

BOOK TWO OF THE QUEEN OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS SERIES



THE
LORD
OF
LIGHT

CAMERON KAY

The Lord of Light
Book Two of the Queen of Light and Darkness
Series

Cameron Kay

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To those of you who daydream about starting a new life in a new town where no one knows your name—run away with me.

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Content Warnings

The Lord of Light is a fantasy romance novel with some mature content.

Potential content triggers include, but are not limited to, age-gap, power-imbalance, dubious consent, forced touching, rough and explicit sexual content, jealousy and possessiveness, infidelity, explicit language, violence, death, and homicide.

1

Alarie

Our bodies banged into my solid oak front door. He fumbled behind my back, urgently grabbing at the door handle, his mouth never leaving mine. I reached behind me, my hand finding purchase on the doorknob. The door gave way, and I felt the weight of my body give way with it. I was falling. But then his sculpted arms were wrapped around me, pressing the front of his muscled body to mine.

I never thought for a moment that he would let me fall. He ran his hands down my body to my thighs, scooping me off my feet eagerly, effortlessly, and wrapping my legs around his waist. I moved against him, working myself up and down the length of his hardness I felt hidden beneath his tailored navy-blue suit pants. He pulled away from our kiss, and a delicious groan escaped his pouty lips, like he regretted even a momentary reprieve of his mouth pressed to mine.

His thumbs digging into the crevice of my hips, he slowed and then ceased my rocking against him. Reluctantly, I allowed him to pry my legs from his broad torso so he could set me down on a white marble end table at the bottom of the staircase that led to the second floor of my wing. He maneuvered his body between my legs, and I looked up into his handsome face, allowing myself to get lost in his intoxicating cerulean eyes. His gaze seared into me as he trailed his rough hands over the top of my shoulders. He pushed the thin straps of my white dress down, exposing the rounded tops of my breasts, and a shiver skittered down my spine. He released another groan, this one more primal, almost guttural with his need for me.

Then he began to move his hips into me, thrusting with precision that elicited a small whimper from my lips and made me wish we had gone straight to my bedroom and stripped off our clothing. I spread my legs wider

and buried my hands in his soft brown hair, pulling his mouth back to mine as I grew more and more frantic for his touch. He lowered a hand to the inside of my thigh, drawing concentric little circles with his thumb on my skin.

All I could think about was what it would feel like when his hand moved farther between my thighs and his expert fingers continued their circling at the apex of my desire. He repeated the maddening circling movement on the inside of my thigh, and I bowed into him, encouraging his hand to slide higher up my thigh and toward the single throbbing point that would be my undoing with just a stroke or two of his nimble fingertips.

But through my lust-filled fog, I began to sense a hesitancy in his touch, like he was unsure of whether to keep his hand where it was or to move it farther between my legs. His thrusts against me grew similarly contemplative, and I knew he was struggling to come to a decision that was either going to make me happy but late for my morning meeting or unhappy but on time for my meeting. My body craved the satisfaction that would come from my lack of punctuality.

He slowly stopped the movement of his hips into me. He removed his hand from in between my thighs, and I immediately ached with promises unfulfilled in its absence. He pushed the straps of my dress back up, and my shoulders sank in disappointment. He kissed me lightly on the lips and picked me up off the table, resolutely placing me back on my feet. He was done with me, but I knew he wanted more. I could still see the bulge in his pants. But he just turned away from me.

“You know Rhett will blame me if you’re late, Al,” Luke said, as if that was the explanation for why he was pulling away from me. We both knew it wasn’t. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to correct the damage I’d done.

“Well, you’re a high lord now. You can excuse me. Write me a note or something,” I teased, burning all over in the absence of his touch. I smoothed out the nonexistent wrinkles in my dress with the palms of my hands to keep myself from reaching out for him again.

“*Acting* high lord,” he corrected, straightening the knot of his thin, knit tie.

And this was how it went with us nearly every day since the day I had broken things off with Jay. Luke and I would go at each other like ravenous animals one minute and then, in the next minute, he would pull away from me before we got *too far*, leaving me hot all over and wanting more.

Luke had been the instigator of our exchange this morning. I'd stayed over at his place the night before, like I did so many nights now. We had finished breakfast in plenty of time for me to get back for my meeting with Rhett and High Lord Preston. We were walking back to my place when I saw him glance in my direction in the hallway outside of my wing of House Rein. And then, the next thing I knew, he was pressing his lips to mine and his tongue was prying my mouth open. We bounced down the hallway from wall to wall, entangled in each other's embrace until we made our way to my front door.

A front door which apparently neither Luke nor I had taken the time to fully close in our haste. As if beckoned by the mere suggestion that I shirk my responsibilities, Rhett peeked his devilishly handsome head through my ajar door and then pushed it all the way open. He scanned our still somewhat disheveled appearances with mock shock and incredulity, like he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Al baby, are you *really* going to make *me* be the responsible one here? It's not a good look for me," he complained. "And *you*," he said, turning to Luke. "You're making us late, *high lord*."

Luke gave me an irresistible "*I told you so*" look as I combed through my long, straight hair with my fingers.

"*Acting* high lord," Luke corrected, making the finishing touches to his outfit in a full-length floor mirror propped against the wall at the end of the hall.

I rolled my eyes at both of them.

"Give me five minutes, Rhett," I said, running down the hall to my bedroom to the sound of Rhett's overly dramatic groans.

* * * *

"What do you think, Al?" Rhett asked, entreating me to take over the conversation.

I worked for House Dumont now. War with Alancia was a foregone conclusion. The wall between the two nations was manned at all times as everyone inside and outside of the High Court prepared for the inevitable. For our part, Rhett and I were supposed to be working on improving the High Court's relations with the lesser fae. The boycotts and supply chain issues caused by what those at the High Court referred to as the "lesser fae rebellion" the preceding year had not endeared the lesser fae to many at the High Court, however. And the lesser fae, who had a home of their own for

the first time ever, were less than interested in leaving the Golden Court for the High Court. Needless to say, we had our work cut out for us.

“The liaison program at the High Court has been a great success. As you know, I, myself, am a product of the program,” I replied, giving High Lord Preston a humble smile.

We sat at a small, round table on a patio outside of High Lord Preston’s manor. I sipped on an iced tea but ignored the spread of snacks offered, since I was still full from my breakfast. The day was warm, but not overly so, and I found myself thinking that, under different circumstances, I really would have enjoyed spending the afternoon here.

“But, Alarie, my darling, *you* are exceptional. We cannot possibly expect everyone who comes out of such programs to be as wonderful as you are,” the high lord vamped.

This was a problem I repeatedly ran into since assuming my role for House Dumont. Everyone still wanted me to be the flirty, smiley House Vitruvian liaison I’d been before. And while I was not opposed to using whatever tools I had at my disposal in my new position, including the skills of persuasion I learned so well from Jay, the topics I had to address in my new role as senior counselor for House Dumont were not the kind of topics that lent themselves to easy laughs and coy smiles. I was struggling to find a way to make the lords and ladies at the High Court take me and issues I needed to advance seriously.

“Grant,” I cooed, hating the necessity of my flirtatious tone. “You have always been ever the gentleman. *But* let’s not inflate my ego too much here. It was before my time at the Court, but I’ve heard good things about the liaison you had a few years back. Lord Bentley, I believe?” I questioned, feigning like I did not know the young lord’s name when I had, in fact, dug into the lord’s background quite extensively for this very reason.

“I have no doubt his success is due in large part to his time with you and your House. Just imagine how excellent a young lesser fae ward would grow to be with years in your presence,” I pressed.

I was trying to warm High Lord Preston and others at the High Court to an idea I’d initially pitched to High Lord Rein. My idea—the expansion of the liaison program beyond university graduates and to lesser fae of all ages—had the immediate objective of getting more lesser fae at the High Court. My ultimate goal was to increase lesser fae representation at the High Court and work toward the elimination of the land disparity between high fae and

lesser fae. High Lord Dumont and Rhett's father, High Lord Rein, liked my idea so much that they tasked me and Rhett with the immediate implementation of the initiative.

"Yes, Lord Bentley was a fine fellow, Alarie. You are quite right." High Lord Preston beamed at me with a smile. "But he doesn't hold a candle to you, dear," he retorted.

I resisted the urge to let out an audible, exasperated sigh. I glanced back at Rhett. *Your turn*, I signaled to him with my eyes.

"Grant, you'll not get a fight from me on this one. Alarie is *quite* ravishing," Rhett said, flashing me a rakish smile and shrugging his shoulders as if to say, *if you can't beat 'em, join 'em*.

"Did you know that House Rein has already taken on one ward from the Golden Court? And we plan to take on another..." Rhett continued, skillfully picking up the mantle of our cause.

Luke

“How’d it go with Grant?” I asked.

I sat on a neutral-colored chaise lounge with Al, her legs thrown over my lap. We were outside on Rhett’s veranda enjoying the last few hours of the temperate day. Rhett was leaning against the railing, staring out at the town below the High Court with his back to us.

Al lived with Rhett in the Rein manor. After the Spring Ball, she just never vacated her room at House Rein, eventually moving all her stuff over from Jay’s. As a result, I found myself spending even more time than before at House Rein, usually in Rhett’s wing, since Al enjoyed the balcony and bar off Rhett’s quarters.

“Ughhhh,” Al bemoaned in reply.

“That good, huh?” I said with a sympathetic chuckle, giving her legs a squeeze before letting my hands rest on her calves.

“We’re making progress, Al,” Rhett said, turning toward us. “Once we get Grant on board, the rest will follow House Preston’s lead,” he continued, tracing a hand through the waves of his head of blond hair.

“I can put in a good word with Jamie,” I offered. We all knew that High Lord Preston’s husband, Jamie, harbored a soft spot, or perhaps something a little stiffer, for me.

“I know you’re right,” Al replied to Rhett. “I just hate how everyone looks at me these days like I’m a lost little girl who should just go back to flirting and looking pretty,” Al lamented.

“Fuck that, Al. You’re not lost,” I said, entwining my fingers with hers. “You’re a fucking trailblazer. These idiots are just too slow to tell the difference,” I said, gripping her hand tighter.

“It’s true, Al. Plus, everyone knows *I’m* the looks of this operation,” Rhett said with a grin, his bright blue eyes dancing with mischief.

No one could deny Rhett’s good looks. There was a reason every available lady, and a fair number of taken ones as well, at the High Court threw themselves at my best friend.

“I’m the one out of my element here,” Rhett said. “They should be telling *me* to do what *I* do best and go back to looking pretty. You’re the brains of the operation, Al. How did you trick me into doing real work, again?” he jested.

“If anyone was tricked, it was me, Rhett,” Al retorted. “You’re the one who asked me to speak to your father about all of this. And then he’s the one who stuck us with this task that neither side seems interested in,” she chided him.

“Oh, yeah! Guess I’m the looks *and* the brains, then!” Rhett joked.

“No offense, mate, but I think she has you beat on both counts,” I chimed in.

I absentmindedly glided my fingers over Al’s smooth skin. Thoughts of how she’d come alive under my hands this morning filled my mind. I consciously stilled the movement of my hands before I ended up finishing what I had started earlier in the day.

“You’re just saying that because it’s true,” Rhett countered.

All three of us laughed.

“Hey, I know what will cheer you up, Al. Let’s go off campus tonight,” I suggested.

All of us, even Rhett, had been focusing so much on our duties at the High Court lately that it had been entirely too long since we’d spent a night away from the Court.

“Isn’t Stefan playing somewhere in town?” I asked.

Al let out an exasperated sigh, and something inside my chest growled with approval. Al was dating Stefan. Al dating wasn’t what I had a problem with. My issue was with her dating Stefan. But it was my own fucking fault that they were dating, I thought, not for the first time. When Stefan had come back from his tour of playing at the northern houses, I’d stupidly talked Al up to him, and he’d been interested ever since. I couldn’t blame him, but what Al saw in him was an entirely different story. He had the musician thing going, and I know girls are into that. But that was all he had going for him, as far as I could tell.

“Yeah. He’s playing at Lucky Hearts or something like that,” Al replied.

“Lucky Hearts, you mean?” I asked, chuckling at her dismissiveness. Al just shrugged. “Rhett, are you and James in?” I asked.

“James went back home for a few days, so it looks like the original dream team is back in action tonight!” Rhett exclaimed.

It had been an even longer time since just the three of us had gone off campus. These days, James and Rhett were nearly inseparable if they were in the same town.

“Luke, don’t you have a date with Lauren tonight?” Al asked me.

Oh. *Yeah*. I’d forgotten all about Lauren LaFleur, which was saying something. She was the hottest commodity around the High Court recently. Lauren had been in a relationship for years with Timothy Durand, but they’d recently split, opening the field for her *many* interested suitors.

“She can come too,” I said. *Problem solved*.

The dream team *plus Lauren*, I amended.

* * * *

Stefan was playing at Lucky Hearts, a bar that usually had a decent game or two of cards going in the back. He sat on a stool, guitar in his hands, and winked at Al as we entered the bar. If Al acknowledged him, I didn’t see it. She walked right past Stefan and the women crowding the dance floor around him and to the bar to order a drink.

With half a beer still in my hand and after only a few songs, Al surprised me by suggesting that we move on to another bar. Stefan hadn’t even finished his first set. He still sat perched upon his stool and surrounded by women fawning over him.

Unsurprisingly, we ended up at Bar Louie. Al walked straight to the bar again.

“Three lagers,” I overheard her say.

“Oh, and, hey, Lauren, what do you want?” she called out over her shoulder.

“A glass of white wine would be great. Oak-barrel, if they have it. Thanks, Alarie,” Lauren replied politely.

Lauren didn’t seem like the type who left the High Court very often. Her gaze bounced around the shabby but clean main room of the bar full of bar games and locals you would never see up at the Court.

“It’s kind of a hole,” I admitted. “But it’s a good time,” I promised Lauren. “Hey, I’m going to help Al grab our drinks. You want anything

else?” I asked, already walking toward the bar. Lauren shook her head.

“Want to talk about it?” I asked, bumping into Al to announce my arrival.

“Talk about what?” she asked, half turning her body away from the bar and towards me.

“Why we just left Stefan’s gig as soon as we got there?” I replied.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she answered too quickly, tossing her long espresso brown hair over one shoulder.

“Ooook,” I replied skeptically, raising my eyebrows.

The bartender slid our three beers onto the bar behind her. I reached my arms around and behind her, grabbing the beers. My arms caging her in, I looked down into her green and gold eyes. They held a steely determination, challenging me to ask more about the subject. I grinned down at her, admiring her feistiness. Al and Stefan were very hot and cold these days. I was happy to stay out of it as long as that’s what she wanted.

“I’ll get this round,” Al offered.

“Not a chance,” I replied, indicating for the bartender to put the drinks on my tab.

“Come get your ass kicked at some bar games and maybe I’ll let you buy me a drink,” I teased, easily lifting the three flagons of lager directly over her head.

“Here’s your wine, Lauren,” Al said, meeting us at the table Lauren sat at by herself. Rhett was already in the throes of a game of darts with a stranger.

“Hey, you want to play?” Al asked Lauren, gesturing toward a dartboard that had just opened up.

“Ummm, no. I’m just awful. You two go ahead, though,” Lauren suggested.

“You sure?” I asked.

Lauren nodded her head. “I’ll just watch from here,” she offered.

I shrugged. “Okay, let me know if you want another glass of wine,” I offered, making my way to Al and the dartboard.

We were on five out of twenty in a game of around the world when Rhett walked over.

“I play winner,” he declared.

“You play winner? What happened over there?” Al joked.

Rhett had very clearly just lost his ass in a game of darts to a lesser fae

man about five hands shorter than him.

“He may look small, but that guy’s a ringer!” Rhett said in his defense.

The tally at the end of the night was two wins for me, two wins for Al, and zero wins for Rhett. I beat Al and Rhett in darts. Al was pretty good at most bar games, but I think the lack of stability she had in the tall heels she perpetually wore put her at a disadvantage in darts. Al beat Rhett and me in pool—she was a straight shark when it came to billiards.

Desperate for a win, Rhett tried to talk us into starting up a game of horseshoes, but I looked over at Lauren and decided we should probably wrap things up. Lauren declined our invites to play any of the games the entire night and instead opted to stand by and observe or go back to our table to sit down by herself, claiming her feet were beginning to ache.

We took a carriage into Court because Lauren didn’t want to walk. When we got to my front door, I invited everyone in for a round of cards.

“I think I’m going to head,” Rhett declined. “I don’t think my pride can handle any further losses tonight.”

“What’s the matter? Are you so lovesick without James around that you can’t even catch a win?” I teased.

“That must be it!” Rhett exclaimed. “This is *all* James’s fault!” he said, relieved. “I can’t wait to tell her.” And he looked like he would have rushed home then and there to tell James if only she were in town.

Al was already inside. She sat on my tufted couch, making herself at home. I saw her kick her heels off and tuck her legs under her as she looked around for a blanket. I looked back over at Lauren, who still hovered inside the doorway.

“Lauren?” I asked, inviting her in by extending my arm inside to the house.

She tucked her shoulder length, blonde hair behind her ear, uncertainly peeking her head into the room where Al sat.

“I... You know what? My feet are really killing me. I think I’ll just head home,” Lauren said, retreating from the doorway. “Rhett, would you mind if I walked back with you?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Rhett replied, already offering Lauren his arm.

“Night, Lauren,” Al called out from inside.

“Yeah. Good night, Lauren. I’ll see you...” My goodbye ineloquently tapered off when I realized that I had no intention of promising to see Lauren again any time soon.

Lauren's eyes hardened in disappointment, but she opted not to say anything, mercifully ending our awkward goodbye. Rhett turned away with Lauren walking toward my front gate. But before they reached the gate, he turned his gaze back toward me, catching my eye before I shut the door and joined Al on the couch.

I knew from his look that I was going to catch hell from him tomorrow. But it wouldn't be his usual "*I went home with your date last night*" or some other nonsense. He was going to accuse me of abandoning my date for the night in favor of Al. I'd deny it and say Lauren made her choice. But the truth was that, seeing Al waiting for me, I didn't really care what people thought.

Alarie

“Missed you last night,” he said, lying next to me in his large, canopied bed. He was propped up against the wooden headboard with only a corner of the white sheet covering his naked body.

“Oh. *Yeah*. I’m sure it was a good time,” I said unconvincingly, turning my face to him as I lay naked on my stomach.

“Where’d you go off to?” he asked directly.

“Bar Louie. Then Luke’s,” I responded, not feeling the need to provide any further explanation.

I stayed at Luke’s often these days, but not for the reasons Stefan assumed. Luke and I actually had not had sex...yet. Last night, Luke and I didn’t even so much as kiss. After Rhett and Lauren had left, I’d been happy to curl under Luke’s arm and fall asleep without pressing for anything more. But Stefan didn’t need to know that.

I rose from Stefan’s bed, looking for my clothes. Then I remembered he had started stripping off my clothing as soon as I had walked through his front door that morning.

“Come over tonight?” he asked tentatively. “I’m going to get done a little earlier than normal.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I responded noncommittally.

A brief flicker of exasperation crossed Stefan’s face. I never stayed the night with him. At first, I think he enjoyed how aloof I was, but after a while he began to press me to stay. But no matter how late it was, I always got out of his bed and made my way back to my place. I would often show up the next morning and climb right back into his bed, like I had this morning. But I

never stayed the night.

This was what drove Stefan crazy about me, according to him. But I knew it was also what *made* him crazy about me. A guy like Stefan, who was so used to women throwing themselves at him on and off the dance floor, was appreciative that I always kept him guessing.

“I should probably get going too,” he said. “I have to meet up with Nina soon. I’m to entertain her and Gloria again this afternoon,” he said, trying to sound put out.

Ah, there it is.

I’d been waiting for Stefan’s parry to my early departure from his gig last night and my mention of my night with Luke.

Mentioning the fact that he was now consort to Lady Nina Kearing, after he had abandoned Lady Tragon’s service, was his go-to move. Stefan brought up Nina any time he felt I was getting a leg up on him. He would allude to the fact that he was consort if he thought it would score him a couple of points in the game he and I constantly played. I thought it was ironic, given the fact that he was actually quite sensitive about the whispers around the High Court that he had simply traded being whore for House Tragon for being whore to House Kearing.

This was the game we played, but unlike the game I once played with Jay, I was unsure that the game between Stefan and me had ever been fun. We had never agreed to be exclusive. In fact, that was an impossibility given Stefan’s role as consort to House Kearing. But that did not stop us from engaging in a war of petty jealousies. We took turns trying to hurt each other while pretending we were not doing exactly that. Our entire relationship was just a perpetual settling of scores, even though neither of us could even recall who’d scored the first point.

But before the games started, it had been fun with Stefan. Committed to sabotaging my relationship with Jay, I had moved from Jay’s bed to Stefan’s almost immediately. It was the only way I could figure out how to not end up back with Jay. I knew if I didn’t *really* fuck it up with Jay, I would just go back to him, and he would take me back. I needed to not think about Jay and the way things went down. The way I had practically ripped his heart out in return for everything he had given me and everything he had done for me.

I reached the hallway between the front door and his bedroom and bent down to pick up my bra. Stefan beat me to it. He stood before me, my white silky bra hanging from a single finger, a grin on his face.

“I’ll trade you,” he said playfully. “Your bra for your panties?” He gestured to the matching white thong I had already managed to find and put on.

“Well, that would be kind of counterproductive, don’t you think? Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I asked.

He isn’t as irresistible as he thinks he is, I thought. Well, not entirely, I conceded taking in the view of Stefan wearing nothing but the freckles speckled across his nose. Not without a guitar in his hand.

I had been taken by Stefan’s voice and his hands on a guitar from the first moment I laid eyes on him. My draw to him was not purely organic, however. Early on, Stefan had admitted that his musical skills were enhanced by his magical abilities. As a performer with a light affinity, his magic enabled him to make any crowd beholden to him—he could sing, dance, play an instrument, or tell a story and captivate any room full of people. Stefan had admitted that his abilities had diminished as the magic continued to dull, but he didn’t think his particular form of magic was as impacted as others.

“*Alarie, stay. Oh, won’t you stay awhile for me, Alarie?*” Stefan sang in his honeyed voice as he pulled me back toward the bed.

“That’s not fair,” I protested, but I gave in to his tugging, falling on top of him on the bed.

* * * *

Lying back in Stefan’s bed thirty minutes later, I thought of how he had talked, *no sang*, me back to bed. I rose and got dressed. Stefan didn’t interfere this time. But something tugged at the back of my mind.

“Didn’t you say you spent a lot of time up north last year?” I asked, remembering what he had told me during our first conversation months ago. Something about being up north too much for his liking.

“Yeah. Too much time,” he confirmed.

“Like where?” I asked, still not sure what was nagging me.

“You name it. I pretty much did a tour of every northern house.”

“House Patton?” I asked after Lady Vitruvian’s maiden House. It was the first name that came to my mind.

“Yep,” he replied.

And then what was bugging me all clicked into place. I had never figured out how Cole Tragon had convinced those lesser fae to terrorize Lord Garaud and his family. High Lord Dumont and Cass had disclaimed having anything to do with it and had expressed befuddlement at what had come

over the group of lesser fae. But Luke had told me that everyone was listening to music that night at Lord Garaud's before everything went wrong.

"House Garaud?" I asked, unable to keep some of my suspicion out of my voice.

Stefan's hands stopped on the buttons of his blue pants. He looked up at me, and the flicker of emotion on his face said it all.

"Stefan..." I said, disgusted. I was glad that I had managed to find and put on all my clothes.

"You didn't," I whispered. "You—" I stopped myself, realizing that I shouldn't say anything more. But it was too late. I'd already said too much. He'd seen the look of disgust on my face.

"Alarie, Alarie," he tsked, and his perpetually cocky smirk turned cruel.

It was like I was looking at a different man, as if he had flipped a switch and turned on a new personality. Even the way he moved, normally cocksure but smooth, now had cruel, sharp edges to it.

"You couldn't just shut up and hide behind that pretty face of yours. Too smart for your own damn good, girl," he said, advancing toward me.

I backed up cautiously, not wanting to turn my back on him. I felt around with my hands extended behind my back until I bumped into a door frame.

"You caught me," he said theatrically with a slow clap of his hands. "Now, what are you going to do about it?" he asked, mockingly.

My eyes darted toward the front door.

"Oh, *no*. I don't think so," he teased, with a wicked smile. "I kept you from leaving once today already," he bragged. "Although you were harder to convince than Lord Belford, I have no doubt I can do it again."

He began to hum. Its rhythm didn't feel sweet or seductive like the song he sang to me before. But I could feel its pull, nonetheless. I froze, despite my overwhelming desire to leave. I had to stop him. I had to break his concentration.

"Lord Belford?" I asked, although I thought I already knew.

Cole Tragon had been vouched for the night Lord Belford was murdered. It seemed that Stefan had done Cole's dirty work for him.

"I lured him right into that hallway. He didn't even see the blade coming," Stefan bragged.

He was talking, which meant he wasn't humming or singing. I started edging toward the door again.

“I didn’t realize you were Cole’s lapdog, too,” I spat.

“Cole was an idiot. I knew it, and his mother did too. He proved that with how he handled things with you. I had to handle Lord Belford, or Cole would have gotten us all caught. The idiot would have stabbed him with his own knife and left a bloodied monogrammed handkerchief as proof,” he sneered.

“Don’t worry, though. I won’t be nearly as rough with you as Cole was. We have a place up north, the *real* north. It may be a little cold for your taste, but I’ll stash you away somewhere; somewhere they can’t find you—”

Free of his compulsion, I lunged for the door. Stefan was ready for my desperate move. He lunged after me. A surge of fear rose within me. I had failed to put enough distance between us. He was going to catch me. But before his hands could lock onto me, he fell back like he had run into an invisible wall. He fell to his ass, rolling into the wall behind him. I didn’t look back as I heard the thunk of his head against the wall. I was already out the door, running barefooted with all the speed I could muster.

I reached a crowd of people in the main hall of House Kearing and stopped running. I needed to blend in, not cause a scene. I kept checking over my shoulder for Stefan until I reached the archway of the manor and then I started sprinting again. I didn’t know where I was running until I got there. I crashed into Luke as he was walking out of the front door of his manor.

“Al?” He grabbed me.

I tried to push past him, shaking and gasping.

“Al?” he said again. “ALARIE!”

He never called me by my full name. That got my attention. I looked up at him, held tight in his arms. I could tell that we were surrounded by one of his invisible protective shields.

“What happened, Al? Are you okay?” he asked, concerned. He pulled me into his house.

“It’s Stefan. He—”

“I’ll *fucking* kill him,” he snarled, releasing me and turning to the door.

“No. No, no, no, Luke,” I said, hysterical. He couldn’t leave me.

“It’s okay, Al. You’re with me. You’re safe. It’s okay,” he reassured me, encircling me in his arms again.

I took several deep breaths, my chest expanding and falling as he held me until my breaths came out normally once more.

“Luke, Stefan killed—”

“He killed? What are you talking about? Who did he kill, Al?” Luke asked, his strong hands grasping my arms and pulling my gaze up to his.

“He killed Lord Belford, Luke. He confessed to me. And that whole thing with Lord Garaud’s family, he’s responsible for that too.”

Luke stepped to the door, barricading it with a shield, then added to the protective layer he had already enclosed around our bodies.

“And then he said he was going to kidnap me, take me somewhere. I don’t know where. Somewhere up north.” I felt like I was babbling, so I just stopped talking, focusing on taking deep breaths instead.

“It’s okay, Al. You’re safe. I won’t let anyone ever hurt you again,” he promised, taking me in his arms corded in muscle once more.

He wrapped a hand around my head, securing me to his chest, and I melted into him. I was usually so good at keeping my tears at bay, but I could feel them coming. I didn’t want to cry. I already felt so weak and vulnerable. But Luke held me tighter, wrapping an arm around my lower back and planting a soft, sweet kiss on the top of my head. I came unglued. I started crying and didn’t stop until the front of his light blue button-down was soaked with my tears.

Luke

“How could they just disappear, Jay?” I barked angrily, consciously resisting the urge to run a hand through my already disheveled hair.

I sat at an ornately carved wooden table in a large study at House Heroux, along with the rest of the members of the High Council. We did not always meet in the same room—sometimes the King would call the High Council to his private study, or we would meet in a dining room and enjoy dinner while talking business. But we always met at House Heroux.

Jay had just finished his report to the King on his interrogation of House Mouchard, Lila Tragon’s maiden House. Neither Stefan nor Lila Tragon was located at House Mouchard’s estate in the north.

Jay arched his dark brow at my tone. I released an exasperated sigh. “It’s just... There are no whispers? *Nothing* to tell us where they may have gone?” I asked, this time tempering my note of frustration.

“Nik traveled there with me himself, and we both searched the grounds and spoke to people,” Jay replied calmly. “There was no sign of them, and no whispers.”

“I should have put Lila’s head on a fucking pike when I had the chance to,” the King interjected. “And that whore of hers as well, for good measure.”

House Mouchard’s strained relationship with the Crown was a concern for the High Council. House Mouchard did not like being subject to heightened scrutiny because of the unfavorable circumstances under which Lila Tragon had been ousted from the High Court by the King. Now, with Lila and Stefan missing, that scrutiny would only increase, and they were not likely to take kindly to the extra supervision.

“And then we would likely be at war with House Mouchard as well as Vandros right now, Grey,” Jay reminded the King, perfectly playing his role

as Contra to the King. Not that I had any doubt before but my time serving on the High Council reaffirmed for me that Jay was particularly well-suited for his role as Contra. He did so well at countering the King's more impulsive nature.

"Speaking of tenuous ties, how goes House Bellamy's relations with House Dempsey?" Jay asked.

"The *relations* with House Dempsey are just fine," I replied crisply.

Jay and I were still what I'd consider friends, despite the circumstances leading up to my and Al's departures from House Vitruvian. However, our friendship gave him all the more reason to poke at what he knew to be a sore spot between my parents and me regarding the topic of Karina Dempsey.

Done with his bit of teasing, Jay brought the conversation around to his point. "It's not that I believe House Dempsey has the same political leanings as House Mouchard, but House Mouchard's influence is strong in that area. Even though House Dempsey controls the port closest to House Mouchard and most of the surrounding ports too, they are not immune to House Mouchard's sway," he said.

I was already well aware of House Dempsey's importance. House Dempsey's port and its influence at other northeastern ports was the reason why my parents so very badly wanted me to date Lord Dempsey's youngest daughter, Karina.

"It's also the closest port to the Alancian border. House Dempsey would be an ideal entry point into Valencia for Vandros. I'd sleep better at night knowing for sure that the Dempsey port and their ships were firmly within our grasp, Luke," the King coaxed.

"House Bellamy will give you that peace, one way or another, my King," I promised resolutely.

The King gave me a nod, indicating that he accepted my promise.

"And what about you, High Lord Dumont? What peace do you offer the Crown at this time?" the King inquired.

High Lord Dumont sat next to High Lord Preston, Drake's sturdy lesser fae build a contrast to Grant's lean, high fae frame.

"The Commander conducts a rotation with his best men of all prior weak points in the barrier wall. The Commander himself lays eyes on each of these points at least once a week," High Lord Dumont reported proudly. "We continue to identify all new areas of risk along the border wall prior to the wall being compromised and bring those points to Your Majesty's immediate

attention. And there have been zero fatalities on our side in the hostilities with Alancian forces,” High Lord Dumont said, finishing his report with his chin high.

In sum, Cass, Commander of the Northern Forces of Valencia, was running one hell of an effective war front for us.

“I do not doubt what you say, Drake. But if that is all true, then how is it that we continue to find Alancian soldiers on this side of the wall?” Jay asked, voicing the question we were all thinking.

“It is true, Contra, that small bands of Alancians continue to be found on our side of the wall. They have been handled successfully thus far. And no large forces, nor Vandros himself, have made an appearance,” Drake explained.

“Rex is not one to sit on the sidelines, Drake,” Jay said. The King nodded in agreement. “If he has not shown his face yet, then it is only a matter of time before we’ll see him,” Jay opined.

Drake inclined his head to Jay, as if to say he would take Jay’s word for it.

“As to how the Alancians are coming over, the only logical explanation, Contra, is that we have traitors in our midst, and they have been there since before we had our current system of defenses in place,” Drake replied.

Again, we were all thinking about it. And I’d bet that if a vote was taken, the vote on the High Council would be unanimous that the traitors at our flanks were somehow related to House Mouchard. But Jay and the Prince had just personally searched House Mouchard for all signs of foul play. As of now, we had no evidence against House Mouchard.

“Grey, I drop in on House Mouchard every chance I get, which, these days, is almost weekly. I never announce my visits ahead of time, and I have yet to see any evidence of compromise of the border wall on House Mouchard’s lands,” Jay confirmed, although we all already knew this. Jay spent a lot of time up north visiting his wife, Elizabeth, now that she was pregnant with his heir.

“Gods damn it!” the King exclaimed, pounding his large fist on the table in front of him. “I want all the damn traitors found and killed,” the King barked. “Starting with that bit of filth still remaining from House Tragon,” he demanded, rising from his ornate chair. He smoothed the front of his tunic out like he was soothing his nerves.

“Yes, my King,” we all promised in unison.

“High Lord Preston. What reports do you have for the Crown?” the King inquired, turning to the comely lord.

“All is well on my end. Nothing to report, my King,” High Lord Preston replied proudly.

“Grant,” I interjected. “There is one matter I’d like to take up with you. I’ve heard that you may not take on a liaison from the Golden Court this year?” I phrased my point as a question, giving him the opportunity to make it appear as though I was simply misinformed.

Grant’s eyes slid to High Lord Dumont.

“Come now, Grant. Out with it,” the King demanded.

“Well, I had considered it, especially after a particularly persuasive visit from young Lord Rein and Lady Armand. But I have now been left with the distinct impression that a liaison from the Golden Court does not wish to serve my House,” Grant replied as neutral as possible.

“Drake, then, please enlighten us,” the King said, turning to High Lord Dumont.

“My King,” Drake began in a deferential tone, “those at the Golden Court are *very* appreciative of the gifts bestowed upon them by the Crown. So much so that they do not wish to depart from the Golden Court.”

I remained silent. I’d stirred the pot, but I was more than happy to sit back and let this play out a little.

“Drake,” Jay said, cutting in. “You know very well that separate but equal cannot be the yardstick by which we measure our efforts of unification between the high fae and lesser fae.”

“There is nothing wrong with my people enjoying their hard-earned *new* liberties,” Drake replied.

“Grant, Drake, Jay is right on this,” the King interjected. “I did away with the ‘don’ classification and then made certain land distributions to lesser fae families to pave the way for more lesser fae to become lords and ladies of this High Court. But in order to do so, they must come and serve at this Court,” the King admonished.

“My people wish to serve, my King. But it is the Crown, and not high fae Houses who they seek to serve,” Drake said, choosing his words carefully.

“Drake, I am not suggesting they come to this Court as servants. They will come to this Court as future lords and ladies and the future of this Kingdom. Now, enough of this. There *will* be *at least* one lesser fae liaison at

every House at the Court, including yours, Grant. It is time that the high fae and lesser fae get back to fucking and fighting together as one again,” the King decreed.

“I second that,” Jay affirmed.

“Here, here,” I chimed in.

“Now, is there any further business from the High Council before I depart for the evening? I swear, I’m not sure what is worse. This talk of traitors or the three hours of fittings I’m about to have to sit through for my wedding that is still nearly a year away.” The King grimaced.

Alarie

I hated going back to House Kearing. The walk there, the walk back, everything about it just reminded me of Stefan. Lady Kearing invited me over to give me what turned out to be a useless update on what they had not found out about Stefan. They still knew nothing about where he had run off to. Stefan had fled when he was unable to contain me in his quarters. I'm told he left pretty much everything he owned but his guitar. Luke told me that Jay almost immediately traveled to House Mouchard, Lila Tragon's maiden House, to personally search for Lila and Stefan. Neither was anywhere to be found.

On my walk back from House Kearing to House Rein, I tried not to think about Stefan or about where I would be right now if he had succeeded in subduing me. An involuntary chill overtook my body, and I shrugged it off, then slipped clumsily on a cobblestone.

Seconds before I would have gracelessly hit the ground, a man caught me, his hands tightly grasping my arms. I stared up into the man's brown eyes laced with lesser fae gold. I blinked. His eyes were no longer brown. They were the lightest blue and gray now. I shook my head like that would help throw off my confusion.

"*What are you?*" the man asked, looking down at me.

"Don't you mean *who* are you?" I laughed, awkwardly righting myself.

"*Sure.* Let's start with that," the man replied, making sure I was steady on my feet before removing his hands that were supporting me.

Taking a step back and getting a view of more than the man's face, I was surprised to find that he looked primarily lesser fae. Except for his notably light high fae eyes, he showed no other sign of his mixed blood. He

was taller than me, but not by much, with spiky blue hair and broad shoulders. His ears were slightly pointed at the top, a characteristic that almost entirely belonged to the lesser fae, not the mixed fae. And I couldn't place his accent.

"Alarie Armand," I replied, holding my hand out to him. "Senior counselor to House Dumont. And you are?"

"Just passing through," he said, taking my hand in his own. "Armand? Is that a northern name?" he asked, eyeing me analytically.

"North of here, but no, not northern. Just Harborview," I replied.

I eyed the ground, searching for the source of my clumsiness. Water covered the cobblestones surrounding the grand fountain between House Kearing and House Heroux. If I hadn't been so distracted by my thoughts about Stefan, I would have remembered that this was a regular hazard on my walk home.

I looked back up to find his startling light eyes intently focused on me. "Thanks for catching me, uh..." I paused, realizing I had not gotten my savior's name.

The strange man kept looking at me in a way that was not unfriendly. If anything, it was *too* friendly. He continued to eye me like he, alone, had discovered something beautiful and wild.

"Look, I have to run. Maybe I'll see you around some time," I said, beginning to turn back in the direction I was heading, making note to skirt around the slippery cobblestones this time.

He gently grabbed my hand before I was out of reach and bowed formally. Looking up at me through his eyebrows, he laid a polite, quick kiss on the top of my hand.

"You can plan on it, little star," he said.

I hustled back to meet Rhett, not looking over my shoulder at the man I could feel watching me as I walked away.

Did he just call me little star?

* * * *

"What's that look for?" Rhett asked as I walked into his study.

"I just had the weirdest interaction," I said, my mind still on the man with the washed-out hazel eyes.

I explained what happened with me almost falling and being caught by the strange man.

"And then I think he called me 'little star,'" I said like I didn't believe it

myself.

I didn't mention how I thought the man's eyes had changed colors from brown and gold to an icy hazel. I didn't want Rhett to think I had bumped my head.

"That doesn't sound all that surprising. You're always wearing those damn high heels, Al. Honestly, I'm surprised you don't twist your ankle more often," Rhett said.

I sighed.

"Easy for you to say. You tower over everyone," I said.

I came by my shorter stature naturally. I inherited it from the lesser fae half of my blood.

"I don't know. There was just something different about him. I couldn't pin where his accent was from either," I said.

"What did he look like? Maybe I know him," Rhett asked.

"Light hazel eyes, spiky blue hair, shorter than you but taller than me," I answered.

"Almost everyone falls into that last category, Al," he teased. "Look, he was probably someone new from up north. We have a lot of new faces around now," Rhett said. "But if you think something was off with this fellow, then I'll send for someone to search him out now." He rose from the seat he'd taken.

Rhett could have a quick chat with one of the guards stationed at the manor, and the odd man would be found. But that was just it... He was odd, perhaps unsettling, but I didn't feel that he had done anything to deserve guards hunting him down. That seemed too harsh for the man who had been nice enough to stop and save me from taking a fall.

"No. I don't think that's necessary, Rhett," I said, calling him off.

Rhett eyed me wearily. "Okay but point him out to me next time you see him," Rhett followed up cautiously. With suspicions of traitors around, we all had to be careful. "I'm sure we'll see him around again."

"That's what he said," I whispered, dismissing the odd interaction from my mind. "Speaking of run-ins, she was too far away for me to say 'hi', but I saw James on my way here."

James and Rhett had a bit of an on-again-off-again relationship in the past. But they had been "on" for a while. So much so that I had not seen Rhett with another woman for months. In Rhett-time, that was like *years* of monogamy.

“How’s that going?” I asked nebulously.

“Good,” Rhett replied.

But I could tell that there was something my friend was holding back.

“Just *good*? What’s the matter? Your game going *soft*, old man?” I teased.

James was older than me by many decades but still closer to me in age than she was to Rhett.

“My *game* is *great*. As good as it has ever been, and I’ll prove it to you if you call it soft again,” he said with a threatening, feline grin.

I held my hands up in concession, giving him a disarming grin.

“It’s just... Well, Al, it’s James. She won’t let me *prove* it to her,” he said.

“You mean you two haven’t...” I spluttered in disbelief.

What were they up to the hours they stayed locked inside his room together? No. I didn’t want to ask. If I asked, Rhett would be more than happy to tell me every little detail.

“Nope. I mean, we do other fun stuff,” he said, wagging his eyebrows exaggeratedly up and down. “But she doesn’t believe in sex before marriage, and, well, I don’t believe in marriage before sex.”

“Woah, Rhett! Marriage? Does that mean that you think she is, you know, your mate?” I asked.

“I...” He tilted his head back and forth. “Yeah, I kind of do, Al.”

I gasped in a small, surprised hiccup of air.

“But with my power in its diminished state, I can’t trust my judgment. I have to know for certain, Al. I can’t risk it. *Not again*,” he whispered.

I couldn’t blame him for wanting to be sure after how things went with the last woman he thought might be the one. It would have been too personal of a question if it were anyone but Rhett. But Rhett had always been *very* open about his magic...and sex.

“Rhett, how does sex fit into finding your mate? Other than the obvious reasons, I mean. Can you really tell just by having sex with someone whether they are your mate?” I asked.

“There is just one out there for me, Al. One incredibly lucky ass woman waiting for me to find them and claim them as my own,” he said with a disarming smile. “Sex and magic, for some, have always been closely aligned. Lovers let their guard down during sex making it easier to be exposed to another’s power. For me, it is even more so. When a woman

opens herself to my magic during sex, this enables me to tell if they are my mate,” he explained earnestly.

“Does James know all of this?” I asked.

“Yeah, she knows.” He sighed. “But even when we do, ya know,” he said with a raise of his eyebrows, “she doesn’t let her guard down enough for me to be able to truly judge. My reputation around the Court on this front, as you know, isn’t great. She knows she wouldn’t be the first woman I’ve told something less than true to get into bed.”

He gave me a self-deprecating grin that would drop the pants right off most women. *There was the charming bastard I loved.* I gave him a small chuckle. I still had a morbid curiosity regarding how I would hold up against Rhett’s abilities. I had witnessed first-hand how he turned almost every woman around him into a googly-eyed, giggling mess. I was thankful to be spared from that indecency due to a combination of both Rhett and Luke using their powers to protect me. But I still wanted to know...

“Rhett, just let me see you. *All of you.* Just this once. Before all your powers really do come back and it’s truly overwhelming,” I solicited.

“Well, first of all, I have no idea if my powers are *ever* going to return to their full capacity. And second, Al... I don’t know,” he replied reluctantly.

No doubt, he was thinking if Luke were here, he would thoroughly be on team *no way in hell*. But Luke wasn’t here, and he wasn’t my keeper.

I knew it might be a bad idea, but it couldn’t hurt for just a moment, just to see. I stared at him obstinately, waiting for his final answer.

“Okay, okay,” Rhett conceded.

It was like he removed a damper from over his entire body. His features came into a sharp focus, making him more beautiful. *Too beautiful.* I stared at him like I could peer through whatever it was that made him seem so different from my friend, who I was used to. I had always thought Rhett was perfect, but whatever he had done had made his face seem even more perfect. He was gorgeous. He was compelling. But *that was it.* That was all I felt. I made an exaggerated effort out of patting my body down, checking myself over to make sure I was okay.

