



MJ MAY

Perfectly  
Charmed  
Pixie

# *Perfectly Charmed Pixie*

PARSNIP'S STORY

MJ MAY

# *Contents*

## Perfectly Charmed Pixie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Like What You've Read?](#)

[Available and Upcoming Works](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Author Bio](#)

Perfectly Charmed Pixie

Parsnip's Story

MJ May

Copyright 2023 MJ May


All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser only. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locals is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by cheriefox.

Edited by Michelle Rascon of Rascon Revisions.

Proofreading by Hannah VanVels Ausbury.

 Created with Vellum

# Chapter One

## *PARSNIP*

Virginia. It wasn't the worst place I'd gone for a job. It wasn't the best either. The place would probably look better decked out in summer colors. Winter was called drab for a reason.

I shivered but not from the cold. Comparing summer's spectacular beauty to winter's equally dismal solitude hit a little too close to home.

"At least it's not Minnesota," Divia said, her voice muffled and her head down, scrolling through her phone. "It's about fifty degrees colder there."

I didn't give a shit what the temperature was in Minnesota. I wasn't *in* Minnesota. I was in Virginia and would be for the foreseeable future. Episodes of *Interspecies Habitat* took as long as they took. Sometimes, it was a quick fix. A wall up here, a fancy crypt there, an enclosed room with its own ventilation system to stem the scent of rotting meat...and voilà, problem solved.

Peaches's and Lucroy's issues were a little different. That was the whole point of dragging the production crew here. There wasn't a recorded mating between a pixie and a vampire in known history. It simply wasn't done. Until now. I had no idea what changed, what brought them together, and, more to the point, what made them think forming an eternal bond was a good idea. That wasn't my business. My business was dealing with the aftermath—the practical aspect of making



that bonding work within the confines of their living conditions.

“What in the hell is a nature pixie doing bonded to a vampire?” Mike asked. Most of our production crew was human, and Mike was one of those unfortunate creatures. Humans loved technology and were better suited to professions involving electronics. Mike’s technical skills involved the camera.

“No idea,” Divia answered. “And none of our business.” My boss echoed my own personal thoughts.

“Yeah.” Mike scratched his head, shifting a scraggly chunk of chestnut brown hair. The color wasn’t anything special. No pixie would be caught dead with hair that color. “But it’s weird.”

“No stranger than the brownie and troll we filmed two years ago,” I answered.

That had been a challenge. The house needed to be large to accommodate the troll, but the furniture, countertop height, and fixtures were a nightmare. In the end, we’d settled on two of almost everything, set at different heights and sizes. The only thing there’d been one of was the bed.

I shut down my imagination. I didn’t want to think about what the size difference meant during intimate situations. I also didn’t want to imagine what going to sleep and waking up next to putrid troll breath would be like. Brownies packed a big magical punch. Maybe this one had come up with something to stem the stench.

“The sun will set soon,” Divia said, pulling her eyes away from her phone long enough to glance at the horizon. While pushing her white-blond hair behind a finely tipped ear, Divia grinned. The tips of her jagged teeth glinted in the fading light. She looked every bit the siren she was born to be. Ghostly pale skin, eyes barely containing a hint of ice blue, and a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth that were far from welcoming. The fact male humans continually fell for sirens’ mesmerizing call rode a fine line between sad and idiotic.

“I heard this vamp tolerates the sun better than most,” Mike said, loosely holding his camera at his side.

I wasn't sure we'd film anything tonight, but Mike was always at the ready. Sometimes it felt like his camera was an extension of his body. Removing it would be akin to chopping off a limb.

I thought about Mike's comment before adding my own. “My understanding is that Lucroy Moony is over six hundred. Not the oldest vampire around but plenty aged. They get stronger the longer they're *alive*.”

The politically correct term was second life. Vampires considered their first lives the time when their own blood filled their veins. Their second lives depended on borrowed blood to continue their existence. I didn't care much for semantics. Others could debate how *alive* vampires were. As long as this one was willing to pay for my services, I couldn't have cared less where the living/dead line landed.

“True.” Divia finally pocketed her phone. I wasn't fooled. Her hearing was excellent, and she'd know the minute it dinged with a new message. “But I think there may be more to the story in this case.” Divia's waist-long hair slid across her shoulder as her head shifted to the side, pooling around her right arm.

My wings fluttered, spreading aqua-colored pixie dust. I'd made sure to position myself downwind. Divia wasn't as affected by pixie dust, but human nostrils found it very irritating. I had no desire to see snot dripping down Mike's face. Been there, done that, and didn't care for a repeat.

“Are we making that part of the show?” I asked, unsure if I wanted to go there or not.

Divia shrugged. “Not sure yet. That will be up to Mr. Moony and Peaches. I won't go out of my way to out something they don't want to be shared. That's not the kind of show I produce.”

I stiffened, wings flipping out and making a smacking noise. I knew the reputation social pixies had, and it was well-

earned. What wasn't earned was the accusatory tone marring Divia's words.

"That was uncalled for, Divia." I kept my voice flat, careful to hide the fury lurking below. Pixies weren't supposed to get angry. We weren't supposed to be aggressive or forceful. Sometimes it was difficult to remember what I was *supposed* to be.

Momentarily silent, Divia inclined her head ever so slightly. "You're right, Parsnip. Apologies."

My wings flapped aggressively, spreading pixie dust slightly farther than I would have liked. Silently accepting my producer's apology, my feet lifted off the ground, my body hovering a foot off the cold earth. My pixie boots offered enough soft warmth that my feet were toasty. The heavy, cream-colored shawl I had wrapped around my shoulders kept the cool breeze from touching my body. Despite that, I still wanted to get inside.

"I'd like to get to work," I said, more than ready to do what needed to be done so I could go back to my rental house.

I'd contacted Lance again. He'd promised a new batch of charms would be waiting for me outside the front door when I got back later tonight. My warlock better not be wrong. The activated charm around my thigh had enough juice to make it through the next couple of days, maybe four, although I thought that would be cutting things too close for comfort.

I also needed to repaint my finger and toenails tonight. I'd noticed a chip in the dark aqua coloring on my toenails. My pixie boots would cover the flaw, but I didn't want to become dependent on them. If the polish on my toenails was chipped, it wouldn't be long before my fingernails followed, and that wasn't something I could cover as easily.

*Normal* pixies didn't need to polish their nails. They were naturally colored the same as their hair. Fingernails were a lighter shade while toenails mirrored the tips of our hair and were the absolute darkest shade.

My nails were no different. But their color wasn't acceptable. Just like my hair and eyes. It was amazing what a stack of cash and a good warlock could accomplish.

*And a bit of your life force*, my brain unhelpfully added. I slapped a muzzle on that argument, just as I'd done for the past six years. Nothing in life was free, and if a shortened life span was part of the cost of living my best pixie life, then my internal conscience could go fuck itself.

Divia got her phone back out and shot off a text. She repocketed her phone within seconds and said, "We're good to go. Mr. Moony just texted me back. He's awake."

"Then what are we waiting for?" I flew toward Peaches's boundary. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. A hum against my skin, faintly itchy but not painful. I had no illusion that anyone who came up against the barrier felt the same thing. You didn't mess with a bonded pixie's territory. We were welcome guests, and that made all the difference.

I let Divia and Mike go before me, allowing my pixie dust to scatter behind me harmlessly. Passing through Peaches's barrier barely sent a shiver down my spine. Divia had the same reaction. Mike probably felt nothing.

We could have driven the car up, but I'd wanted to get a feel for the land. Divia had too. It was part of the process. I knew her mind was working, coming up with the best plan to showcase where Peaches and Lucroy lived—how they lived. Divia would work her magic and make Peaches's home appear even more wondrous than it was.

Gravel crunched under Divia's and Mike's feet, the sound muffled in the cold air. Ahead, I could make out a small cottage. My wings stuttered. I'd known the house was small, but this... I couldn't fathom it. *This is where the king of the Southeast vampire nest would live? Why?*

Vampires were notoriously wealthy, especially ones of Lucroy Moony's age. He could afford to build a mansion out here, but that's not what we'd been contacted about. A small, modest underground living space. Nicely appointed but minimal. That's what Lucroy Moony wanted.

My gaze meandered, taking in the extent of the land, of the orchard trees. There was so much room. Why not use it? Stuck out here in the sticks, they might as well have a palatial place to call home.

I shook my head, floating my aqua ombre hair around, the tips catching in the breeze. I didn't understand nature pixies any more than they understood social ones. And don't even get me started on home-and-hearth pixies. I couldn't even begin to imagine it. They actually liked cleaning. I wanted to gag. Who in their right mind wanted to do that? If it weren't for the disability I hid, I would have hired a housekeeper with the first paycheck I received.

A pang of irritated disappointment lanced through my chest. It wasn't that I couldn't financially afford to hire someone; I couldn't afford it in other ways. How could I explain the silvery gray hairs a housekeeper was sure to find littering the bathroom floor and plugging up the bathroom drain? I couldn't, and that was the problem.

The dim glow of lights inside the cottage peeked through the structure's ample windows. The cottage had been built with a nature pixie in mind. I doubted the orchard's owners ever dreamed a vampire would share the space.

A brighter stream of light illuminated the front of the cottage as the door opened. Golden pixie dust shimmered in the backlight as Peaches flew out the door. Striding behind, hands tucked into sleek, black dress pants, was Lucroy Moony.

"Oh my goddess, I can't believe you're here," Peaches gushed.

Peaches's adoration hit me in the chest, warming me. His words gave me an added hit of power. Social pixies lived to be adored, fawned over, and held upon the highest pedestal possible. No matter the changes I'd suffered during my captivity, that part of me had never wavered. My outward appearance might have changed, but I was still a social pixie—heart and soul.

My smile was automatic, not even a bit forced. "Peaches." I held my arms open wide, and he immediately flew into them.

Each of us was careful of the other's wings. I'd never met Peaches before, but all pixies were social creatures. We were the opposite of touch averse.

Pulling back, Peaches immediately flew to his beloved. Snuggling up close, Lucroy wrapped an arm around Peaches's waist, pulling him in tight and pressing his lips against Peaches's temple. A pang of sharp jealousy hit me at the genuine affection they shared. That jealousy dissipated when the tilt of Peaches's head revealed recent bite marks from Lucroy's feeding. I had no idea how Peaches stomached being Lucroy's food source.

My mind traveled back to a place I wished I could bleach from memory. I was on the floor, staring through metal bars. I could barely twitch my wings, could hardly produce the dust Jed craved. The ogre became desperate, with violence around every corner. I was fading and could no longer produce the dust his addiction needed. His looming figure, fetid breath, yellowed teeth, and sallow skin swam before me. Early on, I'd prayed to the goddess for release. At that moment, all I prayed for was death.

Peaches's carefree voice pulled me from the dark memories. "Lucroy's never seen *Interspecies Habitat*. Can you believe that?"

I blinked rapidly.

Only Lucroy's slightly narrowed gaze gave any hint that another noticed.

Divia laughed, the sound like tinkling bells.

Mike shifted, and I figured he was trying to get his stiffened cock into a more comfortable position. Mike was the only male besides me on the team. Sometimes he wore earplugs. He'd either forgone them today or left them back in the car. Sucked to be him.

"Actually, I can easily believe that, Peaches," Divia crooned, completely nonplussed that one of our latest clients had no idea what we did. "My understanding is that Mr.

Moony is over six hundred. Most that age care little for television.”

“True,” Lucroy answered, his voice cool and liquid smooth. I suddenly understood Peaches’s attraction. “I was very interested when television and movies first appeared, but I’m afraid they’ve lost their appeal...or, at least, their novelty. I do not mean any offense by it.”

Divia waved him off. “And none was taken.”

I quietly listened while Divia introduced Mike. It looked like he’d had some time to get his libido under control now that Divia’s voice was back to what most would consider normal. “And given your earlier reaction, Peaches, I believe you are well aware of who Parsnip is.”

Peaches’s face flushed as he nodded vigorously. “I enjoy your show. It’s amazing what you can do. I hope you’ll be able to help Lucroy and me too.”

It was a painfully sweet notion. “I’ll do my best,” I promised. It wasn’t even false. I always did my best for my clients. It was hardwired into me. Do your best, don’t disappoint, be perfect... Social pixies were filled to the brim with those ideals.

“I know you will. I—” Peaches cut off as what looked like fireflies darted through the air, coming in at incredible speeds.

*Sprites!* my brain screamed as panic set in.

“I wondered how long it would take them to realize we had visitors. And another pixie at that.” Peaches didn’t sound alarmed at all.

What in the hell was wrong with him?

My feet thudded on the ground, wings dropping and pulling in tight. I took two, maybe five, steps back. I couldn’t imagine the horror visibly written across my face. My eyes felt impossibly, painfully wide.

“S-sprites,” I stuttered. “You didn’t tell me there were sprites. I—” I had no idea what to say.

It took every bit of control I had to keep my wings pinned to my back. Instinct told me to fly away, to zoom out of Peaches's orchard and back into the car. I could slam the door shut, locking out these little pixie dust thieves.

I couldn't stand the idea of anything cannibalizing my pixie dust. I'd had enough stolen already. And that didn't even begin to touch the knowledge that my dust might taste different now. It was magically enhanced to change its color. Would the sprites be able to tell? Would they immediately know something about me was wrong?

High-pitched clicks and squeaks slammed into my brain, making me cringe. By the look on Divia's face, I wasn't the only one. Mike just stood there, eyes wide and sparkling with childlike joy. I never thought I'd be jealous of a human. I was wrong.

"Holy shit, that's amazing." Mike's words echoed the wonder-like gaze lighting up his face.

"That's one word for it," Peaches answered, tone soft as he held out his hand and two sprites landed on his palm. "They've been a great addition to the orchard, but sometimes they can be a little mischievous and invasive." Peaches tilted his head, eyelids narrowed. "Now, don't give me that. You know I'm right."

Was he talking to them? How in the goddess's name could he understand a word they said?

"How...?" I started, unsure how to end.

Lucroy tapped his ear and answered, "Translator. Witch-made. Peaches can understand what they are saying."

I sucked in a breath, tasting the fresh, crisp air on my tongue.

"They want to know if they can taste your dust," Peaches said, tone apologetic. "They live here, and I don't mind if they eat mine, but I—"

"No." The word was out of my mouth before I could think of a kinder way to phrase it. "Absolutely not," I followed up, unable to hold in my fear. Turning on Divia, I stabbed a finger



into her chest. “You didn’t say anything about sprites.” The words hissed through my barely parted teeth.

“I didn’t know,” Divia answered calmly. “They seem perfectly harmless though. I fail to see what the issue is, Parsnip.”

*She failed to see?* “That’s because you’re a damn siren and don’t produce pixie dust. They couldn’t care less about you.” Anxiety raised my voice, pitching it higher.

The sprites clattered, their sounds driving a stake into my brain.

“Hush,” Peaches said, talking to the sprites in his hand and surrounding us. “He doesn’t want you to taste his dust, and that’s the final word. You know the rules.”

The whizzing lights dimmed before they flew away, their flight path much slower than when they’d arrived.

“I’m sorry about that,” Peaches apologized immediately. “I should have thought to mention them, knowing you’re a pixie. I’ve just become so accustomed to them, and they don’t really cause any harm. If anything, it’s the opposite. The orchard has greatly benefited from having them here.”

Creaking limbs broke through the evening air. The crack of branches as they reached out for Peaches clear to every ear, even Mike’s.

Holding out his arms, palms up, Peaches flew a few feet off the ground, head thrown back. “They love the sprites,” Peaches hummed, sounding a little drunk. “My trees are happy to have them here, to provide shelter and protection.”

Mike’s sense of awe transferred to Peaches, and I couldn’t even blame him. There was nothing like a pixie in their natural, bonded environment. It was a thing of wonder. The next time I glanced in his direction, Mike had the presence of mind to lift up his camera and start filming. I didn’t think the pictures would do Peaches justice.

Clearing my throat, I pasted on my best smile. This one far faker than when I’d first arrived. “It’s okay. I’m sorry if I overreacted.” My heart still hammered. It would be a long

time before I got over the jolt of anxiety wildly thrumming through my veins. “It was just a surprise, that’s all. As long as they respect my boundaries, then it’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. It was about as far from fine as you could get, but I had a job to do, and I was a professional. I’d spent the last six years getting over my trauma, and damn it, I wouldn’t let my past derail my future.

Lowering back to the ground, Peaches immediately went to Lucroy. It was like they were attached by an invisible tether. Maybe they were. I had no idea how beloveds worked.

“If you wish to get out of our contract, I believe Peaches and I would both understand.” Lucroy’s practical, nonplussed tone soothed some of my anxiety.

Divia shot me a look, one that said I’d better get my shit under control, or else I’d be in for it later. It was the kind of look that demanded you suck it up and go along. At my slight nod, the creases around Divia’s lips eased.

“I believe we can easily work around the situation.” Divia allowed a bit of her honeyed siren voice through. I’m not sure if she did it on purpose or if it was merely instinct.

“Absolutely,” I chimed in, pushing all the false confidence I could manage into that one word.

“Excellent.” Lucroy tugged on Peaches’s waist, nuzzling against his neck before he turned and said, “Perhaps you’d like to look inside the house. We can sit and discuss what Peaches and I would like to change.”

“Of course.” Divia walked with purpose. “Please, lead the way.”

Peaches and Lucroy passed through the door first. Divia followed, along with Mike. I hung back, gaze fixed on the darkened orchard. Somewhere out there was a litany of sprites. They were greedy little gluttons, and I wanted nothing to do with them. Peaches said it was against the rules for them to eat my dust without my permission. Time would tell whether they followed those rules to the letter or not. Peaches might not

mind being lunch for sprites and vampires. Not many pixies could say the same.

## Chapter Two

*VANDER*

Could your head really explode? The more I dealt with the public, the more I wondered. The pounding sledgehammer banging away at the front of my skull suggested it was a distinct possibility. I wondered if Byx would be able to heal something like that. Probably not. She was a gifted brownie but still in training. She was also a little young to traumatize with an exploding head. Brain bits could be hell to clean up. I supposed that's where Muriel's Zombie Cleaning Service came into play. They were pretty cheap. Most likely, Byx could scrounge together enough money to pay to clean up the shop.

“Well, can you do it or not?”

With my forehead in my hand, I peered through my fingers at my latest customer. Human, Vera Livingston was pushing fifty, maybe sixty. She was still beautiful, although I sensed more than a half dozen magical spells lingering around her. Wealthy humans could afford to look good until the day they died. But charms only affected what was on the outside. No amount of magic could fix a wretched soul. And healing magic could only do so much too. Magic hadn't extended human life by more than a decade. Compared to other species, they still aged quickly and died young.

Maybe that was why humans were like this, why they tried to eke out every last bit of desire from the short lives they were allotted. It might explain a lot.

I sighed, long, deep, and full of regretful life choices. “Mrs. Livingston,” I started, “what you’re asking for is illegal.” I’d already told her that not once but twice. “It isn’t a matter of *if* I can do what you’re asking. It’s a matter of legality and, quite frankly, morality. I won’t do what you want.”

Vera didn’t like my answer any more this time than the last. She slapped a hand on the counter, her painted lips twisted, momentarily revealing a plethora of fine lines brought about by years of smoking. “You’re a fucking warlock. Don’t tell me you’ve got some haughty moral code.”

I stiffened, anger adding fuel to the battering ram in my skull. “I assure you, Mrs. Livingston, being a warlock hasn’t diminished my moral code.”

If anything, it had enhanced it.

Unwilling to believe me, Vera waved a hand. “Money can soothe a lot of morality issues.”

“For some, perhaps. But not for me. Feel free to find another witch or warlock to help you.”

“Witches are too goody-goody. I need a warlock, and you’re the best.”

It was a stereotype that seemed to have become ingrained within society. It was one of those known *truths* that weren’t true at all. Witches were good. They communed with nature and didn’t put out anything negative because it came back on them tenfold, blah, blah, blah. Warlocks were evil. We were the cruel, malicious side of magic. We boiled children for fun and liked to torture small creatures for shits and giggles.

Byx got me a sign for my office. It read, “You can’t fix stupid.” That was true enough. What you also couldn’t fix was willful ignorance. There was plenty of opportunity to learn. All you had to do was crack open a book, open an app on the internet, or visit the local prison system. Plenty of witches were incarcerated, right alongside warlocks gone bad. Not to mention any other species that had their own rotten apples.

The only thing Vera Livingston wasn't wrong about was that last bit. I was the best warlock around. That didn't mean I was the best in the world or even the country, but I wasn't humble enough not to acknowledge that I was as good as you would get around the Southeast.

"Be that as it may, I will not work a spell, charm, or even a hint of dust that will make your husband have a heart attack. Not even a little, bitty one."

Vera herself had thrown on that last part when she'd tried to tempt me into service. She seemed to think heart attacks could be doled out by degrees. While it was true that some were worse than others, I wasn't willing to take any chances. Besides, I didn't think her husband would think any type of heart attack was "little."

"You don't even know how much money I'm willing to give you." Shoulders square, Vera sat up straight as a board. Her designer pocketbook and heels had nothing on the diamonds set in platinum draped around her neck, dripping from her ears, and glinting on nearly every finger. Vera wasn't someone who believed in hiding her wealth.

"I don't need to know." Pushing my chair back, I placed my fingers on the counter, leaning over as I did.

I wasn't a small warlock. Most weren't. Genetically, we favored height and were often gangly youths. Muscle came later, and I was old enough that I had plenty to go around. I knew how to be physically intimidating...not that Vera truly had anything to worry about. I wouldn't harm her. Hell, if I'd wanted to hurt her, I'd have given her a rather personal and irritating rash.

"I've never been so insulted in my life." Vera stood, knuckles white as she gripped her pocketbook like I might reach over the counter and swipe it from her. "You can be assured that I will spread it far and wide that you are a shoddy warlock. No one with any standing will use your services again."

I smiled, my grin far from pleasant. "Go ahead, Mrs. Livingston. You saw the sign on your way into the store.

Cameras are on and operational for your protection. I've got everything recorded and happily sitting in the cloud. If you wanna besmirch my reputation, I'll be happy to return the favor. I wonder what Mr. Livingston will say when he finds out you want me to create a spell that will give him a heart attack as he's fucking his mistress. Moreover, I wonder what the police will have to say about that. Shall we find out?"

Bright spots of color filled Vera's cheeks with rage. It was a good thing she wasn't a witch. Human bravado always amazed me. They still hadn't gotten the memo that they were the lowest species in the pecking order. Nothing I did or said today would change that. Fairies knew that better than anyone.

With her cheeks puffed out, Vera Livingston looked about two seconds away from a stroke. The way things were going, it wouldn't be my head and brain matter we'd need to contact Muriel to clean.

I thought there would be more verbal accusations. Instead, Vera turned on her expensive heel and headed out the door. She tried slamming it, but the door's mechanics didn't allow it.

It took a few minutes for my shoulders to relax lower than the edges of my earlobes.

"That went well." Byx climbed on the stool I'd placed for her, allowing the small brownie a few feet in height. She still only came to my shoulder. "You want me to call the other shops, give the witches and warlocks there a heads-up?"

I grunted. "Don't bother with the witches. Vera seems to think that's a lost cause."

"Idiot," Byx grumbled. "I can think of at least three off the top of my head that might do what she's asking. On the down-low, of course."

"Of course," I parroted.

There was a slight pause before Byx asked, "She really want to off her husband?"

I rubbed my stubbled chin, realizing I needed a shave. "Possibly. Mostly I think she just wants to give him a good scare. She's got it in her brain that if he has a medical

emergency while intimately engaged with one of his mistresses, it might make him rethink his actions.”

“Moron,” Byx offered up this time. “Please tell me the ring Mamma gave you didn’t react to that human. Sweet goddess, that would be a nightmare.”

I double-checked the silver ring wrapped around my left index finger. The stone within remained pitch-black, the only color it had ever revealed. Sometimes I wondered if Byx’s mother, Georgiana, had been full of shit when she gave it to me.

“Still dark as night,” I answered, relief clear in my tone.

Byx shivered, and I struggled not to do the same. “Can you imagine being tied to *that* for the rest of your life?” Byx pointed toward the empty doorway, indicating the way Vera had exited. “I know they say finding your one and only is every warlock’s dream but...” Byx shivered more violently, unable to complete the thought, let alone the sentence.

“Well, thank Gaia, Vera Livingston isn’t my one and only.”

I stared at the quiescent ring, a final gift from Byx’s mother. Guilt ate at me. Georgiana had been dying from a disease that depleted her magic at the time. Warlocks and witches twisted magic, honed and refined it to a finite purpose. But some species *were* magic, and brownies were among the most magical. Georgiana hadn’t been able to survive without magic, and no amount of spellcraft changed that. Most likely, Georgiana had used up a few precious days of life crafting the ring innocently perched on my finger. *A final gift*, she’d said, *from one with the sight*.

Byx’s contemplative voice interrupted my personal guilt trip. “Why doesn’t she just divorce him? I don’t get why humans have to make things so complicated. Marriage isn’t like mating or bonding. That shit’s for life. It’s a magical connection that can’t be broken no matter what. But marriage is just a piece of paper. I mean, I get it if it’s a religious thing. Some humans don’t want to offend their god with divorce, but a lot of others... That’s not the motivation.”



“No idea. Thankfully, I’m not human.”

I left Byx standing there, staring at the front door as I turned and made my way back to the office. I needed and deserved a beer after that ordeal. My oversized, under-stuffed, cracked, faded leather chair sat in its usual corner, begging me to sit my ass down. I didn’t argue. Thankfully, I’d taken a good-sized swig of my drink. Otherwise, it probably would have spilled out the top.

“Just out of curiosity, how much did she offer?” Byx eased around the doorframe, hands clasped behind her back and a regretful look marring her face. Clearing her throat, she toed a piece of ragged carpet. “I’m just asking because...you know, the rent on this place isn’t cheap, and—”

“Rent’s just money. What Vera Livingston asked me to do would have cost my soul a hell of a lot more than cash.” I tipped my amber bottle, sucking down two-thirds before pulling it away from my lips.

“I get it.” Byx moved farther into the room. She had her own chair. The steps leading up to the elevated seat were haphazard, but being a brownie, Byx was all grace when she clambered into position across from me. “Really, I do,” she reiterated while pushing a section of dark brown hair off her forehead. Typically, Byx wore clips to hold it back. I wasn’t sure where they’d gone to today.

I stared over the edge of my beer and reassured, “I’ll get the money.” I wasn’t entirely sure how. Or, at least, I didn’t know how I’d get the money for rent and still have enough to feed my beer habit. Things worked out. They always did.

“I know.” Byx stared at her fingernails. “You know, I could always offer—”

“No.” I sat forward, slamming what was left of my drink on the floor. “Absolutely not. You’re too young and still in training.” I refused to allow Byx to start hocking her brownie wares. “I made a promise to your mamma, and I don’t intend to break it.”

Georgiana would crawl out of her grave and give me a dressing down my ego wouldn't be able to handle if I allowed her underaged and magically underdeveloped daughter to charge for brownie services. Byx showed great promise as a healer, but it took time and age for brownies to wield that kind of magical power without backlash.

The bottom line was Byx was twenty years too young.

Byx didn't see it that way. Crossing her arms, she huffed, "I've got plenty of juice."

"I'm not arguing that, and you damn well know it." Scooting forward, elbows planted on my knees, I gave Byx my full attention. "Look at me."

When Byx's eyes remained downcast, I placed a finger under her chin and lifted it, forcing her big brown eyes to gaze into my hazel ones.

"I know you're powerful. Another forty or fifty years and I'm gonna look like small potatoes next to you. But all that can wait. Take it from an expert, kid—don't rush it. You only get to be young and reckless once. You let me take care of things, and you do you. I've got us covered. Besides, anything extra you've got in the tank, you need to place in the reservoir. I'm not losing you like I did your mamma."

No one knew if the disease Georgiana died from was hereditary, but I wasn't taking any chances. With the help of a witch friend, we created a receptacle capable of holding Byx's magic. It was a reservoir of sorts, a safety net. If Byx inherited Georgiana's disease, we could siphon off her magic when she needed it most. I had no idea how long that would give her, but any extra time was worth it.

Blowing out a raspberry, Byx cracked a smile, a hint of sharp tooth slipping into view. "Yeah, I know. I just hate being a burden. I could do more, earn something to help out."

"You have never once been a burden. Never think that again."

I wished telling Byx that would stop the thoughts. I knew better. Guilt didn't work that way, even when it was

misplaced.

“I know.” Byx’s voice was too soft for my liking and didn’t exude the confidence I wished it did.

Regardless, I didn’t argue. “I’ve always been grateful Georgiana left you in my care. I’m not saying she wasn’t crazy to do it, but I’m not one to pass up a good offer. And you, Byx, were the best damn offer I’ve ever gotten.”

I wasn’t exaggerating even a little. Byx wasn’t a child. She hadn’t been a child when Georgiana died. Byx had been young though. She’d been too young to be alone and make her way in the world. Georgiana had relatives, other brownies that could have taken Byx in. She’d had choices, and she’d chosen me. I could have sat there all day debating the wisdom of that particular decision. But like I’d just said, I didn’t regret agreeing to watch over Georgiana’s only child. I loved Byx like she was my own.

“Mamma always did say you weren’t the brightest crayon in the box.” Byx punctuated her point with a dramatic eye roll.

“Yeah? Well, your mamma’s the one who left you with me, so what does that say about her?”

Byx’s surprise morphed into a smile that damn near split her face, and happy giggles quickly followed. “She’d zap you a good one if she heard you say that.”

“No doubt. Your mamma zapped me on more occasions than I’d like to remember.”

Georgiana had been a spitfire of a brownie. I’d been a young and a far stupider warlock when we met. I wouldn’t be half the warlock I was now if it hadn’t been for her guidance. I owed that brownie more than I could ever repay. I’d loved her like family and had been thunderstruck when I learned she was dying. I don’t know if I would have made it through if Byx hadn’t been with me or if I hadn’t needed to suck it up and get my shit together to care for her. Maybe Georgiana had known that. Maybe she’d left her daughter in my care more for my benefit than Byx’s.

Unfortunately, Georgiana had passed on, and I'd never be able to ask her.

Byx's laughter slowly sobered, and she asked seriously, "Do you really have enough work to pay the rent?"

I gave Byx's question the attention it deserved. Mentally thinking over the jobs I'd done and still had contracted. I added their values and gave a slow nod. "Not gonna lie, it'll be tight. But I've got enough." I sent a longing glance toward my nearly empty bottle of beer. Some things would definitely need sacrificing. The care of the brownie sitting before me wasn't one of them. I'd starve before I let Byx go without. Of that, I was certain.

## Chapter Three

### *PARSNIP*

Bed and breakfasts were nice and all, but those establishments' owners were too busy for my liking. Call me high maintenance, but when I was on location, Divia always made sure to rent me my own home. I liked the privacy.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. I was a social pixie. Large crowds should be my jam. They used to be. Before Jed.

My head hurt, and I was exhausted. That wasn't a surprise. Low-grade headaches and I were well acquainted. Lance said it was a side effect of triggering the charm I wore. Activating a charm required a small amount of my life force. Lance promised it wasn't much, maybe a week or two off my allotted total. It was a price I was more than willing to pay. What would a longer life of ridicule and condescension get me?

Thinking of my waning charm, I reached for my phone. Lance promised a new delivery of charms would be at my doorstep when I got back to my rental home tonight. The stoop was conspicuously absent of said box of charms.

With a quick click, I pulled up Lance's contact information. The phone rang and rang until it finally went to voicemail. I sat there, listening to the sound of Lance's grating voice. A lot of warlocks had deep, resonating voices. Not Lance. His high-pitched squeal made my head hurt worse.

When the prompt ended, I left a hasty message. "My charms aren't here. I need them ASAP." I hit the end button.

I never gave much information when I left Lance messages. I paid the warlock handsomely to keep his mouth shut, but that didn't mean others didn't have access to Lance's phone. I didn't need my secret leaked to the public due to stupidity.

Flattening my wings, I lay back on my temporary bed. It was comfortable enough. Not as soft as my bed at my brother's home, but it would do. Overall, I'd been pleasantly surprised by the accommodations in Rutherford Haven. It was...quaint. Not as large as most cities, but big enough to support a fair number of restaurants, bars, and clothiers. Peaches said I should make a trip to Petal's Posh Pants. He said they specialized in pixie clothes and had the finest spider silk available.

Pixies could never have enough clothes, and I liked shopping. Pulling up the internet on my phone, I searched for the store and found it easily enough. If the photos were anything to go by, it did look like they had an array of colorful options. I tended to stay away from the brighter colors. My aqua-colored hair and wings were bright enough, and the color clashed with several others. My options were limited, but I always chose the finest fabric and the best color to accentuate my *natural* pixie beauty.

I stared down at my nails, remembering that I needed to repaint them. Old hurts and anger rushed into my chest, weighing me down. Once upon a time, this had been my natural color. I'd been this bright, this beautiful. Jed had stolen my color. He'd taken so much from me. Fairy law had been harsh, but nothing would take away what had already been done.

I'd been told not to hold too much of a grudge toward Jed. He was addicted. It was a disease that had taken hold of his mind. Had he not been addicted, Jed wouldn't have caged me. He wouldn't have held me captive for months on end—alone. I wouldn't have faded. I wouldn't be...this...

I threw my phone across the bed. It landed with a soft thump. I'd gotten tired of my therapist telling me that, like I

should feel sorry for Jed, that I should have sympathy for my captor. Fuck that. I was the victim, not that ogre.

I silently fumed, repetitively fisting my hands. My anger didn't do any good. It never did. Night after night, I swallowed it down. I was a social pixie. We didn't show negative emotions. I couldn't afford to be angry or scared. I had to be shimmering and full of joy. I had to always be my best and give the world what it wanted, what I needed to survive. No one wanted a depressed, traumatized, brooding pixie. It simply wasn't done.

Pushing off the bed, I flew to the mirror. It was a lovely piece of glass, framed in antiqued bronze and running nearly from floor to ceiling. Turning this way and that, I watched my aqua dust scatter, filling the air in a cool haze. My hair wasn't exactly right. The ombre effect was too sharp, the ends not as dark as they should be. It was something only I noticed. The camera didn't catch all the details my eyes took in, imprinting them onto my brain and continuously criticizing them.

My light gray clothing flowed around me. My pixie boots on the floor beside the bed revealed the chipped polish that needed fixing.

My wings furiously beat as I stared down at that minuscule flaw. It was so tiny, yet it spoke with the force of a megaphone. It wasn't real. I could fool the public. I could even fool myself sometimes. But that single chipped piece of color told the truth.

Fake. I was nothing more than a fake.

---

“Peaches said he can clear out the underground space we need to build Mr. Moony's den.” Mike fiddled with something on his camera as he filled me in. “I want to get that on film. I don't think anyone's ever captured a nature pixie hollowing out the earth before.”

Mike's words were full of awe I didn't share. As far as I was concerned, nature pixies were dirty—literally. They didn't

mind rolling about in the muck. Some even stayed outdoors for months, even years at a time. Thank the goddess, pixie hair didn't tangle and mat like many other species. Otherwise, those pixies would have looked like heathens.

Staring into my handheld mirror, I twisted my neck, shifting to see my hair a little better. My charm was beginning to wear off, and my colors were not as bright as they should have been. It wasn't enough yet for anyone else to notice, but the way things were going, I'd have to activate my last charm tonight. Hopefully, Lance would come through, and a package would be waiting for me when I got back to the rental house tonight. I'd called again this morning, and once more, my message had gone straight to voicemail. It was...unusual.

"Divia told me Phil's going to be there too," Mike said offhandedly.

"*Phil?*" The name sounded vaguely familiar, but I wasn't certain.

"Philodendron. He's the home-and-hearth pixie that mated an alpha werewolf." Mike shook his head while still concentrating on his camera. "Can you believe that?" Mike finally looked up. "This town has some weird shenanigans going on. One pixie bonded to a vampire and another to a werewolf."

I raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "It is interesting." Divia had told me about the pixie/werewolf match. I'd just forgotten Phil's name.

Mike chuckled. "Next thing you know, we'll have a pixie/ogre match. That'd be a hell of a thing. They..."

Whatever Mike said next, I zoned out. With my heart rate skyrocketing, I sat there perfectly still as I tried trapping my fear back into the box it escaped. A lifetime with an ogre. I couldn't contemplate it. I couldn't wrap my mind around the thought, nor did I want to. The six months I'd been held captive were enough.

Mike was painfully naïve. He had no idea what he was talking about, what he'd just suggested. I couldn't blame him.



As a human, he had no idea just how crazy that idea was, just how tragic it would be for the pixie. Probably the ogre too. Unless the ogre wore a mask the entire time, it would be drugged out of its mind. That was no way to live.

My head felt like it was trapped in a bag. Sound was muffled, and my ears rang in time with the warning bells flaring in my mind.

The slam of a car door woke me from my internal nightmare.

Divia's light voice helped wrangle my fear back into the cave it constantly dwelled in. "You look divine as always, Parsnip."

Divia's long hair was twisted into a complicated knot flawlessly perched on her head. Her double row of sharp teeth glinted in the early morning sun when she smiled.

Mike swooned, his body automatically shifting toward her.

Good thing for Mike that Divia was a reformed siren. Otherwise, she would have sucked down his soul and merrily basked in the winter sun.

"Thank you, Divia."

It was a morning ritual, one that would have felt forced if I didn't believe Divia was sincere. The truth was, to the untrained eye, I did look divine. I was the only one that could see the cracks.

"So, do you think we'll have the pleasure of yet another pixie's company today?" Divia rooted around in the large bag hanging off her shoulder.

The things she pulled out of there made me think there was a gateway to another realm hiding out in the bottom.

"Phil," I casually answered, considering Mike still seemed led by his dick, not his brain.

"Yes, Philodendron. Have you ever heard a pixie with that name before?"

“No.” Parsnip wasn’t exactly the most glamorous pixie name, so I didn’t feel like throwing stones.

“I heard he’s big.” Divia waggled her eyebrows. “Really big.”

While rolling my eyes, I shrugged. “Is that so? Maybe you’ll get lucky today and find out. Maybe that’s what his werewolf lover likes about him.”

I didn’t know if Phil would show up today or not, let alone his mate.

Divia’s laughter lit up the atmosphere more than the sun. I wasn’t swayed by sirens, but I did enjoy hearing her joy. “Perhaps. Wouldn’t it be marvelous if his alpha showed up too? I believe Phil bonded to his mate’s home and the wolf himself.” Divia obviously knew more than me.

“Don’t hold me responsible for other pixies’ taste,” I answered haughtily.

I had no desire to be permanently bonded to anyone. The more who loved me, the better. I couldn’t imagine narrowing down that possibility to a single individual.

“Such a brat.” Divia smacked me on the shoulder. “Our ride should be here soon. Mr. Moony arranged for safe travel out to Mulligan’s Orchard. My understanding is that he had to spend the night at Dusk and won’t be there today. That’s why we’re going out in the morning and not waiting until evening.”

“Is there a problem?” It seemed strange that Lucroy would stay away from his beloved, even for a single night.

“Not that I’m aware of. But I doubt he would have told me if there were. Vampires are secretive and with good reason. They aren’t nearly as invincible a species as they would like the world to believe.” This time, Divia’s smile was anything but pleasant and placed her predatory nature on full display.

A large SUV pulled up, and an even larger troll stepped out. The left side of the vehicle rose a few inches when the troll exited. I thought I heard a mechanical groan but probably imagined it. Regardless of its inanimate nature, I felt sorry for the SUV. Trolls were heavy.

“Hey, I’m Pete. I work for Mr. Moony. You guys the TV crew?”

“Guilty as charged.” Divia grinned.

Pete didn’t so much as flinch at her dangerous smile. “Cool. Mr. Moony asked me to take you out to Peaches’s place. You three ready?”

“Ready and eager,” I happily chimed in, forcing joy into every ounce of my persona.

It wasn’t overly difficult. Most days, I actually did like my job. I liked it better when there wasn’t a cloud of sprites waiting to munch my dust. I didn’t care if my dust had no known purpose, if it dissipated into nothing within seconds of production. The point was, it was *my* dust. No one else had a right to it, and I’d swat down any sprite that thought otherwise. It wouldn’t be that out of character. Pixies weren’t known for their love of sprites. It seemed Peaches was an anomaly in more ways than one. Vampire lover aside, his tolerance of the sprites infesting his orchard was mind-boggling.

Regardless of my feelings about the sprites, we all clambered into the SUV. Nerves ate at me. The chafe of the charm wrapped around my thigh was a constant reminder that I needed that delivery from Lance. He knew damn well how important those charms were, and I’d already paid good money for them. Half at the time of order and half at the time of delivery. That was the deal we’d struck years ago.

I pushed the pulsing unease away. Lance hadn’t let me down yet. The charms weren’t always perfect, but he never ghosted a delivery. It would be fine. It had to be fine.

## Chapter Four

VANDER

Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered putting out the OPEN sign. I couldn't figure out if age was jading me or if the different species roaming Gaia's green earth were truly devolving into shades of despicable treachery. Had everyone sold their soul? And if so, what was the going price?

"Well, can it be done?"

This was starting to sound a lot like the conversation I'd had with Vera less than a day ago. The difference was this was no human customer, and the werewolf darkening the other side of my counter wasn't comfortable enough to sit. Instead, he loomed.

A beta wolf. The most common werewolf designation. Alphas weren't exactly rare, but they were far fewer, and that was a good thing. Most had heard the phrase "too many cooks in the kitchen." Alpha werewolves fit that saying too.

I stared at the beta wolf who'd yet to give me a name. I thought about asking, but considering I had no intention of attempting what he wanted, it wasn't relevant. Besides, the *request* hadn't truly come from him. An alpha out there was pulling his strings. Given the area of the country I lived in and the nature of the request, I could probably guess who that particular alpha was.

Mirroring my customer, I remained standing, arms crossed over my chest. Most beta wolves weren't as large as alphas, but this guy wasn't small. Still, my warlock genes placed us at eye level.

Grinding my teeth, I contemplated my answer before I shook my head and said, "I have no idea. Nor do I want to know."

As expected, that answer didn't go over well. "Are you telling me you aren't powerful enough? I was told you're the best in the area. Was I lied to?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it depends on the area your informant was talking about. Regardless, I don't think you were intentionally lied to." I didn't want this were's disappointment coming back to bite anyone on the ass.

"I don't understand. My alpha's willing to pay. Handsomely. Name your price."

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes. Where in Gaia's name was everyone getting all this money? And why didn't I have it to throw around? My conscience spoke up and reminded me it was the reason I was barely scraping by.

Pulling on every ounce of patience I possessed, I reached behind my back and gave Byx the hand signal to activate the protective charms around the front counter. Most likely, I'd win a one-on-one fight with a beta wolf, but I didn't feel like taking any chances. Besides, I wouldn't come away unscathed and didn't want to waste healing charms on myself. Those were some of my top sellers.

I relaxed when the protective magic washed over me.

Leaning on the counter, I repeated what the beta wanted, hoping I'd misunderstood and yet had little hope that was the case. "Let me get this straight. You want me to formulate a magic charm that will destroy a home-and-hearth pixie's bond. Is that right?"

Dear Gaia, I hoped not. Beyond the straight-up cruelty of it, I wasn't at all certain the pixie would survive.

The beta wolf nodded confidently. "My alpha wants it completely destroyed. He also said he doesn't want the pixie to be able to bond again."

I nearly choked on a breath of disbelief. *Was this were for real?*

Fingers fisting, I tested the protective magic shields, confident they wouldn't so much as crack. When I was sure, I said, "Tell your alpha that what he's asking for is cruel and sadistic. No monetary figure on the planet would inspire me to attempt such a thing. For the record, as I said earlier, I have no idea if it can even be done. Bonded pixie magic is the strongest there is. Breaking it would be near impossible, and even if that weren't the case, I would never try. Anyone that would is an asshat, and I have no inclination to deal with those types of clients and their blood money."

As predicted, the beta didn't like that one bit. "You dare insult my alpha?"

"You bet your whipped ass I do."

I didn't even flinch when the beta roared, throwing his weight into the invisible shield. Violet spiderwebs of power scattered around each hit, but just as I'd thought, my shield didn't so much as buckle.

Just because the shield held didn't mean I didn't feel it. Every attack was an internal bruise. But those bruises were minor, and nothing compared to the physical damage those claws would create if they connected the way the beta wished.

I stood back and waited for the wolf to either wear himself out or realize the futility of his actions. This were was in my shop, on my ground. He didn't stand a chance and should have known it. Pride made creatures all kinds of stupid.

Byx stayed in the back. Her presence was a comforting weight. My magic would hold, but it was nice knowing a brownie had your back, even one too young to wield all their powers effectively and safely.

When my were *friend* ran out of steam, I casually asked, "Are you done?"

That got me another growl, but not much more.

Satisfied, I nodded toward the door. "If that's all, then I ask that you kindly leave."

Lips pulled back into something twisted and half-feral, the beta threw out an expected threat. "You have no idea who

you've just pissed off."

"Oh, I have an inkling." I threw the beta a wink that made his face flush a deeper shade of crimson. "I've got a funny habit of pissing off powerful individuals. Trust me, whatever threat you're about to provide, I guarantee I've heard it before and probably with better delivery." I wished it was a fib. Instead, it was the unfortunate truth.

The rattle of teeth sang through my shop as his mouth slammed shut. With a final "you're a fool," the beta spun and blasted through the door. I was certain he intended to slam the thing, just like Vera. And just like always, the door had other ideas and slid shut with a lazy yawn.

"Yeah, I've heard that before too," I mumbled.

"Too many times," Byx agreed, climbing up on the stepstool beside me. "Is there some type of crazy everyone's breathing in?" Byx asked, sincerely baffled. "I don't think I've ever heard of anyone wishing harm on a pixie. I mean, why would you? That's like kicking a puppy."

I huffed out a sound between a laugh and a groan. "Agreed, but somehow I doubt that disturbs Arie Belview's conscience much. In fact, I'll bet he's kicked plenty of were puppies in his time."

"You really think that's who sent him?"

"I'd bet the shop on it," I answered easily. "There aren't a lot of alpha wolves around the area, and he's the one with the most clout. He's also the only one that would ask for something like that. I don't know what pixie crawled up Alpha Belview's ass, but I feel sorry for whoever it is. I doubt Arie will stop with me."

Byx stood silently, drawing my gaze.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Byx huffed. "That's more than you can afford, Van."

I chuckled. "True. Still, I'd like to know what finally shut your trap. That way I can use it again in the future."

I jumped when a shot of electricity zipped through my hip, flaring down into my leg. It wasn't as strong as Georgiana's had been, but it still stung.

"You deserved that," Byx accused before I could call her out on zapping me.

Rubbing my thigh, a slow grin lifted my lips. "Yeah, won't argue that."

"Good, otherwise I'd zap you again."

I held up my hands in surrender. "Got it. Shutting up now." I made a zipping motion across my lips.

Byx rolled her eyes. "And I'm the immature one."

I started to make some wiseass retort when my eyebrows shot up, and panic stabbed my gut. Little puffs of smoke wafted off Byx's head like twin horns. "Shit, you're on fire." I grabbed a nearby towel and pounded it down on her head, trying to beat out the invisible flames.

"Ow! Would you stop that?" Byx's hands slapped my wrists, finally gaining purchase and pulling me away. "Goddess, what has gotten into you?" Byx pushed at her haphazard hair. To be fair, it had looked good before I'd gone on my fire-smothering mission. "You better not have damaged them, Van. It took me forever to figure out how to make them breathe fire." Byx pulled a hair clip out, and only now, with it in her small hand, did I realize it was in the shape of a dragon.

Dropping my towel, I shifted closer and asked, "What did you do?"

Pushing her hair off her face, Byx looked up, dark brown eyes glinting with mischief. "Just a little magic. Nothing major." Byx's grin turned into a thoughtful frown. "Although, I still don't think I've got it right. They were supposed to spit fire and smoke when I felt threatened. They should have activated earlier when that beta were was in here."

"What?" I stared down at the tiny clip. The plastic moved, wings arching back before curling into Byx's hand. "You magicked your hair clips?"



“Yeah. No one ever thinks to look at hair clips,” Byx answered with a shrug. “They probably wouldn’t do much damage, but it might work as a distraction. Plus, I thought it would be cool.”

Leaning back, my earlier adrenaline spike eased, making me lightheaded and weak. Nothing that beta were could have said or done compared with the fear I’d experienced when I thought Byx was in danger.

“You thought fire around your very flammable hair would be a good idea?” I raised an eyebrow.

Byx’s shoulders scrunched, neck bent, and eyes cast down. “Yeah.” She scratched her head, pushing at her hair before putting the clip back in place. Its twin had held up to my aggressive toweling better. “I see your point. To be fair, I don’t think it really worked. There weren’t actual flames, just some smoke.”

*Just enough to damn near give me a heart attack.* “Only you, Byx.”

The happy grin she shot my way melted whatever irritation I had left. “I’m one of a kind.”

“That you are.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Just so I’m prepared, did you magic your other hair clips or are the dragons the only ones?”

Byx twisted her hands, her pinched lips letting out a quiet “Maybe. Most of them haven’t worked out,” she hastened to add. Staring at the empty doorway, Byx said, “Given who our latest customer was, I should have tried the squirrel ones.”

I stood a little straighter, trying to remember what hair clips Byx was talking about. “You mean those cute little ones with the nuts?”

She nodded vigorously.

“What did you do to those?” If Byx was aiming for intimidating, I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what she’d done to a couple of squirrels.

“I made them do that hissing thing,” Byx answered as if I were an idiot.

“Hissing thing?” Maybe I was an idiot because I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Yeah.” Byx proceeded to arch her neck, making a series of clicking, hissing, and spatting noises. “You know, how they do when Millie chases them up a tree.”

“Mr. Roderick’s dog? The Jack Russell?” It was the only Millie I could think of.

“She runs out in the yard, yipping and chasing the squirrels. Once they get to higher ground, the squirrels turn around and hiss at her. It drives Millie nuts.”

I took a couple of seconds to think that over. “And you think if it works on Millie—”

“Weres are canines too. They’re just a different kind.” Byx sounded so matter-of-fact, like I should have figured that out ages ago.

“You think werewolves can be intimidated like a Jack Russell terrier?”

“Sure. Why not?” Byx hopped off her riser, taking off toward the back of the store, leaving me mystified. I was also amused.

Sweet Gaia. I didn’t know if Byx was right but could only hope I’d get to judge for myself one day.

## Chapter Five

### *PARSNIP*

Another night and no package. I stared at my empty doorway, a low, fluttery panic unpleasantly niggling my gut. I forced my clenching fingers to relax as I searched around the entryway, looking for any wayward packages or slips of paper saying I needed to pick it up or sign for it.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Opening the door, I numbly walked into my rental house. My wings fluttered, but not enough to lift my feet from the floor. A smattering of aqua pixie dust drifted behind me, but I doubted it would be enough to so much as tickle a nose.

Without much thought, I reached for my phone, dialing Lance's number again. I halfheartedly expected it to go to voicemail, just like the previous five times. With my heart sinking, the line rang for a fourth time before an exhausted voice answered.

A voice that didn't belong to Lance.

"Hello."

*Hello?* That's all I got. I briefly pulled the phone from my ear, double-checking the number, verifying I'd dialed Lance and not someone else.

"Who is this?" I asked. No sense beating around the bush. Besides, my nerves couldn't take it. "Where's Lance?"

A long, heavy sigh was my answer. "Name's Tony. I'm Lance's stepbrother. As for where Lance is... He's in the hospital."

“Hospital?” I gasped, slumping into a nearby chair. “Why? What happened?” That fluttery panic I’d felt earlier hit me full force, slamming into my gut and bending me forward.

“Idiot tried a spell he didn’t fully research. Didn’t turn out the way he thought it would. The magical backlash took out half his apartment. Lance’s landlord’s not very happy right now. Truth be told, neither am I. I’m stuck here, in the hospital, fielding all of Lance’s unhappy customers. I’m guessing you’re gonna be another one of those.”

He was damn right I was going to be another pissed-off customer. Pushing down the ever-rising panic, I tried to think clearly. I didn’t know when Lance had pushed his warlock luck, but maybe he’d had time to get my charms done. Maybe they were sitting in a box somewhere, ready to ship. There was still hope.

Licking my dry lips, my voice quivered when I said, “I was supposed to receive a shipment of charms. Lance said they were done and he’d get them to me. They’re very important. Maybe you could look around and—”

“You don’t get it. There’s nothing to look around at. Lance’s apartment and everything in it—charms, ingredients, spell books, family heirlooms...you name it, it’s gone. The magical backlash fed on the base ingredients he had in his apartment and worsened the explosion. They’re still trying to decontaminate the area. They had to evacuate the surrounding buildings while they figure shit out. When Lance wakes up, he’s going to be up to his eyeballs in legal repercussions. I’ve already had two fairy visitors. Fucking lawyers,” Tony grumbled. “Trust me, whatever Lance had done for you, it’s gone.”

My breath caught. Precious moments ticked by, and I couldn’t force air into or out of my lungs. It had taken me forever to find a warlock as capable as Lance. It hadn’t been easy. I not only needed a talented warlock, but I also needed one with discretion. And I needed a morally ambiguous one. That wasn’t an easy combination to find.

“Listen, I’m sorry if this is a problem for you, but there’s nothing I can do. I’m human, not a warlock. I’d offer to give you your money back, but I don’t even have access to that. You’ll have to wait for Lance to wake up before anything else can be sorted. Good luck.” Tony ended the call before I could comment.

Not that I knew what to say. My mind was blank, and my constant low-grade headache turned into a lion’s roar. I sat there, time ticking by. The charm strapped to my thigh felt weightier than usual. It was an itch I couldn’t scratch. That itch grew until it couldn’t be ignored. Until my situation couldn’t be ignored.

“Think, Parsnip. Think!”

My body came back to me by slow degrees. My fingers ached from gripping my phone. With great effort, I peeled my fingers off one by one, easing my phone on a nearby side table.

Somehow, I needed to do the impossible. I needed to find another warlock. I needed to find someone capable of doing what I needed. Someone that wouldn’t out me. Someone that could save my career. Someone that could save me.

---

**W**arlock Wishes? The name was dumb, the storefront even dumber. Or maybe sadder. I’d spent last night trolling the internet, searching for a warlock that might fit my needs. I was stuck in the Southeast United States and needed someone within driving distance. Vander Kines was the second name on my rather anemic list. The first name struck out quickly. Family and friends had inflated his social and professional profile.

Vander Kines was different. I’d waffled on where to place him on my list. He was still young. Maybe too young. Warlocks’ powers rose with age. Lance was middle-aged. Young could have its benefits. Many young warlocks weren’t

financially fluid and were more eager to take on questionable assignments.

The small sign on the door sparkled. The word OPEN shifted through a rainbow of colors. With my hand on my hip, I stared at the kitschy sign for a good thirty seconds, debating whether it was worth opening the door.

My indecision was helped along when an older woman came through the door, the tinkling of bells sounding as the door opened and slid closed with ease. She was human. Whatever she'd gotten from the warlock inside wasn't a spell to look younger. Or, if it was, then she needed to go back in and demand a refund.

"Good morning." She beamed up at me, a wide, nearly toothless grin pulling at her cheeks before she hustled away, the bag in her arms held tightly, as if it was the dearest thing she owned. Her gait was livelier than her age suggested.

"Maybe a pain charm," I mused.

Some thought being pain-free was more important than looking good. If money were tight, then perhaps that was the direction the older human female had gone.

Tossing my hair over my shoulder, I wondered at that. I'd pick looking good over discomfort any day of the week. Given my constant headaches and fatigue, that's exactly the choice I'd made.

Deciding action was better than supposition, I pulled the door open. Shoulders back, I flew into the small space, allowing pixie dust to scatter, temporarily coating every surface before dissipating into nothing.

The room was warm and inviting, pushing away winter's chill. Tugging my cream shawl off my shoulders, I momentarily thought about removing my pixie boots but wasn't certain I'd be staying long enough to warrant that level of undress.

