

BOOK ONE OF THE QUEEN OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS SERIES



THE  
LORD  
OF  
WHISPERS

CAMERON KAY

The Lord of Whispers  
Book One of the Queen of Light and Darkness  
Series

Cameron Kay

**Pursuant II Publishing**

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*To the things in life that have broken me so thoroughly that I lost the will to survive  
but found the passion to live.*

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# Content Warnings

*The Lord of Whispers* 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.

For readers who are looking for a little less or little more spice in their lives, a list identifying the spicy chapters in this novel can be found at the end of the novel.



# Prologue

*Jay*

Our magic was dying. Our people were dying. And now, our queen was dead.

I stood at the foot of a mountain next to my best friend of the last two centuries, King Greyson Heroux. Grey was overlooking the too-still form of the love of his immortal life while his only son, Prince Nikolas, stood to our right, unable to look away from his mother's lifeless body. Nik bowed his head, causing his dark curls to pool around his handsome face and hide the pain I knew lingered in the depths of his deep green eyes.

The sun began to sink behind Mount Renascor, leaving a pink summer sky of wispy clouds. Grey reached his hand out toward his late wife and roots and vines loudly erupted from the ground at the King's beckoning. They wove an intricate pattern over the fragile body of Queen Heroux until they formed a mound. None of us altered our somber gazes as her small mass was pulled into and made part of the earth, disappearing completely.

Black shadows began to emanate from the Prince, unfurling at his feet and working their way up and out toward the mountain. Soon, the entire bottom half of Mount Renascor was shrouded in the darkness of the Prince's formidable power. Then the mountain shifted twenty feet to the left, as if someone had picked it up and placed it over the Queen's grave. The three of us stood in the silence of our sorrow, our eyes burrowing into the mountainside, until many hours after the pink sky had faded to black.

“We’ll find her, Grey. We’ll find her, or we’ll figure out another way to stop the magic from dying,” I promised the King fiercely, at last breaking our silence.

But, no matter what graveside promises I made to my closest friend, the truth was that I did not put nearly as much stock into prophecy as he did. And I was not going to just sit around while our people died waiting for us to find the girl who prophecy promised could save us all. I would find another way.

After another moment of silence, the King clapped me on the back and then cleared his throat, indicating to his son that it was time for us to leave the mountainside. Without a word, Nik’s shadows enveloped us and we popped out of existence, arriving moments later hundreds of miles away on the east coast of Valencia at the Emerald Court.

Nik turned away from us immediately, his footsteps muffled by the sounds of the crashing waves of the ocean, leaving his father and me with our insurmountable task of figuring out how to save the future of our Kingdom.

*TWENTY YEARS LATER**Jay*

Vlaise, the capital of the Kingdom, was located in the center of the nation of Valencia. The High Court could be found at the center of Vlaise. At the center of the High Court, there was a bustling thoroughfare of people and carriages surrounded by luscious, green gardens. At the center of that thoroughfare, there stood a statue. And there, in front of that statue, I stood, waiting for my new House liaison, Alarie Armand, to arrive.

I examined the statue, a new addition to the Court, wondering who was responsible for its commission. After all, as Contra to the King, second in power in the Kingdom to only the King himself, little happened at the High Court that I didn't know about. But I'd allowed my duty to keep me away from the Court for more time than I should as of late. My guess was that High Lady Tragon, ever the opportunist in my absence, had managed to convince the King's longtime consort, Gloria, that the statue was somehow in good taste.

Gloria was sweet, but even Grey would have to admit that she could be a bit too far on the glass-half-full side of things. And then, knowing my good friend, he'd likely thought a single piece of art to be too innocuous to require further questioning and had given in to whatever would make his love happy.

It was an overly large, gratuitous piece of "art." A man, clearly meant to be a high fae lord, stood looking down at a petite woman, who equally clearly was meant to be a lesser fae servant. The woman held an ornate overfilled tray of silver-carved meats and cheeses up to the high fae lord, her head inclined with a soppily servile smile plastered onto her small face.

A lesser fae lord or lady would have undoubtedly objected to the caricature of the benevolent high fae lord and his obeisant lesser fae servant. But that was just the issue—there were no lesser fae lords or ladies still remaining at the High Court to voice their objection. The only lesser fae who could still be found at the High Court were, ironically, servants to high fae households.

I turned away from the irksome statue, more annoyed by its reminder of the unsavory machinations of the High Court that were allowed to flourish in my absence than by the statue itself, which I *would* dispose of. My mind stayed on the present dilemma with the lesser fae as I walked away—their abandonment of the High Court and, most recently, rumblings of rebellion coming from the north.

I finally spotted what I'd been standing in the courtyard waiting for—an older gray carriage came into view. It was obvious that the carriage was older because it had been modified to add a partition for the driver. Newer carriages, like the ones most commonly found around the High Court, were made with a separate cabin for the driver. This change was made necessary by the problem that kept me preoccupied and away from the High Court so often these days. It was the same problem that allowed High Lady Tragon's politically ambitious and not-so-secretly bigoted contingent to press their thumbs upon the scales of the High Council advising King Heroux in my absence.

The magic of Valencia was dying, and it had been slowly doing so for the last twenty-three years. And no one, not even the King or I, knew how to fix it. So carriages once propelled by the magic of a lesser fae transporter were now powered by Azurinium, a precious mineral from mines that could only be found in the realm of my Court. And unlike before, when a lesser fae transporter could simply instill a carriage with magic and send it and its contents on its way, carriages now required the guiding hand of a driver.

I guessed the contents of the dated carriage approaching to be my new liaison. She was probably the daughter of some high fae lord from a provincial town, a lord with *just enough* money and influence to get his daughter to the High Court under the auspices of furthering her studies but with the true intention of finding her an advantageous suitor. I was already beginning to regret my decision to take on a liaison for the first time in so many years. But I quickly tempered my own second-guessing, reminding myself that until my powers returned to their full strength, I needed all the

resources I could get. I had to prepare my House and the Kingdom for what was coming.

An earsplitting crack, like two boulders crashing together, ricocheted through the commotion of the busy roundabout, interrupting my troubled musings. I jerked my head toward the direction of the noise in time to see the head of the high fae lord statue begin to roll off its shoulders. The severed head landed with a deafening thud atop the large tray held by the lesser fae servant. I immediately scanned the courtyard and then, sensing no other danger, ran with speed considered fast even among the high fae in time to catch the marble head before it continued its path, rolling and possibly striking a bystander below.

For a moment, the chaos of the consistently busy circle was silenced. *Everyone just stopped.* They stared at me as I cradled the thousand-pound head in my hands. I felt their choked-off words hang in the air as their eyes slid across my body and then darted away, as they always did, as if frightened by the mere possibility of meeting my gaze. Although no one looked directly at me, I knew they waited for my next move. I flicked my hand in the air, a casual command for everyone to move along.

And then, like a switch had been flipped, the clamor resumed with renewed vigor, everyone casting cautiously curious looks back at me and the beheaded statue. I turned my attention back to the severed head, running my thumb along the edge of it and noting the clean cut. As I had suspected, the head had been purposefully and magically detached. That meant that in the few short minutes that I had turned my back to the statue, *someone* had done *something* to cause the head to separate from the shoulders of the high fae lord.

I wasn't sure *what* the something was, but I was fairly certain *who* the someone was—*Don Davante*, the newest face in lesser fae leadership and the man who I now suspected to be single-handedly responsible for the rumblings of rebellion coming from the north.

The don had recently ignited a passion within the lesser fae populace, resulting in the formation of the most competent and cohesive lesser fae contingent in Valencia in the last fifty years. And one of his favorite pastimes, when he wasn't amassing resources in Lord Dumont's lands in the northwest, was expressing his thoughts on the high fae-dominated High Court in increasingly public and theatrical ways. So far, the don's influence had been disruptive but nonviolent, which was why I'd not yet put an end to it.

With the traffic starting back up, I checked back on the gray carriage in time to see a pair of nude stilettos emerging from its opened door. A singularly beautiful woman stepped out into the twilight of the approaching evening. I took in her small frame, trailing my eyes up her slim legs that appeared freshly kissed by the sun's golden rays. My gaze made its way to her face, a face that was captivating because, and not despite of, her apparent lesser fae features. Her brilliant green eyes were laced with a thread of light gold, signature to the lesser fae. She had sharp cheekbones that defined her petite face, and her lips were red and held an enticing pout I usually found lacking from the thinner lips of any high fae lady.

The alluring woman was immediately followed by another woman, a high fae lady with ordinary looks made more plain by her immediate comparison to her ravishing companion. The mousy woman had to be my new House liaison. She fit the bill. But her travel partner... I didn't know who she was.

*Perhaps she was a household servant who had come to see off the high fae lady and catch a glimpse of the big city?*

Unceremoniously chucking the sizable marble head into the hedges to the right of me as if it were no more than a pebble, I lightly brushed the dust from my hands and made my way toward the women. I even allowed the rare shadow of a smile to ghost my lips as I considered the many ways I would make the green-eyed girl's short time at the High Court, and my evening, more enjoyable.

"Jay Vitruvian," I introduced myself, holding my hand out to the mousy woman first. My cufflinks, made of solid Azurinium etched into octagonal little spheres, glimmered in the last rays of the setting sun.

The meek woman took my hand, but her handshake was disappointingly feeble, lacking confidence. I resisted the urge to wipe the limp feel of it off my hand. I would get her situated with staff, make an appearance at dinner, and then turn to the more pleasurable part of my evening.

"Thank you for the welcome to the Court, high lord," she replied.

It sounded like she was regurgitating words that had been fed to her. She looked down toward her modest ballet flats when she spoke, not meeting my eyes.

"I'm Elenor Kane."

*Wait. If she was Elenor Kane, then that meant...*

I turned to the striking young woman just as she offered me her hand,

her gorgeous green eyes meeting the gray of my own.

“High Lord Vitruvian,” she said, taking my hand into hers with a firm yet feminine handshake. “I’m Alarie Armand.”

I suppressed a groan, any trace of a smile disappearing from my face as I forced myself to dismiss all prior thoughts of her and her rosy-red lips. Lamenting the loss of the many ways I’d already come up with for entertaining the young woman that evening and *well* into the predawn hours, I welcomed my new liaison to the High Court.

## *Alarie*

Despite the warmth of the spring evening, he was wearing a fitted, midnight blue tux with a black satin bow tie around his neck. He was a taller man who could not have more perfectly embodied the archetype of an omnipotent high fae lord if he had stepped right out of one of my textbooks. His dark brown hair brushed the tops of his ears; a five o'clock shadow occasioned his handsome face, accentuating his chiseled jawline; and dark, penetrating gray eyes complimented his muscled body, likely honed by hundreds of years of training. A fine, white marble powder sprinkled his sleeves, the only evidence of the chaos that ensued around us in the wake of the explosion.

A host from House Halair appeared in the courtyard looking for Elenor. House Kane did not have a place of its own at the High Court, so Elenor's father had arranged for her to stay at House Halair for a time. Elenor had told me all about it on our way to the Court. The more Elenor shared with me, the less optimistic I became regarding the possibility of showing up to the High Court with a new friend in tow.

She had talked about herself throughout the entirety of the trip, never taking the time to ask me about myself. She'd told me how she was going to the High Court to find some high fae lord and then marry him, like she was the main character in a fairy tale. It quickly became clear to me that we were coming to the High Court for very different reasons, and I wasn't sure we had much else in common.

I decided to dodge introductions with House Halair altogether, instead wandering over to the partially deconstructed statue. High Lord Vitruvian dutifully fielded questions from the House Halair host and others who had



gathered in the courtyard looking for answers regarding the explosion. It was quite the sight to be greeted with, even if it was just a statue—a decapitated high fae lord, his head carelessly discarded feet away from his body.

I had immediately been taken in by High Lord Vitruvian's command mere moments after he'd caught the marble head in his hands. I'd witnessed the entire incident through the window of my carriage. But, as Contra, I guess it would take more than an explosion and a flying head to make him off-kilter.

My eyes roved over the surrounding greenery that shot out from where I stood in the center of the courtyard like the spokes of a bicycle tire. It was pretty, but already I was comparing it to the beaches back home and finding it lacking.

Arms corded in muscle enclosed around me. Startled, I tensed against the unexpected embrace, but he easily overcame my resistance, pulling me against his tall, hard body. His hand wrapped around the back of my head, gently but protectively, holding my face pressed against his muscled chest.

Buried in the strength of his arms, and perhaps with thoughts of the beaches back home still on my mind, I thought he smelled like something that reminded me of home. A memory of digging my toes into the white sand of the beach on a sunny day flashed into my mind, and despite my initial instinct to resist, I found myself taking in a deep breath, my chest expanding as I melted into the man's muscled frame.

I wrapped my arms around the narrow part of his large torso and tried to look up at the man holding me, but his grip on me just tightened. I felt him tense around me, and I reacted with him, my muscles going taut in his arms.

A loud, crashing noise pierced the raucous of the thoroughfare for the second time since I had arrived at the High Court.

The remainder of the marble statue exploded, collapsing where it stood. Its remnants scattered with force as a plume of fine white dust and debris expanded from its perimeter.

When the loudest of the noise subsided, the hand holding my head eased its tension, moving to my lower back and allowing me to move my head once more. I opened my eyes and looked up into a smile so bright that I momentarily forgot how to form words.

His crystal blue eyes had a playful sparkle, and his caramel brown hair had a slight wave to it. A white, powdery haze hung in the air around us. But the debris fell *around* us, instead of *on* us, like we were standing inside an

invisible bubble. For a second that seemed to drag on for hours, the turbulent world around me faded away into a low buzz hidden behind the white haze, and all I could see was his glowing face.

“I’m Luke,” the man with the blinding smile said.

“Alarie,” I breathed out, my face inches from his.

We stood facing each other, my heart beating out of my chest. I ran the flat of my tongue across my lower lip before pulling it between my teeth.

“Luke,” High Lord Vitruvian’s voice rang out, penetrating through the shield surrounding us.

We both snapped our heads toward the approaching high lord. It was obvious that he had not been protected by the same magical shield as Luke and me because, although the high lord still looked impeccable, the marble dusting now covered more than just his sleeves.

“I see you’ve *met* my newest House liaison,” Lord Vitruvian said, his eyebrows slightly raised.

At Lord Vitruvian’s words, I realized that Luke was still holding me. His arms were wrapped around me, his hands resting on my hips, and parts of my smaller, softer body were pressed to the front of his tall, hard body.

Luke looked down at me, standing well over a head taller than me, and gave me an impish grin. Then he released his shield around us at the same time as he released my body from his. Without Luke shielding me, some of the white marble dust that still hung in the air began to settle onto my shoulders. His fingers trailed over my narrow shoulders and down my arms, wiping off the powder before it could collect there. A light shiver skittered down my spine, despite the remaining warmth of the spring evening.

Luke’s light-blue eyes locked with mine as he flashed me his perfect white teeth. Even standing next to the high lord, who in himself was a masterpiece of a man, Luke demanded my attention. He was a high fae lord, standing at least 6’ 4”, with bulging biceps and impeccable style. Where Lord Vitruvian’s attire was elegant and timeless, Luke’s was the picture of the current Court style, from his camel-brown leather shoes to his skinny, dark blue tie.

“*Well*,” Luke said with a chuckle, holding his hand out to me, “welcome to the High Court, Alarie.”

It seemed silly to shake the hand of the man who had held me in his arms moments before. But I matched his chuckle with a nervous laugh of my own and took his hand, anyway. I noticed Luke’s dark coat was beginning to

collect the dust that fell around us.

“Um, I think you have a little something,” I said to Luke, running a finger across the top of his suit coat and pulling it away coated in the white, powdery dust.

“Damn,” he barked. “Damn, damn, damn. I’m going to have to go back by the house and change before tonight,” he lamented, stripping off his fitted jacket and giving me a view of the suspenders he wore. They strained over his bulky shoulders.

Seeing Luke’s muscular arms and shoulders bulging underneath his white button-down, I wondered how he had fit into the suit coat to begin with. It was difficult to believe something as ordinary as a coat could conceal something as extraordinary as Luke’s physique. He casually popped out his cufflinks, holding the little silver pieces between lips, and began to roll up the sleeves of his white button-down.

“Looks like my dinner will have to wait,” the high lord announced.

My attention snapped from Luke to High Lord Vitruvian.

“Grey’s going to want to hear about this,” the high lord continued.

Grey. *King* Greyson Heroux—the King of Valencia—I thought, awestruck.

“You two should head to the manor and get started on the dinner Jena prepared for us,” Lord Vitruvian suggested.

Without waiting for a response from Luke, the high lord turned to me.

“My lady,” he offered with a polite, small nod of his head.

*And then he was gone.*

I stared at what should have been the back of High Lord Vitruvian. But he was so quick that all I saw when I looked in the direction he disappeared was an empty stone-paved path.

High fae tended to be tall, quick, and agile, where lesser fae tended to fall on the spectrum of stocky with brute force and strength, but I was, nonetheless, surprised by the high lord’s speed. And by the looks of Lord Vitruvian and Luke’s muscular figures, I wasn’t so sure there would be much of a difference between the high fae lords and their lesser fae counterparts when it came to strength either.

An image of Cass, my best friend from back home, sprung to the forefront of my mind, sparking an immediate comparison of Cass’s lesser fae hulking mass to that of Lord Vitruvian’s lean body. Luke was somewhere in the middle, bulkier than the high lord but still lean in comparison to Cass.

Then again, everyone was lean when compared to Cass. I inwardly admitted that Cass was undoubtedly stronger than either of the high fae lords but reasoned that he was stronger than pretty much everyone.

“My lady,” Luke said, offering me his arm, matching Lord Vitruvian’s formal tone, a charming smile splayed across his face.

“Alarie’s fine,” I countered, placing my hand in the crook of his arm.

I was going to have to get used to being called a lady now that I was at the High Court, but it felt like Luke and I were already past that bit of formality.

“I don’t know about you, but *I* could eat,” Luke said enthusiastically.

I eyed his hulking mass once more. I imagined that it would take quite a lot of food to keep that amount of muscle fed. He began to lead me down a path through the first of many gardens at the center of the High Court.

“I wouldn’t mind a walk around first,” I suggested, noticing the many paths that broke off from the center garden we stood in.

I was hungry, but it was also my first time at the High Court. I was interested to see what else, other than explosions and dashing handsome lords, the High Court had to offer.

Luke looked down pointedly at the four-inch nude pumps I wore on my small feet.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “*Really*,” I assured him, in response to the skeptical look on his handsome face.

I almost always wore heels instead of flats due to my shorter stature, which I came by naturally because lesser fae were almost always shorter than high fae. Luke acquiesced, beginning his tour along the route to the Vitruvian manor. We walked along the path surrounded by tall, green, well-groomed hedges interspersed with statues, fountains, and steel gates covered in ivy.

The Heroux estate, the King’s grounds, was nearest to the garden we departed. Lord Vitruvian was probably in there updating the King on the events of the evening as we strolled by. We continued down the path to Luke’s house. A cobblestone path led up to a beautiful garden, its greenery continuing onto the ivy-clad brick walls of the manor.

“Wait, House *Bellamy*?” I exclaimed. “*You’re* Lucas Bellamy?”

House Bellamy’s seat in Port City was home to the Silver Court. That meant that High Lord Bellamy, one of the four high lords in Valencia, was Luke’s father. Luke chuckled at my evident shock.

“In the flesh,” he said, spreading his arms out as if showing himself off,

dislodging my hand from his forearm in the process.

“And it’s just you in there?” I asked.

A little embarrassed by my prior outburst, I toned down my shock into simple disbelief.

“Just me,” he reassured me. “Most of the time, anyway. There are the house attendants too. And my parents sometimes. And whoever else my parents allow to stay there,” Luke replied, sounding a little more exasperated as his list went on.

I wondered why Luke served at the High Court on behalf of House Vitruvian instead of his own House. Both House Vitruvian and House Bellamy were on the High Council, after all.

But not quite sure how to address this glaring fact, I asked instead, “Do your parents come to Court often then?”

“Not so much,” Luke answered, tugging me away from his manor and farther down the path toward our final destination, Lord Vitruvian’s house.

“My brother and father prefer to focus their efforts on the port back home. And my mother... Well, she’s too busy lamenting the fact that her baby boy—that’s me, just to be clear—won’t settle down with any of the many ill-fated matches she takes it upon herself to make.”

He tried to appear amused by this last comment, but it came off less lighthearted than his other banter.

Remembering his cursing from earlier, I said, “If you need to get going with your plans for the evening, I’m sure I could find my way to House Vitruvian.”

“You’re not ditching me that easily,” he teased, entwining my hand with his arm again.

Probably for the best. I didn’t want to turn my ankle on my first day at Court. I didn’t think of myself as clumsy, but stilettos and the rounded cobblestones on some of these paths didn’t go well together.

We found ourselves at the stoop of the Vitruvian manor. We stood under its magnificent arched entryway framed by sturdy marble pillars. The sun had set, and despite my earlier hunger, dinner time had passed unnoticed.

“Soooo... what was that whole exploding statue thing all about?” I asked, leaning my back against one of the columns.

I didn’t bring it up before, afraid that I would be prying into something that I had no business in. But my curiosity got the better of me, and I felt that if I was going to ask anyone, I could ask Luke.

Luke pressed his hand to the marble to the side of my head, towering over me. I tilted my head up, looking into his golden tanned face.

“Oh, *that*? That was your welcome to the High Court present. You know, I thought about doing something a little more traditional, like a bouquet of flowers. But then I thought what every woman *really* wants is to be greeted with pure chaos, with maybe even a touch of fear,” he joked.

When Lord Vitruvian approached, I was still laughing.

“You two already finish up dinner?” he asked.

“No, we, uh, we actually haven’t made it in for dinner yet,” Luke replied, taking a small step away from me.

The high lord’s right eyebrow arched slightly, a monumental showing of emotion for him based on the aloofness I’d seen so far. It had been hours since he had left Luke and me in the courtyard.

“Well, in that case, would you like to come in, Luke?” the high lord asked.

“No. Thanks though, Jay,” Luke replied. “Can’t. I have to go meet Rhett.”

Lord Vitruvian nodded, almost as if he’d been expecting Luke’s answer.

“Night, Alarie,” Luke said, squeezing my arm and flashing me one of what I was already coming to think of as his signature smiles.

“Night, Luke,” I said, feeling slightly nervous about not having Luke at dinner as a buffer with the high lord.

Lord Vitruvian pushed open the ornately carved oak front door, stepped through, and held it open for me. I entered the home, facing a tall staircase that narrowed to the entrance to the second floor. Unable to resist the urge, my gaze continued to sweep up, seeing more stairs and more wings of the manor. Hallways interspersed with doors led to more stairs that led to more hallways and doors. I’d get lost if I wasn’t careful.

“I originally intended for a few others to dine with us tonight. But since I was running behind *due to unforeseeable events*,” he noted wryly, “I asked Jena to leave a couple of plates of food out for us instead. She has us set up in the parlor,” he explained, beginning to walk through a hallway to the right of us.

Realizing I’d been standing in the foyer of the manor, gawking, I quickly gathered myself and scurried after him.

“Jena?” I asked, trailing behind him, trying to appear as though I was not astounded by the sheer size and fine finishings of the manor.

I assumed Jena was one of the house attendants but asked the question anyway to have something to keep the conversation going.

“She’s one of the few staff I have kept here full time to help me out. After today, she is actually one of the few lesser fae left at Court,” he noted.

“What happened today?” I asked curiously.

“Well, you may have noticed that when you showed up to Court things were... in a bit of a disarray. The purpose of the theatrics with the exploding statute was apparently to set the stage for a large-scale lesser fae walk out. Many of the lesser fae members of several prominent Houses left the High Court today.”

“Where are they going?” I asked, intrigued.

The high lord raised his eyebrows in a small showing of exasperation. “Most will probably go to Lord Dumont’s lands to the north. Some may go back to whatever was considered home before they came to Court.”

The high lord paused. I wanted to ask why the lesser fae were leaving the Court en masse, but it was clear from Lord Vitruvian’s demeanor that the subject was one he did not wish to dwell upon at the moment. I remained silent.

“Jena’s quarters are next door,” he indicated with a wave of his arm somewhere behind us, transitioning back to our original topic.

“She’s around any time you need her,” he offered.

Yet another thing I was not used to—people waiting *on me* instead of the other way around.

After passing by several doors in the long hallway, we arrived at the parlor. There were plates of food, still hot, on the long, embellished table, a bottle of red wine, and long-stemmed glasses. Lord Vitruvian approached the table, picking up the wine bottle and examining it.

“She picked a good pairing,” he noted, unsurprised.

“Would you like a glass?” he asked, offering up the bottle.

“Please,” I replied, already eyeing the lamb lollipops on the table with interest.

I discreetly laid a hand over my stomach, trying to muffle the growl emanating from it. While I had been with Luke, I’d completely forgotten my hunger, but the exquisite smell of the food reminded me that I had not eaten since I left home much earlier that day. I could tell from the steam coming off a platter of roasted potatoes that the food was still hot, even though it must have been prepared hours before. I noted the slight blue glow coming from

the platters the warm food sat on with admiration.

I curiously reached out to the platter closest to me, running a fingertip along the side of it. It felt warm to the touch.

“Azurinium-laced,” the high lord explained in response to my unspoken question.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” I admitted, impressed.

“One of the perks of being high lord of the Azure Court,” he explained, handing me a glass filled with a dark cherry-colored wine.

The Azure Court was located in Breakpoint and was home to all of the Azurinium caves in Valencia. Even before the high lord said something, I had figured that Azurinium was responsible for the blue aura coming from the plates.

“People back home are always experimenting with Azurinium and derivatives from mining it and coming up with unique uses. These Azurinium plates are one of the more recent and popular items out of my Court.”

The high lord sounded proud rather than boastful.

I took a sip of wine trying not to show my true thoughts, which were on the cost of the unique platters and how my mother and I never could have afforded something like that. Some days, we had barely been able to afford enough Azurinium to keep our oven working.

I brushed off thoughts of home. “Thank you, Lord Vitruvian,” I said, indicating my glass of wine.

“Call me Jay,” he offered.

I suppressed the urge to quirk my eyebrow in disbelief. I couldn’t believe I was having dinner with High Lord Vitruvian—the Contra to the King himself! When I’d been assigned as liaison to House Vitruvian, I’d never imagined I’d get to spend any time with Lord Vitruvian, much less find myself, alone, across from him at dinner and calling him by his first name.

He was not at all what I’d expected. Jay exuded a kind of innate power that commanded everything and everyone within his sight. But that wasn’t what was surprising. What was surprising was that I’d expected the King’s Contra to be older or fatter or something less lip-biting than the man who stood next to me.

“Jay, then,” I obliged, with a small smile.

“It stays pretty quiet around here,” he said, pulling out a chair to his right and gesturing for me to take a seat.

Once I was seated, he pushed my chair in and then took his own seat at



the head of the table.

“There’s Jena and a couple of others who help us around the house, but most of my staff are either traveling with Lady Vitruvian right now or are back home in Breakpoint. Except Creede. You’ll see us out practicing with the sword most days. Otherwise, I spend a lot of time at Grey’s or out of town,” Jay continued. “The King’s place,” he clarified, probably realizing everyone didn’t call the King by his first name.

That was the first I’d heard about the lady of the House.

“Will Lady Vitruvian be returning soon then?” I asked, cutting into my lamb.

“No,” he answered curtly.

“She’s visiting with her sister for a spell. The lady often visits her family’s estate,” he responded disinterestedly, prematurely ending a topic of conversation I’d hoped to latch onto.

“Oh” was all I managed to say in reply.

Our conversation dropped for a minute. The noise of our knives and forks on plates filled the void.

“We’ll start in the morning with your lessons,” Jay said, picking back up our conversation. “I should be around most mornings for those, at least until you pass your liaison exam. And I’ll make arrangements for when I cannot be.”

My heart palpitated. I quickly chewed and swallowed the food in my mouth.

“Lessons?” I asked, surprised.

I’d not been expecting any lessons, especially not ones with the high lord himself.

“*Lessons*,” Jay replied. “Although based on your good marks, I will need to limit our lessons to only those that are not well covered at university.”

I saw no reason to fake modesty, nodding my head in agreement. As part of the liaison program, there was a written test I had to pass. I wasn’t particularly concerned about passing the test. I’d always done well with school and tests before. But I agreed with Jay that there were areas I needed to study up on that had not been sufficiently covered at university.

“I’ll need to brush up on magical theory,” I admitted.

Jay nodded in agreement, running a thumb across the stubble under his chin.

“That’s an area that is never sufficiently covered at university, if at all. You’ll need to do a deep dive into the history and lineage of all the players at the High Court as well,” he added. “Although that is more for surviving your first year here at Court than for your written exam, I suppose.”

I would serve as House Vitruvian’s liaison for one year. That gave me one year to secure a job with House Vitruvian or one of the other Houses at the High Court. If I failed either the written test or to land a permanent position at the High Court, I’d have to head back to my small hometown, Harborview. But I wasn’t going to fail. Because I *wasn’t* going back to Harborview.

I wasn’t shy. But I wasn’t someone who talked endlessly either. We settled into a comfortable silence between bites and sips of wine, filling the gaps in conversation with small talk. Despite his forceful presence, over dinner, I found myself growing more at ease with him as I started to think of him less as High Lord Vitruvian and more as Jay.

We’d fallen into another lull of silence. I was thinking of Luke’s suspenders and how they had strained over the boulders of his muscled shoulders. I was wondering if Jay hid similarly bulging muscles under his finely tailored blue coat. Jay had unbuttoned the front of his coat but left it on during our meal. I subconsciously looked up from my plate and was startled to meet Jay’s smoldering gray eyes.

“I think we should probably head to bed,” he proclaimed.

“What?” I yelped guiltily, drawing my mind back from the path of what was hiding underneath Jay’s jacket.

Jay looked pointedly at the hand I had just used to cover yet another yawn.

“Your room is upstairs in the west wing,” he clarified, throwing his heather gray napkin onto the tabletop and standing.

We made our way from the parlor to the second floor of the manor. As we walked up the ascending staircase, the high lord wrapped his sizable hand around the knot at his neck. He shimmied it down, loosening his tie until he could reach the buttons underneath. Casually, as if he had done that very act hundreds, or perhaps thousands of times, he unbuttoned the first two buttons of his crisp white shirt, allowing the top of his tan, muscular chest to peek through.

I missed a step on the stairs, stumbling in my heels. I managed to catch myself on the handrail in time to prevent myself from falling forward, but I

over-corrected and began to fall backward. I felt the high lord behind me, his hands firmly grasping my elbows as he supported my weight against the front of his body.

“I have you,” he reassured me.

I looked up and over my shoulder at his chiseled jawline and nodded, embarrassed. Normally, I felt much more confident, both of myself and on my feet. But I found myself at a loss on both counts after finding myself in the protective arms of yet another man for the second time that day.

He righted me, his touch dropping to the curve of my lower back until I proved myself steady. I proceeded walking up the stairs with as much dignity as I could muster.

When we arrived at my room, Jay opened the heavy wooden door for me, holding his arm out for me to lead the way in. As I passed close by him, through the doorway, I thought his look lingered on my legs peeking out of my black, fitted skirt that hit just above the knees. Self-consciously, I reasoned that the high lord probably was just noticing the heels I wore because, as I looked around the room, I noted that my heels must be the most worn thing to have ever set foot in the bedroom.

That evening, I climbed into my gloriously overlarge, soft bed, having changed into my usual nighttime attire consisting of an overly large, comfy t-shirt and cheeky panties. Like most nights, I closed my eyes and the events of my day replayed in my mind.

*The headless high fae lord statue... Luke's smile... The way the high lord's large hand wrapped around the knot at his neck...*

I heard something like heels clicking on the marble floor and a woman's giggling coming from the top of the staircase between the east and west wings of the house. I think the noise faded toward Jay's wing. I drifted off to sleep thinking that there were definitely less-handsome lords I could have been assigned to as a liaison.

## *Alarie*

The next morning, I woke up, reveling in the feel of the cool, cotton sheets brushing over my legs. And then I just lay there, contemplating giving myself some credit, for once, for how hard I'd worked to get there. Not in that bed specifically, but House Vitruvian and the High Court.

Unlike most people who made it to the High Court just by being born into the right family, I'd *earned* my place at the High Court by graduating at the top of my class at university. Each year, the top student of the graduating class at my university in Harborview was given the opportunity to serve as liaison to a House in the Azure Court. Once, all the Courts of Valencia had a liaison program. But now, the Azure Court was the only Court that kept the initiative alive with any regularity.

Along with the one-year liaison position, the top student earned their title—*lady*, in my case—a small stipend, and a bit of land somewhere in the Kingdom. To officially complete the liaison program, there was a written test the liaison had to pass during their first year at Court. However, there was no guarantee of employment after successfully completing the first year as liaison. The liaison had to secure a position at the High Court on their own by the end of their first year.

So, yes, I'd earned my spot at the High Court. But, if I was giving out credit, then I guess I'd have to give some to my mother. After all, she was at least partially responsible for my drive to get where I was. Growing up, my mother had made it all too clear to me that I had no safety net. So, if I missed a step, there wouldn't be someone there to catch me. In my world, if I failed, failure was my only option. So, I didn't allow myself to fail.

I'd felt an overbearing need to escape from my hometown and everything I knew since I was a small child. Every decision I'd made from a young age was made with the intention of earning that liaison spot. Otherwise, I never would have found myself with the unbelievable opportunity to serve under Lord Vitruvian's tutelage. Because my family was poor, and I had mixed blood, and the people from my hometown just did not make it to the High Court that often.

I'm not pure high fae. My mother is an alluring lesser fae, a few inches shorter than me, with bright brown-and-gold eyes and beautiful fire-red hair. My mother's beauty had drawn the attention of a high fae soldier traveling through Harborview one evening many years ago, ensnaring them both in a single night of all-consuming passion.

Or, *at least*, that was how my mother liked to describe the night she met my father. I was skeptical of it really being the fairy tale she made it out to be. If it were, then I thought she would have wanted to talk about my father more than she did.

I never got the opportunity to know my father. And my mother had only spoken of him a handful of times in my entire life. On one such occasion, my mother had explained to me that I was part high fae in response to my question as to why I looked different from many of the other children in my small hometown, which largely consisted of lesser fae. I used to get teased by the other girls in school about my distinctly high fae features, but the boys never seemed to mind. I was thinner than the average lesser fae girl, which translated, as I got older, into a less voluptuous figure than that of a lesser fae woman.

"They're just jealous, Mandy. Ignore them," my mother had said coolly one evening after I came home from school upset.

The girls in my class had chosen to give me the cold shoulder and exclude me from their group that day—as they had done the day before and the day before that. I'd gone and played kickball with some boys instead.

"Mandy" was what everyone called me back home. I'm not sure how my grade school soccer coach made the jump from Armand to Mandy, but he did and everyone else did too. Even my own mother. I'd never cared for the nickname as a child, and I'd grown to dislike it even more as I got older, feeling that it was too bubbly and did not match my personality *at all*. But the nickname stuck. At least, until the day I moved away from it and everyone who knew it.

Maybe my mom was right, and the girls were “just jealous.” But that had never made me feel any better. My mom wasn’t exactly the coddling or maternal type. In fact, she’d rarely ever said or done anything during my entire childhood that could be considered comforting. My mother wasn’t unkind. She just didn’t really have it in her to dole out hugs and kisses and affection like the other mothers I saw. My mother was kind of distant, and even when I was a young child, she had treated me like a mini adult.

As a result, I grew up quick, and I grew up tough. Instead of trying to get to the bottom of whatever it was that kept me from making friends with the other girls my age, I’d taken my mom’s advice and ignored them. So, I didn’t have any girlfriends.

I didn’t really have a lot of friends, period, back home. I had mainly hung around with boys growing up. But once I decided to go for the liaison spot, my ambition placed a wedge between me and any hopes of real friendships. I consistently had to choose to do what I needed to do, not what I wanted to do, and that level of responsibility was just not relatable to most of the people my age, especially not the boys who just wanted to spend their afternoons at the beach crushing beers.

I rolled out of bed with a sigh, running my fingers through my long, silky brown hair. I threw on a pair of shorts under my oversized t-shirt and walked out onto the veranda adjacent to my bedroom. I saw one of the House’s lesser fae servants, Jena I assumed, using a broom that hovered in the air to beat the dirt out of several large rugs. I guessed that Jena, like many lesser fae, had some kind of magic that was particularly suited for caring for a house the size of the Vitruvian manor.

Even such a small showing of magic enamored me. By the time I was born, every fae’s magic, high fae or lesser, was diminished. It was not uncommon for fae born around the same time as me and after to exhibit no showing of magic at all. I’d never exhibited any kind of magical ability in my entire life. Whether I had specific abilities or not, all fae were said to have *some* magic, because magic was what made us immortal. At least, we *had been* immortal, before the fading started.

Looking out at the garden from my veranda, I thought about how in school and in life I’d always been good at doing what I needed to do. I decided right then and there that the High Court would be no different. I would do whatever it took to prosper as a lady of the High Court. I walked back into my room and started to get ready for my first day as liaison to

House Vitruvian.

\* \* \* \*

I finished my morning routine, dressing in a fitted, black pencil skirt that hit below my knees and a stretchy light-blue buttoned blouse, paired with nearly transparent black thigh-highs and black pointy-toed heels. The heels were a necessity for every outfit. I was a few inches shorter than most high fae women, so I wore heels that were a few inches taller than normal to compensate. Also, I hated the way pantyhose felt, so I usually opted for thigh-highs instead.

I felt myself flush under the gaze of his gray eyes as I walked into the breakfast foyer.

“Good morning, Jay,” I greeted him confidently, pretending that I regularly greeted high lords first thing in the morning.

He sat on the top of a stool at the breakfast bar, lounging in a three-piece blue suit like other men lounged in their favorite pair of sweats.

“Morning, Alarie,” Jay replied casually.

He gestured to the spread of food for me to choose from, explaining that the kitchen staff was at my disposal if I wanted something different. But I had no real need of the staff. I wasn’t used to having someone wait on me. I preferred a light breakfast most days, anyway, usually just coffee and some fresh fruit. A few lesser fae servants buzzed around the manor while we finished our breakfasts and coffee.

I spoke to Jay about my hometown, Harborview, over breakfast.

“Harborview’s just a few hours north of my estate in Breakpoint,” Jay commented.

I pressed my lips against the fresh strawberry in my hand, savoring its sweetness, before taking a bite. Even the fruit was better, and fresher, here at the High Court. I was well aware of the fact that Jay’s estate was in Breakpoint. Jay’s estate in Breakpoint was the seat of the Azure Court, one of the five courts of Valencia. The Azure Court was aptly named because it was home to the only Azurinium caves in the Kingdom. Azurinium was a blue glowing mineral found in caves in the cliffs facing the Azure Ocean. It was an extremely valuable power source—even more so with the magic failing—and was used for everything from powering carriages to powering clocks.

“Have you ever visited Breakpoint?” he asked.

I noticed his glance slide to my lips, and I self-consciously ran my tongue across my lower lip, wiping away the red juices of the strawberry that undoubtedly stained my lips.

I'd never had any reason to venture down the coast. I'd never really traveled anywhere in my life. I hadn't had enough money to do so. But I didn't mention that part to the high lord. As the owner of all Azurinium in Valencia, I didn't think he would understand not having enough money to travel just a few hours south.

After breakfast, Jay led me around the manor, since I'd not been given a tour the night before. The manor contained many rooms of different sizes, consisting of varied styles, for serving a variety of purposes—all of which we would go into as part of my lessons, Jay explained. Perhaps noticing my lack of enthusiasm—I'd never really taken to domestic duties like my mother thought I should—Jay assured me that formal hosting would be just a small part of my education with him. He would also thoroughly prepare me for the written liaison test and my time at the High Court.

We made our way into a private bar. I ran a hand over the polished brown wood of the bar top, admiring the high lord's collection of bottles. He casually mentioned it was mine to choose from any time I liked.

It was the library, where we would spend most of our time for my lessons—according to Jay—that was, by far, the most magnificent room in the entire manor. Lord Vitruvian's personal library was even more expansive than the library at my university; I took in the varied colors of book after book on the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined the walls of the room. I loved how the sunlight came through the full-length glass-paned window that served as the back wall of the library. I would be able to work in the library and not feel as though I was closeted inside all day.

We began my lesson for the day almost immediately upon entering the library.

"Sit," Jay said firmly but not unkindly, gesturing toward a large table in the middle of the room.

He explained that we would begin with the history of the Houses serving at the High Court before making our way into some more nuanced aspects of magical theory.

"I learned all about the five Courts at university," I said, hoping to head off some of the more elementary aspects of the lesson. And, if I were being honest with myself, itching to show the high lord what I thought I did best.



There was the High Court seated in Vlais and ruled by King Heroux himself. The Emerald Court was the seat of House Heroux before the King sat on the throne at the High Court. It sat in the Emerald Isle and was currently ruled by the King's son, Prince Nikolas Heroux. The Azure Court, Jay's Court, was seated in Breakpoint and under his dominion. The Ruby Court, found in Eaton in northern Valencia, was ruled by High Lord Rein. And then there was the Silver Court, located in the southern tip of Valencia, which was governed by Luke's father, High Lord Bellamy.

"And that, *my dear*, is why we are starting with the Court's history," Jay admonished.

Butterflies took flight and fluttered about in my chest. Whether from the high lord's words, *my dear*, or the fear of being wrong, I couldn't tell. I remained silent, waiting for further instruction from the high lord.

"There are six courts that you must know about. A fact commonly glossed over by our education system," he said, as if that explained the issue.

"Six. Six?" I repeated under my breath. "*Oh*, you mean the North Court," I replied, relieved that I was not totally ignorant of what he was referring to.

"The Diamond Court," he corrected. "Although, yes, Alarie, I guess you are correct. It has come to be known as just the North Court since you have been alive."

I did not know that the North Court was once called the Diamond Court. I had to admit that I knew almost nothing about the Diamond Court other than it was ruled by King Rexford Vandros and was located in Alancia, the kingdom north of Valencia.

"It's called the Diamond Court because there are diamond mines there?" I guessed, unwilling to give up on my efforts to show the high lord I possessed some kind of cleverness.

"That is *one* of the reasons," he said approvingly.

I felt myself brighten at the approbation in his deep voice.

"But let's take a step back. Do you know the reason why all the other courts are named what they are?"

I may not know much about the Diamond Court, but of course, I knew the reason behind the name of each of the other courts. I began to rattle them off.

"The High Court is named as such because it's the home of the High Council," I answered, like I was still in class at university.

“The Azure Court”—I inclined my head to the high lord—“is named after the Azurinium caves found there. The Emerald Court was given its name due to the gems found in that area, most notable among them the beautiful green emeralds. The Ruby Court was given its name because...” I hesitated, thinking that the next explanation I intended to give had always been thin. “The Ruby Court was given its name because King Heroux decreed it. And the Silver Court...”

I had stumbled across a hole in my knowledge I had not even known existed. I ran through the possibilities in my head. Silver wouldn’t be mined near Port City, where the Silver Court was located. It was on the coast, and all the mining of silver in Valencia occurred near the Ruby Court.

I looked up at the high lord, my silence an admission that I did not know the reason behind the Silver Court’s name. There was a knowing half-smirk on his face, as if he knew this was where I would get hung up in my answer.

“*Alarie*,” the high lord began, and his tone was resolute but not harsh. “I know you’re brilliant.”

Despite the humbling position I found myself in, I still felt a flush of warmth at his words of praise.

“That’s why I claimed you for my own House instead of allowing you to go to another House in my Court.”

My hometown, Harborview, was part of the Azure Court. Each year, a student from each court was awarded the opportunity to join the liaison program. But being accepted into the liaison program did not always guarantee a spot at the High Court. Sometimes, a high lord like Jay would keep the liaison for their own House. But often, especially when it came to House Vitruvian, the liaison would be assigned to a lesser House within the high lord’s court. For instance, Jay could have placed me at the Azure Court or passed on me altogether and given the lord in Harborview, Lord Tildon, a liaison for the year. I was beyond ecstatic when I found out that I was placed with House Vitruvian at the High Court.

“But,” he continued, “you’ll find that there is a thing or two that I can teach you. I dare say that you may even learn some things from me that cannot be found in *any* book.”

His last statement was made matter-of-factly and not boastfully.

Sufficiently chastised, I began to admit that Jay was right. But he moved on, apparently without the need to extract such a concession from me.

“The Emerald Court is named not only for its emeralds because, as you

know, the M is rich in other precious gems as well, but also its emerald-green waters. Similarly, the Azure Court is known for its azure ocean.”

“The Ruby Court...” he paused, “well you weren’t far off. You see, after the Diamond Court separated from the rest of the courts of Valencia, Grey and I had to decide what to do with the realm in the north, this side of the border. A new court was preferable to just tacking the land on to the large amount of land owned by the Crown. The truth is that we had already decided that the new court would go to House Rein.”

“We were speaking to High Lord Rein and his son, Rhett, about the new court, and Rhett is the one who came up with the idea of the Ruby Court. He said rather matter-of-factly that he had spent hundreds of years establishing his wardrobe in various shades of House Rein’s red and he wouldn’t start over, not even for a court of his own to inherit someday.”

“And when I pointed out that rubies have nothing to do with the resources from the land in the north, Rhett pointed out my next point regarding the Silver Court. The Silver Court does not have anything to do with the mining of silver, which, as you likely know, actually takes place in the realm of the Ruby Court. Instead, it’s named after the silver coin said to glimmer between every handshake that occurs at the port in Port City.”

It was fascinating to hear the backstory on events I’d only read about in my textbooks.

“You said that diamond mining was one of the reasons that the North Court was named the Diamond Court. What are the other reasons?” I asked, more interested in a history lesson than I’d ever been before.

The high lord seemed pleased by the fact that I’d remembered to follow up on his earlier point.

“The people from that area, from Alancia, they are hard people, Alarie. They are strong; some would say, even unbreakable, just like diamonds. It’s an apt name, I assure you,” the high lord said. “But do you know what resource, more valuable and more precious than even diamonds, originates from the Diamond Court?”

“I... I don’t know,” I admitted eagerly.

“Iron,” Jay replied simply.

The word hung in the air between us. This was the exact kind of information he had alluded to—the kind of information that I would be able to learn from him that could not be found in any textbook. Information regarding iron, one of the few things fatal to fae, was not commonly known,

much less shared with someone like me.

My interest piqued, I asked, “Did that impact the war?” And then, without waiting for an answer to my first question, I followed up excitedly with, “That’s why we had to put up the wall, isn’t it?”

Jay gave me an appraising look out of the corner of his eye.

“Very good, Alarie. The quick answer to both of your questions is yes.”

Like back when I was at university, the warmth of satisfaction at being right washed over me.

I knew the war between Valencia and Alancia ended about twenty-three years ago, a couple of months before I was born. The war started with the Diamond Court breaking from Valencia and creating its own nation, Alancia. The war ended with a permanent magical barrier forever separating the two warring kingdoms.

“Grey and I came up with the idea of the wall, in part, in answer to the unevenly matched supply of iron weapons that favored the north,” he explained.

I looked at Jay, awed by the revelation of his personal involvement in something I’d learned about in my textbooks. Excitedly, I waited for him to continue with his story.

“But there’s a lot more to that story that we aren’t getting into just now.”

A shadow of a smile passed over the reserved high lord’s face in response to my visible disappointment.

“War is not the topic of today’s lesson, dear. Today, we are discussing the High Council and the Houses on the High Council.” And with that proclamation, Jay continued with my lesson.

I knew that House Vitruvian was an old and well-respected House consisting of a long line of pure high fae high lords and ladies. High Lord Vitruvian had made a name for himself, long before he became Contra to the King, as a businessman and a scholar, mixing the two in a skilled manner that made House Vitruvian flush with resources, both in riches as well as status among those who mattered most at the High Court. With the magic dwindling, the Kingdom had become more reliant upon Azurinium to help with everyday tasks. I could only imagine what this surge in demand had meant for Jay in terms of riches.

When the High Court was established a little over twenty-five years ago. Jay was appointed the Court’s first Contra. The Contra was part of a system of checks and balances established within the hierarchy of the High Court.

Fundamentally, the King's power was absolute. He was the ultimate arbiter of all issues in the Kingdom of Valencia. The Contra, second in power in Valencia to the King alone was, by design, meant to be a rival of the King's, someone who would not act sycophantically and instead would challenge the King when necessary to serve the best interest of the Kingdom.

"The high lords, *or ladies*," Jay added, sounding less than pleased, "who rule the courts of Valencia make up the King's High Council and serve as immediate advisors to the King."

The topic of the High Council brought several questions to my mind. Perhaps noticing that I appeared as though wanting to interject, Jay paused in his colloquy.

"High Lady Tragon, she doesn't have her own court though, right?" I asked.

"That's right," he confirmed.

"Then how is she on the High Council?"

"Lila Tragon serves at the King's pleasure," he said in a not wholly unkind but clipped tone I was already getting used to.

"I should amend my prior statement. The Houses of those who govern the courts of Valencia are guaranteed a seat on the High Council. The King may, of course, appoint any others whom he believes will benefit the Kingdom."

