

YVE VALE

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and red lipstick stands in a magical forest. She is wearing a long, green, off-the-shoulder dress with a corset-style back and a large bow at the waist. She holds a silver dagger with a blue gem in her right hand. The forest is filled with purple flowers and glowing lights. A butterfly is visible in the upper right. The scene is framed by a stone archway.

TANGLED
SECRETS

FAE HEARTED BOOK TWO

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the **SECOND** book in the *Fae Hearted* series, a fantasy why choose romance with dark themes. It's set in the same universe as *Shadowcraft Academy* and *Bewitching Monsters* series but happens several centuries in the past and is the origin story for the *Shadowcraft Universe*.

The female main character is a servant and second-class citizen in the fae realm and her personality will reflect this status. Don't worry, she's going to end up a badass. The prince is spoiled, but he will figure it out at some point.

If you love characters that have intense growth arcs, this series is for you.

The female main character will end up with more than one of the love interests. Group scenes are on the agenda.

This series also has a bit of MM romance within the group but the focus is on the female main character, and there's **no** cheating.

If you believe love is love, and of course, some spicy times, then please charge forward!

PLEASE NOTE:

This series also contains several dark themes that some readers may be sensitive to:

abduction, very brief mentions of SA, violence, magic curses, and death.

For more information, visit: yvevale.com

CROSSING

OAKES

The sudden pang of terror almost knocks me to the floor. I steady myself and, with my empathic powers, register the origin of that fear.

Wynstelle.

Prince Eldrin looks at me, wondering why his diplomatic advisor nearly stumbled. Instantly, he knows I'm shaken. He glances around the crowded room filled with Elven dignitaries from all the Elven kingdoms. The prince whispers, "Oakes, what is it?"

"I'm not sure." I attempt to shake off my dread. "Some heavy emotion hit me."

"Is it one of these fools?" Eldrin sneers. "Perhaps the elf behind the ghoul's attacking humans?"

"It could be connected." I nod. I need to keep the prince focused on his duties while I check on Wyn—*immediately*. "I'm going to step out. There are too many telepathic signals in here to identify the source."

"Alright." Prince Eldrin narrows his eyes. "But don't take long. I want to know what's going on."

I hurry away, though not so fast that I'll draw attention. I hate leaving Eldrin behind at the delegates' reception and keeping my fears about Wyn's well-being from him. However, Eldrin might cause a diplomatic incident, and this might be nothing I can't handle on my own.

Once I'm clear of on-lookers, I break out in a run to Eldrin's wing of Ryven Castle. Time could be of the essence. I can't feel Wyn's fear anymore. I'm getting nothing from her now, which concerns me more than continuing to feel her fear. What if I take too long to reach her?

Her door is ajar as I approach. Not caring about etiquette or if she'll be upset with me, I charge into Wyn's suite.

As soon as I enter, I see my fellow advisor standing in the middle of her otherwise empty chambers. "Jaden? What's going on?"

Jaden spins on his heel, his violet-colored eyes wide and flashing with fear. "Have you seen Wynstelle?"

"No. I sensed Wyn's fear and, just now, yours." I scan the room for traces of what might have caused Wyn's fear. Her panic felt like a sword slicing into my chest. "I came as soon as I could pull away without causing a scene."

"How long ago did you feel her?" Jaden asks.

I clench my fists at my side to ground myself, but it's no use. My heart is sinking with her missing. "I was on the other side of the castle with Eldrin. So... no more than ten minutes ago?"

"Did you tell Eldrin what you felt?"

"I only confessed to an intuitive blast, not its source," I grumble. "I didn't need the prince running off when so much is at stake with the Royal Court." I glance around the room. "I thought you were watching over her."

Jaden rubs his chin, looking as if he's losing his mind, his voice choked with worry. "I was with her the whole day."

My psychic senses pick up that my friend and colleague is holding something back. He's completely distraught, and it's bigger than her possibly running off. "What aren't you telling me?"

"I offered to escort Wyn to the human realm—"

"*What?*" I interrupt. "Eldrin will be furious at you for doing that." I run my fingers through my long hair and pace.

“He would have been. But if I hadn’t offered to escort her, Wyn planned to go by herself. It looks like she did, anyway. It doesn’t matter now. I didn’t get the chance to help her,” Jaden explains with a grimace. “I thought I had convinced her to allow me to accompany her. I went to retrieve my travel gear from my chambers. When I came back she was gone. I wasn’t gone but ten minutes.”

“There’s still something else you are keeping from me...” I prod.

Jaden turns away from my scrutinous gaze. “We had a slight disagreement, but she promised to wait for me. Before I went to fetch my things, I thought she understood...”

“Did you frighten her when you had this *slight* disagreement?”

“No.” Jaden shakes his head. “She was mad at me, not scared. She must have left on her own accord.”

“Don’t be foolish. Even if Wyn was upset with you, something else is going on. Something *terrified* her. I felt it.” Searching the room for clues, I find Wyn’s cloak is in still the wardrobe cabinet. “Besides, it’s too cold for her at night not to take her cloak.”

“You’re right. Wyn wouldn’t leave it behind, no matter how angry she was with me. She’s smarter than that.”

“Maybe someone scared her off? Maybe she’s hiding somewhere in the castle?” I suggest. “We know that the members of the royal court are growing tired of a human garnering the prince’s full attention.”

“That doesn’t feel right either. Wyn doesn’t frighten easily. Remember, she faced off with a bear and ghouls already.” Jaden frowns and paces. “However, I know she was ready to leave our realm.”

“Perhaps a threat was all she needed to run on her own?” I say, trying my best to make sense of this. “Even without her cloak.”

Jaden gestures to the door. “Maybe you’re right in the first guess. There wasn’t a guard at this post when I returned to her

room.”

“No guard?” My eyes go wide. “Could the guard have taken her to another part of the castle?”

“Not one of our guards... not without Eldrin’s, yours, or my direct approval.” Jaden’s black hair falls into his eyes as he lowers his head, inhaling deeply to calm his frustration. “I was very clear about the protocol with her. Corwin was on duty when I left the room. He knows better to do something like that.”

I grab the edge of the table, feeling like I might break it in half. “Wyn won’t survive on her own, not with a target placed on humans right now.”

“Maybe she will have a better chance *if* she were alone.” Jaden calms a bit with the thought... Then he sniffs the air again, using his heightened senses.

“Do you smell an intruder?” I ask.

“Yes... *Fuck!*” Jaden shouts. “I was so out of my mind, my senses all but shut down... I scented an Elven male. Not one of my guards. And I can smell her fear that you sensed. And...” Jaden spots a tiny smear on the table. “What’s this?”

“Blood?” I touch the red liquid and run it over my fingers. My heart clenches with fear that she’s now dead, or soon will be. “Human blood.”

“Wyn’s blood,” Jaden confirms. “Still fresh. Look! There’s another smear by the door.”

Both of us run outside the room.

Jaden hurries along the hall, scanning for more. “It’s smeared along the wall.” He clenches his fists. “She *was* taken!”

I curse when my Elven gift senses that Eldrin is on his way to our location.

Prince Eldrin’s hurried footsteps echo down the hall, his white-blond hair flowing freely. When he comes to stand in front of us, he glances into Wyn’s empty room and then at

Jaden. “Where’s Wynstelle? You were supposed to be watching her.”

“Go back to the delegation gathering.” I wave the prince away. “We can handle this.”

“I don’t take orders from you.” After reading our faces, Eldrin grabs Jaden’s collar. His stormy blue eyes seem to glow with anger. “What did you do?”

“Wynstelle is missing. We’re not sure what happened yet,” I say in a calm voice. Although I’m so desperate to *find* her, I want to rip the other two males apart to get on with the search. “She could have left on her own.”

Eldrin’s eyes catch sight of the blood smear on the wall behind Jaden, and he shoves Jaden aside. “Is that... *hers*?” He clutches his shirt over his heart in agony. “She’s *hurt*?”

I must contain the prince inside the castle, so he can focus on his royal duties and the arriving dignitaries. “We know nothing yet.”

“Don’t shield me from the truth!” Eldrin rages. “Did someone attack her? I have to find her!”

I grab the prince by the shoulders. “*We will* find her. Wyn might still be on the premises. She’s only been gone a short time. Let us covertly search for her, and you can study the delegates to see if any of them had anything to do with this.”

“*Alcina*,” Eldrin says with venom, more to himself than to us.

“Your betrothed would be one of my guesses. Or your father’s commander.” Jaden nods. “Although there are several leaders and members of your royal court who also disapprove of humans in Elfhome.”

“We are wasting time.” Eldrin throws his hands in the air. “Find her. If she isn’t on the grounds, send word to me.”

“Of course.” I sigh with relief. Finally, I’m free to find her. “I promise we’ll bring her back, safe and whole.”

“I’m going to have a *chat* with my betrothed. Maybe with my father and Commander Turgon too.” Eldrin growls and

storms down the hallway back to the grand hall.

His confrontations will probably turn into a horrible disaster, but I honestly don't give a fuck right now. Getting Wyn back is the only thing that matters. My heart screams it will die if something has happened to her and she's gone forever.

Letting my worries fade to the background, I close my eyes and push out my emotional radar to pick up on Wyn. I confess to Jaden, "I don't feel her at all. Either she isn't nearby, or she's—"

Jaden clenches his jaw and appears as if he's going to smash my face in. "Don't you dare say she's dead."

I wince at my friend's fury. Jaden doesn't hide his emotions as well as I do, but he's beyond any rational thought. Even his magical senses aren't functioning because of how terrified he is over losing Wyn.

"I was going to say *unconscious*," I continue. "Can you pick up her scent?"

Swallowing down a bit of his fear, Jaden sniffs the air. "It's faint. What I'm picking up is mostly from the blood. If she went outside, a strong breeze might throw me off. I'm not *that* good." He jogs down the hall and the stairwell, occasionally sniffing for her scent.

"Do you recognize the male's scent at all?"

"I don't, but if the attack was premeditated, the perpetrators might have known my skill and employed someone unfamiliar to me to abduct Wyn."

"Would you be able to identify him later?"

"Yes. I'll never forget this bastard." Jaden runs down the hall, then stops and curses when he meets a cross breeze from the castle's ventilation shafts. "I'm losing the trail, and there are no more blood marks to confirm."

We end up near the servants' quarters. Jaden and I search the corridors and rooms. With no more trail to follow, we head outside from the servant's entrance.

“The ground looks disrupted.” Jaden studies the marks in the fading light. “The prints are her size. It appears that she stumbled in the muddy grass.”

“And it looks like her tracks end here.” I point to the ground at our feet.

I spot a guard at the castle entrance and run over to him. “Did anyone enter or leave through here today?”

“No one I saw, but I only reported to duty a few moments ago,” the guard says to Jaden as the head of the prince’s security. “Strangely, no one was at this post to relieve.”

Jaden gives me a meaningful look and says to the guard, “Keep an eye out for anyone coming through this way. Pass the word on to those doing the rounds to be on high alert for any unusual behavior, especially our visiting dignitaries. We have a security breach.”

“What’s happened?” the guard asks.

Jaden sighs, looking to me for what to say.

We don’t want to bring more unwanted attention upon Wyn, but we *need* the guards to know in case she’s still near the castle and needs help.

“Someone has taken the human, Wynstelle,” I admit. “Please assist her if she’s spotted. Send word to the prince that Jaden and I are leaving the castle grounds to search.”

CAVE

OAKES

After we send the guard to deliver our message about Wyn, we resume our search of the castle grounds to pick up the trail of Wyn and her abductor.

One of the little faeries buzzes around my head. I swat at them. “Go away, pest.” I’m usually not so gruff with the little ones, but I’m absolutely not in the mood for their antics.

“Please!” she cries. “He took her.”

“Who?” I narrow my eyes onto the tiny being, suddenly very interested in what she has to say.

“An elf! He hurt her and carried her away!”

“Wynstelle?” Jaden asks. “Golden-brown hair? *Just now?*”

“*Yes! Yes! Yes!*” The winged creature zips around our heads, panicking.

Flower faeries typically have short attention spans, and I’m surprised the little one focused long enough to remember Wyn’s abduction.

“Can you take us to where she is?”

“Follow. Hurry!” The winged one flies off faster than Jaden and I can run.

To our surprise, there’s a chain of flower faeries along the way, each waiting to point us in the right direction.

“What did the mortal do to win your devoted favor?” I ask as we hurry after the faerie.

“She convinced the prince to give us freedom in the castle gardens.”

“That was *her*?” Jaden shakes his head in amazement. “I wondered why the little ones were allowed back in the gardens.”

We follow the faeries’ guidance. Jaden confirms the trail with Wyn’s scent and the occasional footmarks of a large elf.

“You still can’t sense Wyn?”

I press my lips flat. “No.”

“How can you feel her so clearly? You don’t even sense Eldrin with such intensity.” Jaden frowns.

“There is some kind of connection between us.” I shrug as I jog after the faerie. “I felt it developing when we were on the road to Ryven. Our link grows stronger every time I touch her, especially when I heal her.”

“Hmm. Perhaps the energy exchange enhances your connection.”

The faerie stops when Wyn’s trail leads to a clearing in the woods. “This is where we saw the elf take the human. Then she disappeared through the doorway.”

The small meadow is the location of a portal known only to the Royal Court.

“A noble was definitely behind the abduction, then.” Jaden growls.

I nod my agreement. Then I bow to our faerie guide. “Thank you for your service. What’s your name?”

“Lalo.”

“When we find Wynstelle, I will let her know of your deed.”

“I only need you to bring our friend back safe, please,” Lalo says with a quaver in her voice and flies away.

It's dark now and harder to see, even with our enhanced Elven eyes. The moon is all the light we have.

As we approach the portal, Jaden sniffs out a paring knife on the ground. "This is from our breakfast. There's blood on it. Two distinct scents. Wyn's and the male's."

"She cut him?" I glance around. "Those look like elf tracks. He headed back toward Ryven on a different route."

Jaden studies the prints. "Looks like he was lighter on his feet." He thinks for a moment about what this means. "It's just as Lalo said. He's left Wynstelle in the mortal realm." Jaden recites an incantation and opens the way with a swipe of his hand.

The air is considerably colder when we step through the portal, which immediately worries me knowing Wyn is without her cloak.

The moonlight reflects on the snow here, making it easier to see. We are standing in a clearing, much like the fae side of the portal. The landscape quickly transitions into a dense forest with no clear path.

Scanning the clearing, we find no one in sight, but at Jaden's feet, someone has trampled the snow. There's a fair amount of blood staining the ground... and a torn piece of Wyn's dress.

Jaden roars. "That elf is worse than a ghoul!"

There's no doubt in my mind what Jaden will do to that elf if we catch him.

I close my eyes and sense the echo of Wyn's fear. My own blood chills.

Taking a deep breath, Jaden refocuses. "Her footprints lead that way."

It's dark, and the moon only helps to distinguish large objects like boulders and shrubs. Her tracks disappear under fresh falling snow.

Jaden carefully follows her faint scent, but the winds have shifted her trail erratically. We trudge along for an hour when

Jaden pauses, sniffing the air. “She’s near. Her smell is stronger now.”

“There!” I point, sucking in a breath, and running to Wyn’s prone body half-buried in a snowbank. I drop to the ground and roll her over. “Wynstelle?”

Jaden kneels down on her other side. “Wyn?”

She stares vacantly at us, slow to process that we are with her.

I perform a swift healer’s assessment. “She’s in shock. Hypothermic. Her body is damaged.” I cover her exposed skin, pulling her close to me and wrapping my cloak around our bodies, warming her with my body heat. “Where are you cut?” I ask.

Wyn gazes up at us. “I didn’t take it.” Her speech comes out slurred.

“Take what?” Jaden asks gently, pressing his warm hands to her blotchy, cold cheeks.

“Eldrin’s knife.” She looks down at the expensive royal blade in her hand. From the dried human blood on it, I realize her abductor used it to cut her. “Don’t punish me.”

I pull her tighter to me. “We don’t care about the knife.”

“Then why are you here?” Wyn’s teeth chatter.

Jaden groans. “She still doesn’t get it, does she?”

“Not yet. We’ll come back to that. First, she needs to survive this.” I glance up at the falling snow.

Jaden notices her wet skirt, dark with blood. “Where is she bleeding?” Pulling up her dress, Jaden finds the gash on her thigh and a soaked makeshift tourniquet. “Oh, my stars. I *will* kill whoever did this. *Slowly. Painfully.*”

I curse when I confirm the damage I sensed in her body. “I’ll heal the wound, but we need to bring her body temperature up. Now. I can’t get her warm enough out in the elements like this. Can you scout for some shelter?”

Jaden is off and running before I finish my request.

I hold Wyn tightly, taking her in. She's at least wearing her insulated boots instead of the thin slippers she usually wears around the castle. It means she probably won't lose any toes. I don't want to use my psychic senses to discover if Wyn's abductor violated her. I don't think I can bear to know if she suffered that way—not on top of the threat of losing her. But her torn dress and cut are terrible signs.

However, if she was injured from it, I would be remiss if I didn't use my magic to check. I sigh with relief when I don't pick up any damage to her sex—it doesn't appear that she suffered that trauma. But with my psychic scan of her body, I'm even more worried about her leg injury.

“Here, my sweet.” I lift a healing tincture to her lips that I carry in my pocket for the prince's protection. It takes some prodding, but she finally drinks it down.

The tonic awakens her senses a bit.

“Oakes?” Wyn mumbles and blinks up at me, fear clearly shining in her eyes. With my sense, I know that her mind is tumbling over recent events. “What if he comes after me again?” Her voice trembles. “That elf... he'll kill me next time and all of you.”

“We have you now. It's alright.”

“He can't know you came after me.” She swallows down her emotion. “Jaden can own me... and do whatever he wants with me... But he has to keep me hidden so you won't be hurt.” Wyn sucks in her tears. “And please, make sure Merlara is safe in exchange.”

“Oh, my mighty mortal, please don't worry right now.” I caress her face. “We should have never left you alone.”

“No. I should've left the castle earlier... but you, Jaden, and Eldrin...” Wyn shakes her head. “Never mind... it was all wrong.”

“We'll keep you safe from now on.” I send another significant wave of healing energy into her.

“No.” Wyn opens her eyes wide like she has just woken up. “*Leave*, or he'll hurt you. *He'll know* and kill everyone I

care about. He'll hurt you. And Jaden. Eldrin." She gasps in terror at the idea.

"That won't happen." I soothe her with my magic and she slips into unconsciousness, easing her anxiety.

A moment later, Jaden returns. "I found a cave just up from this ravine."

I carry Wyn in my arms the short distance and set her down, carefully removing her wet clothes.

Using our cloaks as blankets, Jaden and I nestle on either side to warm her. We remove our shirts to radiate our heat more effectively, skin to skin.

I move my healing magic into her body, painfully trying *not* to pay attention to her naked body between us.

"My healing isn't working as well as it should. I think it's because we are in the mortal realm," I whisper to Jaden, not wanting to wake Wyn. "We need to warm her... fast. Can you build a fire?"

Without hesitation, Jaden hurries out into the night to gather wood.

Wyn jostles awake and gazes up at me. "I like your touch. It's like warm bread. With static electricity." She sounds drunk.

I smile at her strange compliment. "Thank you. If it's alright, I'm going to hold you like this until you're better."

She nuzzles into my bare chest. "Then I won't get better."

"Wyn, I need you to get better."

"Then don't stop touching me," Wyn argues. "Promise."

"I promise." I press my cheek to her forehead. "I'll never stop."

"Thank you." Wyn grasps my chin, turns my head to face her, and kisses me lightly on the lips.

I suck in a breath, shocked by her actions. Then I realize she's delirious. She probably thinks she's kissing Eldrin.

With a slight smile on her lips, Wyn drifts back to sleep.

Jaden returns to the cave, firewood in his arms, and expertly builds a fire.

After the flames catch the wood, Jaden rejoins us to add his warmth to Wyn's body. "Did she wake?" he asks.

"Briefly, a few moments ago. She's... confused."

There's a long pause as we study her face.

"I offered to be her mate," Jaden confesses. "I realize now she thought I meant only to be her keeper. That's what we argued about before she disappeared."

I wince at the idea. Her comment about Jaden owning her now makes sense. "What happened when you tried to ask?"

"I said I wished to claim her... she cut me off, thinking I meant as her keeper. Apparently, the idea of our mating didn't even occur to her." He closes his eyes, and I sense he feels the bitter sting of rejection. "She believed I wished to use her, pass her around as entertainment. It pains me that she would think such a thing." Jaden rubs his thumb over her shoulder. "I suppose I should be glad she didn't outright laugh at me. She wants Eldrin instead."

"Perhaps she doesn't believe that any elf could want her as a mate."

"You have a point." Jaden studies her face. "She sees herself as a mere servant. I thought I had convinced her I don't see her that way."

I know Jaden attracts a lot of female attention, not that he's returned any of it in the past twenty years. So why is he setting his sights on Wyn?

"So you truly want to mate bond with her?" I swallow hard, concerned she will see Jaden as the better option between the two of us. "I'm surprised. I thought you'd never consider another mate after..." I trail off, not wanting to bring up the unpleasant past. "I sensed your attraction to Wynstelle, but I thought it was mostly physical."

Jaden tears his gaze away from Wyn, and reads my face seeing the same pull I have toward Wyn. “I thought I’d never fall for someone. The heartbreak with Amra’s and Eldrin’s betrayal faded to nothing as soon as I met Wynstelle. It just... evaporated.” Jaden sighs. “Of course, some of my attraction is physical. She’s gorgeous. But it’s her personality... her caring yet secretly passionate side that won me over. Wynstelle has a fire deep inside her. She’s smoldering with life, and is just waiting for someone to give her air to breathe freely.” He chuckles and stares back at her. “Besides, she surprises me with her candor, insight, and opinions.”

I drag out an exhale, wondering how much to confess, but dammit, Jaden has exposed his heart to me and I must meet his vulnerability with my own truth. “Wyn has a power over me, too.” I brush the hair out of her sleeping face. “Her smile lightens my heart. Her laughter is like a bird’s song on the wind.”

Jaden nods. “If I’m honest, she captured my heart the moment I saw her in Crowland. She’s a fighter, even when she’s faced with impossible odds.”

“I know what you mean.” I stroke her cheek, sending her my healing energy as I do. “I witnessed her fierceness on the road when she faced that ghoulish bear. I was about to intervene, but not only did the bear protect her, she also ordered it to leave her alone. And it *obeyed*. The creature followed me until it determined I was no threat to her.”

“Now, she’s even taming Eldrin,” Jaden says, and we both chuckle.

“An impossible feat, I thought,” I agree.

“Oakes,” Jaden says hopefully. “We could both claim her as a mate, if she would have us. I would be honored to be your bond brother.”

It isn’t uncommon for elves to have multiple mates. However, I worry if King Magnus would allow us to bond with a human. Besides, I’m sure Eldrin will be an issue as he will want her for himself.

“If she wants us at all...” I murmur, hesitant to give voice to my worries, as if that will make them true.

“If she desires to be with Eldrin instead, I will accept it... *if* it makes her happy.” Jaden sighs, resigning to the likely prospect. “I suppose I could live with that. Though barely. I just need her in my life in some way.”

“I fear she has had enough of our follies.” My eyes sting with emotion as if she has already refused my offer. “She has almost lost her life because she stayed with us. If she returns to Ryven, her presence in the castle will not be simple. She had hoped to return to a quiet existence with Merlara. Wyn doesn’t want us and all our complications.”

“Probably not,” Jaden agrees, and it’s clear in his voice how much he cares for her. “She was dragged away from her home and had *us* to deal with. What the prince asked of her...”

I squeeze Wyn closer. “Then she’s rewarded by being abducted, attacked, and tossed into another realm to die.”

“She deserves better than me.” Jaden frowns. “Better than the life she had before meeting us.”

Wyn stirs and opens her eyes. Facing Jaden, she smiles at him lazily. Her hand gently traces the line of his jaw. “*Hmm...* Did you know you’re the most gorgeous male I’ve ever seen?”

Jaden chuckles, his grin wide as her attention has his mood instantly shifting. “Did you hit your head too, love?”

“She seems intoxicated,” I grumble. “Maybe the tonic I gave her reacts poorly to her human system.”

Wyn turns toward my voice. “Oh, hello. And you’re the most handsomest.”

“Uh, thank you?” I raise my eyebrows, surprised by her forward talk. She doesn’t speak like this usually. “And what is the prince?”

“He’s... *prrrretty*.” She wiggles to face Jaden again, nuzzling into his chest, and her ass pressing against my cock.

Thank goddess I have pants on, or I’d be tempted to sink into her sweet center.

Her hand skims down Jaden's neck to his broad shoulders, humming appreciatively as she goes. He shivers at her touch and I know we are both hard, even if we are trying our best not to be.

"This is such a strange dream. Why do you feel yummy?" Wyn sticks her tongue out and licks Jaden's chest.

He yelps. "You licked my nipple!"

With both hands, Wyn strokes down each of our stomachs, reaching for our pants. We grab her hands to stop her pursuit. If she reaches her destination, I'm not sure if our willpower would be enough to not take it further than we should.

Wyn pouts, her luscious lips tempting me even more. "You don't like me touching you?"

"I would absolutely love it, if you weren't intoxicated, injured, and in shock." Jaden's voice is tense. "You aren't alright and you don't know what you're doing."

"Then why am I naked with you? Besides, this is my dream. I make the rules." She huffs.

"No, beautiful. You aren't dreaming," I explain. "You were freezing to death, and your clothes were wet." I sense the lingering effects of hypothermia and a bit of shock. Her cut is still healing under the surface.

Unfortunately, we will have to wait until morning to move her.

"Ow," Wyn whimpers. "My belly hurts."

Rushing to take care of my love, I splay my hand out across her stomach to heal her.

Wyn nudges my hand. "It hurts lower."

I shift lower, almost to her pubic bone. *Fuck*. This is too close to her sex.

"Lower."

I yank my hand back, realizing her subterfuge. "*Wyn!*"

She groans at the loss of contact, then chuckles softly.

Jaden shakes his head. “Her sexual appetite has come alive with whatever you gave her.”

“And Eldrin has been *awakening* her,” I say with irritation. Worried about her fussing and wiggling, I check on her leg wound. “At least the cut has sealed on the surface. She won’t bleed out.”

Wyn watches me inspect her thigh. “But I’m still wet,” she says innocently.

I study her briefly, wondering if this is a trick. “Where?”

“Between my legs.”

Jaden chokes. “*Oh. My. Stars.* I can’t handle this.” He shifts away.

I try to force my hardened member to deflate.

She whispers to me, “Oakes, please, seriously, come here. I have a secret.”

I lean in for her to confide in me.

“I think I’m part wood nymph, and I need to climb my Oakes.” She scoots toward me and tries to feel me up again.

I say in a commanding voice, “Wynstelle, you need to behave.”

“But I don’t want to behave anymore.”

“You’re unwell, and we don’t want you to hurt yourself by playing. Understand?”

Wyn grumbles. “Then we can play when I’m better?”

Jaden and I share a knowing look. Goddess, I hope we get that chance. We’d play with her so intensely that she’d know we mean to pleasure her until the end of her days.

“We’ll see, but now you must rest,” I say, brushing her temples with my hand and stroking her hair, soothing my love.

“Alright, I’m tired anyway.” She pats my chest. “It’s so cold here. And this room is swirly. And the world feels fuzzy.” Wyn rests her head and body back against me, yawns, and promptly falls asleep.

I sigh, happy that Wyn is in my arms, and sensing that she will recover from her ordeal.

Then worry frays my victory. I still have to get Wyn safely home, back through the portal.

But is Elfhome a safe place for her to return?

CAUGHT

JADEN

I hold Wynstelle close, trying to keep her warm in the chilly cave. By the light of the campfire, I can see Oakes' face fill with worry. His healing magic is diminished being in the mortal realm, and it seems a human's recovery from hypothermia and blood loss isn't as robust as an elf's.

Oakes' concern for Wyn troubles me. The healer refuses to carry Wyn back to the fae realm just yet, stating it's too dangerous to expose her to the elements for the long trek home. That isn't even taking into account her leg is still mending. The journey over the rough terrain would only agitate her injury.

Wynstelle fell asleep in our arms an hour before, but neither of us can relax. It's perilous remaining in the mortal realm, with only the tentative peace treaty to protect us. If caught, our presence will be a breach of contract. Fortunately, the cave is far away from the closest human village.

The ghost of her touch still haunts me. I want her healed and aware of her actions and her hands on me again. My cock still throbs from her fleeting attention and being so close to her, like I am an adolescent buck in need of a rut.

Goddess, I want to claim my mate. When I thought she was lost to me, I was willing to die. The harrowing journey tracking her down in the snow was pure torture. With every

moment, I grew more certain that we would find her dead. I was already grieving.

Then, by some grace of the goddess, we found her.

Now, I must make everything right for her—even if it means abandoning my advisor’s post with Eldrin and keeping her safe somewhere far, far away. Her intoxicated words make me hopeful she may be more open to my affections than I had thought. The next step is to convince her I mean to be her bonded, and show her I can make an excellent partner.

Then perhaps she might fall in love with me.

Wyn whimpers when she shifts in her sleep, drawing my attention back to the now.

“Isn’t she better? Are you sure we can’t leave?” I ask, although I know the answer already.

Oakes lets out a low growl. “My magic isn’t healing her as fast as it would in Elfhome. Stop badgering me.”

Every instinct in my body is telling me we need to leave the mortal realm as soon as possible. “Being here unnerves me. What if Eldrin tries to come after us?”

“I’m hoping his princely duties with the arriving delegates will be enough to keep him at the castle.” Oakes frowns, knowing as well as I do Eldrin has been unpredictable lately—since Wyn. “The last thing we need is for Eldrin to risk his life by invading. Without us to stop him, he might charge right into the human village, searching for Wyn.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him to do that. He was more upset by her disappearance than I expected,” I say while I rub Wyn’s arm to warm her. “Not just for his own needs, but it appears as a legitimate concern for her.”

Oakes brushes Wyn’s long, brown locks from her face. “I suspect he has more fondness for her than he does for anyone else, including us.”

“I didn’t think he had much capacity to care about others,” I say and then recant, “Well, it’s limited. He just showed little maturity before he met Wyn.”

“Her presence has made him grow up.” Oakes sighs, obviously worried for everyone involved. “Let’s hope we get back before any other complications arise. May the fates keep us all safe.”



The morning comes, and Oakes, Wyn, and I are sound asleep. Our fire has died down to embers, but a trail of smoke leaks out of the cave.

A snap of twigs wakes me. I bolt upright to see eight men at the cave’s entrance.

Fuck.

“*Oakes!*” I hiss.

With his name, Oakes startles awake and glances at me, then at the entrance in quick succession.

“Who are you?” a human shouts.

“Who are *you?*” I deflect.

“We own this land. You’re trespassing.” The man steps into the cave. “Fuck, they’re *elves!*”

The men ready their swords.

A red-headed soldier with a commanding presence moves closer and spots Wyn’s naked shoulders and human ears. “They’ve *taken* one of our women! Defiled her.”

“No.” Oakes explains quickly, “She lives in Elfhome—with us. She suffered from cold exposure during her travels here. We were waiting until morning for her to recover her body heat. We will be on our way home now.”

“Wynstelle?” I call to wake her and validate our story before the men attack. It worries me she hasn’t stirred yet with all the commotion. “*Wyn?*”

MORTALS

WYNSTELLE

I open my eyes, barely registering my surroundings. I vaguely remember the night before when Oakes and Jaden found me in the snow, then drinking an intoxicating healing potion. The tonic must have left me groggy.

The massive blood loss probably doesn't help.

"Wyn?" Jaden calls, sounding close and concerned.

I glance over at him. His violet eyes are alarmed, it frightens me, he's usually so in control. His chiseled chest is bare and my heart pounds at the gorgeous sight. Then I feel another warm body next to me and snap my attention over to find Oakes' amber gaze, but it's trained on something else.

His body is vibrating with tension.

Why are they both shirtless? I look down.

Why am I *naked*?

Oh, I was dying in the snow. They probably needed to warm me by getting me out of my wet clothes.

But why are they upset?

I follow the direction Oakes looks in and notice a host of men. My eyes widen and I immediately sober, pulling a cloak closer to cover my naked breasts. "What's going on?"

"These elves have violated you," the red-haired leader says.

“They wouldn’t do that.” I shake my head and clasp Oakes’ cloak tighter, leaning into him. “It’s not what it looks like. They rescued me from death.”

“She’s delirious,” the red-haired leader says to his companions. To me, he orders, “You’re coming with us.”

“I am not!” I shout, flushing with fear that these men might abuse me. “I’m with them.”

“You belong with *us*.” The man waves me forward as if luring a kitten away from the jaws of an alligator. “Elves are dangerous.”

“They won’t hurt me.” I narrow my eyes and curl my lip. “I can’t say the same for you.”

“These creatures are breaking our treaty by being here. *Seize* them,” the leader orders, and the other men rush forward.

At that moment, Oakes curses, “The fucking treaty.”

I see in his eyes that he wants to cut through these men, sweep me into his arms, and return me to Ryven Castle.

But we need to maintain peace between the two realms. Neither of us wants to be the reason it shatters.

Jaden and Oakes raise their hands in surrender. They don’t resist when the men grab their arms.

Oakes pleads, “We’ll go peacefully, but *please* let us cover her up.”

The men halt, seeing his request as reasonable. They step back and allow me some privacy to dress.

Jaden holds his cloak up as a partition screen as Oakes helps me slip my dress over my head. He frowns at my top, ripped by my abductor. It looks like they assaulted me and tried to tear my breasts free.

I glance down at my exposed chest, then clutch the fabric close. I call out to the men, “Someone attacked me in the woods and left me for dead. But it wasn’t these two. They are my friends.”

“Elves can’t be your friends,” an older man with a raspy voice says. “They are using an evil spell on your simple mind.”

I grimace at the comment. In one sentence, the man insulted both me and the elves.

“Here.” Jaden slips his cloak over my shoulders and secures the front clasps. It usually lands mid-calf on him, but on me, it touches the ground. “Just be careful not to trip on it.”

“Thank you.” I pull up the hem as I watch him put on his shirt and a leather jacket. I sigh with relief that he’ll be warm enough even without his cloak. Elves don’t suffer from the cold as easily as a human does.

Oakes finishes dressing and securing his cloak by the time I turn around. “Are you warm enough?” he asks me.

Although I’m much warmer than I was, I still have a cold ache deep in my bones, but it doesn’t feel worrisome. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you cannot easily walk without pain or feel too cold, let us know,” Jaden says.

I nod, then demand of the men, “Where are you taking us?”

“To Lord Jonathon,” the red-haired leader says. “He’ll know how to deal with this crime.”

The men confiscate the elves’ swords. They approach Oakes and Jaden with shackles.

“We have not been violent,” Oakes says to the leader. “And according to the treaty, iron restraints are not permitted, provided we cooperate.”

The leader shrugs. “You might attack us.”

“I understand your concern.” Oakes projects a calm demeanor. “But truly, we intend no harm. We are only in your realm because we were trying to save our friend’s life.”

“Please,” I plead, “Iron causes fae intense pain and could kill them if worn too long.”

The red-headed leader stares at me for a long moment. “You *really* care what happens to these elves?”

“I do. They are good souls. They rescued me from death.” I take a step closer to the leader, imploring him with my sincerity.

Their leader must see something in my eyes. “Fine, but one false move...” he warns Oakes.

“We understand.” Oakes nods, and Jaden does, too. “We don’t want any problems.”

Turning to the youngest man, the leader says, “Run ahead and warn the village we are bringing elves with us. Ask Lord Jonathon to meet us in the hall.”

The men stand outside the cave as the elves and I exit. The wound on my thigh stings when I put weight on it. I fight back a wince, since I don’t want the men to think the worst of the elves.

“Wyn?” Oakes asks like a warning.

“I’m fine.” I brush him off.

“What’s going on?” the red-headed leader asks.

“I was hurt. It’s mostly mended.” I do my best to walk without a limp.

“Commander, will you allow me to carry her so she doesn’t cause herself more damage?” Oakes asks.

The old grumpy man grumbles, but the commander seems to consider it. “I can carry her.”

Jaden’s energy goes on alert and I wonder how I am so aware of him. “She is our charge, and we’d rather you not touch her.” His jaw clenches so tight I worry he might crack his teeth. He looks every bit a possessive male, ready to come to blows.

The commander seems to have some smarts and nods to Oakes. “Fine. But don’t run off with her.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t put her in danger.”

VILLAGE

WYNSTELLE

*D*uring the trek to the village, Oakes and Jaden take turns carrying me. I feel foolish and cherished all at once.