My gaze traveled the packed shelves. Little signs here and there declared what was in the different jars and satchels. Much of it appeared geared toward human ailment, but other

species were represented well. The merchandise appeared well cared for and was displayed nicely. It was a positive sign.

“May I help you?”

I twirled, wings fluttering and hair floating around me. The voice was higher pitched than I’d been expecting. It was also feminine. Gaze traveling down, I was surprised when it wasn’t a warlock or witch, but a brownie standing behind the counter. And not just any brownie, a young one.

“Hello?” I flew closer and also lower. I hated it when those blessed with height lorded it over others. “Perhaps I have the wrong establishment. I was looking for Warlock Vander Kines.”

The small brownie tilted her head, overly large, brown eyes looking me up and down. Brownies were deceptively cute. Thank the goddess they tended toward peaceful interactions. I had no idea what the world would look like if they decided to fight fairies for the right to rule. Most likely, they would have burned the place to the ground centuries ago.

“You’re pretty,” she said, instantly earning her a spot in my good graces. “I don’t think I’ve seen an aqua-colored pixie before. You look familiar. What kind of pixie are you?”

Some considered the question rude. I didn’t. I was proud of what I was. “I’m a social pixie. I host a show on Home and Kitchen called—”

“*Interspecies Habitat!* Oh,” she happily giggled, “I love that show.” The little brownie clapped her hands and hopped up and down. “Parsnip. I should have known it was you when you flew through the door.” Leaning forward, she asked, “Are you here for a show? Is there someone local that you’re filming?”

The anxiety eating away at me subsided. This was what social pixies lived for. It’s where we drew our power from. Adoration. And this small brownie had that in spades.

“We’re doing a show in Rutherford Haven.” It had taken me about an hour to make the trip from Rutherford Haven to Richmond.

The brownie nodded vigorously enough to shift the clips in her hair. They were silver and appeared to be in the shape of squirrels. I thought I saw one of them move for a moment, but most likely, that was simply an optical illusion.

“I’m Byx.”

“Hello, Byx. It’s nice to meet you.” I shifted closer and held out my hand.

Byx took it and eagerly pumped my arm. It wasn’t often the hand I shook was smaller than mine.

“Van!” Byx suddenly yelled, making me fly slightly higher. “You’ve got a customer!”

“Another one?” The muffled sound was deep and resonating.

Even from far away, it sent a little shiver down my spine.

Byx rolled her eyes. “Yeah, *another one*. Imagine that, customers when we’re open.” Leaning toward me, Byx conspiratorially whispered, “Van’s a little lost on pop culture, so don’t mind him.” Pulling back, Byx’s grin was full of pride. “He may not look like it, but Van’s the best warlock around. I’m not sure what you’re looking for, but you’ve come to the right place.”

Brownies weren’t known for overinflating magical prowess, so I took Byx’s word to heart even though she was young.

“That’s good to hear.”

“Hey, Byx, what have we got?” Closer, that deep voice sounded even better.

The tall, broad warlock that stepped through the open doorway nearly took my breath away. Dark, luscious hair dusted his neck, and the lightest sprinkling of white shot through the temples. Warlocks grayed earlier in life than other species. Some thought it was part of the cost of manipulating magic. Others thought it was simply a part of natural warlock genetics. Whatever the cause, the small touch fit Vander Kines well.



After cleaning his hands off on a small towel, Vander shifted toward the counter, holding out his right hand, rings wrapped around the base of nearly every finger, the tips of his digits black, the color fading as it moved up his fingers. All warlocks looked like they'd dipped their fingers in ink.

“Vander Kines.” His soul-soothing voice reached out to me, wrapping me in a cool blanket.

I blinked, gazing into those hazel eyes. The colors dancing within were fascinating. They were colors that shouldn't complement each other so well, and yet they lived in exquisite harmony.

“Parsnip,” I managed to eke through my arid throat.

“He's a social pixie,” Byx chimed in. And just like that, all the amused joy shimmering within those spectacular eyes faded—distrust and maybe dislike filtering in.

“Social, huh?” Vander pulled his hand away, and I tried not to bristle.

This was the life of a social pixie. We were either adored or abhorred. Many viewed us as vain. They weren't necessarily wrong, but I didn't see it as the disease they did. I was proud of who I was, who I'd been born to be.

“Do you have a problem with that?” I asked, arms crossed, wings beating fast enough to raise me high enough to stare Vander in the eyes.

“No,” he answered hesitantly. “Not as a general rule. Just wondering what I can do for you. I—ow. Hey.” Vander's head whipped around, eyes narrowed as he stared down at Byx. “What was that for?”

She mirrored my pose. “That was for being rude. Parsnip's not like a lot of all those other social pixie assholes.”

I hid my flinch.

“He helps species. He has a show on Home and Kitchen TV. He designs homes for species that have bonded or mated. He helps them figure out how to arrange their homes to accommodate everyone's needs.”

Byx was laying it on a little thick. She was also exaggerating what I did. I wasn't the main designer. I helped, but mostly I was just the host. Still, I wasn't about to correct her misconceptions. Not right now.

"Is that so?" Vander didn't sound convinced. Or maybe he just didn't sound like what I did for a living was as fantastical as Byx made it sound.

"It's called *Interspecies Habitat*," I threw out, deciding I'd been quiet long enough. "It's actually quite popular."

Tossing his towel aside, Vander gave a small, apologetic inclination of his head. "Sorry. I don't watch much TV."

"It's fine. Byx already warned me."

Vander's facial muscles relaxed. His charming grin eased my own tension. "I'll bet she did. Byx is a little more up-to-date on things than me."

"As if that's a challenge," Byx mocked, and yet there was so much love and sincerity in her voice that it negated any sting. I didn't know what their relationship was, but it was clear affection lived there.

Vander chuckled, and I dipped when my wings momentarily stopped. He reached out to ruffle her hair but stopped when Byx's eyes dangerously narrowed.

"Got it." Vander pulled his hands back, palms out in surrender, before he turned his attention back to me. "So, I'm gonna take a wild guess and say this isn't a social call. You came through my door for a reason. So, what can I do for you?"

Talk of getting down to business sobered me. My gaze instantly flashed toward Byx. She seemed like a nice enough brownie, but the fewer ears involved, the better.

Seeming to catch my drift, Vander said, "Why don't you head upstairs, Byx? Last I checked, you've done enough this morning. A little rest is in order."

"I—" Byx started to protest but was cut off by a firm look I couldn't interpret. The two of them had a stare-off, and I

knew Vander won when Byx's shoulders drooped, head hanging.

"It was nice to meet you, Parsnip," Byx said, already turning to hop off the riser that was undoubtedly on the other side of the counter. "I'll keep watching your show."

Vander watched her go, head slightly cocked to the side as if he were listening to something. Seconds turned into over a minute. Finally satisfied, he turned back to me and said, "She's beyond hearing."

I glanced around the very open shop. So far, we were alone, but it was a public place, and Vander Kines was open for business.

Again, he seemed to read my mind. "I turned the sign to temporarily closed. I'm not expecting anyone for another hour. Tell me what's on your mind."

Fisting my fingers, I held my head up, chest pushed out. I refused to be embarrassed by my need, and I'd tell myself that as many times as needed until I truly believed it.

"Before I begin, I need your word—spoken on fairy law—that you will not repeat what I'm about to say. That you will keep our conversation private, even if you don't take the commission."

Vander's eyes widened. "Now you've got my attention. That's an odd request coming from a pixie, even a social one."

"Odd or not, that is the stipulation. I'm willing to pay well for what I need, but first, I require assurances that you will not speak a word of this to anyone. Secrecy is of the utmost importance, and if you're not willing to swear on pain of fairy law, then our conversation has ended before it's truly begun." I wasn't willing to bend on this. I'd been a fool when I'd negotiated with Lance. I hadn't asked him to swear on fairy law. I'd been far too desperate. I was almost that desperate now, but not quite.

Vander cocked his head, contemplating my request. I was more relieved by his hesitation than bothered by it.

“That’s a big request. Before I agree, I need to know if what you want will harm anyone outside this room.”

That was easily answered. “No. No physical harm will befall anyone.”

Vander took a moment to take that in before he gave a slow nod. “Okay.” With the darkened tip of his index finger, Vander made an invisible sigil in the air between us. When he was done, he tapped the middle of it. The sigil flared to life, a violet, shimmering thing. “Place the palm of your hand on it.”

I hurried to comply. Vander did the same on his side, the sigil warmly trapped between us. Eyes briefly closing, Vander’s lips silently moved. The warmth briefly flared and heated before dissipating.

“It’s done. I’ve made a pact and filed it with fairy authority. My silence is binding.”

Inhaling, I tried to relax, though the effort was difficult. “As I said before, I need a charm—multiple copies.” I thought about those words before amending. “Unless you are more talented than my last warlock and can craft something that will last longer.” I had no idea what the limitations were. Suddenly, I realized this issue with Lance might not be the tragedy I envisioned. Perhaps another warlock could craft something better. Lately, Lance’s charms hadn’t been top quality.

“I suppose that remains to be seen. What is it you need?”

I’d had to activate my last remaining charm this morning. Firmly attached to my thigh, I had no intention of removing it unless absolutely necessary. I didn’t know if the old one would be enough, but I fished it out of my pocket, laying it on the counter.

Vander glanced my way before he picked it up, turning the small crystal in his hands. When activated, it sparkled clear and white. Dead, it was little more than a gray thundercloud, all its magic used up.

“A concealment charm?” Vander’s eyelids slid closed, twittering. His long, thick, black lashes fluttered, and I could see his eyes move below his lids. “No, nothing that simple.

This is a..." Vander's eyes flew open. "This isn't meant to conceal. It's meant to enhance, to obfuscate."

Dropping the charm like it was pure poison, Vander's gaze bored into me. "These charms aren't without consequence. The cost is very high."

I'd come prepared and pulled out my phone, bringing up my substantial bank account. I didn't want to transfer the funds directly, but I could pull cash out and pay upfront. "Price isn't a concern." I had no idea what Vander charged for something like this. So far, he hadn't acted like it was beyond his skill, only that it would be expensive. I probably should have been a little savvier, but I was desperate.

"You misunderstand. I said it was costly, not expensive." Vander sounded half-disgusted.

"I don't understand the difference." Cost, price, expense... They all sounded the same to me and added up to a lot of dollar signs.

"That's obvious." Vander crossed his arms, his biceps pushing at the long-sleeved shirt covering them. "Cost is something far different from money. At least in this case. Tell me, how much of your life force did this other warlock make you give up for this?" Vander waved at hand at the useless crystal as if it were toxic.

I waved off his concern. If that was his only hang-up, maybe I could allay his concerns. "Just a week, give or take a day or two."

"*Just a week? Give or take a day or two?* That's it? And that seemed acceptable to you?"

I bristled at the judgment. "Yes. It was very acceptable."

"Sweet Gaia." Vander ran a hand through his hair, tugging at it. "Nothing in this world could be important enough to cover up to warrant such a cost." Flicking his finger, Vander spun the exhausted charm across the counter. "I don't even want to know how long you've been using this type of magic, how many of these you've activated. How much of your life you've given up on something as superficial as how you look."

Vander's words deadened me. Warlocks didn't understand. No one other than another social pixie would. Appearance was everything.

Ignoring the brutal judgment, I asked, "Can you do it? Or is it beyond your skill?"

"Oh, I can do it, all right. But I won't. I'll not contribute to another living creature's early demise. No amount of money is worth that." Vander seemed angrier than the situation warranted.

"You don't even know me. I'm just a worthless social pixie in your eyes. What do you care what I do with my life? It's mine, not yours. My decision. My choice. I don't see how that affects you."

"*Worthless?* Is that the way you see yourself?" Vander asked, his mood shifting but the anger remaining.

"No, but that's clearly what you thought when Byx told you what kind of pixie I am."

Shame briefly flared across Vander's features.

"I can guarantee you, when the end of my life comes, I will not hold you personally responsible for its brevity."

This time, Vander's laugh was anything but joyful. "You might not, but I will, and that's not something I want on my conscience. As I said before, there is nothing you can offer me that will convince me to do this." Again, Vander waved at the deadened charm with disgust.

Snatching my charm back, I shoved it into my pocket, along with my phone. Wrapping my shawl tightly around my shoulders, I flew toward the door. I tried not to let Vander Kines's words hurt, but I'd be lying if I said they didn't.

Hand on the door, I turned, flipping my ombre aqua hair over my shoulder. Eyes narrowed, I stared at the glowing, crimson ring encircling his finger. The thing had lit up when he'd walked into the room, its flare dimming and brightening. Red didn't seem like an endearing color.

“You might want to cover that mood ring of yours,” I said, tone as scathing as I could make it. “It’s beyond insulting, having its crimson color shout your anger and disgust. Plus, mood rings are just plain tacky and went out of style decades ago.”

I pushed the door open and flew out into the blustery air. Even the dim winter sun couldn’t warm the ice encasing my heart. If Vander didn’t want my business and money, that was one thing. He hadn’t needed to sound so condescending about it.

What I’d said was true. It was *my* life. I could live it the way I wanted, do with it what I wanted. Why couldn’t he understand that?

## Chapter Six

VANDER

*Mood ring?*

I stared at my finger, the one Georgiana's final gift was wrapped around. The standard onyx color was absent, replaced by a crimson fire that slowly faded. Fascinated, I stared at the damn thing until the glow was gone. The obsidian that took its place was shot through with thin, spidery red veins.

"Well, shit." I twisted my hand, shifting the ring this way and that.

It had never reacted. In fact, I'd started thinking maybe Georgiana had played some final cosmic joke on me. That I'd stare at its black surface all my life, believing at some point it would do *something*. Georgiana hadn't told me what that something might be. She'd simply said the ring would know when I encountered my one and only.

Brownies were magical, but each one leaned heavier toward a different type of magic. Or perhaps they were more drawn to a certain type. Byx leaned heavily toward healing, but she was capable of a lot more. Her mother, Georgiana, had a different specialty, one that was a little rarer.

Georgiana swore she didn't have *the sight*. She said she couldn't see the future, but she could feel it. When I'd questioned her, Georgiana had shaken her head and claimed it was too difficult to explain. She'd also said that when I met my one and only, I'd be an idiot and wouldn't recognize them.



When she'd learned she wouldn't be around long enough to put me on the right path, Georgiana used up what little magic she had left to craft this ring—the one that glowed like a crimson beacon when it found Parsnip.

I sat down, and a gruff grunt pushed through my lungs. “A social pixie?” Leaning my head back, I stared at the empty ceiling, pipes crisscrossing it here and there. Part of me wanted to curse Gaia, but beyond making me feel temporarily better, it wouldn't be all that helpful. Gaia wouldn't be impressed either and might hold a grudge. Given current circumstances, I didn't think I could afford to piss off a goddess right now.

“I need a beer.”

“It's not even noon.” Byx leaned on the stairway railing, peering around the edge, a singular eyebrow raised. “That's a little early, even for you.” Walking down the final steps, Byx shot a look toward the curtain separating the back office from the front. “Is the pixie gone already?” Arms crossed and foot tapping an irritated rhythm, Byx managed to stare down her nose at me. “What did you do, Van? Parsnip's a pixie. Not even a social one could have wanted something that bad.”

*Oh, little did Byx know.* I swallowed hard. “I can't talk about it.”

“Come on, Van. It's just me. You know I won't tell anyone. You've drilled client confidentiality into me a hundred times.”

I tilted my head before laying it back down on the back of the chair. If I stayed in that position much longer, I'd regret it. “You know I trust you, but I signed a silence pact. It's been registered with fairy law.”

“You did what?” Given my cricked-neck position, I couldn't see Byx, but I could easily envision the wide eyes and open mouth. “Why in the goddess's name would you do that?”

“Don't know. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Instead of zapping me, Byx kicked me in the shin. Despite her diminutive foot size, it still hurt. “Stop being flippant. You don't normally do stupid shit like that.”

I wanted to argue, but Byx was right. It wasn't my usual mode of operation. I wasn't in the habit of getting on the wrong side of fairy law, and I had no intention of breaking my pact with Parsnip. But intention and action didn't always equal the same thing. I'd been around the block enough to know that circumstances changed. It was never a good idea to paint yourself into a corner before even opening the gate.

Instead of answering, I waved a hand at the fridge. "Do something useful and grab me a beer."

Byx didn't kick *or* zap me. Instead, she slapped a cold bottle of water into my outstretched hand.

"Drink it," Byx ordered when I gave her the stink eye. Considering my stupidity only traveled so far, I decided I'd poked the magically inclined brownie enough for one morning and did as ordered. The water quenched my throat but didn't do much for my racing heart and thoughts.

Silence settled, allowing my mind to wander down dangerous roads. Finally, Byx had enough and said, "Seriously, what's wrong with you? I know you can't tell me exactly what Parsnip wanted, but you're starting to freak me out."

The worry in her voice shattered my selfish musings. No matter how old she was, Byx would always be a child in my eyes. Brownie standards placed her somewhere between teen and young adult, but every time I looked at her, I saw big, brown eyes staring up at me through a haze of chocolate-colored hair. She'd sported a toothless grin for at least fifteen years, and that image would be forever imprinted on my brain.

The loving adoration in Georgiana's gaze every time she glanced in her daughter's direction was equally cemented.

Swallowing half my bottle of water, I forced my body upright, leaning forward and focusing on my troubled ward. I thought about what I could say and what I couldn't. I had no idea why Parsnip needed an obfuscation charm. Humans didn't have innate magic, and it was easy to tell when they were under its influence. Other species were more difficult. I'd had a sense there was something different about Parsnip, but I

couldn't peg it. Most likely, he'd been under the influence of one of the charms, thus obscuring why he needed it.

I couldn't talk about that, but I could let Byx in on the other reason for my late-morning meltdown.

Instead of answering directly, I held out my left hand. Most of my fingers were covered in rings, and at first, Byx just sat there, staring at me like I'd left a part of my brain in the shower this morning.

I knew the instant she figured it out. Byx's tightly drawn face fell, mouth slipping open and eyes blown wide. Her naturally brown skin paled, lightening her features to slightly tanned.

"Holy shit... Is that... I mean..." Byx licked her lips, gaze flicking up to meet mine before settling back on her mother's ring. "It looks different."

I pulled my hand back, tucking it between the side of the chair and my hip. "Sure does. It looked even more different when Parsnip was around."

Byx choked on a harshly drawn breath. "You're joking." Scooting toward the edge of her seat, Byx made a give-me motion with her hands, and I withdrew my own, allowing her to cradle my much larger hand within her smaller ones. Eyes slipping closed, Byx lightly placed a finger over the stone's surface. The flare of crimson below was unmistakable.

"It activated." Byx's voice was full of awe. "I can't believe it." Head snapping up, Byx dropped my hand and asked, "Are you sure it was the pixie?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Did you see anyone else in the store?"

Chewing on her bottom lip, Byx gently shook her head. "No. Nobody else was there. It's just... a pixie?" Wrinkling her nose, Byx reminded me of that gap-toothed child she'd once been. "I mean, I don't have anything against pixies. They're okay. It's just... it's hard to imagine. You with a..." Byx rolled her hand in the air, and then her skin took on a decidedly green shade. "Then again, it's kind of disturbing imagining you with

anyone.” Byx looked like she barely contained the vomit creeping up her throat.

“Thanks, kid.”

“You know what I mean, Van. You’re like one of those weird uncles everyone talks about. You know the kind—the relative you’re really embarrassed by and yet love all the same. Besides, you’re old, and it’s gross thinking about old folks doing the nasty.”

I choked on another drink of water. Coughing, I finally settled enough to say, “I beg your pardon. I am not old. Hell, by warlock standards, I’m not even middle-aged.”

“Semantics.” Byx waved me off. “You were an adult when I was a child. Therefore, you’re old. You’ve even got gray hair.”

“I…” I didn’t know what to say. Byx’s logic seemed perfect in her eyes, and I had no idea how to argue the point. Nor did I really feel like it. All warlocks grayed early in life. Mine was only at my temples, leaving the rest of my shaggy hair ebony.

Blowing out a raspberry, Byx settled back into her chair. “Guess Mamma was right. You were a damn idiot when you met your one and only. Bet you pissed your pixie off good and proper.”

I bristled and protested, “I did not.” The words rang hollow as I thought back to how Parsnip had left the store.

“Yeah? Well, then, where is he?” Byx dramatically looked around the room. “’Cause I sure don’t see or sense him anywhere around. There’s not even a cloud of pixie dust lingering. That means he took off pretty quick. What did you do, Van?” It was more than obvious Byx had already chosen a side, and it wasn’t mine.

Gritting my teeth, I thought back on what Parsnip had asked me to do. “You don’t know what he wanted, what he—” I cut myself off, remembering the magical pact I’d made. I couldn’t tell Byx that what Parsnip had nearly begged me to create would shorten his life span. Even before I knew he was

my one and only, the thought of doing that made my stomach fill with acid. All life was precious. Wasting it on something as frivolous as a glamour charm was beyond ridiculous.

Byx's accusatory glare softened. "It was really that bad?" she asked.

Deciding to risk a little honesty, I answered, "It wouldn't have hurt anyone but him."

"Oh." Byx's tone was little more than a whisper. "I'm sorry, Van." A world of understanding lay within those few words.

"I know, Byx. I know."

What I didn't know was what I was going to do with Parsnip.

## Chapter Seven

### *PARSNIP*

My heart wouldn't stop pounding. I'd driven around the Southeast for the past two days and couldn't find a warlock that could do what I needed. I'd found a couple more than willing to take my money, but none that could create a charm half as good as Lance's. They'd talked a good game, but when it got down to the particulars, they'd fallen woefully short.

I'd either ignored Divia's messages or given short and barely satisfactory answers. I'd simply said I needed some private time to sort some shit out. For now, that worked. It wouldn't be much longer, and besides, I was out of leads.

Throwing the keys to my rental car and house on the bed, I paced. My feet hovered a few feet off the floor, and the room quickly filled with aqua pixie dust. In less than two weeks, that aqua color would be a thing of the past, and my dust would look like little more than silvery ash. It would remind others of a burned-out building, not a fabulous social pixie.

I needed to think. I needed to settle my mind and concentrate. There were other warlocks to be found. They just weren't in the Southeast. I needed to think of some excuse, something that Divia would accept, some reason I needed to travel somewhere else in the country. Most likely the Northeast or West Coast. And if I couldn't find what I needed in America, then I'd travel to Europe or wherever the hell else I needed to go.

Taking a deep breath, I forced my body and wings to settle. My toes hit the soft rug and dug in. My nail polish was

hanging in there and looked lovely. It wasn't so odd. Pixies were known to add a little glitter polish to their fingernails and toenails. Even if someone figured out they were painted, they wouldn't be too bothered as long as the color matched my hair and wings.

My ringing phone pulled me from my negative thoughts. When I stared at the screen, my brother's name popped up. Parsley and I weren't twins, but our parents had opted for similar names. It had been more than a little confusing while growing up.

My heart eased, the squeeze in my chest lessening as I hit the accept button. "Hey, Parse," I answered.

"Hey, Nip." They were the nicknames we'd given each other by the time we'd barely been able to speak. "You still in Virginia?"

"Unfortunately," I grumbled. I didn't need to ask where my brother was. Although unbonded, Parsley was a home-and-hearth pixie. He didn't feel the need to wander and was content within a home nestled next to our parents' house. Both our parents were social pixies. No one knew how Parsley ended up with home-and-hearth inclinations. I think our mom was disappointed, but not me. I loved Parsley. There was never any competition between the two of us. There was never a need. We gravitated toward different things, appreciated each other's strengths, and shored up each other's weaknesses. Parsley was my biggest fan. Not a drop of jealousy to be found.

"You don't like it there?" Parsley naively asked.

"No, it's not that. It's just..." I hesitated, not because Parsley didn't know about my disability, but because I knew he'd worry. "There are just some things going on that are making it a little tougher than usual. That's all."

"There aren't any ogres, are there?" Parsley's voice spiked with anxiety and fear. "I'll come get you right now. I—"

"No ogres," I attempted to soothe, although the catch in my throat merely saying the beast's name always gave me

away. “Not that I’ve seen. I’m sure they’re around, but nothing I have to deal with in my job. I’ve been chauffeured by a troll though.”

“A troll?” Parsley perked up. “I’ve only seen a handful of those. We don’t have many in the Northwest.”

“This one didn’t look much different from the ones we’ve seen before.” As a home-and-hearth pixie, Parsley hadn’t been bitten by the travel bug. Most pixies stayed close to home. Social pixies were different. We loved to mix and mingle. We loved new experiences and traveling.

“Hmm...anything else?”

I shivered and answered, “Sprites.”

“*Sprites*? Seriously? In a forest or—”

“They’re all over Peaches’s orchard. He’s the nature pixie that’s bonded to a vampire. That’s why the show’s here.” I’d already filled Parsley in on a lot of our latest episode, but I’d just sent the information in a text and hadn’t given many details.

“They’re on a pixie’s land? Has he called an exterminator?”

Fresh gratitude for my brother sank into my soul. “That’s exactly what I thought, but if you can believe it, Peaches actually invited them onto his property. He’s encouraged them to stay and protects them with his barrier.”

“No,” Parsley whisper-shouted. “Really?”

“Really, really. It’s bizarre and more than a little disturbing. I told him those sprites are not to feed on my dust.” Thinking back, I’d been rough and tactless when I’d made that declaration. I’d given more of myself away than I’d wanted and hadn’t been the congenial social pixie I was supposed to be. I thought, given the sprite situation, I was allowed some histrionics.

Quiet contemplation whispered down the line until Parsley finally asked, “Do you think they’d be able to tell?”



Head bent, I stared at my bare feet. My wings were quiet, silently at ease, the tips barely touching the soft bedding. “I don’t know,” I finally managed. “But I don’t want to take the chance.” There was a chance my charmed pixie dust would taste different. Peaches’s sprites weren’t just irritations. They could cause a lot more damage.

“Probably best,” Parsley agreed.

I could tell he wanted to say more, that he wanted to urge me again to stop the charms and allow my *natural* color through. Parsley would be even more adamant if he fully understood the cost of the charms. My brother thought I was only wasting money. He had no idea that I’d traded bits and pieces of my life force to maintain the ruse.

“And the vampire?” Parsley asked, moving on from the rocky territory surrounding my charmed life. “What’s he like?”

So far, my dealings with Lucroy Moony had been brief. “He seems like most other vamps I’ve met. Maybe a bit less pompous.”

“He did bond with a nature pixie,” Parsley said by way of agreement.

“He did.” I thought back to our original meeting and the rumors Divia and I’d caught regarding their bonding. “Have you ever heard of a vampire and pixie together before?”

“Never. I’m not sure why, but vamps never seem to want to drink from us. I can’t say that’s a disappointment. If anything, most pixies are grateful. It’s one less species we have to worry about.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. But I’ve heard things.”

“Like what?”

I’d tickled Parsley’s curiosity.

“Lucroy was okay with our first meeting occurring during the early evening. The sun wasn’t fully down, but it was weaker. I know Lucroy’s old. From what I’ve heard, he’s over six hundred—”

“That’s old,” Parsley chimed in.

“It is, even for a vamp, although he’s not considered ancient. Anyway, I understand that older vamps can tolerate some sun. All vamps fall to ash in the midday sun, even ancient ones. It’s just...I got the feeling that the sun wasn’t all that big of a concern for him.”

“But isn’t that why you’re there? To make a home underground on Peaches’s bonded land where the vampire can safely live.”

“It is.” I twirled the corner of my shirt between my fingers. The spider silk bounced back when I released it, not a wrinkle to be found. “I get your point, and I’m probably making more of things than I should—listening to unfounded rumors.” That practice had gotten me into trouble before, and I’d paid a huge price for my gullibility. I was still paying that price.

“Don’t say that, Nip. Don’t doubt your instincts. I hate it when you do that.”

I hated it too, but that didn’t change the fact that I couldn’t help it. I’d been burned so badly, to the point where I didn’t recognize myself. Now I had to rely on someone else’s magic to make me feel like...me.

“I know,” I sighed, even though we both realized that knowing something didn’t always change one’s reactions.

“I’m sorry this assignment isn’t as enjoyable as some of your others. You know I’m just a phone call or a plane ride away. No matter what your...No matter what, Nip, I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

My fluttery panic eased, and for an instant, I wondered why I’d felt so worried. Parsley had a way of doing that, of taking away my anxiety and making me feel like everything was going to be okay. I just wished I could always believe and that I could wrap my body in a cloak of my brother’s love.

“Thanks, Parse,” I managed to choke out. Tears filled my eyes, stinging like mad as I held them at bay. That was another thing pixies weren’t supposed to do—cry.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I love you, no matter your color.”

My tears fell. If only everyone else viewed the world through Parsley’s eyes. But they didn’t. It was a hard truth, and I was willing to lie through my teeth, give away all my money, and sell off bits and pieces of my life force to avoid facing their ridicule.

“Thanks, Parse. Love you too.”

The line went silent, leaving me alone in my rented home with only the sound of the heat kicking on for company. For a social pixie, life was very lonely.

## Chapter Eight

*VANDER*

I was an idiot. Or, more precisely, I was about to do something completely idiotic. If Georgiana were still alive, she would have zapped me and placed a binding spell on my legs to keep me home. Then again, I probably had her to thank for the mess I found myself in. If it weren't for this ridiculous ring, I doubt I would have given Parsnip more than a passing thought. Then again, if it weren't for the ring, I probably would have fucked up even greater and missed out on a chance with my one and only.

I stared down at the warm metal band, its onyx surface still shot through with crimson spiderwebs. I'd thought the metal was simply warm from lying against my skin, but that wasn't true. Curiously, this ring was warmer than all the others, so unless my left index finger ran hotter than the rest of my body, Georgiana's magic was at work.

Running my hand over my face, my fingers scrubbed the constant five o'clock shadow covering my chin. Thank Gaia it wasn't a weekend. Otherwise, I doubted I would have been able to get into Dusk. From what I understood, in Rutherford Haven, it was the place to be and be seen. Dusk mostly catered to non-human species, but I'd seen the stray Homo Sapiens here and there. Time would tell if they were either brave or stupid. From what I knew of humans, it was probably a mix of both.

“You comin' in, or you just gonna stand out here all night, brooding?”

I found those words amusing, given they came from a huge, dour-looking troll.

“Either get your ass through the door or get outta line. Others are waitin’.”

I flicked my gaze behind me only to realize the troll bouncer was right. It wasn’t a very long line, but others were waiting.

“Sorry,” I said. “Just mulling some things over.”

The troll, whose neatly embroidered shirt proudly proclaimed he was named Bax, rolled his eyes. “Then mull inside with a drink in your hand.”

“Right.” I took the hint and walked through the door. The music I’d heard outside was louder inside. Thankfully, it wasn’t too obnoxious. Even so, I had no idea how weres dealt with the booming sound.

The place wasn’t exactly hopping, but it was barely after 10:00 p.m. From the information I’d found online, Dusk’s busiest time was between 11:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. I was a little early, but that suited me just fine. I didn’t necessarily abhor crowds, but I didn’t seek them out either.

Byx said I was stuffy. She also said I was old.

“Something I can get you, newbie?” A human with flaming orange hair asked from behind the bar. A heavily studded collar was wrapped around her neck, and she appeared stuck somewhere between bored and irritated.

“Got any burnt rum?”

A hint of interest sparked in her eyes before she gave a slow nod. “Don’t get much call for that, seeing as not many warlocks find their way through our doors. I think there’s a bottle on the top shelf. I’ll need to check and see.”

I waved her off. “If it’s too much trouble—”

“No trouble. Although, it’s a shame Phil or Peaches isn’t here. They could fly up and get it without having to pull out a ladder.”

Byx was the only reason I knew Peaches's name and species. She'd gone digging, trying to find out why Parsnip was in the area. She'd located *Interspecies Habitat's* official website and found a list of shows they were working on. The only one even remotely close to Richmond was in Rutherford Haven. The couple the show this particular episode was going to feature was the king of the Southeast nest and his new beloved, a nature pixie named Peaches. I could hardly believe it when Byx told me about the pairing. Given what the human had just said, it sounded like Byx wasn't wrong.

It also sounded like I might be on the right track.

"Peaches. That's King Moony's beloved. Right?"

My human bartender momentarily froze, eyes narrowed with scrutiny. "That's right. You got something to say about it?" Throwing a hand towel over her shoulder, she spread her arms wide, leaning on the bar in what I suspect she considered a threatening manner.

Was this little slip of a human really threatening a warlock?

Considering I was here seeking information, laughing in her face didn't seem wise. Given the scathing reproach shimmering in her eyes, I didn't hide my smirk as well as I would have liked.

"Johnny," she hollered, making me flinch. Who knew someone so small could make that loud of a sound.

Less than twenty seconds later, a faun came through a door leading behind the bar. "Problem, Lizbeth?" The faun, Johnny, glanced between me and Lizbeth. I realized the instant he figured out I was a warlock.

"Not sure, but this guy's asking questions about Peaches."

I thought that was stretching things and said, "I only asked if Peaches was King Moony's beloved. I meant no offense and didn't realize it was considered a secret."

"No secret," Johnny assured me, much more relaxed than Lizbeth. "Go on, Lizbeth, I'll take care of this one."

My would-be bartender gave Johnny a sharp nod. Before she took off for parts unknown, she said, “He’d like a glass of burnt rum. Not sure if we still have a bottle or not.”

Johnny huffed before rolling his eyes. “Wish Peaches or Phil were here.”

“That’s what I said,” Lizbeth answered before walking away.

“Wendall.” Johnny’s voice wasn’t as loud as Lizbeth’s was, but it resonated with a lower frequency and carried farther.

“Yeah?” A young, human male peeked his head out the same door Johnny had just exited. Far more timid than the human female, his pale blue eyes darted here and there. “You need something, Johnny?”

“Grab a ladder and fetch me that red bottle up there on the top shelf.”

Wendall leaned out a little more, craning his neck and staring up at the shelving. “You got it, boss.”

Wendall scurried to do as told, and I had to ask, “A little young for a human, isn’t he? The legal limit’s still—” My words ground to an immediate halt.

Wendall was closer now, close enough for me to sense him. Or, in this case, not sense him. The only species who did that wasn’t really a species at all.

I hissed in a breath.

“Don’t.” Johnny leaned over the bar, far more menacing than Lizbeth. “Don’t say it. Wendall knows what he is, what’s been done to him. He doesn’t need any reminders. Got it?”

I might not have understood how a zombie was that fully functional and evidently self-aware, but I did understand Johnny’s concern and swallowed my disbelief.

Keeping my voice hushed, I asked, “How?”

Thankfully, Johnny understood the breadth of that single word. “Not sure,” he answered with a casual shrug. “Muriel

asked us to keep him, and the boss agreed. Wendall's a good worker," Johnny said the last loud enough for Wendall's ears to catch it. "That's all that matters to me, and that's all you need to worry about."

Wendall's zombie status wasn't my concern, and it wasn't the business I was here about. When he placed the bottle of burnt rum on the counter, Wendall was all shy smiles and soft pride. "Here you go, Johnny. Anything else I can do?"

"Not right now. Head on back and finish cleaning those glasses. The place will get busy soon enough, and we'll need the extra stash."

"Will do," Wendall answered with an eager grin.

My eyes tracked him as he turned and exited through the door to the back.

"Here you go. One glass of burnt rum." Johnny's voice pulled my attention from the swinging door.

"Thanks." I grabbed the glass, noting its shimmering deep plum color before tossing back the contents. The burn was good, and I hummed in genuine appreciation. "That's good stuff."

Johnny chuckled, the sound almost as warm as the burnt rum pleasantly coating my stomach. "Only the best for the boss's bar, even if we don't have too much need to carry it. Lucroy always makes sure we've got every species' needs satisfied. Even warlocks." There was a minuscule hint of derision coating those final words.

In a sad way, I understood. Not that the bad name warlocks had gotten over the years was truly deserved. A couple of bad apples had not only spoiled our collective barrel, but they'd also rotted it to the ground.

"Tell me," Johnny leaned an elbow on the bar, making me realize there must be a riser or stool on the other side to allow for his extra height, "what's a warlock of your caliber doing out and about tonight?"

"My caliber?" I asked, an eyebrow high. "Trying to flatter me?"



“Nope. Just call it like I see it. You’ve got a certain vibration. It’s easy to spot.”

“Huh.”

I’d heard that before. Different species had different abilities, and individuals within those species varied even more.

When Johnny’s eyes widened expectantly, I said, “Nothing nefarious, I promise. Also, nothing really to do with King Moony or his beloved. At least, not directly. I’m looking for a pixie named Parsnip. From what I understand, he’s in town filming a show involving King Moony and his beloved, Peaches.”

Johnny’s eyebrows rose a little higher, showing off the whites of his eyes. His gaze slid by me, landing on someone just over my right shoulder. The magic I surrounded myself with pinged vampire.

“Parsonip. Hmm,” a smooth voice answered. I’d only heard those cool tones from one species. I hadn’t needed the confirmation, but it was nice all the same.

Spinning on my barstool, I was confronted with ivory skin and flaming red hair bright against its pale glow. I’d never met Lucroy Moony, but I knew enough to realize this wasn’t him.

“Leon.” The vampire didn’t hold out his hand. Instead, he glanced at Johnny and said, “I could go for a snack.”

“Consider it on the way,” Johnny answered before he hopped off the riser on the other side and scuttled off to get Leon his blood.

His attention back on me, Leon’s pitch-black eyes roved up and down my body. He was handsome, and there was more than a hint of desire wafting from him. Three days ago, my dick would have perked up and done a happy dance. Instead, it flaccidly lay there, absolutely refusing to come out to play.

Damn Georgiana for being right.

“A warlock,” Leon said with not a hint of distaste. “Don’t see many of those. Then again, there aren’t really that many to

be seen.”

Leon was right. Warlocks were far from plentiful. Witches outnumbered us nearly ten to one. No one knew why. I’d never cared enough to ponder it too long.

“Tell me, *warlock*, why are you looking for Parsnip?” A purr laced Leon’s cool voice. I should have been suppressing shivers and fighting down attraction. But there was nothing beyond appreciation for a good-looking male.

Internally sighing, I dove into the reason I’d walked through the door. “Parship came to see me about a...project. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to help him out, so I sent him on his way. Turns out, I might be able to accommodate his request. Unfortunately, he didn’t leave me his contact information. My work partner figured out he was probably in Rutherford Haven and who *Interspecies Habitat* was filming. I took a shot and decided to try Dusk, see if King Moony could tell me where I might find my wayward pixie.”

For some reason, Leon found that funny. “We’ve definitely got our fair share of *wayward pixies* around here. You sound genuine enough, but who knows.” Leon leaned back, and the corner of his lip ticked up into a parody of a grin. I took the fact he didn’t show fang as a promising sign.

“Tell you what,” Leon said, “why don’t you give me your information, and I’ll pass it along to Lucroy. Next time he sees Parsnip, he can give him your details, and if Parsnip wants to get into contact with you, then that’s up to him.”

Disappointment flooded me, but I understood and, in some ways, was grateful for Leon’s protective instincts. Parsnip was a celebrity of sorts. I could be a dangerous stalker for all the vampire knew.

A pen and napkin slid my way, and I scribbled down my name and phone number. My name probably would have been enough. Clearly, Parsnip already knew how to find me. When I was done, I started to slide it back but hesitated.

“This is for King Moony,” I reiterated. “I’m not a hookup.”

I'd been around the block enough to recognize the signals Leon put out. I might not feel like reciprocating, but that didn't mean I was blind.

"No?" Leon questioned, gaze sweeping up and down my body again. "I've heard warlock blood is better than fine wine. Can't say I've ever had the opportunity to make my own personal judgment. It would be nice to change that."

"No doubt, but it won't be from this warlock." Not wishing to offend, I hesitantly said, "I'm, uh, already taken." It wasn't a lie. My one and only just didn't know it yet.

The flirty smirk dropped from Leon's face, an unwelcome blank mask of apathy taking its place. "Pity, warlock." Swiping my information off the bar top, Leon tucked it into his jacket pocket. "I'll make certain Lucroy gets this. Currently, he is off premises with his beloved." Leon's voice drifted toward the end, his attention taken by something or someone by the front entrance.

"Excuse me." It was more of a brush-off than a true request.

Swiveling on my barstool, I followed Leon's exiting steps.

"Damn," I whispered. The sound of Dusk's music covered my expletive. "Ray."

I'd met Hellfire Rayburn on a couple of occasions. I didn't know the fairy well but doubted anyone else could claim differently. Fairies generally didn't become fast friends with other species. Some wondered how friendly they even were with each other. Georgiana used to say they were like cats forced to live in too small of a home. They learned to coexist, but that didn't mean they'd mourn the loss of a few other furballs.

The exchange appeared cordial enough, although Leon quickly escorted Ray off the main floor and into the back, away from prying eyes.

"Vander Kines, what in Gaia's name have you done?"

After quickly turning, a grin lit my face, thoughts of vampires and fairies forgotten. "Mattie." Hopping off my seat,

I leaned over and drew the witch into my arms, hugging her fiercely. “It’s been too damn long.”

Squealing, Mattie hugged me back before I reluctantly let her go. The diminutive witch barely came up to my chest. Curly red hair, unruly as usual, with golden strands, caught the light and shimmered beautifully. With fingers decked out in as many rings as mine, just as many necklaces graced her collarbone. The tips of Mattie’s fingers weren’t blackened like mine, and her hair hadn’t prematurely grayed. Those weren’t physical attributes witches suffered.

“How do you warlocks get so damn big?” Mattie patted my chest before stepping back, a deep scowl marring her face. “What did you do?”

“What do you mean?” I hadn’t seen Mattie in what seemed like forever and couldn’t for the life of me figure out what I’d done to piss her off.

Taking another couple of steps back, Mattie waved a hand around my body. “I can see it, the pact. You can’t hide that stupid shit from a good witch, and we both know I’m better than good. Now, what on Gaia’s green earth would have made you seal a pact with fairy law? That’s beyond foolish, and you know it.”

I sighed, long and deep. Mattie was the last witch I expected to see tonight. Running a hand through my hair, I answered, “Blame it on Georgiana.”

Mattie’s eyes flew wide. “She’s dead and cremated, ashes spread to the wind. How can she be to blame?”

Unsure how to answer, I simply shrugged and said, “Regardless, I’m blaming her.”

With a heavy sigh of her own, Mattie stepped closer and hugged me again. “It feels like forever since we’ve seen each other.”

I thought back and nodded. “Probably not since Georgiana passed.”

Mattie’s bright smile faded before flickering to life again, though a dimmer version. “How’s Byx doing?”

My laugh was full of genuine joy. “Well. Or at least as well as a brownie can when saddled with me as their guardian.”

Mattie slapped me again, this time a little harder. “Every lost child should be so fortunate. Georgiana wasn’t stupid, Vander. She knew what she was doing when she left her daughter with you.”

I could only hope Mattie was right. “I suppose that remains to be seen.”

Grunting, Mattie dismissed my comment by leaning over the bar and waving her hand. Lizbeth hustled over. “Can I get another one of those lovely, fruity concoctions you made me before?”

“Comin’ up. You want another umbrella too?”

Mattie vigorously nodded. “Oh yes, please. A bright pink one this time if you have it.”

Accomplishing what I couldn’t, Mattie’s infectiously bright personality drew a smile from Lizbeth. “I think we’ve got that. It’ll take a few minutes.”

“That’s fine, dear.” Mattie waved her off. “My coven sisters and I will be here for a while yet. You might as well keep them coming.”

Lizbeth took off on her fruity-alcoholic-drink mission.

Turning back to me, Mattie winked and said, “Not every human invention is horrid. They have an unnatural knack for mixing a good drink.” Gaze drifting to my nearly empty glass with plum-colored liquid clinging to its sides, Mattie’s lips pinched as if she’d just sucked on a lemon. “Burnt rum?” She shook her head as if I were a lost cause. “I swear, warlocks have the worst taste buds of any species.”

“Even trolls?”

This time, Mattie turned a little green around the edges. “Point taken. You might not be that bad.”

It was always comforting knowing your taste in food didn’t run toward rotten meat. “You out with your coven

sisters?” I’d heard her tell Lizbeth that, but it seemed polite to verify it.

“Out and about for a night on the town.” Mattie sounded like maybe she’d already had a couple of or a half dozen drinks, especially if she were drinking the human-grade stuff. It would take a lot of that type of alcohol to make an inebriated dent.

“So, what brings you to Dusk? This isn’t your typical scene.” Mattie wasn’t wrong.

With a heavy sigh, I leaned my elbows on the bar top. “I’m looking for someone.” Georgiana’s ring warmed with thoughts of Parsnip. “Can’t say I’m having the best luck though.” I really wanted to speak with Parsnip tonight. Once I got a thought in my mind, it was hard to shake.

“Anything I can help with?”

“Not unless you know where I can find a pixie named Parsnip.”

“Parship? Hmm...I know a few pixies, but none by that name. I mean, there’s Parsnip that hosts that show on Home and Kitchen TV, but I doubt he’s the one you’re after.”

*If she only knew.*

Swallowing my answer, I nodded toward the laughing witches gathered around a table smack dab in the middle of things. “Looks like your sisters are having a good time.”

Thankfully, Mattie was easily distracted. “We always have a good time when we’re out.”

I wondered what it would be like to have that many friends. The life of a warlock wasn’t nearly as congenial. While witches formed sisterly covens, we tended to branch out, remaining alone. It was common to see a couple of witches set up shop on the same street. Warlocks stayed at least one to two towns apart.

I thought about warning Mattie about the recent beta werewolf in my shop but decided against it. Witches couldn’t break pixie bonds. I wasn’t even sure a warlock could do it,

but if it were possible, then warlock magic would be the way. Witch magic would fizzle up and die at the very idea.

Instead of bringing the mood down, I said, “I know I’ve thanked you already, but I don’t think a hundred thanks are enough for helping me create Byx’s magic storage charm. Gaia willing, we’ll never have to use it, but it gives me comfort knowing it’s available.”

Patting my arm, Mattie’s big, green eyes gazed up at me. “I’m just glad you thought of it. And I’m blessed you thought to ask me for help. It was the least I could do. Georgiana was special to all of us.”

A chuckle rumbled through my chest. “Can you imagine where we’d be if she hadn’t taken pity on us?”

Mattie shivered. “I don’t even want to contemplate it.”

Older than me by at least thirty years, Mattie had been one of Georgiana’s students, just like me. She’d guided us both and helped us harness the magic around us. Warlocks and witches often taught each other, but to truly understand magic, you needed to learn from someone who was made of the stuff.

Heat enveloped my left ring finger. A slowly brightening crimson glow emanated from the stone when I glanced down. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only one to notice.

“Is that...?” Mattie couldn’t finish, her eyes wide. When Lizbeth slid Mattie’s drink within reaching distance, Mattie grabbed it, tossed the umbrella to the side, and downed half of it in one go. “She really did it, didn’t she?”

I glared at the ring. “She really did.”

The full realization of what Georgiana’s activated ring meant hit Mattie, and her eager gaze swept the room, homing in on Dusk’s entrance.

“Sweet Gaia.” Mattie’s hand flew to her chest, shifting necklaces here and there. “Is it the pixie or the siren?”

Shit, that was a siren with Parsnip. “Pixie,” I muttered.

Mattie inhaled before a coughing fit ensued. I soon realized her coughing was brought about by laughter.

*Parsnip*. Oh...that's really who you meant. I... Oh... I hardly know what to say beyond good luck." Going up on tiptoes, Mattie stretched up while I leaned down. Kissing my cheek, Mattie pulled away, a goofy smile plastered across her face. "You're going to need it, sweetie." Mattie patted my cheek as if I were a wayward child and picked up her remaining drink. Mirth danced through her voice as she walked away, a faint "a social pixie" drifting in her wake.

I stared at the entrance, my gaze transfixed. I hadn't paid the kind of attention I should have the first time I'd seen Parsnip. Maybe it was knowing he was my one and only. Maybe it was the burnt rum swimming through my veins. Either way, I was struck dumb by just how beautiful he was. I'd seen more than a few pixies in my day, but I didn't think I'd ever seen one with aqua-colored hair and wings. White-blond at the crown of his head, Parsnip's hair darkened as it lengthened, finally ending in deep blue-green hues. His wing color shifted in the lights, shimmering darker and lighter while that same aqua-colored dust shimmered all around him.

Dressed in creamy white, flowing fabric, Parsnip was breathtaking. My dick agreed, finally plumping with interest. My libido wasn't in doubt. Too bad my brain had other ideas. Then again, sex drive was a simple thing with a one-track mind. It didn't give two shits about this pixie hiding something. Something big.

Parsnip needed an obfuscation charm. The million-dollar question was why.



## Chapter Nine

### *PARSNIP*

“I don’t know why I agreed to let you drag me out tonight.” Besides Parsley, Divia was one of the few I could be a little honest with. As a social pixie, I should want to go out and do things. I should want to be seen and fawned over. Most of the time, I was game, but tonight I was simply tired. My head hurt worse than usual, and I felt like I could fall asleep at the drop of a hat. I didn’t feel like smiling, like putting on a happy face. Regardless, here I was, doing just that.

“You need to get out, Parsnip. You and I both know it. Part of the reason you’re so exhausted is because you haven’t gone out and mingled much. I know my pixies and social ones need the attention. Otherwise, you just sit and wither away.”

My heart stuttered. I’d already nearly withered away once, and that had been against my will. I was no longer caged. My decisions were my own, and I needed to be responsible. Maybe that’s why I’d agreed. Maybe it had been instinct as much as anything else.

“From what I’ve found, Dusk is the best place for you to recharge. The nearest pixie bar is in Richmond, and that’s over an hour away. This is closer, and I think it will do.” Divia smiled, waving at a nearby gawker. Cell phone cameras clicked here and there as heads increasingly turned in our direction. Once a single individual recognized me, the rest were like dominos and quickly followed.

“You’re a celebrity, Parsnip. Soak it up and bask in the glory.”

Basking did sound kind of good. Besides, I needed something to take my mind off my life struggles. I'd done some internet searching and found a couple of leads in Vermont and New York. I'd also come across some options in California. The Northeast was closer, so I thought I'd try there first. Unfortunately, what I needed couldn't be discussed over the phone. I needed the same thing from them that I'd gotten from Vander Kines. I needed a secrecy pact. That couldn't be done across the internet.

I needed to speak with Divia and let her know I required a few days off. My final charm would last seven, maybe eight more days before it completely lost power. It would take a few days to make the charms, and I hadn't even been able to find a warlock to contract with. By all rights, I should be on a plane right now, not at a local bar.

A weretiger male ran up, getting in my face. "You're Parsnip, aren't you?" He bounced on his toes, and I wondered if he'd already gotten into a bag of catnip.

"That's me." I smiled brightly, throwing out a hip and settling my hand there. Wings fluttering, I lifted off the ground, surrounding my body in a fine sheen of dust. The wind was to the back of the weretiger and blew my dust away from his sensitive nose.

"I knew it!" He threw an arm in the air and fist-pumped. "That aqua-colored hair was a dead giveaway. It's beautiful." Stretching an arm out, his fingers ran through my hair. I'd gone through this before. As a television star, I came into their homes weekly. It was hard for my fans to draw a personal boundary line. Even though I'd never met them before, they knew me. Or, at least, they thought they knew me. I was a familiar friend, a smiling face, and a constant presence.

"We're glad you like the show." Divia moved to my side, placing herself between me and the weretiger.

He barely spared the siren a glance. "Can I get a picture with you?"

"Sure," I happily answered, "why not? Divia, do you mind?"

She wouldn't. My producer had been through this same scenario a time or sixty before. Occasionally, it was the other way around. In the landlocked parts of the country, sirens were rare, and humans often wanted their pictures taken with Divia.

Swiping my fan's phone, Divia proceeded to take our picture. We kind of got stuck there as others approached, pulling themselves out of Dusk's entrance line to create a makeshift new one. As the praises rolled in, my energy levels increased. I wouldn't go so far as to say I felt good and it did little to nothing for my headache, but my ego sure did get a much-needed boost.

When we finally finished, Dusk's line reformed. In the distance, I thought I saw a couple of flashes. Divia's attentive gaze tracked the same way, her eyebrows pulled into a tight V, and her lips pinched.

"Let's get inside." Divia gave me a little nudge.

"I doubt it's her." I wished I felt as sure as my words. "She's not to come within twenty feet of me. If she does, she's breaking fairy law."

Divia hissed, the sound piercing. "You think Letty Fox cares about fairy law?" Divia shook her head while putting a little more force into the push she gave me. "Crazy doesn't see reason, Parsnip. And that witch is about as crazy as they come. She's got it out for you. Letty stepped over the line of jealousy and straight into crazy town. Restraining order or no, I don't trust her."

I didn't either, especially knowing why she was after me. Letty Fox wasn't just a witch. She was a wannabe social media star. She'd auditioned to host *Interspecies Habitat*. From what I understood, she hadn't even been in the final three contenders. That didn't stop her from blaming me for *stealing* a job she thought was rightfully hers. I didn't know how or why, but she suspected something was off with me and refused to let it go. Letty dogged me at nearly every job site. When her attention started coming with threats, I took Divia's advice and filed a complaint. Fairy law sided with me and

agreed to the restraining order. The look on Letty's face when the judgment was handed down was beyond frightening.

Divia was right to worry.

---

“It's prettier than I thought it would be,” Divia said as we walked inside. The lights were dim but enough to highlight the patrons' better qualities. “It's quite the mix. I like it.”

Divia was right again. Several species were represented in the vampire-owned bar. I felt confident Divia was the only siren, just like I was the only pixie, but the mix of different weres, brownies, vampires, witches, trolls, fauns, and a smattering of humans made me feel welcome. A quick scan to check for ogres relaxed my anxiety when none were found.

My wings fluttered in time with the beat of the music. I was careful not to create too much dust. I didn't want to make anyone's night out miserable.

“Do you want something to drink? I heard one of the bartenders is a faun. Maybe they have honeysuckle mead.”

Getting drunk off my pixie ass seemed like a lovely idea, but it was beyond stupid. I couldn't afford to lose control or be hungover tomorrow. I had places to go and warlocks to see.

“I think I'll stick with water.”

Divia frowned and called me a party pooper, but I didn't care.

“Well, I'm going to have a drink. I heard King Moony caters to all types of species. I can't be the first siren he's had come through Dusk. My money's on a good bottle of virgin human tears. Preferably male.” Divia's lips spread into a vicious grin, her double row of razor-sharp teeth on full display.

“You're evil,” I accused.

“No more so than anyone else in this bar.” Divia’s arm swung out, sweeping the breadth of the bar. I followed its motion, my gaze stopping in its tracks when it fell on a familiar warlock.

“Shit.”

“Problem?” Divia asked before heading for the bar.

I swallowed down my instant anxiety along with my anger. “No. No problem at all.” I meant those words. Vander Kines’s opinion didn’t matter. I wouldn’t let it matter. I had nothing to be ashamed of. Abso-fucking-lutely nothing at all. I would not let him make me think less of myself, like my issues and my solutions to them were pure vanities. Warlock Vander Kines could take a headfirst jump into the shallow end of the pool for all I cared.

Head held high, I tilted my nose to the ceiling, refusing to further glance in his direction. Only, I couldn’t exactly help it. And when I did look again, I noticed a squat, redheaded witch at his side. And she... Did she just kiss him?

Rage, boiling hot and swift, raced through me. My movement was more instinctive than thought-out. Wings flaring to life, I sprinted in Vander’s direction. I’d made it past a single table when reason kicked in.

Why did I care who Vander Kines kissed? With hands fisted, I vigorously shook my head. I didn’t care. Did I?

Irritated frustration replaced my rage. This emotion was hardly better than the one before. I’d managed to work myself into a pretty good snit when the annoying warlock appeared before me. I didn’t think he’d used magic to sneak up on me. I was too caught up in my own brain to pay attention.

“Good evening, Parsnip.” Vander’s deep, soothing voice rolled through me, and I shivered.

I’d always found Lance’s higher pitch irritating and lamented the fact that I’d found the one warlock in the country that didn’t have the typical melodic voice. Now I kind of hated that soulful rasp.