Jay's answer was unfulfilling. He was essentially saying that High Lady Tragon served on the High Council because the King wanted her to, which I understood to be the King's prerogative. But I still didn't understand *why* the King wanted Lady Tragon on the High Council. What did she have to offer? However, sensing that Jay's evasive answer had been somewhat purposeful, I chose to move on to my next question.

"Since King Heroux rules at the High Court, does that make Prince Heroux high lord of the Emerald Court?"

"No," Jay responded, his foreboding mood seeming to lessen. "Nik is not part of the High Council, so he is not a high lord. Although you're correct, Nik does rule at the Emerald Court while his father sits on the throne of the High Court. And he is next in the line of succession for the throne."

I nodded, already thinking about my next question, the question I had been thinking of ever since I learned that Luke's last name was Bellamy.

"If Luke's father is on the High Council, then why does Luke work for your House?" I asked, somewhat timidly, knowing that my last question was

not strictly related to the topic of our lesson.

“That, *my dear*, is a question best asked of Luke. But I can tell you that he is a very valuable asset for House Vitruvian and, on my part, a friend.”

Jay ended his lesson for the day, leaving me with many books to set upon before my lesson with him the next day. The texts did not look like the books from my university and instead seemed to be books of limited circulation from Jay’s personal library.

Flipping through the pages, I noticed that some of the texts even had handwritten notes, presumably made by Jay. The prospect of getting to learn history shaped by the high lord’s hands was so enticing that I could hardly wait for my next lesson with him.

## *Jay*

“I need to be out of pocket for a few days,” I said, not looking up from the ledger I wrote in.

Luke lounged on the chaise across from my desk, a hand behind his head and his feet crossed at his ankles. He didn’t look surprised by my announcement. He knew I’d been traveling a lot lately.

“Up north again?” he asked.

Luke didn’t try to pry into why I had been going north so much recently. He knew that I’d tell him if and when I was ready to.

I nodded in confirmation, closing the leather-bound book I was writing in and then placing it in a drawer in my desk.

A piece of paper appeared in the wooden inbox on my desk, sent there by one of the few scribes left with magic whom I still trusted. The constant influx of correspondence I received was a painful reminder that my powers were not what they once were. If I still had my full powers, such written bits of information would have been superfluous.

I grabbed the note without reading it and shoved it into the interior pocket of my dark sapphire-blue suit jacket, knowing that whatever the message was, it wasn’t urgent. Anything pressing would have been delivered in person.

“Look after Alarie while I’m away?” I asked.

“Not a problem,” Luke replied, a little *too* eagerly, sitting up in his chair.

“*Luke*,” I admonished, standing.

Luke looked back at me, his golden eyebrows raised, feigning innocence.

“I know how much you and Rhett love fresh... *faces* at the High Court,” I noted wryly. I made my way to the front of my oversized dark oak desk.

Luke and his best friend, the son of High Lord Rein and a playboy to boot, could be seen around the Court with a new young woman on their arm at each and every event.

“But *not* Alarie,” I said, meticulously straightening my cufflinks. “Ok?” I added, forcing some modicum of friendliness into my voice, making it seem as though it were a question—although we both knew I wasn’t asking.

Luke stood as well, making a show out of pulling at a nonexistent wrinkle in his crisp white shirt while he considered his options.

“I think she may be a good fit for the House, Luke,” I continued, my tone edging toward sternness.

Luke and I usually saw eye to eye on things. I *usually* didn’t have to make him come around to seeing my point on things.

“I don’t need you two scaring her off,” I added.

I had not accepted a liaison for many years. I had neither the time nor the desire to train them. For the last fifteen years or so, Luke had worked for my House and had filled a role none of my other agents could fulfill. But I knew that eventually Luke was going to have to leave House Vitruvian. Luke’s parents severely underestimated the value of his set of skills at the High Court, but they would eventually realize his true worth.

Luke’s particular repertoire of skills was particularly useful for me. As Contra and spymaster to the King, I was in constant need of information. With my diminishing powers, I now found myself relying upon a network of eyes and ears as my source of insider knowledge of the High Court happenings. And when Luke smiled at someone—lord or lady, it didn’t really seem to matter—information flowed more freely. Just having Luke in the room at every court function had reaped bounties for me over the years. Once his parents realized how mistaken they were about him, I had no doubt that Luke’s resources would be turned to House Bellamy’s benefit.

It was too soon to tell, but I was feeling optimistic about my decision to take on Alarie as a liaison this year. I’d expected her to be intelligent, based on her grades alone, but it was her cunning nature that I was most pleased by when I thought of Alarie as mine to mold. Given enough time and training with me, Alarie may even have the skills to replace Luke when it came down to it.

Luke acquiesced to my reasoning on Alarie. He knew she would be



around for at least one year, which was longer than any relationship he had had in the last several decades.

“What about you, Jay?” Luke asked suspiciously.

Although I was married, Lady Vitruvian and I had an arrangement of sorts. She stayed away from the High Court most of the time, by her own preference, and I was free to roam as I saw fit. I was judicious, but Luke knew that, as much hell as I gave him and Rhett about their serial dating, I was no stranger to nighttime visitors of my own. I gave Luke a sideways glance.

“I’m not blind, if that’s what you’re getting at,” I replied, making my way to the door of my study.

I reminisced on some of the tantalizing ideas I’d come up with upon first seeing Alarie before I’d realized that she was my liaison.

“But I’m not that stupid, either,” I said, shaking my head, as if that would remove my thoughts of her lips from my mind.

And that was as much of an explanation as I was willing to give Luke.

“I’m assuming you can control that friend of yours as well,” I said, referring to Rhett.

I walked out of the study without waiting for an answer to my last question that, again, was not truly a question.

## *Alarie*

Other than Jena and Luke, I did not see many people over the next few days while Jay was away. I had not expected to see Jay on a regular basis. After all, he was Contra to the King and undoubtedly had more important things to do than train his lowest House member. But I'd liked the idea of him being around for my lessons. I continued with my lessons, working through the stack of books and papers I found in the library with a note from Jay instructing me on how to proceed each day in his absence.

*Lady Alarie*, the note read in Jay's slanted masculine scrawl. I still wasn't used to being addressed as a lady of the High Court. *I'll be gone for the remainder of the week. Focus your studies on House Tragon today and then move to House Heroux. Yours very truly, Jay.*

*Yours.* I've always considered "yours very truly" to be an overly familiar sign-off and never understood its usage in professional correspondence. But it was not an altogether uncommon, if dated, practice. Shrugging the thought off, I began to skim the text before me. *Lila Mouchard is from a town on the northern border between Valencia and Alancia... she married into House Tragon... the Mouchard estate is located in northern Valencia...* I wondered what Lord Vitruvian was doing at that moment and when I would get to see him again.

\* \* \* \*

"Morning, Al," Luke said, making himself at home and taking a big bite of the toast from my plate.

I looked up from my book. It was the third morning Luke had come to spend with me while Jay was away.

“Morning, Luke,” I greeted, rolling my eyes and going to grab more food.

If Luke was going to join me for breakfast, all the food on my plate would not be enough for him, much less for both of us.

“What do you have going today?” Luke asked, the grin on his face already telling me that he had something in mind.

“Still working through the reading materials Jay left me. Why?” I replied, interested.

“All right, we can get some work done. But then we’re going off campus for lunch,” he offered.

“Just lunch, huh?” I said.

But I acquiesced, looking forward to getting out of the manor. After finishing up our breakfast, we made our way toward the library.

“Let’s work on the veranda,” I suggested.

Luke took a moment to consider my proposal, no doubt thinking about how hot it was outside in the summer in Vlaise.

“Come on, Luke! It’s too nice to sit inside all day,” I pleaded.

He gave in, and we headed toward the veranda that looked over the garden. It was hot. *And humid*. I missed the breeze from back home. In Vlaise it was just hot, with no breeze and no escape.

“Alarie, I’m sweating my fucking face off. Can’t we go inside?” Luke complained after just ten minutes of sitting outside.

“Well, maybe if you were seasonably dressed like me, you wouldn’t be so hot,” I teased, pointing out the contrast of my casual white skirt and tank to the full suit he wore. “I think it feels amazing out here,” I retorted, turning my face toward the sun and basking in its warmth.

Luke stared at me, eyebrows raised, unconvinced. With the back of my hand, I nonchalantly patted at the light sheen of sweat forming on my neck and chest, pretending like I was unfazed by the warm weather.

Giving in, Luke said, “Beats the hell out of being cold.”

He rolled his sleeves up and unbuttoned the first several buttons of his shirt, accepting his fate and getting comfortable. He spent his time next to me reviewing correspondence and taking notes. When he finished with that, he took a book out of his bag and began reading.

“All right, enough of that,” Luke declared after a couple of hours.

“Lunch!” he said, lithely popping up to his feet.

“Ok, let’s go!” I said, enthusiastically shutting the book before me.

“We can head down to Bar Louie. You like beer and pretzels, right?” he asked.

“Is that a serious question?” I asked.

We made our way out of town, away from the High Court. The High Court was all tall spires and ancient alabaster buildings interspersed with ivy-clad walls and gardens that went on for miles. But outside of its perimeter, just a quick walk away, there was a town of a vastly different character. Town probably wasn’t the most accurate word to describe Vlaise. Harborview, where I grew up, was a town. We had a few places to go back home, but the town of Harborview mainly centered around the beach. Vlaise, on the other hand, was a city. Shops, restaurants, and bars lined the city’s streets, almost overlapping one another. Occasionally, a thin vertical townhome was squeezed in between two businesses. People with their hands full of groceries or, in some instances, tankards of lager, filled the streets.

“So, what am I supposed to do when I’m not studying?” I asked, turning to Luke.

I’d heard that a liaison’s first year at the High Court could be grueling. Some liaisons were treated little better than house servants. Others were assigned menial research tasks or else shipped off entirely from the High Court and placed in the court of some remote House.

“For now, just have fun. And keep your eyes and ears open,” Luke replied.

I couldn’t believe it. I went from going to school and studying all day and working all night to “just have fun?”

“Really?” I asked, raising my eyebrows in disbelief. “That’s it?”

“Knowledge and connections, Al. That’s the currency here at the High Court,” Luke explained. “Not silver. Not gold. Anyone can be rich.”

That was easy for Luke to say. The Silver Court was second in wealth only to the Crown itself.

“But very few people actually know what’s going on at the High Court,” he said. “So, yeah, make some connections, build some relationships, listen, and report back.”

The structures in Vlaise were not as big or tall or as spread apart as those at the High Court. But there were still nice places to be found in Vlaise. Bar Louie was not one of them.

The bar was a small building wedged between two larger establishments. A simple wooden sign reading “Bar Louie” hung outside its austere door. It appeared that there were living quarters above the bar, perhaps where the proprietor resided. Inside of the bar, I was pleased to find that it was clean. Simple but clean. Dart boards covered the wall to the immediate right of the door; a polished wood bar sat in the far back, and a couple of pool tables were off to the left. It looked like there was a patio off the back that led to a larger, outside area.

“Look who it is!” Luke barked the minute we walked through the door. “Rhett, you ugly bastard, what are you doing at a bar in the middle of the day?”

I laughed. I’d only known Luke for a few days, but when I was around him, I laughed more than I’d ever laughed and about nothing in particular.

Rhett was far from ugly, I thought, taking in the tall high fae. He had smooth, golden hair, robins’ eggs for eyes, and hands the size of saucer plates. If anything, he was almost *too* handsome. He was dressed as immaculately as Luke usually was, except he wore a blood-red tailored suit where Luke wore blue.

“Is everyone at the High Court just ridiculously good looking, then?” I asked bewildered, voicing the thought I’d had thought several times since coming to the High Court.

Rhett bellowed, clearly pleased that he had invoked such a response upon meeting me for the first time.

“Yeah, yeah. Rhett’s dreamy.” Luke sighed. “Anyway, lunch beers all around!” he declared.

I rolled my eyes. I knew from the moment Luke proposed lunch that we weren’t getting any work done after.

“I’ll grab them,” I volunteered, making my way to the bar before Luke could object.

I came back to the middle of a story that Rhett was relaying to Luke with enthusiasm.

“And then she just slapped me!” Rhett exclaimed happily.

“Who slapped you?” I asked, setting down the three heavy mugs of lager.

I was intrigued more by Rhett’s glee than the fact that he had been slapped.

“James. Lady James Morrigan,” he said, probably remembering I was

still new to Court. “And then she said I could be a real bastard sometimes. Can you believe it?” he asked, thrilled.

Luke gave his best friend a look that said he could easily believe it.

“And you’re happy about this because...” I asked.

“He likes the rejection as much as he likes the, well, ya know,” Luke said, lifting his eyebrows suggestively.

“What he’s not telling you, Al, is that in my past life, I was even more irresistible than I am now,” Rhett said, wagging his eyebrows at me playfully. “I know, I know,” he said sarcastically, like it was hard to believe.

*It was.* Rhett already seemed perfect. It was difficult to imagine how his good looks and easy banter could be even more consuming than they already were.

“The truth is that women became infatuated with me. It was *exhausting*,” Rhett explained. “I could never, you know, just *date*. But now, now that my curse has been lifted, and my magic has faded somewhat, the ladies just think I’m really, *really* good looking,” Rhett finished with an irresistible grin on his handsome face and a twinkle in his eye that left no doubt in my mind that he was telling the truth.

I rolled my eyes again. They were going to get stuck like that if I kept spending time with these guys.

“Oh, is that all? Really, *really* good looking?” I asked.

Rhett nodded his head emphatically.

“What’s your endgame, then? You just want to be a charming bastard?” I asked.

“Well, bastard was James’s word, not mine. But yeah, I think that’s what I was able to convince her of before it was all said and done,” Rhett replied, giving me his best self-satisfied grin.

Luke raised his eyebrows at me with an amused expression on his handsome face as if to say, “*You asked.*”

I’d never heard anyone be so open about their own magic lessening, much less be happy about it. In most company, it was considered irreverent to even intimate that someone’s powers had faded.

The three of us spent the afternoon at Bar Louie, shooting darts and drinking beer. Luke walked me back to the manor in the last few minutes of sunlight remaining in the day.

“See! You thought I was going to keep you out all night. But here you are, home by sundown, because I’m a gentleman and scholar!” Luke bragged.

“Ok, scholar,” I said jokingly. “You only have me home by sundown because the sun stays up until almost nine o’clock on these long summer days.”

“A technicality, m’lady,” he exclaimed.

“And as far as a gentleman—”

Luke leaned in, giving me a discreet kiss on the cheek, stopping any further teasing from me. He flashed me once more with his signature smile and left me in the foyer overflowing with the warm feel of the summer evening and his lips on my skin.

## *Alarie*

“I’m heading to House Heroux this afternoon,” Jay announced to me as he topped off my coffee, the smell of the fresh brew permeating through the room.

He poured my coffee from the same glass French press he had poured my coffee from the last several weeks.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked, pretending not to be disappointed that he wouldn’t be spending the day with me in the library.

Jay traveled a fair amount. But on the days when he was home, he usually spent breakfast with me and then time afterward in the library for my lessons. My lessons had expanded beyond any content that could be found in textbooks. Jay had started to teach me skills that he found useful in his agents at the High Court—how to listen without speaking, when to speak without saying anything, when to use a smile or a touch of the arm instead of words.

I had to admit that I had nursed a bit of a schoolgirl crush for Jay. He could be stern with me but only in a way that pushed me to do better and try harder. He was distant but never unkind, and I couldn’t help but wonder as to what was underneath his high lord facade.

But I knew my crush was just that—a silly crush and nothing more. There were always people going into and out of the manor when Jay was in town, messengers and agents who came to report to the high lord. But I also heard and saw the many women coming and going from the manor when Jay was home. I could tell from the hushed tones and clicking of heels that disappeared down to his wing of the manor late at night that those visits were of a different nature.



I wasn't surprised, honestly—there was no sign that Lady Vitruvian lived in the manor. She was always gone and then there was the way Jay talked about her, referring to her as simply “the lady” most of the time. It all started to make sense. He was circumspect, but he didn't exactly try to hide the women who ran through his bedroom week after week. All signs pointed toward his marriage being something more of form rather than substance, the kind of arrangement I knew was not uncommon among those at the High Court, due to the unions that often occurred for reasons other than love.

“Just a High Council meeting,” he responded, as if regular meetings with the King were something to be casually thrown about.

Then I remembered that for Jay, meetings with the King *were* everyday occurrences. I had picked up on the fact that Jay was not only Contra but also a good friend to the King.

“And you're coming with me,” the high lord commanded casually.

I perked up at this unexpected announcement. I'd spent most of my time at the High Court so far studying in Jay's library for my liaison exam. What little time I wasn't studying, I spent hanging out with Luke and Rhett at the bars and restaurants away from the High Court that they referred to as “off campus.”

“It'll be just the High Council meeting with the King,” he clarified. “But the Houses will bring their favorite liaisons, advisors, counselors, and there will be an informal meeting of sorts between them as well.”

My stomach clenched at the thought of being one of Jay's “favorites.” Then I internally chided myself for not being fully over my crush on the high lord, after all.

I realized the meeting would be a test of sorts to see if I was ready to be thrown in with the wolves at the High Court. Although the only official test that I knew of to complete the liaison program was the written test, I knew that to succeed as a liaison, I had to do more than make good marks. This part of my role as liaison was what Luke and Jay had spent most of their time preparing me for lately. They'd armed me with insider knowledge of every House and every member of every House—who were allies, who were at odds, the internal power struggles within Houses. But they also shared knowledge with me of a more intimate nature—the state of a lord's marriage, tension regarding lines of succession, financial troubles, the kind of stuff most people didn't talk about openly.

*I was ready.* This battle of the minds was exactly what I had pictured in

my head all those years ago when I had set my sights on the liaison spot.

“Sounds good,” I responded, downplaying the anticipation I felt. “You’ll have to give me a few minutes to change, though. I dressed for the library, not House Heroux, this morning.”

Jay gave my outfit an appraising look. I wore an asymmetrical gossamer skirt that showed the top of one of my thighs through a high slit. My skin burned under his attentive gaze, but I didn’t shy away.

“I’ll be here,” he responded coolly, freeing me of his commanding presence.

I went upstairs to change and get ready for my day at House Heroux. Although it had only been a few weeks, I had an extensive new wardrobe, compliments of the high lord. After my first lesson with him, I’d awoken to a box with a pair of exquisite heels inside that had been slipped into my room over the night. Then one evening, I returned to my room for the night to find an entirely new ensemble of the finest dresses, skirts, blouses, heels, and also more intimate items—thigh-highs, lacy nightdresses, and silky, frilly, lacy, matching bra and panty sets.

My style was simple and sexy—a look I’d curated, knowing I didn’t have the resources and, honestly, the interest to indulge in trendier items. I found the latest style of clothing to be restricting and often spent too much time worrying whether I was going to have some kind of wardrobe malfunction and end up showing even more skin than I intended. My new clothes had a lot more strings, slits, plunging necklines, and sheer fabrics than my prior wardrobe. However, my new wardrobe was more in line with the style of the High Court, which veered toward sexy and minimal skin coverage.

I had thanked the high lord the following morning for my new wardrobe, but he made very little of the gift and went back to his work. I was thankful that he had not made much fanfare out of the gift. The truth was that it was difficult for me to accept gifts. I had a fierce independent streak that didn’t allow me to accept help or gifts from others. I’d never wanted to be in anyone’s debt for anything, so if I couldn’t afford it on my own, I just made do without, and if I couldn’t do something on my own, I found another way to make it work.

The fact that the high lord had probably gifted me the wardrobe for his own benefit more than that of mine made the present a little easier to accept. As a representative of House Vitruvian, he needed everything about me to

reflect the excellence of his House, and I guessed that the wardrobe I'd brought to the High Court didn't meet his standards.

I usually leaned into black in my clothing choices, but other than my undergarments, my new wardrobe was almost entirely shades of blue, the color of House Vitruvian. I slid on a thin, white silk bra and a matching thong. Then I pulled on a pair of tall, nude stilettos that came to a point at the toe and buckled around my ankle. I wore one of my new dresses, a dark royal blue number, form-fitting, that hit mid-thigh, with a sheer silk overlay that went to my ankles. The hem was shorter and the neckline was a bit deeper than I would have gone with normally, but I would fit right in with the other ladies at the High Court.

\* \* \* \*

I caught a glimpse of the King as he headed through the expansive room at House Heroux. He had an overbearing figure and was tall, not quite as lean as Lord Vitruvian, with tawny brown hair curling past his ears and sky-blue eyes. Jay followed the King, and as he walked through the room, each conversation he passed by was extinguished just short of his arrival, like their words were a fire and his very presence sucked all the oxygen from the room.

The King and his Contra met each other in their last few paces and walked shoulder to shoulder toward double heavy, wooden doors until reaching the threshold, at which point Jay paused as if just remembering that it was not he who was King. Jay allowed the King to go in first before leading the way for the others. High Lord Rein moved into the room after Jay, followed by High Lady Tragon, her shoulder-length auburn hair disappearing behind the closed doors. I noted that no one appearing to be Luke's father was there for the High Council meeting.

With Jay no longer in sight, the conversations in the room started back up with renewed vigor. Luke appeared next to me while I still stared at the doors the High Council had disappeared into.

"Ah, welcome to the inner circle, Lady Armand," Luke joked, beaming with a smile.

"Lord Bellamy, how very nice to see you again," I replied, picking up on his use of my title and copying his formality.

"The pleasure's *all mine*, my lady," Luke quipped, a playful look in his eye.

I subconsciously matched his smile with one of my own. I normally wasn't a very smiley person, but when Luke flashed me one of his smiles, I didn't think anyone could resist matching it.

"Look, here's the deal," Luke whispered, dropping the lord act and leaning into me.

He placed his large hand on my lower back and pulled me into a hug, pretending like we were still exchanging pleasantries.

"If I would've known Jay was bringing you, we could've pre-gamed. But this room of prim and proper lords and ladies is quickly going to devolve into a pit of flirtatious vipers. So, like we've discussed, flirt and imply and suggest and use the information we have been feeding you, but *never* give up anything useful. And if you find yourself in a tight spot, catch my eye and I'll come save you."

Pulling out of the hug, Luke hovered his mouth near my ear. His warm breath on my neck caused a shiver to run down my spine.

"But, Al, most of all, have some fun. I *know* you're going to fucking kill at this," he whispered.

And with that last comment, Luke broke apart from our seemingly friendly embrace and laughed like I'd said something funny. He discreetly raised his eyebrows at me as if to say, "*Here we go*," before moving into the throng of the High Council's elites.

I took in a deep breath, trying to gather myself in the absence of his smile, his laugh, and his unshakable confidence. The other men looked at Luke with thinly veiled envy, and the ladies stared at me, also envious, no doubt wondering why I deserved the attention of the suffocatingly charming young lord.

I returned my mind to the task before me. This was a situation I felt perfectly comfortable in. It turned out that high fae lords and ladies were no different from the lesser fae I grew up with in Harborview in this regard. I knew how to use the eyes of the lords that lingered on me to my advantage, and I knew every lady in there would hate me for it. I approached the crowd with a self-assured smirk.

"Where are you from, love?" my first prospect asked.

By High Court standards, he was an ordinary man in looks, especially when compared to the likes of Jay or Luke or Rhett. But I could tell from the way he swaggered toward me that he was oblivious to his unremarkable nature. As he reached my side, I gifted with him a coy smile.

“I’m from Harborview, *love*,” I imitated. I caught a few sneers out of the corner of my eye in response to my admission that I was from somewhere as provincial as my small, beachy hometown. “And who might you be?” I asked.

“Jeremiah Thierry, but you can call me Jer,” he said with a grin.

*Thierry*, I ran through the encyclopedia in my head, developed from my recent lessons from Luke and the high lord. A distant cousin to the Crown, but one in the King’s good graces. That explained the overconfidence. But it also explained why he was the first person to approach me. I was wearing the blue of House Vitruvian, and House Thierry was friendly with House Vitruvian as well.

“Jer, who’s your new friend?” another man asked, moving to stand next to Jer.

No matter how different things were at the High Court from Harborview, some things would always remain the same. It was a universal truth that, as the new girl at Court, I was going to be more interesting than a known commodity.

Luke walked up to me about an hour later.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

I looked at him, unsure that I should leave before the high lord.

“There’s nothing to be gained here at this point. And they’re going to take forever in there.” Luke jerked his head toward the room where the King and his High Council were still holed up.

“We’ve gotten everything we’re going to get out of this lot”—he nodded his head toward the other lords and ladies still in the room—“and Jay will be in there with the King hours more.”

I tended to agree with Luke’s assessment. I’d accomplished little more that evening than establishing with the other House agents that I would not be bulldozed, like some may have believed, just because of my humbler origins. I’d also confirmed that Luke was a man among knaves and everyone, even his own House agents, thought Cole Tragon was a petulant twat.

“Yeah, ok. Let’s go, Luke,” I replied.

As we walked out of the King’s manor, Luke playfully nudged me with his elbow.

“Come on, Al, you had fun in there, didn’t you?”

I gave him a thoughtful look out of the corner of my eye before breaking into a crooked smile.

“It did feel pretty damn easy,” I confided in him.

“Of course, it did,” he said, giving me a wide smile. “You’re a natural, just like me,” he bragged. “But let’s talk about Jay,” he continued in a more serious tone, wrapping one arm around my shoulders as we continued to walk.

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Jay’s name, and I internally reprimanded myself. It was beyond time for me to accept that Jay was never going to think of me in that way.

“He can be very particular about his briefings. Don’t try to give him just the high-level details. You get into the nitty-gritty with him. If someone gave you a look, and you thought it seemed off, you tell him. And don’t, *under any circumstances*, say *anything* nice about House Tragon,” Luke warned.

“Why?” I asked, thinking back to the negativity I’d picked up from the high lord during my lesson mentioning House Tragon. I could have guessed about the high lord’s demand for detail before Luke’s admonition, but I wasn’t sure what the high lord’s issue was with House Tragon.

“Ah, well, let’s just say the high lord believes that High Lady Tragon was too friendly with the north at one point during the war, and he’ll not be persuaded otherwise,” Luke answered. “And her son definitely hasn’t done anything to help their reputation.”

I tried to think back on everything I’d read about High Lady Tragon recently. Her husband had died in the last war, and shortly after, she’d become high lady, the only high lady ever appointed to the High Council. She was from a northern border town, and House Tragon was located along the border as well. Location alone didn’t implicate the high lady of impermissible northern ties, though. House Rein was also located in the north and was known as one of the most loyal Houses to Valencia and King Heroux. I knew I was missing something.

“Don’t think too hard on it, Al,” Luke joked. “Work’s over for the day. Let’s go have some fun!” he said, squeezing his arm around me and pulling me closer into his body.

I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Leave the new kid in the dark. Guess I’ll have to find out on my own,” I quipped, pulling my long hair to the side and tucking under Luke’s arm.

## *Jay*

“Grey, the discontent among the lesser fae continues to grow,” I warned King Heroux.

The discontent of the lesser fae was not *new* news. The issues with the lesser fae, like most issues in Valencia over the last quarter century, could be traced back to the dying magic. The magic of Valencia began to dim around twenty-three years ago, shortly after the conclusion of the war with Alancia. The dimming was so gradual at first that many did not notice at all.

The most conspicuous magical abilities were the first to noticeably diminish. Those with abilities to magically travel people and objects with the power of their minds could not travel the same amount or distance as they once could. Healers could not pull off the miracles they once could. However, these more discernible abilities tended to belong to the high fae, and they were very circumspect about revealing the diminution of their power. Eventually, all abilities, high fae and lesser fae alike, were perceptibly impacted, and no one could relegate this fact to the shadows.

The lesser fae’s magic fading, in particular, caused a chain reaction in the Kingdom. Daily transit, as well as the supply chain around Valencia, depended upon carriages powered by the magic of lesser fae transporters. The lesser fae used to be able to simply instill their transportation power into the carriage and send the carriage’s contents on their way. But, as the magic began to die, the power of transporters had to be supplemented with Azurinium, which was plentiful enough at my Court but otherwise limited throughout the Kingdom. The effects of the decline in easy transportation further exacerbated the already impacted resources in Valencia. Lesser fae

with magical harvesting abilities could no longer harvest a crop with the snap of their fingers. Lesser fae with hunting abilities found their fish nets empty and their arrows unused in their quiver. This led to a shortage of food in some communities, which eventually impacted the distribution of all resources in Valencia.

“My King, you can count on House Mouchard to quell any disruptions along the northern border,” High Lady Tragon said sycophantically.

The muscles in my jaw jumped. The high lady pushed the King toward conflict with the lesser fae at every possible opportunity. She thought that a conflict with the lesser fae would give her an opportunity to elevate the status of her maiden House, House Mouchard, which was located along the northern border between Alancia and Valencia and would be strategically indispensable in such a conflict. It was a reckless power-grab.

“Grey, there is nothing that *needs* to be quelled at this time,” I said, ignoring the high lady’s comment.

It was true that high fae and lesser fae, once united by the common cause to defeat Alancia, found themselves once again at odds after the war. The lesser fae, who once stood shoulder to shoulder with the high fae during the war effort, quickly found themselves relegated to their pre-war roles in the Kingdom. After the war, the high fae moved back to their lavish coastal estates and their opulent manors at the High Court, and the diminished lesser fae were once again consigned to their meager existence in small towns and as servants to the high fae.

The divide between the high fae and the lesser fae became visceral around the time of Queen Heroux’s passing. Queen Heroux had been a beautiful mixed fae with liquid black hair and deep dark green eyes. As immortals, there were very few things that could bring a fae true death—essentially, rare magic or specifically crafted iron weapons or some combination thereof. We did not get sick, we were rarely injured outside of war, and we quickly healed on our own. And for the more grievous injuries, there were talented healers. But, after the war with Alancia, the Queen became weak. Despite the ministrations of the best and brightest healers in Valencia, the Queen continued to perish, just like the magic of the Kingdom.

When the Queen passed, about three years after the end of the war, the fae of Valencia were aghast. Fae were not immortal if their Queen could simply perish. And so, the fae of Valencia sought a way to distinguish themselves from the Queen—anything to separate *her* mortality from that of



the immortal. The Queen's lesser fae heritage was all too easy for an unfortunately large subset of the fae population to latch onto.

And so, the Queen's seeming mortality set off a reaction of extreme prejudice within some of the high fae of Valencia. The lesser fae were seen as tainted with mortality, and the high fae viewed themselves alone as immortal. This bit of propaganda was perpetuated, even though around the same time, a lord of pure heritage passed away under the same circumstances as the Queen, just seeming to fade away. The Queen's death wasn't even the first death of the kind, and certainly not the last, although it was the most widely known.

After the Queen's passing, Grey found comfort in Gloria's company and soon made her consort to House Heroux. This was unfairly viewed by some as their lesser fae Queen being replaced with a high fae lady. And then there was the fact that the mixed-fae prince, Prince Nikolas, began to come to the High Court less and less after his mother's passing, which some mistook for further evidence of some prejudice on the part of the King.

The King's relationship with the lesser fae populace since his wife's passing was complicated. But it was not to the point of physical conflict, as the high lady suggested.

"We should send envoys to the lesser fae over at House Dumont," I suggested. "They're reasonable folk over there. I can go," I offered.

House Dumont was the oldest and most established lesser fae House at the High Court. House Dumont maintained a residence and the largest contingent of lesser fae at the High Court until recently. Now, Lord Dumont resided in his manor along the northwestern border of Valencia in Ardmore.

Grey nodded, seemingly in agreement.

"We shouldn't let this sentiment fester with the lesser fae," I advised.

Statue beheadings would be the least of our worries if the lesser fae truly began to rebel. We relied heavily upon the lesser fae for so many things to keep the Kingdom operating.

High Lord Rein chose not to weigh in on the issue. He'd previously told me that he could see points on both sides—as of now, the northern Houses, including his House, were bearing the brunt of the lesser fae discontent because that was where the majority of the lesser fae population resided. But it wasn't anything they couldn't handle, at the moment at least. If matters escalated, however, Lord Rein agreed with me—this was not just a northern problem, and unlike the high lady, he had no desire to take on the entire

governance of the lesser fae relations on his own.

“Perhaps you’re right, Jay,” the King said at last.

I began to release the tension I was subconsciously holding in my shoulders.

“But let’s let the northern Houses handle this a little longer,” the King decided.

The muscles in my shoulders tightened again. I was going to have to push Lord Rein off the fence he so often sat on when it came to High Council matters. Otherwise, those at the High Court would, without fail, believe the issues along the northern border with the lesser fae were the northern Houses’ issues alone so long as they did not touch the High Court. But when it finally did affect the High Court, and it would eventually, the King and the other lords and ladies would demand action.

I’d answered the call of my King in the last war, at great personal cost, while others had sat on the sidelines maneuvering for personal gain. I would not be the High Court’s martyr. *Not this time, not ever again*, I promised myself.

Grey knew me well enough to pick up on my subtle displeasure.

“You have some other things on your plate right now, Jay, that I need you to devote your full attention to,” he added.

Things that the King had not even shared with the other members of the High Council.

I pursed my lips together, knowing my friend was right, at least about the part where I had other things to do. I could not be in two places at once, not even if Nik agreed to travel me everywhere, and I had other issues that required my immediate attention.

\* \* \* \*

“How can you say that, Jay?” she asked with fire in her voice.

My disagreement with Grey still on my mind, I’d merely suggested to Alarie that maybe not having lesser fae lords and ladies at the High Court was the natural order of things, after all.

I’d made my way back to the manor, having taken wine and supper with the King. I’d thought that I would have to take reports from Luke and Alarie the following day, but when I’d arrived at the manor, I’d found Alarie in my bar, reading.

“Alarie, *my dear*,” I reproached, feigning exasperation, “you *must* allow me to finish my thought.”

My tone was one of reprimand, but the truth was that I was not exasperated at all. As the King’s Contra and spymaster, few ever argued with me, and most thought complete silence was the safest and only course of action when in my presence. But over our time together, it seemed that Alarie had forgotten to see me as my role at Court. It was refreshing to have conversations with someone who was not too intimidated to challenge me.

I also appreciated the unique perspective Alarie added to our conversations, perhaps because she was half lesser fae, or perhaps because of where she was from. Or perhaps it was simply because she didn’t know enough about my position at the Court just yet to be intimidated by me like everyone else.

She stretched out her arm before her as if giving me the floor to speak.

I raised an eyebrow at her in warning, but it didn’t stop a smirk from forming on my lips before I proceeded.

“I fought in the war next to lesser fae whom I considered close friends—friends who did not all make it out alive. If lesser fae want to be here, then, as far as I’m concerned, they’ve earned it. But, Alarie,” I said, my gray eyes boring into her, “you have to realize, in this political climate, there are ramifications for voicing this support at the High Court right now. My status allows me the freedom to express my support openly. But this is something you need to be aware of for your own sake,” I cautioned, my eyes tracing the gold that ran through her green eyes.

“What about the King?” she asked, looking away from the intensity of my stare. “Does he share your support of the lesser fae?”

“The King...” I chose my next words carefully. “His late wife was half lesser fae. While she was around, it almost felt like the invisible line between the high fae and the lesser fae at the High Court was erased. But after she passed, the presence of the lesser fae at the Court seemed to lessen. And like the dying magic, the influence of the lesser fae at the High Court diminished. It’s a difficult subject to address with the King due to the loss of his love. But, yes, my friend and I are of a like mind on this topic. Unfortunately, there are some at the High Court who are not,” I finished.

“Jay, I’m sorry for—”

“Don’t apologize,” I interjected fiercely. “Never apologize for standing up for what you believe in, Alarie. Not to me. Not to anyone. I want you to

feel free to challenge me. So long as others are not around.”

She gave me a small nod.

“Anyway, the issue I was alluding to, Alarie, is more one of retention. The lesser fae who do make it to the High Court never seem to want to stay. Take the liaisons who come out of the liaison program you are part of. They almost never stay at the High Court after their one year is up,” I said, bringing the conversation back to my original point.

Emboldened by my words, she said, “Well, since you asked for it... it seems to me that issue is really some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The reason that the only lesser fae still around are servants is that almost everyone at the High Court thinks the lesser fae should all be fucking servants.”

*The girl has a damn dirty mouth.* But she also had a point.

## *Alarie*

Lady Vitruvian returned to the High Court in anticipation of the Summer Ball. She was lovely, if plain, with hazy blue-gray eyes, long blonde hair, and features picturesque of a high fae lady. Lady Vitruvian's hair had a slight curl to it as she stood in the foyer in a dress that sparkled with sequins in the light of the grand chandelier. Her gown, I noted, must have cost more than the collective price of every piece of clothing I'd ever owned in my entire life—that is, before the high lord bought me a new wardrobe.

I stood across the foyer from her in a less ostentatious, yet no less elegant, gown. It was a deep, dark blue satin slip of a dress, simple, with thin straps that accentuated my petite shoulders. The dress was backless, so I couldn't wear a bra with it; instead, I'd chosen to embrace the fact that my nipples poked through the delicate fabric. My sleek, dark brown hair fell past my breasts with a small curl at the ends. The lady and I waited in polite silence before turning to the sounds of the high lord's footsteps. He appeared at the top of the white-and-gray marbled stairs dressed in a fitted blue tuxedo, his muscled shoulders jutting out of his jacket like wings that tapered at his waist. His resoundingly commanding presence held our attention until he stood at the bottom of the stairs between us.

He turned toward me first, acknowledging me with a nod of his head before turning to his wife. I think Lady Vitruvian's eyes tightened just a fraction when she noticed the way my dress complimented Jay's tux, perhaps suspecting where my dress came from. Indeed, I'd come out of my shower that day to find the gorgeous gown and heels sitting at the end of my bed, perfectly sized and worth more than anything I'd ever had on my body.

If Lady Vitruvian was displeased, Jay did not acknowledge it. He stiffly took her by her elbow and led our charge toward the Ball. Having, at last, given up on my crush on the high lord, the sight of him with another woman didn't sting nearly as much as I thought it would. In any event, my focus remained on my first appearance at a major Court event.

For the beginning of the night, I hung near Jay's elbow, being introduced as House Vitruvian's promising new liaison. I exchanged firm handshakes and polite banter, dispensing casual touches of lords' arms and tactful compliments of ladies' gowns, and answering inquisitive glances from across the room like arrows in my quiver, placed there by the high lord's tutelage.

Walking around with the high lord, I began to truly appreciate the extent of his influence at the High Court. It was almost as if I were walking around with the King himself. Heads turned everywhere Jay went and conversations halted to provide him with their undivided attention wherever he appeared. It didn't seem as if the Contra was disliked around the Court, but there was a definite air of caution around him, as if they were afraid to say too much, or really anything at all, when he was near.

I didn't think I could ever see Jay the way the people at the High Court saw him. He was strong and stoic, and the air around him almost seemed to sizzle with a tension that only he felt truly comfortable in. But since the moment I'd met him, he had been kind to me. Firm but kind. I was naturally reserved myself, so Jay's lack of smiles and chatter was comforting to me instead of unsettling like it seemed to be for so many others. He was my stern high lord and mentor, but he was also the man who poured my coffee in the mornings.

Eventually, I broke off from Jay, making my own rounds around the Ball. I ran into Jeremy Thierry, and he introduced me to a young lord from out of town, Lord Belford. After successfully making a few connections and picking up on a few useful kernels of information I would share with the high lord later, I conducted a scan of the great hall until I met Luke's glance. He flashed me a grin, showing his pearl-white teeth as he ran a hand through his light-brown hair. He waved me over. Appreciating just how immaculately dressed Luke always was, I favored him with a familiar smile and began to make my way toward him.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about really," a man standing in a group with a few other lords said loudly enough for everyone in the area to overhear

as I began to walk by. “She may be new, but she’s clearly tainted,” he said nastily.

He was talking about me and didn’t even have the decency to say it to my face. One of his toadstool friends snickered. Another one, a comely lord with light hair and a few freckles dotted across his face, shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

The high fae lord who had spoken had white-blond hair and the lightest blue eyes, and his face seemed stuck in a perpetual sneer, like everything and everyone around him exuded a stench that displeased him. He was waiting to see if I’d take the bait.

*I bit.*

I approached the group of high fae lords, meeting the pale eyes of the young lord who had wanted my attention. He shifted his stance as I approached, and I spotted Lady Elenor Kane standing behind him.

“Oh, hi, Elenor,” I said.

Elenor whispered “hi” to me as she stared at her feet, then shifted her position in the crowd until she was once again hidden behind the men around her.

“And you must be Cole Tragon,” I said. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Cole looked around at the other lords near him with a pleased look on his face.

“That wasn’t a compliment,” I said, deadpan.

Perhaps I should have tried to ply Cole with a smile before I moved to other tactics. But seeing Elenor there with him ignited a flame of white-hot anger within me. Elenor and I had not become fast friends, as I had originally hoped; but she was still a sweet enough girl, and if half of what I had heard about Cole was to be believed, she deserved better.

Luke approached at my elbow but remained silent.

Trying to capture the momentum of the conversation, Cole sneered, “You have to have your boyfriend come and save you?”

“Ah, you’re just jealous, Cole,” Luke retorted coolly, resting his hand on my arm. “And from the color rising in your cheeks, it looks like you’re the one in need of saving, not her.”

Luke’s comment got a few chuckles from Cole’s companions and a few others who had now gathered. Robbed of scoring any points with Luke, Cole turned his attention back to me.

“Jealous?” Cole asked incredulously. “You couldn’t pay me to fuck this mutt,” he sniped cruelly, confirming my suspicion that any attempts at friendliness would have been a wasted effort.

The laughter around us settled into an awkward silence. I felt Luke’s grip tense on my arm. I placed a reassuring hand on top of Luke’s. He knew I didn’t want him to fight my battles. I’d been called worse before. And, anyway, I knew Cole’s type: the type who wanted very badly to fuck me and secretly hated himself more than he hated me for it.

“Cole,” I said, my calm voice cutting through the bated silence of those who waited to see how I would react. “We all know that the women who end up in your bed are the ones who get paid and not the other way around.”

There were more than a few snickers from the crowd forming around us, confirming what I’d said to be true. One of the Court whispers I’d picked up and saved for just such an occasion was that High Lady Tragon bribed women to go to her son’s bed. It wasn’t that he wasn’t attractive enough to get women on his own—if you could look past the permanent sneer on his face, he was good-looking enough. But his personality was so vile, apparently, that the only way women would visit his bed was weighed down with his mother’s coin.

I hoped Elenor took heed of this show as the warning I intended it to be. Based on what I’d heard, Cole Tragon was not the prince she dreamed of in her happily ever after. Even if we weren’t friends, I hoped for better for her.

“And, anyway, there’s no amount of money your mommy could pay me to touch you,” I said.

Luke started off the laughter; he was quickly joined by several others. The red in Cole’s face continued to deepen. Without waiting for Cole’s reply, I pulled Luke by his bulging bicep toward where he’d previously stood talking with Rhett.

I felt myself immediately relaxing in Luke and Rhett’s company. I felt comfortable with them. Almost every minute I was not with Jay, I was with Luke these days. We attended all the same functions and meetings and were constantly running into each other, even when we didn’t attend the same events. I ran into Rhett at a lot of the same events as well, and the three of us would invariably conglomerate by the end of the night.

“That looked like fun,” Rhett commented as we approached.

“I enjoyed it,” Luke said with a chuckle, leaning into me.

“Al, how nice of you to save Luke from yet another dateless soiree,”



Rhett teased.

“Hey!” Luke protested. “I could have brought someone if I wanted. There were some real solid contenders. But, you know, after the way the last one went, I decided it’s more fun for Alarie, here, to be my date.”

According to Luke, he’d recently gone on a string of unsuccessful dates. He claimed his dates never seemed to care for the amount of schmoozing he had to do at these kinds of Court events.

“Contenders, huh?” I asked skeptically. Truthfully, I had no doubt that many ladies were very much enamored by Luke, but I liked to give him a hard time.

“Yeah, but I don’t really need a date for these things anymore now that I have you,” Luke said, lifting both his eyebrows suggestively.

I noticed that the high lord’s eyes were trained on us from across the ballroom. I can’t say what made me do it. I knew he didn’t care about me, not like that. But, feeling his icy gray eyes bore into me, I playfully slapped Luke on the arm.

“Oh, you’ll just have to settle for me, will you?” I quipped, letting my hand rest around Luke’s sizable bicep.

I could still feel the high lord’s searing gaze on me. But I didn’t look back at him, not wanting to let him know I knew he was watching.

“What about me?” Rhett teased.

I sauntered toward Rhett with more sway to my hips than I normally would.

“What about you?” I retorted, sultrily.

Rhett was far too good at making women weak in the knees to react to my attempt at seduction. Plus, flirting with someone at the High Court was as common as discussing the weather back home. Everyone at the High Court flirted if they thought it would help them get some advantage. Rhett probably figured I was playing a High Court game, angling for something, and he was more than willing to be a participant. I moved in close to him.

“What if I wanted Al to be my date for once?” Rhett joked, his eyes penetrating me.

I licked my lips, holding his gaze a moment longer and then lost my nerve. I broke character, taking a step back from my devilishly handsome friend.

“Rhett, your date’s right over there,” I said, elbowing him at the same time I gestured toward an unbelievably tall, beautiful high fae blonde with

sparkling blue eyes.

“Oh. Yeah,” Rhett replied jokingly, like he could have forgotten.

“And we all know there’s more where she came from,” I teased, referring to the queue of ladies who seemed to be on standby, waiting for Rhett to grace them with his presence.

Rhett had said that his powers were fading, but they still seemed to be pretty damn effective to me.

“You got me there, Al,” Rhett said with a laugh.

Half an hour later, again scanning the room and deciding what further mingling I could accomplish before heading back to the Vitruvian manor for the night, I caught the gaze of the high lord as he walked out of the main hall. He ever so slightly inclined his head toward the doorway, indicating for me to follow. I didn’t know all of his looks just yet, but I thought he looked pissed. Intrigued, I cut through the crowd, making my way to where Lord Vitruvian had disappeared.

Turning a corner, I felt his rough hand wrap around my wrist before I saw him. A hot flame shot up my arm where he touched me. The silence between us simmered as he pulled me toward a dim, abandoned alcove. He stopped his march and dropped my hand. Like a predator with his prey cornered, he took a menacing step toward me. And then another until I felt the brick of the wall behind me scrape against my skin. I jumped in surprise, realizing I was out of real estate to retreat. There was a coolness to his gray eyes that pinned me to the wall.

“I attended this Ball with Lady Vitruvian on my arm because she’s the lady of my House and that’s my duty,” he began sternly.

My heart thudded in my chest, but I didn’t interrupt him. He leaned over me, his palm resting firmly against the brick over my head. My eyes darted momentarily up and then down the length of his arm that caged me against the wall before I returned my gaze back to his stony, rugged face. Before I could think of a single word to say, the high lord continued.

“But *you*,” he said, sharply gripping my face with his other hand and turning it to him, “you’re the liaison to *my* House, to *me*, and you, my dear, are *mine*,” he growled so low and deep it felt like the rumble of his words penetrated me to my core.

The heartbeat pounding in my ears gave way to butterflies fluttering in my stomach. And my nervousness shifted to satisfaction.

He was jealous.

Noting the satisfaction on my face, the high lord raised his right eyebrow in warning. A devious smile I'd never seen before settled onto his face, as if to say I had no idea what I'd gotten myself into.

Indeed, I did not. His free hand, the one not caging me against the wall, moved to the small of my back, pressing our bodies together until I felt the front of him pressed against me. The feel of his body against mine ignited a pulsating flame of need within me. He moved into me, pushing a leg between mine, and taking advantage of the high slit in my dress. He pressed his thigh against the outside of my white satin panties.

I was already traitorously wet. He moved the top of his thigh slowly but firmly back and forth, my wetness helping the fabric glide against me. Jay nuzzled his face into my hair, pushing it aside so he could breathe onto my neck. Instinctively, my hips rolled toward his leg between my thighs at the same time I moved my head away from him, allowing him access to the length of my neck. A rumble of approval emanated from his chest.

"You think I'm just some boy from back home who you can tease and bend and keep me right where you want me?" he asked darkly, grazing his teeth over the side of my throat.

An exhilarating chill shot through my entire body as heat continued to gather between my thighs.

"Jay. I—" I began to deny it, but that was *exactly* what I'd done.

I'd tried to make him jealous. I closed my mouth, swallowing whatever excuse I was going to use.

His large hands firmly gripped my hips. Locked into his embrace, he began to rock me back and forth over the top of his thigh, his powerful thumbs digging into the little crevices where my hips dipped, making me angle into his movement. The rocking motion of his hands on my hips robbed me of words. I felt a spike of adrenaline matched by an immediate flood of excitement that settled between my thighs.

The friction between our bodies was quickly building into something I couldn't believe was going to happen right in the middle of the hallway with the high lord. My mind raced as he rubbed against the outside of my slick satin thong.

For a fleeting second, I thought about objecting. But instead, a small show of my mounting pleasure escaped my lips.

"Good girl," he whispered, brushing his lips against my neck.