As we walk toward the village, I notice the elves are almost a head taller than the tallest man, the red-haired commander. With the elves towering over them, the humans seem rightfully nervous. If either elf decided to escape, they could do so with little effort. I guess that Oakes and Jaden don't want to cause another war over a misunderstanding.

The humans put distance between whichever elf carries me and the other one. Though I find some solace that over the human soldier's heads, I can clearly see either Jaden's raven-black hair or Oakes' silky brown locks.

However, I'm still nervous for the elves. It doesn't take a psychic gift to sense that the humans are ready to punish them for stealing a human woman. And I'm not naïve enough to believe these men won't turn their Elven-hatred onto me because of my alleged sexual encounter with Jaden and Oakes.

From this vantage point, coming from the hill into the valley where the village is nestled, the settlement doesn't look much bigger than my hometown of Betonie. If this village is any indication, there doesn't seem to be an overpopulation problem. Do humans really multiply like rabbits, as some elves suggest?

As we enter the outskirts of the town, I convince Jaden to allow me to walk, since the ground is flat and easier to manage. My injury is better with the healing Oakes gave me on the way, and only stings a bit now when I take a step.

Curious villagers cluster on the roads to see us in person. Most of the humans appear to be afraid of the elves, while some look angry. I notice strange glances my way, ranging from intrigue to disgust. Likely, rumors have spread about me being intimate with the elves. Several villagers shake their heads in disapproval.

So far, I'm not particularly fond of humans, and it saddens me to dislike my own species. I try to remind myself that this isn't the best introduction to the mortal realm.

Perhaps if circumstances were different, they would have accepted us more graciously. Jaden mentioned before that humans often don't like outsiders—no matter their origins. True or not, I will probably be odd to them and act awkwardly since I've never interacted with a human before.

I glance around, taking in my surroundings. The human realm isn't as vibrant as Elfhame, but that might have something to do with winter seeming harsher here. The cold feels more bitter than in the fae realm. Sadly, the people seem less vital, too. But maybe that's just a reflection of their currently withdrawn demeanor.

A clear path furrows through the crowd, delivering us to a large building in the center of town. They usher us inside, where we find a few dozen armed men. An intelligent-looking man, radiating authority, sits on a small throne directly across from us as we enter the large meeting hall.

The red-headed leader, or Red, as I have nicknamed him, announces us. "Lord Jonathon, I present the Elven trespassers. And a *human* woman we found naked in their clutches."

I stop myself from protesting his comment. There will be a proper time for arguments—I hope.

Lord Jonathon nods to Red and waves us forward. "As stated in the realm treaty, elves are not permitted on our lands

between summit meetings, which isn't for another year. Why have you trespassed? And why did you steal and violate one of our women for your depraved entertainment?"

Oakes bows and speaks, "Honorable Lord Jonathon, we did not intend to trespass. The human female in question has been a resident in Elfhame her whole life. Wynstelle is a valued member of our fae community. She was brought unwillingly into your realm and was in danger. Unfortunately, in our urgency to save her life, we infringed upon the realm treaty to rescue her. We only had her well-being in mind. Wynstelle was undressed to warm her, because her clothes were wet from when we discovered her in a snowbank. She was dying from exposure to the cold. Please know that Jaden and I would never cause her harm or violate her."

With a raised eyebrow, Lord Jonathon studies the elves. His gaze falls on me to watch my reaction to the Oakes' words. "Woman, what do you have to say about this elf's claim?"

"What he says is true. Someone attacked me, and these elves saved my life. I had collapsed in the snow, freezing, and was bleeding to death from a serious cut. They helped me by finding a cave to keep me warm. They have never touched me inappropriately."

Lord Jonathon scrutinizes my ragged appearance and bloodied skirt peeking from behind my closed cloak. After a moment, he asks, "Have you *truly* lived in Elfhame your entire life?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know your family name?" Lord Jonathon leans forward intently.

I bite my lip and glance at the elves. "I know nothing of my origins. Except that I was a sick foundling baby, healed by the magic of Elfhame."

"We've heard stories of sick children taken away by elves, but I never have seen proof." The Lord tilts his head. "You

appear recovered from this alleged attack and near-death experience.”

“It’s only through Oakes’ Elven healing ability that I feel well enough to travel back to Elfhome,” I say.

What I don’t say is that once the elves are safely on their way to Ryven, I plan to find another village, a new town, one that doesn’t know about my past, so I can live out my days in the mortal realm. I need to keep Jaden, Oakes, and Merlara safe from my attacker.

“Now that you know the circumstances, may we go?” I ask. “None of us meant to be here. They certainly didn’t mean to break a treaty or cause a disturbance over me.”

“If what the elves say is true, and they only wished to protect you, then I would be inclined to allow you to return. But I’m not the authority to decide something as important as this. King Nathaniel will judge the repercussions of this trespass. He has a standing order that *anyone* from Elfhome is to be captured and brought to him immediately.”

“How far away is King Nathaniel?” I ask.

“Under a day’s ride.”

“May I request, since this matter will not be resolved quickly, that Jaden...” Oakes gestures to his fellow royal advisor, “... return to Elfhome and inform our leader of the situation, so that we do not escalate the tension between our peoples? The Prince of Ryven will notice our continued absence and come for us. I would hate for this incident to cause any more distress than it already has.”

Jonathan rubs his chin. “Jaden may inform Elfhome of this situation. However, he is expected to return so he may face his punishment, if one is issued. If he doesn’t return, we will punish you for his disappearance.”

“Thank you for granting my request.” Oakes bows with his thanks. “Perhaps you will allow a small delegation of Elven diplomats entry to assure the continuation of our peaceful terms—under your watchful eye, of course.”

Lord Jonathon turns to the posse leader, Red. “Commander Rhys, have six of your men escort the elf, Jaden, to the Elfhome portal, and when he returns, have them escort the Elven entourage directly to King Nathaniel. We will allow an official representative of the Elfhome into our realm to negotiate on the elves’ behalf. We are calling for a parley, and no harm will come to them while they are guests in our lands.” He narrows his eyes at Oakes. “Should I expect civil cooperation from your leadership? Or should I gather our army?”

“I expect the prince will be amenable because of your fair treatment. He will understand this was *our* transgression, and we will do what we can to make amends.”

Lord Jonathon seems to ease at the assurance. “I hope so, for all our sake.”

“May I speak with my colleague before he leaves?” Oakes asks.

After Lord Jonathon nods his consent, Jaden leads Oakes away from the guards. However, I can still hear him as he leans toward his fellow advisor and says in hush tones, “I’m *not* bringing Eldrin.”

“You know he will insist on coming,” Oakes says exasperatedly. “Not considering his... *interest* in Wynstelle, he’ll demand to be here for you and me.”

“What have we gotten ourselves into?” Jaden clenches his jaw. “We should have left the cave last night.”

“It could have killed Wyn.” Oakes closes his eyes to settle his nerves. “It doesn’t matter. We’re in this situation now. We need to keep the peace treaty intact.”

“Agreed.” Jaden glances over at me. “But I don’t trust these men. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Not if I have any say in it.” Oakes’ lips presses thin. “I will do what I can. Just do your job and keep Eldrin safe.”

They clasp arms in farewell, and six men usher Jaden out of the hall. His violet eyes stare back toward me, concern filling their depths.

The soldier, Rhys, strides over to me, blocking my view of Jaden's departure. "Woman, come with me."

"No." I move closer to Oakes, clutching his arm tightly. "I'm staying with Oakes. I'm not fully healed, and I need him."

Lord Jonathon says, "*Woman*, you will—"

I interrupt his rudeness, "I *have* a name. It's Wynstelle. And I'm not going anywhere without my protector."

"*We* are your protectors," Lord Jonathon says.

"No. *You* are my captors," I argue. "I trust this elf with my life, and I don't know any of you. Oakes has offered no resistance nor raised a hand. I demand that he stay with me while we are in this realm."

"You are under our protection now," Rhys says. "There is no reason to fear us. *We* are your own kind."

I glare at him. "So, humans have never hurt another human—never attacked a female?"

Lord Jonathon's face flushes red. "There's no reason to fear us. We were only going to allow you to wash up before your journey to meet with King Nathaniel."

"I appreciate you offering a place to wash, but Oakes *will* come with me—everywhere." I pull him to me, locking onto his arm.

"Fine. Stay with your elf." Lord Jonathon waves his hand to dismiss us as he walks away hastily, like he can't stand another minute of the absurd situation.

After a moment, four men step forward and signal for Oakes and me to follow. Two more men trail behind us. All of them keep a healthy distance from the elf.

I sigh with relief and whisper to Oakes, "I don't trust them alone with you."

He smiles at my protective nature concerning him and pats my hand. "Remember, I can hold my own, too, if need be."

“It’s my fault you’re captured.” I lower my gaze. “Being a problem seems to be my contribution. Maybe I have a magic power after all... disruption.”

“Wynstelle, you are never the problem. The circumstances were stacked against you from the beginning.”

“I should have left the castle earlier,” I say quietly.

I contemplate my recent experiences with Jaden and Oakes. Then I end up fretting over what happened in the cave, what I remember happening in the cave last night. The men accused the elves of inappropriate behavior, but I was the one who had been too forward.

I blush as I vaguely recall trying to touch Oakes and Jaden and how they pushed me away. *Obviously disgusted by me.*

How silly of me to assume because Eldrin found me sexually appealing that they would also be interested in me. What made me give in to the temptation to touch them in the first place? Perhaps it was the need to feel alive after almost dying. Perhaps because I’ve wanted to touch them like that since I met them.

I remember their tempting scents filling my senses—Oakes’ sweet, woody smell and Jaden’s hot coals and sugared cinnamon. Their scents call to me like a starving person to a feast. I’m filled with shame at how I easily succumbed to my wanton desires.

Then a sobering thought collides with my insecurities.

Did Eldrin send them after me because he’s angry I left without his permission?

With rekindled irritation, I ask, “Why did you come after me to the mortal realm and risk your peace treaty? Is Eldrin not done playing with me? Or is the dagger the elf stole that special?”

Oakes looks as if he’s about to slam his fist into his own forehead. “We didn’t know about the dagger until you showed it to us.” He barely contains his whisper, “*Stars, Wyn!* We came to rescue you after seeing your *blood* smeared all over the castle walls. And when Eldrin thought you were hurt, he

was so distraught that he was about to risk upsetting all the kingdoms, including his spiteful father, just to join us to search for you.”

My brow crinkles in confusion at the thought. “But... *why*? And how did you find me? How did you even know I was in the human realm?”

“A flower faerie named Lalo followed you from the castle grounds.”

“Lalo must have been the faerie who tried to distract the elf when we were passing through the gardens.” I frown, remembering the strange noise in the bushes when I was being abducted. “I was leaving in a few days, anyway. What do you care about what happens to me when you were so close to being rid of me?”

“*Rid of you?*” Oakes sighs. “Do you remember the part about a trail of your blood?”

That was a bad idea. “I, uh, didn’t mean for you to risk the peace of the realms for me. I thought someone might find me *before* he took me off the castle grounds.” I suck in a breath to continue, feeling confused. “And yes, be rid of me. You and Jaden both told me you wanted me to stay away from Eldrin.”

“Not gone. *Safe.*” Oakes then expertly turns the tables around to make his point. “So, you wouldn’t have cared what happened to us after *you* left?”

I make a face. “I will *always* worry about what happens to all of you. But—”

“*But* nothing.” Oakes squeezes my hand. “Apparently, you haven’t realized this yet, but you have made an invisible mark on our souls. Even if you choose never to see us again, you will live on in our memories for hundreds of years until we pass over.”

I gasp. “Oh... I didn’t think I could matter to—” I can’t respond anymore.

Do they really believe that baffling idea? I’ve only been around them for a short time. What do they have to remember?

In the context of their extended lives, what can the hiccup of my existence mean to them? Of course, they will mean something to me. I have so little experience with others. And each of them stirs something deep inside of me. But they've already lived so much longer and more intensely than I have.

I walk for another minute, contemplating his statement. Then his words about a mark remind me of my own. "On my back, the mark—"

"Shh." Oakes hisses out the corner of his mouth. "We don't want anyone to overhear."

"Do you know what it is? *Am* I cursed?"

"*Wyn.*" Oakes glares his warning at me. "*Not. Now.*"

TRAVELS

WYNSTELLE

Oakes appears relieved when our conversation about my mysterious mark is cut short when our escorts stop in front of what looks like someone's home. After comparing it to the other dwellings, it obviously belongs to the wealthiest human in the village. One of our escorts runs up and knocks on the door.

An attractive, middle-aged woman comes out of the building and greets us. "Greetings. I'm Lady Carissa. You may wash up here. I have a change of clothes for you, *Wynstelle*," the woman says pointedly, so the other humans can hear her. "Your elf, Oakes, can also come inside and wash up." I appreciate how welcoming she is to both of us.

"Thank you." I curtsy and follow Lady Carissa inside. I'm amused that finally, I'm meeting another woman, *and* I'm the same height. My whole life, I've always been the shortest among the statuesque female elves.

"Stay outside," Carissa orders the men. "We'll be fine."

One man opens his mouth to protest, but Carissa shuts him up with a fierce look.

Inside, a boy hurries past us with a pail of hot water. I smile at him, and he blushes.

"My son, Harold." Carissa grins affectionately and ruffles his hair as he runs by toward the kitchen. "We're almost done heating the water for your bath. You can set your old clothes on the dressing table inside." Carissa signals for me to join her

in the small room, as I glance back at Oakes. “He can stay just out here while you bathe and use the room when you’re done.”

I hold on to his arm, worried this is a trick to separate us. “No. Oakes is a healer and has seen my body when he has healed me.”

Carissa raises her eyebrows and blatantly admires Oakes’ solid, muscular warrior body. “A *healer*, huh?”

“I was blessed with the magic to heal certain ailments.” Oakes gives her a charming smile. “This is Wynstelle’s first time among humans, and I suspect she is apprehensive. I will only join her to settle her nerves, if that’s alright with you.”

Carissa looks at me. “You must trust him very much.”

I nod. “He has saved my life. Twice now.”

Carissa steps out of Oakes’ way, and he enters the washroom, nearly taking up the entire space with his imposing presence.

The woman’s eyes widen as she realizes how much taller and broader in the shoulders he is than most humans. She grins after a moment. “I’ve personally never had a problem with elves, and I’m happy to hear you feel safe with one. It gives me hope our treaty will stand.”

“I, too, hope we can continue the peace between our realms.” Oakes gives her a slight bow.

Lady Carissa disappears and then reenters with the last bucket of hot water.

I unbutton Jaden’s borrowed cloak, covertly sniffing the collar, and am rewarded with Jaden’s smoldering cinnamon scent. Slowly, I pull it off of my shoulders.

Dried blood stains my entire skirt. My breasts are exposed where my torn dress has fallen open.

“Oh, my goodness!” Carissa glances at Oakes and then at my appearance.

I quickly explain, afraid she will call the men inside to hurt Oakes. “I was attacked. Not by Oakes or Jaden... it was

someone else.”

“I plan on destroying the monster who did this.” Oakes’ face burns red with anger.

Lady Carissa seems mollified by his response and nods. “Punch him a few times for me.”

Oakes nods and shuts the door so that I can start my bath. “I see feistiness isn’t unheard of among human women.”

I hum my agreement, but my energy plummets as the weight of the last two days settles in my body and mind. I have been beaten, cut, abducted and taken to another realm, and almost froze to death. I’ve been naked, delirious, and sexually aggressive in Jaden’s and Oakes’ arms, captured by *men*, and now forced to have an audience with a human *king*. To say I’m exhausted would be the understatement of a lifetime.

Oakes folds our cloaks and removes his own shirt. My eyes wander over his perfectly chiseled chest and abdomen. His long brown hair skims along his broad shoulders. He catches me staring. His tempting pine and maple scent fills the small room.

My skin heats in response.

Why does he affect me so much?

I quickly avert my gaze. All I can think of is the shame of my hands inappropriately touching them last night, and how they pushed me away. My taboo behavior must have repulsed Jaden and Oakes. I can feel my cheeks turning pink. How can I look them in the eyes now?

Embarrassed, I step back and trip on the tub’s edge.

“Careful, little one,” Oakes says in a soothing voice and stretches out his arms to stabilize me.

I retreat farther and tumble to the ground, recoiling when he stoops to pick me up.

Brow furrowed, he asks, “What’s wrong?”

I faintly sense his empathetic invasion of my body and emotions. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Read me.” I push myself to kneeling and try to use the torn fabric of my dress to cover my breasts.

“Alright,” Oakes says hesitantly.

I feel it as he stops using his magic to sense my pain.

Reluctantly, I allow Oakes to help me to my feet.

When I don’t fall over, he releases me. “If I can’t read you, then please tell me what’s going on. Are you experiencing dizziness?”

“No. I’m just feeling too many emotions at once, and I don’t want you to figure me out before *I* can.” I sag and sway with the weight of everything hitting me.

“I understand.” Oakes holds my arms to support me. “May I help you with your dress since you haven’t recovered completely yet?”

I nod, and Oakes pulls my dress over my head, leaving me naked and exposed to him. I wrap my arms over my breasts and try to lift my leg to get into the tub. I wince at the sting since the wound hasn’t healed completely. Without a word, Oakes effortlessly lifts me by the waist and places me inside the tub.

After sitting down in the warm water, I lean forward, clutching my knees, to block his view of my breasts, feeling self-conscious.

I scrub at the dried blood staining my legs.

Oakes kneels down beside the tub. His natural, woody scent wafts over me. With his large hands, he scoops warm water over my shoulders and back. For several minutes, I luxuriate with the sensation of his healing touch.

Only healing, I remind myself emphatically.

Then he rubs the place between my shoulder blades absentmindedly—my mark.

“What *is* that?” I whisper.

“I don’t know... yet. Eldrin asked me to investigate when he noticed it. I was going to ask Mage Neven. But then you were taken, so I never got a chance.” He strokes across my entire back with two swipes. His electric touch becoming almost too much to handle.

My loins respond, aching for him. This is ridiculous, I remind myself, we can never be more than what we currently are—friendly acquaintances.

“My first thought was some kind of binding spell.”

“For what?” I ask, thankful for the distraction.

“Historically, binding spells were used to prevent individuals from exhibiting their magical gifts.”

I chortle. “Well, we can rule that out.”

“No, we can’t. Some humans have been known to have magic. It’s rare, but sometimes it’s as powerful as Elven magic.” Oakes pauses and then continues, “You were able to sense my psychic reading. Which is an ability that even most elves do not possess.”

“Oh...” I turn my head to look at Oakes. His face is so close I can see the subtle glow in his amber eyes. If I only move a few inches, I could taste his lips.

Even without using his psychic magic, he must read my mind because he glances at my mouth. His hand reaches up and holds my chin, probably to stop me from making another mistake. After an eternity, he sits back on his haunches and runs his fingers over my cheek. “Let me clean your face.”

I blow out a breath and close my eyes. What am I supposed to do with the attraction I have for him? I decide I must ignore it.

But then his strong but gentle, healing fingers massage and clean my face and down my neck. He’s giving me his magic again. It fills all the forsaken places within me.

A tiny moan escapes.

Do I hear a quiet groan from him?

My eyes pop open, and I find his eyes are intense and dark.

“Ready?” he asks with an enigmatic mien.

I nod.

Oakes helps me out of the tub and gently dries me off, causing all kinds of sensations to pulse through my body. Sure, the towel separates his hands from my skin, but the reverence and care he takes with the simple act undoes me. I close my eyes and feel treasured, the same as Eldrin did with his kisses between my legs.

Then Oakes stands, towering over me, and slips the new dress over my head. After that, he uses the water from the basin and cleans off his own grime from my rescue.

I’m disappointed that he doesn’t strip off his pants so that I can see how he differs from Eldrin. I sigh. Not that the image would do me any good. I will never have him like that. I remind myself again that he’s only a friend. A sexy and handsome and kind *friend*.

Oakes efficiently cleans the dirt and blood off his arms and slips his shirt back on. After a quick glance to see if I’m ready, he opens the bathing room door.

Lady Carissa hurries over to meet us.

I notice she has a cloak and pack ready. “Are you coming with us?”

“I thought it best I come along,” Carissa says cryptically.

We’re greeted by a group of seven armed men outside Carissa’s home. I shake my head in disbelief. If Oakes promised to meet with the human king, he doesn’t need an escort to force him, though I suppose the men don’t know any better.

Do I really know much about what elves are capable of? I would have never imagined what my horrible Elven abductor did the day before.

I wonder, when Oakes and Jaden return to Elfhome safely, will they hunt down the elf and punish him? Or *kill* him? Oakes told Carissa he plans to punish my attacker, so I guessed he would. But why? I'm only a human servant, and an act of retribution like that for a mortal won't be tolerated. Is it only to prove no elf breaks laws in their castle?

The group of men leads us to a stable. I'm nervous. I've never ridden a horse by myself.

"I'll take her," a young man's voice calls out.

I turned to see the soldier, Rhys, striding toward the stables to intercept us. The commander from the cave locks his intense gaze on me. Now that I'm not blinded by fear, I acknowledged the commander's good looks for a human.

Oakes' eyebrows shoot up. I expect him to protest the man's claim on me for his prince's sake.

"No. *I* will." Lady Carissa steps in front of me, blocking Rhys' path.

Oakes' shoulders relax, but he's quickly irritated again when another man takes the reins of his horse so he can't escape. Reins are but a trifle if the elf wants to flee.

After the group begins to make way, I ask Carissa, "Is Rhys the reason you came with us?"

"Commander Rhys isn't a bad man. Well, from what I know of him, but I want to make sure *all* these men behave. With the rumors, an attractive woman like yourself and an elf, I feared some might be tempted to cause more problems."

"And they'll behave because you are here?" I wonder what kind of power this woman has over the men.

"I'm Lord Jonathon's wife."

Oh, well, that's something. "He doesn't mind you joining us?"

"He's a smart man." Carissa chuckles. "One who sees the value of a strong woman."

I nod appreciatively. "He surprised me."

“How so?”

“I’ve never known other humans. Lord Jonathon presented himself as thoughtful, even if he’s stern. Our situation is difficult, but he was reasonable. He allowed my request to stay with Oakes, which I wasn’t expecting.”

“Are elves hard of hearing when it comes to women?” Carissa asks.

“I only know three males, but they seem to be open to hearing my needs and concerns.” Then I think about how the prince resisted letting me leave the castle when I wanted to. Should I hold that against him?

“Let’s hope your elves use their listening skills in the days to come with our king.”

We ride in silence for a few hours before I decide I should use this time to discover what it’s like to live in the mortal realm. “Lady Carissa, are you happy?”

Carissa laughs. “Most of the time, but maybe I’m lucky. I have a better husband than most. A fine son. A good standing in the community. And I teach the town’s children.” Carissa asks with a knowing smirk, “Are you interested in living among us mere mortals?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps.” I glance over at Oakes, who doesn’t seem to notice my attention. “Within the last moon-cycle, I’ve questioned my entire life. And now, I need to discover what my options are.”

Carissa hums her understanding. “Depending on how the next few days go, I will extend an invitation for you to stay with me as long as you need. Then you can explore your paths in our realm.”

“*Really?*” My mouth drops. “But... you don’t know me.”

“I have a good sense of people. I expect anyone who can earn the loyalty of two warrior elves and inspire them to risk their lives and peace must be exceptional.”

I blush at the compliment and the reminder that Jaden and Oakes risked quite a lot to rescue me.

Maybe it isn't just to get back the prince's plaything.

Maybe they *do* care.

But I don't want to believe that... in case it isn't true.

PRINCESS

WYNSTELLE

After passing through a vast, primarily treeless expanse, our entourage arrives at King Nathaniel's castle just as twilight falls. The sight of the human stronghold is chillingly familiar, and I can't understand why. I feel drawn to this place like nothing has drawn me before, and I wonder about this as we approach.

Is the castle's allure because I long to belong—somewhere? Never in my life have I experienced something other than being *other*. I've been an outsider in every sense of the word. I'm not just different as a human among elves. I'm also an indentured servant—a well-treated slave.

On top of my lower status, I don't behave like elves either. I've always delighted in the little flower faeries and like being silly and curious. Elves aren't often like that. Although Jaden has shown a playful side when alone with me, he's usually serious in public. Merlara didn't laugh much, except sometimes to chuckle quietly at my antics.

If anything, I'm more like the faeries. But I have yet to really get to know any humans. Perhaps once they let down their guard, they will behave more like I do.

Rhys pulls on the reins of his mount and motions for his party to wait before crossing the wide drawbridge.

Four soldiers ride out and meet us, eyeing the group suspiciously, with special attention paid to Oakes and me.

“King Nathaniel and Princess Twyla are expecting you,” one soldier announces, and then leads the entire group across the bridge to the stables.

Finally, we all enter the castle and head toward the throne room.

“I’m here,” Lady Carissa says, walking to my left side.

Oakes is to my right. As my nerves unravel knowing that Oakes and Jaden could be punished for saving me, I’m comforted by having these two close.

The hallway opens up to an enormous room with lush tapestries covering the stone walls. Across the expanse, two thrones are filled with crowned royalty.

It’s an intimidating sight. I freeze and swallow hard, shaking more than when I met Eldrin for the first time. I wonder about that and then realize there’s more on the line than just my life now. This is about the peace of the realms, Oakes and Jaden’s punishment, *and* my future.

When I don’t move forward, Oakes turns and smiles to reassure me and nods for me to follow him toward the dais. I step closer with a slight limp from my still unhealed leg injury.

Once we are five long strides from the seated royalty, Lady Carissa, Rhys, and his soldiers bow to King Nathaniel. Oakes and I follow their form.

From the illustrated books I’ve perused concerning humans, I guess perhaps the king is near forty to fifty human years in age, with his graying hair and slightly creased skin. He sits on an elevated platform, radiating power and strength.

The princess sits to his left. The young woman somehow glows subtly, rivaling the etheric beauty of the elves.

I note the princess is likely about my age but has an older demeanor, likely because of her status. An unsettling observation comes to me. Although I believe Princess Twyla is far more beautiful and elegant, we bear a striking similarity. The princess appears to be taller and thinner, but otherwise, we could be mistaken as cousins, if not sisters.

Oakes seems to have the same thought as he turns to me. His eyes widen as he glances back and forth between the two of us.

Rhys steps forward toward the throne. “Your Majesty, I present the elf, Oakes of Ryven, the accused.”

Oakes bows again.

King Nathaniel studies Oakes for a long moment and finally says, “Elf Oakes, I wish that meeting you was under better circumstances. Lord Jonathon’s messenger has informed me a small Elven delegation will arrive soon to discuss the repercussions of your trespass. Do you understand the seriousness of your actions?”

Oakes nods. “I do, Your Majesty.”

“Is this the woman you claim to have rescued?” the king asks.

His intense gaze locks onto me, and I try to remain steady under his scrutiny.

“Yes, she is a resident of Elfhome, under my protection,” Oakes explains with authority. “However, I failed her when she was abducted, injured, and left for dead in your realm.”

“Is this true?” King Nathaniel asks me directly.

“Yes. I was beaten, cut, and left in the cold. If it weren’t for Oakes’ healing magic, I would have died from blood loss or freezing.”

The king frowns and says to Oakes, “We still have much to discuss, but it sounds as if your intentions have been honorable. My men report you have been more than cooperative, so I will treat you as a guest, not as a prisoner. Unless you prove yourself to be a danger.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

King Nathaniel clears his throat and continues, “The woman...” He seems strangely uncomfortable when he looks at me.

“My name is Wynstelle, Your Majesty,” I offer, dipping into a curtsy with his title.

The king tenses when I give him my name. “Yes, of course, *Wynstelle*. You are welcome to utilize one of our guest quarters until I settle this matter. After that, we can discuss your future in our realm.”

Oakes sucks in a breath at the suggestion the king means to keep me. And I’m a bit taken aback by his comment.

Why does the king assume I will be allowed to remain here as if I have a choice? Would Eldrin simply allow me to stay or will he make me return to attend his event as his guest?

The king stands. “We delayed our meal so you could join us. We’ll allow you and the others to wash off the dirt from the road and then we can eat.”

Lady Carissa heads off to her suite. Apparently, she visits enough to have a regular room. She assures us we will be taken care of and not to worry.

Guards show Oakes and I to a lovely room with an ensuite bathroom. But then a guard guides Oakes to follow him to his own.

“Wait,” I protest, not liking the idea of being separated.

Oakes asks the guard, “May we take turns using our bathing room from one suite then the other? We are both shaken from the ordeal we have suffered.”

The guard gives us a sympathetic look. “Just be quick and don’t get me in trouble.”

Even though he didn’t get to wash up enough at Carissa’s, Oakes gives me the first turn to wash. I make quick work of it.

We switch to his room, and he hurries himself clean. He looks refreshed in the new clothes delivered for him to wear, although they fit tight, especially in the shoulders and chest.

He’s so handsome I almost forget we have to eat with the royals. I find I don’t like the idea of sharing him and his attention at all.



During our initial meeting, I had been sneaking glances at the princess every time I could.

When we arrive, Twyla smiles at me reassuringly. When we enter the dining hall, the princess motions for me to sit next to her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wynstelle.”

“And you, Your Highness.” I try not to gape at the idea that looking at the princess is like gazing into a distorted reflection. The effect is eerie, but I’m oddly calmed by Twyla’s presence. Perhaps being around my own kind makes me feel this way?

After the king takes his first bite, the rest of the guests at the table begin to eat.

Servants pour wine, and I covertly watch Oakes across the table. His diplomatic personality is in full swing. I smile, seeing in this new side of him. He’s paving the way for positive Elven relations with his charming nature, telling jokes, and answering questions. I can’t believe that Eldrin thinks I can be a fraction of the competent ambassador that Oakes is.

I quietly observe the humans as I eat their human food. I’m accustomed to mostly fresh fruits and sometimes meat for meals. But humans have more various meats and loaves of bread than I have ever seen on one table.

My cheeks flush with the warmth from the rich wine, not the elegant, light vintages of the elves.

Twyla turns to me and asks, “How has your time with the fae treated you?”

The king seems to perk up at this question, but he still doesn’t look directly at me.

“Until recently, it has been uneventful. I worked as a servant for a female elf in her workshop. I stayed busy and productive. When I came of age, I was summoned to the Elven Royal Court.”

“Is that when you met Oakes?” Twyla asks with a grin. “You seem to be fond of him.”

I purposely avoid her comment concerning my fondness. “After my summons, I met the princes’ advisors, Oakes and Jaden, then Prince Eldrin of Ryven.”

“*Prince Eldrin?*” Princess Twyla asks with surprise. “Was this Advisor Jaden the other elf discovered in the cave with you?”

“Yes.” I gaze gloomily at Oakes, hoping the two elves won’t be punished for saving me.

Seeming to pick up on my uncomfortableness, Twyla changes the subject. “How is it being surrounded by humans for the first time?”

I poke at my food. I notice Commander Rhys staring at us from down the table. The king has been stealing glances at me as well. “It’s... *odd.*”

Twyla’s eyes flick over toward Rhys. “The men, especially.” She laughs elegantly and whispers, “Rhys is one of my potential suitors. A young and ambitious warrior of high rank and noble blood, but I’d rather have a scholar.”

“Oh.” I ask, “You aren’t already betrothed or promised to someone?”

“No. The king is allowing me my choice of a mate.”

“That is unusual with royalty, isn’t it?”

“It is, but he knows what it is to marry for love and not just political alliances.”

I find it that odd Twyla uses the word *mate*. Lady Carissa had called mates, husband and wives. Maybe the princess is being considerate and adjusting her speech to my vocabulary, using Elven terms.

“I hope we can spend some time together in the coming days,” Twyla says.

“Yes, that would be nice.” I buzz contentedly from the hearty wine. I’m not used to having more than one serving of

Elven vintages. I'm also exhausted from my ordeal and traveling all day on horseback. I stop drinking the wine and switch to water.

As the evening winds down, I'm finally feeling relaxed around the humans, but I'm also ready for sleep. "Your Majesty," I boldly address the King, "I would like to request that Oakes remain by my side at all times. I'm afraid my wounds are not completely healed."

"It's a bit unorthodox to have a male in your room." The King seems flustered. "Are you... *bonded* with him?"

"Uh, no. Oakes is a healer." I blush. "And he has never been less than honorable."

"I suppose, under the strange circumstances, we can allow a cot in your room so he may give you any medical attention you require."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Oakes and I bow and leave the dining hall.

HEALER'S TOUCH

OAKES

Guided by a castle guard, Wyn limps out of the dining hall and toward her room. When we are out of the king's sight, I scoop up Wyn, one arm under her legs and one under her back, and carry her up the stairs.

"Oh, thank you." She throws her arm around my neck and nuzzles into my chest, ready to fall asleep. "I'm so sore from that beast between my legs all day." Absent-mindedly, she strokes my neck and plays with my long hair with her fingers. "You just got really warm. Are you alright?"

I clear my throat and glance at the guard escorting us to Wyn's room. "I'm fine."

The man can barely contain a chuckle. At least the guard finds Wyn's unintentionally naughty comment about her horse ride amusing and doesn't seem to hold it against me.

But I'm not alright. The image of *being* the beast between her legs overwhelms my imagination. Until now, I've kept my desires at bay, but perhaps seeing the young Commander Rhys vying for Wyn's attention all day has riled me. Strangely, the man's pursuit irritates me even more than seeing Eldrin's advances. Perhaps because Wyn will be more likely to choose a mate from her own race.

The guard shuts the door behind us, leaving us alone in her chamber.

The room is sizable but not as lavish in decor as Wyn's suite in Ryven Castle. There's a large poster bed with a thick

duvet. Tapestries hang on the walls. And damask curtains cover a tall window.

I note they have already delivered the cot, set in the corner. The king's servants are efficient. I'll give them that.

Wyn slowly slides down my body to stand in front of me. I nearly buckle as it overstimulates my cock, with her curves rubbing down my length in all the most intriguing ways.

"Thanks for the ride, my beast of burden." She pats my chest but doesn't move away. Then she idly rubs my pectorals, and rests her cheek back on my chest. Her eyes flutter closed, and she leans her whole body against me. She asks sleepily with a sexy rasp to it, "Where do you want to do it?"

"Huh?" In my second of confusion, I think of a couple dozen places for us to do *it*. Then I realize she means my healing.

She yawns.

"The bed will be best, then you can sleep right after." I pull the dress from her body, leaving the chemise as a nightgown as she kicks off her boots.

Wyn doesn't move toward the bed. She drops her hands to her sides and returns to press her cheek to my chest. Sadness and frustration radiate off her. It doesn't take a psychic to sense her gloom or exhaustion.

I know better now than to probe her emotional state with my ability. For some inexplicable reason, she can sense me when I do. My arms circle around her and I implore, "Please tell me what you are feeling."

"I'm just so tired and... feeling a lot of stupid things right now." She chokes on her words. "*Too* much."

"Tell me." I pull her tight against me, and her feet barely touch the ground. "I promise to just listen—to do my best to understand."

Wyn sighs, acquiescing. "My entire life hasn't been my own. As soon as I was old enough to work, I was told to clean this, make that, think this. Which I was mostly fine with, but

then, I was summoned to Ryven Castle, and a prince owned my future. For a day or so, I had freedom, but then Eldrin insisted I stay longer, and I was dumb enough to think I could do just that—stay, enjoy, feel wanted. I was delusional, thinking I could have a moment for myself—a genuine moment of pleasure for *me*—and there would be no consequences. I had a choice to leave, and I made the wrong one. I promised Eldrin I would stay longer. I let him kiss me. And now? Now, all this has happened.” Wyn buries her face fully in my chest, tears finally falling and soaking into my shirt. “Of course, they’d punish me for wanting more, but I never wanted you or Jaden to pay the price, too.”

“This isn’t your fault.” I cradle her head against me, pouring my healing energy into her, sending it to her heart. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to live life to its fullest and being free—to feel *pleasure*. That’s all I ever wanted for you. I want you to enjoy our time together.”

Have I said too much? Not enough? It feels wrong to admit I want to mate with her—not now with so much else on her mind.

Wyn pulls away. With slumped shoulders, she shuffles over, crawls up on the bed, and collapses face down.

Seeing her miserable state, I remain quiet while I remove her stockings and massage her feet and ankles. Slowly, I move up to her calves, her skirt inching up and revealing more of her milky white flesh as I work.

She moans quietly as I dig in, relieving the sore muscles from riding. But my healing hands want to offer her much more than health. I pour into my magic all my affection, my desire, my *need* to pleasure her into every stroke of my hands.