Far from ready to give up my wounded pride, I snapped, “It was good. Then I ran into you.” Crossing my arms, I pushed out my chest and flew a little higher.

I’d expected that comment to wound Vander. Or, at the very least, irritate him just a little. Instead, he laughed.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” Vander cocked his head, amusement lighting up his stupidly handsome features.

*Oooh.* I silently seethed while forcing the widest, fakest smile of my life onto my face. “Apologies. I simply didn’t wish to waste too much effort insulting *you*.” There! Take that, Vander.

“Ah, I see.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, Vander rocked back on his heels. Those damn hazel eyes bored into me, and I couldn’t look away no matter how hard I tried. And I did try. Goddess help me, I tried.

“Well,” I huffed, “if that’s all, then I’ve got places to be, others to—”

“I think we got off on the wrong foot, Parsnip, and that’s on me. I’d like to apologize. If you’ll let me.”

It was like he’d smacked the breath from my body. Wings stuttering, I lost altitude and had to look up at him. “Wh-what?” I didn’t know what else to say. Vander’s words completely blindsided me. Finally pulling my wits together, I managed to ask, “Exactly what are you apologizing for?”

Divia showed up in my peripheral vision. She was holding a crystal blue glass in one hand and ice-cold water in the other. Head cocked to the side, she raised an eyebrow, asking if I needed an exit strategy. If I’d been wise, I would have given her the signal to swoop in. But I wasn’t wise. I’d never once in my life fit that lofty ideal and instead waved her off.

“Well,” Vander started, “I suppose for anything that offended you, but mostly, for belittling your request. I shouldn’t have judged you.”

“Damn straight,” I shouted, wings zipping back to life, allowing me to fly up and get in his face. “You had no right to demean me the way you did, to make me feel like...like...” I

couldn't say it, couldn't admit just how much his words wounded me, how much I'd allowed them to wound me.

"I know, and again, I'm sorry." Vander's large hand cupped my chin, pulling me up at eye level. Goddess, those eyes... I'd never seen eyes with that many colors. Even in Dusk's dim light, they were magnificent.

Before I could say anything, Vander continued. "What I'm not sorry about is my concern for what you're doing. I'll never apologize for that." Releasing me, Vander inhaled deeply, closing his eyelids and covering all those glorious colors.

With him no longer holding my chin, my body dropped. My wings instinctively took over, slowing my descent.

"If you're still interested, I'm willing to discuss your request." Vander's gaze shifted around the increasingly packed bar. "I suggest we go somewhere with fewer prying ears and less noise. I'm happy to head back to my shop, but that's over an hour away."

My head spun, and it was difficult to gather my wandering thoughts. Was he serious? Did he mean what I thought he did? I licked my dry lips. Vander's eyes hungrily followed the movement. What little blood I had rushed south, depriving my brain of precious oxygen.

"Are you staying somewhere closer?" Vander asked, tone mind-numbingly smooth. Goddess, a pixie could get addicted to that voice.

I managed a nod. "I'm renting a house."

"Just you or are the rest of the crew there too? If they are, I can whip up a silencing shield fairly quickly, just to be safe. My guess is not many know about what you're doing."

"They don't," I agreed.

I also noted that our conversation delved into territory I didn't want anyone else to overhear. Even if it were only snips and pieces. A clever mind could do a lot of damage with very little information.

"Let me tell Divia I'm leaving."

I didn't wait for Vander's answer. I flew off in my producer's direction. She'd probably call me an idiot, but I needed this. If Vander Kines came through, I wouldn't have to ask her for time off. I also wouldn't have to risk further exposure to other warlocks. I couldn't believe my turn in luck.

The anxiety I'd felt for the previous week lifted, replaced by cautious hope. Maybe just this once, things would work out for the better.



## Chapter Ten

*VANDER*

The house Parsnip rented was nice. It was a two-bedroom bungalow style that seemed to fit him. I wasn't sure what he was doing with the second bedroom and didn't ask. What did I care who slept in another bed? As long as they weren't sharing sheets with Parsnip, there wasn't a problem.

"Come in," Parsnip offered, holding the door open.

His dust floated around me. I should have been in a sneezing fit, but I wasn't. I had no idea why. Staring down at Georgiana's continuously glowing ring, I wondered if it had something to do with that. I could take it off and test out the theory, but I didn't want to. Despite the problems it was causing, the ring was a present from Georgiana. It hadn't left my finger since she'd slid it on while lying on her death bed. I couldn't imagine willingly removing it now.

Parsnip flew, his wings a rapid beat. It was a common pixie trait—one that reared its head when they were nervous. Despite efforts to hide it, Parsnip definitely seemed nervous.

"Would you like something to drink? I'm afraid I'm not sure what warlocks typically like. Besides, I've got water, and that's about it. I wasn't exactly expecting company, and I think it's pretty obvious I'm not a home-and-hearth pixie. If Parsley were here, he'd be beside himself with humiliation."

"Parsley?" My hackles rose.

"My brother," Parsnip casually dismissed, having zero idea how relieved I was to know I wouldn't have to fight another

for Parsnip's affections.

Then again, did I really know that?

Without putting much thought into it, I asked, "No significant other?"

Parsnip's fidgeting stopped abruptly. Whirling, his mouth parted in surprise before twisting with irritation. Face flushed and fisted hands on his hips, he huffed, "That's none of your business."

I let it go. For now. Parsnip didn't know it was very much my business. Besides, his reaction made it obvious I didn't have any immediate competition.

Hands up, palms out, I said, "Noted. Apologies."

With cheeks puffed out, Parsnip blew out a gust of air before he said, "I'll bet you have to apologize a lot."

"Sounds like you've been talking with Byx." I imagined her giggles when she heard what Parsnip said.

"The brownie at the shop?"

"The one and only," I easily answered. "Trust me, Byx puts me in my place plenty."

"Good." Parsnip gave a firm nod. "It's clear someone needs to."

I grinned, thinking how funny Georgiana would find this conversation. "Indeed." Still in what I figured passed for the living room, I noted the backless chair and said, "Would you like to sit and discuss things or would you prefer to stay aloft? I know flying sometimes puts pixies at ease." It was called *pixie pacing*. They'd fly back and forth in rapid succession.

Twisting his shirt fabric, Parsnip stared at the chair for a good twenty seconds before he said, "I'll sit."

I was tired and more relieved than I wanted to admit. Sitting sounded like a great idea. It might also help conceal my thickening shaft.

Weighted silence suffocated the small living room. Parsnip kept fidgeting with his shirt, and I couldn't seem to take my

eyes off the action. I soaked in every detail, no matter how small. There was elegant beauty in every one of Parsnip's movements. I wondered if that was the obfuscation. Or was it something else? Did the true Parsnip look anything like the gorgeous creature sitting not ten feet away?

Curiosity can be a good thing. It can also muddle your mind and spike your anxiety. Right now, that's exactly what my curiosity did. My mind managed to twist Parsnip's body into all sorts of deformed entities, inviting the question, would I still be attracted to him if he weren't so easy on the eyes?

The fact that I didn't know made me feel like a vain piece of shit. Maybe I really shouldn't have judged Parsnip so harshly.

“Can you—”

“So, what—”

We both spoke at the same time.

Scrubbing my bristly cheek, I waved Parsnip on. “Why don't you go first?”

He looked hesitant but finally said, “Can you really do it? Make my charm?”

Although I was still a little fuzzy on the details, I answered confidently, “Most likely. The magic won't be exactly the same, but I haven't run across much yet that I wasn't able to do. I need to get a better look at the used charm you brought with you. I'd also like to see the active one.”

Trying to keep my libido under wraps, I took a more professional perusal of Parsnip's body. Pixies didn't exactly dress with modesty in mind. Regardless, I didn't see a charm anywhere.

“It's hidden,” Parsnip answered my unasked question. “There was an...incident with a witch.” Parsnip stiffened, and his leg started shaking—tapping out an intermittent rhythm. “That incident has had continuing consequences. It is an unfortunate, ongoing issue. I learned to hide it after that. I'll let you see it, but I'm not taking it off unless absolutely necessary.” Lifting the fabric of his pants, Parsnip pulled the

silky, cream fabric up...and up, exposing a shapely calf and thigh.

My throat went dry, making me wish I'd accepted Parsnip's earlier offer of water. Shifting so he could cock his right thigh out, Parsnip twisted a little so I could get a better look.

"Mind if I..." I waved at the charm.

"Go ahead. I'll hold still."

Sliding off the couch, I went to my knees, bent over Parsnip's outstretched leg. Sweet Gaia, he smelled fantastic. It was a soothing blend that wafted over and through me. My larger hands looked brutish compared to his delicate petiteness. The black tips of my fingers and nails stood out harshly against his cream-colored skin.

*Focus Van*, I internally scolded. I was a professional and needed to pay attention to what I was looking at. With effort, I managed to push back my emotions, allowing my warlock instincts to the fore. With the barest touch, I could feel the magical signature pulsing within the charm. It was foreign magic, something that didn't belong, something that made me want to rip the thing from Parsnip's body. But mixed with that repugnant signature was Parsnip's life force. It was such a tiny aspect of the magic, and yet, it was the beating heart of it. Without that life force, the charm would be a useless hunk of rock and metal.

It was an intricate piece of work. My professional side could appreciate that. I could also appreciate the flaws. It wasn't perfect. Few magical charms were. Witches and warlocks twisted magic to suit our needs or the needs of our customers. Gaia allowed it, but our work rarely matched hers and absolutely never exceeded it.

"Well?" Parsnip asked, breath a little raspy. "What do you think?"

Half of me was reluctant to pull away. I wasn't certain when I'd get another opportunity to be this close to Parsnip

again. The other half of me was relieved. The magic felt so wrong nestled against his skin.

Sitting back on my haunches, I lowered my eyelids, focusing on the strains of magic pulsing through Parsnip's charm. I could tease out the individual threads, reading their code and what they imbued. What I came away with surprised me.

"Color," I whispered, torn between awe and utter confusion. "It's a color obfuscation. Why?" I couldn't figure out why a pixie's color would be worth giving up this much of their life force for. "Did you not like being...whatever color you were before?"

Parsnip snatched his leg back, covering it and hiding his flesh from my hungry gaze. "I *am* the color I was before," he snapped, voice full of anger and grief.

"You're...what?"

I didn't know what to make of it. I'd never heard of a pixie spontaneously changing colors. Not without chemical aid or some other form of magic. Products were available, marketed as enhancements for pixie's naturally colorful hues. Most added a little sparkle or glow under the special lighting at pixie clubs and bars.

Parsnip huffed and then hopped off his seat, flying back and forth and filling the air with dust.

Rising, I stood in front of the couch, watching his movements, my eyes flicking back and forth as if I were watching a tennis match.

"The details don't matter," he stated. "It's not something I want to talk about. Lance didn't need to know, and neither do you." Parsnip certainly had a defensive side, and the power button was clear as day.

Silently contemplating Parsnip's anger, I tasted another emotion fueling it—fear. That realization punched a hole in my gut. Parsnip was afraid. I wasn't sure if he was afraid of what would happen if his secret got out or if it was a fear rooted in the cause of his changed color. Maybe it was a little

of both, or perhaps that latter spurred the former. Whatever the reason, I didn't like it. Parsnip shouldn't be afraid. Maybe he didn't know it yet, and maybe I wasn't fully on board with the idea, but Parsnip was mine. Gaia knew I had a lot of flaws, but one thing I did was protect what was mine. Georgiana knew that. Maybe that was the reason she left Byx with me.

I wanted to force the information out of Parsnip. I wanted to reach into his brain and compel him to spill all the secrets he was hiding. I didn't want to do it for malicious reasons. I wanted to know so I could figure out how to make that fear go away. I wanted to be able to protect him from further harm.

And I could do it. I had the knowledge and the skill. But that kind of magic left a mark, and the process was painful. There was no way I could do that. Not to Parsnip. Not to my one and only. I'd have to wait. I'd have to be patient. Georgiana would laugh her ass off at the thought.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I inhaled deeply and counted to ten. It didn't escape me that, once again, my nose didn't so much as twitch. I'd wondered before if it was part of his charm. Now I knew differently. There wasn't a hint of magic in that charm that would change Parsnip's dust into something less nasally noxious.

It was another bit of unnecessary proof that the pacing pixie was my one and only.

"All right," I finally said, halting Parsnip's flight path.

"All right? Just like that?" He stood, or, well, hovered, above the ground, fists planted on his hips, looking like a strange version of Peter Pan.

I decided to amend my comment and added, "For now."

Parsnip's mouth opened, and his cheeks flushed.

I ended the tirade before it began. "Take it for what it is. I'm agreeing to help. I can make the charm you need, and I can do a better job of it than this Lance warlock you've used in the past." Lance's name sounded toxic on my tongue. "And, I won't ask a lot of questions. Not right now." Decreasing the distance between us, I cupped Parsnip's chin. It was fast

becoming a favorite move. “One day, you’re going to tell me. One day, you will trust me enough to share your pain with me. I know that day isn’t today. There’s no reason it should be. But I promise you, I won’t betray your secrets. You’re safe with me, Parsnip.”

The temptation to lean in and kiss those plump, pink lips was nearly too much, especially when Parsnip’s tongue darted out, wetting their surface and making them glisten. Something told me the move wasn’t intentional. For all his gruff posturing, in some ways, Parsnip struck me as a naïve innocent. I didn’t detect malevolent intent, and none of the charms I wore did either.

Instead of leaning forward, I released Parsnip’s chin, groaning when he gazed up at me with wide, uncertain eyes. Parsnip needed kissing. He needed hot and heavy lovin’ between, or maybe on top of, the sheets. I could give him all that and more, but it would have to wait. I wasn’t in this for a one- or two-night stand. This wasn’t about getting off and forgetting. This was about decades, hopefully centuries, together. I needed to find my cool factor and slow my pace. This was a marathon, not a dash.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Do you still have the other charm, the one you brought into my shop?”

Parsnip blinked, long and slow. Clarity filled his eyes, and his cheeks flushed crimson. “I-I’ve got it,” he stuttered before flying to an adjacent room. He came back with a quiescent stone wrapped in spider silk.

I held out my hand, and Parsnip dropped the dead stone into it. The stone itself was small. A larger, heavier one would be uncomfortable and draw more attention. Besides, it didn’t need to be any larger.

Even though it was dead, the magical signature was still there. It was like reading the lyrics to a song but without melody, no beat or sound accompanying it.

“How long will it take?” Parsnip worried his bottom lip.

I considered the question and asked, “When do you need it?”

“I activated my last charm three days ago. I’ve got seven, maybe ten days left.” He rubbed his right temple, eyes narrowed.

Parsnip knew he had given up some of his life force to activate the charm. I wasn’t sure he understood that it continued drawing magic from him while he wore it. His headache was easy to see. I suspected he was a lot more tired than he once was and that fatigue worsened the longer he wore each charm. As the maker’s magic wore off, it would siphon increasing amounts of power from its wearer until even that wasn’t enough to sustain its purpose.

Charms like this did that. The charm itself wasn’t malicious. There was no conscious intent behind it. The charm simply did what it had been programmed to do.

“I’ll have something in plenty of time.” I wanted to get it done quickly, to make something that wouldn’t draw on Parsnip’s life force. I had an alternative plan, one that Byx would zap me for if she knew. Good thing I was excellent at keeping secrets, even my own.

For the first time that evening, Parsnip’s body relaxed. His shoulders dropped, and his wing speed decreased until his toes touched the carpeted rug.

“It’s going to be okay.” I couldn’t help soothing. “I’ve got this, and the world will never know. Okay?”

I got a slow but reassured nod. “Promise?”

“On my very life.”

Parsnip didn’t know how true those words were.

He didn’t need to know.



## Chapter Eleven

### *PARSNIP*

I'd never seen a nature pixie at work, not face-to-face. I'd watched them on television. A few had shows on Home and Kitchen television. They didn't seek out media attention the way social pixies did, but their love of their land and the plants growing on it often pushed them out of their comfort zone.

Surprisingly, nature pixies weren't very good at teaching others how to care for plants or the land. It was such an innate aspect of their makeup that they couldn't explain it. Nature pixies simply *felt* plants. That wasn't something they could impart to other species. The shows hadn't been disasters, *per se*, but they hadn't been very successful either. Home-and-hearth pixie programs hadn't been total failures, but they were kind of hit-and-miss too.

The ground rumbled and creaked. Mike had his camera out, mouth parted in complete awe as he filmed Peaches, who looked ethereal. The dimmer winter sun did nothing to take away from his golden beauty. Hovering above the ground, body relaxed and head bent, Peaches would have appeared to be sleeping if not for the constant hum of his wings and the golden-yellow dust surrounding him in a magical cloud.

"Fuck, that's good shit," Mike muttered, zooming in on the ground as it parted, splitting along a narrow line, widening by steady degrees. "He's really doing it."

He was indeed. There was no need to bring in heavy equipment. No need to mar Peaches's land with tire tracks and gasoline. The surrounding trees and vegetation heeded

Peaches's wishes, pulling back the dirt and opening a cavernous hole with the exact dimensions needed to create Lucroy's underground haven—a haven I wasn't convinced was truly necessary.

“Divia's gonna be sorry she missed this,” Mike proclaimed, and I didn't disagree.

Divia would have loved to see Peaches in action. She'd been called away, off to scout another location and a couple for upcoming episodes. I liked Divia and missed her when she was gone, but it was a lot easier working with Mike without the siren nearby.

The minutes ticked by, and I had a vague thought that I wished I had timed this. Mike's camera would let us know later. I think it was fifteen, maybe twenty minutes later when Peaches's raised his head, tilting it back and allowing the weak sunlight to shine on his cheeks. Lowering to the ground, Peaches's booted feet hit the earth, and he wobbled ever so slightly.

I started for him, but he was instantly swarmed by chittering sprites, their clicks and squeals indistinguishable in my mind. It was grating.

“Shh,” Peaches scolded. “I'm fine. That just took a little more out of me than I expected.” Holding out his hand, Peaches allowed several sprites to alight on his palm. They crowded in. Those that couldn't fit took up residence on his shoulders, the top of his head, or in his hair. I wondered if there was a sprite on the property that wasn't clinging to him.

A full-body shudder ran through me. I had no idea how Peaches could stand them. They ate his dust and flitted about constantly. My brain knew they weren't like Jed, that sprites were different from ogres in nearly every way possible. Peaches's sprites wouldn't cage him. They wouldn't seal him inside a dark room, kept away from the rest of the world. I didn't understand how, but I'd even heard rumors the sprites had saved Peaches's life.

I'd heard a lot of rumors in my life and learned to doubt most of them. This was one I didn't believe for a second.

The sound of tires on gravel met my ears, and I turned, watching a pickup truck lumber down the lane leading to Peaches's cottage.

As one, the sprites tittered and took off. I jumped back as they darted past me en masse. My heart thundered, and my eyes flew wide as they swarmed the truck.

"Shoo," I pointlessly shouted at them, frantically waving my hands in the air. Those damn things were a menace.

"It's okay." Peaches's firm palm landed on my forearm, pulling it down. "That's just Phil. He's okay with the sprites and lets them feed off his dust too."

I stood there, feet unusually rooted to the ground, mouth slightly agape. Were all the pixies in Rutherford Haven insane?

"Holy shit, that's a big pixie." Mike's expletive pulled me from my less-than-charitable thoughts. But damn, my cameraman was right.

I'd never seen a pixie round on someone so fast. "Not a word," Peaches said, voice low and full of weight. "Phil is a beautiful pixie, no matter his size." Flying high, Peaches's attention zipped to me. Pointing an accusing finger in my direction, he added, "I know a few social pixies who've thrown some hateful words Phil's way. I hope you're not one of them." It wasn't a question, more of an order.

Eyes wide, I held my hands up, palms out. This was a totally different side of Peaches, one I'd never seen, one that was protective of his friend.

My mouth snapped shut, teeth clacking. I'd heard of Phil. From what I knew, he was a home-and-hearth pixie of unusual size and mated to an alpha werewolf. Divia had thought of contacting them, but as we both understood, there was nothing Phil's home needed to accommodate a pixie and werewolf family living together. Besides, as a home-and-hearth pixie, if there needed to be any changes, Phil would persuade the house to bend to his will. Although the story was interesting, there wasn't a show there. At least not the kind of show we created.

“Hey, how are you all of you doing today?” Phil dropped out of the truck, fluttering his wings and scattering pink dust everywhere. The sprites didn’t waste any time. They dove into the pink melee, scooping up dust by the mouthfuls.

Phil waved, and Peaches took off, his earlier fatigue and momentary anger forgotten as he flew into his friend, wrapping his arms around Phil, both squeezing tight. Parsley was the only other pixie I could even imagine being that happy to see.

Phil’s laughter lit up the air. Peaches’s joining mirth added a layer to the happy music. Even the sprites seemed to lower their ear-piercing pitch to something more tolerable.

“You ever seen a pixie that big?” Mike whispered into my ear. “Is he even a *real* pixie?”

I bristled, suddenly understanding Peaches’s concern. Just because Phil didn’t fit the ideal pixie shape and size didn’t make him any less pixie. Reactions like that made me desperate enough to trade my life force just to look *normal*. A part of me admired the hell out of Phil for being who he was. Another part of me wallowed in jealousy that he’d found the courage to be himself. If only I were that brave.

“Of course he’s a real pixie,” I spat, glowering in Mike’s direction before flying toward the embracing pixies.

I stayed far enough away not to get inside sprite range. I patiently waited until they’d parted. I would have thrust my hand out by way of greeting, but I didn’t want to breach the sprite-induced bubble.

“Phil,” I greeted, keeping my distance. “Or would you rather be called Philodendron?”

“Phil’s fine.” His smile was wide and honest. When he started to reach out a hand, Peaches saw where my gaze traveled.

“Parsnip isn’t as fond of the sprites,” Peaches explained, placing a halting hand on Phil’s outstretched arm.

“Oh!” Phil stared around him as if he’d already forgotten their presence. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“No reason you should,” I reassured, although I still thought these pixies were the odd ones out when it came to their opinions of sprites.

“Maybe you should head out into the orchard now,” Peaches suggested, staring into the sparkling cloud surrounding Phil. The tittering noise turned decidedly disappointed. “You can come back later, and you all know it,” Peaches scolded.

As a group, they spun in the air and took off, flying deeper into the surrounding orchard. I watched them go, their bright lights blinking out as they got farther away.

“They’re always so energetic.” Phil chuckled. “I wish I had half that amount of energy when dealing with Dillon and Ruthie.” With a slight but fond head shake, Phil wistfully said, “The cold doesn’t bother them a bit while they’re in their fur. It’s the first thing they do when they get home from school. They strip down and dart outside.” Phil’s light laughter returned. “I’m still getting used to the lack of modesty.”

I’d met my fair share of weres and agreed. “No, modesty doesn’t seem to be something their moon goddess gifted them with.”

“For good reason,” Peaches agreed.

With the sprites now gone, Phil moved a little closer. He was decked out in pink from head to toe. Even the choker necklace wrapped around his neck was filled with pink diamonds. Phil was a handsome pixie, and a humble one if his posture was anything to go by.

“I’m sorry, Peaches. I thought they’d be done filming by now.” Phil’s shoulders rolled in on his body. It looked like a well-worn disguise, one used to make himself appear smaller than he was. I hated that he felt it necessary in front of me.

“I think we’re done for today,” I reassured. “You’re not interfering in the least.” Trying to put Phil more at ease, I said, “Your coloration is beautiful, Phil. I’ve seen a few pink pixies before, but few of them wear it as well as you.” It was an honest compliment.

The effect was immediate. Phil's shoulders straightened, lifting him to full height. "Thank you. And yours. I don't think I've ever seen aqua before. It's fantastic."

It was rare. Even when it had been real. Preening, I shifted my hair, allowing it to fall over my shoulder, showing off its ombre to full effect. The three of us looked marvelous together. Peaches's golden coloration was more common, but he was no less stunning for it.

"Divia's definitely gonna be sorry she missed this." Mike moved in a little closer, the camera by his side. I was glad to see he hadn't filmed Phil. We hadn't gotten permission from him to do so, and I tried to respect that not everyone was as comfortable with the camera as I was.

We stood out in the dying sun, chatting a little longer. It wasn't uncomfortably cold, but with the fading sun, it would be soon. It was nice, and I was loath to leave. Jealousy surrounded social pixies. We knew we were often the pariahs of the pixie world—loved and hated in equal measure. An emotionally tough hide was a must for a social pixie. We had a bad habit of lashing out, of verbally belittling those around us before they could fire the first shot. We'd earned our reputations, but they were there for a reason.

With Phil and Peaches, I didn't feel the need to do so. There was no ingrained animosity, no apparent jealousy. Maybe it was because they were both happily bonded pixies with loves of their own. It was nice being around such incredibly secure pixies.

"Good evening." Lucroy's melodious voice drifted across the darkening sky. "Did you have a good day, Peaches?" Lucroy pulled a blushing Peaches into his arms, kissing him without hesitation before nuzzling his neck. I'd noticed the healing puncture marks there earlier. Mike had made a point of getting them on film. Lucroy licked over the skin, humming in deep appreciation.

Phil and I shared a glance, both of us ready to leave.

Mike stood there, gawking like the uncouth human he was.

With an eye roll that was meant to be seen, I said, “Mike, I believe it’s time for us to leave. Perhaps you could head to the car and start stowing your gear.”

“Y-yeah...I’ll do that.” Only Mike didn’t move. He stood there, eyes glued to Peaches and Lucroy.

“Now,” I said, putting a bit more force into the word.

“Oh. Yeah. Now,” Mike sputtered before taking off, tripping on one of his feet in a hurry.

“I think it might be time to get a new camera person.”

“Oh, don’t fire him on our account.” Peaches sounded genuinely concerned. “I’d hate for someone to lose their job because of me. Lucroy and I weren’t offended. Were we?” Peaches stared up at his bonded mate, eyes wide and begging. I didn’t think the vampire would be able to disagree, and I was right.

“No. Not in the least. I see no reason to hide my affection from the world. The human can gawk all he wishes.”

Peaches beamed. “See? Everything is fine.”

Oh, to be that easily placated. I had no idea what that would feel like, for the biggest concern in my life to be that of a human cameraman I knew next to nothing about. Another shot of unwelcome jealousy spiked through my chest, working its way to my lowly, pounding head.

“Trust me, that would not be the only cause,” I said. Apparently, Lucroy wasn’t the only one affected by those wide, pleading eyes. “I’m afraid working closely with a siren is beginning to affect Mike in ways that may be unrecoverable.”

A siren’s song wasn’t as addictive as pixie dust was to ogres, but it was dangerous. Human males made stupid decisions and threw their lives away.

“Oh,” Phil answered, gaze tracking toward our now industrious human. “I didn’t realize. There’s a siren on your staff?”

“Divia,” Peaches answered for me. “She’s the producer.”

“Hmm, I can see how that would be a problem.” Phil’s gaze turned sympathetic. The sound of an arriving text message drew his attention. A soft, completely smitten smile lit his face. “That was Sedrick. He’ll be home from the mine soon. Apparently, Oliver’s family has offered to keep the kids for a few hours tonight.” Phil’s cheeks flushed rosy red.

Peaches made a sound bordering on obnoxious as he flew around, wiggling his ass this way and that while making a hip thrust motion that nearly had me doubled in half from laughing.

“Sounds like sexy times at the Voss household,” Peaches sang, continuing his oddly intriguing gyrations.

“Excuse my beloved, Philodendron,” Lucroy apologized though his voice was filled with more amusement than a reprimand.

“It’s fine.” Phil waved them off. “Trust me, I’m used to it. I’ll talk to you later. It was nice meeting you, Parsnip. Maybe we can all get together sometime while you’re in town. I’m sure Sedrick would love to meet you. Dillon and Ruthie would too.”

Phil took off, climbing back into his truck and rumbling down the lane.

“He’s very proud of his driver’s license,” Peaches stated, the words full of pride for his friend.

I’d been able to drive since I was of legal age.

The trunk of our rental car slammed, indicating Mike had packed everything away and was ready to leave.

“The construction workers should be here tomorrow. They’ll be happy to see you came through for them with the excavation, Peaches. The three of us will get together soon to discuss design.” That was typically my favorite part. I wasn’t truly the designer, but I never shied away from throwing in my two cents here and there. “Some of our discussions will need to be filmed, but we always go through things a time or two before the cameras start rolling.” We’d found over the years that made for a lot better show. Most viewers liked a little



drama, and we were more than happy to deliver. However, all-out arguments didn't go over well in our demographics.

"Excellent," Lucroy said. "Apologies, but I received a message from my second, Leon. There was a warlock in the bar last evening looking for you. I have Warlock Kines's information if you wish."

My cheeks heated. "I...uh, I've actually already contacted him. Thank you though. I appreciate Leon's care."

"Think nothing of it." Lucroy's black gaze briefly settled on me before focusing back on his beloved. I took it as the dismissal it was meant to be.

With a final wave I wasn't certain either of them saw, I headed toward the car. I checked my phone to see if I had any messages from Vander. He hadn't given me an exact timeline, only said my charms would be done before I needed them. I don't know why I trusted him, but I did. He'd promised, and that was no small thing for a warlock, even if it hadn't been a fairy-endorsed pact.

"You ready?" I asked Mike before climbing into the passenger side.

"Everything's stowed, safe, and secure," Mike easily answered.

We drove down the lane. When I turned, I saw Lucroy standing there, Peaches held so close I couldn't tell where one stopped and the other started. The sprites had returned, surrounding the couple in twinkling stars. Even knowing sprites were responsible for that fairy-tale atmosphere, I couldn't help but marvel and wonder if I'd ever seen anything that stunning. I wondered if anyone could ever love me as much as Lucroy obviously loved Peaches. The thought sobered me, closing the shades on the fantasies running through my head.

There was no way I could risk it. Loving someone, allowing them that close, would expose my secret. I couldn't keep something like that from another. They'd see me without the charm. They'd see what I really looked like, and that

would be the end of the fantasy. No one could possibly love a gray-shaded pixie.

## Chapter Twelve

VANDER

“What are you working on?” Byx scrambled onto the stool next to my workstation. Head cocked to the side, she said, “I can see some of the magical threads. It looks complicated.”

“It is, although I’ve worked on tougher projects.” I focused on another thread of magic, weaving it into the amethyst stone. The first charm would be the most difficult. After that, the others should run smoother. I was trying to make a charm that lasted more than two weeks. I was confident this one would last at least twenty, maybe twenty-one days if pushed. It would be to my detriment if it were *pushed* too hard.

“What changed?”

“What do you mean?” I absently asked, my focus on weaving delicate magic.

“Come on, Van. I just said I could see the magical threads and they’re directly tied to a pixie’s magical signature. There’s only been one pixie in this shop for the last three, maybe four months. You’re working on a charm for Parsnip.” Byx kicked her legs, banging them against her stool.

When I glanced up, Byx glared at me through narrowed eyelids, arms crossed over her chest, and lips pulled into a thin line. She never liked being out of the loop, and it was eating her up inside that I’d made a silence pact with Parsnip.

Holding up my left hand, I wiggled my ring finger. “Your mamma’s ring, for starters.”

“Yeah, but knowing you, that wasn’t enough.”

I thought back on why I was sitting there, weaving a complicated magical charm I didn't fully understand the need for. Oh, it wasn't that I didn't know what it did. Sort of. It was mostly a color charm. They weren't illegal, but most lasted a few hours, maybe a day. They were popular around Halloween and when the elite or celebrities held costume parties. They were meant to conceal, confuse, or amplify for a brief time. They weren't charms specific to an individual. Sometimes they were species-specific, but most didn't have to be.

This one was both, and that made it an entity of its own. To be what Parsnip needed, this charm required more—a greater sacrifice. And that was what bordered on illegal. Parsnip knew he had to give up some of his life force to engage the charm. What I didn't think he knew, what that idiot warlock, Lance, hadn't told him, was that it constantly drained Parsnip's energy. I wasn't sure if that meant an even bigger ticket punched out of Parsnip's allotted time on Earth or not. I didn't want to find out, and more than that, I wanted to nip both in the bud.

“Van,” Byx whined. “Come on, you gotta give me something.”

I wanted to give Byx a lot. I wanted to spill everything I knew, but I couldn't. Mattie was right. A fairy-sealed pact was nothing to sneeze at. If I broke my end of the bargain, the fairy authority would know instantly. Within seconds to minutes, they'd show up at my doorstep or wherever the hell I was when I made that idiotic decision. I doubted I'd get much chance to explain why I'd broken the pact. They'd strip me of my abilities, leaving me little more than a hollowed-out shell of a warlock.

Warlocks that lost their ability to manipulate magic didn't last long. Most lost the will to live, and those that did manage to hang on until the end of their life span were often morose, twistedly thin, and hardly recognizable. It wasn't a pretty end.

With a shrug, I finally answered, “I'm not sure what to tell you, Byx. Parsnip's my one and only. Your mamma's magic is as spot on as ever.”

Byx deflated, slumping in on herself, arms still crossed but loosely. “It was irritating, her always being right.” Animosity was lacking even though the words were harsh.

“Tell me about it,” I easily agreed. “It was damn frustrating.” Memories of Georgiana were never far away and were always a twisted bag of regret mixed with overwhelming fondness and love.

“Don’t worry.” I set Parsnip’s charm aside so I could focus on Byx. “I figure you’re right on track to follow in her footsteps.” I offered a wry grin and was rewarded when Byx rolled her eyes, a loopy grin lighting up her face.

“You suck at the whole cheering up thing. You know that, Van?”

“Yeah, Georgiana told me that too.” I gave Byx a wink and ducked when she threw a nearby crystal at my head. It landed with a thunk a few feet behind me.

“Hey, that was a little too close and could have left a dent.” I pointed toward the spot on my head the crystal barely missed.

“Pleeease,” Byx mocked. “As if that would have done much damage.”

“Brat,” I scolded, no heat behind it.

Truth was, I lived for moments like these, when Byx and I gave each other shit. Georgiana had been the same way. She called me out on my shit, but she was the first one to have my back when I needed it. There was absolutely no way to overstate how freeing that knowledge was, how reassuring. As a young, loudmouth warlock with more ability than brains, Georgiana had pulled my ass out of the fire more than I cared to remember.

It was my turn to return the favor.

“How’s the magic collection going?” It was a subject Byx didn’t like to talk about, but one I wouldn’t let go. “Were you able to siphon off a little more into storage today?”

As predicted, Byx's face twisted into something sour. "Some," she finally said. "I can try a little more tomorrow."

"That's all I can ask."

Neither of us knew how much magic Byx could push into the charmed trap Mattie and I'd cobbled together. It was all theoretical at this point. We'd never tried to run it the other way, back into Byx. Gaia willing, there'd never be a need to test it.

Cocking her head, Byx's hair fell to one side. Her sides were pulled back by hair clips with kittens on them. Movement caught my attention, and my eyes widened, jaw slack. There'd been an underlying hum throughout our conversation. It was a sound I'd peripherally heard and paid little attention to. But now...

"Is that purring?"

Byx's cheeks flushed. "So what? I like the sound. It's soothing," she answered defensively.

I blinked, trying to figure out what the kittens were doing. Finally, it dawned on me. "Are they kneading?"

"It's cute," Byx defended.

"Not saying it's not." And damn, it was fucking cute. It looked like the kittens were kneading Byx's hair, their purrs softly rumbling with happiness.

I had no idea what to say beyond, "You could probably sell those." I pointed toward the clips. "A lot of species like cats, and you're right. The purring is soothing. How much magic does it take?"

Byx shrugged. "Not much." Sucking on her bottom lip, she started kicking her feet back and forth again. "I just can't figure out yet how to make it last without me nearby."

"Ah...got it." That was the thing with brownies. They were walking magic. The world lit up around them, but away from them...that was a different story. That's where witches and warlocks came into play. "Maybe we can figure something out together."

Byx lit up. “You mean it?”

“Sure. Especially if it doesn’t take much magic on your part. I can figure out the threads and weave them into something that lasts. I don’t think it’ll be too much of a problem.”

Byx’s smile, those impossibly white teeth combined with sheer joy, lit me up from the inside. I’d never know if Georgiana knew the gift she had left me. I suspected she did. Byx’s mamma knew all too well.

“Cool.” Byx slid off her stool. “I’m gonna head off to bed. You gonna stay down here and keep working on that?” Byx pointed toward Parsnip’s charm.

With a glance at the clock, I noted it was slipping toward 11:00 p.m. I figured I was a fourth to a third finished. Parsnip’s worried face swam before me, but it wasn’t the worry that made me tell Byx I was staying up. It was fear. One was far worse than the other, and I wanted to alleviate that fear ASAP.

“I’ll stay up a little longer,” I lied. I’d stay up for as long as my magical weaving held out. I figured I’d last at least three more hours, four if I were lucky—or unlucky, depending on your point of view.

Byx knew me well and waved me off. “Yeah, yeah. Just make sure you turn the lights off this time. We can barely afford rent, let alone you running up the utility bill for no reason.”

“Off to bed with you. Shoo, shoo.” I made a motion with my hand that Byx didn’t like, and she stuck her tongue out at me before she raced up the stairs.

I waited until I heard the snick of Byx’s bedroom door before I said, “Georgiana, that’s one hell of a daughter you’ve got.” The sickeningly soft smile straining my cheeks was moronic, but I didn’t care. No one was there beyond Gaia and Georgiana’s ghost to see it.

Gingerly grabbing Parsnip’s charm, I stared at the woven threads, picking up where I’d left off. Each thread was a little

different, each one seamlessly entwining with its partner. I used the dead charm Parsnip gave me as a guide to get the colors right. There were some mistakes here and there and a few areas where the original charm didn't blend seamlessly. Those areas were easy for a warlock of my ability to ferret out.

Each finished strand built on the one before. Each one honed to pixie magic. Each one holding the tiniest bit of my life force. Each one a gift to my one and only.



## Chapter Thirteen

*PARSNIP*

I shouldn't have looked. I knew better. Trolling the internet and lurking around Letty Fox's website was never a good idea and always pissed me off.

"That fucking witch!" I hissed. "Why can't she leave me alone?"

Usually, attention was what every social pixie craved. But there was a fine line between adoration and stalking. Letty didn't adore me. In fact, I got the feeling she loathed me. Then again, that might not be true either. Letty saw me as a means to an end. She was even more hooked on social media than most pixies I knew. She was an attention whore, and she wanted it at whatever price needed to be paid. In this case, she saw me as the currency for more viewers, more subscribers, and more fame.

There I was, standing next to Divia outside of Dusk. She'd been there, hiding in the surrounding area. I'd known. Something inside me, something heightened after what happened with Jed, knew she'd been there—lurking.

Grabbing my phone, I pulled up Solen's number, punching the screen far harder than necessary. At a little after 7:00 a.m. in Virginia, it was way too early to call my fairy lawyer in Washington State. I didn't give a damn.

Solen answered on the second ring.

"There is no evidence she broke the law, Parsnip," Solen said before I could get a word in.

“What do you mean? There’s a damn picture of me and Divia on her blog. She’s got photos of me in the past with little arrows pointed at different parts of my hair, comparing the color.”

“And you and I both know that technology, being what it is, can photograph someone from great distances. Photos can also be easily doctored to appear in any way one wants. The picture appears to be taken from afar. There is no evidence Letty Fox was within the designated twenty feet.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” I was beyond irate. I was scared. Fear was a powerful force, and right now, it was riding me hard and making me stupid.

It was never wise to piss off a fairy. Silence met my rant. My heavy breathing echoed back to me while there was little more than white noise on Solen’s end.

Thirty, then sixty seconds slipped by, and still nothing. When a full two minutes passed and my breathing evened out, Solen asked, “Are you finished?”

My ire instantly flashed red, but it was fleeting. I tired easily, and anger amplified my exhaustion. Rubbing my forehead, elbows on my knees, and wings silent at my back, I sat on the edge of my bed, hating the fear taking over. I was so damn tired of feeling that way, of always being on edge, of sitting on the precipice of destruction. I’d always thought my downfall would come from without, but the longer my deception continued, the more I wondered if it wouldn’t be due to internal collapse.

“Yeah.” The word was little more than a whisper. “I’m done.”

“Good.” Solen didn’t scold me. He should have, but he didn’t. “Do you want me to file charges against her? Beyond the restraining order, we’ve avoided doing so in the past. Perhaps it is time to revisit that plan. If you believe Letty Fox’s actions and claims are slandering your reputation, we would have grounds.”

My eyes slipped closed. “No. That’ll just bring her more attention.” It would also draw more attention to a topic I wanted to throw ice water on, not gasoline. “Letty doesn’t have many followers so far. A lawsuit would change that.”

“Agreed. I simply wanted to know if you had changed your mind. I realize her continued presence in your life is upsetting. I am following Witch Fox’s comings and goings. She posts often, and it is not difficult to discover where she is.”

I scoffed. “You don’t have to follow Letty’s blog to know that. All you need to do is ask where I’m filming, and that’ll be just as informative.”

“I will not argue that point,” Solen conceded. “You must understand that there is little I can do until Letty breaks with the law. Once she does, I will move swiftly. There is little more I can offer.”

I knew, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. It also didn’t mean I needed to be such an asshole about it either. “I’m sorry for calling so early, Solen. I didn’t mean to wake or disturb you.”

“While that is appreciated, it is also unnecessary. I am hardly affected by such outbursts. I am your lawyer, Parsnip. You may call me anytime. That is what I am here for.”

What Solen didn’t say was that was what I paid him for. I had no illusion that Solen was watching out for my well-being out of the kindness of his fairy heart. Some wondered if fairies even had hearts—both in the literal and emotional sense. Fairy anatomy was unknown. Everyone assumed their underlying biology was similar to other mammalian species, but no one knew for certain. Assumptions could be, at best, stupid and, at worst, dangerous.

Regardless of why Solen was being understanding, I said, “Thanks, Solen.”

“You are welcome,” he answered before ending the call.

Pulling the phone from my ear, I stared at the darkening screen. I was tempted to call Parsley, but I’d just wake him up

for no good reason. It wasn't like my brother could do anything about Letty Fox. I'd just worry him, and if I knew Parsley, he'd find out soon enough. I wasn't the only brother lurking on Letty's blog site.

Spreading my wings out flat, I flopped back on my bed, arms akimbo, the phone still in hand. The rental house's ceiling was pristine white. It was pretty, if not a little sterile. It was nice as temporary housing but wasn't my style. Parsley often teased me that I had a little home-and-hearth tendency in me. I liked nesting. I just didn't get a lot of opportunities to stay in one place for long. I'd considered purchasing a home, but it seemed like a waste. Besides, when I had downtime, Parsley's house called out to me time and time again. My brother was more my home than the walls surrounding him.

Early as it was, the winter sun was just beginning to lighten the morning sky. Dim, gray light filtered into the bedroom. Thoughts of Vander Kines snuck their way into my brain. He'd said my new charm would be ready before my current one failed. I wasn't sure why, but I believed him. Warlocks weren't always to be trusted, but he'd gone so far as to bind himself to a fairy-silence pact. That would have been an incredibly idiotic thing to do if he had ill intentions.

My neck warmed, seeping into my cheeks. Vander Kines was handsome. He wasn't the typical male I went for...not that I really *went* for anyone these days. I was so wrapped up in maintaining my secret that I hardly had time for a libido. I'd started to think the damn thing was dead. Vander Kines made me rethink that theory.

"He's gorgeous," I said to absolutely no one at all.

Some might have been turned off by the shots of white hinting at his temples. I wasn't. It was oddly distinguished. His hair would gray further as he aged. All warlock hair did, and the oldest was completely white, not a hint of their original color to be found. It was funny. Eventually, Vander's hair would be similar to my faded color. For a warlock, it was expected. Pixies didn't whiten or gray. Even at the end, we kept our brilliant shades.

Grabbing a lock of hair, I held it aloft, staring at the deep aqua color at the end. Would I still look like this when my final day came? Would the charm fail when my heart beat its last, death exposing the lie I'd fought so hard to protect?

The thought made my chest tight, and my stomach burned with acid. I hated the idea but doubted there was much that could be done. Maybe I'd ask Vander about it. Maybe I should ask him about it now.

I'd no more had that thought than I dialed Vander's number. I had no idea if he would be up. Warlocks were notorious night owls.

The phone rang and rang. Five rings turned into six, and I figured the call would go to voicemail when a deep voice answered, "Ello?"

A shiver ran down my spine, and my eyes slipped closed. I hated how much I loved the deep tenor of Vander's voice. Evidently, it was even more pronounced when he first woke.

"Will the charm you're making last even when I'm dead?" I said with absolutely no preamble. "I mean, if something happened to me, I would hate for all that work to go to waste and reveal my true appearance. I don't like the thought of others mocking me, of being that kind of headline."

A long pause followed my verbal vomit. Finally, Vander said, "Parsnip? What in Gaia's name are you talking about at...7:17 a.m. Do you even know what time it is?"

I flicked a glance at a nearby clock and noted Vander was spot on. What I also internally noted was that I didn't care. "Will it last after I die or not?" I pressed.

"I..." Groaning, grumbling, and more than a few barely audible curse words assaulted my ears. "Are we really going to have this crazy conversation right now?"

My foot tapped. Dangling off the side of the bed, my irritated appendage met only air. "It's a perfectly reasonable conversation to have."

"I doubt that," Vander grumbled. "I should have coffee before you make me think about this."

“So you don’t know?”

A long, drawn-out sigh was Vander’s immediate retort. “In short, no, I don’t know. I didn’t realize that was part of the charm parameters. Disregarding the disturbing idea that you’re going to bite the big one sooner rather than later, I haven’t put a lot of thought or effort into what the charm will do after you’re...gone.” Vander tripped over that last word, as if thoughts of my demise bothered him more than me.

“Hmm...well, I suppose I didn’t stipulate that as part of my wishes. Would it be possible to add that to my order?”

Vander choked. “Your order?”

I wasn’t sure why he sounded so offended. “What else would you call it? I asked for a service, and you’re charging me for it. I think the terminology fits nicely.” Not giving Vander time to respond, I moved on. “I think it would be a nice addition if it’s not too much trouble and if it won’t take extra time to incorporate. If it’s a time issue, perhaps it can be worked into future charms.” I had no plans of dying anytime soon, but one never knew. Pixies were hardy, and we didn’t succumb to disease like humans, but accidents happened, and early deaths weren’t unheard of.

“Yeah, let’s go with that.” Somehow, Vander sounded more tired now than when he’d first answered the phone.

“Okay. I can work with that. How is my charm coming?” My fingers tapped in time with my foot.

“It’s coming along. I think another day of work will complete it.” Vander let loose a cracking yawn. “Shit, I’m tired,” he lamented. “I was up until somewhere between two-thirty and three this morning working on it. My magical weaving is shot for a bit.”

I wasn’t sure how witches and warlocks worked magic. They had some of their own, enough to manipulate the magical flow around them. It was one of the many aspects that differentiated them from humans. Every magical being could run low or even out of magic. The way I understood it, witches and warlocks didn’t exactly run out, but they did seem to

exhaust their ability to wield it. A good rest typically rejuvenated them.

“Are you telling me that I need to let you go back to sleep?” I asked, a teasing lilt accompanying my words. I didn’t know why I felt like poking Vander. I’d never felt like joking with Lance. Most of my interactions with him were, at best, perfunctory and to the point. I’d never called him simply to harassingly chat.

Another deep sigh met my ears. “Not sure that’s possible, but knowing me, I’ll give it my best shot and probably prevail.”

Goddess, Vander was sarcastic. I should have been irritated but instead found I was amused. “You really are an insufferable ass, aren’t you?”

“So I’ve been told. Repeatedly. In my defense, most of that’s come from the brownies in my life.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good defense. Brownies are a very discerning species and exceedingly patient.” I was exaggerating the last, but compared to other species, brownies really were close to sainthood.

Vander barked a low, reverberating chuckle. “Maybe it’s just the brownies I know then.”

“Hmm...perhaps,” I lazily agreed.

Lying there, listening and bickering with Vander, I realized my tension from earlier had dissipated. My body felt loose, my feet kicking back and forth not out of irritation but lazy comfort. My fingers were loose around my phone, and my shoulders relaxed. The bed felt warm and welcoming instead of cold and hard. My usually pinched lips and strained facial muscles laid at ease, a tiny grin stupidly pulling at my mouth.

In some ways, I felt like an idiot. In other ways, I was too peacefully relaxed to care. I’d barely slept last night, a practice that was becoming all too familiar. My body was exhausted, but my mind refused to rest.

Unlike last night, I felt like I could slip my eyelids closed and get a couple more hours of shut-eye.

“You still there?” Vander asked, voice husky.

“Mm-hmm...sleepy,” I managed after a yawn.

Again, that warm, deep chuckle floated across the line, settling in my gut and grounding me. “Glad to hear it. Do you need to get up soon, or do you want me to keep talking until you fall asleep?”

I barely registered a niggle of surprise. The offer was unexpected and kind. It was disturbing I needed such a brief time of contemplation. “I don’t need to get up for a while. I have a video conference with the designers, and then Divia and I are meeting Lucroy and Peaches at Dusk tonight. We’re going to get some footage of Lucroy in his bar.” Divia said something about Peaches’s friends being there too, but I wasn’t certain. I didn’t know if she wanted them in the show or if they even wanted to be in it.

“I’ll take that as permission to keep talking.”

I didn’t argue. Instead, I worked my way up the bed, snuggling under the covers. On my side, my wings rested behind me. Every once in a while, the top wing fluttered, but it was tucked under the covers and barely moved.

Vander’s baritone ebbed and flowed, easing into my brain and settling the constant background noise. My eyes fluttered closed, and before I knew it, I drifted off. Dreams of Vander Kines made my slumber its own kind of magical. Thoughts of Letty Fox, my charmed life, and fears of exposure fell by the wayside, washed away by Vander’s dulcet tones.



## Chapter Fourteen

*VANDER*

I didn't think Parsnip remembered, but I'd told him if I got the charm done in time, I'd deliver it to him at Dusk. Parsnip had sleepily agreed, and I'd worked my ass and magical manipulation skills off to meet that deadline. The bottom line was I wanted to see Parsnip.

Weekends were more crowded, and I'd arrived at what appeared to be prime clubbing time. The line was long, and I dutifully found my place at the end. I was amazed by Dusk's patron diversity. Every species seemed represented. There were no ogres, and the only trolls were standing guard at Dusk's gate, controlling who entered and when.

Glancing at the time, I figured even if I had to wait out in the cold for an hour, I'd still make it inside well before Dusk closed. I wasn't certain if Parsnip would stay that long, but if I saw him exit, it was a simple enough thing to get out of line and go to him. I wasn't here for the bar experience. I was here for my one and only.

Every time Dusk's main doors opened, the music got a little louder. As I shuffled forward, the ache of cold seeped deeper into my bones. I had no idea how the dainty female fox shifter a couple of patrons ahead of me in line could stand there in little more than a tank top and miniskirt. Depending on their other half, shifters ran warmer than most species. Still, that seemed to be pushing it in barely thirty-degree weather.

Warlocks ran about the same temperature as humans and had similar hang-ups with the cold. I activated a couple of heat

charms and instantly felt relief. When ten minutes easily slipped into thirty, I was thankful I'd thought to stuff a couple into my pocket before I left Richmond.

"Back again?" the troll asked. He was the same one who'd been working the door the last time. Given his light t-shirt and vest, the cold didn't seem to affect him much either.

"Meeting someone," I answered with a congenial grin. Getting on a troll's good side could save you a lot of pain down the line.

"Aren't we all?" he grunted before holding out his hand. I passed over my entrance fee. It was higher tonight, probably because of the weekend status. I should have thought about that before suggesting meeting Parsnip here. Then again, given how much money he was willing to fork over for a single charm, I doubted Parsnip had the same misgivings about the entrance fee.

With a jerk of his head toward the door, the troll moved his attention to the humans behind me. I didn't really get the fascination humans had with other species-owned establishments, especially where alcohol was involved. I'd waffled over the years between thinking those humans were brave or stupid. Depending on the human, my opinion was easily swayed to different camps.

The previously muffled music assaulted my ears, and I activated another charm. This was a newer one that I thought had lucrative potential. Tonight would be a good opportunity to see if it worked as well as I hoped. The charm was designed to lower background noise but not conversational sounds.

My heart sped as my gaze took in the patrons crowding Dusk's dance floor. The place was hopping. I had a flash of worry that I wouldn't be able to find Parsnip in this mess but quickly squashed that for the foolish thought it was.

"He's an aqua-colored pixie," I scolded myself. "How hard can that be?"

Turns out, it was a little more challenging than I'd thought. Heading to the bar, I flagged down the busy faun, Johnny,

who'd helped me the last time I was here.

“Warlock.” Johnny grinned. He was on the riser I assumed was behind the bar. Even with the extra height, Johnny was still far shorter than me. “You like our burnt rum that much? Had to come back for another taste?”

I couldn't see a reason not to order another. That might not have been the reason I'd ventured out, but Dusk did have a damn good burnt rum. “I wouldn't say no to a glass.”

“That's the spirit.” Johnny twisted his head to the side, voice raised. “Wendall! Be a good lad and fetch me that bottle of burnt rum.”

Wendall obediently scrambled for a ladder, scaling it with far more dexterity and speed than a zombie should have. I stared, still a little dumbfounded.

“It's rude to stare like that,” Johnny scolded.

“Sorry. It's just I've never...” I waved a hand in Wendall's general direction. His back was still to me, so he couldn't see.

“I know but try to keep a lid on your amazement.”

Johnny clearly had a soft spot for the zombie, and from what little interaction I'd had with Wendall, I couldn't say I blamed him.

“Thanks,” Johnny offered when Wendall placed the bottle in front of him.

“No problem. Yell if you need anything else.” Wendall sped off, headed for the area behind the bar, hidden from the general public.

Filling the bottom half of a tumbler with burnt rum, Johnny slid the drink in my direction.

Picking it up, I gave him a liquid salute before downing half in one go, swallowing appreciatively.

“Good, isn't it,” Johnny said, not a question but a statement of fact.

“Excellent. Just the right combination of smooth and spicy.”

Johnny grinned before cocking his head to the left, something or someone clearly catching his attention. “Be right back,” he said before darting in that direction. Watching where he went, I followed Johnny’s trail to the human who’d originally served me last time. Searching my memory, I thought her name was Lizbeth. She had fuchsia-colored hair tonight. The strands changed in intensity depending on which way she twisted her head and how the lights caught them. Lizbeth had a different-colored studded collar wrapped around her neck.

Less than two minutes later, Johnny was back in front of me. “So, I know we’ve got outstanding burnt rum, but I doubt that’s why you’re back. Anything I can help you with?”

A loud whine pierced my ear, and I flinched.

“You okay?” Johnny leaned over the counter, genuinely concerned.

“Fine,” I answered, magically tweaking the background-canceling charm I’d activated. Looked like the thing still needed some fine-tuning. “Just a little disappointed about a charm I’m trying out.”

Johnny’s eyebrows shot up. “That why you’re here?”

I shook my head. “Not exactly, although it’s a good opportunity I couldn’t waste.” Tapping my blackened fingertips on the counter, I said, “I’m looking for an aqua-colored pixie named Parsnip.” I remembered the odd reaction I’d gotten last time when I’d asked about a pixie and decided to be a little more specific.

Staring past me, Johnny nodded toward a booth in the corner of the bar. “You mean *that* aqua-colored pixie?”

Following his line of sight, I had to focus, my vision swimming past undulating bodies littering the dance floor to a spot far away—one that was a little more secluded. I caught glimpses here and there. Not just one pixie, but three.

Downing the remainder of my drink, I leaned against the bar. “That’s a lot of pixies outside a pixie-run bar.”

Johnny chuckled. “What can I say? We’re blessed.” When I raised an eyebrow, he added, “You should have seen them earlier.” Johnny gave me a wry grin. “Phil and Peaches have a thing for my cousin’s honeysuckle mead. Phil’s mate cut him off before he could get as drunk as the last time, but we still got a spectacular dance show. You missed it by about forty-five minutes. That whole corner was lit up with pink and gold dust.”

