

FAE CROSSING SHIFTERS



SECOND CHANCE  
DRAGON  
CHIEF

SAMANTHA LEAL

PAMELA AVERY

# SECOND CHANCE DRAGON CHIEF

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## CHAPTER 1



“Shouldn’t you be out frolicking in the forest or something?” Bloom said as she set a screwdriver on the bar for Tam as she sat in her usual spot at the bar. “Or maybe there’s some moon ritual to cleanse your aura?”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Tam shot back, with mock annoyance. “Tonight this is my path,” she said, as she lifted the drink to her lips. After a little sip, she added, “I think I’ve done enough this week to connect to my fae roots, thank you very much.”

“I’m sure you have,” Bloom said, giving her a wink and a half smile. “You know I just like to raze you,” she then said as she pulled away to attend to the rest of the newly arrived regulars clamoring for their favorite drinks. It was still early, but Thursday nights got pretty hopping. It was her favorite night. Crowded enough for good business, but not so crowded she couldn’t connect with her peeps. And as the proprietor of what was arguably the central hub of Fae Crossing, The Fair Folk Bar, better known as “The Tree”, she had lots of peeps to connect with.

“Bloom, my dear! And how are you on this fine, fine spring evening?”

It was Dewey, a gentleman of about sixty and one of her regulars.

“Can’t complain in the slightest, my good man,” she called, already preparing a dry martini for him. For whatever reason, she always fell into mock high-borne speech with him.

Actually, come to think of it, it was hardly for no reason. He was full-fae after all, and in that sense, certainly more high-born than herself, though he wasn’t the type to even register something like that.

“And if I may ask after the tomatoes, my good man?”

“You most certainly may. All of my garden is coming in quite nicely. If you are lucky, I may bring you some green beans soon enough.”

“I shall look forward to the day,” she said as she scanned the growing crowd. It was quickly filling up.

*Oh shit.* Nilsa had said they might swing by. *And here they are.*

“Councilman Cliffwyn, um... Nilsa, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Hello, Bloom. What, I don’t get the title, but he does?” the fae woman retorted in a friendly enough voice.

“Oh. No, I meant...”

But the woman quickly interrupted her, “Please, are you kidding? Of course, call me Nilsa. That’s the least I can do to honor your father.”

Bloom felt the familiar stab of pain in her gut. Actually, over time it had become more of a dull ache.

“And please,” said the man, “Call me Finch. Like she said, your father is sorely missed. And I think it’s about time we got on a first name basis.”

“And to what do I owe this honor?”

Humans, fae, and shifter; all were welcome here, even if for the most part, this was a fae watering hole.

*For some crazy reason, shifters don’t seem to gravitate to drinking inside a literal tree—Shocker.* Of course they had the Grizzly Den down the road, but still it seemed a plenty of shifters still liked to come and hang out here, so they weren’t that rare a sight in the fae haunt. *Variety is the spice of life.*

“Believe it or not, but no real reason, I haven’t been in, really, since a while back when your father hosted a few informal council meetings here. I’m sorry I haven’t made myself more known to the famous Tree bar. I guess I should consider myself lucky that it let me in!” he laughed.

“Well, glad to have you, then, Finch. And thank you, it’s nice to know my father is still remembered.”

“Still remembered? Are you kidding? Of course, he is. And I want you to know that we haven’t given up...” he started.

Bloom looked around. Things were already picking up. And she really didn’t want to go there right now.

“Of course. Thank you, Councilman... Finch. What can I get for you guys?”

With that, she took their order. *And narrowly escaped another uncomfortable walk down painful-memory lane.*

She served them up their drinks and as they made their way to a table off

in the quieter dining area, she went back to surveying the main bar room.

The clientele tonight was mostly Fae, with the majority being friendly faces she often saw around town. *Friendly faces? Were they, though? They weren't unfriendly.*

"Guinness, Please," she heard called over the bar.

It was Rocky Clark, the local reporter.

*Too bad he's no Clark Kent, though.*

*What do you care anyhow?*

It was true, she had more or less given up in that department.

Still, he was a good guy. Fae, but not militantly so. He tended to be relatively fair in his coverage in the Herald. The Enchanted Edition, of course. He handled it all, humans too, but the supernaturals got the additional section.

"Lively crowd tonight," Tam commented as Wendy poured Rocky's stout.

"Yes, ma'am. Everyone blowing off steam as per usual. Come one, come all to the world famous Tree bar!"

"World famous, really?" Tam said, "I knew it was a big deal, of course," she added.

Sometimes, Bloom forgot just how new Tam was to the Magical realms. She made her look like an old soul by comparison. That was probably why she felt so comfortable with her. She didn't have to pretend she fit in with Tam.

"World famous-ish amongst the fae, and probably a lot of other magical beings, at least. Yeah, we're a big deal. Right, Ash?" She said that last part out to the room in no particular direction, addressing the spirit that enchanted the Tree itself.

The lights flickered a little in seeming acknowledgment.

"Wow. It is so cool that you have your own enchanted bar as a home!" Tam gushed.

"Well, it's not like I had a whole lot of say in the matter. My mom just plopped me here back when I was ten. 'Hey, meet your dad! By the way, you have a dad. Oh, and he's Fae...oh, and magic's real. Bye now.'"

"That must have been crazy hard," Tam said. "I mean, I thought it was hard for me realizing I was half-fae as an adult. 'But to be ripped out of your old life at ten, and with your mom dying and everything and coming here!'"

"Jeez, you make it sound so tragic. Can we talk about something else?"



“What? Oh, sorry, Bloom, I didn’t know it still bothered you!”

“It usually doesn’t. It was twenty years ago. I guess I’m just having a moment. Honestly, that kind of stuff never totally leaves you, I don’t think. You have any deep fae wisdom for me?”

She interrupted their conversation for a moment as she served up Rocky’s Guinness, after having let it settle for the prescribed few minutes.

“Thanks, Bloom!” he called as he plucked it up and disappeared into the crowd.

She made a note on his tab.

“Wisdom? Not sure I’d put it like that, but yeah” she said. Tam paused for just a second before she seemed to hit on a thought. “June says that sometimes we have to go deep into the darkness to really appreciate the light.” She waited expectantly, apparently to see if this particular bit of wisdom was helpful for Bloom.

“Oh yeah, is that what June says?” *I’m not impressed.* She’d had enough of the darkness for a lifetime, thank you very much.

She removed a few empties off the bar and wiped it down in anticipation of the next wave.

Tam seemed to scramble for a second. “I know I haven’t had to deal with the same stuff you have, Bloom. First your mother and then what happened with your dad.” She paused again, as if to be sure it was okay to proceed. “But there is always hope, you know? Anyhow, she has really helped me. Without her, I don’t know how I’d have made the transition and embraced being a half fae. I feel like I am really finding myself here in Fae Crossing. I’m sure it doesn’t hurt being right on top of one of the most powerful energy vortexes in the fae realms, of course.”

Bloom stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Growing up in Fae Crossing, since the age of ten at least, she was used to the hard core spiritual fae that flocked there. The place was a kind of mecca for the Light Fae. *Everyone has their path, I guess.* It seemed to be helping Tam at least.

“That’s great, Tam. Thanks for the tip.”

In truth, she envied Tam. She had only been here a year, and yet she already seemed to have more of a sense of belonging in Fae Crossing than Bloom has established in twenty years.

She was just about to ask her about her new job working with the witches at their shop, Curiouser and Curiouser, but Tam spoke first.

“You see any good prospects?” Tam said as she scanned the crowd with a

glint in her eye.

She just leveled her with a look. “No. And even if I did, I certainly wouldn’t entertain the thought of scoping one out in my own bar.”

God, what was it with tonight? She was pretty sure she had covered about all her sore spots already. Truth was she wasn’t looking to scope out any man anywhere. Men were not her strong suit. She had the bar. That was enough.

*Keep telling yourself that, Bloom.*

But she put on her smile again. “I’m not interested, Tam. I’ve got a good thing going with this business and I’m not looking to screw it up by bringing a man into the picture. Been there, done that. No, thank you.”

For a moment it seemed that was enough for Tam to get the message. “It’s just that, you’re so pretty, and...”

Time for the big guns. One strategic death stare was enough. It stopped Tam mid-sentence. “Okay, I get it. Just sayin’,” she said as she turned on her heel. “I’m going to go mingle.”

“Love ya, Tam,” she said, blowing her a kiss.

She couldn’t blame Tam, not really, and she hoped the death stare wasn’t too much. Her last shit show attempt at a relationship had pre-dated her friendship with Tam so she couldn’t really understand. And she had no interest in bringing Tam up to speed. No, she’d had enough of men. Didn’t even seem to matter, Fae or shifter. No, thanks.

*Definitely not shifter.*

She literally shook her whole body to clear out all the old garbage that was threatening to surface.

*Deep breath.*

She breathed out.

*Turning the page.*

Her life circumstances struck her as ironic on more than one occasion. Here she was, the proprietor of the town hub, and yet she was probably the loneliest person in the room. At least that’s what she told herself. *I guess I have them pretty well fooled*, she thought sadly as she surveyed the bar.

Still, she tried to remember that she had it pretty good. Fae Crossing was a special place. All were welcome there. If they had a tourist bureau, she thought that’s what it would say on the brochures. *Fae Crossing, where everyone is welcome.*

It was a nice idea. But the reality was often far from that lofty ideal. She shook her head as Marius sidled up to the bar.

“The usual, love,” he called.

*Right, one scotch on the rocks.*

“Coming up,” she called as she set to make the drink.

All *were* welcome but that didn’t mean they were one big happy family. To say Fae and shifters were a natural fit was more than a stretch. More like oil and water. *Facts*. As she got a rocks glass down, she refocused. *Don’t go down that road, Bloom*. It had already been five years, which seemed impossible. But it had been. It still hurt as much today as when it had first happened. Back to the task at hand.

“Scotch on the rocks.” She poured in a few fingers and pushed it across the bar to him.

“What’s with the hat, Marius? Never took you for the baseball cap type,” she chirped conversationally. Marius was a pretty nondescript sort of middle management type fae. Nondescript beyond being about six foot two and two hundred fifty pounds with a serious case of dad bod as they called it these days. He could definitely use some time on the stair master. Work-wise he did something with the governing body if she remembered correctly. Usually came in and had a drink on his own. A good customer really.

“What? Oh, nothing, just thought I’d give it a try,” he said, a little more animated than usual. She really wished he’d take it off inside, but that courtesy seemed to only be something seen in old movies now.

“Got it,” she replied as she rinsed out her bar rag and started a wash of glasses.

Scanning the room to see if anyone was in need of something, she noted a group of shifters off in the corner were getting a little loud. When the drinks started flowing, even the most sedate people got loud. Shifters? Forget it. She was all for them wanting to broaden their horizons, but man, they could get loud. Still, she tried to give people a fairly long leash when it came to blowing off steam, and she had instructed her staff to do the same. Even shifters. The Tree was, after all, kind of the town’s main watering hole – for fae at least, and as such, it should be their happy place. That was the vibe the bar held as well.

But every once in a while, limits had to be enforced, of course. The Fair Folk bar was right at the heart of Fae Crossing, quite literally. Right at the main intersection of Mountain View and Willow Way. They didn’t hold back on their strong drinks. In fact, if drinks were going to have any effect at all on most of the clients, they had to be both strong and enchanted to one degree or

another. The shifters were fine for the moment but she gave Mack a nod in their direction anyhow. He was handling the other end of the bar and sided up to her to be heard over the crowd.

“Oh, don’t you worry, I got my eye on them,” he said. “And I told Wendy already to start watering down their drinks a bit,” he added with a wink. “Comped, of course.”

“Just checking.” She smiled back.

“No worries, your father was the master of handling that sort. He trained me well.”

She had known Mack as long as she had known her father, really, and with her father gone now, he was sort of like a father to her. And with the circumstances of her father’s demise that had become doubly so. And besides the connection to her father, his perspective as a human was also invaluable. Even though she had been in the magical world going on two decades, it was still often strange and overwhelming.

Mack, even more so that Tam was really the only one who knew just how alone she often felt.

“Don’t know what I’d do without ‘cha, Mack,” she quipped as they each returned to their ends of the bar.

She slapped her rag down and smiled. *I guess it’s not so bad.*

Yep, sometimes it was hard to remember what life had been like as a little girl back in the outside human world. This was home now. At least she had Mack and Wendy. And she even had a few friends. *I have Tam.* They were her little family now.

And of course, The Tree. Or the spirit of the tree, Ash. That part had been a bit of an adjustment. But at only ten years old, coming here and learning that magic was real had been more of a confirmation of what every little girl and boy knows, rather than some big revelation. Still, realizing the bar itself was enchanted had been rather... She struggled for the word in her head.

*Trippy. Yeah, it’s still trippy.*

But she had adjusted. Given the spirit a name.

And now, after the events of the last few years, she was still adjusting. She just wished her father were still there. They had just been beginning to build a real relationship. And then he was gone.

Murdered.

*Stop it. You don’t know that, Bloom.* But she did.

They had said it could have been a wild animal.

*Wild animal my ass.*

She felt her temper flaring all over again.

*Okay, Bloom, get a grip. Happy place. Go to your happy place.*

“Who is gonna buy me a drink? It’s my birthday!” Marius’ voice pulled her out of her reverie as he bellowed to no one and everyone all at once, spittle flying from his lips.

He was in rare form. Like *super rare* form.

*What’s gotten into him?*

She looked down the bar to see that Mack had also clocked his increasing antics. She was all for live and let live, but when you were in charge of the bar, you had to know when to cut people off. She locked eyes with Mack and waved her hand across her neck, signaling what was already obvious. Marius was now cut off.

*What is going on?* This wasn’t Marius.

It was, of course. He was right there. But in the years he had been coming in she had never seen him like *this*.

And he wasn’t just drunk. A sort of shiver or tingle went up Bloom’s spine, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She could feel the slightest tension coming from the bar itself. *Something is off*.

“First off all, Marius, it is *not* your birthday, because your birthday, according to you, was last week,” Mack said to him.

“Oh, come on, Bloom. Just one more,” he said, changing his focus to her again. “What’za harm?” he managed to mumble as he suddenly leapt up onto the bar with surprising agility.

“What the...” Mack said as he came down the bar. Mack might be human and past his prime years, but he was still built like a brick shithouse, as they said.

Noticing Mack approaching, he leaped down. Actually, it was sort of half leap, half float.

*What the fuck?*

Fae had certain magical gifts, and they varied, but to say it was in poor form to display them was an understatement. The word *gauche* came to mind. Or cringe. The ill-fitting baseball cap pulled low on his head only added to the effect.

“Marius, what has gotten into you? You are getting close to earning yourself a one way ticket out of here...more than close!” she said, raising her voice a bit.

“Oh hey, sorry, sorry,” he said, almost seeming surprised himself at his antics. For a split second he almost seemed normal before his eyes clouded over again with a far-away look. He was the weirdest combination of hyper and drunk all at once she had ever seen.

As if on cue, he tumbled toward the bar again, causing the patrons in his immediate vicinity to scatter, this time Tam among them.

She let out a yell, probably for fear of being either stepped, spit on, or worse. Marius was a big boy.

“Jeezus,” she said, as much out of confusion as out of surprise. None of this made sense. Mack was at her side now. This was escalating quickly. Had he been drinking before he arrived?

“Marius, I think it’s time you called it a night.”

“Called it an ite?” he said back to her, “I’m just gett’n’ started!”

“Marius, I’m serious, buddy, Time to go.”

“Hey, you can’t tell me to ‘eve, it’s my birfday!”

“Lucas!” she called. It was time for the heavy guns.

Looking around, no Lucas anywhere.

*Where the hell is the bouncer when I need him?*

“Now gimme a drink!” He pushed his way between two young fae, sending them toppling off their stools, as he leaned right over the bar reaching around to try and grab a bottle right out of the wall.

“Lucas!”

But she instantly realized she wouldn’t be needing Lucas. She felt the air crackle. The bar had had enough. Marius had pushed it too far. It seemed to confirm that creeping feeling she had on the back of her neck as well.

“Oh boy. I told you, Marius,” she said, holding her hands up in sort of apologetic shrug. “Now you’ve pissed off Ash.”

The lights flickered and she could feel the electricity in the air building even more.

“Oh, come on, wait,” he said, suddenly struggling to get control of himself. “Uh, I’m sorry, uh, Mr. Tree bar, or, um. Ash. I’m going. I promise. I didn’t know...” He started to back away from the bar, but it was too late.

The entire room shimmered, and then flashed, and then *poof*, Marius was gone. No loud crash, no boom, just *poof*. The sound of the door swinging shut echoed in the room.

After a beat, the crowd resumed its happy hum.

*What the hell was that?* She looked at Mack. “Is it me or was that pretty

weird? I mean, Marius.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. But I’ve seen stranger. The Tree handled it.” Mack shrugged as he went back to work. She almost felt bad, but really was more confused. At the same time it had been handled. She had enough to worry about without adding anything to the list. She bent over and kissed the bar. It didn’t take any shit, that was for sure. “You’re the best.”

Just then Lucas finally appeared, “You call me?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she smiled. “It’s all sorted.”

## CHAPTER 2



Dax almost ran his car right into the man. He'd literally just appeared laying in a heap by the side of the road. If he had passed a minute sooner, he wouldn't have been there, and a minute later, he would have just assumed he had been laying there all along, if he had even noticed him at all. Though this wasn't the first time he'd seen the tail end of someone getting teleported – he assumed via fae magic – it was the first time they had appeared almost right in front of him on the road while he was driving. He thought he had a good idea just where he had been ported from too.

*Dax, let it go. She had nothing to do with this. Right?*

Focusing back on the crumpled heap, it was pretty obvious it hadn't been a voluntary trip... though he couldn't actually be sure. Dax shook his head. This was a weird town, and as the top law man, he had seen it all.

For a brief second, he considered just driving on, but immediately dismissed it. It had been a long day and he was exhausted. Still, he had to check it out, of course. But God, there were times he definitely got sick of dealing with the fae and their high borne airs. But still, he believed in the mission he had taken on. They could all co-exist. That was what his father had told him.

*At least until everything went to shit.*

He pulled over to see what the story was. As he got closer to the guy, all he could tell was that he looked to be a pretty sizable fella. He also didn't seem to have any pants on. *Wonderful. So, do we have a nut job here? Or maybe that had happened in transit.* He chuckled to himself. *The mystery grows deeper.*

Dax called out, "Hey buddy, you alright? What happened here?" Even



though he was keeping his distance, he could feel his dragon at the ready. It paced as it took in the situation.

He heard a grumble from the heap of a man. *Good, at least he's not dead.* He walked a little bit closer, "Are you okay, sir? Looks like you got 'ported. I'm kind of assuming this wasn't your doing." Now he definitely had his suspicions of just whose doing it was, though. "Can you tell me where you just came from?"

The man rolled over onto his back with a groan. *Ohhh.*

Dax knew who it was immediately. His dragon had sensed that it was a fae, but that was it. But now he recognized him.

He relaxed immediately and breathed a little easier. "Marius, you okay, my friend? What happened?"

Marius was sort of the definition of *vanilla*. Certainly not a troublemaker. But this was a fae he was dealing with. Working with the Tribunal he had often been surprised by their idiosyncrasies.

Shifters he understood implicitly. Even humans he felt he had a good sense of. But fae were still capable of surprising him. He just didn't understand the fae at all, and so he had given up trying. All he knew was that they seemed to think they were better than his kind. *Not all of them are that way*, he reminded himself. *But a lot of them.* Which was fine. Let them think whatever they wanted.

Ugg, he hated to be a hater, but he just felt more comfortable dealing with shifters. *Why did I think taking over as alpha of the Fae Crossing was a good idea again?* It was just a rhetorical question he often asked himself, but still the answer came nonetheless. *Because you still believed you could all get along. That you could protect all. Like your father raised you to believe.*

Right before he fucked off.

That was all well and good, but the fae still kind of freaked Dax out.

Regardless of his thoughts on it now, when his dad had started talking of abandoning their sworn pledge as a pack, he had stepped up. He had given his word, and he would not go back on that.

And the truth was that despite the challenges it brought up for him, both external and internal, he believed in their mission. They could all live together. They all had something to learn from one another. Something to offer.

And the shifter contribution was that they provided the law in this town, with occasional support from the fae and the witches.

Witches. Another class of freaky altogether, he thought. But at least they were humans.

He refocused on the task at hand.

“You with me, buddy? Marius? Can you tell me what happened?”

“Hey Dax. I was just mindin’ my bidness.”

“Uh huh. Do you have any idea where you are now?” Dax asked, trying to assess his mental state.

“Of course I doe where I am,” he said, his speech slurred by a strange drunk-giddy cadence. He looked around, and getting his bearings finally said, “Willow Way...” He looked around a bit more. “Way out. By the quarry! Yeah!”

With that, he twirled his hand and a wind picked up and spun beneath him and he began to rise...

“Marius, quit it with the magic...”

He took a step back as he spoke. Magic spooked him at the best of times. But everything about this situation was already wrong to begin with. It only added to his growing unease.

“What the hell are you doing?” This definitely wasn’t normal fae behavior. Unless he was mistaken, Marius had no idea what he was doing either.

Dax knew fae had a magic that was kind of the polar opposite of shifter magic. Fae were more...ethereal. But from what he knew and had seen, they were also very private, and ostentatious would be the last word to describe them.

Not to mention he had never seen a fae make wind. *Not this kind of wind at least.* He laughed to himself at his own dumb joke.

“Marius, where did you say you were?” He was back on guard. His dragon was at the ready.

The little eddy that had begun to lift Marius ceased and he fell back to the ground in a heap again, albeit in a slightly more comfortable looking position.

Unless he was mistaken, Marius seemed as unsettled by the wind as he did. He was just sitting there looking confused, drunk, and maybe a bit manic all at once. Dax’s dragon clawed at the proverbial ground.

*Danger.*

Dax repeated himself. “Can you tell me how you happened to pop up here of all places?” He was speaking slowly and over enunciating to make sure he

was understood.

Marius, who had still been sitting by the side of the road up to this point, slowly got up from the pavement. “Oh, yer gonna hear all about it,” he said, as he dusted himself off. “I work with the council, you know? She had no right, or that damn bar had no right! I was apparated without my pemish... permission! I was just having a good time! Can’t a guy have a good time? I’m full fae too, ya know? From a proud line. Ain’t right what they did.”

*I’m full fae, you know?* He hated that line, but he was surprised to hear Marius utter it. It was definitely a thing with a lot of fae, though. He couldn’t remember the last time he had heard someone say ‘I’m full shifter, ya know?’ though he knew there were shifters with that attitude too.

So what, though. It also didn’t mean squat as far as the law was concerned. But now at least he had a clearer picture of what had happened.

“Ah, the Fair Folk. Am I right?” He had to consciously release the tension that had immediately appeared in his jaw. “That tree spirit does not suffer...” He stopped mid-sentence in order to rephrase it. “It doesn’t play around.”

*Or was it Bloom?* Had she booted him? He had a feeling he knew where this was heading already, and he didn’t like it one bit.

*Great, this ought to be fun.*

“Dax? You’re in charge, you say, so I demand you do something. I had a couple drinks. That’s my regular bar. I need to go there. It’s my right. I had it all figured out...” Now he was really on a drunken rant, Dax thought. “I did. It is all gonna be okay, but you gotta fix it...”

Dax tired of his nonsensical stream of consciousness and shut him up with a glare.

Up until now Dax couldn’t completely put his finger on what was so alarming. His dragon was totally on edge. Hell, *he* was on edge. Doubly so now that he suspected he was going to have to deal with *her* on this.

Part of it was the uncanny drunk-giddy behavior. The weird magical wind thing was part of it too. But he realized it was mostly that Marius just seemed so different.

*Totally different.* He rolled it over in his head.

*Different?*

Where he had always been mild-mannered, and a fun drunk on the rare occasions he had seen him drunk, now he was belligerent and demanding. And did he sense fear as well? He wasn’t sure. But he was himself, that was for sure. And the magic thing. It was all of those things and none of them.

Dax's dragon was on high alert. And in this arena he trusted his dragon implicitly. When it came to other issues, like mates for instances, Dax had reason for doubt, however. Boy, did he ever.

"Marius, I'm sure you deserved what you got. I don't know what you did, but you should know you can only push things so far at that bar. That woman and that bar are not of the forgiving sort."

He knew that all too well.

"I don't have to listen to you, Dax. I don't have to listen to anyone. I had a plan. I had it all figured out!"

This was definitely not the Marius he knew. He could take him down to the Tribunal for public intoxication, no question. But that wasn't why he was going to take him in. The real reason was gut instinct. Dax's skin was tingling. Something was going on.

"Marius, you are coming with me, if for no other reason than because I can't have you wandering around in the bush in your underwear!"

"Dammit, Dax. I am not going anywhere with you! I'll go right to the Fae council, the *real* law!"

Suddenly, Marius moved very quickly. *Too* quickly. Especially considering he was drunk. But the combination worked against him. He rose in a flash, tripped over a nearby branch just as quickly, and face-planted hard into the dirt. He was out cold.

*What the fuck is going on?*

Dax shook his head as he looked down at the heap known as Marius.

"Welp, Marius, gotta say I'm kinda feelin' like the real law right now," he quipped with more than a little satisfaction. "I guess I better get you in the back of the truck, big boy," he added into the night air.

He didn't generally talk to himself, but it was a habit he had taken to on late night patrols like this. Even with Dax's enhanced strength, it took a bit of grit to hoist the huge man onto his shoulder. He carried him over and opened the back of his truck, rather unceremoniously dumping the man in. Marius' cap had fallen off in the process and he threw it in on top of him before slamming the back closed. "You're lucky I'm a nice guy," he said to the unconscious man.

"Plus, I know the importance of a good hat."

\* \* \*

HE SHOOK HIS HEAD AS HE CHUCKLED TO HIMSELF. IF HE HAD A PENNY FOR every time some fae insulted him and threatened to talk to the ‘real law’. Irony was, he *was* the real law. The fae had helped set it up that way along with the shifters back when the town was going through its heyday and first growing as a sort of newly-minted spiritual hotspot for the fae. They said it was some sort of energy vortex or something. *Whatever.*

What was clear was that it had become a sort of hub for supernaturals. And wherever you got a bunch of supernaturals together, you needed the law. And he and the Tribunal were it.

He drove into town and hooked left at the main intersection on his way to the Tribunal. As he did, he couldn’t help but see The Tree there. It was hard to miss.

*Ugg.* He still held out hope that he wouldn’t have to deal with *her*. Hopefully, this would turn out to be a whole lot of nothing, and he could pass it off to Rollo or maybe Jack to deal with.

He pulled into the lot by the massive building. It was a Roman-style building with sort of art deco influences. He thought it looked pretty cool, really. Not that his opinion mattered.

Heaving Marius onto his shoulder again, and once again remembering to grab his hat, he strolled in and went right to the cells they usually referred to as the drunk tank.

The place had the skeleton night crew and he only passed a few random desk jockeys who were burning the midnight oil.

Laying Marius down with a little more care this time, he turned and was about to leave when he remembered the hat, which he still clutched. As he went to set it on the floor by the little bed in the cell, he noticed something on Marius’s forehead. It was part obscured by his hair. Inching a little closer, Dax carefully brushed the hair out of the way, being careful not to rouse the man, though he was pretty sure he could start yelling and the guy wouldn’t have budged.

*Huh.* Seemed he had gotten a bump on the head or something. Or maybe he was just laying on his face the whole ride, Dax thought as he shut and locked the cell door, locking Marius in.

He thought about taking a second look when he was brought out of his thoughts by a familiar voice.

“Hey boss, who do we have here? You nab another fae criminal mastermind?”

He laughed as he turned. “Hey man. Just Marius, I’m afraid. Looks like he got tossed out on his ass by The Tree. I found him out by the quarry.”

“Oh boy.” Rollo gave him a knowing look. “So, I guess you’ll be heading out to visit your lady friend tomorrow, then?”

“Very funny,” Dax growled. Then a beat later in a more mellow tone, he continued, “I don’t see that ever working out at this point. And no way I’m going to go deal with her wrath. Besides, why would I go when I can just leave that to you?”

“Well, you are the boss. But you know I have been promising the boys all month that we are going to head to the coast for a beach weekend, remember? You wouldn’t want them disappointed, would you?”

Inwardly, he groaned. Was that this weekend? Wasn’t he just the lucky guy. “No need to disappoint them. Tomorrow’s Friday. You can head to the bar before the crowds tomorrow evening.”

“We’re leaving midmorning. Remember, I told you?”

Shit. He did remember. And if anyone deserved a beach weekend, it was those boys. Especially the younger two. “Yeah, man, no. Sorry, I forgot. Do the beach thing, a hundred percent.”

“Thanks, Dax.”

“Are you bringing a lady to the beach?”

“What? No way. Kids are just getting over Brie walking out on us. Last thing they need is a new mom right now. Add that to what the little ones have been through, and just no. I don’t want to add to that trauma.”

“Who said anything about a new mom? But maybe just a cute nanny?” Dax said, giving him a knowing wink.

“Come on, man. That’s creepy.”

Dax laughed, “I’m serious, though. You must be losing your mind with the four of them.”

“You don’t know the half of it. But they’re good kids. I can handle them. Still, I do need to decide on a nanny. Just haven’t found the right one.”

“Got it,” Dax said.

“And hey, nice try. I see what you did there,” Rollo said, “turning the focus onto me.”

“Whatever,” Dax said, sidestepping the assertion.

Looking back at Marius, Rollo returned to the original topic, “So, The Tree ‘ported him into the middle of nowhere? I still don’t get what the big deal is? Last time I checked, that’s within fae limits of acceptable. We don’t

need to get involved. I mean, definitely not in light of the other investigation. It will only get messy.”

“That’s my fear exactly, but seems like this has to be dealt with, whether we like it or not. Marius is acting weird. I’m just getting a crazy vibe from the whole thing. It is feeling like it could be one big clusterfuck, though. He kind of threatened to get the council involved too.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Rollo replied.

“My thoughts exactly. Now get out of here. Have a good weekend, and more importantly, make sure the pups have a great weekend. I’ll get one of the other guys to handle this.”

“Thanks, boss.” Still, instead of leaving, Rollo stood there.

“What is it?”

“Just... Maybe handle this one yourself. You never know what might happen if you meet with Bloom again.”

He shot him a look, “You must be high. Are you high?” Dax asked as he pulled out his penlight to shine it in Rollo’s eyes.

Rollo said, “I get that circumstances might not be ideal, but I swear you guys were a good match, a great match. While it lasted at least.”

Dax couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Brother, at this point she practically hates my guts. She thinks we totally abandoned the investigation. That we are sitting on our hands!”

“That doesn’t change the fact that there is something there.”

Dax just shook his head.

“I will take your words under advisement,” he said. “Get home safe.” They fist-bumped and did the traditional half bro-hug as they said goodnight.

\* \* \*

HE HEADED TOWARD HIS HOUSE THROUGH THE DARK NIGHT. IT HAD BEEN A bit of a long day. The shit with Marius was still eating at him. Maybe it was the comment on the “real law”, or maybe it was just the long hours he had been putting in lately.

There were times he went for weeks barely even thinking about his father. How he had just abandoned the pack.

What he had said. “*Only a fool would think fae and shifters could ever really get along.*”

Like he needed to think about that again. For whatever reason, he felt the pull of his dragon.

*Who are you kidding?*

His dragon let out a roar of protest. He knew exactly why he had to break loose. All that other stuff was just par for the course in his line of work. And his father had disappeared a good ten years ago.

No. It was her.

*Bloom.*

This business with Marius had only stirred the pot. And it was a pot he did his best to keep a lid on. Not an easy task in a small town like Fae Crossing.

He did his best to refocus his thoughts. *Anything but her. Dammit.*

He was just heading into the more mountainous terrain of his home in the high woods. He pulled his truck over. It couldn't wait. He needed to fly. Not in ten minutes when he got home. Now.

He took off his button down and jeans and left them in a heap on the front seat. His dragon was practically tearing at his skin now.

He let his beast come to the front as he shifted and leaped into the air as his dragon. His powerful wings beat the air as the blood pumped into his scaled arms and legs. The exhilaration of the shift was beyond words. The freedom indescribable.

The turmoil and confusing feelings that Bloom tapped into faded more with every powerful beat of his wings. Each shift was almost like a new birth, especially on days like this where he had held back for so long. He alternately soared and plummeted.

He let the annoyance of dealing with fools like Marius drift to the back of his mind as well. Even thoughts of the council and of the investigation fell off until his daily challenges were just a faint shadow.

It was good to be a dragon. It was a moonless night and he took full advantage, flying high and low over the dark wooded ridges and valleys of the Clouded Woods until late into the night.



## CHAPTER 3



At the end of the night, she ushered the last of her customers out. In many ways, it had been pretty typical. Every night was different, of course, but it was all more or less variations of a theme, depending on the crowd, and on her mood, and of course, the mood of ‘the bar’ itself.

She was used to the sometimes temperamental ways of “Ash,” as she called it since she had no idea if the ancient fae spirit were male or female. Not that it mattered. Regardless, the bar seemed to do as it wished.

She’d known it to close after only a few hours, based solely on the tension in the air. She had never considered disagreeing or fighting with the bar’s call. That was just part and parcel of living in an enchanted tree. She continued wiping down the bar.

But there had been just something weird with Marius.

*Whatever.*

Ash had handled it. Like it always did. But something about it had been unsettling.

Thoughts of her father drifted into her mind. She began to scrub at a particularly resistant ketchup stain, as if erasing it would delete the sadness that had risen in her.

No point dwelling. Because he’s not here. And he never will be here again.

She focused her efforts to polishing the bar for a few more minutes before Mack’s voice cut through her reverie.

“Hey Princess, I’m heading out, okay?”

“God, Mack. You scared me to death.”

“Sorry, hon. Everything all good? I see that look in your eye.”

“What look?” she asked, continuing to wipe down the dark oak bar.

“That look. I know it. That’s your ‘I’m thinking about my dad’ look.”

She just gave him a look. “Didn’t realize I was so transparent.”

“You’re not. I just know what to look for.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “But I’m okay, thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay kiddo,” he said as he turned to go. But he turned back at looked at her. “Bloom, he was a good man, your father. He meant a lot to this town. Hell, he worked more than all of us combined. But when you came along, out of the blue like that,” Mack paused. “Well, sure, at first he was a bit shocked, maybe even a little pissed that your mom had kept you a secret from him. But boy, was he proud too. He loved you a lot. Everyone can’t say that, so you hold that close, okay? That’s what you hold onto.”

“Ah, Mack...you know how to get to me! Thank you. I will hold onto that.”

“Goodnight, kiddo.”

“Night, Mack.” And he was gone.

It was just her here now.

Mack had been telling the truth. She had felt it. Her dad’s love. While his first love had clearly been The Tree and its patrons, her father had made room for her in his heart. He had brought her in, raised her and instilled in her that same love for The Tree, and really for the whole town. But she had not been born here, and try as she might, all the welcoming smiling faces never quite reached her heart.

Only her father had done that.

And one other. *Him*.

Too bad that had turned sour as well.

She still couldn’t believe it. Everything had a way of turning to shit for her.

No, she was meant to be alone.

Besides, she had The Tree. That was enough.

Eventually she made her way upstairs to her own quarters. It had been a long day. So much had happened that she was wrung out both physically and emotionally. And she was ready for it. Blissful unconsciousness.

Hopefully she would make it to morning with no three A.M. wake ups. She was too tired and had no sooner laid down in bed than she was out.

## CHAPTER 4



The next morning, he was maybe a little surprised to feel a renewed pep in his step as he strode into the Tribunal office, and that was before he even grabbed a coffee.

*I guess I needed that shift and flight more than I thought.*

He felt his dragon swing its massive tail around in annoyance. *We needed that shift.*

He stopped off at the kitchen area to get his caffeine fix on and headed for his desk, ready to tackle the day.

As he passed through the door, he gave the little plaque that read “Chief” a little polish.

*Alpha. That’s what it should say,* he thought.

His pack was a solid bunch, though. He hardly even had to play that card. Really, the challenge for himself and the rest of them was handling the fae and the witches. Or rather, navigating the politics.

Rollo was already at his desk as he took a seat.

“So, I assume you came by just to rub it in my face that you are heading to the beach?”

“You know me so well,” Rollo quipped back. “But sadly, no, just making sure I have everything covered while I am away. Being the peacekeepers in this crazy town offers no real rest. Even when I am not here, my mind is.”

“Don’t I know it,” Dax replied. “I really lucked out when you boys headed the call.”

“Goes both ways, brother. You have held us together through thick and thin.”

“I’m just saying I don’t know what I would have done had you all not

answered the call. Sometimes I still wonder if I did the right thing taking over the pack,” Dax said, spinning around in his chair, his hands folded behind his head.

“Brother, there would be no Fae Crossing Pack if it weren’t for you. No, you didn’t need to pick up the pieces after what happened, but you did. And who wouldn’t want to come here and be right in the thick of it? As far as I am concerned, we are the glue that holds together the whole magical world. At least west of the Mississippi.”

“Tell that to the council. I swear, they don’t appreciate us. They don’t know how much we have on our plate.”

“Facts. Sometimes I almost understand why your father left.”

Anger rose in Dax. “Fuck him. He quit, is what he did. Broke his bond. I will never forgive him for that. And I am always gonna live up to my word.”

“I said almost, Dax. It’s been fifteen years now and I’ve never regretted a day.”

“You sure about that?” Dax said, meeting Rollo’s gaze.

He knew Rollo knew exactly what he was referring to.

“We have been through the shit, brother. And we are gonna come out of it. We will catch that son of a bitch,” Rollo said.

“We better. I’m getting sick of having nothing to say for myself but ‘no comment,’ on that score.

“Don’t you worry about anyone else. We are doing what we need to do. I’d like to see them handle one day of policing this town.”

“I know, but doesn’t make it any easier. People wanting answers, and we got nothing for them.”

*She wants answers, you mean.*

“Soon enough, Dax. We’ll get him.”

“Damn right we will,” Dax said.

“Amen.”

“How can we not? You and the other boys are the best of the best. That’s all I can say.”

“Fae Crossing Pack forever, brother. Ride or die,” Rollo said. “We’d die of boredom without the fae to keep us on our toes.”

“Don’t forget about Etta and Company,” he said, referring to the witches.

“Yeah, they are always good for a laugh,” Rollo added.

“Not sure that’s exactly how I would put it,” Dax responded. “Gotta admit, sometimes I wonder if my dad might be right,” he continued. “It feels

like we are barely holding things together.”

“Bullshit. We hold this town together, Dax. Scratch that. You do.”

“Maybe we have, so far. The pack. But it feels like it’s always hanging right there, in the balance.”

The two were quiet for a minute.

“Deep talk for Friday morning, buddy,” Rollo finally quipped.

Dax laughed. “You know the irony is that Fae Crossing is considered this sacred energy vortex for the fae. Sure is a lot of drama for a supposedly sacred area.”

“Well, the vortex doesn’t create the drama. It’s all the people it attracts. The place is like one of those California gold rush towns.”

“True enough, and without it, we would have never even met,” he pointed out.

Plenty of shifters had been drawn to the area along with the rest back in the day. There was ample opportunity to make some money in any number of businesses and miles and miles of open land for the taking. Of course, this was all right under the noses of the humans who were moving into the area as well, for the most part totally in the dark about the popularity of the area amongst the supernatural types.

Dax pointed to the framed old time picture of the town on the wall. It had been taken right at the four corners. That same row of old buildings on the left still stood. The Witch’s Curio shop, aptly named Curioser and Curioser, was there. And of course The Tree stood tall off to the right. A motley crew of hard looking folks dotted the scene.

“Could you imagine being around when the founders got together to form our pack. Must have been nuts.”

Just like in any old west town, the lawlessness soon became an issue, and it wasn’t long before the shifters and the fae struck up an agreement to set up the Tribunal’s base right here in Fae Crossing.

It was centrally located for the region, and probably the most in need of a firm hand, so voilà, the Tribunal was established, and the Fae Crossing pack coalesced as the call for solid lawmen spread.

“If you think we have trouble hashing out our differences now, can you imagine what it must have been like back then?” Rollo mused, still looking at the old black and white picture.

There were stories from back in the beginning about the growing pains of the pack learning how to work with the fae authorities and the witches. Over

the years, though, the centuries, really, they had forged something of a working relationship. Other than a few blow ups from time to time, by all accounts they had made it work to the benefit of all involved.

“Well, I don’t think we have to imagine. Sometime we could go dig in the archives. Maybe read up on all that shit that went down back then when the fae cast out King Firo. I guess he was as dirty as they come,” Dax said.

That had almost torn them all apart and tested the bond between the different peoples.

But they had made it through, and it had ultimately solidified the Tribunal’s place as they had stood by the current King Tarragon.

In fact, that whole episode had kind of cemented the formation of the Fae Crossing Pack. And even though that had gone down more than a century ago, the king had never forgotten the shifters’ support.

“Just as soon as we have a day off, I’ll get right on that,” Rollo joked.

“Yeah, I hear you. Good talk, man. Sometimes it’s good to remind ourselves of our mission. Of the history here. Otherwise I swear, at times I feel like I could lose it. At least we have the Grizzly Den to retreat to.”

