d tried several old spirit methods, most of which involved Cyrus sending blasts of elemental energy into my brain. By the time we finished that, my neural cavities resembled the aftermath of tunneling pixies in the Earth Fae mines.

I swallowed another gulp of my spritemead and slammed the mug down on the counter. “Again.”

“Are you saying that because you’re drunk off the mead, or are you a closet masochist?” Cyrus’s icy gaze sparkled with challenge, his goading meant to distract me from the pain he was about to unleash on my spirit.

“Don’t flirt with me. Just do—*fuck!*” Lights flashed behind my eyes, sending me to my knees. Oh, if I ever found out who put this nasty piece of darkness in my head, I would enjoy killing them. Over and over and over again.

I massaged my temples and tried futilely to help Cyrus. He used my power to bolster his own, causing me to cringe as he detonated a particularly harsh attack inside my being.

The inky thing roared back at him, clinging to me with sludgy claws that made me gag.

“Almost there,” Cyrus said, totally full of shit. I could feel how thick the

thing in my skull was, and he hadn't even sawed through half of it.

Cyrus yanked out so sharply that I gasped.

"I have it," he said.

"No, you fucking don't," I rasped, hating him almost as much as that muck in my head. "It's still there, id—"

A spiritual punch to the black wall left me winded, and a second had me curling into the fetal position. I wanted to demand him to stop, but he seemed hell-bent on whatever method he'd enlisted and he was drawing on so much of my energy that I couldn't block him even if I wanted to.

My vision swam, the walls of our home blurring.

But I felt the crack splintering through my mind.

A whine came from inside, escaping through my throat, as Cyrus mentally beat the darkness to a pulp. Until it sputtered and sizzled and died in a pool of inky fluid that he sucked out of my spirit and sent to the floor beside me.

"Dark Fae magic," he growled, spitting on the dying substance. "Whoever did this is playing with forbidden arts."

Of a land none of our kind ever ventured into, I thought, unable to speak above my panting breaths.

"No wonder it felt like a fucking vampire," Cyrus continued, his disgust evident. "Because that thing was created by one. And I think that thing in the death fields may have been a Dark Fae, or the spirit of one."

What he said made sense.

Except I didn't understand why.

Until suddenly I did.

Because my memories were finally free.

I sat up despite the ache in my skull and forced my mouth to function.

"Mortus." It came out croaky.

"He took you?"

I nodded, then shook my head, and then nodded again, trying to clear my throat.

"Yes, that clears everything up, brother. Thank you." Cyrus, the perpetual smart-ass, handed me my spritemead. "Drink that. You make more sense while drunk."

Jackass. I snatched the mug from his hand and gulped several swallows while he watched with a touch of impatience.

Right. Because one could just recover immediately after hours of mental

torment and allowing another to use his energy.

I took another sip just to piss him off and smiled when he rolled his eyes.

“It was Mortus,” I clarified, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “But he’s being controlled.”

“By...?” Cyrus prompted, waving a hand.

“Ophelia.” I met his widening eyes. “Claire’s mother has turned Dark Fae, and it would appear that she’s very much alive.”

“You’re sure?” he asked, his voice holding a hint of disbelief.

I dipped my chin in the affirmative. “Now that I can properly think again, I recognize the essence. It feels so much like Claire, but darker.”

“And she’s fixated on our little queen as well,” Cyrus added, his eyebrows lifting. “That’s why it holds similar properties to the plague, but different.”

“It would seem it’s all connected, yes.”

“And that Ophelia somehow survived, and by bringing Claire to the Academy...”

“We awoke a dormant beast,” I finished for him. “Yes.”

“Fuck,” he breathed, glancing at the acid-like substance eating through our stone floor. I flicked a flame over it, needing the shit to burn and disappear. “This is bad.”

I snorted. “Understatement of the century, brother.”

“Has she been controlling Mortus all this time?”

“It’s possible.” The fae never had seemed right, but I’d chalked it up to his dark history. “But I’m more interested in figuring out how an Elemental Fae turned Dark Fae.” They were usually born, their world far different from ours. They required blood to survive—hence, vampires. And they lived without sunlight, something our kind thrived on, which was why trapping an Elemental Fae underground for too long could kill one.

“That is an odd development,” Cyrus agreed, scratching his jaw. “But who knows what happened while she was up in the Human Realm?”

“True,” I agreed. The Dark Fae liked playing with humans; the whole blood and drinking thing really got them off. I blew out a breath, rubbing my face. “Dude, I need a shower.”

“No shit?” Cyrus feigned shock. “It’s only been a few weeks.”

“When I’m done, I want to see Claire.” I could feel her happiness through the bond, her lazy energy telling me exactly how her other mates had distracted her. My heart warmed, my spirit rolling in her bliss. “Do you regret

it?” I wondered out loud, pausing at the exit of the living area.

Cyrus glanced up at me, his own spritemead a breath away from his lips. He didn't need me to clarify, his thoughts almost always in tune with mine. “I expected to,” he admitted. “But no. No, I don't.”

“Would you change the way it happened?”

He chuckled. “I'm pretty sure it was the only way it could have happened.”

I nodded, understanding immediately. “She didn't like you.”

“Not one bit.”

“Good,” I replied. “She needed someone to break through the human shell and unleash the fae beneath.”

His lips curled. “You're welcome.”

So arrogant, my brother. But I couldn't help my resulting laugh.

Because yeah. We all had him to thank. Seeing that Claire had finally embraced her inner fae.

I sighed, both overjoyed and distraught.

Because I wasn't sure which news I wanted to break to her less—that her mother was alive and causing chaos or that Claire had awoken a fae circle so powerful that it proved all the prophecies about her correct.

My precious Halfling was no longer a princess.

No.

Soon, she would be crowned Elemental Fae Queen.

She just didn't know it yet.

Epilogue

Claire



A warmth caressed my heart, causing me to stir among the heavy limbs in my bed. Or was it our bed? I really didn't know anymore. We all had our own rooms, including Titus, but he never slept in his quarters, only mine. So it felt like a shared space. And now it was littered with male limbs.

Vox in front of me, Sol yet again at my back, and Titus between my legs using my thigh as a pillow.

I can't move, I thought.

A chuckle ran through my mind, the sound adoring and so very missed. *Exos.*

I'm here.

I sighed, my lips curling. *I miss you.*

Then come get me, he murmured. I'm in the hallway.

I shot upright, causing Sol to grumble and Vox's eyes to fly open. "What is it?"

Titus nuzzled into my leg, then shifted a little to release me. "Exos is back," he said, his voice deep with sleep. "Go ahead, Claire. We'll be here."

Sol's hand moved from my upper thigh to his own leg, his nonverbal way of granting approval to move. And Vox rolled to his back. I tried to slide over him to get out of the bed, but he caught me by the hip. His fingers threaded through my hair as his mouth captured mine in a mind-bending kiss reminiscent of the hours we spent in bed.

How is this my life? I wondered, awed.

When he finally released me, I almost forgot what I wanted to do. Then I felt Exos's tug again, a patient presence underlined in authority.

“I’ll be back,” I whispered.

“I know,” Vox replied, nipping my bottom lip. “I’ll be here.”

He kissed me again, gentler this time, his tongue lazily stroking mine, before helping me to stand. Titus and Sol had already passed out again, completely at ease. Vox shifted to his side, tucking his arm under his head, as he watched me pad to the door.

I slipped into Titus’s robe—an item I really needed to procure for myself—and met Exos in the hallway. He wore one of his elegant suits, his blond hair stylishly gelled, as if he were about to attend a meeting of some kind.

Yet the clock on the wall said it was just after four in the morning.

“There are some formal ceremonies I need to attend,” he explained, sensing my confusion. He cupped my cheek and brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. “Will you come with me?”

“Are you... Is everything okay?” I asked, leaning into his touch.

He nodded. “Cyrus destroyed the essence in my mind.”

Yes. I’d felt as much when he reached out to me. He felt clean. Like my Exos. And now that I saw him, I could see he was completely back to normal. Fae certainly healed quickly. “What was it?” I wondered out loud.

“Something I want to talk to you about,” he admitted. “Which is why I want you to come with me today.”

“Where?”

“To the Spirit Kingdom.”

I shuddered, not ready to experience that again. But I had to ask: “Why?”

“It’s time to take my rightful place as the Spirit King. And I’d like you by my side when I do it.”

I blinked. “What? What about Cyrus?”

“He’ll be there, too.” Exos leaned down to replace his thumb with his lips and kissed me softly. “There’s so much we need to explain, Claire. And I would prefer to do it in the Spirit Kingdom. Please.”

“What about the others? And the Solstice Ball?” That had to be coming up soon. And why was I fixated on that above everything else? “I promised to go with Sol and Vox,” I clarified, deciding that was a good reason. Well, we hadn’t really finalized it. But it was definitely happening.

Exos’s lips curled. “I’ll have you back in time for the ball, Claire. In addition to your classes, as I understand you’ve missed a few.”

“Been a little busy trying not to die,” I pointed out.

“Yes, I understand the feeling.” His palm slid to the back of my neck.

“Please come with me, Claire. I need you to understand what it means to be a Royal Fae.” *Because you’re becoming one*, I heard him whisper, the words a haunting statement in my mind.

“I...” I glanced at his suit and frowned. “Do you want me to wear my Academy clothes?”

He chuckled. “No. I have a gown for you, princess. One that will make you look like a queen.”

I swallowed. “You’ll tell me what to do?”

“When have I not?” he teased, nipping my lower lip.

“True,” I agreed, amused. “Okay. But I need to tell the others.”

“Of course. Just one thing first.”

I stared into his ocean-blue eyes. “Anything.”

“Mmm, I was hoping you’d say that.” He pulled me even closer, one hand tightly holding my neck while his other pressed into my lower back. And then his mouth took mine in a kiss underlined in power.

My soul rejoiced, my heart beating in time with his, as he lifted me into the air to press me into the hallway wall. I wrapped my legs around him for support, not caring at all how it split my robe open to reveal my intimate flesh.

Exos rocked his hips into mine, his hardening cock hitting me right where I desired him most. I missed this. Missed *him*. And I told him that out loud, his name a conviction I’d whisper for eternity. His palm slid from my back to my breast, squeezing and kneading and eliciting sounds from my throat that I was sure would wake the others.

But no one disturbed us.

This was just me and Exos, his hard body against mine, his mouth tasting and licking and memorizing. And oh, how I wanted to remove the suit.

Yet it seemed sexier to have him clothed, especially as the robe hit the floor and left me naked and wanting against him.

“If we had more time, I’d take you completely,” he whispered, his voice harsh and sexy at my ear. “But for now, I’ll be satisfied with hearing you scream my name.”

I panted, shocked that my body could respond this way after so many hours of pleasure. However, Exos always knew what I needed, his touch a hypnotic caress that left me shivering and quaking for more.

And now was no different.

He pressed into me, the head of his hard cock engaging my clit through

the fabric of his pants and sending me shattering on a wave of ecstasy that took me to another plane of existence.

Our plane.

The one only our souls knew how to access.

I stayed there for several minutes, reveling in the feel of *us*. He kissed me softly, knowingly, our bond singing in approval as our link strengthened all the more.

“My Claire,” he breathed.

“My Exos,” I agreed, smiling against him. “You can take me anywhere you want. You know that.”

“I do, but it’s nice to have your cooperation for once.”

I smiled. “A lot changed while you were gone.”

“I can see that,” he mused as he tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, his finger running up the pointed tip that still felt so foreign to me. “I approve.”

“Good.” I tugged his lower lip into my mouth. “Because I like the new me. I feel stronger. More in control.”

“And that will only continue to grow, Claire.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “You have no idea what destiny is laid out before you, but I’ll help you in every way I can. We all will.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“It is,” he whispered. “More than you know.”

“So tell me.”

He sighed, one palm cupping my cheek while the other clasped my hip to keep me balanced between him and the wall. “It’s your mother, Claire.”

“I know what she’s done, but I won’t make the same mistakes.” I felt it deep in my core that I could never betray my mates the way my mother had done with her own.

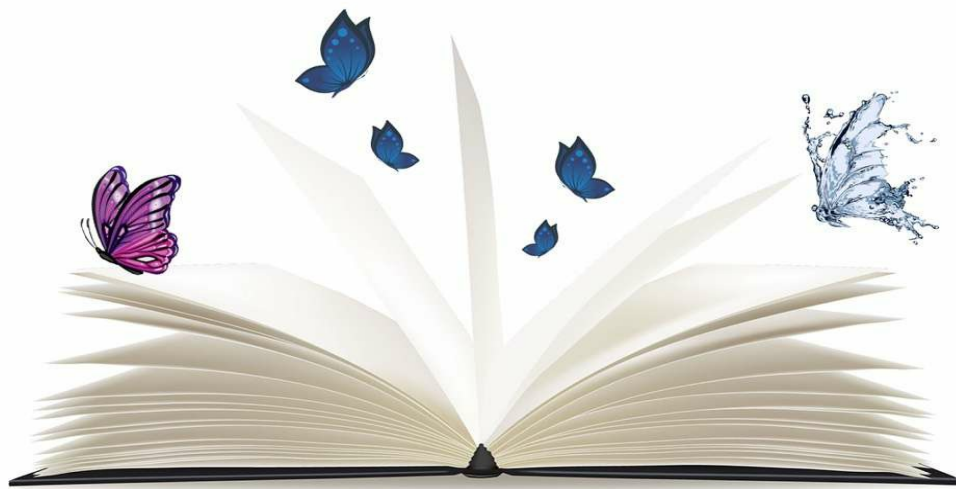
“No. Not that.” His blue eyes took on a serious quality, his grip tightening. “Your mother...” He paused, sighing. “Your mother is the one who tried to kill you with dark magic. She’s also the one who used Mortus as a puppet to capture me.”

My lips parted. “But she’s dead.” Which sounded like a ridiculous statement considering what he just said. Except, everyone told me... My eyes widened. “Elana said a body was never found.”

He nodded. “Because there wasn’t one to find.”

Holy fae... “My mother’s alive.”

GELEMENTAL
FAE ACADEMY
BOOK THREE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LEXI C. FOSS & J.R. THORN

How is a girl supposed to concentrate with five hot fae mentors? It's not like I have a lot to do or anything.

Royal Coronations.

Finals.

A Solstice Ball.

And a mother hell-bent on ruining the fae world.

Just another ordinary day for me, Claire Summers, the Halfling fae with access to all five elements.

Everyone is counting on me, even my esteemed mentor, Elana. Because I'm the only one with enough power to take my mother down.

But what if it's all a lie? What if the bad guy I've been chasing all along is the one standing right by my side?

I'm in for the fight of my life with five fae protectors and an ally I never saw coming. It's up to us to save the Fae Kingdom before it's too late. And it'll require giving my heart to all my mates, to guard and to hold, for eternity and beyond.

Part One



Prologue

Claire



M *y mother's alive.*

I repeated that phrase over and over again in my mind and out loud until someone shook me out of my stupor. No, not someone. The ground. *Sol.*

I blinked and met the concerned gaze of the Earth Fae. He stood stark naked before me, his muscular form momentarily grabbing my attention before I frowned at the males standing around me.

All of them were naked except Exos.

And no one seemed to be noticing this apart from me.

I cleared my throat. “Uh, guys...”

“What do you mean, Ophelia is the one who orchestrated your kidnapping?” Vox demanded, his arms folded over his lean torso. While Sol was built like a solid linebacker, Vox had a runner’s build. And Titus, well, he reminded me of a wrestler. No, a boxer.

Why were they all naked, again?

Right. We’d been in bed.

And then Exos came and revealed—

“My mother is alive,” I whispered. “And you’re all very naked.”

Titus smirked. “You didn’t mind that a few hours ago.”

Honestly, I still didn’t. But it was damn distracting.

“From what Cyrus and I have discerned, Ophelia is very much alive and using Mortus as a puppet. It’s the only explanation for what has happened.” Exos glanced up at Sol. “It also explains why the Earth Fae are slowly dying.”

“Because she’s the cause of the plague,” my earth mate replied softly.

“We think she’s using Dark Fae magic,” Exos added. “And Claire coming to the Academy is what has led Ophelia to come out of hiding.”

“Dark Fae magic?” I repeated.

“Vampires,” Titus muttered, shuddering. “Vile fae. They live on human blood and play with the dark arts.”

“Vampires are real?” I squeaked. “Like Dracula?”

Exos sighed. “They’re not vampires the way you’ve been taught. But yes, other types of fae exist.”

“What other types?” I demanded. “Werewolves? Skinwalkers? Demons?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Claire,” Exos replied, shaking his head. “What matters is Ophelia is using dark magic to weaken the Elemental Fae.”

“Seriously, are werewolves real?”

He just gave me a look. “No.”

“Demons?”

“Also, no.” He shook his head, his expression softening. “We can talk more about the types later. I promise it’s nothing alarming.”

“Says the fae who just revealed vampires exist,” I muttered.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Before we get to all that, I need to ascend, and I want you with me, Claire. As my mate.”

Wait... “Like... fully mated?” I asked, my heart skipping a beat.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Yes,” I parroted back at him, not even needing to think about it. “Yes.” Because I refused to lose him again. Ever. And this would make our bond permanent. Unbreakable. Impenetrable. “Yes,” I said again.

His lips twitched, his blue eyes glittering with amusement. “Well, at least I know how to make you agreeable. Just put you in a hallway of naked men.”

I narrowed my gaze. “Don’t ruin the moment, Exos.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, princess.” He pulled me into a hug while the others murmured around us about my mother and what that all meant.

“Do you think taking her to the Spirit Kingdom is a wise move?” Vox asked, his tone holding a hint of something I couldn’t quite define. Not jealousy, exactly, but a touch of longing underlined in concern.

“She’ll be there with me and Cyrus. We won’t take her anywhere near the death fields.” Exos pulled me to his side, his arm securing my shoulders. “But it’s her decision if she wants to go back there.”

I swallowed, recalling what happened the last time I visited the Spirit Kingdom. The stark desolation of the lands, the way the death fields had

nearly claimed my soul, and that little flicker of light in the distant village housing the only remaining Spirit Fae.

Ninety percent of them had perished because of my mother, leaving them with only two royals left—Cyrus and Exos. My mates. My loves. My fae.

Allowing Exos to ascend on his own wasn't really an option.

It would also mark me as a coward.

No. My mother had taken enough from me, from *them*. She wouldn't take this, too.

"I'm going," I said, feeling the confidence of those two words all the way to my bones. "It's where I'm meant to be. Where I'm needed." I had to show the fae world that I wasn't afraid. I might be Ophelia's daughter, but I wasn't *her*.

Vox, Titus, and Sol all studied me with resignation in their gazes. They could feel my decision through the bonds, my spirit's need to finalize my connection to Exos palpable to everyone in the hall.

"Hurry back to us, little flower," Sol murmured, giving me a small grin. "I'll make sure your peach trees are ready."

"And I'll see what I can do about cleaning up around here," Vox added.

Titus winked. "Meanwhile, I'll supervise and keep them out of trouble."

Sol snorted and Vox shook his head. "If anyone will be supervising anyone, it'll be me," Vox declared.

I think they'll be just fine for a few days, princess, Exos whispered into my mind.

My lips curled in amusement as all three of them began bickering in a playful manner. *Yeah*, I agreed. *I know*. I hated to leave them behind, but they couldn't enter the Spirit Kingdom.

We won't be gone long, Exos promised softly. *A week at most*.

And when we returned, I would have two full mates. Water and Spirit. With three more to go.

I kissed them all goodbye before taking Exos's hand.

It was time to face my future. My mother. And all fae kind.

My name is Claire Summers and I accept my fate.

Whatever that may be.

Chapter 1

Claire



“**H**ands above your head, princess.” Exos loomed over me in an all-black suit that clung to his form in unfair ways—ways that forced me to obey him.

I stretched my hands above my head and gripped the bars of his headboard. “Happy?”

His ocean-blue eyes ran over my naked body and smiled. “Yes. Very.” He slowly unraveled his tie while keeping one knee beside me on the mattress, his opposite foot on the ground.

We were supposed to be going to our mating ceremony, but Exos had pulled me in here instead. Not that I was complaining. However, I did want to move to the final level with him. I almost lost him once. That would not be happening again.

“Mmm, the beauty of spirit is how solitary it is,” Exos murmured as he drew his silky tie along the center of my torso up to my collarbone. “We don’t require an audience, Claire.”

I frowned up at him. “What do you mean?”

He slid the silk around my wrists, tying the fabric into a sturdy knot. “This is our ceremony, Claire.” He leaned down to kiss me, silencing whatever comment I could have uttered back to him. But he had to *hear* my shock, just as he’d clearly overheard my pondering about him taking me here rather than to the ceremonial room.

“Every element is different. Some require the formality, and while Spirit used to indulge in a similar tradition to the others, we gave up on it years ago. Not enough of us left to fill a room.” He righted himself, slid the jacket from his shoulders, and walked over to a corner desk to drape the wool fabric over

the chair.

“We’ll be celebrated tonight after the coronation,” he continued, returning to the bed to smile down at me. “But this morning and this afternoon are for us and us alone.” He punctuated the words with a tug against the silk binding my wrists.

I glanced up to see them secured to the headboard—something he must have done while we kissed. Clever fae. It left me naked and bound before him.

His grin told me he more than approved.

“We’re going to bond, Claire,” he said, his tone holding a delicious depth to it that scattered goose bumps across my flesh. “We’re going to bond all day.”

My lips formed an O, but no sound escaped me.

Because he had started unbuttoning his shirt and I only had so many functioning brain cells around a disrobing Exos.

For months, he’d explored my body without allowing me to return the favor. Well, this last month hadn’t been his fault. My mother had held him captive underground.

Because she was apparently alive.

A train of thought I was so not going to consider right now.

No, I much preferred the sight of male sin before me.

I nearly swallowed my tongue, Exos’s body an art crafted by the Fae gods. His shirt fell to the floor, his muscles rippling along the way, and his hand landed on his belt. “Are you ready to recite your vows, Claire?”

Uh... I licked my lips. “Does it involve saying them around your cock?” Because I could totally get behind that. While I’d seen Exos naked before, I’d never been gifted the opportunity to memorize him with my tongue. And I would very much enjoy doing that right now.

His lips curled. “The ceremony only works if your words are intelligible, baby.”

“Then you probably should have left our clothes on.”

“What would be the fun in that?” he countered, the leather sliding from the loops of his pants. “I thought you enjoyed a good challenge. Isn’t that how we met? You were dared to kiss the man at the bar?”

“The very handsome man,” I clarified, recalling the night we met. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Do you regret it?” he asked softly, kneeling once more on the bed, his

pants unbuttoned but still zipped. He cupped my face, his eyes holding mine. “Do you regret kissing me?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “No.” I still mourned Rick, my friend who had died in the resulting fire, but I no longer held myself responsible for the massacre.

Mastering my powers had provided me with a new view of the world, a deeper understanding of my control. There was nothing I could have done differently that night, apart from not kissing Exos. But even then, I’d been a ticking time bomb.

“You’re mine,” I said, wishing my hands were free to grab him. “I’ll never regret claiming you.”

His lips curled. “That’s good, Claire. Because I’m about to make you mine. Forever.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Cyrus? Can you help us with the vows?”

My eyes widened as Exos’s brother entered the bedroom in a suit, his light hair mussed in that way I adored. He smirked, his hands tucked into his pockets. “You just had to one-up the mating ceremony, didn’t you?”

Exos gripped my thighs while casually replying, “You chose your platform; I picked mine. And in my opinion, a bed is far more appropriate than a ceremonial altar.” His sapphire gaze slid to mine as he gently spread my legs to expose my intimate flesh. “I prefer my method of worship.”

Cyrus snorted and stopped beside the bed, his icy blue irises grinning down at me. “I think I prefer your method, too.” He tilted his head. “You ready to say your vows, little queen?”

My mouth went dry as Exos positioned himself between my splayed thighs. He couldn’t mean to—

I arched off the bed as his lips closed around my clit without warning.

“*Fuck,*” I breathed.

Cyrus tsked. “That’s not how the vows go. It starts with, ‘I, Claire, accept the power that binds me to Exos, born of Spirit.’” He arched a blond brow. “Now try again.”

Exos slid his tongue through my folds, his gaze holding a wicked glint as he watched me.

“I... I...” *Oh God.* I writhed, unable to focus, my veins flooding with liquid fire. This wasn’t fair. How either of them expected me to focus—

Cyrus palmed my breast, his touch eliciting a long, needy moan from my throat.

It was official.

These two were going to kill me.

“Focus, little queen,” Cyrus whispered, his lips brushing over mine. I hadn’t even felt him lean over the bed. My senses were all focused between my legs and on my breasts. “You don’t want to lose Exos again, right?”

I shuddered, shaking my head. Those words registered in my thoughts, the notion of severing my connection to Exos a very real threat. Because it had almost happened.

“Then repeat after me.” He lifted just enough to capture my gaze and hold it. And he repeated the first sentence of the vows.

“I, Claire,” I began, my fingers clenching as Exos did something sensuous with his tongue. “Accept the power that binds me to Exos, born of Spirit.”

Cyrus smiled and uttered the next part.

“To cherish and respect, through all the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part.” This was the same as my mating to Cyrus. However, the circumstances were very different. I’d spoken the vows in a dreamlike state within the Water Kingdom. Now, oh, Exos was making this extremely difficult.

Keep going, he encouraged through our bond. *I’m just warming us up.*

Some warm-up, I thought back at him while Cyrus spoke the next part.

“I give unto him the center of my essence, the heart of my being, my very spirit, and accept his in return,” I recited, my voice far breathier now than it was when we began. Because Exos’s warm-up? Yeah, it was turning into something far bigger.

Cyrus kissed me again before delivering the final words.

Which I parroted in a sultry voice I barely recognized.

“My element is now his just as his is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake him for another, my spirit forever belonging to him and to him alone.”

“Mmm,” Exos murmured, the vibration pushing me near the edge of oblivion.

And he sat up.

I half growled, my thighs quivering from the pending climax he’d denied me. But then he started speaking, the vows ones he clearly knew by heart. A warm aura settled over us, our spirits mingling intimately on a plane only we could access together. It was the place where our elements bonded, where

promises were made and feelings were realized.

With each word he uttered, I felt the finality of our joining clicking into place, tying me to him indefinitely.

I sighed, the burning in my veins subsiding beneath a euphoric wave of rightness.

Mine.

Mine, he agreed in my mind, his palm settling over my heart.

Cyrus placed his hand over Exos's, creating a powerful burst of energy that swirled around the three of us.

Two finalized bonds.

Water and Spirit.

Royal ties on both ends.

Titus, Vox, and Sol came to life in my mind, their elements aware of my deepened ties to spirit. But I didn't feel any animosity or jealousy, just a sense of understanding and acceptance.

I was a Halfling with access to all five elements. I needed my fae mates to ground me, to complete the elemental circle we'd all started.

And two of those threads were now absolute.

Nothing could come between us.

Not even my evil-as-fuck mother.

Exos stretched out on top of me, his mouth sealing over mine. A kiss to bind us together forever. I felt it all the way to my toes, the finality of our embrace. And the welcome of a new future.

My tongue met his in a dance filled with promise and intent. All the heat he'd awoken between my legs roared back to life with a vengeance, my need for him consuming my every thought.

Please, I whispered to him. *Please, Exos.*

After months of him exploring me sexually, I needed him to let me return the favor. I craved his intensity, his touch, his intimacy.

He cupped my breast, his touch similar to Cyrus's and yet so entirely his own.

Cyrus, I thought, remembering his presence.

Only, he was no longer standing beside the bed.

Try not to kill my brother, little queen. He's still recovering. His words caressed my mind, his touch fluid and strong and commanding.

Pretty sure he can handle himself. As Exos was proving with his mouth.

Cyrus mentally slid away with a chuckle that warmed me all over. A

warmth Exos seemed to follow with his hands as he traced my curves. “My brother had you for a week, Claire,” he said softly, nipping at my lower lip. “Today you’re mine. And only mine.”

I had no reply for that.

Which was good because he didn’t give me a chance to even try before taking over my mouth again.

His hips settled between mine, his pants an unwelcome barrier. But my wrists were still bound, holding me hostage as he took his sweet time kissing me. I could taste myself on his tongue, a flavor that only heightened my arousal and need for him.

All these months of foreplay.

Culminating in a fiery moment of passion.

One he seemed hell-bent on prolonging.

“Exos,” I moaned. “You’re killing me.”

“Seems only fair to give you a dose of how I’ve felt these last few months.” He pressed a kiss to my throat before dipping down to tease my breasts. “I’ve burned for you, Claire. So fucking hot. And now you’re mine.” Those dark blue eyes glimmered up at me. “*Mine*, princess.”

“Yours,” I agreed, my hips arching in a desperate plea for friction.

He sucked my nipple deep into his mouth, the act almost punishing but also deliciously appeasing. Such a twisted and convoluted sensation.

Exos repeated the action with my other peak before drawing back onto his knees to admire my bound form. “You’re turning a beautiful shade of pink, Claire.”

“Because I’m on fire,” I admitted, squirming. Fuck, if my hands were free, I’d pleasure myself at this rate.

Which was probably why he tied my wrists above my head.

Evil mate.

“Fuck me,” I demanded.

His full lips quirked up. “Oh, I’m going to do more than fuck you, baby.” He slowly slid down his zipper. “I’m going to devour you—mind, body, and spirit.”

I had no idea what he meant by that, but I welcomed all of the above.

My acquiescence with his plans only deepened as he revealed his perfect cock. Long, lean, and strong, just like him. He swept his thumb over the head and brought the essence to my lips.

He didn’t even need to issue a demand.

I sucked the pad into my mouth without a word and moaned as his masculine flavor touched my tongue. Yes... I've been craving him for so long. Too long.

And finally he was naked.

Hard.

Ready.

But not moving, his gaze riveted on my weeping center.

"Exos," I hissed, my body strung so tight it felt ready to shatter.

He stroked his shaft, his expression thoughtful. "You look beautiful like this. Hot. Needy. So fucking wet."

Oh God, if he kept talking to me like that, I'd burst. And wouldn't that be a feat?

His smile told me he knew, too.

"I missed you, Claire," he whispered, crawling over me. "Do you want to feel how much?"

"Yes." I swallowed and repeated, "Yes."

His lips ghosted over mine as he positioned his hips right where I wanted him. "I've wanted this from the moment I first saw you," he admitted softly. "I fought it at first only because you needed time to acclimate, but there wasn't a second between us that I didn't think about this. About having you."

He pressed against my entrance, his body shuddering over mine and revealing the truth of his words.

"I've never wanted someone so much in my life." He spoke the words against my mouth, his heart beating hard in his chest against mine. "And now you're truly mine."

Exos slid all the way inside, sheathing himself to the hilt with a thrust so powerful I gasped.

A sense of completion washed over me, sprouting goose bumps up and down my limbs. *That* was the finality of our vows, marrying our spirits in eternity. I thought I'd felt it earlier, but this was the consummation.

And as he began to move, I felt our souls stitching together in an unbreakable knot, sealing our fates for eternity.

I groaned, the wholesome feeling consuming me, leaving me light and buoyant and full. My hands ached with the need to touch him, something he must have sensed because he released the binds while capturing my mouth beneath his own.

My nails scored his back, drawing my name into his very flesh as he

claimed my body below. He wasn't soft or tender. No. Exos was all strength, his movements done with purpose and fulfillment. Every upward stroke hit me deep, and every flex of his hips grazed my clit.

He was skill personified.

Experienced in the best way.

Flawless and thorough and *amazing*.

My spirit seemed to detach from my body, sprinting toward our plane to find his element, to join in a gyration of heat and intensity.

With each shift and touch, I flew closer to the edge, my limbs tense and shaking.

And then I was falling on a scream I swore reached the stars.

Exos caught the sound with his tongue, feeding off my pleasure while giving me more, his pace increasing as he chased me into oblivion.

Where we met and moaned and reveled in a rapture I felt with every fiber of my being.

Joined. That was how I felt. This had gone beyond fucking and directly into the art of making love. Exos had redefined it, adding his own flavor to the twist, his own technique to the act of bonding.

I shuddered beneath him, nowhere near done.

And from his continued movements, I knew he wasn't either.

"Take me to the stars, Exos," I whispered.

He smiled. "Oh, Claire, I'm going to take you to a whole new galaxy."

And he did.

With each thrust, kiss, lick, and caress, he introduced me to the novel world of spirit. Our own personal paradise where only we belonged.

For eternity.

Chapter 2

Claire



The gown Exos slid over my head felt too heavy, too suffocating. I didn't want to wear anything, every part of me too alive from Exos's touch. But attending his coronation naked would raise a few questions.

Unlike our mating ceremony, there would be more than just Cyrus at the ascension.

Exos's lips ghosted across my bare shoulder. "You look beautiful, Claire." The silky material hugged my curves, the color the same shade as his dark blue eyes.

I met his gaze in the mirror and smiled. "You look pretty handsome yourself."

He chuckled and fixed his tie. Considering how we'd spent the afternoon, we both cleaned up pretty well. The shower had helped. But seeing Exos dressed in an all-black suit just had me wanting to return to the bed again.

He grabbed my hips and pulled me back into him. "After the formalities are finished, I'll take you up on that thought." His lips brushed my racing pulse. "Maybe Cyrus will join us."

My lips parted. "Cyrus?"

Exos nipped my earlobe and released me with a vague hum. I tried to grab his hand, but he was already on his way to the door. He opened it to reveal his brother waiting in the hallway in an identical suit.

Despite spending my afternoon with Exos, my hormones did a little dance. Because, holy Fae, the two males were sin personified.

And their matching grins said they knew it, too.

Cocky males.

I heard that, Cyrus replied, holding out his arm. Come here, little queen.

I smirked and shook my head. *You're incorrigible.* But of course I went to him anyway. Because he was Cyrus. In a suit. And he smelled like the mist from a fresh waterfall.

He hugged me close, his lips pressing into my temple. "Mmm, I see my brother took good care of you today."

Exos closed the door to his room with a snort. "I took more than *good care* of her."

Cyrus laughed. "Yes, I felt that through the bond." He kissed me again before sliding his arm to my lower back. "Shall we? The crowd has already started to gather in the town square. Feather is managing the roast, while several others have created an assortment of side dishes. Gale handled the spritemead, which I'm sure shocks you."

"Gale? Spritemead?" Exos feigned surprise. "And here I thought he hated alcohol of all kinds."

Neither name meant anything to me, but the fondness in Exos's and Cyrus's auras told me they meant something to them.

"Are they Spirit Fae?" I wondered out loud. It seemed an appropriate deduction since we were in the Spirit Kingdom, but I also knew over ninety percent of the Spirit Fae had perished after my mother unleashed a plague a little over two decades ago.

"Yes. Gale helped raise us after our mother died." Exos threaded his fingers with mine, walking to my left, while Cyrus's arm remained snug around my waist, his heat a blanket against my right side. "Feather is the oldest matron of the Spirit Fae, but only about fifty human years old. She looks closer to twenty-five, like the rest of us."

"The plague took out all the eldest fae among us," Cyrus clarified.

"And it's happening again with the Earth Fae," I added, swallowing. "At least, that's how Sol described it."

Exos nodded. "Something similar is happening to his kind, yes. But rather than wipe them out in a single day, it's taking years."

"Almost like something—or someone—is feeding off their energy," Cyrus murmured, his expression falling into serious lines.

"Someone like my mother," I translated.

"Maybe." He cleared his throat, his arm tightening around my waist. "But that's a discussion for tomorrow. Tonight is a joyous occasion. My brother has finally decided to grow the fuck up."

Exos snorted. "Okay, Prince of Water. If that's how you want to play

this.”

“Who served as Spirit King for the last decade because his brother preferred playing warrior?” Cyrus pretended to think about it. “Oh, right, me.”

“Playing warrior.” Exos shook his head, but his grin said he didn’t mind the jibe. “I’ll play warrior with you later and see how you fare.”

My eyebrows rose. “That sounds like an innuendo.” One I would really enjoy watching unfold.

“Because you have fae cock on the brain.” Cyrus glanced over my shoulder as we descended one of the palace’s many stone staircases. “I’m starting to think you left our little queen unsatisfied, brother.”

“She’s insatiable,” he drawled.

Cyrus grinned. “Tell me about it.”

“If you both keep talking about me like I’m not walking between you, I’ll make sure you’re both very *unsatisfied*.”

They laughed, their confidence a palpable cloud around us. “We’ll see,” Cyrus mused. Yeah, he sounded pretty sure of himself. And, well, I couldn’t blame him. Not with them both resembling gods in their matching suits. They would have me naked and panting in seconds if they put their minds to it. Especially if they worked together.

Just thinking about it had me clenching my thighs.

An Exos and Cyrus sandwich? Uh, yes, please.

I’ll keep that in mind, Cyrus replied.

Stop playing in my head, I muttered, my cheeks heating from how easily he read my thoughts.

Stop telegraphing so loudly, he returned.

“I rather like how open she is to sharing,” Exos said out loud. “Something to consider later.”

“Can we not do this right now?” Because if they kept it up, I wouldn’t be able to keep a straight face in front of the other Spirit Fae. Hell, I wasn’t even sure I could stand before them at all without melting into a puddle of need. Mating Exos had left my body primed and ready and *needy*.

It’d taken almost a week in bed with Cyrus to work it out.

I’d only indulged in an afternoon with Exos.

To say I wanted more would be an understatement.

Don’t worry, princess. I’ll take care of us both, Exos whispered, squeezing my hand. *But I need to ascend first, to stabilize the Spirit*

Kingdom.

Right. Because Cyrus had essentially renounced his throne when he mated me in the Water Kingdom. He was the king's only heir, leaving him with no choice but to ascend now that he'd chosen a mate for his water element.

And Exos had to become the Spirit King.

Making me the mate to not one but *two* Royal Fae.

Just another day in the life of Claire Summers, I thought with a snort.

My heels clacked against the marble ground as we reached the first floor and started toward the main hall.

This place was a vacant maze where sound echoed due to the lack of people. Stepping outside almost relieved me, until I felt the cruel pull toward the death fields.

Fortunately, we were headed in the opposite direction, toward the town in the distance.

Cyrus stopped beside a vehicle—or I assumed that was the purpose of the strange three-wheeled contraption. It looked like the kind of thing I saw back in the Human Realm, with a few distinct modifications.

Like the open-air seating.

And the lack of a steering wheel.

It looked like what would happen if a car mated with a motorcycle.

“Hop in, princess,” Exos said.

“Hop in,” I repeated. “Right.” A magical fae car wasn't the most exciting thing I'd been introduced to over the last few months, so why not? I allowed him to help me onto the soft, leather-like seat while Cyrus climbed in behind me. “I didn't realize fae had cars.”

“Not really a car,” Exos replied as he slid over to sit beside me. “More like a teleporter.”

“A wh—”

The wind whooshed from my lungs as the contraption began to spin. I grappled for something to hold on to, which turned out to be Exos's arm, and held on for dear life as the scenery morphed into a cloud of dust.

Within seconds, we were surrounded by tiny cottages and cobblestone streets. I blinked. *We're in Bavaria*, I thought, bewildered. Thoughts of my high school geography class populated my mind, flashing images of Southern Germany left and right.

No, little queen. We're still in Spirit Kingdom.

Looks like Germany to me.

Well, sometimes fae travel to the Human Realm and create inspirations. Where do you think supernatural tales came from? Cyrus nibbled the back of my neck before jumping out of the teleportation transporter thing. He held out a hand. “Claire.”

“Cyrus,” I replied, allowing him to help me find my footing. “What do you call that thing?”

“A convenience.” He smiled. “Much faster than walking.”

“But that’s not how we got here from the Academy.”

“No, we used another method of transportation,” Exos said as he came around the front of the teleporter thing. “Portals take us between the kingdoms, and the realms, too. Same idea in terms of technology and power, but different execution.”

There was still so much about this fae world that I didn’t know or understand. So I just nodded as if it all made sense, when it very much did not.

Exos cupped my cheek and pressed a brief, sweet kiss to my lips. “We have all the time in the world to teach you, Claire.” He brushed his nose against mine before pulling away. “So let us introduce you to another aspect of our world—the coronation.”

Chapter 3

Vox



Saying goodbye to Claire after she'd turned my world upside down hadn't been easy, but I'd done it for her. I'd put on a smile and given her a tender kiss and sent her off to the Spirit Kingdom, a place that I couldn't go, but I would have tried in a heartbeat if she'd asked.

I might have looked calm on the outside, but Claire had awakened a tempest in my soul. It slipped out more often now, especially when I was thinking about her... which was all the time.

The dishes I'd just cleaned went flying off the counter and shattered onto the ground in a dramatic cascade of broken porcelain as my air magic slipped from my grasp. An invisible gust spun around the kitchen, rattling the light fixtures, before I squeezed my eyes shut and suppressed the outburst.

When I reopened my eyes, Sol and Titus were both staring at me.

Sol straightened and set down the sandwich he'd been working on. "Doing okay, Vox?"

I shrugged, trying to play it off as a fluke—something I'd done a little too much these last few days. "Too much soap," I offered as an excuse. "It's slippery."

Titus chuckled. "Soap doesn't send three pounds of rice flinging across the entire dorm."

Oh, oops.

I turned enough to see that my slip had not only sent the dishes flying but had also uprooted the pantry box with ingredients meant to last us a week—ingredients that were now scattered all the way down the hall.

I sighed and shuffled to the closet for a broom.

"Why don't you just use your element to push it out the door?" Sol asked

with an edge to his question.

It was what I normally would have done, but my powers were out of control and he clearly knew it.

I shrugged again. “Just craving some exercise.”

The ground trembled, signaling Sol’s irritation with me. “I hate it when you close yourself off, Vox. Just admit that you’re frustrated Claire’s gone. Then we can talk about it.”

Titus chuckled and snapped his fingers, lighting a perfectly blue flame on his fingertips as he heated up a cup of tea that had gone cold. “That’s all we’ve been doing for days, Sol. Claire’s gone to shack up with Exos and we’re not invited. What else is new?” He waggled his eyebrows. “It’s not like she could forget the night we gave her. She’s going to be thinking of us the entire time.”

I wished I possessed an ounce of Titus’s confidence, but opening myself up to Claire had done something to me that I feared couldn’t be undone. Did Claire really know the impact she had on me? Was I honestly ready to embrace it?

The memory of her naked before me made my core tighten, and for a moment all I could think of was how she’d tasted—and how all I wanted was more of her. How she made me feel *free*.

No, I could never go back to *before* that night.

Which meant I had to face the consequences of opening myself up to the bond with Claire.

Her mating to Exos and his coronation would only make her pull on me stronger. She was already something unprecedented—a Halfling with access to all five elements. She was able to tug at every secret I thought I’d buried out of reach, and as her mate-bonds grew, so would she, and that would only force me out of my shell further.

Not something I was ready to embrace.

Titus surprised me by snatching the broom from my grasp. He glowered and then pointed at the table where a pile of remaining sandwiches waited. “Sol has a point, Vox. I’m tired of your moping. Sit and eat something before you get skinny.” He appraised my lean body. “Well, maybe too late for that.”

My eyes narrowed. *Skinny? Yeah, I’ll show him skinny.*

I peeled off my shirt and arched a brow. “Claire seemed to like this just fine the other night.”

Titus smirked, his green eyes running over me. “Yeah, I guess you’re not

bad. No need to get your ponytail all in a twist.”

I snorted. “Whatever.” I marched over and sat across from Sol, who was grinning at our exchange and my lack of a shirt.

Okay, so maybe that’d been a bit of a brash reaction. But Titus had turned up the temperature in here anyway, bringing the Spirit Dorm to a boiling point. So it felt good to remove some clothes. And yeah, maybe I also missed Claire.

Bantering with the mate-circle always seemed to help a little. These guys understood how I felt about Claire being gone. But they didn’t know what was really going on with me. I could tell them, but there was nothing they could actually do. The control was on me. Besides, Sol barely understood his royal ties and Titus wasn’t a royal at all. Even if Cyrus and Exos were here, I’d rather swallow a spiked fruit than ask for their help.

So I’d figure it out on my own.

Or maybe with Claire, when she returned.

“The Solstice Ball is coming up soon,” Sol said as I picked up one of the sandwiches.

I rolled my eyes, tired of this topic. He’d brought it up several times over the last few days. “Will you relax already? Exos said he’d have Claire back in time for the stupid ball.”

“He’s excited about it, okay? Don’t undermine the one good thing our titan has in his life,” Titus said, sending a flame down the hall to burn the spoiled food rather than sweep it up. I wrinkled my nose at the sour scent it created and moved my hand to send a gust out the door, then thought better of it and hunched my shoulders as I endured the stench.

“I don’t understand why he had to take her so quickly,” Sol complained, his shoulders drooping as he stared at the half-eaten sandwich on his plate. “Or why this coronation had to be in the Spirit Kingdom.” He curled his fingers into massive fists, and his stony gaze challenged me. “Is he really trustworthy? You had to knock him out because that *thing* was inside of him. What if it’s still there?”

That *thing* was Claire’s mother. I shuddered with the memory of the dark essence that had almost taken Claire’s life, the shadow energy that had possessed Exos.

Did I trust Exos? Yes.

Did I trust him to protect Claire against Ophelia? Also yes.

But something told me Ophelia had tricks up her sleeves that none of us

were prepared to face yet. So I understood Sol's concern, and shared it myself.

Titus sent another controlled wave of flame that manipulated the air, pushing the burnt remains down the hall with a heat-infused gust. "Cyrus wouldn't have let Exos anywhere near her if that darkness was still inside of him. I don't trust the asshole Water Royal farther than I can throw him, but I know he wouldn't make the mistake of putting Claire in danger again."

That was big talk coming from Titus. I raised a brow, wondering what kind of bond the two fae had formed after their bout in the Academy's arena. I supposed Cyrus had earned our trust after all that went down, at least as far as Claire was concerned.

I nodded my agreement. "Claire should be there for the coronation and be a part of such an important day in her mate's life. It'll just make their mate-bond stronger and also strengthen her control over her spirit element." As much as I disliked being apart from her, this was exactly what Claire required—and what the mate-circle needed to protect her.

Sol's jaw clenched. "Do you know something we don't know? How is dragging Claire back to a dying land where she almost died herself a *wise* move?"

I cocked my brow at the disgruntled Earth Fae. "You know what the coronation does, right?" Sol wasn't familiar with his royal line, but I figured even he would know what a coronation really meant. Maybe I was wrong.

Titus finished up his "cleaning" and joined us at the table, looking intrigued. He brushed his hands together and left a flutter of soot over the table that I'd just wiped down before our meal. "I remember she was much stronger after mating with Cyrus, who is as royal as one can get. Is that what you mean?"

I shook my head. "Cyrus is only king because Exos originally turned down the crown. Don't get me wrong, he's still strong—almost impressively so—but Exos will be even more powerful as king."

"So what's going to happen?" Sol asked, concern etching a pattern into his forehead.

My lips twitched. "Nothing bad. Bonding with Exos will ensure she never loses him again. And, by participating in his coronation, she's embracing a royal line of power. She'll no longer have to draw from the outskirts of the element like most fae do because she'll have access to the source directly through Exos."

That kind of power was what made royals so respected and feared. Accessing the raw core of an element was something only true elemental kings could do. As Exos's mate, Claire would be able to piggyback on that ability. Most considered it a dangerous connection—hence the reason only the strongest of fae could ascend.

I'd been in contention for that power once.

I'd immediately denied it.

Air was the most volatile of all the elements and could cause destruction that would decimate the fae in unskilled hands. I would never want to rule such an energy source. Ever.

"How do you know so much about this?" Titus asked, leaning on the table. "I know you have some royal blood in you, but you don't talk about it much."

"For good reason," I muttered, but these were Claire's bond-mates. Both Sol and Titus watched me expectantly, their concern palpable. They were beginning to feel like family. Like they were mine just as much as Claire was mine.

Keeping them in the dark seemed wrong.

And so I did something I'd never done before.

I opened up about my history. Just a little bit.

"My grandfather was given access to the royal source of the air element," I admitted. The source wasn't necessarily a secret; it just wasn't common knowledge as to *how* the royal lines were so powerful. "It's a boon that can be granted by the king. My grandfather, well, he thought he could control it. Until he couldn't."

I shuddered at the memory of tornados exploding across the main city just a day after he'd bragged to everyone about his new powers. Several fae lost their lives that day, casting dishonor over my family line as a result.

"Long story short, he abused his access to the source, which labeled my family as weak and lacking in control. So you can imagine why I'd want to prove them all wrong." Consequently, I refused to allow myself to go anywhere near my royal ties to the source of my elemental power. To do so would be to repeat my grandfather's mistakes.

"What happens when Claire is exposed to the source of spirit magic through Exos?" Sol asked, his eyes growing wide.

Claire wasn't like me. I'd seen how she embraced her elements with a natural grace that put my abilities to shame. She'd grown fearless these last

few months and would only thrive with the power that came from the source. “She’ll be fine,” I assured him. “I have no doubt about that.”

Another short burst of air escaped my grip and sent my hair unfurling from its loose warrior’s tail and put out the small flame dancing across Titus’s knuckles.

Yeah, Claire would be fine.

But me? That I wasn’t so sure about.

Chapter 4

Claire



I stood between Cyrus and Exos as we faced a crowd of a hundred or so young-looking fae in the center square. The setting sun left everyone dressed in warmer clothes as cool wisps of air seemed to descend upon the small town from the outskirts. It left a chill along my skin, reminding me of the nearby death fields.

Yet everyone around me was smiling.

Not at Exos or Cyrus. But at me.

Apparently, I was the one they all credited for Exos's decision to ascend. He squeezed my hand as Cyrus recited something in the old language, the words weaving a magical web in the air that I could almost taste.

Power. A lot of power.

It hummed through the air, weaving into our essences and stringing us even closer together. Exos's grip tightened, his body tensing beneath the cascade of energy. It vibrated through his spirit, intensifying his aura.

My lips parted. *Exos...*

It's okay, baby, he whispered. I'm ready for it.

Ready for what? It felt like a tornado spinning around and around, sucking us into a dark vortex of vitality.

The source.

The source of what? I demanded, my hair whipping around my face.

Spirit. He sounded pained. *Cyrus is relinquishing his hold over it. We've shared it for...* He trailed off, his features pulling tight.

I cupped his face, everyone else forgotten. *Talk to me. Tell me how to help you.*

You already are, he breathed into my mind. His arms wrapped around me

as he pressed his forehead to mine.

I closed my eyes and embraced his spirit with my own. Wind swirled and roared through my ears, the universe seeming to fall apart piece by piece. But I had my Exos, my mate, my Spirit King. He kissed me tenderly, the magic warming our blood and souls.

Royal Fae manage the access to the core of our element, he explained softly. I've always shared the ownership with Cyrus, but he's giving me everything. He can't maintain a hold over spirit and water. It would be too much for anyone to bear, even one as powerful as him.

Does it hurt? I asked, my tongue sliding along his lower lip. *Is that why you didn't want to ascend?*

No. I'm the rightful heir, so it all feels natural to me. I only denied my position to help Cyrus. He refused to embrace his water element. Because of you, Claire, he's finally ready. Exos smiled against my mouth, his pride and gratitude caressing my heart. *You've changed us both for the better.*

Now you're just sweet-talking me, I replied, my fingers slipping into his thick hair. *You realize I've already committed for life, right?*

I do, he murmured, his eyelashes fluttering as he opened his eyes. "Mine forever."

"Ours forever," Cyrus corrected from beside us, his tone amused. "Not to intrude on the moment, but Gale wants to know when we can start drinking."

I frowned. "We're done? Already?"

Exos chuckled. "Yeah, it's not a difficult transfer when a royal already has access to the elemental source. It has to be done on the grounds of the element—which is why we're in Spirit Kingdom. But as I was already the rightful heir with direct ties to the source, it didn't take long. Cyrus's ceremony will be a bit grander since he's refused his water ability most of his life."

My Water Fae mate grimaced. "I prefer not to think about that right now." He clapped his brother on the back. "Tonight's about you, Exos. We all know how much you adore being the center of attention, so shall we get started?"

A few of the nearby Spirit Fae laughed, clearly hearing the sarcasm in Cyrus's commentary. Exos just shook his head. "You're incorrigible, brother."

"So you and my little queen keep saying," Cyrus drawled, winking at me. "Want something to drink, Claire? Maybe a glass of mead?"

Exos's mouth preoccupied mine before I could reply, his tongue parting my lips and capturing my undivided attention. Oh, his kisses literally removed me from this plane. I wound my arms around his neck, holding him close, and gave him everything. All my adoration. My trust. My heart. My soul.

His element stroked mine, eliciting a flurry of butterflies across my skin. I giggled as they appeared in corporeal form, their pink wings fluttering in excitement.

Several fae gasped around us, awed by the display of power.

But Exos merely smiled. "Always creating life, my Claire." He pressed another kiss to my lips before releasing me. "Let's have some mead before Gale drinks it all."

Someone snorted loudly. "It's ye brother who'll drink it all, lad."

Cyrus pressed his palm to his heart. "Me? Never."

A few laughs echoed through the main square, causing Exos's mouth to tilt upward even more. "It's a joyous occasion," he announced, lifting his eyes to the crowd. "Let us celebrate new life and a renewed destiny, and drink to a prosperous future for the Spirit Fae."

"Hear, hear!" everyone cheered, the sounds of excited chatter breaking out amongst the town. It wasn't long until the spritemead made its rounds, all the fae indulging in mugs of the potent liquid. And a fire blazed to life—courtesy of Exos's secondary ability—in the cobblestone center.

Pixies and other fairylike creatures buzzed about, delivering plates of snacks, while a female with long blonde hair tended to what appeared to be a roasting boar above the fire.

It all unfolded so naturally, so beautifully, that I wondered how often the town's people indulged in such festivities.

"Not regularly," Exos whispered. "Not anymore, anyway."

"Morale is down," Cyrus added. "Way down."

We sat on a wool blanket a few yards away from the flames. Other couples had joined us nearby but kept to themselves while they enjoyed the appetizers brought to them by the flickering "staff."

"Maybe you need to do this more often," I suggested, glancing around. "They seem to be enjoying themselves."

It was laid-back, but the vibe felt happy, almost relieved to have a reason to socialize. I couldn't imagine how lonely these fae were with how much loss they'd suffered over the years. And that none of them could have

children, well, I assumed that only worsened the mood.

Most areas of the Spirit Kingdom were like Spirit Quad at the Academy—desolate and dead. This was honestly the most life I'd seen since visiting these lands. I wanted to see more of it, to learn more about all the fae who survived, to find a way to help them grow.

There had to be a reason the fae couldn't procreate, some sort of lasting impact on the spirit element. My mother would know. Maybe it was good she hadn't really died. When we found her, we could demand answers.

"A hunt?" Cyrus asked, eavesdropping on my thoughts as he was wont to do. "I'm down for that." He bumped my shoulder. "But you still have classes, little queen."

"I think locating my mass-murdering bitch of a mother is a little more important than school," I muttered, staring at the flames. "She tried to kill me. Hurt Exos. Killed thousands of fae." Each statement made me angrier and angrier. "And she's still alive somewhere, probably plotting her next move."

Something dastardly and evil.

I could feel the knowledge of it in my blood, the very real burn of an impending doom.

Cyrus wrapped his arm around my shoulders and yanked me into his side. "Nothing is going to happen to you, Claire. Not on my watch."

"Or mine," Exos added, his hand grabbing mine.

I shook my head. "It's not me I'm worried about." *But everyone else.* "She almost killed you, Exos."

He canted his head, his lips curling. "No, baby. She didn't come close to killing me. I'm a lot tougher than that." He released my hand to cup my cheek and leaned in to kiss me. "And we're mated now, princess. So you'll never have to worry about losing me again."

Cyrus's lips met my neck, his kiss working its way up to my ear. "You're stuck with me, too, little queen."

Fire licked a path down my spine, my stomach tightening in anticipation.

Only to have a female clear her throat. "Your Highnesses," she greeted as both men looked up at her.

"Feather," Cyrus replied, grinning. "Thank you for organizing the roast. Orc is Exos's favorite."

My eyes widened. "Orc?" Like the giant horned-goblin things? "Orcs are real?" I demanded, looking at Exos.

He kissed my temple. “Not the way you think. But Cyrus is right. I love a meaty orc. When do we eat?”

I suddenly wasn’t very hungry. All I could envision were those gross-looking things from that famous movie about the ring. Weren’t they, like, dead elves or something? “Where does spritemead come from?” I asked, cutting off whatever Feather had just said. “Sorry,” I added, my cheeks heating.

Cyrus squeezed my shoulders a little. *Honey and grains, little queen. Made by the fae with all-natural elements.*

Well, that’s okay, then. But orc? Yeah, I’ll pass on that.

Feather asked Exos if he wanted to do the honors of slicing off the first piece. He heartily agreed, leaving me beside Cyrus to watch. I cringed, shaking my head back and forth the entire time.

Nope.

Not happening.

Don’t care at all how hot Exos looks in that suit. A girl has to have limits, and I am not eating that.

When he returned with three plates and a dimple on his cheek, I sort of felt obligated to at least try the odd meat. No, I felt coerced. Seduced. Compelled. Whatever the word. And I had to admit, it didn’t smell all that bad. It reminded me a bit of roast beef, at least in terms of scent.

“You use the algae wrap to eat it,” Cyrus explained, picking up the leafy green on his plate. He used it to break off a hunk of the orc and put it in his mouth, then waggled his eyebrows as he chewed.

Anyone else, and I would have gagged.

But it was Cyrus.

And somehow, he made the entire damn thing look elegant and far too sexy.

Exos did the same, minus the eyebrow move. He just smiled afterward and promised to find me something else if I didn’t want to try the meat. Which was apparently a delicacy, according to Cyrus.

Because yeah, why wouldn’t orc be a delicacy?

When in the fae world, I thought to myself as I broke off a piece of the leafy green wrap. How the times have changed.

One of these days, I was going to force the guys to find me a pizza. No, a hamburger. Maybe both. And ice cream. Oh, that sounded decadent. But instead, I had a weird piece of roast beef–looking meat wedged between two

grassy leaves.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to take a bite.

Warm and smoky. Not chewy. Hmm.

I wrapped up another piece and tossed it into my mouth.

Okay. This isn't bad. Actually, it's pretty good.

After a few more bites, I found Exos and Cyrus both watching me with hungry expressions. "What?" I asked, wiping my lips.

"You keep moaning," Exos replied.

"Loudly," Cyrus added, his gaze falling to my mouth.

"Oh." I swallowed. "Uh, the orc is, uh, good." I picked up my spritemead and downed the rest of my mug, needing a distraction.

Exos took it from my hand as soon as I finished.

And Cyrus wrapped his palm around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss, his tongue wasting no time in exploring my mouth. *More than good*, he corrected, referring to my comment about the orc. *You taste amazing, Claire.*

He released me on a pant, my chest rising and falling from the much-needed oxygen that disappeared as Exos took hold and sealed his mouth over mine.

Right. Okay. I can get used to this.

Cyrus chuckled and Exos growled, the combining sounds making my heart skip a beat. These two males were going to be the death of me one of these days.

And what a beautiful death it would be...

But as soon as the kissing began, it slowed to a stop as Cyrus and Exos tucked me between them. My body protested while my chest expanded on a sigh of contentment. One of them picked at the remainder on my plate, bringing bites to my mouth and to their own, as we sat in silence to observe the still-roaring fire.

Peace settled over me.

Satisfaction.

Rightness.

This was the life I was always meant to lead. I just hadn't known it existed until very recently. But now that I'd embraced it, I didn't know any other way of being. This was just me. My world. My fae. And I would do anything and everything to protect it.

Even from my own flesh and blood.

My eyes began to drift closed, the hour darkening the sky as all the fae continued to mingle in soft waves of conversation. Exos and Cyrus murmured around me, conversing together and with others, while I rested tranquilly between them.

I felt protected in their arms. Happy. Thankful.

But something nagged at the back of my mind. An uncertainty I couldn't quite identify. The sensation of being watched. Which, yeah, everyone at the bonfire had their eyes on me. However, this was different. An almost surreal sensation, one I shouldn't be able to sense yet did.

And I swore for half a second that it was my mother's presence I felt. Except it lacked the darkness I expected. Worry and urgency floated in its place. A message I couldn't hear. Lost to a connection we never—

“Claire,” Cyrus whispered, his mouth hovering over mine. “Wake up, little queen.”

Light pierced my gaze, startling me to my new surroundings. We were back at the palace in Exos's room.

“How did we...?” I swallowed, my throat dry from what felt like hours of sleep.

“A little too much mead, it seems,” he teased, kissing me softly as he slid into the bed beside me.

Warmth caressed my back as Exos wrapped his arm around my waist.

Only then did I realize the three of us were naked.

Very, very naked.

Cyrus pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Mmm, we'll let you sleep.” He nuzzled my nose. “You need it.”

Exos sighed against the back of my neck. “Something to look forward to another night.”

“Indeed,” Cyrus agreed, his icy blue eyes glittering with promise. “Sweet dreams, little queen.”

“Yes, sweet dreams, darling Claire,” Exos breathed against my ear. “We'll return to the Academy tomorrow.”

Snuggled between them, I had a hard time denying the pull of their words. While my body desired something different, my mind felt exhausted from something I couldn't identify.

That message, I thought, yawning. Seeking it out had left me tired. But I couldn't for the life of me remember why or whom I'd been trying to connect to.

A query to solve tomorrow.

For tonight, I allowed myself to fall into the safe haven of my two royal mates. And dreamt of what it would be like to experience them both... at the same time.

Chapter 5

Titus



Life without Claire sucked. I should have been in class, but there was no way I could focus right now. Instead of causing trouble and picking a fight with my fellow Fire Fae, I decided it was safer for the Academy if I just stayed here and took my frustration out on the dusty practice arena in front of the Spirit Dorm.

I'd only just gotten her back.

Now she was gone. *Again.*

It didn't matter that there was a good reason for her absence. A hole existed in my heart where her essence should have been, and demanded that I do something about it.

I spun a magicked bo staff and sent a blaze of fire running a jagged line through the sand, leaving behind a streak of melted glass. The staff itself threatened to buckle under the heat, but it would hold up for a few hours more. It was the third one I'd gone through this week. I really needed to get some better weapons.

My growing power should have frightened me. Claire was changing me—changing all of us. Her lingering power surrounded me on our familiar training grounds and gave me a small sense of comfort.

Gods. I just wanted to see her again.

I put on a good show for Sol and Vox, but I missed her more than anything. Every kiss and touch had strengthened our bond. But that connection strained when I was apart from her for too long.

My eyes flashed open, my instincts flaring.

Someone's coming.

I didn't know how I knew, but I sensed the approaching presence. A subtle shift of heat and magic, disturbing unseen elemental currents that ran through the Fae Realm. Maybe it was Mortus trying to recruit me for the more advanced classes again, or Professor Vulcan come to chide me for yet another absence.

"Whoever it is, now's not a good time," I growled to the shimmering air roiling with heat. "I'm in no mood." I twirled the training staff and let the flames etching across the magicked wood grow hotter. Nothing too fancy or exciting or all that intimidating.

I really need more practice with elemental weapons to help protect Claire. The real world used fire and other magical essences, unlike the Powerless Arena.

A teasing hint of water misted over my bare chest, causing steam to fog the air, and I raised a brow.

Cyrus misted in front of me with a grinning Claire in his arms. She launched from him with a laugh and jumped into my aura of flames, causing my weapon to fall with a clatter against the ground. She merged with my element, seamlessly transitioning from water to fire as the living magic enveloped her as its own.

"Hey, you," she said, her voice husky as if she was high on elements and sex.

Which, given the way Cyrus smirked at me, was probably accurate.

"Hey," I replied, unable to stop the pleased grin that spread across my face as I tucked my hands under her perfectly rounded ass and held her against me.

Cyrus invaded the flames, sending the heat sprawling away from him with an effortless wave of water that wrinkled my nose. His lips went to her neck as if he couldn't stop touching her.

I understood that feeling.

"I have business to attend to, little queen," he whispered in her ear, then gave her a nip. His silver-blue eyes locked onto mine. "I trust Titus can handle your needs while I'm gone."

My pleased grin turned sinister. Maybe it was insulting that Cyrus was literally using my dick as a way to keep Claire occupied, but I didn't care.

Not when she wiggled in my arms like that.

"What kind of business?" Claire asked, her lids heavy as she stroked a line of fire up my neck. "Hmm, because I wonder what it would feel like to

mix water and fire,” she added, glancing at me with a mischievous glint as a cool mist of her magic ran down my abs, sending steam between us. Her fingers followed the cool touch, playfully bringing warmth back to my protesting skin.

The effect was fucking amazing.

Cyrus chuckled, and I realized that I’d groaned—loudly.

“Why don’t you practice for me? Seems like Titus may enjoy it.” Without answering her question, he misted away, leaving me and Claire alone in the training yard.

I didn’t give her an opportunity to go after him. I didn’t know if she could mist now, but I wasn’t going to risk losing her attention again. I claimed her mouth with mine and scooped her up against me.

“I missed you,” I told her between breaths.

“I missed—” She tried to reply, but my tongue was busy exploring hers as I all but sprinted us to the Spirit Dorm.

She laughed when I tossed her onto my mattress with a bounce. “I think that was a new record of getting me into bed,” she said, fisting the sheets and bringing them to her nose. She inhaled and her eyelids fluttered closed. “Mmm...”

Seeing her take in my scent made my already rigid cock stand to attention. The inferno in me was primal, and it wanted to *claim*.

I was already shirtless, but my pants were a sudden restriction that needed to be removed. Instead of slipping them off, my flames ignited and seared over my skin, burning what was supposed to be a fireproof garment.

Claire’s eyes flickered with blue fire as her element responded to mine, and her gaze dropped in appreciation. “We really need to invest in some better fireproof wear for you,” she said as she tilted her head and licked her lips.

Sensing what she wanted, I stepped to the edge of the bed and groaned as she wrapped her plump lips around the head. I fisted my fingers through her gorgeous hair, urging her to take me deeper while cautioning her at the same time.

“Careful, Claire. I won’t be able to last long if you keep doing that,” I warned, flames licking down her shirt and leaving a trail of ash as my element played with her nipples.

She gasped, then ran her tongue defiantly up my shaft, making my legs go weak. Her gaze snapped up to mine, full of fight and challenge. The embers

in her eyes glazed over with a sparkle of ice, and she let out a long breath directly against my cock, one of cool mist that mixed a foreign element into our play. She skimmed her tongue over the delicate skin, sending a new blast of heat that had my cock throbbing as startled nerves ignited back to life.

“Fuck, Claire,” I growled, then grabbed her by her hips and unleashed a wave of fire over her, burning all remnants of her clothes. I spun her so that her back was to me, then I wrapped one arm around her chest and cupped the space between her legs with my opposite hand. She tossed her head back onto my shoulder and grappled at my arms as I pinched her clit. “I’ll punish you for that little ice trick,” I vowed, my tone playful.

She writhed against me, her need palpable. “You’d better punish me harder,” she said as her ass rubbed up against my throbbing shaft in clear provocation.

I shouldn’t have obliged her, not yet, but my hips adjusted to match her entrance and then I was inside her, thrusting hard—just as she’d requested.

“Titus,” she cried as her body clenched around mine.

She was different now that Exos had ascended to the spirit throne. I could sense the shift in her, the aching need that demanded she connect with all her mates. Perhaps part of her desire for me was because Exos’s second element was fire and it would be a natural progression for her to seal the bond with me next.

In time, I would claim her completely, but the fires that threatened to consume us frightened even me.

So I enjoyed the burn and lost myself as I tipped over the edge with her into blissful oblivion.



Well, the room was destroyed, but I didn’t care. In fact, I admired the licks of fire scars across the walls followed by permanent streaks of ice that refused to melt.

Claire lazily rested against my chest as her fingers explored mine. “I think we need to have sex in a metal stronghold,” she mused on a chuckle. “This is getting ridiculous.”

“I kind of like the look,” I said, grinning at the pattern of destruction that was uniquely beautiful in the way ash and ice spiraled over one another across the damaged room.

When she sighed, not out of satisfaction but a subconscious sound of discontent, I shifted to look into her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She blinked up at me. “What? Oh, nothing.” She grinned, that discontent disappearing behind her love for me. She ran her fingers over the short stubble of my chin and pressed a kiss to my lips. “You gave me exactly what I needed, Titus.”

I stroked her hair from her face. “And what’s bothering you that you needed a fire-fuck to get your mind off of it?” I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t hide your problems from me, Claire. I’m more to you than that, aren’t I?”

Her eyes widened. “Of course. You mean more to me than anything. I didn’t mean it that way; I just—”

I chuckled and sealed her mouth with a kiss. “I’m just teasing, sweetheart. What’s on your mind?”

She trailed her tongue across my lower lip, trying to distract me.

I tsked, running my thumb across her cheek, and gazed into her eyes. “None of that, Claire. Talk to me.”

A small smile quirked at the side of her mouth. “Stubborn,” she grumbled, then rested her head against my chest once more. “It was just a lot to take in, you know? The whole Spirit Kingdom and meeting all of the Spirit Fae.” Her eyes fluttered closed as if she were reliving the past few days. “I glimpsed what they should have been like, but I know that Exos’s coronation was a rare cause of happiness among them.” Her fingers clenched into a fist. “My mother took so much from them, Titus. And I don’t feel like she’s done.”

I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. I would protect her from whatever would come, give my life for her if that would take away even a fraction of her pain. “You don’t need to be afraid, Claire. I’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

She hesitated, then burrowed into my neck.

She didn’t say anything, but I knew her true fear.

It wasn’t her own life she was worried about. My Claire wanted to save the world.

And I loved her for it.

Chapter 6

Claire



Just days ago, I stood in the middle of Spirit Kingdom while Exos ascended to his throne. And now I was back at the Academy meeting Elana for our biweekly training.

Somehow, it felt wrong. Like I should be doing more than just attending classes as usual and acting as though I didn't know my mother had tried to kill me. But every time I tried to say something to Elana about it, my lips seemed to seal shut.

Which only made this session all the more uncomfortable.

My saving grace was knowing Sol stood just outside waiting for me to finish. At least returning here meant I had all my mates in one place again. Although, Cyrus kept leaving for his mysterious meetings in the Water Kingdom. And Exos had returned to his Spirit Fae twice in the last few days on business.

It made me wonder what life would be like when all my mates graduated.

Would I have to travel between the kingdoms to see them all?

I frowned. *Cyrus really needs to teach me how to mist.*

"Everything all right, dear?" Elana asked, her silver eyes kind in her assessment.

"Just thinking about the coronation," I replied. Not necessarily a lie. It was related to my future, right?

But Elana didn't look all that convinced, her brow pinched in a way I didn't care to see.

So I said the first thing I could to deflect the subject back on her.

"You weren't there. I assume because it's not mandatory to attend that sort of event?" I phrased it as a question, which was totally lame. However,

the way her face clouded over suggested I'd touched on an interesting topic. "Mortus wasn't there either."

She nodded slowly, the pixie she'd conjured disappearing into mist. *Water*, I realized, fighting another frown. *She just used water.*

Something I wouldn't have questioned except that Elana supposedly only had access to spirit. So how was she using water now? Had she somehow manifested the element and not told anyone? Maybe it was a fledgling power. Or—

"I hated missing the coronation," Elana said, interrupting my thoughts. "But the Academy required me to stay here. Mortus, too. All the young lives at this school are my responsibility, and I take that responsibility seriously."

My brow furrowed. The way she said that made it sound like the Academy could be in danger.

Because of my mother? I wondered. *Does she know that Ophelia is still alive?*

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but my voice refused me. Literally. Like, I couldn't part my lips. It felt as though someone had clamped an invisible hand over my mouth. Urgent whispers flooded my thoughts, all of them unintelligible.

I'm losing my damn mind.

That was it.

I clearly needed more sleep. Less sex. Something. Because apparently, I no longer had control over my brain or my body.

Elana had said something while I was lost to the invisible force controlling my body. She stared at me expectantly. "Sorry, I missed that," I admitted, my mouth working just fine over those words.

My mentor gave me another one of those concerned looks. "Are you sure you're all right, Claire?"

"Mm-hmm." I cleared my throat. "I'm just a little tired. It's been an exciting week." Understatement of the fucking century.

Her silver eyes told me she didn't believe me, but she allowed the topic to drop. "Well, how about we focus on something new today? Instead of pixies, I mean."

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

She swept her hand in a wide circle and conjured an ethereal bowl of water.

No. Correction. That is definitely not water.

“You’ve established a firm hold over life, the side of spirit that comes naturally. However, there is another side to your power you’ve yet to explore, and I think it’s time to teach you what it really means to be a Spirit Fae.” Elana locked a cold grip on my wrist, making me suck in a breath.

There was only one other side of life that I could think of.

Death.

Power flooded into me, fluxing back and forth as my mentor tugged at my spirit essence that wasn’t ready for this invasion. “What are you doing?” I asked, my voice going up a pitch.

Elana gave me one of her kind smiles in an effort to soothe me, but every hair stood on end as the temperature in the room plummeted. “Relax, Claire. This is a normal progression to your training that I promise you are ready for.”

I didn’t feel ready.

And this certainly didn’t seem all that *normal*.

The bowl of misty liquid rippled as Elana concentrated. “Think of your power and what it is capable of. Spirit transcends this world, and that is a beautiful thing.” Her element tugged at mine again, just enough to extract a sliver of my connection to Exos—to the source.

A translucent face formed, one with dead, silver eyes that looked right through me.

Elana smiled. “My, this is one of the older Spirit Fae I haven’t had the pleasure of talking with yet. Well done, Claire.”

I didn’t feel like I’d done anything at all.

Trying to extract my grip from Elana’s, I found myself bound to her and an icy power linking us as the spirit finally focused his gaze on me. It tried to smile, but the motion seemed forced.

“Why don’t you try speaking to him?” Elana asked. “Introduce yourself.”

The last thing I wanted to do was talk to the spirit of a dead fae. It seemed inappropriate. Intrusive. *Wrong*.

“Um,” I managed to say around my tongue, which had gone dry. “Hi. I’m, uh, Claire. Who are you?”

The spirit tilted its head, the motion slightly unnatural with his unblinking stare. “You?” he asked, not seeming to be able to comprehend my question.

“Use your power,” Elana encouraged. “Ancient spirits are accustomed to rest, not conversation. He’ll need some help.”

Help. Right.

My lips twisted to the side. I didn't see the point in disturbing an ancient fae's rest like this, but clearly, Elana wanted me to learn something.

Use your power, she'd suggested.

Okay.

I concentrated on the writhing form, on the agony teasing the edges of his lopsided mouth. My brow furrowed. *What happened to you?* I wondered, noting the way he flinched every few seconds as if reliving his death over and over again.

Was that why this felt so wrong to disturb him? Because it tortured him to call upon his spirit?

"Pain?" I asked, using a single word with a coaxing strand of my power underlining the question. This all felt so strange and foreign. I needed to know if the spirit was suffering as a result of our intrusion.

Elana frowned. But I ignored her and focused on the visage before us.

His eyebrows—what was left of them—pulled down. He opened his mouth to say something, but then Elana ripped her hand from mine, dissolving the spell instantly and sending out a shock wave of mist and energy.

"Spirits need to be comforted and coaxed," Elana chided, clearly irritated with me. She brushed her hands together and sighed, transforming back into the patient and kind mentor in a second, the change a startling one. "You're a sweet creature, Claire. But your human side has too much empathy. Spirits can't feel pain, I assure you. It may seem like they can, but that's just because they mimic the life that came before. When conjured, they are tools just like any other power offered by the elements."

My spine went rigid. *Tools?* Elements weren't tools. At least not to me, or to my mates. Our gifts were to be respected and embraced—not used as mindless *tools*.

"I see," I murmured, not sure what else to say.

Elana seemed to sense my discomfort, and she summoned a few familiar pixies to clean the table of the sparkling spirit dust. Warmth and life seeped back into the air, bringing with it a sense of rightness. I almost sighed in my relief, except the cool claws of reality seemed to be clinging to my heart.

That soul... he felt pain. I was certain of it.

"I don't mean to frighten you, sweet child. You have to understand that I'm a thousand years old. I've seen life and death run its course hundreds of times, and I have grown to accept its finality." Elana twisted a ring around

her finger. "It's easier that way."

Guilt spiked a hole through my chest.

Of course Elana must have lost so many friends and family members over the years. I was being too hard on her to expect her to have the same level of empathy that I did. What did I really know of loss or spirits? Rick's death still held its bitter weight in my soul, but that was one death, whereas Elana must have experienced many. "I'm sorry," I said. "You're right." I gave her a weak smile. "It was just... unexpected. That's all."

She nodded. "Sometimes lessons are best learned without warning." She rose to her feet and brushed spirit dust from her dress. "I've traumatized you enough for today. Return to your mates, Claire, and think about what I've said. You have a great gift, and if you choose to embrace it, you can help the Spirit Fae and the rest of the realm in ways no one else can. I would love to explore your spirit magic further on our next visit. We don't have to continue to explore this side of your power if you are averse to it. However, if you are willing, there is much I can teach you."

The hope in her gaze said she truly believed me to be capable of great things. Although, I wasn't sure I could ever get behind summoning spirits as part of my training. "I'll think on it," I promised. "Thank you, Chancellor."

Elana beamed and guided me to the front hall, indulging me in meaningless chitchat that I tuned out, too consumed with the day and everything that had happened.

All I wanted to do was return to my mates. To Sol, who waited just outside and promised me life—not death.

I smiled to myself. *Yes. My Earth Fae is exactly what I need right now.*

Chapter 7

Sol



Finally, it was my turn with Claire. I knew having four other mates kept Claire busy, but I hadn't gotten to spend time with her like this since before she left for the Spirit Kingdom.

I paced back and forth in front of Elana's mansion, not realizing that I was grinding a crack in the stone until I tripped over a jagged edge. How long was Elana going to keep Claire in there? Was everything all right? Should I go in?

Before I made a fool of myself and barged into the Chancellor's home, Claire appeared with a knot to her brow and her gaze distant. I waved a hand in front of her face.

"That bad?" I asked.

She blinked up at me as if she'd almost forgotten I was there. I'll admit, that stung a little, but then she smiled and slipped her fingers around my neck to pull me down for a kiss. Her lips brushed mine, and I tossed out any notion that Claire could ever forget about me.

"Better now," she promised, then curled into my chest. "I just don't think Elana was good for me today. I need to relax."

I grinned and wrapped an arm around her tiny waist, careful not to put too much weight on her. It made me nervous to be this close to Claire without Vox as my backup to make sure I didn't break her, but I couldn't use him as a crutch forever.

Baby steps.

"I know the perfect place to relax," I told her, grinning.

She glanced up at me, curiosity bright in her blue eyes. Her irises had an occasional rainbow sparkle to them now that she had embraced her fae half,

and I adored the small curve of her newly pointed ears. “Consider me intrigued,” she said.

I led the way toward a field between the Spirit Quad and the Earth Quad. I’d tried—and failed—to grow Claire an oasis of peach trees on more than one occasion. I finally figured out that it was all about placement. Too much shit went down on a constant basis to have such delicate things out in the open in the Spirit Quad. Not with Vox sending tornados out the window when he sneezed and Titus setting things aflame because, well, that was just what Titus did.

No, Claire and I needed a place only for us.

Just for earth and sky and sweetness.

The punch of flowering peach trees hit us before we crested the hill to the small grove hidden in the forest.

Claire’s eyes lit up and she sucked in a breath. “Sol, did you make this? It’s gorgeous!”

My heart grew three times its normal size. I’d created and lost so many groves in an attempt to impress Claire. They never seemed good enough or were destroyed before she’d gotten a chance to see them. Then I had worried she would think it was stupid or a waste of energy.

But seeing her expression now? Yeah, it was worth all the effort.

She grabbed my hand and dragged me into the oasis, the crunch of forest under her shoes morphing into the soft patter of her footsteps over the smooth stones I’d placed for a path. My own thunderous footfalls drowned out her excitement, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Claire let go of me toward the middle and skipped to one of the trees, running her fingers up through the leaves and wrapping her delicate fingers around a peach. She snapped it free and brought it to her nose. She closed her eyes and drew in a long, deep inhale. When she let out the breath, her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at me. “Sol, really, this is lovely.”

Encouraged, I waved a hand and sent a wall of forest trees aside to show the rest of the grove that I was still working on. “It’s not done yet, but I was hoping you could help me. I mean, I was hoping we could work on it together.”

She approached the clearing where small mounds of dirt waited for life. I craved more of her magic, of the sweet fruit and mystery that only Claire could provide.

So the place didn’t look too bare, I had sent pink and purple fae flowers

around the perimeter. It gave the place a pop of color, and Claire grinned as she stepped over the boundary. "It's like a fairy circle," she mused.

We'd told her a hundred times that fairies weren't a thing, but I shrugged and agreed. She could call this place whatever she wanted. "Sure."

She chuckled and handed me the peach. "In the human world, we have these stories in which there are fairy circles. If you get trapped inside, then the fairies will take you to their world and never let you leave."

I bit into the sweet flesh of the peach and chewed as I considered the idea of a fairy circle. I swallowed and nodded. "You've got me. I'm not letting you leave." I offered her the remaining half of the peach. "But at least you won't starve."

She took it, then ran a finger over my mouth where a hint of peach lingered. Her features softened, and I leaned down to her unspoken command to adore her. She met me with a tender kiss, her tongue running over my lips, and then she parted for me when I couldn't resist a taste for myself.

She was so much fucking better than a peach.

My hand went to her collarbone in a possessive grip, but I forced myself to pull away. That tension was still in her body, and I wasn't going to ignore the signs that my mate had something on her mind.

"What's wrong?" I pressed.

She licked her lips, her gaze lowering to take in the bulge forming at my crotch.

Well, I couldn't help that.

She was my mate and we were alone, and all I wanted to do was show her how much she meant to me, but I would always put her needs before my own.

"I should be asking you the same question," she teased, but a darkness in her eyes said that she was weary and troubled.

Without giving her a chance to stop me, I scooped her up, running my arm across the back of her legs, and slipped her against my chest. She squealed as she went airborne, and the peach in her hand went flying as she clung to my neck. "Sol!"

I marched her to the biggest tree in the oasis. Peach trees dotted the long path I'd made, but there was one surprise at the end.

The fae called it a World Tree, and it would be where Claire and I would one day consummate our vows. Assuming, of course, that she intended to someday have me as her true mate.

For now, it would be where I would share secrets with her, where she would be free to open up to me, and where we'd both feel safe from anything that chased her.

This was our place.

Her eyes went wide when she took in the long silver branches that made the tree appear otherworldly. "What is that?" she asked against my cheek.

"A World Tree," I said, proud of the creation. I'd come a long way in my studies and my powers since Claire had taught me not to be afraid of what I was capable of. "It's just one branch of many that come from my magic's source."

Vox hadn't been pleased when I showed him this the other day, saying it was dangerous to tap into my royal blood.

The look on Claire's face now, however, told me he was wrong.

Large roots sprawled out from the base, making a perfect bed with soft moss, and I laid Claire down onto it before joining her. She nestled up against me and slipped her fingers under my shirt, exploring the muscles across my chest.

"You're full of surprises, Sol."

I gave her a kiss on the crown of her head. "And you're full of worry. Spill it, or I'll tell Cyrus that you're holding back."

She laughed. "No, you won't."

She was right. Talking to Cyrus didn't fall on my favored list of activities, and everyone knew it. Not my fault the Royal Fae was a pompous ass. Oh, he gave me space. But I saw through his antics.

Fucking waterfall.

I brushed the hair from Claire's face and pressed my forehead to hers. "I'm here for you, little flower." That was what she felt like—a delicate bloom that could fly away on the wind if I breathed too hard. "Talk to me. Did something happen?"

Her fingers continued to explore my skin, making the earth tremble as my need for her grew. "It's Elana, I guess. She introduced me to the other half of my element today, and it sort of didn't go as planned," she admitted, then sighed. "Actually, no. Honestly, I think it's my mother that's bothering me more."

"Oh?"

She bit her lip, the motion distracting me before she continued. "Everything just feels off. I can't really explain it, just a sense of wrongness.

But I know it's her."

"Off how?"

She sighed and draped her leg over mine. I couldn't help but notice that it put her hips dangerously close to my reach. If she kept that up, I was going to be useless in this conversation.

Her glittering blue eyes met mine, holding me captive. "It's just, I think I keep hearing her. In my head. But unclearly." Her gaze darted around our oasis. "She feels very *here*."

I stiffened and immediately unlatched the door I kept over my roaring power, sending the ground around us rumbling. But I only found Claire and her bond-mates in blissful harmony, nothing dark. "I don't feel anything."

"I didn't mean *here*," she murmured, smiling. "But with me somehow." She shook her head. "Honestly, I think I'm just exhausted from everything. It's probably all the sex." Her eyes glittered with intent as she slid her hand across my shirt, parting the buttons to expose my abs along the way. She let out a long breath of appreciation. "Sometimes I can't believe all of this is real."

I couldn't take it anymore and ran my hand over her hip and down her thigh, squeezing while putting my thumb just close enough between her legs to give her a hint of anticipation. Her breath hitched as I massaged her knotted muscles. "It's very real, little flower. We'd do anything for you."

Her expression sparkled with delight, then turned mischievous. "Even dress up in a real suit for the Solstice Ball?"

I grimaced, but my heart leapt that she'd brought it up. "I thought we'd agreed on jeans."

Her fingers ran lower across my abdomen, causing my muscles to clench. "You'd look good in silk, I think." She licked her lips and then leaned in, replacing her touch with her tongue.

I rumbled my agreement. If she wanted silk, I'd wear the damn silk. Fuck, I'd go naked. I didn't care, not when she was doing...

That.

I groaned when her mouth came dangerously close to my beltline, and the ground trembled as my powers threatened to lose control.

"I can't, little flower," I said through gritted teeth.

Gods, I wanted to, but I felt my control slipping. Either we needed a full mate-bond to keep me grounded or I needed Vox here with us. Regardless, I would never do anything that put Claire in danger.

She didn't argue, her understanding written into her features. "You shouldn't be afraid of your gifts," she whispered, nestling back up into my neck as she wrapped her leg around my hip again and pressed her entire body into mine.

My aching cock underneath the thin layer of my clothes protested when her thigh pressed into my shaft, but she stilled when I gripped her hip to keep her from moving.

"I'm not," I promised her. "I'm just careful with you."

She chuckled and lazily swept her fingers over my chest. I indulged her mouth with a tender kiss. "Perhaps later, then," she suggested, delight in her voice. "If you need the others with us to feel safe with me, then they'll be happy to oblige, I'm sure." She gave me another kiss, this one more forceful. "But promise me that one day it can be just us. Maybe your World Tree with our earth and our love." She adored all her bond-mates, but it made me feel like an entirely new fae that Claire wanted me all to herself.

My hand went to its possessive hold on her neck again as I tasted her. "That's a promise I can keep, when we're ready." When the bond between us was so strong that even the earth would move on command.

She poked me on my nose. "And you're taking me to the ball."

I nodded, nipping her lower lip. "You have a deal, little flower."

Chapter 8

Claire



I pinched my lips to the side. *Something's missing.* I just couldn't put my finger on it.

My makeup was subtle, my hair was tousled in long blonde waves down my back, and my blue dress had the most amazing sweetheart neckline. It accented my curves in all the right places without being too clingy. The fabric also matched my eyes, which was a plus.

But something wasn't right.

I tapped my chin, my gaze on my reflection in the mirror. This sense of uncertainty weighed upon my shoulders, holding me captive in my three-inch silver heels.

What is it? I wondered. What am I not seeing?

The edges of the glass dimmed a fraction, flickering beneath the fluorescent lighting. I just couldn't stop staring at myself and wondering what

"You look gorgeous," a warm voice murmured from behind me. A pink butterfly kissed my cheek following the words before settling on my pointed ear like an ornament.

I blinked at my reflection, everything suddenly right. "How strange, yet oddly beautiful."

"You or the butterfly?" Exos mused, coming up to stand at my back. He wore one of his trademark suits, making our attire match for once. Except somehow he still wore the formal outfit better than I did. Benefits of being the king, I supposed.

"Everything," I replied, shaking my head and shifting to face him. "Ignore me. I've felt a little off all day."

He cupped my cheek and drew his thumb across my lip, his gaze thoughtful. “Off how?”

I knew that look. If I didn’t give him an answer, he’d press me for one. And we didn’t have time to play that game right now. Besides, Exos was my mate. He’d understand, or maybe even be able to put me at ease.

“I just feel like I’m missing something,” I admitted. “That’s weird, right? I can’t think of anything I might need tonight other than what I’m wearing.”

Exos’s sapphire irises smoldered as he reviewed my appearance, his full lips quirking at the corner. “Oh, I don’t know. Are you wearing panties?”

My cheeks heated. “Exos.”

“Are they blue like this dress?” he pressed, his hands finding my hips. “Shall I lift your skirt to see?”

I laughed and shook my head. “One-track mind.”

“Can you blame me, Claire?” He eyed my neckline. “You look amazing in this dress. It makes me want to attend the ball with you and the others, just to have a reason to stare at you all night.”

My heart skipped a beat, my tongue sneaking out to dampen my lips. “So I look okay?”

“More than okay, princess. You’re stunning.” He bent to brush his mouth over mine. “Vox and Sol are going to have a hard time not bringing you home early. I give them two hours max before they can’t take it anymore and need you naked between them.”

I shivered at the heat of his words and the picture they painted. “Would you join us?”

“If you wanted me there, yes.” Another kiss, this one longer, more sensual. “I would do anything for you, Claire.”

My blood warmed, lighting a flame deep within my soul that burned for Exos alone. My spirit mate. My king. My love. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him close, not caring at all about my makeup. All that mattered was his tongue and the way it embraced my own.

I would do anything for you, too, I whispered to him.

I knew how he felt about sharing me. He’d commented once to Titus that he didn’t mind sharing in my pleasure, but watching me with another wasn’t an activity he particularly wanted to experience.

And yet, with Cyrus, he seemed rather open to it.