I’d been to a couple of pixie bars in my day. “I’m sorry I missed that. No aqua dust in there?”

Johnny’s grin slipped a little. “Parsnip seems a little more reserved. Odd, considering he’s a social pixie. They’re usually the first to start spinning and showing off.” With a shrug, Johnny easily dismissed Parsnip’s unusual behavior. “But everybody’s different, and I think this might be a work thing for him, so maybe he’s trying to be more professional.”

Another part in the crowd revealed Parsnip’s siren producer, Divia. Lucroy Moony was lounging across the way, and another larger, broader male was near the pink pixie. I pegged him as some sort of were but couldn’t tell from this distance.

I didn’t see a lot of security around Lucroy and Peaches, but that didn’t surprise me. If security were doing their job, they shouldn’t be obvious. Besides, I doubted the king of the Southeast vampire nest required a lot of extra help in the power category.

“You think I can interrupt? I need to speak with Parsnip.” I didn’t want to give away that I had something in particular for my pixie. Typically, there weren’t a lot of reasons other species interacted with warlocks. We provided a service, and it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume Parsnip had contracted mine. I didn’t think anyone in their right mind would guess what kind of charm I had hiding in my pocket.

“Let me check.” Johnny hopped off his riser and headed for the corner. Expertly dodging inebriated dancers, Johnny quickly made his way to where my one and only was. He’d

refilled my glass before he'd taken off, and I took another swig, relishing the smooth, spicy burn.

Johnny didn't bother heading back, vigorously waving me over instead. I didn't waste time. Burnt rum in hand, I tried following Johnny's path. I wasn't nearly as smooth and had to offer more than one apology when someone ran into me or vice versa, but eventually, I made it to the corner booth.

By the time I got there, the pink pixie and the large were—wolf I easily noted now that I was closer—stood. My eyes widened when I realized how tall the pink pixie was.

The golden pixie I figured was Lucroy's mate, Peaches, stood on the seat, flying over the table and wrapping his arms around the larger, pink pixie.

“Night, Phil. Thanks for coming out tonight.”

Phil squeezed back. “I had a great time. Sedrick did too.”

I gazed at the werewolf. Sedrick's adoring gaze was on full display. When I looked closer, I could see Phil's mating mark. This table was full of bonded anomalies. Staring down at Parsnip's wide, surprised, upturned aqua eyes, I knew I wanted to add a third odd couple to this strange mixed group.

“What are you doing here?” Parsnip hissed. I leaned over the table so I could hear him a little easier. Parsnip's eyes darted around the corner, but only his producer, Divia, paid us any attention. All other eyes were focused on Phil and Peaches's elongated goodbye.

Slipping out of the booth, Sedrick wrapped an arm around Phil's waist and pulled. When Phil lightly protested, Sedrick said, “If I don't give you a little encouragement, we'll never get home, and we've been gone long enough. Any longer and you'll start feeling sick.”

Phil and Sedrick locked lips in a kiss that was anything but chaste. Peaches hooted and hollered, a catcall and whistle thrown in there just for fun.

“Good thing Ollie has the kids tonight.” Peaches waggled his eyebrows. “Looks like it's gonna be a fun evening.”

Phil's cheeks flushed, and he spluttered, wings dancing. Pink dust filled the air, and I quickly placed my arm over my nose, blocking most of it out. My throat tickled, but that was about it.

"Sorry," Sedrick addressed me as he passed with Phil snuggled up at his side. "I don't mean to be rude and cut out before introductions, but I need to get my mate home."

I held up my hands, palms out. "No worries."

Sedrick nodded in my direction before doing the same at Divia and Parsnip. "It was nice meeting you. I hope your time in Rutherford Haven is pleasant. Let me know if there's anything Phil and I can do to make your episode better. Or if there's anything else we can do."

A true alpha, I quietly mused. The good kind. The one stories were written about. I hadn't even officially met Sedrick, and I could tell he easily slid into that mold. Unfortunately, not every alpha did. Arie Belview could take some lessons from this one.

That singular thought got stuck in my head, the Belview name spurring a memory I'd almost forgotten. I figured I could be forgiven, what with meeting my one and only. My brain was a little full right now.

Sedrick led Phil out of the bar, his arm never wavering from its possessive position.

"Want to borrow my phone and take a picture?" Parsnip sounded snippy. "It'll last longer."

Surprised by the animosity spinning through his voice, I glanced down and was faced with slitted, aqua eyes shimmering back at me. Parsnip sat there, arms crossed, chin jutted out, and a look of unabashed hurt simmering behind those livid eyes.

It took me an embarrassingly long minute before I realized something very important. "You're jealous."

## Chapter Fifteen

VANDER

Parsnip's jaw dropped. "J-jealous. Don't be ridiculous." He waved me off, dismissing my insane notion. "I don't know why you'd think something so idiotic."

"You don't, huh?" I rocked back on my heels, hands stuffed inside my pockets.

Parsnip's gaze tracked my movements, as if drawn to a flame he couldn't resist. I could tell he hated the knowing smirk on my face, like he wanted to get up and wipe it from my lips. He might be a little taller than me if he stood on his seat. I'd have to look up at him instead of down. I almost suggested it, just to see the satisfaction on his face.

"Parsnip, care to introduce me to your...friend?"

*Friend.*

Divia's siren voice was difficult to ignore, even with my charm. Warlocks weren't as affected by sirens as humans, but we weren't immune either. My charm helped, but it didn't completely eliminate Divia's pull.

Parsnip didn't seem affected in the least. Pixies were one of the species sirens had little effect on. "This is Vander Kines. He's a—"

"Warlock," Lucroy finished. "And from what I hear, the best one in the Southeast. I am surprised this is our first meeting. Then again, I rarely have reason to travel to our state's lovely capital."



Forcing Parsnip to the periphery of my attention wasn't easy, but when the king of the local vampire nest addresses you, you give them your full attention.

"And I don't have much cause to venture to Rutherford Haven." I reached across the table, offering my hand. "Regardless, it's good to finally meet you, King Moony."

Lucroy took my outstretched hand. His fingers were cool but not cold, his grip firm but not crushing.

"Leon told me we had a warlock in the bar recently," Lucroy said, releasing my hand. "It's been some time since your species has graced Dusk's doors. Please tell me that Johnny had a good burnt rum on hand."

I held up my glass, tilting it in the light and showing off its deep plum color. "No complaints on my end."

Lucroy's smile was just shy of showing fang.

"I'm Peaches." Hopping up, Peaches stood on the booth seat before he launched into the air, slamming into my chest and wrapping his arms around me in a fierce hug. I had no idea pixies were that strong.

The breath was knocked from my lungs, and I made the mistake of inhaling, sucking in air as if I were dying. Thick, gold pixie dust invaded my unprotected nose. I sneezed. That was quickly followed by a second, then a third. Soon I was hunched over, caught in a fit of them.

"Oh!" Peaches flew away. "I'm so sorry, I didn't think... I mean, I didn't..." Peaches's voice floated away, and a cold washcloth entered my vision, wiping at my nose and mouth.

"Give it a minute. It'll pass." Parsnip was there, his delicate hand wiping at my face, cleaning me up and taking away the obnoxious dust. "He's a little drunk. Don't hold it against him," Parsnip whispered in my ear.

I nodded, trying to clear my throat. "N-no," I finally managed. "It's okay." Taking a cautious couple of dust-free breaths, I wiped at my eyes. I could only imagine what I looked like—face splotchy, eyes puffy, and skin wet. It wasn't the best look to sport to someone you wanted to attract.

“Are you well?” Lucroy asked, voice cool. “I’m afraid my beloved is often overzealous with his attentions. When honeysuckle mead gets involved...” Lucroy shrugged in a “what can you do about it?” manner.

“It’s fine,” I tried reassuring. When my gaze landed on Peaches’s distraught face, I amended, “Really, it’s fine. I’ve had far worse, and this is nothing. I appreciated the kind greeting, Peaches.”

That seemed to perk the golden pixie up, at least a little.

“I really am sorry. I’m so used to Lucroy. My dust doesn’t bother him, and Sedrick seems to have gotten used to it too, although it still affects him, unlike Phil’s.”

I took that information in, spinning it around my head. I’d thought Parsnip’s didn’t bother me because of the magic in Georgiana’s ring, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe it had more to do with him being my one and only, just like Peaches as Lucroy’s beloved and Phil as Sedrick’s mate.

“Would you like to have a seat?” Divia asked. At some point, she’d stood and was just to the side of Parsnip. “I’m afraid I need to leave.” She checked her watch, noting the time. “I have a conference call with the couple in our next episode. They’re on the West Coast.” Despite my blocking charm, Divia’s soft laughter tickled down my spine. “A mermaid and rattlesnake shifter. Can you imagine that? I have no idea how our designers are going to figure that one out. It’ll make for an excellent episode.”

Divia leaned over, placing a kiss on either side of Parsnip’s cheeks. The flare of jealousy I expected didn’t materialize. It was like watching a sister peck her brother’s cheek.

“Are you okay to get home?”

Before he could answer, I said, “I can drive Parsnip.”

Divia glanced at the drink in my hand. “It looks like that might be a poor idea.”

“Warlocks have a high tolerance. It would take about five of these to impair my judgment, and this is only my second

and my last.” I would never place Parsnip’s life in danger. The charm in my pocket more than proved that.

“Should there be a concern, I can have someone drive them home,” Lucroy reassured Divia.

“All right, if you’re certain.”

“I am,” I said, once more answering for Parsnip. The snippy look on his face made me think I was going to regret that soon.

“Parson?” Divia asked like a good friend.

“I’m good,” he thankfully answered. “Go on. Book our next gig.”

“On it,” Divia sang. When she walked away, it was with a swagger. Nearly every male eye on the dance floor followed her exit.

“Please tell me you don’t have any human males on staff.”

“Currently, just one,” Parsnip answered. “And I’m not sure how much longer we can continue his employment.” There was a deeper story there or maybe just a typical one. “You know any good camera people? If they’re male, preferably of a species not so affected by a siren’s call.”

“Sorry. That’s not a crowd I typically run with.”

Parsnip waved it off. “It’s fine. Asking was a long shot.”

It wasn’t as long of a shot as Parsnip thought. Later tonight, when I got home, I’d start searching for someone to take the human’s place. Now that I’d found him, everything in me was hardwired to solve all of Parsnip’s problems.

“As Divia said, please have a seat,” Lucroy offered, pulling my attention from Divia’s exit.

“Thank you.”

Parsnip shot me a look, just long enough to show his ruddy cheeks. I didn’t think the color was from alcohol so much as embarrassment. Sitting, he scooted over, careful of his wings as he settled in. I followed, shifting a little closer than Parsnip was probably comfortable with. My jean-clothed leg fit

alongside his smaller thigh. I knew he'd feel the rough fabric of my jeans through his thin, spider-silk pants.

Sedrick's large glass of what I suspected had been beer sat empty on the table, a smaller glass of drained honeysuckle mead nearby. I stared at the mismatched glasses, and my mind wandered back to my earlier thoughts.

I didn't know if it was polite, but I asked, "I know this may sound odd, but does Phil happen to be a home-and-hearth pixie?"

Peaches immediately lit up. "He is. Phil's an excellent home-and-hearth pixie." With cheeks puffed out, Peaches gave me a scolding look. "A lot of others don't think he would be, but Phil's size doesn't affect his pixie nature at all. He might be big, but he's all pixie."

I held up my hands, palms out. "I meant no offense. I'm certain Phil is just as good as you say."

Lucroy leaned forward ever so slightly. "You'll have to forgive Peaches. I'm afraid he's witnessed some rather negative comments thrown Philodendron's way. Peaches is very protective of his friends. It is an excellent quality in a beloved."

Peaches gazed up at Lucroy as if he'd hung the stars, moon, and sun.

Parsnip wiggled, but instead of leaning away, he got closer. The heated contact sent my blood south, plumping my cock and nearly blanking my mind.

"How did you know?" Peaches asked, pulling my mind from the gutter. At least a little. "Is it a warlock thing?"

I blinked, trying to focus. Finally, I asked, "How did I know Phil was a home-and-hearth pixie?"

Peaches nodded, the move a little more aggressive than it should be. I got the sneaking suspicion Lucroy hadn't limited his pixie's honeysuckle mead the way Sedrick had done with Phil.

“No, nothing like that. I could probably make a charm that would let me know. Warlocks can tell species apart, but when it comes to a pixie’s specific nature, we need to ask.”

“Oh.” Peaches sounded confused. “Then what gave Phil away?”

I took a moment to turn that over in my head, wondering if I should say anything at all. Generally speaking, I didn’t make a habit of talking about what clients came into my shop to discuss. Despite not having a silencing pact, I was a professional and didn’t like spreading gossip.

This, however, didn’t feel like gossip. It felt like something that might save a lot of grief down the line.

Twirling my glass between my fingers, their blackened tips contrasted sharply with the vibrant fluid within. As if sensing my unease, Parsnip placed a hand on my hip. It was the barest of touch, but it was more than enough.

Inhaling, I said, “I don’t want you to think I make a habit of spreading around what clients ask of me, but in this case, I think I’ll make an exception. Mind you, I might be wrong, but I’ll let you be the judge of that.” When I glanced up, I made sure to make contact with Lucroy’s obsidian eyes.

A faint vampiric nod was all the encouragement I needed. “I get a lot of odd...requests. I probably say no to more commissions than I accept.” Parsnip’s fingers squeezed my thigh. “But this one was a first. A beta wolf came into the shop last week. He wouldn’t tell me who his alpha is, but given the nature of his request, I think I can guess. There aren’t a lot of alpha werewolves out there with that kind of reputation.”

Peaches’s large eyes blinked. I didn’t know whether it was due to ignorance or alcohol. Lucroy didn’t have either of those issues. The sharp tick on his cheek and the thinning of his lips said he knew exactly who I was talking about.

“Anyway, the reason the request struck me as odd, and cruel, was that he wanted to know if I could create a charm that would dissolve or break a home-and-hearth pixie’s bond.”

Peaches sucked in an alarming gust of air, his eyes flying impossibly wide. Beside me, Parsnip hissed something that sounded suspiciously like a curse.

“He wouldn’t...” Peaches’s head twisted, and his body soon followed. Going up on his knees, he leaned into Lucroy. “Please tell me he wouldn’t do something like that. I know Arie’s horribly cruel but...” Burying his face in Lucroy’s neck, Peaches’s laugh grated across my skin. “What am I saying? Of course he’d do something like that. Arie’s a monster. He killed my cousin just because he wanted her bonded land. Doing something like that to Phil and Sedrick is exactly something he’d try.”

Without a word, Lucroy pulled Peaches into his lap. Peaches’s golden wings lay at his back, completely void of life. Parsnip’s hand moved from my thigh, tightening down on my fingers with a punishing grip.

“That’s beyond wicked.” Parsnip sounded like a ghost of himself, and when I looked down, his skin was ashen. “I can’t even imagine the cruelty of it. You don’t...” He audibly swallowed. “My brother’s a home-and-hearth pixie. He’s not bonded, but if he were...I’d kill someone who did that to him. I don’t know how, but I’d find a way.”

I squeezed Parsnip’s fingers in return. “Don’t worry, I’d help.”

Parsnip’s large eyes blinked, his dark aqua-colored lashes shimmering with wetness. Tears didn’t slip down his cheeks, but it looked like a near thing.

Peaches couldn’t contain his. “This has to be a break in his agreement.” Peaches sounded desperate, rage filtering through his sadness and bringing vitality to his bruised words. “Tell me Ray can nail his ass to the wall for this,” Peaches practically begged Lucroy.

I could see it in the vampire’s dark eyes, the need to tell his beloved that Hellfire Rayburn could enact fairy justice on Alpha Belview. What I could also see was that he knew it would be a lie.

Instead of answering Peaches, Lucroy asked me, “Did you get the beta’s name?”

Reluctantly, I shook my head. “He wouldn’t give it, and he certainly wouldn’t give me his alpha’s name. When I *declined* his rather generous offer of naming my price, he attacked me.”

Parsnip’s worried gasp warmed my heart.

“I saw it coming and had activated my protective shield charms in plenty of time. He wasn’t even close to powerful enough to make the smallest dent in them.”

Lucroy silently sat, contemplating what I’d divulged. Finally, he asked, “And if you’d been so inclined, do you believe a charm of that nature would be possible?”

I’d been so appalled by the idea I hadn’t given it much thought. I did now. Turning threads and weaves over in my head, I truly considered the practicalities of crafting that kind of charm.

“Honestly, I’m not certain. As much as I hate to say it, I think it’s not completely beyond possible. It would take a lot of skill and time. Possibly some trial and error too, but it isn’t completely impossible.” I shook my head. “Unfortunately, I fear the answer is yes. With that said, I can’t think of a single warlock out there that would do it. Assuming this is Alpha Belview’s doing—”

“Of course it is,” Peaches angrily spat.

“Then he has a reputation of not giving up once he’s got his sights set on something. I think eventually, with enough time and money, he has a chance of finding what he wants. Or maybe, more accurately, who he wants. At the time, I wasn’t sure who his target was. But after meeting Phil and Sedrick tonight, it wasn’t that hard to put the pieces together. I’m not sure why Alpha Belview has such a hate-on for those two, but they’re definitely in his crosshairs.”

“And, as is irritably typical of Arie Belview, he has made it impossible to irrevocably connect him to the offensive actions.”

Vampires rarely allowed their true feelings to leak into their voices. The frustrated anger I heard sing through Lucroy's spoke volumes.

"I will need to speak with Ray. I doubt he will be able to charge Alpha Belview with anything yet, but I believe the fairy needs to be made aware that an alpha is out there seeking such a dangerous charm. No matter who is involved, fairies will not like the implications. They take their law very seriously, and a pixie bond is not only sacrosanct but protected under fairy law."

I'd thought about contacting Ray myself. In retrospect, I should have reported the incident.

"Let me know if there's anything else I can do to help."

"Thank you. I'm sure Ray will have questions. I will direct him your way."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled." Not that I'd really need to look out for a fairy visit. You knew when they came.

Down from his earlier joyful high, Peaches clung to Lucroy's chest. "We have to warn them." Peaches's earlier indignant anger was replaced by abject despair.

"We will. You know I'll do everything I can to protect Philodendron." Lucroy's fingers carded through Peaches's hair, shifting and settling it over his shoulder, revealing the healing bite on his neck. Bending, Lucroy licked a strip across that mark, making it glisten in the low lights. Peaches shivered, and a light moan filled the air.

Parsnip uncomfortably shifted beside me.

"For now, your friend and his wolf are safe. Just like Philodendron, it is time to get you home. You need your land and your sprites."

Peaches didn't argue. He simply clung tighter, allowing Lucroy to shift below, moving so they were both out of the booth. Standing, hands cradling Peaches's bottom and thighs, Lucroy shifted to the side of the table. Had Peaches's wings been held aloft, it would have been difficult to see Lucroy at all.



“Forgive my early exit. I fear I’ve become a terrible host since finding my beloved. He is all I care about, the only one I now feel the need to please.”

“It’s fine and not rude in the least. Take care of your beloved.”

Lucroy inclined his head. From seemingly out of nowhere, Leon appeared with a heavy lavender shawl in one hand and pixie boots in the other. Leon placed the boots on Peaches’s feet before draping the shawl over his shoulders. Lucroy’s offer of thanks was soft enough that I barely heard it. When they left, I noticed they weren’t the only ones. Dusk’s population was far more anemic.

“Do they close soon?” I asked, completely unsure of the time.

“Officially, not for another hour or two. The sun won’t be up for four hours. I’ve heard the vampires will hang around a little longer, but the staff locks up by 4:00 a.m.,” Parsnip answered, our lonely little booth dimmer with Peaches’s absence. “I can’t believe someone could truly wish that upon a pixie. Especially a home-and-hearth one. They are about as benign as you get. Who is Arie Belview?”

It felt weird to think someone might not know Alpha Belview. I was sure that would stick in Arie’s craw and suddenly wished he were present.

“An alpha werewolf I hope you never have to meet,” I sincerely answered.

Parship’s hand still covered mine, a fact I wasn’t sure he was aware of. “I’ll bet he’s not too happy with you, having turned him down and all.”

“Nothing new there. Like I said, I turn down more commissions than I take. Byx thinks I should take more than I do, but mostly, we’re in agreement. She just wishes we weren’t always so close to missing rent.”

Parship stiffened, snatching his hand back. “Is that why you finally agreed to take my request? Because of the money?”

I wasn't sure where the hostility came from. When Parsnip first entered my shop, he was willing to sell off an organ to get what he wanted. Now he seemed offended by the idea.

"No," I honestly answered. "Not gonna lie and say it won't be useful, but that's not what finally made my decision." Parsnip didn't know it yet, but I didn't plan on charging him nearly what he'd offered in payment. I felt bad enough taking anything from my one and only. When I'd figured a price, I'd charged what I always did for my time and then taken off 50 percent. If it were for anyone else, Byx would tell me I was giving my services away. But she'd understand this decision.

"Oh. I... Why did you agree then?"

I stared down at Georgiana's ring, glowing bright crimson and warmly nestled around my skin. "I've got my reasons," I coyly answered. "You'll find out, eventually. Now, I promised Divia I'd get you home, and pissing off a siren isn't high on my to-do list." Pissing off an alpha werewolf as powerful as Arie Belview wasn't either, but sometimes, needs must. "You ready to get out of here?"

"More than ready." Parsnip's gaze was full of a trust I wasn't certain I'd deserved but was determined to earn.

## Chapter Sixteen

### *PARSNIP*

I couldn't believe I didn't remember Vander telling me he'd meet me at Dusk. The early morning hours were little more than a warm memory blur. More of a feeling than true memory. I woke later that morning with a sense of calm safety I hadn't experienced in years. I had a hint of that feeling when I stayed with Parsley, but it wasn't as all-consuming.

Riding back to my rental house in Vander's car, I didn't know what to make of things or how to disentangle my knotted-up feelings. What was it about the warlock sitting beside me? I found him physically attractive, but there were plenty of good-looking males in the world. Looks alone weren't enough to make me feel the way I did.

I side-eyed Vander, trying to figure out why he made my heart flutter in ways I'd never experienced. I couldn't figure out if what I felt was good or bad and wasn't certain how to find the answer.

"You're being pretty quiet over there. Care to share?" Vander glanced my way, a quirked grin pulling the corner of his mouth. Oncoming headlights lit his eyes, a myriad of colors flaring in their hazel depths.

"Just thinking." I wasn't used to hearing my voice so hushed. I wasn't a quiet pixie. I'd learned long ago that meekness wasn't the path that led to my life goals.

"That's obvious. I'd like to know what you're thinking about."

“Why?” The word slipped through my lips before I could haul it back in.

“*Why?*” Vander echoed. “I don’t know. Call it curiosity or casual conversation.” Vander shrugged, his broad shoulders lifting with ease. “I’d like to get to know you better.”

I scoffed—another knee-jerk reaction. “No one really wants to get to know a social pixie, Vander.” I crossed my arms, back stiff.

I was well aware of my place in the grand scheme of life. Social pixies were made for adoration, but it was always from afar. Never meet your heroes was a saying for a reason. Not that I thought I was anyone’s hero, only that I had numerous followers, a plethora of adoring fans, and thousands, if not millions, of individuals who’d pay a mint to meet me. Not a single one of those fans would want more than the superficial version of me. They wouldn’t want the true Parsnip—the faded pixie, my carry-on baggage busting at the seams with fear.

“Hmm, can’t say that I can really argue that point and probably wouldn’t have bothered before you walked through my door. That’s on me. Live and learn. There’s probably a reason warlocks are long-lived. It takes us that many years to figure shit out.”

“Doubtful, otherwise humans would be the longest-lived of all the species.”

Vander barked out a laugh. The sound filled the car with the kind of warmth that could only be felt on the inside. “True enough. Maybe they did, once, but their god decided that not even a millennium was enough, so they just cut it short and said to hell with it.”

My grin was so pure it was almost painful. “Could be. It’s something worth considering.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure humans wouldn’t see it that way.”

“Doubtful. They’re not all bad though.”

I thought of Mike and felt sorrier for the human than anything else. They seemed so fragile, so susceptible to all the

other species and to each other. Was it any wonder they acted like they did? I knew what fear felt like, but my fear had a face and a general species. Humans had to worry about everyone. That kind of constant hyperawareness had to wear on you—physically and emotionally. Perhaps we were too hard on them.

“No, they’re not,” Vander easily agreed. “They’re like every other species. They’ve got good and bad mixed in. Seems like none of us got off without some bad apples.”

Most other species, even my own, considered social pixies rotten apples. Pixies like Peaches and Phil got an automatic pass with the public. Not that I could fault that thinking. It was more correct than not. But just as Vander said, there were exceptions everywhere.

I thought about Vander’s profession. “You probably meet all kinds, don’t you?” I hadn’t truly given it a lot of consideration before.

Warlocks were different from witches, and not just because of gender. From what I understood, their abilities to manipulate magic were vastly different. The underlying principles were similar, but the magic responded differently. Warlocks were more adept at magic viewed as more destructive or damaging. They often destroyed more than created, or you could say they created destructive charms. Witches, not so much. That didn’t mean all witches were good. I’d be more than happy to point in Letty Fox’s direction if asked.

“It can get interesting,” Vander agreed, tapping the steering wheel. His blackened fingertips melded with the dark color of the wheel. That was probably another reason warlocks were initially thought of as evil. For some reason, nearly every species associated the dark color negatively.

“Interesting, huh?” I figured that was putting it mildly.

Vander just chuckled. “I suppose that’s a nice way to put it. My clients’ expectations are often skewed. It’s not just me. Most warlocks go through the same thing. You’d think, after this many centuries, that it would have changed, but I suppose

there are enough warlocks that fall into the pit of expectation to keep fueling the image. It is what it is. Each of us has a choice to make when we reach our magical potential. I made mine, and I've never regretted it. You can always slide into the dark, but coming out of that darkness and reaching for the light is a hell of a lot harder. In case you hadn't noticed, I'd rather not put that much effort into something." Vander winked teasingly.

"You're telling me the charm you made for me was easy?" Considering how many warlocks wouldn't even try, I already knew the answer.

Vander didn't miss a beat. "As I said earlier, sometimes exceptions have to be made."

The car slowed, turning down the street I temporarily called home, my rental quickly in view. Vander put the car in park but kept the engine running.

"You don't plan on coming in?" I asked.

"Didn't want to assume," Vander answered, turning off the car.

My cheeks burned. "As far as I know, you're just here to deliver my charm." I opened my door. Heat rushed out as cold filtered in. Pulling my shawl closer, I was glad I'd worn my pixie boots. I didn't like my feet covered, but on nights like this, I hated the cold more.

Vander didn't answer. Instead, he followed closely behind but out of reach of my wings. I flew to the door and opened it quickly, then hurried inside. If any moisture had been in the air, it would have turned to snow. Or maybe ice. I wasn't certain and was glad there wasn't enough to find out.

When I was inside, I realized Vander didn't so much as shiver, and his coat didn't seem like enough to keep a warlock warm. As if reading my mind, Vander held up his right arm. His sleeve pulled back enough to show a litany of bracelets, each with its own stones and compositions.

"Warmth charms," Vander said. "I've got one on each wrist. When activated, they're enough to keep me nice and

toasty.”

I blinked, a touch of impressed awe compressing my chest. “That sounds handy. Surely those types of charms fly out the door this time of year.”

Vander twisted his wrist, a frown pulling his mouth. “You’d think.” With a heavy sigh, he shook his head. “But you’d be wrong. Charms like this are a dime a dozen. Both warlocks and witches make them, and humans think the witch-made charms are less...*toxic*.” Vander shrugged. “I’m not sure that’s the right way to say it, but that’s what Byx thinks, and I figure she’s right. Plus, humans have a lot of ways of keeping warm these days. Their technology has come a long way, and most other species run warm enough that the cold doesn’t bother them too much. Anyway, point is that I don’t make that many, and mostly what I do make, I use.”

“Oh, I...” I had no idea what else to say and suddenly felt very awkward. Vander had been in my space before, and memories of that night flooded back to me. My loose clothing hid my growing erection. If Vander had been a were, he would have smelled my attraction. Thankfully, his sense of smell was nearly human-grade.

While I tried to look at anything but Vander, my visiting warlock had no such issue when it came to me. He stared. I’d never seen eyes that intense before, and I hated how much I squirmed beneath his heated gaze.

“Stop staring.” I couldn’t help it. Vander’s constant gaze made me hot. I stripped off my shawl, and my boots quickly followed. “It’s rude,” I added.

“And here I thought a social pixie would view it as a compliment.” Vander casually leaned against the kitchen counter, eyes raking up and down my body.

Aqua dust filled the air as my wings fluttered madly. I figured that would make Vander sneeze, but he must have had a charm for that too. Then again, he’d sneezed a ton when it had been Peaches’s dust. Maybe he just hadn’t activated the charm yet.

“Most of that gawking is done from afar, not this...close.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

While I didn’t think Vander’s goal was making me squirm, I also didn’t think he was truly all that sorry. If he were, he’d stop staring, and he certainly showed no intention of doing that. Only now, his gaze was fixed on my right thigh, the one holding my last charm.

Reaching into his pocket, Vander pulled out a soft, ruby-colored cloth bag. It was small, and Vander’s hand nearly dwarfed its size.

“Here.” Vander nodded toward an open doorway. “Why don’t you go in and swap out the charms. I’d tell you to just do it out here, but I’m going to go out on a pretty sturdy limb and say you’d rather have some privacy.”

Gingerly, I took the bag containing the charm from Vander’s hand. It felt light, far less weighty than the ones Lance made. “The one I’m wearing still has a few more days left.”

Vander’s posture stiffened. “I’d like to make certain it works the way you want. It would be unwise to wait until it is absolutely required. It would take time to tweak it.”

“Oh.” That sounded perfectly reasonable. “Okay. This should only take a minute, so...”

“I’ll wait here. Take your time.” Back at ease, Vander sat on one of the barstools, an elbow resting atop the counter, his fisted hand holding the weight of his head.

I stood there, lips barely parted, quick breaths skipping across my dry skin. How was it that Vander Kines was still single? He was... There were no words. I’d say he was breathtaking, but I was still breathing, though the movement was shallow and so minuscule that I felt lightheaded. Even my wings were still.

Vander smirked. “You should get to it.”

I jerked as if electrocuted. Mortified, I spun and dashed into the bedroom. The door closed with more of a slam than I



intended. My body leaning heavily against it probably added the extra oomph.

“Shit. Get it together, Parsnip.” My heart pounded so hard, my chest hurt. I couldn’t ignore the way Vander looked at me. The attraction was mutual, but it wasn’t real. Vander didn’t know what the real me looked like. Vander Kines was like everyone else—enamored with a lie.

I squeezed my eyes closed, my lashes wet with unshed tears. My hand painfully gripped the soft velvety red bag. I could feel the stone inside, the one holding my charm, the one allowing my continued deceit.

“My choice,” I whispered, no one there to hear.

It had always been my choice. Honestly live as I now was or commit to the lie. I’d made my decision. For better or worse. I was an aqua-colored pixie, and I was going to stay that way. It was the way I’d been born. It was the way I was supposed to stay. If it hadn’t been for my own stupidity and Jed’s insatiable addiction, that’s the way I’d still be.

“It’s not a lie,” I said. “It’s not,” I tried to convince myself. “It’s who I truly am. It’s nothing more than makeup and really good lighting.”

Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I forced determination into every beat of my heart. Propping my foot onto the bed, I yanked off Lance’s charm. The relief was immediate. I hated that feeling, that when the charm came off, my body eased, as if a weight had been removed. I detested that brief physical reprieve, reminding me that what I was doing was so much more than a bit of sparkle and eyeshadow.

“My choice,” I repeated, those words a loop within my brain, pushing me forward.

I shook Vander’s charm into the palm of my hand, my breath catching again. It was so much more refined. Comparing Vander’s work to Lance’s was like comparing a toddler’s artwork to an expert craftsman.

“Beautiful.” It was more than pretty. It was stunning.

It seemed shameful to cover such a masterpiece, but that's exactly what I did. I fastened the strap around my thigh, prepared for the zing of pain and immediate energy drain when the stone hit my bare skin.

But the discomfort I expected didn't come. Instead, soothing warmth echoed from the stone, radiating out and down my leg. I sucked in a relieved breath, and this time, the tears that filled my eyes were anything but sad.

Lowering my pant leg, I rushed to the full-length mirror. My eyes shot wide. "I...I'm perfect."

I twisted, turning and pulling my hair over my shoulder. I studied the ombre shades, blending perfectly and darkening just as they should. While sifting through my hair, my fingernails caught my attention. The shade differed slightly from my nail polish, and a happy squeal peeled through my lips.

"Even my nails!" That was something Lance had never been able to get right.

Leaping into the air, my wings beat wildly. The most perfect shade of aqua pixie dust filled the room, engulfing me in a beautiful sea. My colors were exquisite. They were everything I remembered and more. I was me. In every way, shape, form, and color—I was the me I was before Jed destroyed my life.

Flying from the room, I pulled on the bedroom door with enough force to slam it into the wall. I didn't care. If something were dented, I'd pay for the damages. I was too happy, too full of incomprehensible joy to worry about anything else. I'd been so scared when Lance's abilities were out of commission. But thank the goddess, it had been a blessing, not a further curse.

"It's perfect!" I flew directly at Vander, smacking into his chest.

Those long arms wrapped around me, pulling me in tight. "I'm glad you like it." Vander's breath whispered along the edge of my neck, warm and then cool.

Goosebumps rose across my skin, and I shivered. My cock thickened to painful levels, and it took every ounce of self-control not to rub myself against Vander's solid thigh.

"I love it." Those words caught, and for some reason, I felt the ridiculous need to change the final word in that sentence. Goddess, I was becoming a mess for this warlock.

*He doesn't need to know* slipped into my brain.

Maybe I could have something with Vander. Maybe I could let my guard down a little. Not enough to show Vander what I really looked like. He wouldn't want me if I did that. But why did he ever need to know? I made enough money to keep me in charms for the rest of my life—shortened though it would be. Vander knew I was hiding something. He knew my colors weren't *right*. He knew those things and didn't care.

Or maybe he did.

As close as we were, I could feel Vander's groin—his distinctly soft groin. While my dick was rock hard, his was flaccid. Had I read him that wrong? How?

The realization threw frigid water across my flaming libido. Pulling back, I released Vander, and he reciprocated. Painful disappointment made me want to verbally lash out, but the words died on my lips.

"Vander, are you—"

"I'm fine, just a little tired, that's all." Vander chuckled, low and raspy. "I've been working nonstop, trying to get your charm done." His rough, large hands engulfed me, gently cradling my face. "Looks like all that hard work paid off. I'm glad you're happy, Parsnip. That's all I wanted. It's worth a little exhaustion."

I blinked. It looked like more than a *little*. My colors might be perfect, but Vander's weren't. Skin ashen, a fine sheen of cooling sweat dampened the edges of his hairline. Vander's eyes didn't shine as bright, and although it was slight, a tremor danced along his outstretched arms.

"Vander—"

“No worries,” he cut me off again. “The last couple of days caught up with me quicker than I would have liked.” Glancing down at his flaccid crotch, Vander offered a contrite grimace. “Looks like the rest of tonight’s not going to go as planned.” Dropping one of his hands from my face, Vander rubbed that big palm across my plump cock. I wasn’t nearly as hard as I’d been, but my eyes still fluttered, and I thickened at his warm touch.

“You didn’t read the room wrong, Parsnip.” Leaning in, Vander nipped my ear with his teeth. “I want you. Just maybe not tonight. Don’t worry, we’ll get there, and when we do, I promise to make the wait worth it.”

“That’s a bold statement,” I teased breathily. “You sure you can live up to it?”

“Positive.”

With a final nuzzle along my neck, Vander pulled back. His color had improved a little, but he was still too unsteady for my liking. I was just getting ready to tell him to stay, that we didn’t have to do anything else. Something deep inside simply wanted to take care of him, to make certain Vander was fed and rested.

But those thoughts frightened me more than the erotic ones of Vander’s cock slipping deep inside.

“I better get going.” Vander’s grin was sly, almost mischievous. “Better to get Byx’s verbal beatdown out of the way sooner than later. Once I’ve recovered, I’ll work on your next charm. That one should be easier than the first. The second always is. We’ll see how long this first one lasts. I’m hoping for at least three weeks, but time will tell. We’ll talk soon.”

I stood there, barely hovering above the floor, as Vander opened the door and left. His warmth charms must have run out because Vander burrowed deeper into his too-thin coat when the cold hit him. The blanket tossed on the back of the couch called to me, begging me to grab it, rush out, and throw it around Vander’s shoulders.

That would have been the kind, nurturing thing to do. Parsley wouldn't have hesitated. But I couldn't move. My wings stopped, and my feet hit the floor. The sound of a car engine starting should have startled me out of my stupor. It didn't. I kept standing there, staring at that door, doing its best to keep the cold out. Yet it could do nothing for the ice freezing my core. I stood there, indecision paralysis ruling the day.

## Chapter Seventeen

VANDER

*Fuck.* I pulled off the side of the road, body shaking. My heart was aiming for a rhythm that would ultimately fail. I knew there'd be a drain when Parsnip activated the charm, but I hadn't expected that.

Leaning back into my seat, I turned the heat on high. I didn't have enough energy to sustain my charms and was frozen to the bone, far colder than the outside temperatures.

I hadn't lied to Parsnip. I had worked extra hard, making the charm as perfect as possible. I'd overdone it to finish the charm and take it to Dusk tonight. I'd been desperate to see him. Maybe a little too desperate. Like always, that feeling brought out the stupid in life. Warlocks certainly weren't immune.

My phone chimed, another text from Byx. She was worried. Before I'd left, I'd told her she was being overly cautious, that there was nothing to get so worked up about. Wisely, she hadn't bought all the shit I was trying to sell. Byx was smart like that. She was a hell of a lot smarter than me.

I stared down at Georgiana's ring. Its crimson glow dimmed the farther I traveled from Parsnip. Deep red lines haphazardly danced across its ebony surface. I could still feel its warmth, even through the bitter cold.

My shaking subsided enough for me to feel safe to drive again. Before putting the car in drive, I shot a quick text back to Byx, letting her know I was on my way. I didn't glance

down when my phone dinged again, unsure I wanted to see what kind of emoji Byx responded with.

I needed rest and food. A beer wouldn't hurt either. I should probably stick with that order. Maybe I'd grab something to eat before falling into bed. Most likely, the beer would have to wait.

I also needed to figure this shit out. I'd agreed to make Parsnip's charm, but I hadn't been able to stomach the idea of it stealing away more of his life force, draining him every day he wore the damn thing.

Instead, I'd sacrificed mine. And I would do it again and again if it meant giving my one and only what he needed. What I had to figure out now was a better way to cope with the drain. I couldn't function like this, and more to the point, given enough time, Parsnip would figure out something was wrong. My pixie was far too smart to expect less. I'd gotten away with my fib tonight, but I had no illusions that would last.

And then there was Byx. She was my responsibility. More than that, it was my privilege to care for her. She was still young enough that she needed me. One day, that would change. If I had anything to say about it, Byx would outlive me by at least five hundred, maybe more, years. But for now, I was the adult.

I managed a drive-thru on my way back to Richmond. I couldn't say how the food tasted. I shoved it into my mouth too fast, downing the soda along with it. Sugar and carbs were a poor replacement for magical exhaustion, but they'd do in a pinch, and I definitely felt the squeeze.

By the time I got back home, I was feeling a bit more like myself. Foolishly, I thought it was good enough I'd be able to fool Byx. Evidently, I hadn't lived long enough yet to get past the complete idiot stage of life.

"You look like shit," Byx said by way of greeting. Her harsh words were softened by the worry fueling them. "I told you it was a bad idea."

Since she wasn't completely certain what kind of charm I'd made for Parsnip, Byx hadn't exactly told me that. She didn't know the full extent of my idiocy. What she did know was that I'd pushed myself too hard to get it done and then hopped in my car, driven an hour away, and stayed up all night. My body needed rest to rejuvenate, and I hadn't given it even a glimpse of reprieve.

"Byx," I sighed, unsure I could deal with what she was itching to dish out. "I—"

"Shut it," she demanded. Hair sticking out every which way, Byx flounced down the remainder of the stairs. I got the feeling she'd been sitting on the fifth step most of the night. "Please tell me you at least ate something on the way back."

I'd never been more thankful for Taco Bell. "I did."

"Good. At least that proves you're not a total moron."

"Thanks?"

"Don't thank me too much. I didn't say you *weren't* a moron. I only said you weren't a total one." Huffing, Byx shuffled up to my side. "Put your weight on my shoulder, and I'll help you up the stairs. You're going to bed, and I'm going to put together the biggest damn sandwich you've ever seen. You're going to eat every last drop of food and drink at least two full glasses of water before you drift off to dreamland. I'm closing the shop tomorrow. Don't complain," Byx said before I could argue that I'd be well enough to open in the afternoon. "And don't even ask me to get you a beer. You need hydration, not the opposite."

"Yes, ma'am," I said dutifully. "Your mamma would be so proud."

"Idiot, Mamma would have zapped you good when you walked through the door, knocking you out. She probably would have thrown a blanket over you, but not much else. Maybe that would have taught you a lesson not to be this stupid again."

I chuckled. "She would have tried."



“She would have succeeded, at least in the knocking you out step. I doubt she could have gotten much sense planted in that stubborn brain of yours though.”

“Probably not, but she always enjoyed trying.”

“You think she enjoyed that?” Byx asked before grunting. “Why do warlocks have to be so damn heavy?”

“I don’t know, and yes, I think Georgiana enjoyed our sparring a lot. I know I did.”

“Yeah? You’re probably right. Somehow, she infected me with the same crazy desire.”

I threw my head back, belly-laughing and almost tossing Byx and me back down the stairs. We both wobbled, trying to get our balance before taking the final couple of steps.

Huffing, Byx caught her breath before she helped me to my room, unceremoniously flopping me onto my bed. I landed like a dying starfish.

“Please tell me that all this wasn’t for nothing.” Byx’s hand waved across the length of my sprawled body. “Please tell me the charm worked.”

“It did.” Satisfaction rang through my voice. “Parsnip said it was perfect.” Gaia, that felt good to say.

“Well, at least there’s that.” Byx let a hint of pride slip through. “If you fall asleep, I’ll zap you back awake. I meant it about the food, Van. You’re going to refuel your body before you sleep like the dead.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” I managed a sassy salute, and Byx dramatically rolled her eyes.

I fell asleep to the sound of an exasperated “unbelievable” and Byx’s light footfalls heading down the hall to our small kitchen. Waking would be painful, but there was no way I could keep my eyelids open. I fell asleep to visions of Parsnip’s brilliant smile. I’d made my one and only happy, and that was enough. It was more than enough.

---

**T** rue to her word, the first time I woke was due to an electric jolt of pain. The second time I woke wasn't much better. My bladder wasn't happy about the two glasses of water Byx had forced down my throat. My head wasn't happy about the magical exhaustion, and my body was pissed off on general principle.

All of that paled in comparison to the text message waiting on me when I woke. It was a simple *did you get home okay?* from Parsnip. The words filled up my cracks, melding me back into a semblance of life.

Pushing out of bed, I waddled to the bathroom to take care of business. Relieved, I came out and finally checked the time. It was a little past four in the afternoon. As usual, Byx was right. Closing the shop was for the best. Had anyone come in, my appearance would have scared them off more than drummed up business.

“You finally awake?” Byx asked, barely peeking into my room, hand covering her eyes.

“My eyes are open.”

“Are you decent?”

I looked down at my rumpled pants and shirt. They were the same ones I'd left the house in yesterday. Byx had taken care of me, but she'd rightfully left me to deal with the clothes.

“I'm covered,” I answered.

“No bits that will leave me scarred for life if I see them?”

“Nothing you haven't seen before.”

“Good.” Byx pushed the door wider. Her nose scrunched when she took a step inside. “No offense, Van, but this place stinks.” Leaning forward and sniffing dramatically, Byx amended, “I take that back. You're the one that stinks. The room is just collateral damage.”

Far from offended, amusement tickled me. Lifting an arm, I smelled my pit and agreed. “I’ll take a shower after you get done scolding me. That said, the quicker you are, the sooner the bad smell goes away.”

I thought it was a good bargaining chip. I was wrong.

Arms crossed and toe tapping, Byx said, “Nice try, but not good enough. I’ve been working myself up all night and all day. You will not cheat me out of my lecture.”

Resigning myself to my fate, I sat on the edge of my bed. My sheets were barely ruffled. I’d slept too soundly to move around much. Scrunching my fingers in a “gimme” motion, I said, “Let’s have it.”

Byx’s cheeks puffed before exhaling in a woosh. “I had this all planned out, and now you’re ruining it, Van. I swear, sometimes you make me so mad that I don’t even know what to do with you.”

I’d known Byx long enough to do the translation. *Mad* wasn’t exactly right. I’d scared her, and that fear had turned into anger. Lots of times, that was an easier emotion to wrangle.

“I’m sorry, Byx.”

Her teeth snapped, echoing in the silent room. “But are you sorry enough, Van? That’s the true question.”

I swallowed hard, unsure if I knew exactly what Byx asked. “If I have a client that needs a charm quickly, that’s on a deadline, and I’ve agreed to the commission, then I can’t promise I won’t push myself, that I won’t go too far sometimes.”

For once, I couldn’t read Byx’s face. She closed down so far that the first niggle of fear pushed its way in.

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and I think you know it.”

I wasn’t sure about that. What I was fairly sure about was that I was afraid I knew.

“Maybe you should make it clear.” Assuming things generally got me into trouble, and I wanted to be crystal regarding what Byx knew.

Her foot-tapping stopped. A smoldering glow lit her eyes, turning their deep brown into burnished umber. “How much of your life span did you give up?”

My throat went from parched to arid. I sat there, contemplating my answer. I could lie, but Byx would know. Plus, I hated lying to her. Byx deserved the truth, even if it hurt us both.

“I’m not sure.” When Byx’s face scrunched up, ready to protest, I held up a halting hand. “I’m not trying to fool you. I honestly don’t know for certain. A few days at least, a week at the most.”

Byx’s eyes briefly flared before losing their underlying glow. “And you plan to do it again.” It was more an accusation than a question.

“I do,” I answered with a slow nod. “Although, I think I can tweak the charm so it doesn’t take so much. I probably went a bit overboard on this one, trying to get it perfect.” I’d need to mull it over, but I thought there would be a way to decrease the strain on my life force.

“And now?” Byx’s tone went from accusing to softly worried. “Is the charm still draining you?”

Again, I could have lied, but I didn’t. “It is. Although not as bad as last night. I think when Parsnip activated it, the impact was worse because I was already drained. I can plan better, make sure I’m well rested before he activates the next one.”

“And the one after that, and the next... When does it end?”

I shrugged, slumping into myself. “I don’t know. Maybe never. I suppose that depends on Parsnip.”

Byx remained standing just inside my bedroom door, eyebrows scrunched. She appeared contemplative. “Is he dying?”

“No,” I easily answered, although I wondered if Parsnip thought his true appearance would be just as devastating. Social pixies gained power through the adoration of others, so maybe he wasn’t as wrong as I wanted to believe.

“Then what could be that important that you’d do something like that? Giving up your life force.” Byx shook her head, tossing her chestnut hair this way and that. She’d forgone hair clips today. “I know you can’t tell me much, but...” Desperation licked the edges of those words.

“Come here.” I patted the mattress.

Byx didn’t comply immediately, but eventually, she pushed away from the doorframe and made her way over. When she sat, it was with a good foot distance between us.

Shifting so I could see her better, I grabbed her hands. They looked tiny, her deep brown contrasting my lighter shades.

“I know you’re worried. Truth is, I’m worried too. But you’ve gotta understand. Parsnip is my one and only. I know that’s hard for you to grasp. It’s not easy for me either. Not every warlock finds their one. Despite what your mamma said, I figured I’d always be one of those. I was content with that. You know why?”

Byx shook her head, gaze downcast and fixed on our locked hands.

“Because of you. There are a lot of ways to find love and fulfillment. I never figured I’d have any children, and then your mamma blessed me with you. Genetics don’t matter much to me. You’re not mine by birth, but you are in every other way, and that’s what matters. Georgiana knew that.”

“Mamma knew a lot of things.”

“She did,” I easily agreed. “She knew I needed you just as much as you needed someone.”

Byx stared off to the side, shoulders slumped. “But you don’t need me anymore. You’ve met your one and only.”

“Silly Byx.” I bopped her on the nose and nearly got zapped in retaliation. “I’ll always need you. No matter what happens with Parsnip, that will never change. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Idiot.” Byx got a tiny zap in, just enough to make me jump.

I rubbed my arm, putting a little extra drama into it. Byx could have zapped me much harder. In our world, it was more of a love tap.

Chewing on her bottom lip, Byx glanced at the door before returning her gaze to her hands. Her eyes flicked up to me briefly before landing back on her fingers. I had a sneaking suspicion I wouldn’t like whatever her brain was cooking up. I wish I’d been wrong.

“I was thinking—”

“Never a good sign.”

This time, I was prepared and dodged just in time to miss Byx’s electrified finger. She huffed but didn’t try again.

“Can you stop being sarcastic for half a minute and let me get this out?”

“No guarantees, but I’ll try.”

“Goddess,” Byx rolled her big, brown eyes, “and you’re the one who’s supposed to be the adult.”

Considering I couldn’t argue the point, I sat there, waiting to hear what Byx was cooking up in her brain.

“I may not understand exactly what Parsnip means to you, but I know I would have done anything to help Mamma, so that’s how I’m going to think of it. I know it’s not the same kind of love, but I figure both of them fit into the same category where selflessness is concerned.”

I remained quiet, patiently listening. Byx’s logic seemed sound so far.

“So...I was thinking about it today and figured that would be your answer, that you’d do whatever you needed to do to

help Parsnip out. That means you'll keep draining your life force. I can't help with that, but I might be able to help with the constant magical draining while the charm is activated. We could try to—"

"No." I stood, pacing the floor. "Absolutely not."

"You don't even know what I'm going to say." Byx hopped up too, standing beside the bed, fisted hands planted on her hips.

"Oh, I think I do."

Byx crossed her arms, chin up. If she'd been a little taller and had wings, I would have accused her of being Parsnip. "It could help, and it's my magical energy. I should be able to do whatever I want with it."

I shook my head while slashing my hands through the air. "Never going to happen, kiddo. That reservoir is meant for you, and I will not steal even an ounce of your magic."

Byx stomped her foot. "It's not stealing if I'm offering."

"Semantics. I'm not taking it, and that's final. My decisions are my own, and I'll suffer their consequences. This isn't up for debate."

Stomping up to me, Byx pushed a finger into my chest. She had to reach up to do it and didn't add any magical oomph to it. The pressure was enough.

"Your decision affects me too, Van. Don't add self-righteous indignation to your growing list of questionable life decisions."

"*Questionable life decisions?* I..." Whatever I was going to say slipped from my lips and would have fallen on deaf ears anyway.

Byx stomped away. It was amazing how much angry noise a three-foot, five-inch brownie could make when they were well and truly pissed.

"Way to go, Vander." My temples pounded as last night's headache made an unwelcome return.

With a weighty sigh, I headed back to my bed, sitting on the edge and grabbing my phone. I typed out a quick message, reassuring Parsnip that I'd gotten home safe and sound and apologizing for not answering sooner. With that accomplished, I flopped back on my mattress and stared at the ceiling. I needed to get up and shower. Food was also a necessity. I didn't do either. I lay there in my own funk, contemplating how I'd get Byx to forgive me. I understood where she was coming from, and I appreciated her generosity. That didn't change the fact that I absolutely refused to siphon off the tiniest amount of magical energy she'd stored. That energy was for one purpose and one purpose only. If it sat there, unused and useless for all eternity, I'd count it a win.

Hope for the best but prepare for the worst. It was a good motto and one I intended to heed, especially when it came to Byx's life.



## Chapter Eighteen

*PARSNIP*

*Home safe and sound. Sorry, slept all day and just got up.*

I stared at that simple text, the fear I'd carried all day finally washing away. I'd thought about calling Vander a million times and put my phone away just as many. I didn't want him to think I was a creepy stalker or needy. I didn't think I was a stalker, but I wasn't so certain about the needy part. I hadn't been able to get Vander Kines off my mind all day.

Divia didn't remark on my distractedness, but she did give me a couple of glances that made me realize she'd noticed. I managed to cover pretty well with Jordon. She was one of our designers, and we'd finalized most of Lucroy Moony's inner sanctum décor. I'd need to run it by him before we placed the final orders, but I thought I had a good handle on the vampire's taste and couldn't imagine he'd have trouble with anything. If Lucroy had allowed me into his underground living quarters at Dusk, that would have helped.

Lucroy hadn't offered, and I knew enough about vampires not to ask. That wouldn't be a part of the show—on- or off-screen.

My phone rang. My heart exploded with hope that it was Vander. But the number wasn't one I wanted to see. It was, however, a number I needed to see.

"Parsnip," I answered, crisp and to the point.

“Is this a good time?” Pomegranate’s tired voice slipped through.

It was a familiar tone, one that most pixies shared. Pom knew she didn’t need to hide with me. We were kindred spirits, brought together by horrific shared experiences. Pom hadn’t been imprisoned as long as me. As far as I knew, I held that record. All other pixies that had been captured by an ogre and kept that long hadn’t survived.

“You know anytime is okay.”

Pom and I’d had this conversation before. She and Parsley were the only ones I’d drop everything for. An image of Vander popped into my head, and I pushed it away. If Pom was calling, I needed to focus and give her all my attention.

“I know,” Pom reassured, “I just don’t like bothering you, and...every time I call, it’s not about anything good.”

While that was true, I didn’t blame Pomegranate. “How long this time?” I asked.

“Three weeks. Not that long in the big scheme of things, but she’s young. Her name’s Petunia. She’s a nature pixie. Pretty little lavender thing. She was just starting to fade when she was found and rescued. Her color’s already starting to return, not that she really lost much.”

Pomegranate was one of the healers that cared for me after I was rescued. A couple of brownies, Pom, and Parsley were the only ones aware of my faded colors. Out of those, Parsley was the only one who knew my colors never returned. Once retrieved, most faded pixies regain their color. I didn’t. Maybe it was because my captivity had been so long and I’d been so close to death. Another day, maybe two, and there would have only been a corpse left to retrieve and burn.

“Does she need someone to talk to?” I asked. I’d made it a point to always offer whatever help I could. Sometimes that equated to an ear to bend, sometimes a safe haven, and sometimes it was monetary.

“She does, but she also needs someplace to stay. Petunia’s embarrassed. She doesn’t know what kind of reception her

family will give her. She wants to wait until her colors are fully restored. The healers think that will take seven, maybe ten days. Petunia could use a safe place to land until then. I've spoken with her family, and I think they'd be accepting but..."

"But Petunia isn't convinced."

"No. She's scared. She's also young, barely out of childhood. I think with a little more age, she'd have the confidence to go back, but not right now."

I didn't even have to think about the offer I was about to make. "I'll call Parsley. I'm sure it will be fine."

Parsley had taken pixies in before. After dealing with my fallout, Parsley was an excellent choice. He had the patience of a pixie saint and knew all the right and wrong things to say. Petunia would be safe there, and Parsley knew how to be discrete.

There was a stigma in the pixie world about being captured. All pixie children were told horror stories—cautionary tales regarding reckless pixies who made poor decisions and paid the price. The truth was, most pixies were captured through absolutely no fault of their own. I was the exception, not the rule.

"Thanks, Parsnip. I knew you'd help."

"Always." And thankfully, my brother was on the same page.

"I'll let Petunia know. She's currently in Kansas. It won't take much to get her out and over to Washington State."

"I'll call Parsley now. He'll have everything ready by the time you get there. Let Petunia know that if she needs to talk, all she has to do is call."

Parsley could soothe a lot of worries and fears, but sometimes you needed to speak to someone who truly understood what you'd been through.

"Will do. Thanks again, Parsnip."