Rollo laughed. “And you always have us to bitch too.”

Dax joined him in the laugh, “One of the side benefits of being the Alpha.”

He continued, feeling a little refreshed after venting. “Like you said, this town ain’t boring, and at the end of the day, it’s home.”

“And you gotta admit the fae and the witches come in pretty handy at times. Good friends to have in a pinch,” Rollo added.

“True enough. A little whammie from a fae keeps the doctor away for sure,” he laughed.

The fae and witches were particularly useful when humans saw or otherwise learned a little too much about the true nature of what they likely just considered to be their eccentric neighbors.

Still, he would prefer the company of a shifter any time to a fae or witch. It wasn’t that they were bad or had anything wrong with them. It was just that shifters were easy to understand for him. Someone pissed you off, you let them know, and you settled it right there and then. A few cuts, maybe a broken limb or two, and everything was right as rain.

But with their elemental magic, the Fae freaked him out. And the witches were even worse, always mumbling something just out of earshot and pulling dried plants and shit out of their pockets. *No, thanks. Give me a shifter any*

day.

“Okay, time to get serious here. I have things to handle today,” Dax finally said.

“And I need to finish up and get out of here,” Rollo said as sat back at his desk.

Dax took a seat at his own desk as well.

*Dammit.* He knew why he had been all too happy to just vent for a while. But there was no way to avoid it. *No way to avoid her, you mean.*

*Bloom.*

He thought he felt a headache coming on.

“Hey Dax. So, I hear you are gonna be paying Bloom a visit? That sounds like it will be fun. Maybe give things another try?”

*You have to be kidding. Oh wait.* Maybe there was hope.

He spun his chair around to properly glare at Jack, whose desk was across the bull-pen-like office area they all shared. He had just come in.

“Good news travels fast, huh?”

“Well, Rollo might have mentioned a certain disgruntled fae gentleman getting ‘ported by that freaky bar last night. And I couldn’t help noticing him in the drunk tank this morning either. He is not happy, by the way.”

“Whatever. I couldn’t care less about his feelings at this moment.”

“Hey, what you say goes. Just saying, no need to antagonize the fae more than necessary.”

“Yeah, whatever. We can only do so much to placate them, man.” Dax waved his hand dismissively. He could handle the fae.

*Come to think of it, that should be my job description. Handling Fae.*

“Anyhow, to get back to your little remark, no, I will not be going to The Tree today. *You* will be going to The Tree.”

“Um, well, you know it’s the first Friday of the month, right?” Jack replied.

“Yeah, so?” Dax didn’t like where this was going.

“So, that’s when I always have the Woodland Rambles for the kids. I was just in early to get a few things handled before I head out to my cabin to meet them. Remember?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He threw the pencil he was holding across the room. “Fine. Do your little community service youth thing. Where are Dayton and Clint?”

“Um, I could tell you, but you’re not going to like it,” Jack said, as he

subtly guided his chair behind a nearby filing cabinet, presumably for better cover from flying projectiles.

“Tell me.”

“Fishing.” He waited a beat. “Off the Florida gulf coast.”

He spun around and laid his head on his desk.

“Since when do we have four-day work weeks? And my day started so well.”

“Come on, Dax. You’re the one who said we all deserved some rest. You know we have been going full tilt for a while now. It won’t be that bad.”

“Ugg,” Dax grunted as he sprang out of his chair decisively. “Maybe no one will have to go. Come with me to talk to Marius. I could use an observer while I talk to him. It won’t take long, okay?”

“Absolutely. Let’s go,” Jack said. They all reveled in talking shit to one another, but when it came time for business, their focus was complete.

Dax filled him in on the finer points of what had transpired the night before as they made their way down to the cell in the basement.

Apparently, Marius had not made any trouble that morning.

Sure enough, it was a much different Marius that sat before them when they finally spoke with him.

“Look, like I said, it was all just a misunderstanding,” he said as he sat and rubbed at his temples. Dax also noted that his hat was back squarely on his head. “I don’t want to get the Council involved if I don’t have to, so just let me go on my way and we’ll call it even, alright? Maybe I drank a little too much...that’s it. But you really need to tell that chick to chill out at The Tree. Talk about overreaction.”

Gone was all the bravado, and also the giddiness.

“What was up with your lightning fast speed and that wind trick you did?” Dax asked.

He seemed to pause a split second too long before he responded, “Wind trick? Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. My head is killing me. I’m sorry about the ruckus. Just tell Bloom to let me in no problem next time, and I’ll forget the whole thing. Can I go now, please? And hey, I don’t suppose you have some pants I can borrow?”

Dax almost laughed out loud, “Oh, *you’ll* forget the whole thing? Don’t worry, I will be paying The Tree a visit to get their side of the story. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“No, man, not at all.”



“Okay, you are free to go, Marius. But don’t go too far. The guard will release you in just a few.”

As they walked away, he heard Marius calling after them, “What, no pants?”

As they climbed the stairs back toward the office, he asked Jack what he thought.

“He’s lying. Or holding back. He is definitely concealing something. What it is, I have no idea.”

“I agree.”

They were silent for a bit as they walked back into the office.

“Good luck,” Jack finally said, as he gathered his things to head out.

“With what?”

“With Bloom, of course. I don’t envy you.”

His dragon roared deep in his belly.

*Bloom.*

“It will be okay. Hopefully we can just stick to the reason for my visit today, and leave it at that.”

Jack nodded, but looked unsure.

“I just wish I could come clean with her. It would make it a lot easier. And then maybe she wouldn’t hate me so much.”

“You know we can’t compromise the investigation. She should trust us.”

“Easy for you to talk. It’s not your dad who was murdered three years ago and you still have no one to answer for it. I think she’s a little tired of it. And I can’t really blame her.”

He hadn’t been back to The Tree since everything had fallen apart between them. *I was crazy thinking it could have ever worked in the first place.*

But he couldn’t deny the chemistry that had built between them. Although it all grew out of her tragedy, it had seemed like something beautiful was growing between them.

Too bad it hadn’t lasted.

## CHAPTER 5



“*B*ut we could use all this area here, see?” she said as she pointed out the parking lot behind The Tree on the plans.

“And where will people park?”

“Screw parking, they can walk! If they are coming here, they shouldn’t be driving anyhow!”

Mack laughed. “You want your terrace come hell or high water, don’t you?”

“Now you are picking up what I’m laying down,” she said excitedly as she put up her hand to high five him.

“Well, I think you’re gonna have to run it by Ash,” he said, gazing up at nothing in particular.

“She’ll be onboard.”

“Or *he*,” Mack countered.

“Whatever.”

“That’s exactly the problem right there,” Wendy said as she came by, grabbing a few drinks for the early customers that had shown up.

“What problem?” Bloom asked.

“Too much feminine energy in your life. You need to let in the masculine.”

“What are you talking about?” Ugh. She was not in the mood for a fae lesson on masculine energy. Wendy was fantastic with the clientele, and really sweet, but sometimes she was a little too enthusiastic about her fae spirituality. She really need to put her and Tam together more, she thought distantly. They would both be in heaven talking about it for hours.

“This place gets full of manly men practically every night, Wendy.”

“And how many of them have you dated?” Wendy continued.

“I have dated some,” she stubbornly replied.

“One.” Wendy held up her right index finger, as if Bloom needed help understanding the word.

Mack had already walked away.

*Smart man.*

“What do you care, anyhow?”

“I just want to see you happy, honey. I know things weren’t exactly ideal between you and that cop guy, but I thought there was *something* there. Something special.”

“Are you kidding?” she snapped. Suddenly she realized she was being a lot more aggressive than she wanted. But she couldn’t help it. Wendy had hit a nerve. All of her carefully choreographed strong façade was falling apart. “You mean the guy who has been doing nothing to catch my father’s killer for what, close to three years now?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t know that, Bloom. That is my bad, I... uh, I’m sorry, Bloom,” Wendy stammered quickly as she went to deliver her drinks.

“I know you mean well,” Bloom quickly replied as the waitress began to walk away.

*Good job, Bloom. Way to snap at the staff.*

But what was she supposed to do?

“Look,” Wendy said when she returned, and in a voice that said she was trying to do damage control. “Obviously I don’t know what I’m talking about.” She paused. “It was just, there were times, I remember, you seemed, well, happy, when you two were together.”

Bloom said nothing. There was nothing *to* say.

Seemingly emboldened by Bloom’s silence, she continued, “There was something magical about you guys when you were together. I could feel it. I can feel him, like in your aura. There, I said it.”

“Magical? In my aura?” This was too much. Too painful to think about. Because for a second she had thought she had found someone. That after losing her entire family, she wouldn’t have to be all alone in this freaky town. In this world. For a fraction of a moment he was actually her hero... Tears were fighting to come out, and she was fighting just as hard to keep them in. Where they belonged. Where she had kept them for so long now. Only occasionally letting them out at night, with just her pillow and Ash as witnesses of how much his betrayal still hurt.

“Bloom...” Wendy began to say, going to her. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” Wendy started, apparently realizing she had now stuffed her entire leg, not just her foot in her mouth.

“No. For a second there, I thought those things too. Dax was great. The Tribunal was working on the case. All was well.” She shrugged. “And then all of a sudden, they just said that the case had gone cold. *Cold!*” Tears she could no longer avoid began to cloud her vision. “So no, there’s nothing magical there.” The tears started to run down her face.

Wendy was close to panicking and full of apology. “I’m so sorry. My bad. Zero magic. Got it. You’re the best boss ever, I thought it was helping. What do I know? That is...”

“It’s okay, Wendy, I know you are just trying to help,” Bloom said, her voice cracking a little. *God, these Children of the Vortex.* Wasn’t that what the ones who made the pilgrimage here were called. Sometimes they could really use an edit button.

But her thoughts went back to Dax and the pain returned. She hadn’t realized how much strain she had been under lately either. “I... um, I should have never gotten involved with him.”

*What was I thinking? Obviously, I wasn’t.*

And just like that the tears were coming hot and fast.

“Mack!” Wendy called, but Mack was already right there.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. You’re wonderful, Bloom, and I just...” Wendy was saying.

“It’s okay, Wendy,” Mack said, embracing Bloom. “Shhh. It’s okay,” he said, as he led her into the little back office and breakroom behind the bar.

He just sat with her for a minute while her breathing normalized.

“Hey, you okay, kiddo?”

“Yeah, Mack. Sorry, I’m just embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Tell you the truth, I’m relieved to see you let it out a little. It’s not healthy to hold all that in.”

He gave her a hug.

“If you say so,” she sighed.

“I do. You want to relax a bit here? I can cover the bar for a bit?”

“No, I’m okay. I was just having a moment,” she said, dabbling at what was left of her tears.

*A moment in a long string of moments.*

“Okay, darling. Your call. But you can come back here any time, and I’ll let you be,” Mack said as they both walked back out behind the bar.

Just then the sound of wind chimes caught her ears, indicating The Tree had allowed some new customers in.

Looking up, she felt her whole body flush as she locked eyes with the newly arrived lawman.

There he was, almost as if she had summoned him with her tears.

*Really? Like, seriously. Couldn’t have come at a better time.*

There he stood, Dax Carlyle, in the flesh.

## CHAPTER 6



“*B*loom,” he said in greeting, in as businesslike and neutral manner as he could muster.

“What the hell did you let him in here for?” she muttered to no one in particular. He only caught it because of his high-sensitive hearing.

*She’s talking to The Tree, isn’t she?* Well, this was going to be fun.

The inside of the Fair Folk was impossibly big. That, of course, was because it was enchanted. The main room was roughly still bordered by squared-off walls, but in places it pressed right up against the rounded inner walls of what just seemed to be an incredibly huge tree trunk. Where the walls and rooms and floor seemed to have been hewn by hand, everything was thick beams and wide planks, well-worn with time. They appeared ancient, in fact. In a few places, vines hung down and leaves and a few branches grew implausibly, with a few massive round windows high on the walls. The main room had at least a twenty-foot ceiling and was largely dominated by the bar running down one side. There was no doubt about it, the place was impressive.

But then so was Bloom.

Dax just stood there taking it all in for a moment more. *Dammit but she looks good.*

She had taken to checking in with Rollo or Jack for any updates on the case, so he hadn’t seen her in at least four months. Obviously that was four months too long for his dragon, though, as it was standing bolt upright, ready to spring, it seemed.

*Knock it off. Not happening. For about ten different reasons. This is strictly business.*

“Well, what a surprise. Officer Carlyle.”

“Yes, hello... uh, Miss Havenshaw.”

“I suppose you are here to tell me about your complete lack of progress on my father’s case?”

*Ooooff.*

Her words cut him deeply, but he couldn’t show it. There was too much riding on it for that indulgence.

“Bloom, I’m sorry, but as you well know, the Tribunal can’t share any details of an active investigation.”

“Oh really? An *active* investigation? Because last I heard you were treating it like a cold case.”

Shit, that’s right. That’s what they told her to stop her from always wanting to interfere.

He didn’t blame her for being angry. But that didn’t change anything.

“I know it must be difficult for you, but we will let you know if we have something. But remember, technically speaking, it was never officially ruled a homicide.”

He saw her face flush a deep red.

“Oh please. That was no wild animal attack. You know it. I know it. Everyone knows it. Don’t insult me by pretending any differently.”

*I do know it.* But he couldn’t tell her that. Before he could deflect her comment, she continued, “So if you are not here to tell me once again about your lack of progress in my father’s case, how about you tell me what I can do for you?”

*Damn.* Circumstances aside, his skin was practically burning with her proximity.

Even as she did her best to freeze him out, all he could focus on were her beautiful lips, and those curves. Jeezus. *Settle down.*

But he wasn’t settling down. He remembered what it had felt like to just hold her in his arms. And the effortless excitement and sparks that had flown between them that first night they had finally gone on an official date. Things had only grown more intense.

A tingle of pleasure shot through him, and he felt his manhood swell as his dragon all but purred for her. *Shit.* It was as if no time at all had passed.

*Enough.*

He knew all the chemistry in the world wouldn’t make them a good fit. Even if it weren’t for the complications with her father’s case. And that was a

big ‘if”, could things ever even work with a fae. *Half-fae*, he corrected himself.



He believed they could all live together in harmony, sure, but have a real shot?

*Fae and shifters go together like cats and dogs.*

He shook himself.



“There has been some trouble with Marius,” he said, watching her face to gauge her reaction.

*Yes. Focus on business.*

He had tried to break through her walls back then, but had decided it was a losing battle. Of course she couldn't understand why he had suddenly clammed up, and of course he couldn't tell her. The whole thing had been a mess. Doomed from the start.

“Ah, Marius, right,” she said, seeming to recall the incident now. “He was nothing The Tree couldn't handle,” she said flatly.

“Yeah. That's kind of why I'm here. I don't like to get too involved in fae affairs any more than I need to, but did you really have to blast him into the middle of nowhere for what, getting a bit loud? Don't you have bouncers?”

“Well, Officer Carlyle, *I* didn't do anything. *Ash* did. And if the bar thought it was necessary, I'm not going to question it. And he was getting more than 'a bit loud.' He definitely deserved it, so I am not sure what the problem is,” she added.

Ms, ...can I just call you Bloom please? And please call me Dax, okay? I get it, you are not happy with me, but I can't remember the last time, actually, I can't remember *any* time anyone has ever called me Officer Carlyle.

“Well, I am sure none of your shifter cronies would need to call you anything official. Shouldn't you be down at the Grizzly Den, by the way? I am surprised to see you can be bothered to address a fae problem.”

“We serve all of Fae Crossing, Bloom, shifter and fae alike,” he said, in as calm a voice as he could muster.

“Oh really? You could have fooled me. Seems to me you dropped my father's case easily enough. Or was it because problems closer to home arose? Shifter problems.” He could tell she was getting emotional but was trying to control herself.

And she was correct in a sense. Of course he couldn't tell her that.

“Bloom, that's enough.”

She met him with a sidelong glance, but did not respond.

Dax took a moment to compose himself.

“I am here on fae-related matters. To deal with this Marius business. I had hoped we could at least clear the air a bit.”

“There is nothing to clear. I am sorry about your friends, or packmates or whatever. But I can't just forget about my father. I never will. And I'm just sorry that you feel that your friends are more important than my dad.” Ouch.

If only he could tell her the truth. But she wasn't done yet. "You and I, it was just never a good match. Let's leave it at that."

"So, what do you want to know about Marius?" Mack said as he interrupted, looking between the two of them sternly. Focusing on Dax, he added, "I'm sure Dax is doing all he can to advance the investigation into your father's... um, *highly suspicious* death."

Dax commanded his dragon to settle down. Shit, he commanded himself. He had always respected Mack. Back in the day, he knew him and his father respected one another. Same could be said for his father and Bloom's. Beyond that he had no idea. He took Mack's cue to get back on the topic he had come for.

"Can you tell me about what happened last night?"

Bloom opened her mouth for an instant, as if about to speak, but then closed it. Instead she shifted her feet and brushed her hair back, as she also seemed to be consciously refocusing on something other than their feud before finally speaking. "First, please realize that fae and shifters handle things differently, okay? Marius was acting really, well, crazy. And I trust the bar implicitly. If it felt the need to 'port him out of here, I assume it had good reason." She paused for a minute. "By the way it is also my faith in Ash, the tree spirit, that is making me give you the benefit of the doubt at the moment. If The Tree felt you were not sincere, it would have never let you in in the first place." She paused for a moment, locking eyes with him, "So, now that I answered your question, could you please tell me where you found Marius?"

Another shock of electricity shot through him as they gazed at each other. But almost as soon as he thought he detected something pass between them, he felt her shut it down.

He sighed inwardly. "By the quarry, that's where I found him. With no pants, by the way. Nice touch." That last part he addressed to the room in general. "He may be lodging a formal complaint with the Fae Council, but that's not really why I am here. I doubt that would come to much anyhow. He was definitely drunk, I can attest to that."

"Well, that's pretty funny, cause Finch and Nilsa were actually in the lounge right over there the whole time," she said, pointing at the entrance to the other room. "It's too bad they didn't witness it, cause then he really wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"So, they didn't see any of this?"

"Nope, not as far as I know," Bloom answered.

“Probably a blessing in disguise. They can be... challenging, to work with,” he said. “No offense.”

“Offense?” she echoed.

“Them being fae and on the council.”

“Oh, no, that doesn’t bother me. I get it. That’s not a fae-hater thing... They’re politicians,” she said, brushing aside his apology as unnecessary, while she picked up her long, dark hair and fanned her neck a bit, before letting the waves fall back down.

*God, she’s so sexy.*

“But back to Marius, there was something just... *off* about how he was acting,” she continued.

“How so?” Dax asked, focusing again on what had brought him here, his interest piqued.

“Well...” She seemed to pause for a minute, remembering. “For one thing, Marius is hardly in shape, but he moved almost like a cat for short bursts.”

“Yes! That’s a good way to put it,” Dax agreed, comparing notes mentally. “He moved very quickly at one point, and at another seemed to create a little eddy of wind. I know fae have a magic very different to shifters, but I have never seen one display it openly like that. And never in conjunction with being so, um...drunk.”

“Yeah,” she was thoughtful again. “Yes, he sprang up on the bar, and when he jumped down it felt like he was floating or something.” She paused again, bringing her hand to her chin in consideration. “Mostly, he was just being a total ass. And when he tried to reach behind the bar to grab a bottle, that’s when the bar had had enough.”

“I can see how that ‘porting trick must come in handy alright,” Dax offered.

“It does, for sure,” she said, leveling him with her green eyes. “But you know, to me the biggest thing was that he was just not himself. It didn’t really become obvious until last night, but thinking about it now, he hasn’t been himself really since he got back from the west coast.”

“West coast?”

“Yeah, he was out there on business a few weeks ago.”

“Hmm,” Dax mused. “What do you mean exactly, ‘not himself’?”

“I don’t know. You know Marius a little. Seen him around maybe? He’s a nice guy, but... uh, kind of boring. Ever since he returned from his trip, he

has been more animated. Almost confident maybe? And since when have you seen a fae being so, like, um, extroverted? That's not the right word either, but you said you felt he was off too, right?"

"Yes, I get what you are saying. Fae aren't known to advertise their magic. Quite the contrary, unless there is a definite purpose for it. Not to speak for your kind of course," he quickly added. "And the other thing, yeah, he *was* different. And controlling the wind, and his speed. He was like the Flash there for a second. I've never seen that in a fae."

"You know I am only half-fae, but from what I know, the ability to master the elements, and even the kind of high level vibrational shifting involved for speed, I have only heard of that in very, very old fae. Marius is barely fifty, not even that old for a human, let alone a fae."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Dax said. And he wasn't talking about the shop.

This elicited a reluctant half smile from Bloom.

"You know, I'm a sucker for some Alice in Wonderland."

He laughed, and in a mock British accent said, "I assure you it was not intentional, young lady." Then back in his normal voice, "Sorry, I walked past the shop on my way over, and, well, you know."

She nodded and took a moment, seemingly composing herself from what had been a little flash of their old banter.

"Anyhow, yeah, there is something up with Marius," she said. "Ash must have sensed it too. Ejections like that don't happen every day, or I wouldn't need Lucas," she said, gesturing toward the big man who was helping one of the bar backs move in a few kegs at the moment.

"I see," Dax said, pausing for a moment as he looked at Bloom.

For a moment they locked eyes again. God. He felt it again too. His dragon certainly did as it thrashed about in frustration. An electric excitement practically made him jump.

*Let it go, Dax. What are you doing?*

"Okay. Well, thank you for your time," he finally said. He had gotten what he had come for. It hadn't exactly gone well, but it could have been worse. Sometimes he thought he should just tell her he suspected a connection between her father's death and that of James and his wife. But he couldn't risk compromising the investigation. They needed more. It wouldn't have mattered where they were concerned anyhow.

She just stood there and nodded. No doubt with her own inner thoughts

swirling in her head.

*Okay. Time to go, I guess.* His dragon gave an inner roar of displeasure again.

This was how it needed to be. Obviously, they were never a good match. That's what she had said too. It was just some surface attraction. But before he could stop himself or even think, he was talking again.

"Thanks for your cooperation, Bloom." *Dude. Stop. You had your moment. Let it go.*

"Always happy to help out the Tribunal," she said, with only a little sarcasm, he thought.

"I will let you know if I have any further questions. Hopefully all this will amount to nothing. But in case it doesn't, I'll be in touch."

"Please do," she said. "That is, if you find out something about Marius or whatever, you know."

"Of course."

"And Dax, everything else between us aside, please don't forget about my father. His killer is out there."

"You'll have to trust us, Bloom. We have not forgotten." He tried to make her understand with his eyes, with the few little words he could say on the matter. He just hoped it came across that he did care. "And yes, I will be in touch about Marius if necessary," he said as he teetered on the spot for a moment.

Should he at least shake her hand or something? The pull he felt was ridiculous. And his dragon was losing it. But then she broke eye contact and the moment passed.

He turned on his heel and headed out.

But his dragon seemed elated.

Why, he wasn't sure.

*Bullshit.*

At the very least this business with Marius was not over, he just had a feeling.

*And that means I will be seeing more of Bloom.*

His dragon paced impatiently.

## CHAPTER 7



“*I* still can’t believe he just walked right in at that exact moment.”

“The man has timing, I’ll give him that,” Mack said, as the two of them and Wendy tidied up the bar room.

She was still reeling from Dax’s sudden and unannounced visit. And as shocking as his appearance had been, even more shocking had been her reaction. As soon as he had walked in, she had felt that familiar jolt. It was like her whole body had been connected to a live wire. And the accompanying heat had spread right down to her core. Her pussy was still pulsing from it.

*Damn it.* She had thought he was firmly in her past. Romantically at least. Everything around her father had ripped her life apart. That was bad enough, but to feel she was the only one trying to seek justice. That was even worse. And seeing him just always brought that home. Except that wasn’t all it brought home. She hated Wendy for being right. Why did he have such an effect on her?

“And then the shit with Marius,” she sputtered.

*Yeah, he’s a safer topic.* “I can just see him saying that, ‘I’ll take this to the Fae Council.’ What the hell has gotten into that guy anyhow?” Sometimes I don’t know how I stay sane.”

“I know, kiddo. We all want justice for your father. But you have to try and just let them do their job,” he said, seemingly trying to calm her.

She wanted to argue, but just didn’t have the energy at the moment. Or the heart. But that wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

Mack continued, “I agree with Dax on Marius. I’ll say that much. Something is off. I sort of convinced myself I hadn’t seen what I’d seen, I

guess, but did you see how he moved?” Mack was saying. “I might just be a dumb human, but that was not normal at all.”

“Ash handled him just fine, I think. I just can’t get past Dax’s nerve, coming here. Did he think I’d be happy to see him?”

Neither Mack nor Wendy responded.

“Um,” Wendy intoned. “Probably wasn’t super easy for him to show up here either.”

“Pfft!” Bloom practically spat. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, you know. Just that, like what Mack is saying. Maybe give him the benefit of the doubt a bit. But I can see how that might not be so easy. I can only imagine how hard the last few years have been for you.” Wendy put down the glass she was cleaning. Bloom saw her give Mack a look.

“Look, you want some straight talk?”

“Oh, great. Is this an intervention?” she said, feeling the full weight she had been carrying.

“Far from it,” Mack replied. “But I think you are jumping the gun on Dax a bit. I get it, though. But remember, he worked tirelessly on your father’s case that whole first year. By all accounts. And yeah maybe things slowed down, leads dried up, I don’t know. And that business with car accident and his own pack member. I know you think he stopped caring about your dad, and about you after that. But he is human too.” Mack paused, “Well, you know what I mean. He has been carrying a lot on his shoulders these last few years too. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I am just maxed out, okay, Mack? Gosh, can’t a girl just have a good old fashioned meltdown? But I hear what you’re saying. I do,” Bloom said, the bright fire of anger in her belly suddenly dampened.

“Mack, with the wisdom,” Wendy said as she pointed at him. “But look, Bloom, all things considered, you are doing great in my book. Like I said, I can only imagine. Come here,” she said, giving her a hug. “We just want the best for you.”

“I know you do.”

Wendy gave her another little hug before grabbing a pile of menus to wipe down.

The place was just beginning to fill up. It was not yet busy, but it would be very busy in an hour.

“I am going to go for a quick run. Clear my head.” *God, do I need it. Or maybe she should just start drinking now. I’m a ball of nerves. And*

*hormones. Ugh. I'm hopeless.*

“Okay, kiddo, but don't leave us hanging too late. It is Friday night after all.”

“Well, I need a run,” she said.

“No argument here. Go. Go,” Mack said as he headed to check on the latest drink order for the service bar.

\* \* \*

*DAX CARLYLE. SHE HAD THOUGHT SHE HAD PUSHED HIM FIRMLY OUT OF HER consciousness, which was pretty impressive, considering he was the alpha of the local Fae Crossing Pack, and the Chief of the Tribunal.*

She had taken to checking in with his lieutenants as far as any new developments on her father's case. And thankfully The Tree wasn't the only social hub in town. He and his pack had the Grizzly Den to go to.

She'd assumed that was where he had been spending time. *Not that she cared.*

*Dammit. I spent the last few years getting him out of my head, and now he just walks in unannounced because of that stupid business with Marius?*

She was heading on her usual loop, down Willow to Crabtree, to Cypress...rinse and repeat. It was almost exactly two miles, so it worked out great.

She pounded along at a good pace as the memories flipped by.

Dax. Her father. Other faces of jerks she had dated popped by. Christof, that fae twit. When did things get so complicated?

*Well, that would be when your mother died and you moved in with your father, wouldn't it? Or actually it was probably the day your mother bore you in secret ten years before that.*

There had been a while with her dad where it was simple...once she got past the roughest teenage years and before all the drama of dating. And then Christof. She knew at some level she had been drawn to his fae-ness, if one could say that. Maybe if she were with a powerful fae, or at least one from a good family, maybe then she would feel like she finally belonged. *So cliché.*

It hadn't worked.

*Big surprise there.*

Her feet pounded her forward, and her arms pumped as she headed



around on the long loop that was Cypress, as it cut through the woods. The swamp stretched out on her left. That place was eerie. But it only bordered maybe a quarter of a mile on her route before she was back amongst the woods. Out here there was only the occasional house. People were surprised that she was so fearless, but in truth, she had never felt threatened by what happened to her father. As Dax kept pointing out, they had no leads, or at least nothing he would share with her, but she had always figured it had been some homeless or down on their luck shifter he had made the mistake of trying to help. He had always had a soft spot for counseling or helping those on the fringe. Some unsavory characters were out there. And unless she were way off, it had gotten him killed.

Dax had even posted one of his pack to keep an eye on her for a while right after it had happened. And then he had started keeping an eye on her himself.

*Ugh. Stop. Thinking. About. Him.*

But she couldn't help it. He *had* looked good, in that effortlessly rugged way he had about him. His solid muscled forearms had rippled with every gesture. She had never been totally into muscular guys before him. See exhibit A. Christof. But boy, she had sure grown to appreciate his muscles.

And God, they had only been together a month or so before it had blown up. Or was it two? Whatever. It didn't matter now. But God, though somehow they had never gone all the way, they had gotten close. God had they gotten close. She sighed thinking about it. The way he had touched her. The way he felt.

*Bloom. Stop it. This run is not helping.*

She did her best to bring her focus to her breathing. Counting breaths in and breaths out. Now she was turning right onto Crabtree and getting back to the town proper. More than half way. She upped her pace. Maybe she would go for two laps.

Suddenly, her full focus was pulled to an alarming sight. There was a woman and a girl being sort of backed up along the sidewalk by two men. *Holy shit!*

And it wasn't exactly deserted here, which in some ways made it all the more shocking. They were right out in front of the library.

If being a half breed had done anything for her, it had given her a sensitivity for the underdog, or at least for anyone she perceived that way. The two women definitely fit that bill. She was still about one hundred feet

away when the men grabbed the woman.

That was when she saw the van pull up. *Holy shit!*

The door on the side slid open.

*No way. No, no, no. Not on my watch.*

In an instant, she summed up the situation. There were a ton of people around, actually.

*Scare them. My key chain! The mace!*

Thank God she didn't stop and think, or she might not have acted. But before she knew it, as the two men were dragging the woman toward the van, with their backs turned to her, she yelled, "Hey assholes!"

Just as they turned, wham! She nailed them both with a good dose of mace. The two men instantly screamed and cursed as they rubbed at their eyes. At the same time, the woman broke free. Somehow one of the men made his way toward the van, even as the crowd turned to witness the commotion.

But the other man, half blinded, was not so lucky, as he ran headlong toward the sound of his accomplices' yells, he ran straight into a signpost, and went down like a ton of bricks. He was out cold.

The other non-incapacitated bad guy - she was pretty confident in labelling them as bad guys - hesitated for a moment, before apparently realizing it was time to go. Leaving their presumed partner sprawled out on the sidewalk at the center of a growing crowd, the other two sped off in the van.

"Holy shit," she said, as she looked at the two women, who she immediately realized must be mother and daughter. "That was my outside voice this time, wasn't it?"

"Oh, my God, thank you so much!" the mother was saying, as she hugged her daughter.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

She thought the woman hesitated for an instant before her reply came spilling out. "I don't know. We are between connections on our bus, I think we missed it now," the woman said frantically.

"Okay, okay, just slow down," Bloom said in her most soothing tone.

"And suddenly, they were just on us. Are you okay, honey?" she said, addressing her daughter.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay."

"We need to call the police," Bloom exclaimed.

“No,” the women said almost in unison. “No, we’re fine. It must have just... Um, we just need to find a place to stay. Thank you, you have done enough.” The woman began to fumble with her purse and pulled out a bus schedule.

The woman was in no condition to go anywhere.

*Bloom, haven’t you had enough excitement for one day?* And she thought of what she considered to have been her father’s tragic flaw as well. But she just couldn’t leave them here either.

“Listen, I have kind of a big place and plenty of room, why don’t you come over to my place. I mean, you’ll see.”

“Really? I don’t know,” the woman said.

“Mom, yes, come on,” her teenaged daughter quickly said. “Please.” It was unclear if the ‘please’ was directed at Bloom or her mother.

Interrupting the mother’s pondering, she quickly said, “I’m Bloom,” as she offered her hand.

“Kim,” said the daughter.

Finally starting to compose herself, the mother said, “I’m Chris, and yes, thank you. Maybe it would be good to have a place to rest a bit, but we don’t want to impose.”

“It’s no problem, really,” she said. “Oh and, uh, so, are you into magic?” She had found this was a pretty good screening question when she wasn’t sure where someone fell on the supernatural spectrum. If they were in the know, they would start running off at the mouth about shifter powers or witchy stuff. Or at the other end of it, they might think you had a screw loose if they were your basic generic human – like those in the world that Bloom remembered from her childhood. Little had she know what else the world had to offer.

“Magic?” said the mom.

“You mean, like the cards?” said the girl.

*Okay, so they have no idea. This will be interesting.*

“Oh, I just meant how, you know, they say there’s no such thing as coincidence. Me being in the right place at the right time. That’s kind of like magic, I think.”

*Good one, Bloom.* That was one of her better saves, she decided.

“Oh, I like that,” said the girl.

“Good,” she said as she patted the girl on the shoulder. “Because I happen to think it’s true.” She winked at her. “Now, let’s get you guys out of here.”

As they walked together, Bloom started, “So, uh, my place is a little out of the ordinary, but I think you guys will like it. I’m sure it will like you.”

“Out of the ordinary?” said the girl with wonder in her voice.

“What do you mean, ‘you think it will like us?’”

“Just a turn of phrase, you know,” she said. “It’s just down here across the main intersection.”

They walked along in silence for a few blocks.

As they did, she thought on what the woman had said. *No police*. She hadn’t said it like that, but the implication was clear. At the same time, though, she was only half fae, she still had some of the sight. These women were good. They had no negative intentions, though she did sense trouble. But it didn’t take a high priestess to tell that. She laughed to herself. No, she was doing the right thing.

For a moment, Dax came back into her mind as well.

*Ugg. Great, I’m hopeless.* But why did she feel like she should call him?

*No, absolutely not. I think we’ve created enough entanglements for one day.*

And again. *No police. Fuck my life*, she thought as The Tree came into view. But she couldn’t deny the excitement that was pulsing through her body thinking about him. It couldn’t hurt to just sort of day dream, right?

*Even if he is a jerk.*

“Wow, look at that tree! It’s huge!” said Kim.

“Yup, and that’s where we are going!,” she said.

“Really?” said the girl, wonder in her voice again.

Really,” Bloom said with a smile.

*This will be interesting.*

## CHAPTER 8



The office was already buzzing by the time Dax made it in on Monday morning.

“Hey, boss. Happy Monday! Where have you been? I thought I was in the wrong place this morning when I walked in and you weren’t already here,” Rollo said in greeting.

“Ah, been a long weekend,” he replied. “Very long.”

That just left a confused look on his second’s face. He didn’t elaborate and Rollo didn’t pry.

They all had a camaraderie within the pack, but in the end, he was alpha, and for the most part, the guys knew when and when not to engage in the friendly banter. On a good day, it was fine, and part of being in any pack. But on a bad day, they knew he would feel the need to shut them down and assert his position.

Rollo seemingly put two and two together in his head. “How did it go with Bloom?” he asked gingerly.

That was part of the problem. Normally, Sunday would be a great day of rest and relaxation, maybe fixing up something around the house. Or maybe going off-roading or hunting. But he couldn’t get his mind off her all weekend. Maybe he could have let her in on the suspicions they had where her father’s case was concerned. Would that have made a difference? But mostly the business with Marius had eaten at him. He couldn’t help the feeling that he was missing something.

*You are missing her.*

That was not what he meant. His mind was just all over the place. His dragon had been all over the place too. *Restless*. Or better said, more restless

than usual.

“Uh, about what you would expect. But at least that infernal bar let me in, and it didn’t ‘port me into oblivion either. So, I’ll call it a win.”

“Definite progress,” Rollo said.

“Progress? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just a turn of phrase. But let’s just say that she has made her displeasure with you, with all of us really, very apparent.”

“Can’t say I blame her,” Dax said in a serious tone in response. And then pivoting a little, “But whatever. Nothing to be done about it. I am not risking everything to make her happy. And it’s not like we have all the answers,” Dax said, shaking his head.

“We are doing the right thing. We owe it to James and Cindy,” Rollo said, looking down at his hands. “And to the boys.”

“I know, brother. It’s just not easy. She thinks I don’t care. These people have no idea how hard it is to navigate all this shit in a town like Fae Crossing,”

“Amen, brother,” Rollo said.

“And the fae are top of that list. They treat us almost like thugs, I swear, with no appreciation for the sacrifices we make to keep this town safe.”

“Preach,” Rollo said. “They treat us like guard dogs.”

Dax could tell Rollo’s wolf was right at the surface now.

“Look, man. We will find Frederick. He will pay for what he did.”

“I know, Dax. It just can’t come soon enough.”

I know,” he said, crossing the distance across the bullpen and clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re goddamn right, we’ll get him,” said Jack, who had been across the way at his desk filling out some paperwork. “We’re gonna do it for all of them. Make this shit right.”

He came over and gave Rollo a fist bump.

“So, did you learn anything more about Marius from your visit to The Tree? And come on, there must be more that happened between you and Bloom?”

Dax shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Yeah, there is something up with Marius. My dragon senses it. *I* sense it, but that’s about it for now. She did say that he has been acting differently since a trip out west a few weeks ago. I don’t know.” He hadn’t really felt the potential significance of that detail until now. “Anyhow, don’t you guys have cases to be working on? Aren’t

there some shifter kids out somewhere who need some guidance, Jack? Go make yourselves useful.”

*Enough on Bloom.*

Just then as Rollo and Jack seemed to be getting the message, Dayton and Clint came into the office. By their clothes, it seemed they had come straight from their fishing trip.

“So, you patch things up with Bloom?” Dayton said without even bothering to say ‘Good morning’ first.

“Jeezus, what’s with you guys? Don’t you have your own lives to worry about?”

“Oh, come on, man. Inquiring minds want to know,” Clint added.

“Look, there is nothing to report. She thinks I am a heartless and clueless halfwit who bungled her father’s investigation, okay? So basically, situation is status quo. End of story. Okay?” He was surprised by how much of a nerve they had actually touched.

“Okay, then. Easy, boss,” Dayton said. “I just kind of thought you two were good together. My bad.”

“I wish you guys would stop saying that,” he added as he started to cross the room back to his desk. “It’s annoying.”

“Well, sorry for inquiring about your personal life,” Clint said, feigning hurt, while also apparently trying to defuse the minor tension that had come into the room. “Oh, what’s that? How was our trip? Oh, thanks for asking, boss! It was amazing! Dayton actually landed a Marlin.”

“Yeah, yeah, very funny. You can tell me about it later, okay?” Dax said with a little chuckle.

“Whatever you say, Chief,” Clint said.

Just then his desk phone rang.

He took his seat as he answered it.

After listening for a minute and uttering only a few words himself, he hung up.

“Okay, who wants to come with me to the hospital? Jack?”

“So, that wasn’t really a question?”

“Nope, let’s go,” Dax said.

“Lead the way. What’s up?”

“I’m not sure. Some guy was found a couple days ago, knocked out by the Library. Some witness had seen him trying to abduct some woman or something. It’s unclear what happened exactly, but seems he finally woke

up.”

“Well, let’s go ask him,” Jack responded.

“After you, buddy.”

\* \* \*

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?” DAX SAID.

“He was awake about half an hour ago.”

“Well, can’t you wake him up again? Give him some adrenalin or something.”

“Sorry, Dax. No can do,” said the head nurse, Joanna.

“Fine,” he said, clearly frustrated by the niceties. “Can we at least see him? I just want to see if I recognize the guy, you know, get a picture, etc., so I can start doing some legwork,” Dax explained.

“Okay, but no poking and probing. And don’t go accidentally bumping into him to try and wake him up either,” the nurse said sternly.

“Scouts honor,” Dax said as he raised his fingers.

“Okay. He’s right down here,” she said as she led them to his room.

Upon entering the room, Dax was initially disappointed.

“You recognize this guy, Jack?”

“Nope, you?” he replied.

“Nope.”

“Hmmm.” Dax thought while he took out his phone to snap some pictures of the guy. He looked like your typical meathead.

“Human, right?” That’s what he was sensing at least, but his senses weren’t foolproof.

“Yes, sir,” Joanna said. “His bloodwork was crazy when he came in. Speaking of adrenalin, his was through the roof, but back to normal now.”

“Let us know when he wakes up, okay?” Dax said as they turned to go.

“For real this time,” Jack added with a wink.

Just as they were about to leave, as Joanna was wiping the hair across the guy’s forehead to check him. Dax turned fully to him.

“Wait a minute.”

“What is it, Dax?”

“There,” he said, pointing at the man’s forehead.

“What about it? Didn’t witnesses say he ran into a pole or something?”



Dax got closer to examine the guy. “How many poles leave a red star like that?” Right on the guy’s forehead.

“I’ve seen that mark before...” The mark on Marius forehead was more faded, but still, it seemed like too much of a coincidence.

He snapped a few more pictures and then turned to leave.

“Nice seeing you too, Dax!” Joanna called to his back as they headed out.

