

ERIN R. FLYNN

Wavering  
Aftermath

Artemis University



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ERIN R. FLYNN

*Wavering  
Aftermath*

Artemis University



My name is Tamsin Vale and I'm about to do something smart... Or something really, really stupid. I give it a 50/50 chance, but keeping quiet on what's going on with me has bitten me in the arse too many times for me not to admit it.

And since my mother's journal isn't helping and is heartbreaking to read, it's time to trust the people who say they care about me.

Now that I finally have the answer about Mason, I feel like I can heal from that crazy and focus better on my own needs. No matter what I do, someone will hate it—hate me, so I need to never forget that I have to look to myself for the right answers.

It's also helped me feel more stable. I'm in a good place with four of the five men in my life even if it's not where they want to be with me. But if I don't tell Darby the truth about what's been going on, there might not be a relationship for us to save.

Artemis University is an ongoing, hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker

elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.

\*This book is part of a series and cannot be read as a standalone. Like all my books, this is not light and fluffy and includes dark themes and events some may find triggering. Reader discretion is advised.



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# Quick Character Refresher

## Mates

Dr. Julian Craftsman	<input type="checkbox"/> Warlock- 6'2"; deep emerald green eyes; dark blond hair	F a c u l t y
Darby Moore	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire- shaggy red hair was a natural bedhead, 6ft with a leaner build. Gray eyes	
Hudson Vogel	<input type="checkbox"/> Dragon- eyes so vibrant blue they were almost violet. He was a whole lot of tall, dark, and trouble for sure.	H o b g o b l i n s
Lucca Von Thann	<input type="checkbox"/> Bear shifter; Buffer than Dr. Craftsman and 6'4", sexy hazel eyes. Mixed race, half	

	Black and half White. His hair was a chocolate color and hung in his face.
Prince Neldor Donovan	☐ Fairy- long jet black hair wears in a ponytail, light green eyes; 6'; lean but ripped, built like you would expect a fairy fighter; sexy dimples when smiles widely
Kyle Edelman	☐ Headmaster; Warlock; Nice
Professor Anya White	☐ Female; Professionally & forthcoming; witch; Dean of Witches/Warlocks
Coach Khan	☐ Snarky Alpha male feline shifter
Glen	☐ Head of security and Alpha of the

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		wolf guards;
Marshall	<input type="checkbox"/>	Security; wolf; grabbed Tams originally
Sean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Security; Wolf; grabbed Tams originally
Dr. Salzman	<input type="checkbox"/>	doc at school;
Professor Richardson	<input type="checkbox"/>	Geometry 101; vampire
Professor/Dean Pillay	<input type="checkbox"/>	Witch; head of botany
Professor Nelson	<input type="checkbox"/>	Warlock; a bit of a cad with the coeds but decent guy; buddies with Craftsman; English professor
Melody Rothchild	<input type="checkbox"/>	best friend; dragon

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Professor Kramer	<input type="checkbox"/> New potions teacher who has serious crush on Tamsin, not a plant for council
Instructor Drummond	<input type="checkbox"/> Witch that seems flighty and total hippie dippie
Professor Collins	<input type="checkbox"/> Dean of Vampires
Professor Puth	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf shifter, very Beta Good teacher
Instructor John McGrath	<input type="checkbox"/> Warlock, new at Artemis, but has a few years teaching experience at college level. plant of council who they ordered to seduce her and get access to everything.

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Instructor Nathan Larson	<input type="checkbox"/> Warlock, old, powerful one and good friend of Geiger's, one who's worked and trained with many fairies.
Campbell	<input type="checkbox"/> Witch works mostly with freshman, all about Julian; Priss
	<input type="checkbox"/>
Irma	<input type="checkbox"/> Tam's friend, most trusted hobgoblin, head of Tam's castle, aunt in a way
Ryfon	<input type="checkbox"/> Head of Artemis hobgoblins, becomes Tams's advisor
Elasha	<input type="checkbox"/> Irma's daughter
Darfin	<input type="checkbox"/> Tam's little buddy

Alea	<input type="checkbox"/> Ryfon's cousin who worked for Meira and lived in Theripolis outside the castle
Reptar	<input type="checkbox"/> Was a manager for the co-op but took the job running the sorbet company for Tamsin.
Esta	<input type="checkbox"/> Irma's older cousin, manager of new hobgoblin bakery and knows of Tamsin
Liluth	<input type="checkbox"/> Irma's sister, head of hobgoblin sanctuary
Keya	<input type="checkbox"/> In charge of Natalie's biz estate with mate
Mourn	<input type="checkbox"/> Keya's mate, butler of carriage house and handling "gentleman's affairs" of guests with staff

	<input type="checkbox"/>
Isabella Kincaid (Thorne) (Izzy)	<input type="checkbox"/> Witch, roommate; <input type="checkbox"/> She was cute, almost pretty but clearly would be as she grew up. She was a petit brunette with gold eyes and definitely would be a looker.
Josh Amyx	<input type="checkbox"/> Deer shifter, 1 <sup>st</sup> asshole punished.
Mary	<input type="checkbox"/> Share bathroom with
Claire	<input type="checkbox"/> Share bathroom with
Natalie Higgins	<input type="checkbox"/> Witch; helped with dresses; scholarship student
Ayesha	<input type="checkbox"/> Witch; helped with dresses; scholarship student; friends with Natalie

Holly	<input type="checkbox"/> Mean girl, vampire
Juan Gui	<input type="checkbox"/> dragon alpha/Prince
Katy	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire bitch
Andy	<input type="checkbox"/> Hawk shifter bitch/loves Darby
Sherry	<input type="checkbox"/> Dragon; Tacky and over the top, “betrothed” to Hudson but that ends
Sarah, Hazel, Rory	<input type="checkbox"/> Women in her training classes that took naked pictures of her. Wolf, vampire, hawk
	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lageos	<input type="checkbox"/> Tam’s father, demi- god
Commander	<input type="checkbox"/> Light fairy; trusted



Iolas	<p>advisor of Queen Meira</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Professor Garza alias at Artemis</li> </ul>
Commander Taeral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Dark fairy; trusted advisor of Neldor's mother who is still fiercely loyal to her</li> </ul>
Arlen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Dark Guardian Lt who won last sword championship before frozen</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Crazy fucker</li> </ul>
Commander Onas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Dark fairy, highest rank and huge Neldor supporter</li> </ul>
Commander Shael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Light fairy, highest rank and was not a big Queen Meira supporter, completely buys into all the ancient and</li> </ul>

		elder talk about Tamsin originally
Commander Stefanie	<input type="checkbox"/>	Prominent Dark Guardian that agrees to be her advisor, swears allegiance
Cluym	<input type="checkbox"/>	Geiger's dark fairy mate
Captain Dalyor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dark fairy, captain
Ara	<input type="checkbox"/>	Young female light fairy who is on Tam's regular detail after they're out.
Wyn	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dark fairy normally on Julian's or Tamsin's protection
Agis	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dalyor's three closest friends. All dark fairy captains.
Kerym	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dalyor's three

	closest friends. All dark fairy captains.
Rafe	☐ Dalyor's three closest friends. All dark fairy captains. The hottest one that Darby doesn't want her around.
Commander Talila	☐ Dark fairy that can't adjust to her new reality and wants the ancients to make it all better
Commander Morgan	☐ Light fairy; Not a fan of Tamsin, but adored her mother.
Odile	☐ Noble of the next biggest city after Tamsin takes over 27
Glynnii	☐ Fairy little girl shows Tamsin how kids open portals

Professor Sontar	<input type="checkbox"/> Main guy who teaches Tams extra stuff, dark fairy
Professor Rosini	<input type="checkbox"/> Light fairy female who should have been her tutor to start as she had her mother's
Jordan	<input type="checkbox"/> Zack's fairy mate
Cara	<input type="checkbox"/> Ray's fairy mate
Charlie	<input type="checkbox"/> head of the Land Rights Registration office in Theripolis.
Hhora	<input type="checkbox"/> Dark fairy; Julian's new right hand, trained to take care of heirs and queens
Queen	<input type="checkbox"/> Neldor's mother
Prince Alok	<input type="checkbox"/> Neldor's father
Lorsen	<input type="checkbox"/> Ancient fairy that is

		the royal crown and metal worker
Josie	<input type="checkbox"/>	One of the section leads of the Royal Performers
Calarel	<input type="checkbox"/>	Royal healer Tams met when healing Julian
Mallory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rennyn's older sister.
Queen Meira	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tam's mother
Ancient Simimar	<input type="checkbox"/>	Crazy fucker
Rennyn	<input type="checkbox"/>	Corrupt light fairy noble
Tanesha Jameston	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hudson's aunt; telepath
Mr. Adrian Geiger	<input type="checkbox"/>	Partner in best supe law firm

Claudia	<input type="checkbox"/> Associate at law firm
Queen Sasha Vogel	<input type="checkbox"/> Hudson's mom
King Xavier Vogel	<input type="checkbox"/> Hudson's father
Connor Vogel	<input type="checkbox"/> Hudson's younger brother, heir after they mate
Avril Rothchild	<input type="checkbox"/> Mel's cousin running the havens
Ellen Rothchild	<input type="checkbox"/> Mel's 2 <sup>nd</sup> cousin VP running the havens
Colton Rothchild	<input type="checkbox"/> Mel's cousin, largest man Tam's ever seen, total softy
Trigger Rothchild	<input type="checkbox"/> Mel's dad
Lady Catherine	<input type="checkbox"/> Noble dragon, North America,

Lady Jean	<input type="checkbox"/> Noble dragon, North America,
Ida Reed	<input type="checkbox"/> Owns lingerie and bathing suit stores that sell to humans
Lady Ruby	<input type="checkbox"/> Noble NAmerica, elder lady
Lord Nicholas	<input type="checkbox"/> Lady Jean's mate, in love with Lady Catherine
Lord Warren	<input type="checkbox"/> Lady Catherine's mate
Lord Alfred	<input type="checkbox"/> Jean's younger brother that sold her and took over
King Dae Gui	<input type="checkbox"/> King of Asia/Juan's dad
Queen Sofia Gui	<input type="checkbox"/> Queen of Asia/Juan's mom
Fergus	<input type="checkbox"/> King of the

Courtenay	European dragons
Diaz	☐ King of the South American dragons
Mr. Silva	☐ Head of Diaz knight ninja dragons like the Rothchilds
Roberta (Robbie)	☐ Was first love of Xavier's youngest brother who died in takeover of African royals.
	☐
Katrina Calloway	☐ Owner of the NYC store of Veritas Portas (truth gate)
Jeremy Sims	☐ In charge of cattle ranch and helps hobgoblin sanctuary
Zack James	☐ Wolf, Tam's guard; Former supe police, Captain;



Ray James	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf; Tam's guard, former supe police (cousins)
Marisol Gonzalez	<input type="checkbox"/> Human contact Tamsin saved, hacker and computer genius. Works with group that sells pot
Mary Craftsman	<input type="checkbox"/> Julian's mother
Rupert Craftsman	<input type="checkbox"/> Julian's father
Luke	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf shifters with fairy parent and grandparent; Underground
Marc Higgins	<input type="checkbox"/> Natalie's uncle
Charlie Higgins	<input type="checkbox"/> Natalie's dad; owner of Higgins Remodels and Expansions
Dean	<input type="checkbox"/> New herd leader of

	deer shifters that Tams saved from Underground
Jason Von Thann	<input type="checkbox"/> Lucca's younger brother, next in line to lead, asshole
Ronald Von Thann	<input type="checkbox"/> Alpha bear, Lucca's father
Rich	<input type="checkbox"/> Foster kids Tams knew that was gay and killed himself when they were young
Witt	<input type="checkbox"/> Asshole who pulled the "prank" on Rich.
Captain Reddy	<input type="checkbox"/> Captain of the supe police, wolf shifter
Alpha Geoff	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf shifter, big deal Alpha
Angel	<input type="checkbox"/> Shifter daughter of fairy who was taking

	grandkids of fairies to the Underground
Jackie	<input type="checkbox"/> Porn star friend Tam's rescued. One of the first Tams's Girls
Preston	<input type="checkbox"/> Douche who Tams lost her virginity with
Julie Brooks	<input type="checkbox"/> Bitch daughter
Mrs. Nicole Brooks	<input type="checkbox"/> Councilman Brook's mate, wolf shifter
Judy Collins	<input type="checkbox"/> Dean Collins's mate
Gene Ainsworth	<input type="checkbox"/> Councilman Ainsworth's widow
Ally Taylor	<input type="checkbox"/> Gene's daughter
Sonia	<input type="checkbox"/> Councilman Melvin's aide's niece at HAVEN

Shawn	<input type="checkbox"/> Jerk reporter who loves the Vogels and is considered “neutral”
Mrs. Dominic Ozorio	<input type="checkbox"/> Councilman Ozorio’s mate.
Ellen Guess	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brigid	<input type="checkbox"/> Baby mom of Darby’s sister.
Freya	<input type="checkbox"/> Darby’s sister
Chaddus Thane	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire elder
Elder Ward	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire elder
Harjo	<input type="checkbox"/> Warlock elder
Councilman Duncan	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf elder that Ray dealt with and they looked into; she saved his cousin of Geoff’s pack;

Councilman Chin	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf elder that Zack dealt with as supe police
Councilman Konner Brooks	<input type="checkbox"/> Wolf elder that they both have had dealings with and trust the most, “head” of wolf elders and they looked into;
Councilman Fitzpatrick	<input type="checkbox"/> Bear elder, one of the decent ones, but a bit sexist
Blake Ward	<input type="checkbox"/> Super bitch freshman; vampire council family
Mason Rodriguez	<input type="checkbox"/> bear shifter that pretends to be nice and like Tamsin
Joshua Edelman	<input type="checkbox"/> The headmaster’s father
Jordan	

Holmes	<input type="checkbox"/> Vamp who raped glamoured vamp to be Tams with friends
Mr. Holmes	<input type="checkbox"/> Asshole's father
Elder Harbour	<input type="checkbox"/> Vamp elder Tamsin got removed
"Alpha" Alec	<input type="checkbox"/> Dragon in charge of Australia
Kim	<input type="checkbox"/> His mate
Louis Ainsworth	<input type="checkbox"/> Warlock elder; main player in the black market and draining magic for profit
Alpha Berman	<input type="checkbox"/> Dragon Alpha of Africa
Councilman Leisser	<input type="checkbox"/> Fox elder who is POS
Carson Leisser	<input type="checkbox"/> Eldest son of Fox elder

Councilman Peter Shurr	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire councilman Tamsin drives him crazy and he kills himself
Councilman Melvin	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire councilman
Councilman Dominic Ozorio	<input type="checkbox"/> Vampire Councilman
Noah Taylor	<input type="checkbox"/> Ainsworth's son-in- law
Warren Guess	<input type="checkbox"/> Family: Youngest daughter Kendra; youngest son Brandon; Eldest son Reid; Mate Jennifer;
Liam Moore	<input type="checkbox"/> Darby's older brother
Alfie Fisher	<input type="checkbox"/> First guy Tamsin goes for to sentence back punishments
Chief	<input type="checkbox"/> Alpha (1 <sup>st</sup> & main)

Pikachu	<input type="checkbox"/> Alpha
Rainbow	<input type="checkbox"/> Alpha
Zedd	<input type="checkbox"/> Alpha
Amethyst	<input type="checkbox"/> Daughter of Neldor's mother's unicorn
Gambit	<input type="checkbox"/> Son of Meira's unicorn



# *1*

I asked Hudson, Lucca, Julian, Neldor, and Darby to join me for breakfast the Saturday after finals. They knew it wasn't just for fun, and that was obviously apparent when there were people there they wouldn't have expected.

If I was finally going to admit to having visions, I was going to do this right... Mostly.

What I thought was right at least.

Which was why I'd also invited Katrina Calloway, my witch friend who helped me with just about everything in my life and was my therapist most days.

Izzy, my best friend and sister from another mother.

Irma who was the first hobgoblin I really got to know and was in charge of taking care of me, plus my castle really.

Calarel, one of the royal healers and *my* healer.

Iolas, my godfather and my mother's childhood friend.

Taeral, Neldor's godfather, his mother's childhood friend, best friend to his dad, and the dark fairy I probably trusted most out of all of them. Even over Neldor.

Hey, that was his fault in my opinion.

I also invited Commander Stefanie, my advisor more than just a commander of the Faerie Guardians, Professor Sontar who was my main teacher now, and Commander Morgan who hadn't started as my biggest fan but was incredibly loyal to my mother. People seemed most shocked he was there, and I didn't really blame them.

"I'm a bit worried you're about to announce you're abdicating the throne with this group," Stefanie worried as she picked up a plate from the sideboard and started loading it. We had too many people for the kitchen, so we were in the dining room.

I snorted. "My dad would be here if it was that. And I don't want him to know about this yet."

"Was Shael not available?" Morgan asked. "I'm not sure why you would want me here instead of her."

I thought that was fair, so I met his gaze. "Shael doesn't keep her mouth shut. You do. Shael will never fully accept that my life isn't public or government business. You understood that with my mother and always respected her. That's what I'm hoping for now."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Whatever is said here today or you see, is *not* to be repeated. I'm not ready to share this even, but I think... I think bad things could happen if I hide it any longer so for once, do not make me regret sharing what is going on with me." I felt better when people agreed or nodded, but I'd be a fool if I blindly trusted them.

“I would suggest you show everyone before we start eating since it’s disorientating,” Julian said quietly.

Of course, he figured out what was going on.

Stefanie immediately sat down with her plate and no one else went for food. I shot Julian a look and he simply shrugged.

Yes, yes, it was best to just rip off the bandage, but... Yeah, I couldn’t chicken out.

So I focused on the table and showed them the vision I kept having in different forms. I showed them Darby telling me he was leaving me, the shell I became that no one could reach, finding out he was mating someone else, the wedding I burst in on too late, and finally going to Faerie and letting the world consume me.

“How long have you been suffering with this alone?” Izzy demanded, her voice cracking. “How could—how many times have you seen this, Tams?”

“I’ve lost count,” I admitted. “I didn’t—”

“Who the fuck was that woman?” Darby exploded, standing so fast his chair fell over.

“I think most of us were planning on asking you that,” Hudson bit out.

“I don’t have a fucking clue! I don’t... Who—” He rubbed his neck too hard and then backed away from the table and slid to the floor.

“He’s having a panic attack,” Calarel worried and hurried over to him. “Darby, breathe, child. People here know you’re

telling the truth. You're fine. We'll figure this out and—”

“Tams doesn't,” he wheezed. “I'm not cheating, *agra*. I would never cheat. I can't—I wouldn't—”

“He passed out,” she sighed. “Your Highness, his reaction was—”

“I know,” I whispered. “There's no way he could have an affair without Rafe and Wyn knowing when they're always with him at school and guarding him. Lucca would have smelled another woman on him. There are a million ways he would be busted. I know that.”

“It doesn't make it hurt any less for you when you've been suffering those visions,” she whispered.

“Let's eat and we can talk when he wakes up,” I suggested when everyone just stared at me.

“You think we can eat or be *calm*?” Iolas rasped. “Faerie consumes you. That—I never thought—”

“That ending might have changed now that I had such a huge burst of magic from flying on my own,” I admitted. “I've seen it once now without that ending, but a different one. I don't know yet if it's an outlier or that's my new future. I have to wait and see.”

“What's the new one you've seen?” Neldor asked, looking pale and shell-shocked.

“It's private but not bad,” I answered, reaching over and taking Julian's hand... Much to his shock.

And everyone else's. I ignored it and went for food with him, letting him comfort me.

“I feel like I have the right to be angry that you’ve been having visions about me and the future and didn’t tell me, Tams,” Darby said quietly from the floor when I sat back down with my plate.

“You do,” I accepted, ignoring the people making surprised noises. “But you also better be angry at yourself for fucking up so badly that I didn’t feel like I could tell you. I actually wanted to tell you when it started but you were...” There was no reason to rehash the past.

“I’m not sure why a few of us are here for this, Your Highness,” Professor Sontar cut in before anyone else could say something. “I feel like I do not belong here nor should know this information.”

“Your shock clouds your intelligence,” Neldor chuckled. “She wants people to dig into others who have visions. You’re a scholar. If anyone can help her find out more information on how she can manage this curse, it would be you.”

“He’s exactly right and you have access to one of the largest catalogs of journals given your rank in Faerie academia. We’ll need someone in the light realm or—I need help. I finally went to my mother’s room and found something she left for me, but that wasn’t helpful. It was painful.” I blinked back tears. “So I decided to see how else I could handle this.”

I let out a slow breath and felt better when Julian rubbed my shoulder before looking at Sontar again.

“But you get a bit too stuck in theories. I will not become a lab rat. I understand new magic is exciting and seeing what you’ve only read about is a lot, but I am—”

“I know, Your Highness,” he said gently. “I understand that this is studying a bomb that could go off, not your bubbles or something light. I will—I know I’ve messed up before as have others around you. That was before I knew you as I do now and care more about you as a person than research or studies.”

I was glad to hear that.

People asked me the questions I expected while we ate. When did they start? Have I seen anything else? And on and on.

“This is why you always felt like you saw me leave you,” Darby said as he moved his chair to sit next to me at the head of the table, ignoring that he basically moved in Hudson’s way. “You said it wasn’t your gut, but you felt like you’ve seen it. You said that over a year ago. Has this really been going on since then?”

“No, not that long but yes, I think my visions were trying to start, but my brain was too damn busy dealing with everyone else’s memories because I started as a telepath and my mother didn’t.” I rubbed my tired head. “I would wake feeling like you were already gone. It would feel so real, but I thought it was just because you abandoned me.”

“I didn’t abandon you, Tams,” he rasped and tried to reach for me. He dropped his hand when I flinched away. “I’ve fucked up bad. I know this. Again and again even. I wasn’t leaving. I was distant and stupid but—distracted. I didn’t leave.”

“I’ll let you know when it feels like you didn’t,” I said bitterly. “It was worse than abandoning me completely

because you were there in fucking bed every night, but you weren't there. And then you just—I knew Yale would break us.”

“No, I did that. I've been—I'm having a hard time controlling my anger. I was showing you that I was in this for real and wanted to fix things, and you've been ignoring that because you had visions that you didn't tell me about.”

“Then fucking leave,” I snapped. “You're going to anyways.” I stood and shoved at his shoulder. “You *leave me* and you want to be pissed? Fuck you, Darby. I was protecting myself so Faerie didn't fucking *eat me!*”

He stood and hugged me, ignoring when I shoved at him. Then I gave in and let him hold me as I cried out my pain and hit him.

Someone tried to grab my arm, but Darby yelled at them and didn't let me go. I didn't understand what was going on until I calmed down and realized Darby was hurt.

And I'd done it.

I gasped and sat him down, healing him some as I did. “Idiot.”

“I'm not letting go, Tams,” he wheezed, holding his side. “I won't leave. I don't—beat me every night. I don't care. Just love me again, *agra*. I can't—I'm dying inside that I can't reach you and lost you. That would be the only reason I'd leave you. We're both in so much pain and I know you won't ever do it. That's the only reason I can think of.”

“I think we need to talk to Wyn and Rafe,” Lucca said firmly. “There's something off with what he's saying. He's not

lying, but he smells of guilt and knows more than he's saying."

My heart sank when Darby flinched. I slowly backed away from him. "What did you do?"

"I should have told you, but we weren't in a good place," he whispered. "I didn't do anything, but I didn't tell you what happened again. I should have. I was too scared that you would start agreeing with people."

"Tell me."

He gave me a destroyed look. "Would you really believe me and it was all that happened right now?"

I wanted to say yes. I was dying to even because Darby wasn't a liar. But... "I'm too raw. I don't know."

"That's better than I deserve. Thank you for not completely losing faith in me." He meant it, but he was still upset with me.

"I should have told you too, so whatever this is, I won't get angry. We haven't been in a good place. *But* I want you to remember that when I had this certain feeling you would leave me, when I felt it in my *soul*, I never held it against you or pulled away until you..."

"Neglected you," Katrina offered. "He didn't abandon you, but he did neglect you and your relationship. I believe that is the right way to phrase it and it's valid."

"I did," Darby accepted. "I did neglect you. I didn't see it or understand it, but I did. I fully agree with that. It wasn't intentional though."



“She wouldn’t still love you if it had been,” Neldor muttered. “Rafe and Wyn are coming now.”

“You texted them?” I accused, sighing when he gave me a look that of course, he did. Then I saw something in his eyes that made me flinch. “Right, we know what this is about. Darby said it happened again. Fucking fools.”

Neldor waved off my upset like I was focusing on the wrong thing. “Baby doll, I’m barely keeping it together knowing there is even a fucking chance that Faerie could consume you. I never thought—I know it drove my mother mad, but what you showed us shouldn’t be possible. I don’t want you there until you have more visions and we know that future isn’t fucking possible.”

“I agree with Prince Neldor,” Commander Morgan of all people said firmly. He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I no longer believe if you die, Faerie dies, but we as a people need you, Princess. Not because you are the monarch or the last heir, but because you have given us a real chance at a peaceful future that’s better than we’ve ever known. If you die now, it’s all gone and the supe communities will collapse as well.”

“You’ve always had too much faith in me, Commander, even when you didn’t like me.”

“No, I had the correct amount, and too many others are petty and don’t use their godsdamn eyes,” he argued, apologizing for using such foul language in his next breath. “I’m shaken. What you showed us shakes me to my core. I believed you that your connection to Faerie was more

dangerous than we ever allowed ourselves to realize, but this is...”

“Toxic,” Iolas whispered. “And if Lageos knew, he would blow our world up.”

“Not while people were frozen still and my mom died to protect them,” I argued.

“I think he would,” Iolas muttered. “If he saw that and knew you had visions already after all you’ve suffered, I think he would temporarily go insane.”

“I agree,” Julian said quietly. “He needs you to survive and have a life for any of what happened to be worth it, Tams.”

I didn’t think my dad could ever be that cruel and end a world or lives that were frozen and people waiting for them, but opinions were opinions. “Either way, he can’t know. Not yet.” I focused on Morgan. “You really think I shouldn’t go to Faerie?” I flinched when *everyone* there agreed, loudly voicing their opinions all at once.

“Well, this is fun,” Rafe said as he walked into the room. “I love super tense and explosive meetings before breakfast. Oh, and we had some nosy people tag along.”

I sighed. Fairies were the ultimate nosy people, so I wasn’t surprised when it was Ara, Dalyor, Agis, and Kerym. Ara and Wyn were tight, and the other three were Rafe’s best friends. The foursome of dark fairies were tighter than golfing bros.

