



SHADOW OF THE CROWN

COURT OF THE FAE PRINCES
BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN

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BOOK 1

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DEDICATION

*To my extended family– the fact that you never read my books
allows me to write all the juicy hotness I want without fear.
Thanks for that!*

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ONE



Cassia

I fluff the prince's pillows with a little extra *oomph* because I'm admittedly pissed. With the fae prince's return, my workload, and that of all the rest of the maids, has quadrupled. All day long, I'm on my hands and knees running after the fae royalty and their retinues while they shout orders and sit on their entitled asses.

"Yes, my lord." "Yes, my lady." *All. Fucking. Day. Long.*

If I have to pick up one more smelly pair of underwear, tossed by a spoiled fae who uses glamors to make it seem like they know how to wipe their own ass, I'm going to hunt Prince Sulien down and beat him with said dirty underwear. Let's see how *handsome* and *brave* he is with underwear streaked with brown smacking him in his royal face. I bet he'd be shrieking like a little girl in no time at all, and showing us how the "big defender" of the realm *really* behaves.

Though, to be fair, it isn't solely the prince's fault. It's due to the Summer Solstice Ball. The princes from the Fall, Winter, and Spring Courts have arrived at the Summer Court for the big event, which means fae women from all over the four kingdoms have arrived for their chance to be queen.

There's also just the fae hoping to match with each other, but no one really cares about them. I mean, the fae don't. *I* don't care about any of them, royal or not. My preference is just for them to be anywhere but here bothering me.

“And they need rooms. Clean rooms!” Bitterness laces my words, which bugs me, so I try again. “But there'll be extra tasty treats in the kitchen, so it's not all bad.”

“You're talking to yourself again!”

Startling, I spin around and spot Beatrix by the door. She's wearing the same thing I am, an ugly dull burned orange uniform with a white apron. Except, while my blonde hair fell out of my bun a long time ago and now spills down my back in a mess, her pale brown hair is neatly done. Oh, and did I mention that her clothes are ironed, and she isn't sweating like a hot mess?

I cross my arms over my chest, giving her a fake glare. “You know, it's not nice to sneak up on people.”

She laughs, and the sound is light and beautiful, like her entire personality. “No one has to sneak up on you. When you're in your head, you wouldn't hear a hoard of unicorns stampeding.”

I shake my head, even though she's right. “I'm better than you are when you see a hot guy. Didn't you smack into a wall the other day?”

She rolls her eyes. “Never mind that—”

I snort, interrupting however she planned to save herself from *that* embarrassing story.

“Though,” she says, glancing at the door just to be sure. “I *could* see myself running into *quite* a few things if I spotted the fae princes.”

I groan. “Not you too!”

Every woman seems to be obsessed with the fae princes, even though most of the women haven’t actually seen them at the Summer Court in years. For all they knew, the princes could all look like a pile of sickly sticks with tiny limp dicks. Hell, Prince Sulien is the only one who has even been here as an adult. The other three were kids the last time they made their rounds to the Summer Court. So I doubt any of the rumors about their *overwhelming* hotness are anything but that, rumors.

“I’m just saying, from what I’ve heard, the only thing better than one of them would be two of them,” she purrs the last words.

“Two?” I throw up my hands. “Why not make it all four of them?”

She gets this silly look on her face. “You say that like it’d be a bad thing.”

I laugh. “Talk about a nightmare. Could you imagine all the dirty clothes and bragging? I bet even fucking them is terrible. In fact, I’d bet they watch themselves in a mirror the whole time?”

“Cassia!” She sounds scandalized.

Going to the bed, I start smoothing the blankets again. “I’m just saying, I’d take one hardworking, human man over the fancy pants royals any time.”

There’s a sound out in the hall. Faes laughing.

She glances back at me, looking worried. “You need to finish up. We have to move downstairs before the royals arrive.”

“Yeah, because if one of them sees us, they’ll just *die!*”

“Cassia...” She’s trying to warn me to be good, but she’s grinning.

I grasp my chest. “Oh, no! Oh, no! I’ve seen a maid! Now I know who scrubs my floor! How will I ever survive!” Then, I collapse onto the floor. It hurts, but it’s worth it when she comes up and pokes me with her shoe while laughing.

“Are you done?”

I open one eye to see her staring down at me. “Actually, now that I’m down here, I’m thinking a nap’s in order.”

She laughs. “For someone so obsessed with being the best maid, doing the best job, and rising in the ranks, you’re also completely insane.”

Beatrix doesn’t totally get it. Her mom and dad both work for the fae. She has the privilege of not needing this job, I don’t. She gets to use her money for clothes, entertainment, and to save for her life as an adult one day. I get to use it to keep my family fed and to buy my father’s potions. So, yeah, I take it seriously. But I also take the rare opportunities I’m given to make it fun too, since this is basically my life.

Her amused expression fades away. “If you take much longer, we won’t get the other rooms ready before the fae arrive. And if one of them has to wait for their room...”

They’ll be pissed, which will mean our boss, Alexi, will be pissed at us. “I’ll finish up and meet you there,” I tell her, climbing to my feet.

She grins, calling over her shoulder as she heads for the door. “Don’t take too long.”

“Oh!” My word stops her. “Did Alexi say anything to you about getting an advance on my pay?”

Her expression gentles. “She said no. Sorry.”

My gut clenches, but I try not to show how upsetting the news is. I was really depending on a different answer. I guess I’ll have to come up with a Plan Z. “Thanks.”

She looks like she might want to say something else, but then leaves.

Hurrying, I finish making the bed, then check over the room to make sure I’ve finished everything. Anything I see that needs to be straightened or dusted, I take care of. This is the final check. The moment to make sure that everything is presentable for the precious fae.

Otherwise, we’ll hear about it. We *always* do.

My gaze sweeps over platter after platter of food set out for the prince’s return, and my stomach grumbles annoyingly. Unable to help myself, my thoughts go to my family. We’re always one day away from starving ever since my grandmother went blind and could no longer work as a tutor, resulting in the palace tossing her on her ass. Since then, I’ve spent my days cleaning for the spoiled royalty, but the money doesn’t go far.

They have all of these riches, but they pay pennies. Plus, there’s the whole lack of loyalty thing. We’re about as important as the things they scrub off their pretty shoes.

“And they care just as much about whether we’re starving our asses off.”

I let my hand slide along the table near the unlit fireplace. The one with a tray covered in different kinds of meat. The

one covered in desserts. The one with fruits and vegetables piled high.

There's more food in Prince Sulien's room than we've had in our home in the past year.

"All this food for one person," I grumble as I use a cloth from my apron to dust the statue of Prince Sulien's father next to the spread of food. My father's hunched-over body flashes in my mind. "And I don't have enough money to buy us anything for dinner tonight."

An unexpected thought enters my mind, and my heart starts racing. I look around. No one would even notice if *a little* bit of this food went missing.

I've never taken so much as a cracker from the royals. Cook always gave me and the other maids any extras after meals, and a bowl of the staff porridge made from leftovers from the day before, which is allowed as long as it doesn't leave the castle, but I'd never actually taken something. Because up until recently, I always had enough to ensure my father and grandmother had food.

Up until I started paying for my father's expensive treatments. Treatments I can't take away from him, no matter what I have to do.

I'm many things, but I'd never consider myself a thief.

Reaching into my pocket, I double-check the spot my coins would be and find nothing. This is the first time my family will go hungry. I'll be allowed something from Cook, but nothing to take home. Those are the rules. *Can I really live with myself if my dad and my grandmother go hungry because I failed to provide for them?*

Then, my dad would know how difficult it's been to afford the potions he's been using on his legs. The ones the fae healer said could bring back his ability to walk. He'd already gotten the feeling back in them. He's already managed a few steps.

It's just... so difficult.

Grandmother and father know things are tight, but I've hidden from them just how tight because the food is usually gone by payday, yet I always manage to get more. But if he knew we couldn't eat because of them, he'd stop his treatments.

My stomach churns, and I quickly shove a stack of ham into the pocket of my apron. Maybe it's wrong, but my family doesn't deserve to starve. Not when there's so much available right here.

And it's not like I'll suddenly start stealing gold and diamonds. A little meat. That's all. Nothing really. Just enough to fill their bellies. It won't even be missed.

“What's the prince going to do with this, anyway? He's not going to eat all of this. It'll probably just sit here until it starts to spoil, and then we'll have a chance at it.” I wipe my hands on the bib of my apron, then snatch a cloth off the table, using it to better conceal the meat.

“Dad hasn't had any protein in...” I trail off, trying to actually remember. Shaking my head, I go back to the table and snatch another small handful.

No one will notice. *Please don't let anyone notice.*

The only thing worse than watching my family go hungry today would be watching them go hungry every night moving forward. With no fae blood, no magic, no land, and no skills, it's this job or being a whore. Those are my options.

“Besides, everyone will be focused on the sexy princes, not a pile of meat.” I’m tempted to dump the whole platter of meat into my pockets, but I get back to cleaning, knowing better than to tempt my luck.

“Although, I don’t actually know if they’re sexy. At least not all of them.” My mind wanders to Sulien. It’d been years since I saw him last, but I’m sure time won’t have changed him all that much. “Sulien is sexy as fuck. So sexy that he melts the panties of ladies everywhere. As for the other three, only time will tell.”

Laughing to myself, I shake my head. Trying not to remember the Prince Sulien from when I was a kid. The boy my grandmother would tutor. I was allowed to come with my grandmother to her sessions, which meant getting to know Sulien. He was smart, kind, and fun to be around.

And then grandmother’s eyes went bad, and we were tossed out of the palace. My only interactions with Prince Sulien after that were when I caught glimpses of him in town. By the time I was old enough to work at the palace, I saw him far too often, and yet I seemed to become invisible to him.

“Sexy, but an ass.” My jaw clenched. He could have a dick as big as my arm, and it wouldn’t be enough for me to forgive him. Yeah, maybe he wasn’t the one who decided my grandmother, father, and I were worthless after she lost her sight, but I’ve grown to accept that anything the prince wants, he gets, so he must not have wanted *us*.

“The fae princes get to come here and find their mates while I fluff the already fluffed pillows.” I twirl around, ready to leave the room.

“Oof.” I bounce back and almost lose my footing. I rebound and stand up straight.

Directly in front of me is a man's chest. My gaze moves slowly up, up, up sweeping over an imposing chest, wide shoulders, and then the face that has haunted my dreams for far too many years. I hate that he looks even better. Prince Sulien. The man who is as hot and merciless as the summer sun, with a face that seems carved from stone.

He stares back at me, his eyes the color of canyons at sunset, a brownish-auburn color that I've never seen in the face of another fae or human alike. He doesn't say a word to me, standing there hovering over me. His lips in a firm line. His gaze unforgiving.

My heart races. *How long has he been here? Had he seen me steal the meat?* If he did, I'll be tossed out of the palace so fast my head will spin. *And if he heard my other comments?*

Fuck. What did I say? Nothing good, that I was sure of.

I open my mouth without thinking, and words start flying out. "You know, you're the prince and all, but sneaking up on a woman is beyond rude. I could have been in a compromising situation. What if I was adjusting my clothing? What if I wasn't wearing any clothing at all?"

He stares down at me, still silent, but his eyes twinkle, and the corner of his mouth quirks up almost imperceptibly. "Why would you be undressed in my room while you're working?" He crosses his arms and leans back.

I mirror him and cross my arms as well, trying to buy time to come up with an answer to his very good question. "Maybe a bug flew into my shirt, and I had to strip to get it out." I smile and nod my head.

Yes, that was a reasonable answer. Far better than telling him that I'm sure I'm not the first woman to find his room and

undress, either with him or alone, and fantasizing about him.

I'm honestly proud of myself for keeping quiet.

And then he keeps talking. "Why would there be bugs in here? Isn't it your job to keep this room clean? Are you not doing your job well?"

Dammit. He's gotten smarter over the years. When my grandmother was tutoring us, I'd always been the quicker of the two of us. Oh, what wouldn't I give for the days of him being a lovable dummy.

Not that I can say that, he's staring at me, waiting. So, I start talking. "The windows have been open more lately to air the room out. And that's not my point." I wave my hands in front of me. "My point is that you barged in here—yes, it's your room, but still. You barged in and snuck up on me, and scared the shit out of me."

He lifts a brow, but I can't tell what he's thinking. "Noted. I need a bath. Are you too scared to run me a bath?"

"Scared?" I snort, but then switch to a more formal tone. "No, your Highness, I am not too scared to run you a bath. Right away!" I turn on my heels and head towards the bathroom.

As I prepare the water, he enters and begins peeling off his clothing. My jaw drops, and my gaze locks on him. I swear he takes his time unbuttoning his blue shirt, the one that makes his tanned skin look even more tanned. And when he drops it to the floor, I actually have to check that my panties haven't dropped to the floor too, because he looks that fucking good.

His chest and shoulders are wide. His stomach is so muscled that every man I've ever slept with suddenly looks like a pile of horseshit compared to him. And his biceps as he

reaches for the button on his boots—a shudder rolls through me—they’re actually rippling.

Is it getting hot in here?

“Did you want some lavender to help you relax?” I ask while he unlaces his boots.

“I don’t care,” he says, and his tone seems in agreement with his words.

“What about some hibiscus petals? Those are good for your skin. I don’t know where you’ve been, but if it’s been harsh on your skin...” I trail off, watching his boots and socks hit the floor.

When he doesn’t answer, I throw in the lavender, the hibiscus, and a few more items from the basket beside the tub. Honestly, I’m not looking. And who can blame me?

He reaches for the buttons on his pants and starts flicking them open. Hell, he’s good at taking off his pants. But that’s probably expected. If half the rumors are true, the princes spend their time fucking their way through the four kingdoms. I’m sure they’re all more than apt at removing their pants.

Then, he pulls his pants down and my mouth goes dry. My gaze moves from his strong calves to his thighs that look made for squeezing a woman tight, up to his tight boxers, and I feel the horny rush inside of me getting to dangerous levels.

“Are you excited about the ball? It’s mating season!” No one calls it that. I’m not sure why I just did. “I mean, it’s time to find a mate. I’m so curious about how that goes. It must be exciting, though. A dance to find your wife. So romantic.” I look up at Prince Sulien, and he’s a god standing before me in nothing but his underwear.

And, oh fuck, I stop trying. I just stare at the bulge of his cock and let my gaze run over the outline. The sheer *size* of the thing. No wonder there are so many rumors about him. He is, in fact, concealing a dangerous weapon in his pants, one I'd love to get my hands on.

He clears his throat, and I remember he's here. That he can hear me. And see me... staring at his dick like it's a new treat I desperately want to start licking.

"Do you mind?" He's got that brow up again as he sweeps a hand toward the door. "Bathing me isn't one of your duties."

I feel my face heat up, and my pulse races. "You sure? I really don't mind."

Did that fucking just leave my mouth? If I wasn't blushing before, my face is on fire now.

"I mean. The bath is ready, your Highness, so I'll be on my way." I bow and try to skitter out of the room.

But when I try to slip by, he grabs me and pulls me close to him. For one second, I think he's going to take me up on my offer to bathe him, and I swear my body's already wet and ready for him. But, instead, he whispers in my ear. "There are consequences for stealing, even things as small as food. Be careful."

I hold my breath, waiting for his hands to release me, but it seems to take him an eternity before he does. An eternity where I wonder what he means. An eternity where I wonder if he's about to turn me in, or wants my pocket food back. An eternity where I wonder whether I should beg him on my knees to forget this.

But then he steps away and heads toward the bath, like he'd never whispered anything at all to me. Like maybe it was

all in my head.

Sweat rolling down my spine, I raced out of the room. I'm relieved he didn't fire me from my position right then, but what if this meat in my apron loses me this job? What if I end up with nothing instead of the pennies I get now?

Damn it.

TWO



Cassia

My heart's still racing by the time I escape into the kitchen, being cautious not to be knocked down by the servants who rush in and out with trays of food and drinks as I do. I slide around them and into my favorite nook in the corner, out of the way of everyone.

Then, I watch.

I love to watch instead of work. It's one of my many negative qualities.

The kitchen is a sea of orange, because each of us is wearing uniforms in the Summer Courts' colors, dark orange and light orange, although our uniforms are different based on our positions. The kitchen staff wears dark orange pants and shirts with a long light orange apron covering them. The wait staff wears light orange shirts with billowing sleeves, and short, dark orange dresses on top of them. Our uniforms are the ugliest, I think. We wear dark orange dresses, with light orange collars and sleeves, and a shorter light orange apron.

To think, I used to like the color orange.

Now? Not so much.

I relax a little, watching Cook as she works. She's a flurry of movement as she adds ingredients to pots and prepares delectable meals for all the royalty staying in the palace. Winifred is my grandmother's age, but you'd never know it by the agile way she moves. She has both the strength of a young person and the knowledge of someone older. She, no doubt, has some fae in her bloodline.

Someone passes by me with a tray of pastries. The scent of butter wafts from them, and my mouth begins to water. I stop myself from following the tray out of the kitchen and into the formal dining room by sheer will alone.

But just barely. *Fuck. I'm hungry.*

I lean against the counter beside my nook as my thoughts begin to shift from the kitchen and the food to what's really bothering me. Running the confrontation I had with the prince through my mind once again, I feel my palms grow sweaty. I said and did so many things I shouldn't have. It's one thing to be an idiot in my daily life, but never with the fae. *Especially* not the royalty. Stealing from the fae could cost me my head if one of them is particularly pissed about it... I don't even want to think about that. Speaking out of turn with the fae can easily cost me my job, which is the more likely outcome of my stupidity.

Damn it. I really need to learn to hold my tongue.

Far too often, words fly out of my mouth with no concern for the consequences. This time, however, the consequences of being such a fool might cost me everything, even if the prince doesn't care enough to take my head. Imagining myself being thrown out of the palace makes my stomach turn. This would mean yet another Wither being tossed out. Only unlike my grandmother, I'd deserve it.

Winifred spots me in my nook. “On break or helping?”

I stiffen. “Not on break.”

She laughs and shakes her head before pointing at a pile of potatoes and a knife.

I roll my eyes but know that helping the cook means getting leftovers, so I start peeling.

“How’s your grandmother?”

That was Cook. She never beats around the bush. “She’s doing really well. Considering. She cooks. She cleans, and she’s figured her way around the house and garden.”

She puts a spoon in a pot, then takes a sample of it. Her nose wrinkles, and she adds more spices. “Glad to hear it. I miss Hazel. She’s one of the good ones.”

I wonder if the prince remembers that. I wonder if he remembers that my grandmother was more of a mother to him than his own. That she was the one he went to when he was hurt or sad. That it was her warm arms that held him when he cried.

Who knows if he even knew what became of his old tutor, or if his pampered life erased all the little people that helped him along the way?

The fact that the prince and his family threw my grandmother away like that pisses me off the most, but the truth is that I’m also hurt about losing my relationship with him. We used to study together, laugh together, and play together. We were friends. But maybe I was the only one who saw him that way.

I bet my grandmother, and I have been erased. I bet the moment he saw me today, he only saw my uniform. A faceless

uniform, because real connections mean nothing to the fae. All they care about are their riches, their clothes, and having fun.

It makes me angry, even though it shouldn't.

"How's your father doing?" Winifred asks me, drawing me from my dark thoughts. She's moved to the counter to chop some peppers for a dish she's preparing. Meat is sizzling in a large pan on the stove. I don't know what she's making, but it smells amazing.

There are two things I know I'll get from Winifred at any given moment: delicious food and empathy. She's the kindest person in this palace, and she's really taken me under her wing since I've been working here. My solace when I'm at work is wherever Winifred is.

"He's getting stronger. It's just happening so slowly," I huff. The image of my weakened father laying in bed flashes in my mind, breaking my heart for the thousandth time.

"Slow is better than not at all, Cassia. Be grateful." Sweat glistens on her dark brown skin, and I wonder how she manages to stay in here all day with all the fires burning to prepare the palace meals.

I understand her sentiment, but the fae potions to help him regain the use of his legs take more than half of my pay. As the only person bringing money into our home, that hurts a lot, yet I can't stop buying them. It took us forever to find someone who knew how to make the potion. I haggled the price down as much as I could. When the fae healer threatened to toss out the potion completely over my bargaining, I accepted the price she gave me and went on my way.

I wonder if she added an extra spell to make it work slowly. Fae can be assholes like that.

“I’m grateful. At least I’m trying to be. He took a few steps yesterday. We couldn’t believe it. No one thought he’d ever regain enough strength to stand, much less walk.” I smile.

Dad pushed so hard yesterday. I wanted him to sit down and rest, to not overexert himself, but his determination won out. The way his face lit up as he put one foot in front of the other and walked around our tiny kitchen table will be ingrained in my memory forever.

Winifred reaches out to me and slides a lock of my hair behind my ear. She holds her hand on my cheek and looks into my eyes. “You’re so young. Too young to have all of these responsibilities. First, you lost your mom, then your father lost his ability to walk, and then your grandma lost her sight. All of this is not on you.” She drops her hand and looks away from me. “At least it shouldn’t be. You’re doing a great job. I bet no one’s told you that, so I wanted to.”

I take a deep breath, trying to fight the tears threatening to fall, then peel the potato in my hand more aggressively to distract myself. “Thanks.”

What more can I say? That I screw up on a daily basis and will probably ruin my family with my stupidity? That I really hope that she doesn’t regret her faith in me one day?

A server drops a tray on the counter beside me. It’s mostly untouched, so I know the servant will bring it around again in a little while. The tray is covered in bite-sized pastries that look like fluffy bites of pure yumminess. Yumminess, whipped cream, and chocolate.

My mouth starts to water, and my stomach grumbles.

To my surprise, Winifred carefully removes a pastry and shifts the others to make sure no one notices it’s missing one.

Leaning in, she shoves the pastry into my hand and whispers, “A little bite for you. Something to sweeten up your day. Hurry up and eat it, so you don’t get caught.”

I shove the small treat into my mouth. My eyes close as I chew the pastry, trying to enjoy every bite. The texture and flavor are divine. The pastry doesn’t just have chocolate in it, but chunks of strawberries, too. I haven’t had fruit in months. The flavor of the strawberries lingers on my tongue. My grumbling stomach interrupts my perfect moment. One pastry isn’t enough to calm the angry sea that is my empty stomach.

Winifred hears my roaring stomach and laughs, wiping her hands on the front of her apron.

“Let’s get you something more substantial. We’re all going to be very busy this week. You need some fuel.” She leads me to the staff porridge pot. I stop short of gagging at the sight of it. Porridge is the very last thing I want to eat, but it’s better than nothing, which is what we have at home.

Winifred uses the ladle and gives me a healthy serving. I take the bowl and do my best to look grateful as I tell her thank you. She gives my elbow a squeeze and heads back to her station. I lean against the wall and force down the porridge. I *am* grateful, but I wish I could take this home. There’s always a way for me to eat here. Food isn’t scarce. I just hate going home with a full stomach and seeing my father and grandmother withering away.

“Cassia!”

I turn and spot Beatrix darting around the kitchen staff and heading for my corner.

“Hey,” I say, blowing on the porridge on my spoon.

“Have you seen the prince yet?” Beatrix’s uniform looks brighter and more crisp next to mine. She’s been here just as long, but her life differs from mine drastically. With two working parents in her household, they’re still not rich by any means, but they never go hungry either.

My gaze runs over her as I take a sip of my porridge. Her full face and body make me feel gaunt. She’s soft and supple where I’m angled and thin. Her hair shines while mine feels dry, like straw.

If she wasn’t my best friend, I’d hate her.

“I had a run-in with him in his room.” I don’t offer anything else, not wanting to recount the incident.

Beatrix eyebrows rise. “A run-in?”

I’m aware that there are far too many ears in this kitchen, so I choose my words with care and lower my voice. “I literally ran into him. I finished in his room, and I ran right into him on my way out. His body felt like a brick wall.” I leave out all the talking I did. She doesn’t need to know that.

“I wouldn’t mind running into him,” she says practically purring.

My mind wanders over the memory of him in his underwear. “Running into him, or—?”

“Cassia!” she says with a little gasp, her face bright pink.

“Maybe you want to run into him? Over and over again?”

She looks like she wants to crawl out of her skin. “Stop...”

“Maybe just a little naked and soapy?” Oh oh, when did me teasing her turn into my very own fantasy? Fuck, maybe I should have found an excuse to clean his room longer during his bath.

Not that the royal prick asshole would even give someone like me a second look.

“He’s royalty,” she sputters. “And the prince. Regardless of all the dirty talk from the servants, that’s all it is, just talk.”

I grin, taking another bite of my food and burning my mouth. Karma and all that. “I know. I’m just teasing you.”

She grabs a bowl of porridge and shoves herself close to me and out of the way. “Isn’t it exciting having all the royalty in our palace? There are so many beautiful fae from all four courts. Have you seen their clothes? Their women? Their *men*? Though, the Winter Court can’t be comfortable here. Don’t they live in ice castles?” She’s babbling, but then Beatrix has always been far too fascinated with the fae royalty. It’s like she’s the only one who didn’t get the message that they’re a pack of assholes.

“They look so out of place with their bright white hair and heavy clothing. They seem like the most uptight of all the courts.” The misery on the faces of the members of the Winter Court shone clearly to everyone. They were not acclimated to any terrain except for their own.

“I heard they make their rooms cold by forcing a lesser fae to touch the walls of their rooms and keep them cold the whole time they’re here,” Beatrix whispered.

I believed her. If the summer fae were cruel, it was nothing compared to the chill of the winter fae. “That must be why they all stay in the Queen’s old quarters. They must have a few lesser fae keeping the place cold around the clock. I’d hate to draw that straw. What a bore.”

Beatrix shushes me and looks around for anyone listening in. One of her strengths is restraint. I need to be around her

more and let it rub off on me.

“What’s your favorite court?” Her face lights up as she asks me.

I’ve never thought about it. “What’s yours?”

“Oh, that’s easy. It’s the Fall Court.” She gets a faraway look in her eyes and a half smile appears on her face. “They’re just... something else.”

“It’s the red hair, isn’t it?” I ask, picturing the few people from the Fall Court that I’ve seen in my life. I get it. It’s kind of hot.

“It’s the red hair, and the hunting for their own food. A man who leaves the house to get food to feed his family is *so* sexy to me.” She moans a little and closes her eyes. “They embody fire. I bet they’re wild in bed.”

I laugh. That’s not at all what I thought she’d say. I really thought she’d talk about the weather and the landscape, but she went straight to sex. I get it. A fiery man in bed sounds absolutely delicious. It takes more than just being from a certain court to stoke passion, though.

Survival tops my list. The hunting aspect of the Fall Court is attractive now that I think of it. If I had someone in my life who could hunt, we could eat. It would solve so many of my life’s problems. But I don’t have anyone to do anything for me, so I dismiss the idea from my mind.

“I’ve never been to another court, so I don’t have a favorite. They’re probably all the same anyway with their hierarchies and ridiculous wealth for only a select few while the rest of their court starves to death and dies of illnesses only money can cure.”

Fuck. I killed the mood. I don't like games like this. There are no fantasies in my world most of the time. I live in a painful reality that's hard to escape; I'm a human in a fae world. So, it wouldn't matter what court I lived in, my life would still be the same.

Beatrix's cheery expression falls, replaced with a neutral one. "*Hmm*, well, I've got another wing to get cleaned in preparation for the Spring Court. They'll be here by sundown, and I'm only halfway done."

I wince. "Sorry, I just killed the fun, didn't I?"

She nods. "It's super dead."

"I ran it over with a carriage, then beat it with a shovel."

She laughs, then turns on her bowl of porridge, eating it like a mad woman. Even though it's probably still warm. "I really do have to go, though." Then she gives me a side glance. "You have more to do, too, right?"

I wince. "Yeah," and I start eating faster.

She brings her bowl to the dish washer, who takes it kindly, then she turns, gives me a wave, and slips out the door. Which means she's left me alone with my own thoughts, which are way bitchier than her thoughts, despite her beliefs.

"Which court is my favorite?" I grumble while I choke down the last of the porridge. "Like I've been given a tour of the continent. I've never left this goddamn city, much less been out in the world."

Beatrix means well. She'll probably marry some handsome working man who can provide for her and the hoard of children she no doubt dreams of. I, on the other hand, will work until everyone I love is gone. So, maybe she can afford to be a dreamer. Me, not so much? Because I imagine life is

better if you accept that you're going nowhere rather than imagine that there might be something better.

I hand my bowl to the dish washer and focus on the rest of my day. There's only one more room for me to clean today, and it shouldn't take long, luckily for me. I want to be home before the festivities begin... as far from the privileged fae as I can get.

THREE



Cassia

The first thing I see when I open the door to the Gold Bedroom is Lady Takara's naked, bouncing breasts as she reverse-rides Lord Cirrus on the pale golden sheets I'm supposed to be changing. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is opened in a slight *O* formation. His hands cling to her waist and he slides her up and down on his dick like he's using her to start a fire on his cock.

I freeze, unable to move for a painfully long moment before my brain catches up to what's happening. Taking a step back, I start to close the door, but the damn thing squeaks. Their gazes snap to me before I manage to back out of the room. Neither of them stops what they're doing, but they definitely saw me.

Fuckity fuck.

Lord Cirrus just so happens to be married to a viper of a woman. Some of the fae cheat like dogs in heat, but others demand faithfulness. His wife is the second kind of fae.

I've heard she'd cut off a woman's nose for touching her husband.

Some gossip is fun to know. This kind is *not* because it's the dangerous kind. I'm just hoping everyone involved keeps this incident to themselves. I sure as hell won't utter a word about it. I value my life more than that.

I shake my head, wondering why I didn't have the forethought to knock on the door. The room wasn't assigned to a guest, but still, I know how horny the fae are. An empty room is more temptation than they can handle.

Stupid. I am so damn stupid.

"Fuck!" I whisper-scream, scurrying down the hall.

I just have to hope the two fae, infamous for being arrogant assholes, won't feel the need to remember what a maid looks like. Hell, I'll have to hope they're the kind of fae that see the help as furniture versus actual people. Because if they see me as a threat, my body might be found in the river by tomorrow.

I groan, pick a couple halls at random, and finally slip into a dark corner. Taking deep breaths, I look down and see that I'm shaking. *Damn it.* I want to be calm. I want to be smart. But those two things don't come easily to me.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I whisper to myself. "They did something wrong... you just saw it. You're okay."

And I'm talking to myself again. *Great. Just great. I need to get a hold of myself and act like everything is fine.* But if I do what I'm expected to do, I should be going back to that room to clean it.

Nope, that won't work. I need to do the only thing I can, report to the Head Maid. Tell her as little as possible, because this secret needs to stay with me. I'll either be assigned to another room or be sent home early.

Please let me be sent home early.

Slipping out of the corner, I step right out in front of someone who was rounding the corner. “Fuck!” I startle, then bow my head, and say, “I mean, excuse me.” I give a little bob, then slowly look up, praying it isn’t Lord Cirrus.

Instead, I find myself staring into Prince Sulien’s face.

He lifts a brow. “You like running into people.”

“I’m not sure what to say, since you weren’t asking a question,” I tell him, bouncing a little on my feet. Ready to run the hell out of there, since I’m no doubt going to win a medal when it comes to getting into trouble.

“And who are you talking to?”