## CHAPTER 9



“So, how are our guests settling in?”

“Once they got past the fact that I run a bar out of a tree, I think it was all pretty much smooth sailing.”

“Seems the tree spirit is on its best behavior,” Mack said.

“I know, right? I swear, it must have put some sort of spell on them or, I don’t really know, but they just sort of accepted that the place is impossibly big inside.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time The Tree did that. And I am sure the room The Tree created for them with those crazy comfy beds doesn’t hurt either.”

“Or the hot fudge sundaes to welcome them. Yeah, Ash wasn’t born yesterday, that’s for sure,” Bloom added, laughing.

“I wasn’t so sure about your decision to bring them here at first, but I think you did the right thing. They seem about a million percent more relaxed at least.”

“I know. Chris was pretty shut down,” she said.

“Well, her daughter doesn’t seem to have that problem. Anyhow, ya done good, kiddo. Your father would be proud. But what are you gonna do with them? We’re not running a half-way house, you know?”

“I told them to just relax for now. I figured I would give them another day or two to get back on their feet. I’m not sure what they’ve been through, and so far they haven’t shared. If Ash is cool with them staying here then I am not going to worry about it.”

“Can’t argue with any of that logic. And I like that you put them to work. Probably keeps their minds off whatever they have been through.”

“They insisted, and I didn’t argue,” she said.

“Ah, I see. I still think you should tell your boyfriend about them, though.”

“Mack. Stop it.”

“What?” he said, putting his hands up innocently.

“You know exactly what. Don’t make me say it,” she said, exasperation dripping off her words.

“Say what?”

”He’s not my boyfriend! And we were barely together before. Maybe a few months tops.”

Across the bar, Wendy stopped mid stride and turned her head. Just as quickly, she resumed her trip on her way to serve one of the two tables that were full. It was Monday afternoon, which was to the restaurant business what the doldrums were to sailing. Totally dead.

“Dammit, Mack. Why do I always end up feeling about ten years old with you?”

“Oh, I’m just playing, kiddo. I can’t help it.”

“I know. But there is nothing there with Dax. We had a nice time for a bit. But it was a mistake. Obviously his heart was never with me. It will always be about the pack for a shifter. And I wouldn’t have minded it. I know he wants to catch whoever killed his friend. And I want him to. I’m not a complete monster. But the fact that he just put me completely aside, as if what happened with my father was nothing... I thought he really cared. But I can’t argue with what I see.”

“I think you might be making some assumptions,” Wendy said as she walked past.

“God, can I get some privacy around here?”



“Um, you do know you basically live in a bar, right?” Wendy retorted.

“Point taken. And you know what? If you like him so much, you date him. I know what happened between us, okay?”

“I would, ya know, but he’s not in *my* aura now, is he?”

Wendy just shook her head as she moved on to put her table’s order in the computer.

“I should fire her,” Bloom said, deadpan to Mack as he continued with his break.

“Then who would serve as your conscience around here?” Mack said.

She just laughed at that. That was what she loved about Mack, and that was the problem with him. He could see right through her. At times, he understood her better than she understood herself.

*Like right now?*

“Could we not talk about Dax, please?”

“Okay, but I think that’s going to be difficult,” Mack said matter-of-factly.

“And why is that?”

“Because he just walked in.”

*Again?*

\* \* \*

SHE TOOK A MOMENT TO CATCH HER BREATH AND TO TRY AND QUELL THE tingling and electric buzz that had suddenly filled her body before slowly spinning around to face the entrance side of the bar again.

“Back so soon?” she said as evenly as she could, even though her pulse was pounding. She could feel it. *Everywhere.*

“Hi Bloom, Mack. Yes, uh, I guess I’ll get right to it.”

He was dressed business casual for a change, but the well-fitting slacks and button down only seemed to heighten his effortless grace. His muscles rippled beneath the taut fabric. She couldn’t help notice how everyone in the room turned to look in his direction. He had an effortless charisma.

*Dammit. What is it about him?*

*Focus, Bloom.*

“Is this about Marius again? Did you find something out?”

“Yes and no,” he said as he strode up to the bar.

“What does that mean?” Suddenly, she was very aware that as luck would have it, the very much underage and out-of-place Kim had chosen that moment to clean up behind the bar. She remembered what Chris had said too. *No police.*

*Ignore her and hopefully he won’t notice.*

“A man was brought into the hospital the other day. It seems he got knocked out while attempting to abduct some woman. Got a good dose of pepper spray in his eyes too.”

*Oh shit.* The phrase went through her mind for the second time in probably as many minutes. *Stay cool.*

“Really?” she said, in her most innocent voice, as she tried to casually move a bit to the left to better block Kim from his view.

Something seemed to catch his attention.

*Dammit. Relax, Bloom.*

“Yes. Are you feeling okay? You are almost being nice to me,” he said.

She laughed, a little relieved. *So, he hasn’t noticed.*

“I guess I’m losing my edge. But seriously, I know you have to do your job. No sense in my making it any harder than it has to be,” she said. *Actually true enough.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mack stealing glances as he made a show of sweeping up some non-existent dirt nearby.

Just for a moment, she locked eyes with Dax.

*Oh, don’t do that.* She looked away almost immediately. *No no no.* She

was having enough trouble keeping her body under control.

“So, how can I help you?” she said, again reverting to her best professional tone. This was the voice she usually reserved for difficult clients and business contacts who got a bit too familiar.

He pulled out his phone and held it up. “Have you ever seen this man?”

“May I?” she said, gesturing if it was okay if she took the phone to get a better look.

*Oh shit.*

*I think I’m gonna need a new curse word.*

Right there on the screen she was pretty sure was the man she had pepper sprayed.

“No, I haven’t seen him before. Where did you say they found...”

“I have!” came an excited voice from right over her shoulder.

*Ohhhh shhhhhiiiiit.*

The young girl was pointing at the screen and exclaiming matter-of-factly, “That’s one of the men that was trying to kidnap us! But Bloom maced him right in the face and saved us. Tell him, Bloom.”

She had never wished harder for the power of invisibility. Or maybe the ability to literally fade into the woodwork. Then, quickly realizing that was a futile avenue, she briefly tried to will The Tree to ‘port Dax away.

Dax’s face was a mix of surprise, excitement, and consternation all at once.

“I can explain,” she said, resting her hands flat on the bar top.

“Please do,” he said simply, pulling up a stool and having a seat at the bar. “This ought to be good.”

“Honey, would you go and maybe sweep up a bit in the back?” Bloom said to the young teen.

“Sure, Bloom,” she said as she headed off.

Bloom calmly recounted the relevant events of the previous days, doing her best to downplay the ladies’ roles and divert as much of the focus onto herself as possible.

She felt like she had betrayed the mother and daughter.

“Why didn’t you tell me this from the beginning?” he asked.

“Dax, I didn’t think it was necessary. Besides, they were clear they didn’t want the police involved.”

“You don’t trust me, do you?” Dax said matter-of-factly,

“What? No, that’s got nothing to do with it.”

*Oh please. It has everything to do with it.*

“No, they just seemed traumatized enough. I went with my gut,” she explained. “And I am tired of being angry, okay? Let’s just move forward on this.” she added. “But I am not sure how you can’t see things from my perspective, Dax. I get that you have to follow protocols or whatever, and protect the integrity of your investigation, but can’t you understand what I am going through? My father was murdered. You were great for a while, but then you just seemed to drop the whole case and shut me out. Can you get why I would be upset?” There she had said it.

Dax seemed stunned for a moment, or maybe just lost in thought. “I can only tell you that bringing whoever is responsible for your father’s death to justice is right at the top of the Tribunal’s list.”

“I knew you knew it was no animal attack,” she said, feeling a little spike of excitement at his candid admission.

“You didn’t hear that from me, okay? Let’s just handle this current business and please just trust me when I say we are actively working on his case.”

Dax looked torn for a moment. It almost seemed he was going to add something before he caught himself.

But then he seemed to refocus. “So, you never saw this guy before the other day, right?”

“What? The thug? No, definitely not.”

“Okay. We don’t know if or how the women are involved, but for now let’s keep this next thing to ourselves,” he said.

“What thing?”

“This,” he said as he showed her a close-up picture of the weird red starburst pattern on the guy’s forehead that he had snapped at the hospital.

“What is that? Is that from running into that sign?”

“I don’t think so. Have you ever seen this before?”

“What? No, never.”

“I think Marius had the same thing on his forehead when I found him in that field, but his was more faded.”

Chills went up her spine. And not just because Dax had been leaning in as he showed her the picture.

Okay. Maybe that was part of it.

“This may be more serious than I thought before,” she said slowly, putting pieces together in her mind.

“I think we are actually agreeing on something for once,” he said, smiling uneasily as he put a hand on her wrist in a familiar way that echoed back to their time together.

Immediately, she felt a tingle of pleasure erupt in her core. It was like he had just shocked her.

*This is not good.* She pulled her hand away, maybe a little too quickly.

“Oh, come on, we’ve agreed on lots of things.”

“Well, we used to...” he said.

“Fine, I get it, but yes, I see why you came back over.”

“Good,” he said a little awkwardly. “Under the circumstances I’d like to talk with the mother and girl.”

He seemed to sense her uneasiness and quickly added, “I see no need to make it formal or to take them to the Tribunal. But I am concerned that this could be connected to something much bigger.”

\* \* \*

“IT’S LIKE WE SAID. WE HAD JUST GOTTEN OFF THE BUS AND HAD BEEN JUST strolling around for a little bit, and then it all just happened so quickly,” the mother was saying.

She could see Dax studying the woman’s face as she spoke. And Bloom was studying him. He had genuine concern in his eyes as he listened to the woman.

*Sigh. Well, get it out of your system, because this is going to be sorted out soon enough and you can go your separate ways again.* The thought alone shot a longing through her as well as sadness, but she let that go.

Dax had gone over things with them a few times, but their story seemed pretty consistent. Or the mother’s story, she should say. Other than the initial outburst that identified the man, the daughter had hardly said a word.

She noted that he was being true to his word and was taking it pretty easy in his questions. As promised, he had not brought up the red starburst thing. Not until now at least.

“So, what about this,” he said as he suddenly put the picture of the starburst pattern before them. Unless she were imagining it, he was purposely putting it nearer to the young girl.

Again, she saw Dax studying their faces. This time, she joined him.



The reaction was unmistakable. The girl's eyes in particular went big.

"What is it?" he said quickly.

"That's Supernova."

She thought the mother was about to hush her daughter, but she seemed to think better of it and remained silent.

"What's Supernova, hun?" Dax was saying.

"That's the latest drug that's going around."

"Drug?"

"Yup. And I hear it is crazy strong."

"Oh shit." This time both Bloom and Dax said it in unison.

## CHAPTER 10



“*R*ollo.”

“Hey boss. What’s up?”

“You got a few? I just wanted to toss around this business with Marius, and that guy in the hospital.”

“Yeah, one hundred percent. Fire away, Dax.”

Dax had become increasingly alarmed by the situation with Marius and where it had led to.

In less than a week it had gone from what seemed like a typical drunk and disorderly call to what could be the beginning of some new drug epidemic.

*And then there’s Bloom.*

But that was another matter entirely. He needed to focus on the developments around Marius, who he had been unable to locate for further questioning. Then there was the matter of the woman. He and Bloom both felt they were holding back, but he didn’t feel it was the time to grill them. This would call for a soft touch.

Laying on his couch at the end of the day, he had decided to call Rollo, to see if there was anything he was missing.

“I just don’t know. I am sort of wondering what we can do. The idea of some new drug moving into our community is concerning, to say the least,” he said.

“I don’t know that there is that much that we *can* do at the moment. With the guy in the hospital still out and Marius M.I.A., unless you want to put the screws to that mother and daughter, then I think all we can do is put the word out to keep eyes peeled. And we’ve done that. Did I miss anything?”

“No, as usual I think you’ve pretty much got it sussed, which by the way,

is why you are number two,” he said, complementing his right-hand man.

“So, you want to tell me the real reason you called?” Rollo said.

“What? Rollo, you know what this could do...”

“Boss, come on. Bloom. You gonna sit there and tell me you aren’t maybe just a little bit affected by her showing back up in your life like this?”

“Whatever. She’s ancient history. She still hates me. And in typical fashion, still treats me like I am some clueless hillbilly sheriff.”

“We did kind of freeze her out, boss. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for her to lose her dad like that. Can you blame her for being a little salty?”

“My hands are tied, though. That’s the problem. It’s one thing to want answers, but jeez man, why couldn’t she just trust me? That’s what sucks. I can’t risk telling her that we suspect Frederick was behind it. She’s a loose cannon and would undoubtedly start screaming to high heaven to anyone who would listen that we need to track him down.”

“Right, and that would be the best way to ensure he disappears, maybe for good. I get it. But I’m just saying cut her a little slack. Be the bigger man. She’s hurting and maybe has said and done some things that were tough to swallow, but she did lose her dad. No relationship could have withstood the kind of tension going on between you. Honestly, I was surprised when you guys started dating in the first place.”

Dax was silent for a minute as he considered what his right hand man had said.

“But I do know you two made a great pair,” Rollo added. “It might not have lasted very long, but from what I could tell, it was pretty sweet. You were happier than I had ever seen you, to be honest.”

“Really?” Dax said.

“Really, man. And so she’s fae. Nobody’s perfect. I just don’t think you should give up that easily.”

“Half-fae, and what are you talking about ‘give up’? There was nothing to give up on. She was acting crazy,” Dax added.

“I can tell you from firsthand experience that losing someone that close to you will do that to you.”

*Ouch.* Dax was quiet for a second.

“I’m on your side, Dax. We both want Frederick. I can barely sleep at times thinking he’s still out there after what he did to James and Cindy. I know it’s not easy dealing with her, especially knowing we can’t tell her

what we know, okay? I'm just saying think of it from her perspective."

"That's a tall order, brother," Dax said. "But I hear you." Then after a moment's further consideration, "I don't know what you did with my packmate Rollo, but I am on to you!"

Rollo laughed.

"Hey, I have no agenda here. You called me for my honest opinion, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what I am giving you. Besides, looks like we are going to be dealing with Bloom while we sort out this "Supernova" business. And those women who are staying with her. You get more bees with honey, buddy, so try to make an effort for that reason if no other."

"Good point. I am thinking maybe I should make you pack counselor."

Rollo let out a deep laugh at that. "The Witches would lose their shit."

Dax laughed in return. "Too right. They'd say you were stealing their thunder."

"But back to the pack business, if those women don't open up soon, I think you will need to have a talk with them."

"Yeah, I think you are right."

With that, they wrapped it up and Dax put down the phone.

A week ago the waters of Fae Crossing had seemed pretty calm.

Suddenly, he had a feeling a storm was brewing.

And he and Bloom seemed to have found themselves right in the heart of it.

*Wonderful.*

## CHAPTER 11



“*Y*ou realize that if it weren’t for the circumstances, I would have never agreed to meet you,” she said.

She had been surprised when he had called and said they should meet up, but less surprised by the wave of heat that had passed over her just at seeing his number come up on her phone.

He just leveled her with an even gaze. “I get it, trust me. You have made that perfectly clear already on the phone. And like I said, this isn’t about you and me, so get over yourself.”

She deserved that. She just had no idea how to fight her attraction for him, so she was constantly on edge. She was going to apologize, but as soon as he was done talking, he was putting up his hands in a soothing gesture. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.” He sighed. “Obviously we have some history, but I think for the good of Fae Crossing, and for Kim and Chris, and for The Tree, we really need to get past it, okay?”

“You’re right. But this isn’t easy for me, Dax. Knowing that my father was killed and the one man who is supposed to be leading the charge to find his killer just seems to be too busy with other business and brushing what happened to my father aside.”

“You’re right,” he said simply. “I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you, and I am sorry, I could have been more... I could work on my sensitive side I guess,” he said, seemingly floundering.

*But at least he’s trying.*

“You know a lot was going on. And it’s still going on. Please just believe me when I tell you that your father’s case remains at the top of my list. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to say more. Just give me the benefit of the doubt

here. If I could say more I would. But I just can't. Not yet."

She felt a subtle stir in her heart as he spoke. It wasn't perfect, but for the first time she could see he hadn't just been blowing her off. He did care.

"So, you are still working on it?" She felt a little ray of hope shine through the fog that had existed around all things related to her father's passing. He had said it before, but she hadn't been sure if he was just blowing smoke up her ass.

"Of course we are, Bloom. But please, you have to trust me. We have some leads. That's all I can say."

"Okay, I will give you the benefit of the doubt. For a little while. So we can focus on this Supernova shit. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, extending a hand across the table.

She did her best to maintain some semblance of a doubtful look, but inside she could feel her excitement rising, despite all the ways her mind was trying to suppress it.

"Let's just consider this a fresh start," she said. "Not that we are starting anything, that is. Or that is it going anywhere."

He laughed, "To new beginnings, then." He raised his water glass.

"Isn't it bad luck to toast with water?" she said.

"Eh, I make my own luck," he said, winking.

"Um hm", she said, clinking his glass, "And am I to assume that picking the Dancing Pants Café for our meet up was part of that?"

A look of total confusion came over his face. "What are you on about? Don't you like it?"

"Of course I like it. It's where we had our second date."

This had been where they had stopped after they had that amazing day out hiking. He had gotten them both ice coffees. It had been perfect.

"Oh right, I had forgotten," he said, a genuine smile spreading across his face. She could tell he was remembering that day as she did. "You give me too much credit," he laughed, now suddenly more at ease. "I'm not that clever." Then after another beat. "This is where we had our first kiss too."

She laughed as well. "Now you're remembering."

A moment passed between them as they gazed into each other's eyes.

But as soon as it came, they were both suddenly fidgeting.

"Yup, so we should talk about our game plan," he said, breaking the tension between them.

"Yes," she began. "I'm just not exactly sure what I can do," she

concluded.

“I am not sure either,” he agreed. “Not just yet at least. But let’s go over what we know.”

“Okay,” she said. She realized with some concern that she was almost enjoying this. *You’re enjoying him.*

“First, there is some new drug in town called Supernova, that is supposedly ‘crazy strong’,” she began.

“And it has come from out west...and you said you think Marius was out there a few weeks ago, right?”

“Right, And then there’s those men that attacked Kim and Chris. At least one of them was on it too,” Dax offered.

“So, you think it’s related, or they are related to Marius? Because I’ll tell you I don’t want any more of that drug around The Tree. That’s mainly why I’m here.”

“I don’t know if ‘related’ is the right word, but you know how I feel about coincidences. And yeah, we are on the same page.”

“Yes, and I agree with you that Kim and Chris are hiding something. The mother, Chris, really.”

Dax just sat across from her silently for a moment.

She spoke again, “But you really think something is going on? Maybe these are isolated incidents and those guys are long gone? And new drugs come and go all the time.”

He leveled her with that piercing gaze of his again. The one that could turn her knees to Jell-O under other circumstances. *And do a few other things too.*

*Enough.*

“You don’t really believe that,” he said flatly.

No, she didn’t.

“Because the biggest evidence I have, and the reason I called you, the reason we are sitting here now, well, you know what it is,” he said.

She did.

“Yeah, my gut is screaming too. Something is wrong. Something is off in Fae Crossing.”

“Bingo,” he said. Then just as quickly, he was on his feet and moving toward the counter.

“So, do you want an iced coffee, then?” He gave her a wink that sent a fresh pulse of pleasure shooting to her core.

“We can re-toast. Toasting with coffee is okay, right?”

She laughed in spite of herself.

*Oh yeah. He’s still dangerous.*

After he got their drinks, they sat in silence for a few minutes. She thought through the ramifications of what could happen to a town that was devastated by drugs. She had heard of more bustling and thriving places than Fae Crossing being torn apart. *Pratt’s Pass for instance.*

She could only assume he had similar thoughts in his head. He seemed to confirm this when, after finishing his coffee, he finally spoke. “I think it’s time we have a little more in depth talk with your guests.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” She had already been thinking along those lines. “But hey, be nice.”

He gave her his most charming smile. “Me? Always.”

“Oh please.”

\* \* \*

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG FOR HER TO REALIZE SHE HAD NOTHING TO WORRY about with Dax and his approach. Once they got to The Tree, they had all gathered at a table out on the floor. They agreed, they didn’t want them to feel cornered, so would do whatever they could to put them in a relaxed environment.

“I hope you ladies are finding our little town to be to your liking,” Dax was saying.

“Oh, absolutely. It’s so quaint,” Chris said a little nervously.

“This place is the coolest!” Kim added enthusiastically.

“I’m glad you are enjoying,” Dax said. “You know, I should talk to my friend Jack about maybe introducing you to some kids your age. He has a sort of informal camp he runs out in the country. If you would like that, that is,” he added.

“That would be great. Thanks, Officer Carlyle!”

“Call me Dax, please.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Dax,” Kim said, smiling.

“We really appreciate how much you all have done for us, Dax. Bloom has been amazing.”

“We take care of our own here, and well, we’ve decided you’re included



in that...if you want to be of course,” he added.

“I don’t know how we can repay your kindness. We are a little, um, in between at the moment.”

Bloom watched as Dax listened intently before speaking again.

“My father was sort of in charge of protecting this town, and now it’s my job. You just being safe is payment enough for me. Besides, from what I hear, you ladies haven’t been shy about finding ways to help out. So, I have no doubt you will fit right in here in Fae Crossing, if you want to stay that is,”

“Oh. We haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“Of course not, I just want you to know that as far as we are concerned, you are welcome. And between the two of us, we probably know half the town.”

“That’s very kind of you both,” Chris said, looking a little uncertain now. “I imagine you are here because you want to know what we know about that drug, is that right?”

“I guess I’m pretty transparent, huh?” Dax said, as he sat across from the ladies.

“Well, you are a cop,” Kim said.

“Kim!” her mother chided.

“No, she’s right, I am. Head cop actually,” he said with a wink. “So, I guess we should get to it, then. You said that it’s called ‘Supernova’, right?”

“Yup,” the young teenager said.

Despite all the time Dax had put into putting her at ease, though, Bloom was sure she saw her tense up at the mention of the drug.

“And how do you know about it?”

“The big kids,” she said, perhaps a little too quickly. “I heard them talking about it.”

At this point, the mother interjected, “We really appreciate what y’all have done for us, but we told you everything we can. Everything we know. Okay?”

Dax put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “It’s okay. I’m sure you have. I just wanted to see if maybe there were any details you forgot that might be important to us, but might seem unimportant to you. Does that make sense?”

“Well, I guess. I just don’t know what else we can say. But she’s right. That drug is powerful all right.”

*She’s frightened.*

“And what else can you tell me about it? Or about the men who were

after you? Do you know why they were trying to take you?”

The woman turned a shade paler and her lips turned to a thin line.

“We don’t know anything else.” She was shaking her head and squeezing her daughter’s hand.

“Please, anything you tell us can help. We can help you.”

“Dax, you got to understand we don’t have anywhere to go. That is, we really appreciate how kind you’ve been. We just can’t go back there. And...” The woman was growing more and more agitated as she continued.

Thankfully, Dax was drawing the same conclusion she was. As much as they wanted answers, this wasn’t working, and the hardball approach still didn’t feel right. They would have to be patient.

But it seemed he was intent on pushing them a little.

“Why, Chris? Why can’t you go back?”

The woman almost had tears welling up in her eyes at this point, but as she pulled her daughter close, she said, “You don’t want that drug here in Fae Crossing, okay? I can tell you that much.” She gave her daughter a hug. “Now, is it okay if we go rest a while, Bloom? We cleaned and restacked the whole storeroom for you earlier. And we really do appreciate y’all,” she added, almost apologetically.

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Chris. Kim. You were a big help.”

They just looked down as the two retreated from the room.

After they had gone, Bloom looked at him, “A big help? Were you being sarcastic?”

“Not at all. It *was* helpful. Did you see how scared she was?”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

“That lets me know that whatever we are up against, we should be afraid of too.”

“Oh great,” she said. “So glad you find that ‘helpful’.”

“Hey, relax,” he said, “I’m not going to let anything bad happen. Not to you. And not to those women.” He was dead serious.

She felt that now familiar heat pour over her in spite of herself.

Maybe teaming up was not such a good idea.

In one afternoon he had almost completely dismantled her defenses.

Wendy had been right the other day.

*He does look good.*

## CHAPTER 12



“Well, that’s not good,” Dax said, as he rolled the base of his beer on a coaster, listening to what the rest of the pack had picked up around town.

“Nope, not good at all,” agreed Rollo.

“Let’s go, then, come on. We’ve dealt with worse. Let’s stop this Supernova shit before it begins,” Jack said.

They were all talking in loud voices to be heard over the music coming from the main bar. The Grizzly Den served as their sort of unofficial hangout. It was kind of unclear when or how it had happened, but the back room was all theirs.

Duke, the owner, poked in his head in just then. “You boys all right?”

“Yeah, Duke. Thanks,” said Clint.

Then Dax, surveying the table, quickly added, “Another round would be great.”

They all respected Duke, he was a grizzled old bear shifter, tough as nails in his day. Still someone a shifter would think twice about tangling with.

He used to be part of the core pack back in his father’s day. Now he served as part of the old guard. And more importantly, he brewed a serious IPA beer the pack loved.

“‘nother round comin’ right up,” he said with a smile and tip of his cowboy hat as he retreated from the room.

“So, word is out about this Supernova shit, huh?”

“That’s what it sounds like,” Dayton chimed in. “You know these fiends, always looking for the next score!”

“Yeah, but this is supposed to be different. I don’t know. ‘Mind blowing!’

they say,” Jack added.

“That’s what they always say,” Dax said, thinking. “But it is still just a trickle, right?”

“Yeah, just a handful. But Marius’s name came up every time, or at least they didn’t deny it. Seems he’s been dealing the shit. And supposedly he was bragging that The Tree was his territory,” Rollo added.

“I bet it comes from those fuckin’ vampires,” Jack said.

“Hey man, we don’t know that,” Dax said quickly. And then a little more soothingly, “It’s not always the vampires, brother.”

This elicited a grumbling assent from Jack as he downed the last of his beer.

*That wound will never heal.* Dax understood. They all carried their scars.

“So, look,” Dax said, now raising the authority in his voice, letting them all know what he was about to say was important.

*More important. Everything I say is important, of course.* He chuckled to himself. Did his dragon roll its eyes at him?

“I have been bouncing this around in my head. I finally got a hold of Marius and got him in for another interview,” he said.

“No shit. How’d you do that? I was sure he would be hiding behind his beloved Fae council connections,” Rollo said.

“Turns out my council connections hold more weight than his. Besides, one mention to Finch of a potential drug problem hitting Fae Crossing was all it took. I guess he made it clear to Marius that he would be hung out to dry if he didn’t cooperate. Marius actually called *me*.”

“No shit,” Rollo repeated.

“You already said that, mate!” called Dayton. “You need to work on your vocabulary!”

“Fuck off, Dayton,” Rollo said.

“I hope you don’t talk like this around the boys,” Dayton said. The lines between jokes and fighting words could be razor thin with shifters, and the tension in the room suddenly shot up to a nine.

Before the two had time to get to their feet, Dax raised the timber of his voice. “Enough!” It wasn’t the famed ‘alpha voice’ but it was enough to stop them both in their tracks. The last thing he needed was a wolf and a bear rolling on the floor right now.

When they had settled down, he continued, “I got some solid intel from him, and I want you all to listen carefully. I have a plan, but I want your input

here,” he added, scanning the shifters.

“Marius was more than cooperative. Turns out he has landed himself in some serious hot water. He had run up some debts and had this hare-brained idea to start dealing this shit to get out of it. I won’t get into it, but we are using it all to our advantage. I don’t know much about Fae laws and customs, but they must be pretty severe. Either that or Finch is more of a bad ass than I give him credit for. I think he mentioned ‘banishing’ or something. That and arranging to help Marius out of his predicament is doing the trick. Marius is falling in line, and none too soon.”

They all sat up a little straighter and were leaning in toward Dax. This affected them all. They were sworn to stand with each other and to protect and serve the town. Dax knew they would gladly die in that service. The cost of being the tip of the spear for the Tribunal had been made all too real in recent years.

He continued, “It seems Marius was just small time and operating out of desperation. I don’t even want to know what, um, extra-curriculars got him into debt in the first place. I didn’t ask, so don’t ask me.” That elicited a low chuckle.

“But those men that went after the mother and daughter, Chris and Kim, they are something else entirely. Our sources on the street tell us that they are sitting on a whole pile of this drug and are intent on unloading it all, and soon. Marius was actually acting under their noses, even starting to deal in The Tree. Apparently, they are human, believe it or not, and though somehow they caught word of The Tree as the hub of the town, they have, for obvious reasons, been unable to find it. But I am sure they will find other avenues to get the drug out to willing buyers.”

“Humans?” Dayton laughed. “Let’s just go find ‘em! I’ll handle ‘em in five minutes. One shift and they will be so freaked out they will high tail it all the way back to wherever the fuck they came from!”

“Language,” Rollo said.

“You may get your chance, Dayton,” Dax was saying, but we *do* need to find them first, preferably before they unload this big supply of Supernova right here in Fae Crossing.”

“I’m not sure why Finch was so tweaked by the idea of drugs,” Clint piped up. “Seems to me that half of the fae that come here are already on drugs, always talking about the ‘amazing energy’ of Fae Crossing.”

“Let’s not get into fae and their vortex and get back on task,” Dax said to

try and rein them in. Vaguely, he wondered where Duke was with their next round.

“All we know is that they are from out west,” he said, getting up to pace while he spoke. “I doubt they have vampires putting them up to it, but you never know,” he added, addressing Jack as he spoke.

Jack nodded, as if to show appreciation for Dax’s acknowledgment of his concerns.

“Marius will do whatever I ask at this point, so I have come up with a plan to flush out these dealers, or whatever they are, before they can do any more damage here.”

He paused for a moment to take in their reactions. “We are going to set up a sting. We send Marius out into town accompanied by Kim and Chris. We already know those thugs want the women for whatever reason. My guess is that they will want a piece of Marius too. I bet they are still here in town and the target of all three of them, Marius and the women, all together, will be too much for them to resist.”

Just then the door swung open.

“Ah, just in time,” Dayton was saying as he gathered the empties into a bunch for Duke. But it wasn’t Duke that had entered the room.

Bloom backed in, her elbow propping open the door as she carried two fists full of beer bottles. “Wait a minute. *What’s your plan?*”

Dax checked his watch. It was four thirty. He was sure they had agreed on five.

She must have seen the surprised look of consternation on his face. “I hope you don’t mind my coming early! Here, take a beer as a sign I come in peace!”

Dax felt his stern features soften. “Crafty.”

“I thought so. Again, apologies,” she said as she set the beers down.

Her sudden appearance caught him off guard, but only served to highlight the sway she held over his dragon. From curled up and relatively dormant, it had jumped up to begin pacing behind his eyes.

He had jumped to his feet as she entered, as had the rest of the crew. Even Dayton took his feet off the table right quick to stand respectfully for the lady now in their presence.

After a moment, he realized an awkward pause had formed. He was still taking in her form. She had actually put on a sort of flowing sundress. She looked amazing and he was having trouble remembering what they had been

talking about. Finally, after what seemed like minutes, but in reality was probably only a second or so, he got his bearings.

The crew grabbed up the beers as he pulled up a chair for her and they all once again took seats.

“Boys, you all know Bloom,” he said as they all offered very polite greetings. Knowing her place in Dax’s heart, whether that was in the past or not, as well as what she had been through, they all showed her every deference.

“Again, I didn’t mean to interrupt, I just had been thinking and couldn’t wait any longer. Mack has the bar under control – along with the added help of our two guests, I might add,” she said looking around. “You’re sure it’s okay if I join. I can wait up front if you’d like, but it seems my timing is pretty good.”

“It’s fine, but what do you mean about timing?” Dax said.

“Well, I heard what you said, and I was thinking along the same lines with Marius,” she said tentatively. “But I will meet with Marius instead of Chris.”

“Absolutely not.”

Adrenalin shot through his veins, and if his dragon were alert before, now it was practically ready to burst forth in protest.

*Danger.*

“Why not? It makes perfect sense.”

“Are you kidding? It’s too dangerous. Besides, what would they want with you? What would be the draw?” Dax asked.

She explained patiently, “Look, you said they want to get into The Tree, right? To deal out of it?”

“Yes, that’s what Marius said.”

“So, I meet up with Marius under the guise of negotiating some deal that would allow him to deal out of The Tree. Everyone knows my bar is the main hub in town,” she said, pausing for a second as she scanned the faces at the table. “No offense,” she added, acknowledging that their shifter bar was not even in the running.

“None taken,” Dayton said in his most cordial and charming voice.

“We just need to spread the word a bit first amongst the local underground scene. They will be on the lookout for us then. It will be irresistible if they want in on the action as badly as you say.”

*Not too shabby, Bloom.*

But he wasn't going to say that out loud. His dragon was already freaking out. "I don't like it at all," he finally said.

"It's actually not a bad idea, boss," Jack said evenly.

"But how could we be sure they'd take the bait? We know they'd go after the ladies here. That is already proven," he said.

"Oh, come on. You know they would. Besides, if you are worried about what might happen, I'm sure you guys would be able to find a way to be all around, which I'm sure was already your plan if you had Chris meet him. The moment they show up, boom, you spring into action. I have full confidence in all of you," she said smiling as she waved a hand at the collected pack.

"Oh, really?" He doubted it. There was no way she fully trusted them at least. If she did, there would be no need to offer herself as decoy.

"At least there's one fae who does," Dayton quipped.

"Half fae," she corrected him.

"Right, sorry."

"Man, this must be one amazing drug," Clint interjected.

"Why do you say that?" Bloom said.

"Just seems to be a hell of a lot of fuss over it."

"Well, let's make sure no one else finds out how 'amazing' it is," Dax said. "So, maybe your idea is a good one," he said as they locked eyes. "But I am going to be within ten feet of you the whole time," he added.

If he had to have her there, he was going to personally make sure she was safe and nothing happened.

"Well, yeah," she said. "That was part of my plan."

He looked down at her lips and saw she was looking at his, even as she ran a hand through her hair. Warmth shot through him in a wave.

If they had not been surrounded by the pack at the Den, he was pretty sure they would have been having what people liked to call 'a moment'.

As if the rest of them sensed it and just couldn't stand the tension either, Jack quickly raised a toast, "To the new plan."

"To the plan!" the rest chimed in as they clinked their bottles together.

Bloom leveled a gaze at him. In the space of a short week or ten days, it was like the last two years had disappeared. He had to push his dragon down to prevent himself from pulling her into his arms right then and there.

But what would happen when they were alone?

*Maybe I could bring her into the fold as far as the investigation and Frederick?*



He was far from sure about that, but his mind immediately started conjuring images of before, when things were effortless between them. When they were close. When he used to pull her into his arms. Kiss her. And he couldn't help but want that again.

He shook himself out of it.

For the moment, he had to do his best to turn his attention to the plan.

They couldn't afford any mistakes.

Especially because now the stakes were much higher. She needed to be protected.

## CHAPTER 13



“Thanks,” Bloom said as they walked side by side down Willow Way toward the four corners. She was trying to get her bearings, which was proving a challenge at the moment. She was having trouble keeping up with her rapidly changing feelings toward Dax.

But that wasn’t quite right really. The last thing she had expected in the aftermath of her father’s death had been to begin to develop feelings for the man in charge of the investigation. But that was exactly what had happened. And though her frustration and anger at the department had obscured her feelings almost to the point of extinguishing them, she knew they had never really died. The torch she was holding had never really gone out - despite her best attempts to snuff it.

“Thanks?” Dax repeated.

“Yeah, for not shooting down my idea right then and there.”

“If it had been a dumb idea, I would have shot it down in a heartbeat,” he said matter-of-factly. “But it makes sense.”

“Good to know,” she laughed.

“You know, I am not sure what kind of monster you think I am,” he said, suddenly seemingly serious.

“What are you talking about? I don’t think you’re a monster.” *Not per se at least.*

“Okay, because I just want you to know I meant what I said. Even to say ‘I’m sorry about your father,’ feels like the most feeble attempt at expression. But it’s the best I can do. We really have been working very hard on the case. And though I wish I could share more with you, I just can’t. I hope you understand.”

“It seems I don’t have a whole lot of choice at the moment, but still I appreciate you saying it like you have. Why couldn’t you have said it that way two years ago?” This was a different side of him for sure.

“There was a whole lot going on then, Bloom. I guess I didn’t come across the best. For that, I am sorry. I really don’t have an excuse.”

“I know your pack was dealing with its own problems too,” she conceded, before going silent for a few steps. “In light of this conversation, I am hereby removing your previous ‘monster’ status,” she said as they continued down the main drag of Fae Crossing.

“Good, because I wanted to clear that up. See, I am a Dragon, not just any old monster.”

“Ohhh” she said, laughing, and seeing where he was actually going with that. *Not where I thought.* “Well, a long time ago, when there were knights and castles, I’m sure they thought of dragons as monsters.”

“True, but they also thought sickness came from one of the four ‘humors’ being bad and all sorts of other nonsense.”

“Point taken,” she conceded. “I guess you’re right, because they also thought that fairies only lived deep in the forest in “Dells” and they danced around circles under the moon.”

“Wait, are you saying you *don’t* dance naked on the full moon? You’re shattering my image of fae.”

“Very funny,” she said, giving him a gentle punch in the arm. “Of course we do that. In truth there are as many types of fae as there are of humans and they are just as varied.”

“But they all do the dancing thing, right?”

She let out another laugh. “Yes, Dax, we have established that. We also usually rub oil on each other’s bodies while we do it.”

“Okay, good. Just wanted to be sure I am not buying into any stereotypes.”

“Right,” she said, smiling at him and then shifting to a more serious tone. “But really, truth is, I am not all that well versed in fae history or of the many fae realms for that matter. Being only half fae, and raised by a human mother, I missed out on a lot,” she said, surprising herself by the direction the conversation had taken. She was pretty sure that they had never talked this way back during their short fling.

*Well, you guys never even sealed the deal either.* She felt a wave of pleasure surge through her core as the thought crossed through her mind.

“Yeah, all the stuff with your fae realms kind of wigs me out. Different dimensions. All that.” he confessed.

“Wigs you out?” she repeated.

“Oh, sorry, it... um... freaks me out? Is that better? It’s hard not to pick up on the human vernacular.”

She laughed, “Tell me about it,” she said. “Dude,” she added playfully.

*Bloom, keep it cool*, she chided herself. She was getting a little too relaxed around him perhaps, but he seemed to appreciate her joke as he laughed.

“I am way more comfortable among shifters. I understand them. If there’s a problem, we fight it out. Simple.”

“Lovely,” she said, laughing.

“But I mean, fae are just so damn mysterious. And the many fae realms. All that is crazy to me,” he said.

“Oh, I understand. It’s crazy to me too. And like I was saying, the fae are as different from one another as humans are from each other, or shifters, or any kind of supernatural, I imagine. I really need to learn more about my own kind. But I can tell you that the fae you, or really even I, interact with, for the most part, have chosen to be here in this particular, um...earth plane dimension...the one with humans and shifters, etc., so you don’t really need to concern yourself with other realms. It’s not really your business.”

He looked almost affronted.

“No. I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, grabbing his arm. “That’s how the witches explained it to me.”

“Oh, right, yeah,” Dax said. “Don’t get me started with the witches.”

She had forgotten how funny he could be. Or maybe it was that she had forgotten how much fun they had together.

“You’re funny, Dax.” *Oh God. Bloom. You didn’t have to say that out loud!*

“Well, sometimes you got to laugh, ya know? Otherwise, well, you know the alternative.”

“I do.”

Suddenly, he got serious again. “We both do. But hey, I didn’t mean to remind you of...” he was saying now, suddenly backpedaling it seemed.

“What? No. And really, I am glad this came up,” she said, turning to face him. By now they were standing at the four corners and it was time for them to go in their different directions.

She took his hand in hers. "I'm sorry if I have been too hard on you."

"Oh, don't mention it," he began. "I know you were going through a lot. A whole lot."

She was surprised at how she was warming up to him, even as they spoke. "I will tell you it did hurt, you know, when I felt like my father didn't matter anymore. But of course, with the car accident and everything, I know." But then she continued, "And I could have been more understanding. I was just too crushed. It was easier to be mad than to admit how much it hurt. And then, well...with everything, I just couldn't take it. Seeing you and feeling nothing was happening with the case... I guess I needed to blame someone, you know?"

Had she just said that out loud?

"I'm so sorry, Bloom," he said suddenly, as he pulled her into an embrace before she even knew what was happening.

It was as if the weight of the world had fallen off her shoulders for a moment as she let him take it from her, surrendering to the safety of his arms. For a moment it was like no time had passed between them. As he held her, he spoke in her ear, "I definitely didn't mean to hurt you. I was just... Us big, bad shifters don't like to admit it, but we have our limits too. I could have been more patient. Maybe better explained things. But truth is I was struggling to hold myself and my own pack together as well. I'm glad that we got to talk a little bit about it now, though."

She felt that now familiar warmth spreading through her body again. "So, I guess we are in full truce mode, then?"

"Most definitely," he laughed, seeming to catch himself as he released her from his embrace and stepped back.