"Anytime."

We ended the call, and I quickly pulled up my brother's information. Parsley didn't disappoint. He was all business. Our conversation was quick and to the point. As a home-and-hearth pixie, Parsley was a natural nurturer. He'd take excellent care of Petunia.

Ending that call also, I slumped down on a nearby chair. It was odd. I should have been exhausted. I wasn't. Not physically. Mentally, I felt a little wiped out, but that was to be expected. Hearing about another captured pixie always tried to pull me into the dark depths of memory. It was a slippery slope, and once I started down that path, it was difficult to crawl my way back out.

I thought about calling Vander. I wanted to hear his voice. I felt unsettled, and instinct told me the quickest way to keep the dark thoughts away was Vander Kines. Phone in hand, I scrolled to his number, but just as I was about to hit the send button, my phone lit up with another incoming call. I frowned when I saw the name attached.

"Lance?" I asked, unsure if it would be the warlock or his stepbrother, Tony.

"Hey, Parsnip." Lance's typically high-pitched, nasal voice was absent. The scratch that replaced it wasn't much better. "Sorry about the delayed shipment. I've got things ready now, and I can get them to you in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours."

I sat there with my phone squeezed in my hand. Clearing my throat, I said, "I thought you were out of commission."

"Yeah. Me too." Lance chuckled, the sound little more than a rasp. "But I'm out of the hospital and need to get back to work. Bills to pay and all that."

So, that was it. Lance needed money. Well, I hated to disappoint him, but this last batch of charms was the last bit of coin he was getting from me. Vander's charm was a world apart, and I had no plans to go back to an inferior and more draining product.

“I see,” I finally managed. “I’ll send the money, but this will be the final time, Lance.”

There was a slight pause before Lance stuttered, “Wh-what? You mean you’re coming out?”

It was an odd way to phrase it, but I understood well enough. “No. But I have found another warlock.” I wanted to tell Lance that Vander’s work was far superior, but I held my tongue. I wasn’t certain how ill Lance was and didn’t see the need to rub more salt into his wounds. “I was under the impression that you wouldn’t be able to finish my order in time, so I had no choice but to contract with another warlock.”

“Oh. Well, I can see the need, but I’m back to work, and the healers expect a full recovery. There’s no reason we can’t go back to our previous arrangement.”

There certainly was a reason, but I still tried to refrain from hurting Lance’s ego. “I’m sorry, Lance, but I don’t believe so.”

“Why not?” Pitch and heat returned to Lance’s tone, neither welcome. “Is he charging less than me? Is he undercutting my operation?” Anger sang loud and clear. “Tell me what he’s charging, and I’ll do better.”

I didn’t know if I should feel offended or not, but that’s the exact emotion that struck me. I started to tell Lance that Vander’s price was the same, but then I realized I’d yet to pay Vander a dime for the charm warmly and comfortably resting against my thigh. I didn’t even know that we’d settled on a price.

“It’s not that,” I honestly stated.

“Then what?” Lance growled. “Tell me who this warlock is.”

I had absolutely no plan to do that. “That is private and none of your concern.” Irritation boiled within me. Lance had made a lot of money off me the past six years. If he didn’t have any left for a rainy day, then that was his problem, not mine.

Still not wanting to burn any bridges, I tried to placate Lance. “I’m sorry, but that’s my final word. As I said, I will pay for the charms you’ve already completed. That’s fair.” Even though they were several days late, and I had no intention of using even a single one unless absolutely necessary. Still, it would be good to have a backup, even if they were inferior.

“That’s bullshit, Parsnip. I don’t come through one time because of an illness—”

“Injury,” I corrected. “According to your stepbrother, it was an injury of your own making. And besides, that’s not the reason.”

“If that’s not it, then what the hell? I rely on that money. You owe me for the past six years. If nothing else, you owe me for keeping my mouth shut. Do you realize just how much I could make outing you? Any gossip rag would pay a mint to hear about the celebrity who’s been fooling everyone. No species likes a liar, and that’s exactly what you are. You think anyone will want to watch a show with you on it after that? Especially when they hear what you really look like? That you’re just a drab little pixie that looks like shit when not wearing a charm to cover your ugliness.”

I’d made a lot of mistakes in my life. One of those had been with Lance. I’d been so damn desperate. I hadn’t asked him to engage in a fairy-silence pact. And, of course, he’d seen what I really looked like. I hadn’t had a charm to cover my appearance at that time. There’d been no choice.

Fear combined with rage boiled up inside me. “Are you threatening me, Lance?”

“Take it how you want. As long as I keep getting paid, I don’t give a shit.”

I’d never heard Lance sound so cruel. “After I pay for the current charms, you’re not getting a dime from me. If you try to go public with this, your career as a warlock is over. No one will ever commission you again. Trust is a hard-won thing, and if you break mine, I’ll make certain everyone knows about it. I will spread your name far and wide. Do you understand?”

Lance's raspy chuckle was nothing like Vander's. "Yeah, I think I've got it. Take care, Parsnip. Just remember, there are other ways of getting paid that have nothing to do with going to the press, and I'll deny leaking your secret to my grave. You wouldn't be able to prove shit."

Lance ended the call, leaving me staring into my rental home's abyss. My darkening phone screen blurred as I continued staring, eyes fixed and unblinking. I'd always known Lance was an arrogant ass. I hadn't known he'd be an underhanded one too.

Unsure what to do, only one thing came to mind. Only one warlock. I thought about calling but didn't think that was enough. I needed to see Vander. I needed to not only hear his soothing voice but also to feel his rough hands on me. I needed his warmth because right now, I felt colder than the winter wind.

## Chapter Nineteen

*VANDER*

I itched to start on Parsnip's next charm but held back. I needed to rest, and that didn't just mean my body, but it also meant that part of me that made me a warlock.

By the time 10:00 p.m. rolled around, Byx was still giving me the silent treatment. She'd holed up in her room most of the evening and night. I figured she needed time to cool off, to wrap her head around why I was so adamant about not taking her up on her magical offer. I thought she'd settle down eventually. I just wished it was sooner rather than later. Byx and I argued a lot. Typically, they were more in jest than true disagreement. This argument was completely different.

Freshly washed and dried, I didn't smell as bad as before. Too bad I couldn't wash my brain the same way, come out of the shower all crisp and clean, all negative thoughts washed down the drain. There was no charm that magically scrubbed the brain of racing thoughts.

There were drugs for that, but I firmly turned from that path.

I made another sandwich, piling it high with veggies and protein. I felt a lot better this evening than yesterday, but I wanted to keep that up. I had orders to fill that had nothing to do with Parsnip, and I'd need to get back to business tomorrow. I'd paid last month's rent, but the next one would approach faster than I wanted.

Banging on the front door halted my hands, my sandwich just out of reach. Leaning back on my stool, I stared down the



hall, as if I could see who was at the front door. I'd been hanging in the back of the shop, trying to give Byx more space upstairs. She'd only come out of her room to eat and use the restroom. But I wanted her to feel comfortable if she needed to do that again.

The banging stopped, and I thought whoever it was had figured out the shop was closed. I started to take a bite again, but as I raised my hand, a brilliant, scarlet glow caught my attention.

"Son of a..." I set my sandwich down and headed for the front door. Just as I'd thought, a shivering pixie stood on the other side.

"What in Gaia's name are you doing out there?" I shut and locked the door after pulling Parsnip inside. "It's freezing, and you don't even have your boots on." I was glad to see he'd thrown his shawl over his shoulders, but that hardly seemed enough. Flurries fluttered by, catching the outdoor light here and there.

"I forgot them." Parsnip sounded forlorn, almost like he wasn't even certain where he was or what the weather was like outside.

"Forgot them?" I vigorously rubbed up and down his arms, trying to get some warmth back into him. As I rubbed, I heard a noise in the background and turned just enough to see Byx come through the curtain separating the front from the back.

"I heard a sound," Byx said, her gaze glancing between me and Parsnip. There was no animosity there, and I was grateful. I hadn't been certain how Byx would treat Parsnip when she saw him again. I wouldn't have blamed her if she'd been unkind. I wouldn't have liked it and we would have words, but I wouldn't have been angry.

"What's going on?" Byx moved into the room, a note of concern lacing her voice. "Is he okay?"

"I'm not sure yet." I took a minute to check how Parsnip looked and couldn't see a problem with the charm. It appeared to be working, and Parsnip still looked as he wanted. I felt

along the magical lines of the charm and couldn't sense a problem there either.

"What can I do?" Byx asked. I wished I had an answer. Considering I wasn't sure what I was going to do, I hardly knew what to say.

"Maybe some hot chocolate or tea?" That sounded benign enough and might warm Parsnip. "Do you have a preference?" I didn't know Parsnip well enough to know, and that grated. He was my one and only. I should know things like that.

"Hot chocolate. If it's not too much bother." I didn't like how timid Parsnip sounded.

"Got it," Byx readily agreed. "You want me to bring it down here or are you taking him upstairs?"

When Parsnip swayed toward me, my decision was easy. "Upstairs. My bedroom."

"Got it." Byx didn't argue or give me grief. She was all business.

"Come on. Let's get you upstairs and under the covers. I need to warm you up."

Parsnip didn't complain. He leaned into me. Leaning over, I wrapped my arms around him. With a little hop, Parsnip entwined his legs around my waist, clinging like an octopus.

"Easy," I soothed. "Whatever it is, we'll figure it out." Cupping his ass and careful of his wings, I carried Parsnip up the stairs and to my room. I was grateful I'd washed my sheets. I'd just finished making the bed when I decided another sandwich was a good idea.

Parsnip's answer was to cling tighter. We easily made it into my room.

Byx met me there.

"Water's heating in the microwave. I thought you could use some help getting him under the covers." Byx was as good as her word and pulled down the covers so I could settle Parsnip underneath. Only, he wouldn't let go and pulled me with him. Pixies could be hella strong when they wanted.

“Guess I’m staying put.” I offered Byx an apologetic grin.

“I’ll grab an extra blanket. The water should be ready soon and—” The microwave beeped, and Byx took off.

“Please don’t let me go.” Parsnip’s voice was barely audible. “Please.”

That word, along with the pleading tone, broke my heart. “Never.” I ran my fingers through his hair. It was just as soft as I’d imagined, and that was all Parsnip. I hadn’t added that to his charm.

“Got it.” Byx ran into the room, steaming hot chocolate in hand. “You might want to let it cool for a minute or two. I’ve got an extra blanket too.”

Soon enough, we were both covered. Byx’s tiny hands tucked us in. Her eyes glowed as she stared at Parsnip, analyzing him. Hands raised, palms out, she read through his vitals. Lips pulling into a frown, she said, “I’m not sure, Van. His core body temperature is low, but we already knew that. I can’t sense anything else beyond a lot of stress. I’m not sure if your charm is interfering with my reading or not.”

“It shouldn’t.”

Parsnip laid his head on my shoulder, tucking in under my chin.

“I didn’t think so but wanted to make sure.” Byx shrugged. “I’m not really sure what else to do.”

“I’m not sure there is anything. Time, comfort, and warmth.” That was all I could think of.

“Don’t think I can really help with any of those things.” With a pat on my shoulder, Byx added, “Looks like it’s all on you, Van. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Byx.” I grabbed her hand, gently squeezing it to get her attention.

Byx’s round eyes met mine, quickly softening.

“We okay?”

“Yeah. We’re okay. I’m still not happy, but you and I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry about me.” Byx inclined her head toward Parsnip. “You’ve got bigger fish to fry right now.”

I released Byx’s hand, and she walked out of my room, softly closing the door behind her.

Alone with Parsnip, I just kept running my fingers through his hair, rubbing small circles on his back. “I’ve got you. Talk to me when you can, okay?”

I got a mumbled response that I thought might be an affirmative but wasn’t sure. Byx had placed the hot chocolate within reaching distance, and I grabbed it, pressing the warm cup to Parsnip’s cool skin. He wasn’t as cold as he’d been when I’d first opened the door, but he was still chillier than was natural for a pixie.

“Can you drink a little of this for me?” I cajoled.

Shifting within my embrace, Parsnip moved just enough to grab the mug. Cradled within his hands, he slowly brought it to his lips and drank. The barest flutter of his wings let me know he appreciated the warmth and taste.

“It’s good. Thank you.” Parsnip lowered the mug, leaning back into me. His body shivered, and I pulled the blanket up farther. I also activated my heat charms.

“Can you lower your wings?” I wanted to wrap the blanket around his shoulders but couldn’t with his wings out.

It was alarming how quickly Parsnip’s wings dropped. Trying not to worry too much, I pulled the blanket around us and leaned back into the headboard. Parsnip’s body followed along. I took the remaining hot chocolate out of his hands before it spilled.

We stayed like that, Parsnip’s light weight nestled against my chest, his hair entwined within my fingers while I continued running my hand up and down his back, between his wings, and around his shoulders. Basically, anywhere I could reach. His shivering ebbed into minuscule muscle fasciculations, and soon, even those evened out.

“You’re so warm,” Parsnip mumbled, burrowing into my chest.

“That’s because I didn’t go traipsing around outside without shoes and a coat in less than thirty-degree weather.” I kept my tone light, aiming for levity.

Parsnip hummed a noncommittal response and went silent.

I waited a couple of minutes, but my curiosity and worry were burning a hole through my patience. Finally, I asked, “Can you talk about it?”

“Sleepy,” Parsnip answered, evidently still unwilling or unable to tell me what was wrong.

I didn’t argue. “Go ahead. I’ve got you. No one will hurt you here. Rest. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Within seconds, Parsnip’s breathing evened along with his heart rate. His body went slack, but he still desperately clung to me. It wasn’t the most comfortable position, and I’d have to activate more than a few pain charms in the morning. Even knowing that, I didn’t try to move him. I held Parsnip through the night and into the morning sun.

## Chapter Twenty

### *PARSNIP*

I couldn't remember ever feeling this warm. No, that wasn't true. What I didn't remember was feeling this safe. Not since I was a naïve child who thought tales of ogres were little more than ghost stories meant to scare silly pixies. Parsley had tried to make me feel safe again. He'd done the best he could, and to his credit, he'd partially succeeded. But nothing came close to this.

Vander.

His name eased through my mind, softening all my sharp edges and soothing the peaks of panic that wanted to rise into insurmountable mountains. Vander was here, lying beneath me. His firm chest rested below my head, the steady beat of his heart a soothing melody. My body rose and fell with every breath he took. My wings tried to flutter, but the heavy weight of a blanket stifled their movement, and I quickly quieted them.

I wanted to stay there, wrapped in Vander's arms for the rest of eternity. My mind kept trying to think back on my phone call with Lance, but every time that warlock's image popped into my brain, I replaced it with Vander's hazel eyes.

A larger breath raised my body higher, and I eased down as Vander expelled the deep intake. "You awake?" he asked, voice scratchy.

"Hmm...maybe." I placed the palm of my hand over Vander's pectoral, loving the strength beneath. Vander's larger palm cupped mine and gently squeezed.

I waited for him to ask what happened, why I'd shown up half-frozen on his doorstep.

Instead, Vander asked, "How are you feeling? Are you warm enough? I deactivated my heat charms a few hours ago, but I can turn them back on if needed."

I flushed at his caring. "I'm fine. Plenty warm." I needed to pee, and my stomach felt like a hollow shell, but I wasn't lying about being warm.

"Good. I don't know about you, but the bathroom's calling my name. The kitchen too. Byx is up. She poked her head in about thirty minutes ago and asked if she should start breakfast. You were still asleep, so I told her to hold off. You ready to face the day?"

I didn't think it mattered whether I was ready or not. Like it always did, day followed night. The rising of the sun meant I needed to face my life and figure shit out. I had no idea how I would do that, but it didn't matter. I had to solve this problem. There was no other choice.

Pushing off Vander's chest and leaving our little nest of blankets and comfort was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I did it anyway. Vander's hands cupped my ass, holding me still. His intimate touch didn't stir so much as a single word of protest.

"You take my bathroom. I'll use the one down the hall." Vander kissed my forehead, his lips skimming down my temple and to my cheek. Little pants of air jetted past my lips, and my eyelids fluttered. I was only partly ashamed of the whine I emitted when he pulled away.

I didn't hurry while in the bathroom. After relieving myself, I went to the mirror and couldn't believe how good I still looked. Vander's charm felt heavier against my thigh. It wasn't real. I had no idea what I really looked like, but I could guarantee it wasn't the perfection staring back at me. For the first time, I hated that image. It wasn't real, and that seemed suddenly wrong.

Confusion swamped me as water rushed over my hands. The lathered soap slipped down the drain, and I wished I could wash away my racing thoughts the same way.

When I opened the door, the smell of bacon and eggs assaulted my nose. I didn't hate the scent, but like every other pixie, I was a vegetarian. I sincerely hoped there was something in the kitchen I could eat.

I shouldn't have worried. A fresh bowl of fruit was placed in front of one of the kitchen chairs, a glass of orange juice accompanying it.

"I wasn't sure if you drink coffee," Byx said, a skillet of eggs in one hand, one plate already full and the other ready to be served. "I also don't have any tofu, so I couldn't do much better than the fruit. I've got bread and can make some toast if you'd like."

I smiled, flying over to the chair and taking a seat. It wasn't a backless chair, so I had to arrange my wings, but I didn't mind. "This is plenty. Thank you, Byx."

"You're welcome. Van should be in soon."

The words no more than left Byx's mouth than Vander walked in. Clapping his hands together, he rubbed vigorously, a huge grin plastered on his face. "This looks and smells fantastic. Thanks for cooking this morning, Byx."

The brownie lifted a shoulder, placing the warm skillet into the sink. "No biggie. I've been up for a while."

We sat in companionable silence, each of us hungry enough that conversation was kept to a minimum. It didn't seem strained or awkward. Occasionally Byx and Vander engaged in shoptalk. They decided the storefront should be opened today. I got the feeling they'd closed yesterday and felt a pang of guilt. Most likely, Vander hadn't felt up to it. He looked a lot better this morning than he had the night he'd left my home.

I was surprised when I looked into my bowl, only to find it empty. I'd been hungrier than I'd thought.



“Do you want more?” Byx politely asked. “We’ve got some more bananas. I’ve got some pistachios too. Not sure if that’s really breakfast food or not.” Byx’s little nose crinkled with thought. It was terribly cute and went along with the soft purring emanating from her...head...

My eyes flew wide. “Goddess, are your hair clips moving?” I’d never seen anything like it.

“Oh. Yeah. You like it?” Byx reached up, petting one of the clips. “I magicked them. I’ve got others but thought the cats would be best for today.”

“She’s also got hissing squirrels and dragons that, thankfully, only emit smoke,” Vander added with pride.

“I’m still working out the fire bit,” Byx leaned over and conspiratorially whispered, although clearly, Vander could hear her. “Van thinks it’s dangerous, but I think it would be super cool. What do you think?”

I blinked and answered, “I think it’s a little of both.”

Byx grinned, showing off her pointed teeth. “Excellent answer.”

“Yes, very diplomatic,” Vander agreed. “Now, why don’t you get ready so you can open up the store? You cooked. It’s only fair that Parsnip and I clean up.”

“You sure? I can do that if you two need to talk or something.”

“Nah, we’re good, and if Parsnip wants to talk, then there’s no reason he can’t do it while drying.” Vander got up, grabbed the plates from the table, and headed for the sink.

“Okay, don’t have to tell me more than twice.” She hopped up and took off down the hall to what I assumed was her room.

The kitchen was small, much like I gathered the rest of the apartment was. The first time I’d come into the shop, I hadn’t realized Vander and Byx lived above it. I supposed it made sense. Following Vander’s lead, I gathered my bowl and empty glass, adding them to the counter with the dirty dishes.

“Towels are in that lower drawer.” Vander inclined his head in the direction I needed to look. I found the clean but tattered supply easy enough.

The sink filled with warm, soapy water, and Vander got busy. I dutifully dried what he handed me but was unsure where things went. I made a clean stack and thought of Parsley. If he were here, he’d be flying all around the kitchen, discovering its secrets and conversing with the cabinets.

We were two-thirds done, and Vander hadn’t asked me a single question. He simply washed, a light hum of a song I barely recognized drifting through the air. I’d never been one for domestic activity, but cleaning dishes with Vander was soothing. It relaxed some of my tension, though it couldn’t take it all away.

“You know,” Vander finally said, “I’ve heard that sharing a problem often halves its burden. I know we haven’t known each other long, and you’ve probably got no reason to believe me, but you can trust me, Parsnip. Deep down, I think you know that. I think that’s why you drove over an hour to find me.”

Vander placed a dripping glass in front of me, and I mindlessly grabbed it. I considered his words and knew they were true. I didn’t know how I knew. I didn’t trust easily, and Lance’s recent betrayal should have had me locking my mouth down tight. But Vander agreed to a silence pact. He already knew my deep, dark secret. He risked losing his warlock abilities if he did what Lance threatened.

Glass dry, I set it along with the others on the counter and started. “Lance called last night.”

Vander’s body stilled. “Lance? The warlock?”

“The one who made my previous charms, the one that had a *magical* mishap that landed him in the hospital,” I clarified.

“Ahh yes. I take it he’s out of the hospital?”

“He is.” Those two words sounded far harsher than they should.

“And that’s a bad thing?” Vander stopped washing, giving me his full attention.

I barked out a laugh. “You wouldn’t think so, would you?” I shook my head, wondering how my life had gotten so fucked up.

Wasn’t there a point when karma said you’d been punished enough for your stupid mistakes? Hadn’t I already paid the price for my arrogance? Considering Lance’s threat last night, I had my answer.

It was amazing how little time it took to relate the story. Fascinating how such a brief conversation could send you into a tailspin of despair.

Vander listened. He resumed washing, finishing up what little was left, but he paid attention. Vander’s biceps flexed in time with his anger. Anger close to the point of rage.

Vander Kines was fascinating. I’d seen a lot of pissed-off individuals in the past. Vander was different. He didn’t shout, didn’t curse or storm about. It was a low, simmering boil. A carefully considered rage. It was quiet and contemplative, and I had a feeling it was far more dangerous than the explosions I was used to.

When I finished, Vander asked, “No silence pact?”

“With Lance? No. I was desperate and foolish back then.”

“I wouldn’t say foolish, but desperation often leads in that direction. You were trusting, and now Lance has betrayed that trust. Warlocks like him are what give us a poor reputation.”

I couldn’t argue. “I’m not sure what to do. Lance is right. He doesn’t have to make it known that he’s the one that outed me. There’s...”

I thought about Letty Fox. Lance knew about the witch. We’d had to change the charm from a necklace to something I wore around my thigh because of her. I’d told him the reason. It wouldn’t be difficult for him to track Letty down. She’d salivate over the revelation and waste no time posting it to her blog. Lance could give her all the information she needed to make the blog convincing enough for others to believe. Even if

everyone didn't buy the story, enough would. The damage would be done.

"There's what?" Vander's palm fell onto my shoulder.

The pressure was enough. It was the reassurance I needed.

"There's a witch. Her name's Letty Fox. She..." I wasn't really sure what to say. I hardly understood Letty's motives, or, at least, I didn't understand them from a witch. "She's obsessed with fame. Or maybe more notoriety. I'm not sure which. All I know is that she craves attention. She's worse than any social pixie I've ever met. The first charms Lance made me were worn around the neck. Letty spotted it. She didn't know what it did, but being a witch, she knew it was for *something*. She started paying attention to me, to every little detail. Lance changed the charm so I could wear it somewhere that could be concealed easier. But Letty wouldn't let it go. She became obsessed. She's still obsessed. She meticulously reviews any photo or video of me she can get her hands on. And she's noticed things."

"What kinds of things?"

I sighed, slumping against the kitchen counter. "Lance's charms weren't always consistent." Vander snorted. "There were discrepancies. Little things that the typical viewer wouldn't notice. Unfortunately, Letty is anything but typical."

Vander mimicked my counter lean, head tilted down and contemplative. "So, this witch, her goal is what? More likes on her blog?"

"In a way. Like I said, I'm not completely certain of Letty's motives. She craves attention, and just like a toddler, she doesn't care what form that takes. Parsley thinks she has an inferiority complex and is seeking out attention as a way to validate her existence. He might be right. Regardless of her reasons, Letty's been a huge pain. She's a stalker too. I have a restraining order out, but that hasn't helped much. She can still be the allotted distance away and still snap photos. She's here in Virginia."

“What?” Vander jerked away from the counter, muscles stiff and voice little more than a low growl. “She followed you here?”

“She follows me everywhere.” I sighed. “I called Solen. He’s my fairy lawyer. Solen said there’s not much he can do since she’s not breaking the law. I have to wait until she does something more up close and personal.” I smiled, but it wasn’t pleasant.

For the first time, Vander’s stillness made me squirm. “You’re staying at the rental house alone?”

“Yes, and before you say anything else, I don’t think Letty will actually *do* anything. She’d be a fool to break fairy law. They’d strip her of her witchcraft if she did.” I stared at a nearby wall, unseeing and finally expressing something I’d felt for a long time. “Maybe I deserve it. Maybe this is still punishment for being such an arrogant fool.”

Vander’s tone was clipped when he said, “I think I’ll need a bit more information to break down all that idiocy.”

Despite the heavy situation, I grinned. “For obvious reasons, not many know the story.” I waved a hand down my body before lifting a lock of hair, letting the colors shift through my fingers. “My only defense is that I was young and...gullible.”

“Typically, that’s a good defense. All of us were that way once upon a time. Some of us never progress.” Vander’s tone was both cool and warm.

“Thanks, but you might change your mind.” I inhaled deeply.

I didn’t want to remember that time in my life. I worked very hard, each and every day, to forget it. Now I was about to do the opposite. I couldn’t delve into all the particulars. That would drive me back into the dark mental hole that had stolen my colors.

Given my hesitation, Vander offered, “You don’t have to tell me, not if you’re not ready.”

“Then you’ll never find out because I doubt I’ll ever be truly ready. Regardless, for some reason, I want you to know. I really was young. Six and a half years doesn’t seem that long, but I’ve aged so much since then.” Some days, I felt downright old. “I’d heard a rumor, and then I *verified* it on an internet site.” I laughed at how stupid it sounded now. “You’ve heard how addicting pixie dust is to ogres. Everyone knows that. Fairy law has helped a lot, but it hasn’t eliminated captures.”

Vander inhaled, and his knuckles whitened as he gripped the kitchen counter.

“I’d heard that pixies could control ogres, that once they got a taste of our dust, they’d do whatever you asked them just for another taste. The internet site I visited gave away all the *secrets*. How not to be the one enslaved but the one doing the enslaving.”

I licked my suddenly dry lips as I let that sink in. That I hadn’t been innocent when captured, that I’d actively courted that fate.

“I was, of course, a fool. I remember thinking how much attention it would bring me, having an ogre at my beck and call. I’d heard all my life how dangerous they were. All pixies fear them. Can you imagine what a rock star I would be if I was the one in control of the ogre?” I couldn’t look Vander in the eyes. “It was all I could think of, all I could dream of. And I followed that dangerous dream until its inevitable end. Not so shockingly, I found out that pixies controlling ogres with our dust is little more than a dangerous fairy tale.

“Jed captured me. I was in that cage for a little over six months. When I was finally rescued, I was a day, maybe two, away from death. I’d lost all my color, and evidently, I was too far gone for it to return. As far as I know, I’m the only pixie who’s been that close to death and survived.

“And that, Vander Kines, is how I lost my color. That is why I do what I do, why I’m willing to give up my life force to be what I once was.”

Vander was silent. I could only imagine what he thought of me, how he regretted comforting me in his arms last night.

Goddess, he'd made himself ill working on my charm. He probably thought I'd swindled him, that I was just as superficial as he'd thought when he learned I was a social pixie.

I couldn't take the silence, the quiet judgment. I didn't need his accusations or his moral superiority. I'd made my mistakes, and I'd paid for them. I was still paying for them. If Vander couldn't accept that—couldn't accept me—then so be it.

With my head up and shoulders thrown back, my wings fluttered to life. I didn't have anything to grab. I'd even left the keys in the rental car.

"I'll get out of your way." I'd leave before Vander could throw me out.

My eyes burned, but I pushed the tears away. I wouldn't be able to hold them back for long, but I'd at least control them long enough for me to get to the car. I refused to allow Vander to see me break down. Not again. Flying forward, I headed for the hall and the stairs beyond. I didn't get far.

"Where do you think you're going?"

My wings beat furiously, slamming into Vander's shoulders. His arms didn't move. They were tight bands firmly holding my waist.

"Let go," I screamed, each repeat of the word escalating in pitch and urgency. The tears wouldn't wait. They were so close, and I couldn't fight them forever.

"No." That one simple word, Vander's warm breath skating over my sensitive ear. "Never. You think that story would make me hate you? You couldn't be more wrong. Stop fighting me. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

I gasped, choking on the snot clogging my throat. "You can't... You..." I didn't know what I was trying to say. "Didn't you hear me? I tried to enslave that ogre. I—"

"I won't argue that you were an idiot. But, like you said, you paid the price. You'd never try something like that again, even if it were possible."

“You don’t know that.”

How could Vander sound so certain?

“For now, you’ll just have to trust me until you can trust yourself. Now, ease down, Parsnip. You’re scaring Byx.”

I sucked in a gasp, my head flying in the direction of the hall. Byx stood there, brown eyes blown wide, fingers entwined in her shirt, twisting it this way and that. Her eyes shimmered, a reflection of my own tears.

“Oh, I-I’m so sorry. I...” Every ounce of fight fled my body like water from a stream. I slumped, Vander’s hold the only thing keeping me from falling to the floor.

“We’re okay,” Vander reassured Byx. “I’ve got him.”

“You sure, Van?”

“I’m sure. Thanks for checking. Let me get him settled, and I’ll be down. I’ve got a couple of phone calls to make before I head into the shop.”

Byx nodded. “It’s pretty quiet right now. If anyone asks, I’ll take a message and let them know you’ll get back to them.”

“Thanks again.”

Within one blink and the next, Byx was gone.

Uncontrollable tears fell, dripping one by one onto the old linoleum floor.

“Turn around,” Vander ordered.

I thought about refusing but did as told, keeping my head down. Vander wasn’t having it and placed his fingers under my chin, raising it. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what I looked like. Vander’s charm wouldn’t cover up my red, swollen eyes or the snot dripping from my nose.

“Wrap your arms around me.” Another order I couldn’t disregard.

Vander lifted me, hands cradling my ass as he carried me back to his bedroom. The mattress dipped below me as I



settled on my side. Blankets covered me again.

Vander didn't crawl into bed with me. He sat on the edge instead.

"Do you have your phone with you? Maybe in your car?" Vander's fingers carded through my hair, pushing it out of the way and behind my ear.

I nodded against the pillow. "In the car. I think." I couldn't truly remember whether I'd brought it with me. "Keys are in the car too."

"Okay. I'll go out and see. I need to call Divia. She's probably worried about you, and since you'll be staying here a bit longer, I want to let her know. I assume her number's in your contacts?"

"It is."

"Good. I'll need your passcode to get into your phone."

I rattled the four numbers off without a second thought.

Vander leaned down, pressing his lips to my forehead. He pulled back enough that I could stare into his eyes as he said, "Listen to me and listen well, Parsnip. What I said last night still stands. You're safe here. That means all your past, current, and future deeds as well. If you're looking for someone else to hate you for what you did, then you're out of luck. I get the feeling you hate yourself enough to make up for the rest of us. We'll be discussing that later, but for now, get some sleep. Everything's going to be fine. I'll make certain."

Vander leaned in and gave me another kiss. This time, I tilted my head enough that our lips met. It wasn't the deep, searingly passionate kiss I dreamed of, but it was full of something I needed more—reassurance, care, and the promise that everything Vander Kines said was absolute fact. My brain might not have been certain where we were going last night, but my heart had known enough to lead the way.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*VANDER*

I was so pissed I was surprised steam wasn't rolling out of my ears. Magic crackled around me, responding to my silent fury. Byx wisely kept her distance. The air sparking around me would affect her too, and I was glad she was smart enough to realize my lack of control.

"That bad?" Byx asked while leaning against the doorframe separating the front store from the office in the back.

"Worse. I need to see if Parsnip left his phone in his car." I paced back and forth, trying to find a measure of calm.

"Let me do it. The way you are now, if you go near that car, it'll fry all the electronics. I doubt Parsnip's rental car company will be happy about that."

I should have protested, but Byx was right, and I nodded. She held out her hand and asked, "Keys?"

"Parship says they're in the car."

"Goddess, help us." Byx rolled her eyes. "We'll be lucky if it's still there. Make, model, and color?"

I gave her the details of Parsnip's car, and she took off. Less than five minutes later, she was back. "We got lucky. Car's still there, and I found his phone. You settled enough to handle it?"

"Barely, but I don't think there's much risk now." I held out my hand, and Byx handed over the phone and keys.

“What are you going to do?”

Byx hadn't heard Parsnip's confession. She'd only shown up when Parsnip had gotten upset and tried to leave. She might not have all the details, but Byx knew enough to realize the shit had hit the fan and I was in active clean-up mode.

“First”—I woke Parsnip's phone up, happy to see it still had at least half a charge—“I'm going to call Divia and let her know that Parsnip's safe and not to worry.”

“And second?”

“I'm going to call that shoddy warlock, Lance.” I grinned, already anticipating that conversation. “Lance is about to find out what a piece-of-shit warlock he really is and that his actions have consequences that can cost a hell of a lot more than money.”

Byx hopped on her toes, excitement brimming in her eyes. “Can I listen?”

I considered her request and shook my head. “Not this time, kiddo. There's a chance I'd break my silence pact if you did.”

Byx only pouted a little. “I'll be up front then, bored out of my mind.”

“Thanks.”

“You're welcome. Just make sure you make it clear to that smarmy warlock that whatever he did to Parsnip, he needs to stop. Tell him you've got a pissed-off brownie as a backup. That might tip the scales a little.”

I grinned. “It'll tip them more than just a little, Byx. Thanks again.”

Byx's kitten hair clips purred loudly as she turned and headed out. I didn't wait for her to be out of hearing range when I dialed Divia's number. She answered after the first ring. As predicted, she was worried. I reassured her the best I could, and by the time I ended the call, she'd calmed. I promised Parsnip would call later, and that seemed to mollify her.

I scrolled through Parsnip's contacts and found Lance's name. I hit the send button without much thought and placed the phone to my ear. Lance didn't answer as quickly, but when he did, it was with a scratchy, high-pitched whine. This jackass didn't even sound like a typical warlock.

"Have you had enough time to reconsider?" There was a lot of confidence in Lance's voice—confidence I planned on running a battering ram through.

"Oh, I've had a lot of time to consider things, Lance." I allowed the deep baritone of my voice to purr through the line.

"Who is this?" Lance sounded on edge, just as he should be. "Where's Parsnip?"

"Peacefully sleeping in my bed. Exactly where he belongs." If I had it my way, Parsnip would never sleep anywhere else.

Lance scoffed. "I didn't take the little pixie for whoring himself out."

My blood ran cold. "Use that phrase again when speaking of him, and I will do more than report you to the Magical Usage Council."

Witches, warlocks, and brownies made up the majority of the Magical Usage Council, but we weren't the only members. A siren or two had taken a position on the council in the past, and a smattering of other species whose numbers weren't large enough to form their own oversight. Vampires governed themselves. Weres had tried, but there were just too many different types of weres, and their council disbanded centuries ago. Most of their conflicts were resolved within their own territories. Priests and priestesses basically ignored every law except fairy, and humans had created their own intricate and irrationally complicated governments and law enforcement agencies. Fairies answered to their queen.

Each and every lesser judiciary system was under fairy law. In general, fairies liked species to handle their own day-to-day squabbles. They left us to our own management until a

dispute was large enough or too complicated for an individual species' judiciary process to solve.

Weighted silence could only last so long, and Lance's nasal sneer of disbelief soon broke ours. "Calling a pixie a whore is hardly grounds for report." Lance acted as if that term was tossed around frequently when referring to pixies.

If that was his misconception, he was even more of an idiot than I'd originally thought. Sure, pixies dressed provocatively, but that was more their general nature. Heavy clothing was uncomfortable, and they enjoyed the feel of lighter, softer fabric. However, that didn't mean pixies randomly slept around. Some did, but their choice of clothing didn't equate to promiscuity.

I had no idea who'd been Lance's teacher, but whoever it had been had either done a shitty job, or Lance was one of those individuals who simply couldn't be taught.

Inhaling deeply, I moved past Lance's misconceptions regarding pixie sexuality and headed into more dangerous waters. I had to choose my words carefully to avoid breaking my silence pact.

"You're right. I doubt the Magical Usage Council would care much about name-calling. What they will take exception to is a contracted warlock blackmailing a former client, threatening to expose the charm they contracted for."

Silence once again met my ears. And just like before, it didn't last long enough. "What are you after? Money? Is that why you'd turn over one of your own? Do you think protecting Parsnip will endear you to him, that he'll continue to use you to make his little charms?" There was a mountain of snide condescension filling Lance's voice.

"Considering Parsnip has ended his contract with you, what I'm after is of no concern to you. And, just to make my point clear, I am well aware of the damage your charms did to your client—damage that was not made clear to him in the contract."

“What? That little pixie shit knew it would take a part of his life force to activate the charm. If he’s said different, then he’s lying. He—”

“Oh, he is aware of that and was very upfront about it. What he was also upfront about was that each activation took only a few days off his allotted total, not a few *weeks*. What he is also unaware of is the constant drain the charm takes on his body while active, and that that drain worsens as the charm’s power fades and needs to draw more upon its wearer to remain active.”

“That...” Lance huffed and blustered. “You can’t prove any of that.”

“Oh, I think I can. I’ve got one used-up charm and another that’s still active at my disposal. If I can figure it out, then those on the council shouldn’t have a problem either. As for what Parsnip knew or didn’t know...a truth-saying charm should solve that little problem.”

Parson would never agree to something like that, and there was a good chance Lance knew it. But there was the slim possibility we were both wrong, that Parsnip would agree, and as soon as he did, Lance’s bacon was well and truly cooked, nice and crispy.

“Listen, I worked for that shitty pixie for six years. I made his charms and—”

“Inferior charms,” I clarified, wanting to pull Lance out of the lofty cloud he seemed to have placed himself on. “There were several inconsistencies. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it shoddy work. However, there was certainly room for improvement, and I easily made those corrections. I suppose it is possible that you performed to the best of your abilities. If so, then my apologies. I never truly like to put a warlock of lesser talent down.”

“Why, you little—”

“I’m hardly little. And what’s more, I’m hardly a defenseless and desperate pixie. I’m a warlock, Lance, and a much more talented one than you. Oh, and because she

requested I inform you, I also have a brownie that's become very fond of Parsnip. She's more than willing to back up my magical skills."

Irate huffing filled our phone connection. "You... You have no right. I was the one that pulled Parsnip's ass out of the fire. I was the one that made his first charm. It was my ability that allowed him to land that job. I'm the reason he's so damn successful. I deserve my fair share. I deserve more!"

"Oh, on that we certainly agree, although I doubt we would agree on exactly *what* you deserve more of. As for the rest of your inane comments, you've been paid for services rendered. Most likely, far too much, but that's beyond my current reach. The point is that you will not get another dime from Parsnip. Put him from your mind and find another source of financial stability. Your cash cow has found a new pasture. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Lance ground out. "You'll get yours when Parsnip betrays you next. Don't think you're anything special."

"Parson didn't betray you, Lance. And you're wrong. I am something special. I'm something very special indeed." Before he had a chance to respond, I finished with "I hope you continue recovering from your injuries. Goodbye."

I pulled the phone away from my ear and slammed my finger on the end button. My heart raced, but not painfully. I hated warlocks like Lance. Warlocks like him were the reason humans like Vera Livingston darkened my door. They continued our shady reputation and led to alphas like Arie Belview sending their minions in requesting horrendous charms.

If I could wipe the earth clean of warlocks like Lance, I'd consider my life well spent.

Flopping down into my favorite office chair, I scooted until my ass barely clung to the cushion. Legs stretched out, my arms lay relaxed along the chair's armrests. Head tilted back, I stared at the ceiling, contemplating my next move. Or, more to the point, Parsnip's next threat.

“Byx,” I called out, voice low but easily carrying through the curtain door.

“What is it?” she asked, voice closer.

When I twisted my head, I found her standing in the doorway, pushing the curtain aside.

“How we doing out front?”

“Medium. I’ve had a few customers. A human bought two cold-breaking charms, and Doctor Jay picked up that infectious sterilization charm you made him. Other than that, it’s been quiet.”

“Good. You think you can handle things for a few more minutes? I’ve got another call I’d like to make.”

“Sure. No problem.” Byx disappeared behind the curtain, the fabric swaying as it settled back into place.

Waking Parsnip’s phone up again, this time, I hesitated before placing this call. Solen was Parsnip’s fairy lawyer. Client privilege wouldn’t allow him to tell me much, but I was hoping I could get some useful information about my one and only’s stalker.

“Was there something else, Parsnip?” Solen answered on the second ring. Fairies had smooth, liquid voices. Some found them too monotone. I didn’t think that was it. I just thought they all sounded bored.

I cleared my throat and answered, “This isn’t Parsnip. My name’s Warlock Vander Kines. With Parsnip’s permission, I’m currently using his phone.”

“Is Parsnip unwell?” Again, there was zero inflection. It sounded as if Solen had simply wondered if it might rain today.

“He’s well enough. I’m not going to tell you he’s fine, but physically, he’s on the mend.” Inhaling, I decided to jump into things. “I’m going to tell you something that Parsnip isn’t aware of yet. I’m going to give you this piece of information so you understand that I’m not asking for information with any ill intent in mind. Parsnip is my one and only.”



Less than two seconds passed before Solen said, “I see. You understand that if I discover you are being less than honest, the consequences will be most...uncomfortable.”

“I’m aware, and I’m not concerned. Parsnip is my one and only. I only discovered this a few days ago, so it is new. My reasons for not telling Parsnip are...complicated. But I assure you, I plan to claim him.”

“Assuming Parsnip agrees.”

“Of course.” I didn’t like the implication.

“Good. What is it you believe I can assist you with, Warlock Kines?”

It sounded like Soren might actually be willing to give up some information, and I wasted no time answering, “Letty Fox.”

“Hmm...an interesting situation. Not so unusual for a celebrity. However, most obsessed fans have an irrational affection for said celebrity.”

“Not in Letty Fox’s situation.”

“No. Her fascination seems to stem from deep-seated animosity. I assume this started when she was not chosen as the host of *Interspecies Habitat*. Of course, her anger is misplaced. It is not Parsnip’s fault she wasn’t chosen, but clearheaded thinking rarely plays a part in these situations.”

I couldn’t really disagree.

“While I appreciate your concern, especially given that Parsnip is your one and only, I am uncertain what more I can legally tell you. I am Parsnip’s lawyer, and unless I get his express permission to share his legal concerns, I am afraid I will not be much help.”

I’d anticipated that answer and was relieved that when it came to the law, Solen was a typical, upstanding fairy lawyer.

“I understand and wouldn’t ask you to break client confidentiality. I’ll try not to ask sensitive questions regarding client/attorney privilege. What I am hoping you can do is give me some background information on Letty Fox.”

“That might be agreeable. What is it you wish to know?”

“She’s a witch who’s obviously off the rails. Why hasn’t her coven dealt with her?”

That was the interesting thing about witches. Their issues rarely reached the level of the Magical Usage Council or fairy law. They were a democratic group that typically cared for misguided witches within their covens. They dealt appropriate punishments and either set the wayward witch back on the right path or, worst-case scenario, bound their powers.

“Letty doesn’t belong to a coven.”

*Wait, what?* “All witches belong to covens,” I protested.

“That is untrue. Well over 99 percent do, but that still leaves a very small proportion of the species that does not. Letty Fox is a part of that minuscule percent.”

“Well, shit.” I blew out a deep breath. “That explains a few things.”

“It certainly does. What it doesn’t explain, and what you have failed to ask, is why.”

I didn’t think it was fair to judge me on what I hadn’t asked yet, considering I hadn’t exactly had the time. Remaining silent, I waited for Solen to expound, and thankfully, he didn’t disappoint.

“It seems that Letty was once a member of a small coven in Wyoming. This was approximately eleven years ago. Their coven leader died. The death was unexpected. I have been unable to find the particulars. As is common practice, the witch was taken care of within her coven, her body cremated within twenty-four hours of her death.”

That was typical practice. Sometimes, the ceremonial crematory fire was delayed forty-eight, maybe seventy-two hours at most, to allow the coven and distant family members to arrive. Small covens moved quickly to lay their deceased to rest.

“It seems Letty saw herself as the next coven leader. The others disagreed. Witch Fox was not pleased and denounced

the coven. They, in turn, excommunicated her. The coven itself soon disbanded, and the few remaining witches were absorbed into other local covens.”

“But not Letty.”

“No. I ran across some reports that she attempted to join other covens, but she never seemed to *fit*. Within two years, she stopped socializing with other witches. Since that time, she has been a loner.”

That wasn't good. Witches were a social bunch and relied on hierarchy within their covens for direction and grounding. I'd need to speak with Mattie soon, get her take on a lone witch and see if she thought it was as dire a situation as my gut told me it was.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” Solen asked after I'd been quiet a little too long.

“No. Not that I can think of. I...” I didn't know what else to say, what to ask. I'd been hoping Solen could point me in the direction of Letty's coven and I'd be able to reach out and seek their help dealing with her. That plan was essentially shot to hell.

“Very well.”

“Thank you,” I blurted. It was never a good idea to be rude to a fairy. “I mean, I appreciate your help and the information.” I might not have liked the facts Solen had given me, but I was grateful for them.

“You are welcome. And if I might add, congratulations on finding your one and only. I realize this is an auspicious occasion for a warlock.”

“It is, and thank you again.”

“Please let me know if I can be of further service. Warlock Kines, please use caution when dealing with Witch Fox. Perhaps it is not my place to say, but she seems highly unstable. My hands are constrained by the law that governs their actions. Were that not the case, I would have taken care of the situation already. Do you understand my meaning?”

I swallowed hard. I understood all too well. “I believe I do.”

“Good. Have a pleasant day. Please tell Parsnip the same.”

The call ended, and I remained sitting with Parsnip’s phone dangling from my hand. I’d used up a fair amount of its remaining charge and needed to save enough for Parsnip to give Divia a call later.

Staring down at the scarlet, glowing ring on my finger, my cheeks hurt with my intense frown. Why couldn’t others be happy, or, at least, content, with what they had? Greed caused a lot of pain and heartache. Sure, more was great, but at some point, more was simply...more.

Scrubbing a hand over my chin, I glared a hole through the ceiling. I thought I might have taken care of one of Parsnip’s issues. Time would tell if Lance would heed my warning. If not, I had no problem going to the Magical Usage Council and setting them on his stupidly greedy ass.

As for Letty Fox...I didn’t have a clue. I had another phone call to make, but it could wait.

With a heavy sigh, I pushed myself out of my chair. Stretching, my back popped a couple of times, and I activated another pain charm. I’d been right about my awkward sleeping position last night. It hadn’t done my neck or back any favors. The warm blanket overlying my heart argued the discomfort was worth it. I couldn’t find it in me to argue with my heart.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *PARSNIP*

I spent another night at Vander's and returned to my rental home the following day. It seemed colder than when I'd first walked through the door a few days ago. The actual temperature was the same, and nothing inside had changed. Nothing but me.

Vander's apartment was small. It wasn't the kind of place any social pixie would want to be caught dead in, and yet, all I wanted was to hop in my car and drive back. That lovely, peacefully sedating feeling of safety fled with alarming speed, and I was back to looking over my shoulder and jumping at the slightest sound. My stomach was tied up in knots, and acid burned my throat.

"I'm being a fool," I scolded, though there was no one to hear my self-deprecating thoughts. Parsley wouldn't be pleased with the roads my mind wandered down.

As if brought about by thought alone, Parsley's name flashed across my phone, his accompanying ringtone softly chiming.

I'd plugged the phone in to charge and kept it plugged in as I answered.

"Hey, Parse. How is it going?"

"Well. I think. Pom dropped Petunia off late last night. I wanted to get her settled in before I called you."

I sat on the floor, legs crossed, and pulled a nearby blanket off a chair, suddenly desperate for warmth.

“How bad is it?”

“Not terrible. They found her quicker than some. Her colors are doing well. Pom knows better than me, but I don’t see any reason why they won’t be back to normal in a week, maybe a little longer, but I doubt it.”

“And her mental state?” Sometimes, that was the hardest part. Getting your colors back helped, but sometimes that wasn’t enough.

Parsley sighed. “That’ll take longer. Pom warned me that Petunia’s young, and she’s right. She’s blaming herself, saying that she wasn’t careful enough, that... Well, I won’t get into all the things she’s saying. Besides, you’ve heard it all before.”

I had and had said most of it too. The difference was that my capture had been my fault. “Who took her?”

“That’s the scary part.” Parsley inhaled, and I could hear the hesitancy in his voice. “Listen, Nip, I don’t want to frighten you, but it looks like there’s another ogre trafficking ring that’s started up.”

“Shit.” I slammed my hand on the wooden floor. “I swear, you get rid of one, and another pops up to take its place.”

“You’re not wrong. Pom told me they’re trying to track this one down, but they’re slippery. She’s not even sure ogres are the ones in charge this time.”

That got my attention. “What do you mean?”

“Pom said there’s been some chatter about other species kidnapping pixies and selling them to addicted ogres. Apparently, it’s very lucrative. The ogres will pay anything to keep feeding their addiction.”

Shivers of fear raced through me, leaving me freezing despite the fluffy blanket I tried wrapping myself in.

“If other species start doing that, then...who do we even watch out for?”

Pixie children were taught to steer clear of ogres, but did we have to be careful of everyone now? Were we going to be little better than humans?

“I’m not sure. Pom told me the fairies aren’t happy. In fact, she said they were downright pissed. You know fairies; they lay down a law and goddess help the one that breaks it. Pom said they’ve got a meeting scheduled with the fairy queen. No promises, but everyone expects her to increase the punishment for pixie trafficking.”

“The punishment is already harsh.”

“Yeah, but not as harsh as it could be. Rumor has it that execution is on the table.”

I sucked in a breath. “Death?”

“Mm-hmm. No trial. No reprieve and no excuse. Justice would be in the hands of the fairy on site, and they would have full authority to give out punishment.”

“No questions asked?”

“None.”

I didn’t hate the idea. In fact, it settled the chills racing through me. It didn’t melt the cold. If anything, that sat even heavier in my chest. Only this frigid state was welcome.

“And the ogres involved?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No changes there. They’ll still be sent to rehab. If they become repeat offenders, unable to break the cycle, then they’ll be kept under lock and key.”

I made some type of noncommittal sound.

“It’s not their fault, Nip. It’s a disease, one that’s difficult to control. I know it’s hard to accept, but they’re victims too.”

Deep down, I knew that. But when you were on the other end of that addiction, when you were the victim too, it was hard to spare any sympathy.

“Anyway,” Parsley went on, “as for Petunia, I think she’ll be fine. She’s tough.”

“All pixies are,” I said.

“True enough. It’ll take time. There were a lot of nightmares last night. I think when she gets her tracking chip placed, Petunia will feel safer.”

I would have felt the skin over my own chip if I could have reached it. It was placed in my upper back, above the start of my wings. All pixies captured by ogres had the option of being implanted with a tracking chip. I’d agreed. Almost all rescued pixies did. If we were lost again, we could be found much quicker. Addicted ogres didn’t have the mindset to look for it to remove it. I wasn’t sure about traffickers. If they knew about the chips, knew where to look, it wasn’t inconceivable they’d be able to remove them.

“I think maybe it should be mandated that all pixies get them,” Parsley said, “regardless if they’ve been captured previously or not. Especially if this trafficking shit is going to start up again.”

“You can’t mandate that, Parse. Not everyone wants to have something that invasive placed in their body. A lot of pixies don’t like the idea of being easily tracked. It’s...it’s like we’re cattle or something.” I was okay with my own chip, but I understood why other pixies didn’t want one and hated that it was something that might become necessary.

“I know.” Parsley’s tone was soft. “And I get it, really I do. I just don’t know what the answer is, and I hate seeing our species suffer like this. Maybe they should make a mask mandate with ogres. If they never get a whiff of pixie dust, then they can’t get addicted.”

“Not all ogres get addicted to our dust. Besides, now you’re interfering with their rights.”

“Ugh! I hate this.” I rarely heard Parsley lose his cool. He must be really frustrated to sound so despondent.

“I know. So do I.” Situations with no answers were always draining. “Back to Petunia. You think she’s going to be okay?”

“I do. It’ll take time, but I’ve seen worse.” Parsley had stopped counting me as part of that *worse* group. My situation



was so beyond all others that I was more of an outlier than a true bar.

“Good. I’m glad. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. And thank you for taking her in.”

“Of course.”

I could visualize Parsley waving his hands in the air as if my thanks were ridiculous.

“You know, I didn’t even hesitate when I told Pom you’d be willing to take Petunia in.”

“No reason you should have. My home is always open.”

I grinned, and my chest loosened a little. There was something peaceful knowing you could count on a facet of life. Parsley was that constant.

We talked for fifteen, maybe twenty more minutes. I gushed about Vander’s charm and how great it was. I was glad I could honestly tell my brother how good this charm felt. Parsley sounded relieved.

I couldn’t bring myself to let him in on Lance’s threats. Because of that, I didn’t tell him about Vander’s counterthreat. I still couldn’t believe he’d done that.

By the time I ended the call with Parsley, I was a mixed bag of emotions. On the one hand, talking with my brother almost always eased my mind and soul. On the other, the idea that another pixie trafficking ring had started, and it was being run by species that weren’t ogres, scared the shit out of me.

I stayed there, lying on the hard floor, my wings stretched out behind me. I wasn’t sure how long I lay there, or would have continued lying there, but my ringing doorbell pulled me from my impromptu lounging spot.

Unsure who it was, I hoped it was Vander and also knew I’d be disappointed when I looked through the peephole and he wasn’t there.

I was disappointed. I was also curiously perplexed when a sheen of pink and gold pixie dust clouded my stoop. A shot of grass-green eyes peeked back at me.

“Parsnip? Are you home?” Another knock sounded on the door.

“You’ve got to do it harder,” Peaches said. “Like this.” A heavier pounding sounded.

“I didn’t want to be rude.” That was Phil.

“It’s not rude. It’s knocking,” Peaches argued.

Warm humor lit me up from within. Still confused, I opened the door, just a crack, and peered out at my visitors.

“Surprise!” Peaches shouted, wings fluttering and pulling him to eye level with Phil. “Divia said you weren’t feeling great, so Phil and I thought we’d stop by and cheer you up. Don’t worry. I didn’t bring any of the sprites along. Although they wanted to come and were very disappointed.” A large, honestly concerned grin lit up Peaches’s face.

Phil was more sober. “If we’re bothering you and you’d rather be alone, just say the word and—”

Peaches shouldered past the larger pixie. “He’s a social pixie, Phil. Of course he wants company.”

I stood there, door open, while I was joined by Peaches and Phil. With my lips parted, I stared as they took over my house.

“I brought apple cider. It’s the best, and I’m not just saying that because it came from my trees,” Peaches boasted.

“Yes you are,” Phil teased. “But in Peaches’s defense, it is the best cider.”

“It most definitely is.” Peaches twirled, gaze scanning the room as if he’d lost something. “Phil, where are the kids? I thought they were right behind us. They—”

“We’re here.”

I flew off to the side as a young werewolf male strode in, followed by a younger female.

“Hey, you Parsnip?” The young male held out his hand. “I’m Dillon, and this is my sister, Ruthie.”

Dillon was only a little shorter than me, so I didn't really have to lean down to shake his hand. Ruthie was a little smaller.

"Cool place," Dillon announced. "Not as cool as our home but—"

"Dillon! That's not polite," Phil scolded, his cheeks flushed pink.

"But it's not," Dillon protested. "No house is as cool as ours. Right, Ruthie?"

Ruthie nodded sagely. "Our home is the best, Phil."