His hand moved from my hip to my thigh, his fingertips digging in as he

wrapped my leg around his waist. He rubbed the hardness of his length against me. A soft whimper escaped my mouth. I arched my back into him, eager to increase the resistance between us, giving up on words altogether.

My nipples hardened to tiny peaks, protruding through the delicate fabric of my dress. My back against the brick wall, he wrapped my other leg around him and began to thrust into me, rubbing me up and down against his length through his pants. His thrusts were getting faster.

I closed my eyes, unable to focus on anything other than the buzzing that climbed to a deep, fast pulsing where he moved against me.

“No, Alarie,” he barked, his hand grasping my chin as his hips continued to grind into me. “Eyes on me,” the high lord commanded.

I opened my eyes and peered into the high lord’s intense gaze. The hunger, the need to possess me, I saw there seared through me. The pulsing between my thighs pitched. My legs clenched around him. He wrapped his hand around my mouth, stifling my moans that multiplied as he increased the pace of his thrusting.

“Here’s your first *real* lesson from me, Alarie.”

My lips parted slightly under his hand, gasping for air.

“I will take what’s mine *whenever* and *wherever* I so desire. And since *You. Are. Mine*, that means that each and every one of your orgasms belongs to *me*.”

The throbbing heightened until it seemed in tune with my racing heartbeat, growing faster and faster with his hard thrusts into me.

“Now give me what’s mine. *Come for me*,” he demanded.

He circled his hips, finally hitting that one spot where it felt like all my throbbing was trapped, waiting to be set free. I released a muffled cry, my lips pressed against the inside of his hand, finding my reward for taunting the high lord.

He held my gaze as I rode out the explosion of my release, his hand still pressed against my mouth so hard that my lips pressed against my teeth. And then he dropped his hand, and I gasped in air.

He delicately righted me in my heels, taking the time to carefully lower the hem of my dress to the floor. Then he tilted my chin up to look at him until I stared into his deep gray eyes. He held my gaze as he lowered his mouth toward me, planting a chaste kiss on my forehead.

“You can go back to your boys now,” he said coolly, dismissing me like I was the one who had dragged him into the hallway.

He walked away from the alcove without another word. Jay placed his hand in his pocket and went back to the Ball like the front of him was not covered in the evidence of the orgasm he had just ripped from me.

Voices in a not-too-distant hallway floated to me. I looked down at my dress, double checking that I was back in order, then scurried back into the main hall shortly after the high lord.

## *Alarie*

I washed for dinner, sinking into the feel of the water against my skin as I stood in the spacious marble-tiled shower. I was thinking about my first “real” lesson with Jay again. He was palpably absent in the days following our run-in at the Summer Ball. I tried not to take his absence personally, knowing that he’d traveled a lot long before I was under his roof and under his hands. But I also knew that the reason for Jay staying away was more likely that he regretted pulling me into that hallway at the Summer Ball.

And he was probably right, too—it had to be a mistake for us to get involved. After all, I hadn’t worked my entire life to make it to the High Court, only to quite literally fuck away the opportunity. I dunked my head under the stream of water, exasperated, and ran my hands through my wet hair, thinking of which of my new dresses I should pluck from my wardrobe for dinner.

Our dinner guests for the night, a visiting couple from a few towns over, Lord and Lady Shoal, had arrived and were waiting for us in the formal dining hall.

I met the high lord at the top of the staircase between our wings of the manor. Drinking in the sight of Jay for the first time in days, I suppressed the urge to take my bottom lip between my teeth. He wore a royal blue tux accented with a white silk pocket corner that looked so similar to the white thong I wore under my dress, it could have been a pair of my panties stuffed into his pocket.

“Evening,” Jay offered me in a cool but not altogether unpleasant tone.

His eyes roved over my outfit for the evening, giving me a cursory nod

of approval. My dress had a plunging neckline, too deep to wear a bra.

“Good evening, Lord Vitruvian,” I responded, matching his businesslike tone.

I was fine with the focus on business that evening. More than fine. I was looking forward to putting some of my other lessons to use that night, the ones that didn’t involve me burning under his touch, then left in the cold for days. I took the elbow he offered.

Walking into the grand parlor, Jay presented our guests with something close to a smile.

Throughout dinner, I played my part well. Implementing the knowledge from my lessons with the high lord, I asked the right questions at the right moments to show interest but not give away any particular motives of House Vitruvian.

After dinner, while Jay and Jim Shoal enjoyed a cigar on the veranda adjacent to the bar, I decided to try my hand at one of the lessons Jay had spoken to me about at length—the way to wield silence in a conversation like a sword, staving off the urge to speak and enticing the other person in the conversation to fill the void and offer up information they would have otherwise kept to themselves.

Lady Shoal and I remained inside of the bar, lounging in two comfy oversized leather chairs. I began by establishing a friendly rapport with the lady, using the skills I’d honed long before joining the High Court. I was very conscious of the edge that inhabited my eyes. It was the look of tough times and hard choices that could not be concealed, no matter what kind words I offered. I knew this about myself and combined with my penchant to offer a straight face where a smile was needed, I’d long ago developed a system to disarm the unease that regularly hung between myself and other women.

I dismissed Jena for the night and offered to pour Lady Shoal a glass of wine myself. Lady Shoal had terrible taste, requesting a glass of our sweetest wine, but I obliged, intending to pour myself a nip of scotch. I’d remained silent, maintaining a pleasant, nonthreatening smile on my face, while I walked across the room to the selection of bottles behind the bar. I opened a bottle of pink moscato, poured a glass for the lady, made a show of selecting the scotch I wanted for myself, and then filled my own short glass. Then I made my way back over to the lady, offering her the stemmed wine glass I held in my left hand.

I could see it was working. I could see the silence eating at her. She was

the type who would prattle on about almost anything once she'd had a glass or two of wine. And she was now several glasses deep into the evening. I raised my glass to my lips, taking a second to inhale the burn of the scotch before taking a sip. I exaggerated my enjoyment of the beverage before finally looking up at Lady Shoal and giving her a minuscule smile.

Taking a drink from her own glass and unable to endure the silence any longer, the lady began to spill the details of her and Lord Shoal's agenda since arriving at the High Court. A lesser lord who ruled over a small town a few hours outside of Vlaise, Lord Shoal did not maintain a manor at the High Court. The Shoals arrived in Vlaise three days ago and were staying in High Lord Vincent Rein's manor, Lady Shoal explained. She shifted in her chair, growing more animated as the words began to flow from her.

"We were all enjoying a lovely evening when Lord Tragon arrived, seemingly in a foul mood. Of course, I'm not sure Cole Tragon is ever the kind of company you want just stopping by. He pulled Lord Shoal and Lord Rein into a separate room," Lady Shoal continued, expressing her annoyance at the disruption.

Cole Tragon was High Lady Tragon's only son and heir to House Tragon. I nodded my head in encouragement, offering the lady platitudes to keep the conversation moving. "Uh huh," "that's interesting," I sprinkled in between the lady's words. It seemed she no longer really cared what I said and instead enjoyed the sound of her own voice, prodded by the nearly empty glass of wine in her hand.

"Well, when they came back from speaking with Lord Tragon, Jim's mood matched Lord Tragon's, and Vince didn't seem particularly happy either. So, Lady Rein and I were left to our own devices the rest of the evening. Lady Rein had the most beautiful..." the lady drolled on.

*Finally.* Something useful in Lady Shoal's dribble. What could Cole have said to agitate the other lords?

I checked back into the conversation with Lady Shoal. She had moved on to discussing her admiration of Lady Rein's jewelry collection.

"Beaufords has the most dazzling earrings. I bet that's where Lady Rein purchased hers," I placated. "A shame the lords were so upset by Lord Tragon's visit, though," I noted, turning the conversation back to what I really wanted to discuss.

"Oh, well, it wasn't much of anything. They eventually got over it, you know. Just some young don, Don Davante, someone from House Dumont, is



stirring up trouble, trying to unite the lesser fae and whatnot.”

I could tell by the way Lady Shoal said the word “don” that she did not think much of the title. Technically, the difference between a lord and a don was the ownership of land. A lord owned land or was “landed,” a don did not. Practically, the difference between a don and lord was that a don would be lesser fae and a lord would be high fae. This tended to be the case almost without exception because of the historic concentration of land in high fae families which was perpetuated over the years through inheritances by the male line of the high fae families.

“Lord Tragon doesn’t care for it at all,” Lady Shoal continued. “Cole tried to convince Vincent that they should take a strong stance against the lesser fae independence movement because their northern Houses are the ones surrounded by lesser fae and the ones who will be targeted by any rebellion. Apparently, Lord Rein didn’t see eye to eye with Cole. Cole stormed off, muttering something about having to do it himself. Whatever that means,” she said dismissively. “You know, Jim has always thought Vince was a little *too* sympathetic toward the lesser fae. Jim’s cousin, Lord Garaud, has a nice place up north, and he doesn’t seem to mind. But I’m happy we live in the south and away from most of the lesser fae,” the lady rambled, taking note of the gold in my eyes and realizing, too late, what she had just said to her half lesser fae host.

Her comment confirmed the bigotry I thought I’d sensed in her. I ignored it. The lady had finally given me something worth sharing with Jay.

Later that evening, after the Shoals departed, Jay and I sat in the bar and compared notes from our conversations with the lord and lady over a nightcap.

“Did Lord Shoal mention Cole Tragon’s visit to High Lord Rein’s manor?” I asked.

I’d waited to mention this last.

“No. That did not come up,” Jay replied, interestedly.

“Lady Shoal, in her slightly bigoted ramblings”—I let my annoyance twist my lips—“mentioned that Cole had visited to discuss Don Davante’s recent push to unite the lesser fae. But the interesting part is that it sounds like Cole wanted something from High Lord Rein, and Lord Rein didn’t give it to him. And then Cole made some kind of ominous promise about doing whatever it was himself.”

Jay gave me an appraising look. I glowed under the weight of his gaze.

“Last time we talked about the issues with the lesser fae at the High Council meeting, High Lord Rein didn’t weigh in, and as usual, the high lady and I were on opposite sides of the issue,” Jay explained. “I know House Tragon is up to something. But it’s going to take more than a visit from Cole to convince Vince to take some kind of direct action against the lesser fae. As long as the lesser fae remain peaceful, at least,” he added.

“I met Cole the other day,” I remarked, not hiding my distaste.

Something flashed in Jay’s eyes like cold anger. “And how did that go?” he asked, a bit too rigidly.

The intensity of the look on Jay’s face made me hold on to my words. I decided not to tell him the story of my exchange with Cole, after all.

“Uneventful,” I lied.

It looked like Jay relaxed the tension held between his shoulders by just a fraction.

“Whether the King thinks I have time to or not, I need to do further digging into Don Davante. He’s escalating things beyond their normal levels,” Jay said, the razor-sharp edge in his eyes softening.

And then his piercing gray eyes were back on me. He rose from the leather chair he sat in, drawing my gaze up to his face. He moved to stand in front of where I still sat and lightly trailed the pad of his thumb along my lower lip, ending his progression with his thumb just below my chin.

“Strong work tonight, Alarie,” the high lord praised, letting his hand drop.

I walked to my room, trying to ignore the ghostly imprint of his fingerprints on my skin.

## *Jay*

House Heroux hosted dinner at the High Court once a month. Lately, I'd been unable to make the regularly scheduled dinner due to my out-of-town travel, but tonight everyone on the High Council was in attendance. Everyone except High Lord Bellamy. His seat, as usual, remained empty. King Heroux sat at a table overlooking the large crowd in attendance, with me on his right and his consort, Gloria, on his left. Lady Tragon sat next to Gloria, and High Lord Rein sat on my right. With dinner finished, the evening transitioned to entertainment.

King Heroux was once one of the most powerful fae there ever was in Valencia. He still was, comparatively. His ability to weave magic allowed him to create almost anything he wanted out of nothing at his whim—a wall to keep our enemies out, a prison to keep our enemies in, a shield, a cup, *anything*. But in the days of the magic dying and less ostensible showings of magic, other forms of power—such as youth, beauty, and money—began to take a foothold at Court.

Lord Philip Belford and Cole Tragon were both evidence of this shift at the High Court. Lord Belford was a comely young lord visiting the High Court from the southwest coast of Valencia. He had reddish hair but not bright red like that signature of the lesser fae. The hue of his hair had more of a rusted-red look to it.

Cole challenged Lord Belford to a duel of first-touch, which Philip accepted. The young lords were cocksure, even in the presence of their King and the High Council, as they made their way to the center of the ballroom. The crowd cleared around them, sticking to the sides of the room and

creating a circle in the center of the large room.

With all the people rearranging to make room for the duel, I lost track of Alarie. I scanned the room until I found her again. She looked amazing dressed in the blue of my House. We'd kept our distance lately. But the same could not be said for her and Luke, I noted, as she was pushed closer to his side by the crowd.

The two young lords faced each other in the center of the room as a hush fell over the crowd. Cole unsheathed the longsword at his belt and crossed the sword over his body, lightly touching his right shoulder with its hilt before holding it in front of his face between himself and Lord Belford. Lord Belford matched Cole's efforts, their two swords crossing in the middle between them.

Lord Belford made to incline his head, as a show of sportsmanship. Unsurprisingly, Cole did not match this gesture, and before Lord Belford even lifted his head, Cole was striking out at him with his sword. Lord Belford met Cole's parry, and the young lords went blow for blow with each other. Several minutes into the spar, the two lords appeared fairly evenly matched. Cole began to exhibit frustration at this fact, taking riskier moves and making harder blows in an effort to throw off Lord Belford. I'd seen amateur swordsmen make this mistake before. Cole would tire himself out or else open himself up to a blow from Philip if he kept it up.

Perhaps realizing that he would not be able to keep up his exaggerated movements much longer, Cole stamped down on Lord Belford's foot, causing Lord Belford to stumble. As Lord Belford went to rise, Cole met Lord Belford's chin with the tip of his sword. It was an ungentlemanly move on Cole's part, not fit for a friendly duel with the purpose of evening entertainment. But Lord Belford was gracious about it, nonetheless, conceding the match. The applause that followed was a small, muted affair.

Cole stood by with a gloating smugness on his face, scanning the room and waiting for his next challenger.

"Jay," the King barked. "Go show those young pups how to properly win a duel." He beckoned toward the shuffling crowd.

I cast a sideways glance at my friend. Lady Tragon sat down the table close enough to hear the King's words but remained silent, staring out into the crowd with a focused gaze.

"Grey..." I warned.

Grey knew damn well that I would easily beat Cole and that the prideful

young lord was not likely to take it well. I'd been a sword master for longer than the snotty little lord had been alive.

"Go on," Grey encouraged, a mischievous smile playing at his mouth.

I tilted my head to the side as if to say, "*If you insist*," but already I was looking forward to it. I stood, not trying to avoid the scraping noise that my chair made as I pushed it back and away from the table. Several heads turned toward me until Cole noticed and also turned toward the head table that stood above the crowded room.

The room grew silent as it always did when I was near, all conversations fizzling out before I reached them. Cole's eager eyes tracked my movement to the center of the room until I stood before him.

"Cole," I greeted.

"Contra," he spat.

We skipped any further pleasantries. Cole was feral to get at me. We crossed swords immediately. Similar to before, Cole made the first move, quickly breaking away from our crossed swords and lashing out at me. I parried Cole's move with a quick, efficient strike of my own sword. Moving one hand behind my back, I batted down Cole's sword. I stood still, waiting for his next attack.

Cole came at me again, and I met his blow once more with little effort. Frustrated by the embarrassingly low effort that I needed to put into the match, as I knew he would be, Cole predictably came at me with a flurry of strikes, bringing his sword down hard and fast.

I met each move, expending the same amount of effort as before. I'd always felt at ease with the violent, fluid movements of a sword in my hand and the ringing sounds of steel clashing against steel in my ears. Deciding to end the spectacle, I spun instead of meeting Cole's next hard blow, causing him to run straight past me. He stumbled and lost his balance. When Cole went to right himself, he straightened his back into the point of my sword.

I immediately released the young lord from my sword tip and made to leave the floor. I'd moved so quickly that the spectators in the crowd were still trying to figure out what had happened and why the match was already over.

"Again, Lord Vitruvian," Cole demanded, his breathing labored, his normally pale face flushed.

I could feel Cole's cruel eyes drilling into my back. I kept walking. For years, I'd tried to give Cole a little room for growth since he was relatively

young and had lost his father at an even younger age. I'd known his father to be a good man. But over the years, it became apparent that Cole had inherited his mother's personality and none of the good that I had known in his father. I'd heard some truly vile stories involving Cole and his use of lesser fae women. If he came within an inch of Alarie, I would ensure that House Tragon would soon find itself without an heir. But I had better things to do than to teach Cole where he belonged in the hierarchy at the High Court. The fact that he had not figured it out at this point in his life meant that he was too stupid or too full of himself to do so.

"That mutt of yours was talking during our match. She distracted me," Cole spat at my back.

I stopped walking mid-stride.

*Mutt?*

But then Cole diverted his hateful gaze to Alarie, still standing in the crowd next to Luke, leaving no doubt who he was talking about.

A fiery rage burned in me before settling into a sharp iciness. I smiled wickedly, then turned my head to the side, nodding once in agreement. I turned on my heel and walked back toward the foolish, prideful lordling. Standing before Cole again, I made a show out of switching my sword to my right hand, my nondominant hand, and tucking my left hand behind my back. Gasps and snickers emanated from the crowd. Men had been killed over such insults.

Red crept further onto Cole's face, and his nostrils flared.

Cole had clearly not realized it, but I'd gone easy on him during our last match. My prowess with a sword was well known. That meant he really thought that much of himself to think he had a real chance against me.

We exchanged just two parries before the young lord found himself with the tip of my sword beneath his chin. I held the point to the soft skin under Cole's neck with enough pressure that his slightest movement would draw blood. I saw unadulterated hate blazing in the young lord's eyes.

*"Again?"* I taunted.

The point of my longsword still at his neck, Cole imperceptibly shook his head. I lowered my sword and made a cursory bow to my thoroughly defeated opponent. Silent stares followed me until I took my seat back at the head table next to the King. The high lady stared straight ahead, not making eye contact with me as the chatter around the room started back up. She remained silent, but she wore the same embarrassed flush on her cheeks that

her son did.

“I hope that met your expectations, *my King*,” I said.

“Indeed, it did, my friend! Indeed, *you did!*” he exclaimed.

Grey chuckled, holding his wineglass in the air to cheers my victory. With a flourish of his hand, the King beckoned a servant to begin pouring more wine.

\* \* \* \*

“Luke,” I said, answering the door later that evening.

I heard Alarie pattering down the hall from her room before I saw her. She was halfway down the stairs before she looked up and saw me already at the door with Luke. Her silky brown hair swayed with each stair she took. She wore a dark blue satin nightgown.

Luke and I both turned and looked at her as she made her way down the rest of the stairs. It was only when the cool air from the open door rushed to meet her that she looked down, realizing she was wearing nothing more than a negligee.

“Let’s head to the parlor,” I offered, stepping aside to let Luke in.

“Al,” Luke said as he passed by her.

But Luke’s usual light-natured demeanor was missing, replaced by something much graver. He didn’t even bother to tease Alarie about her state of undress. But as Luke walked by her, Alarie noticed for the first time the blood on his rolled-up white sleeves. I had seen the blood, of course. She grabbed Luke by the arm, stopping him from walking any farther into the parlor.

“Luke, are you ok?” she asked, her concern for him showing in her narrowed eyes.

He nodded, pulling Alarie the rest of the way into the sitting room, where they plopped down on a sofa across from where I took my seat.

“It’s not mine. I’m ok, Al,” he said, firmly wrapping his hand around her knee and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

I homed in on Alarie’s silk nightgown. It had ridden up to expose her thighs. My eyes drifted farther down, where Luke’s hand still rested on her leg. A muscle in my jaw involuntarily tightened.

“Ok, what happened then, Luke?” I asked.

“It’s Lord Belford,” Luke began.

“Philip accused Cole of cheating in the duel earlier in the evening when he stomped on Philip’s foot. We were all thinking it, but Cole took offense anyway and challenged Lord Belford to a duel—first blood.”

“Lord Belford refused, claiming that Cole would only cheat again. Unable to provoke Philip into a duel, Cole stormed off.”

“How did you get blood on your shirt if they didn’t even duel, Luke?” Alarie interjected, fingering his rolled-up sleeve.

Luke looked at me.

“Lord Belford was found this evening, after his confrontation with Cole. Stabbed. Several times.”

Alarie gasped.

“Was a healer called?” I asked, ignoring Alarie’s shock.

Luke looked at Alarie as if deciding something.

“It’s ok, Jay. Al can know. Yes, I was called on to heal Philip.”

Alarie made another small intake of breath. It appeared that she hadn’t known that her friend was a prolific healer, which wasn’t much of a surprise. In the days of the dying magic, no one asked questions about another fae’s magic.

“So, what did Philip say happened? Did he say it was Cole?” I interrogated.

“Philip didn’t say anything, Jay. *He’s dead.*”

I saw Alarie’s grip tighten on Luke’s arm.

“Since when have stab wounds been beyond your ability to heal, Luke?” I questioned.

“I should have been able to heal him.” Luke looked down at his hands. “But I couldn’t,” he finished, like the admission physically hurt him.

“Iron?” I asked analytically, still looking for an explanation for the night’s events.

Luke licked his lips and shook his head.

“Grey should have known that that little spectacle he had me put on with Cole would result in some kind of backlash. That murderous little twat,” I seethed, referring to Cole.

But I knew it wasn’t just Grey who was to blame. I’d gone the extra mile to embarrass the little lordling and hurt his pride after what he’d said about Alarie. He’s lucky that was all I did.

“That’s just it, Jay,” Luke continued. “It wasn’t Cole.”

“How do you know?” Alarie asked before I could.



“Because several people said they were with him from the time he stormed off to the time Philip was found,” Luke replied.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “Who vouched for him?”

“There are several people, Jay. Not all of them are from House Tragon, either. Rhett told me himself that he saw Cole standing across the room at an after party at House Tragon. Rhett said he didn’t see him leave the entire time.”

“Convenient,” I said skeptically. “I’m getting to the bottom of this *tonight*,” I continued, rising from my large cognac leather chair.

“You coming, Luke?” I barked, already walking out of the room.

“See you tomorrow, Luke,” Alarie promised.

“Yeah, Al, ‘night,” he said, squeezing her hand before getting up and walking out of the room to follow me.

I came home late that night after investigating Lord Belford’s death to find Alarie at the bar having a glass of red wine and reading.

“So?” she questioned tentatively, as I made my way straight for the scotch.

I made a straight line with my mouth. “Too many reliable eyewitnesses have confirmed that Cole was accounted for when Lord Belford would have been attacked,” I replied.

“Do you know who else might have done it?” she asked.

“Not yet. Cole’s hand might not have been the one to do it, but I have no doubt it was done on his behalf. I just can’t prove it.” I sighed.

“Alarie,” I said, leaning against the arm of the large leather chair she sat in, her legs curled up underneath her.

I gently took the book out of her hand, setting it on the wooden end table next to her. Then I enveloped her small hand with my own. She looked up at me, her green-and-gold eyes curious.

“Alarie, I don’t want you walking around the Court by yourself, especially not at night anymore,” I said. I phrased it as a request, but my tone made it plain that I was telling and not asking.

“Jay, I’ve gone around alone just fine my entire life. I don’t need—”

“No, Alarie, you’re going to listen to me on this,” I demanded.

I appreciated her feistiness most of the time, but I would not entertain a discussion on this, not when it came to her safety. I gently stroked the top of her hand with my thumb to soften my stern tone.

“You can’t possibly know the things I know about these people at the

High Court, dear. The things they're capable of. This isn't the first body to show up in its halls and is not half as dark as some of the things I've heard," I said.

"Whenever I am out of town, you're taken care of. You don't have to worry about that," I reassured her. "But promise me, Alarie. You will not go wandering around by yourself. Stick with me or Luke, or even Rhett."

I knew she thought I was being overly protective. But she had no clue about the things, the people, I'd already lost because I wasn't protective enough before. I would not make the same mistake with her.

"I..." she hesitated.

"Promise me, dear," I demanded.

She squinted her eyes in consternation. "Yes, Jay," she finally promised.

I liked the way her sweet little mouth looked wrapped around those two simple, perfect words.

## *Jay*

A shadow of a smile danced across her beautiful face as I entered the library that morning. I'd been out of town again. It had been days since I'd seen her gorgeous face light up with a smile.

"Did you just get in?" she asked as I settled down next to her at the long, dark mahogany table we always shared in the library.

"No," I replied. "I got back around ten thirty last night."

A delicious flush rose in her cheeks, and I knew why. It was the same reason my hand itched to wrap around her leg that was pushed next to mine under the table.

She got up from her seat, pushing her chair back with the bottom of her heel. Alarie walked to a nearby bookshelf, standing on her tippy toes in her high heels to reach for the book she wanted. I allowed my eyes to rake over her backside, then cleared my throat like that would help me clear my head of her.

The new wardrobe I'd picked out for her was working out well, *too well*. Alarie was embracing the style of the High Court and wearing the tighter, slinkier items I'd purchased for her, and it had been pure torture for me every single day since.

It wasn't like me to get hung up on something young and pretty. Before the Summer Ball, it's true that I'd had to ramp up the visitors to my bed to distract myself from the fact that Alarie was just right down the hall from me most nights. Then, after my slipup at the Summer Ball, I'd picked back up with a string of women, redoubling my efforts to avoid another lapse in my control. But, despite my best efforts, she was thoroughly in my head. I

couldn't get her out of my mind, even when I was with the other women who, before Alarie stepped out of that carriage and into my life, had been entertaining enough to pass most nights.

My affliction regarding the young fae didn't end outside of the bedroom, either. I'd restructured my daily routine, when I was in town, to maximize the amount of time I could be near her. Before Alarie, I worked out of my private study. But after Alarie's first lesson, I'd just stayed in the library. And every day since, I brought my work to the library, at the same table, sitting right next to her.

The lady of the House was not the issue. We had an understanding, the lady and I. We'd married during the war for mutual political gain, and there was never love, or even lust, between us. Just duty, which after so many years, Elizabeth and I usually bore without too much chafing.

Alarie's age wasn't even an issue, although she was quite young, not even twenty-four until spring.

The real concern was her position in my House as liaison and the fact that she was living in the manor with just me most of the time. As she made her way back over to me, my eyes tracking her the entire way, I tried to convince myself it would just be too complicated.

That's why I'd kept my distance from Alarie since the Summer Ball. And it seemed that she agreed. Without having discussed it, there was a silent agreement between us that a repeat of our exchange at the Summer Ball was a bad idea. But seeing Alarie, after what I'd heard the night before when I'd come home, I didn't know if I cared if being with her got complicated.

Her thigh brushed against me as she sat down. We'd silently agreed not to let it happen again, but that didn't stop her from teasing me every opportunity she got. Even though the library was huge and had many tables and the table we sat at was the length of many chairs, we invariably sat in the same two seats right next to each other.

Sitting so close to her that I could smell her soft, feminine floral scent, I tried not to think about what I'd come home to last night—my name, gasped in urgent little breaths so quiet that only I could hear. Standing at the top of the staircase between my room and Alarie's, I focused in on the tiny little gasp and was surprised to find that, similar to the time when my power had been more robust, I could chase the whisper down to its owner. Following the whisper in my mind's eye, a picture of the west wing of my manor came into sight.

*And then I saw her*, a beautiful flush to her cheeks, lying partially hidden under the crisp white sheet in her bed. Her legs were splayed out, creating two perfect little tents with the sheet. Her breasts heaved, and the strap of her silk nightgown fell off her shoulder as she moved her hand to grip the top of her gray tufted headboard. And then I'd trailed my eyes to her other hand, where it pumped underneath the sheet between her legs.

She squirmed, and her hand pumped again. Her hand went white as she tightened her grip on the headboard. She whispered my name again, this time dragging it out as a moan as she rode the surge of the orgasm overtaking her.

I'd remained frozen at the top of the stairs. The polished wooden banister trembled and creaked under my grip, and I'd had to tell myself to remove my hand or the wood was going to give way and crumble. Only my hundreds of years of training and discipline kept me from busting into her bedroom to finish the job she had started, making her moan my name over and over again until she begged for a reprieve.

I'd stood at the top of the staircase for longer than I would like to admit, before I finally regained my composure and convinced myself to turn right, instead of left, toward my own room.

A knock at the front door jerked me back from my reflection. I rose from the table we shared, putting a hand in my pocket to circumspectly tug at the front of my pants. Seeing that she was entranced by the book she was reading, and unable to stay the ache of my palm any longer, I lightly ran my hand across her shoulders to grab her attention. She looked up at me through her thick black eyelashes.

"Be back shortly," I muttered, reluctantly dropping my hand from her.

## *Alarie*

I nodded, feigning casualness even though it felt like my skin was on fire where he had touched me. After a few minutes, Jay returned to our table and returned to work.

Unsurprisingly, talk regarding Lord Belford consumed the High Court in the days following his murder, in the days Jay had been gone. But what was surprising was that it was more so the fact that Lord Belford's wounds couldn't be healed than the fact that he had been stabbed and left to die in a hallway that dominated the chatter. I wondered if that's where Jay had been—smoothing over relations with House Belford, cleaning up House Tragon's messes. *Where was House Belford?* I stood up from my chair, reaching for a book on the far side of the table in which I knew a map with a location of each House was located in the front of the text.

Seconds after I sat back down, Jay closed the book in his hand so forcefully that it made a definitive clap. I jumped. Then he rose from his chair. *Probably just another messenger at the door.* But then I felt his strong hand grab my small face between two fingers.

"Alarie," he purred, his tone deep and thick with his intentions.

He forced my face to turn up to his. I met his eyes, laden with his desire, and the growing heat between my thighs exposed the truth of what I'd tried to deny for weeks.

"I've been thinking about it for quite some time," the high lord explained matter-of-factly.

"And what is it that you have been thinking about, Jay?" I asked flirtatiously, forcing more confidence than I felt into my voice.

A devious smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. “Of how you’ll taste.”

I swallowed hard, gulping down the air from the deep breath I’d taken. The heat pulsing within me ignited, forming a burning flame of desire.

“Every morning, I sit at breakfast with you wondering if you’ll taste as sweet as the berries you run across your lips, teasing me,” he said.

He ran his thumb across my lips like I’d done with a strawberry many times before.

I tried not to blush at being called out for my efforts to get his attention. It was true that I’d never really given up on the crush I had on him. I’d thought of the high lord almost incessantly since I’d arrived at the manor, wondering what he was doing when he wasn’t around me, trying on every outfit and thinking of whether it would draw his eye, finding ways to casually touch him when we sat next to each other each day in the library. I’d been thinking of him, his body pressed against mine, last night while I’d lain in bed.

*But he couldn’t know that*, I reassured myself.

His thumb ended its journey across my bottom lip, plunging forcefully into my mouth and catching me off guard. He ran the pad of his thumb over my teeth, before prying my mouth open farther, like he was examining how far it could open. Seemingly satisfied, he closed my mouth.

“I plan to find out. *Right. Now*,” he growled, his voice simmering with the promise of things I’d only dreamed about.

I considered for a moment, not because I didn’t want him—*I did*. He was stern and domineering and bossy, and his every word pushed the flame of my desire for him higher and higher—but to consider the implication of getting involved with my high lord and mentor. The only real thing that gave me pause, I decided, was his wife. I thought I already knew the answer to my question based on what I’d already seen and heard, but I had to know.

“And Lady Vitruvian?” I asked, my voice a low whisper.

I couldn’t keep the reluctant hope out of my voice. The high lord continued to grasp my face firmly.

“There’s an arrangement. So, *this*”—he indicated his hand on me—“isn’t a problem,” he replied curtly, clearly not wanting to distract from the moment to elaborate. “And *that*, my dear, is all that you need to know for now. Now the next words that come from your pretty little lips better be my name, yes, or some combination of the two,” he ordered.

I took a deep breath, raising my eyebrows at his overtly domineering

demeanor. He stared right back at me, his hard gray eyes unflinching and unapologetic. To my own surprise, my desire for him to touch more of me overpowered my normal instincts to rebel against anyone who ever tried to tell me what to do.

“Yes, Jay,” I said, aiming to please.

“Good girl,” he purred, letting his hand drop from my face.

I felt both warmth from his praise and a chill from the loss of his touch.

Jay sat back in his chair and turned to me, encircling my tiny waist with his strong hands. He lifted me easily and placed me in his lap, making my neck accessible to his mouth as my thighs lay over his legs, close to the feeling of him growing harder by the second.

Then he began a delicate trail of kisses up my neck. He placed an inquiring hand up my skirt on the inside of my thigh, brushing the top of my thigh-high.

I threw back my long hair, relishing his lips on my skin, and opened my legs a little wider for him, causing his hand to move farther up my leg. I wanted his hand to creep farther and farther up my leg until he found the fire within me that ached to be stroked higher.

I felt the length of him, hard and poking at the back of my thigh. He ran a fingertip over the outside of my satin panties and the apex of my sex. I swallowed a hungry gasp of air. He found me already soaked with my desire for him.

“So eager to please, so wet,” he said, brushing his lips on the side of my neck.

He greedily pushed the fabric to one side and released a growl of approval against my breasts. Then he slid a finger into my soaking warmth. I had to take my bottom lip in between my teeth to stifle a moan.

“You remember your first lesson, dear?” he asked as he gently, methodically, plunged his finger in and out of my wet little space as his palm rubbed against me.

He played in my wetness, the confirmation of my need for him.

“Um hmm,” I moaned.

“Good. Because you’re going to ride my hand until you come for me,” he demanded.

I was consumed with the feeling of his movements inside of me. I burned with the need for more.

“Now what do you say, Alarie?”



“Yes, Jay?” I ventured.

The steely glint of approval in his eyes confirmed that I had answered correctly.

And then I began to move with the rhythm of his hand, my need rushing me to push his fingers farther inside of me until my breathing hitched. I took part of my lip between my teeth again. I was close. *So close.*

He adjusted his hand, keeping two fingers inside of me, and used the palm of his hand to rub against the crown of my sex until the fire within me was about to consume my entire existence.

“Be a good girl, Alarie. *Now come,*” he ordered in the domineering tone mastered by a 300-year-old high lord used to getting his way.

The flame within me rose to soaring heights. I shuddered around him. He grabbed my jaw with his other hand, setting his mouth over mine, and I breathed a moan into his mouth. He sucked in the breath of my orgasm hungrily as he kissed me for the first time. His tongue swept over my teeth and the roof of my mouth as if he could taste my orgasm. Slowly withdrawing his hand from inside of me, he rested it on my inner thigh.

“As part of your first lesson, you will learn to *always* come for me,” he said in the commanding voice of a high lord.

An afterglow upon my cheeks, the remnants of my pleasure dripping onto his pants, I simply nodded. I didn’t know what lessons he was referring to or what “always” entailed, but at that very moment, I wanted nothing more than to find out. I eyed the bulge in his pants.

“Tell me what you want, Alarie,” he demanded.

I normally wasn’t shy, but I hesitated to answer his question. Already somewhat confounded by finding myself more malleable under his hands than I’d ever been at any other point in my entire life, I now struggled to put what I wanted into words.

I squirmed in his lap, rubbing my ass against the length of him. He groaned, digging his fingers into the curves of my hips, but continued to look at me expectantly.

“Answer me,” he demanded.

“You,” I managed to say. “I want you,” I said, a little more confident.

He delicately ran the back of his hand across the side of my face before placing a finger under my chin to hold my attention.

“Then get on your knees, my dear, and do your *very best* to please me,” he ordered.

His deep voice skated over my skin, reigniting a surge of desire within me again. I slithered off his lap and kneeled between his legs as he remained seated in his chair. I knew what to do, but I'd never done it before. I'd only been with one guy in my entire life, and that had not been a particularly involved or lengthy experience.

I was amazed by Jay's calmness, conscious of how desperate I'd been for my own release. I was all too aware of the desire that continued to well up inside of me, wanting more of his hands on my body.

I proceeded to unbutton his pants and let his hardness spring loose. He continued to look at me with that same burning calmness as I broke our gaze to peer down at the full hard length of him. I took him in my hand, stroking his impressive length. A low growl escaped his lips, and I felt a wave of excitement, a kind of power from eliciting such a response from a man like him, a man who was always in control of everything and everyone around him. But with him in my hand, I felt like I was holding onto the beginning of a loose thread. And if I tugged at it *just right*, then just maybe he, and the power he held so closely, would come undone for me, *because of me*.

Emboldened, I took him in my mouth, first just the tip and then more and more, finding I could take the length of him but that he slid down my throat. But I didn't gag. I began to truly enjoy myself, feeling more powerful each time I made my way up and down the length of him.

Jay's large hand grasped my chin, tilting my head up toward his face, holding it there so that I couldn't look away. It was a difficult angle, but I saw his hunger for me in his piercing gray eyes, and it made me want to redouble my efforts. He moved his hand from my chin to the nape of my neck, where he entangled his hand into my long hair. I was desperate to please him, but I tensed as his thrusts came faster and more forceful. Then I really did gag around him.

"You can take it," he reassured me.

"That's it," he said, hitting the back of my throat as I began to relax again. "Just like that," he crooned, leaning farther back into his chair but not releasing his grip on me.

"Now breathe," he ordered, pushing his way forcefully to the back of my throat again.

Even when he was fucking my mouth, he was giving me a lesson, I thought, my usual ornery nature momentarily rearing its head. But I was determined. I breathed in through my nose and focused on taking him deeper.

He continued thrusting the hard length of him in and out of my mouth until he found his rhythm, and then his release, spilling down my throat. His grip in my hair went slack, and I knew I'd succeeded.

I went to rise from my knees. Jay grabbed me and placed me on his lap. He, again, commended me.

"Hmm," he rumbled, his hand resting on the inside of my thigh. "That was *good*."

I brightened at knowing my hard work had paid off.

"Where did you learn how to do that?"

"I didn't. That... That was my first time," I admitted, hating the shyness in my voice.

Normally so confident, I felt so timid at finding myself in new territory, especially with a man like Jay. He merely nodded in approval.

"Learning to please me with every part of your body *in every way* will be your second lesson, my dear. But you have to master your first lesson first. You've done spectacularly, and I have no doubt you'll continue to do so, but you'll not touch me again until I've decided that you've mastered your ability to come for me when I command it."

He looked at me expectantly, waiting for my reply.

"Yes, Jay," I replied, knowing that was the answer he was looking for this time.

Resuming his stoic high lord demeanor, he gave me a chaste kiss before lifting me off his lap and placing me back in my seat, making it clear I was to return to my studies. He buttoned up his blue dress pants and went back to his book, licking his finger to turn a page, the same finger he had stroked within me minutes before.

"Strawberries," he noted appreciatively under his breath, as he continued his reading.

I burned in satisfaction at the sound of approval in his voice. *Always come for him, learn to please him, lessons*. I wasn't sure what exactly I'd just signed up for, but those were the kind of lessons I could look forward to. I struggled to return my focus to the book before me.

*Led by Prince Heroux, the forces of Valencia rebuffed the advance of the Alancian army...* I read and reread the same sentence several times, trying to ignore the wetness threatening to escape my small panties. I let out an exasperated sigh, finally turning the page of my book that had taken me entirely too long to get through. Jay released a small, self-satisfied chuckle,

as if he knew of my internal struggle.

As he stared at the books before him, I watched his face revert back to that of the aloof high lord. I ran a fingertip across my lower lip, contemplating which path forward would be more tortuous—his continued attention solely upon me or my inability to touch him in return.

My lessons for the rest of the week continued with me and my books taking turns sprawled out on top of the large table in the library.

## *Jay*

Grey popped into existence at the same time I appeared alongside his son at yet another location along the magical border wall between Valencia and Alancia. Despite still being summer, there was a cool crispness in the air of the woods because we were so far north.

“How many is this?” Grey asked. The King wore a simple, forest green tunic and dark pants. He rolled up the sleeves of his tunic to his elbows despite the coolness around us.

“Five,” I responded. “*Today.*”

It was the fifth location we had viewed that day that had signs of deterioration. The border wall itself was invisible and the only way to know it was there was to look directly at it. In a healthy condition, the magical border wall functioned as a mirror. Upon approaching the wall, all that could be seen would be a reflection. However, as I peered at the wall I did not see the reflection of the woods behind me. Instead, through a hole big enough to fit about one man, I saw a section of the forest where the woods continued. I spotted a creek in the distance.

It was difficult to believe that it had been twenty-three years since I had seen what was on the other side of that wall; twenty-three years since my southern brethren and I had been separated from our northern counterparts.

“Just like the others, it’s not a complete hole through the wall. *Not yet.* No one has gotten through it,” Grey said, almost as if reassuring himself. “But if I don’t fix it, it could get worse and it is conceivable that someone could get through it.”

The King’s son, Nik, stood nearby, his hands in his pockets. He craned

his neck, peering at the small opening, and something that looked like the crest of a wave peeked over the high collar of his dark emerald-green button-down. His dark brows furrowed and then turned his back on the wall, pacing in the opposite direction.

“Do you—” I began to ask my friend if he felt up to addressing the hole.

Like everyone’s powers, the King’s powers had diminished over the years, and he had already tapped into his magic to heal the four other weaknesses we had found that day.

“I have enough magic for this. You’re nearly as bad as a mother hen, Jay,” the King retorted.

I backed away, hands up, conceding the area to my friend, choosing not to comment on the sweat I saw beading on his brow despite the bite of coolness to the air.

Nik approached us, his hands no longer in his pockets, his brow no longer furrowed. There was an intensity that brewed in the younger lord’s deep green eyes. Broad shouldered, he was bigger and more muscular than either me or his father, partially due to his mixed fae heritage but more so a result of the hours I knew he spent each day training and throwing around weights the size of large boulders.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Nik said, like he was continuing a debate we had all just pressed paused on.

Nik had kept his thoughts to himself the first four times we’d gone through this process that day, his father expending his magic, getting paler with each effort. But it was clear that he wouldn’t remain silent any longer.

“*Nik*,” I cautioned the Prince, trying to head off an argument between the King and his son.

The two were so often at loggerheads these days.

“Our magic wasn’t strong enough to win the last war back then, and with our magic in the state that it is, could you imagine the risk if the north still has its magic in full force?” I asked.

“But our magic is dying because of this fucking wall!” Nik exclaimed. “It’s killing us.”

Darkness began at the Prince’s feet until it overtook the part of the forest we stood in like a dense cloud had suddenly appeared in front of the sun. It was cool before, but in the shadow of the Prince’s darkness, there was a frostiness to the cold, northern air.

I didn’t disagree with the young Prince. The issues with our magic

began at the same time that the wall went up. I suspected that the magical barrier somehow disturbed what I believed to be a magical ecosystem connecting the magic of all fae. But, then again, the war itself and the loss of so many fae lives could have also had an impact on our magic.

“We don’t know for certain that it’s the wall, Nik. And how many of us died during the last war? How many of us will Rex kill if we don’t have this wall?” I asked calmly, rehashing our same old arguments.

“The wall is not the answer to our problem, friend,” Nik began. “It *is* the problem.”

Maybe the wall was not the answer to *this* problem but it was the *only* answer to a different problem—King Vandros. The civil war had been a cataclysmic clash of magic, one that King Vandros would not have allowed to end until he had the heads of anyone powerful enough to challenge him, which would have included my head, the King’s, and his son’s, at a minimum. Without the wall, we would once again be exposed to King Vandros’s pursuit.

“The prophecy—” Nik began.

“Nik,” the King interjected before we could once again have this argument. “*Son*, the prophecy has left us empty handed. And now’s not the time to have this discussion again. *Some of us* need to get back to the High Court,” the King said, taking a jab at the Prince’s continued refusal to have anything to do with the High Court more than once a year since his mother’s passing.

Grey waited until the darkness emanating from his son receded. Then the King placed his hand on the invisible barrier and closed his eyes in concentration. He’d explained the process to us before. How he could picture the weave. It was like someone or something had sliced through several layers of the wall. He said he could find the severed ends of each weave and mend them back together. Grey stepped away, discreetly wiping away the bead of sweat that rolled down his too-pale face.

“Done,” he said with finality.

I inspected the wall. I could no longer see the creek. I saw only my own reflection and that of Nik behind me, pacing.

“Is that’s all of them?” I asked.

“That we know of. For now...” the King replied.

“Will you be able to sense it if another weakness pops up?” I asked.

“No,” the King said solemnly. “Maybe at one time I could have, but not

now.”

I nodded. “Then we will need the wall patrolled at all times going forward.” It was time to pull our forces together. It was time for us to prepare for what will happen if there is a hole in the wall and we cannot seal it in time.

The three of us popped out of existence without another word, landing somewhere between the border wall and the High Court. Nik would have to travel us around another time or two before he could drop off his father and me at the High Court. Although he did not seem as affected as Grey or me, his powers, too, had faded. Not even the Prince of Darkness, who had once moved mountains, could travel distances as long as he once could.



## *Alarie*

Opening my eyes, I scanned my large bedroom, enjoying the way the sun peeked through the tall, ornate curtain in the corner. I noticed a navy-blue matte satin box with a bright red bow near the door to my bedroom. It must have been slipped into my room while I was sleeping. In my nightgown, one of my new blue ones that was silk and short and clung to the shelf of my ass, I retrieved the box.

I headed back to my plush bed, burrowing myself back under the fluffy covers. I excitedly opened the lid to find a gorgeous pair of stilettos, nude leather with fine details indicating that they were of a price I would have never been able to afford on my own. The spike of the heel was so thin it seemed unbelievable that it could support even my slight weight.

I pulled my legs out from under the white comforter and slid the stilettos onto my small feet. I stretched my legs out long, admiring how perfectly my new pumps fit and wondering when Jay had had time to arrange for the purchase of the gift.

As I got dressed, I decided to leave off my thigh-highs. Truthfully, I preferred to keep my bare legs. Coming from a coastal town, it was often too warm and humid for such suffocating undergarments, so I only wore them when they enhanced my outfit. Dressed in bare legs, my new heels, a tight stretchy knee-length blue skirt with a mid-thigh slit, and a cream-colored tank top that was much more sheer than anything I normally would have worn, I made my way to my day's lessons.

Jay did not join me at breakfast. But when I walked into the library, I spotted him already entrenched in his duties. He quickly looked up at me as I

entered the room. The glint of promises in his focused, steely gaze made my breath catch. By the time I moved to sit to his left at the long table we so often shared, his eyes were already back on his work.

After two hours of us working in near silence next to each other, I reached near the high lord for an old red leather-bound book, at least in part to draw his attention to me since we'd been working diligently that morning with no indication of anything but more reading to come. The high lord had stepped out of the library earlier for a half hour or so to receive a messenger, but otherwise, we'd sat in silence all morning.

As if seeing through my thinly veiled attempt and agreeing it was time to focus on more *pressing* matters, Jay closed the notebook he had been writing in, definitively, with an audible clap that caused me to look over my shoulder, still half bent over the table. His large hand rested firmly on top of his book like he had glued it there to keep it from wandering.

His unrelenting gaze dropped to the new heels on my feet. The approval in his normally icy eyes felt hot on my skin. I did not break the silence as his carnal hunger filled the air between us. I was no longer bent over the table, but I did not take my chair again. I'd been successful in getting his attention, but now that I had it, I stood frozen, not sure what to do with it, as if paralyzed by the warmth that grew between my thighs under his gaze.

Jay saved me from having to decide. He placed his strong hands on each side of my hips, allowing his fingers to dig into the side of my ass as he smoothly tugged me to him, arranging me in his lap. His well-muscled left arm slipped around my waist as he moved his right hand to my bare thigh, using his thumb and forefinger to trace small circles on my skin.

"Alarie, my dear, you've done so well with your first lesson. Like everything else for you, it seems to *come* naturally to you," he praised.

I had a hard time focusing on his words. The shapes he traced on my skin set off a tingling sensation between my thighs that pitched to an ache as he traced yet another circle on the sensitive skin inside my thigh.

"But there's still a ways to go in your education. You see, when I say you are always to come for me, I mean *always*, each and every time, no matter where we are, who may be around, or what distractions may be in play that day. Even when my duties take me away from the manor, as they often do, you will come *for me*."

"I..." I hesitated, thinking of what to say. "Yes, Jay," I replied simply, through uneven breath, still not knowing exactly what he intended but

wanting to find out.

A lopsided smile played across his face at the sound of his name on my lips. The look in his eyes said he would make me writhe with pleasure until I screamed it.

“Good answer, Alarie,” the high lord praised. “Short, sweet, and obedient, just like you,” he elaborated.

“I’m not obedient,” I retorted defensively, snapping out of my lust-filled trance.

Obedient had never been a word used to describe me. I was notoriously obstinate and anti-authoritarian. Growing up without a true parental figure had made me overly independent to the point that I chafed anytime anyone tried to tell me what to do.

Jay slightly raised his right eyebrow in response to my challenge. His hand tightened on my thigh, his fingertips leaving little white marks and causing a wave of fervor to shoot through my entire body.

“You will be when you’re with me, Alarie,” he replied, his tone leaving no room for argument.