I love the way my golden skin contrasts with her ivory thighs. She reminds me of a porcelain sculpture, so delicate and beautiful. Perfect.

As I reach her thighs, her moans become more insistent, lost in the moment of pleasure, the feeling of being treasured. I sense her lust building, as is my own.

Does she know how her sounds make me feel? Or is she so enraptured by my healing touch that she doesn't realize she is making those tantalizing sounds?

Her slip is just up around her hips, and I have a heart-stopping sight. She isn't wearing undergarments. Her legs are splayed out, giving me a lovely peek at her sex. Glistening wet, she's ready for my attention. Her hips undulate with need.

My cock hardens, and I know I should look away. That's what I should do, right?

However, that's not what I really want. But does she want the same?

"What do you need?" I practically purr.

"Don't stop," Wyn whimpers when I pause. "It feels too good."

My hand slides up onto her round ass and kneads.

Wyn tilts her hips into my touch, angled so I can see more of her tempting flower, making herself more accessible.

How I want to pounce. Without thinking, I move to settle a knee between her legs so I can pleasure her more effectively.

She arches her back, offering herself to me, but still I resist running my fingers through her folds.

Wyn moans when I knead her globes, teasing closer to her honey pot with my thumbs.

"Yes. More," she hisses, then my fingers trail further away from her center.

"You've been drinking," I say with as much restraint as I can conjure. "You don't know what you are asking of me."

Wyn looks over her shoulder at me, desire in her eyes and not a trace of drunkenness. "*Oakes, I do.*"

I stare into her golden-brown eyes, but don't press into her wetness. I'm stock-still, overcome by the moment.

"Please. *There.*" She begs, pushing back and opening her legs more for me.

Desperate with her need and my own to bring her release, I slip my fingers over her slit. She groans loud and appreciatively.

I fucking love how vocal she is, but we can't get caught like this—not before our precarious situation with the peace treaty has been resolved. “Moan into the pillow, my treasure.”

Wyn nods, shoves her face into the pillow, and growls when I move my finger over her sensitive bud and circle it.

I want to mount her and hold her full hips and plump breasts in my hands. I want to wring every ounce of pleasure from her body. Make her scream my name in ecstasy, no matter who hears. Not Eldrin. Not these men.

Right now, she craves *my* touch. And I can give her that.

My hand palms her entire sex, and she clenches the pillow around her head. “Oh, Oakes. Your touch... *how*...”

I dare to slip my finger into her gently. Wyn bucks back into me, working my digit deeper into her. She's so tight. When she stretches, I add another.

“Oh, yes.” I hear her muffled excitement as she bites down on the pillow. “*Yes... yes.*”

If I ever have the chance to slip my cock into her, I will take care to make her ready. This time is for her to experience what pleasure I can give with my touch alone. To relieve the tension of the last few weeks. For her to feel cherished and desired. To let Wyn know I treasure her.

Her hips move and buck against my hand, and I match her rhythm, sensing the orgasm building inside her. “Come for me. Let me feel your release around my fingers.”

“*Oh, oh, oh.*” With my words, she thrashes, pulsing around my fingers, grunting in ecstasy, like a madwoman.

And I fucking love it.

I would kill to hear her make that sound every night. Her release keeps surging. I move my hand in rhythm to ride the climax until she's finished.

Then she's so still, and I think she might have passed out. Suddenly, she jerks upright as she recovers from her orgasmic state. She scrambles off the bed, away from me, falling onto the floor. "*Stars!* What did I do? Oh, goddess, I'm sorry!"

I frown, run over, and take her hand to help her back onto the bed. "Why are you sorry?"

"It felt so good when you were healing me. I got lost in the feelings you stir in me, like I was in a dream. I've longed for you... uh, but..." Wyn tugs her skirt down to her ankles. "I got caught up. I shouldn't have *made* you touch me like that. I practically demanded you do it. Oh, Goddess, I'm so embarrassed."

"*Made* me?" I chuckle. "Wyn, I've wanted to pleasure you—since the beginning."

"What? No." She covers her face in shame. "Don't lie to me. In the cave, I remember... you and Jaden were disgusted with my advances. You pushed me away when I tried to grope you. I'm so out of control! And now, I—"

"Oh, no, my treasure." I have heard enough of her self-deprecating talk. "I only stopped you because you were injured and barely conscious. Otherwise, I would have enjoyed you touching me very, *very* much."

"What?" Her mouth drops open in disbelief. "No... *Really? Me?*"

"Yes, really." I smile. "I've assumed you didn't want *my* advances."

Wyn settles back onto the bed and glances at my pants. "Do you need to find your release now?"

"Under different circumstances, I'd consider indulging in our continued pleasure, but I'd rather not have those men walk in on us."

Wyn stares longingly into my eyes. "I wish we were somewhere else."

"Me too." I pull back the covers, easily lifting her with one arm. I tuck her in, lean over, and kiss her cheek.

She reaches out and clasps my face, bringing me closer, and stares at my lips. Asking with a look, I kiss her lightly on the mouth. My lips hold the same electric healing, and she gasps with the sensation.

I stroke her cheek. I want more from her than she's probably ready for. I want *all* of her for as long as she will have me. I know she is overwhelmed by everything that has happened in the past moon-cycle, but as I turn to find my way to the cot, she catches my arm. "Are you alright? You seem sad."

"I want to hold you through the night, but I don't want you to feel obligated to say yes."

"Why do you think I asked for you to be in my room?"

I nod toward the door. "Because the men make you nervous?"

"Because I enjoy being near you." Wyn draws back the covers and smiles. It's a simple gesture, but it melts my heart.

She tilts her head innocently. "And I need more *healing*."

I slip in beside her. "Actually, you *aren't* completely healed."

Cradling Wyn in my arms, she seems to fit perfectly, as if she were always meant to be there.

"Dream of me."

Wyn giggles. "You already *know* that I will."

SECRETS

OAKES

When I wake up, Wyn is no longer nestled beside me, but sitting on the edge of the bed, her face cradled in her hands. Something's wrong. My senses go on full alert, trying to pick up on what's upsetting her without invading her mental privacy.

Does she regret what happened last night? Did I take advantage of her exhausted, emotional state? Should I leave now and make sure I never hurt her again?

My voice full of dread, I ask, "Are you unwell?"

She shakes her head but doesn't look at me. "Why didn't you just turn around when you saw I'd been taken to the mortal realm?" Wyn asks quietly. "What if King Nathaniel is actually cruel? What if, after Jaden returns, he punishes you both? There's something off about him... He stares at me when he thinks I won't notice. He looks at you oddly, too. I don't know what's going on with him yet, but I'm afraid he is setting a trap." She sucks in a breath, trying to calm herself. "So *why* risk your lives or the peace treaty for me?"

"I already explained why. We couldn't leave you to die." I rub my forehead in disbelief that she asks such a thing. Why doesn't she see we would do anything for her? "We saw your blood smeared on the walls. How could we ignore your call for help?"

"I seriously regret doing that. I put you in danger." Wyn rubs her eyes. "I'd hoped Jaden would catch me before I even

left the castle.”

“I *felt* your terror.” I move closer and turn her head so she’ll hear me and see the truth in my eyes. “I would have chased after you even without a trail of blood. I would have searched for you to whatever ends, for however long I needed to.”

“But you’ve risked the peace between the realms to find *me*,” Wyn says with exasperation. “I won’t be able to handle it if these humans hurt you because of me. What if they are just waiting for an excuse for another war? What if Eldrin insists on coming here to help you, and he gets hurt too?”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and hold her. “I would risk everything all over again.”

Wyn huffs. “But you shouldn’t have. I’m riddled with guilt that I’m the reason you and Jaden, and now *all* Elven-kind, are in so much trouble.”

I press my cheek to the top of her head, trying to infuse my love into her. “None of this is your fault. Eldrin shouldn’t have summoned you to the castle to begin with.”

The shift in her energy is instant. She’s angry, but it’s better than her taking the blame for what isn’t her fault.

I just hope she can forgive us.

“Wait... *What?*” Wyn pulls away, stands with her hands on her hips, and glares at me. “I thought Ryven Court summoned me. And that Eldrin only *intervened* by sending you to help me along the road and then he saved me from their judgment.”

“No.” I sigh and pull my hair back with the stress of my confession. “Eldrin heard a rumor about a human woman in Betonie and wanted to meet you.”

“*He* turned my life upside down? It was all a manipulation from the beginning? He didn’t save me from the Ryven Court? *He* put me in danger? And in summoning me, flaunting his interest in me, and insisting I stay longer, Eldrin risked *all* our lives?”

“I know I shouldn’t have kept that secret from you. But I knew you would be angry at him... and upset with me for not telling the truth from the beginning. However, I couldn’t let you take the burden of this whole situation.”

“So he always wanted to barter my freedom for my body?” she asks, her voice deceptively calm.

“He wanted to meet you.” I inhale deeply to find the right words. “I suspected he might want more than a mere meeting when he saw you, and I was correct. Not that it makes it right, but as you now know, sexual favors and bargaining are the ways of the royal elves. None of us knew how innocent you were.”

“I forgave you for keeping your connection to Eldrin a secret on the road, because I thought he was trying to protect me on some level. I’m such an idiot.”

“You are far from an idiot, Wyn. Eldrin started this off under false pretenses. That’s not a reflection of you. Jaden and I advised against summoning you to Ryven. We told him not to barter your freedom.”

Wyn stares at me for a long while, not saying anything. There’s a storm of emotions swirling in her.

“I appreciate you finally being honest, but I need to clear my head.” Angrily, Wyn rubs her bloodshot eyes, refusing to cry. As she leaves her room, she mumbles just loud enough to shoot a painful statement into my heart, “And to think I trusted *any* of you.”

GARDENS

WYNSTELLE

With a royal guard following me at a discreet distance, I wander down to the gardens to contemplate Oakes' confession.

King Nathaniel's gardens are much smaller than those of Ryven Castle. Human gardens, with their manicured hedges and tidy rose bushes, differ from the vibrant textures and colors of Elven wild gardens, which I prefer. Though I wonder if I only favor Elfhame's wildflowers and sprite-filled shrubs, because that's what I'm used to.

Princess Twyla's lyrical voice cuts through my reverie. "Wynstelle, do you mind if I join you?"

I turn toward the princess. Twyla is polished and graceful. My lack of these qualities makes me momentarily self-conscious. I'm particularly disheveled right now, having not bothered to fix myself up before storming out of my room, leaving Oakes to deal with the consequences of his secrets.

"Of course." I nod. "Please join me."

Twyla smiles pleasantly. Again, I'm stunned by how her face reminds me of my own. Could we be distant relatives? Not that I would presume myself to be royalty. Then again, perhaps there are only so many variances in human attributes. What do I know? I have seen very few humans in person.

Would it be rude to ask about our similarities? Would the princess find offense being compared to a servant? I want to stay on Twyla's good side, so I hold my tongue. It might make

a difference in how Oakes' and Jaden's trials are resolved. Perhaps the subject of our resemblance will come up naturally. I'm not the only one who noticed. Oakes did too.

"You seem bothered." Twyla's piercing golden brown eyes stun me, being almost the same color as mine. "Have my people treated you poorly?"

"No. It's not that. I'm upset about something that happened in Elfhome."

"If you wish to discuss it, I'm happy to listen." Twyla rests her hand on mine.

There is a strange sensation of completeness at her touch, as if a missing part just returned. I inhale deeply to catch my breath.

Once recovered from the overwhelming feeling, I worry that a confession of Eldrin's behavior might cause us all more problems. They might punish Jaden and Oakes, seeing elves as untrustworthy. The matter is personal anyway, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't be used for political motivations if the human king is so inclined.

After a moment, I say with a wave of my hand, "It isn't something I should trouble you with."

"It's no trouble. You feel like a long-lost sister. Don't you feel the same?"

Is Twyla acknowledging our corresponding appearances? Why do I feel safe with the princess? I nod, pushing aside any concerns that Twyla might hurt my elves' chance of freedom. I can trust the princess, right? Twyla does feel like a sister I've always had but never met. Or is the feeling just what it is like to be around fellow humans?

Then I wonder if I'm making Eldrin's deceit out to be more than it is.

"Can we keep this between us?" I ask.

Twyla smiles. "Of course."

"Oakes just confessed that it was the prince, not the Court, who called me to Ryven. Apparently, he was curious to meet a

mortal.” I’m careful not to say too much. The humans might get more upset than *I* am. “Prince Eldrin kept that detail from me when we met.” I frown. “I’m frustrated because his actions and attention, *inadvertently*, have turned my life upside down. I was attacked and left to die in the mortal realm because I was the prince’s guest. And now, Jaden and Oakes are in trouble.”

“Why did Oakes decide now was the time to tell you?”

“Because I was blaming myself that he and Jaden are on trial.”

“From what I understand, it isn’t your doing. Perhaps it was meant to happen.”

“Meant to happen?” My eyebrows raise in skepticism. “I don’t see the benefit in all this.”

“We don’t always see the good in an event until after it’s over.” Twyla cants her head knowingly.

I wonder if there’s something the princess is hinting at. I bite my lip and shake my head. “But why didn’t the prince confess *he* had brought me to the castle?”

“Sometimes, it’s hard to be truthful because the truth hurts.” Twyla frowns, and it seems she has something else to say.

When she doesn’t elaborate, I go on, “If the prince had left me alone, I would be safe, working away in my keeper’s foundry, reading my books, living a quiet, simple life. I wouldn’t be confused about which realm to live in, and my... *emotions* are all stirred up.” I shrug. “I need to sort through what’s happened... and figure out where to live... now that I have options. Now that I’m no longer forced to be a servant in Elfhome. It’s all just so much to think about. I’ll be free to choose my own path after their trials are over and that’s overwhelming.”

“Change can be good, but it usually *is* scary at first.” Twyla begins to walk away, and says over her shoulder, “The most significant gifts are often concealed in ugly wrapping. Remember, not all offenses are born out of treachery.”

As the princess walks away and disappears into the hallway, the emptiness within me returns. But oddly, that emptiness has been soothed by the princess' contact.

Perhaps I will forgive Oakes and Jaden. After all, they were obligated to follow the prince's orders.

But Eldrin? That is another story.

AMBASSADORS

ELDRIN

Immediately upon our arrival at King Nathaniel's castle, myself, Jaden, and our four Elven soldiers are escorted under heavy guard to the throne room.

I don't want to waste time dealing with the mortal king. I desperately need to see that Wynstelle is alright. Jaden assured me several times on our ride, but it has been almost two days since my advisor has seen her.

Shaking off my gruff internal irritations, I plaster a pleasant smile on my face, like a good little royal prince, to greet the mortal king who demands custody of my love and my faithful advisors. I'm not in the mood, but I do my duty until I secure our freedom from this blasted realm.

A castle guard announces, "Elven Prince Eldrin of Ryven, Elfhome Realm, and the accused Elven trespasser, Royal Advisor Jaden of Ryven."

I nod to King Nathaniel but certainly don't bow to the man.

The king only inclines his head as well. "Prince Eldrin, I was not expecting *royalty* on this visit, especially considering the potentially volatile nature of this incident. Should I be concerned that it's you who should appear in my domain?"

"Certainly not. It just so happens that the two elves in question are my personal and official advisors. Their infraction should be addressed by the one responsible for their actions."

“So it was *you* who sent them to invade my realm?” The king leans forward, tension lacing his question. “Why would an Elven Prince ask his advisors to risk themselves and our peace treaty over a *human* woman?”

I bite back my comment that it’s none of the king’s cursed business. Instead, I politely answer, “Wynstelle is my honored guest. An attack on her is one upon myself.” I touch my chest over my heart. “I would have been troubled by her loss. Besides, I’d hardly call two elves an invasion.”

“Why do you take such an interest in this particular human?” King Nathaniel narrows his eyes, evaluating my every expression and weighing every word.

Does the king suspect I’m more involved with Wyn than my assumed responsibility as her host? Are my affections for her written that plainly on my face? Or has my love demanded to be returned to my arms? I hope for the latter.

“I found her to be bright and courageous,” I confess, then frown slightly. “Before her abduction, I had hoped she would be the face of change between our races, an ambassador to shift human-elf relations among my people. So that we might heal wounds left behind from the horrible war. She charms me, and I hope she will win others over, seeing humans with fondness.”

“Hmm.” The king grins wistfully. “I found her bold enough, which is surprising because, from what I understand, she has been a slave to elves all her life. She speaks her mind, even to royalty.”

I bristle at the term slave. I would never use that word to describe her, even if she had been bound to Merlara for her whole life. “Her keeper educated her, and from what Wynstelle confided in me, the female was kind and caring. As far as Wynstelle’s personality is concerned... Yes, she speaks her mind confidently. She’s also wise beyond her limited years.” I grin, fondly remembering how Wynstelle set me straight a few times. “More importantly, she has opened my thinking to new possibilities.”

“I see you are as taken with her as I am,” he confesses.

I tense, wondering if the king has designs on keeping Wyn for himself. I glance at Jaden next to me, who also seems to have gone on alert.

King Nathaniel waves his hand, dismissing the subject. “On to the charges against your advisors... I will set the hearing for tomorrow morning. You and your elves may rest tonight. However, I want to address revisiting our treaty, which we would have done so within the year with King Magnus, anyway. Will you be able to speak for your Elven King?”

“To negotiate, but I cannot approve any concessions. Hopefully, now that time has passed, we can mend the damage done by the war. Bridge our realms again.” The king nods his agreement, and I ask, “Where are Oakes and Wynstelle now?”

“Safe,” King Nathaniel says with a cocked eyebrow. “Perhaps Advisor Jaden should join them? Prince Eldrin, I ask that you and I talk about a few details in private, and then you can check on all three.”

I want to demand to see Wynstelle, but I fear this is a test of my patience and cooperation. So instead of losing my temper, I fall back on my royal training, and say to Jaden. “See to them. I have our guards to accompany me.”

REUNION

JADEN

Scenting Wyn and following my nose, I hurry away from Eldrin with two human guards in tow.

Within minutes, I burst through her chamber door and lock eyes with Wyn.

I want to explain away any confusion she has about my intentions to mate with her.

Her racing heart lets me know she's excited to see me again. All I want is to take her in my arms and *show* her how I feel.

Quickly, Oakes thanks the guards and shuts the door so no one will witness our reunion. My emotions are obviously heightened, and I reel in my need to claim her mind, body, and soul.

Her eyes seem to glow when she steps toward me.

I want to race forward and scoop her into my arms, but I don't want to hurt her if she is still injured. "Wyn?" I look her up and down, assessing her health. "Have you recovered?"

As if my question breaks her from a trance, she runs across the room and throws her arms around me in a tight embrace. "I was so worried about you," Wyn says with pure relief, then grumbles, "But I'm upset with you, too."

I glance at her and then at Oakes. "Because I suggested claiming you as mine?"

“No. Oakes confessed Eldrin was the one who summoned me from my home, not the Court as I thought.” Wyn shrugs. “I know you and Oakes were only following orders, but it still hurts that you kept it from me.”

“His entire plan drove me insane from the beginning.” I brush a loose lock of hair from her brow. My voice sounds rough, desperate to let her know how I feel. “I wanted to tell you. I came close so many times. Especially when I got to know how amazing you are.”

She wrinkles her nose at my compliment, but otherwise doesn't comment on it. Changing the subject, she asks, “How did the men treat you on your journey?”

“I'm fine.” I pull her tighter against my chest. “Thank you for protecting Oakes.”

Wyn laughs heartily. “You know me, always looking out for the giant warriors.”

“We're elves, not giants.” I smirk and step back to look at her, stroking her arms. “Seriously, are you alright? You were at death's veil.”

“I'm fine. Oakes has been taking care of me.”

Her body awakens with her casual statement, and I scent her arousal in the air.

Has something happened between them? Did Oakes confess his affections?

Then Wyn brushes away my hands. Perhaps she's confused that her body responds with sensual thoughts about two different males. Should I tell her I understand if something happened with Oakes?

I interrupt her mental replay. “Do you really think I'm *the most* gorgeous male?” My hands crawl up to interlace at the back of her neck.

Her face blushes. She *does* remember what she said. “Yes, but I don't know many males, so don't become too vain.” Wyn stares at me for a long time, studying my black hair as it cascades over my forehead, then my mouth. Finally, she gazes

into my soul. Her golden-brown eyes seem to have a direct link to my heart.

Wyn says in a forlorn voice, “I’m sorry I touched you inappropriately in the caves. I wasn’t thinking—”

I cut her off. “*I want you.*” My voice is low and needy. I sense her core instantly heats with my proclamation.

She licks her lips, staring into my eyes as if she wants to throw me on the ground and ravage me.

I don’t care if Oakes sticks around for whatever is going to happen between us—what I *hope* will happen. With my attention focused on Wyn, I have all but forgotten about Oakes standing by the door. The only thing that would stop me is if Wyn doesn’t want to do anything in front of Oakes.

A long, tense moment passes as I study the subtle signals of Wyn’s body—the shifting of her breasts upward as an offering. How her mouth parts. The way her breath hitches, and her pulse races. The depths of her golden-brown eyes as they dilate.

She wants me, too.

I scent her lust—orange blossoms.

Stepping into her space again, I lift her up by her thighs and wrap them around my waist. My powerful hands pin her body to mine. But she’s gripping my waist tight with her thighs.

Oh, stars, I’m about to explode.

My mouth finds hers, waiting and willing. I turn and cage her against the wall.

Fuck. Her lips taste like honey and sunshine, and I will never have enough.

My hands adjust her hips, guiding my hardened member to align perfectly with her center. The clothing separating us is nearly too much for me to tolerate. I need to feel her flesh—to be inside her—to claim her.

I manage to slip my hand under the hem of her dress and squeeze her bare thighs.

Wyn greets my kisses with zeal. Her body arches, grinding her most sensitive parts over the bulge in my pants.

Suddenly, she stops.

Her face shifts to wariness as she glances at Oakes, who leans casually against the door.

I look at Oakes myself. "Are you alright with this?"

"Only if Wyn is," Oakes says, his voice gravelly with a need of his own. "And if you're alright that I want to be with her, too."

I stare back at Wyn. "You want me to kiss you?"

Wyn chuckles. "It's a little late to ask me that now." Her lips graze mine.

I press my body back into hers. My mouth trails along her jaw and neck.

Her breaths become ragged with my assertiveness. Wyn bucks against my crotch, rubbing herself into me as I knead her hip and breast, her skin flushes hot.

I feel the tension in her body, shocked and delighted by how responsive she is. Her orgasm is quickly building, just from my kiss, only from my touch.

I caress her face. "Let go for me, love. Release." I run my thumb over her lips. "You can moan into my hand when you do." I move to put my hand over her mouth.

Instead, Wyn brings her mouth down onto my thumb and sucks. Hard.

"Holy fuck!" I whisper. "You are... *too* much... in all... the right ways," I gasp as I thrust and grind between her spread legs. Again, I curse the clothes that prevented me from finding her center and diving inside.

But this is enough *for now*. It has to be. I want the first time I'm inside her to be more than a quick stolen moment

against a wall. Although, I wouldn't mind doing it like this after we have our first time together.

My eyes roll back with the sensation of her heat on my cock and my thumb in her mouth.

Does she know what I really want in her mouth? Would she do that for me?

“*Wyn,*” I growl, rocking against her. My teeth nip at her neck. I want to sink my sharp canines into her soft flesh, like an animal claiming a mate.

Wyn grunts and groans. Her body shudders with an orgasm. A destroyed whimper escapes her lips around my thumb. “Stars! Jaden!” she cries out and tenses as another wave hits her while I continue to stimulate her.

I revel in the fact I have undone her completely. Her hooded eyes glaze over, lost in ecstasy where I brought her.

I rub my hard member against her sensitive bud, helping her ride out her bliss until, finally, she goes limp in my embrace.

I trail a line of kisses back to her mouth. “Love, I wish I could pleasure you more, but I think we will be interrupted in a moment.”

She nods her understanding and presses a kiss to my lips.

I help Wyn slowly slide down my body to rest her feet on the floor. Her legs wobble, and I steady her by holding her close against my chest.

Then I wait for the incoming storm to arrive in the form of a prince.

CONFRONTATIONS

WYNSTELLE

“Stars!” I exclaim when my focus returns to the world, my face flushed and hot. “What are you both doing to me? I’m like a cat in heat, rubbing up on any male I meet.”

Oakes cocks his head and grins. “What other males are you rubbing yourself on?”

I observe him for any negative reaction to what’s happened. “You aren’t upset? I mean, after last night...”

Jaden raises his eyebrows at his counterpart, and he steps aside for Oakes to respond to my question.

Oakes crosses the room, holds my face in his large palms, and gently but passionately kisses me. “Are *you* alright that both of us want you? If you’d rather have just one of us—”

“This is absurd.” I interrupt him, breaking away from his touch, and patting my hair down. “I suppose I should just enjoy whatever pleasure I can for now before...” I frown and don’t go on.

Jaden looks confused. “Wynstelle, we want you for more than sex. We want—”

The door flies open and hits the wall.

I jump at the sudden intrusion.

Eldrin stands at the threshold, looking a bit crazed. He eyes all three of us in our tight formation—too close to be a

normal conversation.

He notes my flushed face and my disheveled appearance.

As he steps inside my room, Eldrin nods for the guard to close the door. “What’s going on here?” he asks. “Wynstelle, are you alright?” He glares at Oakes and Jaden as if they have hurt me and rushes forward as if he means to embrace me.

I cross my arms. “No. I’m not alright. I’d rather you leave *my* room. Now.”

Stopping abruptly, Eldrin’s eyes widen at my order. He shoots another warning look at Oakes and Jaden. “No. You all belong to *me*.”

I point my thumbs at his advisors. “They might, but I don’t. You set me free. *Remember?*”

Eldrin steps forward. “Wynstelle, why are you acting like this? I just risked upsetting all the kingdoms at the delegation by traveling across the realms to rescue you from this mortal king. So why are you angry with me?”

“Where to start?” I throw my arms up. “First, I find out that *you* are the one who summoned me, yanking me away from my home so you could manipulate me into using my body. From the beginning, you put me in danger. Do you realize how frightened I was? I had to trek across Elfhame as an *unarmed* and unaccompanied human. Ghouls attacked me. Twice!”

Eldrin snarls at his advisor. “Oakes was supposed to be watching you.”

“Not the point.” I continue, “Then, you make a deal to *explore* me. In other words, sex for my freedom. I had no choice but to say yes to a prince or possibly die when you banished me to the mortal realm.”

“Yes, I made a terrible mistake in that, but I gave you your freedom before we did anything more since that first day.” Eldrin argues, “And we haven’t actually had sex yet.”

“*Yet?*” I scoff at his assumption that we will. “Let’s continue, shall we? Both Jaden and Oakes warned you from

the beginning that you were putting me in danger. You only heightened that by inviting me to the ball which your jealous *betrotthed*, and your disapproving father—*The Elven King of Ryven*—would attend. And because of your attention, I was abducted, beaten, and sliced. I was left to die, bleeding out and freezing to death in the mortal realm.”

“I sent Oakes and Jaden after you.”

“Ugh!” I growl, throwing my hands in the air in frustration. “Yes. And now they’re on trial, and the peace treaty is in jeopardy. All because you wanted a human plaything.” I step right up to him, toe to toe. I have to tilt my head up to glare into his stormy blue eyes. “So, now you know... that’s why I’m *acting* like this!”

“You’re not a plaything to me!” Eldrin snaps. Then he softens and adds, “Don’t you understand? I love you.”

I stumble backward, my eyes wide with shock and anger. “Are you crazy?”

“Yes, I am. Because I’m in love.” Eldrin moves toward me, but I step farther back. “I’m in love with a human. And I don’t know what to do. I *never* meant for you to get hurt. But I *had* to bring you to the castle. It was as though I was compelled to do so, like you called to my soul. Then when I saw you, I knew you were special. My heart cracked open.” His eyes redden as if he were about to let tears fall. “But I just didn’t know how to—”

“Behave properly?” I suggest with my hands on my hips.

“Yes, you’re right. Exactly! I didn’t,” Eldrin implores. “But you are teaching me how to be better. I *want* to be better for you! Don’t you understand what that means? How you have affected me?” He reaches out. “Wynstelle, I love you.”

I cross my arms over my body again. My emotions swirl like a tornado. “No. This is too much. All too much. What am I supposed to do with an absurd statement like that? You just haven’t had anyone say no to you before. That’s all this is. A challenge to your ego.”

“That’s not true.” Eldrin reaches out to hold me.

Jaden blocks in his path and scowls. “Can’t you sense she needs her space?”

Eldrin pulls back at the outright hostility of his subordinate.

Oakes asks, “Wyn?”

“I want to be alone for a while.”

“But—” Eldrin says as the other two males usher him to the door.

“*Later,*” Oakes warns his prince.

FREEDOMS

ELDRIN

When we are alone in my assigned luxurious suite in the mortal castle, I pull on my long, blond hair, and I growl at Oakes. “What were you thinking? Why would you tell Wynstelle about my summons? Why *now*, of all times?”

“Wyn was blaming herself for everything that had gone wrong. She was torn up about putting us in danger.” Oakes narrows his eyes. “And it’s *your* fault we are in this mess, not hers. She needed to know that.”

“And she needed to know *now*?” I clench my fists. My glare turns icy. “By the way, *I* planned on telling her everything when the time was right.” And I had, but my fears stopped me every time I came close. I knew she would be angry at me—just like she is now, and my heart feels like someone has ripped it out of my chest.

“*When* were you going to confess?” Oakes throws his hands in the air in frustration.

“After the ball,” I say, just above a whisper.

“Ghoul’s shit!” Oakes snaps.

“How dare you speak to me like this?” I say in a low growl, scowling at my advisor, not understanding their betrayal. Yes, it might have been a stupid thing by summoning Wynstelle the way I did. But why are they so furious at me? My advisors are supposed to support me and help me if I’m flailing, not undermine me.

Oakes' teeth clench hard as he speaks. "How dare you put me in the position to *lie* to a kind, brave woman who placed her trust in each one of us?"

The reason behind Oakes' ire dawns on me. I fold my arms over my chest. "You sound as if you have a personal interest in her."

"Maybe I do."

"Same," Jaden speaks up, cocking an eyebrow in defiance.

"*What?*" I rub my face. Both of my advisors plan on stealing the love of my life from me? And because of my follies, they are likely to capture her heart right from under my nose. "Why Wynstelle? What could you possibly be thinking, going after *her*?" I say, without the confidence that I had just minutes before seeing Wyn, "She's mine."

"She isn't *yours*. I believe Wyn is my mate match," Jaden says flatly. "I believe what you feel is nothing more than possessiveness."

"You dare to question me? My motives?" I snap at Jaden.

"*Yes. I. Am.*" Jaden stands face-to-face with me, challenging me. "It isn't fair to play with her emotions. Don't tell her you love her when you don't."

"And *you* do?" I chortle. "You are worse than me when it comes to caring for your dalliances."

"I haven't *had* dalliances in decades!" Jaden's fists pump with rage at his side. "And when I finally found someone I expected to share my life with? You seduced the woman I was to mate. You treated her so callously that even *if* I could have recovered from your betrayal, Amra could never live in the same city as you. You promised her the realm, so you could crawl between her legs, then you treated her like nothing afterward. Since then, I've felt nothing for anyone because of *your* betrayal." Jaden sucks in a breath to center himself. "Now? I'm sure you will ruin Wyn, and she doesn't deserve how you will treat her once you grow bored with the conquest." Jaden points his finger in my face. "I cared for

Amra. But not nearly as much as I feel for Wynstelle. And you? You don't care about anyone but yourself."

I stagger back, sensing Jaden is on the verge of punching me. What my advisor says is partly true. I haven't really cared about anyone else... *before* Wynstelle.

"The affair with Amra happened before Wynstelle was even born." I say, and the excuse sounds pathetic, even to me, "When I was essentially a child. A complete fool."

"And now you're just a fool," Jaden says with disdain, turning away from me as if the sight of me disgusts him. I don't blame him. But he doesn't truly understand why I seduced Amra. I can never confess to him my selfish reason I did what I did back then.

But now? I'm trying to be reasonable, and Jaden is determined to attack, even if what I did was at a time when I was completely inexperienced and impulsive. Wyn has tempered me in a way no one else has. She is my light in the darkness—and it has been dark. Since my mother's death, my father has been a rage-filled tyrant, and I've felt like I'm drowning in nothingness. It's why I've ignored my princely duties and studies. It's why I've slept around without a care for the destruction I may have wrought.

They are trying to steal away the only good thing in my life. "So, that's it? Now you want what's mine?"

"Enough! She *isn't* yours." Oakes steps between Jaden and me. "She isn't *any* of ours. Wyn may not want any of us for more than what fleeting pleasure we can offer."

"Have you *taken* her?" My face burns red. My heart is cracking. Anger bubbles up, believing they have abused her innocence. I've already made that mistake. I intend to take things slowly with her—treat her with respect. If they have pushed her farther than she was ready for, then I will murder them myself.

"That isn't your business." Oakes shrugs me off. "She's a free woman now and must decide where her life will lead her. We need to let Wyn make her own decisions about us, about

her future home. She may want to stay with her own kind among the mortals. Can you agree she needs to figure this out herself... *Your Highness?*”

Oakes makes my honorific sound like an insult. My advisors are really pushing the line. Their sudden loss of caution and protocol blindsides me.

I take a deep breath. I realize they would only act like this if their affection for Wyn truly stirs them.

His words are like a slap in the face, breaking my possessive wrath. Oakes is right. Wyn needs to choose her own path. I just hope she picks me.

I won't continue my maneuvering her away from my advisors' attention. She has to want me, willingly, or not at all. I haven't been the male I should have been, and I will have to change my approach. *Immediately*. I will prove my worth by being someone Wynstelle would be proud to know, proud to love.

I grit my teeth. “Fine. I won't push her to choose me. But I *will* make amends for my missteps.”

Oakes raises an eyebrow as if surprised. “I encourage you to make amends, but do it for *her* sake, not yours.”

“Of course, because I *do* love her, whether or not you believe me.” I grimace. “I will do whatever I need to do to make her happy, even if it means watching her choose you.”

I promise myself that I will make her happy no matter what she wants, though I fear it will cost me my own happiness to do it. However, I'm willing to give my very life to ensure she is alive and well.

Will my advisors ever believe in my sincerity unless I actually sacrifice my life?

With my past wretched behavior, I worry they won't.

TREATY

WYNSTELLE

The next morning, the king orders the four of us to meet him in his private study. When we arrive, King Nathaniel and Princess Twyla are waiting for us. The guards, Elven and human, stand outside the closed doors.

I stiffen when I sense a strange tension between the mortal royal father and daughter. I can't relax, sitting on the edge of my seat, twisting my fingers. I'm nervous for more than just our meeting with the royals. My last words with the elves, especially with Eldrin, weigh heavily on my mind. I needed to stand up for myself, and I'm still angry with him, but I don't like the idea of never speaking with Eldrin again. Why has the prince gotten under my skin?

Oakes and Jaden both offer me a sympathetic glance, sensing my anxiety.

Prince Eldrin focuses on the mortal king. Neither royal male has yet to look at me.

"I've been deliberating over how to broach what I am about to tell you." The king's eyes fall upon me finally, and I shiver. "Because it will affect all of you, I will deliver the truth with all of us together. Perhaps I say it with an audience because I am a coward." Nathaniel pauses and looks at each of us in turn. "What I divulge here does not leave this room and into my realm. Understood?" His voice is laced with a threat and a plea.

I grasp the edge of my chair. What can the king say that has anything to do with *me*? I glance at Twyla. The princess looks remorseful, her lips are pressed tightly together as she stares at the ground, not meeting my eye. Is she upset with the king? Could this information change the outcome of Jaden and Oakes' punishment? Did my confession to Twyla about Eldrin cause this tense meeting?

"Swear it," the king commands. His demand startles me back to focus on the people in the room.

"I swear," the four of us answer in unison.

King Nathaniel collapses back in his chair and sighs. "Twenty years ago, during the Elven wars, my queen gave birth to our daughter." All eyes shift to Twyla. "My sweet wife did not survive childbirth. Our daughter was sickly, born too early, and without her own mother's milk to nourish her to health. I was afraid I would lose my only child, too."

Twyla now meets my gaze and studies me, her eyes soft and tearful.

The king continues. "I made a secret deal with the Elven King Magnus. He would take my child to the Elfhome realm so she could survive. And in exchange, I would take an Elven changeling to raise as my own." He drops his head back as if fighting tears. "To give up my daughter was the hardest decision I have ever made as a man or as a king."

The elves stare at Twyla, then pointedly, at me.

The king nods.