Hudson ignored all of that and kept us on point. “What has Darby been hiding from Tamsin? Have people approached him that she should know about?”

“Who?” I bit out when Rafe and Wyn both looked at Darby and winced. “No, wait, don’t tell me. I promised that you weren’t there to spy on him but to keep him safe—”

“I fucking didn’t!” Hudson roared. “Fuck his privacy! I don’t care about any of that. I care about you not—” He stopped himself in time and gave me an imploring look. “Shorty, I’m barely holding it together. I’ve been the one taking you to Faerie when that could be your future. Please. River and I cannot take this.”

“Sorry, beastie,” I whispered, not having thought he’d be upset about that. “I loved our flying lessons, and I didn’t think there was any overlap.”

“Tell them,” Darby cut in. “I should have. I know I should have at least told someone else, but you guys seemed annoyed, not threatened or—it’s fine.” Darby scrubbed his hands over his face. “I honestly thought you already reported it to Stefanie after the first guy. It was all noise in my ears, and I was focused on fixing things with Tams.”

That was all Wyn needed to break the dam. “Two different groups of nobles showed up at Yale and cornered Darby. One made it clear that even if he got into law school and aced it, he would not be worthy of you and never accepted in Faerie. The other said you were done with him and to have pride as a man to end it before you both were ridiculed more than you already were.”

“I want names,” I bit out.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you, Tams,” Darby sighed. “You’re so stressed out. I couldn’t add to your stress, but I forgot about the New Year’s deadline thing.”

I healed him the rest of the way now that his body could handle it. “This isn’t even about you and me. More than what we already discussed before, fairy nobles came to this world and harassed someone of another species. That’s unacceptable for them to behave that way. It’s *extra* stupid of them for doing it to my fiancé. Yeah, you should have told me. It makes me look bad that I didn’t immediately go beat their asses.”

“That’s exactly what I said,” Rafe sighed. “He told us that he would tell you but to give him time to fix things with you first. He didn’t want to act like that was the reason he was an idiot and then your relationship would be worse.”

“Anything else I need to know?” I asked him.

“Yes, some vampires who clearly want to be councilmen made it clear that they found out about Freya and Darby was signing checks he couldn’t cash. That both of them would never be allowed in vampire society again unless he ended things and repledged himself to his own people.”

“Well, clearly his listened because *she* is a vampire,” I seethed, swallowing my annoyance when I remembered not everyone there should know about my visions.

“Who are you talking about, Your Highness?” Wyn asked, glancing around the room. “There’s no way Darby cheated. We would have known. Not only is he not smooth enough—we would have known. We live with him.”

“It’s not about cheating,” I muttered. “Forget about that. It’s not—forget it.” I leaned into Darby and lowered my voice. “You picked your sister who you didn’t even want to know over the woman you said you loved, asked to marry, and then neglected. Yeah, I don’t know why I haven’t been letting you

back in.” I walked out of there before I said something more that I might regret.

I went downstairs for the portal to Faerie, almost there when a seriously pissed off bear grabbed me around the waist and dragged me off.

“Did you not hear us that you’re not going to Faerie?” Lucca growled. “Seriously, Tams.”

“Right, yeah, okay. I wasn’t... I can have those nobles brought to me.” I still broke his hold so he put me on my feet. “I need a minute and then I need to figure out—how the fuck am I supposed to stay out of Faerie as the ruler and the person they need to wake up fairies? Even I don’t know how to pull off that card trick.”

“Yeah, that’s a rough one,” he agreed and then cupped my cheek before giving me a soft kiss. “I also have questions about what this is doing to you. You seem so much more tired this semester and you said you’ve been slacking off from school. So why? You sleep more from what I’ve seen.”

I blinked at him a moment. “You don’t think I’m sleeping during the visions. I don’t get as good of sleep when I have dreams of people’s memories so...” I nodded. “I thought I was just lucky since my mom got the visions when awake and it was painful. Plus, people noticed.”

“That is lucky, but we need to plan for you not getting enough sleep then and figure something out.” He hugged me to him. “I vote for more naps and snuggles. I don’t get snuggles with my cream puff.”

“You just want to gobble me up,” I joked.

“Don’t tease me right now, Tams. I’m not in my right mind.” He rubbed his nose against my neck, and I felt tears fall on my skin.

Yeah, what I’d shown them had been difficult. I fully understood that.

Really, I did.

“If I’m right, the new level of magic I hit will make me too powerful for Faerie to do anything to me. I don’t want to get my hopes up yet, but that’s what it feels like to me. And I think the ancients knew that was something possible.”

“Why do you think that?” he hedged.

“Because they were all so furious that Lageos was a demigod. I wasn’t believing their crap or letting them bully me, but something about my dad being a demigod just chapped them in a way I didn’t understand. I think a few of them need to be reinterviewed with all the extra I know now. I think I need to do it.”

“Not now,” he worried. “They can’t come out of Faerie and you can’t go in there. But I have an idea of how to handle you not going there for a while. If you trust me—”

“Always. Always, Lucca. Tell me.”

He gave me another kiss and then hurried me back upstairs. He looked at Rafe and the others we’d called in. “Go to Faerie and drag those assholes to one of the hotels so Tams can beat their asses.”

“Do it. The original one too from the beginning of the semester,” I agreed when they looked at me. “And I want a conversation with those vampires. They don’t get to decide

that for anyone, vampire or not. If they think that's something I'll allow in our shared supe society, I'll gladly show them the cells their former councilmen were in so they can see their futures."

"Yes, Your Highness," Rafe accepted, all of them looking amused.

I waited until it was the original group before I sat down to my now cold plate of breakfast. "So none of you want me in Faerie for a while. How the fuck do we pull that off?"

## 2

“With a half-truth which is always the best way to handle these situations,” Lucca said before anyone else could answer me. “Calarel makes an announcement that given your recent and explosive jump in magic, she wants you to adjust under her watchful eyes. That you won’t allow mistakes of the past to be repeated, and all of the directions you’re pulled in make for uncertain outcomes.”

“People are going to immediately say that I’m weak and broken,” I argued.

“No one says you’re weak anymore, Your Highness,” Morgan corrected. “No one, even those who want you off the throne. No sane person can say you’re weak. The way to frame this is that you’re maturing and understand the caution needed with strong magic so that you don’t break yourself. No more injuring yourself or going over the top.”

“I agree with that,” Julian added. “Too many have jumped on the thread that you’re a ticking time bomb basically as a way to control you. From the moment you appeared and were an unknown. Make like you’ve heard all of that criticism and your healer isn’t risking your health or future.”



I glanced around and felt better when everyone seemed to agree. “Okay, but people will be validly upset that I’m not waking fairies. Forget the optics, people are hurting and waiting for their loved ones.”

“Your Highness, as someone who cried every night for my mate to be woken, the good people understand,” Calarel whispered. “None of this was your fault and you were a baby when it happened. You’re the savior and solution, not the culprit. I’ve heard *very few* people get upset that you’re not going fast enough. Most want you to slow down so you don’t hurt yourself. I’ve heard parents who have frozen children say that.”

I swallowed loudly and nodded. “Fine, announce it for over break. That we’re hoping my break from school can give me time to focus and learn my new magic level. We will keep people updated, but that’s what we’re currently shooting for, no promises.”

“She needs to be doing something for Faerie still,” Hudson said after a moment. “People won’t accept her being hands off completely. Even if you take out the visions, what you’re saying makes sense. People know that Neldor’s mom lost herself to Faerie now. Fairies at least. They accept that is part of what happened and don’t want history to repeat itself.”

“There’s one thing I need to get from Faerie before we do this,” I interrupted. I met Neldor’s gaze. “Come with and use my power to put me in a bubble. I need to retrieve my mom’s journal.”

“I thought it was more than you wanted to deal with?” he hedged.

“Yes, but my magic is reacting weird to not being allowed in Faerie and I just had a flash of it,” I admitted, rubbing my arms. “It’s settling now that I said I’ll get it. I obviously opened the can of worms that I can’t stick back in.” Then I cursed up a storm. “I can’t just not go to Faerie. I’m still blessing hobgoblins. I can’t do that to them.”

“They will understand,” Irma argued. “Your life is more important than anyone’s blessing.”

That was fair, but then I groaned. “The party for my Royal Etiquette and Diplomatic Relations with Other Species II final is tomorrow. We’re having the luncheon with a bunch of everyone. The dragon queens, White, and the other rare female councilwomen. A dozen spouses of council members and a dozen mates of powerful Alphas.”

“I thought you said you were all done with finals?” Lucca muttered.

“Yes, to Artemis, because we didn’t want anyone interfering with the party or knowing too much,” I sighed. “I mean, I aced it, but this is the actual party that would give me Rosini’s seal of approval that I’m royally royal or whatever.”

“Fine, but I’ll attend with you and—” Neldor offered.

“Did you grow breasts?” I drawled. “Did you not catch the theme of the party as the females?”

Neldor sighed. “I will sit outside of the party and keep tabs on your magic. Just make sure someone feeds me while I look over paperwork.”

“I can’t starve the babysitter,” I drawled. “Fine, but what about what Hudson said?”

“Stones,” Lucca answered quickly. “I was going to—I already had this idea. You should focus on those stones that fairies use now instead of wiring. They need like a ton more I heard. That’s consistent and focused and will actually give you something Calarel can track. Have everyone else in Faerie focus on food to feed the animals to help the wild animal breeding programs since you won’t be cleansing there.”

“That’s better than I could come up with on the fly,” Taeral praised him.

“Lucca listens. He takes it all in and listens to everything,” I told him. “He pays attention and fits the puzzle pieces well.”

“Now that I’m not a selfish asshole all of the time,” Lucca chuckled, but I saw he liked the compliment and was embarrassed at the same time.

“It’s smart and true that it would be something I can use to work with you and check your levels,” Calarel agreed. “Your father will like it for you over break as well. Eat menus of restaurants with him like you used to do with your friends—or with them still—and make a magical workout plan with him for this break.”

“Okay, get a plan in place after you talk to my dad. Obviously, leave out the other stuff, but tell him your concerns about my magic jump and I’ve agreed to be proactive.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“They’ve got some of the nobles at the dark fairy hotel,” Neldor informed me.

“Good, I feel the need to be violent,” I muttered as I headed for the portal in my garage. I didn’t bother telling

people to stay or worrying about who was following. I was twisted up inside and fairly conflicted about too much.

And I was hangry. No reason to deny it. I was now starving and wanting to eat my weight in greasy breakfast food.

I arrived in the cafeteria and saw a few of the nobles, shaking my head and not surprised. I went to the first and kicked him in the head before he even realized I was there. Then I punched the next one and then shot my hand into the chest of the third.

I smirked down at them since those hits knocked them to the floor. “I hope it was worth losing your titles and your lands. You are all the remaining holdouts, so now the rest of the areas are under my control. Thanks for all being so fucking predictable.”

I waited until they all healed themselves and focused on me.

“This is not about it being Darby. My father will beat you for trying to persuade my fiancé—whom he approves of—to leave me. This is about more than your oaths as nobles and the role of nobles in a monarchy. You knew what you risked, and that’s all over now. My anger right now is separate. This is about you harassing someone of a different species.

“That is completely unacceptable. Cornering them at college and risking outing them is completely out of line. There is no reason you should have been there with Darby the law school student, and you undoubtedly made a scene. I will *not* allow the people of Faerie to pull that shit when I’ve

busted other councils and assholes of other species for doing that.”

“You could create an interspecies nightmare for us,” Shael bit out. “One you would not have to clean up, but the princess would. She warned you not to approach her mates. You don’t get to judge who she is with! And you pick on the vampire who has been most loyal to her and us? When they’re rebuilding their council and most would love the reason to flex their power on her? You are all—”

I held up my hand to cut her off. This was my time to knock sense into people. “You are banned from leaving Faerie for a year.” I nodded when they couldn’t hide their shock. “Those portals are a *privilege* that is only allowed because of the heirs and queens. We create and keep them going. So you are banned from using them for a year.”

“And if we don’t agree?” one stupidly asked.

I smirked at him as I squatted down and slapped his cheek roughly a few times. “Well, I could expel you and your family from Faerie forever if you like this world so much. I’m already taking your titles and lands. I mean, there are so many options when I’m in charge that it’s stupid of you to ask and poke me, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” he bit out.

I stood again and looked around. “This will be the standard. If you come to this world and make a mess I have to clean up, then you lose your privilege to come to this world. Spread the word because we are *not* making a habit of this. We do not harass other species. Not now, not ever. We hunt criminals and take out corruption.” I looked down at the three

nobles. “Do you want to lie to me that Darby fits in either of those categories?”

“No, Your Highness,” they grumbled like children getting grounded for hiding something from their mom.

And they thought they should judge Darby?

More nobles showed up and I waited until they were all there before beating more ass and repeating my decree.

“If he loved you, he wouldn’t want you to suffer the pain having a vampire mate will bring you,” one of the last to arrive stupidly said. “And if you loved him as you say, you wouldn’t want that future for him either.”

“That’s not his future,” I chuckled darkly. “I won’t allow it to be if I have to smack sense into every fucking fairy who disrespects him. And I will.” I smiled when I felt Lageos arrived. “And so will the demigod who loves me.”

“Which idiots harassed my future son-in-law?” Lageos demanded.

I had Rafe and Wyn name them so all of the witnesses there understood it wasn’t just something Darby told me.

I clucked my tongue when several shot them nasty looks. “You were too full of yourselves. You did it in front of two highly decorated Faerie Guardians that I trust? You should have climbed down that pillar you had yourself standing on because now you made me knock you off of it. Try something again or retaliate and you won’t survive it. Savvy?”

“You’re being too kind in your punishment,” Neldor said quietly from my right.

“Everyone always says my punishments are too harsh. They’re bitching and moaning at what I’ve already done,” I reminded him.

He gave me a look not to be silly. “They say that to wear you down and set the new standard of easier punishments. They know you weren’t alive to see how our mothers worked. I was, which is why they always want you to punish them.”

“All the lying and cheating from a species that prides itself on honor and being honest disgusts me,” I said, not caring who heard me.

I *wanted* them to hear me and know that was what I felt.

“How would you punish them?” I asked Neldor, noting when all of the nobles in trouble visibly flinched. So Neldor was right. “How would either of our mothers punish them?”

“Your mother would have banned them for a year or two, but that’s a loss of privileges they abused. They still need to *pay* for what they did to hurt Darby, use up our time, and such.” He was quiet a moment. “Meira would have given them six months work detail with the groves. Use their magic to help feed those who aren’t in the homes yet and to help the repopulation breeding programs. Work in your rest stops.”

I really liked that, nodding it was good. “And your mother?”

He swallowed loudly, glancing around and noticing the change in the room. He glanced at me and saw I was ignoring it. “She would make them pay. She always said hurting the pocketbook was the best way to hurt someone with too much perceived power. She’d make them buy a feast for the Faerie

Guardians or all of the extras the rest stops need for the next few months. Pay to hire more hobgoblins to work there as well until they can have other jobs.”

Bobbing my head as he spoke, I smiled widely as I came to a decision, squatting back down to be eye level with the dozen fuckers. “Well, I’m part my mother, you’re part your mother, and we’re in charge. *However*, we’re also part our fathers.” I chuckled darkly when they flinched. “So my punishment is *all of the above*.”

“We would need specifics to enforce it, Your Highness,” Shael told me, sounding amused.

“They are banned from Earth for a year, their families included unless they personally come speak to me with a valid reason,” I declared as I stood back up. “If they won’t get in line and listen to me as enough of a reason, let their families tear into them for their bad behavior and punishment. Especially since they’ve cost their families their land and I now control it.”

“Well done,” Neldor muttered.

“You will work the next six months in the groves or helping farmers that work with us regrow crops,” I ordered. “Full eight-hour days, and *then* you will donate your time to the rest stops to help clean up after dinner and prep for the next day. The hobgoblins and others donate their time daily. You will start leading that good behavior by *example*.”

“As we do,” Neldor agreed, gesturing between the two of us. “We’re there all of the time when we can be helping. And there is no world where you’re busier than *we are*.”



“*Also*, you will collectively throw a feast for the Faerie Guardians. A Saturday blowout that all of them can attend when their shifts are done. I want food from Earth in droves. I don’t care if it’s cheap Taco Bell and whatever fast food, but I want a spread and to fill their stomachs completely. Along with booze. They have been killing themselves and should get one fucking day when you all are constantly lazy asses.

“And *then*, you will each buy a dozen butchered cattle and a dozen butchered hogs for the rest stops. That would be a great help given how many eat there.” I smiled when people whispered and couldn’t hide their shock. “That last part is for Darby. He loves the hobgoblins and the rest stops. He would absolutely want that as your punishment instead of putting money in his pockets as payment.”

“Many will say this punishment is actually harsh after they lost their titles and lands,” Shael warned me.

“It should be,” I said firmly. “Not only did they go against my decree about messing with Darby, but everything else as well. And they still have to get their punishment from Prince Lageos who gave orders as well. I expect those to be painful.” I stood and smiled at my dad. “But make them fast. I’m hangry. Let’s go make the manager of a buffet cry?”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Anything you want, Daughter.”

“Ohhh, a Vegas buffet with the expensive stuff,” I said, excitedly rubbing my hands together. “I wish I ever got to spend time there besides work. I’ve never even gambled legally. Can’t I just stay there over break with all of the buffets and pools? I did well on my finals.”

“You are more whiney starved than hangry,” Lageos chuckled, kissing my hair to take the sting out of what he said. “Let me beat up some nobles and then we can eat. Invite your mates and let’s have a nice morning.”

I nodded even if I knew there was no having a nice morning after what had already happened. Nicer was about the only option.

We didn’t end up going to Vegas though—much to my disappointment—but to a busy chain buffet place instead. Neldor muttered that we would blend better without glammers, but I simply frowned. Vegas was always busy and people blended in there all of the time.

No matter how many cameras were all over the place.

Still, the place had a great egg scrambler and pancakes, so my tummy was happy. It was clear Lageos caught on that something was up because he kept glancing between my mates and then looking at me. I simply shook my head and gave him a begging look to let it go.

Thankfully, he did.

“I agree with Calarel that you avoid Faerie until you have control over your new magic level,” Lageos said when we were wrapping up. “I’m going to speak with Xavier and Sasha about using their land to work with you. I assume you and Hudson want to go there now to fly?”

“I really need it,” Hudson agreed when I was going to say we could go another time.

I nodded, seeing in Lageos’s eyes that he’d been trying to give me a hint.

Fair enough.

“You guys can come with and hang at the hot springs if you want,” Hudson muttered, looking pretty beat up.

“I’m sorry, beastie,” I whispered as I looped my arm with his.

“I know. I love you, Tams,” he rasped. “I just don’t know that I’ll ever unsee what happened. I’m angry at you for keeping it quiet. I’m angry at me for not knowing you’ve been suffering. I’m pissed I didn’t understand how hard it is to see and hear what you do. I’m just raw.”

Again, fair enough.

We flew for a while, honestly past what I probably should have, but pushing myself was important too. It was nice to get all of that extra energy out, and I was beyond ready for a nap when we finished.

“I got her,” Lucca chuckled, and suddenly I was in his arms. He smiled down at me. “You started dozing while we were walking back to the castle.”

“Good to know I can sleep while walking instead of walking in my sleep,” I drawled... And snuggled up against him.

“Oh, I’m sure you’d manage both just to worry us, cream puff,” he threw right back.

He wasn’t wrong.

I was out before we even made it to the castle. I woke in a *very* nice dream though. Lucca was naked and so was I. We were kissing passionately, and he got aggressive with my

breasts in that way I loved and only he ever seemed to do perfectly.

He teased me about being dripping for him and I begged him to do everything to me. I grabbed his hard dick when he said not yet and then his fingers were inside of me.

I came twice and then he did, groaning that he liked seeing his spunk on my naked skin. I shivered at the intensity of what he said. He said we weren't ready for sex though and I wasn't having that in my own damn dreams. I rolled us so I was on top and told him I was done waiting.

“Oh thank fuck,” Lucca sighed.

I let out a yelp as someone grabbed me around the waist, and then I was a Tamsin burrito in a sheet.

“I need you to wake up, Tamsin,” Julian demanded, his pretty green eyes full of worry. I simply stared at him a moment, appreciating the view.

He'd been working out because his hair was wild and hanging in his face, curled and wet with sweat. I licked my lips as I eyed over his naked chest, always turned on how he'd bulked up and worked on being toned to tempt me. It seemed shallow, but it was the time he'd put into being what I wanted.

I did the same for him.

“My dream got me horny,” I whined. “Why aren't you doing dirty things to—”

“You were doing dirty things to Lucca in your sleep, my sweet fairy,” he cut in, nodding when I couldn't hide my shock.

“I’m still frozen,” Lucca grumbled. “Can we handle that, please? I’m a bit freaked out.”

I looked over at him and saw he was naked in my bed and clearly unable to move. I found my magic on him and pulled it off, wincing when he hurried to cover himself. “Did I—what did I do to you?”

He looked at me with worry in his eyes but a soft smile. “Nothing that I wasn’t willing to do, Tams. I just didn’t want us to have sex while you were clearly sleeping.”

“It was a dream,” I whispered, and then Julian got blurry as tears filled my eyes. “Not again. I can’t go through this again. I can’t lose my mind and—”

“Hey, hey, you won’t,” Julian promised quietly. “This was different, okay? I’m going to ask Lageos for a dampener for your magic. I think you just need to wear it when you sleep.” He seemed worried to me but not like *worried*.

I searched his eyes. “You’re not scared. You’re confident.”

“I’m worried how you’re going to react to what happened because it’s Lucca, not because of what you did. You are not the only powerful magical being that has done magic in your sleep, Tams. That’s how people figured out that I was a savant and extra powerful. I was muttering spells in my sleep at four. It happens when we’re *exhausted* and we cast magic but are too tired, so it doesn’t wake us up.”

That made sense, especially when I didn’t need to write runes but simply think them. I bobbed my head, too embarrassed to look at Lucca. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m only sorry that we aren’t there on our own,” he said quietly.

But I was. I was there and ready to take that step with Lucca. It just scared me too much.

And clearly Julian saw that from whatever he was getting off of me. He gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and mumbled that maybe Lucca and I needed a night out together.

That actually sounded great, and it was exactly what we did after I apologized about a hundred more times. I took him out to a nice dinner and we had like four desserts because we both were addicted to sweets. It was great and I was glad he wasn’t pissed at me.

And yeah, I got the dampener from Lageos. I didn’t want to make a habit of molesting my mates in my sleep.

Or ever, not *ever*, holding people in place against their will because I thought it was a dream. I would be freaked out beyond words if that had been done to me. I’d been chained up and restrained too many times. I knew that clawing fear of being trapped like that.

That wasn’t something I ever wanted to do to anyone and make them afraid.

But Lucca in his goofy way asked for padded handcuffs next time so he knew it was playtime. He even said pink would be his color.

I broke down crying. He was too good to me. I would never have been able to accept that level of crazy so easily. He was my sweet bear and simply hugged me and promised he was fine.

I hoped so. I was scared to try again with him, but I knew I couldn't live without him in my life. Even if our original bond had been broken... A new, stronger one had formed in its place.

### 3

The luncheon went fairly well. I hated those types of events, but it was much better when there weren't enemies involved.

However, friends can be just as much of a pain at times. Especially when they genuinely care for you and stick their nose in everything because of it. Mrs. Von Thann wanted to know about my relationship with Lucca. Queen Sasha was curious how far Hudson and I had "linked" back up, meaning if we forgave each other enough to feel the mating bond.

And that meant we were having sex again without her having to ask if we were.

A few others weren't enemies but clearly wanted to know if Neldor would be on the market so their family would have a chance.

Neldor was waiting for me when it was over, noticing the amount of people who were pretending not to watch how we would interact. He leaned in and kissed my cheek. "You look amazing as always, Princess."

I cleared my throat. "Thanks."



“Let’s go pick up what you needed to and say goodbye to your unicorns before you take this break from Faerie.”

I nodded and let him lead me away, glad when I saw Shael nod that she had the rest in hand. She would make sure everyone was escorted back to Earth and I wouldn’t have to worry about someone sneaking around Faerie.

He opened a portal for us and I felt upset flare behind us, hurrying through instead of whatever else was going on. He answered my unasked question once we were at my castle. “Several people were planning on trying to use this opportunity to get to see your mother and report with their own eyes.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my horror. These were our friends? “People lack tact when their curiosity gets the better of them.”

Still, that was so damn shitty that it made me grumpy.

“You can’t pout like that in such a pretty dress, baby doll,” he gently chastised as he took my hand and led me to the unicorns.

“Wait, I’m in heels,” I reminded him as we walked over the gravel path. I gave him a look to shut it when he snickered and teleported us over to the unicorns. I gave love to both of mine and checked in with the caretaker. Everything was fine and they were all getting along well.

Nice.

Then I brought him outside of my mother’s room, scaring the crap out of the guards. I apologized for teleporting and startling them, but we had limited time... And my feet were starting to hurt. I went inside alone and retrieved my mother’s

journal to me. I glamoured it to look like something else just as a precaution and then left, thanking the guards for their diligence.

I brought us back to the portal, but Neldor stopped me after we went through it. I raised an eyebrow at him.

He let out a slow breath. “You need a break, baby doll. I know you think you take too many or we baby you, but please hear me as a fairy that you do too fucking much. You need these breaks and better ones. You need—”

“Neldor, I agree. That’s why I didn’t fight any of this. I do need a break and to work on my magic. You don’t have to talk me into that.”

“Good. I wanted one too.” He leaned in and brushed his lips over mine, shocking me. “Trust me? Please? You’ve done so much to help me and make me feel... Let me do it this time for you, Tams? Yes, as your mate, but mostly as your friend. I can’t—I wouldn’t survive if Faerie consumed you. I would lose what was left of my soul if the planet I once loved ate someone else I love. Please?”

I nodded when his voice cracked. I didn’t understand what was going on, but if Neldor needed a break, I would absolutely agree to it as well.

“Thank you.” He opened a portal and led me through it...  
Onto an airplane?

No, one of my airplanes.

Yeah, that eyebrow went right back up.

Someone snorted from my right, and I turned to see Darby there. “So clearly you told her what’s going on.”

“He asked me to trust him and I do,” I hedged.

His face softened. “I know, *agra*. Your look was just comical.”

I nodded but then focused back on Neldor.