If it had been anyone else, I would have railed against their attempt to dominate me. My entire life, I’d actively resisted anyone who tried to tell me what to do. But in that moment, I realized I’d been waiting my entire life for someone to come along who *could* tell me what to do and actually make me do it. Back home, there was no one who fit that bill. If anything, the boys my age were intimidated by me. But Jay, he blew right past my tough facade.

He waited expectantly for my reply.

“Yes, Jay,” I replied, a need I’d never known I had welling inside of me. A need even greater than my near-constant desire for independence. I felt myself *wanting* to submit to my desire for him, wanting to submit *to him*.

He didn’t miss a beat, like he knew that there was no other possible answer I could have given.

“Starting right now, you’ll come for me. *Twice*,” he growled.

He lifted me off his lap, causing me to stand facing the table. With me wedged between his hard body and the table, he allowed his hardness to brush against the firmness of my ass. He moved his right leg between my legs, kicking my feet out and widening my stance, making room for himself. I gulped down air. Jay laid his hand on the back of my neck, gently but firmly pressing until I was bent in half, my breasts against the tabletop.

“I thought these heels would be the perfect height for this,” Jay

reflected, sounding pleased with himself. He held onto my hips and ground his length against me.

I arched my lower back, trying to angle my ass toward what I felt, long and hard, pressing against me. Jay let out a growl of approval, then separated his body from mine so he could reach a hand up my skirt. He found my silky underwear and slid a finger under one side, hooking the string and pulling it down, allowing the stringy garment to fall to my ankles. And then he placed his warm hand on the inside of my thigh. Jay covered me in words of approbation as he felt the wetness that was no longer hidden by my undergarment begin to drip down the inside of my thigh.

“Always so wet, so ready. Alarie, I just love how damn wet you get for me,” he hummed as he began to play in the wetness circling the pinnacle at the top of me before moving back to my opening and then back and forth slowly until I released a moan, a plea of my urgency.

He placed a hand softly around the front of my throat, lifting me from the table so he could nip the side of my neck with his teeth. And then Jay plunged a finger inside of me, finding the aching knot within my core. I bowed against him, overtaken by the feeling of him inside of me. But he held me firmly pinned to the front of his body until I sunk into his strokes and began to move against his hand.

“That’s right. Don’t stop,” he demanded, his teeth grazing against my ear, sending a shiver skittering down my spine.

I bit at my bottom lip, muffling a moan. He quickly, roughly, pressed me back to the table again and added another finger to his taunting within me. The throbbing multiplied within me with his every stroke.

“Now you are going to come for me, Alarie,” he breathed as he picked up the pace of his fingers curved inside of me, stroking.

Eager to please him, I focused on the pressure mounting until it began to blossom into pleasure and then spread throughout my entire body. I thought I might lose my footing in the pencil-thin stilettos, but he held me pressed against the flat of the table. He let loose a sensual, pleased laugh as, seconds later, I heeded his command. I pressed my lips together to keep from screaming his name in the otherwise quiet library.

Released from his grip that held me to the table, I righted myself as best I could in the thin stilettos that were trapped by my stringy undergarment. Upon facing Jay, I saw the considerable, eager bulge in his pants, and the desire to take him in my mouth and feel that thrill of power again was

overwhelming. I moved for the button of his pants, but Jay stopped my hands, holding my wrists lightly but firmly.

“That was one,” he cautioned, leveling his smoldering gray eyes with mine.

I took a deep breath, causing my breasts to rise as I debated asking for more or begging for mercy.

“Jay, I don’t know if I can again,” I protested. I still buzzed with the remnants of my first orgasm.

“How many of your orgasms are mine, Alarie?” he asked.

His fingers found my left breast, rolling and then pinching my nipple with his rough hand.

“All of them,” I panted.

“And how many did I say I was claiming right now?”

His other hand found the nipple of my right breast, rolling and pinching it as well.

“Two,” I said, bucking under the pressure of his fingertips.

“So how many times are you going to come for me?” he asked.

I stared into his resolute gray eyes, and he stared back at me, unflinching. And then I felt that new desire rise inside of me. I wanted to give in to him so that his hands and his words could make my body hum with pleasure.

“Twice,” I whispered amidst unsteady, surrendering breaths.

“Good girl,” he crooned, and my body hummed itself into a painful ache that could only be calmed by his touch.

He guided me to sit on the table I’d been bent over moments before. My feet dangled, and one heel began to slip off my left foot. The heel dropped to the floor as he pulled down the front of my blouse, lowering his mouth to my left breast, licking and sucking and gently rolling my nipple between his teeth. I couldn’t help arching my back, pressing myself more into the embrace of his mouth.

One hand buried in my hair, pulling my face back and up to him, his other hand slid between my legs, and he began to explain the next part of my *lesson*. He circled the top of me, playing in my wetness.

“You’ve learned to come for me *when* and *where* I want,” he said, continuing his maddening circling.

And I had—at the Summer Ball, on the library table, in the hallway of the manor between one messenger leaving and another already knocking at

the door. Anywhere and everywhere Jay had decided to instill my first lesson into me, and my body had heeded his commands.

“You’ve learned that your body is *mine*,” he said, plunging a finger inside of me to drive this point home.

I threw my head back, agreeing vehemently.

“Now,” he explained, adding another finger and stroking the knot within me, “you must learn that *you* are mine. You must give into me so completely that no barriers remain between us. I mean it, Alarie,” he warned. “If I feel you holding back, you’ll spend another month on this library table.”

“Yes, Jay,” I agreed without hesitation.

As amazing as he had made me feel, made my body feel, I wanted more. I wanted the one thing that he kept from me. I wanted him.

And then, High Lord Vitruvian dropped to his knees on the library floor. My breath caught as I realized what he intended. He looked up at me, his face positioned between my thighs, his eyes determined. And then he moved his head farther between my legs. He hooked his arms around my thighs, sliding me to the edge of the table and pulling me closer to him.

I felt his warm breath on my inner thigh and then a lick, a nibble. I writhed, looking down at the second most powerful man in Valencia down on his knees for me. He placed his hand on my lower stomach, holding my torso to the table as he lifted my legs to rest on his muscled shoulders.

I heard a growl, deep inside his chest, before I felt his tongue teasing at my opening. He circled the tip of his tongue at my opening, and I curved my body into his embrace, wanting to feel him inside of me. But with the next flick of his tongue, he made his way to the bundle of nerves at the top of me.

I spread my hands wide on the table, reaching for something to tether me to this world. It felt more amazing than anything I’d ever felt in my entire life.

“*Oh fuck. Oh, my fucking gods, Jay!*” I gasped.

He continued with consistent little flicks of his tongue on the nest of my desire. Pleasure welled within me so quickly it threatened to overpower me. But something nagged at the edge of my subconscious, preventing me from spilling over. Despite the unbelievable pleasure I felt mounting, I also felt incredibly vulnerable laid bare before Jay and understood what he meant about me having to give into him completely.

There was something about the position I found myself in that required me to surrender something more than just my body to him. Each and every

time I'd given into him before, I'd told myself that I was just giving in to what my body wanted. But now, I knew he demanded more. He demanded that I let my guard down, that I trust him with more than just my body.

His lapping between my legs intensified, growing longer and heavier, pulling me toward the beckon of my looming orgasm and away from the insecurities in my head. I was approaching the sharp edge of my pleasure. Unable to find anything to grab onto on the table, I dug my hands in my own hair, grasping fistfuls. I admitted that complete and total control was a small price to pay for this lesson. And then his tongue slipped inside of me.

I gave up any and all reservations standing between us, between me and the release building between my thighs. I capitulated to his demands and his incessant licking. I bucked off the table and shattered over his tongue.

He continued to lick at me, and it was too much. I was overwhelmed with the sensation, with the reverberations of my orgasm shooting through me with each pass of his tongue. I tried to maneuver myself out of his grasp, but he didn't let me. He firmly held my lower body to the table and continued to dart in and out of me and suck at the sensitive apex, causing my release to drag on. Jay didn't move his mouth from me until, like a wet washcloth wrung dry, he had forced every drop of my orgasm out of me.

I sat there on the top of the table, spent, legs weak but still lightly wrapped around him. He lessened the pressure he used to pin me there and bent down to retrieve my lost heel. It was so small it almost fit within the palm of his hand. He bent, delicately placing it back on my foot. Then he dropped into a graceful crouch, grasping my soaked panties that hung around one of my ankles in one of his hands, and pulled them off and over my heel. Jay gave the inside of my knee a small kiss before standing and placing the dainty undergarment drenched in my scent into his pocket.

"Two," he said with satisfied finality.

He stared into my eyes as he possessively licked his fingers, covered in evidence of my orgasm. And then, even though I saw his need pressing against his pants, he sat back down in his chair with a finality that let me know that my lesson was done, at least for that moment.

## *Alarie*

I arrived at the library the next day to find a stack of books with a note atop them. I recognized the high lord's slanted masculine scrawl:

*"You will continue working on your lessons while I am away for a few days. Yours, J."*

I reflected on his note. I had every intention of continuing with my studies. I still had to pass the liaison exam. I wasn't worried about passing the test, but I did have some subjects to brush up on. At my school, they had not taught the history of the High Court in as much detail as I needed to know, and they had not gone into magical theory at all in my prior lessons.

Then I realized the note was referring to my *other* lessons, the ones that he so diligently helped me with most days in the library. I recalled his earlier statement: *"Even when my duties take me away from the manor, you will come for me."* I set the letter aside, feeling obstinate, and thinking that maybe I wouldn't continue with that particular *lesson*.

I was feeling ornery from a combination of my disappointment that the high lord would not be joining me for the day's lesson and also remembering just how thoroughly and submissively I'd taken the high lord's *lesson* the day before. But then I focused in on the *"yours"* at the end of his note.

If I was being honest with myself, I *was* his. My body was leagues ahead of my mind when it came to being truthful about how I felt about the high lord. My body was ready to give him everything, letting him tell me when and where to do whatever he wanted, and I would love every minute of it. But my mind didn't want to let him in so completely, to give up my hard-earned independence. It's not that I didn't trust him. I did. I just didn't know



how to let someone in and give over any of the control I had white-knuckled for so long.

Putting aside the question of whether I would continue with my *lessons* as Jay had ordered, I turned to my reading for the day. My lesson focused on the strategy and tactics of warfare. Jay had explained that it was not his intent to ready me for a battlefield but that the High Court was like a battlefield, and he intended to prepare me to strike down our enemies and walk away unscathed.

I got it. In some ways, that's how I felt about my life leading up to my time at the High Court—it had been a battle. But I had not walked away unscathed, I reflected, thinking of my reluctance to give myself to Jay. The ruthless independence I'd wielded to get to this point in my life had isolated me for years, trapping me in a safe, lonely box of ambition.

As the day wore on and I did not feel the brush of Jay's leg against mine and there were no breaks in my studies for my *other* lessons, I found myself with an unsated warming gathering between my thighs. I refocused on the book before me, chastising myself for my lack of restraint.

\* \* \* \*

“How much do you want to bet that Rhett's already there?” Luke asked as we walked into town that evening. “He avoids the High Court more than any other lord I know, the lucky bastard,” Luke ruminated.

Rhett's father, High Lord Vincent Rein, ran the estate at the High Court, leaving Rhett free to gallivant about Vlaisse doing whatever the young lord pleased. Rhett's gallivanting usually involved many, *many* ladies of the Court and drinking in town with Luke, and sometimes me, at Bar Louie. Luke, on the other hand, ran the estate of House Bellamy at the High Court and had his duties as senior counselor to House Vitruvian. Between his two roles, Luke stayed busy and attended nearly every High Court function there was.

It wasn't that Rhett was lazy—he wasn't. He was just too damn smart, and too gorgeous, for his own good. He knew exactly when there was something he had to handle himself versus something someone else could do for him. His hands-off approach to managing the affairs of House Rein at the High Court allowed him to have a hands-on approach with the majority of the ladies at the Court. I commended, rather than judged, Rhett for his master skills of delegation.

And although I thought my friend was a devilishly handsome genius, I wasn't interested in throwing my hat in Rhett's ring along with all his other lady suitors. He was perfect, *too* perfect for my taste. Anyway, there was no way I could compete with the prominence of the ladies who threw themselves at Rhett. Whatever woman Rhett ended up with would likely have credentials sufficient to be the next queen of Valencia.

"Umm, I'll bet you a beer he hasn't made it out of whoever's bed he landed in last night," I speculated, thinking of how Rhett had departed the night before with an enchanting platinum blonde.

We arrived at Bar Louie. It was busy and the after-lunch crowd was already into their beers.

"Look who it is!" Rhett shouted almost the moment Luke crossed the threshold of the bar.

"Pay up, little girl," Luke said, always with the short jokes, even though I was wearing my usual four-inch heels.

I walked to the bar, ordered three beers, then headed back to the table where the boys sat. The only time Luke—or Rhett, for that matter—let me pay for anything was if I lost a bet. As a result, I was rather free in making my bets with them. At first, I'd tried to fight them on the issue, insisting I pay my fair share. But Luke would always respond something to the effect of, "*When you own your own castle, maybe I'll let you start picking up a tab or two.*"

I didn't own my own castle, but I was landed. When I'd earned my role as a lady at the High Court, I'd been given a small piece of land somewhere in the south that was supposed to be big enough to build on. I'd never been there and really had no reason to go there. The land was more symbolic than anything—a bit of land to support my title as a lady, since I hadn't earned that honor through my lineage.

Rhett would also brush off my efforts to pay, jokingly referring to his money as being "Daddy's money," even though I knew damn well that Rhett had his own ventures and his own money.

The truth was, I rarely had to pay for anything anymore. I was almost always with Luke or Rhett or Jay. Jay had provided me with more than I'd ever needed or wanted and insisted that I use his account, and not my personal account, any time I was out. I didn't even know how much money I had in my personal account at the local bank, consisting of my savings from before arriving at the High Court and almost the entirety of my wages earned

since coming to the High Court.

“I thought for sure you’d still be up at the Court... *Perhaps still in bed,*” I quipped, setting the three tall lagers down at the table.

“Nah, baby. We have that party tonight, so I’m shirking all my High Court obligations until then,” Rhett responded, reminding me of the party that night at Lord Preston’s.

I ignored his sweet talk. He was always calling me “baby” or “doll” or some droll. I hardly even noticed it anymore.

“Who do you have lined up tonight?” Rhett asked Luke.

“Al’s my date tonight. Aren’t you, Al?” Luke joked, taking a sip from his mug and then running his hand through his light-brown hair.

Luke didn’t need to say it. I was always his “date” to High Court events because our respective liaison and counselor roles for House Vitruvian landed us there. We’d spent countless days and nights together, sharing breakfast, lunch, brunch, tea, dinner, after-dinner drinks, and everything in between. Rhett had spent a fair amount of time with us at the High Court as well, although not as much because he often shirked his High Court duties.

“Al, baby, I thought you were going to be my date?” Rhett jested.

“I’ll be both of your dates if you promise to save me from having to dance with anyone else,” I retorted.

It was very common for Luke and me to dance the night away so that I could avoid awkward invitations to dance from other lords. I didn’t mind talking to, or even flirting with, the other lords. I’d gotten quite good at the casual flirting that came with the games of the High Court. But I hated dancing with anyone but Luke or Rhett. We often saved each other from unwanted invitations to dance... or to go home for the night. And then I would end up with Luke and Rhett by the end of most nights. We would migrate toward each other and any dates the boys had could join or not.

“I don’t mind sharing,” Luke said, wagging his eyebrows at me. “You have yourself a deal!” he continued, a smile spreading across his face, like this was some kind of new deal and wasn’t what we did for each other already.

“As long as you help me dodge my father,” Rhett said.

“He currently has a stick up his ass named Cassian Davante,” Rhett continued.

“*What did you say?*” I asked, jerking my head toward Rhett and almost spitting out my beer.

“You know, *Don Davante*, how the lesser fae in the north have started to unite, boycotts, shortages, not going to work, leaving their towns to join others near House Dumont. Keep up, baby,” Rhett teased like I’d hit my head and forgotten about the current events of the Court.

“Yeah, yeah. I know all of that, Rhett. But what did you say the don’s first name was?” I asked eagerly.

“Don Cassian Davante,” he repeated. “Some lesser fae with Lord Dumont’s House. A serious motherfucker built like a brick shithouse, I hear,” Rhett replied with a laugh.

I was dumbfounded. Don Davante couldn’t be Cass. He just couldn’t be. Not *my Cass*. There were a million Davantes in this world. It was a common surname, which was why it had never crossed my mind that Don Davante could possibly be Cassian Davante. It also seemed unfathomable that my childhood best friend was the man behind all of the High Court’s recent troubles.

“You know him?” Rhett asked, his handsome brows furrowed.

“Yeah,” I whispered in disbelief. “I think so.”

“How?” Rhett and Luke both exclaimed, mimicking each other.

“He’s... He was my best friend back home.”

\* \* \* \*

I usually fared pretty well on the short walk between the Court and downtown Vlaise, but my feet were absolutely killing me as Luke and I walked back to the High Court that evening. Rhett decided to stay back at the bar and avoid the High Court a little bit longer.

“I love these heels but, damn it if they aren’t just torture devices posing as really cute shoes,” I lamented.

“Then why did you wear them to walk into town, genius?” Luke teased.

“So, I can see past your belly button, *genius*,” I retorted.

Luke was over a foot taller than me.

“If I get blisters, I’m hosed for the party tonight,” I groaned. “I’ll be lucky to be able to stand in my heels, much less dance.”

I contemplated taking off my heels and walking barefoot, a thought I knew would have horrified the prim and proper ladies of the Court.

Suddenly, Luke swept me off my feet. His strong arms under my legs, he continued walking.

“Luke, what the hell!” I cried out in surprise.

“I can’t dance by myself all night,” Luke explained, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I giggled. I wasn’t the giggling type, but I giggled anyway.

“You’re just going to carry me all the way back to the Court?” I asked.

“Easily,” Luke grinned, looking down at me.

I smiled. And it wasn’t one of the fake smiles that I’d gotten so good at giving the lords I flirted with at the Court. He had earned a genuine smile. I considered it for a moment. It beat walking back barefoot, I decided. Luke continued walking with me in his arms like I was as light as a feather.

“Ok, yeah,” I relented. “But this position’s awkward, Luke. It’s like I’m your bride and you’re carrying me over the threshold, but for a half a mile. Let’s switch it up,” I suggested.

He threw me over his bulging, muscled shoulders like a sack of flour. I lay bent over his shoulder, Luke securing me with a single hand around both of my ankles.

“How’s this?” he asked as I started laughing again.

Slung over his shoulder, I slapped his ass.

“Luke,” I admonished.

In retaliation, Luke brought his other hand up and spanked my ass, his large hand grazing against the underside of my ass cheeks.

“Luke!” I yelled. “Just give me a piggyback ride.”

Luke wrapped a hand around each of my ankles and pulled me off his shoulder, sliding me down the front of his body until I straddled him, our faces inches apart. Luke stopped walking.

“Is this what you had in mind?” he asked, the timbre of his voice warming my insides.

I swallowed down the cool night air then gave him my best “*you know damn well this is not what I had in mind,*” stare.

“A piggyback ride,” I emphasized, squeezing my legs around Luke’s torso to hold myself up, which wasn’t necessary because his strong hands were already gripping my thighs and easily supporting my weight.

“You’re so light,” Luke said, tightening his hands on my thighs. “I could just throw you around all day,” he said, hefting my weight up and down against his body for emphasis.

My legs wrapped around him, and his hands wrapped around me. We looked into each other’s grinning faces until our smiles were replaced with

the recognition of the closeness of our bodies.

“Get on my back then,” he said, finally breaking the tension.

I hurriedly scurried onto his back in an undignified manner. I wrapped my legs around his back, and he wrapped his arms around my legs, then hiked up my weight. I flew up, then bounced back down on his back. I placed my face near his neck so that I could speak to him.

“I’m not a sack of potatoes, you know,” I said, resuming our usual joking demeanor.

“I know,” he agreed. “A sack of potatoes would be heavier than you,” he japed.

When we arrived at the High Court, Luke ran his hands down the length of my legs, gently placing me on the ground.

“Thanks for the ride, pack mule,” I said.

“You can ride me any time you like, Al,” Luke joked unashamedly but with a heat in his voice that brought me back to the feeling of my legs wrapped around his muscular torso, his fingers digging into my thighs.

“*Luke*,” I warned.

“Come over for a drink before the party?” he suggested, unapologetic.

I’d intended to go back to the manor and freshen up. But I didn’t have much time. Anyway, I didn’t know if Jay was home. If he was, I really hadn’t thought out how I wanted to handle the Cass situation with Jay yet.

“Ok, but I’m walking. People already talk too much about us, as is,” I replied.

Because of our near-constant presence with each other and the roles we sometimes played, often making a show out of being a little *too* friendly if we thought it advanced the position of House Vitruvian in whatever High Court maneuvering we were in the middle of, the whispers flying around the Court about us were pervasive. Even though Luke dated other women, it didn’t stop the Court rumors that we were an item.

“Your loss,” Luke joked, smiling. But he reached out his hand, allowing me to hold it and balance as I slid my heels back on.

As I crawled into my bath that night, after the party, after dancing the night away with Luke, my mind once more went back to Jay’s note, and his demand. My body began to react, pulsing between my thighs at the thought of not continuing with my *lesson* just to see what he would do, what new *lesson* he may teach me. But as my need continued to build within me, I thought of his words of praise for me. “*Good girl*,” he would say, and I

would melt. And then I slid a hand between my thighs until I came undone with thoughts of my next lessons with the high lord when he returned.

## *Jay*

It was the middle of the night when I returned to the Vitruvian manor after too many days of being away from her. I stood at the top of the staircase between the east wing and the west wing of my house. Between my room and hers.

I'd wondered as of late whether Alarie didn't embody some vestige of high fae magic. But I wasn't sure what high fae ability she might possess, some rare channeling ability perhaps. Her abilities didn't seem specialized enough to be anything else. Instead, it was like she was the embodiment of magic itself. I felt like I was better with her by my side, like she somehow enhanced my abilities, even though my abilities still paled in comparison to the power I once possessed before the magic began to dull. Her effect on me could be in the nature of some kind of healing or protector ability, but I'd never known of such an ability.

I ran through the possibilities, at last admitting to myself that it was probably no magical ability at all. I had to own up to the fact that what I was looking for magical answers to was more likely a lot more simple—I was just plain old infatuated with the girl. I had been since the moment I laid eyes on her. And as good as I felt with her by my side, it was nothing compared to what I felt when she was under my hands. I wanted to feel that now, feel *her* now. But it was late, and she was probably asleep, I told myself.

But it wasn't just how she was constantly so ready for me before I ever laid a single kiss upon her or how she responded to my every move with eagerness. It was *just her*, everything about her. Her intellect was razor sharp in the sexiest way possible. She absorbed everything I threw her way and



asked for more. Our conversations were intoxicating because she wasn't afraid to challenge me.

And then there was her vulnerability, hidden behind the impenetrable walls she had built around herself. It called to me. Alarie was not raised at the High Court or anything that even resembled a court. She had worked immensely hard to earn her spot at the High Court, and the things she had done to make it to this point had left their mark upon her. She had a barrier around herself so thick that I did not know if I would ever be able to penetrate it.

Before I had managed to work my way into her good graces, she was used to taking care of herself to the point that she would not let anyone try to do anything for her. I understood, and I'd even come to admire the ruthlessness in her. It meant she would do what it took to succeed on her own.

But I also believed that behind her impenetrable exterior there was a girl who wanted to be loved, who *needed* to be loved, and who cared so much that she had to pretend like she cared about nothing. I wanted to rip down the vestiges of every hurt she had ever had to endure in her short life and build my own walls around her, protecting her from ever having to endure anything unpleasant again. I had a primal need to make her feel safe and happy.

It was at this moment of reflection, standing at the top of my stairs, still unable to convince myself to go to my own quarters, that I had a revelation—I knew *exactly* what this feeling was, and it was more than ordinary possessiveness, which I had to admit I was prone to. It was a desire to magically imprint on Alarie.

My desire to magically mark her as my own was raw and primitive. I almost darted up the rest of the stairs and to her bedroom upon realizing it. But I wasn't sure that she had enough magic for me to imprint upon. And, in any event, it was much too soon in our relationship to take such permanent steps. If I imprinted on her, I would be magically connected to her in a way that made her particularly susceptible to my magic. And we hadn't even discussed my magic yet.

When I was younger, and my magic had been stronger, I'd imprinted on a girl or two. In our reckless, youthful love, we'd gone headfirst into things with consequences that youth couldn't possibly understand. Because the young cannot grasp what forever feels like for an immortal. To this day, I could still feel the remnants of those broken magical links. I'd learned to

ignore them long ago, and with the magic weakening, the strength of those lingering connections did as well to the point that I rarely thought about them anymore.

But I was still very conscious of the remnants of the single broken bond in my life. Before marrying Elizabeth, I'd been bonded to another—a beautiful young fae, Alanna. To imprint was just to leave a magical mark upon another, forming a connection to another's thoughts and feelings. Imprinting could even be one-sided. But to bond was so much more.

Bonding was more than a magical connection—it was a *union* of two people's hearts, minds, and magic. Each person on each side of a bond literally gave a piece of themselves and their magic to the other and were only made whole again by replacing that missing piece of themselves with a piece of their lover's magic. The bond was an innate dependency upon another and their magic. The bonded would physically crave the touch of their lover, without which their lover's magic inside of them would eventually wither and die.

It was *extremely* painful to break a bond, and a bonded person could never get back the piece of their magic that they had given away. As the other person's magic died and then completely disappeared inside of the bonded, they were just left incomplete, with a hole that could never be filled. I banished the picture of my magic, with a large, Alanna-shaped bite taken out of it, from my mind.

I wasn't sure if Alarie had sufficient magic to allow me to imprint on her, but I would have to be very careful, nevertheless. I could see myself, in the heat of the moment, when I finally let myself bury deep inside of her, not caring about the consequences as I sunk the talons of my magic into her.

## *Alarie*

I lay in bed feeling agitated at being deprived of the high lord's attention for yet another night and wondering if I should continue my lessons, once again, alone. Thinking of the warmth gathering between my legs and what to do about it, I heard a discreet clearing of a throat outside my door, a pause, and then I saw the doorknob turning. Jay stepped through the door, shutting it firmly and placing his body in front of the door.

Standing there in his tailored three-piece suit, sporting a five o'clock shadow on his handsome, rugged face, his very appearance slaked a thirst within me but quickly created another.

"Jay," I greeted him, sitting up straighter in my bed.

"I just got in," he explained. "I wanted to check on your progress while I was away."

His eyes unashamedly roved over the parts of my body that were not under the comforter.

"Did you get through all of the *work* I left for you?" the high lord inquired, a delicious slight arch in his right eyebrow.

I knew he was not asking about the piles of books he had left me on the library table. Deciding not to shy away from his question, I met his eyes.

"Oh yes. I was most thorough," I teased, shifting around in my sheets suggestively with a smile that alluded to the pleasure I'd given myself while thinking of him each and every night that he'd been away.

To my delight, my normally stoic high lord took a deep breath, and I saw his need for me settle in his eyes.

"*Good,*" he said briskly.

And then, as if he had just decided something in his head, he swaggered through the large room, stopping at the side of my bed. I tracked him with my eyes, his desire for me unlocking a thrilling sense of power.

“In fact, I was just about to...” I dipped a hand suggestively under the sheet.

One minute he was standing beside my bed, and the next, his hands were on my thighs, dragging me to him, positioning himself between my thighs. I opened my legs to him willingly, eagerly. With his fingers grasping my face, he turned my soft mouth up toward his. Parting my lips with his tongue, he began to roam my mouth and teeth. I made soft little whimpers into his mouth and tried to wrap my legs around his waist, attempting to eliminate any distance between my body and the hardness taunting me.

I’d almost pressed my core to that stiff part of him when he removed his hand from my chin, placing a hand on each of my thighs and squeezing them to keep me in place.

“Jay,” I tried to say, but my words were muffled by his mouth still pressed to mine.

He pulled his mouth from mine, moving to my neck, showering me with more insistent kisses.

“Jay.” I was able to clearly say it this time, making my plea for more, for *all* of him.

He ripped the front of my blue cotton nightgown down the middle, and my heart jumped into my throat in excitement. And then he was grabbing my left breast and pushing it into his mouth, his rough hand grasping my other breast.

I arched my back, wanting his mouth to continue lower on my body. He let out a chuckle of satisfaction and obeyed my silent command, making his way to the silky white panties I wore. He ripped the panties off my body too, throwing them somewhere off the bed. I lay on the bed, half propped up on my elbows, surrounded by the shreds of my clothing.

He lowered his head between my thighs, finding me slick with my eagerness for him.

“Jay, don’t make me wait any longer,” I begged, swelling with an ache to be filled by him.

He knew what I was begging for. I wanted him buried hilt-deep inside of me. He ran his tongue down me, drinking me in, then plunged his tongue inside of me. It wasn’t what I was begging for, but a hungry sigh escaped my

lips, anyway.

His fingers and tongue had explored my body many times as he taught me to master my first lesson and come for him whenever he commanded. But he had not yet sheathed himself inside of me, the very thing I begged for in that moment and had begged for the last several times I found myself under his ministrations. Jay had resisted, saying he would only give in to me when I wanted him inside of me more than anything I had ever wanted in my whole life. I knew it was to be my last and final act of giving in to him completely. The pleas spilling from my mouth proved that he had succeeded.

Jay drove his tongue into me once more, answering the need in my quavering breaths. I began to hold my breath, a sure sign that I was moments away from shattering for him. Unable to tell me to come for him with his words, he commanded me with the urgency of his tongue until I lost myself, squeezing my eyes shut as white stars exploded into my vision. Jay withdrew his tongue from inside of me but continued lapping at the outside of me as if enjoying the taste.

“Tell me what you want, Alarie,” he ordered.

“Fuck me,” I whimpered, my voice thick with my desire for him.

I pushed up onto my elbows, looking down at him.

“I want you inside of me, Jay,” I said, no longer too shy to tell him *exactly* what I wanted.

With a wicked look in his eyes, he rose and immediately began to expertly unbuckle his pants with a single hand. Removing his belt from the loops, he wound it around his hand, pulling so tightly that I saw his hand go white underneath it. My mind began to race with ideas of what he could do to me with that bit of leather. Jay traced my eyes to his belt and then peered back at me. The smoldering look in his gray eyes made my breath catch.

“No more lessons for tonight, dear,” he said, as if speaking to himself more than me and dismissing whatever idea had come to his mind.

His need from weeks of teaching me to come for him was impossible to be contained anymore. Without being told, I scrambled from the bed, falling to my knees with my desire to finally take him in my mouth once more. An approving rumble emanated from the throat of the high lord at the sight of my eagerness. As soon as he released himself from his pants, large and glistening at the tip with his need, my mouth was on him, taking him into my throat as I'd done before.

His hand found the back of my head, wrapping my hair around his hand

tight enough so that I could no longer control the movement of my mouth over him. Instead, he began to push into my mouth, not overly rough, seeing that I could take all of him before making deeper, increasingly faster thrusts. I moaned around him, begging him to keep going. But he stopped, his hand in my hair tightening. He pulled my mouth from him and forced me to look up at his face.

Kneeling before my high lord, his gray eyes penetrating me, I knew, *at last*, I was going to get what I'd pleaded for.

He pulled me from my knees and lifted me onto the bed. He lowered his body on top of mine, his muscled body sliding against my breasts. His length fell against me, feeling my wetness. He rubbed himself against the outside of me as he nipped at my neck. I tried to angle my hips and to get my hands to him, to maneuver him inside of me. He offered a soft laugh as he prevented me from doing so, pressing me down with the weight of his body.

Grabbing my hands and encircling both of them easily with one of his larger hands, he pinned my arms above my body. Stretching my body taut, he dipped his head to my breasts. He moved his other hand to my lower back, causing me to arch into him. My entire body hummed in anticipation.

"You want my cock buried inside of you?" he asked, continuing to tease the pool of wetness at my opening.

I pressed my eyes closed, consumed by my need for him, writhing under him in response. He roughly grabbed my face in his hand.

"Answer me, Alarie," he demanded.

My eyes popped open.

"Yes, Jay. Fuck me. I can't stand it anymore."

And then, his gaze locked onto my green and gold eyes, he crossed my threshold for the first time. A growl escaped his lips as my wetness enclosed around him inch by inch. He watched as my eyes went wide with the pain that came with him making room for himself inside of me for the first time. The pain quickly turned to pleasure as he gently pushed himself inside of me until he was fully sheathed. He lay on top of me, inside of me, unmoving, like he was savoring the feel of being soaked in me. I tried to move against him, but he pinned me to the bed with the weight of his body.

"Alarie, my dear, you were worth the wait," he whispered softly, his lips pressed right below my ear.

And then he began to move inside of me.

"Jay! Oh my gods, Jay. Yes!" I moaned, losing myself at the feel of him

inside me, finally filling that ache I'd begged for him to sate.

He continued to move tenderly inside of me as he placed his mouth around mine. With his muscled arms on both sides of our bodies, he lifted his torso off my breasts so that he could look down and see himself slowly moving in and out of me. He placed a firm hand on my lower stomach, possessively, feeling himself move inside of me, pressing against my walls. Each stroke within me felt like it was radiating through my entire body, culminating in one all-consuming rush.

He reached back and grabbed my foot, using it to press my leg wide and toward my chest. He angled me until he found that spot within me that always made me quiver. Taking more shallow thrusts, he stroked over and over the spot, working me into a frenzy.

Looking back up from the intoxicating sight of him plunging into me, I threw my head back, biting my lower lip as I bucked against him, moaning his name as my orgasm rocked me. He began to thrust inside of me with more urgency.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he demanded.

He wrapped his hands around both of my thighs, gripping me tightly as his need drove him deeper and harder and faster until he lost himself inside of me for the first time.

“You're exquisite,” he said with his eyes locked onto me.

In that look, I did not see my mentor, the high lord who had so diligently worked my mind and body these last several weeks. Instead, I saw a man softening with something other than pure desire.

## *Jay*

“I went off campus with the boys while you were gone,” Alarie announced the next morning.

She sat at a smaller round table in the breakfast nook, picking at her fruit. We hadn’t had much time for talking when I’d visited her in her room the night before.

A spike of unchecked jealousy rose in me. *There it is*, I thought, my original concern about getting involved with Alarie. Luke was one of my senior counselors and a damn good one. He was younger, and despite his father relegating him to the High Court as little more than the social face of House Bellamy, I knew that Luke’s father had misjudged him. I’d seen through Luke’s jovial facade and found pure unadulterated ambition. The way the other lords and ladies enjoyed Luke’s company and failed to see past his smiles and jokes made him a prized asset for House Vitruvian. And it wasn’t just Luke’s skills at gathering information that I valued. Luke had earned his position within my House by showing that he could provide sound advice and could operate without needing his hand held. But I wouldn’t allow Alarie to fall under Luke’s spell the way I’d seen so many others do.

As much as I wanted to, I’d already ruled out any attempt to imprint on her, at least for the moment. And although I may designate Alarie as my consort at some point, making my claim on her known, it was much too soon to consider something like that. Even with my arrangement with the lady, she would likely bristle at the idea, and I would have to make some kind of concession to smooth over our continued arrangement.

But Luke had given me his word that he would not pursue Alarie. And



ultimately, I would just have to rely on my tried-and-true methods of marking my territory. I'd made it clear at the Summer Ball that she was mine and mine alone, and I would reinforce that lesson as many times as I needed to.

"Anything new?" I inquired nonchalantly.

Leaning against the bar across from the round table Alarie sat at, I did not look up from the papers in my hands.

"Yes. It's about Don Davante," Alarie replied, sounding unsure of where to start.

Sensing that she had something important to tell me, I set the papers down in my hands and walked over to her. Standing over her, I felt the softness I had developed with her harden as my obligations as Contra took over.

"Tell me everything, Alarie," I ordered.

"He's a friend of mine from back home, Jay. Promise me you won't do anything to hurt him?" she entreated.

She knew I liked the sound of my name coming out of her mouth, and she tried to use that against me.

"Alarie, I won't make a promise I can't keep," I responded sternly.

Alarie stared up at me, arms crossed over her chest, resolute in her silence.

And I did soften in my adoration at her loyalty and her willingness to stand up to me; something many fae, many times her age, had failed to do over the years. I pulled up a chair in front of Alarie. I pulled her chair out from under the table and toward me so that they faced each other. I leaned over to her, my hands firmly resting on the tops of her thighs above her knees.

"But I can and will make any number of other promises to you, my dear," I began, hardly recognizing the tenderness in my own voice.

"I promise that I'll do everything in my power to hear your friend out and to come to a peaceful and mutually agreeable resolution. I will further promise that, although I may not agree with the methods of your friend"—I allowed some of my disagreement to show—"you know very well that I empathize with the plight of the lesser fae, so I will—as I believe I have done my entire life—work toward a better life for them." My gray eyes penetrated hers.

I brought her small hand to my mouth, brushing my lips against it with a kiss, and looked up at her through my raised eyebrows with an expectant

gaze, waiting for her to continue her story.

A smile of relief slid across her face.

Knowing I'd won her over, I said, "Start at the beginning."

"Well, you know I never had many friends, just a couple of guy friends back home. But he and I were close. He was my best friend," Alarie explained.

I quelled the uncontrollable spike of jealousy that began to rise in me at the tender way Alarie said his name. "*Cass.*" *Close? How close?* I wondered before reprimanding myself for just how crazy I let myself get over her. *Now's not the time for that,* I admonished myself internally.

"Cass got a bad rap as being some kind of dumb brute just because he was freakishly strong and not a big talker, but, really, he isn't. Dumb or a brute, that is," she clarified. "He was just selective about who he would share his thoughts with."

"Well, at least that was the Cass I knew," she said. "Honestly, I was a little taken aback when he started talking about going to the border to 'earn a name for himself.' In school, he had never been particularly motivated—another reason I guess people mistakenly thought he wasn't that smart," Alarie reflected.

The insight Alarie had on Don Davante was invaluable. And needed to be relayed to the King.

"I need to go catch up with Grey since I've been out of town for a couple of days, anyway. It's never good to let High Lady Tragon whisper in his ear too long unchecked," I said. "You can come with me and see what kind of trouble you can kick up in House Heroux." I rose from my chair, then grabbed her chin between my thumb and forefinger, tilting her face up to me. "But it will just be us, my dear. You'll have to do without your *Lord of Light* for an afternoon," I japed.

"Yes, Jay," she said, showing me the submissiveness she normally reserved for our private moments.

A growl rose in my chest, and I had to move my hand from her before we found ourselves lost in a distraction.

## *Alarie*

Luke, Lord Grant Preston, his husband, Jamie, and I stood in a thoroughfare between large marble pillars outside of where we had just finished lunch. Jamie's stream of dialogue faltered. And that's when I noticed Jay's appearance at the other end of the hallway.

I gulped down air as I felt Jay's eyes lock onto me, standing a little too near Lord Preston. I managed to give Grant a small, reassuring smile, and his demeanor held up better than his husband's, given the high lord's approach. People always clammed up around Jay, like their fear of him held their tongues in some kind of vice grip.

Luke stood a few feet away from where I stood with Grant. Luke managed to prod Grant's husband, Jamie, back into conversation by the time Jay reached my side, interrupting briefly to shake Grant's hand.

He was just passing through on his way to House Heroux, Jay explained.

"Stop by my study when you get back to the manor," Jay directed to me.

My pulse quickened as I thought of the lesson Jay, no doubt, had in store for me. Jay didn't interrupt Luke and Jamie, the latter of whom appeared to be enraptured by Luke's very presence. Jamie was very taken by Luke, and I'd directed my attention toward Grant most of the afternoon. After Jay's departure, Grant started back up our conversation.

"I don't know how you do it, Alarie," Grant said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Just stand there all calm and smiling next to Lord Vitruvian. He scares the shit out of me," he joked.

I'd already secured a helpful piece of information earlier in the

conversation from Lord Preston—a ship carrying bourbon barrels made for the High Court had hit some bad weather in the south and would be delayed several weeks. With all the parties and soirees coming up at the High Court, lords and ladies would pay a premium to save themselves the embarrassment of a sparsely stocked bar. Once I relayed this information to Jay, I knew he would be able to purchase all the bourbon he could get his hands on and make a significant profit on reselling it.

So, I turned my attention to some tactical teasing with the young lord.

“No, he doesn’t, Grant,” I said, smacking him lightly on the arm. “You looked *just fine* to me,” I continued playfully.

“You, on the other hand, Alarie. Well, I’d stay here and let you smack me around as much as you like,” he teased with a smile on his face.

“I may just take you up on that offer, Grant. Drinks next week?” I asked, giving him my best fake smile. “You and Jamie, of course,” I said, setting myself, as well as Luke, up for the next meeting.

\* \* \* \*

I arrived at the manor and sought out Jay in his private study, where I knew I would find him going over his reports from the day. I opened the solid wood door to Jay’s study, stepped in, and closed the door silently behind me.

“Lord Preston was of some use today,” I said, smiling wryly.

I walked to the back of the large brown mahogany desk where he sat and leaned against it, crossing my ankles. Looking up from his papers, Jay raised an eyebrow at me, then a one-sided devilish smile slid across his handsome face.

“I have no doubt he was. Based on how close I saw you standing next to him, he never really had a chance. He probably breathed you in and breathed out his life’s deepest secrets.”

I told Jay about the delayed shipment of bourbon to the High Court.

“Anything else?” he probed.

I knew he was looking for the kind of information that wasn’t related to the market, the kind of information that people only whispered about behind closed doors.

“Grant and Jamie seem perfectly open to...” I paused, choosing my words carefully, “*Being open*. But I think Luke would fare better in that regard than I would. Grant seems willing enough, but Jamie only had eyes for Luke,” I finished, pretending that I was the slightest bit disappointed by this

last statement.

This was the game we played.

As liaison, I often met with other lords. It was my duty to attend all social court functions and be the face of House Vitruvian. I had a few guys who could be considered friends—Luke and Rhett. But I never allowed any of the lords to advance past the flirtatious smiles and casual touches that were exchanged during my social calls. I knew how to toe the line of showing just enough interest to keep their attention but not so much interest that they felt rebuffed when things did not go further. This was the game many at the High Court played, and it assisted me in gathering the tidbits of information I would later share with Jay.

I knew this, and Jay did too. Only my wishful courtiers were out of the loop. We'd decided to keep our relationship private for the time being. At the High Court, all forms of relationships could be found and were accepted. Mistresses and lovers were often seen at the High Court. Some were even selected as consorts, an official position within the House recognized at the High Court. But I did not want my initiation into the High Court tied to my initiation into Jay's bed.

By all appearances, I'd not yet picked a suitor, which only made me that much more appealing to the other lords. After all, I was new to Court, and no one had *had* me—that they knew of.

So, I would flirt and tease the other lords and come home to Jay with my pockets full of secrets. He would graciously accept the fruits of my labor as high lord and then, in the next breath, use those very same efforts as the reason to remind me that I was his alone. I was sore for two days the first time Jay saw me dance with another man who was not Luke.

"I'll just have to see if I can't do a better job catching Jamie's eye next week when we grab drinks," I said teasingly.

"*Alarie*," he said in a warning growl.

"Hmm?" I hummed innocently, running a fingertip playfully across my bottom lip.

Jay set the pen in his hand down. Still seated, he slid me toward him until I was standing between him and his desk. Due to our height difference, this move put my breasts and neck within reach of his mouth.

"You want to play with the young lords?" he questioned darkly, deliberately unbuttoning the top buttons of my shirt to reveal the tops of my breasts pushed up like a shelf supported by a white silk bra.

Jay called everyone a young lord, even if they were hundreds of years old, because almost everyone at the High Court was younger than him.

“That’s fine,” he said as he bit the top of my right breast lightly, grazing his teeth along my skin while he firmly handled my left breast, his roughness indicating it was anything but fine.

I leaned into his attention, pushing more of myself into his mouth, enjoying this bit of roughness, as an ache grew between my thighs.

He stood and lifted me onto the desk so that my feet dangled. Then he continued to run his hand up my body, pressing me down until I lay on my back on the desk. His hand ended its journey, lightly resting around my throat.

“You can play with the young lords all you want, Alarie, but remember, when you do, you *will* come home to me and I *will* take what’s mine and mine alone,” he warned, his fingers tightening ever so slightly around my throat to emphasize his point.

I swallowed under the feel of his grip. “Yes, Jay.”

Then he sat back in his chair and wrapped my legs around his shoulders. He lowered his head under my skirt, inhaling before he grabbed my white panties and began to pull them to the side.

He let out a growl, his lips so close that I could feel it rumbling inside of me. And then he began his relentless licking. He started at my opening, licking the pool of desire that had already gathered, sticking his tongue into me slightly before firmly rolling his tongue to the top of me. When he reached the top of me, my back began to arch off the table. He placed a firm hand on my lower stomach, stilling me, keeping me from moving.

“Let me hear you say it, Alarie,” he demanded, his mouth hovering over me, leaving me drenched and aching.

“I’m yours, Jay,” I almost pleaded, knowing exactly what I was supposed to say.

“And?” he demanded, running his tongue down my middle and stopping again.

“I’ll always come home to you and come *for* you,” I rambled.

“Don’t you *ever* forget it, Alarie,” he commanded.

Then he roughly buried his face into me.

He began to flick his tongue, at first slow and then faster. Jay slid a finger into me and began to stroke the knot inside of me in sync with the flicks of his tongue. I dug my fingers into his hair, riding his face. I tightened

as I held my breath in the last moments before he brought me over the edge of my pleasure, a wave of ecstasy causing my legs to go wider and bow into him.

Jay peeked his head out from under my skirt, looking up at me, satisfaction plain on his face.

“Hmmm,” I purred, propping myself up on my elbows and then all the way up, unable to quarrel with the high lord’s smug satisfaction.

I kissed his face, tasting my sweetness on his tongue. I reached for the hardness still encased within his pants. I used both of my hands to begin unbuttoning his pants while he explored my mouth with his tongue. At last, releasing him from his pants, I began to stroke the length of him, running my hand over the top of him with each stroke.

“I want you in my mouth,” I said between kisses.

Jay liked for me to tell him what I wanted. And I wanted him.

He obliged, stepping back long enough to allow me to hop from the desk. I proceeded to let my skirt drop to the ground and then unbuttoned what remained of my shirt and threw it to the ground, too. I stood in my black pumps and my white silk set, my nipples poking through the thin fabric of the bra, then I dropped to my knees. I licked the length of him up and down while running a hand over the top of him. I took him into my mouth, licking the bottom of his shaft as he pushed farther down my throat.

My panties were soaked through from my release and the feel of him in my mouth. The ache between my thighs turned into a gushing throb.

“Fuck me, Jay,” I said with my mouth still on him.

Still standing, he lifted me easily, holding me up to him. Then he began to slide me on top of his length as my legs wrapped around him. My ache lessened with every inch of him that pushed into me until he stood fully sheathed inside of me. Connected, he turned us away from the desk until my back was pressed against the wall. He began to thrust into me.

“Harder,” I begged, wanting the length of him to pin me against the wall with each thrust.

He drove into me relentlessly.

“You’re mine,” he said, driving his point home with each thrust.

“This is mine,” he said, indicating with his thrust.

“These are mine,” he said, roughly grabbing my breasts.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I agreed emphatically as he drove me to and past the point of my pleasure.

It was a fun game we played.



## *Luke*

“Let’s go somewhere,” I implored.

Al and I sat in one of the smaller studies at the Vitruvian manor. We’d just finished giving our reports to Jay on the fruits of our recent labors at the High Court. Jay would be in meetings the rest of the afternoon, receiving all his other reports, and then he would have a High Council meeting that night.

Al looked at me from the corner of her eye. I could tell from the smile that played at the corners of her pouty lips that she was in.

“Ok, let’s go off campus,” she agreed.

Al went upstairs and then came back down in flats, a pair of blue jean shorts, and a white t-shirt that was cropped just enough to show a sliver of her flat stomach. She stood at the top of the stairs, the light of the chandelier glinting off a small diamond teardrop pendant she wore around her neck.

I wasn’t dressed as casually as Al, but I was dressed casually for me, because I’d planned all along to spend the day with Alarie in town. I wore a pair of blue slacks and a white button-up shirt, no tie. My light-brown hair looked perpetually ruffled, like I’d just run my fingers through it, probably because I had.

It was a great day for a walk into town. Alarie basked in the warmth of the sunlight, at one point closing her eyes and turning her face up at the sun while she was still walking. I walked beside her, holding her arm so she didn’t trip and fall on her face with her eyes closed.

“Hey, you want to come home with me for the Winter Gala?” I asked.

Her green eyes popped open. The happiness on her face changed to a pinched expression.

“I can’t, Luke. I’m going to the Winter Gala here. With Jay.”

“It’s really warm there and there are beaches,” I said, tempting her, tugging at her arm looped into mine.

She looked back at me, clearly contemplating. She looked torn.

“Did I mention I own my own island?” I bragged, trying to sway her.