She let her hands linger on his hard, chiseled chest for a moment as she looked up into his eyes as they parted. It was taking all her willpower to not throw herself back into his arms.

"Okay, well, good talk," she said. She shuffled back and forth on her feet before finally extending a hand.

*What are you doing?* But she knew exactly what she was doing. She needed to reestablish some boundaries. She was already nervous about the direction she felt things leading.

He seemed to gather himself as well. "Right, yeah, good talk. Enjoy the rest of your night, Bloom."

"You too." *Keep it together, girl.*

“We’ll be in touch about next steps soon, probably tomorrow. The pack and I, that is ...”

“Sounds good. Good night, Dax, and thank you for our talk,” she finally said as she crossed the open grass to reach The Tree.

*What the hell is going on?*

Her body was practically on fire.

\* \* \*

SHE LET THE WATER POUR OVER HER. PEOPLE SOMETIMES ASKED HER WHAT her favorite part of living in an enchanted tree was, and when she said the bathroom, that often got a strange look. But it was totally true. The bathroom could actually morph with her mood, but not in a freaky way. Most of the time, or if it was her wish, it was just a standard bath and shower, albeit a totally amazing one, with one of those crazy huge shower heads that made it seem you were in a rainstorm rather than just the morning shower.

But this evening, it was a weeknight, and so with all that had transpired, she decided she deserved a nice relaxing shower. And the bathroom had not disappointed. The water seemed to cascade off a rock ledge today, the wall covered in green and moss. She let the warm water rinse through her hair and hopefully wash away all that had been occupying her mind for the last few weeks.

*Yes, where is the off switch to this brain?* And no sooner than she had flipped that switch, her mind began to dwell on a different topic.

Well, one aspect of the last few weeks. And it wasn’t so much her mind, or not *just* her mind. Her body really had led the charge.

She thought of Dax, and how he smelled, and how strong and centered he had been. How he had actually taken her side, or at least backed her up. But mostly it was how she felt when she was with him. She wasn’t sure when it had started, but in truth, little by little, it was Dax who had begun to fill her mind’s eye. His rippling muscles. That ridiculously cut jawline. The way others seemed to gravitate to him.

And then in the last few days, his kindness. And today, the way he had listened, really listened. He really did care. He had cared all along. She had known of course he was dealing with his own stuff, but today she really saw it. She could feel his struggle even as he did his best to comfort her. Even

after the way she had hardly made any of it easy for her.

She grabbed the soap to begin to gently scrub away the grime. Across her arms, and then her legs. Now her breasts. She lingered, taking a nipple in her fingers and squeezing as she thought of Dax. His hardness. His rock hard body and abs. They had almost gotten naked that one night. He had rubbed her down with the most amazing massage.

She squeezed at her breast even harder before moving the soap down, at first just making a cursory pass over her pussy. She did her best to fight the urges that were arising, trying in vain to resist, before finally bringing her fingers to rest on the mound of her sex, pushing her hips against her hand. She felt her wetness spread as she again thrust her hips against her hands, even as she put a finger gently into the folds to better rub her clit. Before she knew what to do, she had balanced herself against the rocks, one hand squeezing at a nipple as her other dove into the increasing hot wetness of her pussy. She imagined herself pulling down his boxers, freeing his glorious cock once and for all, feeling its girth in her hands. She imagined dropping to her knees for him. Taking him in her hand, she first kissed at the head, and then ran her tongue along its length. Even as she did, she imagined his firm, strong hands seizing her, pulling her up to look in his eyes. To kiss him deeply even as he lifted her, allowing her now sopping core to press against his rock hard member. He would lift her and buck, sliding his shaft along her willing opening. Teasing her. She plunged another finger in as she pumped her fingers against herself, gasping out loud in spite of herself.

“Ohh,” she dropped to her knees and brought her second hand to her clit as she fucked her fingers, moaning in pleasure as she imagined him with her. Finally. His strength, his tight muscular body, his...”

*His...oh my fucking—*

“Bloom!!”

*...nnoooo.*

For a moment, she tried to stay with it. *His...his...right...big muscles. Um. Oh dammit.* It was no use.

“Umm, Chris? Just a minute. I’m just taking a shower here!”

“It’s just a quick question. I know you wanted us to redo the floors and Mack said you had a special wax...”

*For fuck’s sake.*

She came back to herself...both annoyed at the interruption, but also more than a little shocked.

“Okay, okay, just a minute please, I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Oh no, I’m sorry. It can wait. I just thought...” she heard Chris stammering.

“No, It’s fine, I’m already getting out,”

*Sigh. Seems I won’t even let myself have him in my fantasies.*

She chuckled at her joke.

But then again, maybe there was some truth there.

*Maybe things need to change?*

*Maybe.*



## CHAPTER 14



**D**ax was tense. More so than usual. His dragon was totally on edge.  
*No stupid moves, people.*

He was afraid his dragon would fry them before he could stop it. He was that on edge.

He leaned his head down and spoke into the little mic. That had been Jack's idea. He was their tech guy. Or their Q. He did feel a little like James Bond, but that little bit of thrill was largely overshadowed by his worry for Bloom.

"Is everyone in position?" he said into his collar.

"Chocolate is a go."

"Vanilla go."

Everyone else checked in. *I can't believe I okayed these stupid codenames.* But he had to keep his mind on more important aspects of the operation.

They were at the outdoor seating of the Babbling Buck, a popular restaurant and bar down the way from the Four Corners. It had been agreed that it was best to stay away from the very heart of town in case things went south. If worse came to worst and they had to shift, they figured the fewer witnesses, the better. Even so, they had called in Etta and Lora. Nan was not exactly perfectly suited for the mission being that she was almost blind as a bat. But if they needed her help with forgetting spells there was none better. He looked across the street nervously and pushed down his annoyance.

Try as he might, he had been unsuccessful in trying to get Etta to abandon her signature flowing scarves completely. He realized he should consider it a win that she had agreed to only wear one today, rather than her customary

billion.

They had already arranged for the table behind him to be held until Marius and Bloom arrived. They would be taking separate paths to reach the restaurant. Their going theory had been that the two thugs would only approach them once they were together, essentially to better negotiate or facilitate them getting in on the action and being given access to supply via The Tree. From their sources, the pack had learned that the dealers had come to believe that The Tree was some ongoing rave that popped up in a different warehouse every week.

Well, that would make more sense to a human than the idea of a tree that was also a bar, and oh yeah, existed more in the Fae realms than in this one.

Marius had already arrived and was sitting down from what he had been told.

I should have sat facing them. Damn. He had thought it might be too obvious. A big guy like himself sitting right across from their table. But now, facing away, he felt blind. He would have to trust his team.

“What’s he doing?” he said into his collar.

“Just sitting there. Relax,” came Jack’s voice through his earpiece.

“Copy.”

Just then Bloom came in and sauntered past him. She was wearing a sundress again. His dragon let out what amounted to a combination of purr and growl.

And then her perfume hit him. *Wildflowers*. He took a deep breath in. She knew he loved wildflowers.

*Focus, buddy.*

“Okay, everyone. Stay alert.” Rollo was around back, and Jack was near the entrance. Dayton and Clint were down Mountain View in opposite directions from the venue.

Dax scanned the street and immediate vicinity. Nothing.

The others kept him apprised of every new development, but after half an hour, the most noteworthy development had been that Bloom had sent back the appetizer. Rollo was of the opinion it hadn’t been what she’d ordered, while Clint’s bet was that it was, but had arrived cold.

“Okay, okay. Just stay focused.”

He could hear Bloom chatting away. He couldn’t really tell what was being said, but she seemed to be relatively at ease. They had held a meeting the day before in secret at the Den, and Marius had groveled sufficiently to

satisfy her. He was trying to make things right, even if it was because the Fae council had threatened him, most likely with banishment. Agreeing to settle his debt had sealed his compliance.

He was still trying to wrap his head around the U-turn their relationship had taken over the last few days. And the way she had stepped up and put herself right in the middle of the sting operation.

*It made him more than a little uneasy. But it also was only intensifying his growing desire for her.*

God, he did his best to bring his thoughts back to monitoring the situation in the here and now. But she definitely had a way of distracting him.

*Keep her safe.*

His dragon was on point. That instinct was pouring off of him.

*Yes, buddy, fine. 'And keep her safe'.* Being a shifter could be exhausting. His dragon might be the big, scary, badass part of him as far as others were concerned, but there were times it felt to him like being chained to a toddler. A big, scary, fire-fucking-breathing toddler of course. That could fly. And rip a man to shreds with its bare claws.

*What does Bloom really have to gain from all this?*

Once again his mind wandered. His more cynical mind responded immediately. *She wants to protect her bar, of course. The Tree.* That was true, but what was wrong with that?

And what about those women? She had nothing to gain from protecting them. She certainly didn't have to charge in there in the first place and mace that guy.

He chuckled at the thought of it again. But he knew the expression, the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree. He laughed at the unintended pun.

Her father had always looked out for the little guy. His dad used to say that Mr. Hawthorne was one of the good ones.

Yeah, and it seemed to have gotten him killed.

He turned the mental page. Her father aside, she was pretty impressive, really. And not your typical fa— Half fae.

A few hours had passed by now. Dax himself had already drank three waters and eaten three appetizers as well. This was going nowhere.

“Okay, guys. I think we call it.”

“Copy that,” came back from multiple voices.

“But let's be careful on our exit too,” he said.

“Hundred percent,” Jack said. “Okay, they are wrapping up.”

“Copy,” Dax said. He had already paid and wanted to be sure the coast was clear for them on the way out. He stood quickly, and just as he turned to take in the restaurant, he was met by Bloom, who had apparently risen at the same time and taken a step toward the exit. The two immediately became entangled as Dax reached out his hand to steady himself. Had it not been for his superior reflexes, they would have definitely gone down in a pile. As it was, though, Bloom did go down. Or at least she took out a chair that smacked the ground as she lost her feet. Dax caught her fully under the arms, though, and absorbed her body. *Her soft, warm, delectable body.* It was only with some effort that he managed to avoid grabbing her anywhere he shouldn’t.

“Heads up, Bloom’s down,” Jack called out.

“Was that a shot?” he heard almost immediately from Rollo, who didn’t have eyes on them at the moment.

After the initial shock, Dax quickly patted her down, from her ass up her back. He was pretty sure there had been no shot, but needed to check nonetheless.

“You sure you didn’t miss anywhere?” she said under her breath.

*Is she flirting with me?*

Feeling nothing but healthy, solid flesh, he determined she had not been shot after all, and began to help her to her feet. “Just making sure,” he said.

“Um hm,” she replied as she adjusted and smoothed her dress.

“Chief? Everything okay there?” Jack’s voice came again over the comms.

“Um, affirmative,” he whispered into the mic as he once again turned to leave. Then in a voice that was perhaps a little too loud and a bit too theatrical, he added, “Be careful, miss.”

With that, he finally headed out, letting Marius attend to her as he exited the restaurant ahead of them, scanning for threats the whole time.

“Okay, guys. We’re heading out. Stay alert.”

“Roger that.”

As the operation wound down, he went over it all in his head. It had gone by the numbers. It just hadn’t worked.

But his dragon was still happy.

Of course.

*Mate.*

That stopped him dead in his tracks. *Ohh, no. No no no. Don’t even go*

*there.*

But the feeling, the conviction pouring off his dragon was unmistakable. *Great.* Just what he needed.

\* \* \*

“YOU DON’T THINK MARIUS TIPPED THEM OFF OR SOMETHING, DO YOU? Maybe playing both sides?” Rollo was saying as he and Dax sat at the Den winding down a little later.

“I don’t think so, man. You should have heard the fear in his voice when we were talking. No, he is more afraid of the Fae Council than of these dealers, I’d say. I just don’t think it was our day.”

“Right,” Rollo said.

They both sipped in silence for a few minutes as they came down off the adrenalin high that accompanied any operation, even one that took them nowhere, like today’s.

“So?” Rollo finally said.

“So what?”

“Oh, please. Come on,” Rollo answered.

Dax was silent for a minute. “Is it that obvious?”

“Uhh. Yeah,”

“Great.” Dax laughed. Then groaned. “I don’t know.” Dax was silent for another minute. Rollo didn’t say anything.

“My dragon gave me the mate vibe today. Right at the end. You believe that? And about a half-fae.” Dax looked at his lieutenant. “You’re not gonna help me out here, are you?”

“There’s worse things that can happen to you besides finding a good woman.”

Dax laughed again. “You think she’s a good woman? Half-fae and all?”

“Ah, come one, it’s fun to make fun of the fae, and yeah, generally speaking they are freaky as hell. But on a one to one basis, they’re just like we are. At least that’s what I’ve always thought.”

“Damn, you really are gunning for pack counselor.” Dax took another sip off his beer. “You know I’ve never been in any hurry with getting a mate, though. And come on, tell me your wolf doesn’t get all mate sick at the drop of a hat. Mate this and mate that. I think I am just exhausted.”

“Dax, come on. Don’t tell me you believe any of that. I told you two years ago she was different. For you. There was something between you two. There *is*. I mean, it’s one of those two plus two equals five things.”

“Two plus two equals five?”

“You know what I mean.” Rollo took a long swig of his beer.

“So, maybe I’m overthinking it?”

“Look, boss, I don’t really know what you’re doing, and I can’t really say for you. I can just tell you what I have seen. And what I see is that you are sort of... I don’t know. Maybe more, um... grounded? Centered? Like something about you with her just feels right. I just don’t want to see you pass on a good thing. To be honest, I am a little jealous,” Rollo said as he got up. “I love you, brother. Like I said, I just want to see you happy. I have to get back to the kids. Nanny’s gonna kill me if I’m late.”

“Okay, brother,” Dax said as he watched Rollo leave.

*Two plus two equals five.* He would have to think about that.

But first they needed to get this scum off the street and secure Fae Crossing, and that was proving to demand a little more patience than he had bargained on.

## CHAPTER 15



“*Y*ou are just going to have to trust us a little longer, okay, Chris?” Bloom said.

“Are you sure this will work, though? You have to stop it before...” Chris started to say, but seemed to stop herself. “I don’t want to see anyone else get hurt.”

“Get hurt? Don’t worry, Chris. Dax and his men know what they are doing. I’ll be fine. They’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.” She rubbed Chris’s shoulder to reassure her.

*She doesn’t look reassured.*

Chris and her daughter had opted to stay put at The Tree. She was beginning to wonder what would become of them really. She didn’t mind putting them up, but she couldn’t house them forever, even if she had grown to enjoy their company. But until they dealt with those thugs, or were satisfied that they had lost interest in Fae Crossing and moved on, Chris showed no interest in so much as stepping outside of the safe confines of The Tree.

*Maybe those men are already long gone.*

It was a nice thought, but she didn’t really believe it.

*I wonder what Dax thinks?*

She missed him, she realized. It had only taken a week of reconnecting for the old feelings to come flooding in.

She looked at her phone, half expecting it to ring right then. He had established a rather uncanny way of showing up almost every time he came to her mind.

*Which would be all the time as this point.*

But, true to form, she did not have to wait more than a few minutes before her phone rang.

“Bloom,” he said, a little breathlessly.

“Dax,” she said in turn. Unless she was imagining things, their interactions had definitely taken on a new tone... a warmer tone. *Warmer my ass. The guy practically drips “sexy”.*

“Are we gonna get these guys or what?”

“Damn right, we are. We have a plan in place and I just wanted to run it by you.”

*Things have changed.*

“You don’t think it’s possible that they have already moved on, do you?”

“Not a chance,” he said without a moment’s hesitation.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Call it instinct, or I don’t know. I just know this isn’t over.”

“I was hoping you would change my mind, but I feel the same.”

“Right, okay,” he said.

He began to outline his plan B.

“Got it. I really hope this works, though, and quickly. I don’t think I can stand listening to Marius drone on a third time.”

“Your sacrifice is noted,” he said wryly.

“I like the adjustment, though. We need to make ourselves as visible as possible. But you’re not worried about collateral damage or any humans seeing what they shouldn’t? Isn’t that like a big no-no for shifters? Even more so than for fae?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” he said. “It is most definitely a ‘no-no’ as you call it, but we have to risk it considering the situation. There is no way we are letting some drug epidemic take hold in Fae Crossing.

“Preaching to the choir,” she said. “You know I am with you on this or I wouldn’t be doing it. Obviously,” she added.

“Okay,” he finally said, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

\* \* \*

AN HOUR LATER, BLOOM AND MARIUS WERE ON THEIR THIRD LAP WALKING IN rough figure eights around the downtown area and through the Four Corners.



“This is ridiculous,” Marius was saying.

“Ridiculous or not, just keep chatting and looking like we are scheming together,” Bloom said as they crossed Willow again and headed for the park.

“Maybe they’ve decided Fae Crossing is too much trouble,” Marius said as he glanced around the street.

“If you want to establish a drug trade, Fae Crossing is the hub for this whole region. I think they are still around,” she said as she did her best to look conspiratorial.

“I just hope those shifters are close. And the Council better be watching. Finch is going to owe me after this,” Marius was saying.

“Umm, haven’t you got that a little backwards?” she replied. *This guy is definitely out of touch. He’s lucky he is not banished to the far side of the moon.*

“Whatever. How many times can we walk in circles? If this were going to work, it would have worked by now.”

*Don’t fall apart on us now.*

“Just stick to the plan, Marius.”

Just then, Dax came into her ear via the radio, “Everything okay there?”

“Yeah,” she said into her microphone, “I’m just starting to wish these guys would just attack already, and save me from Marius and his idiotic conversation.”

Dax laughed. “Copy that. Head into the park and do a lap and then back to Four Corners. If we still have nothing, we’ll call it. Might need a plan C.”

“Got it.” This obviously wasn’t working. Maybe they weren’t as onto the criminals’ plans as they had thought. Or surprise, surprise, maybe the bad guys had better things to do than keep tabs on her and Marius. Truth is, it had been a long shot.

She glanced around as they took a right into the park. It had once been the grounds of some fae noble. For a while, it had lay abandoned after he died. Then it was bought up by a corporation and finally donated to the town.

In its current form it was a popular spot. Deeper into the park were the remains of the old home, which had burned to the ground back in the 1950’s.

Its fifty acres had been heavily landscaped and largely inspired by the romantic period and English gardens in particular. That’s what the plaque said at least.

Her favorite parts were the Greek and Roman inspired “follies” that dotted the grounds. She just loved the whole concept of little monuments and

buildings that had no purpose whatsoever, other than to look cool and be “romantic.”

“Come on, Marius. I want to go down by the lake before we head back.” It was obvious no one was watching them.

“Shouldn’t we stay up on the main paths?” he said a little nervously.

“If your friends were gonna jump us, I think they would have done so by now.”

“They’re not my friends!”

“Whatever. Besides, maybe they have been hanging back, just waiting for us to go into some place off the beaten path. It could still happen.” She looked around again, inwardly bracing herself for the action to start.

“You sound like you want them to attack.”

“Of course I do. Isn’t that the point?”

“But I liked it a lot better with all the people around. I don’t even see your boyfriend...”

“My *boyfriend*?” she said, a little surprised to realize their attraction had become so obvious so quickly.

“Yeah, the cop... the way you guys are...”

She stopped in her tracks and was about to turn to correct him but decided not to waste her breath.

“Is everything okay down there?” Dax’s voice came into her earbud almost instantly.

*He must have eyes on us. Good.*

“Yes, it’s fine. Marius is just being Marius.”

He glared at her.

“The rest of your crew are still in position, right?” she asked then.

“Affirmative,” he said. “Don’t worry, we haven’t taken our eyes off of you.”

She felt that familiar warmth spread through her core. “Just checking. Marius is getting antsy, and I guess it’s getting to me too.”

“Just stay the course.”

She looked around the immediate area, and saw nothing, which only added to her growing anxiety, although she knew full well the Fae Crossing Pack were all hidden around her, never letting her out of their site.

*At least that’s what they are telling me.*

“Yup, we are going to go circle this little Roman temple thing.”

“Copy that, we’ve got you.”

But nothing seemed to be flushing out the bad guys, if indeed they were even there. Their journey to the old garden folly and brief exploration were totally uneventful.

Finally, after a few minutes, Dax was back in her ear, “Okay, Bloom. We got nothing here. Not so much as a pair of teenagers making out. Head back toward The Tree.”

“No teenagers making out, huh?”

“The park is empty, yes,” Dax replied.

“Did you check if there are any heading to second base?”

Dax sighed over the audio. “There is no romantic action of any sort taking place. Now get your ass to The Tree please.”

“Heh hmm,” she heard another voice over the radio.

“Uh, so we are going to wrap it up, boss? Is that right?” She was pretty sure it was Rollo, his second in command.

“That’s affirmative.”

“Okay, guys, keep cover, but we’re heading back out. At least we got to spend a little time in the park,”

Just then, though, she heard the screech of tires as a black SUV came peeling up over a bank out of the brush. *What the hell?*

Marius instantly turned and began to run, without so much as a glance in her direction.

At the same time, the SUV was coming up behind her quickly. Apparently, she was their preferred target. It must have come up the service road? *Or it’s been waiting there, hidden in the brush.*

She heard crackling over the radio. “Move, move, move! Bloom, I’m coming,” Dax’s excited voice came on the radio again.

Before she even knew what was happening, the SUV was beside her, though. It was all a blur. The sound of the racing engine filled the air, and then the shouts of men. One of the men had gone after Marius and made short work on him. Even now he was dragging him into the back. She turned to run, when out of the corner of her eye she saw an impossibly large wolf barreling toward them. It lunged, gripping the arm of the assailant that held Marius. The man howled in pain as he released his hold. Across the field, she saw a huge bear quickly closing the distance between itself and them. But even then she felt hands on her. She tried to fight and tore at her assailants as they pulled her roughly toward the truck. In the scuffle, she felt the earbud fall out. *Shit.* Before she knew it, she was pulled into the back of the truck.

Even before the doors were shut, the engine began to race. The last thing she saw out the door before it sealed her in was Marius's wide-eyed face as he lay on the ground, looking on in fear.

"Go, go, go! Did you see that dog? Jeezuz!" screamed the man on her right, even as he looked down at the blood seeping from where the wolf had torn his upper arm. *Good.*

That must have been Rollo. She was pretty sure he was the wolf. Or it could have been Jack too.

"What about Marius?" said the man sitting to her left, his iron grip holding her wrist firm.

"We don't need him if we have her. Now we are just going to have a little talk, Bloom," said the man in the front passenger seat.

Before she knew it, they had bumped down the path, trees flying by on either side, until they flew right past the massive stone gates of the old estate, with pedestrians leaping to either side. Then before she had even fully taken in what was happening, they were on the road, barreling out of town at high speed.

Adrenalin coursed through her. This is not how the plan was supposed to go down. But she had put her faith in Dax.

*Now he just needs to come through.*

The guy in the passenger seat seemed to be in charge. "Look, we are reasonable. We don't want much, just to discuss some business dealings. You will find we make much better partners than Marius. But that is irrelevant. Our offer is going to be of the take it or leave it sort. We don't recommend you leave it."

The men on either side of her gripped her arms tightly, even as the one on her right kept up a steady monologue of curses directed at the bleeding gash on his arm, "Did you see the size of that fucking dog?"

"That was no dog, Big J, that was a wolf."

"Where the hell did it come from?"

"Those critters are pretty scary," Bloom chimed in.

The guy on her right, "Big J", seemed a bit annoyed at her contribution to their conversation. "You're just beginning to see scary, lady," he said in an apparent attempt to regain some control over the narrative.

"Oh, they have things much scarier than doggies," Bloom said. Big J's attempts to intimidate her were only egging her on.

*Just wait till my dragon gets here.*

She felt a surge of excitement pulse through her.

*My dragon.* She played the thought through her mind.

“Things? What the hell are you talking about? It’s lucky I didn’t shoot it dead,” Big J said, with as much bravado as he could muster.

She was beginning to see her new shifter friends in a new light. Maybe even appreciating them.

“Where are you taking me?” she finally demanded. Despite her growing faith in Dax and his pack, she couldn’t help but feel more than a little alarmed at being kidnapped. They were fast approaching the old Macon Bridge, which was sort of the unofficial border between Fae Crossing and the outside world.

“Come on, Dax,” she said aloud.

“Lady, who the hell are you talking to? Hey boss, this lady is kooky.”

*Okay, I take back all the bad things I have thought about shifters. I get it. I was wrong. Great, this must be the bargaining phase I am in now. Isn’t that part of how people deal with trauma or something? Or is that grief? Whatever, Dax, if you are going to save me, now would be a good time.*

Just at that moment, ‘Boss’ turned in his seat to address her. “Don’t go all nuts on us, lady. We’re not gonna hurt you. We just want to make a little deal. Word is your underground club, The Tree, is the hottest spot in town. And it just so happens we have the hottest drug. I am sure we can come to an arrangement for our mutual benefit. Well, for our benefit at least. You don’t want to disappoint us. We aren’t always so nice.” The two thugs gripped her arms tighter as she fought in vain to free herself.

*Any time now, Dax.*

As if on cue, the whole SUV suddenly lurched and swerved as the space around them darkened. The screech of steel was immediate as the roof began to buckle in places.

“What in the fuck?” gasped Big J as he looked up at the roof.

*Eloquent.*

“Is that a fucking claw?”

“That’s my man, er, dragon.”

Big J just stared at her with his mouth agape as the SUV seemed to be almost lifted before the top of the vehicle was peeled back like a sardine can. And standing right on top was the most beautiful beast she had ever seen. The dragon was jet black and covered in pearlescent scales. Beneath the scales rippled the beast’s muscles, and upon its back were two great wings. Even now she could feel the wind as it beat them to aid it as it further ripped open

the roof. Then it locked eyes on her. Locked eyes with her. Its blue eyes.

Dax.

It was just a flash, but she would know him in any form.

“Jeezus...what in the..” came the cry from the driver.

This time, Big J had already drawn his pistol, apparently not wanting to make the same mistake he had made with the “dog”.

But just as he was raising the gun toward him, the dragon reached in and ripped him clear out of the SUV as it uttered a deafening roar. The last she saw of Big J were his legs as he was plucked, and apparently thrown from the SUV.

*Not feeling so big now, I bet, J.*

Rather than be next, it seemed her other captor decided to make a quick exit, as he flung open his door and jumped from the speeding vehicle.

They were now barreling headlong toward the bridge. Even as the “boss” in the front passenger seat sought to pull his own gun on the dragon, Dax delivered a sweeping blow to him and the driver with one on his clawed feet. No sooner than she saw both men in the front flung against the doors than she felt a powerful grip on her jacket.

Before she knew what was happening, she was lifted higher and higher clear of the SUV. From this vantage, she could see the chaos that had quickly filled the streets. It was only a short distance back toward town and she could already see a crowd forming to gawk at the commotion. No doubt they were talking about the massive bear and wolf. Oh...and the dragon. Here she was, being literally swept away by a dragon, and all she was thinking of was how many random humans would need to get forgetting whammies.

She was surprised that rather than feeling afraid, she felt...

*How do I feel?*

*Alive.* That was the word. More alive than she had ever felt in her life.

*So this was why people got into extreme sports.*

But there was more to it.

*I feel safe.*

Safe like she never had before. She had always recoiled at the shifter bravado. They practically seemed to sweat testosterone. Maybe that’s not such an awful thing after all. She had done nothing but stew on what she thought had been the pack’s inaction over the last few years. Even now she was just taking his word for it that they really were making some progress, even if it were all behind the scenes. They had certainly jumped into action

now. Dax was flat out kicking ass.

She realized that Dax was also looking down, and surveying the scene. Even as they hovered high above, she heard the awful crash of steel on steel. *The SUV*. Dax pivoted midair as well and she just caught the splash as the truck went into the river. It had missed the bridge entirely and crashed through the steel guardrail. Already a few cars were pulling over. The stretch of road from town to the bridge was no more than a quarter mile, and from up here, it reminded her of an anthill that had been kicked.

Dax seemed to share her thoughts as he suddenly beat his massive wings stronger and they shot off toward the mountains beyond the Clouded Woods.

With both fear and more than a little excitement, she wondered, *where is he taking me?*

\* \* \*

HE TOOK HER DEEPER AND DEEPER OVER THE PRIMEVAL FOREST THAT stretched between the town and the mighty Craven Rock Mountains. It was full of ancient oaks and maples, and of course, all manner of other creatures she knew. They couldn't have flown for more than a few minutes before a beautiful lodge came into view. It sat alongside a sort of minor ridgeline high enough up the mountains that it must have a beautiful view of the town, but not so high as to seem totally inaccessible. As they came in closer, she saw it was built of local rock and rough-hewn timbers, probably around the same time as the estate that the park had been built around, she guessed. It was stunning, like one of the "Great Houses" she had once read about that could be found along the Hudson Valley above New York City in the east.

They came in with great flaps of his wings and he gently set her on her feet before releasing her. The dragon then deftly flew up and over the high peaked roof and disappeared behind the home.

The front of the home had a sort of covered entrance, where a car, or a carriage at one time, she supposed, would have pulled up. Probably to drop off guests for some extravagant ball.

She took a seat on a bench that was positioned to offer a stunning view of the town a few miles away. *Did I just get a ride from a dragon?*

"I hope it's alright that I brought you here," she heard his voice behind her. "All things considered, it seemed the safest, best option."

“Of course. Thank you, Dax,” she said, turning, suddenly feeling a flush come over her. She had not expected it, but suddenly, almost inexplicably, they were here, on the side of a mountain, at his incredible home. And utterly alone.

She realized this was the first time she had been alone with him. The first time since before, at least.

He stood before her in some jeans, and a white tee shirt. The rest of her words died on her lips. Holy shit was he sexy.

*Maybe I am suffering from some kind of PTSD? Or PDSD? Post dragon stress disorder? Maybe a little.* The ride in the SUV, while that had been the plan all along, was still pretty terrifying. But the way Dax had just swooped in... That kind of overshadowed the rest.

She could feel the now familiar rise he caused in her. She struggled to get control of herself. *Do I even want to get control?*

“With all those people milling about, and not knowing who else might have been around, it makes sense,” she said, trying to keep her voice assured and steady, even as her knees were going weak.

“I just wanted to get you out of there,” he said emphatically.

“Well, you sure did that,” she said, blushing a little. “So, you shifted out back, I guess,” she stated. *No shit, captain obvious!* Oh God, why had she said that?

“Yeah, basically, I figured witnessing one traumatic event per day was enough for you,” he said, smiling. “Look, why don’t you take in the view here for a minute. I’m just gonna go clean up a bit. You’re heavier than you look, ya know,” he said, cracking a smile.

“Very funny,” she quipped back as he headed off, presumably to take a shower.

“Hey, or you can relax in here,” he said as he reached the main entrance.

She caught up to him and as they entered through the heavy oaken double doors he pointed off to the right. “You can rest in there. I’ll only be a few minutes. There’s a bathroom down the hall. I’ll be right back,” he said as he turned around a corner of the massive main hall and disappeared.

For a second she looked around, taking in the high ceiling that peaked through the crossing beams that supported the roof above this section of the house. There were various animal trophies mounted along the walls interspersed with a few portraits. A dashing looking man standing over a dead knight in one, a landscape in another. The whole place was quite



impressive really. There were a few nooks built into the walls where windows looked out. Each had an ancient looking leather chair positioned alongside little side tables mounted with books. Worn oriental rugs covered the stone floor.

She finally pulled her eyes away and headed into a sort of more modern living room, full of sofas, and a few floor lamps. Beyond the room, a hall continued down into one wing of the house. But her eye was most drawn to a heavy and particularly old looking wooden door off in one corner. It had a sign on it, but from her current vantage point she couldn't fully make it out, so she stepped down into the side room in order to cross between the various sofas and stuffed chairs. She took in the massive stone hearth that came into view as she crossed toward the object of curiosity.

She stifled a laugh, before muttering under her breath, "Boys."

Now, standing right in front of the door she could easily read the hand carved sign. It was pretty artfully done, to tell the truth, especially considering the subject material.

### **Dax's Man Cave**

AND THEN JUST BELOW THAT IN SMALLER LETTERS,

**My Cave, My Rules.**

*SERIOUSLY, DAX?*

SHE CHUCKLED TO HERSELF AGAIN.

HER CURIOSITY SATISFIED, SHE TURNED AND WAS ABOUT TO MAKE A BEE LINE for one particularly comfortable looking couch, when she heard the squawk of a radio, or maybe a C.B. from behind the door.

“Dax, come in, you got ears? Copy?”

For a second she stood frozen, but then decided the situation warranted it. After another moment’s hesitation, she grabbed the large worn brass knob and gave it a turn.

She was met by darkness and could see the top of a flight of stone steps. This part of the house seemed to be even older than the thick beamed construction of the house she had already seen.

She felt along the wall until her fingers found an old switch. It was the old push button type, and with the appropriate press a light came on below.

She made her way down the stone steps, one hand on a rail to her right. She noted with appreciation that the steps were actually carved into the bedrock. She heard another squawk from the still unseen radio.

As she reached the bottom of the steps, the room opened up and she could make out a large sprawling collection. There were a few large glass cabinets that held an assortment of items. Everything from strange looking skulls to colorful action figures. There was a whole attached room that seemed to be a workshop too. Another wall was full of what appeared to be ancient leather bound books.

But what caught her eye the most and what she was pulled toward was the large wall map of Fae Crossing itself. There was a regional map mounted beside it, each covered with little sticky notes, and even photos. Off to the side, a photograph of her father took pride of place right at the top. A little below it were pictures of a couple, maybe in their mid-thirties. There were questions scrawled and theories written out. Phrases abounded. “Random attack?” “Business related,” “Settling a score?” “Animal attack – Doubtful.”

And on a desk alongside were countless notebooks. She picked one up, “Interviews 2023” it read. She thumbed through it quickly.

“Duke Thorton, Friday afternoon: Duke agrees, Frederick the most likely responsible for Corbin’s death. But still not enough. Must work harder. Fae Crossing needs this solved. Bloom deserves it. Have to push harder. Follow up with a trip to Pratt’s Pass.”

She ran her finger over her father’s name. *Corbin*.

The entry was dated only a few days ago. She quickly flipped back earlier. There were entries almost daily.

*Oh wow. He has been working on it.* She felt almost ashamed of herself. But what was she supposed to have thought? Or felt?

Just then she heard the radio squawk again behind her, waking her out her shock. She couldn't believe it. He'd been working on the case!

"Yeah, Rollo, I copy."

Her heart jumped into her throat as she spun around.

"Oh my God, Dax, I'm sorry, I..."

But Dax was already making a "calm down, it's okay" gesture with his hands.

"You all okay?" came Rollo's voice again.

"Yeah, buddy. Hundred percent. I have Bloom. We are safe on the mountain. If you have it handled, I think it best for me to just keep her here. She had an awful fright I imagine. I want to give her a chance to calm down."

"Ten four. We're cleaning up down here. Will give you a holler back once we have them all mopped up."

"Copy that," he said as he set the handset down.

She couldn't apologize fast enough. "I wasn't going to come down here, but then I heard the radio, and I thought it might be important...and then, well, I saw my father's picture! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to snoop, really..." The words just poured out.

"Hey, hey, it's alright...it's okay. I get it," he said. "No need to add to your trauma today, okay?"

Relief flooded through her.

"All this," she said, waving at the map. "You weren't lying. That is, I knew you weren't, but I should have known, I..."

This time he interrupted her. "No, Bloom, it's okay. Understandable, to say the least. But look, will you just trust me? It's ongoing, just believe me when I tell you we are following up on a lot of leads. Leave it to us."

"Thank you Dax. That's all I wanted. To know it wasn't going to just be forgotten. That *he* wasn't going to be forgotten."

"Bloom, of course he is not forgotten," Dax said.

She felt her heart swell again with relief. It was as if she had been holding her breath for the last few years and could finally let it all out. And then after all that had passed throughout the day, she almost felt weak in the knees.

"Hey hon, it's okay, it's okay," Dax said as he came and enveloped her in an embrace. It was hard to say if it was more just a catch to prevent her from falling down where she stood, but she didn't really care. She was just relieved

to let go.

“And then you saved me, even after how I’ve been.”

“Bloom, shhh,” he said, bringing a finger to her lips, “You’re fine. I mean it, you’re fine.”

She breathed in his fresh showered smell, and snuggled deeper into his embrace.

“You’ve always been fine,” he said as he now whispered in her ear. I haven’t exactly been the most cuddly myself, you know?”

She relished the feel of his strength surrounding and supporting her.

*This is perfect.*

*Almost perfect,* she corrected herself.

“Hey,” she said, matching his whisper in tone. “Do you think we can get out of your man cave now? It’s great and all, just not really my jam.”

Dax laughed, probably as much to release some of the built up tension of the day as in response to her funny comment. “Yeah, babe. I think we can do that,” he said as he led her up the steps.

Once upstairs, he led her to the closest couch where they collapsed together in a heap.

Dax let out a deep breath, as if he too were releasing all the pressure he had been under.

He turned to her. “I’m so happy you’re here. Safe,”

“Yes, thanks to you.” He had saved her life and she could never thank him enough.

“When you were taken, I lost control. My dragon took over. I couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to you, Bloom.”

She felt her skin flush and a deep pulsing wave of pleasure race through her core.

“You couldn’t?” she said, before catching herself.

*You couldn’t! Did I really just say that?* She clenched her jaw shut to prevent any other awkward words from escaping.

“These last few days, really, these last few weeks, I…” he seemed to pause as he reached his hand out to take hers in his. “I’m not sure where my head’s been, but today has sealed it. I don’t want to be without you again.”

She managed to keep her mouth shut this time as she looked into his eyes. She had been lying alongside him, and she turned now to face him even as he pulled her back into an embrace.

“I guess we both could have done better, huh?” she said as she smiled up

at him. “Um, so kinda no fair. You got to take a shower. You think I need one?”

He answered by pulling her in and pressing his lips to hers.

She instantly grasped his muscled arms, then his chest...as she opened her mouth to receive his tongue. One of his hands fell to her ass as he pulled her hips to press against his own. Whatever walls they had built had been crumbling for days, but now they were just tumbling down, it seemed.

She felt her heart swell again. It was like she was finally seeing clearly for the first time in years. *Feeling* clearly. He had always been there. She just could see it. Or maybe couldn't let him in. But she could now.

Pleasure exploded in her as she grabbed at his hard body. Her hands couldn't get enough of him even as she felt him pulling her in even tighter.

With an effort, she pulled herself away for a second.

“By the way, your dragon is amazing, Dax,” she said as she looked into his eyes.

“I thought you'd never notice,” he quipped back.

She laughed, “Well, let's say I have a new appreciation for shifters.”

Instantly, she amended her statement, “A new appreciation for you, that is. And for your dragon.”

That seemed to release a new level of desire in him. She saw a flash in his eyes. His dragon. Just for an instant, and then it subsided. He let out an accompanying low growl. Or was that a purr?

*Do Dragons purr? Is that a thing?*

Whatever. She slid her hand down to his jeans and gasped in pleasure at the hardness that was waiting there, already straining against the taut fabric. All the time they had shared together came rushing back. As well as the fact that they had never actually slept together.

But before she could linger, he scooped her up and began carrying her out of the room. “I assume you'll be wanting a tour of the upstairs too?”

“Oh, is that all I get?” she said, teasing.

“Eventually, but to be honest, a tour is not the first thing on the agenda.”

“Good, because I am about to eat you up,” she said.

“You'll have to wait your turn,” he said, as he buried his face in her neck, kissing and sucking, much to her delight. Her body was on fire now, reacting to his every touch.

She barely registered the epic interior as he carried her up the stairs.

Before she knew it, he was throwing her down on a massive four-poster

bed.

“I can’t believe you never brought me here before.”

“You never really gave me the chance!” he said, in mock outrage.

“Oh, right. I guess I’ll have to make it up to you, then.”

She reached over to grab at his belt, but before she could even get a grip, he pushed her back into the pillows and got onto the bed himself. As he removed her strap-on sandals, he began with a slow massage of each foot.

Oh boy. She had forgotten his massages.

*How could I forget those?*

He kissed at each foot in turn as he ran his strong hands up, first her shins, and then onto her thighs. She felt a fresh electric shock even as she began to gyrate her hips in anticipation. She pressed them into the air, even as he slowly worked his way up her lower legs with his kisses. She grabbed at his head and pulled in vain, trying to get him to finally lay on her. She needed to feel him. Instead, she just writhed in pleasure, as he worked his way up her legs, now kissing her just above the knees, first one thigh and then the other, even as his hands slipped beneath her hiked-up dress. She felt his thumbs graze by the soft down of her pussy, even as he slipped his hands underneath her panties. But he didn’t take them off, he just teased her, rubbing up to her belly, before pulling his hands back out free.

“Dax,” her voice a plea, a prayer.

She tried to press her pussy up toward his face, as he kissed either side of her sex, lingering so that his hot breath brought a fresh wave of wetness to her sex...

She moved to pull her own panties down but he grabbed her hands in a vice grip and held them at her sides as he continued his slow exploration.

This only intensified her pleasure as she began to writhe her hips all the more in anticipation of their union.

“Dax, please...” she begged.

“I need you. Enough with the teasing!”