“Welcome to Vegas,” he purred as he headed for the exit. “You’re here as you, your plane just landed at the airport. We have one stop before the suite I reserved using your name.” He let out a huff. “I had to use your name a lot to put this all together. It’s rather annoying, and clearly I need to work on getting my own fame in this world.”

“I prefer you didn’t until we have to reinvent ourselves,” I muttered. “I was going to mention that to you that I think we should take turns but yes, one of us should always have fame in this world. It’s a pain, but it can be useful too.”

“Smart,” several people agreed.

I looked around then and saw Hudson, Lucca, and Julian as well.

Dalyor, Agis, Kerym, Rafe, Wyn, and Ara were still seated towards the back. I simply gestured between them as if asking to explain.

“We’re crashing your vacation under the guise of being security,” Wyn said bluntly. “So are Calarel and her mate so she can work with you. I think Sontar is going to be coming with his mate as well. He’s taking this as a vacation with some tutoring. Prince Neldor set it all up.”

“Izzy’s missing,” I said, giving Neldor an annoyed look. “How could you forget Izzy?”

“Izzy and her honey are already here,” Neldor chuckled. “They have a room for the week, and then Izzy will be all yours as much as she can after her internship with White and the council.”

“I didn’t realize they were still dating,” I admitted, also having forgotten she was interning again over winter break. There was just too much to always keep track of. “She’s way too quiet about her shit when all she does is poke into mine.”

“It’s the first time she’s dated,” he reminded me. “Imagine the shyness you felt and then add the layers of being your age and just starting to date.”

“Okay, fair, but I still want to be there for her,” I whined.

“Oh dear, that food at the luncheon wasn’t enough,” Julian chuckled. “Let’s go. She needs fuel stat.”

“I always do,” I admitted.

The look I gave Neldor when there was a damn limo waiting amused everyone, but he promised that it came with the suite he’d booked. That didn’t make it much better until he admitted we were getting a huge deal because I was taking promo shots.

Then I wanted to throttle him. The largest owner of a corporation that owned *resorts* should not be taking promo shots at other places.

“I made sure they knew you would only take them and post them—let them use them if the place is up to the hype and you really give your approval,” Darby said after we were in the limo.

“You helped on this?” I hedged.

“We all did,” Julian chuckled. “Somedays you’ll be Tamsin but others you’ll be glamoured so we can all get our dates and fun time with you.”

I glanced over at Lucca. “And what part did you handle?”

He gave me a smirk not to be silly. “I found all of the places with cream puffs and desserts that your security will go stand in line for.”

“We’ll send others,” Dalyor corrected. “We’re not leaving and risking anything when both of our last royals are here together publicly.”

Neldor sighed when I looked at him. “Okay, so I was a bit of an idiot. I couldn’t get anything much at the last minute. And it’s Christmas for the humans, plus all the New Year’s parties. So I had to use your name. They wanted to know what man was speaking for you and I said my actual name because they could know we’re business partners.”

“And the commanders wouldn’t agree to that unless they glued security all over us,” I surmised, nodding that it was fine.

“We’re staying in your huge suite with the private heated pool,” Rafe informed me. “They wanted people on you like *glue* and we were the least troublesome.”

Ohhh, I wasn’t sure I’d put them in that category. We simply knew them, and the commanders were smart enough not to allow recent enlists or newbies to watch us since we’d walk all over them.

Damn it.

Oh well, it was the best deal Neldor could swing, and it would be fun to actually be there as Tamsin for some of it.

We stopped on the strip at a food court, and I grumbled about being in a fancy dress and heels. I hoped Neldor wasn't lying when he promised it would be worth it.

I wanted to give him an annoyed look when our destination was a potato place... Until I saw someone with a massive stuffed baked potato with a damn lobster tail on top.

Then I was just hungry.

I started with that, the damn thing stuffed with so much lobster mac and cheese that it was unreal. Then I had a fried chicken one with gravy and just a whole meal of nummy. There was a BBQ one and then I wanted another fried chicken one. I glanced over and saw Darby with a lobster roll and I couldn't help but smile.

He did a double take when he noticed me staring and then smiled as well. "It's not as good as the ones I had on your first food challenge, but you know I love them."

"I do," I said softly. "I still have dreams of that burger. We need to go back there."

"Anytime. I'd love to," he whispered, looking a bit relieved but also maybe choked up?

I wasn't sure, but it was a nice moment when we hadn't had any of those in so, so long. Even if he'd been around as much as he could. I almost asked about school, but then I didn't want to or get too into anything with him.

So I focused on my chicken in the potato and tried not to feel like a damn chicken.

“They have this place on Portal Chow,” Hudson informed me when I was eyeing up the menu to see what was next. “And people have announced you’re here.”

“That’s seriously dangerous,” I muttered, meaning that I could get this through Portal Chow.

“We’ll handle everything, Your—” Agis closed his mouth at the last minute but still got elbowed by Rafe.

“She means getting this from Portal Chow. She never doubts us like that,” he chastised.

“And one of the food challenges she picked out just for you guys,” Darby added, winking at me when I looked at him. “You pulled a list of ones that included booze after a few people made comments you needed to skip so many desserts and do adult challenges.”

I snickered, shaking my head. “Well, no need to order tacos here then.”

We headed for the hotel, and unfortunately they wouldn’t let us check in until I actually showed up. I thought that was a bit much until I learned it was a thirty-five *thousand dollar* per night suite. Then I looked at Neldor like I wanted to smack him.

“We’re not paying that much,” he promised.

The manager had something they wanted me to sign, and I looked at him next like he was nuts.

Darby grabbed it from me and quickly read it over. “This is fine. It’s saying that they’re giving you discounts to review all facets of the hotel, not just the room or one rolled together

review. Meaning if you like the spa services, you'll say that even if you hate the suite."

"Yeah, I don't post about things I hate," I muttered, reading over his shoulder now. "It's not fair to tear into places for what could be one bad day or employee. If it's good, that's easy to say, but I don't like shredding places or food." I nodded that I got it when the manager chuckled and made it clear that was why they were willing to make this deal.

I would *undoubtedly* like something.

"A few in my party will always double check services like the spa and stuff," I told them, tapping something on the paper. "My security for sure since one place tried to drug me and make a rape tape because people are that crazy. We always tip and I don't care if we pay more then, but don't tell me it's booked up except for me."

"We aren't fully booked, but space is limited," the manager hedged.

"Fine, give us a list of times and what's available now and we'll get it back to you tonight," I agreed. "I'm fine with everything being separate and signing that I'm doing this in good faith, but my time is *limited*, and I'm not just agreeing for discounts when my people won't be treated well and taken into consideration. That's what I don't like in this."

"You have my word, or personally call me out so they'll fire me," the manager said firmly.

I agreed when I saw Hudson and Lucca both nodding that the guy was for real.



I somehow had luggage to unpack, laughing when I saw that clearly the men in my life had picked what I brought. “Who forgot all my fucking underwear?”

“I would guess that was on purpose, Your Highness,” Rafe joked from the living room.

“Right, and they mostly packed dresses. I get it’s Vegas, but it’s December, and it gets colder at night, you twits,” I drawled.

I didn’t even bother arguing, teleporting back home and grabbing some jeans, tops, and fucking panties. I knew the luggage was more for show and probably to make me laugh, but I was tired, and I wanted comfortable if we were going to be out and about.

“We’re leaving in five,” Neldor announced just as I got back. “Did you grab sneakers?”

Nope, so I had to teleport back. Oh well.

Not long later, we arrived at a place called Tacos & Beer.

“Who wants to guess what the challenge is?” Ara mocked as we got out of the limo.

I wasn’t the only one who snorted.

Luckily, we were going after the lunch rush but before anyone would come for dinner, so we had the place mostly to ourselves.

“You’re really not doing this?” Dalyor checked as he looked over what it was, seeming happy with the seventeen-taco-and-four-beer challenge.

“I’m not a beer drinker, and I don’t like the ones where you have to shovel it in and worry about barfing,” I answered.

However, Hudson, Lucca, and all of the other fairies in our party participated. I tried not to lose it when they saw Hudson’s arrive first and then everyone else started ordering sides of sour cream and guacamole. I jumped in when Ara wanted the beans and some slaw sides, reminding her she only had fifteen minutes and could eat more after.

Julian offered to let me get whatever fruity beers I might want to try, but I looked at the clock and saw happy hour started in like ten minutes and shook my head. I smiled and told them they had margaritas soon when he asked why not.

They had some food specials then too, so we ordered a bunch of everything that wasn’t a happy hour option and our server kept looking at us as if to ask if we were kidding. Just because Julian, Darby, and I weren’t doing the food challenge it didn’t mean we wouldn’t eat as well.

Fine, it was mostly for me to try and take pictures of, and the rest of my garbage disposals could finish it after their seventeen tacos and four beers.

Agis’s had come out after Hudson’s, so they went together. Kerym, Lucca, and Wyn went together. Last were Ara, Dalyor, Wyn, and Neldor. I was glad that Neldor hadn’t tried to go prince against prince, but then I saw in his eyes that he’d done it on purpose. Good.

They all killed it. The people working there couldn’t hide their shock.

“There’s dessert, right?” Lucca checked when he was done.

I burst out laughing, nodding and handing him a menu. “These nachos are delish.”

Everything was good, and I had a whole pitcher of strawberry margaritas myself.

“I’m getting yelled at,” Neldor sighed. “Tams, you’re not allowed to drink, *drink* given what happened.”

Right, no being drunk when my magic went up levels. I nodded I heard him and hurried to eat more tacos.

“And she needs to start working on getting this fuel all out,” Neldor muttered to Julian. He sighed when I gave him a look to shut up. I realized my mistake when everyone else laughed. Right, he was saying that I needed to use magic, not that I needed to poop.

My bad.

The margaritas were good.

Calarel, Professor Sontar, and Lageos were waiting in the living room of our suite when we arrived back.

“Aw, I thought the to-go order was for us,” I teased, giving them a wink.

It turned out that the idea on how to work with me over break had already changed. The transfer stones weren’t complicated and lots of people could make them. The commanders did all of the time when they had excess magic. So we weren’t as low on the supply as Lucca had thought,

more people had been commenting how many tons would be needed eventually.

What they wanted was for me to create something new... Which I was always all about.

And so was Julian from the excited look in his eyes that he was trying to hide.

I let out a slow breath and held out my hand to him, making it clear that I was fine with him helping. We sat down and joined them, listening to what they wanted to do while they ate their food.

“So basically, you want me to create a crystal, *from scratch*, that will do what I do to the groves? Not just get them jumping or regrow crops, but how I cleanse too? You want me to make a crystal that can do all of that and someone can just toss on the ground like a nature grenade?”

“But without the destruction,” Lageos agreed, chuckling when I blinked at him. “Tams, this isn’t remotely the weirdest thing you’ve done. Don’t start getting into the mindset that others have. Your biggest advantage over almost everyone is the sky isn’t a limit for you.”

“This is where we’re going for first dinner if you do well,” Neldor told me as he handed me his phone with a video loaded.

I groaned. I simply groaned at the massive bowl of ramen. “That won’t be enough for first dinner.”

“It’s a twenty-minute timer, but you can order more if you want after,” he explained. “There’s a cookie challenge for dessert if you—”

“I’ll try my hardest. Don’t threaten to not let me have cookies. That’s just mean.” I handed back his phone and waved him off.

After linking up with Lageos, I worked for an hour. I tried everything they suggested, Julian even mirroring my magic. I was getting nowhere, and I felt like at the end of the hour I was nothing but tired and annoyed. It seemed further from my grasp than the concept.

I cut off my dad and shut myself off from Julian before letting my magic do what it wanted within what I was looking for. I focused and listened to myself and then there was... Something in my hand.

“Well, that explains a lot,” I grumbled as I studied the small geode in my hand. “It’s not one crystal, but a group of them to handle that magic. And it’s only half of what you wanted. I don’t think I can try to do the cleansing side when I’m indoors.”

“Why do I bother ever trying to help?” Julian mumbled and pushed to his feet.

“Oh, I think you were needed, Dr. Craftsman,” Sontar chuckled. “It’s like staring into your eyes.”

He was right. The inside of the geode was green crystals of all kinds of shades, but the main one was emerald. It was like Julian’s eyes.

“It helps when you guide me,” I told him. “But it doesn’t work for me the way you guys suggest sometimes and my magic gets...”

“What?” Calarel asked.

“It gets sassy, like it’s saying, ‘hold my beer’ and then just does it as long as I’m on board.” I shrugged and handed it over to Julian. “All I know is you have to put it face down in the dirt. The crystals want the ground.”

“Can you make some more and we can have people try it out while we go eat?” Neldor asked as he took it from Julian. “Well done, Tams.”

“Half is better than none,” I accepted.

“You might not be able to put your cleansing into a crystal or...” Lageos said but then frowned. “A crystal is too static. It’s not complicated enough to cleanse. Focus on your magic and see what it might want from you. What it thinks of.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, getting into the vibe of cleansing and trying to focus it instead of letting it lead me where it wanted. I didn’t want to always be the bumbling goof who had to be babysat as she cleansed.

“Something timed,” I mumbled. “Like I’m seeing a music box almost. Open the box and it has a limited time. And I don’t put the cleansing inside of it. Like it can’t cleanse me, but it’s a conduit.” My eyes popped open and then I blinked at my hands. “It felt like Neldor opened it in Faerie. Whatever it is.”

“I felt like I was holding a large hourglass,” Neldor whispered, staring at his hands when I looked at him. “A big one. It was blessed. It felt like pressure was being released when I flipped it and I... Heard you singing? It was like hearing you sing from underwater or a distance.”

“Okay, then that part is on hold,” Lageos said firmly. “You would need to bless it in Faerie at the temples. If Neldor could use it, Faerie was involved.”

I nodded and went back to the first part, making geode after geode. I grabbed my head after a dozen. “Shit, it doesn’t feel like I’m using too much magic until I’m almost out.”

“Join us for the challenge, Lageos,” Neldor offered as he studied one of the geodes. “Tamsin said you love Asian food.”

“I love all food.” He checked with me, and I nodded. It was silly he even checked. I always wanted my dad to join me.

A portal opened and Iolas came through with Shael and Morgan.

“Tell them what you told us and then let’s get you fuel,” Neldor instructed.

I sighed. “I don’t really know. It feels like you’re almost supposed to kind of turn it down into the dirt so the dirt fully connects with the crystal side. It has to be face down, that’s all I know.”

“What is this?” Shael gasped as she took one.

“Later, she needs to eat,” Neldor cut in.

“I’ll explain it,” Sontar offered. “Have fun on your challenge. I have reservations for a nice romantic dinner with my mate. I thank you both for it.”

“We’re pains in the ass and you’re a good teacher. You deserve a break on us,” I said as I stood. I was shocked when Sontar burst out laughing.

“Princess, you both are the *easiest* students I have ever had. Not only do you both love to learn, but you’re diligent and constantly ask fascinating questions that I don’t always have the answers to. It’s made me feel young and open to possibilities.”

“Well, I don’t feel so bad for the lectures I’ve zoned out on now,” I admitted.

On that note, we got out of there and had ramen.

For the challenge, I had the tonkotsu ramen, and the portion was four times the normal size. I killed it in ten minutes. Nom, nom.

Then I had the black garlic miso ramen and two bowls of their monthly special ramen that honestly gave me Hamburger Helper vibes and I didn’t mean that in a bad way. It was like nostalgia and comfort together but fucking delicious.

Plus, there was a ton of potstickers, fried rice, tofu, everything tempura, and quail eggs. All of it was amazing.

Lageos muttered halfway through that I should try and do the geodes while fueling to see how that felt. I nodded and made one then and a second once I was finishing up. It felt okay and like my magic would still have enough to recharge.

We all finished and paid the bill for first dinner in Hawaii before walking along the Vegas Strip for a while.

Then it was second dinner in Vegas at the Heart Attack Grill where it wasn’t a challenge but just something crazy we wanted to try. The burger that had eight half-pound patties with cheese, forty slices of bacon, and chili. There were



nowhere near enough fries to make me happy, but I also got a milkshake and Jell-O shot.

“We’re getting more fries after this, right?” Lageos quietly checked.

Yup, I was his daughter for sure.

“Can we get like four more orders of fries, please?” I asked.

“You’re just making your doggy bag bigger, gurl,” the server joked.

No, I wasn’t. We ate all of it and it was just what my stomach needed.

The last place we went to was a dessert challenge back somewhere in Hawaii. It was a one-hour timer to eat fourteen huge New York-style cookies, three scoops of gelato, an enormous scoop of cookie dough, a glass of their fancy mixed milks, and a milkshake or latte drink.

All of it I could choose what I wanted, so I got an array of cookies, the gelato that looked best, regular cookie dough, strawberry milk with fresh strawberries blended in, and a Biscoff milkshake because Julian promised I would love it. Done and done.

And yes, I finished all of that too.

Luckily, there were so many food challenges around the world or I would really be sad I could only do them once. It might seem mean or like I wasn’t being fair because I wasn’t human, but considering how many extra cookies we bought to take back, I’m pretty sure the place still made out well.

# 4

Julian leaned in and winked at me. “Where are you going to go, love? We’re mates. That means you’re mine.”

I swallowed a cry as I sat up, ready to punch Julian when I saw he was lying next to me.

But he was asleep.

I glanced around and realized I had been too.

Nightmare. It had been a nightmare remembering how he’d treated me while under the black magic. I bit my fist to keep in what I was feeling since I couldn’t get out of bed without disturbing Julian or Hudson as they slept on either side of me.

Then I felt like a *moron* and teleported to the other side of the room by the door. I didn’t want to risk waking anyone, so then I teleported to the living room... And scared the shit out of the people there.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “I figured everyone would be asleep.”

“You guys don’t act like college kids but old people,” Kerym drawled. “You were back by nine from your cookies and milk fun—”

“Which you loved as well,” I grumbled.

“And all went to bed,” he finished.

“Hey, it’s actually *really normal* for college kids to sleep like a week after finals.” I nodded when Dalyor, Agis, and Kerym gave me a range of looks. “I see Rafe is missing. Where is he? Or Wyn?”

“Fair,” Dalyor accepted, getting I meant the two fairies who finished law school finals were crashing too. “Ara though has—”

“She was working her ass off reinvestigating everything about Mason while still doing her normal guarding, and campus is just tiring even if you’re not a student,” I defended. They paused in their card game, but I ignored it. “Why are you playing cards up here? There’s a whole casino downstairs I thought you guys were ready to check out?”

“We were, but you all went to bed and we’re your guards,” Kerym reminded me.

Agis waved the other two off, studying me carefully. “Are you okay, Your Highness?”

I flinched, realizing I had been a bit... Grumpy? “Sorry, I had a nightmare.”

“Like... What kind of nightmare?” Dalyor worried.

“Not the magical kind.” I frowned. “I don’t think. Fuck, Julian.” I teleported back into my bedroom and checked Julian was fine, all of them were even. I let out a slow breath and went back to the living room. “Yeah, he’s fine. Just a normal nightmare.”

“Which clearly involved him,” Agis muttered. “What did the warlock do?”

“It was from before,” I mumbled and moved closer to the windows to check out the amazing view of the Strip. “Go play in the casino. We’re fine up here.”

“And you’ll go back to bed?” Dalyor asked me, suddenly standing beside me. He sighed when I flinched. “How bad was this nightmare that you got lost in your head and didn’t hear us?”

“It’s not his fault,” I rasped. “He was poisoned with black magic and we all missed it. I can’t blame him for what he said or did then.”

“It doesn’t make it any less traumatic for you to have gone through,” he worried.

“I know.” I sniffled and wiped my eyes. “I’m fine. I’ll be awake so they’re safe. Go play at the casino.”

“She does know we’re here to protect her not the others, right?” Rafe asked as he joined us.

“How was your nap, student?” Kerym teased him.

“Law school is harder than it used to be,” he grumbled.

“It’s all the laws they’ve added since you’re so old,” I mocked. “Go play. We’re fine.”

“You’re not going to bed after the nightmare so come join us,” Dalyor offered. “Aren’t you hungry? There’s an hour left for that pizza place they have here.”

That was tempting, but... “I don’t feel like changing.”

“It’s Vegas,” Rafe snorted. “People will be down there in their pajamas.”

“Or worse,” Agis drawled.

Fair enough. I still put on a bra and shoes. I was in a cami tank top and bed shorts so nothing too much. I texted the guys that we went down to the casino and grabbed my wallet before we were out the door.

The pizza slices that they had ready looked like they were sitting out at eleven at night on a Sunday... So we ordered fresh pizzas.

It wasn’t like we wouldn’t eat them.

“I’ve got it,” Dalyor said when I went to pay. I couldn’t hide my shock, making him chuckle as he handed over a credit card to the cashier. “You would have ordered room service and watched TV or gone over stuff for work if you couldn’t sleep. You did this for us, so we’re not on duty. We’re taking our friend Tamsin out for some fun and her first gambling.”

“Okay,” I accepted when I saw all four of them were in agreement. “But then I want fries too. McDonald’s is twenty-four hours.”

“Fries and pizza? I want your metabolism,” the guy said from behind the counter.

I snorted. “It comes with my workout routine. Want to ask me how many miles I run every morning?”

“Nope,” he chuckled and handed Dalyor his receipt.

Yeah, I didn’t think so.

The fries were ready, but the pizzas would take a while.

Kerym led us over to blackjack and plopped down with chips he already got at some point. “You can’t sit with food or anything extra since they watch you for cheating.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” I agreed, checking with the dealer if I could keep eating from where I stood. It amused him, but he nodded.

“I can hold the food if you want to play,” Dalyor offered.

I shook my head. “I’m good. I know how to play, but I’m not big into gambling.” I hurried on when they seemed to hesitate. “It’s fun to watch. I’m just hungry.”

“Was there nothing you wanted to play?” Rafe checked.

I shrugged. “I thought maybe roulette and some slots for fun. Isn’t it like a rule you have to play the birthdays of everyone you love the first time you got to Vegas or something?”

“No, but it should be,” the dealer chuckled as he dealt in Rafe as well. “That’s much sweeter than how I normally see first-time gamblers here.”

Oh boy, I could only wonder the crazy stories he probably had.

I watched them play, Dalyor sitting as well once he was done with his food. He lost hand after hand while Rafe or Kerym kept winning.

“I’m going to get the pizzas,” Dalyor grumbled... With an amused look in his eyes. “You going to play, Agis?”

“All of us shouldn’t be distracted. Even if we’re taking her out as our friend tonight, she’s a high-value target.”

“Relax, Vegas has more cameras than the Pentagon,” I drawled, giving him a look to cool it when the dealer was too interested.

Dalyor came back with a few of the pizzas and they rotated out to play or eat, Agis going to get more of the boxes. We were amusing the people around us and others came to play as well.

Something hit me after I kept guessing which cards would come up and I linked minds with the four of them. “*Can fairies count cards?*”

“*Shit, I thought someone warned you,*” Dalyor groaned. “*Yes, it only takes us a few hands to get the numbers. We’ve acted in this play many times. The trick is not all of us can win and it’s best to have one big loser in the group.*”

“*Card counting isn’t illegal,*” Rafe defended.

I mentally snorted. “*No, but you’ll get banned from the casino forever and the casinos share the lists sometimes. Plus, you won’t like the conversation you might have in the back room.*”

“*Yeah, we made that mistake years and years ago when everything was owned by mobsters,*” Agis drawled. “*Someone got cocky and wanted to pick a fight.*”

All of my money was on Kerym. He was absolutely the type.

“*That was more about one of the mobster’s women wanting me for the night,*” Kerym defended.

I’d called that one.

“Let’s move on,” Dalyor said after several more hands. “This isn’t my lucky table.” He gave the dealer a hundred-dollar tip to show there were no hard feelings.

“It’s my lucky table,” Rafe purred and gave the dealer several chips. “I’m going to find you later, my man. I never gamble this well.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Kerym chuckled. “Normally, I come out ahead and you and Dalyor are in the red.”

“You have some unique names,” the guy sitting with them muttered.

“They don’t use their real names since they’re working as my security,” I quickly said. “Yeah, let’s go check out roulette.” They wanted to cash out some of their chips soon so they weren’t targeted as big winners to watch, and I let out something close to an “eep” at the idea.

We went to a quiet, closed off area to eat and I told them that we needed to talk to Geiger first. I didn’t know how their human covers were and explained to them that it could be a problem. They’d be issued IRS forms for the income and the casino had to report everything to the government.

“Well, that’s not as much fun as it used to be,” Kerym grumbled. “It used to be that you cashed out in smaller amounts and nothing got reported.”

“I’m also not the right person to ask about all of this,” I admitted. “I suggest you take them upstairs and we can figure it out later. I didn’t think we’d be doing any real gambling. Or... I didn’t plan this at all.”



“Fine, I’ll take them upstairs and a few of the pizzas to reheat later, but you go gamble,” he said as he handed me ten hundred-dollar chips.

“I’m filthy fucking rich,” I reminded him. I sighed when they all had amusing reactions from laughing to Agis who was too serious but even his lips twitched.

Fine, I might take risks in business or with my life, but I wasn’t the type to gamble with money. I liked fun bets that it didn’t matter if everyone lost.

Still, I promised I would lose his money and went off with Dalyor and Agis while the other two took up pizzas and their chips.

Agis cleared his throat and tapped his temple, so I linked the three of us. *“I’m a bit surprised you’re fine with this. From what I heard, your mother was against it, like she thought it was offensive and criminal.”*

I snorted, not just in our minds. *“She was naïve to this world. The odds for Vegas and the way they work it—fuck them. They prey on addicts and—yeah, fuck them. There are professional gamblers and you’re above the curve being a fairy. We have enough shit. As long as no one is stupid or gets caught, I don’t care. Pay the taxes you need to. I’d rather it be a rule that half of the income after taxes has to be donated.”*

*“I wondered how it was different than raiding gangs, cartels, or illegal gambling halls,”* Dalyor admitted. *“I didn’t want to criticize the dead, especially since you never knew her, but it felt a weird line to me.”*

I completely agreed.

We went over to roulette and I scanned the table before having a flash of the wheel in my mind with the white ball stopped on a number. It made me blink out at the place to bet and I found myself putting one chip on the number.

“Just one?” Dalyor chuckled. “I think people put down a few.”

I shrugged, quickly looking at the numbers. “I don’t know that two or three out of thirty-seven is that much better odds. This is just for fun.”

Which was why my mouth dropped open when I won. I couldn’t even hide my shock, Dalyor chuckling and moving my chips towards me.

Except, I did it again. I made that “eep” noise once more and tried to pretend I didn’t.