“Well, good try, anyway,” I joked.

Rhett arched a single eyebrow at me and slid the damper on his power back in place.

“Interesting,” he murmured, giving me a suspicious overly cheerful smile.

Alarie

“Al, why aren’t you packed?” Luke asked, his eyes scanning around my room and noting the lack of suitcases. “You’re still coming with us, right?”

He was talking about House Bellamy’s Summer Gala in Port City. The prior year, Luke and Rhett had abandoned me at the High Court for the warmer, beachy gala put on by House Bellamy each winter at the Silver Court. And last year, I had sworn to myself that I would not let the boys abandon me to the cold Winter Gala at the High Court again. I wasn’t going to let them abandon me at the High Court alone, period, whether it was for the Summer or the Winter Gala.

The issue I was struggling with was that this year’s trip to the Silver Court was taking on a decidedly couple-y feel. Rhett was going again, but this year he was bringing James with him. I knew I was being stupid. Luke and I did not place expectations on each other or abide by labels. We did what we wanted, when we wanted, and people were free to think whatever they wanted in return.

And some people had some *strong* opinions. Lauren LaFleur, for instance. It wasn’t until I saw Lauren at Court several days after our night out that it had dawned on me that her date with Luke *might* not have gone *exactly* how she had expected. Lauren and I had been friendly before, but when I saw her again, there was a coolness in her eyes and in her words. That’s when I realized that Lauren probably thought that since she had been Luke’s date for the evening, I should have been the one who had been unceremoniously pushed out of Luke’s front door that night, not the other way around.

The funny thing was that it had not even crossed my mind that night to head back to my place. And Luke hadn’t given me the slightest indication

that he had wanted me to. It just seemed like the usual order of operations for me to fall into Luke's bed after a night out together. We hadn't even kissed that night. Instead, we'd just fallen asleep tangled in each other's arms and legs. But Lauren was convinced that Luke and I were an item and was miffed that Luke had bothered inviting her on a date in the first place.

Further complicating my dilemma was the fact that I had not been with anyone except Luke since I had quite literally run from Stefan's bed. I didn't know if Luke was sleeping with anyone else. It really didn't matter to me. But if he was, he wasn't parading it around in my face. So, by coincidence, Luke and I had stumbled into something that was beginning to feel very much like a relationship.

"Or what? Let you guys leave me again? *I don't think so,*" I replied, nudging Luke playfully in the ribs. "Are you sure your parents will be okay with me coming?" I asked, giving him one last opportunity at an easy out.

Luke's parents had been pushing for him to get involved with Karina Dempsey. They had already gained a concession from Luke in exchange for his role as acting high lord on the High Council—Luke had agreed to take Karina to the Fall Ball at the High Court later this year and to engage in some amount of "courting" after. But his parents were pushing for more, sooner. Luke, however, had made it plain to his parents that he was not interested in an arranged marriage, no matter how politically advantageous it may be for House Bellamy.

I had faith in Luke's resolve when it came to his parents, but he'd shared with me that the King had also expressed an interest in his courting of Karina, although not in those words. House Dempsey's ports in the northeast were taking on a new importance in the face of a conflict with Alancia. I knew that behind Luke's blindingly beautiful smiles there was a willingness to do whatever it took to make his spot on the High Council permanent.

It wasn't like I was trying to lock down Luke or keep him from dating other women. *I wasn't.* As far as I was concerned, he could date Karina or Lauren or anyone else he wanted. I didn't feel the need to be possessive or jealous when it came to Luke. But I didn't think his parents would see it that way. Luke's father had seemed to like me when I had met him at the Spring Ball last year. I had a feeling that things would not go over so well with his mother, however.

"I'm 135 years old, Al. I think they'll just have to come to terms with the fact that I can make my own damn choices," Luke said like he was

joking, but there was a seriousness behind his words that indicated he meant exactly what he said.

“Ahh, the beach! I can’t fucking wait,” I replied, getting excited about our trip. “I have to finish packing,” I noted, a little less enthusiastically.

* * * *

The trek from Vlaise to the Silver Court hadn’t taken too long. Or maybe I just felt that way because I ended up taking a nap tucked under Luke’s arm. Luke, Rhett, James, and I arrived in Port City the day before the Summer Gala. The plan was for Luke and me to stay through the weekend and into the next week, giving me the opportunity for an extended beach vacation while Luke caught up on some of his familial duties. Rhett and James intended to head back to Vlaise after the weekend.

House Bellamy had an expansive beachfront property along the southernmost point of Valencia, overlooking the Azure Ocean. When we arrived in town, we headed straight toward Luke’s estate, which included a mansion-sized cottage along the beachfront. I recognized the feel of Luke in the cottage immediately—the decor was modern, and sunlight freely shone through its interior.

Rhett and James immediately claimed one room and disappeared into it. Luke automatically put my stuff in his bedroom. There were plenty of rooms available. I could have taken my own room, *if I had wanted*. But what would have been the point? We all knew I would end up in Luke’s bed every night we were here.

The entire back half of the cottage was made of glass and looked out onto the beach. I made my way to the back porch off the lower level of the cottage. A set of stairs led directly down to the sandy beach. The moment I walked out of the door, I took a deep breath, allowing the ocean air to fill my chest and calm me like it had my entire life. The wind lightly blew through my long brown hair. The straight, sleek hairstyle I often donned at the High Court would soon be replaced with soft, beachy waves. I closed my eyes and soaked in the sounds and smell of the beach like it was an antiseptic for the troubles I’d had at Court this year.

Luke came up behind me, an appreciative smirk on his handsome face as he ran his fingertips across my shoulders. He looked as irresistible as he ever did, perhaps even more so. The humidity in the salty air gave his caramel hair a tad more curl and volume than normal, and I felt the urge to tangle my fingers in the wavy, curly mess.

“Let’s go down to the beach for a while,” he suggested.

“Don’t you have to go meet your parents?” I asked, leaning the front of my body against the banister of the porch.

Luke came up behind me, placing his hands on the wood of the banister on each side of my body. I could feel his warmth against my back. He pressed his lips to the side of my neck. A chill rose on my skin despite the warmth of the sunlight.

“Nah. We have the afternoon to ourselves. But we’ll head over for dinner later,” he replied.

“Rhett and James?” I inquired, looking over my shoulder and up at him.

“Will be busy for a while, I imagine,” Luke replied with a knowing smirk.

Rhett and James were definitely in one of their “on” phases. I bet they would hardly leave their room the entire weekend. Luke took a step back from me, and I immediately missed the feel of his body pressed to mine. But then he extended his hand to me.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I suggested, kicking off my heels and gripping his hand in mine. “Does this beach have seashells?” I asked excitedly, thinking of how I used to spend hours walking the beach back home, picking out a seashell and declaring it my favorite, only to drop it a few feet later for my next favorite shell.

“Come see for yourself,” he replied with an enticing smirk, tugging me to follow him down to the beach.

Alarie

With sand between my toes and the sound of ocean waves in my ears, I usually felt at peace. But, despite our long walk on the beach that evening, I still felt a bit unsettled.

My role with House Dumont was at the top of the list of things currently overworking my mind. I had walked away from the closest thing to a sure deal—a spot in House Vitruvian and a life with Jay—and ventured into uncharted territory with my role in the newest House on the High Council, House Dumont.

Accepting the senior counselor position with House Dumont had been a gamble, and I did not gamble. I kept my head down and worked hard until I reached the next milestone. But I found myself in a situation where hard work alone was not enough. There was no top grade to earn if I put in the time and effort. There were decisions to be made, and no matter how much work I put in, they would either turn out to be the right choices or the wrong ones.

But it wasn't just my role at the High Court that had me feeling out of sorts. It was also the entire fiasco with Stefan. How had I been so wrong about him? Jay had seemed to have some kind of specific and personal dislike toward the musician, but I had written that off as just part and parcel with Jay's near constant jealousy. And when Stefan had chosen to abandon House Tragon rather than leave the Court with Lila and Cole Tragon, I had taken that as further confirmation that Stefan was not as bad as Jay had made him out to be.

But it turned out Stefan was *much, much* worse. And now I was

questioning everything about my judgment. Maybe accepting the position with House Dumont had been a mistake. Maybe leaving House Vitruvian and Jay had been a colossal error in judgment that I would never be able to recover from.

And then there was the constant limbo I found myself in with Luke these days. He was my best friend. But he was so much more than that—even when I had been with Jay, he had felt like something more and different to me. And then, after Jay, I jumped straight into Stefan’s bed, not Luke’s. It was never jealousy between Luke and me, not really. Maybe more like envy because the people we took to our beds got to experience a part of us we did not share with each other. He had lusted for me at times. I had lusted for him at other times. We flirted and teased and stepped right up to that line but never over it. We weren’t together, but we were definitely more than just friends.

I lay on a lounge on the veranda off Luke’s bedroom as he strummed an acoustic guitar, a pastime for him, nothing more. My mind continued to wander despite the normally soothing sounds of waves gently crashing in the background. But then Luke added words to the song he strummed, bringing me back into the moment.

I drank in the sight of him. I had been struck by his easy smiles and good looks since the first time I met him. He was leaning against a tall stool, his white long-sleeve linen shirt unbuttoned to reveal a swath of luscious hair on his muscled chest. On the top of his lip, he had grown out a silly mustache, something I liked to tease him about, even though it only added to his roguish charm.

I decided, right then and there, that I could never truly be lost as long as I could find my way back to Luke. He was my bedrock, my very foundation, since the moment I had set foot at the High Court.

I stood and walked toward where he sat. He looked up from his guitar and continued singing as he followed me with his sharp blue eyes as I crossed the room. I held his stare as I stopped directly in front of him, letting my need fill my eyes. I gently grasped his strong jaw and lifted his face to mine. Then I brought my mouth to his, a gentle, inquiring kiss, brushing my lips against his.

“*Alarie,*” he growled, his deep voice penetrating me to my core.

His hands stilled, resting on the strings of his guitar. Hunger burned in his eyes. We had danced around it for so long. We had both wanted it for so

long but took turns denying it from each other.

The look in his eyes asked if this was smart, if we were just going to fuck everything up. *No*, I answered him with the intensity of my gaze. We wouldn't fuck it up. Same as we had always done, we would take from each other only what we had to give and no more. There were no expectations in our situationship.

With immortal speed, he carefully set the guitar down and scooped me into his arms. I jumped to meet his embrace, wrapping my legs around him as he carried me toward his bed. My hunger for him was ravenous. It was like we had been sitting in the dark all this time and someone finally let in the light. I ran my fingers through the hair on his chest as I kissed and bit his neck.

He threw me onto his bed unceremoniously, and I laughed. Luke always made me laugh. He crawled onto the bed after me with a devious smile on his face. In my head, I'd cataloged every smile I'd ever received from Luke, but the smile he gave me now was one that I had never seen before, and it actually made my heart stop. He took my breath away. My hand went to my chest, grasping for the air to return to my lungs.

I lay on his bed, propped up by my elbows, watching him. Luke crawled toward me until he was on all fours, hovering above me but not touching me.

"I want this," he said simply, indicating his body over mine. "I want *you*," he said, his desire plain in his eyes.

The look in his baby-blue eyes warned me that if we went any further, there would be no turning back for us. I knew it cost him something to admit that this meant more to him than just his body pressed against mine.

"What do you want, Al?" he asked, his tongue running along his bottom lip.

I didn't hesitate, my mind already made up.

"I want you to fuck me, Luke," I replied, having been taught long ago to voice my most explicit desires.

Instead of being encouraged by my rough language, the desire on Luke's face seemed to falter for a moment. I realized that he'd put himself out there, and I'd responded with pure lust.

"I want you, too, Luke. I *need* you," I explained, cupping his square jaw in the palm of my hand. "The only time I feel complete is when I'm with you," I said, baring myself to him.

It was true. When I was around Luke, the worries that normally filled

my head about what I was doing with my life dulled to a low hum or disappeared entirely.

He fell onto me, moving his hard muscled body between my legs. His mouth devoured me. He moved his tongue so deep into my mouth that I had to open wide and tilt my head back to grant him better entry. He worked his hard cock, still contained by his pants, against the part of me that throbbed with my unsated desire for him. I ached with my need to have him inside of me so badly that it physically hurt.

My dress already pushed up, I wrapped my legs around his body, trying to eliminate every inch between us. He pulled at my clothing, yanking the top of my dress down until my breasts spilled out. He lowered his mouth to my right breast and roughly grabbed my left breast with his other hand. When I felt his tongue circle around my nipple, I threw my head back.

“Oh my fucking gods,” I moaned, digging a hand into his soft hair.

I felt like I might break from the feel of his mouth on me alone. He made to move lower down my body. I thought about the circling of his tongue lower on my body, and the ache inside of me sharpened painfully. I grabbed him and pulled him back toward my mouth.

“I need you inside of me. *Now*,” I demanded.

A truly animalistic growl escaped his throat, and he looked like he might rip my dress right off of me. We were wearing entirely too many clothes, but there was no time to properly undress. My breasts exposed and dress hiked up to my torso, I clawed at his pants. We both pulled at the buttons in our urgency, and when his hard length was at last free, I pulled his body on top of mine.

I wrapped my legs tighter around him, and he propped himself up on his arms, his bulging biceps now on either side of my head. He angled himself at my opening, and I eagerly raised my hips to meet him. I stared unblinkingly into his piercing blue eyes as he drove himself deep inside of me for the first time.

We fit together like a key in a lock, his every thrust opening me to him. Only a few strokes in, I really did break upon him. My desire to be filled with him was so extensive that the feeling of him inside of me alone was enough to push me over the edge. I clawed at his back as I shattered for him.

“Fuck, Al. You feel amazing,” Luke groaned, thrusting through my orgasm.

“Don’t stop. *Don’t ever stop*,” I begged, never wanting to go a single

day without his touch ever again. When he moved inside of me, I didn't just *feel* complete. I *was* complete.

I clenched my legs around him, trying to bury him further inside of me. I wanted it hard and fast. I wanted to feel him try to touch the other side of me with his cock. But Luke took each of my hands into his, holding them as he pushed my arms over my head. He pressed our palms together, and I intertwined my fingers with his. He lowered his mouth to mine, and despite our voracious, carnal hunger for each other, his kiss was soft and sweet. His thrusts in me became almost painstakingly slow, as if he was savoring every inch every time he slid in and out of me. It was wonderful, blissful, torture.

"You feel so good. I want to make it last forever," he said, explaining his almost languid pace.

"I... ah..." I struggled to form coherent words.

Luke's slow thrusting was driving me mad. He thoroughly stroked the spot inside of me that would be my undoing, over and over again, working my ache into a heightened frenzy that would all be set loose with one hard, penetrating thrust.

"Give it to me," I finally managed to gasp. "*Please*, give it to me," I pleaded.

I wasn't sure what I was begging for other than more of him. I needed *all* of him. He granted my wish, picking up the pace of his thrusting. He fucked me so hard that our bodies made loud slapping noises as they came together each time.

My hands still entwined with his, I screamed, "Oh fuck, yes! Harder!"

I begged, even though I didn't know if it was possible for our bodies to come together with any more urgency than they already were. His thrusts became punishing, and I was moments from spilling over the cliff of another orgasm.

"Say it, Al. I want to hear you say my name. Ever since I met you, I have been dying to make you scream it," he growled, working in and out of me.

And with his next deep thrust into me, he hit the spot that had been waiting to be pressed like a button to my point of no return.

"Luke! Luke! Oh my fucking gods, Luke!" I screamed as I quivered around his hard cock, unraveling for him.

He continued to work his way in and out of me, thrusting through and elongating my orgasm. And then, when what I thought was the last

reverberation of my pleasure rang through my body, he spread me wide and commandingly thrust into the deepest part of me, sending another cascade of aftershocks through me as he lost himself inside of me.

Hands still entwined, Luke collapsed onto my chest, resting his head on my breasts. We lay there together, sweaty, gasping for breath, the glow of our pleasure surrounding us like a halo.

“Why *in the fuck* did we wait so long to do *that*?” Luke exclaimed. “We should have been doing that the whole time, Al,” he said in amazement.

I just laughed, agreeing whole-heartedly with him. My body was slick with his sweat and already humming with anticipation for more of him.

Luke

My mother's long, dark hair was pinned up in an intricate weave with two little tendrils of hair left loose to frame her beautiful, ageless face. She smiled at Al in a way that was not unkind, but it did not touch her obsidian eyes, and I knew that meant that whatever my mother was going to say next was not something I was going to like. I stared out past my mother and allowed the sight of the azure water lapping against the shore of the beach to still my tongue. I loved my mother, but each time I came home, I was quickly reminded of why I preferred to maintain a healthy distance from the seat of the Silver Court.

"What does your father do, Alarie?" my mother asked, beginning her honey-lipped interrogation.

It was an intimate gathering of sorts before everyone showed up for the Summer Ball the next evening. I stood next to Al, her arm locked with mine. Al wore a light, white linen dress that complimented the color she'd gained from our brief time at the beach earlier that day. Al glowed in the golden light of the evening, and I regretted having allowed us to leave my bed for *this*. Now that Al and I had given in to our pure, unhinged desire for each other, I was kicking myself for having fought it for so long.

"I wouldn't know, my lady. I never knew my father," Al said, trying to sound casual about this hurtful fact.

I lightly trailed my thumb along the inside of her forearm.

"Apologies, my dear. So it was just you and your mother growing up?" my mother asked. At least her surprise seemed genuine. My mother hadn't known about Al's father.

I knew where my mother's line of questioning was going, and I bet Al knew, too.

“Yes,” Al responded casually. “My mother still lives back home where I grew up in Harborview. I ended up at the High Court through the liaison program. A very successful program that has expanded recently to integrate lesser fae from the Golden Court,” she replied, heading off further questions from my mother regarding where she came from and how she’d managed to make it to the High Court.

“Oh, yes, such a shame that you no longer serve House Vitruvian,” my mother said, pivoting to what she perceived as Al’s next weakness.

“And then Luke had to leave House Vitruvian at the same time,” my mother continued, as if it were a tragedy.

I did my best not to let the corners of my mouth tug upward with amusement. *So she’s going to blame Al for me not wanting to date Karina Dempsey as well as my leaving House Vitruvian?* My mother knew very well why I’d left Jay’s House, and it wasn’t because of Al. Even before Al showed up at Court, I’d been planning my departure from House Vitruvian.

“Obviously, he was sad to see us go, Mother, but Jay is pleased to have a representative of House Bellamy on the High Council once again,” I said, taking a not-so-subtle jab at my father. “And you should hear Jay sing Al’s praises still,” I added.

My mother held Jay and his House in the highest regards. She would have tried to marry me off to Jay’s daughter if he had one, I thought with a chuckle. But the latest news around Court was that Jay and his wife were expecting a baby boy.

“Al has already had great success in her role as *senior counselor* for House Dumont,” I continued.

I emphasized Al’s title, making it clear that her current position was a promotion over her previous role as liaison at House Vitruvian. I didn’t normally feel the need to come to Al’s aid like this. She was more than capable of handling herself. She excelled at the mind games at the High Court. A conversation with my mother would be no different. But I felt responsible for putting Al in this situation to begin with.

“Due to Al’s efforts, and a little help from Rhett, a lesser fae liaison has now been placed with every House at the High Court,” I bragged.

My mom wasn’t nearly as clueless about the goings-on of the High Court as she pretended to be. I saw a minuscule showing of respect flitter across her face before disappearing behind her austere demeanor.

“Luke humbly leaves out the significant part he played in getting the

lesser fae back at the High Court,” Al interjected, equally loyally.

“My lady,” Al said before my mother could launch into her next line of questioning. “If you will excuse me, I have just spotted Lady James in need of my presence on the dance floor. You have a lovely estate, and I thank you so much for your... *hospitality*,” Al said with a small, respectful bow of her head.

I knew that Al just barely kept the bite out of her words, but even her forced kindness contrasted with the words and intent of my mother in such a way that there was no doubt where the unkindness in the conversation had originated. Al pulled away from me, and I reluctantly let her go, sliding my hand down her slim arm.

After Al departed, I squared my shoulders to my mother. I knew she meant well and was just doing what she thought was best for me and our House, but I meant what I told Al before. It was time for my mother’s nonsense to come to an end. My mother looked back at me serenely.

“Mother, do you have a problem with me bringing Al home for the weekend?” I asked, cutting to the chase. “We’ll happily stay over at the cottage and not attend the Summer Ball if you do,” I threatened with a tight smile.

We could easily stay on my estate and never see another soul if we didn’t want to. Of course, my mother would rather swallow a toad than have me miss the Summer Gala.

“She is a sweet young woman,” my mother responded. “But, Luke dear, don’t you think it’s unfair to get something going with the girl when you will be taking up Karina Dempsey so soon?” my mother asked.

We both knew my mother’s concern was not for Al. She just wanted to use our conversation as an opportunity to talk about House Dempsey. It was simply appalling that we were at war with Alancia and still all everyone ever seemed to care about was who was going to marry whom. With Jay’s miracle baby on the way, there was a renewed vigor for talks of alliances through marriage and heirs.

“*Mother*,” I replied through my clenched teeth, my tone a warning. “I can handle Karina—”

“*Handle*, my dear?” she began reproachfully. “The King expects—”

“I know what the King expects,” I interjected. “I am the only one who has *ever* looked out for this family at the High Court. I made a promise, and I will deliver on my promise to the King. And the promises I made to you. I

will take Karina to the Fall Ball, and I will entertain her for some time after. *But your meddling, it ends now, Mom,*” I said firmly.

For too long, I’d let my mother run with her machinations, because I’d never cared. But now... “And I hope that next time you run into Al, you find some kinder words for her. She is a part of my life, and she isn’t going anywhere.”

My speech had perhaps stirred enough emotion in my mother to turn her blank face into one of small intrigue. I held my mother’s gaze, waiting for her retort. When none came, I turned from my beautiful mother and went to find Rhett and a strong drink. I ended up finding my drink first and Rhett second.

“Where’d James go off to?” I asked, dipping my head to take a sip of my scotch.

Rhett jerked his head to the dance floor, where James and Al emerged from the crowd, laughing and dancing together to a fast-paced song. Al looked so beautiful when she allowed laughter to lift the burdens she tried so very hard to hide inside. I took another sip, drinking deeply.

“I heard that Al did *not* get your mother’s stamp of approval,” Rhett commented, cutting his eyes to the side toward me.

“Surprise, surprise, the woman who was not hand-selected by my mother is found to be lacking. And as if having my mother in my business is not enough, now the King is interested in an *alliance* between House Bellamy and House Dempsey as well,” I replied, tiring of the topic.

“There is *nothing* lacking about Al,” Rhett said loyally.

“Rhett, I know that. And I told my mother as much too,” I said.

“Did you now?” Rhett replied with a raised eyebrow.

“I did. We all know the only thing *lacking* about Al is that her family does not control most of the ports in the northeast,” I said.

“Wow, is that the going rate of your dowry these days, mate? I would have thought for certain that a couple of cows and a shiny piece of silver would have carried the day for some lucky lady,” Rhett teased.

I cut my eyes toward him and then broke into a chuckle.

Fuck it. Fuck all of it. Fuck all of them.

I kicked back the rest of my drink, savoring its burn, and then set my empty glass on a nearby cocktail table, making my way to Al on the dance floor.

Alarie

“Get your bathing suit on. We’re going for a ride on my boat,” Luke said. He kissed me lightly on my forehead, just as I had begun to stir that morning.

“But sleep, coffee, *other things...*” I said, taking note of Luke’s hip bones jutting over the top of his mid-thigh length swim trunks and trying to prioritize which of my early morning needs should come first.

I reached out, tracing the line of the muscles on his flat stomach with a finger. *Coffee could wait.* He gave me an appreciative chuckle as he grabbed my hand, thwarting my progress underneath the band of his shorts.

“Everything’s packed but you. Bathing suit is optional now that I think about it,” he teased, wagging his eyebrows at me. “Just get your cute ass downstairs.”

I smirked at him, stretching and rolling toward the other side of the bed as he left our room. I found Luke down at the dock loading the boat.

“What time did you wake up?” I asked, noting how the boat was ready to go and stocked with what appeared to be a picnic basket and other provisions.

“Early. But I figured you could use the beauty rest after I kept you up all night,” he bragged.

“Don’t be so proud of yourself,” I retorted, making my way onto the boat.

Luke had been relentless last night, like he was trying to use his cock to carve his name into my soul with orgasm after orgasm. When he finally allowed me to rest, I was convinced that I would wake up delightfully sore. But apparently the beauty rest had healed me. Instead of soreness, there was a faint throbbing through my core as I admired Luke without his shirt.

Laughing, he grabbed me by my waist, easily lifting me and placing me on the boat.

“I said never mind on the bathing suit,” he said, noting with dismay the minimal white string bikini I wore.

“Luke, I think other people would notice if I was completely naked,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Speaking of other people, where are Rhett and James?” I asked.

“You aren’t the only one who needed to sleep in this morning,” he replied. “They’ll probably be gone for brunch by the time we get back. And, anyway, there will be no other people where we are going,” he said, with a devious smirk on his face.

Intrigued, I slumped onto the bench next to where Luke stood in front of the helm of the boat. We didn’t speak as the wind blew us to a small island within sight of the cottage. I propped my feet up on the console of the helm and lay back, turning my face toward the sun. My hair danced in the light breeze. I let the coverup I wore fall open, exposing me to my midriff. Luke guided the boat until we made a soft landing at the shore.

“We’re here,” Luke said, grabbing my attention.

I opened my eyes. I had almost drifted back to sleep.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“My island,” he answered.

“You really own an island,” I said in disbelief, remembering how he had mentioned it to me once before.

“Yep. It’s all mine. It’s too small to run a port through, so my father and brother never cared about it,” Luke explained.

He lifted me off the bench, his corded arms under my thighs. He lithely jumped off the boat into the shallow water and carried me to the shore, placing me down ever so gently. He placed a firm hand on my lower back and pressed my body into him as he lowered his mouth to mine. I was bare-footed, which made me significantly shorter than Luke, so I had to crane my neck and stand on my toes to meet his embrace. He kissed me deep and long, and when he finally lifted his mouth from mine and I tried to stand on my own, I swayed, lightheaded. A proud smirk slid across his face.

“I’m just sleepy,” I said, in an attempt to downplay the effect he had on me.

“I think I can help you find your way to a nap,” he said, jumping back up onto the deck of the boat with much more energy than I could muster at

the moment.

Luke unloaded the boat while I dug my toes into the sand, enjoying the warm water washing over my feet.

“What’s the plan for today?” I asked.

“You see it,” he said, indicating the pallet he had made in the sand surrounded by baskets full of food and water and wine.

“What about that brunch your mother had planned?” I asked.

“I don’t think we’ll be getting off of this island in time to make it,” he replied, running his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip.

My breath caught in my chest before the tension moved lower in my body, settling into a pulse between my thighs. I knew Luke was trying to make up for the night before, for how his mother acted toward me. The first time I had met Luke’s father at the Spring Ball at the High Court, I had felt like I’d undergone, but passed, some kind of test. When I met Luke’s mother, Courtney, last night, I knew that I’d undergone some kind of test and had, without a doubt, failed.

It was clear to me that no matter my accomplishments, my pedigree would never match that of anyone Courtney Bellamy deemed worthy of her son. I may have won over his father, but it was evident to me that I could not accomplish any such feat with Luke’s mother.

Turning to Luke, I began, “Luke, you don’t have to—”

“Don’t take it personally, Al,” he said, heading me off. “No one except perhaps the Queen of Valencia herself would be good enough for my mother.”

“I’m not trying to—”

I was going to say I wasn’t trying to lock him down. I wasn’t trying to even compete with Karina Dempsey or anyone of her caliber. I knew my family didn’t have connections with ports pivotal to the war effort, like House Dempsey, to offer Luke’s family. I knew that I didn’t have a title or wealth to my name or anything that would ever make me a worthy partner for Luke.

But Luke pressed his lips to mine, shutting me up, pressing so hard that I felt my teeth against the inside of my lips before I gave in to his need and opened my mouth to him, allowing his tongue to slide into my mouth and then sweep along my teeth.

I forgot what we were talking about. He pulled the tie behind my back, relieving me of my bikini top and throwing it to my left. Then Luke sank to

his knees in front of me. He looked up at me, his big hands grasping my hips. I pounced on him, pushing him to his back in the sand. The palms of his hands landed in the sand, bracing for our impact.

I lined myself up with the hardness poking through his shorts as his gritty hands came up to my breasts. I placed my hands over his, enticing him to squeeze my breasts harder as I rode the length of him through our minimal clothing. I threw my head back, but one of his hands made its way to my throat, lightly grasping it to draw my attention back to him.

We were both thinking the same thing. *The sand was going to be a problem.* I rose from him, topless, and turned toward the water, untying the bottoms of my bathing suit as I did so. Luke followed me, kicking off his bottoms and catching up with me as the water began to lap against the top of my thighs.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he questioned.

“Wherever I so damn please,” I quipped.

He wrapped his hands around my waist, pulling me into the line of his body. I wrapped my legs around his torso as he sank into the water.

“Go ahead. Try to tell me this isn’t *exactly* where you want to be,” he teased.

He guided my middle toward him until he found me slick and ready for him. The tip of him rubbed against me before I angled my hips and tried to drive myself down onto him. His hands on my hips stifled my efforts.

“That’s what I thought,” he said, chuckling at my visible frustration.

He lowered me down onto him slowly, inch by inch. When at last I was seated against him, I arched my back. He took the opportunity to pull my hair back and bite at my neck. The waves crashed against us, causing us to buoy slightly, but his grip on my thighs left no chance that I would drift even an inch from him.

I closed my eyes as he moved inside of me. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. I allowed the feel of Luke and the sound of the waves to consume me as the throbbing inside of me climbed. He crashed into me over and over again as the waves crashed against our intertwined bodies. I wanted Luke to feel, to taste, the exact moment I lost myself in him. I licked his pouty lower lip, and he opened his mouth to me.

I felt the crest of my very first wave of pleasure begin to overtake me. His tongue swept my mouth as the wave of my orgasm pounded through me. I didn’t know how it was possible, but each time was better than the last with

Luke. As my all-consuming pleasure coursed through me, I could no longer tell where my body ended and his began. I was more than complete when I was with him. I became one with Luke.

“Open your eyes, Al,” he said softly, allowing me to pull my mouth away.

I languidly opened my eyes.

“Luke!” I exclaimed.

I didn’t have words for what I saw. Luke was glowing. Not in the usual way where his smile and dazzling eyes made it seem as though a glow hung about him. He was *actually* glowing. A golden aurora emanated from his skin, making him even more beautiful than I thought possible.

He gave me a big smile that made his eyes dance with joy, and then he grasped me by the back of my neck, pulling my lips to his once more. The unfamiliar feel of the full force of his magic washed over me as he moved in and out of me with the rhythm of the waves. It was like we were in a little dome in the middle of the ocean. It felt as though everything was toned down but focused. I could still feel the warmth of the sun on my skin, but the heat of the day was kept at bay. I could still feel the waves lapping around us, but the movement of the water was gentle and rolling. The noises around us quieted until the ocean sounds of waves crashing and birds cawing were distant and the sounds of Luke’s breathing and the slapping of our bodies together in the water were sharp.

A tingling sensation began to overtake my body. The sensation began beneath my skin, overtaking my body in the same way that an involuntary shiver consumes a body as the cold settles in. Except I wasn’t cold, and instead of a shiver, it was the precipice of pleasure that overtook my body. The orgasm dragged on. I clung to Luke as the anticipatory tingling immediately returned and concentrated where Luke thrust, causing me to break over him once more. The sensation returned again and as he threatened to consume me for a fourth time in a row, I begged for a reprieve.

“Luke!” I gasped. My eyes fluttered open, and I tried to gather myself, to find my way back to reality.

But then Luke thrust into me once more, impaling me on his hard length, and I collapsed into the endless abyss again. I threw my head back as he lost himself deep inside of me. In my half-dazed state, I realized that I was glowing, too, now. We were an impossibly bright ball of light in the middle of the clear blue water. People must be able to see us from miles away.

Our bodies connected, he rested his forehead against mine, and the sound of the waves and the seagulls nearby bled back into existence. I could still feel the light of his magic kissing my skin, but fortunately, he'd decided to give me a break from the life-altering cascade of orgasms his magic could induce. I had so many questions. But I felt unbelievably sated and...sleepy.

Luke carried me to the beach without saying a word and delicately positioned me on the blanket. I was barely awake when he lay on his back and pulled me into him, offering his arm as a pillow.

I woke up what felt like several hours later.

"Oh, damn. Am I burned?" I asked Luke, turning into his body.

I could tell from his breathing that he was already awake.

"Don't worry. I put a shield over us before you napped," he said.

That reminded me of what happened right before I was fucked into a mid-morning coma.

"Did the rest of your powers come back? Wait, what are your other powers?" I asked.

Normally, it was rude to ask another fae about their powers in the days of the dying magic. But Luke and I were past any such concerns. I was brimming with questions.

"Let's pack up and head back for the cottage, and I'll answer your questions," he promised.

Alarie

“So you glow?” I asked Luke incredulously as we sat on the back porch of his beach house.

The aurora around him intensified like he had released a damper on the light exuding from his body. My breath caught in my chest as I took in the sight of Luke with his caramel brown hair rustled by the sea breeze and his golden tanned skin. He offered me a white, toothy grin as he was surrounded by an ethereal golden glow.

“The Lord of Light,” I muttered under my breath, remembering Jay’s words from long ago.

“You already knew?” Luke asked, surprised.

“What?” I asked, still trying to process the light pouring from him. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “Just something I heard once, but I didn’t know what it meant at the time.”

“Well, you heard right. That’s what I used to be called...before.” *Before the magic began to wane.*

“And I thought I looked better with a tan,” I joked.

My skin had already taken on a golden sun-kissed hue from our hours at the beach. But Luke looked like the gold on his skin came from his every pore, almost creating a sparkle to his appearance.

Luke and I, along with Rhett, sat on the back porch of Luke’s cottage overlooking the crashing waves as we sipped our cocktails and nibbled at some snacks before the Summer Ball. Rhett said he and James had seen the light, “like a small second sun,” coming from the island, and he’d decided to stick around to get the story behind it. James had decided to head over to Lady Bellamy’s brunch and was not back yet.

Rhett looked at Luke like he expected Luke to say more, but when Luke

didn't add anything further, Rhett jumped in.

"Luke was known as one of the most powerful protectors in Valencia. People would fawn over him in an attempt to bask in his healing light and protective shields," Rhett said.

I knew that a protector was a kind of warrior who specialized in defensive arts, such as shielding and healing.

"If we're going to talk about people fawning... tell her about your powers," Luke said to Rhett.

Rhett looked back at his best friend of the last hundred years.

"Mate, she already knows. In fact, I..." Rhett hesitated in a way that was foreign to the overly confident lord.

"He's going to kill me either way. Al, you tell him. Tell him about that day you asked me to, uh..." He raised his eyebrows suggestively at me. "Show you my powers."

I rolled my eyes at Rhett.

"Oh. *That*," I replied, looking at Luke, who was still waiting for an explanation from his two closest friends. "Well, Luke, you know I have always been curious about how I would fare under Rhett's powers," I began.

Luke looked at Rhett. Luke was not smiling. In fact, Luke took several steadying, deep breaths.

"Luke, come on. It was nothing. I was fine. *Really*," I reassured him when his foreboding aspect did not lessen. "I found Rhett *slightly* more attractive than I normally do," I said. I saw no reason to sugarcoat it.

Rhett pretended to be affronted.

"But that was it. I didn't dissolve into a puddle of giggles or anything," I said, looking at Luke.

"Alarie, you really do look ravishing with a tan. I swear, it's almost like you are glowing with the same light as Luke," Rhett said.

Really? I thought, now hardly seemed like the best time for Rhett's flirtatious teasing.

Rhett looked at his best friend, a smug smile on his face. Luke returned his friend's smile with something close to a glare.

"Come on, what's going on with you two? Spill it," I demanded.

"Al, have you thought through the possibilities that allow you to be around me giggle-free when I'm not holding my abilities back and Luke's not shielding you?" Rhett asked.

I gave him a small shake of my head. I really hadn't thought about it at

all.

“There are three,” Rhett said definitively. “The first one: you’re in love with someone right now and that protects you from my power.”

I had no doubt that I loved Luke. But *in love*? I didn’t know if I would ever allow myself to be that vulnerable again. Not after Jay. I avoided making eye contact with Luke as I shook my head once from left to right, indicating I didn’t think that was it. I waited for Rhett to continue.

“And you claim not to have any of your own powers, correct? So you aren’t doing anything to block my powers?” he asked.

I shook my head, giving him another *no*.

Rhett went silent for a moment. I looked between Rhett’s and Luke’s handsome faces, waiting for them to explain the final option.

“Al, the only other answer is that—”

“*You’re his mate*,” Luke breathed out.

I stared at my two best friends in disbelief, the waves behind us growing louder as they churned into something less peaceful as the day wore on.

Rhett could only have one mate. He had one shot at true, eternal happiness. And Luke thought that Rhett’s one chance was with me?

“Geez, who died?” James asked jokingly, walking out onto the veranda. “I know I’m the life of the party, but you guys really should be able to get on for a few hours without me,” she teased, totally oblivious to what she walked into.

James was the kind of woman who should be Rhett’s mate, not me. She was groomed from the day she was born to be the wife of a high lord. She moved with the graceful confidence of a woman who knew her beauty, knew her worth, and would settle for nothing short of the very best.

Rhett broke into a smile, the fact that he was showing a little more of his white teeth than normal was the only indication that something was slightly off.

“*They* may be able to get by without you for a few hours, but you are asking entirely too much from me. You have been gone too long for my taste,” Rhett quipped, pulling James up and toward the house before she could get settled on the sofa next to him.

* * * *

I dressed in the silver and white colors of House Bellamy since I was Luke’s guest for the Summer Ball. My gown was nearly to the floor and was made out a white gossamer fabric so light that even the warm summer breeze

coming off the Azure Ocean caused a chill to rise on my skin. Luke came behind me, kissing the top of my exposed shoulder so gently that the chill that had just left my skin returned threefold.

“Oh, sorry about that,” he chuckled, trying to rub away the goosebumps on my arms with his calloused hands.

A warmth radiated from his palms, and it felt like sunlight on my skin. I felt like I was lying on the beach again, the sunlight kissing my skin under a refreshingly light breeze.

“I love that feeling,” I said, looking over my shoulder up at him.

He was *breathtaking*. He wore a light gray suit cross-stitched with fine, white detailing, and a thin silver necktie. The suit was made of a lighter material than the suits he normally wore at the High Court, and the fabric pulled across his sculpted chest and boulder shoulders just the right amount to accentuate the muscular nature of his body, but not so tight that it stretched or gaped. His silver cufflinks, made of little silver rope knots, gleamed in the moonlight.

“Quit staring at me like that, or we are going to be late to the Gala,” he warned.

Indeed, I had been staring, unable to peel my eyes away. He looked every inch like the high lord of House Bellamy. He grabbed my left wrist, wrapping his hand around it, and when he pulled away, there was a dainty little bracelet with a chunky charm in the shape of a heart. Not a charm, *a diamond*, I realized. It had to be worth more than anything I’d ever owned.

“Luke,” I began to protest.

“Let’s go,” he interjected, not giving me a chance to turn away the gift as too nice.

“We’re going to have to drag Rhett and James out of their room, or we’ll be late,” he quipped.

Despite his pleasant mood at the beginning of the night, I was surprised to find my best friend in an unusually somber mood the rest of the night at the Summer Ball.

“I know, it doesn’t seem right, does it?” Rhett asked, tracing my stare in Luke’s direction. There was not a smile anywhere near Luke’s normally happy face.

“Being home always starts to get to him after a few days,” Rhett explained.

“Why?” I asked, turning away from Luke to take in Rhett’s handsome

face.

He wore a fitted white suit with House Rein's color, a ruby tie, and cufflinks. As usual, he looked perfect, not a golden hair out of place, despite the perpetual light sea breeze in Port City.

Rhett pressed his lips together, pulling the corner of his mouth in a contemplative expression.

"Well, you've met his parents," Rhett replied, as if that were answer enough. "But it's his brother."

"Brad?" I questioned, furrowing my brows and looking around the room until I found Luke's older brother. Brad was like a carbon copy of his father but with dark features where his father's were light. But he seemed nice enough.

"No, Al. His *little* brother. *Jacob*," Rhett answered.

"I didn't—" I didn't know Luke had a younger brother.

"He didn't make it home from the war," Rhett said, answering my question before I had finished it.

I looked back over at Luke, feeling the weight of the sadness for my friend for the losses that can accumulate when you live unlimited lifetimes. He was being a good host. He had been all night. Instead of just sticking with me and Rhett like he normally did at the High Court, he made sure to make the rounds and speak to every person who had made the trip into town. I had begged off from his side, taking a reprieve from the barrage of new faces.

"Come on," Rhett said, taking my hand in his. "Let's dance," he said, already pulling me toward the floor in the center of the open hall.

It wasn't until his hand was closed around mine that I remembered our conversation from earlier that day, the one all of us had purposefully avoided mentioning, especially with James around. I had actually been able to forget about it for the first hour or two of the Ball when I had been with Luke. But now that Rhett's large hand was wrapped around mine, my skin felt hot under his touch. I had danced with Rhett plenty of times before, but now thoughts that had never been there before lingered in my mind.

The lively tune we had walked out to the dance floor during was replaced by a slow, methodical number. Rhett pulled me into the strength of his body, one hand going to the small of my back while he entwined his other hand with mine. He was tall, and even in my heels, I had to tilt my head back to look up at him. I took in a breath and was going to say something, anything, to try to imitate the comfortable friendship we usually shared. But

at that moment, Rhett tilted me back, his hand pressing my lower body more firmly into him and causing me to arch into him.

I was self-conscious about things I'd never cared about before while dancing with Rhett, like the way the dip caused the white, delicate fabric of my gown to pull tightly over my breasts. When Rhett pulled me back to him, I had lost whatever words I had tried to muster before.

He spoke first, breaking the tension that had built between us in the silence.

Rhett leaned down and whispered in my ear. "I know it's not what either of us planned, but if it turns out by some crazy chance of fate that you are my..." *Mate*. He left it unsaid. "Well, I'd be honored to spend my days with you, Al baby."

He leaned back, eyes fixed on me. I inhaled a deep breath of the ocean air coming in through the opened ballroom doors. I thought there could be worse fates than being mated to one of my godly handsome best friends.

I met his enchanting, pure-blue eyes and pressed my lips together into a coy smirk.

"Me too, Rhett," I replied, squeezing his hand.

We slowly revolved in a circle, my mind dancing with possibilities that neither of us had asked for or even considered before. As we made another rotation, I spotted Luke in the crowd. His eyes were trained on me, so when Rhett led me into the next move, his gaze moved with me. I didn't look away from Luke's unyielding stare until Rhett moved me again, putting Luke out of my line of sight.

Late that night, after the Ball, Luke and I fell into his overly large bed, silence replacing the usual fervor of our touches. But then Luke pulled me over to his side of the bed, tucking my small frame into the alcove of his body. He nuzzled his face into my hair, making room for himself along my shoulder.

"Luke?" I asked, unsure if I should break our silence.

"Hmm?" he replied softly, still holding me.

"Should we talk about this? This thing with Rhett?" I asked.

The muscles in his arms tensed around me. Luke was silent for so long that I thought he had decided to ignore my question entirely and just go to sleep. But then I felt his embrace soften around me.

"It's just, you can't be his. You just can't, Al." He pulled me closer into his body until he was molded against my back.

“Why, Luke?” I asked.