"See. Ruthie agrees." Dillon's hands fisted on his sides, chest puffed out and looking like the proud alpha I could see him one day becoming. "And she's a dire. Ruthie *knows* things."

I blinked and finally spoke. "A dire wolf?" I'd heard of them, but they seemed more myth than reality. I stared down at the little girl with increased interest.

"It's a long story." Phil scooped Ruthie into his arms and squeezed her tight.

Happy giggles filled the room and eased the tension from my shoulders. Before I knew what I was doing, a grin lifted my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Phil said, Ruthie still in his arms. "I hope the kids didn't offend you. Your home is lovely."

I waved him off. "It's just a rental, and it's nice, but I'm sure the children are correct. You're a home-and-hearth pixie, Phil. I've no doubt the home you've created is fantastic."

"Oh...I..." Phil's pleased blush was sweet. Parsley would have reacted the same way.

Cabinets rattled in the background, and a triumphant "aha, found them" let us all know when Peaches discovered which cabinet the glasses were in. If Phil hadn't been distracted by Dillon and Ruthie, he likely would have gone straight to the right place.

“How many bottles did you bring?” Dillon asked, quickly going into the kitchen to help Peaches.

“Three, but there’s more in the truck for you to take home.”

“Yes!” Dillon fist-pumped, and Ruthie seemed nearly as excited.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Peaches apologized as he handed me a glass of apple cider. “I’m afraid I’ve already been away from my orchard for a few hours and can’t stay much more than one, maybe two. I hope you understand.”

Not on a personal level, but that didn’t mean I didn’t get it. “And what about you, Phil?” I asked, unsure why. I had no idea what we’d do for the next hour, let alone more.

“I’m good for a bit longer. I’ve got the kids with me, so that allows me more time away from our home.”

“Phil’s bonded to the house and family,” Peaches said with pride.

“That’s because we’ve got the best damn pixie on the planet,” Dillon echoed that pride.

“Dillon, language,” Phil scolded, though it was said with more humor than ire. “And that’s not, I mean... There are a lot of great pixies out there.”

“Yeah, but none of them are you,” Dillon said with the confidence of youth. No argument would convince him otherwise, and why would I want to?

Peaches, Phil, Dillon, and Ruthie either flew or scampered here and there. I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed so much or felt so light. I strongly wished Parsley could have been there with us. He would have been in heaven.

I’d wondered how we’d spend an hour, let alone two. But when it came time for them to leave, I found I was reluctant to let them go. Thanks were thrown around, as well as hugs. Peaches left me with a fresh, unopened bottle of apple cider, and I knew I’d wait until Vander was around to share it with him.

Thoughts of Vander kept me warm as I closed the door,  
silencing the house.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*VANDER*

I felt it as soon as the fairy walked through Warlock Wishes' doors. All species had unique signatures, something magic recognized. Warlocks and witches could twist the magic into categorization too. Every species did. They just had different ways of going about it. Depending on the type they were, weres used their natural senses to differentiate. Georgiana told me that different species resonated on their own frequency. Brownies, who were made of magic, could easily distinguish them. She'd also said it was suspected that fairies were the same, though no one knew for certain.

Byx peeked over the stair railing, brown eyes wide and full of question.

"What did you do, Van?" Byx hissed. "Please tell me you didn't break the pact you made."

"Not that I'm aware of."

The scathing look on Byx's face, combined with the puffs of smoke coming from her spelled dragon hair clips, let me know she wasn't all that pleased with my answer.

When Byx started to head down the stairs, I held up a halting hand. Her eyebrows rose high, leg stopped mid-step.

"Wait there. I've got this."

Byx's foot landed with a stomp. "That's not reassuring, Van. It's a fairy. You need me."

Byx was and wasn't wrong. Depending on the fairy, the two of us might be able to take them on, but I didn't like our

odds. Even if we did manage a win, another, stronger fairy would show up. If this turned into a clusterfuck, I didn't want Byx anywhere near the fallout.

Putting on my cockiest grin, I forced relaxation through my muscles. Hands stuffed into my pockets, I casually rocked back on my heels.

"We don't even know why they're here." That, at least, was the truth. Tilting my head toward the curtain, I said, "Let me go check the situation out."

Larger puffs of smoke emanated from Byx's hair clips. Lips little more than a thin line, Byx relented. "Better get out there then. Fairies don't like to be kept waiting."

*No. No, they don't.*

Byx dramatically rolled her eyes at my responding wink. "You're gonna get your ass fried, and it'll be all your fault." With a huff, Byx walked out of my sight, but I knew she wouldn't go far. Between one blink and the next, Byx could go wherever she wanted. I just hoped she stayed put.

With Byx out of visual range, I let my casually confident façade drop. Running my fingers through my hair, I realized a comb would have been better, but I didn't want to waste any more time. Besides, fairies didn't give two shits what other species looked like.

Casting a longing glance at the anti-inflammatory charm I was working on, I turned and headed through the curtain and into the customer part of the shop. The long fiery red hair I was met with instantly identified my latest customer.

"Ray," I greeted, purposefully using the more casual version of his name. "I wasn't expecting a visit. What can I do for you?"

Hellfire Rayburn turned, the move effortless. Dressed in a sharply tailored dark gray suit with a silk, ebony dress shirt below, Ray was the picture of fairy perfection. Twin braids pulled the sides of his hair back, the remainder flowing down his back.

“Warlock Kines.” Ray inclined his head ever so slightly. “Pardon the intrusion, but King Moony requested I speak with you regarding a commission request you recently received.”

“Ah yes.” I mentally slapped myself. I should have expected this. In fact, I had been expecting it. But with everything that happened with Parsnip...I’d allowed it to slip my mind. Remembrance genuinely relaxed my strained muscles. “I assume you’re asking about the beta werewolf that visited the shop.”

“Indeed. Lucroy filled me in on your previous discussion. I would appreciate a firsthand account.”

“Of course.” I didn’t hesitate to retell the encounter.

Ray listened, interjecting a question here and there but mostly remaining silent. A brief, fiery flame lit his eyes but was gone almost as quickly as it sprang to life.

“And no names were given?” Ray asked.

“None. At the time, I didn’t think about pressing the matter, given I had no intention of taking the commission.”

“Understandable. Tell me, do you believe the request is possible?”

Lucroy and Peaches asked me the same thing. I’d had a little more time to contemplate it and had unfortunately come to a rather disturbing conclusion. “I think it might be.” I shook my head as I thought about the type of magic it would entail. “It would be a complicated mess, but given enough time and a little trial and error, I think in the right, or maybe in this case, wrong, warlock’s hands, it could be done. I think the werewolf requesting the charm has no idea just how difficult it would be. If they did, they probably wouldn’t even contemplate it.”

“Desperation and vindictiveness are often the seeds of destruction.”

“True enough,” I easily agreed. “It would take an exceptionally talented warlock. But not just that. Like I said, I think it can be done, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t take a toll on the warlock twisting the magical threads. We can only manipulate magic for so long before we have to rest. Breaking



a pixie bond... That would take time and a lot of it. Something like that couldn't be accomplished in a few days."

"How long? A week? Two?"

"Not weeks. Months, maybe even a year. And even with that, there's no guarantee the first charm would work. Like I said, I imagine it would be a case of trial and error, and the spell would need to be specific to the bonded pixie. That's a hell of a lot of work. Even if a warlock agreed, they'd be out of commission for anything else during that time frame." Even if I didn't find what the beta wolf asked morally reprehensible, I couldn't imagine shutting down the rest of my business for possibly greater than a year to work on a sole project like that.

Ray gazed off to the side, hands clasped at the small of his back. I had no idea what he saw, but I didn't think it was the shelf of anti-aging charms.

"I realize this may be a delicate question, but I'm afraid the implications of this *request* are too serious to rely on polite conversation. Can you name a warlock that might be willing to take on this commission?"

I expected the question. I'd even been wondering the same thing myself. "I've been thinking about that," I honestly answered, "but it's not as simple of a question as you might think. You see, there are two main aspects to consider. First, you've got to have a warlock whose moral code is nearly nonexistent. Second, that same warlock has to be capable of manipulating magic into doing something inherently against its will. That's not an easy combination to find."

"Forgive me, but I was under the impression that manipulating magic in that way is what all warlocks excel at." Ray's tone was absent of an accusation, merely a factual statement as he understood it.

"Not exactly. I mean, you're not completely wrong, but mostly warlocks use magic to break things down." I inclined my head toward a shelf holding the pain modification charms. "Take the feeling of pain, for instance. Or, in this case, chronic inflammation. That's a chemical process that occurs in the body, but it can be broken down and reversed. Warlocks

manipulate magic to undo the inflammatory process. Witches manipulate magic to confuse the brain's response to inflammation. It's a different approach to the same problem.

“However, a pixie bond is something else entirely. That is a purely magical creation. The magic wanted that bond, and it doesn't wish to release it. In that situation, forcing magic to go against its nature would be...difficult.”

“But not impossible.”

“No, I'm afraid not.” I released a weighty sigh. “I just can't figure out why anyone would want to do something like that. It's beyond cruel, and besides that, it's pointless.”

That was something I just couldn't get out of my head. The *why* of it. Overall, pixies were harmless. Their bonds were gifts, especially home-and-hearth pixies.

Hands still clasped behind his back, Ray's head tilted down, his voice hushed. “It is fortunate you do not understand the why, Warlock Kines. It speaks positively regarding your character. Unfortunately, assuming the individual who made the request is who we both believe him to be, the why is painfully clear. What is also clear is that this individual's obsession has overcome his self-preservation instincts.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I did not want to be on the wrong end of a pissed-off fairy.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “So, is what I told you enough to act on?”

“Unfortunately, no. At least not directly. However, it allows me to focus my resources. Now that I understand the latest method behind the madness, I can better monitor the situation and hopefully intercept the culprit. With that said, although it is doubtful, should you be approached by this same individual again, perhaps you should show a bit more... interest.”

“More interest? But... Ah... A trap.” My blackened fingers danced along the counter. “I wish I would have thought of that.” I'd been so appalled there'd been little room left for rational thought.

“No reason it should have come to mind.” Ray didn’t find my lack of forethought offensive. “As I said, it is doubtful he will come here again, but on the off chance that is not the case, then it would be in everyone’s best interest if you were a little more accepting of their offer. Should that happen, contact me immediately.”

“Of course.” I wasn’t crazy enough to try to take on something like that alone.

“Good. Thank you for relaying the information. I realize that warlocks value their clients’ privacy and it may not have been an easy decision.”

“You’re right. I don’t make disclosing requests a habit, even when it’s not a commission I’m willing to take. But this seemed...” I shrugged, unable to put into words what this request seemed like.

Ray offered a single nod, his gaze uncomfortably latched onto me. Only, it wasn’t as if he were looking at me, more like through me or, perhaps, around me.

Silence stretched, making me uncomfortable. “Is there anything else I can do for you or...?”

“It’s a dangerous game you are playing, Warlock Kines,” Ray flatly stated. “A warlock of your caliber should know better.”

My parted lips closed with a click of teeth. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re referring to.”

I could have sworn Ray smirked, although, with a fairy, it was difficult to tell. “You understand very well. Your brownie ward undoubtedly understands as well. I am certain Georgiana Gillian’s daughter is more than capable of reprimanding your foolishness. One’s life force is a precious gift. Giving it away is an offense to the Gaia you pray to.”

I bristled. “What is even more of an offense is not doing whatever one must to keep their one and only healthy, happy, and safe.” I rubbed Georgiana’s ring. I couldn’t feel the crimson lines spiderwebbing across the onyx surface, but I could easily see them in my mind’s eye.

“I see.” Ray inclined his head. “Apologies. Fairies may not have an equivalent, but we do understand that such bonds are important to other species and often result in unwise decisions.”

“Can’t argue there.”

The edge of Ray’s lips twisted up, and amusement danced in his eyes. “Tell me, young warlock, is it worth it?”

“Without a doubt,” I quickly answered, not wasting a moment on thought.

---

“Fairies give me the willies.” Parsnip leaned over my workbench, twisting an amethyst crystal between his fingers. “I suppose that isn’t fair, but it’s how I feel.”

“Don’t worry. It’s the way most species feel.” I twisted another thread of magic, layering it on top of the last one I’d set in place. This charm was a fever-breaker. About 70 to 75 percent of my business was human-based. If they were a healthier species, I’d be out of a job.

“Yeah, I know.” Parsnip’s wings fluttered, filling the air with a fine sheen of aqua. “Soren’s not bad, but I don’t think he helps me out of the goodness of his fairy heart. He’s a lawyer, and I pay him plenty for his services.”

“Sounds about right.” I tried to focus but found it increasingly difficult, given Parsnip’s proximity.

My one and only looked good. He sounded so much better than the last time I’d seen him. When he’d called earlier, asking if he could spend the night, I hadn’t hesitated and told him to come immediately. When I told Byx, she decided an impromptu visit with an auntie was a prime decision.

“Have you heard any more from Lance?” The name tasted like ash on my tongue.

When Ray asked me if I could think of any warlocks that would take the pixie commission, Lance’s name came to mind,

but I'd dismissed him because I didn't think he could complete it. I'd seen Lance's work firsthand. It had gotten the job done, but the charm was the equivalent of a bull in a china shop. It left a mess in its wake.

Parsnip momentarily stiffened before he answered, "Not a peep. I'm not sure if that's good or bad."

"Time will tell." It always did. "If he does make any more threats, you let me know, and I'll follow through on my threat." I had absolutely no reason not to.

"Thanks." Parsnip sounded sincere, but he still carried a lot of tension in his shoulders.

Twisting his head this way and that, Parsnip's neck popped loudly. When I glanced up, his gaze was trained on the crystal, but I didn't think he saw its perfect lavender color. Eyebrows pinched and lips little more than a thin line, Parsnip definitely had something on his mind.

"Are you still worried about Lance?" I asked, setting down my work and focusing on my one and only.

"What? Oh." Parsnip tilted his head. "No. I mean, yes, but that's not what's bothering me."

"Care to share?"

Parsnip's arms quivered, his fingers shaking enough that he dropped the stone. I caught it as it tried to take a nosedive to the floor.

"I'm sorry." Parsnip jumped out of his chair, wings a blur of motion. "I didn't mean to drop it. Did I ruin it?"

"You didn't ruin a thing." Twisting, I scooted out from under my workbench and patted my lap. "Come here and tell me what's got you so upset."

Parsnip eyed my thighs. I thought he'd decline, but instead, he flew toward me, slamming into my chest hard enough that I'd never been so glad for the back of my chair. Nestling in, Parsnip wrapped his legs around my waist, desperately clinging to me.

“Hey.” I rubbed his back, trying to soothe him. “What’s wrong?” I hated the hummingbird rhythm of his heart, the constant quiver in his limbs, and the way his fingers dug into my shirt.

Wiggling, Parsnip managed to nuzzle his face into the crook of my neck. His breath warmed my skin.

Seconds slipped into minutes until, finally, his heart slowed and the shivering stopped. I thought I’d have to prompt him again, but Parsnip softly said, “I got a call from Parsley.”

“Is your brother okay?” Fresh waves of worry filled me.

“Parse is fine. He...he had some information about a newly rescued pixie. They think there’s a new pixie trafficking ring in operation.”

The vice squeezing my chest clamped down harder. My arms tightened too. “Tell me about it.”

Parsnip did, or, at least, he told me what was known, which wasn’t as much as I’d hoped. I wished the story ended with the capture of the ringmasters, but it didn’t. I sat there, holding Parsnip as he let it all out. His words were heavy, and I knew they fueled the fear constantly inside him.

“I can’t believe other species would do something like this.” Parsnip sounded forlorn and maybe a little lost. “Why? I mean, as much as I claim otherwise, at least I understand why ogres would do it. It’s a disease, a drug many can’t overcome. But that’s not what’s going on with other species.”

“Greed,” I grumbled. “Greed is a drug all its own.”

A violent shudder rolled through Parsnip. “Peaches and Phil came over to the house last night.”

I wasn’t sure where the change in topic had come from and silently rolled with it.

“I look at them, so full of love and happiness. They’re lucky they don’t know what it’s like—being held captive. Fading. I won’t lie and tell you I’m not jealous of that fact, but more than that, I fear for them. All pixies are in danger. I don’t think... If something like that happens again, there’s no way

I'd last another six months. I wouldn't be able to hang in there. I..." Parsnip's voice trailed off into incoherent babbling.

With overwhelming effort, I pushed down the instant rage. The mere thought of Parsnip held somewhere against his will... It was nearly too much. But my one and only didn't need blind anger. He needed stability and reassurance.

Slipping my hand up Parsnip's leg, a fresh shiver wracked his body, and I could only hope this one was due to the feel of my flesh. When I reached my goal, I let my large palm settle over the charm resting below.

"Listen to me, Parsnip. This"—I pressed down on the charm—"is a guarantee that you will never be alone. No one can ever take you somewhere I can't find you. I'm connected to the charm, and as long as you have it, then I will come for you. I don't care how many ogres or other species stand between us. I will not allow you to be kept again. Do you understand?"

Quick, harsh breaths of puffed, warm air hit my damp skin. Raising his leg, Parsnip pressed into me, rubbing against my hand and thigh. "Promise?"

"Promise. Now and always."

Parsnip's hand snuck its way up my chest, the soft pads of his fingers resting against my neck as he asked, "Why? Why do you care? Why would you make that kind of promise? You hardly know me. You—"

"It's easy to get hung up on the whys of life. But their answers rarely offer the satisfaction you think they will. I like you, Parsnip. And I think you like me too." Like was far too weak of a word, yet I couldn't bring myself to give my feelings more weight.

"I do like you," Parsnip admitted. "I like you more than I should."

"Not possible."

"But you like a lie, Vander. If you knew what I really looked like, you'd—"

“It wouldn’t change a thing, Parsnip. I promise.”

Byx would tell me I was being a fool, offering up so many promises.

“How can you promise something like that?”

“Easily.”

Parship inhaled, sharp and needy. “I don’t understand.” The words were weakly spoken.

“Understanding is often overrated too.” I twisted, the lovely tip of a pointed ear easily coming into range. Taking advantage of its proximity, I licked a long, flat strip up that ear.

The shiver and groan I got in return made the awkward position worth it.

“Feel good?” I asked, already knowing the answer if the firm cock pressing into my thigh was anything to go by.

“So good.”

“Do you want to feel even better?” It was a selfish request wrapped in altruism. I wanted to touch Parsnip. I wanted to feel every part of his body, hold his heavy shaft in the palm of my hand, feel the pulse of blood as it filled him.

Hushed silence lingered in the air until a faint “please?” nearly undid every ounce of self-control.

With a little manipulation and a slight shift in Parsnip’s position on my lap, I slid my hand from his charmed thigh to the thick length of his cock. It was a perfect piece of flesh that fit nicely within my large hand. Proportionate to the pixie, Parsnip’s plump shaft felt like it had been made just for me to hold, to cherish, to worship.

Parship’s breath caught as I stroked my hand up, coating my fingers with his pre-cum. Burying my face in the soft waves of Parsnip’s hair, I inhaled, taking my one and only’s incomparable scent deep into my lungs. Having made his obfuscation charm, I knew Parsnip’s scent was all his own.

“Tell me if I do something you don’t like,” I whispered into a delicately pointed ear. “I only want to give you



pleasure.”

Parsnip panted. “S-so far all...good...oh...so good.” He started squirming, shifting his pert bottom across my lap as he rutted into my hand. I let him move as he wanted, wings fluttering and filling the air with a fine sheen of dust.

“That’s it.” I kept my voice low, tone soft. “Take what you need. Let it all go. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

The sound Parsnip made was somewhere between a moan and gasped sob. His hips moved faster, and he clung to me tighter. If he were stronger, I’d have bruises. As it was, Parsnip mostly had a hold of my shirt. I couldn’t have cared less if he shredded the thing right now.

My own cock rose to the occasion, painfully pressing against my pants. I wanted to shift, to unzip my pants and let myself free. I didn’t. This was about Parsnip’s pleasure, not my own. One day, hopefully soon, it could be about the both of us. But not tonight.

Parsnip wasn’t loud. His moans of pleasure were barely whispered puffs of air I had to strain to hear. That quiet cadence made them all the more precious, and I tucked each and every one away in my memory.

Time passed, yet I had no measure of it. Soon, Parsnip’s rhythm stuttered. Head thrown back, hair falling down his back, and wings stretched wide, Parsnip came with a silent scream. I gently stroked him through his aftershocks, his cock now flaccid within my cream-coated fingers.

Tension ran from Parsnip’s body, leaving him little more than a puddle of loose limbs. Folding his body into mine, he laid his head on my shoulder. Chest to chest, I felt the pitter-patter of his racing heart slow to a languid love song.

Pulling my hand free, I wiped it along the length of my pants. A trip through the washing machine would make them right as rain again. Hand somewhat clean, I wrapped my arms around Parsnip’s body, hugging him tight while I leaned back into my chair.

“Better?” I asked while tracing the edge of a wing.

“Hmm...so much better.” Parsnip yawned the last. Given that his head was tucked up into the crook of my neck, I couldn’t see his face, but I imagined his blissed-out, sleep-filled eyes.

Soft, rumbling laughter rolled through my chest, lightly shaking Parsnip. He didn’t even try to move.

“I think it’s time to put someone to bed,” I said while standing. Parsnip’s weight was next to nothing, making it easy to carry him up the stairs to my bedroom. When we got to the bed, I bent forward, depositing him on top of the covers.

Parsnip stretched, arms high above his head.

“Clothes on or off?” I asked. When Parsnip quizzically eyed me, I held my hands up. “Just to sleep, that’s all.”

In answer, Parsnip started stripping. Some thought pixies didn’t wear underwear. I couldn’t speak to all pixies, but Parsnip had on a pair of dark, aqua-colored silk panties. They were loose and barely qualified as underwear, but Parsnip didn’t seem shy. Given his perfectly toned body, there was no reason he should be.

Slipping under the covers, Parsnip lay on his side, head on a pillow and hair fanned out all around. “You’re coming to bed too, aren’t you?” It was more of a plea than a question.

I still had work to do. My charms wouldn’t magically make themselves, and rent was still due at the end of the month. I should have begged off and gone back downstairs. I didn’t. Instead, I pulled my shirt off, stripped off my soiled pants, and left my black boxer briefs on. My dick was still half hard and would remind me all night long that it deserved some attention. My situation didn’t go unnoticed.

Parsnip’s light, aqua eyes blinked up at me. “Do you want me to—”

“No. Not tonight,” I answered, slipping under the covers beside him.

“You don’t want me to touch you?” Parsnip asked, voice wounded.

“I’d love for you to touch me,” I easily answered, pulling Parsnip into my arms and settling him across my chest. His wings stretched out, covering us both. “But that can wait until next time.”

“Next time?” Parsnip leaned up on an elbow so he could stare down at me. “That’s very confident of you.”

“What can I say? I’m a confident warlock.”

Parsnip’s lips twitched, fighting between irritation and amusement. Lucky for me, amusement won out. “And a very humble one too.”

“Humble has nothing to do with it. I just know what I want and don’t plan on letting it get away.”

With a roll of his eyes and a grin lighting his face, Parsnip flopped back down on me, wrapping his arms around my body while resting his cheek on my chest. My body eased, and the magic constantly surrounding me fell into perfect sync, humming with contentment. My eyelids grew heavy. I wanted to stay awake, to stay in that moment forever. But time always had other ideas and marched ahead despite my wishes. Dawn would come, just as it always did.

My only consolation was that night would follow, and hopefully, I’d find myself in a similar situation, with my one and only tucked in my bed, safe within my arms.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *PARSNIP*

“Lucroy loves the plans,” Peaches pronounced as soon as I opened the car door. Divia was still out of town, leaving me alone with Mike. We’d gotten some good footage. My time in Rutherford Haven was running out. I’d need to come back—to film some shots mid-renovation and then at the end. But soon, I’d be pulled to another project, bouncing back and forth for this season’s round of shows.

“I’m glad,” I honestly answered, opening my arms just in time for Peaches to fly in and give me a hug. Most pixies were touchy-feely, but Peaches seemed to thrive on hugs. I didn’t mind. In fact, it was kind of nice.

Grabbing hold of my wrist, Peaches dragged me to his cottage. “You have to see. They’ve made so much progress. It’s amazing.” Peaches sounded awestruck.

“I think your quick excavation helped a lot.”

“Nonsense.” Peaches waved me off. “That was nothing, and honestly, the trees were happy to help. They know how much I love Lucroy, how much I want him here with me. They want to keep him safe as much as I do.”

I swallowed my doubt. I’d been around King Moony more than once, and those instances had only solidified my opinion that the underground dwelling wasn’t strictly necessary. Whether it was or not wasn’t my business. I wasn’t a nosey pixie. A lot of social pixies were, but that wasn’t me. I respected privacy. I wasn’t sure if I would have felt the same way if my past were different. In the end, it was pointless to

speculate. My past was what it was, and it shaped my present. There was no getting around it.

Sprites lit up the sky here and there. They weren't congregated, but instead, they seemed spread out, zipping here and there through the trees.

Peaches took to the air, and since he still held my wrist, I did too. "They've got all the walls up and the ceiling too. I spoke with the foreman, and he told me that in a couple of days, I can cover the new construction with dirt. With a little encouragement, the foliage will grow over the top in no time. Give it a year or two, and you won't be able to tell anything was done," Peaches proclaimed with pride.

"I've no doubt."

My aqua dust mingled with Peaches's golden hues, mixing together. A handful of sprites flew closer, and two of them broke off, diving for the dust. I tried to pull away, but it was too little, too late.

Peaches kept chattering, oblivious to my horror. I snapped my wings closed, falling to the ground. My shoulder wrenched, Peaches's grip still firm on my wrist. My fall pulled him down too, but not all the way to the ground.

"Parsnip, what's wrong?" Peaches asked, landing beside me, his wings still furiously beating.

My quick actions weren't enough. My dust lingered long enough for one of the sprites to snap it up.

I'd been afraid my charmed dust would taste different, that the sprites would be able to tell something was wrong. Turns out, my fears weren't completely unfounded, just...wrong.

High-pitched twittering and squeals that pierced my ears and were completely uninterpretable lit the air. Zipping through the midst of that racket was a single sprite. Only, this one wasn't lit up like a light bulb. It was a shimmering dot of aqua.

"Oh...oh my." Peaches twisted, finally releasing my wrist. "I..." Gaze flicked my way, Peaches's golden eyes were wide

as he split his attention between me and the strangely colored sprite.

I stood there, feet rooted on the ground as if I were one of Peaches's precious plants. My heart hammered, threatening to pound right out of my chest. I had no idea what to say. Panic swamped me, turning my body into a statue of indecision.

Palm upturned, Peaches held out his hand. The shimmering, aqua-colored sprite landed. It was small, but I could see it turn this way and that, examining itself and its new shimmer.

"I've never seen this happen before." Peaches's eyebrows scrunched, and his lips twisted in concentration. "They've eaten Phil's dust before and none of them have ever turned pink." Sudden dawning hit Peaches, and he twirled, eyes blown wide again and lips parted with realization. "Oh goddess, Parsnip."

This was it. Peaches knew something was *wrong* with me. He knew I was a complete and total fake. Peaches was about to call me out. He was going to tell me to leave his property, to —

"It ate your dust. I'm so sorry." Unshed tears made Peaches's eyes glitter. "I promised they wouldn't do that." He shook his head, cupping the wayward sprite within his hand. "In its defense, I don't think it was really going for your dust. They're so used to eating mine, and we were so close together. Our dust mingled, and I think it was an honest mistake, but still, I promised and... Oh...I don't know what to say beyond I'm sorry. I know you were very adamant they do not eat your dust, and I really did intend to keep my promise and..."

The now-aqua-colored sprite flew up to Peaches's shoulder, nearly hidden in the thickness of his hair. It chittered some, the tone much lower than before. Peaches nodded. "They're very sorry," Peaches apologized for the sprite. "As I thought, it was an honest mistake. They promise it won't happen again."

I stared, unable to believe what I was hearing and seeing. Did Peaches not realize the problem? The sprite had taken on

my color. My *fake* coloring. I blinked, then blinked again. Words were difficult, like they were running through an open field, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't capture a single one.

Finally, I asked, "Is it okay?" I wasn't a fan of sprites, but that didn't mean I wanted to be the cause of one's demise. "I mean"—I swallowed hard—"does it feel okay?"

A quick chitter answered, and Peaches nodded. "They say they feel fine, and again, they apologize."

"It's okay." I licked my dry lips, completely lost as to how this turned into a situation in which Peaches was the one apologizing, hoping I was in a forgiving mood. It was completely ass-backward, and yet I was too much of a coward to correct him. "I can see how it was an honest mistake, but... maybe there needs to be more caution." I waved a hand in the sprite's general direction.

The little sprite flew up, buzzed around Peaches, then flew off to join a congregation of other sprites. Within a matter of seconds, every sprite in the orchard surrounded the aqua-colored one.

"I wonder why it changed their color," Peaches mused. Before I could come up with a lie, he said, "I know so little about them. Traditionally, pixies avoid them, so...maybe this has happened before and we just didn't know about it. Maybe Mattie knows."

"Mattie?" I swallowed down another spike of panic.

"She's the witch that brought them here."

That panic blossomed. "I see." I was afraid Mattie would see too.

Peaches shrugged it off, and when he turned his attention back on me, it was with a big smile stretched across his face. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. They seem fine, and from what I can hear, the other sprites think the change is beautiful. I'll need to have another discussion with them about not eating your dust. I can tell some of them are jealous and want to be aqua-colored too."

“Oh, I-I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. I don’t—”

“No, I understand.”

Peaches really didn’t understand.

“You don’t want them to eat your dust, and myself and the sprites promised that wouldn’t happen. I don’t take my promises lightly.” With hands on his hips, Peaches’s wings fluttered, lifting him off the ground, the tips of his booted feet barely touching the ground.

“Thank you. I appreciate your sincerity.”

Peaches beamed. “You’re very welcome. Now”—he reached down, grasping my wrist again—“let’s go see what they’ve gotten done on Lucroy’s den.”

I let Peaches drag me along. I spared a glance at the gathered sprites, praying to the goddess that they really would be okay. I supposed the color change made sense. I wondered how long it would last. I doubted it was permanent, but I couldn’t say for certain and doubted Vander knew either. It was worth an ask, and I’d do so as soon as I was out of Peaches’s sight. At best guess, I figured they could enjoy their new shade until my current charm faded and a new one was activated.

If there truly weren’t any deleterious consequences and if there were more sprites out there, it might have been a lucrative side business.

It was amazing how badly I wanted to call Vander. And not just call but see him. I’d never felt this way about anyone. If I were honest, it was a little frightening. Vander was quickly becoming a drug I didn’t want to give up. But I would need to give him up. I traveled. In many respects, I was a homeless pixie. I was a wanderer, squatting in one city or another.

That wasn’t the kind of life warlocks preferred. And even if Vander didn’t mind giving up his business to follow me around the world, he had Byx to care for. A brownie that age needed stability. There was no way I could take Vander from her or ask Byx to join in my meanderings.



Chest heavy, I gave Peaches my best, fakest smile. I'd perfected the look long before Jed came into my life. Nearly every social pixie did.

After checking out the progress on Peaches's newest addition, I slid into my car and pulled out my phone. For a second, I hesitated, but in the end, my need won out, and I pulled up Vander's number and hit the send button. It rang five times before going to voicemail. I left a brief message for him to call me.

Disappointed, I thought about calling his business number but figured if Vander didn't answer his phone, then he was probably busy with a customer, and I didn't want to interrupt that, especially when I didn't really need anything important.

My hand drifted to the charm on my hip. It still amazed me how different it felt from Lance's charms. This one was still pleasantly warm against my skin. My headaches had all but disappeared, and I felt energized again. I had an unhealthy urge to call Lance and brag about Vander's abilities, but that was beyond reckless. So far, I hadn't heard another peep from Lance's direction, and it would be stupid to wave a red flag in front of that particular bull.

Starting my rental car, I turned up the heat and lumbered down the gravel path leading away from Peaches's orchard. I knew the moment I passed through his protective boundary. That sense of safe belonging that enveloped me like a blanket disappeared. Peaches considered me a friend, and his bonded land responded in kind.

It was another weight added to my already heavy chest. Would Peaches still feel the same way about me if he knew the truth? I knew the most likely answer and rubbed the pain settling deep within my heart. Days like today made me wonder if my continued deception was truly worth it.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*VANDER*

Fuck, I was tired. I rubbed my temples, trying to push away the headache that seemed to settle in and set up house. I'd yet to find a pain charm that eliminated it completely. The ache had become an unwelcome house guest, and it had company—fatigue.

“You want me to stay and watch the front?” Byx asked, climbing up on her stool and staring at me. There was a note of concern in her voice I didn't like, mostly because I didn't want her to worry. The problem was, she was most likely right to be concerned, and I didn't have it in me to outright lie.

“Nah, I'll be okay.” I offered a half-ass grin, one that used to be a little more carefree.

“That's debatable,” Byx answered, crossing her arms over her chest. She had her dragon hair clips in again today, but they were simply lying there, no puffs of smoke and, thank Gaia, no fire.

“Won't argue that point,” I agreed. “Regardless, I'll be okay. We're only open another hour tops, and you and I both know we don't get much traffic this time of day. I think I can hold out until then.” I offered a weak wink.

Byx rolled her eyes. “You need to take it easy, Van. You've been working too hard. Given how drained Parsnip's charm makes you, that's not a good idea.”

Good idea or not, it was necessary. “Rent will be due sooner than later.”

“Yeah, and it wouldn’t be a problem if you’d charge Parsnip what those charms are worth.” Leaning forward, Byx tapped a finger on my workbench. “Mind you, there’s not enough money to pay for your life force, but that’s just my opinion.”

Typically, it would be mine too. “Money’s not what I want or need from Parsnip.”

Byx blew out a raspberry. “Yeah, I get it, and I...I wouldn’t push it if it meant you didn’t have to work so hard on other things just so we can get by. I think if Parsnip knew, he’d be more than happy to pay you and—”

“And I don’t want him to feel indebted like that.” I didn’t want Parsnip to think I’d worked so hard on his charm simply for money. Besides, it wasn’t like my one and only wasn’t willing to pay me. The cost just hadn’t come up, and I didn’t know how to broach the subject.

No, that wasn’t true. I didn’t *want* to broach it.

“Ugh.” Byx threw up her hands while sliding off her stool. “You are so frustrating, Van. I have no idea how Mamma put up with you for so many years.”

I chuckled. “Neither do I, but given the fact you’re stuck with me, maybe after a decade or two, you’ll figure it out, and you can let me in on the secret too.”

With a huff and a one-finger salute, Byx turned and headed for the stairs. “I’m gonna go study.”

She was halfway up the stairs when I said, “And bank some magic.” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t exactly an order either. One of the first lessons Georgiana taught me was that you didn’t *order* a brownie to do anything.

Byx waved me off. “Yeah, yeah, and bank some magic.”

I had no idea if Byx would do it or not. Sometimes she was too contrary to work in her best interest. Then again, the same could be said for almost all of us.

---

I checked the clock. Less than ten minutes to go, and I could change the sign to CLOSED and wrap up for the evening. I didn't smell anything delicious coming from the kitchen upstairs which probably meant that Byx had done what I'd asked and banked more magic. She was typically tired after doing that and didn't feel up to doing much. Given my current depletion, I understood better than I would have liked.

I laid down the final thread of Parsnip's second charm. I'd weaved this one slightly differently, hoping it wouldn't pull as much on my energy. Time would tell. Parsnip had called and left a message while I was helping a client. I planned on calling him back in a few minutes but wanted to make certain I had plenty of time and wouldn't be interrupted. The chances of a client coming in this late were slim, but it had happened before.

Laying the charm carefully on my workbench, I lifted my arms and stretched, back cracking and neck twisting.

"Damn, that feels good," I whispered with a sigh.

That pleasant sigh easily transferred into a curse when I heard the bells hanging over the store entrance chime.

"Fucking hell," I murmured. "Why tonight?" Pushing off my chair, my legs felt far heavier than they should.

I started for the curtain but slowed. Something didn't feel right. Or, more to the point, I couldn't tell who had just walked through my front door. I should be able to tell. The store was charmed to feed that information to me. The fact that I knew someone was there but couldn't tell their species pinged alarm bells. It could be an innocent situation. Or, well, maybe not innocent, but not bad either. I was a warlock, and others came to me with all kinds of requests. A lot of individuals were in need, and some were in hiding—often with good reason. Charms were a good way to confuse the senses.

Pushing the curtain aside, I stepped behind the desk. My latest customers were on the other side. An odd pair, to be

certain. Looking at the larger of the two, I was beyond glad Parsnip wasn't here.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, head cocked to the side as I studied the smaller, humanoid-looking female and the ogre at her side. I might not be able to sense what she was, but the layered rings, necklaces, haphazard blond hair, and overall air screamed witch.

"Warlock Vander Kines?" she asked, a pleasant smile lifting her lips.

"That's me," I answered.

Exhausted as I was, I took the time to trip my protective shields. I didn't know what she wanted, but instinct told me to be cautious. Witch magic wouldn't be able to get through my shields. Neither would ogre strength.

"Wonderful." Her smile widened, but it didn't reach her light blue eyes. Clapping her hands together, the sound of metal hitting metal pinged through the shop as she craned her neck around the store. "This is a *quaint* little establishment."

I bristled. "It pays the bills."

"Does it?" That disturbing grin never once left her face.

I glanced at the ogre, a female with dilated pupils and a fine sheen of sweat on her brow.

My skin itched, and the ring on my pinkie flared to life. Danger. I just didn't know what kind or what direction it was about to come from. I was glad I'd had the forethought to activate the protective shields surrounding my desk.

"I'm sorry, but it's almost closing time." I attempted to remain congenial. "If there is something I can help you with, please let me know. Otherwise, I'm afraid I need to finish up. I have other work to complete."

"That's a shame." The witch shook her head, tossing her hair from side to side. "I always hated disappointing customers, but sometimes, needs must. Franny." The witch quickly glanced at the ogre, a wave of her hand indicating she should come closer.

I tensed, sensing an impending blow to my shields. I still didn't know what the two of them wanted or why they were here, but I'd been right to think they were up to no good. They were also about to be very disappointed when Franny tried putting a fist through my shields and instead got a nasty backlash for her efforts. The blow would hurt me internally, but I'd take it. I might be tired, but I still had enough energy to hold the charms.

I stared up at the ogre. "You think you can punch through my charms?"

Franny didn't say a word. She just stood there, eyes glazed.

"Oh." The witch laughed, the sound light and airy. "That's so cute that you think I brought Franny here for her muscle." Her laughter died, and a cruel, twisted smirk took its place. "My dear warlock, you, more than anyone, should know you don't bring muscle to a magical fight."

I crossed my arms, ready to be done with whatever this was. "You don't bring a witch to a warlock-charmed stronghold either, Miss...?" Tired of calling her *the witch* in my head, I wanted a name.

Her twisted smirk grew wider. "Letty. Letty Fox. I'm sure you've heard of me."

My eyes flew wide, and anger filled every crevice of my being. "Oh, I've heard a little." I didn't want to stroke this witch's ego. From what little I knew from Parsnip, she lived for that kind of thing.

"So modest," she mocked. "I'm certain Parsnip has told you more than a *little*." Arm raised, Letty twisted her hand, fingers splayed, showing off an array of charmed rings. "And you're correct. You don't bring witch magic to a fight with a warlock." Eyes narrowed, their pale blue sparked with an underlying glow. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen something so malicious. "You bring warlock magic. By the way, Lance sends his regards."

I didn't have time to react, not that I could have managed anything.

Pulling her arm back, Letty punched her fist forward. Visible cracks fractured the shields, and splintering pain lit me up from the inside. Pulling her hand back again, she punched forward a second time, then a third. On the fourth round, my shields shattered, and I collapsed with them. Fire raced through my insides, burning deep and pulling a scream to my lips.

I couldn't remain silent, and my tortured cries brought Byx running down the stairs. I had a moment to note her ashen face and pinched, frightened features before blackness erased her panic from my vision. She might have screamed, but I wasn't sure where mine stopped and hers began.

---

Pain.

All-consuming and draining was the first thing I realized upon waking. It was as if Byx had zapped me with a thousand-megawatt lightning strike. My groan was automatic. I probably should have tried to hold it in and play possum a little longer. It wouldn't have mattered. I wasn't alone, but my company was worse than I could have imagined.

"B-Byx." My voice was scratchy, her name little more than a harsh echo in the damp room. *Basement*, my mind silently supplied.

She didn't answer. While I was on the floor, knees bent and wrists cuffed, Byx was laid out on a nearby couch. The fabric was old, and I could smell the mold from here. What worried me the most was that, as far as I could tell, Byx wasn't restrained. You didn't leave a captured brownie like that unless you were certain they weren't a threat.

"Byx," I tried again, increasingly desperate.

"She can't answer." A large, lumbering figure eased its way out of a dark corner.

I hadn't seen them. I only had eyes for Byx.

"What's wrong with her? What did you do?" I pulled at my cuffs, but they were spelled and fed off the energy I expended, quickly weakening me further. All my rings were gone, as was every charm. Between that and the cuffs around my wrists, I was little more than human, all magic out of reach.

"I didn't do anything," she answered, and now that the ogre had moved a little more into the light, I could see that it was the same one that had been in the store. Franny.

I swallowed, my throat arid and lips chapped. "Then what's wrong with her?"

Franny shrugged as if it weren't that important. "Witch business. Letty was really pleased. She wasn't sure we'd get the brownie too. Letty put something around her neck, made sure she can't get it off and that she can't pop outta here like brownies do."

Air slammed into my chest, my inhale nearly choking me. Dear Gaia, Letty had done something to keep Byx from transporting to safety. "Byx is innocent. She—"

"Ain't no one innocent anymore," Franny argued.

Her fingers fisted before relaxing, and a fine quiver wracked her body now and again. The sweat I'd noticed before was greater now, and even for an ogre, her complexion was splotchy with areas of ocher mixed with forest green.

Dawning hit me. "You're addicted."

Franny sneered, her thick, blunt teeth snapping together like a bass drum. "I'm not," she protested, even though she was clearly lying. I had no idea if she believed the lie or not. "I just like the stuff. I can quit anytime." She grinned, and her bloodshot eyes glinted in the low light. "But why would I want to quit? You don't know what it's like, how good pixie dust makes you feel. And I'll feel that way again soon. Letty promised she'd get me a pixie."

Franny moved closer, and her noxious, roadkill breath nearly stole what was left of mine. "He'll come for you. Letty says he won't be able to stay away, and Letty's always right.



She promised me a pixie,” Franny repeated, her voice filled with anticipation and stripped bare with desire.

“No. Gaia, no.” Every thought scattered, the mere concept too horrid to try to grasp. I’d promised Parsnip I would always come for him, that his charm would lead the way. But this... I’d never imagined this scenario. He had to stay away.

“Franny’s right.”

I couldn’t see past the ogre looming in front of me. I couldn’t see the witch behind that sickly sweet voice.

“Move aside, sweetie,” Letty cooed. “It’s polite to see the one you’re speaking to.”

Franny’s eyes softened, their mania filled with a different kind of obsession—adoration.

“Sorry, Letty,” Franny mumbled as she shifted to the side.

“No harm.” Patting Franny’s large shoulder, Letty filled the empty space.

Witches weren’t like warlocks. They didn’t have a uniform stature. Some were more petite, like Mattie. Some were tall, some lank, some round, and others thin. They came from almost every heritage across the globe and matched that great diversity. Letty Fox was whipcord thin, her dirty blond hair too long for its fine, wispy texture. Her cheeks were high and sharp, her nose narrow, and her lips thin. A line of pale freckles danced across the bridge of her nose—the only color in an otherwise sallow face.

Chains of varying sizes dangled from her neck, her wrists wrapped in just as many bracelets. A ring wound its way around every finger. Unless a witch had a noise-dampening charm, they’d never be able to sneak up on anyone.

I quickly ran my gaze over Letty’s accumulation of charms, looking for anything familiar. I had no idea what she’d done with my confiscated charms, but it was obvious she wasn’t wearing them. I’m not sure why I thought she would. My charms were geared toward warlock magic, not a witch. It would have been difficult for her to wield them. Then again, she’d done just fine with the one Lance had made.

The memory filled me with rage. If I got out of this mess, Lance would be lucky if all I did was turn him into the Magical Usage Council.

“My, my, you are a strapping one, aren’t you?” Letty giggled as if she’d just said something saucy.

I stayed where I was, teeth grinding. If I could kill this witch with the level of hate coming from my eyes, she’d be little more than a smoking pile of ash.

My obvious rage fueled Letty’s pleasure. Hands clapping together, she danced back, the sound of jingling metal echoing in the damp underground. I had no idea how vampires could stand *living* like this.

“I hadn’t expected this to be so much fun.” Letty’s grin nearly split her face, revealing uneven, white teeth. “And the brownie.” Her gaze shifted toward Byx, and panic twisted my gut. “Who would have thought I’d get that kind of bonus?”

“Bonus?” I broke my silence. “How in Gaia’s name do you figure that? Do you have any idea what kind of hell you’ve signed yourself up for?” Brownies were peaceable, but that didn’t mean they were pushovers, and it certainly didn’t mean they took kindly to one of their own being kidnapped.

“Ah yes... Well, they would have to find out first, now wouldn’t they?” Letty winked, twirling away and walking off toward a side table.

Her loose skirt flared out, revealing a familiar ombre aqua pattern. Cream-colored at the top, Letty’s skirt darkened to deep aqua at the bottom. Did she know what she’d done? Did Letty Fox have any idea how deeply her obsession with Parsnip had affected her?

“You think they won’t?” I barely kept the fear from my voice.

Letty shrugged as if it wasn’t important. Ignoring my question, she reached for the table and picked up something I recognized: Byx’s magical storage charm.

“This is a very interesting piece of work.” Letty shifted the small stone this way and that. “Not just warlock casting, but

witch too. And if I'm not mistaken, and let's face it, I'm never wrong"—off to the side, Franny sighed her agreement—"it's filled with brownie magic."

Letty stared at Byx's stone, desire laid bare. The level of sheer want filling her pale blue eyes stole my breath and sped my heart.

"I've never seen anything like it." She licked her lips. "I can feel it pulsing, just out of reach. Imagine what one could do with all this untamed, wild brownie magic." Letty shivered, eyes glazed. "Trust me, warlock, I can imagine a lot."

I swallowed hard, fear taking over my rage as I watched Letty's attention zero in on Byx. "She's still young and so full of power." Letty's eyes slid shut, both hands clasped over Byx's charm. "Tell me, warlock, how do you get it out? How do you use it?"

Several realizations hit me. One, Letty was under the very misguided notion that I was the one benefiting from Byx's brownie magic. Two, she hadn't the slightest clue how she thought I did that. And three, Letty had a bigger ambition than destroying Parsnip. I supposed you could add on a fourth realization, although this one wasn't difficult to figure out.

Letty Fox was batshit crazy.

I sat there, hating that I was on my knees with no way to change my position. I looked like I was kneeling before Letty, and that grated more than the burning in my thighs. I needed to think, needed to push my fears aside and figure a way out of this. I needed to get Byx somewhere safe, and I needed to keep Parsnip as far away from Letty and Franny as possible. I just wished I had a fucking clue how to do that.

"Warlock?" Letty's tone lowered, head tilted and eyes narrowed. "You'll find that my patience is limited, and what there once was of it has been whittled away by that fraud of a pixie who stole my job."

"Your job?"

Letty's lips twisted. "I was supposed to be the host of *Interspecies Habitat*. They were all set to pick me until

Parsnip showed up.” Letty said Parsnip’s name as if she were spitting poison.

For the first time, I chuckled. “That’s not what I heard.”

Letty’s eyes went ice-cold. “You’d listen to a pathetic, lying pixie. And you even know he’s lying.” With a hand gripped around Byx’s charm, Letty strode forward, her long limbs quickly eating up the space between us. “Lance told me everything.” She grinned, triumphant hate gleaming in her eyes. “I know it all. Now, all I need to do is get it on video. I’ll upload the great reveal and prove to everyone that I was right all along. I will destroy Parsnip’s reputation. His fans will hate him for his deception. And even if they don’t hate him for lying, no one will want to watch a gray-colored pixie.”

I didn’t hide my surprise well enough.

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Letty bounced back, all bubbles and joy again. “Lance said you might not. You made Parsnip’s charm, but you don’t even know what you’re covering up.” Throwing her arms out, Letty spun in a circle with her head thrown back, her light laughter cutting like razorblades through my mind.

“You made the charm, but you didn’t truly know. Oh... how deliciously sweet. You’ll see too. You’ll see how bland and boring Parsnip really is. No one wants a dull pixie.” Letty shook her head. “Honestly, I’ll be doing Parsnip a favor, handing him over to Franny. At least he’ll still be wanted. Franny won’t care about his color. The dust should still be just as effective.”

I’d never felt so cold in all my life.

“I get the pixie,” Franny parroted, eager glee evident.

“Of course. I promised, didn’t I?”

Franny nodded so hard I thought her head might tumble off. “You did.”

“And I always follow through with my promises. My last coven found that out. A little too late, but that was on them, not me.” Shrugging, Letty dismissed thoughts of her previous

coven and whatever had happened to them, focusing on Byx's charm again.

“Now, back to this lovely, exquisite, magic-filled masterpiece. Tell me how I release the magic and maybe I'll let you leave this basement alive.”

I had no illusion that Letty Fox would follow through with that dangled carrot. Even if I thought she would, I wouldn't have told her a damn thing beyond “you can't. It's for Byx's use and her use alone. It doesn't do anyone else a damn bit of good.”

That wasn't completely true. Brownie magic was specific to the individual. When Georgiana had been dying due to magical drainage, no other brownie could have cured her. That's why we were banking Byx's magic. However, warlocks and witches weren't magic. We used it. We manipulated and contorted it to fit our needs. In that sense, Byx's stored magic was a gold mine. That's why Letty wanted to break into it so badly. What she didn't know, what I couldn't let her find out, was that Byx was the only one that could do that. She was the only one that could release the magic within for another to use. Theoretically, Mattie and I could activate the charm if Byx wasn't capable, but in that case, the magic could only do one thing—siphon into Byx.

Letty rolled the charmed stone within the palm of her hand. “You don't say.” Fisting the stone, she once again focused on Byx's still unconscious form. “I wonder if your brownie will tell the same story?”

I swallowed down my rising fear. Earlier, I'd prayed to Gaia for Byx to wake up. Now all I wanted her to do was stay unconscious.

“The answer won't change,” I bravely bluffed.

“Hmm...I suppose we'll see. And, for both your sakes, you should hope the answer is different. After all, what good is she to me if I can't suck her magic dry?”

My brain knew it wouldn't work, but my heart roared, and I pulled against my chains, yanking and clanking, grunting

with effort and spitting every useless curse I could think of Letty's way.

Unamused, Letty waved a hand in Franny's direction. A simple "please" was all she said, and once again, Franny loomed before me, her meaty fist drawn back.

Kneeling on that disgustingly damp floor, my final thought before that fist met my head was that I was staring up into Parsnip's worst nightmare, his bad dream morphing into my own.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### *PARSNIP*

I checked my phone again, even though I would have heard it ring. Still no answer from Vander. I wanted to drive to Richmond again tonight. The thought of sleeping alone was too much, but I wasn't sure I should keep barging in on him the way I'd done the past few nights. But at this point, was it still barging? Or did Vander just assume I'd come to him?

I didn't know, so I wanted to speak with Vander before heading in that direction. I'd been struggling with my thoughts and feelings all day. Hell, I'd been struggling with them for a lot longer than that. Was I in love with Vander Kines? I wasn't certain. I'd never been in love with anyone before. Social pixies weren't known to settle down with a single individual. We fed off adoration, and the more, the better. If I were tied down to a single soul, would that change? Would my fans abandon me if I were "off the market"? I wasn't certain, and perhaps what was even scarier was the fact that I was beginning to wonder just how much I cared.

The scales were tipping. Vander made me feel good. He made me feel safe and wanted. Did I really need other, more superficial desires?

Not for the first time, I wished I understood my nature better. My experience with Jed changed me. What I didn't know was if it had truly changed my underlying nature or not. Would I still feel this way if it hadn't been for what I'd gone through?

I didn't know, and there wasn't a manual on social pixie trauma. You'd think there might be, given all the pixies who'd gone through what I had. But there was a stigma surrounding captured pixies. Most of us just wanted to forget what had happened, to move on as if we'd never been caged and kept as a pet to an addicted master.

Sighing, I pulled into my rental home's drive. The once-cozy house looked cold and unwelcoming. Without a doubt, it would have looked bright and cheerful with Vander standing in the doorway. But he wasn't in the doorway. He was miles away in another city.

I stared at my blank phone again, decision made. Whether he expected me or not, I was going to grab a few things and head to Richmond. Vander hadn't turned me away yet. There was no reason to believe tonight would be different.

The evening was even colder than past ones. Pulling my shawl tight around my shoulders, I hustled out of my car and flew to the door. I was pulling my key out when I noticed a light blue envelope taped to the inside of the storm door. My name was scrawled across the front.

Ducking behind the storm door blocked the wind as I snatched up the envelope and tore it open.

I saw the pictures first, my numb finger nearly dropping them. Nearly crumpling in on myself, my forehead hit the inner door, the metal freezing, yet I barely felt it.

Vander.

Byx.

Their names thundered through my head, pounding on my ears and ringing through my skull. They looked bad. Vander was cuffed and looked unconscious. And Byx was just lying there on some dirty, rotten couch.

Hands shaking, I opened the slip of paper tucked inside. It took me at least three tries before I opened it enough to read the print.

*I have something you want, Parsnip. Getting them back will cost you, but I believe you're finally willing to pay the*



*price. You know how this game goes. Their lives are in your hands. Don't be selfish. Come alone. Letty.*

A simple address was written below. I had no idea where it was, but that didn't matter. Letty Fox had Vander and Byx. My body vibrated with fear. I hadn't seen this coming. I hadn't anticipated anything remotely like this. Letty had never threatened anyone but me. If she had, I would have tracked her down, spent every last dime I had to take her out.

Rage, hot and lava-thick, spread from my core. How dare she? I silently seethed my anger without an outlet.

Though my fingers shook, I managed to get into the house. Taking flight, I paced back and forth, trying to think of what to do. It wasn't easy, and my thoughts ran like wildfire through my mind. I couldn't risk Vander and Byx, but at the same time, I couldn't be foolish enough not to alert someone what was going on.

Grabbing my phone, I typed a quick message, saved it, and set it on a timer. If I wasn't back to stop it within two hours, the message would upload to both Divia and Solen. I sent the address I was headed to and snapped a copy of the letter and pictures Letty left for me. I added a quick note to Solen's message, informing him of the chip implanted in my back. Worst-case scenario, I could be tracked.

I would try to solve this myself. I had no idea what I could do. I was just a pixie. We didn't have offensive powers. We could play good defense, but social pixies weren't known for that art. We didn't have anything to protect. No home, no land...just ourselves, and our goddess hadn't deemed that enough to form much of a protective barrier around.

I didn't care. I was armed with fury and need. Maybe they wouldn't be enough, but I'd work them to the best of my ability. I would not let Vander, and certainly not Byx, suffer for Letty's madness, for her obsession.

Grabbing my phone and thicker shawl, I programmed the address into my phone and headed for my car. I set my phone in the cup holder and allowed its uncaring voice to tell me how far I'd be on certain roads and where to turn. The directions

led me out of Rutherford Haven proper. I vaguely realized I was headed in the opposite direction of Peaches's orchard, but beyond that didn't have a clue.

I passed a number of cars, their lights a brief flash that I barely contemplated. My heart hammered, and my hands clenched the steering wheel. The directional app led me into a run-down neighborhood filled with homes that had seen better, more fruitful days. The house I ended my journey at looked like a carbon copy of the ones to its right and left, each missing more than a few windows, rotting boards covering otherwise gaping holes in an attempt to keep out the elements and riffraff. Their mission was a lost cause the moment the nails were hammered home.