"Wait... what?" I blurt, but no one answers my question.

The king goes on with his story. "We signed the peace treaty. I pulled back my army and people from the agreed-upon lands. The Elven King promised to raise and educate my daughter under his supervision and to match her with an elf of nobility to solidify our treaty. The changeling you know as Twyla, would do the same with an influential human."

I sway in my seat. Could *I* be the sickling child? No. That is ridiculous.

The king must only be *hoping* it is me. Just because I am of the right age and was a sick foundling as a baby doesn't mean I'm the one he mentioned.

"Wynstelle, you are my child." King Nathaniel leans forward but doesn't move closer to be near me.

"No. That's not... I didn't grow up in a castle." I shake my head. "You've made a mistake. It's not me—it can't be me. I'm sorry, but you're wrong."

"It would seem King Magnus did not fulfill his end of our treaty and raise you in Ryven Castle," King Nathaniel says with irritation.

"My father promised you this?" Eldrin rubs his face in shock. "The compelling call I had to bring Wynstelle to Ryven Castle—that must have been the magic of the pact manifesting his vow to you."

I shoot him a look. *Was* Eldrin answering a call as he claims? Or was it only his sexual interests at work?

"All these years, I only knew you were alive, but not in what condition. I didn't even know the name they gave you." The king gestures to the changeling princess. "Twyla sensed you were safe, at least until recently."

"I was... until recently." I gape at Twyla. "How did you know?"

"We are linked. That is why my physical form developed to resemble you as familial camouflage, noticeable in our similar appearance, like sisters. You felt our connection when we touched hands. I could read the reaction on your face."

"The mark," I whisper and glance at Oakes and Eldrin. "I have a mark on my back. But it can't be the same." I turn, ready to show Twyla.

"Yes. That mark is the symbol of our bond." Twyla nods. "When either of us dies, the other's mark will change to alert the loss of our twined souls."

"So each party would know the other was keeping their word," Eldrin surmises.

“At least as far as *proof* of life was concerned, but not what *kind* of life.” King Nathaniel frowns. “I’m disappointed in King Magnus for not providing Wynstelle with the life that was promised. Instead, he hid her in a village as a servant.”

“I’m outraged by this injustice.” Eldrin stiffens in his seat, looking ready to spring up and do something about my situation right then. After a moment of thought, he deflates. “Although I can do nothing about what has happened in the past, I *can* make amends in the future by confronting my father.”

“Speaking of amends, to start with...” King Nathaniel walks over to me and extends his hand, indicating I should rise.

I take it and stand.

The king wraps his arms around me and, after a long embrace, steps back enough to stare into my eyes.

Now so close, I see how much my eyes are like his, brown with flecks of gold. My heart pulls in my chest, wanting to fall back into his arms.

The vague but the immediate familiarity of their faces I had during the first sight of the king and princess now makes sense. I sensed our connection. And since I’d never felt the presence of a family member, I didn’t recognize the feeling for what it was.

“I would like Wynstelle to stay with us in the mortal realm... if she so pleases,” King Nathaniel says to Prince Eldrin, but doesn’t take his eyes off me.

“I’ve already granted her freedom,” Eldrin says, with sadness in his voice.

“That may be so if she had remained in Elfhome, but you do not have the authority to release Wynstelle from your father’s contract into this realm. You will have to convince King Magnus that Wynstelle staying here isn’t a breach of the treaty on my part.” The king directs his next words to me. “I’m sorry for this next stipulation, but whether or not you stay in this realm, I cannot claim you as my own child. It would

disrupt our kingdom if anyone learned who and what Twyla really is. I can't have civil unrest when we are so close to fully recovering from the war."

My eyes fill with tears. "You want me to stay here... with you?"

"I do, but it's your choice. I plan to identify you as my long-lost niece, who was born just before you were. This will elevate you to a royal status without raising suspicions. If you must go back to Elfame, my people will assume that you are fulfilling the alliance between elves and men. If you stay, you can live with us... as a family. I can keep you close. If you choose to, you can marry a man of your choice here and create your own family."

"I will have to... uh, think about all this, Your Majesty," I say in a daze.

"I understand." The king pulls me into another embrace. "And you can forgo using my honorific."

King Nathaniel turns to Eldrin as I practically collapse back into my chair. "So, you see why I asked for your discretion concerning these matters. I will dismiss all charges against Jaden and Oakes on the grounds that they were rescuing my flesh and blood. Which for the public, we have just now realized Wynstelle's origins during this meeting."

"Yes, of course." Eldrin nods and glances at me. His eyes are troubled.

Is Eldrin worried he won't be able to convince his father to release me from the treaty's stipulations?

"Wynstelle, may I speak with you alone for a moment?" King Nathaniel asks.

I barely can think or reply. It's all so much to process about my past and speculate about my future. Finally, it registers that my father asked me a question. "Uh, yes. Of course, I will speak with you."

The elves and Princess Twyla leave the room, and I turn nervously to my father. What does one say after hearing all of what he claims?

The king smiles and sits in the seat next to me, holding my hands as if I were fragile. That thought alone almost makes me laugh. I have forged metal all my life. I'm far from fragile, even if my emotions feel that way now.

He clears his throat nervously. "I will not press you for a decision about where you want to live. What I told you will take time to accept." He sighs and inhales deeply. "I love you very much. I never stopped. Please believe that, if nothing else." Nathaniel glances toward the door. "Twyla has been an excellent daughter, but I have wondered many times over the years what it would have been like with you in my life. Now that I have you back here, I want you to stay. However, *only* if that is what you want. And I'd hope to heal the pain of our separation, for both our sakes."

"You do?" I ask in a whisper.

"However, I see that you have an emotional bond with these elves. Perhaps you have others in Elfhome who you cannot bear to leave. So, I'm advising you to follow your heart. Don't make a decision to please anyone but *yourself*—not even me. Do you think you can do that?"

I squeeze his hands, appreciating what he is offering me—freedom. "To find you after all this time... and that you want me around—" My eyes well with tears.

"I will make no demands on you coming and going between realms. Whatever you decide, you are always welcome here. Though I don't know if the Fae will have the same attitude. Perhaps you should speak frankly with Prince Eldrin and his advisors and see what they truly believe King Magnus will do. Even though he broke his word concerning the particulars of our agreement, we are at the mercy of the Elven King. I get the impression that your prince will insist his father take your wishes into account."

"He isn't *my* prince." My cheeks redden with embarrassment.

"Not by vows, no." My father pauses and then promises, "If Magnus commands you to return to Elfhome and you decide to stay with me, I *will* fight for you."

I wince at the idea of King Magnus having power over me and what trouble might be caused by my staying in the mortal realm. “I will speak with Prince Eldrin to understand the repercussions of my decision, but I don’t want to ignite a war.”

NIECE

ELDRIN

After hearing King Nathaniel's confession, Oakes, Jaden, and I retreat to my guest quarters. Escorted by the human and Elven guards, the walk is tense and silent. I wait until we are alone in my chambers before speaking.

When the door shuts, I snarl, "I will kill my father!" How dare a king, *an Elven King*, outright lie and break his word on a treaty? My blood boils in my veins with the shameful offense.

Oakes shakes his head. "Calm down. Don't make threats you can't back up."

"What makes you think I won't?" I set my shoulders and glare at my advisor. My father has committed a crime against the realm. I have every intention of making this right, even if I have to challenge my father in battle. "He acted dishonorably, shaming our people. Wynstelle suffered as a servant all these years because of it. She should have grown up in the castle, where she would have been educated by the finest tutors. With her presence in the castle, humans might have been accepted long ago."

"Yes, King Magnus has reparations to make." Oakes drags his hair away from his face in agitation. "But we can't be certain her fate would have been better in the castle. It wasn't easy for her now. It's likely she would have suffered even more if she grew up surrounded by the castle's elitists."

I drop into a chair and rub my eyes. “If what King Nathaniel says is true, then Wynstelle was promised a noble-born mate. Initially, I thought my compulsion to bring her to the castle was odd, but now it makes sense. She was promised to me.”

Oakes clears his throat and raises his eyebrow. “Or to some *other* noble.”

I grit my teeth. “I couldn’t stand that. Other princes are even more arrogant than I am.”

Jaden shrugs and says to Oakes, “He has a point. Of all the princes, Eldrin is the least of the wretches.”

“Thanks.” I grimace at the backhanded compliment. “You know she would be treated horribly by any other noble.” The idea of someone stealing her away turns my stomach. Who knows how one of them would treat her behind closed doors? My blood runs cold at the thought. I will do anything to prevent her from that pain and suffering.

“You realize that Oakes and I can fill the role too,” Jaden says, reminding me of his birthright. “Nathaniel didn’t say a *prince*. He said a noble-born mate. Oakes and I are both noble-born.”

I ignore the remark. “My father wanted to keep his son *pure* and marry me off to Alcina for his political standings.”

“That *is* the role of royalty,” Jaden points out, with very little empathy in his voice.

Oakes sucks in a breath, a thought coming to him. “You don’t think *both* King Magnus and Alcina are behind Wyn’s abduction?”

“Anything is possible.” Jaden rubs his chin. “Although I say it was one *or* the other since our kingdoms don’t typically get along, hence the marriage alliance between Alcina and Eldrin.”

“Enough speculation. I must return to Ryven and demand answers and recompense from my father.” I glance between my two advisors. “One of you must stay behind to keep watch over Wynstelle.”

A NEW LIFE

WYNSTELLE

I remain alone in my room all day, contemplating and sorting through my options and emotions. Soon I will speak to Eldrin to find out what his father's stance concerning my fate might be, but right now, I want to be unencumbered by what he has to say.

What *do* I want? As my newfound father suggested, I must discover what my heart desires.

As evening draws near, an attendant delivers a beautiful deep purple gown to my room, and the young woman informs me that the king will make an important announcement at dinner.

The attendant helps me into the dress and does my hair. As I look in the mirror, I have conflicting thoughts. Am I no longer a servant? Do I want to be royalty?

When I arrive at the grand dining hall, everyone is already present and in the process of finding their seats. Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden are the first that I see, all of them being taller than the other men. My eyes would have been drawn to them regardless, because they are also the most impressive beings in the room. Dressed in formal tunics made of fine silks with elaborate embroidery, the three elves are breathtaking.

I almost blush, thinking of how they have all made me feel at one point. Will I *choose* to experience forbidden pleasure with any of them again? *Should* I?

King Nathaniel waves for me to join him at the far end of the table, opposite Twyla. I quickly hurry past the elves and to my father.

He clasps my hand in his and says, “Everyone, I have an announcement.” The king keeps me standing next to him as everyone sits. “I’m sure many of you have noticed the striking similarity between Princess Twyla and our lovely guest, Wynstelle. Well, there is a reason for that. Wynstelle is my late brother’s long-lost daughter. The illness that befell my brother and his wife almost took her, but the elves saved her as a newborn. Now, she has returned, rescued once again by elves. I have exonerated Oakes and Jaden of the Ryven kingdom of Elfhome of the trespassing charge, as they have given me the precious gift of returning my family to me. Wynstelle has yet to decide to stay or return to Elfhome as an ambassador for our people, maintaining peace between realms. Either way, I expect you will wish Princess Wynstelle a warm welcome and make her feel at home among her people.”

All the dinner guests stand and applaud.

I bow slightly, accepting the welcoming acknowledgments with a tinge of embarrassment, having so many eyes on me. “Thank you. You are very kind,” I say as the crowd’s noise dies down.

“Let us celebrate her return!” The king toasts with his goblet, and the guests raise their cups.

During the rest of the dinner, I say very little. Prince Eldrin has the seat next to mine. He steals glances, hoping for some conversation, but I’m not ready to engage him yet, especially in front of an audience.

After the dessert is served and the guests begin to mingle and mill about, I excuse myself and wander out into the unoccupied rose garden. The snow has left a light blanket on the ground and casts a magical glow on the wilting roses.

I sigh quietly to myself. I need a moment to recover from all the socialization. If this is what it’s like to be a princess, then I don’t think I’m up for the challenge. Especially not after I’ve enjoyed years of solitude.

As I move toward the center of the courtyard, I sense someone has followed me out. I turn to see who and am slightly disappointed to see Commander Rhys and not one of the elves.

“Princess Wynstelle, do you mind if I join you for a moment?” Rhys asks, more pleasantness in his tone than I have heard from him before.

I cringe. I will have to get used to my new title. “Um, yes, that’s fine.” I wonder what he wants to say to me. Will he chastise me for my association with the elves? Will he apologize for his antagonistic behavior at the caves?

“It is quite exciting to have another lovely princess in our kingdom.” Rhys sits next to me on a bench. “The king suggested you may return to Elfame. Is that what you wish to do?”

“As the king mentioned, it’s still undecided,” I say truthfully.

“You should spend time with your own kind, to be in the company of *men*,” Rhys says in an underlying commanding tone. He must notice my concerned look at his comment and softens his approach. “Your Elven acquaintances seem tolerable, but you must feel out of place among them.”

“I’m out of place here too.” I study Rhys’ auburn hair as the garden torches make his locks glow in the firelight.

What would it be like to be with a human? Could Rhys bring me as much pleasure as the elves... or more? He is handsome. I have heard during the social gatherings that Rhys is a valiant soldier and a decent man. Twyla only mentions she wishes he was a scholar, not a warrior, but offered no other criticism of him. I don’t need a scholar, only someone kind. Of course, I find I now crave affection, lacking it for so long. And couldn’t we both grow old *together*? Our relationship wouldn’t be taboo, either.

How would it feel, wasting away year after year while the elves remain the same? Will they still want me around when I am wrinkled and hunched over with age? But a human man

would be in the same condition and perhaps accept my deterioration over time.

“Did I upset you?” Rhys asks after my long silence.

“Just thinking.” I smile half-heartedly.

“Well, as you consider your future, know that I would like to court you properly.”

When my eyes widen at his forwardness, he explains, “Don’t be offended that I was courting Twyla before you. Princess Twyla has made it quite clear that she prefers a scholar rather than a soldier. But perhaps you see the value of a champion? Stay here, and I can show you all the blessings of the human realm and what I might offer you.” Rhys moves closer. “Would you desire that?”

Do I desire a human mate?

Rhys leans in for a kiss, and I want to know the taste of his lips. Perhaps I would know which realm to choose if there’s a spark with this man.

Rhys’ chaste kiss is gentle and light. A thrum of excitement passes through my body, but it isn’t like being with the elves. Although different doesn’t necessarily mean bad.

As I pull away, I see someone in the distance as they stop their approach abruptly. It’s Eldrin. He must have been coming to catch me alone. Clearly, he has witnessed the kiss. His face is calm, but his blue eyes flash and seem to glow with emotion.

Rhys turns to see what I’m looking at. He whispers in my ear, “Stay here with your people. The elves will only bring you pain. You almost died by *Elven* hands.” His tone is now filled with disdain.

My gut churns at his venom. Is that a common sentiment because of the war? I don’t know if I can handle the hostility against those who saved my life. I don’t believe an act of violence by a few elves should make me hate *all* elves.

“Leave me now,” I say in a tight voice.

Rhys stands and walks away without another word, his shoulders stiff with tension.

Prince Eldrin approaches slowly, perhaps calculating what he will say. “*Princess Wynstelle.*” He bows with a tight, apprehensive smile. “It seems your list of suitors grows by the hour.”

“Apparently.” I shrug off the idea of suitors and his loaded comment. “What do you want?”

Eldrin bristles slightly at my curt response but doesn’t comment on my tone as he settles next to me. “I wanted to talk with you about all that has happened to you since Elfhame... and all that has been disclosed. It’s overwhelming for *me*. I can only imagine what you must be going through.”

“What do you believe King Magnus’ response will be if I stay here?” I cut to the heart of the issue. I don’t want to rehash everything with the partygoers so close. I might break into tears, thinking about our arguments, my abduction, and my father’s confession. “I’d also like to know *if* I go back to Elfhame, what will be expected of me? What freedom can you really offer?”

Eldrin sighs at my direct questions and abrasive tone. “I plan on returning to Elfhame tomorrow to ask those same questions. If it were up to me, I would allow you the choice of realms. That is what I will petition my father for.”

“If I decide to return to Elfhame, would I be able to visit my... *uncle* occasionally?”

“Oh, I thought you might wish to stay here.” Eldrin nods in the direction where Rhys left. “He’s a strong and handsome human. Do you prefer to be mated to him?”

“I’m not sure what I want in a mate. Or if I want one at all.” I touch my lips absentmindedly. “And you never said what you think will happen to me if I return to Elfhame.”

“*I* will ask you to be my mate... as it should have been since the beginning.”

“What?” My mouth drops open in shock. “But you are betrothed to Alcina. And I’m a *human*.”

“From what King Nathaniel told us, you were my intended, but my father reneged on his promise to your father. If my father forces you to find a mate, and you don’t want me, then at the very least, I won’t allow him to pair you with someone you don’t want. I’ll make sure of that.”

“But I *can’t* mate bond with you,” I protest.

“Why not? Because you don’t wish it?”

“Because I’m human, and you’re an elf,” I say, exasperated. “It’s *forbidden!* Everything I’ve ever *experienced* with you is forbidden.”

“No, it’s not.” Eldrin’s face twists in confusion. “It may be severely frowned upon, especially since the war, but there’s no *law* against it. Who told you that lie?”

“Merlara drilled it into me to *never* be intimate with any of the fae. It’s taboo.”

“Oh, my princess.... She was controlling you with untruths.”

I shake my head. “She wouldn’t.” Though deep down, I am already questioning Merlara’s proclamation.

Eldrin challenges my assertion with a question. “What did you think King Nathaniel meant when he said my father would find you a match in Elfhome?”

“A keeper?” My brow crinkles. “Like with Merlara, but with maybe less hard labor involved?”

“What?” Eldrin shakes his head in amusement. “He meant a match as in a *mate*.”

“Really?” I take a moment to think. “But... I can’t mate with you, even if all that is true, and Alcina wasn’t already your betrothed, someone had me tossed out of Elfhome because of your attention. It’s too dangerous for you, Jaden, and Oakes... and for me.”

“Or is it because you don’t believe that I love you?” Eldrin’s voice drops in misery. “Oh, my princess, I’m sorry I began our relationship on false pretenses and with bartering. I

messed this all up, and now, you can't see beyond it and feel my love for you."

I pick at my fingers to regain my composure. This is all so confusing. "This isn't about you and what you *claim* to feel for me. I don't believe that love truly exists. There are lusts and obsessions, and responsibilities and obligations. There's no such thing as unconditional love—not for me, especially given to me by an *Elven* Prince. An elf shouldn't even consider a *mortal* mate. So, why should I go through the commitment of a mate bond if it will only end in sorrow... and quickly at that?"

"You may not believe in love, but I love you." Eldrin rests his hand on mine. "I can't explain love. It makes little sense. One can only feel it when it's present. However, I *can* tell you I would give up my kingdom for you. I would risk everything. I know I love you because I would endure it if you wanted to leave me *if* that's what made *you* happy. If Rhys or this mortal realm brings you joy, then I want that for you. If you need Oakes or Jaden or someone else, and not me, then I will step aside. I only desire your happiness."

Tears stream down my face, and I lean into his shoulder. My heart doesn't want to be mad at him anymore. I don't want to resist his affection. "Why are you acting so sweet?"

"Would you rather I act like an irksome troll, as per usual?" Eldrin chuckles softly as I cling to his side.

I smile through my tears. "No. I prefer you when you are kind."

"It's more than mere kindness that you elicit from me, Wyn. I want your happiness more than my own." His steady hand strokes my hair, soothing me. "When you know what you want, I will fight anyone and everyone to get it for you."

My heart warms with his pledge, and I kiss his cheek. "Thank you."

DECISIONS

WYNSTELLE

*I*t's early morning when I wake up in my room alone. I stare up at the ceiling, thinking about Eldrin's confession of love. His offer to fight for my happiness makes my heart glow. But why would he offer Oakes and Jaden as a mate? He must make more of their sexual interest. Sure, both of his advisors like me well enough, and they have been kind, but they couldn't want me as a life mate. I won't let my heart break under the illusion that either of the males wants anything more than a pleasurable time exploring my human body.

It's more likely that their sexual advances are rooted in a power struggle against their liege. I've read about similar situations in history books. Time after time, rebellion and jealousy causes strife in the royal courts, human and Elven alike.

And for an elf to claim a mate is no lighthearted matter. Rubbing on each other's private bits for release isn't even close to the same thing as a committed and, for an elf, an immortal lifetime.

A knock on the door makes me jump up, and I call out, "Come in."

The guard opens the door. "Prince Eldrin and his advisors are here to see you."

The three elves enter, and after the door shuts, Eldrin speaks, "My princess, I'm returning to Elfhome now to

confront my father about your fate. Oakes will join me. If it is alright with you, Jaden will stay behind with you to make sure you are treated properly.”

“I don’t object to Jaden’s company, but I don’t think any of you should linger in the mortal realm with the animosity that I have picked up from the humans. We have just secured the continuation of the peace treaty. Besides, I doubt King Nathaniel will do anything to harm me,” I say dismissively.

“I’m not worried about *him*.” Eldrin gestures toward the throne room. “However, just as with the Elven realm, Oakes senses you might not be entirely welcomed by all. I advise you to listen to your instincts with anyone you come into contact with in *either* realm.”

I nod. I know sage advice when I hear it. “Do you know who the elf was behind my abduction? Was it your father? Was it your betrothed?”

“We will discover who he was and who ordered the attack on you.” Eldrin looks at his advisors. “Jaden wasn’t able to sniff out the elf at the castle when he came back to fetch me. The perpetrator is likely long gone by now. However, Oakes can read emotions, and we are hoping he will sense guilt amongst the noble elves at the delegation ball. Then we can catch the one who employed your abductor.”

“Don’t worry, Wyn, we won’t let the crime go unpunished,” Oakes promises.

I frown at his statement. If I returned, it might not be only an attack that I suffer.

“Have you decided which realm you would like to remain in? Or perhaps there are questions you might have for me?” Eldrin asks, his voice filled with hope.

I avert my gaze. “No decisions or questions.”

Eldrin grimaces at my reserved reply, but doesn’t push me. “Alright. But please don’t return to Elfhome until you hear what King Magnus has to say about your obligations.” He walks up to me and opens his arms, wishing for a hug goodbye.

My heart aches with the thought of missing him, and I step into his embrace.

Eldrin kisses the top of my head, and I smile.

I turn to Oakes and hug him, too. While in his embrace, I ask, “Wait—if I *don't* return to Elfhome, will I ever see either of you again?”

Oakes frowns. “King Magnus and King Nathaniel will have to approve our return here to visit.”

I pull Oakes tighter to me. “But I don't want to say farewell.”

“I would ask you to come with us now, but I fear for your safety until I understand the plot behind your abduction.” Eldrin wraps his arms around me from behind, sandwiching me between the two tall elves. “And I don't want my father to get hold of you, sending you away before I can secure our demands.”

After Eldrin and Oakes leave, Jaden guides me to an overstuffed chair. My heart hurts with them now missing from my life—perhaps forever.

Jaden sits down and gathers me up into his lap.

Cradled in his muscular arms, I feel small and insignificant, but also protected. “Why am I so sad?”

“You care about them. And you're worried.” Jaden strokes my cheek with his thumb. “Maybe you're starting to feel... *more* for them, for us.”

“What, you mean, like... *love*?” I blow out a quick, skeptical exhale. “Eldrin claims to love me. And his promise to make me happy even at his own suffering seemed to be true. *Powerful*. However, it's more likely that he will realize he doesn't care for me at all when faced with his father's wrath.” I sigh. “What do you think?”

“You underestimate your emotional intelligence. What do you *feel*?”

I shrug.

Jaden grins sympathetically as he tucks me closer in his arms. “Well, I can tell you that people often ignore it when they are loved or experiencing love for someone because they fear getting hurt.”

I scoff, but it lacks conviction.

“I speak from experience. I have done this myself,” Jaden says softly.

“Not you,” I say with disbelief. “You don’t fear anything.”

He doesn’t comment.

I turn to gaze into his hypnotic violet eyes, and realize he isn’t exaggerating. He *has* feared being hurt. “What happened?”

“Years ago, I pushed away a potential mate, rationalizing I was too young, that I wasn’t enough, but the truth is I was scared of putting my heart in someone else’s control. Perhaps I was right to do so then.” Jaden meets my gaze. “But now, I think it might be scarier *not* to tell someone how I feel.”

I grow more focused on his story than my sadness. “Why?”

“Because I might lose them,” Jaden says. “I might lose my chance to be with that person if they don’t know how I feel. I might lose the chance to be happy and have that bond of trust with an amazing soul.”

“It sounds as if you have someone you feel that way about now.”

“I do.”

“Jaden!” I admonish. “Then, no more of my wall-humping. When you get back to Elfhome, you need to go directly to your love and tell them.” I move to get out of his lap.

Jaden tightens his grip and shakes his head. “Oh, love, you really don’t understand?”

“What? You just told me! I get it now!” I say, irritated he isn’t letting me up.

“Wyn?” He waits for me to settle for a moment and confesses, “I have fallen in love *with you*.”

“Have you gone mad?” I push away from him. “This is *not* funny.”

Jaden releases me to stand. He holds my arms, so I’m forced to pay attention to his next confession. “No. It’s *not* funny. It might be devastating. Probably is, at least, for me.” He takes me by the hands and kisses my knuckles. “When I spoke to you at the castle, I believe you misunderstood me. I was trying to tell you I wanted to claim you as a mate, not as your keeper. If you return to Elfhame, I hope you will consider my offer to own my heart.”

I wobble, dumbstruck.

When I don’t respond, Jaden says, violet eyes blazing with passion, “Please consider my offer, even if you do not love me now, because I will do everything in my power to make you happy.”

He exits the room before I can say another word.

ROYAL PAINS

ELDRIN

The royal ball is in full swing when Oakes and I return to Ryven Castle in Elfame. We use my private entrance, so our presence won't alert the rest of the castle.

"Let's clean up and attend the festivities," I suggest. "You can use your empathic skills to sense my father's responses. Alcina's too."

"King Magnus has mastered masking his emotions, but I will see if I can catch him off-guard when we surprise him with our unexpected attendance."

Oakes and I quickly change into our party attire of embroidered silk tunics, fitted pants, and polished boots.

Walking into the ballroom, energy ripples throughout the space upon our arrival. Rumors have spread. What these rumors are, I won't know until I ask my allies later. Likely, the abducted human and my obsession with her are at the heart of it.

The giant ballroom is glittering with hovering lights. Delicate, gossamer fabrics cascades down from the ceiling, creating a loose sense of partitions and secrecy.

Spotting my father from the other side of the expanse, I cross the room, greeting no one along the way, with Oakes following closely behind me. "My kingly sire." I bow before my reserved and cruel father. "Would you mind if I pull you

aside for a moment to address pertinent matters of the human's abduction?"

"Whatever your needs are, they will wait until tomorrow. You've already wasted enough time on that servant." Magnus twitches his eyebrow. "End of discussion," he warns when he sees my mouth open in protest. "Go greet your *betrothed*. I don't need any more rumors circulating."

"Yes, my king." I spin on my heel and make for the serving table for a drink.

When the few elves standing nearby sense my volatile mood, they scramble away from the area.

I turn to Oakes. "Anything?"

"Unclear." He glances over at Princess Alcina's entourage, and I follow his gaze.

Several male elves are dotting on my betrothed, the princess. *Sycophants*. I appreciate that Wyn isn't like these elves. She either dislikes or likes someone because of what is inside them, not because of their power or prestige.

I grimace. What will Wyn see in me now that she knows I kept the truth of her summons from her? Her integrity and emotional honesty are admirable traits, but that means I have no more leverage than a common stableboy when it comes to her affections. I have to be better, do better, to show her I am worthy of her love. I hope I'm up to the challenge. But what if Jaden, Oakes, and likely the rest of the kingdom are correct, and I am a troll in prince's clothing?

Oakes clears his throat, noticing how I have drifted away in my thoughts.

"What is it?" I ask. My eyes scan the room again.

"I sense a lot of agitation in that corner." Oakes nods toward Alcina.

"Root of it?"

"We must prod her before I can narrow it down." Oakes swirls the liquid in his glass, though he dares not drink it and muddle his senses. "Her restlessness could center on her

jealousy and nothing else. We don't know for sure who took Wynstelle. We might consider the attack was perpetrated by another culprit altogether. Maybe the same individual or group behind the ghoul attacks."

I nod tightly, and we stroll over to greet my betrothed.

Oakes bows to the princess and her group.

"You are looking lovely this evening," I can barely give the compliment without a snide tone.

"Thank you for noticing," Alcina says, devoid of emotion. "I wondered if you could see anything beyond your human toy."

"Wynstelle is not a toy." I sip my drink casually. "Actually, far from it. I plan to make her a valued asset to Ryven Court." I need to push more to see if Oakes can pick up her emotional reaction.

"Yet the frail thing disappeared right from under your noses." Alcina sniffs as if bored. "It makes me question your worth as a mate when you and your... *advisors* can't keep an insignificant human on its leash—especially if you think to elevate her status here."

Alcina is trying to rile me, and I know it. The tactic works anyway.

"Well, if my worth is in question, then perhaps we should dissolve our arrangement." I test her, hoping she will break our contract, even if it means escalating tension between our kingdoms. Maybe Alcina wants out of our commitment, too.

Alcina blanches, but recovers quickly. Her kingdom is the weaker of the two, and she needs our alliance to assure Ryven won't overpower them completely. "We have many years until the established date for our mate bonding. I can wait to see if you grow *wise* by then. Although I must confess, I doubt that will ever happen."

"Until then," I toast and walk away.

Oakes keeps pace at my side. "Well, that went better than I expected."

I grind my teeth in exasperation. “Sense anything?”

“Just irritation.” Oakes scans the room. “I don’t think she was involved in Wyn’s disappearance. Though she *is* delighted with it.”

“Alright.” I stare at my father’s imposing figure across the room. “We should mingle. Perhaps another elf is behind Wynstelle’s abduction.”

Oakes makes eye contact with one of the foreign dignitaries and smiles to greet him.

With Oakes now back to his job as my diplomat, I wander through the crowd, casting a mental shield around my mind and avoiding any significant contact. People curtsy and bow, politely addressing me, but all I desire is for Wynstelle to be at my side. I could endure these stuffy occasions if she were here. Wyn has changed me, made me see beyond myself. Now, I see the self-centered pretenders for what they are. However, I was one of them not that long ago. Perhaps I still am.

Dread fills me with the thought that Wyn will never return to Elfhome. Or worse, that she will be forced to mate another elf. If that happens, then at every event, I will have to look on in envy, hoping she is at least happy. But the chances of finding a kind, noble elf, other than Oakes or Jaden, to mate with Wyn are slim. No, if one of us can’t be with her, then it will be better if she stays with her father, even if it means fighting *my* father.

I end up at the long, empty table reserved for the royal guests and sit down. From my elevated vantage point, I can see everyone in attendance.

They all are so sterile and illusionary. Nothing real is ever said—all innuendo and masked threats. Flowery compliments are disseminated and meaningless. While elves aren’t known for telling a lie, we are gifted in not speaking the truth. My father is a prime example of that. Some wording in his agreement with King Nathaniel must have allowed him to break the spirit of the treaty. That is why Wyn spent her days in front of a foundry’s hazardous cauldrons and not in the safety of the castles’ wellsprings, soaking in comfort.

Wynstelle differs from all these deceivers, myself included. She is honest, kind, and spirited. And now, I lament, Wyn is a realm away. My heart aches with the distance, but if Wyn wants to stay with her people and her father, I will do whatever I can to make her happy. Maybe when she understands how much I love her, we can visit each other across the realms. I need her in my life, even in some small way, in whatever form she will allow.

I growl to myself, desperately wanting more than a few stolen moments of her life. I want to spend *every* precious moment of her short and mortal life basking in her love and lavishing her with mine.

I wonder, *will* she be any safer in the mortal realm?

Probably not.

I then consider Twyla. She is a mysterious variable. Is the changeling princess as innocent as she seems? Or an infiltrator poised to do King Magnus' bidding?

I regret leaving Wynstelle with the humans and the changeling, but I have to ensure my father won't make a hostile move against Wyn if she returns or uses her absence to start a war.

Whatever the case, I need Wynstelle to decide her own path. Then I will fight for her to safely walk it. I have already pushed my will upon her enough to drive anyone away.

I need her to choose me because she loves me. Not because she feels obligated.



The following morning, I curse as I walk into Oakes' private chambers unannounced. "Last night was a waste."

"Good morning to you too," Oakes grumbles, rubbing his eyes. Throwing back the covers, he stretches his naked body and slips on his pants. "How long have you been awake?"

The sky glows brightly with the morning sun. "I never slept, not really." I toss Oakes a shirt. "Let's go."

After Oakes is dressed, we traverse the expansive castle to locate Magnus in his meeting chambers.

I don't wait for my father to give me permission to enter. Magnus' commander, Turgon, is going over the daily tasks. They both look up to glower at me when I enter unannounced.

"Father, I need to speak to you. *Now.*" We have a formal relationship, but I'm not in the mood for protocols. Not when Wynstelle's life is balancing on the thin thread of a shaky treaty.

"Fine. Out with it." Magnus waves me on.

"It has come to my attention that you and King Nathaniel had an agreement about the human Wynstelle, his daughter. He was under the impression, as part of your treaty, that you were going to raise her in the castle and find a mate of noble birth. Instead, I found her an indentured servant, toiling away in a foundry, hidden in an outskirt village."

Magnus raises an eyebrow. "What of it?"

"You broke your word outright." My eyes go wide with my father's callousness. "She should have been here, educated, groomed for diplomacy between our realms."

Magnus leans forward, the movement almost predatory. "Why have you taken such an interest in this female?"

"That is beside the point." I cut the air with my hand. "Wynstelle has intelligence that was supposed to have been nurtured. Yet, even without a proper education, she is still a bright and wonderful addition to our realm. You were tasked—and agreed—to treat her as one of our own. And from what I saw of the changeling, Twyla has been brought up as King Nathaniel's own child. Treated with more respect than you give to me."

"Respect is earned."

My jaw flutters with irritation. "What do you intend to do to rectify this grievance?"

"Where is the mortal now?" Magnus asks, impassively.

“*Wynstelle* is recovering in the human realm after an elf abducted and almost murdered her.”

“And you wish to bring her back to this *hostile* environment?” Magnus asks lazily.

Commander Turgon smirks. “Sounds unwise to bring her back to Ryven Castle after such an attack.”

“I wish to bring her back so I can make reparations and mate bond with her.”

“Out of the question,” Magnus says with disgust.

“You promised her a noble mating, and I am willing.” My tone hardens with determination.

“Willing, but you are promised to another.” Magnus’ face flushes red.

“Strange that I was promised soon after you made your pact with King Nathaniel. You did that to prevent me from being *Wynstelle’s* mate.”

“The noble *match* that I promised him does not mean you... or even a prince.” Magnus grips the side of his desk. “No offspring of mine will be mated to a *human*.”

“So, *that* is how you deceived King Nathaniel. You used the word *match* instead of mate. And Roul was of noble lineage. But Merlara used *Wynstelle* as a servant!”

Magnus doesn’t respond.

“I plan to dissolve my mating agreement with Alcina.”

“You would cause strife among our kingdoms over this mortal?” Magnus slams his fist down.

“I would.”

“Well then, I want this human back in our realm immediately. As of now, King Nathaniel is in breach of our contract. I will consider it an act of war if he doesn’t return her within the quarter moon. Whatever the outcome, the human is *mine*. It’s time I meet the mortal and decide its fate.”

MAGE

OAKES

I drag Eldrin out of the King's chambers before the prince can make the situation worse—although I don't see how it could devolve anymore than it has.

Eldrin *is* too young and too brash for anyone's good. I remind myself that Magnus would have probably demanded Wyn's return no matter how delicately Eldrin broached the subject of her freedom, but it does nothing to soothe my irritation at my prince.

Hurrying down the hall, we head back to the prince's castle wing.

Eldrin slams his door shut and turns to me. "Fuck! I just put Wynstelle in more danger, didn't I?"

I curse my advisor position. Why has Eldrin fought me so much whenever I tried to teach him the finer points of negotiation? He's shown his hand too early... shouting his intentions to take Wyn as his mate. Even if Magnus would consider it, there is little chance Magnus will bend to Eldrin's demands now. The king may even block my ability to mate with Wyn.

"I don't trust your father to be reasonable with Wynstelle's future. Not after what you said about dissolving your mating contract with Alcina." I'm rattled. I sensed a few of my king's emotions—a rare feat to accomplish. None of what I picked up is good for Wyn.