Maybe our bond had changed his view.

You changed my view, he corrected, his palm flattening against my lower

back. *Seeing you happy makes me happy. When you smile, I smile.* He pulled back just enough to nuzzle his nose against mine. “I love you, Claire.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered, closing my eyes. Everything about the moment felt right again. This was what I was missing—my mates. Being apart from them left me feeling empty and alone. They were my life now, my circle, my completion. I sighed against Exos, resting my cheek on his chest as I hugged him hard. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping me feel better.”

“Anytime.” He kissed the top of my head. “It’s been a whirlwind these last few months. Try to have some fun tonight. You’ve earned it.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to a ball,” I marveled, amused. “Of all the things to do. I seriously thought dances were over after high school.”

“Welcome to the fae world.” He squeezed me once more before loosening his hold. “I’ll take you dancing sometime, just the two of us.”

I cocked a brow at him. “You dance?”

His lips curled. “Oh, Claire. You have no idea.” With that, he released me and led me to the door. “Vox and Sol are waiting and I can feel their impatience.”

Yeah, I could feel their nerves as well through the bond. I couldn’t talk to them the way I did Titus, Exos, and Cyrus, but emotions traveled easily between all of us. Such as Sol and Vox’s annoyance at Titus’s amusement. My fire mate found their formal attire comical, something he’d clearly remarked on a few times in their presence.

I turned toward my makeup to touch up my face, only to find myself being led toward the door with Exos’s palm against my lower back.

“No sense in reapplying lipstick, Claire. The guys will just destroy it.” He pressed his lips to mine for emphasis and opened the door before I could protest.

Sol and Vox stood in the hallway, their expressions morphing from nervous to clear appreciation as they caught sight of my gown.

“Oh, wow,” Sol said, awed. “You remind me of the azure meadows in the heart of Earth Kingdom, only even more alluring.” He stepped forward and captured my hand, bringing it to his lips. “Hi.”

Butterflies took flight in my stomach at that little word, the way his deep brown gaze twinkled with it almost shyly. I went to my toes to kiss him properly on the mouth. “Hi.” I took in his crisp black-and-white tux. “While I

love you in jeans, you do wear this rather nicely.”

His lips twitched. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I kissed him again before turning to a mute Vox. The silver around his black irises seemed to thicken as he gazed at me, giving him an unearthly regal glow.

He swallowed.

Twice.

And cleared his throat.

“Try using your air,” Titus called from a few steps away. “I hear that helps with speaking.”

Exos chuckled at my back. “Can you blame him for being a bit speechless?”

“I certainly don’t,” Cyrus mused, joining us. He looped his arm around my waist, tugging me to him without acknowledging the others, and captured my mouth in a hungry kiss that left me shaking with need against him. “Now you’re properly warmed up.” He winked and nipped at my bottom lip. “Your natural blush is so enticing, Claire.”

“It is,” Vox agreed, his voice sounding a bit hoarse. “She’s magnificent. *You’re* magnificent.”

Now it was my turn to be speechless.

Between Cyrus’s embrace, the heat radiating from Exos, Sol’s compliments, and Vox’s nerves, I felt a bit overwhelmed.

The only one who didn’t seem to be flustering me was Titus, but catching his gaze from the other room, I understood why. He served as my rock, the one grounding me to the moment and lending me strength where he knew I would need it.

He blew me a kiss and winked.

All of these males played a different role in my sanity, bolstering my courage, taking care of me, and respecting me in ways I never could have anticipated.

I was seriously the luckiest woman in the world. No, in all the worlds. However many there might be.

I shook my head on a laugh. That was a topic for another day.

Tonight I wanted to have fun, just as Exos suggested.

I would spend the evening with two of my intended mates, forget about everything else, and just enjoy myself. Because my life? Yeah, my life was pretty fucking amazing.

And I had all my mates to thank for everything.

“Let’s go to the ball,” I said, eyeing Sol and Vox. “I can’t wait to dance with you both.”

Chapter 9

Exos



“**W**hat’s wrong?” Cyrus asked as soon as the door closed behind Claire.

I twisted my lips to the side. “Something’s coming.” I felt it rising all day, this sense of wrongness settling over my shoulders and knocking my world off-kilter. “She sensed it, too.”

“Hence your distraction,” Cyrus murmured.

I nodded. It hadn’t been part of the arrangement for me to go to her in the room, but I’d sensed her need for emotional relief. “She deserves a night of fun without her mother hanging over her head.” Or whatever this dark, doomful energy meant.

“I don’t feel anything,” Titus said, joining us in the hallway. He’d overheard our conversation, not that I’d tried to hide it from him. As Claire’s mate and one of the strongest fighters I’d ever met, he needed to be involved in the discussion.

“It’s a disturbance in the spirit.” I folded my arms and leaned against the wall. “It feels like a gray cloud lingering on the horizon that refuses to leave. Claire mistook it for something she was forgetting. But I recognize it for what it is—a bad omen.”

“Someone is playing with magic that doesn’t belong here,” Cyrus translated. “Dark Fae magic.”

Yes, that was exactly what I felt. “Do you sense it, too?”

“Only through Claire,” he admitted. “But it reminds me of Kols.”

I snorted. “Feels harsher to me.”

“But you know what I mean.”

“I do.” The energy signature was similar in origin, marking it as

belonging to the infamous Midnight Fae, which we commonly called Dark Fae.

“Who or what is a Kols?” Titus interjected.

“A Midnight Fae Royal,” Cyrus replied. “Cocky bastard, but a hell of a lot of fun at parties. You’d love him.”

Titus’s auburn brows rose to meet his hairline. “You’re friends with a Midnight Fae?”

“Friends’ might be a bit of a stretch.” It wasn’t like I called upon Kols regularly. We just saw each other at the occasional political function.

“For you,” Cyrus clarified. “I adore the bastard.”

I shook my head. “Of course you do.” They had similar personalities, despite their clear fae differences. “You should reach out to him, see how things are going over there.” Last I heard, there was some sort of war breaking out between the two classes of Midnight Fae.

“Yeah, once we solve our problems with Claire’s mom, I’ll follow up.” Cyrus slid his hands into his pockets. “Unless you think this is all somehow related.”

“Nah, Elemental Fae can’t use dark magic.” Only the Midnight Fae had access to darker energy. Some believed it was their affinity for human blood that enabled them to reach the harshest recesses of the fae power. More likely, it was tied to their overall nature more than anything else.

I shook my head. “It might feel like Midnight Fae energy, but I don’t see how that could be possible. Regardless, we need to look out for Claire. I want her to have an enjoyable evening.”

“Which is why you didn’t tell Vox or Sol,” Titus added. “You want them all to have a good time.”

“Yes.” I knew Vox wouldn’t be able to enjoy himself if he was too busy watching out for Claire. Same with Sol. “It’s better if we just watch from afar. I don’t think anything will happen, but I want to be there just in case.”

Titus rolled his neck, his excitement palpable. “Works for me.” The Fire Fae was clearly born for this kind of job. “Let’s do this.”

“So eager and ready to fight,” Cyrus murmured. “Some might say you’re burning a bit hot for it, really.”

“What can I say?” Titus drawled. “My last opponent didn’t give me much of a challenge, so I’m looking to up my game.”

“Hmm. Maybe next time your opponent won’t go so easy on you.”

Titus snorted. “Are you saying you lost on purpose?”

“You know I did.”

“You two fought?” I asked, interrupting their bickering. “And Titus won?”

“I let him win,” my brother admitted. “Claire wouldn’t have been all that happy with me for killing her fire mate.”

Well, that was true. Still... “I can’t believe you let him win.” I glanced between them. “I want to see a rematch.”

Titus grinned. “Happily.”

Cyrus sighed dramatically. “So eager for another beating.” He peered at the Fire Fae. “Were you dropped on your head often as a child? Or were you always this dumb?”

Titus narrowed his gaze. “Were you born an ass? Or did all that power just go to your head and turn you into a colossal prick?”

My brother laughed outright. “I was definitely born this way.”

“That’s what I thought.” Titus pushed away from the wall. “Are we going to continue standing around here flirting or go protect our woman?”

I smiled. “I knew I liked you, Titus.”

“I’d say the same, but I’d be lying,” he replied, leading the way to the door.

“I’m telling you, he’s not the brightest mate of the bunch,” Cyrus mock-whispered. “Unless he’s on fire, in which case, he burns rather bright.” A flame broke out across my brother’s hand with the words—a flame that sizzled and died beneath a light spray of water.

Smoke billowed around Titus not a second later as he defended himself from Cyrus’s retaliation.

And an elemental blend of fire and water broke out around us.

I sighed. “Yeah, this is how we inconspicuously attend a ball to guard Claire.”

The two males chuckled. “I promise we’ll behave,” Cyrus said. “Mostly.”

“Mostly,” Titus agreed, smirking.

Oh, Claire.

The things I do for you...

Chapter 10

Sol



“**W**hat is *that*?” Claire asked, her focus on the Earth Fae’s carriage waiting for us in the Spirit Quad.

“It’s tradition,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. I mean, Claire deserved the full Solstice experience, and I damn well planned to give it to her. And that included providing the transportation most fae were accustomed to receiving for the ball.

Her mouth quirked up on the side, her amusement palpable. “It’s a pumpkin carriage.”

I reviewed my work, trying to grasp her meaning. The rounded orange undercarriage was left open at the top with fine vine framework to keep its shape. I supposed it sort of resembled a pumpkin, but I wasn’t quite sure why she jumped to that conclusion.

“Sure. I guess it resembles half of one.” I had taken pride in doing this for her, despite the work required to create such a delicate design. *Oh well.* “If that’s what you want to call it, then that’s what it is.” I held out my hand to help her onto the first step.

She giggled and placed her palm against mine. “All I need now are some glass slippers and talking mice.”

Vox paused at Claire’s side and gave me a worried look over her head. “Glass would be quite dangerous to walk on, and mice don’t speak here.” His eyes seemed to ask me if the mice in the Human Realm spoke, something I didn’t know. We’d have to ask River later. Titus’s Water Fae buddy seemed to know everything about mortals.

“Guys, I’m joking.” Claire settled onto the bench and tucked her dress under her thighs, leaving little to the imagination as the fabric hugged her

curves. “It’s from an old fairy tale.” At our blank stares, she sighed. “Just get in here.”

She didn’t need to tell me twice. I bounced into the opposite seat, needing more space in the small vehicle and to balance the weight. Vox cleared his throat as a small breeze swept between us. He seemed nervous and unsure of himself, which was decidedly unlike him.

I arched a brow. His power seemed to be unraveling as a result of the mating, something he hadn’t exactly admitted out loud. But I could see it in the way he handled himself, especially now. Yet he said nothing. Part of me wanted to call him out on it. Claire was our mate, and if his powers were on the fritz, she needed to be aware of it.

However, as someone who had spent an entire life in his shoes, I understood his hesitancy. He would tell us when he was ready. As long as it didn’t wind out of control, I would allow it. But the second I even suspected he might put Claire in danger, I’d call him on it.

Vox wiped his hands on his pants before slipping into the carriage and next to Claire. His gaze went down her delicious curves, and another stronger breeze swept her hair away from her shoulders, revealing cleavage that I wanted to bite into like one of her ripe peaches.

Claire chuckled. “If the two of you keep looking at me like that, we’re not going to make it to the ball with our clothes on.”

Vox’s gaze snapped up to her face, and he offered her a smile. “You’re gorgeous, Claire. You’re going to be the envy of everyone at the ball.”

Her natural blush deepened. “And you both look quite dashing in your suits. I’m glad we decided on formal wear.” She glanced at us, and this time I took note of how *we* were affecting *her*. We’d all been intimate together before, but tonight felt like it was supposed to be special, that it needed to be perfect.

I cleared my throat and leaned onto my knees, taking one of Claire’s hands and pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “I agree with Vox. All the fae are going to drop at your feet.”

With the tense moment broken, Claire smiled, her magic conjuring tiny pink butterflies. It was a new trait, one that I liked and made her seem all the more ethereal. Her free hand strayed to Vox so that we were all connected, then she glanced around the carriage. “So, uh, how do we get to the ball? I don’t see any horses or anything.”

That was Vox’s cue. Usually, an Earth Fae would hire a troll, or some

other creature of burden, to take us to the ball. But we didn't need one with an Air Fae present.

Vox grinned, and this time he appeared more confident now that he was touching Claire. She seemed to ground him and embolden his courage.

A strong gust of wind caught at the carriage, sending it rolling along the path to the ball.

Claire jolted as the wheels moved, and amusement warmed her features. "Oh, I see."

Vox normally would have had to concentrate for the amount of elemental power it took us to ride all the way to the ball, but he was strengthened by his connection to his mate.

I felt the same with her.

My unruly energy found its roots in her soul, something that only intensified as she closed her eyes and allowed the three of our elements to blend into an intoxicating web of rightness.

I almost didn't want to leave when the carriage came to a halt outside the bustle of the castle used for the Academy's entertainment events. However, when Claire gaped up at it, I knew she was going to love every minute of this.

I exited the carriage first, followed by Vox, and we both held out our hands for our mate.

Several fae paused on the stairs to watch, causing Claire to freeze. Air magic swept up her golden locks, sending them tumbling over her shoulders in an alluring wave. My earth gave her skin a bronze glow, and then there was still the immense buildup of her time with the others. Her eyes glowed blue with Cyrus's water, her tongue flicked out with a touch of Titus's fire, and a fresh sprinkle of pink butterflies tangled up in her hair like a crown, reflecting Exos's coronation and her eternal connection with the source of spirit.

Her impact stole my breath away, as it did for any fae who'd stopped to observe the new arrival.

Aflora was the first to break the frozen moment. "Sol!" she exclaimed, skipping up to us and flashing Claire an adoring smile. "I see that you've brought the Halfling."

Claire chuckled. "I do have a name, you know."

Aflora's eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't mean to offend. I just, uh..." She bit her lip. "I'm terrible at this."

Claire grinned. "I'll let you in on a secret," she whispered as she descended the carriage. "I'm terrible at this, too."

My lips curved, pleased by their interaction. "She prefers 'Claire,'" I said softly.

"I do," my mate agreed.

"Claire," Aflora repeated, her pale cheeks pinkening as she studied the makeshift crown in Claire's hair. "I love your ornaments." She reached up to touch one and jumped back when it moved.

"Butterflies," Claire explained. "They're my favorite."

"They're beautiful," Aflora replied, awed.

"Thank you." She licked her lips and glanced at Vox, who squeezed her hand in encouragement.

This was probably the longest conversation Claire had ever experienced with another fae on campus, aside from her mates. I couldn't have picked a better representative. Not only was Aflora kind, but she was well liked by our people. They would see her interaction with Claire as a vote of confidence.

"I, uh, love your dress," Claire attempted.

Aflora giggled and smoothed out the soft petal frills. "Really? I made it myself."

"Wait..." Claire eyed the fabric closely. "Is that... It's alive?"

Aflora's icy blue eyes lit up. "Yes!" She shifted in a circle, pointing out all the nuances of her vibrant red gown while Claire studied it in awe.

Vox and I subtly led them toward the ballroom, the two girls lost in a discussion about other clothes Aflora had made for herself using the roots of her earth. She was a powerful fae, which was to be expected with her royal bloodline. Her father had been king, once upon a time. Leaving her as the only heir to the throne. But as a female, she couldn't accept it. Only male fae could access the source directly.

Claire sucked in a breath as we pushed open the oversized ballroom doors. "Oh..."

Delicate melodies filtered throughout the huge chamber, filling every corner with the best music magic had to offer. Elana had gone all out this time, as had the other professors and student committee who'd put together this year's Festivus celebration.

Aflora stepped back into the balcony shadows with a wink, fully aware of what was about to happen. And I gave the male at the top of the ballroom stairs a card to announce us.

He cleared his throat, adjusting the rune on his necklace that amplified his voice. “Solstice Celebration, I announce Sol of the Earth Fae, Vox of the Air Fae, and their consort, Claire, Halfling of the Five Elements.”

A hush fell over the crowd as Claire went rigid under the scrutiny.

“You didn’t say they’d announce us!” she hissed under her breath.

I chuckled and tucked my arm around her tiny waist. “Would you have come if I had?”

She glared at me, but I took a step forward, my weight forcing her to follow me down the stairs and into the crowd. The other fae didn’t shy away from her, but rather eased closer to welcome us all.

Some of the Earth Fae swept in to touch the butterflies in Claire’s hair, all of them naturally drawn to signs of life. The Fire Fae nodded in admiration. The Air Fae bowed when Vox passed, giving Claire respect out of association. Even the Water Fae took turns joining us for idle chatter, curious about their new princess.

Aflora leaned closer to Claire and lowered her voice. “Do you like the plants?” she asked, pointing up at the delicate vines and blooms that lined the ancient walls and spiraled up columns that speared to the top of the high ceiling. “I added some of those peach trees you taught us.”

Claire smiled, taking note of the fuzzy fruit being enjoyed by some of the fae. Glacier, who I assumed was Aflora’s date, approached us with a half-eaten treat in his grip. “I presume I have you to thank for this delicacy? Do tell, is there more like this where you come from?”

Aflora beamed and nodded emphatically. “Yes, I’d love to hear all about the many human trees you could teach us!”

“Have you tried them?” Glacier asked Aflora, offering his piece. “They’re quite delicious.”

Aflora blushed. “Yes, of course. She grew some during Earth Class.” She glanced at Glacier’s companion, who joined us with a handful of the fuzzy fruits in tow. “I see that River is new to them.”

The Water Fae, who I remembered was Titus’s friend, joined us with a beaming smile on his face. “This is incredible!” He tucked his chin when he noticed Claire giving him a raised brow. “Oh, hi.” He glanced at Aflora. “Did I hear someone say Claire was going to teach us more about human trees?” The Water Fae had a vast knowledge of human facts, but he seemed as enthralled as Aflora to hear it from the source.

Claire giggled and started talking about apple trees, which bled into a

discussion on other fruits and how they were grown. River seemed most fascinated by the fact that humans took years to grow their trees, with no magic at all. A crowd formed, everyone hanging on her every word. Even the Fire Fae seemed enraptured.

I met Vox's amused gaze and shook my head.

So much for this being a special night for the three of us. It seemed the school had finally embraced Claire as their own, and now they wanted to know every detail about her.

Aflora stood at her side the entire time, offering a friendship I would have to thank her for later. I knew she did this out of loyalty to my sister, whom we both lost in recent years. Kamsa would have appreciated this a great deal. She always thought I would end up with Aflora, but while the younger female fancied me, I'd only ever been able to see her as a sister. And it seemed she was starting to realize that her crush had been unfounded as well.

The music changed, causing several of the fae to grab their partner and head for the dance floor. I took that as a cue to truly begin the evening with my date.

I glanced at Vox and corrected myself. *Our date.*

Glacier bowed and offered his arm to Aflora. "Shall we dance?"

Aflora shrugged. "If you can stop stuffing your face with peaches, perhaps."

"For you? Anything." He kissed her cheek, to which Aflora fluttered a shy gaze at me, then looked away.

An Earth Fae and a Water Fae. Not a typical pairing, but there weren't many Earth Fae left for our kind to date.

Claire smiled as they walked away. "They seem nice." She glanced around the ballroom. "Everyone seems to be nice, actually."

Vox bent his elbow the same way Glacier had. "You belong here, Claire. They all know that, even if they were reluctant to admit it at the beginning."

Claire relaxed and took Vox's arm, then glanced at me to see how to manage. She finally decided on resting her palm on my wrist. My bicep was far too massive for her to loop her arm around.

"So, who gets the first dance?" Claire asked, seeming to enjoy the dilemma. "You can't possibly ask me to choose."

Vox loosened his collar, then snagged a fluted glass from one of the passing server's trays. "Perhaps a drink first." He handed her the bubbly drink, then grabbed one for me and himself.

I raised my glass. "A toast to the best Solstice Ball ever."

Claire grinned. "Agreed."

Vox saluted with his drink, then tipped it back, downing the whole thing. I had hoped the Air Fae would have calmed his nerves, but now that we were here, it seemed he was getting all worked up again.

Claire sipped from the rim, and the butterflies in her hair fluttered. "Mmm. That's delicious."

"Careful," I warned. "Solstice brew is strong."

She gave me a sly smile. "I doubt it can hold a candle to spritemead. If I can handle that stuff, then I can handle some Academy booze."

I chuckled. "Very well. Don't say I didn't warn you." I clinked my glass against hers. "Maybe it'll help you pick who to dance with first."

Claire relaxed, her expression one of joy and happiness, a sight that warmed my heart. The other fae were accepting her, the ballroom was breathtakingly beautiful, and her contentment brightened the air.

A perfect evening.

Eventually, she nodded. "Very well. I've made up my mind. I'll dance with Sol first." She placed her empty glass on a passing tray. "I mean, the whole ball was your idea to begin with. It only seems fair."

If Vox was dejected, he didn't show it. In fact, he looked relieved as he handed her over to me. "I'll be waiting for my turn," he promised, giving her a brief kiss before backing away.

I frowned at him, but Claire tugged me toward the dance floor before I could protest. Something was definitely up with Vox. He seemed trapped in an eternal struggle between his clear intoxication with Claire and his reservations of how she made him feel.

Claire stood on her tiptoes to reach me as she wrapped her arms around my neck. She seemed to sway a bit, the drink having loosened her muscles and leaving her in a pliable state.

I chuckled. "I warned you that it was strong. Are you going to dance or just let me carry you around on the dance floor?"

She tilted her head back and grinned at me. "Where I come from, that qualifies as dancing." She moved with me, humming to the music. "Oh, Sol, this is just perfect. I feel like I'm in a dream." She glanced over her shoulder, noting Vox, who watched us with that soft ring of silver to his eyes. He smiled and waved. "Vox isn't mad at me, though, right?"

I smoothed her hair from her face. "No, of course not. He's just nervous."

At least, I hoped that was the cause of his odd behavior. Maybe his control over his power had slipped more than I realized.

Claire murmured something, her eyes glazed with pleasure, and giggled when the song transformed into a more rambunctious beat. It didn't fit the mood, and Vox looked like he dreaded having his turn. Considering the new pace, I couldn't blame him.

"I think I'll go to the bathroom. Give Vox some time to prepare." She hiccupped and covered her mouth, smothering a giggle. "Okay. Perhaps that Solstice brew was a bit much."

I pointed to the end corridor. "The facilities are that way. Do you want me to take you?"

She waved me away. "I'm fine. I'll be right back."

I waited until she had disappeared from sight before approaching Vox. "The fuck is wrong with you?"

The Air Fae frowned. Although, he didn't seem surprised at my anger. "You don't understand what it's like, Sol." He glanced up at the trees and vines lining the walls. A cool breeze had kicked up during the last song, and even I had noticed how leaves floated through the air, the decorations slowly deteriorating under the damaging winds. "I can't even control myself here, during what is supposed to be a joyous occasion." He scoffed and ripped the band from his warrior's tail, sending his hair flying around his face. "I'm losing control, Sol. I'm not used to this."

Well, at least he admitted it out loud.

Still, I couldn't help feeling a bit irritated by his statement. "Really? I wouldn't know anything about losing control?" I narrowed my gaze. "How about you try that again?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. You've had all your life to learn how to deal with it, but it's new for me, and it shouldn't exist at all. I should be in control."

"Claire is what you need," I reminded him. "And damn your control. Your ass is tighter than an orc's. You really need to get over yourself."

The Air Fae smirked. "That's a lovely picture."

I retrieved another Solstice brew and made him drink it. When he was done, I shook him by the shoulders. "Now, are you going to pull yourself together and show Claire a good time? She's counting on us. It's important that she feels welcome here. I don't want anything to make her feel like she doesn't belong, especially not your broody-ass self."

Vox chuckled and pushed my hands off him. “Yeah, all right. Stop hounding me already.”

We both nursed a fresh drink while we waited for Claire, but when the next song started and she still hadn’t returned, an unsettling feeling grumbled in the pit of my stomach. It wasn’t until an unfamiliar surge of fear swept through the mate-bond that I realized Claire might be in trouble.

“Did you feel that?” I asked, shoving my drink to a fae next to us.

Vox’s eyes locked on the corridor. “She’s in trouble.”

We hurried through the gathering of female fae, ignoring their shrieks when I ripped the door open. “Claire?” I called, my rumbling voice rising in panic.

The room was empty.

Claire was gone.

Chapter II

Claire



FIVE MINUTES EARLIER

Perfect.

Everything was perfect.

And yet, I still had that strange nagging suspicion that I was missing something. It'd crept back up my spine on the way to the bathroom, and as I stared at my reflection in the mirror once again, I felt it hitting me square in the chest.

What is it? I demanded.

No one stood nearby, the restroom empty.

I hiccupped again from the bubbly brew Vox had given me. The pear-like taste still lingered in my mouth. *So good.* I wanted more. Just as soon as I figured out this sensation of loss.

Gripping the counter, I studied myself. "You're losing your mind," I muttered. "Here you are at a beautiful ball with two gorgeous men, and you're talking to your reflection." Good thing no one else was in this bathroom to hear me, or they would have agreed.

"Claire..."

I jumped at the sound of my name, spinning around and searching for the source.

No one.

Nothing.

Not even the beat of the music from the ballroom reached me here.

What the hell?

Had I imagined it?

I crouched down to look beneath all the doors, wondering if I somehow missed a person, when I heard my name again. It came on a whisper against the back of my neck that sent me rotating upward onto my feet.

Vacant space.

“What the fuck?” I demanded, the hairs along my limbs standing on end. It had to be an Air Fae of some kind playing a trick. But why?

I narrowed my gaze on the exit and marched toward the door, fully expecting to find some asshole in the hallway. But it was as empty as the bathroom.

“Claire...”

I blinked to my left, toward the source of the murmur. “Where are you?”

No answer.

Fine. Someone wanted to play with me? They’d deal with the full weight of my elements.

The door closed behind me as I wandered down the stone-walled corridor toward what appeared to be an open terrace. Earth and fire swirled around me, ready to engage my command on a second’s notice.

But as I stepped out onto the cobblestone patio, I found a myriad of unoccupied benches and a garden beyond them. The floral scents called to me, hypnotizing my senses and shrouding me in the comfort of home.

I remember this, I thought, delirious and lost in a memory of my grandmother’s garden. She loved Oriental lilies, would tend to them every summer and fill the house with the ones she pruned.

Who knew the same flowers grew here? I meandered toward them, curious. Because I hadn’t seen these anywhere on campus.

“Claire,” a feminine voice said, clear now.

A chill skated down my spine. I knew that voice. Had heard it in my dreams.

I spun around, a scream lodged in my throat as a ghostly image of my mother appeared with her hands raised in the air. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said urgently. “Please, just hear me out.”

“Hear you out?” I repeated, my voice squeaking at the end.

I needed to run.

To fight.

To do something other than stand here and gape at her.

Yet my feet refused to move because, holy shit, my mother had appeared in spirit form. I tried to engage my own element, to battle her in whatever

way a Spirit Fae fought, but my heart refused me.

Exos!

“Please, Claire,” my mother whispered. “Everything you know is a lie. You can’t trust Elana. She’s the one who—” Her essence flickered, disappearing into the night, and with her the scent of my grandmother’s favorite flowers.

I spun around, searching for whatever trick she’d set up for me, only to find myself alone beneath the moon.

“Claire!” Exos’s voice thundered through the night as he pushed through the doors I’d touched only moments ago. I collapsed at the sight of him, my knees hitting the ground as if whatever spell I’d fallen under had been lifted.

And cried out in surprise.

Not because of the impact of my legs against the cobblestone, but because of the very real memories assaulting me. My grandmother. Her flowers. And the sense of dread and loss piercing my heart.

My mother was alive. And she appeared to be trying to communicate with me in spirit form. Her words reverberated in my head as all my mates were suddenly there, surrounding me with questions, but their voices were lost to the wind of my thoughts.

You can’t trust Elana.

That statement resonated the loudest. Because I felt the truth of that claim all the way to my very soul. Something wasn’t right with that woman. I sensed it when she called upon the dead. An eerie, violent energy that no one should possess or use.

I didn’t sense that from my mother. Her features and tone and words resembled concern and fear, not anger and harshness.

Everything you know is a lie.

Not everything, I thought back at her, taking in the horrified expressions of my mates. *I know them. I know their love.*

But something told me that wasn’t what my mother meant.

Strong hands on my shoulders shook me. *Cyrus.* I met his cool blue eyes, noted the irritation in his gaze, and narrowed my eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He snorted and released me. “She’s fine.”

I shook myself, taking in all five males yet again. Sol and Vox look horrified. Cyrus appeared pissed off—no shock there. Although, Titus seemed just as angry. And Exos, well, his expression radiated tired patience.

“What happened, Claire? What would possess you to walk out here alone and unescorted?”

My eyebrows rose. “Are you implying that I can’t wander around by myself?” Totally not the point, but a worthwhile question.

Cyrus gestured to my body on the ground as if to say, *Do I even need to answer that?*

Right. One moment of weakness and the men all turned me back into a damsel in distress. I supposed I did look rather ridiculous on the patio ground in this gown. But I’d just seen an apparition of my mother. I was due a bit of a freak-out.

Everything you know is a lie.

With those words ricocheting through my mind again, I shoved myself upward—without the assistance of my mates—and brushed my palms against my gown. “We need to talk,” I told them all.

“Really?” Cyrus deadpanned. “I had no idea.”

“Stop being an ass,” I said, not in the mood for his brand of tough love.

“Stop being a brat,” he countered.

My eyebrows rose. “Are you serious right now?”

“Deadly,” he snapped. “You can’t just go wandering around on a whim, Claire. Unless you’ve forgotten the threat of your mother’s existence? That she nearly killed you and Exos?”

“I’ve forgotten nothing.”

“Could have fooled me.” He folded his arms. “What the fuck were you thinking wandering out here alone?”

There it was again, the subtle hint that I couldn’t protect myself and needed their help to stay alive. “Following a voice,” I replied. “Which happened to belong to my mother. Except she appeared as some sort of ghostly spirit thing. And I’m fine, by the way, thanks for asking.”

“I can see you’re fine, Claire. Your mental state, however, remains to be seen.”

My lips actually parted, his insult a slap against my face.

“Cyrus,” Exos muttered.

“What? You all agree with me. What she did was careless and stupid. Acting in this manner puts not only herself in jeopardy but also the rest of us. What would happen to the Spirit Kingdom if she died, Exos?” he demanded.

“Not the time, brother.”

“Not the time,” he scoffed. “Well, we had better pick a damn time

because our little queen is just wandering around without a care as to herself or the impact her demise would have on the rest of us.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Because he clearly meant something beyond the typical grief that accompanied death. “Also, I’m fine. I can protect myself. Thank you.”

“Can you?” he countered, stepping into my personal space, his icy eyes glistening with power. “Can you really?”

“Cyrus,” Exos hissed.

But his brother ignored him, as did I. Instead, I sent a wave of power into Cyrus, forcing him back several paces.

He wrapped a cord of liquid rope around my waist to yank me along with him. I stumbled, found my footing, and severed the thick substance with a sweep of air mingled with fire. Then called upon the earth to break through the stone and wrap around his ankles.

Cyrus countered by creating a geyser that held him a foot off the ground, the hot spring too powerful for my tree roots to break through.

So I smiled, whirled my finger, and called on my water and air. Together they formed a tornado that nearly took Cyrus down. But he leapt forward, wrapped his arms around my waist, and misted me back to Spirit Quad, where I found my back pressed up against a wall.

I growled as his lips claimed mine. If I couldn’t feel the very real worry traversing our bond, I might have bitten him. But sensing the weight of his fear had me melting into him on instinct, my need to convince him that I was fine outweighing all the words he’d said.

Because he was right.

Going out there alone had been a really stupid thing to do.

I knew that, especially after everything that had happened.

My arms wove around his neck, holding him to me as he devoured my mouth with his own. Cyrus’s kisses were all-consuming heat and adoration, and I returned every ounce of that emotion with my tongue.

It wasn’t until I felt the others approaching that we finally broke apart, Titus’s fire a burning flame against my soul as he glowered at my water mate. “I hate when you do that.”

Cyrus wrapped his arm around my shoulders, holding me at his side. “I would apologize, but I wouldn’t mean it.”

“So much for a fun night at the ball,” Sol muttered.

My heart sank. “Oh, Sol...” I walked across the courtyard into his open

arms and hugged him tight. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin our evening. I just..." I glanced backward at Cyrus. "I wasn't thinking. I heard my name and followed it." Which could partly be blamed on the alcohol, but also on my curiosity. "It didn't sound like her until I was outside and surrounded by the lilies."

"What did she say?" Exos asked, his voice holding an edge to it.

I sighed. I'd let them all down, something I secretly vowed not to do again. Not when it resulted in all these disappointed expressions. "I'm sorry," I said again, this time to all my mates. "It was a stupid thing to do."

"Yes," Exos agreed. "Now I want to know what she said."

I swallowed, glancing around, and dropped my voice to a whisper meant for their ears alone. "She told me that everything I know is a lie and not to trust Elana. Then she disappeared before she could elaborate."

Cyrus snorted. "Well, that's informative. I haven't trusted Elana in nearly twenty years."

My brows rose. "What?"

"Instincts," he replied. "I've never bought into her holistic-fae approach. It's always felt too contrived, and I swear she's hiding something."

"Yet you told me to accept her mentorship." I frowned. "Why?"

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, little queen." He winked at me. "Remember that."

"She's definitely hiding something," Exos added. "But I don't think she's evil."

"What did she have you do the other day that made you so uncomfortable?" Sol cut in. "The day I picked you up from her house?"

"Can we do this inside?" Vox interjected, sounding tired. "Sound carries out here, and I don't want to waste energy on covering a conversation that could happen in the dorm."

I nodded and followed them all into the common area inside the dorm. Cyrus took the chair, Titus across from him in the opposite recliner, while Vox and Sol took over the couch with me between them.

Exos was the only one who remained standing. "What did Elana teach you?"

I cleared my throat and glanced at Sol, who gave me a reassuring nod. "Tell him."

"She, uh, conjured a spirit. A dead fae." I twisted my hands in my lap, wincing. "I didn't..." I swallowed and tried again. "It didn't feel right, but I

thought it was just my mood. You know, with my mom and all that.”

Cyrus’s face told me my reaction had nothing to do with my mother and everything to do with Elana. “She raised the dead?” His icy gaze narrowed at Sol. “And you knew about this?”

Sol appeared just as uncomfortable as everyone else in the room. “I only knew Elana introduced her to the other half of her ability. I didn’t realize that meant raising spirits from the ground.”

“You should have told me.” Exos sounded frustrated. “That’s not how spirit magic works.”

“How would I know that?” I countered, my shoulders falling. “She’s my mentor and the damn Chancellor. She’s supposed to be good. Right?”

Cyrus and Exos shared a look, both of them shaking their heads. “Yeah, she should be good, but lately, there have been signs of her hiding something.” The statement came from Cyrus, his gaze still on his brother. “She manipulated water at the last Council meeting.”

Exos’s brows rose. “And you’re telling me this now?”

“Been a little busy, brother.”

“Clearly.” He ran his fingers through his blond hair, cringing. “Disturbing the rest of a spirit... What was she thinking? Did it say anything to you?”

My mouth went dry with the memory of the male’s head appearing, his stark sense of pain. “Not really. He seemed, well, preoccupied. Like he couldn’t focus. And I think he was in agony.”

“Sounds about right,” Exos muttered. “Why would she teach you something like that?”

If I had the answer, I would have given it, but his guess was as good as mine at this point.

“Has she done anything else? Made you uncomfortable in any way?” That came from Titus, who had been quiet and observing from his chair.

I shook my head. “Nothing I can think of off the top of my head, but I’ve never been very comfortable around her. I always assumed it was her position of power and the fact that she could banish me to the Spirit Kingdom with a flick of her wrist.” Which reminded me... “What happened to Ignis and her friends?” They were the mean girls who tried to make it appear as though I had no control over my elements. “If Elana isn’t who we think she is...”

“Then she may have manipulated them into their dirty work,” Exos translated. “Yes. I thought it might be the work of your mother after we realized she’s still alive, but Elana would be more than capable of that.”

“So what happened to them?” I pressed, frowning.

“I don’t know. Elana was the last to be seen with them.” He frowned. “And I didn’t sense their presence in the Spirit Kingdom, which is strange since I bound their power. I should have a link to them, but I don’t.”

He shared another of his cryptic glances with Cyrus. “It’s a good thing school is out of session for a few weeks,” Cyrus mused at him. “Gives us time to sort this out.”

“Yes,” Exos agreed. “But where? We can’t afford to separate. Not now.”

Cyrus nodded. “Agreed. The Water Kingdom will be too chaotic with my father breathing down my neck.”

“And they can’t go to the Spirit Kingdom,” Exos added.

Both of them looked at Titus. His auburn brows rose. “I don’t have a palace, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

“What are you asking?” I interjected, trying to follow their cryptic conversation. We went from Elana to, well, I wasn’t quite sure.

“For a place to spend the holidays,” Vox explained. “I’m the best candidate.”

Everyone looked at him, but it was Cyrus who grinned. “Indeed you are, Vox. Thanks for volunteering.”

A hint of frustration and fear blossomed in my bond with Vox, but he didn’t let it show as he nodded. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

“What about Elana?” I demanded. “And my mother?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Sol said, lacing his fingers with mine and giving me a gentle squeeze. “Together.”

The others nodded their agreements. “And we’ll make it a little easier for Ophelia to reach out again,” Exos added.

Cyrus seemed to tense but didn’t argue or comment.

“Do you think that’s a wise idea?” Titus asked, sounding wary.

“Only one way to find out,” Exos replied. “But my instincts tell me it’s the only way. We need answers, and it seems Claire’s mother is the guardian of those answers.”

My heart skipped a beat, the idea of seeing her ghostly form again didn’t appeal to me in the slightest. But Exos was right. She might be able to tell us more.

Like where the hell she’d been these last twenty years.

Or why she’d tried to kill me.

I shivered, the memory of my near death too fresh to ignore.

Sol kissed my shoulder, his touch surprisingly soft with his big form. “It’s going to be okay, little flower. I promise.”

My throat constricted, his words exactly what I needed but also reminding me how horribly wrong our evening had gone. “I’m sorry about the ball.”

His lips quirked up. “I’m not. We danced, you were beautiful, and now we’re home. The perfect experience, if you ask me. Minus one minor detail.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” I wondered, feeling his amusement warming our connection.

“You’re still clothed.”

Those three words captured the attention of the entire room.

And lit my body on fire, diminishing all the sense of dread clouding my spirit. “What are we going to do about that?” I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

“We’re going to remove your dress,” he said, his palm circling the back of my neck. “And then we’re going to devour you, Claire.”

Chapter 12

Claire



“**A**re we at the two-hour mark already?” Exos mused, glancing at his wrist. “Fascinating.” A devilish glint entered his gaze as he looked at me. “Strip, beautiful.”

I gaped at him. “*What?*”

“You heard him.” Cyrus pushed off the chair, his icy blue irises trailing over me in a seductive wave of energy. “Strip.”

“My mother just appeared in an apparition, and you all want sex?” This was the clear downside to having five male mates.

“We can still discuss that while you’re naked,” Titus casually pointed out. “In fact, I feel it would drastically improve the conversation.”

Exos nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

“You’re all incorrigible,” I said, standing.

Only, Sol tugged me back down, his palm going to my thigh and trapping me on the couch. “This isn’t about us, little flower,” he murmured. “This is for you.”

“Being naked is for my own benefit?” I nearly laughed. “Right.”

He tilted his head. “I think we need to demonstrate, Vox.”

The Air Fae beside me grasped my opposite thigh, his lips brushing my neck. “You really do look amazing in this dress, Claire,” he whispered against my escalating pulse. “If you want to keep it on, I can work with that.”

“What about—”

“There’s nothing we can do about Ophelia at the moment,” Cyrus said, cutting me off. “What we can do is continue enjoying the evening we intended to indulge in prior to her making an appearance.”

“And what evening did you intend us to have?” I asked, my throat going

dry.

Sol's mouth trailed across my jaw until he hovered right over my lips. "Well, I had intended to remove your dress." His hand slid down to my knee, where he bunched the fabric upward in knowing, measured movements. "Slowly," he added, punctuating his point by the tedious rise of my gown up my legs.

"While we planned to watch," Cyrus murmured. "It's Sol and Vox's night, but the three of us couldn't deny your beauty in that dress."

"Which is why we all agreed on observing," Titus added, a flicker of heat in his words. "And maybe more."

"Depending on your mood," Exos said, his strength and courage brushing my spirit in a tender stroke. *Vox and Sol went all out for tonight, their desire to spoil you superseding reason. It would be a shame not to celebrate their hard work, princess. Don't you agree?*

You're talking about the carriage, I whispered, whimpering out loud as the fabric of my dress inched up my thigh.

Among other things. Finding a suit to fit Sol wasn't easy.

But he looks so good in it, I replied, trailing my palm up his thick thigh.

Sol's lips captured mine, his tongue a welcome presence in my mouth as he continued to lift my dress higher and higher. Vox's palm moved to my bare limb, slipping between my thighs and upward to my heated center.

I moaned as he cupped me through the lace, my body responding to them all in different ways.

Fire in my veins for Titus.

Liquid warmth for Cyrus.

A writhing spirit for Exos.

Aroused scents permeating the air for Vox.

And an earthly quiver jolting my body for Sol.

Oh Fae...

They were right yet again. I needed this, a moment to forget, to just be me, to ground us all with the elements and experience the bonds Mother Nature intended me to have.

My fingers wove into Sol's thick russet hair, holding him to me as I devoured him in kind. My opposite hand went to rest over Vox's between my thighs, urging him to do more than just cup me.

Fabric rustled.

My dress flying over my head.

Lace ripping.

A cool breeze teasing my exposed skin.

They had me naked so quickly that I could scarcely breathe, but I trusted them implicitly. These were my mates. My fae. My men. They would never hurt me.

No, they wanted to take care of me.

I released Sol's nape and lowered my grasp to his groin. They were all wearing too many clothes, a complaint I voiced out loud, which earned me a few warm, masculine chuckles in response.

But I heard them complying.

Their zippers music to my ears.

This was what I needed, a chance to play with my elements, to weave our souls even closer in the mating circle, to take us that much closer to completion.

With all five.

Oh, this had never happened before. Only three. And they'd nearly killed me with pleasure. But I would handle this, for them, because I wanted it. Wanted *them*.

Sol shifted, his suit disappearing beneath his hands and leaving him primed, naked, and ready. I didn't wait. Didn't ask. I just straddled him, taking him inside me on a rumble of vicious need.

The entire room vibrated, his control hanging on by a thread. However, that was exactly what he needed to break. I could feel it in the way our bodies came together, the underlying desire to bestow his trust in me, to allow our connection to deepen, and for my power to literally ground his.

"Use me," I whispered. "I can take it."

His palm splayed across the base of my spine, his mouth brushing mine. "Claire..."

"I'm here," Vox said, his chest pressing to my back and shooting a current through us that stole my ability to think and breathe. I tossed my head back against his shoulder, my breasts heaving. He wrapped an arm around my center, stabilizing me between them.

Energy hummed between the three of us, Vox and Sol holding each other's gazes and communicating some unspoken words.

Cyrus stepped up to the couch wearing nothing but a pair of dress pants, his rippled abdomen on display and begging my fingers to explore. He caught my hand and brought it to his lips, then guided it backward to Vox's groin.

“Touch him,” Cyrus encouraged. *Show him how you feel.*

I squeezed Vox’s shaft with my palm while my thighs clenched around Sol, causing both males to groan in satisfaction.

But it was the approval in Cyrus’s gaze that nearly undid me.

He was such an enigma in my life, constantly mentoring me in his own way. To the point where I wanted to kill him at times, but in moments like this, I loved him more than I could even articulate. And his smile said he knew it.

His fingers circled my hips before moving backward to my ass. “She’s not ready for this yet,” he murmured. “But someday soon.”

I shivered, the implication of his words making me want *someday* to be *today*.

Vox went to his knees on the couch beside us, providing me easier access to stroke him.

And Sol thrust upward.

I curled over into his broad chest, the pleasure of that single move sending me closer to the edge of oblivion.

Then Titus trailed a kiss of fire down my back that had me vibrating with pleasure.

All of them were teasing me in their own way. Even Exos, who seemed to be using his spirit to touch mine intimately, caressing me from the inside out.

I lost myself to the rapture, indulging in all the elements, reveling in Sol’s big body trembling beneath mine, and feeling Vox’s response beneath my hand.

More... I bent to take Vox’s cock into my mouth, needing to taste him.

“Fuck,” he breathed, his fingers weaving through my hair.

Sol repositioned us all on the couch. He entered me from behind with a thrust that had me seeing stars, my ass up in the air as I bent over Vox’s pelvis with my fingers digging into his thighs.

Power rippled around us.

Energy thriving and urging me to deepen our bonds to the next level.

Until it all snapped into place, zipping through my bloodstream and soul.

Vox and Sol were mine.

Third-level bonding.

Intended for forever.

And it felt amazing. Perfect. *Right.*

Vox’s grip tightened, his beautiful, athletic form tensing as he pistoned

into my mouth. Sol's palm stroked up and down my back, his pace brutal and sensual at the same time.

Fire licked up my limbs, Titus adding his own element to the mix, and glided to my core to flick my clit.

I groaned, his hot touch shooting me into the stars on one of the most intense orgasms of my life. Exos joined me there, his spirit catching mine and cradling me in our special way.

While Cyrus's water blanketed my skin, cooling my body from the outburst of my pleasure.

All of it culminated in Sol and Vox erupting inside me, their essences an addiction I would never get enough of. I swallowed all of Vox, sucking him for more long after he was done, while my core continued to squeeze Sol, refusing to let him go.

But my mates weren't done. Nowhere near it.

Titus soon took Vox's place, his long, perfect member protruding proudly near my lips as Cyrus slid into me from behind. Only Exos remained off to the side, his pants securely fastened while he observed with hungry eyes.

I fell into the hypnotic pull of his irises as Titus and Cyrus set a pace.

You look beautiful, Exos murmured. And very well fucked.

My throat worked, my mouth tightening around Titus as another orgasm mounted swiftly between my legs.

What about you? I asked, my mind delirious with the impending ecstasy.

Oh, I'm quite content to watch, princess. I never thought I would be excited by this, but it's hot as hell.

I moaned, Cyrus's fingers doing something to my breasts that captured my undivided attention. Titus's grasp on my hair tightened, his muscles tensing in the way I loved. He wouldn't last long like this, something his expression told me as I sought out his gaze.

I ran a flame up his neck and along his jaw to his lips, giving him a fiery kiss. He returned it by sending another cinder of heat between my legs to stroke my clit, making me think of his tongue.

Fuck... I wasn't going to last either if he kept that up, especially with Cyrus adding water to the mix. The two of their elements combined against my most sensitive place drove me hard over the cliff and sent me soaring into the clouds.

Their pace increased as they chased after me, their groans music to my ears.

I all but collapsed between them, my body weak from being so thoroughly taken by the four of them, leaving only Exos leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his bare chest, those maddening pants still buttoned.

His control floored me.

I beckoned him with my eyes, my body too exhausted to move. He merely smiled. *We'll play later, baby*, he promised. *When you're ready for another round.*

My heart skipped several beats, my breathing labored as I whispered, *I love you.*

I love you, too, he replied, pushing off the wall. He approached and bent to brush a kiss over my swollen lips. "You never took off your shoes."

I blinked at him. "What?"

He gestured with his chin to my heels, and sure enough, they were still strapped to my feet. "Hottest thing I've ever seen."

The other males grunted in agreement, causing me to laugh.

All I could do was shake my head. "You all are going to kill me with sex."

"But what a way to go," Titus mused, his thigh flexing beneath my head. Somehow I'd ended up using his lap as a pillow.

Cyrus drew his palm down my backside, which was draped over his legs. Sol and Vox were on the floor, their heads leaning back against the cushions of the couch near my midsection.

What a picture we all made.

A proper... six-some.

I laughed, the sound bursting from my lips on an unexpected wave of happiness.

Titus gazed down at me, arching an auburn brow. "Did we fuck you too hard, sweetheart?"

"Nope. I'm fine." *I just had a six-some. No big deal.*

Technically a five-some, Exos corrected, grinning. *I just watched.*

You did more than that, I told him. *I felt your spirit.*

Because it's yours, he replied. *As are all the other men in this room, Claire. We're all yours.*

"We can't do this in Air Kingdom," Vox suddenly said, causing several of the males to laugh. "No, I'm serious. My parents are already going to have issues. If we do *this*..." He flinched. "It won't go well."

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cyrus drawled. “I think that went extremely well.”

“Something we actually agree on,” Titus replied.

“Seriously, we cannot do this in Air Kingdom,” Vox tried again.

“Sure,” Cyrus murmured. “We’ll keep it in mind.”

Vox sighed, shaking his head. “I’m so fucked.”

“No, that would be Claire,” Exos corrected, winking at me. “And we’ll figure it out, Vox. It’s just a week of holiday celebrations. How difficult can it be?”

“You’ve clearly not met my parents,” the Air Fae grumbled.

My heart warmed at the idea of meeting his parents and learning more about my air mate. It sounded like a great way to spend the holidays. Whatever holidays they were.

I frowned. “What are we celebrating, exactly?”

“Fae Festivus,” Titus said.

“And what’s that?” I asked, curious.

“Oh, Claire,” Exos murmured. “You’re in for quite a treat.”

Part Two

“The Fae Festivus is a time for bonding among the elements. Raise a toast to the gods above, thank them for our beautiful gifts, and be merry. Cheers.”

—Exos

Chapter 13

Vox



Nothing about home had changed. Not the way the wind plucked at my hair, or how dizzy I became when I looked over our spire's balcony, and certainly not my family.

"Tempest, quit your fussing!" my father roared at my mother, his temper already out of control.

He didn't like it when I visited, but rather than own up to it, he took it out on everyone else. Especially my delicate mother, who would never face his rage head-on. Instead, she bent to his wrath like a willow leans with a strong breeze, somehow never breaking under the strain.

Ignoring my father, my mother cupped my cheeks and gave me a kiss just above the line of my trimmed beard. "Vox, darling. Am I fussing?"

She always liked to put me in the middle. A blockade against my father's winds.

Shifting my gaze to the angry Air Fae, I took in my father's scowl as he stood in the foyer surrounded by baggage for two—Claire and me. Sol, Titus, Cyrus, and Exos would be coming in a few days. That had been my only condition that Cyrus would agree to.

By the look on my father's face, it wasn't going to be enough.

"No, Mother, you're not fussing. And even if you were, I haven't been home in quite some time," I reminded my father, not that he seemed to care.

"You could have given us more warning," he growled, crossing his arms over a perfectly pleated white suit. "Or better yet, you could have just done what you do every year and not come home." He narrowed his gaze. "You've made it clear that your family disappoints you."

I didn't let his challenging stare deter me. Yes, my family disappointed

me. And if there was somewhere else we could have gone for the holidays, I would have suggested it in a heartbeat. But Claire needed all her mates right now, and Air Kingdom made the most sense. The grounds were protected and well populated, and being here offered us the space and opportunity to spend the Festivus together as a unit.

Our only other options had been the Academy or Cyrus's home. The former posed a problem because of Elana, and the latter would have likely forced Cyrus and Claire to focus solely on coronation planning.

No, we needed a place to lie low, enjoy ourselves, and allocate adequate time to analyzing Elana's and Ophelia's motives without any potential interference. This place provided us all with an opportunity to determine our next steps beneath the sanctuary of my home. Because Elana couldn't visit Air Kingdom without an invitation, and Ophelia, well, she wasn't welcome anywhere.

Yes, this was where we were meant to be.

My father would just have to deal with it.

"It would be improper for me to spend yet another Festivus season on campus or in another realm," I said to him now. The sooner he accepted I was here to stay for a few days, the better.

My mother nodded with eager agreement, her white curls flowing over her shoulders as an effortless wave of her power swept around her gentle form. "I agree, Notus. It will do our standing well to have Vox home."

"And your intended mate? A *Halfling*? What in the Four Winds were you thinking?" My father—Notus—snapped, his black eyes going wide. He cared so much about what the other royal Air Fae lines might think.

Elements forbid I hadn't brought home a privileged Air Fae brat. *Because that's who I've always dreamed of mating. Not.*

My father scoffed, adding, "No. It's worse than just the Halfling. We now have to deal with multiple bond-mates like some kind of barbaric Spirit Kingdom family. How many did you say there were?"

"Give the boy a break," came a scratchy voice from the hall. My grandfather, the one who had brought shame to our family, entered with a smile. His notorious jagged scar tugged across his left eye, running through a milky white iris that served as a reminder of his sin. "I've settled the Halfling with the best view of the spire."

He had secured this particular spire in his youth in one of the more desirable crags that overlooked the clouds and distant cliffs below. It

contained strong winds meant to power a family's elemental well—or push unwary guests off the edge to an early death.

I swiped my face with my hand. “You can't leave her out there by herself,” I said, worry creeping into my voice. “She's not from here.” And my mate had a tendency to wander off alone.

“Of course she's not from here!” my father bellowed, his temper spiking again. “She's not fae!”

“Half-fae,” I corrected.

He scoffed. “It's more shame that you bring on this family, Vox. I won't tolerate it.”

As much blustering as my father wanted to do, this was my grandfather's house. When he passed, then my father could have a say in such matters, but until then, I never paid him much heed.

“Sounds like you need to go burst some wind,” Malichi grumbled, waving away my father's rage. He swept a frail arm around me and tugged me along with him. “Come, boy. Your grandfather has missed you.”

We left my parents behind bickering over the baggage. Father threatened to toss it all over the edge of our property, and Mother began the tedious work of soothing him with promises that Cyrus and Exos were powerful royals that could offer a boost to our reputation. He'd come around, but this was precisely why I hadn't brought all my other bond-mates right away. My family needed time to adjust to the idea.

“What's it like?” my grandfather asked, his good eye sparkling with delight. “Being mated to a Halfling?”

Shrugging his arm from my shoulders, I wrinkled my nose at the cool, nostalgic breeze that swept scents of clouds and mist through the wide halls. Sunlight streamed in from skylights that lined every corridor, making the spire feel like there was no place to hide from watchful eyes.

I hated being home.

“You've been mated before, Grandfather,” I said, not wishing to discuss Claire with the Air Fae. “You don't need me to tell you what it's like.”

He chuckled. “That's not what I meant, my boy.” He swirled an invisible breeze around his finger. A subtle practice act of what was left of his power that he insisted on keeping up, even though the Air King had taken away his access to the source of our element. “She has access to all five elements, so I hear. Do you feel them, too?”

I tilted my head in thought. Yes, I was connected to the other elements

because of Claire and my bond-mates, but it didn't give me power over them in the way my grandfather likely hoped. "Only Claire has that power," I assured him. "Don't get any funny ideas."

He dismissed the breeze, sending his beard puffing from the tiny shock wave. "Can't blame an old fae for trying to think of ways to redeem the family line. If our own royals won't speak to us, then maybe your bond-mates have some connections."

I wanted to tell him that was impossible. Exos and Cyrus had their own problems, and Sol definitely had other, more important things to worry about than my "family honor." Our royal line would never be anything but a shameful reminder of what happened when powerful Air Fae lost control. It was what we deserved until we could prove otherwise.

The extravagant display of wealth when we reached the viewing platform reminded me that my family was hopelessly vapid and could never meet my expectations.

Claire, however, stood on the very edge with her arms spread and her hair flinging in the violent wind.

My heart leapt in my throat and my tongue went dry. "Claire?" I said, hoping we wouldn't startle her over the spire's cliff. "Don't you think you're a little close to the edge?"

She spun on her tiptoes, teetering in a way that made me dizzy. Wind swirled around her, and I realized that she leaned back, staying aloft by invisible threads of power that kept her from falling. "Vox! This is amazing!"

While she did indeed look amazing, my hands clenched with the need to grab her and tug her away from the cliff. "Claire..."

My grandfather chuckled. "Fine mate you've got yourself there, my boy." He gave me a lewd wink. "I'll leave you two to enjoy the view." He waved a hand as he turned. "And don't worry about your parents. I'll talk to them. This is still my home, and we are more than equipped to handle a few guests for the festivities. You just enjoy yourself this evening."

My grandfather shuffled away while my gaze remained locked on Claire. I extended a hand. "Claire, I know you're powerful, but you can't fly. Come here before you fall."

"Oh, Vox," she said with a soft pout, allowing me to take a breath when she stepped away from the edge and walked into my waiting arms. She wrapped herself around me and gave me a tender kiss. "You never told me how much magic there was here. I can feel it everywhere. It's incredible."

I held her tight, my heart thundering from the very real fear of losing her. She was a true fae sometimes—wild and free. And she had no idea how easy it would be to fall from the windows of this spire.

“The Air Kingdom is located in the highest lands available in the Fae Realm,” I said and led her to a bench on the translucent floor. The picturesque view below depicted low-lying clouds intertwining with rocks and trees. “It’s also the closest we can be to the source of our element. That’s what you sense, Claire. And through our bond, you’ll be able to access that source while you’re here.”

I palmed the back of my neck. It hadn’t occurred to me that by mating with Claire, she would gain access to my power and bloodline. All my walls wouldn’t protect her. She’d have to build her own.

Claire rested her head on my shoulder and squeezed my hand. “Tell me what it was like to grow up here,” she mused, her gaze locked on the expanse beneath us. “Your mother seems nice.”

I snorted. “She just knows you’re mated to two kings and wants your approval.”

My mate shrugged. “Or maybe she cares about you and wants to make me feel welcome.”

I highly doubted that, but I didn’t debate it. “I apologize for my father, and my grandfather. They can both be a bit, uh, much.”

Claire chuckled and burrowed her nose against my neck, leaving tender kisses that forced the knots to unwind from my shoulders. “No family is perfect.”

I winced. No one knew that better than Claire. “I’m sorry,” I admitted. “I shouldn’t complain.”

She nipped my ear as her hand drifted over my thigh, making me forget why I’d been so upset to begin with. “Nonsense. Complain away. I want to hear why you hate it here so much, because then maybe I can do something about it.”

“I never said I hated it here.”

“You didn’t have to,” she replied, eyeing me knowingly. “I can sense it.”

Of course she could.

I sighed. Titus and Sol already knew about my history. But I hadn’t yet told Claire. I supposed now was as good a time as ever.

So I told her the story about my grandfather and how he obtained his scar. How the Air King gave him access to the source, only for my grandfather to

take advantage of it. “He killed people,” I told her. “And not because he’s vile or malicious, but because he was arrogant and lacked control.”

I continued by telling her how it brought shame to our family, how despite being of the royal bloodline, we were no longer permitted to touch the core of our power.

“My connection with the source is stronger than anyone else’s in our bloodline. As such, my father seems to think I can restore our family’s good name,” I concluded. “But I know my limits, and I have no desire to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps. Hence my need for control.”

Claire studied me for a long moment, and I half expected her to express disappointment in my history. Instead, she murmured, “Hmm, but denying your gift isn’t how you stay in control.”

“I’m not denying it.”

She gave me a look. “I can feel you fighting it, Vox. And if you continue to deny your abilities, it’ll eventually explode out of you. That’s how people get hurt.”

The shadow of memory in her gaze told me she was thinking about the night she burned down the human bar. It was a bit different since she didn’t know about her gifts then, but I understood her implication.

“I’m not fighting it,” I clarified slowly, “so much as trying to find new ways to tame it.”

“Seems similar to me.” She studied me. “You’ve felt... stressed.”

I huffed a laugh. “Yeah, that’s one way to describe it.”

“And coming here didn’t help,” she added.

“No, maybe not. But I’m determined to enjoy our Festivus regardless. I even ordered food for us to cook together.”

Her blue eyes twinkled. “Bacon and eggs?”

Not exactly bacon... “Yes,” I said instead, still not having the heart to tell her the truth about the origin of her precious pig meat.

“So this is like Christmas,” she mused. “Right?”

“Uh, sort of?” I knew the humans celebrated a holiday around a giant fat man with cookies, but I didn’t really understand the point of it. “It’s the same time of year.”

“Excellent.” She seemed quite pleased by the similarity, so I didn’t add any corrections. “I have an idea.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “But first, we need a tree.” She jumped up, clapping her

hands in excitement. “And ornaments.” Claire spun around, her joy palpable. “Oh, Vox, this will be so fun.” Another clap. “This is going to be the best fae holiday ever; you’ll see.”

“Sure,” I agreed. *But why the hell do you need a tree?*

Chapter 14

Claire



B *ea*utiful, I thought, evaluating my work.

All my mates were in the other room with instructions not to enter until I was ready for them. I could hear Titus chuckling at something Cyrus had said, their banter becoming friendlier every day. Which was perfect because I needed them in a good mood for this to work.

I tugged on the writhing garland—a vibrant green strand I’d created using my earth element. My gift came in handy for the flowerlike ornaments as well, while my spirit controlled the red butterflies fluttering around the branches. A different shade from my usual pink, but I wanted proper Christmas colors.

“Okay,” I breathed. “I think that’s about it.”

Wiping my clammy palms against my blue dress—an early present from Exos—I made my way toward the guest area where all my mates had taken up residence. Everyone had arrived last night and had given me all day today to work on this surprise.

The open windows lining the hall gave me a glimpse of the cheerful activities below as the entire city celebrated the Solstice holiday with lights and beautiful melodies. The scents and sounds weren’t exactly the same as Christmas, but close enough.

My tree and holiday brunch would do the trick of melding it all together.

Titus met me by the door with a suspicious twinkle in his forest-green eyes. “Why are you grinning like that, sweetheart?”

I blew a kiss at him in response, not ready to reveal my surprise yet. I needed Vox to confirm something first. “Your parents are gone, right?”

He raised a dark brow from his seat upon the couch. “Yeah, they’re out

for dinner with one of the commissioners.” His lips twitched to the side, his expression contrite. “Sorry they didn’t invite you, but they insisted you would have found it boring.”

I laughed. “I’m sure that was their reason.” We both knew the truth. Some of the Air Fae found me to be an enigma and someone they wanted to know. Others, however, were horrified by the idea of a Halfling wandering among them. That I had five mates only made it worse.

Fine by me. Besides, Vox’s parents were right. I would have found dinner with some snobby commissioner terribly boring, and I really wanted to spend some quality time with my men.

Titus looked me up and down. “Are you bored, sweetheart? I can think of a few things that might entertain you.” He accentuated his proposal with a waggle of his eyebrows.

“Hold that thought. I have a surprise first,” I said, about to burst out of my skin. I’d been planning this for what felt like days.

“I like surprises,” Sol offered, always the first of my mates to jump on board when I had a crazy idea. He wrapped a massive arm around my shoulder and kissed the crown of my head. “Does it involve eggs and cheese?”

I chuckled. “It’s not food, well, not just food.” I tugged him by the arm, leading him toward the hall. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

Cyrus and Exos shared a quizzical look before shrugging and following along. Titus looked hopeful that my “surprise” would involve being naked, and Sol’s stomach growled. Vox poked him in the abs. “I just fed you an hour ago. How are you still hungry?”

My mates bantered and tried to guess what I’d been doing in the sitting room all day. The only one with any idea of my intentions was Vox since I’d needed his help in gathering supplies. But he didn’t know how I used everything. Nor did he know about the presents I slid under the tree this afternoon.

“I just want to know what you did with that poor tree,” Vox murmured.

Sol pegged him in the shoulder, making the Air Fae wince as pebbles clattered to the floor. “Don’t be rude. Claire’s excited, so I’m excited. Plus, she said there’s food.”

Vox gave me a playful smirk. “Well, you heard the ogre; show us your surprise.”

Sol *hmp*hed but seemed satisfied and crossed his arms.

I grinned at them all and paused just outside the door. “Ready?”

They all gave me expectant looks.

“Merry Christmas!” I exclaimed, pushing through the threshold and admiring my twelve-foot-tall evergreen tree.

Berries and pinecones added pops of color with a shimmering string of fae-glamour as my blinking lights. Fae didn’t exactly have ornaments, but I found items around the house that worked in addition to my floral adornments.

I winced as the big light at the top flickered and died.

Ugh, I’d fixed that three times today, and of course it chose now to burn out again.

With a shake of my head, I snapped my fingers and set the blue flame alight again just an inch above the tree. My water element flowed just beneath it, helping to protect the branches from burning. *A star, I mused. Perfect.*

I turned with a smile, excited to see their reactions, and froze.

Abject horror radiated from Sol’s expression.

“Why did you kill a perfectly good tree and decorate its corpse?” he demanded, taking in the strings of fae-lights and the ominous fire burning at the top. “It’s a bit morbid, Claire.”

“I, uh, it’s—”

“Why are there prayer orbs hanging from the branches?” Vox asked, his voice hitching at the end.

“Prayer orbs?” I repeated. “What—”

“And are those my mother’s fertility leaves?” Vox gaped at the middle where I’d set a pair of beautiful red palms I’d found downstairs. “That’s... that’s just wrong.”

“I don’t know,” Titus said, his brow furrowed. “It’s kind of cute. She’s using the dead tree to protect her bags.” He gestured at the gifts beneath the tree. “They’re a bit shiny, though.”

“That’s certainly an interesting use for water,” Cyrus put in, eyeing the top of the tree.

“Is it supposed to be an elemental project?” Sol asked, his palm on the branch as he outwardly mourned the life of the evergreen. “Can we replant it outside? Restructure its roots?”

“Um... I guess, but—”

“It’s a Christmas tree,” Exos cut in, shaking his head. “Come on, it’s a

popular holiday treat for humans.”

My shoulders sagged. “Yes.”

“It’s beautiful,” Exos praised, wrapping me up in his arms and kissing the top of my head. I sensed him admonishing the others in the room with his eyes, his annoyance stark in our bond. “Thank you, Claire,” he added.

“Yes, thank you,” Cyrus murmured. “It’s... unique.”

“But we can plant it again later, right?” Sol pressed.

“Yes,” I said, giving up. “We can plant it after brunch.” Because, clearly, they were not going to enjoy the tree in the same way I had.

“Brunch?” he repeated.

“Food,” Vox clarified. “I’m just going to go return my mother’s fertility leaves to her room. I’ll be right back.”

I banged my head against Exos’s chest while he chuckled. “That was a strange adornment, Claire,” he murmured against my ear.

“Vox’s grandfather said I could use them.” The elder male had been positively jovial when I asked to borrow it. “Now I understand why.”

Cyrus laughed outright. “Oh, I bet he was all for it.”

I allowed the fire to die above the tree, no longer caring about the stupid star. At least the food would be appreciated. Because yeah, I could see why the Christmas tree tradition might be a bit weird. Especially to an Earth Fae like Sol.

Probably should have thought about that before creating the evergreen and decorating its dead branches.

With a grumble, I righted myself, determined to still enjoy our brunch.

Which Sol had already found in the dining side of the sitting area.

He was eyeing the holiday delicacies with a hungry gleam. The embers I’d set alight kept the food warm while I finished decorating the tree.

“Humans usually feast for Christmas, so I tried to organize something for us to enjoy that sort of spans both holidays,” I explained.

“It all smells amazing,” Sol said, giving me a small smile.

Well, at least I’d done something right.

The others joined Sol in admiring the dishes. And Vox returned with a relieved expression, then eyed all the platters of food. “Wow, now I see why you wanted all those ingredients.”

I smiled. “Thank you for finding me what I needed. Your grandfather helped, too.”

He stared at me. “He did?”

“Yep. He helped me with the cookies and sandwiches. But the dragonsteak was my idea.” I pointed to the stick of meat wrapped in bacon. “I also made eggs and an orc roast.” But I had no clue how that turned out. I just kept cooking it and hoping for the best.

All the males nodded and began filling up their plates.

Except for Cyrus and Exos, who appeared to be eyeing the dragonsteak skeptically.

I frowned at them. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Exos said slowly. “It’s just, uh, not something we’ve seen before.”

“It’s bacon swirled around a dragonsteak stick,” Vox supplied helpfully, his eyes latching onto Exos as he gave him a tight smile. “Eat it. It’s good.”

Exos blinked at him. “It’s a what?”

“A bacon-wrapped dragonsteak,” I clarified. “Trust me, you’ll love it.” I’d already snacked on a piece earlier today.

“Bacon,” he repeated as if tasting the word.

“It’s from a pig,” Sol said helpfully, already halfway done with his first plate. “Human thing.”

“Claire calls it bacon,” Vox added.

Exos just stared at him. “You told her this was bacon?”

“Because it is bacon,” Vox replied through his teeth. “Eat it, Spirit King. Claire made it.”

Cyrus burst out laughing, his amusement a heavy wave of entertainment. “I’m not touching that,” he said between chuckles. “I love you, little queen, I do, but it’s not happening.”

“Then I’ll eat it,” Sol replied, taking all of the dragonsteak for himself.

“You would.” Cyrus wiped tears from his eyes.

“I don’t understand why this is so funny,” I said, glancing between them all. Even Titus seemed amused. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Exos appeared to be the only sober one in the room, his gaze kind as he said, “That’s not bacon, princess. It’s troll fat.”

Another round of laughter ripped from Cyrus’s mouth. Titus joined him.

Vox just looked defeated. “You’re both assholes,” he hissed, the words directed at Exos and Cyrus.

“I’m not the one who told her troll fat was bacon,” Exos drawled. “That’s on you.”

“River promised me it was the same thing. And it’s not even that bad, as

long as you don't think about it."

"Troll fat?" I repeated, still catching up with Exos's statement. "I've been cooking *troll fat*?" No, not just cooking it. Eating it. "Oh God..." I was going to be sick.

Titus caught me around the middle before I could run from the room, his lips against my neck. "Trolls look like pigs, sweetheart. They're gross little things that roll around in mud. Same kind of meat, just a different species."

"Gross," I muttered, cringing.

"Now you see why we won't be touching that," Cyrus mused, taking one of the sandwiches instead.

"I like it," Sol said, on his second helping of food. "You all are seriously missing out."

"I'm sorry, Claire." Vox hung his head. "I couldn't get you bacon, so I improvised."

"And gave me troll fat," I translated. "Which I wrapped around dragonsteak. For Christmas dinner." I blinked a few times and then burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all. Welcome to the fae world, where nothing matched human reality. Like my sad Christmas tree.

I giggled and shook my head, wiping tears from my eyes.

"Now I can't wait for you all to open your presents. It'll be one joke after another." Especially since Vox's grandfather helped me. For all I knew, I'd actually be giving them fertility gifts.

I laughed again, my stomach hurting from the effort.

But the men had sobered, their attention falling to the boxes beneath the tree.

I waved them on, too humored to help at this point.

Vox did the honors of distributing the boxes. Which they all praised for being beautiful. When I told them they actually had to unwrap them, they all started laughing right along with me.

Wow, we came from different lands.

Yet somehow that made this Festivus all the more unique and special, because they were teaching me about their traditions while I showed them my own. It didn't escape my notice that had my mother actually been around while I was a child, my experience would have been completely different today.

For one, I wouldn't have put fertility leaves on a tree.

I also would have known it was troll fat, not bacon.

Still, I wouldn't have changed any of my mates' reactions for the world. Vox's excitement at unwrapping his new fae flute—an item his grandfather had recommended—would stay with me forever. Same with Sol's genuine pleasure over the seeds I'd created of all the fruit trees from back home.

Titus loved the bo staff I'd created for him using my earth skills. I'd melded it with fire and water, ensuring it would last more than a few practice sessions beneath the weight of his hot power.

"Can I slap Cyrus with it?" he asked. "Give it a good test run?"

"No," my Water Fae said with finality. He palmed his own gift—a ring forged from my elements. I'd created an identical one for Exos as well, which he had already slipped onto his finger.

Eventually, I would make ones for Sol, Titus, and Vox. When our matings were complete.

"Humans wear symbolic bands to indicate their relationship status." My cheeks heated, uncertainty swirling in my thoughts. "I mean, I don't know if it's really like marriage here, but I'm mate-bonded to the two of you on the deepest level and, soon, hopefully, to all of you. I just... I want to show that to the world, somehow." I shrugged. "Maybe it's silly."

Cyrus wrapped me in his arms and kissed me. "It's not silly, little queen. It's heartfelt and true."

Exos agreed with a smile, then glanced at the others. "We should make a gift, too."

"What did you have in mind?" Titus asked, arching an auburn brow.

"She says a ring symbolizes love," Exos murmured. "How is metal made?"

"By joining the elements," I said, my head against Cyrus's chest. "Or that's how I did it, anyway." It took some serious effort and a lot of trial and error, but I finally figured it out.

"On it," Titus said, his hand glowing as he held out his palm.

"Here," Cyrus murmured, triggering a mist that joined Titus's element.

Vox's hair began to blow as he focused on the whirl of magic, and the foundation of the room rumbled as Sol engaged his own element.

Exos grinned and held his palm over Titus's, then slowly closed the gap between them.

If it hurt, they didn't show it. Instead, they all seemed to be enjoying themselves, their magic mixing and blending until they released it all at once, leaving me winded in their wake.

And then Titus revealed what they'd created—a tiny ring glimmering with all the colors of the elements.

Much fancier than the ones I'd crafted.

"I need to up my game," I marveled as Exos plucked the item from Titus's palm.

My Spirit Fae grinned, holding the item out for my review. "Here's a piece of all of us, Claire. Just for you."

"Always for you," Cyrus whispered, his lips against my ear.

With tears in my eyes, I slipped it over my finger and smiled. "It's perfect."

"Merry Christmas," Exos mused.

"Merry Christmas," the others echoed.

Peace slid over me, making me feel at home and alive all at once. "Happy Festivus," I replied.

This was the way life should be.

Happy, loving, filled with joyful moments.

But deep down I knew this would be short-lived, could feel a darkness calling for my attention. Yet I shoved it away, promising to acknowledge it another day.

Because something was coming.

I could feel it in every fiber of my being, and the look Exos gave me over the cheerfulness in the room told me he felt it, too.

Chapter 15

Exos



A soft cry stirred me from my rest.
Claire.

I sat up, searching for her in our makeshift sleeping quarters. She lay absolutely still between Vox and Sol, her eyes closed and her little hands curled into her chest.

Then she whimpered again, not out loud, but into my mind.

A bad dream, I realized, creeping over to her.

Cyrus stepped into the room with an arched brow, my brother having chosen to stand guard for the night while everyone else rested. We agreed to alternate evenings. The Air Kingdom might be safe, but something lurked on the horizon. Claire's other mates couldn't feel it, their lack of a connection to spirit impeding their ability to sense the darkness looming over all of us.

A tear leaked from the corner of Claire's eye, her expression otherwise soft.

I gently clasped her ankle, searching for a connection to her mind and found the source of her pain.

Ophelia.

She stood alone in a cold cell, shivering and mouthing unintelligible words to Claire.

I frowned at the apparition, trying to discern dream from reality when those cruel eyes locked on me and narrowed.

Reality, I decided, closing my eyes to focus on falling into Claire's mind...

"You don't belong here," Ophelia said, her voice sharp and cold and reminding me of our stark surroundings. Wherever she'd taken Claire, it was

icy and unwelcoming.

“I could say the same to you,” I replied, cocking my head. “What are you doing to my mate, Ophelia?”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Mate?”

“Don’t play coy. You know what Claire means to me and can sense our bond. What is it you want, Ophelia?” I demanded.

She blinked at me, the action slow and deliberate. I glanced around the cell, noting the rotting bars and moldy stones. Somewhere with water, which made sense. Ophelia was a Spirit Fae with access to the water element.

But why would she choose this as her desired meeting location?

“Where’s Claire?” I asked, searching for the source of whimpering I still sensed in my mind.

“She’s fine,” Ophelia said. “It was you I wanted to talk to.”

I arched a brow. “Interesting. I thought I didn’t belong here.”

“You don’t. Or I thought you didn’t.” She shook her head, a hint of madness lurking in her expression.

She resembled a much older, far more tired Claire. Something that shouldn’t be possible on a fae so young. It appeared as if someone had siphoned all her beauty and youth from her, leaving her frail and gaunt.

“Why am I here, Ophelia?” I prompted, drawing her focus back to me and away from whatever thought had captured her mind.

“You care... about my Claire?” she asked, sounding uncertain.

“She’s my mate.”

“Not just a ruse?” Her head tilted in an eerie way. “She says you’re using Claire for power. But I don’t sense deceit.”

“She who?” I wondered.

“You know who,” Ophelia replied cryptically. “She’s orchestrated all of this, you know. I never should have listened to her. I thought... I thought she would leave me be. Freedom is a dream, young king. She lied.”

“Who lied?” What started as a coherent conversation had melted into confusion.

“She did,” Ophelia murmured, her voice taking on a dreamy quality. “Part Dark Fae. Part Spirit. She’s using my Claire. You’ll see. You’ll all see soon.” She began to hum a broken song, the sound hauntingly beautiful. “She’s coming. I need more—”

A harsh zap had me grabbing my head and stumbling backward, the dark cloud in my mind sucking energy from me on a gush of sound that brought

me to my knees.

Cyrus's voice rose above the chaos, his hands on my shoulders as he blasted me with his water element and knocked the leech loose from my spirit.

"*Fuck!*" someone shouted.

But I was too busy reeling beneath the unexpected attack.

The bitch had tried to siphon spirit off me, using me to connect to the source.

I gripped my hair, ready to pull it from my head when I heard Claire screaming from the bed. It snapped me out of the last vestiges of my dream state and sent me flying toward her, only to see her gazing upward with tear-ridden eyes. She grabbed me by the shoulders and yanked me onto the mattress, her arms weaving around my neck. "I thought... I thought..." She hiccupped, her voice in hysterics, her body trembling beneath mine. "I thought she took you from me..."

"I'm right here, princess," I whispered, meeting Cyrus's furious stare. "I'm fine."

"You're a fucking idiot is what you are," my brother seethed. "You let that thing in your head again!"

"She was in Claire first," I argued. "Better she latch onto me than her."

Claire shook her head. "No. No. No. She wasn't hurting me. She was trying to tell me something... something about Elana. But she had to go, and borrowed energy so she can come back."

Vox and Sol gaped at Claire. Titus, too. In fact, we were all gaping at her.

"How do you know that?" I asked, my voice a rasp of sound.

"She told me," Claire said. "She whispered an apology right before she latched on, saying she needed the strength to make a future connection."

I just stared at her.

"Does she often visit your dreams?" Cyrus asked, his voice a lethal calm that I recognized.

Claire shook her head. "This is the first time."

The tension radiating from my brother seemed to dissipate a fraction. "If she's reaching out on the spirit planes, then she's growing in strength," he muttered.

"She was in a cell," I said, frowning. "Not the spirit planes."

"What's the difference?" Vox asked, his fingers running through Claire's hair.

She hadn't yet released my neck, so I shifted with her in my arms, sitting up and cradling her in my lap. Claire buried her face against my throat, her face wet with tears. "Spirit Fae can access the spirit planes. It's where we pull life and death. But Ophelia created an entire background for her visit, suggesting she might have taken us to a real place."

"A cell," Claire whispered. "She's being held there."

"How do you know?" I wondered out loud.

"I just do," she replied, shivering. "It was so cold there, Exos. So... dead."

I met Cyrus's gaze again. "It reminded me of the death fields, only slightly more lively."

He shook his head. "This is insane. You're saying Ophelia dream-walked and took you to a cell, to what? Share stories? Warn you?"

"She wanted to test Exos," Claire breathed. "She doesn't trust him."

"Yeah, well, the feeling is quite mutual," Cyrus assured.

He wasn't wrong, so I didn't comment. Instead, I palmed Claire's cheek and pressed my lips to hers. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "She didn't touch me, but I felt her siphoning energy from you. I... It scared me."

I nodded, understanding, and pulled her against me once more. "I'm all right, baby."

"What does she want?" Sol asked. He'd moved up to lean against the headboard, his bare chest on display for the room. "What's her goal? Why does she need to trust Exos?"

"She seemed to be worried about my intentions with Claire," I replied, my brow furrowing. "Honestly, it didn't make a lot of sense. She kept talking about a Dark Fae, or someone who was part Dark Fae."

"Part Dark Fae?" Cyrus repeated. "That's... not a thing."

No, it most definitely wasn't. Elemental Fae did not mate with Dark Fae, or any other kind of fae for that matter. We stuck to our own kind for a reason. To do otherwise would tip the balance of power. "We need to talk to her again."

Cyrus's expression conveyed his response before it left his mouth. "Absolutely fucking not."

"I wasn't asking permission, Your Highness," I replied. "Oh, wait... I'm king now."

His ice-blue eyes narrowed. "Don't be a conceited dick."

“Pot, meet kettle,” I tossed back at him. Similar to *spirit, meet element*, but I preferred the human phrase because it sounded ridiculous. It also irritated Cyrus. Win-win.

“You two are like twins,” Titus marveled, pulling on a pair of sweatpants. “Claire, sweetheart, what do you want to do?”

“I want to talk to her again,” she said without hesitation.

“Then there we go,” Titus said, waving at her. “You two might be kings, or whatever the hell you are right now, but she’s our queen.”

“I agree,” Sol put in.

“Me, too,” Vox murmured.

Cyrus shook his head. “You’re all playing with fire.”

Titus’s palm blazed to life as he grinned. “And what fun it is, Water Prince.”

My brother snorted and doused the flame with a spray of mist. “Fine, I can see my intelligence is outnumbered here. So how do we go about talking to her again?”

“I have an idea,” I admitted. “But it’ll take me a few days to get it worked out. In the interim, bolster Claire’s elements. She’s going to need them.”



It took effort to convince Claire to fall back asleep, but it was the middle of the night and she needed rest. Especially for the festivities to come. The fae did not play around during the Festivus season. There would be a bonfire, dancing, and endless nights of drinking ahead. Which would hopefully help her relax, at least a little.

Although, she seemed rather content in the bed with Sol, Vox, and Titus.

Those three certainly knew how to wear out our mate.

With a small grin, I stepped into the hallway where Cyrus stood waiting.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” he demanded, his irritation coming through just fine despite his low whisper.

“I don’t think Ophelia is a threat,” I admitted. “She seemed a bit insane, but not in a cruel way. There was no darkness in her aura, just a hint of desperation that escalated when she latched onto my power. Like she’s been

starved and needed my energy to survive.”

Cyrus narrowed his gaze. “Go on.”

Those two words showed how well he knew me. I never stopped analyzing and theorizing, something he was guilty of as well.

I palmed the back of my neck, blowing out a breath. “If someone’s kept her locked up all these years, then that could explain why she latched onto Claire in the death fields. She would have been so hungry for spirit that she’d have done anything to absorb it. Including attack her own daughter. Which explains the energy depletion on Claire’s part.”

My brother considered my words and stroked the stubble dotting his chin. “That would also explain why she tried to go through your bond to get to her.”

“They’re related by blood. That links their spirits.”

He nodded, then frowned. “But why starve Ophelia?”

“To feed off her own power?” I suggested. “She looked ill, Cyrus. Like a thousand-year-old fae, if not older. When she’s, what, maybe fifty years in total? Not even?” I shook my head. “Something isn’t adding up here.”

“That something seems to point to Elana,” he added.

“Half Dark Fae, half Spirit. That’s what Ophelia said.” Of course, she was probably stark raving mad, but it was worth bringing up again. “What if she’s talking about Elana?”

“She’s a Spirit Fae.”

“With access to only spirit.” A trait that was exceedingly rare for our kind. Although, lately, I’d begun to question whether or not it was true, because I’d sensed her water element rise on more than one occasion. As had Cyrus. “Who were her parents?” It wasn’t something I’d ever thought to investigate or to know, but now it seemed imperative that we found out.

“I can ask my father,” Cyrus murmured. “He wants to talk to me about coronation stuff anyway.” He grimaced over the words.

“At some point we need to tell Claire what it means to be queen,” I pointed out. She sort of understood, but not really.

His lips curled down. “Yeah, that’s a conversation I’m not looking forward to.”

“She’s strong,” I said softly. “Intelligent, too. She’ll understand.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just not something I want to talk to her about.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “One problem at a time. We’ll focus on Elana, see what we can find out about her history, while you work on your idea to

contact Ophelia again. But I want defense mechanisms in place. And this time, I come with you. Because I don't trust that woman near you or Claire."

I grinned. "Spoken like a protective little brother."

"By, like, eighteen months," he retorted. "And someone has to keep your wits about you. Going into her mind like that without even asking for backup." He shook his head. "If I hadn't been so busy kicking that fae out of your head, I'd have kicked your ass for being so stupid."

"Aww, I love you, too," I drawled, tugging him into a hug.

He returned the embrace, squeezing once before letting me go. "Don't do that again."

I smirked. "We both know I can't agree to that."

"Stubborn prick," Cyrus grumbled, then held up his hand. "Yeah, yeah—pot, meet kettle. Picking up human terms." He shook his head. "Tell Claire I'll be back soon."

He misted without another word, leaving me chuckling in the hallway.

Half brothers, we might be, but he was also my best friend.

And I meant what I said. I loved him. Just as I knew he loved me.

I couldn't think of anyone better to have my back.

Stay safe, I thought at him. Not that he needed it. Cyrus was probably the strongest of all of us, something he already knew. Although, I bet Claire would one day give him a decent challenge. And wouldn't that be a sight to behold?

With that fantasy in mind, I returned to her and sat in the chair near the foot of the bed to guard her dreams.

Chapter 16

Vox



This was bullshit.

Claire and everyone else had wandered off to one of the bonfires to ring in the solstice with spritemead and sparkling pixielings, while I was stuck here being grilled by my parents. Again.

“You’ve had your fun,” my mother was saying with a tempered kindness as if I were a faeling all over again. She handed me a prayer orb, reminding me how Claire had “desecrated” the sacred objects without even realizing it. “It’s time to come back to reality, Vox. Pray to the elements for forgiveness and move on from the Halfling. She has no place in our family.”

Apparently, she’d given up on the idea that Claire might help restore our family name.

Shocking.

“I’m *bonded* with her, Mother,” I reminded her for the thousandth time. “We’re already committed on the third level. We won’t be breaking it. Can I go now?”

“By the Four Winds,” my father barked, sending a violent breeze through the sitting room. “I don’t care what level of bond you have with the girl; it’s foolish and she needs to be removed.” He took a blue gem from his pocket and showed it to me. “This will call the guard, and they will escort Claire from the kingdom. All I have to do is break it. Do you really want to force my hand?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “You really want to test the wrath of the Spirit King and the Water Prince?” Cyrus had returned this morning after spending three days in Water Kingdom. The wariness in his expression told me he’d endured similar dealings with his parents. Well,

maybe not too similar. His father at least liked Claire, from what I understood.

My father gave me a grim stare. “We only recently had some of our political privileges reinstated, and your bond with the Halfling is threatening those arrangements.”

“What privileges?” I asked, his claims being news to me.

“If the Halfling has befuddled your loyalties, then she needs to be dealt with,” he added, ignoring me as he always did.

“She’s *befuddled* nothing,” I snapped, my words stirring a breeze that caused the items hanging from the Christmas tree in the corner to jingle. “I love her, Father. I realize that’s an odd concept for you, but that’s how I feel. We will move to the fourth level, with or without your approval.”

Distant thunder sounded as my father’s black eyes glimmered. “After tonight, I forbid you to see her again.”

“And here we go,” I drawled, irritated beyond measure. “Do my words not even reach your ears?”

“She’s half-human, right?” he interjected, again acting as though I didn’t have a voice. Which maybe I didn’t. “That means you’ll only have to wait a short time before she succumbs to her mortal weakness and you can take a new mate.”

“Never happening,” I countered.

But he once more continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “You will stop your folly at the Academy and focus on your studies. And if you don’t listen to me, then you’ll force me to do what needs to be done.”

Excommunication.

The irony.

“I’m not ending my relationship with Claire,” I replied, keeping my voice calm even while my heart raced. “So do what you need to do, *Father*.”

“Don’t be a fool!” he roared.

“Oh, so you heard that,” I said, mostly talking to myself. “Good.”

“You don’t understand, Vox,” my mother cooed. “We’ve been given responsibilities again in the kingdom, and that includes watching for threats—threats like the Halfling. It’s a preliminary step, but if we prove our loyalty, we will continue to climb and maybe reinstate our family name.”

Which was all they ever cared about.

I fought not to roll my eyes. “Claire isn’t a threat—”

“I’ll not have you ruining everything with this ridiculous fancy of yours!”

My father clenched his fist around the jagged jewel in his palm. “Your mother is right about one thing. The Halfling has no place in our family.”

“Maybe she’s not the only one who doesn’t belong in this family,” I returned, my own element swelling in my chest with an uncharacteristic rage that only my “well-meaning” parents could incite.

A pained look crossed my mother’s expression. “Vox, sweetheart. You don’t mean that.”

“Oh, no, actually, I do.” I swept my hand, releasing a sliver of my power that sent the Christmas tree bowing and prayer orbs flinging to the ground. “I’ve tolerated the two of you and your ridiculous ambitions all my life. I’ve kept my head down and done my best to redeem the family by subduing my own power, but now I realize how fucked up that is.”

“Vox!” my mother cried, covering her mouth.

“You will not speak to your mother that way!” My father flung his free arm wide, sending a gust meant to slap me and sting my flesh like he’d done so many times before.

I’d always endured his punishment.

But not today.

I retaliated and opened the gates to my element—gates I’d kept locked for far too long. The force was strong enough to send the gem hurling from my father’s grip until it jammed into the ceiling.

Fear should have trampled down my spine, but all I felt was invigorated. Finally, I was embracing my true path.

No more webs meant to lock down my ability.

No more internal chastisement for unleashing too much energy.

No more *bowing* to those who pretended to be my betters.

My father wanted to own my every action. Well, no longer would I allow it.

My mother screamed when my control slipped and twin tornados released into the room, sending furniture and drapes catapulting into the air.

My father blocked the worst of the debris with the last of his power, enduring the onslaught and keeping him and my mother safe. My parents stared, dumbfounded, until the winds dissolved, sending the wayward items clattering to the floor.

The mixture of hope and horror on my mother’s face said it all.