I agreed with him. Surely, if I was Rhett’s mate, I would have ended up in his bed, and not Luke’s after I split with Jay.

“Because you’re...”

He didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he nuzzled against my neck. The gentleness of his touch felt intimate, not sexual, and I found myself wanting to reciprocate the feelings he didn’t put into words. I grabbed his hand, which was wrapped around my waist, and pulled it over me, holding it close to my chest, over my heart. Like a treasured possession, I nestled his hand between my breasts for safe keeping.

“Night, Al,” he whispered.

Alarie

Luke and I decided to cut our trip short and head back to the High Court with Rhett and James the following morning. Luke felt that he had fulfilled enough of his familial obligations for one trip. For my part, I would be sad not to have the extra days at the beach, but there was no denying that this situation with Rhett had put a damper on any relaxation I'd hoped to have that week.

We dropped James off first upon reaching the High Court. The silence in the carriage wasn't uncomfortable, but it was out of the ordinary for us. When we arrived at House Rein, Luke popped out of the carriage first.

"I'll carry your stuff up for you," he offered, already grabbing my bag and walking toward the front door. Out of habit, we stopped in Rhett's parlor, which was on the way to my wing of the manor. My quarters were a floor above his and farther down.

"There's a way to test it out, you know, Al," Luke said hesitantly, like he was still trying to decide whether it was wise to speak up.

Rhett handed me a glass of sparkling water, which I gratefully took. I was thirsty after our carriage ride.

"Test what, Luke?" I asked, taking a sip.

"Whether you're Rhett's"—his lips thinned into a straight line—"mate."

I looked at Rhett to see if he knew what Luke was talking about. Rhett's expression told me he wasn't sure what Luke was suggesting.

"You need to have sex with me *and* Rhett," Luke said matter-of-factly.

My eyebrows shot to the top of my head, and I choked on the carbonated water I had been in the process of swallowing.

Rhett gave Luke a sly smirk at the same time he firmly patted me on the

back a couple of times, helping me dislodge the water from my lungs. But Luke didn't break out into laughter. And Rhett looked like he was considering it.

"You're serious, *aren't you?*" I asked.

Luke gave me an upward jerk of his head.

"And how would *that* help?" I asked. I thought about taking another sip of my water, but then decided it was best to set the glass aside until this conversation was over.

"You mean other than the obvious?" Rhett asked, wagging his eyebrows at me.

But Luke's weighty look tempered our friend's endless flirting.

"If you're..." Luke gritted his teeth, like it hurt him to say it. "Rhett's mate, then he'll be able to confirm it with that kind of... ahem, closeness."

"He's right, Al," Rhett chimed in.

"Not everyone can tell their mate just by having sex with them. But that's part of my magic. If you let my magic"—He paused, quirking his brow at me—"roam over you while you are having sex, I will be able to feel if something in you answers me."

"Then why don't I have sex with *just* Rhett, then?" I asked incredulously. "Why both of you?"

I couldn't believe I was having this conversation with my two best friends.

"Well, Al, first of all, both of us mean *twice* the fun," Rhett said cheerily.

Even glares from Luke couldn't make Rhett behave, not when we were discussing something that was so quintessentially Rhett.

Rhett's teasing set off an involuntary pulsating, throbbing between my legs, which almost overcame my need to hear if there was a second reason for why I should go through with this.

"And also, I would be there to shield you if you get overwhelmed and feel that you need it," Luke added more practically.

"What about James, Rhett?" I asked.

"Well, I think I can say with confidence that James would not begrudge me a kiss if it comes down to finding out who my mate is," he answered.

"Just a kiss?" I questioned. "I thought you just said sex?"

"Well, let me clarify. For my part, I will only need a kiss. My dear friend Luke here, he can do the other work"—his eyebrows rose—"that will

open you up for my magic.”

I rolled my lower lip between my teeth. Luke was already positioning himself behind me. I felt his hard length press against my ass. Then he grabbed my face, turning it up to him. He slid his tongue deep into my mouth. My resolve weakened as I melted into our kiss, and the effect of our kiss moved directly to between my thighs.

Then Luke broke away from our kiss and turned my head toward Rhett, who was now standing directly in front of me. Luke offered Rhett my mouth. Rhett’s eyes were on my lips with a hunger that he had never looked at me with before.

“Worst case, Al, we have *a lot* of fun,” Rhett teased, but the look of desire on his face was no joke.

I’d be lying if I said I had not thought about it before. I dared anyone to spend any amount of time with the boys and not think about it often and fondly.

“But what if I’m not *that*?” I asked.

Mate. I couldn’t say it. It still seemed absurd that we were having this conversation.

“Won’t I just fall under your spell and turn into a pile of smiles and giggles?” I said.

“No, we can be careful and make sure that doesn’t happen,” Luke answered.

They’d disposed of nearly all my concerns.

“If I open myself to your magic, Rhett, will that mean that you imprint on me? Or that we are bonded?”

I didn’t know much about the magical relationships that could develop between fae. But I knew enough to know that there was significance to willingly subjecting yourself to another person’s magic.

“No, Al. I will make sure to keep a rein on my power. I’m not trying to make my mark on you with my magic. I’m just trying to feel you out. Think of it like the difference between a kiss and a bite. I’m just going to kiss you with my magic,” he said, reaching for my hand and lightly grazing his lips over my skin. “No teeth,” he assured me, looking up at me through his eyebrows. “Unless you ask me to, of course,” Rhett said mischievously.

Luke lowered his mouth to my ear. “I’ll be here to protect you, Al. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

And as soon as Luke said it, I knew I had nothing to worry about.

Except getting naked in front of my two best friends, who happened to be two of the most attractive guys I had ever met. Rhett stepped in closer to me with an irresistible glint in his eyes. Luke's hand was still on my face, waiting for his offer to be accepted.

I took a deep breath in through my nose, allowing the air to fill my lungs as my eyes roved over Rhett and, for the first time ever, I allowed myself to take in his perfect looks and his sexy charm and want him. I nodded at Rhett, beckoning him to join us.

Rhett took my face from Luke, delicately wrapping his hand underneath my hair and around the back of my neck as he lowered his soft lips to mine. His kiss was gentle, and his tongue explored my mouth with the same finesse. He pulled away from our kiss, lightly taking my bottom lip between his teeth.

"A kiss...or two. And maybe a little teeth," Rhett teased.

I suddenly wondered what I had gotten myself into. Luke turned my head back to him. His kiss was rougher, which was the perfect contrast to Rhett's soft kiss. They had done this before, I realized. They worked with each other with a practiced ease that made it clear they had shared women before.

Luke slipped the straps of my dress off my shoulders, causing my dress to pool at my feet. Rhett immediately followed Luke's move, reaching behind my back and planting a kiss on the side of my neck as he unsnapped my bra and allowed it to fall to the floor. At the same time, Luke hooked a finger under the side of my thong, pulling it to the ground. I stepped out of my panties and stood starkly naked before my two best friends.

Mustering up more confidence than I felt, I joked, "It seems I'm outnumbered here. You guys are going to have to help me get your clothes off."

Luke chuckled, and Rhett joined in.

"Actually, Al, for what I have in mind, Rhett and I don't need to take off any of our clothes."

"Well, that seems kind of unfair," I retorted, still very naked.

Without discussing it, Rhett and Luke moved to change positions. Luke moved to the front of my body, kissing me and lightly rolling my nipple between his fingertips. Any further protests disappeared from my lips. Rhett lined up behind me, and I leaned into the weight of his tall frame for support.

Luke lowered to his knees, causing a catch in my breath. He picked up one of my legs, kissing his way up the inside of my thigh. He wrapped my

leg around his shoulders so that he could bury his face against me. Rhett turned my face back to him and kissed me once more deeply as Luke ran his tongue down the center of me. I opened my mouth, and Rhett swallowed my moans.

“Open yourself to us, Al baby. Let my magic in,” Rhett whispered.

I relaxed further into his embrace.

Luke lifted my other leg off the ground, supporting my weight with my legs wrapped around his face. Rhett wrapped his hands around my breasts, and he fed at my mouth, while Luke fed on me as well.

I squeezed my eyes closed and allowed their efforts to consume me. My body was humming with pleasure from head to toe. And then I saw it in my mind. It was like a glowing golden string. *Was it Rhett’s magic? Was the sex so good that I was hallucinating?* Near the middle of the string, there was a part that looked thin and fraying. I was drawn to it.

Was I supposed to touch it to allow Rhett’s magic to enter me? If I managed to fix it, did that mean I was his mate?

In my mind’s eye, I reached out a hand and hesitantly touched the golden thread. The frayed ends connected with a sharp snap, and I felt a jolt of adrenaline surge through my body.

“You going to come for us?” Luke purred, bringing my consciousness back to the edge of the pleasure I neared.

I panted heavy breaths into Rhett’s mouth in reply. Luke swirled his tongue around my opening before darting inside of me, then rolling up to the top of me. I arched my back, pushing myself toward Luke, who buried himself deeper into me. Rhett slid his tongue into my mouth in the same rhythm that Luke worked. I rocked my hips into the embrace of each pass of Luke’s tongue. The swelling built up inside of me and I held my breath in anticipation.

I moved my hands on top of Rhett’s, encouraging him to squeeze my breasts harder, as Luke’s tongue moved to the top of me again. I dug a hand into Luke’s hair, riding his face, then I shattered over the incessant flicking of his tongue. Rhett pinched my nipples, rolling them between his fingers as my orgasm dragged on.

Luke rose from his knees, handing me my clothes as he did so. Legs still weak from my release, I slid on my panties and then threw on my dress, deciding not to go through the trouble with my bra.

“Now I see why you guys were holed up in Luke’s bedroom all

weekend. That was—” Rhett tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, as if just realizing something. Luke and I both looked at Rhett expectantly, waiting for him to finish his sentence.

“That was fun. *But...*” Rhett said, taking a step away from me. “That’s it, guys. *Just fun. My* search for my mate, at least, continues.”

Luke swooped me into his arms, his laughter warm against my neck. I didn’t even have time to feel relieved or say anything at all to Rhett. Luke was already heading straight to my room with a determined glint in his sky-blue eyes that told me I would not be leaving my bedroom for the rest of the day.

Cass

I cautiously walked along a slightly different path than the one I had taken an hour before. Despite my large size, the movement of my feet along the forest ground was nearly silent and indistinguishable from the other sounds of the forest around me. I was patrolling one of the areas along the wall that had been previously compromised but was now patched up by the King. We knew of over twenty such locations so far.

The King had explained that although he had repaired the magical hole in the wall, that area would always be a weak point, like when putty replaces what used to be a brick. I, along with a handful of my best men, monitored these weak points week after week. Others under my command were assigned to patrol the larger areas in between these points to look out for any new holes in the wall.

Our near-constant patrolling kept us out in the forest, at camps, and away from our homes. And High Lord Dumont wanted me back at the Golden Court every minute I was not out patrolling. But I'd been thinking about taking a trip back to the High Court—

I turned abruptly at the sound of a small twig snapping behind me. The hilt of my dagger was in my hand and ready to be thrown. Depending on the height of the fae who had thought to sneak up on me, the blade would either hit him in the heart or the throat. I was fine with either.

“Commander,” the man breathed out seconds before I would have thrown the blade in my hand. The man stood stock-still, eyes wide, knowing how close he had come to an iron dagger in the throat.

“Charles, man, why have you not followed protocol?” I barked,

displeased that I had almost killed one of my travelers, one of the very few we had in our service.

Travelers appearing out of nowhere, and startling soldiers was a recipe for disaster. Protocol would have required him to travel at least sixty yards away from me, giving me time to identify him as not a threat.

Charles, a high fae man with blond hair pulled into a slick bun at the nape of his neck, gulped but stood his ground. “Commander, there was no time. There are Alancian soldiers, sir.”

“How many?” I barked. I would take up the issue of the traveler’s lack of discipline another time.

“Fifteen. Probably scouts,” Charles answered.

“How many of us can you take with you at one time?” I asked.

Every traveler varied on the number of people they could move, if they could even move people. Some travelers could only move objects, and all travelers varied on how far they could go, whether they could go over water or just land, and so many other aspects.

“Five,” the traveler paused. “Including you,” he said, like he had to consider whether my hulking frame might not count as two men.

“Then let’s go to camp and grab four others and be on our way,” I ordered.

We traveled to base camp and quickly located four soldiers who were ready to move.

“The odds. It’ll be three to one, sir,” Charles noted as the other men stood by. He wasn’t questioning my orders, but there was a nervousness in his manner.

“Each of you will take one Alancian. I will handle the rest,” I promised matter-of-factly.

The four soldiers and the traveler nodded in understanding. They had seen me in action enough to know that I could back up what I said. With me in the lead, they would accept being outnumbered three to one.

“How many leaps?” I asked the traveler.

The distance a traveler could go without having to stop in between varied. Depending on how far away the Alancians were spotted and Charles’s abilities, it was possible that we would have to make several stops before reaching our final destination.

“Two jumps total. Just one in between,” he replied.

“Let’s move. *Now*,” I ordered. “Before we lose them.”

My men—Charles, two high fae, and two lesser fae combat-trained soldiers—and I appeared in the center of the Alancian contingent. I immediately threw out one of my daggers, burying it into the left eye of a lesser fae Alancian before the Alancian soldiers had time to register our arrival. The Alancian died on impact with the iron dagger. The enchanted blade returned to my belt automatically. But I already had my broadsword out in anticipation of my next foe. My team spread out immediately, clashing with the Alancian forces.

Two Alancian fae approached me. They were lean, muscular high fae, who no doubt saw my bulky lesser fae frame and thought me slow, easy prey in such close quarters. I let them continue to close in on me until they were too close for me to use my long sword. I could see from the malicious glint in their eyes that they thought they had me.

I dunked under the blow of the first fae's short sword, slicing his legs behind the knees with a short sword I had hidden at my back. I finished the same thrust, bringing my short sword up and under the chin of the second fae, removing his head. The fae I had chopped down struck out from the ground, slicing me on the inside of his thigh. I had felt the blade coming in time to maneuver, so that the resulting cut was shallow enough to just barely miss my femoral artery.

I stepped back toward the Alancian on the ground, kicking him in the face and knocking him unconscious. I applied my weight down, crushing his head with my boot until I felt a crunch. Then, for good measure, I came down with the stroke of my long sword, chopping the soldier's head off.

I straightened up from decapitating the Alancian with my sword extended behind me, catching another soldier I'd heard trying to sneak up on me in the gut. I jerked the long sword up, running him through from navel to chin. So far, I had only killed four. I promised my team I'd take care of at least nine.

The remaining Alancian soldiers wisely decided to give me my space, focusing on my soldiers instead. I expertly moved the bulk of my body within the confines of the separate fights. I grabbed a man by the back of the neck, holding onto his neck firmly and then kicking out at the man's body with such force that I was left holding a head with the neck dangling from it, the body having been propelled feet across the opening.

The few remaining fights became one chaotic melee. I took out my matching iron daggers, one in each hand, and dove at the nearest Alancian

soldiers, taking two down with me. The battle was over in minutes. The casualties were absolute on the Alancian side.

“Commander, we should get you to a healer,” Charles suggested, noticing where the Alancian soldier had tried to bleed me by my femoral artery.

“It will be a scar. Nothing more,” I said, dismissing his concern. I cut away a piece of fabric from the bottom of my shirt and tied it around my thigh to staunch the bleeding. “Report,” I barked.

“No casualties, sir. All Alancians are dead. No one got away,” Charles said.

“Injuries?” I asked.

“Yes, Commander,” a soldier said, stepping up next to Charles. “Many.” His left arm hung oddly at his side.

“Get yourself and these men to a healer, and then, Charles, you come back for me,” I ordered.

In addition to the four men I had brought with me, the traveler had previously left behind one of his scouts to track the Alancian soldiers. That made six men, which was more than the traveler could take in one trip.

“Sir, I’ll stay behind,” the scout offered. Every man there offered the same.

“Go. All of you. *Now*. That’s an order,” I clarified.

My men knew better than to argue with a direct order. The traveler and the four other soldiers disappeared, their only trace, the dead bodies that lay under the canopy of trees around me.

I stood in the center of the first four dead men I had felled. I kicked at the contents of one of their nearby bags. And then I picked up another tote when I did not find what I was looking for. No maps. No food. Nothing to indicate any of these Alancian men were, in fact, scouts. None of them had used any ostensible magic. Fifteen seemed too big to me to be a scouting group but too small to be any attempt at a stealthy attack. The Alancian soldiers had been here for a reason, but I didn’t know what that reason was.

I had kept one of my hands near the hilt of my iron dagger the entire time. Whether it was because I had confirmed my suspicions about the spies or something else. I threw the bag in my hand down, moving one hand behind my head to grasp the longsword that hung across my back between my shoulder blades. My other hand tightened on the blade at my belt.

I turned sharply, dagger in hand, ready to throw. An instant before I

released the dagger, I realized it was Charles who had popped into existence again.

“Damn it, Charles,” I growled, my grip tightening on the blade I had nearly thrown into the throat of the traveler once again.

“We are going to have to do something about your repeated failure to follow protocol, soldier,” I said sternly.

I was on edge and angry. I still felt like something was off about the entire encounter. Why were the Alancians only coming over in such small numbers? We’d made preparations, but undoubtedly, a larger force would challenge us, especially if that force included warriors with magic. We still didn’t know if the magic of the Alancians had faded along with our own.

“We’ll *start* with fifty laps around the camp. *No traveling,*” I sentenced.

I was going to have to drill discipline into the well-meaning lord, or I was going to find myself short a traveler. Charles stood across from me, grasping his throat like he couldn’t believe a dagger wasn’t buried there.

“Did the other men make it back okay?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” Charles replied, removing his hand from his throat and standing at attention with his hands at his side.

“Then let’s leave this place, Charles,” I said.

Alarie

Rhett shot the eight ball into the far corner pocket with a deafening thud, looking smug. Bar Louie was particularly busy for a Tuesday night, but we'd managed to grab one of the three pool tables.

"Rack 'em baby," he crooned in a sultry manner, running a hand through his golden hair.

Even when he was gloating about beating me, he still managed to be supernaturally good looking, I thought, annoyed. I rolled my eyes and leaned against the pool table. Luke walked over from our table near the bar, and my gaze focused in on the way his cotton t-shirt pulled over his muscled chest. He was wearing a plain white t-shirt, an extremely casual look for him and one that I *really* thought he should embrace more often.

With a knowing smile, he leaned over me, resting his palms on the pool table on each side of my body. I looked up into his dazzling sky-blue eyes. He leaned in, and I parted my lip slightly, ready to accept his kiss. He moved to the side of my face instead and whispered in my ear.

"I'll rack them for you, Al baby."

Unlike when Rhett used the nickname, the words on Luke's lips made something in my body react. I felt like his sultry words were somehow directly tethered to the space between my thighs. He pulled away from the table with the triangular rack in his hands. I slapped his chest, squeezing my thighs tightly closed.

"Tease," I said, accusingly.

Rhett, Luke, and I had quickly and easily moved past the events that occurred between us at and after the Summer Ball. There had been no further discussion, or concern, about me being Rhett's mate. Rhett was still hot and

heavy with James. And Luke and I had gone back to doing what we wanted, when we wanted. We weren't exactly dating. If anything, we were perhaps a little more guarded with each other now. When we had been worried that I was Rhett's mate, things had gotten awfully intense, awfully fast, and that just wasn't what either Luke or I was looking for at the moment.

Things were actually going quite smoothly for me at the High Court lately. My role with House Dumont now felt more like a success now that we had at least one lesser fae liaison placed at every House at the High Court. Already the Court felt more lively and diverse with the new faces around.

"You guys want to meet over at my place before the Ball tomorrow?" Rhett asked. "James will be over. I'll have some people from out-of-town over, too."

Reaching for a stray ball, Luke shot a glance my way from over his shoulder and then straightened up, plopping the ball in the rack with a thud.

"I have to meet up with Karina for the Ball. Karina Dempsey," he clarified. "She just moved to the High Court. And I..." Luke looked over at me again. "I promised my mother a while back I'd take her to the Fall Ball. And you know, with things how they are in the north, the King is expecting me to make sure House Dempsey remains a strong ally."

Luke was almost rambling, which was odd for him. Rhett faded to the other end of the pool table, applying chalk to the tip of his cue stick like he wasn't the one who had started the conversation to begin with.

"But, you know, I could probably get out of it. My parents are used to me disappointing them at this point," he joked.

I looked at Luke, furrowing my eyebrows. I knew about Luke's agreement with his parents regarding Karina. He'd told me about it months ago. And it wasn't like Luke and I were exclusive. We had just happened to have been with only each other lately.

"What? Because of me?" I asked. "Oh. No, Luke. It's okay," I assured him.

I was under no illusions regarding my relationship with Luke. We were friends with *really, really* great benefits. But he wasn't dating me like he was going to date Karina. There were no hopes of the King and the Kingdom tied to our time together. He looked at me from under his brows.

"I'm good." I nudged him with my shoulder and gave him a small, reassuring smile.

Rhett began to head back to the head of the pool table to make his break.

“You don’t have to worry about me. *Really*,” I reassured Luke. “Actually, Cass wrote to me and told me he would be there and... he asked me to go with him,” I said.

Rhett veered back to the end of the pool table, seemingly deciding his cue needed even more chalk.

Cass had written and asked to take me to the Fall Ball. But almost immediately after his first letter, a second letter had shown up saying he didn’t know if he’d be able to make it, after all. But I would figure it out if he didn’t show. I just didn’t want Luke to feel obligated to be my date for the evening. Luke pressed his lips together, the faintest hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Well, I guess that settles it, then,” he said. “We both have dates.”

Rhett popped up between us. He’d clearly been listening to every word we’d said.

“Good! It’s settled. I’ll see all *four* of you tomorrow at my place,” Rhett concluded.

Rhett leaned over the pool table, stroking his cue and preparing to make his break as victor of the last game.

“Are you inviting the Prince to your little shindig?” Luke asked.

Rhett ceased his stroking of the cue and perked up, looking at Luke.

“The Prince? Why would I?” Rhett asked, bemused.

“You didn’t hear?” Luke asked. “The Prince has decided to grace us with his presence for this Fall Ball.”

Rhett raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Really? I thought he only came around the High Court for the Choosing?” I asked.

I had never so much as glimpsed the Prince in all of my time at the High Court. To my knowledge, the only time he had been to the High Court in years was for the Prince’s Choosing, which only occurred once a year. And last year I’d been away with Jay at Breakpoint during the Prince’s Choosing.

Although I’d never met the Prince, I got the general impression that he was not well-liked around the High Court, particularly among the male fae. I could see why the men may not appreciate the Prince’s annual ceremony involving their sisters, girlfriends, and, in some instances, wives, because no one was exempt from the Prince’s Choosing. The women were lined up like cattle, picked through, and then passed over by the Prince year after year.

The women around Court, on the other hand, didn’t seem nearly as put

out by the process of the Choosing. After all, whatever flaws the Prince may have, he was still the sole Prince of Valencia and heir to the throne. And drop dead gorgeous, according to James.

James previously explained to me how she'd gone through the Choosing many years ago. This year, I would have to participate in the ceremony. I think I sided with men at Court on their opinion regarding the Prince. I didn't care how amazingly good-looking he was. I wasn't some piece of chattel to be compared with the rest. And I wanted to pick my own future, including my future partner.

"Apparently, he wasn't able to wiggle out of this one," Luke replied. "With Jay being out of town because he is expecting the baby any day now." Luke cut his eyes to me, and I tried to appear as blasé as possible.

The truth was that I had some regrets about how things ended with Jay, but my decision to bow out of being part of the new, happy Vitruvian family was not one of them. Jay's unborn baby was nearly as renowned and mystical as the Prince around the High Court. The miracle baby, the first fae baby to be born in twenty-three years. I didn't think that mistress or House Consort to the happy new parents would be an enviable position to be in at the High Court. I was thankful that, for the most part, my relationship with Jay was relegated to whispers at the High Court and that the Lord of Whispers could contain those.

"I doubt the Prince wants to come to my little get together, anyway," Rhett replied. "After all, I don't think we've received a single invite to any event at the Emerald Court since the Queen's passing," Rhett noted.

This was another reason for the Prince's apparent dislike at the High Court. The *only* time he ever showed his face at Court was for the Choosing. There was an understanding around Court that the Prince thought himself too good to mix with the masses. Instead, he kept to himself at the Emerald Court and surrounded himself with sycophants. The Prince infrequently hosted events at the Emerald Court, and when he did, the invite list was always very exclusive.

Rhett got back to his break and shot the cue ball so hard it struck the rest of the balls with a resounding crack, causing many of the balls to scatter into pockets.

"Your turn, Al baby," Rhett said, handing me his cue.

"Actually," Luke interjected, intercepting the cue, "I called winner."

Alarie

I awoke to a knock at my door. The pounding got more and more incessant.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” I yelled, exasperated, padding down my hallway toward the door.

I had a slight headache and felt like I could use some water. I had stayed out late at Bar Louie with the boys. I opened the door, expecting it to be either Luke or Rhett. They were the only ones who ever visited my wing of the Rein manor and the only ones who would feel comfortable enough to knock on my door like a mad man.

“Is that how every lady answers the door around here? If so, then I’m beginning to think I could really like this place,” he said, wagging his eyebrows at me.

I was wearing a silk slip of a nightgown. The hem barely covered the top of my thighs, and the lace detail at the top exposed the tops of my breasts.

“Cass,” I said, smiling. I stepped aside to let him in. “I didn’t know if you were going to make it.”

He leaned down and gifted me with a roguish smile and a kiss on the cheek before moving into my foyer. Last time he showed up at my door unannounced, we had shared a passionate kiss that had been cut short by the necessity of Cass having to leave the High Court and patrol along the magical border wall between Alancia and Valencia. I had been worried that our kiss would make it weird between us, but him showing up on my doorstep unannounced and giving me a hard time felt completely natural.

“This is what you get when you wake people up from a perfectly good morning of sleeping in,” I replied, bumping my shoulder against his large body. I bounced off his muscled frame, and I doubt my attempt even

registered with him.

“Come on, we’re going hiking,” he replied, ignoring my jape. He walked toward my bedroom like he owned the place.

“Ugh,” I groaned, following him to my room.

I found him digging around in my closet.

“Don’t you have anything in here that isn’t silk, lace, or see-through?” he quipped. He held up one of my more indecorous tops with a single finger and wagged his eyebrows at me.

I rolled my eyes and snatched the top from him. But now that he mentioned it, I didn’t know if I did have anything that was suitable to wear for hiking. I started digging for a pair of tennis shoes I knew I had left over from before Jay replaced my entire wardrobe.

“Okay. I’ll go hiking with you on one condition: Go make me some coffee,” I bartered.

“I accept your terms,” he teased, abruptly ceasing his rifling through a drawer of delicates and walking out of my bedroom toward the kitchen.

I heard him clanking around in the kitchen while I dug out a tank top and an old pair of shorts that I had not worn since I came to the High Court.

* * * *

“I’ve never been out here before,” I said.

We headed away from the Court in the opposite direction from the way I would have taken into town if I were heading to Bar Louie. The direction we headed in was the same way to go if we were going to Breakpoint or Harborview, but instead of heading along the main road, we immediately cut into the woods as soon as we were outside of the High Court’s perimeter.

“Yeah, you don’t look like you get out in the woods much these days,” Cass replied.

It was true. I had not gained weight despite having access to any kind of food and treats that I wanted, a luxury I did not have back home. Instead, I was about as thin as I had always been. But there was a softness to me that had not been there before, particularly around my chest where the top of my breasts had filled into mounds. Back home, I had been lean and wiry, probably from a combination of never having a lot of food around and having to walk almost everywhere. Plus, I used to be a little more rough and tumble, going hiking or for a run on the beach.

“I’m not complaining,” Cass assured me, noticing my analytical stare. “It looks good on you.”

“Where are you taking me?” I asked. I was beginning to work up a sweat already.

“There’s a watering hole over here, not too far,” he replied, holding a low branch for me to walk past.

I took the lead for a while, dunking under tree branches and watching for holes and loose rocks on the forest floor. It felt good to be active. The most physical activity I got these days was walking to and from Bar Louie, and that was only when Luke didn’t carry me.

I grabbed a branch to move it out of our path like I had done the last twenty minutes or so.

“Mandy, watch out—”

Cass tried to warn me, but it was too late. I had failed to realize that there was a wasps’ nest perched on the branch. I released the branch in my hand and the nest crashed to the ground at my feet. Angry wasps exploded from the pieces of the nest, swarming me and Cass.

“Run,” Cass yelled, taking the lead once more.

I took off, loping after Cass. The wasps buzzed around us as the watering hole appeared in sight. Cass threw our pack on the bank and kicked off his shoes. He dove head-first into the clear water. I managed to kick off my shoes before crashing into the water after him, fully clothed.

I was already out of breath from running when I began laughing. Fortunately, the wasps had finally decided to leave us alone. Cass emerged from the deeper water, running a hand through his dark green hair. His wet shirt clung to him, so that I could see his muscular pecs and defined abs underneath.

“You get stung?” he asked, his laughter fading. He ran his rough hands over my arms and back, feeling for stingers. A shiver that had nothing to do with the cool water ran down my spine.

“I don’t think so,” I answered, trying to shake off the chill on my skin.

He pulled his soaked shirt over his head, shaking the water from his hair. The full extent of the tattoos I had seen peeking out of his shirt before was revealed. His chiseled chest was covered in ink. The black, blue, and green ink melded together, making it difficult to make out distinctive features of any particular tattoo without having to stare.

“Take off your shirt,” he ordered.

“What?” I said, tearing my eyes away from the drops of water now dripping down his bare chest.

“Shorts too,” he said.

I looked at him incredulously.

“Or keep wearing wet clothes,” he responded to the look in my eyes. “But I’m going to lay my clothes out to dry.”

He began to walk toward the edge of the water. I stripped off everything but my bra and panties and handed them to him. He trudged over to the grass and laid my small clothes over a branch. Then he peeled his shorts off, revealing a pair of short navy boxer briefs, and threw his clothing over a branch as well. The muscles in his thighs were so huge that his briefs were forced to bunch up at the top of his legs.

I was sure that he could feel my eyes on him as he waded through the water back to me. I noticed a long silvery scar along the inside of his thigh just before his lower half disappeared beneath the waterline. It looked new. I knew that the silvery nature of the scar, like the one I had under my chin, meant that the cut had been made with an iron blade.

“What happened to your leg?” I asked.

“Someone tried to relieve me of my femoral artery,” he replied nonchalantly.

I wanted to ask more questions about the battles in the north.

“So, what do you think?” he said, changing the subject. He held his arms out and turned around in the water, gesturing at the alcove of the forest around us.

“It’s beautiful,” I responded, looking at the canopy of trees. “From here, you can’t even see that there’s a city out there.”

“I know. That’s the point,” Cass replied.

But I was distracted by the tattoo I spotted on his back when he turned around. I swam up to him and began to trace the outline of the tattoo that covered the entirety of his back and worked its way down his muscular arms. It was a set of wings. But not just any wings. They looked just like the dark set of feathered wings I knew his father donned.

Cass was proud of his father and his wings. His dad used to be able to retract and recall back his wings at will but, as the magic began to fade, his ability to do so also faded until one day he could no longer make the wings disappear. His father had always said he was thankful that when that day came, he was stuck with his wings, instead of without them. But Cass had grown up envious of his father’s wings and his ability to fly. Cass had felt that the dying magic had robbed him of his birthright—his own set of wings.

“How’s your dad?” I asked, pulling my hand away from his skin.

“Good. I stopped through for a minute on my way here. He says you haven’t been home since you left,” Cass replied.

Cass laid back, floating in the water and closed his eyes. Guilt coursed through me, just like every time I thought of home, my mother, and everything I left behind.

“Yeah, you know...” I equivocated. “I’ve been busy,” I finished, lamely. He opened his eyes, cutting them toward me.

“It’s not as bad as you remember, Mand. People miss you there,” he replied, closing his eyes again.

But even the sound of him calling me by the name I went by back home—Mandy—struck a chord of existential dread within me.

“Speaking of missing people. Why’d it take you so long to come visit me?” I said, changing the subject.

He didn’t push. He knew I had mixed feelings about everything to do with our childhood home.

“Someone has to fight their wars,” Cass replied.

And I knew that he meant the high fae by “their.”

I shivered again, this time from being cold.

“I’m going to go lie in the sun for a minute,” I said, swimming toward the shore.

As I walked out of the water, I remembered I was wearing a thong. But it wasn’t like it was that much more revealing than the bathing suits Cass had seen me in a million times before. The fact that my bra and panties were white was the bigger problem. They were practically see-through when wet.

I decided just to lie on my stomach for a bit. A few minutes later, I heard Cass getting out of the water. Then I felt him settle next to me. We sat in silence in the soft green grass, allowing the sun to dry our bodies and our clothes. I flipped over to lie on my back, peeking one eye open to stare up at him.

Despite the fact that I was laid out in front of him nearly naked, he was staring at my face. I gave him a small smile and closed my eyes again, thinking of our kiss the last time I had seen him. And then Luke popped into my mind. But it wasn’t like that with Luke. It wasn’t like we were... exclusive. He had been on other dates. He was going on a date with Karina Dempsey tonight, and that would kick off his “courting” of her, as he had promised his parents.

Before I could make up my mind on whether my prior kiss with Cass had been a good idea, his lips were on mine.

At first, I was hesitant. Cass and I had always just been friends. But that was then, and this was now, and my body was telling me that I very much wanted to explore new territory with Cass. I pushed myself up to meet his embrace. Our kiss dragged on until my panties, which the sun had almost dried from my swim, were drenched for a different reason. Cass broke away from my mouth, a devilish grin on his face.

“Man, I can’t tell you how long I have wanted to do that,” he said.

“*Just that?*” I teased, the ache between my thighs vehemently disagreeing with him not touching me.

He looked at me, amused.

“I don’t know how they do things here at the High Court, but back where we come from, you at least have to take a girl to a proper meal first,” he replied, raising his eyebrows at me suggestively.

“Cass, I’ve known you almost my entire life. And I’m not hungry right now,” I retorted flatly.

I propped myself up on my elbows under him, my nipples poking through my translucent white bra. He set his jaw, contemplating.

“Well, lucky for you, I’m starving,” he joked, but his eyes blazed with a hunger that was anything but jovial.

He rose to his knees, and his large body cast a shadow over me as I looked up into his brown eyes, noting the gold that traced through them, just like mine. He pressed his hulking mass against my small frame, pushing me to the grass. He reached a hand between my legs, pushing my panties to the side, and found me soaked in anticipation for him. He hovered his mouth over mine as he slid a finger into my core.

I gasped, trying to close the gap between our mouths, but he pulled back, keeping just enough distance so that I breathed into his mouth but could not touch his lips. He brought his finger to his lips and licked at it, showing me with his eyes how much he enjoyed it. He relieved me of my bra before he went back to working his two fingers in and out of me. He inhaled my breathy moans.

“At night, sometimes after a battle, I lay in my tent and dreamed of this. Dreamed of you,” he whispered.

He looked at me like I was everything he had ever wanted in life materialized before him. I pushed myself up, closing the distance between

our lips and kissed him, stopping him from spilling any more of his secrets.

“This is real, Cass. This is me and you, right now.”

“Then make my dreams come true. Come on my fingers, Mandy,” he growled.

He stroked the same knot inside of me over and over again. I clung to his back, my hands clawing at the outlines of tattooed wings I knew were there, imagining what it would be like if I clung to real wings instead. I closed my eyes as I opened myself to him and allowed my climax to crash over me. The pleasure washed over my body, and I loosened my grip on Cass, lying on my back with my eyes still closed.

I felt Cass rise to his knees and then a shadow settled over us like something large was standing over us. Startled, I popped my eyes open, but it was still just the two of us in the alcove. The shadow I felt settle over us came from Cass.

Large, feathered onyx and charcoal wings now protruded from his back. I was too shocked to say anything. He rose to his feet and pulled me up to him. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me to his chest like I was something to be cherished, and his wings closed over us like a cocoon.

“Better than a dream,” he murmured, kissing the top of my head.

And then, the next thing I knew, we were in the air, his wings beating around us. Before I could find my words, we were above the tops of the trees. I should have been terrified that I was naked and flying above the city. But wrapped in Cass’s arms, I felt as safe as I had ever been. He was laughing as subtle tears of happiness streamed down his face.

“Wha—How?” I managed to gasp out.

“You,” he replied simply, laughing and smiling down at me.

I began to protest before I remembered Luke moving inside of me in the ocean and the blinding ball of the light surrounding us. Cass flew toward the High Court.

“What about our stuff? I’m naked, Cass!” I protested, remembering myself.

“Fuck our clothes and fuck them,” he said, flying over the parapets and rooftops of the Court.

We landed on the balcony to his room at the Dumont manor. Cass encircled me in his wings, leaning his head down and gently bestowing a kiss upon my lips before letting go of me for the first time since we lay in the alcove. I followed him inside as he walked toward his closet.

“It might be a little big,” he joked, tossing me one of his white undershirts.

Alarie

I had not expected Rhett and Luke to be waiting for me when I finally made my way back to the Rein manor that afternoon. I was cutting it close—I had not planned for our hike and other things to take quite as long as they had—but I’d still make it on time to the Fall Ball if I started getting ready now. I would have to skip Rhett’s pre-party festivities and meet Cass at the Ball, however.

“What’s up?” I asked, surveying my friends.

They both looked tense. Luke was sitting on a long sofa, parallel to Rhett’s bar, when I entered Rhett’s main lounge. But Luke rose from the sofa to greet me as soon as I entered the room. Rhett stood behind the length of his bar, holding a drink in his hand. I couldn’t be sure, but I had my suspicions that the contents of Rhett’s glass contained something stronger than a refreshing iced tea. It looked like Rhett had been running his hand through his golden locks of hair.

Luke reached my side, and I became very conscious of the makeshift outfit I’d borrowed from Cass’s closet since he’d decided to abandon my clothes in the alcove of the watering hole. I was wearing one of Cass’s white cotton t-shirts, which I’d tied up in the back so that it did not hang to my knees. The pair of black athletic shorts I’d borrowed from Cass were also unsurprisingly so large that I’d had to roll them up several times until they just barely hung over my hips.

Unsure, I looked at Luke, waiting for his reaction. Luke and I were not exclusive, and he wasn’t the jealous type, but being with Cass was the first time I had been with someone other than Luke in a long while.

Luke broke into a smile, his handsome face lighting up despite whatever

it was that was on his mind, and I felt tension I did not know I had been holding in my chest escape. He picked a leaf out of my hair and I smiled back at him, slightly chagrined. Luke took my hand in his and led me to the lounge he'd sat on before, pulling me down beside him. He may not be upset about Cass, but something was still off with him.

"Al, this is something that we maybe should have talked to you about sooner," he began. "*Although*, in our defense, we didn't really anticipate you flying over the High Court naked," Luke teased.

We? I looked over at Rhett. *What did Rhett have to do with this?*

"Am I correct in believing that Cass did not have the ability to fly before your hike with him today?" Luke asked.

"Yes..." I responded tentatively.

"And he gained the ability to fly during your"—he cleared his throat suggestively—"time together while away from Court today?" he asked.

I nodded my head.

"Al, it's your magic," Rhett said, cutting to the chase.

"My *what?*" I exclaimed, snapping my head in Rhett's direction.

"Your magic," he replied resolutely, walking over to where Luke and I sat.

"I don't have any magic, Rhett," I retorted, equally sure.

"Yes, you do," Luke replied.

"No—" I began to protest.

"Yes, you do, Alarie," Luke insisted. He allowed the light of his magic to shine through the room. His skin sparkled like his every pore was made out of an ethereal light—his reminder of how his magic came back to him while he had moved inside of me in the ocean back at the Silver Court.

Rhett nodded in agreement with Luke.

"Al, you remember when we all had that...*real good time* together?" Rhett asked.

Of course, I remembered. A girl isn't likely to forget a threesome with her two gorgeous best friends.

"Well, after I was with you, more of my magic came back. It almost feels back to normal," Rhett finished.

"I don't...I don't understand," I mumbled, my grip tightening on Luke's hand like his touch was the only thing tethering me to reality.

I felt lightheaded. I pictured the shredded thread of gold I had imagined mending when I was with Rhett and Luke. I hadn't told Luke or Rhett about

it. I thought it had something to do with possibly being Rhett's mate, and then, in all honesty, I had gotten so wrapped up in the moment that I completely forgot about it.

Rhett came and sat on the other side of me.

"Al, it's okay," he said, grabbing my other hand.

"We think we are the only ones who know. But you're going to have to talk to Cass. This isn't the kind of news that can get out," Rhett cautioned.

"What? Why? Look, I'm not convinced that I do have any magic—not the kind you are suggesting—" I stammered. "But if I do, then why does it have to be kept a secret? You both have magic. Plenty of people still have at least some of their powers," I pointed out.

"Because we don't understand your magic, Al. We don't know anyone who has ever been quite like you," Rhett replied, deathly serious.

"Can you imagine if people found out that after all these years of the magic dying, you have some power that gives other people their powers back? Can you imagine if Vandros found out about power like that?" Luke asked ferociously.

He was gripping my hand a little too tightly, but he realized it and let up.

"Al, tell me you understand?" Luke pleaded. "They'll take you away from me. They'll lock you up. People will do *anything* to get their powers back," he said, his voice raising.

"Guys! GUYS!" I said, squeezing both their hands.

"I think you're crazy. I don't know why or how you got your powers back. And I don't know why Cass got his wings when he did. I don't have any more magic than the next fae born during the last twenty-four years. And I certainly don't have the kind of power you are talking about. *But...*" I said, cutting off their protests, "I will talk to Cass after the Ball tonight."

Rhett squeezed my hand and then dropped it, slithering away back to his post behind the bar. I looked at Luke inquiringly. He leaned in, kissing me gently on the cheek before pausing near my ear.

"Don't think coming home dressed in another man's clothes will keep me away from you," he growled, scooping me into his body.

A rush of excitement flooded through me before settling into an aching throb between my thighs. He squeezed my ass with both hands, but the kiss he gave me on the lips was soft and sweet.

"I'll let you start getting ready," Luke said, releasing me.

He gave me a smile that didn't quite make it to his eyes.

“Hey, Al, did you hear the news about the King?” Rhett called to me, back to his normal, confident self.

“No, what is it?” I asked.

“The King is using the Fall Ball as one of the five or ten engagement parties he will probably have. It’s going to be the biggest celebration we’ve had in decades, and it starts an hour before the Ball!” Rhett exclaimed.

“I have to go get ready!” I yelled, already half-running down the hall.

I hopped into the shower, and as the hot water poured over me, I ran my fingers through my hair and thought about what the boys had said. My magic. *My magic.* But I didn’t have any magic. I’d never done anything remotely magical in my entire life. There had been times in my life where I’d wished I had some kind of magical ability. Of course, all fae had some magic. It was that spark of magic that made us immortal. But I’d never flown, fought, or so much as baked a pie with any kind of magical prowess. I’d come to terms with that fact and accepted that, probably because of my being born around the time that the magic began to fade, I just had less magic than most.

I wasn’t completely oblivious to what they were talking about. Jay, Luke, Rhett, Cass—all men who I had been with in some capacity and all men who now had recovered their powers while others’ powers continued to falter. But there had to be something other than me that tied the powerful group of men together. Their relationship to the King? The fact that they are the first-born male in their family? But even as I ran through a list of possibilities, I remembered that Luke wasn’t the eldest—his brother Brad was.

I was not the reason for them getting their powers back. I couldn’t be. I just couldn’t be. That kind of power didn’t exist. There was no power that could reverse the dying magic. There wasn’t even a power associated purely with sex. What they were suggesting—that somehow these men had gained their power back from sex with me—was not a thing. It was unheard of.