Eldrin paces his room. “Then we shouldn’t bring Wynstelle back here.”

“If we don’t, your father might use it as an excuse for a war.” I sigh, exhausted. “It could be that he arranged her abduction to do just that.”

Eldrin stops and stares wide-eyed at me. “You think he knew I would react like this?”

“If he has spies in your ranks, then yes. And he *definitely* has spies in your ranks. How could he not? He’s a controlling monarch. Her door was left unattended and the way out of the castle was absent of all servants and guards when she was abducted.”

Eldrin nods at the logic, pauses, and scratches his chin. “But why would he start a war when *he* stopped the last one?”

“I don’t know. It’s a good question. However, I sense your father is ready, maybe even eager, to make one happen.”

“Could he be bluffing?” Eldrin looks hopeful.

“Perhaps, but do you want to risk that?” I ask. “Wyn wouldn’t want a war started over her.”

“What if my father does something horrible to Wynstelle?” Eldrin collapses into his plush chair, rubbing aggressively at his temples. “He could imprison her. Or mate her with a sadist. He might just—”

“Don’t say it. Please.” I grit my teeth. I’m trying my best not to blame Eldrin for this predicament, but if he hadn’t forced the issue of being with Wyn, then she might not have had this fate. “We only know that he wants to control *you*.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” Eldrin asks exasperatedly.

“Consult the mage. Her insight might give us a way out of this mess.”



There’s no time to summon Mage Neven to the castle. Nor would it be prudent to reveal to others in the castle that Eldrin is meeting with the wise one. So Eldrin and I pack our bags for

the journey back to Wyn and stop at the mage's temple in the woods just beyond Ryven's city wall.

We bring along our most loyal personal guards—Corwin, Baelen, Agis, and Daylor—who have already traveled with us to the mortal realm. When we arrive at the temple grounds, the guards wait at the roadside.

The mage stands at the temple's entrance, obviously expecting our visit. Mages often know when visitors will arrive, but her lingering presence and fierce stare do little to settle our already fragile nerves.

The mage's shiny, silver hair, the only feature denoting her age, is pulled back in a loose braid. Her flawless skin shines in the morning light. "Welcome, Your Highness, and Oakes."

"Thank you for seeing me." Eldrin dips his head in respect to her station as an Elven spiritual leader.

Mage Neven looks at me. "It seems our human friend has found one of her challenges."

Eldrin narrows his eyes at me with the realization he hasn't been privy to all the mage has predicted. "It seems you are aware of Wynstelle's situation. Do you have any guidance for us?"

The mage glances over our shoulders and ushers us inside the temple. She closes the doors and studies both of us for a long while.

To me, she says, "You haven't told him of our discussion?"

"What discussion?" Eldrin's body tenses. "About Wynstelle?"

I turn toward my prince hesitantly. "Mage Neven told us we need to keep Wynstelle safe at all costs, and that her death would be devastating if we failed."

Eldrin glares at me for not telling him before now and says, "Losing Wynstelle would be devastating for me, but..." Confused, he asks Neven, "Why would an Elven mage care about a mortal's well-being?"

“It would be devastating for *everyone*.” Mage Neven corrects him undoubtedly seeing details of potential futures we can’t possibly fathom. “Her life sealed the peace treaty, and her blood will break it. Beyond that, there will also be wider repercussions from her demise.”

“Then how do we keep her safe?” Eldrin clenches his fists nervously at his sides. “How do I keep *all* my people safe?”

“First, you will have to bring Wynstelle back here and risk your father’s wrath.”

“What if he tries to kill her?” Eldrin asks. “All these years, I thought he wanted peace, but now, I’m not so sure.”

“Goals change.” The mage inclines her head, heavy with the burden she’s giving the prince. “Being immortal creatures, we can play a very, very long game.”

“So he made peace just so he could break it at a later date?” Eldrin asks, then his mouth opens with a sigh of acceptance. He feels the truth of her words. “To attack when he was better prepared?”

“Is he behind the ghouls attacks?” My jaw flutters with anger. “Her abduction?”

“I cannot see the answer to the attacks... yet.” Mage Neven appears disturbed by her lack of knowledge. “I am not completely *certain* of my speculation about King Magnus’ intentions. But you suspect what I suspect—that he ordered her blood to be spilled to start a war.”

“If you cannot see everything, then how do you know that it’s the right move to bring her back to Elfhome?” Eldrin asks, irritated that he has no straightforward answers.

“I only see a clear future for her when she is with the three of you.”

“So, are you saying that our presence alone will keep her safe?” I ask.

“I have visioned about this. Wynstelle’s life is very short without you three by her side.” The mage opens the door to

signal our discussion is complete. “Follow your *hearts*, and your fate will follow.”

We bow to the mage and head to the road.

Eldrin grumbles before we reached our guards, “That didn’t help very much.”

“We learned you were correct about being near her.” I shrug. “We also learned how much depends on her continued well-being.”

“Mage Neven isn’t the only one with that kind of knowledge, though. Other seers and my father will know of Wyn’s significance.”

LOVE

JADEN

King Nathaniel is hosting another large dinner party in Wyn's honor. During the festivities, it seems someone tops off her goblet every time she takes a sip.

"I'm not used to the level of abundance. I think I've enjoyed more wine than I realized," Wyn confesses to me. "I've met so many people, my head is spinning... or that could be the wine. Either way, the conversations and crowds are exhausting me."

"We can probably leave now. It's been an appropriate amount of time spent with King Nathaniel's people. We can excuse ourselves for the night."

With me in tow as her personal bodyguard, we climb the stairs. As I move to enter her room, the guard near her door stops me.

"Let him be." She waves the guard off. "He'll sleep on the cot."

The guard protests, "But—"

She shushes the guard, obviously done with people telling her what to do. I'm sure the excess of wine only adds to her sassy attitude. "I'm the long-lost princess around here. Are you as well?"

The guard's eyes widen at her snappy question, and he shakes his head. "No, Your Highness." He reluctantly steps out

of the way.

Once I shut the door, she giggles, kicking off her shoes. She pulls off her dress on the way to the bed, revealing a thin shift underneath. “I see now why Eldrin can be a jerk. He was always... *special*. Being a royal pain in everyone’s tush.”

I chuckle and eye her in the thin slip of fabric, barely concealing her curves.

“Goodnight,” she says.

I watch the seductive sway of her hips as she crawls onto the bed, but then she flops on top of the duvet, not bothering to get under the covers.

“Did you notice that the room is swishy?” she mumbles, staring at the ceiling.

I pull her bedcovers from under her body and tuck her in. All the while, she grins and wiggles happily about the care I’m giving her. Goddess, she is a refreshing delight.

With an amused grin of my own, I shake my head at her silliness. “You’ll need to build a tolerance to alcohol or ration yourself from now on.”

“Pftth.” She sticks out her tongue. “You’re no fun.”

“You know that isn’t true.” I give her a chaste kiss on her forehead, then reluctantly walk across the room and lay down on the cot. “Goodnight, love.”



Hours later, I’m awakened by the smell of Wyn’s arousal—orange blossoms on a summer day. I glance over at the source. The moonlight reveals her writhing on the bed with her slip pulled up to her waist and her hand between her thighs. I quietly stalk over to see if she is asleep and pleasuring herself, or if she has awoken with an overpowering need.

“Stunningly beautiful,” I whisper loud enough for her to hear.

Wyn startles and snaps her legs shut. Her eyes catch me hovering near the edge of her bed. “Stars! I thought I was

quiet.” I notice she’s no longer drunk, so I don’t have to feel bad about my approach.

“Sensitive, magic ears and nose, remember?” I tap my nose and my pointed ears. I grin wickedly and stand at the side of her bed. “Please, don’t stop on my account.”

Her eyes shoot open and her eyebrows raise in surprise. “You want to watch me touch myself?”

“I do. Very much so.” I move closer and sit on the edge of the bed. “Would you like that too?”

Wyn grins her answer.

“Take your slip all the way off.”

She glances at the door, nervously expecting someone to burst through at any moment.

“I locked it when we came in.” I sense my violet eyes flash hungrily.

Biting her lip, Wyn pulls the slip over her head and throws it to the side. Her breasts peak further with the cool air. She hesitates, as if I will pounce.

When I only press down on my groin and don’t jump at her, she relaxes. Her legs fall open again so she can continue her ministrations.

I stare at her center and lick my lips. I want to dive forward and taste her sweet nectar. Will she taste like orange blossoms as well?

“Let me see how you please yourself,” I urge her, because if she doesn’t, I’m going to ask if I can. I want her to discover her sexual power. Then we can delve into the lover’s dynamic of give and take.

“But... I don’t know what I’m doing. I have never done this before.” Her hand skims down between her thighs.

“Then you should learn what you like. I want to learn with you.” My voice is so gravely and rough with desire that I hardly recognize it.

She shivers with my words. “It’s just... I woke up with a craving. You all broke my brain or my body, or maybe both.”

I grin. “The feeling is mutual.” I groan as she runs her fingers along her wet center. “What were you dreaming about? What did you crave?”

“I imagined what *it* would be like.” She gazes at me intensely, eyes dropping to my groin.

“You want to know what my cock would feel like sliding in and out of your pussy?”

“Pussy?” Wyn must have never heard the term, but she quickly grasps the meaning. “Oh...” Her eyes fully dilate, turned on more with my dirty talk. Her golden-brown eyes are almost black. “*Yes, that,*” she whispers hoarsely.

My cock jerks to attention. I don’t think I can get any harder, and I don’t want to. My shaft and balls ache painfully. I’m consumed with the thought of bonding with Wyn, and it’s overwhelming my libido.

I shift slightly so that at least the fabric of my pants relieves the mounting tension.

“I can’t give that to you...” I lean forward, skimming her thigh with my lips, whispering, “Yet.”

She moves her hand urgently over her folds, excited by the idea and my light touch.

My eyes widen as I take in the show. “But I would love to taste your sweet honey.”

She gasps at my offer. I scent her escalating arousal.

Wyn moves her hand out of the way and opens her legs wider to accommodate my broad shoulders.

“Oh, my love.” I shed my shirt.

With only her eyes, she consumes my exposed flesh.

Pleased by her nonverbal approval, I crawl up between her legs, skimming my lips down each thigh, kissing too lightly. She bucks with the tickling touch.

“More,” she gasps and arches with each approach, but I deny her the release of my mouth on her sex.

Wyn whimpers.

I find her nonverbal plea too much to resist and swipe my tongue down her middle. “Fuck, you’re delicious.”

“Really? I didn’t think so.”

“For me, it’s the most delicious meal I could have.” I kiss and suck her sensitive bud.

She rolls her hips with my attention.

“Touch your breasts,” I give the calm demand, knowing it would excite her. She likes it when I take a bit of control. “Pinch your nipples.”

Wyn writhes with my orders, my commands bringing a new excitement, shooting straight down into her core with another wave of blossoms. She caresses her full breasts.

“That’s it,” I say between licks, staring up at her. “Just feel it all. This is all for you.”

My eyes lock with hers over her mound, making her shiver. My hand reaches up and meets hers at her chest.

Her hand guides mine, massaging her entire breast. I pinch her pebbled nipple.

She bites her lip and moans.

Excited by her response, my urgency at her opening heightens, plunging my tongue inside her in a quick rhythm.

“Do you want my finger inside you?”

“Yes. Please.”

With her approval, I slip a finger inside her channel and pump in time with the thrusts of her hips, finding a spot inside that makes her tremble with pleasure.

“Stars!” Her body clenches, and she shudders as her climax crashes over her. Tiny grunts of bliss escape her mouth while I lick at her clit and stroke her folds.

Her orgasm subsides, and Wyn returns to her surroundings.

I'm suddenly laying at her side, playing with her nipples and plucking them with my lips. "Did you need more to quench your insatiable thirst?"

Wyn smiles and crinkles her forehead. "Don't you males need to release too?"

I suppress a laugh. "More than you know. But I'm just happy to see you happy."

Her hand wanders down my naked chest to my waistband, and I groan at her gentle touch. I need to release more than she can comprehend.

Should I let her slip a hand over my throbbing cock and let her see for herself what she does to me?

"Is it the same kind of release for males?"

I'm surprised Eldrin or Oakes haven't come in front of her, but I refuse to bring up their names now.

"Yes and no," I groan when she strokes my cock over my pants. "It's, uh, ours is messier."

"Messy? Oh, the seed for reproducing." Wyn's eyes sparkle with curiosity and eagerness. "Can I bring you to release? I know you don't want to be *inside* me, but could we do something else so I can give you the same pleasure you have given me?"

"It's *very* possible for you to bring me to release without traditional intercourse. I could reach it by simply watching you."

Wyn sighs and presses her body against mine. She pouts. "I feel all this attention is out of balance. It would make me feel good to give you pleasure in return."

"You did please me." I smile gently. Her pleas and insistent touching are testing my resolve.

Her eyes shift to rejection. "I don't understand your resistance. Why don't you want to share your release with me?" Her voice sounds more forlorn as she continues. "I'd understand if you regret your offer of bonding."

I can't believe my ears. *How can she think I would be so cold-hearted that I would rescind my offer?*

"I am even more sure of my offer of mating." I would mate with her right then to prove my dedication, but I need *her* to be sure. A mate-bond is no flippant commitment. I growl and kiss her hard. "Just so you know, I very much *want* to sheath my cock inside you. But we should wait for that act until you know what *you* want for your life."

"I thought elves were free with sex. So what's the issue?"

"Personally, I haven't been very free with sex. I haven't even been with anyone in almost twenty years." I trail kisses down her face. "And with you, I want your first time to be special."

"It *would* be special with you, so why does it have to have conditions attached?" Wyn glances at the door to the human realm. "Or is your refusal due to where we are?"

"Because of where *you* are." I pull her close to my chest, breathing in her irresistible scent. "I want the first time I enter you to be during our bonding ceremony. But if you choose another for love, then I want that experience to be special for you and your mate."

"What if I don't want a mate?" Wyn asks.

I lean back to stare directly into her golden-brown eyes. "This is what I mean... What *do* you want?"

Wyn sucks in a breath at my intense gaze. "I... uh... I don't know what I want."

"That is why I won't take you. Until *I* know you know."

Wyn nods her understanding. "Well, right now, I know I want to give you your release. Show me how." Wyn smiles impishly and licks her lips. She trails her fingers down my torso and presses against my bulge. "It would make me happy."

"*Fucking stars*. You stir me up." My pants are gone faster than she can blink. My erection presses into her leg. "I am yours to do with as you wish."

Wyn's eyes crinkle with repressed laughter, even as she eyes my revealed cock with interest. "I wasn't trying to guilt you into getting naked and offering your body."

"Well, if you were, you did a fine job of it." I shrug. "I just realized that perhaps I was being selfish for *not* offering you what you wanted."

"Are you sure you're ready?" Wyn asks with a smirk.

I laugh and glance down at my almost painful erection. "Do I appear unsure?"

Wyn giggles. "No." She bites her lip. "But I don't know how to pleasure you."

I swear I will spill for her no matter what she does. She has me so out of my mind with need and desire, and my heart is hers. Hopefully, soon she will claim the rest of me.

"From what I've seen so far, I won't have to teach you much. You're a natural."

Wyn blushes and glances away.

"Hey," I catch her chin and make her look me in the eye. "You have nothing to feel shameful about. You are perfect."

She blushes again, but with a smile this time.

RELEASE

WYNSTELLE

*M*y hand moves down to encircle Jaden's thick shaft—velvety skin over a hard stem. When his eyes close, he falls flat on his back, lost in my touch. I hum happily at his reaction and shimmy down his body to get a closer look at his cock.

Jaden's eyes pop open. His breathing turns ragged. "*Wyn?*"

"I want to taste *you*. Would you like that?"

"*Woman...*" His hands tangle in my hair, and he brings me back up to claim my mouth. "You are divine."

Why does Jaden's assertiveness turn me on so much? It's the opposite with Eldrin. I enjoyed being the one in control of him. And with Oakes? I couldn't get enough of his gentle, electric touch. If I'm forced to choose, I don't know what I will do. But that might not be an issue. Magnus might make the decision that I can't have any of them. And if I remain in the mortal realm, then I can't have any of them anyway.

I shove the worries away for now. This is my moment to experience something special with Jaden. I'm inexperienced, and he hasn't chosen to be with someone for decades.

I give him another kiss since he calls me divine. "I might not be the natural you think I am, I haven't done anything yet."

"Oh, love, I believe you are."

I settle back down by his groin and take in the enticing view of his hardened cock. Brushing my lips up from its base to his tip, I sense it takes all his strength not to buck into my face. On the next pass, I extend the tip of my tongue. On the third, I use the flat of my tongue to stimulate his shaft.

Then I swipe my tongue over his tip and taste a bit of fluid that's leaked out.

"Wyn," Jaden hisses with longing.

"You taste salty yet sweet," I say. "I like it."

"That's just the sample. I have much more to give you."

I grin at his reaction and ask innocently, "Will you fit into my mouth?"

"Oh, fuck... please do try, love."

I slowly test my ability to slip him into my mouth. My lips are tight around his girth. I quickly realize he's too big to take all the way down, so I fist my hand at his base and use my hand as an extension of my mouth.

"You're... so... glorious." He bites his fist to quiet his moans.

With slight movements with his hips, he informs me of the pace he desires. I match it, enjoying the pleasure of giving him his.

His fingers clench around my hair at the base of my neck.

It's commanding, though I don't feel he means to truly control me. If it makes me feel anything, it excites me more to have him struggling with dominance. I feel powerful because he's losing his mind just as he makes me lose mine.

I taste his hot-coals-and-sugared-cinnamon scent smoldering in my mouth with each plunge of my head onto his cock, stoking his flames. Never has something tasted so delicious. So forbidden. My own sex throbs once again, hearing his moans, and I can tell Jaden is reaching his orgasm.

"Let me show you my release." He gently guides me off his cock with one hand and keeps my hand moving on his

shaft with the other. “Stroke with me.”

I do and feel a pulsing wave under my fingers.

Jaden’s body arches, and a geyser shoots from his member onto his chest and stomach.

“Oh, my stars. That was...” I squeal in excitement. “*Amazing!*”

“It *was*?” Jaden chuckles and claims my mouth again with his. “I love that you found it entertaining and not off-putting.”

“Of course not. It’s your release that I helped create.” I lick a drop of his release off his chest and hum with the taste of his bliss.

Jaden groans. “Love, you are making me wild.”

He flips me on my back, pinning me down. His muscular thigh slides between my legs and presses against my slick, throbbing sex. His chest grinds into me, his release covers my breasts. With his free hand, he rubs his fluid over me, massaging it into my chest as he works his thigh over my center. “Come on my leg, my naughty mortal.”

He licks his cream off my nipple and sucks. I lose my mind, grinding myself on his leg. I was so close to another orgasm, but his words and actions quickly have me trembling with an impending climax. “Oh, Jaden,” I cry and find my limbs are useless and I melt into the bedding.

“I love you wearing my scent.” Dragging his nose up my neck, he kisses me again. “But I can’t mark you just yet. I’ll be right back.”

He washes in the bathing room, then he brings back a wash bowl and gently cleans me up.

Before he leaves to return the bowl to the washroom, he presses his lips to mine and says, “I love you.”

In the romance books I’ve read, I know what’s expected. I’m supposed to say it back, but I don’t know if I can return his sentiment. I care about him deeply, but can I—should I—say the words unless I’m completely sure of how I feel?

Thankfully, he doesn't wait for me to respond. From his talk earlier about coupling with me, I know he understands the confusion in my heart, but his patience makes me ashamed that I'm too inexperienced to be certain of how I feel.

Before he returns from the ensuite washroom, I pull my slip back on and curl under the blankets, pretending to be fast asleep.

Jaden strokes my cheek, likely seeing if he can stir me awake. I don't. Then he returns to his cot, since someone with a key could easily intrude upon us in the morning. He doesn't have Oakes' excuse of healing as a reason to be in bed with me.

I don't know how to handle the emotions behind the pleasure I find with these Elven males. I have no context for what I feel for them. I'm naïve and ignorant compared to their many years of experience.

I know Jaden fires up my body faster than I can think, but like a raging fire, his attraction to me will probably burn out quickly.

Then there is Eldrin... He somehow keeps breaking down my walls, claiming my affections, too. He is one of the most powerful males in all the realms, and he is willing to listen to me and give some of his power over to me, especially in the bedroom.

But even if Eldrin wants to force King Magnus to allow a bond between us, it won't end well. If I give my heart to Eldrin, I will get hurt. Someone was outraged enough about his choice of company to have me killed. Besides that, his subjects just aren't fond of his interest in a human, and they will make my life miserable every day I'm in the castle.

Oakes says the prince is young and impulsive, and I *have* seen it for myself. If we were bonded, he would tire of me when the shine of my newness dulls, when my skin sags and wrinkles. Then the prince will realize I'm really just a human servant dressed up in a princess's clothing.

And Oakes? Well, *if* Oakes wants me as a mate, he hasn't said so. He might only be interested in having sex and then move on, as most elves do. I don't fault him for that. Knowing what little I know of him, he will probably be, at the very least, honest and let me know his intentions for a quick fling. When I first arrived, he warned me not to fall in love with Eldrin, or any other elf, including himself.

The most likely scenario is that Eldrin, Jaden, and Oakes will all tire of me once they are done playing their power drama.

ACCEPTANCE

WYNSTELLE

As evening falls, Oakes and Eldrin arrive with their Elven guard entourage at King Nathaniel's castle and are immediately escorted to the king's meeting chambers. Twyla, Jaden, and I are quickly summoned to join them.

I spent most of the day avoiding Jaden, so I won't have to have a conversation about him loving me. I successfully accomplished this by reading in the corner. Besides, I believe Jaden is gratefully allowing me time to think through my feelings.

But now, I have to face what the Elven King has decided as my fate.

King Nathaniel sits behind his large desk and waits for everyone to take a seat and the doors to shut before he asks, "Prince Eldrin, what news do you bring?"

"I wish it were more auspicious tidings. I have been instructed to return Wynstelle to Ryven Castle within a quarter's moon time. King Magnus believes it's a breach of your contract for her to be in the mortal realm."

My father grumbles. "What about *his* breach in treating Wynstelle so poorly?"

"I pledge to honor my father's agreement and ensure Wynstelle has a happy, healthy life from now on." Eldrin glances at me but quickly refocuses. "King Magnus demands to meet with her. If my father says Wynstelle must have a life

partner, I will insist that she has one who will treat her right. I will petition for that someone to be me.”

Both Oakes and Jaden tense at his statement. I stiffen with uncertainty. Why is he insisting on mating with me?

“You see no chance that King Magnus might allow Wynstelle to stay with me?” Nathaniel frowns. “There is no other treasure or bargain he might accept in her place?”

“I don’t believe so.” Eldrin’s face reflects his remorse.

I wonder about his disheartened attitude. Has Eldrin threatened his father, and now he regrets his words? The little I know of the prince, I guess that is a strong possibility.

Eldrin looks at me as if hearing my thoughts. “My father considers it an act of war if Wynstelle remains here.”

“I’ll go,” I blurt out before they can argue over it anymore. My eyes burn with unshed tears, thinking about leaving my newfound father so soon. “I’m grateful I could meet you and Twyla, but I couldn’t stand creating any more problems because of my presence.”

“I would go to war if you don’t wish to return,” King Nathaniel swears.

“My life is already on borrowed time. I don’t want anyone’s death on my conscience.” I grimace at the thought. “Most of the fae have been kind enough throughout my life. I’m sure Prince Eldrin will do everything within his power to keep me safe. But perhaps...” I look to Eldrin and ask, “Do you think King Magnus would allow me to go back and work for Merlara for the rest of my days?”

I remind myself that my former keeper has probably known of my background and kept that secret. But I will let Merlara explain herself. I rationalize that at least I will be useful in the foundry and am unlikely to start any wars while working in the village of Betonie. Ryven Castle isn’t a safe place for a human, especially me. I will only be a liability in the capital. I’m a liability to Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden.

“I don’t think returning to Merlara is an option,” Eldrin says. “But I will do my best to make you happy, no matter

what.”

“I suppose, first, I need to meet with King Magnus and see what becomes of me.” My pent-up tears begin to fall and I run to hug my father. “I’m sorry that I must leave.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” King Nathaniel holds me tightly. “It’s alright. It’s your choice, and a *noble* choice, to put the realms before yourself.” He steps back and gives me a melancholy grin to soften his words. “Since we have a few days left together, I would like to throw a farewell celebration tomorrow night. I hope that with the camaraderie I’ve cultivated with Prince Eldrin and his advisors means I might see you again someday.”

“I hope we can too.” I nod, and my heart drops into my stomach. I fear that King Magnus will never allow it. Besides, I doubt I will live long at all. I’m a threat to Eldrin’s mating arrangement with Princess Alcina. Kings aren’t usually tolerant of people or things getting in the way of their power. And now, I’m an obstacle to be eliminated.

After the conversation in my father’s meeting chamber, I walk out of the room without speaking to anyone.

Oakes, Jaden, and Eldrin follow behind me, hopeful I will want their company. Even Twyla makes a half-hearted attempt to join us, but seems to think better of it. The changeling princess nods to the elves and splinters off after a few moments.

I wander up to my room, vaguely aware of the trail of elves. I don’t have the energy to decide if I want them around. What does it matter *what* I want? I’m about to lose control over my life once again.

King Magnus will probably lock me up far from Ryven or just simply have me murdered. Deep in my heart, I believe he’s behind the attack that almost killed me. His demand for my return to Elfhame only reinforces my suspicion. This move is a diversion. Nothing more than pretense. The Elven King has something terrible in mind for me. He wants to make an example out of me—that a mortal means nothing in their

realm. Hasn't he tried to prove that already by making the mortal king's daughter a servant in a dangerous foundry?

When I enter my room, the door guard doesn't bother protesting the elves' entry. The man has given up trying to fight me about who comes and goes. Ironically, I half-heartedly wish he would send them away.

I collapse on the bed and curl up in the center.

The three elves share a look of concern as they circle around my bed.

"Wyn?" Oakes slowly approaches and stands beside my head.

I don't respond.

Eldrin sits down next to my feet and touches my ankle. "I will make sure my father treats you fairly."

"This is all so absurd," I whisper to the room.

Eldrin turns to Oakes and Jaden, his eyes pleading for them to help soothe me. I would laugh if I thought there was any humor left in the situation.

"I understand this is a lot to take in," Eldrin says.

A fury spins inside me now with his placating words. No one can understand all that has happened to me. "No. You don't." I sit upright, legs flung off the side of the bed, and stand up. I glare at Eldrin. He just doesn't get it. "I've lived my entire childhood in servitude. Now I find out my father gave me up in a peace bargain. My mother is dead because of my birth. And of all the *fucking* crazy things, I'm supposed to be a princess. A changeling has lived with my father's love all these years while I sweated over a fiery pit day after day, burned, and cut because I was denied a place at Ryven Castle. You claim to have some deep, preposterous emotion for me that is tearing my heart to shreds with hope and the sheer absurdity that you love a mortal. You make promises of my safety that you can't keep, even if you wanted to. And *now*, I must go back to surrender my freedom so I don't cause a war. King Magnus will either kill me outright or mate me off to some elf who will kill me off quietly."

When I'm done, I'm almost panting with anger. My hands fist at my sides. "So, you all know *exactly* how I feel?"

Jaden raises his eyebrows. "Well, *now*, we do."

I stare at him for a moment and laugh wildly and manically, relieved after venting.

"I'm so sorry." Eldrin dares to pull me into an embrace.

I don't understand why, but I fall into his arms, exhausted.

Eldrin guides me back to the bed, sits, and gathers me up into his lap.

I press my face into his solid chest, not wanting to look at any of them when I'm so drained, so tired of feeling.

Jaden sits on my other side and strokes my arm.

Oakes drops to his knees in front of me and rests his hands on my lap.

With his touch, he fills me with healing magic, and then gently calls to me until I finally look at him.

Gazing into my tear-filled eyes, he says, "Yes, you have suffered, and by malevolent hands, but you are strong. You will overcome it. We will find a solution, and we will be there at every step to assist you."

Goddess, I want to believe him. But can they promise such a thing?

FAREWELL

WYNSTELLE

Unleashing my pent-up emotions has a cathartic effect, and I feel better as a result. The elves offer to sleep in my room, but I need to distance myself from their attachment. If I survive my return to Elfhome and I'm mated to some random elf, I will have to prepare for the loss of their company. I've been growing more fond of them with every moment together, and I will be devastated when we part ways, so why allow myself to become *more* attached?

To think that I will walk away from this unscathed is laughable. My heart will be broken in the end.

I have seen the looks of skepticism Jaden and Oakes trade when Eldrin speaks of swaying his father to allow me to mate with him. What does it matter? I doubt I will live long beyond my meeting with the king. I must return, or else I will be the cause of so many deaths in both realms. I can't have that weighing on my soul.

I sigh when the attendants show up to fill the bath and bring me a selection of gowns. Twyla's handmaid debates with herself hairstyles for the party.

I don't care much for any of the fuss. I have no knowledge of expensive garments or which hairdo will flatter my face. It doesn't matter to me.

Then the realization strikes me that this might be my final days and with the people I care about, in either realm. Why

should I make anything more difficult than it needs to be? Shouldn't I enjoy the last few days I am free and alive?

I give in to the attention because my father and the elves will enjoy that I am being pampered, and I'd like to see them all smile one last time. It's not as if the pampering hurts me, and once I surrender to it, I find it relaxing and distracting.

If I am to die, why not go out in style?



As I finish getting ready for the party, there's a knock at my door. Before my attendant can answer it, I jump up and open the door myself.

My king, *my father*, stands at the threshold, making the door frame appear small. I assume I must have inherited my mother's height. He's tall for a human and has a broad, muscular build. The gentle eyes that gaze at me now soften his rather intimidating physical appearance.

I smile at the fact that I got to know my father at all, however briefly.

Within seconds, his facial expression changes from happy to distressed to pleased to pained.

"You look beautiful." He holds out his hand to me. "May I bother you for a moment?"

"You aren't bothering me. Come in." I glance behind me at the woman scrambling to gather the brushes and skin creams from the side table.

"Mary, leave it for now and give us the room?" King Nathaniel asks, and the servant curtsies and hurries out. He turns to me, his secret daughter. His smile is strained. "I wanted to check on you before we throw ourselves into the festivities."

"I'm fine," I answer by rote.

"How could you be?" Nathaniel asks softly. "So much has fallen at your feet in the last few days. Yet, I almost believe you, seeing your strength and resolve right now."

“I will make do as I always have.” I try to sound optimistic, but it falls flat.

A mournful look fills his face. “I’ve noticed that you aren’t keen on large gatherings, and I’m sorry if I have made you uncomfortable with having this party in your honor. However, we need to present all of this as your choice and a joyful event. Although, it saddens me to no end to lose you once again.”

I press my lips together to prevent myself from crying. “Perhaps King Magnus will allow me to return for visits.” Though I know it isn’t likely.

“Your Prince Eldrin seems very tenacious. He might convince his father to agree to all his terms.” Is he saying this to comfort himself or me?

“I told you before, he isn’t *my* prince. He never will be.”

“Not according to his assertions.” King Nathaniel cocks an eyebrow.

“He’s a bit young and naïve.” I wave his comment off.

Nathaniel lets out an uproarious laugh. “How old is he? A hundred?”

“A mere toddler... at *sixty*.” I break with a giggle through my withheld tears. “Elves mature slower, or so I’m told. Although, perhaps it’s only Eldrin who suffers from that affliction.”

“Pardon my asking, but how did you develop such a wit, being a servant?”

“Servants can be bright, too. Just disadvantaged in society.”

Nathaniel blushes. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t.” I sigh, realizing I’m being prickly for no reason. “Merlara taught me to read and brought me books on a wide variety of subjects so I could entertain myself in the evenings. We talked in great depth over every dinner.”

“I’m glad she at least did that for you.”

“Merlara was good-spirited most of the time and generous with my intellectual development. Perhaps that was only to keep the conversations at home interesting. Now I wonder how much she knew of Magnus’ agreement with you and if she knew who I was.” I look at the floor. “It’s strange to think about my old life, considering the life I was supposed to have with you and then what had been promised by the Elven King.”

“I wish I had known what happened to you. I could have done *something*.”

“There is no benefit in dwelling in the past.” I shrug. “I have had a good life, better than most, I suspect.”

Nathaniel nods solemnly and then smiles. “Now that I know you can read and write, perhaps we can exchange letters. Delivered to the portal and picked up at a scheduled time.”

“That would be nice.” I smile wistfully and pat my eyes dry from the few tears that have escaped. Will I have to lie about my happiness to keep him appeased? Will I even live long enough to write anything? “I can ask Eldrin about setting up that arrangement.”

“Are you ready for your party?” he asks, forcing the mien of a happy king.

“I believe so.” I twirl for him to inspect my outfit.

“Perfect.” King Nathaniel offers his elbow to escort his proclaimed *niece* to the party. “We’ve made the people wait long enough to see your beauty.”

My cheeks redden at the compliment. As we walk arm in arm, I wonder how many times I wished for a moment like this with a father? And now that it’s happening, I realize it will probably be only this once. “Thank you for being so... *receptive* to my unexpected arrival. And for the gift of welcoming me.”

“Thank you for accepting *me*.” King Nathaniel frowns. “But I only wish our visit was longer.”

DANCE

WYNSTELLE

I suck in a breath at the beauty surrounding me. From the top of the stairs, I can see the entire ballroom. Candelabras, sconces, and candle-lit chandeliers glow and twinkle with the guests' shiny expensive fabrics and metal embellishments. There's joyful laughter floating through the air. The scene almost feels as magical as the fae world.

Lord Jonathon and Lady Carissa glance up and nod to me and King Nathaniel. Across the room, my three elves seem to glow all on their own. But I think that's probably just a byproduct of my affection for them.

The prince's white-blond hair shines like glass in the light. As though he has sensed my presence, he turns and catches sight of me, and his stormy blue eyes lock onto me.

Oakes turns then, brushing back his shoulder-length brown locks with a sweep of his hand. His amber eyes find me a second later.

When my gaze settles on Jaden, his violet eyes are already burning a fire through me as if he has always been watching me. His raven-black hair roguishly falls over his brow, only highlighting his mesmerizing eyes.

"Ready?" King Nathaniel asks, breaking my attention away from the three.

I nod to my father and note the Elven guards posted alongside the human guards at each entrance.

Eldrin hurries toward me first, eyes wide. He cuts through the crowd like a knife, people moving out of the way as he strides across the floor as if on a mission. His handsome advisors follow on his heels, and my heart speeds up as they near.

From our elevated position on the stairs, King Nathaniel squeezes my hand and cuts short the elves' approach by calling out to the room, "Ladies and Lords! Tonight, we are brought together by this lovely woman beside me. My flesh and blood returned for a brief visit. It gladdens my heart to have reconnected with another member of my family. We also celebrate her return as our human emissary to solidify our peace treaty with Elfhome. Let the festivities begin!"

A cheer ripples through the room at the king's declaration.

I smile outwardly. But inside, I'm saddened at how gifted royalty is at re-framing the truth. I wonder how much of what Eldrin says is only a *version* of the truth.

Eldrin approaches and bows to both the king and me. "May I speak with the princess?"

"She is her own person to consent to that." My father winks at me.

I pat him on the arm. "I will allow it," I say with mock haughtiness.

The king kisses my hand and walks away, leaving the elves a quiet moment with me.

"That gown..." Eldrin seems to be at a loss for words as he takes in my appearance.

I run my hands over the silk, periwinkle fabric, and tight bodice. "Yes, I picked it because it looked most like the dress you had made for me."

"That was very kind." Eldrin can't suppress a schoolboy grin. "You look gorgeous."

"No. That is *my* adjective." Jaden smirks.

I laugh as Eldrin shoots him a glare. I agree, "Jaden's correct. I'll need another descriptor."

“Breathtaking. Spectacular. Dazzling,” Eldrin offers, playing along.

Oakes chimes in, “Stunning. Magnificent. Resplendent.”

“*Resplendent?*” I raise my eyebrows. “That isn’t used often.”

“You deserve them all.” Eldrin bows.

“I’m just glad you have backup descriptors since Eldrin already owns *pretty*.” Oakes chuckles.

Eldrin furrows his brow. “I’m... *what?*”

“Wyn’s words.” Oakes shrugs. With a cocky grin, he adds, “I’m the *most handsomest*, by the way.”

The lighthearted banter is almost enough to make me believe my life will be alright, but dread creeps into my gut. “Aren’t we supposed to mingle at these fancy soirees?”