I possessed more power than they realized because I’d hidden it, kept it bottled up inside and refused to allow it out to play.

Until Claire.

She'd unraveled my power, our mating bond emboldening my royal ties to the source—royal ties I'd spent two decades blocking.

And I'd spent the last few weeks terrified of it.

Now I embraced it.

My parents gaped at me until a light knock sounded at the door. My grandfather poked his head into the room, and his dark eyes went wide at the destruction. "I thought I heard a crash..."

"This is your fault!" my father yelled, finding a new, suitable target for his rage. He pointed a finger in accusation. "You shamed our family, and now your only grandson chooses to follow in your footsteps!"

Unaffected by my father's outrage, the old fae stepped over broken prayer orbs and smashed plates to give me a pat on the back. "Your beautiful mate came by to check on you, saying she felt a disturbance. I promised her I would investigate." He took another long look at the room, then locked his gaze onto my father's. "You should be ashamed, son. Have you learned nothing from our excommunication? You've tried so hard to win a place back into society that you've forgotten what it means to be an Air Fae, to be family."

"Don't lecture me, old man," my father said.

"Enough." I was done. I didn't want to have this conversation anymore. There was nothing they could say or do to change my mind. "Claire is looking for me, and her concern means more to me than yours. So if you wish to ever speak to me again, you'll consider your next actions wisely. I leave for the Academy tomorrow—with my mate and my bond-circle."

I expected my father to fling another weak attempt at punishment at my face, or go for the gem lodged in the ceiling, but for the first time in my life, his dark eyes shifted down. "If you leave us now, you will not be welcome back," he warned.

Fucking fine with me.

I turned on my heel and left my parents with their prayer orbs and judgment. It tore me up on some deep level to make this choice, and I hated them even more for it. But if I'd learned anything, it was that "family" did not mean pursuing blind ambition at the cost of my soul.

True family was where I could be free.



My grandfather followed me as I stormed out of the spire to where Claire stood waiting on the doorstep. Her blue eyes sparkled with concern. “Vox, is everything all right?”

I ignored the question, needing more than words right now.

Threading my fingers through her tousled hair, I pulled her into a kiss. It was hard. Fast. Filled with emotions I couldn’t hide. And powerful.

She melted into my embrace, her slender arms sliding around my neck as I parted her lips with my tongue.

Heat blossomed between us, carried on a robust wind stirred by the mixing of our shared element. A roar of sound tunneled through my ears, the whipping sensation one I reveled in and adored.

This.

This is what I needed.

What I craved.

What I desired.

My Claire.

My mate.

“I want you to be mine,” I whispered. “To keep me for always. To ground me. To soar with me. To love me as I love you.”

Her reply was lost to my mouth, my need to devour her overriding everything else. She clung to me with the same intensity as I did with her, our lips engaged in a dance no one could interrupt. Not even my grandfather, who stood behind us clearing his throat.

I no longer cared about propriety.

No longer worried what my family might think.

Fuck any and all reputation tied to my parents. I was my own person, destined to create my own future.

And I chose Claire.

Her legs wound around my waist as I lifted her and pressed her back into the wall of my parents’ home. “Vox,” she breathed.

“Claire,” I returned, nibbling a path down her neck.

She ran her fingers through my tousled hair, which had come undone

during the explosion of wind. “What happened?”

“I’m following my destiny,” I told her. “I’ve chosen you.” My raging element instantly quieted with her presence to stabilize my power, but it was time to stop denying what my heart needed.

What she needed from me.

Titus leaned on a nearby pillar and watched the exchange. I gave him a nod. “Titus, can you tell the others that I’ll be stealing Claire away for the remainder of the night?”

He gave me a knowing grin. “Only if she agrees.”

“What am I agreeing to?” Claire asked softly, her lips swollen from my attention.

I palmed her cheek and captured her aroused gaze. “I want to complete our mating. If you’ll have me.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight,” I agreed. “Here. In my kingdom. With my grandfather as my witness.” It was why I didn’t mind him following me. I needed a royal to help with the vows, and while he might be an outcast, he still maintained his bloodline.

The look he gave me now said he understood. And his smile told me he approved.

Old, he might be. Dense, he was not.

“Really?” Claire beamed at me. “You want to finalize our mating?”

“I do,” I told her, brushing my lips against hers once more. “I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

It wasn’t because of my parents or their harsh words. Although, their callousness did prove my choice to be the correct one. Without their push tonight, I might have waited a little longer.

But now I saw no choice in putting off the inevitable. I wanted Claire. I’d always wanted her. And I didn’t want to spend another moment without her as my true mate.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. “Yes.”

Our lips met again, this time in a slower embrace filled with every emotion we shared between us. My frustration at my parents. Her fear of the future. My utmost respect and adoration. Her devotion and love. Our affinity for air. Our intertwined future with all the other elements. Our promise to always remain faithful to each other in our own special way.

Mine, I thought. *My Claire*.

I just needed the world to know it. To bind us in the most traditional of ways. To cherish her for eternity.

“I’ll let the others know,” Titus said, sounding amused. “Besides, I hear Sol is going to try some of your city’s famed blast mead.” He chuckled. “It’s too bad you both will miss it.”

Claire grinned against my mouth. “I want to hear stories later.”

“Anything for you, sweetheart,” Titus promised, blowing her a kiss.

She blew him one back, her arms never leaving my neck and her legs still wound tight around my waist.

Titus shoved off of the pillar, staggering once. Perhaps the Fire Fae had enjoyed some of the powerful mead himself. “If I sense anything strange, I’m coming to find you.” He gave Claire a semi-stern look, then he sauntered away.

“What did he mean by ‘strange’?” I asked.

Claire shook her head. “I’ll tell you later. I promise.”

I stared her down, but Claire merely smiled.

Reluctantly, I let it go.

I didn’t want to live another moment without Claire as my mate. And there was only one way to secure our future together for good.

“Grandfather,” I said, never once looking away from Claire as I grazed my thumb over her lower lip. “You still have priest status, yes?”

The old fae chuckled. “I do. The king can’t take that away.”

I nodded. “Good. Claire and I wish to wed. Isn’t that the human term?”

She laughed. “It is, but I want to know what happened up there first. I’ve never felt emotions like that from you. You were... angry. Like someone had betrayed you.”

“I was,” I admitted, allowing my element to unravel and sweep around us. The distant melody of the Festivus celebration was a pleasant contrast to my father’s thunder.

I took Claire’s hand and wrapped it around the ring that hung about my neck. She’d created it after our Christmas celebration, stating she wanted me, Titus, and Sol to have one as a symbol of her commitment to us all. It served as her promise to mate each of us.

“My father threatened to take you away from me. To say he disapproves would be an understatement, but the thing is, I don’t approve of him. I don’t approve of anything he or my mother have done to try to regain power. They’re exactly what’s wrong with our family name.” I glanced at my

grandfather. “No offense.”

“None taken,” he replied. “You’re right. They’ve not learned a damn thing from my mistakes, but I can see that you have.”

“Power is not something you acquire; it’s something you cherish, regardless of how much or how little you possess,” I said softly, thinking of Claire and her abundance of elements. “But this isn’t about status or ascending. This is about love. This is about devoting my future to my mate, no matter the consequences.” I palmed her cheek. “This is about me binding myself to you in an impenetrable connection.”

Because I had no doubt that if I returned to the Academy and resumed my life with my bond-circle without having stronger ties in place, my father would find a way to tear Claire and me apart, third-level bond or not.

Claire blinked up at me with both concern and wonder in her gaze. “I don’t want to force you into anything. If your family is pressuring you, perhaps I could go talk to them and—”

“No, Claire.” I fisted her hair, forcing her to hold my gaze. “You are my family; do you understand? I won’t deny what you mean to me any longer. Nor will I deny the power thriving inside me.”

Her eyes went wide, and then a smile broke out on her face. “Are you serious?”

I captured her mouth with mine, and she bent to me, opening for me and intertwining her elemental gifts with my own until my skin tingled with her never-ending power.

My grandfather cleared his throat. “Now, now. Can’t have you two mate-bonding right here on the spire’s doorstep.”

“Where, then?” Claire asked, breathless from my kiss.

I grinned. “I know just the place.”

Chapter 17

Cyrus



“**S**he’s happy,” I murmured, tapping my spritemead against Exos’s mug.

“You mean distracted,” my brother clarified.

“Mmm,” I agreed, sipping the seductive liquid and sighing. “Mating Vox is a good play. It’ll only strengthen her to have more of that royal blood in her.”

Exos nodded. “Sol should be next.”

I eyed the drunk Earth Fae, who sat several yards away with a laughing Titus at his side. “Either will do,” I said, considering their elemental affinities. “But yes, having a stronger tie to Sol’s bloodline would benefit her.”

And given what we both felt was coming, enhancing Claire’s abilities was more than needed.

“What did your dad say about Elana?” my brother asked softly, keeping his voice low and pitched for my ears alone.

We hadn’t been able to chat much today with all the festivities, and it’d been our top priority to keep Claire happy. She hadn’t slept well in my absence. Yet Ophelia never appeared. It was almost as if she kept trying to manifest but couldn’t.

“My father did not have kind things to say about Elana.” Which was an understatement. He pretty much cringed the second I brought up her name and didn’t stop huffing until we were done talking about her. “I guess it’s rumored that her mother had an affair, but no one knows with whom. But she didn’t look anything like her father. Some claimed Elana’s single spirit ability was a consequence of her mother’s infidelity. From what I gathered, our

brethren were not kind to Elana.”

“Which could explain why she chose the path she did. She wants unity among the fae to bring us together and remove negativity and competition from our world.”

“Or, she’s full of shit and up to something,” I countered. “Which is what my father claims. He says he’s never trusted her, that he’s sensed her growing affinity for water for over a decade, and he feels strongly that she’s hiding something.”

“Sounds like you,” Exos drawled.

“He is my father, after all.” Something I’d denied most of my life, choosing to ally myself with the Spirit Kingdom first and foremost. I half expected my father to hold that against me, but he said he respected the loyalty because he knew the Spirit Fae needed my guidance more.

The old man wasn’t half bad.

I might even eventually like him if he kept this up.

Shaking my head, I returned to our conversation at hand. “Regardless, I’m inclined to agree that Elana is hiding something. I just can’t figure out why she’d go through all this trouble, or for what.”

“So you think she might be keeping Ophelia captive?”

“It’s possible.” I rubbed my jaw, considering. “I just don’t know why.” I glanced at him. “How close are you to summoning her again?”

“Close. I’m planning to work with Claire on it tomorrow.”

I nodded. “Good. I want to be there.”

“Serves as a good lesson,” Exos added, shrugging. “As Spirit Queen, she should know how to call upon the fae spirit.”

“It’s not exactly a beginner course,” I replied, cringing. “I’d not even call it advanced.” It was more like a superior skill that very few Spirit Fae had mastered. It required a great deal of elemental power, typically drawing from the source. “Still, I agree. It’ll be a good training exercise.” Because it was the same method we drew upon to control another fae, which may come in handy one day and save her life.

“Elana knows how to do it,” Exos pointed out.

“I know.” I’d observed her manipulate others countless times. “She always does it in a way that paints her in a positive light.”

“Like when she forced the truth out of those girls at the Academy and supposedly sent them to the Spirit Kingdom?” Exos suggested.

“Yeah, exactly like that. Comes in, plays the role of savior, and rids the

world of evildoers.”

“Only, I’d bet you a bucket of spritemead those girls were actually innocent.” He lifted his glass, knocked back the drink, and relaxed on our bench against the rocky cliff behind us. “Not that I picked up on it at the time.”

“No, from what the others implied, they looked pretty guilty.”

“Almost as if someone set them up,” Exos murmured.

“Indeed,” I agreed, leaning back on my elbows, my mug nearly empty. “I think we have a lot of detective work to do, brother.”

“My favorite kind,” he mused.

My lips curled. “Mine, too.”

Chapter 18

Vox



Festivities echoed against the crags, and the air grew thin as we climbed the seemingly endless stairs to the top. But the exhaustion was worth it because I knew we wouldn't be disturbed here.

"How far is this place?" Claire huffed, her breath coming in short gasps.

I chuckled and took her hand. "Do I need to fuss at Titus for not keeping you in shape? He's far too easy on you if a couple of stairs are your match."

She glared at me. "Easy for you to say. You have the body of an athlete and grew up in this thin air. I don't think you ever run out of stamina."

I grinned. "Quite right, Claire. I can go all night."

Her eyes widened. "Did you just make a joke?"

"Here we are!" my grandfather announced, ignoring our banter. He waved his hand and undid the magical binds that kept the sacred ceremonial chamber locked. The doors popped open and revealed a platform that overlooked the city and the cliffs below. It provided an even more breathtaking view than that at my grandfather's home.

He let out a long, appreciative sigh. "I haven't been to this place in centuries. Perhaps the last time was when I mate-bonded to your grandmother." His smile turned somber, and a reminiscent breeze swept over the sacred space.

"I miss her, too," I admitted and took Claire's hand as I guided her onto the platform. This one had safety rails, something I appreciated as it alleviated my concerns about losing control of my power during the ceremony. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew this would be the moment where I had to embrace my true nature and acknowledge myself as a Royal Air Fae.

Claire clung to my robes as she took in the vast scenery.

The kingdom glimmered with lights, alive with celebration and joy. The music could barely reach us at this height, but another melody caught my ears. One of wind and nature's harmony as the element twirled and played at the top of the ceremonial spire.

Claire focused on the starless sky above, its tapestry blocked out by a long sea of rolling aura lights. "It's beautiful," she breathed, lifting her fingers as if to touch the masterpiece. "What is it?"

"Wind's source," my grandfather said with pride. He moved to a single pedestal that housed sacred texts, even though he didn't need it. We all had the vows memorized by heart. To mate-bond was the most important day of our lives as a fae, and I didn't take this lightly.

"Nothing is more beautiful than seeing you here with me," I said, brushing away Claire's hair from her face. My fingers didn't touch her skin but hovered just out of reach as my element kissed her cheek.

She smiled. "What made you change your mind?" she asked, seemingly bewildered by my readiness to mate-bond with her. "I'm not blind, Vox. I've sensed your hesitation from the very beginning. I thought you would never go beyond the second stage of mate-bonding, but then the other night, I thought maybe I pushed you into the third bond..." Her gaze drifted to the aura again. "Are you really ready for this?"

I didn't tease this time. I wrapped my hands around her waist and pulled her close to me so that I could feel her breath on my face.

"I've been a fool." My admission echoed out across the great expanse even though I'd barely uttered the words. The energy in my chest stirred, and anticipation made every inch of me feel electrified.

"Yes, I've fought the bond," I continued. "But not because of you. I fought because deep down I knew what it meant for my power. All my life, I've prided myself on my control, and you, my darling Claire, unwind all my practiced restraint. It terrified me at first, made me feel like I'd lost a key part of myself. However, I realize now that you were teaching me how to live. How to breathe for the first time. How to truly *feel*."

I cupped her cheek and brushed my lips across hers, loving the taste of her, the sensation of her in my arms, the irrefutable reality of her finally being mine.

"I love you, Claire," I told her. "So yes, I'm ready. I've never been more ready for anything in my life." And I meant every single word.

Claire answered me with a kiss of her own that ignited a storm inside of me. A storm that confirmed this was where I belonged.

My grandfather creaked the old book open. "Repeat after me..."

Claire spoke the words first, her lips hovering just over mine.

I, Claire, accept the power that binds me to Vox, born of the Four Winds. To cherish and respect, through all of the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part. I give unto him my promise of freedom, my warm breeze, my calm before every storm, and accept his in return. My element is now his just as his is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake him for another, my wind forever belonging to him and to him alone.

The elements roared to life when she completed the last phrase, and she gasped, her finger running over my cheekbone. "Vox, your eyes."

I didn't have to ask her what she meant, because her eyes had transformed as well. For just this moment in time, she was an Air Fae, embracing all that it meant to become one with me and to approach the source of my power. Her irises glistened with a wild silver band that grew as the winds surrounding us picked up.

I felt that power in my chest, and I did what I never could have done without Claire.

I embraced it.

I, Vox, accept the power that binds me to Claire, a Halfling who completes me like no Air Fae could. To cherish and respect, through all of the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part. I give unto her my promise of freedom, my warm breeze, my calm before every storm, and accept hers in return. My element is now hers just as hers is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake her for another, my wind forever belonging to her and to her alone.

The blast that hit us swept us off the platform. It didn't matter that there was a rail; we went flinging over it and into the skies. Claire gasped and clung to my neck.

"I thought you said we couldn't fly!"

We couldn't, but we weren't flying.

We were being accepted by the source of the Four Winds into a sacred realm only royals could go.

"Don't be afraid," I assured her and turned her so that her back was to my chest. Our feet dangled, but an invisible force took us up into the thin air

where the surging aura lights waited. Jewel tones filled the horizon, and a bed of clouds formed under us.

I lowered Claire onto the soft element, finding it tangible and real. She marveled as she swept her hand through the cottony substance. "I've never seen anything like this."

Her eyes had gone completely silver now, and my element called to hers. My yearning for her to complete what we'd started overwhelmed me. We had to appease the energy swirling around us, to become one in the most sacred of realms.

"Claire," I breathed, her name a desperate plea as if I were in pain even from this small separation. We needed to complete the bond.

Her silver eyes gleamed knowingly, her fingers sweeping in an arc that sent wind tangling her power through my hair, undoing my warrior's tail, and lifting the dark strands over my shoulders. She tugged at my clothes as I did the same to hers, sending my desire to shift her sleeves off her shoulders. My lips went to her delicate skin, then I tasted her neck with my tongue.

"Vox," she said, fluttering her eyelids closed as my hand went underneath the thin veil of her dress to pull away the fabric that separated us. I wanted us to be skin to skin, to feel every inch of hers with my own.

Her hair waved around me when my touch found the delicate folds between her thighs, slipping my fingers into her wetness and rolling my thumb over the soft nub that waited for me. I claimed her mouth as I drank in her moans.

"Vox," she attempted again, arching her back against the bed of wind and mist. "We're on a cloud. Floating. This... I should be terrified. But..." She trailed off on a moan.

We dangled above the kingdom where the air grew thinner and only magic kept us aloft, but I trusted the source more than I ever had in all my life. It wished us to become one, to bless our union. I had only heard about such pairings in Air Fae myth, but it assured me that I had made the right choice beyond a shadow of any doubt.

Claire was mine.

"Do you trust me?" I asked, pressing my cock to her waiting heat.

"Yes," she whispered. "Always."

She sighed as I slid inside her, my hips setting a rhythm meant to please and enhance our joining. I clamped my teeth over her taut nipple, eliciting a shocked groan from her throat, one I reveled in and adored.

“More,” she urged. “Take me, Vox.”

I did, picking up the pace and driving into her with a craving only she could satisfy. My power circled us, the wind kissing every inch of her skin as I worshiped her breasts and thrust deeper into her with each intake of her gasping breath. I ground my hips in a way that brushed her clit, making her silver eyes roll into the back of her head as she approached pure bliss.

Her body tightened around me, just needing one more push to be sent over the edge.

I gave it to her, caressing her with a gentle breeze and driving myself to the hilt. She cried out, my name a chant on the winds and forcing me to tumble over the cliff into my own release.

We are one, I thought, moaning her name out loud.

But the source wasn't done with us yet.

It wanted more.

I wanted more.

And so did Claire.

She writhed underneath me, her hands going to my hair as she pulled me down for a kiss. “Whatever you just did to me, promise me you'll do it again.” Her silver eyes flashed with renewed desire.

And so I did, my powers whispering back to life, commanded by my mate to worship every inch of her until there was nothing left but sky, wind, and her sweet cries drifting on the breeze.

Chapter 19

Claire



My heart fluttered at the sight of Cyrus and Exos waiting for me in the hallway, their stances relaxed despite the task ahead. They'd dressed slightly more casually today in button-down shirts and slacks. Apparently, this was their idea of being comfortable.

I couldn't say I minded. They resembled walking models, especially with the sleeves of their dress shirts rolled up to the elbows like that. If their aim was to distract me from our goal, they were off to a fabulous start.

Exos's lips pulled up into a grin as he wrapped his palm around the back of my neck, pulling me in for a long, sensuous kiss. I barely had a second to breathe before Cyrus grabbed me and repeated the greeting, his mouth a warm welcome I adored.

"Well, if that's how this activity is going to go, then I'll happily play along," Titus drawled from the doorway behind me.

He stood in nothing but a pair of flannel pants, his upper body flushed from sleep.

"I wish it were that enjoyable," Exos said, taking my hand and tugging me into the space between him and Cyrus. "Alas, it's going to be a long day."

"You say that like you don't enjoy fucking with the spirits of others." Sol appeared beside Titus, his expression matching his harsh tone. "Oh, but wait, that's what your kind does best."

Ouch. I frowned at him. "What are you implying? That I want to play in the spirit realm and hurt people?" Because that was far from the truth. We were only doing this today to obtain answers from my mother. "Don't you think I'd choose another route if I had a choice?" My mother hadn't reached out again since that fretful night. And frankly, I wanted our next contact to be

on my terms, not hers. This was the best way to accomplish that.

“Not all of us enjoy inflicting torture on others,” Cyrus added quietly. “I can see the scars on your spirit. What we are doing today won’t touch another in that manner. I swear it.”

Sol narrowed his gaze at my water mate. “It’d better not.” And with that, he stomped off, his agitation clear in the way the stone reverberated beneath his steps.

I flinched, my chest aching as if he’d shot an arrow through it. “He thinks I would do that?”

“No, he thinks we would.” Exos kissed my temple. “Trust me, his anger isn’t directed at you.”

“Could have fooled me.” He hadn’t even looked at me, much less replied to my commentary.

“I’ll talk to him,” Titus promised, pushing away from the door. “He’s probably just hungover from all that blast mead last night.” He wagged his brows. “Vox and I will fix him right up with some breakfast. He’ll be as good as new when you get back.”

“Pretty sure it’s more than a hangover,” I grumbled. Sol had always appeared to be on edge around Exos and Cyrus, but I never knew why. And Cyrus’s comment regarding Sol’s scars was news to me. I didn’t even know what he meant.

How does one scar a spirit? I wondered.

We’ll explain it today, Exos replied with another kiss against my head. *It’s one of the darker parts of our power.*

Like raising the dead? I asked.

I sensed his scowl more than saw it. *No. That would be dark magic.*

“Come on,” Cyrus encouraged, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “We have a long day ahead.”

I blew my fire mate a kiss that he caught and brought to his heart before sending me one in return. With a smile, I allowed Cyrus and Exos to lead me down the hall. “Where are we going?”

Exos threaded his fingers through mine while saying, “Vox suggested a place where we won’t be disturbed.”

My lips curled at the thought of my air mate. It’d been hard to leave him in bed this morning, but he looked so at peace between the—

“You’re still here?” a deep voice demanded as we entered the foyer.

Exos turned toward the source with an arched eyebrow. “Indeed we are.

Is there a problem, Notus?”

Vox’s father narrowed his ebony eyes at me, ignoring Exos entirely. “Haven’t you done enough to disgrace my family, Halfling?” He practically spit the name at me as if it were a curse. “You’ve already ruined our name and stolen my son. I think it’s high time you left.”

My eyebrows met my hairline. “Wow, you’re charming in the morning.” And a complete dick as well. “Vox told me about your reservations regarding our relationship, and I’m truly sorry you feel that way. But I’ve done nothing to ruin your family name. As for taking your son, I believe he made that choice all on his own.”

“I did,” Vox agreed, seeming to appear behind us with the wind whipping around him as he called upon his gift to empower his stance.

Notus’s lips parted at the demonstration of air energy. “You’re accessing the source.”

“Because of Claire,” he replied flatly. “My *Halfling* mate. The one you’ve chosen to belittle and disregard because she’s not the royalty you’ve always craved. How interesting that the elements seem to favor her.”

My cheeks heated as he awarded me with an indulgent smile.

“Yes, it does seem to me that Claire could have only helped with the family name,” Exos said, his tone regal and filled with authority. “But after the hospitality we’ve received here, I can assure you that will never happen.” He glanced at Cyrus. “I suggest we move our lesson to another kingdom, as we’re clearly no longer welcome here.”

“I’m sure my father would accommodate us,” he drawled, not missing a beat. “He’ll also be incredibly intrigued by this turn of events.”

Exos nodded as Notus sputtered out nonsense. I almost wanted to hear what he had to say. But then again, he wasn’t worth our time. He’d made his opinion clear, and there wasn’t a damn thing we could do to change it.

“I’ll inform the others of our change in plans, and we’ll meet you back at the Academy tonight,” Vox said, ignoring his father’s rambling apology—or I assumed that was what he was trying to say. Maybe it was just another insult. At this point, I no longer cared to listen. Vox was happy, and that was all that mattered to me.

“It will likely be tomorrow,” Cyrus said. “We’ll need time to recover before we travel again. Fortunately, my father is a hospitable host.” That last comment was tossed in Notus’s direction. “We’ll meet you there, Exos.”

The world dissolved around us as Cyrus engaged his misting ability and

teleported us with the ease of a practiced fae. I hadn't learned how to do this yet but loved the way it felt—like effortlessly swimming through a refreshing stream. Except we always arrived dry.

We materialized in the center of Cyrus's bedroom to the welcoming sound of the waterfall in the corner. I vaguely remembered it from my time here, that tranquil song of moving water while we made love over and over in his silky sheets.

He stole my mouth in a kiss, confirming his mind had ventured to the same memory, as he replayed those heated nights with his tongue against mine. I arched into him, adoring the sensations he stirred inside me and longing to indulge in so much more.

But a stern knock on the door shattered the moment.

Cyrus sighed, his fingers running through my hair. "Exos won't be here for another hour, pending fae transport."

"Because you can't mist him, right?" It wasn't something he ever actually clarified for me.

"Only Water Fae can mist, little queen." He tapped me on the nose and pressed a final kiss to my lips. Then went to tug open the large wooden door, revealing his father on the other side.

"Back so soon?" the king drawled.

"What can I say? I love this place," Cyrus deadpanned. Then he informed his father of Notus's poor accommodations and continued into what we had planned for today. His father didn't appear alarmed, telling me Cyrus had disclosed his suspicions about Elana already.

Instead, all the king did was nod. "Let me know if I can be of any help." His blue eyes—the same shade as Cyrus's—focused on me. "It's good to see you healthy, Claire."

We hadn't properly met the first time, a result of my near-death state. However this man had not only helped save my life, but had also encouraged Cyrus to mate-bond with me. "Thank you, sir," I said, my throat going dry. "For the, uh, compliment, and everything else."

Smooth, Claire, I chastised myself. Really smooth.

The Water King grinned, his amusement palpable. "Trust me, it's you I should be thanking." He glanced at my mate. "You finally made my son grow up."

Cyrus scoffed. "I grew up a long time ago."

His father sobered a fraction, nodding. "Well, that's true. But I have her

to thank for you accepting your rightful place.” There was an edge to those words—an edge that had Cyrus standing up a little straighter.

“I’m not here for that right now,” he replied through his teeth.

“I know. But we’ll need to set a date soon, Cyrus. The imbalance of power must be rectified.” The look he gave his son wasn’t nearly as friendly as it was moments ago, but was instead a stern, fatherly admonishment. “Soon,” he repeated. He then took his leave with a casual, “I’ll ask Coral to make dinner arrangements.”

“What does he mean by ‘the imbalance of power’?” I wondered out loud after the door closed.

Cyrus ran his fingers through his hair, blowing out a long breath. “Our mating has tipped the scales.” He stepped forward, wrapping his arms around my waist and gazing down at me with a smile in his eyes. “We’re strong together, Claire. Stronger than everyone else in this kingdom, including my father. But with that strength comes a price.”

“Your coronation,” I translated.

He nodded. “Yes, however, it can wait.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “We have more important things to worry about first.”

Like my mother, I thought. And Elana. “Your coronation is important, too,” I pointed out. “And Exos’s ascension hasn’t changed much, right? Will yours be much different?”

He gave a little laugh and shook his head. “Oh, little queen, you have no idea.” He slid his palm down my arm to my hand and tugged me along beside him out onto the balcony rimming his suite. Waves crashed against the shores below, bleeding into streams that roped through the city surrounding us.

A giant city.

Bigger than the Spirit Kingdom and Air Kingdom combined.

My lips actually parted at the sight, having not seen any of this during my last visit. Or, at least, I didn’t remember it. “Wow, Cyrus, it’s beautiful.”

“It’s the biggest kingdom of all the fae,” he added, grabbing my hips to guide me backward into his body, where he pressed his chest to my shoulder blades. “This will all one day be ours, Claire. But with great power comes great responsibility.”

“And you never wanted the position,” I realized out loud. “That’s why you chose the Spirit Kingdom.”

“Not entirely. The Spirit Fae needed me more than the Water Fae did, but they have Exos now. Leaving me to take over my responsibilities here, with

you.” His lips brushed my cheek before he settled his chin on the top of my head, his substantial height dwarfing mine when he held me like this. “Being queen of this world will require sacrifices, Claire.”

I stiffened, not liking that term—*sacrifice*. “What kind of sacrifices, Cyrus?”

He sighed, his refreshing scent teasing my nostrils as he held me close. “For one, we’ll be required to produce an heir. And, as you have several mates, dividing time between kingdoms will prove difficult. There might be instances where I have to remain here while you venture to Spirit Kingdom with Exos. Both of our lives will require certain formal functions, ones meant to unite our fae kind. I won’t lie to you, Claire. It’s going to be difficult.”

I turned in his arms, lifting my gaze to his. “But we’ll make it work.”

“That was never a question,” he replied, a small smile curving his beautiful lips. “How do you feel about the heir part of the conversation?”

The idea of giving Cyrus children made me feel all warm inside, but it did raise a pertinent question. “How will we know it’s yours?”

“We’ll know,” he murmured.

“How?” I pressed, actually curious now. And then a horrifying thought hit me. “Wait, should I be using protection?”

He chuckled. “No, little queen. We have it well handled on our side.”

“What does that even mean?”

Another chuckle as he shook his head. “Fae males control reproduction, at least for Elemental Fae. You won’t become pregnant until one of us decides it’s time, which, trust me, will be a group conversation.”

I blinked at him. “Male fae...” Yeah, I couldn’t finish that.

“We’re not human,” he added, drawing his finger over my pointy ear. “And neither, my darling, are you.”

Right. That part I accepted. “But you can control it?”

His lips curled again. “Yes, little queen. I can control quite a few things. Would you care for a demonstration?”

My eyes widened. “Now?”

He laughed outright. “I’m not going to impregnate you, but it’s good to know where you stand on the pregnancy discussion.”

“I mean, I’m not against it. But, uh, I don’t... I mean, it’s not time yet. Right? I’m only—”

His mouth silenced mine, his kiss a seductive caress that had me melting into him on instinct. Minutes passed. Maybe hours. I always lost time when

Cyrus touched me, but somehow we remained clothed, our tongues doing all the talking while the soothing sound of waves rolled in the distance.

My Cyrus, I thought, adoring his touch.

My Claire, he returned, his palm flattening against my lower back. *I love you.*

I love you, too, I whispered, my arms winding around his neck. *Whatever you need, I'm yours.* And I meant it. If it was an heir he desired, I'd give it to him in time. If we needed to mist around the kingdoms to keep everyone happy, I'd do that as well. Whatever he required, I'd give him. Just as I knew he would do the same for me and the others.

My mate-circle.

My life.

My loves.

Chapter 20

Titus



The Academy felt empty without Claire.
No, it felt wrong.

Mostly because she was about to undergo a dangerous journey without me. I trusted Exos and Cyrus to watch over her, but I hated that I couldn't even help.

And worse, they'd left me to play babysitter to a cocky-ass Vox and a sulking Sol. The former was acting like a faeling who had just discovered his powers for the first time, while the latter wouldn't stop muttering about "damn Spirit Fae."

Why had it become my responsibility to keep this mate-circle together and happy?

Rubbing my temples, I grumbled, "Isn't that Exos's job?"

Vox paused his chopping of the ingredients in the kitchen—from his position on the couch—and sent a controlled gust to slice into the vegetables on the counter. He grinned, proud of his new trick, and focused on me while his meal essentially prepared itself through the use of air alone.

Hence, cocky-ass Air Fae.

"What's Exos's job?" Vox asked. "Making dinner? Why would that be his job?"

"Exos," Sol repeated, his lip curling in annoyance. The ground rumbled, sending a fresh crack up the Spirit Dorm's columns. He clenched and unclenched his fists as his eyes flashed with building rage.

"What the hell is your problem?" I demanded, already exhausted and we'd barely spent an hour back at the Academy. "It's like you're about to implode, and you"—I pointed at Vox—"keep throwing invisible knives

around. If one of those nicks me—”

A gust spirited between my legs, causing me to jolt in surprise. *Fucking Air Fae.*

Vox grinned. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

I gathered a fireball and aimed it at Vox’s carefully prepared meal. “Don’t make me burn it to teach you a lesson.”

Vox readied a stance, seemingly intrigued by the challenge. His eyes took on a flash of silver when I released the attack, yet the fire fizzled out in midair before it had a chance to hit. Only a gentle brush of wind betrayed that Vox had done anything at all.

I sighed. “I liked you better when you were broody.” The bump to his power—and his confidence—that Claire’s influence gave him was getting on my nerves.

Sol slammed his fist against the table, sending it breaking down the middle, as he shot to his feet. “I can’t think straight with the two of you idiots around,” he growled and then shoved past me, sending a painful jolt through my shoulder.

I gave Vox an arched brow.

“Don’t look at me.” He raised his hands in surrender. “Sol’s been in a sour mood all day. He’s probably just hungover.”

“It’s more than that,” I said, turning and following the Earth Fae outside.

Sol stormed to the practice arena as jagged spires of rock shot into the air all around him. The shiver of power that permeated the soil made my hair stand on the back of my neck, but I trailed after him anyway.

Just an angry Earth Fae... I can handle this.

“Sol,” I snapped, hoping to jolt the fae out of whatever funk he was in. “What’s got you so worked up?”

He ground his teeth together and his jaw flexed. Vox took position at the edge of the yard to watch us, his eyes bright with a strong band of silver that said he’d intervene if I needed it.

By the way the ground shook, it was likely.

Sol slammed his foot, and another column of earth shot up, spraying dust and pebbles everywhere. I lifted my hand to shield my face with a column of fire.

“Spirit is dangerous!” Sol roared. “You don’t know. You don’t understand. You weren’t fucking there!” He let loose a guttural scream as he sprinted for me with a balled fist.

I dodged the impact—barely. And I noted the light gust of air that had helped me move out of the way in time. Without it, I might have lost my head.

“Fuck, Sol!” That was way too close. “Did you just try to punch me?” I demanded.

The Earth Fae’s chest heaved with so much pent-up rage that I was surprised he could stand. I’d seen that look before, the one that bespoke of years of repressed anger and grief. It was the kind of expression that often came out in the Powerless Arena.

“Sol,” I tried again as I retrieved the bo staff Claire had given me from our weapons stash. I’d just put the gift here when we arrived this afternoon, hoping I’d get a chance to play with it later. Might as well give it a whirl now. It lit up with an aggressive wave of blue heat as I twirled it in my palm. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Sol looked between Vox and me as if there were answers just out of reach. “I...” He grabbed his head and groaned. “Claire can’t go there. She can’t experience what I did. She won’t... She *can’t* survive.”

“She’s a Spirit Fae,” I reminded him. “She’ll be fine.”

“No, no. You don’t get it. Neither one of you does. You didn’t... They all died. Every single one of them *died*.” Sol fell to his knees, denting the earth on his way down. “And it hurt.”

I eyed Vox to see if he could tell me what the hell Sol was talking about.

The expression of horror on the Air Fae’s face told me he did. “Your family,” he breathed.

“All of them,” Sol whispered, the sound broken. “You don’t know what it’s like to have them in your head, in your *soul*, and not know what they did. All you feel is immense *pain*. And I don’t even know who did it. Who touched me. Who left me with all these scars.”

Oh, shit. I mean, I knew the Earth Fae had some issues with control, and yeah, he was a bit of a grump at times, but I just thought that was part of his misguided charm. But this? Yeah, this wasn’t something I would have guessed.

Sol groaned as if in pain, and the ground shook again, this time forming spiky craters that spiraled down into the earth. “A Spirit Fae ripped us apart from the inside. And the plague, it killed them, but somehow, I survived. And I don’t even know why.”

The plague. He’s talking about the plague. The Earth Fae had

experienced the worst of it—second to the Spirit Fae. Yet Sol seemed to be untouched by it. Hence his size, strength, and ability.

But what he described made it sound like he'd been a victim, too. Just of a different variety of torture.

He blew out a breath, his shoulders hunching as a cascade of cracks ran through the training yard that threatened to reach the dorm.

If the giant kept this up, he was going to demolish the entire quad.

“Okay, Sol, you need to take a deep breath, man. Claire is with Cyrus and Exos. I know they're assholes, but they've proven themselves. She's in good hands, buddy. Or I'd be just as pissed as you. Got it?”

Sol narrowed his gaze at me and ground his teeth again, sending a rumble to unseat my balance.

Right, so that approach didn't work well.

I stabbed my staff into the soil and poured my fire into it, melting rock back into place.

“Look, if you love Claire, you have to stop this. She's a Spirit Fae. You can't just rip—”

When the heat of my fire reached Sol, he launched to his feet with an explosion of earth and power.

Okay, maybe fire was a bad idea.

The Earth Fae roared as he stormed toward me, his massive legs building momentum in a terrifying blur of speed I wouldn't have credited to the titan.

I dodged him—this time without Vox's help—and twirled my bo staff, creating a fire shield to separate us. Sol twisted as he tried to reach for me, but the position put him off-balance.

Hmm, the bigger they are, the harder they fall. And Sol clearly needed some sense knocked into him. I swiped my bo staff at his ankles in an attempt to topple him over.

The staff met rock-hard calves, and the crack reverberated up my arm, making my teeth chatter.

Sol grabbed the weapon, ignoring the flames that engulfed him as he pulled me closer.

Not good.

I ducked when another punch went flying past my head, and I slammed a palm to the ground, pouring my fire into it. Sol staggered as rock melted and resolidified around his ankles, trapping him.

He swung wildly, this time catching me once in the ribs. It would have

broken something had Vox's air not softened the blow, something I'd have to thank him for later.

Another fist, then another, and all I knew was fury and pain as Sol unleashed his rage. The winds couldn't stop him forever, and Vox's shouts echoed through the training yard, but the Earth Fae wasn't listening.

I raised the bo staff and poured all of my heat into it, thinking of Claire and the passion our fires burned together. The flash blinded me and Sol, causing the giant to roar with outrage as he snatched up the instrument and snapped it in half.

The impact stole my breath.

That had been a gift from Claire, and he'd just... *snapped it*.

Sol seemed to freeze, stunned as the halves of my weapon clattered to the glassy ground.

"You broke it," I whispered, unable to mask the hurt in my tone. Claire had given me that staff as a present, and now...

I blinked.

"How could you do that?" I demanded. "How could you do that to Claire? To me? What the hell is your problem?" I shoved him back, the rock giving way to his feet as he stumbled.

Sol seemed as broken as my staff, his earthy gaze falling to the ground. "Fuck." He fisted his hair and blew out a long, harsh breath. "*Fuck.*"

Yeah, understatement of the afternoon. "Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?"

The giant shook his head. "Everything and nothing." He gripped the back of his neck and finally met my gaze. "You don't understand what it's like to watch everyone around you die and have no idea why you survived. But I feel the marks of it every day—whatever that Spirit Fae did to my soul that damaged me so much that not even the plague wanted to touch me."

"But Claire isn't like that," Vox whispered. "You know she's not. And neither is Exos or Cyrus."

Sol visibly shivered, his shame painting his cheeks a dark red. "I know. I... I just don't know who did it. Or why. And now they're teaching Claire how to do the very thing that nearly destroyed me. The thing that I'm convinced created the plague among my kind, not that I have any fucking proof."

He kicked a glassy stone with his shoe, his tension mounting again. But rather than unleash it on me, he just puffed out his chest again with another of

those violent sighs.

“You know the worst part?” he mused, more to himself than to me. “I don’t even remember most of it. Just what I see in my nightmares. I couldn’t even tell you who did this to me. That person could still exist, could be stalking our Claire, and I’d have no idea.”

He bent to pick up the pieces of my staff, his shoulders falling again.

“It’s not her fault. I know that. It’s not anyone’s but the asshole who did this to me. It’s just... It’s hard.” He pressed the two halves together, his earth magic flaring to life. “Give me some fire and wind,” he said, focusing on the splintered frays. “Help me meld this back together.”

My eyebrows lifted as he smoothed over the wood, gluing it together with a flicker of power that lifted the hairs on my neck. I added my flames to the seam, helping to melt the embers as Vox guided them with his wind.

And in seconds, the staff was as good as new. Just with a few added flavors to the mix, making it not only a gift from Claire, but a product of the three of us as well.

Sol tossed it to me. “You might need Cyrus to add some water to the weak spot to ensure your inferno doesn’t rip it apart again. Otherwise, it’s solid.”

“Thanks,” I said, somewhat pleased to have my weapon back. I twirled it once to test the balance and infused it with my heat, watching as it effortlessly flashed a blue shade. “It’ll do.”

He gave a nod. “Good.” He glanced up at the sky and then back at us. “Just so we’re clear, if anything happens to Claire during this spirit lesson, there’ll be hell to pay.”

I grinned. “On that, we agree.”

“Good,” he repeated, brushing some rubble from his shoulder and rolling his neck. “Then how about we try all that again, Fire Fae? I have a lot of anger to burn off, and you seem somewhat capable of holding your own.”

“Somewhat capable?” My brows inched upward. “You really want to use those words?”

“Prove me wrong and I’ll change the phrase,” he taunted.

I grinned and tossed my staff to the side. Weapons weren’t required for friendly sparring. And, well, I didn’t exactly trust him not to snap it again. Especially as it hadn’t worked all that well on him the first time. “Bring it on, Earth Fae.”

Sol grinned, and for the first time today, it reached his eyes. “Your

funeral, Fire Fae.”

Vox sat on the sidelines, a giant smile on his face. “Let me know when it’s my turn. I think I’ll enjoy this game.”

Of course he would.

Cocky-ass Air Fae.

Chapter 21

Claire



“**A**ll right, Claire. I need you to close your eyes.” Exos’s warm tones echoed through Cyrus’s bedchamber, his voice sounding much farther away due to the chaotic beat drumming in my ears. “And breathe for me,” he added softly, his palm sliding up and down my bare arm.

Cyrus sat to my other side, his hand bracing my lower back while Exos led the exercise.

I swallowed and focused on the comfort of their presence. It was so peaceful here with the soft flow of the waterfall trickling into the makeshift fountain in the corner. Magic existed all around us, kissing the air with a blissful mist that soothed my soul.

Slowly, my heart rate returned to normal.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Repeat.

I couldn’t tell where the words originated from, but whether from me, Exos, or Cyrus, it didn’t matter. I followed the advice, easing my spirit and relaxing between my two mates.

One of them brushed my hair with his fingers.

The other placed a kiss against my shoulder.

And I felt the cushions press into my spine as they eased me backward into the bed of pillows on the ground.

“Look inside yourself, Claire. Search for the tendril of spirit that mates us as one,” Exos instructed softly. The proximity of his voice told me he’d lain down as well. His palm went to my stomach, the heat of his skin branding me through my thin strapless dress.

Cyrus rested on my other side without touching me, giving me the space I needed to connect to his brother.

With a deep breath, I tugged on my elemental strand that bonded me to Exos. I felt his grin more than saw it and sighed as he brushed his lips against mine. "Follow the link, baby. Come play with me."

He made it sound so simple.

Truly, it was.

I trailed the cord to our special place, the one where only our souls could dance.

Only, Cyrus's presence lingered there, too.

A dark blue wave on the horizon, rippling powerfully and quietly.

Exos found me first, his spirit familiar with mine and reaching for my hand as if we stood beside one another. And maybe we did. Just as apparitions of ourselves.

This is the spirit plane, he explained softly. But it's our safe place, Claire. One that our souls constructed just for us. Out there, where Cyrus waits, is the spirit realm that houses the source of power.

I saw it then, the blinding light in the distance that flickered with intensity, beckoning us to come closer. Like an addictive ray of sunshine that taunted our aura, begging for a chance to bathe our skin in hypnotic energy.

It's dangerous, Exos continued. The allure can overwhelm an untrained fae. Particularly one not accustomed to standing so close.

Yet Cyrus appeared unfazed.

As did Exos.

But I felt the draw, the thirst to explore and indulge in a forbidden essence. To consume myself in the core and never let go.

It was intoxicating.

With each step, my desire grew. My heart began to thump almost painfully in my chest, the yearning to lose myself in the vitality of this plane almost overwhelming my ability to think.

Until Exos stepped into my path, blocking my view. *Focus on me, Claire.*

I blinked up at him as if awoken from a dream. The craving still persisted, a lethal draw to move around him and run toward the vibrant rays. He cupped my face, his touch grounding my instincts. I leaned into him, absorbing his strength and knowledge, trusting him to lead me through the perimeter toward Cyrus and away from the magnetic ball representing life.

This is a plane only Spirit Fae can access, and most can only move so

close to the center before being drawn back to their corporeal form, Exos murmured. However, my birthright places us almost directly on the source whenever we venture into this realm of being. It's why you must be careful never to do this alone, not until you're better trained on how to handle the pull.

I understand, I replied. And I did. This was not a place I wanted to visit without Exos by my side. I could feel him anchoring me in both mind and spirit, his touch a final weight to keep me locked at his side.

From here, you have access to all life, Claire. Do you remember our conversation about the Dark Fae?

Not just Elemental Fae, but all types of fae. It's why our kind is often revered and feared by other supernatural beings. Because at the end of it all, we control the vitality of fae kind.

I stumbled at his words, my lips parting. All of them?

He nodded. But most have employed protective runes to prevent Spirit Fae from interfering in their lives. Not that it's really needed. Only the strongest bloodlines can reach across barriers to the other species of fae.

Exos paused on the path, his arm stretching toward a translucent tendril of smoke. He gave it a tug, pulling a darker aura toward us.

This leads to the Midnight Fae, the ones you call vampires. They have wards in place to identify a breach from our lands, which I could circumvent with a lot of concentration. But there's no point in altering their lives, as they are so different from our own.

He released the dark string and reached for another, lighter one, the color a pristine white.

Fortune Fae, he mused. They foresee the future and don't require any runes at all. Because they would see me coming before I even tried.

Exos selected a handful of others, naming the different types and associating them with their colors before releasing their strands. They all seemed to wave around us, humming near the vibrant core, waiting to be manipulated.

But it was the elemental ones that seemed to writhe around him as he stroked his fingers through the air.

Their souls recognize our power, he mused. Unlike the others, there's nothing foreign about our touch and they almost welcome our interference, our source of vitality. He caught one that hummed close to my side, the yarn appearing almost frayed at the edges. His brow furrowed as he studied the

patterns, his gaze flickering to Cyrus. *A powerful Spirit Fae did this.*

Yes, Cyrus agreed.

Did what? I asked, gently stroking the cord and recognizing the earth energy vibrating protectively within the threads.

Do you recognize it? Exos countered, releasing the soul to my hands and smiling as the essence twined around my arm like a loving vine, sliding upward to rest near my heart.

A tear caught in my eye as the name breathed into my spirit. *Sol.*

Mmm, Exos hummed in confirmation as he captured a flash of light in his palm. The ball unwound into the flicker of a flame that he released onto my shoulder.

Titus, I recognized immediately. *And the one hovering by your head is Vox.*

Yes, it's like he's supervising me even from afar, Exos mused, teasing the spirit with a puff of air.

Can they feel us?

He shook his head. *They might sense we're near, but they can't access this plane.*

Their spirits are entirely vulnerable to our influence, Cyrus added, his palm cradling a liquid strand of powerful waves.

Your father, I realized.

Yes. He settled the essence on his shoulder, his gaze watching as Vox floated closer to me. *Those of our bloodline gravitate to our presence automatically. And it seems your mates have found you as well.*

But they can't feel us, I said, disturbed. *That's a terrifying concept.*

It is, Exos agreed. *Which is why entering this plane should only be done with a purpose.*

To do otherwise would be an abuse of power, Cyrus added. *But this is where one would go to manipulate another being, because access to the soul allows you to control the mind.*

This is how Elana questioned Ignis and her friends, Exos added. *She went into this plane to access their souls and force the truth to the front.*

And also how she made everyone freeze in the gym. I shivered, recalling how everyone bowed and remained that way until she released them. *She commanded so many souls.*

A show of power. Exos raised his arm, and a swarm of energy latched onto him in an instant, including the souls that had been clinging to me. *It*

takes practice, but calling upon the spirit of others isn't a difficult task. He released them as quickly as he'd summoned them, his expression radiating a regal brightness that took my breath away.

Perhaps now you understand why so many fear us, Cyrus whispered.

I swallowed, nodding. *Yeah.* Because that was terrifying. Exos hadn't even needed to think to call all those lives to him. It struck me then how easily he could command the fae, manipulate their minds to his will, and take over the entire elemental world. Maybe even more.

Yet he remained poised and in control.

Always.

No wonder you're so stubborn, I marveled. *Both of you.*

Exos chuckled. *Ah, Claire, we could say the same about you.*

He pulled me to him, his fingers running through my hair, or what felt like my hair, anyway. We were really just apparitions of ourselves, but I sensed him touching me back in Cyrus's room, his body a blanket of protective heat beside my own.

Let's try calling your mom, he suggested softly. *As Cyrus said, our bloodline reaches out to us automatically, as do any of our mates. So she should be hovering nearby.*

Somehow I doubted it would be that easy. *How do I find her?*

Think about her, Exos replied. *Picture her in your mind. Call her to you.*

Okay. I considered the ball, the way she'd appeared to me in that wispy form, and wondered if that resembled her current state. So elderly and frail and not at all like the photo I saw of her as a child. But nothing happened, the only souls swimming around me belonging to those of my mates. I smiled as Titus brushed my cheek, his fire leaving an ember behind like a kiss.

Sol continued to weave around me as if trying to root himself in my soul. Maybe he was, too. We weren't yet fully bonded. *Soon,* I promised him. *My Sol.*

And then there was Vox, who continued to hover near Exos, ever vigilant.

My lips curled at how perfect they all were, my circle of fae mates. Even here they acted as I expected.

Until a disturbance rumbled between us, causing them all to flicker around me in a shield of protective warmth.

Cyrus moved to my side, Exos on the other, their expressions hard.

Tell me this is normal, I said, grabbing their hands as another tremble threatened my footing.

I'm not in the habit of lying, Claire, Cyrus replied, his fingers tightening against mine. *Your mother is trying to answer your call, but something is stopping her.*

Something powerful, Exos added, his arm lifting as he commanded the spirit to appear. I felt it rather than heard him, the power erupting from him harsh and all-consuming. It threatened to steal my breath away, causing my heart to jump wildly in my chest.

Exos...

Let him concentrate, Cyrus murmured, his grip resembling concrete as wind whipped around us in a violent maelstrom of energy.

I sensed the fight in Exos, his dominance taking over as he broke through the binds that held my mother's soul captive. Each mental snap made me cringe, the visual in my head one of agony and despair.

You're hurting her, I breathed, shaking from the onslaught of her pain. *Exos, you're hurting her!*

I know, he gritted back. *But I have no other choice.*

Cyrus wrapped his arms around me before I could retaliate, his embrace a waterfall of sincerity and love that ejected me from the spiral of anguish and into one of peace and tranquility. I blinked in confusion, his mist a cloud I didn't expect to see or feel. But oh, how I adored him. How I needed that brush with reality, the reminder of our bond.

Ready? he asked.

For?

His mouth captured mine for a split second before everything evaporated to reveal a vapid space of white and nothing else.

I blinked. *Cyrus?*

Nothing.

Exos?

No reply.

I twirled in a circle, finding myself alone in a world of endless *white*.

Oh no. This can't be good.

I spun again, my eyes opening and closing wildly, my heart practically bursting in my chest. *Exos! Cyrus!*

Why had they left me?

Where was I?

How was I supposed to get out of here?

This was still the spirit plane. I felt it in every fiber of my being.

But I was standing in the middle... of the source? Maybe?

My feet sprinted on my behalf, taking me this way and that as I fought to find a way out, any path I recognized. Yet everything looked the same. Just white. No souls. No mates. No life.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound escaped me.

Just soundless inexistence.

Think, Claire, I demanded. There has to be a way out of this. A way home.

To my mates.

Yes.

I just needed to think about them. They would come. My loves. My life. My circle.

My breath evened as I envisioned them, demanding they respond, that they find me and free me from this pristine cavern.

“Claire?”

Not the voice I expected to hear.

I turned toward my mother. She stood in a translucent state several feet away, her blue eyes wide with surprise.

“How did you bring me here?” she asked, glancing around as if in a hypnotic state. “How did you break her spell?” And then her expression morphed into one of horror, her eyebrows lifting in astute alarm. “You didn’t. Oh, darling, no. Dark magic is not for our kind. Promise me you’ll stop. Promise me you won’t do it again!”

“I didn’t,” I replied, my voice strained. “I haven’t touched dark magic.”

“Then how did you break the binds?”

“I didn’t,” I repeated. “Exos... He called you to the spirit plane.”

“Oh no,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Oh, no, no, no. She’ll know, Claire. She’ll have felt the interference! You must run before she finds you. Run, Claire! Run now!”

“Who will find me?” I demanded. “You’re not making any sense.”

But my mother seemed to be fading, her expression one of absolute terror. “She’s coming. Oh, she’s coming. Run, darling. Don’t let her find you. Ru—”

The ground roared to life, swallowing me into a hole of sound and sensation and eliciting a scream from deep within as I was forcefully sucked into a vortex of swirling color. Life. Death. Water. Pink. Fluttering wings. It all wavered around me in a blanket of confusion, swathing me in the sea of

reality and spitting me back out onto Cyrus's bedroom floor.

I came alive with a gasp, my lungs on fire, my heart racing against my ribs.

Cyrus and Exos let out a cry of relief, their hands running over me in protective strokes.

"Holy fuck," I breathed, my voice raspy and harsh. "What a trip." Because wow, that was intense. It was as if I'd seen a millennium of life in that tunnel, all whipping around me in a whirlwind of activity too fast for my brain to comprehend.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Exos demanded.

"What?" I gaped at him. "What do you mean?"

"You stopped breathing, Claire," Cyrus snapped. "For ten fucking minutes."

My eyes widened even further. "*What?*"

Exos sat back on his heels, shaking his head.

Cyrus rubbed his face with his hand.

Pissed-off energy mingled with relief between them, their grips on my arms almost bruising.

"It was all white," I whispered, trying to recall what happened. "And then my mother appeared." I told them what she said, how she made no sense at all, and they just stared at me in obvious alarm. "Say something."

They both shared a long look.

But it was Exos who finally broke the tense silence. "You went into the elemental core, Claire."

"Right into the damn center of it," Cyrus added, his tone somehow furious and surprised at the same time.

"And somehow survived." Exos grabbed my shoulders and yanked me into him. "Don't ever do that to me again, Claire." His mouth captured mine before I could reply.

So I whispered, *I don't even know how I did it.*

Never again, he repeated.

Which I would promise if I knew how it happened in the first place.

But he wasn't hearing any of it, his lips too busy memorizing mine as if he thought he'd never kiss me again.

Cyrus clasped the back of my neck, tugging me away from Exos and kissing me with the same vigor, his emotions a tidal wave of need against my senses. Each lick engraved his name upon my soul. Each nip a reminder of

our bonds. Each caress a promise for a long future ahead.

By the time he released me, I couldn't form a coherent sentence, let alone think.

Which seemed fine by them.

Because Exos was already tasting me again, his tongue mating violently with mine as Cyrus ripped off my dress.

What is happening? I wondered, my mind spinning beneath the onslaught of their seductive energy.

We almost lost you. Exos sounded frantic. *We thought we lost you, Claire.*

I'm right here, I promised.

Prove it, little queen. Cyrus bit my shoulder, causing me to groan and arch back into him. *We need you to prove it.*

Chapter 22

Cyrus



She died.
Claire. Fucking. Died.
Her heart stopped.

Her lungs ceased to breathe.

Her svelte form refused to move.

And her soul...

I shuddered and buried my nose in her hair, her neck, needing to *feel* her, to believe she was actually still here. “I’ve never been so terrified in my life,” I admitted, my mouth trailing along her neck. “Fuck, Claire. Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I didn’t—”

Exos’s mouth captured hers, silencing her response.

Not that it mattered.

Nothing she could say would alleviate the pain of our momentary loss, the agony of having her ripped from my arms for what resembled eternity.

Exos and I had awoken frantic, unable to sense her at all. She’d just disappeared. Her spirit gone.

Never had I felt so lost and weak all at once. Neither of us had known what to do, where to go, how to find her and bring her back.

My sweet Claire.

My little queen.

My heart.

I breathed her in once more, tasting every inch of her skin with my tongue. Her breasts. Her flat stomach. The apex between her thighs.

Fuck, I loved her scent. Floral and sweet and, oh, that delicate place that

wept for attention. I licked her deep, adoring the way she cried out into Exos's mouth.

Alive.

She's alive.

I repeated the words over and over again, reveling in her strength, her spirit, the soft beat of her heart.

"Make her come," Exos urged. "I need to hear her scream."

"Mmm, happily," I agreed, circling her clit before sucking the bud between my teeth.

Her back bowed off the floor, her limbs shaking from the onslaught of sensation writhing through her veins. Confusion warred with yearning in her features, her body bending to our will on pure instinct and need.

More.

We all needed so much more.

However, she required gratification first.

A small hint of the evening to come.

Because after almost losing her, we had no choice but to celebrate her life. To lavish her with our love, to rejoin all our souls and reignite the bonds between us. Oh, they still existed. Still flourished after her first returning breath. But it wasn't good enough.

As Exos demanded, we needed to hear her scream.

And scream she did, her orgasm slamming into her body on an excruciating wave of power that I felt through our connection.

The others would, too.

Which, I knew, they needed just as much as we did, because they had to have sensed her detach from this plane. Just as they would have experienced her return.

"More, Claire," Exos breathed. "Give us more."

She moaned, her breasts flushing from her residual pleasure and calling to Exos's mouth. He laved her nipple, eliciting another delicious sound from her throat as I drew her arousal downward with my tongue.

Our sweet Claire was too lost to the assault of our lips to understand my goal, too wet from her climax to realize where my mouth was headed even as Exos rolled her to her side to grant me better access.

It wasn't until my touch reached the heart of her backside that she jolted. First with my tongue and then my fingers, preparing her for what we all needed.

My name fell from her lips, whether in warning or question, I couldn't tell. But she soon succumbed to the moment, her beautiful form writhing beneath Exos's mouth as he worshiped her sweet pussy with every ounce of skill he possessed.

Life breathed into the air between the three of us.

Claire's life.

Her spirit rejuvenated. Joyful. Alive. *Here*.

But still, I needed more.

She'd *left*.

Stopped breathing.

Her energy *gone*.

Never again. I wouldn't allow it, would thread my soul with hers if I had to, just to keep her with us forever. And I knew Exos felt the same, could sense it in the way he caressed her now. So frantic, alarmed, and uncontrolled. All heat and emotion. Arousal. Yearning.

A craving she nearly left us with for eternity.

A deep sadness.

A perpetual loneliness.

No. I refused to accept such a fate.

Mine, I thought, biting her rump and smiling at the imprint left there.

"Cyrus," she groaned, searching for me over her shoulder. With one hand in Exos's hair, she tried to grab me with her other, but the angle was all wrong. I nipped her backside once more before pressing kisses up her spine to the back of her neck, my fingers still lodged deep within her. Scissoring. Expanding. Preparing her for something I doubted she'd ever experienced.

But our Claire wasn't shy. No. As soon as I was close enough, she grabbed the back of my neck and forced me to kiss her.

Exos chuckled against her damp heat, high from the taste of her ecstasy—a sign of *life*.

We were drunk on it.

Fueled to take her to additional heights.

To fuck her into an oblivion of mutual satisfaction.

Sharing women wasn't unusual for us. It also wasn't typical. We'd been known to experiment and play. But to have Claire between us now put all that previous experience to shame.

Because she was our heart.

Our mate.

The one we adored more than existence itself.

“We’re going to take you, Claire,” I whispered against her mouth. “Together.”

“Mmm, and you’re going to love every second of it,” Exos agreed, licking a path up her stomach to her breasts. “I can’t wait to hear you come with both of us lodged deep inside you, baby. It’ll be the most amazing sound.”

“Yes,” I agreed. Her screams resembled vitality, assured us both she still breathed. And her pleasure was still ours to give.

I withdrew my fingers, certain of her readiness, and nudged her backside with my cock.

“Do you understand, Claire?” I murmured, my lips at her ear now as she arched back into me. “Do you understand what we’re about to do to you?”

“Oh God...” She shuddered, her eyes falling closed as she pressed into my groin once more. “Yes...”

I smiled against her neck, tonguing her racing pulse. “Good.” I positioned myself at her entrance—the one no one had dared enter before—and pushed just enough to test her acceptance.

She shivered, her body flushing all over.

And Exos distracted her by sucking her nipple deep into his mouth while his fingers grazed her damp folds.

I slid in a little more, my balls tightening as she squeezed my shaft in response. “Easy, Claire,” I murmured, gently kissing her throat. “It’s better if you relax.”

“Mmm,” Exos agreed, switching breasts and biting down on her stiff peak.

She cried out, her focus temporarily shifted, and I used the distraction to thrust deeper inside her. “Oh!” She jerked against me, causing me to glide home, where I stayed and allowed her to acclimate. “*Fuck...*”

“We’ve not even started yet,” Exos mused, causing me to chuckle against her nape.

Because yeah, we really hadn’t.

And when we did? Oh, sweet Claire would be in for the ride of her life.

Exos licked a path up her throat to her chin and hovered over her mouth. “There’s only one mate I’ll likely ever be able to truly share you with like this, Claire.” He kissed her softly while I buried my nose in her hair, inhaling deep. “But we can do this whenever you want.”

Which we both knew would be often.

But I'd let her admit that when we were done.

I nibbled her ear, exhaling slowly as Exos pressed his arousal to hers. "Ready, little queen?" I asked, meeting Exos's gaze.

He wouldn't hurt her.

But he wouldn't be gentle either.

I caught her hip just as he thrust into her waiting heat, her cry one of surprise mixed with ecstasy and maybe a hint of pain. We weren't lacking in size, and having us both inside would be a bit overwhelming the first time.

An expletive fell from her lips, followed by a mewl of pleasure as we began to move—slowly at first, introducing her to the experience.

Then Exos set a pace, one I met with ease, my mouth falling to her neck as my breathing turned harsh. Because fuck, that felt good. To be inside her. To feel her quivers. To scent her arousal. To embrace her soul with my own.

With each thrust, I embraced her vitality. Heard her moans. Experienced her gratification. She squeezed my cock, groaned our names, whispered commands, and engaged us both in a hedonistic display that would grace my dreams for decades to come.

She was perfect.

Gorgeous.

Mine.

I couldn't imagine a more exquisite feeling than having her writhe between us with abandon. Words left her mouth that were so fucking dirty and beautiful that I could hardly believe my ears. She demanded more. Harder. Faster. Again. And we gave it to her and more.

She came on the hottest surge of power, our names an engraving into the stars above.

But we weren't done.

It wasn't until she released again that I allowed myself to follow, with Exos quickly on our trail, the three of us lost in a euphoric cloud of wantonness.

A cloud that continued.

On and on.

Our need to worship Claire, to celebrate her existence, too strong for just one climax.

No, we fucked until we couldn't move, our hearts hammering in our chests, our bodies depleted and shaking from the exertion.

A wildness had taken over, driving our movements, forcing us to the point of no return.

We collapsed together in a pile of limbs with Claire giggling between us.

I glanced sideways at her, noted her gorgeous pink complexion, and smiled.

She looked so animated and joyous that it almost hurt my heart. But I used the last vestiges of my strength to tug her to me for another kiss and sighed as she relaxed against my chest.

Exos wrapped his arm around her waist, nuzzling her back, our positions having switched at some point during the fuck fest. I couldn't be the only one to experience that sweet ass of hers, after all.

Now it all resembled a blur of sensation and sex and absolute bliss.

One I would happily experience again, once my dick awoke from a long nap.

Claire nuzzled into my pec, her cheeks still pink. I drew my fingers through her hair, unknotting the strands. "Don't ever leave us again, little queen. Please."

"I didn't mean to," she whispered, her eyes drooping. "I don't even know how I did."

Which was even more concerning than her actual disappearance.

Exos's eyes said the same as he met my gaze. "We need to talk to Kols. Find out what the hell is going on."

"He might not know," I pointed out. "But I agree. If anyone can shed some light on this darkness, it's him." Because that was what I felt when Exos had unraveled the binds holding Ophelia's soul hostage.

Dark Fae magic.

Evil shit.

And somehow his slicing through the ropes had sent Claire directly into the source, a consequence we absolutely needed to avoid in the future. Assuming they were related. Which, I was willing to bet, they were.

"I'll arrange it," I said, referring to Kols. "In the morning." When I could properly move again.

Claire wasn't even listening, her eyes having fallen closed after uttering her last word.

But Exos was alert. He nodded, then kissed her nape. "Good night, princess."

She didn't even stir.

I smiled. “Yes. Sweet dreams, little queen.”

Part Three

“When one becomes half
And five become one,
A plague will descend upon the fae.
Only death is the cure.”
—Gina

Chapter 23

Claire



Of all the places to meet a Midnight Fae, Cyrus chose a Manhattan nightclub. Like, in New York City. With humans. Alcohol. And obnoxious music that grated on my nerves.

I winced as a particularly harsh bass kicked up to the roar of the crowd, everyone gyrating to the hypnotic tune. At least it wasn't as loud at the bar, which allowed for conversation.

Not for the first time, I glanced at my entourage and demanded, "When is this guy going to show?" Because I was more than ready to head back to the peace and quiet of the Elemental Realm.

Cyrus sipped his bourbon and grinned. "And here I thought this place would make you nostalgic."

I snorted. "This is not what I miss about my world." Pizza? Absolutely. Loud parties? No.

Exos wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer to him and kissing my temple. "It won't be much longer."

"He's right," a feminine voice chimed from behind the bar. "He should arrive in the next few minutes."

My brow furrowed as Cyrus and Exos broke out in matching grins. "Well, would you look at that?" Cyrus mused, reaching for the woman's hand. "A Fortune Fae playing bartender in the city. I never would have prophesied such a thing."

Cyrus paused just before touching her, and the woman gave him a knowing smile. She extracted a strange playing card from her pocket that gleamed. "Hmm."

Her dark eyebrows danced, and he caught her hand in response.

She laughed as he pressed a kiss to her wrist. “You always were a charmer, Cyrus,” she said, her tone sultry and immediately getting under my skin.

No. It wasn’t the tone. It was her whole package. She had curves in all the right places. A tight top that emphasized said curves. Perfectly straight near-black hair. Soft blue eyes. And a smile that captured the attention of half the bar.

Including that of my mates.

I hated her on sight alone.

Hated her even more as Exos took her hand and kissed her in the same place Cyrus had. “What brings you to the Human Realm, darling?” he asked, gaze flickering with curiosity.

She sighed and shook her head. “Bureaucratic bullshit.” She waved her freshly manicured fingers around and focused on me. “You must be Claire.” The woman even had dimples when she smiled. Too fucking perfect.

“I am,” I replied. “And you are...?”

“Not your competition,” she mused, her gaze twinkling. “But I am glad you finally tamed these two. They caused quite the stir in the Fortune Kingdom a few years back. Who was it? Aurora and Cassandra, right?” She giggled. “You two are bad, bad boys.”

“Now, now, Gina.” Cyrus flashed her an indulgent look. “Don’t go putting thoughts in my mate’s head.”

“Oh, she doesn’t need my help with that,” the female—Gina?—replied, winking at me. “I can see she’s well acquainted with your antics already.”

“Who are you?” I asked again, this time with a little more force.

“Gina.” She positively beamed at me. “I’m so glad you’re finally here. The plague is spreading, you know. But you’ll fix it all up in no time. Just have to rid yourselves of that dark piece that doesn’t fit.”

Cyrus folded his arms on the bar, his amusement dying behind an intense mask. “Elaborate.”

“Oh, I would, future Water King, but I’ve already revealed too much. And with my luck—which does appear to be running out—I’ll be discovered sooner rather than later.” She sighed dramatically. “The future refuses to bend.”

“Who is the dark piece?” Exos tried again.

But Gina merely smiled. “You already know, Spirit King. As does your beautiful mate. And if I may...” She made a show of leaving the playing card

on the table before capturing my hand without warning. Her blue eyes flickered into a creepy clear shade. She blinked, the color returning to normal as she gave me a squeeze. “So much pain, Claire. Two decades of it. But you have the power to heal them all, to restore the balance. I’m rooting for you.” She leaned in and lowered her voice. “Just remember who you are, Claire. Your mates aren’t the only ones counting on you.” Her attention drifted over my shoulder, her expression lighting up. “Ah, he’s here. You all behave now. Can’t have you drawing more attention to me.”

She whirled around, frolicking—and that wasn’t an exaggeration—to the other side of the bar with a flourish of her very short skirt.

Like she really needed any help drawing attention.

Fortunately, Cyrus and Exos didn’t seem to notice the length or her magnificent legs. They were too busy standing to greet the newcomer who I assumed was Kols.

And wow, was he gorgeous.

Tall. Athletic. Brown hair tinted with a hint of red that glimmered beneath the low lighting of the club. And eerily beautiful golden irises that flickered with power as he met my gaze.

Fuck, this guy is potent. I could see it in the grin that graced his full lips.

“Charm her, and I’ll kill you,” Cyrus said flatly as I pushed off the stool.

Kols chuckled, the sound warm and masculine. “Too late, Water Prince.” He held out a hand. “I’m Kols.”

“Claire,” I replied, pressing my palm to his.

“I know,” he murmured, kissing my wrist the same way Exos and Cyrus had done to Gina. This time it was their turn to scowl.

Exos wrapped a possessive arm around my back, tugging me into his side. “Good to see you, Kols.”

“Is it?” the Midnight Fae asked, releasing my hand. He glanced around the room, the slight arch of his neck showcasing a line of inky black tendrils moving just beneath the collar of his dress shirt. Like Exos and Cyrus, he wore a suit, sans tie. However, he’d chosen all black, while my mates were in crisp white shirts and ebony jackets.

When he finished his perusal, I noted the hungry gleam in his eyes.

Vampire, I remembered, shivering.

His lips quirked as if hearing my internal thought. And maybe he could. Wasn’t that a supposed trait—their ability to read minds? Or was it mind control? I’d have to ask Exos and Cyrus more about it later.

“Let’s grab a corner booth,” he suggested, nodding toward the darkest side of the club where a group of people had just stood to vacate.

Did he do that? I asked, my heart fluttering in my chest.

Yes, Cyrus said. *Kols isn’t just a Midnight Fae; he’s also a prince. Like me.*

Meaning he’s powerful, I translated.

Incredibly gifted, yes. Cyrus took my hand and led me forward, while Exos remained on my opposite side with his arm draped around my waist. If any of the humans noticed our little triad, they didn’t react to it. But Kols certainly eyed our touch with amusement. He slid into the booth first, followed by Cyrus, while Exos and I took the opposite side.

“Was that Gina I saw up at the bar?” Kols asked, curiosity deepening his voice.

“Yeah.” Cyrus glanced at the stools we just vacated. “She’s hiding from something.”

“Isn’t she always?” Kols mused.

Cyrus lifted a shoulder. “Seemed a bit more serious this time, but I’m sure she has it handled. Besides, she seemed more interested in leaving us with cryptic words.”

“Typical Fortune Fae.” Kols’s eyes glimmered as he steepled his fingers on the table. “So how can I be of service? As I assume this isn’t just a meeting for fun.”

“Not this time, no,” Cyrus agreed, indicating they’d met for fun in the past. Given his easy candor with Gina, I could only imagine what that meant.

I mean, my mates were all experienced. And I knew I wasn’t their first lover. While I could accept that, I didn’t want to think about their pasts. Especially not with a beautiful fae like Gina.

“We suspect one of our elders is using dark magic,” Exos said, jumping right to the point. “And we’re hoping you can help us confirm that.”

Kols grinned, a flicker of flame circling his pupils and dying beneath a blink of his long, elegant lashes. “Sure. Can you replicate it? Or detail what you felt?”

Cyrus looked at me. “Can you describe what happened when Elana summoned the dead?”

Kols eyebrows lifted. “A death spell?”

Cyrus and Exos nodded.

“Do tell,” Kols murmured, leaning forward, his intrigue palpable.

I cleared my throat, unsure of where to start. So I went with the beginning, about how Elana had taught me about spirit magic, creating pixies and things of that nature. Then I told him about our last session, about the spirit writhing in the strange liquid and the pain I felt from his spirit. Just the memory of it made me shiver with wrongness. "It was like he couldn't speak," I added. "But I sensed he wanted to say something."

Kols nodded. "My guess is she threaded a mutation into the magic, one that disabled his ability to form sentences. Because a proper summoning allows the soul to speak. It's also possible she infused some of her spirit element into the act, thereby compelling his silence."

"So you agree it's dark magic?" Cyrus pressed.

"Oh, absolutely. I didn't need all the gory details to tell you that. Necromancy is popular among a certain sect of my kind, while frowned upon by the rest of us. Aswad is a particular advocate for raising the dead." He grimaced. "But yes, it's absolutely dark magic. Which means your Elana must have some Midnight Fae heritage because one does not just become a necromancer. One must have an affinity for the death call first."

Cyrus and Exos shared a look.

I knew what they were thinking because I thought the same. "Part Dark Fae, part Spirit. Isn't that what my mom told you?"

Exos nodded. "Yes."

"That's impossible," Kols cut in. "Mating between the species is prohibited. It tips the scales of power."

"Such as being able to raise the dead and control it, too," Cyrus suggested, arching a brow.

"Wait, what do you mean by 'prohibited'? Why?" I asked, frowning. "We're all fae, right?"

"Yes, but with unique bloodlines. Tampering with those bloodlines creates... abominations." Kols cringed, his gaze darkening to a black cloud that sent a shiver down my spine. "The Dark Wars are not a time I ever wish to live through."

"Dark Wars?" I repeated, even more confused.

"A black point in Midnight Fae history," Exos explained softly. "Commingling between the fae altered the balance that we all pull from to survive. Imagine vampires with the ability to control water or fire."

"Well, that's not a difficult trick," Kols murmured, a light flame erupting over his fingertips. There and gone in a second. "But it was worse than that."

Magic requires an equilibrium between light and dark. If it's disturbed, mutations occur, and power is distributed rather unevenly."

"Which creates chaos and allows dictators to rule," Exos added.

"That explains her obsession with the Council," Cyrus mused, causing Exos to arch a brow at him.

"Meaning?" my spirit mate pressed.

"If her origins were revealed, she'd be executed without ceremony. However, if she convinces us all to work together and asserts herself as the leader of the Council—which she has—that puts her on a pedestal as the fae who created it all. If you ask me, it's only a matter of time before her true intentions rise."

I pinched my lips to the side. "So you think it's all a ruse and she's using her connections to all the fae for her own benefit somehow."

"By siphoning energy from them," Kols said, leaning back in the booth. "I mean, if she's already playing with the dead, why not manipulate the life source of others while she's at it?"

My eyebrows shot upward. "She can do that?"

He flickered another of those flames across his knuckles and winked. "Child's play, sweetheart. Especially if she's of the necromancy line."

"Water." Cyrus laughed, the sound lacking in true humor. "I've sensed her use water more than once, but she's notoriously a single-gifted Spirit Fae."

Kols spread his hands as if to say, *Case in point*. "She's siphoning it off another."

"But why?" Exos demanded. "Why would she do this?"

Cyrus scratched his chin. "Only one way to find out."

"If she's practicing dark arts, I doubt it will be as easy as having a conversation. But I might have something that could help you," Kols said, grinning. "Your elders won't like it, though."

"What is it?" Cyrus asked, arching a skeptical brow.

"A book." His lips quirked up even more. "Sort of like a beginner's guide to necromancy. I'd be breaking a dozen Midnight Fae laws by giving it to you, but I suspect it'll assist you in more ways than one." Power radiated from him as he spoke, reminding me of how the elements seemed to swim around Cyrus and Exos.

"A Midnight Fae text," Exos mused. "Exactly how many rules are you breaking by handing that over to us?"

Kols chuckled. “How many are you breaking by accepting it?”

Cyrus and Exos just smiled.

“Why would there be rules about a textbook?” I wondered out loud.

The three of them laughed, Exos’s arm wrapping around my shoulders to pull me in for a hug. “Fae politics, princess,” he murmured. “Dark magic is purely Midnight Fae. Just as we own the elements.”

“But sometimes you have to break the rules,” Cyrus drawled.

“And I’d say now is one of those times,” Exos agreed. “When can we get the book?”

“Tomorrow,” Kols replied, his gaze drifting out to the club. “I’ll be busy tonight.”

Right. Vampire. Nightclub. Sort of cliché, but also appropriate. “So are we done?” I asked. Because as hot as he was, I really didn’t want to see him snacking on humans.

“So eager to get us home,” Exos teased, his lips trailing up my neck. “Do you want us to share you again, princess?” The words were spoken against my ear, causing my stomach to twist in anticipation and my cheeks to heat.

Cyrus smiled from across the table, clearly aware of what his brother had just said.

Fortunately, Kols appeared too busy scoping out his next meal to pay attention to us. “Right, well, I’ll be in touch,” he said, pushing away from the table. His gold eyes met mine, twinkling with mischief. “I would tell you to have a nice evening, Claire, but I can already see Exos and Cyrus have it covered. So I’ll just say, lovely to meet you, gorgeous. Enjoy.”

Chapter 24

Exos



“So do you two often venture to the Human Realm to meet up with other fae?” Claire asked as we escorted her to a well-known New York City portal.

She’d been rather disappointed by the uneventful transport, stating she thought it would be magical with fairy dust or pixies or some crazy flying horse. Instead, it was an elevator in an older building with a special keypad that teleported us between the realms at will.

“Not often,” Cyrus replied, his arm draped across her shoulders. I’d given her my jacket, wanting to cover her shoulders and protect her from the cool New York air. It was winter, after all. And she’d worn one of her usual dresses with knee-high boots instead of a sweater and a coat. Fortunately, she had her fire to keep her warm, but she seemed to appreciate the chivalrous act as she hugged my jacket around her.

“But you seem to know the other fae well,” she said slowly. “Like Gina.”

My lips quirked up. “Jealous, Claire?” I teased, kissing her on the neck before opening the door to the building we needed.

“No.” Her answer was quick. Too quick.

I shared an amused glance with Cyrus and gave him a look that said, *You tell her.*

“She’s an old friend,” he explained. “And not that kind of friend, Claire. Fucking a Fortune Fae would not be enjoyable. She’d know all my moves before I made them.”

A laugh leapt from my throat as I nodded in agreement. “He’s right. Takes all the surprise out of it.” I nipped at my mate’s neck again, pressing my chest to her back and wrapping my arm around her waist. “Just think how

boring last night would have been had you already known what was going to happen, Claire.”

She shuddered, her body melting into mine. “I... That wouldn’t be...” She swallowed, her weight collapsing into me even more. “Yes.”

I chuckled against her throat as Cyrus mused, “That wasn’t a complete sentence, little queen.” He pressed the button for the elevator in the lobby. “But I’ll allow it.”

“As for us visiting the human world, it’s infrequent. But as Royal Fae, we are well acquainted with the others. It’s how we know Kols and Gina. Their families hold status in their respective fae kingdoms, and occasionally, we are required to meet for social functions.”

“To maintain the balance,” Cyrus added.

“Exactly,” I agreed. There was still so much Claire didn’t understand about the supernatural world, the laws that governed us all, how we cohabited in peace, and our long histories of times where we didn’t maintain that perpetual peace. We were just so wrapped up in the current problems within the Elemental Realm that we hadn’t had a moment to talk about the others. But Kols and Gina, they both had their troubles within their own ranks. Just as the numerous other types of fae did.

We all just chose to mostly focus on ourselves, only coming together when needed.

The elevator chimed, and Cyrus entered the sequence of numbers required to return us to the Academy as I ushered Claire into the waiting car.

“Can you mist from here?” she asked.

Cyrus considered it as he joined us, just as the doors closed. “I can mist anywhere, but between realms is harder. Within our elemental home, I’m closest to our source. It’s easier. Here, it would require a lot of effort that I’d prefer not to expend because who knows when I might need my magic.”

It wouldn’t necessarily deplete, but I understood what he meant. Accessing the core of our gifts from this far away took strength and energy, weakening our ability to fight like we could on our own ground. Best to retain as much of our element as possible in case of the need.

Light flickered around us as we began our journey, the sound a quiet *whoosh* softened by the metal car transporting us to the Academy. Kols would use this contraption as well, but it would take him to the Midnight Fae Academy. “Is Kols in his final year?” I asked, thinking out loud.

Cyrus shrugged. “No idea. That fae doesn’t talk about himself a lot.”

I snorted. “True.” For as many times as I’d met him, I barely knew him. He seemed to hide behind a mask of nonchalance and elegance. A typical royal, really.

We came to a stop, the metal clinking and beeping and dissolving before our eyes to reveal the heart of the Academy. My muscles loosened on instinct, the familiar elements bathing us in warm welcome.

Claire spun in a circle, her smile one of the most beautiful sights I’d ever seen.

Until a familiar presence spoiled our fun.

I turned toward it, eyebrow already arched. “Mortus,” I said, his name resembling more of a curse than a greeting. I hadn’t seen him since he knocked me out and threw me in a cage. I knew now that it wasn’t actually him, that someone had been controlling him, but that didn’t make me any more relieved to see the bastard.

“Where have the three of you been?” he demanded, eyeing Claire.

“I don’t believe we have to report our whereabouts,” Cyrus said coolly, wrapping his arm around our mate. “Unless you’re questioning the intentions of your Spirit King?” He nodded at me.

“He’s right,” I agreed. “We don’t owe you an explanation at all.”

“The two of you maybe, but Claire is a student. And all students were due to report back this morning.” Mortus straightened his spine. “Unless you believe she’s above the rules?”

I smiled. “We both know she is, Mortus. But if you must know, we were on official Spirit business. Nothing to concern yourself with, old man. We’re fine.”

His black eyes narrowed into slits, flames practically shooting from his ears. He turned with a dramatic flare of his long black coat and stomped off in the direction of Elana’s home.

“Fucking prick,” Cyrus muttered. “He’ll tell her where we’ve been.”

“And all she’ll find is evidence of a nightclub visit,” I replied. “I’m not worried. Claire’s part human. She can’t fault us for wanting to reacquaint our mate with her home world.”

“Yes, because going to clubs is how I spent my time,” she deadpanned.

“I met you in a bar,” I reminded her, snagging her waist with my arm and guiding us toward the Spirit Quad. “It’s a logical assumption.”

She snorted. “Uh-huh.” Her elbow dug playfully into my side. “I did more than drink and party.”

I kissed the top of her head as we walked, chuckling. “I know, princess. If that was all you did, you wouldn’t be quite so stubborn.”

“Ha ha.” She attempted to elbow me again, but I caught her and pulled her up into my arms, carrying her across the quad.

“Our poor drunk Claire keeps running into me,” I said conversationally to Cyrus.

“Shouldn’t have given her that cherry cocktail, E.” He reached over to tickle her side, causing her to squirm in my arms on a laugh that warmed my heart. “What will we do with her?”

“Oh, I have some ideas,” I drawled. “But I think the others might want to join in.”

“Mmm, a welcome-home party,” Cyrus mused. “Yes, that sounds entertaining indeed.”

“Ugh, I swear you all are going to break me,” Claire muttered, then laughed as Cyrus tickled her again.

“You love it,” he murmured, eliciting more giggles from her and making it rather hard to continue walking while carrying her. But hearing those sounds from her lips made it worth the effort it took to stay upright and moving.

“Okay! Okay! I give!” She practically chortled with the words, and Cyrus took her from my arms to hug her close.

“I love you, little queen,” he said, brushing his lips against her forehead as he allowed her to stand once more, this time with his arm around her. “Now let’s hurry back. I can practically feel Titus’s irritation at our late arrival, and I can’t wait to goad him a little.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “The two of you are going to end up killing each other one of these days.”

“Or fucking,” I put in, smirking at my brother. While he typically bedded women, I knew of a few males he’d entertained in previous years. Cyrus always was one to experiment and play.

He merely shrugged, neither confirming nor denying it. “One or the other.”

“Wait...” Claire turned to walk backward, her gaze on Cyrus. “Did you just admit you’d fuck Titus?”

Another shrug. “He could use a dominant hand.” His expression darkened a fraction, his icy gaze twinkling with deviousness. “Why? Is that something you’d enjoy?”

Her stumble answered the question without words. As did the beautiful blush painting her cheeks.

Oh, Claire.

Our innocent little princess.

The things we would teach her in the years to come.

Maybe we'd even teach her a few things tonight...

Chapter 25

Claire



My entire body tingled, courtesy of Cyrus and Titus. Oh, they didn't fuck each other last night, but they definitely had fun putting me between them.

Of course, I spent half of it imagining what they would do to each other. Vox and Sol, too, for reasons I couldn't explain.

But not Exos. No, I suspected Exos would never touch any of them. A point he drove home by merely watching last night rather than joining in. I could sense his arousal the entire time, yet he never once approached, preferring to almost supervise like the last time all of us engaged in an orgy in the living room.

God, who was I becoming?

A sex fiend, obviously.

"What are you thinking about over there, little queen?" Cyrus mused, his blue eyes knowing. "You're looking awfully flushed."

"Nothing," I lied. I squirmed in my seat and tried to focus on the papers in my lap.

Kols had delivered the dark-magic texts to Exos this morning—as promised. Only, he'd provided us with more than the one book we discussed, saying we might be interested in defensive magic as well. So Cyrus had that text while I perused the dark arts for something resembling what Elana had done. Exos sat beside me on the couch, one arm stretched out across the back over my shoulders and his other palm on my thigh as he read with me.

"There," he murmured, fortunately concentrating better than me. "It mentions liquid summoning."

I skimmed the passage he pointed at and nodded. "It's similar to what she

did, yeah. But she seemed to have more control somehow.”

“Perhaps she altered it with spirit,” he replied.

“Sounds ominous,” Titus said as he approached with a tray of mugs. “I’m not Vox, but I tried my best.” He set the drinks on the table and picked one up to hand to me. “I may have added something special to this.”

I peered inside to see embers rotating on the top.

No, not embers.

Burnt marshmallows.

My lips curled. “You made hot chocolate.”

“Or a version of it, anyway,” he replied, sending a flame dancing over my cheek in a kiss. “I had to improvise a little from the recipe Vox left out because we’re low on ingredients. Used some sort of fruit milk instead of the creamy stuff you like.”

I sipped it, noting the spicy undertone, and sighed. “It’s perfect.” It tasted nothing like the hot chocolate I grew up with, but I didn’t mind. This was better. Sweeter, stronger, and it warmed my insides. Mmm. Yes. “Perfect,” I repeated, taking another sip.

“I’m glad you—”

A sharp pain to my abdomen had me dropping the mug, which tumbled to the floor after splashing hot liquid all over me and the couch. But I felt none of it, the pang inside me too great to feel or hear anything else.

Sol! I cried out, our link quaking uncontrollably as his agony flooded my soul.

I leapt up, threw the blanket and book—which, thankfully, caught the majority of the spill—and took off for the Earth Quad with Cyrus, Titus, and Exos sprinting along behind me.

They were saying things.

Telling me to slow down.

But I couldn’t stop even if I wanted to.

My mate was in trouble and needed my help, his anguish unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

Classes had restarted today, and I’d spent my time in fire class with Titus. Sol had gone to his usual courses, but the Earth Quad was huge. He could be anywhere, except for maybe the dorms.

Where? I demanded, calling upon my spirit to follow the thread to his soul. *There.*

He knelt in the middle of an orchard with an unconscious woman in his

arms, his tears streaking down his face.

Aflora, I realized as I took in the dark hair and petite form. “What’s wrong? What happened?” I landed on my knees beside him, my hands running over his bulging biceps. “Talk to me.”

“She’s...” He broke off on a growl laced with such agony that my heart fractured in two.

I saw it then, the blue lines traversing her skin, flooding her veins with a plague her small body couldn’t fight. It blanketed her skin in a sheet of white laced with sweat.

“Claire,” Titus whispered, the strain in his voice drawing my attention to him and then to the field around us.

“Oh God...” *Aflora* wasn’t the only one.

There were at least twenty, all lying in the grass as if on their deathbeds.

And the trees moaned with their loss, the branches drooping in sorrow before my eyes.

My hands ran over Sol, searching him for signs of the infection, but he remained as sturdy as ever, his soul flourishing beneath my touch. “How?” I demanded. “How are you unaffected?”

But he didn’t answer, his heart breaking before my eyes. “Don’t do this to me, *Aflora*. Don’t you dare die on me.” He sounded so anguished, so terrified. And I understood then that she was the only family he had left—his final root to the Earth Fae. It wasn’t a romantic connection but a familial one that mattered more to him than I realized before.

His mother had raised her as her own, a detail I picked up from our bond, something he’d never before mentioned. No wonder they had such a close relationship. She wasn’t just his sister’s best friend, but his sister as well.

Sol had already lost his parents and the sister *Aflora* once called her best friend.

“Don’t do this to me,” he repeated softly. “Please don’t do this to me.”

Tears pricked my eyes, the once beautiful female wilting in his arms like a dried-up leaf.

This can’t happen.

I glanced around the field, noting all the others in similar positions.

Exos and Cyrus were with a few of them, offering words of encouragement that did nothing to stir life into them.

This plague—or whatever the cause—had reached the Academy, and it was taking them all.

“No,” I breathed. “No.” I wouldn’t accept this.

My mother was involved with this once, or so the rumors said. And I had a way to contact her. She would give me answers.