I picked a number that I didn’t see in my head and that seemed to take the focus off of me.

“You can play more than one chip on a number,” Dalyor reminded me.

I simply shrugged, seeing two numbers in my head this time. I put a chip on each and glanced at him. “There, happy?”

“Very,” he chuckled. He did a double take and then frowned.

I ignored him and focused on the table. Honestly, I was a bit annoyed they didn’t warn me about this. I lost several times and won once more before saying that I didn’t want to push my beginner’s luck. I grabbed my almost twenty grand in chips and went to leave.

Except someone had signaled for someone from the casino. They offered me a high roller's room with others and some complimentary whatever, all of it a bit fuzzy in my head.

“No, thank you,” I said easily. “That was my first time gambling and way too nerve-racking. I don't think this is for me. I did want to know if I could tip the attendant like they did for blackjack?”

“Yes, of course you can, Ms. Vale,” he muttered, studying me like I'd grown another head.

“And housekeeping since we're staying here? Or is that crass?”

“No, you can tip any hotel employee with chips except the cashiers. We don't allow them any chips or money on their person given their job.”

“Oh, that's really smart. Thank you. I came for the spa and the chance to eat through my break on Vegas's amazing food, but I'm glad I got to play a bit.” I rushed back to the table even though he tried to talk to me and tipped the attendant a few chips. I waved to the manager and wished him a good night before faking a yawn and heading for the elevator.

Neldor was sitting up waiting for us in the living room looking less than thrilled. He took one look at the massive amount of chips I had on the damn carrier and went right for Dalyor. “You took her gambling and didn't even fucking warn her that we count cards? Are you—you'll blow her whole identity in this world—”

“No, they didn't,” I grumbled. “I figured that out fast and luckily wasn't playing, but it would have been nice to warn me

we also know the numbers that win for roulette. We had just talked about what we can do as fairies and then you don't tell —" The last bit of that was said from behind Neldor's hand. It took me several moments to realize the asshole had actually moved his hand over my mouth.

I was about to shove him away and maybe beat his ass... But then I saw the look in his eyes.

"*We* don't know the numbers for roulette in advance, Your Highness," Agis said firmly, his voice almost cold. "But I would guess it would be nothing for someone with *visions* to see. So when did those start?"

Neldor turned around and pushed me behind him. "Remember who you're speaking to, Agis."

"They're not going to hurt me," I told him gently, moving next to him. I tripped when he shoved me back behind him. "What is your deal?"

"Agis, tone it back. Prince Neldor, we're not going to hurt her," Kerym said firmly. "We're all on the same side now, okay? I know we're older and you're scared of—she's not Queen Meira and we're not at war."

They had probably said something about taking out my mother at some point because they couldn't win against her if she had visions. It wasn't hard to put the pieces together, and I dragged Neldor to the sofa, shoving him to sit down.

He gave me a hurt look, but I simply knelt at his feet and rubbed his knees until he calmed down a bit.

"Have you met my father? I'm fine. Bad at keeping secrets, but we've known that, okay?"

“I can’t lose you, baby doll,” he whispered, tears in his shaky voice.

“Do you want me to shove them off the balcony? Would that make you feel better?” I offered.

“Hey, we were fun,” Rafe reminded me.

“I woke because I felt her fear,” Neldor snapped. “I was suddenly terrified and sweating on the couch and then I realized it wasn’t me but her.”

“We did have fun before that,” I cut in. “We had pizza and I learned some cool stuff. I just shouldn’t gamble here again and they might check the roulette table, but there’s no way to show I was cheating or counting anything. It’s fine.”

“Did your visions start tonight?” Dalyor asked, his voice calmer and gentler. “Is that why you’re both so scared?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “I don’t know what happened. For all I know the table was rigged bullshit and the attendant thought the numbers. Or someone else did working there. From what I’ve heard from my father and Iolas, it wasn’t like that for my mother. She wasn’t a crystal ball or able to tap into the curse. I’d have to ask him, and my dad cannot know I might be having visions.”

“He can help you though,” Dalyor argued.

I turned and gave him an annoyed glance. “Do you have any idea the hell he suffers? His mate that he gave up immortality for is trapped in her death, and he had to let that happen to save all of Faerie. He was trapped in the darkness while you were frozen. It’s a fucking miracle that his mind isn’t shredded from that. I saw that—you don’t understand

what he deals with to stay with me for now. I can't do this to him."

"I agree," Neldor sighed. "If he knew you were maybe having visions..." He slid to the floor with me and hugged me. "I know how much it hurts, but you're stronger than any of us to know you have to let him go for his own sake. I would be a bastard and force my dad to stay with me forever."

"You grew up with the idea that he would be around for a long time, much longer than he was," I rasped. "I found out the first day I met Lageos that he would die when I unfroze my mom. I always knew our time was limited and just appreciated it."

"Most of us would be incredibly resentful of that," Rafe muttered.

I snorted. "I am. Every fucking day, Rafe, but it doesn't change my reality." I wiped my eyes and stood, bringing Neldor with me. "And I hate my mother most days that she chose saving Faerie when it cost him his life. She chose the world she loved and all of you over my father knowing he would die when I came into the world to save you all and unfroze her."

"The alternative was to let us all die," Agis said angrily.

I snorted. "How easy your mind must be that you only see those two options. She had hundreds of visions of what happened. That meant she had notice. She could have done a *lot* of other things."

"Including assassinating my mother," Neldor muttered after I pulled away. "I've heard others mad that she didn't, but

the war would never have ended if she had. Onas and the others have said it clearly given where the realm was.”

“I know. I’m not saying she was wrong. I’m saying she killed my dad to do it, not just herself.” I stared down the other four men. “So don’t you fucking dare tell a soul what you think I might have as whatever power. I will never forgive you and banish you from Faerie if you are the ones to break his soul before I have to let him go.”

“We won’t, Tamsin,” Dalyor said sadly as I turned on my heel and headed for my room.

Hudson, Lucca, Julian, and Darby were standing in the hallway by the door. I couldn’t even blame them for listening in. I hadn’t meant for us to be loud, so I muttered an apology.

“You okay, *agra*?” Darby whispered.

“Let’s go to bed,” I mumbled.

“Good idea, love,” Julian agreed and reached for me.

Except I flinched away from him, shocking all of them. “Sorry, I had—I got up because I had a nightmare.”

“About me?” he checked letting out a slow breath when I nodded. “And clearly I called you ‘love’ in it.”

It wasn’t a question, but I still nodded.

“Will you show me? Please,” he whispered.

“It happened when you were under the black magic,” I explained. “Just forget it.” I gasped when he grabbed my arms and made me look at him.

“No, I won’t. I know it wasn’t my fault, but I did things that destroyed my mate’s fucking soul. You don’t ask me to

apologize or demand that I pay penance for that, but it all still traumatized you, Tams. Don't ask me to ignore that or I'm a git now, without black magic on me."

"I agree," Hudson muttered. "You're not bringing up an old fight or throwing it in his face. You had a nightmare that left the sheets damp after you've been gone for probably a while. He should help you if he can, shorty. You went through something horrible, and it just doesn't go away when the magic did."

I nodded that I heard him, staring into Julian's eyes. I tried to tell him what memory it was, but I couldn't get my mouth to work. I showed him instead, wincing when I projected it to all of them.

"Well, clearly, you need a new memory to replace that one," he said like he was trying to force himself to be calm. "Anytime you think of that horrible moment that I deserve death for putting you through, now you'll think of this moment tonight, okay?"

I opened my mouth to agree so we could just go back to bed, ignoring that I didn't think it worked like that... But I was picked up and thrown over his shoulder before I could respond.

Huh?

"Lads, close the door behind you, I plan on having her be loud enough to disturb others, but they don't need to see her," he instructed before dumping me on the bed. He was over me before I could react, kissing me as he pulled off my clothes.



“I don’t think that’s how a therapist or trauma counselor would recommend handling this situation,” Darby muttered, sounding conflicted.

I tended to agree, but when Julian kissed down my neck and flicked my nipple with his tongue... I kinda didn’t care.

Then he kissed lower, and I thought he maybe knew better than a therapist?

No, not really, but I wanted oral sex. I snorted. “So I get eaten out for every nightmare I have about you?”

“Yes, that should absolutely be the deal,” Lucca answered. “For all of us, cupcake. Anytime we interrupt or upset your sleep, we give you oral sex.”

“Twice,” Hudson muttered.

I wanted to quip they’d be doing it a lot then, but it wasn’t really funny with how many issues we’d had.

And I didn’t want the reverse to be true, or I would be giving a *lot* of blow jobs from how I’d probably hurt them too.

Julian sucked on my clit and all debate—all *thoughts* left my head, and all that was left was pleasure. Much needed pleasure.

He chuckled when I roughly grabbed his hair and made the happy noises he loved. He brought me higher and higher until I was there... And then he changed up what he was doing. Fucker.

Seriously, what a fucker. I knew what he was doing, and I would have loved the orgasm, but I wanted it now. I was greedy like that.

Hudson and Lucca seemed to know what Julian was pulling because they moved onto the bed on either side of me and started touching me. Lucca kissed me while pinching my nipple and that was it, I was done.

“My turn, right, cream puff?” Lucca purred as Julian gave me a long lick when I was done.

I simply blinked at him. “Wait, how did this become a group...” I shut my mouth when Lucca moved between my legs taking Julian’s place. Yeah, I didn’t want to ask questions or shut this down.

“We all get a turn tonight, *cariño*,” Julian muttered. “I want two turns at least.”

“Me too,” Hudson and someone else said.

Wait, I was doing this with Darby? I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but then logic left my head again as Lucca growled against my clit.

“I love the fucking taste of you. I need it more, give me more, cream puff.”

I gasped as he shoved two of his thick fingers inside of me and then curled them. It didn’t take long before I finished and I looked at Hudson, asking if he was really going next.

He chuckled and nodded down the bed... Where Neldor was kneeling.

“Wait, we’re not...”

“Not what, baby doll?” he whispered as he moved over me, studying my eyes. “If you don’t want me, say no. I’ll respect that. Don’t say no because you think it’s not fair to me.

That's my choice." He pushed when I simply swallowed loudly. "We can have some Vegas fun, right? It will stay here. Just between us." He let out a slow breath when I still couldn't think of what to say.

"Don't make him watch your other mates love on you when you know you want him too, Tams," Julian said gently.

"Let me lick you, my future queen," Neldor whispered in my ear before nibbling on my earlobe. "Let me taste you like I've been dying to."

I caved. Yeah, I super-duper caved. That was so sexy to hear from the guy who had been a jackass not long after we'd met and made it clear I was going to service him.

Now he was begging to lick me with no commitments or anything else I was afraid of.

He kissed me breathless and feasted on my breasts for a bit before someone cleared their throat and he moved on.

And I learned that Neldor was fan-fucking-tastic at oral sex. He was as intense with it as he was with everything he did. Right when I was almost there, he flipped us so I was sitting on his face and used some sort of rune on me.

I didn't just fucking climax, I did whatever orgasming was to the tenth power. I actually had to bite my lip until it bled to try and tone back my reaction. It went on and on and was more amazing than I knew oral sex could be.

Shit, I might cave and be with Neldor just for the naked fun if he was this good.

"No, don't push her," Darby was quietly arguing when I could hear anything over the blood pounding in my ears. "I'm

not taking advantage of her crazy night and hormones.”

“Thanks for implying I did,” Neldor drawled.

“That’s different. She validly is upset with me,” Darby countered.

“You don’t want to, I get it,” I whispered before I could stop myself. “Just admit you don’t want me anymore.” I let out a yelp as I was flipped onto my back again and Darby was over me.

“I want you every fucking minute of every fucking day, Tams. That’s not what this is about,” he argued, annoyance in his eyes.

“But you didn’t,” I snapped, smacking his chest. “I was there waiting for you, night after night. Always next to you and waiting for you. Waiting for you to come back to me from Yale and you didn’t. You didn’t touch me. You didn’t want me.”

He mashed his mouth to mine, not deterred when I didn’t really kiss him back. He leaned his forehead to mine, his breath warm on my face. “I always wanted you. I will always want you. I messed up. I neglected you. I’ve done so much wrong, but I’ve never not wanted you. Please, I can’t stand that you think something so fundamentally wrong.”

He went to move off of me when I didn’t say anything, and I reached for him before I even understood what I was doing. I couldn’t let him leave me. Even if I wasn’t in the place where I thought we should be messing around, him moving away from me right then broke my heart. Flashes of

the visions drilled my mind and I couldn't let him move away from me.

So I let him love on my body.

He made me orgasm, but we both knew it wasn't what it used to be and it was... Not what it should be. Tears were in Darby's eyes as he moved up next to me on the bed and held me. He rubbed my back and crushed me against his chest.

"I don't care what your visions are. I'm never leaving, Tams. I might have in that future. I started to think maybe I should so you could be free of me and the pain I've caused. It felt selfish to stay when it could hurt you and Freya. I did feel that. I knew you would never leave me, so I did start to think it." He held me tighter when I let out a sob. "But I won't. I won't ever leave you unless you tell me to. I swear it."

"Idiot," someone muttered. "That's not telling her you want to stay."

"Of course, I want to be with her," he snapped. "None of this has been easy. I wouldn't still be here with four other fucking men and a list of shit we deal with if I didn't want to be with her. I'm staying she's worth that and I don't want to be anywhere else."

I almost asked where my kind and understanding Darby had gone, but I opened my eyes and met Julian's gaze. There was worry in his eyes. He glanced at Darby's back and then met my eyes again. He nodded.

He was telling me Darby wasn't himself and I should be worried? Or let the harshness go?

Yeah, I understood that and could accept it, mouthing “thank you” for giving me the heads up.

“So I don’t get my turn, right?” Hudson asked quietly, breaking the super serious and emotional mood right then.

I couldn’t help but love my stupid dragon. “I was thinking you got sex for going last.”

I yelped as I was pulled away from Darby and moved across the bed. Hudson’s nostrils were flared and his eyes were deep purple with passion. He waited for me to nod that I was really giving him permission before he kissed me.

And then my dragon rode me hard the way I loved and needed.

Just not on the bed yet. He moved me over to the sofa and we gave everyone a show.

Hey, at least we were sleeping in the bed together fine and I’d... Something with Darby. That was enough for one day.

## 5

“You are in *way* too good of a mood to not have participated in the fun we overheard last night,” Dalyor said from the living room the next morning.

“Tamsin is not the only one who can bar people from leaving Faerie,” Neldor replied, his voice deadly cold. “I can as well, and by the gods, I will if you poke at her or me in front of her. Wanting her doesn’t give you—”

“I think he was telling you to chill your mood,” Rafe cut in. “You’re about to start whistling like in a cartoon.”

“Fuck off,” Neldor grumbled. “Just remember you all like this world a lot and behave.”

I wasn’t sure what to do so I went with my gut and walked into the living room and made it clear that I’d overheard the conversation. I kissed Neldor on the cheek in thanks and went over towards Ara. “What’s on the agenda?”

There was a thud behind me, and I turned to see Neldor retrieving a bottle of water from the floor. I blinked at it a moment and then noted how he didn’t look at me.

Had he dropped it in shock?

That was actually adorable, and I felt my face flush. I cleared my throat and tried to stay focused. “We’re playing another day of stuffing Tamsin with everything good, right?”

“I got you covered there, shorty,” Hudson said from behind me, his voice rough from sleep.

Several people chuckled or coughed to cover that they wanted to laugh.

It hit me what he’d said then and I spun on my heel and flicked him in the forehead. “Seriously?”

He rubbed his forehead even if it didn’t really hurt and leaned down for a kiss. “Sorry, but last night was so fucking amazing that I can’t—this place gets good room service, right?”

“You’re grounded. Go back to your mountain,” I grumbled.

“No, I only have today completely free,” he whined as he hugged me to him. “I can only come back here and there after today. Don’t send me away. I’ll feed you what—”

“If you say I crave your cock, you’re getting tossed off the balcony and can fly home,” I warned him.

“I was going to say ‘whatever you want,’ you dirty fairy,” he purred.

“I hate you today,” I mumbled, my face, ears, and everything flushing lava hot. I hurried for the door, stopping only to get my phone and wallet from a smiling Julian.

The manager stopped me in the lobby, all smiles and clearly down for gossip. “I heard you made a winning last



night.”

“It’s kind of sus,” I replied, several in my party going tense. “I say I’m going to play some birthdays of the people I love and suddenly the table is rolling those numbers. That’s too much beginner’s luck.” I hurried on when he opened his mouth probably to say that he agreed. “Then someone’s immediately standing there asking me to hit the high rollers room? After a handful of hundred-dollar bets? Sus. I knew gambling wasn’t for me.”

Instead of wanting to talk to me, the man now wanted to get away from me which had been the goal. “I’m not a big gambler either even if I work where there’s a casino. I’m a spa fan if I have free time.” He handed me a folder. “That’s what we have open and can accommodate your people for over the next week.”

“Oh, thanks so much. Yeah, this is way more my vibe.” I took it and gave a little wave before hurrying towards the limo.

Especially when I saw Izzy standing there. I hugged her and twirled her around like we hadn’t seen each other in weeks instead of a few days.

“I missed you too, goof,” she chuckled. “And I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

“Hello, hi, yes, good morning, Your—” her girlfriend started to ramble when I set Izzy back down.

“Tamsin,” I cut in and gave her a half hug. “Good to see you again. I hope you’ve been well.”

“Yes. Um, yes. Okay.” And then she about dove into the limo.

I just gestured to her and looked at Izzy as if asking what was going on and if I had to handle something.

She snorted. “Ignore Rana. She’s just a huge fan and I told her that you get annoyed with fangirls.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” I argued as I got in next and met the woman’s eyes. “I don’t get annoyed as long as people don’t think they can just touch or grope me without permission and that’s mostly for guys. I just don’t know what to *do* with people who are my fans. I don’t really understand why I have fans.”

I shrugged when several other people chuckled. I understood since I would be queen—kind of—but... Yeah, I wasn’t really a fangirl of anyone, so I didn’t get it.

We arrived at The Pepper Club for one of the few brunches in Vegas that wasn’t on Sunday. Izzy took charge about the reservation and what she had preordered to start.

Namely, the entire menu.

“Izzy took over what I had started and added more,” Neldor let me know.

“Hey, you said we’re having fun and doing this and I’m keeping one of my income streams going,” Izzy said over her shoulder.

Right, she had control over the Hungus Among Us social media and even my streaming stuff that I barely got to do anymore. The videos went up on YouTube and she was in charge of all of that now.

I wasn't going to do it and there wasn't enough to entertain Marisol.

Since we were focusing on that, it was how we ended up in our old seating arrangement of Izzy at the head of the table with her camera, me next, then Darby, and Julian. Everyone else filled in the other seats, so I was actually sitting across from Izzy's girlfriend... And Rana looked like she might faint from that.

I could just ignore that, right? It wasn't my fault after all.

I tried not to get annoyed because if she was dating Izzy and behaved like that, it make it hard for me to hang with Izzy. She would get over it just like others.

I hoped she did.

I had had high hopes from the place, but honestly... It was hit or miss. The tiny breakfast tacos for almost twenty bucks were about as filling as a Taco Bell breakfast Crunchwrap and had about the same taste. With half an avocado.

There were a few things that were damn good, but it was like the rest of the menu was pumped up to that and was basic. Izzy stopped taking pictures after about half of the items and we didn't order anything else.

I still tipped the server generously since she was nice.

"This is Vegas where you can get great food cheap," Izzy grumbled when we were outside in the limo. "You can't have overpriced okay food here."

That summed it up pretty damn well.

There was a cereal challenge on the agenda next, but since the brunch place didn't pan out, Izzy found us a restaurant right in the same hotel shopping area and we ate there. It was great—good quality, price was normal, and the servers were nice.

We went to the food challenge where Neldor and I crushed the five pounds of cereal in forty-five minutes. It was honestly easy since we were always hungry. The staff was fairly shocked.

And since it was still breakfast time, we ended up picking up an order from Earl of Sandwich before heading back to the hotel... Which ended up being funny because we had one in our hotel.

“For the record, I didn't realize this was going to be an intimate thing,” Neldor warned me as he handed me something in the limo.

I flinched when I saw it was for a couple's massage at the hotel. “I'm not against us doing this, but not publicly. You saw how the manger knew what happened at the casino. If I have a couple's massage with a man not Darby, it will be all over social media.”

“I didn't think of that. I'm sorry.” He looked over at Darby. “I apologize.”

Darby nodded. “I'm sorry I'm about to steal your massage, but she's right.”

“No, of course. I don't want her getting—I wasn't thinking.”

I thought back to what Darby had said the night before about being with me even when it was difficult because there were four other men. I reached over and took Neldor's hand. I couldn't even imagine what he went through having known I was his mate for years, since I was a *baby*, and having to constantly come in last place. Yes, some of that had been his fault, but if I was honest, most of it was the fault of supe society now.

"Tell the manager that you made a mistake and didn't realize it was a joint thing instead of just two massages," Hudson quietly suggested. "You could go glamoured as Wyn and Ara."

Neldor and I shared a look and both shook our heads, Neldor responding. "It's too risky at something like a massage to keep up a glamour. We're too powerful for someone to put it on us, and all it could take was for one of us to doze off, which I generally do during massages. But thank you for the suggestion."

"Someone was trying to talk me into hiring a royal masseuse so you know, we can have massages then," I added, trying to keep my tone light.

The massage was amazing and then we had lunch at the dim sum restaurant at the hotel. It was good but had items on the menu that I wouldn't try again. Mostly the chicken feet. I was out the moment it was eating animal balls or feet.

Probably a few other parts if I was being honest.

But the dumplings were amazing and Izzy was on the same page about that.

“Aren’t you supposed to be letting the fuel out?” Neldor asked me when we were done.

“I wanted to see how the geodes test went, and also I was thinking of saving it up to try something new.”

The dining room table was loaded with cream puffs and more of those crazy baked potatoes when we arrived back upstairs. I was super happy about that... Until I saw Lucca frowning.

“I didn’t do this,” he grumbled. “Cream puffs were supposed to be our thing.”

“They are, pouty bear,” I chuckled.

“It’s from the hobgoblins, so you cannot be upset,” Stefanie said from the far side of the suite. “Can I just book a massage while visiting you or something? This spa catalog is very appealing.”

“Yes, you absolutely can, and we have the calendar of open appointments,” I told her. “Now why are the hobgoblins feeding me food they had to buy instead of what they make?”

She blinked up from what she was reading and couldn’t hide her surprise. “Has no one told you how the geode test went?”

“No, but I learned fairies count cards,” I chuckled, nodding when she winced. “And my guards like to gamble, so we need a real adult to figure out how to handle that situation when I’m not sure who has social security numbers or whatever. Papers to be from another country, any of it.”

“That would probably be best,” she muttered.

“Fine, but if they’re not paying taxes on the money, they have to donate half to charity. I don’t care if that’s for the rest stops, a project in Faerie, or saving this planet—just donate it.”

“More than fair,” she agreed.

“What happened with the geodes?” Julian asked, handing me a baked potato and fork.

He really did love me. I dug right in as Stefanie told us the geodes were nothing short of a miracle. They used one at the co-op after they had just harvested the huge cotton fields and the geode regrew it all over a few hours to bigger than when the plants had been harvested.

“It was needed to get our economy back in Faerie,” she said as she ate her own potato. “Several large storage houses of fae material were ruined in the war, so any clothing stores—anything that uses material has been on hold. Only now are some hobgoblins returning to Faerie to their old lives and businesses. The co-ops there have—”

“They all get geodes,” I said firmly.

“Already done with the largest hobgoblin co-op,” she assured me. “More residences are finished for the hobgoblins, and dozens have left the employment they still had in this world. Even if they worked for not bad people, they gave notice once we were out as back and made it clear they wanted to return home.”

I nodded and glanced at Neldor, distrusting of all of them being let go. “Once they all leave those employments, I want a check done of every known supe housing. Fae dogs. They could sense if hobgoblins were inside no matter the magic or

what people cooked up while you were gone. I know it's overkill and tedious, but it needs to be done."

"Agreed," she said. "We checked again and again for them, but I agree that all hobgoblins need to leave their supe employments in houses and we check everyone."

Good. I was glad they all finally understood how we needed to do better.

"The other geodes were used at a few of the largest farms in Faerie with even bigger results. The magic went ridiculously well and affected areas we would never have guessed."

"Was any damage done?" I checked, relieved when she told me no.

"How come you haven't done any today?" she asked. "Or have—"

"No, I haven't yet because I wanted to try something," I admitted, tossing the empty container and wiping my hands. I went outside to sit in the sun by the pool. I closed my eyes and focused on what I wanted. If I could create crystals—a bunch of crystals even in a geode—it made sense that I could create other things that were found in the ground.

I ramped up my magic and then let it out for what I wanted... And never even felt myself hit the ground when I passed out.

I woke with a groan, reaching for my head, but my arm didn't respond. "Fuck, that hurt. Glad that didn't work. Can't my magic just tell me no?"

"Stop talking," Julian snapped. "Did we find him?"



“Yes, he was in Faerie,” someone replied. “And should be here—”

“Where is she?” Lageos growled.

“She’s here and trying to talk, but it was gibberish,” Julian answered. “And before you get pissed, she didn’t tell us what she was planning on doing.”

“You wouldn’t have stopped the fool even if she had,” Lageos muttered before flooding me with power and healing. “Can you open your eyes?” He sighed when I did.

I was lying next to the pool, *wet*, and on my back. “I have questions.”

“Is she out of danger?” Julian checked, let out a slow breath when Lageos nodded. “No more trying new things that have never been done before without your father or healers standing by.”

“Fair,” I whispered, taking in all of the freaked out faces. “Sorry. I didn’t think it was—I did a bunch of crystals in a geode. I didn’t think that so different than a gem since they both came out of the ground.”

“They are,” several people said firmly.

“To be fair, there was no way she tried for a ten thousand carat diamond,” Darby said from my left.

“No, I was thinking like earrings—how do you know I wanted a diamond?”

He moved closer so I could see him, a range of emotions on his face and in his eyes. “You didn’t fail, *agra*. You made a diamond that’s almost five pounds.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but my stomach growled obnoxiously. “Why am I wet?”

“You dropped so fast that you went ass over teakettle into the pool,” Julian growled. “Luckily, you put your phone and wallet on the table when you came in.”

It made more sense when I saw Agis mostly naked and using magic to dry his hanging clothes. “Thanks for the save.”