Fuck. He heard me talking to myself?

I tear my gaze away from his soul-sucking eyes, but when they shift to his chest, I’m suddenly distracted by the memory of him shirtless. “You see, your highness, I have a habit of talking to myself because no one else seems to want to talk to me.” I sneak a glance back up. Does he look amused? “Although, I blame everyone else. I’m delightful to talk to.”

He clears his throat. “You...”

I realize he’s struggling to remember my name. Which is, you know, fine. It’s not like we grew up together. No, wait, we did. “My name’s not important, Prince Sulien. I’ll try harder to stay out of your way.”

Before I lose my nerve, I give another bow and dart around him, heading toward the Head Maid, Alexi’s workroom. Although I swear, I can feel his gaze on me as I run for it.

It’s not until I’m nearly to my destination that I risk slowing down. I have two horny faes to avoid and one princely

one. As a maid, my job is to be invisible.

I can do that. Even though it's not exactly my skill.

Darting down the hall containing the small rooms of the maids who live at the palace, I head to the very last room. Alexi isn't going to want to hear anything except that I'm done with my work for the day. She takes few excuses, but this one is actually an acceptable one.

Tapping on the door, I debate about exactly what to say, knowing who she is as a person. Alexi isn't a terrible boss, but she doesn't care about anyone or anything. She just wants the job done. So, how do I approach this without saying too much or not enough?

"Come in!" I hear her say.

Stepping inside, I instantly feel a strange pang of envy. I don't want to be a maid, so I sure as hell don't want to be the Head Maid. But seeing Alexi with her feet up, papers in hand, and the relaxed look on her face, it's hard not to want what she has. My kind of work will quickly erode my body and my beauty, but not hers. We're the same age, but in time I have no doubt she'll age far better.

"All done?" She asks, not looking up from her lists. She lives for a list. Her desk is littered with them. A checked-off list is the only thing I know that'll make her smile.

I'm not about to make her smile.

"My last room for the day is..." I trail off, trying to find the right word. "It's currently occupied."

Alexi shuffles through her list and finds the one with my name on it. "No, it shouldn't be. They haven't arrived yet. I just got an updated list of our guests." She picks up another list and runs her finger down it. "Nope, they aren't here yet."

I let out a low sigh. “I understand. But the room is occupied.” I raise my eyebrows to give her an indication of what I mean by occupied, but she still hasn’t looked up at me. I pinch the bridge of my nose. I can’t tell her that two high fae are fucking in the room. I definitely can’t tell her I barged in there without knocking and saw them fucking.

“Well, it shouldn’t be occupied, but we can’t do anything about that now. Go to the next wing and clean the Purple Room. Someone’s occupying it, but I know she won’t be back in it for another couple of hours after lunch. I’m sure it could use a refresh. Take care of that, and you can call it a day.”

Relieved, I head to the Purple Room, named so because of the decor, but also because it’s the most west-facing room with a large window that catches our gorgeous purple sunsets. Something about the sky in the Summer Court amplifies the purples in the sunsets here. This room blazes a brilliant purple every single day. It’s one of my favorite rooms in the palace.

Knocking this time, I enter after waiting for a response for longer than usual. Walking in on anyone else today just doesn’t sound appealing. Jewelry covers every surface of the room. Whoever rooms here brought every ring, necklace, and bracelet she owned with her.

I laugh at the idea that she feels she needs this many choices for the few days she’ll be here. These superficial fae make my stomach churn. The value of one necklace... I shake the thought out of my mind. There’s no use in whining about their egregious wealth. You’re born into it or you’re born human. I’m the latter.

I spruce up the room, avoiding all of her jewelry. Some people are meticulous about the placement of their belongings. I don’t want to disturb her process. I remake the bed, open the

curtains all the way, and pick up anything that doesn't belong on the floor—an easy last task of the day.

I open the door, smiling because I'm done for the day and also because I've got some food to take home. These spoiled, over-indulged fae will have their party tonight, and I'll spend the evening with my family, who I'd choose any day over the fae. I head towards the closet. They make us leave our regular clothes and belongings in, the one they search regularly, to grab my bag.

Glancing behind me, I see Lady Takara and Lord Cirrus lurking at the end of the hall. *Lurking*. Fae don't usually lurk, they saunter, and they don't hang out near the servants' quarters. Something clinches around my heart. *Are they planning to threaten me? Slit my throat on my walk home?*

I'm tense as I continue past them, but neither of them stops me. I unclench my ass cheeks just a little when I start down the stairs, and they don't stop me. Still, I think I might find someone to walk me home today.

Downstairs, I see Alexi and a fae I don't know. She's from the Fall Court with their signature shiny auburn hair falling in waves down her shoulders. The woman's face is scrunched up, looking irritated, but she says nothing. Alexi points at me and then signals for me to approach, which is weird. She'd usually be waving for me to get the hell out of there in front of an important guest, but who knows what the woman wants?

Coming to stand in front of her, I hesitate, then decide to just ignore their awkwardness. "I finished cleaning the last room."

I don't acknowledge the fae. There's no point. Not only am I just the help, but I'm also a human. She wants nothing to do with me.

“And everything was as expected?” she asks me, choosing each word carefully.

Damn, this woman has her really wound up. “Yes, ma’am.”

She sighs, then shakes her head. “This is the guest from that room. Her fire opal necklace is missing, and... you were the last person in her room.”

My stomach drops. “What are you saying?” I want her to say it, to verbally accuse me of stealing. Otherwise, I’m not going to suggest it. If this is some kind of trap, I won’t be lured into it.

“I need to search you,” Alexi says in an almost whisper. She looks everywhere but at my face.

“Because you think I stole it?” I ask, coldly.

“Because it’s valuable, and we need to be sure,” she answers, her voice almost kind.

I want to argue, but that would only make me look guilty. Glancing over at the fae woman, she glares at me, and it takes everything in me not to stick my tongue out at her. I don’t know what her deal is, but if she thinks just because I’m human, I’m a thief, she’s about to learn a lesson.

“Of course,” I say, my voice sickly sweet.

I drop my bag on the floor and lift both of my arms out to make a T with my body. The first pocket she reaches into is the one with the food I’ve stolen, which I’d forgotten about until that very moment. Fuck, okay, so I’m a little bit of a thief, but not one who steals jewelry.

It’s hard to keep my face steady, not admitting any guilt or regret as she finds it. Taking food shouldn’t be a huge offense

if none of the fae knows about it. She holds the food in front of my face and frowns. I look past her at the sconce on the wall. The fire in it flickers even though it's midday.

Of course, the one day I've ever taken so much as an olive, I'm caught.

That's just my luck. But at least I didn't steal the jewelry. I'll be punished for the meat, but I won't lose my job. Not if the fae woman doesn't know what the meat pile means. Alexi will keep this between us, I think.

She returns the food to my pocket with a little sound of disgust, probably not wanting to handle the old food any longer than she has to, and reaches into my second apron pocket. I hear the unexpected jingle of metal. Shifting my vision down, I watch as she pulls out a gold necklace with orange gemstones.

Tears sting my eyes, and I shake my head. *No, no, no. I didn't do this. Alexi knows this. She has to know that the fae used their powers to plant this on me.* I force air into my lungs through my nose, not wanting to let anyone know how much this hurts me. I need this job desperately. My family needs me to have this job.

"I didn't take that," I tell her. "I wouldn't. It'd be pointless. Who would even buy a necklace like that from a human? I'd be reported immediately. You have to know I'm not that stupid."

Oh, the irony. I hate this job, but I need this job. And now, after all my screwups, I'm about to lose it over something I didn't do.

If Karma is real, she's a twisted bitch.

“I knew it,” the fae says angrily, ignoring my words. “Filthy human scum.”

I bite back the urge to call her a bitch. “It wasn’t me. I know how this looks, but it wasn’t.”

Please. I need this job. I need something to go my way in this stupid life.

“Then, how did this get here?” Alexi asks, staring.

I draw my shoulders back. “I saw two fae fucking. One of whom is married to a *very* dangerous person. Then, I saw them lurking around the corner just before you found that necklace on me, so they must have used fae magic to put it in my pocket, to frame me and get me removed from this job, so I can’t tell anyone. Not that I *planned* to tell anyone.”

“Lies!” the woman shouts. “How *dare* you accuse a fae of such treachery?”

Alexi drops the necklace, her expression genuinely upset. “We don’t tolerate larceny in the palace. You need to leave right now. You’ve forfeited your pay for the week, and you aren’t welcome back.” Her anxious whispers are replaced with fire on her tongue.

She looks back at the woman, handing her the necklace and apologizing profusely. They both stare at me like I’m the lowest kind of scum. Which shouldn’t bother me, but it does.

I meet Alexi’s eyes, glaring now, and bend over to snatch up my bag. Angry tears threaten to escape my eyes, but I hold my head up high as I leave.

Only at the end of the hall, I see Prince Sulien standing with his arms folded across his chest. I glare at him, lift my hand to flip him off, debate for a minute, and drop it. I’ve already lost my job, no need to lose my head too. Instead, I

march past him, hating him and all the fae with every ounce of my being.

FOUR



Cassia

Tears gather in my eyes as I storm down the street, sadness and anger competing against one another in my heart. This job was already my last resort. There's nothing I'm skilled enough at to actually make a living doing. Not when fae are always better at everything than humans. We take the lowest of the low jobs, jobs that they don't want, and I'd just lost one of those jobs. Who else would have me after being fired by the fae?

No one, that's for sure.

And I wasn't stupid. I knew Lady Takara and her fuck buddy framed me just to make sure I wasn't in the palace, and couldn't spread the rumor about how I found them.

Dumb asses. I was never going to tell anyone, and they still ruined my life.

The fae suck so hard they should have puckered assholes.

I pass The Velvet Sands, the most popular brothel in the Summer Court. My stomach churns and knots form in every muscle in my body. For my father and grandmother, I'd do anything. Which might just mean applying for a job. Selling my body in a way I'll never be able to come back from.

With the way the fae treat humans, the ones they can use like rags in the brothel get it even worse, if half the rumors I've heard are true. Being a whore in the Summer Court would mean having my body broken and bruised. Allowing my pain to give pleasure to the worst of the fae... the ones who pay to touch humans when they have so many other choices.

More fire stings my eyes. I clench my jaw and continue walking. If I can't think of a better place, I'll have to go and beg for a job before we go too long without food. The decision will likely need to be made by morning.

Decision? I want to laugh. There is no decision. I've been marked by losing my job with the fae. That Takara bitch had made certain that I'd be lucky if the brothel *let* me work for them.

Lucky. To be broken. Lucky to be violated.

I turn down a tree-lined path, wanting to get away from the hustle and bustle of the main street to clear my head. It's a small relief to be out of the scorching sun under the trees. A chance to get my emotions under control. I don't want what happened to be written all over my face when I walk into my house and see my grandmother and father.

The only thing that could make what I have to do tomorrow worse is if they found out. They will, eventually, rumors fly after all, but I'll try to keep this from them for as long as possible.

It takes effort to practice smiling as I walk. To blink the tears from my eyes. But nothing I do eases the tightness in my chest.

I wish I could wake up from this nightmare.

Heart racing, I pinch myself, just in case, but nothing changes. The terrible feeling in my gut builds. *Why am I even walking home? I should be going straight to the brothel. The only difference between today and tomorrow will be how hungry I am.*

Pausing beneath a tree, I take several deep breaths and think of my grandmother and father. My family. If I'm not home this evening, they'll wonder. They've been through enough and don't need to worry about me or how we'll survive. If I'm going to take this next step, I'll need to come up with an idea to explain my change in schedule.

I need a night to sleep on things and come up with a plan. The second the thought comes to me, some of the tension eases from my chest. *A night. That's all I need. I don't have to do anything tonight.*

"Right." I laugh. "Tomorrow I can decide all this whore business."

With my resolve restored, I keep walking. This might not be a good plan, but it's a plan. The thought of a cruel fae's hands biting into my flesh, slapping my face, and ramming into me makes me stagger. But, I right myself and keep going, trying to forget the sight of the bruised and battered whores wincing as they walk out of the brothel.

If that's my future, I'll handle it. I'll handle whatever I have to for my family.

My steps come surer as I walk, even though a coldness fills my belly. All I hear are my footsteps on the dirt path. All I see is the flickering of light between leaves as they shift on the ground, and the wind playing on the leaves like today is any other day.

Like the world doesn't realize that my life got turned upside down today.

I suddenly sense that I'm not alone. My blade is in my hand before I can even think about it. I try not to change my stride, just like my grandmother always taught me, keeping my pace even until I'm absolutely sure I'm not alone. *Someone is watching me from somewhere, and I'll be damned if I let them take me by surprise.*

Holding my blade out in front of me, I turn in a quick circle, then crouch, surveying my surroundings. There's nothing. No movement. But I know I'm not alone. Either that, or I've started to lose my mind. I'm going to bet on the not alone thing though.

"I will gut you before you get anywhere near me," I growl, every muscle in my body tense. Waiting. Watching.

Out of nowhere, Prince Sulien appears, leaning against a tree in front of me. I barely manage to swallow down a scream of shock, but I manage it before clenching my blade tighter. Everyone knows powerful fae can teleport, but I've never seen one do it before. From what I understand, it's considered rude to use the power in front of others. Probably because it'd be unsettling just teleporting around others like an asshole.

Hell, what's he doing here? Haven't I had enough bad luck?

I don't say that though, I just study him. Staying crouched, staying ready. It seems these damned fae aren't done with me yet, but if he thinks I'm going to take whatever this is lying down, he's wrong.

"Prince Sulien," I greet, trying to keep my voice respectful, and failing.

His mouth twitches, but whether I pissed him off or amused him, I can't tell. The damn man is impossible to read.

When he doesn't respond, I let my gaze run over him. His long legs could be tree trunks themselves with how large and thick they are. Under his dark clothes, I know they are sinewy and sun-kissed, and the memory of him before his bath dances in my memories no matter how much I wish to erase it. His chest, his huge arms, all of it is impossible to forget, but I want to. I've officially decided I hate fae. All of them... but he makes it hard to remember.

"Is there something you need?" I ask, spinning my blade for a minute before stopping it.

His gaze shifts to the dagger in my hand. "Your grandmother's lessons on weapons and fighting are still with you, I see."

"Oh, so you *do* remember my grandmother?" My voice drips with accusation. I've already been fired. What do I have to lose?

"I remember your grandmother was a good tutor before losing her sight. I remember that she tried to hide what was going on instead of being honest with my father and me." He's expressionless, unaffected by how that one day set my never-ending streak of bad luck in motion.

I chew on my bottom lip in frustration. "Yes, because telling the fae you can't do your job anymore always ends with empathy."

He lifts a brow. "Lying's the one thing my father doesn't tolerate from anyone...except for himself." He mutters that last part, but I catch it.

I meet his eyes, a scowl on my face. “Great walk down memory lane. Anything else I can help you with? Or can I go?”

He grins at me, his dark eyes shining in the sunlight that peeks through the trees. “I saw you get fired.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “You saw me get setup, but that doesn’t really matter, does it? I was fired from the Summer Court. I no longer serve you or your family, so I guess we’re done here.” I do my most exaggerated bow before standing tall and walking past him.

“I have a proposition,” he calls after me, his voice as smooth as silk.

“Proposition?” My back goes as steel as a rod.

I glance back at him, trying to ignore the fury weaving through my blood. What kind of proposition can he possibly offer me? He’s a fae prince who doesn’t give a crap about me, so it’d only be something that helps him out. And what could I possibly help him with?

He flashes the smallest smile, and I feel the blood drain from my face. *Right. That.*

“I am not a whore,” I tell him through clenched teeth.

Not yet, at least. An image of The Velvet Sands flashes in my mind, and I shudder. *Maybe the prince will be able to pay my fee in another night or so, and he’ll get what he wants without even having to follow me home.*

“Perhaps proposition was the wrong word. How about a proposal?” He counters, unmoving. That smile of his gone, replaced by his mask of indifference.

Proposal? Proposition? It all seems to mean the same thing.

My heart pounds in my ears. “A proposal now? Is this... some kind of joke?”

Was losing my job really not enough? He’s playing with me now? A proposal for sex? For something awful? What the fuck does he want from me?

“No, when I said proposal, I meant proposal. This isn’t a job. This is me asking you to be my wife.” There’s not an ounce of amusement in his face.

“Your wife? Oh, sure? But why stop at that? I could rule all the fae.” Sarcasm oozes off of my words, as I try to figure out what the hell his angle is.

“I’m serious.” He pushes away from the tree and walks toward me. When I take a couple of steps back, he stops. “I can take care of your family. Move them into the palace. Treat them like the royalty they’ll become. All you have to do is become my queen.”

“Queen of what? Scrubbing your underwear?” I laugh, shaking my head.

His eyes harden. “Queen of the Summer Court.”

My brain feels like it’s swimming through words, facts, and ideas that don’t make sense. “Don’t you have to meet your mate tonight at the ball or something? Isn’t that how you’re supposed to find your queen?” I don’t understand how he can ask me to marry him. Fae don’t do that. That’s a human custom.

You know, if there was even a reason for a fae prince to be asking his human maid to marry him. Another bubble of nearly hysterical laughter threatens to explode from my throat.

This can't be real. This is some kind of trap or fae game. I just know it.

He sighs, his handsome face betraying nothing of what he thinks or feels. "We do have the Solstice Ball tonight, where magic should determine my mate. It's a whole production..."

"So, then, what are you doing? Go to your... ball."

He starts moving toward me, and this time I stay still, not willing to run from him any further. The fae prince moves until we can almost touch, and then his voice comes out no louder than a whisper. "I have a spell. A powerful one that will make it seem like you're my mate. All I have to do is drink a potion with you in my arms." His long, black hair flows in the breeze, making it impossible to ignore the pure beauty of the man as he speaks.

But I try to pull my thoughts back to his words. He wants to use a spell to make me *appear* to be his mate. The whole point of the ball is for the magic of the evening to connect the fae princes and their mates. You know, along with helping the other fae find their mates, but no one cares much about that. The person the magic connects them to is more than a bride, a wife, or a partner. They're the person the princes are destined to be with forever. There's no logical reason why any prince shouldn't want that.

So what the hell is this?

I stare up at him, craning my neck to look into his auburn eyes, taking him all in, my thoughts tangling together. "Why? Why would you want to do this?"

His expression becomes even more guarded if possible, his jaw tightening as he seems to choose his words with care. "I want to be king and rule the Summer Court. Nothing more. I

don't want the rituals and customs. I don't want the ceremony. I don't want a wife or children. I don't want any of it." He turns his gaze to the treetops. "I'd never touch you. I'd never hurt you. You'll be my wife in public only. We will show up together at important events where the king and queen are expected. The marriage will be a convenience: you helping me and me helping you."

I'm without words. This proposal makes no sense. I stare up at him, and his genuine countenance pulls at something inside of me. He's desperate, I realize. But how can that be when this man could have anyone he wanted? He has to have a thousand other women he'd be better off asking.

Yet, if my life paths are currently divided. One being me working at a whorehouse. And the other being me as queen of the Summer Court, maybe I shouldn't dismiss this insanity so quickly.

"How can a spell make it seem like we're fated to be together? I know you're a powerful fae, but I've never heard of anyone being *that* powerful."

"The spell will work," he tells me simply. "That I have no doubt."

"But I'm human," I whisper, watching his face, wondering if anything I say will be something he hasn't thought of. "No one will believe it. I don't have any fae blood. Not a drop of it."

"No one can ever truly know that they don't have any... and even just a little fae blood can make a match. All the people of the courts need to believe is that you have just a little, and they will... because this spell is unlike anything anyone has ever seen before. As far as they know, no spell can

do this, so they won't even question our match." His dark gaze intensifies, and my pulse quickens.

He wants an answer now, but I can't give him that.

"Why don't you want to find your real mate? Why lie to all the royal fae? To the whole world?" It's a risky move. One that may end up with me being punished and nothing happening to him.

"I just don't." The bite in his voice lets me know this subject is off-limits.

But why? Why doesn't he want a real mate? Why have me simply play the part?

"Look." There's just a touch of annoyance in his deep voice. Pleading, apparently, isn't his strong suit. "Your father is sick. I went to your house first. I saw him. Those potions you're spending so much money on are actually weakened. Whoever you're getting them from is diluting their power. The first two or three doses should have cured him completely."

"Dilluting the potions? You fae are sick bastards!" I shout, angry at everyone all at once.

I've been working myself to the bone for those potions, and they've been making them weaker on purpose? My father could have been doing better already, but those pieces of shit decided he wasn't worth it? They were just *fine* with my father suffering?

He looks unaffected by my reaction. "Agree to this, and your father and your grandmother will have a life they can't even dream of. He'll have a real cure."

It all sounds too good to be true, which means it probably is.

When I just stare, he continues, “All three of you will spend your lives in luxury with anything you could want and more. And you and me... that will only be pretend. This question shouldn’t even be a question.”

There’s a desert in my throat. *There’s really no logical reason to say no, so why can’t I say yes?*

“There’s an outfit for the ball on your bed. If you show up tonight, I’ll know you agree, and we’ll be mated. If not, I’ll find my true mate and do what is required of me to be king.” He winces, then, and without another word, vanishes, leaving me alone again.

I let out a deep breath, and my thoughts become clearer. *No one ever gives something for nothing. Ever. That’s not how life works. He wants me to be his queen, to live a life with nothing required of me.*

If it sounds too good to be true, then that’s what it is.

He looked and sounded genuine, like he was telling me his truth, but I can’t help but wonder what the real truth is. *Why marry a human when you can have your true mate? Why lie to everyone and accept a fake relationship?*

The outside world is quiet as I continue my walk home, but my mind is a whirlwind of thoughts and questions and scenarios. I imagine what my life will be if I accept the prince’s proposal. Instead of cleaning the rooms of the palace for balls and parties, I’d be hosting them. A human in charge of the Summer Court palace. It’s unfathomable. It’s most people’s dream come true.

So why am I hesitating?

Can I really be Queen of the Summer Court, the most powerful human in the land ever, even though I’m the last

person who deserves it? And do I even really have a choice? I let the thoughts simmer as I make my way through the woods, knowing that I need to pull it together and make a decision soon. Tonight.

I'm fucked.

FIVE



Cassia

I walk into my home, and instantly relax, if only by a little. It's not like the fae prince, or rumors of my criminal actions can't get through this door, but at least it feels like a break from the chaos that's my life right now. I let my back press against the wooden door and release a slow breath, breathing in the scent of my father's woodworkings. Buying myself a minute to try to put on a brave face before I see anyone.

My gaze runs over the tiny living room. Three chairs sit near a fireplace: mine, my grandmother's, and my father's. His chair is surrounded by his tools and his carvings. My grandmother's chair has her knitting in a basket beside it, while mine sits bare.

Unsurprisingly, both of their chairs are empty. The pain my father endures nearly every waking hour often leads him to sleep as much as possible throughout the day. It's no surprise he's in bed now. Grandmother, however, tends to go to the kitchen to cook around this time, not that there's anything to cook today. Which means she's probably in there writing. It's something she tends to hide from us, because she can't see her words any longer, and she's embarrassed by what her scribblings might look like.

But we know. We all know just about everything about each other. The only things you can hide in a home this small are your thoughts and feelings. And, even then, those have a way of coming to light too.

I listen as my heart slowly calms. Our home isn't fancy in the least bit. In fact, it's rundown. The roof leaks when we occasionally get rain. Warm and cool air seeps from the walls and around the windows, keeping the temperature always just a step above miserable. But it's home, gray and dark as it is. It's where I grew up and where my father and grandmother showed me what it meant to be loved completely and fully.

They had so little to give in the way of material things, but made up for it in every other way. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss the material stuff, but what hurt more was watching *them* have nothing. Watching them desperately want to be able to work, but being limited because of life's cruel twists.

My family deserves better. I've just never had the choice to *give* them better before.

Until now.

Fuck. I close my eyes, thinking of the prince. Thinking of the mysterious spell that's supposed to make his plan possible. Thinking of the lies I'd have to tell, forever, if I do this.

So much could go wrong. I could be resigning myself to a cruel fae's will. Once this lie is spun, I'll be the one at his mercy. If he grows tired of me, all he needs to do is speak the truth. He'll suffer backlash that will be forgotten, and I'll lose my head.

My eyes flash open. My soul says that this is wrong, but my heart says otherwise...

I glance at my father's chair in the corner. It's set low on the ground, so he can crawl into it. My heart aches. If I were alone, I would simply leave these lands. I'd travel to another court and start over, but my family doesn't have that luxury.

The three of us just can't start over somewhere else. At least here we have a roof over our heads. If we packed up from here and left on foot, how long could a young woman, a blind woman, and a man without the use of his legs go? The answer is: not far.

It's the *only* reason I'm considering the prince's proposal. People would call me a fool if they knew I was even thinking about refusing a chance at wealth, comfort, and power as queen. But the pit in my stomach says that being a queen like this, wrapped in lies, will make me more of a slave to the prince.

Servant I can do. Slave? I don't know.

"Cassia," my grandmother calls my name.

My moment to think has passed.

I take a few steps deeper into our tiny home so I can peer into the doorway of the kitchen. Grandma is clearing papers and dishes off the littered countertops. Her long gray hair, weaved with dark strands, conceals her face in shadows. But the sound of her humming tells me how she feels without her words. Her humming is light and hopeful. Even though she hasn't eaten since yesterday.

My eyes sting, and I angrily blink them until I get my emotions under control.

"How was work today?" She asks, glancing up, her milky white eyes seeking mine, like she can still see.

I clear my throat, being cautious of my tone. “It was work.” It’s all I can offer, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to tell her the truth, either.

To stop the humming. To kill her hope.

“The Royal Mating Ceremony is tonight, isn’t it? I bet you were busy getting everything ready for all the wealthy and powerful guests.” She sounds excited, like the ceremony means anything to us.

Queen, no queen, it’s all the same. We’re the vermin that keep their floors clean and place food on their plates, nothing more.

Even though, I guess, I could be more. Tonight. If I want.

“Cassia,” she prompts, frowning. Reminding me I haven’t responded to her about the Mating Ceremony.

I force a laugh. “I called it mating season when I ran into Prince Sulien today. Not my best moment.”

She grins. “You spoke to Prince Sulien? You actually *said* that?” She sounds torn between horrified and amused.

“Yeah, he didn’t care though, I’m just the maid.” I hope she doesn’t pick up on the edge of bitterness in my voice.

Her expression gentles. “You’re not just a maid. You used to run circles around that boy when I was tutoring him. He took forever to catch on to things that you got instantly.” She shakes her head. “How is it that he’s royalty, and you clean his room? This world isn’t fair. It’s just as dumb as the fae.”

I’ve wondered the same thing every day that I’ve worked there.

“He’s a little more clever, actually. They must have sent him away to school because there weren’t any tutors around as

good as you.” I leave out the fact that he’s blazing hot and makes me warm between my thighs, because, you know, that’s not the kind of talk a grandmother wants to hear.

“I bet he’s just as cute. He was a handsome little boy. I hear he’s even better looking as a man.” She smirks at me, waiting.

My cheeks heat. “He was just like the rest of the fae.”

“Now, that’s a lie! Humans and fae alike swoon all over the Summer Prince, if the rumors are true, which I suspect they are given *just* how many rumors I’ve heard.”

“I wasn’t swooning,” I say, a little defensively.

Okay, maybe I was a little. When he was dressing down in the bathroom. When his tight underwear hugged his enormous cock, making it look like he was smuggling a giant sausage, and I *really* wanted to get on my knees and suck him off right there on the floor.

“What *does* he look like?” she asks, snapping me from my dirty thoughts.

I take a shaky breath, trying to forget his mammoth sausage, then lean against the doorframe of the kitchen, choosing my words carefully, so as not to give away the fact that she’s right about him being ridiculously swoon-worthy. “He has silky black hair.”

“*Silky?* So it’s nice?” She’s trying to sound uninterested, and failing miserably.

Damn it. Fell right into that trap. “It’s fine.”

And, by fine, I mean *fiine*. Long and beautiful, falling just past his shoulders. Masculine in a way that’s surprising, given how feminine many of the male fae appear.

“And the rest of him?”

The rest of him. *Fuck*. I didn't want to think about the rest of him when all he was offering was to do was make me his queen. He wasn't offering to fuck me every night. He was offering an arrangement where I wouldn't even be able to have some tiny hot dogs to keep me happy while thinking about the mammoth sausage I couldn't get in my mouth or in my pussy.

Not that I'd be open to the arrangement if it included sleeping together. Right?

Right. Hell no.

“Cassia,” she says my name on a huff of annoyance.

Oh, yeah, she was asking what he looks like. “His eyes are, I don't know, brown or something.” Not brown. Auburn. An almost impossible hazel-like color that captures the heat of summer like nothing I've ever seen before.

“Oh. And the rest of him?”

Is it getting hot in here? Hell. “He's in shape, or whatever.” In shape is an understatement. A potato has a shape. This man has muscles for miles, and until my firing, and his little offer, I'm pretty sure he'd have fueled my fantasies when I touched myself for a good long while.

“Well,” she has that innocent voice again. “If you ever get a chance to take a roll in the hay with him, rumor has it he is very, uh, well-equipped and knows how to use it.”

“Grandma!” My cheeks are flaming.

“What? By my age, you learn a few things, one of which is to use that young body as long as you can, and to never skip out on a chance to ride a man with a big co—”

“No, just No! Please end this!” I’m talking to the heavens now.

She laughs. “Prude!”

“Better a prude than whatever this is!”

She tosses back her head and laughs. “This is a small home, Cassia. No one in this home thinks you’re some innocent virgin.”

I want to die. To shrivel up and meld into the ground. In all my time, I’d only brought two men back to this house, and I’d tried everything in my power to be quiet... even though I’d realized my natural state during sex is very, *very* loud. I wanted to be respectful.

Apparently, I sucked at that, too.

“Besides, the prince isn’t exactly a stranger to you. I swore I’d never seen two children take to each other the way you two did. Everyone talked about it, how the fae prince only liked to play with the little human girl.” She sighs. “Maybe in another life, you two could have been...”

My gut twists, all humor fading away. “There’s no other life, Grandma. Just this one.” I rest my hands on my apron pockets and feel the food that Alexi had slid back into my pocket.

Shit! I thought she’d taken it for some reason!

“Oh, I almost forgot.” I pull the food out of my pockets. “I have food!”

The look of relief that flashes across her wrinkled face makes my heart swell, and then she’s smiling mischievously. “And how exactly did you get this?”

I guess Grandmother's as smart as I thought. Likely, she's put two-and-two together about how expenses the potions are verses how much I make. She also must have realized that I wouldn't have been paid for a few more days, which would mean there would be no food for us tonight, and now she's wondering where exactly I came up with this. My only question is what she'll think about what I've done.

"From the palace..." I trail off, not sure what else to say.

She tilts her head, her expression curious. "I know the palace didn't give you food. The staff can eat there, but nothing gets to leave the palace grounds. It's to discourage thievery." Her hands move to rest on her hips like she used to do when I was a kid, and she was trying to get me to confess to something.

I should have known, she'd ask. She's not the kind of person who can ever take things as they are. She wants an explanation for everything. One that makes sense.