“What! Your own—No, I can’t,” she replied, letting out an exasperated breath. “I already told Jay that I would stay here and go. And with you out of town, he’ll need me here.”

“Ok. You’re missing out, though,” I said, managing to sound only slightly disappointed.

Unconsciously, we were both heading to Bar Louie, our favorite bar. We’d probably run into Rhett at some point, if he wasn’t there already.

“Speaking of the Silver Court. Luke, can I ask you something?” she said.

I looked at her, arching my eyebrows as if to say, *go ahead*.

“Why aren’t you going with Jay tonight to the High Council meeting?”

I tugged my lips to the side at Al’s question.

“Well, Al, I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” I joked, “but I’m not really a high lord, you see. So, I don’t have a seat at that table.”

“But your *House* does. And, well...” she hesitated. “It doesn’t seem to be being filled.”

I nodded, understanding where she was going with this.

“You’re right, Al. My father rarely comes to Court. House Bellamy is aligned with Jay on most things, so we have essentially just given Jay a second vote for his disposal on the High Council.”

“But why, Luke? Why doesn’t your dad just have you in there on behalf of your House instead of here working for Jay? Couldn’t you attend the High Council meetings in your father’s stead?” she asked.

I gave her a smile much smaller than normal.

“My father has just never cared about what he views as High Court politics. He has always been this way. You know, before the war, Grey and Jay approached my father about taking on King Vandro. And all he cared about then, and all he cares about now, is his port and the silver that passes through there. He only agreed to throw in his lot with Grey and Jay because he knew war was bad for business.”

“And now? You’re here. And he’s there. So why doesn’t he just let you handle it?” she asked.

“He wants me back home. Or, more accurately, my mother wants me to come back home. They don’t want to encourage me to stay here. When I came to the High Court, he thought it was a waste of time. That all I did was go to parties and chase skirt. And, if I’m being honest, Al, he wasn’t always entirely wrong.”

She gave me a skeptical grin as if to say my father may still be right.

“So, are you planning to just work for Jay’s House forever?” Al asked.

“No, Al. And Jay knows it too,” I replied sternly.

Jay and I both knew that my time with House Vitruvian was growing short.

“I’m going to be on that High Council one day, and it is going to be under my own name,” I promised, my determination laid bare.

We passed by a small fair that was in town. It was a dinky fair, not like the magnificent one that visited Vlaisé every spring. The bright lights of the rides didn’t quite show through the remaining daylight, but soon the sun would set and the sky would light up with the incandescence of the fair’s attractions.

“Oh, Luke, let’s go to the fair!” Al exclaimed excitedly.

I smirked at her excitement.

“Yeah, ok, but I’m starving. Let’s grab something to eat first,” I said.

We poked our heads into Bar Louie, and for once, Rhett wasn’t there.

“Probably has his head under a skirt,” I japed.

Al nodded in agreement.

We ended up at a burger joint a street over from Bar Louie.

“Luke, has Rhett always been like this?” she asked. “I mean, do you think he will ever want to settle down... you know, for more than a night or two? It’s just—”

“I know what you mean, Al,” I said, pushing my chair slightly back from the round table we sat at.

My friend put on a good face, pretending he enjoyed bouncing from girl to girl. But it seemed that Al had spent enough time around Rhett to pick up on what very few ever noticed about him.

“Believe it or not, that’s actually what he’s trying to do,” I said.

She looked at me skeptically.

I took a sip of my beer, and then a deep breath.

“Rhett was engaged once,” I said.

Al looked like she would fall out of her chair in disbelief.

I gave her a knowing, sad smile. “Like Rhett told you, women were— are—enchanted by him. I won’t explain everything about his powers. That’s for him to tell you.”

She nodded in agreement.

“But one of the things that comes with his magic is that one woman and one woman alone can be his mate,” I explained.

Alarie’s eyes went wide in shock. People could love one another and not be mated. Some fae went their entire life without ever finding a mate, although, undoubtedly, they loved. But, outside of Rhett, it was unheard of to be limited to the possibility of one person being their mate. People could form a mating bond with anyone they loved enough. All the women Rhett went through, it was just an impossible numbers game for him. He was trying to find a needle in a haystack.

“He thought he had found his mate. He certainly loved her. And he certainly believed she loved him. We all did,” I spat bitterly.

“She wasn’t his mate?” Al asked, wearing the heartbreak she felt for our friend on her sleeve.

I pressed my lips into a tight line. “No, she wasn’t.”

“She didn’t love him?” she asked quietly.

“She did. But not of her own volition,” I said.

“Who?” Al bit off her question, knowing all too well the kind of cruel games that proliferated through the High Court.

“Someone on King Vandros’s side. We never found out exactly who. It was a cruel plan to distract Rhett. They made her feel as though she were in love, made it seem as though she was in love, and then one day they just stopped.”

“Why would anyone do that to him?” she asked.

“They were scared of him, Al,” I replied simply, taking another sip of my beer.

“Scared of Rhett? Sure, he’s...” she said.

I know what she wanted to say... a *beguiling, sometimes bastard of a man*.

“But he wouldn’t hurt anyone,” she finished.

I looked at her, and it was one of the few times I truly felt the gap in the years between us.

“Alarie, you’ve only seen the cute, fun side of Rhett’s magic. But Rhett was a formidable weapon for our side. Imagine for a minute that you’re a lord

and you see your wife of fifty years fall for Rhett.”

Rhett had told her that people who were in love were immune to his powers.

“Imagine you have a daughter, a daughter who sees Rhett and will literally do *anything* he tells her to do, whether it’s good for her family... or her, for that matter.”

“But Rhett’s powers, it just makes them giggly and fall in love. You’re making it sound all... *dark*.”

“At the height of his powers, he could have told a girl to jump off a cliff and she would have done it, Al. No questions, no hesitancy,” I said, setting her mind down the not-so-nice path of Rhett’s power.

I looked at her, seeing that she was only just starting to truly understand the reach of Rhett’s abilities.

“Rhett wouldn’t do that,” she protested, but she didn’t sound so sure of herself anymore.

I’d grown up with Rhett. I knew what he was capable of. I knew what lurked behind his good looks and laissez-faire attitude. He was a warrior, just like me.

“Al, it was war,” was all I said in response.

At that moment, our burgers arrived at the table, offering us a reprieve from needing to go any further in our conversation.

I devoured my burger and fries and then started on the other half of Alarie’s burger.

“Slow down or you’re going to puke on the rides,” Alarie admonished.

“I wml nmm,” I mumbled unintelligibly, a big bite still in my mouth.

“What?” She grinned, taking another sip of her beer, although I think she understood the gist of my denial.

\* \* \* \*

“You can hardly call this a fair, Al,” I said, skeptical.

“What’s wrong with it?” she retorted as she walked around the small grounds, tickets clutched in her small hands, deciding which ride to torture me with first.

Without waiting for an answer, Al stopped at the Ferris wheel in front of us.

“Let’s ride the Ferris wheel, Luke!” she cried excitedly.

“Is that a wire hanger holding the cart to the wheel?” I asked incredulously, not answering her.

“You scared?” she teased.

I didn’t care if it was a wire hanger. I would go to the top of a Ferris wheel hung by a fucking thread just to see Al this happy. The fair had brought something out in her that I’d never seen before; something I’d never even imagined that she’d had in her. No matter how much I made her smile and laugh, there was always an edge to her that I could never soften. But in this moment, Al displayed a childlike joy.

We climbed into the cart together. The cart was tiny, and so was she, but my tall, muscled frame was a tight fit. The two of us pressed against each other inside of the metal cart, our legs touching, our arms overlapping. There was nowhere to put our hands, so my right hand and her left hand ended up resting on the top of my right thigh. My pulse was racing as the Ferris wheel began its rotation.

When our cart reached the top, the Ferris wheel abruptly jerked to a halt. The feeble hanger holding the cart to the wheel made a screeching noise, and the cart rocked back and forth with the momentum of the sudden stop.

Al saw me look up at the hanger with a look of dread, and she burst out laughing. She laughed like I’d never heard her laugh before, like a dam had broken inside of her, letting out a wave of joy that washed away every dark image that lingered in her beautiful eyes, leaving nothing but pure unadulterated Alarie.

Her laughter washed over me for the moment that our cart rested at the top of the Ferris wheel, overlooking all of Vlaisie. The sight of the tall spires of the High Court lighting up in the night’s sky would have been intoxicating if I were not already drunk on the sound of her laughter.

Our cart jerked on the rusty hanger as the Ferris wheel started forward again, bringing us toward the ground for our next rotation. Still laughing, Al started at the jerk of our cart, grabbing my hand in hers. Her hand felt so small in my big hand, but she entwined her fingers with mine and they somehow fit together perfectly. Al’s laughter or the movement of the Ferris wheel, or perhaps both, set off a chain reaction with the decrepit hanger that secured our cart to the Ferris wheel.

To my horror, Al discovered that she could make our cart rock back and forth, alternating between us lying on our backs looking at the stars and us being thrown forward, looking directly at the ground. She cackled in pure

delight as she caused the cart to rock, reveling in my reaction. We grasped each other's hands too tightly in the mania of the moment.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I exclaimed, daring to open my mouth.

My burger and several beers sloshed around in my stomach.

"Me too!" Al laughed, not sounding at all upset about it and continuing to rock our cart.

When, at last, we exited the death trap posing as a fair attraction, Al dropped my hand. But when I climbed out of the cart after her, she took my hand back into hers, entwining our fingers once more. Neither one of us was sick, although I certainly felt green for a few minutes after.

We walked hand in hand back to the manor, laughing our asses off about the fair and our genius idea to go drinking before going to ride jerky, spinning rides.

"Try not to miss me too much while I'm at the beach!" I quipped when we arrived at the door of the Vitruvian manor.

I squeezed her hand and moved to let it drop, but Al hung onto it.

"Luke," Al said, all laughter gone from her voice.

I looked at her, my heart stilled by her serious tone.

"Yeah, Al? What is it?" I asked.

"You want to know the real reason why I can't go to the Winter Gala with you?" she asked.

"Only if you want me to," I said, trying to be nonchalant.

"We're dating, Luke. Jay and I..."

I raised my eyebrows, rolling my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip.

"And here I was thinking you were going after my job," I joked.

She started laughing, and I immediately felt better.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner. I was worried that you'd think... you know, think that's how I plan to get ahead at Court," she said.

"Al, I know how smart and hard-working you are. Why would I possibly think that about you?" I asked.

She smiled, relieved. "So, we're—"

"Good," I said, finishing her sentence. I brought my other hand on top of hers, enclosing her hand in mine. "You don't have to keep secrets from me."

Her smile settled into a small smirk. She nodded her head slightly.

"Same goes for you," she said.

I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before she pulled away. Al walked

to the door of the Vitruvian manor and then looked back at me, where I stood a few steps down.

“I am, you know,” she whispered.

“You’re what?” I asked.

She looked like she was glowing from the light of the house behind her. All signs of the joy she had shown at the fair had disappeared from her beautiful face.

“Going to miss you,” she said, and then she disappeared into the Vitruvian manor before I could respond.

“Right back at ya, Al,” I whispered to the door.

Walking away, I flexed my hand, fingers splayed, trying to dispel the ache that had settled there in the absence of her.



## **Luke**

“Jay, I’m sure you already know this, but those rumors going around about me and Al, they’re just rumors,” I said. “They’re not true,” I emphasized. We sat in Jay’s study. I sat across the desk from him in a comfortable leather and wooden chair.

“I know, Luke,” the high lord reassured me, sounding unconcerned.

Of course, he knew. Powers fading or not, the Lord of Whispers had enough resources to know the truth of *those* rumors.

Then the high lord paused.

“But you know the rumors that are going around about me and Alarie? Well, they are,” he said.

He held my gaze, waiting for my response.

“I know, Jay,” I said, mimicking the matter-of-factness of his prior response. “That’s why I mentioned it to begin with.” And then, in response to Jay’s questioning gaze, I said, “Alarie told me.”

Jay nodded his head as if he had expected my answer.

“I guess you had a change of... *heart*... about Alarie’s role with the House, then?”

He had told me Al was off limits because we needed her to stick around for House Vitruvian’s sake.

“No,” he replied. “She’ll keep her same role, and I still have long-term plans for her, too. Alarie knows what she has signed up for. That’s why we have chosen, for the time being, not to make our”—the high lord paused, looking for the right word—“*relationship* public just yet.”

“Well, if that’s what she wants...” I trailed off.

“But you bring up a valid concern, Luke. The whispers about Alarie and who she’s dating... I don’t see any need to change the ones floating around about you two,” he said.

“So, what are you asking me to do then, Jay?” I asked, the muscles in my jaw feathering.

“You two just keep doing what you’ve been doing, Luke. You work great together,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

“Where’s your other half?” Rhett asked.

We sat in one of House Rein’s carriages, a relatively new number bedecked in golden accents, on our way to Port City for the House Bellamy Winter Gala.

“Al? You know I don’t bring girls home,” I replied dismissively. “My mother takes personal offense to any woman I bring around that she did not personally handpick,” I explained, unsuccessful in keeping the irritation out of my voice. “Anyway, Jay wanted Alarie to stay back and attend the Winter Gala with him since I couldn’t be there.”

“You going to make it?” Rhett teased.

“What are you talking about?” I retorted, incredulously.

“*Are. You. Two.* Going to be able to make it apart this long?” he asked.

“You spend almost as much time with her as I do these days,” I shot back.

“It’s not the same, and you know it. You two have been damn near inseparable since the day she showed up at Court,” Rhett pointed out truthfully.

“You jealous, mate?” I teased. “Look, I promise she hasn’t replaced you. You’re still my best bud,” I joked.

“You know I have plenty of other people *a lot prettier than you* to keep me preoccupied,” Rhett retorted.

I pretended to be wounded, as though Rhett had stabbed me in the shoulder.

“So, are you going to seal the deal any time soon with her? I’ve never seen you take this long to go after what you want,” he said.

“It’s not like that with Al, Rhett,” I answered.

“Luke. *It’s me.* I play third wheel with you guys *all the damn time.* You

don't have to pretend.”

“I'm not pretending. Well, I am. But not in the way you are thinking. It's Jay—”

“What *in the hell* does Jay have to do with this?” Rhett interjected incredulously.

“Well, for fucking starters, he's the one dating Al,” I retorted.

“Fuck!” Rhett exclaimed. “Didn't see that coming.”

“Yeah...” I chuckled sardonically. “And, not in so many words, Jay has encouraged me to foster those rumors going around about me and Al until they're ready to go public with their relationship,” I said, thinking about my conversation earlier that day with Jay.

Rhett let out a low whistle. “Luke, mate, you really go all out for your job, don't you? I could use someone like you on my team. Will you intercept James next time she comes after me?”

“I will not,” I said.

Lady James Morrigan and Rhett were very on-again, off-again. I was smart enough to stay out of it.

“And why not?” Rhett asked, as if offended by my answer.

“Because you deserve it. Speaking of which, why didn't you bring James along?”

Rhett pursed his lips, tilting his head as if slightly browbeaten. “Turns out I may have pushed my luck a little *too* much with her lately. I fear I have surpassed the line of *charming* bastard and am now in the realm of *just* a bastard in her books.” Rhett tried to play off his comment as a joke, but there was an underlying tone close to regret in his words.

“Anyway, why bring your own cake to a party?” Rhett asked, back to his normal self.

“And *that's* exactly why you deserve everything James sends your way, man.”

Rhett raised his eyebrows as if surprised, then decided to give up on the act and tilted his head from side to side in agreement.

When we arrived at my parent's manor, the seat of the Silver Court, a host rushed out to greet us. My father was one of the last ones out the door.

“Son, I knew you wouldn't miss a chance at a good party,” my father quipped by way of greeting.

My older brother, Brad, snickered, then covered his response with a purposefully unconvincing booming cough. I stared daggers at my older

brother, who was dark in every way that I was light, having inherited his looks from our mother instead of our father, like I had.

“You know me, Father. Disappointing middle child and official partier of House Bellamy,” I replied dryly, walking toward the house.

My mother trailed along my side, her long, dark hair whipping behind her, as I made my way into the manor.

“Your father knows you do more than just party at the High Court,” she said.

“He has a funny way of showing it.”

“He’s just never been one to put much stock in the High Court politics. And after Jacob—”

“Mother,” I interjected. I did not want to talk about my younger brother, the one who had not made it home from the last war. “*I know*. You don’t have to keep making his excuses for him.”

My mother’s eyes cut to the tall blonde high fae lady who had just made her way into the foyer behind us. I knew my mother wanted to bring her up, so I just went ahead and asked. No matter how tired I grew of my mother’s matchmaker games, I had a soft spot for her.

“Who’s that?” I asked, not completely hiding my annoyance.

“Eliza Rafford,” my mother said cheerfully.

“I mentioned to her that you’d be here,” my mother said cautiously, testing my temperature.

I let out an exasperated chuckle. I had to admire my mother’s tenacity.

“Well, perhaps you could introduce us then?” I said, inviting the unavoidable.

I knew Eliza’s father was from several towns over and that he owned a port my father would very much like to have some involvement with. Like the woman before her and the woman before that who my mother had tried to set me up with, I wasn’t interested. I didn’t even like blondes—that was Rhett’s MO. For that reason alone, Eliza was very likely going to end up in Rhett’s bed, not mine, by the end of the weekend. But I didn’t tell my mother this.

“At the Winter Ball,” I said quickly to my mother, who was showing signs of wanting to push Eliza off on me at that moment. “We have to...” I failed to come up with an excuse, instead just grabbing Rhett and walking away.

“So, the blonde’s there for you?” Rhett asked.

He was well aware of my mother's machinations.

"You know it."

"What's her name?" Rhett asked, showing a modicum of interest.

I smiled. He was nearly as relentless as my mother, just in a different way. "Eliza Rafford. And you can go for it," I said, giving Rhett the go ahead to pounce on Eliza the moment my mother wasn't looking.

My mother would be pissed, but it would just be the latest disappointment in a long string of disappointments for her when it came to me.

"You know I'm more into brunettes anyway," I said.

"Brunettes or *a* brunette?" I heard him mutter under his breath, but he didn't push it any further.

## *Jay*

The tux I wore was so dark blue it was almost indistinguishable from black. I was standing at the bottom of the staircase in the foyer waiting for Alarie to come down. She appeared at the top of the stairs wearing the gown I'd had custom made for her for the occasion. It matched my tux. It was a dark blue velvet number, its plunging neckline almost meeting the high slit up her leg. She also wore the thin, long, gold necklace I'd gifted her. It formed a "Y" around her lovely neck before narrowing into a single gold line that trailed down her delicious cleavage toward her tiny belly button.

There was no hint of a smile anywhere near my face. I knew my look was possessive and primal, and it was all for her. I allowed my eyes to bore into her as she delicately placed one foot in front of the other, descending the stairs carefully but confidently in her four-inch stilettos. I patiently waited at the bottom of the staircase in the foyer. I held my hand out in anticipation of hers when she reached the last few steps. She placed her hand into mine, and I bowed, lifting her hand to my mouth and kissing it sensually.

"My lady," I said, rising from my bow. I felt my need to possess her lingering behind my every word.

"My lord," she returned, with heat in her voice.

I took a deep breath, as if I could inhale her. Exhaling, I said, "Unfortunately, my dear, there's simply not enough time for me to rip this dress off you and have it pieced back together in time for the Gala. And we really do have to get going. I told Grey I'd meet him before things got kicked off," I explained, regretting my promise.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to see if I can provoke you into pulling me

into a quiet hallway at the Gala then,” she teased.

I pulled her small body into mine, pressing the front of her against my hard line. “You should be careful what you start, Alarie,” I growled. “There are lessons you’ve yet to learn. Lessons that I will *very much* enjoy teaching you, that would make the Summer Ball seem like child’s play,” I warned.

I thought of the way she had looked at my belt wrapped around my hand, like she wanted to find out what I could do to her with it. She took in a deep breath, causing her breasts to press against me. She wasn’t intimidated by my words. Like the good girl she was, she wanted to find out what more I had in store for her.

Somehow, we managed to make it out of the manor and to the Winter Gala without me ripping Alarie’s dress off her. We walked into the Winter Gala, arm in arm. Our coordinated outfits raised a few eyebrows perhaps, but it wasn’t uncommon for people from the same House to coordinate their attire. The effect of our outfits was likely exaggerated by the fact that it was the first major Court event we had attended together without either Luke or the lady as a buffer.

“How’s Nik?” I asked Grey about his only son, the prince of broodiness. It had been a few weeks since I’d last bounced around the border wall with Nik.

I subconsciously searched the room until I spotted Alarie talking to Lady Morrigan over to the left of me.

“You know how he is this time of the year. He’s pissy because he has to come to Court soon for the Choosing,” the King lamented.

I let out a chuckle. No one got under Grey’s skin like his own son did. It was funny because Grey didn’t realize that the stubbornness that drove Grey crazy in his son was the same stubbornness I often found myself up against when dealing with Grey.

“Well, the High Court isn’t for everyone, Grey,” I said.

“Yeah, well, sooner rather than later Nik’s going to have to start coming to the High Court more than once a year. He has to accept that this is part of the Kingdom he will rule over one day,” the King said.

We’d had this conversation many times before. One of the reasons that Grey ended up as King over me was that he had an heir and I did not. But now was not the time to delve into the topic that was the rocky relationship between the King and the Prince.

“Look, Grey, you’ll have to do without me for a couple of weeks. I’m

going home,” I said.

“Yeah? What’s the occasion?” he inquired.

“Alarie misses the beach,” I said truthfully, letting the implication of my words hang between us.

After a moment, the King replied with a chuckle, nodding his head in understanding.

“That explains the matching outfits. You never can resist an opportunity to mark your territory, can you, Jay?” Grey teased.

*You have no idea how true that is*, I thought, the desire to imprint on Alarie popping to the forefront of my mind. So far, I’d resisted the nearly overpowering urge to imprint on Alarie, but my reasons for doing so now were different than my initial reasons. Before, I’d been concerned about the implications of jumping into something so serious so early with her. Now, I was concerned that, assuming we had the magic to enable it, we would end up bonded instead of just imprinting on each other. I could try to deny it all I wanted, but I was falling for the girl, and I thought she was right there with me.

“It’s not like that, Grey,” I responded. “Well, it’s not *entirely* like that,” I admitted with a guilty smirk on my face.

Grey raised his eyebrows in disbelief before continuing. “Well, well, well, someone has finally managed to get through that thick-ass hide of yours,” the King quipped.

I let a fraction of what I felt about Alarie show on my face. “I haven’t talked about it with the lady yet,” I said begrudgingly.

The King knew I was referring to Lady Vitruvian.

“But I’m thinking Alarie will be House consort by the time of the Spring Ball,” I said.

“And this is the first I’m hearing of it from you? What the hell, Jay? Where’s my asshole best friend and what have you done with him?” Grey continued to tease, enjoying the opportunity that only came around once every few decades.

“But what about the Choosing, Jay?” my oldest friend said, changing tones.

“What about it?” I barked.

The King cleared his throat.

“Well... Alarie hasn’t participated in the Prince’s Choosing yet, has she?”



“No,” I growled. “And she won’t need to.”

“Jay,” the King replied, sternly. “The prophecy—”

“Has run out of time to work, assuming it ever would have. And, anyway, Alarie won’t be twenty-four until *after* this year’s Choosing,” I said in measured words.

He knew as well as I did what the realities of our situation were—the magic was dying and the prophesized girl who would save us all was a no show so far.

As far as the Prince’s Choosing went, only women who were twenty-four had to participate. Alarie was *mine*, and that meant I would not allow her to be lined up and picked over by anyone, not even the Prince of Darkness himself. This was going to be a fight with my good friend. But it wasn’t a fight we needed to have until Alarie turned twenty-four. The King let the issue drop.

“Let’s go greet our host then,” Grey said, changing the subject. “I have a gift for him.”

The rest of my night, the talk around Lord Preston’s Gala was truffles. Or a single truffle, really, which turned out to be no truffle at all. Leading up to his party, Lord Preston had bragged about a rare and expensive truffle he was having delivered just for the Winter Gala. However, the Ruby Court was home not only to Valencia’s mining but also its agriculture. As the magic continued to decline over the years, the agricultural operations became more and more labor intensive and less reliant on magic. The lesser fae wanted land to call their own in exchange for their toil. High Lord Rein was open to it, but others, in camp with House Mouchard, were resistant. As a result, the lesser fae had started to leave not only the High Court but also the fields.

Due to a recent lesser fae boycott in the north, Lord Preston had been unable to get the truffle delivered in time for the Gala, a great embarrassment to the lord, and on an even higher level, an unpleasant reminder to the High Court that we were very dependent on the lesser fae and our daily lives could be easily affected by the mood of the lesser fae.

But the missing truffle was just the beginning of Lord Preston’s truffle-related troubles that evening. Knowing of Lord Preston’s predicament, the King had someone from his House pick out a fine truffle from his own reserves. The King’s consort, Gloria, had presented the gift to Lord Preston shortly upon their arrival at the Gala.

As Gloria had handed Lord Preston the golden box wrapped with a big

red bow, the King had explained, “I know it’s no help for this evening, but for the next party, you’ll be prepared.”

Lord Preston eagerly began to unwrap the bow and then removed the lid to find a large, black lump in the box.

“A fine truffle, my King,” Lord Preston exclaimed as he reached for the lump.

He raised the black nugget inquisitively to his nose, taking a big whiff. He threw it to the ground, dropping the box as the dark clump burst apart on the marble floor.

“Shit!” Lord Preston screamed. “It’s fucking *shit!*” he exclaimed, holding out his hand.

Then, realizing that he had screamed obscenities in the direction of the King and his consort, Lord Preston began to apologize profusely.

Unfazed by Lord Preston’s antics, I bent down, noticing a note that had fallen out of the box after being thrown to the ground.

*Go dig in the ground for your own fucking truffles.*

— *Don Davante*

I took a deep breath and exhaled in exasperation.

## *Alarie*

Laughing at Cass's stunt with the truffle and wondering how he managed to get such accurate insider information that allowed him to pull it off, I noticed Jay walking out into the winter night. I followed my high lord out onto one of the many verandas at House Preston, the crisp air immediately causing my nipples to cut through the fabric of my dress. Despite being fairly mild, the weather in Vlais during the winter was still cool, bordering on cold.

"Truffles, huh?" I said with a slight chuckle.

"Come here, Alarie," he ordered, gesturing toward the end of the balcony.

I lifted an eyebrow at him but made my way to him. The moment I passed behind a large column and was hidden from the view of the general masses, he pressed me into the alcove of the pillar, the rough surface of the wall biting at the exposed skin of my shoulders and the back of my arms.

"What's this, Jay?" I inquired, my heart racing. "I've been particularly well-behaved tonight," I assured him.

"I tend to agree," Jay obliged, moving his body into the line of mine.

"Then what's with this?" I gestured, indicating his large body pressing me into the wall. But even as I pretended to protest, I pressed my body back against his.

Dipping his head into the hollow of my neck, he admonished, "Alarie, Alarie, Alarie. Whatever made you think that you have to *provoke* me to take what's already mine?"

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the cool winter air. My pulse quickened at his words. Calmly, always calmer than me, he

took a step back from me and began to remove the cuff links at his wrists.

I looked at him, puzzled.

“Hold on to these for me for just a moment, will you?” he asked me.

I reached out my hand, but instead of dropping the Azurinium-laced metal pieces in my hand, he pressed them to my lips.

I parted my lips obediently and took the cuff links into my mouth, holding them between my lips and teeth.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly, lifting my gaze to his with his thumb under my chin.

And then his hand moved to his belt, quickly and efficiently unfastening it with a single hand. Taking advantage of the extremely high slit of my dress, he didn't need to push the dress up as much as open the curtain of fabric to expose my eager sex. He'd planned this, I realized, since the moment we'd left the foyer of House Vitruvian. Perhaps even before. I knew he was the one who had picked out my dress.

Unable to say it through the bit of metal in my mouth, I inwardly hoped the high lord did not rip my panties off me. Due to my run-ins with the high lord throughout the day, I usually ended up having to change my panties about three times a day, sometimes more, either because I'd soaked through them or because Jay had ripped them off me. The ones I wore under my velvet dress were one of my favorite pairs and, in any event, walking around the party the rest of the night with such a high slit and nothing to cover me would be precarious, at best.

“Don't drop those,” he admonished me, as he wrapped one of my legs around his waist, digging his fingers into my thigh.

He pulled my panties aside and slid into me. I bit on the cuff links between my teeth, suppressing a moan. I was so used to him thoroughly preparing me several times before he ever entered me. Without his usual attention, I was tight, and only the metal between my lips kept me from crying out. He was enjoying the look on my face, my eyes wide as my tightness pressed against him.

“Let me in, Alarie,” he demanded, pushing at my walls.

Each time he thrust inside of me, my skin scraped against the wall he pinned me to. Once he had made some progress, he lifted my other leg, wrapping it around his waist, burying himself deeper into me as he began to thrust. I pressed my lips together around the cufflinks even harder together to stifle my small noises of pleasure.

“The sooner you give me what’s mine, the better the chance we won’t get caught,” he teased as he moved inside of me.

A flood of excitement ran through me at the idea of someone catching us out on the balcony, propelling me toward my finish line.

“But, Alarie,” he rumbled, plunging into me faster. “I hope someone does come out here and sees me buried deep inside of you, then realizes that the only thing that is keeping you from screaming my name is that bit of metal I shoved between your pretty little lips,” he confessed. “Because you’re mine, and I want everyone to know it.” Possessiveness dripped from every syllable.

His words drove me toward and over the precipice of my orgasm. I held in my moans, biting down on the metal between my lips as I closed my eyes and rode the pleasure radiating through my body. Then I tightened around him, urging him to lose himself at the same time. He slipped a hand between my lower back and the wall and thrust into me fiercely, once again building the throbbing within me. Already, I was clenching around him, on the precipice of my next orgasm.

“That’s right, Alarie, give me more. I want all of you,” he demanded.

My pleasure spilled over once more, and he lost himself within me.

Still pinned to the wall with him inside of me, he reached up and removed his cuff links from my mouth, noting my lipstick on the metal with satisfaction. He kissed me deeply before letting both of my legs slide down his body and allowing me to stand in my heels once more. I could feel his release inside of me, marking me as his, threatening to drip out of my thin panties and down my thighs.

As the high lord unhurriedly guided his belt through the loops of his pants, I asked earnestly, “You really don’t care if we get caught, Jay?”

“Not in the slightest, my dear. They’ll know you’re mine soon enough, anyway,” he replied casually, as he finished buttoning his pants.

Jay and I had warmed to each other, allowing our touches to thaw the iciness we’d both surrounded ourselves with. For Jay, I think it had been too long since he’d allowed anyone to get close to him. He’d erected his high-lord veneer and left it in place for hundreds of years. But for me, I’d never allowed anyone to get close to me. To get close was to be dependent, to be dependent was to be in debt, and to be in debt was to lose control. So, I was surprised to realize that despite my original concern about what people would think about me, I found myself caring less about what people may think and

whether my relationship with Jay stayed a secret.

Goosebumps rose on my skin. I'd been out in the cool evening for too long. Jay reached out, rubbing my arms with his hands.

"Let's go to the beach," he said.

"What? When? What beach? Yes!" I exclaimed all at once.

He smirked.

"Tomorrow. And I was thinking of the one I own," the high lord offered, planting a possessive kiss on my neck.

"I would love that!" I said, my skin still covered in goosebumps.

His kiss did not help my goosebumps go away.

"We could spend a couple of weeks there. I have things I need to catch up on back home."

*Home?* I thought. I'd never heard Jay speak of "home."

"Do you want to stop by Harborview on our way? My estate is just a couple of hours south of there, you know," he said, kissing his way down my neck.

I tensed under his touch. His question threw me into an immediate tailspin of guilt. I'd not given much thought to Harborview, or my mother, or really anyone else outside of the High Court since I'd arrived in Vlaise. I'd spent my entire life doing everything possible to make sure that I'd made it out of Harborview, and when Lord Tildon announced at graduation that I would be going to the High Court as part of the liaison program, I'd walked across that stage and never looked back. But that was not what I felt guilty about. Harborview was beautiful, but I was glad not to call it home any longer.

I felt guilty about the fact that I had not thought about my mother or any of the other people I knew from back home since I'd been at the High Court. My relationship with my mother was simple—there wasn't one. My mother never mistreated me, but she had no maternal instinct. I'd been on my own for as long as I could remember when it came to most things. My mother provided me with a roof over my head, but otherwise, she'd made it plain to me that I had no future unless I made it for myself. I believed my mother had done the best she could, given her circumstances and the person she was. But, no, I did not feel like stopping by Harborview to visit my mother.

Aside from my mother, there was almost no one else who would warrant a visit. I'd had a couple of friends at school. Maybe it would have been nice to see Cass, but he was clearly preoccupied and away from Harborview as

well.

“No. Let’s just go straight to Breakpoint,” I told Jay, repressing my guilt and returning to his question.

I still couldn’t believe that I was with someone who had their own beach. His question had me thinking back to home, to where I came from. I’d quickly fallen into the habit of having nicer things—servants in the manor, any piece of clothing or jewelry I desired gifted from Jay, the ability to do what I wanted whenever I wanted instead of working 24/7, and saving money, lounging on the veranda with my high lord, going to parties with Luke.

I had nothing to feel guilty about, I told myself. *Guilt is a useless emotion*, I admonished, when that didn’t work.

He pressed his lips to my neck, kissing his way to my mouth. He didn’t let up until I had forgotten all about home.

## *Alarie*

We rode in a carriage driven by one of the lesser fae members of Jay's House. He explained that the trip home used to take him about a quarter of the time when the carriages were powered by magic instead of Azurinium. I knew with the state of affairs with the lesser fae, we were lucky that Jay had someone in his House to help our carriage along. There were a lot of carriages these days going in and out of the High Court without any lesser fae assistance.

This was the first time the high lord had discussed in detail how the dying magic affected him. I'd often wondered about Jay and his abilities before the magic began to dwindle to nearly nothing. But no one liked to talk about what the magic was like before it began to die. And it was an unspoken vow among all fae that no one would speak of any ability a particular individual may have lost. As a result, the younger fae like me, who had not lived during the height of the magic, did not know much more than what we could glean from books.

"Why do you think the magic's dying?" I asked Jay.

I would try to lead up to my questions about Jay's powers specifically. The high lord looked at me with genuine sadness in his eyes, a very rare showing of such plain emotion from him.

"Grey and I have spent more hours than you can imagine trying to figure it out and figure out how to stop it from getting worse," he lamented. "I know it has something to do with the war. About twenty-three years ago, after the war with Alancia, the magic just began to dim until it is what you see today. Its decline seems to have stagnated, reaching some kind of homeostasis. I



have some theories I'd like to run by you. Maybe one day when you want to take a break from batting your lashes at the little lords you can come back into the library and do some research with me," the high lord jested.

It was true that I spent very little time in the library these days. Jay and I both felt that I was more than prepared for my liaison exam, which was to take place after we returned from Breakpoint.

"I'm sure research is the only reason you want me back in the library," I teased playfully.

Before he could respond, I interjected, "What was it like? You know, back when the magic was still... here," I probed.

The high lord took in a deep breath.

"Magic was life. It was in everything and everywhere. This cart would have been propelled by lesser fae magic alone, and it would have taken us about a quarter of the time it will now take us now to get to the estate. And I..."

I ran my hand down his arm, intertwining my hand in his, waiting for him to continue.

"I wouldn't need my elaborate network of eyes and ears because my ability to channel would deliver to me every word that every person ever whispered at the High Court."

Channeling was simply the ability to channel magic and could take any number of forms. So, traveling, weaving, healing, and all magical abilities were a subset of channeling. However, where an ability was so rare that it did not have its own category, it was simply referred to as channeling. It sounded as if Jay's channeling ability was extraordinarily rare and particularly well-suited for a spymaster.

"How did it work, your ability?" I asked cautiously, knowing I was venturing into territory that no one ever spoke of.

I caressed the top of his hand with my thumb like I was trying to coax the answers I'd wanted for so long from him. But Jay didn't hesitate to respond to my question.

"My ability to channel is based in air and darkness, so any time someone whispers something—it doesn't have to be in the dark, that's a bit of a red herring—those words or sometimes just feelings would find their way back to me. All the whispers would come back to me as a maddening mass of information, and I could sift through it in my mind to find out what I wanted. I could also send a whisper on the wind to whomever I wanted and only that

person would be able to hear what I had to say,” Jay explained.

I let Jay’s admission wash over me. So much of what I’d witnessed at the High Court made sense—the way people almost seemed fearful to say anything in front of him, for instance. They didn’t *seem* fearful. They *were* fearful. I’d heard people refer to Jay as the Lord of Whispers and thought it was just a reference to his position as spymaster for the King. But he was, quite literally, a lord of whispers, I realized, stunned.

I knew enough about magic to know what Jay described as his ability was a wholly unique ability. Each ability had one or more affinity—air, water, fire, earth, light, and dark—but as the high lord alluded to, the affinities did not necessarily provide clear parameters to an ability. The only real rule was that an ability was never both light and dark. It could only be one or the other. So, an ability with a dark affinity, like Jay’s, could mean that the ability only worked in the darkness, or it could mean that it was just an ability that was associated with or worked better with darkness.

The ability to travel was a good example of the differences in affinities. Generally, a traveler could transport persons and things to separate locations with the power of their minds. This power varied greatly. Some travelers could only transport themselves. Some travelers could only transport objects and not people. Some travelers with a water affinity, for instance, could only transport people and things over a body of water.

I worked up the nerve to ask the question that was burning in my mind.

“Do you still have some of your power?” I asked, at last voicing the question I’d thought to myself many times before this moment.

“Some of it,” he whispered. “But it is all still there. I can feel it. It’s like there’s a wall between me and my power. I feel the entirety of it bustling on one side of the wall, but I’m stuck on the other side, and no matter what I do, I cannot break through. But there’s a tiny crack in the wall, I think, that allows just a trickle of my magic to come through. And lately”—he looked at me—“I feel a little closer to my magic.”

I sat next to my high lord, who must have been one of the most magically gifted high fae in the last several hundred years before his powers faded. My fingers laced between his, my heart broke for him. He had never been so vulnerable with me. I wanted to cover him with the assurance of my lips and tell him how absolutely amazing he still was, even without his full powers.

I detangled my hand from his and climbed into his lap. I had to hike up

the long coral-colored cotton dress I wore in anticipation of the beach later that day so that I could straddle him. Sitting astride him, I looked into his penetrating gray eyes and tried to convey my thoughts to him.

*You are so strong, even without your powers. I love you,* I said with my gaze.

Jay wrapped his muscled arms around my petite waist, drawing me into his body, and kissed me. He didn't say it, but I saw my love reflected in his eyes. I'd managed to penetrate the walls of the high-lord veneer he had presented to the world for hundreds of years. I continued to cover him with soft small kisses, kissing his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes. The length of him grew hard under me, and I ached for him to be covered in my wetness.

The tenderness of the moment gave way to something wild and carnal. He reached his hand under my little dress and ripped my panties off. Responding to his urgency, I clawed at his pants, anxious to remove the only barrier remaining between us. Jay parted my lips with his tongue and drove his tongue into my mouth at the same time he drove into me. My moan as he slid in and out of me was garbled by his mouth pressed punishingly over mine.

He ripped his mouth away from mine, his thrusts becoming deeper as he made room for himself within my core.

"Say it, Alarie. Say it for me," he demanded, driving himself into me at the same time he pulled me down onto him.

"I love you, Jay," I confessed, letting the words spill from my mouth for the first time in my entire life.

I'd never said those three words to any man.

Driven by my confession, he began to plunge himself into me faster. I responded to his rhythm, maddeningly circling my hips.

"I love you, Alarie," he echoed, firmly grasping my chin, forcing me to look at him and see the love in his eyes.

We both raced toward our release, the emotion of our confessions urging us on. He began to lose his rhythm inside of me.

"Now come for me, my love," he demanded.

"Oh fuck, Jay," I said, my dirty mouth taking no reprieve, not even during the sweetness of our moments.

My legs began to shake, and I was pushed over the edge, finding my bliss. He came undone at the same time as me, and in that moment, it felt like we shared one pounding heartbeat.

## *Alarie*

The Vitruvian estate was located in Breakpoint, a decent-sized town on the southwestern coast of Valencia. As our carriage rode through the town to the manor, I took in the many stores and bars and restaurants that lined the main thoroughfare. Although not as big as Vlaise, Breakpoint made my hometown a couple of hours up the coast seem positively podunk.

Our carriage made its way up the hill to the Vitruvian estate. After we'd made love, I'd fallen asleep with my head in Jay's lap, but I awoke to see the estate. It was built on a cliff over the Azure Ocean. The Vitruvian manor was an immense, alabaster castle with at least ten spires and half as many towers, and perhaps a hundred windows. The Vitruvian estate in Breakpoint made the Vitruvian estate at the High Court seem modest in comparison.

"Home," the high lord said, squeezing my hand as we stopped in front of the manor.

He reached for the carriage door. Jay hopped out of the carriage and reached up to grab my hand and help me down.

I took his hand, entwining my fingers with his once I was on the ground. Jay stopped in front of the castle for a moment, allowing me to take in the sight before he moved toward the entryway, with me in tow.

A beautiful, older high fae lady opened the doors to the castle and met us at the doorway. The enchanting woman enveloped Jay in a big hug.

"Cress, this is Alarie. Alarie, Cressida," Jay greeted the lady, pulling out of her hug after a few moments.

I reached out my hand, the one that was not preoccupied with Jay's hand, to Cressida. On our way to the estate, Jay had explained to me that

there was no need to be concerned about concealing the true nature of our relationship at his estate, not that we tried to conceal it very well while at the Vitruvian manor at the High Court, anyway.

Cress pushed aside my hand, encircling me in a warm hug as well. I wasn't the hugging type, but Cress had the kind of natural motherliness that you just wanted to melt into. Cressida was the high lord's steward. She carried out Jay's orders and took care of the Vitruvian estate in his absence.

"Oliver wanted me to tell you that you should meet him in the courtyard with your sword, 'unless you've gotten too old.' His words, not mine!" Cressida said, fondly patting the high lord on his arm.

"Sounds like Oliver," Jay replied, smirking. "Please tell Oliver that I have some very important *business* to attend to," he said, looking pointedly at me. "And then I'll gladly remind him to respect his elders."

Cress nodded and gave her high lord a knowing smile.

"Let me show you around," Jay said, turning to me and pulling me by the hand through the door.

The foyer was extravagant. A chandelier bigger than the room I grew up in hung in the entryway. The expansive marble staircase leading away from the foyer contained so many stairs I wondered if I would have to kick off my heels before walking up it. As if reading my mind, Jay raised his right eyebrow at me and swept me off my feet, holding me in his arms. It was a playful, very un-Jay-like maneuver.

Once we were at the top of the stairs, he carefully set me back on my feet and led me toward what appeared to be a bedroom.

"Jay," I protested. "I thought you were giving me a tour."

"Fair enough," he conceded. "There's the foyer," he said quickly, pointing to where we had just left. "The ocean's over there," Jay said, pointing to a window in the hallway where I could see the white peaks of the waves of the blue ocean. "The library's in a separate wing that we'll have to explore later. And this, my love, is my room and is where I will conclude my tour for the afternoon and perhaps well into the evening," he said, a mischievous look playing across his face as he led me through the door of the huge room.

It had a lavish master bath connected, a sizable sitting area, and a veranda that spanned the entirety of the room and overlooked the cerulean ocean. I walked toward the balcony, taking a deep breath and inhaling the ocean air for the first time in months. I exhaled, letting out tension I did not

know I'd been holding since I'd last seen the ocean back home. My chest expanded as I rolled my shoulders back and lifted my face to bask in the sunlight.

I closed my eyes, savoring the sound of the waves crashing onto the shore. I'd missed this more than I'd realized. There were many things I didn't like and didn't miss about my hometown, but the beach was not one of them.

Jay came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling my body into his. We stood that way for a few minutes in silence, taking in the sight and feel of the ocean before I turned toward Jay, wrapping my arms around him and looking up into his ruggedly handsome face.

"It's wonderful. I love it," I breathed.

"You're wonderful. I love you," Jay imitated fiercely.

This was the first time he'd told me he loved me since we were in the carriage. The first time he said it, he had been sheathed inside of me, yet somehow it felt more intimate for him to say it now, as we looked into each other's eyes. I melted further into his embrace at his words.

"I love you," I said.

Those three simple words still felt foreign on my tongue.

He leaned his head down toward mine, some of our height difference alleviated by my tall heels, and he lightly kissed me.

"You want to go to the beach?" he asked, looking over my shoulder at the ocean.

"Well..." I said, pointedly looking to his right in the direction of the large four-poster bed in the middle of the room.

"I could use some help getting these heels off. Can't walk in the sand in these, can I?"

A keen expression moved over his face, and his right eyebrow lifted. "I would think not," he responded with mock seriousness before sliding his strong arms under my legs and carrying me to the bed.

He gently placed me on top of the linen comforter and dropped into an elegant crouch. Jay grabbed my right foot in his hand and, ever so delicately, unbuckled the strap around my ankle, slipping the shoe off my foot. He deliberately placed the pump on the floor and then reached for my other ankle. This time, he brought it to his lips, where he planted a soft kiss on the inside of my ankle.

His kiss shot a thrill of exhilaration up my leg and directly to the spot where my need was already gathering between my thighs. He looked up at

me, his intentions plain in his eyes. He was going to kiss his way up and down every inch of my body. I let out a groan, thinking about how torturously thorough he would be.

He set the second heel down, then ran his calloused hands up my bare legs until he found where my panties should have been. But he had already ripped them off earlier that day. He ran his hand down one leg while he kissed his way up the other, kissing my calf, then my knee, and then my inner thigh until his head was hidden under my dress.

I grabbed the hem of my dress and lifted it over my head, throwing it on the other side of the bed. I wanted to be able to see the high lord kneeling before me. He nipped the inside of my thigh, and I jumped a little as another wave of excitement increased the throbbing of my exposed, wet sex. He moved his mouth onto me. His licks began leisurely, beginning at my aching opening, then he circled his tongue around and around, not going farther up, not going inside. He was taunting me until I couldn't take it anymore.

"Jay, please," I said, my desperation clear.

"Please, what?" he said, with feigned ignorance.

I took a breath, the ache between my legs excruciating.

"I need you inside of me."

He continued licking around me and then moved his focus to the top of me, lapping at me with heavy, long licks. Then he moved back to my opening, plunging his tongue inside of me. My back bowed in pleasure as he lapped at my core, but he held me in place with his hand on my stomach as he continued his relentless caress until a million little white stars burst into my vision, my body overwhelmed with pleasure.

He stood, looking down at me with a pleased smile. I eyed his hardness pushing against his pants.

"Ok, we can go to the beach now," I said jokingly.

"Not a chance," he growled, unbuckling his belt and pulling it off through the loops of his pants.

We didn't make it to the beach until after the sun went down that day. I loved walking along the beach at night, anyway.

## *Alarie*

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Jay said, pulling me along.

I followed him as he walked into the glowing blue halo of an Azurinium cave. We were still in our beach attire, having spent the morning at the beach before breaking for lunch. There was some evidence of mining having occurred. The pool of water in the middle of the cave glowed from particles of the Azurinium falling into the water. I pulled back the hem of my white gossamer coverup, dipping my foot into the water. It came out sparkling and glowing blue as well.

“Is it safe?” I asked, looking down at my foot.

“Perfectly safe,” he said.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped down onto a staircase hidden beneath the water. I hadn’t noticed it until he stood on it.

“You swim in this?” I asked in disbelief.

I couldn’t imagine swimming in a pool of Azurinium when, back home, my mother and I could have barely afforded enough Azurinium to power our stove. In response to my question, he dove headfirst into the center of the pool. And then he swam to where he could stand up out of the water. He ran his hands through his dark brown hair, pushing it back and away from his face. Little blue droplets of Azurinium-kissed water dripped down his face and arms.

I stripped off my coverup and laid it at the edge of the pool. Plunking down, I allowed my legs to dangle in the water. Despite the darkness of the cave, Jay seemed to glisten, like he was in blue-tinged sunlight. I sat transfixed, my lip between my teeth, as he waded toward me in the waist-



deep water. He moved his body between my legs, then laid a trail of insistent kisses down my neck. I felt him untie the string of my bikini top from behind my back. His hands found my breasts, cupping each as if to lift them. He stripped off my top, took a step back, and looked at me, topless and covered in his hand and lip prints like they had been painted on with an iridescent blue paint.

“I’ve always liked you in blue,” he said, admiring his work possessively.

“So, you’re the one who’s responsible for the fact that my wardrobe is almost entirely blue, then?” I asked jokingly.

“I threw some white in there,” he retorted.

“You picked out my bras and panties?” I asked incredulously, thinking of my nearly all-white undergarments.

“Come here,” he said, taking a step back and beckoning me into the water.

The look in his eyes was determined. I kept his stare, rolling my lower lip beneath my teeth. But I was still skeptical of swimming in the blue-dyed water. His stare moved to my lip between my teeth.