It did not exist.

Alarie

“Good evening, *little star*.”

A man appeared out of the shadows of the foliage surrounding the courtyard. I saw his icy blue-gray eyes appear out of the darkness before I could make out the rest of his features.

I was walking from House Rein to House Heroux for the Fall Ball. I was alone and running very late. I had spent the entire time that people were downstairs at Rhett’s pre-Ball festivities getting ready for the Ball. I convinced Rhett and Luke to leave without me, promising to catch up with them at the Ball.

Little star? I thought, stopping my hurried steps.

“Oh.”

I could make out his blue hair and his shorter, wide frame now that he was closer. I recognized him as the man who had saved me from falling flat on my face earlier in the year when I had slipped on a slippery cobblestone. I had never gotten the man’s name at our last meeting. It seemed rude to ask at this point, so I brushed past it.

“Hi. Are you here for the King’s party?” I asked the unusual lesser fae man with high fae light-hazel eyes.

“Grey must have forgotten to send out my invitation,” the man replied.

I furrowed my brows at the implication that this man was on a first name basis with the King.

“But no, I’m not here for the King’s celebration or the Fall Ball,” he continued. “I’m here for *you*.”

I scanned my surroundings. Everyone else had already made their way inside House Heroux. The sound of water cycling through the grandiose fountain behind me filled the otherwise silent courtyard.

“That’s, um, *nice*,” I replied, unsure of how to respond. I really didn’t have the time or the desire to properly play the High Court game of flirting. I needed to get inside and find Cass.

“But I really have to get going. My *boyfriend*...” I emphasized the word. Cass wasn’t exactly my boyfriend. But the strange man didn’t need to know that. “Is in there waiting for me and—”

The man moved to stand directly in front of me. He was taller than me but not by much since I wore heels. He covered my mouth with his large hand and wrapped his other hand around the back of my head, stifling my words. I saw a look of pleasure register on his face as he took in the sight of my eyes going wide with surprise.

“Little star, as much as I can’t wait to learn *every little thing* about you, we will have to catch up later. We really need to get going now,” the man said.

My blood was pounding through my veins as I thought about what to do. He released a growl at the sight of fear creeping into my eyes. I tried to fight my way out of his embrace, pulling at his hands, scratching at his arms, but his hands on me were like vise grips. I was also severely restricted by my stiletto heels and my tight dress. Even if I did get free, I knew I wouldn’t be able to run. I was more likely to turn my ankle and fall on my face than I was to escape.

And then there was a blur of movement. A wet, warm liquid splashed across my face. Instinctively, I closed my eyes to avoid getting it in my eyes. I heard a gurgling noise and then opened my eyes to see the lesser fae man thrown halfway across the courtyard, his head barely attached to his shoulders.

The most gorgeous man I had ever seen stood in front of me. He pulled a handkerchief out of thin air, wiping off the knife he had just used to cut the lesser fae’s throat, then shoved the blade and the dirty handkerchief somewhere at his side into a pocket of darkness. They just disappeared.

Despite my shock, it registered with me that he was, *without a doubt*, the most *irresistible* man I had ever found myself in the presence of.

Rhett may have been the most classically handsome man I had ever seen. He could charm the pants right off almost any woman.

And Luke—he was just *beautiful and perfect*, inside and out. A woman was likely to forget altogether that she even had pants around Luke, much less come up with any reason why she wouldn’t want him inside of them.

But the man who stood before me—shadows of darkness rolling off him and making him appear as one with the fall night—he was the kind of man who made a woman forget her pants and immediately think of what was *underneath*. He was the kind of man who made a woman want to lose her religion, or more likely, find a new one that involved happily selling her soul in exchange for just a single night to *pray* at his altar.

“Is almost getting kidnapped turning into some kind of hobby of yours?” he asked coolly. He pulled a clean handkerchief out of the same darkness he had disposed of the dirty handkerchief and blade in.

He wiped gently at my face, but I jerked back, my hand shooting to his and stopping his movement. When my hand touched his, a flicker of surprise, or anger, or something, flashed across his face, but then it was gone. He raised his dark eyebrows, took a step back, and calmly handed me the handkerchief to wipe the blood from my own face. I noted that he did not have a drop of blood on him. He was eerily calm for someone who had just slit another man’s throat so thoroughly that he’d nearly ripped the man’s head off.

I looked down at the soft, white piece of cloth in disbelief. I ran my fingers over the letters “NAH” monogrammed in the corner of the handkerchief. Guards clad in black leather ran up to the tall, dark, handsome lord.

“Stay here,” he ordered, not waiting for my response.

He spoke to the guards for a few minutes and then made his way back to me where I stood shell-shocked but no longer covered in any blood. He softly grabbed my arm, gently tucking it under his own, and began to drag me toward the main hall.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, *what?*” I retorted, looking down at his hand on me incredulously.

“Why was someone trying to kidnap you?” he asked, exasperated, showing some kind of real emotion for the first time.

He seemed like the kind of man who was used to getting answers without having to repeat himself. A trumpet sounded. He pushed me into the main hall and began to jog away from me.

“Stay in my sight until I get a chance to speak to you,” he called over his shoulder, again, not waiting for a response. He clearly expected his orders to be followed.

I scanned my dress. By some miracle, I did not have any blood on me.

There was no outward sign of the struggle I'd been in minutes before. I scanned the room, trying to shake off the last five minutes as I looked for Cass.

I didn't know what disturbed me more. The guy who tried to kidnap me or the guy who so casually slit the other guy's throat right in front of me and then proceeded to show no other concern other than an apparent need to boss me around.

"What were you doing with the Prince?" Cass asked.

Cass had found me in the crowd before I could see him, which made sense since he towered over everyone whereas I was shoulder height for most, at best.

"*Huh?*" I said, scanning the crowd for the annoyingly rude man. "The Prince!" I exclaimed, realizing what Cass had said.

I pulled out the dirty handkerchief still covered in blood and looked at the initials monogrammed in the corner. NAH: Nikolas Heroux.

"Yeah. You didn't know?" Cass chuckled.

I was saved from having to answer any of his questions by the sounds of the trumpet announcing the arrival of the King and the members of his House.

"I'll explain later," I replied.

Sure enough, the man who had dabbed blood from my cheek minutes before was now wearing a simple gold crown encrusted with small emeralds atop his head. He stood to the King's immediate right.

I saw him glance over the faces in the crowd until he spotted me. With the intensity of his deep green eyes, he reaffirmed that he would be seeking me out the moment he was free of his obligations.

* * * *

"Lord Davante." The Prince of Valencia held his hand out to Cass.

Cass took his hand. "Prince Heroux," he replied respectfully.

Reading the look of surprise on Cass's face, the Prince explained, "It's my business to know the men who fight for this Kingdom, Commander."

"This is Mandy," Cass said, gesturing to me at his side.

I squeezed Cass's biceps, or what little I could fit under my hand, in protest.

"I mean, Lady Alarie Armand," Cass corrected himself, so unused to High Court etiquette, especially when it came to me.

“Why was someone trying to kidnap you?” the Prince asked, again, without preamble.

“What *the fuck* is he talking about?” Cass blurted out, forgetting any attempt at maintaining decorum.

“Alarie, *that’s* why you were late!?” Cass exclaimed, using my real name as he so rarely did. “Are you okay?” he asked, running his hands over the top of my arms. I nodded, patting his hand reassuringly.

The Prince turned back to Cass.

“Do you know why?” the Prince asked.

“Can we talk about this somewhere else?” Cass asked, cautiously looking at the crowd around us. His hand that wasn’t on me moved near his belt, and I knew he was strapped down with weapons, despite wearing a suit.

I doubted anyone had heard a word we’d said because it was so loud with chatter in the main hall. They were talking about me like I wasn’t standing right there in front of them. I waited impatiently to see when they would realize this and direct their attention back to me. But that didn’t happen.

The Prince nodded his head for Cass to follow him and turned his back to me without another word. The Prince looked back to find Cass reluctant to leave my side after the news that someone had tried to take me by force.

“The guards are watching her. She’ll be fine,” the Prince assured Cass, indicating the guards positioned throughout the room who were indeed focused on me. Cass leaned in and kissed me sweetly on the cheek.

“We are talking about this as soon as I get back,” he whispered.

Tight-lipped, I watched them walk away. Well, I wasn’t going to stand there like an idiot waiting for them to come back. I spotted James not too far away and moved to join her.

* * * *

Their conversation had taken longer than I had anticipated. The Prince sought me out, meeting my eyes with the deep forest green of his own and indicating for me to join them with a nod of his head. I excused myself from High Lord Preston and his husband’s company and walked toward the Prince and Cass. Cass’s demeanor was markedly different from when he had left my side. He looked pissed.

I looked at Cass. He was not one to hold his tongue. If he had something

to say, normally he didn't care who was around to hear it. So his silence was puzzling. But if Cass was pissed, then I was pissed too. I directed my gaze to the Prince, allowing an annoyed expression to settle onto my face.

"Congratulations, princess. You work for House Heroux now," the Prince stated flatly.

I had no idea what had transpired between the Prince and Cass, but if the Prince wanted to be rude, then I could be rude too.

"No, I don't," I replied, matching his clipped tone.

"I'm senior counselor to *House Dumont*," I replied proudly.

Cass smiled at me.

"So you're turning down my offer of senior counselor to House Heroux, then?"

I would be crazy to turn down an offer like that. Working for House Heroux was one of the most coveted positions at the High Court.

"I don't recall ever receiving that offer," I quipped. But my anger was cooling. I was beginning to understand the source of Cass's displeasure. He would, of course, want me to continue in House Dumont's service. But, at the same time, I knew he would not begrudge me accepting this kind of opportunity.

"Do you want the job or not?" the Prince asked, exasperated.

It seemed that being bossy and exasperated was the only way he knew how to act around me.

"Yes," I replied truthfully.

"Then meet me outside of House Heroux at nine a.m. tomorrow morning," he directed. "Commander," he said, inclining his head to Cass slightly.

"My Prince," Cass replied respectfully.

The Prince sharply turned on his heels and walked away from me.

Alarie

It was entirely too early to be up and ready to leave the house, considering the party everyone had been at the night before and into the early morning. Well, everyone except the Prince. I didn't see the Prince the rest of the night, after our pleasant little run-in.

Cass only agreed to leave me to go run the morning drills with his team at House Dumont after a very sleepy Rhett promised him that he'd personally walk me to my meeting this morning with the Prince. But Luke showed up only a few minutes after Cass left, already asking questions about what had occurred the night before.

"Tattletale," I jeered at Rhett.

He shrugged unapologetically. But he looked tense and concerned, too. Luke wrapped me in a hug, squeezing me until I tapped on his shoulder.

"I'm fine, Luke. Let up," I reassured him.

Rhett hovered to our side and ran a hand through his already disheveled golden head of hair.

Luke pulled me away from his body and stared into my face, firmly grasping me by the shoulders. "I'd heard about the intruder who was dealt with last night, but I had no idea you were involved. Why *in the hell* didn't you tell us what happened last night?" he demanded.

I looked at Rhett like Luke was overreacting, only to find Rhett looking back at me expectantly, waiting for a reply.

"Okay, okay." I threw my hands up in surrender, breaking away from Luke's grasp.

"You were..." I wanted to say, *too busy*. Luke hadn't left Karina's side the entire night. "Having too much fun," I said instead.

“Anyway, Cass didn’t leave my side the entire night, and the Prince spoke with Cass and assured him that my safety was taken care of. I didn’t want to ruin the ‘biggest party in the decade’ for you,” I explained.

Rhett pressed his lips into a straight line but seemed willing to accept my answer. But Luke’s nostrils were still flared.

“Luke, can we talk about this later? Rhett has to walk me to my meeting with the Prince,” I said, trying not to sound irritated about the apparent necessity to hand me off from one man to another.

“I’ll take her,” Luke barked, the way he gently tucked my hand into the crevice of his arm not matching his tone.

Rhett willingly backed off.

“I’m going back to bed,” he said. “Night, Al baby,” he joked, half-heartedly.

“This is *exactly* what Rhett and I were worried about, Al,” Luke continued in a discreet whisper as we walked in the direction of House Heroux.

“Did you have that talk with Cass?” he asked, referring to the talk I’d promised to have with Cass about my nonexistent powers.

“I didn’t have time to, Luke. Look, that can’t be it. No one can know what you’re worried about. One, because it’s not a real thing. But two, because, well, how could they?” I protested.

“What did Cass tell Nik?” Luke asked.

I was intrigued by Luke calling the Prince by his first name, but I knew Luke wasn’t done with his questioning, and he wasn’t going to let me change the subject just yet. I breathed out a sigh.

“He—he told the Prince that he got his wings when he was out hiking with me,” I admitted.

“Fucking hell,” Luke cursed. “This is exactly what we don’t need to happen. We *don’t* need *this* getting out.”

“Luke, there is no *this*,” I whispered.

“If that’s true, then why did someone try to kidnap you last night, Al?” Luke continued.

“I’ve been thinking about it, Luke. What about Stefan? If I pass on some kind of magic through sex then wouldn’t Stefan have been affected too?” I asked.

“Maybe you did impact his magic and he never said anything. Or maybe,” the muscles in Luke’s jaw feathered, “deep down, you never trusted

that piece of shit enough to give him any of your magic. I don't know how it works, Al but..."

We cut off any further argument upon reaching the steps of House Heroux. The Prince was already outside, waiting.

He stood at the top of the steps, his hands in his pockets, his dark hair falling around his piercing green eyes. He took the steps toward us nimbly, one at a time. He seemed so sure of himself as he stopped one step above us.

"Hope you didn't have *too late* of a night," the Prince teased, a knowing glint in his eyes.

"Luke, it's been—" the Prince purposefully cut off his own sentence, clearly indicating that he didn't quite agree with the usual refrain "*too long*."

"Long enough, yeah," Luke finished the sentence for him.

And I couldn't help but stare over at my friend, who was normally so kind and friendly to everyone I had ever seen him around. I furrowed my brows at him, but he didn't look away from the Prince.

"Well, as much as I *love* catching up at the High Court, we really must get going." The Prince shrugged, removing a hand from his pocket. He took a step down, offering his hand out to me.

"Where are we going?" I asked, looking at but not taking his outstretched hand.

"To train," he answered shortly, nodding at me to take his hand.

Begrudgingly, I stepped up and took his hand, feeling calluses that could have only come from years of holding a sword. I turned back to say bye to Luke, but he was gone.

Or rather, I was gone. I found myself clinging to the Prince in the complete darkness around me. But then it was gone before I knew what was happening. We reappeared on what appeared to be the roof of a large building. The sun was bright overhead, and I heard waves crashing in the background.

Steadying myself in my heels, I looked up to see a twinkle of amusement in the depths of the Prince's dark green eyes. I realized that in my panic in the darkness, I had wrapped his hand around my waist as I clung to the front of his high-necked hunter green tunic. I released the fistful of his tunic and pushed away from him.

"First time traveling?" he asked, the only remnant of his amusement a slightly quirked eyebrow.

I refused to let him ruffle me.

“Very observant of you. Where are we?” I asked.

He ignored my sass, drawing his eyes purposefully up from my four-inch stilettos to the top of my head, which, even in heels, was a foot or more below his own.

“The M,” he answered.

The Emerald Court on the Emerald Isle. That explained the ocean nearby.

“Seeing as how you are not *dressed* for any real training today, we’ll just have to talk through some things first,” the Prince noted.

I noticed that his green tunic was tightly fitted, clinging to the curves of his muscles. But there were no weapons on him that I could see. He didn’t look like Cass had that morning, strapped down with so many weapons I’d lost count.

“And what, exactly, is it that I need to be dressed to train for?” I asked, determined to maintain my composure.

“Your powers. Now tell me about them,” he replied, putting his hands in his pockets and beginning to pace.

“That’s easy. I don’t have any,” I responded petulantly, already knowing where the conversation was going.

“That’s not what your boyfriend said,” the Prince retorted.

I had called Cass my boyfriend just the night before. But something about the way the Prince said “*boyfriend*” made me bristle.

“We don’t agree on this particular issue,” I replied.

“I’ve heard that you have shown some aptitude for shielding,” he continued to press.

I had thought about it over and over again. How Stefan had lunged for me. How he had been inches from me. I should have felt his hands wrap around my arm, but instead, he had fallen back, *hard*, like he had run into a wall, an invisible wall...a shield. But I had only told Luke, and maybe Rhett, about what had really happened with Stefan that day. Not even Cass knew.

“How did you hear about that?” I asked, too curious to be irritated.

“How do you think Jay was able to get to House Mouchard so quickly and search for that piece of filth?” the Prince said, answering my question with his own.

I knew the Prince had traveled himself and Jay to House Mouchard that day. They had been the ones who discovered Stefan and Lila Tragon were missing. I did *not* want to talk about Stefan.

“Then tell me how Cass came to get his wings,” he ordered casually, seeing that I was not going to offer more on that subject.

He didn’t raise his voice. He barely showed any emotion at all around me except for the occasional slight amusement at the irritation I couldn’t seem to hide around him. He had the kind of commanding presence where he didn’t need to yell or try to intimidate. His bulky, carved physique, too big to be pure high fae, was intimidating enough, especially when combined with his cool command, which came from the certainty of *knowing* his orders were going to be followed.

I calmed myself, reminding myself that this was my first day on my new job. Maybe the Prince’s demeanor was some way to throw me off, to test me. If that was the case, then I had probably failed. I had definitely let him get to me. But what he was asking was a bit of a personal story, especially to tell the Prince of Valencia, who had done nothing but act like a prick since the first time I had spoken to him.

“Cass and I went hiking. He got his wings. Then he flew us home,” I replied succinctly.

A muscle in the Prince’s broad jaw fluttered, and I felt a small sense of satisfaction rise in me at managing to irritate him as much as he irritated me.

“And what were *you* doing when Cass got his wings?” he asked.

He pulled a red apple out of a dark shadow to his side and took a big bite, waiting for my response. I stared, wondering where the apple had come from. He threw the half-eaten piece of fruit up in the air next to him and it disappeared into darkness again.

Show off.

“You might as well cut to the chase, princess. You won’t leave here today until I know the full story,” he said.

“That’s not my name,” I replied crossly.

“Then what *is* your name?” he spat. “Alarie? Mandy? Al? Any of the names your throng of little lordlings call you?”

I pursed my lips into a straight line, thinking of all the names the men in my life called me. He was awfully informed about my personal life already.

“I don’t care. Call me whatever you want,” I retorted. “You can call me sugar tits for all I care.”

I regretted the words as soon as they came out of my mouth. I was failing miserably at maintaining the High Court mask I had perfected over the last year. Already, my potty mouth was showing. Something about the Prince

galled me. He stepped closer to me, purposefully staring down at my breasts with an appreciative gaze.

“You don’t seem that sweet to me,” he mused, rolling the words around in his sensual mouth, a glimmer of amusement crossing his face.

“So just tell me,” he demanded, all signs of amusement gone. “What were you doing with Cass, *princess*?” he added.

I huffed out a resigned sigh. “I was underneath him.”

He looked at me expectantly, waiting for more detail.

“I was naked. We were, ya know, in the middle of doing some *stuff*,” I said generically.

“And his wings appeared before, during, after?” the Prince asked, not missing a beat.

“You want the blow-by-blow detail?” I asked sarcastically.

“Yes,” he answered crisply.

I breathed a big, beleaguered breath.

“*Fine*. We went for a hike outside of Vlaise. We ran into some wasps and ended up having to jump into a nearby pool of water.”

I decided to skip ahead.

“Cass’s hands and mouth were on me. I was...” I squeezed my eyes tight in frustration. I could not *believe* I was having this conversation with *him*.

“Well, I was a little distracted, because it was about the same time that I...”

He rolled his tongue across the front of his bottom lip, raising his eyebrows at me.

“That’s when I felt the shadows over us. It was his wings. They had come out of nowhere.”

The Prince appeared appeased at my description.

“Is there anything else or *anyone* else I should know about?” he asked.

I looked at him tight-lipped, crossing my arms.

“Luke. Luke Bellamy,” I clarified.

“Funny. Your *boyfriend* didn’t mention that one,” he teased.

I had never told Cass about how Luke came into his full powers. The first time Cass showed up at the High Court, he had asked me if Luke was my boyfriend, and I had been able to say honestly that he was not. The subject of the nature of my relationship with Luke had not come up with Cass again, however.

“Similar circumstances?” he pried, showing some of his amusement.

“We were fucking, if that’s what you mean,” I replied crudely, becoming irritated at him being amused at my expense.

“And he gained his powers back while you were *fucking*?” the Prince asked, mimicking my dirty mouth.

“Yes. We were in the ocean.” And then, remembering that the Prince had seemed irritated by Luke, instead of veering away from his questions, I decided to lean into them.

“My legs were wrapped around Luke. It was hard to keep up, my orgasms were crashing into me wave after wave, but at some point, he began to glow, really glow, and then I was glowing too,” I gloated.

The Prince took a deep breath.

“When was this?” he asked.

“The Summer Ball at House Bellamy,” I replied.

“Anyone *else*?” he asked.

I sighed, exasperated.

“Rhett Rein,” I conceded.

“Again, *fucking*?” he asked, his enjoyment at taunting me returning.

I took a deep breath in through my nose.

“Yes.” And then, before I could catch myself, I said, “Well, not exactly. I was with Luke.”

“So you and Luke were going at it, and Rhett somehow got his powers back from that?” the Prince asked, puzzled.

I pursed my lips together.

“Not quite,” I said.

He waited for me to explain.

“If you really need to know, I was with Luke and Rhett...*at the same time*,” I admitted.

I definitely saw a glimmer of amusement in his dark green eyes at this confession.

“But I didn’t end up having sex with Rhett. We just did...*stuff*,” I finished lamely, losing my nerve.

I glared at him, daring him to ask for more specifics about what kind of “stuff.”

“And that occurred...”

“Right after the Summer Ball,” I answered.

“I really need to get out of the M more,” he teased. “I’d heard that

House Bellamy's galas rivaled the High Court's, but if I'd had any idea..."

I crossed my arms at him.

"Anyone else I should know about?" he asked again.

I thought about Jay. I would not share that secret with him. And there was even less proof than there was with Cass and Luke and Rhett that I had any influence over Jay's powers.

"No," I bit back.

"Well, unless you want to do *stuff* with the entire Valencian army..." he said.

I stared daggers at him.

"No?" he chuckled, amused by himself. "I didn't think so," he said, tilting his head dismissively, like it had been a real possibility. "Okay, then we're going to have to figure out how to tap into your magic."

We? I wasn't going to do *stuff* with him either.

Seeing the look on my face, he retorted, "Relax, princess. I don't need whatever magic you have between your legs to get my powers back. I still have mine," he bragged. And to prove his point, he traveled to the other side of the rooftop and back in the blink of an eye.

I was burning with anger. I wasn't ashamed of what I'd done with Cass. Or Luke. Or Rhett. But why did I have to do this *with him*?

"I wasn't offering," I retorted.

"Well, don't rule it out just yet, princess," he teased.

I groaned under my breath. He was never going to call me by my name.

"What does any of this have to do with me being a senior counselor for House Heroux?" I asked.

"Your first priority as senior counselor for this House is to learn how to use your magical abilities. You *will* train with me. And if we are successful on this first task, then senior counselor to House Heroux can mean whatever you want it to mean. The resources of this House will be at your disposal," he promised.

Disbelief roiled through my body. If he truly meant what he said, then I had bargained for much more than a promotion as senior counselor to High Heroux. I could do anything I wanted, become anyone I wanted, with the resources he offered. It was an opportunity I could not have even come up with in my dreams.

"But until then, princess, you're my magical guinea pig. And one way or another, I'm going to figure out how to get that magic out of you," he said

resolutely.

There it was. He didn't care about me. He just wanted to find a way to use whatever magic he thought I had.

Alarie

“Come home with me for a few days,” Cass implored. He kissed my lips and then my neck, and I felt myself softening to whatever he wanted.

“I don’t know, Cass,” I replied reluctantly, trying very hard to think of reasons to get out of the trip and not be distracted by the line of kisses he made down my neck.

“Come on, Mand. Don’t be that way. It’ll be fun.” His lips lingered on my skin with a promise of better things to come.

I seriously doubted that going back home for the first time in a year would be *fun*. But I had not been home since I had come to the High Court, and I couldn’t just avoid it forever. At the very least, I needed to go and check in on my mom. The thought came with a pang in my stomach.

“What about my training?” I asked, proud that I had managed not to let him fully distract me.

I had relayed to Cass how frustrating my first day of “training” with the Prince had gone, leaving out a couple of details, of course. Cass had not joined me in lambasting my infuriating new trainer. Cass respected the sanctity of the order of command too much to openly criticize the Prince for what he viewed as minor squabbles. But there was a coolness to his respect for the Prince, bordering on iciness. Cass hadn’t quite gotten over the Prince ripping me away from House Dumont.

“What? You don’t get days off now that you work for the Prince?” Cass asked skeptically.

He was thinking that I was using my change in work as an excuse to get out of going home. And he wasn’t entirely wrong. I pursed my lips in contemplation. It wasn’t like the Prince and I had discussed a schedule for my training.

“You can send the Prince a note letting him know you guys can pick up your training when you get back in a couple of days,” Cass suggested.

He could see my resolve weakening.

“I want you to be there when my dad sees my wings for the first time, Mandy. And we can go to the beach,” he bribed, all but sealing the deal.

“Okay,” I capitulated.

“Great! Now go pack. The carriage is already on its way!” he said.

“Cass!” I exclaimed. “What would you have done if I would have said no?”

He wagged his eyebrows at me. “I can be *very* persuasive.”

He swept me into his muscled arms, dipping me back and kissing me firmly on mouth, before righting me.

“Now go pack,” he said, patting me on the ass and pushing me toward my room.

* * * *

My heart palpitated as we rode into town. Everything looked exactly the same as I had left it, but somehow it felt small and foreign now. The small town of Harborview lacked the tall buildings and spires that pervaded the Vlaise skyline.

“Home, sweet home,” Cass said, and he meant it.

He squeezed the big arm he had wrapped around me, beaming with a big smile. Although my feelings about coming home were mixed, I couldn’t help but smile at Cass’s happiness. He loved our hometown and was always happy to visit with his father.

His father, Troy, was already outside in the yard when we pulled in front of the small, white brick home Cass had grown up in. Cass hopped out of the carriage and turned, offering his hand for me to step out. At the same time, he called his wings, allowing them to appear and expand. I looked over the side of one of his wings to see Troy approaching, his matching wings out, with a beaming smile.

“Pop,” Cass greeted his father.

I knew his large onyx wings, which had white-tipped feathers dispersed throughout, were soft to the touch. When Cass was surrounded by his wings, he seemed larger than life. I could see the glimmer in Troy’s eyes as he took in his son with wings that matched his own. Cass embraced his father, their huge wings shifting naturally with the rest of their bodies. I took a step back, allowing them to have their moment.

Troy discreetly wiped a single tear from the corner of his eye.

“Mandy, come give an old man a hug,” Troy said, directing his attention toward me standing a few feet back watching the interaction.

“Thanks for giving my boy his wings,” he whispered in my ear before pulling away from our hug.

Cass clapped his father on the back, and the three of us made our way into the house.

“You stop by and see your mother’s new place yet?” Troy asked conversationally.

The guilt that seemed to be perpetually associated with my life back home began to rise in me. I had no idea my mother had a new house. *How? With what money?*

Troy’s friendly gaze turned unsure as my guilt ate at me, keeping me from answering his question.

“No, we came straight here,” Cass replied, saving me. “But we’ll stop by later,” he continued, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“Anyway, it’s good to have you home. *Both of you,*” Troy said.

“Wanna go to the beach for a little bit and then we’ll stop by your mom’s?” Cass asked.

“Yeah, that works,” I said. I was excited about the beach, at least.

“Good. Jase and some of the boys are going to meet us down at the Bluff,” Cass said.

Cass wrapped me in his arms and flew us to the beachfront. It was a view unlike anything I had ever seen before, taking in the white sand and the blue water with whitecaps from above. We landed in the middle of a group of guys singing at the top of their lungs. Cass joined in the minute his feet touched the ground.

“The baddest man in the whole damn town,” he bellowed, setting me down and only stopping his singing for a moment to kiss me on the top of my head before starting back up.

He jumped into the air for a frisbee. There were cries of cheating.

“I don’t need my wings to punk your sorry asses,” Cass japed, tossing the disc to our friend, Jase.

“Mandy, heads up,” Jase called out seconds before throwing the disc my way.

It was like I had never left. It had been a long time since I had even thought about Jase or Wes or any of the guys I used to hang out with before

leaving for the High Court—except for Cass. But they treated me just like before, like one of the guys. Wes tossed me a beer.

“I’m three deep already. Catch up, Mandy,” he challenged.

I opened the beer as a smile crept onto my face. I looked out into the ocean, its waves peaking then crashing against the coast. I took a sip of the beer, closing my eyes, and turning my face up toward the sun, then inhaled the salty sea air.

“Told you people missed you here,” Cass said, moving behind me and wrapping his arm around my waist.

He swayed in tune with the song playing in the background. Wes was bellowing the lyrics out purposefully loud and out of tune, and everyone was laughing. I turned my face up to Cass’s, seeing his smile touch his eyes. I saw love in his eyes, and in that moment, it felt like falling in love might be an easy thing to do. He leaned his head down to mine, planting a soft kiss on my lips.

* * * *

With sun-kissed skin and the beach still in our hair, we made our way to my mother’s new house. Cass’s dad gave us directions. The house was a significant upgrade from the tiny home I had grown up in. It even had a second floor. Cass threw his arm around me and rapped his knuckles on the front door.

“Hello!” an overly cheerful man answered the door.

“Uh...” I stammered, confused, wondering if we were at the right place. But then I heard my mother’s voice from the other room.

“Jim, tell them I’ll be right there. Just pulling the rolls out of the oven,” I heard my mother call.

“Come on in, Cass, Mandy,” the man, apparently named Jim, said.

Cass and I exchanged bemused expressions as we moved into the house. My mom walked up to us, smiling.

“Cass, looking handsome as ever.” She greeted him in the way a proud mother would. Then she folded me into a hug. “Welcome home, Mandy.”

I was lost for words. *My mother was dating? And smiling? And hugging?*

“Ms. Armand, nice house you have here!” Cass jumped in before my lack of words got too awkward.

“Thanks, Cass. We just moved in a couple of months ago. Jim and I— This is Jim,” she offered for the first time.

It was a little late for introductions, but I shook Jim's hand and offered him a friendly smile.

"Too bad I didn't have my magic helper in the kitchen with me when I was baking the bread," my mother said.

My mother had always said her food came out better when I was in the kitchen helping. I was under no illusion. It was clearly an attempt to get me to take an interest in cooking, something I had never shown any interest or aptitude in.

The entire night felt surreal. I wanted to be happy for my mother, who seemed to be happier than I had ever seen her. But it was hard. *Was I such a burden to raise? Was my mother happy I was gone?* I had always known my mother loved me. But it would have been nice to have grown up with whoever this woman was.

I wandered out to the backyard after dinner. My mother followed me out.

"It's nice, huh?" my mother asked, meaning the new house.

"Yeah, very nice," I responded, trying not to let my feelings seep through.

"It's all because of you, you know," my mother said.

"What is, Mom?" I asked.

"The house. Those equities you sent home shortly after you left for the High Court. They matured so nicely and so quickly, I found myself able to afford this house in months. And then it kind of gave me a new perspective in life. I started dating Jim..." she trailed off.

I stood stock-still, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. I had never sent my mother any equities. But as soon as she had said it, I knew who had. I wondered if I would ever, in all my immortal years, outlive the generosity Jay had bestowed upon me, so much of it without my asking or even knowing.

"I'm sorry, Mandy," my mother said, misunderstanding my reaction.

I turned to my mom. I *really* did not want to have *this* conversation. This was part of the reason I had been avoiding coming home for so long.

"I'm glad you're happy, Mom," I replied, making my way back toward the door into the house.

I meant it. I was happy that my mother was happy.

"And you're happy too?" my mom questioned, hopefully.

I looked through the glass pane of the back door and saw Cass politely

nodding his head like whatever Jim was telling him was the most interesting thing he had heard all day. I loved how kind Cass's heart was.

"Yeah," I replied simply. "I am."

I reached for the door handle.

"I did what I thought was best for you, you know," my mother blurted.

I rested my hand on the doorknob. I took a deep breath and then sighed and turned back to my small, beautiful mother, her fiery red hair standing out in the dark of the night.

"I know you did, Mom," I said.

"I'm so proud of you, Mandy. I just knew that you were made from a different mold and were destined for things bigger and better than anything Harborview could offer you," my mother explained.

"Cass is from Harborview," I retorted.

Maybe if I had liked home a little bit more, we both would have stayed in town, and we would have been together this entire time. Maybe I wouldn't have had to be alone all those years. And Cass wouldn't be leading a damn war.

"And I am so happy you two found your way back to each other. I always thought you two would be cute together," my mother said.

And before I could think of something to say or go into the house, my mother added, "I just didn't want you to get too comfortable here. And look at you now." Like that justified everything I had gone through in my life.

I had never been comfortable in Harborview. There wasn't much in my childhood that could be described in terms of comfort. I was raised to believe that comfort was a four-letter word associated with bad feelings of being trapped and settling for less. But my mother was right. Whatever she did, it drove me to leave Harborview, and I was doing pretty well for myself.

"So, Jim's a funny guy," I said, changing the subject.

I gave my mother a smile, letting her know that we were good. My mother had done the best she could raising me. I had to believe that.

Alarie

Cass and I walked toward his father's house, our interlocked hands swinging in between us. We had enjoyed the silence of the night for the last five minutes or so. Harborview was so much quieter than Vlaisé at night.

"Are you still mad at me for making you finally come home?" he asked.

I continued to stare at the road ahead of us but squeezed his hand.

"No. I'm not mad at you, Cass. You were right. It was good for me to come home for a bit. You know me. I just had it in my head that there was nothing for me here anymore," I explained.

"I know, Mand. You've always done that," he said.

"Done what?" I asked, somewhat defensively.

"Distanced yourself. Pushed others away. Denied yourself the things you want now for the promise of something better later," he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

His tone was gentle, but his words were true and penetrating.

"But, Mandy," he said, tugging on my hand so that we stopped walking. He moved my small hand over his heart, holding it there with his own hand on top of mine. I could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart.

"You feel that?" he asked. I felt his unyielding muscle and a slight jump in his heartbeat. "You can push all you want, but I'm not going anywhere this time. If you leave me again, I'll just follow your ass," he said.

My heart fluttered. I knew what he was working his way up to. I had seen it in his eyes all day. I had seen it in his eyes since the first night he kissed me at the High Court. But I wasn't ready to say "I love you" yet.

"Now, who's the one not living in the moment?" I teased. "I'm here with you right now, Cass." I brought my other hand up to his face, tenderly caressing it.

He grabbed me and shot into the air.

“How’s this for living in the moment?” he asked.

I laughed off the startlement I had felt from being on the ground one minute and in the sky the next. I didn’t know if I would ever get used to Cass’s quick transitions to the sky. He flew us the rest of the way to his father’s house, landing on the roof.

He pulled me down so that we both sat on the flat rooftop. He spread his wings out, and we lay on top of them, like a pillow. His right wing curled around me slightly, tucking me in. We looked up at the stars that lined the midnight sky. When we were kids, we used to climb up on the roof at night and just talk or make up pretend constellations in the stars.

“That one kind of looks like a bird’s wings,” Cass said, pointing at a random configuration of stars.

“Look at that one. It looks like a heart!” I replied, embracing our old pastime.

He rolled his body on top of mine, using his wings to encircle us. That day had been the longest I had ever seen Cass without him retracting his wings. At the High Court, he normally flaunted his otherness in the face of everyone else. He put his scars and tattoos and his lesser fae strength on display for everyone to see. But he usually only kept his wings out if he was using them, or sometimes at night when we were sitting on his balcony.

Wrapped in his arms inside of his wings, I felt incredibly comfortable. It was like we were in our own personal safe, warm cocoon. My mom had hit the nail on the head earlier. My entire life, I had been afraid of being comfortable. I’d been scared that if I got comfortable, I would get stuck and never grow to fulfill my dreams. But in this moment, I realized that being comfortable could be amazing too.

“I’ve wanted you for so long, Mand. Longer than you know.” He pressed his body into mine.

He was always saying stuff like that to me—hinting that he had been in love with me since we were kids, that I was his dream. It was intimidating trying to live up to the picture of me he had created in his head all these years.

“The wait’s over,” I said, grabbing his hand and gripping it around my breast and squeezing.

I felt him harden against my leg. Our sweet moment was replaced with an urgency for our bodies to become one. Cass and I hadn’t gone all the way

yet. He was more conservative than I was when it came to those things.

We were still in our clothing from the beach that day. He kicked off his swim trunks as he untied the sides of my bathing suit bottoms. He slid two fingers up my middle and began pumping them in and out of me. I arched my back, and a moan escaped my mouth as he settled over the knot within me, stroking it over and over. One of his hands moved to cover my mouth.

“Shh, or the entire neighborhood will know what we are doing up here,” he teased.

I took his hand between my teeth and bit down to keep from making too much noise. He stroked inside of me, his hungry eyes fixed on me, driving me closer and closer to the blinding light of my pleasure. I squeezed my eyes closed, white little dots replacing my view of the stars as I was overtaken by the pleasure of my orgasm.

He rose onto his knees, removing the cover of his wings. I immediately missed their embrace. His wings splayed out behind him, the starry sky his background, then he used my wetness to stroke himself. He looked like a valiant warrior who had come home to claim his prize.

And I wanted to taste the power that was coming off him. I crawled to him on my knees until I was in front of his impossibly large body. He moved the hand he was stroking himself with to the back of my head and guided me to the tip of his cock. I stuck my tongue out of my mouth, laying it flat and opening my mouth wide so that he could plunge into me.

I looked up at the bright night sky, at his wings protruding from his back as his pace picked up. I tilted my gaze back down and wrapped my lips around him. His hand dug into my hair, slowing me, and then he pulled from my mouth, tilting my face up to his.

“Fuck it. No way you are staying quiet through this next part,” he said, low and gravelly. “People are just going to have to mind their own fucking business,” he said with a mischievous grin on his face.

He pulled me from my knees and wrapped his strong hands around the crevice between my thighs and my ass, wrapping my legs around him. He slid into me slowly pulling my body to his until I was impaled on his length.

“Ride me, Mand,” he demanded.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, squeezing my thighs around him to bounce up and down on his cock. He wrapped his wings around me, helping my movement.

I bit my lip, trying to stifle my moans.

“Cass,” I moaned, digging my fingers into his shock of green hair. “Cass,” I repeated with more urgency.

Like he was driven to action by his name on my lips, he moved to lay us on the rooftop, with him on the bottom. I continued moving him in and out of me.

“Fuck, Mandy baby. Just like that,” he said. He circled my waist with his hands and rocked me back and forth on top of him.

One of his hands moved to my throat, helping me bob up and down on his hard cock. I rocked my hips, repeatedly rubbing him over the deepest part of me until I shattered, lifting my face to the sky and screaming my pleasure up at the stars.

It was the cue Cass had been waiting for. He grabbed me by the waist, threw me onto my back, then thrust into me, one, two, three times. His wings shot out, creating a shadow over my body as he spilled into my core. We broke apart, lying next to each other and staring up at the stars, both of our chests heaving.

“Oh, yeah. Pops *definitely* heard that.” He laughed, pulling me into his body with his wings.

* * * *

An urgent knock at the front door woke us early the next morning. Cass detangled his body from mine, slid on a pair of boxers, and went to find out what could possibly be so important so early in the morning.

He came back into the room moments later, searching for his pants.

“I gotta go, Mand. Sorry to cut our trip short,” he said.

I knew from his tone that the knock at the door must have been a messenger with news about the situation up north between the Valencian and Alancian forces.

“Pops says you can stay as long as you want,” he offered.

I probably wouldn’t stay any longer, not without Cass there. My mind went to the Prince’s response to my note to him letting him know I would be away from the Court for a few days. His response has been short and, like all words that came from his mouth, in the form of an order.

You can have the weekend. Be back on Monday.

I had intended to push my luck with the bossy Prince if Cass and I ended up staying longer than the weekend, but without Cass here, I saw no point. I’d just head back to the High Court. I was curious about what my training would look like with the Prince, anyway.

Cass was sitting on the bed putting his boots on. My heart clenched at the thought of him rushing into battle.

“Cass—” The words got stuck in my throat. Even with the prospect of him going into battle, I couldn’t say the three little words I knew he was already ready to say to me. *I love you.*

“A kiss for the road?” I asked instead.

He pulled me, naked, into his lap, causing me to straddle him. He gripped my ass as he kissed me deeply, his tongue moving in my mouth, setting off a cascade of wetness between my thighs. I ached for him to take me again.

“I’m coming back to finish this,” he promised.

And then he was gone. He was out the door and in the sky in seconds. I covered myself with the sheet, dragging it along as I ran to the bedroom window and saw Cass turn into a small speck in the early morning sky.

Cass

I flew toward the spot outside of town where I was told a traveler would be waiting for me. I took an immediate route along the coast, enjoying the scenic view. Coming home with wings had given me the ability to see the place I grew up in from an entirely new perspective. The beach was beautiful when my toes were in the sand, but from up here, it was just stunning.

I cut in from the coastline, toward the forest area outside of town. I wasn't exactly slow when I flew. Flying was faster than almost all other forms of transportation. But there could be no doubt that flying could take hours, where traveling took seconds. I was thankful for the few extra minutes my own flight bought me today. I had to get Mandy off my mind and focus on the conflict waiting for me.

The traveler stood right outside a thicket of woods on the outskirts of town. He was tall, broad shouldered, and wore all black battle leathers.

"Commander," he greeted.

"Prince Heroux," I replied, not showing the surprise that I felt that the Prince was the traveler who would take me into battle.

"Out here, Commander, there are no princes. I am a Commander in the King's, forces just like you," he said.

That wasn't exactly accurate. I was Commander of the Northern Forces. The Prince was Commander over *all* Valencian forces and heir to the throne.

"Commander, sir," I replied obediently.

"We have Alancians. A lot of them," the Prince said.

"Their target, Commander?" I asked.

"They are about thirty miles outside of the High Court's perimeter," the Prince answered.

"Fucking hell," I barked.

If they had made it that far into the Kingdom, that meant they had magically traveled there. There was no way they would have gotten through our defenses otherwise.

I thought of Mandy for just a moment and was glad that she was back home at my father's house and far away from the High Court.

"So it's a magical battle they seek?" I asked.

"I don't think this is the final battle. But, yes, I do think he is ready to test us. We must make a strong showing today, or we will find Vandros at our doorstep," the Prince said.

This was it. We would finally get to see if the magic of the Alancians was as impacted as our own magic after all these years. I couldn't know the full extent to which my own magic was impacted; I was born in a time where the magic was already diminishing. It was clear that I was blessed with the strength and powers of a warrior from a young age, strength and power that has only increased as I got older. And then, of course, there was the blessing of my wings, something I'd never dreamed I'd have. I had Mandy and the powers she denied she had to thank for my wings.

There could be no doubt that Mandy had some kind of magic. I didn't know how she'd managed to gift my birthright to me, but she had. She was amazing that way and humble, too, with the way she wanted to deny her role in it. I wasn't sure what the Prince's intentions with Mand were. Presumably, he intended to harness Mandy's power to restore the gifts and powers of others. If she, in fact, did have that kind of power, it would be unprecedented. But depending on how things went today, it could also mean the difference between us winning this war or losing it.

To say that I was displeased with the possibility of Mandy's direct involvement in the war effort would be a severe understatement. Then again, she was already involved before I came into the picture due to her role at Court and the people she surrounded herself with. The only real way either Mandy or I could have avoided being involved was if we had never left Harborview to begin with. But that isn't what either of us wanted. I would do everything in my power to protect Mand, but I was proud of her and would not hamstring the results of her hard work.