The truth tastes bitter on my tongue. There's also no good way to erase the morally questionable choice to steal. What's more, my grandmother has always held all of us to a high moral bar... yet, she's also smart. She has to logically understand that we need food, and she should be happy with it, however I went about getting it.

Fuck. I'm just going to give this the nicest spin I can.

"I know I deserve more pay for all the work I do, so consider these my bonus payments. Bonus payments I just have to take when no one's watching." I grin, and although Grandma can't see it, I know she feels it.

The air stretches between us for a minute. I can see her thoughts spinning, and I'm half dreading what they've

concluded when she opens her mouth. “Well, give it here. I’ll whip something up with it.”

Relieved, I place the food on the counter in front of her. She gives everything a quick feel and sniff, yet another way she’s learned to work around the loss of her eyesight. Then, she takes the soup pot out and starts prepping the food.

Looking at the spread I stole, I wish I’d had a little forethought to try to get a little variety of food. Food is food, but with just a little more effort, it could’ve been a nice soup. The meat will be amazing, for all of us though. It’s been a long time since I could afford to buy meat.

Grandma already has the wood burning over the stove and the pot placed on top, while I’ve just been sorting my thoughts. She goes and starts cutting up the meat into little slips, humming her happy tune again. A smile on her face.

Being useful always makes her happy. So does the thought of a full belly.

“Do you need any help?” I ask, rolling up my sleeves to take my place next to her.

“Now you know I can’t stand that question. If I needed help, I’d ask for it.” She starts mumbling and cuts her cloudy eyes at me. She can’t see with them, but she can still be expressive with them. “And you know you can’t cook. Why are you even acting like you can do anything but get in my way? Go on somewhere else.” She shoos me away.

I laugh and hear the sound of my father no doubt crawling into his chair in the living. “I’ll go see if he’s up.”

Taking a few steps into the living room, where sure enough I find my dad. He’s carving sun figurines to sell at the market, because he hates being idle and not being able to help the

family. He can't use his whole body to work, but he's always been handy. He typically makes enough to buy food for one meal a week, which is amazing.

"How are you doing today, Old Man?" I bend down and give him a kiss on his cheek. His color's so much better than it has been for the past few years. I swear, from the time I was old enough to be aware of his pain, he'd been an unnatural grey-green color. When he started taking the potions this year, one of the first things that returned was his color... then, slowly, his strength. He almost looks like a healthy person now, even sitting up straighter.

"Mother, should I show her?" He turns to me, an airy smile on his face. "I have a surprise for you."

Grandma beams from the kitchen and walks to stand near him, while I watch, confused. He scoots to the edge of his chair then braces himself and rises to his feet. My grandmother hovers a foot in front of him, and I watch in confusion as my father takes a step. My chest feels tight. He's managed a few steps before, and that tired him out for quite a while. Two steps because of the painfully expensive potion I've been buying him.

What's he doing now?

"Should I—?" Stand behind him to catch him? Help?

Grandmother shakes her head. "Just watch."

He manages another step, and now I'm sweaty. Two steps. He should be falling. Falling, and getting upset. Falling and going to his room and crying so quietly that he thinks we don't hear him, but we do.

Somehow, he remains standing, managing three more steps, reaching the front door, before his legs crumble.

Grandma somehow manages to catch him before his knees hit the ground, leading me to believe that they've been practicing this.

I press my hands to my mouth as he turns his head and looks at me, grinning. He's happy with himself. Happy with his amazing accomplishment for the first time instead of feeling depressed that his progress has been so slow.

"That's amazing!" I run over to him and pull him into a hug. He groans, and I help him back to his chair.

Pulling back, I run my hands over his dark hair weaved with just a few strands of gray at his temples and beard. My heart swells. He's a young man. A handsome man, by all accounts. Even without the use of his legs, I've seen the way the neighbor ladies look at him. He deserves so much more than the life he has.

And now, I've lost my job. I won't be able to afford his potions any longer. His progress will be lost, and the light I see in his dark eyes will fade away, along with his healthy color.

I hate that tears catch in my throat as I say, "That was incredible, dad."

His face widens into the most incredible smile. A smile he so rarely has. "I'm feeling a lot stronger lately. That's the second time I've done that today."

"You'll be running by next year," I say, blinking away tears.

He nods eagerly. "The potion is working, Cassia! It really is!"

I hate that he's right, because it only makes what I'm facing all the harder.

He reaches out and squeezes my hand. “But I used it all, and I need you to get me more.”

“Of course.” I want to scream into my pillow. Except, I’m pretty sure my scream would end in sobs. *How is this happening? With every step into this house, my options seem to be fading away.*

“What if I heal all the way? What if I get so well I can work again?”

“That would be wonderful,” I tell him, and for some reason, I can picture it. Him going off to work, healthy and happy, this house flourishing like it never has.

But that only happens if I can afford to get him his potions, and the only way I can do that is if I make money, either as queen, or at the whorehouse. The whorehouse would be a gamble too. I might not even make enough to afford more than to keep food on our table.

His dreams would go up in smoke.

“You know,” he begins excitedly. “If I start working, you can quit that job at the palace. You can marry a nice boy and have a family of your own.” His eyes twinkle as he speaks.

My stomach lurches at the thought, and my whole life shifts. I’ve never really thought about any other future except me working to care for my grandmother and father. Sure, if I found some nice boy who would be okay with signing on for this life, I might marry him, maybe even have kids, but those thoughts have never really crossed my mind. I’ve been too wrapped up in being a caretaker that I couldn’t fathom any other life.

“Can you imagine little ones running around here, Mother?”

My grandmother smiles. “I can, and I bet they’d have Cassia’s sweet disposition. Remember what she was like as a baby?”

Father squeezes my hand and lets go. “You were the sweetest creature. Could scream like a banshee when you had to, but the rest of the time, you were impossibly good. Just like you are now.”

This conversation is like a strange dream. Marriage? Kids? It never occurred to me that my father and grandmother had dreams for me, that when I was born, these people, who were so different back then, imagined a beautiful, perfect life for me. I wonder what they wanted for me. I wonder what they wanted for themselves.

What does happiness look like? Before, it looked like heading to the palace with my grandmother to tutor the prince. Happiness was when my dad, the best man alive, would greet me from his chair in the evening and wrap me up in a hug after I got back from tutoring with Grandmother, before his pain made everything a thousand times worse. But a life where my father worked, I got married and had kids... it just didn’t seem possible.

“I have to finish dinner,” Grandmother said, still smiling as she headed back to the kitchen.

“Dinner?” Father grinned at me, but he looked exhausted.

“Meat,” I told him.

He gave a long sigh. “You were worth everything.”

I laugh. It’s something he always says to me. I’m not sure what everything is, but the way he says it makes me believe that he thinks I’m something amazing.

His eyes drift close. “I’m going to rest until dinner.”

“Okay.” I ruffle his hair and then press a kiss to his cheek. “I’m going to go lay down for a bit.”

He makes a little sound of acknowledgement, and I turn away from him, weighed down by thoughts and decisions I never imagined I’d have to make. I head to my bedroom, open the door, and freeze. My eyes are drawn to a glimmering gold dress on my bed.

Moving quickly, I shut the door behind me, then spin back around to the dress. I have one stupid moment when I worry that my father saw the dress, before I remember that if he saw it, he would have said something. *But how did the prince get it here?*

“His powers.” Of course. The damn prince teleported into my bedroom.

I glance around the space, wondering what he thought when he was in this room. There’s a bed in the center of the room. A cracked, full-length mirror I stole from a trash pile in the corner, one nightstand, and a dresser with everything I own in it. *Did he think this room was sad? Pathetic?*

He’s probably never seen a room like mine in his life, so, yeah, that’s probably exactly what he thought.

I don’t like the idea, but I take a step into the room. Close enough to touch the shimmering dress. A dress that is more beautiful than every item in this house combined. Hell, I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen a fae woman in anything prettier, even the royalty.

Then I notice something else. Sitting beside the gold dress is a pair of gold heels that buckle around the ankle. They’re absolutely beautiful, but not so high that I think I won’t be

able to walk in them, although I've never worn heels. There's also a little blue jewelry box.

Reaching for the mysterious box, I open it and gasp. A golden necklace with amber stones, the official stone of the Summer Fae, glimmers within the box, along with a matching bracelet. The stones are large and finely polished to reflect every drop of light. Anyone who sees this jewelry will believe the wearer is among the Summer fae royalty.

If I wear this, it's Prince Sulien's not-so-subtle way of claiming me as his own. It's a bold move, but then his whole plan is bold. Reckless. Dangerous.

“And I'm going to do it.”

I sink onto the edge of my mattress as my knees give out. I'm going to do this. There was never any actual choice. When the decision is between letting my grandmother and father have everything they've ever wanted and more, or continuing to barely survive as their hope dies, there's no decision to make.

Tonight, I'm going to don this dress. I'm going to pretend that there's enough fae deep inside of me that the magic will choose me as Prince Sulien's mate. And then, I'm going to play the part of the handsome fae's wife. He won't touch me in private. I won't touch him. There will never be children in my future, and I'll never know true love.

And each day, I'll hope. Hope that the prince doesn't betray our secret. Hope that he doesn't get bored with me or find another woman he'd rather match with, maybe even his true mate. And this quiet home I've grown to love will fade away.

Lying back on the bed, I swear my face feels wet. But I don't cry. Crying is stupid. I was never going to marry some man I loved and have a bunch of children. That was never my life, regardless of what my father and grandmother thought. So, I'm not really losing anything.

"I'll be queen." I thought the words would come out happy, but instead, they're broken and sad.

SIX



Sulien

Everything about tonight is so fucking fake it makes my teeth hurt, and my headache grows worse. I can spot a glamor from a mile away, and this whole ballroom is one giant glamor. From the decorations, to the women, who have been throwing themselves at me all night—like rubbing against me will magically turn them into my mate come midnight—it’s all a sham.

It’s no wonder I’m tired of it all.

Where is she? I check the time again. Midnight is approaching with every passing second. Then, the magic will awaken. Then, I must drink the potion in my pocket, and Cassia must be in my arms.

I hope she just wants to make an entrance.

My lips nearly smile at the thought. Cassia is many things, but most certainly unpredictable. Maybe I hadn’t expected her to come *flying* into my arms with my proposal, but her complete refusal was not among the things I thought she would do.

A fae woman wearing a pink mask winks at me as she passes, and my amusement fades away. I need to focus. To

keep my eyes open for Cassia's entrance, to bring her to my side as quickly as possible once she arrives.

Candles flicker all over the massive room, hanging from the ceiling in crystal cages that reflect light in every direction. Black material weaved with amber threads, spills from the walls, making the room look dark and mysterious. Concealing couches in shadowy corners where fae fuck, then exit, straightening their skirts, and pretending to be ladies.

I sigh and slowly make my way to the ornate table littered with drinks and more food than necessary... What a waste. None of these women are going to eat. They're going to sip on drinks and hop from man to man, hoping to make some kind of connection.

And the men? They'll spend their evening in dark corners of the castle, fucking random women, taking breaks to take potions to keep their dicks hard, and they'll chug drinks to make it easier to believe that any of this matters. The whole affair is sad and pointless, like most of life as a fae.

I need a stiff drink right now. Maybe the men have the right idea on that. Forgetting all of this seems like the best thing I can do.

"And how is Prince Sulien this evening?" Lady Takara asks, sliding up to me, wearing a white mask with little horns and an auburn dress... which is ballsy as hell. By wearing auburn—wearing my colors—she's basically marking herself as a fae from the Summer Court. As a fae from the House of Wealth, it signifies to everyone that she's hoping that I'll be her mate.

I want nothing to do with this arrogant woman. An arrogant woman who I suspect framed Cassia as a thief. Still, it's never a good idea to insult any fae. Peace between us may

have lasted for a long time, but it's more fragile than any of us care to admit.

"I'm fine."

She puts a hand on my arm, which I don't appreciate. "You're looking fine too, and we match!"

I'm wearing black pants and an auburn shirt, along with a golden ring with an amber stone. It's an outfit that's expected of me. Not one I care about in the least bit.

Does this woman actually think I care about my clothes or hers?

When I say nothing, her smile falters. "Are you excited to be matched?"

I'm excited to be king. To rule better than my father before me. Although my father has retired, and I've already taken on the responsibility of the king, I get the official title when I wed. The title *and* an increase in power to help me continue protecting the kingdom from the damn iron demons. "It's a requirement I accept."

She laughs like I've said something charming. "I bet you're hoping to avoid women like that." Then, she nods to some women in one corner.

Those women don't have glamors. They stick together in the shadows, hoping not to have to mingle with the men, their masks doing little to conceal their unhappy emotions. These are the very few fae that have no desire to marry, to have husbands, or children, but their families have forced them to come.

My mother was like these women.

The magic claimed her. I'm told she wept as my father took her into his arms. That even with all the power of the magic, and being mates, she hated being claimed by him. A man I'm also told that I'm a lot like.

A shiver rolls down my spine. *I will never marry a woman who will hate me for it. Nor will I marry a woman I will hate.*

My thoughts move to Cassia, and every muscle in my body tightens. It's no lie that I... find her attractive. That I love her fire, her spirit, and the way she seems to fear nothing. But that's not why I made this proposal to her. I made it because I've known her since we were children. She's smart, capable, and deserving of all the goodness in the world.

Goodness, I couldn't give her when we were children.

I grip the potion in my pocket. If she comes, if we do this, she will play the role of my wife well. She will never cause me embarrassment. She will make me proud in everything she does. And I won't crush her spirit the way my father did to my mother because she won't let me.

And because of our arrangement.

Lady Takara steps into my view. "Checking out the beautiful women?"

I shrug, not sure what she wants me to say. The truth, to tell her that I couldn't care less about them, rises on my tongue, but I swallow it down. The temptation to tell her that the only thing I want to see is Cassia walking in almost makes me smile, imagining the reaction of the pathetic woman, but that too is information I don't want her to have.

She runs her hand up and down my arm. "Just so you know, if I become your mate, you don't need to limit yourself

to only me.” Then she winks and saunters away, like I’m going to enjoy the view of her flat ass.

I shake my head, letting my gaze roam around the room. Searching for a woman in gold. Trying not to think about what I’ll do if she doesn’t show.

Gripping the potion again, I take a deep breath. *She has to show. I refuse to have a true mate. I refuse to marry and break a woman into pieces the way my father did to my mother. Only through an arrangement, only with Cassia, can I treat my wife like a business partner instead of a spouse. Only with her will I have a unnatural distance between two married people that will keep both our hearts and souls safe.*

But Cassia is still nowhere to be seen.

Show up, damn it. I check the clock on the wall. Thirty minutes until midnight, the time when every fae above the age of twenty-five will have the chance to find their mate. Anyone who doesn’t find their mate tonight will have a chance again in five years time, at the Summer and Winter Solstice when the stars have aligned again and their powers are strongest, to find their mate.

The woman needs to get here. My pulse picks up, and I take deep breaths, trying to calm myself. Trying to focus on the room and not the growing dread in my stomach.

Snatching a drink off a servant’s tray, I drink it quickly, then place it on another tray. Summer Solstice should be a night full of new beginnings, but I always dread it, especially this year. This year I’ve hit twenty-five years old, which means the universe is supposed to show me who I’m meant to be with. It’s supposed to pick some unsuspecting fae woman to be my bride.

I'm told that when the magic chooses your mate, it feels like nothing else. Like the instant you see that woman, nothing and nobody matters. That this person now owns your heart in its entirety, and you would do anything for them.

I find that hard to believe when I watch fae cheat on each other as regularly as the sun rises. My father, before his retirement, insisted that this was a choice for each fae couple. Many see the wants of the body as separate from the wants of the heart, but I don't know how that could be possible. Knowing my luck, I would want a mate, heart and soul, and she would love my money and my title only.

The thought makes a bitter laugh swell in my throat, that I swallow down.

I pass a woman who I think I recognize. I stare at her, trying to figure it out beneath her mask. Then I realize she's got a glamor on too. Again, I want to laugh. What's the point of all this? There are no glamors in daily married life. Do these fae men and women really not think enough ahead to consider what it'll be like when their partner sees the real them at some point?

A glamor certainly never helped my father woo my mother, or made my mother hate him any less. It certainly never made my childhood any happier, any less lonely, having two parents who never wanted to be in the same room together. Two parents who never wanted to be in a room with *me*.

I shake the negativity away. Cassia's going to show up tonight, and I won't have to relive my childhood in a different role. I won't have to be anything like my father, nor force a child on her that she'll hate. *She'll show. She has to.*

“Sulien, my man, I've been looking for you!”

Cobar, the prince of the Spring Court, stands before me looking like some strange combination of an angel and a devil. His curly, honey-blond hair is loose about his shoulders, and his clothes are even tighter than usual. He's wearing the colors of the Spring Court, shades of green, and looks nearly as pretty as the women, but without the glamor.

"And I've been avoiding you," I tell him, lifting a brow.

He throws back his head and laughs, then turns to survey the room beside me. "Anyone here tickle your fancy?" He asks, his lips parting into his infamous wide grin.

Cobar is the life of the party, even when there isn't one happening. He lives and breathes for fun. I'll never understand how he manages it, but he is who he is, and he honestly has always helped my mood. Opposites attract. Isn't that what they say?

One of the ways the courts keep peace is by trying to have royal children around the same time, and by having them spend their time traveling between each other's courts to help their bonds. So, over time, Cobar has become one of my closest friends, even if we're complete opposites. He's simply... hard to dislike. Impossible, really.

"Did you hear me, old man?" he questions, grinning, because he and I are the same age.

I sigh deeply and shake my head. *No one tickles my fancy. This whole display serves no purpose. It's self-indulgent and extravagant for no reason at all.* "All of this is a waste of my time."

He gives me a big-eyed look of shock. "How can you say that in the face of so much beauty?" Then he points. "There's a gorgeous green-eyed brunette over there who would give me

beautiful babies. I may take her to a side closet and have a practice round.” But Cobar doesn’t linger on her, he scans the room, smiling and winking at every woman he sees.

I chuckle and shake my head at him. He’s like a child indulging in sweets. One should be enough, but he wants them all just because they’re available. I watch him work the room with his eyes. The women all respond to him with smiles and waves.

My friend is a playboy, but the women don’t seem to mind.

“So, you don’t think your queen is here tonight?” He asks, seeming truly curious.

I don’t think my mate exists, but I don’t tell him that. “I don’t.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we have the Winter Solstice next, maybe yours will be there.” He makes eyes with a leggy redhead and gives her a little nod. She blushes and waves at him. “Whether mine is here tonight or not will be fate. Either it’s my time to settle down, or I still have a little more time for fun.”

Is that how he sees this? Marriage as the thing to settle him down, and not finding his mate meaning he can continue having his fun? I know Cobar would never cheat on his partner, but over the years that I’ve known him, I’ve always suspected he was looking forward to marriage. To having a partner and someone to love. But, perhaps, he sees it as a bit of an obligation too?

“I need a wife to rule as king. That’s all any of this is about for me.” I tell him honestly, glancing around the room, still not finding Cassia.

“We aren’t our fathers.”

I stiffen and look at him.

Cobar's blue eyes are glued on mine. He's being serious, for once. "We're different men, and we will have different relationships with our queens."

I shrug, hating the ache in my chest. "I'm here because it's required. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"All this beauty does nothing for you?" he asks, waving a hand over the room again as if by doing so I'll see what he sees. "Come on, I know *little* Sulien enjoys his ladies." The seriousness didn't last. But then, it never does with him.

"There's nothing *little* about any part of me," I tell him right back, smiling. "These women, coated in glamors, willing to do anything to be queen, are simply not my type. I mean, do you really think any of them truly care about us?"

He sighs dramatically. "You're such a spoilsport, literally the dullest person I've ever met. Loosen up, and maybe let something other than your fist pleasure *little* Sulien tonight."

The redhead moves in our direction, and Cobar strides up to her, immediately wrapping his arms around her tiny waist and pulling her into his arms for a dance. There's no resistance. She leans into him, and they move with the ease and smoothness of longtime lovers dancing to their favorite song. Although I know for Cobar, if she's not his mate, the best she can hope for from him is a night together. Cobar doesn't keep his ladies around for long.

I grab another drink from a table, the first one having had no effect on me or my mood. A headache rises, and I grit my teeth and let more power out to the barriers surrounding our lands. This is the role of the princes, to always keep the

barriers reinforced with our magic, but the role isn't an easy one. Even tonight.

Zane Zane, Prince of the Winter Court, approaches the table close by without looking at me. His head is held high, as always, and his long, white hair spills down his back and chest. His harsh features are as cold as his lands as he snags a drink from the table and looks out at the room. Anyone would think he was miserable to be here, but the truth is, he always looks this way.

Only Cobar and I would know that beneath his surface... he *is* truly miserable here.

Zane sticks his finger in his drink, presumably making it colder. He finds no comfort in the heat of the Summer Court. His silent suffering whenever he visits my court is almost palpable to anyone who knows him.

I feel sorry for his future wife, if she's from here, because the misery that is the Winter Court will weigh on her. They live very differently out there, spending their days skating on ice, drinking warm drinks, and playing in snow. A summer fae in the winter court would be a sad sight indeed.

When Zane glances up and spots me, he slides closer. "Cobar is in his element tonight, isn't he?"

"That he is," I respond, lifting my glass to him.

We stare at Cobar as he runs his hands down the red-head's back and grabs a handful of her ass. She looks happy as can be, while the jealousy of the women around him practically oozes. Cobar is the kind of prince these women need. One who is eager for their attention, and to find his mate.

Where the hell is Cassia? I check the time again, feeling a mix of irritation and nervousness.

“Do you think we’ll find our mates tonight?” Zane takes a sip from his drink, and a look of relief comes and goes across his face in an instant. No doubt finding it satisfactorily cold, he downs the whole thing in one gulp, then turns to watch the dance floor once more. Unlike me, I suspect that Zane wishes he was out on that floor, but he’s never felt particularly at ease with women or celebrations. Hell, outside of Cobar and me, he’s never found it particularly easy to make friends.

And we’re royalty. Everyone wants to pretend to be our friends. That’s how difficult my poor friend finds the social world. I may have allowed few people close to me, but the difference is that’s been by choice.

“I hope I don’t find my mate,” I tell him.

Zane’s harsh features shift into an almost-smile. “I know that. That wasn’t my question.”

I don’t want to answer him, so I change tactics. “Are you hoping to find your mate?”

He tilts his head and doesn’t answer for a long minute. “I wouldn’t mind... someone. If it were the right someone.”

I study him, trying to decide if I’m surprised, then decide that I’m not. Zane is from a harsh land with harsh people, but beneath his surface he’s exactly the opposite. I think all his life he’s searched for gentleness, for kindness, but has only ever found anything close to what he needs through the animals he befriends.

A gentle partner might change his life. “If she’s your mate, she should be the right one. Right?”

He studies his diamond ring. “I suppose. That’s what they say, isn’t it?”

It is. But all three of us have seen evidence that chosen mates might not be all that we've been told. That maybe finding your mate isn't the fairy tale the elder fae wants us to believe.

"Has anyone caught your eye?" Again, I'm curious. Fae not of age cannot attend the Winter and Summer Solstice Balls. I've always wondered if a fae simply takes no interest in another person one moment, and then the magic makes that person irresistible a moment later... or if some level of attraction has always existed between the people.

I've heard that it happens both ways.

Zane shrugs. "I've found a few fuckable women tonight, but I'm not marrying any of these mindless fae. I hope. They just want the title. They have no idea what we deal with or even who we are, and they'll probably never care. I imagine a lifetime with them would be miserable."

I nod, although I don't even know if I'd actually fuck anyone here. The glamors hide their truths from us. It's all an illusion. If they have to hide what they look like, what else needs to be hidden? What will show up whether they want it to or not once we're married?

It's not a risk I want to take.

We stand in comfortable silence, watching the ball play out in front of us for the rest of the song. Cobar kisses up his partner's arm all the way to her neck. She blushes and giggles before he sends her on her way and finds another dance partner: someone from the Winter Court this time. He's tasting all the samples tonight.

"It's unbelievable how much magic these iron demons need from us. It's double the amount it used to be," Zane says,

squeezing his eyes closed and rubbing his temples.

My head aches from the mention of them. “The headaches are the worst part. If we had a way to give our magic without the headaches, I’d be happy to do it.”

“Those headaches are just a *wonderful* bonus to being the powerful princes that we are.” Zane scowls. I do too. It’s all bullshit, the things we have to quietly do to protect our lands. Hilarious bullshit.

“What’s so funny?” Forrest, Prince of the Fall Court, asks as he slithers up to us.

I resist the urge to punch him in the face. I promised myself I’d behave tonight, but just seeing his face makes me want to forget that promise.

“We’re just talking about how wonderful it is to be the princes of our courts.” Zane doesn’t look at Forrest as he speaks.

Forrest is a complete asshole. Out of all the courts, the Summer and Fall Court have fought the most. And while the Summer fae are more than glad to be at peace, the Fall fae live for war. They itch for any excuse to cause death and destruction, so we always have to treat them with care.

Over the years, I’ve spent just as much time with Forrest as I have with Cobar and Zane, and I still don’t trust him. He’s arrogant. Selfish. And impossible to read. I’m pretty sure that every word that comes out of his mouth conceals a lie.

“Oh, you mean how being a prince means that we could fuck any girl in this room if we wanted to?” He grins and lets his eyes wander around the room.

Zane and I exchange looks.

Women seem to shrink back from him as he stares at them, and I wonder if it's because of the scar that goes across his face, through his forehead, eye, and cheek, or if it's because of his reputation as a hunter. Maybe it's neither. Maybe it's simply because he's a Fall fae and the rumors of their ruthlessness is enough for all the women to be hoping not to be claimed as his mate.

I don't know, but Forrest tosses his head full of long, auburn hair and raises a glass to the women. "To their chances of claiming one of us."

Zane and I smirk at one another.

Forrest slams his drink and then slaps it onto a tray. I almost remind him that this isn't his court full of huge, laughing hunters and the servants that do their best to avoid them, but I hold my tongue. A moment of arrogance isn't worth war claiming my lands and people once more. I intend to be better than my father as ruler, not worse, and that would not be a good start.

"There are a lot of beautiful women here tonight. Maybe one will be your mate," Zane says, tossing another drink back, playing the part of diplomat, when he knows I won't.

Forrest smirks. "Or maybe none will be, and I'll have a few more years of fun."

I scoff. His mind is in one place tonight, but I guess I don't blame him.

A headache slams through me, and I wince, releasing more of my power. Slowly. Feeding the barrier that surrounds the fae lands, protecting our people from the iron demons, until the pressure slowly eases.

My heart thumps wildly, and I see all the fae princes are holding their heads. We all stand straighter, exchanging glances. Once we have our queens, the magic that comes from the bond will help fuel our own, and the headaches and pain will ease. At least, a bit. It's one of the many reasons for finding our queens.

When we were children, our parents helped feed their magic to keep the boundary strong. But once we hit eighteen, it was our responsibility alone. And when we reached twenty-one, they retired to the nicest lands in their courts and left all the responsibility to us, even without us having all the power.

That's the way of the fae.

"We need our queens," Zane whispers.

Forrest nods, rubbing his head one more time before dropping his hand. "Perhaps."

Looking at the time, my blood runs cold. She needs to come. She has to arrive. I need an arrangement, not a real mate. *Where the fuck is she?*

Maybe I should go drag her here.

My jaw tightens, but I push the thought aside. I want a willing wife. That's what this is all about. A willing wife who will act as a partner. *If she doesn't come on her own, then, what's the point?*

But just the thought of the magic choosing a mate for me makes my stomach turn.

I reach for another drink, and pause as a flash of gold catches my eye. My gaze zeroes in on it, and I strain my neck to make out the source of the color. Then, freeze.

Cassia. She came. And she looks... *incredible.*

She stands on the stairs leading down to the dance floor. Her hand rests on the railing, the bracelet I gave her dangling from her arm. The amber glistens from her neck and wrist, but it's nothing compared to the woman herself. She looks like sin in flesh form. I might have found her beautiful in her maid's uniform, but the outfit should be burned now that I see her in all her glory. The dress hugs her large breasts and tiny waist, sliding off her perfect hips. When I saw the slit in the dress, I hadn't imagined what it'd look like on her, but seeing her leg now, peeking from the slit, makes it hard to breathe.

Is this a mistake?

I rub my face, overwhelmed. I promised her a marriage of convenience, but how can I follow through with such a promise when I can't even handle seeing her in a dress? Heat rolls through my body, and my dick hardens. I think of her in my bathroom, the way she lingered. The way she seemed to want to see me undressed.

Is that what she wanted? Would she want more than this arrangement?

I reach for the potion in my pocket as she slowly makes her way down the stairs. Marrying her is supposed to solve all my problems, not create them. And the way my thoughts are going now... that's pure trouble.

My feet start moving before I can stop them. I'll go to her. I'll take her in my arms, just like we planned, and I'll forget the strange ache inside of me that promises nothing but heartbreak and pain. And if ever my thoughts stray from the plan, I'll remember my mother the day I found her, covered in her own blood. A dagger in her hands. Life gone from her eyes, because it was her only escape from the cruel Summer King.

I will *not* be my father.

SEVEN



Cassia

I can barely convince my feet to continue down the stairs to the ballroom as I adjust my mask. I was so sure about my decision when I left my house, but now my whole body is trembling. Someone is bound to recognize me before I even get to do this whole fake-queen thing, not that I'm important enough for that. It's just that these fae can probably smell a human instantly.

Taking a deep breath, I try to steady my mind. *It's going to be fine. I can do this.*

Continuing down the stairs, I think about my grandmother and father. They're why I'm here. If I was willing to consider becoming a whore to support them, I shouldn't be this scared to be a queen instead. Once I become Prince Sulien's mate, my family will have everything they could ever want and more.

If I just focus on them, I can do anything.

Curling my free hand into a fist, I continue down the stairs, keeping my head down. Hoping to go unnoticed until I find the prince. Keeping the images of my family in my mind, so if the urge to hurl and run from this insane plot comes, I'll remember why I don't have that option.

At the bottom of the stairs, I make my way through the crowd with care. Most of the fae are men, but that's no surprise, there's more fae men than women by far. But even so, I feel like I'm surrounded by abnormally beautiful women, women who may be the true mate and bride of the prince, not a phony like me. Honestly, any one of these women are pretty enough to be queen, but as a maid I know their dark secrets. I know those of them who can't wipe their own asses and who throw tantrums when their dresses and jewelry aren't perfect. I know the ones who have never opened a book in their lives and have heads as empty as their hearts.

Maybe I'm not a beautiful fae, but I can do this. I'm not lesser than them just because I'm not wealthy and gorgeous. Their glamorous and fancy homes don't change who they are deep inside.

I scan the room, my face itchy from the mask, looking for Prince Sulien. There's a sea of women around me wearing dazzling dresses and elaborate masks, fae men that seem to be eyeing the women, but no sign of the prince. *No doubt he's in some circle of them, struggling for air, praying for me to come save him.*

Okay, maybe not. Even though he's hatched this plan, I'm sure he's enjoying every ounce of the attention. Whatever his motivations for marrying me are, they certainly aren't that he's afraid of female attention, if half the rumors about him are true.