But this seemed to only make him go slower as he took even more time to touch and caress her exposed flesh. Slowly, he pushed her dress up further, and then sat her up to remove it entirely before laying her down again. But now she could tell his desire was beginning to press him forward too. Seemingly driven by raw attraction, he grabbed her legs behind the knees, pushing them open as he kissed first around, and then on her panties. She tried to press her sex into his mouth but he teased all the more until finally he

began to rub and massage all around her growing wetness.

“Dax.” She bucked, until he finally lifted her and pulled her panties free. Then as if he couldn’t hold back any longer, she felt his tongue exploring her folds. She moaned in spite of herself as she felt him enter her with his fingers, slowly rubbing and caressing as she pushed her hips up to meet his touch.

She pulled at his shoulders, torn between enjoying the warm pleasure that filled her at his touch, and her even greater desire to feel him inside of her. Finally.

She had been hesitant their first time around, they both had been, each perhaps a bit overwhelmed by the fire of their connection. It had scared her, she now realized. To submit to such a beast. To submit to her own passion.

But she would no longer fight. She wanted him. She had always wanted him.

His beast scared her because she wanted him to devour her, to surrender to him completely. And now she knew she could.

He had saved her.

Even as his tongue darted and his lips kissed and tasted her clit, she pushed against him to get to her elbows, trying to get at his belt.

*God, I want him.* She almost let out a growl herself.

*Not very fae-like, Bloom.*

He was no longer fighting her and rather joined in at her attempts to free his manhood. His passion was quickly winning out.

She could see his beast in his eyes again as she ripped his jeans down. His rigid sex sprang up and she seized it in her hand, grabbing its girth at the base as now he thrust against her.

She kissed and licked at his length even as Dax ripped his own shirt off, exposing his beautiful sculpted chest and abs. She could hardly stop herself as she took the head of his cock in her mouth, delighting at the feel of him filling her. She sucked and then licked as a moan escaped his lips. She let her hands run over his firm, hard chest, his back. Moaning in spite of herself, she took him even deeper, wanting to pleasure him, to bond with him...to take all of him.

As another moan escaped his lips, it changed almost unperceivably into that growl purr as he pulled her away and lifted her face to kiss him.

And just as quickly, he lay her down on the bed before him, removing what remained of his clothing hastily.

“I think we have waited long enough for this moment,” he said.

His cock seemed to grow even harder and thicker as he lay on her, taking a nipple in his mouth. He pressed the length of his hardness on her now aching pussy, teasing as he forced his hips hard against her, running his shaft across her slick opening. She gasped in pleasure as she pressed her slickness against his glorious cock, arching her back up to meet him. She splayed her legs wide, trying in vain to guide his shaft into her sopping hole.

“Dax, please, I want you,” she moaned, but he only continued to tease her, grabbing at her thighs and pinning them to her belly wide as he lay his hardness against her.

She thrust even harder and whimpered in protest as he continued to tease until finally she felt her pussy stretch as he pushed in the head.

“Uhh,” she sighed as she spread her legs even further to receive him. But just as soon as it was in her, he pulled out again.

“Come on! Please!”

He was driving her crazy with his teasing.

He looked into her eyes now as he lay against her. She could feel his hard body pressing against her own softness.

“I just want to savor this moment, Bloom. But I am ready to claim you, to make you mine.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, she felt him drive his thickness deep into her waiting, yearning pussy.

“Oh god,” she let out a moan as his breathing grew more rapid.

He drove it in again. “Yes, baby.”

She brought her hips up again slowly as she felt her pussy adjusting to his size. She hooked her legs behind him for a moment, trying to drive him even deeper into her core.

He began to increase his pace, driving a little deeper every time. Pleasure shot through her as she felt them merge.

Finally, they were one.

She held his chest to her, feeling the rippling muscles of his back as he began to speed up his thrusts.

Just as she was beginning to feel the pressure in her abdomen increase, he again brought his lips to her breasts before he rolled her over. She willingly completed the move, wanting him to dominate her completely.

She thrust her ass up as he drove his hardness deep into her pussy again and again, feeling his hips pound against her ass as his breath began to come in hoarse gasps.



She tried to arch up her back to take him even deeper as she forced his manhood into her again and again. Each time she felt he would split her as he pressed back against her, feeling him driving so impossibly deep in her core.

“Yes, Dax, take me.”

“I claim you now and forever as mine,” he roared as he grabbed her hips now in his powerful hands and pounded her pussy even harder. With every thrust, he crashed against her swollen clit and lips, releasing an ever increasing pulse of pleasure throughout her body. Her gasps almost were approaching screams as she pushed back to receive him even deeper still.

She could feel their juices mixing with their sweat running down her thighs as they both grunted.

If she had been holding back at all she finally let go completely, bucking and pressing her ass against him, reveling in the feeling of being completely at his whim.

Finally, just as she began to feel the pressure building to a crescendo, he began to grunt as he let loose completely, thrusting in so hard it drove her deep into the pillows. Just then she felt his hot seed shoot deep into her belly, as wave after wave of pleasure burst in her core as she came with him.

Grunts and moans of pleasure escaped both of their lips as he bucked rhythmically and uncontrollably shooting more of his come as his orgasm took him over.

She shook and quivered against him, pressing him in even deeper as she reached back to caress his face. He kissed her cheek in response. “You are amazing,” he breathed into her ear as he kissed her. “And I’m sorry it took me so long to save you today.”

She pressed back once more against him as her orgasm settled in a full body release and calm. She rolled over to face him as she replied, “Well, you made it worth the wait.”

“So, why didn’t we do this before?” he asked in a mock serious tone.

“I think we were both maybe a little stubborn,” she winked as she kissed him again. “I think I like the new us.”

“Most definitely,” he said.

“What about those men?” she finally said. “Not to be a buzz kill or anything.”

“Hey, who’s the sheriff around here?” he joked. “I think they said they would check in once they have moped up the scene. Rollo and Jack and the rest can handle it. Besides, you saw them go into the river, didn’t you? I don’t

think they will be a problem any longer.”

“Well, that will be a relief, and free up a lot of time for you, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, and good thing, because I think you and I are going to have plenty to keep us busy,” he said as he kissed her neck again, causing her to erupt into giggles.

“I love you, Dax,” she said, feeling more at peace, and more whole than she had ever felt in her life.

Just then a radio crackled. She hadn’t even realized he had one in his room.

“Hey boss, we got things pretty well buttoned up down here in town but think we should check in and be sure we are on the same page. Is Bloom doing okay?” It sounded like Rollo.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Dax rolled off the bed and picked up a handset connected to the radio on the side table.

“She’s doing just fine, buddy,”

“Good to hear. So how about we circle up at the Four Corners?”

“Roger that. Four Corners. I need about twenty minutes.”

“Copy that, boss. The witches are already doing some whammies.”

“Perfect,” he said into the radio before signing off. Then to her, “Hey, you want some coffee or that shower? You don’t have to come back right away if you don’t want to. You could stay here?”

She was trying to just enjoy the moment...”Coffee would be good, and of course I am coming with.”

She sighed and rolled over in the cushy comfort of her man’s bed.

*My Dragon’s bed. Or is it a nest?*

She felt so relaxed, although it would have been nice if they could have just stayed in bed for a while longer. Like all day. Also it would have been nice if he had said the words back to her.

*Don’t be silly, Bloom. He has responsibilities. He just got interrupted.*

*And he did “claim” me.*

*That has got to be good for something.*

## CHAPTER 16



*R*ollo finally came walking into the Tribunal at around eleven that morning, which was fine with Dax. He had earned the right to come in a little late.

“About time you showed up!” Clint called to him as he sauntered in.

“He has my blessing,” Dax called. “Come to think of it,” he said, this time directing his speech toward the new arrival, “I thought I told you to take the day off entirely. After the last three days going full out, I assumed you might need some face time with the boys.”

“Ah, you know me, boss, I can’t stay away for long. But I didn’t mind sleeping in, that’s for sure. Made some pancakes for them too. I’m just glad things seem to be calming down and nothing came of that talk of, what was it called again?”

“Supernova!” called Clint.

“Right. Anyhow, man, what a shit show. Never knew humans could be such a pain in the ass.”

“The drug dealing variety sure can be. And let’s check each other for short term memories okay? I’m always a little nervous around the witches when they start doing that “Bye bye butterfly” shit,” Dax said, rubbing his temples.

“I know, but they got the job done. Could you imagine the mess we’d have if they couldn’t just wipe memories?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Humans are pretty good at not believing anything that pushes them out of their comfort zone. No one would have listened to them anyhow.”

“Maybe not, but come on. Tell me it’s not easier to just have the witches

zoink them than deal with all the rumors and stories. At the very least Fae Crossing would be overrun by, what do they call them again?”

“Crypto-zoologists,” Clint called over.

“Yeah, that,” said Rollo. “Freaky or not, I’m glad we have the witches on our side.”

“Well, the Fae have some magic that does the trick too.”

“Either way, I’m not complaining.”

“And all we have to do is look pretty and be the muscle,” Dayton chimed in from around the corner.

“That rings strangely true,” Dax said.

“That hasn’t exactly worked out badly for you, boss,” said Rollo. “Seems Bloom has taken more than a little shine to you again,” he said.

“A shine, huh? Well it took some working up to, I can tell you that much,” Dax offered.

“Isn’t that always the way it is with woman?” Rollo responded.

“Can’t argue with that. Although I think Bloom and I have had to work out more than our share of misunderstandings.”

“Misunderstandings huh? Look who’s suddenly all positive. You gotta admit, that is some serious spin you are putting on it.”

They all laughed a bit at that before Rollo continued. “But I am convinced that that is the norm when dealing with woman. Not sure how it magically is supposed to disappear when you find your mate, but I figure if a mountain man dragon shifter like you, with a face like that can find a mate, then I am all set.”

Dax glared at him a moment before he burst out laughing. “Am I really so hideous to look at?”

It was Rollo’s turn to laugh. “But seriously, congratulations man, I know nothing is easy when it comes to mates. I can attest to that first hand.”

The other members of the pack knew enough not to tease him too much about it, he figured, not while it was still relatively new. It hadn’t even been a year since Tonya had more or less just up and abandoned him and the boys.

“So are you going to fill her in completely now on the investigation?” Rollo ventured.

“We have an understanding now,” Dax said in measured tones.

“Gotcha,” Rollo said. “Let me know if I can help out with that. She’s probably going to have a lot of questions.”

“Maybe after this latest drama is a little further in our rearview mirror, ya

know? But yeah, you know Frederick's time will come."

Rollo just nodded, his face a stoic mask now.

"Speaking of handling things, Jack is getting that SUV fished out of the river, right?"

"Yup, as we speak, I believe."

"And the one guy we have down at the jail's not talking, right?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'talking'," Clint was saying.

"He kind of won't shut up about seeing some dragon or other?" Clint joked as if he had no idea what the guy had been talking about. "But no. He claims he was just muscle. And he is convinced he saw some mythical beast."

"He did," Dax said distantly. "Okay, fine. Get Etta, or Lora, or a fae over there to wipe that little detail out."

"Sure thing, boss. I'm on it."

"And the other guys are dead, is that right?"

"Yeah, we got one dead and hung up in a tree, and then we pulled one body out of the river, so that leaves one unaccounted for, but I imagine he's dead too."

"If not, he's halfway across the country by now," Clint laughed.

"Cool, so hopefully, that's the end of that and things will start to settle down around here again."

"We can only hope," said Rollo. "Then we can get back to finding Frederick."

"You know we are all with you on that, buddy,"

"I know, boss."

They exchanged a fist bump.

Rollo added, "But our eyes and ears on the street say the talk of Supernova has been more sporadic...so, hopefully, it was just a minor thing and soon to be forgotten."

"We can only hope."

Dax's desk phone rang, "Now what?"

It was Jack. Dax listened for a moment and then nodded. Rollo had already returned to his desk. Dax knew his mind had already returned to tracking Frederick, so he turned to one of the bear shifters, "Hey Clint, how about you come with me. Something's up at Curiouser," which was the popular abbreviation for the witches shop by the Four Corners.

Clint groaned as he stood up. "Seriously? I thought we were done with witches, at least for a little while."

“We get to protect everybody, buddy. Come on,” Dax said as he got to his feet.

“Fine. Lead the way,” Clint replied, as they both headed for the door.

\* \* \*

NOTHING WAS TOO FAR FROM ANYTHING ELSE IN FAE CROSSING, AND IN THIS case they had only to walk a few short blocks to the Four Corners.

“You ever been in here?” Clint asked?

“Sure, man. You know, on official business with the witches.”

“Um hum.”

As they walked up to the entrance, Dax noted the creative window display of a fortune teller mannequin seated at a table, with a spread of tarot cards before her. Assorted dreamcatchers, and prisms and little sculptures of wood nymphs and gnomes decorated the rest of the window.

As they opened the door, the smell of sandalwood filled his nose.

“Man, they love their incense,” Dax said.

“Yeah, they do,” Clint replied as he held the door for Dax.

Inside, the place was full from floor to ceiling with every manner of “spiritual” – *or hippie* – interest. There were cabinets full of crystals and pendants, and rows of leather bound books. From the ceiling hung all manner of chimes and mobiles. Fairy wings and masks adorned the walls, as well as skulls and skeletons and various oddities under little bell jars. Then as they came more fully into the space, he could see through a doorway into an adjacent room.

It was totally trashed. There were shredded books, and ripped up dresses everywhere. The first image that jumped into his head was that of his bathroom once, when he came home after leaving his cats alone all weekend. One of them had absolutely shredded a roll of toilet paper. The scenes were strangely similar.

He examined the room briefly before heading back toward the counter.

Jack stood there, half interviewing, and apparently half comforting the clerk. It was a young woman Dax had not met before. She must have been relatively new. The witches who owned the place, Etta, Lora, and Nan were nowhere to be seen. But obviously this girl was in the know if she worked here.

As they approached the checkout, the conversation came into earshot.

“Okay, okay, just calm down. Just run through it again, now that my associates are here...”

The girl was doing her best to take steady breaths as she tried to recount what she had seen. “So, this guy was just acting, well,... weird...He was really, really...I don’t know, friendly...but too much, if that makes sense... and then he, well, he just started jumping and darting around.”

“Jumping around?” Jack asked, as he took notes on a little pad.

“Yeah, jumping,” she said, looking a little unsure of herself.

“Like an animal. But not like an animal,” she continued. “I know it sounds crazy, but then one arm suddenly changed.” She was getting more anxious now.

“Changed?” Jack asked.

“Shifted! It became a furry leg and paw!”

Clint went around and told her to take it easy.

“Okay, so this guy started shifting here?”

“Well, yeah and no,” she began, almost looking to them for some clarity on the matter. “Well it wasn’t, like, clean, like he was going back and forth. It was freaky! And don’t shifters have some kind of code? Like it is only done in secret? And for good reason? Like you can’t just go freaking people out!”

“Yes, of course,” Dax said. She was stating the obvious. His kind hadn’t existed hidden alongside men for centuries without the unspoken rules.

“And don’t they shift like all at once? And aren’t just *animals!*”

“We are definitely not animals,” Clint was saying, perhaps a tiny bit defensively, Dax noted.

“Right. Well, this guy started shifting like one leg, and then one arm, and then they shifted back, and then he just started going nuts. Did you see that room? He was like the Tasmanian Devil! I am not kidding. And the way he moved. I know shifters are powerful. I mean, I have never seen it, but I have heard about it.” Now she was really on a roll, maybe warming up to the guys a little. “I just learned about all this magical stuff, you see. I’m just half-fae, but I’m learning. I am sort of new here, to all this...”

“Okay, okay. So, what happened?” Clint was saying as he went around to the back to put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. *And get her back on track. Good man,* Dax thought.

“I know shifters are powerful and have heightened abilities, beyond being able to turn into animals, that is,” she said, as if to clarify.

“Yes, miss...”

“Tam. My name is Tam.”

“Tam, we’re shifters, okay? We get it.” Jack was saying.

“Oh, sorry. Okay. So anyhow, he was impossibly fast. Like a blur. And then he was just all over the place. Half shifted. And then finally he fully shifted into some kind of a big cat, like a puma, and totally destroyed the Fairy room. Did you see it?”

“One guy did that?”

“Yeah, in like thirty seconds.”

The three packmates looked at each other. Dax really didn’t even know what to make of it.

Just then the bells above the front door sounded and Bloom entered followed closely by Chris and Kim.

“Tam! Are you okay? Mack told me something was up.” She turned to Dax and after embracing him in a quick hug, she added, “He said he saw a bobcat or something come tearing out of the place. Almost caused a car accident, he said.”

The mother and daughter exchanged confused glances.

“There was a bobcat in here?” Kim said excitedly.

Bloom quickly spoke up. “Perhaps today is not the best day to get you two started over here, after all. Do you mind waiting outside for a minute while we handle some business?”

“Of course”, said the mother nervously. “Did anyone get hurt?”

Dax interjected, “No, not that we know, just a minor issue with a customer.”

But he noted Chris looking into the next room and looking distinctly uncomfortable. There was no hiding the destruction.

“We’ll wait outside,” mother said, as the two stepped out.

“So, what are you going to do with them?” he asked out of curiosity.

“I spoke with Etta and she has it in her head that Fae Crossing might be just the place for them.”

“But they are humans, aren’t they? And totally in the dark about, um, most everything, no?”

“Yes, but Etta has a feeling about them. Who am I to argue?”

“Indeed.” Then turning his attention back to the matter at hand. “This is not good,” he murmured as he exchanged glances with his packmates.

“He didn’t attack you or bite you or anything, did he?” Bloom was asking



as she went to Tam.

“No, she’s fine,” Dax said, maybe a little too curtly. His dragon was already on guard.

“Good. I would hate to see you hurt,” Bloom said. Then turning to Dax, she added, “She is new to Fae Crossing and is not so familiar with shifters is all,” she added. “I am just glad you are okay, Tam.”

“I AM, IT WAS JUST JARRING. I DIDN’T KNOW SHIFTERS COULD BE SO,” SHE paused.

“Shiftery?” Bloom said, giving Dax a wry look.

“Crazy,” Tam said. “Or erratic, I guess.”

“What you are describing is not normal shifter behavior,” Clint interjected quickly.

“Regardless, shifters are different from Fae,” Bloom said, before quickly adding, “They aren’t all bad. They can just take a little getting used to.”

Dax felt his dragon stiffen.

“Well, we do have our uses, I suppose. Like rescuing damsels in distress,” he said with a wink.

“The man speaks the truth,” she replied with a smile.

“But this is not normal shifter behavior. I know Fae tend to think of us as little more than instinct driven beasts,” he said, looking at Bloom, “but our kind have to adhere to a very, very strict code. So strict it is never even mentioned. Without it, we would never have survived among humans. So, to see it broken so flagrantly is disturbing, to say the least.”

“Of course,” Bloom said as she came around the counter to give him another hug. “I’m sorry, babe,” she said in front of them all. Then she added in a whisper into his ear. “You know I love your dragon. Can’t get enough of him, really.”

“You’re forgiven,” he said with a kiss on her cheek.

Addressing his pack, he said, “We should go see about this ‘bobcat.’”

Clint gave Tam another comforting pat on the arm before the three shifters headed toward the door.

Just before they left, Dax’s gut told him to stop. “Hey, Tam, was there anything else you can tell us about this guy? Did anything else stand out?”

She grew quiet for a moment, thinking. “Well, he was sweating, like a lot,” she said. “He looked really...I don’t know, strung out, almost... Oh!

And he had this really bright, weird red blotch right in the middle of his forehead.” She put her finger right to the middle of her own. Like a red star.”

Dax and Jack exchanged a look.

“And I thought things were calming down,” Dax said.

## CHAPTER 17



A few days had passed since the events at Curiouser and Curiouser, and Bloom was back at the Tree wiping down the bar as she got the place ready before the evening crowd began to appear.

“I thought you were going to set Kim and Chris up with Etta and the witches over at Curiouser?” Mack was saying as he eyed the daughter sweeping across the room at the back.

“That’s still the plan, but seems a little on hold at the moment. They got wind of what happened at the shop and it kinda got them all keyed up again,” she replied.

“But as far as they know it was just an animal thing, right?”

“Well sort of. Dax was talking about the red blotch thing on the guy afterward and they heard, and I guess it was enough to get Chris all riled up again. It just re-traumatized them I think.”

“I see. But Dax and Jack found the cougar shifter dead out toward the swamp, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, but that didn’t seem to make Chris any happier.”

“I’m not following.”

“All she knows is that a guy who had the red spot died, so she knows the drug is still hurting people. Really the question, for us and I imagine for them, is if this is just a lingering effect, or if the baddies are still active.”

“Well, I think they know more than they are saying,” Mack said, wiping his hands on his rag.

“Agreed, but Etta has advised we don’t push too hard. Let’s give them some time, Mack. It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Far be it from me to question the most fashionable witch this side of the

Mississippi,” he sniped.

“But is she a fashion pioneer or a fashion emergency?” Bloom quipped.

Mack laughed appreciably.

“Etta sees potential in them. I think we are moving toward some sort of arrangement where they will apprentice with the witches.”

“Seriously? Remind me to stay on their good sides,” Mack joked.

“Nothing is in stone yet.”

Mack just nodded.

The mother and daughter were hardly the focus of her concern at the moment, though. The dead shifter with the red blotch was.

As unpredictable as she had always felt shifters were, she knew shifters didn’t just fly off the handle like that.

And Dax had confirmed that the shifter they found had indeed been a user. They assumed the red splotch was either a side effect, or maybe related to taking the drug. Either way, Dax was concerned to say the least.

*As he should be.*

They had all been quick to think the business with that drug was in the past...but she had actually had to kick a few patrons out recently who were getting a bit rowdy when her staff made it clear that they were not dealing the drug. Apparently, word on the street was that they were.

“And, Mack? Let’s make it double clear that no talk of that drug will be tolerated. Tell Lucas to make sure patrons remove hats, etc. before coming in. I’m not sure what that forehead mark is, but it seems like one way to detect a user at least. I am not sure why our friendly neighborhood tree spirit doesn’t catch them, but if Marius got it in here before, the bouncers need to keep an eye out.

“Absolutely. Already on it, Bloom.”

“Thanks, Mack.”

“I thought that drug business had blown over,” he added.

“That’s what we all thought,” she confirmed. “Maybe it has, I don’t know. We’ll see.”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

*Dax.*

She picked it up. “Hey lover,” she said as she answered.

“Oh, I see you are trying to get back on my good side,” he teased.

She had to relax her brow as she furrowed it unconsciously.

“I didn’t know I had ever left it,” she replied.

“Just kidding,” he said. “Just wanted to say hi, and make sure we are still on for later.”

“Of course we are,” she said. Despite the little wrinkle in their conversations, she felt her heart skip a beat. In fact, the moment she had seen his name on her phone, a little shiver of excitement ran through her. “We have a lot of lost time to make up for,” she purred. The implication was clear.

“Oh boy. Are you trying to wind me up?” Dax said. Her message was getting through loud and clear.

“Who, little old me?” she cooed in her most coquettish voice.

“I am not buying your innocent ploy one bit,” Dax responded.

“I guess you know me too well,” she said, excitement bubbling through her veins.

A beep came over the line, indicating a call coming in.

“Hey, it’s Finch, of all people. Talk later?”

“Finch? What do you think he wants with you?”

“No idea. Call you later.”

“Later, babe.” Dax ended the call as she answered the incoming one from Finch, the head of the Fae Council.

“And how can I help the Council today?”

“Bloom, I hope I am not interrupting you on a busy day.”

She was actually rather surprised at getting the call, but played it off as casually as she could.

“No, not at all. I’m not used to getting calls from Fae Crossing Luminaries. How can I serve the council’s needs?”

She tried to sound calm, but her heart was beating with some excitement. Perhaps she really was gaining acceptance in the community.

*Maybe?*

“Oh, you flatter me,” Finch said, though he was obviously charmed by her words. “No need to be so formal. But there *has* been an incident. I wonder if I can count on your discretion on this, but also your, how shall we say, your influence perhaps.”

“My influence?”

“Yes, with Dax.”

Now he had her attention.

“There has been an incident at Mackenzie’s. My people are already alerting the Tribunal. I just want to be sure the fae perspective is understood and upheld.”

“McKenzie’s? As in the supermarket?” She didn’t hide her surprise at hearing there was an issue in what was widely considered the “posh” part of Fae Crossing. “What happened? And what do you mean, the fae perspective?”

“Yes, the supermarket. Just get over there, okay? And you know, nothing against Dax, but his type can lack a certain finesse at times,” Finch said.

*His type?*

“Shifters have their own way of handling things for sure, but Dax has always been fair in my experience. Unless I am mistaken, you and the council have always backed the Fae Crossing Pack in running the Tribunal?”

“Yes, of course, but no one is perfect, and that support has not been without its hiccups. I am sure you are aware of his father’s attitude toward the fae.”

*What?*

But before she could fixate on that, he was already continuing on. “The Meadows, as you well know, is full of a very particular sort. They are not always as understanding of shifter ways as you or I. Okay, so I am just hoping you can be there to ensure things go smoothly.”

“Of course, Council-, Finch, I understand.”

Finch was referring to the fancy fae district. She was getting the idea.

“I am glad you understand my concerns.”

“Of course, it’s important that our town runs smoothly.”

“Also, I think you know the man involved. Dewey?”

Now he really had her attention. He was a regular. Sweet guy. She instantly thought of their many conversations, mostly around his many gardening tips. “Dewey? What happened?”

“It is still unclear. I just want it handled with discretion. I know Dax is honorable. I just, well, I just thought as a fae, your input could be helpful. Perhaps I shouldn’t have called, but your help on this will not go unnoticed. Many of us have been less than pleased by the slow progress in your father’s case. The Tribunal, I am sure, has many other cases to handle. Perhaps it has already been relegated to the cold case files. I am sure a few phone calls to the Regional Tribunal would be helpful. What happened to him was a tragedy. He is sorely missed.”

Another jolt went through her.

“Of course,” she replied, really not knowing what else to say.

The brief call left her a little conflicted but just for a moment.

*We are all in this together. The council just wants things to run smoothly. And so do I. So does Dax for that matter.*

But what was that business about Dax's father?

She made a mental note to ask Mack about him. But not today. She had enough on her plate aside from that unsettling comment.

"Mack, I am heading out for a bit," she said as she headed for the door.

\* \* \*

SOMETIMES BLOOM WONDERED WHY SHE EVEN HAD A CAR, HER TOWN WAS SO small, but she jumped into her orange Mini and headed over toward the Meadow. Her mind was racing, trying to guess what on earth Dewey could have gotten up to. And at a fancy gourmet market of all places? And why had Finch felt the need to ask her to go over there and watch out for 'fae interests'?

The Meadow was a relatively short drive, just over the river and down in the southwest of town. The moment she crossed the Bibury River it was evident things were different. It had always been that way. As soon as Crabtree Lane crossed the bridge in fact, it changed from being a simple 2 way road into a much more scenic divided thoroughfare. The space between was filled with lush flowerbeds, and even the occasional marble statuary. The part she was actually most jealous of were the roundabouts. There wasn't a stoplight to be found in the Meadow.

After navigating a few turns, she pulled up at McKenzie's. She instantly clocked Dax's Range Rover as well as a few of the other pack members' vehicles. But the cars weren't what held her attention. Despite it being the early bloom of spring, she was more shocked by what she didn't see. There was not a single leaf on the trees. And where there should have been rows of the market's famous flower beds, there were only matted brown withered husks. Every plant was dead.

*Ugh and it stinks!*

Rotting vegetables it turns out are just as bad as rotten meat.

*Gross.*

She pulled her shirt collar over her nose as she walked in, passing a few other pack members who were milling about, taking statements from stunned witnesses.

She saw Clint talking to a young boy.

“And then the pasta sauce exploded!” the kid was saying excitedly. You would have thought the kid had seen the coolest thing ever from the way he was talking. “And then the broccoli started dancing!” he continued. “That was before all the vegetables turned black.”

“Right,” Clint was saying, apparently coaxing the kid to tell him what he saw. “And then that’s when the man passed out?”

“Yeah, before that, he was going crazy, like he was singing to the vegetables or something. But then they died.” He looked at Clint somewhat conspiratorially. “I don’t think that was his plan. But yeah. Then he just fell over,” the boy finished up as he shrugged his shoulders.

“Dax is inside,” Clint said. Then, as he saw her continue to search for him as she walked in, he shouted, “Produce aisle.”

She gave him a thumbs up as she dared to sniff the air inside, and headed in that direction.

*What a mess.*

It was more than a mess, really. But thankfully the smell was mercifully less potent inside somehow.

It felt like a tornado had swept through the store, except the shelves seemed more or less intact. But it seemed every bottle or container had burst, and the contents were festooned about the store like there had been some unbelievable party. Or food fight.

Picking her way across the front, she came to the produce section.

*Carnage. Utter Carnage.* Those were the only words for it.

*Ugg, that smell again.*

Here it was even worse than outside. It stank of death. Vegetable death. There were blackened peppers and rotting cucumbers. Some had looked like they were arranged in lines across the floor before they turned black.

“What the hell happened here?” she said under her breath.

“That’s what we are trying to figure out,” Dax said as he walked up to her. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, um, a fae friend called me. They said something had happened and that Dewey was involved?” The words were out of her mouth before she knew it.

*Why not just tell him it was Finch?*

No, she knew he wouldn’t appreciate that. Not a bit. No need to poke a sore spot. She knew Dax could handle things just fine. More than fine.



Despite the culinary catastrophe that surrounded her, she still leaned over to him and gave him a hug and a kiss.

“So, what is going on?” she breathed into his ear? “Is he okay? Dewey, I mean?”

Dax gave her a look that said, ‘no, he is not okay. Very far from okay actually’.

He gestured over his shoulder. On the other side of the apple section, she saw Rollo and a few others in a little crowd. Although she wasn’t entirely certain of what they were gathered around, she was getting a sinking feeling.

“Oh no,”

“I’m sorry, Bloom. It’s not pretty,” he said grimly. “Pretty weird, too, but not pretty. Maybe you shouldn’t look.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Dewey wouldn’t hurt a fly. I can’t believe anyone would hurt him,” she said as she rushed around to see what had happened.

“That’s just it. By all accounts, no one did anything to him. On the contrary.”

“What are you talking about?” she said as Dewey’s body, sprawled out in the middle of the aisle, came into view. Most of him was obscured, though.

“*He* did all this,” Dax said, gesturing around at the complete and utter destruction. “That’s what all the witnesses are saying, but it gets pretty weird.”

As Dax came up to stand beside her, she moved a bit off to the right to come within earshot as Dayton interviewed a young woman.

“I told you. I know how it sounds! But he was waving his arms all around and yelling crazy things. Like madness!”

“Crazy? I’ve seen many shades of crazy, lady,” Dayton was saying. “Could you be more specific?”

The woman gave him a look, apparently not appreciating his somewhat casual tone.

“I can, actually,” she said as she glared at him. Apparently acting out what she had seen, she yelled, “Rise! Rise! To slay your oppressors! Broccoli! Kale! To arms!” She was waving her arms haphazardly as well as she raised her voice another octave. “But the really crazy part is that the vegetables were listening!”

“What are you saying?”

“They were marching! Or at least moving! The whole produce section.

Then he just started yelling, ‘Revolution! Revolution!’” the woman said, a little wild eyed.

Bloom noted Dayton’s raised eyebrow as his eyes shifted back and forth between the woman and his notepad.

“I’m just telling you what I saw,” she said defensively.

“Could they have come from an enchanted patch?”

“How the hell do I know? But I doubt it. They don’t just sell that stuff in the market!” the woman was saying, apparently incredulous that he was bothering her with such details.

“Okay, and then what happened?”

“Well, that’s when it really went off the rails. He just got wilder and wilder and the vegetables just started going everywhere, and the shelves everywhere started rattling! Then it was like a shockwave or, I don’t know what...some kind of magic I guess...And all at once his eyes rolled up in his head, and that thing...that spot on his forehead got real bright,” she was saying.

*Spot on his forehead?*

“And then ‘boom.’ The shockwave. His eyes rolled back and he keeled over, and everything on the shelves just exploded, and all the veggies, um... dropped dead.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Not that they were really alive, but you know what I mean.”

“Dropped dead,” Dayton said aloud as he scrawled her words dutifully.

Bloom looked around. Even though this must have happened a good thirty minutes ago or so, there were still stunned fae everywhere it seemed. At least she was pretty sure they were all fae. Nobody else really shopped here. Plus, she could almost always sense fae-ness. Not always, but usually.

She took in the dazed faces again.

*I guess seeing dancing veggies would do that to you.*

But what the hell had happened here?

*These people need help.*

Just then, interrupting her thoughts, Dax called out loudly enough that all could hear. “Okay, listen up, anyone who hasn’t given a statement, get over to one of the guys.” Then to his own men, “No one leaves till we have a full interview. Got it? No one. I want every detail.”

*Is this what Finch meant?*

Regardless of what the councilman had said, he was being a little rough.

”Hey, hey babe, come on, take it easy,” she said, placing a hand on his

arm gently. “These people are traumatized enough. No need to go full ‘Alpha voice’ on them.”

Dax’s head whipped around, “Bloom, please,” he said.

He seemed annoyed, she noted.

“Just let me do my job, okay?” he finished.

He turned and bent to address an older man who was crumpled off to the side of the aisle.

Gruffly, he demanded, “Sir, tell me what happened here.”

“Dax,” she snapped just a little more sharply than she intended. “Would it kill you to be a little nice?” She wasn’t sure why but she felt her temper rising.

Rising to face her, he pointed a finger to where the body was laying and said, “Bloom, did you see his forehead? We don’t have the luxury of using velvet gloves. Not here, not now. In case you didn’t notice, things are starting to spiral. And not in a good direction.”

He turned back to the man before she even had a chance to answer.

“I’m just saying, you get more bees with honey.”

“One second, sir, don’t go anywhere,” she heard him say to the crumpled man before turning to face her. She didn’t think Dax had anything to worry about. The guy was totally out of it.

“Bloom, I’m not sure what’s gotten into you, but you need to let me do my fucking job. The witches and all the fae healer types I am sure will be available for plenty of hand holding later, but right now I need these witness statements while they still have something in their heads. Okay?” He threw his arms in the air in despair. “And remember that shifter from the shop? Well, he died. And I am pretty sure your friend Dewey is going to die too. Obviously, I misjudged the situation with that drug. It is not gone. In fact it is getting worse. Much worse. And guess whose job it is to protect Fae Crossing? Mine. And right now I am failing. And you are not helping.”

She was stunned, not just by his harsh words and demeanor, but by the news about Dewey.

A moment later Dax seemed to realize that perhaps he had gone too far. “I’m sorry,” he said, as he pulled her into a hug. “You didn’t deserve that. But this is serious. There is more to this drug than meets the eye, and things are rapidly spinning out of control.”

While the hug felt good and she appreciated his words, she was still a bit stunned.

Was Finch right? Maybe she did need to be here to look out for fae interests.

He released her and was about to return to interviewing witnesses when he turned one last time. “And I am going to need to talk to Chris and Kim. They have been hiding something, and the time for secrets is long since passed.”

After that, he brusquely said his goodbye and turned to man once again.

She turned and headed back to her car.

*I think I need to talk to Mack about Dax's father.*

## CHAPTER 18



“Are you sure this is the best way to handle things, Dax?” Rollo was saying as the pack gathered around the table at the Grizzly Den.

“I don’t know, but it’s what we’re doing, okay? I am tired of those women playing games with us. We gave them plenty of opportunities to come clean.”

“But what if they already told us everything they know?” Clint asked.

Dax just leveled him with a look. “Seriously? Is that the best your bear senses can do? You can’t tell me you really think that they have been totally open and honest? Come on, man.”

“Fine,” Clint replied. “I just don’t know what they would be hiding.”

“And that is what we are going to find out.” Dax leaned back in his chair for a moment and took a sip on his beer. “It’s on me that it has even gotten this far. I got soft.”

He looked around the table, and to preempt any of the pack, he continued, “And yeah, Bloom probably had something to do with it. She thought I should go easy on the woman and daughter, and truthfully, I didn’t think there was much more to their story anyhow. But with two people dead – and the way that shifter freaked out...and now a fae...”

“Don’t forget about the poor bad guys you offed,” Dayton added.

“They don’t count.” He shook his head as he continued his train of thought. “I thought that SUV going in the river was the end of it, but it’s only gotten worse.”

The door to the front bar swung open and Duke stuck his head in. “Hey Dax, they’re here. Want me to send them back?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Duke. Give us two minutes. And another one for me,” he

added, pointing at his beer.

“Make it two,” Dayton said, raising his empty bottle.

“Got it. Two minutes,” he said as he held up two fingers before retreating and closing the door. He poked his head back in for a split second, “And two beers,” he added with a wink.

After acknowledging Duke, they looked at each other.

“Just be nice,” Rollo said. “And remember, Kim is just a kid.”

*Be nice?* Dax felt his dragon stirring. Even his own pack seemed to be missing just how much danger the town could be in.

“The time for *nice* has passed. Of course, I’m not gonna be a dick. And I definitely don’t want to scare the kid. But we need answers, Rollo. Did you see McKenzie’s? Or the curio shop? I’m done playing.”

He looked around at his pack. They knew they had all underestimated the danger of this drug. The chaotic nature of its apparent effect on shifters and fae was unsettling to say the least. He knew that none of them were too pleased with themselves.

*And I am not gonna let this town fall apart.*

An image of his father during their final discussion popped into his head.

*You’d like that, wouldn’t you, dad?*

“Okay, boss,” Rollo said as the door opened again, bringing Dax back to the moment. Bloom appeared in the opening, followed by Chris and Kim.

The assembled pack all got to their feet.

“Gentleman,” Bloom said, maybe a little stiffly.

Despite not having seen or heard from her over the past few days, Dax felt a thrill as she entered the room. His dragon stood at attention as well, with his mate near.

Despite his reaction, he was still mad at her for how she had acted the last time he’d seen her.

How dared she try to tell him how to do his job? In front of his men and all those self-important fae?

Did he come to her bar and tell her how to pour her drinks? No! So what right did she have to tell him to calm down and to be nice or whatever. They didn’t need nice. People were dying. They needed action. Answers. A leader who acted. Someone who could get things done. And so far nothing he had done was working. He was failing and failure was not an option. It was time to step it up.

“Ladies,” Dax said as he offered the three women chairs around the larger

rectangular table in the room.

Chris, the mother, had a distinctively frightened, and maybe a bit sheepish, look about her, while her daughter kept stealing glances her way.

“To what do we owe this ‘summoning.’”

“Summoning?”

“Oh, come on. You could have made the trip over to The Tree to visit with them yourself. Tell me this isn’t some kind of power play?”

“We have given them more than a few chances to discuss this under what might have been more, let’s say, casual circumstances,” he said firmly. “And let me remind you that you are part of the reason that didn’t happen, okay?” He gave them all a stern look. “Out of respect for you and for what you ladies have been through I did my best to be patient. Perhaps that was a mistake. We are doing it my way now. This is not just about your convenience. This is about the safety of the whole town. I would think you of all people would appreciate the threat we are dealing with.”

Frustration surged through him. His dragon began to pace. She was clearly not pleased. Well, too bad. They were out of time.

Before she could come up with anything else, he powered through, addressing the mother and daughter. “Thank you, ladies, for coming over on such short notice.”

He made a few quick introductions and offers of refreshments, before speaking directly to Chris. “I apologize if I am about to come across a little more...” he paused as he attempted to tap down his frustration level a bit. “A little more direct,” he continued. “But you know more than you are telling us and I need to know what it is.”

Chris shifted uneasily in her chair, but it was her daughter who spoke first. “Mom, just tell them. People are dying!”

The rest of the pack looked on with rapt attention, but no one spoke.

Chris put her hand to her temple as she stifled a little snuffle. “I know, and I’m sorry,” she began as Bloom sat up in her chair, still seemingly unhappy with the tack Dax had decided to take. At the same time it was obvious she was also very much interested in what Chris might have to say.

“Just tell us what you know,” Dax said firmly.

“Dax, just give her a minute,” Bloom implored. “She’ll tell you everything. Right?” she added turning to Chris and holding her hand offering support.

Dax felt his dragon pacing. The tension was palpable.

*Why does she have to keep undermining me in front of everyone?*

He couldn't allow his frustration with her to take over when the real enemy was out there. But he couldn't just sit there and do nothing either.

"Don't you all see the danger we are in? The danger our town is in? You saw the marks on their foreheads. You saw what they each did! For God's sake, Dewey killed everything within a block...well, every plant. Next time it might not be just plants! The witches are still trying to understand what kind of twisted magic he was wielding. Lora doesn't even understand it other than that it is all very high level – far beyond anything Dewey should be capable of."

"We don't know it was Dewey for sure," Bloom said. Dax felt himself tense up at her interruption. "He is...was the nicest man you could ever meet," she continued. "And he never hurt a fly. All he cared about was his gardening, and his flowers."

"And amassing an army of broccoli to take over the world it seems," Dayton quipped.

Dax gave him a subtle shake of the head. "Not the time."

"Sorry," he said, putting up his hands in apology.

"Cassius was also 'just a big pussy cat' but he totally destroyed that shop. We are lucky he didn't hurt Tam. Do I have to say it again? Two people are dead."