“You’re welcome, Your Highness,” he muttered, not even sparing me a glance. He really was a hard nut to crack.

Luckily, I had no desire to do that. Someone else could.

I took off my wet clothes and Darby helped me into a robe before I sat and inhaled two of those massive stuffed potatoes. I felt like I was back in my head and I looked at Julian first. “I’m sorry. Please stop being angry. I have questions and you’re like one—”

“I’m not angry. I’m freaking out,” he admitted as he plopped down across from me.

“This isn’t remotely the weirdest thing I’ve done,” I reminded him.

“I know,” he whispered and let out a slow breath. “It’s the pile of them. It’s also the rules you keep breaking. Yes, I didn’t know everything since I’m not a fairy, but even Neldor immediately said you couldn’t have made a diamond because that’s not possible.”

“Oh, well...” I still would have tried it. I knew fairies could make certain crystals from scratch, but it wasn’t normal, and I’d done other things no one had.

“I think I can,” Lageos muttered with a frown. “No, I think my brother did and vomited for a few days. Magic isn’t about making things like that. It tips the scales into selfish or something.”

“I don’t see how that’s any different than growing crops that people will sell,” I countered. “It always seemed weird we couldn’t make gold. It’s one element. Water is two combined elements and dirt is a whole mess of organics.”

“I understand where your mind is, but you have to think of the founding of magic or the root of it,” Stefanie said as she sat down next to me with a cream puff. “It’s a blessing and power from the gods to aid us. The basics of our magic are to aid people—fairies, witches, or even humans who have no magic—when the world was new. Droughts meant starvation and death, thus water is allowed.

“Fire can save from the cold. Wind to put out fire or water. All of it stems from basics. Just like your body moves to run from danger or bring you to food. Even more complicated things like sex to procreate or hunting to feed more. All of it stems from survival.” She waited until I nodded. “Now, we know how things get twisted around. The body that was meant to hunt food kills people too.

“Even the good stuff of laughing and dancing. That all evolved with people and intentions just as magic has. Diamonds and the importance of gold came much later. It wasn’t in the original concept of magic. You have to think of it that way. It’s important *now*, but when magic first came about, gold was no more useful than a pile of lead, and why would you need to use magic for that?”

I waved the others quiet for whatever they might have wanted to say as I took a cream puff from the box she offered. I mulled over what she said and went for another one. “That makes sense. I just always think of it in terms of complicated versus simple. Gold is one element versus water being two. Fire is a combination of stuff. Even a reservoir with layers and layers is way more complicated than the makeup of a diamond.”

“Right, but just because it’s an element doesn’t make it simple,” Darby cut in. “There are elements that aren’t naturally occurring but are one element. They have to be made and it’s complicated as can be.”

“I think that’s what I was missing,” I admitted.

“You also have to think about how that gold originally formed,” Neldor added. “There was a theory that it was from two stars colliding or a supernova, right? It was particles that fell to earth when it was still forming. That’s very complicated over water which is naturally occurring. Even naturally occurring is complicated.” He held up some hunk of rock in his hand. “Diamonds take hundreds of years to form with complicated conditions.”

I nodded my head until he wiggled the rock at me and then my mouth fell open. “Are you saying *that’s* the diamond I made?” I almost fainted when he sighed as if to tell me *duh*. “Wait, we’re *sure* it’s a diamond? Maybe I failed and made a really big crystal?”

“It’s a diamond,” Dalyor chuckled. “The biggest raw diamond ever known to this world. Bigger than the Cullen one

that was three thousand carats before it was cut up. That thing is beyond priceless.”

“Except we’re never telling people we have it or she made it,” Neldor told him firmly, his voice back to cold and deadly.

I waved for it, but the moment my fingers touched it, I pulled my hand away, feeling almost a shock with my magic. “Okay, so my magic wants to do it again. It’s excited.”

“Of course, it is,” Neldor sighed.

I gave him a look to stuff it. “I was focusing on the *one-carat* earrings I have, okay? One. Maybe two because I actually pictured both earrings. I didn’t think of a fucking hunk, so back off.”

He sighed and set it on the table before kneeling at my feet. “We don’t need to add to the list of reasons people would want to take you from me—fairies. That’s why I’m upset. I’m not mad at you. I’m frustrated too.”

“We couldn’t tap into you to heal you,” Julian explained. “We were blocked from you. Even if we weren’t linked, I should be able to heal you. Neldor as well. We couldn’t.”

“That freaks me out more than the big fucking diamond,” I muttered.

“Us too,” Julian admitted.

“I wasn’t blocking or trying to put myself in a bubble.” I looked over at Lageos. “Could my connections be cut when I’m vulnerable like that so no one can do anything to me? Like it doesn’t want them going down with my ship or something?”

“Probably both,” he accepted. “It’s to protect you from anyone using that connection but also to protect them. Yes, that’s exactly how your magic would work.”

Okay, well, that was one thing figured out.

“Let’s make sure there’s nothing with this that people can tap into and it’s just a diamond,” I declared. “Once we know it’s fine, talk with Katrina. We can break it down and auction them off for however she wants and use the money for Faerie.”

“That’s it?” Neldor hedged.

“Yeah, except figuring out what my magic wants to play with if I can get it to be controlled,” I said with a sigh. “I want another massage.” I actually threw on clothes and headed for the lobby to the surprise of everyone, Ara and Wyn racing to go with me.

Izzy caught us at the elevator. “I’m fine with Rana’s memories being changed.”

I nodded, thanking her. It couldn’t have been easy for her to want her girlfriend’s memories to be changed, but I appreciated her doing it to protect me. I hadn’t realized they’d come up with us to the suite or I wouldn’t have even attempted it.

Izzy knew I didn’t want to talk about it though. “I posted this morning about your winnings and how crazy it was that you won big off important birthday numbers, but you didn’t think gambling was your thing, too stressful.”

“You’re perfect,” I sighed, glad we handled that.

“I just posted that you had one of the best massages ever and it was a nice chance for you and Darby to spend some

time together,” she muttered. “I put in the agreed-upon thing that the post isn’t sponsored but you are getting discounts as a reviewer.”

“Glad you added that in about Darby to show we’re fine.”

“Of course, but are you guys fine?” she hedged. She nodded when I sighed. No, but the world couldn’t know that.

I went right for the manager and was glad when he moved us off to the side. “What do you hope I will try out and love? Not saying I will, but like what would you prefer me to focus on?” I put the spa pamphlet on the counter. “Stuff like being wrapped in towels I can’t do—”

“But I could,” Izzy muttered, getting where my head was and why I’d left the room. “And Tams wouldn’t bother with getting dolled up for dinner with your services, but I bet you would want that photo of her after she did.”

“We would,” he hedged, seeming shocked we were willing to play ball like that.

“I don’t have a problem doing that, but like I said, my people will do it too and if they don’t get the same treatment as I do, I’m still not going to say it’s awesome. We can all fake too much for one person who can’t hide her bright red hair.” I felt better when he smiled and seemed a bit more at ease with me.

I felt better when it was all planned out. I was getting a body scrub tomorrow, a facial the next day, mani and pedi Thursday, and Friday they would do my makeup and hair for going out... And that was the night he wanted us to review

their prime rib and crab that the hotel had special at their buffet. Done and done.

“Corporate wanted me to lose these messages, but that’s a line I’m not comfortable with,” the manager muttered as he slid some papers to me. “You’re only staying this week with us, but apparently others would love you to stay there next and will offer you a lot to make it happen.”

“That’s stupid because someone would have eventually gotten to us and Tams would have pulled the plug hearing you guys were shady,” Izzy grumbled and took the messages.

Absolutely. I didn’t deal with that kind of shit, and I made it clear with the look I gave the manager before we left.

We got everyone together and then went to lunch at one of the restaurants the hotel had before hitting a nine-pound spicy pizza challenge that I didn’t actually participate in. Even if I could tolerate spicy now because of runes... I didn’t like that numbness and my mouth tingling with everything I ate later. So I didn’t go for spicy.

Then it was the ten-pound quesadilla that I greedily gobbled up. After a break, there was an all-you-can-eat seafood boil place off the Strip that was killer. Next was another challenge in Hawaii we weren’t announcing we did but saved it for another time. It was six huge sausages and three loaded fries. I wanted more when we were done and I wasn’t the only one to the owner’s amazement.

If only they knew we’d had a massive dinner before that they would have fainted.



And that was how my first week in Vegas continued. Eat, spa, make geodes, and let loose as much as I could.

For breakfast, we mostly hit buffets. The buffet in our hotel was actually amazing, and we went more than just that Friday night. I got some flak about saying it was the second-best buffet in Vegas since it was normally ranked fourth and fifth, but I stood by what I said and defended it. I put we didn't just go for the review, and out of the three times we went, everything was perfect, the service was as well, and the price was the best value.

There was also an all-you-can-eat Brazilian steakhouse, Korean BBQ, hot pot, dim sum, and tacos that we found.

Of course, there were more food challenges like a "big meat challenge" at one of those places that were supposed to be funny for being rude. For the record, none of us enjoyed, it and I thought Ara was going to smack our bitch server who got a kick out of us not liking it more than the act.

Then there were challenges of eight pounds of pasta that was amazing, five-and-a-half-pound burrito that was meh, two different burger ones that made me happy, and a ribs challenge that had never been won before.

Lastly, my favorite, the froyo challenge with *eight* large and loaded sundaes. Yummy.

And in between, we went back to our favorites that were quickies like that potato place, a burger place that was unreal... Plus, all the cream puffs my bear could find for me.

The result of all of that besides a massive diamond?

A shit ton of geodes. Like a shit ton of a shit ton.

Yay?

## 6

New Year's Eve I was sitting in the Vogel's bathroom trying to control my temper but also blink back tears of... A variety if I was honest with myself.

"Are you all right?" Sasha asked gently as she locked the door behind her so no one else could come in.

"No matter how much cancer we cut away, there's just more and more until I'm just drowning in sadness that there's nothing worth saving," I admitted. "This wasn't the life I ever wanted, and I'm a bit tired of accepting so much."

"Unfortunately, that's part of life no matter the level of power."

I glanced at her and didn't hide my emotions fast enough, looking away when I saw shock in her eyes.

"You're mad at me. Or both of us? Our family?"

"That's not an easy answer and I think would depend on a few things," I hedged.

"You mean it will gauge just how upset you are with me because you are fuming," she whispered.

I pushed to my feet and squared off with her. “Yes, I’m pissed. That’s valid no matter your answers. I’m trying to stop myself from judging you though.”

“I came here to comfort you,” she reminded me.

“While I appreciate that, why should I need comfort in your damn castle, Sasha? Why am I being so disrespected in your house, at your party?” I bared my teeth at her when she opened her mouth. “I am more than Hudson’s future wife. I can bear this, but if his mate was someone without a fucking army behind her—would you have stepped up and protected her? I don’t think you would have given how much you’ve allowed to be said about your son.”

“Hudson is—”

“I mean his brother,” I clarified. “How can you let people call him your *backup* in your home? How can you let him hear such bile?”

Anger filled her eyes. “That is part of being in power, Tamsin. You rise above it.”

“You know what happened when I did that? People pushed more and fairies got hurt. Assholes are children who don’t understand lines and boundaries, only what they can get away with. I have flattened people who spoke of Neldor that way. That is my job as the boss—to protect everyone who stands behind me.”

“Well, we are not in the same positions as you are,” she snapped.

“No, but you’re not in the positions you were five years ago either,” I reminded her. “And no matter what position you

are—I'm not saying you start a damn war, but you invited them into your home, Sasha. You gave the bad kids cookies. I understood when there were so many threats, but your council is gone. The vampire and warlock councils are being rebuilt from the bottom.

“Alec and Berman are gone, their whole families, and the traitors dead. So who are you still so worried about? Because we both know I would swoop in with a million fairies if you were ever threatened and so does everyone else. Except now you've let anyone here passively aggressively insult me because I'm here as Hudson's future wife and they think it's allowed. It's not allowed.”

“You're more than welcome to say what you feel you should. We would never stop that.”

“Oh, so everyone can talk about your deranged future daughter-in-law? Why do I have to do that? Have I made *you* do that at my functions? No, because everyone knew their ass would be buried or drowned in Faerie if they ever thought to.”

I headed for the door but paused in unlocking it.

“You spent so many years grabbing your ankles with this bullshit because you were worried about your children and the lives of your family. I can't imagine what that was like for you to have to be nice to snakes because they scared off other predators. But if you don't change what you allow, you won't have the friends who treat you well stick around because of how those snakes you've invited treat them.”

I unlocked the door and left, ready to be done with this stupid fucking night. I hadn't even gotten the chance to dance with my mate.

“Oh, you’re back?” a woman purred, surrounded by several others. “We thought you were going to hide in the bathroom all night. Apparently, your mother didn’t teach you how—”

The look of death I gave made it clear she should shut her mouth. “Speak ill of the queen of the light realm in my presence and you will not like the consequences.” I glanced over my shoulder and met Sasha’s gaze. “They push and push. Now they’re going to start being passive-aggressive about my dead mother who gave her life to save fairies because no one stopped them saying so much about me.”

“I think that’s a bit much,” another woman chuckled. “It was simply a harmless observation about how you were raised. It’s a shame someone who might mate into the Vogel family is so sensitive.”

I was about to blow my lid when I saw how large the audience was to this, like the parasites gathered near the ballroom’s bathroom when I’d gone in there. I was interrupted when Commander Talila and three squads of Faerie Guardians came hurrying into the ballroom. I swallowed my annoyance when the two women went pale at seeing them.

Seriously, there was just so much cancer in this society that it never ended.

Talila bowed to me before coming closer and leaning in. “There are two situations with portals and your orders were for none of us to approach. Only you and your dogs.”

Demons. Demons had actually been stupid enough to try and breach Faerie.

Ballsy.

I nodded and stepped back from her before teleporting my dress, shoes, and tiara to my room while bringing my uniform, boots, and sword to me. I'd perfected the move and even practiced it with my new power level just to make sure I had the control of my new magic.

I turned and faced the two women as I added fae fire to my sword, scaring the shit out of just about everyone there. "None of us are ever only one thing. I wasn't only Hudson's date tonight. I am *always* the heir of Faerie and how you have treated the future queen of Faerie has been seen by many." I put out the flame and went over by Hudson. "Sorry to leave you alone, but I have to handle something only I can."

He leaned down and gave me a heated kiss. "Be safe. I'll be waiting to tuck you in when you're victorious."

I winked. "That's the only way I know how to be. I hope you'll be wearing less when you tuck me in, beastie."

"It's a promise," he chuckled, glancing at Talila. "Best of luck, Commander."

She snorted. "I appreciate the sentiment, Prince Hudson, but we have the most powerful person in two worlds leading us. I would save the luck for those who need it."

Wow. I wasn't the only one shocked at that given how Talila had once loathed me. Still, she always toed the line in public and I've always appreciated that.

We headed for the portal and Talila set it, walking through first before one squad did, then me protected in the middle, before the others would.

The moment I stepped through the portal, something felt off. It wasn't the demons there, but magic I'd felt before. I glanced around and saw who was there glad when I saw Agis and Kerym. I quickly linked our minds as people moved out of my way so I could approach the portal to Faerie.

*“Someone is watching us. I feel strange magic I have before. Slip away and see what you can find but be careful. Someone powerful enough to hide from everyone other than me is very powerful. Take Alphas of my packs, hidden.”* I opened three portals and let my fae dogs join us.

*“Yes, Your Highness,”* they both said.

I gave orders to the two Alphas that arrived first, and they acted like they were checking out the portal and demons before going invisible and slipping away.

Something Talila and Taeral noted. I told them in their minds but to leave it to Agis and Kerym.

“You were smart to trap the portals,” Taeral praised. “I didn't know the demons would be frozen in it—”

I caught a flash of something since I already had my telepathy on. “Do not allow Neldor here. They assumed I wouldn't come because of the party and he would.”

Taeral immediately pulled out his phone, but Talila simply moved closer to me and lowered her voice. “Are you reading the minds of demons?”

“I don't know, but that's why I stopped speaking in your head,” I admitted, moving closer to the one demon. “I want someone to use a telepathy rune and try.”



She was smart and waited until Taeral wasn't distracted with the phone before doing as I said. "I'm sorry, but I can't hear anything, Your Highness."

"I'm not really hearing it either," I muttered. "But I am. It's like a radio that's not tuned right." I shook my head. "No, that's not right. A video call with bad internet. It's like I'm only catching one of several words." I sighed. "I need them separated."

"I would advise against you in the minds of evil," she worried.

"I'm not in their minds. It's what they're broadcasting, but I agree with your concern," I told her. "I won't do this long or try too hard. I'm simply listening carefully."

After considering how to do what I wanted, I put down the same runes trap further from the portal and opened another portal below three of the four demons so they landed in that trap. Then I put a thick barrier over them before focusing on that one demon left.

And it helped.

"Interesting. Their mind isn't technically theirs since they're possessing the dead body, but I catch something. I bet the voice would be different like with the black magic."

"We spooked the person, Your Highness," Agis told us. "The dog reacted in fear when they caught something and I felt a portal open."

I nodded, focusing on one pack of dogs. "Search the area. See if they're really gone or if you can pick up any trace to follow." I thanked them when I got barks of acceptance. I

froze when I caught what was next. “I knew keeping that fucker alive was a mistake.”

“Princess?” Talila hedged.

“Who is the best with telepathy runes? Onas?”

“No, he actually isn’t,” Taeral muttered. “You would think so because of his ability to get everything from an interrogation, but it’s his magic and he makes observations other ways. I would think I’m one of the best.”

“I want your sister here as well. I apologize, but we need to check if another fairy telepath can hear this.”

“I would prefer her not be near demons or on their radar so forgive me for asking what—”

I showed him and Talila what I’d caught, both of them going pale.

“I’ll get her here right away,” he whispered, his voice shaky.

“I would suggest a few other commanders who use the telepathy runes best,” Talila said quietly.

“Do it.” I moved closer to the demon and decided to get started but then remembered how surprise was always the best way to handle these situations.

Which meant waiting when I was impatient. Bah.

Neldor showed up anyways, and I gave him the look he deserved before teleporting him to my house to wait for me.

But the fucker just came back.

“I’m giving you a direct order,” I seethed. “Are you really going to dare disobey me like this in front of others?”

He adjusted his neck and bowed to me. “Never. I apologize.”

Good. I sent him to my house again. I wasn’t sure how he’d gotten from the hotel or whatever, but I just needed him out of there.

He could open portals after all.

The commanders couldn’t catch anything with the telepathy runes... But Taeral’s sister could. Not a lot, much less than me, but she caught enough to make her afraid.

I had my witness. Perfect.

“I would suggest you let Neldor try since he could use your power,” Taeral worried.

“We’re mates. You know people will just call him a simp and not listen.” I grabbed his arm and made him look at me. “Give her whatever protection you want. I don’t want her harmed either, Taeral. Let her move into my fucking castle. I need someone else without an agenda to be a witness. No one will allow me to do what I need otherwise.”

“I don’t think that’s still the case,” Morgan admitted. “It was too scary before, but they’ve been locked up for a while now and Faerie is better off for it. People know they barely eat so they don’t share power to help our planet like you ordered. All while you kill yourself to give them everything they never knew to want in life. I think if we simply said we had a witness that would be enough.”

Relief flooded me when the others agreed.

I gave Taeral's sister a guilty look, but she simply smacked her brother when he opened his mouth. "I'm honored to help you in this matter, Your Highness. I'm willing. Please, let me help you kill off the rot in our beloved world."

"Thank you." I reached out and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, truly."

She nodded. "I cannot imagine the amount of sleepless nights you've had worrying about the ancients who want to cause you so much harm. I hope this brings you some peace."

Damn right it would because Ancient Simimar would always be in my nightmares.

I focused harder and let Morgan head the interrogation, telling them what I saw when I did instead of risking our minds linked. We really couldn't get that much, but it was enough to horrify those there.

"A banished fairy is working with demons to try and get certain ancients out of prison so they can take me over and rule Faerie with the person," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. "I want the ancients named brought somewhere secure for interrogation, a fae dog on them at all times with permission to burn them if they so much as twitch. We have new information to get out of them."

"We need Onas for this," Morgan muttered.

"If he's willing. No more pushing him over the fucking edge. And he needs to start being the final boss for stuff, no more using him for everything. I'm just as much to blame. He needs to train more people too."

“We are all in agreement on that and we’re working on it,” he said gently.

There was more someone was going to say, but I waved them off, moving away from the demon and by the other three. I saw something half stuffed in a pocket. “He’s worried that I do not find whatever that is. He hopes I burn them all before I discover it.” I moved in even closer against the protests around me. At the last second, I accepted someone’s cloak to wrap around my hand just in case before touching the demon’s arm.

I pushed it aside and he dropped what he’d been trying to shove into or pull out of his pocket when the trap activated. I grabbed it with my free hand before it hit the ground and instantly knew the magic.

Swallowing loudly, I took a few shaky steps away from the demons. I waved off others when they asked questions, focusing on the three demons. It didn’t work together, and I had Chief burn the first demon and then split the other three up so I could listen individually. It was a lot of the same, so I made the call not to risk anyone and burned them.

“What is that, Your Highness?” Talila asked quietly, still terrified that I could make fae fire for some reason.

“It’s a device to try and break into Faerie portals. I have no idea if it works or...”

No, but I did know how to test it.

I gave the order to clean up this scene and hold the other one before teleporting to Anya White. She could test this for us and was powerful enough that I didn’t have to worry about her.

But the moment I saw her, I had a flash of something in my mind. My magic connecting dots.

I didn't just pick Anya White for what I thought, but my gut was telling me to find her.

“What can I help you with, Your Highness?” she asked, not hiding her surprise that I was there in her office.

“What are you doing in your office at the council on New Year's Eve?” I drawled.

She snorted and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “And what are you doing in your uniform looking ready to go into battle?”

Touché.

I licked my lips and studied her. “What happened to the device that brought the plagues at Artemis?”

She slowly lowered her hand and blinked at me. “I haven't thought of that in a while since it was dead ends and too much else was going on. Whatever brought this up?”

I told her, holding up the device. She already knew about demons, but she didn't know what else I had connected together. “This magic is the same magic from that person who attacked me that scared me. I didn't fight, I teleported away, and everyone assumed that they weren't actually as powerful as me, but I was hungover, sobbing, and a complete mess, totally not in a good place.

“And my gut said to come to you to help me see if there is actually a device that can open Faerie portals since you're not a fairy. But when I looked at you, I had a flash of us that night. So I think there's more to this. I was too new to know much

about magic and tracing people, my wings not even out then, but now...”

“I have it locked in a safe at my house,” she told me, opening a portal as she stood. “I don’t know if I’m happy we might finally solve that mystery that drove me crazy or terrified for what the truth might be.”

“I think the same thing about lots all the fucking time, Anya,” I drawled.

We went through the portal and arrived in a hallway of her house. I frowned as she opened a door to a half bathroom and went inside.

“I don’t have to use the washroom,” she chuckled when I waited in the hallway. “It’s one of my hidden safes.”

“Smart,” I muttered, going in with her.

Who the fuck would seriously look for a safe in a bathroom?

She opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out some items from the shelf before moving her hand to the back of it and using her magic. The panel pulled out and then there was a safe like she’d put in my dorm room freshman year. She opened it and the moment the safe stopped blocking the magic, I could feel it and had my answer.

“It’s the same person,” I whispered, scared but also excited to have a lead. “Bring that to your office. I’ll be back.” I teleported away and into something unexpected.

Namely, Captain Reddy shirtless and making out with a woman.

“I planned on cracking a joke about your handcuffs since you find me amusing but well, I think you’re already having fun,” I said as they jumped apart. “Right, it’s New Year’s. My apologies, but this is important and I think you can help.”

“I’m always here to help, Your Highness,” he accepted, both of them dipping their heads to me.

“I have to erase her memories of this. I’m sorry.”

He sighed but nodded that he understood.

Except I didn’t trust myself after my power had hit new levels. I opened a portal to Iolas and he walked right through with a few other fairies. I explained the situation and he nodded that he understood.

He looked at his phone and cleared his throat. “It’s pressing, but the good captain is an ally. It’s almost midnight. I think we can wait until he’s done.”

“Fine, leave someone here and bring him to White’s office at the council when they’re done. I want you too.” I teleported back to White’s office, not shocked when a few fairies were already there. “I forgot about your protective detail.”

“I didn’t,” she drawled. “It’s hard to relax when people are always watching you.”

The look I gave her probably spoke volumes about how she was preaching to the choir. “You don’t say?” I smirked when she snorted. I texted Neldor that he could portal to me now and that I was hungry.

He showed up with a frown, but at least he came with food.



I quickly went and changed clothes before coming back and digging in, glad when Captain Reddy and Iolas joined us.

I tossed the device to Iolas. “That was made by the man who attacked me when I was so freaked out months ago. Feel that level of magic and tell me if you think I was wrong that he wasn’t as powerful as me.”

He nodded, taking it seriously and scanning it. “He’s more powerful than I am or any of the commanders, but I don’t know about them. We were wrong that he wasn’t as powerful as you thought. This person is powerful.”

Good, at least that was decided, and he could yell at some people for not believing me.

I glanced at Reddy. “Again, I apologize for interrupting your night, but I’m also going to give you information you won’t want to have. I need your mind and experience. So demons are real, accept that, and that dark fairies hunt them.”

He blew out a slow breath before looking at White. “I assume you have some form of strong alcohol here, Councilwoman?”

She snorted, nodding to a cabinet to his left.

“This doesn’t read as fairy magic to me,” Iolas muttered.

“Neither did the box that Tamsin found that caused the plagues at Artemis. I would have known,” White informed me.

“Yeah, it’s the same person,” I told Reddy and then caught them all up with the different pieces we’d found out that night as I stuffed my face.

“Okay, so why am I here?” Reddy asked when I was done.

“Because you don’t get stuck in mindsets the way others can,” I answered honestly. “You expect people to break the rules and act like criminals because that’s what you’re used to.”

“Meaning you have a theory,” Neldor muttered, accepting a glass of alcohol with a sigh when White offered it.

“Yes, but it’s also obvious because there are a limited number of people who can be more powerful than us,” I reminded him.

His eyes flashed shock and worry. “You think it’s an ancient.”

I nodded. “I think it’s an ancient who was banished from Faerie and clearly was here all along while you guys were trapped in darkness.”

“From what I understand—and forgive me for being crass to put it into terms Tamsin understands easily—is a fairy being banished from Faerie is more like a grounding,” White said after a few minutes of letting them settle with what I’d revealed. “It’s meant to be ‘get out of my sight until I can stomach you again’ because going to the other realm wasn’t possible. The queens didn’t permanently banish people like you have.”