I feel a hand on the small of my back, and relief washes over me, thinking Prince Sulien has found me. He's the only person I know here. The only person who would randomly touch me. But when I turn around, the man touching me isn't Prince Sulien. He's tall, blond, and beautiful, wearing clothes

that are so sinfully tight that I can make out every inch of his dick.

And, boy, it's no wonder he's cocky enough to be touching a random woman.

He leans closer to me, a smile dancing across his lips. "You're who I've been waiting for. A tall, gorgeous woman who looks as if she's been dipped in gold. Dance with me." He pulls me close. His hands are soft and warm, comfortable.

But unfortunately for him, I'm not interested.

I slip from his arms. "No thanks, I'm looking for someone."

He looks surprised for a second before his smile returns. "Aren't we all?" His fingers walk up my arm slowly, and he leans his face close to mine.

My eyes close on instinct, but I force them open and turn away from him again, heart hammering. This isn't what I want. I have a plan. Find Sulien. Use the potion, fake a connection, marry, and give my family a happy life. Nowhere in the plan is some beautiful fae man randomly trying to seduce me because I look good in a dress.

A fae man who probably wouldn't give me a second look if I was scrubbing his floor.

He's in front of me again. Somehow. Probably teleported, the bastard. "Are you looking for someone in particular, then?"

"Not you," I tell him, darting around him as he stares after me, mouth hanging open.

The bastard is in front of me again, not giving me enough time to stop from crashing into him. Instantly, he wraps his

strong arms around my waist, and our bodies are pressed together.

The surprising touch takes my breath away as he presses me against his hard body. Without realizing it, I'm suddenly dancing with him. Swaying to a seductive tune that seems to beg me to fall in love with him.

But this isn't right. Didn't I tell him no?

He's beautiful with perfect honey-blond ringlets flowing down his back, and I don't hate this dance. In another life, I might revel in this moment, but I'm here on a mission. Something he doesn't seem to be getting through his thick head.

"I said I have to go." I try to get away, but he pulls me in closer.

"You don't want to dance with Prince Cobar Bloom?" he sounds shocked.

Fuck. I've gotten the attention of the Prince of the Spring Court? That's the last thing I want.

I smile sweetly enough that he smiles back. "Not even a little bit."

He pulls me even closer. "Every woman here wants to dance with me. Every woman hopes I'm their mate. But, not you, why?" And he actually seems sincere.

My body aches a little as his head lowers closer to mine, but I tell my body to calm down. Pretty fae are a dime a dozen. Maybe not royal ones, but I don't have time for him either. "Has it ever occurred to you that you might just not be that interesting?"

His jaw drops. “S-since when does being interesting matter?”

I tilt my head. “Since always.” I pull to try to escape him, but he holds on tight.

“I’m a royal fae.”

I sigh. This is getting old. “And if I have to bet, you never clean up after yourself, never thank someone unless you see a reason to impress them, and have never worked hard enough to sweat. Tell me I’m wrong.”

He stares at me like I’ve grown a second head. “Is this what women want now? Clean, polite men who sweat?”

“That’s what I want,” I tell him. “And you are *not* that.”

Couples squeeze around us, making me feel a little suffocated, but they’re just a blur as the beautiful man stares down at me in surprise. I’m waiting now for him to push me away, to get angry, to throw a fae tantrum. And, I realize, belatedly, that in trying to avoid him, I might be instead creating a scene, when he smiles again. “I could be clean and polite and sweat for a woman like you.”

I speak without thinking. “You can’t. You don’t have it in you. Tomorrow you’ll be drunk and barking orders at servants, looking forward to yet another person you can be around who will tell you how handsome and clever you are.”

“Do you think I’m handsome?” he counters, turning us on the floor.

“That wasn’t my point.”

“The question is still valid.”

I almost sigh, enjoying this bantering more than I should when I look at the time, and my heart starts to race. “I really

have to be going.”

“What is it with you and leaving me? Do you truly intend to steal my heart and then just walk away with it?”

I lick my lips, and his eyes follow the movement. “How many women have stolen your heart tonight?”

“Just you,” he lies, but it’s a sweet lie.

“Spin me,” I say, and to my relief, he does. I use the opportunity to break free of the dance and take off, slipping between groups of women as they chatter about who they’d like to be mated with. Knowing that the instant I escape him, that prince will find another woman to bother.

Completely out of Prince Cobar’s sight, I continue my search for Prince Sulien.

“You look like you belong in a museum,” a velvety voice whispers in my ear. I shiver when the man attached to the voice lets his lips brush against my ear.

When I turn around, I’m staring into eyes a color I’ve never seen before. They’re pale and almost completely colorless, but perhaps hold an edge of blue. They rest in the face of a man who is at such odds with Prince Cobar that my mind takes a moment to process it. While Prince Cobar had a sweetness, a softness that was comfortable, this man is all harsh lines. His long, straight, white hair flows down his shoulders, drawing attention to his face, with angles so sharp he could be carved from ice.

A winter fae.

I shiver. They’re known for their coldness. No doubt, this man isn’t any different.

“I’ve never seen a dress quite like yours,” he whispers, leaning in just a little closer to send that cold breath of his over my skin once more.

It takes me a minute to untangle the words from my throat. “Gold seems to be my color.”

“I saw you dancing with Prince Cobar. Are you hoping to be chosen as his mate tonight?” His eyes almost close when his lips lift into an almost-smile, and the icy man slides closer to me.

Oh, so this man is just interested in learning if I have any connection to that prince? Of course. The females here want to marry the princes, and the men want to make connections with them.

I sigh, irritated that I’d lost even more time, distracted by a handsome fae. “Not really. The *mighty* Prince Cobar forced me to dance with him. That one’s a pompous asshole, so best of luck to you, whatever you want from him.” He’s beautiful, but still an asshole.

This man’s laughter surprises me, it’s warm in a way nothing else about him is. “You may be the first woman I’ve met who thinks as much about our dear prince.”

“That’s hard to believe. I thought I was going to have to take the hose to that guy to get him to take a hint.”

He smiles, and it softens the harshness of his features. “I would pay to see that.”

“I’d do it for free,” I offer, returning his smile.

“Who are you?” he asks, and although he sounds intrigued, the question makes my stomach turn.

“No one.”

He extends his hand like I'd just said my name, and not knowing what else to do, I take it, feeling a chill when his skin touches mine. We make eye contact, and my breath hitches. When he leans down and kisses my hand, his lips aren't cold. They're warm and as soft as I imagined Cobar's to be.

Warmth spreads through my body. I gasp and pull away, though he doesn't seem to notice.

"Most women are here to meet the princes, not run away from them. Are you sure you're at the right ball?" He asks, studying me.

"I'm in the right place, but I'm not here to meet any of those asshole princes, especially if Prince Cobar is their representative. He just ruined it for all four of them."

I try to relax my face. I know it reveals my feelings, but who cares? I'm not here to impress anyone. I have one goal: to set my family up for a better life. These men that are flocking to me because it's fae mating season are not my concern.

Taking a step back, I try to say something to leave with a little more grace than I had the other man. "I should go."

"Understood. But maybe I could go with you?" he offers, surprising me.

Before I can respond, my spine straightens, and I turn. A man parts the dance floor like a stalking beast. And, unfortunately for me, I know he's approaching me because his bright green eyes are locked on me.

My pulse betrays me as he approaches. Even as I tell myself to get moving, I can't tear my eyes away from him. The man is striking, with long auburn hair and a scar through his eyes that adds to the strange air of dangerousness that surrounds him. He's big, burlier than any of the other men

here, and radiates the kind of energy of someone who could pick up a deer and rip it in two with his bare hands.

Sweat gathering at my palms, I turn to go and smash into the icy man behind me. “S-sorry,” I offer, then try to shift around him when I hear a voice behind me.

“Who is this ravishing lady in gold?” I turn to make up some excuse, when he takes my hand and twirls me around.

Fuck. Any other time in my life I might not mind a sea of hot men throwing themselves at me, but time is ticking away, and Prince Sulien is waiting. These men can offer me a few minutes of flirtation, or a night of fucking, but none of them are offering my family a way out of poverty.

“No one,” I sputter out, then try to think of an excuse to be rid of them.

But the winter fae speaks before I can. “This lady in gold just called us assholes and has no desire to meet any of us.” The men exchange a look.

“*Us?*” I ask, sensing I just humiliated myself in front of the guests of honor. *I wouldn't be Cassia if I didn't make a fool of myself at least once a day.*

Although I've actually done it multiple times today.

“Yes, *us*. I'm Zane Frost, Prince of the Winter Court. This bastard here is Forrest Wilder, Prince of the Fall Court.” He slides his cold hand down my arm, raising goosebumps on my flesh. “No harm done. Something we assholes have in common is our admiration for a beautiful woman.”

My face heats up, and I lower my eyes. I just called three of the most powerful fae in the land assholes to their faces. This isn't going the way I thought it would. No one is

supposed to even notice I'm here, and now three of the four princes have approached me.

And none of the three are the one I want to see.

"Dance with me. Give me a chance to prove to you that I'm not what you think." Prince Forrest doesn't wait for my answer. Instead, he takes my hand and leads me to the middle of the dance floor.

I want to resist, on principle, but my body, again, goes against my mind and leans into his. He's quiet and unassuming, and his hands stay where they're supposed to, which is already an attractive trait in a man. He smells like pine, and I want to lean in closer, but I'm suddenly ripped out of his arms.

"Whoa!" Prince Forrest yells, his brows furrowed, making his scar dance.

Prince Sulien glares at the other man, and I feel like I want to shrink into the floor.

"Is she yours then?" He asks, then chuckles, holding his hands in the air in innocence.

"She's done with your dance," Prince Sulien says, his voice controlled even though his eyes are filled with rage.

Prince Sulien's anger doesn't make sense to me, at least it's directed at him and not me. Aren't these princes all here to find a mate? Don't they dance with all the women before the end of the night? I mean, I know they're acting like I'm something special, but isn't that just their thing? Their fun before finding their mate?

Prince Forrest's gaze slides back to me. "I can see why you'd want to keep her for yourself, but you know the magic will decide for us all."

“And the magic won’t lead you to her,” Prince Sulien says, his tone clipped.

He pulls me away from the Fall Fae and into his arms, like he wants to dance with me next. It’s confusing, but I lift my hand and place it on his shoulder as his arms slip around my waist. My head spins a little from the contact, and from the abrupt change. Instead of searching, I’ve now found where I’m supposed to be.

The prince is who I’ve been looking for all evening. We’re supposed to be touching, I think, to make the spell work, and yet this feels more intimate than when I was watching him undress.

“You came,” he whispers in my ear, the anger fading from his voice.

His warm breath makes my skin tingle, and I suck in a breath. This feeling is wrong. We have an arrangement. An agreement for my family. I can’t let the fact that he makes me weak in the knees forget that.

Hell, the man made it clear he has no intention of fucking me.

“Of course I came,” I say, keeping my voice low.

We’ve never been this close before. I can feel his hesitation as he pulls me in closer. His fingertips press into me, heating my skin with his touch. But it’s different than with the other princes. This desire feels like it only exists in my mind. Like he’s playing a role, and I’m imagining there’s more between us than there is.

It almost makes me miss the other princes. But not quite. I’m supposed to be in Prince Sulien’s arms. How else is the potion supposed to work?

“You look better than I thought you would in that dress.” His hands shift on my waist, and I shiver.

“You thought about how I’d look in it?” I’m genuinely surprised.

We’re supposed to be conducting business. We have an arrangement. No strings attached. So who cares what his little human bride looks?

“I thought about it. A little,” he says, his voice deep and sexy. This feels flirty. Too flirty to be a deal we’re making. Too flirty for a marriage just for show.

Unless this is a show too.

My back arches as his hand slides further down my back and a sigh escapes my lips. I don’t know why I’m responding like this. Too many human women have fallen for the soft touches of the fae, only to be forgotten in the morning. I won’t be one of those women, even if I’ll be married to this fae.

Prince Sulien turns me on the dance floor, and I hear the women whispering. Something about how Prince Sulien never dances. My body tenses, but I try to relax. Time is ticking down. The magic hour will be upon us, and he’ll use his potion. This is all part of the plan.

So why doesn't it feel like it?

He draws me in a little closer, and I look over his shoulder. There, drinks in hand, are the other fae princes, and they’re watching us. Their expressions are a mixture of annoyance, curiosity, and envy. Which I don’t understand.

I glance behind me to see if there’s anyone else they might be staring at, then back at them. Sure enough, they’re looking at me. Which makes absolutely no sense.

My heartbeat picks up, and I hate that I feel like tonight I got some small taste of each of them. I'm a woman with needs, but I'm not someone who ever falls for a pretty face. So, this weird connection to them bothers me more than I like.

I'm *marrying* Prince Sulien. I won't be cheating on him, so that means a lifetime with no sex and lots of masturbation. When I accepted this deal, I accepted that. *So why is it that a lifetime without sex suddenly feels painful when I stare at them?*

And they stare back.

I shiver, feeling my nipples harden as their gazes lock onto mine. Those three are dangerous. And no matter what happens moving forward, I'll avoid them at all costs. I swear it.

EIGHT



Cassia

As we finish our dance, the air starts to feel heavy with static. Everyone's gazes shift up toward the lunar skylight, beyond the candles to the glass ceiling. The full moon is in its place, which means it's time for the ritual. For the magic to unleash and reveal to the fae their chosen mates.

Some people keep dancing with their partners, but more and more women are breaking free and edging closer to the princes. And because they're close to me, that means the women are squeezing in around us. It's suffocating. Several times I fix my mask, praying it stays in place.

Praying I can do this.

My father, my grandmother, my ratty house with food for tonight, but none for tomorrow or any day after, are counting on me. Working as a whore or nothing else. My future depends upon this moment.

I've made my choice, and this is it. I just have to be brave enough to face it with my head held high.

Prince Cobar is near, taking every opportunity to touch all the women, *wherever* he can get a grip. They fawn over him, squealing and giggling in his presence like he'll grab their

boob, and they will suddenly be queen. As I watch him smirking, his gaze collides with mine, and my breath rushes out. The look he gives me... it's so damn possessive that I have to look away to ease the tension inside me.

Focus. He's none of your concern. He's busy with his women anyway, not that it matters to me.

I feel annoyed for reasons I don't understand. *This must be his favorite holiday.* Well, I guess it's technically his first time celebrating it, given his age, but I bet it'll be his favorite holiday moving forward. The player.

Forrest and Zane stoically shake hands with the women as they approach. It's formal. Almost like the fastest interview for a position I've ever seen. They're not even interested in the women themselves, just whatever magic is supposed to show. Magic that will suddenly make them seem interested in a woman they previously didn't give two shits about, I guess.

Only, that doesn't seem to be enough for the women. Just as many that shake their hands are grabbing their arms, their chests, and even their asses. I would have thought the two men would enjoy the attention, but instead, they already seem tired by the whole affair. A prospect that makes me happier than I care to admit.

I know they're not mine. I know the moment of attraction I felt with them means nothing, and that they have those kinds of moments with women a hundred times a day, but I still like the fact that they don't seem to be enjoying being felt-up by a bunch of desperate women.

Zane jumps a little, and I'm pretty sure someone grabbed ahold of his cock. His expression grows colder, and I wonder if his skin is as cold as his mood. *Shouldn't he be happy? Couldn't one of these women be his mate?*

“The groping has commenced,” I attempt a laugh, looking in Sulien’s direction.

His gaze is locked on mine, his eyes dark and intense. “It’s all part of this shitty song and dance.”

“What a romantic!” I say, fanning myself with one hand.

His lips curl into an almost-smile, and then it fades away as hands grab at him.

“Prince Sulien!” Someone in a high-pitched voice calls.

“My mate!” Calls another.

Women separate us, pushing me away from him, and I’m suddenly lost in the crowd. No less than twenty women have come up to him and touched his hand, his broad shoulders, his arms, and other parts of his anatomy in as many minutes. He scowls through it all, almost pushing to reach me once more. Then I’m back in his arms.

“Did you feel the tingle of magic with any of the blushing brides?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood and ignore the brick in my stomach.

He doesn’t laugh. I wonder if he ever laughs, and if he does, what it sounds like. He clenches me harder and takes a shaky breath. His auburn-eyes meet mine, holding my gaze intently, and my heart skips a beat. He seems to be trying to silently communicate with me, and I hear the message loud and clear.

It’s happening. We’re about to play this dangerous game, I know it.

“Are you ready?” His left hand slides into his pocket, where I assume the potion for the spell is.

Before I can answer, the air crackles, and Sulien's dark hair starts floating upward. All around the ballroom, everyone's hair is standing on end. I guffaw. These high fae are at their finest: ballgowns, tailored suits, jewels galore, and all of their hair reaches for the sky. *How many women sat for hours getting their hair done?* The moon just ruined it all.

The moon. And the magic. That can only touch the fae. The magic that is different from anything I've felt in my life. I think this is the closest I'll ever be to feeling like a fae.

"Does this happen every time?" I ask as the lights flicker.

A hush falls over the room, and Prince Sulien grips me harder. I assume this is a new development, but I can't begin to guess what it is. The magic has been here since the moon reached its peak, that's when the women started groping the princes, but something more is happening now. *Does it grow stronger with time?*

Alarm flashes on Sulien's face for the briefest moment before light blinds me as sparks come shooting out from where our hands touch. I try to jerk my hand away, but Sulien holds on tight. I stare down at our joined hands, and force myself to keep breathing. As I watch, the sparks continue to spread until they're shooting out of our very skin, and the whole room brightens from the light we're emitting.

Oh, shit. This is... not what I expected, but this must be what it looks like when a fae finds their mate.

He did it! The spell worked! I only wish I'd asked him more about it, because I had no idea that it'd have such an obvious effect.

I look at him, my gut turning. His eyes are wide, and I remember that we're playing a part here. I mimic him, doing

my best to let shock and wonder play across my face. We're just two fae here at the Summer Solstice, finding our mate, and it's all so magical and perfect.

Not at all terrifying.

The crowd *oohs*, and *ahhs* as the sparks continue to fly. Chatter builds up as they realize what's happening. I feel the eyes of hundreds of fae as they focus on us, on me, the new bride-to-be of the Summer Prince.

"Prince Sulien has found his mate!" A man calls out in the crowd, saying what everyone is thinking.

Cheers sound from all over the room, but our moment only lasts a minute. There are more sparks in various areas of the room. They're all smaller, though. The colors range, some blue, some green, and some red. Only ours is a bright gold, overtaking this part of the room so that the other lights almost look comically dull in comparison.

This must be what it's supposed to look like when a royal finds his match. I guess the royals do everything bigger and brighter than the rest of the fae.

"To the future King and Queen of the Summer Court!" Someone calls out, holding up a glass in a toast.

Glasses clink all around the room, and cheers rise up.

I tear my gaze away from all the lights and sounds of the room and focus back on Prince Sulien. He's staring at me intently, and my heart flips. It's strange how he does that. Makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world. It's like the quiet man knows how to seduce a woman without a single word.

"Cassia," he whispers.

The flipping feeling in my chest grows, even while I remind myself this is all for show. He pulls me against him, his body hard and warm against mine. His gaze slides to my lips, and I lick them thoughtlessly, nervously. *This is all a show. This is all a show.*

When he leans down and captures my lips with his own, every thought fades from my mind. Even as the gold light shooting off of us fades away. There's only him and me. His hard lips on mine, and I realize I've dreamed of this moment a thousand times before.

And it's better than anything I imagined.

His lips are hungry. Desperate. Slanting over my mouth, branding me with his touch. His hands slip up and down my body as if he wants to touch all of me, but doesn't know where to start. It's incredible. The kind of kiss that makes a woman's legs weak and sends all logic flying out the window.

And then, he breaks our kiss. We're both panting, but he stares down at me with absolute shock, which I almost believe. How the hell is this man good enough of an actor to make my legs shake, and my body ache?

Damn this beautiful fae prince.

The light between us finally begins to dull, then fades. Prince Sulien keeps hold of my hand as people surround us, giving their congratulations. I force a smile that I hope doesn't look painful and take their kind words, trying not to think about how badly these same fae treated me in my maid uniform. How little Prince Sulien noticed me before today, at least since we were children.

This is all a show. A show I'll be part of for the rest of my life, so I better learn to compartmentalize. To know what's real

and what's pretend.

More sparks go off around the room and people rush from one place to another, getting drunker with each passing second, or at least that's what it feels like. The crowd around us starts to shift away as Prince Sulien pulls me a little closer. I want to ask him a thousand questions about what will happen from here, but I know it's not the time or place.

Music continues. Dancing resumes. The mating hour hasn't passed yet. So, many more fae should find their matches in the minutes that come. And, it seems, they're eager for exactly that because I can't imagine any other world where the king's match would so quickly be forgotten.

Don't these fae have some sucking up to do to their new queen? I almost smile at the thought.

I glance at Prince Sulien, and his countenance hasn't changed. Except, maybe, he looks a bit confused. He drops my hand, and again I desperately want to ask him questions. *Are we going to have to publicly kiss a lot, or was this a special thing? What do we do for the rest of tonight? Do I return home after? My thoughts continue spinning, running over everything that had happened so far. Was the brightness and size of our light just a normal fae thing when it comes to royalty? Or did he fuck up the spell?*

No one is asking questions about me and us right now, but tomorrow they just might, if things weren't done right. I have no knowledge about what's normal or strange to compare this night to. I just want to know why the hell he looks so confused.

Something is off.

“Congratulations!” Prince Zane approaches, clapping Prince Sulien on the back, his expression almost cheerful. “There’s no more beautiful woman than her here tonight, you did well, my friend.”

Prince Zane turns to me and tilts his head, and again I feel that strange heat crawling beneath my skin. “And it’s no surprise to me that you were meant to be a queen.” He takes my hand as if to kiss it, but suddenly, the candlelight flickers again and sparks fly from our hands.

What. The. Fuck.

This isn’t possible.

Another light show begins. Sparks dancing between us while I try to pry my hand away, and he holds on tightly. My heart races as I try to understand what’s happening. The spell has to have gone wrong, which means everyone will know what we did.

I flinch, expecting shouts of anger or surprise. Expecting... I don’t know, I need to start running like hell. No one knows me after all. I can just run all the way home and forget tonight ever happened.

Instead, someone shouts, “She matched with Prince Zane too! A Summer and Winter Queen.”

An uproar of conversations takes over the crowd.

What. The. Actual. Hell. Is. Happening.

“This hasn’t happened in at least three generations,” another person shouts.

No. No way. The spell went wrong, and now it looks like I’m mated to *two* fae princes? How will this even work?

Prince Zane doesn't know about the deal, and we can't tell him, or I'll lose my damn head.

This is bad. *Real* bad.

I yank my hand out of Prince Zane's and survey the crowd, looking for my escape. But, they're everywhere, a mixture of amusement and amazement on their faces. Obviously, they think this is real because their excitement fills the room. Applause breaks out, and people continue to shout.

So... my brain is trying to catch up with the scene in front of me. This must have happened before. A fae must have had two mates before. In the back of my mind, something scratches at it. Memories of fae guests at the castle with two husbands. But I... this wasn't part of the plan.

I need to get out of here.

"My lady," Prince Zane says softly, then moves closer. "I'm honored that the magic has chosen me as your mate."

It's hard to swallow around the lump in my throat. "I guess I'm a real catch."

His icy facade crumbles, and his lips curl into a smile. He looks at me like he's looking at all the hope in his world, and it steals my breath. It makes me forget all about the screwed up potion, Prince Sulien, and my life without choices. I'm not some worthless human, I'm the mate to *royal fae*.

When he leans in and kisses me, I'm frozen for a minute in shock. But then, his cold lips on mine send warmth blossoming through my body in the most unexpected way. Goosebumps erupt across my skin, and my head spins. His lips are soft, gentle, teasing. Like he's tasting me, and I'm just letting him.

My hand curls into his shirt, and he shifts closer. Close enough that I can feel his erection pressing against my stomach. Close enough that I can hear the beating of his heart matching the fast rhythm of my own. So close, and yet, I want him closer.

Fuck. I need him closer.

He groans against my mouth, and the sound shakes me from his spell. I leap back, and my gaze goes to Prince Sulien. He looks pissed. His hands curled into fists. His mouth in a thin line. *Well, fuck. This isn't good. Have I already pushed him hard enough for him to call this whole thing off?*

No, it was just a kiss. He kissed *me*. When we fix this mess, I'll remind Sulien as much.

And stay the fuck away from this Winter Prince.

Despite myself, my gaze swings to Prince Zane. He has his fingers pressed to his lips, and he's smiling as he gazes at me in a way that makes my heart ache. A strange tugging comes inside of me, and I want to close the distance between us, but my logical brain wins out, and I step further away, trying to look at anything except the two princes.

This whole thing is trouble. I need to get out of here.

Prince Cobar approaches, pushing his way through the crowd, a mischievous smile perked on his face. His mind has to be somewhere terrible. And then, as his gaze runs from my toes slowly up to my head, I know where his mind has been. This guy is picturing me doing all kinds of things, probably positioned between his two buddies.

Asshole.

"I can see now why you had no desire to dance with me. You're going to be one busy lady being matched with two

princes. You'll get the summer heat *and* that icy coldness that's Prince Zane's specialty. Congratulations!" He takes my hand as if to kiss it, and the lights flicker again.

Fuck on a stick!

"No no no!" I back away from all of them as the sparks continue to bounce between us, and Prince Cobar stares at me in absolute shock.

Because of the damn spell... I'm matched with Prince Cobar, too. I need to get out of here before I match with a dozen fae males and have to spend my nights rotating between cocks, or else admit my deception. *This is too much. I need to escape and fade into the night, never to be seen again.*

I make eye contact with Sulien. I can't read his face, but I think it looks pained. As it should be! He was so damn confident about this spell that I actually believed this could work.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.

"Remember Queen Icily, she matched with all four princes," someone shouts.

Suddenly, everyone is chanting, "Four princes! Four princes!"

My heart drops into my stomach. *Do these people just want to see some poor woman bonked to death? I mean, most women complain about having to pretend to sleep to avoid their husbands. How am I supposed to avoid four of them?*

Four seemingly hot, horny ones?

It might have been a pleasant fantasy in my bed by myself, but this fantasy is becoming a nightmare really quickly, so I grab my skirt with one hand and search for the exit. I can

make it, I think. But through the crowd, it's hard to figure out which direction to go for a minute, until I spot the stairs.

Then I see Prince Forrest approaching, looking pleased as a peacock, his gaze fixed on me. *Fuck.*

"You're at three out of three," he calls to me with a big grin. "So, damn it, why not?" He reaches for me, and I dodge him, racing for the exit.

The crowd, full of libations, and feeling very loose, laugh as I dart around the guests, trying to escape Prince Forrest's touch. Some people move out of my way. Others, in their drunkenness, grab me and try to thrust me in his direction. I'm peering over the crowd, looking for the stairs. He's stalking me like I'm his prey, determination blazing in his eyes. He pushes everyone in his path away, moving closer and closer to me.

I've never wanted to crawl into the floor and die so much.

Ahead of me, I see the stairs. I dash towards the door; it's so close I can practically taste freedom. Then, someone sticks their foot out and trips me. I cry out and crash onto my stomach, then roll onto my back. *I'm going to figure out who did that and claw their eyes out.*

People gawk at me, laughter filling the ballroom. I scramble to get up, but every time I plant my hand on the ground, someone uses their foot to push me off balance. The crowd parts, making a pathway, and Prince Forrest emerges. I can see the satisfaction on his face because I'm within his grasp.

"Are you okay?" He asks, his voice saccharine.

"I'm fine," I grumble. My attempt to roll over and escape is thwarted by the crowd. They inch closer, boxing me in

completely.

“Touch her!” A woman in a bright blue dress screams.

“Grab her!” Another man says.

Forrest holds his hand out to me. “This is ridiculous. Let me help you up.”

“Not a chance, asshole,” I shout.

His mouth twists into a smile. “Either I help you, or you risk being trampled to death.”

I don’t even hesitate. “Have them bury me in white to reflect my innocence!”

He laughs, and the sound is as smooth as velvet. “I doubt very much you’re innocent, now, take my hand.” When I don’t move, he adds, “If you’re mine, I’ll claim you whether I help you up, or I come down there with you.”

He’s serious. Fuck.

I have no choice. Feeling like I’m about to touch fire, I slowly reach my hand out. He snatches it eagerly, and the candlelight flickers.

Shit. This can’t be happening.

Sparks fly from our hands. They shoot all the way to the lunar skylight and illuminate the entire space. Forrest stares down at me in utter disbelief, as if until this moment this was all just a game to him, and he’d never truly thought I was his mate.

The crowd thunders. Everyone in the room screams and cheers. The music comes on again, louder and faster than before, and there’s a frenzy in the air that’s almost frightening.

I try to yank my hand away, but Forrest has a strong hold on me. He pulls me up and into his arms, before twirling me like we're dancing.

My head spins. I don't know what the hell to say or do. Now I'm dancing with a fae prince I never even thought about until tonight. A fae who thinks I'm going to be marrying him soon.

"This isn't right," I tell him.

He pulls me closer, his hands burning through the thin fabric at my waist. "It's a lot to handle, but it's right. It's always right."

The look in his eyes overwhelms me, like he can't quite believe I'm his mate. Maybe because I'm not. Maybe because this is all a lie that only Sulien and I know the truth about. Does he sense it too?

He can't.

"I knew there was something about you, the moment I met you," his voice holds an edge of seduction that my body desperately wants to fall for.

"I'm no one. This is... nothing."

He tilts his head, his mouth curving into a smile. "This is the furthest thing from nothing, and you feel it too."

I don't know what I'm going to say, certainly not the truth, when he leans down and captures my lips in an unexpected kiss. Every muscle in my body tenses. I start to pull away, but he follows my mouth, the pressure of his lips going from soft to hard within moments. My thoughts spin away, and I cling to him, my heartbeat filling my ears.

My body feels alive—electric. I shouldn't be enjoying this, but my body leans into him, my lips part, and his tongue invades my mouth. Instantly, my core throbs, and all logic fades away. I grip his arms, digging my fingernails in, trying to gain back my control... and losing.

He growls, and the vibrations in my mouth makes me shiver. I moan into his mouth, trying to remember who the hell I am and what the hell I'm doing, but all I want is him. Sliding closer to him, I press my body against him, and he jerks back from me just an inch, panting against my mouth.

“If you keep that up, I'm going to fuck my beautiful bride right here in public. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to keep that body of yours all to myself.” Forrest bites my bottom lip before releasing me from our kiss.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes. *Did that really just happen? How the hell did one kiss make me lose control like that? I must be hornier and more lonely than I thought.*

Suddenly, someone yanks my arm, hauling me from his arms.

My head spins, and I curse. “Hey! That's attached to my body, you know!” I scowl, then realize that Prince Sulien is the culprit.

He stares at me. I stare at him. I'm suddenly unsure about what the hell I'm supposed to be doing. *When Forrest kissed me, was that cheating?* Prince Sulien and I had a deal, not Forrest and I. And yet, the expectation is that I marry all of them.

I should be able to kiss all of them, right? So why does Prince Sulien look so pissed off?

“What are we doing?” I whisper to him, drawing closer. *What am I supposed to do right now? Is there a way to undo this mating bond gone crazy? Should I be running before anyone knows who I am?*

People began to toast around the room as more and more fae find their mates.