She *had* to give me answers.

To stop this.

To fix this!

Sol had already lost too much. He would not lose Aflora. Not today.

Where are you? I demanded, standing, searching, peering into the spirit network for my mother’s soul. *I know you’re here. I want answers. You will answer me.*

The Academy fell away as I floated to the place Exos had taken me, near the electric source. But I didn’t care about the core this time. No, I wanted my mother.

Come to me. Now. I threaded the words with power, urging her to comply. *Now!* I shouted.

There would be none of this hiding bullshit.

She had information I needed, and we didn’t have time to spare.

Claire? My name was a whisper on the wind, one I followed with my air element, searching for the owner of that voice.

Too far away.

Too cloudy.

Come here now! I screamed, tired of this game, these tricks, the damn hide-and-seek. This ended today.

Energy swirled around me, the elements answering my call and thrusting me into the heavens on a surge of power so great it knocked the breath from my lungs and blinded me with its light. I shielded my eyes, pushing through the thick ropes of spirit threatening to drown me, and shoved to the other side.

To darkness.

I coughed, sputtering from the acrid stench littering the air, and blinked a dozen times to clear the flash from my retinas.

Only to find myself in a cell lined with iron bars that burned.

Literally.

With fire.

What the fuck? I spun around, my feet splashing in unspeakable fluid. I gagged, the air reeking of foulness and death. *Where—*

I jumped as a hand landed on my arm, the touch as cold as ice. “Claire?”

My mother's voice.

I whipped my attention to her, startled.

And gaped at the terrifying sight before me.

She resembled a walking corpse, her bones protruding from all angles, her hair a ghastly white, and her eyes... They were as colorless as the night.
"M-Mom?"

"Well, isn't that sweet," a third voice said, sounding decidedly cruel and all too familiar. "A family reunion at last."

I slowly looked to my right, through the fiery bars, and met the eyes of my mentor. "Hello, Elana."

Chapter 26

Sol



“**C**laire!” Exos’s shout pierced my ears, drawing me from my sorrows and introducing me to a new horror.

An unconscious Claire.

A shock wave of spirit magic spilled from Exos and Cyrus, slamming into my chest and sending a vibration down my spine.

They were kneeling beside us in an instant, Exos cradling Claire’s head while Cyrus leaned to listen for breath. Titus paced, flames burning along every inch of his skin as he cursed.

The ground began to quake around me, my ire mounting by the minute.

Aflora still lay in my arms, her earth magic swarmed by a sea of darkness as she absorbed the brunt of the plague-like energy swirling in the air. Her royal line provided her with the direct source to our element, denoting her as the perpetual gatekeeper of our magic. And she was playing her part, acting as a shield to the rest of our kind.

A shield I couldn’t help her reinforce because the plague refused to touch me.

And my bloodline wouldn’t allow me to step into her shoes, not without claiming her as my mate.

Which I couldn’t do.

But Claire...

“It’s hurting her, too,” I realized out loud. The darkness swathed her essence, a spiritual element I shouldn’t be able to see. However, through my bond with Claire, it was right there. Tangible. Stealing the life from my mate right before my eyes.

I stirred a bed of grass with my element and placed Aflora in it, wrapping

her in my power before turning to help Cyrus and Exos.

Except, I didn't know what to do.

"She's not breathing again," Cyrus said, his tone underlined with fury. "It's the fucking spirit source!"

"Then fucking fix it," Titus ordered, his flames inching higher.

"No, it's different this time." Exos placed his forehead against hers, closing his eyes and focusing. "Her spirit is here, at the Academy, just not inhabiting her body."

I snapped my gaze up to him. "What the fuck does that even mean?" I demanded, finally finding my voice.

Because this was ridiculous.

All of it.

Why is this happening?

"I don't know what it means. It's never happened before," Exos said slowly, lifting his head. "But she's alive. I'm certain of it."

"Claire!" Vox shouted, his voice carrying a desperate plea on the wind as he ran to us. His element swirled around him, lifting him off the ground so that his feet barely touched it as he sprinted. His wild eyes burned with a silver ring as he fell to his knees beside Cyrus. "Bring her back," he said urgently. "Bring her the fuck back!"

Exos grasped Vox's shoulder. "She's not dead," he promised him.

"She's just not breathing," Cyrus said through clenched teeth. "But Exos can feel her spirit."

"Where?" I demanded. We were running out of time. I could feel the earth magic seeping away from the realm, threatening to take the last of my family line with it.

Aflora might not be my blood sister, but she was every bit my sibling. We grew up together. Learned earth together. Grieved the loss of my mother and sister together.

And now something was trying to take her and Claire from me.

It was unacceptable.

Wrong.

Cruel.

This is not happening on my watch.

Exos frowned, his gaze flicking from our Claire to some invisible point in the distance. "She's not far. But I think she's underground."

Which meant she would be weak.

Elemental Fae couldn't access the source from beneath the earth. If left there for too long, fae died.

"We need to split up," Exos continued, standing and taking charge like the king he was. Normally, I'd tell him to fuck off. Today? Yeah, today I craved his leadership. Because my head was not in a good place. It was clouded with memories of death.

"Sol and Vox, you two come with me," Exos said.

"What about the Earth Fae?" I asked, glancing at Aflora and then the others. "I can't just leave them." I was the only one still awake. What if one of them needed my strength?

Not that I knew how to lend it.

But I'd damn well figure it out.

Like I was trying to do when Claire arrived.

"Claire's underground, Sol. You might be the only one who can find her when we get close enough." Exos glanced at Vox, squeezing his shoulder again. "And you're fully bonded with our mate. You can help me pinpoint her location."

My shoulders fell.

Because he was right.

Titus finally stopped pacing, his gaze finding mine. "I'll help with the Earth Fae," he promised. "And Cyrus will look after Claire."

For once, the two of them didn't bicker.

Cyrus merely nodded, his fingers running through Claire's hair. "I'll keep searching on the spirit plane," he said softly. "She'll find us. She has to."

Titus knelt beside Aflora, eyeing the nest I'd created. "I won't let anything happen to her, Sol."

I nodded, my throat clogging with emotion.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have predicted such a decision—my mate or my family.

But my mate was my family, too.

An impossible choice. One someone would pay for, for making me endure it. I shoved to my feet, the soil shuddering beneath the weight of my frustration.

"Is that soot?" Titus asked, gesturing to the tendril creeping up Aflora's arm.

I eyed it with a grimace. Because yeah, it certainly looked like the remnants of a fire.

“We don’t have time,” Exos pressed, dragging my focus to him. “We have to find Claire. I can sense her agitation, the wrongness embracing her spirit. She needs us. Now.”

“I’ll look after Claire and the Earth Fae,” Cyrus vowed. His blue eyes swirled with his element, giving them a striking azure glow. He reached out and sent gentle streams of water to feed the weeping trees and give them the nourishment my people needed to fight off this illness. He glanced at me, his expression determined. “I won’t let you down, Sol. You’re not going to lose them. Not today.”

For once, I allowed myself to have faith in a royal.

Titus gave me a reassuring nod. “We’ve got this.”

I believed him.

Not because of the severity of his expression or the way he said it, but because I *knew* him. Claire’s chosen mate. Member of our circle.

As a unit, the six of us were powerful.

And we would prove that today, a certainty I felt all the way to my soul. *We’re coming for you, Claire.*

I followed Exos and Vox through the Earth Quad, rage burning in my chest with each step because we couldn’t walk in a straight line, forced to avoid the writhing Earth Fae that were dying all around us. My instincts begged me to stop and help them, but my soul’s priority belonged to Claire.

My mind reeled from having to face this darkness again, from watching others suffer while I survived. It wasn’t right. None of this was right.

The ground trembled as I stormed along behind Vox and Exos.

Vox glanced back at me with concern knitting his brow. “Save your power for whoever is behind this.”

He wasn’t telling me to contain my gifts, not anymore. Vox had changed and so had I.

But he was telling me to be smart about it.

Cracks radiated out from each heavy footfall as I embraced my element. “Don’t worry,” I said through gritted teeth. “There’s plenty where this came from.” When I finally had a target for my fist, I’d revel in breaking every bone in the culprit’s body.

Because someone had to be behind all of this. Plagues didn’t just happen. No, there was someone pulling the strings, and my instincts told me that puppet master was after my Claire.

Exos paused when we reached Elana’s mansion. It didn’t surprise me that

this was where he sensed Claire's spirit, but it did confirm what we were all already thinking.

Dark vines guarded the entrance, a maze of twisted earth magic that stood in our way.

"Well, that's new," Exos mused.

I didn't share his amusement.

"Get out of our way," I commanded, storming through the earthy blockade. Vines snapped beneath my command, the earth rumbling in favor of its approaching master—*me*. Some of the plants retaliated, pinching me with familiar energy as if all my people were here, protecting Elana as their queen.

Why?

The magic and energy were wrong here. I sensed a well of power beneath the ground—a lot of it.

Vox and Exos followed on my heels.

"She's here," Exos said, certainty underlining his tone.

But I didn't need him to tell me that.

Because I felt her, too. Imprisoned underground. Scared, but not alone.

There.

I knelt, intending to rip out the ground with my power, when pain spiked up and down my spine. Claire's ethereal screams echoed up through the layers of earth and hit me straight in the chest. The ground began to quiver and quake, forming jagged cracks and spikes of harsh rock.

"Get back!" I roared just as the columns of Elana's manor splintered and the floor gave way. Vox swept us all out into the safety of the forest with a blast of wind just as the walls of her home came down.

"Claire!" we shouted as one.

But none of us could be heard over the roar of energy and power swirling up into the clouds.

The manor... was gone.

Chapter 27

Claire



SEVERAL MINUTES EARLIER

“Well, this presents a slight problem,” Elana mused, glancing at my corpse of a mother. “You just had to reach out, didn’t you?”

“What is this place?” I demanded, whirling around and flinching as more of that slime on the floor touched my shoe. Well, sort of, anyway. I wasn’t exactly corporeal, but even in spirit form, I definitely *felt* my surroundings.

Like my mother’s icy fingers grasping my arm. “Go, Claire,” she urged. “Go!”

But I couldn’t.

I didn’t even know how I got here, let alone how to leave. So I focused on Elana instead and repeated my question with a haughty arch of my eyebrow.

It earned me a chuckle from the bitch on the other side of the bars. “You think to command me, child? That’s adorable. You couldn’t even summon a spirit properly.” She tsked. “Oh, Claire. I had such high hopes for you. What will I do now?”

Eat shit and die? I thought. But yeah, that wasn’t the best reply to this situation. So instead I folded my arms and assumed a casual position, similar to how I imagined Cyrus or Exos would do if they were in my shoes.

“You could start by explaining yourself,” I suggested. “I mean, we both know my mother’s evil. But you told me she was dead.” A thought occurred to me then, one I ran with without looking back. “Actually, you told me her body was never found and suggested she might be alive. Why? Because you had her in custody?” I tilted my head, feigning confusion. “Why hide her?”

Why not tell everyone you have the source of the plague?”

Assuming my mother even caused it, I added mentally. Which I'm seriously starting to doubt.

The way my mother's expression fell with my comments confirmed my instincts, but I still wanted an explanation for all of this.

Answers regarding the plague. A way to help the Earth Fae. Why it's happening all over again now. My lips flattened. Wait a minute...

Why it's happening again now, I repeated to myself, my senses picking up on something I'd missed before.

Elana.

She was surrounded by spirits, their smoky tendrils chaotic and terrified as they tried futilely to swim away. As if she was sucking them all into her with a summoning spell...

“How did you get here?” Elana demanded, ignoring my questions.

Does she know I can see all those souls slithering around her? I wondered. She had to at least expect it since I was in my spirit state. Hmm, but it would be best not to confirm it.

So I sighed, acting agitated. “Exos keeps trying to teach me how to navigate the spirit planes.” Not necessarily a lie. “He told me to seek out a soul I knew, and I thought I was going to Sol, yet somehow ended up here.” Well, that wasn't exactly true, but it carried hints of the truth.

Enough to lend confidence to my tone, anyway.

“I have absolutely no idea how to get back to my body,” I added truthfully. “But since I'm here, I'd love to know what's going on.” I arched a brow, glancing at my cowering mother and then back at Elana. “Did you find her lurking around campus? Because we've suspected she had something to do with Exos's disappearance last month.”

Elana's eyebrow rose in a perfect example of surprise. “What disappearance?”

I fought the urge to scoff, *As if you don't know.*

Instead, I said, “Someone took him and siphoned off his energy. He said it felt a lot like Ophelia.” I glanced at my shivering mother, her hand no longer on my arm. “You tried to kill my mate. You're going to pay for that.” An empty threat, but I imagined myself saying the words to Elana, so they came out just as lethal as I desired.

My mother opened her mouth as if to reply, only to wince as her jaw snapped closed.

A strand of energy trailed from her lips to Elana as if she wore a muzzle tied to a leash. Could I see that because of my current state? Or had my powers grown?

Elana smiled one of her trademark indulgent smiles. “Actually, I did find her recently. I just haven’t decided what to do with her yet.”

I bet, I thought. “What was she doing?” I asked, wanting to see how far this lie would go.

Elana waved a hand as if brushing the question aside. “What matters is that I’ve caught her and we can seek justice. I was just in the process of trying to find out what she’s done to the Earth Fae, in fact. This would serve as a suitable lesson for you, if you’d like to join our interrogation.”

Man, she’s good.

Still playing the part of perfect mentor despite the obvious red flags.

But hey, why not play along? It wasn’t like I knew how to leave, and maybe I’d glean some important details along the way.

“I’d love that,” I said, not lying. “As I clearly have no idea what I’m doing.”

“I don’t know, Claire. You seem to be doing very well to me. Appearing in this form outside of the spirit planes, as you are now, requires a great deal of power. It’s something not even I can do.” A hint of envy flashed through her gaze, but she blinked it away behind her caring mask. “I have great hopes for you.”

Uh-huh. To do what? I wondered.

“Well, where were we, Ophelia?” Elana continued, her mask slipping just a hair as she focused on my mother.

Fear radiated from my mother, her fingers clenching into fists as she fought the tendril of spirit hovering against her mouth.

What do you really want to say? I thought at her, tempted to brush that strand away, to reveal her true words.

It looked easy.

Just flick it with a talon of my own.

“She’s lying!” my mother screeched as the rope disappeared, my heart skipping a beat in the process.

Shit. Did I do that?

But I didn’t have time to worry because my mother took center stage, words spewing from her on a wave of truth that unsettled my very soul.

“It’s not a plague. It’s Elana. She’s feeding off the Earth Fae like she did

the Spirit Fae. It's dark magic, Claire. She siphons the elements, borrows them, kills them. It's not me. But I figured out what she was doing when she forced me to bond to Mortus, using spirit compulsion. I broke free by going to the Human Realm, but I met your father, and then she came for me. I had to leave you, Claire. I had to leave both of you behind. But she's framed me for all of this."

It all came out so quickly, so harshly, that Elana didn't have time to stop her.

Mostly because I seemed to have her strand caught in my mental fist.

Something her thunderous expression told me she'd noticed.

Oops.

Sorry, not sorry?

I swallowed as the calm-mentor veneer disappeared, revealing a darker expression, one that caused the hairs along my arms to dance in warning. Her lips peeled apart into a sneer that had me instinctively reaching out to Exos. Only, I couldn't find him. Or Cyrus. Or Vox. Or any of my mates.

Oh, they were there. But not. Like I'd somehow left them in my current state, similar to when I'd ventured into the blinding white light.

Shit.

I should have evaluated that earlier, but I'd been distracted by my mother and Elana.

Now, however, it became far too clear that I was on my own to find a way out of this.

"I could try to deny it, but what would be the point?" Elana took a step toward the bars, her eyes on my mother. "You've been such a disappointment to me, Ophelia. Over and over and over again." She tsked, the sound reminding me of nails on a chalkboard.

An ice dagger shot from her hand toward my mother's chest, one I instinctively manipulated with my fire to melt before impact.

Elana snarled, sending another that I quickly deflected before creating a sheet of flames meant to protect my mother from further assault.

"You've been holding out on me," my former mentor accused, changing tactics and focusing on me. "If the fae knew how powerful you've grown..." She trailed off, tapping her jaw. "Well, I imagine we'd share an execution chamber. It's what the fae do to those they consider different. It's all about the balance, trying to avoid wars between the supernaturals, because they all fear true power. Which you and I both possess, Claire. In abundance."

She took a menacing step forward to wrap her fingers around the bars, completely unfazed by the heat flaring from the fire shield I'd created.

"I know what it's like," she murmured. "Not being accepted by your own kind, being called derogatory names like Halfling or Weakling. Being a Spirit Fae with access to only one element painted me as insignificant to most. They either teased me or pitied me." Her lips flattened. "It wasn't an easy existence, knowing I couldn't tell anyone my true nature. Knowing if anyone found out my father was a Midnight Fae that I'd be burned alive. It's not like I chose my parents, but the fae don't care, Claire. They discriminate against anyone they fear."

I swallowed. Because what she described matched what Exos, Cyrus, and Kols had told me. *Abominations*, they'd said. And I was fully aware of how the others had treated me as a Halfling, like an unwanted roach among a sea of butterflies.

But they're different now, I told myself, recalling the ball. *They were... nice.*

Because they liked me?

Or because of my ties to my mates?

"You know it's true," Elana said, astutely reading my thoughts. "They wanted to banish you to the death fields just for existing, Claire. But I'm the one who made sure that didn't happen. I'm the one who protected you, offered to mentor you, *vouched* for you. Because I don't believe in prosecuting someone just because of her birth. I *value* your power, Claire. I want to see how high you can climb."

"Don't listen to her," my mother interjected. "She just wants to use you, Claire. Like she—" She cut off on a gurgle, water spilling from her mouth.

Fuck! Her lungs were overflowing with liquid. I focused on the element, calling it to me and begging it to bend to my control. But Elana had a firmer grasp, her age and experience far surpassing my own.

"Ophelia, you've well and truly served your purpose here," Elana said, her tone holding a wicked edge that frosted the air with power. "When I present your remains to the fae, they'll bow at my feet in worship, thanking me for finding the one who *plagued* their kind. Maybe I'll do it just in time to save the Earth Fae from their fate."

My mother's eyes went wide, her expression a plea that slashed my heart.

No!

We weren't finished here yet.

I needed answers.

And it seemed my mother possessed them all.

She began to convulse, drowning on the liquid clogging her airways. But the element refused me, Elana's grasp on it decidedly strong.

An element she shouldn't even be able to touch, I thought, frowning. *Unless it's not water at all, but something else entirely. Something like dark magic.*

My gaze widened.

Shit.

I couldn't fight her Midnight Fae side. But I could use my own gifts to fight her.

Like earth.

Roots danced beneath the concrete floor, begging for my attention. I caught two of them and thrust them upward right beneath her feet to dislodge her stance.

She tripped to the side, her concentration momentarily distracted.

I mentally latched onto two more roots, sending them upward to grab her, only she dodged and sent a flicker of smoke to encircle the limb. It immediately snapped, the agony from the ground nearly bringing me to my knees.

But I wasn't done.

Stones and dirt and *earth* responded to my call, dismantling her floors and creating a bumpy terrain that threw her off guard. She fell with an *Oomph*.

And my mother sputtered beside me, finally able to breathe.

I knelt beside her, unsure of how to free her. The bars were iron, thick, encrusted in fiery magic. And not the element I adored, but a harsher essence that seemed to answer to Elana alone.

She leapt up with a roar, a horde of inky strands writhing around her.

Earth Fae.

They were scrambling, screaming, trying to escape.

But she was sucking on them harshly, absorbing more and more of their power.

Is Sol among them? I wondered, my heart catching in my throat. *Aflora? How many others?*

I had to do something, *anything*, to stop this madness.

It couldn't continue.

I wouldn't let her take down the Earth Fae as she had the Spirit Fae.

Sentencing a faeling to death because of her bloodlines and abilities was wrong, yes. But Elana's response, her torment, her violent reactions, made it all so much worse.

There had to be another way.

I refused to accept her path, to agree with such a fucked-up mentality.

This can't be the solution.

My arms spread wide, my elements joining and thrashing inside me, urging me to intervene, to *fix* this. To help the Earth Fae trapped around her aura. To free my mother. To find another method of coexistence. To take down the bad influence who threatened the source of elemental good.

Heat engulfed my being, my fire stirring passionate and hot.

Ice cascaded down the walls and along the iron, penetrating the brutal energy and winding around it in wintry ringlets.

Rocks rumbled beneath my feet, answering to my call and vibrating with vengeful need.

A breeze kissed my cheeks, whirling in rapid circles up and down the corridor, searching for a way to break me free.

And my spirit thrived, my essence reaching out to all the dying souls floating in this dungeon, to lend strength for survival and *life*.

Vitality, I realized, calling upon the source as I closed my eyes. *They need vitality.*

Chaos erupted as Elana chanted foreign words, her own magic battling mine and springing deathly hollows all around us.

Visages of ghosts, howling in pain, painted the ghastly dungeon. Their mouths gaping in hunger as they slowly began to crawl into our reality, their presence disturbing the balance between life and death.

Everything began to shake.

The foundations of the building around us unable to hold because of such power and *wrongness*.

I grabbed my mother, calling the roots to fold around us, to craft an impenetrable hold, and demanded the souls beneath the earth to latch onto my essence.

They swam in waves, eagerly leaving Elana for the safe haven I created, my water flowing in a spring above my roots to hold the falling debris off of us.

But there was too much.

The power too great.

Energy hummed around me, my mother cringing beneath the violent onslaught. I couldn't hold us much longer, had to do something, to save us all.

Darkness cascaded over my vision, leaving me to swim in a sea of black.

I screamed, my throat clogged with soil. Roots. Trees. Flowers. Plants. Life exploding around me, through me, consuming every inch of my being.

"Claire!"

My mates were calling for me.

My mother, too.

I thrashed violently, fighting off the vines holding me down and the smoky cloud drowning my spirit. Warm hands grasped my bare shoulders, shaking me.

Lips met my cheeks, my hair, my neck.

My name rent the air.

Words followed.

It was all a jumble, my body tangled in a frenzy of limbs and heat and elements.

Water.

Fire.

I basked in the familiarity, lost to the soothing sensations.

Until my eyes flashed open to find the sky looming above my head.

And two very pissed-off male mates.

Chapter 28

Titus



Energy hummed through the air, seeming to zap Claire's body back to life.

And her eyelids flew open.

I gaped at her, shocked by the sudden change.

Cyrus, however, growled low in his throat before saying, "I need you to stop fucking doing that, Claire."

"I second that statement," I said without missing a beat. Her lack of breath had scared the shit out of me. If Exos hadn't been absolutely certain her spirit still thrived...

No, I couldn't think about that right now. We had more important things to worry about, like the Earth Fae stirring around us. An earthly essence filled the air, reinvigorating them and causing several of them to moan.

Although, Claire didn't make a sound. Her brow furrowed as if confused. Then she bolted upright. "I have to stop Elana!" She tried to launch to her feet, only to be wrapped up in Cyrus's arms.

"You need to tell us what the hell is going on," he corrected, his bedside manner as on point as always.

She shook her head, shoving him away, only to collapse back into him. Her chest heaved as she sucked in fresh breaths, her pallor a bit too pale for my liking. "Easy, Claire," I murmured.

Cyrus steadied her, his expression smoothing into lines of concern. "Your body needs a moment to adjust. You know, because your spirit somehow *detached*. Again." He brushed a kiss over her cheek, the spot glowing blue with his element as he gave her the power she needed.

I knelt beside them and grasped her hip to lend her some of my fire. It

slowly breathed color back into her features, heating her otherwise cool skin.

“Elana,” she managed to say, her voice hoarse. She cleared her throat to try again. “She has Ophelia. She’s draining her. Draining them all.” She swallowed and tried to stand again. “Need to go. Now.”

“You need to absorb more energy,” Cyrus said, wrapping his arms more firmly around her.

Earth Fae began to whimper all around us, their heads shifting as questions spilled from their lips. None of them were coherent, all lost to the plague that’d taken them down.

“They’re recovering,” Cyrus said, eyeing the Earth Quad with interest. “What did you do, Claire? What did you find?”

“*Elana.*” Claire shoved away from us with far more force than Cyrus or I anticipated, allowing her to leap to her feet. She bolted before either of us had a chance to grab her.

“Claire!” Cyrus shouted, his voice catching on the wind as I took off after her in a dead sprint. I sensed him following on my heels. I had no doubt he was as frustrated as me. Our mate had a tendency to run toward danger without thinking. I wasn’t going to let her leave my sight.

We worked our way through the recovering Earth Fae. Roots and vines wound over their limbs and lifted them up, the males seeming to grow larger and the females sprouting blossoms in their hair.

“Is this your doing?” I asked Cyrus. He’d been trying to infuse life back into them while we guarded Claire, but without much luck.

He shook his head as he kept pace at my side. “No. Whatever was infecting them disappeared.” He paused to head right, following Claire. “I felt the dark presence lift right before Claire woke up.”

Sprouts formed in our mate’s footsteps as she sprinted, suggesting that she might be the one healing the Earth Fae.

I frowned, unsure of sure how I felt about that. She couldn’t save everyone. If she expended all her energy, she’d have none left for herself.

We reached Elana’s mansion—or what was left of it—and found Sol ripping chunks of rock from the earth. A boulder bigger than my head flung past, and I ducked. “Hey!” I shouted. “We have Claire. You can stop digging.”

“There’s something down there,” Sol grunted, tossing another boulder over his shoulder.

Focused on his task, Vox helped Sol, sweeping away debris with

controlled gusts as Exos pointed toward a single spot. “There!” he shouted.

We stopped just in time to find Sol unearthing a wad of vines and roots. Goose bumps spread over my flesh when I faintly sensed Claire’s magic inside the ball of elemental power.

Claire dove into the pit and gripped on to Sol as tears streamed down her face. “Is she alive?” Claire glanced back at me and bit her lip. “Titus, can you burn away just the top layer? Please be careful. We have to get her out of there.”

Her who? I wondered.

Claire clung to what was left of Sol’s shirt as her eyes pleaded with me. “*Titus. Please.*”

Right. I didn’t know what she wanted out of that heap, but it clearly meant something to her. And if she didn’t want to dismantle the ball herself, it was because she didn’t trust her own control.

Cracking my knuckles, I prepared myself for the task ahead. In my current state, I was going to have trouble doing this without making something explode. But I’d do it for Claire and for whomever she protected inside the bundle of earth.

Deep breaths.

Sweat broke out over my forehead as I concentrated.

Slowly now...

I crafted my flame into a thin rope that I sent through the air with as much precision as I could manage. It landed on top of the nest like a saw, which I used to cut through the top layer.

Then the second.

As well as the third.

Until finally a ghostly hand fell free of the opening. Working around that, I slid the fire wide, carefully lancing the side.

And a corpse-like body fell out.

Claire caught the woman whose bones protruded from every angle and hugged her to her chest. “Help me,” she said, looking at Exos. “Help *her.*”

He jumped into the crater Sol had created and scooped her into his arms, his eyes running over the ghastly remains. “She’s energy-starved. Weak. It’s going to take a lot of work, but we’re not too late.”

Cyrus knelt beside the hole to take Ophelia—or who I assumed was Ophelia, as it was hard to tell with her decrepit form—into his arms.

Sol lifted Claire out of the cavern while Exos climbed out himself.

And the Earth Fae hoisted himself onto land. “How are my people?” he demanded, looking at me.

“Recovering,” I said. “Cyrus said the plague is gone.”

“Not a plague,” Claire cut in. “*Elana*. She was using dark magic to siphon their energy.”

“Why?” Exos demanded, his focus on Ophelia and not Claire. But his question was on point, as always.

“She went on about being an abomination, said the Council would kill her if they knew about her birthright. She said they’ll kill me, too, when they realize how powerful I am.” She swallowed on that last bit, then shook her head. “I think she was trying to recruit me.”

Cyrus and Exos shared a long look.

Then the Spirit King glanced at me, Vox, and Sol. “Cyrus, Claire, and I have a lot of work to do. Ophelia is hanging on by a thread after whatever Elana did to her. I need you to check on the other fae throughout the Academy, make sure they are all okay. Because that power surge I just felt? It was fueled by the fae on these grounds.”

I nodded. “Whatever you need. We’re on it.”

“Good.” He glanced at Claire. “Let’s go back to the Spirit Quad. It’ll be a quiet, safe place for us to begin the energy transfusion. But I need you to be very careful, Claire. No more source visits without me.”

“She shouldn’t even be able to do that,” Cyrus muttered at his side.

“A conversation for another day, brother,” Exos returned, already walking. “Let’s go.”

Sol seemed to think twice, his desire to snatch Claire written all over his face, but he drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “I’ll be on Earth Quad.”

“And I’ll check Water and Air Quad,” Vox said.

“That leaves me with Fire Quad.” I took off at a run toward the chaos, unsure of how to truly help but determined to find a way.

Tufts of earth had overturned every which way, leaving scars across the ground on my jog to Fire Quad. Weakened fae staggered and held their heads as if dazed, while others screamed for answers.

Utter insanity.

But one fae caught my attention above all the others.

Mortus.

The old fae staggered back a step, his expression one of bewilderment

and confusion.

I reached out to steady the professor and noted his lack of fire. “Mortus,” I said slowly. “What’s wrong?”

He blinked, his dark eyes focusing and unfocusing all at once. “I... I don’t know.” He leaned in and lowered his voice. “C-could you tell me...? What year is this?”

Chapter 29

Sol



When I came upon the Earth Quad, I paused to assess the damage. Not as bad as I'd feared. Likely due to Cyrus's glittering blue streams he'd woven through the grounds. Previously wilted trees now stood up straight and boasted fresh leaves and fruit, along with solid branches that reached for the sun. And the soil breathed with vitality, happy to have absorbed liquid nutrients from the Water Prince.

I spotted Aflora tending to another Earth Fae in the shade of one of the larger trees. She pressed her palm to the trunk and drew in its copper power, glowing as she fed on the source of our element, and gifted it to the petite female beside her.

Relief lightened my chest.

She's alive.

"Aflora," I said, and she glanced up at me, her blue eyes flashing with specks of emerald magic. I smiled and rested a heavy hand on her tiny shoulder. "You shouldn't be using your magic right now. Just moments ago you were unconscious."

Almost dead.

My gaze ran down her neck, searching for those black streaks. Aside from some lingering soot, I couldn't detect the illness that had taken her so suddenly.

She shrugged me off. "I'm fine, Sol." She flashed me a confident smile. "Can't keep this Earth Fae down."

I frowned, not wishing to downplay how close to death she'd come.

The female fae beside her groaned as black lines retreated under Aflora's magic.

“There,” Aflora murmured, seemingly pleased as she rested the Earth Fae against the sturdy trunk. “Draw on its power,” she instructed. “You’ll feel better in no time.”

Even though Cyrus had bolstered the Earth Fae, Aflora’s miraculous recovery didn’t settle well with me.

I glanced around the quad again, noting how many of the others resembled the female fae Aflora had just treated, all of them leaning on the coppery substance of earth for survival.

But someone had given them a kick start.

Was it something Claire had done, or was Aflora’s grasp on the source stronger than I had previously imagined?

Aflora wiped her hands together as she stood and rolled her eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I pinched some of the soot remaining on her shoulder and rubbed my fingers together. “It doesn’t feel right, Aflora. You need to reserve your magic, not spend it.”

She chuckled. “Well, aren’t you the bossy one? I knew there was a royal in there somewhere.”

Now it was my turn to scoff. “You’re the princess, Aflora. In time, it’ll be you who leads our people back to the fruitful civilization it’s meant to be.” I knew she had always thought we’d do that together, but I could never mate Aflora. Not just because she was like a sister to me, but also because of the scars on my soul. I didn’t know who or what had put them there, but it kept me walled off from the darkness that infected my people.

Not that it mattered. I wasn’t a leader. I’d spent my entire life trying to figure out my own shit. However, I was making progress thanks to Vox, Claire, and the rest of my mate-circle. Today confirmed that, as it was the first time I’d been able to trust someone else to carry my burdens with me.

I’m no longer alone.

Aflora and I made our way through the recovering Earth Quad, and I marveled at how the fae seemed to be stronger than before, as if experiencing another bout with darkness had shaken them loose from the long years of suppression and now they could take in a full breath for the first time.

I told Aflora what I knew so far, about Elana and how we suspected her to be a Midnight Fae Halfling. Claire mostly confirmed it with her comment about dark magic, but I didn’t know what else was said.

“Death magic?” Aflora squeaked. “Do you think she’ll bring the dead

here?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But we need to be ready.” I surveyed the stronger Earth Fae, noting their growing vitality, and nodded.

It might be enough.

Enough for an army.

Chapter 30

Vox



I *'m going to kill that bitch*, I thought, picturing Elana.

She'd absorbed air from several of the fae. Enough to create her giant vortex that had swallowed her entire home.

It left debris and terrified fae all over campus. I'd met with several of the professors, told them what had happened, and warned them that this was only the beginning. Because Elana? Yeah, she was alive. I knew because I'd seen her energy go up into that damn cloud before everything vanished.

A neat trick, sure.

One I'd love to replicate with fire and watch her burn alive.

A task for another day. Because I needed a damn nap first.

No, I needed my Claire.

All the Air Fae and Water Fae were managing themselves beneath the supervision of professors, leaving me without much left to do other than go home.

Using a gust of wind, I propelled myself back to the Spirit Quad and nudged open the doors.

Claire startled against Exos's chest, her gaze flying to mine.

Cyrus merely slammed his palm down on the table to stop the papers from flying, his gaze on an open textbook.

"Necromancy doesn't even begin to describe what Elana did today," Cyrus said. He flipped a page and frowned. "Kols gave us a shitty book. I swear this thing is useless."

Based on Cyrus's sour mood, I decided not to even ask what he meant by that and went to my mate instead.

Claire rubbed her eyes as Exos helped her to her feet. "How'd it go?" she

asked groggily as she slipped effortlessly into my arms. “Are the Air Fae all right?”

I nodded as I tucked my chin beneath her ear and indulged in her elements surrounding mine. “Only a few were weakened by the momentary leech of power,” I said, reluctantly pulling away. “Elana seemed to focus mostly on the Earth Fae, minus her finale at the end.”

“I hope Sol’s okay,” my mate lamented. Her pain swept through our bond, and I clutched her to my chest.

“He’ll be all right,” I promised, although I knew the Earth Fae was thoroughly shaken. I cupped Claire’s face. “Everyone is okay, Claire. Thanks to you.” And whatever the hell she’d done to Elana. I wanted to hear more, but I also didn’t want to press her right now. She looked ready to collapse with exhaustion.

Her lips curled into a small smile as she rested her hands over mine. “I hope so.”

I brushed my lips over hers. “Trust me.”

She began to nod just as Titus and Sol entered the dorm.

“Fucking Mortus,” Titus said by way of greeting, rubbing his temple. “I left him in the care of some of the other Fire Fae, but we’re going to have to do something about him. The guy has absolutely no recollection of anything after mating with Ophelia.”

My eyebrows rose. “What?” That was news to me, but the lack of surprise from the others suggested they already knew.

“Did he say what the last thing he remembered was?” Claire asked.

Titus shook his head. “His last memory is of his time here. As a student.”

Exos whistled. “That was over two decades ago.”

“So he’s been under Elana’s control all this time?” Claire looked stricken. “That’s horrible.”

“It’s the power of a Spirit Fae,” Sol muttered, collapsing on the sofa. “How’s your mom?”

Cyrus finally parted from his texts and rested a fist on the table. “We’ve stabilized her for now. She’ll remain in a coma until she’s recovered enough to break free of what Elana did to her.” He shrugged. “We can cure her body, but she’ll have to be the one to cure her mind.”

Claire shivered and leaned into my chest. “How much do you think she can tell us about Elana?” Her fingers slipped under my shirt and ran slow circles around my abdomen as if the contact gave her comfort. I released a

sliver of my connection to the source into Claire's touch, attempting to rejuvenate what she'd depleted.

"She'll have many of the answers we seek," Cyrus confirmed. "But it'll take time."

"If that's even possible," Exos added with a frown. "Two decades of torture. Do you really think she can bounce back from that?"

"Only one way to find out," his brother replied.

Which meant we were going to have to wait, and time was the one thing we didn't have on our side. I pressed a light kiss to Claire's hair. She smiled up at me, no words needed to express that she knew we were all here for her, that I loved her.

"Let's hope she wakes up soon," Titus said, joining Cyrus at the table.

Claire frowned. "And what are we planning to do in the interim? Just wait for Elana to attack us again?"

"Yes," Cyrus said, his tone that of a king. Final and with no room for argument. "Except this time, when she returns, we'll be ready for her."

Titus smirked as a flame danced across his fingertips. "Now you're speaking my language."

Cyrus smiled. "I've been speaking it for years, Fire Fae. You just weren't very adept at listening."

"Sounds like you want to start sparring right now, Water Prince," Titus drawled.

"Now you're just trying to seduce me," Cyrus replied, closing his textbook. "But we can dance tomorrow, Powerless Champion. See how you hold up *with* your element." He waggled his brows in challenge. "You'll need it, after all."

"So will all the others," Exos interjected.

"Sounds like we have a new course for the Academy," Titus said, grinning. "One I'll very much enjoy leading."

Cyrus snorted. "More like co-leading."

"Sure." Titus grinned. "We can call it that."

"Regardless." Exos stood, interrupting their little bickering match. "When Elana returns, we're taking her down," he said, his tone brooking no argument. "Together."

"Together," everyone agreed.

Part Four

“At the core of every element is a light so bright it blinds those with unworthy intentions. I can only hope it finds my heart pure and gifts me with the strength to survive. For a war is on the horizon. One we all desperately need to win.”

—Claire

Chapter 31

Titus



ONE WEEK LATER

“**A**gain,” Cyrus demanded, eyeing River’s form as he created a water whip and lashed it through the air. When we announced our intentions to train some of the fae in preparation for Elana’s return, several students—and professors—had jumped at the opportunity to learn.

Others had fled for their kingdoms, the Academy on a permanent break until the situation here could be sorted.

Apparently, finding out the lead Council member and Chancellor of the Academy was an evil bitch turned everything into a shitshow. Who knew?

But Cyrus and Exos were confident she’d be back. If anything, to retrieve Claire.

I wasn’t as certain because I didn’t understand Elana’s motives. Sure, she was an abomination. She hated the way people treated her and decided to bolster her power to seek revenge. Seemed a bit extreme to me, but then again, I’d never been on the receiving end of such cruelty.

Exos claimed it really messed with her mindset.

Cyrus said it might stem from a lack of Midnight Fae training, which led to her misguided use of her death magic.

My opinion? She was just a power-hungry bitch out to rule the fae.

Claire seemed to agree with me.

I struck my bo staff against hers, countering her attack and smiling as flames danced between us. “Now, now, Claire,” I taunted. “Don’t let those emotions rule your movements.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied, sending a liquid

wave over my weapon and cooling my fire. She readied another fighting stance as the flames in her eyes glazed over with the azure glow of her water element. A breeze shifted between us, gathering moisture from the air to form a barrier that slithered across the ground. Her powers had definitely grown, but I noted the lack of control when it came to earth and fire.

That was her primary weakness.

And weaknesses weren't acceptable when it came to a battle with Elana.

Claire's elements naturally strengthened through her bonds with her mates. By engaging the final level with Exos, Cyrus, and Vox, she'd created a shift in her balance of power. It was almost lopsided in favor of her completed links. Meaning she needed more fire and earth to truly feel grounded.

Meanwhile, Elana drew energy from all of those around her, which meant that Claire had to be ready for anything.

And her current state suggested she wasn't.

Which concerned me.

"Focus," I said, vaulting over the floating stream to her side. I faked a blow to her head, forcing her to raise her weapon before I snatched my staff back and caught her in the ribs. She buckled at the impact, even though I'd held back. "You're distracted."

Her jaw ticked as a powerful gust shoved me off-balance. She launched at me, using her staff against my throat to pin me to the ground. "My mother is in a coma. Elana is off doing fuck knows what while we prepare for an attack we don't even know is going to happen. We not actually sure if she really intends to come back or do something worse. Hell, we don't even know what she's truly capable of yet. So yeah, I think I have every right to be a little *distracted*."

"Titus is right," Cyrus interjected, approaching us and leaving River in charge of Water Fae training.

Claire frowned as she swung her leg over me and allowed me to stand. Cyrus offered an arm and I took it, grateful for the backup. It wasn't often that we found ourselves on the same side.

The Water Prince gave me a knowing grin. I'd pleased him with our sparring session this morning. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, we worked well together and our opposing elements created a spark that I'd never felt with another male.

As much fun as it would be to practice more of my fire on Cyrus, Claire

was the one holding back, and all of us knew why.

Cyrus was just the first to say it out loud.

“You need to complete your bonds to the elements, Claire. You’re clumsy when it comes to fire and earth. I paired you with Titus as a test, and it’s proven my theory correct. You’re having to rely on your other elements to fight him because they are easier to access.” He brushed a kiss across her cheek, proving his point when droplets swarmed around her in an effortless display of her gifts. “You need to complete your mating bonds, little queen. It’ll strengthen you.”

Claire’s expression showcased a mixture of emotions, her hand clenching around her staff. “It feels wrong to indulge in my bonds when so much is happening.”

She glanced at Mortus. He was supposed to be leading the other Fire Fae but instead lingered on the outskirts while the high-level students took turns building fireballs and launching them into the air. He still had that distant look of horror on his face, as if he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the two decades he’d lost.

“How am I supposed to concentrate when so many are suffering?” she added quietly. “It seems selfish.”

“No, little queen. It’s practical.” Cyrus took Claire’s hand and placed it in mine. Flames linked our fingers together, our elements ready to take the next step. “Denying the bonds isn’t going to solve anything. It’ll only make matters worse.”

“He’s right,” I agreed. “You need our elements to bolster your own, and it’s not selfish to strengthen yourself, sweetheart. It’s a good way to prepare for the inevitable.”

“Assuming Elana even comes back here,” she muttered.

“If she doesn’t, then we’ll go after her. When we’re ready.” Cyrus lifted a brow. “And in your current state, you’re not ready.”

She blew out a breath, her irritation palpable. Then she glanced at me and her gaze softened. “This isn’t at all how I imagined mating you, Titus,” she admitted, her words tinged with regret. “You deserve better.” The way she said that implied she thought I only meant to do this because I had to, not because I wanted to.

“Claire,” I murmured, drawing her into my embrace. “We don’t have to be in a fancy room in the Fire Kingdom for me to declare my love for you.” I brushed my fingers over her shoulder, and her skin glowed red in response.

“My fire has always belonged to you.”

To prove my point, I claimed her mouth and ran my tongue across hers, this time not holding back as I poured my element into her. She could handle the raw truth of the passion she brought out in me.

We were both ready for this step and had been ready for a while now. There just hadn't been the right moment. And maybe now still wasn't perfect, but I didn't care. I just wanted her. I always had, from the first time I'd laid eyes on her in that field.

My beautiful Claire.

She melted into my touch and kissed me in return. Flames licked at my hair as she nudged open that well in my soul where my fire burned. Claire stoked those flames unlike anything else I'd ever experienced, and I knew mating with her would decimate my world in all the right ways.

The ground trembled beneath our feet—courtesy of Sol. A subtle reminder that we were still in the training yard and had a very real audience.

Claire giggled as she pulled away and waved at her earth mate. A number of Earth Fae practiced building shields as trunks and branches shot from the ground, although they'd all stopped when Sol had formed a brutish wall of solid rock in demonstration. He grinned at Claire. “Titus isn't the only one who has something to offer.”

Maybe, but tonight Claire was mine. I made sure of that as I stabbed my staff into the ground, allowing my fire to inch across the earth to melt Sol's stone block. It'd worked well enough during our last encounter, where I'd temporarily trapped him during his little smash tantrum.

But the Earth Fae was ready for my trick this time.

Powerful roots wove across the ground, making a lattice against my molten attack. He grinned. “Nice try, Fire Fae.”

“Nice tactic,” I mused.

The surrounding Earth Fae seemed to agree as they mimicked the motion with their own magic, trying to accomplish a similar style of defense.

I grinned. Sol might not see himself as a royal among his people, but he was a leader where it mattered.

Claire smacked me in the ribs with her staff and grinned when I expelled a startled breath. “Now who's distracted?”

I retaliated by sending a tuft of fire underneath her clothes that bit at her nipples. She squeaked and tried to soothe the burn with water, but I wasn't going to allow her to cheat her way out of playing with my flames this time. I

noded to Cyrus and his eyes darkened. He was a source of power for Claire, but he could dampen that connection, even if it took some effort.

Claire's mouth parted as I took advantage of the momentary lapse of her power. Her skin heated, and my inferno wrapped around her, forming an embrace on every sensual curve.

"No fair," she breathed, her tone aroused and willing.

"I think you're ready," Cyrus murmured, approaching us. "As we don't necessarily have a Fire Fae available to complete the vows, I suggest we use Exos as a stand-in. His royal title and affinity for flames should do the trick."

"Wait, you want to do this now?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Why not?" Cyrus countered, already leading the way. "It'll give you two time to celebrate afterward." He flashed me a knowing wink over his shoulder, causing my lips to curl.

"It's like you're trying to get into my good graces, Cyrus," I said, pulling Claire along beside me.

"Maybe I am," he replied, a smile in his voice.

Claire glanced between us, her brow furrowing. "I thought you two hated each other."

"Fine line between love and hate, little queen." Cyrus opened the door to the dorm. "After you."

I met and held his gaze for a long minute before guiding Claire inside. Something was definitely there between us, a weird spark I didn't quite understand. Most days, it resulted in me wanting to kill him. Today, however, it burned a little on the aroused side—a place typically only Claire could touch.

A consideration for later. It was probably just the mating circle fucking with my instincts.

Exos sat inside, his nose in one of those dark-magic textbooks. His Midnight Fae friend had sent a few more, along with a few suggestions.

Hence the training outside.

Kols, who was apparently a Midnight Fae Prince, told us to prepare for anything. Because if Elana was truly messing with death magic, she was capable of a hell of a lot more than burning her own house down. He even mentioned the possibility of spirit minions, whom Claire had immediately called zombies.

Cyrus inched a brow upward when his brother didn't react to our entrance. "Exos."

“Yeah, I know.” He shuffled some of the books around and stood. “We don’t exactly have a ceremonial space on campus, so how do you feel about your bedroom, Titus? It’s already pretty well decorated by you and Claire.”

Her cheeks reddened at the cause of those decorations, and I smiled. “Does that mean I can mate her naked?”

“I’d enjoy that,” Cyrus mused, glancing at his brother. “Reminds me of her spirit mating.”

Exos’s lips curled in memory, his gaze flickering with wicked intent as he looked at Claire. “I love this plan.”

She sputtered out an unintelligible response that earned several chuckles from the room. I moved behind her while fondling the hem of her shirt. “It’ll help keep you focused,” I whispered against her ear, inching the fabric up her skin.

“Focused?” she squeaked out. “How?”

I kissed her racing pulse, drawing the shirt higher and over her breasts. “Trust me.” Because it was already working. She wasn’t thinking about Elana at all now. Just the two hungry males watching as I tugged the cloth up and over her head.

Goose bumps trailed across her skin, followed by a swathe of heat as our element danced across the surface.

She barely seemed to notice me removing her shoes, socks, and pants, too lost to the sensation all three of us stirred inside her. Part of me thanked Cyrus and Exos for that, knowing how badly she needed to remain grounded in the moment without concern for what was happening outside or in another realm.

This moment was about our mating.

And I accepted that Cyrus and Exos were very much a part of that.

I unsnapped her bra and slid the straps from her shoulders, revealing her hard nipples to the room. Then sent a strand of fire across the lace of her panties, singeing them at her sides and causing the rest to fall to the floor. “Beautiful,” I said against her ear, running my hands up and down her sides. “Ready, sweetheart?”

She swallowed, her back relaxing into my chest as she placed her palms over my grip. “Yes.”

I smiled. “Good.”

Exos turned away first, heading toward my room.

Cyrus followed, but not before running his gaze over Claire one more

time. I couldn't exactly blame him. Our mate without clothes served as the best kind of distraction.

I lifted her into my arms and carried her to the bedroom, not releasing her until we stood beside the bed. She clung to my shirt, then crinkled her brow. "Wait."

Wait? My heart skipped a beat, uncertainty an evil presence in my soul, until I felt the stirring of her power.

A flame erupted down my spine as she effortlessly sawed through my supposedly fireproof shirt. As it disintegrated to the floor, I wondered—not for the first time in her presence—if I needed to invest in a new wardrobe.

My pants were next, her fire coming awfully close to my stiffening dick.

She stroked a flicker of heat across it, reminding me of a kiss, before teasing the head and completing the job.

"If I have to be naked, so do you," she said, her palms resting against my abdomen as she lifted a challenging brow while the rest of my clothes turned to embers at our feet. Even my shoes.

"I'm starting to wonder if she needs the bond to help her focus, or just sex," Cyrus commented conversationally.

"That was impressive," Exos agreed. "Maybe it's both?"

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her to me. "I suggest you start the vows, Exos. Before our mouths become too busy to repeat the words."

The vows came quickly and efficiently, each statement breathed against each other's mouth.

I, Claire, accept the power that binds me to Titus, born of Fire. To cherish and respect, through all the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part. I give unto him my heat, my passion, and my internal flame, and accept his in return. My element is now his just as his is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake him for another, my fire forever belonging to him and to him alone.

I promised her the same, my soul igniting as the finality of our bond slipped into place. The room grew hot from the fire flaring between us, causing Exos and Cyrus to excuse themselves before the true inferno began.

An inferno that I assured Claire would blaze all night long.

One she happily accepted.

Over and over again.

Chapter 32

Claire



Every part of me ached from Titus's attentions. He'd more than lived up to his pledge to fuck me all night. And then some.

A glance at the clock showed it was well past noon, meaning we'd only slept a handful of hours. Not that I minded. Titus had provided me with the escape I needed from the reality looming over our heads.

I turned in his arms, smiling as he trailed a molten rope of fire over my naked thigh, inching up and up.

"Mmm," I moaned. "You're going to make it so I can't even walk later." My eyelids fluttered closed, reliving the all-consuming sex that had left me both sore and empowered. Our vows had come hot and quick, pledging our souls to one another in an endless cascade of fire and bliss.

Titus kissed my cheek, then grinned against my skin. "Did I wear you out, sweetheart? Or can I wake you properly?" He punctuated the request by sliding his fire inside me—*down there*.

"*Fuck*," I groaned, arching into his touch, my body alighting from the inside in response to his hot intrusion. Rather than burning me, I reveled in the way I absorbed the power as it fueled my spirit. "More."

He inflamed his elemental touch and grabbed my hip to keep me from moving.

Mate-bonding with Titus was everything I had imagined it could be and so much more. His raw need slithered over me, trailing a sea of molten lava in its wake up and down my spine.

An eternal flame.

That was my Titus.

He wasn't royal, but he didn't need to be. His passion more than made up

for his lack of a noble bloodline.

“You’ve really been holding back on me,” I accused, sensing his yearning pooling beneath his skin like liquid fire.

“You have no idea, sweetheart.” He nuzzled my neck, his lips caressing my pulse. “This is only the beginning.”

My mouth parted when his heat licked at my swollen clit. It both hurt and soothed, causing me to crave another stroke. I would always want more from my Fire Fae.

And it seemed he felt the same, if the erection pressing up against my thigh was anything to go by. Titus possessed an impressive stamina, something our mate-bonding had only seemed to strengthen.

“I will fuck you over and over again,” he said, confirming my thoughts. His palm slid to my lower back, branding my skin. “I will consume every inch of you until the two of us melt together as one.”

Oh, I’d long ago melted. Warmth and liquid heat pooled all around us, adding more scars to the floor and bedroom walls. It was a miracle we hadn’t burned the entire building down.

Titus’s fingers trailed back to my hip and down to the slickness between my thighs. The world turned red as his flames devoured me from the inside out, his touch a searing stamp of our promises to one another.

“Yes, that’s it, Claire,” he breathed, his mouth hovering over mine. His kiss belied the intensity brewing below, an intensity he bolstered by pushing me to my back and replacing his fingers with his hard cock.

I gasped as he slid inside me, his claiming pure and passionate and so fucking hot.

“More,” I demanded, lifting my hips into his and urging him to take me deeper.

“Always,” he returned, nipping my lower lip.

And then he was kissing me.

Hard.

Fast.

Perfection.

He rivaled the rhythm with his lower body, taking me to new heights with every stroke. “I love you,” I chanted. “I love you, Titus.” Maybe it was in poor form to announce such a thing in the heat of our passion, but that was what defined us—our fire.

“I love you, too, Claire,” he whispered, his tongue dancing along my

lower lip. “My mate.”

“My mate,” I repeated, squeezing my thighs around him and sighing as he slowed the pace. What had begun as a rough taking morphed into gentle lovemaking, his body worshiping mine in the best way.

Because he knew.

He always *knew*.

Exactly what I needed and how.

Tender strokes.

Followed by intense, deep thrusts.

Erotic and emotional.

Arousing and heartfelt.

My Titus.

My fire mate.

My love.

Chapter 33

Exos



“**A**t this rate, she won’t be physically capable of mating with Sol tonight,” Cyrus said, joining me at the table. He scanned the page of the text I had open and whistled low. “Well, would you look at that.”

“It’s like they wrote this about Elana,” I muttered, reviewing all the ways a Midnight Fae could absorb the powers of others. “Kols says it’s not practiced often.”

“I imagine not. It sounds painful for both parties involved.” He was still skimming. “A lot of sacrifice required.”

“Which explains the plague that took out our kind.” Because all of this magic necessitated death, typically in the form of absorbing a soul and gifting it to the Midnight Fae gods as payment. “She used this spell”—I found a previously opened book, turned it to the right page, and gave it to Cyrus—“and her spirit magic to create a vortex of power. It’s how she created the death fields.”

“They’re all the souls she’s refused to release from this plane,” my brother finished for me, his eyebrows lifting. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, blowing out a breath. “It proves she’s coming back, because those souls still exist.”

“And she needs them to practice her fucked-up magic,” he surmised, taking the words out of my mouth—again.

I nodded. “Exactly.”

He collapsed into his chair, meeting my gaze. “We need to tell Claire.”

“We need Claire to finish her mating to Sol first.” Because if these texts were right, Elana had amassed more power than any other fae in our realm.

And our only hope was that Claire could use the five elements to take her down. “She needs earth to complete the circle.”

“Then I should probably tell Titus to stop exhausting her,” Cyrus suggested, his lips curling.

I shook my head. “You keep flirting with him and he’s going to retaliate.”

“Good,” Cyrus replied, standing. “I can’t wait to see how that works out for him.”

“We both know you’ll end up on top,” I said, returning to my texts.

“But he doesn’t know that,” my brother mused.

“Who doesn’t know what?” Vox asked, entering the dorm’s lounge with Sol following close behind.

“Sol doesn’t know that he’s mating Claire tonight,” I announced smoothly before Cyrus could comment on the sensual game he had in store for Titus.

The Earth Fae froze, his eyebrows lifting. “What?”

“She needs to complete the circle,” I said, feeling like a broken record. “She needs her earth.”

“And she’s okay with this plan?” Sol pressed, no doubt fully aware of the fucking going on in the other room.

“Of course,” Cyrus replied, his tone one of confident ease. “I was just about to go ask her for a time. But perhaps you can tell me instead and I’ll just relay the details?”

Sol’s mouth opened and closed several times.

I closed my book and leaned back, folding my arms. “What’s wrong, Earth Fae? Afraid of the competition Titus is providing in the other room?”

The giant scowled. “No.”

“Then what’s the problem?” I demanded, not having time for this. We had a hybrid fae on the loose with an undetermined return date.

And she was definitely going to return.

Those texts proved that not only did she need the death fields but she also needed to remove any and all powers that stood in her way of accessing those fields. And now, I just happened to be that power. The second I’d learned of her energy source, I’d used my spirit to seal it off from all external parties. Only I could enter that field now. Until someone removed me from the equation.

No one knew I’d set myself up as the bait yet. Mostly because I’d just done it this morning. Cyrus would be the first one I told, as soon as we

figured out this final mating.

“Nothing’s ready,” Sol grumbled. “I’ve not even asked her if that’s what she wants.”

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t she want to mate you, Sol? You’re already on the third level. That makes you engaged by her human standards.”

His cheeks tinted a red shade. “Yeah, I know, but I wanted to ask her... properly.”

Cyrus smiled. “The closet romantic. Let me guess—peaches were going to be involved?”

The ground rumbled beneath us as Sol narrowed his gaze. “Yeah, well, unlike you, I value consent.”

And all the amusement in the room died.

“Excuse me?” Cyrus said slowly. “Are you trying to accuse me of something?”

“It’s not an accusation. It’s the truth. You mated Claire while she was unconscious, without a voice.”

“To save her fucking life,” Cyrus retorted, taking a step forward. “Or are you saying I should have just let her die? Because if that’s the case, then you’re not worthy of her at all.”

“I’m more worthy of her than you are, *Spirit Fae*.” The words tumbled from Sol’s mouth, followed by a vibration of the foundation of the building, his power mounting by the second. “At least I’ll never manipulate her into anything. Won’t threaten to break her fucking soul. But you can’t promise that, can you? Water Prince or not, you’re still a Spirit Fae at heart. And Spirit Fae *hurt*.”

Right. One step forward, twenty steps backward.

I pushed away from the table to stand in front of Cyrus before he could physically react.

It didn’t stop the whip of water that lashed out and struck Sol across the cheek. Or the words that seethed from my brother’s mouth. “I have been patient with you, Sol. Very fucking patient. But your misconception regarding Spirit Fae? It ends today.” He shoved him again with another strand of liquid, then wrapped it around his throat. “Spirit Fae are not the only ones who can inflict pain and harm. Shall I demonstrate?”

I opened my mouth to tell him to stop, when a root burst through the floor and circled Cyrus’s waist. Squeezing. Hard.

“Stop!” Vox shouted.

But the two fae were lost to their elements now.

Sol had already conjured another thick branch, this one coming through the window from the outside, and went directly for Cyrus's chest.

While my brother lashed out at it with a tidal wave, snapping it into pieces.

Chaos ensued as Vox tried to blast them apart with air, and I used my fire to incinerate both the water and roots infiltrating the dorm.

They were going to take this fucking place down.

"What are you doing?!" Claire screamed, her body clad in a sheet as she took in the wreckage of the living area. Her power flew out of her, smacking all of us in the chest as she forced us to different sections of the room.

Spirit, I recognized.

Not her other elements.

But her spirit.

She'd used it to force our compliance, and the look on Sol's face bespoke of just how much that hurt him.

Shit.

"What the fuck is wrong with all of you?" Titus demanded, coming up behind Claire in a pair of boxers and nothing else. "We have an unconscious Spirit Fae, who happens to be Claire's mother, resting in the other room, and you all are trying to take down the damn building on our heads!"

Cyrus had the grace to appear contrite.

Vox just looked frustrated.

And Sol, he was utterly broken.

I sighed, rubbing my hand down my face. This was not a team ready for Elana's pending arrival. It was a clusterfuck of emotions and twisted-up pasts. I focused on the core of the pain—Sol.

"I don't know what happened to you or who did it," I told him. "But I can promise it wasn't me, Cyrus, or Claire. And this animosity you carry toward our gifts? It has to end. Now. Either you trust us or you don't. It's as easy as that."

Claire froze, understanding seeming to punch her in the chest. "Wait." She cleared her throat and turned to face Sol. "You think we would, no, that *I* could ever use my power against you? In a negative way?" She released all four of us in an instant, her touch against my spirit gone in a flash. "You think I could hurt you? Intentionally?" She blinked, but not fast enough to hide the tears blossoming in her gaze.

It had me wanting to take a step toward her, to pull her into my arms.

But this wasn't my hurt to fix.

This hurt belonged to Sol.

"Do you not know me at all?" she whispered, her heart breaking before our eyes.

Cyrus gave Sol a thunderous look, as though he wanted to rip him limb from limb.

Vox merely sighed and shook his head.

And Titus appeared ready to join Cyrus in his rampage.

"Claire," Sol started, taking a step forward.

But she took one step back, her head swaying back and forth. "I... I don't know what to do with this. I thought... I thought we..." She trailed off, swallowing. "I need... I need a minute."

Her shoulders hunched as she turned away from everyone and left the room.

Titus took a step to go after her, but I called out, "No. Don't."

He glanced back at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

"Sol needs to do it," I said, gritting my teeth at how hard it was not to follow Claire myself. "He needs to fix this." I looked at him. "You're either in our circle or you're out, Sol. No more waffling. No more distrust. You fucking fix what you just did, or you leave. Your choice."

I couldn't stand there to see what he'd do.

Couldn't think beyond the beating of my heart.

Because if he didn't go to Claire and heal the pain I felt radiating from her soul, I'd fucking kill him.

Which meant I needed space, too, before I did something we'd all regret.

I grabbed my brother—who was seething just as much as I was—and forced him to follow me outside. "I need to talk to you."

"Now?" he demanded.

"Now." I had his shirt gripped in my fist as I all but yanked him outside. Sol's bullshit notwithstanding, we had Elana to worry about and a trap to discuss. One I now regretted igniting because it meant she'd be here sooner rather than later.

And after that show in the living area?

Yeah, none of us were ready.

Which meant we needed a plan B.

“I want to talk about contingency plans,” I told him.

He snorted. “Why?”

I met his storming gaze. “Because we’re going to need them for when Elana realizes I’ve cut off her access to the death fields.”

His eyebrows lifted. Then a curse tumbled from his mouth.

“Yeah. My feelings exactly,” I muttered, running my fingers through my hair. “We’re going to need backup.”

He huffed a laugh. “Brother, at this point, we’re going to need a fucking miracle.”

For once, I hated that he was right.

Chapter 34

Sol



Well, now I'd really fucked things up. I'd never seen Claire look at me like that, and I stood like an idiot in the destroyed living room.

Fix it.

Exos's last order to me before he dragged his brother out of the room, although a part of me wanted Cyrus to try and take my head off. Prove me right. Prove what the Spirit Fae were really capable of.

Yet, if all Spirit Fae were evil, then that meant Claire was evil, too.

In my heart, I knew she wasn't evil at all. And neither was Exos or Cyrus.

Which left me with one option—to figure this the fuck out. And, as Exos had said, fix it.

Clenching my fists, I gathered the courage to go after my mate. I'd hurt her deeply, and raw emotions ripped through the bond-mate circle. An apology wouldn't be enough, but I had to start somewhere.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Vox demanded, not hiding his disgust. He was used to my tantrums, but this time I'd gone too far. And even I knew it.

"I don't know what to say to her," I admitted as I stared down the hall. "I love her, but..." *She's part Spirit Fae.*

"But nothing," Vox said with a snap of wind across my face. "If you love her, then that's all you need to know." He pointed down the hall. "Like Exos said, you're going to fix this, or you're going to get the fuck out."

It stung to hear Vox give me an ultimatum like that. We'd always been close, but on this there was no room for negotiation.

Vox was right.

They all were right.

All of her mates were more than capable of calming Claire down. I was the only one not fully mated to her, which made me feel least qualified for the job. Still, I'd created this mess, so I was going to fix it, even if I had to bare my scarred spirit to her.

If I were being honest with myself, I'd admit that was what frightened me most—that she might see how damaged I really was.

But maybe that was exactly what I needed to do.

Show her everything. Trust her with not only my heart, but my very soul.

I found Claire in the next room with her back to me, the white sheet draped precariously low across her waist as she clutched the fabric to her chest. She stared out the window, up into the sky.

“Claire...” I swallowed, mostly because her shoulders stiffened upon hearing my voice. Not the kind of reaction I desired or liked from my intended mate. I moved closer, stopping just within touching distance. “Claire, I’m—”

She spun on me and growled before I had a chance to finish. Her eyes blazed with raw power from her bond with Titus.

“I don’t want an apology,” she said, stabbing a finger to my chest. The tiny digit held enough earth magic to stagger me back a step. “Actions speak louder than words, Sol. I would expect you to understand that by now, but clearly, you don’t. Or you couldn’t possibly think I’d ever intentionally hurt you.”

“You’re right,” I whispered, hanging my head low and splaying my palms open in surrender. “You’re right,” I repeated. “Actions do speak louder than words, Claire. And if I let you understand my history, you’d understand just how true that is.”

That seemed to soothe some of her ire, just enough to let a hint of curiosity through. “Then tell me.”

“I could,” I whispered, realizing in that moment exactly what I needed to do. How I could truly gain her trust and prove myself to her in kind. “But I’d rather show you, Claire.” She required more than words. I understood that better than anyone. So I’d give her everything.

My love.

My trust.

My very soul.

“There are two sides to a Spirit Fae,” I continued. “I want to show you the darker side. No, I *need* to show you, Claire.” I knelt beside the bed, pleading

with her. “Help me stop hiding who I am. See me, Claire.”

She studied me, her expression softening another fraction. “I do see you, Sol. I always have.”

“I’m not talking about my exterior.” I swallowed. “I’m talking about my soul.” I closed my eyes, my forehead meeting the mattress. “I need you to truly look, Claire. Go into my spirit and witness what was done to me. The pain. The torment. The marks I can feel but can’t actually see. The torture I can’t remember but have spent countless nights reliving in a sea of darkness and screams.”

My throat began to burn.

My heart pounding in my chest.

The memory of that night a haunting image just out of my reach.

“Do you know what it’s like to know something happened but not be able to detail it?” I wondered out loud, lifting my head to meet her gaze. “I remember the pain, the screams, my mother begging and my sister crying. Yet, I can’t tell you how it all unfolded.”

I paused, needing a breath.

Then forged ahead.

Because she needed to understand. It was the only way to explain my fear and my inherent reactions to her element.

“All I know is, a Spirit Fae plagued us that night. The fae reached into my soul and shredded it, did the same to my mother and my sister, and I had to watch them gradually die for over a decade as a result. No one believed me. But I saw the signs, Claire. I knew what was happening to them and couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it.”

I trembled, their pain ingrained into my mind. The visual of them so ghastly and pale on their deathbeds.

“Something happened that night, Claire,” I whispered. “Something that haunts me to the very core of my element and has left me without access to the source, even with my supposed royal ties. And you can see the scars of it on my spirit.”

I reached for her hand, which, thankfully, she allowed me to take.

“Look at me. Beneath the surface. Find my spirit and tell me what you see. Because it kills a part of me to know those marks are there and to not be able to prove it to my own eyes. Be my eyes, Claire. Please. Tell me what you see.” I brought her palm to my chest and closed my eyes, waiting.

“Sol...” My name sounded so broken from her lips, but I refused to back

down. I hadn't realized how much I needed this until now.

"Please, Claire," I whispered. "I'm ready. Use your spirit and tell me who I am. Tell me what you see."

She brought her other palm to my face, and I leaned into her touch, craving the truth. I trusted her to do this, to explore me without harm, to learn my spirit and all the broken pieces of me.

Because that was how I felt beneath it all.

Shattered.

Alone.

Lonely.

She had my heart, but what we both needed all this time was for her to access my soul. I'd kept it locked away and out of reach, protecting that final part of me that was so wounded long ago.

It was finally time for me to stop hiding.

For her.

For *us*.

Her breath fanned my lips a second before she kissed me. So soft and tentative as I felt the first stirrings of her power brushing against mine. I didn't retreat. I didn't even flinch. I merely accepted this as our fate. Welcomed her into me. And unleashed everything I owned for her to explore.

Warmth spiraled through my center, blossoming in my chest as I *felt* her spirit brush mine. No icy talons or sharp stabs of pain. Just a pleasant comfort. My Claire, caressing me in a way I never could have anticipated.

It stole the breath from my lungs.

Escalated my pulse and subdued it at the same time.

Left me depleted and exhilarated all in a single second.

Vitality, I realized. *She's gifting me the comfort of her vitality.*

And it brought a tear to my eye, the soothing touch not one I expected. "Claire," I whispered, my throat clogging with emotion.

"Shh," she murmured, her fingertips trailing over my cheek to my neck. "I can't mend your scars, but I can relieve some of the tension in them."

I shivered as her actions followed her words, an invisible weight lifting from my shoulders with each passing moment. The intimacy of the moment alleviated all my worries. Filled me with hope. Replenished my every desire. By the time she pulled away, I felt so full of life I thought I might burst.

Instead, another tear fell from my eye, one she caught with her finger. And she sighed. "Oh, Sol, I can't even imagine the pain you endured to

receive such damage.”

“That’s not even the worst part for me,” I admitted. “I can deal with the pain. It’s not knowing how it happened that haunts me.” My eyelids opened to find her gazing at me with so much love it made my heart hurt. “I survived, Claire. That’s the biggest punishment of it all—having to watch the plague take my mother and my sister while leaving me healthy and alive in their place. And never understanding why.”

“While only knowing a Spirit Fae caused it all,” she added, her voice whisper-soft. “How old were you when it happened?”

“Seven.” I swallowed. “My sister was only five. She lived for over a decade with that darkness inside her, stunting her growth and abilities, until finally she died. And you know what she said to me that day?”

It hurt to repeat, to relive the memory, but Claire needed to know. I had to tell her everything I could. To help her understand why her element terrified me.

I cleared my throat, pushing the emotion down into my chest, where it festered and burned. “She... she told me she was thankful,” I managed to say, my voice hoarse. “She was thankful it was finally her time to die. Because she knew it wouldn’t hurt anymore. And she’d be with my mother again. Her only regret was leaving me.”

To live a lonely existence while always wondering why it all happened.

What I did to deserve such a cruel fate.

“Sometimes I think I received the worst punishment of all,” I whispered. “Because I survived. Because I had to bury them both in the earth. And live on. Without them.” My history was the reason Aflora meant so much to me. She was there through it all, living the agony at my side.

She was possibly the only one who understood.

Until Claire.

“Oh, Sol,” my mate said now, her arms encircling my neck and pulling me up onto the bed to join her. She didn’t cry or cast pity my way, two things I was grateful for. Instead, she curled into me and gave me her strength, her spirit caressing mine in a kiss of life.

We lay like that for what might have been hours.

Me lost to the memories of my past.

Claire soothing my fractured soul.

I relaxed into our embrace, feeling closer to her than ever before, with my hand drifting up and down her bare side. *Content*, I realized. *I’m truly*

content.

Because she was mine.

And I was hers.

Not officially, though. Not quite.

“I know I’ve not been the best mate,” I started, deciding that might be the understatement of the century. “Trusting Exos and Cyrus will never come easily to me. But deep down, I know they’re not evil. I know they’d never do this to a person out of spite. It’s just the mere idea that they could that unnerves me. And you possess the same ability.”

“I do,” she murmured, her fingers tracing patterns into my shirt as she rested her head against my shoulder. “But the thought of harming another in that way sickens me, Sol. I would never do it. And certainly not to you.”

“I know.” I tightened my hold around her, squeezing her. “I know, Claire.”

“Cyrus and Exos wouldn’t either.”

“I know that, too. But whenever I feel spirit energy in use, it... it makes me ill. Because all I remember is how it was used against me in a way I can’t recall. All I hear are my sister’s dying words. All I see are my mother’s gaunt features and her lips trying to form one final smile.” I closed my eyes against the pain. “I don’t know if it will ever go away.”

“How did you feel when my spirit touched yours?” she asked softly, peeking up at me. “Did that hurt you?”

I shook my head. “No. It felt...” I searched my brain for the right words. “Soothing. Good. Natural.”

She studied me for a long moment, then propped herself up on my chest. “Then maybe that’s what you need to heal. I would never wish to replace your memories, but we could add new ones, positive ones, that you can draw upon whenever you feel spirit in use.”

Her soul kissed mine with her statement, whether on purpose or not, I wasn’t sure. But I felt her presence there, the warmth of her nearness and acceptance, her calming energy surrounding mine. It elicited a shiver from deep within, the ease with which she accessed my soul both unnerving and sensual. A conflict of interest that would likely take years to fix. However, her idea held merit.

“I would be willing to try,” I said, my voice much softer than it’d ever been before. “But only with you.” Exos and Cyrus meant well, something I understood on a fundamental level, but the notion of allowing them access to

my soul had all my walls flaring.

Still, I could admit that I owed both of them an apology.

Especially Cyrus.

My comments earlier were unfounded and unfair. I knew he had no choice but to mate Claire. Was thankful he'd done it to save her life. And it was very clear to me that she didn't regret it at all. Even if I didn't understand her attraction to the royal prick.

Her lips curled, amusement flashing in her eyes. "I can feel your animosity toward Cyrus. He's not that bad, you know."

"I know." I frowned. "But he's still a dick."

"It's part of his charm," she replied, smiling. "And he respects your boundaries, Sol. I've been with him on the spirit plane, have seen how he avoids touching your spirit. Exos, too."

"You found my soul on the spirit plane?"

She shook her head. "No. You found me. You all did. Like you were protecting me from myself and the source itself." She rested her chin on my sternum. "Exos and Cyrus were very careful not to touch any of you, or any of the other souls drifting around. I don't know who did this to you, but it definitely wasn't them."

"I know," I said. "Logically, I know. But in the moment..."

"It's hard not to fall on old memories," she replied. "Yes, I understand. But it's something we can work through, Sol. Together. If you want."

I didn't hesitate. "I do, Claire. I want forever with you, too. The whole fight started because Exos demanded I mate you, but it felt wrong to do something without talking to you first. I wanted to ask you formally. I had it all planned with peaches, too." It seemed ridiculous now. Childish. But with all the chaos of late, I wanted to give her that moment of peace and sweetness. To escape to our special place and discuss forever together.

"Peaches?" she repeated, her eyes smiling. "I do love peaches." She moved up my body to press her palms into the pillows on either side of my head, her bare breasts hanging over my chest as she angled herself over me. It didn't seem intentional on her part, but I was definitely enjoying the sexual connotation behind her words, coupled with the visual.

Her expression, however, fell serious. Her gaze intent.

"I want forever with you, too, Sol," she said. "But it requires accepting all of me. Including my spirit. And Cyrus. And Exos. I need to know you can do that."

I lifted my palm to cup her cheek while my other arm slid around her back, holding her. “I already do, Claire. My mind may fight my intentions, but my heart has accepted you all for longer than I can admit. My soul will take longer, at least with Cyrus and Exos. However, you’re mine, Claire. And I’m yours. If you’ll have me, that is.”

She canted her head. “Forever?”

“Forever,” I repeated. “Everything I have is yours, if you will have me.”

Tension eased from her features, her lips curling as she bent to brush her mouth against mine. “Then I will take you, Sol, every single piece, and I’ll put you back together again.”

She kissed me again, this time with more sensuality and intent.

“Tomorrow?” I asked softly, not wanting to spend another day without finalizing our bond but also knowing I needed time to create the perfect oasis for our ceremony. To show her I truly meant what I said.

“Tomorrow,” she agreed, falling into my embrace. “But for tonight, I want you to kiss me, Sol. Show me I’m yours.”

I threaded my fingers through her hair, holding her above me. “Only if you return the favor by claiming me in return.”

Her spirit settled against mine. “Oh, Sol, you’ve been mine for a while now.”

I smiled against her mouth. “Good. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

“Stop flirting and kiss me, Sol.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

I took her mouth with my own, unleashing all my emotions into our embrace and allowing her unfettered access to every part of me.

My soul had never felt more alive.

All because of my Claire.

My little flower, the one who’d finally given me the chance to bloom.

Chapter 35

Sol



Everything had to be perfect. Especially after all the shit that went down yesterday.

I needed to reaffirm to Claire that I loved her. To prove that she was my rock. And to make sure she knew I was in this for eternity. Not just with her, but with the entire circle.

Surveying the oasis I'd created brought a grin to my face. I'd spent all day on this project, and it was perfect. All of Claire's favorite plants and trees covered the grounds, stirring notes of sweet fruits throughout the air. Flowers of all shapes, sizes, and colors lined the walkways, and the sprout of the World Tree I'd called into the center now towered high into the sky.

Across from it sat a fountain—one Cyrus had created to commemorate the occasion. He meant it as a peace offering, which I'd accepted and returned by giving him a bucket of peaches. He nibbled on one now from his spot on the path, his icy gaze grinning in approval. "Almost done, Earth Fae?"

"Yeah." I knelt and inspired a few more flowers to bloom, then nodded. "I'm ready."

"You are," he agreed, clapping me on the back. "Or Exos might kill you."

I snorted. "He could try." And probably succeed. But he wouldn't do that to Claire.

"Let's go," Cyrus said, leading the way.

I left the grove behind with a sense that everything was going to go perfectly tonight. Claire loved life and earth and adored the stillness of everlasting promises our element offered, just as much as I did. She'd taught me how to embrace the source of my power, and now I would share my

world with her.

I couldn't fucking wait.

Returning to the Spirit Quad, Exos cocked a brow. "Does our giant have a skip in his step?"

Vox grinned as he adjusted his warrior's tail. "I'd say so. Wonder why that could be?"

I opened my mouth to tell them both to fuck off, but the music of Claire's giggles cresting the corner made me pause.

A red glow preceded her as she made her entrance, flames forming a thin dress down her delicious curves as Titus rested a hand on her hip. He never took his eyes from her, glued just as I was to the raw beauty of her power.

"May I present our glowing mate?" Titus pressed a sensual kiss to her neck, then waggled his brows playfully.

Claire brushed him away and smiled shyly at me. "Hey, Sol."

Her nerves were palpable, likely a result of being bathed in Titus's passion, but it didn't bother me at all. She was my mate, my heart, my rock. And she radiated such joy that I couldn't help but be grateful to Titus for making her smile like that.

I offered my hand to her, feeling massive when she slipped her tiny fingers into my waiting palm. "Hello, little flower."

Her cheeks deepened in a ruby blush as she transitioned her power to accommodate mine. Fire made way for bronze, and her dress took on a metallic hue.

Beautiful.

I bent to taste her plump lips and Claire lifted her chin. Just a quick kiss, meant to—

An icy chill swept through the Spirit Quad, causing us to freeze.

Silence.

Followed by an agonized scream that split straight into my skull.

"Mom!" Claire shouted, eyes wide as she spun and tumbled out of my grip. Her dress melted to ash as she ran toward the bedroom where we kept Ophelia isolated. Titus was hot on her heels, his shirt flowing off his body to wrap around hers, as our mate seemed completely oblivious to being stark naked.

All of us stopped in the hallway, and Claire entered first.

Ophelia shrieked, flinging herself into the corner of the room, her eyes wide with raw terror. She still resembled more of a corpse than something

alive, her stringy hair a ghastly veil that framed her gaunt face.

“Elana!” she screeched and pressed herself further into the corner, curling her knees up to her chest as she made herself small.

Claire glanced at the five of us. “Don’t frighten her. Please.”

My jaw flexed. Claire might believe Elana was behind all of this, but until I saw substantial proof of that, Ophelia remained on my guilty list.

The bitch had tried to kill my mate, something Claire seemed to have forgotten. But she insisted on taking the gentle approach.

Fine.

Obedying, I nodded and eased into the shadows where I could keep an eye on her should Ophelia go from cowering corpse to crazed killer.

But Exos took a step forward, unwilling to hide. As Spirit King, I supposed he had the most right to that claim. This was the female who supposedly demolished his kind. I got it.

Titus and Vox lingered in the doorway while Cyrus joined me in the shadows, his spirit humming at the ready. Between him and his brother, Ophelia wouldn’t be able to pull any tricks on us.

And if she did, well, I could always smash her face in.

Claire glared at me when the ground rumbled, and I pulled my power back into my body, biting the side of my cheek to keep myself in check.

“Mom, it’s me. It’s Claire,” my mate said, her voice low and sweet as Titus’s shirt billowed around her thighs. She seemed to frown at it, momentarily distracted. And my lips parted as she burned away the garment, replacing it with an array of fluttering pink butterflies.

“When did you learn to do that?” I wondered out loud.

Her lips quirked up. “Aflora taught me a few wardrobe tricks.” Her amusement was short-lived, her focus quickly returning to her mother. “Mom?”

Ophelia blinked up at Claire, her expression competing between terror and awe. “C-Claire?” My mate reached out to comfort the creature, but the moment of lucidity passed and Ophelia’s face twisted with horror. “No! Stop it! I can’t take it anymore!”

A shock wave of spirit flashed out and slammed into my chest. Exos and Cyrus were ready and held off the attack. Exos shoved out with raw power, making Ophelia’s eyes roll back in her head.

“Sleep,” he commanded.

Ophelia collapsed, and Claire caught her just before her head slammed

against the wall. She glared back at the Spirit King. “Was that necessary?”

Exos didn’t flinch or respond to her censure. “It’s as I feared. Her mind can’t handle the two decades of torture Elana has put her through. We’re going to have to get answers a different way.” He shared a look with his brother. “We could go into her mind...”

“No,” Claire said with finality. Exos might be a king, but Claire’s gaze burned with a regal authority of her own. She held power over the five elements, not to mention our hearts. “We’re going to do this my way, Exos. Nobody is touching her mind *ever* again.”

When Claire struggled to drag Ophelia’s limp body back to the bed, I left the shadows and gently took the woman from my mate’s arms, then draped the frail female over the sheets as carefully as I could.

“Thank you,” Claire whispered, taking my hand and guiding me out of the room. “Call me if she wakes up,” she called over her shoulder, the words a demand, not a request.

I couldn’t help the grin that formed at the edge of my mouth. I loved hearing Claire boss around the royal brothers.

And their responding smiles said they felt the same, even if they didn’t agree with her.

Vox and Titus followed us into the living area, where Claire began to pace.

“That went well,” the Fire Fae said, crossing his arms and settling his gaze on Claire. He looked as if he wanted to go to his mate, to comfort her, but Claire was too shaken for the unbridled raw emotions Titus inspired in her right now.

She needed something solid, a rock she could hold on to.

As if hearing my thoughts, she stopped by my side. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, hugging her close and kissing the top of her head. “It’s going to be okay, little flower.”

She nodded, then melted into my embrace. “I know. But I need to be here when she wakes up again. There are things she can tell us, things that can help us, and I don’t know if she’ll talk to anyone else.” She flicked her gaze to Exos and Cyrus as they entered. “And she won’t be able to if they just knock her out every time she screams.”

“She’s suffered intense pain and torment, Claire,” Exos replied, unapologetic. “Her mind is unreliable, which means defensive energy is our only approach until we can ease her into her new reality.”

“He’s right,” Cyrus agreed. “I can’t even begin to understand what she’s endured these last two decades. And I can’t decide whose situation is worse—hers or Mortus’s.”

“They’re equally bad,” Titus muttered. “Have you seen how lost he is out there?” He gestured to the makeshift sparring grounds outside. They were empty right now due to the evening hour. But his point was made.

“It’s bad,” Exos agreed. “They’re both in rough shape.”

“Which leaves us without additional information on Elana,” Cyrus added. “Luckily, we’ve learned a lot from those books. Such as the source of her power.”

“Which is?” Claire asked, her brow furrowing.

“The death fields,” Exos replied, glancing at his brother. “The spirit energy she’s imprisoned there is used for sacrifices to the dark arts, particularly death magic. Fortunately, she can’t access it anymore.”

“And unfortunately, that means Exos is her new target,” Cyrus added, narrowing his gaze at the Spirit King. “I gave you a day, brother.”

“And I said we would discuss it after the matings were done,” he gritted out through his teeth.

“We’re on a time clock here and—”

“Wait,” Claire interjected, cutting off Cyrus. “You set yourself up as bait?” Her voice broke on that last word. “And didn’t tell us?”

“I needed a way to guarantee she’d come here,” he said. “Now she has one.”

“Which would be great if we were better prepared to receive her attack,” Claire countered.

He didn’t appear at all fazed by her combative tone. “My choices were to shut down her access or allow her to continue feeding her dark energy, and the latter didn’t feel like a great option. So I did what was best for the Spirit Fae—what was best for all of us.”

“What do you mean by ‘feeding her dark energy’ with the death fields?” Vox asked, his dark brows furrowing.

“The Spirit Fae plague wasn’t a plague at all,” Exos explained. “It was a way for her to trap the souls of dead fae, to use as fuel—*sacrifices*—for her death magic.”

“You’re certain?” I asked.

He nodded. “And from what I can tell, it’s what she’s been doing to the Earth Fae. She’s been slowly stealing their lives and putting the remnants of

their souls in the fields. Refusing to grant them access to the afterlife.”

Vox frowned. “As Spirit King, can’t you just release them all?”

Exos shook his head. “No. Not without undoing her magic. The best I could do was block her access to the souls by placing a spirit shield over the entry point.”

“Which will make her come after you.” Claire dampened her bottom lip, considering. Then sighed. “You still should have told us.”

“You’ve been a little preoccupied with your matings, princess,” he replied softly. “Which was more important to all of us.”

“But how am I supposed to mate Sol tonight with my mom being in a spirit-induced coma and the very real threat of Elana’s impending arrival?” She glanced up at me, her eyes filled with sadness. “It won’t be fair to mate you tonight with my mind preoccupied by everything else.”

I pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “I understand, little flower.” It broke my heart not to complete the bond with Claire, especially when she needed my earth to fully ground her. But Claire was right; these distractions would damper our joining and ruin what should be a joyous experience. “We’ll postpone the mating until after things have cooled down.”

“But she needs to complete the circle,” Exos interjected. “It’ll strengthen her.”

She shivered in my grasp like a leaf about to tear itself from its tree, defying his words. “Not in this state,” I argued. “Mating tonight while all of this is weighing upon us will taint the bonding.”

Exos eyed us both, then blew out a long breath and shook his head. “Damn it.” He glanced at Cyrus.

“He’s right,” his brother said softly.

“I know,” Exos agreed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I know.”

“We’ll figure this out,” Cyrus vowed. “All of us. But first, I suggest Claire spend tonight with Sol to at least absorb what she can through the bond.”

I nodded. “I’ll give her whatever she needs.”

“But you need your element, too.” She tugged on my shirt, demanding my attention. “You only give me what you can, Sol.”

“Okay.” I kissed her forehead. “But I have a lot of power.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Sol.”

“What? I do.” I lifted her up into my arms, loving the way her butterflies seemed to flutter around me in response. “I’ll prove it.”

“Yeah, go prove it,” Titus encouraged. “But try to get some rest with Sol. We’ll watch over your mother in case she wakes again.”

Vox, Exos, and Cyrus all nodded in agreement.

“No more fainting spells,” she said, aiming the words at the two Spirit Fae.

“Yes, ma’am,” Exos drawled, winking at her.

I started walking toward my bedroom before she could argue, not wanting to waste another moment of our time together. We might not be mating tonight, but we could bond in other ways.

Claire seemed to agree, because her dress dissolved the moment her body hit my bed, the oversized mattress large enough to accommodate my size. My gaze raked over her.

She curled under the sheets like a seed settling into the earth. Her blue eyes seemed to glow in the dim light awarded by the window. “Sorry,” she murmured. “The butterflies were starting to itch.”

I smiled, peeling away my clothes and joining her, to add warmth to the cool sheets.

She settled against my chest and draped a leg over my thigh.

“I’m here for anything you need,” I said, stroking her bare shoulder.

She tucked her chin against my neck and breathed in, then exhaled, and her breath swept goose bumps across my skin.

“Fuck, Claire, don’t do that, or I’ll be here for *more* than you need right now,” I said as my cock reacted to what she did to me.

She giggled and snuggled closer, wrapping her arms as far as she could around my chest. “Sorry.” She didn’t sound very apologetic.

I took three long breaths and tried to bring to mind images that would calm the rumble in my chest.

Hmm.

Glacier—hate his face. He’s so not good enough for Aflora. But I knew better than to tell her that.

Oh, Titus melting my stone around my ankles. The bastard had made me look like an idiot.

“Do you think Vox will join us?” Claire asked, interrupting my attempt at a mental distraction. Because just the thought of Claire between Vox and me had me rock hard.

I shifted my weight. “Do you want him to?”

She pondered the question, then rested her head on my chest, her hair

splaying over me. “I think I just want to rest. For now. It’s been a long few days. Weeks. Months.” She laughed softly. “You know what I mean.”

I did. But I wouldn’t change any of it for the world.

“We can rest,” I agreed, stroking my fingers through her hair.

She fell quiet for so long that I thought perhaps she slept.

But I felt her eyelashes moving against my skin, her mind clearly racing.

“What are you thinking about, Claire?” I asked, drawing my thumb down her spine and back up again.

Her breath feathered over my skin, reminding me of a warm solstice breeze. “She was so scared, Sol,” Claire whispered. “I... I could feel what Elana did to her.” She made a fist and shivered, the sensation reverberating against every inch of me. Because I knew what she meant, understood how spirit could scar the soul. “Elana’s going to pay, Sol. For this. For what she did to the Earth Fae. For everything.”

I tucked her closer into my side, wishing to shield her from the darkness her words evoked.

But Claire was right.

Elana would pay for what she’d done.

And soon.

Chapter 36

Claire



Fire licked across my skin, burning a path along my soul, branding me in death.

*I fought beneath the restraints, my hands bound behind my back.
Elements whirled around me. Chaotic. Frenzied. Unbalanced.
And the winds roared overhead.*

“She’s coming, our queen,” a dark voice whispered, the cackle that followed eliciting a trail of goose bumps down my arms. Only to wither and die beneath the fire.

“She’s coming,” it repeated, singsonging in my thoughts. Inky wisps of smoke twirled along my nostrils, leaving behind an acrid stench. “She’s not alone.”

Another tendril wrapped around me, bathing me in the scent of the dead.

“We’re coming,” an echo taunted. “Run, run, while you can. We’re coming for you.”

I flew upright on a scream, my body drenched in sweat. “She’s coming!” I shouted, sounding like the remnants of my nightmare.

But it wasn’t a nightmare.

I knew deep down it was very real.

Those creepy-crawly *things* were on their way here.

A hot arm wrapped around me, eliciting another shout from my lips, my fight instincts roaring to life.