“That we are.” Eldrin offers his elbow. “And we need drinks.”

“And Wyn needs food to help keep her sober.” Jaden warns in a whisper, “Or she might take advantage of our bodies right in front of everyone.”

I mock offense. “I only do that in private.”

Oakes grins. “*So far.*”

His words once again remind me of our limited time. At the moment, I’m committed to making the most of our night.



I learn and forget more names than I ever thought possible. Living a solitary life as a forced introvert, I don’t have the skills or mental fortitude to handle a party full of people. Fortunately, Eldrin and Oakes are experts in social functions. Every time my eyes glaze over, they spirit me away with some excuse or another.

My would-be human suitor, Commander Rhys, finally lands an approach. “Princess Wynstelle, would you care to join me for a dance?”

I have pointedly avoided the dance floor. With the intricate patterns and moves involved, I know I will end up with my butt on the floor. I'm hardly keeping upright in the tight bodice and fancy shoes as it is. "I'm not a dancer."

"If that really is the case, I won't let it show." Rhys smiles seductively. "Just feel the rhythm and follow my lead."

I blush. His instructions sound like they could apply to a lot more than mere dancing. I glance at Eldrin.

But he doesn't rescue me with an excuse. Oakes has gone mute too.

I make a mental note to pay them back later if I can.

Eldrin gestures with a nod for me to enjoy the dance, even if he looks slightly reluctant to let me go.

I shake my head and say to Rhys, "I meant not a dancer at all. *Ever.*"

"I'll catch you if you stumble." Rhys extends his hand.

"You better." I threaten, "Or I'll send the elves after you."

"I would deserve that fate if I made you look a fool."

A new song begins. Rhys guides me into position. I have been eyeing the dancers throughout the night and note standard moves. I remember that I'm not uncoordinated. I can maneuver a knife well enough to impress a weapons expert like Jaden. Isn't dancing much like learning swordplay? I hope so.

Rhys' steady hand presses against my waist. The heat of the touch sparks my insides, but I realize it's because I wish it was one of my elves touching me this way. It can't be this man who brings forth this sensation. Can it?

"Are you leaving of your own volition?" Rhys asks just above a whisper.

I'm blindsided by the question, having been far more focused on staying in time with the music. "Hmm?"

"Are these elves forcing you to return to Elfhame?"

I deduce he wanted a moment alone so he could question my motives for returning to the fae realm. “They aren’t,” I say. Technically, it isn’t my elves, but the Elven King who insists I return. And I don’t want a war. “I go willingly.”

“What about my offer to show you this realm?” he asks, sounding rejected.

“I considered it.” It isn’t a lie. I thought about what my life might look like with him by my side. “But by returning, I intend to keep the peace treaty in place.”

“Oh, a noble cause.” Rhys seems appeased by my explanation. “I’m sorry for losing you so soon. I would have liked to have known you better.”

I blush a response. Fortunately, he doesn’t press for more conversation and allows me to focus on our dancing.

To my amazement, I manage to get through the song without falling. Gazing into Rhys’ green eyes, I move to the music like it’s second nature. As if the skill was passed down through my lineage.

“Thank you for this, but I need a break.”

“Of course.” Rhys leads me over to the refreshments and hands me a glass. “You are much better than you let on.”

“Pure luck. But you are a good dance partner.”

Eldrin walks up with that statement. “If you feel adventurous again, I’d like to see how I measure up.”

I smile at him with heat in my cheeks from the wine and the exertion. “Next song... *maybe*.”

Eldrin turns to Rhys. “I hear you are quite the warrior, quickly moving up the ranks with your skills and instinct for strategy.”

“Only tested by small skirmishes amongst humans who do not want to abide by the treaty.”

“*Our* treaty?” Eldrin’s interest is piqued. “How so?”

“Not everyone agreed with King Nathaniel’s judgment about ending the war. Many wanted to push our boundaries,

not caring if it harmed Elfhame.”

“I understand your people’s need for expansion, but it drains *both* realms when we occupy the same territories. Forests become deserts. This has been proven to be true over and over throughout time. Eventually, both races are forced to vacate.”

“I know the reasoning.” Rhys nods, his voice flat. “But some believe it’s only an excuse for the fae to control humans.”

“Are *you* one of these people?”

“I fight for the law of the land.” Rhys inclines his head toward his king. “And King Nathaniel is the law.”

“Humans procreate faster than we do, often having more than two offspring. So you feel the need to spread into every piece of land you can claim,” Eldrin says, his tone neutral. “But elves have maintained limited populations in relatively small territories. We only ask for our right to continue living where we have been established since *before* the dawn of man. It isn’t as if humans can’t find other places to expand without destroying our realm.”

“You have a point,” Rhys says, glancing at me. “Let’s not waste our energies on politics during this celebration for Princess Wynstelle.”

“Of course.” Eldrin holds out his arm for me. “Shall we dance?”

I brace myself against his arm, and when we reach the dance floor, I say, “I don’t think he’s particularly fond of elves.”

“I agree.” Eldrin smiles. “But I didn’t bring you out here to talk about him.”

His steady hand presses on my back, and I gasp at the heat of his touch. I missed him more than I realized. Eldrin’s contact holds so much more of a spark for me than Rhys’s touch. I want to go back in time with Eldrin and relive the moments on my bed, exploring each other’s bodies.

But the dance floor isn't the place for naughty thoughts, so I ask, "Do you think your father will treat me fairly?"

"He better." Something like a dark cloud crosses over Eldrin's stormy blue eyes. "Or he will bemoan begetting me."

A chill runs down my spine. There's a meaningful threat in his words. I shudder at what it means.

As the party winds down, Eldrin, Jaden, and Rhys are debating fighting techniques. Finally, I excuse myself and sit down at a table to think.

Oakes spots me alone at the table and politely breaks off his conversation with Princess Twyla. He crosses the room and sidles up next to me. "When you are ready to call the evening over, I would like to escort you to your room. I have a few things I need to tell you."

"I'm tired. We can go now." I take his offered arm. "It's best if I sleep alone again tonight, though."

"I know." Oakes pats my hand in the crook of his elbow. He remains quiet until we're inside my room.

"Is something wrong?" I turn, staring up into his warm amber eyes.

"It's nothing like that," he says and strokes his large hands down my arms.

The way the elves made me feel beautiful during the party, has made me feel desirous. I have half a mind to ignore my own restrictions. How hard would it be to climb up Oakes' tall body so I can kiss him?

"Wyn—" Oakes sucks in a breath, appearing shy. "I want to..."

"What is it?" I'm baffled by how tongue-tied Oakes is. I step closer to comfort him.

"Nothing's wrong." Oakes caresses my face. "I'm just nervous."

"Now, you're making me nervous." I can't look away, even though instinctively I want to avoid whatever he has to

say.

He sighs sadly. “You have quite a lot on your mind, and I don’t mean to add to it, but before we return to the chaos that we will find in Ryven, I wanted to make it clear how I feel—”

“You don’t have to do that. I wasn’t expecting...” I step back and try to rein in my emotions. “You made it clear that I shouldn’t get my heart broken by loving an elf. I enjoyed your touch the other night, but I wasn’t expecting anything more than that lovely gift of physical affection from you.” I hold up a hand when he opens his mouth. “And for your information, I don’t expect Eldrin or Jaden to *actually* claim me as a mate. I know it’s absurd, especially with a prince. They are both caught up in being my heroes and protectors right now. But I’m not going to be caught up by their affections or their promises—”

“*Wyn...*” Oakes interrupts. “That is the opposite of what I want to say.”

My forehead crinkles with my confusion, thinking he was going to remind me of the lecture he gave me early on in Ryven. “Then what do you need to tell me?”

“I’m in love with you,” Oakes confesses, pulling me to his chest and brushing his hands down my back. “If King Magnus allows you your choice of mates, I wish you would consider me.”

I shake my head and place my hands on his chest, as if to push him away, but I don’t seem to have it in me to do it. “You don’t really mean that. None of you do. You *cannot* believe you love me.”

“Wynstelle—” Oakes keeps me close and caresses my cheek.

“I can’t handle this right now.” I pull away, and he lets me out of his arms. “Please. I need to be alone.”

“I’m sorry that I overwhelmed you, but I needed you to know before you made a choice of mates. And it *is* true... I love you,” he says and quickly exits.

CONSEQUENCES

WYNSTELLE

After breakfast, I wander out to the garden alone, without my guards. I have convinced the elves I could use some quiet time and I'm safe within the castle walls.

King Nathaniel asked Eldrin for a private meeting concerning future negotiations, which may or may not be about what lies ahead for me in Elfhome. My father seems to approve of the prince's mating proposal, though he probably doesn't understand how dangerous it is for me to accept. It doesn't seem as if Eldrin does either.

I choose to believe Eldrin and my father's royal meeting is about the peace treaty, so that I don't have to worry about what they might say about me.

Oakes and Jaden mentioned they were going to check out the castle's armory under Rhys' invitation from the previous night. Apparently, they bonded after Rhys' concern over my potentially forced return to Elfhome was resolved.

Twyla's off doing whatever princesses do daily—probably getting her glowing skin pampered with expensive oils or something like that.

Whatever they are all doing, I'm happy for the time alone.

The last few days have been warmer, and the garden is the perfect place for processing my emotions—whatever good it might do. Likely, I won't have a say in my future. It won't matter if I want Oakes, Jaden, or Eldrin as mates.

With a sigh, I brush my fingers along the manicured shrubs and sniff the few roses that have held on through the dusting of snow. Of all the places in the mortal realm, the gardens most reminded me of my favorite places in Elfhome. The fae have a deep connection to their flora, and many elves have the talent to encourage growth in any plant. Although not as lovely as the fae gardens, I find comfort in the outdoors of the mortal realm.

Do Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden mean what they say? I can't believe any of them would want me for a mate if they'd take a moment to think about the ridiculousness of it all. I will age, and soon they will realize what a terrible mistake they've made. Even if it isn't taboo to be together, I wonder whether it should be. If they love me, they will have to go through the pain of watching me die, while they will go on for centuries. They will be as virile as the day I met them, and I will wither in a relatively short time.

How is that fair to them? It feels selfish to have them go through that.

Then there's the question I don't want to ask... Do I love them, too?

How can I know what love is? I have no experience with life, let alone love. And isn't it selfish to want them when I don't know how to be the partner they deserve?

As I meander through the garden paths, I hear a shuffling of feet behind me. It's probably one of the castle guards on their frequent patrols. But for a half-second, I wonder if it could be Jaden or Oakes following me. Or even Rhys.

Goosebumps dot my flesh. My instincts are screaming this isn't someone I know.

I sense danger.

I spin with a cry for help ready on my lips, but there's a hand over my mouth before I can unleash it.

A second man grabs me by the waist. With a raspy voice, he threatens, "We will make you *wish* you got murdered by that fucking elf."

I wrench against his grasp, kicking at his shins and throwing my head back to knock him out. I hear the crack of impact, but it does nothing to loosen his grip. I continue to thrash and kick to get away.

I let out a guttural cry that only travels as far as my throat.

Now a hand is around my neck, squeezing my airway closed. I pant for a full breath.

Another man places a gag in my open mouth and then ties my wrists together.

I'm on the verge of passing out when he finally releases his stranglehold, and he throws me over his shoulder. I have yet to see the faces of my attackers, but I'm certain they're human.

They exit the garden and head toward the castle's exterior defense wall. An access door is already opened, waiting for a quick escape.

I'm in the wilderness within moments. Like a falling rock, it hits me *why* they are doing this—to start a war.

LOSING

OAKES

Last night was rough. I cannot get Wyn's look of confusion as I professed my love for her and desire to be her mate out of my mind. I needed to tell her of my interest before she made her choice, only now I regret piling more onto her plate. However, it needed to be said in case she might feel the same way, but not understand my feelings toward her.

Wyn doesn't seem to believe any of us truly love her. She can't seem to shake the belief that elves and humans can't be together. Is it because of her upbringing, making her suspicious of males? Or because how we all met under false pretenses?

Or is it the worst possibility—she doesn't love us back?

Apparently, she told both Jaden and Eldrin that she does not understand love. I find it hard to believe when I have felt her care, compassion, and what I have assumed with love toward all of us at some point. Perhaps it was merely her compassionate heart I was sensing.

Whether or not she loves me, I will do what I must to keep her safe from Magnus, even if it means abandoning my duties, running off with her, and hiding. I'm fairly certain Jaden would do the same. Eldrin seems to be willing to go to extremes to ensure her happiness too.

I fear it will cost him his life if he challenges his father to the death for the crown.

Wyn believes we are delusional... perhaps we are, about the solutions, but not about our all-consuming love for her. After pleasuring her the other night, and feeling her soul reach out to me during her bliss, I'm more than certain she is my mate match.

Could all three of us be her match? Do we have the potential to be exactly what she needs?

Jaden knocks on my door, and I answer, still consumed with the thought of Wyn.

He must sense the swirling worries in my mind. "You alright?"

"Not really," I confess. "I proposed mating to Wyn last night."

"Did she take it as badly as she has with Eldrin and me?"

"Maybe worse?" I rub my hand down my face in agitation. "All I did was overwhelm her more than she already is."

"Perhaps. But she needed to know, in case she wishes to choose you."

On our way to the armory to meet Rhys, I stiffen my shoulders with alarm and flick my gaze in the direction of the gardens. "Wynstelle is in trouble."

Jaden and I run, cursing that we don't have our swords because of the security mandate. Fine, we can play by the humans' rules. We are skilled in hand-to-hand combat and can rip the limbs clean off a man if so motivated.

"What are you sensing?" Jaden asks, his jaw tight with concern.

I grit my teeth. "Pure fear." It feels just like when she was taken from Ryven.

Jaden and I somehow run even faster. When we arrive at the gardens, no one is in sight.

"She *was* here, correct?" I ask.

Jaden sniffs the air. "Yes, I smell her scent. Fresh. I can smell terror in the air, too. And adrenaline from whoever took

her. Humans. I think there was..." He sniffs again, to be sure. "Two males, vaguely familiar."

Jaden and I follow the scent trail all the way through an unlocked access door in the castle's outer walls.

Jaden yells, "Watch out—"

Clubs come down on both our heads.



I swim in and out of consciousness as my healing gift works its magic on me. Slung over a horse, my captors have shackled my wrists in iron. The poisonous metal burns through me, draining my magic.

I hear men's laughter.

"I told you they would fall for the trap. These elves can't keep their filthy hands off that whore. They got their magics all tangled up in her."

My temper flares. How dare these vile creatures insult Wyn?

"We'll have fun breaking her."

My blood boils with the idea of them harming Wyn. I vow to protect her at all costs, even with my life. I curse myself for leaving her alone this morning. We thought her safe enough in the castle, with her father's guards patrolling every corner. She declined an Elven guard to keep watch over her. Why didn't we ignore her demands and assign a guard, anyway?

The other man says with disgust, "I'm not touching that nasty wench."

"More time for me then."

I thrash to break free from my restraints.

The man knocks me in the head, and I fade again.

I awaken next when I'm dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Jaden is dumped next to me. Blood trickles down my unconscious friend's head.

Across from us in the small clearing, just a few strides away, Wyn is bound and gagged. Tears line her face. She shakes her head as if to apologize.

“We should keep moving,” the shorter, younger man suggests. “We are still too close to the castle.”

“Shut up, *ya knob*. I’m deciding *how* we should kill them,” the raspy-voiced man says. “It will take a while for them to track us here. We left so many false tracks. We will be long gone when the king’s search party finds these damned beasts, and then the elf prince will run back to faerie land to complain to his papa.”

“You need not kill us,” I interrupt. “You’re doing this to incite a war? I can guarantee a war by what you have done already.”

“Nah. You’ll back out. Another fucking pact with King Nathaniel the Cowardly.” Raspy grins. “Anyway, we *want* to kill you.”

“If you kill us, you’ll only ensure Prince Eldrin will murder you personally.” I nod toward Wyn. “Lay a hand on her, and you will make certain the Elven people do it slowly and painfully.”

“Yeah, I already noticed you elves are obsessed with this elf-whore. Why do you think we took her? King Nathaniel will be swayed to believe elves have taken his precious niece. Finishing the job that your kind started at the portal. And the Elven Prince will assume it was humans who killed you. Both sides will *demand* a war.”

CHASE

ELDRIN

“Do you believe you can protect Wynstelle from your father?” King Nathaniel asks me. His intense glare suggests he doesn’t believe I can.

I pause to calculate my answer. He doesn’t want some political brush off. He’s worried about his daughter’s life, and I understand the weight of his question. “Whatever happens during my father’s meeting, I plan to do everything I can to make him see reason. If he refuses to allow me to be with her, I will make sure she is placed in Oakes’ or Jaden’s care.”

“And if he doesn’t allow that?” He cocks a brow, daring me to answer.

“If he tries to take her away from us to punish her, I will fight...” I gather my courage. “I will challenge him.”

“Those are bold words.” The king gives me another once over as if reassessing my worth. “When I told Wynstelle I’d go to war over her, I wasn’t lying,” he says. “If I hear any word of her further abuse under the orders of Magnus, I will not tolerate it. I was insulted when he placed her to work as a servant.”

“I understand your anger,” I agree. “I have it too. Even if I hadn’t met and come to adore her, it was shameful for my father to go against the intention of the deal. He insulted humans and dishonored elves in this one choice.”

We both hear a female’s voice urgently calling to the guards outside King Nathaniel’s study.

For a moment, I believe it's Wyn's voice, but it's Twyla who bursts in.

Eyes wide and her body shaking, she runs to the king's side, interrupting our meeting. "It's Wynstelle!" she cries.

"What's happened?" I grip the arms of my chair and then launch to my feet.

"I sense something is very wrong," Twyla says in a panic.

"What do you mean, you sense it?" I demand.

Twyla spins to face me and explains, "I can sense her whenever she has potent emotions. She's in danger. I felt... terror. I hurried to the gardens to check on her. She wasn't there. The wall gate was wide open, but it shouldn't be. Since Oakes and Jaden were closest, I ran to the armory, but Rhys said they never arrived for their tour. The guards haven't seen them either. They all might be in trouble."

My emotions swirl inside me. Why didn't I insist she stay with one of us?

"Can you sense Wynstelle's location through your bond?" I ask.

Twyla closes her eyes and seems to focus on her link with Wynstelle. "Yes, I suppose I can when she's in the mortal realm. With her emotions so strong, I have a sense of their direction right now. She must be awake." Twyla stands, calming at the idea. "As long as she is conscious and emotionally heightened, I can probably follow the connection and let it draw me to her. Or close."

"I'm not putting you in danger, too," King Nathaniel rages at Twyla, his booming voice trying to cover his fear.

"You realize *someone* wishes to start a war with this act," I say. "If you don't let Twyla go, she will be in much greater danger, especially since we know her... *origins*."

"Are you threatening Twyla?" King Nathaniel growls.

"No. I'm informing you of your situation." I lean over the desk toward the mortal king. "Give me Twyla, some of your most loyal soldiers, weapons, and I will get your *flesh and*

blood' back before they mutilate her to incite a war between the realms."

King Nathaniel's jaw flutters with frustration. He says to Twyla, "Go! Tell the armory to let the prince have any weapons he needs." His voice softens. "Return safely with Wynstelle."

"I will, Father." Twyla kisses him on the cheek and runs out the door before he changes his mind.

My body is rigid with the fear of losing the three most important people in my life.

My Elven guards rush to follow behind me down the castle halls, their senses alert for any threat to my life—but I will no longer care about my life if Wyn dies.

I glance at Twyla and whisper, "How sure are you of your ability to locate Wynstelle?"

"I think I can get close. Very close." Twyla hurries by my side toward the armory. "Do you have tracking skills?"

"Some. Not as good as Jaden's, but few are." I curse myself for not training more with Jaden. I will rectify my spoiled nature once I return to Elfame. I won't resist any more training sessions like the indulged prince I have been. "But I believe my skills should do well enough. Between the two of us, my guards, and your soldiers—"

Rhys runs up to me and interrupts, "Princess Twyla, I've called for my men to meet us at the armory. Is it true? *Has* Princess Wynstelle gone missing? Jaden and Oakes too?"

Still suspicious Rhys is a war sympathizer, I grab him by the collar. "Are you behind this?"

Rhys throws his hands up in surrender and does nothing to fight my hold. "I would never hurt Wynstelle, even if I wanted war, which I *don't*."

"Your tone last night suggested you might," I growl, my whole body radiating anger.

My Elven guards step closer in case Rhys tries to hurt me.

“I don’t want to die for something so petty,” Rhys says with all the sincerity he can project. “Have your territory! Like you said, you only need a small portion of the world to survive.”

Hearing the sincerity in the man’s words, I release him and charge toward the armory. “Fine. Come along. We could use all the help we can get.”

Rhys straightens his shirt confidently. “Don’t worry, we’ll get *all* of them back.”

CAUGHT

TWYLA

From the back of his horse, Eldrin leads the way through the dense forest. Occasionally, he glances back to receive a sign of Wyn's whereabouts with a pointed look from me. The changeling connection needs to remain a secret, so we try to keep him deferring to me for directions unnoticed. He acts as though he is keeping an eye on the helpless princess for her own safety.

Rhys will be the hardest to fool, so we must ensure I'm not caught signaling by the commander.

I feel the pull toward Wynstelle like a missing piece of myself. Our link is powerful magic.

During a secret meeting when I was a child, the Elven Mage, who created our bond, once told me that the connection will allow me to sense Wynstelle throughout our lives. Since meeting Wyn, that sensation has increased significantly.

I shudder, thinking about how *either* realm could exploit our bond. Now that my father knows how strong it is, will he figure out how to use it as a weapon against the elves?

I have sensed his anger building against the Elven King for treating Wynstelle so poorly.

And now that Wynstelle is about to go before Magnus, will the Elven King use Wyn to his advantage?

I know that all of this subterfuge was set in motion twenty years ago, and I fear I can't stop what's coming.

I clench my jaw, thinking Prince Eldrin shouldn't have exposed Wynstelle's existence to his realm by summoning her to his castle. His actions only forced Magnus to deal with Wynstelle's part in the battle between the realms. However, I also know that Elven vows have a way of being fulfilled no matter how clever the pledgers are in trying to manipulate the meaning of the contract. Eldrin did precisely what he was fated to do—bring Wyn to the castle to fulfill the treaty.

Nevertheless, I'm still angry. Life will never be the same for *any* of us, because his actions have set everything into motion.

“Princess,” Rhys asks, breaking my reverie. “What are you doing on this rescue mission?”

“It is not the first time I have been out in the field.” I glare at Rhys, daring him to challenge my authority further.

But the bold commander does just that. “Yes, but this is a dangerous mission. I'm surprised King Nathaniel would risk your safety.”

I wonder why his questioning my participation makes me respect him more, even if it's frustrating. Perhaps it's that he is trying to do what is best for our kingdom.

“If we do not retrieve my cousin, then we are *all* at risk,” I snip back.

“True.” Rhys nods. “But—”

“If my father, the *king*, allowed it, then there is no need to debate this topic,” I interrupt and state firmly. “Don't worry. When we locate the rebels, I will stand back... unless your *sword* does not prove worthy.”

Rhys' face reddens. “My sword is more than capable.”

“Let's hope so. Now, let us refocus on the mission,” I command with an air of finality.

RECLAIMED

ELDRIN

I grin at how adeptly Princess Twyla puts Rhys in his place.

I finally acknowledge that her complicated mix of a kind but fiery spirit is so like Wynstelle's. How much *do* the two females share in personality? Is their connection influencing one another? Or does their tethered life force *only* communicate extreme emotions and mark whether the other lives?

I know little of changelings, since the practice is more uncommon than lore might suggest. But Twyla is more tethered to Wynstelle than I initially thought. With these concerns, I must research everything about changelings when I return to Elfhome. Hopefully, Mage Neven will have answers. Perhaps, if I am lucky, she is the mage who bonded the two, and I will have easy access to answers. No matter what, I need to know if Wyn is being harmed by the changeling connection.

My heart squeezes in my chest at the thought of Wyn being harmed and the condition we might find her in.

I believe I might instantly die of grief if we find her too late.

I glance back at Twyla to gauge which direction to travel.

Her eyes are wide.

I understand by the flare of her nostrils that we are close. I slow my horse, and she nods, imperceptible to humans' eyes.

“She’s close,” I say, claiming my Elven senses as our guide so far.

Commander Rhys comes up beside us and points to the ground. “Horse hooves. The marks are faint but fresh. But we’ve seen a maze of tracks so far in an attempt to deceive us.”

“No.” I look at Twyla again for confirmation. “Wynstelle is nearby.”

Rhys nods his acceptance of the claim and jerks his head for the group to follow him as he proceeds forward after the tracks.

Just then, my keen Elven ears hear Oakes’ voice rumbling in rage just ahead. I shoot a glance at Twyla.

She’s heard it, too.

I pull my sword free.

Taking my cue, the human soldiers and Elven guards do the same. Our collective warrior instincts all triggered at once.

Her tracking no longer needed, Twyla slows and eases back into the center of the grouping to play the role of the protected princess.

A stir in the brush causes Rhys to yell out, “Ambush!”

Swords clash as the rebels charge at our rescue party.

I block a blow from an attacker on my left. Another closes in on my right.

The trees and shrubs give the horses little room to move. There’s nowhere to dodge the man’s swinging sword as it comes down, barely missing my leg as I parry it just in time.

Fortunately, the blade lodges in the saddle’s leather and not in my thigh or horse.

I curse, frustrated at the close quarters.

I hop up onto my saddle, flip off my mount, and land behind one of my attackers. I slide my blade into the man’s back before he has recovered from his surprise.

That's one maneuver I was happy to learn from Jaden, and it pays off now.

As I turn, the human rebels converge on me. Clearly, I'm their primary target.

Deflecting the blows of swords, I press forward through the fray.

I'm a male obsessed with one goal... I have to locate my love and my friends.

My guards aid me in that goal and help me cut through the mortals.

I do my damage as well, using my Elven strength, I halve every rebel in my path with a single stroke each.

I bellow in rage. These disgusting vermin are slowing my race to find my people.

If one of mine is dead or dying, I will declare war myself.

DEFENSE

WYNSTELLE

When the abductors dropped me and my elves to the ground, I noticed a dozen men nearby keeping guard. Now, the makeshift camp is down to only two men I've nicknamed Raspy and Knob.

Jaden, in iron shackles and with his head bloodied, lies unconscious next to Oakes. I don't know if he will even have the chance to wake up. Will I be able to gaze into his passionate violet eyes ever again?

I drop my head in despair, cursing that I've caused all this with my very presence in their lives.

Oakes catches my attention and mouths, "This isn't your fault."

Tears pour down my cheek. Because, in many ways, it is.

"What's all this about?" Raspy mocks me when he notes my tears.

I recognize Raspy's voice as the condescending man from the cave where we sheltered and were discovered after entering the mortal realm. Is he also one of Rhys' men? Is Rhys behind this?

I glare at Raspy as he moves to stand in front of me, blocking my view of Jaden and Oakes, a knife in his hand.

"What is it about you that has these elves so worked up?" he sneers and grabs me by the throat.

“Leave her alone!” Oakes yells, straining against his iron shackles.

Raspy’s cohort, Knob, kicks Oakes in the side.

Oakes doesn’t seem to notice his own pain, focusing instead on my danger.

But after another direct kick to the head, Oakes is left in a daze.

Raspy suggests to Knob, “Let’s finish this. How about I have my fun, and you have yours?”

Knob smirks his agreement and punches Oakes hard across his face, knocking him out. Blood blooms on Oakes’ split lip as his head hits the ground.

Raspy tosses his knife aside, thinking I’m properly subdued now.

He grabs me by my throat, yanking me up, and then crashes me backward onto the flatter ground to stun and disorient me.

Then he kicks me in my side with enough force to make me wheeze with the pain of it.

He’s not paying attention to my squirming though, and I have been loosening the binds on my wrists. I use his distracted moment to wrench my hands free.

With his fists raised, it appears as if he plans on pummeling me to death now. He lunges to pin me down with his weight and bash my head in.

I remember Jaden’s instruction and bring my knees up and against the man’s chest as he launches toward me.

As his body hits my shins, I lift my hips to wedge him away from my body, stopping his approach.

Braced against my knees, Raspy swings his punches wildly, aiming for my head and body.

I block most of his blows with my forearms. At the same time, I maneuver to kick at his hips to shove him backward.

Using his confusion, I bring my other leg up and ram my booted foot into his face. As he falls to the side in a daze, I slam the heel of my hand into his nose. I hear a crack, letting me know I've broken it.

Raspy scrambles to get away from my barrage, holding his face, that's covered in his own blood.

I don't let up my onslaught and kick the side of his head again.

My attacker falls unconscious.

I jump up, grab Raspy's discarded knife, and spin to see Knob holding his oversized dagger, ready to bring it down into Oakes' chest for a kill strike.

I lunge forward, jabbing Raspy's knife into Knob's side.

My effort stops Oakes' murder, but it isn't enough to kill or incapacitate Knob.

He spins around, swinging his dagger at me.

I leap back, the blade narrowly missing my abdomen.

On his second swing, I'm not as fast. Knob's dagger slices across my stomach.

Instantly, blood darkens my dress.

I clutch my stomach in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the bleeding.

Knob punches me while I protect my wound.

I fall to my knees.

He grabs my hair and wrenches me to look at him. "It's over, *princess*," he spits.

Then both Knob and I hear a scuffle and shouts just beyond the dense brush.

He freezes, waiting for someone to appear.

MINE

ELDRIN

I crash through the bushes and let out a roar, quickly taking in the situation. Wyn's clothes are torn and filthy from blood and mud.

I yell, desperation and rage in my voice, "*LET HER GO!*"

Instead, her attacker holds the blade to Wyn's throat. He swiftly moves behind her, using her as a shield. He pulls her head back farther, exposing her delicate neck to the knife's edge. "Let's see if your healer elf can heal this!" His dagger slices across her skin.

Behind Wyn's attacker, Rhys throws a knife, sinking it into the man's back.

The vermin's blade loosens in his hand, but its sharp edge continues to cut Wyn's throat.

Her eyes widen with shock.

I lunge forward, pulling Wyn away from her attacker, then run my sword through him, ensuring his death.

Clasping her limp body to me, I call to her, "Wyn?"

She doesn't respond.

Blood flows freely from her neck.

Rhys clamps a hand over the wound to staunch the blood loss.

The gleam of life in her eyes begins to fade.

“Oakes!” I yell as I pick her up. But Oakes has barely regained consciousness from his beating. “Help me!” I say to the commander.

Rhys keeps the pressure on Wyn’s wound as I carry her over to my healer. He tries to reassure me by saying, “It doesn’t appear as if he hit the major blood channel.”

“Wynstelle? How is your stomach? Wyn?” I call, hoping to keep her alive by talking to her.

Her face is deadly pale. She has already lost too much blood to acknowledge me.

Oakes curses as he comes back to his senses and sees Wyn’s condition. “My shackles! Get them off so I can heal her.”

I take over applying the pressure on her neck.

“I have a skeleton key!” Rhys pulls a metal object from his pocket, and unlocks Oakes cuffs. Then he quickly does the same for an unconscious Jaden.

I can see Oakes calling for his healing talent. When it doesn’t surface, Oakes yells, panicking, “My magic is weak! The iron! If we were in Elfhame...”

“Please, at least just try to close the wound so that she doesn’t bleed out,” I demand as gently as I can to quell my friend’s nerves.

Oakes calms with the orders. He holds Wyn close, sending what healing magic he can muster into her.

As he does his magic, I study Jaden’s prone form. “Will he—”

“Just knocked out,” Oakes says. “They beat him badly. I expect he’ll wake soon now that he is out of the iron shackles.”

“I think we captured all of them,” a human soldier says as he runs up to Rhys. “But I believe Princess Twyla is hurt.”

“How bad?”

“She brushes it off as nothing, but I swear she’s hurt.”

“Bring her here. Now,” I order.

“Already here,” Twyla says, charging forward. Her hands are on her own stomach and throat, clutching them. “Move aside, Eldrin.”

I do, but with a puzzled look.

Twyla studies Wyn’s condition and then orders, “Commander Rhys, can you and your men check the perimeter for those that might have escaped and would attack us again?” She pauses, knowing her would-be suitor is concerned for her health. “I’m fine. *Go!* I have Eldrin and his Elven guards here to protect me.”

When Rhys hesitates, she barks, “*Now!*”

The commander rushes off to do her bidding, shouting at the other soldiers.

I understand from her cues that she needs privacy, so I order my Elven guards to secure the area and keep an eye out for attacks. “Don’t let any human back in this clearing until I say.”

The guards’ positions themselves between the wilderness and our inner circle.

Twyla places one hand on Wyn’s back, where their marks link them, and the other on the stomach wound.

Wyn’s wounds begin to seal.

“Keep hold of her,” Twyla warns Oakes in a conspiratorial whisper so even the Elven guards can’t hear. “It is *your* magic that is healing the wounds.”

Oakes nods, mouth pressed firm, understanding Twyla’s words. She can’t reveal her true nature as an Elven changeling and apparently as a healer to boot.

I scan the surroundings to see if anyone lingers to overhear. “How extensive are her injuries?” I can’t bear to look at Wyn’s battered appearance, blaming myself for all her suffering.

“I can’t sense anything clearly.” Oakes grunts out a curse directed at himself. “My mind is still scrambled.”

Twyla then touches and seals the slice across Wyn’s throat. “She’ll make it. I think,” she says with more desperation than conviction. “The wounds are closed, but barely. But we need to be careful when we move her, or they could reopen. Once we are secure in the castle, she will need more attention to strengthen the repairs.”

With a quick nod, I turn away from the scene and inspect Jaden, examining the burns on his wrists from the iron shackles.

His eyes flutter open.

“*Jaden?*” I clasp my hand on his shoulder.

With a shake of his head and then a wince of regret, Jaden grimaces at me. He rubs his recently bound wrists. After gingerly touching his head, he comes away with blood on his fingers. He frowns at the sight and then looks over at Oakes. Jaden can only see Wyn’s collapsed frail form and sprawled out in Oakes’ arms, and blood soaking her entire dress.

Twyla and Oakes are blocking the rest of his view.

“Wyn!” Jaden cries out and reaches for her.

I can see that he thinks she’s dead and that his soul can’t bear that thought.

I catch Jaden’s arm as he tries to move closer. He tugs his arm away, but I stop him again so the healers can continue their work. “Let Oakes heal her.”

“How bad?” Jaden asks me when he realizes I’m preventing him for a reason. He desperately looks at me for answers. “What happened?” His voice is shaking.

“They cut her neck and stomach.”

Jaden sucks in a breath. “Is she going to—” He can’t finish his question and slowly crawls over to our love.

Seeing Jaden’s anguish only elevates mine. My rock solid mentor is about to crack.

“Twyla thinks she will pull through,” I say, with little hope.

After several more minutes of healing, Oakes calls, “Wynstelle? Can you hear me?”

She doesn’t rouse to answer him.

“With the amount of healing Wyn has had, she should have responded to our calls,” Oakes whispers to Twyla for confirmation.

Twyla hems in agreement.

Jaden doesn’t acknowledge the pessimistic commentary, instead he pushes forward so he can touch her. He gently strokes Wyn’s temple and speaks soothingly to her. “Wyn? I need you to heal these scratches. We all need you here. I promise we will face whatever comes our way. We’ll fight it. *Together.*”

“We promise,” Oakes and I agree in unison.

A moment later, Wyn’s breathing deepens, and her eyes crack open. “You’re alright?” she asks, her voice cracking with the damage.

We nod to reassure her.

Pleased with our answer, she smiles weakly as she looks at each of us in turn. Then she winces with pain and closes her eyes, mumbling, “Thank you... for everything.”

Wyn falls limp.

Jaden feels for a pulse but can’t register one. “Is she—?”

“She’s holding on but by a thread,” Twyla answers solemnly.

I don’t like Wyn’s last words. It sounds like a farewell.

HEARTACHE

OAKES

*W*ith great care, I cradle Wyn within my healing embrace on our ride back to King Nathaniel's castle, making sure the horse doesn't jostle her fragile body. It's probably a blessing that she fell unconscious again almost immediately after we roused her. She won't feel the pain that exists in her still damaged condition.

Will she wake again? Or has she given up on life?

Since Eldrin's news about having to return to meet with King Magnus, I sense she doesn't have much hope left in her. I wonder if part of her thinks it will be easier to leave her existence now before being betrayed by the fae once again.

Does she believe *I* will leave her to a horrible fate under the King's orders? Can she not see a future with any of us in it? Can she not see a happy future of any kind? Or am I the fool to believe the stars will align so that she can have a happy life? Possibly *with* me?