“To Prince Sulien!”

“To Prince Forrest!”

“To Prince Zane!”

“To Prince Cobar!”

There’s a pause. “Who *is* she?”

The crowd murmurs, and my skin suddenly feels too tight. No one has any idea who I am, but when they discover the truth, they’ll know I’m a fraud. Right? *Will they really believe I have enough fae in me to be bonded to not one, but four princes?*

It’s doubtful.

“Who is the bride who will share the four princes?” Another voice cries.

Drunken voices. All of them. *This is not going to go well.*

“Take off her mask. Unveil her!”

I use my free hand to hold my mask in place. My breathing comes in and out so hard it hurts. The plan, in my head, had been to unveil me here, at the ball, so that no one could deny our bond. But right now, I don’t know if I want that any longer. If I ran right now, I don’t even know if Prince Sulien would look for me. He may just go along with it being a mistake, and then meet his real mate at another solstice.

This can't happen now. I need time to think. Poverty. A terrible life for my family. Starvation. Or, not only keeping the truth from everyone I know, but from three of my four husbands. Pulling three innocent men into our plot and keeping them from their true mates.

Somehow, being a partner and a bride, not just for show, to four men. With them, they'd want me to share their bed and their lives. They'd want me to have their kids and have a real life with them.

All while I lied to them.

I take another step back and crash into a hard chest. Prince Zane. Forrest, Sulien, and Cobar stand close to me, and I can't tell if the looks they shoot in my direction are full of pity or something else.

"They need to know who you are. They'll find out eventually," Prince Zane says, his voice as cold as his words.

"I need more time," I whisper.

He leans close to me and says, "Don't we all," and then he pulls the ties to my mask and yanks it off, showing my whole face to everyone in the ballroom.

Taking away my choice and my escape.

I guess this is my life and my lie now.

NINE



Cassia

There's no real reaction from the crowd. No gasps. No shouting. But that doesn't stop my heart from pounding so hard that it sounds like drums in my head. I'm standing here surrounded by fae, feeling naked without my mask. A liar, pretending to be something I'm not, with my life on the line.

But the drunks just stare at me, grinning. A few look confused, like, "I don't remember her in one of our orgies." Not at all like they think I'm a fraud.

Which means I'm probably in the clear. Right?

Breathe. I think. Just breathe. You're safe.

No one knows who I am. Even if they've seen me before, they wouldn't have looked at my face well enough to really remember me because no one pays attention to the help.

Being seen as no better than a trashcan suddenly has a huge upside!

When no one calls for my head, my pulse starts to return to normal. Soon, I'll give them my name. It'll still mean nothing to them. And it probably won't be until tomorrow, when they're sober, that they'll start to look into the family connections for one Cassia Wither.

“This is Cassia Wither,” Prince Sulien says, speaking before I have the chance. “She will be your new queen.” His tone is one of pride as he takes my hand and lifts it a little.

And, I swear, the man is as good of an actor as he is hot. There’s just something about him. About how warm his touch is. How cold his disposition is. It’s like he was born to play a role... not be a person, which is almost sad. But at least his words tell me what part I should be playing in this little game of ours.

He wants to keep rolling with this, even if the spell screwed everything up. I can do this. I can roll with this, for now.

“Cassia?” Prince Cobar’s voice draws my gaze as he smiles at me. “I like it.”

“It’s as beautiful as the woman herself,” Prince Forrest says, his thumb brushing over his bottom lip, like he’s reminding me of our kiss.

I tear my gaze from him, my cheeks burning, and my gaze meets Prince Zane’s. He’s studying me, but when he sees that I’ve noticed, he murmurs, “It suits you, my queen.”

My cheeks feel even hotter. *What now? Everyone has seen me. They’ll remember me. Is it too late to turn back now?* I think it might be, but my mind can’t quite wrap around what will happen from here.

People murmur all around us. It’s almost comical. They’re still trying to find their mate, moving around, touching each other, kissing each other, and yet, they’re trying to keep an eye on us at the same time. I guess it’s not every day all four princes match with one woman, but they seem confused about what’s more important, their mate, or me.

It’s your mate. Idiots. Focus on each other, not me.

“The last time a female mate was shared with all the princes, our lands went to war.” I hear someone say, and I tense, looking at Sulien.

He gives a subtle nod, but nothing else. *So it's true? This means even more trouble than I thought?* Heck, I should have paid more attention when my grandma was teaching me history, but it was always my least favorite subject. Like, if I don't care what the fae are doing right now, I certainly don't care what they did a hundred years ago.

“Does this mean—?” I start to ask Sulien, but he shakes his head.

I guess my questions about the fact that this is really possible, mating with four princes, will have to wait until later. And my *many* questions about what the hell that life looks like. Right now, we just need to get out of here.

“What court or house is she from?” Another person asks.

I stiffen. *Did Sulien think of this? What do I say?* I should probably pick one of the more mysterious houses, the ones who appear at the Solstices and otherwise avoid the courts, like the House of Death and Sorrow. No one would wonder why they haven't seen me before tonight, because I wouldn't have been old enough for the past Solstices, and wouldn't have come for other social events.

I'm about to start pulling an answer out of my ass when my gaze meets that of Lady Fucking Takara, the bitch who accused me of stealing. She's wearing an auburn dress, her long hair weaved into an intricate hairdo on top of her delicate head. For a second I don't think she recognizes me, and then her eyes widen.

Damn it.

“She’s a human maid!” Lady Takara screams, her voice filled with shock and disgust.

No one pays her any attention. They still talk amongst themselves about how all four princes matched with one woman. Which, I guess, isn’t a surprise, given how drunk and distracted most of the fae are.

But, she tries again, “She’s just a maid! A *human* maid, and a thief!” Her voice rises as she tries to get them to listen to her, and this time she seems to get through the cloud of their drunkenness.

Eyes move from her to me, and it grows quieter.

My heartbeat pounds through my chest. *This is it. Everyone knows. Now, there will be questions, and they’ll figure out that I’m not who I’m pretending to be. The spell will be revealed, and I’ll lose my head.*

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that I taste blood, feeling like a lifetime has passed since Takara’s shout, even though I know it’s probably only been a few seconds.

A man steps in front of her, the huge build of one of the Fall Fae. “Are you a fucking idiot? She wouldn’t be mated with any of them if she was human. Have some respect for your new queen!” For a minute I think he’s going to shove her, but another huge fae grabs him and steers him away from Lady Takara.

“These matches were strong. The matches never happen like that. They must be fated mates.” A masked woman points out.

There’s more murmuring, and I feel even more concerned when they talk about the powerful connection that is fated mates. Mates that are brought into this world to be with one

another, body and soul. The kind of mates who can't live without one another.

I've heard about them. They're rare, but there's several pairs of them, even just in the Summer Court. I had no idea that their bonds looked bigger and brighter than the normal matches. I had no idea that's what the spell would make people think.

Where the hell did Prince Sulien get this spell?

I look at him, but his face is a mask of indifference. I get the sense he's putting on a show for the audience, but I need him to do or say something to tell me what to do. It's like he's feeding me to wolves and seems to be completely confident that I'll be fine.

Or he doesn't care.

My gut flips. The other princes are studying me, and I jerk my gaze away from them. I can still feel the heat of their gazes on me, but I'm worried that they'll be able to read through my lies like a book.

The second I can escape them, I need to.

Lord Cirrus, the very man himself, comes pushing through the crowd. He stands close enough to Lady Takara to protect her, but not so close as to let everyone in the room know that he's screwing her. He's big, brawny and seems like he's not sure exactly what side he's on. Not that I blame him. You'd have to be an idiot, like Lady Takara, to risk pissing off all the royals.

Finally, Lord Cirrus speaks, "The elders simply need to be consulted."

Suddenly, Prince Cobar is laughing. "Do you think anyone is going to tell us who our mate is?" He looks incredulous, like

he's watching a bunch of people act like idiots. Like the very idea that someone is questioning me as their mate is a joke.

Prince Zane stands beside him, his expression cold and angry. "Even the elders wouldn't be that foolish," his voice is as cold as his face, and he gives me a look. One that makes me shiver.

Prince Forrest squeezes between Zane and Cobar, but his gaze is fixed on me. "It's like some fae are looking for a fight tonight."

I take a step backward, toward the door. Tension sings through the room, and I get the feeling that things are about to go very south. But maybe I can still run for it during the fight? *No, shit, they know who I am. There's no running now.*

Prince Forrest cracks his knuckles in a very deliberate way. "You boys need to get warmed up?"

Fuck.

I turn to Prince Sulien and glare. It's only then that I realize he's staring at me. The strangest look of vulnerability on his face. It's like he's forgotten that he's in a room full of people and he feels... I don't know, but when his gaze catches mine, his expression goes back to one of indifference.

"Prince Sulien?" Prince Forrest says, standing up straighter. "You want to help us with these idiots?"

The quiet man continues regarding me for a second and then says, "Everyone, go back to the Solstice."

It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop when someone comes pushing through the crowd. I stiffen when I see the elder in his long auburn gown. He's an elder of the summer court, one who had stepped around me while I cleaned more than a few times. A fae so old that he actually *looked* old,

which easily made him a few hundred years, I guessed. And someone must have called him to the Solstice because of me.

He approaches Prince Sulien and bows. “Your highness. I heard I was needed.”

Prince Sulien glances at Lady Takara in disgust and says, “You heard wrong.”

The elder draws himself up taller. “Surely you can see that this needs to be sorted out, and we have the wisdom to do that.” He gestures to the top of the stairs where three other elders stand. I imagined they’d look more serene and stoic based on past stories of them stepping in to advise the royalty in desperate times. Instead, their faces are etched with unease. Like Prince Sulien is someone *they* don’t even want to mess with, but they’re going to, and it’s not going to be fun.

I glance at Prince Sulien. *He has to stop this. If they get involved, no doubt they’ll see me for the fraud I am.*

But Prince Sulien simply gives a little nod and says, “If you will.”

If you will? Is he kidding me? Isn’t he the prince? Can’t he tell them what to do?

Damn it.

TEN



Cassia

Princes Zane, Sulien, and Forrest start off ahead of us, whispering between themselves. I feel the warmth of a hand on the small of my back and I'm gently pushed toward the door of the ballroom. I glance back to see Prince Forrest when only moments before he was in front of me. *Damn royals and their ability to teleport.* What's worse is that his large hand feels nice on my back, and has my dirty thoughts wondering what else is *large* about Prince Forrest.

Not that I'll let him show what he's doing to me. "Do we need to do this?"

Prince Forrest's voice is warm in my ear. "It'll be over quickly, and then you'll be all ours."

Butterflies dance in my stomach, but I force myself to try to sound normal when I say, "So, *now* you want to let me out of this room? I was more than happy to leave before!"

Prince Forrest laughs, and the sound is deep and rich. "Well, now you're leaving *with* me, so it's different."

"Different my ass," I mutter, remembering being hunted down like an injured squirrel.

“Speaking of your ass, I approve,” he purrs into my ear, sending every hair on my body standing on end.

“Have you ever met an ass you didn’t approve of?” Prince Cobar asks, suddenly at his side.

I glance at the other man, and he winks at me. It’s like he wants to make sure Prince Forrest isn’t the only one who gets to flirt with me. But, I guess, that’s normal, since he thinks I’m his mate. This whole thing is a fucking disaster, and Prince Sulien better have a plan to get us out of it.

Prince Forrest grins. “*Your* ass does absolutely nothing for me.”

“Thank the gods for that!” Prince Cobar says, then throws back his head and laughs.

These two are pretty funny together. I know the princes rotate from palace to palace together every year as a way of keeping the peace between the courts, but I hadn’t actually thought about their relationship much... except for the dirty rumors I’ve heard.

Oh... the rumors...

“So you two have never...?” I point between them, unable to stop myself from voicing the ridiculous question. “Because there’s a lot of whispers about the fae princes.”

They stop short, forcing me to stop and look at them both. The men look absolutely shocked. So blown away that they seem to have lost the ability to talk, which makes me wickedly happy for reasons I don’t understand.

There! Let them be the uncomfortable, flustered ones.

Prince Forrest lifts a finger and shakes it like a scolding mother, with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen. “My

lady, I have *never* dunked my pen in a manly inkwell.”

A laugh explodes from my lips. “*Manly ink?*”

His expression grows more serious. He walks toward me and takes my chin in his large hand, tilting me up, up, up to look into his brilliant green eyes. Making it impossible for me not to trace his scar with my gaze before returning to his eyes. “Many fae don’t care what, uh, hole they dip their pen into, but I prefer the feminine inkwell.”

I’m laughing again, and I can’t stop as he gazes down at me in horror. *Feminine inkwell? What the fuck?*

His serious expression slowly shifts, and then he’s smiling. Before I know what’s happening, he leans down and brushes his lips against mine. “There’s always going to be laughter in our home,” he whispers against my lips.

My humor is gone. I swallow hard and stagger back, and I’m relieved when he lets me go. But then, I’m bumping into someone else.

When I turn, Prince Cobar is there, smiling at me. His beautiful face is even lovelier when he smiles. “I took a moment to decide if I was offended by your question and decided that I wasn’t. I prefer the ladies as well, but there *are* some awfully pretty fae men, so I understand why you might think otherwise. Prince Forrest included among those pretty men, of course.” Then he winks at the other man.

The Fall Fae’s cheeks turn bright red, nearly as red as his hair. “Watch it, Cobar, or I’m going to run you through with my sword.” But he doesn’t sound angry, just flustered.

Prince Cobar flutters his eyelashes. “My, my, you’re forward, Prince Forrest, but I’d prefer if you kept your sword to yourself,”

“*Cobar...*” he hisses, and I can’t tell how serious he’s being, but it’s amusing as hell.

“Though I reckon we’ll have to learn how to work our swords together if we’re going to properly run our bride through.” Prince Cobar leans his head to the side and cups his face while fluttering those long lashes again.

It’s hard not to laugh, even though they’re talking about sharing me in the bedroom. Something I haven’t agreed to. Hell, I truly figured the worst-case scenario would be me having to go from bed to bed with these princes. But all at once? That’s one fantasy better left in the imagination.

Prince Cobar spins to face me and takes my hand. “I swear, my lady, if Prince Forrest and I have to practice day and night until you’re ready for us in your bed, we will manage to make our cocks work in sync.”

“I am not practicing with you!” Prince Forrest roars, but he still looks more shocked than angry.

Prince Zane is suddenly beside our little group. “Prince Cobar, stop messing with him. We have more important things to worry about.” Then, he turns to me, his expression impossible to read. “Worry was the wrong word, my lady. You have nothing to worry about.”

He offers me his arm, and unsure what else to do, I reluctantly take it. Our pace is more brisk as we continue along, but I can hear the others scrambling to keep up with us.

“The elders simply want to weigh in since this is an unusual situation,” Prince Zane explains to me gently, patting my hand with his cold one.

Ah. Here, I sense I might actually get some answers.

“How unusual is it?” It’s a question I’ve been wondering since the spell went wrong. Apparently, my matching with four fae royals is believable, but strange enough to get the elders involved. Probably because there was a war the last time this happened according to the fae in the ballroom.

Which is more than a little scary. *Way to add to the pressure.*

Prince Zane sighs. “All the courts and houses have relationships where one woman shares more than one mate. It’s believed this is because there are fewer women than men among the fae, so if women aren’t shared, many men would be left without a mate.” It’s strange how much I like the sound of his voice. I thought it was as cold as the man at first, but it’s more musical. Deep, yet light at the same time. “Fae royals have had fewer shared mates. I believe four or five in history, but only once have I heard of one female being shared by all four royals.”

It’s hard to swallow around the lump in my throat. “So, this will cause problems?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Most fae have one child, but since it’s believed each male can only have one child, in situations like this, the woman often will have the same number of children as she has partners. That means there should still be one royal per family, which would be the number one concern.”

Four children. I’m expected to pop out four kids. I mean, I never really thought about marriage and kids, but that’s a lot... isn’t it? And yet, that’s just the beginning of this mess.

“What’s the number two concern?” I ask, even though I’m pretty sure that has to do with what I heard in the ball concerning a war.

Yeah, like what humans need is more trouble. War means that the humans will get the short end of the stick, no matter where they stick that stick.

His gaze meets mine, those pale eyes of his stealing my breath. “That we won’t be able to share you, and that it’ll cause a war amongst the kingdoms.”

I was right. War. Death. Famine. It hadn’t happened in ages, but peace amongst the fae is always fragile, if our history is any indication.

He pats my hand again. “But don’t worry, my lady, we will do whatever it is we must in order to share you, and to keep war from our lands.”

I try to smile, but I feel like I’m heading for my doom. The noise of the ballroom is gone, and now there’s only the silence of the rest of the castle. We walk down several hallways until we reach one with a bench outside the doors. *The Elders’ Chambers*. There, a few guests mill about. Probably the already married ones who were only at the party to see the matches.

Probably also some of the ones responsible for tattling on me to the elders. I’m just guessing, though. Again, I wish I knew more about the solstice nights and the elders. All of this is so new and confusing to me, making an already difficult time harder.

We stop outside of the imposing doors, and the four of us stand in silence. I don’t venture to imagine what they’re thinking. There’s no telling since three of these four princes think I’m truly their mate, and one is as hard to read as a book with no words.

The elders walk past us, cast Prince Sulien a look, then disappear into their chambers. I glance at the prince again, and I stiffen. The Summer Prince has the look of a man capable of awful things as his intense auburn eyes sweep from me back to the elders' chamber.

What the hell is he going to do or say? How is he going to protect our secret? I don't know, but I'm almost scared of him right now. He's pissed, I just hope that anger is directed at the elders and not me.

"The damn fools like the dramatics," Prince Forrest whispers in my ear, the heat of his breath distracting given the circumstances. "They like to seem all-knowing and powerful, but they're really just a pack of old men hoping to prove their use on the rare occasion they can."

I hope he's right. I honestly do. The elders are often whispered about by the staff, but most of what we know sounds more like fairy tales than the truth. Fairy tales about powerful older fae capable of steering the direction of our court.

Prince Sulien turns to all of us, heed held high, shoulders back, and says, "I'm going to meet with them and handle this. Stay with Cassia."

It's frustrating. His voice gives nothing away. *Is he worried about this? Is he cocky as hell?* I can't tell, and I kind of want to slap the answer out of him.

"You're going to talk to them and put them in their places, right?" Prince Forrest asks, and *he* absolutely sounds cocky.

The summer fae doesn't look impressed. "I'll hear their concerns and deal with them."

“If these were *my* elders, I’d tell them to go fuck themselves,” Prince Forrest says, and there’s a challenge in his voice.

Prince Sulien’s expression doesn’t change when he answers, “And that is one of the many ways you and I differ.” Without giving me the least bit of reassurance, he turns and disappears into their chambers.

Great. I guess I get to just sit out here and twist in the wind. Although, I guess, I prefer this to actually being in there with him, lying through my teeth.

Yet, I feel helpless. And I *hate* feeling helpless.

Not sure what else to do, I sit on the bench in the hall, gripping the wood, letting my thoughts race. I need to think. To come up with a plan of what to tell the elders. Who am I? How am I a fae? What house am I from? How do I explain working as a maid all these years without telling people about my fae side? How do I explain why I’ve never shown control over the least bit of magic? They’re all good questions.

Unfortunately for me, I don’t have any answers.

Suddenly, Prince Cobar sits close beside me. So close that his thigh and arm touch mine. It’s bold, and not at all what I’m in the mood for right now, so I scoot the other way down the bench.

“Did you really steal a necklace today?” He whispers into my ear, suddenly beside me again.

Damn teleporting. He could have just moved over. I pull back from him and glare. “You’re terrible at breaking the ice. You know that, right?”

He smirks. “But I more than make up for it in good looks.”

Despite my best intentions, I smile before I can smother it. “Look, I’m busy right now.”

“Busy worrying?” he asks, lifting a brow.

Prince Zane sits down on my other side, his chill oddly nice against Prince Cobar’s warmth. “She hasn’t dealt with the elders before, of course she’s nervous.”

“All the more reason to distract her with questions,” Prince Cobar answers with a grin.

“I know a better way to distract her,” Prince Forrest suggests, standing a little too close to me, my face cock-level with him.

Shifting back, I lift a brow. “Is that all you ever think about?”

“With you? Yes,” he answers slickly.

Yeah, right.

I laugh. “I saw you at the ball. Your reputation, proceeds you. If you’re going to try to pull lines like that, you might want to try them on someone dumber.”

He looks shocked. The other men looked shocked. *Surely, I’m not the first woman to call them on their bullshit, right?*

“Damn. Our mate is smart,” Prince Forrest says to the others, but he actually sounds a little hurt.

Hurt? I wonder why. No doubt a man like him constantly has beautiful women throwing themselves at him. He shouldn’t be hurt just because I don’t think he’s all that and a bag of gold coins.

It’s weird.

“So, tell us about the necklace?” Prince Cobar’s voice is filled with innocence as he starts his not-so-gentle badgering again.

Seriously? The elders could have seen right through our trick, and are currently getting ready to call for my head, but I’ve got to explain my life to them? I have better things to do.

“Do you think I stole a necklace today?” There. A question with a question. If he’s going to annoy me, I’m going to annoy him right back.

“Perhaps.” He chuckles.

His answer pisses me off. “Sorry to disappoint, but I was framed by a snotty fae.”

“Who?” Prince Forrest says, then his voice goes low and sexy. “We’ll have their head.”

Okay, that’s a little romantic, but I don’t need them fighting my battles. “It doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

Down the hall, someone calls for Prince Cobar. A group of ladies. He looks irritated for the briefest moment, excuses himself, and heads down the hall. I try not to follow him with my eyes. He’s not mine. Not really. But, it’s weird. One minute he’s over here trying to flirt with me and the next he’s distracted by all the glamorous fae.

Stupid men, Stupid Princes.

“So you worked here as a maid?” Prince Forrest asks, his voice colder, but still edged with curiosity.

What is it with these guys and their questions?

Oh, right, I’m supposed to be their mate. I guess it’s natural that they’re curious about their supposed mate, a mate who they’ve only heard weird things about. Still, I’m not in a

mood for this. I haven't even gotten my story straight with Prince Sulien.

"I believe me being a maid was covered," I tell him, my words clipped.

He smirks. "And where do you live?"

Damn it. I don't know what I'm supposed to say! Isn't it enough to sit here in suspense?

"Is this some kind of interview? Where do you live? Where do you work?" I snap, firing off the questions with more anger than necessary.

"You got under her skin," Prince Zane says, but there's no judgment in his voice.

I look away from the Fall Fae and back to Prince Zane. "I just don't see a purpose in all these questions."

Instead, the Winter Fae stares, his expression sincere. "I'm sorry if you don't like all the questions, but you must understand, you're our mate, so we'd like to get to know you." His eyes sparkle. "And to answer your questions, I have the esteemed privilege of residing in the Winter Palace, and I'm the prince of the Winter Fae. If you ask around about me, you'll learn a lot, but not all of it is true." He extends his hand to shake mine like this is the first time we're meeting.

Prince Forrest smirks. "Do you want to learn more about Old Frosty? Or can we get back to you?"

Me? No thanks. "I'd like to learn more about Prince Zane," I tell him as matter-of-factly as possible as I turn to the Winter prince.

For a second he seems to be considering his words, and then he says, "I didn't want to match with anyone today. The

truth is that I've always felt that I don't need to be mated with anyone to be able to rule my court. My subjects are my main concern. Maintaining order and prosperity top my list of priorities, so bringing an unknown person in to help me rule was a hard idea."

I'm surprised to hear that. I guess I never spent a lot of time thinking about how the princes would take this. Not that I've had much time to process it all myself.

Prince Cobar comes ambling back our way. His face lit up with a smile. "I was just visiting with some very heartbroken women."

I study him, blankly. He's handsome, but something about him irritates me. He's blithe, as if he has no cares in the world. It's not that I prefer him falling all over me, but flirting with women after meeting your mate seems like such a weird thing. I wonder if he, like Prince Zane, doesn't actually want a mate, either.

He comes to stop in front of me again, his smile still bright. "They really wanted to be chosen, and they're so disappointed. You're the envy of the evening." Then he bows before me.

I stare him down, bothered for reasons I don't understand. "There's nothing stopping you from going back there and choosing one of them."

To my surprise, he laughs. "Still playing these games like you don't want me?" He kneels in front of me and leans in close to my ear, "That won't last."

I roll my eyes. "We'll see."

My words don't seem to discourage him. He squeezes into the space on the bench between me and Prince Zane and puts

his hand on my knee. I swat it away, annoyed. I'm here trying to figure out my game plan, and he's here bouncing between flirting with other women and flirting with me.

"Come on," he continues, "I saw a twinkle of curiosity in your eyes when I danced with you. You liked being in my arms. You fit perfectly. I promise you'll love being in my bed even more."

I snort in a very unladylike way. "Do I need to take a number? Or do I just join the line down the hall?"

Prince Forrest tosses his head back and roars with laughter. "She already knows you, my friend."

The Spring Prince finally scowls. "There's no line needed, not now that I have my mate."

"Tell that to the ladies down the hall," I counter, pointing at the women, still waiting, casting wistful looks in our direction.

He gives me a pleased look. "You *are* jealous."

I feel my cheeks heat. "Never!"

"You are!"

"I couldn't care less!"

He wraps an arm around my shoulders, half on the back of the bench, half on me. "If you want to know the truth—"

"He's a complete womanizer," Prince Forrest says smugly.

Ugh! I'm embarrassed. I'm frustrated, and I just want to go home and forget all about this.

"It seems to me you all are," I tell them, sighing. "Now, sit down and shut up, or get out of here."

I hold my breath, knowing these men will be talking again before I can even clear my thoughts. *What have I gotten myself into?*

ELEVEN



Cobar

I don't know anything about this wild woman who doesn't want to be with me, but I like her. I liked her the second I saw her. The moment I touched her. I truly couldn't understand my fascination with her at the time, but when she was shown to be my mate, I admit I was happy rather than upset.

Which was entirely unexpected, given how anxious I've been about finding the right mate. At the right time in my life.

From the first time I walked in on one of my parents' orgies as a child, I promised myself I would be faithful to my wife. When my parents put me in the middle of their constant affairs, becoming more and more outrageous with each partner, and their actions, I swore that I'd cut off my own cock before putting a wife and a child in a similar situation. But I've never met a woman I could imagine giving all other women up for until Cassia.

She intrigues me. She makes me laugh.

Which means the woman must be the mate for me.

"Are you sure you don't want to find a better way to pass the time?" Forrest asks, lifting his brows suggestively at Cassia.

A ball of jealousy forms in my stomach that I try to push away. Many fae have shared mates before. It's said that when the bride is found, the men unite too, creating a bond unlike any other friendship. I can easily imagine that happening with Sulien and Zane, but Forrest? Not so much. The man is irritating at best, so watching him with my mate won't be easy.

Luckily, she's not falling all over him. "I would sooner walk on hot coals."

He laughs again, but I enjoy the confusion on his face. Forrest might talk a big game, but he's the worst in our group with women in general. Most Fall Fae spend their time fighting, hunting, and drinking. They're like big drunken fools clumsily trying to attract their women. He lacks the grace of the rest of us, and he knows it.

Leading to him not having a clue what to do with this woman.

"The elders will be fair," Zane says, and I'm suddenly reminded of why we're out here.

Of course, they'll be fair. They can't decide to give her to just one of us, she's our mate. We'd die for her. We'd start wars for her. Which is exactly what they're trying to avoid.

I do find myself a little concerned about what ideas they might have for preventing war. Last time this happened, I believe the bride remained with each mate for a season. A decision that ended in tragedy.

My gut twists, and I glance at Cassia again. I don't want to be a fool, but I won't allow her to be gone from my side for so long, even if I have to argue with the elders. Sulien might be reluctant to challenge them, but I'm not, and I know Forrest

and Zane feel the same given the way they've been looking at our mate.

"And what will the elders consider fair?" Cassia finally asks, and some of her bravado is gone.

Zane turns, so he's facing her, and there's sympathy in his pale eyes. It surprises me. Not that he's sympathetic, Zane has a heart of gold, but that he's allowing his feelings to show. He only does that with people he trusts, specifically Sulien and I. "If the elders say something you don't like, we'll take care of it. We're your mates now, which means you're our top priority."

She smirks and looks at Forrest first and then me. I think when she realizes we agree with every word Zane spoke, whatever smart remark she had ready to go dies on her lips. We're a group of idiots, but Zane's right. We'll die for our clever mate.

"They just better make their decision soon. I'm ready to go to bed with my mate," Forrest says, and his tone is grumpy. Like the elders are the *only* reason he isn't fucking Cassia right now.

"You're kidding, right?"

I'm having a hard time not laughing at the way she scowls at the three of us. Worse fates exist than a night with a handsome fae prince. But I like that she doesn't want to be forced into anything. That she didn't hear the word "mate" and rushed to fall into our beds. She has her own mind, and, apparently, cares about more than being queen.

This marriage might prove to be better than I ever imagined.

Things will be different for Cassia, and our children than it was in my home with my parents.. Of that, I have no doubt.

Whatever the elders say, I won't let her be taken from me even for a moment. If she's like the last queen, with four mates, she'll have four children, and one will rule my court, but *all* will be mine. Four children who will always have their mother, fathers, and each other.

They'll never be lonely.

It's hard not to smile when I think about it.

"What's so funny?" She asks, glaring at me.

"You won't think it's funny." I shrug. But maybe one day the thought *will* make her smile too.

The doors beside us suddenly open, and we all stand. I might be willing to argue with the elders if they say something I disagree with, but I'll still show them respect until then. None of us want another war on our hands, after all.

One of the elders of the Summer Court clears his throat. Beside him, Sulien stands silent, his face a mask of indifference, his favorite facial expression.

My body tenses. As much as we've teased Cassia, I'm nervous about what they'll say, too. If they decide something stupid, fighting will begin between the courts, which is never fun. Especially when I'd much rather focus on my beautiful bride-to-be.

I guess I better hope they're as smart as they're supposed to be.

The elder clears his throat again, regarding us all.

Come on, old man, use your words.

And he finally does. “The four of you will wed Cassia in a fortnight.”

A fortnight? It seems so damn far away. I realize it takes time to plan a royal wedding, yet I want to be done with it sooner than that. I want to have my bride in my arms and in my bed, with everything settled, and my child already growing in her belly.

But if it makes the fucking Summer Court elders happy, I'll obey.

When none of us argues, he continues, “You will rule your respective courts, traveling to them as needed, but your marital home will be the Celestial Equilibrium.”

“The Celestial Equilibrium is the castle in The Crossing where the boundaries of all four courts intersect. It lies uninhabited by royals, but it's in good shape, a castle that's fit to rule all courts from, and the town that surrounds it is lovely. There, you will spend the majority of your time, together, with your bride.”

It takes everything in me not to pump my fist in happiness. Apparently, these elders aren't as dumb as I thought they might be. They didn't even try to restrict when, and how often, we can see our bride. Doing our work from The Crossing will make it easy to slip to our courts, do what must be done, and return to Cassia, the place we'll call home, the place we will raise our children, together.