“It’s me!” Sol said, jolting away from the flames flashing across my body. “*Shit.*”

He waved his hand around, the skin burned from my carelessness. I immediately soothed it with water and spirit, mending his wound without

even realizing my intention. He gaped at it in shock. “How did—”

Exos threw open the door, Cyrus right beside him. “What the hell is going on?” my spirit mate demanded.

“She’s coming,” I said urgently, apparently unable to say anything else.

“Elana?” Cyrus asked.

Vox and Titus appeared behind them, looking half-asleep.

Which, yeah, it was the middle of the night. But... “We need to prepare. Right now.”

They all shared a glance, and I knew what they were thinking: *How do you know it’s not just a dream?* Well, I *knew*. I couldn’t say how. I just *knew*.

“Trust me,” I urged. “Please. We need to prepare the grounds. She’s bringing the dead with her.” I couldn’t explain how I knew that either. Or what those things would look like. But their stench still lingered in my nostrils.

Real.

Lethal.

Things.

My mates nodded as one, choosing to believe my instincts. “Right,” Cyrus said first. “We all know what to do. Let’s sound the bells. See you all on the main grounds.”

And so it began.

The beginning of the end.

I felt it in every fiber of my being.

Tonight was the night.

I’m ready.

Chapter 37

Cyrus



The moon blurred beneath an uncustomary cloud, confirming Claire's claims. The elements were warning us of the future lurking beyond the horizon. Death drifted in the air, the earth uncharacteristically silent.

"Soon," I whispered to Vox, aware of the currents lingering around my mouth, awaiting my command.

He nodded from the other side of the quad, acknowledging he'd heard my warning, and relayed it to his fellow Air Fae.

A chill swept goose bumps up and down my arms, leaving behind an inky sensation of doom.

Water Fae stood at my back, awaiting my signal.

While Sol and Titus hid with their respective ranks.

We had a good idea of what to expect, thanks to the texts from Kols and to Claire's previous death experiment with Elana. It seemed the old Chancellor was playing with animated corpses. And from what Claire described of her dreams, those were exactly what we could expect to arrive any minute now.

Exos stood at the top of a tower, Claire lingering at his side.

He was the bait and she was his knight.

How the chess pieces had shifted. But our mate had demanded a front-row seat, her powers the strongest among all of us thanks to her access to all the elements. If only we'd been able to complete her mating to Sol.

Alas, there wasn't time.

Not with the approaching army of dead coming for my brother.

Mortus cleared his throat, and I glanced sideways at the shell-shocked professor. "Yes?"

“I can feel her,” he said softly, grimacing. “Like a leech searching for the souls it’s touched before.”

That didn’t surprise me. We’d agreed before this began that I’d be knocking him out if I suspected for a second that Elana had ahold of him. Hence his position beside me.

I poked his spirit with my own, found it as shattered as before, and nodded. “She’ll either swoop in quickly to take you over or she’ll leave you to the wolves.” My bet was on the latter. Mortus had served his purpose, his mind and body resembling a broken puppet after Elana’s manipulations. There weren’t many resources left for him to offer her at this point.

Ophelia was in the same boat.

Which was why we left her unconscious at the Spirit Quad. A handful of Fire Fae had agreed to guard her. Not that we expected it to be needed.

No. Elana wanted Exos.

And my brother was standing at the highest point, essentially offering himself up for her to kill.

Anyone else, and I’d call him an idiot. Fortunately, I knew better than to question Exos’s strategy. I trusted him. As did Claire.

“Titus and Sol are ready,” River announced, meeting me on the field to take his position.

“Good.”

We’d set a little trap for Elana, one Sol and Titus had constructed together. The rest of us were merely the lure, to ensure that her minions came to the right spot.

She’s here, Claire said suddenly. *I can’t see her, but I feel her darkness everywhere.*

I followed her line of thought to the spirit plane and noted the dimness approaching the source. Yes, I agreed, pulling back to focus on our surroundings. “She’s here.”

“Where?” River asked.

I shook my head. The darkness lent her a supreme advantage, something she played on as more fog and clouds filled the sky, removing the moon from our view.

“It’s time,” I whispered, nodding at Vox.

He bowed his head in acknowledgment, communicating to his squadron.

The hairs along the back of my neck rose.

A whistle of foreign energy glided through the air.

Followed by the acridness associated with the dead.

There! Claire shouted into my mind. *By the forest line.*

I narrowed my gaze, seeing the shift of smoke. But another glimmer near the opposite edge of campus caught my focus just as Vox said, “Behind us.”

She’s approaching from all angles, I told Claire, saying the same out loud. *She means to divide our forces.*

A smart tactic. One that would work if we weren’t all in communication in some manner. “Luring these monsters isn’t going to work. River, tell Sol and Titus to move to their secondary plans. They’ll understand what that means. Go. Now.”

“On it,” River said, taking off for the rock tunnel manufactured by the Earth students. It appeared to lead underground, but didn’t. The clever fae had carved it into a hill, one that rested above sea level, thereby allowing the fae inside to maintain their access to the elements while hiding beneath a sturdy shelter.

I rolled my shoulders, preparing for the inevitable. Darkness continued to fall as the smog painted over the light above, shrouding us in a sea of black.

But I had a contingency plan.

One that would light up with my signal.

Closing my eyes, I called upon the source of both my elements, weaving them together in an intricate web of life and ripples of tranquility.

Sprinkle and grow, I whispered to the intoxicating mess of magic. *Breathe new vitality into the sky. And shade our land in hues of blue.*

I released it on a breath, smiling as the sensation grew into a spark of watery light above our heads.

The display of a royal.

The power of a king.

“Vox,” I said, opening my eyes and glancing at him. “Wanna dance?”

His lips curled from across the field. “Hell yeah.”

Air tangled with my elements, stirring a vortex into the night sky that absorbed the darkness threatening our lands while leaving my energy to shine.

That was the sign.

“Let’s begin,” I said, raising my hand and showering my fae with gifts from the source itself. “Go!”

Chapter 38

Claire



Droplets kissed my skin, Cyrus's power infusing my own and eliciting a smile from me despite the dire circumstances. *I love you*, I whispered to him.

I love you, too, little queen. Now focus on protecting my brother.

My smile grew. Already am.

I had my palm pressed to Exos's lower back, our spirit energy growing mutually between us and cascading over the lands in search of the villain we sought. We had one goal: to dismantle her soul.

But she remained elusive, hiding behind her ebony ocean of death. It clouded our affinity for life while seducing our darker side, causing us to fight an upward battle as we strove to hold on to the vitality that grounded us.

Exos had chosen this position for visibility, not just for us but for Elana, too.

"She'll scatter her minions across the grounds and come for us alone," he'd said as we climbed the tower. *"Which is exactly what we want. Kill the source, everything else dies with it."*

His plan hinged on our ability to take out Elana alone.

And if that failed, we would move on to another plan involving all my mates.

I brushed my damp palms against my cotton pants. Titus had given them to me, claiming they were light and fit for a fight, while also fireproof thanks to a magical surface treatment. Same with my long-sleeved shirt. Both were meant to protect me.

As was the staff in my hand and the blades strapped to my hips.

They didn't bring me nearly as much comfort as my elements did.

Especially as the first sounds of attack drifted upward into the air.

I swallowed, the acrid air unsettling my insides. My soul instinctively reached out to check on my mates, worried for them as they battled below.

But I found only excitement lacing our bonds.

Pride from Cyrus.

Fierceness from Sol.

Determination from Vox.

And a sense of happy resolve from Titus as he chanted threats in his mind at the deathly creatures crawling overhead. His power ignited, warming my skin, as Sol collapsed the earth on a horde of incoming skeletal beings. Fire poured over them all, melding the land around them to form an ensnaring rock.

“Brilliant,” Exos praised, his amusement palpable. “I knew those two would come to terms and work well together. Now let’s see about getting them some help, shall we?”

I nodded, refocusing on the task at hand. *Find Elana.*

But her presence was everywhere and nowhere at the same time, her soul withering just out of reach. I frowned at it. “How does she keep doing that?”

“She’s old,” Exos said, his presence closest to the source. “And she’s developed some cunning tricks over the centuries.”

I growled, frustrated, and dove back into my spirit.

So much darkness.

Not at all like the last time I ventured into this plane.

Shadows lurked in corners, taunting my presence and providing false leads. *Hmm, but that one in the distance keeps fading and appearing as if striving to hide but failing.* I trailed after it, determined to identify the master of the creation.

Or maybe mistress.

Where are you, Elana? I wondered. *Come out, come out, wherever you are.*

The ground shifted, rocking our tower. I clung to Exos and a nearby pole, my focus still on the spirit realm and that fleeing form. *You can’t escape me,* I thought at it, pursuing it faster. *I’m going—*

A piercing scream yanked me back into reality, my eyes flying wide. “Mom!” I shouted, recognizing that yell from the last few days of overhearing her night terrors.

Exos caught me around the waist before I could begin the descent. “It’s a

trap,” he said, his mouth against my ear.

“How do you know?” I demanded, my mother’s agonized shouts slicing my heart. “They’re hurting her, Exos! We have to do something!”

Exos’s arms tightened around me. “Think, Claire! We have a plan. We can’t deviate.”

“But they’re killing her!” I could see it in the way her aura flickered in the spirit realm, a sense of her demise looming over my very soul. I had to go to her, to help her, to *free* her. I’d only just gotten her back, and for her to die now wouldn’t be right.

She deserved a second chance.

She needed to clear her name.

Everyone hated her, accused her of a sin that she never committed.

If she died, she’d leave us with the knowledge of her failure.

Another shriek fractured my heart, her light blinking in and out in the soul plane, begging me for help. I couldn’t ignore her. I had to go to her, to help her, after all the years of leaving her to suffer. Never again. Not now that I had the power and knowledge to do something.

Exos’s words were drowned out by the escalated beating of my heart, the sound whooshing in my ears as if I were underwater. His arms fell away. His touch seeming to go right through me as the world dissolved into a shield of clarity and peace.

Only to be wiped away by the sight appearing before me.

My mother on her knees.

Elana’s hand wrapped around her throat.

A yawning vortex of energy swirling around them both as Elana literally absorbed my mother’s soul right before my eyes.

“Enough!” I shouted, blasting her with every bit of power I could muster and sending Elana across the Spirit Dorm into a nearby wall.

I misted, part of me realized.

But I had more important problems to worry about.

Slithering skeletal minions turned on me, furious that I’d dared to touch their mistress. With a wave of water, I sent their remains scattering. Then created a fiery shell around my mother, protecting her unconscious form on the floor from future harm. Earth would have been better, but I didn’t trust that element yet. Not with my mating bond still outstanding.

Air, water, spirit, and fire would have to do.

I used the first to create a tornado, sucking up all the pieces of Elana’s

minions and blowing them out into the Spirit Quad. Then I focused on the bitch herself.

Except she was nowhere to be found.

I frowned, whirling around, searching for Elana.

She'd been there just a second ago.

Realization dawned as the scene rippled before my eyes, disclosing the truth for the split second I needed to discover what was happening.

It's all a mirage...

With that thought, the world calmed and revealed the real Spirit Dorm. The flames died around my mother. She still lay unconscious with sleep—a sleep Cyrus and Exos had subjected her to only hours before.

And the only destruction around us was the one I'd caused.

None of it was real.

But where were the Fire Fae set to guard my mother?

With a sickening feeling, I wandered outside, hoping against hope that it hadn't been them I destroyed.

And I found them all lying on the lawn.

“Oh God...” I pressed my hand to my mouth, falling to my knees.

Those skeletal things were fae...

And I killed them.

My heart hammered in my chest.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I punched the earth, furious at myself for allowing my emotions to take me under. The ground rumbled beneath my strike, cracking. *Stand up, I told myself. Stand up and find that bitch. Finish it.*

My legs wobbled with the effort.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, a tear tracking down my cheek as I breathed the word to the five fae on the field. “I'm so—”

Claire! Exos's scream ripped through my being, his agony a slap to my senses.

I looked for his tower and found it wavering in the night, electricity flickering all around him.

Exos! I took off at a run, leaving my mother behind. It physically hurt, but my soul drove my actions, forcing me to make the impossible choice. *I'm coming!*

But he didn't respond, his spirit lost in a duel I should have been engaged in with him, at his side.

How could I be so stupid?

Elana played the one card she knew I wouldn't ignore.

Using my mother against me yet again.

Hatred fueled my steps. Vengeance darkened my heart.

A watery haze overcame me once more, power erupting through my veins. And I arrived on an explosion of elements to find Exos unconscious at Elana's feet.

Unconscious but alive.

Because I felt his life thriving around me.

He'd taken Elana to battle in the spirit plane.

Only, she seemed to be in both places at once. Her arms seemed to lower in slow motion, the blade in her hand on a perfect trajectory to hit Exos's chest.

"No!" I sent a fistful of water into her face while grabbing hold of the metal with my fire and melting it right from her hand. A drop of it sizzled against Exos while the rest scattered on a breeze I shot sideways.

Elana roared, coming for me in a split second of speed I hadn't seen coming, sending us both over the side of the tower.

Vox's scream assaulted my ears, his howl seeming to circle around me to soften my descent, just as the earth cushioned my fall.

A fall that should have killed me and Elana both.

Only, she was again nowhere to be seen.

Another mirage!

I rolled to my side and up to my feet, furious, and spun around. "Where are you?" I demanded. "*Where the fuck are you?*"

"Where's Exos?" Cyrus breathed, having misted to my side.

I pointed upward.

And Cyrus disappeared, only to reappear with my unconscious spirit mate in his arms.

"What happened?" he demanded.

I shook my head. "She's creating fucking visions."

Hell, for all I knew, Cyrus could be one. Except I felt in my soul that he wasn't, our bond thriving from our nearness.

Speaking of... I pressed my palm to Exos's chest, focusing on our connection to find him in the spirit realm. *There.*

He stood before the source, encased in power as Elana blasted him with magic that didn't belong here. It shook the core, disturbing the balance and causing Exos to fight for his footing.

I pulled away slowly, considering our options.

“We need to find Elana’s body,” I told Cyrus. “She’s here somewhere. But we need to find her fast.” Because from what I could see, Exos didn’t have long until one of her foreign balls of energy pierced his armor.

And I didn’t want to know what would happen then.

“I might be able to help with that,” a soft voice said.

Mortus.

He held up his hands. “I promise she’s not in my head. But I have certain memories of the last two decades. Or I think that’s what they are. Honestly, they feel like dreams.”

“Your point?” Cyrus demanded.

Mortus cleared his throat. “I, uh, I think I know where she is.”

Chapter 39

Cyrus



I don't trust him, Claire whispered into my thoughts.

Neither do I, I admitted. But I don't sense any compulsion of his spirit.

It could still be a mirage. She folded her arms, her eyes narrowing at Mortus. "Where do you think she is?" The skepticism in her tone wasn't lost on me or Mortus.

He flinched before replying, "There's a place in the forest, just beyond campus, that leads to an array of hidden tunnels."

My brow furrowed. "You want us to go underground? Where our elements don't work?" I snorted. "Yeah, that's going to happen." Plus, I wasn't even sure those tunnels existed. I'd never heard of such a thing, or seen them, and I knew these grounds forward and backward. When I said as much out loud, Mortus shook his head.

"I found them last week," he admitted, his voice low. "I kept dreaming of them and had to see if they were real. And, well, they are."

"And you didn't think to tell us that?" Claire snapped, taking the words out of my mouth.

He lifted his hands as if surrendering. "I... I didn't know they would be important. I... You don't know what it's like to not know what you've done, or who you are, or whom to trust, or to wake up in a world that's aged without you." His eyes met mine. "I remember your mother like it was yesterday, Cyrus. Like we just shared a spirit course together last week. I... I don't..." He shook his head, a deep sadness overrunning his typically stern features.

A twinge of pity radiated from my chest, only to be squashed by the

weight in my arms.

My brother grew weaker with every passing second. I felt it as his soul fought with everything he had, against a force that was far more powerful than it should be, especially when faced with the wrath of the Spirit King. “Show us the entrance,” I said, not yet seeing an alternative. If Mortus’s words proved right, then we’d call upon Sol to unearth the entire maze.

Assuming he could take a break from slaughtering the dead.

Skeletal creeps had overrun the grounds, and they were fast little fuckers, too. Worse, they kept putting themselves back together. It didn’t matter how many times Vox’s team blew them apart; the damn bones seemed to just morph into new creatures that continued to cause havoc.

Shrugging off a foreboding chill, I gestured for Mortus to get moving. We’d be taking Exos with us because I didn’t trust anyone to watch over him apart from me and Claire, and her mates were otherwise engaged. “Tell Vox and Titus where we’re going.”

“Already done,” she replied, following Mortus. *I still think this is a bad idea.*

Do you have a better one? I asked her.

No. She cast me a look, then glanced at Exos, her shoulders falling as guilt pierced our connection. *I shouldn’t have left him.*

What do you mean? I demanded. *When did you leave?*

She informed me of what happened with her mother while we walked, her mental voice holding a touch of sorrow when she reached the end about the Fire Fae she’d accidentally destroyed.

Casualties are a consequence of war, I whispered, brushing her cheek with a mist-like kiss. *And fae are tougher than one might expect. They may have survived.*

You think?

We’ll find out after we deal with Elana, I promised, my arms beginning to shake from the weight of carrying my brother.

At least he’d chosen a tower near the edge of the campus.

It meant we hadn’t needed to walk very far until Mortus showed us the entrance—an entrance that was mysteriously void of the death creatures haunting the Academy grounds.

What do you think? Claire asked, eyeing the twisting trees.

An observer would see only that—two giant trunks mating at the earth to form a beautiful V with vines dancing up and around to decorate the limbs.

But Mortus pulled aside the shrub at its base to reveal an entrance only large enough for a person to crawl through.

I think there's no way in hell I'm letting you wander down there alone, I replied, frowning.

Which left me with a significant issue resting in my arms.

You can't carry Exos through that, she replied, noting the problem already spinning through my thoughts.

I know. And there was no way in hell I'd leave Exos under Mortus's care. *Can you reach out to Titus and Vox, ask one of them to bring Sol?*

Claire shook her head. *There isn't time, Cyrus. And I've already taken you away from the fray. The others need them.* She took a step forward to investigate the trees and the cavern they revealed below. *There's only one choice here.*

I disagree.

I know you do, she tossed back. *But you're also wrong.*

"*Claire.*" I laced her name with a warning.

"Take care of Exos," she said, stepping out of my reach. "I'll be back."

"*Claire!*" I set Exos down, prepared to grab her, but the little minx had already slithered into the damn hole. "*Fuck!*"

I'll be okay.

Not when you get back out here, you won't, I seethed, pacing before the entrance and ignoring Mortus's muttering. He offered to look after Exos, which was not happening. *Fuck, Claire! I'm going to beat your ass raw.*

That sounds arousing, she returned. *You promise?*

This isn't funny. Get back here.

I'm fine, she promised.

I glanced at Exos, then at the ground, and then back at Exos. "Blast the elements!" I hated the choice she'd left me with—leave my brother and help her, or trust her and guard him.

But she was underground.

Where she couldn't seek the elements.

Going fuck knew where.

Claire, I growled.

Stay there, she demanded, infuriating me more. *I might need your element.*

Which I couldn't access if I followed her into the tunnels. *I'm going to throttle you, woman!*

Promises, promises, she singsonged. Now stop flirting and tell me how to kill Elana when I find her.

Chapter 40

Claire



Cyrus's roar of frustration sent a chill down my spine.
Yeah, I'd pissed him off.

But we were out of time. One look at the spirit realm and he'd know that. Exos had put up one hell of a fight, but the darkness swarming around Elana was beginning to overpower him. I suspected it was because of me. Exos couldn't go full Spirit King without jeopardizing my access to the source, thereby weakening me. And the stubborn male would never allow that.

I knew, because I'd do the same.

We all sacrificed sanity for love.

Hence my presence in this ghastly tunnel.

Fortunately, it'd opened up after the entrance, allowing me to walk along the rocks rather than crawl. But I had no idea where this led, and the light down here was nonexistent.

A very small flame flickered over my fingertips, the passage not entirely underground. Or maybe that was wishful thinking, because I felt my elements draining with each step.

I paused, frowning. *Cyrus?* I asked, realizing he hadn't replied to my question about how to kill Elana.

Static flowed back at me.

Not good.

Either I was wrong about the depth of this maze or something had happened.

What if Mortus turned on him? I wondered, glancing backward, my feet caught between moving toward Elana to save Exos and retreating to check on

Cyrus. *She's the source*, I thought, taking a breath. *If Mortus is under mind control again, it's because of Elana. The best way to save them both is to proceed.*

Killing her would protect them all.

I just hoped I wasn't too late.

Picking up my pace, I continued onward, searching with the flickers of my spirit energy for Elana's signature.

Nothing.

As if she were dead and buried. Because she couldn't access her elements down here?

My lips curled downward. Hmm, that wasn't right. Otherwise, she wouldn't be engaged in a battle with Exos right now.

Which meant that not only was she using her natural gifts but they were also strong.

I hastened my stride into a jog, determined. This had to lead to somewhere, a meadow or a field. An outside source that granted her access to the elements.

Unless we were completely wrong about this being her hiding place, in which case we were all royally fucked.

No.

I refused to think like that.

My heart warmed as I pushed on, my instincts taking over as I allowed the elements to guide me. A twinge of life here. A taste of earth there. And a fire that burned brighter with each step.

Yes.

This is the right way.

Somehow, I just knew. As if it were my fate leading me to the ultimate duel.

All my mates had gone quiet.

But I wasn't listening for them now.

Elana was who I sought, her black heart twisted with foul energy that didn't belong. Brushing my fingertips against the dirt-laden wall, I sensed it. A wrongness blossoming in the earth. Death lingering in her wake.

Closing my eyes, I began to walk again, tracing the tendrils of magic that soured my elements.

Until I entered an underground clearing filled with plants and flowers and a slotted roof with access to the air above.

I smiled, breathing in the core of my strength, my mates immediately rioting in my mind—their joint concern one I soothed with a thought to each of them. *I'm fine. And what was more... I found her.*

Lying on a stone.

Surrounded by snarling minions.

If this is another mirage, I'm going to lose my ever-loving mind, I thought, using my air magic to scatter the minions into pieces. Then engaged my earth to tie them to the ground, forbidding them from piecing themselves back together.

Elana came alive on a gasp, the threat of my presence yanking her out of the spirit plane. Something Exos and Cyrus both confirmed in my head, so I knew this was real.

Third time's the charm, I thought, smiling. "Hello, Elana."

Where are you? Cyrus demanded.

I stirred a geyser above us, shooting it high up into the sky as a signal of my location. *Here. And the demon is awake,* I added as Elana leapt to her feet.

"Mortus," she spat, clearly irritated.

I knew better than to let her talk or to gain the advantage.

So rather than listen to the words spewing from her lips, I created an ice pick and aimed it at her heart.

She diminished it with a wave of her hand, her control of water surprisingly strong. A similar weapon came back at me, one I barely blocked as I called on my fire for a shield.

Liquid rained from above, dousing my flames in an instant, and Elana sighed. "Harming children has never been an enjoyable activity, but it is an easy one."

My chest ached as she hit me with an invisible wave of power, knocking me backward and almost out of the small clearing. I called a gust of air to force me back into the center, requiring my elements, but Elana tripped me with a black tendril of thick smoke.

Shit! My ass hit the rocks, shooting pain up my spine.

"Ah, Claire," Elana murmured. "How young you truly are."

Ice pelted me from all sides, slicing through my clothes without preamble and digging into my skin.

I shrieked, spinning away from the foreign sensation that wasn't water yet resembled it.

But it didn't heed my call.

My fire tried to burn it away, creating an acid-like liquid that scalded my skin and elicited a scream from my throat.

Claire!

I couldn't tell which of my mates was shouting. Cyrus? Vox? Titus? A mixture of them all?

I curled onto my side, fighting the pain and relinquishing my hold on the elements just for a chance to breathe. Somehow Elana was using them against me. Turning my powers into harmful substances that hurt me rather than offering me protection.

"We could have been so good together, you and I," Elana continued, her icy power swathing me in a blanket of foreign energy. "But it's too late for that now. I see that the way to breaking Exos's hold is through your heart. Without you, he'll crumble. And I can take what is mine to take."

Exos, I breathed, sensing his pain through the bond.

Elana had come close to destroying him.

With my demise, she would complete the job. I felt it to the very core of my being. Because breaking our bond would distract him long enough for her to finish the job. And then she'd go after Cyrus. My other mates. The entire Academy. Everyone in the Elemental Fae Realm.

I sensed her plans in the dark power wrapping around me.

Her malevolent intentions to take everyone down who might stand in her way.

She'd gone mad with her vengeance. What had begun as a simple desire to protect herself—to not allow others to find out about her Midnight Fae half—had blossomed into this need for destruction.

With every soul she absorbed, she'd eaten at her own spirit. Diminishing it to dust beneath her craving for more power.

I almost felt bad for her. This couldn't have been her original intention, but now it consumed her.

Hatred.

Violence.

A desire to kill.

It all swam around her in inky waves, her heart no longer that of an Elemental Fae, but of a being overrun by her own dark energy.

Whoever Elana once was, she no longer resembled that woman now. She merely wore the facade on the outside, her mind a constant game of chess as

she devised her next play.

Calculated.

Cunning.

Cruel.

Not an ounce of remorse inside her, not even for the lives she would take today. For the very academy she ran for all these years. A means to an end.

How I ever saw sympathy in her eyes was a miracle. A concept her savage spirit had crafted to lend to her plans. Which all led to the ruination of Elemental Fae kind.

I saw it all unfolding in the blink of an eye. Her devastating schemes. The way she used the death fields as a source of unbending power. The way she fed those fields with more souls—souls she'd taken through the use of death magic.

It sent a shiver down my spine.

“How can you even live with yourself?” I wondered out loud, shaking my head. “All those fae... you’ve taken them all.” I saw with clarity what had happened to Ignis and her friends, how Elana had controlled them like she’d done with Mortus, forcing the girls to frame me for elemental crimes against their will. And then their resulting screams as Elana tossed them into the Spirit Kingdom, allowing the fields to swallow them whole. All the while absorbing their magic for herself—a magic Exos had bound, and then released upon being knocked out by Mortus.

Everything played out in full detail.

Unraveling all the moves I hadn’t seen her make.

Setting my mother’s decrepit soul in the mess of the others, allowing her to lie in wait, knowing full well that Cyrus would take me there. Elana’s resulting laughter as Ophelia latched onto me as a source of life, our bloodlines calling to one another by instinct. My former mentor had reveled in that moment, enjoying the way I suffered at the spirit of my own mother, the manner in which I almost died.

However, I survived, a fact that intrigued Elana even more.

Mated Cyrus—a move she hadn’t anticipated, but adored.

Meanwhile, Exos provided a challenge, one she tried to break by putting Ophelia in the cell beside his. Allowing her to feed on me through my connection to Exos. Only, the stubborn male cut me off, a fact Elana had respected and hated at the same time.

My head spun with the truth of it all, the explanations none of us had

seen.

I blinked up at the devil incarnate in absolute horror, words lining up on my tongue that were meant to scathe. Only, she gazed at me with blank eyes, her entire form frozen, her magic a stagnant energy in the air.

It dissipated in a second, her rage coloring her cheeks in a putrid red shade. “*You dare enter my mind?*” she demanded, lashing out at me with a whip of power that scalded my insides.

I sucked in a breath, the air icy and cold. *What?*

My mouth couldn't form the word.

I'd entered her mind?

Of course, I realized. *That* was how I'd seen all her pieces, the perpetual chessboard calculating her every move.

Including the one I *knew* she'd make next.

I engaged my fire on instinct, flaring it bright in her eyes to catch her off guard while I dove into the spirit realm and directly for the source. It was the only way to overcome her dark hold.

I needed to fight her with *light*.

Exos brushed my spirit as I raced past him and leapt for the white energy I craved. It bathed me in a heat that could melt the sun. But my access to the other elements kept me grounded.

My fire roared to life in a protective wave.

My air whirled me in a motion that kept me moving even while everything else threatened to stop me.

My water soothed my aching bones, filled my soul with peace.

And my earth rooted me to the reality I needed to fight in.

All four combined with the most powerful of them all, bringing me to my feet on a surge of elements that sent Elana back several paces. I cocked my head, curious by her widening eyes.

Fear, a part of me recognized, my mind oddly detached from my emotions so that it seemed like a foreign concept. Yet I knew I liked it. Craved more of it.

I wrapped her in a rope of bronze laced with fire, not pausing even as she screamed.

Evil existed inside her.

Evil that needed to be eradicated.

Spirit Fae adore life and vitality. This one craved death. And it was my duty as Spirit Queen to give her what she desired.

The source of all the elements swarmed me, lifting me from the earth and to the field above. A field I vaguely recognized as the first place I met Titus.

Filled with flowers.

And happiness.

And a blossoming sun on the horizon.

How beautiful and perfect for the burial of this foul being.

“Spirit is both the essence of life and death,” I said, not recognizing my voice at all, but hearing the power behind it, realizing that I myself somehow inhabited the core of the spirit.

No, not only spirit.

Air.

Water.

Fire.

Just not earth. Although, I sensed it waiting for me, welcoming me with flowery petals of warmth and sunshine.

How beautiful, I mused. Hmm, but not yet.

No, I had other sources to appease first. Specifically, spirit. It raged for the life before me, craving the death of such a vile fae.

“You abused our power,” I seethed, again not recognizing my voice. So deep. Still feminine, but echoing as if for miles. Commanding. I liked it. But I did not like the woman cowering before me, tied up by my elemental rope.

“Claire...” The uncertainty in that familiar voice had me glancing sideways to where Cyrus stood. Exos at his side. I couldn’t say who had spoken, but thought it might have been the Water Prince.

Mmm, my mates, I sighed, happy to see them both alive. The energy inside me rippled in its pleasure, bowing to the masters of their source, before refocusing on the task at hand.

Because today, I was queen.

And this poor excuse for a fae no longer deserved to live.

“The elements have spoken,” I said, tightening the vines around her. “And you, Elana of Spirit Fae, will abuse us no longer.”

Vitality rippled out of me, swathing her in a bright, white cloud. It absorbed her soul into its depths, taking her to a place where she would never escape or even be reborn. Her spirit too vile for any reconsideration.

And in its wake, it left the shadow of a Midnight Fae.

One that crumpled to the earth in a pile of black ash.

A breeze teased the remains, whirling them into the air as flames erupted,

engulfing every speck and removing the existence of her form in all ways.

The elements taking their due.

Destroying every last bit.

And eliminating the death magic from the lands.

I sensed it in the frosty kiss of the air, the finality of her passing erasing any and all evidence of her previous existence.

Including the death fields.

Exos fell to his knees, the power lancing through his chest, but the source inside assured he would be fine.

Cyrus, too.

They would all survive.

But the spirits needed to ascend, and so I closed my eyes and willed it so. Freeing thousands upon thousands of fae from Elana's cruel captivity.

Fly, I encouraged them. *Fly and be reborn once more*.

For that was the cause of sterility among the Spirit Fae. Not a plague, but a curse maintained by Elana. Every spirit she fed to the darkness couldn't be reborn. And she wouldn't allow any of the others to move on, to complete the circle of life.

A tear slid from my eye at the understanding of it all, the workings of the universe laid out inside me as if it was my destiny all this time to absorb every detail.

Spirit.

Life and death.

The elemental core of our very existence.

I bowed before it, respecting the gifts given to me, thanking it for my creation, and promising never to abuse the energy thriving inside me.

Each element embraced my very soul, accepting the vow and returning me slowly to the new reality I'd created. The world I'd blessed. The kingdom I'd just saved.

To my mates.

My loves.

My fae.

Chapter 41

Exos



Cyrus caught Claire before she hit the ground, his ability to mist making me envious and grateful at the same time. Because she was out cold, her form a dainty feminine ball of power tucked against my brother's chest.

Icy blue eyes flashed up at me, his expression rivaling my own. "Did that just happen?" he demanded.

I swallowed twice before I could muster up a response. And it had nothing to do with how weak I felt from dueling Elana in the spirit plane. "I, uh, yeah. Yeah, it did."

Our mate had absorbed four elemental sources, her body flaring with a light that would have killed an ordinary fae. Yet she'd worn it like a queen, her hair glittering a white shade of power. I stepped forward to fondle the ash-blonde strands, the only remaining hint that what we'd just witnessed had truly come to pass.

Well, along with the vitality flowing all over the Academy grounds.

"She demolished them all," I marveled, gazing down at her beautiful face. "She did what we couldn't."

Because Elana's powers were far stronger than any of us could have anticipated. The way she used the elements against me—including my own—had weakened me beyond repair until Claire's timely intervention.

"I don't know how she did it," I continued. "But she absorbed all four cores of her bonded elements, even flirted with earth there for a moment. And then they spoke through her."

Cyrus brushed his lips against her forehead, smiling. "Because she's our queen."

“Yes.” I combed my fingers through her hair again, preparing to say more as Mortus stumbled into the clearing, his expression one of bewilderment and confusion. It seemed to be his permanent mask these days, the poor bastard.

“Thank you,” Cyrus said to him now, nodding his head once. “Your help today has not gone unnoticed.”

“She’s gone,” he whispered, staring at the hole in the earth created by our Claire. “She’s truly gone.” He didn’t sound sad, exactly. More broken. As if he’d hoped that Elana’s disappearance would heal him somehow. It would take a lot more than that evil woman’s death to mend the wounds she left behind on his soul.

Claire began to stir, her energy humming around us in a calming wave that soothed my heart.

“At least she didn’t stop breathing this time,” Cyrus mused.

I chuckled. “There is that.” I pressed a kiss to her cheek and released her hair. “Mist her back to the quad. The others will need to see that she’s all right.”

Cyrus nodded his agreement, disappearing and leaving me alone with Mortus. His black gaze lifted to mine, a hint of worry fluttering in the depths as he swallowed.

“I should punish you,” I said, walking toward him. “For everything you’ve done.”

“I know.” He swallowed again. “I would accept it, too, my king.”

Pausing before him, I considered my options for the thousandth time this week. He’d kidnapped me, hurt me, and committed countless sins over the years, all beneath the compulsion of Elana.

Many would call for his castigation, regardless of his control over the acts.

Same with Ophelia—who, as far as I could tell, was completely innocent in her crimes. But two decades of rumors would be hard to assuage.

However, it did give me an idea.

“Walk with me,” I said, leading him along the trail back to the Academy grounds. This place brought back memories of my first days with Claire, her emotions running high due to the guilt over killing her friend and the very real impact of being uprooted from her world.

Seeing her performance this morning had proven just how much she’d grown.

How powerful she’d become.

My lips curled, knowing I played a small part in her ascension. Or maybe a large part. Regardless, the majority of it was Claire. Her determination, strength, and stubbornness were what won over the elements. That they chose to favor her with their gifts merely indicated the powerful future ahead of her.

A future I was thankful to be a part of.

My access to the source burned bright inside me, pleased with my acceptance of my mate, while also fortifying my position as king.

But everyone knew a king was nothing without his queen.

Mortus stumbled over a root, the early morning sun not yet brightening our horizon. I teased a flame into the air, highlighting the ground as we moved, my mind spinning over the idea that had come to me moments ago.

“Do you feel any connection to Ophelia?” I wondered out loud.

I felt his wince more than saw it. “Yes,” he admitted, his voice gruff.

“What level?” I pushed aside a low branch and watched as he moved through the passageway I’d created.

He paused to allow me to lead once more, a sign of both submission and reverence. Good. It was high time he recognized me as his king.

Of course, all those hostile moments on the Council weren’t him at all, but Elana playing him like a puppet.

I nearly sighed, agitated with her once more. The image of Claire shredding her with elements, however, appeased my inner vengeance. Elana had more than deserved the pain of being ripped apart by the spirit source. Had I been able to do such a thing, I would have in an instant. But it was Claire whom our spirit chose as the conduit.

“I... I’m not sure what level we’re on,” Mortus eventually said, drawing me back to the path we were walking upon. “I can sense our link, but it’s frayed to hell.”

“Because she broke the vows of a third level,” I murmured, nodding.

“No.” Mortus cleared his throat. “Because it was compelled, not willingly given. On both sides.”

“Interesting.” I mused over that in silence for several minutes, pleased to see the grounds appearing through the forest ahead—the dimming moon still shining across the lively grass. “Elana compelling you two to bond defied the elements, which caused the rift of power.” I almost admired the clever bitch. Almost. But I despised her a hell of a lot more. “And she used that distraction to her advantage by sucking the souls of all the Spirit Fae in attendance on that fateful day.”

“During our ceremony, yes,” Mortus said.

“You remember?” I asked, glancing at him.

He shook his head. “Not exactly. But enough people have told me what happened.”

We stepped onto the path that led back to the Academy, a warm energy caressing the fields and leaving a hint of Claire’s sweet scent behind.

She smiled into my thoughts, our connection thriving stronger than ever. *You’re okay*, she whispered.

Thanks to you, my queen, I replied softly, my lips curling. I didn’t ask if she was awake. I already knew, could feel her vitality sweeping through the air all around us.

What happened to ‘princess’? Her amusement touched my chest, causing my heart to beat in time with hers.

My princess became a queen, I told her. *No, a goddess of the elements.*

I don’t know how it happened, she admitted. *It just... did.*

You were favored by the source, Claire. Thereby completing the prophecy our Council once feared. *When one becomes half and five become one, a plague will descend upon the fae. Only death is the cure.*

For so long, our kind thought it meant the end to the Elemental Fae race. But that wasn’t it at all. Claire was the cure—the one to bring death upon the plague otherwise known as Elana.

No one ever told me the prophecy. I could picture her frown matching her internal voice. *Why did you all keep it from me?*

Because it never mattered, I replied. *You chose your fate, Claire. Not some prophecy proclaimed by the Fortune Fae.*

It might have helped to know I was destined to absorb a bunch of energy and kill Elana, she countered, her sassiness causing me to chuckle.

Would it have made a difference? I wondered back at her. *Truly? Because I think you would have done exactly what you did regardless of some words hanging over your head. Or perhaps you would have acted differently and changed fate.* I shrugged even though she couldn’t see it. *Either way, you were exquisite, my queen.*

She seemed to be mulling over my comment, just as Mortus was with my earlier statement about Elana using his compelled bond to create a distraction.

“I want you to help Ophelia,” I told him as we walked through the Academy’s iron gates. “Help her heal and I’ll consider your debt repaid.”

He glanced at me, his shock written in the lifting of his eyebrows. “You

think I can help her?”

“I think you might be one of the only ones who can, Mortus.” I paused on the precipice of the quad, admiring the joyous chaos unfolding among the fae with their savior, Claire, at the center. Cyrus, Sol, Titus, and Vox stood around her like warriors protecting their queen. But Claire wouldn’t be deterred, her magic spreading among the masses to offer healing and acceptance to everyone around her.

Just like the queen I knew her to be.

“Why?” Mortus asked, drawing me back to our conversation—one I was ready to end in favor of embracing my mate. “Why do you think I can help her?”

“Because of the bond,” I replied. “I can see your spirits, Mortus. They’re linked in a fractured way, suggesting that not only can you assist her in healing but she can also return the favor and mend you. If you allow it.”

“If *she* allows it,” he returned.

I hid my smile. “Yes, I imagine she’ll be quite stubborn.” Like mother, like daughter. “Hence, it’s a fitting punishment, don’t you think?” Winking at him, I took my leave with a casual, “I couldn’t go too easy on you, old man,” tossed over my shoulder. “May the fates be with you.” Because he was going to need all the luck he could get.

The circle parted for me as I approached Claire and the pink butterflies swarming around her. One kissed my cheek, earning me a flirty little smirk from the queen in the center.

I hauled her into my arms, reveling in the spirit energy overflowing from her center, and kissed her hard for all to see. She giggled against me, her arms winding around my neck. *Arrogant king*, she accused.

Glorious queen, I whispered back at her, nipping her lower lip. *Have I told you today that I love you?*

Only once.

I smiled against her mouth. *I love you, my Claire.*

I love you, too.

Thank you for being the queen we all need, I added, pressing my forehead to hers. “Goddess Claire.”

“Our future Water Queen,” Cyrus said, adding his own flavor to the mix.

“With air royalty flowing all around her,” Vox mused, his breeze kissing her cheek.

Titus pressed a palm to her lower back. “And a fire that burns brighter

than the sun.”

“All that’s missing now is earth,” I said, glancing at the giant beside us.

He wrapped his hand around Claire’s neck, his earthy gaze flaring with intent. “Not for much longer.”

She smiled up at him, the sun in her blue eyes. “Not for much longer,” she repeated, accepting his mouth against hers as a binding promise.

And stirring more of those beautiful butterflies all over the quad.

We won, I thought, taking in the light glistening on the horizon. And today is a new day to shine.

Part Five

“In the aftermath of destruction, new life breathes restoration and hope into the most compelling of futures. And I couldn’t be more proud.”

—Ophelia

Chapter 42

Claire



“**I**, Claire, accept the power that binds me to Sol, born of Earth,” I said, holding my intended’s gaze. “To cherish and respect, through all the eras and time that may fall before us, until our souls do us part.”

His smile grew with each word, the World Tree beside us seeming to hum its approval.

Sol pressed my hand to the base of our tree, the roots thriving with my mate’s power. The influx made me suck in a breath as raw life surged through my veins.

The musk of earth enveloped me, exploring and glorifying in our pairing. My missing piece. The one source I couldn’t access. My final connection.

We didn’t have an Earth Fae priest to guide us through our vows, only the element itself. The earth touched my heart and gave me the words I needed to say. Although, I had most of them memorized by now.

I opened my eyes to find Sol gazing down at me in wonder as vines danced all around us, sprouting flowers from my world as well as from his in a flurry of color. My other mates kept their distance but would witness this bond with us, the final seal on all five elements.

Inside the oasis Sol had crafted.

With the afternoon sun shining overhead.

Healing energy flourished around us, the campus grounds restoring themselves from the hurt inflicted upon them by Elana’s dead army. We lost lives today. They would not be forgotten. I felt the breaths of their souls warming the spirit plane, their circle of life flowing the way it should, and blessing the union occurring today.

The one to my earth mate.

Flowers whispered the words on a breeze, encouraging me to continue my vows.

But I already knew what was needed; I'd merely chosen to bask in the beautiful moment, to absorb the elemental bliss dancing around us.

"I give unto him my unyielding promise, my vitality, and the seed of my heart, which, together, we will nurture and grow, and accept his in return. My element is now his just as his is now mine, to the fae heavens may we never part. And I shall never forsake him for another, my earth forever belonging to him and to him alone."

He palmed my cheek, his opposite hand remaining above mine and pressed to the base of our tree as we lounged in the flower bed he'd created for this moment.

Water trickled nearby, courtesy of Cyrus's fountain.

Flames twirled in an arch several feet away, one we'd walked beneath to reach this special place in our oasis.

A light breeze filled with love tousled our hair.

And the Spirit King blessed our union in the plane harboring our souls.

My earth mate grinned, his happiness an aphrodisiac that heightened the moment almost as much as his vows did. Each word was low, purposefully uttered, and rumbled across the ground beneath his intense power.

I shivered.

Smiled.

Leaned into him for more.

And closed my eyes as the sweet embrace of energy from the earth flowed over me, encasing me in the element I so craved.

It was the piece I needed all this time, its healing essence making me one with this world.

Fire.

Water.

Air.

Spirit.

And finally, earth.

Sweet, sweet earth.

I sighed, reveling in the finality of the bonds, my lips seeking Sol's with a hunger only he could sate. My mates would protect us, would give us this moment, would allow us to prosper beneath the bright blue sky.

Our bond slid into place like two pieces of stone carved for one another.

The butterflies clothing my being fled, revealing all of me to Sol's gaze. "Don't make me wait," I whispered, my fingers sliding through his thick hair as I pulled him down on top of me, my head cradled by the flowers decorating the tree roots. "Take me, Sol. Don't hold back."

His mouth responded without words, his tongue parting my lips to devour me.

I love you, he said into my mind, his voice a welcome presence that had me clinging to him more.

I love you, too.

His clothes seemed to disappear beneath my hands. Or perhaps magic. I couldn't tell, too eager to consummate our mating, to slide that final piece into my soul.

It'd been missing today when I danced among the elements.

My earth felt so far away and still did.

Something was holding us back.

A broken quality that required healing.

"Sol," I whispered, my thighs parting to accept him. "Please."

I needed all of him. His heart. His mind. His *soul*.

I opened everything of me to him in return, urging him to let go, to find his peace and accept our mating. But I could feel his struggle, the part of him with errant control that required soothing. Jagged spikes littering his spirit, caused by an unknown fae.

My heart longed to soothe them. To smooth out the rough edges and help him recover.

He pressed his forehead to mine, his breath harsh. "What are you doing to me?"

"Loving you." I laved his bottom lip, my gaze finding his. "You're mine, Sol."

His palm encircled my throat, his erection prodding the entrance of my waiting heat. "And you're mine."

"I am," I agreed, my back bowing off the ground as he slid all the way inside me, his penetration perfect, demanding, and so very powerful. "Take me," I urged again. "Give me everything."

Because I needed to feel him. His strength. His force. His pain. His happiness. His fears. No more hiding. No more fighting for control. We were in this together now, and I showed him that with my element, the ground quaking beneath us in affirmation.

More flowers blossomed.

Life sang all around us.

Peaches ripened.

Trees sprouted fresh leaves.

And not just here, but all over campus, our power lending healing energy where the Academy required it most.

“Mate me, Sol,” I told him. Because I felt him holding back. Knew this wasn’t the best he could do.

He trembled, his restraint causing the ground to shake beneath me. “I don’t want to break you, Claire.”

I drew in some of his magic, mixing it between us so that there wasn’t just Sol or Claire, but two branches of a single tree that needed nourishment. “You can’t,” I assured him. “Fuck me, Sol. Show me that you trust me.”

His eyes widened, the bronze irises flecking with the emerald magic of his vitality and life. “You really are a goddess,” he whispered, his expression one of reverence as our bodies joined below in a matrimony as old as time itself.

I felt like a nymph come to life.

Bedded in flowers and earth, my screams echoing off the branches around us, vines growing and flourishing beneath the power our bodies created as one.

He pulled out, then drove in hard, making the World Tree shake under the impact. My body blossomed with pleasure as I took his brute force. I was just as much an Earth Fae as any other element, and my body attuned itself to his.

“So delicate and strong,” he praised as he thrust again, this time with more confidence.

I clawed my nails down his arms, leaving marks that sparkled under the sun. I closed my eyes and threw my head back, enduring the pleasure that filled me up from the inside. “More,” I pleaded, and Sol gave it to me, pounding into me until my words turned into screams of ecstasy.

His climax pushed me over, his seed filling me and providing the final claim to my body that sent me over the edge.

Sol, my foundation, my rock.

I love you.

A momentary stillness of peace overcame us as Sol’s spirit brushed against mine, linking us together for eternity.

Complete, I thought with a sigh. Finally.

Peace settled inside me, only to be disturbed by the fracturing of Sol's
essence all around me. A wall tumbling beneath the power of our mating.
Sending us spiraling into the depths of a nightmare.
Of a sequence of events long buried.
By the source itself.

Chapter 43

Cyrus



SEVERAL MINUTES EARLIER

“**S**he’s high on her elements,” I mused to Exos from our posts outside of Sol’s little oasis.

Our little queen had decided to consummate her earth bonds directly following the ceremony, her ethereal energy still high and floating around her in this intoxicating cloud of vitality.

“How long do you think it will last?” I continued, pondering out loud. “Or is this a permanent change?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t know. I imagine it’ll become a mixture of both.”

I nodded. “Good. I would hate for her to lose that fiery temper of hers.”

“No, she’ll probably just set you on fire instead,” my brother replied conversationally.

“And I hope to be there to watch,” Titus added, approaching from the side. He’d run off to check on Claire’s mom and the Fire Fae stationed to guard her. From his expression, I could tell we had a problem. “Did you send Mortus to talk to Ophelia?”

“Ah, yeah.” Exos palmed the back of his neck. “I’m hoping he can break through to her, you know, using the bond.”

“Well, she’s screaming,” Titus replied. “But not out of fear.” His lips curled just a touch. “Seems she’s not Mortus’s biggest fan.”

“No idea why,” I drawled.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna give them some space to work out their differences.” A flame flickered across the Fire Fae’s fingertips. “I’ll only

intervene if needed.”

I looked him up and down, amused and a little aroused. “You endear yourself to me more every day, Fire Fae.”

He snorted. “Not a chance in hell, Water Prince.”

Exos just shook his head. “You should know better than to give my brother a challenge. He always wins.”

“Yeah? Like that time in the powerless ring?” He feigned a thoughtful expression. “Oh, right, I won that, didn’t I?”

“Because I let you win,” I reminded him.

“So you say.” He arched a brow. “I’m ready for a rematch—a real one—when you are.”

“Can we focus on putting the Academy back together first?” Vox interjected, a breeze floating around him as he landed before us. The Air Fae had developed a knack for flying, one that intrigued me. I still preferred my misting, but I’d never seen a fae manipulate air currents the way this one did.

“What’s the damage?” Exos asked, his expression turning serious.

“Sixteen known deaths. Several dozen injured and recovering.” Vox palmed the back of his neck. “Fighting in the main quad was smart, as it isolated the majority of the damage, but there’s quite a bit of it.”

Exos frowned. “I thought Claire’s date with the source released enough vitality to restore the grounds.”

Vox shook his head. “She rid the Academy of those dark remnants, but the buildings themselves are in bad shape.” He glanced at the oasis. “And, well, what they’re doing right now is revitalizing the agonized earth elements throughout campus. So mating Sol was a good call.”

“She made that choice, not us,” I said, admittedly amused by our little queen’s decision. She truly had blossomed into the epitome of a fae creature, following her elemental heart before her human mind. And I couldn’t be more proud.

“Regardless, it’s helping. But they’re going to need a lot more than earth to restore the Academy.” Vox sounded tired. “We need to work together as a unit.”

“You say that as if it’s a tedious task we can’t handle,” Exos replied, his lips twitching. “I think we’ve proven to perform as quite the unit, yeah? So maybe we should put on a little show for the Academy.”

“Spoken with the arrogance of a king.” I wagged my brows. “When do we start?”

My brother's smile was infectious. "Right now." He met Vox's gaze. "You stand guard for a bit, make sure no one sees our mate in the throes of passion. Titus, Cyrus, and I will go have a play on the Academy grounds."

"There's a squadron of Air Fae awaiting orders." Vox folded his arms. "I'm sure you won't have any trouble taking command."

"I think I can handle them," Exos agreed. "And if not, I'll give them to Cyrus."

My lips curled. "Today just keeps getting better and better."

As if Claire agreed, I felt her ecstasy through the bond, her waves of pleasure stirring goose bumps up and down my arms. *Mmm, my little queen.* How I adored her climaxes, even the ones not gifted by me.

The pause from the others confirmed they'd felt it, too.

All four of us were aroused by what was happening beneath that World Tree.

It would be so easy to join them, to add our own personal touch to the mix, but Sol had earned this. It was his time with Claire, and none of us would interrupt such a beautiful moment.

"Yeah, a distraction sounds great," Titus said, breaking the silence. "Let's, uh, go."

"Feeling a little hot?" I teased. "Allow me to help with that."

Mist pebbled across his skin, sizzling beneath his own power. "Not happening, Water Prince," he gritted out between his teeth.

But I caught the subtle flush to his cheeks.

Oh, this would be fun.

Whether anything would ever come of it remained to be seen. Merely taunting him satisfied me immensely.

But it was Claire whom I adored and loved. If she ever wanted to play, I'd happily indulge her. And despite Titus's opinions to the contrary, I suspected he'd gladly succumb as well.

Fortunately, we had a long and prosperous future ahead to work out the finer details.

Another rumble of the earth sent us all running ahead on a chuckle.

Until the rumble turned into a quake.

And our Claire screamed.

Directly into our minds.

Chapter 44

Claire



F *alling.*
Pain.
Suffering.

The World Tree guided me through the chaos of Sol's heart, a place where black, spiked vines wrapped around a pulsing core.

Trapped memories that festered and bled, leaving an acrid stench in my nostrils that reminded me all too much of Elana and her evil.

Even in death, she haunted me.

I reached out and touched the darkness, bleeding my vitality into it and forcing the inky sickness to unravel and release its hold on my mate.

The memories unfurled in a tumult of agony, taking me under in its sea of sorrow that had dwelled in my Earth Fae's heart for far too long.

And when I opened my eyes, I was no longer Claire.

But Sol.



A Spirit Fae with silver eyes towered over me at the front door, her hair pulled up tight at the top of her head. She kinda looked important. But she wasn't supposed to be here. "You gotta leave," I told her. Mom wasn't home, but she'd be back soon.

The lady didn't smile.

She sort of growled.

Her presence was dark and wicked and not quite right. I didn't like her.

"Get out of my way, child," the woman sneered, lashing at me with magic.

Spirit magic.

Mom once warned me about the Spirit Fae. She said they could control other fae. Fae like me. But most didn't. Most were good. At least according to my mom.

But I could tell this lady was bad. And not just 'cause of the way she looked at me. Her black cloak seemed weird, and she smelled funny.

"Move," she demanded once more.

"No," I said, folding my arms. "I'm not gonna." My mom said not to let any strangers in the house while she was out with my little sister. She called me the man of the house. And this lady wasn't gonna come in no matter what.

She sighed. "Why do children never listen?" Her hand cracked the side of my face, sending me into the nearest wall with a loud thud.

I gasped.

My legs wobbled.

Black spots messed with my eyes.

'Cause that hurt! A lot.

But the scream from Aflora in the living room hurt more.

"No!" I shouted, trying to find her. She was supposed to be hiding. I told her to when I saw the weird lady standing outside. But Aflora was always soooo difficult, refusing to listen. Even to my mom, who was supposed to be her mom now. I didn't really get that. But now wasn't the time.

Mom put me in charge of Aflora.

She was too small to fight on her own.

I ran into the other room, the ground seeming to vibrate beneath me, and found my new sister against the wall with the evil woman's hand locked around her throat. Aflora clawed at the lady's arm like a wild animal, her stark blue eyes flaring with fear and fury.

"Finally," the woman said. Smoke twirled around her finger in a tendril of foreign magic that didn't belong here. "Your parents did a good job of hiding you, little girl, but I have you now. The final Earth Fae Royal. Mine to devour and destroy."

The smoke turned into a thick rope, swirling in the air and unsettling the earth magic in the room.

It was very wrong.

It didn't belong.

I wanted it gone.

With a stomp of my foot, the ground shook beneath the woman, knocking her off-balance. Aflora squirmed at exactly the right moment, jumping away from the crazy lady and sprinting toward me in the doorway.

"You want to touch my sister, you gotta go through me." I called for a root to wrap around my feet, forcing the earth to hold me upright as Aflora hid her little body behind mine. She grabbed my sides, her fear shaking us both like leaves in a breeze.

The Spirit Fae turned, her gaze narrowed. "You're a brave but foolish little boy. No royal blood. No Academy training. Nothing that's worthy of my time." She flicked her wrist, sending a wave of magic infused with darkness to stab into my chest.

Pain shot through me, causing me to bend forward, but my roots kept me standing. Darkness spread from the black dagger lodged into my chest.

"Sol!" Aflora cried out, her grip on me tightening as her earth essence clung to mine.

It burned.

Fought off something on my behalf.

And grew.

Too much.

Too bright.

The source, I realized. Aflora somehow had access to it, even though she was a girl. They taught us in school that it was a boy's power. Yet somehow she was giving it to me. And I latched on with all my might, needing the energy not to save myself but to save her.

Because deep down I knew this lady was here to destroy my new sister.

And as man of the house, I couldn't let that happen.

The lady roared in disapproval, causing my lips to curl. 'Cause that just meant I'd done something right. Or maybe it was Aflora.

Either way, this lady had chosen the wrong house to barge into.

She scowled as another burst of fresh power rooted itself inside me, protecting me and forming a barrier around the darkness that had iced over my heart. It burned cold and painful, but layers formed over my insides as I straightened once more.

"What is this?" the woman demanded, slashing another wave of magic at

me again.

This time it pinged off of the shield the source had built for me—for me and Aflora—a barrier that nothing could penetrate, not even the darkness the Spirit Fae sent my way.

“You can’t have my new sister,” I said, curling my fingers into fists as the ground around us began to shake. I’d always been strong, but now renewed energy flooded in without any sign of stopping. It frightened me, but I didn’t let that show on my face.

The evil lady growled, the darkness swimming around her in that odd black cloak. “If I can’t have your new one, I’ll take your old one. And your mom, too. Unless the source seeks to protect them, too?”

As if hearing the lady’s words, my mom came running into the house with my little sister at her side. Both their eyes wide. “Elana,” my mother gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“I was trying to tie up a loose end, but your son has shown exquisite strength.” She narrowed her silver eyes at me. “Much to the cost of everyone else around you.”

I gulped. That sounded bad. But everything should be okay now, right? Mom was home. She’d make this evil lady leave.

She sighed loudly, her cheeks puffing with the motion. “Well, it seems the Earth Fae’s source is still beyond my reach. For now.” She stroked her black cloak. “No matter. I’m a patient woman, and I’m happy to do this the hard way.” She grinned, the expression making me sick to my stomach. Because it was me she grinned at. Not my mom. Not my sisters. But me. “Mark my words, boy. Your family. Your friends. Everyone you’ve ever loved will wither and die before your eyes. You won’t even know why, or how. You’ll just know that this all started with you.”

She extended a crooked finger, making a shiver go through my bones with the force of her prophecy. She wasn’t a Fortune Fae, but I felt the weight of her promise just as much as any dark premonition the ominous fae could supply.

I said something.

Or thought it.

But the words were lost to sudden darkness that overcame the room.

Only to be disturbed by a scream that came from deep inside my house.

My concentration faltered as I turned toward it. Aflora gripped my wrist, trembling, all the fight bleeding out of her as fear filled her eyes. “Sol, what’s

going on?”

I tried to reply.

But I couldn't.

I... I couldn't remember.

Wasn't there someone here? Someone bad?

I turned again, spinning toward that dark, weighty feeling of spirit magic and wrongness.

Nothing.

Dread crept over me in a sickening wave as I took Aflora's hand. "Let's go inside," I told her, the words tasting wrong in my mouth. I thought we were already inside?

My torso burned hot as if I'd been branded with fire, but I straightened as Aflora looked to me for confirmation. She felt it, too. Something terrible had happened, but neither of us knew what or why.

I scratched at my aching chest, which felt like it might split in two, as I went inside and found my mother and sister collapsed on the floor with strange, dark veins writhing under their skin.

And froze as Aflora screamed.

Because somehow, I knew, this had all been my fault.

I just didn't know why.

Chapter 45

Sol



I woke with a start, feeling lighter than I ever had before despite the dark weight of my memories pressing at my soul.

Because I remembered everything.

Every detail of how it felt.

It was never a Spirit Fae that scarred my soul, but the earth source itself. To protect me against Elana's dark magic. To help me guard Aflora. To strengthen me with direct access to the element, then block me from ever taking on too much.

And then it had blocked my memory of everything that happened to hide the truth from me until I was ready to face it.

With Claire by my side.

She blinked up at me with tears streaming down her cheeks. She'd been there, revisiting my memories with me, the source as our guide. Leaving me with the full access of a royal fae, my element finally feeling balanced inside me for the first time in my life.

All because of Claire.

She was my balance, my mate who could absorb the weight of my past and guide me into the future. To help shoulder my burden, stabilize my growing power, and keep me grounded.

"Do you think Aflora knows?" Claire breathed, her blue eyes still ripe with tears.

I shook my head. "No. She has no recollection of that night." And something told me the core of our element wasn't ready to tell her yet.

Because that night with Elana was only the tip of the iceberg on Aflora's past.

How I knew that, I couldn't say. I just did. Courtesy of the source, most likely. It would tell her in time, perhaps when she found a mate of her own. I would be there for her, as a big brother, but I sensed it wouldn't be me she needed when that time came. Or our element would have given us both the truth long ago.

Sighing, I snuggled my mate to my chest and held her tight.

Vines, blooms, and an array of foliage and soil caked in all around us, having formed a cocoon during the healing. I sensed concern emanating from the mate-circle. It was strange to feel them so clearly now that I'd been fully bonded to Claire. Testing out the connection, I sent out a wave of reassurance that we were okay.

An echo of relief returned, but they were watching over us until we were ready to unearth ourselves from our bonding cocoon.

"That's new," Claire mused, nuzzling my neck.

"What is?"

"The five of you being able to communicate," she replied. "Or whatever that was."

"You couldn't do that before?"

"Oh, I could. I can speak to all of you mentally. But the circle has never been able to communicate collectively, at least not as clearly as that."

"Interesting." I drew in a deep breath, for the first time feeling whole. Not just because of Claire and my element, but because of them all.

How wrong I'd been about Cyrus and Exos. I could sense it now, their powerful energy a hive of strength for our mating circle.

Titus was the fire that inflamed all our passions, heightened our emotions, and resembled the glue between us all. Even though I doubted he'd ever admit it.

And Vox represented the practical branch, his intelligence and cunning providing us all with the voice of reason and control. Our personal Air Fae philosopher. I would enjoy having this close access to his mind.

A fun task for another day.

Because now, I just wanted to be with my Claire. To revel in our pairing and the element surrounding us.

"Part of me wishes Elana wasn't dead," Claire admitted. "Just so that I could kill her all over again."

I chuckled and stroked my mate's hair, untangling the small blooms that had grown within the strands. "She's gone, thanks to you. And now I know

what really happened that day.” My chest was still heavy with the memory, but it felt good to know, to actually remember.

Claire stroked my cheek as she gazed up at me. “Elana was trying to make her way through the royal lines. What do you think she was aiming to accomplish?” She frowned. “Other than spreading death and disease.”

“She wanted the source,” I said, caressing my mate’s shoulder. It was the only explanation. “And she didn’t just want one element; she wanted them all. I suspect she desired ultimate control over our kind, which would require the power of all five elements.”

Claire flinched. “I guess that’s why I was so attractive to her as a protégé.”

I nodded. “Indeed.”

Claire let out a long sigh as she nuzzled into me and closed her eyes. “Does it still hurt? What the source did to protect you.”

I rubbed at my chest. “For the first time since I can remember, the pain is dulled. It’s still there.” There would always be scars. “But it’s not cutting into me anymore. It feels like I can finally heal now.” Mostly because I had my access to the source again, the shield it had created no longer a barrier between me and my power.

“What was it like—seeing what happened to me?” I wondered out loud. “I could feel your presence but didn’t see you.”

“Because I was you,” she said quietly. “I lived through the memory as if I were a seven-year-old Sol.”

“There’s a scary thought,” I mused. “Not a good place for you to be, Claire.”

She giggled and shook her head. “I doubt it’ll be a common occurrence, unless there are more memories locked up in that head of yours?”

“Hopefully not,” I replied. Of course, I wouldn’t know for sure, but at this point, I doubted any of the others mattered. “But I suspect there are several hidden in Aflora’s mind.”

Claire glanced up at me. “What do you mean?”

I shook my head. “It’s an instinct awoken by my contact with the source. It’s done something to her, or perhaps her parents are to blame. But there’s a history there.”

“Like why she came to live with you?”

“Yes, like that.” Because it was never really explained to any of us. “Our mothers were best friends, but I never actually met Aflora’s parents. I

assumed all this time that they died from the plague, but given Elana's struggle against me and the source—as a seven-year-old—I have to wonder how true that is.”

“And if perhaps they hid her for another reason entirely,” my mate added.

“Yes.” Which meant Aflora's story wasn't finished yet. Not nearly. “We shouldn't try to unlock her memories, though. Or even hint at them.” Because she had never displayed any of the signs that I had. Aflora was funny, light-spirited, and a stubborn thorn when she wanted to be. I didn't want to do anything to change that.

Claire squeezed her arms around me as far as she could. “I agree. The elements will tell her when they're ready.” She kissed my chin. “Let's sleep, just for a little while longer, before you dig us out.” She glanced at our makeshift roof, a smile curving her lips.

I chuckled, looking up through the tangle of vines that blocked the sky. “Or we could just stay here forever.”

Claire awarded me with a soft laugh. “My other mates might not appreciate that.”

I hummed. “Perhaps not.”

We held each other, reveling in our love while I also reveled in the light suffusing my soul.

All thanks to Claire, my mate, my heart, my rock. She'd chased away my darkness. For good.

Chapter 46

Claire



TWO WEEKS LATER

I studied the final building on our tour and nodded. “It’s done.”

“Yeah,” Exos agreed, his palm at the base of my spine. “Good as new.”

“Minus the Chancellor’s house,” I added. We hadn’t bothered to reconstruct that monstrosity. “And the Spirit Quad is looking a little less dusty.” *And a lot more alive*, I thought as a butterfly fluttered by my nose.

Sol had helped me spread seeds all over the campus, creating new life in every corner to help improve the vitality among campus. He’d also assisted Cyrus in creating a series of fountains—a combination of Sol’s rocks as the foundation and Cyrus’s water element for the visual art. Vox had managed reconstruction with his squadron, the Air Fae using their wind to lift heavy Earth Fae-crafted boulders for the Fire Fae to weld together.

It took a literal village, but the Academy had never looked so beautiful. “What’s the verdict from the new Council?” I asked my spirit mate. There’d been an emergency gathering among all the royals—new and old—this morning to discuss the fate of the school. While I was invited, I’d chosen not to attend in favor of helping Sol, Titus, and Vox around campus. My elements craved a release more than a political meeting.

“We’ll reopen in the next term, which would be similar to a human university in the autumn.” He brushed a wisp of my hair behind my ear and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “They’ve agreed to allow the four of you to graduate early, but there are some conditions that come with the allowance.”

With the Academy not reinstating itself this year, it left Vox, Titus, Sol,

and me in limbo. So Exos and Cyrus had agreed to ask for a waiver that allowed us to call our education complete. It seemed strange since I'd only attended the Academy for a few months, but the whole purpose was to master my elements. And the last few weeks had more than proven that task to be accomplished.

"What are their terms?" I asked.

"Well, first, they've asked me to take over as temporary Chancellor and Head of the Council," he said, his tone suggesting just how he felt about that. "Apparently, I've shown great leadership in my young years."

My lips curled. "They're not wrong, Exos."

"Yes, that remains to be seen." He heaved a breath, his acceptance of the requirement evident in that gesture alone. Exos was a man of duty. If the fae requested his leadership, he would give it, if nothing else but to protect those he loved. Like me and Cyrus and our mate-circle.

I pressed my palm to his chest, allowing him to fold me into his arms. "What else do they want?"

"You," he replied softly, his ocean-blue eyes glittering with challenge. "Specifically, your connection to the elements. They say it makes you a fine Advisor to the Council—a title they made up this morning that essentially means you'll function as a conduit between them and the core of our powers. Any decision they make, they want to run by you for approval."

"Approval from the elements," I translated, frowning. "They make it sound as if I can speak to them."

"Can't you?" Exos countered, palming my cheek and drawing his thumb across my lip. "You have access to all five sources. It's likely that your instincts would tell you if the Council made a decision that went against our elemental cores."

I swallowed, considering.

A shallow dive into my spirit showed a series of bright stars awaiting my command, all flashing their approval, knowing I would never do anything to abuse them.

"My goddess Claire," Exos mused, having followed me along that path, his spirit right beside mine, his mouth at my ear. "As you said, love, they're not wrong." His lips against my temple drew me back to the quad, my gaze capturing and holding his.

"What else do they want?" Because in that brief touch of our spirits, I sensed there was more. These were just the two biggest concessions.

“Vox, Sol, and Titus,” he murmured. “The Academy is in need of strong mentorship. Particularly the Earth Fae, which is why they want Sol to take on a teaching role among his kind. As for Vox, Professor Helios is on the verge of retirement. They feel Vox is a suitable replacement but want him to mentor beneath Helios for a few years first. And Titus is the perfect replacement for the intramurals professor who fled before the battle.”

“So all three of them have to stay at the Academy.” I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. “What about me, you, and Cyrus?”

“I plan to reside here as well, having already proven to be able to effectively manage the Spirit Kingdom from afar. Not to mention, I want to be here when the Spirit Quad reopens. There’s going to be a lot needed to get it ready again. Fortunately, we have some time before the life cycle kicks in again.” His eyes lit up with the words, his relief flooding our bond.

Already, two Spirit Fae had fallen pregnant in the last couple of weeks, proving Elana’s hold over the death fields had been the cause of infertility.

“And Cyrus, he can mist between the Academy and his Water Kingdom. As can you,” he added, his palm sliding from my cheek to the back of my neck. “You can live here with us and still see Cyrus whenever you want. Which, I assume, will be often because I don’t see him going more than a day without your touch.”

“Where will we stay?” I wondered out loud. “The Spirit Dorms?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No, baby. I was thinking of building a place for us out in the field.”

“In the forest?”

He nodded. “Unless you have another idea in mind. But I’d prefer to live off campus grounds.” His lips brushed mine before drifting to my ear. “Your rapturous screams are for your mates and no one else, Claire. Therefore, privacy is a must.”

Exos nipped my escalating pulse, the heat of his breath raising goose bumps along the back of my neck.

“What do you think, Claire?” he asked, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Would you like to stay at the Academy? Help mentor some students and continue learning about your elements?” He kissed my cheek before pressing his forehead to mine. “If you think about, it’s the perfect place for you, surrounded by all the Elemental Fae. You’d thrive here.”

I shivered, my arms loosening to allow me to clutch his shoulders. “I want to be where my mates are,” I told him, locking my gaze on his. “I want

to be where *you* are, Exos. And if that's here, then I'll be here. If that's in Spirit Kingdom, then I'll be there. If we all stay with Cyrus in Water Kingdom, I'm okay with that, too. I just want all of us to be together."

"Spoken like a goddess," he mused, pride beaming from his gaze. "I think they'll all vote to stay where you are, Claire."

"But being here would make them happy," I added.

He nodded. "I think so, yes. Vox has always wanted to be a professor. Sol would thrive on the idea of helping his fellow Earth Fae through mentorship. And I don't see Titus balking at the idea of taking over fae intramural athletic activities."

My lips twitched. "No, I don't see him rejecting that either." In fact, I pictured him loving every minute of it. All of them would enjoy the opportunity. "And what would I be doing all day?"

"What you already do," Exos replied. "Leading us all."

"To where, the bedroom?" I teased.

His amusement tickled our bond. "If that's where you want us to go, we'll happily follow."

"Uh-huh." I smiled up at him. "I want to help you."

"Me?"

I nodded. "With Academy responsibilities. While also being the conduit, or whatever you called me, for the Council."

"Advisor," he corrected, his grip tightening. "And I accept, Claire. You're my queen, baby. We belong beside each other. Always." His lips touched mine for too fleeting a moment, leaving me with a craving deep inside for more. The hardness pressing into my lower abdomen through his suit pants told me it was a yearning he shared. But the seriousness in his gaze warned that we weren't done discussing important matters.

"Your mother," he started, his hand finding my hip while the other remained against my neck. "While the Council is convinced of her innocence, they're concerned about her mental state. Which is the other reason they recommend we remain on campus. Because they want to keep Ophelia here for the time being."

"Why?" I wondered out loud. "She's a Spirit Fae. Can't she live in Spirit Kingdom?"

"She could, but the fear surrounding her is too great. Believing the truth is entirely different from accepting it, and unfortunately, the Spirit Fae have villainized your mother for so long that it will take time for them to see her in

a new light.” His thumb stroked up the column of my throat. “Her mental state is too fragile to handle them right now.”

I sighed. He was right, of course. Most mornings she woke up screaming. Once she remembered her location and everything that had happened, she was usually fine. But some days, she walked around with a distant glow in her eyes, one that reminded me very much of death.

“Mortus has agreed to remain as well, to continue trying to heal her,” Exos added.

“Because that’s going splendidly,” I muttered.

Allegedly, they were archrivals in school, something being forced to bond only made worse. Because the link still remained, awaiting their true consummation. For years it was believed she’d died and Mortus had just chosen not to take another mate. Apparently, it was all a charade, because the Spirit Fae couldn’t bond with anyone else while my mother still lived.

They were forever engaged.

Mortus seemed to be more accepting and apologetic than my mother.

At least at first.

But a few words from her, and his ire spiked, creating this strange energy between them that left me decidedly uncomfortable.

“They’ll work it out,” Exos mused. “I have faith in that.”

“Glad you do, because I think they’re going to end up killing each other.” When my mate informed me of his decision to pair Mortus with my mother for her recovery, I feared it would do more damage than good. But the only time she really seemed to come alive was when she bickered with him over old wounds from two decades ago. “They fight like teenagers.”

Exos chuckled. “Reminds me a bit of Titus and Cyrus. All that tension and animosity. I do wonder what will come of it.”

“We both know how I intend to resolve that problem,” my water mate informed us from behind me. I hadn’t sensed his approach, too wrapped up in Exos’s aura. But I sighed as Cyrus pressed his chest to my back, his lips against the top of my head. “Mind if I steal our little queen for a moment? We have state business to discuss.”

“Ah, the coronation.” Exos wagged his brows. “I did catch on to your father’s impatience this morning. Best not to leave the old man waiting much longer, brother.”

Cyrus buried his face in my hair while murmuring his agreement, his arm sliding around my middle as Exos took my mouth in a kiss underlined in

promise. The heat from them both kick-started my heart, reminding me of the night the three of us shared together what felt like too long ago.

I wanted to experience that again.

To revel in them both.

To lose myself to their touch.

Soon, little queen, Cyrus promised, his warm exhale sliding over the back of my neck and Exos's hand. *Soon.*

Now works for me, I replied, my tongue eagerly engaging in the sensuous battle Exos had just initiated. He meant to tease. Well, I happily returned the favor, arching into his groin and moaning as he deepened our embrace.

He grinned against my mouth. "Playful little minx," he whispered, then spun me into his brother's waiting arms. "Try to keep her warmed up for me, Cyrus. I'd like to continue that when you're done."

My water mate spread a possessive palm against my lower back while his opposite hand gripped the back of my neck, just like his brother's had. "She'll be ready," he promised, his lips gently claiming mine. *Mmm, we need to talk about the coronation. But kissing you is far more enticing.*

His tongue engaged mine in a slow, sensual dance that stirred butterflies in my lower abdomen. When Cyrus kissed me like this, I felt fragile, worshiped, and very much *his*. Mist spun around us, our element playing in time with our mouths. It left me feeling giddy, eliciting a giggle from within that he swallowed with a groan.

How are you so perfect? he marveled, his hands falling to my hips to lift me in the air.

I wove my legs around his waist, my arms encircling his neck. *The elements made me this way,* I teased. *And I remember a time when you didn't think I was all that perfect.*

He nipped my lower lip in reprimand. *Nonsense. I adored you from the beginning.*

Uh-huh.

You were my stubborn little queen then, just as you are now. He took a few steps, halting when my back hit the trunk of a tree. It provided him with the leverage he needed to hold me between his body and the earth behind me.

I groaned as he pressed his growing arousal into the pillow between my thighs, making me wish I'd chosen a skirt today instead of pants. Or perhaps it was better this way. Cyrus and I couldn't be trusted in this state, too consumed with devouring each other to care about propriety.

With the Academy no longer in session, my father wants to do the coronation next week, he whispered into my thoughts. He states that I can no longer use your studies as an excuse to delay.

Okay, I replied, sucking on his tongue and threading my fingers through his thick hair. *Just tell me what to wear.*

He pulled back, his eyebrows lifting. "This is a big deal, Claire."

"Mm-hmm," I agreed. "So you need to tell me how to dress." I went to try to kiss him again, but he held me at bay with an incredulous look.

"This will make you the Water Queen."

"I know."

"And things will be expected of you."

"I'll need to give you an heir," I translated. "Yes, you told me that."

His eyebrows shot up. "You make it sound so easy, Claire."

"Isn't it?" I countered, arching an eyebrow right back at him. "I'm your mate. You're the future king. That makes me the future queen. We'll need to provide leadership over the Water Fae, and eventually, we'll need to produce a son. How am I doing so far?"

"It's a lot of responsibility, Claire. And easier said than done."

"Aren't all things easier said than done?" I asked him, my lips curling. "But I'm sure you'll enjoy the procreation part. We can practice as many times as you want, my future king. And when we're ready, I'll carry your heir and raise our child with you and the others. You just have to work out with Exos who gets to impregnate me first. Let me know what you decide."

He openly gaped at me. "Who are you and what have you done with my little queen?"

"She turned into an elemental fae goddess," I replied conversationally. "Now she listens to her elemental instincts." I tightened my hold around him, drawing his mouth closer to mine. "And right now, they're telling her to devour her water mate. Then follow him to his coronation next week and wear a pretty crown at his side."

"Fuck," he breathed, his exhale reminding me of an ocean breeze. I wanted to revel in it, taste him, indulge him forever.

"You're mine," I told him softly. "And I'll be whatever you need in return. It's as simple as that, my Water Prince. Now kiss me. I'm tired of talking about politics and want to fuck instead."

He released a surprised chuckle. "My needy little queen," he mused.

"You promised to satisfy me for eternity, Cyrus."

“Indeed I did,” he agreed, his mouth lingering over mine. “I’ll ascend next week, then.”

I nodded. “Yes. You will.”

“Then I’d better get to satisfying my future queen,” he said quietly. “She’s a stubborn little thing.”

“Demanding, too,” I added.

He smiled against my lips. “That she is.”

“Kiss me, Cyrus.”

“Happily, my queen,” he whispered, his mouth taking mine.

All talk of the future was swept away beneath a wave of lust and erotic intention. The Water Prince seducing his Water Princess beneath a sea of matrimony and bliss.

Forever and always.

To the moons and back.

Over and over again.

Epilogue

Claire



“**M**ay I present Queen Claire?” Cyrus announced, opening the bedroom to his quarters.

I glanced at him sideways. “You can stop saying that now.” He’d been doing it all evening, ever since accepting the Water King crown. “This is supposed to be your night, not mine.”

“Oh, but it is my night,” he murmured, his palm resting against the small of my back. “And I intend to celebrate accordingly.”

“Yeah?” I asked, allowing him to guide me through the threshold and into his bedroom. “What did you have in mind, Your Highness?”

“Mmm, I like those words from your mouth, Claire.” He pulled me to him, kissing me long enough to have me consider the need for breathing. “Say it again.”

“Your Highness,” I repeated, batting my eyes up at him.

He chuckled, closing the door behind him with his foot. “That gives me delicious ideas for later, when I have you on your knees.”

“You’ll make me kneel?” I feigned shock. “How degrading, King Cyrus.”

“You’ll enjoy it,” he promised, his palm sliding down to smack my ass. Hard. “Besides, we love when you go to your knees, little queen.”

“We?”

He smiled. “I told you that I intended to celebrate accordingly. And I would prefer to go down in history as a giving king.” His gaze lifted over my head. “What better way to start my reign than to share my coronation night with those I value most.”

“I love that dress on you, Claire.” Titus’s warm voice caressed my exposed spine, his heat radiating from somewhere behind me.

We were all waiting on the balcony, Sol explained into my mind. Cyrus wanted it to be a surprise.

I smiled. *Consider me surprised.*

While all my mates had attended the coronation, there'd barely been a moment for me to spend with them. Exos hadn't lied when he warned me Cyrus's ascension would be a grand affair.

Several Elemental Fae were in attendance, including Aflora. She'd worn a flower dress fit for an Earth Fae Queen but didn't seem quite herself. I suspected it had something to do with Glacier. From what I'd gathered, he was supposed to be her date and had chosen to stay with his parents the whole time instead.

Sol was right about him. The jackass didn't deserve Aflora. I'd wanted to talk to her, but Kols had distracted me with a giant hug. I'd known the Midnight Fae Royals would be in attendance. His easy candor still caught me off guard. However, it was a brief encounter because not two minutes after embracing me like we were best friends, he'd left me to pursue Exos and Cyrus's Fortune Fae friend—Gina. I'd only seen her in passing, just long enough to receive a glimpse of a smile and the approval radiating from her expression.

Cyrus said it was typical, that Gina probably stopped by to ensure the future she prophesized had come to fruition. And it must have, because I didn't see her again after that. Mostly a result of me being too wrapped up in meeting fae from all over the world to notice much else.

One thing was for sure: I still had a lot of learning to do about this fae world. Because there were a hell of a lot of kingdoms I'd never heard of.

But now was not the time for such explorations.

Not with the growing warmth at my back as all my mates entered the room from the balcony outside.

Cyrus's palms skimmed up my arms to the dainty blue straps at my shoulders. "Hmm, I don't think Titus wants to destroy your beautiful gown, little queen. Shall I help you remove it for him? Before his passion burns out of control?"

I shivered and pressed a kiss to his jaw. "Whatever you wish, Your Highness."

His lips curled. "Oh, Claire." He hooked his thumbs beneath the sapphire fabric. "If that's how you want to play, then that's how we'll play." He slid the silky strands to my biceps and lower, the Grecian-style dress falling with

his movements to pool at my waist. His gaze followed, the icy ring around his pupils thinning as he took in my exposed breasts. “Do you know why I chose this gown, little queen?”

“Because it flows like liquid over my skin,” I replied.

His lips curled. “Yes. And because I knew you wouldn’t be able to wear anything beneath it.” With a slight tug, he caused the garment to fall to the floor, leaving me clad in only a pair of silver heels. “Knowing you were naked beneath that dress was the ultimate tease for all of us.” He pressed his lips to mine, then turned me to face my suit-clad mates. “Again,” Cyrus murmured softly. “May I present Queen Claire?”

Four pairs of hungry gazes roamed over my body as if seeing it for the first time, their arousals all slamming into me at once.

Standing naked in a room surrounded by five males in formal wear was certainly one way to seduce a woman. Because fuck, I could hardly stand beneath the need assaulting me from all angles.

Cyrus grasped my hip with one palm, his chest a comfort against my back, and dipped his opposite hand into the damp heat between my thighs. “Mmm.” He nuzzled my neck. “Our Claire is quite ready, gentlemen. Shall we indulge our little queen?”

Exos leaned against the wall beside the fountain, in his hand a glass of bronze-colored alcohol. “Yes,” he agreed, clearly not in line to be the first to touch me.

No.

My spirit mate liked to watch.

He’d be the last one inside me. Make us both wait for the joining of our souls.

Titus would be first.

Vox and Sol sharing second.

Then Cyrus.

And maybe Exos would join then.

A trail of fire caught my focus, the flame inching downward to meet Cyrus’s hand. The Water King didn’t move, instead adding a kiss of water to the mix that left me quivering in his arms. Titus stepped forward, shrugging out of his jacket as he moved. “You’re making me thirsty,” he said casually to the male behind me.

“Am I?” Cyrus asked, his finger gliding with ease through my folds as Titus’s flame followed.

I trembled between them, my body lost to the sensations below. And we hadn't even started yet.

Holy Fae, these men are going to kill me, I thought, grabbing Cyrus's wrist as he thrust two fingers inside me. I gasped, the penetration harsh and oh-so right.

"Poor Claire," he mused at my back. "How will she survive us all?"

Sol and Vox both removed their jackets.

Titus kicked off his shoes.

And Exos remained calmly composed, sipping his drink and watching me with desire bright in his dark blue eyes.

A cool breeze tweaked my nipples, drawing my gaze to Vox. He smiled and canted his head. "I foresee a lot of screaming in her future."

"Indeed," Cyrus agreed, his fingers leaving me and stirring a whimper from deep within my soul.

Until Titus went to his knees before me.

My knees buckled as his mouth sealed over my clit, but Cyrus caught me with his arm around my middle, his opposite hand lifting to my paint my lips with my arousal. "Don't lick, little queen," he said. "That's for Sol to taste, not you."

Oh, dear mother of the elements...

Sol stepped forward, his palm going to my throat as he angled me to receive his kiss.

And kiss me he did.

The heat of his tongue a brand against my own, mingling with the juices Cyrus had left for my earth mate to enjoy.

Titus grazed me with his teeth, forcing me to divide my focus between them.

One of my hands went to Titus's hair, the other to Sol's cheek, and all the while, Cyrus remained a steadying presence at my back, holding me upright while my other two mates devoured me.

Vox's groan had me opening my eyes to find his lips wrapped around Cyrus's fingers, sucking them clean. And fuck if that wasn't the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

My men playing together?

My thighs clenched around Titus in response.

Yes. More of that, please, I thought, groaning against Sol's mouth.

A consideration for later perhaps, Cyrus replied, his lips brushing my

neck and nibbling at my racing pulse. *Tonight is about worshipping you, our queen.*

While you lead them as the king, I whispered back to him.

He smiled against my neck. *Yes, little queen.*

I understood then that he'd worked this all out with my mates, his dominance coming out to play in the way he knew best. While allowing us all to flourish under his command, to indulge and enjoy.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Sol pulled away, allowing Vox to take his place.

Titus remained between my thighs, his tongue bringing me ever closer to the edge of oblivion as he teased my wetness with his fingers.

"Do you remember what happened the last time we were in this room?" Cyrus hummed against my ear.

I arched back against him, Titus's mouth doing something that sent a violent tremble up and down my spine. Vox continued to kiss me, making a verbal response impossible, so I answered in my mind with a hissed, *Yes.*

"Do you want to experience it again, little queen?" he asked softly, his arm tightening around me while his other hand drifted from my hip to slide between us, down to my ass. "Do you want all of us to fuck you, Claire? To take you to new heights? Together?"

I swallowed, my lips leaving Vox as I panted at the picture Cyrus created. "That's impossible to do," I breathed, considering how many of them there were. I only had so many, uh, options.

My water mate chuckled, his breath warm against my neck. "We'll have to take turns." He nipped my earlobe. "But only if you want to, Claire."

Titus tilted his head back, his forest-green gaze glazed over with lust, his lips damp from my core. My limbs tightened at the image, my lower belly curling painfully with the need for release.

"I want you all," I said, my voice hoarse with desire. "However you want. Wherever you want. Just, now. Right now."

Cyrus chuckled. "You heard our queen. She wants us all. Let's take her."

Sol and Vox began unbuttoning their shirts.

Titus went the easy route of burning his to ash, his cock bouncing against my lower belly as he stood before me. His mouth found mine, his abs pressing into Cyrus's arm.

"Hold her," my water mate demanded.

Titus wrapped his arm around my lower back as Cyrus disappeared, his

opposite hand going to the back of my neck. Mmm, he tasted like me and fire combined, his mouth a heated ember I longed to lose myself in. And so I did, kissing him back with everything I owned, until something cool and damp slid between my ass cheeks.

“Shh.” Cyrus pressed a kiss to the top of my spine. “Just helping you prepare for your mates.”

I jolted as he slid a finger inside me back there, my body going directly into the wall of muscle that was all Titus.

And I forgot the world again.

My lips finding his in a passionate embrace underlined in an inferno I felt building throughout my entire body.

Hands began to caress me.

Mouths and tongues tasted my skin.

Vox and Sol, my elements recognized.

I moaned, the sound swallowed by Titus as he and the others guided me toward the bed.

Except for Exos. He remained as poised as always, still in his suit, waiting. The heat in his gaze resembled a brand as I crawled onto the mattress, that tumbler grazing his lips while he took yet another sip. Cyrus stepped into my view, his tie unknotted, his jacket gone, but he remained almost as clothed as his brother.

“Titus is going to fuck you, little queen. Sol wants your mouth. And Vox is going to slide behind you. Do you think you can handle that?” His words stirred a maelstrom inside me.

Three men?

At once?

Oh Fae... Why am I nodding? Because I wanted this. Because the wickedness of his words had set me on literal fire. Titus traced the flame along my arm, his lips curling. “That’s one way to express your approval, sweetheart.”

I swallowed, my gaze finding his. “Why aren’t you inside me yet?” I sounded breathless. Needy. Aroused.

“Feisty,” he murmured, lying down beside me, his green eyes darkening with yearning. “Take what you want, Claire. Ride me to your heart’s content.”

“Here, love.” Vox held out his hand, pulling me up and helping me to straddle Titus. “Get comfortable.” He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, his

strong body kneeling behind mine for support while I took Titus inside me.

My fire mate hissed in response, his palms grasping my hips to guide himself deeper and all the way to the hilt. “Fuck, Claire.”

“You said to take you,” I reminded him, sliding myself up and then down.

He growled my name, causing my lips to curl.

I love that sound, I told him.

And I love when you moan, he returned, his fingers drifting along my lower body to strum my clit. *Yeah, just like that.*

I nearly collapsed onto him, my body strung so tight from all the kisses, nips, and strokes, but Vox caught me around the middle, his arm strong. “Ready for me?” he asked against my ear. He tweaked my nipple with his air element, causing me to arch back against him, presenting myself in the most wanton manner.

The head of his cock nudged my ass. With one arm still wrapped around me, he used his other hand to part my slick cheeks to find my entrance.

Only Exos and Cyrus had fucked me back there.

But Vox, he didn’t penetrate fast or hard.

No, he took his time, his shaft easing in and out. In and out. Setting a rhythm that had my breaths coming in matching inhales and exhales. Calming me. Soothing me. Seducing me.

Titus incited heat and passion

Vox bathed me in sensuality.

And Sol grounded me, my rock, my giant with the tender smile. He caressed my cheek, capturing my attention, as he stood beside the bed. “Can you angle this way, little flower?” he asked softly.

The way Vox and Titus had positioned me on the bed put me at the perfect height to take Sol in my mouth. I just had to bend a little. But that bead of moisture on the tip of his arousal had me hungry for a taste.

So I responded by licking him, his fingers sliding into my hair to support my movements, not rush them.

Vox and Titus set a pace, not fast or painful, but smooth and enticing. I felt so full. So owned. Absolutely consumed.

Air caressed my skin.

Fire blossomed in my veins.

And earthy scents filled my senses.

Perfection.

My mates.

My elements.

All bonding as one while my water mate and spirit mate watched, waiting their turn. They were both in my mind. Praising me. Telling me how gorgeous I looked between my mates. Promising me a night of unending pleasure. And as the first orgasm crested through me, I knew they would uphold everything they vowed and more. Their hearts beating in time with mine.