The streets were empty. Only a single streetlight was still operating, and even it flickered like it might go out any second.

The night was frigid, but the weather had nothing on the ice flowing through my veins. I stared up at the ominous house. I wasn't much for horror movies, but I thought this one would fit right in. Leave it to Letty to choose something like this.

"No imagination," I muttered, the wind catching my words and carrying them away. This was the perfect example of why Letty wasn't chosen as the host of *Interspecies Habitat*. "Could you get any more cliché?"

When you didn't have a lot of physical strength, you had to use every advantage you could find. In this case, I chose haughty indignation and wrapped it around my shoulders like a second cloak.

Head held high, shoulders back, and wings rapidly beating, I left my car on the street and flew toward the front door. At least this house still had its front door, unlike the one to its right that was a piece of failing plywood.

My aqua-colored dust was nearly invisible, its brilliant color lost in a sea of darkness. I didn't bother knocking. I pushed the unlocked door open. It was just as dark inside. I

wasn't sure if the house still had electricity or not. If it did, no one had bothered to leave any welcoming lights on for me.

"Letty," I yelled.

There was no reason to hide my entrance. I honestly didn't know how powerful of a witch Letty was. Even the weakest ones should have felt my approach. Besides, I wasn't exactly trying to sneak in.

Silence met my ears. I flew a little farther into the house, peeking around doorways but not committing to going inside. "Letty!" I raised my voice even higher, more pissed than afraid. Old wood framing creaked, but nothing more happened. I glanced down at my phone, checking to make certain I had the correct address. Everything looked right.

"Goddess damn you, Letty. I'm fucking here, so—"

Laughter echoed through the house, and it was impossible to tell exactly what direction it came from.

I fought down my reflexive shiver, shoring up my bravado. "Is that supposed to frighten me?"

"No." Letty sounded amused. "I expect the fear will come later." I didn't get a chance to ask exactly what she meant. "If you want to see your warlock and brownie again, follow the lights."

"Follow the lights? Have you looked around? It's pitch-black and—"

The lights lining the stairwell lit just the faintest hint of a warm glow.

I gritted my teeth. Letty was playing a game, and right now, she held all the cards. I was little more than a ridiculous character led around an uncaring board. I wanted nothing more than to walk back out that front door, but I didn't. I flew forward, up the stairs. When I got to the top landing, another light lit along the right, leading to a door toward the end of a short hallway. A dim glow barely shone from under the room's door.

After cautiously going toward it, I grasped the knob. The metal felt warmer than it should. Not hot, but definitely not cold. Inhaling deeply and praying that I'd walk back out that door, whole and with Vander and Byx at my side, I turned the knob.

Blinding, white light instantly consumed me. I slammed my eyelids closed against the searing pain. My body twisted toward the light's center until a loud *pop* rattled my eardrums. Pressure filled my chest, pulling my body inward before throwing it back into place. The experience was nauseating, and when the searing white light dimmed, I found myself on my knees, vomiting all over a faded rug.

Sweat beaded across my skin, dampening my hair. The nausea continued swirling, making me queasy and unable to stand. I felt like I'd been placed in a Tilt-A-Whirl and spun at top speed for far too long.

"Pleasant, Parsnip. I should have expected such a graceless entry. Amazing how you never fail to lower my expectations further."

I knew that voice. I *hated* that voice. I'd heard it on Letty's podcasts, on her website, and during the hearing for the restraining order. Anyone that confidently cocky needed to be thrown back down to earth. I just hoped I was strong enough to stomp Letty Fox into the ground.

"L-Letty." I spat out a disgusting, bile-laced glob of saliva. I couldn't give two shits about whatever floor I'd just expelled my guts on. Hopefully it was something Letty was fond of. "If you don't like my manners, then maybe you should stay the fuck away from me."

Letty's sigh rang through my ears as I pushed into a standing position. I couldn't have maintained it if my wings hadn't helped steady me. I wanted to take in my surroundings but was still too dizzy to let my gaze wander too much. What I could see didn't exactly make sense. It wasn't at all what I'd expected when I'd walked into that dilapidated house.

First off, the room was warm. I could feel it now that my stomach had turned itself inside out and my nausea slowly

faded. A warm fire crackled in a fireplace to my left. The scent of my vomit wafted up to me, nearly undoing the uneasy calm settling my stomach.

My feet rested on a soft rug. It looked old and haggard but clean except for the addition of my stomach contents. An equally faded sofa sat near the fireplace, with a desk along the wall behind it.

The witchy bane of my existence sat perched on the corner of said desk, one hand braced and holding her weight while the other swirled a glass of umber-looking fluid. I had no idea what Letty was drinking and didn't want to stick around long enough to find out.

"Where's Vander and Byx." It wasn't so much a question as an order.

Letty grinned, sipping her strange drink. "Now, now. Patience is a virtue, Parsnip. One that I've had to endure for far too long. I believe you can muster a little now. You at least owe me that."

"I don't owe you a damn thing." I crossed my arms, wings beating enough to lift me off the carpet.

Letty's mouth pinched. "You do. And tonight, you'll pay up." Letty set her glass down on the desk, but she didn't stand.

I shouldn't have felt warm. The house I'd walked into was ice-cold. Windows had been boarded up, and there hadn't been any evidence of heat. The place had been abandoned. It... *Shit*... I could only blame my slow uptake on the dizzying trip through whatever portal Letty had set up.

The room was warm because I wasn't in that ghost-town house. As soon as my hand turned that doorknob, it activated a spell—a translocation spell. Not all witches were capable of them. In fact, most weren't. It took a fair amount of magical manipulation, and they weren't pleasant to travel through. My nearby vomit more than proved that point. They also typically only had enough juice to work once.

My newfound warmth seeped from my marrow. My backup plan, the message I had typed out and scheduled to

send to Divia and Solen, was useless. They were both out of town, but they'd call and get someone out to the address I'd sent them. And when they got there, they'd find...nothing. Abso-fucking-lutely nothing at all.

Depending on who showed up, they might be able to sense the magical signature, but they wouldn't be able to trace the portal. I had no idea where I was, and neither would they. I'd walked into Letty's trap. The only thing I had going for me was the tracking chip. I could only hope and pray my little trip through Letty's portal hadn't fried the thing. Electronics and magic didn't always mix well.

A slow, lazy smile worked its way across Letty's face, pulling her already thin lips even tighter. "Just figure it out?"

"Where are we?" I asked. I could have feigned ignorance, but that was pointless.

"Oh"—Letty's gaze traveled around the room—"here and there. The physical address isn't really that important, at least not to you."

My fingers clamped down into tight fists. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to cry, not in front of this tormentor. She didn't deserve a molecule of salt. My mind swirled. I'd foolishly hoped I could get Vander, Byx, and myself out of this mess. I had no idea how I thought I'd manage that, but I'd been confident I'd think of something. Worst-case scenario, Divia and Solen would send someone to our rescue. My secret be damned. My colors, fans, and television show were unimportant compared to Vander's and Byx's lives.

But now, I was stuck. No one was coming to the rescue. I couldn't even rely on my tracking chip. It was well and truly up to me, and the only thing I had to bargain with was...me.

Head up, I stared Letty in the eyes. "I'm here. Let Vander and Byx go. They've got nothing to do with the stupid vendetta you have against me."

"True," Letty agreeably answered. "But all the same, I don't think I'll let them go just yet."

My heart pounded, and I started to protest, but Letty said, “You see, I made a promise to your previous warlock, Lance, that I’d take care of Vander Kines for him. It was the deal I struck in order to get all that juicy information about all the little secrets you’ve been hiding.” Letty grabbed her drink again, taking a deep swallow. “You know, it’s an exquisite feeling, finding out you’ve been right. I can’t imagine what it will feel like when I prove to the world that what I’ve been saying all along, what I’ve been posting and blogging about, is an absolute fact. That you, not me, are the disingenuous one.”

My heart pounded, and my head felt like it might explode. Vander could not be collateral damage in this. I’d never survive that. And even if I didn’t survive this night, I needed Vander to be okay. He was... I loved him. I hadn’t fully understood my feelings until the threat of losing him loomed over my head. The thought of Letty harming him...it was unthinkable.

“At least I’m not insane,” I stupidly countered. “Even if you succeed and post my true appearance, even if the whole world knows I lied and you’re the one who exposed it, you’re still breaking fairy law. You came within the restricted space. You violated the restraining order.”

“Ah, ah, ah...” Letty wagged her finger at me. “I didn’t break the agreement. *You* did. You came to me, Parsnip. I was just casually sitting in my office, having a drink, when you came into my home.”

“Do you honestly think anyone will buy that bullshit?”

“Doesn’t matter. You are, in fact, in my home. I didn’t forcefully drag you in here. Fairy law can’t do shit to me.”

“And what about kidnapping a warlock and a brownie? You think that’s going to go over well with fairy law?”

Letty shrugged. “What fairies don’t know about can’t hurt me, and I don’t intend for them to ever find out about your little warlock lover and his brownie.”

My breath came too quickly, sucking in and out yet not allowing oxygen to flow to all the important places. “There

was no reason to involve Byx in this.”

“I’ll admit, that wasn’t part of the original plan, but then she came running down the stairs, intent on saving your warlock.” Letty shook her head. “You know, I probably wouldn’t have gone after her if she’d stayed upstairs in her bedroom.” Letty’s eyes went large and round. “But do you know what I found? She still had it clasped in her hand.” Reaching behind her, Letty pulled up a stone I didn’t recognize.

“A stone? They’re all over Vander’s shop.”

“Oh, it’s not just any stone.” Letty held it within the palm of her hand, gaze worshipful. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. It’s thrumming with her energy, her magic. It feels heavenly.”

“I…” I thought back on my conversations with Vander. He’d told me about Georgiana’s sickness, about how he wasn’t about to take that risk with Byx. He hadn’t told me directly what he’d done to try to intervene, but I was beginning to get an idea.

“It’s packed full, and yet I think it could hold more. The amount might be infinite,” Letty said with awe. “Just imagine what a witch could do with all that magic.”

Bile crept up my throat again. I didn’t want to imagine all the damage a witch like Letty could do. “It’s not meant for you,” I stated, feeling foolish but needing to say the words out loud. “That’s Byx’s magic. It doesn’t belong to anyone but her.”

“And that’s fair?” Letty snapped. “Why do brownies and fairies get all the magic?”

Now I was just confused. “They don’t. All species but humans have magic or have access to it.” I’d decided long ago that Letty was insane, but this was beyond what I expected from her. Vampires had death magic. Weres had shifter magic. Pixies were granted the magic of bonding. The list went on and on. Some weren’t as clear-cut as others, but except for humans, magic flowed in or through all of us.



Letty's grip on Byx's stone tightened. "We're nothing compared to brownies and fairies. They took the largest piece of the pie and left the rest of us with scraps."

I had no idea what to say to that. I certainly had never felt like my pixie birthright was little more than leftover magical scraps. I was proud of what and who I was. Even if that was little more than a gray-colored social pixie.

Vander was right. Every species had rotten apples, and Letty Fox stank with disease. She'd twisted her abilities into something vile, using her goddess-given abilities to harm rather than help. She was the worst of her species.

"You're a selfish witch," I accused. "And that's the kindest thing I can say about you." I pointed at the charm in Letty's hand. "You'd condemn a young brownie, just coming into the prime of her life, to satisfy your own selfish goals. What the goddess blessed you with is more than enough."

"It wasn't enough for you," Letty spat. "You weren't satisfied with the colors she gave you. You've lied to everyone for vanity's sake alone."

"Like hell!" My wings beat faster than ever, lifting me off the floor and showering the room in aqua pixie dust. "This is the color the goddess made me. All I wanted was to be what I was before I faded. I'm not trying to be something I'm not. I'm trying to be who I was. That is not what you're trying to do. Do not compare the two of us."

"Always so damn superior." Letty sneered, Byx's charm still held tightly in her hand. At this rate, I didn't think she'd ever let it go. I wasn't sure what she thought it could do for her. If she'd been able to access the power, she would have done so already.

"If we're comparing me to you, then you're damn right." I crossed my arms over my chest, feet dangling. Only now did I realize I'd lost my pixie boots. I wasn't sure why they hadn't crossed the portal with me and didn't know if they were still at that abandoned house or lost in the magical ether that brought me to this hellhole. If things went as badly as I suspected they

might, I'd probably never need them again. For some reason, that didn't matter. My mind became fixated on their loss.

With her lips pulled back, Letty looked damn near feral. For a minute, I thought she might literally pounce on me. I would have dealt with that better. Tense, I was prepared for a physical attack. What I wasn't prepared for was the wicked grin that lit up Letty's face.

"I wonder just how superior you'll feel when you see what's through that door and down the stairs. Shall we head in that direction and find out?"

Dread filled me. There was far too much satisfaction in Letty's tone, her words too laced with anticipation.

"Vander and Byx are waiting for you," Letty teased when I hesitated. "Don't tell me you came all this way, did all that posturing just to chicken out now."

I didn't fly toward that door because Letty baited me. I turned that doorknob because there was no other choice. If there was one thing Letty was right about, it was that I'd come for Vander and Byx. I wasn't foolish enough to think leaving was a true option, and even if it had been, I wouldn't have taken it. There was no way Letty was letting me leave her finely crafted web without satisfying her cruel need for retribution. It didn't matter that her reasons didn't make sense, that they were completely unfounded. When you're insane, reason doesn't apply. A thousand others could be in the room and all tell you the same thing, but you wouldn't believe them. That voice in your head, the one convincing you you're right, won't let you believe. That's the crux of mental illness.

Unlike the last doorknob I touched, this one was frigid. My fingers shook as I wrapped them around the metal. It squeaked and moaned, but the latch gave way. A decently lit stairway went down, digging into the depths of the earth.

"A basement. How original," I said with more bravado than I felt.

"A fitting place for filth."

I bristled at that. Letty could think all the foul thoughts she wanted about me, but Vander and Byx didn't deserve that level of disdain.

“Go on.” Letty didn't magically or physically nudge me. She could have if she'd wanted. I was a helpless child against her magical casting. There were laws against using magic in that way, but I doubted Letty gave a shit about something as mundane as the law. The fact she'd kidnapped a warlock and brownie shouted that loud and clear.

Hovering just above the steps, I cautiously flew down, afraid of what I'd find. The images she'd already sent me of Vander and Byx were seared into my brain. I didn't know what I'd do if I got to the bottom of those stairs and found them... Goddess, I couldn't even finish that thought. They had to be okay. Nothing in me was willing to accept anything less.

The basement wasn't as well-lit as the stairway, and it took my eyes a few seconds to adjust. Blinking, I could finally see well enough to get a decent view. My breath caught. Vander was on his knees, head bent and shoulders hunched. His wrists were shackled in front of him, and a huge, swollen knot was on the side of his head. Dried blood trickled down from a cut that ran the length of the knot.

“Vander,” I gasped, the word barely able to get through my clogged throat.

Vander groaned something I couldn't understand.

Without thought, I took off toward him, pixie dust scattering behind me.

I didn't even get halfway there.

My body froze, wings instantly slamming closed and body dropping to the floor. I landed harder than I should have, yet I barely registered the pain that lanced through my feet and legs. Eyes wide, I stared, unable to accept what was before me.

Fear slammed into me. My mouth opened wide, a scream ready and willing but unable to form, lost in the abject terror racing through me. Blackness crept through the edges of my

vision, and darkness was all I saw, all I knew. Before that light completely flickered away, I heard the ogre's frustrated growl.

And then I fell through a deep pit of horror.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

VANDER

*No!*

My brain shouted, but my mouth was cotton dry, that singular word stuck in my throat. I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. Franny's fist was like a battering ram my head hadn't been able to stand against. I wasn't certain, but I thought it only took one good punch and she'd knocked me out cold. Waking up to this nightmare, I wouldn't have minded staying oblivious.

"Parsnip," Byx whined, proving she was awake and experiencing the same bad dream as me. Voice small, Byx whispered Parsnip's name again.

"It's not right!" Franny screamed, pulling at her hair. Three strides took her across the room, only to repeat the motion again and again. "It didn't do anything." She sounded desperate. "You promised me a pixie, Letty. You promised!"

My head swam, but I could still make out the fact Letty didn't appear fearful.

"Calm down, Franny. It's probably just the charm. Once it's removed, his dust will be just fine."

"But..." Franny wanted to stare at Letty, but she couldn't take her gaze off Parsnip.

I wanted to rip her covetous eyes from her head.

"Soon," Letty dismissed Franny's concerns. Instead, she busied herself around the room, setting up a litany of cameras. "I don't intend to miss a thing. I want every angle covered."

Letty gleefully went from one corner of the room to another, stepping around Parsnip's folded body. One wing looked bent at an unnatural angle, not that Letty cared.

"Van." Byx sounded like she could drink a gallon of water and it wouldn't be enough.

I knew the feeling well.

My gaze snapped from Parsnip to Byx, making me a little dizzy. I gave it a fifty-fifty chance that I had a concussion. When the three Byx swimming in my vision finally morphed into a single figure, my stomach settled.

I didn't know what to say, how to reassure Byx that I'd figure a way out of this mess. I desperately wanted to say something, anything that would ease her fear. But I had nothing. Byx was too smart to be cajoled by meaningless lies.

I knew the instant she realized just how screwed we were. Byx's eyes widened, their shimmering brown glistening in the artificial light. Her mouth thinned, and her facial muscles tightened. Still lying on that disgusting couch, Byx managed to get an elbow below her, lifting her upper half a little. She looked exhausted, and I could see the beginnings of an ugly bruise on her chin, but other than that, she appeared relatively unharmed. Unfortunately, I didn't trust that situation to hold true.

"Finally wake up, dear?" Letty stopped setting up her cameras long enough to focus on Byx. "You were asleep a long time."

Byx's lips twisted into a sneer. "Yeah? I guess getting clocked in the jaw will do that."

Letty tsked and replied, "Needs must."

Byx rolled her eyes, completely unimpressed. I knew the minute Byx tried to teleport. The realization she couldn't made her shiver, her hand immediately going to the band around her neck.

"We'll talk later." Letty held up Byx's charmed stone, twisting it in the light.

Byx's eyes impossibly widened, the whites of her eyes far too prevalent.

"It's amazing. I've never felt anything so powerful and yet packed into something so small. I can't wait to get a taste, and despite what the warlock says, I think you know just how to make that happen."

Byx shot me a worried look, licking her dry lips. I tried to convey that she needed to keep her mouth shut. Thankfully, Byx picked up on my silent plea.

Turning her back, Letty started shuffling around the room again, checking the angles of her cameras, absently talking as she did so. "Your future is up to you, brownie. I can be gentle, or I can be merciless. The choice is yours. You can willingly allow me to siphon your magic or you can fight me. Either way, I win."

"Siphon my magic?" Byx was a mix between horrified and mystified. "That's not even possible."

"Oh, I assure you, it's completely possible." Letty stopped what she was doing and gave me a chiding glare. "Didn't you teach her anything?"

"Her mother and I taught Byx a lot. We just never thought she'd need to worry about someone as psycho as you."

Letty momentarily stiffened before her shoulders rolled, forcefully relaxing her body. "You know, my last coven said something similar. They couldn't understand what I had to offer."

*Oh, they understood, all right.*

"We were a small group, but we could have been so much more. They couldn't see that. Elise couldn't see it. Coven leaders should be wiser than that. They should look out for the good of the whole and not just themselves. She knew I was powerful, and Elise was afraid of that power. Everyone was. Instead of embracing what I could do, they shunned me. Even when I removed Elise—"

"Murdered her," I corrected.

*“Removed,”* Letty insisted, “they still wouldn’t name me coven leader. And now look at them, scattered to the wind, stuck in inferior, static covens with absolutely no goals, no ambition. That’s the problem with the covens. None of them sees the future. None of them sees just what we could be, what we could do.”

My head ached, making it difficult to think. Parsnip was still crumpled, unmoving on the floor. I could make out the rise and fall of his chest, but that was all. Franny hadn’t taken her drug-obsessed eyes off him but was keeping her distance. I had the nauseating fear that if his dust hadn’t been charmed and had the same effect pixie dust typically had, she would have scooped him up, Letty’s protests be damned, and barreled headlong up the stairs.

“And you think fairies would let you get away with that?” Byx huffed. “You really are a whack job.”

Letty turned on Byx, her face flushed with anger. “Fairies only rule because brownies allowed it, because they wouldn’t join the rest of the species and fight for what is rightfully ours.” Pointing a heated finger Byx’s way, Letty growled, “And that is on you and all your kin. You could be so much more too, but you sit by, passively agreeing to everything they say.”

Pushing herself straighter took obvious effort, but Byx managed it. “That’s because we like living in a world with order and without violence. That’s because fairies made a hell of a lot more sense than you’re capable of making.”

With a hiss, Letty held out her hand, index finger writing an air sigil I didn’t recognize. Slamming her hand into it, half of Letty’s rings lit up right before Byx screamed, clutching her chest as she doubled over.

The flow of magic ran like a river from Byx’s body and into Letty. It hadn’t been common before fairy law, probably because brownies weren’t easily captured, but ghost stories were told of a time when witches and warlocks would drain brownies dry, leaving a husk behind.



“Stop!” I managed to scream. The word kept coming, repeating on an endless loop as I desperately yanked against my chains. “You’re killing her!”

Letty closed her hand, squeezing it into a tight fist. “You’re right. She’s not strong enough yet for me to pull that much out. Wouldn’t want to drain you too quickly.” Spinning, Letty hummed, swishing her hips and making her skirt dance. “Now, I think this camera needs to be raised a little higher. That’s assuming we can get Parsnip up.” Letty sighed as if she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Spinning around the room, she checked every corner, making certain everything was to her specifications.

“The lighting could be better.” Letty sighed again. “The setting too, but I suppose it will do. Now, to wake up the star of our show.”

Just like Byx, Letty didn’t bother restraining Parsnip. Pixies weren’t known for their strength, and she had enough magical energy to keep him where she wanted. Letty proved that when she wove a spell around Parsnip’s body, raising him off the floor. The wing caught under his body didn’t snap back into place. It folded and twisted at an unusual angle.

Franny’s eagle eye caught on. “What’s wrong with his wing?” She circled Parsnip’s magically hanging body, fretting over the bent wing. “He can’t produce dust if he can’t use his wing.”

“He just needs the one,” Letty reassured, tone clearly losing patience. “It will be fine.”

Franny didn’t seem completely reassured. Regardless, she stepped back. “But he’s mine, right? When you’re all done, I get him?”

“Yes, yes. Just as I promised.”

Franny appeared appeased and took two large steps back, just out of the camera frame.

Stepping up to Parsnip, Letty placed her fingers under his chin, jerking it. “Time to wake up, pretty Parsnip.” When he didn’t stir, Letty slapped his face. “Wakey, wakey.”

My heart bled at the pained whimper that finally exited Parsnip's lips.

"That's better."

Stepping back, Letty waved Franny back a little farther—out of Parsnip's immediate visual field. She was probably concerned he'd pass out again if he saw the ogre.

Parsnip's eyes blinked. He had a few seconds of blissful confusion before reality slammed into him. Eyes flying wide, Parsnip's wings tried to beat. The magical hold Letty had him in didn't allow for much movement, just enough to prove that one of his wings was well and truly damaged and in pain.

"Nice to have you back with us, pretty pixie."

"Letty, what—"

"Ah, ah, ah." She waved a finger in front of Parsnip's face. "This is my show, and I'll ask the questions."

Parsnip's mouth slammed closed. Suspended, he managed to turn his head enough that he caught sight of Byx. She was slumped back on the couch. I didn't think she was unconscious again, but she was still in a lot of pain and struggling. When he turned his gaze on me, I felt the heavy weight of my failure. Those piercing, aqua eyes didn't hold an ounce of judgment. There was no accusation, just a well of grief and...love.

It was plain to see. Unguarded and unapologetic. Parsnip loved me. I'd been in love with him for days but hadn't been certain of his feelings. What a shitty time to discover my one and only's affection.

Turning her back on Parsnip, Letty smoothed down her wispy hair and tugged on her dress in an attempt to be as camera ready as possible.

With a flick of her finger, the lights on all the cameras came on, the whirl of electronics filling the dank basement.

"Greetings, viewers. Today is an auspicious day. I have with me, Parsnip, host of the television show *Interspecies Habitat*. As you all know, for the past few years, I've been posting information and photos exposing Parsnip's blatant

deception regarding his appearance. Today, the depth of that deception will be revealed. I've no doubt that once they view this recording, *Interspecies Habitat* will have a new host." Letty placed a hand on her chest. "Yours truly."

Even if Parsnip was fired after this, there was no way the show's producers would hire Letty. It was what happened with her coven all over again, and Letty was too far gone to see it.

"Now, Parsnip, perhaps you'd be so kind as to let my viewers know just what kind of charmed life you've been leading."

Parsonip looked like he was going to be sick, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*PARSNIP*

This couldn't be happening. It was what my brain had on repeat, and yet no matter how many times it said that useless mantra, nothing changed. The truth was, this *was* happening. I didn't know if Letty was live streaming or not. In the end, it didn't really matter.

Letty didn't seem deterred by my silence.

“What, nothing to say? How disappointing. I've heard that unburdening yourself of past lies is freeing. Not that I would know.” Letty's grin was cruel.

Turning back to the camera, Letty gushed, “You see, viewers, I was recently contacted by Parsnip's previous warlock. It seems that he's been spending much of his ill-gotten gains on obfuscation charms. Now, what in the world do you think our pretty pixie is trying to hide? Care to share with the audience, Parsnip?”

I clamped my mouth shut. I had no intention of giving Letty what she wanted. Not because I was still trying to save my reputation but because she didn't deserve to know. It wasn't her business. It was mine. Letty was a cruel, murderous witch. She didn't deserve to win.

My body vibrated with fear. Not just of Letty, but of the ogre I remembered. It was too much to hope that it had simply been a figment of my imagination. Maybe I didn't see her right now, but there had been an ogre here, and knowing Letty, she had plans for that ogre. Plans that involved me.

Terror threatened to consume me. This nightmare was worse than any my brain had managed to conjure since my captivity. If it were simply my life at stake, I would have caved to that fear. I would have allowed it to swallow me whole. I would have sunk into that deep, dark oblivion and lost myself to all hope.

But it wasn't just my life on the line. Vander and Byx had gotten caught up in this clusterfuck, and they deserved better.

Evidently tired of my reluctance, Letty placed her hands on her hips and huffed. "Well, I suppose it would have been surprising if you'd simply admitted it." Tapping a finger to her lower lip, her gaze traveled between Vander and Byx. "Hmm...I wonder which one will get you talking the fastest?"

My heart thudded. "Leave them alone, Letty. Vander and Byx are innocent. They—"

"Oh, pretty pixie, it's cute how you think *anyone* in this world is innocent." As if to prove her point, Letty walked toward Byx. She started writing something in the air.

Vander exploded, yanking on his chains, screaming at Letty.

My fear skyrocketed. I had no idea what she was about to do, but Vander did, and he was desperate to stop it.

With glowing rings, Letty slammed her hand into that spot in the air. Within half a second, Byx screamed, shredding my heart.

I watched in horror, impotent to do anything to stop whatever Letty was doing. My screaming joined Vander's, yet our calls to stop did nothing.

Finally, Letty fisted her hand, ending Byx's pain.

Byx slumped, unconscious.

Letty lowered and shook her head. "I don't think she'll live through another draining. What do you think, warlock?"

"You fucking witch!"

I'd never heard Vander yell and scream. His anger was always low, a rumbling pot set below-boiling point. He was always so calm and thoughtful. That Vander was gone, replaced by desperation.

"Sticks and stones, warlock," Letty sang. "Sticks and stones."

Vander gasped, pulling in lungful's of air that nearly made him choke. "You... If you hurt her anymore, I'll—"

"Do nothing," Letty gleefully jeered. "There's absolutely nothing you can do. But Parsnip can." Letty sauntered my way, swinging her anemic hips and making her swishing skirt a mockery of my colors. "Parship, do you really want to watch me drain the brownie? I really do think one more time will do it. Not that it's my preference, mind you. Considering no one is willing to tell me how to crack open that little nugget of magical perfection she's locked away, it would be nice to keep her around a little longer. Everyone needs a magical boost now and again." Letty shrugged as if she weren't talking about enslaving and magically draining a sentient being.

"Wh-what do you want from me?" Pride be damned, I couldn't watch that happen again. My capitulation wouldn't truly save Byx, but it would buy time, and right now, that was all I could do.

"That's more like it." Letty bopped me on the nose. I tried to recoil from her touch, but whatever magic she'd wrapped me in wouldn't allow that much movement. "What I want, pretty pixie, is for you to tell the viewers out there, in your own voice, exactly how you've been deceiving them. I want them to know that you got your position as host of *Interspecies Habitat* by lying, and then, I want you to show them what you truly are."

I swallowed. Hard. I'd been so afraid of this very moment happening, but now that it was here, admitting the truth was the least frightening thing in the room. New, fresher horrors easily took the place of my vanity.

"Fine." I steadied my voice. If I was doing this, I didn't want to sound meek. I wanted to sound confident. I was a

social pixie, and we did not cower. “Letty Fox is correct. I’ve been using an obfuscation charm to hide what my current, true color is.”

Letty’s grin started out slow and grew until it stretched from ear to ear. “How interesting. And where, exactly, have you hidden this charm?”

I thrust my chin up, moving my head as much as her casting allowed. “Right thigh.” And just in case Letty was stupid enough to live stream this, I was going to throw Lance under every tire of every damn bus in the known world. “Warlock Vander Kines did an amazing job. Far better than my previous warlock, Lance Billings. Lance’s charms were little more than second-rate to what Vander did for me.”

Letty’s eyebrow raised, but otherwise, she said nothing. I didn’t think she cared much about what happened to Lance. As long as she didn’t out him, she’d technically keep her promise. I had no such qualms.

“Parsnip.” Vander’s soft voice pulled my gaze to him. “I’m so sorry,” he needlessly apologized.

“Not your fault,” I reassured. “This is all on me.”

“No, it’s not. I—”

“Enough.” Eager to expose all my dirty secrets, Letty pushed up my loose pants, easily finding the concealed charm. Her fingers felt disgusting against my skin, yet I refused to so much as shiver.

Nothing was protecting the charm from removal. I’d planned to discuss it with Vander—something to add to future charms. We hadn’t had the time to discover what could or couldn’t be done, and Letty easily released the leather cord holding the charm against my flesh.

I knew the second the stone was no longer in contact. The warmth that had become a constant, soothing presence dissipated, leaving me colder than before. I couldn’t see the change. No mirrors were hanging in Letty’s dungeon. The look on her face was all I needed to know that I’d reverted to little more than shades of gray.

An odd look crossed her face, something between disappointment, frustration, and anger. The joy I expected was absent.

“Where are the others?” she demanded.

“There are no others. That was the only one.”

“It can’t be.” With a wave of her hand, she said, “There must be more. This is... There simply has to be more.”

“There isn’t,” I honestly protested. “I’m a washed-out, faded pixie. No pixie is just shades of gray. Silver, yes. Gray, no. I was born aqua, and that’s what I wanted to be again. I simply wanted to get back to how the goddess made me. I told you that before. It’s not my fault you’re too stubborn to believe me. Pixies aren’t supposed to be...this.”

I couldn’t look at Vander. I didn’t want to see the abject disappointment when he saw what I truly looked like. I didn’t want to see the judgment or the want slip away.

“Beautiful.”

My eyes flew wide, and I tried to turn my head but couldn’t. The best I could do was shift slightly, just enough to make eye contact with Vander.

I’d been afraid of what I’d see. I shouldn’t have been.

Love. Undying, unyielding, precious love.

“You are absolutely beautiful, Parsnip,” Vander said again, awe filling his voice. “That’s what Letty can’t believe, why she thinks there must be something else you’re trying to cover. She can’t accept that you’re just as stunning even without a charm. The joke’s on her.”

Letty fisted my charm. Since it wasn’t meant for her, it did nothing. It might as well have been a dead rock for all the good it did her.

“You still lied,” Letty shrieked. “You’ve been fooling your viewers, your fans, for years. Everyone talks about what a beautifully colored pixie you are, but it’s not true. You’re nothing but a fraud.”



“That may be, and I’m sorry if I truly offended anyone. But that’s for them to decide, not you. You’ve gotten what you wanted. You’ve got the truth. You can crow until the cows come home about how right you were, about how no one believed you and I’m the villain. I don’t really give a shit what happens to me. Keeping Vander, and especially Byx, makes you far worse than anything I’ve ever done.”

“Will his dust work now?”

Even without Letty’s magic, my body would have frozen. The ogre from earlier stepped out of the shadows, out of my periphery and into the light. She was just as huge and horrifying as the first time I’d seen her. My breathing became rapid-fire, barely filling my lungs.

Whatever disappointment Letty suffered fled when she saw the ogre. “It should work just fine now, Franny. And, just as promised, it’s all yours.”

I was painfully familiar with the glazed look that took over Franny’s eyes. It was the same one I’d seen in Jed a hundred times over. It was the look of someone addicted.

In that moment, I realized Letty’s plan. She was going to let the ogre, Franny, have me. And, even if Vander did somehow make it out of here alive, Letty had my charm. If my tracking chip had been fried too, Vander would never find me. I’d be left to fade. The only consolation would be that it shouldn’t take long. I’d lasted six months the last time. I didn’t figure I’d make it six weeks.

With a wave of her hand, Letty released the magical spell holding me captive. I fell back to the floor. My wings reflexively tried to beat, but one of them was damaged, and it hurt like hell. I snapped them shut, landing on the cold floor with a thud.

“Fly,” Franny ordered. “Make pixie dust.”

My good wing twitched just enough to scatter a bare hint of dust. Franny leaned in and inhaled, eyes rolling to the back of her head, facial muscles relaxing.

“So good. More,” she demanded.

“I...I can’t. My wing’s damaged.” It wasn’t even close to a lie.

Franny wasn’t having it. She grabbed my shoulders and shook me. Hard.

“Make more!”

“I can’t,” I yelled back.

Letting loose a wail that shook the ceiling, Franny stomped toward Vander, her meaty fist pulled back. “You’ll make more or I’ll beat him.”

Horrified, I looked to Letty, but she was no longer paying us a bit of attention. She’d gotten what she wanted. She had the evidence she’d been after for so long. I didn’t think it made her nearly as happy as she thought it would. Regardless, she’d already moved on to a new target—Byx.

After scooping her up and off the couch, Byx’s limp body hung from Letty’s uncaring arms.

“Do with them what you want,” Letty said. “They’re both yours.”

Franny’s grin was full of ocher peg-like teeth. Staring at me, arm pulled back and ready to let fly, Franny demanded again, “Make dust. Now.”

I did the only thing I could. I gritted my teeth against the pain and moved my wings. It was agony, and I couldn’t keep the pain from my face. But it was worth it. Franny dropped her arm and leaned in, inhaling as much of my dust as she could.

Vander gazed at me, my pain reflected in his beautiful hazel eyes.

“Enough, Parsnip,” Vander whispered, voice barely audible. “It’s enough.”

I shook my head, tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. “No. I can’t let her hurt you. Not anymore.”

“She won’t,” Vander reassured me, even though I had no idea how he planned to stop her.

Despite his plea, I kept my wings going. I'd do it until I passed out. I wasn't sure how long I could keep us both alive, but I'd do everything I could to buy just a few more precious seconds to look into those adoring eyes.

And then those eyelids slid closed, and Vander took a large inhale. His next words were spoken loudly and resonated with authority.

"I, Warlock Vander Kines, break my fairy-made oath of secrecy. Parsnip came into my shop and asked me to make an obfuscation charm. I agreed never to repeat this fact out loud. I break my oath," he repeated.

My wings dropped, and fresh fear dug its ugly claws into my chest. It was one thing to admit that I'd asked Vander to make me a charm. My secrecy was never an aspect of the pact.

His was the binding tie.

It was a tie he'd just cleanly snipped.

It was a tie that would ultimately break him apart too.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*VANDER*

It was humbling to realize how utterly helpless you were. I'd been born a warlock, and I'd worked hard to gain skill throughout my life. I'd practiced and trained, honing my abilities into something I thought could always protect me and the ones I loved.

And yet, here I was, kneeling on a filth-covered floor, freezing and body pounding in pain as I watched those I loved being tortured and toyed with. Given Franny's plans, death was the kindest thing Parsnip could hope for. And Byx...I couldn't even contemplate the pain she'd suffer at the hands of Letty.

It was time to end this, and if the cost was my eventual life, then so be it. There was only one way out, one way to stop Letty and Franny. That one way required a sacrifice—one I was more than willing to give. My warlock abilities.

I'd broken my oath, and there was only one punishment. I would no longer be a practicing warlock. My DNA wouldn't change, but my abilities to control magic would be irrevocably removed. I'd be a shell of what I was, dying and wasting away to nothing. If Parsnip and I were officially bound, I might take him with me. But we weren't. Parsnip didn't even know he was my one and only. I'd kept it a secret. I wanted him to love me for me, not because of a fated pull.

And he did love me. It was enough. It was more than many warlocks got in their long lives.

“What did you say?” With Byx still in her arms, Letty crossed the basement, standing next to a drugged-out Franny. “What did you just say?!” Panic filled her.

I’d take that with me too, that moment of utter satisfaction.

“You heard me, and more importantly, the fairy court did too.”

And how exactly did I know that?

It might have been the fairy standing behind Letty Fox.

The fairy she was totally unaware of.

“No, you don’t get to—”

“Warlock Vander Kines, you have broken your oath.” Fairies always sounded calm, their speech often devoid of inflection. This one was no different.

Despite Letty’s height, this fairy stood at least a head taller. Her hair gleamed silver, and a few lavender highlights pulled behind her pointed ears. She was dressed in a matching lavender pencil skirt and cream blouse. Her feet were adorned by two-inch heels. She was immaculately cool.

Letty spun. Byx, still unconscious, flopped unceremoniously in her arms.

The fairy followed the movement, dark eyes sharp and calculating. Those eyes drifted to Byx and narrowed significantly. Her expression didn’t improve when she took in Parsnip’s collapsed body, kneeling close to me on the floor, one wing bent at an odd angle. Franny was leaning against the wall, lost in a drugged-out haze.

Letty didn’t wait for the fairy to speak. She started weaving her lie immediately. “Thank the goddess you’re here. These two held me captive. Me and the brownie.” Letty lifted her arms just a little, highlighting Byx. “I just managed to get away, but I was afraid they’d follow. Now that you’re here, you can take them into custody.”

The fairy’s gaze raked over Letty again before settling on me. “Interesting, since he is the one in chains, and you are free.”

“I...I just barely managed to get them on him. He...”  
Letty’s tale ran out of steam.

“And the wound to his head, his stripped charms, and obvious dehydration.” Moving a hand in Parsnip’s direction, she added, “And this damaged pixie?”

Letty’s shoulder snapped back as she gathered her indignation around her. It was nearly impossible for Letty to hide her obvious fairy disgust. “You can’t prove anything. The warlock is the one who broke his oath. Strip him and be gone.”

I chuckled, low and raspy. “Fairies aren’t that stupid, Letty.”

“Besides, there *is* proof,” Parsnip added. “She filmed it all. Or live streamed it. I’m not sure which. Either way, there will be a record. Once something is on the internet, it can never be fully removed.”

Parsnip was right, and the irony was beyond fitting. Letty’s desire to be adored and followed by millions would be her ultimate undoing.

Letty shifted, pulling Byx tighter. Byx didn’t even twitch. I could see the sluggish rise and fall of her chest, and her head dangerously lolled across Letty’s arm.

“Byx.” I pulled against my chains, no more successful this time than the last time.

Parsnip wasn’t chained. He was exhausted, and I was afraid his wing was broken.

On shaky legs, he managed to stand. For every step he took toward Letty, she retreated two. I’d seen a lot of different expressions on my one and only’s face. I’d never seen that level of sheer rage.

“Release her,” Parsnip demanded. “She’s not yours, and you’ve already done enough damage to her.”

Letty gripped Byx tighter. “She’s not yours either.”

“No. If she belongs to anyone, it’s Vander. Byx’s mother left him legal guardian.”

The fairy moved, shifting ever so slightly, weight on the balls of her feet. I had no idea what this fairy had been before fairy law was enacted. Considering she'd answered the call of my broken oath, I could only imagine she'd been some type of soldier or enforcer. Her current stance reinforced that theory.

“What has happened to this brownie?” the fairy asked.

“Nothing,” Letty snapped. “Just an accident. I was on my way to take her to a healer.”

“Liar.” Parsnip’s hands fisted. “You drained her. You stole her magic. I don’t know how you did it, but I know that’s what you did.”

“That’s a serious charge.” The fairy’s tone didn’t so much as raise an octave. “Draining another of magic against their will is forbidden.”

If there was one species fairies were very wary of, it was brownies. As I’d told Letty, fairies weren’t idiots. They knew just how powerful brownies were, what a clusterfuck it would be if their nature weren’t as docile as it was. It was in every species’ best interest, especially fairies, to keep brownies happy. Capturing and draining one of their own was not conducive to that plan.

“Gently lay the brownie on the couch,” the fairy ordered.

Letty had other ideas.

“She’s mine. Franny,” Letty hollered for the ogre, but Franny was still lost in a drug-filled haze.

She grinned and seemed focused on a spot of what appeared to be empty air. I had no idea what Franny thought she saw, only that she was lost to whatever was truly going on around her. It was sad to see what pixie dust addiction did to ogres.

“I don’t believe your ogre friend is currently available.” The fairy held her arms out, palms open. A faint lavender glow began forming.

“Don’t hurt her,” I shouted and then amended, “Don’t hurt Byx.” I couldn’t care less what she did to Letty.

“The brownie will be safe,” she assured.

Frustration tightened Letty’s features.

“Give her up, Letty,” Parsnip pleaded. “You’ve got what you want, and you and I both know that if you hurt Byx anymore, it’ll go far worse for you.”

Letty’s lips twisted, a malicious grin firmly back in place. Her eyes sparkled with something that struck me as crazy, and I tensed.

“You’ll have to catch us first.” Head thrown back, Letty said the words to a spell, her rapid-fire speech too fast for me to follow. Half a dozen rings and at least that many of her necklaces lit up, flashing so bright I struggled to keep my eyes open. The air thickened, becoming oppressive as Letty’s magic rent the atmospheric space directly behind her.

“Gaia, no!”

She was making a portal. It took a lot of magical energy for a witch or a warlock to create something like that. I doubted she would have had enough juice if she hadn’t stolen it from Byx. If Letty stepped through, she could go anywhere. We’d never find her.

Letty’s laugh pierced my eardrums and rattled through my chest like pneumonia. My eyes flew wide, the side of my face Franny recently pummeled pounding and limiting how well I could see.

The fairy stood there and did...nothing. Panic consumed me, ratcheting up when Parsnip leaped forward, intent on stopping Letty from leaving with Byx.

Her horrid grin still in place, Letty took a step back. I expected her body to disappear, sucked through the portal. My heart thundered, and I braced myself for the worst. But as Letty stepped back, nothing happened. Well, that wasn’t completely true. It’s just that what happened wasn’t what she’d expected. It wasn’t what I’d expected either.

Letty took a step back and got...stuck. The atmospheric rent morphed around her body, trapping her and holding Letty still.



“What?” The strain on Letty’s face was obvious. She was funneling power into her spell, draining the magic she had access to, and it was all for nothing. She couldn’t move. Letty couldn’t go forward, and she couldn’t go back. I had no idea where the back half of her body was. All I knew was that the front half, the part that held Byx, was still here in this room.

Our fairy *friend* closed the distance. “Your parlor tricks are no match for true magic.” The disgust in her voice was the first change in cadence I’d noticed. “Release the brownie.”

I wasn’t sure if Letty released Byx of her own volition. Regardless, the fairy gently pulled Byx from Letty’s grasp, cradling her with far more care than Letty had shown. Turning her back on Letty, the fairy carried Byx back to the couch, softly depositing her. Palm covering Byx’s heart, she closed her eyes.

Those lavender eyes opened a few seconds later, and her face paled. “This brownie is near death. She is severely magically depleted.”

Parsnip whimpered, and I sucked in a heated breath. “Release me. I can help.”

The fairy turned, eyes slightly narrowed.

“He’s not lying.” Parsnip stumbled toward Letty, who still had Byx’s charmed stone tightly wrapped in her hand.

“If you don’t give it up, I’ll chop off your damn arm to get it,” Parsnip warned.

I had no idea how he planned on doing that, but I also didn’t doubt he’d find a way.

Evidently, Letty didn’t doubt him either and reluctantly opened her palm just enough for Parsnip to pry the stone free.

With a noticeable limp, Parsnip made his way to the couch, his traumatized gaze flashing Franny’s way at least twice.

“It’s full of her magic,” Parsnip said, handing the stone to the fairy. The slightly raised eyebrows were the only indication that she realized what it was.

“You can activate this?” the fairy asked.

“I can. Byx can too when she’s conscious. We worked it so that I’d be able to activate it if she couldn’t. A witch named Matilda can activate it too.”

Mattie wasn’t here, so I was all that was left.

“Very well. Release.”

The chains around my wrists released, clanking to the floor. The skin below was bloody and bruised, but that was a future worry. Right now, I had a brownie to save. Struggling to stand, pins and needles pierced my lower legs and feet, the blood circulation having been diminished too long as I’d remained kneeling.

I fell once, and when I pushed to get back up, Parsnip was there, hauling my body up and supporting as much of my weight as he could. Somehow, between the two of us, we managed to get to the couch.

Gracefully standing, the fairy moved aside, and I took her place. Byx was cold, her skin too light and ashy. Her eyelids didn’t so much as flutter, and her heart rate was painfully slow.

“What can I do?” Parsnip asked, hovering near Byx’s head. His wing was too damaged for him to fly, and his bare feet were left on the frigid stone.

“You’re already doing it.” I offered a weak smile and pushed as much love as I could into my eyes.

For the first time since he’d walked into this hellhole, Parsnip’s muscles eased, and the faint grin he offered in return said everything I needed to hear.

Pulling my gaze from Parsnip, I focused on Byx. “Hey, sweetie. Time to wake up and join the party. You’re missing all the fun.” While I spoke, I wove threads of magic together, combining them until they perfectly fit the spell. It was intricate work, but I’d practiced this spellcraft until I could do it blindfolded and only semi-conscious.

“Vander’s right.” Parsnip leaned down, running his petite fingers through Byx’s dark brown hair. “Letty’s stuck in the in-between. She’s really pissed. You’ll be sorry you missed that.”

I chuckled. I didn't know if Parsnip realized just how right he was. With a final weave, I activated the spell. The charm lay on Byx's chest against her bare skin. The pull of magic stole my breath and nearly doubled me over, but it wasn't anything I hadn't expected or braced myself against.

The stone lit up, its golden glow soft and warm. Lines of magic seeped from it, spiderwebbing across Byx's skin, sinking deep into her flesh. Those lines raced through her body, lighting up every cell, finally calling home to her central core—to Byx's soul.

"Interesting," our fairy understated.

Byx's skin warmed, deep browns returning, replacing the sickly ash color. Byx's eyes flickered beneath her eyelids, and a groan left her throat. She'd be in pain when she woke, but she'd wake. That was the important part. Bruises healed. Magical depletion often didn't.

"Hey, kiddo. Time to stop snoozing and join the rest of us." My fingers joined Parsnip's running through Byx's hair.

Her dragon hair clips were still barely hanging on. They started moving, stretching, and blinking, waking as Byx did.

"V-Van?" Her throat sounded raw, and the grimace pulling at Byx's lips made me want to strangle Letty Fox with my bare hands.

"Hey. You awake?" Relief came so swiftly, it left me lightheaded.

"Yeah. I think."

"Can you sit up?" Parsnip asked, chewing on his bottom lip.

"Maybe?"

"I'll help," Parsnip offered, reaching behind Byx's shoulders and lifting her. The charm slid from Byx's chest, landing in her lap. Those brown eyes impossibly widened as realization dawned.

"You had to use it?" Byx asked, searching my eyes for the truth.

“I did. Letty drained you too much, and we were afraid that...” I couldn’t finish, couldn’t even contemplate the fear that had taken control of my mind and heart.

Tears welled up in Byx’s eyes, dripping down her cheeks in endless rivers. Her small hand reached out, skimming over the knot Franny had left on my head.

“Oh, Van.” Byx didn’t say anything else. Instead, she launched herself off the couch, plowing into my chest, arms wrapped around and holding me in a vice grip. I could barely hear anything else over her sobs.

“It’s okay now, Byx. I promise.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that, Van. It hurt sooo bad. Is Letty dead? I want her dead.”

I shivered. I’d never heard Byx say anything like that before. The truly sad and frightening thing was just how much she meant it.

“She’d not dead,” Parsnip answered, “but soon, I’ll bet she wishes she were.”

“The pixie isn’t wrong,” our fairy finally spoke again. “I can think of several species who will demand retribution. The ogres will be angered that she encouraged and provided someone with addiction access to pixie dust. The brownies will demand she be stripped of her abilities because she has more than shown a willingness to do harm with what her goddess gave her.”

“Don’t forget the witches,” Parsnip said.

“Fair bet is she murdered her previous coven leader,” I added.

“Indeed.” The fairy arched a single, silvery-lavender eyebrow. “That is a harsh charge, warlock.”

“It is, and what’s worse is that it’s true. If necessary, you can contact Mattie. She’s part of the local coven and can handle things with Letty Fox.”

“I will take your suggestion into consideration.”

“Great, now can we—”

Franny groaned and pushed herself up, standing and weaving slightly. Her eyes were glazed, skin clammy, and body trembling as she came down from her high. Those haunted, unfocused eyes lit up when she saw Parsnip.

“Pretty pixie.” Franny lunged.

Parsnip froze.

Our fairy went into immediate action. With a single tap on Franny’s forehead and the command, “Sleep,” Franny went down, crumpling into a snoring ogre-sized lump.

With a hand clasped over his heart, Parsnip’s wide gaze stared at the sleeping ogre. “H-how... How l-long...”

“How long will she sleep?” the fairy thankfully surmised.

Parsnip nodded.

“Long enough” was the only response we got.

“Okay. Can we get out of here now? I don’t want to be here when she wakes and—”

“Understandable. However, there is still the matter of the warlock and his broken oath.” The fairy calmly turned to me.

“Van?” Byx’s voice quivered. “What did you do?”

“No, no, no.” Parsnip jumped from the edge of the couch, leaning heavily on his left leg, his damaged wing hanging to the side. “I release Vander Kines from his oath.” Parsnip’s chin went up, head held high, and voice filled with arrogant authority.

“The oath was taken and bound by fairy law. It is not yours to rescind.” My judge made it sound like we were discussing the cold snap clinging to the area.

“Not mine?” Parsnip’s tone went up an octave. “Of course it is. I’m the one that made him take it.”

“You are, but the oath was not bound to you by law.” She turned to me. “No matter the circumstances, you broke your oath. The punishment is clear.”

“Van, what were you thinking?” This time, Byx’s tears were far from relieved. Her fists slammed into my chest, and I grabbed her wrists.

“Hey, none of that. I’m beat up enough, and you don’t have enough energy to waste on zapping me.”

Byx looked up, those large, brown eyes pleading. “You can’t do this, Van. You can’t let her take your warlock abilities. It’s not right, and you’ll...”

“I know.” I ran my hands through Byx’s hair, fingers finding her tipped ears and tracing their edge. “But I don’t regret it. Breaking my oath was the only way to save you and Parsnip. I wouldn’t go back and change a thing.”

Parsnip’s hushed “no” drew my gaze to him. “You can’t. Not for me.”

With Byx cradled in my arms, I couldn’t take my eyes off Parsnip. “Of course for you. I love you, Parsnip. My one and only.”

## Chapter Thirty

*PARSNIP*

*“I love you, Parsnip. My one and only.”*

My breath got stuck in my throat. Obviously, I wasn't a warlock, but I knew what that term meant. I was...I was Vander's. He didn't care about my colors. Vander didn't care that I was little more than a pale imitation of what a social pixie should be. He didn't care that I'd soon be jobless and most likely shunned. None of that mattered to Vander Kines.

I'd done the impossible. I'd fallen in love and found someone equally in love with me. And now, I was about to lose him.

Stripping a warlock of their abilities was tantamount to a death sentence. Vander wouldn't die today, but he wouldn't live as long as he should. Not even close.

“Your one and only?” the heartless fairy asked. “Have you bonded?”

Vander's lost eyes bored into me, and he reluctantly answered, “We haven't.”

“Then what happens to you will not negatively affect the pixie.”

*Wait, what? Of course it would negatively affect me.*

My heart pounded, my breath uneven and too quick. I felt dizzy. I'd thought we were safe, that we'd finally end this nightmare and go back to Vander's. We'd contract a brownie healer, and my wing would be right as rain. All three of us would heal. We'd come through the other side of this, and

Letty would spend the rest of what was left of her life regretting her choices. Or, more likely, plotting her revenge.

But now, all of that was moot. This fairy was going to strip Vander of his warlock abilities. The situation surrounding his oath-breaking didn't matter. My wishes didn't matter. Only the strict letter of the law.

Rage, hot and demanding, poured into me, filling up all my crevices and pushing away the cold. Pixies weren't powerful. We weren't feared. I was no match for Letty Fox, let alone a fairy, and that pissed me off. I should be able to protect Vander. This whole mess was my fault. If I'd never walked through the door of Warlock Wishes, he'd never be in this situation. Byx wouldn't have been nearly killed, and...I never would have met Vander.

Goddess, I loved him. A million adoring fans couldn't hold a candle to what one Vander Kines meant to me. The rest of the world could rot. They could laugh at me, shun or ridicule me. As long as I had Vander, none of that mattered.

And I was about to lose him.

"No." The word started out small, barely audible, even to my own ears. But with each repetition, it grew louder until it became a shout.

The fairy ignored me.

Byx was too frightened for Vander to care.

Vander gazed at me with forgiving love.

Letty Fox didn't matter. The ogre sleeping in the corner didn't matter.

Only one thing did.

The glow emanating from the fairy's hands changed from lavender to magenta, burning with intent. She raised her hands, aiming them at Vander's center, at the source of his warlock abilities. A final "no!" screeched through my lips, and something inside me snapped.

No, that wasn't quite right. It wasn't a snap as in a break. It was a heaving outward, stretching until it consumed and



surrounded Vander, snapping into place when it found its home, weaving into the very fabric of his being.

Strings of fairy magic raced toward him, but they didn't get very far. Those streams of magic bounced away just as a swell of water dissipated when it hit a wall.

The magenta-colored strands briefly flared, and more magic fed into their tendrils. And still, nothing.

The fairy dropped her arms, and I moved around her, standing next to Vander, with Byx still firmly held within his arms. Vander's hazel eyes shone with surprise, one of them partially swollen shut.

"Parsnip?"

I ignored Vander's hushed question, facing off with the fairy who'd attempted to steal what equated to Vander's soul.

"He's mine," I stated, sounding a lot like Letty a few minutes ago when she'd falsely claimed Byx. "You heard him. I'm his one and only."

The fairy's head slid to the side, shifting her hair. "But you are not bound."

"Maybe not by warlock ritual, but I'm a social pixie, and I claim Vander Kines. He is mine, and you cannot have him." Shoulders back, I desperately wished I had my colors back. My claim would be far more impressive if I looked like a pixie. I couldn't even use my wings, but that didn't matter. Nothing on the outside did. I was a pixie deep in my core, and nothing could change that. Not a gray color palette or a damaged wing.

She blinked, expression neutral. "Interesting."

Vander reached out, grasping my wrist and holding tight. "She's not touching you," I boldly claimed. "I won't let her."

She pulled a cell phone from a back pocket without saying another word. "I have a situation" were the only words spoken before the air shifted again, a single line torn through the atmosphere.

A fairy with crimson hair walked through that singular tear.

Vander's hand clenched around my wrist to the point of pain.

I didn't flinch.

"Anna, what seems to be the problem?"

"Ray," she answered, a slight tilt of her head showing that Ray was above her in authority.