This is the way to keep the four princes happy. *But what does our bride think?*

I glance over at Cassia, and my heart drops. She's visibly shaking. I slide an arm around her and brush my fingers along her back. She stiffens, but doesn't move out of my reach.

“And what about how she’ll be... divided?” Forrest asks gruffly.

I wince at the poor word choice.

“Divided?” she asks, her tone outraged. “I’m not a pie!”

The elder lifts his hand to silence us. “We cannot relive the marriage that caused the Great War. When the Queen spent a season with each prince, jealousy and animosity destroyed our kingdoms. We must do everything we can to prevent that. So, to keep the peace and maintain fairness in your marriage, you will share your wife at all times. When you travel to each of your homelands, you will travel to them together.” He tilts his head. “Any questions?”

Honestly, it seems like the best solution, and it gives me what I want: Cassia. “None.”

The other men shake their heads.

Cassia stands up taller. “What about my feelings on the matter?”

Her words are met with silence. My hand drops from her back. *What does she mean, her feelings?* I mean, she’s been vocal about not having an interest in us, but she had to have gone to the ball knowing she could be matched with one of us. This might be unexpected for her, but it can’t be unwanted. Can it?

“What do you mean?” the elder asks.

Sulien shakes his head. She notices, but presses on. “What if I don’t want to be the mate of four princes?” She hesitates. “Is there another solution?”

My heart drops. I look at the other men. None of them look happy, even Zane.

“What kind of solution?” The elder looks more than a little annoyed.

She puffs out a breath and throws up her hands. “Can I just pick one? Or...I mean, I can’t have four husbands?”

The elder moves so he’s closer to her. “Lady Cassia, could you really give up any of your mates?” He studies her, frowning. “And if you could, who would you be rid of?”

Now, Sulien looks pissed. “I believe the lady is just feeling overwhelmed. She is rather timid, and the thought of four husbands may be too much.”

Timid? Her?

I don’t know why, but I’m fucking pissed. “If she can give up someone, it’s not me.”

“Or me,” Zane and Forrest say together, then exchange an angry look.

The elder lifts his hands and sighs, “Lady, surely you can see that even the idea of this will lead to war.”

“It won’t,” she says with a scoff. “I’m not... war-worthy to you, princes, is it?”

We all stare at her hard. Her gaze meets mine, and she flinches back. I’m not an angry man, but if she keeps talking like this, I’m going to rip this Summer Court palace apart piece-by-piece until the anger inside of me calms.

The power of my thoughts overwhelms me. *Which of us would she be rid of indeed?*

Again, the elder sighs. “You live with your elderly grandmother and bed-ridden father on the outskirts of town. Be thankful for your blessings and stop questioning them.”

“But I’m happy with my family.” Her words are soft, pulling at my heartstrings, and she never breaks eye contact with the elder of the Summer Court.

The elder reaches out and takes her hands. “Be brave, Lady Cassia.” Then, he turns and disappears back into his chambers.

When he’s gone, Cassia looks at Sulien. “Is that all that came from your conversation with him?”

“All that needed to be said was said,” he tells her, a warning in his voice.

She looks angry. “This isn’t at all how the night was supposed to go.”

I don’t know why, but I find her reluctance to be my queen frustrating. “Yet many would consider it a blessing.”

She doesn’t look convinced.

I glance at Forrest. He’s locked in on her, trying to figure her out, too. Who is this woman who sees being queen as a bad thing? Who seems to dislike all of us so much? And why was she working as a maid, believed to be a human, until now?

Sulien walks over and touches Cassia on her shoulder, leaning in almost as if to whisper in her ear. “We need to talk.”

To my surprise, instead of one of her angry retorts, she nods, looking relieved.

She was ready to throw us away, but she’s relieved to speak with him? Alone? Why?

Something inside of me clenches and burns with anger. They’re both from the Summer Court. He probably knows her

better than the rest of us. Perhaps they even had a relationship before the magic claimed them as mates.

An image of Sulien grabbing her away from Forrest earlier this evening flashes in my mind, and I wonder how well he knows her. She escaped from my arms, but she didn't resist him. On the contrary, she seemed relieved to dance with him then, too.

Then there were her words when I first came upon her. She said she was looking for someone. Was it him all along? Is that who she wants instead of the four of us, just him?

I feel hotter and try to shake the feeling away, but it's unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Jealousy. It's jealousy I'm feeling. I try to push the feeling away, unaccustomed to being jealous of anyone. *He may know her, but I'm Cobar of the Spring Court. It may take some work, but I'll win her heart, too.*

Still, when he leads her away, my jealousy grows.

TWELVE



Cassia

I don't know where Prince Sulien wants to talk, but I sure as hell know why. He keeps my hand on his arm as we walk down the darkened halls, leaving behind the other fae princes. Outside of their company, the palace seems darker and colder. Or maybe the warmth of the three men made me forget how cold life really is. Either way, I feel uneasy as our steps echo down the empty halls.

What will Prince Sulien tell me? I hope it's that he has a solution for this, but maybe that's too easy. Maybe the mess we made will be harder to unravel than that.

To my surprise, the prince leads me to his bedroom, of all places. A room I'd so recently cleaned while fantasizing about his dick. When he opens the door, I hesitate for a moment, trying to ignore the memories rising up inside of me, but he leads me inside.

Somehow, it feels wrong to be here with him. Wrong to be alone with him. This arrangement is supposed to be on paper only. *What will people think?*

What will the other princes think?

I try to shake off the thought, because it doesn't matter. I'm not really marrying them. One way or another, there's a way out of this. I just hope Prince Sulien has already figured it out.

He releases me and closes the door behind us, then walks toward the fireplace. I pause, looking around the room. I've been here so many times before, but never this late. Never under circumstances that don't involve my servitude. It feels... wrong to be here, in every way.

Even if the room is beautiful.

The moon breathes life into the large, well-decorated space, casting our shadows on the wall. The low fire illuminates his eyes, making them glow. As much as I hate it, he's even more breathtaking in the moonlight, with the glow softening the hard lines of his face.

I watch him as he uses a poker to encourage the flames to grow, and then he tosses a log on before reaching out and touching the wood. The log is engulfed in fire in seconds, but his hand lingers in the flames, probably enjoying the heat like most summer fae.

My muscles clench as I study him. The asshole is so damn beautiful that his jawline could've been hand carved by the summer court's finest sculptor. And as for the rest of him... his tight clothes are almost painted on, straining across his hard body, every inch defined by muscles.

It's swoon worthy shit.

Did we really make an agreement that this whole thing was a business deal? My body kind of regrets that now.

One handsome fae I might be willing to handle. Unfortunately, this little situation involves me handling *four* of

them. Not just four of them, but their dicks, too. Which makes me feel more like I've chosen a different kind of whorehouse to pay the bills, and I don't like feeling like a whore.

I'm an adventurous girl, but that's too many, even for me. At least, I think it is. A picture starts to form in my head, and I jerk my focus back to the man in front of me, feeling my cheeks heat.

"So, are we going to talk about this mess we're in?"

He stands a little straighter, regarding me with an expression so blank that it pisses me off. He can't be surprised that this is a crazy, upsetting situation. If he thought it was normal, he wouldn't have asked me to come to his room. Or am I the crazy one?

Nope, it's him. Definitely him.

But the asshole says nothing, just stares at me in response. *He's going to make me do all the talking, isn't he? Even though he called me in here, and he screwed everything up.*

"That's why I'm here, right?" I snap. "To discuss what happened and how to get out of this?"

He's still quiet, and it makes me even angrier. I know he's not big on conversation, but this situation requires an immediate discussion. He needs to be talking and telling me exactly why this happened. He needs to be laying out the steps to fix it, not staring at me like a moron.

I agreed to marry him. That's it. Not a whole handful of horny fae.

"None of this was a part of our deal," I prod him, although I know he already knows.

He gives me nothing. *Nothing. At. All.*

I take a deep breath and slowly release it, hoping it calms the storm brewing inside of me. This evening went wrong from the moment I stepped into the ballroom and didn't spot him immediately. I should've just left then.

Geez. Pity party for one, anyone?

No, I did this for a reason. For my family. Being queen is better than being a whore. I have to remember that, but I'm truly not at a place where I believe my only choice is to play wife to four fae. Or trick three men into thinking I'm their mate, and taking their true mate away. I can't be expected to smile, talk, and play the part of a woman bound to four fae, when I'm terrified to even play the part to one.

Surely, at some point, someone will figure out the truth. I can't lie like this to men I'm married to, can I? And what about children? As a human, it'll be nearly impossible to become pregnant. Will the four courts be left with nothing but bastard kids from whatever women my horny husbands are running around with?

Who will become the next set of rulers?

When he still doesn't speak, I decide to try a different tactic. "How did the spell go so wrong? Did you use too much of the potion?" I stare at him, trying to look less aggressive. *Maybe he'll respond to that?*

His gaze shifts, but I still can't tell what he's thinking. "No."

My freaking eye twitches. "No, what?"

He shrugs. "Things changed." Then, he looks just beyond me out the window into the darkness of the night, like his answer ends the conversation.

“Then change them back. You’re the fucking king.” Apparently, my plan to try not to be aggressive has gone out the window.

“I won’t be the king until I marry you. None of us will be.” He holds my gaze, something in his eyes I can’t decipher.

Does he really expect me to care that he can’t be king without me? That’s the least of my problems right now. “That sounds like a royal fae problem, not a former maid problem.”

“I wasn’t implying it was your problem,” he says, lifting a brow. “Just that I’m not yet king.”

Fine, he technically didn’t say that, but his words definitely implied it was something I *should* care about. Still, he doesn’t seem to be really getting the problem here. It’s as if this was all part of the plan, and I’m just some hysterical woman upset for no reason.

I take a step closer to him, glaring as he watches me. “I need an explanation. What happened? What went wrong?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “There’s nothing to explain. What’s done is done.”

What the actual fuck?

“Undo it!” I shout, taking another step closer. Demanding an answer I most certainly deserve.

His expression gentles, if only a little, and his words come out softer. “At this point, we don’t have a choice. We have to go through with this.”

Our eyes lock, and my breath hitches. I can’t seem to look away. The power of his eyes pulls me in and makes me imagine things between us that don’t exist. Like that in another

life, we were really mates, and we stood on the same side instead of opposite ones.

But there's no other life, only this one.

I force air into my lungs when I look away. "It's 'we' now? *We* don't have a choice? What's changed?"

Is he trying to paint us as a team now? You become teammates with a shared goal. We entered into a deal that was mutually beneficial, but he screwed it up... for me, not for him. They're all the same, these fae, only concerned with themselves and never worried about how their actions affect the humans that clean after them. And we humans are always at the bottom, scraping our way through life.

"It was always *we*," he says.

I snort. "You don't have to fuck four men."

He flinches. "But I am connected to them now. Forever."

"Because of the spell you screwed up!" *He can't really be serious acting like he's an innocent party in this whole thing, can he?*

He just stares, like he wants to say something, but he's not. I wait. Feeling the damn irresistible pull of his gaze, hoping he finally learns to use his big boy words. But he remains silent.

Fine then. "Either way, no. I won't go through with this. I refuse. You need to figure out a way to get me out of this."

He leans in closer to me, so close that I could reach up and touch him, if I wanted to, "If the court thinks a human tricked them, I'll be fine, but you'll pay with your life. You keep saying what you don't want; is *that* what you do want? Do you want the fae court to believe you tricked them?"

Shit. He's right, of course dying's not what I want, not at all. I just thought there was another way.

“Is there no way to undo this?” And I hate the pleading note in my voice.

He flinches like I've struck him again. “No.”

I feel tears sting my eyes. The realization that if he can't get me out of this, *we* can't get out of this comes to me. I can't just flee either and leave my father and grandmother behind. I can't just accept a life as a whore, because no one would allow it from their queen. I can't do anything except marry the four men.

Marry them and lie. All the time. I won't even be able to play the part of Prince Sulien's wife and then hide in my room, reading, and enjoying a life of leisure. There won't be spare time, or off time. I'll be a wife to four men. I'll have to be their wife in public and in private. I'll have to pretend I feel whatever the hell mates are supposed to feel.

There will be no escape. And if ever the princes find their true mates, my life will be on the line.

“This is all your fault,” I tell him, sounding angry but fighting tears. “You're trying to be the king, but you can't even protect me from this. You won't even try. You're just a boy, playing in his dad's palace, acting like you're in charge.”

The slightest tick in his eye lets me know I finally hit a chord.

“Why did you even choose me? You ruined my life once already when we were children. You haven't done enough to me?” Wow, I didn't even know where that came from, but I meant it.

And he looks pissed.

“You have to know I didn’t want this to happen!” he thunders, fury etched in his brows. “I had a plan. The perfect plan and now it’s fucked!”

I almost step away from him, shocked by his unexpected fury, but I force myself not to move. If I show myself to be a coward now, I’ll always be a coward.

He rubs his hands across his beautiful face, his jaw clenched. His gaze sweeps to me with a look of pure agony, then away. And it’s strange. I can almost feel how tense every muscle in his body is, can almost hear his heart racing, and for some reason, that makes me feel a little better. Like, maybe, this situation is actually bothering him too.

He takes a few steps toward me, reaches out, then drops his hand.

I stare, not sure what to do.

“We’re stuck with each other. Accept that.” And now he sounds calmer, quieter, and resigned.

My head swims. There’s no way out of this, according to him. I’m stuck with four princes as my husbands. My only other choice is to reveal my deception and lose my head to the fae.

But, no, things can’t be that hopeless.

I try to push the fear inside of me down at the thought of losing my head, and dooming my father and grandmother at the same time, but the fear lingers. “I’m going to find a way out of this.”

He sighs, “you can try, but it’s going to get you killed.”

I look up at him; the expression on his face tells me he believes it. Unfortunately for him, he has no idea how

resourceful I can be. Afraid or not, I just need a little more time. Time that I don't have to spend worrying about where my family's next meal will come from.

I can do this.

THIRTEEN



Cassia

I'm jolted out of my sleep, staring around me in confusion, wondering what the heck woke me up. But after a minute, I hear loud noises right outside my room. Noises loud enough that I have a moment where fear and adrenaline give me the urge to run. Then, logic kicks in and I realize that grandmother and father must be getting into some kind of trouble in the house. Probably fixing something that broke the best they can, given all the noise.

Okay, so that's one question answered.

Groaning, I roll over, glance out my window, and see bright light streaming through it. *Shit! I'm late!* Sitting up, heart racing, I'm mentally walking through the excuses I'll tell Alexi for why I'm late for work... when everything comes flooding back at me.

Last night.

The four princes.

Am I even a maid any longer? I feel the color drain from my face. Am I really engaged to four men?

Maybe I'd been dreaming last night. Maybe the ball and the princes never really happened. It certainly seems crazy

enough to be a figment of my imagination. *Has losing my job pushed me over the edge?*

I try to remember if I fell asleep instead of actually putting on that gorgeous golden dress and going to the ball. It's possible. *Isn't it?* I scan my room, then freeze when I spot the dress in a pile on the floor looking very much worn. The heels rest beside them, along with the very expensive jewelry Prince Sulien gifted me. Jewelry too fine for me to ever be able to sell. No one would touch it with a ten-foot pole.

Shit, yesterday really happened.

I was fired. I made an insane deal with Prince Sulien. I went to a ball, and the spell went wrong, matching me with the four princes instead of just one.

How'd I even sleep after everything that happened? The race home and the way I'd torn off the dress flashes through my mind. I guess I'd just been hoping everything would make more sense in the morning.

Unfortunately, it does not.

I crawl out of bed and go to my dresser to pick something to wear. Everything looks plain and ugly compared to the golden dress, but at the same time, better suited to me, and not the me I was pretending to be. It's a bit of a relief to not have to play the role of a woman betrothed to four fae princes, at least for a little longer.

My house dress is the most comfortable, so I reach for it. The dress is soft as I slip it on, sliding against my skin in a way that's comforting. I don't remember what color it was originally, but now it's off-white with a hint of blue.

I give myself a once over in the mirror hanging on my wall. The dress is a little low-cut in front with short sleeves. It

reaches nearly to my ankles and fits me perhaps a little more snugly than it was meant to, but only because I've had it for so many years.

Running a brush through my hair, I study myself. The dark circles under my eyes tell the world that I didn't have a restful night's sleep, which is absolutely true. My dreams were filled with the four fae princes. With secrets and lies. With them, discovering who I am.

In my dreams, they chased me. Sometimes with lust. Sometimes with anger. But other times it was with sadness and disgust. All because they learned that some little human woman had made fools of them.

I set the brush down and glance in the mirror one more time, wondering what I got ready for. If I can manage it, I'll spend the next few days hiding out from the princes and deciding when to tell my grandmother and father, and how to. And yet, there's no food here. I have no job. And chances are there are enough rumors going around that I'll need to tell my family the truth before they learn it from somewhere else.

So, I don't have *days* to get my head on straight. The first thing I probably have to do is tell my grandmother and father, answer their questions, and figure out how much a "betrothed" makes, so I can get food into this house.

How does one go about asking her husband-to-be, or is it husbands-to-be, for money, for food? I shrug and open the door to my bedroom, fully expecting to walk in on one of my family's "projects." But more than that, to figure out how to explain the mess I'm in to my family.

Taking a step down the hall, I freeze at the scene unfolding before me. Several fae walk past my door, holding boxes filled with Granny's pots and pans. Another walks by with a stack of

quilts. I walk out of the hall and stare in shock. A whole line of fae are carrying our household items out the door and into a wagon sitting right outside our home.

What the hell? I walk further down the short hallway into the kitchen. It's nearly empty.

Taking another step forward, the living room comes fully into view, and I see my grandmother in the center of the nearly empty room. She has her hands on her hips, and fae, all dressed in the colors of the Summer Court, are carrying everything we own out the door.

My jaw drops. *What the hell is this?*

Grandmother moves to the couch and pats it. "My couch has sentimental value. Go ahead and put it on the wagon. I don't care if it doesn't fit in with the decor. I won't see it either way, and it's mine, so I'm taking it."

Grandmother's bossing the fae around like she's royalty. They actually skitter away from her. It's... *unbelievable*. People who wouldn't even spit on her before are rushing around to follow her orders.

She points at one fae, who was whispering to another one, and the tall man widens his eyes in shock as she does so. "Don't think that because I can't see you, I don't know where you are. My hearing's intact. You don't move in silence. My couch, ugly as it may be, is coming with me."

"Of course, my lady," he says, bowing and gesturing for another fae to grab the other side of the couch.

Seriously... what the hell is going on?

"Grandmother?" I approach her, reaching out to let her know I'm close by.

“Cassia!” She sweeps me in a hug that’s so tight it steals my breath.

“Is everything okay?”

She laughs, squeezing me again before releasing me. “Of course. But why didn’t you wake us up last night when you came home to let us know what happened? I know I fuss at you and your dad about my beauty sleep, but becoming the bride to four fae princes is a damn good reason to interrupt it.”

I open my mouth and close it. Okay, logic told me the fae were here because my family knew what happened, but it’s like I couldn’t process it until she said it aloud. *I’m officially fucked.*

No, I can come up with an excuse. I can say something to stop this.

She’s smiling brighter than I’ve seen in a long time, and it’s enough to make me stop and think before I keep talking. I don’t know what I planned to tell them, but I certainly planned to make my reservations clear. Now though, with her so happy, what am I supposed to say?

“Last night was just.. a lot,” I say, unsure of how else to phrase it.

I haven’t processed it all the way myself. There’s this part of me that still thinks there’s a world in which I can just marry Prince Sulien and just be his wife in name only. Where my grandmother and father could still have a really wonderful life, and I didn’t have to lose every piece of myself. But it feels like every moment that passes, my chances of that are growing slimmer.

Closing my eyes, I breathe in deeply through my nose. There’s no point in focusing on that right now. I have to let her

be excited, because in life there are so few good moments and so many crappy ones. I can't take this away from her when she's already had so much taken away in her long life.

"Was the ball as beautiful as they say?" she asks, and I notice the other fae listening.

"It was. It was just... a lot."

She laughs. "You keep saying that."

"I can't think of a better way to describe it... all the food and drinks. All the beautiful women and men..." There. That wasn't a lie, and it doesn't give away my terror about everything either.

"There was also a lot of matching with *a lot* of men," Grandmother retorts, laughing to herself. "What are you going to do with four princes? You only knew Prince Sulien as a child, and you don't know the others at all."

My thoughts exactly. The other princes could be awful. Is Prince Zane as cold as the rest of the Winter Fae? Will Prince Cobar bring other women into our bed like the other Spring Fae? And is Prince Forrest as rough and cruel as the rest of the Fall Fae?

I swallow around the lump in my throat. *None of that matters if I don't have to marry them. If I find a way out of this.*

"Cassia?"

Realizing I hadn't answered, I scramble for something to say. "We're... matched with each other, so I guess we're meant to be, and it'll all work itself out." Except, we're not, and it won't.

Grandmother shakes her head. “That fae tradition of being matched on the solstice is so odd to me. I mean, we humans get to meet someone, fall in love, and choose to marry.”

Yes, we do. *I* might have. I’d never really thought about actually meeting a man, falling in love, and marrying him, but I guess now that will never happen. Never. Because I’ve accepted this fake marriage.

For the first time, that actually feels like a loss.

“That does sound lovely,” I say, and I swear I feel tears stinging the corners of my eyes.

Grandmother tilts her head to the side. “We also end up living in the worst parts of the city with the worst jobs. Maybe love’s overrated.” She shrugs.

“Maybe it is,” but the words feel false.

Fae staff come out of her and father’s bedrooms carrying boxes. I hear a jingle that sounds like glass.

“Whoa! Whoa! What’s in that box?” Grandmother says, pointing at the very guilty-looking fae.

She turns to me. “Do you mind if I get back to the move? These fae seem to know a lot about moving gold, gems, and silk around, but give them something hearty, and they’re all butter-fingers!”

It’s hard not to laugh at the insulted looks on the fae’s faces. Especially because, while a lot of my grandmother’s stuff has interesting textures, not a lot of it... looks pretty. Like the messed up frog my dad carved for her that’s currently sitting in a box in the fae’s hands.

“Don’t let me interrupt you.” I plant a kiss on her cheek and give her hands a squeeze before heading outside.

She gets back to hollering at the fae about what to take and what to leave behind, but I try to tune her out. Wondering where my father is and how he feels about all of this. Wondering if there's a quiet place I can hide from all of this and come up with some kind of incredible plan that means my family gets to keep all this happiness, and I don't have to share a bed with four giant fae.

To my shock, my father sits outside in a very nice, brand new wheelchair. We've never been able to afford one for him to get around in, and just seeing him in one makes my heart squeeze. Just that wheelchair alone will allow him freedoms he's never had before, and I think he knows it. I think he knows all of this is going to open doors for him because he looks so damn happy.

The sight brings a smile to my face.

A fae's pushing him around, and he's directing some of the packing onto the wagon himself. When he sees me, he tells the fae to stop pushing his chair. "My daughter. Queen of the four courts. I can't believe it." He claps his hands together.

"I'm not that yet," I tell him, feeling oddly embarrassed.

He waves me closer, his smile widening. "How did it happen? Tell me everything!"

I give him a very brief review of last night. Skipping as much as I can without it seeming like I'm skipping anything. Basically, I paint the picture of going to the fae ball on a whim to see the pretty fae only to discover my matches. The four princes.

"So, no one has asked about your fae heritage?" he asks when I'm finished.

A chill rolls down my spine, and I get the feeling the servants are listening. “No, but there must be a fae in our family line.”

He stares down at his lap. “That must be it.” Then he smiles again. “Come here and give me a hug. What an incredible opportunity.”

I lean down and hug him. His arms wrap around me, squeezing me tightly, and the sense that my choices are slipping away settles around me like a bear trap. I can’t help but wonder, have I been presented with an opportunity or caught in a trap? The benefits to my family in this arrangement appear endless. I, however, might be trapped in four miserable marriages, lying my ass off, with no idea how I’ll be treated by my spouses.

Opportunity. For some reason, the word rings false.

As I go to stand, he holds on to my hands. “They’ve given us a cottage in the castle’s garden. I get to keep my chair, and I have an appointment with the fae healer. All because you were brave enough to go to the Solstice ball last night.” He squeezes my hands, and tears form in his eyes.

“It wasn’t brave, it was stupid,” I tell him honestly.

And so reckless, I want to scream.

He shakes his head. “No, it was brave. And no matter what your grandmother says, you got that from me.”

I plaster a smile on my face. I desperately want to tell him the whole truth and let him know this could all come crumbling down if anyone finds out about the spell and me, but I can’t tell him right now even if I wanted to. Not with the fae here listening. Not when I’d only be burdening him with something he doesn’t need to know.

He directs another fae, then looks at me. “They even think I might get the use of my legs back. And your grandmother... They have books that she can read. Hundreds of them! She cried when she heard!”

The happiness they both feel now tugs at my heart. That’s why I said yes to Prince Sulien. It’s why I went to the ball in the first place. This is the better life I wanted for my family.

“All because of my brave daughter, not even knowing she was fae, and taking a chance at the ball.” It’s been years since I heard him like this, so positive. Like he actually has something to look forward to.

“That’s great, Dad. You’ll love living on the castle grounds.”

I freeze, wondering where I’ll be sleeping tonight. *Am I moving into the castle too? Will I live in the garden cottage with my family?* I don’t know anything. Which is terrifying. “I’ll let you get back to directing the packers. You and Grandmother have a busy day ahead of you.”

He smiles up at me with glistening eyes, and the fae behind us wheels him away.

I walk back to my room, where the royal fae servants pack up my belongings. My drawers are splayed open, and they’re carefully refolding my clothes and packing them into ornate trunks. My few trinkets are carefully wrapped in paper and placed on top of my clothing.

It only takes three trunks to pack up my whole life, which is strange. This house holds far more memories than those few items, and I’m suddenly bothered at the thought of leaving this place. I guess when I made the agreement with Prince Sulien, I never really thought about what that life would look like.

As quickly as the fae entered my room, they leave, and my room stands an empty shell. I touch the walls. I touch my bed. *What will become of this place now? Will another family of desperate humans move here, taking our place?*

Either way, until my deception is discovered, this isn't our home any longer. Yet, I don't have another home, not really, at least not one that I'm sure of. I can't even just follow my Grandmother and father, because I have things to sort out that I don't want them to be aware of.

There's nowhere for me to go, so I walk out the front door and watch as Grandmother and Father are loaded into a carriage. Our neighbors mill around, watching our lives change in the biggest way possible. They won't make eye contact with me when I spot them though... but I guess I am, supposedly their new queen.

Is everyone going to treat me differently now?

"Coming?" Father calls out from the carriage window, staring at me.

I'm truly glad they're so excited right now, but I can't just go along with them and pretend to be happy. Not right now. I just need to be alone because this feels like the last time I'll be alone for a very long time.

"There's that strawberry plant in the back I want to dig up and bring with us. So I'll do that, and I'll meet you there in a few hours. Go get settled, have a meal, and relax," I say, meaning every word of it. They deserve all of that, and more.

My grandmother's voice carries from the carriage. "Come when you're ready."

She knows me well.

I stand on the porch watching as the carriage rolls away. My stomach turning over with each spin of the wheels. *There goes my family. There goes my life.*

Now, I'm really locked into this. Whether it's one prince or four, I can't go back. It's the first time it really hits me that even if I have to marry four princes to give this to my family, I will. No matter how awful it is. No matter what these strange men are truly like.

I've endured a lot in my life. I can endure this too.

The moment the carriage is out of sight, my smile vanishes. My legs shake, and I feel the overwhelming urge to scream or cry, I'm not sure which. I turn to enter the house one last time, to maybe take some time alone in my room to grieve the life I had.

I start walking, and I jump as Prince Forrest appears before me.

Damn it. So much for my time alone.

FOURTEEN



Cassia

My body goes stiff the moment I lay eyes on Prince Forrest. The giant man is wearing a green shirt that brings out the startling color of his eyes even more, and brown pants so tight my gaze starts to slide south before I force my gaze back higher. *Damn these sexy princes.* When I'm around them, I sometimes feel like they've been handcrafted to tempt my logic.

Unfortunately for them, I have the willpower of a mean old woman who snagged the last loaf of bread.

I'm not in the mood for him right now. No getting-to-know-your-mate bullshit is happening today. Getting out of my quadruple engagement tops my list, if I can do it without ruining my family.

"What do you want?" I ask, making the annoyance in my voice obvious.

Prince Forrest's gaze travels up my body, and a satisfied smile grows on his face. Which is more than a little annoying. *Hasn't anyone ever explained the difference between confident and cocky to the little shit?* Apparently, not.

He strides into the house while I follow him, my inner-voice screaming to avoid this whole mess. But it's just too much, I have to figure out what new game he's playing. Without looking back at me, he takes in the living room, doing a full 360 turn. It's like he's on some exciting tour. *That's right, the fae prince has probably never been in a human hovel before.*

How *wonderful* for him.

"So, you grew up here?" he asks.

Ask a stupid question...

"No, this is my vacation home," I answer, glaring at him.

He chuckles. "You have a smart mouth." I hate that I like the way his lips twitch when he laughs.

"We finally agree on something."

He runs his hand along the wall where there's an outline of the couch, touches spots where pictures have been removed, and studies the hard-dirt floor. I kind of wonder if it's some kind of fae trick. *Does he have the abilities of the Memory Fae? Is he pulling memories out of the walls?*

"Why are you here?"

His smile fades, probably because the question came out a little more harshly than I intended. "You're my mate, and I wanted to get to know you."

"What if I don't want to get to know you?" I try to decipher his response, but he ignores my question and looks past me.

"Do you cook?" He asks as he moves to the kitchen and begins opening the cabinets even though they're empty.

“I’m sure you don’t cook because you’ve been catered to your whole life.” I glare, thinking about all the fancy meals I’ve brought to the fae in my previous career as maid to the fae.

Meals that were often wasted.

He shrugs. “You’re right. Other than cooking meat over a fire, I don’t know anything about cooking. You?” he asks, repeating the question.

This boy is getting under my skin. “Is that what you’re looking for in a mate?”

He smirks. “My wife won’t ever cook unless she wants to cook, which brings me to my question...”

I sigh, deciding it’d be better to answer his damn question than continue going around in circles. “No, my Grandmother cooked. I earned the money, though we barely ever had enough food to eat, so there wasn’t much of an opportunity or time for me to learn to cook.”

He cocks his head to the side and stares at me as if trying to tell if I’m being serious. Then, his green eyes widen with shock. *Is he just now realizing some people are poor?* I try not to laugh at the pampered prince who can’t even be bothered to understand everyone’s life isn’t like his.

“Is that really so unbelievable to you? That people go hungry?” I accuse.

To my surprise, he shakes his head. “It’s just that people in the Fall Court never go hungry because everyone hunts. Kids hunt animals before they speak their first words. Don’t you know how to hunt?”

“No.” But hearing him speak, I wish I did.

“If you lived in the Fall Court, you’d have food. Human or not, we make sure everyone is fed. It’s one of the ways we’re less savage than the Summer Court, despite what they claim.” He says this as an unquestionable fact.

I speak without thinking. “Maybe I should move there.”

He grins at me. “You’re about to be their queen. You can be there whenever you want. Hell, I could teach you to hunt, if you’d like.” Then he walks away from me and into my bedroom.