I swallowed Sol's rapture, moaned as Titus's hot essence filled my insides, and sighed as Vox caught his release on a breeze that stirred every hair on my body.

And then Exos and Cyrus were there, taking their positions and driving me into an oblivion lined with the stars.

I lost myself to all of them, their hands, their mouths, their unbridled passion and desire. Over and over again we danced, the night soon blossoming into morning, where we finally fell asleep in a pile of limbs and adoration.

All six of us.

My mates.

Forming a circle of elements bound by love. Respect. Joy. And ecstasy.

Joined in a union no one could ever penetrate.

For eternity and beyond.

In our very own happily ever after.

The background is a soft, ethereal winter scene. It features a dense field of white snowflakes of various sizes, some appearing to be falling. Several vibrant blue butterflies are scattered throughout the scene, some in flight. In the lower half, there are several Christmas ornaments: a large white one with intricate silver scrollwork, a smaller silver one, and a white gift box tied with a silver ribbon. The overall color palette is dominated by whites, blues, and silvers, creating a clean and magical atmosphere.

ELEMENTAL FAE QUEEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LEXI C. FOSS & J.R. THORN

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Dear Reader,

Elemental Fae Queen is a standalone reverse-harem paranormal romance. It focuses on characters from the [*Elemental Fae Academy*](#) universe and includes a few cameos from [*Midnight Fae Academy*](#) and [*Fortune Fae Academy*](#) characters.

While this story contains crossovers within the fae universe, it takes place in the future and doesn't require knowledge of previous books. It also happens after the events in the other series; therefore, this isn't concurrent with those timelines and instead takes place after the conclusion of those stories.

This is a holiday-themed story with steamy scenes, emotional twists, and a little bit of fae politics sprinkled on top. There are also some MMF scenes with emphasis on the MM. Claire's mate-circle has grown rather close over the years ;)

Enjoy!

Jen & Lexi



ELEMENTAL FAE QUEEN

**All I want for Christmas is to feel my legs.
Because my mates broke me.**

After years of adoration and love—and lots of intimacy—my guys have a special holiday request.

A little fae baby.

Like a fool, I agree, but there's no way I can choose who gets to be the father. So, my guys have come up with a solution. A series of trials will determine who'll do the deed; namely, one in the bedroom that has me questioning if my lady parts are really up for this. Right now? Yeah, I can't feel my legs.

Except one look at my mates has me caving. The idea of them as dads melts me into a puddle of Claire-goo.

Even if their timing can't be worse. My dream of opening an Interrealm Fae Academy is just within reach. Then my pregnancy arrives with one hell of a twist.

I'm going to have to count on my guys more than ever to get me through this mess.

Wish my mates luck. They're going to need it. Because a pregnant fae with control over all five elements is a challenge unlike any they've ever faced before.

Something tells me this is going to be one unforgettable holiday.

The background is a soft, blue bokeh effect. In the foreground, there are several silver, reflective objects: a large five-pointed star, a smaller star, and a glass ornament lying on its side. Several blue butterflies are scattered throughout the scene, some appearing to fly around the text. The overall aesthetic is clean, elegant, and festive.

PART ONE

TRICK OR TREAT...
GIVE US
SOMETHING
GOOD TO EAT



PROLOGUE

CYRUS

Sex with Claire was my favorite activity. But there was something innately beautiful about holding her afterward and watching her sleep in this fully gratified state.

I could feel through the bonds that Exos and Titus shared my opinion. Even Vox and Sol were content, though they were elsewhere at the moment, preparing a surprise for our Claire.

Our little half human adored the holidays, and we wanted to make this year extra special for her. We had an ulterior motive, one we all hoped she would enjoy and accept.

A child.

It'd been a conversation whispered about between the mate-circle, but not fully explored. And we wanted to start the preparations for it now.

Which requires our little queen to be in a favorable mood.

Hence the fuck fest Titus, Exos, and I had just provided.

I met my brother's sapphire gaze over her shoulder, his expression knowing. Titus was lost between her legs, his head using her thigh as a pillow. But when I looked down, his dark green irises sparked with embers and excitement.

We had a proposal to make.

One we hoped our mate would accept.

Tomorrow, I thought. Tomorrow, we'll tell her what we have in mind.

And then the trials could begin...

CLAIRE



Pumpkins.

My mates carved pumpkins!

I stared at the display in awe, surprised that Sol had allowed Vox to desecrate one of Earth's creations in such a manner. The one and only time I'd mentioned Halloween festivities to him, he'd gone into shock before engaging in a rant about humans having no respect for the earth and its finer qualities.

"First, you cut down trees and decorate their corpses in gaudy strands and ornaments for Winter Festivus, or Christmas—whatever the hell it's called. And now you're telling me they gut pumpkins and take a knife to the sacred shell? Why in the five sources would anyone do such a thing?"

And that had effectively ended our discussion on Halloween traditions.

But he stood before me now, holding a big orange jack-o'-lantern.

Vox was beside him with a different sort of creation. His carving resembled a bell shape, making me wonder if he'd confused the Christmas ornaments with Halloween traditions. However, I smiled like a loon anyway.

"They're perfect," I said, delighted by the festive decorations. I wanted something that would bring all the fae realms together today, and this would surely do it. Because we all shared one thing in common—the Human Realm. So why not borrow from some of their fun traditions to set the tone for agreement?

“We have more to show you,” Vox murmured, his voice holding a husky note that always made me weak in the knees.

My Air Fae just had a way with sound, something I swore he used the winds around us to highlight. He’d grown even more powerful over the years, his ties to me and the source highlighting his former royal connection and strengthening his bonds to our shared element.

Even now, I could see the power swirling through his long, dark strands. He wasn’t wearing his trademark warrior tail today but instead allowing his hair to brush his strong shoulders.

“Yeah.” Sol cleared his throat. “We, uh, decorated your office, too.”

My eyebrows lifted. “You did?”

They both nodded.

“Want to see?” Vox asked.

“Do we have time?” We were supposed to be heading to the neutral zone in the Human Realm to meet the other fae for the annual Interrealm Fae Council meeting—something that had just been established over the last few years.

“We have two hours,” Vox replied. “Plenty of time.”

“And it’ll be a good distraction,” Sol added, his earth gaze knowing.

All my mates could feel the nerves rioting inside me, just as I could sense them all sending calming energy my way. But it wasn’t every day I had to deliver a proposal to all of fae kind.

My mates’ idea of a distraction was very welcome, so I nodded. “I would like to see it. Just don’t let me be late.”

Vox snorted, his silver-rimmed black eyes glimmering knowingly. He was never late, a fact he reminded me of with that look.

“Okay, show me,” I said, my curiosity piqued.

I’d started adding items to my office around each holiday about two years ago. Just subtle reminders of home. While I loved my fae and their festivities, I often felt nostalgic for the traditions of my past. I grew up with my human grandparents in Ohio, always celebrating Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and a myriad of other holidays.

Things weren’t the same here.

That didn’t make them bad.

Just... different.

Sol and Vox set their pumpkins down on the stoop of our Elemental Fae Academy home, then escorted me into the heart of campus, where I kept my

office.

Several fae waved along the way, everyone cheerful and pleasant in the autumn weather—weather that also reminded me of home.

Except the trees here didn't change like they did in Ohio. Instead, they remained green, and it never really snowed on Academy grounds. The elements kept everything thriving, indulging in a very different circle of life from the Human Realm.

A hint of nostalgia touched my chest, something that seemed to happen during this season every year. I'd learned to ignore it mostly, but I still dreamt of snowy trees, Christmas lights, and even Santa Claus.

Ridiculous, yes.

But some childhood experiences never died.

"Okay, close your eyes," Vox said as he led me to the door of my office. "No peeking."

"I don't peek," I replied.

"Sure, you don't," Sol drawled, his low timbre a caress to my senses. He came up behind me—his large, muscular body the biggest of all my mates—and grabbed my hips. "Don't think I've forgotten about that time with the blindfold."

"You didn't ask if I could see through it," I reminded him, my insides warming at the memory of Vox and Sol playing with sensory deprivation.

My Earth Fae mate was the rock of our mate-circle, his dominance quiet and strong and oh-so Sol. While Vox was my philosophical, wise mate. He always thought everything through and often provided the voice of reason that I needed.

"Excuses," he grumbled against my ear, his earthy scent wrapping around me in a cloak of comfort. "You knew what we expected from you, little flower. And you cheated."

"I would hardly call it cheating. I would have known who was who regardless." They'd wanted to play a sexual game that required me to guess who was inside me.

Sol's girth always gave him away, just like Vox's long length.

Heck, everything about them was unique. Even their tongues and the way they touched me. Sol always held back, afraid his much-stronger form would crush me, and Vox preferred sensual strokes and wind kisses.

Which, of course, had my thighs clenching. Because now I wanted sex.

And something told me that had been Sol's intent as he aligned his chest

to my back and wrapped his arms around my waist. “We’ll have to play again to find out,” he hummed against my ear.

“But decorations first,” Vox insisted. “Now close your eyes, Claire.”

A shiver traversed my spine at the demand in his tone, my insides heating all over again with the promise of what was to come.

My mates liked to play.

And I liked to play, too.

I closed my eyes and relaxed into Sol’s hold. My pointy ears—something I still wasn’t fully used to—twitched as the door swept open. Then my nose picked up on the subtle hints of foliage.

Sol had created something. My affinity for earth roared to life, trying to identify the foreign substance. It wasn’t Elemental Fae in origin, but foreign. Not human, either.

My lips curled down as I tried to determine the roots. But then Sol urged me forward with his much-bigger body guiding mine from behind, pushing me into my office.

Lights flickered beyond my closed eyelids, and the door whispered closed behind us.

“Okay,” Vox said. “You can look now.”

I squinted my eyes first, nervous, then immediately widened them at the sight of my fully transformed office.

A tree stood rooted beside my desk, branches resembling vines along my ceiling and wrapping around the upper molding of my walls. Yellow, red, and orange leaves decorated the limbs, their vibrancy the embodiment of autumn colors. A breeze ran on a loop between them, spreading the fragrance of home throughout my office.

“Oh, it’s beaut—”

I jumped as a skeletal thing appeared in the corner, billowing in the wind in a ghostlike state.

My eyes widened. “What the hell is that?”

Vox and Sol followed my gaze, the former frowning and saying, “It’s supposed to be a skeleton. Like for Halloween. Exos created it using spirit magic. Did he do it wrong?”

I blinked. “He used...?” I trailed off, because, yes, I could feel it now, the hint of his element weaving through the skeletal structure, commanding it to disappear and reappear at random.

A Halloween trick.

“Oh.” I grinned. “That’s clever.” I took in the tree again. “And this is amazing. What breed is it?” I pressed my palm to the bark, asking it to speak to me, but all it did was whisper Sol’s name.

“I, uh, sort of made it up. You once told me about the leaf cycles from home, but ours don’t do that. So I created a tree with leaves naturally occurring in your autumn colors. It will always look like this. I guess we can call it an autumn oak?”

“Autumn oak,” I repeated, my heart thudding in my chest. “Yes. Oh, Sol, thank you!”

I spun around in his arms to kiss him, only to be caught off guard by the glowing pumpkin lanterns strung around my door. My eyes widened at the very real flames brightening the insides of the hollowed-out baby pumpkins. They were all strung together by strands of water swirling with spirit and air.

“Wow,” I breathed, stunned by the gorgeous use of elements.

“You like it?” Vox asked softly, his chest caressing my back as he sandwiched me between him and Sol.

“It was Vox’s idea,” my earth mate said, a note of annoyance in his tone. “He made me create all those pumpkins just for Titus to gut them.”

“And we’re making a pie from it all,” Vox added, his tone excited. “River gave us a recipe to try. I’ve already started the process back at home.”

“Pumpkin pie.” I couldn’t hold back the excitement in my voice. “Are we... are we going to have Thanksgiving this year?” We’d never really celebrated it before.

“We’re looking into it,” Sol replied, reaching up to twirl one of my blonde strands around his finger. “But we want to focus on Halloween first.”

“Yes, definitely Halloween,” Vox murmured, his lips falling to my neck. “A very memorable Halloween.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean? The fae don’t celebrate Halloween.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t,” my air mate whispered against my ear before nibbling on the lobe. “Do you like your decorations, Claire?”

“I love them.” I tried to face him, but his hands landed on my hips, forcing me to remain in place.

Sol’s touch drifted from my hair to my cheek, his massive palm cupping my jaw with his trademark tenderness. “Did we get it all right, little flower?”

The ghostly skeleton chose that moment to whisper through the room, disappearing into a wall. My cheeks began to burn from smiling so hard. “It’s

all perfect,” I said, meaning it. “But I don’t understand why you did this.”

“Can’t we do something nice for our mate?” Vox asked, his lips tracing the column of my neck.

“You always do nice things for me,” I replied, leaning into Sol’s palm and elongating my throat a little more for Vox’s mouth.

“Then this shouldn’t be a surprise,” Vox replied.

“But it’s a lot more than we usually do.” Last year, I just had a pumpkin on my desk. Then I’d gone a little overboard on Christmas decorations shortly after because I’d needed a little human fix. I intended to do it all over again this year, and being surrounded by autumn remnants now only made me more excited to play with winter-themed ornaments and spice up our homes with holiday cheer.

That was the upside to having multiple places to stay—it gave me that much more to decorate.

“Maybe we want to make this year extra special.” Vox’s mouth returned to my ear. “Our mate-circle is turning five years old soon.”

“Yes,” Sol agreed, his earthy gaze following the movement of his thumb as he drew a line across my bottom lip. “Consider this an anniversary gift of sorts.”

“An early one,” Vox whispered, his tone eliciting a trail of goose bumps along my skin.

I melted into them, their seductive touches lulling me into a sense of peace only my mates could inspire. They were doing this to put me at ease, to ensure I was entirely relaxed for the Interrealm Fae Council meeting.

This was just one of the many reasons why I loved them.

They always knew what I needed, their intuition tied to their abilities to read my thoughts and mine theirs. But I sensed they were hiding something from me now. Some sort of big surprise.

I didn’t pry because I wanted to enjoy whatever they had in store for me.

Sol rewarded my acquiescence with a kiss, his tongue sliding in to slowly dominate mine in a thorough and powerful way that was all him.

Vox nipped my shoulder, his hands drawing the fabric of my dress upward, the silk tickling my thighs along the way. “She’s not wearing underwear again,” he said as he revealed my hips.

“Naughty, Claire,” Sol said, then took my mouth once more before I could reply.

You guys keep ripping off my underwear, I said into their minds. *It’s*

much more economical to go commando.

“Mmm, we’re not complaining,” Vox said, his palm flattening against my thigh before sliding toward my center.

His touch was always like this—precise and knowing.

Just as Sol maintained his possessive hold, his hand drifting from my cheek to the back of my neck to angle me to more thoroughly receive his kiss.

I lost myself to them, allowing them to guide me into the sensual act our bodies all craved.

Vox slid two fingers into me, his growl hot against my neck. “Fuck, Claire.”

“That’s exactly what I want you to do,” Sol replied, his teeth skimming my lower lip. “I want you to sink balls-deep into her sweet heat while she swallows my cock with this beautiful mouth.”

My blood heated with the illustration his crude words provided.

Over the years, Sol had really come into his own, taking charge where he wanted and always offering me the safety and warmth I craved.

He was my literal rock.

I kissed him again, my soul igniting into an inferno of need as Vox added a third finger below.

Sol pawed at my shoulders, dragging the straps of my dress down my arms to my wrists, successfully exposing my braless chest. He made a low noise of approval before palming both of my breasts and giving them a sensual squeeze. I arched into him, moaning his name, then falling into a groan from Vox’s stimulation between my legs.

“Oh, Fae,” I breathed, trembling from the onslaught of pressure building in my lower belly.

Only, my mates didn’t allow me to fall over the edge. Instead, they spun me around to push me down onto my desk, my hard nipples protesting against the wood.

I glanced over my shoulder, a complaint clawing up my throat, only for the words to go dry at the sight of Vox unzipping his black dress pants, his heated gaze on the space between my legs.

His arousal always undid me.

All of my mates had that impact.

Including Sol as he strolled around the desk to unfasten his own pants in front of me. His fingers feathered over my jaw before going to my hair, his

brown-green eyes capturing mine to evaluate my acceptance.

Whatever he saw in my features must have confirmed it for him, because his touch shifted back into my hair, where he tangled his grip in my strands. He pulled me just a little bit to the side, lining my face up with his groin, while Vox stepped between my legs from behind.

Thank the Fae for the desk beneath me. It gave me the leverage and sturdiness I needed to make this possible.

“Open your mouth, little flower,” Sol said, his tone softer than a true command.

His girth had always proved a challenge for me to swallow—a challenge I very much enjoyed. Something I allowed him to see now as I held his gaze and moisturized my lips with my tongue.

Vox’s palms found my hips, his cock nudging my entrance as Sol slid into my mouth.

Their thrusts were gentle at first, their care for me evident in their steady pace. But as our arousals intensified, their movements grew faster and harder, Sol hitting the back of my throat while Vox slammed into me below.

It was dirty. Hot. *Beautiful*.

My senses were on fire from the surrounding autumn elements, all created by my mates for my personal enjoyment.

Vox breathed air around my stimulated form, his affinity stroking my clit in a breezy kiss that sent my soul soaring toward the clouds. Then Sol grounded me with his shaft, his earthy essence trickling down my throat in a prelude of what was to come.

I moaned and shook between them, overpowered by our connection, our mate-circle throbbing to life inside my heart and caressing each of my nerve endings.

Cyrus, Exos, and Titus were all aware of what was happening right now, and I could feel their collective intrigue. Titus sent fiery kisses to my spirit, reminding me of the hot strokes of his tongue against my clit last night. Cyrus whispered icy thoughts of cold promise, forcing me to recall how he’d used ice to counter Titus’s tongue, the dual sensations driving me mad.

And Exos’s soul stroked mine, his spiritual being joining Vox’s air essence against my sensitive center, causing me to cry out.

All of them were in me, even though it was only Sol and Vox in this room. But I felt us all playing together, climbing higher and higher to a climax that was going to split me in two.

Sol flexed his hips, sending himself even deeper into my throat, forcing me to take more of him. I wrapped my hand around the base, stroking him in time with my mouth.

Vox's palms were brands against my hips, his long length hitting that spot deep inside me that elicited the most-addictive pleasure.

He knew how to angle himself just right, stroking me on repeat and shoving me closer... closer... closer...

I could feel them chasing me, their pleasures mounting in tandem with mine, dancing together on a plane of elemental existence only our mate-circle understood.

And then a wave of power crashed through us all, Cyrus sending a sensual push that threw all three of us over the cliff together into an oblivion underlined in passion and love.

Sol ground out a curse, Cyrus's name on his tongue.

Vox groaned.

And I screamed around the shaft unloading down my throat.

It was intense and overwhelming and perfect, leaving me in a cloud of delirium I never wanted to surface from.

I swallowed everything Sol gave me. Squeezed every drop from Vox between my legs. And all but collapsed onto my desk.

The earthy scent of the autumn leaves provided a sweet stroke across my existence, alighting me from the inside out and leaving me blissfully pleased between my two mates.

Vox bent to kiss my shoulder, and Sol brushed his knuckles across my cheek as he carefully dislodged himself from my mouth.

I need a nap, I thought at them.

They both chuckled in reply, then Sol went to his knees before me to press his nose to mine. "You can nap on our way to the Human Realm. I'll carry you."

I started to nod, my eyes falling closed.

Then I remembered what I had to do when we got there and groaned—a sound that turned into a pleasant moan as Vox slipped out from between my legs. Every part of me tingled in reply, my body already preparing to go again.

Years of satisfying five mates had preconditioned me to accept multiple orgasms.

Not a bad life.

But it definitely became problematic when on a timetable such as this because there was no time for more sex.

You're insatiable, little queen, Cyrus mused into my thoughts.

Stop reading my mind, I replied.

We're reading your spirit, Exos corrected. *You're practically writhing in the spirit realm, begging to be fucked again.*

I wonder why that is, I shot back.

No idea, Cyrus said, his voice the epitome of innocence.

Uh-huh, I drawled, shivering as Vox drew his fingers up the back of my thighs.

"Turn over, Claire," he said. "We'll clean you up with our mouths."

Sol grinned, clearly in favor of that idea. "Yes, turn over, little flower. I'll start with your breasts."

Enjoy, Cyrus whispered across my mind, then disappeared as Vox and Sol took control of my body, moving me to my back and devouring me just like they'd promised.

By the time they were done, I couldn't even remember my name.

Which was completely okay.

Who needs a name anyway?



“Well, our plan seems to be going well,” I said conversationally. “She is usually pretty agreeable after a good fucking,” Titus agreed, his hand slipping into the pocket of his dress pants. He’d chosen to wear black slacks and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. No tie. It was the Fire Fae’s definition of professional attire.

Mine differed from his, my wardrobe containing over a dozen suits for occasions just like this. Exos maintained a similar style. Which was why we both stood in three-piece suits.

“Is everything in place for tonight?” my half brother asked, his sapphire gaze a much-darker shade of blue than my own icy irises. But we had the same blond hair, courtesy of our Spirit Fae mother.

“Yep,” Titus replied, the picture of ease with his windswept auburn locks and easygoing smile. “I have the keys to the cabin, River helped me stock the fridge with popular human food, and we moved the two king beds out of the bedrooms to push them together in the living area. Everything’s a go.”

I nodded. “Excellent. Now we just have to convince our little queen to accept the trials.”

“Let’s hope this meeting goes well,” Exos replied, his expression sharpening. “We need her to be happy and agreeable.”

“A few orgasms can help with that,” Titus drawled.

“Not if she’s unwilling to accept them,” Exos tossed back. “This idea

means a great deal to her. It's also important to us and our potential offspring."

"We're all aware of what's at stake," I murmured. "So let's see who we can schmooze to pave the way for our mate's success."

Titus grimaced. "I'd rather just light the opposition on fire."

"Let's call that our backup plan, hmm?" I suggested.

The Fire Fae heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Fine. I'll try the diplomatic route first. But if anyone so much as speaks out against Claire today, I'm setting them on fire."

I considered pointing out how that could lead to a battle of fae powers in the Human Realm—which would be very bad—but decided not to comment.

Titus would do whatever the fuck he wanted, with or without our consent.

Trying to convince him otherwise was a futile task.

So I just shrugged and went back to surveying the crowd.

We were meeting on neutral ground in Greenland, where the Interrealm Fae Council maintained a territory shrouded in protection. The mortals had no idea this civilization existed; it was all hidden through a variety of fae magic.

To the mortal eye, this territory resembled an uninhabitable glacier. But once a fae traversed through the enchanted boundary, a city of warmth and color was revealed.

Not all fae chose to remain in their own kingdoms—a recent development encouraged through a variety of events—and several of those fae had chosen to reside here.

I wasn't sure of the current population numbers, but it continued to rise.

We stood in the center of the city, near the main hall, where the Interrealm Fae Council chose to convene annually. Our mate wanted to start a school here for those with cross-species abilities, otherwise known as abominations.

Many fae were anti cross-species breeding because of the events of our past, but Claire was determined to fix the perception. She had several powerful allies on her side, including support from the Midnight Fae and Fortune Fae.

Claire felt that if abominations and Halflings had been more accepted as a society, her path to queendom would have been easier because she would have been welcomed and provided with the training she'd needed.

Her allies from the Midnight Fae and Fortune Fae kingdoms were also

driven by personal reasons, most of which stemmed from their own trials in life.

Claire had presented her idea to their respective leadership first and had used their feedback for her presentation today. And I really could not wait to see my mate in action.

Speaking of my mate, I thought, smiling as she entered the grand hall with Sol and Vox on either side of her.

She headed right for me, her blue eyes holding a touch of the panic I felt radiating around her spirit. I immediately sent a reassuring squeeze through our bond, doing my best to calm her nerves.

“Do you have the letter?” she asked by way of greeting.

“You think I would forget it?” I countered, arching a brow.

“Cyrus.”

“Claire.”

She stared me down, and I stared her down right back. My little queen needed some fire, and if that meant pissing her off, so be it.

The letter she wanted was the formal request from the Elemental Fae to create the Interrealm Fae Academy. I also had a similar one from the Midnight Fae. The Fortune Fae were a bit more complicated, as they divided their territories up between Alpha leaders who ruled in equal measure with their Omegas, so Gina would only be speaking on behalf of her region and would confer with the other Omegas afterward. Although, I doubted any would challenge a revered Omega like Gina.

All the other realms would require similar agreement or would forfeit their involvement in the school.

Please don't do this, Claire whispered into my thoughts. *I need your support right now, not a fight.*

What you need is to remember who you are, I countered through our mental link. *You're a queen, Claire. Now lift your chin and show off that regal neck of yours. Maybe I'll reward you with a kiss.*

She narrowed her gaze.

I merely arched my brow back.

Was I being an ass? Yes. Was it distracting her from her nerves? Also yes.

She stepped into my personal space to start searching my jacket pockets for the letter, her hands roaming all over my torso and causing my lips to twitch with amusement. “Where is it?” she demanded, a hint of hysteria

touching her gaze.

I caught her chin and held her gaze. "Breathe," I told her. *Don't let anyone see you panic, Claire. You need to walk into that meeting like you own the room. This is a brilliant idea. Fucking own it.*

Her nostrils flared. *How can I do that if you left the letter at home?*

I didn't leave it at home, little queen. I kept it safe, just like you asked, and I'll present it when you request it during the meeting. I released her jaw to cup her cheek. *Where is all this anxiety coming from, Claire? What are you afraid of?*

That they're going to hate this idea, she whispered back at me. *That... that they won't accept me or the school. Which is exactly what I don't want to happen to anyone else in my position.*

I pressed my lips to hers, hiding the tears welling in her eyes. She just needed this moment to bolster her strength, and so I provided it with my mouth while the others closed ranks around us, ensuring no one could see our queen's nervousness over this proposal.

It meant a lot to her on a personal level, making this more emotional overall. I understood that. But I needed her to understand that queens bowed to no one.

"You will go into that room and show them what a queen looks like," I told her softly. "I won't accept anything less from you, Claire."

She swallowed. "What if they hate it?"

"Then you change their minds."

Her blue eyes sparkled, the tears bleeding into something more passionate. "I don't accept a negative answer," she said slowly. "I make them say yes."

"Exactly," I replied. "They're not allowed to say no."

"They're not allowed to say no," she repeated, nodding with me. "Okay."

"Okay," I echoed back at her, pressing my lips to hers once more. "You're going to be magnificent, little queen. And we're all here if you need us."

"Thank you," she murmured, a hint of color staining her pale complexion. Not embarrassed, but excited. "I can do this."

"I know you can," I agreed. "Kick their asses. And if anyone opposes, Titus will light them on fire."

"Damn right I will," he said, nodding behind her.

Claire giggled. "That's not very diplomatic."

The Fire Fae rolled his eyes. “Fae, you sound just like Cyrus and Exos.”

“I personally take that as a compliment,” my brother replied, his sapphire gaze alight with approval as he studied our mate.

I released her, aware of what he wanted, and watched as he pulled her into a reassuring kiss. Titus grabbed her next, then Sol, and finally Vox, leaving our little queen winded and breathless by the end.

But she looked ready to slay.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“I know,” I replied. “Lead the way, little queen.”



Claire resembled a goddess as she answered questions from the head of the table, her stature poised and confident, her expression jubilant.

My mate was born for leadership, just like Exos and Cyrus, who both stood beside her now.

I hung out in the back, observing everyone and monitoring Claire's mood through our bond. All this council shit wasn't for me. I preferred to handle discord with my fists, not clever words, thus making it a good thing Claire had mates like Exos, Cyrus, and Vox for balance.

"I don't like the way that Shifter Fae is acting around our mate," Sol grumbled beside me, his eyes on the vibrant-haired male talking to Claire.

"He's a peacock," Vox replied. "It's in his nature to strut like that."

"Well, if he keeps cocking his head like that, he's going to become a featherless bird," Sol muttered back at him. "Actually, isn't that what River said to cook for Thank You Day?"

"He said we need a turkey," Vox corrected. "And I think it's called Thanks Day, without the 'you.'"

"Thanks Day, then. But what's the difference between a peacock and a turkey?" Sol asked.

"I... I don't know." Vox glanced around the big guy to look at me. "What's the difference between a peacock and a turkey? They're both birds, right?"

“How the fuck would I know?” I wasn’t the chef in our mate-circle. I also knew nothing about human food.

“We’ll have to ask River,” Vox said.

“Or we could pluck that flirty shifter and roast him instead,” Sol muttered, his earthy gaze narrowing as the brightly dressed male tossed his feathered head back on a laugh.

My lips twitched. “At least he seems to be entertaining Claire’s ideas.” Unlike several other fae council members in the room.

The notion of an Interrealm Fae Academy stirred a great deal of conflicting results. Some were open to the idea. Others felt it would only exacerbate the abomination issue.

And then there were those who had chosen to miss the meeting entirely—namely, the Hell Fae.

I would never forget the day Cyrus and Exos explained the various kingdoms to Claire, and her horrified reaction to learning demon-like fae existed.

“You told me demons weren’t real!” she’d snapped. “And werewolves, too. You... you said that was all human bullshit, or whatever.”

“Technically, demons and werewolves don’t exist, so I didn’t really lie,” Exos had replied in that holier-than-thou tone he seemed to favor.

“Yes, the appropriate terms for them are *Hell Fae* and *Shifter Fae*,” Cyrus had added.

Claire had just glowered at them both, then she’d stomped outside to release a stunning array of elements that had left us all in awe of her talents. Afterward, she’d returned with a great deal of questions.

However, after learning about the Hell Fae’s penchant for stealing fae for their bride trials, she hadn’t been all that eager to meet them. So I supposed it was a good thing they kept skipping the meetings.

Except, she had mentioned wanting them here. Something about how they would appreciate the school since their breed of fae had been created through a series of abominations. She felt that it meant they could aid in the organization of the school programs, and had also commented on how maybe a little collaboration between the realms would help cool some of their notorious ire toward the other fae.

An optimistic outlook, one I admired her for sharing. But it would never come to fruition. The Hell Fae had no interest in reconciling with the kingdoms that had basically cast them all to the underworld—hence their

name.

Sol stiffened beside me as two Paradox Fae approached Claire with glowing swords on their hips. Exos shook hands with one of them, his expression stoic and regal. Cyrus followed suit.

“I’ve never liked time dwellers,” I muttered, agreeing with Sol’s aggressive stance. “They’re tricky little buggers.”

Those swords on their hips were tokens that allowed them to alter timelines, leaving everyone around them none the wiser. Who knew how many realities had been shifted under their authority? Just the thought gave me chills. For a Fire Fae, not much gave me that effect.

“They’ll definitely demand a price for their involvement,” Vox said, his tone diplomatic. “But they love making deals.”

Well, that was one outlook on their kind. An outlook far more positive than mine.

After the Paradox Fae finished, another clan of Shifter Fae approached. Each animal type had their own councilman or councilwoman, and most seemed to be represented.

On and on it went with each fae kingdom voicing their questions and concerns and only a few verbally agreeing to the idea. Others wanted more time to think, or they needed to discuss it among their own councils.

Claire positively glowed with excitement as it all came to an end, her cheeks a beautiful pink shade that reminded me of the spirit butterflies she enjoyed conjuring.

I grinned at her, eager to take her back to the cabin we’d arranged for the week. She had no idea what surprise lay in wait for her, but first, we had to eat.

Part of me wanted to skip the meal pleasantries and go straight to dessert. But Claire would need her strength later for our first trial.

Assuming she agreed to our plans.

My stomach tightened in anticipation. Part of the fun would be convincing her to indulge us in the games we had planned. And the prize would be watching her grow round with a little fae child.

Claire was already stunning, but there was just something so hot about the idea of her being pregnant with our children. She would make a beautiful mother. I couldn’t wait to see it.

I just hoped she said yes.

We all did.

It'd been difficult to keep our plans from her, specifically as she was linked to all of us mentally. However, we'd somehow pulled it off. Perhaps because she'd been so wrapped up in her Interrealm Fae Academy plans.

She glanced at me, her blue eyes twinkling with so much joy my heart hurt. Then her lips curled into a secret smile as she sent fire to dance over my fingertips. I returned the gesture with a little stroke along her neck that made her visibly shiver.

You look hungry, she said into my mind.

I'm always hungry, sweetheart, I replied, the innuendo thick in my voice. *Do you want to be my appetizer?*

I think dessert is probably best.

Took the words right out of my head, I drawled, because she really had since I'd just thought something similar a few seconds ago. *I look forward to devouring you later, Claire.*

Likewise, fire mate, she murmured, blowing me a fire kiss that landed on the edge of my mouth. I drew a line of flames across her bottom lip in response, then Exos leaned in to lick it off with his tongue.

Spoilsport, I thought, rolling my eyes.

He winked back at me, then kissed her again before turning to lead the group our way.

Dinnertime.

Then... dessert.

CLAIRE



The icy air blew with a fury outside the restaurant windows, displaying the true nature of this part of Greenland. Yet, inside, we were warm and cozy and completely unimpacted by the elements.

An entire fae city was being built under this dome of magic. We were sitting on the outskirts of it all, in the pub closest to the exit. What I liked about this location was the food—they catered to all fae kind.

Which was how I'd ended up with a bowl of pasta bolognese.

It had been listed under Midnight Fae cuisine since the vampire-like beings tended to frequent the Human Realm for blood snacks. From what I understood of their culture, they'd adopted mostly human foods into their world as a result because it was all they ever ate.

Worked for me.

But I did pair it with a spritemead, because yum.

My mates all had elemental-themed dishes, while the Fortune Fae at our table had decided on some items similar to mine.

And all around us were tables filled with different types of fae.

I loved it, this feeling of togetherness among the realms. It gave me a glimmer of hope that this Interrealm Fae Academy might actually kick off.

A spark of Winter Fae magic tickled my nose, drawing my focus out the windows once more. Fae magic still amazed me, particularly as I could sense the essence humming across my skin like a live wire.

The waves left behind a foreign kiss that called to my water magic. An icy swirl danced along my fingertips in response—one Cyrus responded to with a trickle of his own power.

My lips quirked upward in response, the sensation one that called to my very soul.

You like that, little queen? he asked, his icy blue eyes meeting mine from across the table.

I responded by increasing the flow of water around my fingertips, only to jolt as he matched my speed and took control of it with his own ties to the source. He was the Water Fae King, granting him unlimited power when it came to his element.

He sat beside his cousin Kalt, who was currently serving as a dignitary intern in one of the other fae realms.

Winter Fae, I thought, glancing outside for the fifth or sixth time tonight. They were the ones behind the magic here in Greenland because they used a similar shielding power up in the North Pole.

All those stories about Santa and his elves? Yeah, they stemmed from a real place. It had blown my mind when I first learned about it, and I was dying to visit someday. They were working closely with the Elemental Fae, mostly because they already resided in neutral territory in the Human Realm. And they were rather kind, too.

Kalt leaned in to ask Cyrus yet another question, one my mate accepted with a contemplative nod before replying.

My heart warmed at the sight of their mentorship. I rather liked this nurturing side of my Water Fae mate. Although, it hadn't escaped my notice that he seemed far more patient with Kalt than he was with me.

"Oh, so the trials have started, then," Gina said from beside me, her voice holding a touch of excitement.

The water swirling around my fingers dissipated into mist as Cyrus focused on the Fortune Fae, his gaze narrowing. "Don't do that."

She blinked her soft blue eyes at him. "Don't do what?"

"Play in the future," he snapped.

"That's akin to telling you not to indulge your affinity for water," she retorted, frowning. "Does that mean I'm ahead? Because the path is pretty well formed."

"It is," her mate, Zeke, agreed softly, his blond hair flirting with his shoulders from the gentle breeze Vox had just conjured from the opposite end

of the table. “But I think we might be in that timeline now, Dreamcatcher.”

“Oh.” Her full lips twisted to the side. “Right.”

“What trials?” I asked, confused by her sudden commentary. Of course, I rarely understood her random statements. The woman loved to talk in riddles and often didn’t make any sense at all. But we’d grown closer over the last few years. Mostly because we shared a lot of the same political motivations.

It wasn’t always that way, though. I hadn’t liked her at all when we’d first met. She’d been just as cryptic then, saying something about a dark piece that didn’t fit. A dark piece that had turned out to be a lot closer to us than any of us had realized. Alas, that was in the past now.

However, I’d strongly disliked Gina on sight because of her stunning looks and the way Exos and Cyrus had clearly displayed a history of knowing her. Fortunately, they’d only shared a friendship.

A friendship that appeared to be in jeopardy now as they were both glowering at the Fortune Fae.

Zeke cleared his throat. “Just because I’m blind doesn’t mean I can’t see,” he said. “Don’t look at my mate like that.”

“Okay. What’s going on?” I demanded. “Why are you all so tense? What trials are coming? Is this because of the school?”

A few fae at a nearby table stopped talking, their pointy ears all angled our way, my tone having caught their attention.

I wanted to smile and wave them off, but I was too concerned about Gina’s cryptic commentary to focus on diplomatic niceties.

Kalt cleared his throat. “I’m going to get another spritemead.”

No one replied, everyone too busy staring between my mates and Gina.

“Um...,” Aflora hummed by way of greeting, then glanced up at the tall Midnight Fae beside her—Guardian Zephyrus. “We’ve clearly missed something important.”

Aflora had mentioned joining us a little later for dinner, saying she needed to take care of a task. She hadn’t elaborated, but then, she rarely did. The Royal Earth Fae I once knew had blossomed into a powerful queen-like female with peculiar magic that many other fae feared.

But she was exactly why an Interrealm Fae Academy needed to exist—so we could better understand abominations and the matings of power.

“Are you causing trouble?” Aflora asked, her blue-black eyebrow arching upward at Gina. The two of them had history. Something about a coffee shop. So I wasn’t surprised that she immediately suspected the Fortune Fae of

playing a word game. Her kind was rather notorious for it. At least she hadn't taken out her infamous card deck.

"Why does everyone assume I'm always to blame?" Gina demanded.

"Because you usually are," a Paradox Fae drawled from the bar.

"No one asked you, Kali."

"Pretty sure you just asked the entire realm," she tossed back.

Gina huffed a breath. "All I mentioned were trials," she muttered.

"Trials?" Aflora repeated, her cerulean blue eyes locking on Zephyrus.

He lifted one of his broad shoulders. "Fuck if I know." He wrapped his arm around her, then bent to whisper something in her ear. Whatever it was caused her cheeks to flush scarlet. I didn't know the Midnight Fae male well, but Cyrus and Exos enjoyed his directness. It seemed Aflora did as well, because her eyes flashed from whatever he'd said.

I stopped looking at them and stared Gina down. "Explain."

"Ask your mates," she replied. "They know what I'm talking about."

"Have you seen who wins?" Titus asked suddenly, causing Cyrus to growl at him. "Oh, come on, you're wondering the same thing I am."

"I don't want to know," Sol put in. "I want to play the game, fair and square."

"What game?" I asked. "What the hell are all of you talking about?"

"I don't need Gina to predict the winner," Cyrus replied, his focus on Titus. "We already know it's going to be me."

"Bullshit," Titus tossed back. "I beat you just the other night. She totally screamed louder for me."

I gasped. "Titus!"

Cyrus just chuckled. "Keep telling yourself that, Firefly."

"Call me that one more time, Royal Jackass."

"Firefly," he repeated, smirking.

Titus made a move to stand, but Sol clamped a paw on his shoulder to shove him back down while Vox released a long, drawn-out sigh.

Exos merely shook his head. "We want to have a baby, Claire," he said. "And we've devised a series of trials to determine who gets to do the honors."

I blinked at him. "I'm sorry... what?"

"And that's my cue to go," Gina said, pushing away from the table. "You're all welcome, by the way."

"Pretty sure none of us thanked you," Cyrus replied.

“Yeah, totally not invited to Thank You Day,” Sol added.

“It’s Thanks Day,” Vox corrected.

“Whatever,” my Earth Fae mate growled back. “She’s *not* invited.”

“Are you talking about Thanksgiving?” Zephyrus asked.

“Thanksgiving?” Sol repeated, his dark brows drawing down. “That doesn’t even make sense as a word.”

“But Thanks Day does?” Zephyrus countered.

“Seriously, I want to know who wins,” Titus said, his forest-green eyes on Gina. He drew his fingers through his red hair and gave her a beautiful smile. “It’s me, right.”

She just grinned. “Well, it’s been great. I’ll see you all next month at the nesting party.”

“Baby shower,” Zeke said as he pushed to his feet beside her, his motions fluid and somehow regal, even while being blind.

“Yes. Right. Baby shower,” she agreed.

Not that I was paying attention to them.

I was too busy gaping at the table.

Except, what had they just said? “Baby shower?” I repeated on a squeak.

“Yes, but fae call it a nesting party,” she replied, already walking away with her mate, his hand on the small of her back. “Oh, and you’re going to need the Hell Fae to agree. I suggest you meet with one of Lucifer’s Hellhounds. But don’t let Cyrus near them. If he douses their flames, they won’t agree to your proposal.” She gave a little wave, then started toward the exit.

“Hold on,” I called after her.

But she didn’t listen, instead turning the corner before I could ask what the hell she was going on about. I almost chased after her, but she had already stepped through the doors, disappearing into the snowy beyond. She’d be in a portal in the next few seconds, traveling to wherever she wanted to go.

No wonder she’d recommended eating at the restaurant by the border.

She knew this was going to happen.

Damn Fortune Fae!

“Someone had better start explaining things to me,” I said, not in the mood for any more word games.

“I already did,” Exos replied calmly. “We want to have a baby, Claire. And rather than ask you to choose who gets to be the first father, we’ve devised a series of trials to help determine a winner.”

I gaped at him. “What if I don’t want a baby?”

He didn’t even bat an eye, saying, “Then we won’t bother with the trials.” Except I felt the pain instantly spike through my bonds, all my male mates suddenly concerned that I might turn them down.

Even Vox had a wary note to his silver-rimmed gaze.

Aflora cleared her throat again. “Uh, I think, we’re just going to, uh, go...” She spoke so softly I almost didn’t hear her. And as rude as it was, I couldn’t even reply. I was too consumed by the emotions thriving through my bonds.

My mate-circle had spoken about children several times over the years.

Cyrus needed an heir for the Water Kingdom.

Exos also required an heir for the Spirit Kingdom.

Vox had chosen a profession in teaching because he enjoyed philosophical studies, but he also possessed a soft spot for children and watching them learn.

Sol wanted a little one of his own to nurture and grow.

And Titus, well, he tried to pretend that practicing the art of mating was all that interested him, but I caught the flickers of excitement in his thoughts around having a little fae to play Fae Ball with.

They all wanted kids.

Not necessarily one of their own—except for maybe Exos and Cyrus, who had royal duties involved—but the others just wanted to expand our circle with little fae. Even my two king mates wanted that, despite their obligations to their thrones.

This went beyond duty for all of them.

They just wanted to create life.

Which was an Elemental Fae’s greatest gift.

But I could also sense their willingness to wait, if that was what I desired. They didn’t want to push me. They also didn’t want to make me choose. Hence, the trials.

I couldn’t discern the details from their thoughts, their minds closing off around whatever they had planned.

However, anticipation hummed through my veins, ready for whatever they had in store.

“Okay,” I said slowly, looking at each of my mates. “Tell me about these trials.”

CLAIRE



“Okay, I’m going to need you to go back to the orgasm trial again.” There’d been other items mentioned, but that was the competition that had captured my interest.

Titus smirked. “It’s exactly what it sounds like, and we intended to start here tonight.” He gestured around the cabin my mates had sequestered me off to in Iceland, of all places.

After we’d paid for the food and drink bill at the Fae Pub—yes, that was the extremely original name—and Cyrus had said goodbye to his cousin, my mates had portalled me to the middle of the woods where a cabin waited with a very large bed inside.

I suspected they’d taken the beds from the guest rooms and just pushed them together in the center of the living area, because the sheets were a bit haphazard, and the size of the mattress definitely wasn’t common in the human world.

Regardless, it worked.

And I really wanted to start the orgasm trial... like, now.

“So you’re all just... going to see how many orgasms you can force out of me over the next five days.” I did not see a problem with this logic. At all.

“Six days,” Titus corrected. “We decided the first one doesn’t count because of the excitement. So we’ll warm you up properly for a day, then we each get a twenty-four-hour period.”

I swallowed. "Oh, okay," I said. "Um. Yeah, we can start now."

Exos grinned. "So eager."

"We need you to agree to all the trials first, little queen," Cyrus murmured. "And we also need to know you're really okay with the outcome. Are you ready to have a baby with us?"

All five of them studied my reaction, my mates always putting my comfort above their own. Was I ready to have a baby? I wasn't sure. Was anyone ever ready?

But I knew in my heart that my mates would be amazing fathers.

They would help me through this, protect me, and love me unconditionally. All facts I felt through our bond yet already knew.

Because they'd been there for me from the beginning, even before we were fully mated.

The six of us were made for this, and if my mates wanted a baby, then so did I. We were in this together, forever and always.

Besides, I rather liked the idea of making them all fathers.

They'd all make some sexy fae dads.

But that wasn't the reason I really wanted to do this.

My reason was simply because it felt like it was time. I hadn't really noticed it before, but I could sense it now. Our mate-circle was ready to create a new life.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "Because I don't really know what to expect. But I trust you guys. And if you all are ready, then so am I."

"Don't do this for us, Claire," Exos replied, stepping up to cup my cheek with his palm. "This needs to be because you really want it, too."

"I do want it," I whispered, leaning into his touch. "It... it feels right. Fae create life. I want to create a life with all of you."

I knew only one of them could actually plant the seed, but it would be a shared experience nonetheless. Because we were a unit.

I opened my heart and mind to all of them, allowing them to feel my acceptance and love, and melted beneath their responding waves of adoration and devotion.

Then Exos captured my mouth in a mind-blowing kiss that ignited the first trial. This was meant to ease me into the experience, to sate my mind and body and prepare me for the pleasures and pains to come.

Having a child wouldn't be easy.

We all knew that.

This was about worship, to prove to me that my mates would see to my every need, to be there for me through it all.

They wanted me pliable and agreeable, too.

But most importantly, they wanted me to feel how much they loved me.

I returned their ardor with my spirit, embracing each of them with the heart of my being while falling headfirst into Exos's kiss.

It was hot, fiery passion, burning into an inferno as Titus stepped up to my back to grab my hips. Exos's lips went to my neck, his hands unzipping my jacket, which Titus then removed from my shoulders and dragged down my arms.

Cyrus took it from him, tossing it to the side. Then he switched spots with Exos, his mouth claiming mine as his palms slid up beneath my sweater. I shivered against his cool touch, my skin fire to his ice. Then Titus's hands met my bare back, his thumb drawing fire down my spine.

I groaned, the onslaught of elemental powers alighting me from the inside out and calling my own affinities to life.

My sweater incinerated to ash, Titus's essence roaming possessively over me as he drew his blazing touch down my jeans.

He sliced through the fabric with a fiery blade, destroying my pants and scattering the remains in a dust of embers on the ground.

Cyrus smiled against my mouth. "That is so handy, Firefly."

Titus growled in response, his hand leaving my back and reaching up for a fistful of Cyrus's blond hair. "One more time, Jackass. One. More. Time."

"Firefly," Cyrus taunted, grinning at whatever expression Titus gave him over my shoulder.

Their aggression had my thighs clenching at the underlying sexual tension. They sometimes played with each other, but only when I joined. Unlike Sol and Vox, who sometimes shared a bed. I didn't mind, because I felt their connection to me the whole time, and I often crept in to join them after a heavy-petting session.

Our bonds were special because we all loved each other, too.

Even when Cyrus and Titus pretended to be at odds with one another.

I wrapped my arms around Cyrus's waist as Titus pushed me closer to him, fully sandwiching me between them. Then he yanked Cyrus's mouth to his own, the two of them engaging in a feral and harsh kiss.

The lace of my panties soaked right through, their virile display almost enough to make me orgasm on the spot.

That I could feel their hard bodies on either side of me only intensified the moment.

Then a palm on the back of my nape yanked me toward another hungry mouth. *Sol*. My rock. My Earth Fae mate. I melted into him while Cyrus and Titus continued to duel on either side of me.

It was gratifyingly intense and beautiful and grounded me in the reality of my circle.

So much passion and heat.

One of them palmed my breast. *Titus*.

The other cupped my sex. *Cyrus*.

And still they dueled with their tongues as Sol devoured me with his own. I moaned, on fire from the sensations and eager to feel more.

Cyrus slid my panties aside, making me wonder why I ever bothered with the undergarment as he dipped two fingers into me and speared upward. I cried out, then whimpered for more.

He rewarded me with another thrust, his thumb sliding upward to flick my clit. An orgasm flared out of me as though he'd demanded it to rise, causing my knees to buckle and my body to alight with renewed flames.

Titus caught me with his arm around my waist, his pronounced erection digging into my backside. My forehead went to Cyrus's shoulder, Sol's palm still around my nape, as my males held me through the aftershocks of the too-sudden pleasure.

"This is why we needed a warm-up day," Titus said.

"Yes," Cyrus agreed. "Too easy."

I really wanted to remark on that, but I didn't have enough air in my lungs to speak. Nor was my brain functioning well enough to muster up a comeback. So I settled on a grunting sound instead that had all my mates chuckling around me.

"Finishing stripping her," Cyrus demanded.

Titus's fiery energy warmed my breasts, the lace disintegrating in a second. Then the same sensation traveled to my shaved mound and lower, causing me to jolt upright on a moan. "She's ready again," he mused, his power stroking through my slickened lips before he used his gift to incinerate my panties.

Sol went to his knees beside me to handle my boots and socks, removing them with hands gentle and sure. Then he stroked his fingers up my calf to my thigh before wrapping his palm around the back of my leg and tugging

me toward his waiting mouth.

A curse slipped from my lips as his tongue met my clit, my legs giving out again. But Titus caught me with ease as Cyrus stepped out of the way for Vox to join the fun. I gazed up at him through hooded eyes, my body convulsing and limp from Sol's ministrations below.

I expected my Air Fae mate to kiss me, but instead he dipped his head to my breasts, sucking a nipple deep into his mouth before gently grazing the tip with his teeth.

I threaded my fingers through his long, dark hair, holding him to me as he taunted me with his skilled tongue.

Sol seemed to replicate the pace between my legs, his rhythm rivaling Vox's in every way.

Then Titus reached between my legs from behind to draw some of my wetness backward to my other hole. I groaned as he slid a finger inside, working to stretch me and prepare me for the night to come.

They would use me just as I would use them.

And together, we would fall into a heated mess of limbs and naked bodies.

Yet I was the only one without clothes right now, all my mates still fully dressed.

That wouldn't do.

I took a page from Titus's playbook and destroyed their outfits with a flick of my mind. Or I tried to, anyway. It worked on Vox and Sol, their clothes disappearing beneath a wave of my power. Their shoes were somewhere by the door, so I left those alone.

But my other mates had anticipated my play. Exos and Titus had created a wall of their own fire guarding their fabric, and Cyrus had countered me with water.

My eyes fluttered open to find the two kings smirking at me, daring me to try harder.

It served as an aphrodisiac, heightening the moment and cascading me beneath an avalanche of challenge and intrigue. Sol and Vox kept their mouths on me, my fingers weaving through their soft hair, holding them exactly where I needed, while Titus held me in place for their feasting mouths. He increased his pressure on my backside, causing me to cry out in agony-induced pleasure, my body on literal fire for them all.

I wanted to be filled by them, to be taken to heaven and back by my

mates, and to land in a pile of sweaty limbs.

But I knew this was just the beginning.

They never rushed, their mouths and touch thorough to the very end.

Sol sucked my clit deep into his mouth while Vox skimmed my nipple with his teeth. Then Titus added another finger below, stretching me deliciously and warming me up for an evening of sex.

Yet three of my mates remained clothed, and I needed to fix that. But, oh, I wasn't sure how. Not with Sol's tongue moving like that. And Vox, *Fae*, his lips... *mmm...*

Titus chuckled against my ear. "Focus, sweetheart." He scissored his fingers. "You'll need to disrobe all of us if you want us to fuck you."

"Or Sol and Vox can do it for you," I replied on a moan, my body undulating wantonly between them all.

"You'd prefer I fuck Titus?" Cyrus taunted, sending a wave of heat through my veins as the mental image appeared in my mind.

They were always bickering, the sexual tension between them off the charts. And the idea of Cyrus bending Titus over and driving into him? Yeah, that had my thighs clenching around Sol in severe anticipation.

"I hope you brought lube, Firefly," Cyrus murmured, his icy gaze full of wicked intent.

"Not happening, Royal Jackass," Titus returned, his teeth skimming my throat. "But you're welcome to suck my cock."

"I only kneel for Claire," Cyrus replied, his expression heating. "However, I would consider a temporary position, if that's her desire."

I groaned at the thought, my climax mounting as Sol pushed me over the edge with his tongue. And then I was too busy kissing Vox to understand up from down.

My mates were consuming me, just like they always did. Throwing out hot suggestions one moment and distracting me the next.

I tried to focus on one task, only to be thrown headfirst into another as Titus carried me to the bed. "Spread your legs for Sol," he demanded. "We'll see if his cock is enough to satisfy you."

Clothes, I thought. *I have to remove their clothes.*

That was the game... tonight's challenge... to see if I could focus long enough to disrobe them.

And when I won, they'd reward me with their bodies.

Sol climbed over me, his muscles rippling as he bent to suck my nipple

into his mouth before sliding in between my thighs. “So wet,” he mused, nibbling a path up to my jaw. “Wrap your stems around me, little flower.”

My thighs cradled him as I hooked my ankles against his ass, urging him forward. He took it for the invitation it was, filling me to the hilt and stretching me deliciously around him. I arched, my sensitive insides protesting the invasion while also squeezing him in warm welcome, begging for more.

It was such a conundrum.

My mates had taught me how to receive hours of pleasure, all of them able to take me over and over again without growing tired.

It was a whole new definition of stamina that made me all the more thankful for my fae half.

Sol captured my mouth in a searing kiss, his body bathing me in an earth scent underlined in heat and sex. Vitality blossomed inside me, embracing my spirit and grounding me thoroughly in the moment of his clear claim.

Only, fire danced along my arms, followed by a trickle of water that reminded me I had other mates waiting.

They were teasing me.

Watching Sol fuck me.

Engaging my elements and forcing me to play their game.

I groaned, a cataclysm of eroticism ripping through my soul and calling my elements to the surface.

Air.

Water.

Earth.

Fire.

Spirit.

All of them danced through the room, crawling along the walls in real vines decorated with pink butterflies and fiery embers. Water swirled with the flames, dancing to the same pace as Sol’s hips, and heat erupted in my lower belly as another orgasm shredded my ability to breathe.

Vox was suddenly there, his mouth on mine, blowing air into my lungs, rejuvenating me with his essence as he lay alongside me. His arousal touched my hip, then Sol reached down to fist him. My Air Fae mate jolted, a growl vibrating his tongue against mine.

Goose bumps pebbled along my arms and legs, the lust of the two men overwhelming me in the best way.

I allowed them to take their pleasure, reveling in their need and letting it suffocate me beneath a cloud of ecstasy.

Sol sank his teeth into my shoulder as he came inside me, his seed hot and filling me with his earthy essence, while Vox shot off beside me, his cum a welcome substance against my skin.

But Titus had been right.

It wasn't enough.

I needed more.

My mates who still wore clothes.

And I suddenly knew just what I needed to do to convince them to strip.



Clever little mate, I thought, watching the minx roll around in the sheets, painting herself with Sol's and Vox's cum.

She'd started with a finger through her slick pussy, drawing Sol's essence up her shaved mound to rub into her skin. Then she'd taken the remnants of Vox's pleasure along her ribs and painted the rosy little peaks of her breasts.

I never would have thought my mate drenched in the cum of other men would turn me on, but here we were. And all I wanted to do was strip myself and add to the mess.

The tension radiating from my brother said he felt the same.

My tie was suddenly a little too tight. I loosened it while Claire watched, and her blue eyes flashed. "I know what you're doing, baby," I told her.

"Do you?" she asked, her tone falsely innocent as she dipped her hand between her legs again to slip her fingers through her pretty pink lips. Sol and Vox lounged on either side of her, content for the moment, while the rest of her mates stood around the bed with raging hard-ons, fully clothed.

She brought her finger to her lips this time, groaning at the taste of her arousal mingling with Sol's seed.

It left me wondering why we'd decided to play this game. All I wanted was to sink balls-deep into my female and force my name from that alluring mouth.

I pulled off my tie, and Cyrus mimicked the motion, then took the silk from my hands. I immediately understood his intention as he approached the bed. “Give me your hands, little queen.”

She smiled. “Only if you give me your shirt.”

He considered her for a moment, then dropped the ties onto the bed. “All right.” He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it at Titus. The Fire Fae caught it and proceeded to destroy it with one of his hotter flames.

Cyrus smirked. “You’re going to pay for that later, Firefly.”

“I hate that nickname.”

“Oh, I know,” he returned as he unbuttoned his shirt. “It’s why I’ll forever call you by it.”

“Royal Jackass,” the Fire Fae muttered, the label one he seemed to use interchangeably between me and Cyrus. My brother adored it. I just rolled my eyes.

“Here you go, little queen,” Cyrus said, dropping his shirt on the bed for her. “Now give me your hands.”

Vox rolled over her to lie beside Sol, his gaze knowing as Cyrus took hold of Claire’s wrists and bound them with our ties. She’d known his intention as well, but the glimmer in her eye told me that had been her plan all along.

And as his pants went up in flames half a second later, I understood why. She’d used his brief touch as a way to overpower his water magic and destroy his clothes.

My lips curled, impressed.

Cyrus rewarded her with a kiss, his own amusement at her antics clear in the way he cradled her face while devouring her mouth.

Titus watched the scene with interest, then pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the ground. “Fuck delayed gratification.”

Something told me this had been Claire’s plan as well. She knew just how to manipulate each of us with her body and mind. I slid my hands into my pockets as Titus kicked off his pants and joined the others on the bed. He went straight for her cunt, his mouth and tongue lapping up her soaked sex and causing her to moan into Cyrus’s mouth.

She threaded her fingers through the Fire Fae’s auburn locks, her wrists still glued together from the silk ties. Cyrus caught her hands and gently pulled them over her head. Sol clamped his palm over hers, holding them down against the pillows while Cyrus drew his fingers down her arms.

It was all so harmonious after years of playing with our mate. While we often took turns, frequently desiring nights alone with her as well, we still enjoyed moments like this. It just didn't happen as much as we would like.

Vox, Titus, and Sol resided with Claire at Elemental Fae Academy. Cyrus misted back and forth between the Academy and the Water Kingdom, sometimes taking Claire with him for brief visits. And I maintained my residence in the Spirit Kingdom but ventured back to the Academy for our group nights.

It worked for us.

Claire always spent one night a week alone with me in the Spirit Kingdom, just as she went to Cyrus for a night as well. Then Titus, Vox, and Sol all had their own evening with her at the Academy. And then we would have two full days as a mate-circle.

Which typically ended in a similar activity to the one unfolding on the bed.

"Straddle Titus," Cyrus demanded as the Fire Fae lay on his back beside Sol. Vox had propped himself up onto his elbow to watch, while the Earth Fae lounged lazily on the pillows, his protective gaze on Claire. He always ensured her safety, just as I guarded the entire circle. It was why I still stood fully clothed, watching the events play out.

I'd join last.

I almost always did.

My groin tightened as Claire lithely rolled onto Titus's hips, her body reminiscent of a goddess. Which was an apt description, given her control over all five elements.

She was a true queen.

A beauty.

A wonder in the world of fae.

And she was mine.

I licked my lips, loving the way her breasts swayed as she rocked her hips to guide Titus inside her. The Fire Fae hissed out a breath, his hands clamping down on her slender waist to hold her in place. Cyrus removed her silk binds, then threaded his fingers in her voluminous hair and guided her down to Titus's waiting mouth.

The two of them engaged in a kiss defined by their affinity for fire. I felt it heating the air, engaging my secondary ability for the element. Cyrus battled it with his water, dousing each of the embers before they could reach

his fair skin. Then he moved behind Claire to line himself up with her ass.

Titus had already prepared her, something we all knew he'd done for Cyrus.

The two of them had bonded in an unexpected way over the years, their penchant for double-penetrating Claire well known and respected in our circle. Sometimes I joined them and took her mouth, but not tonight.

I wanted her last.

To make love to her.

To soothe her.

To adore her.

She'd done so well today at the Interrealm Fae Council meeting. My chest warmed with the memory, my pride radiating through the bond as she accepted Cyrus's thrust. Her pleasure shot through our link, her back arching at the impact of both men inside her. Titus palmed her tits while my brother wrapped his arm around her middle, holding her to him as he pushed deep into her backside.

Then he grabbed her hair and angled her head back for a kiss, providing the most erotically beautiful image for us all to observe.

Our mate being fucked at both ends.

Her tits cupped by a Fire Fae.

Her tongue claimed by a Water Fae King.

Sol and Vox were already aroused again, the sight of their mate's pleasure an aphrodisiac none of us could ignore. The fact that Cyrus and Titus knew how to turn her into a work of art only added to the experience.

They didn't hold back, taking her with an abandon that made her scream against Cyrus's mouth.

I unbuttoned the top of my too-tight pants, my stomach clenching with a need I barely contained. I needed her more than I needed to breathe. But I held myself back, valuing my control, guarding her while she lost herself to utter bliss between the two mates fucking her.

She created such a stunning sight, her body made for sex, made for this, made for *us*.

I sent a trail of fire down her abdomen to her clit, sending her over the edge with Titus right behind her. And then Cyrus growled, his body emptying inside her, the three of them riding out an orgasmic experience that all of us felt through our connections.

It was so intensely intimate that I almost came myself. Sol started lazily

stroking himself in response. Vox just stared at the others, his silver-rimmed black gaze filled with rapturous intent.

But it was my turn to play.

Claire glanced at me with lust-blown pupils, her cheeks blushing with a mixture of exertion and excitement. Her power flared, her fire trying to destroy my clothes once more. But I shielded myself from her, desiring a proper fight that only my mate could provide.

She didn't disappoint, taking me to the spirit plane, where our souls thrived, and engaging me in a seductive twist of enchanting warmth.

I smiled, intrigued, and pulled her toward the source, longing to test her abilities and overall control. She yanked back. Then I jumped away and she followed, frolicking inside our special place while our bodies remained in the Human Realm with everyone else.

Cyrus lurked nearby, his spirit energy drawn into the playground on impulse alone. We were both sons of a Spirit Fae Royal, and most Spirit Fae had access to more than one element. His secondary element was water because of his royal father. My secondary gift was fire, which was how I battled Claire in the physical plane. But my soul belonged to the spirit element, where I often made her bow.

Except she seemed hell-bent on bringing me to my knees tonight, her flirtatious movements brushing along my side, alighting a trail of yearning in her wake.

You're getting good at this, princess, I whispered into her mind. *Even royally fucked and exhausted, you're still putting up a decent challenge.*

I learned from the best, she breathed back at me, her energy signature humming along mine once more.

She was beautiful here in her ethereal state, her essence holding a touch of pink tonight. Her happiness warmed my heart. But it was the red spot at her center that I desired—her passion and need.

I took a step toward the bed, aware of our surroundings in the cabin. Her eyes had fallen closed, her other mates giving us a little bit of space for this spiritual embrace. Cyrus lay to her left, his head on her pillow. Titus was on the right. Sol and Vox rested on Cyrus's other side.

A beautiful sight, welcoming me into the fold.

But I remained in the spiritual realm as well, chasing her all over the field near the source of my power. Most fae couldn't play this close to the anchor of our element. However, I wasn't most fae. Elemental Fae Kings were the

conduit of our respective sources, and I maintained the spirit entity. As my mate, Claire could access it as well, which she proved now by darting even closer to the blinding light.

I anticipated her next move, though, and stepped into her path to catch her. She giggled, then melted into my essence, providing me with the most intimate kiss our kind could ever experience.

We weren't physically touching but mentally embracing.

And it nearly sent me to my knees.

Please, Exos, she pleaded into my mind. I want you.

You always want me.

I do, she agreed, ignoring my arrogance. But tonight, I need you. She leaned into me, her spirit weaving through mine and creating an intimate braid I would never be able to detach myself from. Not because I lacked the power to do so—I could easily dismantle it—but because I refused to ever unknot our souls. We were made for each other, and I proved it now by allowing her power to rush over me, to dissolve my clothes in the present.

You know I love you when I let you destroy one of my favorite suits, I whispered into her mind as I knelt onto the bed between her splayed legs. Are you ready for me, baby?

Yes, she replied, reaching blindly for me. Fuck me, Exos.

I bent to press a kiss to her mound. *Maybe I want to eat you instead.*

I need you inside me.

Do you? I asked, sliding a finger into her slick heat. *Like this?*

More.

I added another finger. *Better?*

Exos.

Claire.

She growled, and it was the most adorable sound. I nipped her clit in response, then licked a path up to her generous tits. She groaned beneath my touch, her fingers weaving through my hair as she yanked me fully out of the spirit realm and to the cabin around us. I could usually play in both realities, but I felt her need for my complete physical touch.

Our souls were already bound.

Now she wanted to unite our bodies.

I prowled over her, then took her mouth in a kiss meant to bruise. She accepted my cruelty, my love, my need for control, and unleashed her unspoken demands by wrapping her legs around me.

“Give her what she wants,” Cyrus encouraged.

“Yeah, or I’ll do it for you,” Sol added in a low tone.

I chuckled and drew my dick along her damp pussy, loving the wet, welcoming kiss of her heat. “You all had your turn. She’s mine now.”

“Ours,” Titus corrected.

“Not for this moment,” I replied, sliding my cock deep into her, claiming her fully and taking her the way I preferred.

She allowed it, knowing my preferences in bed and embracing them. As did the others, even though I could practically feel Titus challenging me through the bonds. It only strengthened the moment, giving me a purpose to drive toward, a point to prove by taking our mate to new heights as I drove into her with the abandon we both needed.

Endless gratification required new twists to keep the pleasure fresh, which was what I gave her now.

A hint of pain.

A hint of violence.

A hint of male aggression.

And a whole hell of a lot of adoration.

Her tongue dueled with mine, her nails scraping down my back as I spurred her onward. Then I tightened my hold around her spirit, adding another knot to the mess she’d created and groaning as she jolted in reply.

It was a spiritual mating underlined in physical touch and heat.

She burned me from the inside out, and I returned the favor in kind.

Exos, she panted into my mind.

Now, princess, I replied, knowing what she needed. *Come for me now.*

Her back bowed off the bed, her lips parting on a scream that I swallowed with my tongue. She vibrated, her pleasure nearing pain, and her walls strangled the fuck out of my shaft. It felt amazing. Addictive. Delirious.

I pumped into her, needing more, driving her to yet another orgasm in minutes, and giving her a prelude for the competition to come.

Because I wanted to win.

Just like all the other mates.

And I had no problem pleasing my Claire.

For hours. Days. Weeks. Whatever it took.

She fell apart beneath me, her teeth digging into my lower lip in a silent reprimand for forcing so much out of her. And damn if that wasn’t the sexiest response she’d ever given me.

I speared my tongue into her mouth in time with my cock below and reveled in the burn building inside my lower abdomen. Fuck, it was good. So, so *good*. Claire dug her heels into my ass, urging me onward, giving me that subtle demand she knew I loved, and encouraging me to join her in oblivion.

My balls tightened.

My stomach clenched.

The moment slowed, everything intensifying and then exploding into a million pieces as I lost myself inside her.

She was so tight. So hot. So wet. So fucking perfect.

I groaned, her name a benediction on my tongue as I gave her everything, drenching her with my claim and kissing the life out of her along the way.

I love you, I told her. *Fuck, I love you, Claire*.

I love you, too, she breathed, her eyes fluttering closed, her exhaustion evident.

I couldn't wait to see her in a week. She'd be a replete mess of over-gratification.

"Hmm, let the orgasm trials begin," I mused, nibbling her chin.

"'kay" was all she said back, her lips pulling into a lazy grin as she fell into a sweet slumber.

"Get some sleep, little queen," Cyrus said, kissing her temple. "You're going to need it."

CLAIRE



I never wanted to come again.
Ever.

Well, for at least a few days. Maybe a week. Because yeah. I couldn't feel my lady parts. My nipples were pretty much solid glass. And yeah, I couldn't walk.

"You know, I think this whole trial thing backfired," I said conversationally. "You broke my vagina. So. I won't be having a baby after all. But thanks for all the, uh, orgasms."

Cyrus chuckled, his palm a brand against my thigh. "Trust me, you're not broken." He leaned in to kiss the pulse point of my neck. "And I bet we could all make you come again in a few hours."

I crossed my legs. "No."

Titus joined Cyrus in his amusement. The two of them had tied in the trial. Apparently, it wasn't just about the number of orgasms but also about the intensity of them and how loud I screamed.

They were all even in my book, but Cyrus and Titus claimed victory for making my aftershocks last the longest.

I hadn't been paying attention at all—too lost to blissful oblivion—so I just took their word for it.

Exos handed me a cup of his famous hot chocolate and bent to kiss me on the head. *You're majestic*, he whispered in my mind. *And you're not broken*,

just well fucked.

His words drew a line of fire through my veins that caused my lower belly to pulse with want. I squirmed, the intensity too much too soon. He chuckled in response, as did Cyrus, who had felt my thigh clench beneath his hand.

Vox entered with a tray of food, his hair loose around his shoulders and his upper body shirtless. Sol followed him inside with another tray, his body similarly clad to the Air Fae. They set both platters at the foot of the bed.

“There’s more in the kitchen,” Vox said, winking at me.

My nose twitched at the familiar scent of bacon. “Did you...?”

“I did,” he replied, reading the thought from my mind. Perhaps not literally. All my mates had to know what I was thinking.

“So this is real bacon? Like, from a pig?”

“Yep,” he confirmed. “Not a troll in sight.”

I set my hot chocolate on an end table and jumped up in excitement. Then I threw my arms around him just as someone cleared their throat from the doorway.

Kalt stood on the threshold wearing a winter hat, scarf, jacket, and jeans. His eyes were fixated on Cyrus, not on me, but that didn’t stop Sol from grabbing my naked body and pushing me behind him. “Out,” he snapped.

“Cyrus told me—”

“Out!” Sol repeated, louder this time.

I peeked around him in time to see Kalt mist somewhere else, causing me to roll my eyes.

“Really?” I asked my Earth Fae mate. “You could have just handed me a robe.”

Which was precisely what Exos did, his manner much calmer. I slipped the silk over my arms and cinched the tie around my waist.

“We are not inviting a sixth mate into our circle,” Sol grumbled.

Cyrus huffed a laugh. “Kalt has his hands full with a selkie at the moment. I think he’s fine.”

“A selkie?” I repeated.

“Yeah, a seal shifter,” he replied. “They’re a type of Winter Fae.”

“Is it safe yet?” Kalt called from the other side of the door. “Or would you like to continue discussing my love life?”

“Cheeky,” Cyrus murmured, grinning from ear to ear.

“I have no idea who he reminds me of,” Exos deadpanned. “No idea at

all.”

Titus snorted and plucked a piece of bacon from the plate.

“You can come in,” I called, stepping around my rock of a mate. He placed a possessive palm against my lower back, making my lips twitch. *I don’t need or want more mates, Sol.*

Good. His mental voice reminded me of smooth rocks. *Because I’m not sharing you with another royal.*

You like Exos and Cyrus.

I tolerate them, he muttered.

You more than tolerate them, I replied. There’d been a time when Sol didn’t trust any of them, his experience with a powerful fae having altered his opinion of Spirit Fae and royals. But he’d slowly overcome his past, even if he was trying to feign otherwise now.

I could feel his deep-seated respect for Exos and Cyrus. This was more about Kalt seeing me naked after a week of orgasms than it was about the possibility of me taking another mate. Sol didn’t like anything that could potentially cause me discomfort. And for that—and a myriad of other reasons—I loved him dearly.

I’m okay, I assured him as Kalt entered again, the Water Fae’s gaze wary.

“What brings you to Iceland?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“Uh, I have an update from the Winter Fae. Cyrus said you were still here, and he suggested I drop by to give you the news.” He swallowed, his long white hair billowing in the wind stirred by Vox’s air magic. It seemed to just flow naturally around my mate, who stood closest to the door.

“Tell her,” Cyrus said, his lips curling.

Those two words told me my water mate already knew whatever Kalt intended to say.

“The Winter Fae have agreed to support the academy and enchant it like they did the Interrealm Region,” Kalt announced.

“They have?” I jumped up once on a squeal, then ran across the room to hug the Water Fae emissary. He didn’t return the gesture because of Sol’s growl at my back.

That robe is thin and leaving nothing to the imagination, little flower.

Fae run around naked all the time, I reminded him, rolling my eyes. *Especially Earth Fae.* But I released the frozen Water Fae anyway and took a few steps back. “Sorry, I’m excited.”

“I know,” he replied, glancing at Cyrus. “How do you know about

Norden?”

“I know a lot of things,” my mate drawled. “I know about Lark, too.”

Kalt made a noise. “It’s not true. I’m not in their triad.”

Cyrus lifted a shoulder. “Hey, I’m not one to judge.”

“I’m a Water Fae, not a Winter Fae.” Kalt uttered the words through his teeth, his pretty eyes blazing with icy power.

“What’s a triad?” I asked, glancing between them.

“Similar to a mating circle,” Exos replied. “The Winter Fae culture is a little different from ours. They form male packs that take a single female mate.”

“So they’re like Fortune Fae?” I guessed, thinking of Gina and her mate-circle.

Exos considered that for a moment before saying, “Hmm. Sort of. It’s a comparable concept in how the males bond with each other just as much as they do with the female. However, the Winter Fae don’t have the same Alpha, Beta, Omega structure.”

Kalt snorted. “Tell that to Lark. The royal elf sure as fuck thinks he’s an Alpha.”

“That’s because you keep fighting fate,” Cyrus replied.

“*I am not a Winter Fae,*” he retorted, his white hair frosting at the ends. “And why are we even talking about this? I just came to deliver the declaration.”

“From Lark,” Cyrus added.

“Yes. From Prince Lark,” he admitted, his jaw clenched. “They’ve agreed to support the academy and the necessary magic. Now I’m taking a few days off while the Winter Fae go play and spread Christmas cheer throughout the Human Realm.”

“You should come back with us to Elemental Fae Academy,” Cyrus suggested. “You can help us with the trials.”

“Trials?” he repeated, his expression morphing from confusion to exasperation. “Ah, fuck, what did Lance do now?”

I almost laughed. Lance was Titus’s little brother and Kalt’s best friend. And yeah, the little firecracker was a troublemaker. But he’d mostly cooperated with his probationary sentence, where he served as my assistant at the Academy. I rather liked the hotheaded fae. He reminded me of his brother, just younger and a little more wild.

“He’s talking about their competition,” I clarified. “For who gets to be the

father of our first baby. Nothing to do with Lance.”

Kalt blinked at me. Then he looked at his cousin and arched a white brow. “Why the hell would I help with that?”

“We need judges,” Cyrus explained. “And last I recall, you still owed me a favor.”

The Water Fae narrowed his gaze. “So this is the favor you require? Judging sex games on my days off?”

“Uh...” I cleared my throat. “I don’t... I, uh...” I couldn’t remember what the other trials were, as my mind had concentrated solely on the orgasm competition. “I agree with Kalt on this one.” Because those trials were probably sex related.

Exos chuckled. “The other trials are all about nurturing, nonsexual endurance, and meal preparation. We need the judge specifically for the last part.”

“Meal preparation?” Kalt arched his brow again. “So you need someone to judge food?”

“Essentially, yes.” Exos lifted a shoulder. “All three trials blend together but end with cooking dinner. We’ll be relying on others to tell us who prepares the best meal.”

“Free food,” Kalt said. “Okay, sure. I can handle that.”

Cyrus smirked. “Not enjoying the Winter Fae cuisine?”

“It’s a little sweet for my liking,” he admitted. “They eat cupcakes for breakfast.”

“I see nothing wrong with this,” I replied as I retrieved my untouched hot chocolate from the end table. “Let’s go to the North Pole.”

“But I made bacon.” Vox waved at the plates. “And real eggs.”

My lips twisted. “True. Okay, breakfast, then cupcakes.”

All my mates chuckled, while Kalt remained unmoved. He clearly didn’t like the idea of going back to the North Pole.

“We have to start the trials today, little queen,” Cyrus said. “But once we’re done, we can take you wherever you want to go.”

“Why today?” I asked before taking a sip of the decadent liquid. It was so, so, so good. *I seriously love you*, I told Exos.

I love you, too, baby.

“Because we all agreed that it was best to test our endurance and nurturing after a week of pleasuring you. It increases the stakes and makes it more realistic,” Cyrus explained.

“Yes, because we need to make sure we can balance fucking you and raising a child,” Titus added, his trademark bluntness coming out to play. “So the next phase is to nurture a breakable object, stay awake for thirty hours, and then cook a nutritious meal.”

Cyrus nodded. “We’ll be evaluated on all three tests and have that added to our scores from this week.”

“What kind of breakable objects?” I wondered out loud, picking up a piece of bacon to nibble on between my sips of hot chocolate. Weird, yes. But it tasted amazing.

“It’s yet to be assigned,” Titus replied. “And we’re supposed to have an observer for that part, too.”

“True.” Cyrus looked at Kalt. “So you’ll be judging that as well.”

“He can’t be your observer,” Exos interjected. “He’s too biased.”

“You’re right. He’ll say I failed,” Cyrus replied. “He can observe Titus.”

Kalt grunted. “You realize I know nothing about caring for an object?”

“All you need to do is take notes and say how the object was treated,” Vox murmured. “If Titus lights it on fire, add the observation to the notes.”

Titus scoffed at that. “I’m not going to light it on fire.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Vox replied, his lips curling.

My fire mate just rolled his eyes before saying, “Lance can be another judge.”

“River, too,” Exos suggested. “He’s at the Academy, so it makes sense.”

“We can also get Ophelia and Mortus to help,” Cyrus said. “That gives us five observers for the nurturing trial. They can also confirm we didn’t fall asleep for thirty hours. And afterward, everyone will join us for dinner.”

“It’s settled, then,” Exos agreed, clasping his hands together. “So let’s eat, then we’ll head back and find our items.”

I smiled around my mug of hot chocolate.

This was going to be amusing as hell.

Good luck, boys, I thought at them all, then lost myself to breakfast.

Because bacon was almost as good as sex.



“What is that?” I asked, eyeing the translucent sphere in Cyrus’s hand. It resembled a glass orb with ice crystals etched along the outside.

“It’s an ice relic from the Winter Fae realm,” Cyrus replied, using his water magic to keep it frozen. “I asked Kalt to bring me one.”

“It’s beautiful,” Claire said, her element stroking the item tenderly. “What did you find, Titus?”

I cleared my throat, suddenly nervous. Why did Cyrus have to go show me up with a relic from another realm? Dick. Not all of us had access to foreign objects. At least mine was elemental related. I gently unrolled my pouch to present my fragile item for Claire.

“It’s a Firebird egg,” I said. “An infertile one, so it’s technically edible.” I hadn’t wanted to risk a life in this trial. Perhaps that was counterproductive to the nurturing part of the test, but Firebirds were beautiful and rare and very protective of their unborn young.

“I love Firebirds.” Claire’s eyes took on a dreamy quality, her mind picturing one of the stunning fiery creatures. They reminded me of phoenixes, only smaller.

Vox, Sol, and Exos all went next, displaying their items for Claire in a similar fashion.

Vox had a feather.

Sol had a peach from Claire's favorite tree at the Academy.

And Exos held an enchanted hand mirror, one that could function as a portal key to peek into other realms. He demonstrated by showing her a picture of her home in Ohio, which earned him the biggest grin of all.

"Oh, I miss it there." Our mate sounded so wistful, which only further confirmed that our plans for her were the right ones. "The pumpkin patch and corn mazes were always so fun." We watched a kid run through one of the mazes she mentioned, cheering him along until the end, then Exos stowed the mirror.

"You can have this when the trial is done," he promised her.

"I would love that," she admitted.

He kissed her on the cheek, then faced us. "All right. Thirty hours. We have our observers," he waved to the five fae who had agreed to help.

Well, maybe not all of them had agreed.

My brooding brother stood on the sidelines with his arms folded, his expression bored. He would much rather be off playing in another powerless duel. The prick had a penchant for shattering all my records. It was like he'd made it his life's mission to destroy my legacy and replace it with his own.

So yeah, I didn't feel at all bad about roping him into this assignment.

Besides, he was on probation for another month, which meant he had to do anything we told him to anyway. That was what happened when you ran off to the Human Realm to pick fights with mortals.

Honestly, Claire had gone too easy on him by just turning him into a glorified intern. He needed to serve a jail sentence for what he'd done in New York. But I respected my mate's wish to try and mentor him first. When that didn't work, I'd be pushing for a harsher sentence. He needed to learn that there were strict consequences for his actions, something I knew he didn't fully grasp yet.

"The goal here is to go about our typical day while keeping our item unharmed. But as our observers are all here at the Academy, some of us will have to improvise." Exos looked pointedly at Cyrus, as the two of them didn't reside on campus full-time. Sol, Vox, and I would be fine since we all had our respective studies. "Perhaps we can go work on the Spirit Quad? Continue the restorations?"

Cyrus nodded. "I think that would be a wise use of our time."

"I can help," Mortus replied. He was in charge of watching Exos—an activity that five years ago would have been completely off the table. We all

had a history with the former Spirit Fae professor. It wasn't a good one, either. But he'd slowly redeemed himself over time, particularly via his treatment of Claire's mum, Ophelia.

The two of them had been engaged once, their third-level bonding one that should have been unbreakable. However, a bunch of shit went down that destroyed their mating and several lives.

There was a lot of heartbreak involved, but the pair seemed to be healing together.

"I guess I'll help as well," Lance muttered. "Since I'm *observing* Cyrus."

The Water Fae King made a noise through his nose. "I'm going to put you to work for that comment."

"You sound so disappointed about that," my brother drawled, his attitude problem firmly in place.

I considered saying something but decided against it. Cyrus had this sorted and would quickly put the rebellious Fire Fae in his place.

I looked at Kalt. "Guess you're joining me in the gym."

The Water Fae lit up. "I like where this is going."

"It's not all that exciting. He doesn't fight anymore," my brother replied. "You'll be bored in five minutes."

I narrowed my gaze at my hotheaded little brother. "Watch yourself."

"Or what?" He arched an auburn brow that looked exactly like my own. "You'll challenge me? Oh, wait, you're out of shape and old. So I guess you'll just stand there and spew words at me instead."

I growled, and Exos stepped in between us. "Stop baiting your brother." Royal power flared around him as he stared my brother down. "And get your ass to the Spirit Quad before I show you how I duel. And it won't be powerless."

"I don't need you to stand up for me," I muttered, irritated that he'd defused the situation using his Spirit Fae King presence.

That felt like cheating, and I didn't cheat.

"I'm not standing up for you," Exos replied, glancing over his shoulder at me. "I'm protecting our objects, which is the whole point of this exercise. If you two blow up in an inferno, it'll defeat the purpose of this test."

Well, he had me there.

I dipped my chin in subtle acknowledgment, then looked at Kalt. For whatever reason, this guy decided to be best friends with my moody brother. I'd never understand it. But I caught him giving Lance a look now that told

him to cool it. My brother just rolled his eyes and turned toward the Spirit Quad with Mortus, Exos, and Cyrus following.

Vox smiled at Ophelia, then guided her toward the Air Quad, where he had classes to lead today.

Sol nodded at River—a Water Fae and my best mate from the Academy—and led him toward the Earth Quad to go help with some classes.

And I started toward the neutral campus area with Kalt. Only, after a few steps, I realized we'd forgotten an important piece.

No, not just important, but the key piece to all of this.

Our queen.

I turned to find Claire looking off in each direction, nibbling her lip. “Come join us in intramural class, sweetheart,” I said softly. “We can play a game of Fae Ball.”

Her blue eyes lit up at the prospect. “I haven't played that since our Academy days.”

“Then let's go relive the experience. Afterward, we can spar a little.”

She wasn't pregnant yet, which meant playing was absolutely allowed. And the way her face beamed at me said it was the right approach.

I wrapped an arm around her while my other hand cradled the Firebird egg.

This trial would be easy as fae pie.

And soon, Claire would be growing with my child.

I couldn't fucking wait.

CLAIRE



The bed was cold without my mates, making me pleased this series of trials was coming to an end.

“They really are something,” my mom murmured, observing my mates from the kitchen window. They all stood outside discussing their kitchen assignments.

Titus appeared disgruntled over something. Sol looked half-awake. Vox’s expression held a touch of arrogance—as the main chef of our mate-circle, he totally had this task in the bag, and he knew it. Meanwhile, Exos and Cyrus looked just like they did thirty hours ago: handsome, polished, and ready to win.

We were waiting on Lance and Kalt, who had taken the night shift to observe and were napping through the morning hours while my mom, Mortus, and River took over.

The utter devotion to these trials warmed my heart. If I had any reservations about having a baby before, they were gone now. Because I realized how much support I had, not just from my mates but also from our family and friends.

“I’m ready,” I told my mom. “I’m really ready.”

“I know you are,” she replied, smiling softly. “You’re going to be an amazing mom, and those mates of yours are going to make great dads.”

I smiled. “Yeah, they really...” I trailed off as a swirl of flames danced

along the field, heading directly for Titus. My elements engaged to throw up a shield, only my fire mate triggered his first, blasting off a wave of power in the direction of the source.

Lance.

“Ah, hell,” I muttered, going to the door to stop the two hotheaded males from battling in the front yard. *Again.*

The last time this happened, they destroyed two of Sol’s trees and blew out the windows to the house. Vox had been furious about all the glass, while my Earth Fae mate had threatened to bury Lance alive beneath the replacement roots.

Cyrus sighed audibly as I stepped outside, his hand forming a wall of water that protected himself and my other mates.

“That’s not going to stop him,” Titus muttered, a ball of fire ready in his palm.

“What’s his fucking problem?” Exos demanded.

“He values his beauty rest,” Titus drawled.

Cyrus snorted. “Don’t we all?”

Kalt created a door and stepped through the water without getting a drop on him, while Lance sprinted through the tidal wave and directly into Exos.

Who proceeded to drop his mirror.

It shattered all over the ground, destroying his object and eliciting gasps from the group.

Exos stared at it for a moment, shock evident in his expression, then he narrowed his gaze at the cause of the issue. Titus immediately stepped in between his little brother and my Spirit Fae mate. “Apologize,” he demanded, his focus on Lance. “*Now.*”

“An apology isn’t going to fix my mirror,” Exos muttered, his fury and sadness swirling through our bond. He’d lost the trial and he knew it, which meant he was now disqualified from the results.

All because Titus’s brother had lost his temper over Fae knew what.

Shit.

“I... I’m sorry,” Lance said, sounding more contrite than I’d ever heard him. Likely because he’d just pissed off the Spirit Fae King—a male known for his warrior abilities and no-nonsense attitude. “I just wanted... to fuck with... Titus.”

My fire mate snorted. “Yeah, well, good job.”

“I’m sorry,” Lance repeated. “I didn’t get a lot of sleep, and it seemed

like a good way to burn off my mood. I had no idea it would... that I would... that this would..."

"It's fine," Exos said, his tone surprisingly soft. "The goal of the exercise was to protect and nurture our items. It's my failure, not yours. And it's not going to stop us from finishing this. Let's go inside. We have meals to prepare." His sapphire gaze met mine as he turned around, his sorrow echoed in the depths of his eyes. I caught through our bond that it wasn't so much disappointment of his loss as it was sadness over failing me and his object.

You're going to be an amazing father, I whispered into his mind. And you just proved that by not losing your temper with Lance.

He didn't mean to run into me, Exos replied. There's no sense in being angry with him. It would just make him feel worse and doesn't solve the problem. The damage is already done.

I know, I agreed, pressing my palm to his cheek and kissing him on the mouth. But that reaction is what will make you a good dad. It shows patience, something your trials didn't factor in at all.

"Exos still earns points for the nurturing trial," I decided out loud, making sure everyone knew my stance.

"Yes, accidents happen. It's how we react that matters," Cyrus echoed.

The others all murmured their agreement, my mates coming through for each other despite the competitive atmosphere.

I glanced at my mom, her eyes beaming with pride. Our relationship had been a bit rocky at first, but we'd grown closer over the years. She offered maternal guidance that was missing for most of my life. Not that my grandparents weren't great to me as a child, but they only prepared me for the human world, not the fae realms.

My mom came up to me as my mates headed inside, her hand grasping my shoulder. "You're definitely ready," she whispered, agreeing with my statement from earlier. "All of you are."

I smiled. "They're really great, aren't they?"

"They are," she agreed, heading in after them.

Kalt, Mortus, and River all followed in silence, but Lance stood just outside, his cheeks pink with chagrin. "I'm sorry, Claire."

"Water under the bridge," I replied.

He frowned. "Is that...? Are you telling me my punishment?"

I blinked at him. "No. It's a saying."

"I don't get it."

“It’s a way of saying I forgive you and it’s forgotten.”

“What do water and a bridge have to do with forgiveness?” he asked seriously, his green eyes the same color as his older brother’s.

“It’s a human phrase,” I replied. “And... I actually don’t know where it comes from.”

“Oh.” His brow furrowed. “I’ll have to look that one up on my next visit.”

“There won’t be a next visit if you keep doing stupid things like attacking your brother with fire for no reason,” I replied.

“I was playing.”

“You were provoking,” I corrected. “I’ve spent the last six months with you, Lance. I know your tells.”

His lips twisted to the side. “Okay. Fine. I was bored and wanted to spar. You and Kalt got to practice all day yesterday, while I helped Cyrus reconstruct stones.” He grumbled the words and rolled his eyes. “I belong in the ring, Claire.”

“All you *know* is the ring and how to fight,” I corrected. “The whole point of your probation is to learn about other opportunities. You’re a powerful fae. There’s a lot more to the realms than fighting, Lance.”