I tried to clear my head of Mandy once more. If the Alancians wanted a battle of magic, we could still give them one. And magic wasn't everything. We had soldiers with training and a home field advantage as well.

"And pardon me, Commander, for the questions but—"

“You are doing what any good soldier should do. Do not apologize,” the Prince stated simply.

“The King, is he safe?” I asked.

“Far from it, Commander. Our King fights with us. He does not hide behind the protection of others,” the Prince said.

“Yes, sir,” I said with a grin.

“All set, Commander?” the Prince asked.

With a nod of my head, we disappeared from the clearing. We landed in a thicket of woods surrounded by our own soldiers. Alancian soldiers, at least two to our one, stood around like they had been waiting for the Prince and me to arrive. We brought the fight to them, engaging the Alancian forces.

In seconds, arrows and magical weapons filled the air. The Prince traveled to the nearest Alancian soldier, stabbing him in the gut and viciously yanking his short sword up, nearly severing the soldier.

“Cass, to me,” Luke called.

Wings out, I half flew, half jumped to where Luke stood in the middle of what appeared to be a ball of light. When I got closer, I felt one of the Lord of Light’s shields slide into place over me. With Luke as my protector, I was invincible. We may have been outnumbered, but we were not outmatched.

I felled an Alancian soldier who had tried to incapacitate me with some kind of concealed magical ability. But with Luke’s shield around me, I was unfazed. The soldier looked surprised that I was still standing, and he was even more surprised when I was able to easily make my way to him and slice through his torso with my long sword. I slid on my knees, taking a second soldier from behind, slicing his legs from under him. The Prince darted around so quickly from Alancian to Alancian, like a deathly dark blur. It was hard for me to keep track, but he, too, was cutting through our numerous enemies with lethal speed.

The Contra, High Lord Vitruvian, was a little way off in front of me. I saw an ax thrown at the High Lord, and I shouted, too far away to intervene. The High Lord followed through with the stroke of his sword, cutting down an Alancian in front of him, wholly unconcerned about the ax barreling toward his face with a confidence that could only mean that he, too, was protected by Luke’s shield. Luke engaged in a sword fight with two Alancian soldiers. It was beyond impressive that Luke had the mental fortitude to keep shields around so many of us and still engage the enemy.

The most impressive figure on the battlefield, by far, was none other

than the King himself. His powers of weaving—which before today, I had only read about in my textbooks—had not been exaggerated. He made the world around him his weapon. His enemies tripped on roots only to be swallowed whole by the ground under them. Or else found themselves in an invisible prison enclosed with whatever lethal magic they had tried to unleash on the King. I wasn't sure how long the King would be able to keep up such magical feats, but while he could, he appeared to be in little need of my or anyone else's help.

Then, just as we were hitting our stride, the battle was over. The Alancians executed a swift retreat, making it clear that it had been their intention all along. Throughout the battle, Alancian soldiers had positioned themselves in clusters so that travelers hidden among the masses could travel away groups of them at a time. Large groups of Alancian soldiers disappeared from the battle in several locations all at once. The few, unlucky stragglers, who had been unable to get to their exit point in time, were dealt with expeditiously.

There were several things that were apparent to me in the immediate aftermath of the short but intense battle.

One—the border wall still held. Otherwise, we would have been inundated by Alancian soldiers. They'd managed to get small numbers of Alancians through the wall in a manner we'd yet to determine, but they were still limited by those they could magically transport.

Two—King Vandros had outnumbered us just as quickly and in the same manner as his soldiers had retreated. He had meant for us to show him our most powerful, magical cards, and we had been forced to do just that.

And three—King Vandros and most of his known magical powerhouses had not bothered to make an appearance at the battle. That meant that when we all finally did meet on the battlefield, it was going to be a much different battle than the one fought and won today.

Alarie

“**Y**ou the Commander’s girl?” the driver asked.

He had a crotchety old man look about him, but I’d already been turned down by three drivers who were waiting on their passengers, and I was told that the rest of the carriages were sold out for the day. It wasn’t normally this difficult to grab a same-day carriage, but I was also told that some of the carriages that were supposed to come back from the High Court were running late for some unknown reason.

“Cass?” I asked unnecessarily.

Harborview was a small town. Unsurprisingly, news had traveled fast about me and Cass.

“Yes, I am,” I said proudly. I wasn’t beyond using whatever goodwill Cass had earned here in our hometown to my advantage.

“And you’re looking for a ride to the High Court?” the driver asked. He eyed me up and down like he expected me to be dressed for Court on the journey. But I wasn’t. I was wearing a clingy casual dress, something similar to what I wore in the days before I’d ever been to Court.

“Yes, I am,” I said again.

“All right, then. Hop on in,” he said, gesturing to the older but well-maintained carriage he stood in front of. “I’ll get your bags for you, m’lady,” he offered.

The ride felt like it was taking longer than was normal. We’d not passed a single carriage going either way, which made the trip feel all the more monotonous. I’d mostly thought about two things on my journey—one, the possibility of Cass out there fighting and, two, why I should try not to think about the possibility of Cass out there fighting. Bouncing between these two fun thoughts, it took me a minute to register what I was hearing outside of the

carriage.

“Fucking hell,” my driver cursed.

“What is it?” I asked, deciding to stick my head out of the window of the carriage and see for myself.

“Fucking hell,” the driver cursed again. “Don’t do that!” he barked at the sight of me poking my head out the window.

What I did glimpse coming from the woods to the left of us made me want to repeat my driver’s favorite moniker.

“Fucking hell,” I said.

Soldiers dressed in green leathers charged towards us on fast horses, and they didn’t look particularly friendly. A spear was thrown and just narrowly missed our front, right wheel, confirming my suspicions.

“I tried to do the Commander a favor, and now I’m going to get his girl killed, and then he’s going to kill me...” the driver continued to tailspin.

“They’re going to catch us!” I shouted unhelpfully.

“Just hold on,” the driver yelled and then we were going faster than I’d ever gone in a carriage before.

The trees around us sped by at breakneck speed, and we began to pull away from our pursuers. After a couple of minutes of our fast-paced travel, the soldiers disappeared from view. And then a makeshift base camp with tents and Valencian flags appeared on our horizon.

“Thank the gods,” the driver muttered under his breath.

We resumed something closer to a normal pace, and after a minute or two of silence, I recovered enough to address the driver.

“You’re a transporter?” I asked.

Most carriage drivers these days were just regular ol’ fae. If they had any powers, they were not related to transporting carriages. But before the magic began to fade, all carriage drivers had been transporters. Transporters could either ride in the carriage and hasten its way or instill the carriage with their magic and send it on its way.

“I still have a little bit left in the barrel,” the cantankerous driver replied, pride and relief visible on his face.

Valencian soldiers appeared from the left and right of us and soon had us surrounded. Our carriage halted to a crawl, whether from something the soldiers did or something my driver did, I didn’t know. Luckily, my driver flew a Valencian flag off the front of his carriage and the soldiers did not attack us on sight.

“What’s your business? Speak fast,” the soldier ordered, his attention directed to my driver.

“I’m hired help here. I was taking this one from Harborview to the High Court when we ran into some trouble,” my driver answered.

“Who are you then?” the soldier asked, now looking at me. A list of possible answers ran through my head—the Commander of the Northern Force’s girlfriend? No, that couldn’t be easily verifiable. The Prince’s secret mentee protégé? No, that was even worse. “I’m senior counselor to House Heroux,” I declared.

“We don’t need any counselors out here,” the soldier replied skeptically.

“Listen, can you just go ask someone? Commander Davante? High Lord Dumont? High Lord Vitruvian?” I added, thinking that Jay must be around.

The soldier looked more and more skeptical as my list continued with each person higher in rank. There had to be someone here who knew me.

“Perhaps I should just go ask the King himself,” the flippant soldier joked with his companions.

I thought for a moment that the King would remember me before I realized the soldier was messing with me. Just then, a retinue of Valencian soldiers arrived at the base camp entrance ahead of us. And then I saw him atop a brown gelding, his golden spun hair shining like a beckon.

“Oh, thank the fucking gods,” I said under my breath, ignoring the soldier that was showing signs of wanting to search our carriage. “Rhett,” I called out. “RHETT!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

The handsome bastard trotted over to me.

“Al, what *in the fuck* are you doing here?” Rhett asked. “Leave it to you to ride right into the middle of a damn battle.”

We were granted entry into the base camp, and Rhett helped me out of my carriage. My driver was more than happy for me to be someone else’s problem now.

“Come on, Al baby. Let’s get you somewhere where you can relax and tell me how it is that you are here,” Rhett offered, seemingly cool as a cucumber, but there was tightness around his blue eyes.

“Rhett, what’s going on?” I asked, showing the opposite of the composure he exhibited. “First, Cass had to leave me in Harborview in a hurry. And now, this,” I said, gesturing toward the camp full of soldiers around us.

Rhett casually threw an arm around my shoulders, and I felt myself calm

just a fraction. He began to walk with me toward what appeared to be the largest tent in the entire encampment. We walked into a tent that was much larger and nicer on the inside than it appeared on the outside.

The King sat slightly slumped in a chair on the far side of the tent. He looked regal but exhausted. High Lord Rein was next to him, and they were whispering intently. If they thought my presence at the camp was odd, they didn't say anything. I didn't even think my existence really registered with them.

Rhett plopped down into a wooden chair, gesturing for me to sit next to him in a dark green, velvet-lined seat that seemed very out of place in a temporary tent.

"It's okay, Al. The battle is over. At least for now," he said wearily.

I scanned around the tent again. There were shelves of books and a long, large table and many other items I would not have expected to be in such a makeshift operation. Perhaps I was wrong to assume the tent was here for purposes of this one engagement. Maybe we had these kinds of set ups all over Valencia and I just didn't realize it. I made a mental note to ask Cass about it.

I looked around the tent again and finally realized what, or actually who, I was looking for.

"Where's Luke, Rhett?" I asked, failing to keep the panic from my voice.

If Rhett was here, that meant Luke probably was, too. My heartbeat spiked. Rhett gave me a smirk that was meant to be reassuring.

"He'll be here shortly, Al. I came back with the King. He's helping some of the others round up some of the last few Alancians who were unlucky enough to get left behind," Rhett explained.

Cass, Rhett, Luke, I tallied in my head. The Prince and Jay had to be around as well. It felt like someone was trying to squeeze my heart until it popped.

"Has the wall failed, then?" I asked after the one thing we all worried over.

"No," Rhett answered. "The wall is still intact, though they are still managing to get some Alancians through somehow. If the wall wasn't functioning, they would have had an entire army here. Instead, only those who could be magically traveled were present," he explained.

He was not conveying information to me fast enough. I needed to know

what was happening. I couldn't just sit here. I went to rise from my chair. Then I heard what sounded like a group of people arriving all at once, followed by the sound of several pairs of heavy footsteps walking up to the tent. Rhett stood, moving between me and the entrance.

One by one, they came through the tent entryway. First in was Jay. He was wearing his normal stoic facade and simple clothing similar to what I'd seen him wear before when he practiced with his sword. His gray eyes darted to me, but he quickly directed his attention to the King. My eyes stayed glued to the tent flap, waiting for the next person to walk through.

"Luke," I cried out, nearly running to his side the moment he ducked under the tent flap. He wore the same tight forest green clothing as Rhett and big, heavy-looking dark boots. It was so unlike the clean-cut suits he normally donned at Court.

I took two steps toward him, and he met me the rest of the way. He gave me a smile that felt like salve on a wound I didn't even know I had. Relief rolled through my entire body.

"I heard we had a little surprise visitor," he said, still smiling.

He ran his thumb lightly across the line of my jaw before grabbing my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my gaze to his. I knew he could feel my body shaking.

"Hey, I'm okay," he whispered.

I glanced back at the tent flap, waiting for the next person to come through.

"We all are," he added.

I grabbed his hand from my face and held on to it, pulling it to my side and squeezed it to remind myself he was there. He squeezed back but said nothing.

The Prince was the next one through the entrance. His hands weren't in his pockets for once, probably because his battle leathers were too tight and didn't even have pockets. Not that he needed them with the way he used the air around him like his own personal storage. The black leathers clung to his defined thighs just as much as his dark shirt clung to his sculpted chest.

For just a moment, he looked relieved, probably to see that his father was tired but well. But then his gaze dropped to my hand in Luke's, and that spark of perpetual amusement settled into his hunter green eyes. I tried my best not to scowl, but I reluctantly dropped Luke's hand, conscious of the scene we had made.

And then Cass entered the tent. Even with his wings hidden, his shoulders were so broad that he had to push both sides of the tent flap open to make room for his entry. My eyes roved over his body from head to toe looking for injuries, but it was impossible to tell because he wore the same tight leathers that the Prince did.

In the King's war tent, surrounded by other men who had also just been on the battlefield, Cass still managed to look like something that had wandered in from the wild. His green hair was a stark contrast to the high fae blonds and brunettes in the room.

His beautiful brown eyes seared into me with a look so intimate, so hungry for me, that it felt like everyone in the tent had joined us in the bedroom where we had left off in Harborview. His gaze locked onto mine, and he did not look away as he purposefully strode towards me. I ran my tongue across my bottom lip, dragging my lip between my teeth and biting down.

"Alarie, *dear*, I thought I taught you your lesson about taking that lip of yours between your teeth," Jay chastised, appearing at my side.

It was the first time Jay had spoken to me since the Spring Ball. We had only seen each other in passing at the High Court over the last several months. I avoided House Heroux if at all possible because I knew if Jay was in town, then, more likely than not, he would be there. But true to what he had told me before, it appeared that he was spending a lot of time up north and away from the High Court.

The tone of Jay's voice was not cruel. He had said the statement like he was talking about one of the many other lessons he had given me, like a lesson on Court history. Most would not even know what he was talking about. But Luke knew. I had taken my lip between my teeth many times when I was with him, under him, just before I began to hold my breath and...

I only had eyes for Cass and how he would react to the revelation that he wasn't the only one in the tent, which now felt very small, who was familiar with my tell. Cass was a good soldier, the best, and Jay was Contra and answered to the King alone. A moment of recognition passed between Jay and Cass. It felt like Cass's presence in the room, already so palpable, began to expand. Too big for delicate things like velvet-lined chairs, he grew even broader as charcoal and onyx feathered wings appeared on his muscled back. Everyone around him, even Jay, took a step back.

Surprisingly, it was the Prince who spoke first, breaking the tension. He

approached us right after Jay.

“Jay, you’re an old man now. Maybe your *lessons* aren’t quite as good as you think they are,” the Prince teased.

Luke chuckled. Cass’s wings, which before the Prince had spoken, had felt like they were ready to overtake the entire space, knocking anything and anyone out of his way, relaxed, his shoulders rolling back. But Cass still remained squared up to where Jay stood.

“Speaking of lessons,” the Prince said, grabbing my arm. “It’s time for yours, princess,” he concluded, pulling my body toward his.

We disappeared before I could say anything to Cass. The last view I saw was of him standing next to Rhett, Jay, and Luke, a very, very wild thing among the civilized lords of the High Court.

Alarie

I jerked my arm away from the Prince the second we popped back into existence. He had called me princess in front of all of them. He'd call me anything but my name.

"I don't recall my father's best friend being on the list we already discussed," the Prince said coolly.

I stood next to him, fuming. We were on the rooftop at the Emerald Court. Not even the beachy sounds of the Emerald Isle could cool my frustration.

"You should have let me handle that," I protested.

I had a few choice words brewing for Jay. That man had always had an issue with containing his jealousy. But if I was being honest with myself, I was relieved not to have to answer to Cass just yet. The Prince ignored my protest.

"A simple *'thank you'* would suffice. Maybe even a *'thank you, my tall, dark, handsome Prince for saving my sweet ass,'*" he suggested.

I stared daggers at him.

"No? I didn't think so," he said, amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Let me see this lip of yours that is causing so much trouble then," he said, pulling me back toward him.

He grabbed my face, tilting it up to his, then he ran his thumb across my lip, pulling it down so he could see the small lump on the inside of my bottom lip. He ran his thumb across it, looking into my eyes. I don't know why I let him. I didn't flinch. I didn't look away.

He was so close I could smell him. He smelled like leather and trees and a slight musk that might have been intoxicating if it was anyone but him. He moved his thumb back to the outside of my mouth, pushing my bottom lip

back in place like it was a button he could press.

“A scar?” he asked.

I had been holding my breath. I exhaled, running the flat of my tongue over where his thumb had been, and nodded.

“You know, you really should have told me about Jay,” he said.

“And why should I have done that? Do I have to tell you about every man I have ever slept with?” I objected.

The Prince raised his eyebrows.

“Given your track record, yeah, I think you do,” he said.

I glared at him.

“Well, now, you pretty much know them all, anyway,” I admitted. “There is one more, a guy from back home, but I don’t think you’re interested in anything I did before the High Court,” I said.

“Then you’d be wrong. There’s nothing I don’t want to know about you. But, for now, Jay—”

I knew he was asking about the specific circumstances under which Jay’s power had appeared again.

“In the back of a carriage on the way to the Azure Court,” I said.

I didn’t feel the need to explain that we had been having sex. After the other stories, the Prince understood the context. The next part in my story with Jay felt too intimate to share. But the Prince continued to pierce me with his dark green eyes, expecting more.

“It was the first time he told me he loved me,” I admitted quietly. *And the first time I had ever told any man I loved him.*

Normally so reserved, this got a reaction from the annoyingly handsome Prince. He raised his eyebrows as if impressed. But then his surprise was gone, replaced by his usual devilish glint of mirth.

“You know, princess, I’m beginning to think that the future of the entire Kingdom rests right between your...” He allowed his gaze to grow sultry and heavy as he purposefully directed his gaze between my legs, his tongue rolling over the inside of his bottom lip.

Pinned under those penetrating green eyes, I felt an involuntary flush of excitement.

“*Shoulders,*” he finished, drawing his eyes to my face.

I squared my jaw at him, crossing my arms over my chest, which did not help my cause because my arms squeezed my breasts together and up toward the V neck of my dress. The Prince pretended not to notice; his gaze locked

onto mine.

“I see that you are not dressed for training *again*,” he said.

It was Monday, and he had said in his note to me that we would resume training on Monday. But I still wore the white sundress I had traveled in from Harborview. It was far more casual than anything I would ever wear at the High Court, but its neckline was plunging, and its fabric was clingy.

“You can’t be serious,” I replied. The glint in his eyes told me he was. “I haven’t had a chance to change since I left Harborview. You still want to train today after the day we’ve had?” I asked in disbelief.

He patted himself down theatrically. “I just fought in a battle, and I’m ready to go. And you don’t look like you have so much as a wrinkle in your little dress,” he noted. “So, yes, we are going to train today. And lucky for you, princess, I was prepared for you to show up unprepared. Follow me,” he ordered.

He didn’t travel us to our next location. Apparently, he was capable of walking. He led me to a wall made entirely of tinted glass. The wall split in half, invisible doors sliding back and making room for us to walk through. I had heard that houses responded to the magic of their masters. But that was one of the magical abilities that had been lost over the years. Not even Jay had commanded House Vitruvian, at least not when I had lived there.

We walked through a training facility that appeared to encompass the entire floor. Weights and weapons were interspersed throughout, and there were more doors, behind which there were probably more and different weights and weapons. The Prince passed down a flight of stairs quickly. I was wearing wedges and had to slow down so as to not twist my ankle.

At the bottom of the staircase, I was surprised to find a bedroom. There was another wall of tinted glass to my right. I could hear the waves of the beach crashing behind it. There wasn’t much in the room despite its size. The centerpiece of the bedroom was a large fourposter bed. It was black with a thick wooden charcoal-gray headboard. Pieces of wood connected the four posts together like a cube... *or a cage*.

The Prince approached me where I stood, feet from the bed. He got close to me, so close that our feet were touching.

“See something you like?” he teased.

He wrapped his hand around one of the posts and jerked it like he was trying to shake the bed. Despite his strength, the bed didn’t move. It had clearly been built to withstand his forces.

I rolled my eyes.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

He dropped his playful teasing.

“No,” he barked.

But his eyes were on my feet now.

“It’s going to take you forever to walk through these halls in those,” he complained and then, without waiting for a response, he wrapped his arm around my waist and traveled us away from his bedroom.

We reappeared in another bedroom. This one also faced the water, but the tint of the glass was lighter, and I could see the veranda overlooking the beach. The water was emerald green, and the sand was sugar white. There was a wooden armoire on each side of the big bed in the center of the room. I liked the feel of this bedroom better. It felt like the kind of place I wouldn’t mind waking up to.

“Pick something from the one on the right. *Pants*,” he emphasized. “And no heels.”

He turned and left the bedroom, closing the door so quickly that I had to peek over my shoulder to make sure he was gone.

I opened the doors of the armoire to find an entire wardrobe of clothes that looked like the female version of the clothes I’d seen the Prince wear for training. I decided on a dark emerald-green matching set. The leggings were tight but made of a stretchy material that would allow me to move easily. The matching sports bra had a cute, stringy pattern in the back, but the front was high-cut and supportive. I slipped on a pair of low-cut black sneakers that showed my ankles.

I looked in the full-length mirror that sat perched in a corner and didn’t recognize myself. I had so thoroughly adopted the style of the High Court, the silk and silts and plunging necklines, that I had forgotten that I once used to wear a different kind of clothes. Before, my style had been simple and maybe a little sexy. The green set I wore fit that bill—it was surprisingly comfortable despite its compression and just a little bit sexy with the stringy back of the bra and the sliver of my stomach that showed.

I stepped out of the room, feeling confident. The Prince was leaning against the wall, eating the last few bites of a sandwich. He popped the last bite into his mouth, pressing his lips together and running his tongue across his thumb.

“Hungry?” he asked.

I realized that I had been staring at his mouth.

“Umm, no. Thanks, though,” I said.

“If you want muscles, you have to feed them,” he said matter-of-factly.

“And who said I want muscles?” I asked.

He looked at me with an exaggerated, bemused expression on his handsome face.

“You’re here to train, princess. Your magic. Your mind. *And your body*,” he answered.

I didn’t bother to correct him and tell him I didn’t have any real magical abilities to train. His gaze purposefully focused on my arms, making me aware of their skinny, undefined shape.

“And I would have thought that you’d want to learn to defend yourself so that next time someone tries to kidnap you, you don’t need me to save you,” he said.

It was like he had slapped me in the face by pointing out how helpless I had been when that lesser fae mystery man had tried to steal me away. But no one had ever offered me the opportunity to learn how to defend myself.

“I do,” I replied fiercely. “But you’re talking like it is only a matter of time before someone tries something like that again,” I said.

He stepped into me, so close that the front of our bodies were almost touching. I had to crane my neck to look into his face, even more so than normal because I didn’t have my four-inch heels to bridge the gap in our height.

“*Alarie*.”

I felt like someone had knocked the breath out of me. It was the first time he had ever called me by my name. Not princess. It felt like the hallway got darker and that darkness pressed around us.

“I’m only going to say this *once*, so listen to my words. You have *something* that other people want *very badly*,” he said, a dark shadow rising around his feet.

“I—”

“I don’t want to hear that you don’t have magic. Don’t *ever* tell me that again. You *do*. And if we don’t figure out how you can use it, you’re going to get yourself kidnapped or killed,” he said.

He stepped back from me, and the pressing darkness receded with him. He looked angry. The muscle in his square jaw twitched. I exhaled a breath I’d been subconsciously holding in.

“Now, come on, princess. It’s time to train,” he ordered.

Eager to get started, I reached my hand out to him. A flicker of surprise crossed his face at my willingness. He took my outstretched hand and suddenly jerked me into his body. If I had been wearing heels, I probably would have broken my ankles trying to stay upright. But in my sneakers, I was able to skid to a halt, slamming into the hard wall of his body. I grunted at the impact.

In the second before we disappeared into the darkness, I saw him genuinely smile for the first time. It was a feline smirk that disappeared into the black until all I could see was the glow of his green pupils.

We dropped back onto the training area on the rooftop, and for once, he pulled away from me before I could pull away from him. I had been subconsciously leaning into his body, so that when he disappeared so suddenly, it was like a wall I was leaning against disappeared. I caught myself before I fell on my face.

“What the hell, Nik?” I barked, righting myself.

But any further words of chastisement died in my throat. He was several paces away from me, across the rooftop, but I saw the hard, predatory look in his eyes.

“Try to stop me with your magic,” he ordered.

He took menacing steps toward me. The floor beneath us quaked under his steps. When he reached me, he tsked in disappointment.

“Did you even try to stop me from getting this far?” he chastised.

“I don’t know how!” I replied in frustration. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to be teaching me?”

“Helpless little princess, aren’t you?” he mocked.

His words stung, despite his seductive tone.

“You mean to tell me”—he purred darkly—“that there is *nothing* you can do to stop me from doing *this*,” he said. He ran the calloused palms of his hands down my arms. I stiffened, but the sensation caused a tingling at the nape of my neck and my hair to stand on end.

“What else can I do to you, princess? Maybe I’ll take you back down to my bedroom. Tie your hands over your head so high and tight that you have to stand on your toes,” he purred.

His mouth was hovering over the top of my shoulder, at the hollow where my shoulders met my neck.

“Nik, what the fuck?” I said, exasperated, pushing at him.

But he didn't budge. He stood over me, his breath warm on my neck.

"Stop me, Alarie. *Damn it!*" he barked. "Fight *me* before you find yourself opposite someone who isn't me. Or are you just going to spend your whole life waiting around for a Prince to save your ass?" he ridiculed.

There was anger in his words. And I felt the blood rushing to my veins, thudding to meet his anger. I wasn't helpless. When Stefan had reached out for me, I had knocked him back so hard that he'd fallen on his ass halfway across the room. I'd like to see tough, gorgeous Nik sprawled on his ass.

He pulled at the ponytail I wore high on my head, forcing my eyes to his. His grip was firm.

"Push me away, princess."

His hand in my hair tightened, the length of my ponytail now wrapped around his hand. The angry blaze in his eyes began to fade into disappointment as nothing happened. I didn't want his pity.

I thought of being cornered by Cole in the hallway of the High Court and how I had to be saved by Jay. I thought of the lesser fae man's hands wrapped around my mouth and how Nik had saved me. But then I thought of how I had felt when Stefan was cornering me, helpless, desperate to escape. And then the burst of satisfaction that I had felt to see him thrown against the wall, away from me.

Nik began to loosen his hand in my hair. He was giving up on me. But I could do this. I pictured Nik thrown on his ass, across the roof where he had started this exercise. I'd wipe that glint of amusement off his stupid face.

Before Nik's hand had left my hair, he took a couple of steps away from me, stumbling as if someone had pushed him hard on the chest. I hadn't managed to throw him across the rooftop like I had wanted, but I had done it. Somehow, I had shielded myself.

"Good girl," he growled.

My body hummed with satisfaction.

Alarie

“Looking good, Mand,” Cass greeted me as I appeared out of nowhere, surrounded by inky black shadows. We were in the main bar at House Rein, Rhett’s bar, because I’d asked Cass to meet me here.

I felt Cass’s brown and gold eyes rake over my body. He ignored the fact that the Prince’s arm was wrapped around my waist and allowed his appreciation of the dark green, tight leggings and longline bra I wore to show on his roguish face. He effortlessly pulled me away from the Prince and into the alcove of his heavy, muscled arms.

“Tomorrow, princess,” the Prince said, reminding me of my lesson with him the next day. The Prince gave Cass a nod of his head and then he stepped into a cloud of darkness, disappearing.

When the Prince was gone, Cass asked, “Why does he always have his hands all over you when you travel with him?” It was the closest Cass had ever come to criticizing his Commander.

I pursed my lips, considering his question.

“I—I don’t know. I guess I thought he had to touch me in order for me to travel with him,” I said.

I hadn’t really questioned the necessity of Nik touching me. Since the very first time he had traveled with me, it had been that way. I thought that sometimes he was a little more free with his touches than was necessary, but that was just to annoy me, or Cass, or Luke.

“The *fuck* he does. Do you think he was wrapping his arm around my waist when he traveled with me?” Cass asked, incredulously.

That. Prick.

Cass grinned at the anger that flashed across my face.

“Come here,” he said, pulling me into his hulking frame. “Has anyone

ever told you that you're cute when you are angry?"

He leaned down and kissed me, pressing his lips against mine at the same time he pressed me to the front of his unyielding body. I was eager to see where he was going with this, but we had to address the elephant in the room first. Begrudgingly, I pulled back from Cass's embrace.

"Cass, about earlier," I began.

"Mand, you don't have to explain yourself to me," he said, and I knew he meant it. "I won't lie. I was surprised to find out about Jay. Luke, I would have believed. But I didn't see Jay coming," he said.

I grimaced at his comment about Luke.

"Cass, remember when you showed up at my door in the middle of the night and you kissed me for the first time?" I asked.

"Yeah," Cass replied dreamily. He smiled like he was reliving one of his fondest memories. "That was one of my better ideas," he said, clearly pleased with himself.

"And you asked if Luke was my boyfriend, and I told you he wasn't?" I continued.

"Yeah..." he said, his smile faltering. But he stared at me, patiently waiting for me to explain before he reacted. Cool, calm under pressure, just like a good soldier.

"Well, he was, and he wasn't, Cass. I was dating Jay at the time, but to keep that quiet, Luke and I... We didn't try to stop the rumors that were going around Court about us," I explained.

"I've heard some of that about you and Luke. So, it isn't true then? You guys never dated?" he asked.

I was at the crossroads I knew I would one day find myself at. I could tell Cass about my history with Luke leading right up to my time with Cass. But I hadn't been with Luke since I'd been with Cass. And Luke was with Karina now, at least until his three-month promise to his parents ran out. I'd thought about it, and I just didn't think Cass would be okay with Luke and I staying such close friends if he knew about the true and recent nature of our relationship. Cass wasn't like Jay. He wasn't likely to burn up with jealousy. But he wasn't like Luke, either—he didn't want to share. I refused to be forced to choose between my boyfriend and my best friend.

"Yeah. Just Jay," I lied. I rolled my tongue along the front of my teeth like I could remove the filthy film the lie left in my mouth.

"Hey," Cass said, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger and

tilting it up to his face. “None of that matters now,” he said, misunderstanding the cause of the dissatisfaction I wore on my face. His words only made me feel worse.

He leaned down and softly kissed my lips, and I returned his kiss with vigor in an effort to show him what my words failed to convey.

“Can’t a man have a drink in peace these days?” Luke joked, bursting into the bar.

Rhett and James followed him in, hand in hand. Cass and I broke apart, but he kept my hand.

“Hey, Al,” Luke smiled. “Cass.” Luke nodded in acknowledgment.

“Hey, guys. Do you want to go into town for a drink with us?” Rhett asked. “Karina should be here in just a minute.”

I looked questioningly over at Cass.

“We can’t,” Cass answered for the both of us. “I have to head back to the wall tomorrow morning, and this one”—he gestured at me—“has to help me pack.”

The proud smile on his handsome face told everyone that he had activities much more fun than just packing in mind for his last night at Court.

“You really have to go back so soon?” I asked, disappointed.

“I really do,” Cass answered. “Drake is going to stay here at the High Court for a little while, so I am going to be bouncing between the wall and the Golden Court for a while,” he explained.

That made sense. High Lord Dumont was not likely to leave his hard-earned seat on the High Counsel empty any time soon.

I turned to Luke. “Do you have to go too?” I asked, trying my best to mask the concern in my voice.

“No.” Luke gave me a small smile.

“Why did you have to go at all?” I asked.

“Because we thought it might be something big; but the bastard is still just testing us,” Cass said through gritted teeth. I knew he was referring to King Vandros. “He threw a bunch of people with magical abilities our way and waited to see how we would respond and *who* we would respond with, and when he got his answer, he drew back.”

“But don’t feel like you need a special threat to call me in, Cass. We made a pretty damn good team out there,” Luke commented.

My gut twisted into knots. I didn’t like the idea of Cass going back out there to fight, but both of them would be unbearable. As if knowing the

worry that tore through me, Cass gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“You just keep an eye out for my girl here at Court until then, okay?” Cass responded.

“I’ll always do that,” Luke said fiercely.

The collegial interaction between Cass and Luke so soon on the heels of my lie made me want to crawl out of my own skin and hide.

“Who says I’m the one who needs looking after?” I asked. “The Prince seems to think I may pack a powerful magical punch of my own someday.”

I didn’t believe it, but I was desperate for a change of subject.

Luke and Cass both shared a look that clearly said they thought they were going to continue doing the protecting.

“Okay, fighter,” Cass said, pulling me into his body. “But come help me pack before you save us all,” he joked.

Cass wrapped me in his muscled arms, then his wings appeared with a loud whooshing noise so quickly it was like they had been there all along and simply were unfurled.

“Let’s take the long way home,” he purred in my ear, causing a shiver to start at the nape of my neck and work its way down my body.

“Have fun in town,” I barely had time to say to Rhett, James, and Luke before Cass shot us into the air. His wings gracefully pushed us higher and higher.

I looked down before we got very far into the night sky. Luke was hugging Karina, who must have walked in the moment after we had taken flight. Luke’s arms were wrapped loosely around Karina, but he was looking over her shoulder, and his eyes were locked on me.

I had been on the receiving end of a thousand smiles from Luke, and each and every single one of them had taken my breath away. But the tight-lipped smile he gave me as I drifted farther and farther away from him stole the air in my lungs for an entirely different reason. The light usually surrounding my best friend appeared to dim, casting a somber shadow over his beautiful face.

It felt like someone was squeezing my heart in their fist and was testing to see how much pressure it could take before it simply imploded. Luke turned his back to me, breaking our eye contact, and appeared to offer Karina his seat. Soon, Luke was just a small speck in the distance, and I wondered if he thought the same thing about me as I disappeared into the stars in Cass’s arms.

Alarie

The Prince landed next to me on the balcony of my bedroom. I was leaning with my forearms on the railing, looking down at the High Court gardens. I could see the busy traffic circle where I had first arrived at the High Court. The same place where I'd first met Luke, when he had bowled into me and shielded us from the debris of the offensive marble statue as it collapsed. The same statue Cass had caused to explode, although I didn't know that at the time. So much had changed in my life since then, but Luke was my one constant.

"Not punctual, but at least you're dressed appropriately this time," he noted.

Apparently, the Prince didn't think I was capable of showing up to training properly dressed so he had taken care of it for me. The previous day, I'd received a delivery of pants and tops and sports bras, mostly of various shades of green, with a brief note from the Prince. "*Wear these,*" he'd ordered, like I couldn't even figure out that part myself.

I wore a pair of tight shorts that barely covered my ass. They were black, and the waistband nearly met my sports bra, which was so deeply green it almost appeared black as well. My long brown hair wasn't pulled back into a ponytail yet.

The Prince's outfit was in stark contrast to mine. He was dressed for the High Court. He wore a black tailored suit with a collared shirt that was the same color green as my bra. His cufflinks gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. They were small, dark hexagonal emeralds. He looked dark, broody, and predictably extraordinary.

I knew he was trying to get a rise out of me, like that would help invoke my dormant magic somehow. I was supposed to meet him in front of House

Rein at two-thirty p.m. It was two-thirty p.m. on the dot.

“You’ve been at Court?” I asked, pulling myself from the railing.

“Unfortunately,” he responded. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?” he teased, his head inclining toward my bedroom. “You’ve seen mine, after all.”

His black, four-poster bed sprung into my mind. The one he had threatened to tie me to.

I looked at him skeptically, like he really cared what my bedroom looked like. But I needed to put on my sneakers, anyway. I extended an inviting arm toward my bedroom and then walked over to the gray bench at the end of my bed and plunked myself down. I brought my knee to my chest and slipped on my first shoe, a pair the same green color as my bra.

The Prince stood somewhere behind me. From the corner of my eye, I saw him put his hands behind his head and then, stiff as a board, fall back onto my bed. The frame shifted with his weight and made a creaking noise. I peered over my shoulder and gave him an *is that really necessary* look.

“Not that sturdy,” he judged. He propped himself up on his elbow, his entire body minus his shoes lying across my white bedspread.

I rolled my eyes.

“Maybe not for someone your size,” I retorted. “And it’s not meant for that, anyway.”

“My size? Your boyfriend’s the size of a mountain,” he quipped. “And I know *exactly* what a bed is meant for,” he said, the timbre of his voice low and rumbling.

He traveled to the bench in front of me, offering his hand to help me stand. I glanced up at the Prince, who enjoyed toying with me so much, and then looked pointedly at his extended hand.

“I know you don’t have to touch me in order for me to travel with you,” I said.

“I know I don’t *have* to. Did I ever say that you have to let me touch you?” he asked calmly.

“Well...” I stammered. *No*. He had not. But it was implied.

“Would you like to see what it is like when I don’t?” he asked.

“How does it make a difference?” I questioned.

“Let’s just say I’ve been told that it’s much more *enjoyable* for most people when I am touching them, and the closer, the better,” he said, the usual glint of amusement sparkling in his dark green eyes.

“I think I’ll take my chances,” I shot back.

He withdrew his hand, raising his eyebrows as if to say, *suit yourself*.

I got to my feet, feeling buoyant in my sneakers, and then the shadows of his darkness enveloped me. But unlike the other times I had traveled with the Prince and the darkness had almost seemed welcoming, now the endless black air whipped around me violently, making me feel as though I were being thrown ass over teakettle to my final destination. In the Prince's arms, I had always felt like I simply disappeared one minute and reappeared the next. We reappeared on the training platform on the rooftop at the M. I bent over, thinking I might be sick.

"It hits everyone differently," he said, standing over me. "I'm told some people get used to it. Or else they have a way to combat the ill effects. My father, for instance. He can weave a magical tether to me, and he says that helps."

I looked up at him, both of my hands resting on my knees. He held his hand out to me again, the same as he had done when I had sat at the end of my bed. But there was a glimmer of satisfaction in his devilish dark eyes.

"*Bastard*," I spat.

I took his hand and tried to jerk him off balance using one of the defensive moves he taught me. When that failed, I gave up on any respectful maneuver and simply tried to give him a swift kick to the shin.

"You can do better than that, princess," he teased, easily dodging my kick.

Then he was behind me. I spun in the direction of the sound of his voice.

"Easy for you to say. You never stay in one place long enough for anyone to get their hands on you," I complained.

"I wouldn't say *never*. If you promised to be sweet, I might let you get close enough to touch me," he teased.

He was laying it on thicker than normal. He usually teased me, trying to see if he could goad me into using my untapped magical abilities. But it felt different today. Today, it felt like he almost needed the distraction.

"I'm not that sweet, *remember*," I retorted, throwing his words from before back at him.

"That's okay. I don't like 'em that sweet, anyway," he crooned.

He had traveled directly behind me, whispering over my shoulder. And it had been exactly what I had been waiting for. Waiting for him to get close enough for me to push him back with the shielding power we had been working on. I seductively snaked my leg in between his, my bare skin

rubbing against the silkiness of his suit pants. He didn't move. He didn't say anything.

And then I hooked my leg across his ankle at the same time that I pushed at him with my power. He tripped, landing on his ass, and I noted that even when I caught him off guard, he still managed to make it seem like it had been his idea to simply take a relaxing seat on the ground for a moment.

Before he hit the ground, he was laughing. It was the first time I had ever heard him laugh. His laugh was deep like his voice, and it felt like it was reverberating through me, breaking through my frustration. I looked down at him, the satisfaction on my face plain.

And then he swiped my legs from under me. I fell with much less grace than he had, directly on top of him. I grunted on impact. It was like falling into a solid brick wall.

The next thing I knew, I was under him, caged by his arms and legs. He wasn't touching me, but I felt that familiar feeling of his darkness pressing against me. Black tendrils of shadows rolled off him. His tanned face hovered over mine. I licked my bottom lip.

"Gloating will get you killed," he said, his tone indicating that playtime was over and my training for the day had begun.

He popped off me and then pulled me up after him. Then his hands began to work the buttons of his dress shirt. I stared at his bare chest. Not just his muscles, although his abs were so defined it looked as if they had been individually chiseled. But it was the tattoos that covered his body that caught my eye. He was covered in as much ink as Cass, maybe more.

He stood in front of me, his deep green shirt unbuttoned and exposing his entire torso. And then he reached for his belt, his large hand grasping the end of the leather and tugging it to the side. He pulled the belt through the loops of his pants in one solid motion and then threw it to his side like he was throwing it to the ground, but it disappeared into darkness instead.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

I had seen him put things away and bring them out from nowhere, but I didn't know how.

"I don't have to travel my entire body to a place," he explained, taking off his shirt and suit coat together. He reached into the darkness, disposing of them. His tattoos continued down his left arm, all the way to his wrist. The tattoos on his right arm stopped around his sculpted biceps. He flipped open the button on his pants with a single hand, his hand going to the zipper. I

should have looked away, but I didn't. He stepped out of his pants one leg at a time. There was a large tattoo covering the top of his right thigh.

"It's like folding these pants," he continued, standing in nothing but his boxer briefs.

I noticed those, too, were a dark emerald green, like almost everything he wore. I tried not to notice the dip in his hips and how the muscles of his lower abs formed little channels leading straight into his waistband. But he was holding the pants he was using to demonstrate the concept of traveling right in front of himself.

"I can bring the two ends together and then I can just reach right in and take what I need. This is from my closet downstairs," he said.

He turned around and reached into his closet again. Hopefully for some clothing to put *on*. He was out of items of clothing that could be taken off. His back was so muscular, he looked like an upside-down pear, his broad shoulders tapering down to a narrower waist. His back wasn't as covered in tattoos as the front of his torso; instead, he had a tattoo that went down almost the entirety of his spine and then his tattoos from the front looped around his ribs and his sides.

He pulled a plain white t-shirt over his head and turned back to me, running his hand through his dark hair.

"I didn't peg you for the type to be covered in ink," I said.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, princess," he retorted.

He worked me hard for the rest of the afternoon, running through hand-to-hand drills. He didn't push me to try my magic again. I found myself dripping in sweat at the end of the day, the hair around my face wet and clinging to my skin. I was already dreaming about a shower when he called an end to our day.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked. He didn't offer me his hand like he always did when we were about to travel.

I ran my thumb across my bottom lip, thinking. I was trying to resolve my internal conflict over having made an issue out of him touching me when we traveled and not wanting to feel sick again from traveling without his touch. I took a deep breath, steeling myself to ask him for his hand, or an arm, or anything to keep me tethered to him when we disappeared into the darkness once more.

He reached his hand out to me before I had to ask. He pulled me to his side, wrapping his arm around my lower back, his hand resting on my hip.

His hand was so big that his thumb wrapped around my lower back, almost matching up with one of the dimples I had there, and his fingers curled around my side and to my front. We popped out of existence, and for the short time that we were consumed by the darkness, it was comforting and cool. It pressed at the edges of our interlocked bodies and then we were back in my room at House Rein.

Alarie

Nik showed up on my balcony like he had done every couple of days for the last month or so to pick me up for my lesson. It was the most consistency I'd had since I had shown up at the High Court. His reliability and the repetition of it all was almost comforting now.

He was in training clothes, which meant that he'd only come to the High Court to retrieve me. He was wearing a pair of forest green shorts, which was different for him.

The tattoo on the top of his right thigh peeked out from the bottom of his shorts. It had grown and now spread down, wrapping around the back of his calf. The new addition was a kind of pattern that reminded me of the shadows that often unfurled at the Prince's feet. Except the tattoo was green and blue, instead of black, which made me think of ocean waves crashing into and splashing up his muscular legs.

I was dressed and ready for training as well. I wore a pair of dark, textured green leggings and a white sports bra with a loose white tank tied in the back. I'd grown fond of the supportive yet comfortable clothes I wore for training and would sometimes wear them even on days when I was not expecting Nik to pop onto my balcony.