Hunt? Fuck. I actually think I’d like to learn a skill like that, so I’d never be dependent on anyone again for food. And, I kind of like it that he offered to teach me. If he’s serious.

I follow him, unsure what else to do. This big fae prince should not be in my tiny home, and he shouldn’t be using his charms to get into my head.

Everything inside of me clenches when he sits on my bed, and my bedroom suddenly seems far too small. I don’t like being alone with him or having him in my space, especially when he spreads his big legs and leans back, as if making himself comfortable on my lumpy mattress.

He looks good with the sunlight streaming over from the window. His auburn locks loose about his shoulders, and his sun-kissed skin looking good enough to lick. If a human man, without any complications, came into my room looking like this, I’d have no choice but to pin him down and have my way with him.

As it stands, my cheeks burn, and I try to think of what to do with the same man, but in our complicated situation. *Do not reach into his pants and see what he’s packing. Do not reach into his pants and see what he’s packing.*

“So, this is your room?” He asks with a nod, drawing me out of my dirty thoughts.

“What makes you think that?” I try not to sound defensive and fail.

He grins, completely ignoring my tone. “It smells like you.”

I try to decide if he’s insulting me, but he’s just sitting, casual as hell, so I play along. “What exactly do I *smell* like?”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Vanilla and sex.”

“Vanilla and sex?” I ask, my tone bordering on outraged.

He cocks his head, giving me another look that heats my blood. “It’s fucking intoxicating.”

I feel my nipples harden and cross my hands over my chest, regretting my question. “You know, this whole hot, cocky fae prince does nothing for me.”

“Then what does do something for you?” He’s serious.

My cheeks feel hot. “None of your business.”

“You know,” he draws out the words. “I’m going to figure out what turns you on, and I’m going to do it. Over and over until you want something else, and then I’m going to give that to you, too. You might have four husbands, but you’ll want for nothing from me.”

The room is so hot that I have to stop from fanning myself. “And what if I want more than all this... sexual crap?”

He smirks. “Then tell me what you want, and I’ll make sure you have it.”

“Just like that?” I ask, incredulously.

“Just like that,” he repeats with utter confidence.

I hate that he makes all of this sound so easy. Like being married to four spoiled princes is going to be simple. Just me spreading my legs when they want, and spending the rest of my time being adored by them.

Come on. That's not life. Life is thinking something good will happen and having it dashed away. Life is trusting someone and watching them shatter your trust. I'd walked this road a thousand times as a young, desperate girl trying to provide for my family.

If I hadn't become a maid... I shiver. There were few uses for a young girl, and the world made that very clear to me.

Hell, even going to town trading taught me about the world. When people knew my grandmother was no longer making money, they offered me the bare minimum, knowing I had no other options. You'd think people my grandmother had been kind to, had paid, and had known would be kinder.

But, fuck, the world is harsh. These princes will be just as harsh, and they can't convince me otherwise.

"I won't be your queen or their queen. I'm not going through with it."

"What's the one thing you want for yourself?" He answers me with a question of his own, his gaze intense.

"I've never had time to think about it, but I know it's not four husbands." *There. That should shut him up.*

"Why haven't you had time to think about it?" He asks, skipping completely over my rejection.

I sigh, annoyed again that he can't understand what it's like to be poor or human. "I've been too worried about ensuring my family's survival. I don't have time to dream.

Dreaming is a privilege bestowed on very few humans. We serve and we survive.”

“So you really have nothing you can think of that you want?” He asks, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Nope.” I shake my head. “What about you?”

He surprises me by answering. “I want to rule the Autumn Court.”

“Oh, Prince Forrest, such an unattainable goal. However will you accomplish that? It’s not like it’ll just be handed to you—oh wait, it will be.” I laugh at the irony that he can’t understand my lack of a goal, but his goal isn’t even a goal. It’s an inevitability.

“You’re about to be handed all four courts.” He replies. “Why are you so against this? It’s going to make your life monumentally better. And your family? They’re going to be treated well. Why don’t you want that?” Those eyes of his try to penetrate my thoughts.

I chew my bottom lip, trying to keep calm. Telling the truth will do no good. But by all logic he’s right. If I were their mate, this wouldn’t even be a question. I would feel a deep connection with them that I couldn’t ignore, and marriage would be inevitable.

So, how do I explain my hesitation without giving myself away?

Not knowing what to say, I don’t say anything, instead I meet his gaze and find myself unable to look away. I’ve never been in love, but some strange part of me thinks I could be in love with Forrest in another life. If he wasn’t so cocky. So arrogant. So sheltered from the real world.

And yet... it makes him interesting.

One of his hands hooks around my waist and pulls me closer so that I'm standing between his legs. The other hand wraps around the back of my neck and brings my face close to his, so close I can feel his breath on my lips. It's warm and pleasant.

Like the man himself.

He pulls me even closer, and I can't take my eyes off his. They're intense. Beautiful and unexpected in a man who looks like the picture of danger itself. Our bodies touch, and heat flares between us. He gently presses his lips to mine as if testing me. Giving me a chance to pull away, but, for reasons I don't understand, I don't.

His lips press harder, capturing mine with a possessiveness that takes my breath away. When his tongue parts my lips, I close my eyes and accept him in, goosebumps erupting on my arms at the feel of his tongue inside my mouth. His tongue slides against mine, and a strange desperation blossoms. I wrap my arms around him, and my body melts into his. He groans, pulling my legs around him so that I'm straddling him as he sits on the bed.

The taste of his lips intoxicates me, and the rhythm of our tongues dancing together makes heat rush to my core. My body rubs against him, almost grinding against his erection. He makes a choking sound against my lips, and his hands move up my neck where his fingers tangle into my hair.

There's an urgency to the kiss, a rush of movement, of ragged breaths, and choked moans. His teeth tug at my bottom lip. I gasp, digging my nails into his back, riding him, cursing the clothes that separate us. Wanting more.

He grabs the back of my neck roughly and pulls my head back. "*My Cassia,*" he pants.

I stare into his eyes, wild with passion. He seems to be waiting for something, but I don't know what. *Fuck. What do you want Forrest?*

We pant and stare at each other.

"I'm yours," he says, but it's more than words. It's a declaration. One I get the sense he wants me to echo.

I blink hard, and whatever spell we were under breaks.

I pull back, untangling our bodies, until I'm standing in front of him. Feeling awkward and unsure. I touch my lips; they still tingle from his touch.

What the hell just happened? One minute... we were talking, or arguing, and the next, I couldn't resist him. It was almost out of my control, and I don't like that one bit.

"You're not like anyone I've ever met." He tells me, fire blazing in his eyes. His desire to finish what we'd started is evident in his gaze and his tented pants, but he doesn't reach for me.

My legs feel shaky, so I sit down beside him. Take a breath. And try to sound normal. "Oh? How so?"

"You say what you want." His gaze softens.

"No one else around you does that?"

"They all say what they think I want to hear. I know they're bullshitting me. Women who don't know me at all throw themselves at me, telling me how kind and wonderful I am." He faces me on the bed, a pained look on his face.

"You're not kind or wonderful?" I ask with raised eyebrows.

He doesn't reply, and that's all the answer I need. I chuckle. "You'll get nothing but the truth from me."

"Why don't you want to marry us?" He asks, plainly.

His genuine question takes me by surprise, so I strive to give an honest answer without revealing my secrets. "It's not the life I want. The life I want just involves my father, my grandmother, and me. Enough food to eat. A solid roof over our heads. Just a good, simple life. I don't want to be pulled into a complicated world. I don't want to be shared by four fae princes. It's just too much." There. This man has finally gotten a vulnerable answer out of me.

He gives a small smile. "You've got no choice. Besides, we'll take good care of you." He almost purrs the last part.

It enrages me. Prince Sulien said nearly the same thing. *How is it that I don't get any choice in this arrangement? Fuck that.*

"I have a choice."

The bastard laughs. "No, you don't. The magic picked us. We're mates. From this moment on, we're together."

I rise and hurry from the room, and his face is plastered with confusion. He calls my name, but I ignore him. Instead, I rush out of the room and head outside, away from him, and away from the problems I've created. *Damn it. I can't believe I let my guard down with him.*

That's a mistake I won't make again.

FIFTEEN



Forrest

I sit in Cassia's room for a full minute after she leaves before I teleport back to my room at the castle, feeling frustrated and confused as hell. *What the fuck did I do wrong?* I keep running through everything that happened, and feel like I should be happy, but I'm not. We connected. She showed that she was attracted to me. More than showed it, if I hadn't had some primal fucked up need to have her admit my claim to her, I'd probably be buried inside her right now.

She. Wanted. Me. Despite her painful words, she showed me that she felt the mate connection between us, and it was a moment of triumph. *Yet the look she gave me when she walked away was one of fury and disgust.*

Why? "Damnit!"

I punch my fist into the bed as a growl escapes my lips. Women are confusing. Women, I never understand. They're perfectly happy to dangle off my arm and soak up the power given to them as my woman, or fuck me, but their presence has always left me feeling empty and confused. I never seem to say or do the right things. I can sense they don't want to be around me, no matter that I'm the Prince to the Fall Fae, but I'm clueless as to why.

They're so different from men. Men respect good hunters and good fighters. That's all that matters to them.

And yet, I thought it would be easier with my mate. I thought she would understand me. Some ridiculous picture in my mind painted a story of us living in peace and harmony together. Sharing laughter. Sharing stories. But if I can't pull my big foot out of my mouth, none of that will happen.

A terrible thought occurs to me. *What if she's never happy with me? What if I love her and cherish her, and she only wants the other men?* It feels like I've swallowed a rock.

Of course, she would want them. They're smooth, always saying the right things. Women fall all over Sulien because he's "strong and silent." They laugh at Cobar and drink up his compliments. They fall for Zane's intelligent conversations and elegant words.

What do I have to offer a mate? Nothing. Fucking nothing. My title seemed to be the only thing, but my Cassia will get that from the other men.

I feel sick.

For a minute, I don't know what to do. From the moment she became my mate, all I cared about was her. *She needs to see and believe that I'll be the husband she needs, if I have any hope of capturing her heart. So what can I do right now that would show her my love and devotion, but give her space while she deals with whatever the hell upset her?*

And, it hits me! Her father and grandmother should've arrived by now at the castle. If she loves them, then I do too. They're now my responsibility, and I'll care for them each and every day moving forward. *If she sees that, maybe she'll realize I'm more than my fumbling words and crass behavior.*

She'll see a reason to love me, too.

I leave my room and head down the hallway towards the stairs, planning to check on them. But in an instant, Zane teleports just ahead of me. He leans against a wall, his typical cold expression carved into his pale face. And I know by the way he looks at me that he's here waiting for me.

“Leaving so soon?” Zane inquires coldly.

“Fuck no. I have a mate. I'm not going anywhere.” *This asshole. He can't just let me walk past him. He always has something to say.*

He gives me a look that's almost sympathetic. “I know it's hard for you to be out of your element. It's different, more civilized, here in the Summer Court. No one around wearing animal pelts and bone jewelry. There aren't any wild hunts or drunken parties with bonfires. It's all finery and delicate things.”

I can't tell if he's trying to insult me or if that's how he really sees my people. Either way, it *is* insulting. My people are wild, they do enjoy the hunt, drinking, and being free, but we also have civilized meals and palaces that rival the Summer Court's. Which he knows, because he's spent many months in the Fall Court.

Irritated, I cross my arms and stare back at him. “We take pride in our savagery. It helps us survive. It helps us win wars. And it's better than being whatever the fuck you are.”

“I am the beloved prince of the Winter court.” He gives a dramatic royal bow. I don't laugh, but I want to. He's ridiculous.

But with Zane, I can never tell if he's joking. I just don't get the man. I don't get *any* of the fae princes. Every word out

of their mouths tends to piss me off.

“Beloved my ass.”

He studies me. “Far more beloved than you, am I correct?”

“Fuck you.” I pass him, planning on getting as far from him as I can.

“Is it hard always being a jerk? Is it hard to always treat everyone around you like they don’t matter?”

I stop walking, but I don’t turn around. While punching him square in the jaw would be wholly satisfying, I have to admit he’s right. I’ve made no effort over the years to even get to know the other princes, and now we’re linked together forever. The realization is kind of miserable.

Just like with Cassia, something has to be done. I have to change in some way. Show my value.

“I haven’t tried to bond with you—with any of the princes,” I confess.

I’m unsure if I should go down the stairs or try having a deeper conversation with him. Truthfully, I just want to leave. I want to just continue on with my day and not interact with anyone at all. But that’s how I always handle things, which has resulted in a pissed-off mate and the three men I’m bonded with hating me. So, maybe it’s time for something else.

I take a deep breath. “But none of you like me for some reason, so I haven’t bothered.” The truth hurts to say aloud. Vulnerability doesn’t suit me.

“It’s not that,” Zane begins slowly, as if carefully selecting his words. “You act like an arrogant asshole. Like you want to be anywhere but around us. And you never let down your guard, *never*, not even after all this time. So how are we

supposed to know you, or like you, if you don't give us a chance?"

"You're telling me Sulien lets his guard down?" I ask, turning in disbelief.

Zane tilts his head. "He does, with people he trusts."

In other words: not me.

"Who do you trust, Forrest?" He stares, and I say nothing. "Your father? Your mother? Your friends?"

I draw myself up taller. "There are few people I trust less than my parents."

"You and me both," he says, almost as if he's surprised.

Interesting. "And I wouldn't say I have friends, in the technical sense."

"But you could, right?" He lifts a brow. "If you tried. With us. I mean, we're going to be living together, sharing a woman together, and building a family together... So shouldn't we try to be friends?"

I've got a philosopher on my hands, but damn, he's right again. Friendship isn't something the Fall Court's known for. We don't have balls or parties with glitter and fucking pretty drinks. There's no hanging out with buddies. We do two things well: hunting and fighting. We survive.

I'm surprised with everything I've heard about the Winter Court that Zane doesn't understand that about me. They work hard to survive too. *Actually, it's their humans who do the hard work.* I think back to what Cassia said earlier about surviving and never having time to dream. Maybe Zane doesn't understand my position as much as I might have thought.

I crack my neck, square off, then remember that we're talking and not fighting. "Look, I've been an arrogant asshole. It's a part of who I am, but it's something I'm working on. Regardless, you're right. We're going to be sharing a stubborn mate, who I think hates all of us, so we can't keep things the way they are."

Zane nods, thoughtfully.

"We can start over and be a united front." I continue, believing the words more with each one that's spoken. "We can't hate each other and expect our mate to find a way to love us."

The four courts have always tolerated one another. Never before have we had to work together on a deep enough level to share a mate. That's why the Celestial Equilibrium lay uninhabited.

Cassia's going to change all of that for us. Because of her, we have to do more than tolerate each other, or we'll never have a happy wife or a happy family. *Maybe she's what we need to bring our kingdom together.* The last time all four fae princes shared a mate, war broke out. Maybe this time, peace will reign.

Zane sighs. "I'm willing to give, I think." He doesn't seem confident, but it's something.

I hesitate, then blurt out, "I saw her today."

The information feels important, like something that might help us bond. If I'm going to try to trust these men, I might as well start today. No matter how uncomfortable the whole thing makes me.

But Zane simply raises his eyebrows and waits for me to continue.

Okay, I can open up. I can share. This is normal and not weird as fuck at all. “The castle sent fae servants to move her family out of their home and into the castle. After they left and she was alone, I appeared and went into her house.” *After* watching her for a bit, so I could arrange a moment for us to talk alone, but I don’t say that.

Zane listens intently, but I swear I see jealousy flicker in his eyes.

“Her home was... tiny, old, and rundown. Not at all the kind of place I imagined for our beautiful mate.”

Truth be told, it bothered me, but not as much as her comments about not having enough to eat. My people often preferred to sleep under the stars rather than beneath a roof, but no one went hungry. No one. Each person played a role in our society, in our hunting, and our feasting, so everyone ate. The fact that she knew hunger made me want to beat the shit out of Sulien and the rest of his dickhead Summer Fae.

“And what happened? How... was she? Was she anymore open to the idea of marrying the four of us?” Zane sounds desperately curious, which is surprising, the man seldom showed any emotions at all.

“She told me flat out that she doesn’t want this. That she doesn’t want us.” It’s somehow even more depressing to say the words out loud.

Zane sighs and nods, rubbing the back of his neck. “I got that sense, too.”

I hesitate, then push on. “What do you think will finally win her over?”

He takes so long to answer that I almost think he won’t. “You’re right about us needing to work together. We can be

charming as hell, individually, but it doesn't seem to be enough with Cassia. We need the full power of the four of us to show her a life that she'll enjoy. We need her to see what all the other fae women see, which will require teamwork."

"Teamwork. I like that. It's better than no plan."

He nods. "And I know Cobar and Sulien will be on board. Sulien's been sulking in his room all morning over her, and Cobar's been ordering new clothes in hopes of impressing her, along with having jewelry made to gift to her. I don't think he can get his pants any tighter, but by the gods, he's trying. Now, we need to combine our efforts and win her over."

I grin, feeling better. Working as a team might just get her to love us *and* build great relationships all around. *Hell, I've always wanted a wife. But just as much, I've always wanted real friends.*

This might be the beginning of the happier life I've always wanted. The one where I feel safe. Where my nights aren't plagued with nightmares. Where someone loves and cares about me.

At least, I hope.

SIXTEEN



Cassia

I reach the bottom of the steps leading to the castle and look up, feeling uncertain as I stare at the towering white structure. Normally, from here, I'd be making my way to the servants' halls to change and get ready for my shift. Now? I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to be doing.

But then as I'm struggling to decide what to do, a fae servant exits through the huge wooden doors, looks at me, eyes wide, and heads toward me. My heart races. The human servants rarely interacted with the fae servants. Even though we have similar roles in the castle, they're still above us. And yet, this servant seems to have been looking for me specifically.

"My lady," she gushes as she reaches me, giving a sweeping bow. "We've been expecting you."

"You have?" I ask, feeling dumb.

Of course they would have been expecting me. My family's already arrived and the Summer Court functions like a well-oiled machine. No doubt they already have a room cleaned and ready for me, along with anything else I might need. That's just how things roll when they think you're fae royalty.

She smiles as she straightens, and the movement draws attention to her heart-shaped face and large eyes. The girl can't be more than eighteen, but she carries herself like she's far older. "Come on now, you're late, Lady Cassia."

"Late?" I snort. "Late to be porked by four princes?" The moment the words slip from my lips, I regret them.

Her cheeks turn scarlet. "N-no, not for that."

I feel as embarrassed as she turns and leads me through the castle. Just because I'm terrified of a night with the princes doesn't mean I should be discussing it with some random servant. She doesn't deserve that.

As we walk, I feel all eyes on us, and hear the sound of whispering each time I pass someone. I keep my back straight, even though my gaze is trained on the ground. I might not want to see humans and fae alike, who are now looking at me like some long-lost fae princess, staring, but I'll be damned if they see just how much they're getting to me.

When we stop in a room, I finally look up and frown. "What's this about then?"

The servant turns back to me. "Prince Sulien has instructed us to prepare a wardrobe for you." She sweeps her arms around the room covered in material, with a little place to stand, and a mirror in front of it.

A fae man with long dark hair and a pointy nose appears from behind a changing area. "Ah, you're here at last, come now," and he offers me his arm, which I awkwardly take, and then he leads me up onto the little stand.

Before I even have a chance to process, he's measuring me this way and that with a little tape measure, jotting down notes as he goes. "What are your preferences in colors? Fabrics? Fit?"

Length?” he rattles off the questions so fast I can barely follow.

“I just don’t want to look like an asshole.” *Geez. Surely there was a better way to say that?*

He freezes while measuring my arm. “Uh, an asshole, my lady?”

All this ‘my lady’ stuff is already getting old, but I clarify, “I don’t want to be squeezed into outfits that have my boobs falling out. I don’t want to have huge puffy skirts that make it hard to walk. I want to be in clothes that I can move around in and do what I have to do. Other than that, I don’t care.” There, that’s better.

He gives a nod, but he has a funny look on his face, like he’s trying to figure me out as he measures me. Granted, I haven’t exactly been a smoothtalker since I entered this room, so I don’t blame his reaction. The thing is, I just want to find some quiet place to crawl into and sleep away the rest of this strange day.

Maybe then I’d gain some clarity about what to do with the princes and the spell that went so terribly wrong.

“I don’t think she needs new clothes. She looks just fine in what she’s already wearing.”

I freeze and glance to my side where Prince Cobar leans against a wall looking far too handsome in dark blue pants and a white shirt that’s unbuttoned nearly to his belly. His golden curls have been left loose around his face, softening the strong lines of his face ever-so-slightly. His startling blue eyes cling to my body, moving from my feet up to my face, heating my skin like a caress.

It’s unsettling. He shouldn’t be here.

Damn teleporting.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, feeling even more frustrated.

I’m not ready to face these men. Not yet. Not when I still don’t know what lies to tell to buy me time to find a solution to the mess I’m now in.

He smiles, and I hate how much I like his smile. “I had the good fortune of hearing that you were here and thought I’d check on my bride.”

This again? “Not your bride,” I counter.

“That’s not what the magic says,” he teases, followed by a wink.

My tailor clears his throat. “My lady, do you have a, uh, more suitable gown you might be able to wear while we’re preparing your other garments?”

I look down at my clothes. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Not a thing,” Prince Cobar says smoothly. “You look more beautiful than any woman I’ve seen in my life, and I’ve seen the finest women from the four kingdoms.”

Lifting a brow, I study him. “You know flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

He smirks. “We’ll see.”

The tailor rises from measuring my legs. “Prince Sulien simply suggested that it’d be... good to give you something to wear for now, so I’ve placed a few gowns in the changing area, if you will.”

I bite my lip, debating about whether I should tell them all to go to hell followed by me simply stomping out of the room. But that'd be pointless. If things go as planned, I'm still going to marry Prince Sulien and have to get used to all of this, so why not start now?

"Alright," I say.

Prince Cobar offers me his hand, and I reluctantly take it. But he surprises me by pulling me into his arms. I gasp, my hand on his chest, and our eyes meet. My heart races, and his smile falters as his gaze moves to my lips.

I jerk away from him, my legs feeling wobbly, as I head for the changing area. Ducking inside, I draw in several shaky breaths. I hate that I'm this woman, like all the others, charmed by the beautiful fae princes. I thought I was better than that, but it's like everything changed the night of the ball, and now I can't seem to escape them, both in real life, and in my thoughts.

"Do you like the choices I left you?" the tailor asks.

Right, the dresses. I turn looking away from the changing screen and see half a dozen dresses hanging from the wall. Most are far too fancy for me. One is covered in feathers. Another in gems. A third looks so low-cut in the front that I'm sure my boobs would be popping out left and right. The dress on the end, however, is a blue-green color that reminds me of my eyes. It's simple. Short sleeves, silver along the bodice, and has a corset back.

When I touch the material, I sigh. It's soft. Criminally soft, and now I desperately want to wear it.

I struggle out of my dress, hanging it from one of the hooks, and then slip into the dress. I'm not sure how it looks,

but it feels divine. Unfortunately, I can't tie the back.

“Uh, can I get a little help?” I ask.

In seconds, someone is behind me, and I shift my hair over my shoulder to give them better access to pull the laces tighter and tie it. The person's touch is light and gentle, and I find it strange to need someone's help to dress, but I guess this is my life now. Fancy, soft dresses and servants tying my clothes.

“It's beautiful.”

I whirl around and find Prince Cobar there, staring down at me, and my heart leaps into my throat. “You shouldn't be in here.”

He doesn't smile. “I know, but I couldn't help it.” His gaze heats as it moves over my dress, and then he reaches out and strokes the fabric at my stomach. “It's soft. Like you.”

I snort and speak without thinking. “I'm not soft, you are.”

He raises a brow. “Cassia, one thing you'll learn about me is that I'm never soft around you. Want to check?”

My jaw drops open, and despite my best intentions, my gaze moves lower. Sure enough, the bastard is hard and ready to go. I wonder if he'd be this eager if he knew I was only a human, a human who tricked him with a potion. That big dick of his would be limp as a noodle before I even finished my explanation.

“Soft or hard,” I tell him slowly. “It doesn't matter to me, because you won't be getting anywhere near me with that thing.”

He tosses back his head and laughs. “How long are we going to play this game, my little mate? Just crawl into my bed. That's where you'll be from now on anyway.”

It's irritating. These men. They think they want me as a wife because of a spell, and they think they don't need to work at all to earn my heart because I'm their mate. But even then, shouldn't I deserve better? Is this how they'd really treat their mate?

I shove him a little, and either he was off-balance, or my action completely caught him off-guard, because he stumbles back into the changing screen, and it goes toppling down. My cheeks heat as I see the tailor and the servant staring open mouthed at us, but I can't take the time to care.

"Don't follow me!" I say, pointing at Prince Cobar.

Then, I storm away, disappearing out into the hall... where I run smack into a big body. My gaze moves up, and Prince Zane is there. His eyes wide with surprise.

"Cassia, my lady." He bows, then rights himself, still too close to me.

I step back, then around him, racing down the hall, to who the hell knows where. Unfortunately for me, he has much longer legs, so he manages to match my stride with ease. Several times I glare over at him, but he doesn't seem to notice, just keeps pace with me.

"What?" I finally snap.

He casts me a curious glance. "You seem upset."

"No joke, because your friend with a hard dick wants me in his bed."

Prince Zane freezes and the thunder in his face makes me stop too. Hell, it makes my heart stop. "Which of my friends propositioned you? I'll have his head!"

“Wh-what?” I say, my brain seems to have decided to stop working.

He draws so close to me that our breaths mingle, and the look in his eyes makes a shiver roll down my spine. “Which of my friends would make such an offer? I may be a calm man, but there is nothing inside of me that will stop from beating him to a pulp.”

Is it weird that I find his threat hot? “No, I, uh, just meant Prince Cobar.”

“Prince Cobar?” The fury fades from his face, and he takes a shaky breath. “Well, that’s different, I have no choice but to share you with him.”

Now, I’m truly curious. “You were about to kill some random guy a minute ago, why is it different with him?”

He seems to consider me for a moment. “With there being fewer female fae than male fae, sharing women is quite common. And the fact that you are the mate to all four of us means that I either accept it or lose my mind. I might feel an uncomfortable amount of... possessiveness when it comes to you, but I’m not an animal. I have to understand that this is the way things are.”

Wow. Progressive.

“I can’t imagine sharing a man with someone else,” I tell him honestly.

There’s amusement in his gaze. “Lucky for you, you won’t have to, we’ll be content with you and only you.”

“Because I’m your mate.” *Not because you know me. Or like me. But because some magical thing said that I’m the one.*

He nods. “Because you’re our mate.”

My chest aches at his words, and I turn and walk away.

“Why does that bother you?” he asks, again at my side. “We’ll be married soon. Bonded for our lifetimes. You’ll spend your days being worshipped by us, and your nights having your body worshipped by us. Is that really a bad thing?”

My body. Our nights. Being in their beds. These fae seriously have one track minds. They want to pledge themselves to a human servant who none of them really know, all because of a lie. It’s almost so painful it’s funny.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I need to find my room.”

I can tell he wants to say more. That he wants to follow me, but he does me the small kindness of letting me leave. I don’t know where I’m going, but I know I need to get away from all the princes before I say or do something I might regret.

SEVENTEEN



Cassia

My room on the royal floor is bigger than the house I moved out of this morning, and as different as night and day. I sit on the obscenely large bed and survey the room, letting my hands run over the expensive fabric. The sun sits high, and light shines brightly into the room. Crystals in the chandelier glitter and reflect sparkles all over the room. The marble floor glistens. It's all like something out of a fairy tale.

Basically, it's weird. *Really* weird.

Two days ago, I was cleaning this room, picking up some snotty, entitled fae's dirty underwear, and making the bed with the softest material I've ever felt. Now I'm sitting on the bed—something I'd always wanted to do, but would have cost me my job if I'd have been caught—the linens alone are worth more than I got paid for six months of work. And even though I'm going to enjoy sleeping on them tonight, I'm feeling strangely uncomfortable about the whole idea.

I stand and walk over to the dressing table where four jewelry boxes are lined up neatly with the official seals from the four courts. Sitting down in front of them, I hesitate, then open the first box. It's filled with diamond jewelry. I know it's from Prince Zane, since it's the official gem of the Winter

Court, and I know what the others will look like, too. Amber from Prince Sulien. Emeralds from Prince Forrest. And Sapphires from Prince Cobar.

I push the boxes away, feeling numb. *I don't belong here. Life in the royal castle just isn't for me.*

Before I got to my room, I'd sought out my father and grandmother in the garden cottage. With the help of the fae who'd moved our belongings, Grandmother had already unpacked, and Father was rolling around in his wheelchair, overjoyed at his newfound mobility. *They have exactly what I wanted them to have, happiness and security in a way I never could've provided them before. No more worries will plague them ever again.*

As long as they're here.

Standing with them is when it hits me on a soul-deep level. I'm stuck with these four princes because ripping the joy I see in my family is out of the question. Maybe I can still find a way out of marrying all four of them, but if I can't, I have to accept this.

For my family.

I close my eyes and lay my head on the dressing table, I feel overloaded, unable to process all the changes that have happened in less than a day. I'm experiencing the oddest feeling of being trapped and being set free all at the same time, and I don't like it. Life before might have been uncertain in some ways, but there was... a certainty to knowing I'd be working each day. A certainty of coming home and seeing my grandmother and father. A certainty to who I was in this world.

That's all gone now.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were here yet,” Beatrix says with a start.

I whirl around to spot her in the doorway. She’s backing away, and my heart leaps into my throat at the sight of a familiar face from my old life.

“No, wait, please come back!” She freezes at my words, and I stand and walk toward the door. “How are you?”

Beatrix bows, her spine stiff, and her shoulders set. She’s wearing the same ugly burned orange uniform I’d worn a thousand times before, except hers is wrinkle-free. It’s neatly done too, just like the bun in her hair.

And it’s strange, the sight of the uniform almost makes me miss wearing it.

I force a smile, hating that my friend is bowing to me now, just because of some lie. “Don’t do that. Please. I’m the same Cassia I’ve always been. I worked here as a maid *two* days ago. Seriously, I’m just me.”

She smiles, and some of the tension eases from her face. “Why would you want to be ‘just you’ when you can be fae royal? Your life is a dream come true!”

I can’t tell her the whole truth. I wish there was someone I *could* tell, but that’d be too dangerous, even if talking this out might help me understand how I’m feeling.

So what can I tell her?

“I’m not sure I’m up for all of this.” I wave my hand in front of me. She’s better off than I am—was, but she’s got to understand the leap from bottom-rung human to royal fae is monumental. “Dating the princes? Marrying all four of them? That’s a lot.”

Beatrix half shrugs with a small smile, teasing her lips. “I mean,” she drags out the word. “Marrying four sexy fae princes and living the high life of a royal fae does sound like shit on a stick. *Ew.*” She shakes her head and frowns.

I can’t help but laugh. “Well, when you phrase it like that...” But I find myself sad again before I can even finish the sentence.

If only things were that easy.

“You deserve good things.” Her gaze is locked with mine. “And four fae dicks all at once, or even one at a time, sounds like good things.”