Chris had her head down and suddenly gripped the table. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Okay? I was frightened! You don't know what those thugs can do. They don't care about people. I was afraid they would come after us," she said as tears streamed down her face. "And I couldn't let anything happen to Kim. I just couldn't!" She hugged her daughter.

"Tell us," Dax commanded. "Please."

His words had the desired effect, it seemed, and she snapped out of her upset and refocused.

"The drug. They knew. They knew what it can do. It's amazing. Everybody said it gave them special abilities, or enhanced what they already had. Some even said it gave people magical powers. There were stories." She paused and looked around at the assembled group for a second. "Like things I have heard you people talk about when you don't think we're listening. But I didn't believe it. We *are* talking about people on drugs, after all. But stories of people turning into animals, and of casting spells. I just thought all that was the hallucinations or..." she trailed off. Then she looked around. "Now I



don't know what to think.”

Bloom squeezed her hand. “We are going to go see Etta soon. And the other women at the shop. It will all make sense to you then.”

“Yeah, but none of that matters. What matters and what I should have told you all right away,” she said as she seemed to build up her courage.

“And what about that red mark they have on their foreheads? What's that about?”

“That's how you do it. It comes on a card and you heat and wet it.” Chris was saying, struggling to catch her breath as the words poured out of her.

“Heat a card?” Dayton said, as he cocked his head, as if he weren't sure he had heard right.

“Yeah, it's supposed to go right to your “third eye” or something. That's what they say,” she continued.

“And if they have that mark, does it mean they're on it?” Rollo asked.

“Not exactly, I don't think. Maybe at first, but the more you do it, the less it fades, till I don't think it ever goes away. Doesn't matter how long. Course once you start doing it you don't want to stop. Supernova's supposed to be amazing and only get better and better with every hit for about a month,” she added. Then finally slowing down, she looked around and added, “after that, people start getting sick...really sick. Or worse. Usually worse. Like dead worse.”

“Cassius and Dewey.”

Chris just nodded her head, “And my brother.”

“I don't see why you couldn't have just told us that,” Dax sighed with frustration. “Maybe we could have done more!”

“You don't understand,” she said, her eyes opening wider. “They are dangerous. And they have a giant stockpile of it. They have a huge amount, worth millions... but already out west word is getting out that it is deadly. Like really deadly. They can't move it there, but they can't afford to lose that money, so they made a plan to come here. Fae Crossing is the hub of the whole south west. They need to unload it all before word gets out that it is a killer. They knew we knew. That's why they were after us.”

“But how do you know so much?”

“My brother. He worked for them. He's the one I learned all this from. Unfortunately, he got hooked on the drug early. Before any deaths had occurred. Or any they knew of. When he learned about it, he told me everything, but by then it was too late.” Tears were running down her face

now. "He... He's dead," she began to sob.

"I'm sorry, Chris," Bloom was saying as she comforted the woman. "Everything is okay."

"But it's not okay. I heard their plans, and I was so angry. I think they know I want to stop them. Of course they do. So we ran."

It was all coming together. Finally.

"We were already in enough danger. I knew they were already looking for me, but if they thought for a second that I was getting in between them and their money, they would kill me and my daughter without hesitation."

She looked around the table. "I'm sorry, but that's why I didn't say anything. I already lost my brother. I just couldn't put Kim in any more danger than she was already in. And now I don't know what we'll do."

"We will protect you, Chris. And you, Kim," Dax said firmly. "But you have to be one hundred percent honest with us from now on, okay?"

"I know, you're right. I'm sorry. There is one more thing," Chris confided. "I know they are looking to make a deal. One big deal. I know there was someone here in Fae Crossing or they were going to meet someone here. I think the idea was one big sale to move their whole inventory."

This got the pack's attention and they all sat up a little straighter.

"Who? Do you have a name?" Rollo interjected now.

"No. I swear that's all we know," she said, turning her palms up to the assembled pack. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I wish I could help more."

"Jeezuz," Dax said. His dragon was raging.

But at the same time now he better understood why she had been so secretive.

"Rollo, get on the line with Tim. We may need Mossy Ridge boys over here as well. We need to blanket this town. A few weeks have already passed. We'll just have to hope they haven't made a deal yet. Put our men on every corner, and in every major public place if that's what it takes."

Rollo replied, "If they had made a deal already, I think we would have heard about it."

"Maybe, maybe not, but if there's a chance they haven't, we need to take action to stop it. Big time," Dax said, raising his voice. He had had enough of this drug.

"Dax, you are going to terrify the fae. You could end up doing more harm than good," Bloom said. "You need to think about the bigger picture before you go rushing forward."

He felt a surge of heat flash over him. His dragon almost breathed fire right then and there.

“Bloom, I have been the alpha on the Tribunal for going on fifteen years. I don’t tell you how to run The Tree. Don’t tell me how to protect this town. God forbid I step on any precious fae toes in my efforts to keep them alive. Please, just let us do our job.”

*Doesn’t she understand what we are up against?*

## CHAPTER 19



“*M*an, he was pissed,” Kim said, as they walked toward the curio shop.

*Tell me about it.*

She was happy to have a reason to think about something else.

Bloom had been feeling it was time to introduce the women to the witches already, but what they had revealed today sort of sealed the deal. They were becoming more than she could handle anyhow. She had enough on her plate navigating things with Dax. And the witches were going to want to hear the latest updates on what they knew about the drug, she thought, especially as it seemed it was sort of infringing on their domain of magic and spells. She was sure any mention of “third eye” was bound to pique their interest.

Etta and her crew took such things very seriously. Bloom actually got the feeling that if it were up to them, they would be the only ones who could cast spells in Fae Crossing.

Lucas and Mack trailed along beside the women. They had insisted on acting as “protection” for the relatively short trip down Willow to and from The Grizzly Den. Dax and his men hadn’t found any bodies in the river, so everyone was still on edge.

“Dax is just worried about the town,” Mack said, as his eyes continually roved the street. “You have to realize that protecting Fae Crossing is his highest priority. That’s just how it is and how it’ll always be. What’s the saying? ‘Don’t get between a dog and his bone?’ I think that goes double for wolves.”

“So, I guess you’re saying that applies to dragons too?” she said.

“Times three I’d wager,” Mack said with a laugh.

She thought of what Finch had said about Dax’s father. She wished it were just the two of them so she could ask Mack about what she’d heard.

She tried to play it off casually, but Mack’s words cut deeper than she was prepared for. She understood that his job was important. Of course it was. She was just afraid of the lengths he would go to to protect it.

“I get it, but he needs to tone it down,” Bloom said.

“No, Dax was right, hon. We should have said something before,” Chris said miserably. “And now you are pawning us off on the ladies who own that shop. I don’t blame you.”

“Hold on a second,” said Bloom, turning toward the mother and daughter as they walked along down Willow.

“First of all, I am not *pawning you off*. I just think it could be a good fit. They may have jobs for you, and can help you get settled better here if you wish, or in another town if that’s your desire. Besides, tell me you aren’t going just a bit stir crazy cooped up at The Tree.”

She looked from the mother’s face to the daughter’s and then back again.

“They are *very* connected.”

That was the understatement of the year.

*Oh and they are also witches who think you two may have the sight! So, there’s that too!*

“And secondly, you have been put in an impossible position,” she said. “I can understand not wanting to put an even bigger target on your back than was already there. Dax may be a little rough around the edges sometimes, but I am sure he knows that.”

“You’re sweet, Bloom, and you’ve done a lot for us, but he’s right. Maybe if we had spoken up, those men would still be alive.”

“I don’t see how your speaking up could have averted their fate. Sounds like they were already hooked and taking the drug for a while. From what I understand, both of them were out west recently.”

“Still...”

“Look, what matters is you spoke up now.”

“According to Dax, they didn’t find any bodies in the river, so we have to assume one of those men is still out there,” said Mack.

“And with word getting out about the nastiness of this drug, he must be more desperate by the day to unload it before it becomes worthless,” Bloom said.

“I don’t know, even knowing what it does doesn’t seem to stop some people from doing it.”

“Maybe not, but I doubt they intend to wait and see.”

Finally, they hooked a left at the Four Corners and arrived at the curio shop soon after.

“So, what’s in it for these friends of yours?” Kim said, rejoining the conversation.

“Maybe they need some help at their shop,” Chris said.

“Maybe. But I have just been thinking. This town is weird. Very weird.” She looked around while Bloom did her best to keep an innocent look on her face. “Like freakishly weird,” she said, narrowing her eyebrows as she looked at Bloom.

“It is quirky, and Curioser and Curioser is the quirkiest,” Bloom said, brushing aside the comment. “So I think you’ll like it.”

She would let the witches handle it from here. Would they wipe their memories? Or maybe bring them under their wing?

Brushing aside her doubts, she pushed open the door to the shop, eliciting the soft tinkle of the door chimes.

“Ah, we’ve been expecting you,” called Etta, as she turned from her task of arranging some gemstones in a display case off to one side of the main room.

“Hi Bloom,” called Tam, as she came over and gave her a quick hug as well.

“We are just putting the final touches on our little forced makeover,” Etta said, as she turned to take in Chris and Kim.

“Oh hi, Chris, Kim,” Tam said. “So you finally made it over! So good to see you again.”

“So, we finally meet, ladies. I’ve heard so much about you both!” Etta gushed warmly.

Just then she could hear the trample of feet coming down the stairs in the back. In a moment, Lora came trotting out of the fairy room. Then after a moment, slower moving along with her cane, Nan joined them as well.

“Welcome, welcome!”

“This is Chris and her daughter Kim.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, ladies,” said Lora, as she circled around the ladies in an appraising manner.

“Your shop is so cool,” Kim gushed.

“Thank you, child,” Nan quipped.

“Are you blind?” Kim asked, seemingly totally unaware of any breach of etiquette.

“Kim!” Chris cried, apparently mortified.

But Nan only cackled. “Not yet! But it’s true my eyes aren’t what they used to be. Thankfully, it’s not only with our eyes that we see, child.”

Kim knit her eyebrows for an instant before turning her attention back to the shop. “It’s so hippie, and trippy, and like, I don’t know. It’s just so cool.”

“We prefer pagan,” Etta said. “But I think we will get along just fine.”

“It’s cool,” repeated Kim as she walked around, taking in the various statuettes, books, and trinkets.

“We had not foreseen meeting the ladies so soon,” Etta said.

“They just told us a few other things I thought you should hear for yourselves,” Bloom replied. Then to Chris, she said quickly, “They work with Dax sometimes, to protect the town.”

Kim once again screwed up her eyebrow curiously but didn’t say anything.

Bloom had begun to see why the witches were interested in these women, or she thought she saw what they saw.

Just then her phone buzzed in her pocket, interrupting her thoughts.

*Finch. Again?*

But he was not someone she could ignore, or even wanted to, not for long at least.

“Excuse me a moment, ladies,” she said as she stepped out onto the street.

“Hello, Councilman..”

“Didn’t I tell you to please call me Finch?”

“Yes, of course,” she said.

“I do hope I am not bothering you. Is this a good time? I just wanted to check in for a quick minute.”

“Of course, what can I do for you?”

“It seems that Dax was perhaps a little heavy handed with some of our community the other day. I am sure you could have done anything to avert it, of course. I am sure you did all you could to smooth things out. So, I am of course grateful. But myself and others on the council are a bit concerned that perhaps he is not taking this threat seriously enough.

While she was not Dax’s biggest fan at the moment, she knew he was definitely on the case.

“Finch, if I may, Dax is handling it. I get it, with the history here between shifters and fae, you have your doubts. But I can assure you he is taking things seriously. Even as we speak he is already investigating a potential deal that is to go down in the next few days. If all goes to plan they will catch both the dealers, and the buyer.”

“But do you think we can really trust him and his pack to look out for our interests?”

“I understand your concerns, I really do. I almost called the Herald myself I have been so freaked out, but I really think we need to trust Dax on this. I get it, that can be challenging at times.”

“The Herald. Interesting. Okay, thank you, Bloom. It is good to know he is on the case. We are very appreciative of your insights on this.”

Etta’s voice pulled her attention away from the call. “Let’s all go sit in the back, then. For some tea. And you can tell us all about it. How’s that sound?” Etta said reassuringly.

“That sounds great, thank you,” said Chris, as they all headed through the fairy room, which was still largely in a state of disrepair after the incident with the shifter earlier in the week.

She could see Chris visibly relaxing in the presence of the witches. Then again, after Dax’s grilling, she wasn’t surprised. Still, she breathed a sigh of relief. At least the story with the women seemed to be resolving itself. This was where they belonged.

If only she felt as good about where the same circumstances had brought her and Dax.



## CHAPTER 20



Dax was trying to figure out why Bloom had been acting so weirdly lately.

“You okay, boss?” Rollo said, as he strolled into the bullpen at the Tribunal.

“Just peachy. Can’t you tell?” he said in a voice that approached a growl.

“Hey, just asking. What’s the problem?”

“You mean other than the rogue dealers loose, two people dead, and Etta on the way over? You know we are fucking up when the witches get involved. Oh, and for some reason, Bloom has decided I suck at doing my job. Is that enough problems for you? And this is on top of the usual.”

“Okay, okay. I thought it was something serious, like that we were out of coffee or something.”

Dax huffed a breath and cracked a smile for the first time that afternoon.

“That *would* be a tragedy,” he agreed as he rested his head in his hand as he sat at his desk.

“But I get it. We’re getting both barrels today. Explain again why the witches are on the way?”

“Do I have to? This is making my head hurt,” Dax moaned. “But okay,” he said as he sat back in his chair.

“Etta just called. I guess Bloom is setting Chris and her daughter up with the witches and they brought Etta up to speed on everything we discussed at the Den. So Etta insisted on coming over to interview that thug we pulled off the road. As much as I may complain, fact is I’m not arguing. At this point, it’s all hands on deck.”

“Oh I thought you had Jack on him already?”

“No, dude was a little too out of it. But just as well. Etta is a force in the interrogation room.”

“She’s a force period. Just let me know when she’s coming so I can make myself scarce.”

“Then you better get going because she’ll be here any second now,” Dax said.

“Great,” Rollo said...

“And Bloom is coming too.”

“Oh great. So, we are being invaded by fae as well as witches! No offense.”

“Hey that’s my mate you’re talking about,” Dax said, feigning anger. “Just kidding, man, maybe they cancel each other out?” Dax said.

“How would that work?” Rollo asked him.

“I don’t know, I’m just talking shit,” he laughed as he rubbed his face. “So, are you taking off?”

“Absolutely!”

“No problem. Just stay in touch, okay? I’m probably going to want to recap this interview with you.”

“Roger that,” Rollo said as he disappeared around the corner.

*Mate. Is she really my mate? With the way she’s been acting?*

His dragon roared.

*Okay, okay, easy.*

But Dax was having his doubts.

\* \* \*

IT WASN’T TOO MUCH LATER THAT ETTA ARRIVED. OR AS DAX AND HIS PACK often joked, a few of her flowing scarfs arrived, and then about a minute later, she caught up with them. He had once counted seven scarves on her. *Seven. Insanity.* Of course he wasn’t going to tell her that.

Bloom came right along with her. As usual, Dax’s dragon was instantly alert the moment she came into view. More alert. But he was a little put off that she didn’t approach him.

*I don’t have time for this now.* He pushed his worries about Bloom away, even as his dragon clawed at the ground.

“My dear Dax, where is our prisoner? Now that we know more, I think

we need to have a little chat with him,” Etta said, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Follow me,” he said. Then turning to see Bloom following, “It seems the women are out of danger now, and I would say The Tree is in the clear as well. I think it’s best if you wait here, or you can watch on the camera. But I don’t want you in the room.”

Bloom seemed a little taken aback, but then quickly recovered, “I thought we were in this together, Dax.”

Etta interrupted before he could say anything.

“I assume he’s in the holding cells, right? Let’s go, we have no time to waste.”

He pointed Bloom to where she could go and watch from the cameras before marching off behind Etta toward the stairs.

His Dragon raged.

\* \* \*

“SO, IT’S JASPER, RIGHT?”

“That’s right,” the man said. He had the tough guy looks and size to go along with his apparent job. He sat tight-lipped across from Dax and Etta in the interview room. Dax looked up at the camera, knowing that Bloom was watching from another room.

“Tell us everything you know,” Dax said simply.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Jasper said.

“Oh, I don’t believe that, sweetie,” Etta said. It was obvious who would be playing the ‘good cop’ today, Dax mused.

“You guys can go fuck yourselves, both of you – sweetie,” Jasper hissed.

“Oh, is that so?” Dax breathed. This was going to be fun.

Jasper remained silent as he glared at them.

“We have reason to believe your boss is looking to sell your little Supernova drug, and lots of it, right here in our quaint little town. And we just can’t have that, sweetie,” Etta said kindly. “Now, I know you are a good boy deep down, so why don’t you just save us the trouble of beating you senseless, okay, sugar?”

Jasper’s eyes got a little wider at that, and Dax had to stifle a laugh.

She’s good.

“What’s the plan?” Dax growled, “Who’s the buyer?”

“Fuck you. I want my lawyer.”

*Playtime’s over.* Dax looked over at Etta and she gave him a subtle nod.

“Listen, fucktard,” he hissed as he was over the table and grasping the man by the throat, pinning him to the wall with impossible speed. “This is your last chance. I’m your lawyer now.”

The man’s expression changed drastically. “You’re on it! Why didn’t you say so? I can get you some when you let me out... relax, man!”

*He’s just not getting the message.*

“No, I don’t do drugs, buddy. This is pure dragon,” Dax hissed as he allowed his beast to come forward just enough to get the point across with no room left for doubt. His eyes went bright blue and the iris took on the look of his dragon. At the same time he allowed his features to shift just enough so that scales popped out here and there as he tightened his grip and lifted the man clear off his feet. His muscles swelled beneath his button-down shirt.

All remaining color drained from the man’s face, “Jeez, lady, help me!” he tried to scream as he flailed his arms and legs helplessly. Then to Dax “What the hell ...what are you?”

“Tell us about the deal. What is the plan?”

“Okay, okay, just let me go!” the man blabbered. He had gone from hardened street thug to sniveling heap in an instant.

Some days, it was very good to be a dragon.

After Dax had released him, he just sat for a minute catching his breath and apparently trying to compose himself.

“When people started talking about the side effects, like weird hallucinations, etc., it was hurting business. The shit wasn’t selling anymore, and my boss was getting nervous. He was all in on Supernova. I mean big money. So we came here...and he is in a hurry to unload it before it’s worthless.”

He snuck looks at Etta who just sat smiling at him as if nothing had happened.

“So, that’s how it is, that’s all I know,” the thug said.

“Oh, surely there’s a plan, honey. With so much product to unload?”

“Etta, I had no idea you knew the lingo so well,” Dax said, impressed.

“I love my Netflix crime dramas,” she said.

Jasper just sat there looking more and more confused.

“So?” she said, waiting for an answer.

“Look, lady. I don’t know what you…” Jasper started to say, apparently still thinking he could find an ally in Etta.

At that moment, Etta smiled her sweetest smile.

“I don’t suppose you knew Dewey? He was the sweetest fae you could meet.”

“Sweetest what?” Jasper said, looking very confused.

“Or Cassius? He was one of our best customers, you know? And a dedicated member of the shifter community.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jasper was decidedly unnerved.

“You see, we can’t have you coming into our happy little supernatural town and messing with our people.”

“Supernatural?” Jasper coughed, his eyes taking on the distinct look of a terrified deer.

“You’re right, supernatural is a misleading term, since by definition, all things are natural. It’s just you people see so little you have to add the ‘super’ for what you don’t see. See?”

“These are the side effects. I heard of this. There’re crazy stories, but they are just stories! Hallucinations... like all this, it must be. You drugged me... right? What is this place?” Now he was approaching full on blabbering.

“Oh, this is Fae Crossing, and I can assure you, you haven’t been drugged,” Etta said just as spiders began to erupt from her nose, her mouth, and her ears to make a beeline for poor Jasper.

Dax watched with amusement and perhaps a little disgust as the flood of spiders reached the chair of the hapless thug who began to scream. They were rapidly climbing toward his face. “Jeezus! God! Okay, okay...what are you people?”

Just as the first spider was about to climb onto his chin, they all vanished.

*That’s a new one.* As if the witches didn’t creep him out enough already.

“Yes, you were saying?” Etta pressed him in a casual voice, as if nothing had happened.

He looked around wide-eyed for an instant as Dax and Etta just smiled across at him expectantly.

It seemed he didn’t need any more convincing. “There’s a man. A contact. Julius—that’s my boss—was trying to set up a deal. The guy wants to buy everything. I think it’s supposed to go down tomorrow night.”

“Who’s the man? Where’s it supposed to go down?” Dax said, his voice booming with authority.

“We just knew him as Mr. Smith...I swear... really. Boss spoke to him a few times and was setting something up, but I don’t know when or where, but it’s soon.”

Dax looked into the man’s eyes. He was satisfied he was telling the truth.

“Okay, Etta. That’s it, you can wipe him.”

The man had just enough time to look suitably confused all anew before Etta simply waved her hand and said, “Bye bye butterfly.”

Immediately, Jasper’s entire body went limp. At the last second, Dax caught his head before it crashed into the table. He released the man’s head and just left him slumped over. He would be out for hours and would wake up with no memory of the events of the last week or so if he knew Etta well.

“I didn’t know you were so sensitive, Dax,” Etta joked.

*With Bloom watching, I am.*

Though he grudgingly had to admit to himself that he probably would have caught the man’s head anyhow. A fair fight was one thing, but there would be no honor in abusing the vanquished.

He looked at Etta. “How are we going to stop this deal?”

“That’s a very good question,” she replied as they exited the room.

As they made their way into the adjoining offices, Bloom pulled her eyes away from the monitor screen. “I know exactly what we need to do.”

## CHAPTER 21



“Let’s just take a breather here, Bloom,” Dax said.  
“I just did,” she replied. “And you heard that guy. All they care about is money. Not the lives they are destroying.”

“We *are* talking about criminals here,” Etta chimed in.

“I know, I know.” She was so mad. She just couldn’t get the image of Dewey dead on the supermarket floor out of her mind. She couldn’t bear the thought of anyone else being hurt.

“I should have done this a week ago!”

She pulled out her phone and was already pressing dial for Rocky Clark over at the Herald.

“Hey Bloom, slow down,” Dax said, in a voice that was an odd mix of his attempts to soothe her, as well as some underlying anxiety.

“We have to do something! Did you see that guy? They don’t care how many people they kill. I’m calling Rocky at the Herald.”

Dax and Etta exchanged glances.

“The Herald? And what exactly is that going to accomplish?” Dax asked as he gently took her arm. He held her by each shoulder as he looked into her eyes. “I know Dewey had a special place in your heart...but this whole thing is bigger than just your friendship. Think it through, Bloom.”

She felt frustration and anger flush her face.

“I don’t want to think it through, we need to do something!”

With a look and shake of her head, Etta quieted Dax before he could reply. “What your less-than-eloquent shifter friend here means to say is that we want to stop this, but we need to do it right.”

“Right, what she said, and what is Rocky going to do anyhow?”

“He could put out a headline, warning the whole town. “Supernova drug kills, not just a good time,” or something.

“Catchy,” Etta quipped.

“Oh great, and spook them and make them just crawl back underground? Bloom, we need to catch these guys and destroy the problem at the root,” Dax was saying. “You have to trust me on this.”

“But we have already tried,” she said. “I just want it to stop. If the people of Fae Crossing just know the truth about this stuff, it will die on the vine.”

“Kill it at the root, die on the vine, your friend Dewey the gardener would approve of your analogies,” Etta said, trying to bring some levity to the conversation.

“Hello, Bloom? Bloom!” she heard faintly coming over the phone.

*Oh shoot!*

She looked down and realized she had completely forgotten about the call she had placed.

“Rocky? Hey sorry, I’ll call you back? Or I won’t. Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have called.”

*What the hell am I doing?*

“I’ve got to go,” she said as she ended the call before Rocky could even respond.

“Bloom, think it through. We still have a chance to catch these guys. If it is true that they are desperate to unload this stuff, then we can use that to our advantage. Maybe they will slip up.”

On the one hand, she knew he was right. This was what he did after all. But at the same time, she was getting tired of cloak and dagger sting operations. She just wanted her town to be safe again.

“We’ll handle this, okay? Let me talk to the pack. Maybe we can set up a sting and finally get this problem eliminated, and get this product off the streets before it can hurt anyone else. Why don’t you go back to The Tree and get some rest? Trust me, I want this handled as badly as you do.”

But did he?

Finch’s words echoed in her head. What he had said about Dax’s father was a little disturbing.

As her mind spiraled the fear in her heart only intensified.

“Just don’t take too long this time, I can handle the three years I’ve waited for my father’s justice. Another day or another year won’t hurt *him*. But this town is still alive, Dax. These are real, living people that you are



charged to protect.”

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. But she was just so tired of holding it all inside. Her father, her mother before that, and now maybe even The Tree and the town. It was all she had left, and she couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

“We will handle this drug, Bloom, and we will bring you what closure we can where your father is concerned. You have my word on it. Just let me handle it.” With that he turned back to Etta as she made her way out of the Tribunal.

*Can you really trust him, Bloom?*

She would try.

\* \* \*

SHE HEADED BACK HOME TO THE TREE. SO MUCH HAD HAPPENED SHE JUST needed to rest and clear her head.

Curiouser and Curiouser was on the way, so she quickly stopped in. Tam was already showing Chris and Kim the ropes at the shop. Thank God at least that seemed to be settled. Clint was positioned out front.

“Dax have you on guard duty?” It was more an observation than a question.

“Can't be too careful, Bloom,” he said good-naturedly as he surveyed the street.

*Maybe she could trust him? At least with this.*

After she got back home, she spent a few hours doing some bookkeeping in the back room and then tidying up the bar. Mack and Wendy both milled about as well doing the day's normal prep work.

“You all good, sweetheart?” Mack asked her.

“Yeah. Thanks, Mack. Just a lot going on, you know?”

“Don't I know it. I'm really sorry about Dewey. I know he held a special place for you,” he said as he came over and put a reassuring hand on her back.

“Thanks, Mack. I just want Fae Crossing back like it was. It's all I have left, you know? You. Wendy. Tam. The Tree. The people. All this drug shit has to end.”

“I know, kiddo. Dax and his crew are on it. Just give them time.”

*Time. Relax. Arg.*

Then she remembered.

“Hey Mack, can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“It’s about Dax’s father. Did he have a problem with the fae or something?”

Mack was quiet for a minute, and looked thoughtful.

“Why are you asking this?” Mack finally asked.

“No reason, just some things I’ve heard,” she replied

He was quiet again.

“To talk about Owen you need to understand my generation. Your own father’s generation. We didn’t get coddled. And people weren’t so ... um ... soft, really? I don’t think people realize it was a different world. My point is you can’t judge someone in the past based on today’s norms.”

“Why do I get the feeling you are about to tell me terrible things,” she said, her mental alarm bells already chiming.

“You want me to tell you about his father, then I will tell you about him. I am just setting the stage. Whether or not you take into account what I am saying is up to you.”

“Fair enough.”

He just looked at her for a second.

“He was not much of a fan of the fae really. But it made sense. Back in his day, in mine, early on really, there was a lot more distrust between shifters and fae. And word has it that Owen caught a lot of that when he worked the security detail for the Council.”

“His father did security for the Fae Council?”

“He did. This was in his youth, back when Dax was just a youngling. Word has it the fae never treated him with much respect. And it seems he returned the favor. There was major friction. Maybe even a scandal you could say.”

“I had no idea,” she said, shocked to learn details her mate had never bothered to share.

*Or purposely left out.*

“And that’s why I am telling you,” he said, pausing to take a drink of water. “So he was encouraged to give up that job, but a lot in the pack agreed with his take on the fae, and he rose to be Alpha, largely on the back of his outspoken critique of them, particularly of King Tarragon.”

“No way!”

“Way,” Mack replied simply. “But don’t get me wrong. He still largely believed in what Fae Crossing stood for. At least that’s my belief. It got a little murky, but I think his issue was with King Tarragon, rather than with the Fae.

“That’s not really what I heard,” she said.

“Well that would be the murky part. Anyhow he was alpha here for years, but eventually it was clear it was going to either be him or King Tarragon. And well, let’s face it, the King wasn’t going anywhere,” Mack laughed as he made a shrugging motion with his shoulders.

“So he left?”

“Yes, he left, and now we are only talking about, oh I guess about fifteen years ago now. That’s when Dax took over.”

“So his father really did hate the fae.”

“I never said that.” Mack said, raising a finger. “But he was no fan of the council, that’s for sure. Really not of Tarragon if you ask me. He actually raised Dax speaking of tolerance. Despite his experiences working for the council he had always believed we could all get along. He got along with most fae just fine, your father included. And he was always decent to me too. Of course I am just a human who was unfortunate enough to stumble into this crazy place.”

“You still haven’t told me about how you did come to be in-the-know here in Fae Crossing.”

He always had an excuse to dodge that one.

“That’s true,” he said with a wink.

She knew it was pointless to push. “But as far as Dax’s dad, it seems he wasn’t exactly a poster child for brotherly love between shifters and fae.”

“Not exactly. Quite the opposite if you go by the fact that he finally up and left Fae Crossing altogether, never to be heard from again. Some say he was exiled. I tend to think it was of his own accord. I know he had words with Dax before he left, though. And then he was gone, and Dax was Alpha.”

“Wow.”

“Yup,” Mack said as he got up from his bar stool. “Okay, I gotta make sure the kegs are all ready to go. You know how it is,” he said. “And like I said, give Dax and the pack a little time to process this latest wrinkle. Be patient.”

“You keep saying that. And you know it’s not my strong suit.”

Regardless, she did her best to do just that, and was thankful when the evening came and the night's clientele and business took her mind off her constant ruminations.

It was late and she was cleaning up, wiping down the bar, when her phone buzzed in. *Rocky*.

"Bloom, why didn't you call me back?" were his first words.

She had to say something. She had decided to give Dax the chance to show her he could handle this, but if that failed, she'd talk to Rocky then. For now, she had to save face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I... It was sort of a buttdial."

"Didn't sound that way to me. Come on. I've been reaching out to my sources all day. That deal...that drug. My source tells me the dealer is slated to meet with this 'Mr. Smith' to finalize a massive buy. They are ninety percent sure it will be tomorrow. Deadline for tomorrow's paper is in ten minutes. I am gonna run it."

"Rocky, you can't!"

"Bloom, I heard your conversation. And you are right. We have to do something to break up the deal. And people need to know. It could save some lives. This is bigger than you and Dax at this point."

"But what if it just pushes the criminals underground, when the Tribunal could catch them instead?"

She spun on her heel, gesturing with her hands emphatically as her inner conflict grew.

"My source is emphatic, Bloom, The deal is going down tomorrow. And from what they can tell, the buyer is very eager to make the buy."

"Do they know who it is? We could tell the Tribunal!"

"No, this is second hand, but they are a *very* reliable source. If they say the deal is going down, it is going down. Look, Bloom, this is kind of a courtesy call. We are running the story. It is like you said, the people have a right to know. We can do some good here and maybe even stop the deal. I just wanted to give you a heads up as a friend."

"Rocky, just one more day, okay? Please!"

She heard a deep sigh on the other end.

"Fine. But only cause your Guinness is the best pour around. But late addition tomorrow could still happen."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Thanks, Rocky, you're a lifesaver," she said as she hung up.

Still, she was torn. She trusted Rocky at his word. But maybe she should tell Dax about this call.

But Rocky said he'd hold it so that could wait until morning, right?

## CHAPTER 22



This was looking good. Very good, Dax thought, as he got out of bed and headed to the shower. He had spoken with Tim, the alpha over at Mossy Ridge, and he was sending him ten more shifters. He had agreed that this was a problem that could easily spread and concerned them all.

Tim himself was going to come with them. They were even going to pull in more help from a few other packs. They would blanket the town. Etta and her sisters were going to bring in their wider coven. Finch had even offered some of his fae help. Out of character, but not unwelcomed. They had never thrown so many resources together.

He was proud of himself too. This was why he had believed in the dream. Fae Crossing *could* come together.

Screw what his father had said. He had his issues with the fae, and the witches for that matter, but at the end of the day he was alpha because he believed in their mission. They really could all ‘just get along’ as someone had once said.

And maybe Bloom had really rubbed off on him as well.

Fae, witch, and shifter all working together. He had never fully understood why his father lost his faith in the town, and in the dream. It was his father who had instilled it in him, after all.

He did his best to ignore the thoughts running through his head. It was a familiar thought loop.

*Focus on what you need to handle today.*

They were going to nail these goons once and for all. He was sure of it. Even now his team was assembling at the Tribunal.

He was pulling on his jeans and preparing to go when the old school short

wave radio they used squawked.

“Boss, you there? Over.”

“Yeah, man. Go. Over.”

“You’re not gonna like this.”

*What now.*

\* \* \*

HIS WINGS BEAT FURIOUSLY AS HE RACED OVER THE MISTED FORESTS.  
*Frustration. Anger. Rage.*

The feelings pulsed through his dragon as he ducked and weaved through the early morning light.

And then in the next breath.

*Protect. Cherish. Mate.*

His dragon bellowed fire high into the sky in frustration as the Tribunal came into view. He crashed down behind the building and shifted, quickly going to his locker to dress.

In a few short minutes he was storming into the Tribunal bullpen.

Rollo and Jack both stood there, grim looks on their faces.

“Show me,” Dax commanded.

Rollo tossed the paper down onto a central meeting table.

## **The New Superkiller Supernova**

THE HEADLINE DOMINATED THE TOP OF THE CROSSING HERALD.

Just under that, in midsize letters, was a secondary headline.

**Trendy drug will kill you in less than a month**

“DAMMIT!” HE SHOUTED.

Both Rollo and Jack stepped back as he unleashed his consternation.

“I told her to let us handle it. Everything was in motion,” Dax called out.

“What do you mean, you told her?”

“Bloom. Bloom did this!” he hissed.

He had never felt so conflicted in his life.

His mate.

*Mate?* Would a mate go behind his back like this? Treat him like a fool?

“Oh, I see,” Rollo said as he considered the situation. Apparently, he was wise enough to say no more on such a sensitive subject.

He felt the burn of humiliation at her defiance spread across his skin like a fever.

“It could still work,” Jack said hopefully.

Dax turned on him, and he quickly backed up a step.

“Bullshit. We’re screwed. This was our best and probably last chance to catch these guys.” He crashed his fist down onto the table. “And she knew it.” Then after a beat, “I have been more than patient.”

“It definitely isn’t making our job any easier,” Rollo quipped.

Dax laughed but there was no real humor behind it. “That’s the understatement of the year.” He stopped pacing to look at the newspaper again. “Shit. We might as well call things off with The Mossy Ridge pack.”

“What if they don’t see the headline? Or maybe they won’t care even if they do! The deal could still go through,” Jack offered.

“Come on, man,” Rollo said. “The last thing this guy will want is this kind of heat. Not to mention that a product that kills its users does not exactly lay the groundwork for a sustainable business model. No, we are screwed.”

The three stood there looking grim for a minute before Dax broke the silence.

“Call Tim and Etta, tell them it’s off.” Then after a beat. “Dammit, Bloom!”

“Easy, boss. We don’t know the full story,” Rollo started to say. He was saying, “No pun intended”, sheepishly as Dax whirled on him.

“Easy?”

“Okay, okay.” Rollo backed off. “I’ll call Tim.”

“I’ll let Etta know,” Jack said.

“What are you going to do, boss?” Rollo asked.

He had no idea. His dragon roared inside, but he pushed it down.



He couldn't have been clearer. Why couldn't she just let them handle it? *Obviously she doesn't listen to a word I say. Or she doesn't trust that we can handle it.*

Neither answer made him feel any better.

*Fine. I don't know why I even tried.*

His dragon thrashed about.

*Mate.*

The pull, that desire. He asserted himself again.

No. What mate would completely defy him? He tried to clear his mind. Rollo was still looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"What can I do? It's back to square one. Dayton and Clint should be here soon."

Well, it had been nice while it lasted, but it was pretty obvious now he had been wrong. No mate would undermine her partner like this.

His dragon thrashed about.

*Why couldn't you just take the hint the first time, Dax?*

*More to the point, why did you ever think it was a good idea to get involved with a family member involved in an open case.*

*Just not smart.*

What a clusterfuck.

This was what he got for thinking he could be the white knight.

That line of thought brought all the business with Frederick right up front in his mind.

*Not what I need to worry about right now.*

Now his thoughts were racing and his emotions were totally out of control.

Before he could plot his next move, he had to burn off the fire running through his veins.

He raced to the back of the house, and within a minute, he had shifted and was airborne, his dragon cutting through the sky.

## CHAPTER 23



*B*loom pushed the soft down duvet aside as she swung her legs over the lip of the bed.

*Coffee.*

That was her single-minded focus at the moment.

*Then I better call Dax to give him a heads up.*

But a night's sleep had cleared her head a bit and she was no longer so worried.

*Still. Must. Have. Coffee.*

Sometimes she wished she hadn't instructed Ash to not provide her with coffee in bed. That was a no brainer for a spirit that enchanted a tree. But she knew it was only the desire for coffee that would make her actually get her butt moving every morning. She could have all the coffee she wanted once she got downstairs.

After washing up a bit, she headed down to the bar section of The Tree.

Mack was already in early, going through a new shipment of glassware.

"Good morning, kiddo," he said.

"Morning, Mack," she said brightly, making a beeline for the coffee maker.

"It's about time they got the media on this. Maybe they will actually do some good for once!" Mack said enthusiastically. "Run those scumbags out of town once and for all!"

*Oh no.* Dread hung in her belly like a knot.

"What are you talking about?" she said, just as he slapped the newspaper down in front of her.

"I like the way Dax is handling this, getting the paper involved. They

think they can just come in here and turn Fae Crossing into a drug den in the shadows? Maybe they need a little spotlight on ‘em.”

As she read the headlines, she felt her blood run cold.

“That son of a b...” She caught herself and didn’t finish the word. Every once in a while she tried to at least pretend to be ladylike. “Dax had nothing to do with this.”

*I’m going to kill Rocky.*

At the same time she had to admit she felt some relief as well. At least the word was out.

She found it hard to believe whoever this buyer was would go through with it, assuming they were aware of the headline. And it wasn’t every day there was such a sensational headline. They would see it alright.

Maybe this was for the best. Maybe Dax would see it that way too.

*Yeah, right.*

\* \* \*

SHE HAD TRIED TEXTING DAX, AND THEN CALLING, BUT GOT NO RESPONSE with either. Maybe this wouldn’t be such a big deal. She couldn’t control Rocky.

*Rocky wouldn’t have even known about this had you not called him.*

*Hush you.*

But her mind was already in full rumination mode.

*It will be fine, Bloom. He has to understand.*

When he still hadn’t responded after a few hours, she figured she would busy herself by checking in on Chris and Kim. They had been staying with the witches for a few days now and she wanted to be sure they were okay.

Besides, she was getting increasingly worried about Dax, or more the point, worried about his reaction to the headline.

After the short walk over, she pushed the door to the shop open, eliciting the soft tinkle of the chimes.

“Good morning, child,” Etta said almost immediately, as she entered. “I am glad you are here.”

“Oh? Well, it’s always nice to feel welcomed,” she said. “But where’s Tam? I just thought I’d check on how Chris and Kim are doing.”

“The ladies are settling right in. They are still upstairs, and Tam is off

watching Rollo's kids. With that shitshow headline, Dax is on the warpath and it's all hands on deck.

Bloom's spirits fell. "Shitshow headline?"

"Yeah, we had lined up full surveillance and even called in some fae who are particularly gifted with the sight. Dax had hoped we could apprehend this mystery buyer and put an end to this drug scourge before it even got off the ground. That headline sure screwed that up. I swear, I don't know whose side journalists are on sometimes."

"So, Dax is not happy?"

Etta suppressed a laugh. "That's putting it mildly. One of my sisters lives up in Clouded Woods. She said he practically started a forest fire this morning. But you don't have to ask me," Etta added. "Here he comes now."

Bloom turned as the doors swung open and the entrance was suddenly filled by the imposing figures of Dax, Rollo, and Jack. There was a fourth beast of a man behind them. *Another shifter.*

She looked at Dax wanting to explain, but his icy stare and demeanor were enough to warn her off.

"Dax, I ..." she began.

He just held up a hand, before saying, with a deep growl, "Don't. You've done enough."

His words rocked her to her core.

"You don't understand," she said.

"Oh, I don't?" he said, whirling on her. "I will admit I have been a little slow, but let me see if I have this straight." He held up a finger for each point as he counted off what he seemed to be taking as the insults to his character. "You don't trust me, you don't think I give a shit about the fae, and though you haven't said it right out, despite all I told you, you still think I somehow failed your father by letting the case go cold." He let the three fingers ball back into a fist. "I am not sure what part of 'Alpha' and Chief of the Tribunal you have misunderstood, but Protecting Fae Crossing is my job. And contrary to whatever you think of me, that means protecting everyone, Fae, shifter, and even human. If you think I am so anti-fae, or whatever you believe of me, then I don't know why we are even having this conversation. Or maybe you just think I'm inept? You should go find some fancy fae, and leave me to my barbaric shifter ways. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to talk with the witches. Somehow we need to salvage this mess and find a way to catch this buyer."