“*Get in,*” he growled.

I hopped down from the side of the cave pool and met Jay where he was waist deep in the glowing azure water. He reached down and picked me up, wrapping my legs around him. Then he moved to the side of the cave pool, pressing my back against where I’d sat before. He began to rub against my bikini bottoms.

“You’re sure—” I began to ask again whether it would be ok.

I wasn’t sure the water was ok on my skin, much less *in* me.

“Promise,” he interrupted, almost sweetly, at the same time that he pushed my bikini bottoms to the side.

Even in the water, he found me ready for him. He rubbed against the outside of me before plunging inside and pushing against my tightness. Each time he moved into me, the water between us splashed up, covering my breasts, leaving glowing remnants in its wake.

When we made our way back to the manor, we ran into Oliver outside. He barked out a laugh at seeing us glowing in blue.

“Real subtle, Jay,” Oliver laughed.

Then I remembered the dinner we had scheduled for that night. Jay was hosting the lords of the Azure Court, including Lord Tildon, the high fae lord from my hometown, Harborview. I turned to Jay accusingly.

“Jay, tell me this will wash off!” I demanded.

A very un-Jay-like mischievous grin splayed across his face.

“It’ll wash off,” he reassured me.

But I noticed that the mischievous look on his face did not go away. Ever since we’d gotten to Breakpoint, it was like something in him had changed. There was an almost lightheartedness to him that had never been there before.

“Jay, you didn’t... *When* will it wash off?” I asked.

His smirk turned into a smile.

“It should be gone by the time we head back to the High Court. *Unfortunately*,” he theatrically lamented. “So we should probably take another dip before then to avoid that.”

\* \* \* \*

That night, I tried to make polite conversation with Lord Tildon despite the fact that he did not remember me from my graduation ceremony. He’d been the one who’d announced that I’d won my place in the liaison program and would be going to the High Court, but he still couldn’t remember me.

“My mother, she still lives back home. Lana Armand,” I prompted.

Lord Tildon acted polite but disinterested, as if he were trying to remember my mother. Our plates had already been cleared. He took a sip of his wine.

“Fire-red hair, you can’t miss her,” I continued.

I was already eyeing the others down the length of the table and seeing who I could use to pivot out of this conversation.

But apparently, I’d sparked Lord Tildon’s memory.

“Yes. I remember now. But what is truly astonishing is that I failed to recognize someone as beautiful as you. This glow on your skin, doll. It’s as if you have taken a bath in Azurinium,” Lord Tildon commented unknowingly.

He placed a hand too high on my thigh under the table. I stiffened. This small-town hick had no tact. This was not how you played the game at the High Court. This was how a big fish in a small pond abused his power. He was used to taking whatever he wanted. But I didn’t want to rebuff him too strongly. I was very aware of the fact that, although I was out of his reach at the High Court, he could go back to Harborview and make my mother’s life difficult. But before I could decide on the best course of action, I felt a small gust of wind pass in front of my face, like someone had opened a door and air

had rushed in.

Lord Tildon released my leg like he'd been burned by a hot iron. I looked up at him, startled by his sudden movement, and saw that his face had gone pale underneath his smattering of freckles.

"P-please accept my deepest apologies, Lady Armand, but I must depart immediately. S-something has... well..." he stammered. "Do give your mother my best next time you see her. Excuse me."

Lord Tildon threw his napkin into his chair, stumbling over his feet as he walked—almost ran—out of the room. I scanned the others at the table, seeing if they had noticed anything. Jay was still in conversation at the far end of the table. I shrugged off Lord Tildon's unusual behavior, taking a sip of wine, glad for the conversation to be over, whatever the reason.

But later that night, after dinner and drinks and the departure of our guests, I mentioned Lord Tildon's odd behavior to Jay. We stood on the veranda to his room enjoying the light of the moon on the water.

Jay looked satisfied. "Glad to hear he understood my message."

"What message?" I asked.

"Alarie, there's something I've been meaning to tell you since we arrived at Breakpoint."

I waited for him to explain.

"My powers, they're back," he declared.

I gasped. "Jay, that's—"

"Well, not entirely," he interjected. "But they're stronger than they've been in years."

I was elated by this news. "When?" I asked excitedly.

"In the carriage, on our way here. Right after you told me that you loved me," he said with a glint in his eye.

"Why didn't you tell me before now, Jay?" I demanded.

"After so long... I wanted to be sure," he said.

I nodded, already focusing on my next question.

"But how? Why now?"

"I don't know, love. Lately, I've felt stronger, like more of my power was at my disposal. But in the carriage, it was like the floodgates opened. All the whispers just rushed back to me."

"So, when you say you sent Lord Tildon a message, you mean..."

"Just a whisper," he said, smugly.

I was slightly aggravated that Jay had stepped in with Lord Tilden. I

could have handled a small-town brute like him. But I was too excited about Jay's powers to stay annoyed.

"How does it work?" I asked excitedly.

I felt the same wisp of wind that I'd felt earlier that night, and then, as if Jay were standing over my shoulder, breathing along my neck, I heard him say, "Come here and find out what else I can do."

The hair on the back of my neck rose. His magic felt strong and commanding, just like him. It demanded my attention. All my senses stood to attention, as if eager for and tied to his every word. I bit my lower lip, almost involuntarily rolling my head to the side to offer him my neck, even though he still stood feet away from me. I blinked, and he was next to me. He moved his lips to my ear.

"This is going to be fun," he whispered, sliding his leg between mine.

## *Jay*

We finished dinner at Alarie's favorite restaurant in town, Atala's, and went for a stroll along the waterfront in town to walk off some of our fullness. Alarie wore a white linen dress that showed off her ankles, paired with a pair of blocky cork heels. It looked amazing against her golden tanned skin and the beachy curl in her hair.

I was dressed significantly less formal than my usual attire, sporting a tailored blue suit with a white button-down with the first two buttons undone and no tie, a stark contrast to the tuxedos I commonly wore at the High Court.

"How long have Cress and Oliver been with you?" she asked.

I knew Alarie had noticed how differently I acted and everyone acted around me here versus at the High Court. At the High Court, everyone acted like they were frightened to take a breath in front of me. Here, Oliver acted like my younger brother, talking shit one minute and idolizing my every move the next. And Cress, she played the role of the doting mother over the two of us. The people in town were also friendly, appreciative of the freedom I gave them to run their businesses and the town as they saw fit so long as the Azurinium production was maintained.

"Since the end of the war..." I trailed off, indicating there was more to the story.

"They... fought in the war with you?" she asked.

"No. Neither did," I replied, stopping to stare out at the water, still holding Alarie's hand.

She squeezed my hand, I knew, urging me to tell her more. Inhaling the

salt of the ocean air, I began to tell her my story.

“Cress’s husband was a good friend of mine. We lost him in the war. And she’s been a part of my House and my family ever since. She’s done more for me than I have ever done for her, honestly. The way she runs my household at Breakpoint leaves me free to focus on things at the High Court without the slightest concern as to what’s going on at home. She helps with arranging the sales of the Azurinium as well,” I explained.

“And Oliver, I met him in the north shortly after the war was over. He was in the service of House Patton, and someone mentioned that he was a skilled swordsman and suggested I seek him out. You’ve seen us spar. He’s one of the most skilled fae I have ever crossed swords with. His potential wasn’t being maximized by House Patton. They didn’t even have him in a sword master role,” I said with a sneer.

“So, I invited him to become the master at arms for my House. The offer came with a bit of land as well. He heads up the operations for the Azurinium mining too now.”

“So, he’s a—” Alarie began in a tone of surprise.

“Lord,” I interjected.

“And what about House Patton? How did that all come about?” she probed.

We usually avoided the topic of Lady Vitruvian. She just wasn’t relevant to our day-to-day lives. She stayed at one of her family’s estates most of the time, and Alarie and I lived our lives unencumbered at the High Court. But I’d mentioned House Patton, Lady Vitruvian’s maiden House, so I guessed this time was as good as any. I dropped Alarie’s hand as I moved toward the water, resting an arm on the banister of the fence running along the waterfront path.

“There were a lot of sacrifices made in the wars. Deaths like Cress’s husband are the most obvious kind of losses, but there were others—of land, of power... of love.” I paused. “Rex’s powers are...” I paused.

“Rex?” she asked incredulously.

I gave her a wry smile, my foreboding effect dissipating for a moment.

“When you have been around as long as I have, love, even kings have first names,” I said.

“To say Rex is powerful is a gross understatement. His abilities are wholly unique, Alarie. His powers are of both light and darkness.”

“That’s not possible,” she said.

Her reaction was predictable, understandable. It was textbook magical theory that a fae's power was either of light or darkness, but never both.

"It's impossible," I agreed, "*unless* you're Rex."

"There have been stories of a few others throughout history. And I've always been skeptical until Rex. Alarie, I have no doubt about it when it comes to his powers. They are unrivaled."

She raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

"Even still, we may have been able to defeat him. But we were suffering losses that were not acceptable," I explained fiercely.

"Rex and the northern fae were more willing than the southern fae to pay the costs of war. In the north, absolute power reigns supreme, which allowed them to view the toll of the war in simple terms—the strong live, the weak die. But the fae in the south were ready to get back to their easy lives, and we were looking for a way out of the war. So, Grey and I and a few others came up with a way—we would erect a magical wall between the two kingdoms. Figuring out how to pull off such an unparalleled magical feat took months of planning. During that time, we relied heavily upon the loyal Houses along the northern border to stifle King Vandros's advances. That reliance came at a price."

"House Mouchard," I spat the name, "was looking to extract a sizable concession from Grey in exchange for their resources along the border. When the Diamond Court broke off and created Alancia, the Ruby Court was created to take over the northern part of land that used to be part of the Diamond Court. Ever since House Mouchard was passed over for House Rein as the seat of the Ruby Court, House Mouchard has acted like there was a debt owed there. With her husband having died at the beginning of the war, Lila Tragon was looking for a new, strong suitor. She had her sights on Nik—Prince Heroux," I clarified.

"But there was no way that House Mouchard or Tragon had anything to offer that would justify that match. So she set her sights on me."

Alarie looked like she was holding her breath. She finally exhaled, waiting for me to continue.

"I also refused to marry Lila Tragon. So, we looked for other solutions. Too many of our people were dying, so I stepped up and secured the support of House Patton and paid the price they asked—a marriage with Elizabeth. We considered a marriage between Grey's son, Nik, and Elizabeth. They're closer in age, after all, but an alliance with the King's House was too high a

price to pay. And, in any event, it seemed unfair to saddle the Prince with an arranged marriage at so young an age.”

“So that’s why you don’t like High Lady Tragon?” Alarie asked.

There was one last thing that I needed to tell Alarie for her to truly understand the sacrifices I’d made in my life before her.

“There’s more. A lot more. When you have been around as long as I have, you have scars on the inside that no one can see. But it would take me all night to share the full story, and we have better things to do tonight, love. So, I’ll just tell you this. I was engaged *and bonded* to another woman at the time I agreed to marry Elizabeth. Al—”

I didn’t want to say her name. *Alanna*. I banished thoughts of the chunk of my magic that was forever missing because I’d given it to Alanna.

“*She was murdered.*” I gritted my teeth, nostrils flaring, surprised by the emotion that still lay there even after all these years. “Stabbed in the heart with an iron blade—shortly before I turned down Lila’s last overture and agreed to marry Elizabeth.”

“Oh, Jay,” she sighed.

Alarie grabbed my hand, tenderly running the underside of her thumb across the top of my hand.

“Wh... Who? Why?” she asked quietly.

“Who? Probably Rex or someone on his side,” I replied, getting a grasp on my anger. “As to why, well, it was war between the fae. I, and everyone I had ever cared about, had a target on their back, and I wasn’t... I wasn’t there to protect her.”

I held onto Alarie a little tighter.

“Jay, you can’t blame yourself—”

I interrupted her. I wanted to get through this story and move on. “But going back to your question, if I’m being honest, my dislike for Lila Tragon these days has more to do with her role on the High Council than anything that happened back then,” I said. “She ruined the balance of the High Council, and that’s made my job as Contra a lot more challenging than it should be.”

“How so?” Alarie asked.

“Well, as you know, my role as Contra is to check the King and throw my weight behind what I believe is best for the Kingdom so that the King’s love of self or power or any number of the other vices that monarchs can fall prey to do not overtake the interests of the Kingdom. The role of the other



members of the High Council is to throw their weight behind either me or the King when disagreements between us arise, again, with the best interest of the Kingdom in mind. Although we cannot overrule the King, any King who hasn't totally abandoned all sense of duty will listen to his High Council."

"But Lila, almost without exception, throws her vote with the King's, which undermines the purpose of the High Council. Now, I too often find myself and Vince on one side and the King and Lila on the other. Or worse yet, Lord Rein and Lady Tragon go against me entirely. So, I'm thwarted left and right when I'm trying to do what's best for Valencia. The situation with the lesser fae is just the latest example of this. Despite being from a northern border town, the high lady's views regarding the lesser fae are particularly unenlightened." I stopped, checking the anger creeping into my voice again.

"How did she make it onto the High Council to begin with?" Alarie asked, her tone matching my frustration.

"She was never supposed to be the one who fulfilled the counselor role on the High Council to begin with. It was supposed to be her husband, Lord Tragon. Grey had cut a deal with Lord Tragon—he would serve on the High Council for a span of ten years. Promising a fixed term on the High Council in itself was unheard of because, other than the heads of the Courts, counselors traditionally served at the leisure of the King. But Lord Tragon could deliver the support of House Tragon and Mouchard and the resources we needed on the northern border. Plus, Lord Tragon was a congenial lord and, overall, known to be a reasonable guy. So, the Kingdom wouldn't suffer from his guaranteed term on the High Council."

"Unfortunately, before Lord Tragon could deliver on his promise, he was killed in battle. This set back our negotiations with House Tragon and House Mouchard—they became one and the same. We were now dealing with Lady Tragon and her side of the family directly, instead of Lord Tragon. This is when they changed their price to marriage with Lila. When that didn't work out, they insisted that the original deal was for House Tragon to have the seat on the High Council, not Lord Tragon specifically.

"Ultimately, against my advice, Grey relented, believing it would be little repayment for her husband's death in the war to not give House Tragon a role on the High Council. He agreed that Lady Tragon would serve on the High Council, but her term would only be guaranteed for a period of five years."

"She's been on the High Council for a lot longer than five years," Alarie

noted, incredulously.

“Ah, well,” I said with a sigh. “Grey’s not without his faults. He says he likes the high lady on the High Council because it’s progressive to have a woman in a role that has traditionally been filled by men. But I think Grey has grown fond of the echo of his own views that he hears more often than from the lady’s lips. Plus, she is not without her own support at the Court.”

I made this admission with a bit of sorrow in my voice. I rarely voiced any criticism of my longest friend. Alarie stood next to me, leaning against the railing as well and staring out at the moonlight reflected on the ocean.

“Enough of that, love,” I said after a few moments, turning toward her and pulling her into an embrace.

I placed my hand under her chin, tilting her face toward mine. I kissed her, burying my past in the taste of her lips.

“It’s our last night before we have to go back to Court. Let’s make it a late one.”

## *Alarie*

It was my first day back at the High Court since my vacation with Jay at the Vitruvian estate in Breakpoint. Jay was already back at House Heroux, having spent too much time away from the King. But, most importantly, he had to tell the King about the revelation with his powers.

I already missed the estate, the beach, and the life I'd shared with Jay while we had been away. I missed the part of Jay who walked into the room and was greeted warmly by his surrogate family, Cress and Oliver, instead of the fearful silence that fell over any room he walked into at the High Court. I missed walking hand in hand with him in town and going to dinner together instead of wearing our facade of high lord and liaison any time we were in public at the High Court. I missed *us*. I hadn't realized how much I was missing until our visit to Breakpoint. Our charade at the High Court, which was once exciting to me, now chafed.

Walking into Court, I could feel Cole's eyes on me as I approached. When I reached Cole Tragon and his circle of sycophants, his eyes met mine, lingering on the gold that was interlaced with the green, and if possible, the disdain that permanently lived on his face intensified.

"Mutt, you've been gone a while," Cole said as his usual way of greeting me, smugly looking away from me to his companions.

"How nice of you to notice," I responded dryly. "And it's even nicer of you to spare us the charade of you pretending like you are something other than the shit stuck to the bottom of my shoe that I had to throw out because that kind of stink just can't be washed off," I said.

My comments got more snickers from Cole's friends than his own had.

“That’s oddly specific,” Lord Preston joked, barking out a laugh that he unconvincingly veiled as a cough.

I saw Luke turn his head from across the room in response to the laughter. He gave me one of his best smiles, a wide, toothy one that lit up his entire handsome face. He knew there was no need to come to me. I could handle a twat like Cole. But I almost gave up the interaction with Cole at the sight of Luke’s smile. I’d missed that smile.

I momentarily felt guilty about this thought before telling myself that I could love Jay and, at the same time, miss Luke every day I wasn’t with him. He was my closest friend here at Court. The two were completely unrelated.

Without waiting for any further bile to spew from Cole’s mouth, I turned toward Lord Preston.

“Grant, could I borrow you for a moment?” I said, lightly grabbing Lord Preston’s arm and playfully tugging him away from the group.

Tucking my arm in Grant’s elbow, I turned my back to Cole and began walking toward Luke.

“Always a pleasure, Cole. And do remember to take a breath. You’re turning purple,” I said over my shoulder. More laughter broke out among his friends.

Luke and Grant filled me in on what I’d missed while I’d been away at the Vitruvian manor in Breakpoint.

“So, I take it that we don’t have a princess yet?” I asked.

They were talking about the Prince’s Choosing, which occurred while I was away.

“Twenty years going strong and not a single twenty-four-year-old woman in Valencia is good enough for our dear Prince,” Luke said, disdainfully.

The Prince’s Choosing has happened once a year for the last twenty years. Every woman, high fae or lesser fae, in their twenty-fourth year was required to come to the High Court for the ceremony. Every twenty-four-year-old woman was lined up in the same room before the Prince for his choosing. No one had ever been good enough to be officially chosen by the Prince during the ceremony. Although those at the Court said that, after the ceremony, the Prince usually chose one *or two* of the women to visit his bedroom.

I wasn’t twenty-four yet, so I’d not been a part of the Choosing yet. I crinkled my nose, inwardly cringing at the thought of being chosen by the

Prince and having to spend the rest of my life with someone I'd not chosen myself. Then I let my mind wander to more pleasant thoughts as Grant made a lascivious joke about the Prince's good looks and wishing he was a twenty-four-year-old woman.

I recalled the conclusion of my lesson with Jay all those weeks ago on how to please him. I'd reveled in the protracted lesson after all that time of him focusing solely on me and not allowing me to touch him. Yes, my lessons were definitely a good part of my life at the High Court.

*And, of course, there is Luke*, I thought appreciatively, looking at Luke and realizing he was saying my name.

"Al, did you hear what Grant just said about *Don Davante*?" Luke stressed the name to get my attention.

We'd decided to keep my connections with Cass a closely held secret for the time being.

"No, what? What did Ca—he do, and who did he piss off this time?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Well..." Luke began, "it's not really like the other stunts we've seen so far."

I let out a small chuckle, thinking of the shit-truffle and the statue beheading. I'd been amused by the don's antics before I knew that Cass was behind them, but now that I knew the don was Cass, I thought they were hilarious.

Luke gave me a tight-lipped expression showing that he did not think the latest incident was funny at all.

"It is pretty fucked up, actually. Lord Garaud had hosted a dinner that evening and some of the lesser fae actually showed up. Apparently, the night was going well; everyone was listening to music and getting along. Lord Garaud, his wife, son, and daughter all made their way to bed at some point, but the party continued on. But later that night, Lord Garaud and his family were chased out of their beds and nearly out of town by some lesser fae before members of House Tragon intervened."

That sounded cruel, and not at all like Cass. No way the Cass I knew would have ever been involved with or let something like that happen, especially with women and children involved.

Reading the disgust on my face, he said, "I know. The word is that the King is up in arms and wants House Rein to start some coordinated efforts against the lesser fae front near the Rein manor up north."

I groaned. Jay was probably hearing about the exact same thing over at House Heroux, and he was going to be pissed. I was going to have to talk to Jay about this. I just hoped it wasn't already too late.

## Jay

“Good evening, love.”

I greeted Alarie as she strolled into my study, high heels in hand and smelling faintly of booze.

Even before we’d left for Breakpoint, she’d been spending more time out of the manor and longer nights hanging out with “the boys” as she liked to call them—Luke and Rhett.

Noticing my look at her disassembled appearance, she threw her heels to the side of the door, and said offhandedly, “My feet were killing, but I didn’t feel like having Luke carry me again. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about the news from the north.”

“Did you at least let Luke walk you home?” I asked, tight-lipped, deciding not to comment, for the moment at least, on this Luke not carrying her “again” situation. *When and to where, exactly, was she being towed around by my House counselor?*

“Jay, I’m capable of walking by myself,” Alarie protested.

“Alarie, what have I told you?” I asked, failing to keep all the frustration out of my words. I checked the overwhelming need to protect Alarie that rose in me, threatening to consume all reason. “If you heard the things I heard, knew the things I knew, love, you wouldn’t think I was being so ridiculous. You have no idea how dangerous the High Court is, especially with people getting their powers back,” I explained.

As the Lord of Whispers, I heard the terrible confessions and ideas that were only voiced in whispers in the darkest corners of the High Court. When my powers and the whispers had faded, I had not forgotten about the awful

things I'd heard. But with everyone's powers lessening, my concerns regarding what was planned behind closed doors lessened as well.

Since my powers had returned, so too had the whispers of the secret desires and plots. And now I had Alarie to worry about keeping safe. She had not been around—had not even been born—when the plotting and scheming of the High Court had been at its might. I would do anything to keep her safe, even if it meant gluing Luke and his sticky hands to Alarie's side when I couldn't be around.

"But you're the only one getting your powers back, Jay. Not everyone else," she said.

"We don't know that, Alarie," I cautioned.

She looked back at me defiantly, unwilling to give in to my repeated demand that she be escorted when out of the manor, especially at night.

"Ok, what news?" I asked, setting aside the issue for now.

"Cass," she started, looking up at me.

I clenched my jaw, locking my teeth together.

"Yes, I heard what your *friend*"—I spat the word—"has been up to while we were away."

"Jay, you have to know that Cass would never, ever go after someone's family, and if he could help it, he would have stopped something like that."

I looked back at her coolly.

"Jay, Cass may be a bit of a practical joker. But this... this is not like the statue or the truffle. Do you think it was a coincidence that the head of the statue flew off before the rest of the statue fell? No," she continued, without waiting for an answer. "That was Cass's way of clearing the area so that no one got hurt. Cass wouldn't hurt innocent people," she pleaded for her friend.

"Your friend was not spotted at House Garaud, but some of his affiliates were confirmed in attendance by House Mouchard agents," I said.

"And since when have we believed anything they say?" Alarie bit back.

I considered her words for a minute. "We received an almost immediate denouncement of the act and a denial of any involvement from Lord Dumont and his lot," I admitted.

"Jay, I'll swear to it. I'll tell whoever will listen. Cass couldn't have been involved."

"Alarie, I've told you before about needing to be cautious about the political positions you take—"

"Jay, this isn't a political position. This is my friend I'm talking about!"



I didn't want war with the lesser fae any more than Alarie wanted Cass pinned for the Lord Garaud incident. Luckily, Alarie and I had arrived just in time from Breakpoint, before Lila had time to work this into something bigger than it needed to be.

"I need to discuss this with the King," I said, pushing myself off my desk that I was leaning against.

I grabbed Alarie's hand as I began to walk back toward the door. "And you're coming with me," I said.

Alarie looked disenchanted with the idea of going to House Heroux at this time of the night.

"Don't worry about the hour, love. Grey's definitely still awake and, anyway, he knows about us, so he won't question you being with me this late hour."

"Ok," she capitulated, going to grab her heels.

I beat her to them.

"I'll hold on to these," I said, her tiny heels hanging off two of my fingers.

"And since your lovely feet are so sore, *I'll* carry you to House Heroux," I said.

We arrived at House Heroux minutes later. I placed her onto the cobbled stones in front of the King's House and held her hand while she balanced, slipping on her heels. We were immediately admitted to a small private study of the King's, where I was informed that the King would join momentarily.

"Jay, if you were going to show up this late, why the hell didn't you just join me for drinks to begin with?" King Heroux asked as he entered the study.

I could blame it on work, but the truth was that I'd been waiting for Alarie to come home.

"Why don't you come have a nightcap?" the King continued before his eyes drifted over to Alarie.

"Well, I knew you'd be up, and there is something I wanted Alarie to share with you," I replied.

At the mention of her name, the King looked momentarily toward Alarie, giving her a slight nod, before returning his gaze to me.

"Ok, what's the news?" the King inquired.

"It's about the news from the north with Lord Garaud," I replied, reaching my hand toward Alarie and drawing her toward me.

The King's eyes squinted with a smile at the sight of my fingers interlocked with Alarie's.

"I need a drink if we are going to talk about the damn north. A drink, Alarie?" the King offered, walking toward the bar at the end of the room.

"Scotch would be great..." Alarie replied confidently, before trailing off, unsure of what to call the King in this situation.

"Grey's fine," the King replied with a laugh, picking up on her hesitancy.

It seemed that the King, like Alarie, was already several drinks into his night.

"I'll take one too, Grey. Thanks for asking," I jested.

"Get your own drink, old man," Grey retorted.

I chuckled, walking to the bar where he poured Alarie's drink, pouring myself a nip of scotch, and walking back to Alarie with both our glasses in hand.

"To the Court, to the King"—I inclined my head toward Grey—"to the Kingdom," I said, lifting my glass in the air in a toast.

Pride and a rare sense of contentment filled me at the sight of Alarie clinking glasses with my closest friend.

"Ok, what do you have to say then?" the King asked, exasperated, returning to business.

"Well, you know that Lord Dumont has denied any involvement in the incident with Lord Garaud and his family," I replied.

The King raised his eyebrows, skeptically.

"The thing is, Alarie here knows Don Davante personally. She grew up with him, in fact, and can give some insight into who we are dealing with here."

The King turned to Alarie, patiently but expectantly.

"Grey," she began. "I have known Cass—Don Davante—my entire life. He's one of my closest friends. For what it is worth, I would base my word and my life on the fact that he had absolutely nothing to do with terrorizing Lord Garaud's family. I'll go to Cass myself and confirm it if you'd like," she offered.

Grey looked over at me.

"It makes sense. It does seem quite out of character with all of Don Davante's other... shenanigans. And you've known Lord Dumont for years. It isn't like him either. And then you have to consider where a lot of our

information on this has come from—House Mouchard,” I spat, not trying to hide my plain dislike of High Lady Tragon’s maiden house.

“For fuck’s sake. The stuff with the wall and now this shit,” the King exhaled, ineloquently. “What do you suggest, Jay?”

“You have pushed it off long enough. Like I have been telling you, we need to treat with Lord Dumont.”

“Jay, I know. You’re right, it’s just—” the King paused, remembering that Alarie was still in the room.

Grey turned his gaze toward Alarie, realizing she had witnessed the manner in which I’d spoken to him, totally lacking in any deference, almost admonishing him. I saw the direction and tone of Grey’s gaze and knew the King regretted allowing Alarie to witness the true power dynamic between us and how he often deferred to me. We were good friends and the closest of confidants, but as King, Grey had never quite forgotten the number of people who would have supported me as King over him all those years ago.

“Alarie, I don’t believe we require further assistance from you tonight. I’ll see you back at the manor,” I said, adopting my best high lord impersonation and dismissing her.

Alarie pretended not to have noticed the change of mood.

“Someone will walk you home.” I wasn’t asking. I’d send a whisper for someone to meet her before she could leave the study.

“My King,” Alarie said succinctly, bowing her head and leaving her glass on the table. “My lord,” she gave me a slight nod of her head before departing.

\* \* \* \*

“Grey’s fine. He can just get a bit touchy about his... perception,” I explained, entering Alarie’s room later that night.

“So, what’s the next move?” she asked, pulling me by my hand to sit on the side of her bed.

“Well, we need to head off any kind of skirmish with the lesser fae in the north,” I said, gracefully falling onto her bed. I absentmindedly trailed my hand over the area where I knew her flat stomach was hiding underneath the comforter.

“You think it’ll come to that? I told you it wasn’t Cass,” she asked, clearly concerned.

“Even if it is not Cass, it was someone. I’ve been telling the King for quite some time that the magic dying in Valencia has placed a lot of unwanted work on the shoulders of the lesser fae. That, combined with the misconception that King Vandros is some kind of champion of the lesser fae, was bound to stir up some trouble,” I continued.

“But he’s not, is he?” Alarie asked, referring to King Vandros. “He’s not some kind of hero for the lesser fae?”

“The Diamond Court is less divided than the High Court when it comes to the lesser fae, or at least it was before the wall went up. And there are more lesser fae lords and ladies at the Diamond Court than there are at the High Court,” I responded.

“But don’t mistake Rex for a good man. I believe even he would tell you he is not,” I admonished. “He is, by far, the most ruthless man I have ever had the misfortune of knowing. In his world, there is only power. And everything else in life is a *far* distant second.”

Alarie raised my hand to her mouth. Taking the edge of my hand between her plump lips, she grazed her teeth against my skin, trying to pull me back from my anger.

“So, no,” I said, clipped, “Rex is not any kind of hero. But King Heroux’s relationship with the lesser fae is a far cry from perfect,” I admitted.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Alarie asked.

“Lord Dumont is coming to the High Court for talks,” I said.

Alarie was visibly relieved to hear that things were going in the direction of diplomacy instead of escalation. She leaned into me, landing a playful bite on the side of my neck as she did so.

“I have more good news, love. But you must promise to speak of this to no one,” I cautioned.

“I promise, Jay! What is it?” she asked excitedly.

“Grey told me that he and Gloria will soon be engaged.” Alarie’s eyes went wide in surprise. “There will be a year, or perhaps two, of planning and parties, but eventually we will have a queen again,” I said. “It will be good for the Kingdom. The parties and the unity that having a queen will bring.”

“Oh, wow! That’s great, Jay.” Alarie exclaimed, her beautiful face lighting up with a smile. “A royal wedding. We haven’t had one of those in...”

“A very long time, love.” I finished her sentence, pulling her close to me. “You are, by far, the most singular thing I have ever had the pleasure of

calling my own, Alarie,” I whispered into her hair.

## *Alarie*

I returned to the manor to tell Jay that Lord Dumont's party had arrived at the Court earlier than we had thought they would. I'd waited in the Courtyard, hoping to see Cass's large frame pop out of one of the carriages containing Lord Dumont's contingent, but it seemed that Cass was not going to make an appearance at the High Court after all.

I went to Jay's study, but he wasn't there. Miffed, thinking for sure I knew the high lord's tendencies by this point, I made my way toward the library to see if he was in there. I met him in the hallway outside of a large study adjacent to the library, noticing that he was buttoning his pants.

"Jay," I began, causing him to look up from his hands on the buttons of his suit pants.

Upon seeing me, a forlorn expression filled his face. I furrowed my brows at him, confused by why he was looking at me in such a manner.

In the next moment, Lady Vitruvian pushed him aside, leaving the study after him. Lady Vitruvian's face was simple, beautiful, *and flushed*. It felt like someone had sucker punched me in the gut, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Reacting to the look of surprise that briefly appeared across my face before I could regain my composure, the lady added an unkind swagger to her step to confirm *exactly* how she had been used by Jay in the study.

Jay caught my eye, not showing any emotion but silently indicating for me to join him in the library. I followed him into the room we'd spent so many days in together, maintaining my mask of composure, determined not to let the emotions that raged inside of me show on my face.

*He'd never explained that that was part of the arrangement*, I screamed in my head for being such a fool, for allowing him to make me his fool.

The look on the high lord's face was not one I'd seen in some time, and when he spoke to me, his words matched his face—the sound and look of my exacting tutor and stoic high lord from our earlier days in this very library.

“Alarie, take a seat,” he ordered, indicating the chair he pulled out.

The chair I'd often sat in while he... I blocked out the happy memories, defiance showing on my stony face. I continued to stand, arms crossed.

“Alarie, *sit*,” he ordered again, this time with the authority of the high lord of three hundred years.

Begrudgingly, I walked over to the table and leaned against it. It was as much of a concession as I was willing to make at the time. Jay came and stood in front of me.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry you found out this way,” he said flatly.

Shock, mixed with the other emotions, whirled inside of me. My exacting high lord did not apologize *to anyone*.

“As you know, Lady Vitruvian willingly spends most of her time away from our estate. She arrived unexpectedly while you were away today and”—he drifted off for a moment before continuing—“although there's an arrangement between us, there are certain *duties*, Alarie, that you have to understand I must fulfill. It is my duty as high lord of House Vitruvian to try for an heir,” he explained.

Thankfully choosing not to go into details, he said unpleasantly, “This particular duty will not arise again for another several months.”

*Not good enough*, I screamed in my head.

But I knew I had no right to feel the way I felt. Lady Vitruvian was his wife and the lady of the House. I was the extra in their marriage and in their home. I'd gotten so entrenched in the daily life that Jay and I enjoyed in the usual absence of the lady that I'd grown blind to what the reality of our situation was. I felt like an angry fool, hurt and confused. He could have explained this to me before, but I was rational enough to understand the deal struck with the lady. I unfolded my arms, softening the smallest bit.

“Why the hell didn't you tell me before now, Jay?” I exclaimed.

“Because I haven't been fulfilling this particular *duty* since the day I met you. Because I didn't want to sully the time we spent together at my estate. Because I love you and didn't want to hurt you,” he said, at last, dropping the high-lord veneer.

I had an idea of what it would cost him to renege on his agreement with the lady. The high lord had married Lady Vitruvian during the war with Alancia, a marriage necessitated to secure her maiden House's support and their strategic position in northern Valencia. It wasn't a bad arrangement for either the high lord or the lady. He gained the forces he and the King needed, and her lesser House allied itself with the well-established House of Vitruvian, earning itself a voice at the High Court. But they had never loved or wanted each other. Even before I'd ever shown up, the lady had preferred her family's estate and the cooler weather in the north, so she had spent most of her time up there.

But I should have known that their arrangement included the duty to try for an heir. Since the magic had started to fade, fae children, high fae and lesser fae, were a rare blessing. It would be considered sacrilege among the fae not to at least try for a child in marriage, especially when the perpetuation of one of the most prestigious Houses of Valencia was on the line.

I didn't want to ask why. Why he had chosen to go through with it? Why he had chosen her over me? I knew why. It wasn't only that it would be dishonorable to break off the arrangement where the lady had upheld her end of the bargain, which it would be, and for someone like the high lord, honor was everything. I didn't ask why because, even though I was hurt and angry, I would not make him admit that he needed the alliance with the lady and her House. He needed the connections through the lady to keep his thumb on the pulse in the north, especially with the trouble Cass was stirring up.

So, I knew why, but I still couldn't help asking, "Why *now*?"

"For you, Alarie. *For us*," he stated simply.

"For me?" I asked incredulously, my disbelief dripping from my words.

"Look, I knew we were struggling with the transition back from Breakpoint and I wanted to give you something more. I immediately told the lady of my intention to name you as consort to House Vitruvian at the Spring Ball, and she called me out on not abiding by the terms of our original agreement. She agreed that as long as I fulfilled the terms of our arrangement, she would have no problem with naming you as House consort."

I was stunned by the high lord's explanation. The admission that we'd both been struggling since we'd returned from Breakpoint hung in the air between us. At the High Court, we played the roles of high lord and liaison and then, in secret, that of lovers. But in Breakpoint, for the first time, we'd seen what life could be like with our love in the open, as high lord and lady



together. And it was glorious. I could not forget the days we walked hand in hand through Breakpoint, the nights we spent together, and the morning we awoke in each other's embrace. And apparently neither could he. And when we'd returned to the High Court, to our secret lives, and our separate lives, what was once a thrilling secret became a glaring and painful truth—we could never be together, not like that, not at the High Court.

I was reeling, not only from that but also Jay's reveal: *consort to House Vitruvian*. There it was—the ugly truth that we'd both avoided talking about, that our relationship had a ceiling. The high lord was stuck in a loveless marriage, and as long as the high lord stayed married, I could never be anything more than a consort to the high lord. Consort to the Contra was nothing to frown at, especially for a young mixed fae like me. In fact, it would be a dream come true for almost any young fae lady. But not for me, I realized with a pang in my heart.

I did not claw my way from Harborview to the High Court only to live my life out of a lord's manor, not even a high lord's manor, not even Jay's home. I thought of Cass leading a damn revolution among the lesser fae. If he could do that, I had to aim higher than a highly regarded kept woman.

The truth was that before Jay, I'd never allowed myself to want, only to need. Before Jay, the luxury to consider what would make me happy instead of what I needed was not a lot reserved for me in life. Jay was the first person who ever really tried to take care of me. It was difficult in the beginning to let him take care of me. But eventually, I'd learned to accept and enjoy his ministrations, even come to expect them. Being with Jay had allowed me to think of more than just surviving. I had aspirations, and consort was not one of them.

I'd been treated by everyone I knew my entire life as if I were different. I was either not high fae enough or not lesser fae enough, making me an island of *never enough*. But Jay had never made me feel that way about myself. I'd expected my accomplishments to be discounted by the high lord and others at the High Court when I'd first arrived. I'd expected them to say that I'd done well, *for where I came from*, or perhaps, I was talented *for someone like me*. But the high lord's approbation had been served without such hurtful qualifiers. I had never truly realized what it meant to hear others speak of my accomplishments in life without the hurtful caveats.

I'd worked my entire life to get to the High Court, and now that I was there, I realized that I still had so much further to go and so much more I

wanted to do.

I bristled at his touch but did not resist when he, like so many times before in that very library, sat in the chair next to us, pulling me into his lap. I did not change my stony expression. I could not let him know how I felt inside, how much this hurt. Not the events of the night with the lady—although that was certainly devastating all by itself—but what caused me to feel like a boulder sat upon my chest was my sudden realization that I didn't know if I had a future with Jay.

"It's time for another lesson, my love," he said, but when I looked at him, it was not the stoic high lord who once taught my lessons in this library.

For the first time, he spoke of lessons, not as my high lord, but with the face of the man I loved. He softly brushed my arm with his fingertips, but I did not melt into his touch like I normally would. I tried to push down the panic rising in me as a result of my epiphany.

"You and your love are *mine*, Alarie," he said, his hand dropping to my inner thigh as he softly kissed the top of my shoulder. "Your body was made to show me your love. So, your body is mine as well," he continued as he drew circles on my skin with his rough fingertips.

My skin burned under his touch despite the chaos of emotions I felt raging inside.

"So, you must *never* withhold from me what is mine. Now tell me that you understand, Alarie," he demanded, not with the usual steel that accompanied such demands but with something more akin to a plea, a tone wholly unfamiliar to the high lord's lips.

The gentleness in Jay's voice took my breath away like I'd been plunged into a frozen lake. I couldn't handle the vulnerability in him. I needed my strong, unyielding high lord back.

"Yes, Jay," I answered, sultrily, attempting to direct his mood back to what we did best.

Feeling my capitulation, he softly kissed the side of my neck. I slightly widened the gap between my legs, causing his hand to slide farther up my thigh.

"Alarie, Alarie, Alarie," he crooned against my neck, like my name in his mouth was life itself.

The heat in his voice shot warmth through my entire body until it settled over my traitorously eager sex. He moved his hand closer to the wetness, feeling it begin to soak through my thin undergarment. I felt him stiffen

underneath me, and his desire for me melted away any last vestiges of my hurt and anger, replacing it with the same need borne in the library all those months ago.

His hand moved up my thigh, finding my throbbing wet center and slipping his fingers under the barrier between us. Only a few strokes in, I almost lost myself, my whirlwind of emotions complicating yet heightening the feel of every stroke.

“I love you, Alarie,” he said, his purr turning into a growl as he picked up the pace of his stroking inside of me.

“Now show me how much you love me. Come for me,” he demanded, the familiar steel returning to his voice.

I broke with my need to feel something else. He turned my head toward his, opening his mouth over mine and swallowing my moan. He withdrew his hand from between my thighs and lifted his fingers, coated in my ecstasy, to his mouth with an intensity in his eyes that screamed *mine*.

## *Alarie*

Lady Vitruvian departed from the Vitruvian manor after only two days, but Jay and I did not return to our unencumbered lives. We still shared coffee most mornings and found ourselves tangled in each other's embrace most nights. But there was a silence that hung between us, and in that silence were the words we'd left unspoken about Lady Vitruvian, my role as consort, and my increasingly frequent and late nights out with the boys.

I knew Jay had his reasons for what he did, and I could even believe that he did what he did for us. But he had purposefully done something that he knew would hurt me, and that was something that I'd never imagined he was capable of doing. He felt like a different person to me now. It had been so long since I'd allowed anyone to even be in a position to hurt me like this. My years of isolation had hurt in different ways, but the kind of pain I experienced now was the kind I thought I had closed myself off to long ago.

But, if I were being honest with myself, Jay wasn't solely to blame for the distance growing between us. I'd subconsciously started to distance myself from him even before the incident with Lady Vitruvian. After Breakpoint, I'd found more reasons to stay away from the manor for longer and longer periods. Jay and I had erected a fence around our relationship to keep others out. But we'd gotten too good at segregating each other's involvement in each other's lives. I'd become accustomed to living without Jay being a part of so many aspects of my life.

But if I became Jay's consort, all of that would change. I didn't even know what role I could perform at the High Court once I was Jay's consort, but I was fairly certain it wouldn't be liaison or anything along the same

lines. People were *terrified* to say anything of substance in the presence of the Lord of Whispers. Who would have loose lips around his consort? And who would dare flirt with the Contra's consort? So, without truly realizing what I was doing, I'd begun to reinforce the fences Jay and I had built around our relationship, turning them into walls that kept us from growing instead of keeping others from prying.

The issues with the lesser fae similarly remained unresolved. Lord Dumont had left the High Court without any agreement in place between the factions. The lesser fae wanted land, money, and representation. They likely could have come to an agreement on the first two asks, but the last ask had ended in Lord Dumont's prompt and cool departure from the Court.

The lesser fae wanted a seat on the High Council—and they wanted their own court. Lord Dumont presented the proposal to the High Council. The new court would be called the Golden Court and would be seated at Lord Dumont's estate in Ardmore. Lord Dumont would initially take the seat on the High Council. Even the request for a seat on the High Council may have been tolerated, but the creation of a new court was unthinkable to most, particularly the Tragon contingent.

I dismissed my thoughts of Jay and Lord Dumont as I approached the great hall where High Lady Tragon's soiree had already begun inside. Upon entering the expansive room, I heard someone singing with a rousing, warm voice that immediately had me searching the room to find its owner. I found the singer sitting on the other side of the large hall, a handsome younger lord with dirty blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his nose, propped up on a stool with his hands wrapped around an acoustic guitar.

I moved a little farther into the room, and the young lord's head moved with me, catching my eye and flashing me a playful grin and a wink. I spotted a few people I wanted to catch up with surrounding the handsome lord, so I made my way across the room, perhaps adding a little more sway to my walk than I normally would have. I spoke to Rhett while enjoying the young lord's performance, before moving on to another crowd to pry secrets from the lips of the lords and ladies.

As always, Luke, Rhett, and I gravitated toward each other by the end of the night.

"Cole's too busy to make an appearance at his own House party?" I commented on the fact that Cole had not shown his face that evening.

“Must be your lucky day, Al,” Luke replied.

“Time to get out of here, right?” Rhett said, practically begging.

“What about your date?” I asked Rhett, noticing the absence of the dazzling blonde who had been next to him most of the night.

“That would be Candace over there,” Rhett said, staring pointedly toward a large group of ladies, whispering and laughing across the room.

“I dare say I’ll get the chance to entertain her later,” Rhett quipped, a satisfied smirk upon his face.

“I’m sure you will,” Luke interjected, looping his arm around my waist.

As usual, Luke and I were each other’s date for the evening.

At that moment, the group of women all seemed to turn toward Rhett and giggle.

“I’m good if you are. We have some off-campus celebrating to do anyway,” Luke said, turning toward me. “All of this wedding talk is taking away from the real cause for celebration today,” Luke continued.

“Luke, I hardly think me passing a test is bigger news than the fact that the King of Valencia got engaged.”

The night was consumed with toasts to the King and his soon-to-be queen, Gloria, after the announcement was finally made regarding their engagement. It would take years to plan a royal wedding, but everyone was excited, nonetheless. I wondered where Jay was and why he wasn’t next to his best friend celebrating his engagement... or the fact that I’d passed my written liaison exam earlier that day as well.

“But yeah, let’s go,” I agreed, brushing aside the guilt that rose in me as I internally acknowledged that I was delaying going home to Jay yet again.

As we walked into town, I thought, not for the first time, about the overpowering effect Rhett still seemed to have on women despite his allegedly fading powers.

“Rhett, try not to take this the wrong way, but I’m not seeing it,” I said.

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Yes, you are incredibly good looking,” I admitted matter-of-factly.

Rhett turned to Luke, looking pleased with himself.

“But I don’t turn into the giggling mess that other women seem to turn into around you,” I said.

“Well, Al, there are a couple of possible reasons for that. First of all, it could be that you are just blind. Quick, how many fingers am I holding up?” Rhett teased.

“Just one, right?” I retorted, making a vulgar gesture at him.

We all laughed.

“Seriously, Rhett, why?” I asked.

The amused smile on Rhett’s face made him look even more charming.

Luke cut in. “It’s mostly because of me, Al. I shield you with my magic any time you’re around Rhett,” he admitted.

I looked at Luke, considering whether to get pissed about this uninvited bit of protectiveness. I decided to let it slide.

“But what about when you’re not around?” I questioned.

Ninety-nine percent of the time when I was with Rhett, Luke was there as well. But I’d been around Rhett a time or two without Luke.

“I’m always extra careful when I’m around you, Al. *Epecially* if we’re alone. When I’m around you, I keep my power on a tight leash,” Rhett explained.

“Why?” I asked.

“Bro code, baby,” Rhett replied, nodding his head toward Luke.

I looked at Rhett, waiting for a further explanation.

“Luke called dibs first,” Rhett said in reply to my questioning glare.

Luke gave me a mischievous smile.

“You called *dibs*?” I asked incredulously.

“Almost immediately,” he responded unashamedly.

“You know, before I knew...” he trailed off.

I knew he meant before he knew about me and Jay.

“Anyway, do you have any idea what it’s like trying to get a date standing next to this guy?” Luke joked.

I laughed. “Luke, I think you do just fine.” Although now that I thought about it, I had not seen or heard about Luke going on a date in a while.

I thought of asking Rhett to let out whatever he had been withholding and make Luke lift his shield. I was curious to know how I would hold up against Rhett’s allegedly irresistible powers. But another part of me didn’t want to know. Rhett was my friend—I didn’t want to turn into a puddle of giggles around him like all the other women did.

I let the topic drop as Luke opened the door to Bar Louie for me.

## *Alarie*

Walking up to House Heroux that evening, I recognized the same honeyed voice I'd heard at the high lady's soiree before. I quickly scanned the room, finding the handsome young lord on the far side of the room. The singer spotted me, giving me his usual playful grin and wink as his nimble hands skillfully moved over the strings of his guitar.

"Good evening, love."

"Jay," I breathed out, jumping in surprise. I hadn't noticed him approaching me.

I was there to pass my social test for the liaison program. Jay had explained that prior to the magic waning, this portion of the liaison program would have been an opportunity to showcase any magical abilities I had. But, luckily for me, that kind of magical test had fallen to the wayside with the magic dying. Now, all I had to do was survive the evening without pissing off anyone, beginning with the high lord himself.

"My lord," I crooned, "that's a fine suit you're wearing," I said, discreetly squeezing his toned arm to quell the possessiveness I knew was always lingering near the surface for him.

With one raised eyebrow, appeased, Lord Vitruvian gave me a smirk that didn't quite make it to his eyes. He offered me his elbow.

"The King, the High Council, and then some, are in there," he warned, leaning his head down to whisper to me.

I tensed up at this news.

"You got this, love," he whispered, lightly and lovingly touching the arch of my lower back.



His hand dropped from me before we walked in, approaching the King and his soon-to-be-queen; High Lady Tragon and her son, Cole Tragon; High Lord Rein, Lady Rein, Rhett, and Luke; and the Lords Preston.

\* \* \* \*

I walked into the hall, making my way back to the gathering after taking a quick break from everyone under the pretense of using the bathroom.

“Alarie,” a man called out. “Al.”

Only Luke and Rhett called me “Al.” But I didn’t recognize the voice that called out to me. I stopped and turned to face my pursuer.

“What are we going to do about this?” the grinning musician with the enchanting voice asked me cockily.

I responded to his question with a bemused expression.

“And what exactly is ‘*this*,’ Lord...?” I trailed off, waiting for the young lord’s name and giving him the slightest flirt of a smile.

“Stefan. Stefan Jovian,” he offered, extending his hand.

“What are we going to do about *this*?” he said, indicating the feel of his calloused hand in mine.