I curse myself that I wasn't enough for her when she needed me most. I wasn't able to save her from those pathetic men. Bound and unconscious, I could do nothing but watch as the blades sliced her gut and throat.

How many more wounds did she suffer that I can't see? I don't know yet what happened while I was knocked out. I don't want to know, wishing to remain ignorant of how severely I have failed her, if only for another few moments.

Eventually, I will have to use my magic and see how extensively she has been brutalized.

I glance at Twyla riding beside me. None of us dare speak of the changeling's healing abilities and her deep connection to Wyn. I worry that there's something more to the changeling's skill. Does Twyla have a natural gift for healing? No, I didn't sense that magic in her. I suspect the changeling's bond with Wyn is the key to her unusually impressive healing power in the mortal realm. What does that connection mean for Wyn? Is she harmed by it? Or is it a blessing?

When I return to Elfhome, I will have to ask Mage Neven about the implications. I won't be able to trust the changeling's word, even if she has just saved Wyn's life. She's likely compelled through magic to lie about her true nature, or at least the parts Magnus wants to keep hidden from the realms.

Just before our group reaches the castle walls, Princess Twyla announces, "I will keep Wynstelle in my chambers tonight."

I instinctively pull Wyn closer to my chest, unhappy with the thought of letting her leave my side ever again.

Eldrin opens his mouth to argue, but Twyla shuts him up before he can. "*I will take care of her. Give her solace after what has happened. Oakes has healed her enough.*"

I bristle at the comment but can't argue without drawing attention. *I want to give Wyn solace and healing. However, my logic steps in, reminding me that Twyla can heal Wyn more than I can at the moment. My magic is but a trickle after all the damage it innately repaired in my body and then for Wyn. I'm spent. The mortal realm does very little to refuel my supply. If I were to insist on staying with Wyn, it would be for purely selfish reasons and not for my love's benefit.*

Thinking of leaving her in this condition makes my heart ache. *Who am I fooling?* My heart aches every single moment I'm away from her. What has this mighty mortal done to me? And it doesn't seem to be an isolated incident. Jaden and even Eldrin are under her spell.

Is it a spell?

Dread briefly fills me, thinking of the changeling magic and wondering what else is in play.

But when I think about my feelings for Wynstelle, it isn't any magic other than love.

All of my admiration for Wyn is aligned with my ideal expectations for a mate. She is fierce *and* kind. An honorable and mighty mortal. She is honest with her emotions, sometimes disquietingly transparent.

Her emotional sincerity is vitally important to me. I despise it when I sense someone's genuine feelings conflict with the masks they display to the world. So many of the elves I've encountered through the years have deceit on their lips and in their hearts. I blame my political position most of the time for my lack of viable mates. Though I know that even those not involved in the manipulations of the royal courts can be uncaring and full of pretense, too.

With Wyn, there is integrity. I also love all of her odd quirks and refreshing outlook on life.

When we enter King Nathaniel's outer castle walls, I let Wyn down from my horse into Jaden's arms.

My dark-haired friend carries her through the castle's main entrance directly to Twyla's chambers.

I let him, even knowing Jaden still is suffering from his own injuries, but Jaden desperately needs to see Wyn close up, to see that she will be alright. I can only pray to the stars that she will be.

Our group hands off our horses to the stable boys and follows Jaden inside. Rhys and his soldiers nod to Eldrin, then he says, "I will inform the King the princesses have returned."

"Thank you." Eldrin dips his head in appreciation. "And thank you for your help today. Tell the king I will be along to give him my account soon. I want to make sure Wynstelle is settled first."

Rhys bows deeply and hurries off in the direction of the king's private meeting chambers.

Eldrin, Twyla, the Elven guards, and I all follow after Jaden as he carries Wyn with a slower stride than usual. Finally, he makes it to Twyla's suite and places her on the huge bed.

After waiting for the attendants to leave the room, Jaden kisses Wyn's forehead and caresses her cheek. Reluctantly, he shuffles toward the door, preparing to leave. Eldrin strokes her hair back from her face as if he were memorizing it and then follows Jaden.

Hesitant to go, I gaze down at Wyn's beaten condition and choke out a question for Twyla. "You can *continue*... in her recuperation?"

"Yes. Use your healing abilities on yourself now." Twyla's sharp golden eyes study my wounds, and then she notes the sorry state Jaden is in. "And heal Jaden too. Wyn's *body* will be healed by tomorrow."

Sensing the changeling's concerns, I ask, "But you worry about her mind?" I brush my hand over Wyn's while she sleeps. "I was knocked out... did something... Do you sense what happened to her?" My voice breaks as I ask.

Twyla shakes her head soberly. "I will ask her what happened when she is ready to talk. But I sense her will to live is weaker than it was when we arrived here."

My forehead furrows. "I came to just as that man was about to kill me. His blade bearing down on me. I was as good as dead. And then... Wyn risked her life to save me—stabbing him. And now, she suffers the wounds I should have." My eyes water, thinking she might not pull through.

"She is brave and resilient. Believe me, I feel her strength in my soul." Twyla pats me on my shoulder. "She cares for you more than even she comprehends yet. That's why she risked herself."

"Wyn couldn't stand by and do nothing while you were in peril," Jaden agrees. "You can't blame yourself."

“It’s the fault of violent instigators.” Twyla nods. “The men behind the attack *will* be punished. My father will see to it.”

I sigh as I stand. “Let her know whatever has happened, it changes nothing for how I feel... or what I’m willing to offer her.” I turn to see Jaden and Eldrin at the door, nodding in agreement. “It looks as though that goes for Eldrin and Jaden, too.”

“*If* she needs to hear that sentiment, I will tell her.” Twyla smiles and gives me a nudge. “Now, let me clean her up and finish her recovery.”

CHANGELING

WYNSTELLE

In the morning, I wake to Twyla's gentle touch on my back, where my changeling mark is located. I glance around, not seeing my elves and I immediately worry.

"Are they alright?" I ask with a groggy voice.

Twyla lets go of my mark and sits back in her chair by the bed. "Yes, the elves are fine." Twyla shakes her head in disbelief. "How are *you*?"

"Physically?" I assess my body. "I'm tired. There's a tingle across my neck and stomach."

"That's normal with accelerated healing. I was worried that you wouldn't survive the injuries or the emotional trauma of being so close to death." Twyla strokes my arm. "When you are ready to talk about what happened, I'm here for you."

I rub my throat and sit up, propping myself against the headboard. "It was scary. I thought they would kill Jaden and Oakes and start a realm war over my death." The idea of people on both sides dying makes me shiver.

"Your concern was over... a war?" Twyla raises her eyebrows. "And the elves?"

"Of course." I frown, wondering why that's absurd.

Twyla mirrors my frown. "What about *you*?"

"I don't want to die, but I'd hate that others might die because I was sacrificed as a pawn." I bite my lip, trying to

find the words. “It’s just... it’s unlikely that I will have a long, significant life. Being a sick baby, I am lucky to have lived this long. So yes, I worry more about the elves and a potential war.”

“Oh, sweet princess.” Twyla pours and offers me a glass of water. “Do you so rarely consider your needs?”

“Being a servant, not a princess, I have had little chance to worry about *my* needs—to be spoiled with my selfishness.” I shrug and sip the water.

“It has nothing to do with being spoiled,” Twyla says with a huff. I wonder if Twyla feels guilty for enjoying the life I was supposed to have. “When you get back to Elfhome, you need to stand up to King Magnus. *You* should choose your mate.”

“No. I shouldn’t mate with anyone.” I study my glass. “*That* would be selfish.”

“Why shouldn’t you be a little selfish?” Twyla gestures to the door. “You have three amazing males hoping for your bond.”

“Perhaps. For now, they are interested in me, but I’m young. In a few years, I will wither, and they will be the same beautiful males they are today. They will grow tired of my human novelty soon enough.”

“Nonsense!” Twyla grabs my hand. “They understand the nature of your mortality, and they want to bond with you even though you have a shortened life span. *And* they each know they will mourn your loss for a long time—centuries!”

“You aren’t saying anything to convince me. You’re doing the opposite, actually.” I pull my hand away from the pretender-princess.

At that moment, I resent the changeling. How dare Twyla tell me what to do with my life? She doesn’t know what it’s like to be a servant and a *real* mortal. But ultimately, I am angry that I can’t be with the elves the way they want me to be.

“They shouldn’t suffer because they care for me.”

“*Love* you.” Twyla has a bemused look on her face. “And love makes you suffer, and dance with bliss, and drives you mad, and gives you blessings that you would never experience otherwise.” Twyla smiles as if she has just stolen a whole pie for herself, which seems so odd to me with her current emotional state. “There’s something very important that I must talk with you about before you return to Elfhame.”

I’m nervous to hear another massive secret revealed.

BONDS

WYNSTELLE

Oakes, Jaden, and Eldrin are allowed into Twyla's room after the midday meal.

I'm fully dressed and appear recovered, but my eyes feel heavy. The knowledge of what Twyla shared weighs on my shoulders.

What will I do with what Twyla has told me?

Eldrin notices my fatigue, walks over, and gently holds my hands. "How are you?" His head tilts, studying me for signs of remaining injuries.

"Just tired." I half-smile. "We should return to Elfame as soon as possible. We can't risk another incident like that."

"No." Oakes moves next to me. "You have just been through... *a lot*." Oakes' deep voice cracks. "I'm sorry I failed to protect you from your assault."

I watch the elves' faces, reading their expressions and furtive glances at my body. More than my life being threatened, it's apparent they are worried about the nature of my attack.

Would they not want me anymore if that man defiled me?

"You don't have to tell us anything. We love you no matter what," Oakes says quickly.

I need to relieve them of their worries. "He hit me, but he didn't... you know, do anything other than beat and kick me."

My eyes well with tears, remembering my fear. “I was lucky to fight him off with the maneuvers Jaden taught me. I knocked him out. And then, when the other man tried to kill you, I stabbed your attacker. He turned his blade on to me. Eldrin showed up. And you know the rest.”

“Thank you for saving my life.” Oakes kneels at my feet and holds my hands. “But I am supposed to be *your* protector.”

I place a hand on his strong jaw. “I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt you.”

“I’m so sorry that any of this happened at all.” Eldrin throws his muscular arms around me. Then so do the other two elves. “I’m glad you didn’t have to suffer in that way. But even if it happened, it wouldn’t change how we feel about you. We wouldn’t rescind our mating proposals. You know that, right?”

I try to shrug, but the males are crowding me. They are a solid muscular wall, trying to keep out all the pain. “Can I just face King Magnus now and figure out what is in store for me next?”

“You aren’t meeting him alone.” Eldrin looks me in the eye. “We are all facing him—*together*.”

“I figured you would be there when I met with him. However, if he sends me away to some other elf or kingdom, then I’m on my own. If I’m *matched* with a cruel elf, hopefully, the torture won’t last long.” I shake with the idea of Magnus gifting me to a male who will probably abuse me. Kill me.

“You think I would allow that?” Eldrin’s jaw flutters with my palpable fear. “I will force my father to do right by you.”

“But he’s *The King*. Your king!” I protest.

“I don’t care.” Eldrin squeezes me to him. “I’m prepared to go to *any* lengths to keep you safe.”

I’m warmed by the sentiment, but worry Eldrin *will* go to those lengths. I don’t want him or anyone else to suffer for me. “But I want you safe too.”

THE WARNING

ELDRIN

*B*efore the group leaves for Elfhome, Princess Twyla asks me for a moment alone in her chambers.

“I’m sure you are unfamiliar with the changeling ways, since it’s secreted even among the fae. However, you have seen enough in the last few days for you to understand the powerful magic that is part of the exchange.”

“Yes.” I fold my arms over my chest, uncertain of where Twyla is taking the conversation. “I intended to ask you if Wynstelle was being harmed through your... bond.”

Twyla’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, and it makes me alert for deception. Her words rush out, “Oh, no! She isn’t harmed by *me*.”

“Are you suggesting *I* am harming her?” I know my jump to that conclusion is based on my own fears that I have put Wyn in danger since I summoned her. “Do you have some *opinion* or warning about my interest in Wynstelle?”

“My opinion matters little. But I approve.”

I noticeably relax. “Oh, well, then what do you have to tell me?”

“There’s a rumor of a mate bonding ritual that can be created with a human who has a changeling mark. Although I caution against it, you should be aware so as to decide yourself, or for any other *worthy* elf who she might bond with, in case they should desire the connection. Or, if you don’t wish

for a deeper bond, I wanted to warn you how to *avoid* creating it.”

“Go on.”

“Legends suggest that if an elf touches the mark when consummating a mate bonding, it may form the same bond that elves have with their Elven mates. The mated elf will be subtly attuned to her emotions, perhaps even her location, if she is distressed. Just as I was able to. This is a commitment of attachment in and of itself, but...” Twyla frowns.

“What’s the reason you would caution against it?” I ask.

“When she dies, the loss will be extreme, more than a normal loss. I dread that day myself, for I will share in the grief. A grief that has the potential to ruin us.”

I’m quiet for several moments, wondering if what Twyla says is even possible. “Thank you. I will treat this information with caution and contemplation.”

JOURNEY HOME

ELDRIN

Wynstelle is quiet on the way back to the Elfhome portal. King Nathaniel loaned her a horse for the trip back, but only as far as the portal. Fortunately, Oakes and I brought our own, with Jaden's horse in tow, when we returned to the mortal realm.

Our Elven guards ride as sentinels surrounding us. A human patrol, led by Rhys, trails after our group to ensure we all return safely.

As we arrive at the realm portal, Jaden calls out to Wyn, "Since your horse will remain in the mortal realm, would you like to ride with me?"

"Alright," Wyn says as she dismounts and hands the reins off to Rhys.

I grumble that I wasn't quick enough to offer.

Oakes smirks and reminds me, "It's best if she arrives on one of our horses and not yours."

"But it would irritate my father."

"Exactly. We don't need him *more* irritated," Oakes whispers. "Let's see what honey might buy us this time."

Oakes joins Jaden and Wyn, waiting for the portal to open. He calls out his goodbyes to his new human friends.

I grin, watching the interaction. I'm blessed to have a diplomatic advisor so adept at his job. Quickly, my mood turns

again. I won't be able to talk to Wyn privately on the ride to my castle. I know Oakes is probably right about keeping my distance for now, but I want, *need*, to be close to her. She has all but ignored me since I professed my love. What's going on in her mind and in her heart? Will she accept my offer?

As if she hears my thoughts, Wyn looks at me from her perch on Jaden's horse. Her cheeks are flush as Jaden has his arms locked around her. Is she more interested in my advisor's proposal? If she is, then I know I must accept the fate of watching her fall deeper in love with my friend. Yet, if I'm about to lose her, I would rather it be to either Jaden or Oakes. At least I know they will do everything in their power to make her happy. They have already risked their lives. And if they falter in assuring her happiness, I will be there to make certain they stay focused.

Rhys' laughter cuts through my thoughts. When I shoot him a glare, he smiles and says, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, why?" I say, confused.

"I've been talking to you, but you seem much more focused on Princess Wynstelle's choice for a ride."

I adjust my cloak in irritation. "I was just thinking about how I almost lost her. It would have ruined me."

Rhys nods in agreement. "That was close. I never knew the elves could magically heal wounds as severe as *that*."

"Few elves have a gift that powerful."

"And to have a healer like Oakes at your side," Rhys says. "Must be useful during war..."

"Let's hope we don't find out." I watch Rhys for a reaction, still questioning the commander's commitment to the treaty.

"I concur." Rhys stares at Oakes. "Wynstelle is lucky Oakes managed to do so much when he was quite injured himself."

"She was." I grip my reins. What is the human hinting at? Or is he hinting at anything?

“Although I’m still wondering why Princess Twyla came along,” Rhys says casually.

Now I’m certain there isn’t anything casual about the comment. Rhys suspects something about Twyla.

I wave off his questioning probe. “Elven warriors are males and females. As you have seen, one of my personal guards is a female. If the princess wishes to rescue her cousin to prevent a war, then I say she showed admirable bravery and only reinforced her right to rule one day.”

“Yes.” Rhys nods. “Princess Twyla is brave. Braver than I previously gave her credit for. Though I would have grieved if we had lost her in the incident when she did not need to join us.”

“Then it is lucky we all survived.” I tilt my head in farewell. “If we meet again, I hope it is in celebration and not upheaval.”

“So do I.” Rhys bows slightly on his horse. “Your Highness.”

I quietly chant a spell and swipe my hand at the portal entrance, and the window to the fae realm opens. Irritated that the humans are posting a guard at the portal, I almost growl at the man standing nearby. I only wrangle my ire because, for the humans, it *is* the prudent thing to do, covering a potential enemy’s entry point.

Besides, I did the same the last time I came through, posting guards on my side to ensure no more fae travel into the mortal’s realm. Now this secret entryway has been compromised on both sides.

I didn’t want to reveal one of our stable portals, but the incident has forced me to expose the portal for peace and my advisors’ lives. During our peace talks, all existing gateway locations were a nonnegotiable contingent for King Nathaniel’s cooperation in releasing Wyn to me.

Shaking off my disappointment of compromised secrets, I remember it’s in my power to have a *new* stable portal created.

I wonder if, strategically, it should be located closer to Nathaniel's castle.

I call out to my advisors and guards, "Let's go home."

ELFHAME

WYNSTELLE

All the elves let out a collective sigh of relief when they cross through the portal. I do not. I tense even more.

Jaden squeezes my side reassuringly, sensing my anxiety. “We *will* keep you safe.”

Leaning back in his warm embrace, I nod but convey none of the thoughts in my mind. Whatever the final outcome might be, the meeting with King Magnus will not go smoothly.

“We’ll settle in, clean up, and I’ll send word we have returned for our *audience*.” Eldrin’s voice is tight, obviously not looking forward to the confrontation, either.

I automatically hum my agreement. There’s nothing left to say. I am a ward of the Elfhome realm once again, and at the mercy of the Elven King.

I catch Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden trading a look of concern. None of us knows what’s going to happen to me.

I’m sure as the event of meeting their king unfolds, they will realize they need to rescue themselves instead of worrying about what happens to me.

I won’t blame them. In fact, I will encourage them to protect their own futures.

Because it would kill me to see any of them hurt because of me.

Once inside Ryven Castle, we retreat to the Prince's wing and to our rooms.

As Jaden leads me to my old suite, Eldrin stops him. "No, Jaden. Wyn is coming with me to my private chambers. I don't want her out of my sight until we settle the matter with my father."

Jaden and Oakes both grumble.

"I know you want me to back off, but I insist." Eldrin gives them a pointed look.

I assume he needs to speak to me or he's just being possessive. Either way, I don't care where I clean up. I only wish to wash up and change my clothes before seeing Magnus.

Finally, they concede, and Eldrin rushes off after offering me his arm to thread with mine.

Our trusted guards, Corwin and Baelen, stand watch just outside his door.

To the guard who was waiting for Eldrin's return, he says, "Have my attendant deliver a wide selection of female clothes to my room so we can pick out what Wynstelle would like to wear for our audience with the king."

Eldrin allows me to bathe alone in his lavish ensuite bathroom with a massive heated bathing pool, giving me the space I need.

Once the piles of expensive clothing options are delivered, I pick out a simple but elegant dark green shift dress with a narrow brocade trim that projects a persona of trustworthiness and unpretentiousness.

After brushing and braiding my hair, I rest on top of the bedcovers while Eldrin makes use of his ensuite and freshens up.

My eyes wander over the extravagant decor of Eldrin's room. When taking in his surroundings, there is no doubt that he's a prince.

However, despite hearing about my royal bloodline, I still don't feel like a princess.

Besides, I'm not a princess in Elfhame.

I'm a servant—*property*.

My life is not my own. Magnus owns my future and my happiness. I doubt he will treat me with kindness.

On that note, I still don't understand why Eldrin insists on the foolhardy idea of mating with me when I'm clearly not a proper match.

MAGNUS

ELDRIN

A knock at the door comes right as I exit the bathing room, pulling my shirt on. I answer the hail and am informed that the king is now ready to see my guest and me. I send the messenger away, then turn to Wyn.

She has bolted upright with the news, the most animated I have seen her since the human rebel's abduction. Her fists clutch the bedding, and her face tightens. She is shutting down even more.

My heart clenches as she slides off the bed, her expression wooden, ready to meet her fate.

"Wait, I need to ask something before we go to the king." I stare into her eyes. "Do *you* want me as your mate?"

She opens her mouth to answer, but hesitates.

"Be honest." I brush a loose lock of hair from her face. "I need to know what you want so that I can demand it for you. If you don't desire me, I won't be angry. Disappointed that I ruined things between us, yes, but never angry at you." Her eyes drift down, so I gently lift her chin so she will remain focused. "Wyn, I need to know what life I should negotiate for you. I must know what you want."

"I don't want to be given to some cruel elf."

"That won't happen. I won't let it," I say with more force than I mean to, but the idea has me going mad with rage. I take a deep breath, realizing she hasn't seen much of my newly

developed generous side. “Or would you rather have Oakes or Jaden as a mate?”

“But I’m a human,” she says in a soft voice.

“Did you think I would forget?”

“No. However, you barely know me. And you are promised to another... and your betrothal ensures the security and peace between two Elven kingdoms! I can’t have you trade my happiness if it means others will suffer.” She sucks in a breath and glances away again. “Besides all that, I’m just a simple human servant, no matter what I was born to be. I can’t be all you need.”

“You are more than I can handle.” I chuckle to make her realize how silly the thought is. “How could you think you are less? I wished to mate bond with you before your lineage was discovered. Wyn, you are far from simple and no longer a servant.”

“I was raised as a servant. That doesn’t just evaporate, because I’m dressing in fancy dresses and sleeping on a comfortable bed in a castle now. Your attention doesn’t change my past.”

“I never thought it would. You are stronger, smarter, and more compassionate because of your past. You didn’t need to change. I did.” I smile softly, “Alright, there is one thing you could change, and that’s believing you deserve to be happy.”

Wyn grabs my hands and holds them tightly, almost pleading with me now. “You deserve a mate who will offer you status, not condemnation. I will only be a strain on you because both realms want to attack or threaten me. I will die *long* before you. You will only suffer if you mate with me.” Wyn’s eyes and nose turn red with emotion. “I’m a curse.”

“No. You’re a blessing. And you didn’t answer my question.” I tilt her face to look at me. “Do *you* want me as your mate?”



Wyn and I join Oakes and Jaden on the way to our meeting with King Magnus, trailed by our Elven guards.

“He wants to conduct this meeting in the throne room to intimidate Wynstelle,” I growl at Oakes and Jaden.

“Likely,” Oakes agrees, but then looks to Wyn. “But it doesn’t matter where we meet. Magnus is fearsome in any room.”

As we pass the king’s private meeting chambers’ door, Jaden halts and sniffs the air. “Wait.” He presses his nose to the seam of the closed door. “I recognize that scent,” he whispers. “The elf who took Wyn.”

Wyn’s eyes go wide, and she steps back, pulling my arm. Despite her fear, she protectively places herself in front of me as if the elf will jump out and murder us right then.

I’m shocked that her first instinct is to protect me, but then she did fight off an attacker to rescue Oakes from certain death. She’s much braver than I ever expected.

Rage brews inside me, thinking about what the elf did to my love and seeing Wyn’s panic clearly written on her beautiful face.

Breaking free from her hold and stepping around her, I ram myself full force against the door, and it crashes open to surprise anyone hiding inside.

Jaden and Oakes draw their swords and rush to follow me into the meeting chamber.

A male runs for the door on the other side of the room.

“Stop!” I order.

Jaden zips past me and tackles the male to the ground. Oakes helps to subdue our captive.

Wyn stands safely at the threshold, watching the scene unfold with two of our guards protecting her.

The elf turns and freezes when he sees Wynstelle.

I point at the male. “Is this the elf who attacked you?”

Wyn's fists ball up at her side, as if ready to punch the elf senseless. "It is."

"Was it at King Magnus' bidding you took Wynstelle to the mortal realm?" I ask him.

The male glares at me but says nothing. I look at Oakes.

He snarls. "I sense it was."

"Bring him along for our little get-together." I storm out of the room and catch Wynstelle's hand as I pass her. Guiding her quickly down the hall, I whisper, "Are you alright?"

Her face is tight, clouding over once again, emotionless. "Yes."

Even I can see she's protectively walling herself away from the world.

My father is relaxing on his throne, conversing with his commander, Turgon, when I burst in. Their calm demeanor unravels, but only for a moment when they see the assassin in Jaden's clutches.

"Your Majesty, we found the culprit in Wynstelle's abduction and attempted murder." I bow and wave a hand at our prisoner. "He seems to be an associate of yours." I glance at Turgon. "Or do you claim him?"

"What is your point?" Magnus asks.

"My *point* is..." I take a deep breath to calm myself. "I demand you make amends for Wynstelle's treatment. You had Wynstelle disposed of. And before that, you promised her father much more than what she received."

"She's alive, isn't she?" Magnus flicks his hand dismissively.

"Barely, thanks to your ghoulish elf here."

Magnus ignores me and waves Wynstelle closer. "So, mortal, what do you have to say for yourself? Crawling into our castle beds and stealing my son from me?"

Wynstelle doesn't cower at the powerful ruler before her. She squares her shoulders and projects confidence.

I'm pleased she's demonstrating her strength in front of these males. She is tougher than they've given her credit for.

"First, I *stole* no one." Wyn levels her eyes with the Elven King. "Second, from what I understand, I was invited here twenty years too late." She pauses, and then says with emphasis, "*Your Majesty.*"

I resist the profound urge to smirk.

"Don't fool yourself into thinking your royal birth in the mortal realm makes you my equal. You lost your birthright when you were given away—like trash."

"Princess Wynstelle lost no such thing. Her title remains," I snap. "And I *am* claiming her as my mate."

"You don't get to make that choice."

"You will either honor my wishes, or I will make the rest of your reign a miserable one." My voice is thick with vengeance.

"Don't threaten me." King Magnus' jaw tenses.

"That is a *promise*. And I keep my promises."

Turgon goes rigid and becomes more alert with the most recent exchange. His hand rests on his sword, the very movement a threat.

I wonder if my sire would let Turgon strike his son down. I don't like the probability of it happening to any of my people in the room.

Magnus' face boils to red. His Elven pride wounded over the question of his honor. I think it's ridiculous that he is only angry about being caught and called out for his underhanded behavior.

After a moment of fuming, Magnus speaks, "You want this human so desperately?" He grips the armrest of his throne. "Have her!" Then he eyes my advisors. Obviously, he has heard rumors of my advisors' interest in Wyn. "*If* she'll have *you*. The human can accept *any* proposal she receives in our realm—"

“Fine,” I interrupt. “But don’t go back on your promise. Wynstelle *will* make the decision as to her future. She will have complete rights as an Elfhome citizen when mate bonded to an elf.”

“So be it,” Magnus grumbles. “Not that it will make much difference.”

“If you don’t honor your word,” I threaten. “I will challenge you for your kingship on grounds you have dishonored our kind.”

“Don’t tread down that path. You won’t last long.” Magnus pauses, allowing the force of his words to wash over me. “As I was saying... She will *not* get a proper ceremony with *any* elf. Her mating will be in the commoner’s way. If she chooses you, she will hold no rank or status other than being your consort, and will be known as a courtesan. There will be no formal announcements of her bonding, since she won’t last long, anyway.”

“That better not be a veiled threat to her life.” I step forward. “I demand a blood oath that you will not encourage or order in *any* way, directly or indirectly, any harm unto Wynstelle.”

“I have no reason to do that.”

“I have reason to ask it of you since you are not an elf of your word.”

Magnus huffs and waves me off dismissively.

“*Now.*” My voice is a growl.

Magnus launches from his seat and glowers at me. “Do you think this will stop the inevitable?”

“What are you referring to? The war or Wynstelle’s death?”

“Both.”

“You *have* been trying to incite a war?” I ask.

Magnus raises an eyebrow. “The mortals threaten our existence every single day. I would be a fool if I wasn’t ready

to cut them down.”

“Using Wynstelle to incite a war ends now. Neither side can survive another conflict.” I glance at my love. “And my affections for Wynstelle will not go away with her death. Even if she doesn’t choose me, I will never mate with Alcina.”

“*You* shouldn’t make promises *you* can’t keep,” King Magnus spits out. He pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment to calm himself. “*Actually...* I want you to mate with this mortal. It will be a quick and brutal lesson. Nothing like a dose of unforgiving reality to instill wisdom for the thick-skulled. Then you will know the hollowness of losing a mate, as I have. Even the loss of a pathetic *human* mate will change you forever.” He scoffs. “She will be gone soon enough. And then you *will* satisfy your agreement with Alcina.”

Although my anger simmers, I stay my response. I’m so close to succeeding in my plans. “Your oath?” I remind my father.

“Let’s get this over with so I don’t have to listen to your blathering anymore. Before you say anything else that you will regret.”

The king removes a small ceremonial dagger from his dais, slices his hand, and offers the knife to me. I do the same. We clasp hands.

“I swear no harm will come to the mortal Wynstelle under my direct orders, indirect comments, or suggestions.” King Magnus squeezes my hand so hard that my knuckles turn white. “How’s that?”

I barely suppress a wince. “Good enough.”

Magnus breaks contact. “You’ll regret this foolish choice in a mate.” He turns and retreats toward his antechamber with Commander Turgon.

I call after them, “And what would you have me do with your assassin?”

“Kill him. He wasn’t proficient in his job if you caught him,” King Magnus says over his shoulder.

The assassin's face pales, and he wrenches against Jaden's firm grip.

When the king leaves the room, Jaden asks me, "What should we do with him?"

Wyn speaks up, "He was under orders from the king." She looks at me with sorrow. "I don't want someone's death on my conscience."

"I don't need your pity, human scum." The assassin spits at her.

Oakes punches the elf in the face. "You won't get any pity from us."

"Agreed," Jaden growls and knees the elf in the back.

I hold back my need to pummel the elf into the ground. "Take him to my dungeon and make him... *comfortable*."

Oakes and Jaden drag the assassin out of the throne room as he kicks and curses.

Wyn shakes her head in disbelief. "You have your own *dungeon*?"

"I have a lot to show you yet," I say suggestively, to lighten the mood.

Wyn nods out of reflex, but her impassive reaction isn't what I hoped for.

I pull her close in an embrace. All I have to do now is convince Wyn that she's my destined mate. Then I can make her happy for the rest of her days. I kiss the top of her head. "You're safe now."

"From your father..." She pulls away and stares into my eyes. "And *that's* only a maybe."

"I understand your concern, but let's celebrate the victories as we earn them."

"I suppose I can do that."

"How about we all have a nice dinner tonight and relax?" I smile reassuringly as I lead her out of the throne room and

toward my wing of the castle.

THE PAST

JADEN

*A*fter delivering the assassin to the dungeon, Oakes and I climb to the top of the stairs.

“Wynstelle is closing herself off from us,” I say.

Oakes drags his long, brown locks out of his face. “Yes, I sensed confusion. Sadness. Fear. Worry for us.”

I frown at his confirmation. “All understandable after what she has gone through in the last couple of moon-cycles.”

“We need to make sure Eldrin doesn’t push her any more than he already has.” Oakes bites back a curse. “The King might have scared her. Magnus made her sound like a curse to the realm and to us. Then Eldrin just claims her as his mate after he had said he would wait for her decision? What if Eldrin won’t allow her to pick one of us?”

“Yes, he was adamant about claiming her for himself.” I lower my eyebrows in frustration.

“How would you feel if she accepts his offer?” Oakes asks, with a hefty weight to his words.

I stop in the hallway, looking around for unwanted eavesdroppers, not wanting Eldrin or anyone else to overhear our conversation. “I need to settle my grievances with Eldrin about Amra, so I can have some sense of calm if Wynstelle does choose him.” I tighten my jaw. “Sure, he was just a fledgling when he betrayed me, but *has* he changed much in

the years since? After all these grand gestures, can he do right by Wyn in the days and *decades* to come?”

“I don’t want to admit it, but the prince does seem to have changed. Grown. But I don’t know how much.” Oakes drags his hand over his face in frustration. “Wyn has awakened a new awareness within him, but we won’t know what kind of mate he’ll make until he proves himself through time.”

“It will not be an easy path to mate with Wyn, not for any of us. But he is less prepared to consider someone other than himself. There will be many challenges with her being a mortal, and that *isn’t* including the political backlash. Can he handle being scorned by the other nobles?”

“I don’t know. A moon-cycle ago, I would have said no. But now?” Oakes paces. “My own selfishness wants her for myself.” He raises his eyebrows with a thought. “Or if we *all* commit to her, maybe we can equal her value. We can all face the adversity of what might come—together.”

“You think she would take on more than one mate?” I ask, briefly daring to hope for a solution. “From her words and actions, I don’t think she wants any of us as mates. She doesn’t mind the pleasure we bring her, but she can’t see being with us long term. Not for a commitment. She didn’t mind our touch, but as soon as we confessed our hearts, she recoiled.”

“You’re right,” Oakes agrees. “Until a few days ago, Wyn didn’t even believe elves and humans were allowed to have sexual interactions, let alone mate bond.”

“No. The real problem is that Wyn doesn’t believe that we *love* her.” I say, “She claims not to know what love is. But I feel she’s my true mate. Not just a mate match, but a fated mate.”

“I feel the fated mate call, too. She hasn’t been enthused with any of our proposals though, and I doubt she will receive the idea of being fated any more than just professing our love.” Oakes sighs, and we start again on our way to Eldrin’s chambers. “Somehow, we need to explain how we feel without also pressuring her.”

“And hope she wants any of us,” I say, picking up my gait in my need to see her again.

Brushing past the guards, I enter Eldrin’s private chambers without knocking.

Oakes, with a look of surprise by my brazen behavior, slides inside and waits for Eldrin’s reaction.

The prince glances over from his pacing to see the stern look on my face. “Out with it,” Eldrin says, with surrender in his voice.

Oakes and I glance around the prince’s receiving room.

Eldrin notices our scan of the room. “Wynstelle is asleep in the bedroom.”

The door is shut.

“I know you want Wyn for yourself, but threatening your father wasn’t the right way to go about it. You have to be smarter if you expect to be a suitable mate for her.” My jaw ticks. “You’ve put her in more danger now.”

Eldrin sighs and collapses into one of his plush chairs. “You’re right.”

Oakes and I both raise our eyebrows in disbelief that the prince admits it willingly.

“That is my only regret in my confrontation with my father. I want her, but I fear for her life now.”

Oakes interjects, “The oath was a smart move. However, his sycophants might try to please him and attempt the deed without his bidding. And Turgon believes that an affront to the king is one upon himself.”

Eldrin nods and then says to me, “I sense you are more upset about my claiming her as *my* mate.”

I breathe in to calm myself. “Wyn doesn’t need you strong-arming her into a mating bond. She has gone through so much in the last moon-cycle. Finding out about her origins is more than enough to overwhelm her. Since meeting us, she has had

four near-death experiences. Why should she choose to remain around us at all?"

"Yes. I know I'm horrible. I selfishly brought her here." Eldrin frowns. "What if she *never* truly forgives me for keeping the truth of her summons from her and how I made a deal for her freedom?"

He still doesn't understand my frustration. "No, Eldrin, the real problem is if she forgives and picks you. I'm afraid you're going to grow bored with her, and I can't allow you to hurt her," I say, holding my emotions back so I can say what I need to. "You did that with Amra. I will not stand by while it happens again."

"I understand. I do," Eldrin says, then continues when he sees our exasperated faces. "I took your betrothed to prove I was better than you. But now, I realize stealing someone's love doesn't make me better than my competition. It makes me selfish. I know now that I will *never* be a better elf than you."

My eyes widen. I have never heard the prince talk this way. "Why would you want or need to prove anything? You're the prince. I'm just your advisor."

"I've always looked up to you," Eldrin says and then addresses Oakes, "And you. I have always marked my worth against both of you because you are noble, intelligent, and strong in *every* way."

"I never sensed that sentiment from you," Oakes says.

Eldrin looks a bit shy and hangs his head. "Oakes, I'm sure you must have picked up a bit of the other reason I chased after Amra."

Oakes presses his lips together. It's clear he knows something, but he says nothing to confirm it.

"What do you mean?" I demand.

"Not that it's a good excuse, mind you, but I was jealous of Amra for having you."

"I'm your advisor. She wouldn't have gotten in the way of my pledge to you."

“Not in that way.” Eldrin’s ears turn pink with embarrassment.

Oh, why didn’t I see it before?

“You were everything I wished to be,” Eldrin explains. “All the long hours of training and getting to know you, well, I sort of... became infatuated.”