He stared at me for a long moment. “I want to do something with humans. I want to find what makes them so... resilient.”

Given the human fighting ring he’d played in while in New York, that admission didn’t surprise me. “Then consider joining the Interrealm Fae Council initiative,” I suggested. “There are a lot of opportunities there to work with others on how to hide our worlds and assimilate with humankind, too. And when the academy is up and running, maybe you can teach classes similar to Titus’s, but for all fae.”

His green eyes brightened. “You think I could do something like that?”

“I do,” I replied, smiling at his excitement. “But you have to learn and earn it. Just like Kalt is doing now with his internship.”

Some of his happiness ebbed. “I don’t want to be a politician or an emissary.”

“You don’t have to do that; his role is only one example. Maybe you can join us at the next Interrealm Fae Council meeting to learn about other opportunities.”

He considered it for a moment, then nodded. “I would like that.”

“Good.” I grinned. “Now let’s go see what Titus plans to make. I’m guessing it’s breakfast related.” My mate knew how to make a killer omelet.

“Domestic Titus entertains me immensely,” Lance admitted.

“It entertains me, too.” But for very different reasons.

I turned to find Cyrus’s eyes on me, his icy irises swirling with warmth. *I think you just showed all of us up in this nurturing trial, little queen*, he whispered into my mind.

He just needs someone to talk to, I replied. *I’m happy to be that person for him.*

It’s more than that, Claire. He admires you. Not as a mate, but as a role model. And that’s what he desperately needs.

He could use Titus for that, I pointed out.

He’s too stubborn for it, and so is your fire mate, he replied as Exos handed him some ingredients. The two of them appeared to be cooking together rather than individually.

Vox had gone solo, making something with eggs.

Titus was working on an omelet, just like I’d thought, so they shared a space but prepared separately.

And Sol... appeared to be taking a nap at the table.

I eyed him with an arched brow. *Sol?*

Mmm? he hummed back at me.

What are you cooking? I wondered, amused by his sleepy-mind mumble.

Skittle snacks, he said, not moving an inch from the table.

Skittle snacks? I repeated, entertained. *So you found the rainbow in the Human Realm?*

Rainbow? he sounded exhausted. *I don’t know about a rainbow.*

And I don’t know what skittle snacks are.

Scuttle... scuttle... butt... snacks? He was full-on drifting now. Rather than wake him up, I just walked over to run my fingers through his hair and sat beside him on the bench. He snored while the others cooked.

River just chuckled and shook his head. “Well, he’s not going to win.”

“They all win,” I murmured, stroking my earth mate’s cheek. “The baby will belong to all of us, regardless of who gains the most points.”

Cyrus winked at me from the kitchen, his agreement warming our bond. Exos handed him a plate of chopped vegetables, which my water mate proceeded to layer into a casserole dish.

“Where the fuck is my Firebird egg?” Titus suddenly demanded, causing Sol to jolt awake beside me. His forehead had a bunch of crispy flakes embedded into it from the table. He narrowed his eyes, then flicked the items

from his head and onto the table in a confetti-like confusion.

“Oh...” Vox turned beet red, his eyes widening. “Uh...”

“You didn’t.” Titus stared down my air mate, their similar heights making them eye level with each other. But Titus had about thirty pounds more muscle on him than Vox. “Tell me you didn’t *cook my Firebird egg.*”

“Did you put it on the counter?” Vox asked, his voice lifting at the end into a squeak.

“I told you I did!”

“I... I didn’t remember... I was in my groove... and...”

“You cooked my fucking egg.” Titus threw his spatula down on a growl and gripped his auburn locks in his fists. “Fuckin’ fires, Vox!”

“I’m sorry!” my air mate exclaimed.

Cyrus and Exos just shook their heads, chuckling as they continued their own dishes.

Sol munched on his ingredients beside me, completely forgetting the point of this exercise as we watched the battle in the kitchen unfold.

Vox’s eggs went up in flames, causing him to engage his air magic to try to put out the fire. But Titus was raging and completely lost to his annoyance.

Not exactly a nurturing reaction, but I understood his frustration. They hadn’t slept in thirty hours, and he’d been on his way to winning the trials. While I meant what I said about us all winning, I knew Titus had a competitive edge from his time in the Powerless Champion ring.

He eventually calmed down after a few minutes, resigned to his fate, and finished his omelet while Vox scraped his burnt eggs into the trash with a scowl.

Sol chuckled, nearly halfway done with whatever the hell he was supposed to make. He offered me a few berries, which I took and popped into my mouth.

Then his brow furrowed, and the light bulb went off. “Ah, hell.”

I giggled and took more of his berries. “Tastes great, Sol.”

He grumbled and picked up his peach for a bite before holding it out to me. “Might as well enjoy it.”

“Are you suggesting we eat our future children?”

He snorted. “It’s juicy and ripe. Take a bite. I already lost anyway.”

“None of us are losing anything,” I reminded him before indulging in a taste. He was right about the ripeness. It was perfection and made me groan in approval. He licked the juice off my lips, then fed me another bite, his

disappointment over failing his trials disappearing in a blink. Sol never stayed upset for long.

He licked more peach juice off my lips, then slipped his tongue into my mouth for a long, sensuous kiss. I momentarily forgot we had an audience until River cleared his throat. "While your mom is aware of the purpose of these trials, I don't think she wants to witness the consummation."

Warmth touched my cheeks as I pulled away from Sol to find my mother and Mortus intently watching Exos and Cyrus finish their casserole dish. The pink tinge in my mother's cheeks told me she'd definitely seen my kiss with Sol and had likely overheard River's commentary.

I cleared my throat and tried my best to keep my hands to myself.

Your vagina still broken, little queen? Cyrus asked as he slid the casserole into the oven. *Or are you ready for more orgasms?*

I swallowed. *I... I feel better; thank you for asking.*

His silver-blue eyes found mine. *Good. Because I intend to bend you over that table in a few hours.*

The heat in my cheeks spread down my breasts, my body warming to the idea of his touch. *You assume you've won.*

I know I have, he replied, leaning against the counter and holding my gaze. *And you know I have, too.*

He was right.

I knew he'd won as well.

If I were honest, I'd say he won before all of this had started. He always considered every angle and outcome before engaging in a challenge, and I'd never seen him lose. Not even to Titus when they dueled. At best, they would call it a draw.

That's why Exos didn't get mad; he already knew you were going to win.

Yes, Cyrus agreed. But also, he knew Lance didn't mean it. Getting mad at him would only worsen the issue, not fix it.

That's pretty much what Exos said, I replied.

That doesn't surprise me at all, little queen.

It didn't surprise me either. Cyrus and Exos were a lot alike. Not just because they were brothers, but because they were both kings. It required a certain amount of patience and understanding to act as the conduits for their elements.

I relaxed into Sol's side as my mates cleaned up in the kitchen.

Then I waited as they presented their dishes.

Vox didn't have one because he'd tossed it into the trash.

Titus gave me an omelet with all my favorite ingredients—I shared it with everyone else for the taste test, and the others agreed it was well done.

Then Exos and Cyrus presented their leafy casserole. It reminded me of a shepherd's pie without the meat.

No one commented on the fact that they'd worked together on it, mostly because it was a demonstration of our future. We had to work as a team. It was the best way to raise our future child.

No. Not child. *Children.*

Because seeing them all now, I realized I wanted more than one. I needed to have them all. One for every element. I felt the truth of it deep inside—the desire to create as much life as we could.

Perhaps not right away, but over time.

And I would start with Cyrus.

Everyone agreed that he'd won. He didn't gloat so much as accept the responsibility with pride. Then he gazed meaningfully at me, and the others left the room.

Not my mates, but the observers.

I barely felt them leave, my focus entirely on my water mate and the intentions warming the air between us.

"It's Halloween, Claire," he said, prowling toward me. "How do you want to celebrate?"

"By trick-or-treating?" I suggested.

His lips curled. "How about we skip the trick part and get right to the treat?" He grabbed my hips and pulled me up onto the counter of the kitchen. "We'll indulge in your sweetness first. Then you can indulge in ours."

"We?" I repeated on a breath. "Ours?"

"You didn't think I'd leave them out of our conception night, did you?" he asked, his hands sliding up my thighs and beneath my skirt, pushing it to my hips. "We're a mate-circle, little queen. I might be the one planting my seed tonight, but you can bet we're all going to be inside you in some way."

My heart skipped a beat. "None of you have slept."

"We don't need sleep to properly fuck you," he countered, his lips sealing over mine. "Now lie down. It's our turn to eat."



Claire's body glistened with sex, her drowsy gaze catching mine as she lounged like some sort of erotic offering on the bed between all her mates.

I'd tasted her first, giving her a quick orgasm with my tongue before I stepped back and allowed the others to prepare her. Her comments regarding her broken insides were long erased by hours of proof to the contrary.

Now she beckoned me with a sweet smile, aware of what I intended to do next.

Exos sucked her nipple into his mouth while Vox laved her other tit.

Titus licked between her legs while Sol combed his fingers through her hair, his lips reverent as he kissed her temple, her forehead, and then her lips.

But as he pulled away, I found her gaze again, the heated orbs an invitation.

She was ready.

And so was I.

You're overdressed, she murmured into my mind.

Am I? I began unknitting my tie. *Perhaps you should help me out of my clothes, little queen.*

Titus chose that moment to draw his teeth over her clit, causing her to jolt and shoot flames from her fingertips. I caught them in a glove of water, extinguishing the burn, and created a mist around us that set the tone for our

joining.

We'd moved Claire from the kitchen to our bedroom hours ago, the entire floor a mattress made for our weekly gatherings.

The windows were covered in curtains. Vines and flowers decorated the wall. And the ceiling was enchanted by spirit magic, the winking lights reminding me of stars.

Claire writhed beneath it all, her moans music to my ears. I tossed my tie to the pile of clothes in the corner and kicked off my shoes and socks. My mate watched with lazy anticipation, her pupils dilated with desire.

She murmured something through her bonds to the other males, causing them to back away just enough for her to kneel before me. My lips curled at the wantonness playing over her gorgeous features.

I knew what she intended.

And there wasn't a chance in hell I was about to stop her.

She grabbed my belt and threaded it through the loops before dropping it at her side. Then she grasped my button-down shirt and yanked it out of my slacks to expose my lower abdomen. Her lips met my skin, lighting my being on fire from that touch alone.

My dick pulsed in response, ready to play.

But I let her take her time, exploring me with her tongue as she slowly unfastened my pants and pulled down the zipper.

A subtle push sent them down my legs, followed by my boxers as she freed my cock to her mouth.

She didn't ask or comment, just took my throbbing head into her mouth and swallowed me down as far as her throat allowed.

"Fuck, Claire," I groaned, fisting my fingers in her hair. "Do that again and I won't have anything left to give you."

Her blue eyes flared as she met my gaze, her cheeks hollowing around my shaft in a delicious caress that nearly sent me to my knees.

This woman sucked cock like no one else.

And I would happily die in this position.

Because *fuck*.

It was so intense, so beautiful, so damn perfect that I almost wept. Instead, I praised her with my thoughts and drew my fingers through her hair, thanking her for the gift of her alluring mouth.

She swallowed me again, her tongue masterful against my skin, then she released me with a pop. I almost growled a protest, but her fingers hooked

into my shirt and tugged me down to her on the mattress. I chuckled as I landed on top of her, which I suspected was exactly what she desired.

Rather than remove my shirt, she set it on fire and burned it away from my skin. I could have stopped her, but I didn't want to. My mate's penchant for destroying clothes intrigued me. Although, it was proving to be a costly little hobby of hers. Most of my suits were from the Human Realm, all handmade and tailored in Italy. Same with Exos's.

Not that Claire cared about the semantics of our wardrobe.

Our little queen just wanted us naked and inside her, which was exactly what I gave her by spreading her thighs beneath me and sliding home without an ounce of foreplay.

Her body was already primed and ready, thanks to her other mates. She didn't need my hands or tongue. What she required was my cock, and that was precisely what I gave her as she wrapped her legs around my waist and urged me to fuck her.

I kissed her hard, palming her neck to angle her where I wanted. My other hand went to her tit, giving it a squeeze for her attempt at taking control.

She grinned against my mouth. *You're not mad.*

Never, I agreed. I love the way you play with me, little queen. It makes this so much more enjoyable.

I drove into her, smiling at her responding moan.

How many orgasms have you had tonight? I asked her. *Seven?*

Yes, she hissed, arching into me.

Are we going for eight or nine? I wondered, my lips leaving hers to trail down her throat to her flushed breasts. Fuck, she was a sight to behold, all wicked lust and salacious intent.

The men around me agreed, their cocks all stirring at the thought of fucking her again.

She made us insatiable beasts, with her as our queen at the center of this dark madness.

But I had a role to perform tonight, one Claire would need to play an equal part in for it to take.

I kissed her again, muting whatever reply stirred in her thoughts, her mind and body protesting the idea of nine orgasms in a night. Ridiculous, because we all knew she could handle so much more.

Fae—no matter our origin or kingdom—were beings of life and creation. We craved sex.

Even though she was half-human, her fae side overrode her where it counted, making her close to immortal and capable of endless hours—or days—of pleasure.

I reminded her of that with my mouth and cock, spearing her, owning her, driving her to the brink of rapture by hitting that spot deep inside.

She soared for me.

Screamed.

Her cheeks red with the force of pleasure overtaking her being.

I nuzzled her throat, slowing my pace, readying her for what would come next.

A new bond of sorts.

The heart of fae magic.

She whimpered, her over-sensitized body rippling with aftershocks of her ecstasy. Her mind was already protesting again, but I shushed her with a gentle kiss, my movements below measured and deliberate.

“Are you ready to make a baby, little queen?” I murmured against her mouth.

Warmth blossomed all around us from the others, their hands reaching out to stroke her in their own ways. Sol fondled her hair. Exos touched the side of her breast, stroking downward. Titus kissed her hip, his palm drifting from my backside to her thigh. And Vox drew his finger along her arm.

They were all here, all ready, all focused on the heart of our mate-circle.

Claire’s thick blonde lashes fluttered open, her gaze gleaming with approval. “Yes. I’m ready.”

I kissed her tenderly, my heart skipping a beat at the perfection of this moment. In a previous life, I never would have imagined this possible. Now, I couldn’t picture it any other way.

Claire was the love of my life, the only one I would ever want. But I cherished her other mates as well, loving them all in their own ways. It was as if our elements all thrived as a hive unit, because of Claire as our core and conduit.

She was our version of the elemental source.

Our goddess.

Our queen.

And it was finally time to create new life inside her.

I slid out all the way to the tip, before plunging deep and awakening her pleasure once more. She groaned, her back bowing as she encouraged me to

do it again.

I did.

But this time, I reached into our shared element as well.

Her eyes widened, feeling the power rippling over us as I called forth my water magic to bind us together as one. To *create*.

She shivered, her connection to the element opening wide in response as she matched my swirling wave with one of her own, bathing in our shared power, marrying it together as one.

The others could feel it, their skin misting as a result.

But the true source of the element coated me and Claire, swathing us in a sea of familiar bliss.

I kissed her, reveling in the sensation of our element playing through our beings, engaging our souls, and warming with the gift of life.

All it takes is a thought, I whispered to her. *Accept my offering, Claire.*

She didn't ask what I meant, because she felt the warmth of my power brushing her soul. She opened beneath it, gasping as the element pierced her very heart, sending vibrant electricity through her veins and mine.

It centered in my groin, alighting me from within and stirring a cyclone of sensation in my lower abdomen. I growled from the onslaught, the pleasure unlike anything I'd ever experienced, even during our first mating.

Fae are meant to create, I thought at her. *Fuck, Claire. I can't hold back much longer.*

It was too intense.

Too overpowering.

Too *right*.

She squeezed me with her thighs, welcoming me into her body with little movements of her own, the sensation curling inside her as well. I could feel it through our bond, her acceptance and excitement. Her preparedness. Her *need*.

Her limbs began to shake, sexy noises falling from her lips, as she picked up the pace of our joining, forcing me to shoot off into an oblivion of stars. Water exploded around us, my control over the element snapping as I released my seed inside her on a roar of emotion and astute gratification.

Claire followed me with her own scream, her nails digging into my back as she held on through each rapturous wave of insanity.

I couldn't breathe.

We were drowning in my element, lost in the depths of the ocean and

struggling to surface. I held on to her as she clung to me, our lungs failing us both.

Until we surfaced on a collective breath, our lips crashing into each other as we mated our tongues in a dark dance of fate and expectation.

I fucking loved this woman.

She took everything I had to give and gave it back tenfold, her body a pillar of worship that I would forever kneel to.

And inside, life had taken hold.

I could feel it in my very being, the source rejoicing in our mating and showering us in icy kisses that stung my already damp skin. Claire giggled, her smile the most beautiful sight.

Rather than speak, she kissed me again. Then she grabbed Sol and dragged him in for a kiss. Followed by Titus, Vox, and then Exos.

I was still joined to her below, could feel her walls fluttering with renewed vigor, her happiness a drug we all wanted to indulge in.

My hips flexed, giving her what she craved.

We'd already created life, but I didn't mind fucking her again. Just as I knew her mates wouldn't mind joining.

Now it was about celebrating. Worshipping. Cherishing. Existing.

Our Claire had just given us all the biggest gift of our lives. And we intended to show her our gratitude for as long as she wanted.

Thank you, little queen, I whispered, kissing her jaw as Sol took her mouth again. *I love you,* I added, palming her belly. *Both of you.*



PART
TWO

'TIS THE SEASON
TO BE
PREGNANT
FA-LA-LA-LA-LA
LA-LA
LA
LA

CLAIRE



TEN DAYS LATER

“Claire!” Titus shouted, making my eyebrows scrunch as I pulled the blanket over my head. He shook me, albeit gently, as he insisted on rousing me from the best sleep of my life. When I didn’t respond, he pulled the sheets away, making me squirm as cool air rushed over my skin.

“So tired,” I mumbled as I tried to fend him off with a wave of my hand. “Go away.”

“Thank the source you’re finally awake,” he said on an exhale. I peeked at him with one eye, finding him leaning back on his heels as he watched me. “How... how are you feeling?”

A blanket of fatigue draped over me in response to his question, refusing to lift its weight entirely, but the concern in Titus’s eyes made me sit up.

“What time is it?” I asked, confused. Sunlight streamed in with pleasant rays that banished the strange chill in the room, but it felt like no time had passed at all since I’d laid my head down.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh, it’s midday.” He continued to stare at me, his eyes running over me as if he was searching for a source of injury.

“What is it?” I asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you slept much longer than I expected.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. It wasn't like I hadn't ever slept in before. "And that concerns you... why?"

He sighed and took my hand, warming me with his magic. I jolted at the unforgiving warmth, frowning. "Because you're pregnant, Claire. It's my job to be concerned."

Yes, I was pregnant, and just the affirmation in my mind made my heart flutter with joy. There could be no denying the surge of life I'd felt through my bond with Cyrus and all of my mates.

"Is the faeling doing okay?" he asked after a moment, as if it was something I should have confirmed already.

"What?"

"The faeling," he said again, his words coming out in that slow, calm way when I knew he was starting to worry. "Can you feel it?"

I frowned. "Should I be able to?" Could he not feel the life thriving through the bond? It seemed pretty real to me. But maybe I was mistaking it for something else?

He stilled for a moment, as though trying too hard not to show a reaction. "Exos didn't think we should prod you about it, but now that you've passed the incubation period, you should be able to feel something."

I wasn't sure exactly what Titus meant by that, but it unfurled a thread of doubt that this pregnancy would take hold. I knew that Cyrus had filled me with life, but this was a fae mating.

And I was only half-fae.

It was a secret, dark fear I hadn't considered until it jolted through me with ugly clarity. As a Halfling, I didn't quite fit in either world. It was my mates who had made a place for me. To everyone else, I was just an oddity...

An abomination.

What if that meant I couldn't procreate? What if I'd been too lost in my mates' love for me that I'd missed the dreadful truth right in front of me?

"Maybe we shouldn't get our hopes up, Titus," I said, warning him with a slight tremor in my voice. I really didn't want my mates to be disappointed if my human half took charge in this instance. Even if this pregnancy failed, it didn't mean I would stop trying. When he continued to frown at me, I added, "We don't know if the pregnancy is, uh, viable."

"Viable?" he repeated, his hand drifting to my shoulder. "Do you not remember Cyrus and you conceiving? Or are you doubting him?" The latter question seeped with hurt, but he misunderstood my concern. I didn't doubt

my mates so much as I doubted myself.

I brushed off his touch as another wave of fatigue wafted over me. I covered my mouth and yawned. “It’s only been a little over a week since we, um, since we tried, I mean.”

I rubbed my eyes, part of me wanting to throw the covers over my head again and just go back to sleep and hide from all my doubts and fears.

“It’ll be at least a month before we know anything for certain. And even then, we’re supposed to wait a bit before we really start planning. I don’t actually know the statistics, but miscarriages sometimes happen in humans.” It was a male-fae bonus to have control over conception, but I wasn’t exactly a textbook case.

Titus cocked his brow. “Miscarriage?” He shook his head. “We’ll know in a lot less than a month, Claire. And I think you underestimate your genetics and the potency of male fae.” He grinned. “Especially a male like your Water King, who is even cockier than me. He has a reputation to uphold, you know.”

I sighed. Cyrus’s virility wasn’t what I questioned. “You’re not hearing me.” I really didn’t know how to explain this without the fissure in my heart splitting open.

What if I failed my mates?

What if I was broken?

“Hey.” Titus leaned in so that I could see his green eyes blazing with heat. “I *am* hearing you, sweetheart, and I’m telling you that you have nothing to worry about. You know why?” He grazed his fingers over my chin, making me sink into his touch.

“Why?” I asked, my voice hopeful even though my stomach twisted with worry.

“Because you are life itself, Claire.” His smile lifted into a smirk. “And there’s no way you’d fall asleep during sex unless you had a good excuse, so if you *aren’t* pregnant, I’m afraid I can’t forgive you for that.”

I frowned. “What?” I’d passed out during sex before—because a girl can only take so many orgasms before her brain just shuts down—but falling asleep? That wasn’t possible. “There’s no way...” I trailed off.

He chuckled. “Tell me the last thing you remember.”

“We were playing with fire,” I said slowly, recalling how he’d been agonizing me with slow flames that ran up the insides of my thighs. “Then...” My words drifted off as I tried to remember what happened next. The warmth

and excitement were there, but my memories sort of just... stopped.

“You fell asleep,” he finished for me.

I frowned, then gasped when I realized he was right. “Oh, Titus,” I said, covering my mouth, “I’m so sorry!”

He laughed. “It’s a good sign, sweetheart. The first month of fae pregnancy comes with extreme fatigue because the baby has a lot of growing to do in a short amount of time. You’re going to sleep a lot, especially during the incubation period. Although, you had me worried with how much sleep you needed.”

He enveloped me in an embrace, coddling me as if I were made of porcelain. He also seemed to think that saying things like “incubation period” was completely normal.

“I’m glad you’re comfortable enough to trust me with your protection. Fae instincts tend to keep the mother awake until she feels it’s safe.” He gave me another gentle hug before releasing me. “Now that you’re past the first phase, I’ll go find the Healer. We’re going to need to have you checked out for phase two.”

The authority in his voice said “no” would not be an acceptable answer.

I blinked a few times, not sure what he meant by “phase one” and “phase two” or why he kept saying I was incubating like I was some sort of damned chicken.

My hand went to my belly while Titus rolled off the bed and grabbed his clothes.

“Shouldn’t we do a pregnancy test or something first?” I asked. That would at least confirm the pregnancy, right?

He chuckled. “A test? What do you mean?”

I bit my lip before replying. “You know, it involves peeing on a stick?”

He stumbled midstride as he looped one pant leg over his foot. “Excuse me?”

Exasperated, I let my hands fall to the sheets. “How do fae know if they’re pregnant? In my world, you pee on a stick, and it tells you a positive or a negative result.”

He barked out a laugh. “Humans have such odd magic. No, you don’t pee on a stick, Claire. You can tell if you’re pregnant with your elements. Use the spirit source.” When I stared at him, he continued. “Have you tried it?”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. Reaching into myself to touch the elemental sources was second nature, but when I tried to touch the spirit

source, nothing happened.

“I don’t feel anything,” I said, starting to worry. “Does that mean the baby...?”

Titus went still, and a brief moment of seriousness swept over his features. It passed, replaced with his usual sexy smirk as he finished getting dressed. “I’m sure everything’s fine. You’re a Halfling, so that could be impacting the connection to the source during pregnancy. This will be a new experience for everyone, so let’s just take it one step at a time, okay?”

I tried not to hyperventilate.

Or it means something’s wrong.

What if I really had miscarried?

“Do Halflings usually have faelings?” I asked, starting to panic. “Is it normal for us... to...? Do you know of one who has? What if... what if...?” I swallowed the lump in my throat and palmed my belly, a sense of protectiveness sweeping over me.

I desperately clung to Titus’s speculation that my child might impact my connection to the source. Anything more sinister than that and I would be sick.

“Just breathe, sweetheart,” Titus said, his voice a calming presence in my mind, drawing me back to him and out of the shadows of my concerns. “Let’s meet with the Healer, okay? She’ll tell you what to expect.”

Yes. Okay. He was right. “A Healer,” I repeated. “That sounds... that sounds good.”

He gave me a kiss on the cheek, reassuring me with a graze of magical warmth. “Everything’s going to be fine,” he repeated, perhaps saying it more for his benefit than mine. He gave my arm a light squeeze before he ventured out the door. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, Claire. Just relax.”

Relax, I repeated to myself. Yeah, sure.

But I tried anyway, releasing a long breath.

Where are you guys? I asked through the bonds.

The guys all answered quickly. Cyrus was out rounding up appropriate fae willing to meet with me about the Interrealm Fae Academy. Exos, Sol, and Vox were all out in the Human Realm procuring decorations for the holidays. Something about wanting to decorate my office—an idea that made me smile. That explained some of the random bags in the bedroom, all overflowing with autumn colors and a few with red and green.

Is everything going okay? I asked Cyrus.

I should be asking you that, little queen, he replied, his voice a kiss against my thoughts. And yes, everything's fine. Kalt is helping me, too. I think he's avoiding his triad issue with the Winter Fae.

I really want to know more about that, I admitted.

Me, too. I'll see what I can learn and report back. He sounded amused. I'll be there soon, little queen. And don't worry; you are definitely pregnant.

I frowned. Are you playing in my head?

No, your concern is radiating through the bond. Your fae genetics trump your human half. Trust me, he murmured. We're all heading back for your Healer appointment, little queen.

He left me with a misty kiss to my mind, his focus returning to his tasks.

Thank you, I whispered back to him. It wouldn't be easy to convince the other fae to create the Interrealm Fae Academy, which was why I wanted to meet with them all individually, to assure them their needs would be met. And there was no one better to convince them than my Water Fae King mate. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

Sighing, I jumped out of the bed and hurried to the shower. I felt kind of grimy for some reason. Maybe because I'd slept for too long? Yet, I could easily sleep more right now.

To banish my lingering fatigue, I made the shower cold, which seemed to do the trick.

After I finished, I studied myself in the mirror as water dripped from my long blonde locks. My breasts looked the same as usual, perky and ready for my mates' attention. Although, as I ran my hands over them, my nipples did feel a little sore. My fingers ran down, circling the belly button on my flat abdomen.

I tried to access the spirit source again, only to find a sense of nothingness. It wasn't as if the space inside of me felt empty—rather, it felt blocked.

Hmm. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

Running my fingers through my wet hair, I reached for the fire source out of habit to dry the dripping strands.

And nothing happened.

My stomach sank as I paused, then tried again.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Water hit the floor, mocking me at my attempt to touch the fire source, which worked great as a magical dryer.

Frowning, I decided not to panic. Maybe Titus was right. I was a Halfling, and being pregnant could have strange effects on my powers. If I couldn't access the spirit source, it made sense that I wouldn't be able to access the others as well. Although, I didn't like the sensation of helplessness that came with feeling so... *human*.

"Well, if you're going to be human, then you might as well act the part," I said to myself, leaning on the counter to make sure my reflection heard my determination.

I didn't have a human hair dryer, so I snatched up a towel and scrubbed until my hair went from soaking wet to damp. I plaited the strands into a complex braid, wrapping it around my head like a crown. The style was popular with the Water Fae, who preferred to leave their hair wet. I had learned it from one of the students—Artica.

That done, I put on a loose-fitting blouse and matched it with a blue skirt that complemented my eyes. I didn't allow myself to linger or let my thoughts drift. I propped my hands on my hips and surveyed my bedroom filled with decorations.

Yes, a distraction would suit me well.

CLAIRE



I separated the decorations into piles based on theme.

Halloween—even though it had already passed. However, Exos liked the skeletons.

Autumn Solstice to represent the fae.

Then Christmas and Winter Solstice decorations made up the third pile. Christmas was just around the corner—plus it was my favorite of all the holidays—so I liked to start sneaking in hints of tinsel and garland wherever possible.

I started wrapping the pumpkin lights around one of the pillars in the living room, then took to the other with one of the Christmas silver stars. I finished off the third and fourth with standard fae lights, although they were more like dull orbs since I couldn't access my magic to activate them.

A problem to deal with, um, later.

I had nearly finished up with the kitchen when Titus, Cyrus, and an unknown fae walked in. They all stopped in their tracks and openly gaped at me. I'd just scrambled up the countertop to put the finishing touch on the room. I'd dragged a massive red ribbon in tow, determined to affix it to the arch that ran along the ceiling above the stove.

“Claire!” Cyrus shouted, his tone panicked. “Get down immediately!”

Ignoring him, I kicked off my shoe and hooked my toes into one of the unused shelves, gaining a bit more height. “I've almost got it,” I insisted out

loud. “I survived the end of the world. I can survive tying up a bow.”

“Vox!” he yelled, turning to the Air Fae, who had just walked in with Sol on his heels. “Help me get her down.”

Titus rubbed his temples. “Will someone talk some sense into her before we yank her down with Vox’s faulty magic?”

“My magic is fine,” Vox replied, glaring at the Fire Fae. His element only acted up when he became stressed or emotional—a side effect he’d never quite gotten over since mating with me. And given the panic flaying our bond, he was definitely feeling a bit emotional right now.

Exos entered last, his smirk a sharp contrast to the looks of raw panic from my other mates.

“Well, it looks like I was right,” he said, sounding amused. “Claire has officially entered phase two, and the child is definitely a troublemaker.” He slapped Cyrus on the back. “Well done, brother.”

Vox worked a careful strand of wind magic, swirling pressure around my body to give me a lift. The extra boost of height allowed me to loop the ribbon’s tassel through the slat, and I secured it before Vox guided me to the floor.

“There!” I said, slapping my hands together as I surveyed the finishing touch on my decorations. The massive red ribbon brought it all together. “Perfect.”

I turned, and the smile on my face melted when I saw that my guys most certainly didn’t share my festive enthusiasm, except maybe Exos, who was still pleased with himself.

The unknown fae—who I assumed was the Healer—cleared her throat. “Well, suffice it to say, I do think your mates are right. You’re exhibiting all of the typical phase two traits.”

I blinked, then glanced around at my still-displeased mates. “Yeah, so, will somebody explain to me what all these phases mean? Where I come from, there are three trimesters, and I’m definitely not in the second one. I’m only, like, a little over a week pregnant. That’s hardly enough time for anything to happen.” Not to mention there were certain concerns yet to address.

Cyrus took one of my hands and placed a kiss on my knuckles. The gesture made me soften a little. “Little queen, things are going to move fast now. Once the Healer checks you out, we really should start making preparations.” He glanced around the room. “While I’m sure the faeling will

appreciate a festive atmosphere, we should be focused on the nursery. We don't have a crib, clothes, or any of the items we need for a newborn."

Exos crossed his arms. "It's important to keep Claire happy. Plus, fae furniture is just fine."

I propped my hands on my hips, catching a loose strand of tinsel in my fingers. I looped it around my throat like a necklace. "We have nine months before we have to worry about any of that, so will you all just simmer down and let me celebrate the holidays?"

My guys all took on various expressions of shock. Sol went pale. Vox's mouth parted. Exos and Cyrus shared a long look, and Titus tightened his jaw.

My fire mate nudged the Healer forward. "You'd better have her sit down," he said, his voice coming out strained. "I think there's a human-slash-fae difference we all forgot to consider."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

The Healer released a nervous laugh as she took my hand and guided me into the living room. She paused, staring at the array of festive pillows shaped like Christmas ornaments before managing to clear a space for us both to sit down.

She waited until I was fully seated and all my guys had followed us into the room before she spoke. "It seems there is a key detail your mates may have failed to mention," she said, her tone scolding as she glanced at the male fae.

Cyrus folded his arms. "She's a Halfling, but she's also a queen and a goddess of the elements. Informing her of all the possibilities seems presumptuous on our parts."

I glared at him. "Presumptuous?" I turned back to the Healer. "What is it that you're trying to tell me? Is there a huge difference between fae and human pregnancies?"

The Healer gave me a weak smile as she patted my hand. "You're exhibiting all the signs of a typical fae pregnancy. There are three phases. The first is incubation, which happens while asleep. From Titus's testimony, you've already surpassed that during your three days of rest, although usually it's only twenty-four hours—"

"*Three days?*" I repeated. "I've been asleep for *three days*? When was somebody going to tell me that?"

Cyrus gave me a sympathetic smile. "We thought it best for Titus to be

there when you woke up. It's normal, I assure you." He gave the Healer a nod. "Please, continue."

She cleared her throat. "Right, well, the next phase is nesting, which I would say by all the, uh, decorations, you've officially started." She turned my hand over. "May I?"

I swallowed past the lump in my throat before I nodded my permission.

She ran her palm over mine, sending a pleasant silver glow into the room. I sensed spirit magic working over me, although it felt more distant than usual. She hummed with thought, then ran her glowing hand up my arm and down over my stomach. She smiled. "Yes, you're progressing nicely."

The tension in the room eased. "So... I'm still pregnant?"

Yes, little queen, Cyrus murmured into my thoughts. *Definitely pregnant.*

The Healer laughed. "Yes, dear, and you have a healthy fae child blossoming in your womb. If no one has said it yet, congratulations."

I swayed against the wave of relief that swept over me.

I was definitely pregnant.

With Cyrus's child.

And the baby is okay.

The solace that swept through me was strong enough to make me feel giddy. "So, I'm in the second phase?" I asked, my voice wavering. I needed something practical to hold on to right now before I turned into an emotional puddle on the floor. "I'm, uh, nesting?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. You're preparing for your child to be born, and that means creating an environment your instincts find conducive to a relaxed and joyful ambience."

A strong gust of wind swept through the room, a testimony to Vox's stress levels. He batted at the retaliating hanging decorations while Sol pulled out a strand of fae cherry puffs from his bag and started eating them off the string.

"Those are supposed to be hung up," I told him.

"And eaten," he agreed, inhaling another mouthful.

"I wouldn't call this relaxed," Vox said slowly, looking around at all the decorations and the mass of bags they'd just brought home with them.

I frowned. "What do you mean, this isn't relaxed?"

"It's... sort of busy?" he replied, deepening my frown.

Did he not understand the point of the holidays? "Titus?" I asked, pointing at the dull orbs wrapped around the nearest pillar. "Could you light

those for me, please?”

He arched his brow but didn't ask me why I hadn't done it myself. Instead, he obeyed and flicked his fingers, sending the swirl of orbs alight. Cyrus silently activated the second one, giving the room a complement of fire and water that made my shoulders relax.

“See?” the Healer asked with a smile. “That makes you feel better, doesn't it?”

I nodded, sighing. “I've always liked decorating for the holidays. That doesn't mean anything.” I leaned in. “So, you're telling me I'm past the 'incubation' period and now I'm nesting. How can I be nesting if I'm only a week pregnant?”

Well, technically, ten days since I apparently slept for three of them.

She patted my hand again, this time more forcefully. “Your pregnancy will be similar to that of a fae, not a human.” She glanced at my pointed ears. They had transformed years ago after I had accepted the fae side of myself. “You've lived in the Elemental Fae realm for quite a few years now, and you have fae mates. Therefore, it makes sense for your pregnancy to run a similar course to a fae's.”

I glanced around the room and found that none of my mates would meet my gaze. Finally, I zoomed back in on the Healer. “And what does that mean, exactly?” I demanded, suspecting this was the part my mates had “forgotten to mention” to me.

She chewed her lip before appeasing me. “You say that a human pregnancy lasts for nine months? Well, a fae one runs a bit shorter.”

“How much shorter?” I pressed.

Cyrus took pity on me and massaged my shoulders. His gaze said that he took full responsibility for this situation, being the one who'd impregnated me. “You'll likely be delivering our child in about two months, little queen.”

My entire world screeched to a halt, and my stomach dropped.

“I'm sorry... *What?*”



“**N**ine weeks.” Claire repeated those two words over and over again, her feet moving swiftly over our bedroom floor as she paced back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

“Nine weeks.”

More pacing.

More mumbling.

I glanced at Exos, and he gave me a look that said, “What did you expect?”

I had expected her to understand and believe she was more fae than human. I had also expected her to be pleased that she would come to term in nine weeks, not nine months. Who would prefer nearly a year as an incubator when they could be done in roughly two months?

Of course, I wouldn't say that out loud now. Not with Claire in her tender condition. My usual go-to of pushing her to accept fate wasn't going to work this time. She might not feel it yet, but her hormones and body were already changing. Adding more stress to that transition wouldn't be helpful for either of us.

So rather than speak, I wrapped a blanket of mist around her and allowed the droplets to tease her exposed skin. She wore a cute little skirt and button-

down shirt that I very much wanted to remove from her body. But something told me that would not be welcome in this state.

I also adored her hairstyle choice. It was a damp braid commonly worn by Water Fae. All she needed was her crown to fit her role as queen of my kind. She didn't wear it often, only to formal events. But I sometimes fantasized about her wearing those jewels... and only those jewels.

Something about this woman always sent my mind to my groin, which perked up with interest as she turned around to reveal her dampening shirt.

No bra.

Fuck.

Exos's sapphire gaze flashed with interest.

He'd misted back to the Water Kingdom with us. It was technically my night with Claire, and I had intended to take her to dinner with my father and his mate, but I'd postponed that dinner to brunch tomorrow. I needed to calm my little queen down first.

"Nine weeks," she said for the umpteenth time, shaking her head.

"Yes, that's roughly sixty-three days," I informed her dryly.

So much for my calm approach.

She spun to face me as though she'd forgotten I sat on our bed a few feet away. My gaze immediately dropped to her tits, those beautiful dusky nipples were completely visible beneath her shirt, and she hadn't even noticed.

Perhaps my mist blanket had been a bad idea.

But I absolutely didn't regret it as the fabric started to mold to her chest.

"*Days?*" Claire repeated.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, little queen. Sixty-three days is plenty of time. Nine weeks. Would you prefer to be carrying around a faeling for nine months? That's an awfully long time to be pregnant, don't you think?"

Exos grunted beside me, whether in agreement or to chastise my directness, I wasn't sure. I also didn't care.

"How am I supposed to gather all the requisite approvals for the Interrealm Fae Academy in *sixty-three days?*" she demanded. "You should have told me about this before I agreed! You knew how important that academy is to me. And now there's no way I'll be able to get this done, Cyrus. I'm going to have a baby in nine weeks!"

"Technically, it'll be closer to seven now," I murmured, which was apparently the wrong thing to say, because she screamed.

I flinched.

Exos groaned.

And I recalled the warnings from the Healer about Claire's impending hormonal changes. Phase two came with a lot of physical and mental imbalances, nurturing instincts, and general nesting practices. It was the longest of the pregnancy periods and the hardest.

Phase three was the one I rather looked forward to.

But I wouldn't get into that now with her.

Instead, I focused on what her real concern was here—the Interrealm Fae Academy.

"Little queen," I said softly.

"Don't you 'little queen' me," she snapped. "*You got me pregnant!*"

I chuckled. "Indeed, I did. And I don't regret it." *Even with you yelling at me*, I thought, pushing off the bed to stand in front of her. "*Little queen*," I repeated, taking hold of her shoulders. "You have five mates."

"I'm aware, but you're the one—"

"No, Claire. That's not what I mean. You have five mates who can help you and *will* help you with the academy. We all know how important it is to you. The hard part is already done. Now we just need to arrange meetings with the fae to encourage them to agree. Do you know what Exos and I happen to be very skilled at?" I arched a brow, waiting for her to consider my words and hear what I was saying to her.

She nibbled her lip, her blue eyes flashing with consideration as she fought her instinct to rage instead of reason with me. "You... you like politics."

"Yes," I replied, lifting one hand to her heated cheek. "And we are very skilled at convincing fae to do what we want."

"Like make babies," she grumbled.

My lips twitched. "You want a faeling just as badly as the rest of us do. Don't let a little time shift convince you otherwise."

Her mouth parted to argue my choice of "little"—something I caught in her mental voice as she began to rage in her head again—so I silenced her with a gentle kiss, one that ended in her biting my bottom lip.

I soothed the ache away with my tongue before kissing her again and sliding my fingers back into her braid to hold her to me. There were so many things I could do with her hair in this state, all of them sexual in nature.

But I chose to merely embrace her, to allow her to feel my love and tranquility, to surround her with my inner element, and to allow it to soothe

her inner turmoil.

We're in this together, I reminded her softly. We all want the Interrealm Fae Academy to prosper. It will be a great place for our children to attend school. So trust us to help you, little queen. That's why we're here. The world doesn't always need to rest on your shoulders.

She sighed, her arms slipping around my waist as she began to melt into my touch, her mind quieting.

I languidly deepened our kiss, drawing her into a state of contentment that I felt to my very soul. Exos stood, his heat blanketing her back as he clasped her hips before dropping his mouth to her neck.

She moaned between us, her smaller form surrounded by royalty and Elemental Fae power.

His palm slid between us, going to her lower belly, his mouth brushing her ear. "I can feel the faeling," he whispered to her. "I know you were worried earlier, Claire. I could sense it through the bond. But our future baby is healthy and growing, just as he or she should."

Our, she repeated in her mind, smiling. I grinned against her mouth, liking the sound of it, too. Because it didn't matter that I was the one who had fathered the child; all her mates would look at the faeling as *our* child.

"Let us take care of you," I said against her mouth. "That's why we're here."

"We'll handle the fae meetings," Exos added. "Just let us know what you want to be part of, and you'll be there. Otherwise, leave it with us. And focus on taking care of our faeling."

"It's not in my nature to just... give up control," she admitted, swallowing.

"Then tell us what to do," I offered. "Tell us what you need, and we'll help you achieve it. But don't carry all this around on your own, Claire. That's not going to work for any of us."

She nodded. "I know."

"Good." I kissed her nose, then pressed my forehead to hers. "Now I have another request."

Her eyebrow inched upward. "Another request?" She sounded cynical. "I think you've had enough requests."

I grinned. "This is one I think you'll like."

"Uh-huh."

I nibbled her lower lip, then pulled away just enough to look down at her

blouse. “May we help you out of these wet clothes?”

She frowned, glancing down. “How...?” She blinked. “Hold on, what’s the request? I’m not letting you use sex to distract me. Last time I did that, I ended up pregnant.”

Rather than correct her statement, I merely said, “Stripping you is my request.”

“Oh.” She frowned, then looked down again. “Okay.”

“While we’re making requests,” Exos added, his mouth against her throat again. “I would like to request fucking your ass.”

Her cheeks flushed. “*Exos.*”

“And I want your pussy,” I declared, enjoying how her skin darkened to a deep red shade. “Don’t act like you’re surprised by our bluntness, little queen. You’ve been mated to us long enough to know our preferences.”

She swallowed. “I’m still not used to it.”

My lips twitched again. “Then allow us to provide another demonstration.” I started unfastening her blouse since she’d technically provided permission. “Consider this a practice round for phase three.”

“And what happens in phase three?” she asked, breathless as we peeled the shirt from her gorgeous body.

“Intense sex,” Exos whispered against her ear, his fist on her skirt, dragging it down her legs. “Now go get on the bed and spread those pretty thighs.”

CLAIRE



A WEEK AND A HALF LATER

Okay, so there was a benefit to this whole pregnancy thing—*amazing sex*. And also, just my mates in general.

They had never been more attentive than they were now, which was saying a whole heck of a lot, considering they always seemed to bend over backward for me.

Such as now, with Titus helping me decorate the main meeting room of the chancellor building on campus. Cyrus had said to expect a few fae to drop by to discuss the Interrealm Fae Academy, and I'd gone into interior designer mode.

Holidays made people happy.

And I needed these fae to be happy.

Which was how I found myself in a sea of sequins, glitter, and festive winter décor. It covered every inch of the meeting chamber for today's guests. I just couldn't focus on the paperwork or potential negotiations, not until the room was properly prepared.

The term "nesting" repeated over and over again in my head, only driving me into a frenzy to make everything even more right.

But everywhere I turned, I found an empty space that needed a Santa statue. A blank wall that was missing a splattering of glitter. A staircase in

desperate need of more tinsel.

“Candles,” I declared with a clap of my hands. Oh, yes, a sea of flickering lights would do the trick.

I needed my elements, even if I didn’t have full access to them.

Yes, yes. Definitely candles.

Titus studied me as I used one of the already lit candles to carefully light the others one by one. He appeared ready to say something, when a stray puff of fake snow drifted through the room, nearly catching on fire. He arched the flame away from it with a sweep of his hand, his eyebrow inching upward at me.

“Thanks,” I said shyly, hating that I was having to rely more and more on my mates to keep me from setting rooms on fire.

“Suddenly afraid of a little heat?” he asked with a sexy smile, planting a kiss on my lips. I indulged in the taste of him before I wriggled away to keep on with my work.

“I’m just being extra careful,” I replied, meaning it.

“Yes, I can see that.” He followed as I surveyed the room for the thousandth time.

The decorations seemed to take precedence over preparations for my impending meeting. However, Titus didn’t point out my lopsided priorities.

Aflora and a few other fae would be walking through the door lined with holly any minute now. The rest of my mates would be joining as well to keep an eye on me. Cyrus in particular was protective as of late, understandably, and Titus was probably feeling the pressure to keep me safe as well.

“Do you really need to give me a heart attack again?” Titus asked woefully, catching my side as I wobbled on a ladder. “Just tell me what needs to be hung up, and I’ll do it. Or we could grab Vox.”

“No,” I replied, stubbornly taking each step up the ladder with Titus’s hands firmly on my hips. “You wouldn’t do it right.” I was the only one who knew where everything had to go. Except I couldn’t really explain that absurd sense of certainty to my mates.

Titus’s warmth escalated out of frustration as I adjusted one of the snowflake streamers.

Usually, I would have used a little wind magic to cinch the tall loops into the ceiling, but my element wouldn’t come to me.

That should have been concerning.

And yeah, I probably should have said something.

But the Healer had told me I might feel a little off my game as the faeling grew. And it wasn't like this Halfling pregnancy came with an instruction manual or anything.

So rather than fret over it, or unnecessarily worry my mates even further, I'd decided to stay calm and do what I could to make this feel more like a safe space.

Hence all the decorations.

A room full of festive cheer gave me the sense of calm I needed.

"Yes, there we are," I said, satisfied as I snagged the streamer swaying in between complementing layers of autumn leaves and pumpkins.

"Are you finally done?" he asked, his voice going up with a hopeful lilt.

"Hmm," I hummed, glancing around the room. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Autumn and Winter Solstices all wrapped up the room in my festive masterpiece, but something was still missing.

"Um..." came an uncertain voice as Aflora inched the door open, pushing aside the faux snow I'd crammed too close to the hinges. A nearby candle flickered, and Titus twisted his fingers, sending the flame away before it lit the entire display on fire.

"Am I in the right place?" she asked, warily eyeing the candles.

"Aflora," I greeted, excited to see the female Sol referred to as his little sister. The two of them had grown up together after Aflora's Royal Fae parents died, and now the two of them shared access to the source of earth.

I waved my hands to beckon her to enter and immediately regretted the motion as I nearly fell off the ladder. Titus cursed and caught me, setting my feet on the ground.

Then a flame broke out across the room.

"Shit," Titus muttered.

Aflora pulled a wand from her cloak and muttered a spell, killing the fire with a few spare breaths. Then she looked around the room with her cerulean gaze.

"Well, there are enough decorations in here to decorate a field of wildflowers," she said. "Someone's definitely nesting."

Titus grunted in agreement as male voices cascaded through the open doorway. Zephyrus stepped through it while smirking at whatever Cyrus had just said.

"Wow, did Christmas and Thanksgiving have a baby?" Zephyrus asked, glancing around the room.

“Claire’s nesting,” Aflora replied.

“Yes, I see that,” he deadpanned. “Hi, Claire.” The greeting lacked affection, but that was standard from the Warrior Blood. Midnight Fae had a variety of classifications. His focused primarily on defensive magic, which echoed in his stance now as he went dutifully to Aflora’s side. “Why is your wand out?”

“Fire,” Aflora replied, putting the magical conduit away. “I’m fine.”

He looked her over with pensive green eyes, his features sharp and cutting as he ensured she was truly “fine.”

Cyrus arched a brow at me just as Titus jumped to take out a newly escaped flame.

“I thought nesting was supposed to help you make a *safe* space,” my water mate teased, walking forward to brush his fingers under my chin. Mist washed over me, giving me a tingling sensation as he instinctively protected me with a shield of water.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You don’t need to put me in a literal bubble, Cyrus.”

He smirked. “I do when you’re intent on setting rooms on fire.”

“I got this,” Titus assured him, then hissed when another flame escaped his attention.

“You missed one, Firefly,” Cyrus pointed out, earning a growl from my Fire Fae that promised vengeance.

I grinned, amused by their usual banter.

Gina poked her head through the door and glanced around the room, boasting a wry smile. “Did I miss the fireworks?”

“What fireworks—” I asked, only to be interrupted by an explosion that had me shrieking and clinging to Cyrus.

Aflora held a hand to her chest while Zephyrus narrowed his shrewd gaze. Titus’s unruly flames—spurred on by Cyrus’s “Firefly” taunt—had reached the appetizer trays of shelled nuts. Now they were exploding all over the ceiling. The life-sized nutcracker jostled next to the display, appropriately gyrating its mouth open and closed as it wobbled.

Gina clapped her hands, the only one among us who hadn’t been surprised. Well, Zephyrus didn’t look very surprised, so much as annoyed.

Cyrus doused the flames with a sweeping caress of his magic, careful not to soak my decorations in the process. However, he left the flames alight, likely to irritate Titus.

I can feel your amusement, baby, Exos murmured into my mind. *Causing chaos again?*

Just having fun with holiday decorations, I replied, my lips twitching.

Hmm, he hummed back, his own amusement reaching my heart. *I'll be there in a few minutes with Sol and Vox. I hope you're hungry.*

Why are we having so much food for a meeting? I wondered at him.

Maybe it's not for a meeting, he suggested.

What do you mean?

Patience, Claire.

If he were standing before me, I'd stick my tongue out at him in annoyance. Instead, Cyrus distracted me with his mouth by placing a kiss on my lips that left me sighing in contentment.

Aflora shuffled through the glitter to find a seat. She pushed aside some stuffed pillows in the shape of stars and Christmas trees before finally plopping down onto a chair. "I don't know where everybody else is going to sit." Zephyrus smirked and took the seat beside her.

I bit my lip as I studied the room, considering the problem. I'd just let my instincts fly and hadn't really considered logistics.

Gina swayed to a collection of faux snow and settled into it like a bird snuggling into a nest.

"I think this works just fine." She plucked at the puffy edges of her makeshift seat. "It reminds me of when my Omega instincts first took hold. It's a similar type of nesting instinct, I think." She gave me a smile, her eyes flashing with a hint of white as she grazed her fingers over the decorations that triggered one of her visions. "Welcome to pregnant life, Claire. It's going to keep you on the run."

"Claire?" came my name, paired with a worried feminine tone, before I had time to address Gina's strange statement. My mother walked in and halted, her eyes growing big. "Oh..."

"Oh, hi, Mom," I greeted, smiling. "We're having a meeting." Whenever all the other fae decided to arrive.

What time are they all coming, again? I asked Exos.

They're all arriving right now, he replied.

My eyes widened. *Oh, I'm not ready yet!*

You're fine, he replied. *Just talk to your mom.*

How do you know my mom is here?

No response.

“What is it, Ophelia?” Mortus asked as he entered after my mother, causing me to frown.

Why is Mortus here?

Because he’s your mom’s boyfriend, Exos replied.

Yeah, I know. But why is he attending the meeting?

Because we invited him, baby.

“What’s my brother saying?” Cyrus asked softly, his arm circling my waist as he stepped to my side.

“I was asking him about the meeting,” I muttered, then smiled as my mother and her boyfriend approached.

“Ah, yes. The ‘meeting,’” Cyrus replied, an odd caress on that final word.

“Your mother warned me about your nesting, but you’ve really outdone yourself, Claire,” Mortus said, leaning down to kiss my cheek. It was a bit strange seeing the former Fire Fae professor be so warm. He used to be such a dick. However, he hadn’t exactly been himself then. “Happy nesting party,” he added softly.

“Nesting party?” I repeated. “What?”

My mother playfully slapped him on the chest. “It was supposed to be a surprise, Mortus!”

“Oh. Right.” He grimaced. “Sorry.”

My mother sighed against him and just shook her head. “You’re forgiven. Do you want to put the presents under the tree?”

He nodded. “Anything for you, sweetheart.”

Their relationship had grown over the last few years, but they weren’t really mated. I supposed he truly was more like my mother’s boyfriend than a husband. Which was a really weird designation for him.

“What’s a nesting party?” I asked, perking up at the idea of another festive occasion.

“*Fuck,*” Titus cursed as another flame shot out of control.

Cyrus smirked. “Problems, Firefly?”

“Suck my cock,” Titus snapped.

“Titus!” my mother gasped, making my fire mate flinch.

“Sorry, Ophelia,” he said, sounding contrite.

Cyrus just grinned harder.

Stop taunting him, I said to my water mate.

But it’s so fun, he replied.

I just shook my head and glanced at Gina, wondering if I should worry

about more explosions, but her attention had diverted to the door as if she was waiting for more fae to enter.

Is a Hell Fae coming? I asked Exos.

Definitely not.

Shifter Fae? I guessed.

Nope, he replied.

Then who all is coming?

Patience, he repeated.

Sighing, I went back to the task of adjusting my decorations, which included ascending the ladder again to adjust another streamer.

“What are you doing up there?” my mother demanded, shock evident in her voice. “You shouldn’t be tottering about at dangerous heights.”

“Good luck convincing her to stop,” Titus muttered, then cursed as fire raced up one of the curtains. “Damn it.” He stilled the flame with a wave of magic.

“I don’t like you up there,” Cyrus said, his hands on my hips, steadying me while Titus focused on the candles. “Come down, please.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. Vox and I often found ourselves in the clouds during one of our one-on-one sessions, but she didn’t need to know that.

But I allowed him to pull me off the ladder anyway just as the rest of my mates entered.

Exos narrowed his gaze but didn’t comment.

“Why aren’t you steadying yourself with the earth?” Sol asked as he helped Vox place a mountain of food on the table near the burnt nuts. “And what happened here?”

“Claire likes candles,” Titus explained.

“And she can handle heights just fine,” Vox added, then frowned as glitter floated toward the food. He sent it away with a puff of air. “This stuff is everywhere.”

“I know, and it’s so pretty!” I exclaimed, lacking a better reason for why all of this was necessary.

He softened and smiled at me. “Yes, it’s all beautiful. Just like you, Claire.”

Exos smirked in amusement, then left for more food. When he returned, it was also with a bunch of plates and cutlery.

“Seriously, why do we need all this food for a meeting?” I asked him.

“Because it’s not a meeting,” he replied. “It’s a surprise nesting party.”

“Which isn’t so much a surprise since everyone keeps telling her,” Cyrus added dryly, his arm around my waist again.

“Okay, but what’s a nesting party?” I asked again, hoping somebody would clarify. “And if it’s not for the Interrealm Fae Academy, then I want an update on how all that is going.”

Cyrus slipped behind me to wrap his arms around my waist, forcing me to face my mother. “Want to explain, Ophelia? This was all your idea, right?”

My mother giggled, the sound girlish for her age, as she sat down beside Mortus. Of course, she didn’t look a day over thirty, and neither did her *boyfriend*. Fae genetics were kind of awesome like that.

“Yes, Cyrus is right. I’m to blame,” she admitted as Mortus slid his arm around her. I wondered if they would ever decide to mate each other again. Their first mating hadn’t been by choice. But they really did seem to love each other now.

“I wanted to surprise you with a nesting party, which is like a baby shower,” she explained, making me recall Gina saying something like that to me last month. I met the Fortune Fae’s gaze, and she gave me a dazzling smile. Right. She’d predicted this.

“So your mates helped me with this ruse,” my mother continued. “You’re in the heart of your nesting phase right now, so I thought you’d enjoy a little celebration.” Her gaze swept across the room, then fell to my stomach, and her features softened into a smile. “Your little holiday heir will be here before we know it.”

Holiday heir.

I liked the sound of that.

“So there’s no meeting,” I said. “But someone is going to update me on the Interrealm Fae Academy, right?” The only update I had was that they kept scheduling meetings all over the realms, providing information from my presentation and trying to secure alliances. There would be a big vote near the end of the year.

“How about after the nesting party?” Cyrus suggested, his lips against my ear. “Let’s enjoy our faeling first, then Exos and I will shower you in political discussion.”

My lips curved. “Promise?”

“We promise,” he murmured, kissing my cheek.

I call your pussy this time, Exos said in my head, causing me to choke on my own tongue.

Exos!

What? He gave me a devious look from where he stood beside the food.
Do you prefer me in your ass?

Stop. My mom is here. Right there. Staring at me.

And what a beautiful blush you're now wearing, he teased, winking at me from across the room.

I attempted to swallow, but Cyrus's warmth against my back made that difficult. Then Sol and Vox gave me heated stares from across the room as well, and it was like I'd become one of the unruly candles.

All of you need to stop, I said, blasting the message through the bonds.

I've not even started, Titus replied, his gaze reminding me of embers as he faced me.

"Nesting party time?" Cyrus offered softly. "What do you say, little queen?"

"Party time," I agreed.

"Not all presents are good for eating," Gina interjected, her commentary random and so completely like her.

I glanced back at Cyrus, who only shrugged in response.

"And the fun has arrived!" Lance announced as he swept into the room with his arms stretched wide and nearly knocking a candle to the ground. He righted it with the ease only a Fire Fae could possess.

"Lance," Titus hissed. "You're supposed to be visiting with Mum and Da right now, aren't you?"

"Mum and Da?" I repeated on a squeak. I hadn't seen Titus's family in years, and while they seemed to like me, Fire Fae ran a bit, uh, hot, to say the least. And Titus's relationship with his parents, as well as his brother, wasn't the best. He'd lost control of his powers when he was younger and had killed several extended family members in the process. Including Lance's favorite cousin.

"You didn't tell me your parents were here?"

"Because they're visiting my brother, not—"

A Fire Fae with gleaming red eyes and bulky muscles pushed into the room, halting Titus midsentence. His father paused to gape at the room, his heat causing the holly decorations around him to wilt. Sap dripped on his shoulder, making him frown. "Okay, we're here. Where's the food?"

"Pyros," his wife, Ruby, chided. She was a sweet little thing with bright red hair. For whatever reason, she always reminded me of cherries. "Say

hello to your son's mate."

The Fire Fae cleared his throat. I had a feeling that my Fire-Fae-in-law—an adopted term I used for all the parents of my mates, even though it wasn't technically accurate—was not someone to be disobeyed. "Hi, Claire. Congratulations on the faeling."

That done, he made his way to the food and took his time filling one of the plates.

Titus came up beside me, and his lips brushed my ear. "Don't mind my da. He's just sour that a Water Fae got first dibs on an heir. It's yet another fault he'll lay at my doorstep."

Cyrus snorted, having overheard the comment.

Ruby approached, giving me a soft smile. "You look radiant, darling," she said as if in consolation to her husband's rudeness.

"Thank you, Ruby."

She patted my hand before taking a seat beside Gina. She moved on to making pleasant conversation, all the while not so subtly trying to encourage the Fortune Fae to tell her when she could expect a little Fire Faeling to appear.

Releasing a long breath, I allowed Cyrus and Titus to guide me to a chair. Then Sol handed me a plate he'd already prepared, and my mates crowded around me with dishes of their own.

It took me a little while to fully relax, but when nobody moved to dismember my decorations and instead found their way around them, I started to enjoy myself.

Vox fussed a little over the food as glitter continued to spoil his "perfect creations." However, Sol insisted it added a crunch that had been missing, much to Vox's detriment. My Earth Fae mate really loved all food, regardless of the origin or type.

Cyrus and Exos also caved and gave me the updates I wanted regarding the academy. They were all positive, save the Hell Fae issue.

"We might need to consider moving forward without them," Cyrus said.

I shook my head. "We need them."

"They've not been part of fae society for centuries, Claire," Exos murmured.

"And I want to fix that," I insisted. "Think about it. If an Interrealm Fae Academy had existed before, this never wou—"

"Would have been an issue," Exos and Cyrus finished for me.

My water mate blew out a breath and shook his head. “I promise to keep trying.”

“That’s all I ask,” I replied.

“I know.” He cupped my cheek and bent to brush a kiss over my lips.

“So where did you train?” Lance’s voice carried across the room. He’d chosen to sit next to Zephyrus—something that clearly made the Midnight Fae uncomfortable. Aflora seemed to find it amusing, though.

When Zephyrus didn’t respond, Lance added, “I’ve held the Powerless Champion title for the past three years.”

Still no reply, but I suspected the Warrior Blood was talking to Aflora mentally, because her eyes were sparkling with unrestrained laughter.

“Do the Midnight Fae have any fighting rings?” Lance pressed.

The Warrior Blood narrowed his eyes, giving a succinct answer. “None where an Elemental Fae would be welcome.”

Lance puffed his chest up, taking that for the challenge it was. I bit my lip, wondering if I should intervene before the hotheaded Fire Fae had his ass handed to him.

When I was about to get up, Titus pushed a present under my nose that smelled of... a sort of cinnamon?

My stomach pitched.

Normally, I liked cinnamon, even the fae variety, but I wasn’t sure I could handle more fae food right now. My stomach was already rolling from the food my mates had put on my plate, and I’d barely touched it.

So, yeah, trying something new did not appeal to me right now.

“It’s from my family,” he explained, obviously proud of the gift. “You did remember to pack it correctly, right?” he asked Lance pointedly.

His brother rolled his eyes. While his muscular build reminded me of Titus, he had a harsher edge to him, taking after their father more, whereas Titus more closely resembled their mother. “It’s exactly as you instructed,” the younger Fire Fae assured him before turning back to a still-uninterested Zephyrus.

Titus gave the package a light shake, then planted it in my lap. “Open it,” he encouraged me, keeping his lips close to the curve of my neck as he brushed my hair aside.

I smiled and undid the tie, then unwrapped the shiny red foil to reveal an adorable little cinnamon cake etched with glowing embers.

“Will it burn me if I try to eat it?” I asked, my stomach churning. I really

hoped this didn't make me sick.

How humiliating would it be to vomit at my own nesting party? *Ugh.*

I loved when Titus surprised me with new fae treats, but this couldn't have been worse timing.

Titus brought the treat to my mouth and swayed it under my nose, causing my insides to churn in protest.

Yeah, this wasn't going to work.

"It's a fire cake," he explained, oblivious to my agony. "I think our little faeling will love..."

Just when I felt like the contents of my stomach were about to come up, the cake erupted into a massive flame, making everyone shriek.

Shit. Did I do that?

I most certainly hadn't cast any magic, but the fire element that burned the gift to a crisp—literally—had come from me.

Or... from *within* me.

Pyros barked out a laugh. "Now that's a fire cake. Nice."

"But I didn't—" I protested while Titus stormed over to his father.

"Do you think this is some sort of joke?" Titus boomed. "Why are you here if you're going to ruin everything?"

Titus's father puffed out his chest. "I didn't burn your cake, if that's what you're implying." He landed a hand on Lance's shoulder, making the fae flinch. "Although, it was pretty funny, wouldn't you say, Lance?"

The younger Fire Fae did not appear to be laughing at all, nor did he seem amused by his father's hand on his shoulder.

"I'm afraid it's my fault," Cyrus interjected. "I rather detest fire cakes. It's a Water Fae thing. Maybe Claire is taking on some of my preferences during the pregnancy?"

Titus frowned, but the suggestion wasn't enough to cool him off.

Gina held up a package she'd plucked from under the tree. "Oh, look, a present from Sol's family!" she announced. She hurried to me and brushed away the drifting ash before dropping the gift onto my lap. She leaned down and whispered, "A distraction will keep the Fire Fae from blowing up."

Titus grumbled but returned to my side as I unwrapped the item. The decorative tissue held a large green leaf. I held it up to the light. "Do I, uh, eat this, too?" I asked, afraid it might erupt into flames like the last edible item did.

Sol chuckled. "It's a swaddle, little flower."

I turned it over and raised an eyebrow. “Oh... um, thanks?” I said, giving him a weak smile before putting the leaf back into the tissue paper.

The gift-giving continued as the fae offered me more presents—some of which I hadn’t even noticed beneath the tree, thanks to magical enchantments crafted by Aflora and the others.

Each present was stranger than the last.

Gina gave me a row of sticks that supposedly would help me predict nap times.

Aflora and Zephyrus gifted me with a seed that they stated I would not want to plant. Something about burning thwomps and only using it as a protective measure.

Vox’s family had sent a rather annoying set of wind chimes that I suspected had a curse attached to it.

My mother and Mortus provided the most normal present of them all—a book of elemental stories to read to our faeling when she or he was older.

I started to read it as a distinct sensation made me cross my legs and start to squirm. *Crap.*

“What is it?” Cyrus asked, placing a hand on my knee.

Sol wrapped his fingers around the curve of my shoulder in that possessive way I liked. He had sensed my sudden discomfort, too. I almost allowed it to lull me into a state of comfort.

Until my bladder protested and forced me into action.

I shot up, flinging my mates off of me. “Bathroom!” I shouted, not caring how everyone openly stared at me as a sudden, inexplicable urge swept through my body. “Gotta... pee!”

Gina’s prophetic words followed me as I bolted out of the room.

Welcome to pregnant life, Claire. It’s going to keep you on the run.

CLAIRE



Cyrus stood outside of the bathroom, waiting for me.
“Ready for another gift?” he asked, a hint of promise in his voice.
“Is it sex?” I guessed.

His lips quirked upward at the sides. “That’s a given, not a gift,” he drawled, holding out his arm for me. “Come on, Exos and I want to show you something. And no, that’s not a euphemism.”

“With you two, it’s hard to know for sure,” I muttered.

“Definitely hard,” Exos echoed.

The two males laughed, and I just shook my head. “I rest my case.”

Cyrus wrapped his arm around me, steering me away from the nesting party and toward the building’s exit. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“Home,” he replied.

“Without saying bye to everyone?” I asked, frowning.

“I’ll mist you back for that,” he promised as Exos took my hand and walked along on my other side.

“All right. I’m holding you to that.” Not that I really wanted to return to the party, but it seemed rude to leave without at least expressing my gratitude to everyone. Especially Aflora and Gina, who had traveled the realms to get here.

Titus, Vox, and Sol joined us outside, their gazes all filled with questions.

“You don’t know what their gift is, do you?” I asked them.

A chorus of negatives met my question.

Which meant this was all Exos and Cyrus. Great. “Nothing good happens when you two are working together,” I grumbled, not really meaning it. But I wanted to know what they had planned for me.

“Nothing at all?” Cyrus replied, his hand slipping lower onto my backside. “You seem to enjoy it when Exos and I work together.”

I shivered, Exos’s comments from earlier warming my mind. “Well, maybe there are exceptions.”

Titus grunted.

“Jealous, Firefly?” Cyrus taunted him.

“Fuck off, Jackass,” Titus retorted.

“That’s *Royal* Jackass to you,” Cyrus corrected.

My fire mate just shook his head, his demeanor displaying his exhaustion. He’d worked hard keeping all those flames under control today. Because I hadn’t been able to help.

My lips twisted. I really needed to say something, but how did I bring it up? Like, *Oh, by the way, I can’t access the elements. Okay. Good chat.*

They were all being so protective already. That would just make it worse.

Except, my not talking to them also caused problems.

I really should—

“Cyrus has been bragging about his present to you all week,” Titus murmured, distracting me. “But he wouldn’t tell us what it is.” He glowered at the Water King. “I *had* been hoping to overshadow him with a fire cake, but that blew up in my face.”

Vox chuckled. “Literally.” He patted the Fire Fae on the arm as we started up the path to our home. It wasn’t too far from the Chancellor’s office—since I was the Chancellor. But we had built the two buildings separately, unlike my predecessor, who lived and worked in the same place.

“We can make one together,” Vox added, taking pity on my fire mate. “I’d love to learn the recipe.”

Titus opened the door to our house. “There was a reason I had my brother bring the present. It’s a highly guarded secret through my mum’s line. Good luck getting it out of her.”

“Challenge accepted,” Vox said, his eyes gleaming as he stepped through the threshold. My air mate seemed determined to learn all cuisine secrets, human, fae, or otherwise.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I hadn’t been able to enjoy any

of his typically scrumptious meals for a few days now. I hoped whatever Cyrus and Exos planned to surprise me with came with a side of hamburgers and fries.

Cyrus undid his tie as we entered our home and stepped in front of me. I lifted my brow. “And what do you plan to do with that?” I asked.

“Blindfold you.” He wrapped the soft silk over my eyes, and Exos released my hand to step behind me and helped his brother tie the strands against my hair.

“You said this wasn’t about sex,” I reminded him. “Not that I’m complaining.”

He chuckled. “I just want to make sure you get the full effect,” he promised. Although, the tug in our mate-bonds suggested he wouldn’t mind a little foreplay follow-up later.

Exos took my hand again. I knew it was him because his kiss of spirit magic always called to my heart. It made me miss my elements even more.

However, my mates’ magic seemed to surge through me more and more lately, as though providing me with much-needed nourishment directly from the elemental source.

It felt odd to describe it that way.

Their magic had never given me that sensation before, but their touch somehow eased my hunger, so I clung to Exos, drawing out the tingling strand between us as we walked.

My mates guided me through our home and toward the secondary bedroom we had set up for guests or visiting family members.

Not that we really ever entertained any.

Our nightly activities made it kind of difficult. And my mom lived just off campus with Mortus, so she didn’t ever have a reason to stay.

Hmm, in retrospect, with the bedroom just two doors down from ours, it was a poor choice for guest quarters. But it was one of the bigger rooms, so it had once made sense to use it for guests.

Except, now I suspected my mates had a different purpose in mind, which caused my heart to flutter at the *gift* Cyrus and Exos had intended for me. I tried not to get my hopes up, telling myself this probably wasn’t at all what I thought, but the subtle kiss of water in the air—a kiss that hadn’t been there this morning—had all my instincts firing to life.

Someone opened the door, and approval surged through my mate-bonds, making me even more anxious to see. “Can I take off my blindfold?” I asked,

my nostrils flaring at the alluring scent of mist and a calming fragrance that reminded me of the spirit realm.

“Not yet,” Cyrus said, water warming my bare arms, making the hairs stand on end as if electrified. He guided me another step forward, then whispered, “Okay, now.”

I jerked off the silk tie and gasped at the sight before me.

“Oh, Fae,” I said, taking in the enchanted nursery scene swarming with water and spirit magic.

A purple butterfly kissed my cheek, causing my eyes to wander sideways to Exos. He grinned, then gestured to the array of beautiful spirit-infused creatures fluttering about. No pixies, just butterflies. My favorite.

A fountain resided in the corner, the gorgeous structure pumping moisture and magic into the room with a small basin beside it that would be good for bathing a newborn. I moved forward to brush my fingers through the warm spray, smiling at the sense of calm provided by the source itself.

Beyond the fountain was a window providing a breathtaking view of Sol’s white Christmas trees.

But the most elaborate piece rested against the wall.

I stepped up to the ornate crib with glowing blue spirals. I touched it, expecting to find glass, but my fingers grazed a warm, smooth texture that slightly gave way underneath my touch. It was unlike any material I’d ever seen.

“It’s a magical water construct that’s safe for teething,” Cyrus explained, his hand going to the small of my back. “I had intended on buying human furniture, but when my father’s mate showed me what the royal line had access to, combined with our own enhancement magic, well, I knew you’d love it.”

“I do,” I said, running my fingers over the gorgeous work of art. I chewed my lip as one hand went to my belly. Cyrus’s touch followed, his embrace warming me to my core.

“Hmm, but I think it’s missing something,” Exos said, stroking his jaw as he considered the room. “I think we need some earth.”

Sol studied the room, then rubbed his hands together before going to work on a cherry blossom tree in the corner opposite the fountain, adding a burst of pink to the overly blue room.

I inhaled the scent, my heart fluttering in response.

“And maybe some fire,” Exos added.

“On it,” Titus said, adding delicate embers that floated to the ceiling, capturing warmth like tiny little stars.

“And air,” Cyrus murmured, glancing at Vox.

The Air Fae grinned, his essence whirling upward to bring the whole scene together with a calming song humming on the wind, the ancient melody one that had my eyes drooping in sudden tiredness.

It’s a faeling nursery rhyme, he explained into my mind. It’ll calm our little one.

It’s calming me right now, I admitted.

Good, he replied. That means it’s working.

“This is... the most enchanting nursery I’ve ever seen,” I whispered, relaxing into Cyrus. “Thank you.”

My water mate lifted me with ease into his arms, my head pillowing against his shoulder. “Thank you, Claire,” he replied, kissing my temple. “You’re doing all the hard work. We’re just trying to help where we can.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

This didn’t feel all that hard.

In fact, it sort of felt like a dream. One I never wanted to wake from. So I closed my eyes and allowed it to overtake me.

I love you all, I said softly into their minds, yawning. I’ll show you just how much when I wake up.



A WEEK LATER

There were ingredients all over the damn kitchen.

I'd taken every single item out of the cupboards and shelves to see what I could possibly make for my mate that wouldn't result in her losing her meal after five minutes—or, in last night's case, before she'd even had a chance to ingest it.

"Maybe I should try a different type of peach tree," Sol suggested as he rubbed the back of his neck. He was just as frustrated as I was about Claire's latest pregnancy symptom.

We were in charge of Claire's well-being while Titus dealt with his family and Cyrus went with Exos to make final arrangements for today's meeting with the Hell Fae—something none of us were very keen about, especially now.

All the more reason for Claire to be nourished and at her best. And I had about an hour to make that happen.

I held up the remaining bag of grains I'd used to make porridge, something painfully simple and bland, but maybe she'd be able to keep it down. The bowl steamed on the counter, cooling while we waited for Claire to awaken. I hated to give my mate something so tasteless, but nothing else had worked yet, and I was determined to give her body something to keep up

with her—literal—growing demands.

“Ugh. This isn’t going to work,” I said, slamming the package down. The bag burst open as my magic spiraled out of control—*again*—sending food and packages tumbling over the counter from a powerful gust of wind.

Sol frowned as a lump of troll fat tumbled onto the floor. “Maybe we should make a new dish and tell her it’s a popular human food? That worked last time, right?” he asked as he stomped over to the rubbery substance, the ground trembling in his wake. He plucked the fat from the floor and placed it back onto the counter with a mild smile. “She still eats it when we call it bacon.”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s not going to fall for that again.” A whimper caught on the wind swirling through the hall, telling me Claire was awake again. I straightened and grabbed the bowl of porridge. “You woke her up with your stomping around.”

Sol followed me—still stomping—as I briskly walked with a lighter stride to the master bedroom. “Yeah, I’m sure the crash of food all over our kitchen had nothing to do with it,” he muttered back at me.

“What are you guys arguing about?” Claire moaned as she shifted within the bedsheets.

Fae, she was gorgeous, even more so now with that alluring curve to her belly. Her nightgown clung to her as she moved, revealing plump breasts with nipples hardening against the chill wind I’d brought into the room. I immediately found the warmer currents from higher in the rafters and began to bring them down.

Seeing Claire like this made my stomach do flips. The child would be born in roughly four or five weeks, and soon she would struggle to keep up with the accelerated growth of the faeling inside of her.

“Not too fast,” I warned her when she slipped her foot over the bedside and tried to stand. She stumbled, her sense of balance seeming to fail her—likely from lack of food.

She grabbed onto me.

“Oh,” she said, smiling when I caught her with ease, using a kiss of wind to wrap warm currents around her body so she wouldn’t be cold. Goose bumps sprinkled over her arms before she sighed into the embrace of my magic.

Sol took her elbow, steadying her until she waved us off, determined to stand on her own two feet. “Stop fussing. I can walk just fine.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as she swayed again.

“You need to keep up your strength,” I said. Her once flushed cheeks were now sunken in. Her golden locks had flattened after too much time rolling over her pillow, and when she turned, I spotted hints of her rib cage as her gown clung to her back. Her arms and legs had lost their lean tone, and I wasn’t the only one worried that she wasn’t getting the nutrition she needed.

I held up my latest effort—porridge. “Can you eat?”

She eyed the dish warily. “No spices?” she asked.

“None.”

She glanced at Sol. “No fruit... or fat?”

He smirked. “Neither fruit nor fat,” he confirmed.

She took the bowl and sat on the edge of the bed, staring into it. “I feel like I have a bowling ball in my stomach,” she muttered.

I smiled even though I had no idea what a bowling ball was. “Here,” I said, taking the spoon and offering her a bite. “Give it a try.”

She gently blew on it, although that wasn’t necessary. I used tendrils of air to run over the offering to make sure it was the perfect temperature before it reached her lips. She took the spoonful, tried to swallow, then clamped a hand over her mouth before making a strangled sound.

I snatched up the bowl before she flung it onto the floor, and she ran to the bathroom.

Sighing, I handed my failed attempt at a meal to Sol. “Could you get rid of this, please? And add porridge to the list of foods she can’t eat.”

Sol cocked a brow. “I think we’d have a shorter list of things she *can* eat.”

“When I find something, I’ll start one,” I replied flatly as I followed Claire and tried to think of something else she could stomach.

CLAIRE



“Where are you?” Titus called, his voice drifting into the bedroom.

I leaned against Vox for support while I held a washcloth to my mouth. I didn’t like my mates seeing me in this state, but each of them had proved that they were going to be there for me through all of it.

If the last few days hadn’t run them off, then I was pretty sure nothing would.

“We’re in here,” Vox replied, his words carrying on the wind as he brushed hair from my sweat-dampened face. “Do you feel any better?” he asked, lowering his voice. His fingers continued to stroke my temple in calming circles, easing my constant sense of nausea.

“Some,” I said, although I definitely didn’t feel my best. Hunger constantly gnawed at me, but I couldn’t stomach any of this fae food. I didn’t want to admit to my guys that it might be a cultural thing. I’d lived here for years, but my instincts craved food from home, like caramel-coated popcorn and salted meats. My mouth watered just thinking of it, and Vox misunderstood the groan that came from my mouth.

“What hurts?” he asked, running his hands over me. “Should I fetch the Healer?”

I grabbed his hands and kissed his fingertips. “Vox, I’m fine. I’m just hungry, but I’ll survive.”

Titus poked his head into the bathroom. “Hey, nobody invited me to the

bathroom party.” His eyes swept over my body, taking in my thin gown that did little to hide my curves or my breasts. His gaze lingered on the latter, appreciating how my nipples protested against the cool breeze he’d let into the warm room.

“I thought you were busy with Lance,” Vox said, his voice holding a note of irritation. Although, I had a feeling he was just angry at himself for failing to find me something to eat.

“He’s showing our parents the Fire Quad and his newly amassed row of Powerless Champion trophies,” Titus said, poorly hiding his displeasure at his younger brother’s success. The two of them were always at odds. It didn’t help that their parents clearly favored Lance and frequently commented on his ability to control his powers, thereby alluding to the one time Titus hadn’t.

Anyone else would have been miserable over the constant reminders of his failures.

But not Titus.

He had accepted his past a long time ago—before we’d even met—and lived his life the way he wanted to, without a care in the world as to what his parents thought of him.

I loved him for it. I also understood it because I, too, had once hurt those I cared about through an unexpected blast of power.

Titus slipped into the room and wrapped his arms around my torso, running his fingers over my enlarged belly, choosing to focus on me instead of his family quarrels. “How are you feeling today, Claire?”

“She’s weakened,” Vox snapped, not giving me a chance to respond. “If you’re done prancing around campus, why don’t you help me find her something to eat?”

“Don’t fight,” I sighed, glaring at him as I untangled myself from their wandering hands. “I’m just going to take a nap.”

“A nap?” Titus repeated. “You can’t take a nap.”

“Why not?” I asked, my brow furrowing.

They both stared at me for a moment. “You don’t remember?” Titus finally questioned.

“The meeting you had scheduled with the Hell Fae before the final vote?” Vox supplied when I blinked up at both of them, confused.

I tilted my head. “Meeting? That wasn’t until the end of the week, right?”

Titus and Vox shared a look before my Fire Fae replied, his words patient

and slow. “It is the end of the week, Claire.”

What?!

Cursing, I jerked open one of the drawers and pulled out a hairbrush, then ripped it through my strands. As if the physical state of my pregnancy wasn’t bad enough, these damn memory gaps were going to be the death of me. “Well, that’s okay. I’ll just get myself together and...” I trailed off, searching for my toothbrush. Definitely going to need that.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Vox asked, his tone concerned. “We could reschedule.”

“Nope.” I yanked the hairbrush through an unruly patch of my hair, then tossed it onto the counter and started brushing my teeth.

Both of my mates watched me with unease, waiting for me to finish my rapid brushing.

“Cyrus has been working to bring me a Hell Fae representative for weeks,” I said after spitting out some of my toothpaste. “By the time we could meet with someone new, I’ll have a baby to deal with.”

And then that would take all my priority.

After the faeling came, the last thing I would be able to focus on would be forcing fae to work together. No, I couldn’t leave this job half-done before I became a mother.

Plus, what kind of world would I be bringing my baby into if I didn’t have the groundwork established for a place like the Interrealm Fae Academy? A place where my child would eventually be welcomed.

Not an abomination.

But a blessing.

Titus crossed his arms. “I still don’t like this, Claire. Hell Fae are fickle creatures at the best of times, and, well, just plain *hell* when they’re unhappy. They’re not going to want to work with us. Not after what the fae did to them.”

Ignoring him, I splashed cold water on my face. “They’re just misunderstood. I’m going to fix that.” It was one of the many reasons I wanted the Interrealm Fae Academy to exist—so none of fae kind experienced the torments the Hell Fae and other abominations had endured.

Once I’d dried my skin, Vox held up a concealer stick that Cyrus had picked up during one of his Human Realm trips, at my request. I liberally applied it to the dark spots under my eyes.

Vox said nothing while Titus leaned against the wall and watched as I

tried to hide the evidence of my exhaustion.

“One false move and I’m burning them all,” he said, his tone lacking his trademark humor.

“Yeah, burn the Hell Fae. That’s a brilliant idea,” Vox deadpanned. “Not like they haven’t dealt with fire before.”

Titus frowned. “Then Cyrus will blast them into the ocean and drown them under leagues of water. I don’t care how it happens. If they mess with Claire, they’re dead. That’s all I’m saying.”

Vox tied his loose strands into his favored warrior’s tail as if preparing for a fight. “Agreed.”

With a sigh, I decided it would be a Christmas miracle if this meeting went even remotely as planned.

Speaking of Christmas...

“Hey, Titus?” I asked, going onto my tiptoes to lean into the mirror and apply my blush. If I got much bigger, I’d have to pick up my stomach to do this. “Do Hell Fae like Christmas presents?”



Titus didn’t think it was a good idea, but really, who didn’t like presents?

I marched toward my office with my gift in hand, meticulously packaged with my best silver wrapping paper topped with a glimmering bow. Thanks to Titus, twinkling embers studded the exterior, giving it a smoldering look that I thought a Hell Fae might appreciate.

It felt good to step into my office, which Sol and Vox had perfectly redecorated. Gone were the autumn decorations of October, and in their place was a gorgeous white Christmas tree. It sprouted from the center of the room, a living creation courtesy of my earth mate. Glimmering stars and sparkles danced on a rotation around the ceiling as well, the current a loop created by Vox’s affinity for air.

I sighed in contentment. Because it really did feel like true Christmas magic.

However, one thing did not go with the festive, wintry decor, and that was the Hell Fae sitting in my chair with her legs propped up on the desk.

Cyrus shrugged when I came in. “It was the only way I could keep her waiting.”

“That’s all right,” I said, smiling. I’d erase the scorch marks from my chair later. I had a Fire Fae for a mate. Flames often happened around upholstery.

My mates all insisted on joining the meeting with the Hell Fae representative and surrounded me like a protective barrier. She didn’t look so terrifying, though. She had a warmth about her that reminded me of a Fire Fae, but that was where the similarities ended.

Horns protruded from glossy, midnight hair, and a disturbing growl rumbled in her chest as she swung her high-heeled knee-high boots off my desk. She glared up at me with eyes that glowed with ember red that had a sinister look to them as she tapped her manicured fingers across the wood.

“You’re late,” she stated, her tone flat with a hint of annoyance. However, I suspected my tardiness wasn’t the only thing that agitated her.

I put on my best smile and placed the gift on the desk. I held out a hand. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I’m Claire. And your name is?”

She stared at my hand for a moment, tapped her fingers on the desk again, and then pushed aside the gift she clearly didn’t care about. Her gaze dropped to my protruding stomach that stuck out between the layers of my council robes. “What is *that*?” she asked, lifting her lip into a sneer.

“*That* is our child,” Cyrus said with an edge of warning to his tone. Water droplets formed in the air, a warning of his power. “You’d be wise to be respectful in our realm.”

Red streaks of molten power ran over her arms and writhed across her skin like a living entity in response to the threat. She rolled her eyes, kicked away from my desk, and stood on her high-heeled boots.

“And you’d be wise not to bring me out of my realm for this bullshit. I thought you said I was going to meet your queen of the five sources. I only came up here because Lucifer is intrigued by her naivety.” She crossed her arms and glowered. “So instead of trying to bore me with pleasantries, how about we get to the point and—”

A flare of heat made us all jump. I’d been so focused on the Hell Fae that I hadn’t noticed her brush against the Christmas tree. Hellfire spread throughout the delicate branches, igniting it like a matchstick. It roared with flames. Titus attempted to stop it, but his element didn’t work against the foreign fire.

“Cyrus!” he shouted, shoving me out of harm’s way. “Do something!”

Sparks of magic electrified at my fingertips, and a sharp kick hit me from inside. I gasped, realizing that I’d just felt my faeling for the first time, not because of excitement, but because of distress.

Cyrus doused the tree with a wave of water, leaving steam to fog the room as the stench of burned evergreen tinged my nose. Tears welled in my eyes when I saw my beautiful tree burned to a crisp. Hellfire didn’t hold back.

Sol immediately went to my side. “Don’t cry, little flower.”

He stroked my head with broad, sweeping movements as my cries morphed into sobs. It didn’t make sense that I’d get so upset about a burned tree, but it felt like a metaphor for my life.

No matter how hard I tried, everything just went up in flames.

It had always been that way for me. My first experience with fae magic had resulted in me burning down a bar with my friends still inside. Was this going to be what motherhood was like? Would I just be terrible at anything I tried to do? Would more people die because I couldn’t get my shit together?

The self-doubt only made me sob harder, and I couldn’t explain it to my mates, who were all trying to control the situation.

Sol shoved me into Cyrus’s grip. “Fix this,” he demanded while he went to the tree and worked an excessive show of magic, forcing the branches to warp and change as he brought it back to life.

Vox helped him, brushing away the ash into the cracks in the ground as the revived tree took shape. Exos grabbed the Hell Fae’s arm and pulled her aside before she could burn anything else. She hissed at him, which would have been comical had I not been holding on to Cyrus like a hysterical loon crying over a tree Sol was already reviving.

It’s okay, little queen. He’s fixing it. He brushed his lips against my temple. *Shh, it’s okay.*

His words only made me cry more.

Then Sol finished, and the tree was fuller, larger, and even more beautiful than before. The unique, white-feathered branches brushed the ceiling as Vox sent glitter and sparkles to dance around it. Titus snapped his fingers, creating a delicate blue glow to illuminate the top.

And my sobs increased.

It was just so sweet, and all of it was so, so beautiful. My mates would do anything to make me happy, even if it was something frivolous like fixing a

Christmas tree.

And oh, I didn't deserve them.

Or any of this.

I couldn't even eat porridge right!

The Hell Fae gawked at me before glancing questioningly at Exos. I saw him mouth, "Pregnancy hormones," before she smirked.

I should have been mad, but I didn't care. I knew I was being unreasonably emotional. But what did they expect? I was growing a faeling in nine *weeks*. Not months. *Weeks*.

"Why are you still crying, little flower?" Sol asked, coming back to brush the tears from my face while I clung to Cyrus like a lifeline.

"It's just so *beautiful*," I said, smiling now as the tears continued to come, but this time they were tears of happiness. "Thank you." Then I looked at Cyrus. "Nine *weeks*. How did you expect me to do this in *nine weeks*?"

He blinked. "Claire..."

"No, this is your fault!" I pointed to my belly, then melted as the little faeling kicked again. "Oh my Fae, it's so cute. Did you feel that?"

"I did," Cyrus replied, his palm against my stomach and his lips curling. "Do it again," he encouraged, a note of wonder in his voice.

I relaxed into him, content.

Then the Hell Fae gagged, ruining the moment. "Seriously, this is why our kind have our Hellhounds raise the faelings to toughen them up. Who has time for this shit?"

Cyrus narrowed his eyes. "If you're done upsetting our mate, we brought you here to discuss the Interrealm Fae Academy plans. You're a proxy for Lucifer's vote, correct?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but no. I'm not interested. If he wants to work with you lunatics, he can come up here and vote for himself." She stormed out of the room. Vox followed her movements with a gust of wind to keep her hellfire from burning any of the festive decorations again.