She felt like she had been slapped. She imagined her face was so hot, surely they could feel it.

In front of everyone! Shame and embarrassment washed over her. And anger.

And just when she thought things couldn't get any worse, Rocky Clark suddenly burst in the door.

"Bloom!" he said, half excited and half surprised to actually find her.

"Dax, um, guys," he said awkwardly as he looked at the others.

For a moment he looked unsure of what to do.

"Well?" Dax said. "You burst in here, apparently intent on talking to Bloom. We were just discussing the somewhat sensational headline in your paper today."

"Yes, that's just it," he began, seemingly unsure of who to even address with his comments. Then to Bloom, "I went by The Tree, but Mack told me you had come over here,"

"Out with it," Dax practically commanded.

"I just wanted to apologize. The story. I tried to hold it, but my editor was really pressuring me. It was out of my control."

*Oh no.*

At first she had thought Rocky would be her savior, but suddenly it all made sense.

"So, it is as I thought," Dax said, anger, and even more painfully, disappointment in his voice.

But before she could speak, he continued to Rocky, "What do you mean pressured you? Why would they do that?"

"The Council, of course. They were insistent. He didn't really have a choice."

Dax's face darkened further. "The council."

He stood still for no more than a few seconds as the wheels in his head seemed to turn.

"No one knew about this deal but us. And there is no way in hell any of my pack breathed a word of it. And now suddenly the council is pressuring the Herald. And by 'the council' I am sure you mean Finch."

One look at Rocky's face seemed to confirm it.

Then Dax's eyes fell on her as he studied her face as well.

"Dammit, Bloom." She knew her face gave her away.

The crestfallen look on Dax's face was enough to rip her heart right out

of her chest.

“You don’t understand, I was—”

He cut her off, “I think I understand plenty. It wasn’t enough that you told the Herald, you had to go telling the Council too.”

Dax’s face was a mask of anger and pain. “I tried. I really tried. And I really thought we had something.”

Dax glanced around at the mixed company. Everyone stood in stunned silence, and he seemed to catch himself. “I was a fool. The fault is with me. But you are no mate of mine. It’s over.”

He turned to leave even as the rest of his pack stood around in shock.

Even Etta seemed stunned as she rearranged a few of her scarves.

As he was leaving, he caught the door before it could close behind him.

“And I shouldn’t have to say this, but obviously you think so little of my word and my allegiances that I do. This will have no bearing on the ongoing case with your father. We will bring whoever was responsible to justice.”

With that he let the door shut behind him.

*I can’t believe I ever thought this could work.*

Then the sobs came.

How could things have gone from so perfect to so awful so quickly?

## CHAPTER 24



“*D*ammit!” Dax paced around the table at the Grizzly Den.

It was barely going on noon, but he had called a meeting to address the latest wrinkle in their plans.

*Wrinkle. More like gaping tear.*

The rest of the pack sat, watching him circle. Dax noted the apprehension on their faces.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to kill anyone.” He let his eyes roam across theirs.

Tim, the Alpha of the Mossy Ridge pack was sitting in as well. “Probably.”

Tim was the only one to crack a half smile.

“We’re working from behind the eight ball now. I don’t think I need to remind you of that. Tim, I am sorry to have brought you over here. With these guys being spooked now, I feel I’ve wasted your time. They are bound to take extra precautions, or really, who knows what they will do. But now we have to wait for them again. We’ve lost the advantage.”

He hoped his frustration and rage were not completely overshadowing the planning session. Stay on the mission. That’s what he needed to do. It seemed that was all he knew how to do anyhow.

*Mate.*

He almost scoffed at the word. But his dragon was struggling to practically rip through his flesh. It was only with great effort he was pushing it down.

*Go to her.*

Telling her it was over was the hardest thing he had ever done. But what

else could he do? There were enough obstacles to being the Chief of the Tribunal.

*I don't need my own mate working against me.*

No, she had made the decision for him. At every turn she questioned and second guessed him.

*Betrayed.*

That was the word that burned at him that he tried to push away.

He was done listening to his dragon. Or giving in to it. It seemed to only bring him pain.

He still couldn't believe she had gone and told The Fae council about their plan.

*She doesn't respect you.*

She never had. None of them did. It was just like it had been with his father.

He should have listened to his advice. *Never make a fae your friend and don't even think of making one your mate.*

Yeah, and he had left too.

*Yes, and you are Alpha now. Act like it.*

That was the other reason. She had left him no choice.

No Alpha, no shifter for that matter, would allow themselves to be so disrespected. It was bad enough that half his pack witnessed his humiliation. And Tim as well.

And he had allowed it. But not again.

*Some mate.*

Again his dragon raged.

*Rage away, buddy. It's not going to make her respect us.*

Jack spoke up, bringing his mind back to focus on the meeting. "No plan survives contact with the enemy."

"Or with the mate, apparently," Tim said.

Dax felt scales wanting to burst forth across his chest. He bit down to suppress the feel of talons wanting to erupt. He locked eyes with Tim and allowed his dragon's eyes to flash.

"Watch your words, Tim," he spat.

"Just trying to lighten the mood, Dax," he said, raising his hands palm facing Dax to indicate he was backing down. "No offense. I respect your authority here in Fae Crossing and do not wish to challenge you."

Dax felt his muscles unwind slightly.



“And I do not feel our presence is wasted. If I may,” he said, asking Dax permission to speak.

Dax gave him a nod.

“Allow me and my men to spread out. Each can be accompanied by one of yours. And keep the plan with the Fae and the Witches. Perhaps we can use this situation to our advantage,” he said, choosing his words with care. “Perhaps with them spooked, they will get sloppy. Also perhaps our fresh eyes will be of some use.”

Dax thought about it and quickly nodded his ascent. “Fine, have our men pair up, and Jack, if you could, let the fae and witches know to keep to the original plan. We are counting on the fae here, I think.”

The irony of his last statement was not lost on him. His father would not have approved.

“Indeed,” said Tim.

“And by that I mean the fae we have out at the bridges and key locations. Those with emotional sensitivities. They will be scanning for, for whatever it is they scan for,” he said.

“And what about the Council,” Jack asked?

“What about them? Not much to do. They will always look out for fae interests, which does not always mean Fae Crossing interests. It’s like the old story of the scorpion and the frog. So I am not surprised,” Dax said.

“That’s one perspective,” Rollo added.

Dax just nodded. “Okay let’s do this.” Those were words his pack understood. Immediately they got to their feet and headed out.

As the rest of the pack filed out, Rollo turned to him, “What about you, chief?”

“I am going to go fuck some shit up.”

Rollo nodded. He knew that he more than any of the rest could relate.

“Do what you gotta do, we got this.”

“Wait, what old story of the scorpion?” Clint said.

Dax looked at him, “Really?”

“So sue me, I don’t know it.”

“Fine. So there’s a scorpion and a frog, and they both want to cross a river, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So the scorpion says, ‘hey let me climb on your back so you can take me across the river.’ And the frog is like, ‘What so you can sting me halfway

across?”

Dax acted out each character as he said their parts.

“I won’t sting you, that would be suicide. We’d both drown.’ So the frog agrees, and the scorpion climbs on and they head across. Then halfway across the scorpion stings him.”

Clint looked affronted.

“And as they are both going down, the frog says to him, ‘why did you do that? Now we are both dead?’ and the scorpion replies, ‘I can’t help it, it’s my nature.’”

“So you are saying the fae are like scorpions?” Clint asked.

“I’m saying they are how they are,” Dax said, setting his jaw.

He wasn’t sure how he had held it together through the meeting. But with business handled he headed out behind the bar...he knew where he wanted to go.

\* \* \*

THE QUARRY WAS THE PLACE DAX WENT TO THINK. TO WALK AND THINK. BUT it was also the place he went to smash. It was of course abandoned, but wreckage for years past lay everywhere. Rusted out cars, empty graffiti covered concrete shells of buildings whose original functions were long since forgotten. Gravel and rock and ponds lay everywhere, crisscrossed by bike trails now.

He had shifted as soon as he got out the back of the Grizzly Den. He really didn’t give a shit who saw, though he knew he was asking for problems that way. What did anything matter anyhow?

He swooped down on a relatively freshly dumped car. With one huge clawed arm he smashed in the hood, before lifting the entire thing and tossing it the length of a football field. Tilting back his great scaled head he bellowed fire into the sky.

The torment was almost too much to bear. Yet even in this form, with his dragon in full control, he knew there was no going back. She had violated all he held dear. All his kind stood for.

Loyalty.

Trust.

He took to the air again and this time immediately whirled and dove,

coming down feet first into what remained of some sort of earth moving vehicle, crushing it completely as if it were no more than a Tonka toy.

But it wasn't enough. The pain still remained in his heart and he pummeled, and he ripped and bent and tore until all that was left were scraps and bits of metal.

But still the pain remained. No matter what he did, it would not soften. He tore at the ground, and then beat it to exhaustion.

He had tried. Done all he could. To protect the town. To protect her. To catch her father's killer.

*Frederick.*

He could not be certain but he was all but sure.

And he couldn't tell her.

*Definitely not now.*

He beat at the ground until his strikes became little more than scratches. Even then he summoned the power to pound the earth a few more times until finally, totally spent, he shifted back to his human form.

Naked, tired, and emotionally spent he sat that way for another long while.

*I was a fool to think I could have a mate. That I could be loved.*

*Or that I could love.*

Images of his father leaving fifteen years before flashed through his mind, as did his few attempts at romance in the past.

*No, I am just a lone wolf. Dragon. A lone dragon. That is my destiny.*

*The sun matched his mood as it began to sink below the horizon.*

\* \* \*

AFTER THE SHORT FLIGHT BACK, HE REDRESSED AND REENTERED THE GRIZZLY Den.

The shift had only mildly calmed him. At least he should sleep soundly, he thought. That would be a miracle in itself after what he had been through.

But even in his exhausted state, there was just no getting away from the pain he felt.

His heart literally ached.

*Bloom.*

He sat down at the clubhouse table in the empty back room.

*Informal clubhouse*, he reminded himself.

For a time he just sat in silence, contemplating if he would just walk the few miles back to his mountain home, or if she should fly.

*Which will exhaust me more?*

He just wanted oblivion.

Duke came through the door from the front, rag in hand, presumably to clean up the table from their earlier meeting.

“Dax,” he said, with mild surprise in his voice. “Boy, you look like shit.”

Dax couldn’t help but laugh. Though his clothes were clean enough, his arms and face were covered in dried mud. His hair caked with it.

“Well, I feel like shit too, so that’s perfect.”

“One of those days, huh?” Duke just said simply.

Duke was a man, a shifter, who Dax imagined had seen many of those days himself.

“Can I ask you a question, Duke?”

“Now you know you don’t even have to ask that. You and the boys are the closest things Bessie and I have to sons, so you go on ahead.”

Dax took in what he said.

*And you are the closest thing I have to a father now.*

“Was it always so perfect between you and Bessie?”

Duke almost fell over himself as he uttered a deep laugh. In fact it made him cough or choke it seemed, so off guard did it take him.

“Perfect?” he repeated as he continued to laugh. “Boy, that is the funniest thing I have ever heard. Where on earth did you get the idea we have anything perfect?”

Dax was caught a little off guard himself.

“What I mean to say is, you both just always seem so affectionate. So supportive of each other.”

“Well,” Duke said as he got a little thoughtful. “I suppose that is true. But don’t think that came so easy.” Walking back up front through the door. A moment later he returned with a few beers, and passed one to Dax.

“So unless I’m mistaken, you got lady troubles, huh?”

“It’s that obvious?”

“It is,” he said simply.

“Great. Not anymore,” Dax sighed. “It’s done. She betrayed me. And the pack. It seems everything I have tried to do, she has tried to undo.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now,” he said miserably.

Duke was quiet for a minute as he sucked down his beer.

“We’re talking about Bloom, huh?” Duke said thoughtfully, weighing his words. “My nightlife competition?” he added laughing.

“Hardly, she caters mostly to the high and mighty fae, and the fucking council.”

“Ah, you’d be surprised, but a few shifters make their way over there,” Duke said. “And you know we get our fair share of fae. But I am starting to get a sense of your dilemma. Look, son. I don’t know the details, and I’ll wager they don’t even matter. But I will tell you this. I’ve seen the look in your eye when you too are together. And in hers. That is not something to just dismiss.” Duke got serious. “You want to know why Bessie and I are still together. Because we recognized what we had. We don’t let any stupid bickering or opinions or whatever get in the way of that. If she wants to tell me to take my boots off before I enter the house, that’s fine with me. Hell, she could probably tell me to wear a dress while I’m in the house, and I’d do it. You can’t put a price on a good woman. You gotta know when to bend, or you’re gonna break too,” he said, sort of pointing at Dax with his beer. “Behind all the other bullshit of our quirks or whatever, we both know what we have. We love each other. That’s something most nobody really finds in this life. So, I don’t know the details of your little squabble, and I don’t rightly think it matters. But you gotta ask yourself if it’s worth losing what I see in both of your eyes when you’re together. Because that ain’t something to piss away. I’ll tell you that.”

Dax just listened. He wanted to believe what Duke was saying, but Duke didn’t know what she had done.

“Good speech,” he finally said.

“I thought so,” Duke said with a wink. “Now drink the rest of your beer and stop making me sound like a pussy with all this mate talk.”

This time it was Dax’s turn to laugh as he clinked his beer with Duke.

He downed the rest of his beer.

*This mate business is not easy.*

## CHAPTER 25



“*M*ates shmates,” she said miserably between sips from her drink as she sat at one of the tables in the relative emotional safety of her own bar.

“Bloom, come on, at least do your drinking behind the bar,” Mack said.

“There’s hardly anyone here,” she said, waving him off.

What did it matter if she got hammered in front of or behind the bar anyhow.

*Nothing matters.*

“Come on, kiddo,” Mack said, as he came up behind her and gently helped her to her feet.

“I want to be with someone like The Tree,” she said, raising her glass to the bar.

“Oh, is that right?”

“The Tree would make the perfect ‘mate’,” she said. “For me that is. Too bad it’s just a spirit.” Then, after a beat, “No offense. But it’s protective, and certainly tries to look after my needs.” She paused in consideration. “Of course it is missing a few key things.” She stared into her glass for a moment.

“But it would never accuse me of betraying it.” She descended into tears for a moment, which she quickly suppressed into just sniffles.

“Did you try to explain the situation to him? It sounds like Finch sort of tricked you, or at least took advantage of your goodwill.”

“But he’s right,” she said miserably. “I did sort of betray him. I didn’t mean it. I did want to look out for him. And I didn’t mean to doubt him or whatever he thinks. Undermine him. I don’t know. It’s just so confusing.”

She was making headway on her third drink, but that was nothing for her.

“From what you told me, it sounds like you were trying to stick up for him,” Mack offered as he opened the glassware washer.

“I was! But at the same time, come on, you have to admit, he is like a bull in a china shop when it comes to the Fae. He just charges in. I just don’t get it. But that’s just part of it. I still didn’t mean to spill the beans on his plan. Finch was so tricky. And then Rocky. Ugg, it makes my head hurt trying to figure out where I screwed up.”

“Did you try to explain any of this to Dax?”

“I didn’t have the chance. And what would be the point anyhow? I’m just an idiot. I just can’t do relationships. With anyone.”

“Bloom, come on, that’s not true. You have more friends in Fae Crossing than anyone, I bet.” He began to wipe the glasses down one at a time as he removed them from the washer.

She gave him a shocked look. “Are you kidding? I pour drinks for a lot of people. I say ‘Hi, the usual?’ to a ton of people. Matter of fact, I could probably tell you the favorite drink of every fae and half the shifters, and even a fair number of humans in Fae Crossing. But as far as friends? Real friends?” She put her hand out in front of her over the table and began to count with her fingers as she spoke, “There’s you, and Wendy. Then Tam.” She thought for a minute. “And that’s it. I have three friends, and you guys probably don’t even like me.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“I am not. You don’t get it. Nobody gets it. Everyone thinks I must have so many friends and “isn’t her life so great.” Sure, people are compassionate with what happened to my dad, but they don’t know the half of it. Don’t you see? I don’t fit in. I’ve *never* fit in. Anywhere. And I never will.”

She took another sip of her drink, this one approaching a chug. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to feeling sorry for myself.”

“At least you seem to have a plan,” he quipped.

“A plan? How is that a plan? I’m a mess. Everything is a mess. A mess of my own making,” she said as she took another long sip.

“Feeling sorry for yourself is a plan. That’s fine. Just see it for what it is, kiddo. Everyone has a reason to do that if they dig deep enough, but that’s still no reason. By the way, If you are trying to drown your sorrows you really aren’t doing a very good job of it.

“I can’t even get drunk properly,” she said unhappily.

“Consider it a blessing in this case,” he said as he patted her on the

shoulder.

“Why do I suck at everything?”

“Look, kiddo. Don’t go judging your whole life based on one bad day.”

“One bad day? Did you hear anything I just said?”

“I know, kiddo. I am just saying, give it a minute. I don’t know exactly what went down between you and Dax, but I can tell you he means well. His heart is in the right place. And for what it’s worth, I’d say so was his father’s. All the shit with the council, I don’t know. Just give yourself a few days before you start drawing conclusions. Let your head clear.”

“I wish it were that simple. But no. Dax and I just aren’t meant to be. I was an idiot thinking it could ever work. Everything I say comes out wrong, and everything I do leads to shit.”

Mack was quiet for a minute.

“Look, I get it, okay, and I’m sorry. You know, I remember when your father met your mother.”

This got a little of her attention.

“Oh, yeah, well that must have been another shit show.”

“On the contrary. They got on quite well. And yeah, it didn’t work out.”

“Great, thanks for the uplifting story. Really turning my day around,” Bloom said.

“But then ten years later you showed up,” Mack continued. “I know things were kind of tough for you two initially. It was a transition. But I will tell you, you should have seen the change that came over him. He loved you with all his heart, Bloom. And he was so proud of you.”

“Why are you telling me this, Mack?”

“You never know what the future holds or what good might come out of a situation, okay? So, don’t write this one off either. Keep looking for the good, kiddo.”

“I know, Mack,” she said. “But I think I need to let my hurt be with me for a little longer. Still, I appreciate the thought. Actually, you know what, Mack? I think it’s time we get to work on that back terrace,” she said. “That would be positive.”

“The terrace?” Mack said, looking a little confused.

“Yes, why not? For whatever reason The Tree hasn’t manifested it for me, so I guess this one’s on me. I think it would be cool.”

She had learned that while The Tree could be incredibly thoughtful or protective in some ways, like when it kicked Marius out, or created a room



for Chris and Kim, on other topics her desires seemed to go unanswered. It seemed it had zero interest in creating her long envisioned terrace. Maybe since the back area was outside of The Tree it couldn't effectively create what it wanted? She had no idea. But it would sure help to focus on something else right about now.

"You're the boss, kiddo," Mack said as he finished emptying the washer and putting away the glassware.

"I'm going for a run," she said.

"You're what?" he said skeptically.

"Going for a run. I run. You know this."

"Drinking and running doesn't sound like the best mix," he offered.

"I just need to get out of here, okay?" she said.

She just wanted to do something, anything. Anything not to think about him.

And she really hadn't drank much. She had her issues, but being a hard drinker was thankfully never one of them.

"Okay, I'll hold down the fort."

"Thanks, Mack," she said.

Just then Wendy piped up, "Hey, I can come with you if you want? You know, if you want company or want to talk more?"

Something in her kindness triggered a fresh wave of tears for Bloom.

"No, that's okay. Thanks, Wen," she managed to get out without her voice breaking. "I'll be okay. I just need to get out and get some air."

She ran upstairs to change before Wendy had a chance to reply. It was still midafternoon. She would do her regular loop.

*Yes, this is good. You got this, Bloom.*

She went to push open the front door, and it wouldn't budge.

She tried again.

*Oh, come on.*

"Please let me out? I'm going to have a panic attack if I stay in here another minute. I'm okay, really. I swear. Just going for a run." She pushed again. This time the door swung open. "Thank you," she said with a sigh of relief. She knew Ash was just looking out for her.

She took a deep breath of fresh air. Finally she was outside. A run always cleared her head. She had only had, what? Two beers?

She broke into a jog. And immediately stopped. The beer in her belly was like a weight. She groaned inwardly.

None of her favorite escapes were doing the trick. The pain was still right there. She couldn't drink it away, and it seemed her body wasn't going to let her run it away either. And just then Tam appeared.

*Perfect.*

"Bloom! Hey, it's so good to see you! Oh my Gosh, Chris and Kim are just dolls! Are you going for a run?"

She was being so nice.

*Hold it together, Bloom.*

Between Tam and Wendy's kindness that was becoming very difficult. She felt the tears wanting to pour forth. But she gritted her teeth and forced a smile. She didn't want them to see her like this. In some ways she was still getting over her father's death. And now this.

"Yep, except I think today is going to be more of a walking day," she said.

"You're so good, I need to start doing something like that," she said. "I bet I'd sleep like a baby."

"Yeah, it's great," she said, before turning to head up Willow Way to start her usual route. "Gotta squeeze it in before it gets busy," she said in parting.

Tam waved. "You got this. Thanks for the inspiration! I don't know how you do it all!"

"Thanks. Bye," she managed to get out before her voice cracked and the tears started to flow again.

*That's twice.*

*Just tell them, Bloom.*

No, the shame was too much. She had already told Mack. She knew he would be okay with it. He was like her rock. Him and The Tree. But she just couldn't break down in front of the girls. She just wanted to be alone.

*I don't know how I managed to screw up so much so quickly.* And to think she believed it could work out for her. She'd actually thought Dax was the one.

Wendy had told her she should do some therapy. Or some weird fae healing stuff. That wasn't really her jam.

But maybe it should be.

*Screw that, I need a brainumectomy. Or would it be a lobotomy?*

*There must be some way to turn off my head.*

She would have laughed at that if she hadn't finally allowed herself to

start to cry.

She set off on her loop, at as quick a walk as she could muster, and she let the tears start to fall.

When she was around the first corner and out of sight of The Tree, she put her hands on her knees and bent over. She let the deep sobs come.

*It's just all too hard. It's too much.*

*I just suck. I suck at everything.*

The beer hadn't made it better.

*I can't even run it off. This is truly misery.*

And to think that for a second she actually believed she wouldn't spend the rest of her life alone.

*At least I still have The Tree.*

After crying out a good bit of it, she wiped her nose.

*Great, and now I'm all snotty.*

*Who wants a mate anyhow? And a dragon shifter at that.*

This line of thought was not helping.

She did her best to push Dax out of her mind completely as she walked on, looking out into the vast swamp off to the left as she let herself cry.

But it was an exercise in futility. She let the tears keep coming.

At least no one had to see her that way.

## CHAPTER 26



“*W*e have every angle covered, boss,” Rollo said again.

“And you’re sure the Mossy Ridge boys are up for it?”

“Dax, they are committed. Besides, our guys are with them. Like I have been telling you, it’s all handled,” he said, as the two walked along the shops on Willow Way.

“Would be extra special if we could nab these guys before the sky unleashes on us,” Dax replied as he looked up at the gathering storm clouds.

He knew they were all on it, but still he felt anxious. His Dragon paced to and fro.

He went over the plan in his head again. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to focus. Bloom kept popping into his mind.

“You can still go talk to her, boss,” Rollo said.

“Talk to her? What is there to talk about? There is no coming back from what happened. It was rough even before that shit with the headline. And then to find out she has been feeding information to Finch and the council? Are you kidding me? The fae drive me insane sometimes, I swear. I’d like to see how they would deal with things if we just up and left altogether.”

“Hey, the fae are strange birds for sure, but that doesn’t make them bad.”

“Some would disagree with you on that. Like my dad for one.”

“Thankfully, you aren’t your dad, are you? I’m just saying, try to see it from her perspective.”

“See it from *her* perspective? Why don’t you try to see it from *my* perspective? God, you’re the worst right hand man ever!”

“Hey, if you want a yes man, maybe you should go over to Pratt’s Pass and do some recruiting. But as long as I’m here, and I am your right hand

man, I am gonna tell it to you straight. You have a good thing with Bloom. Are you willing to throw it all away because of your pride?”

Now Dax really thought his head was going to explode.

“Pride!” he practically screamed. “Pride?” Now it was a question. “Oh I’m sorry, I don’t want my mate giving the enemy my secrets.”

Rollo just leveled him with a look. “You know what I mean.”

“Fine, not ‘enemy’ but you know what I mean. I can’t have my mate going around blabbering about things I have confided in her. Jeez, I can’t believe I actually have to explain this to you. It’s as obvious as the sky being blue.”

“You said it yourself, Dax...you see the fae as your enemy. You think your fae mate might notice that a little bit? Maybe, just maybe, that little detail is getting in your way?” Rollo continued.

“Why don’t you just leave me to my misery?” Dax wasn’t liking the direction this conversation was taking. “Let me focus on the job. It’s the only thing I seem to be borderline good at. Of course that seems to be in question now as well.”

“We’ll get these guys,” Rollo said, dismissing the change of subject.

“We better.”

“But let’s say we do, Dax, then what?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, then what?” Rollo repeated.

“Then the town will be safe, for now... so we will go back to hunting Frederick. That’s been on hold too long already.”

“That’s my burden, brother,” Rollo said. “I am just gonna say this one more time. Probably because if I try a third time I get the sense we might come to blows. But look, Bloom is half-fae, you are a shifter. Try to at least realize you might have something to do with this thing between you two, okay? Maybe take a hard look in the mirror. And while you’re at it maybe consider that the fae are entitled to their own perspective on things.” Rollo said, pausing.

“I don’t have a clue what you are talking about, man,” Dax said, although the truth was that deep down he had the unsettling feeling that maybe there was something to it.

“Don’t be the scorpion, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Don’t be the scorpion?”

“Or maybe ‘shifters aren’t scorpions’ is what I mean.”

“Dude, what the hell?”

“Dax, you can be ‘right’ and make her ‘wrong’, and be the big bad shifter who was wronged by the evil fae harpy. I think part of you would love to play out that story. But that would be being the scorpion. And you would both drown.”

“Dude, you suck at analogies, and this one is giving me a headache.”

“That’s because your brain can’t handle my levels of truth, brother.”

“Or because they make zero sense. Besides, if anyone is the scorpion in this scenario, it’s the fae. Predictable as fuck.”

“Fine, what do I care? Go ahead. But the price of being right is most likely going to mean being mate-less, at least as far as being with Bloom is concerned. You have a chance with her. I can see it. Everyone can. Don’t be so quick to let it go.” He paused a beat. “There, I’ve said my peace.”

“Yeah, like three times!”

He could feel his dragon rising.

He just felt so frustrated. What was so hard to understand?

*She betrayed me. There must be somebody around here who gets it.*

“And you are mister perfect? Did you ever consider it might be hard to be with a dragon?” Rollo said, shaking his head in disappointment, as he turned and walked away up the street toward the Tribunal. His intonation implied that Dax should have in fact considered it.

He really wanted to hit Rollo. He could feel his dragon coiling its tail. He could even feel his skin pebble up. He flushed red.

And just then, even as the muscles in his forearms tightened, it hit him. An image of the scorpion and the frog popped into his mind.

The scorpion always stings.

*Because that’s his nature.*

*And I want to hit.*

Just like a scorpion wants to sting.

*Dammit.*

God he hated logic sometimes. His dragon didn’t want to reason. Didn’t want to think. He just wanted to fight. To react. But he knew this was not the way. This was actually part of what had created the problem in the first place.

He fought to regain control of his beast.

He asserted his mind...and strangely he realized, his heart.

He had been so caught up in all of this Supernova stuff, and so caught up in his judgements and mistrust of the fae that he hadn’t even thought of how

he must be coming across to Bloom.

*But she betrayed you!*

But had she really? Did she even make the call?

*She told Finch!*

But what exactly did she tell him, and was her intent really to hurt you.

His mind began to clear even more.

*God, have I really been the scorpion?*

His mind went back to his conversation with Duke.

*Would I wear a dress for Bloom?*

*Jeezuz man, you are fucking losing it.*

*No, I am getting it back.*

It was like someone had turned on a light As clarity flooded his mind and soul.

“Rollo!” he yelled. “I have to go. Keep me posted,” he said, holding up his phone.

He ran now toward The Tree. Suddenly there was nothing more important than Bloom. How could he have been such a...” he stopped in his thinking, but only for a moment. No, it was true. *I have been a fool. Time to un-fool myself. Or is it de-fool?* he wondered.

As he was about to cross the Four Corners, he heard Jack yell, “Dax, we got him! Or rather, Dayton and Max got him!”

*No shit.*

“Where?” Dax called, as his eyes went back to The Tree.

*Bloom could wait a little while longer.* He paused again. His dragon clawed at the ground, torn as well.

“They caught him hightailing it out of town on the Meadows bridge. And get this. His trunk is full of tabs of that shit. Home run, boss.” Jack said, by now only a few feet away.

“Seems the headline trick worked like a charm after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seems that headline did rattle them, but into running, not hiding. They didn’t go underground like you were afraid they would. He ran right into our trap. He was in such a hurry he didn’t even make much of an effort to hide the drugs or anything, I guess.”

“Maybe he was gonna try and outrun the headlines and sell them somewhere else?” Dax said. “Either way, I guess we got lucky, then, stopping him?”

“Yes and no. Nilsa was there, so she must have sensed something because she told us to stop and search the car.”

“Well, I’ll be...”

“Yeah, boss. Don’t you love it when a plan comes together?” Jack said. “So, after all the drama, seems it was a combination of Bloom’s approach and yours that saved the day.”

“We still don’t know who the buyer is, though,” Dax said. “But we got the drugs off the street, or so it seems, so that’s what matters.”

“A win is a win, chief. One thing at a time. But looks like Bloom’s impulse on this turned out to be a good one.”

“I can’t argue with that. Do they have him in a cell yet?”

“On the way. This just went down.”

Dax nodded an acknowledgment.

“I am heading over there now,” Jack said as he headed up the street toward the imposing building.

Dax followed Jack and as soon as they got to the Tribunal, he could feel Rollo’s eyes boring into him. “So, is this where I get an I-told-you-so?”

“I would never deign to say that to my alpha,” Rollo said diplomatically.

Dax growled. He had always felt he got more out of his pack by allowing them some leeway. But they knew any serious challenge would be met with his dragon. Claws and blood would fly.

“But truth is truth, Rollo. Without her, it is all for nothing. I need her at my side. You were right. I have been the scorpion, and I didn’t even see it.”

“Well, you better go get your frog, boss. Unless you want to let another two years go by between you. But first, we should get over to the holding cells and meet Dayton and Max there. If we play our cards right, maybe we can get this guy to give up the buyer.”

“Not going to hold my breath on that, but you’re right. You go, though. I need to make things right with my frog.”

“We need a better analogy.”

“We can work on that later,” Dax said dismissing the distraction. “Regardless, she is what truly matters. I must go to her.”



## CHAPTER 27



*G*reat, now it's starting to rain. Perfect.

The storm clouds had come in out of nowhere. The first raindrops fell against the exposed skin of her hands. Seemed that nature wanted to pile on to her woes.

*Fine. What do I care?*

But that just brought a fresh torrent of tears. Because she did care. She cared a lot. She hadn't even realized.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. She wasn't supposed to be sad and alone and tipsy walking out in the rain. But it seemed try as she might, it always came back to this in the end. And even worse, she knew she had something to do with it. She had built up so much armor to keep out the pain, that she was keeping out the love too.

Wendy and then Tam had both wanted to talk, but she was too proud. Or was it just too sick of the hurt?

*PotAto -potAHto.*

It didn't really matter, because it added up to the same thing in the end. And it had been like that with Dax too. Rather than trusting him, she had wanted to belong. To look pretty in the Council's picture. And now it was too late. The damage had been done.

What had Mack said when they were talking about the town?

*Dax wants to protect Fae Crossing.*

Was it really that simple? That she had been so fixated on the Fae and in doing things her way, that she had lost sight of what Dax had to handle? It wasn't just the fae he had to deal with, or the shifters, or the myriad of other beings that passed through on a regular basis. He had to hold it all together.

*God, that must be exhausting.*

But it was true. Her world was just part of it. He had to look out for everything and for everyone.

She thought of her father again.

Their romance had come about from the most unlikely of circumstances. Or maybe it was cliché? The detective and the damsel in distress?

Regardless, they had built a connection that had finally become romantic. And when he couldn't solve her father's case and magically make everything better, their cliché romance had hit the wall.

*Because of me.*

She had been so busy feeling like the victim of cruel fate that she hadn't realized how much she was putting it on Dax to just make it all better. When the case went colder and colder it was just too much for her to handle. It had to be someone's fault. And that someone was Dax.

And then, to pile on top of that, she had challenged his work at every turn, hadn't she?

*Wonderful.*

She walked on miserably, the rain beginning to pick up its tempo as if to magnify her grief.

Too bad she had realized all this two days too late.

*Or maybe two years too late.*

She let out an audible sigh.

So much for her chance with Dax.

She looked out into the deep impenetrable swamp on her left as she made her way down the loneliest stretch of her regular route, watching the rain make a thousand little circles where it hit the clear pools of the swamp. The place had always given her the creeps.

*Pull it together, Bloom.*

Or maybe she just needed to truly fall apart? What she had been doing, her whole life, it just wasn't working. This brought on a fresh bout of sobbing and tears.

*I sure am nailing the falling apart at least.*

She was trying to figure out where to go from here, what to do with these new awarenesses, when she saw a huge shadow crossed the road. The sight of it shocked her enough to stem the flow of tears as she jerked her head up instinctively toward the sky. At first she saw nothing. But a moment later she saw him.

For a second she wasn't sure she was seeing correctly. Could it really be him?

*But how? Why?*

She felt a tenuous hope building in her chest.

Maybe he was just passing over. But she knew that wasn't true, he didn't just fly around as his dragon on the regular.

*The witches would have his hide for all the forgetting spells they would be forced to cast.*

But as he swept lower over her the doubt receded and the hope began to turn into a warm excitement in her chest. That, combined with the awesome sight of him cleared her mind of any and all of her previous thoughts.

Her body reacted. She felt it relax, or open, but only enough to let her know just how constricted she had been.

*What does he want?*

Was he here to scold her? To tell her how she had destroyed what little hope they still had of saving Fae Crossing from a slow steady decline into becoming a drug haven like Pratt's Pass?

Or maybe he was going to just tell her to steer clear. That he couldn't stand the sight of her.

*You stick to your side of the tracks, and I'll stick to mine.*

Or something like that. She had never felt so torn in her life. Fear gripped her. But beneath it there was something else.

Hope? Was it still possible?

She was almost afraid to entertain the possibility. But she couldn't help it either.

He was coming down fast now. Swooping down. He had started as a dot, high above, and now was coming in with his wings almost folded. Just as she was afraid he was coming to pluck her up, or dash her to pieces, he unfolded his mighty wings, catching the air in great flaps that sent the rain against her like a spray.

He hovered above her before dropping down to his feet on the asphalt. This time he did not land out of sight, or flee behind a building to make his change. No, it was right before her eyes that he transformed. His wings pulling in, his scales disappearing, even as his great snout and talons all receded. Impossibly his mighty dragon retreated, shifted, until it was him, Dax, in the flesh. In the glorious flesh, standing before her. Only, his eyes shone bright now, a last vestige letting her know he and the dragon were one

and the same. The transformation had been magical. Incredible to see. Far more intimate than she could have imagined. He had wanted her to see. She could feel it.

She stood stunned for a moment, taking in his rippling musculature. His perfect abs. All of him. The rain made his skin slick, and it glistened as the rain pelted against him.

After a moment she found her tongue.

“Dax?” It was almost a question, as if she still couldn’t believe he was here in the flesh. “What are you doing here? I thought you never wanted to see me again.” She began to find her words and spoke more quickly. “I wanted to explain. The paper, the headline. Finch. All of it. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m the one who is sorry, Bloom. I’ve been such a fool!” he said as he walked closer.

“You have? Wait, what?” She was gobsmacked. “But everything that happened. It was all my fault. Please believe I never meant for that headline to come out! I should have just trusted you. You were right. You have to look out for all of Fae Crossing. I’m sorry, I was so selfish,” she said. The words were just pouring out.

“No, no, Bloom,” he said, as he stood right in front of her now, gripping her shoulders gently. “It is I who needs to apologize. I let the situation... everything... blind me. Blind me to you, and to us. I’m so sorry.”

She heard what he was saying, but couldn’t even really process it. She still had so much she wanted to tell him.

“But you aren’t angry? I screwed up so bad. I messed up everything with Finch. But I didn’t know! I didn’t know.”

Now she felt the tears come.

“I just wanted to belong, Dax. For once, the council, the real Fae council, came to me and wanted my help. I’ve never belonged anywhere. It’s always been one foot in this world and one in the old one,” she said, as tears streaked down her face.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay, I’m here. I’m here.” He pulled her into his chest as the rain continued to fall around them.

“I thought I was helping you. I was standing up for you. I didn’t know Finch would ruin everything.”

“No, I should have listened to you. I was an ass. And Finch didn’t ruin everything. You didn’t. That’s what I am trying to say. I have been so focused on the divide between fae and shifter that I let it blind me. I let it

blind me to so much. Especially to what we have. I will never let that happen again.”

Before she could respond, he pressed on. It seemed that he too could hardly contain all that he wanted to share with her.

“The headline worked. That might not have been the plan, but so what? It was still the right call. I should have listened to you in the first place.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean, the headline worked?”

“We got the dealer at least. And you were right, that’s what matters. The drugs are off the street. Finch was just trying to protect his own, just as I would have done.” And with the council pressuring him, Rocky had no choice but to run it.”

“So, I didn’t ruin everything?” She still could hardly believe it.

“No, not at all. Didn’t you hear what I said? It was me who almost ruined everything.” He paused and randomly kissed her full on the mouth. “Sorry, I’ve been wanting to do that since I got here, but I had a few things to say first.”

“It’s okay,” she said as she now took her turn and put her hands on his chest and then kissed him full on the mouth.

They stared at each other as they both caught their breath. “I was the scorpion, Bloom.” Dax said in a tone that implied he was sharing the deepest of truths “And I didn’t even see it.”

“You were the what?” she said, utterly confused now.

“I was the scorpion. I refused to look at things in any other way than how I have always seen them. I have been so angry with what I saw as fae attitudes about shifters that I couldn’t even see that maybe there was some truth in it.”

“Are you really Dax? Or are you a pod person?” she asked with mock suspicion.

“Oh, and that makes you the frog, by the way.”

“The what?” she said, playfully patting him on the chest.

“The frog, see, you gave me a ride across...” he began before trailing off. “Yeah, the analogy breaks down pretty fast.”

“But what about the buyer?” she said, still trying to understand exactly what had happened.

“We don’t know, not yet, but it doesn’t matter, Bloom. We got the drugs off the street. You were right, that is the important thing.”

*Is he really saying these things?*

She almost felt like she was having an out-of-body experience.

*But it is real.*

It was like somehow they had both ‘leveled up’.

*Maybe we have.*

“How did you find me anyhow?” she said. There was just so much to cover.

“I went to The Tree to look for you. Mack said you had gone for a run, and I know this is your route, so...”

She couldn’t help herself anymore and jumped into his arms. Then she pulled back and looked him in the eyes.

“I think at some point we are going to have to stop apologizing to each other,” he laughed.

“Maybe,” she said. “But just let me get it all out, okay? I should have trusted you. You are a good man. A good dragon. I just haven’t appreciated how much it must take to protect Fae Crossing. I know that is your mission. I should have supported you in that, not doubted and fought you. I’m sorry.” She kissed him again on the lips as he laced his hands in the small of her back as they gazed into each other’s eyes.

“I think I am almost done apologizing, okay?”

“I still have some groveling to do, Bloom. I should have never made you feel like it was either you or Fae Crossing. You *are* Fae Crossing to me. It would all be meaningless without you.”

She gave him a side eyed glance. “You sure you’re not just saying that because you caught the bad guy?”

“Catching the bad guy didn’t hurt,” he winked, “but no, it’s true.”

She felt her heart bursting open as he held her. She was melting in his arms.

“And there’s one more thing I should say. Not that I should say, but that I need to say. I realize now that I have always known, I’ve just been too, um, stubborn to admit.”

“And what might that be,” she said, looking up at him, and enjoying the feel of his skin against her. They were together again. And it felt so right. She realized she actually felt shy for some reason.

“You remember back when we, uh, right after I saved you from those dirtbags,” he began.

“How could I forget?”

“Afterward, and after we had,” he said, apparently searching for the right

words. He swallowed. "After we had made love, you said 'I love you,'" he continued.

"I remember," she said. She wasn't about to rush him now. She relished the feel of his strong arms as they wrapped around her, and of his hands as they held her lower back.

"I never said it back. And my dragon has been going nuts about it. But that's all another story. My dragon can be," he said pausing, "Challenging."

"Um hm," she said simply. "You know I am half fae...and half human. So I know a little about that tug of war. But you were saying?"

He kissed her again. "I love you, Bloom. I love you, I love you, I love you. And I'm sorry it took me this long to just put it into words. We shifters are a little..."