“That’s true,” Iolas confirmed. “It’s more severe than grounding a child, but you’re not wrong. It’s meant to remind people how blessed their lives are in Faerie and if they won’t appreciate it, go live on Earth for a bit. Not criminals, we punish them. Troublesome people, but not forever as Earth isn’t a dumping ground for our problems, and the people here don’t deserve that punishment to have them forever.”

“Right, it’s a time-out and putting people in the corner where they can’t harm Faerie, got it,” I muttered.

“Yes, and after the situation calms down, someone of their family normally puts in a request or has the suggestion whispered in the ear of the queen or nobles that the person should come back,” Iolas explained. “But, no matter the status

of a fairy, when the queens call us back, everyone returns to Faerie.”

“Yeah, I’ve never thought that was completely true,” I chuckled darkly. “Especially with a big war like that. There are draft dodgers, and if you got kicked out of Faerie, I bet you would resent the queen for a bit.” I nodded when Reddy snorted but pointed to Iolas and Neldor. “They’re about to shoot me down.”

“I would have, but you’ve changed my mind about a lot, and I’ve seen more darkness than I realized was in our world,” Neldor admitted. “So you’re assuming someone was banished and didn’t come home and that’s how they were here when Faerie was sealed off.”

“Possibly, but I think—the first thing you warned me was that my castle always has ears and to be careful. I think someone heard something they weren’t supposed to about my mother’s vision and got the hell out of Dodge. An ancient who either knew I wouldn’t be in Faerie or just to save their own ass.”

“I find that hard to believe since I was your mother’s best friend and your *godfather*, and I didn’t even know about her vision this time,” Iolas muttered. “But I also didn’t know how much the ancients and elders put her through, so I’m open to accepting that idea. My question is why would he need a device to open the portals to Faerie if he’s a fairy?”

“He doesn’t want to be trapped there,” Reddy answered easily. “The princess can shut down all of the portals to Faerie, right? That’s how the queens did it when it was sealed off?”

“In theory, but I’ve not played around with that much yet,” I muttered. “Others wouldn’t know that, just I reactivated the dead portals. But I agree that a rat wouldn’t risk getting trapped. Demons in Faerie, at Ankthus no less, where the ancients and elders are being held, would be massive chaos. Enough for them to use the chaos to get out.”

“And a person who has waited this long, stayed their hand, isn’t someone stupid or careless. They would send in their minions to do their dirty work,” Iolas muttered.

“Agreed, but why not send them to Artemis then and do something so convoluted like having plagues there?” Reddy asked.

I flinched. “Because there are rules about them showing themselves to people who don’t know about them. The question is—why do it at all? They made me a target, but I already was, and they weren’t really coming at me.”

“The vault,” Neldor muttered. “You found something of your mother’s magic in their vault. You said the last plagues scared people into thinking the death of the firstborn children would happen. The place was going to be cleared out when it normally wasn’t. It’s like pulling the fire alarm in a gallery and slipping out with one of the priceless paintings.”

“I don’t disagree, but there are other times to try that like summer,” I hedged.

“Edelman is a firstborn son,” White whispered. “I’m a firstborn child too. So is Julian. We three are the most powerful that were there then. Yes, there are other ways to have had us all leave the same day for a while but...”

We would have had the focus on them, and we never had with everything that had happened. It was always me or some firstborn *student* that was the target. Or that another school was just fucking with us.

Though I hadn't believed that in a while. I would have caught something from all of the headmasters I'd dealt with setting up the adult education program to get people their degrees so they could use conduits. Better jobs too.

I shared a look with Neldor and we were on the same page. We needed to know what the fuck my mother had hidden at Artemis and why.

Which meant I had to read the journal she'd left for me no matter how painful it could be. If there was an ancient trying to get demons into Faerie so they could get their friends out, take me over, or any number of horrors that weren't good, I had to be the shield and do what I needed to.

Even if there wasn't any way to shield myself from the damage it would do to me.

We came up with dozens of other possible ideas or pieces, all completely plausible, but in my mind, the first theory was the most sound and checked all of the boxes. After hours of talk and right before the sun would come up, we called it, locking the knowledge of demons in Reddy's mind.

"They thought it would be you that showed up, and you're a very powerful weapon to use against me," I told Neldor when we were alone later. "An ancient would know you could tap into my power and—"

“It’s common knowledge in the dark realm that fated mates can do that,” he muttered. “It’s part of what drove my mother so insane and made her think your mother had something to do with the death of my father.”

“Because if he could tap into her power, there wasn’t much he couldn’t do in an accident or heal himself,” I whispered, never having fully understood why so many were so damn convinced my mother had done something. But if she had, that magic could have made it all difference. “And if my mother could win over her power, the dark realm would have lost the war. The terror she would have felt at so many losing their lives because she couldn’t...”

“Shield them,” Neldor sighed. “I know, I know. I’ve tried so hard to understand. I just...”

“What she did would have killed you. You don’t have to forgive her that. I can’t ever forgive her either, but the more we learn, the less I hate her and know she wasn’t the only one to blame.”

He hugged me tightly and I hugged him back, knowing the two of us had suffered so much that no others would ever understand.

“It was an accident,” he assured me as if thinking I might doubt it. “Accidents just fucking happen even to fairies.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t—Meira was inconsolable. I understand more now that she saw my father’s death and tried to prevent it, but she would look at me and tears would overflow her eyes. Even if she was the best actress in the world, no one

could fake the pain she felt for my loss. I thought it was understanding what losing Lageos would be to her or you losing your father, but...”

I cupped his face and admitted something he hadn't put together yet. “It was also the final nail in the coffin on her visions and your mother being lost to Faerie. She saw the car accident she tried to stop and failed. I don't blame her for that, but she did.”

He nodded, letting me see in his eyes that he'd put that together too.

He also agreed to up his security level. After a bit of back and forth, I apologized before giving him the same rune that the others had so he could call my fae dogs to him in case he was ever in trouble.

Neldor wasn't even mad.

Hudson had fallen asleep waiting for me in the last mega-suite we were staying at in Vegas. It had been our third one and I'd been suspicious when it had been fully comped, and I was right, the hotel and its restaurants complete trash, so I just wanted to go back home early.

I stared at Hudson, Darby, Julian, Lucca, and even Neldor sleeping in the bedroom. He'd been tired and crashed, but my mind was still racing with questions and pieces missing.

Pieces I needed to put together or the five of them could end up dead because I was very sure there was one thing we got wrong in our theory. The ancients at Ankthus wanted to take me over and puppet me... But this guy had attacked to kill me. I knew it down to my soul.



Why?

Not why would someone want me dead. There were a million reasons for that, but why did this one ancient want me dead instead of the plan the others had?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered and did the one thing I promised I wouldn’t do.

I risked my life and was stupid.

Grabbing the device we hadn’t tried out yet, I focused on the magic and teleported to the man.

“You really do make it too easy.” He was leaning against a tree as if waiting for me. “Curious and stupid, just like your mother.”

I opened my mouth to respond but felt a zip to my magic and somehow knew I was related to this man. I teleported about twenty feet to my right, knowing this place was open for battle. “She couldn’t teleport, so I have that advantage where I’m not stupid but tactical.”

He opened his mouth, and I teleported again about fifty feet in another direction. He frowned and then used fairy speed to come at me.

I teleported faster, not allowing my shock that I’d gotten to see his eyes closer... And they were the same eyes as mine.

I arrived back at the hotel and locked down the area from allowing people to open portals. I went right for Neldor, not so much shaking him awake but just *shaking* from what had happened.

He woke instantly, sitting up in a flash as if feeling my panic.

Or my magic panicked in him.

He searched my eyes and bared his teeth at me. “What did you do?”

They could all yell at me later. This was too important. “We’re related.”

“No, we aren’t,” he growled.

I grabbed his arms and held on so tightly that I felt my nails cut into his skin. “Neldor, that man is related to me. I felt the zing from my magic that Irma talked about and knew we were related. He has *my eyes*. That’s the missing piece. We’re related!”

He blinked at me and I practically saw his brain explode. If it wasn’t so fucking serious, it would have been funny.

But it was maybe one of the most serious fucking moments in my life.

“How? I don’t understand how?”

It was my turn to blink at him. “Are you having a laugh? I need to explain the birds and the bees to you?”

Neldor rolled his eyes. “Of course not. How do you have another member of the Vale family that no one *knows about*? Do you have any idea how the queens are watched and—the only person in recent history was your grandmother’s brother but he died.”

“What if he had a bastard child before he did?” I shrugged. That really wasn’t the point at the moment. There

was lots that didn't get recorded. I mean, the whole bullshit with the ancients and even my connection to Faerie. All of that fell through the cracks, but no Vale child wasn't ever hidden?

I had been for fuck's sake.

"We have a serious fucking problem if he's my family and older than me, Neldor. I don't even know how to fucking handle that. And there's another *option* now for Faerie. How many would gut me just..." That was the answer.

"They couldn't control you, so they'll kill you and put him in as king since I wouldn't do that to you," he whispered in horror. "We cannot tell anyone."

"Well, we all woke up because terror is pouring off all of you, but Julian put up a barrier that I hope comes from your magic," Lucca muttered from behind me.

"Yeah, I did," Julian whispered. "Tell me I caught that wrong. Did you just say you have a living relative?"

I turned to plop on the floor, but Neldor pulled me up onto the sofa next to him, moving his arm around me. I nodded. "The man who attacked me months ago and the person who used magic to make the plagues at Artemis are the same person. That's what we learned tonight. I couldn't let it go. I needed to—I teleported to him just to see his face and teleport away. I didn't stay, I promise."

"Yeah, I don't know that I couldn't have done the same," Hudson sighed. "You teleport so fast that honestly, it was a smart play, shorty." He searched my face though. "You're sure?"

I nodded. “He said I was curious and stupid just like my mother.”

“You have to read that journal, baby doll. You have to. I’m sorry,” Neldor rasped.

Yeah, I really did.

But there was one person I needed to talk to first. I knew I couldn’t sleep until I did, but I calmed down for a bit... And then I teleported to my dad.

Who was waiting for me too.

He turned on me before I could even say anything, and for the first time, he was truly and completely pissed at me.

“You’re fucking hiding things from me and I’m tired of it!” He looked up at the sky when I flinched. “I’m sorry. I’m just—I’m the parent here, Tamsin. I’m so old that I can’t remember how old I am. Don’t do this to me. Your mother did it and it killed me. Please! We couldn’t be there for you when we should have been and I will never forgive us for that, but don’t shut me out when I’m still here!”

I nodded, tears blurring my vision. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll tell you everything. Something happened tonight—today though that I need to know about first.”

“Anything,” he sighed, coming closer and hugging me tightly. “Let me help, Daughter. I would do anything for you, give my soul to protect you. Please let me help.”

“Did Mom know of any family she had alive?”

“No, she was the only Vale left after her mother died.” He shook his head when I looked up at him. “I would have

known. There was no one.” He cupped my cheeks and wiped my tears when I didn’t say anything. “Talk to me.”

So I did. I told him everything that had happened since Talila came to the party. I didn’t leave out a single detail.

And I also asked him why I didn’t feel the zing of magic the first time the guy had attacked me.

He let out a slow breath and pulled me to an area of shade and we sat down. “That’s—there could be a dozen reasons. You had a barrier up. My magic was protecting you then too. That would be my main guess, but you were out of sorts. Your soul was hurting. Magic doesn’t always work just like your mating bond with Hudson.”

That made complete sense and I nodded.

“I don’t know of anything that can fake that zing, but you of all people should consider that to be possible.”

I nodded but studied him. “You’re really set on him not being related to me.”

“Not to your mother,” he corrected. “The first thing that came into my mind was maybe a sibling of mine had a child too. I’ve said I couldn’t be sure, but I didn’t think so. Maybe they did and it was with a fairy too. That could have been the zing.”

“That makes sense, but he had Mom’s eyes, Dad. They’re pretty unique.” I hurried on when he opened his mouth. “It could have been a few generations ago that someone actually lived or even Grandma’s brother had a bastard?”

“Yes, you’re right, and Meira didn’t ever know,” he sighed. “That truly could be.”

“But?” I hedged.

“I worry that another child of a demigod could do glamour that could fool you. Some of my siblings were more powerful than me, or maybe that cancels out like when it’s in a mirror or through a lens. Maybe someone used magic like that to fool you with glamour. I’ve never trusted how—glamour is one of the magics with the most pitfalls. Just like that girl who had a birthmark that you busted for glamouring you. There are holes in that magic.”

“You’re right.” I bobbed my head. “Yeah, you’re completely right, and it was even a smart play because when I saw his eyes—if I didn’t have teleporting on lock and was ready to...” I frowned. “How come he didn’t teleport? If he’s the child of a demigod too, why didn’t he teleport?”

Lageos shrugged. “That’s just like any other power. Maybe he didn’t get it, but he got a different one of ours that you didn’t. Maybe he got our better glamour instead or a dozen other things. Maybe he didn’t know he could until meeting you and hasn’t figured it out yet. I have trouble thinking that my siblings didn’t raise that child and wanted to leave if they gave up their immortality to have them.”

Yeah, sooooo there were way more questions again.

“I also have trouble thinking he’s a Vale and couldn’t get into Faerie. Just because you’re the heir—the royal bloodline is powerful. If Neldor was older or had had his wings, I would absolutely believe he could have reawaken one of those portals. Why didn’t that person if they were a Vale? If nothing else, try to get at the Vale vaults and wealth?”

Again, another very, *very* good point.

Fuck.

So we were really back to where we started, but the person maybe had some relation to me if they hadn't faked that zing.

"There's a way to banish someone from Faerie so they can never use a portal again," I muttered, having remembered that to answer one of his questions.

"This is a lot to think about and *plan*," he said. "I would assume that was a one-time chance for you to teleport to him. He was waiting but didn't have it trapped."

I flinched. "He wanted me to come back and announce there's another Vale, another option to rule Faerie."

"It's smart, and so far this adversary has made it clear that he is smart." He waited for me to agree and then grabbed my hands. "You cannot try to find him again. Not alone. Not yet. The risk is too great when we don't have the—"

"I agree, and we all need to step up security since he's making moves now."

"Good, good," he sighed. "Now tell me the rest of what you don't want to tell me."

I asked we went for food first and we picked up a ton... And then I told him about the visions. I told him everything except one thing.

That my mother had had a vision of him being trapped in the darkness and what happened to me because of it. That wasn't my secret to tell, and she didn't confess it to me—she'd written about it to teach me about visions.

That was between the two of them when they met again and wouldn't do anything to help us now.

"Show me," he whispered.

"No." I shook my head when he argued. "The vision has changed. Faerie doesn't eat me anymore. I shouldn't have shown people who love me that. I wasn't thinking, but seeing how it's killed them—I was selfish."

"No, you're not," he snapped, jumping to his feet and pacing. "Keeping us out is being selfish. I hated that your mother did that."

"Okay, well, I need to have a conversation with my mates then," I decided. "I need to see how they feel about this now that I've told them." I let out a slow breath. "I can't show you, Dad. I don't—I can't let you see me like that."

"What has changed? Tell me everything."

I blew out a slow breath. "There were three visions of Darby leaving and getting mated, but Faerie didn't eat me. Something intimate—Julian saved me. He pulled me out. Now it's been nothing. I don't have the vision anymore."

"More than once isn't an outlier. Once is an outlier and they never come true. I've learned that much with your mother," he muttered.

Oh, if only he knew that wasn't actually always true. Geez.

"Darby's made it clear he won't ever leave now that he sees how it kills me," I muttered. I tried to lighten the mood by telling him about playing roulette.



“I don’t know if that was how it would have been for your mother. She had such a weird thing about cheating in Vegas. She saw the whole thing as a human accomplishment as that whole city was built from nothing in the desert and astounded her. She didn’t hear me how it was mostly run by gangsters and the casinos cheat.”

“Yeah, I’m not outlawing it the way she did. I might give some sort of license and half of the winnings have to be donated,” I told him.

“Smart.” He blew out a slow breath. “You cannot hide your visions. I know they make you feel alone and are too much, but you can’t.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “Now that I *know* they’re visions, I... I told Julian what I thought was going on. Neldor too. They can help me magically and it seemed the right thing to do. I just wasn’t sure, Dad. Then I let Julian see it all and—I just couldn’t tell you.”

“I’ve failed you if you couldn’t even be that honest with me,” he whispered sadly.

“No, you fucking didn’t,” I snapped, storming over to him and grabbing his arm so he faced me. “You are an *amazing* dad. Better than any dad I ever dreamed about when I thought I was an orphan. Never think that again.” I waited until he nodded, shock in his eyes. “I love you too. When you talked about Mom’s visions they killed you. You think I could just be horrible and talk to you about it when I wasn’t even sure?”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about that when I’m the parent.”

I reached up and flicked his forehead like I did with Hudson and Lucca, smiling when he rubbed the spot even if it didn't hurt. "Don't be stupid, stupid. That's not how parenting works when the kid loves you too. I'm an adult and I worry about you too. Deal with it."

"Fine, but then I'm going to be a brat too sometimes," he warned before giving me a huge hug. "Now go get some rest. You're going to need it."

Yeah, I really was.

## 8

Neldor made the executive decision to pack up and leave Vegas given the new threat. I completely agreed but was sleeping when it all happened, Ara glamouring as me to check out... And apparently, get chewed out by the hotel manager that I was a con artist who took everything for free and gave nothing back.

Ara gave him an earful about how shitty everything was and how the place was such trash we didn't even want to stay longer. But if they wanted me to say that in a review, I had no problem doing that.

Yeah, the manager shut up real fast.

Until corporate sent a bill and threatened to post it publicly saying that I didn't pay my debts.

Geiger was all over it. Not only their threats and charging me after an agreement was signed, but the public statement on my behalf on their immoral business practices. That would carry a lot of weight given how rarely I tore into places.

I had an emergency—but open—meeting with all of the nobles of Faerie. Some of them had a *lot* to say about the final round of nobles I'd kicked out of their areas and taken titles of.

It turned into a bit of a shitstorm as others defended me and reminded people that those nobles in charge had set all kinds of plans back by up to a year for keeping those areas of Faerie closed.

I definitely agreed with that. I'd thought it had all been done several times but then a group would push back that they hadn't seen enough of my changes to get on board and they just couldn't make the decision in good conscience. I'd known they wanted the public to pressure me to reopen their areas without the changes I wanted.

Except the public liked my changes—in general—and pressured the nobles. So none of it was in good faith, but every time I'd put it all in the “handled” pile of shit in my mind or life, it just couldn't stay finished.

“I'm glad you all got that out, but I want to ask why you think I called an *emergency meeting* the day after New Year's when the whole week of the new year is normally a hiatus of government in Faerie? I did this weeks ago and the decision was made, not open to argument. So I'm not sure what just happened here besides some of you getting to vent out frustrations?”

I nodded for my ally Mallory to go ahead when she cleared her throat.

“All of the noble meetings are generally emergency meetings like that since the queens were always so busy. Or more last minute when we could be fit in.”

I opened my mouth to knock that but then realized it was probably done on purpose for politics and to remind the nobles they answered to the queens... Not the other way around as

they kept thinking. “Going forward I would like a normal monthly meeting. We were doing well but there were people who weren’t acting in good faith. That is clear from what happened. I’m not going over the situation or changing my—”

“It’s too harsh to punish the whole family, Your Highness,” someone cut in. “Really, it is.”

I glanced around to find that person but couldn’t zero in on them, and it seemed to be the general consensus of the room, even if they were on my side. “It’s meant to be too harsh. It’s meant to make it clear I’m over a lot of shit, and I will not let any family stand in the way of helping Faerie and her people. I listened to a lot of them when they asked for more time in good faith.

“None of them really wanted that. They wanted me to cave. When it was clear I wouldn’t, they harassed my fiancé. Should I not punish that harshly and give people permission to do it to the other mates I have? Do worse?” I narrowed my eyes at all of them. “Tell me which of you wouldn’t have punished them the same for being so brazen to threaten your mates *in public*, flaunting the authority of two Fairie Guardians?”

That shut most of them up *really* fast.

“Look, I get no one wants to be punished for the crimes of their family. However, those families didn’t go against what their leaders were doing. Others *have*. So they went along with it when it was easy for them and in the hopes that the pressure on me might work. That doesn’t sound like someone innocent to me.”

Mallory snorted. “No, it sounds like someone complicit. And I’m proof if someone comes to you later and explains, uses truth-telling runes even, that you’re *ridiculously* understanding and accepting. Have they tried that in the weeks since? I would bet not.”

“None have contacted me through any of the *many* ways people can including just telling the hobgoblins because they snitch on everything,” I drawled. I glanced around at the meeting. “Now that we’ve discussed that, can we talk about the actual emergency situation I called this meeting for?”

People flinched, but I wanted to sigh. I’d said I hadn’t called the meeting last minute to talk about that. Didn’t they understand there was an emergency then?

Yeah, their fear or upset clouded their heads right then.

Plus, a few looked like they’d seriously overindulged, and we had healing runes and magic to help with a lot. I hadn’t realized how much the week of New Year’s was really kind of a party bender for fairies.

I told them about the demons trying to use the portals in Faerie. I even confessed that the person behind it was the same person who had tried to attack me months ago. I gave them a few minutes for all of that to sink in.

“The plan was to cause enough chaos with demons at Ankthus to get over a dozen ancients out,” I finished up.

“You caught the fairy? You’ve confirmed this in an interrogation?” someone asked.

“No, I heard it from the demons with my telepathy, and I have a witness who caught enough of the same. I will *not*

name her for her safety, but there were several commanders who witnessed it and verified her truth. The second scene is still being held, and if there are any telepaths among the nobles, you have my permission to go listen for yourselves. I'm going to see if Lageos can get anything else from them."

"I assume others tried telepathy runes?" a different noble asked, nodding when I did.

"It's not normal telepathy," I sighed. "It was like picking out only every fourth or fifth word. I couldn't get images from them or anything. I'm *very sure* that I didn't get the names of all of the ancients or elders involved."

"There is true evil among them, and I'm still upset they were simply banished to Ankthus instead of put to death," Mallory hedged.

"But?" I pushed.

"How do we know they were involved in this plan?" someone else said. "None of my family has been in contact with the elders we are related to there. None. I *know* that because we were happy to be free of them." The man met my gaze and I saw he was as tired as I felt. "I believe what you heard, but there's nothing to say those at Ankthus were involved. I think you have to prove they would have escaped to get the result you want."

"Is a staged prison break enough to convict them on escaping?" I threw right back. "They could say that it wasn't about escaping but getting away from the demons. We know that wouldn't be true though."

“They are slippery like that,” he agreed. “Where is your mind then, Your Highness?”

“We were going to interrogate them to see if they were slipped notes or if they know who this person is. We think it’s an ancient that didn’t come back for the war or slipped out before the portals were sealed.” I nodded when they couldn’t hide their shock.

“But if you interrogate them, you risk showing your hand when they might not have been involved,” he worried.

That was a really, really good point. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say when Lageos appeared.

“Besides the three demons you wanted held to question later, the rest have been killed,” he announced as if telling me he would pick up dinner tonight.

“I’m sorry... *What?*” I whispered.

“I killed them all. There’s a huge mess of areas to clean up.” He shrugged when I couldn’t get my mouth to work. “They were a threat to you and making moves that could lead to freeing people who would kill you because they can’t control you. I won’t allow that. I won’t, Tamsin. I sent them all back to where they came from.” He winced and glanced around, not having realized that others were with me.

Yeah, I’d done the same. Many, *many* times, so I couldn’t even yell at him for it.

“They won’t just sit still. There has to be one missed or someone who worked with them that will make more,” I muttered.



“Of course, it’s not a war you ever win, but it’s not only a warning for crossing lines they shouldn’t have, but it gives you time to catch up with this new information,” Lageos told me and then beamed at me. “Especially when I found rats working with them.” He teleported four people to where we were, and I ground my jaw when I recognized the first I laid eyes on.

“Anyone else feel bad for the nobles that I punished for going after Darby?” I drawled, pointing at the one I was staring at. “Because this piece of shit was also working with demons and someone who tried to kill me.”

“Not at all, Your Highness, but this gives us the answers we needed instead of having to go through the hoops to trick the ancients,” a noble on my side said, his voice relieved.

I explained to Lageos what he meant, and my dad sighed, hating how often I had to jump through hoops. I understood, but I also knew how rash I could be and wanted to never regret when I handed out punishments.

Things moved fast after that. The nobles demanded I commute Onas’s sentence so the best could handle the interrogations and we didn’t have to risk any other rats falling through the cracks. I agreed, sending a messenger to Xavier and Sasha explaining I had to for the security of all Faerie.

Basically, I gave them the heads-up so they didn’t hear it from anyone else, but right then I didn’t care what they thought or their opinions.

And I made that fairly clear in my message.

Shocking, right?

I didn’t think so either.

To be careful, Neldor and I had agreed not to be in the same vicinity until we had more information. The goal was obviously to take us both out, so we needed to be smarter. I sent Lageos with his prisoners to go find him and the commanders since they were having a meeting going over exactly what I was with the nobles.

We had three telepaths among the dozens of nobles gathered and two made it clear they wanted to listen to the demons. One because she wanted to back me... And the other still didn't trust me.

That was fine and I made that clear. As long as it wasn't to sabotage me, I didn't care. Some people were shocked at that, and I reminded them that I didn't trust most of them either.

Duh.

The third didn't want any part of this, not even wanting to be around a demon.

"No, I'm sorry," I said gently, nodding when she gave me a teary look. "You're hundreds of years old. I'm in my twenties and I had to deal with demons alone before you were all awoken. No more hiding in the sand or letting others be the shield always. You don't have to listen, but you will go and see for yourself."

Oddly enough, most of the nobles accepted that. Too much had changed, and no one could be the reason they were kept in the dark. Not when I was killing myself every fucking day to bring them out of the darkness.

I opened a portal and they all came through, some terrified beyond words, but still sucking it up and doing it.

“The princess tells the truth,” the one who didn’t trust me declared after several minutes. I’d split up the demons like before and the three of us were listening in to whatever we could get. “I thought they all went too far, but I thought...” She shook her head.

“What?” I pushed.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Your Highness,” she said sadly. “I was brainwashed by the reverence I was taught to always feel for the ancients and their words mattered most.”