"Ready, princess?" he asked, his hand held out for mine.

I didn't even bristle at his favorite nickname for me anymore. I took his hand and felt his dark shadows enclose around us and pull us into the quiet, dark place between here and there.

And he traveled me right into the middle of a fucking ocean!

Before I could figure out where I was, a wave smacked me in the face. I tasted the salt water in my mouth as I treaded the water, just barely keeping

my mouth and nose above the waterline. My clothes were soaked and dragging me down. My tennis shoes felt particularly heavy and unnatural in the water. I took the time to reach down and pull them off, momentarily allowing my head to bob below the water. Without my shoes on, my clothing was still heavy, but I felt like I had more control to keep myself floating. No longer frantic, I treaded water and looked around for Nik.

“What in the actual fuck, Nik? This isn’t funny,” I screamed into the vast ocean surrounding me.

There was no answer.

“Nik! You asshole!” I yelled.

Still no answer.

I was alone. In the middle of the fucking ocean. I spun around in the water, trying to see if I could figure out where I was. I spotted what looked like the faint outline of the M in the distance. So that is where I needed to go. Luckily, I was a strong swimmer, having grown up spending my weekends at the beach, swimming and surfing. But the coastline was farther away than I’d normally swim, and weighed down by my clothing, it was much harder. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my breathing and think. But I kept swimming toward my final destination.

I tried to think rationally. Nik was a bastard, but he did this for a reason. He wanted to test my shielding abilities. I’d seen Luke throw up a shield any number of times. There was the very first time Luke had shielded me. The crude statue of the high fae lord and the lesser fae servant had exploded. Luke had wrapped his arms around me, then he’d cupped my head with his hand, pressing it to his firm chest. And I was protected from the explosion and the ensuing white dust bomb. I felt myself calming as I thought of Luke and his arms around me.

If Luke could shield us from the remnants of the statue, then maybe I could shield myself from the water. But that was absurd. I wasn’t thinking about shielding myself from an afternoon shower. This was an entire ocean. Was it possible? I guess almost anything was possible depending on what powers a fae had.

I let myself get lost in the rhythm of my breast strokes synchronized with the kicks of my feet. And then I tried to recreate the feeling of Luke’s arms around me and the protection I’d felt. Nothing happened. I was still treading water. *Damn. Okay.*

I tried to think of another time Luke had shielded me. When we were in

the ocean together at the Silver Court! Why hadn't I thought of that first? Luke had shielded us by filtering out some of the sounds that surrounded us, and he had filtered out the impacts of the waves but not the water itself, allowing us to swim, or well, do other stuff, peacefully in the ocean.

I continued with my breast strokes, but this time, I imagined that with each spread of my arms, I was smoothing the waves around me. I kept swimming. Was it in my head or did this part of the water feel smoother? I stopped swimming for a minute and looked around me. Sure enough, the water around me was smoother. In about a six-foot circumference around me, the choppiness of the water had turned smooth as glass. Without a tide or waves pushing and pulling at me, I felt nearly weightless in the water. I breathed out one final sigh of relief, knowing that I could now easily make it to the shore.

Even with the shielding I'd managed to perform, it still took a lot of effort to propel myself to the shore. By the time I reached the shoreline, I was almost crawling. I reached the beach, stumbling, and decided I'd like to sit there for a minute. I landed gracelessly on my ass and sat down with my elbows propped up on my knees. I leaned over and rested my head on my arms, staring down into the sand but not really focusing on anything.

"You look like a mess, princess." I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I slowly drew my head up and looked at the Prince from underneath my eyebrows.

"You—" I began, but then I noticed that he was soaking wet too.

"You were in there with me the entire time?" I asked in disbelief.

"It was a nice day for a swim, don't you think? Especially after you got that shield going. Swimming in your wake was a piece of cake," he said with a feline smile.

I stared daggers at him.

"I called for you," I whispered.

"And I was right there," he reassured me.

"I hope you don't think that this justifies what you did. Just because I managed to put up some kind of shield," I said.

"And why doesn't that justify what I did?" he retorted.

"Because..." I said. Planting a hand in the sand, I pushed my exhausted body off the sand. "You can't just do that to people!"

I was standing in front of him. I could only imagine what I looked like

with my wet hair plastered down my back and my makeup smeared. He looked frustratingly handsome, sexy even, with his wet t-shirt plastered to his muscled chest and his dark, wet hair slicked back.

“Princess, you have some kind of block on your powers. They’re there, but you cannot use them unless you are put in, well...” He tilted his head, indicating our current predicament. “Tough situations. If you don’t want to be put in these situations, you know what else has worked before.”

He raised his eyebrow at me, inviting me to take the bait. He meant sex. The only other time my powers showed their stupid face was when I was having sex with someone. Or very angry or frightened. He stuck his arm out to the side, and it disappeared into a shadow of darkness. He pulled his arm back out and threw a towel in my face.

I took a deep breath and took the opportunity to gather myself. I was wringing out the end of my hair with the towel when I finally decided to ask a question that had been on my mind ever since my first training session with the Prince.

“Why is it that your magic was not affected as much as others?” I asked.

Nik finished brushing the back of his head with the towel in his hand. His hair now looked disheveled instead of slicked back, but it still managed to look good somehow.

“I think that when the magic started to fade, some fae started using their magic less or stopped using it altogether, like they thought they could save it up. But I don’t think it works that way. I never stopped using my magic. I use it just the same as I always did. And I’ve been impacted, princess, don’t doubt that. I...” He gritted his teeth in frustration. “You’re right that my powers have not diminished to the extent of many others. But everyone’s magic is different. I can’t claim to know what makes everyone’s magic work. I just know how mine works,” he explained.

His thoughtful and direct answer surprised me.

“And my magic? What are you doing here? With this?” I said, gesturing at our bizarre situation.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out, princess,” he replied.

“And why are *you* the one who is tasked with figuring out what makes my magic tick?” I asked. This was another question that had been on my mind.

He looked at me like he was weighing his options. “Enough questions, princess. We aren’t done with today’s training,” he said. He peeled off his

soaked shirt, wrung it out, then laid it across his shoulders and began to trudge up toward the M.

Luke

“Look at that muscle!” I exclaimed, wrapping my hand around Al’s thigh and squeezing it. She lay along the chaise with her legs crossed at her ankles and thrown over my lap.

“She’s almost as ripped as you, mate,” Rhett teased.

Clearly, Rhett was exaggerating, but after training with the Prince, Al’s body did look different. Although her training had seemed to be initially focused on her magic, it sounded like her time with the Prince had turned into little more than gym sessions most days. As a result, some of her feminine softness was now replaced by toned muscle.

“I think I can officially say that I can push around more weight with my muscles than I can magically,” Al said, sounding proud and exasperated at the same time. “Of course, my ‘magic’ isn’t much more than a puff of wind these days,” she elaborated.

Obviously, I saw the appeal of unearthing Al’s magical abilities. She had all but healed my own magical powers. And Rhett’s too. But, so far, Al reported that they had had little success in advancing her magical abilities. She didn’t share very many details with me about her training sessions with the Prince these days. Not since she told me about the stunt Nik pulled with leaving her stranded in the middle of an ocean and I had reacted less than favorably to such tactics.

Some of my thoughts of displeasure must have shown through on my face because Al asked, “Luke, why don’t you like the Prince? I mean, I know you don’t love the idea of my training sessions, but you didn’t like him before all of that,” she said.

“You mean other than the fact that he lines up every woman in the

Kingdom, decides whether he wants to marry them or not, and has deemed every woman in Valencia thus far unworthy? And this year that will include my—” I caught myself. “Well, it will include you and Karina.”

“Is there something other than that?” she asked earnestly.

“Yes,” I replied quietly. We sat in silence for a moment. “You know about my little brother, Jacob?” I asked.

She nodded her head. My youngest brother, Jacob, who had died in the last war.

“We were all under Nik’s command at the time. Nik was”—I clenched my teeth like it caused me pain to say these next words— “a good commander, overall. He fought on the front lines next to his soldiers, and he fought well. But the day that Jacob died, Nik had separated us. He wanted me in the battalion along the northeastern lines, where we thought we were going to get hit hardest, so I could protect and heal our guys and make them last longer along that front. And he put Jacob’s battalion, which had some of our less experienced lads, farthest away from the action,” I said.

“It made sense, Al. It was a solid battle plan. But I was so far away from Jacob, and I’d promised my mother that I’d protect him. And when...” I paused, my nostrils flaring. I took a deep breath. “When Jacob was injured, I was too far away from him. No one came to get me. When I finally got to him, it was too late. Nik and I had words. More than words... We came to blows. He was mad that I’d left my battalion before the battle was over. I was mad that he hadn’t let me go to Jacob sooner. I won’t tell you which of us was right. Nik and I weren’t friends before, but after...” I trailed off, pursing my lips and tilting my head to the side in dissatisfaction.

“He’s nearly as ruthless as Vandros, Al. Everyone is just a resource to him,” Rhett added.

Al leaned up from her position of leisure and grabbed my hand in hers. I could tell that she wanted to launch into some kind of sympathetic tirade regarding the Prince. But I never liked to dwell on the past, especially not on what happened with Jacob.

“When do you leave?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Tomorrow,” Al responded, letting the topic of Jacob drop.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Same,” I replied.

I was heading to Port City for the Winter Gala at the Silver Court. Al was going to the inaugural Winter Gala at the Golden Court with Cass.

“You and James still planning to stay here?” I asked Rhett.

“Yes. James’s mother and father are coming into town, and I am going to charm their pants right off,” he replied.

“Meeting the parents. Look at you!” Al exclaimed.

“Just a suggestion, but if I were you, I would keep her mother’s pants *on*, mate. The mother-daughter thing hasn’t gone so well for you in the past,” I teased.

Rhett threw the red apple in his hand at my head. I caught it nimbly in my hand, turned it around, and took a bite, still chuckling.

“Is Karina going home with you?” Al asked.

I looked down at the apple and took another bite, even though I wasn’t feeling particularly hungry.

“Not really *with me*,” I said. “We are arriving separately, and she will stay in the main house instead of mine. But, yes, we will attend the gala together,” I explained.

Karina was smart and pretty and came from a good family who would bring connections and resources to House Bellamy. And she was always around whether I pursued her or not because Karina had become fast friends with James. I didn’t mind my time with her, but the months of courting Karina I’d promised my parents in exchange for my position on the High Council would be up soon.

“Well, I have to go pack,” Al said, moving her legs off me.

“Let’s have a drink before you head out,” Rhett suggested.

Al was already out of the door. She waved at us over her shoulder. “Sounds good.”

“Luke, I have to ask you something,” Rhett said, after Al was gone.

And then, without waiting for a response, he continued, “What in the *hell* are you doing?”

I looked exaggeratedly around Rhett’s bar.

“Well, I thought I was sitting here for another minute or two, but if I’ve outstayed my welcome...” I replied jokingly.

“*With Al*, Luke. What are you doing with Al?” Rhett clarified.

“Rhett, come on,” I said, exhaling out of my nose. We’d talked about this before. And again, before then.

“She made her choice,” I said with a sideways smirk, trying not to sound bitter.

“No, she made *a* choice because she wasn’t aware of what all of her

options were,” Rhett retorted.

“Not to be crude, but I think I made it pretty clear I was on the menu for her, and she chose me time and time again until she didn’t,” I said.

“Bullshit, man. You know, Al. You know how she thinks she has to earn every minute she is here at the High Court. She always feels like she has to prove she is worthy. And then the whole thing with your mom—”

“I told her not to mind my mom,” I interjected.

“And then Karina,” Rhett continued.

“I offered to bail on that too,” I said, but I was getting frustrated.

“Did you ask her to be your date to the Fall Ball instead? Did you tell her you want to be with her, your family obligations be damned?” Rhett continued to push.

“Al and I don’t really talk about these things. Not like you and I,” I said, cutting my eyes toward my friend. “But Al and I have a kind of understanding,” I said.

“Well, I’m telling you right now that it is her *understanding* that she would never be good enough for your sorry ass,” Rhett barked.

The thought that he might be right gnawed at the edges of my self-assurance.

“She deserves to know, Luke. Not just about how you feel about her, but also how you magically—”

“If we’re going to talk about relationships, what about you and James?” I interjected, switching from defense to offense. “What are *you* doing? You’ve gone through hundreds, more like thousands, of women over the years, allegedly looking for your mate, and now that you’ve found her, you are going to, what, take it slow?” I asked.

There was a pause, and I didn’t know if Rhett was going to push back on the change of subject.

“You’re right, Luke,” Rhett replied simply. The lack of fight in him took me by surprise, and I furrowed my eyebrows at him.

“That’s why I’m going to ask her father for her hand when I meet him,” Rhett declared.

I stared at him, flabbergasted. And all my frustration disappeared into happiness for my best friend. I stood and clapped him on the back.

“Congrats, man. The High Court isn’t going to be the same without you running around single and terrorizing every woman in sight,” I teased.

“You’re going to be my best man. And I want Al there, too. So whatever

you end up doing with her, don't fuck it up, yeah?" he asked.

"Yeah, man," I reassured him.

I had no fucking clue what I was going to do about Al.

Alarie

Nik silently popped into existence in my bedroom, landing gracefully on his back, feet crossed, right onto my bed. My bed frame made a soft creak under his weight, a reminder that he had previously judged my bed as not built for more strenuous activity.

He looked entirely too comfortable on top of my white, puffy comforter, both of his hands tucked behind his head, somehow managing to prop himself up but not ruffle a single hair on his stupid, sexy full head of hair.

Luckily, I was already dressed, although if he had just popped into existence a minute or two before, I would not have been. I knew there was no point in pointing this out to him. If anything, it would just encourage further drop-ins from him. He would do anything to put me on edge.

He was wearing a three-piece tailored suit, the suit itself so deeply green that it almost appeared black. The vest underneath the jacket was more of an emerald green, and his tie was thin and black.

“You’ve been at Court today?” I asked. I knew he only dressed that way when he was at the High Court. He dressed much more casually at the M.

“No. Just getting here, princess,” he responded.

“Then why are you all dressed up?” I asked, gesturing toward his get-up.

“Oh, you noticed, did you?” he asked, sitting up on my bed. He gave me a devious look.

I stood at the end of my bed, arms crossed, looking at him as if I were unimpressed with the sight, which we both knew couldn’t be entirely true. No woman could have taken in that man in her bed and not be enticed.

The next second, he was behind me.

“You like my suit?” he whispered.

He was so close that the fabric of his pants brushed against my bare legs. His words on my neck brought an involuntary shiver up my spine.

“Gods damn it, Nik!” I exclaimed, startled.

I turned around and beat on his chest with my hands. It was so firm it felt like I was pounding against a rock wall. I realized my efforts were futile and looked up into a smile so devilish that all I could do was scowl.

“I like your outfit too, princess,” he teased, taking a step back from me.

Of course, he liked my outfit. I’d wanted something more comfortable than my usual High Court attire, so I’d gone with some of the clothing Nik had provided. Most of my High Court attire was blue, thanks to Jay, and any clothing provided by Nik was the green of House Heroux. I made a conscious note to get over my dislike of shopping and go buy some clothing that was not a color associated with any of the main Houses of the Court.

I huffed out a sigh of breath.

“So, why are you all dressed up if you haven’t been at Court?” I asked.

“Because I’m escorting you to the Golden Court, princess,” he responded, for once directly answering one of my questions.

“You didn’t have to get all dressed up for me, not for the two seconds it takes you to travel me there,” I teased.

“Oh, princess. You really think that I am just here to take *you* to the Golden Court?” he asked.

“Well, yes, isn’t that what the plan was?” I asked, confused.

My stuff had already been sent along to the Golden Court. Instead of a lengthy carriage ride, the Prince was traveling me to the Golden Court. I was thankful for it, more than ready to see Cass again. It got harder and harder to spend time apart while he was off handling his duties as Commander.

“You are lovely,” he stated simply as if this were a universal truth, wrapping a piece of my long hair around his finger in a curl. “But I’m a chauffeur for *no one*. Not even you, princess.”

My room grew darker despite the sunny day outside.

“You are accompanying *me* to the Golden Court this evening, where there is a reception being held in *my* honor.”

His darkness pressed around us, and somehow it felt like the blackness was responsible for our bodies being pressed closer together. He was inches from my face. I stared up into his intense dark green eyes. I’d grown so used to being around him that I had forgotten that he was the Prince of Darkness and could actually be quite scary.

“And you are to be *my* escort for the night.” His hand moved from my hair to under my chin.

I’d never felt threatened by Nik before. And I still didn’t feel unsafe. But the situation I found myself in felt precarious. I gulped down air.

“I... Cass—” I grasped for words.

“Has already agreed to the terms of this arrangement, princess,” he said.

He stepped away from me, and his cloud of darkness dissipated. I took a deep breath, like the absence of his shadows had returned the oxygen to the room.

“Now, as much as I love to see you in my House colors, tell me you packed something more appropriate to wear for the party,” he japed.

Ass. I’d known there was a party that evening, and I had sent several gowns along as options for the night. I just didn’t know that the party was for the Prince and that I would be his date, not Cass’s.

I rolled my eyes. “If you are done with your little shadow show, then I’m ready to go,” I said dismissively.

He flashed me a feline smirk in response to my sass, then surged toward me. Still shaken by the display of his power, my heart leapt into my throat, and then I found myself reaching for him as I was surrounded by his darkness once again. He picked me up, wrapping my legs around him, and in the darkness, as I always did, I clung to him, my arms wrapped around his neck like I was afraid what would happen if I was separated from him in the all-encompassing darkness that accompanied traveling. Before I could yell at him for scaring me again, we were already at the Golden Court.

We popped into existence, my legs wrapped around the front of the Prince, his large hands firmly grasping my thighs. And, *of course*, there was a retinue of people waiting to greet us. I dislodged myself from the Prince’s body with as much dignity as I could muster in a room surrounded by people. Luckily, I was wearing a skirt that had a pair of shorts underneath it.

Just as I dismounted the Prince’s large frame, I spotted Cass’s hulking mass approaching. I groaned under my breath.

“Fucking hell,” I breathed.

I thought I heard Nik chuckle, clearly pleased with himself. Being the good soldier that he was, Cass made no reaction to the unusual circumstances in which the Prince and I appeared.

“Commander,” he greeted Nik with a slight inclination of his head.

Then Cass pulled me away from Nik and into the warmth of his body.

“Mandy, babe. Tough day of travel?” he joked.

I laughed and the tension around us eased.

“I’ll be by your room at eight-thirty this evening, princess,” Nik called out, walking away.

“Better knock first,” I retorted, meaningfully grabbing Cass’s hand and wrapping it around my waist.

Before Cass could say anything, I felt the need to explain.

“He tried to startle me. You know, he is always trying new things to try to...get my magic to show. And then we just kind of ended up tangled during the traveling. Oh, Cass, you know he does it just to fuck with you, with me, with everyone,” I said.

“I know, Mand. You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” he reassured me, tugging my hips toward his.

“I...I didn’t know that the party tonight was in the Prince’s honor,” I began, working my way up to the subject I wanted to broach.

“I thought you knew,” Cass replied with a shrug. “It’s not technically in *his* honor. It is the Golden Court’s welcoming of the Crown. The Prince is standing in on behalf of the King.”

“And how exactly did I come to be *his* date for the evening?” I asked, thinking back on Nik’s words that Cass knew of the arrangement.

“Well, as honoree, he had the right to choose any woman in attendance as his date for the evening. And seeing as how you will be in attendance...”

“Cass, I’m sorry. Is this going to be trouble for you?” I asked.

“Quite the contrary, Mand,” Cass replied coolly. “It is considered the highest honor for your...date to be selected by an honoree for the evening. My House will be remembered for years to come,” Cass said.

Despite his words, he still sounded less than thrilled. I was glad he wasn’t mad about the situation, but Cass still sounded uneasy.

“There, uh... Well, Mandy... The issue is that I cannot go without a date to the party. I am the host. I have to do dances and, you know, hosting stuff,” he finished ineloquently.

What the hell? I went from going to a nice party with my boyfriend to my boyfriend going on a date with some other woman.

“Okay,” I said.

He peered into my face, and his roguish handsomeness was laced with concern.

“Okay,” I repeated this time, meaning it a little more. So, the party

would be a bit different from what I'd expected. "But we're still going home together at the end of the night, right?" I asked.

"The end of the night, Mand? I'm not waiting that long. Where do you think I am taking you right now?" he growled.

Alarie

Nik showed up at my door later that evening looking good enough to eat. And the worst part was that he fucking knew it. He wore a classic black tux that had been tailored to hug every bulging muscle on his body. No one would be able to look at him and not think of what was underneath the form-fitting fabric.

Cass had graciously left a few minutes before Nik's arrival to save us any further awkwardness. He also had to go meet up with his date, I thought, unamused.

I wore an eggshell-colored strapless silk gown. It was beautiful in its simplicity and had been tailored to hug my every curve. I'd chosen a neutral color for the occasion. I couldn't very well wear the gold-accented dress I'd originally planned to wear when I had thought Cass would be my date for the night.

Nik stood in the doorway, taking his time examining my outfit. I felt confident in the shape of my new, more toned body. I knew I looked damn good, but under his analytical stare I was growing self-conscious.

"Well, *my Prince*, does this meet your standards?" I asked, with a simple twirl to show off my gown.

"You look ravishing; like a princess fit to spend the night on the arm of a stunningly handsome Prince," he said with a smirk.

I would have rolled my eyes, but the feel of his eyes still drilling into me told me he meant every word.

"But you are missing something. Close your eyes," he ordered with the kind of authority of someone who knew compliance was impending.

I furrowed my brows in skepticism, but I closed my eyes. I felt him

reach around my neck. He was so close I could smell him. Something cool and heavy touched, then rested on my chest, high above my cleavage.

“You can open your eyes now,” he said.

I looked down, then grasped the cool object. It was an emerald, almost the size of my fist, attached to a gold chain that appeared too dainty to support the weight of the giant jewel.

“Nik, what is this?” I whispered.

But my question was rhetorical. I knew *exactly* what it was. And everyone else would know as well. It was the most famous jewel in all of Valencia. It was House Heroux’s crown jewel. There were countless paintings of the late queen wearing the priceless piece.

“You didn’t really think you’d get away with wearing neutral colors tonight, did you?” he asked, quirked his eyebrow.

He was insane. The emerald was worth more than my entire hometown. It was...well, priceless.

“Nik, what if someone tries to steal it from me?” I asked nervously.

“I’d like to see them try,” he growled. “I don’t plan on leaving your side all night,” he promised, and for emphasis, he tugged me to his side, looping my arm through his.

We made our way to the main hall in silence. As we walked into the ornately decorated hall, I automatically scanned the room, looking for Cass. I found him across the room, already surrounded by guests. He was everything Nik was not in that moment, but in the best way possible. Nik did, in fact, look like Prince Charming, except perhaps for his hair that was a little too long and untamed.

But where everything about Nik screamed tradition, Cass’s look responded with *fuck tradition*. He was wearing a black tux, but that was where the similarities between the two men ended.

Cass wasn’t even wearing a bow tie or any kind of tie. His white button down was completely unbuttoned to display the scars and tattoos that covered his chest. His wings were out, and he seemed simply too large to allow. He flaunted his otherness for all to see, and it was intoxicating. And not just for me. I could see how others around him flocked to his side, hungry to stand in the presence of such raw power. I wanted to run my hands down his chest and then his abs and then...

A woman delicately wrapped her hand around as much of Cass’s biceps as she could under the auspices of getting his attention. I recognized her as

Lady Alyssa Grady, Cass's date for the evening. The realization that it would be her and not me who would be touching Cass's arm all night extinguished the fire that had threatened to consume me moments before.

"Come on, princess. Let's get you a drink," Nik offered, pulling me in the opposite direction of Cass.

Even if I couldn't be by his side, I was proud of Cass. At the High Court, he always seemed uncomfortable and out of place. But at the Golden Court, he looked at ease and that really allowed his beautiful personality to shine through. He had not made his way to my side yet, and I had resisted my urge to go over and cling to him. But it was clear he was flourishing in fulfilling his hosting duties.

It was time for Nik, as honoree, and me, as his date, to open the dance floor. The entire room stilled, all chattering going quiet. Nik took my wineglass, which was nearly empty already, and set it on a nearby table. And then he reached for me. I offered him my left hand, and he gracefully took it, pulling me into the alcove of his body, his left hand resting on my lower back.

I'd been in any number of close situations with Nik during our training sessions together, but his body pressed to mine took on a completely different feel and meaning now. I stared into his dark emerald eyes, and his normal glint of amusement was replaced with an intensity that took my breath away.

We just stood there, in the middle of the room, with all eyes on us, with the front of our bodies pressed together. I ran my tongue along my lower lip, then dragged my lip between my teeth. He stared at my lips like we didn't have hundreds of people waiting on us to take three simple steps so they could join us on the dance floor.

Thankfully, the Prince took the first step, and I followed. On our third step, he welcomed others to the dance floor by guiding me into a dip. He pressed the front of his body so close to mine and applied pressure to my lower back. It felt like I was doing a backbend with him glued to the front of me. And then Cass, as the host, and his date, Alyssa, joined the floor, shortly followed by others.

True to his word, Nik did not leave my side the entire night. If I wanted to dance, we danced. If I wanted a drink, he got me a drink. The Prince attended to me so well the entire night that I hardly had time to dwell on the fact that I was not with Cass.

Toward the end of the night, I was actually a little thankful that I was

not Cass's date for the evening. When I was ready to turn in for the night, I looked around to find Cass preoccupied with his hosting duties, glad-handing with every guest as they departed. I could just imagine how exhausted he would be by the end of the night.

"Ready to go, princess?" Nik asked, his hand taking up almost the entirety of my lower back.

Nik had been so pleasant to be around the entire night that I didn't even bristle at him calling me princess. At that moment, I imagined that even if I were a real princess, my night would have been no better. I had spent the entire night on the arm of a handsome Prince who had said and done everything right. I was downright suspicious of Nik and his sudden change of character, but I was thankful for it. I had expected a night of Nik taunting Cass and making Cass's first large, hosted event difficult for him. But Nik did no such thing.

"I think you've put in enough steps in those heels. Let's take a shortcut," he said, offering me his hand.

And I took it without hesitation. We disappeared from the middle of the main hall without having to say goodbye to a single soul. The emerald on my neck glowed with the same intensity as Nik's emerald eyes in the shadows of his darkness for the moments we were in between here and there. And then we were on the balcony outside of my room.

There was the cocky Nik I knew, I thought. He couldn't just drop me at the door. Of course, he had to invite himself in.

"Just wanted to make sure you made it in safely," he said, like he had read my mind.

"Oh, yeah," I said, remembering his family heirloom that was still around my neck. I'm sure he wanted to make sure it was safe.

"Let me—" I said, reaching around the back of my neck to delicately remove the emerald necklace.

But then Nik was behind me.

"Let me," he offered, his hands already reaching for the clasp.

I dropped my hands and pushed my hair to the side and out of the way. I could feel his body behind mine. He didn't struggle with the clasp at all, instead bringing the ends of the necklace around each side of my face. He grasped the emerald in the palm of his hand so it wouldn't fall, then let his fist rest against my chest. I looked down at his hand on my sternum, but he grabbed my chin between his thumb and finger and forced me to stare up at

him over my shoulder.

I didn't know what was happening. Or what to think. Surely, he could feel my heart pounding in my chest. He looked down at me with eyes as deep and green as the emerald enclosed in his hand, and I thought he might kiss me. I nervously ran my tongue along my bottom lip. That was a mistake. Now he was focused on my lips.

He moved his face closer to mine, and I finally broke out of my emerald-tinged trance. I was about to stop him. I was about to tell him to back off. I was with Cass, and even if I was Nik's date for the night, that didn't mean he could just go around kissing other people's girlfriends. But at the last second, Nik changed his course. His lips just barely brushed the side of my cheek.

"Sweet dreams, princess," he whispered in my ear. And then he disappeared into one of his inky shadows.

I ran my hand across my chest, trying to dissipate the coolness that immediately replaced the warmth of his hand.

Alarie

Cass was leaning against the railing of the veranda, overlooking the morning sun shining over the Golden Court below. His back was corded in muscle, and his biceps were so big they looked like they would pop. I wanted to run my hands down his bare back, over the tattoo of wings that resided there in the absence of his real wings. I wanted to get on my knees right then and there and—

Cass turned his head over his shoulder to find my eyes on him, my lower lip between my teeth. He rose from the banister he was leaning against and made his way toward me, not trying to hide the desire that bulged in his pants. He kissed me, taking my bottom lip between his teeth.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A scar. I got hit in the lip when I was a kid. You know we didn’t have a healer in town growing up, and I was too chickenshit to get it sewn up,” I replied, aching for more of him.

Cass cackled.

“I knew you when you were a kid. You weren’t chickenshit. You weren’t scared of anything,” Cass said.

“Except long pointy needles in my mouth,” I replied.

He picked me up, wrapping my legs around his hulking torso. He pressed me against the wall behind us. He worked his hard cock against me, quickly working me into a frenzy of desire. I broke free of his mouth, hot all over and gasping.

“Shouldn’t we go inside?” I asked, peering uncertainly around us. I didn’t see anyone.

We were outside on my veranda in the middle of the day. The balcony

was tucked away, affording us some amount of privacy. But it wasn't outside of the realm of possibility that someone would see us.

"If they don't like it, they can look away," Cass replied, distracted, already pulling down the top of my dress to expose my breasts. He fed at my mouth again as he pushed aside the small piece of fabric under my dress, finding me soaked and ready for him.

He separated our bodies just enough to pull himself over the waistband of his pants. He began to rub against my outside.

"But perhaps you want someone to see us, baby girl?" he teased, playing in my wetness.

I licked my lips before biting down on the knot inside of my lip again. The thought of someone watching Cass take me in broad daylight caused a jolt of new excitement to rush through me.

Cass let the pleasure of having guessed correctly shine in his eyes.

"That's what I thought," he said, then he buried the entire length of himself inside of me in one quick thrust.

I gasped so loudly people across the way could have heard.

"If we are going to put on a show, then let's make it one worth watching," he said, lowering his mouth to my nipple and licking it until it stood at attention before moving to the other one.

"Cass, you're —"

But his thrusting stole the words of protest from my mouth, and I began to make small, breathy noises of pleasure instead.

"Unbelievably good looking?" he asked, driving into me at the same time as he pulled my body down onto him.

"God-like in between the sheets? Going to make you scream my name for everyone to hear? All true," he teased, finishing my sentence for me.

It took a little maneuvering, but he stood behind me now, pinning me against the railing as he re-entered me. His hand was gently wrapped around the front of my neck, forcing me to look out at the sun shining over the rooftops of the Golden Court.

"I bet there's someone watching us right now," he whispered in my ear, bringing his other hand around to circle my front.

I threw my head back, resting it on his shoulder. The thought of someone watching us sent a thrill of white-hot fire through my core.

"You going to tell them whose cock's buried inside of you?" he teased, thrusting into me.

“Cass,” I mouthed, trying to catch my breath as the throbbing between my legs built to a crescendo.

He separated our upper bodies, bending me further over the railing so I stared down over it. He lined his thumbs up with the dimples above my ass and lifted my feet off the ground so that he held me up by my hips as he drove deeper into me.

“I don’t think they heard you,” he taunted.

His thrusts became punishing. He drove himself to the end of me, making loud slapping noises reverberate from the balcony.

I screamed his name as he hit the back of me, causing me to peak, then crash over the height of my pleasure. Cass kept plunging into me as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me.

“The show’s not over yet, Mand. Get on your knees,” he ordered.

He withdrew from me, and I obeyed. He gave me just enough time to hit the ground before he buried his cock in my mouth. He cupped the back of my head with his big hand, holding me to him as he spilled down my throat.

* * * *

“What’s your plan for the rest of today?” I asked after we had cleaned ourselves up. “Lots of chores to do?” I anticipated he had a list of a million items long to complete before hosting the Golden Court’s first Winter Gala.

“A few,” he replied, downplaying what he had on his plate. “But there is one thing that is more important than them all,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I have to give you a tour of the Court,” he said.

“There’s no way you have time for that,” I protested. “It’s okay,” I said, trying to relieve any guilt he might feel. “I can keep myself busy. I’ll have to start getting ready for the Ball soon, anyway.”

“I’m giving you a tour,” he said firmly. He would not be deterred. “Anyway, you can help me check a few things off my list. We already checked off one item on the balcony this morning,” he teased with a self-satisfied grin.

He leaned down and gave me a quick, sweet kiss.

“Now put some clothes on, woman, or the only tour of the Golden Court you are going to get is the inside of this bedroom,” he growled.

I thought about disobeying him just so he would make good on his threat.

“Good day, Lord Davante,” a sweet lesser fae woman greeted us almost

the moment that we left my room. She was mopping the white-and-gold swirled marbled floor in the hallway.

“Hey, Gladys,” he said, giving the woman a warm smile as we passed her.

The Golden Court was different from the High Court in so many ways it was difficult to put my finger on any one thing. Like seeing Gladys mopping at the Golden Court. At the High Court, there was undoubtedly a lot of work to be done at any given time—floors that needed mopping, trash that needed taken out, bushes that needed to be trimmed. But at the High Court, you never really saw that kind of work being performed. Instead, it was just done but always out of sight.

Maybe it was all the preparation for the Winter Gala, but the general feel of the Golden Court was one of industriousness. Everywhere we turned, people could be seen working.

Cass took a shortcut through one of the large kitchens. Everyone exclaimed when they saw him enter. Cass took the time to greet and smile at everyone who turned his way. Cass purloined a handful of blueberries from a bowl on our way out.

“I saw that, Lord Davante!” an amiable mixed fae woman in a chef’s hat admonished. “Those are for the pies!”

The most refreshing difference between the High Court and the Golden Court was seeing just how comfortable and happy Cass was here. I didn’t think he’d dismissed his wings more than once or twice since I’d arrived. He didn’t fidget around in a suit and tie that was too restricting to fit his massive body. He walked around laughing and calling everyone by their first names. Although High Lord Dumont was high lord of the Golden Court, it was apparent to anyone in these halls that Cass was the future of the Golden Court.

“What are you smiling about?” Cass asked me, matching my smile with one of his own. He said he was walking me to the library, which was guaranteed to be one of my favorite rooms at the Court.

“Just you. And this place,” I said with a wave of my hand, the one that was not wrapped in his grip.

“I know. It’s perfect, right?” he said.

“You have something really special here, Cass,” I replied. “And they owe it, in large part, to you. They know it. I hope you know that, too, Cass.”

“We all earned it, Mand. You, too. You may have been at the High

Court at the time, but you were fighting for us in your own way,” he said.

“Cass, you’re sweet. But the things I did, the things I am trying to do at the High Court, that is all done in an effort to get the lesser fae back at the High Court and on equal footing. But what you’ve done here... You’ve created your very own haven.”

“Exactly,” Cass replied passionately. “We don’t need the High Court. Everything we could ever want is right here,” he continued excitedly. “This can be your home too, Mand. It can be *our* home.”

He stopped talking and looked over at me. I squeezed his hand, letting me know it was okay. I wanted him to continue with what he had to say.

“You should know that High Lord Dumont has asked me to stay here at the Golden Court and rule in his stead indefinitely. He has no plans of leaving the High Court or his access to the King any time soon,” Cass explained.

Now everything made sense. Walking around the Golden Court, the people here had felt like Cass’s people because they were. The halls had felt like they belonged to him, too, because they did. The heart and soul of the Golden Court already belonged to Cass.

“That... Wow, Cass! That’s big. You’re perfect for it. It’s perfect for you,” I said sincerely.

Selfishly, I felt a twinge of sadness at the thought of Cass ruling over the Golden Court. What would that mean for us?

“It’s going to be awhile before I will be able to step into my role full time,” he explained. “Things with the war are going to really have to calm down before I can be at the Golden Court full time.”

His words, “full time” struck me, but I tried to remain happy for him instead of thinking of myself. I didn’t get to see Cass as much as I would like to, with him having to patrol the border wall so often, but he still managed to pop down to the High Court and see me on a regular basis. How often would I get to see him if he was “full time” at the Golden Court? I could come see him sometimes, but I couldn’t be gone all the time.

“I know we haven’t been together very long, Mand,” he began, and my heart skipped a beat. “But I want you here with me. You don’t have to say anything right now, but when I do finally take my place at the Golden Court, I want you next to me.” He grabbed my hand, rubbing his thumb across the top of it lightly.

I felt the warmth of a smile blossom in my heart before it made its way to my face. It sounded like a good dream—Cass and me settling down at the

Golden Court together. It was a dream I could picture myself living out with him... *one day*.

Cass

“Lord Davante, will you please rise?” High Lord Dumont requested.

I rose from my chair on the dais that High Lord Dumont, the Prince, and I sat on overlooking the rest of the guests at the Golden Court’s inaugural Winter Gala. I faced my High Lord. He rose from his ornamented, gilded chair and tapped me on the shoulder, directing me to stand to his right, facing out toward the crowd.

“Prince Heroux, would you do me the honor of standing witness for this ceremony?” High Lord Dumont requested, gesturing to the empty space to his left. The Prince elegantly rose from his finely detailed chair and gave High Lord Dumont a respectful nod as he took his place to the high lord’s left.

Murmuring spread amongst the crowd as the components of a formal ceremony fell into place. I was unsure what my high lord had in store for me, but I blindly trusted Drake. And that was something I could say about almost no one else in this Kingdom.

“Lord Davante, it is not often that someone can claim something good out of civil unrest and war, but I stand here today to do just that.”

Excited murmuring continued to expand throughout the masses until a concerted effort of shushing brought the ambient noise back under control. High Lord Dumont smiled down at his constituents patiently.

“I have worked with you these last few years, and in that time, you have served as my confidante and a compassionate and fearless leader for our people.”

Despite the seriousness of the moment, a few cheers and whistles broke out from the crowd in agreement.

“Now I would like to ask you to serve in another important role for me and for this Court which you have made a home for so many. As some of you may know,” High Lord Dumont said, turning his attention toward those who stood in the crowd below us, “I lost my dear wife before we were able to conceive an heir. However, it is with happiness in my heart that I stand here before you all today so that you may know that, although Lord Davante may not be of my blood, he is my kin. I name Lord Cassian Arturo Davante heir to all I have in this world, including the seat of the throne of the Golden Court,” the high lord declared.

I kept my gaze on the crowd and maintained my soldier’s stance, but shock rippled through my body in waves. We’d discussed the possibility of Drake naming me as his heir on quiet nights where we shared our dreams of the future. But I’d had no idea he had intended to make such a move now.

Drake turned to me, looking at my face with pride beaming in his kind, hard eyes.

“My High Lord and my friend, you give me an honor, which is my life’s ambition to accept. I shall serve with honor in your name so long as this Court shall have me.”

“So witnessed,” the Prince repeated ceremonially.

Cheers erupted from familiar faces out in the crowd. I reached behind me and grabbed my mug of lager off the table.

“To the *Golden Court*, to the King, to the Kingdom,” I roared over the chaos, raising my glass in a toast.

I looked over at Mandy. Her glass was raised in her hand, and I caught an unmistakable glint of love in her eyes. She looked like a princess who had stepped right out of one of the old paintings that hung in hallways. Her long brown hair was curled and tossed over one shoulder. She wore *my* colors, the colors of the Golden Court, and the gold made the golden thread in her green eyes dance like an ember flame. Slips of gold gossamer fabric formed the top of her form-fitting bodice. The skirt of her dress was made of tiers of layered, delicate golden fabric that expanded out, making her torso appear all the more petite.

I’d promised her that the Golden Court would be our home someday. Now she understood that not only would it be our home, it would be *our* Court, and she would sit next to me on this dais someday.

Our business out of the way, we turned our attention to our guests for the evening. A line had formed in front of the dais of those patiently waiting for their turn to speak to one of us.

“Prince Heroux,” a small lesser fae woman with spiky orange hair and golden embers for eyes addressed the Prince.

She looked like the incarnate of a flame, and I wondered if she had any abilities that were fire related. She sunk into a low, respectful bow before righting herself and addressing the Prince once more.

“I would like to personally welcome you to our Court, my Prince. My cousin, he resides at the Emerald Court, and he tells me great things about your Court. I hope that the Golden Court follows in your footsteps, my Prince.”

“Thank you for the warm welcome. Please visit the Emerald Court so that we may return the courtesy,” the Prince responded succinctly but kindly.

The small woman nearly jumped out of her shoes in her excitement at receiving an invitation from the Prince himself to his Court.

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord,” she said excitedly before bowing again and drifting away with a big smile on her face.

I found the small fae woman’s comments about the Emerald Court to be intriguing. I’d heard tales that the Emerald Court was a good home for the lesser fae. But I had never been myself, and the Prince was usually quite selective in whom he invited to his Court.

The next guest in line directed his attention toward me.

“Good evening, my friend. What is your name?” I inquired.

“I do hope to be a friend, my lord. I am here as an emissary under a white flag of peace,” the man announced clearly.

The room grew silent. I shifted in my chair, sitting a little stiffer.

“And who is it that you are here for, emissary?” I asked.

“I am here with a message for you, Lord Davante, from my King, the King of Light and Darkness, *the King of Alancia*,” he said.

I glanced down the length of the table and to my left. High Lord Dumont displayed a soldier’s calm. The Prince was similarly even keeled, bordering on aloof. Apparently, they were fine with letting me handle this.

“Your King’s forces have been quiet for some time, emissary.” In fact, there had been no major conflicts with any Alancians since the engagement that had occurred immediately following the Fall Ball. “Do you come with news that your King has decided to end this conflict?” I asked.

“No, my lord. That is not the message I carry today. It is my understanding that my King has not acquired what he came to Valencia for, and he will not leave without it,” he replied.

Probably our King’s head and the throne of the High Court, I thought.

“Very well, emissary. Proceed with your message,” I directed.

“The King of the North speaks directly to you, Lord Davante, and states as follows,” the messenger said and then, perhaps by just a trick of the light, it appeared as though the messenger’s eyes grew lighter.

“I come with a message of equality and an offer for those of like-minds to come together. Lord Davante, you are a warrior, both on the battlefield and off it. What you have done in fighting for equal rights for the lesser fae is *admirable*. But it also should have been *unnecessary*. Although I congratulate you on your success in giving the lesser fae a home at the Golden Court”—the emissary swept his hand toward the crowd—“I offer you and your people a home where they can live *together* with the high fae as true equals. You see, the Diamond Court has never been captured by the prejudices that the High Court has long been beholden to. At the Diamond Court, all stand equal to one another, except the King, of course, to whom all must bend the knee.”

I waited patiently for the emissary to finish his message. “Emissary, you make it seem as though the Diamond Court is a winter wonderland. But isn’t it true that at your court it is those who cannot defend themselves, high fae and lesser fae alike, who are discriminated against?”

“My people are a *strong* people, Lord Davante, as they must be to live in the north and survive the isolation *your* King has forced upon me and my people,” the emissary responded.

“Where is the honor in feeding upon those who are small, weak, or infirm?” I pushed.

“At the Diamond Court, power reigns supreme,” the emissary replied. “Those who are less powerful must use their cunning or other resources to protect themselves. At the Diamond Court, principles like equality and personal freedom to act are not sacrificed to prideful and nebulous concepts like honor. I thought perhaps your people were strong enough to understand the sacrifices necessary to live in a world where they would be provided the same *opportunities* as everyone else to succeed or fail.” The last words were said with clear disdain. “But perhaps I have misjudged.”

“You may tell your King that the people of the Golden Court will be no one’s victims. But neither will we play the bully to another,” I responded.

The emissary gave me a discerning look.

“You have already told him, warrior,” the emissary replied solemnly with a nod of his head.