I took my time examining Stefan from head to toe, not veering away from his directness, and ending my journey at his eyes with a look that told him I wasn’t impressed, which, if I were being completely honest, was not *entirely* true. Stefan let a frustratingly knowing smirk slide onto his face.

“Well, Lord Stefan, it seems I’m at a disadvantage here. You know me, but, *regretfully*, I do not know you,” I said coolly, trying to cut through the cocky smirk on his face.

“Ouch,” he replied, like he had been pricked by the thorn of a rose. “Well, I’ll take the blame for that. I’ve been up north and away from the Court too much for my taste lately,” he said. “Look, I have a proposal for you,” he said, glancing back toward the room where everyone else was gathered.

I looked back at Stefan, coolly.

“High Lady Tragon would like to offer you a role in her House as coordinator,” Stefan volunteered.

Of all the things, that was not one I’d expected to come from the overconfident lord’s mouth. How could the high lady realistically expect me to be receptive to her offer? I’d made my dislike of the high lady’s son quite

plain on multiple, very public occasions. But, if liking Cole Tragon was a criteria for working at House Tragon, then his mother would be the only one still there.

“And you’re what exactly to the high lady?” I asked, still trying to figure out the motive behind the offer without revealing anything myself.

“Consort,” Stefan answered in a clipped tone, some of his arrogance deflating.

And that’s when I remembered where I’d first seen Stefan. At the Summer Ball, he’d stood next to Cole Tragon, shifting uneasily on his feet as Cole and I had exchanged barbs. And then I did not see him again for months, until Lady Tragon’s soiree the other day.

“Hmm,” I mused.

“So, you know Luke and Rhett?” I guessed, changing the subject.

He had called me Al, so that meant he knew Luke, Rhett, or both. Hanging out with Cole was an immediate red flag, but if he knew Luke and Rhett, then maybe he wasn’t so bad.

He nodded his head. “They told me *all* about you.”

“You can’t believe half of what those guys say,” I joked.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he replied, his voice smoldering.

“So, what are you going to play for me next?” I asked, sidestepping his overt flirting. He was being a bit heavy-handed for the usual High Court games.

“Absolutely anything you want,” he said, suggesting it was more than just my choice of songs that he would be willing to give to me.

I rolled my eyes at his persistence.

“How about you just play the next one for me, ok?” I replied.

“Deal. But you have to promise to think about my offer,” he said.

And then he turned away, flashing me one more mischievous smile over his shoulder before heading back into the parlor to get back to his performance. I took my lower lip between my teeth, biting it and thinking about everything Stefan had said as he disappeared back into the main room. Then I went back to the party, joining Luke as Stefan played in the background.

“It’s weird to see Jay here,” Luke said.

“Yeah, why?” I replied, still distracted by my conversation with Stefan.

“It’s just that he never used to come to these kinds of things before. This definitely would have been something he would have sent me to handle for

him. Before you, he used to only go to House Heroux functions and then maybe the seasonal galas,” Luke explained.

“And the King and the entire High Council too,” Luke whistled. “This must be the best attended liaison dinner of all time. Normally, it would just be me and some other agents on behalf of each House.”

“Speaking of House agents. I’ve heard you’ve been telling lies about me to Lord Stefan,” I said, changing the subject.

Luke gave me a sideways assessing gaze before responding.

“Only if it’s a lie to say you’re the most brilliant woman I know. Hot, too,” he said, wagging his eyebrows at me.

“Luke,” I exclaimed, “save it for the other ladies. I know your games *all too well*, and they don’t work on me,” I continued, playfully bumping my shoulders into his.

His brick wall of a body was unfazed by my effort.

“Don’t they?” he asked confidently, flashing me one of his white toothy grins, the kind of smile that could melt a glacier.

“They just need a firm hand,” Cole said loudly enough for everyone standing in the vast room to hear.

He was standing with Rhett and Lord Preston, and his husband, Jamie. Jay stood next to the King talking across the room. High Lady Tragon and Gloria had run off somewhere long ago. Stefan was across the room, beginning to pack up his guitar for the evening.

Other than the high lady’s unusual job offer, everything had gone well so far that night. If we ended the night then, I had no doubt that I’d passed the informal social test necessary to progress out of the liaison program. All I had to do was leave without rocking the boat. But I’d heard this diatribe by Cole before, his snipes about the idea of a Golden Court and the lesser fae wanting to be called the gilded, not lesser, fae instead.

Approaching Cole, I retorted, “Cole, the only firm hand you know about is the one you give yourself every night alone in your bedroom.”

Rhett barked out a laugh, and Lord Preston made a more discreet snicker. Our exchange had immediately drawn the eyes of everyone else in the room to us.

“What do you know, mutt?” Cole retorted, falling back on his trite name calling.

I felt the familiar tension in the air that I had come to recognize as Jay’s power. I found Jay’s eyes and subtly shook my head, telling him not to come

over to where I stood. Fire blazed behind his gray eyes. Grey put a casual hand on his friend's shoulder, distracting him.

Luke walked over and stood next to me. Jay's eyes seared into Luke's back.

"I know the guy you're talking about—Don Davante—and I know that if you try to take a 'firm hand' with him, he will break your hand, and then your arm, and then that sword at your side like a twig."

"I'm not worried about Cass," Cole sneered.

Cass? I wondered at Cole's familiarity.

"I guess that answers the question we have all been wondering about then—you really *are* that stupid," I said.

Blustering, Cole replied, "I will not be talked to this way by some small-town mongrel. When I'm through with you, no one at the High Court will offer you a job," he spat through clenched teeth.

"Well then, you better go talk to your mother because she's already offered me a spot in your House."

Cole looked over at Stefan, who gave him a nod, confirming I was not lying. Cole gave me one disgusted look and then turned on his heels, storming off.

Jamie looked uncomfortable and wandered off, muttering an excuse about needing to find Gloria. Lord Preston was still chuckling as he made his way over to Jay and the King.

Rhett's and Luke's chuckling finally began to subside.

"She really offered you a position with House Tragon?" Luke asked, incredulously.

"Yep," I said, trying to find Jay's eyes and see how he felt about this news, but he was still talking to the King and wasn't looking my way.

"Are you considering it?" Rhett asked, neutrally, ever the diplomat behind his Prince Charming facade.

"And work with that gem?" I joked, gesturing toward where Cole stormed off.

"Good. Because if you're leaving House Vitruvian, then it better be to come and work for my House," Rhett replied.

"I think it's safe to say we're done here for the night," Luke said.

"I'll walk you home, Al," he continued, grabbing my elbow and beginning to pull me toward the door.

"No need, Luke," Jay said, appearing next to us, although he had been

across the room seconds before.

“Lady Armand, you can join me. I’m heading back as well,” he said, stiffly holding his elbow out to me.

I looked back at Luke and Rhett.

“Night,” I said, pulling out of Luke’s grip and taking Jay’s elbow.

When we were out of sight, I felt Jay’s discreet but possessive touch on my lower back.

“Did you enjoy the evening at the King’s house, Alarie?” he asked, engaging in small talk we could easily exchange in case of prying ears.

However, I could hear that something more severe than the possibility of eavesdroppers was underlying the faux formality in his voice. I couldn’t tell if he was pissed about my scene with Cole or the high lady’s offer, or perhaps both.

“It was quite the party,” I responded, generically, biding my time to find out the reason for Jay’s undertone.

“What did you enjoy the most? The food? Or perhaps it was the *music*?” he spat, emphasizing the last word, leaving no doubt in my mind as to the true reason for his mood.

My heart jumped into my throat as my exchange with Stefan replayed in my mind. I’d flirted with the musician, but my flirting had been no different from the flirting I usually faked to wheedle information out of people. But even as I tried to convince myself of this, I inwardly admitted that it was not entirely true. And somehow the high lord knew this as well. I couldn’t explain it now that I was no longer in front of Stefan, but in the moment, I’d felt myself being a little *too* receptive to his blunt advances.

“The food was delicious,” I responded, taking a subtle deep breath to slow my pounding heart.

I knew our charade would drop the moment we stepped through the door of the foyer. We spent the remainder of our walk in silence. As we crossed into the foyer of the manor, the high lord’s hand encircled my wrist, turning me toward him. I pretended not to pick up on the heat practically rolling off the him as I faced him, staring too innocently into his face.

He held my gaze a moment longer, then sharply dropped my hand, taking a single step back from me and purposefully reaching for the belt at his waist. Silently, his eyes bore into me as he began methodically taking off his belt, sliding it meticulously through each loop before folding it in half and holding it ready at his side.

“I...” I began, eyeing the belt in his hand, a tantalizing new kind of excitement rushing through me.

I gulped down air, not knowing what excuse I could come up with. But before I could finish my sentence, his tongue was prying my mouth open and exploring each crevice as if to flush out the lie that had been on my tongue. He roughly placed his hand over the top of mine and squeezed my hand over the hard length of him.

“*This* is where your hands belong,” he commanded.

The young lords who had once been an impetus for the game Jay and I played suddenly became the fuel for a different kind of fire. Forgetting whatever excuse I’d wanted to give, my need for him seared through me. His jealousy rode my body and electrified me as if I’d been struck by lightning. He broke away from me abruptly, grabbing my arms, digging his thumbs into them as he turned me around and pushed me toward the closest wall.

He gripped both of my wrists in one hand, pulling them together above my head and deftly wrapping his belt around them, tying my hands together.

“If you can’t keep your hands off other men, I’ll do it for you,” he growled, yanking the leather tighter until it bit into my skin.

“Yes, Jay,” I responded breathily, excited for what appeared to be a new lesson.

He wrapped his arm around my waist while he kissed and bit at my neck and fumbled with loosening his pants with his other hand. Finally freeing himself, he used his free hand to hike my dress above my waist and pull my panties to the side. I was panting, his every touch like a direct line of fire to the throbbing between my thighs.

Then Lord Vitruvian pinned the tail end of the leather belt and my bound wrists to the wall, mounting me forcefully from behind. My wetness allowed him to easily slide into me. He slipped his hand inside the front of my panties and began to roughly flick the raw apex at the top of my sex while plunging himself deeper into me, as if trying to fuse his shaft permanently to the end of me. The leather of the belt dug into my skin with each thrust.

“Give me what’s mine, Alarie,” he demanded, tugging the leather of the belt tighter, bringing me to stand on my toes in my heels.

“*Now*,” he said as he continued to fiercely drive himself into me.

And I did, the roughness in his voice and our lovemaking quickly pushing me over the edge. As his teeth grazed the top of my shoulder, I couldn’t help but turn my moan of pleasure into his name.

My knees began to buckle with my pleasure as he continued to plow into me harder and harder.

Through gritted teeth, he said, “You. Are. Mine,” punctuating each word with a punishing thrust.

“Fucking say it, Alarie! I want to hear you scream it,” he demanded, a rare obscenity slipping from his lips.

“I’m yours, Jay. Just yours,” I insisted as he thrust into me harshly and drove all thoughts of Stefan and anyone else but him from my mind before he lost himself deep within me.

Still inside of me, his body pressed against the back of mine, his hand tightly wound around the leather digging into my wrists, he warned, “Don’t let me *ever* see you take that lip of yours between your teeth for another man.”

Then he withdrew from me so abruptly that I almost fell to the floor, my hands still bound, my legs weak from my all-consuming orgasm, and his arm no longer supporting me around my waist. Before I could turn away from the wall, Lord Vitruvian was walking away from me, not bothering to retrieve his belt that still bound my wrists.

“You passed, by the way,” he said flatly over his shoulder. “Congratulations,” he said as he finished buttoning his pants.

He didn’t look back at me as he left the room.

At least I knew what had given me away. With the emotions of the night raw and whirling within me, I walked to my room and reflected on the relapse of my loving Jay to that of my exacting tutor and high lord.

Although I had passed the last test for the liaison program, for the first time in my life, I thought that I may have failed a different test that night. I had no doubt that the high lord had just given me a very thorough lesson and had meant to instill in me that I was his. But the only lesson I’d learned that night was that I very much enjoyed being tied up and fucked.

## *Alarie*

Luke and I walked into one of the larger studies in the manor. Jay wore a three-piece deep blue suit with an even darker blue tie, so deeply blue it almost appeared black. Even though the bespoke suit fit him perfectly, it still seemed like his muscles were bulging under the fabric, like he could flex and the threads would tear down the seams.

I hadn't seen Jay at breakfast that morning. He'd been in meetings all day, probably since before I was even out of bed. Today was the one day out of the month when most of his emissaries would come to the manor for a full debrief. Luke and I usually gave our reports to the high lord together since we worked over the same High Court events together.

"So, I'll see you tonight?" I asked Luke, finishing up our conversation as we all made our way toward the large desk in the center of the room.

"Of course, Al. Who the fuck else am I going to dance with? Rhett?" he quipped, gifting me one of his glorious, toothy smiles.

I laughed.

Closing the door behind us, Jay quipped, "Luke, perhaps you could refrain from flirting with Alarie long enough to give me your report?"

"Sorry, Jay," Luke replied, his tone making it plain that he was not sorry at all.

"Is this one of the times that you *don't* want me to pretend to be Alarie's boyfriend?" Luke asked, the smile disappearing completely from my friend's face.

"Luke, what are you talking about?" I demanded.

Luke looked pointedly at Jay.



“What is he talking about, Jay?” When Jay did not immediately answer my question, I followed up with, “Did you ask him to pretend to be my boyfriend as some sort of cover for us?”

“Well, Alarie, you wanted things to remain a secret throughout your first year as liaison,” Jay replied.

“We agreed to keep it a secret,” I corrected him. “But, Jay, I never asked that Luke help us hide it.”

“You didn’t have to, love. *I’m* the Lord of Whispers. *I’m* the one who handles what’s said behind closed doors here at Court.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

“Why didn’t you ask?” he retorted.

“I didn’t know I needed to.”

“Exactly, Alarie. Like everything else, you left it to me, and I took care of it,” he said.

And his point sunk into me like a blade, buried to its hilt in my side. *He was right*. I didn’t question the way everything in my life just went perfectly since I’d gotten involved with him. I didn’t ask questions about how things got paid for or what needed to be taken care of.

When I’d arrived on Jay’s doorstep, I’d been so independent to the point of self-isolation. But with Jay, I’d submitted to him not only in our intimate moments together but completely. I’d let him make every decision to do with me, and I didn’t even question it. It had been such a relief, for once in my life, to have someone take care of me. But at that moment, I didn’t even know the wage I was being paid as liaison or even where my money was being kept. My insides churned at this realization, at the dichotomy to what I used to be.

“Jay—”

“Alarie, we’ll talk about this later,” he interjected, cutting me off.

“Report,” he barked, looking back at Luke.

Luke looked at me. I nodded, letting him know I wanted to move on. Pushing past the awkwardness of the moment, Luke and I began our report to the high lord.

“Cole’s been conspicuously missing from Court lately,” Luke began. “As you can imagine, no one particularly misses Cole’s charm, but him missing his own House soiree a couple of weeks ago started some chatter. House Tragon has remained silent on the reason for his sparsity.”

“Pretty much, Cole has missed every court function the last couple of

weeks. No one has seen him for more than a minute or two,” I added in.

“Cole and House Tragon are hiding something,” Luke concluded.

“The other day, Cole referred to Cass by his first name. That’s weird, right? How could he possibly know Cass?” I asked, bewildered.

Jay nodded in agreement, forgetting our prior rift.

“I have no doubt that they’re up to something,” he growled. “I just can’t figure out what. Before, there was a silence around them that I thought may have been because of my fading powers. But even with my powers returning, it’s like there is a shield around their whispers, keeping them from me. But I know every person who is capable of that kind of shield and none of them would work for House Tragon,” Jay said, letting his aggravation show.

When we were finished with our report, Luke moved toward the door of the study, holding it open for me. I looked back at Jay.

“I’m going to hang back for a minute, Luke,” I said, failing to hide my irritation.

Throughout the entirety of our report to the high lord, I had sat there fuming at the way Jay had pulled his high-lord card, ending our conversation prematurely.

“Ok, Al. I’ll see you tonight,” Luke said, squeezing my arm with his large hand and then closing the door behind him.

I turned on Jay.

“What the fuck, Jay?”

I was angry with him, but I was angrier at myself that I’d let myself get into such a vulnerable position without even realizing it.

Jay rose in his chair. “Alarie, don’t—” he started, adopting his high-lord veneer.

“No. You don’t, Jay,” I interrupted.

I’d never spoken to him that way before. Not even when I’d found him with Lady Vitruvian. But I felt violated, like my best friend had been turned against me as a spy.

“Alarie, you *will* lower your voice,” the high lord ordered.

He had never taken that tone with me before. Although he did not raise his voice, the power in his words, his power, seemed to fill the crevice of every corner in the room, *compelling* me to obey. Even in the beginning, when he had been my forbidding tutor, I’d felt an innate kindness within him. But as he stood addressing me in his study, that underlying warmth was gone. I stood there, stunned.

And then another thought came to me, about his powers, about him controlling the whispers at the High Court and “keeping me safe,” while he was away so many nights.

“Jay, do you... Do you *listen* to the things I say, to what people say to me?” I asked.

I now looked at him, wondering where the man I loved ended and the Lord of Whispers started or if there could, in fact, be any daylight found between the two.

“Alarie, how else do you expect me to keep you safe when I can’t be around you? When I have to be away from the High Court so often?” he said, the muscles in his jaw clenched.

I felt a chill shoot down my arms and then my spine. He had been *spying* on me.

“Alarie, you know about Ala—You know what I lost when I wasn’t able to be there before. I won’t, *I can’t*, ever let that happen again.”

I softened, just a bit, at the long lifetime of pain and guilt he had put himself through for things that were not his fault. But the sympathy in my eyes seemed to strike a nerve with the high lord.

“I have other emissaries outside the door waiting to make their reports. We’ll talk about this later,” he said coldly, dismissing me.

He had always encouraged me to speak my mind and challenge him as long as I didn’t do it in front of others. That was part of our deal—I gave him “Yes, Jays” in the bedroom but maintained control of my life outside of the bedroom. Or, at least, that was what I’d thought was our deal.

He had never tried to overtly tell me what to do outside of the bedroom. He was ruining the delicate balance of our relationship by pulling the high-lord card on me like this. I raised my eyebrows in disbelief before turning to the door, calming my face so that the other emissaries waiting in the hall would not notice anything unusual, and left without another word.

I caught up to Luke walking toward House Bellamy.

“Luke,” I called out to him. “Luke.”

Luke stopped, waiting for me to catch up. He hadn’t gone very far. He’d probably been waiting on me, knowing Jay well enough to know that my conversation with the high lord was not going to go over well or take very long.

“Al,” he said, his lips pressed into a sideways smirk.

“Luke...” And before I could stop myself, I blurted, “Have you just

been pretending to be my friend?” I was questioning something I’d never thought to question before. “Am I just one more piece on the game board that is the High Court for you and Jay to play with and I didn’t realize it?”

I looked down, unable to meet his eyes, scared of what his answer would be.

Luke grabbed my chin, gently tilting my face up to him.

“Al, how can you even ask me that?” he replied fiercely. “I did what Jay asked because I thought that was what *you* wanted—I thought *you* wanted to be with him. I thought you wanted to keep things quiet between you two.”

“I did. I mean, *I do*. But I guess I just didn’t realize you and I were just pretending,” I said.

“I wasn’t pretending, Al. Not in the way you are thinking. When I’m with you—” He stopped himself. “Well, Al, what did you think we were doing?” he asked me.

I looked down at my hands hidden between his big hands.

“I—”

The truth was that I’d never thought to question the nature of my relationship with Luke. It had always just felt so natural. And I’d never thought about how Jay, who had used every man I’d ever touched as the basis for some kind of *lesson*, had never said anything to me—at least not since the Summer Ball—regarding how Luke and I were so close.

“I don’t know, Luke. You’re *you*. You’re—” I struggled to find the right words. “You’re my best friend,” I said, lamely, feeling that “best friend” did not really capture what I had been going for either. I held onto his hand, squeezed it once, then dropped it to my side in hopes of conveying in that one silent gesture what I could not put to words.

Luke looked like he was going to say something, then changed his mind.

“Don’t tell Rhett that,” Luke joked. “He’ll get jealous for sure.”

And even then, when I felt like my carefully curated life at the High Court was falling apart, he made me laugh.

For the first time that I could remember, Jay was in town but was not waiting for me at the manor that evening when I got home. And I did not seek him out. Instead, I went to bed dressed in something other than a Vitruvian-blue nightgown, wondering what other strings Jay was controlling in my life that I’d not even thought to question.

Jay’s power play that afternoon had definitely proven one thing to me—the game he and I played all of these months was no longer fun. Before, we

both knew that there was nothing behind my flirtations with other lords. It was just a part of my High Court facade. Instead, we'd used my teasing the other lords and Jay's feigned jealousies as harmless fuel for our passion.

But since the incidents with Lady Vitruvian and Stefan, I guess his jealousies were no longer pretend, and our game was no longer fun. I knew the high lord's tiff with Luke had less to do with Luke in the moment and everything to do with the fact that the game we played was irretrievably broken.

## *Alarie*

I woke up early the next morning after my fight with Jay to the feel of his weight pressing onto the side of my bed. I wasn't surprised to wake to his presence after he'd stayed away the night before. Lying next to me, on top of the covers, he twirled a piece of my long hair around his finger into a curl before letting it drop.

"Alarie, I have to leave the manor for a couple of days," Jay said, his tone not matching the gentleness of his caress.

I'd been expecting an apology, not a goodbye.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the northern border. Yesterday, after I received your report," he continued, deftly avoiding the topic of what happened immediately thereafter between us, "I received several other reports."

"Something to do with Cole?" I interjected.

He shook his head. "Still working on that. But we have more immediate problems. Alarie, you know all of these trips I have been taking up north?"

"Yeah. What about them? I assumed it had something to do with the lesser fae."

"That's not it," he said, shaking his head.

"There's something that only Grey and I—well, and Nik—know. Something we've been preparing for."

I looked at him, tight-lipped and waiting.

"We're preparing for the possibility of war with the north again, love. With Alancia."

"What does that mean? What are you talking about, Jay? And what does

that have to do with your trips?” I asked frantically.

My heart fluttered, the thought of a conflict immediately driving a million questions through my mind.

“We’ve been making trips to examine the wall. The barrier between Valencia and Alancia is weakening. And every time we go to fix it, more failure points just keep popping up. We may not be able to keep it in place and keep Rex out much longer.”

I couldn’t stand the thought of Jay at war. I knew that he was much more than the King’s eyes and ears. I’d read about the legions he’d commanded during the war. I knew he would be on the front line of any battle, and the thought made me feel ill. I grabbed his hand, but he did not soften his high-lord semblance.

I didn’t want him to leave with our fight hanging between us.

“You’re still mad about yesterday?” I asked at the same time I strategically dropped the sheet covering my nakedness.

A smirk glinted across Jay’s handsome face before quickly retreating.

“It’s not that, love,” he said, at last softening. “It’s that I have no desire to repeat our exchange from yesterday, but I fear the next bout is just moments away,” he said begrudgingly.

I dropped his hand as I moved to instinctively cover myself back up, my mood no longer matching the tone of our exchange. “Just say it, Jay,” I said, thinking I knew what he was going to say.

He had said that his obligations to Lady Vitruvian would not come up again for some time, but he was going north. He would probably see her and...

“Elizabeth’s pregnant,” Jay replied, assuming his stoic facade again.

That was *not* what I’d thought he would say.

“I...” I spluttered. “Congratulations?” I finished awkwardly.

In any other circumstance, it really would be a cause for congratulations. The fae had been unable to conceive for decades. I was among the last generation of fae born.

“Alarie, this doesn’t change anything,” he admonished.

“How can you say that, Jay? You’re going to be a *father*. Elizabeth is going to be the mother of *your child*. The first fae child to be born in, what, twenty years?”

“But that doesn’t change *us*, Alarie,” he reassured me. “The baby is going to love you as much as I do,” he said, already showing a tenderness I’d

not seen before at the prospect of being a father.

“And this will be my last trip without you,” he promised fiercely, grabbing my hand and pulling it to his chest. “Elizabeth’s pregnancy will be announced at the Spring Ball. But after the Ball, we can announce you as consort to House Vitruvian, and we will end this charade. Then you can be by my side *always*.”

And with this all-consuming, life-altering declaration, he raised my hand to his lips with a kiss.

I was speechless, so I just nodded my head and leaned in, accepting his kiss. Jay grasped my shoulders with his strong hands and pulled my bare breasts into his body, kissing me possessively. Then my gallant high lord, who had already given too much to the last war, left my room to prevent another.



## *Alarie*

I met Luke at Bar Louie. I'd chosen a mid-length, clingy, cottony black dress for the night, something different from the blue I almost always wore these days. Something simple that I made slightly sexier by pairing it with a pair of wedges that wrapped around my ankles.

Luke was leaning against the bar, chatting with one of our regular bartenders. He was always dressed to the nines, but outside of the High Court, I would often find him in various stages of undress. Tonight, he wore a sharp black suit, but he had already disposed of his jacket, leaving the suspenders to his pants exposed. His tie was untied and hanging loosely around his neck, the sleeves of his white button-down were rolled up to his elbows, and his brown hair was slightly curled, probably from him running his hands through it all day. The exposed straps of his suspenders only served to further highlight his muscled frame, the way the thin straps seemed just barely capable of stretching over his large shoulders before leading the eye down to his pants.

Rhett wasn't there. He must have been in too deep with whoever was his date for the night to join us. I walked up to the bar, the click of my heels on the bar's floor announcing my arrival. Luke, still leaning on the bar with his ass poked out and a foot propped on the bottom ledge, turned his attention toward me.

"Al!" he bellowed in excitement, like he didn't see me all the time.

"What's up?" I greeted, popping the straps of one of his suspenders against his muscled back.

We shared our first beer of the evening, sitting at the bar.

“Guess that explains why Jay was in such a foul mood,” Luke commented in response to my rendition of why Jay’s trip to the north was necessary.

I didn’t mention Lady Vitruvian’s pregnancy, but I did hint at issues with the border wall.

“Yeah, that must have been it,” I replied.

Luke flashed me one of his prized smiles and said, “So, when’s the announcement?”

My heart dropped, worried that Luke knew that Jay planned to announce me as House consort. Or that Elizabeth was pregnant. But he couldn’t, I reasoned, calming.

“What announcement is this?” I asked coyly.

“Al, I know competition when I see it. Tell me Jay doesn’t intend to name you counselor at the Spring Ball,” Luke replied.

Relief flowed through me. “You want some competition? How about I beat your ass in horseshoes?” I quipped.

I was actually quite good at horseshoes and had humbled Luke and Rhett any number of times on the back deck to Bar Louie.

“Let’s do it, little girl,” he teased. “But don’t come crawling to me when you’re three sheets in the wind.”

The usual bet between us was that the loser of the game took a shot of the winner’s choosing. We made our way to the back deck of the bar.

“Ladies first, I always say,” Luke said.

“Ever the gentleman,” I teased.

I picked up the rusty horseshoe, feeling its weight in my hand before throwing it perfectly, ringing the stake in the ground. I looked at Luke, satisfied, but not overly so, not wanting to count my eggs before they hatched. I was good, probably better than Luke most of the time, but he had shellacked me more than a few times. I knew better than to gloat this early in the game.

Luke pitched his horseshoe, flashing me a wide smile as his shoe rang directly on top of mine.

“Looks like we have ourselves a game,” he taunted, the challenge twinkling in his eye.

For that smile, I would almost be willing to throw the game. *Almost*, I thought, throwing another shoe that landed immediately adjacent to my first throw.

We continued to play horseshoes throughout the night, but Rhett never appeared. The first two shots went to Luke. I treated him to two particularly sweet shots because I enjoyed him having to go to the bar to order them. A specimen like Luke was unfazed by a couple of shots.

Luke took the third game—choosing an equally horribly sweet shot for me as my punishment. At this point, we were both several drinks and shots deep, and a win or loss was no longer necessary to provoke another round of shots. We toasted ourselves, each other, and our bastard friend, Rhett, who was too busy banging to hang out.

I closed down Bar Louie for the first time ever. And it was exactly what I had needed to get my mind off how I'd left things with Jay.

"You don't have to go home, but you have to get the hell out of here," the bartender bellowed.

We had not even realized the hours that had passed since we first arrived. We stumbled out of the bar, and my hand darted out for Luke's arm, so I didn't trip on the cobblestone.

"I whooped your ass, and you know it," I jeered at Luke.

"Maybe I let you because I just wanted to get drunk," Luke replied.

"Keep telling yourself that, big boy," I retorted.

"You know, you talk a lot of shit for someone who can fit under my chin," he jested.

"With heels, I come up to at least your mouth," I japed, defensively.

To prove my point, I stopped walking, standing in front of him and lining up my face to his until our faces were inches apart.

"See," I breathed, my lips inches from his.

If he tilted his head down any farther, our lips would be touching.

"Right up to your mouth," I said slowly as I stared into Luke's blue eyes, holding my breath.

"I guess you're right," he said, sweeping me off my feet and breaking the tension.

He hefted my weight in his arms, causing one of my heels to almost fall off. We laughed.

"Let me down, Luke. I'm not *that* drunk," I protested. "I can walk," I said, when we finally quit laughing.

Luke set me back down, and I almost instantly almost rolled my ankle. Luke wrapped his arm around my waist, easily holding my weight with one arm as we continued to walk. My black cocktail dress bunched under the

strength of his grip at my waist.

“I can run you back to House Vitruvian if you want,” Luke offered.

He often scooped me in his arms and ran with unnatural speed to our destination. More so due to my slow pace in my high heels than anything else.

“Let’s go back to your house. I think we could use a nightcap,” I offered.

The last thing we needed was another drink. But I wasn’t ready to go back to the manor. We made our way back to the Bellamy manor, yelling and laughing the entire way back to Court. When at last we made it to Luke’s private bar, Luke made me my favorite drink, a nip of scotch with a splash of soda and a twist of orange peel. It was later than Luke and I had ever hung out by the time we were willing to admit it was time to quit drinking and go to bed.

“Ready for me to take you to the manor?” Luke offered again.

I didn’t respond to his offer, instead walking out of his bar and toward his bedroom. As I did so, I kicked off my heels, flinging the shoe from my right foot into the distance before kicking my left shoe in the opposite direction. Luke’s laughter rang out through the silence of the house in the early morning as my heels struck objects in the distance. I laughed too, unable to resist the urge to match Luke’s mood.

I continued to walk toward Luke’s bedroom, slipping my tight black dress off in the hallway, allowing it to pool at my feet. Luke trailed behind me, his laughter silenced by the sight of me undressing and moving into his bedroom. Standing in my matching set of a black satin bra and thong, I entered Luke’s room and went to his closet. Finding a soft shirt that smelled like him, I slipped it on and then removed my bra through the armhole of the shirt.

Luke entered his room where he was greeted by the sight of me in his shirt in his bed. He slipped off his shoes as he removed his watch from his sizable wrist. His eyes continued to bore into me.

“You sure about this, Al?” he asked, beginning to unbutton the white button-down he wore. “I can still get you home.”

I had never stayed at his place before. The charade we put on to cover up for my relationship with Jay had never extended that far. But this didn’t feel like part of the charade at all. It felt like something entirely different. In response, I crawled on all fours farther into the bed, allowing my ass to poke

out of Luke's overly large shirt.

Luke ran his thumb across his pouty lower lip and down to the irresistible dimple in his chin, considering, before continuing to strip off his clothes. He stripped down to his gray boxer briefs and came to the side of his bed, stopping to take a sip of water with his eyes still on me.

I rose to my knees, meeting him at the side of the bed, and wrapped my arms around his neck, roughly pulling him onto his bed and on top of me. I pulled his body between my legs, his shirt that I was wearing pushing up to expose my stomach and the only other piece of clothing I wore. Luke pulled up from my embrace as I lay on my back with my legs loosely wrapped around him.

"Al, you're wasted," Luke admonished.

"Don't be that way," I responded.

He looked at me skeptically.

"Ok. I'm a *little* drunk," I admitted with a smirk.

The liquor in me made me want to do something wild and reckless, but I still knew what I was doing.

"But we both know we've wanted this for a long time, Luke. Tell me I'm wrong," I demanded, tightening my legs around his waist until his boxers rubbed against my satiny panties.

I felt Luke harden against me. I curved my body into him, pressing my aching sex into his thickness, and whatever control he had disappeared. He collapsed onto me, lowering his mouth hungrily to mine, his soft lips caressing mine before he slid his tongue into my mouth, probing, as he pressed his muscled body against mine.

I reacted to the feel of him in my mouth vehemently, desperately wrapping my arms around his muscled back, pulling him closer into my body as I returned his kiss passionately. I began to writhe against him as our mouths fed at each other like I was trying to eliminate the possibility of air between our bodies. I reached my hand down toward the band of his boxers, and Luke pulled away from our embrace once more.

"Al, *no*," he said. His hands dug into my thighs, keeping me separated from him. "*Not like this*," he whispered quietly but firmly.

"You don't tell me no," I said defiantly, half-joking, half-serious.

Luke took a deep breath.

"Al, what do you think I am? A fucking god?" he asked, squeezing his hands on my thighs until little white marks formed under his grip, his hands

almost shaking in his effort to hold back.

“It’s a godsdamn miracle that you aren’t on all fours with me buried inside of you right now,” he said with heat in his voice that turned my core into liquid. “I’m trying to be a gentleman here. *I promise,*” he finished, sounding exasperated with himself.

I didn’t like being told “*no,*” but I knew he was right.

“Ugh,” I sighed, disappointed, my legs still wrapped around him.

I tried not to picture what Luke had suggested. Me, on my hands and knees with him behind me, his strong hands lined up on the dimples on my lower back, as he pulled me into him at the same time he thrust into me. The ache between my thighs disagreed emphatically, but Luke was right. *This* wasn’t right.

Seeing the disappointment on my face, Luke laughed, dissipating the tension between us. I loosened the grip of my legs around him as he continued to laugh. I laughed too.

“You know, Luke, laugh all you want, but someday I’m going to be yours and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it,” I promised, not making any sense, drunk and already beginning to fall asleep.

I retreated to my side of the bed and began to fall asleep almost immediately.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” Luke retorted, pulling my body into the crook of his own.

## *Alarie*

Luke's t-shirt pooled over my dress from the night before. I tied it in a knot in the back, so it didn't look like I was wearing just his t-shirt. Luke walked me home that morning. We shared a comfortable silence, not really feeling the need to discuss the events that had transpired between us the night before.

"You were half right, you know, about being named a counselor for House Vitruvian," I said.

"I figured as much. What's the other half?" he asked.

"House consort," I replied flatly.

"I guess we won't have to keep up this charade much longer then," Luke said, gesturing to his arm around my shoulders.

But his words did not come off as lighthearted as he had intended. I snuggled into him closer, ignoring his ill-fated attempt at a joke.

"That's not all. She's pregnant, Luke. Lady Vitruvian is," I said, finally voicing what was on my mind.

"That's amazing," he exclaimed without thinking about what that might mean for me. "I mean—" he said, trying to lessen his excitement.

"No, it is. It's a blessing for everyone. A sign that maybe things are going to get better. Who knows? Maybe the magic is coming back for everyone," I said.

Our conversation was cut off by our arrival at the manor. Jay met us at the door, opening it and stepping through. Jay pointedly looked at Luke's arm slung around me. The King himself might have withered under the stare that Jay gave him, but Luke just lightly tugged on me, pulling me closer to him.

"Ah, you're home," Luke said, unfazed. "Congratulations on the baby,

Jay. Al told me.” His kind smile contrasting the heat that blazed behind Jay’s usual icy eyes.

“Luke,” he said, tight-lipped, with a slight nod of his head.

Luke shrugged. “See ya, Al,” he said.

I tried to smile back at Luke but failed, only managing to slightly turn up the corners of my mouth. Jay stepped aside, waiting for me to enter the manor. He quietly but firmly shut the door behind us.

“What did you do, Alarie?” Jay demanded, his anger simmering beneath his too-quiet words. He had obviously been waiting for me that morning in the study beyond the foyer.

“Jay, now’s not really the time for this. Isn’t the lady in the house?” I replied, directing our attention to what I believed was the real obstacle that stood between us.

I’d assumed that the lady would come back with Jay to make their announcement at the Spring Ball that was only two weeks away.

“I don’t give a damn if she hears!” Jay exclaimed, raising his voice but confirming my suspicion that Lady Vitruvian was back in town.

“The whole godsdamned Court can hear for all I care. *What. Did. You. Do?*” he demanded, punctuating each word with a pause.

I met his question with stony silence. I held his gaze defiantly, refusing to look away from the anger there. I tried to sell the lie with the silence and my eyes. *Let him think the worst*, I thought.

But I felt sick about what I’d done for many reasons. Most of all, I felt sick about using my best friend. I had used Luke to cheat. *If you can even cheat on someone who has a wife and fucks her a couple of times a year*, I thought sourly.

“So, this is how you get back at me for Lady Vitruvian?” Jay asked, completely ignoring my attempt to make him feel guilty.

*Fair enough*, I thought. After all, he had taught me most of my means of manipulation when it came to getting the upper hand in a conversation. If I was being honest with myself, I hadn’t done it just because of the lady. There were a lot of reasons why I had tried to implode our relationship the night before, and the arrangement with the lady was just one of them.

I continued to stare back at him in silence, maintaining my icy veneer, which seemed to only make him angrier.

“First, you flirt with Lady Tragon’s whore and now this?” he demanded, his jaw rigid.



“So, that’s what I’ll be to you, Jay? Your *whore*?” I asked, my anger beginning to match his own.

“For fuck’s sake, Alarie,” he said, allowing a rare obscenity to cross his lips. “You know that’s not what I meant,” he retorted. But he didn’t apologize.

“It may not be what you meant, but it’s what everyone else will think! It’s what I’ve been training to be all year, isn’t it?” I screamed, finally admitting a small part of what I was worried about.

“You really think that?” His question was dangerously quiet and brimming with something more than just anger. “You think that I trained you,” he said, then spat his last words, “*to be my whore*?”

He took a deep breath, calming himself.

“Alarie. *Love*,” he said, softening, “everyone at the High Court is playing a game of some sort. But it’s what’s between your ears, not your legs, that makes you valuable to my House. Yes, I may have taught you to use the influence your beautiful face buys you around the Court, but it’s your ability to know *how* and *when* to use it that matters. You are *nothing* like him,” he said, unwilling to say Stefan’s name.

“Look at Gloria. She was consort to the King. And no one would dare make that insinuation about her,” Jay said.

“Gloria’s going to be Queen of Valencia now,” I reminded him.

“And you’ll be consort to the King’s Contra,” he retorted, as if that decided the matter. “And if anyone so much as whispers the word *whore* and your name in the same sentence, *I’ll know, Alarie, and I will end them*,” he promised darkly.

I could feel the sincerity in his words. I also knew that if I didn’t do something to change the trajectory of my life, I would be the consort to Lord Vitruvian for the rest of my life. Maybe if we could live in Breakpoint, our arrangement could work for me. But I knew that as Contra, he needed to be at the High Court. I also knew that I hadn’t sacrificed the fun part of the first twenty years of my life to get to the High Court only to leave it and settle down a couple of hours south of my hometown, even if that settling did come in the form of Jay and a big, oceanfront castle. The idea of us having a life together at Breakpoint was nothing more than a fantasy.

I realized that we were each other’s fantasy. I was his escape from his arrangement with Lady Vitruvian. And he was my escape from Harborview. But the difference was that I had escaped from my past and was free, thanks

in large part to him.

But he was still stuck. And now he had a baby on the way. I had no idea how I fit into the picture of Jay's new family. Would he leave me to go north all the time? Or would I go with him now? Or perhaps Elizabeth would begin staying at the High Court with us in the Vitruvian manor? I had thought I wanted siblings at one point in my life. But that was made impossible by the fading magic and the fact that, to my knowledge, my mother had not dated since my father.

But Jay having a baby was not the same as me getting a sibling, not even close. I was still trying to figure out my own life. I wasn't ready to have a child in my life.

"The day you showed up at Court was one of the best days of my rather long life. You're an incredible liaison, and truthfully, you have been functioning as much more than a liaison to House Vitruvian for quite some time. I rely upon you as I would a counselor, and it's past time that we recognize this and make you a counselor to House Vitruvian," Jay said.

I felt wicked as I drank in the high lord's praise, knowing that he meant every single word of it. He was willing to give me as much as he had to give, and somehow, what the second-most powerful man in Valencia had to offer was still not enough for me.

I knew that Jay valued me for much more than what we had between the sheets, but I was worried that my role at the High Court would be defined by my relationship with the high lord. I worried that no matter how considerable my talents and dedication, that everyone would just believe I fucked my way up the ranks of House Vitruvian instead of believing me to have truly earned my advancements.

"Aren't you going to at least try to explain yourself, Alarie? Don't I deserve that much?" he asked firmly, through thinned lips.

My heart sunk a few inches in my chest. He had hurt me badly by not telling me about his obligations to the lady and then fulfilling those obligations. But in that moment, I realized that what I did was to hurt *us*, not him. I didn't want to hurt him. I wanted to go to him and tell him the truth. He might be disappointed that I had kissed Luke, but he would forgive me, and Luke too; perhaps even use it as an excuse to remind me of some of my very first *lessons*.

But I had set down this path for a reason, I reminded myself, and I couldn't back down now. Could I do better than what Jay, Contra to the King

and high lord of House Vitruvian, had to offer? Almost certainly not. But it wasn't about doing better than what I could do with Jay. For me, it was about doing it on my own. It was important to me that whatever I got, I earned it on my own.

The ironic part was that the girl I'd been when I'd showed up at Jay's doorstep would not have dreamed of the opportunity to be consort to the King's Contra. But Jay had molded that ambitious young girl into a woman with aspirations. When I lived in Harborview, all I could think about was what I needed to survive. My only desire had been to get out of Harborview and find something different. I had not had time to think about what I wanted beyond that. I had not been able to picture a life beyond that. But now that I had escaped, I realized I didn't just want something different, I wanted *more*.

Jay had showered me with everything I had ever needed, and with the support of his love, money, and skills, I had allowed myself to think about what I *wanted*, not just what I needed, for the first time in my life.

I didn't know if I would ever be able to make people see past where I came from or my mixed blood, but I was certain that if I stayed with Jay, I would forever be defined by him. If I stayed with him, then no matter what I did, my successes would be his successes. But Jay's love and support had empowered me to dream of a better life, a better world perhaps due in some part to the contributions I had made in my life.

"Jay, let's not do this. We don't have to talk about it, *do we?*" There was an edge of a plea in my voice.

*Please don't make me hurt you any more.*

The high lord took in a deep breath, letting the anger out of his shoulders and reached a hand out to me. I had done enough damage for one day, I decided. It was as much as I could stomach at the moment, anyway. I walked toward him, accepting the temporary truce.

Jay pulled us both into a large armchair, placing me on his lap. I didn't feel any sense of his usual need pressing against his pants as I did so.

"My sweet, wicked, Alarie," he let out in a low, gravelly voice.

I gulped down a breath, unsure of what this reaction from him was. He didn't rage with jealousy or anger, and he didn't try to teach me a new lesson or reaffirm an old one. No, he just wrapped his arms around me and began kissing my neck, gently, *much too gentle for the situation*, I thought with a panic. I could have accepted a jealous tirade or another lesson, but his gentleness made me feel macabre for what I'd done to him, *to us*.

And then he began to trail his hand up my right thigh. *This is more familiar*, I thought, calming as I opened my legs to him as I had always done, allowing him to get closer to my sex, its usual throbbing wetness missing. He moved his thumb and forefinger together, drawing circles inside of my thigh, and nipped my neck. That was the jumpstart I needed for my wetness to begin pooling at my opening.

I moved my mouth over his, not exactly to say sorry, but to try to convey all the words that were left unsaid. And then his fingers plunged into my wetness, alternating between drawing his fingers in and out of me and stroking the top of my sex. He played inside me lazily, as if wishing to linger instead of going straight to his usual purpose.

He grabbed my jaw with his other hand and held his mouth just hovering over mine, breathing in my moans. Despite his languor, I felt him grow beneath me, and that quickened my pulse. I began to squeeze around his fingers in the way I knew would bring me nearer to my release.

Lord Vitruvian demanded in his steely high lord voice of old, “Alarie, come for me now,” and I quickly complied, finding my pleasure for what seemed like the millionth time on the lap of the high lord.

Jay carried me to the rug in front of the fireplace in his study. He ripped Luke’s shirt off me, tearing it down the center. I held my breath. But the rest of his movements as he disposed of my remaining clothing were urgent but less angry.

He pushed me on my back on the soft rug, kneeling between my legs. Laying on his stomach, he raised my sex, drenched with the ecstasy of his prior efforts, to his mouth and he drank me in. He flicked his tongue over me time and time again before plunging his tongue into me and lapping me in. He brought me crashing over with his tongue still inside.

Only after he had shattered me several times and I had begged for him inside of me did he, at last, release his hardness from his pants, pushing himself between my legs. He submerged himself to the hilt inside of me and moved deep and slow, savoring every moment. He pressed his body against mine, holding my hands above my head and interlocking his fingers with mine as he pushed inside of me with punishingly penetrating thrusts.

He lifted me into his lap as he sat up, still inside of me, making my legs wrap around his torso. We were impossibly close, joined at our most intimate middle, torsos pressed together, as we rocked back and forth with him sheathed inside of me until I once again shattered against him. I tried to throw

my head back, getting lost in my pleasure, but he gripped my chin between his fingers, forcing me to stare into his eyes as I came undone. I couldn't bring myself to say the words I knew he wanted to hear. So, I said his next favorite thing.

“Jay. Oh, Jay,” I chanted his name as I rode him until he lost himself deep inside of me.

I went to my room to clean up, unsure of what lesson I was supposed to have taken from my love's embrace that morning. I thought that maybe I was past the days of lessons, and that maybe Jay knew that too.

## *Alarie*

We spent the next morning in each other's presence enjoying a quiet, yet uneasy, silence.

"So, how did it go up north?" I asked.

With the way things went between us the day before, I hadn't gotten the chance to ask him about the status of the magical wall separating Valencia and Alancia.

"It's as we feared, Alarie," Jay responded after taking a sip of coffee. "Grey and I went up north, and he confirmed that the magical weave he put in place all those years ago sealing off Valencia from Alancia continues to deteriorate. It likely is going to get to a point that Grey can't fix it. We are going to have to post soldiers along the wall."

"So, what does that mean for you? What do you have to do?" I asked, my breath catching in my throat with dread.

"It means I'll likely be spending a lot more time up north. And there's no need to fight about it, Alarie, because you'll be coming with me. Once you're House consort, you'll go wherever I go," he explained resolutely.

"What about my duties at the High Court?" I protested.

"We'll let Luke handle the official flirting on behalf of House Vitruvian while you're away, just like he did before you got here," the high lord retorted.

I bristled at the gross oversimplification of my role at the High Court.

Seeing my reaction, the high lord added, "Alarie, with my powers back, I find myself in less need of that system that you and Luke are a part of. And anyway, I could use your help hitting the books again and digging into my

imbalance theory on the dying magic. Unfortunately, if things keep going the way that they are, my theory may get tested at last and we need to be ready.”

A pang of guilt radiated through me. It had been quite some time since I had helped Jay with his research.

“Speaking of imbalances, I’m going to have to put an end to your friend Cass’s lesser fae rebellion, too. We can’t be at odds with the lesser fae and also looking at a potential war against the north.”

“What do you mean ‘put an end to it,’ Jay? You promised that you wouldn’t do anything to hurt Cass,” I said, as a knot began to form in my stomach, twisting my insides.

“Alarie,” he responded firmly. “I said no such thing. I promised to do my best to come to a reasonable outcome with the young don. Something that has been increasingly difficult to advocate with the King, I would remind you, because your friend has caused me and the King a fair number of headaches.”

“Headaches, Jay? That’s how you want to describe the lesser fae fighting for a decent wage and food and a home to call their own?” I retorted.

I was finding it harder and harder to maintain my neutral ground in the dispute between the high fae and the lesser fae these days.

Brushing off my attempt to bait him into an argument over the causes behind the current predicament with the lesser fae, Jay said, “What I’m saying is that it is very fortunate that there has not been the slightest sign of violence from Cass and his crew. If they had taken up arms, a peaceful resolution would have been out of my hands. But,” he said, cutting me off before I could get started, “there has been no violence, and I have no intention of harming your friend. As I promised, I intend to come to terms with him. Now, with the issues with the wall, Grey’s ready to come to the table and figure this out with the lesser fae,” Jay explained.

I sat in silence, considering everything Jay had told me. I knew what I was supposed to say and what I should do. I should do whatever I could to help Jay and Cass come to a quick and peaceful resolution. I should help Jay prepare for what seemed like an impending war with Alancia. But, for once in my life, I didn’t want to do what I was supposed to do. I wanted to be selfish and do what I wanted to do.

Finally, Jay broke the silence.

“Alarie, we ended on a fun enough note yesterday, but we still have to talk about it.”

“Jay, I...” I trailed off before picking back up. “You know I love you, right?”