Exos sighed. "I'll go after her."

Cyrus reluctantly guided me into his brother's arms. "No, it was my job to obtain the Hell Fae vote, and I messed it up. I'll fix it." He rested his hand on my stomach, smiling when the faeling kicked again. "You're doing a great job, Claire. Don't cry, and don't stress. I'll make sure the Hell Fae support the project."

Sniffling, I nodded. Cyrus gave me a quick kiss before he followed the

smell of burned Christmas tree out of the room.



“Something’s not right.” I kept my voice low, not wanting to wake Claire in the other room. Sol had stayed in there with her because he was the loudest of all of us. Which meant we would hear them coming if she decided to wake up.

He knew what we planned to discuss out here.

It was weighing on all our minds—Claire’s refusal to eat and her odd relationship with the elements.

“When was the last time someone saw her use an element?” Exos asked, his arms folded across his broad chest.

We’d all agreed that her reactions in her office with the Hell Fae were all wrong. She’d reacted like a helpless faeling, not a queen. And while we could grant her some leeway because she was pregnant and didn’t want to put the child at risk, we also all felt the disconnect in her inaction.

What happened to our fae who had taken on a dangerous abomination via the spirit realm? A Hell Fae shouldn’t frighten her. I mean, sure, they were terrifying as fuck, but the one in her office had barely lifted a finger, and Claire had wilted like some sort of weeping flower.

Exos thought it was hormones.

Maybe he was right.

But that didn’t explain the other events or how she couldn’t seem to eat anything we gave her.

“It’s been a while,” Vox said slowly. “Around the time of the consummation.”

I nodded. “I’ve spent the most time with her lately while you all have been handling other things. And she’s not used her elements at all. Not even to dry her hair.”

“That could be her Water Fae coming out a little,” Cyrus said, sounding thoughtful, not arrogant. “Most of my kind prefer wet hair for obvious reasons.”

“Okay.” I could give him that. “But she’s been avoiding fire. She claims it’s for safety reasons, but since when has she feared flames?”

“She’s also not been using air at all to stabilize herself when on ladders,” Vox added.

“She shouldn’t be on any ladders,” Cyrus reminded him, his annoyance palpable.

“Yes, yes,” Exos replied, waving him off. “But the more important point is that she’s not using her elements.”

“Or eating,” Vox muttered. “I tried to give her porridge today, and she couldn’t even accept that.” He palmed the back of his neck and blew out a breath. “Sol suggested we fake human food, but I’m thinking we should try real human food. We’ve already missed that Thanks Day holiday since it was this week. I couldn’t find a bird, or whatever it was we needed, and River said I had waited too long for him to gather the ingredients. Besides, I wasn’t even sure she would eat it.”

“A turkey,” Exos corrected. “Which is a type of bird, but Thanksgiving—which is the holiday’s name—is all about the turkey. And we probably should have made her one.”

“Maybe we need to take her home,” Cyrus interjected. “For Christmas.”

My brow furrowed. “Um, she’s already home.” Unless he meant the Water Kingdom? “Is she eating at the palace?”

“No, not an elemental home,” he replied. “*Her* home. As in the Human Realm.”

“Ohio,” Exos murmured, his expression pensive. “It would take some time to organize, but that might be what she needs. While her fae side is dominant, she is still half-human.”

“Can you put it together?” Cyrus asked.

Exos nodded. “Yeah, most of the fae on my list have already agreed to the academy. The only real outstanding kingdom is the Hell Fae.”

Cyrus groaned. “Don’t remind me. Those fuckers are going to be the death of me.”

“Do we really need them to agree?” Vox asked, sounding wary.

“In theory, no,” Exos replied. “But Claire really wants them involved. You know how she feels about making them feel welcome.”

Yeah, we all did. She was under the misguided notion that the Hell Fae needed to be involved to try to reconcile the past. Since they were a kingdom of abominations, they were exactly the kind of mixed fae she was trying to help through this initiative.

The thing she failed to realize was that the Hell Fae were beyond help. They’d developed their own manner of existing centuries ago, and no amount of groveling now would turn back time. Even with a Paradox Fae’s help.

I blew out a breath. “Right. So we’ll plan a trip to the Human Realm. Is that where we want to be for phase three?”

Cyrus glanced at Exos. “We’re going to need a big bed if we do that.”

“It worked in Iceland,” he pointed out. “I’m sure I can figure something out in Ohio.”

“We’ll need space, too,” Vox warned. “She’s connected to all five elements. We have no idea what that’s going to do when she falls into the final phase.”

“She should mostly take from water since the child is tied to our shared element,” Cyrus said. “But I’m also half Spirit Fae. And as you said, she has all five elements.”

“Assuming she even has access to them,” I muttered.

“If she doesn’t, she will,” Exos replied. “It’s not uncommon for the faeling to absorb from the source while in the womb. However, she’s not said anything about it.”

“You know Claire. She wants to do it all herself.” And it drove me flipping nuts. “We need to keep an eye on her.”

Exos smirked. “Like we haven’t been doing that already.”

“You know what I mean,” I muttered, dragging my fingers through my auburn hair. It was sticking up on all ends today, thanks to that Hell Fae meeting. Fucking hellfire bitch. What was she thinking lighting the Christmas tree on fire? Ugh.

“Yeah, I do,” Cyrus said softly. “We need to be extra guarded. If she can’t access her elements, then she can’t properly protect herself.”

“Will that be a problem in the Human Realm?” Vox asked. “Taking her

somewhere new when she can't protect herself might be a bad idea."

"Yeah, but it's what she knows," Exos reminded us. "She's going to feel safe there. And hopefully, she'll eat."

"We'll need to decorate." Claire was obsessed with her Christmas colors and seasonal items. "Can that be done before we go?"

"She might want to be involved," Cyrus pointed out. "Maybe we should wait and just have the items ready for her?"

Exos nodded. "Let's see what I can get done first, then we'll go from there. You focus on the Hell Fae. Titus, you keep monitoring Claire. Vox, see if River can't suggest a human remedy of some kind. And tell Sol to look into more fruit trees. And I'll organize our trip to occur during the solstice."

That would help us all out with missing work. As it was, I'd already delegated several of my courses to Lance because I had to make Claire a priority. But Vox didn't have anyone to share his course load with, and neither did Sol. Cyrus and Exos had the benefit of being their own bosses, so they could really do whatever the fuck they pleased.

"Right, I think we're set, then," Cyrus said. "I'm going to make arrangements for an underworld visit since that appears to be the only way to get through to Lucifer."

Exos gave him an uneasy glance. "You sure you want to do that?"

"I absolutely do not want to do it, but for Claire, I have to try," he replied. "Oh, were there any outstanding Shifter Fae we needed to track down?"

Exos shook his head. "The majority agreed, so it's a done deal. Kalt had the Winter Fae. Aflora already helped with the Midnight Fae. Same with Gina and the Fortune Fae. And most of the other breeds have also agreed, too. So it's really just the Hell Fae."

Cyrus grimaced. "Great. Well, wish me luck. I'm going to need it."

"Try not to get burned," I said, which was my version of *Good luck*.

The Water Fae snorted. "Thanks, Firefly."

I rolled my eyes. "I fucking hate that nickname."

"Which is why I will forever use it."

"And I'll forever call you a Royal Jackass," I drawled.

"One of these days, you'll scream that while I fuck you."

"In your dreams," I tossed back.

"Every fucking night," he agreed, smirking at me. Then he misted out of the room without another word. Typical Cyrus.

"Can you find River for me?" Vox asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll go see if he’s hanging around Water Quad.” He was a professor now for human studies but spent most of his time with his kind. “Be back soon.”

“Thanks, Titus,” Vox said, his voice underlined in exhaustion. He’d been sleeping about as well as Claire.

“We’ll figure this out,” I told him.

“I hope so,” he replied softly. “I really hope so.”

CLAIRE



A WEEK LATER

Every day, I asked about the Hell Fae.

And every day, Cyrus assured me that I had nothing to worry about.

I didn't believe him, but I also didn't *want* to worry. As much as the vote mattered to me, the life growing inside of me took precedence. I couldn't shake the urgency that I needed to prepare and relax. Pretty soon, we'd all be busy with a little faeling in need of our love and attention.

"What are you all up to?" I asked. My mates had guided me away from the intended direction of my office and toward the neutral grounds at the center of the campus.

"You'll see," Cyrus answered cryptically.

I frowned. We usually only ventured over here to spar in the gym or take the portal to the Human Realm. My current physical state confirmed the former was out of the question, and the latter would only make sense if we were going into the Interrealm Fae Council area for the vote—which wasn't for a few more weeks.

An emissary waited for us as we arrived. Exos greeted him by name, handing him payment in exchange for a beautiful coat with fur puffed around the lining. "You'll need this," he said to me, his smile wry as he handed me the present. "Let's try it on, shall we?"

“Won’t I get warm?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

His eyes sparkled. “Don’t you trust us, princess?”

“Maybe I would if you told me where we’re going,” I said while I allowed him to wrap the impossibly soft coat around my shoulders.

It must have cost him a fortune. Because the emissary was from the Human Realm. It was the same one who brought Exos and Cyrus their tailored suits. However, when the coat wrapped me in suffocating warmth, I wondered if he was trying to sweat some sort of truth out of me.

“Patience,” Exos murmured, using his favorite phrase.

“You’re going to love it, Claire,” Vox promised, sweeping my fingers up with his to press a kiss to my knuckles.

“Don’t spoil it,” Sol warned, then frowned at my languid pace. “Are you doing okay, Claire? Do you want me to carry you?”

I glanced down at my boots, aware that they hid my swelling feet.

It felt like my body had doubled in size over the last week. I wasn’t exactly huge, just, well, a lot bigger than I used to be. And... “I’m tired,” I admitted out loud. “And hungry. And now I’m warm.” The last comment was for Exos.

I squeaked when Sol swooped me up into his arms without warning, making me giggle as I wrapped my arms around his neck. He smiled at me, his earthy eyes sparkling with mischief.

Really, what were my mates up to?

“You’re *more* than tired,” Exos said, opening the door to the realm travel chamber. “You’re exhausted, which is why we’re mandating you go on maternity leave—starting now.”

Cyrus and Vox hid their pointed ears with their hair, while Sol, Titus, and Exos put on hats. Cyrus gave me a kiss as he tucked my hair around my ears as well.

Okay, call me intrigued.

My eyes lit up when Sol brought me into the room, and Vox turned on the portal, activating a sequence of buttons that brought festive Christmas music ringing through the air as it connected to its destination.

I recognized the melody instantly because I’d heard the same carols growing up.

Home. They remind me of home.

My eyebrows lifted. “Are we...?” I couldn’t finish the hopeful statement, my heart beating a chaotic tune in my chest that reminded me of that famous

song about bells.

“We think we know why you’re not feeling well, little queen,” Cyrus said, keeping his tone soft while the Christmas music lingered in the air. The atmosphere hummed as the world around us distorted, the smooth realm transition taking place in one of the more secure transit devices built by the Fortune Fae.

“What’s your theory?” I asked, a smile hinting on my lips as I waited for the realm travel to complete so I could see exactly where we were going. I hadn’t been back to my hometown in ages. I could almost taste the hot chocolate from my childhood. Although, my childhood had often been a lonely one.

Sol shifted me in his arms, keeping my belly resting comfortably against his chest while Cyrus leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips. His water magic tingled over me, reassuring me that I wouldn’t be alone this year.

“You’re half-fae”—Cyrus’s blue eyes sparkled with magic—“but you’re also half-human. And we think you might be in need of some human indulgences. So that’s exactly what we’re going to give you.”

My lips curled. “I think you might be right. I’ve been craving my human food...”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Vox asked, his silver-rimmed irises flashing with a mixture of emotions. “I would have tried, Claire.”

“I know. But you all have been doing so much... I didn’t want to ask... It’s... I’ve been okay.”

Sol grunted at that. “*Okay* is not the word I’d use, Claire.”

“You should have told us,” Vox added.

“She’s telling us now,” Exos interjected. “That’s what matters.” He leaned in to brush a kiss against my forehead.

My heart fluttered in response. *Thank you*, I said to him.

He gave me a smile. *Anything for you, baby*.

This is exactly what I need, I promised. *Home*.

I loved my fae. I loved everything about their world, but with a child on the way, a sort of nostalgia gripped my heart and wouldn’t let go.

I wanted my child to know everything there was to know about the world. Not just about the fae realm, but about where I came from, too. Humans had a good side to them, one I had enjoyed in my friends before my universe imploded. My child would be one-quarter human, and that was a part of our bond that I wanted to share.

The room shuddered as we arrived in the Human Realm, the doors opening onto a busy street just a few blocks from where I'd grown up. *Oh!* I smiled to myself. *Everything's just the way I remember it.*

I drew in a delighted gasp as Sol took me out into the open and a snowflake landed on my lips.

Winter.

Not just the fake kind with my attempts at springy cotton strewn about my office. *Real* snow landed in puffy balls all around me, making me feel like I'd stepped into the center of a snow globe.

This was what I'd been missing.

The cold drifted around me with its welcome embrace, and the coat Exos had given me did a good job of keeping me warm. I tucked my chin into the fur's edge and smiled.

Carolers strolled along the street, their songs highlighting the festive ambience. It made me want to dance and sing along with them. "Oh, Sol, put me down," I begged.

He appeased me, but not without a warning frown. "If you stumble, I'm picking you up again."

I promised him I'd be fine while I crunched my way through the snow, now grateful for the boots Cyrus had insisted I put on earlier. They weren't practical in the Elemental Fae realm, but now I understood why he'd wanted me to wear them.

"Your surprise is this way," Cyrus said with a smirk.

"This isn't the surprise?" I asked, my eyes wide. Just being here meant the world to me.

Titus rolled his eyes as if my question insulted him. "Please. Do you think just a realm jump is all we had in mind?" He took my hand and guided me down the street, ignoring the humans that stared at us. While my fae could technically blend in, they couldn't hide how otherworldly and freaking gorgeous they were.

"They're staring at you, not us," Cyrus corrected me, hearing the direction my thoughts had gone.

The side of my mouth lifted up in a wry grin. "Because I'm starting to look like a snowball with this growing stomach?" I guessed. "I'm painfully aware of how big I'm getting. You all have been kind not to comment on it."

Cyrus rested a hand on my belly, his love seeping through me along with his magic. "Everyone is watching you because you're radiant, Claire."

Agreement surged through my mate-bonds, reassuring me that I wasn't the walking marshmallow I envisioned myself to be. To my mates, I was the picture of beauty and fertility. That thought made me lift my chin with pride.

When we passed through the main streets from downtown into the more rural area, puddles formed where the city had oversalted—something about my hometown I'd forgotten.

Sol held out a hand, stopping me before I stepped into one of them by accident. Then he glanced at a car that blocked the higher ground and stormed up to it, gripped it from the bottom, and lifted it over his head.

"Sol!" I shrieked while Cyrus rubbed his temples.

My earth mate blinked at me. "What?"

Vox glanced around before sending a gust of wind magic to push the car off of Sol's shoulder. It looked as if it might crash to the ground, but Cyrus swept a layer of snow underneath it to cushion the blow.

Exos patted Sol on the shoulder, my Earth Fae mate still confused about what had just happened.

"There are rules in the Human Realm," Exos explained, his words holding more patience to them than I had right now. The last thing I wanted was for interrealm laws to be broken when I was about to give birth.

The consequences were dire—a necessary measure to keep fae from revealing themselves to non-fae species.

The Human Realm was one of the last remaining neutral zones. Thus, fae valued humans in a variety of ways, and many of those benefits would be in jeopardy if the non-fae ever found out how they were being used.

It was a bit strange to think that way since I used to be human. Well, I wasn't truly human. But half-human and unaware of my heritage.

Anyway, the train of thought was so natural now, when it used to be quite foreign.

But maybe humans shouldn't be taken advantage of so—

Relax, Cyrus demanded in my thoughts, the word an order. *You're here to rest, not to devise more political schemes.*

I glowered at him. "I am relaxed," I said out loud and stormed through the puddle. I could rest and scheme at the same time.

Cyrus whispered the puddle away from my steps, casting it out like a mini tidal wave that froze in beautiful arcs.

I rolled my eyes. "Now who's risking breaking interrealm laws?"

"Nobody's around," he said, his voice cheery as he guided our little group

around the corner. “That’s why we picked it. We want you all to ourselves.”

I gasped when I spotted what he meant. A darling cottage rested at the end of a long trail of snow, filled with a field of browned cornstalks in neat rows behind it.

“Do you like it?” Cyrus asked.

Tears filled my eyes and tumbled over my cheeks. I sniffled and wiped them away with the back of my hand, but they kept coming and soaked into the fur lining of my coat. “Oh, Cyrus—all of you. Yes! Yes, of course I love it.”

“She’s crying again,” Sol said, sounding distressed. “I don’t like it when you cry, little flower.”

“I’m fine,” I promised, slipping my hand into his and giving him a squeeze. “Really. These are happy tears.”

My mates stood around me like a protective barrier, blocking off the harsh wind that slipped through the open area. Cyrus didn’t look convinced that I was okay; he didn’t like my tears, either, but he didn’t chide me for it, and we all walked to the cottage.

This felt right.

A jump inside my stomach agreed, making fresh tears come as I realized that the first things my feeling would experience would be all the things I loved about home.



A FEW DAYS LATER

I held up the strange leafy cone Claire had given me. She claimed she was going to teach Vox how to cook it, but it didn't look all that edible. "What's this called again?" I asked, testing it with my teeth. It gave way with a hard *crunch*.

"Sol!" Claire cried out, grappling at my arm and snatching the leafy cone from my grip. She bounced back onto her stool we'd brought into the kitchen so she could stay off her feet while she showed us human food. "You have to peel the husk, first," she instructed as she ripped off one of the sides, revealing a strange, yellowish, pebbled texture underneath.

I lifted one lip. "It looked better with the leafy cone."

Claire giggled at me. "It's corn, silly," she said as she took a white, oily stick from the refrigerator and swiped it over the *corn*.

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Vox, who just shrugged. "So, is this popper corn?" I asked, looking over her shoulder. "You'd mentioned something about that for snacking." I liked snacks.

She pointed at a canister on the counter. "No. That's *popcorn* in the tin." She bit her lip. "I hope that one's fresh. I know you just picked it up from the store, but can you check the date on the bottom, Vox?"

He did as instructed, picking up the canister and peering underneath it. "I

see some squiggly numbers.”

Claire asked about the last two, which she said indicated the year, and determined it would be safe to eat.

Curious how this popper corn would taste, I left Claire lathering her yellow pebble cone with the white stick while I opened the canister and chomped on a handful of the stuff. This time the crunch was even louder, but the taste was satisfying.

“No, Sol.” Claire choked on a laugh, nearly toppling over her stool as she tried to jump to her feet. She grabbed her stomach, her instincts seeming to kick in to protect the baby from the nearby counter. “You’re supposed to pop it, first.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t eat any more of your ingredients,” Vox promised, guiding her back to her seat before giving me a glare.

“How was I supposed to know? I don’t even understand how these things pop?” I complained.

“Stop stressing her out, you walking mountain,” he muttered. “You’re ruining it.”

“Am not,” I grumbled back, earning a curious glance from Claire.

“Of course you’re not,” she said, smiling cheerfully. “Can you fill up that pot, Vox? The cobs are ready to boil.”

Vox gave me one more glare before he shoved a pot under the faucet and filled it. “This is for boiling the corn sticks? And then we’ll have a separate pot for the ones we have to pop?”

She chuckled, although I wasn’t sure what she found funny. “Yep.”

I folded my hands in front of me and stood in the corner, resisting the urge to eat more of the raw popper corn. It had tasted just fine to me. Not sure why it needed popping.

I zoned out while Vox and Claire worked, and instead listened in on Cyrus and Exos arguing in the background about the Hell Fae, with Titus adding his loud opinions—ones I matched.

Even though they had enough fae to support the Interrealm Fae Academy vote, Cyrus was insistent on needing the Hell Fae support. I understood why—to make Claire happy. But she didn’t get how horrible those fae could be. They kidnapped their potential mates and forced them into deadly competition with each other. How could Claire want to be involved with beings like that?

I might not understand all of the ins and outs of interrealm politics like

Cyrus and Exos did, but even I knew they were bad news. I had no interest in working with creatures like the Hell Fae and would rather smash their faces in for making our mate cry.

But Claire had a heart of gold.

And this was what she wanted.

Hence, the debate in the other room.

My nostrils twitched when I smelled something burning. I turned to find that the peeled leafy husks had gotten too close to the hot coils and were now on fire. My mate was the clumsy sort, but powerful in her elements, so I didn't jump to her rescue.

Except she didn't use her fire magic at all, and instead she yelped in pain.

I stormed to her side, knocking over the dining room furniture in my way.

"Claire!" Vox yelled, sending his wind magic to push the flames down, working at them until they were sufficiently extinguished.

Claire hissed and stumbled into me, holding her arm as angry red splotches streaked across her skin.

I blinked. *It burned her?*

How was that even possible? She was one with the elements. Flames played over her skin all the time.

My chest began to burn, my lungs refusing to work. *Panic*, I recognized. *I'm... panicking.*

Shit!

The rest of our mate-circle practically ran into the kitchen, having overheard the commotion.

"What's wrong?" Cyrus demanded, his authoritative tone requiring answers. He rushed to Claire's side and saw the damage for himself. He glared up at me as if I were to blame. "How'd this happen?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. I hadn't acted, leaving an opportunity for Claire to be injured. "It's... it's my fault," I finally managed to stammer out, my heart cracking in my chest. *I failed my mate.*

"It's nobody's fault," Claire interjected. "Well, nobody's fault but mine." She hissed when Cyrus sent tepid water over the burn, then relaxed as her skin began to magically heal through whatever royal voodoo he used to help her.

Titus frowned. "You need a Healer, Claire."

She shook her head as fresh tears came, causing my gut to twist in agony right along with her. "Claire—"

“I don’t want to go back so soon,” she said, cutting me off. “We’ve only been here a few days and—”

“Why didn’t you use your magic?” Titus asked, his tone harsher than usual. He never interrupted Claire, but the anger in his gaze burned like hot embers. However, his rage didn’t appear to be for her so much as for himself. It was his element that had caused her harm, and he hadn’t been watching over her when it’d happened.

That was something I could relate to.

She bit her lip, then looked down.

“What is it, little flower?” I pressed, cupping her chin and lifting her gaze to look at me.

Her resignation stared back at me.

“My powers...,” she began, then the tears came again. She sniffled and straightened, as if determined not to cry. “Nothing’s wrong. I would know if something was wrong. I didn’t want to worry you, I just...”

“You’re rambling,” Exos said, crossing his arms. “Start from the beginning, Claire. What’s wrong with your powers? They’re not working, right?”

“Not working?” I repeated.

“We talked about the possibility a few nights before leaving for the Human Realm,” Titus explained. “But I think this is sufficient proof of our suspicions.”

“You suspected her elements weren’t working and didn’t tell me?” My eyes widened. “What the fuck, Titus?”

“You were with Claire when we discussed it,” Vox murmured. “And then I forgot to tell you about it. We were so consumed by the trip that...” He trailed off, his silver-rimmed black irises catching mine. “I’m sorry, Sol. I’ve been distracted.”

“We’ve all been distracted,” Exos murmured, his gaze on a trembling Claire. “When did you lose access to your elements?”

“I-I haven’t been able to access the source since I became pregnant. And sometimes... I think... I think sometimes power is sort of coming out of me without my permission. Like the fire cupcake.” Her hand fell to her stomach, running over it with a large, circular caress. The motion seemed natural, protective. “I think the faeling is blocking my powers somehow, but you said strange things could happen, right? I’m a Halfling, and nobody knows what to expect during a half-human, half-fae pregnancy.”

Titus frowned. He liked this just about as much as I did. “You should have told us.”

Her lower lip quivered, and I wrapped my arm around her, wanting to soothe her and throttle her at the same time.

It was just like our mate not to confide in us over something she would consider trivial. Or something she thought she was protecting us from.

“It’s our job to protect you, little flower,” I told her, squeezing a little. “We can’t do that if you don’t talk to us about *life-threatening* things.” I glared at the others. “And you all are just as bad. If I’d known about your suspicions, I would have put out the damn fire.”

“Vox already apologized,” Exos said, ever the politician. “We should have told you. I’m sorry, too. But it’s all out in the open now, right? Or is there more you need to tell us, Claire?”

“I just didn’t want you all to worry,” she mumbled, then looked up at me. “And I didn’t want you to look at me like... like *that*. Like something’s wrong with me.”

I smiled and cupped her chin again. “We love you, Claire. We just want to make sure you and the faeling are okay. That’s all.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “Maybe... maybe I could visit a human doctor?”

Titus sighed. “I think a Healer would be better.”

Cyrus considered Titus and then Claire. “Actually, I think a human doctor might not be a bad idea. It’ll continue to soothe Claire’s human side, which I think we all can agree is working. What can it hurt?”

He took Claire’s hand, leading her into his embrace. I let her go, knowing that Cyrus would know exactly what to say to make her feel better.

He tugged her hair around her ears, hiding the pointy ends that gave away her fae lineage. “And if you want to use human technology to tell us the gender, I think that would be an amazing Christmas present.” Cyrus must have picked that thought out of her head, because her eyes sparkled with excitement and understanding. He kissed her on the forehead, and I relaxed as her frown tilted upward into a smile.

“We can find out the gender?” Vox asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

“Yes,” Claire whispered.

“Is that what you want, baby?” Exos cupped her cheek. “Do you want to know the gender?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I do.”

“Then so do we,” Titus said, his gaze raking across the group to search for any disagreements. He sure as shit wasn’t going to get one from me.

Excitement had replaced the discord in the mate-circle.

And that improved everything.

Is it a girl or a boy? I wondered, looking at her belly. I wanted it to be a girl. Preferably, a little fae sproutling who would one day blossom into a woman just as beautiful as her mother.

Or maybe that was what I wanted for us.

One day, I promised myself. *One day, we’ll have a little girl.*

I felt certain of it, my lips curling into a grin.

Claire caught my look, her own mouth rivaling mine. *I would love that*, she told me softly.

Me, too, little flower. Me, too.

CLAIRE



Cyrus helped me out of the rental car—one he’d picked up just yesterday on the off chance we’d need it—and escorted me into the hospital. He’d already said if the doctor found anything wrong, he’d immediately mist me back to the Elemental Fae realm—interrealm laws be damned.

I hoped it wouldn’t come to that and instead filled myself with positivity and good thoughts as we walked through the massive hospital reception area.

Most people didn’t like hospitals, but I found it amazing that there was a place I could go to and there’d instantly be people ready to help me. There was something to be said about human compassion.

Titus led the way while straightening the Santa hat I had gotten for him earlier at the store.

I tugged the white ball and grinned at him. “You sure do make a handsome fire elf.”

He glowered. “Don’t push it, Claire. The hat is humiliating enough with a ball dangling in front of my face.” He blew the puff out of his way, glancing at a smirking Cyrus.

The guys had thought Titus should wear the hat to keep the Christmas cheer going. My fire mate clearly didn’t approve, which only seemed to amuse me, not upset me.

Yeah, pregnancy hormones were insane.

I sort of loved them.

A receptionist greeted us and helpfully pointed us down the hall.

Scheduling an appointment hadn't been easy, but there were benefits to having powerful mates. Exos had already established connections in Ohio prior to our arrival, knowing this visit might be needed. He'd also prepared for the potential birth—which I would want in a hospital, not at home. I loved that he thought ahead like that and that he'd do anything he could to make sure my wishes were granted.

We entered the office we were directed to, and another receptionist gave my group of mates a wary eye. “Uh, may I help you?”

“I'm here for my appointment,” I said with a smile.

The woman blinked a few times at my mates, particularly settling her gaze on Sol, who had wandered to one of the seats and was trying to sit down—*unsuccessfully*.

“And, uh, who is the father?” she asked, keeping her head down as if this was a natural question to ask. “We prefer not to allow, um, visitors.”

I frowned. Biologically, Cyrus was the father, but all my mates had a place in my heart, and in the life of my growing faeling. “They're all the father,” I said without hesitation. “Is that a problem?”

A few women in the room coughed.

Exos leaned down, putting on the charming smile that he reserved for negotiation. He used it on me far too often—and far too often, he also got his way. “I've already spoken with Dr. Renalds. If you could please check with her, I believe she'll tell you everything is in order.”

The receptionist twitched her nose and looked like she was going to argue, but Exos kept his perfectly constructed smile on his face, so she finally sighed and got out of her chair.

“Why is everyone staring at us?” Vox asked in a whisper as he rested a hand on the small of my back.

Yeah, there were a few details about human culture I hadn't missed.

“Polygamy is very uncommon here,” Cyrus supplied. “In some countries, it's even illegal.”

Vox frowned as if he didn't understand. “Why would a government control how many mates one can have? Do humans not sometimes have multiple soul mates like fae do?”

Exos cleared his throat as the side door opened and someone called my name. “Let's save the human lessons for later,” he suggested under his breath

before nodding to the nurse.

We all filtered through the hall, the staff giving my mates curious looks.

Titus lowered his hat around his eyes. “Now you like the hat,” Cyrus mused, making my Fire Fae grin.

After a short wait in another room, and an awkward attempt at changing out of my outfit and into the pathetic sheet hospitals liked to call a gown, the doctor finally came in.

A tall woman with wild red hair caught up in a bun entered and gave me a bright smile. “Claire Summers, is it? And oh, you have so many fathers here to join us! I was intrigued when Exos told me about your situation. You’re from another country. He didn’t mention which one, though.”

Exos cleared his throat. “We’re very grateful that you’re able to see us on such short notice. I hope the hospital grant is still being put to good use?”

Her smile tightened, and I understood now why Exos had been able to get me an appointment on such short notice, as well as entry for all of my mates.

“Yes, absolutely. In fact, we were able to purchase two new sonogram machines, top of the line, one of which we’ll be using today.” She glanced at me. “Exos mentioned you might be interested in learning the gender of your baby?”

I beamed, glancing at all of my mates to confirm that they were dying to know just as much as I was. “Yes, we’d love to know,” I said, sitting on the edge of the examination chair. “But first, I want to make sure he or she is healthy. That’s all that really matters to me.”

She nodded and wrote a note down on her chart. “Yes, of course. We’ll do that right away.”

She had me lie down, and my mates all found places to stand without being in the way. I knew none of this would hurt, but there was still a sense of anticipation anyway.

Vox and Sol looked at the machine that she rolled over, clearly fascinated with the technology. Cyrus and Exos had more experience with human machinery, whereas Titus was harder to impress.

The doctor swept a device over my stomach after slathering it with cold gel. We all jumped when a loud, rapid thumping sounded throughout the room. “Ah!” she exclaimed, zeroing in the device on the left side of my stomach. “There. Such a strong heartbeat.”

My own heart seemed to speed up to match the rapid pace. “Is it supposed to be that fast?” I asked.

She smiled, her relaxed demeanor putting me at ease. “Yes. A fetus’s heartbeat should be anywhere between one hundred and ten to one hundred and sixty beats per minute. Your baby is on the low end of the spectrum, but still in a healthy range.”

My shoulders unhinged from my ears. “Okay, good.”

“And the gender?” Cyrus asked, his tone hopeful. He likely already knew the heartbeat’s pace and had evaluated the fetus through his spirit element, even if I hadn’t been able to. But I suspected Cyrus had resisted from finding out the gender through his fae abilities. His gaze met mine, full of excitement, along with the rest of my mates. I knew this was a moment we’d remember for the rest of our lives.

She pulled out a different device this time, and a blotchy image appeared on the screen. She moved the scanner around on my stomach, making the baby inside squirm, but I couldn’t sense distress, just a reaction to the pressure. The doctor smiled, and she clicked a button, outputting a still image that looked like an ink splotch to me.

She pointed at the screen. “See that? Looks like you’re having a boy.”

Titus jumped to his feet with a celebratory roar. “Yes! I knew it!”

My mates all likewise laughed, delighted in the news in their own way. As for myself, the awful tears came again, seeming to flood my vision no matter if I was happy or sad. I would have loved news of either gender, but a boy?

A boy.

A little fae king.

The thought made my heart swell three times over, and I thought I’d die right there on the spot.

I held Cyrus’s hands in mine as the tears freely streamed over my cheeks.

“A boy,” I repeated the thought out loud.

Cyrus echoed my delight in my mind.

Our little holiday heir.



DECEMBER 23RD

The mate-circle practically hummed with excitement and the desire to celebrate.

Claire and the baby were fine—more than fine—and they would be even better after they were fed and sated.

Although, we planned to surprise our mate in more than one way in that regard. We all wanted to assure our Claire that carrying a child only made her more beautiful and more desirable, not less.

I glanced down at the list Claire had given me of human food items. When I told her I was going out to run some errands, she hadn't realized that included yet another detour to the Hell realm. Cyrus had ventured down there yesterday, and today had been my turn.

Those demon bastards were really giving us a hard time. And I was pretty sure it was purely for their sadistic enjoyment.

However, I felt pretty confident that we were making decent headway.

Rather than tell Claire about my little side trip—there was no benefit to worrying her—I'd just agreed to her errand, which was how I found myself strolling through a human market after spending a few hours in literal hell.

I roamed the aisles and grabbed every item on her list, plus anything else that looked interesting. I also grabbed some festive decorations for the

cottage—I suspected Claire wouldn't mind adding to what we'd already put up.

Most of the food seemed unhealthy to me, but she could indulge. No, she *needed* to indulge. Growing a faeling required ample energy, so Claire needed as many calories as she could physically ingest.

After food, she needed to relax and rest, and I knew just the thing to distract her from thinking about politics and our faeling's impending arrival.

Every birth was unique, as well as difficult—that, unfortunately, ran similar between fae and human pregnancies. I'd done my research before going into this venture with my mate-circle to be as prepared as we could be for the unknown.

However, none of my planning could have prepared me for the protectiveness radiating through me, in addition to the new layer of love that threaded through my bond with Claire and our entire mate-circle. It brought us all closer together, knitted our love tighter, and gave it a sense of permanence that I hadn't realized had been lacking.

If one child did this, then I looked forward to many more.

After we survived this one.

And after Claire decided she was ready, of course.

For now, I would make sure she was as comfortable as possible and that she wouldn't have to worry about anything.

I finished my purchases and piled all of the bags into the car, then headed back to the cottage. When I arrived, it was to find Claire laughing, the sound music to my ears and making my lips curve up on the sides.

Vox and Sol had positioned her onto a plush sofa with her feet resting on an ottoman. She looked like the picture of a fertility goddess mixed with North Pole magic, one of the only fae realms that humans had somewhat worked out, even if they considered Santa a myth.

I couldn't help but feel festive myself as I smirked at the snowflakes Cyrus had lured in from outside. He'd permanently frozen them, and Vox used his air magic to swirl them around on a loop, providing a festive flair for us all to enjoy. Titus also had several candles flickering in the windows, all using real flames—which would be a hazard for most humans, but not a Fire Fae.

In addition to our own decorative magic, we'd found human tinsel, holly, and red ribbons to place all throughout the interior. A single massive Christmas tree glowed near the window, adding its final touch to the

ambience.

Claire grinned as I entered, then Cyrus joined me in bringing in all the groceries. Meanwhile, Vox and Sol argued over who got to massage Claire's elegant feet, which were poking out from the blanket she'd snuggled into.

"I'm much better at massages," Vox insisted, demonstrating on Claire's left foot. She groaned as he expertly swiped his thumb and worked at the swelling of her ankle.

Sol frowned. "We'll see about that. Is this the start of another challenge for faeling number two? Because I'm up for practicing."

"Don't count your fae before they hatch," Claire chided, making Sol's frown deepen.

"You're not going to lay an egg, Claire." His eyes grew big. "Right? I mean, do humans normally lay eggs?"

She chuckled as she eased further into the sofa. "No eggs," she promised. "It's just a phrase."

"Humans have strange phrases," Sol complained. After all these years, some things that our mate said still confused him, but he enjoyed learning.

"A massage trial would be just for practice," Vox coaxed, swiping his fingers again, working at a spot near her heel that had her biting her lip.

Oh, she knew where this was going. I could see it written into her flushed cheeks and the way she subtly arched her chest. *Beautiful*, I thought, momentarily distracted from putting away the groceries. Then Cyrus nudged me with his foot, and I took two bags from him while he ran out to grab more from the car.

"As long as we're not practicing the orgasm trial again," Claire said, her hands sweeping over her rounded stomach. "I think I'm still recovering from the last session." Even though she protested, her eyes sparkled with the memory, and a whisper of need swept through the mate-bond.

Yes, my Claire was ready for what we had in mind for tonight. I wasn't the only one reacting to Claire's growing desire to be physically sated on every level.

I'd been ready for this. Heightened libido was a trait both humans and fae experienced during pregnancies. Although, fae definitely experienced it at a whole different level—something Claire would be finding out very soon.

She was a fae with an already accelerated sexual state, which suggested phase three could drive her mad once unleashed. I just hoped she didn't try to suppress it.

Fae were sexual creatures, filled with passion. We possessed the strength and stamina required to link the elemental sources together to produce new life. It wasn't a simple physical act like it might be for humans. For the fae, children were just as much a spiritual creation as a physical one.

Sol smirked, catching on to Vox's antics. "We'll practice the massage trial, then," he decided out loud. "I'll start with this foot, then we'll massage more of you after you eat." He glanced at me, and I gave him a low nod of approval.

Titus swept past me and started helping me put the food away as Cyrus carried in the last of the bags. He grinned, sensing the building tension. We all knew what was going to happen tonight.

Well, all of us except Claire.

"I'm going to win this one," Titus vowed, referring to tonight's pending events. Phase three was all about elemental sharing... through sex.

"I'm confident," he added, placing a precooked ham on the counter beside some of the items I'd already set aside for our meal.

I smirked but didn't reply.

Because there was no way in hell he would last the longest out of all of us tonight. My money was on me or Cyrus. We'd both danced with the source of power before. We knew how to keep it balanced.

Of course, the third phase would throw everything we knew out the damn window. So it really was anyone's game at this point. And frankly, we would all win in the end because it meant coming inside Claire.

Vox glanced between our mate and the kitchen. "Does anything need to be cooked?" he asked, clearly not wanting to give up his competition with Sol's foot-massaging efforts.

I chuckled. "Most of it is precooked or packaged. We can handle the preparations, Vox. You don't have to always prepare our food."

Claire hummed in agreement. "Yes, you'd better not stop what you're doing. I command you to be the official foot-massaging mate."

Sol took that as a challenge. He'd learned how to control his strength over the years and demonstrated his skill by carefully kneading Claire's other arch with just the right amount of pressure, based on the way her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Correction," she said. "Both of you can be my foot-massaging mates."

My lips curled. "We'll let you know when the food is ready."



Claire’s eyes widened as we brought the trays of food to her, placing them all around her so that she wouldn’t have to move from her chair.

I’d found a breakfast tray that worked perfectly to perch food at eye level without disturbing her growing stomach.

She scanned the offerings as she licked her lips, the motion going straight to my dick.

Yes. Sex was absolutely what she needed tonight.

As well as the human food.

Already, she appeared healthier and happier, and well on her way to phase three.

We all sensed it coming.

Tonight.

She plucked at a miniature cake with white cream in the middle and moaned as she took a bite, making my pants suddenly tight.

“Claire,” Cyrus warned, his lips lifting in a sly smirk. “If you keep making sounds like that, you’re going to make us want to eat something, too. And it won’t be food.”

An adorable blush flushed over her cheeks as she chewed. “I can’t help it,” she said around a mouthful as she grabbed another item. “I’m just starving, and this is fucking delicious.”

Mmm, I like that word from your mouth, I told her. Say “fuck” again.

Her gaze sparkled at me. *Fuck.*

I smiled. *Good girl, Claire. I'll reward you later for that.*

Don't make promises you don't intend to keep.

When have I ever not followed through on a sexual promise? I asked, arching a brow.

That had her flush creeping down her neck to disappear beneath the mountain of blankets.

I allowed her lack of a response, mostly because she made another moan as she bit into her cupcake again, and I couldn't think of anything else other than that sexy little sound.

All of us watched her eat, our own appetites growing with each passing minute. She seemed completely oblivious to the intensity, too lost to her meal. Which was good. She needed the energy for phase three.

But the new thread pulsed among us all, the life inside her tugging on our sources with such urgency that it couldn't be ignored any longer. The elemental source called to my affinity for spirit, urging me to bring the life in her womb to fruition by sharing my magic through our bonds on an intimate level.

I usually watched.

I usually waited.

This time... I wasn't sure I could.

When Claire had sufficiently sated her appetite for food, she leaned back with a contented sigh. "I feel much better," she admitted. Her eyelids drifted closed as her hands roamed over her stomach, smiling when her fingers twitched. "The faeling is kicking. He's happy, too."

And probably growing, I thought.

She'd slip into a preparatory sleep, soon. I sensed her closing in on the end of the final stage, the one where another mating would be required. It was an indescribable sensation of anticipation in the mate-bond, one that drove me to resolve that lingering requirement that plagued my mate.

While her appetite for food had been sated, I spotted the fleeting frown that crossed her face as her eyelids fluttered open to glance at us. She still had one need left to be met.

Or rather, five needs, judging by how her gaze scanned the mate-circle.

I removed the breakfast tray and Claire's blanket, then took her hand. "I believe we have a massage trial to practice," I said, my lips lifting with a mischievous smirk.

Her eyes sparked, but then she frowned as she grabbed the edge of my suit collar and sniffed. “Have you been smoking?”

Oops. Underworld problems.

“No, but I walked by some people who were smoking when I was picking up all the human food you asked me for,” I said, casually reminding her that I’d gotten everything she’d requested on her list. And it wasn’t a lie. I had walked past humans who were smoking, although they’d been on the other side of the parking lot. I kissed her cheek. “Are you ready for a massage, Claire?”

Her fingers closed into fists as she looked down at her stomach. “I don’t think I can...” She knew what I meant, and it terrified her. I felt her fear surge through the mate-bond, and it twisted my heart until I could choke on it.

Cyrus joined me, taking her other hand to lift her to her feet. “You don’t have to do anything, little queen.” His confidence seeped into my spirit, reassuring me that Claire could be convinced. We’d never failed before. “Let us adore you,” he said, his tone sweet and regal. “That’s all we ask.”

She bit her lip before giving us a nod, which was all the permission I needed. Her spirit called to mine with such clarity that a melody unfurled in my mind, one where our souls danced together and began a new courtship.

Beautiful.

Cyrus and I escorted her to the massive bed, then I stopped her beside it. “Can I strip you, Claire?” I asked. “Massages are best when naked.”

She licked her lips, then slowly nodded her head.

“Words, baby,” I murmured. “Give me words.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “You can strip me.”

I smiled and rewarded her with a gentle kiss, my fingers teasing the edge of her nightgown. “Thank you, Claire,” I said, loving the act of removing her clothes. So did all the others, but I wanted to remind her with my words and touch, to ensure she felt just as beautiful now as she ever did before. Because to us, she was perfect. Gorgeous. A goddess of the elements, even if they were blocked right now.

Goose bumps pebbled her arms as I slowly pulled the strap of her gown downward. Then she froze as the material revealed her breasts.

Mmm, no, that wouldn’t do.

I wanted her fluid. Warm. Aching for our touch. Not chilled and afraid of what we might think of her beautiful form. I could sense that uncertainty in

our bond, had heard it in her voice when she claimed that she might not be able to accept a massage.

Our mate needed to go into phase three feeling cherished and loved.

Not unconfident and alone.

Could she not feel the pull from the source? The very real melody humming in my ears and in my heart and through my soul, begging me to take her? To fulfill the next stage? To give her what her body craved and desired most?

Oh, Claire.

I trailed my lips along her shoulder, urging her to relax, and brushed her spirit with mine, coaxing her closer to the blinding source of our power. A new life had been created here, one that we would cherish together as a family.

But first, she had to know how much she was loved by us all, how much we would always desire her. A child didn't change this facet of our lives. If anything, it only brought us all closer together.

"Lie down," I commanded, earning a feisty spark of rebellion in her eyes. She didn't like to be ordered around, but in this case, she needed to listen to me. She was far too wrapped up in her own self-doubts and fears. I needed her to let go and to give me control right now.

She righted her nightgown, hiding all the luminous skin from us, but lay down on the bed like I'd demanded. I knelt beside her and ran my fingers down her cheek. "I need to love you, Claire."

I rarely begged, and that was as close as I was going to get to it. She bit her lip before replying. "Well, lying on my back is actually a bit uncomfortable," she admitted.

I smirked. Oh, well then, I had another position that would suit even better for my mood. "Can you rest on your knees?" I suggested, one eyebrow lifting as the plan unfurled in my mind. "I was going to massage your breasts, but I can work with another area."

She swallowed and glanced at the rest of the mate-circle, taking note of how Sol and Vox rested near the wall, eager to have a good view of what was to come. Cyrus and Titus had eased around on either side of us, slipping onto the bed with sensual intention that dripped through the mate-bond.

I snapped my spirit magic through her, making her gaze jolt back to me. "But I'm so... *pregnant*," she protested, still doubting her beauty. As if the sight of her would dampen our love or deter our desire.

This was precisely why this needed to happen right here, right now.

“On your knees, Claire,” I told her, allowing her to hear the demand in my voice.

She swallowed, but complied, her pulse thrumming so hard I could see it against her neck.

Words weren’t going to solve this.

So we would lead with actions instead.

I eased into my secondary affinity for fire and smoldered a careful layer over her gown, disintegrating it and leaving her bare. The heat glowed pleasantly against her skin as she fisted her hands against her sides, still nervous and uncertain.

Determined to assure her, I followed my magic with my hands and then my lips, kissing her swollen breasts down to her enlarged stomach. Then I slowly pushed her forward to balance on her hands and her knees.

Cyrus and Titus waited patiently, their arousal evident. I had no doubt they could hear the same melody I did, the call of our elements too strong to ignore.

Our mate shivered as I swept my touch down her weeping sex. “Exos,” she said, my name more of a plea now. I smiled. That was the right direction, but I needed more from her.

“What kind of massage would you like?” I asked, grabbing her ass with both hands as I spread her open for me.

Fae, she was beautiful. My cock lurched at the sight of her so wet for me, eager for my tongue to taste her sweetness.

Vox and Sol both made strangled sounds from behind me, likewise affected by the gorgeous sight, but not just that. Claire sent a wave of desire through us all that hit like a bolt of lightning.

There it is, I mused. The third phase is coming.

Exos...

Don’t fight it, baby. Revel in it. Erase your fears and just feel.

I kissed the base of her spine, my palms branding her hips as I stroked her through her insecurities, encouraging her to come out and play.

You’re our goddess, Claire. Our queen. Let us worship you. I nibbled her hip bone, then drew my tongue upward to her spine once more. *Please, baby. All we want is to make you feel good.*

She groaned, her worries slipping from her mind as she shifted her focus to the very real throbbing between her legs. I could feel it riding her spirit and

pulsating into mine. She needed this. Just as much as we needed this.

Can you feel our need? I asked her. *Is it burning you the way your desire is burning me?*

Another groan, this one followed by her fisting the sheets.

Cyrus increased the intensity by unzipping his pants and freeing his erection, his palm stroking the shaft in a leisurely pace as he watched her beneath hooded eyes.

Titus copied the motion, allowing our Claire to see what she did to him. To us.

“Do you see how hard they are, baby?” I asked against her ear, my hands still roaming her body, light and petting rather than thorough and knowing. I wanted her to cave first. Then I’d give her what she needed, what we *all* needed. “Is that precum, Titus? I think you should give our Claire a taste. Remind her how much we want her.”

Titus swiped his thumb over the tip and brought the moisture to her lips. She moaned loudly in response, her body convulsing beneath my palm.

“Mmm, that makes me want to taste you, baby,” I said, widening her knees to accommodate my shoulders as I lay down on the bed beneath her, my lower body still supported by my feet on the ground. “Sit on my face,” I told her. “Let me taste you.”

She shuddered, her legs wobbling beneath the intensity of my command and her overwhelming yearning to comply. Cyrus shifted closer, his fingers finding her nipple and giving it a little tweak. “My brother gave you a command, little queen. Are you going to disobey him?”

“I...” She trembled, her pussy lowering to my mouth, where I gave her a firm, long stroke with my tongue. “Oh, *Fae*,” she breathed, nearly falling forward. But Cyrus caught her with his palm against her breastbone.

I suckled her clit, making her cry out my name in that tone I fucking loved. I did it again, and she rewarded me with a full-body spasm.

“Oh,” she repeated, her legs convulsing. “I need... I *need*...”

“Tell us what you need, little queen,” Cyrus murmured.

“Yeah, sweetheart. Tell us what you want,” Titus agreed, his tone low and warm as he fed her another swipe from his thumb.

I didn’t see it so much as feel it through the bond, her pleasure mounting to a cataclysmic frenzy.

“Cock,” she said. “Oh, now. I need it *now*.”

I nipped her clit, then slid out from beneath her as the others began to

disrobe.

Cyrus and Titus took her first, their cocks already free and very willing to satisfy. She took Titus into her mouth, taking him down her throat before she grabbed for Cyrus and did the same to him.

And fuck if that wasn't the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

As much as I liked to watch, I wanted to take my mate first this time. "My massage wasn't over," I warned her. "I was only just getting started."

She glanced back at me as I unzipped my pants. Then she licked her lips as she angled her ass to give me a better view.

Yes, this was how I preferred my mate. Willing. Needy. Demanding. And *wanton*.

When I slid forward and coated my dick with her wetness but refused to stretch her open, she groaned with frustration and took Titus into her mouth again, this time so forcefully that he jolted.

He released a growl. "Careful, beautiful, or I'm going to unleash this load I've been saving right down your pretty little throat."

That only encouraged her to work him that much harder, likely taking his statement as a challenge.

I slipped my dick over her clit, making her hips gyrate over my sensitive skin. I'd make her come like this first, then I'd properly fuck her.

She popped off of Titus's dick when I thrust through her folds, her back arching beautifully. "I want to see Vox and Sol," she moaned.

The two fae had begun fisting each other, something they knew Claire would like, and would only prime themselves for her when it was their turn. I angled her so she could see them, and her eyelids grew heavy with desire. She liked to watch her mates play, something I'd never indulged in, but I understood the voyeuristic tendency because I enjoyed observing, too.

Sol put one fist against the wall as he faced Vox, their naked bodies giving us a profile view as Vox fisted his own dick, then slipped the same hand over Sol's. The throbbing between Claire's legs intensified at the erotic display, encouraging me to run my head over her clit again.

She screamed as she fell headfirst into an orgasm she'd clearly been holding on to for some time.

Naughty, Claire, I thought at her. We're going to have to make you come all night now, just to make sure all those climaxes you've denied are rectified.

Her body spasmed in response, causing a sensual wave to crash through

the bonds.

The melody intensified, roaring through our connections with a vengeance, demanding that we release control of our elements—something we'd all learned *not* to do.

The third phase had officially begun, and it required all five elements, not just one or two.

There's a very powerful fae growing inside you, baby, I murmured. *He wants all our elements.*

All of them? she replied, sounding exhausted already. Then she flared with sudden power, her spirit humming through our bond as the final stage ignited.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Claire breathed, that word so beautiful from her very sexy mouth.

“Yes, Claire. That's exactly what we're going to do,” I confirmed.

She didn't seem to hear me, her instincts taking over as she scoured the demand through us, ripping us open until there was nothing left.

We had no choice but to comply, to break the very rule that had grounded us all since we were young faelings ourselves.

Unleash the elements.

Open the source.

Drown in ecstasy.

Claire took Titus deep into her mouth, destroying his chance to fight his elemental release. Then she wiggled her hips against me, coaxing my cock to come out and play.

I was a strong male fae.

But not strong enough to deny my mate.

I thrust into her quivering body, giving her what she needed and cursing as she squeezed the life out of my fucking shaft. Each punch of her hips tested my resolve not to unravel before we'd even begun.

Titus gave in to her, failing to restrain himself and his power, and groaned as he came. Cyrus grinned against the other fae's exposed throat, then pressed a gentle kiss to his pulse. It wasn't meant as a taunt so much as a tender gesture of understanding, one Titus seemed to appreciate as his head fell against Cyrus's.

I slowed my thrusts, drawing out my pleasure as Claire came down from her high, and the harsh demand of her melody eased off, sated by Titus's offering. The Fire Fae slumped onto the bed as he threw his head back on a

curse.

Oh, he'd lost this game—to see who could hold out the longest—but I wasn't far behind him.

Cyrus took his turn next. Claire grabbed onto him like her life depended on it, suckling at his dick with renewed need as the melody kicked up again, eager to devour us all.

I followed her movements with my hips, rewarding her when she took my brother deeper. I didn't care if this mating destroyed me. It was the most fucking beautiful thing I'd ever experienced.

Sol and Vox continued to stroke each other as they watched us, their eyes on Claire as she threatened to achieve an orgasm that would take us all under with her.

This was new, *raw*, something different that I hadn't expected when I'd read about pregnant fae sexual side effects.

But I sensed the reason now, the link of our magic that drew in our power and fed her just as much as any physical nourishment would. Instead of fueling her body, we fueled the threads of her elemental power that would bring the life inside her to full term.

I would strip myself of all of my magic if need be to give Claire and the child what they needed, and so I fucked her with abandon, letting go of my control as I poured my power into her.

She gasped at the hit of unreserved magic, and all of the elements burst around the room as all the fae in our mate-circle followed suit.

Embers glittered in her hair.

Dusty motes of earth drifted around us.

And a warm breeze swept across my chest.

Then mist steamed in the air, and we breathed it in, sending our very life force into our mate as we slipped over the edge and didn't look down.

Take all of me, Claire, I told her. Take every last drop.



Fuck.
I could barely breathe, my heart hammering so hard against my damn chest I thought it might explode.

I was pretty sure Claire just tried to kill us through fucking. And honestly, I wasn't even a little bit upset about it. Because wow.

That had been some of the most intense sex of my existence. As soon as I rediscovered my ability to move, I wanted to do it all over again. But she'd pretty much just sucked the water element out of me, leaving me dry and weak in her wake.

Thank fuck we'd done this in the Human Realm. I couldn't even imagine the repercussions of doing that at home, where we were all that much more connected to our sources.

Perhaps that was why she'd reacted so negatively to fae food. On some subconscious level, she knew where she needed to be for phase three.

Or it was all a twist of fate.

Regardless, it was right. And we'd survived. *Barely.*

Happy Christmas Eve, little queen, I murmured to her. Technically, it was Christmas Eve morning now. But as she couldn't hear me, it didn't really matter.

I took a calming breath.

Then joined her in the land of sleep.



“Thank. Fuck.”

Exos took the words right out of my mouth.

Our third visit to the damn underworld had finally paid off, and I had the proof of it in my hand. Lucifer might not attend the vote, but I had his proxy letter, and that was all that mattered.

It had taken a little bit of negotiation, mostly because he’d demanded Elemental Fae females in exchange for his cooperation. When I told him that was never going to happen, he started asking for more practical things. Like help growing certain edible plants. And a few meant for getting high.

“I’m just glad it’s done,” I said, folding the letter into my suit jacket pocket. “I’m eager to return to Claire and repeat last night.”

“Sounds like a good Christmas Eve to me,” Exos agreed, punching the buttons into the portal board. Then he faced me with a grin as the system engaged to work its magic. “Titus wants a rematch.”

“He’ll still lose,” I drawled.

“I know,” Exos agreed. “But I won’t.”

I arched a brow. “You sure as fuck did last night.”

“I wasn’t prepared.”

I grunted. “Fuck that. You’re always prepared.”

His lips curled. “True. I may have given in last night, but so did you.”

“We all did,” I replied. “She was fucking magnificent.”

“She was,” he murmured. “Which is why we need to do it again.”

“Is it my turn to seduce her into it? Because I could probably complete that task faster.”

“Only because of my help last night,” Exos retorted.

I lifted a shoulder. “Not my fault you volunteered to go first.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved me off as we arrived in the Human Realm. “We need to think of more...” He trailed off, frowning.

I felt exactly what caused that expression to appear.

Something’s wrong.

I didn’t ask permission, and Exos didn’t hesitate. He knew what I had to do. I grabbed onto his wrist and accessed the reserves of my magic to mist us

directly to the cottage.

While it was a short jump, misting outside of the Elemental Fae realm drained me considerably, and my vision darkened with black stars as I searched for our mate.

“Is she okay?” I demanded, unable to see.

If I fucking passed out when she needed me, I—

“Cyrus!” Claire cried out as she grabbed onto me, her tone panicked but her grip strong.

My vision cleared enough for me to see the source of her distress. She held on to her stomach, grinding her teeth as a wave of pain swept through the mate-bonds. *Labor*, I realized. *She’s in labor*.

Claire immediately tried to shut us out in an attempt to save us from the agony, but I pulled her into my arms.

“Don’t do that,” I said, brushing away her hair. “Give us your pain, little queen. We can handle it.”

We’re here, I added into her mind. *You’re not alone. We’re all right here.*

CLAIRE



“I can’t do this,” I bit out as my mates hurried me into the hospital. My water hadn’t broken at all like they showed in the movies. It’d been more of a trickle. I’d honestly thought I’d lost control of my bladder, which had been embarrassing. But nope. It turned out that was the start of labor.

“You can,” Cyrus assured me with a kiss as he guided me into a wheelchair. My mate still looked pale from misting in from wherever he’d been. I wanted to smack him and Exos for leaving, even if it was unexpected that I would go into labor early. What could have been so important to take that chance?

And on Christmas Eve?

The latest contraction eased off, and I released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. Without the wave of pain overtaking my brain, I was able to think clearly.

Oh, right.

“Was today the vote?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

Cyrus and Exos shared a grin. “Not quite, little queen. But close.”

“Well, tell me,” I said, eager to know what had happened. They’d been out of the realm for a reason.

“Shouldn’t we concentrate on the faeling?” Vox asked.

I narrowed my gaze at him. “I’m having a difficult time concentrating on

anything else.”

He flinched. “Sorry.”

Titus pushed me into the elevator and stared at the buttons. “Which fucking floor was it again?”

“Third,” Vox said, always efficient, as he shoved an arm through and stabbed the number. “That’s triage, where they’ll evaluate her.”

“She’s clearly in labor,” Exos said, irritated. “What kind of evaluation do they need to do?”

“Exos,” I said. “Tell me what happened.”

“Pregnant and giving demands,” Cyrus mused, leaning down to brush his lips over mine. “We were in the underworld, little queen. Lucifer has agreed to support your initiative, and I have his signed vote in my pocket.”

My eyes widened. “You got the Hell Fae to—” I cut off on a gasp as pain crashed through me again, knocking the air from my lungs and causing all my muscles to tighten in agony.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to cut the pain off from seeping into my mate-bonds.

“I told you not to do that,” Cyrus chastised as he took my hand. “If you can handle it, then we can, too.”

When I opened my eyes again, all my mates had their hands on me, demanding that I share my burden.

This was something I knew no human birth could compare to. How many women could share their pain with those who genuinely wanted to help?

I hated to do it, but I knew none of them would forgive me if I tried to shoulder the responsibility all by myself.

We were a mate-circle for a reason.

Forever and always.

And this was exactly why our links existed—to *help and support each other*.

I relaxed my constraints, allowing the mate-bond to flow through me as the pain dispersed through the circle.

All of my mates buckled, Sol in particular making the elevator jolt as he slammed into the side. “Holy fae,” he bit out. “That’s like getting hit by a mountain.”

Vox groaned and rubbed his neck. “*Fuck*, Claire. You’ve been holding that in all by yourself? I’m with Cyrus. Don’t take that on alone.”

I grinned weakly, relieved as the pain lessened, much more manageable

now that it was shared across the bonds.

The elevator dinged, and Titus pushed me out into the office. I pulled some of my discomfort back in to let my mates focus on signing me in. Then, the moment I passed triage and was cleared for the delivery room, I shared the aches and pains with my mates again.

Labor took much longer than I would have expected. I went through cycles of agony, in and out for hours. Every time the doctor came in, I wasn't dilated enough for delivery.

When we were left alone again for the umpteenth time, I turned to Cyrus. His silver-blue eyes watched me with concern. "Are fae supposed to dilate before giving birth?" I asked, wishing I'd spent more time talking with the Healers.

His lips curled on one side. "Yes. Be patient, Claire. Your body is still half-human. You've gone through an incredibly accelerated pregnancy for your genetic makeup. You can do this, but don't rush it."

"Patient?" I repeated. "You want me to be *patient*?" That was Exos's chosen phrase. Not Cyrus's. And I'd been pretty damn patient all night. "Why isn't my body cooperating?"

"Because you're not ready, Claire," Cyrus replied, his tone holding a touch of his trademark chastisement.

"But I was more than ready on Halloween when you *impregnated me*," I snapped.

He sighed. "Claire. I know it hurts, but you're stronger than this."

My eyebrows winged upward. "Stronger? Are you..." I trailed off on a hiss as another contraction hit me. This one I blasted through the mate-bond, causing Cyrus to double over on an exhale. "Patient... enough... for you?" I asked through my teeth as another contraction hit me almost immediately.

Fuck! The shout came from all my mates. Or maybe one of them. I really couldn't tell because chaos had erupted around us as the doctors returned.

Sol and Vox were arguing about something.

Exos was speaking urgently to Cyrus.

And Titus was looking at me as though I were dying.

Am I dying? I asked him, panicking.

You're okay, sweetheart. I just hate seeing you like this.

"Claire," Cyrus was saying, pulling my attention back to him. "It's time to start pushing."

"What?"

“Push, little queen,” he urged.

I’d completely missed where the doctors said it was time, but I read the urgency in their expressions.

“It’s time?” I squeaked, then another pain slammed into my abdomen, and I about shot out of the bed. “Cyrus!” He gave me his hand, and I clamped down, my insides rioting as my instincts took over.

Push.

Okay.

Push.

Yep.

I can do this.

But no matter how many times I pushed, it wasn’t over, and all it did was radiate aches up through my hips and spine. It felt like I was being ripped in half, and not in a good way. “It’s not working!” I cried out, anger and sadness and failure filling me as a hum sounded in my ears. “Why isn’t it working?”

Cyrus and Exos sang into my thoughts.

Titus joined them.

Then Vox and Sol were there, too.

I barely heard the doctor talking over them, his voice so far away beneath the cloud of soothing evoked by my mates.

“I see the head,” the doctor informed me. “One big push now on the next contraction. You can do it!”

I waited for the pressure to build, and then the pain hit again. That was my cue.

I screamed as a new burn ran through me, one of magic rather than physical torment. All of the elements that had been blocked unleashed at the same time, searing me with their raw power as if I’d touched the sources themselves.

Fire blazed across my skin.

Water crashed into the walls.

Air swirled in a violent spiral, kicking up the chairs and medical supplies.

The floor split, sprouting life all around us.

Pink butterflies burst into existence, glittering as they fluttered through the writhing elements unleashed in the delivery room.

This wasn’t me, but my *child*.

I didn’t have time to process what this all meant. All I knew was that my son needed me right now to bring him into the world, and no matter if I died

trying, I would succeed.

All of my mates placed their hands on me, calming the inferno of elements as one final push gave me the sweetest relief. I held my breath and stared up at the ceiling as the swirling of colors mixed together, releasing bursts of sparkles like stars.

Then a cry sounded.

My son...

He was finally here.



“Congratulations,” a dark voice whispered from the shadows of Claire’s room. “The perceptions of the medical staff have all been altered.”

I didn’t know Shade well, but he came highly recommended by Aflora and Zeph. They told me if anyone could help us clean up this mess, it was the secretive Midnight Fae with a penchant for playing with time and memories. “Did Kyros help you?” I asked him, very aware of his close friendship with the Paradox Fae.

“If he did, I wouldn’t tell you,” he replied, his lips curling as he stepped out from the shadows. “But everything is as it should be.”

I nodded. We’d already handled the elemental mess left behind from Claire’s childbirth. Now she rested peacefully in the bed with her son cradled against her chest. Cyrus sat beside her, his fingers shifting through her hair as he closely watched Shade. Titus, Vox, and Sol all wore similarly guarded expressions.

Shade wasn’t just a Midnight Fae. I could sense the otherworldly energy pouring off him like thick bands of wispy smoke, suffocating all those in his presence.

“Do you require anything else?” he asked, arching a dark brow, his icy gaze flashing.

“We just needed the memories altered,” I replied.

He nodded and turned, as though to walk into the wall.

“Let us know what you want in return,” I added, uncertain of what else to say to him. We barely knew each other, and he never attended the meetings with Aflora.

Shade glanced back over his shoulder. “I don’t require anything,” he said. “My mate requested a favor. And I never say no to my mate.” His icy irises flashed again, an array of secrets brewing in their depths. “I have a feeling you understand.”

“I do,” I admitted.

“Good.” He smiled. “Congratulations again.”

With that, he vanished into the shadows. Literally.

I shivered, his inky magic leaving an imprint in the air that was severely at odds with my spirit essence. I had no idea how or why he’d mated Aflora, but it was clear that he worshipped the ground she walked on, which was good enough for me.

Sol, however, didn’t seem to agree, his scowl firmly in place. “Willow stump,” he muttered.

I arched a brow. “What?”

“Nothing,” he grumbled.

“Mmm?” Claire mumbled, stirring from her rest and causing the baby to awaken against her chest. Rather than cry, he lifted big blue eyes up at his mother before staring straight at Cyrus.

My lips twitched. “Yeah, he’s going to be bold.”

“Of course he is,” Cyrus cooed, smiling down at the little bundle. “He’s a future king.”

“King?” Claire repeated on a yawn, her long lashes fluttering open. “Oh. Yes. King. Hi there, little king. Oh, what a handsome little one you are.” She positively beamed, her sole focus on the tiny faeling.

He blinked his eyes back to her, his love and adoration evident in the way he worshipped her with that intelligent gaze.

She cocked her head. “It’s like he understands me.”

“He does,” Cyrus replied. “Faelings are a little different from human infants.”

She slowly drew her gaze to Cyrus. “A little different, like ‘nine-week pregnancies instead of nine months’ different?”

I bit my lip to keep from smiling.

Cyrus, however, didn’t bother to hide his grin. “Yeah, sort of like that.”

Her eyes narrowed. "I want a better explanation than that."

"How about we name him first?" he offered. "Then we can talk about the differences."

I crept forward, very interested in this conversation now. Not that I wasn't amused before, but this took precedence.

"Name?" she repeated, swallowing. "Oh, I... In all our preparation... I..."

"Shh," he hushed. "I haven't thought of one yet either. I wanted to meet him first before I decided."

"Do you have one in mind now?" she asked.

"Sort of." He studied the faeling, his gaze intense. "He's our Christmas baby, born in the Human Realm beneath a wave of all five elements. So he needs a strong name, one that represents his birth and his elemental status. What do you think about Storm?"

"That's not very Christmassy," she said slowly. "But he did create quite the catastrophe on his way out."

"He came in like a rough storm, yes," my brother agreed, his lips twitching. "I also thought of Frost because he created some ice on the ceiling that not even Titus could melt."

"He's going to be a handful," the Fire Fae said, his voice full of adoration. "I like Storm. It suits him."

"I like it, too," I admitted. "But I want Claire to love it."

She stared down at the baby. "What about Blizzard?" Her lips twisted. "No. That's too much. Hmm." Her expression turned pensive. "Jack is too plain. Winter isn't right, and Christmas doesn't fit."

"What about Ciro?" I suggested. "It's a variant of Cyrus, but it means 'of the sun.'"

Claire blinked at me, then down at the baby once more. "Ciro," she repeated, her expression brightening. "King Ciro."

"Prince Ciro," Cyrus corrected. "I'm still King Cyrus."

She beamed. "Yes, Prince Ciro. Oh, that's perfect. I love it." The baby seemed to agree, because he released a little giggle, which caused Claire's eyes to widen. "They can do that when they're this young?"

"Faeling," Cyrus reminded her.

But rather than demand he start listing all the differences for her, she just hummed in agreement and continued repeating, "Prince Ciro," to the little one in her arms.

Everyone smiled, pleased with the name.

And Cyrus turned his icy blue eyes up to me, a hint of emotion flashing in his depths.

He knew why I suggested that name.

It wasn't just because of the similarity to his name, but to Cira—our mother.

We rarely spoke about her, as she passed when we were much younger, but she forever lived in our hearts. Just like our mate. And now, baby Ciro.

“Merry Christmas, Prince Ciro,” our mate murmured, her gaze shining with tears as she looked up at all of us. “Merry Christmas, guys.”

“Merry Christmas, Claire,” we all echoed, dropping in to kiss her on the cheek and mouth.

“And happy birthday, Ciro,” I added, giving the little one a nuzzle to his nose. “Now be a good boy and let your mom get some sleep. She's more than earned it.”

CLAIRE



“I think we should go with the multicolor Christmas tree,” Vox said, grinning at a sweaty Sol, who had just spent the last several minutes growing a selection of trees in our living room.

He’d mimicked the standard evergreen tree, then created one with pure white ferns similar to what was in our backyard, and finally a third one—his latest invention—a tree displaying multiple color pigments twisting along the branches. It really was impressive.

“The baby definitely likes multicolor best, right, Claire?” Vox glanced back at me, his silver-rimmed irises twinkling.

Of course, we didn’t really need a Christmas tree for New Year’s Eve, but Winter Solstice was in full swing back in the Elemental Fae realm, and I’d been rather occupied on our Christmas Day in the Human Realm.

Not that I was complaining.

Now that we’d returned to our Academy home, my son suckled at my breast, content as he made little sounds of enjoyment while I observed the tree-selection process.

“I’m afraid Vox is right,” I told Sol, who still had a burp cloth on his shoulder—a permanent fixture he refused to remove. He loved holding the baby, and I wasn’t one to deprive him of it. Whenever my arms grew tired, my rock was there to hold our son for me.

Sol gave me a soft smile. “You’re lucky that you’re pretty,” he said as he

leaned down and tapped the raw earth exposed through our ruined floor. He glanced at the babe at my breast. "And you're lucky that you're cute, Ciro." Then he sighed. "More trees coming up."

The ground trembled while Sol worked, and I chuckled, delighted by the display of reds, greens, yellows, and purples that shot out from the branches, a new trick I was intent on learning.

Cyrus and Exos entered the room, my water mate rubbing his temples. "Who let the Earth Fae loose again? I just had the floor repaired."

Titus walked in from the kitchen, shaking a bottle as he elbowed Cyrus on his way to me. "You act like you don't have the funds," he teased, then handed me the supplemental formula.

I pinched my breast to unlatch my son's mouth, then I readied the bottle sparking with embers in its milk. I smiled up at Titus, grateful that my mates continued to help me supplement magic for our son.

The baby complained until I offered the bottle's nipple, and then he latched on, making me chuckle. "Greedy one, aren't you?"

"Insatiable," Cyrus agreed as he came to me and kissed the crown of my head. "I can't imagine where he gets that from."

My lips curled, amused. "No idea."

His lips moved to my ear. "Aren't you going to ask where we've been?"

I blinked. "Why would I...?" My mouth dropped open. "Oh, Fae! Was the vote today?"

Cyrus grinned. "It was."

"Why didn't you remind me?" I demanded.

"You and Ciro were napping, and we didn't want to ruin it," Exos replied. "So we attended to oversee the vote."

I waited, but neither of them continued. "And?"

Ciro's nose scrunched at my tone, then he went back to sucking on the bottle a half second later. The little guy knew what his priorities were, just like my mates. Which was why I didn't get mad that they hadn't woken me. Because I probably wouldn't have wanted to leave Ciro anyway. It was too soon.

"The vote passed," Cyrus finally said, his lips curling. "No one voted against it. The Interrealm Fae Academy project can officially begin."

I jumped up in excitement, then immediately stopped as Ciro gurgled in response. It took me a second to realize he was giggling around his bottle.

Vox walked over, cooing at the little man, and took him from me so I

could properly react, which included hugging Exos and Cyrus extra hard. Then kissing them within an inch of my life. And also promising a whole slew of dirty things in their minds.

“I’m holding you to that,” Cyrus said.

“I would expect nothing less,” I replied, grinning like a loon. “Oh, I can’t believe it passed!” I knew they’d gotten the Hell Fae to somehow agree, but hadn’t heard any of the details yet. Mostly because they’d delivered the news as I was going into labor. Still, I couldn’t be more thrilled that they’d pulled this off for me. I really did have the best mates in the world.

“I told you to trust us,” Cyrus murmured. “We’re good at negotiating.”

“I know,” I deadpanned. “Very good.”

“The best, actually,” Exos said, his tone indicating he meant it.

Titus grunted, then took Ciro from Vox and started humming him a little fae ballad, his gaze filled with love and adoration for the now-grinning faeling in his arms.

I smiled, my heart bursting with warmth. All of my mates helped with every single task, even diaper changes. And I never even had to ask.

Seriously, I was probably the luckiest woman in the world. And it made me just so incredibly grateful for them and their support system and their love.

Just as I was grateful for my multiple Christmas celebrations as Sol finished his multicolored forest of trees. Cyrus took our son as Vox and Titus went to work adding magical ornaments, all of them glittering in the setting sun, something Ciro found just as mesmerizing as I did.

It really was a merry Christmas. My favorite one yet. “You guys are so screwed,” I realized out loud, laughing. “There’s no way another holiday will ever beat this one.”

Titus’s eyes gleamed with embers as Exos gave me a smoldering look of his own.

“Don’t be so sure about that, little queen,” Cyrus murmured. “This mate-circle is only just getting started.”

EPILOGUE

CYRUS



TEN MONTHS LATER

“So, when are we doing this?” Titus asked, his eyes burning with intrigue. “Because we’re definitely starting with the orgasm trial. I deserve a rematch.”

I smirked, amused by Titus’s confidence that he would win this time around. And maybe he would, but one glance at the rest of our mate-circle proved he was going to have his work cut out for him.

Sol sported his permanent burp cloth and a record for the most bottle feedings. It seemed the fae’s rumbling heartbeat put our son at ease.

Vox held the diaper-changing record, to which we were all immensely grateful.

Titus could always make the faeling laugh, even without trying. My son found his aggression amusing—just as I did.

Exos constantly knew what my son needed, regardless of what it was. His spirit had intertwined with the child, giving them a link through their mother that I adored.

And then there was me. I could always calm Ciro no matter his discord, able to lull him to sleep with a push of tranquility and peace—a gift that came to me whenever I thought of Claire.

If one fae child was like this, then I looked forward to more.

All of us were ready for round two. Except for maybe Claire. Which was why we'd devised a longer trial this time around.

"We tied on the orgasm trial, Firefly," I reminded him, enjoying his flare of aggression at the nickname.

Yes, I'd call him that until the end of time.

I loved fucking with him in every possible way.

"You're disqualified this time around," Titus informed me, his green eyes burning with challenge. He stabbed a finger at my chest, making me grin. "I don't think you should even get to participate."

Oh, I very much was going to participate, even if it wasn't for points. I didn't need an excuse to fuck Claire.

Igniting Titus was just a side bonus.

"I thought you wanted a rematch?" I taunted him.

His jaw ticked in response. "You're going down, Royal Jackass."

My lips twitched. "I only kneel for Claire."

"So you say," he replied. "But I'm going to change that. One day."

"In your dreams," I agreed. "Sure."

"Never—"

"We need different trials," Sol interjected, tapping his lip. "How about a gardening trial?"

"Like you wouldn't have an edge there," Vox said, rolling his eyes.

"An Elemental trial," Exos suggested. "One where each of us is tested based on our affinity." He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall of the empty nursery, sending a new flurry of purple butterflies to dance against Titus's drifting embers. "After the last phase three mating, I think a magical endurance trial would absolutely be in order."

We all shifted our feet as we recalled that experience. Yes, that was something I very much wanted to do again.

Claire cleared her throat, glowering at us as she dripped water onto the floor by the doorway. "I hope you guys aren't talking about what I think you're talking about. It's not fair to conspire when I drop our son off for a visit with his grandmother." She flicked her wrist, sending more droplets scattering. "He still has some serious separation anxiety. Fae help my mother, but that woman is a saint for watching him."

Titus slipped his arm around her waist, sending a lasso of flames to wrap around her chest. "Who can blame him? I don't like being separated from you either," he murmured. "Although, now that you're free, I suggest that I

dry you off, starting by removing your clothes.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, lighting herself on fire to dry her own clothes. It served as a statement to remind us all that her elements were fully functional once more. “You can’t distract me. I know what you’re up to.”

Well, that certainly sounded like a challenge to me.

Titus seemed to agree, because he nipped at her. “Our faeling needs a little brother or sister, maybe one who can keep his elemental affinity in check?” he suggested, referring to her previously drenched state. My son had learned how to splash his magic, and he particularly loved dousing us with the magical waves.

I loved it.

Claire, not so much.

“I’m not ready,” she said, her words holding a flat tone to them as she accessed her fire magic to dry out her hair.

I scooped her into my arms, guessing that her reservations came from how many surprises she’d endured the last time. We certainly could have done a better job of preparing her for a fae birth, but I wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. “We know what to expect this time around,” I assured her, running my thumb along her lower lip. “I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but we’ve proved that you don’t have to do this alone, little queen.”

She sighed. “Yes, you have. That’s not the problem.” She rested her cheek against my shoulder, her gaze growing distant. “I’m just afraid of neglecting him when a new faeling takes the spotlight, you know? I want my son to get all the love he needs.”

Vox chuckled. “Claire. You have five mates who adore you, and you’re worried about sharing your love?”

She pursed her lips. “I guess it does sound silly when you put it that way.”

She held out her hand, taking Sol’s extended fingers as she surveyed our mate-circle. She’d never left anyone out, and I knew she would be able to share her love with five faelings without any issue.

Maybe even more.

“Would you like to hear about the new trials?” I asked, trailing my fingers south. “I think you’ll like them.”

“Prolonged trials,” she immediately said, spinning in my arms to face everyone else.

My eyebrow arched as I met Exos’s gaze. His expression told me he had

the exact same thought as I did.

She's already thought about this. Which meant she'd already accepted the inevitable, at least on some level.

Good.

That would make this much simpler.

"I'm still not ready for another faeling yet," she added. "Pregnancy and birth suck. You're going to have to convince me to do it again."

"You didn't enjoy phase three?" I asked against her ear as I settled my hands on her hips.

She shivered. "Okay, that... that doesn't count."

"Doesn't it?" Titus closed in on her front, running his finger down her chest, blazing a line that cut through her shirt. "Can we start working on the convincing now?"

"I..." Her lips parted when Vox and Sol came to her side, their hands roaming along her exposed flesh. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Sol repeated, cupping her breast. "And how would you like us to convince you, little flower?"

"Orgasms," she breathed, arching into his touch as he pinched her nipple through the fabric. "Lots and lots of orgasms."

I pressed my arousal into her backside, fitting against her with the anticipation of meeting her every desire. "That can be arranged."

Titus growled, nipping at her throat. "And this time I plan on winning."

I grinned. "Then let the trials begin."

Claire released a sigh as I slid my touch south again to move her panties aside, allowing Titus the access he required. Perhaps I'd give him a head start.

Her legs quivered as she released a delicious whimper. "Well, happy holidays to me...", she said. *Again.*



The End

Curious about Kalt and his Winter Fae triad? Check out [Winter Fae Queen!](#)

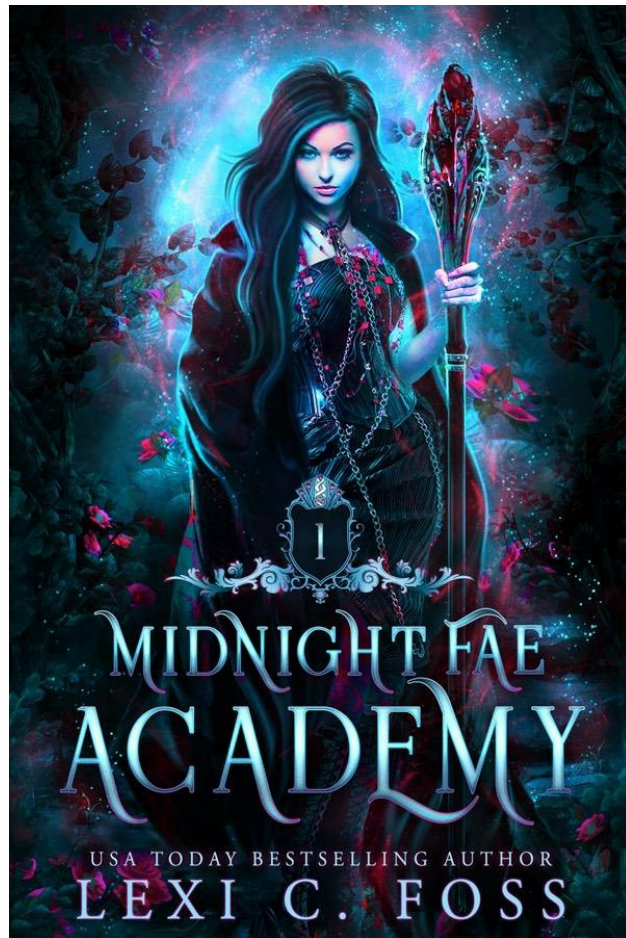
Want more Lance? You can read all about him in [Candela](#),
a Silver Springs why-choose story.

Other Fae World Series:

[Midnight Fae Academy: Vampire Why-Choose Romance](#)
[Fortune Fae Academy: Omegaverse Why-Choose Romance](#)

You met Aflora in Elemental Fae Academy. Now she's about to meet the Dark Fae of the world, and she's not at all happy about it...

Welcome to Midnight Fae Academy.
Home of the Dark Arts.
Vampires.
And cruelly handsome fae.



A forbidden bite led to my capture and recruitment.

There are no flowers here.
No life.
Only death.

I'm an Earth Fae who doesn't belong here.
They can play their little mind games all they want, but I'm going to find a way back to my elemental world. Even if it kills me.

Except Headmaster Zephyrus is one step ahead of my every move.
Prince Kolstov won't stop cornering me.
And Shadow—the reason I'm in this damn mess to begin with—haunts my dreams.

My affinity for the earth is dying and being replaced by something more sinister. Something powerful. Something deadly.

The Midnight Fae believe this is my fate.
They claim that I was “recruited” for a purpose.
To battle a rising presence.
Or to die trying.

I don't owe them a damn thing. But if I have to pass their trials to find my way home, then so be it. I survived a plague and far worse in the Elemental Fae realm. An ominous energy? Please. What a joke.

Give it your best shot.
I'm waiting.
And don't you dare bite me.
Or I'll make you regret it.

Author Note: This is a dark paranormal reverse harem series with bully romance (enemies-to-lovers) elements. Despite Aflora's opinions on the matter, there will definitely be biting. Shadow, aka Shade, guarantees it. This book ends on a cliffhanger.

[Book One of Midnight Fae Academy](#)

You met Gina in Elemental Fae Academy. Find out what she's really up to in [Fortune Fae Academy](#)...



I never asked to be an Omega.

I'm a Fortune Fae—I see the future. But I didn't see this coming.

My Alpha will stop at nothing to possess me and has dragged me all the way to Fortune Fae Academy to join the other wide-eyed Omegas-in-training. He believes I'll survive--and I hope he's right.

He also believes I'll kneel at his feet.
He couldn't be more wrong about that.

I don't need three broody Betas and an asshole Alpha telling me what to do.
When I graduate the Academy as an ascended Omega, I'm rejecting my
mate-circle and getting the hell out of here.

Except there's one slight problem. My Alpha has seen the future too... and
he knows something I don't.

Whatever he thinks is going to happen, his cruel smirk says I'm not going
anywhere.

*Fortune Fae Academy is Book 1 in a Reverse Harem Omegaverse Romance.
Be warned there are obsessive males who will stop at nothing to claim their
fated mate. As this is a series, book 1 ends on a cliffhanger.*

LEXI FOSS

The logo features a stylized owl with grey and white feathers, golden eyes, and a golden crescent moon on its forehead. The owl is positioned behind the letters 'X' and 'F' of the name 'LEXI FOSS'. The letters are in a serif font, with the 'X' and 'F' being larger and more prominent. The owl's wings are spread out, and there are some golden lines and dots around it, suggesting a celestial or magical theme.

USA Today Bestselling Author Lexi C. Foss loves to play in dark worlds, especially the ones that bite. She lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with her husband and their furry children. When not writing, she's busy crossing items off her travel bucket list, or chasing eclipses around the globe. She's quirky, consumes way too much coffee, and loves to swim.

Want access to the most up-to-date information for all of Lexi's books? Sign-up for her newsletter [here](#).

Lexi also likes to hang out with readers on Facebook in her exclusive readers group - [Join Here](#).

Where To Find Lexi:
www.LexiCFoss.com



Also by Lexi C. Foss

Blood Alliance Series - Dystopian Paranormal

[Chastely Bitten](#)

[Royally Bitten](#)

[Regally Bitten](#)

[Rebel Bitten](#)

[Kingly Bitten](#)

[Cruelly Bitten](#)

Blood Alliance Standalones - Dystopian Paranormal

[Blood Day](#)

[Crave Me](#)

Dark Provenance Series - Paranormal Romance

[Heiress of Bael \(FREE!\)](#)

[Daughter of Death](#)

[Son of Chaos](#)

[Paramour of Sin](#)

[Princess of Bael](#)

[Captive of Hell](#)

Elemental Fae Academy - Reverse Harem

[Book One](#)

[Book Two](#)

[Book Three](#)

[Elemental Fae Queen](#)

[Winter Fae Queen](#)

Hell Fae - Reverse Harem

[Hell Fae Captive](#)

[Hell Fae Warden](#)

[Hell Fae Commander](#)

Hell Fae Prince

Hell Fae King

Immortal Curse Series - Paranormal Romance

Book One: Blood Laws

Book Two: Forbidden Bonds

Book Three: Blood Heart

Book Four: Blood Bonds

Book Five: Angel Bonds

Book Six: Blood Seeker

Book Seven: Wicked Bonds

Book Eight: Blood King

Immortal Curse World - Short Stories & Bonus Fun

Elder Bonds

Blood Burden

Assassin Bonds

Mershano Empire Series - Contemporary Romance

Book One: The Prince's Game

Book Two: The Charmer's Gambit

Book Three: The Rebel's Redemption

Midnight Fae Academy - Reverse Harem

Ella's Masquerade

Book One

Book Two

Book Three

Book Four

Nightmare Fae - Reverse Harem

Their Lethal Pet

Noir Reformatory - Ménage Paranormal Romance

The Beginning

First Offense

[Second Offense](#)

[Third Offense](#)

[Fourth Offense](#)

Underworld Royals Series - Dark Paranormal Romance

[Happily Ever Crowned](#)

[Happily Ever Bitten](#)

X-Clan Series - Dystopian Paranormal

[X-Clan: The Origin](#)

[Andorra Sector](#)

[X-Clan: The Experiment](#)

[Winter's Arrow](#)

[Bariloche Sector](#)

V-Clan Series - Dystopian Paranormal

[Blood Sector](#)

[Night Sector](#)

[Eclipse Sector](#)

Vampire Dynasty - Dark Paranormal

[Violet Slays](#)

[Crossed Fates](#)

Other Books

[Scarlet Mark - Standalone Romantic Suspense](#)

[Rotanev - Standalone Poseidon Tale](#)

[Carnage Island - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance](#)

[Claim Me - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance](#)



Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance - Never Choose.

J.R. Thorn is a Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance Author who loves coffee, stormy weather, and heated discussions with her inner muse. She can often be found scribing her steamy stories in her writing cave far away from the prying eyes of her toddler, husband, two vocal cats, and canine pack!

www.AuthorJRThorn.com



Also By J.R. Thorn

All Books are Standalone Series listed by their sequential order of events

[Click Here for a regularly updated reading order with clickable links!](#)

Immortal Vices & Virtues

[Taste Me](#)

Elemental Fae Universe Reading List

[Elemental Fae Academy](#)

[Midnight Fae Academy](#)

[Fortune Fae Academy](#)

[Fortune Fae M/M Steamy Episodes](#)

[Candela](#)

[Winter Fae Queen](#)

[Hell Fae](#)

Blood Stone Series Universe Reading List

Recommended Reading Order is Below

Seven Sins (Books 1-3)

[Book 1: Succubus Sins](#)

[Book 2: Siren Sins](#)

[Book 3: Vampire Sins](#)

The Vampire Curse: Royal Covens (Books 1-3)

[Book 1: Her Vampire Mentors](#)

[Book 2: Her Vampire Mentors](#)

[Book 3: Her Vampire Mentors](#)

Fortune Academy (Part I)

[Year One](#)

[Year Two](#)

[Year Three](#)

Fortune Academy Underworld (Part II)

[Book 3.5: Burn in Hell](#)

[Book Four](#)

[Book 4.5: Burn in Rage](#)

[Book Five](#)

[Book Six](#)

[Book 6.5: Burn in Brilliance](#)

Fortune Academy Underworld (Part III)

[Book Seven](#)

[Book Eight](#)

[Book 8.5: Burn in Ruin](#)

[Book 8.666: Burn in Darkness](#)

[Book Nine](#)

[Book Ten](#)

Crescent Five

(Rejected Mate Wolf Shifter RH)

[Book One: Moon Guardian](#)

[Book Two: Moon Cursed](#)

[Book Three: Moon Queen](#)

[Book Four: Moon Kissed](#)

[Dark Arts Academy \(Vella\)](#)

Ongoing serial

[Book One \(KU\)](#)

[Book Two \(KU\)](#)

Unicorn Shifter Academy

• [Book One](#)

• [Book Two](#)

• *Book Three*

Non-RH Books (J.R. Thorn writing as Jennifer Thorn)

Noir Reformatory Universe Reading List

Noir Reformatory: The Beginning (Standalone)

Noir Reformatory: First Offense

Noir Reformatory: Second Offense

Noir Reformatory Turns RH from this point with the addition of a third mate

Noir Reformatory: Third Offense

Sins of the Fae King Universe Reading List

(Book 1) Captured by the Fae King

Learn More at www.AuthorJRThorn.com