I didn’t say anything for a few moments. “You understand there’s a lot inherently wrong with that when Faerie is a monarchy, yes? Do you now understand how much the system was rigged against the queens and what was truly done to them?”

She knelt on the ground and lowered her head to me. “I’m trying, Princess Tamsin. I am. I’m hundreds of years old and it seemed we all lived and thrived because of the ancients guiding the queens in what they needed to do. That was what I truly believed, but they lost their heads because the queens failed Faerie on their watch. I saw this all so differently.”

“But working with demons is over the line for you,” I said for the others mostly. “I’m glad you found the line before too much else was lost.” It made me feel better when she nodded, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Those ex-nobles that my father found confirmed that about half of the ancients took the deal of a man they don’t know or have never seen. The deal included murdering me and Neldor and taking over Faerie. What is the punishment?”

“Death,” she said immediately, shaking with rage and her magic snowballing for a fight. “There can be no question. To work with demons and pure evil is enough reason, but to risk the progress Faerie has needed—to risk waking the rest of us because of their selfish desires—there is no other punishment.”

Good.

And everyone there agreed.

Even fucking better.

I studied the demons and then decided to try something different this time, teleporting their clothes to a pile. I shrugged when the nobles gave me a range of looks. “Police strip search criminals. We found something bad on the last ones, but none of us will want to touch them. It seemed the smart way to handle it.”

“True,” Mallory agreed as she moved by the pile. She moved her sleeve over her hand and picked up the device to break into the portals. “This is it?”

I nodded. “We have to get a non-fairy to try it.”

“Just destroy them, Your Highness,” someone else argued.

I sighed at how shortsighted people could be. Would they just pretend it never happened if I destroyed the devices?

Yeah, great... And what if more were made? If they were made they could be made *again*.

I killed the demons with my fae fire and then went by Mallory to check the clothes as well. There wasn't much, but I grabbed the wallets just in case. Maybe Marisol could find

something useful from them. I opened one up and froze when I saw a company ID for AT&P.

So that theory was clearly correct.

I didn't want the nobles getting all involved in our investigations, so I closed the wallet and tucked the others away.

"There are a few more things I want to discuss with you all," I said, coming to a sudden decision. "I invented something—"

"The geodes, we heard, Your Highness," someone said quietly, tension shooting up among them.

I hadn't expected that. I opened a portal to take us back to the room we were meeting in, and I waited for all of them to come through before staring at the man who had spoken. "Why do you say it like that?"

He cleared his throat and looked as if he regretted opening his mouth.

"Don't make me turn on my telepathy," I warned him. "I try to respect everyone's privacy when we meet, but I need you guys to respect me enough to tell me what's going on."

"That's very gracious of you," Mallory said, moving up to the man. "People are not talking kindly about you playing with your magic to invent things when you're taking a break from waking fairies."

I shook my head. "Does no one ever give me any benefit of the doubt? Is it really so hard to give me even an inch of faith after all I've done? And so fast?" I eased down when I

saw some of the ones who didn't really like me even giving me pitying looks.

Yeah, heavy was the head that wore the crown.

“My healer and my father wanted me to try and find a new way to cleanse my magic so I can work through this new power level faster,” I told them bluntly. “I can't spend hours and hours a week cleansing as they say I need. I've needed it before even opening Faerie because of what happened. I need it from my stress and—I need it.”

“And that's how the geode was made,” Mallory surmised, giving me a sad smile when I nodded. “It's not a lot of people, Your Highness. People push for you to take breaks. It's just hard when it's their family that gets pushed back.”

“I know.” I flinched when I realized I was rubbing my chest. “I didn't make this call to hold off waking fairies. It hurts me to know they wait on me.” I sniffled and blinked back tears. “But I can't win a lot of times, and it's part of the problem and why I have to cleanse so much. My soul is injured from all of this doubt and the assumptions my character is bad.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I think things will be better now that we can finally get rid of the rest of the rot in the nobles. I really do.”

“I hope so,” I whispered, moving my hands to my hips and shaking my head. “I'm a disappointment and mess if my magic goes wacky or my wings are coming out, but then I'm being selfish and playing with my magic if I take a break to get it on lock. What's the answer then? I'll get fifty answers if I ask. I just... I'm doing everything because I have faith in the

people of Faerie and it's my duty. Can anyone have a duty to support me?"

I turned to leave but stopped when Mallory pulled me into a hug, ignoring the gasps around us.

"You're doing so well, Princess," she comforted. "You are. I won't excuse the behavior. It's not okay. I just wanted to explain it so it didn't hurt you so much. Too many are in the eye of their own storm and can't see it. When they can—when their own souls hurt less, they are on your side. They look back and feel bad on how they thought. I promise."

I nodded and hugged her back, smiling when she put comfort runes on me.

After another minute, I let out a shaky breath and let her go. "I wanted to come up with some sort of plan for the geodes. They're challenging and take a lot of focused power to put me through the paces I need to work through this jump in my magic, but I don't have time to coordinate their use. I figured if I can't wake fairies for a bit longer, at least this could help grow more food so the animals might repopulate faster."

They jumped on the idea, and I wasn't sure why, but then after listening in a bit, I heard that most of them were at their limit and overwhelmed. Demons and fairies working with them and ancients and elders involved... All of it was too crazy for them.

Especially after all the crazy they'd already been through.

Fair enough. If they wanted to focus on this and it was something they could take off my plate... Yeah, I was all for

it.

And they were actually helpful. When I confessed that I hadn't been able to figure out the cleansing part yet, they said I should keep cleansing on Earth and maybe not even with extras on my shoulders. I didn't understand that though.

Mallory glanced at a few of the other nobles who liked me, and they seemed to share some unspoken agreement before she focused back on me. "You don't get much of a chance to enjoy your magic, Princess. Go do that. I used to love sitting in the rainforest and enjoying the nature there. Humans have cut down too many of them, right? Or somewhere that was a forest fire? Go regrow there and cleanse."

"That might get her caught, but I agree with the rainforest," someone else said. "Don't worry about everything else even in your cleansing for a moment and just go enjoy the birds and animals in the rainforest while you have a picnic and cleanse. At least once a week—even if quick—just go meditate."

I nodded. That sounded nice. Really nice.

I just always wanted to kill two birds with one stone. So much was needed always, and it was like I needed to justify every second of my time.

We decided to make the geodes known in Faerie, and people had to petition for them to be used and explain why. I didn't want it always to be for farmers or groves but also to help areas that hadn't been gotten to yet.



Especially now that I could open the last of the areas of Faerie. That alone was finally, *finally* something off my plate.

And annoyed me because it kept seeming like it would have been done a while ago, but... I felt like Charlie Brown with the fucking football being pulled away from me every time I was ready to kick the damn field goal to celebrate a win.

It was really fucking annoying, and I was very sure if Charlie Brown had been a real person instead of a cartoon, that dark-haired girl would have been pushed off a cliff.

They wanted to go over other topics and have a meeting, but I pushed back on that, reminding them that the meeting had started on an emergency that I needed to finish handling.

Except apparently not.

The moment the meeting was over, Neldor was waiting for me and without a word, handing me his phone.

I didn't bother asking, playing the video... And my knees gave out at what I saw.

"He can't ever threaten you again, baby doll," he whispered as he hugged me to him.

I let out a slow breath and nodded, hugging him back and giving myself a moment to try and let go of all the pent-up fear I still had inside of me.

Because I didn't need it anymore.

Well, at least where Ancient Simimar was concerned... Since he was dead.

Yeah, that was the video. Lageos taking the head of Ancient Simimar.

Neldor had filmed it for me since I couldn't go to Faerie and see it for myself, and clearly my dad was done holding back.

"I gave the order," Neldor told me, nodding when I couldn't hide my shock. "Lageos did it as prince regent of the light realm, but all of the commanders were in agreement."

"I thought they'd want to question him more and..." I trailed off when I saw in Neldor's eyes that he and Lageos wouldn't let that happen. I swallowed loudly, knowing it was to protect me so no one found out I had a family member alive. "How?"

"Demons tried to break into Faerie and maybe could have because of an ancient we can't pinpoint," he said easily. "We made it rather clear that everything you had worried about keeping them alive had almost come to fruition and we weren't going to allow that anymore. The commanders backed it. Notices will be posted around Faerie that they were sentenced to death for working with demons. All of the commanders signing it."

"Who else?" I whispered, my eyes going wide as he named them. "That many?"

"Yes, the cockroach former nobles that Lageos found with demons were easy to get names from." He kissed my hair. "I have to get back. I'll film all of their sentences."

I nodded but then grabbed his arm before he could open a portal. "Talk to the commanders about not burying them in Faerie." I kept nodding when he couldn't hide his shock. "That evil shouldn't be buried in the world we're trying to take the darkness out of and join the realms. They did too much to keep

that future from ever happening. Let them be cremated on Earth.”

And give me the chance to see their bodies. Neldor clearly knew that was also a goal from the look in his eyes, but it was like 75% what I’d said. I didn’t want those monsters even buried in the world I would rule.

I had a moment to wonder if that was maybe how Faerie had become... Could burying the bodies of evil in a planet mess with the magical sentience of a world? The gods had given that power to Faerie, and I doubted they would have wanted it to *eat* the rulers they’d ordained to be the beacons of leadership to help their children.

Right?

It was at least something to think about.

Neldor agreed. Clearly agreed when I told him. He gave me a quick kiss and promised to handle it, begging me to rest.

I didn’t. I couldn’t.

Instead, I went to handle something people wouldn’t want me to while they were distracted.

No one should really be that surprised by that anymore.

## 9

“Are you going to yell at me for checking on you again?” I asked Luke as he sat down next to me.

“Your concern always touches me,” he replied, his normal sarcastic self. “At least you feed me when you risk my life by contacting me to ask if I’m okay.”

“I don’t contact you just for that, I simply have manners and start off with checking on you,” I threw right back with the same level of sass. “And I have people following you now to check you’re okay, so I already know you are.” I chuckled when he froze.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not.” I smirked at him before taking a bite out of the huge potato in front of me. “Eat up.”

The sigh he let out probably could have been heard around Vegas... But he did dive into the huge stuffed potato I’d gotten for him.

Yes, I was clearly addicted to the crazy loaded baked potato place, *but* it was also smart to meet Luke at someplace like Vegas. Since I did have someone always tailing him, it was easy to slip him a note with a time and location. He met

up with Rafe and they switched glamours so Luke could come take his seat like nothing had happened if any of us had tails.

I was also glamoured and had come in with Rafe while Agis and Kerym sat at a different table and Dalyor was standing just off the entrance acting like he was waiting for someone.

“I can’t sense them, but I would guess those two at the table are with you,” Luke muttered.

“And one at the door,” I confessed.

“Glad you’re being smarter.”

I bristled at that. “It was never about being stupid or smart but having the right people to trust. You fully understand that, lone wolf.”

“Fair. So why am I here?” He took another bite of the potato and groaned. “Though honestly, this is good enough to come all this way for.”

“Right?” I chuckled. “I can’t even tease you that I brought you just to try that because you’d actually think I was that dumb.”

“No, I’d think you saw or heard something that spooked you from saying what you wanted to,” he said after a minute.

Glad he didn’t think I was so naïve and not as careful anymore. “Do you and/or the Underground know about demons?”

He froze again, a forkful of food stopping halfway to his mouth. “If anyone else asked me that, I would have accused

them of fucking with me or just saying bullshit to try and trap me into something, but you don't play like that."

"No, I don't." I blew out a slow breath. "And if your answer is no, I have to take the memory of this from you. I'm sorry, but I do."

"Not happening," he growled quietly. "No one screws with my brain."

"They can come after you if you're in the know," I told him coldly, waiting until he met my gaze. "You cannot fight them, and you will die if they *scratch you*. You need fae fire to kill them. Do you have that?"

"At least tell me why you're asking," he said after a minute of settling with that.

"Is a fairy the head of the Underground?" I asked instead.

He let out a soft chuckle. "So you guys finally figured out not everyone went home to Faerie like good little citizens, huh?"

"I've never thought they did." I smirked when he did a double take. "Dude, I'm way too distrusting for that, but the way people talk about it, it seemed more like a compulsion they had to obey." I gestured between the two of us. "Come on, people like us wouldn't have just gone back if there was a war just to go to war. We fight for smarter things than that. And we don't just fall in line. I don't think you get that from your wolf side."

"You're not wrong, but I always thought fairies fell in line pretty damn well." He snorted and went back to his potato. "And with their blinders on."

I stopped eating and studied him for a few minutes. “How many had that opinion?”

He shrugged. “It’s stupid to say things like that when they were around so who knows? I mean, most know they can’t stand up to you guys, so saying you’re not as great as you think you are isn’t conducive to living long.” He took another big bite. “I got the feeling it was mostly after they were gone that people saw more through the cracks. Like how powerful they were and fighting just to fight really.”

I nodded, thinking that was fair... Even as the other fairies around me practically had steam coming out of their ears. “How many stayed? Is that who leads the Underground?”

“Officially, I don’t know,” he told me firmly. “I don’t. It’s my own theory. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me. Or their fairy parent was a royal or—their power is huge. Something doesn’t add up.”

“Makes sense.”

“Now you’re just placating me,” he growled.

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “There was so much going on right in the faces of too many that I’m not going to tell you about. Too much was in plain sight, so people can tell me there’s no chance of this or that all they want, but I don’t buy it. There are a *lot* of fairies who don’t like me having non-fairy mates, so I absolutely could see some royal having a non-fairy child that got hidden here generations ago or something.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of my working theory if it’s not a fairy,” he muttered, studying me closely.

“Why are you suddenly being like this?” I asked. “You didn’t treat me like just a fairy before.” I studied him right back when he didn’t answer. “Is this really about my having people tailing you?”

“No, something that slipped through the cracks that I’m trying not to judge you for, but I’m being too harsh.”

Instantly, I knew what he was referring to. “I had too much on my plate, but I’ve finally worked on that. It’s part of why I contacted you.”

He stabbed his potato harder than needed. “Oh really?”

“I’m sorry, Luke. It’s not all I’ve had on my plate. You have no idea what else has been going on. You *know* I don’t care about them less because they’re not fairies.”

“Do I?” His eyes were full of challenge and anger.

I didn’t answer when I saw Agis getting ready to move, Luke too upset for him to relax. I glanced over at him and made it clear to chill out before looking back at Luke. “I have a law drawn up. I need to work with my attorney and get the wording right, but ask me what the law is that I plan on enacting the moment I’m queen. The one I’m planning on doing first. Or at least one of the first.”

“Abolishing the ban on light and dark fairy mating.”

“Besides that. Technically, I already did that one even if it’s not official. No one’s adhering to that anyways.” I snorted. “Not with all of the pressure I’m under to mate a dark fairy.”

He accepted that and calmed down. “What law?”



“Making child abandonment a punishable offense. For non-fairy children.” I ignored when tension poured off the fairies around us.

“Clearly, that is something that will cause problems from the vibes I’m getting,” he muttered.

I snorted again. “My breathing causes problems some days. It’s fucking disgusting that non-fairy children can just be ignored like they’re not still their children. The moment I’m queen it won’t happen without *severe* punishment. The fact there weren’t more fucking protections in place on their own fucking children before they went to *war* is disgraceful. Fine, they didn’t know what would happen, but they were responsible for what’s happened.”

“Most wouldn’t agree with you.”

“I don’t fucking care. I’m still right and you know it. I don’t care if I have to beat the shit out of every neglectful father or mother that just washes their hands of a non-fairy child.”

He opened his mouth but then closed it. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a mother bailing on their non-fairy child. It’s always the fathers.”

That made sense. Carrying a child for nine months gave a different bond. Not always, but the same happened in the human world where fathers had the easier time bailing than mothers. It wasn’t even a sexist comment but... Statistics.

“The men of Faerie aren’t remotely as equal opportunity as the party line,” I drawled. “I had someone today say that they grew up believing that the ancients were the reason the

queens were able to do their jobs and their duty. With a straight face. Not hearing at *all* how fucked up that is or that the glaring problem was right in front of their face.”

His eyes went wide, and he started to look over his shoulder but caught himself in time. “At least one of them wants to—he’s not happy with what you said. Be careful of that one.”

I snorted. “It always hurts to hear you’re an idiot or were part of the problem. A lot of them were.” I rolled my eyes and focused back on my potato. “The ancients are all fucking men. There are ancient females, but they aren’t part of that label and distinction of “ancients” meaning nobles and forced advisors of the queens. So men much, *much* fucking older than the queens who don’t live all that long ‘guide’ them to do their *duty* and—”

“No one was smart enough to figure out that could be a problem until shit imploded. Yeah, that’s exactly the blinders I’m talking about.”

“Preaching to the choir, Brother, preaching to the fucking choir,” I grumbled, both of us silently eating our potatoes until they were gone. “You buying this round?”

He snorted. “You’re rich.”

“I doubt you’re hurting,” I drawled but still went and ordered more for us, paying and getting a refill on my drink before sitting back down. “So yeah, I need help getting more children and grandchildren of fairies out of trouble now that we have something in place. But first, back to what I asked you.”

He frowned, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I don’t know who the head of the Underground is. I’ve told you that.”

That wasn’t the question I meant. “How many stayed? That’s what I was referring to. How many fairies stayed during the war? Did you come across any or—fill me in since I was clueless on everything.”

He scratched his cheek and sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever directly come across one or one I knew. I will say you’re not the first to figure out how to hide fairy magic or their signature.”

“I didn’t think that I was,” I chuckled darkly. “So you don’t know but saw traces that made you think they were around or just your hunch?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but our order arrived so he held off, politely thanking the woman who brought our potatoes out. He let me distribute and seemed happy I’d gotten him two more. “Mostly gut, but I found a few things that didn’t add up unless a fairy was involved. Especially given I think a fairy might be our leader.”

“Like?”

“There used to be witch and warlock abduction and draining. It didn’t happen for long, and then it suddenly stopped and we were given orders to not even think about it.”

“That would be over the line to most even if they weren’t good people or didn’t toe the line to go home,” I muttered, nodding when he did. The only thing that had a chance to shut down someone evil and powerful was someone not great and

powerful. I could totally see a fairy who on their own stopping something like that.

But why only that?

My mind was a scary place because then I immediately worried that a fairy had been in charge of the black market the former warlock elders had been part of. Then I shook my head. They were mostly the leaders of it. If they'd been working with a fairy... They wouldn't have had that much pull or power. They were idiots.

Not to say fairies couldn't be... Too many were.

But to hide from all of the fairies that had lived in this world, they couldn't be stupid.

No way.

“Do you guys have your hands in AT&P or INTELS?”

He raised an eyebrow on that. “Not that I'm aware.” He took a few bites and shook his head. “No, unless it's a small group or something, but I really doubt it.”

“Why?”

“I think the big powerful houses that weren't elders like the dead uncle of your mate made it clear that was theirs and not to go near it. Criminals turn a blind eye to each other all of the time but don't like others on their turf.”

I nodded, fully understanding what he was saying. I could *absolutely* see Julian's uncle making it clear to someone in the Underground that he didn't care what they did but to stay out of his business.

I had another thought but was hesitant. “I want to take you by somewhere demons were killed and not cleaned yet. You can feel the evil and it’s not something you forget.”

He raised an eyebrow at me again and I had an amusing thought that he should just keep it up instead of ever lowering it at this point. “You going to tell me what’s going on that you’re pumping me for information?”

“No, because if you can’t connect the dots for me I’m just going to take the memories anyways to protect you.” I let out a long breath when that didn’t seem to be enough. “We got new information on the fairy who tried to kill me. I’m trying to make sure everything isn’t all connected.”

“The head of the Underground did *not* go for you,” he said firmly, nodding when I couldn’t hide my shock he was so sure. “They want you as theirs. I’ve heard from my direct supervisor that the plan was always to get you on our side. Even after you’ve been waking fairies and had backup. They believe that the fairies won’t accept you in their perfect society because you’ve been tainted with this world. That we can turn you once they do.”

“It’s not a bad move,” I admitted, ignoring when the tension from the fairies around me shot up again. “It wouldn’t have worked because I’d never join that team, but I thought that would be the outcome of all of this a lot.” I snorted and focused on my food. “I still think it could be once I awake all of the fairies. Part of me thinks I shouldn’t wake the last of them until I’m queen and they’re stuck with me.”

“That’s darker than I thought you’d go,” he muttered, not hiding his shock well.

I glanced up at him and rolled my eyes. “You don’t know me well enough and what I’ve been through, wolf. My best friend came at me with my death in her eyes because I denied her the vengeance she wanted even if the cost was her life. Fairies who don’t even know me would slit my throat and bleed me out if it would wake their family. I’ve always known that.”

“And yet you’re giving everything to them,” he sighed, giving me a look that I just proved I was as dumb as he’d accused me of being at times.

“Not everything. I won’t give my life. I won’t give up my chance of happiness. I made it clear—and I’m not kidding—that I’ll walk away if they won’t accept—”

“The vampire,” he cut in, nodding as he took another bite.

“Any of them. They don’t get to dictate my love life or who I am. I’ll walk.” I snorted and went back to my own food as well. “Most days I’m completely convinced I still will.” I sighed when he snorted this time, obviously not believing me. “Look, my mom died to protect those people and that world. There’s a lot more to this than we tell anyone outside of Faerie.

“While I *loathe* how some fairies treat their non-fairy children, I do agree that they not get read in on everything. You’re a wolf. That will always be your heart and soul. That’s where it should be, and it’s fair that you don’t get all of the info fairies or hobgoblins do. You’re a cousin, not the immediate family.” I waited until he gave a sharp nod. “Fairies are judgmental.

“Even if most of them are defending me now—especially to the public—it took a *lot* to get there, and I don’t know that I’ll ever forgive them for that. All I went through to save them, and I still had to pull miracles out of my ass for them to be on my side. The amount of pain I went through waiting for them to back me... There aren’t words for that, and it’s been an abusive relationship that I don’t know is worth saving most days.

“So as long as it won’t cost me my life or hope for happiness, I’ll do what my mom wanted. I’ll wake them up and set Faerie on the best path, but after that—I’ve never said I’m all in, and if people say that, they’re just saying what they want. It’s not the life I would have ever wanted for myself, and it’s a hundred times harder because I’m not treated like one of them by them.

“But then I’m judged by them. Constantly. Someone was insubordinate and it almost got someone important killed. That’s a very clear ‘you fucked up,’ right?” Again, I waited until he nodded. “Except it wasn’t. Everything was about how I handled it. What I did wrong. And that was completely because he’s a real fairy. They know him. He’s *one of them* and I’m the half demigod, practically human fairy since I grew up here.

“I’m not sure how that works since I’m supposed to be the most powerful, but it does to them. I was 100% in the right and he fucked up, but no one took my side at first and for a while, way too long when I’m their *boss*. So yeah, you snort like it’s a done deal, but no one’s heard *me* say that. And every time shit like this happens, one foot gets further out the door.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“Why are you sorry?” I asked, not sure how that was his response to my rant.

He let out a heavy breath and pushed away the first empty plate. “Because I was judging you too.”

I gave a half shrug. “I should have done something sooner about the kids we rescued. I’m pissed at myself for not being able to juggle that or letting everyone else’s priorities push me around.” I waited until he looked at me. “That is a *fair* judgment even if you were harsh. I dropped the ball. If people say that about me, I can accept it when it’s true. That’s not even what I’m talking about.”

“I get it, but it wasn’t fair. You still don’t have things squared away and I thought you did.” He adjusted his neck and looked annoyed. “Apparently, you maybe never will if they don’t pull their heads out of their asses.”

“No, apparently not,” I whispered, not hiding how sad that made me. I snapped myself out of it and focused on my food. “Actually, why don’t you pass it up the food chain that you heard I’m getting flak about not waking fairies over my break.”

“Tell me that’s not fucking true.” He growled when I snorted. “Are you kidding me? They were all over you being embarrassing for not controlling your wings and taking your magic more seriously and then you *do* and you’re getting shit on again?”

“Yeah, especially because I invented something to help Faerie big time,” I mumbled, not hiding that I was pouting but



really it was being tired and needing more sleep. “People are upset that I’m *playing* instead of actually working on my power surge, and I’m neglecting my duty giving all of myself to them and that world.”

“Un-fucking-real,” he seethed. “You’re a *kid*. I get they want their family woken, but they’re safe. They’re alive, and none of that was possible without you. So all that matters is what they want, and you *still* don’t get to live like them because they’re so selfish?”

“I don’t understand what—”

“Fairies in college, normal fairies your age *play* with their magic all of the time. That’s all they do at that age. You’re taking courses now that they normally get, right? It’s advanced magic that pushes everything. It’s meant for you to work your levels higher after your wings and everything.”

I nodded, that made sense with what Sontar taught me. I winced. “They didn’t teach me to fly. Hudson did—has been.”

Darkness filled Luke’s eyes in a way that made me flinch even if I knew it wasn’t directed at me. “Those fuckers didn’t teach you to fly? You’ve had your wings almost two years. Do you have any idea the damage that could do to your magical growth by not learning to fly?”

“I don’t know if that’s—it’s not so much damage, but it can cap the growth from what I understand,” I muttered, focusing on my food so I didn’t have to meet his gaze. “And a lot of them wanted that, Luke. Or they think Faerie will die if I do and wouldn’t risk me.”

“Selfish fuckers,” he bit out. “Their planet is more important than their own fucking savior when they don’t know if that’s even true.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed loudly. “My dad wouldn’t have let it damage me, and there were some other issues with my magic that he was worried about me getting control before I tried for another power level.” I shrugged. “It didn’t happen. My power just jumped twice in a few months.”

“I’m glad,” he said quietly, understanding this was a difficult topic for me. “Now I’m really sorry I was being such a shit about things.”

I snorted as I finished one plate and moved on to the next. “You didn’t come yell in my face or tell the world I was a jerk. Fuck, can you teach more people to be a ‘shit’ about what I do like that?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have that magic.”

“Yeah, me neither.” We ate in silence a few minutes and then I cleared my throat. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Validating my feelings,” I answered honestly. “The people who love me are on my side and would say the same—some of them at least—but hearing someone outside of it saying they’re still being too selfish and abusive with me helps. A lot.”

“I’m glad, but I hate you’re still in that abusive relationship with them.”

“Yeah, me too.” I snickered and stabbed my food harder than needed. “Some of the worst threats against me are finally

being taken out.”

“Glad they’re finally protecting you at least.”

I threw back my head and laughed, startling him from the way he flinched. “Oh, they didn’t do it for *me*. They did it because the bad guys wanted to bring demons into Faerie to break them out of jail. They couldn’t risk that evil in their world so they—that’s why they’re being executed. Wanting to steal my power and puppet me? Yeah, no big. Have them retire to a fancy island and live in the best prison ever.