“May I assume that your *honor* extends to the privileges of the white flag and that I am free to leave this Court unharmed?”

It could be my overconfidence in how this conversation had gone, but the emissary seemed somehow lesser than he was moments before. His eyes had lost some of their light sparkle, and he seemed to stand a little smaller than he had before.

“You may leave this Court and return to your home in whatever fashion you came. But be warned, emissary, if you are found lingering on this side of the wall, then the terms of the white flag will no longer apply,” I cautioned.

I raised my hand to the nearest server to get their attention. “Please provide this man with food and water for his long journey home.”

“You truly are honorable, my lord,” the emissary said sincerely. “But my journey is not so long that I require such provisions.” The emissary dipped his head in a slight nod to me. He did not acknowledge High Lord Dumont or the Prince during our entire exchange. True to his word, he had delivered a message from the King of Alancia to just me.

And then he disappeared from right where he stood in front of me. Murmurs of shock spread through the hall. The emissary was a traveler, then, just like the Prince. Despite the white flag, it was not lost on me that King Vandro had sent a traveler emissary to my halls as a not-so-subtle reminder of our inability thus far to keep his forces from infiltrating our side of the wall or even my own Court.

Alarie

I sat on the expansive balcony off my room looking up at the midnight sky. I thought about how if Cass were sitting here with me, we'd probably be pointing out imaginary shapes in the stars. Cass and I had separate rooms here at the Golden Court because he said that he had too much to do while I was visiting, and he did not want to disturb me at all hours of the day and night.

I guess he had been right. I was already wearing my satin nightgown and thinking of bed, but I was fairly certain he was wandering around the Court somewhere, probably still in his tux, talking with High Lord Dumont and the Prince regarding King Vandros's surprise of the night.

Which was why I was surprised to see Nik lead a gorgeous blonde high fae out onto the balcony to the left and about a floor down from where I sat. I didn't even know where Nik's room was, much less that I could see it from my own. I recognized the woman as Nik's date from the Winter Gala. The woman was tall like most high fae women and hardly had to stretch at all to reach Nik's mouth. He barely allowed her to graze his lips with hers before he turned his face from her, kissing his way down her pale, slender neck.

He seductively slipped the straps of her dress off her shoulders as his mouth made its way to the hollow of her collarbone. And then he abruptly pushed her onto her knees, showing no concern for her fine gown. The beautiful high fae lady looked elegant, even on her knees with her supple breasts out.

Despite the dark of the night, I could easily see them. I should have turned away, but my curiosity overrode my good sense. Nik tightly wrapped

his hand in her pretty blonde hair. With his free hand, he flipped open the buckle of his belt and expertly pulled himself from his pants.

My heartbeat jumped into my throat. He yanked her hair back, forcing her face up to him. And then he drove himself into her mouth. I saw the woman gag on his substantial size, but he did not let up. He kept making hard, penetrating thrusts in and out of her mouth. The woman was able to adjust and take his thrusting, which I could tell was no easy feat.

I found myself wondering if I could take that kind of roughness. Even more surprising, I found myself wanting to try, to find out. And then Nik turned his face toward me, locking eyes with me like he had known I had been watching the entire time. I ran my tongue across my bottom lip and then bit down hard on my bottom lip.

He held my gaze as he punishingly plunged in and out of the girl's mouth. I found that I was enthralled by his roughness. He thrust one last time and then threw his head back, firmly holding her mouth to him as he spilled down her throat. The blonde rose seductively from her knees. I turned my back to them to walk into my bedroom. I'd already seen too much.

Seconds later, Nik startled me by traveling directly onto my balcony.

"Did you enjoy the show?" he asked cockily, without preamble, like his cock hadn't been down another woman's throat moments before.

The wetness between my thighs threatened to betray me. I avoided answering his question.

"Did you enjoy putting on the show?" I sneered. "You know, if you didn't want someone to see you, maybe you shouldn't have fucked that poor girl's mouth on the balcony where everyone could see."

"Poor girl? She enjoyed every damn minute of it. Almost as much as you did," he said with a smug smile.

I rolled my eyes, all too aware of the wetness pooling in my panties.

"I don't need your show. I already had one of my own today," I deflected.

"You don't think I know that?" he barked fiercely, closing the space between us.

I gulped down a breath of air. Earlier, I'd been excited by the prospect of someone seeing Cass so boldly have his way with me in the middle of the day. But that was before I knew that Nik's room was almost directly across from my own. But I bet Cass had known exactly where Nik's balcony was located in proximity to mine. Maybe Cass wasn't as servile a soldier as I

thought he was.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now, and Nik had just done the same thing, although ostensibly under the cover of darkness.

“What do you care?” I spat back, stomping into my bedroom. “All you care about is my magic.”

He stalked toward me, dark shadows already forming around him. Sometimes the shadows that formed around him would appear slowly and gracefully and then would hover below his knees, trailing behind him. But tonight, in the blink of an eye, an all-consuming darkness overtook the little part of my bedroom we stood in. The menacing darkness moved with him as he stalked toward me, swallowing everything in his path.

Without realizing it, I had backed up until I was pressed against a sitting table with a large mirror behind it. I bumped against the table and decided to lean on its ledge like that had been my intention all along. He firmly planted his large palms on the top of the table, his arms caging me in.

“I care because...” he began through gritted teeth. Then his gaze flicked over my shoulder to the mirror behind me.

I peered over my shoulder to see what he was staring at. In the mirror, I could see what had captured his attention so thoroughly. Our reflection looked like a silhouette painting of the two of us. There was a haunting beauty to the scene. His dark shadows surrounded us so that all that could be seen in the mirror was his face close to mine. We were so close it almost looked like we were kissing, not arguing.

When I turned back around, Nik was calm once again. He took his palms off the tabletop, then surprised me by pulling the chair out from under the table and sitting in it. I was so used to looking up at him, it was jarring to have to look down at him.

He grabbed me by my knees and effortlessly pushed me all the way up onto the tabletop, forcing me to sit. And then he moved his chair in between my legs, his hands grasping my thighs above my knees. I did what I could to tuck my short nightie between my legs.

“I showed you a good time last night, didn’t I? I was everything that a prince should be for a princess?” he asked.

I peered down into his deep green eyes, trying to figure out where this line of questioning was going.

“I... Yes, Nik you were everything I... I imagine a princess—a queen, even—could ever want *last night*,” I emphasized. Unable to let whatever this

momentary peace between us was last, I added, “But I don’t know why you insisted I be your date when you clearly already had someone else lined up.”

“I didn’t pick you as my date because I was out of options, Alarie,” he rebuked.

My name on his lips caused a sharp jolt of energy to course through my entire body. That sizzling energy settled on my skin where his hands still rested above my knees.

“Then why did you pick me as your date, Nik?” I asked.

“Because I wanted to show you what I’m like when I’m not having to train you,” he answered.

He was completely calm now. His shadows had disappeared almost completely, except maybe a tendril or two still remaining by his feet.

“What is this, Nik? Another one of your tests?” I barked.

He had pushed me physically until my muscles were so sore that I couldn’t move the next day. He had abandoned me fully clothed in the middle of the ocean. He had tried to startle, surprise, scare, frustrate, tease, and intimidate my magic out of me in any number of ways during our training, but whatever he was doing now felt unlike anything he had tried before.

“Are you trying to *charm* my magic out of me now?” I asked skeptically.

The emotion lingering in his eyes was replaced with the devilish intent I was used to.

“So, you think I’m charming?” he teased, looking up at me like I was dessert he had gladly opted for in lieu of a six-course meal.

He tightened his grasp on me, his thumbs digging into the tender part of the flesh inside of my thigh. Just then, a couple of ladies burst into the hallway outside my room, drunk and speaking much too loudly for the late hour.

I jumped up off the table like it was made of hot coals. I didn’t know what the Prince was angling at, but it was time for him to go. When I turned around to tell him as much, Nik was already gone.

Luke

James rushed to Al's side the moment she walked through my parlor's door. Al wore a long-sleeved clingy golden cotton maxi dress that nearly swept the floor, and she looked happy.

A smile crept onto my face at the sight of her, even though she was holding hands with Cass. James stuck out her left hand with a pride wholly unique to a new bride-to-be and showed Al the ring she now wore on her third finger. Not that Al would have been able to miss the ruby and diamond ensemble that weighed down James's left hand now.

"You didn't!" Al said in disbelief.

She scanned the room until she found Rhett kicked back with his arm thrown over the back of the sofa. He raised his eyebrows at her, pleased with himself.

Cass let out a loud whistle. Hooting and hollering and hugs ensued. I still couldn't believe it myself. The man who had sunk at least a thousand women had sunk to his knees for a single woman, and I hadn't even been there to see it.

I'd been out of town at the Silver Court when Rhett had proposed. Rhett had explained apologetically to me that his meeting with James's parents had gone so well that James's mother was unable to contain her excitement. Rhett had proposed to James within minutes of getting her parents' blessing.

We'd been celebrating every minute since I'd gotten the news. I didn't tell Al the news but had left a message for her to come straight to my place from the Golden Court so that she could join in on the fun.

After the initial excitement was over, Cass shrugged his big shoulders and said apologetically, "I would love to stay and celebrate some more, but I have to head back to House Dumont tonight."

Cass and Al moved to my foyer, hovering right inside my front door while the rest of us dispersed and took our places back on sofas and overlarge chairs we had been lounging on before Al's arrival.

In response to a particularly sad look from Al, an attempt, no doubt, to get Cass to stay a little longer, Cass said, "You know I have to head out early in the morning, Mand. But I can walk you back if you are ready to go?" he asked hopefully.

Al looked over the room where the rest of us sat. Rhett sat next to James and was already shuffling a deck of cards. Poker was on the table tonight, and I was thinking about whether I would go easy on my friend since it was his big night. *Probably not.* James sat with her legs tucked underneath her and was in her own world, staring down at her ring admiringly. Karina sat quietly next to me.

"You in, Al?" Rhett yelled over his shoulder, forming a bridge with the cards in his hands.

"Yeah," Al replied to Rhett. "I'll walk back with Rhett," she said, turning back to Cass.

I tried to purposefully zone out of the rest of their conversation. But Cass made it difficult not to notice his departure. He scooped Al into his big body and embraced her in a kiss that ended with her hands entwined in his green hair. Cass looked up from their passionate goodbye with a roguish, shit-eating grin on his face.

"Bye," James called out with a wave of her ring hand and a big smile still plastered on her face.

"Congrats, again," Cass waved over to Rhett and James.

"See ya," I said at the same time Karina quietly said, "Bye."

"Don't get used to it," Cass said. "You'll be seeing me a lot more from now on."

Al looked up questioningly at Cass. It appeared that she was as in the dark as we were.

"With things being so slow at the wall these days, High Lord Dumont has asked me to come and spend some time at the High Court so I can get ready to head things up at the Golden Court. So, this will be my last trip back up north for a while," Cass explained.

"Congrats, man," Rhett replied. We all knew that Cass's time at the High Court would be a short precursor to his rule over the Golden Court while High Lord Dumont manned his spot on the High Council.

“That’s great, Cass! Why didn’t you tell me?” Al asked, but the smile on her face told me she was happy for him.

“Because I wanted to see that smile on your face,” he answered.

And just like that, our little group of three—me, Rhett, and Al—was officially a party of six. Cass, Karina, and James joined me, Al, and Rhett everywhere we went around the Court if we were all in the same town. And that did not seem likely to change now that Cass was moving to the High Court and Rhett and James were engaged.

I rose from my seat next to Karina. “Yeah, congrats, Cass,” I said, patting him on the arm and then making my way to my study. I walked over to my white, marble top desk and grabbed the first stack of paper I saw and began to rifle through it. To my surprise, Al followed me in almost immediately after. She said nothing as she entered my study; instead, she found a glass candy bowl sitting in front of a stack of books and dug through it.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking up from the random stack of correspondence in my hands.

Al and I didn’t necessarily talk directly about relationship type stuff, but we had our own form of communication. She knew I was asking why she had chosen to follow me into the room.

“I like to check out all of my options before I decide what I want,” she responded, continuing to pick through the different kinds and colors of candy.

She looked up from the candy bowl to find me standing right next right next to her with an appreciative smirk on my face.

“I know you do, Al. But I already know what you want,” I said confidently.

And my tone made it plain that what she wanted was *me*. I’d been thinking about what Rhett said to me before I left for the Winter Gala. Specifically, what he had said about Al not knowing all of her *options*. The three months of courting I’d promised my parents with Karina would be ending soon. After that, I could renegotiate things with my parents and House Dempsey.

As far as the King’s expectations went, there was more than one way to strengthen alliances between Houses, and many of them didn’t require forced unions. I’d been waiting for Al to get back to Court to broach the subject of her *options* with her.

“Hmm?” she said under her breath, still digging around in the candy.

She momentarily moved her hand out of the bowl, setting aside a piece of green candy, then resumed her digging. But she took her lower lip between her teeth, biting it, and I knew exactly what that meant.

I reached into the glass bowl, grabbing her hand and stilling it. I ran my thumb gently across the top of her hand.

She looked up at me, and I think there was something close to fear in her beautiful green and gold eyes. She was scared. She was scared of her feelings for Cass. She was scared of her feelings for me. She was scared of the possibility of losing it all.

I took a deep breath and released her hand, grabbing a pink piece of hard candy.

“Watermelon,” I said with a smirk, handing her the pink piece of candy I knew she had been searching for. “Your favorite.”

I couldn’t do it to her. I couldn’t tell her, *“Hey, Al, I know you are really happy with Cass right now, but you remember that one time we thought you might be Rhett’s mate because you are pretty much immune to his magic? Well, it turns out the reason his magic can’t touch you is that I accidentally magically imprinted on you. I don’t know how it happened. I believe it actually happened sometime before we ever had sex, which I didn’t even know was possible. But now, there’s an invisible magical string tying me to you, and my magic protects you even when I am not around you. Oh, and it hurts when I’m not with you.”*

That was the gist of what I’d come up with to say to her today. But seeing her so happy with Cass, I just couldn’t say it. I wouldn’t make her feel like she had to choose between the two of us. I wouldn’t risk losing her, even if it meant I lost the chance to ever kiss her beautiful face again.

“Come on, you two,” Rhett called out.

I left Al with the pink and green candies in her hand. I walked back into the parlor and plopped down on the sofa across the table from Karina. Al plopped down right next to me.

“Whose deal is it?” I asked.

Rhett began throwing out the cards in response to my question.

“Don’t forget your ante,” Al said helpfully, unwrapping the pink candy and decisively popping it in her mouth.

Alarie

My days with Cass at the High Court were some of the happiest times of my entire life. Leaving Cass, with a smile on my face, I came home to find a gorgeous strapless white dress hanging on the front of my stained oak armoire. I traced my eyes down the long silken skirt of the gown, noticing a pair of silver stilettos just my size. I grabbed the small slip of paper resting on top of the heels.

I get to choose what you wear this evening. — N.

I'd been back from the Golden Court for a month, and I'd still failed to go shopping for a gown for the Prince's Choosing. I'd kept thinking that maybe there wouldn't be a Choosing this year. Normally, it would have occurred closer to the Winter Ball. But then the announcement was made, and I still didn't make myself go shopping.

I was thinking of wearing one of the gowns Jay had bought me. I had plenty that I'd still never worn, but they were almost all blue. Traditionally, women who were part of the Prince's Choosing shed their House colors for the night, if they had any, and opted for the emerald green of House Heroux.

I looked down at the beautiful yet simple gown. White was a puzzling choice, but I thought it would look nice. Despite it being the middle of winter, my skin still held a slight tanned glow, perhaps from my days of training with Nik outside at the M.

There were maybe only thirty of us who had come to the age of twenty-four that year. It seemed like a lower number than past years. But, then again, that made sense, considering that birth rates continued to decline with the dying magic until dropping to zero shortly after I was born. There couldn't be more than a year, maybe two, left for the Prince's Choosing if they stuck with

the twenty-four-year-old criteria.

Everyone gathered in the King's great hall. They neatly lined us up, one by one, in the center of the hall. I didn't know why twenty-four was the magic number, anyway. I was placed a little to the right of the center of the line, perhaps twentieth in line. Dressed in my white gown, I stood out like a white lily in a field of green clovers.

The crowd hushed as the High Council took their seats at the elevated table at the front of the room. High Lord Dumont and High Lord Preston filed in first. As the newest members of the High Council, their seats were on opposite ends of the table, the seats were farthest away from the King. They moved and stood behind their chairs, not taking a seat just yet.

Next in line was Luke. He was as handsome as ever. His blue eyes scanned the line of women standing below him, his gaze first finding Karina, who stood toward the front of the line to my left. He gave her a nod, then continued his search until he found me. He gave me a charming sideways smirk. I raised my eyebrows at him as if to say, *here we go*. Luke's stare broke from mine as High Lord Rein appeared at his side.

Next was Jay, wearing a deeply blue tux that made me glad I had not worn one of my blue gowns after all. We would have been nearly matching. The High Council took their seats as the King arrived at his chair in the center of the long table. The King turned to the squire, who had helped us all line up in the middle of the room.

"Squire Daniels, is everyone accounted for?" the King asked.

"Yes, my King."

"Any absences?" the King inquired.

"None, my King."

"Very well then," the King said.

The King scanned the room, and we all looked around with him, looking for the same thing. No one had seen the star of the evening, the Prince of Darkness himself. Nik stepped through the parting crowd as if he had planned the timing. Knowing him, he probably had.

Shit, I thought, pursing my lips. I was matching the Prince. He wore an all-white suit with a plain white shirt underneath. His lapels were the same silken fabric as my dress. I already stuck out like a sore thumb, since I was the only woman not wearing a shade of green. I saw a few heads swivel on each side of me, eyeing me down. Some murmuring started in the crowd again.

“Let’s begin then,” the King declared over the murmuring, taking his seat.

Nik began at my far left, giving the occasional nod but remaining silent. He stopped in front of Karina Dempsey. My gaze immediately shot to Luke, and I saw a tightness around his eyes. It sounded like the Prince said something to Karina, but I was too far away to make out the words. Nik moved on to examining the next few women. I had no doubt that Nik had stopped to speak to Karina purely to fuck with Luke. Ass.

Nik stopped in front of a gorgeous high fae blonde with bright blue eyes. She looked so similar to the woman who had been Nik’s date to the Winter Gala that she could have been a sister or a cousin. Nik twirled a piece of her long blonde hair around his finger before moving on.

He continued to make his way down the line of young women without stopping until he reached me. I stared straight ahead, shoulders back, not looking away from his piercing green eyes.

He stepped into me and whispered so only I could hear, “Princess, you look *absolutely* stunning tonight.”

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. He was probably doing this to fuck with Jay, or even Luke. The truth was that the Prince also looked ravishing in his all-white ensemble. His olive skin popped against the white almost as much as his muscles popped against the pull of the fabric over his shoulders and biceps. He waited confidently for my retort, no doubt expecting something snarky.

“Your suit...*suits* you, my Prince,” I said through a tight-lipped smile. It felt weird calling him by his title. I’d gotten so used to calling him by his first name during our training sessions.

He gave me a feline smile then stepped from me, indicating that playtime was over. I was already beginning to look to my right at who was next in line when I noticed the Prince’s hand extend out to me.

“Alarie Armand,” he spoke my full name solemnly. “You *are* my chosen,” he declared in a booming voice that echoed through the expansive room.

Gasps and murmurs pierced the silence of the crowd. The women on either side of me craned their necks to get a better view of me. My heart beat so hard it felt like it might just punch a hole right through my chest. I stared down at Nik’s waiting hand in shock. Then I trailed my gaze up to meet his incredibly gorgeous face. There was no sign that he was teasing me. He

arched his left eyebrow at me, intimating for me to take his hand.

This was the Prince's Choosing. I didn't have a choice here. I slid my hand into his, and his calloused palm enclosed around my hand. He immediately raised our hands above my head, prompting me into a single, luckily graceful, twirl. My dress circled my feet, and when I came to a stop, we were standing hand-in-hand facing the High Council table.

The King rose and began to clap. And then everyone else joined in. Jay's gaze was icy, bordering on glacial, but that wasn't far from the Lord of Whispers's usual demeanor. Luke was the last to rise from the High Council table. It seemingly took him great effort to stand. He had to push off the table in front of him with both hands, like he had to heft his considerable mass out of his chair. His square jaw was clenched. He reluctantly raised his hands to join in the clapping, but before his two hands came together, Nik and I were gone.

Nik's cool, comforting darkness surrounded us and then we were on the balcony to his room at the M. I felt so numb with shock that I didn't even notice my hand was still enclosed by his. We stood looking out at the ocean, the silence between us filled with the sound of waves crashing onto the shore. He was the first to pull away, breaking me from my daze.

"Congratulations, princess," he said sarcastically, no doubt picking up on the fact that I was less than thrilled.

"Nik..." I tore my eyes away from the whitecaps of the crashing waves. I hesitated, trying to carefully choose words I'd never imagined I'd have to say to the Prince of Valencia. "I can't marry you."

I thought of Cass. How was he going to handle all of this? I didn't even have a chance to spot him in the crowd before we disappeared.

Nik raised his thick eyebrows at me.

"You're awfully quick to turn down something almost any woman in this Kingdom would kill for," he said.

"And you're awfully full of yourself," I retorted.

He sighed. "Who said anything about marriage, Alarie?"

"Well, isn't the whole point of the Choosing? For you to find your betrothed?" I asked.

"That is what people have assumed all of these years," he said, sounding resigned.

"But it's not true?" I asked.

"No," he replied simply.

“Then why do you do the Choosing?” I asked.

“Well, this year, it was just for show,” he said.

“So, I’m not your Chosen then?” I asked, hope filling my words.

If I didn’t know better, I would have thought I saw a flicker of hurt cross the handsome Prince’s face.

“Oh no, you are,” he said with a grim grin. “It’s just that I didn’t need to go through the Choosing today to know that. I’ve known for months now.”

“All of this time you’ve been training me?”

“Almost since the first moment I laid eyes on you,” he confirmed.

I thought of the first night we met. How he’d saved me from being kidnapped. And that look I’d seen in his eyes that night for just a fleeting moment.

I stared at him analytically, the wheels churning in my head. “Why put on a *show* tonight, then?”

“To send a message,” he replied succinctly.

Was he going to make me drag every last little detail out of him, question by question?

I breathed a huff of air out of my nose. “Send a message to who?” I asked.

“Vandros,” he said, again with a clipped answer.

I had no idea what I had gotten myself in the middle of. Now I was being used as some kind of message to the ruthless King of Alancia?

“Nik,” I said, letting my exasperation show. “Will you please just tell me what is going on instead of making me drag it out of you? If being your Chosen doesn’t mean marriage, then what *does* it mean?”

“It means you’re the one I’ve been looking for all this time, Alarie. You’re the girl from the prophecy,” he breathed out.

Alarie

“The prophecy? What prophecy, Nik?” This was growing more surreal by the minute.

“Let’s have a drink,” he suggested.

“Nik! What prophecy?” I almost yelled. I took deep calming breaths to try to stay the panic rising in my chest.

“Princess, I’m going to tell you. But, you know, you aren’t the only one who has something going on tonight. I’ve waited twenty-four years for you. Twenty-four years of having to go through that process and people thinking what they think and hating me for it.”

He was right. I thought about how Luke and almost every single other man in the Kingdom felt about the Choosing and Nik.

“But at least that part is over now. So let’s have a gods damned drink,” he said.

Usually so unflappable, Nik’s momentary transparency pulled me out of my own head.

“A drink would be nice,” I replied simply and grabbed his hand, so used to him traveling us to our next location.

“We can walk,” he said, but he didn’t let go of my hand.

Instead, he led me through his bedroom. His bedroom was smooth and dark and enticing, just like his demeanor. He dropped my hand as we crossed the threshold of an adjacent room I’d never been in before. The sitting room shared the balcony that was attached to his bedroom and had a small bar in the corner.

“I’ll take a scotch—”

“With a twist of lemon. Yes, princess, I know,” he interjected.

I opened my mouth to say something and then closed it, bemused. I needed a drink.

We didn't speak as he made our drinks. I plopped down onto a camel-colored leather lounge, deciding to kick my heels off. I decided to further make myself at home by propping my feet up on the coffee table. My gown was long, and the weight of it pulled its length to the floor, exposing my legs.

Nik came over to me, handing me my drink before he sat next to me. He took a sip of the glass of dark liquor he'd made himself, eyeing my casual demeanor with amusement, but he didn't break the silence.

I took a sip of my scotch, letting it roll over my tongue before swallowing, and then, despite my extensive education on the significance of silence, I spoke first.

"The prophecy—"

"Is known to few," he interjected.

"It's real?" I asked skeptically. I'd heard of such powers, but it seemed like something made up or exaggerated.

"Rarely. But in this instance..." he paused, enjoying another taste of his drink. "It is very real."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I have lived by it, princess. Do I strike you as a frivolous man? One overtaken by the whims of others?" he asked.

His thick, dark brows were furrowed into an intense, challenging stare.

"No," I admitted quietly.

Another minute passed in silence.

"What does this prophecy say?" I asked.

I almost expected him to pull some old tomb out of his invisible closet of darkness and start reading. But he didn't. He began to recite the prophecy from memory.

"She will be of high fae and lesser fae, of north and south, and of light and darkness. She *alone* shall have the power to save the magic. But her star will fade and the magic of all along with her unless she is found in her twenty-fourth year by he who shall be King, the first of his name of mixed birth. His mark upon her and her magic shall give her the strength to save the lives and magic of all..." he recited, trailing off.

"Is that all of it? Say it again. Please," I asked intently.

He obliged, repeating the words once more in the same calm cadence.

"But, Nik, how could you possibly think that is me? I'm a mixed fae. But north and south? I don't know what that means, but I'm not from the north. I've never had anything to do with the north. And I won't even get into

the light and darkness part. No one can have powers of light and darkness, Nik.”

Except maybe the King of Alancia, according to Jay.

“How do you know you aren’t from the north?” he asked, clearly placating me.

“I think I’d know if I’d lived in the north before.”

“Your mother was raised south of the border wall?” he asked.

“Yes, her entire life,” I said, relieved he was beginning to understand.

“And your father?” When he asked this question, it was equally clear that he was challenging me.

“He was from south of the border wall as well,” I responded over confidently.

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “And you know that for certain, princess?”

* * * *

My mother answered her door on the second knock. Her fiery red hair shone brightly in the light of her foyer.

“Mandy love,” she greeted me with her new bubbly personality, the one that couldn’t be further from who I grew up with.

“Hi, Mom,” I said resigned.

My mother eyed Nik suspiciously.

“Why are you so dressed up?” she asked, taking in the full-length silken gown I still wore from the Choosing. “Where’s Cass?” she asked loyally.

“Mom, *please*. I’ve had such a long day already. Can we just get inside?” I pleaded.

We stepped through the front door, and my mother pointed us toward the living room. She went to the kitchen, grabbed a pitcher of freshly made lemonade, then handed glasses to Nik and me. She filled Nik’s glass first, continuing to eye him with open suspicion.

I inhaled a deep breath, preparing myself.

“Mom, this is Nik. Prince Nikolas Heroux,” I said.

She spilled a little lemonade on Nik’s pants.

“It’s fine,” he assured her, wiping it off.

My mother quickly regained her composure. “Welcome to my home, my Prince. And what brings you two to my door this evening?” she asked coolly.

“Ms. Armand, I think it’s best that Alarie here does the talking for us. In fact”—he looked around—“do you mind if I check out your garden?” he asked, already rising from the over-large recliner.

My mom shook her head, gesturing to the door to her backyard.

My eyes followed Nik’s large frame until he disappeared behind the door. He could have traveled out there. He could have traveled back to the M and just came back for me later. He was being surprisingly...normal.

“Well, Mandy, why is the Prince of Valencia wandering around in my backyard?” my mother asked in a tone that faintly reminded me of being scolded as a child.

I cut my eyes to the windows and saw Nik, the Prince of Darkness himself, eyeing my mother’s daisies with interest.

“Is Jim around?” I asked, not answering her question.

“No, he’s in town picking up a few things for us to have a late dinner. But he should be back in maybe thirty minutes or so,” she answered.

“Good, because I need to talk to you. I...” I hesitated. “I need to talk to you about my father.”

The new cheeriness of my mother’s personality drained away, replaced by the distant coolness I’d grown up with.

“There’s nothing to say about your father, Mand. He was here for a night and then he was gone. And that was a long time ago,” she said dismissively.

She finished filling my glass of lemonade and sat down across from me. I took a sip. It was good, tart and sweet but not too sweet.

“And he was a soldier?” I asked.

“Yes,” my mother responded, making it clear she was not going to facilitate this conversation in any way. “Mandy, why are you asking these questions?”

“It’s *really* important, Mom.”

Her eyes cut to the backyard, and I looked too. Nik leaned down and smelled a white hydrangea. It would have been hilarious to see the Prince of Darkness doing something so mundane, if not for the circumstances that brought us there.

“He was a soldier for *Valencia*, Mom?”

She looked at me analytically.

“Mom, for Valencia, right?” There was a note of pleading in my voice. “He wasn’t a soldier for the north. Mom, tell me he wasn’t from Alancia.”

“Your father was a good soldier and a good man, Mand. And he was a soldier...*for Alancia.*”

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to swallow my heart, which had jumped into my throat. *It was true. Everything Nik said was true.*

My mother thought I was taking the news rather hard. She couldn't understand the implication of what she had just confirmed.

“I wrote to him, you know. I told him I was pregnant and...” my mother paused, and I saw a rare showing of vulnerability on her pretty face. “And he wrote back. He promised he would come to us after the war and...” A single tear rolled down my mother's cheek. “He was happy to start a family.” My mother gathered herself, resuming a stoic demeanor. “But then the wall went up, and I never heard from him again.”

“Why didn't you tell me before, Mom?” I whispered.

“It was safer for you not to know, baby girl. Safer for both of us. When you were born, the sentiment toward Alancians was not friendly. Same as it is today, in fact. But why does this matter, Mand? Why are you asking this now with the Prince here?”

Nik traveled right next to my side. My mom jumped, startled by his sudden appearance. He reached his hand out to me.

“Did you find the answer you were looking for, princess?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

I nodded.

“We'll talk later, Mom,” I said, rising from the couch.

I took Nik's hand. He pulled me off the couch and into his body, and we disappeared from my mother's sight. To my surprise, Nik took me back to my room at House Rein instead of back to the M.

When I saw my bed, I realized just how badly I wanted to crawl beneath the covers and sleep. I wanted to get lost in its comfort and wake up to only realize that this entire day had been one long, crazy dream. I was still wearing my gown from the Choosing ceremony and my heels. Without saying anything I walked over to the bench at the end of my bed and sat down. I kicked off my shoes and stared into the wall across from me.

After a while, Nik came and sat next to me. The bench was small, and his thigh touched mine. I was a little surprised to still find him there. We had been so silent for so long, I would have expected him to have traveled away.

I ran over the words of the prophecy over and over again in my head.

“Nik,” I finally said, breaking our silence.

“It’s you, Alarie,” he said, anticipating what I was going to say.

“But it can’t be. Even if I am mixed fae and am ‘of the north and south,’ there is still that last part. Whatever power I have, I do not have powers of both light and darkness,” I said.

All fae had some small amount of magic. That was why we were immortal... or were immortal. So, I knew I had some kind of magic. And I had to admit that I’ve exhibited some limited shielding abilities. Those powers would likely have a light-based affinity. But unparalleled powers of light and darkness known thus far only to the King of Alancia? I just couldn’t have that kind of power.

“You do, princess,” he replied, simply staring at the wall with me.

“You can’t know that,” I objected.

“But I do,” he said.

“How?” I whispered.

“You know your shielding ability is based in light. You should be able to feel it. But I can feel the powers of darkness lurking inside of you,” he replied.

“How can you feel what powers I have, Nik? That’s absurd,” I objected.

“Dark calls to dark, princess. And before you fight me on this, let me just ask you, how does my darkness feel to you? When I take you into the space between and you are consumed by my shadows, how does it feel?”

I thought about his question, tearing my eyes from the blank wall and looking over at him. His hair was rumpled from running his hands through it.

“Well, that one time, when I didn’t let you touch me, it felt turbulent. I felt like I couldn’t control what I was doing, and it made me feel a little shaken up,” I said.

He turned toward me and took my hand in his, rubbing his rough palm over the top of my smooth skin. His skin was more olive-toned than my golden hue.

“And when you let me touch you?” he pried.

His shadows of darkness began to creep out of the alcove of his body. Tendrils of black nothingness danced at our feet, moving up my legs. I closed my eyes, embracing the darkness enveloping me, and thought about how I felt.

“It feels...cool but not cold. Silent but comforting. Almost inviting, like it wants me to stay.” I thought of my bed again. I felt so drained. “I feel like I could pull a blanket of the shadows up to my chin and just sleep for hours,” I

finished, opening my eyes.

We were surrounded by pitch black total darkness. His deep green eyes tethered my existence in the vast sea of nothingness.

“No one without powers of darkness would say what you just said. They could not feel the way you feel right now, princess.”

“And what if I say that I don’t care? That I don’t want to be a part of whatever this is with you anymore?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

He dismissed the shadows surrounding us, and we were once again in my room. He dropped my hand and walked toward my balcony.

“It’s not just you that the prophecy is about. It’s me, too. I’m the King the prophecy foretold. I’m just as in this as you are,” he said.

I’d run the words of the prophecy through my head over and over again. I’d assumed, I guess without really realizing it, that the other part of the prophecy had been about Nik.

“Whatever you may feel, or not feel, about me, Alarie, it doesn’t matter. Because this isn’t about *us*. This is not about me, and this isn’t about you. This is about what prophecy has foretold will save our people and our magic from dying. Are you willing to turn your back on *them*? Are you willing to sit by and let everything we are fade into nothing?” he growled in his deep voice.

“Who else knows?” I asked quietly.

“Those on the High Council who did not already know were told about the prophecy before the Choosing,” he answered.

“Can no one else know?” I asked, trying to keep the pleading from my voice. I could already feel the loneliness of my destiny weighing on me.

“The fewer people who know, the better. The more they know, the more they are put at risk of being used by Vandro,” he said.

And then, as if he had predicted my next question, he said, “Cass cannot know.”

“Why?” I pushed. I could see the reason in keeping someone like my mother in the dark for her protection, but Cass didn’t need my protection. “He is Commander of the Northern Forces. He has sacrificed more for this war than perhaps any single person in this Kingdom has,” I said, defensively.

“My concern is not for the Commander’s loyalty to our cause. It is his loyalty to *you* that is the issue. He loves you. He loves you so much that there is no way he cannot let it taint his mission in this war, which, as you know, is vital. You are a tool in this war, Alarie. The most important one there is.

Prophecy says you will save the magic and our people, and it is my duty to do whatever I need to do to make that happen.”

“It would be painful for...*someone* who cares for you to see you in such a light and would be perhaps impossible for someone like the Commander who loves you. I know already that he does not care for our training sessions, although he has said nothing. What do you think he would do if I needed you on the front lines of the battlefield with me? Do you think he would be able to prioritize anything above you?”

Nik’s words felt like he had raised his hand and slapped me on one cheek and then turned my face and slapped the other. Although I already knew it to be true, the reminder that the Prince viewed me as nothing more than a tool served as a reminder of how truly alone I would be in this mission.

And then there was the painstaking realization that Nik was right about Cass. Cass had not said the words yet, but I knew he loved me. And his love for me *would* taint his vision of what needed to be done as Commander. The stakes were too high. For Cass because he’d worked his entire life to become Commander. I would not let him jeopardize his future for me. And for all of Valencia, if Nik and I failed at our mission.

Nik left me with my thoughts, disappearing into his darkness once more.

Alarie

Cass sat in his chair across from me at the smaller dining room table adjacent to my kitchen. For better or worse, everyone had given me the night to myself following the Choosing. I found Cass at my front door this morning, and after giving me a quick kiss, he moved into the kitchen and prepared a hearty breakfast for me.

I picked at the food remaining on my plate, which was most of it. I'd been unable to find much of an appetite. We had eaten in near silence.

"Let's talk about it, Mand," Cass said.

I pursed my lips, then licked them while I thought of where to start.

"Well, it's not as bad as you probably think, Cass. The Choosing isn't what everyone thinks it is," I said.

Cass remained patiently silent, waiting for me to find my words. That was one of the things I loved about him. He was always so kind and considerate when it came to my needs.

"I don't have to marry the Prince or even date him," I said.

Despite his calm demeanor, I saw him release the tension he'd held in his fist resting on the tabletop. He reached his hand out, taking mine.

"It's... well, I actually can't tell you everything," I continued.

I could tell by his facial expression that he was more willing than I'd been to accept this limitation on his knowledge. *Just like the good soldier he was.*

"It has to do with the powers that Nik and you all think I have. I have to figure out how to use them. They think that I may be able to really help with the state of our magic and maybe even the conflict with Alancia," I explained generically.

"Are you okay with playing that kind of role?" he asked.

“I...I have to be. This is something I have to do,” I said resolutely.

After my conversation with Nik the night before, one thing I knew for certain was that I was not going to run away from this, not if there was a real possibility I could help.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, Mand. We could move to the Golden Court tomorrow. We could leave it all behind us,” he promised.

Cass tugged at my hand, pulling me towards him. I rose from my chair and took the few steps that stood between us. I nestled myself between his legs, remaining standing and holding his head in my hands. Despite his brutish intellect and skills at bloodshed, Cass was really quite sweet in a way that even at my worst moments, I was careful not to crush.

He wrapped his strong, muscled arms around me, giving me a hug I didn’t know I needed. I found myself running my hands through his hair, then moved to sit on his lap and wrap my legs around him as he remained seated. Straddling him, I felt his hands caress my back. I moved against him, then wrapped my mouth around the nape of his neck and bite it playfully.

He stiffened.

I pushed through, trying to eliminate every inch of distance between my body and his, as I went to press my mouth to his. He turned his head to the side, dodging my advances even as I felt him grow hard underneath me.

“Mandy, you’re upset,” he said.

“Then make me feel better,” I purred.

I tried not to think of how if I were in Lord Vitruvian’s manor, he would have recognized the need welling up inside of me and would have wrapped his strong hands around my waist and placed me in his lap, without me needing to ask. Lord Vitruvian would have kissed and stroked me and demanded I come for him until I no longer dwelled on what troubled me.

Pushing all thoughts of Lord Vitruvian out of my mind, I again began to move against the hardness I felt beneath me despite his protests.

“Mand, hey. Talk to me,” he said, with a note of disapproval.

I let the straps of my top fall down to expose my breasts.

“Please,” I breathed, trying to make him understand that I wanted this, needed it.

I rested my mouth on his mouth as I continued to straddle him, making him all too aware of where our bodies connected. He gave in, at last.

“Take them off,” he ordered, his eyes narrowing with his need.

I stood from his lap, removing my tiny thong, as he worked to loose himself from his pants. I went back to his lap, my skirt hiked to my torso. I immediately reached to put him inside of me, and despite little build up, he slid into me, finding me tight but ready.

I rocked myself on top of his lap with him sheathed inside of me, and he lowered his head to my breasts. He took one, then the other breast in his mouth, expertly working his tongue against me. I had finally overcome his last remaining doubts and convinced him that I really did want this. He grabbed me by the chin, his rough fingers turning my head toward his.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

He set his mouth over mine, exploring my mouth with his tongue. I broke away from the kiss, leaning back to bury him further within myself, and then continued to ride him. I spasmed upon him, able to escape into my singular moment of joy.

Having fully awoken Cass’s interest, I could tell he was ready for something rougher than the lovemaking we had just completed to my satisfaction.

“Fuck me, Cass. From behind,” I murmured in his ear.

He growled. His favorite position. He did not require convincing. But he did require something sturdier than the chair we sat in. He carried me to my bedroom.

* * * *

After our lovemaking, I lay on my back in my bed next to Cass, my hand outstretched to his so that just our fingertips touched.

“I love you, Cass,” I whispered quietly. I’d selfishly held onto those words for far too long. I should have given them to him sooner.

He gripped my hand, intertwining his hand with my own.

“I know you do, Mandy. I love you, too,” he replied sweetly.

I couldn’t help but wonder why now, of all the times, he had decided to finally tell me that he loved me for the first time. I had seen the love in his eyes a hundred times before. I had felt the words on the tip of his tongue, but he had never spoken them out loud to me.

“Why didn’t you say it before?” I asked.

“Because I knew you weren’t ready to say it back,” he replied so quickly that his words felt like a pinprick to the happiness I’d felt at finally admitting

our true feelings. I felt a lump rising in my throat.

“Why say it now, Cass?” I asked softly.

“Because I knew if I didn’t say it, if I didn’t tell you how much I love you, Mandy, I would regret it every day for the rest of my immortal life. I’d regret it even though I know it’s not going to change what you have to say next,” he said.

It felt like someone had sunk a dagger into my heart.

“I can’t be the person you want me to be,” I said, feeling small.

When Cass looked at me, he looked at me like I was everything he had ever dreamed of incarnate. But the picture he had of me in his head... I wasn’t that person anymore, if I ever was. I couldn’t fulfill his dreams when I was still trying to figure out what my own were.

“You are already everything I’ve ever wanted,” he responded simply.

The dagger in my heart turned viciously, digging deeper.

“I can’t go to the Golden Court, Cass,” I said, almost pleading for him to understand. “Not now. Probably not any time soon. I have things I have to do here at the High Court and the M. Things I can’t walk away from.”

He wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me into his impossibly large, hard body. I felt so safe and comfortable in his embrace.

“I know,” he said, too understanding.

He gently grasped my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pushing my gaze to his. The thread of gold in his eyes blazed.

“I hope he makes you happy,” he said sincerely. “I would have gladly spent the rest of my life trying, but I know it’s not me you want.”

The dagger in my heart viciously jerked upward, severing my heart in two.

“Who, Cass?” I asked. “Nik? I told you, that’s not what the Choosing meant. It’s not like that.”

“It’s okay, Mandy,” he said firmly. “You deserve to be happy. I want you to be happy.”

Tears welled in my eyes. I felt like someone was squeezing the air out of my lungs. I started to second-guess myself. If I was making the right decision, then why did it hurt so much?

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

He rolled away from me. The loss of the heat of his body felt like the loss of a limb. He started getting dressed.

“I’ll go north. They need me there,” he said.

His words cut through me even, though I knew he hadn't meant them to. His people at the Golden Court needed him. *I didn't.*

"I don't know how to live without you," I said pathetically.

It was an unfair thing for me to say. I was the one breaking up with him.

"Yes, you do. You are too damn tough to let something like this stop you," he said with a smile that would have broken my heart if it weren't already split in two.

I crawled to the other side of the bed toward him, holding the sheet to my chest as I rose to my knees to meet him. He circled me in his arms, one hand going to the nape of my neck, the other to my ass, pressing me into the hard line of his body. He leaned his head down and he kissed me. I opened my mouth to his, and our tongues took turns exploring each other's mouths. He kissed me so deeply it felt like he was consuming every breath of air I tried to take.

He kissed me like he would never kiss me again, like he would never see me again, like it was the last kiss he would ever have in his life. It tasted like goodbye, and tears welled in my eyes, causing my throat to constrict. I sucked in a breath, trying to stifle a sob, and breathed in the warmth of his breath. And then he broke away from me.

"See you next time, Mand," he promised.

His wings, larger than life, appeared behind him, and he took off into the air, thankfully, before I spilled my first tear.

Alarie

Nik popped into existence on my balcony at his usual time. There was still plenty of daylight left in the afternoon sky. He trailed his eyes up my body and ended his journey by quirking a single, dark brow at me. I was standing there like a good girl in my House Heroux greens, waiting for him.

“You ready for this, princess?” he said, offering me his hand.