Ray's gaze traveled the room, taking in the sleeping ogre and Letty's body still hanging in limbo. She'd exhausted herself, head hanging and lank hair draped around her shoulders, hiding her features. Finally, his burning gaze settled on Byx, Vander, and me.

A crimson eyebrow raised. "This certainly appears interesting. Warlock Kines, what situation have you dragged Anna into?"

Quick and efficient, the fairy I now knew as Anna gave Ray the rundown. I would have taken a lot longer and added in a lot more profanity and adjectives to describe what happened, but I didn't interrupt, and neither did Vander or Byx.

When she was finished, Ray moved closer, and I stiffened. Hands clasped behind his back, Ray closed his eyes and inhaled. I didn't think he was scenting anything in particular, more that he was centering himself, focusing on the magic surrounding Vander.

A slow, barely there smile tilted his lips before he opened his eyes. "I see the problem. Calling me was the correct action, Anna. You may go, and I will resolve this problem. Please take the witch with you. I will contact a local ogre rehabilitation service. I'm certain they will be able to care for Franny properly."

"As you wish, Hellfire Rayburn." Anna used Ray's full name before she walked to Letty.

Byx shifted to her knees, staring daggers in Letty's direction. The dragon hair clips she wore spewed smoke,

roaring their anger.

Ray stared on with what appeared to be a rare expression of amusement.

I wondered exactly how Anna intended to handle Letty. With a firm grip on Letty's chest, Anna pushed, and they both slid through the atmospheric rent. I gasped, but Ray appeared unfazed, so I hoped that's what was supposed to happen.

I tensed as Ray's attention focused back on the three of us. I needn't have worried.

"Fairy law is clear on matters such as these. Pixie bonds are sacred and not to be broken. It is rare for a social pixie to form a bond, but not impossible. Parsnip has chosen you, Warlock Kines. No living creature has the right to attempt to break that bond. To do so would be a death sentence to Parsnip, and since he is not at fault and has not broken fairy law, it would be unjust to injure him. I would suggest completing the bond from Vander's warlock nature. A double bond would provide even more protection for the both of you."

Byx squealed, throwing her arms around Vander's shoulders, all previous pain temporarily forgotten. Vander hugged her back, but he slumped while doing so. None of us were very hale and hearty at the moment.

Hands still clasped behind his back, Ray took another step closer. "There are other punishments I could enact, and I would be justified in doing so. Punishments that would not affect your life span or affect your pixie bond negatively."

Vander and I tensed while Byx held her breath.

"However, I find this situation fortuitous and believe we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement."

I moved closer to Vander, wrapping my arm around his shoulders, needing the contact.

Fairies didn't strike deals often. They didn't need to.

"What can I do for you?" Vander asked, voice steadier than mine would have been.

“At the moment, you can rest and heal. As for the future... There is an alpha werewolf that is becoming increasingly tiresome.”

Vander nodded. “Arie Belview.”

“Hmm.” Ray’s gaze slipped to the side. “It is odd, but I’ve developed a...fondness for a few local individuals, and Alpha Belview seems to have an unnatural fixation on these same individuals.”

“I haven’t been approached since I turned down that beta wolf. I would have let you know if I had.”

“I believe you. And I suspect we will need to go to him, not the other way around.”

Vander gave a slow nod. “Okay. I don’t see a problem with that. I’d like to nail that fucker too.”

“That is good to hear. Second—”

“There’s more?” Byx asked, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Unfortunately,” Ray answered, and I truly believed he meant that. “It seems there is a bit of a...situation that our fairy queen has asked for my assistance with.”

*Shit.* I audibly gulped. The fairy queen was as much myth as fact. No one had seen her since fairy law had come into power and they’d basically taken over running the Earth. Some wondered if she was still alive, and speculation ran rampant regarding her seclusion. And here I was, standing next to a fairy that had direct contact with her.

“Yes?” Vander prompted.

I didn’t know if he was already agreeing or simply trying to get more information from Ray.

“It is a delicate matter, one that will require strict confidence and a talented warlock.”

Vander gave a slow nod. “I’m sure you could find a more talented warlock than me. I’m not saying that to put myself down or dodge the issue, just stating the truth.”

“And that is appreciated. However, I believe you’ll do.”

Vander and I shared an equally confused glance.

“We’ll discuss the issue further once you’ve healed. Time is an issue, but currently, it is not a pressing matter.”

“Okay,” Vander agreed, despite knowing precious few details.

“Excellent. Now”—Ray’s gaze swept the room again—“I have a few calls to make. The first of which will be seeing if we can get you three out of this foul-smelling room and back into the world. Do you require a hospital or do you wish me to contact a healer?”

Vander looked at me. “Is your wing broken?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so, just damaged. A talented healer should be fine.”

“Good. I don’t want to drag you to a hospital if we don’t have to. Given enough time, I should be able to make your charm again. You’ll be back to your old self soon, and if Letty didn’t live stream what happened today, then no one needs to know.”

I ran my hand down the undamaged side of Vander’s face. “You know. I don’t think I care anymore.” When his eyes flew wide, I shrugged. “This is me. It’s the me I am now, and I’m not ashamed anymore. As long as you don’t mind...as long as you still love me, then my colors don’t matter.”

Vander’s warm grin and adoring eyes filled my heart, and my chest swelled to near bursting. “You are the loveliest creature I have ever laid eyes upon. In here”—Vander poked a finger over my heart—“and the packaging that incredible soul is wrapped within is perfect—no matter the color.”

“He’s right,” Byx readily agreed. “It may not be how you were born, but the gray tones are really sophisticated and accent the hint of aqua.”

“Thank you, I... Wait, all my aqua faded during my capture.”

Byx cocked her head to the side. “Not all of it. Or if it did, then some of the color came back.”

I frantically pulled my hair over my shoulder, skimming my fingers through the shades of gray, only to discover that Byx was right. There wasn't much of it, just enough strands to stand out.

"Oh." My breath caught, and tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. Blinking away the moisture, I asked, "Is this your doing, Vander?" I wasn't sure how it could be, but I didn't have another explanation.

"Not me. That's all you."

"Oh." I sucked in another breath, throat catching and ending in an inelegant coughing fit.

"There's some aqua on your wings too," Byx said, a soft smile and playful joy lighting up her deep brown eyes.

I tried twisting but couldn't manage it, and moving my damaged wing too much hurt. I'd have to wait until I had a mirror to get a better look.

"Transportation is on the way, courtesy of King Moony," Ray's smooth voice interrupted my surreal moment.

"How far away?" Vander asked. "Because honestly, I have no idea where we are."

"Ditto," I agreed. "This isn't the house Letty gave me directions to. That was simply the address of the portal she'd rigged." I couldn't help my self-loathing, having fallen for the rouse. "I didn't think she was powerful enough to do something like that." I glared at the empty space Letty had tried to create another portal through, trying to steal Byx and haul her off to goddess-knew-where.

Ray's eyes narrowed. "Given today's events, I very much doubt Letty Fox's abilities were completely her own. It is painfully obvious she had no qualms obtaining power, no matter the consequences or the law."

Vander, Byx, and I remained silent, our agreement evident.

The silence stretched, interrupted by Franny's gentle snores. I didn't envy her when she woke. She'd have to go through detox, and from what I understood, it wasn't pleasant.

“She took all my charms,” Vander suddenly said. Staring down at his naked fingers, I realized he was correct. “I don’t care about most. They can be remade, but there was one that Byx’s mother, Georgiana, made for me. It can’t be replaced.” Vander rubbed one of his fingers.

“The crimson mood stone?” I asked.

Vander blinked, and Byx started laughing. “Mood stone.” Fresh, happy tears slipped from Byx’s eyes. “Oh, Mamma would have loved that.”

“It’s not a mood stone?” I felt silly, but I wasn’t a witch or warlock. There was no earthly reason I should have known what it was.

“Your ride’s here,” Ray pronounced, and I realized we never had gotten around to finding out where we were. As if he could read my mind, Ray offered, “You’re closer to Warlock Kines’s home. I would suggest heading there.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” Byx hopped off the dirty couch. It was ironic that she now had more energy than Vander and me combined.

“We’ll search the area thoroughly, and if we can’t find your belongings here, then it will be my pleasure to personally interrogate Witch Fox,” Ray offered with a near-feral grin, one that showed off his pointed teeth.

“Thank you, Ray.” Vander stood and held out his hand. Ray didn’t hesitate to take it. “I don’t want to think about where we’d all be if you and Anna hadn’t shown up.”

“You played a dangerous card, Vander. Although I understand your reasoning, I would not suggest tempting fairy law again. Leniency is...rare.”

I swallowed hard. I had no doubt Ray spoke the absolute truth.

“You ready to get out of this place?” Vander asked, holding his hand out to me.

I came willingly. “More than ready.” I leaned into him, loving his hard, muscular planes.

Byx was already halfway up the stairs. “We’ll tell you about Van’s *mood ring* in the car.” Laughter echoed within the stairwell as Byx’s feet pounded up the treads.

I glanced up at Vander and said, “It’s not a mood ring at all, is it?”

“Not the way you think,” he answered, a smug smirk lifting the corners of his mouth.

Whatever irritation I felt was wiped away by Vander’s lips. They were chapped, broken, and swollen, but they felt like heaven.



## *Chapter Thirty-One*

*VANDER*

Three days later, I still felt like roadkill. Lucroy Moony had called in a healer—the brother of a brownie, Marty Buttons, that Phil and Peaches knew well. He'd done a great job healing my wounds, but my ability to manipulate magical energy would need to come back in its own time.

Byx was doing great, better than she had a right to be. As far as any of us could tell, we'd completely drained her magical charm container. Mattie had stopped by and taken a look at it and said the charm wasn't dead, that it could be filled back up and used again. Byx and I were both relieved. I was also relieved when Mattie told me her coven was called to bind Letty's abilities. Mattie had gone a little pale while telling me how oily and disgusting Letty's magical abilities felt. From what I understood, the binding was the first step, and there was a fair chance she'd be completely stripped soon. Letty had violated some very serious fairy laws, and as Ray mentioned, fairies weren't a forgiving species.

Neither were brownies. Honestly, if I had to pick which species doled out my punishment, I would have picked fairies. Not because it would be lesser, but because it would be a hell of a lot less painful. As expected, the brownies were not pleased when they found out about Letty's plans for Byx. They'd especially been pissed when they found out she actively drained a brownie. Needless to say, Letty was in for a world of hurt, and I couldn't give two shits.

I'd informed the Magical Usage Council about Lance's part in this whole fiasco. Needless to say, they hadn't been

pleased. The warlock magic streaming through the ring on Letty's finger easily backed up my story. I'd been informed Lance was in custody, and they'd decided to strip him of his warlock powers. Everyone knew what that meant. Just like with Letty, I couldn't muster a twinge of compassion and didn't spend another thought on that waste of a warlock.

Ray had been by yesterday and informed us that Letty hadn't live streamed what happened. She'd recorded it and had automatically uploaded it. During their investigation, Ray found a program on Letty's computer. The footage was set to automatically load to her blog within three days if she didn't disable it. Thankfully, Ray's investigators got to it first. Thus far, Parsnip's secret was safe, as was Franny's identity.

Parsnip was relieved, but he hadn't changed his mind. My one and only was content, and I believed him. That's not to say that Parsnip was looking forward to the big reveal, only that he was committed to ending the lie. With Letty's exposé on lockdown, Parsnip had control of the narrative, and from what I understood, he planned to use it for the greater good.

“Morning, sunshine.”

Parsnip stumbled out of our bedroom, stretching his arms high above his head, revealing a length of perfectly pale skin. His damaged wing was still a little slower than the undamaged wing, but it was on the mend, and the healer thought within a week, Parsnip would be good as new and flying high.

My one and only rolled his eyes. “Morning, Vander. Is Byx up?”

I scoffed. “She's been up for about three hours.”

Parsnip shook his head, strands of gray ombre mixed with hints of aqua shifting back and forth. Byx was right. Some of the color returned. It wasn't a lot, but what was there was stunning. There were hints of aqua in Parsnip's wings, and his toenails were tipped in the color. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough. Parsnip's eyes lit up when he saw it. And speaking of eyes, Parsnip's deep aqua—a color that had been magically enhanced by the charms he wore, was now a pale, ghostly gray rimmed in equally pale aqua. They were stunning.

Mostly gray pixie dust, mixed with a few particles of aqua, floated through the air. “I envy her energy,” Parsnip said, quickly followed by a yawn.

“I do too, but it’ll run out soon. I think she’s still a little jacked up from the magic poured into her. I probably overdid it, but having never done something like that before, I thought more was better than less.” I shrugged. I’d basically emptied Byx’s charm. Turns out, that much wasn’t really necessary. Who knew?

“Completely understandable, Vander.” Byx grabbed a banana and sat across from me at the table. “How are you feeling today?”

Out of the three of us, I was taking the longest to recover. I rolled my recovered rings around on my fingers, noting they fit a little looser than before. “Better than yesterday,” I finally managed.

“Hmm, I suppose that’s progress.”

“It is.” I scooted my chair back and reached for Parsnip.

He came easily, settling in my lap. It was fast becoming one of our favorite positions. Stradling my lap, Parsnip laid his fruit down on the table, running his fingers through my hair.

“I like the extra white,” he said, carding through my temples. “It suits you.”

Turns out, Parsnip’s colors weren’t the only ones changed by Letty’s ministrations. Although not nearly as dramatic as Parsnip’s change, I’d gained more white. It made me look older than I was.

“Glad you like it,” I murmured against the expanse of Parsnip’s neck, inhaling his scent, allowing it to filter through my body and soothe my rough edges.

“There’s a lot to like.” Parsnip’s voice deepened, turning husky.

“Back at you, beautiful.”

His cheeks flushed. I enjoyed making Parsnip blush, and it was surprisingly easy. He loved compliments, and I didn’t

mind dishing them out. In fact, it was quickly becoming one of my favorite past times.

Tilting his head, Parsnip gave me more access, a soft cooing sound slipping through his lips.

“Ew, you two are so disgusting.” Byx trotted into the kitchen, digging through the fridge for some kind of snack. We’d discovered her appetite had increased with her overload of magic. She burned through calories a lot quicker. We were all hoping that would fade as her magic evened out. The way she was going, I didn’t think I could afford to keep up with the grocery bill.

Parsonip eased back slightly but didn’t get out of my lap. His wings fluttered, spreading more dust. Byx moved back and grabbed a hand towel to cover her nose. The act reminded me that I needed to make her a charm so Parsnip’s dust didn’t bother her as much. We might not have talked about it, but I didn’t plan on letting Parsnip out of my sight, and he seemed content spending his days and nights with me. Filming had been placed on hold, at least temporarily.

Instead of feeding into Byx’s teasing, I gave her a wide grin. “Anything going on in the shop?”

We’d decided to open back up today. I wouldn’t go in, but Byx was bored and needed something to do. She could field questions and sell available products. Any special requests could be dealt with later.

“We had a couple of customers,” she answered, crunching on an apple. Next, it would be a bag of chips, but I was glad she’d gone for something mildly nutritious this time. “Nothing major.”

Byx wore her kitten hair clips, and they purred constantly. Parsnip and I thought it was an indication she was more traumatized than she was letting on. Hell, I was still plenty traumatized, and I didn’t see that changing anytime soon.

I’d been staring at Byx’s hair clips long enough that she self-consciously touched them.

Parsnip picked up on the move and thankfully asked, “Do you think you could make me something to put in my hair for the big reveal?”

“Really?” Byx perked up. “What do you want?” She took another bite of the apple, moving closer. “I’ve got a few more things in mind.”

Parsnip’s smile was gently fond. “Why don’t you surprise me?”

Byx’s grin lit up the room. “You’ve got it.” She nodded, already lost in thought. “I’ll need Vander’s help. Right now, they just run on my magic, and when I’m not around, they don’t work.”

“I’ve got some ideas.” I didn’t think it would be too difficult.

Byx nodded aggressively. “You’re going to have the best damn hair clips in the world, and every pixie will be envious.”

Thankfully, Byx left the room before Parsnip’s smile wilted. I knew what was on his mind.

“When are you recording the big reveal?” I asked while rubbing circles along his back, soothing his wing muscles.

“The end of the week. Divia thinks it’s better to do it sooner rather than later. I spoke with Peaches and Lucroy. They’re okay with the idea.”

When Parsnip revealed his true colors, Divia had been understandably confused. She recovered quickly, becoming all business. She’d called the producers of *Interspecies Habitat*, and they’d been trying to knock out a plan ever since. Parsnip had gotten some blowback regarding his deception. I got the feeling there’d been a lot more fury than we knew about. Divia was an unmoving wall, and thankfully, she was on Parsnip’s side. She was also a great filter.

“Peaches doesn’t strike me as an attention-seeking pixie.”

“No,” Parsnip agreed. “He really doesn’t care that my reveal will steal the thunder from his home’s episode.” Parsnip sucked on his bottom lip, enticingly plumping it. “It’s nice to

be around pixies like Peaches and Phil. They remind me of Parsley.”

I’d yet to meet Parsnip’s brother, but I’d gotten to speak with him on the phone. Parsley had been beside himself, and it had taken a lot of cajoling on Parsnip’s part to keep his brother in Washington State. He still had an ogre-traumatized pixie under his roof, and Parsnip didn’t want to take his brother away from her. I’d gotten on the phone and convinced Parsley that Parsnip wasn’t alone. When Parsley learned his brother had bonded to me, everything changed, and he became very agreeable.

I’d come to appreciate Peaches and Phil. Both had stopped by, together and separately. Sedrick accompanied Phil. Lucroy hadn’t been by Peaches’s side, but he’d called—twice—to ask if there was anything Parsnip and I needed. I wasn’t certain how we’d gotten on the vampire king’s good side, but I wasn’t about to complain. Friends like Lucroy Moony came in handy more often than not.

Parsnip leaned into my touch, pleasantly humming. “That feels wonderful.”

“I’m glad. I want to make you feel good.” I wasn’t lying even a little bit.

Life was funny and more than a little amazing. My world had been turned upside down and spun in a completely different direction. I had two goals in life—making Parsnip deliriously happy and taking care of Byx. As long as I succeeded in those two areas, nothing else mattered.

We sat there, enjoying the silence late morning brought.

Leaning into me, Parsnip rested his head on my chest, and I wrapped my arms around him, pulling my one and only tighter against my body. “You think I’m making a mistake?” Parsnip asked, tone soft.

“About revealing your true colors?”

“Mm-hmm. That and not outing Letty.”

I didn’t need to think about my response. “No to both. You’re beautiful. I’m not saying it will be easy, and there will

undoubtedly be backlash, but we'll handle it. Together. As for Letty, I agree. She craved attention, and the most suitable punishment for her is not to give it. Letty wanted to be a star, she wanted to be a media sensation, and she didn't care how. Well, now she's nothing. She'll fade into obscurity."

Parsnip and I'd discussed it at length, and then we'd spoken with Ray. He'd agreed with our request not to release her name. He'd also petitioned to have her blog site taken down. There wouldn't be a mention as to why. There would simply be silence, and Letty would pass from memory in that silence. All her efforts would be for nothing. She would gain nothing. No one would know her name. No one would care that Letty Fox had ever existed.

Parsnip, Byx, and I would know. Despite our best efforts, we'd always remember. Most likely, Franny would too. I wasn't certain how much the ogre would remember from her dust-induced haze. Regardless, she was in a recovery center now. Time would tell if she'd get better. Franny would always be addicted, and she'd have to deal with that addiction all her life.

"Thanks, Vander." Parsnip snuggled closer, and his wings fluttered, the damaged wing just a hint behind its healthier twin.

"Anytime. Do you want me to be there the day of filming?"

"Do you mind? I hate to ask but—"

"You didn't ask. I offered. And no, I don't mind. If it were up to me, you'd never leave my sight." I kissed the crown of Parsnip's head.

He inhaled, letting the breath loose by slow degrees. "Do you think you'll be well enough to form a warlock bond with me before the taping? I know it's a big ask, but I'd like to have that."

"If you want it, then we'll make it happen." That was an ongoing mantra where Parsnip was concerned.

“I don’t want you to do it if you’re still too drained. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I should be better by then, and we’ll make it official on my end and yours.”

I’d never dreamed a pixie would bond with me. It was something on the edge of my awareness, a warm tingle that echoed through my magical channels. It had become a constant hum, a rhythm that always played my favorite tune.

Parsnip squeezed me. “I can’t wait.”

“Me either.” I wasn’t sure I could will my body back to full health, but if possible, I’d find a way to do it.

---

I didn’t know if it was my will or just Gaia taking matters into her own hands. Whatever the reason, by the end of the week, I felt like I could craft the most intricate charm and still have enough energy to do twenty more.

The charm I worked for Parsnip wasn’t the most intricate I’d ever done, but it was the most important. This charm wouldn’t simply be worn but would become a part of him. It would meld with his body and could never be removed.

The crystal-clear quartz was no bigger than a dime, but it was packed with my love, affection, and dedication. Once bonded, Parsnip would never doubt my commitment to him. I’d be with him the same way he was with me.

“It’s so small,” Byx said, staring over my shoulder. “I figured it would be bigger.”

“Haven’t you ever heard that good things come in small packages?” I teased.

“Good thing that’s a true saying.” Byx moved around me and grinned. “So, tonight’s the big night, huh?”

“It is.” My gaze wandered toward the stairs and my bedroom beyond. “Parsnip’s on the phone with Divia. They’re working out tomorrow’s logistics.”



“Got it. I’ll head out soon. I just wanted to see what it looked like before activated.”

“Thanks, Byx.” Maybe we needed to look into a bigger space. One that had an area for Byx so she didn’t have to leave every time Parsnip and I got up to sexy times.

“No worries,” she reassured me. Head cocked to the side, Byx huffed before throwing herself at me. I caught her with an *oof*.

“I’m so happy for you, Van. Mamma would be too. You deserve to be happy, and I’m glad you dragged your head outta your ass and went after Parsnip.”

I hugged her tight. “Me too.”

With a final squeeze, Byx pushed off my lap. “Don’t screw this up, Van,” she said, wagging a finger in my general direction. “You only get to bond with your one and only once. That’s the whole point of the thing.” Then, with a final wink, she blinked out, transporting herself to her aunt’s house.

I’d seen her do it a hundred times, her mother even more. Watching brownies transport never got old.

With the shop closed and Byx gone, the space quieted. I could barely hear Parsnip’s muted voice, growing louder as I climbed the stairs. I didn’t have a fancy dinner planned. Truth be told, I didn’t have much of a plan at all beyond completing the bond. Byx was probably terribly disappointed in me. Thankfully, I didn’t think Parsnip would care.

“If you think that’s best,” Parsnip said, speaking into his cell.

He was currently on FaceTime with Divia, something he said he used to rarely do. Parsnip had been so worried about allowing his true colors out that he’d never considered what the lie was doing to him. My pretty pixie was so much stronger now, so much more confident.

I didn’t hear Divia’s response, but Parsnip nodded. When he saw me leaning against the doorframe, he held out a hand. I happily heeded his call.

When I came into the frame, Divia smiled. “Hello, Vander. How are you feeling?”

“Good. Back to normal.” It was a slight exaggeration, but not much of one.

“Excellent. I hear you’ll be accompanying Parsnip tomorrow.”

“I’ll be wherever he wants me.”

Divia’s grin grew, scrunching her eyes. “Also excellent to hear. I think Parsnip and I’ve got everything hashed out. I’ll let him go and see you both tomorrow.”

The screen blackened, and Divia was gone.

Rubbing Parsnip’s back, I asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just... It’s a lot.”

“It is. Have I told you recently how brave I think you are?”

Parsnip gave me a dismissive wave. “I’m not brave.”

“The hell you aren’t.” I sat on the bed, scooting him over. “You’re the bravest.”

With his head bent, Parsnip wouldn’t look at me, and I wasn’t having that.

A single finger under his chin was all I needed to lift his gaze to mine. “You’re amazing. I am the luckiest warlock on the planet.”

Parsnip rolled his eyes, but a grin lifted his lips, and pink flushed his cheeks. “Or the most delusional.”

“Maybe. But if that’s the case, I’m good with it.”

Wings fluttering, dust filled the air, sparkling in the dim lighting. “You’re a fool, Vander Kines. But you’re my fool.”

“Damn straight. And...in that vein of thinking, I’ve got something for you.” I held out the unassuming quartz crystal.

“A charm?” Parsnip asked, mouth twisting with confusion. “But I don’t need a—”

“Maybe you don’t, but I do. You asked me to bond with you in the warlock way.” I held the charm a little higher.

Parsnip’s eyes flew wide. “V-Vander? Is this...? Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been surer about anything. You are my one and only, Parsnip, and I thank Gaia every day for the gift you are.”

Chest rising and falling in rapid succession, Parsnip’s big, light gray eyes gazed up at me. “What do we do?”

I wagged my eyebrows. “What do you think we do?”

“Get naked?”

“Oh yes. Very naked.”

Knees bent, Parsnip used his wings to steady his body as he perched on our bed. “I think I can get on board with that. Care to help?”

*Oh, most certainly.*

Pixie tops were called that for a reason. They were structured to fit around wings. The first time I’d undressed Parsnip had been anything but smooth. I felt like a young warlock trying to work their way around the first bra I’d ever seen. Byx might argue differently, but I was a fast learner, especially when motivated, and I was very motivated to get Parsnip undressed.

The special ties slipped through my fingers. Parsnip’s spider silk felt heavenly and eased off his body in shimmering sheets, pooling around his waist. Parsnip was slender and a good two feet shorter than me, but his body was well-toned and muscular. Pixies were works of art, and mine was no different.

“You’re beautiful.” I’d lost count of how many times I’d told Parsnip that. I meant it more with every whispered compliment.

“You’re not so bad yourself, warlock.” Parsnip’s lips teased my chin, nipping at my ear and ending with feathered kisses across my eyebrows and eyelashes. “I never thought anyone could love me the way you do.”

“That just confirms what I’ve always thought. The world is full of fools.”

Choking on a laugh, Parsnip leaned his forehead against my neck. “I have no idea how your mind works, Vander.”

“Good thing. We’re going to be bonded for life. It would be great if one of us were sane.” I grinned at Parsnip’s wide eyes and parted lips.

His relaxed shoulders, slight head shake, and small grin were my reward. “Kiss me before I decide you’re too crazy to bond with.”

“Too late, pretty pixie. You’ve already formed a bond, and now it’s my turn. No going back.”

“No.” Parsnip’s grin softened. “No going back.”

“Are you sorry about that?” I had to ask.

“Never, Vander. Never ever.”

“Good.”

I decided we’d talked enough, and Parsnip’s silence let me know he agreed. His warm lips pressing into mine was another hint. I groaned, loving the feel of his soft skin. Parsnip’s fingers skimmed over my flesh, their touch light yet possessive. My pixie was a contrast to me in nearly every way. Where my hands and fingers bore the callouses of charm weaving, Parsnip’s body was as silky as the clothes he wore.

Those clothes quickly went by the wayside, mine following posthaste. Carefully, I laid Parsnip out on the bed, his wings flattened against the mattress, gray-toned hair fanned out over the pillow, those hints of aqua on full display. I swallowed hard, still unable to believe this stunning creature was mine, that I got to see this beautiful display until death claimed us. With any luck, I’d be blessed with decades of this stunning view.

“Are you just going to stare all night or are you going to do something?” Parsnip ran his fingers up and down his chest, each pass inching lower yet avoiding touching his thick cock.

“Can’t help it,” I defended. “The view is too good.”

Parsnip's pale skin flushed a soft pink. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. I didn't think he knew what to say. That was okay with me. I didn't need his words. The deep, adoringly trusting look in his eyes spoke volumes.

Bending over, I nipped Parsnip's nipple, earning me a little yip of surprise. Running the flat of my tongue over the sting, Parsnip eased back onto the bed, unaware that I'd used the distraction to fish out the lube from a nearby night table.

"How long has it been?" I asked while warming the lube on my fingers.

Parsnip hesitated before finally answering, "Long enough."

"I'll go slow. Tell me if it's too much."

"Okay."

I raised Parsnip's legs, scooting a pillow under his bottom and raising his body. My cock was proportionate to the rest of my body. Nothing on me was small. Thankfully, pixies' bodies were adaptable.

One finger turned into two, which quickly turned into three. Parsnip didn't tell me to stop. In fact, he begged me for more, begged me to keep going. When he was open enough, I lined myself up and pushed inside. Parsnip took all of me in, drawing me deep into his warm body until I hardly knew where I stopped and Parsnip began.

"Oh." Parsnip arched just enough for his wings to wiggle. It was instinct.

"Feel good?" I whispered, my breath ghosting across his pointed ear. I needed to hear it. Needed Parsnip to tell me to move.

"So good," Parsnip answered with a whine. "Vander, I need..."

I didn't wait for him to formulate more words. I moved. Gaia, good was too weak a word. Parsnip was everything, and being inside him, connecting to my one and only... There wasn't a word in any language that could express what I felt.

Parsnip's groans and moans of pleasure were muted, half-whispered pleas into the night. Each little gasp filled me with satisfied joy. Making Parsnip happy, giving him pleasure, and seeing to his every need was a life goal I looked forward to attempting every day for the rest of my life.

The slap of flesh, the scent of sweat, and the echoed moans of pleasure made me glad Byx wasn't in the house.

"Vander, I—"

"Let it go. I've got you. I'll always have you." My balls tightened, drawing up, ready to burst. With Parsnip's charm in my hand, I used the other arm to pull him off the bed and into my lap. I kept rocking into him, and his wings fluttered madly, filling the bedroom with sparkling pixie dust.

Pressing the charm against the skin over his beating heart, I spoke the activation chant as Parsnip's warm cum exploded, coating our stomachs. I didn't last much longer, filling Parsnip up and emptying everything I had into him—my cum, my love, and my charmed magic.

A flash of bright white light lit my vision beyond my closed eyelids. It was down to a warm glow by the time I opened my eyes. There, shimmering in shades of aqua and the warmest glow, was the charm I'd crafted, now embedded and part of Parsnip's flesh. The ties that now bound us weaved their way into my soul, swiftly traveling down all my magical pathways. I shivered, our new bond seamlessly entwining with the pixie bond already there.

"Can you feel it?" I asked, nearly breathless.

"I... It's so warm, so..." Parsnip's breath caught, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

"Parsnip?"

"No, it's okay." He giggled, the sound nothing like I'd ever heard from him before. It was so light, so full of immense joy. "That's not true. It's fucking far from okay. It's wonderful. Goddess, there isn't a word that describes it."

I knew what he meant. "I get it."

“I had no idea anything could ever feel this good. I feel... safe.” Parsnip’s eyes flew wide, and more tears flowed. “I know that doesn’t sound very special, but to me, it’s everything. I haven’t felt safe in so long. I didn’t think I’d ever feel that way again, but you...you were willing to give up your warlock nature to save me and Byx. I...” Parsnip shook his head before laying his forehead against my chest, soft hair falling around his shoulders and sensually sliding against my skin.

“And I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Never doubt that.”

“I don’t. That’s the point. I know you would and...and I never want you to do that, but knowing you would is... Just so you know, I’d do the same.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? I didn’t know you were a warlock too. I had no idea that pixies could be—” Slapping me on the shoulder, Parsnip wiggled, reminding me that my cock was still nice and warm and pleasantly buried in the sweetest flesh imaginable.

“Careful,” I teased. “That kind of wiggling will only get you one thing.”

Tilting his head, Parsnip ran the pad of his finger over his charm and, with a sultry flutter of his eyelashes, said, “Promises, promises.”

*Oh, he was so on.* The night was young, and Byx would be out of the house until morning. Growling low, I rocked, flopping onto my back, Parsnip straddling my waist, my thickening cock still happily snuggled into its newfound home.

Head thrown back, Parsnip’s laughter filled the room, along with my heart. There was no sweeter sound, and I’d work day and night to make sure I heard it as often as possible.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### *PARSNIP*

Goddess, only in my nightmares did I ever dream I'd be doing this. My wings were twitching madly, filling the space with mostly gray dust. Despite Peaches's dire warnings of retribution, my dust had been too enticing, and a couple of sprites had already snatched a particle or two. Although I couldn't really understand what they said, their tones led me to believe they were disappointed it didn't change their color. After speaking with Peaches, we'd figured out the sprite who'd ingested some of my charmed dust had turned back into its standard, bright white color about the same time Letty removed my charm. Vander was looking into making a charm that could change Peaches's dust just enough to make the sprites change color. Peaches said the sprites had asked, and as long as it wasn't harmful, he was okay with it. The look on Lucroy's face made me think he wasn't as thrilled, not that he'd say anything that might make Peaches unhappy.

"You okay?" Vander asked. He knew I wasn't and was just being polite.

I inhaled, taking in the clean, country air. The cold snap had broken, not that it wasn't still chilly, just not bone-numbing cold. Peaches's orchard really was beautiful. And if it was this pretty in the throes of winter, I couldn't imagine what it would look like in the spring.

"No," I truthfully answered. "But this is what's right. It's what's best, and I can do it." I pulled my aqua-colored shawl tighter. I'd made a trip to Petal's Posh Pants and was decked out in a pale version of my previous aqua coloring. True to her



word, Byx made special hair clips just for me. Swallowtail butterflies flapped their tiny wings, lifting sections of my hair every now and again.

“I know.” Vander bent over and placed a kiss on my temple.

I leaned into his touch. I’d been running my fingers over the crystal embedded in my skin. Despite the cool temperatures outside, it was always warm when my finger touched its surface. That same warmth pulsed through my skin, running like soft streams down my body, deeper into my flesh.

“Anything you need, just ask, pretty pixie.”

Vander had taken to calling me that. I’d hated hearing it come from Letty’s or Franny’s lips. But coming from Vander, the words were soothing and reassuring.

I watched as Mike set up the camera, getting ready for the shot. Divia and I’d decided the big reveal should be in front of Peaches’s home. I hadn’t wanted to wait, and Peaches was more than fine with the idea. When he’d seen the true me, he’d fussed and spun, scattering golden-yellow pixie dust everywhere. He’d gone on and on about how gorgeous I was and that he’d never seen another pixie with my colors.

Coming from another, I might have doubted their sincerity. But Peaches was different. Phil was too. All of us had plans to meet up at Dusk later this evening. I just had to get through this afternoon’s filming.

“Ready?” Divia asked. Her shimmering white hair was pulled back and twisted into an intricate knot. She was dressed in a blood-red pantsuit, nails painted black.

Inhaling, I squeezed Vander’s hand—hard. He didn’t flinch or pull away. “Ready,” I said with a lot more confidence than I truly had.

Divia gave a sharp nod. “Good. This episode is going to be ratings gold.” She grinned, showing off a double row of razor-sharp teeth. “*Interspecies Habitat*’s executives are fools, and we’re about to show them just what idiots they are.”

I wished I felt as sure as Divia. But either way, what would be would be. No matter what happened with the show, I'd still have Vander. Nothing and no one would ever take him from me and vice versa. Nothing on this planet could have given me more peace of mind, more infinite happiness.

"Go on," Vander said. "I'll be right here, waiting and cheering you on."

Wings flaring to life, I lifted off the ground, eye level with my warlock. Grabbing the sides of his face, I pulled him close, kissing him deeply. "I love you." Words that had once been so hard to say came surprisingly easy now.

"I love you too. Now, go show them what you're made of, pretty pixie."

My smile wasn't as forced as I'd thought it would be, and I carried Vander's confidence with me, wearing it like a cloak until the day I'd gained enough of my own to give back what I'd borrowed.

---

"I think we should have a watch party," Phil said, voice slightly slurred. "When will the show air?" he asked while looking at me, grass-green eyes shiny.

"I'm not sure. Word will get out sooner though." I wasn't trying to hide. I'd walked into Dusk tonight with my head held high. No one in line recognized me. I wasn't stopped. No line formed, desperate for a selfie. I thought I'd miss it. I hadn't. Maybe one day I would, but I got the feeling a decade from now, I'd still feel the same.

"Oh!" Peaches leaned over the table, and Lucroy grabbed a hold of the back of Peaches's shirt, steadying him. "Will they put a teaser up on the website?" Peaches's eyes were wide, pupils a little too blown. He and Phil had been happily partaking in honeysuckle mead. Evidently, Johnny's cousin made some of the best. I was still working on my first glass and had to agree that it was fantastic.

Losing control didn't come easily to me. While living my charmed lie, I'd had to be very vigilant. I couldn't afford to get rip-roaring drunk, and despite my newfound emotional freedom, I didn't think I'd feel that comfortable for some time. Still, watching Phil and Peaches have a good time was enjoyable.

"No offense, Vander, but this stuff looks horrid." Sedrick sniffed the drink he set down in front of my warlock, nose wrinkling. "Smells bad too."

Vander chuckled, completely unfazed. "You don't know what you're missing," he answered while throwing back half the glass.

Sedrick shivered as he sat down next to Phil, immediately draping his arm over the back of the booth. "Give me a beer any day of the week." Sedrick held up his cold mug.

Lucroy was the only one without a drink in front of him. At Sedrick's raised eyebrow, Lucroy grinned sinisterly. "I get my beverage straight from the source."

"Moon goddess, save us." Head tilted back, Sedrick roughly ran his hand over his beard while Phil patted him on the chest.

Peaches just giggled and snuggled up next to his vampire. The fresh bite wound on his neck was clear to see.

Lucroy's grin spread wider, nearly showing fang. He appeared ready to retort when a commotion came from Dusk's entrance. The dance floor parted, and I craned my neck to see what was going on. Raucous laughter rose above the music, and deep in the crowd, someone yelled, "Party bus is here!"

Phil jerked, and Sedrick's jaw dropped.

"Is that...?"

"Ollie, Burt, and the rest of their crew," Sedrick finished. "Yup, I'd say so."

"The dwarves are here?" Peaches hopped up, standing on the bench, wings madly twittering. "Oh, Phil! That *is* them."

Leaning across the table, Peaches held one hand out to Phil and another to me. “Come on! Time to dance.”

“Oh, I...” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d danced in public. “I don’t know if...” I glanced at Vander.

Those same steady, hazel eyes gazed back at me. “I’ll be right here,” he said, those words meaning so much more than they should.

My heart thudded, wondering if it were possible to love him any more than I already did.

“All right.” Gaze still fixed on Vander, I clasped Peaches’s hand and allowed myself to be pulled free.

The three of us flew up and over the table. By the time we reached the edge of the dance floor, the dwarf hoard had made it through. Phil and Peaches flew toward the two in the lead, fiercely hugging them. Cheers went up, and the music picked up steam. I flew high into the air, twirling and letting myself go. Peaches joined me, and Phil hovered a little lower. I spun with abandon, letting my hair fly free, my head thrown back, and laughter set loose.

Goddess, life was good.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*VANDER*

“We are three lucky sons of bitches,” Sedrick proclaimed before chugging his beer.

Lucroy made a miffed noise, eyes slightly narrowed. “While I do not disagree with the sentiment, I would, perhaps, have phrased it differently.”

Sedrick snorted. “Of course you would.”

I stared, starstruck, as Parsnip really let go. It was difficult to take my eyes off him.

“It never gets old,” Sedrick said, leaning back into the bench. “I could watch Phil spin and dance all day and night, and I’d still think there was nothing better in the whole damn world.”

“Again, I cannot disagree with the sentiment,” Lucroy said.

Absently, I rolled Georgiana’s ring around my finger. It glowed crimson nearly all the time now. I’d grown fond of the color because it meant Parsnip was near. Silently, I thanked her again for setting me on the right path, even from beyond the grave.

“He’s perfect.”

“They all are,” Sedrick answered, making me realize I’d spoken out loud. “I can’t believe Burt and Ollie are still on this party bus kick.” Sedrick shook his head before looking at Lucroy. “You sure you’re okay having them here?” Sweeping

out a hand, Sedrick pointed toward the dance floor. “They’re taking up over half the space.”

“I care not. Dusk is for every species’ enjoyment.”

Sedrick raised a bushy eyebrow. Whatever he was about to say was cut off when Wendall shuffled up to the table. “Hey, boss,” he said, eyes shifting between us until they landed on Lucroy. “Johnny wanted me to ask if he can get into the good stuff down in the basement. I think he’d like to get something special for the dwarves.”

“Tell him that is fine. The dwarves are special guests.”

Wendall grinned. “Thanks, I’ll let him know.” Wendall absently scratched at a spot on his arm.

Alarm bells rang through my head when I saw the deteriorated flesh.

Tugging down his sleeve, Wendall’s actions weren’t quick enough to hide the patch of necrotic skin from Lucroy’s view.

Ignoring the decaying elephant in the room, Wendall beamed, lips spread wide and eyes bright. “I’ll go let Johnny know.”

Zippering away, Wendall wove through the crowd on his way back to the bar.

“What just happened?” Sedrick asked. “You two look like I pissed in your drinks.”

I waited for Lucroy to say something, but when nothing appeared to be forthcoming, I said, “I’m not sure why, but his magical signature dipped. It seems unstable. It blinked out and then flared back to life.”

“*Life?*” Sedrick stared at me. “He’s a zombie. Not sure that’s the right way to phrase it.”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure either, but that was the best way to describe it.”

“Has that happened before?” I asked Lucroy.

He gave a slow nod. “That is the first time I have witnessed it, but Johnny has seen other worrying areas. He

came to me, concerned.”

“Well, shit,” Sedrick said. “Does that mean Muriel’s reanimation is fading? I didn’t think that happened. I’ve grown fond of Wendall.”

“I am uncertain. I will contact Muriel and find out.” Lucroy’s gaze shifted past me toward Dusk’s entrance, or more precisely, to a wall close to the entrance. “Interestingly, Hellfire Rayburn appears...*invested*...in Wendall’s current condition.”

My shoulders stiffened, spine straightening. It was uncouth to look, but I couldn’t help it. I followed Lucroy’s sightline, and sure enough, Ray stood there, holding up the wall. He looked unusually tense for a fairy, with his arms crossed over his chest, gaze tracking Wendall’s movements.

Turning back around, I grabbed my glass of burnt rum, throwing back the remainder, deciding another one or twelve might be in order.

“That bad?” Sedrick asked, leaning an elbow on the table.

I groaned. “Possibly. Let’s just say I owe Ray a debt of *gratitude*, and I’ve got a sneaking suspicion it might have something to do with the zombie that just walked away.”

Sedrick’s amber eyes flared as they flicked up to Ray. “I didn’t want to bring up bad shit on a good night out, but Ray told me you’re going to help with Arie Belview. I didn’t know Ray roped you into something else.” Sedrick sounded concerned.

“It’s okay. One, I’m happy to do whatever I can to stick it to Alpha Belview. Two, I already agreed, and I don’t think anyone at this table thinks it’s a good idea to go back on your word, especially when there’s a fairy involved.”

“Shit no.” Sedrick nodded his agreement. “That’s a poor life plan right there.”

“Sedrick speaks truthfully,” Lucroy readily agreed. “However, if you’d allow, if me or my nest can be of service, please do not hesitate to ask.” Lucroy’s gaze shifted to Peaches. Phil had just tossed him into the air, and he was

wildly laughing. Lucroy's eyes visibly softened. "Peaches has become very fond of Parsnip, and I find having a gifted warlock nearby is equally desirable."

Sedrick huffed. "In a not as stuck-up way, I agree. I can't thank you enough for helping out with Arie. Whatever you need from me, just ask."

"Are you going to make him a part of your pack too?" Lucroy asked, a hint of amusement tickling his words.

"Like you said, having a talented warlock around isn't a bad idea." Sedrick threw me a wink. "Besides, just like Peaches, Phil's mentioned more than once how much he likes Parsnip." Sedrick's easy-going smile faded. "Pixies haven't always been kind to Phil, especially social ones. Parsnip's different. He's never made Phil feel inferior, never made him feel like his size is an issue. For that alone, I'll do whatever I can to help out where needed." A low growl rumbled through Sedrick's chest. "For what it's worth, if I'd known what was going on with that witch or where she'd taken the three of you, I would have been happy to show her what an alpha werewolf's capable of."

"And a well-seasoned vampire," Lucroy added with a minuscule head tilt. "I do not like such things happening within my territory."

"I would have gladly accepted whatever help you could have given. Not going to lie, for a while, I thought it was the end of all of us." I swallowed hard, remembering Parsnip's terror when Franny stepped out of the shadows. "Parson and Byx would have had it the worst. Letty just planned on killing me. But the two of them..." I couldn't finish.

Sedrick's meaty fingers wrapped around my bicep, squeezing. "No one wants to think about that."

"True enough, but I think we have to."

Multicolored pixie dust filled the air, dissipating before it drifted low enough to bother the dwarves dancing below our trio of flying pixies. Like Sedrick, I hadn't wanted to put a



damper on this evening of celebration. However, given their choice of mates, my concern was also theirs.

“Meaning what?” Lucroy asked, a single eyebrow arched high.

“Meaning there’s an active pixie trafficking ring out there.”

Lucroy hissed while Sedrick growled.

“And it doesn’t look like it’s ogre-driven. I can’t believe the ogre rehabilitation society is pleased about it either.”

“Someone’s capturing and selling pixies?” Lucroy’s tone was deathly quiet.

“They are. Parsnip’s been using his money to help rehab rescued pixies. His brother, Parsley, has a home in Washington State. He lets them stay there until they’re ready to go home. Apparently, there’s a stigma within pixie society, and captured pixies are often reluctant to go directly back to their families. It probably has to do with how long they were kept and just how much they’ve faded. Parsnip told me that most pixies regain their colors. He was kept for a long time before rescued and”—I rolled my hand in the air—“his results were a little different.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Understatement, Lucroy,” Sedrick huffed, eyes glowing with alpha power.

“I believe the vampire council will be most interested to hear this,” Lucroy said, gaze fixated on Peaches. “Accepting Peaches as my beloved has had interesting...consequences. Let us simply say that my bonding has sparked interest within the vampire world. I believe my species has more vested interest in keeping pixies safe.”

“That would be fantastic.” I sat up a little straighter. “I can ask Parsnip for contact information for the group he’s affiliated with.”

Lucroy nodded. “And I will see what Leon can find out in the meantime.”

“I can spread the word within the shifter community too,” Sedrick offered. “Most of my species think I’m nuts mating a pixie, but that doesn’t mean they’ll take kindly to trafficking.”

Some of the tension I’d been carrying around eased. “Thank you. Both of you.”

“Of course,” Lucroy easily answered.

Sedrick gave a grunt of agreement.

Parsnip’s loud laughter drew my attention back to the dance floor. Phil had just tossed him into the air, and Parsnip did an ariel barrel roll, hair and clothes flying out around him.

“Fuck, that would make me puke,” Sedrick said, and when I looked in his direction, he appeared a little green around the edges.

I laughed. “Can’t disagree.” I looked at our empty glasses and asked, “You want me to get us another round?”

“Please,” Sedrick answered. “It looks like we’ll be here for a little while.” He said it with more affection than malice. “How long until you need to get Peaches back to his orchard?”

“We have another hour, maybe a bit longer. I will watch the time. When he is in this condition, Peaches tends to lose track of it. I will get him back to his land before he sickens.”

“I think the honeysuckle mead already has that covered.” Sedrick grimaced.

“The fallout is worth it,” Lucroy answered.

Sedrick chuckled. “That it is. That it is.”

Rising from our shared booth, I wormed my way around the dance floor. We weren’t the only ones fascinated by the show the pixies and dwarves were putting on. Nearly all eyes were glued to the end of the dance floor. And all those eyes shimmered with amused joy.

“Another burnt rum?” Johnny asked as I saddled up to the bar.

“And another beer for Sedrick.”

“You got it.” Johnny threw me a wink, gaze drifting up to our dancing pixies, a chuckle rumbling his chest.

Leaning against the bar, I couldn't take my eyes off Parsnip. His joy was contagious, and I was happily infected. Rubbing Georgiana's ring, I whispered my thanks. “I've got the prettiest pixie.” A fresh jolt of warmth shot through my finger, arching up my wrist, through my arm, and settling in my chest.

It was the warmest zap Georgiana had ever given me.

## *Epilogue*

THE WORLD OF FAIRY WAS ODD, EVEN TO ME. IT WAS SEPARATE yet intimately connected to the Earth. That connection spurred fairies to intervene when humanity threatened to destroy the planet. Visiting the Land of Fairy was something innate to all fairies and fairies alone. No other species could visit unless in the direct company of a fairy. That system had kept us safe and protected. It had also kept us isolated.

Fairies, it seemed, were not always so different from humanity. While many were content with their place, others were not. That burning fact led to a simple truth: The only danger to a fairy was another fairy.

My species had learned that the hard way. We'd paid the price for centuries-long conflicts. Perhaps we should thank humanity for bringing us together, giving us a common goal, and for another way to prove our superiority outside battle-borne bloodshed.

Going home to Fairy teased my senses and eased the pressure in my chest. It also gave me pause. My queen rarely called one of us home. No one ignored the call of their queen.

Queen Silvidia was only the second monarch in recorded fairy history. She was the previous king's daughter and had taken the throne when her father was murdered. I'd been little more than a fledgling then, a young fairy just coming into his power. Now, I was considered an elder, and Queen Silvidia... she was the most ancient of us all.

Lavender hues filled the evening sky, and a sweet, floral scent wafted through the air. My queen was outside, as she

often was, walking among the low-hanging branches of a tree that had given birth to the willow.

Queen Silvidia appeared delicate. She was far more petite than most fairies, her hair colorless, a mound of flowing white haphazardly heaped upon the top of her head, colorful ever-blooming flowers interspersed. The gossamer gown she wore would have been seen as scandalous by humans. I did not see the flesh below. I saw the strength. My queen could kill as easily as foster life with a thought. She could maim and disfigure with a wave of her seemingly innocent hand. Queen Silvidia could do all that and more, and yet she spent the majority of her time like this—peacefully meandering through endless landscapes.

I stood a few feet away and waited to be acknowledged. My queen knew I was there and would speak when ready.

Time moved differently in Fairy, and I was unaware how much had passed before she said, “It was good of you to come, Hellfire.”

“I am at my queen’s command,” I sincerely offered.

“A fact that I am grateful for.” She turned just enough for me to see her in profile, a gracious grin pulling the edge of her lip.

It was easy to get pulled into Queen Silvidia’s orbit. Odes had been written regarding other fairies trapped within her gaze, happily withering away as time slipped them by.

“How might I be of service?”

She sighed, her exiting breath shifting the long willowy branches and leaves around her. “It seems I have been neglectful.”

My eyebrows rose. “Never, my queen.”

“That is very kind of you, Hellfire, but unfortunately, in this case, you are wrong.” With delicate fingers, Queen Silvidia touched a wilting flower in her hair. It sprang back to life as if freshly born. “It seems my brother had a dalliance I was unaware of.”

I sucked in a breath. “Prince Hanan?”

Queen Silvidia flinched.

“Pardon, I should have thought. I—”

“No, do not apologize for speaking his name. Grief is powerful, and I’ve allowed mine to cloud my judgment. Hanan’s name should be spoken often and with joy, not hidden for fear of upsetting me.”

“Yes, my queen.” I’d known Prince Hanan, perhaps not well, but I’d fought by his side and knew his character. We’d lost him during a very toxic period in fairy history. There had been no sibling rivalry between him and Silvidia. They’d been close siblings, fighting alongside each other.

“It seems my brother produced a child with a human before he died.”

This time, my inhaled breath stuck in my throat. It wasn’t unheard of for fairies to produce offspring with other species, but it wasn’t common. In general, fairies were not very fertile. Perhaps it was our long lives that hindered us. Should we have been as prolific as humans, Fairy would have been overrun long ago.

“Given the times we were in, he was wise to hide this fact. Or, perhaps, Hanan was unaware of the child he produced. Unfortunately, we shall never know.”

My brain tumbled through the implications. “Has the lineage continued?”

Queen Silvidia finally turned, giving me her full attention and the brunt of her peach eyes. “It had, but it shall continue no longer.”

A fresh stab of grief sliced through my heart. “The last has perished?”

She gave a slow nod. “He has, and yet, he remains.”

“My queen?” Confusion filled me. “He is a vampire?”

“I wish we were that fortunate. He has been reanimated. My brother’s last descendant, my nephew, was murdered. His

fate fell into the hands of a priestess. Wendall was reanimated and is currently kept that way through Priestess Muriel's efforts—efforts that are failing. That is why I called you here, Hellfire Rayburn.”

I knew who Queen Silvidia spoke of. However, “I do not see how I can be of assistance.”

“The bond Priestess Muriel and Wendall have is faltering. Without another magical source as an anchor, Wendall will fade away, and his reanimated body will decompose. I will truly lose the last piece of my brother.” Queen Silvidia stepped closer, each footstep crushing the flowers below her feet, increasing the heavy floral scent that began making me dizzy.

“You, Hellfire Rayburn, are my only hope. You will bond with Wendall. You will attach your life force to his and, in so doing, gift him with everlasting life. This is why I called you to me. This is the task you must do. You have lived for centuries and never given your bond away. It is time to change that.”

Cold consumed me. I would do anything for my queen, but this... She was asking me to take Wendall as my lover, as my forever mate. And in fairy terms, forever was a very long time. It was one of the reasons we rarely bonded. The commitment was enormous.

My instincts shouted, screaming at me to run, and yet I could not. I stared into those swirling peach eyes and said the only thing I could. “Of course, my queen.”

## Like What You've Read?

If you've enjoyed reading *Perfectly Charmed Pixie*, please take the time to leave a review. Reviews help readers find works they might enjoy and help support authors.

Reviews are priceless gifts.



Available and Coming Works by MJ May

The Reaping Covetous Series:

Sow What You Reap: Reaping Covetous I

Dead Women Tell Tales: Reaping Covetous II

Dying to Reap You: Reaping Covetous III

Brother's Keeper, Brother's Reaper: Reaping Covetous IV

Ashes to Ashes: Reaping Covetous V

Pushing Up Roses: Reaping Covetous VI

Reaping Consequences: Reaping Covetous VII—End

M/M Fantasy Romance: Perfect Pixie Series

Perfectly Imperfect Pixie

Perfectly Perfect Pixie: Peaches's Story

Perfectly Charmed Pixie: Parsnip's Story

Coming Late Fall/Winter 2023: Perfectly Perplexing Zombie:  
Wendall's Story

M/M Mystery Romance: Maverick Insurance Mysteries

No Good Deed

Goes Unpunished

Coming Winter 2024: Maverick Insurance Mysteries Book  
Three

## Acknowledgments

I'm not sure if it takes a village to make a writer, but I believe it takes a village to make a writer's books more enjoyable. My village consists of friends, coworkers, editors and proofreaders, and two- and four-legged family.

I am thankful that I stumbled upon Michelle Rascon. Michelle gets the first crack at editing my books, and she has always offered constructive criticism along with praise. She continues to open my eyes to glaring mistakes, and I learn new things with every book I write. Hannah VanVels Ausbury proofread and polished my writing into something infinitely more enjoyable to read. I don't believe I can ever thank them enough for all their hard work.

The book cover for *Perfectly Charmed Pixie* was done by cheriefox. As always, Cherie did a great job and made the cover beautiful.

Longtime friends can be hard to come by and, in my case, are exceedingly rare. I will be forever grateful that Kathy and I sat down across from each other almost thirty years ago. Biology lab wouldn't have been half as fun without her, and my life would have been infinitely duller had either of us picked a different seat or table. Thank you for reading my raw writing, even when the genre isn't one you would usually pick.

My furry, four-legged family is my sanity, heart, and home. I have no idea how people live without pets; I only know that I would simply be existing, not living, without mine. Newton and Fennik are my compasses. They humble me, remind me the world isn't always as fucked up as it seems, and give me a smattering of hope the human race can do better. Or, at the very least, that the human race needs to do better.

## Author Bio

MJ May lives in the Midwest with her cat, Newton, and dog, Fennik. She is passionate about her furry children, the wild birds eating her out of house and home, and her garden. MJ May is a firm believer that changing the sheets on your bed with a housecat involved should be an Olympic event. Scores should be based on speed, accuracy, creative cursing, and how many times you have to toss a cat off the bed.

Connect with MJ May at her website: [https://  
blogawaywithmjmay.com](https://blogawaywithmjmay.com).