“Despite recent events,” he said coldly, clenching his jaw, “yes, I believe that you love me,” he responded.

“Then can we talk about this later? I really need to get going,” I said.

Jay knew I was just postponing the inevitable, but he nodded his head in agreement, giving me a kiss before I left the room.

\* \* \* \*

My mind still on how I left things with Jay, I walked through one of the myriad hallways that connected the various Houses and halls at the High Court.

“Alarie,” a man called out from behind me.

I recognized the voice, but it was the first time I had ever heard Cole Tragon use my actual name, instead of one of his degrading nicknames for me. I paused, intrigued. Cole had been noticeably absent from all things High Court lately. I allowed him to catch up with me. At least he was alone, without his usual posse of cronies to jeer him on. I thought he looked paler than usual, which was saying something because his complexion normally resembled that of an eggshell. He had dark bags under his eyes like he had not slept in a week.

I gave him my best “fuck you” expression. “What?” He had used my name, but I would not extend him the same courtesy.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” he asked condescendingly, presumably referring to Luke.

I rolled my eyes and began to walk away.

“No, no. Okay. Wait!” he called out.

I paused again, staring at him expectantly. Then I cocked my head to the side, noticing something was out of place. It was quiet—too quiet. I looked around the hallway. The normal noises of the Court, murmuring heard through walls, the sounds of carriages on stone, had disappeared. My gaze made its way back to Cole in time to see a shit-eating grin sliding into place.

“Gotcha, little mutt,” he said.

He normally looked at me with disdain bordering on hatred, but his eyes now held the intent of malignancy. The hair on the back of my neck rose.

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re up to, but I’m not interested,” I



said, instilling a hard edge into my voice.

He stepped closer to me, seemingly unperturbed by my words.

“You’re going to play my game, because I know your secret,” he taunted.

I looked at him, unamused, waiting for him to explain.

“How is it that when everyone else is losing their magic, your precious high lord is growing stronger by the day?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” I challenged.

“I don’t need to. I’ve already figured it out,” he bragged.

“Good for you,” I said dismissively.

I began to turn my back on him.

“I saw you two, you know,” he said hurriedly. “You and High Lord Vitruvian at the Winter Gala on Lord Preston’s balcony,” he continued.

*Oh, I thought, finally thinking I understood what this was all about. He thought he was going to be able to lord that over my head?*

“Don’t care, Cole. Go ahead, tell whoever you want. Is that it?” I said, losing interest again and peering down the hallway.

“I saw you at the Winter Gala spreading your legs like the filthy little whore you are for everyone at the High Court to see,” he said.

I let out an exasperated sigh, rolling my eyes again.

“We’re done here,” I said, turning my back to him to walk down the hallway.

I felt his hand on my arm. He had cussed, threatened, and bullied me before, but he had never actually touched me. He usually acted like touching me would be unsanitary.

“Get your fucking hand off of me, Cole. *Now*,” I barked.

But instead of complying with my demand, he gripped my other arm as well, pushing me into the nearest wall with enough force that the breath in my lungs was knocked out of me with an “*oof*.” He hovered over my small frame with his towering height. I tried, unsuccessfully, to pull from his grasp.

“What do you want, Cole? Just fucking cut to the chase,” I said, momentarily stopping my struggle.

He’d gone too fucking far this time. I would let Luke, and Rhett, and Jay take turns ripping him apart limb by limb.

“*You*,” he replied simply, a sickening grin on his face.

I had heard the stories of the demented things Cole did to those who shared his bed. I saw the glee seep into his face as I frantically looked left and

right down the hallway for anyone nearby.

“You know as well as I do that this corridor is always abandoned. That’s why you always take it, to avoid people,” he taunted.

My nostrils flared. He was right. Jay had made me promise not to wander around Court by myself, but I often took this quiet corridor as a shortcut, anyway.

And then, as if reading my mind, he said, “Go ahead and scream. No one will hear you. I may only have a drop of my magic left, but that was all I needed to shield us from prying ears.”

He had blocked out noises from around us, at the same time, keeping our voices in. That explained the eerie silence that hung over us. He pressed his body against mine, and I could feel his hardness rubbing against me. It was sickening. The more I showed my disgust, the more he reacted to me, touching me, so I tried a different tack. I became rigid and disinterested. I would get him talking while I figured out my next move.

“Why would you possibly want me? I’m a mutt, remember?” Maybe he would get disgusted with himself and back off.

“You’re a filthy fucking mutt. That hasn’t changed,” he spat. “But I’ve figured out something about you that no one else has,” he bragged, too-gently tucking a strand of hair behind my ear, then resting his hand around my jaw, firmly grasping it and forcing my eyes up to his. “See, I saw you with Lord Vitruvian at the Winter Gala. Then everyone knows he started gaining his powers back. And then he managed to impregnate his wife—the first fae to do so in the last couple of decades.”

He leaned his head down to reach my mouth, his firm hand holding my head in place, a stark contrast to his gentle kiss. His thin lips grazed against mine. I felt bile rise in my throat as my heart pounded out of my chest.

“Everyone else thinks Lord Vitruvian is responsible for his own miraculous recovery. But no one else is gaining their powers back, are they? No one else is having fae babies. The only thing that he has that the rest of us don’t is *you*.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You and that big oaf ruined my plans with Lord Garaud. Now, you’re going to make this right for me. You have some kind of magic that helps other people get their magic back, and I want it,” he said.

“You’re insane. Do you hear yourself? I’ve never had any kind of magical ability my entire life. What magical ability could I possibly have that

would restore someone else's magic? That would get another woman pregnant? That kind of magic doesn't exist, Cole," I protested, trying to make him see reason.

His hand moved to my throat, and all his earlier gentleness was gone. He began to squeeze his fingers around my windpipe as he whispered in my ear. In his other hand, he produced a dagger. There was a heat coming off it that made my skin itch. He saw the moment I realized the dagger was made of iron and grew harder against me as genuine fear crept into my eyes.

Unperturbed, he said, "It does exist, and I'll be taking it now. Is it in your blood?" he questioned darkly.

He jerked my head to the side. Right under my jawline, he lightly trailed the blade against my skin, creating a shallow cut. I stayed perfectly still, holding my breath so that the iron dagger he held against my throat didn't cut deeper.

Cole lowered his mouth and licked the length of my throat, consuming the faint trail of blood that escaped from the wound.

"Or is it between your legs?" he asked, pushing his knee between my thighs and forcing them apart.

Revolted, I tried to think of a way out of the situation. I would wait until he was in a more vulnerable position and then lash out. That meant allowing him to continue to touch me. I was going to be sick.

"Come on, fight me. It's more fun when you do," he taunted. "I know you like it rough. You seemed to really enjoy being pinned against that wall when you were getting fucked at the Winter Gala."

I wanted to scream, but I knew screaming would be of no use. *But maybe I don't need to scream*, a small voice whispered in my head.

I thought of Jay, my Lord of Whispers. Cole was right. For whatever reason, Jay's power was returning to him. He had once told me that whispering his name was like skipping to the front of the very long queue of whispers he constantly intercepted. He said that at the height of his power, invoking his name would break through any shields like the one Cole had in place. I didn't know if it would work, but it was my last hope before I got really desperate.

"Lord of Whispers, *Jay*," I pleaded. "Help me."

Cole's hand began to tighten once more around my throat, causing black and white dots to float in and out of my vision. He laughed.

"I told you, you stupid fucking mutt. No one can hear you, not even your

Lord of Whispers.”

“Lord of Whispers, Lord of Whispers, Lord of Whispers, Lord of Whispers,” I chanted over and over with my remaining breath.

Jay had told me that the more times his name was said, the more likely he would be to hear the whisper. Cole moved his forearm across my throat, pinning me to the wall.

“Enough of that. I don’t need you chanting some other guy’s name the entire time I’m fucking you.”

It hadn’t worked. With all hope lost, I went crazy, kicking and clawing at Cole. But he was significantly taller and stronger than me. All my efforts got me was more pressure exerted on my throat. I stopped flailing and clawed at his arm restricting my windpipe, unable to breathe, hoping he would let me take a breath. I gasped for air, and his tongue filled my open mouth. I tasted my own blood on his lips.

I closed my eyes, trying to gather myself. And then I felt the pressure of his arm move from my throat. I gasped in ragged breaths of air. Then I heard a wet smacking noise.

I opened my eyes to see Jay, violence blazing in his cold gray eyes, standing over Cole, his fist repeatedly smashing into Cole’s face with wet, sickening crunching sounds.

I was safe.

I walked over to Jay, determined not to crumble, not to cry. I dug deep into myself and found the cold, distant place where I hid so many of my other emotions and pushed everything I was feeling into that steel box. I didn’t look away as Jay continued to beat Cole to near death with his bare hands.

His hands covered in Cole’s blood, Jay reached for the iron dagger Cole had cut me with. Because iron was deadly to fae, the dagger was a rare and restricted item. Such weapons were supposed to be reserved for war only. Each one had been meticulously accounted for following the last war and were supposed to be in the Crown’s possession. But, somehow, Cole had obtained one of the illicit weapons.

Unable to move, Cole lay on the ground, covered in his own blood. Jay moved the dagger directly under Cole’s chin, the tip digging into Cole’s skin and causing his blood to trickle down the hilt. Jay looked into his eyes. Jay would make those cruel eyes close for the last time.

“Jay, wait!” I exclaimed, my brain coming out of some kind of fog.

I knew he was seconds away from cutting Cole’s throat.

“He mentioned something about Lord Garaud, about plans and Lord Garaud and me ruining them. And...” I hesitated, thinking of Cole’s words. “Big oaf. I think he knows something about Cass’s involvement in all of this too.”

Jay held the tip of the dagger digging into Cole’s throat.

“What plans did you have involving Lord Garaud?” Jay demanded.

Cole remained stubbornly silent. Jay dug the dagger farther into his skin. More blood dribbled down the blade.

“Ok. OK! We—my mother and I—we’re the ones who had those lesser fae drive Lord Garaud and his family out of his house,” Cole admitted.

Jay didn’t need to ask why. We knew why High Lady Tragon was pushing for war with the lesser fae. If we had not arrived back from Breakpoint in time, House Tragon’s maneuver may have worked.

“You’re sick, you know that!” I yelled, feeling a sudden burst of emotion. “There were kids there!”

Cole tried to turn his head to look at me, but Jay kept the dagger pressed into his soft flesh.

“Don’t you *dare* look at her,” Jay warned.

“Lord Garaud was well aware of what was coming. It had all been arranged,” Cole said, nostrils flared.

“And what did Don Davante have to do with your *arrangements*?” Jay spat.

“He, well, I’ve been feeding him information, ok? Trying to stir things up. But he refused to have anything to do with any kind of violence, so I had to take things into my own hands, didn’t I?” Cole said, like attacking his own people was the only obvious solution.

“How did you keep it from me? Why can’t I hear half of what is said around House Tragon?”

Despite his vulnerable position, a familiar sneer landed on Cole’s face.

“Me,” he said proudly. “*My* powers.”

“You’ve never exhibited any kind of shielding power like that. I would know. I know every person in this Kingdom with those kinds of powers,” Jay interjected.

“My mother has kept it a secret since I was child,” Cole boasted again.

Satisfied he had gotten the information he needed, Jay made to slice across Cole’s throat.

“No. Wait. Please!” he pleaded. “I’m sick. I thought she could help. I’m

dying. Fading,” he rushed through his excuses.

Jay considered his words, dagger still pressed against Cole’s skin.

“How could Alarie possibly help you with that?” Jay snarled.

“The same way she helped you,” Cole answered quickly, not intending to test the high lord any further. “Heal my magic,” he said.

Jay didn’t even bother to deny Cole’s insane theory. Jay made a quick swiping motion across Cole’s throat with the dagger. I turned my face away. Cole fell back, clutching his throat but alive. Jay had purposefully bestowed only a shallow cut across his throat.

“You shouldn’t have told me that. Any of that. You should have let me kill you,” Jay said coldly, reaching for and taking my hand into his own.

“You don’t deserve it, but I would have made your death quick. Now, I will enjoy watching you slowly die until you fade out of existence. And you’ll be lucky if the King lets your mother keep her head,” Jay spat.

Jay looked at me. The blood no longer trickled from my wound, but my throat was still covered in my own blood.

“And you’ll keep your mouth closed about whatever it is that you *think* you know about Alarie and my powers, or you’ll find yourself wishing that you had faded faster,” Jay promised.

Jay scooped me into his arms and ran back to the manor, setting me down on the lounge in the front study.

“You ok?” he asked, his hand delicately running down the length of my bloody neck as his concerned eyes roved over the rest of my body.

I nodded my head, clutching his hand.

“I love you,” he said, his intensity dripping from every word.

I could tell from the way he said it that Jay thought the incident with Cole had pushed us past our fight that morning. But, in my book, the facts remained the same.

“I love you,” I replied, but compared to the ferocity of Jay’s words, my words felt hollow.

He tenderly stroked my jawline, and I grabbed his hand, dragging it to my lips where I kissed the inside of his palm. I moved his hand covered in Cole’s blood over my heart, forcing his fingers to almost painfully dig into my breast so that I could feel something, *anything* other than what I felt at that moment. I wanted to distance myself from everything that had just happened and get lost in the love and safety that came with Jay’s touch.

Seeing the need in my eyes, Jay took his other hand and wrapped it

around the back of my neck, pulling my body into his. He wrapped his hand in the back of my hair, gently pulling my head back until I looked into his fierce eyes.

I decided my words were not to be trusted, so I moved my mouth over his. I tried to convey the half of my feelings that I wanted to share with Jay in my kiss while hiding the reservations I still held regarding our future.

Jay released a growl from his throat in response to the passion I infused into my kiss. For just that moment, I put aside all thoughts other than the taste of his lips.

## *Jay*

Leaving Alarie safe and asleep in her own bed, my agents all around and outside of the manor, I stormed into the King's private study, unannounced. I could see the immediate concern on my best friend's face when he saw the violence in my eyes.

"Jay, what happened?" the King exclaimed.

"Fucking House Tragon is what happened! We should have never let them in the Court, much less the High Council, Grey."

The King was well aware of my feelings about Lila Tragon, but he could tell that the murderous intent he felt rolling off of me was not that.

The King walked to the bar and made himself and me a drink. I stood pacing in front of the large window overlooking Vlaise.

"Jay, what happened?" the King tried again, handing me a drink.

I shot back the entire glass of scotch and handed Grey back the empty glass. Grey went back to the bar, filled up my glass again, and then handed it to me and waited.

"Cole Tragon," I began through gritted teeth, "forced himself on Alarie," I said, forcing myself to loosen my grip on the glass on my hand before it shattered.

"Jay."

I saw Grey notice the specks of blood on my sleeves.

"Does Lila know? What did you do with his body?" the King asked, no doubt picturing Cole shredded by my longsword and his corpse left displayed on the steps of House Tragon.

I'd thought about it. When I had left Alarie, I'd thought about it again,



about finding Cole instead of going to the King.

“He isn’t. I didn’t kill him,” I responded simply, my nostrils flaring.

“I left him with a fate much worse than any death I could give him, Grey. He’s fading.”

I saw my words hit him. It was an unbelievably painful subject for him, even now, all these years after his wife’s passing.

“That’s not all,” I said.

My voice was quiet, but violence laced my every word.

“Treason,” I added.

“Treason?” the King questioned, his mood growing darker and matching my own with each word.

“Cole confessed to it. Lord Garaud. That was him and Lila. And the reason I have not been able to find anything on Lila all of these years, despite the fact that I knew, just *knew*, she was up to something. Lila’s been lying to all of us about Cole’s powers since he was a babe. He has a shielding power, one of the few, it appears, that can keep me out. Or at least it could before I got my powers back.”

I stewed, thinking of what I may have missed over the years, not knowing that my powers were being thwarted by Cole’s own. Cole’s powers were rare but not wholly unique. There were a few—very few—who could actually keep their words from making their way back to me. And I knew who they were, and I had these blind spots in my power triple covered.

“And they’ve been feeding information to the lesser fae contingent too, Grey. Sounds like their alliance fell apart when Don Davante refused to have anything to do with more aggressive measures Cole and Lila wanted to implement.”

“That treasonous *bitch!*” Grey exclaimed. “I’ll have her head for this.”

I could not believe I was about to advocate for Lila Tragon’s life when I was still covered in her son’s blood and thirsted for more.

“We need House Mouchard, Grey,” I said, like the words caused me pain. “We have to protect the wall, *at all costs*,” I said, deflated.

*At all costs.* But Grey and I had already paid so much. We sat in silence not as the King and his Contra but as two friends who long ago took on this burden. I knew Grey was thinking about all that he had lost—his wife, his relationship with his son, the ability to love and remarry whomever he wanted without being judged.

I was similarly thinking of what I had lost, what I *would* lose. I knew I

was losing her. I'd waited too long to claim Alarie as my own by naming her consort or by imprinting on her. I'd repeatedly put the needs of my King and my Kingdom before the wants and desires of my own and, once again, it had cost me everything. I'd dragged my feet imprinting upon Alarie and, if I tried now, she would be resistant to my mark upon her.

The weight of our full duty upon us, the King spoke first.

"We may need House Mouchard, yes," Grey conceded at last. "But House Tragon is no longer," he said fiercely.

"I may let her keep her head but that name, that House, will not live to see another day," the King decreed.

"And they will thank us for our mercy," I added.

We lapsed into silence again.

"What else is on your mind, Jay?" Grey asked, noticing that I still seemed to have more to say.

"Three is too small of a High Council," I said, fully transitioning to my role as Contra.

"War and treason will tend to do that, you know," Grey said dryly. "But you're right. We'll have to replace Lila. Who are you thinking? Lord Preston?" Grey asked.

He knew I'd been looking into Lord Preston recently. Alarie and Luke had helped with that effort.

"But replacing her with Lord Preston isn't going to give us the support in the north we lose from booting her," I pointed out.

"Ok, so who do you have in mind, Jay? Out with it," the King demanded.

"Lord Preston and... Lord Dumont," I replied.

The King considered what I'd thrown out. I'd been working on a plan for replacing Lila for some time now.

If we added Lord Dumont at the same time as Lord Preston, it would dilute Lord Dumont's piece of the pie, but he wouldn't be able to complain because the High Council's number had been historically low to begin with. And Grey had had his fill of the lord and ladies from the north on the High Council. It would be good to add another southern gentleman, like Lord Preston, to the mix again.

I could see the possibilities swirling in Grey's eyes.

"I know you're thinking about it. Cole just confirmed that they have refused to take arms against us. And there would be no more need for further

negotiations with Lord Dumont and Don Davante,” I said.

Lord Rein and I led the negotiations with the leaders of the lesser fae rebellion, Lord Dumont and Don Davante. They were not unsympathetic to the threat coming from the north—the integrity of the magical wall between Valencia and Alancia was compromised—but they were looking for a long-term commitment before they agreed to throw in their forces to a possible battle with King Vandros.

The irony of the situation was not lost on me. Grey and I had thought that we did everything we needed to do after the last war to make sure that the King was never in a position to have to barter to gain the resources needed to support a war effort. But we had overlooked the sway of the lesser fae entirely in our analysis. We couldn’t tax the land the lesser fae didn’t own. We couldn’t threaten to take each House’s firstborn son as ward when wardship at the High Court was one of the opportunities the lesser fae were looking for.

“This is the last time I’ll cut a deal like this, Jay. If they don’t want to support the next war effort, I’ll just let Rex fucking have them,” the King swore.

“I’m right there with you, Grey,” I replied, my mind wandering back to Alanna, Alarie, and all the personal sacrifices I’d made for the Kingdom already.

## *Alarie*

It was the day before the Spring Ball. The Spring Ball at the High Court was a coveted event, one that was bestowed upon a different House by the King each year. I'd missed the prior year's Spring Ball hosted by House Tragon, having arrived at the High Court days after its conclusion. This year's Spring Ball was hosted by House Dempsey, an established House from the north who was known to have a foothold in many of the northeastern ports. The word around the Court was that Lord Dempsey intended to use the Spring Ball as an opportunity to identify potential suitors for his youngest daughter, Karina Dempsey.

In the days immediately preceding the Spring Ball, my relationship with Jay had taken on a fervor it had not undergone since the initial days of my lessons atop the library table. It was as if our love was fighting for its life. Jay took every opportunity to make his mark upon me. He had even boldly taken me in the King's own study the day before. After meeting with the King, Jay all but excused Grey from his own study, making it clear that he required the room. Amused, the King had departed and seconds later I was bent over the King's large gray stone desk. I would run out of panties at the rate Jay was tearing them from my body.

Luke and I walked up to the King's estate for Lord Dumont's coronation.

"What's that?" he asked, curiously.

"Hmm?" I responded, his question only half registering with me, lost in my thoughts about Jay.

I drew my eyes away from the stars and looked up at Luke. He reached

out, his calloused hand softly grasping my jaw and turning my head. I realized too late that he was focusing on the small, silvery scar that had already formed on my neck from where Cole had cut me. It was shiny and silvery because the cut was made with a blade made of iron.

The perpetual laughter in his baby blue eyes was replaced with a chilling savagery. His muscled chest swelled and every muscle in his corded arms tensed. My usual ray of sunshine transformed before my eyes in a matter of seconds to a bringer of death.

“I’ll fucking kill him,” he spat through clenched teeth, his jaw squared off.

I had told him everything about what had happened with Cole. He had gone off on a murderous tirade that had only ended after he agreed with Jay that Cole deserved a slow death.

He looked scary as hell, but he was still my Luke. I grabbed his large hand from my face, holding it between my hands.

“Luke, I’m fine. And he’s already dead, remember?” I reminded him softly.

Cole and Lila, and anyone unwilling to openly denounce House Tragon, had been dislodged from the High Court over a week ago. The King stripped House Tragon of all titles, reclaiming all estates for the Crown and banishing them from the High Court indefinitely. We got word that Cole passed away days after he left Court with his mother.

“Jay was too easy on him. You don’t know what I can do, Al,” he promised with death in his beautiful eyes. “I’ll bring him back to life and make him wish for a quick death.”

I didn’t know if Luke was exaggerating about the powers he once had or if he could, in fact, bring fae back from death. Such power was unfathomable. I was touched by his outrage, but I wanted back my laughing best friend. Seeing him like this just made it that much worse. Noticing the concern in my eyes, Luke pulled me into his body, my back resting against his firm mass. He hooked one arm through mine, wrapping his hand around my small waist and holding me tightly. I could still feel the tension in the muscles on his back, but he bestowed the gentlest kiss upon the top of my head.

\* \* \* \*

“Mandy,” a voice rang out from across the King’s hall. “Mand.”

*Mandy?* I thought, turning my head toward the voice.

*Cass? It is fucking Cass!*

I dropped Luke's arm and ran toward Cass, his big arms opening to encircle me in a crushing hug.

He stuck out like a splash of color in a sea of black and white. The tall lesser fae had a swath of green hair atop his head that faded into short, green stubble above his ears. He wore a black, high-collared coat, no tie, the white button-up underneath unbuttoned at the top enough to allow the tattoos that covered his defined chest to peek through. Those were new—the tattoos, not his hulking muscles. Cass had always been massive and his physique had only gotten more defined with age.

He lifted me off my feet, squeezing me and holding me for a moment before setting me down. A genuine smile was plastered on my face.

“Cass! What the fuck are you doing here?” I asked.

Cass had not shown up the last time Lord Dumont came to Court, so I had not expected to see him this time either.

“Same ol’ potty mouth, I see,” Cass teased with a sideways smirk.

“Lord Davante, is this who I think it is?”

A burly man with caramel skin and silvery-red hair approached as we still untangled from our hug.

“Lord Dumont—” Cass began.

“*Lord Davante?*” I interrupted Cass.

Cass tilted his head at the same time he raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment.

I grabbed Cass's hand, squeezing it in my excitement.

“Congrats, Cass!”

“Mandy, this is *High Lord Dumont*,” Cass continued, stressing Lord Dumont's newly minted title.

“*Alarie Armand*,” I gently corrected Cass, holding my hand out to the short but muscled lesser fae.

High Lord Dumont surprised me by taking my hand and pulling me into a hug.

“Alarie, good to finally put a face to your name. I've heard a lot about you,” Lord Dumont said.

And with this comment, his eyes briefly cut toward Cass.

“For instance, I hear I have you to thank for the change of tides here at the High Court. I hear you've always been an advocate,” Lord Dumont said.

I wondered what version of events had made it to High Lord Dumont. Surely, Jay would not have shared all the details regarding what happened with Cole. Several things had happened in quick succession. With House Tragon's opposition gone and the truth regarding who was culpable for the Lord Garaud incident out in the open, Jay and the others were able to reach a resolution with the lesser fae. Lord Dumont was sworn in as a high lord and the Golden Court was decreed by the King. I gave him a humble smirk.

"Lord Dumont—"

"Drake," he insisted.

"Drake..."

I didn't know what to say. Jay had warned me about sticking my neck out for the lesser fae, but I had done it, anyway.

"I thought it was the right thing to do," I said simply with a shrug.

"And that is exactly why I have come to seek you out, Alarie. Now, I know that there is probably no chance you will accept this offer seeing as how you are already set up with House Vitruvian. But if I can ever convince you to jump ships, you just say the word. You'd make a great senior counselor for my House."

Cass beamed at me. Senior counselor would be a big step up for me even if I was leaving an established House like House Vitruvian for a smaller, less established House like House Dumont. Lord Dumont was on the High Council. I could do much worse. Drake interpreted my contemplation as polite rejection.

"Can't blame me for trying. The offer's there, Alarie. Enjoy the party. Cass, we have to go. But I'll give you a minute," he said, clapping Cass on the back, then departing.

"You have to go? You're not staying for the Ball tomorrow?" I asked, disappointed.

"That was the plan originally, Mand. But with Lord Dumont's coronation out of the way and, well, after the meeting we just got out of, we have to head back as soon as we can," he replied nebulously.

"What are you getting into now, Lord Davante, now that *your* rebellion is over with?" I teased.

"War most likely, Mandy," he said somberly. "My new title came with another promotion—Commander of the Northern Forces of Valencia," he said.

My heart dropped to my stomach at the thought of Cass leading a war

effort. Just a couple of years ago, we had been at school together, studying things like war in books. But I knew that this had always been what he wanted—Cass had always wanted to fight for what he thought was right. He'd always been a warrior at heart. I took a deep breath, swallowing my concern for my friend, and tried to don a convincing enough smile.

“Impressive, Cass,” I replied sincerely. “But you come back to me in one piece, ok, Commander?” I said sweetly, nudging his shoulder with my own.

Cass encircled me in a hug, and despite his large size it was gentle, like he was holding something precious and fragile. His hug made me feel small and safe and reminded me of home, but only the good parts.

“You stay safe too, ok, Mandy? Not all of war is fought on a battlefield,” he cautioned.

I stood in place, watching Cass's large figure work his way through the crowd and over to High Lord Dumont. With a sigh, I turned and made my way back to Luke. He took my hand, pulling me to him and immediately entwining his arm with mine.

“That was Cass,” I explained, a smile still on my lips. “You know, Don Davante? Well, Lord Davante now,” I corrected myself, still blown away at how much my childhood friend had changed since I last saw him.

“He really is built like a brick shithouse,” was all Luke said, a throwback to Rhett's description of the then don.

\* \* \* \*

I lay in bed tired but not exactly sleeping, my mind still processing the events of the night. A new job offer for House Dumont. *Jay*, I thought, feeling like I had been plunged into a cold ice bath. Lady Vitruvian had been at High Lord Dumont's coronation. Although the official announcement wouldn't be made until the Spring Ball the following day, news about Lady Vitruvian's pregnancy had already spread around the High Court. I had always thought Elizabeth appeared cold, disinterested at best. But seeing her walk around with her hand perpetually resting on her belly that did not yet show the life of Jay's baby, she had seemed content, maybe even happy. I had also seen Jay accept congratulations with an already blossoming fatherly pride.

A knock at my door rang out in the silence of the night. Startled, I jumped out of my large bed. It was the middle of the night, closer to dawn.



By this time, even the latest party animals had gone to bed and would soon be replaced by the early risers embracing the next day.

Jay could be an early riser when he needed to be. But I wasn't even sure Jay knew where I was. Well, he was the Lord of Whispers, so he probably did know exactly where I was. I was in an apartment in the Rein manor. I had decided to stay away from the Vitruvian manor for only the second time since I had arrived on Jay's doorstep. With the lady around, I just didn't feel like being there.

But, if I were being honest, the real reason I stayed away was that I just couldn't handle the rollercoaster of emotions that was my relationship with Jay at the moment. Our near-constant fucking left me no time to think about the conflict within me. Sex and love had never been the issue with us. But I needed time to figure out how I felt about being consort and my overall role in House Vitruvian. It was like Jay knew this, so he didn't give me a spare moment to get my thoughts in order.

I may have stayed with Luke, but with his father and other guests in town for the Spring Gala and staying at the Bellamy manor, I didn't really feel like dealing with any prying eyes or questions. So, no questions asked, Rhett had offered up a place to me for the night, which I graciously accepted. It was nice. Really, really nice. I had my own private wing within the Rein manor.

It could be Rhett at my door, but he was more likely to be one of the ones who had just gone to bed a few hours ago instead of someone just waking up. So that left Luke. I opened my door, wondering what Luke was doing awake at such an hour.

"Lu— Cass!" I exclaimed, as I pulled the door open and saw Cass's towering figure.

He no longer wore the suit that he wore earlier in the night. He wore a dark forest green, long-sleeved shirt that appeared to be stretched to its limits over his biceps. His tattoos peeked over the neck of his collar and up the sides of his thick, muscled neck. He had two longswords strapped to his back and wore a black belt strapped with so many weapons I couldn't see the leather of the belt underneath.

"Hi," he replied simply, a boyish grin on his face.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked, still recovering from my surprise. "I thought you had to leave tonight?" I said.

"That guy, Luke, is he your boyfriend?" Cass asked, brushing past my

questions.

I thought about his question. I remembered when Luke and I had broached the subject, I had called him my “best friend.” But even then, I didn’t believe that really captured the true nature of my relationship with Luke. But Luke wasn’t my boyfriend either.

“It’s kind of complicated, but no, he’s not my boyfriend,” I responded, perplexed that this question could not have waited for a more decent hour. “Why?”

“Good,” Cass said, and he grabbed my chin, tilting my face up to meet his mouth.

His kiss surprised me. We had never crossed over the threshold of our friendship. But as his tongue parted my lips, I allowed the boundary of our friendship to dissipate and was surprised to find a passion for my friend within me that had lain there dormant for years.

I returned the heat of his kiss, tangling my fingers in his green hair and pulling his mouth down to mine. He stepped past the threshold of my door, pushing my small body against the wall behind me as his enormous hands encircled my waist, picking me up and wrapping my legs around him.

He was so big and muscled that my legs barely fit around him. Heat gathered between my thighs, and I tried to tighten my legs around him and eliminate the space between our bodies. I broke away from our kiss.

“Come in for a minute?” I asked, breathily.

He looked down at me, likely contemplating Lord Dumont and his men waiting for him to leave town.

“I can’t,” he growled, reluctantly loosening his grip on my thighs and beginning to lower me to the floor.

A roguish smile broke across his face in response to the disappointment on mine. He leaned down and gave me a sweet kiss on the cheek.

“Gotta go, Mand. See you next time,” he promised and then turned away, somehow managing to silently and gracefully jog down the hallway despite his size.

I stood at my door, staring at Cass’s hulking mass disappearing down the hall, adding another item to the long list of things that were already keeping me up that night.

## *Alarie*

I stayed away from the manor most of the next day, only going back to House Vitruvian when it was time to get ready for the Spring Ball. Jay wasn't waiting for me in the foyer this time. The lord and lady had several cocktail hours to attend prior to the Ball, and I had waited until it was time for them to leave before making my appearance at the manor.

I walked into my room finding a beautiful blue gown with fine sequined detail lying on my bed, a gift from Jay that undoubtedly matched his tux for the evening. I had come a long way from the days of feeling uncomfortable about the gifts he showered me with, I realized, admitting to myself that I had expected Jay's gift before I had even laid eyes on it. Jay had dressed us in coordinating outfits for every major event since I had arrived at the High Court. Swallowing the lump rising in my throat, I began to slip on the outfit he had laid out for me.

It was less than a year ago, yet it felt like I had lived a lifetime since the first ball I attended at the High Court, the Summer Ball. I remembered the pair of heels and blue dress bestowed upon me by Lord Vitruvian all those months ago as I now looked into my closet full of the finest clothes and jewels. I remembered how I had been paraded around the Summer Ball by Jay and the lady the previous year and how I'd had to fake my interactions with the others, offering false smiles and casual caresses to make up for the sharp edges I had been unable to hide my entire life, the edges that screamed where I came from and what I'd done to get here. But Jay had smoothed those edges in me over the last year, and things that once felt forced for me now came naturally, I realized.

Before Jay, I would have never owned and never considered wearing something like the dress I donned for the Spring Ball. Dress was a generous term for the piece of fabric. A coverup may be a more accurate descriptor. My outfit began with a silky blue bra and panty set. The see-through slip of the dress and the sequined details of the gown lined up perfectly with my undergarments. Sequins clustered overtop my bra outline before making a thin trail down my stomach to the outline of my panties, where the sequins clustered over the front of me and wrapped around the back of me as well. The sequins on the back provided even less coverage, clustering over the T-shaped back of my thong and not much else. Outside of the sequins, the full-length coverup was made out of a gossamer blue material so that most of my slim stomach, the better part of my ass, and the expanse of my thighs and legs were exposed. The sequins were the only thing really keeping me from appearing naked under a mist of blue. And I was not only ok with it but also comfortable in it.

I arrived at the Spring Ball, blending into the throng of the other lords and ladies until I made my way to Luke.

“Al, you look...” Luke’s words trailed off as he lifted his eyebrows and took part of his fist into his mouth, biting down on it like he was biting a piece of my body, grazing his teeth against his skin and sinking his teeth in ever so slightly.

I let the feel of Luke’s gaze wash over me before returning the compliment, starting my gaze at his feet and purposefully letting my eyes slowly walk up his toned body in approval until I reached his handsome face, staring into his burning blue eyes.

“You too,” I offered with a smirk.

My glance moved across the room until I found Jay. He stood next to King Heroux at the front of the room. Predictably, Jay looked amazing in his deeply blue tux that complimented my dress. On his lapel, his blue tux had sequin detailing that matched my own, and his bow tie and handkerchief had the same transparent overlay of fabric that my dress was made of. Luke saw where my eyes landed.

“He’s in a mood,” Luke warned, giving me a nudge with his shoulder.

“Yeah, well,” I responded equivocally, allowing myself to fall into Luke’s body instead of bounce off of it.

We both knew he had been “in a mood” ever since Luke and I had spent the night together. There was no need to point that fact out.

“You would think he would be happier now that the news is out about the baby,” Luke said.

The words stung even though I knew he didn’t mean them to. I had tried, unsuccessfully, to figure out how I felt about being House consort and the news of Jay’s baby. I was happy that Jay’s magic was coming back and that, hopefully, there would be more fae babies to come. And I was truly happy for Jay—I suspected that he had wanted to be a father for a very long time. But what I had been unable to figure out was how I fit into the new picture of the happy growing family.

“Speaking of rays of sunshine,” Luke said sarcastically, “let’s go see why my father has decided to grace us with his presence,” he quipped, encircling his arm within mine and beginning to lead the way across the great hall.

Luke’s father rarely attended High Court functions, preferring to leave such “social things” to Luke while the older lord spent his time at the Bellamy estate on the southern coast running the commerce through their port along with Luke’s older brother, Brad. Luke’s father was strikingly similar to Luke in appearance—they had the same piercing blue eyes and light-brown hair. But Luke’s father was missing the glow that seemed to encircle Luke wherever he went. Maybe it was the fact that Luke’s father offered a straight face where Luke perpetually had a smile on his lips, I thought, contemplating the differences between the father and son.

I felt Lord Bellamy’s assessing gaze upon me as I approached, his eyes lingering on my hand, still tucked into the crook of his son’s elbow. Luke and I could most often be found touching each other casually in some capacity or another, so much so that the rumors about the nature of our relationship were pervasive. We were unconcerned about the rumors, and I wasn’t going to drop Luke’s arm just because his father was looking.

“Father, this is Lady Alarie Armand, liaison to High Lord Vitruvian,” Luke introduced me with more pomp than usual.

“My lady, a pleasure to meet you,” High Lord Bellamy said with a small smile that made me feel like I had just undergone some physical assessment of the lord’s and just barely passed.

“The pleasure is mine, my lord,” I replied, reaching my hand out and shaking the lord’s hand as I removed my other hand from Luke’s elbow, grasping his father’s arm delicately.

It couldn’t hurt to flirt a little.

Allowing my hand to drop back to my side, I reflected on the radiance in Luke's smile that was lacking from his father's. Luke tucked my hand back into his elbow as I began to field his father's questions. Luke was his normal jaunty self around his father, the only difference being that he went out of his way to brag on me. High Lord Bellamy was interested in my education and experience at the Court, appearing impressed by the time Luke and I had answered all his questions. I felt like I had just passed another test of the elder Lord Bellamy's.

"Son, I need to speak to you for a moment," High Lord Bellamy requested.

I could tell from the way that High Lord Bellamy made the request that I was not to be privy to the conversation he wanted to have with his son.

"I need to go find Rhett anyway," I lied. "Find me later?" I asked Luke after saying goodbye to his father.

I had gone the entire night without speaking to Jay. As I decided what my next move would be, I heard the strum of a guitar and a familiar voice. I followed the sound of the music until it led me to a smaller room where I spotted Rhett in a corner, giving Lady James Morrigan his best beguiling smile. Then my eyes locked onto Stefan, dressed in black and sitting at the front of the room, perched on a stool, surrounded by people talking and enjoying the music. He offered me a wide smile and a wink, like he had done on prior occasions, nodding his head in an offer for me to join as I walked farther into the room.

Luke followed me in shortly thereafter. His conversation with his father had not been very long. He was smiling about something.

"What're you so happy about?" I asked.

Luke beamed. "My father just told me that he's finally going to let me sit in on the High Council for our House."

"That's great, Luke! Why the change of heart all of a sudden?" I asked.

"Well, he knows business, and he knows that war is bad for it. So he wants us to take a more active role in the High Court affairs. But I can see my mother's involvement all over this. She thinks that if I am on the High Council, I will be less likely to end up out in the battlefield."

The thought of Luke in battle made my chest ache with a pain so sharp that it physically hurt, like someone had scooped my insides out with a dull spoon and replaced them all with ice. I pushed the thought deep down, secretly agreeing with Luke's mother.

“Plus, my mother is desperate for me to accept one of her little hookups she is always putting together but pretending that she didn’t. She has apparently given up on trying to put a woman in my path and hope for the best. Now she has resorted to direct bartering.”

“Yeah? Who is it this time?” I asked.

“Lord Dempsey’s youngest daughter, Karina Dempsey,” he replied. “My father has been looking to increase our foothold in the ports in the northeast run by House Dempsey. Anyway, Karina is supposed to come to the High Court permanently, beginning with the Fall Ball later this year. I agreed to ‘court’ her the first three months she is at the High Court.”

I raised my eyebrows in a show of surprise. The fact that Luke reached this agreement with his mother spoke volumes to just how badly he really wanted the spot on the High Council. Historically, Luke had been very resistant to his parents trying to foist any kind of romantic entanglement upon him.

“Does Jay know? About the High Council part, I mean, not the Lady Dempsey part,” I clarified.

“I haven’t told him yet. Wanted to tell you first. But, you know, knowing Jay, he probably does already know,” Luke said.

As if on cue, Jay entered the small parlor moments later. But he only had eyes for me.

Seeing that Jay wanted to speak to me, Luke said, “I need to go find Rhett and tell that bastard that I made it on the High Council before he did.”

I went to Jay, lackadaisically, in no rush to have our first conversation of the day. We stood in silence near the doorway as Stefan’s ballad played in the background. The music swelled into a crescendo. I had learned Jay’s lesson regarding the use of silence like a weapon too well. I waited, unperturbed in the expansive silence that lingered between us, scanning the room and taking a sip of my drink.

Jay broke our silence first.

“Come back home, Alarie,” he asked.

His tone and aspect were neutral. He could have been commenting on the weather, but the muscles in his jaw clenched, showing his effort at restraint. I let more silence linger before I side-stepped his plea.

“Lord Dumont offered me a job. Senior counselor for his House,” I said.

I looked at Jay. He wasn’t surprised. Of course, the Lord of Whispers already knew.

“I’m going to take it, Jay.”

More seconds of silence expanded between us. He’d expected that, too.

“I love you,” my beautiful, strong high lord, the Contra who could cow a King, whispered.

*Don’t do this*, his words left unsaid. It was probably the closest the high lord had ever come to begging for anything in his entire life.

I felt empty inside as I steeled myself. I could see the silent plea in his eyes, my intrepid mentor nowhere to be found in that desire for me to return his love. Panic began to rise in me as my feelings for the high lord tried to claw their way out of the cold steel box I had enclosed them in.

I took a deep breath, repressing the panic rising in me until I found the ruthlessness inside of myself that I had relied upon so many times before in life to do what I needed to do, no matter how difficult.

“I know, Jay, but I don’t. I don’t love you anymore,” I said flatly, not knowing if it was true or not as I said it.

Throughout all our fucking and fighting, the words had developed, letter by letter, word by word, in the back of my mind. I had held onto them, cautiously collecting them, hiding them like a grenade with a loose pin.

It wasn’t what I had planned to say. It wasn’t even what I had planned to do. But, in that moment, I was confident that it was the only thing I could say to make him let me go. I turned my back to him without another word and sought out the bellow of Luke’s laughter.



# Epilogue

*Rex*

*That's it. Just a little more.*

I pushed my will into the head of my weaver. I sat comfortably on my throne at the Diamond Court in Alancia, a simple crown adorned with diamonds resting atop my swath of platinum blond hair as my piercing gray-blue eyes stared out at the few lords and ladies who had been brave enough to show up to Court that day. Those present hoped to benefit from my good mood should things go according to plan, but they risked much being near my wrath if the events of the day did not go to my liking. Admittedly, I was prone to defenestration when displeased.

I could feel and see my weaver who stood at the southernmost border of Alancia hundreds of miles away from where I sat on my throne. Taking note of the perspiration rolling down his pallid face in beads, I knew that the weaver's mind was moments away from breaking.

*But it would be worth it if I can pull this off at last.*

King Heroux thought he could keep me out of Valencia. He thought he could keep me away from what was rightfully mine with his web of intricately weaved magic. The invisible magical wall between Valencia and Alancia was an impressive bit of magic, I would give him that. But anything could be undone with enough time, and what was time to an immortal? Since the moment the magical barrier between the two kingdoms had gone up nearly twenty-three years ago, I had maintained a constant rotation of weavers working to undo the unparalleled magic King Heroux had put in

place.

It was an unnatural bit of magic too, throwing the balance of all fae's magic off. I had experimented with different holes in the wall along different locations, and it seemed like the ambient magic would keep those holes open, maybe even worsen them slightly, but the magic had not altogether gotten rid of the damned wall. And then King Heroux had gone behind me, foreclosing on whatever progress I had made. But all along, I had focused my best people on a solitary area in the wall. I would not let anything come between me and my future queen.

I could not see the magical barricade myself, but through the eyes of my weavers I could see that the wall was like a big, knotted, messy ball of thread. First, we had to find the tail of the magical thread which had been hidden by King Heroux like a needle in a haystack. That had taken us a decade.

Once we had found the tail of the magic, the hard part began. We had to work the thread through the elaborate matrix of magical weaves, having to work through knot after knot as we did so. The process was slowed by the slight diminishing of our magic. Until, at last, we had finally reached that sweet spot of the process where the thread of the magic started to pull through relatively easily. I could see it in my weaver's mind. A few more tugs and there would finally be a hole in the wall. Just a small hole. We would still have to work to bring down the remainder of the wall, but a small hole was all I needed to get started.

The weaver hesitated, sensing that he was at the limit of his powers and that if he pushed much further, he would drain his magic possibly beyond the point of any recovery. He was also concerned that there was some kind of trap waiting for him if he was the one who unmade King Heroux's magic. I tended to agree with the weaver on both counts, thinking that either of the weaver's concerns, perhaps both, were only moments away from being realized.

The weaver had only gotten so deep into his magical reserves to begin with because I had used my channeling ability to get inside his mind and persuade him. My power was based in both light and darkness, which was so rare it was believed by most to be impossible. I was the only known living fae who had a magical ability of both light and dark affinities.

My power was that of light and dark, and I knew how to wield both with expert precision after honing my skills in my nearly three hundred years of life. So, I had pushed the weaver, getting inside his head and playing upon his

love of his King and his country, showing him scenes of being welcomed back to the Diamond Court as a hero showered with riches and the approbation of his King and his fellow lords and ladies. And when the light side of my power no longer sufficiently motivated the young fae, I switched to my dark abilities, playing upon the weaver's fears of displeasing me and what exactly his welcome back to the Court would look like if he failed.

But, at this point, I knew that only showing and making the young fae feel like he was experiencing his deepest fears would motivate him to push past the point he and his body knew would ruin him, possibly for eternity. I dug deep into the young fae's mind, searching its darkest recesses until I found what I was looking for. It appeared that the weaver had a paralyzing fear of being stuck in small spaces. I conjured in the weaver's mind a vision of him failing at the border wall. He tried to make a run for it—he would hide in the harsh, isolated mountains of the far north. But no, there was no running from me. I knew everything and would find him anywhere he went.

He returned to the Diamond Court, arriving in the throne room to accept his punishment for failing his King and his Kingdom. He bowed his head in shame as he walked into the expansive throne room. Every lord and lady of the Court was present. I did not even address the disgraced weaver, merely gesturing at the cage in the middle of the room. The cage was small enough to fit a smaller animal, perhaps, but not large enough for a man to fit in it without being doubled over. The high fae lord knew there was no point in trying to resist his punishment. The young lord climbed into the cage of his own volition, despite his entire body shaking with his fear of small, enclosed spaces. He hoped that perhaps if he accepted his punishment with dignity, I would have mercy on him and end it sooner rather than later.

But his hopes of mercy never came to fruition. Each day, the failed weaver would be displayed in the throne room in his cage, sometimes just sitting on the floor, other times hanging from a hook dangling from the ceiling. At night, he would be freed from his cage only to be placed in another small, confined space, a space between two walls, pitch black and so narrow that the lord had to sleep standing. And then, one morning, they didn't come to put him in his cage, and he feared he would be encased inside the wall forever—

I gave the weaver a reprieve from the nightmare running through his head to see if he was ready to make the correct decision. The moment I freed the young fae from the horror playing out in his mind, he jumped at the

opportunity to please me. That was the great thing about my ability—I rarely ever had to follow through with the dark scenarios I conjured in the heads of other fae. Usually, the threat alone was sufficient.

The weaver pulled at the magical thread of the wall and the moment before he collapsed, unconscious, I felt his elation at having finally succeeded—I could see through the weaver’s eyes a small opening in the wall, wide enough for about three men to fit through. I pulled back from the weaver’s mind, causing my light-hazel eyes to disappear and be replaced with the weaver’s own dark gray eyes, which rolled into the back of his head as he lost consciousness.

“Take me there. Now,” I ordered the traveler I had standing by for this exact moment.

Seconds later, I appeared at the southern border. The sun shone on my skin, which had a pallor to it that would have seemed unnatural to most, but which only complimented my light features. The weaver lay sprawled out at my feet. I could feel that the weaver’s mind was still intact, so I had not pushed him too far, after all. Good. We were going to need a bigger hole. However, the young fae had been right about the possible traps that had been waiting for whoever was successful in taking down King Heroux’s magic. The weaver was afflicted with a particularly nasty spell.

“Get him to a healer,” I barked at the traveler.

I stepped through the hole in the border wall and breathed in the air of Valencia for the first time in twenty-three years.

My queen was waiting.

# Sneak Peek

## *The Lord of Light*

Book Two of the Queen of Light and Darkness Series

### *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...

***The Lord of Light***  
**Available on Kindle Unlimited and Amazon.**

# 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.

## Spicy Chapters

Chapters in this novel with spicy, mature content include Chapters Eight, Twelve, Fourteen, Seventeen, Nineteen, Twenty-Three, Twenty-Four, Twenty-Five, Thirty, Thirty-Two, and Thirty-Six.



## Jay & Alarie's Playlist

“Style” by Taylor Swift

“*There’s Nothing Holding Me Back*” by Shawn Mendes

“*Watermelon Sugar*” by Harry Styles

“*Sucker*” by Jonas Brothers

“*You Are*” by Punch Brothers

“*Flowers in Your Hair*” by The Lumineers

“*Calling You*” by Blue October

“*Chateau Lobby #4 (in C for Two Virgins)*” by Father John Misty

“*Hallelujah*” by Jeff Buckley

“*Glycerine*” by Bush

“*Bored*” by Billie Elish

“*Dearly Departed*” by Shakey Graves (feat. Esme Patterson)

“*the 1*” by Taylor Swift

“*Only*” by Nine Inch Nails