I erupt into laughter. But just as some of the tension that’s been resting on my chest starts to ease, I remember that she doesn’t know all the details. She doesn’t know that all of this is because of some fucked up magical potion. That all four princes might find their true mates at some point, and that the truth will cost me my head. But until then, I’ll be lying to three men day and night, pretending to be something I’m not. The tension returns twofold.

It’s a huge risk. More than I signed on for. And thinking of the four men I’ll be marrying, I hate the thought of hurting any of them. The princes seem so genuine. I hate thinking about the way these men are trying to win my heart because they all seem so genuine, but it’s all based on a lie.

This is the first time in my life where I’ve felt like a bad person, while also knowing I can’t do anything to fix the mess I’ve created. Unless, of course, I can find a way to go back to just being betrothed to Prince Sulien, which seems unlikely.

“Thank you,” I tell her, but the words sound so broken. As broken as my heart.

Beatrix sighs. “Cassia, I’ve known you our whole lives... Can I be honest with you?”

I nod eagerly. Honesty is what I desperately need right now.

She looks uncomfortable, but takes a breath, and the look passes. “You haven’t had an easy life. The whole world has given you every reason not to trust it—”

“It’s been fine,” I interrupt, then force my mouth to close.

She continues. “I can remember when you were ten, not long after your Grandmother, had lost her eyesight and was fired from her job. You were trying to sell some jewelry that belonged to your mother to pay for food, and everyone at the market was trying to scam you. I caught you walking home in tears, because you’d thought of those people as your family, and when you needed them the most, they failed you.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Sometimes life sucks.”

“And sometimes people fail you, but not all the time.” She hesitates, then pushes on. “I remember when you were twelve and the men in town started making you awful offers in trade for food and the things you needed. The same men that had snuck you treats when your grandmother was a woman working at the palace, trading with them regularly. I remember you asking what was wrong with you that they wanted those things from you. It was... awful. Awful seeing you blame yourself and awful watching you lose faith in people one day after another.”

My eyes sting. “Life can be hard.”

She takes my hands. “It can be. It has been for you, but it doesn’t *have* to be, Cassia. That’s what I’m trying to say. It can

have good things. It can have good people. There can be magic, laughter, wealth, and love in your life, if you're open to it."

If only she understood...

"There's *four* of them," I say, trying to blink away the tears that gather in my eyes. "They have expectations. And *I'm* not going to fill any of those expectations." I pull my hands from her and gesture to the room. "They're used to this! I'm used to *cleaning* this!"

She shakes her head. "If you don't meet their expectations, they're crazy, and they don't deserve you."

I wish she could understand. I wish she knew the truth. Her opinion of everything would change if she knew I wasn't really their mates. If she knew I tricked them, like some snake in the mud.

"Cassia, just don't do what you always do in these situations. Don't get stubborn. Don't hide behind your fear. You've missed out on so many things because you were scared to trust..."

A knock at the door quiets us. Beatrix jumps and scurries to the bed, pulling a pillow out of place and then straightening it. I want to tell her that she doesn't have to do that, but know deep down that I have to answer that door, and she has to play the part of my maid and not my friend.

This is my life now, after all. Even if it breaks my heart a little.

Later. We'll finish this later. Because her words are clinging to me like fresh wounds. They make me uncomfortable in my own skin, which probably means I need

to think about how much truth there is in them, and how they apply to my current situation.

Feeling wounded and vulnerable, I open the door and Lady Takara stands in front of me, flanked by two fae I've seen before but can't identify. I stare at the three of them in confusion. *Why the hell are they here? And why do they look like they're all dressed for different events?*

Lady Takara is wearing a bright pink dress with glitter on the fabric, on her skin, and in her blonde hair. Beside her, a woman stands stiff as an arrow, with harsh green eyes. Her ears are pointy, making me think she might be from the House of War, or the House of Memories. She wears brown and green clothes that have a masculine air, even though they wrap her figure perfectly. On Lady Takara's other side, is a woman I know has to come from the House of Cosmos. She has curly black hair, gentle brown eyes, and silver wings. Her dress is silver too, as are the large gems woven into her hair.

"Can I help you?" I ask, wanting to have more of an attitude for Lady Takara's benefit, but not willing to be an ass to the two unknown women.

Beatrix slips out of the door, taking my only friend with her. None of the fae notice. But, of course, they only notice humans when they're going to be their new queen.

"I'm Lady Nova from the House of War," the green-eyed one introduces herself, head held high.

"I'm Lady Starlite from the House of Cosmos," the one with the curly black hair adds, with a little bob.

Okay...

"I don't think we've formally met. I'm Lady Takara from the House of Wealth," Lady Takara announces in her high-

pitched voice, then barges into the room.

I bristle and stand up straighter. I don't like Lady Takara being in my space. Well, the only place close to my space anymore. There's just something about her I don't like. *Maybe it's the planting stolen jewelry on me and getting me fired thing. Bitch.* But I ignore her like the useless irritant she is to me now, and focus my attention on the other women.

Lady Starlite takes my hand. "The stars aligned perfectly on the night of the Summer Solstice. The celestials put on a show that night, making a tapestry that determined your future and a great future for the four courts. You were fated to be our queen. You managed to harness the energy of the retrograde and attract the princes. It is still in you. I can feel it. So much good is coming to the kingdom that—"

"How are *you* a fae?" Lady Takara interrupts Lady Starlite, glaring at me. I can tell she has more to say, but she clamps her mouth shut.

If she thinks she's going to intimidate me any more, now that my job doesn't depend on being nice to her, she's sorely mistaken. "I imagine someone in my family fucked a fae, or the other way around. And here I am."

She snarls at me. "Well, who's a fae in your family line?"

"Someone born before me." I slowly blink at her, then welcome the women awkwardly into my room, before closing the door behind them.

She scoffs and her attention is drawn to the jewelry boxes on my dressing table. She walks over to them and runs a finger along the box filled with diamond jewelry. "The princes deserve a full fae. Someone from an important house. Someone equal to them."

“Yet, I’m their mate. Deal with it.”

She rounds on me, fists clenched. “No matter what, you’ll always be the girl who scrubbed my floors.”

Oh, honey, no you didn’t... “No, I’ll be queen. *Your* queen. Capable of putting you in your place in creative and painful ways, if I so wish.” Then, I smile, proud of how cold and confident the words came out.

Her jaw drops.

Glancing at the others to decide how to deal with them, I see that Lady Starlite isn’t even paying attention to our conversation. She’s doing weird signs with her hands and practically prancing around the room. *The House of Cosmos, they’re weird people.*

I look away from her and toward Lady Nova. The blonde is staring silently, and I get the feeling she’s assessing me, which is uncomfortable. *That’s right, my new subjects, this is your future queen in all her glory!*

“You know, I’m a very important member of the House of Wealth. The last thing you’d want to do is piss me off.” Lady Takara draws herself up taller, but there’s a flicker of uncertainty in her gaze.

Doubt it. She seems like the type of fae that even her own house would be glad to be rid of.

Then, I picture her the day I was tossed out of the castle in disgrace, and I remember exactly why she unleashed that hell on my life. “You might be important, but you also seem very good at angering important people. Living on the edge and taking what doesn’t belong to you.”

Her big eyes widen. She opens her mouth, then closes it, before dropping her head.

I bet you don't have anything more to say, bitch.

Maybe now I've said enough to get her off my back. I've got more than enough shit to deal with without having to watch my back around this horrid woman. Now, I just need to figure out the other two. *Are they friends or foes?*

I turn to Lady Nova. "Is that why you're here, too? To support her when she's clearly pissed that I got all four princes, and she got stuck with herself, a *dreadful* consolation prize?"

Lady Nova lowers her head and speaks just above a whisper. "I just don't want war."

"I don't plan for war," I tell her honestly.

War is the furthest thing from my mind. I'm trying to save my own ass. To see if there's some loophole that will get me out of marrying all four princes, and still allow my family to enjoy the good life. War isn't even on the radar.

"No one plans for war," she tells me, cocking her head. "But it seems that you'll be the deciding factor between peace and bloodshed for our people."

"*Me?*" I ask in shock.

She stands up taller, meeting my gaze. "Do you know the tale of Queen Icily?"

I shake my head. *Should I?*

"Queen Ellie was matched with all four princes." She pauses, lifting a brow as if to tell me, *just like you*. "It is said that she was a vain but beautiful woman, unprepared for ruling. She saw the role of queen as a way to have the finest things, and wield her influence over the courts and houses like a weapon. Instead of fostering the relationships between the

four princes, she pitted them against each other. She showed some more love, some more attention, and some more affection than others. This bred jealousy and resentment between the four kings and even as war ravaged our lands, she continued to see nothing wrong with what she was doing. She, quite simply, didn't care that she was the cause of war, death, and destruction.

“A queen who matches with all four princes is meant to be strong, powerful, and intelligent enough to understand that her job may be to rule the kingdom, along with her husbands, but equally important is her role to foster peace between the four kings. Queen Ellie did not understand that.” She finishes abruptly, then stares at me.

I hate that this is the first time I'm hearing about any of this, and it hits me like a punch to the gut. If I marry the four princes, I don't just need to keep my secret and play a wife to them. I need to... prevent *war*. My job is to maintain a happy relationship between me and my men, *and* each other.

Everyone is staring at me, so I try to hide the fact that my stomach is churning and put on a brave face. “So all of this is to say...?”

Lady Nova considers me for a moment, then says, “I'm from the House of War. My people will suffer more than any other house if there's war. I just wanted to see the woman that will determine our fate and decide if you understand how powerful your position is. And see if you're ready for such a role.”

I draw myself up taller. “Have you come to a conclusion?”

Her eyes narrow, and she nods.

But before she can answer, Lady Takara jumps in, “None of this really matters. Before we even talk about wars and her role as queen, we have to wait for the elders to conduct the test.” And she looks so damn smug that I want to rip her hair out.

Unfortunately for me, I have no idea what she’s talking about. I don’t even know enough to determine whether she’s lying through her teeth, or if I should take what she’s saying seriously.

But I guess I have to find out.

“What test?” I feign nonchalance, like it slipped my mind.

No one said anything about a test. Just like no one told me, my family was moving into the castle today. If I do become queen, I’m changing the way they send out information because there’s no system now, and it is infuriating.

“It’s the test that will determine your fae heritage. Afterward, everyone will know what house you come from.” She smiles widely, like she knows my secret rather than the other way around.

Lady Starlite is suddenly in front of me. She places her hands on my shoulders, and our eyes meet and hold. “Don’t worry about the test, my lady. Three of the five planets were aligned on the day of your meeting, one star ceased to exist the moment you touched Prince Sulien, another fell from the sky just after. The solar system was awake, breathing, watching. Your bond will be like no bond before it. Your rule will be one filled with love, prosperity, and change. The test means nothing because the stars and planets have already said it all.”

I glance at Lady Nova.

She shrugs and says, “I don’t care what the stars or the test say, all I care about is what you do.”

Fucking hell. “So... the test will really-?”

“Show us all who you are,” Lady Takara says, then grins like she’s won. “Ladies, we should go. I’m sure our future queen would like time to enjoy this life.” I fill in her unspoken words, *before it’s taken away.*

I watch them go, then collapse onto my bed. She doesn’t even know for sure that I’m a fake, but everyone will know soon, if she’s telling the truth about this test.

Fuck. Is this really happening when it’s too late to go back?

And why didn’t someone warn me about this? And by *someone*, I mean Prince damn Sulien.

EIGHTEEN



Cassia

With my fists balled up and my heart pounding, I march to Prince Sulien's room. He had to know about this test before we even started this plan. *Was this all a joke to him? A game?* They're clearly going to discover I'm just a human, and then they'll take my head.

I don't knock. I barge in, ready to start shouting, but I have to stop short when I find him there with Prince Zane. *Half-naked.* Their glistening bare chests give me pause. They zap every thought from my head, and I'm left gaping at the sight before me.

They're in nothing but towels. Water slides down their bare skin, heading to whatever's concealed beneath the little towels, and my head starts to conjure up the bits of them I'm missing. Even though the bits I can see are more than appetizing.

Fuck. How can men be this good looking? This muscular?

I realize I'm staring with my mouth hanging open and close it. They're both looking back at me, frozen in shock, twin expressions of surprise on their handsome faces. I know I need to talk before they do, and I destroy any power I have in this situation.

Speak. Fucking speak!

“What have you two been doing?” I ask, my voice dripping with suspicion.

Uh, what? That isn't what I planned to say. *Hell*. But what had I planned to say? The water droplets cascading down their pecs make me lick my lips. I'm suddenly very thirsty, and it's hard to come up with a clear thought that doesn't involve me on my knees licking these two dry.

I swallow hard.

They glance at each other, eyes wild, then back at me. It'd be comical if I wasn't so damn turned on.

“We were practicing with our swords. And we just got out of the shower,” Prince Sulien says awkwardly, tightening his towel and shifting his feet.

My eyes grow wide. I imagine the two of them together. Water running down their hair, over their chests, to their hard cocks. I see them rubbing each other with soap, their hands sliding around, then down.

“You showered together?” I whisper, trying to rid myself of the image.

“There were *separate* showers,” Prince Zane adds in a rush, his voice deeper than usual.

Does he know that my dirty thoughts need a long ass shower to get clean?

My brain scrambles for what to say. “And you needed to meet up to talk before you got dressed?”

And do they have these half-naked meetings frequently? Maybe I need to pop in more often...

“What are you doing here?” Prince Sulien asks, ignoring my inquiry, an edge to his words.

His irritated tone helps to snap me from my dirty thoughts. A little.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here. Maybe I was just drawn to your room by some kind of magical force,” I tell him sarcastically.

Prince Zane smiles seductively. “My room’s across the hall... If you ever feel a magical force and want to head there, you’re welcome.”

My cheeks feel hot, and my eyes dip lower to slide over that little towel of his. “Uh, yeah, maybe.” When I force my gaze back up, he’s grinning, and I realize he caught me in the act.

“Cassia, what’s really going on?” There’s Prince Sulien. The man without a heart, and with a terrible plan that might get me killed.

Anger and bitterness rear their ugly heads inside of me once more. “I’ve got some questions for you, Prince Sulien,” I reply, crossing my arms and glaring at him.

Prince Zane’s smile fades away, and the energy in the room changes. *Is he upset?* I can’t for the life of me understand why. I’m the one who’s pissed.

“I’m free to answer any questions you might have,” Prince Zane says, giving a little bow, like he’s in a fancy suit instead of a towel.

My anger practically hums through me. “Good to know, but this question is just for Prince Sulien.”

His gaze shifts to the other man, and he draws himself up taller. “So, I assume you want me to leave you alone together?”

I stare, confused but trying to keep a grip on my anger. Anger makes sense. Anger is safer. “Yeah, that’s usually how private conversations go.”

There’s a flash of something in his eyes.

“Maybe this can wait for another time. Maybe when I’m dressed,” Prince Sulien says, emphasizing each word in an obnoxious way.

Like hell he’s getting out of this. “I don’t think so.”

Prince Zane moves toward me, and then he’s standing over, smelling like something cool, refreshing, and absolutely delicious. “I know that you’re from the Summer Court, but I want you to see me as a confidant and advisor as well. Anything you need, anytime you need it, I’ll be there.”

My cheeks heat, even though I’m not sure he knows what I’m picturing when he’s saying things like that while barely wearing anything at all. “Good to know. Thanks.”

He hesitates, then reaches out and combs the hair back from my face. “And you can pop into my room any time you’d like, just the way you do with Prince Sulien. My door is always open to you.”

I shrug. “Thanks, but I can’t see myself needing to pop into any of your rooms.”

He stares. I stare.

Okay, I need to say something more. “It’s not like I come here often.”

“*Often?*” Prince Zane’s eyes darken. “You’ve been here before? With him, alone?” He lets out an almost imperceptible growl.

Prince Sulien’s eyes dart in Prince Zane’s direction, but he doesn’t say a word. I’m learning he wields silence like a weapon. Or like a very incompetent weapon, like a flaccid penis. I haven’t decided which.

The thing is, I don’t understand what’s going on, and I don’t care. I need to talk to Prince Sulien. Alone. And not a nice conversation. One with lots of pointing, shouting, and name calling.

“Whatever this is, can you do it later?” I ask Prince Zane before facing Prince Sulien. “I need to talk to you right now. *Alone.*”

Prince Sulien and I both peer at Prince Zane expectantly. Prince Zane shifts closer, blocking out my sight, bombarding me with his essence. He suddenly doesn’t seem so cold. There’s something almost dangerous about having a big, sexy, half-naked man close enough to touch.

I breathe him in. My eyes close, and I lean in closer to him like there’s actually a magical force drawing me in, and I feel him lean in too. Close enough that I can feel his breath on my neck.

“I can’t wait to make you scream on our wedding night,” he whispers into my ear, and his voice practically vibrates through my body.

Jerking back, I try to calm my breathing. *What is it with these guys and talking to me like I’m just a piece of meat? Is this what a married life with them would be like? All sex? Feeling like an object?*

Yes, I was just ogling him. Yes, these men make me think dirty things, but just once I'd like to hear something sweet or reassuring from them. It's like the only women they've ever talked to are ones that couldn't hear them talking.

These fae princes need to be taken down a peg. Or maybe twenty. If I'm forced to marry them, I don't want my life to just become that of a woman with her legs spread all day for her husbands. If I let stuff like this go, I predict my married life will be absolutely miserable.

So, handle it.

"I'll be screaming?" I clarify angrily. "Screaming with *laughter*, I think!" I tap at his crotch and his hands reflexively cover the area. I raise my eyebrows and let out a small laugh.

To my surprise, he looks more hurt than angry. "So, this is what you want? Just to speak to Prince Sulien? Alone?"

"You finally get it!" I say, taking a step away from him.

He looks between us, gives a curt nod, and heads for the door. For some reason, my chest aches as I watch him leave, but I'm not sorry for what I said. Aren't all these changes enough? Do these men really think that constantly talking about fucking me before I even know them is going to make me want to be around them?

Because it doesn't.

"Was that necessary?" Prince Sulien asks softly.

"You could have gotten him to leave," I challenge. "Or reminded him that I'm not a piece of meat."

He sighs, shaking his head. "He didn't mean it that way."

"What other way is there to mean it?"

He's silent. I hate when he goes silent. I don't even get the sense he's thinking, just ignoring me in hopes that I'll go away. It's almost as frustrating as the crap the other princes keep pulling.

Deep breaths. We're finally alone. "What's this test the elders have planned for me? And when is it?" I feel out of sorts, like I'm doing everything wrong when I'm just desperately trying to protect myself and my family, and I hate feeling like this.

But I need answers.

He waves me off and walks to his dresser. "Don't worry about that. I took care of it."

I glare at him, unmoving. I want my response to be calm and measured, so he knows I'm serious. But I don't have that in me.

"You took care of it like you took care of the spell that got me four mates?" I take a step closer to him, trying to keep from pounding my feet in anger.

Nothing. I get nothing from him. *Again.* I'm damn near combustible. My throat is sandpaper, and my body trembles.

"*What* have you taken care of? Did you take care of letting me know I'd be awakened by movers this morning?" I grab a small wooden statue off the shelf near me and hurl it at him. He's far enough away to see it coming. Or maybe his fae powers make his instincts fast, but he twists, and it misses his shoulder by centimeters.

"Did you get those three assholes to stop chasing me around like they're dogs in heat?"

There's a carved ball on the shelf behind me. I pick it up, then throw it with all my strength. But, of course, he catches it

with one hand. Never taking his eyes off me.

I grab a little carved figure. “Did you take care of the spell that linked me to four men?” Then, I hurl it.

This time, he lets it hit him. It strikes him in the chest, then bounces onto the floor. Useless. Certainly not big enough or hard enough to do any real damage to a man made of steel, but I’d desperately wanted to hit him.

Yet, I don’t feel any better now that I have.

My fists are drawn so tightly that my fingernails hurt my palms. I cross the room, get in his face, and jab him in the chest. “As usual, you’ve taken care of nothing but yourself. What actual action have you taken?”

I blink, and he’s behind me, smelling of citrus and cedar. His presence so overwhelming that I instantly want to move away from him, but I don’t. He breathes into my neck, his hot breath branding my skin. My knees surprise me by buckling.

His strong, bare arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against him. His body huge compared to my own. Hard against my softness. I’m shocked when he plants a kiss on my neck. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to draw in a full breath as he presses one kiss after another up my throat, branding me with each touch.

“I take action when it’s necessary,” he whispers in my ear, his breath hot against my skin.

He nibbles my earlobe, sending goosebumps dancing on my skin. Then, he turns me to face him in one fluid movement. His hand digs into the hair at my nape, and he holds me as he devours me in a kiss.

He’s not soft or gentle. His lips move with fervor on mine, and the urgency of his tongue to get to mine stuns me into

opening my lips and letting him have his way. One of his hands moves to my ass and he grips it, hard, dragging me against him.

His erection is an incredible surprise. Thick and long, pressing against my belly. Announcing that this kiss is affecting him just as much as it's affecting me.

I don't know what I'm doing when I reach between us and grab ahold of his cock through his towel, but his groan against my lips encourages me as I stroke him up and down, loving it when he curses and kisses me harder. His mouth slants over mine, his tongue slides up and down my own, and his hand in my hair angles me in whatever direction he wants.

And I like it.

These princes know how to kiss. Like no man I've been with before. And it makes me wonder, what else are these fae better at? The temptation to untie his towels builds inside of me, and I slip between the folds of fabric and grab hold with my hands.

His lips break from mine. "Fuck, Cassia!"

I stroke him harder, gripping him as our gazes hold. The air between us sizzles with tension. The need to have this man inside of me is overwhelming.

"This. Means. Something," he says, his words grinding out in tune with my pumps.

I nod and kiss him again, but he pulls back.

"Cassia, you're mine. Really. Mine."

Damn it to hell. What is it with these fae men?

"Let's just fuck and not worry about it," I pant.

He shakes his head. “You have to stop. I can’t. I don’t have the strength. I’m going to—”

“Come?” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “Claim you.”

Damn it. I don’t want to think. I just want to act. “No. Fuck. Just fuck.”

When he releases me, pushing my hand away, we’re both panting and disheveled. I smooth my clothing out, and he readjusts his tented towel. Both of us are looking at the other, and I have no idea what the fuck to do now. He’s the only prince things should have been simple with, and now, things are even more complicated.

I don’t even know what this means.

“What is it with you fae wanting to claim me like some prize?” I ask, trying to keep from sounding breathless. And failing.

His dark eyes sweep to me. “Have you done this with the others?” And his words border on an accusation.

What do I say? Do I lie? Fuck it. “You arranged this so these men are sharing me. You can’t be surprised when that’s what they do.”

His hands ball into fists, and a shiver rolls down my spine at the pure fury in his gaze. But, he says nothing. Not a word. Just glares around the room like he wants to fuck the whole place up.

I take several steps back, trying to escape his scent, trying to escape his overwhelming presence. Getting too close to these men affects my sensibilities in a way I don’t understand. It must be their fae magic, because never before has a man

made me lose all logic, all sense of myself, the way these men do.

What did I come in here for? Right, the test. The fact that soon everyone will know I'm only human, the princes will know I lied to them, my family will lose everything, and I'll lose my head. *That's* what's important. Not the sexy man in front of me.

"Tell me your plan. How are you going to protect me from this test?"

He runs his hand through his hair, looking away from me. "I can't say."

"Why?" I'm mad again now.

He doesn't answer, just keeps his gaze fixed on a wall near me.

Does he know how much I hate his silence? "I really thought I could trust you. I thought you'd do right by me. But all you've done over the past twenty-four hours is let me down. I don't trust you anymore, so I have no choice but to take care of this myself."

His gaze finds me again. "Don't do anything stupid, just—"

"You've already done something stupid. I'm just going to try to find some way out of this mess you've created." I turn and head for the door, hoping against hope that he'll stop me. That he'll tell me his plan and restore my faith in him.

But he says nothing... which tells me everything I need to know.

NINETEEN



Zane

The elders sit on the dais, dressed in their respective court's ceremonial attire. They don't speak, but their eyes say they're tired of waiting. We've been here for twenty minutes past the set meeting time, and everyone has arrived... except the queen-to-be.

I begin to pace, wondering if something happened to keep Cassia from showing up on time. *Maybe it's something with her father or grandmother.* The impulse to teleport to their cottage to check on them courses through me, but the elders frown upon things like that during a formal ceremony, even if it hasn't begun yet. Though, I haven't figured out what the elders don't frown upon outside of blind obedience to their will and their antiquated rules.

Cassia's testing that right now with her absence.

I smile. She tests everyone with that passionate temper of hers. Watching her fume at Prince Sulien put me further under her spell. She's electric. Some part of me didn't care if she turned that temper onto me, just as long as she was looking at me.

She's made me insane. A man of feelings instead of logic. The Winter Fae will be horrified by the change.

I've never met a woman in my court like her. Hell, I doubt there's anyone like her in the four courts, especially considering her view on marrying us. A view that's driving me crazy. I just can't wrap my mind around her not wanting to be our queen. *Are we really that bad? Or is it something else?* I thought every girl dreamed of being queen, yet she's fighting it tooth and nail.

There's never a question of how she feels because she says it and she shows it, and I don't think she has to try. It's natural for her to express herself. My feelings live inside of me. Hers are loud and out for the world to see.

Being married to her will be an adventure. She'll be the fire to my cold.

A smile perks up on my face when I think about the way she responded to me when I stepped into her space in Prince Sulien's room. *She wants me.* I saw how her breathing changed and the way she closed her eyes when I whispered in her ear. She's fighting her attraction to me, which makes no sense because she'll be my wife, our wife, within days.

I can't wait to touch her, to bed her on our wedding night. Even though she made a joke about my manhood, I'll be the one laughing when I show her just how wrong she was, and just how much I can do with my very adequate cock.

My wife will be pleased in all ways. As pleased as I am to call her my own.

I feel a gaze cling to me, breaking me from my thoughts. Prince Cobar's gaze holds my own from across the room, a question in the look, before he glances away. I draw my focus back to the present, but doing so brings forth the uneasy feeling in my chest. Prince Cobar, Forrest, and Sulien stand on different sides of the room. I don't know what they're

thinking, but they mill around, fidgeting with their clothing and watching the door.

Cassia's not royalty, yet, so she doesn't understand the way of the elders, but she's pushing the limits with her tardiness.

"Where is your mate?" The Summer Elder asks. He stands and looks down on us, wanting to be intimidating, but he's not. He's just an old man with power because we've allowed it.

But Sulien answers him with respect. "The servants are fetching her now." He glances at all of us, and moves to the center of the sanctuary. We follow him and stand in a circle facing each other. Waiting.

Hopefully not much longer, because something about all of this feels wrong. This is more than a person running late. This is something... Prince Sulien may know more about.

"What's going on?" I whisper to Prince Sulien. He's closest to her, being the prince of the court she lives in. They have a connection outside of this betrothal, but neither of them let us in on their history. It's obvious, and infuriating. He's going to have the upper hand with her in our marriage, and the rest of us will have to work harder to charm her.

I wonder if he's fucked her before. My jaw twitches.

"I don't know. I made sure the servants knew what time to bring her here." He puts his hands in his pockets and squints toward the massive double doors at the entrance. They don't move. No one's entered the sanctuary since we walked in.

"Do you think something's happened to her family?" Prince Cobar asks.

It's a good question and one of the only possibilities that make sense. This event is one of the most important in our

queen-to-be's life, only something truly awful would excuse her tardiness.

But that possibility is quickly dashed away. "No. I checked on them before I came here," Prince Forrest says, his eyes locked on the doors. "Her grandmother made me a delicious breakfast, and her dad gave me a carved wooden figurine. They're happy here. She's the only one who's unhappy."

We fall back into silence and continue to wait. I look around the room and see the wedding preparations have already begun. Influences from each of our courts hang on the walls and from the ceiling. Yet, those aren't the most important parts of a wedding.

Has our queen been fitted for her dress?

I was fitted for my suit yesterday, as were all the princes. Our suits represent our courts well. The silver accents in my black suit play on the ice that covers my land, and are a nod to our court stone, the diamond.

I didn't see anyone else's suit, but I'm sure it's more of the same. The elders revel in ceremonial garb and representing our courts. They don't have time or concern for personal taste.

"She's *thirty* minutes late," the elder says, his tone bordering on enraged.

The massive doors open, and relief hits me like a truck as I turn toward it. *She's here!*

I'm excited to see her, regardless of how she feels about seeing me, for now. Except, it's not Cassia in the doorway. Instead, four servants stand nervously staring at all of us. Their faces pale. Uncertainty radiating from every inch of this.

What the hell is going on?

One walks over to Prince Sulien, bows, and whispers in his ear.

We wait for him to respond, but he stands there, a strange look on his face. It's a mix of worry, but there's something else in it. Something that makes me uneasy.

I've known him for a long time. We've played together all our lives when we rotated between the four courts. I've seen him through his best and worst moments. And I can tell when something's off with him.

Something's wrong.

His expression changes to one of anger in a moment, and he jerks back from the servant. "Find her!" He booms, loud enough to make everyone in the room jump. Then, he turns to face the guards. "Lady Cassia has gone missing. I want every man, woman, and child out searching for her. Now!"

The servants scurry out of the room, and the guards around us file out along with them. But I can barely focus on them. *Cassia is gone? Where? Why?* None of this makes sense.

He faces us. "We need to search as well. Pair up and head east, Prince Cobar and Prince Forrest. We'll search the west." He says to me.

My mind is reeling. "What happened to her?"

A stubborn look crosses his face. "It doesn't matter. We just need to find her."

I step in front of Prince Sulien before he can leave and lower my voice. "Do you think she was taken?"

"I don't know," he says, but he won't meet my gaze.

If she wasn't taken, then... "Or did she leave on her own?"

Prince Forrest scoffs. “Why would she leave on her own?”

“She’s going to be our queen,” Prince Cobar says, shaking his head. “She might have needed some time to warm up to the idea, but surely our mate wouldn’t just run away.”

Keeping my focus on Prince Sulien, I ask, “you didn’t answer the question...”

He tries to push past me. I push him back, and his eyes flash with rage. “Watch yourself!”

Watch myself? When you’re the one hiding things about my bride? When you’re lying straight to my face? I don’t think so.

I shove him again. “Answer the question!”

Anger and desperation comes over his face, and his frustrated words come exploding out, “I don’t know! Okay? I don’t know!”

Shock flows through me. I asked the question, but I never imagined that answer. Our bride, she really could have run away? Our mate?

Fuck. I press my hand to my chest, and I swear the same pain radiating through my chest radiates through all of us as their hands go to their chests, too. The mate bond... It’s a powerful thing. No one should be able to resist it. And being separated from one’s mate, brings pain and misery.

“We need to get her back.” *And then, we need to win her heart. Because, apparently, we haven’t.*

We were fools not to realize it. Fools to have taken our eyes off of her. And now we have to do whatever we can to get her back and to gain her love.

No matter the cost.

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Lacey Carter Andersen is a USA Today bestselling author who loves reading, writing, and drinking excessive amounts of coffee. She spends her days taking care of her husband, three kids, and three cats. But at night, everything changes! Her imagination runs wild with strong-willed characters, unique worlds, and exciting plots that she enthusiastically puts into stories.

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