"Complicated?" she said, completing his sentence.

"Yes, complicated."

"Well, lucky for you, and for me I guess, I like complicated,"

He looked at her with a little uncertainty.

"And I love you, Dax."

"Oh, thank God," he said, breathing out almost like a sigh of relief.

She couldn't help utter a little laugh. "Oh, come on. Like there was ever a doubt," she breathed.

He just pulled her in and squeezed her tight. "Promise me one thing, okay?"

"Anything, babe," she breathed.

"Promise me we will never let ourselves get that far apart again."

She squeezed him back. "You've got a deal, lover, I promise."

For a moment they just held each other before Dax spoke once more.

"And, Bloom. I told you before, about your father, we do have a lead," he began. But before he could say more, she put a finger up to his lips.

"Dax, I know you will handle it. I believe in you. Let's let that rest for the moment, okay? I am sort of feeling like there are more important things I would like to focus on."

For a moment he seemed to be unsure what she was talking about until she gave him her best bedroom-eyed look.

"I see," he said.

"You see?" she repeated?

"I do," he said, but he was already lifting her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around him instantly in response as she gazed down into his eyes.

“But I really think we ought to get out of the middle of the road first.”

She laughed as she looked around, realizing that they were in fact dead center. Thankfully Cypress Road was out of the way with relatively infrequent traffic.

“Wait, I’m doing it again, I think,” she said.

“Doing what? What are you talking about?”

“Getting between you and the town. You probably have to deal with the dealer you caught, right? Business first.”

She was trying hard to be different. But eyeing him, still buck naked, and in the rain definitely wasn’t helping at the moment.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. So, should we walk or fly?” he asked.

“Is that a trick question? Because unless you brought some clothes hidden somewhere, that means you’re going to be buck naked. And I have a reputation to protect. I’m a fine upstanding part of the fae community, you know?”

This elicited a full laugh from Dax. “I wouldn’t want to sully your good name,” he said.

“So, does that mean we are flying?” she asked. “Because to tell you the truth I am having second thoughts about the whole ‘business first’ thing. I think I would rather you just fly me to your lair and take me now.”

“Well, you’re going to have to stop talking like that, then!”

“What do you mean?” she suddenly felt appalled.

*Oh my gosh, I thought he’d like my sexy talk.*

“Am I being too forward?”

He laughed again. “Hardly. No, it’s just that, uh, when you talk like that it makes it hard. I should say, difficult to shift. If you catch my drift.”

“Oooohhhh!” she said. If she had been eating or drinking at the moment, she would have spit it out. “I never thought about that!”

She looked down now, though, and quickly understood the problem. Somewhere between talk of ‘business’ and the talk of him taking her in his lair he had become rather aroused.

“No reason you would. Let’s just talk about taxes or something for a minute, and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Ok, big boy,” she said, as she ran a hand down his shoulder to his nipple. “Did I tell you how bad I’ve been?” She pouted her lips. “I don’t report even half of my cash business,” she breathed. “I’ve been very, very naughty. Are you going to turn me in, Mr. Policeman?”



“Oh, my god. Stop.” But just as quickly, he changed his tune. “Actually, too late,” he said as he pulled her to him, burying his face in her neck, before he pulled her top up to expose her breasts.

“I hope this isn’t too soon,” he said. “But I think we have done enough apologizing,” he said as he took one of her big nipples into his mouth as he caressed the other breast.

“I agree,” she said as she cradled his head in her arms, relishing the feel of his lips on her exposed flesh. “I was thinking some make up sex is definitely in order.”

“I’m glad we are on the same page now. And on so many topics,” he said as he gently nibbled and licked at her hard nipple and his caresses became a little more insistent.

She breathed out a sigh as a wave of juices flooded her pussy.

“Oh my,” she cooed as she pulled his head against her chest and leaned back in ecstasy.

“Dax?” she said, pulling herself away from his attentions and looking around. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we are still in the middle of the road.”

“Hey, you started it, babe,” he said. “And so what, I’m the alpha of the shifter authority. Didn’t you say you finally realized how much I have to deal with? This is my way of relaxing. Besides, if anyone sees us, can’t you just do a memory whammy on them?”

In between sighs of pleasure, she said, “Very funny, but that’s not how it works, Dax.”

With badly acted feigned surprise, he stopped his ministrations and looked up at her, “It’s not?”

“No.” She laughed. “It’s not. And I had no idea you couldn’t shift with a boner either.”

“You make it sound so vulgar,” he said, winking at her.

She laughed. “I’m just saying, I think we have a lot to learn from each other,” she said, as she shifted her chest to push her other nipple into his mouth. “Umm.”

“We do. And you’re right, let’s get out of the road and continue our learning.

“Lead the way, chief.”

He didn’t need any more encouragement as he lifted her up whole and carried her off the road. Off to the left was a swamp, but there was forest to the right. He carried her a short distance through a small break in the trees.

Not far back, the forest opened up into a clearing. The tiny meadow graced the ground, and without a second to spare, he laid her down. She could see he really couldn't wait. His cock had only become more engorged since it had become the topic of conversation earlier.

"I do love you, Bloom," he said gently, as he laid her down.

"I know you do, Dax. And I love you," she said.

She thought she saw that flash in his eyes again. Even as she did, she kissed him on the mouth as his strong hands moved to pull off her top. At the same time she finally surrendered to her own growing desire and took his sex in her hand, seizing him by its base, enjoying its hardness.

She felt a quiver in her core as she anticipated him thrusting deep inside her once again.

She had never felt so close to him, so connected. Her body yearned to match that connection in the physical. To be one with his.

She could feel they had both finally let go. She couldn't put a name to exactly what it was they had surrendered. The past? Their mistrust? Their walls? That was the closest to the truth. Some invisible barrier was gone. It was both terrifying and exhilarating. To be so bare, so naked before him.

*And I haven't even taken off my shorts yet.*

She took the head of his cock in her mouth for a moment, loving the feel of her lips wrapping around his sex, tasting him, feeling his hardness. Hearing the catch in his breath at her every touch. Knowing the pleasure she was giving him.

She drew him in further as she let her hand stroke his shaft, moaning in pleasure herself even as he grunted in time with her sucking. Even as she caressed him, his hand sought out hers. Every nuance of her ministrations was met with a corresponding squeeze.

This time he didn't fight her, and instead slowly went to sit. She refused to surrender her prize as she continued to stroke him until he lay flat. She only released him in order to get to her feet and strip off what remained of her own clothes.

"That feels amazing," he moaned. "You are amazing."

"Just wait," she quipped, "There's more."

"I can't even imagine."

"Well, lucky for you, you won't have to," she said as she got back to her knees and stroked him once again.

Deftly, she took him in her mouth once more, this time taking him even

deeper, feeling the head of his cock slipping across her tongue as he writhed beneath her. She was rewarded both by the feel of his hardness and by the deep moans of savage appreciation that left his lips.

Releasing his shaft, she quickly positioned herself to sit on top of him, leaning over to give him a quick kiss, before reaching down to guide him inside her.

“Hey babe,” he said, as he put a hand to her chin to bring her eyes up to his.

“Hey sugar,” she quipped back.

“Gimme another kiss,” he breathed.

She did. “You know, I am not sure if I’m setting a healthy precedent here,” she added after their lips parted.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, trying to prop himself onto an elbow to better look into her eyes.

“Every time you come save me, I reward you with sex,” she replied.

Dax let out a laugh. “I don’t see any problem with that,” he said.

“I didn’t think you would,” she said, leaning over to kiss him again. She took the opportunity to let her weight settle on his hardness, feeling it pressing against her lips. She reveled in the feel of him against her bare, slick flesh as she began to gently grind her hips along his length, surrendering to her desire even further.

Finally unwilling to put off her longing for another second, she positioned him at her entrance and slowly guided him in, allowing herself to adjust to him as she spread herself around his thickness.

She moaned in pleasure as he slid in. Waves of pleasure emanated from her core as her pussy opened for him. He grabbed her hips and thrust ever so slightly, but still allowed her to guide their tempo.

She could tell his own animal instincts were forcing his cock in deeper even as she began to rock her clit against him, feeling him reaching deeper and deeper inside driving him as well.

She grabbed his wrists and folded on top of him, splaying her hips as she began to pivot her hips faster, feeling him penetrating her subtly deeper with every new push.

“You do spoil me,” he whispered in her ear as he caressed her back, her thighs, and her ass as she sped up her pace.

“Shhh,” she breathed as her breath began to come in gasps.

She increased her tempo as Dax began to reciprocate her movements,

driving into her even as she drove down.

“Oh my god, Dax. Yes,”

“Yeah, baby,” he said as he lay back.

She was beyond words now as she rocked to and fro, surrendering completely to her body’s desires. Every movement now was sending pulses of heat throughout her.

She felt the pressure build as her climax was nearing. Waves of passion moved through her body as intense pleasure built in her core.

“Dax, I’m...” Just as she said it, he let out a gasp as she felt his hot seed shoot into her core. It sent her over the edge.

“Oh my god,” she moaned as his thrusts reached a climax. She drove herself down even harder and grasped him tight, willing their bodies to meld. Pleasure erupted as stars shot across her eyes.

She came harder than she ever had, even as he did, until they both rode their pleasure to its conclusion, until she lay, collapsed on top of him in a sweaty heap.

After a blissful moment of silence, she noted the rain had ceased.

Finally, he spoke, “Wow.”

“Yeah,” was all she could reply. She just wanted to lay there with him and take in this moment.

“Is it okay if we just lay here a minute Dax?”

“Of course, babe. As long as you want.”

“Just for a little while,” she said.

For a little while longer they lay like that, her just enjoying the warm feel of him against her, until finally she spoke again. “Do you think we will need to do this every time you need to shift?” she asked.

“You know, I think we just might.” He laughed.

## CHAPTER 28



A few days had passed, and for the first time in a long time Dax could breathe.

Some semblance of normalcy had finally returned to Fae Crossing.

“Looks like we saved Fae Crossing from certain destruction once again,” Jack said, smiling as he tossed a wadded up piece of paper across the bullpen to make a basket in the trash.

“Don’t go getting a hero complex or anything,” Dax said.

Bloom had stopped by for a visit and punched him in the arm. “And I thought you were reformed!”

“I am, I am!” he said.

Dayton chimed in, “And all thanks to you, Bloom.”

Dax laughed, “I’m not sure how I should take that.”

“It’s a compliment, boss. You landed a hell of a mate. She is good for you, that’s what I’m trying to say.”

“And you’re good for me too,” she said as she sidled up to him as he sat in his chair, putting an arm around his shoulder.

“It’s about time at least one of us got a mate,” Dayton chimed in.

“I am happy to be the one to crack the rank and file of the five most eligible bachelors in Fae Crossing.”

“Really? Five most eligible, huh? Four now, I guess.”

“If you’re into shifters, yeah,” Bloom winked. “Took a little work, but I got over myself.”

Dax and the rest laughed at that. “I had a little getting over myself to do as well.”

“That’s for sure,” Bloom cracked, eliciting more laughs.

“All’s well that ends well, babe,” Dax offered.

“Bro, you’re turning into a poet, jeez.”

“No, man, just expanding my horizons.”

Bloom gave him a quizzical look.

“You’ll see,” he said with a wink.

She didn’t ask any further questions.

Good. He wanted it to be a surprise anyhow.

“Okay, boys. Hope you don’t mind, but I am stealing my man away.”

The pack all put their hands up, presumably to make it clear that far be it for them to stand in the way of Bloom’s wishes, especially where their alpha was concerned.

“You both have my blessing,” Dayton said, in a kingly voice.

Bloom laughed appreciatively as Dax got to his feet. “Where did I find you guys again?”

With that they were off. He had a few things planned for her.

\* \* \*

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

“Oh, nowhere special,” he teased.

“Dax, don’t play with me. You know I hate surprises!”

“What are you talking about, I thought you loved them?”

“I love them and I hate them,” she responded, as if there was no inherent conflict in the statement.

“Of course,” Dax replied. “If you must know, we are going to The Tree.”

“The Tree? *My* Tree? Why?”

“You’ll see.”

As they were walking over, Nilsa approached them.

“You are all set for nine AM, Dax. Don’t be late!” she chided.

Bloom knit her brows. “What are you up to, Dax?”

“Nothing, dear!”

As they walked over, they passed Curiouser and Curiouser, and Dax was surprised to see Tam still inside. As soon as he saw her, her eyes got big, and thanks to his dragon hearing, he distinctly heard her say, “Oh shit, we’re going to be late,” even through the closed door. Just as quickly, she was calling to Chris and Kim, who quickly piled out of the shop and fell in

walking beside them.

“What are you doing?” Bloom said, her face showing her growing consternation.

“You’re going to The Tree, right? We just thought we’d grab a bite too. Is that okay?”

“Dax.” Her eyes bored into him.

He just laughed. “Settle down, you’ll like it.”

After a short walk, they were right there. But rather than approach from the front, he led them all around to the back side of The Tree, which had previously been surrounded by a small patch of wild growth. But a small arched path had appeared. And a small stone wall now was barely visible.

Nilsa and the other fae had outdone themselves.

“What the...” she started.

Her eyes had taken on a look of wonder as they all filed through the stone arch and down a short path that was canopied by vines and overarching tree limbs. In a moment, they came out into a clearing, hidden within the bramble. Mack and Wendy stood there to greet them, along with the witches and Nilsa who had beaten them there.

“What is this?” Bloom gushed, bringing her attention back to whatever all this was. She was already happy to see the barest beginnings of her vision realized.

“A little bird may have told me, or maybe a big one,” he said as he winked at Mack, “how much you have been dreaming of creating a little beer garden back here.”

He could already see her eyes welling up a bit.

He had not anticipated *feelings*.

“So, Nilsa and the witches sort of felt into Ash’s feelings on the matter. Now, with your blessing and our help, we were thinking we could create your beer garden once and for all. If you want to, that is.”

Her response was immediate and without reserve. “Of course I want to, are you kidding?”

“It seems The Tree was afraid you were becoming too dependent on it. Ash wanted to be sure you found love. And now that you have, she’s all too happy to help shape the new garden.”

“She?”

“Yup.”

“I always thought so.” Bloom looked quiet for a moment as everyone

looked on. “Okay, so what’s at nine AM?”

“Oh, that,” he said as he looked at Nilsa. “That’s just my first Fae Studies class.”

“What?” she practically screamed, as she gave him a big hug. “You surprise me, Dax.”

“Well, you surprise me, babe. And I am full of surprises. Besides, just wait till you get to know the rest of the pack.”

“Should I be afraid?” she joked.

“Maybe a little.” He laughed. When he calmed down, he added, “I just realized that I have a lot to learn, and not just about the fae. But that’s certainly a good place to start.”

She hugged him again and gave him a big kiss.

“Hey Dax,” Rollo called, interrupting their moment.

“What is it?”

“My apologies, Bloom,” he said first. “Check your chat. Clint says we got a letter you’re gonna want to see.”

“A letter?”

“Yup.”

“Like now?” When Rollo just nodded, Dax added, “Well, let’s go.”

\* \* \*

A FEW MINUTES LATER HE WAS HOLDING A SIMPLE HANDWRITTEN LETTER IN his hands as he stood in the bullpen over at the Tribunal. It had been addressed simply to the “Fae Crossing Pack.”

He read it out loud for the rest of the assembled pack:

*I WAS TO BE THE BUYER. I THOUGHT THE DRUG MIGHT HOLD SOME BENEFIT FOR my kind. I was mistaken. I can assure you I am a friend, not foe. You need not waste any more resources on searching for me. Again, I apologize if my action could have put Fae Crossing in danger in any way. Fae Crossing is close to my heart. That is all I can say for now. Blessing to your pack.*

IT WAS SIGNED SIMPLY, “A FRIEND”



“READ THE REST, BOSS,” CLINT SAID.

DAX CONTINUED DOWN THE PAGE.

*AS A SIGN OF MY GOOD INTENT, I THINK I HAVE SOME INFORMATION YOU ARE looking for. Fairbanks college. Jimmy Anderson. As I said, I am a friend.*

THAT WAS IT.

Dax paused for a minute. “What do you think?”

“Jimmy Anderson just seems like a regular student. Not much to report from a quick search on the web. But Fairbanks is out west, near to where this drug first appeared,” Rollo offered.

“Okay, I’ve been neglecting my duties around here long enough. You and Dayton go out there and track this kid down. I’ll see about getting Nilsa to go too. I have a feeling we are going to need her powers of wham.”

“So, you are all good with the council now? That is after that mess with Finch interfering with Bloom and all that?”

“All good might be a stretch, but yeah. Finch and I have an understanding. As much as I wanted to pound him into the dirt,” Dax said, taking a minute to roll his shoulders and make a show of relaxing his body, “Truth is he was just doing what he felt he had to do to protect his people.”

Rollo looked at him a little sideways. “You sure you’re feeling okay, chief? Did I actually hear you right?”

Dax laughed. “I don’t want to be the scorpion anymore, man. Drowning is a high price, and I got a second chance. Wait, a third chance really with Bloom. So, I am making an effort here, okay?”

“Alright, just don’t go all soft on the fae on me.”

“We aren’t about to go singing kumbaya together anytime soon if that’s what you are worried about. But things are good now.”

He looked at Rollo. “We all need to make an effort, okay?”

“Yeah, chief, whatever you say.”

“Cool, now, what do you make of this ‘friend’ who wrote us the letter?”

“Not too much to make of them at this point. I’m not exactly sold on it yet, but let’s see where this lead goes. Keep an open mind, right?”

“My thoughts too,” Dax said.

They spent another twenty minutes going over the details of the mission before a text came through from Bloom.

*AREN’T YOU COMING BACK? I NEED YOUR HELP PLANNING OUT THE NEW FAIRY beer garden!*

A LONG STRING OF CUTESY EMOJIS ACCOMPANIED THE NOTE.

“Okay, guys, you got this? I gotta go.”

“Roger that, boss.”

With that, Dax headed back to help his mate.

## CHAPTER 29



Things had been going amazingly with The Tree, and really with her and Dax too. It was all amazing. Bloom felt like she was walking on air as they strode hand in hand by the shops that lined Willow Way.

“Hey guys!” Tam called as they came up on her, Etta, and Bloom’s former houseguests.

“Hi Bloom,” echoed Kim and Chris.

Etta just stood to let the ladies exchange pleasantries.

After a minute, Kim pulled a dress out of one of her bags. “Look at this sundress! Isn’t it amazing? Oh, and this scarf,” she said as she displayed a few of her purchases.

It did Bloom’s heart good to see the ladies really finally settling in.

“They have exceeded our expectations,” Etta was saying, “And so I thought it might be nice to treat them to a little shopping spree.”

“Plus, they are turning out to be very promising apprentices,” she added.

“I am just so happy things are going well for you,” Bloom gushed.

“It is all because of you, Bloom,” Chris said, getting a little teary eyed as she gave her a half hug, bags still in tow. “If you hadn’t intervened with those thugs, I don’t want to think about what would have happened.”

“Then don’t think about it, because we kicked some ass, all of us,” Bloom said matter-of-factly.

“You can say that again,” Dax said.

“Indeed,” added Etta. And then after a moment, “We still have lessons later on, so it’s back to shopping for a bit. Come on, ladies.”

“Bye, Tam!” Bloom called, “Let’s chat later!”

“Absolutely!”

The two hadn't even had a chance to say much with all the talk being on the spree. But it didn't matter, they could just catch up later.

"Bye," the little group called as they headed off.

As the women got a little further away, Dax spoke, "You just watch, in like two months Kim is gonna be wearing a scarf all the time, just like Etta. And then in a year she'll have like three all the time."

Bloom laughed. "Worse things could happen."

"Fair enough," he joked as they continued along.

But before they found a new rhythm to their conversation they were again interrupted.

"Hey, what's up, love birds?"

It was Jack from the Pack, walking along with Rollo.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Dax joked.

"I'd like to see one try!" Jack retorted, doing a little shadow boxing to indicate it would be no easy task.

"Oh boys," Bloom quipped. "Always with the fighting and the testosterone."

The guys laughed. "Come on, Fae Crossing would be so boring without us," Dax said.

"Facts," Bloom replied, as she pointed at him.

"So, what are my best mates up to on this fine Saturday?" Dax said.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Rollo said. "Since my nannies keep quitting on me, I managed to talk June into watching the boys, and me and my man Jack are just taking the day off."

"That doesn't sound like you," Dax said suspiciously.

"We're gonna go four wheeling over in the quarry in a bit," Jack added.

"Ah, now you're talking. I was getting worried," Dax replied.

Jack laughed. "Why don't you guys come? Wouldn't take you long to go get your quads, Dax."

"Thanks for the invite, Jack, but we are having a romantic afternoon stroll, if you didn't notice," Bloom said.

"Ohh, sorry, I had no idea," Jack said, instantly apologetic.

"No problem, buddy," Dax added. "You guys enjoy yourselves, because now that we have that Supernova shit handled, I wanted to start right in on Monday first thing. Frederick is next."

"Yeah, he is," Rollo said. "We are gonna get him for James and his wife. And then the boys can sleep better." Then seeming to remember, "And

maybe for your dad.”

Dax squeezed her shoulder.

“I have made peace around my father. Dax, you have helped me to do that,” Bloom said.

“I have?” Dax said, apparently surprised.

“What I mean is that my revenge won’t bring him back, and it would only serve to eat away at what I have found here, now in Fae Crossing.” She paused as she looked around at the three shifters, who all seemed transfixed by her declaration. “I finally really feel like I have a home.”

“Aw, babe,” Dax said, hugging her tight.

“You’re damn right you have a home, Bloom,” said Rollo.

“You’re one of us now,” Jack added.

“Thanks, guys. So yeah, I am at peace. At the same time, if it turns out this guy Frederick is responsible for what happened to my father? Let’s just say I am not gonna stand in the way of whatever justice the Fae Crossing Pack sees fit to mete out – and deliver.”

The packmates stood silent for a moment, before Jack broke the tension. “Hell of a woman you got yourself there, Dax. Hell of a mate.”

Dax and Bloom both laughed, and the mood lightened once again.

“Hey you guys, be safe out there. Some of the cars and machinery might be moved around a bit. Maybe blocking the paths. Sorry about that,” Dax said smiling. “You know, I was a little upset the other day...”

“No need to explain. Believe me, I get it,” Rollo laughed. “Okay, guys, catch you later,” he added as the two headed off.

After the two had left, Bloom took a stance as if to prepare herself for their next friendly encounter.

“I know, right? What do we have to do to get some privacy on this street?”

Bloom laughed before Dax continued, “What was I going to say before we were so rudely interrupted by all our friends? Oh right,” he said, apparently remembering. “You know you are going to have to settle on a plan for the beer garden eventually, right?” Dax said.

“Says who? The Tree is used to me changing my mind,” she said.

“I swear in the last few days you have shown me like ten layouts.”

“And I will show you ten more in the next three days, probably,” she laughed, poking him in the ribs. “I still can’t believe you got Nilsa and the other fae to sort things out with The Tree! I have to say, at first I was a little, I

don't know, jealous? That's my tree spirit!" she laughed. "But then it all made sense. The Tree, she was looking out for me. She knew if she created the back beer garden for me, I never would have found love. I was in real danger of never leaving The Tree again, for that matter."

"I did have to dig pretty deep to get their help." He smiled at her. "But nothing's too good for my mate," he said, hamming up his chivalry.

She held onto his arm as they walked along taking in Fae Crossing as they did.

*I must be the luckiest girl in the world*, she thought, as they strolled up the sidewalk. If she wasn't waving to someone, then he was. As they walked by the Grizzly Den, she asked him, "So, do they have Shifter Studies classes as well?"

"I don't know, you'll have to ask Nilsa, but I bet they do."

"If they don't, I suppose I will just have to drop by the Den from time to time to soak in the shifter vibes."

"If you think you can handle slumming with us," he joked.

"Slumming nothing. I can't wait."

They walked on for a few more minutes in silence just enjoying each other's company before she asked, "So, about that college kid. Was it just some clueless kid who stumbled on the drug?"

"Makes me feel kind of dumb when you put it like that, but yeah basically."

"Did you get the full story yet?"

"More or less from what they told me so far, he was making some extra cash and fueling whatever anarchist philosophy got him off by making some more standard drugs. He somehow stumbled into a patch of magic mushrooms. But the real kind. They are still trying to sort out how that happened. Seems the local fae got lazy and hadn't been keeping up the wards to keep the dell hidden. Or Etta thinks the kid might have some fae way back in his lineage that allowed him to enter and harvest it."

"That's crazy!"

"That's what I said. But either way, Nilsa and Etta whammied him and half his friends, after he led them to the patch, of course. They warded the hell out of it, and will be having some conversations with the local fae for sure."

"So, all this was caused by some kid?"

"Yup, seems the drug was getting really popular at the school and a local

gang got wind and had the kid working overtime. To tell you the truth, the kid had really gotten himself in deep. Too deep. I think he was relieved to get caught. It wasn't going to end well."

"But what about the gang?"

"Oh, they are all whammied too, just like the ones we caught."

"Is that safe?"

"I don't know. I mean, I think so? According to Etta, pretty much every human out there has been charmed more times than they could count. I guess it's getting harder and harder to stay hidden among them. But they don't seem any worse for the wear," he said happily.

"I guess..." She wasn't so sure, but whatever.

They walked on happily. The only regret she had was that she had let things go sour between them two years ago.

They walked on, passing the shops on the main avenue. Kim and Chris passed and waved happily. According to Etta they were settling in very well. It had been decided that Kim definitely had the sight. Chris as well for that matter even if not as strong.

She loved this town.

They passed through the Four Corners, but went right rather than head to her beloved Tree. She had decided it would be a perfect day to explore the follies of the park.

This time without worrying about being ambushed by bad guys, thank you very much.

As they walked amongst the roman revivals, she gazed at her man, her dragon. Her mate.

*I wasn't ready for him then. And he wasn't ready for me.*

*But now it's perfect, just perfect.*

She had never felt more at peace. Never more whole. She had truly never been happier.

## EPILOGUE



“*I* just didn’t see any reason to put it off any longer,” Dax said to Jack as they awaited the women’s processional.

“I guess ‘when you know, you know’, right?”

“Exactly,” Dax said as the trumpet finally sounded and they could see the women coming around the corner of the Roman temple folly down by the lake in the park, where Bloom had insisted on having the ceremony. It had been barely a month since they had wrapped things up with Supernova.

As far as they were concerned it was actually two years too late already.

Tam, Wendy, Kim, and her mother were the first to come into view, all draped in the same simple white dresses of the rest of the bride’s wedding party. Finally, Bloom herself as well as Nilsa and the witches came into view.

Dax stood along with the rest of his pack, each dressed in identical simple shirts and pants.

“I hope this doesn’t take too long,” Dax whispered to Rollo, who flanked him on the other side.

“I hear you, this shirt is itchy as hell,” he responded.

“Let’s hope Etta makes quick work of it.”

“Yeah, man. I am looking forward to the after party,” Dayton quipped from Rollo’s side.

“SHHH,” Etta whispered. “Or I’ll put a hex on each and every one of you. You included, Dax!”

“Wow!” said Dax under his breath as he finally got a good look at his mate.

“I said, shhhh!” Etta said.

“Sorry,” Dax said, far too loudly. “I mean, sorry,” he repeated in a



whisper.

Etta just rolled her eyes.

She looked stunning. Her long fair hair was styled in long flowing curls that hung at her shoulders.

Clint let out a low whistle.

“Clint!” Etta called. “Seriously, it is frightening that you boys are in charge of keeping this town safe.”

That elicited a low chuckle.

But Dax hardly noticed it. He was lost in his own thoughts.

*How did I get so lucky?*

Finally Bloom and the many bridesmaids approached and Bloom and Dax stepped forward to take their place before Etta.

There were only a small group of onlookers, including Mack, Rocky, Duke, and even Finch. The truth was that the ceremony was more a matter of following tradition than anything else for them. And perhaps a bit of an excuse to have a party.

Dax was surprised that he actually felt a little nervous as the ceremony progressed, but nothing too bad.

It was only when they were halfway through their individual vows and Etta pulled out the cord that he began to feel a little shaky. As he looked into her eyes, she began to recite her final pledge. She was radiant.

“And I, Bloom, promise to stand by your side, Dax, to support you in all your battles, to hold you to be your best self, and to shower all parts of you, both the light and the dark, with my full love and attention. I am your mate true for all time,” Bloom was saying.

*You got this, buddy.*

And he knew he did.

“And I, Dax, promise you, Bloom, to protect you from all dangers, to hold you dearly in my heart in rain as well as sunshine, on the most beautiful of days, and in the thick of any battles that may come. I shall hold you as my mate true for all time.”

Finally Etta spoke as she addressed all in attendance, “I, as the high priestess of the wind and the earth, of the sun and the rain, wind this cord to bind you for all time. Let this unity now in the moment signify your union for all times. Let all of you witness their love and support it. Let it grow strong like the oak, light as a feather, and pure as the snow.

And then to the amazement of all, Etta whipped her hands in a quick

fashion and with a low whispered incantation, the cord leapt from her hands as it began to wind gently around Bloom and Dax's clasped hands.

Neither of them could suppress their surprise as they both let out nervous giggles as the cord bound them as mates.

The two watched the cord finish winding its way around their wrists, until Etta herself finally tied the knot.

"Go ahead, Dax...now you kiss her!"

The whole crowd burst out in a half laugh and half cheer, as Dax did indeed, take her chin in his free hand as they kissed.

Cheers of "Huzzah!" arose as they continued their kiss.

Finally their lips separated and Dax looked over at Etta expectantly. He wasn't particularly adept at ceremony.

"That's it," she said, "It's official!"

"So, to The Tree?"

"Yes, babe. To The Tree," Bloom said with a wink. He couldn't help but notice that she was beaming.

Ceremony might now have been his thing, but in that moment he realized he would have endured a week long ceremony just to see that look of happiness on her face.

He had to admit he kind of enjoyed it to.

And with that they led the procession back out of the park and back toward the Four Corners and The Tree. All the work they had put into the outside terrace had finally come to fruition. The Tree itself, apparently satisfied that Dax was a good mate for Bloom, had facilitated Bloom's every whim.

As they led the procession up Mountain View, cars honked their horns and cheers surrounded them from every window.

"So, how long are we gonna be tied together like this?" Dax finally asked, not that he totally minded being so close to his bride.

"Well, in fae tradition, it's usually three months, but I figured, since you're shifter, and have a job to do and everything, just a month will suffice."

"A month?" Dax said incredulously.

"Or I guess Etta could untie us as planned at The Tree," Bloom said with a giggle.

"Thank God. That was just ridiculous enough that I thought it might be true. We are talking about fae customs, you know?"

"Very funny," Bloom said, poking him in the ribs with her free hand.

They walked in silence for a minute, just breathing in the feelings of being surrounded with so much love and support.

Finally, as they approached The Tree, Dax just looked at her and said, “Thanks, babe.”

“Thanks? For what?”

“For just being so awesome. And for showing up in my life.”

Cheesy as it might have sounded, it was true.

“Aww, thank you, babe, thank you.”

And with that they headed in for the inaugural feast of The Tree’s brand new terrace.

And it was sure to be a rager.

\* \* \*

I hope you enjoyed the first tale in the Fae Crossing Shifters! While you eagerly wait for Rollo’s story in book two perhaps you might want to dive into another world, the world of Misty Vale...

[Click here to read Dragon Daddy’s Nanny, the first story in the Misty Vale Shifters series!](#)

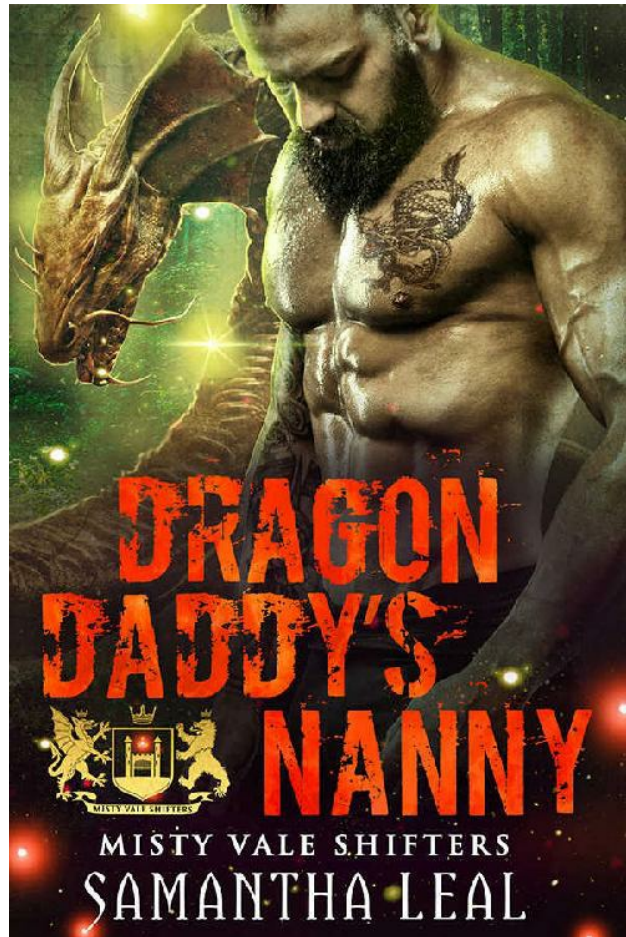
DOWNTRODDEN AMELIA HAS DECIDED IT IS HER TIME TO SHINE...AND FATE has picked the mysterious mountain town of Misty Vale...

When on her first day in town she meets the incredibly handsome and intimidating Dash Livingstone, she never could predict what was coming... now she is the nanny for Dash's adorable daughter Nora, and fate seems to have even more in store for them all.

Dash is a man among men, but she can sense there is more to him than meets the eye... As the tensions in town begin to rise between two powerful families, Amelia finds herself pulled into the century old secrets of Misty Vale, and finds out that Dash is part of that legacy... he is a powerful dragon

shifter who is about to blow her mind and change her world.

Here, love and power collide and neither of their lives will ever be the same...



Here's a little preview of Dragon Daddy's Nanny...

“OKAY, SO I GUESS THIS IS HOW IT’S DONE IN ALL THE GREAT ROMANCE novels!” Amelia said with a grin as she let her finger hover over the map, willing her subconscious to find somewhere spectacular.

When she brought her hand down and she felt her fingertip connect with the smooth paper underneath, her heart skipped a beat and her skin tingled with anticipation.

This was it.

She eased her eyes open slowly, her vision adjusting to the myriad of lines all coming together into one spot where she had randomly placed her forefinger, a place in time and space that was surely about to change her life. And yet, it was somewhere she didn't even yet know.

When she focused and the words came popping out at her, she instinctively found herself smiling.

Misty Vale.

From what she could tell from the map, it appeared to be a little town nestled in the Rockies, somewhere she had never ventured before in her life, but she supposed somewhere that had also always intrigued her. It would certainly be a lot different to here. She had lived by the beach her entire life. But it's not as if that had worked out so well for her.

"Misty Vale." She said it aloud and let it roll around on her tongue. Her soul liked it. It sounded good. Wholesome. Somewhere that would surely bring her more happiness than here. Somewhere that could give her hope.

Without wasting a moment longer, she jumped to her feet and sprang into action. Today was the day she was going to change her life.

\* \* \*

WITH HER PACK HITCHED HIGH ON HER SHOULDER AND WITH A SPRING IN HER step, Amelia couldn't help but grin from ear to ear. The cold, crisp air, the scent of pine and the beautiful fall leaves were the first thing that struck her as she walked into town on her first day and saw how picturesque and stunning Misty Vale was. Being a beach girl for as long as she had known, it was certainly going to be a different way of life out here in her new town. She was in awe at how beautiful it was, and as she wandered around taking it all in, she knew she had found somewhere special. It was the perfect place to begin again and to forget her past and all the trouble that had gone along with it.

It was the kind of town you saw in the movies, one that Amelia had barely even dared think existed until she had played roulette with the map a

few days before. She looked up and saw The Grand Lodge was sitting on the mountain, looking down over the town as if it were some kind of overseer, and it made her think again of places she had seen on TV. Like some perfect little place off the beaten track in countries like Switzerland, its colors popping out of the landscape, adding to the reds and greens, and giving the mountainside a festive feel. She began to walk and explore, and Main Street was long and full of incredible shops. She smiled as she spotted a cute little candy store, a beautician, gift shops and bars that were all independent and quirky in their own way. She didn't think she had yet to see a chain store or big corporation, and as she ventured further into this lovely little place, she found herself feeling right at home. Something that kept appearing was an image that must be the town's crest. There was a castle in the middle of it with a crown hovering overhead, and an ancient-looking dragon on one side and what she thought may have been a bear on the other. It looked like something from the Scottish Highlands, old and powerful, but it made her smile.

Amelia stopped when she reached a B&B and hitched her bag back onto her shoulder. It had been a long train ride and she was aching and tired. All she could think about was sleep, but she needed somewhere to crash and ditch her things before she headed out to look for a job, and she wasn't going to waste any time doing it.

She reached for the doors of the B&B at the exact same time that they swung open, and she felt the unwelcome thud of the door hitting her shoulder as her bag went crashing to the ground.

"Ouch," she whispered as she tried to regain her composure, and she instinctively bent down to collect her things. She was aware of someone bending down too, and as she looked up, she saw him, right there in front of her eyes, looking back at her with disdain.

"I'm sorry," he said with a raised brow. "I almost took you out there."

Amelia found herself scowling, but at the same time, her heart faltered for a moment as she took in the tall dark guy with broad shoulders, a black beard, and a smoldering stare. Man, he was hot. Clearly trouble, but hot. He was dressed casually, in a pair of dark blue jeans and a black sweatshirt, but she could tell that his clothes weren't just from any old store. They looked well-made and expensive. His eyes were heavy and brooding, and as they rested briefly on hers again, she felt stunned into stillness.

Wow...

That was the only thought that went through her mind as she found herself kneeling there as if she had been frozen to the ground.

“I... well, thanks, I guess...” she said, trying to mimic his manor.

He scooped up her bag and smiled sheepishly as they both rose to their feet. She couldn't tell why, but the way he was looking at her was as if she had done something wrong and he was trying to figure her out. As if he wanted to ask her what the hell she had been doing there.

“Should watch where you're going next time,” he said with amusement and then he winked, and it made her skin tingle.

He was so handsome, so intimidating in his stance and the way he held himself. He was like no one she had ever seen before; someone so confident in their own skin, someone who seemed to command attention. It was as if the whole of Main Street had stopped when he had stepped outside, and yet, here she was, caught in his glare and feeling as if he was seeing deep into her soul. Her skin burned with something she could only liken to intense excitement, and she suddenly became aware that her mouth must have been gaping open and she closed it tight. He seemed to narrow his eyes at her, as if he were sizing her up again, but he smiled warmly. She gave a weak smile and went to ask him if he made a habit of almost knocking girls out with swing doors, but before she had chance, he took another step, and he was moving away, glancing back over his shoulder at her as he made his way down Main Street in the direction of the mountain.

Amelia faltered for a moment, unsure of what had just happened. She felt stunned. Shaken. Her heart was pounding slightly, and she felt in a daze. It was obviously just an accident, a silly little moment of oversight. But had he been rude? Or had she been acting dumb because he was so goddam good-looking? She shook her head and laughed to herself. She was such a ditz! If she was going to make it in a new town, she was going to have to play it cooler than that when a handsome guy appeared in front of her. Plus, that most certainly was not what she was about anymore, anyway. Men were the last thing on her mind after the year she'd had. She shook the thoughts away, not letting herself go there. She absolutely would not let the events of her past ruin what was supposed to be her new beginning.

She felt as if she still had his eyes on her, and she found herself looking ahead to see if he was still walking down Main Street, but the crowd had surged outside one of the coffee houses and he was gone. She sighed and pushed open the door to the B&B and headed inside, still feeling as if her

feathers had been slightly ruffled and she needed to prune them back into their glorious self.

After checking in and finding her room, she threw her bags down on the floor and flopped down on the bed, stretching her arms high over her head and enjoying the feel of finally being off her feet and somewhere cozy and warm. This was it. This, as they say, was the first day of the rest of her life.

She hugged her arms around herself and closed her eyes. It had been a rough year, with lots of setbacks and plenty to run away from. But she had done it. She had packed up and fled, and now she was somewhere new, somewhere that filled her with hope, and somewhere she could finally let the memories of her relationship with Toby disappear. There was nothing here in Misty Vale to remind her of what had happened between them. Nothing that would evoke a feeling or strong memory when she stepped inside a restaurant or a store. And she had done the ultimate thing to make sure she never suffered at the hands of someone like him again, she had done what he always tried to tell her she couldn't do. She had gone out on her own and she was being independent. She didn't need someone to guide her, and she certainly didn't need to be under anyone else's control. She was her own woman, she was regaining her life, and she was starting again, without someone trying to erase who she truly was so that she fit their perfect image.

She smiled to herself knowingly and felt a surge of pride again. She really was going to live now. The past was long dead, and she was ready for her future...

[Click here to grab your copy of Dragon Daddy's Nanny on Amazon!](#)  
[And have a great day \(or night\) too!](#)