I raised my head in a single nod of affirmation and took his hand. For the moments we were in between here and there, I tried to focus on the darkness surrounding us. I tried to connect with it. The shadows felt open to the possibility of accepting me as one of their own, but I didn’t know how to accept that willingness. And then we were in the training center above Nik’s room at the M. The room was as quiet and sterile as ever, waiting for my sweat and grunts of exhaustion.

There was a feeling of intentionality shared between Nik and me that had not been there before. I couldn’t imagine how I had powers that could stop the fae and the magic from dying. But if there was even a possibility that the prophecy was true and that I was the girl in that prophecy, then I at least had to try. Nik believed that I was, and I had to believe that I was, too. Otherwise, I had given up my life with Cass for nothing. And that was unbearable to imagine.

We started with a hand-to-hand warm up, which essentially consisted of Nik prompting me to kick, punch, and hit him in any and every way I could manage. He easily danced around, dodged, or accepted my blows until my breathing was labored. My blood was pumping, and my resolute numbness morphed into a heated determination. I knew this had been Nik’s goal—to bring me out of my reverie. And it worked.

I went in for a kick to the side of his ribs, and he caught me by my calf and then yanked my other leg out from underneath me. I landed on the ground on my back with a thud that knocked the breath from my lungs. He followed through with his attack, allowing his body to fall on top of mine. He pinned me to the ground with the weight of his body.

I had already worked up a sweat, but this close, I noticed that he still smelled pleasantly fresh, like he had just gotten ready for the day.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, his voice deep and low.

We were so close he barely had to whisper his question. His question took me by surprise. *Did I trust Nik?* I didn’t know if I would ever really trust anyone *completely*, except maybe Luke. But I did trust that Nik wanted what was best for the future of the Kingdom he would one day rule over. And I also believe that Nik thought that I was pivotal to that future. So, I decided, yes, I trusted that Nik and I had the same goals. And that was good enough for me for now. Nik stared unflinchingly into my eyes as I went through this analysis.

“Yes,” I replied.

I knew he sensed my unspoken doubts, but I had given him what he needed. He wrapped his arm around the back of my waist and the training room around us disappeared. I was surrounded in the complete darkness of Nik’s shadows that usually accompany our traveling. I’d known instinctively that this was where he would take me. He rotated us to where we were vertical, but our bodies were still pressed together. There wasn’t really a ground beneath us, but he took a step back from me, giving me a little space and moving his hand to my hip. I wanted him to keep touching me. I knew how it felt when we were traveling without his touch, and I didn’t want to feel that again.

Plus, it was unsettling to feel like I was standing in nothingness. It was not the darkness or the shadows that whipped and whirled around us that was off putting. It was the lack of the earth beneath our feet or any other structure tethering us down that I found disturbing. I imagined that this would be what it felt like to float around in outer space, but without the moon or the stars to guide me.

If he let go of me, would I just float away from him? At that thought, I took an involuntary step closer to him. We’d never stayed in this space between for more than the few moments it took to travel. I didn’t know if this was the space or somewhere different altogether from the darkness that came

with his shadows that sometimes surrounded me.

“What is this place? *Where* is this place?” I asked quietly. I was proud that my voice was steady and did not betray any of the uneasiness I felt.

“It’s the inbetween. It’s everywhere and nowhere all at once. It is light, and it is darkness,” he said matter-of-factly, as if he had thought of the answer to my very questions many times.

“How can this”—I gestured to the vast blackness encompassing us—“be light?” I asked. I was beginning to get used to the feeling of not having a ground beneath my feet.

“What is darkness, princess, but the absence of light? What is light but the absence of darkness? One cannot exist without the other,” he replied.

Impressed at the thoughtfulness of his answers, I tilted my head, looking up at his handsome dark features. I’d seen many sides of the Prince, but the waxing philosopher was new and a little surprising.

“And why did you take me here?” I asked.

“This is where my powers of darkness feel most balanced. I figured if you could learn to be comfortable here, to embrace and connect with the darkness, then maybe you would connect to your powers based in darkness,” he explained.

“And how do I do that, Nik?” I questioned earnestly.

His big hand still rested on my waist, his thumb resting against the curvature of my hipbone and the rest of his strong fingers wrapping around me.

“Feed it your pain,” he said, digging his fingers into my skin. “Better yet, give it your pleasure,” he suggested, placing his other hand on my waist and tugging me a little closer to the front of his body.

When I didn’t resist, little tendrils of shadows began to seductively dance up my ankles, then wrap around my calves. They skillfully whipped and flicked against my skin with a precision that promised so much more. I got the feeling that these masterful little tendrils could assist me in feeding either pain or pleasure to the darkness, although their current pursuit felt like pleasure.

“Nik,” I panted as the shadows threatened to advance up my thighs and make good on their promises. Their progress halted at my words.

“Princess,” Nik cooed what was once my least favorite name. “I know you are hurting. Let me do this for you. Let me take away your pain and replace it with pleasure.”

My body wanted me to say yes. My heartache was all-consuming, but there was a competing ache building between my thighs that greedily wanted to find out what reprieve the shadows had to offer. I leaned into his embrace until there was no longer any space between the front of our bodies.

“That’s right,” he purred, and his shadows once again advanced up past my knees to my inner thighs. “I’ve tried everything with you, to try to break you free of whatever it is that is holding your powers back. Everything but *this*.”

As he lowered his face to mine, I thought of how irresistible his lips looked. But then his words registered with me. I pushed myself off his firm chest, keeping his face away from mine. He didn’t want me. He only cared about my magic. I didn’t want to do *this* with someone who viewed me as nothing more than a tool or weapon.

“Is this the only way, Nik?” I asked quietly. “Is this what the prophecy meant by you having to make your ‘mark’ on me?”

I had thought about the words of the prophecy over and over again. *His mark upon her and her magic shall give her the strength to save the lives and magic of all.*

“Is there no other way for us to break my magic free?”

I didn’t want to be used, but if it was the only way and I could save it all, I would find a way to be okay with it. The darkness around us was replaced with the afternoon sky so quickly that I brought my arms up to shield my eyes. I was on the ground back at the M by myself, and Nik was standing nearby, cool and collected. I shook my head, leaning up on my hands, and trying to adjust to the quick, disorientating change of scenery.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think that sex is the *only* way. I just think that when you are having sex is one of the only times you actually let your guard down enough to get in touch with your abilities.”

“Don’t act like you know me, Nik. Not like that,” I bit back.

I was angry that my body was still burning with desire for his touch. I was angry that he was probably right. That was probably why nothing had ever happened to Stefan’s magic while I was with him. I had never let my guard down while I was with Stefan. I had never even stayed the night at his place because something always felt out of place with him.

“I think we can be done with lessons today, princess, yeah?”

He walked over to me, standing above me, looking as magnificent in the daylight as he did in the dark. He offered me his hand and pulled me to his

side. His touch was light and respectful. He just barely gripped my waist as we disappeared in darkness once more.

Alarie

With Cass gone, our group of six was now just five—Luke, Karina, Rhett, James, and me. I spent my days training, but my nights were lonely. My heart ached for Cass so viscerally that I often spent my hours in bed tossing and turning, trying unsuccessfully to forget the comfort I had once known wrapped in his muscled arms and cocooned by his gigantic wings.

It wasn't all bad, though. Since my breakup with Cass, it felt like Karina and James had started to make an effort to be my friends, which was nice. We'd always been friendly, but now they invited me to hang out even when Luke and Rhett were not around. I had my suspicions that their recent friendliness was, at least in part, spawned by their curiosity regarding Nik and me being his Chosen.

It was clear that everyone assumed my breakup with Cass had something to do with Nik. But I couldn't tell anyone about the prophecy or the role I was supposed to play. Luke knew the truth about the prophecy. The entire High Council knew. But no one else could know. So, I just had to go on letting everyone believe whatever they wanted to believe about me and Nik.

"Luke, throw me that blanket, will ya?" I asked.

The five of us sat in a sitting room at Luke's house. We'd opted for a low-key night—dinner at the High Court, followed by drinks and cards at Luke's. Luke grabbed the blanket on his end of the lounge, throwing it over me and tucking the blanket under my legs as he scooped my feet up so that my legs rested in his lap.

"Who's ready to lose?" Luke chirped, beginning to hand out cards.

After just two short hands, Karina popped up out of her seat like it was made of hot coals. "I think I'm going to bed."

Luke looked over at Karina, his brows furrowed.

“Okay,” he responded flatly. “I’ll walk you over.”

Karina was staying in a guest house adjacent to his manor.

“No, you look comfortable, Luke. You can just stay right where you’re at,” she snipped, looking pointedly at my legs slung across his lap.

I noticed Karina’s glance and jumped like I’d been poked with the sharp end of a stick. I quickly shifted to move my legs off of Luke, but he stilled my movement. He took his time delicately picking up my feet and placing them gently on the couch. Then he stood and walked over next to Karina.

I had convinced myself that my prior relationship with Luke had escaped Karina’s attention. I felt embarrassed that I had unknowingly acted in a manner that had hurt Karina’s feelings so soon after she had gone out of her way to be nice to me. I had grown so blind to the innate intimacy in the way Luke and I interacted with each other. I wondered if Cass had felt the same way as Karina.

“I’ll walk you back,” Luke repeated firmly.

We heard Karina burst into tears before she and Luke were out of sight. Rhett gave me an indifferent smirk.

“I should probably get out of here,” I said, stating the obvious.

“I think I better go check on Karina,” James said.

Rhett nodded, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Night, Alarie,” James said with a small smile. I appreciated that she was trying not to choose sides.

“Al, I’ll walk with you,” Rhett said, grabbing my arm and tucking it in his elbow as we began to walk back to House Rein.

I was already in bed reading when I heard a knock on my front door. I had no idea who it could possibly be. Nik didn’t knock. He just appeared whenever and wherever he wanted, so it couldn’t be him.

I opened the door in my golden silk nightgown. He started at my bare feet, moving his gaze up my tanned legs until he focused on the hem of my silk slip. I blinked, and his hands were buried in my hair, pulling my head back to feed on my mouth. He kissed me deeply before pulling away.

“*Luke*,” I managed to gasp. “What are you—”

“If I’m going to be accused of being with you, then I’m going to fucking

be with you,” he said, seething with anger. “Tell me you don’t want this, Al, and I’ll walk away like this never happened,” he offered, his arms tensing around me.

I looked up into his dazzling blue eyes, his hunger for me evident. But I knew he meant it. He would respect my wishes and walk away if that’s what I wanted, and we would go back to being just friends.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling his mouth back to mine. Luke picked me up, wrapping my legs around him. I squeezed my legs around him. We fell onto the lounge outside my foyer, Luke’s hulking body pressed down onto me. My hands moved to his belt as his hands pushed the straps of my nightgown off my shoulders, revealing my breasts. His hands fumbled with his pants until he freed himself. I loosened my legs around him just enough for him to angle at my opening. In a matter of seconds, he went from knocking on my front door to pushing my panties to the side. He slid into me, finding me more than ready for him.

“*Luke*. Oh my gods. *Yes*,” I moaned, moving against him.

It was like I had been starving for him but had not even realized I had been hungry until the very moment he crossed my threshold. And now I was ravenous. I wrapped my arms around his back, digging my fingers into his skin.

“I missed this, Al. I missed *you*,” he murmured against my neck, as he moved in and out of me. “It hurt when I couldn’t be with you,” he whispered.

His words washed over me, mirroring my own thoughts.

“Yes, Luke. Yes,” I chanted, rocking my hips in sync with his thrusts.

I felt the familiar feel of his magic working its way over and through my body, awakening a part of me that had lain dormant during our time apart. I was glowing underneath his touch. The tingling of his light on my skin progressed to a humming and then a throbbing. I was moments away from losing myself in him.

“Come with me, Luke,” I urged, tightening my legs around him, burying him deeper inside of me. I wanted to feel the unity of us crossing our finish lines together.

He plunged into me, grabbing one of my legs and pushing it wide and up to my chest so he could bury himself in the deepest part of my center. I angled my hips, taking him into me until he could go no farther. The glow around us was so bright that I closed my eyes and gave into the pleasure pulsing through me. My orgasm coursed through my body and dragged on as

Luke thrust his way to his own release, filling me.

Luke carried me to bed at some point that night. It was late at night, turning into morning. I was lying in the crook of his body, playfully lacing my fingers through his, when he finally spoke. I felt him take in a big breath, his chest expanding.

“What are we going to do, Al?”

“I don’t know,” I said, intertwining my fingers with his and laying our hands on his chest. “Everything else feels so complicated. But this,” I said, indicating our intertwined bodies, “just feels easy. It’s always been easy with you, Luke.”

He brought my hand to his mouth and lightly kissed the back of it.

“So then be with me,” he said, simply.

“Luke,” I groaned.

That wasn’t that easy.

“Be with me, Al,” he said again, more earnestly.

“Your mother will lose her fucking mind if you break it off with Karina,” I protested.

“That’s her problem,” he said, leaning up on one elbow and hovering over me.

“I—are you serious, Luke?” I asked.

We had never been together in the way he was suggesting. We had never even discussed it. I’d never even considered it as a possibility.

“I want you, Al. I want *us*,” he said, his blue eyes piercing me with his need.

I remembered he had said almost that exact same thing to me moments before he had crossed my threshold for the first time.

As if reading my mind, he said, “It’s always been you. Just you.”

The thought of Cass ran through me like I had been plunged into an ice bath. A pang of pain radiated through my body every time I so much as thought his name.

But I couldn’t feel bad about being with Luke. Luke had always been a part of me. It was like every relationship I had ever been in since Jay had a Luke exception—I could be with someone else as long as they were okay with the fact that Luke was mine and I was his. I couldn’t feel bad about Luke, because being with Luke, in any capacity, had always felt right.

Plus, Luke knew about the prophecy. If I was with him, I wouldn’t have to be alone in my duty any longer.

Luke waited with bated breath.

“Okay,” I said.

He still waited, hovering over me.

“Yes, Luke!” I said with more enthusiasm.

He smiled down at me, and the happiness on his face took my breath away.

I awoke to the smell of bacon. With my eyes still closed, I reached my hand out to the other side of the large bed, finding it empty. Wondering where Luke had gone off to, I rolled out of bed, finding his undershirt from the night before and throwing it on as I walked out of my room, following the smell of breakfast.

I heard his voice before I saw him. I walked into the kitchen to the sight of Luke’s tanned, muscled back. He was humming a pleasant tune that I knew but couldn’t name. He must have turned the servants away that morning and was making breakfast for us himself.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that it’s dangerous to cook without a shirt?” I teased.

He half-turned away from the pan that had his attention, granting me one of his easy smiles that regularly made my heart skip a beat. I stopped by the chair I meant to sit in, unable to look away from Luke’s blue eyes.

“And miss that look on your face? I’ll risk the burns,” Luke replied, lifting an eyebrow at me before turning back to the stovetop.

His cockiness broke me from my trance.

“For bacon, I’ll let you risk the burns too. Where’s the coffee?”

Luke laughed, moving to the counter to pour me a cup of coffee that was much needed after our late, mostly sleepless night. He handed me the mug, and I moved to touch him, but he danced away, back to his cooking, before I could ensnare him. I just wanted to run my hands across his chest, perhaps down his abs, maybe see if he was wearing boxers under those shorts.

Thwarted, I collapsed into a chair with my cup and took a moment to inhale the scent of the coffee before taking my first sip. Luke started singing and humming again. He was making me pancakes now. I could smell the sweetness of the batter in the air and...*blueberries*.

I sunk further into the wingback chair, wrapping both of my hands around my warm mug. Luke’s voice and the aroma of the coffee melded

together. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Tension I didn't even know was there lifted from my shoulders before the relief spread through my chest. After my breakup with Cass, I'd felt perpetually drained, like the act of getting up and doing my everyday activities was too much. But in this moment, I finally found comfort. Everything just felt like it was finally going to be okay. When I was with Luke, I...

Fuck.

I took another deep breath, this time trying to calm the sudden spike of adrenaline I felt from my realization that I was hopelessly in love with my best friend. I knew I wanted Luke, that I loved him. I knew he loved me, too. But being *in love* was completely different. I felt guilty about realizing this so soon after Cass. I loved Cass. How could I be *in love* with Luke so soon? Unless I'd been in love with Luke all this time? What if Luke didn't feel quite as deeply as I did?

Luke came to the table, placing plates overflowing with food in front of me. I gave him an analytical look, like I could look through him and see the answers to my questions. He sat next to me and then pulled my chair to him until our legs were touching under the table. He misread the intensity of my gaze for something else.

"Eat your food before you start some shit I have to finish," he quipped.

I gave him a small smile, huffing out a breath, as I picked up a fork.

I was overthinking things. It just didn't matter as long as I had Luke by my side.

Alarie

Luke left me in a daze from a combination of a full belly, a lack of sleep, and a racing mind. I made my way into my room, and immediately looked at my bed, thinking of crawling back into it and taking a nap. But then something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. That's when I saw a shadow move on my balcony.

"Nik? What are you doing out there?" I called out.

There was no answer. But I definitely saw something or someone move on my balcony.

"Nik, come on. Don't jump out and scare me. I'm too tired for this today," I said, exasperated.

He stepped out of the darkness of my balcony and into my bedroom. He was tall, but not as tall or as bulky as Nik, I could see that now. *But his eyes.* They were the same eerily clear, piercing blue-gray eyes...

I took an involuntary step back, almost stumbling, stunned.

"Good evening, little star," he said nonchalantly, continuing to stroll toward me.

Little star. Those two little words confirmed it. I felt like I'd been sucker punched in the gut.

"What's the matter? Don't you recognize me?" he teased, pretending that his feelings were hurt. He bowed slightly and took my hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing it softly as he looked at me up through his eyebrows. Just like he did the first time I met him.

"I... How? You're dead." I whispered in disbelief.

"I'm quite well. But your concern is touching," he mocked.

“Joffrey, on the other hand... You are quite right about him. He is dead. You see, I was walking around in Joffrey when we first met.”

I had no idea how that was possible and what he could possibly mean by that. *Is he suggesting that he can just walk around in other people’s bodies?*

“H-h-how?” I stuttered in disbelief. “How are you here?”

“With some difficulty, I must admit. You are better protected than, I think, even you know. You *reek* of his magic, by the way,” he said, leaning into me and smelling my skin. He crinkled his nose in distaste.

“Whose magic?” I asked.

“Your little Lord of Light. In fact, your magic feels like...” His eyes narrowed like he’d discovered something that displeased him.

“I thought you were with the warrior? I saw you with him at the Golden Court,” the strange man said.

I had not seen anyone who looked like this man at the Golden Court.

“No matter,” the man said, shrugging off my non-response. “It’s good that you like warriors, though. I like him. I really do,” he said.

“Why are you here?” I asked, looking around my room, towards my door.

It didn’t feel like last time. It didn’t feel like he was going to kidnap me. Surely, he would not have taken the time to speak with me first if that was what he intended.

“*I’m* not here. This is Gabe. I’m riding around in his head, using his body for now,” the man replied.

Well, that explained nothing.

“Don’t worry, little star,” he said, his deep voice trying to sound reassuring. “I’m not bringing you home with me tonight. I’ve already made that mistake once,” he lamented. “When I come for you, *and I will*, it will be my true face you will finally get to look upon. I have gone through a lot of painstaking details to make sure things go smoothly next time.”

“Why? Why do you want to take me with you?” I should have screamed or tried to run, but his lack of hostility toward me somehow allowed my curiosity to overtake my desire to flee.

“I knew from the moment I met you that there was something about you I wanted. And then, when I did some digging, I heard the most *amazing* rumors about powerful men who became more powerful after they shared your bed. From that very moment, I knew you were *mine*,” he said.

Fuck. It was just like Luke and Nik had said. Someone had found out

about whatever power it is that I was supposed to have, and they wanted me. The man chuckled at the realization on my face. *And that made me angry.* Against my better judgment, something irrational inside of me boiled to the surface, and I disregarded any concerns I had for my own safety.

“Everyone wants me for my magic. I don’t have any *fucking* magic!” I screamed.

He smiled at me like he was amused by my outburst. Like it somehow pleased him.

“That’s simply not a true, little star. You just haven’t been able to use your magic because you need me to show you how,” he said.

He sounded like Nik. But Nik hadn’t had much luck bringing out my supposed magical abilities.

“What makes you so special, then?” I asked, continuing to ignore my instinct for survival.

“I am wholly unique,” he replied matter-of-factly. “My powers, they are of both light and darkness.”

No one’s powers were both light and darkness except... I quit breathing, paralyzed with fear. My muscles grew rigid. *No. No, no, no.*

“I *am* the King of Light and Darkness,” he roared with a ferocity that finally managed to break through my cavalier attitude. “And you, little star, will be my queen,” he declared with a smile.

He ran his fingertips along my arm until he reached my hand, ignoring how clearly petrified I was. He leaned into my body.

“I need to be going. But you will see me. Very soon, little star,” he promised, ever so slightly brushing his lips across my cheek. And then King Vandrois just walked out of my door.

I stood there, in the middle of my room, for what felt like a very long time. At one point, I swallowed and realized how dry my mouth was. In a daze, I looked at my door, the one the King of Valencia had so casually exited from. I guess he was gone. And I was thirsty.

I trudged to the kitchen, grabbing my glass and pouring some water. I chugged the glass of water and then poured myself another. I chugged it too and then decided that the thirst I had could not be quenched by water. I walked out of my wing and made my way to Rhett’s bar. I moved without thinking, picking out a bottle and pouring three fingers into a rocks glass.

“Al?” Rhett called out to me. “Al, I’m glad I found you. I have to...” he trailed off.

He stared at the glass in my hand. "I'm not one to judge, but it's a little early for you to be hitting the brown stuff," he noted. A tinge of concern crept onto his too-perfect face when he noticed I was still in my nightgown and had bare feet.

I looked down blankly at the glass in my hand. And then I chugged it. The scotch burned as it went down my throat, and then its warmth began to spread into my chest. It stirred something inside of me. I poured a second glass and turned to Rhett, who was now right by my side.

"Hey," he said, tenderly putting his hand on my shoulder. "Al, baby, what's going on?"

You reek of his magic.

"Where's Luke, Rhett? I need Luke," I said.

"He's... Well, Al, that's what I was coming to tell you. He got an urgent message from the Silver Court. His mother is sick. He had to go home," Rhett said.

"Oh," I said, unable to truly register what Rhett said.

If Luke's mom was sick, that meant fading, and if she was fading, that meant she was dying. And I just couldn't process that right now. I took a large swig of the scotch in my hand.

"Can you tell me what's going on with you now? Please, Al, you're scaring me," he pleaded.

"Whatever protections you have around here have been breached, Rhett," I said flatly.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because King Vandros just left my bedroom."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Al? King Vandros was here? Are you okay?" he asked, his hand going to the dagger on his belt. He looked around the room like he expected the King to step out from behind the curtains.

"I'm...okay. He's gone now. But he wasn't here. His body wasn't, I mean. But he was here talking to me," I said.

I went to take another sip of my scotch, and Rhett grabbed my hand.

"Al, you're not making any sense. Slow down on the scotch and tell me what happened," he begged.

"He was on my balcony, waiting for me. He had the same eyes as the man who tried to kidnap me earlier this year, Rhett. It was the craziest thing. But it was a completely different man. Obviously, it was a different man,

because Nik cut the other man's head off. And he said he was coming back for me, and he would be in his own body when he did."

"And then what happened?" he asked.

"He just left."

"He shouldn't be able to travel in or out of here," Rhett said, getting angry.

"I don't think he did, Rhett. It was the damnedest thing. He just walked right out of my door."

Rhett let me take another sip of my drink now. He went behind the bar and poured himself a glass, and then, for good measure, refilled mine.

* * * *

"Come on, princess, you're coming home with me."

It was hours later. I was still sitting in Rhett's parlor in my nightgown. I'd quit chugging scotch at some point. Someone had brought food and laid it in front of me. It was still there, untouched. I knew I was in shock. The King of Alancia had tried to kidnap me. He was going to try again. Because he wanted me to be his queen? Nothing made sense to me.

I looked up at Nik. He was in his full Prince of Darkness mode. His thick brows were furrowed in anger, his dark eyes brimmed with fury, and, of course, he was surrounded by shadows of darkness despite the fact that it was just approaching dusk and some light still remained in the sky.

"What are you talking about, Nik?" I managed to say in my stupor.

"You are coming to live with me at the M, where I can keep you safe," he said through gritted teeth, his nostrils flared. "Clearly, it is not safe here."

Well, he wasn't entirely wrong about that. Since I'd been at the High Court, I'd been attacked by Cole and Stefan and, apparently, King Vandro, *twice*. But that didn't mean I was going to move my entire life and run away. I knew how obstinate Nik could be, however.

"No. I'm not, Nik." I sighed.

"He shouldn't have been able to get to you here. We made sure of it," he said, ignoring my comment entirely and plopping down right next to me on the lounge.

"You smell like scotch, by the way," he noted.

"If you don't like it, then don't sit so close to me," I snipped. I looked for my scotch glass. Maybe I should have some more.

“Wait, what are you talking about? He...he said that I was more protected than I know. How have I been being protected?” I asked.

“People. Shields. I am the only one who is permitted to travel in and out of House Rein,” Nik explained.

So everyone knew I was at risk except for me? I guess they had tried to tell me. I just didn’t believe them. Because I didn’t think I had any magic.

“He didn’t get in by any magical ability, I don’t think, Nik. He walked right out my door. That’s probably how he got in, too,” I noted.

“I know. The description of the man you provided... He has been working as a messenger at the High Court for months. So his presence did not raise any of the defenses,” he said, starting to sound angry again.

I imagined it was pretty difficult to defend against a man who could apparently look like anyone at any point and time. The only thing that might possibly give him away was his eyes, which were unique. I mentioned this to Nik. Nik looked like he wasn’t listening.

“You feel...different today,” he said, and to my surprise, he ran his thumb softly along my jawline. “Your magic feels different,” he said vaguely, letting his hand drop away.

My magic that I showed no real signs of had a feel, and that feel had changed?

“He said something like that, too,” I almost whispered, remembering his words.

“What *exactly* did he say?” Nik asked sternly.

“He said that, well, it was something about me reeking like Luke’s magic.”

Nik eyed me analytically.

“You had sex with Luke again, didn’t you?” he said like he already knew the answer.

I stared at him, making it clear that I was not denying it.

“Look, you don’t need to grab anything. We’ll just send for it or buy you new things if you need,” Nik said, going back to his original point. Rising from the couch, he held his hand out for mine.

“Let’s go, princess,” he said, but his use of the nickname didn’t feel mocking. It almost felt endearing. Maybe I was just getting used to it. But it reminded me of one more thing that King Vandros had said, one of the most unbelievable bits of all.

“He said he was going to make me his queen,” I whispered quietly in

disbelief.

Nik clenched the hand he still held in a fist, like he was ready to turn around and bury it into the wall behind him. Instead, he held it tightly at his side. The inky shadows of darkness grew to the height of his waist, wrapping around his hand as if restraining him. My comment had clearly made him quite angry.

I went back to staring at my empty scotch glass. If I did have some kind of magical ability, I wished it was one that would allow me to float a bottle over from the bar and fill my glass.

“I have all the scotch you need back at the M,” Nik said through clenched teeth, apparently managing his anger enough to finally speak again.

“Nik,” I said, exasperated, tearing my eyes from my empty glass. “You are not listening to me. I am not going to go live at the M.”

We locked eyes. I still felt numb but determined on this point. I didn’t break contact with his eyes until he lowered his outstretched hand. A bottle of scotch popped into existence next to my empty glass.

Luke

She was beautiful even in the last moments of her life. Her long, dark hair pooled around her too-pale face, sticking to her skin despite the light ocean breeze that came into her room through the open veranda doors. But even the silver light of the near-full moon failed to make her skin light up as it once had.

“Mother.” I stroked her cheek. “Mom,” I whispered softly.

She was a frail thing now. As her magic faded, it took parts of her with it—the perpetual youthfulness of her face, the sparkle of cunning in her obsidian eyes, her sharp smile. I was told that her condition had worsened more quickly than they had expected. Of course, I wouldn’t know myself because they failed to reach out to me until it was too late.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner, Mom?” I said, voicing the question that had run through my head since the moment I’d learned of my mother’s condition. She was fading. She was already near death.

“Because I knew that you’d think it was your responsibility to save me,” she said with what was left of her weak voice.

I clenched my jaw, biting back words too harsh for what may be my last to her.

“But what if I could have saved you? I have my powers back. Al... She... Mom, why didn’t you tell me sooner?” I asked again, stumbling over my desperate words.

“Luke.” My mother mouthed my name, her voice so soft this time that I had to read her lips.

“Yes?” I responded with clenched teeth.

“I see the way you look at that girl, Luke,” she whispered.

“Mom, *please*. We don’t need to talk about that right now.” The last

time I'd seen my mother, at the Summer Gala, we'd had words over Al. But I'd already forgiven my mother for her too many years of meddling in my love life.

"You look at her like you'd give it all up for her, Luke. Like you'd choose her over your family or your Kingdom or even your own life if it came down to it. Luke, my sweet boy, don't make yourself have to make that choice. Don't let yourself love something so much that can be taken from you. Please, son, stay away from her. That kind of love will consume you."

It already has. I'd imprinted on Al without knowing it, and the months that had passed where I was unable to touch her had been torture. The inability to connect with Al and the part of my magic that now lived inside of her had caused me physical pain, pain that I had gladly born when I thought it was Cass who would make her happy. But now, Al and I would be together.

I planned to tell Al about our magical connection and hoped that she would be happy about it and overlook the fact that I had failed to tell her sooner. This wasn't the conversation I wanted to have with my mother on her deathbed, though.

"Gods dammit. Damn them for doing this to you and damn them for making this be our last conversation."

I was surprised by my mother's explanation behind why she was so against me being with Al. I thought all along it was simply that she had not picked Al for me, and, of course, she didn't think Al had anything to contribute to our House. But it turned out that my mother's concerns were a little deeper than that. They were still embedded in her overall concern for our House, but what she was really worried about was that if push came to shove, I would choose Al over the good of our House. Honestly, I didn't know if she was right or wrong. I just could not process a hypothetical scenario like that right now.

I would not burden my mother's deathbed with the truth about me and Al. That Al and I were going to give it a real go at last. Breaking up with Karina wouldn't be particularly tough for me, and honestly, it probably wouldn't be too tough for her, either. We liked each other well enough. But we did not pretend that we were in the position we were in for any reason other than the alliance of our Houses.

Our parents, on the other hand; they have fallen in love with the possibility of a union sealed by me and Karina. They would, without a doubt, take the breakup the worst. But there were ways other than marriage to forge

an alliance between House Bellamy and House Dempsey. And I would do what it took to keep my promises to the King in order to forge that alliance.

“I love you, Mom,” I whispered, pressing my lips gently to her forehead.

“I’m proud of you, Luke. I always knew you would be the best one to lead this family,” she whispered before closing her eyes.

* * * *

“Son.”

My father approached me as I stared out at the choppy waves forming whitecaps in the dark ocean. It was an appropriately ugly, overcast gray day. My mother was gone from this world.

“Father,” I spat out through gritted teeth.

“Lucas, it’s what she wanted,” my father said, meekly trying to defend himself.

“Fuck that, Dad!” I exploded. “I could have saved her. I could have done something to stop or slow this!”

“You can’t reverse death, Luke. No one is that good. Not even you,” my father whispered.

The muscles in my jaw jumped at my effort to swallow the words in my throat.

“*This* is not your fault, Lucas. And neither was Jacob,” my father whispered much too quietly compared to his usual boisterous demeanor. “You can’t save the world, son,” he said, resigned.

“Don’t bring Jacob into this. And maybe I could have saved my mother. But now we’ll never know because you made that decision for me,” I replied, unable to bite back my words any longer.

“You’re right, son. I’ve made a lot of bad decisions for you because I thought I was doing what was best for you,” my father admitted.

I looked over at my father, my anger momentarily paused by his tone of contrition. “But I can’t do this anymore. I don’t *want* to do this anymore,” my father continued morosely.

“Do what?” I asked in a clipped tone.

“Be high lord of this House, Luke,” he said.

“What are you saying, dad?” I asked.

“It’s yours, son. You are high lord of the Silver Court for this House now,” he said, and with those words, my father’s usual regal demeanor

seemed to diminish.

“This isn’t a decision to be made on a whim, Dad. Maybe right now isn’t the best time for you to make this decision,” I cautioned.

“I’ve been thinking about it for some time, son. It’s time. It’s *past* time,” he replied.

My mother had known this was what my father intended to do. She was probably the one who had orchestratedated it all as she lay in her bed, fading into nothing.

I looked over at my brother, who stood in the corner with his shoulders sagging. He looked like he was staring out into the expanse of the dark ocean, but his eyes were glazed over, and it was evident that he was incapable of seeing anything except the thoughts he played through in his mind.

It almost hurt to look at him because he appeared so similar to my mother. He had her dark features. I realized with a pang that radiated through my entire body that the closest I would ever come to looking into my mother’s eyes again would be to look at Brad.

“What about Brad?” I asked. After all, Brad was the eldest.

“You know Brad is like me. He has no desire to play your High Court games,” my father said.

I grumbled at his continued description of the machinations behind running the Kingdom as “games.” That was one of the issues with my father serving as high lord. He just didn’t understand, and didn’t care to understand, what it took to run the Silver Court and the Kingdom. All he cared about was running the port and making money for the family. My father raised a hand, asking for me to hold on to the tirade he no doubt knew was coming.

“Brad just wants to run the port here and stay at home. Brad and I will support you as high lord in whatever you choose as best for this family,” he said.

“Why now?” I asked. I’d wanted this for so long. It had taken him years to make me *acting* high lord. Now, within a year, he was ready to hand it all over to me?

“I’ve led this House for hundreds of years, son. I’ve led us through war. I don’t want to do it again. And I think you’ll do it better. There are going to be some tough decisions ahead of you as high lord. You are responsible for the future of this family, this Court, and, ultimately, the Kingdom now.”

I knew being high lord wasn’t all fun and fairytales. I had already experienced that as acting high lord.

“Just promise me one thing. Promise me for your mother.” And when he mentioned her, the strength in his voice faltered in pain. The meekness my father wore felt unnatural and made me feel the cracks in my own strength. I needed this conversation to be over.

“Anything,” I promised him.

Alarie

A fae funeral was a muted state of affairs. There was no flirting or laughter or jockeying for the King's favor or even the wearing of House colors. For this one event, we were one, and we all donned our blackest attire, the single, somber hue a reflection of our collective mourning. The mourning family would continue to wear black for days, possibly weeks. There would be no service or a procession of people. We simply gathered to mourn not only the loss of Luke's mother but the loss of our immortality.

It was my first funeral but likely not my last. Fadings were still rare occurrences, but they were still occurring. My dress was black, and its hem nearly swept the floor. It was modest by High Court standards, but even still, the skirt was made of a see-through black tulle, and its top was corseted. As usual, I wore tall heels, a strappy black pair of stilettos that wrapped halfway up my calves.

I walked into the main hall of House Heroux and was immediately greeted by a crowd of murmurings that sounded much happier than the occasion justified. I peeked through the crowd and found the cause of the oddity. Jay stood with Lady Vitruvian, and she held the first fae baby to bless our Kingdom in over two decades. Asher Vitruvian, with his grey eyes and golden spun hair, appeared to be a happy baby and, even at this sad occasion, the joy that came with his baby smiles and sounds could not be resisted by the mourning mass.

Luke had told me that Jay, Elizabeth, and baby Asher had permanently relocated to the High Court. I imagined that Jay and Elizabeth had amended their "arrangement" so that Asher could grow up at the High Court and, if I had to guess, likely summer at Jay's manor in Breakpoint. A smile ghosted

my lips at the thought of Jay's de facto little brother, Oliver, getting to play the cool uncle for Asher.

I thought it would hurt more to see Jay with his family. But I was pleasantly surprised that it didn't hurt nearly as bad as I had thought it would. I felt a certain kind of sadness, the kind that came with unfulfilled dreams and what-ifs. But, to the extent that his stony exterior ever could express such an emotion, Jay looked happy, and I was at peace with that.

The King called for everyone to quiet. I scanned the room, anxious to find Luke's impressive figure. My heart hurt for my friend. But it also harbored a kind of excitement at the thought of seeing him again after our last conversation. We would get through this *together*.

I began to walk toward him. But then he turned around to reveal Karina Dempsey standing directly behind him. Her blonde hair was done up in an elaborate bun, and she was smiling.

Luke found my eyes across the room. I looked back at him, hopeful. But he shook his head. I was confused. High Lord Bellamy raised his glass for a toast.

"On this somber evening, we would like to share news that would have brought Courtney great joy. Please raise your glass in Courtney's memory but also to the newly betrothed," he said. And then he turned toward Luke and Karina.

Karina took Luke's hand. I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. Bile rose in my throat. I felt like I was going to be sick. I immediately turned and rushed out of the room.

"Al. AL! Stop. *Please*. Let me explain."

Luke followed me out of the main hall. I was already making my way to the courtyard outside the front door. I wouldn't be tearful. I wouldn't cry. I had to be strong and keep it together for him. But I felt the pain, the embarrassment of thinking I was good enough for Luke, that he would have actually picked me, welling up inside of me. I stopped but didn't turn around. Luke caught up with me.

"Al, it's not what you think," he pleaded, grabbing both of my shoulders in his large hands and turning me around to face him.

"My father came to me. He told me he was stepping down as high lord and was making me high lord. Not *acting* High Lord. Actual High Lord."

I looked up into his sparkling blue eyes. Even when I felt like I did, I was happy for him. I knew that was what he had always wanted.

“Congrats, *High Lord Bellamy*,” I said. My tone was flat, but I meant it.

“Al, no. That’s not the point. My father explained to me that my mother, before she passed...” I almost felt him flinch as he said it “She put this in motion with Karina and her family. And, so, my spot as high lord came with a price tag—engagement to Karina.”

“I hear congratulations are in order for that as well.” I hated the bitterness I heard in my own voice.

“I told my father that I would accept the high lord position but...” He hesitated at this point. “I told him I would have to think about the second part. Al, I just need time to figure out a way around it. He cut my legs out from underneath me with that announcement. This is exactly why I need to be high lord and not my father. He just doesn’t get the political ramifications of what I am going to have to go through to undo this.”

My heart fluttered for a moment.

“Don’t,” I said, looking up at him again.

“What?” he asked.

“Don’t undo it, Luke.”

Just the fact that he would, for me... that was more than enough. I had to be as selfless as him.

“But, Al, everything we talked about,” he said.

And there was hurt in his voice. He grabbed both of my hands in his.

“Us,” he whispered, squeezing my hands.

I took a deep breath.

“It’s what she wanted, Luke,” I said, referring to his mother. “We both know that. She didn’t... She didn’t want me,” I said with a smirk, trying to hide the pain that admission cost me.

“Al... *no*. We can figure this out,” he pleaded.

“I...” My heart tugged at the pain in his voice. I wanted to believe what he said more than anything. “No, Luke, I can’t ask you to give up what you have always wanted. I couldn’t forgive myself even if you could. You deserve to be High Lord of your House. I’m so sorry about your mother. And now this. I...I shouldn’t be here. I’m just going to make things more difficult for you. I’ll see you soon, okay?” I said, giving him a small, sad smile we both knew I didn’t mean. I leaned into him, having to stand on my toes, and brushed my lips against his cheek.

I pulled my hands from his and nearly ran away before I allowed him to say something to change my mind. I left the gathering and ran into Nik in the

courtyard. He wore the black of mourning and sat on top of a bench with his feet on the seat. He appeared to be playing with the whirls of the darkness of his shadows, drawing shapes in the inky blackness with his finger.

“What are you doing out here?” he barked.

“Don’t start, Nik. Not tonight,” I said with a sigh.

“What’s your deal?” he asked.

“I fucking hate it here! I can’t be here right now,” I erupted.

It felt like no matter what I did, it always ended with me in pain. I felt myself reaching for the cold steel box of loneliness I hid in most of my life. I would hide there again, alone, but at least I’d be unfeeling again.

“Well, we finally have something in common then,” he said, rising from the bench.

I looked at him and then I realized who I was talking to, what he could do. Nik could travel.

“Take me somewhere,” I said.

“Take you somewhere?” he asked, shocked.

“Yeah. Take me somewhere,” I repeated more definitively.

“Where do you want me to take you, princess?” he crooned.

I didn’t bite back at him for calling me princess or his flirting.

“Anywhere, Nik. Anywhere but here,” I said, taking a step closer to him. I offered him my hand.

And then I remembered his offer for me to live with him at the M. “I accept your offer. I will live with you at the M. Take me home, Nik.”

The look in his dark green eyes was so intense it was searing. My skin would have grown hot under his gaze if I hadn’t already turned off my ability to feel. He pulled me into his body, and I didn’t resist or complain. I didn’t want to. I wanted him to take me away from all of it.

We disappeared from the High Court together, arriving seconds later at our destination in a hallway I didn’t recognize, but I knew we were at the M because I recognized the taste of salt in the air.

I took a step away from Nik.

“Welcome to your new home, princess,” he said, still trying to figure out my mood. “Do you—”

“Thanks for the ride. But you don’t have to babysit me,” I bit out. I just wanted to be alone.

Whatever softness he had shown before was gone.

“I’ll just show you to your room, then,” he offered.

He walked me down a hall and then another. I recognized the hallway as the one he had traveled me to before, when he'd shown me to a wardrobe to change into clothes for training. That reminded me that I had nothing to change into. I looked down at my funeral garb, more than ready to be rid of it. Nik opened the door to the room I'd changed in previously. The bed was in the middle of two armoires. I knew at least one of them was full of athletic clothes, some of which had to fit me.

"This is you. This is your room," Nik announced.

"My room?" I questioned.

"The room and everything in it are yours. It has been since I first showed it to you," he shrugged. "Clothes for training are there," he said, pointing to the armoire closest to the door. "The other one and the walk-in closet have more options. If you need something that isn't here, we can send for it."

"Why didn't you mention it before?" I asked, walking farther into the room.

When he didn't answer my question I turned to find that he had already disappeared. I was all alone.

Luke & Al's Playlist

- "Glitch"* by Taylor Swift
- "Boyfriend"* by Justin Bieber
- "Treat You Better"* by Shawn Mendes
- "Bad Habit"* by Steve Lacy
- "What A Man Gotta Do"* by Jonas Brothers
- "Tongue Tied"* by Group Love
- "Talk Too Much"* by COIN
- "Light Switch"* by Charlie Puth
- "Dress"* by Taylor Swift
- "Everything Has Changed"* by Taylor Swift (feat. Ed Sheeran)
- "Wildest Dreams"* by Taylor Swift
- "Sugar"* by Maroon 5
- "Don't Blame Me"* by Taylor Swift
- "At Last"* by Etta James
- "Lover"* by Taylor Swift
- "Take It All Back 2.0"* by Judah & the Lion

Cass & Mandy's Playlist

"Southern Girl" by Incubus

"Cardigan" by Taylor Swift

"Best I Ever Had" by Drake

"Adore You" by Harry Styles

"This Love" by Maroon 5

"Like a Wrecking Ball" by Eric Church

"As Long As You Love Me" by Justin Bieber

"I Know Places" by Taylor Swift

"Fast Car" by Luke Combs

"Make You Miss Me (Acoustic)" by Sam Hunt

"Stubborn Love" by the Lumineers

"Midnight Rain" by Taylor Swift

About The Author

Cameron Kay

Cameron wrote her first novel when she was twelve years old. It was a self-illustrated murder mystery...and it was just awful. Fortunately, she has significantly improved her writing skills since middle school, and she no longer has to do her own artwork. These days, when Cameron isn't dreaming up magical MMCs who all look like our favorite Hollywood boyfriends, she can be found chasing sunrises and her never-ending fitness aspirations.