I notice he doesn’t use the word love for me, and I ask, “Is it the same feeling as what you have for Wyn?”

“It’s not the same. I do not know why. Perhaps because I’ve known you my entire life and grew to care for you in a different context. Even though I long ago gave up my hopes of ever exploring something more with you, if I lost you, I would grieve you beyond measure. However, with Wyn, I believe when she dies, my soul will die too.”

“Will you be able to handle your feelings if Wyn chooses me over you?” I ask.

“I hope so. I think so, because I’m not the same male I was.”

He’s not the same, and I can feel that in my bones. His sincerity doesn’t mean his jealousy won’t rise again.

“You and Oakes have been my guiding light until recently. Until Wynstelle.” Eldrin sighs, heartbreak and hope filling every molecule of his exhale. “I will come to terms with it if Wyn picks either of you instead of me. I will not prevent your love. Perhaps I should encourage her to choose someone *other* than me. Or maybe she shouldn’t have to mate with anyone. I could negotiate with my father again. She needs to know that I will make sure she can have any life she desires. I only want her happiness.”

“That is generous of you.” I’ve searched his words for any deceit and don’t sense any. “You really love her. You’re willing to give her a chance at the best life.”

“Wynstelle has shifted something inside of me. You might not believe I have changed, but I’m not the same person I was before I met her.”

“No,” I whisper, just loud enough for him to hear. “I believe you.”

CONTEMPLATIONS

WYNSTELLE

*W*ith the imminent threat of King Magnus out of the way, I request space to consider my future and retreat to my old room. Reluctantly, the elves agree to give me time to think.

I know waiting for my answer is hardest on Eldrin, unaccustomed to not getting his way immediately as he has his entire life. He also just risked everything to fight for me. But I can't allow that to sway my decision.

This is the first time I have had even a modicum of control over my own life, and I will give myself time to exercise it.

Besides, I need to make sure Magnus won't pull another devious move.

I wonder if I should run away now before I suffer another attack. I figure that is the smart choice. However, the elves have too much of a hold on my heart for me to run without thinking it through.

Jaden's most trusted guards, those who have traveled with us to the mortal realm—Corwin, Baelen, Agis, and Daylor are assigned in rotations of two outside my door at all times. Only Eldrin, Jaden, and Oakes can order them anywhere else but their post.

However, despite their promise to give me space, the elves can't wait long before they interrupt my alone time.



Jaden checks on me the next morning, bringing a plate of food. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to join us for breakfast?”

I smile, but it’s a tired smile. I’m still in bed, with a lethargic energy about me, and I have no plans to get up soon. “I might join you for dinner,” I say noncommittally.

“I promise we won’t pressure you to choose one of us over breakfast,” Jaden says with a smile as he takes my hand, gently tugging me to move.

I pull my hand back and tuck it under the covers.

Jaden sits down on the bed but keeps his hands to himself. “I’m sorry, but we’re worried.”

“I have had little more than a day to think about my future. I know I’m mortal and have to work on a faster time schedule, but don’t you think a decision such as a committed mate deserves more than a blink of an eye to consider?”

“Of course.” Jaden can hear my anger in my tone. “I’m not worried about you picking me for a mate. Well, that isn’t entirely true. I am. But that isn’t what I meant about being worried. You have been through a lot recently. Do you hate us now because you had to leave your father and the mortal realm?”

“How could you ever think I’d hate you, especially for that?” I study his gorgeous, yet tormented face. “I’ve never seen you flustered like this.”

When Jaden covers his face dramatically with his large hand in an attempt to hide his worried expression, I chuckle.

As my tension eases, his subsides too.

“Yes, life has been quite a lot as of late.” I frown briefly. “When I close my eyes, I can still feel my blood draining from my body. I remember my last thoughts as I was slipping away. It...” I can’t finish my sentence.

Jaden waits for me to complete the thought, but when I don’t, he prompts, “What did you think about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Jaden nods. “I understand. I haven’t confessed to anyone what ran through my mind when those men took you.”

I sit up a bit, his comment catching my interest.

“I knew they were going to kill you,” he says. “When I had fluttered in and out of consciousness, I heard their wretched plans for you and couldn’t stop them. My heart was breaking. I couldn’t help you. I couldn’t hold you one last time. I believed it was your end. And I didn’t want to outlive you, not even for a moment.” Jaden breathes in deeply, trying to center himself. “I didn’t want to live in a world where I couldn’t see your smile. Or see the fire in your eyes. I *wanted* to die if you were gone.”

I clasp my hand over my mouth. Then I grab his arm and sit all the way up to look him in the eye. “Don’t say such a thing!”

“But, it’s true.” Jaden places his hand over mine.

“You still have maybe several hundreds of years to find your Elven mate. Why would you even consider having your bond be with me? It will hurt you like Magnus said.”

“I love *you*.” Jaden holds his hand up to quiet me when he sees the protest on my face. “I am not asking you to reciprocate. Or to believe in my love. Or to believe in love. I am only stating a fact.”

“How can you love someone you barely know?”

“I wondered about that, too.” Jaden grins. “What I have realized is that the duration of knowing someone rarely equates to fondness or love. I think you can fall in love with someone in a moment. It’s a recognition of souls. A deep knowing. When there is an acceptance of the other’s spirit. Love is a sort of magic. And I feel a bond between us without a bonding.”

For several breaths, I stare at Jaden. “I understand some of what you are saying. When we first met, I felt a familiarity, a sort of connection, with all three of you. But I don’t know if I can claim that as love.”

Jaden reaches out and strokes my cheek. “I will let you be so you can have your space to think. If you need anything...”

“Then I’ll ask Corwin for it,” I say with a playful smirk.

“There’s that fire I adore.” Jaden grins, kisses me on the forehead, and leaves me to ponder my future, alone.

FUTURES

WYNSTELLE

The next day, the female guard, Baelen, knocks and then enters with my dinner tray. “How are you doing today?”

I wander over to the small table where she sets the tray. “Are you allowed to join me to eat?” I ask, giving her an out so that she won’t feel obligated.

Baelen glances at the door. “Sure. I will just let Corwin know what I’m doing.” After notifying her fellow guard, she sits down across from me at the small dining table in the corner of the suite. “Too much solitude?”

I grin wistfully. “I suppose. When I was with my former keeper, we usually had our evening meal together. And since I came to the castle, I have had more socialization than I thought possible.”

“I barely get a moment alone.” Baelen shrugs as she picks out a piece of fruit to eat. “But that is the nature of this job.”

“Do you like it here?” I ask. “Do Jaden and Prince Eldrin treat you alright? What about Oakes?”

“They treat *me* fine.” Baelen raises a questioning eyebrow. “Did you have something in particular that you wanted to ask me?”

I frown and focus on my plate. “Do you know what is happening with them, and what they have asked of me?”

Baelen slowly nods. “They each want to mate bond with you.”

I blush.

Baelen chuckles. “Don’t be embarrassed. It’s not unheard of to have many suitors.”

“If you were me, which of them would you pick as a mate? Or would you pick *any* of them?” I slump in my chair, wondering why I’m bothering to ask for an opinion at all. I know I shouldn’t choose any of them.

“I think it is a matter of what you want and what you are willing to risk.”

“Because they would be a target if they mated with me?”

“No. Because *you* would likely be the one to suffer the consequences. I doubt anyone would attack the prince or his advisors directly, but you are another matter. From the rumors I’ve heard from Turgon’s guards, the king isn’t pleased with your presence here. Someone might act on their own to please him.”

“So what should I do? Run?”

“I don’t suggest that.” Baelen shakes her head thoughtfully. “Life is full of risks. For example, I could be killed at any moment, for any number of reasons. But that isn’t an excuse to stop living my life or doing my duty.”

“So I need to figure out what I want, but understand the risks of having it,” I surmise.

“That is my advice.” Baelen grins widely and cocks an eyebrow. “If I had my pick, I’d claim all three.”



Oakes is outside my door for the next midday meal, delivering my food himself. I hear him ask the guards how I’m doing.

Baelen says in a lowered voice still loud enough for me to hear, “She is fine. She seems to be in a contemplative mood.”

“Oh,” Oakes says with defeat. “Can you give her this?”

I hate hearing his sad tone and hurry to the door before he leaves. “Oakes? Please, come in.”

His face lights up when he sees me, and he rushes inside as if worried the door might slam shut if he takes too long. He reaches out to hold my hands but hesitates. “I’ve missed you,” he confesses.

“I miss you too,” I admit and offer him a seat at my table. “Have things settled down for you in the castle?”

“Eldrin is still stirred up. He’s trying to secure all possible access points to his wing of the castle.”

“Because of me?” I sigh.

“Partly.” Oakes nods. “But also because his security was far too lenient before. We didn’t realize the threat from the king and Commander Turgon. All of us are vulnerable to attack.”

“From King Magnus?”

“Maybe not directly.” Oakes takes a moment to consider his words. “In the last couple of days, Eldrin has spoken out publicly against conflict with the mortal realm. He announced his campaign to build a positive relationship with humans. Most have outwardly supported his ideals, but I sense many feel conflicted, and some are resistant to the idea.” Oakes lowers his voice. “Secretly, Eldrin is doing his best to secure alliances against his father.”

“More likely, he will only secure more enemies for himself.” I lose my appetite, pushing the plate toward Oakes.

He plucks a piece of fruit and eats it. “It’s a bold step, but I agree with him. I don’t want to see a war. Never mind how it will harm your chances of happiness in our realm.”

“Because if you were at war with my kind, then I would be treated like more of an enemy than I am already?”

“Yes.” Oakes reaches out and touches my hand. “However, we will do everything we can to stop a war.”

I glance down at his hand on mine, feeling the spark of attraction and the hum of his magic. I miss his electric warmth.

For a moment, I bask in his healing touch, remembering how his hands electrified my secret places. My cheeks glow pink with the memory.

Oakes raises his eyebrows, probably sensing my mood shift. He seems to debate what to say next. “I hope you will rejoin us soon. We would very much like to see your smile again, at least for a meal.”

“I will think about it.” I stand up and politely usher him out.



That evening, before dinner, Prince Eldrin knocks on the door. I chuckle to myself. Of course, he would come by after Jaden and Oakes had their visits.

“Wynstelle?” His voice is pleading. “Are you available?”

I’m impressed. He didn’t just slip in after a quick knock, as he usually does.

“Come in,” I say, closing my book about the art of war. I’m determined to understand why people would want such a thing. What is it good for? Nothing. In my opinion, the temporary grasps of power, the cost of lives is too steep.

As he slips inside my room, Eldrin’s smile is shy and charming. I remember how intoxicating his presence can be.

Why does everything have to be so complicated? Can’t we just continue our sexual explorations and forget about prejudices and wars and being of two different species? Forget about mate bonding?

“I’m not here to pressure you,” he quickly announces, his hands up in surrender. I wish he would use those powerful hands to hold me close so I can breathe in his sandalwood scent and feel his sensual touch once again.

“Good to know.” I chuckle. “But tell me the truth, were you just a bit sad that Jaden and Oakes wiggled their way into my chambers, and you hadn’t?”

“Perhaps a little, but only because I’ve missed you so much that my heart aches.” Eldrin ventures over, sits next to

me in the window seat, and holds my hand, his thumb skimming mine. “Have you been comfortable in here? Should I prepare a route so you can wander around the gardens without having to see us?”

“Actually, it might be nice to go outside again. Is Lalo still living in her flower shrubs?” When Eldrin nods, I bounce excitedly. “So I can visit her and her family?”

“Of course!”

My smile grows wide with the thought.

Eldrin sighs happily. “Seeing your beautiful smile again makes my heart burst with joy.”

I look away toward the window. I sober when I think about my feelings. “I appreciate you put a lot on the line for me with your father. I don’t mean to make you wait for an answer.”

“If you didn’t take your time, then I would be suspicious that you were only accepting my proposal out of some sense of obligation. I don’t want that at all. I don’t need pity. I want your bond only if you truly desire it.”

“I wouldn’t say yes out of pity. It is too important. As your father said, to lose a bonded mate is a horrible loss.”

“Why are you worried about that part? The loss? When there is so much to gain.” Eldrin squeezes my hand, and I turn toward him again. “I’m willing to take on any consequences in my love for you.”

My chest constricts when I realize he deserves better than the trouble I bring.

Sensing my emotions, Eldrin jumps up and paces. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I know... but please, I need to think,” I say.

He walks out, and the room seems dimmer without him.

PROPOSALS

WYNSTELLE

*M*y problem is twofold.

First, I don't know if I *should* mate with anyone. With the target on my back, it's potentially dangerous for me to choose any one of my elves.

Second, if I *do* mate, I don't want just one elf. I cherish something different in all three.

Eldrin brings out my self-confidence, and with his gentle approach, he coaxes out my sexual assertiveness when he allows me to explore his body. He also encourages me to be more outspoken toward authority, even if that wasn't his original goal. When he defied his father for me, I was terrified for him, and incredibly honored that he would put so much on the line for me.

Oakes has healed more than just my outer wounds. He also awakened my sexual self the moment my gaze fell upon him. I can almost feel his muscular thighs between mine from that night at the inn and how he makes me tingle from his touch. He offers an overwhelming sense of comfort. And I feel treasured whenever I'm in his presence.

Jaden offers fiery passion and protection. Not only do I feel safe with him, he has faith in me to teach me defense moves so that I can protect myself. He encourages me to carry a weapon, even though it's forbidden by mortals in Elfhome.

He pushes me to explore, to feel adventurous, and to be rebellious. So far, that has been mainly in the bedroom. I

blush, thinking of how I brought him to release with my mouth. But is the feeling I have for them... *love*?

Oakes and Jaden suggested they will be willing to both be my mate together, but Eldrin has made no such offer, except that I can choose one of them over him if I want to.

A knock at the door shakes me out of my contemplation, and I sit up in bed.

“Wynstelle?” Prince Eldrin calls.

“I’m alive!” I call back.

“Good to hear.” He chuckles. “I, uh, have Oakes and Jaden with me, and we have something to talk to you about.”

Uh oh.

My heart quickens. They have finally gotten tired of waiting. They won’t allow me to ignore them any longer. If they want a decision right then, I might just run.

“Come in,” I practically squeak.

The three elves file inside my suite. They all have suspiciously pleasant looks on their faces, as if they are approaching a spooked horse. Perhaps that is what I am... spooked and ready to bolt.

“We appreciate you needing your time to think.” Eldrin inclines his head apologetically. “However, we also realized that you might not have all the facts or answers you needed to decide your future. I also want to remind you that you need not pick any of us. We will fight for whatever you want to do with your life.”

Oakes opens his stance as if sacrificing himself. “Before we get to that, is there anything you would like to ask us?”

“If I ask something, will you all answer truthfully?” I stare into each of their eyes. “Will you be completely and frighteningly honest with *yourselves* and me?”

They all audibly gulp but say yes.

“Each of you believes you want to commit to being my mate?”

“Not just believes, but *does*,” Eldrin answers, and the other two nod their heads in agreement.

I sigh. “You understand that if I actually survive all my likely future death threats, I would grow old, wrinkled, and brittle.”

They don’t show the reaction I’m expecting. In order to create the decrepit image of my weathered self in their minds, I ask, “Have you ever seen a fragile old human?”

“We have,” Oakes answers. “We realize what will happen as you age.”

“And none of you have a problem with that?” My voice is skeptical. “I don’t believe you.”

“We understand that your last years could be... *difficult* for you in mind and body,” Jaden says with a tight expression. “And the thought of losing you is devastating.”

“I won’t be young and attractive, like you are, for half of my short life. I only have another twenty or thirty years before I will begin to decline and lose my energy and youth. Even if I don’t have health issues, you might have sixty years with me at most.”

“I see your spirit, so you will always be attractive.” Oakes smiles.

“True,” Eldrin and Jaden concur.

“But besides my appearance, I’m just a simple servant girl. Perhaps I was born from a noble line, but I’m *not* royalty.” They need to realize that I’m not compatible with them. “I can’t give you what a polished Elven female can offer you. You will grow bored with me when I no longer have my looks, and you realize that I’m not the right fit for the life you must lead.”

“You are a noble soul, which is much more powerful than your bloodline.” Eldrin points to the gardens. “You care for the flower faeries’ rights and well-being. And they went out of their way to help you. They *never* care about elves, and we rarely concern ourselves with their needs. Not only that, you even showed mercy to the murderous elf under my father’s

command. You are a fine example of a leader and the sort of female we want guiding us.” Eldrin implores me to understand with a look. “You have made me a better elf—just by being you. I only wish to live up to *your* expectations.”

I shake my head. “I don’t expect anything from you.”

“Exactly!” Eldrin smiles. “But I want to be a kind and wise ruler. I want to be a compassionate mate because of your example.”

I blush. “You’ve only known me just over a moon-cycle. How can you be so confident you want to be bonded with me?”

“We know. It’s part of the Elven sense. We know when we have met a mate match.” Eldrin frowns. “Is the actual issue that you don’t feel that kind of love for *any* of us?”

I freeze, caught by my own line of questioning. What *is* the emotion I have for each of them? Much of my ruminations have been about whether *they* should commit their lives to me.

Eldrin’s face loses all hope. “You don’t, do you?”

“I wouldn’t say I don’t.” I can’t look any of them in the eye. “I told you before, I don’t know what love is. Not really. I mean... I’m definitely attracted to all three of you. My body responds to you. But maybe my body responds to any stimuli?”

“Are you attracted to every male you’ve encountered in the last moon-cycle?” Jaden raises his brows with a touch of humor on his lips. “Or before meeting us?”

I shoot an exasperated look at him. “Well, no...”

“How do you feel when I say that we will never see each other again?” Oakes asks.

Pain strikes me like lightning. My hand instinctively grasps at my heart. “I don’t like it. It hurts.”

“Are you pushing us away for our sake and not considering your own needs?” Eldrin asks.

“Why are you all so perceptive suddenly?” I whine.

“Because you made me, *us*, pay attention to life.” Eldrin moves closer, reaching for my hand. “Are you worried you will hurt one of us if you don’t choose all of us?”

“*All of you?*” I ask in a husky voice that hits me out of nowhere. I blush, and my core heats. He can’t be saying what I assume. “What do you mean by that?”

Jaden walks over to my other side. “Would you want to be with *all* of us?”

“*That’s* an option?” I look to Eldrin since he will be the one I most expect to have a problem with that arrangement. “That seems... greedy.”

“I would be alright with sharing our life with Oakes and Jaden...” Eldrin offers, “But only if that’s what you want.”

“Uh.” I stare at each of them, all watching my reactions hopefully. “Can I think about *that* now?”

“Don’t overthink it.” Jaden winks.

Eldrin strokes my hand with his thumb. “How about you spend the evening with us? We can relax, eat, and talk, and you can get a sense of how our lives might be if you accept. We can treat it like we would if we were mated.”

“Are you expecting...” I glance at their crotches.

“No. We will limit our affections to what we can do in public.” Eldrin smiles.

I’m not sure if I’m disappointed with that last promise.

CONFESSIONS

WYNSTELLE

*W*eighed down by the elves' new proposal for mating, I take advantage of Eldrin's offer to visit the gardens. Corwin and Baelen escort me outside so I can think and stand guard by the entrances so I can be alone.

But I'm not alone for long, as Lalo flies up and settles on a branch next to the path I'm walking down.

"Princess Wyn!" she chirps.

"Hello. How did you hear I was born a princess?" I ask, surprised the little ones know about my origins.

The faerie flutters her wings and glances around nervously. "Rumors."

"Oh." My face is blank, wondering what other rumors are circulating about me.

I notice two male faeries just behind her, deeper in the shrubs. "It appears you have some admirers," I whisper to her.

"Oh, they are my mates!" She grins widely and waves them forward. "Don't be shy. I told you, Wyn is very friendly." With a wave of her hands, she introduces them. "This is Fen and Weller."

"Nice to meet you." I curtsy, and they blush.

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty," Fen says.

"Oh, I'm not a queen," I correct him.

I swear I hear Weller murmur, “Not yet.”

Deciding to ignore that comment, I focus back on my tiny friend. “How have you been?”

“I’m worried. Are you still hurt from when the elf took you?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

She frowns and looks apprehensive to tell me. “You feel sad to me. Hurting.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip, not sure what to confess. I decide she may as well know. “King Magnus said I can choose a mate.”

Lalo looks utterly confused. “And that makes you sad?”

“Well, yes. I don’t know if I should choose one of them... all three... or none.”

“What does your heart want?” she asks, her voice soft.

“Maybe it shouldn’t be up to my heart. What if I hurt them by mating because I will eventually die? Or does my presence ruin their futures? It also feels greedy to pick all three if I can’t give them all the love they need.”

“Why can’t you give them love?” she asks.

“I’m only a simple human. And I don’t know how to be an Elven mate.”

“No, you’re *not* only human.” She places her tiny hands on her hips. “You are an Elven foundling, a princess, and you act more like fae than humans or elves. You have a faerie heart.”

I blink, realizing she’s right. I’ve always felt more at home with the faeries. However, I never understood why. “I don’t disagree with you on that. But why do you think I’m like you?”

“Your heart is infinite, just like us. Faeries have so much love inside us that we must take more than one lover and mate.”

“And you find you can share equally?” I ask, now curious how it would work.

“You will never have to worry. I sense the love you have for your elves, it overflows from your being. And it will guide you in how to be with them.”

The two males behind Lalo move up and slide their arms around her waist, proudly claiming their mate. I sense and admire the love she speaks about with them.

But do I truly have enough heart to give to my three elves?



Eldrin’s private dining room is cleared so the four of us can talk openly.

Once we are alone, I ask the elves, “What if I lived longer than the king expects me to?”

“I’ve read records of humans in Elfhome living much longer than their normal life spans,” Oakes says.

“There are elves who live *much* shorter than theirs.” Eldrin glares in the general direction of the throne room.

A chill rushes down my spine. Is he threatening his own father’s life?

“I’d consider myself blessed if you had an extended life span.” Jaden reaches out to brush his fingers over mine. “Even if you were too frail to walk, I would have a valid excuse to carry you with me wherever I went.”

I shake my head, grinning at his claim. Although, I wouldn’t mind spending the rest of my days in his powerful arms.

“I would be happy for any extended time with you.” Oakes smiles and continues the conversation. “I wish we had better records about humans in our realm and how Elfhome might affect their aging.”

I blurt out my worry. “What about the pain that Magnus mentioned with a lost mate? *When* I die, will you all be able to move on to find happiness with an elf?”

“We’d rather not think of that day.” Eldrin settles his utensils on his plate, losing his appetite.

“I’d rather not either,” I agree, “but if I’m honest, my mortality is an issue for me. I seem to have a rather large target on me, and I would only draw more vengeance if I mate with *any* of you. I could be killed before I even have time to age.”

Jaden tenses and says, “It seems *we* would be the ones to deal with your mortality.”

“Wyn, why is it an issue for *you*?” Oakes asks.

Eldrin leans forward to hear my answer.

“I will feel horrible knowing that you might be in pain because of my death.”

“In the strange way that life works, you could outlive us, especially if there is a war,” Jaden reminds me. “Any of us might die any day.”

“This whole misnomer of immortality irritates me.” Oakes tightens his jaw. “Yes, we exist for an extended period compared to mortals, but we *all* succumb to entropy. We all pass through the veil, eventually. Some of us go early and *violently*.”

Oakes’ anger is unsettling to me. Is he mad at me because I have concerns?

Upon seeing my eyes widen, he jumps from his seat and runs around the table, and drops to his knees by my side. He holds my hands in his massive palms. “Oh, my treasure, it’s not you. I’m just...”

“Scared?” I ask.

He nods.

“I am too,” I confess. “Terrified. But I’m not sure if it’s for the same reasons. Why are you?”

“I’m not scared of you living a happy, long life and passing gently in my arms. No, I’m scared that if I’m *not* in your life, I will miss all the things that bring you joy. With a war brewing, I fear you might never reach a ripe old human age if I’m not there when you might need healing.”

“I know you have the brave soul of a fighter,” Jaden adds, “but I worry I won’t be able to keep the danger away from you. I fear I won’t have the chance to bring you a smile each day. To discover all the ways to bring you pleasure. To love you more than I do now.”

“And if you aren’t in my life, I won’t have much to fight for in this realm.” Eldrin’s stormy blue eyes warm in the candlelight. “I need you as my guiding light and as my hearth. I need to be near you. In whatever way you wish me to be.”

Tears threaten to tumble out of my eyes, and with a blink, they do. “You all are crazy.”

“Absolutely,” they all say.

“For you,” Eldrin adds.

Oakes gazes into my eyes with all the passion he can convey. “*Wynstelle?*”

I suck in a breath. Oakes’ large hands smooth over my skin. With him kneeling in front of me, he’s only a little taller. I place my hands on the sides of his face and lean in to kiss him. He moves closer, parting his lips as I run my tongue along the seam.

He turns my chair so that I face him. Then his arms snake around my waist and pull me closer. My legs are now splayed on either side of his torso. An instant heat ignites in me, causing me to tilt my hips to press my sensitive flesh against his muscular abdomen.

There’s a stirring in the room, and I glance up.

Jaden and Eldrin are heading toward the door, looking defeated.

“Where in Elfhome do you think you are going?” I ask defiantly.

“Huh?” Eldrin glances at Jaden.

Jaden looks at me for an answer.

“Didn’t you want a kiss after Oakes?” I smirk playfully. “You said you would share me.”

“We... uh, yes... but we thought...” Eldrin stutters.

“Looks like you thought wrong.” I lower my gaze suddenly. “Unless you don’t want to, and you didn’t really mean what you said about sharing me.”

Suddenly, a pair of hands turn my head, and my stare meets Jaden’s violet eyes, flaring with desire. His kiss comes down on me like a crashing wave. His heated touch trails down my neck.

As he kisses the tops of my breasts, Oakes’ hands shift down to lift my skirt. His fingers slowly tingle up my calves, then my thighs, kneading my flesh. My moan echoes in Jaden’s mouth.

Jaden breaks away.

I find Eldrin sheepishly smiling at me. “Kiss me. *Now*,” I demand.

“Yes, *my* princess.” Eldrin’s kiss is at first tentative and delicate, but I increase my urgency, and he responds in kind.

Oakes’ hands work toward my sex. His thumb fondles my wet center under my undergarment, and he drops his head down and kisses my inner thigh. “I will not be polite in public for much longer,” he says in a gravelly voice.

“Would you like to move this to my room?” Eldrin asks me.

I nod, and before I can register what’s happening, Oakes scoops me up, and we are halfway to Eldrin’s bedroom chamber.

PLEASURE

WYNSTELLE

Oakes carries me over the threshold of Eldrin's private chambers. Setting me down, and the three elves crowd around me. Pressing their hard bodies against mine, I gaze up at three sets of eager eyes.

Suddenly, I'm very nervous. "I... What are you expecting? Are we... *mating*? Right now?"

"What do you want?" Eldrin strokes his hand down my side and rests his palm on my hip.

My breaths quicken. It's one thing to enjoy the elves individually, but how does it work with all of them at once?

Jaden caresses my face. "No need to panic. We don't have to do anything at all if you are uncomfortable."

"No." I grab onto his shirt as if he were about to bolt. "I want to... I just don't know how. This is all so new. How does this work?"

"What do you want from us?" Eldrin asks quietly.

I frown. "I'm confused."

"Do you want us only to pleasure you?" Oakes asks, "Or do you want... *more*?"

"You mean... uh, *penetration*?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

Eldrin chokes with my word choice. "Well, yes, but I mean, do you have an answer about our mating offer?"

“Oh.” A moment of insight fills my mind, remembering Jaden’s words. “You only want to release inside me with our mating?”

“That is our preference. So before we move forward and get lost in the moment, we’d like to know your intentions and not ask during, upsetting you and ruining your pleasure.”

“Sorry, it’s just, you’re acting so odd.” I chuckle, and the males do not. “But mating is an important question. A big question. And even though a huge part of me wants to say yes right this moment and have you inside me...” I pause, imagining how that would feel. “With everything going on and the Elven population would hate you for bonding with me—”

“Hate is a strong word,” Eldrin grumbles.

“But it isn’t inaccurate,” I say.

I think it strange that they still haven’t stepped away. Their heat seeps into my skin. It makes it hard to think straight. Their towering, muscular bodies block out the world. I wonder why I’m protesting.

“You want to wait?” Oakes asks, slipping his hand behind my head, cupping it in his palm.

I turn to look at him. “I’m disappointing you.”

Jaden smirks. “We can all have a *lot* of pleasure without penetrating your sweet sex with our cocks.”

I blush bright red, remembering how Jaden tastes on my tongue. “*Oh.*” I lick my lips.

They all hum and press closer.

“It seems like our princess needs convincing of what we can do for her if she accepts our bonding proposal.” Eldrin dips down and kisses the side of my neck, nipping as he goes, making me moan.

“It is only fair that we show her how many releases she can have in a night, just with our hands and our mouths.” Jaden brushes his hands down over my breasts and then kneads them until my nipples peak under the dress’s fabric.

“She needs to know she will never have unfulfilled need again.”

My brain is overwhelmed with their words and touch, and I whimper.

“Would you like us to demonstrate how we can satisfy you, my treasure?” Oakes asks as he slowly pulls up the hem of my skirt.

“Oh. Stars. Yes. I want that, yes, please.” I’m light-headed. My sex is already throbbing from the simple caresses and kisses.

Through their touch, I can feel their affection for me. I open my heart to them and can *feel* how each of them loves me in their own way.

The air seems to vibrate between us. It is a profound realization that I’m *really not* a toy or a novelty to them.

They cherish *me*.

And I cherish them.

They will all give me anything I ask for.

Eldrin leans in for a kiss, and I meet his lips with the hunger I feel.

My dress comes off, and my undergarments are gone a second after.

I blink and frown when I see they are still dressed.

“On the bed, love,” Jaden commands. I love his dominance. His violet eyes pierce my soul.

Feeling dizzy with lust, I fall back into Oakes, who catches me and guides me to the foot of the bed.

As I perch on the edge of the bed, the three elves strip off their clothing slowly, their eyes devouring my every curve. I can see it in their eyes. They know exactly what they want. *Me*.

I squirm with excitement as I watch them disrobe, fascinated to see them all. Their muscles ripple as they pull off

their tunics. As their pants fall to the floor, I gasp at their gorgeous bodies.

Oakes is the only one I haven't seen completely naked, and I keep my eyes on him as his braes come off. Then I quickly glance at all their magnificence. All the virile masculine beauty makes my sex throb, and I press my thighs together to stave off the building pressure.

Why am I saying no to mate bonding?

I remember... But the threat of the realms feels so insignificant when I focus on the emotions we share and the desire we feel.

I can't stop wondering what it will feel like when they are inside me. Their huge fingers are almost too much to take into my channel. How will I accommodate their large members during actual intercourse?

Oakes is the largest, both in body and in his malehood. And he is the only one I haven't touched.

On the bed, I crawl over toward him. "I never got to touch you."

He steps closer with a wicked grin on his face.

I'm hypnotized by his erect member, swaying as he walks. "May I?"

"Do you remember what I told you in Crowland?"

I smile, remembering how I pressed my sex against his leg and ran my hand over his chest while he was healing me. I answer, "That your body is mine?"

"I meant it then and now."

My breathing grows ragged as I kiss him and slide my hands down his chest to his groin.

He sucks in a breath when I take his thick cock in my hand. Stroking him, he moans.

I glance over my shoulder to see Jaden and Eldrin enjoying the show, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I worried there might be jealousy of my affections.

Oakes catches my chin, and makes me look into his amber eyes that glow with lust. “Don’t worry about us.” Then he leans me backward until I’m flat on my back in the center of the bed. “We are going to take care of you now.”

Jaden crawls up on the foot of the bed and slowly opens my legs. His hands trail up and down from my ankles to my groin, never quite touching my sensitive flesh.

I writhe, begging him to make contact with the one place I need him to.

Oakes crawls up behind me and gently pins my arms over my head with one hand. He leans over and kisses my lips. With his free hand, he fondles my hardening nipples until I moan, “Oh, stars.”

Eldrin holds one of my legs in place and finally gives me some relief by stroking my folds, amplifying the tension they have built.

Jaden holds my other leg and joins his hand with Eldrin’s, working in tandem.

My eyes widen as I realize they have pinned me down completely. “Uh?”

Jaden trails kisses up my inner thigh while they brace my legs open wide. “Relax. All you have to do is call for us to stop, and we will.”

The tension of not being able to return their kisses and touch is only adding to my need for release. I’m ready to explode. Just a bit more pressure on my sex, and I will feel the wave of ecstasy.

“Please...” I beg.

“What do you need, princess?” Eldrin asks as he lightly circles my bud.

“More.” I thrash when they don’t give it to me.

Jaden finally answers my request by licking and sucking on my sex, giving me the pressure I crave.

Oakes pinches my nipple, hard.

I buck and scream out. “Stars! Yes!” I moan and ride the waves of pleasure.

As my orgasm wanes, Jaden turns me onto my stomach, and my face is on top of Oakes’ groin.

I smile up at him and then quickly take him into my mouth.

He gasps at my assertive move. With one hand, he gently cups under my chin to keep my eyes locked with his while he slides his thick cock deeper, reaching my throat. “Such a good princess.”

His adoring gaze and his naughty praise make me shiver with an all-consuming need to take more of him.

Eldrin slides his fingers inside of me, slowly matching the rhythm of my oral ministrations.

Jaden kneads my ass and brushes over my puckered hole. I’m surprised how much I enjoy the touch.

Oakes hums with contentment. “Oh, Wyn, you are magical.”

My mouth full, I try to chuckle, but then Eldrin adds another finger. I groan with the stretch and push back into his hand.

The second orgasm hits me fast and hard, my sex contracting around Eldrin’s thick fingers. Oakes pulls out of my mouth and spends his seed on his chest and stomach.

I pant, my hair damp with my exertion. “I, uh, I can’t breathe.” Not only am I overwhelmed with sensations of their bodies, I can feel their building emotions with every caress.

I turn onto my back, my eyes darting to all of them.

Jaden and Eldrin crawl up on either side of me, trailing their fingertips until they each claim a nipple. Eldrin kisses my mouth, and Jaden latches onto my breast.

I reach down and hold their members in my hands. They undulate into my grasp.

Not done with me, Oakes moves from behind me to at the foot of the bed. With his gentle nudging, he spreads my legs again and licks my apex, his mouth electric with his magic.

I cry out with the unexpected magical attention.

Eldrin swallows my moan with his mouth on mine.

Oakes gives me my third release as Eldrin and Jaden find theirs.

After a moment to process all the debauchery, I bark out a laugh.

Jaden smiles. “What’s so funny?”

I look down at my chest and sides. “You weren’t joking about a male’s release being messy.”

Eldrin scoops me into his arms and carries me to his oversized tub already filled with warm water fed from an underground hot spring. All four of us slip into the huge basin

They all wash me, stroking their large hands over my entire body. I feel every bit a princess with their attention.

Then I remember outside Eldrin’s bedchamber, only danger awaits us.

Why does the world have to intrude on our bliss?

I gaze at their beautiful faces, filled with affection for me. I have never seen them so content. Right now, the realms’ power plays are the furthest thing from their minds. Between stealing kisses, they banter with each other and take turns holding and washing me, even though I am thoroughly clean now. My heart is bursting for these males.

I finally understand what love is. But I also know love often means sacrifice.

I decide what my answer will be to their proposals.

And I understand that my decision will only bring disaster.

TO BE CONTINUED...

in [Chaos Tempted](#)

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Four Demon Warriors. The last Serafim. One dark cell.

I find myself imprisoned with four gorgeous males
from a violent warrior species.

With their massive size, horns, and tails, I worry they will seek
revenge for my reluctant part in their torment.

When my healing hands wander, their growls turn to purrs.

Will they take me with them if we can escape?

Will they give me what I crave—their touch?

<https://books2read.com/chained-fates>



Rebel Fates: Shadow Myths Book 2

The Egyptian gods were aliens, and their people still exist...

I'm done with Earth. The moon base has to be better.

Famous last words...

However, my plan didn't go as I had hoped.

I end up on a ship with three intense warrior aliens who look
like gorgeous Egyptian gods—all who I begin to crave. They
have heads of animals and bodies of men. They look like
Anubis, lion man, and a minotaur.

And they're furious I'm a stowaway.

I'm not out of trouble yet...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Yve Vale loves spicy romance, fated mates, and redeemable supernatural bad boys who end up as cinnamon roll alphas for their woman.

She writes about strong females and their magical males, all set in paranormal worlds.

She is a lover and a fighter. This is why her books feature a fair amount of action, both in romantic endeavors and in battle.

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