“But risk evil on their planet? Instant death. Behead the fuckers within a few days and everyone agrees.” My food was blurry, making me realize tears were falling. “Plans to subjugate and rape their future *queen* and I had to fight to get them even locked up. Fuck the nightmares and fear I’ve lived with that it could still be my fate because those fuckers are powerful. Yeah, what does that matter?

“But talk to demons or anyone who works with them and that’s it. You’re toast.” I swallowed loudly and wiped my eyes with my forearm before meeting his gaze. “So yeah, it’s not a done deal. Not even close.” I snorted and shoveled more food in my mouth. “Fuck, the more I talk to you, the less I can think of a reason to sign up for this abuse for the rest of my life. I’m like a willing victim if I do.”

“I’ll tell the higher-ups what you said about getting the flak,” he said after several minutes of us eating quietly. “And if you get me a contact that’s not stupid, I’ll get you locations of grandkids we’ve gotten our hands on. I’m not sure how many kids are left that weren’t brainwashed like the ones you rounded up.”

“I still want to find them. We’ve deprogrammed a bunch of the ones we took into custody. That’s who is going to be watching over the grandkids.”

“I’m glad you could. You know those places will become targets, right?”

“I’m counting on it. It’s so much easier to pick off bad guys when they walk right up to you looking for a fight.”

He studied me for a few minutes. “I want to lecture you about using kids as bait, but I’ve done much worse, and knowing you, you’ve got enough in place that the kids won’t even know they were ever in danger.”

“I love how you barely know me and have enough faith in me to realize that. I got several earfuls on the topic like I’d really ever risk kids.”

“Do they ever *not* mistreat you?”

“The hobgoblins don’t,” I grumbled. There might have been more I was going to say, but my phone started vibrating in my pocket as I saw Agis and Kerym on their phones.

Luke looked over my shoulder and nodded, letting me know Dalyor was on his phone as well.

That couldn’t be good.

I pulled out my phone and swore under my breath. “Speaking of abusive shit, I have to go handle this.”

“Yeah, leave first and I’ll switch back with your guy.” He grabbed my wrist when I stood. “You need backup?”

“No, it’s not that kind of emergency. It’s contained, but they need someone up the food chain to handle it, and if I

don't—I don't trust what decision they might make without me.”

“Wow, that's... I don't have to worry about that, and I work with criminals.”

Realizing he was right did *not* help my mood.

I mumbled a goodbye and hurried to leave so I could slip in between people and teleport without being noticed.

My security could catch up or not. Right then I didn't actually want to be around fairies anyways.

# 10

I arrived where Mason was imprisoned and couldn't hide how pissed I was at what I found. The look I gave the guards made them all drop to a knee instead of just bowing to me.

"Someone explain why we're just standing here when a bear is raging over there trying to break her son out of his cage?" I bit out.

"She's not trying to break him out, Your Highness," the guy closest to me corrected. "She's trying to break in so she can kill him. She screamed she was going to kill him before shifting and launching at the cage."

"She's not doing any damage to the bars or cage because of the magic, Princess," someone else added.

"I understand. Thank you for catching me up," I muttered, blowing out a harsh breath. So basically, they were letting Mason's mom throw a fit and get out her energy instead of risking her later saying we hurt her for subduing her or something.

Still, it was ridiculous that this was happening.

And I *really* wasn't in the mood for anything else ridiculous.

I moved closer and used my magic to force her to shift back, knowing it would hurt the way I did it. I waited until she was a woman again and she glanced up at me in anger. “If you tell me you’d let me just rage out at your house and wouldn’t intercede, I’m going to smack you for lying to me.”

That took a lot of wind out of her sails.

“He is in our custody and we are responsible for him,” I told her firmly. “That means if *anyone* tries for him, we have to stop it. I’ve made it clear that I don’t want him dead and you doing this—his mother or not—is disrespecting my orders. Don’t you think you’ve done enough of that?”

She swallowed loudly, probably seeing I wasn’t fucking around in my eyes. “I apologize for losing my head.”

I studied her and gave a nod. “Fine, you’re forgiven and can still visit him, but I suggest taking a break until you get yourself back under control.”

“I won’t be coming back,” she whispered, lowering her head. “If I can’t kill him to erase my sin of birthing a monster, I can’t—I have to erase him from my mind.”

I blew out a slow breath before squatting down in front of her. “I can’t believe I’m about to fucking comfort someone who’s been such a fucking cunt to me, but apparently I’m as stupid as some people accuse me of being.”

I flicked Mason off when he snorted.

I raised his mother’s head so she looked at me. “There are psychopaths who aren’t monsters, Mrs. Rodriguez. Just because they’re born with an underdeveloped brain doesn’t—” I slowly turned when there was a loud snarl from my left,

smirking up at Mason. “That’s what it is. Your brain didn’t fully develop in impulse control and emotional areas, asshole. You look down at all of us, but you’re the one with the issue.”

He launched at the bars, and one of the guards portaled into the cage and had him subdued in a flash.

I focused back on his mom. “It’s not about how he was born. *And* we have evidence that someone else in the Rodriguez family tree might have been one too.” I nodded when she couldn’t hide a shock. “Mason had his journal and used that as a reference about knowledge of fairies. It wasn’t correct, and that’s how he almost killed me by drugging me, but the ramblings were all crazy.

“He did kill a fairy though. We’re pretty sure of that. It fits because the studies I’ve read believe that being a psychopath is a genetic condition. How they *act* on that is totally fucking up to them. I’m not saying you’re off the hook or haven’t been a shit parent—fuck, I think you’re a shit person, but you aren’t responsible for how the adult man over there behaved. You’re not.”

She bobbed her head, sitting back on her ass and pulling her knees to her chest.

I glanced around and saw her clothes were in tatters. I looked to the fairy nearest me and gestured to her body, giving them the signal to figure that out. “I would have your other children checked though. I doubt it’s a dominant gene or condition, or the world would be filled with psychos, but one percent isn’t nothing either.”

“I will, thank you, Princess.” She grabbed my wrist when I went to stand, immediately apologizing when everyone



around us went tense. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. What did you want to say?”

“I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you. I...” She shook her head. “I couldn’t believe the sweet boy who was my shadow and biggest joy could ever become... It had to be you. You had to be the reason. It had to be your fault. But it’s not. It’s not your fault and he’s a monster.”

The wail she let out cut through me and everyone there it was so deep and from her soul.

Except Mason. He smiled from where he was forced to lie on the ground of the cell.

I waited until he glanced at me. “You’re pathetic. This is what you are now? A lunatic who enjoys destroying his own family? She was the only person left who truly loved you and you’re getting off on this.” I stood and smirked at him. “No one at school ever missed you. They did shit to fuck with me because they hated me, but there was no love for you. Most thought you were a loser and full of yourself.”

I went to say more but shook my head instead. What was I doing?

Seriously? What the fuck was I doing wasting my breath and *valuable time* talking with the crazy fucker who almost killed me?

Was I the one mentally unwell?

“You’ll get her home?” I checked with the guards, glad when they nodded. “Allow her access still. That was the deal.” I waited until Mrs. Rodriguez looked up at me. “No more outbursts though. I was handling plans to take out more of the

Underground and getting intel from a source. I think we both know that was more important than this.”

“I hate her, but even I can’t lay the mismanagement of your own people at her feet,” Mason mocked.

I almost snapped back at him that it was about the politics because his family had made such a damn mess, but I caught myself in time and simply walked out of there. My phone had gone off a few times while I’d been there, so I checked it, shocked when it was a picture from Julian of Lucca, Hudson, and Juan.

And they were drinking?

I looked closer and realized it was taken at Julian’s condo.

Yeah, I wasn’t sure what was going on. Was he inviting me over to have some fun? To... I wasn’t, sure so I just teleported to him.

He flinched as I appeared in his kitchen and he was going over work. He studied me as I tried to get my mouth to work. “Have you slept?”

“Not much since I left the Vogel’s party,” I admitted. “And there’s been a lot. So what is...” I just pointed towards where his living room and the picture had been taken.

Julian let out a heavy sigh. “Lucca and Juan were mostly staying with Hudson during break. You knew that, yes?” He waited until I nodded. “Well, Hudson punched someone at their party and told his parents to fuck off when they wanted him to apologize. So he left home and that meant Lucca and Juan left too.”

Yeah, I really couldn't get my mouth to move after that, amusement in Julian's eyes as I tried my best to say something.

Finally, I landed on the question confusing me most. "So how did you get involved?"

"There was some back and forth on whether they were allowed to stay at your home, and Darby didn't feel comfortable making the call given where your relationship was at. He said your vacation home or a different residence was fine, but Hudson and Lucca's mothers still keep using your house in Italy like their vacation home. Hudson asked me if I'd seen you and was fairly drunk by then so..." He shrugged.

Yeah, he'd just told them to come over.

Oh boy.

"Right, I'll take the drunks home. Who did he punch and why?"

The look Julian gave me spoke *volumes* about how silly I was to ask.

Me.

It had to have something to do with me if Hudson lost his temper.

Fair enough.

I let them know I was there and then got Hudson to tell me everything.

And I was *not* happy at what I heard.

Luckily, I got a lot of images using my telepathy even if he was mostly drunk. He was a super cute dragon trying to comfort me when I hadn't even been there or heard what was said. I promised him that I'd handle it before giving him a kiss and getting the three of them settled at my house.

"They're always allowed here if there's a problem," I told Darby and the guards there.

"I figured, but I didn't want to make the call unless they were stuck," Darby said with a sigh. "I mean, it's not like they can't afford a hotel or they could've just gone to Julian's."

Fair enough and I said so. Then I asked my security to get them food while I changed... And Darby gave me a look not to even try lying to him.

Yeah, I wasn't going to change.

I teleported to the hawk shifter that Hudson punched, glad when he was alone. He was watching TV and didn't even see me until I moved closer to the TV. Then he was on his feet and sputtering.

I simply smirked at him as I went over to the remote and shut off the TV. "You're filing a grievance against my mate? Did I hear that crazy right or was Hudson misinformed?"

"He punched me and won't even apologize," the hawk bit out.

I used a rune and made him kneel. "He was teaching you much needed *manners*, cockroach. I'm the leader of all Faerie and you don't even address me properly?" I snorted. "Right, I'm... What was it you said? What did you say about me in public, at a party I'd just been at? In the *home* of my mate?"

He pressed his lips together, but I simply used a different rune and made him answer. “I wondered how many of those fairy soldiers you’d slept with because the only way a man would ever take orders from someone like you was if you fucked them.”

“And?” I pushed.

“That I’d rather kill my son over letting trash mate into my family, and I questioned if the Vogel’s had any honor anymore,” he bit out.

I let out a slow breath as I sat on his coffee table. “And you can tell me with a straight face that you *didn’t* deserve to be punched for that? You wouldn’t punch someone if they spoke of your mate like that?” I snorted when I heard in his mind he would have killed anyone who spoke of her that way. “Hypocrite.”

“I’m not,” he snapped. “My mate is amazing, and it would be lies to—”

“What’s your body count?” I interrupted rolling my eyes when he thought it. “Yours is three times mine. Fuck, I don’t care and so what, but seriously, let’s keep things in perspective.” I shook my head when it was clear that he didn’t believe me. “I think it’s pathetic that your mate would stay with someone like you who spouts bile about women because he’s *jealous*.”

“Of *you*? Never.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re oozing with it. Seriously, I can hear your thoughts and you’re only partially lying to yourself, so you know I’m right. This is all about

jealousy. I have more power. More money. More *everything* than you. It's shallow and disgusting." I held up my hand to hold him off. "I'm not going to argue with someone so warped and twisted.

"I'm exhausted and have been working my ass off to keep people safe. That wasn't a ploy for me to get out of the party and go have sex, you stupid fuck. People could have *died* and I stopped it. Here and in my world. And you're jealous that I'm the boss, so you took shots in front of my mate and are now playing the victim when he gave you what you deserved. Pathetic."

"Like I'd believe your word on something like that," he seethed saying more bile and I just let him, knowing my phone was already recording in my pocket.

"You done?" I drawled. "Seriously, even your own council would take your head if you said half of that to one of your leaders. We both know it. Or your Alpha. I'm the leader of another species and they will side with me."

"No, they won't," he argued.

I smirked at him. "They already *have*. All of the councils have made it abundantly clear that this talking to me or about me however people want is *over*. Sorry you're late to the party, but now you get to deal with me." I moved my elbows to my knees and my chin to my folded hands. "So I'll tell you what—Hudson will apologize and *I'll* give you a punch instead because you said it about me. With witnesses. How does that sound?"

"You are trash if you respond to words with violence," he growled, trying to spit on me, but I let it hit a barrier.

Rolling my eyes at him, I sighed. “Really? Spit? That’s all you got? Hey, that’s not words. That’s an action. A pathetic one, but it still is.” An idea hit me and an evil smile slowly crept over my lips. “You go tell your council what happened and that Prince Hudson is willing to apologize, but Princess Tamsin will be punching you for what you said. And I’ll punch you with *all* of my magic.”

His face went a bit pale, but then disbelief filled his eyes.

I went on before he could say anything. “I’ll punch your head clean off just for threatening to take action against my mate, mother fucker. Never doubt that. You’ll be in the *ground* or eaten by my godsdamn dogs. Hell, I don’t even need them.” I made fae fire appear in my hand. “I’m the first to do that. Are you *really* stupid enough to take a punch from me?”

He swallowed loudly.

Well, at least he wasn’t that stupid.

“*Or* you will publicly issue an apology that you were 100% wrong and people should never speak of women like that. *And* you specifically apologize to Hudson and the Vogels for starting trouble in their home when they welcomed you. That people who behave in such a manner are *trash* and you’re mortified you behaved that way.”

I used a rune to tie him up with rope and teleported us to the room the hawk elders used mostly for council meetings.

“Let’s see whose side they choose, shall we?” I found a large pad of presentation papers and a marker.

Perfect.

I wrote out exactly what I wanted the apology to say, verbatim, and left it propped up in the chair of the head elder. Then—just to be a shit—I went over to the guy and patted him on the head, saying I’d let someone know he was there waiting to speak with them... But hopefully, he didn’t piss himself before they arrived.

No, I didn’t tell anyone. I let the guards or whomever just find him.

And he was on supe TV before lunch the next day reading exactly what I’d said.

Glad the elders were finally wising up because I wasn’t kidding about threatening Hudson and what I would do.

I went to the bakery after someone said reporters were there trying to get a sound bite from any fairy they could. I had no problem giving it to them.

“What do you think about what happened, Princess Tamsin?” the guy called over. He chuckled when I gestured for him to take it down a bit as I walked over to him.

“This is a place of business, so let’s not get others involved—customers or employees,” I chastised with a smile. “To answer your question, I found it incredibly disheartening. People were being so ridiculously petty and abusing the Vogel’s hospitality all over the place. I wouldn’t be surprised if they canceled the event going forward.”

I shrugged when the three reporters couldn’t hide their shock.

“I would. People—*guests*—used it to have some ten seconds of fame moment to get in a dig on the heir of Faerie



because I was a guest as well. That doesn't change that I'm the leader of Faerie and her people. I'm always that no matter the situation I'm in. It's not a hard concept. Put people were so over the line—he is not the only apology I expected, and my guards made sure to find out names to blacklist them from our events.

“Just because you say something with a smile or follow it up with a line for me not to be sensitive doesn't make it any less bile that came out of their salty mouths. Plus, people were insulting Hudson's younger brother. It's *gross* that people call him a 'backup' or 'second choice.' Connor Vogel might be secondborn, but he should *never* be anyone's second choice. His grades are stellar and having worked with him, I can speak to how smart he is.

“He's kind, understanding, and a wonderful person. If Hudson and I do mate and he decides to step down as the heir, the dragons of North America will be in amazing hands with Connor as their future. Honestly, a lot of people at that party should take some lessons in manners from him. His are impeccable and he's a delight to be around. As opposed to the *adults* who were bullying someone in high school.

“And laughing about it. They think it's a good time to hassle a high school student. That doesn't sound like the actions of someone mentally stable if I'm honest. He's not even of age and they were mocking him. The fact they aren't ashamed of their behavior is—I hope their councils or leaders are.

“They represent not just themselves, but their species at a party like that, and I'd be mortified if I was their leader. I was

when a few of mine stepped over the line and hassled someone of a different species. I handled it firmly and swiftly.”

“How did you punish them, Princess?” a different reporter asked, looking like she wasn’t buying it.

Fool.

“They’re banned from leaving Faerie for a year. Their entire family since they used their family name as leverage,” I answered, nodding when they couldn’t hide their shock. “I’m a lot of things, but a hypocrite isn’t one of them. They also received six months of community service because they risked the peace among our community by poking people of another species.

“I also lead by example. Unfortunately, some of the examples the different council members have been giving have led to this ridiculous behavior. I hope they stop being such weak, uncouth leaders and can step up to the level of a woman in her mid-twenties. Or the *seventeen-year-old* who kept his composure and was still polite to everyone because he understood he represented his family. Too bad the adults around us didn’t.”

I thanked them for letting me speak my mind but excused myself that I had to handle a list of things for the day. If they wanted more of our official comment, I gave them Shael’s cell number.

I winked at the amused hobgoblins who knew I was there just to see the reporters... But still had boxes for me like that was what I’d come there for.

Of course, they did.

Hudson, Lucca, Darby, Julian, Juan, and Izzy were watching what I'd said when I returned home with the treats. The looks they *all* gave me like I had huge balls were rather amusing.

"I love you, shorty," he whispered as he was suddenly in front of me.

"I love you too, beastie," I chuckled as I stood on my toes for a kiss.

He gladly gave it, careful of the boxes. They were taken from my hands and then I got a much better kiss.

I tapped his arm as I pulled away. "I would *love* to do a lot more of this, believe me, but—"

"You're exhausted," Julian worried.

"I'm exhausted," I agreed. "Any word from Neldor?"

"He stopped in to show you more executions but said he'd catch you later," Julian said. "Oh, and the commanders approved your request—whatever that means."

"I don't want the sentenced ancients and elders buried in Faerie," I told them all. "I don't want that evil festering in the sentient planet."

"Yeah, that's really smart, Tams," Izzy muttered. "Damn, I never thought of it like that, but I wouldn't want it even if I was a normal fairy, not to mention when you have the link to Faerie."

I wouldn't either which was why I had no problem asking to make it happen. Any fairy with a brain should have wanted the same.

# 11

I was confused when everyone seemed to be on my side of what happened. The supe news was playing clip after clip of people going on the record that I was right and it was nice that someone finally called out people for their bad behavior. On and on praising me without any real criticism... Even from the station that hated me and always found a way to shit on me.

Seriously, I could have cured cancer and they would have ignored the achievement and simply run segment after segment tearing into me for not doing it sooner. Or demanding I step down from being the heir because I was so embarrassing to fairies. That was always how it worked.

So yeah, I was ridiculously confused.

Until I realized it was all *fairies*. All the clips were of fairies.

And they had to be using magic to make that happen. No one else was asking hawks about their feelings or anyone coming on that was at the party?

Yeah... They were using magic to make that happen.

Then it hit me.

I dropped what I was doing and teleported to the dark fairy hotel, not shocked when I found who I wanted sitting at a table working. I went right up to Agis, Dalyor, and Kerym, not caring that I was interrupting a meeting.

“Who did you tell about my conversation with Luke?” I demanded. I bared my teeth at them when two of them flinched, Agis always too locked down to react much. “*Who?*”

“We reported the situation to our supervisors,” Agis answered, completely unashamed or repentant.

I nodded, glancing at the other two before focusing on him. In this instance, he was the perfect one to talk to. “Why?”

He frowned at me, glancing at the other two when they opened their mouths, but I used a rune to silence them. “They needed to know what was said at that meeting given what was said.”

“Why?” I pushed.

“Princess, I’m not—”

“*Why*, Agis? Answer me.”

He let out a heavy breath. “Their job is to protect Faerie, and the conversation was about the future of Faerie.”

“So you needed to warn them.”

“Yes.”

“Them as in—who are they? What are they?”

“The commanders, my bosses,” he answered firmly, getting upset I was pushing this and not hearing what he’d just said.

Especially ignoring that *I* was supposed to be the boss of all of them.

“And they told people?”

“Yes.”

“Who? Why?”

“I don’t know specifically who they told,” he answered, glancing around again, clearly not liking all the eyes on him.

Too fucking bad. “Who do you think they told?”

“The people they answer to.”

Which again, should have been me. “So the nobles? Who?”

“I don’t know. The people they thought needed to know.”

“What people?”

“Our people.”

I didn’t react to hearing that and kept pushing. “Who are your people?”

He finally cracked, gesturing to him and his friends and then around the cafeteria. “Us—fairies. That’s our people. We’re fairies, and we need to know what to expect as people who were born and raised there, and I will always report what I hear from outsiders about our home. That is my job.”

And there it was. That was what I wanted him to admit.

That I was an outsider to him.

I nodded, others reacting to what he said and the slip, but not him since he was flustered. “I want you to remember this moment, Captain. I want you to *burn it* in your mind and what

you just said. If I don't take the throne, look back on this moment and know you were one of the many who pushed me out the door. Fuck, made me feel unwelcome and unwanted."

"Wait, I don't under—"

"Quit while you're behind before she quits," someone snapped.

Yeah, I couldn't have said that better myself.

"The three of you will never be on my detail again. Don't even bother asking or trying." I couldn't even hide my hurt as I looked between them. "Your friend you took gambling my fucking ass. You were spying on the *outsider*, right? And you don't know what you've done. They're using *magic* to force the scenario and reporting. You're fucking with the press and people's minds. That makes us the bad guys.

"And no one fucking checked with me, the one who is supposed to be *all of your boss*. Not the commanders. Not the nobles. *Me*. Or Neldor, and I know he wouldn't have agreed to this. Not when he's smart and knew I would be pissed that you're manipulating supes and placating me that you all fucking care about me. Every fucking step we take forward just has to be ruined. People will figure this out and *blame me* and I didn't make the call!"

Which was something I couldn't ever say. I couldn't tell people that. I would look the fool and a puppet.

Clearly, I was.

I went to teleport to Iolas, not bothering to waste any more of my breath with people... But I couldn't. I didn't go anywhere.

He was in Faerie.

Fuck it.

I teleported to the portal, went through, and then teleported to him. I found him standing off to the side while Lageos and Neldor were talking quietly together. So they were still carrying out sentences.

Good.

“When you’re done here, come see me at my house, and if you have any hand in this new bullshit, don’t be surprised if I block you from my house too,” I told him before teleporting away. I wasn’t supposed to be in Faerie, and honestly I was so annoyed with the world and the people who lived in it that I didn’t want to risk doing anything I would regret.

But I could never do that to the hobgoblins.

Once I was back through the portal, I teleported home. I didn’t even bother speaking to the fairies that were there to guard me. I opened portals under them and sent them to the dark fairy hotel. Then I went to the barrier and... Reprogrammed it? I wasn’t really ever sure what I did, and I could definitely never teach it.

Not that anyone would ever trust me to be their teacher when I was an outsider.

I changed the barrier so the only two fairies who could set foot on the property were Iolas and Neldor. Then I changed the portal in the garage and in the basement that no fairies could come through even if they had the correct runes to manage it.

“What happened?” Darby asked quietly as I came into the kitchen with dark clouds all around me.



I opened my mouth to brush him off but then sighed, not having the energy to be angry at him when I was so angry at... Millions of fairies really. “Same shit different fucking week and people pulling the rug out from under me thinking that things will get better. Just another day in fucking paradise.”

“What can I do to help?” he asked after a few moments.

“I don’t know there is any help,” I sighed. “Nothing will ever change and it’s time to just accept that. I... I have piles of work that I didn’t want to handle because it would put me in a bad mood. Well, I’m there, so I might as well punish some criminals.”

He bobbed his head. “You’re going to fuel for that. What are you in the mood for?”

I blew out a harsh breath. “I don’t know. I’m too all over the place. Whatever you want is fine. You know what I like.” I went towards my study but then threw a “thanks” over my shoulder.

Using magic, I moved the stacks and stacks of files waiting for me to review into the dining room. I needed that huge ass table to really make sense of the mess I had. Especially when there was a bunch more that I knew hadn’t been brought over yet.

Why were there so many stacks and more to come?

That was a funny answer that wasn’t really fucking funny at all.

When the Faerie Guardians started finally punishing people—including the ones they came to school to sentence for speaking lies to me—it only worked on the “kids.” The

adults threw fits that they weren't allowed to give punishments when they were the ones who did the investigating. They *completely ignored* that I had made the call and it wasn't the same ones who had investigated.

But it wasn't really ever about being fair. They were starting shit to try and get out of what they'd done wrong and the spotlight. It was like human criminals getting off on technicalities or hiring big lawyers the other side couldn't go against.

Yeah, bad people ditching their comeuppance wasn't a new thing.

It was a stupid fight in my opinion, but it wasn't the only one we had at the time, and it could have led to pushback on other things. Unfortunately, someone had used the argument that I hadn't been educated yet in the laws or criminal system of Faerie as the reason that I couldn't handle it all yet.

And they weren't wrong, so it wasn't even a slight against me, but logic.

But people ran with it.

It wasn't their fault I was inept and everything. That I needed to learn in the fire of life then and blah, blah, *blah*.

Idiots. They really never learned or paid attention to who was standing in front of them. They thought I would just give them lighter sentencing or a slap on the wrist to have it done.

*Me?*

Super-duper fucking idiots then.

Instead, I announced that I would declare punishments after I had the education that was needed and I had a lot on my plate. So I would do it within three years or they would be off the hook.

I was never going to let that last part happen, but it gave them the hope to back off because it was a good deal for them. They couldn't say that I didn't give in to their "concerns" or meet them halfway.

So it was dropped, and I enjoyed letting them think they would come out ahead and pushed it off. Plus, it was depressing and I had enough of that.

Now I was filled with such venom that I wanted to have somewhere for it to go. Really and truly I did.

And to do it in a bigger way than I originally planned. I wanted to do it my fucking way instead of worrying what others would think, judge, or how they would handle it.

Fuck them anyways.

"In hindsight, I was thinking with my stomach," Darby said about thirty minutes later as he walked into the dining room loaded to the gills with food.

I snorted. "I'm not someone who could ever judge that, but what does that mean?"

"I got messy, hands-needed Portillo's because it sounded perfect, not thinking we needed to handle documents and files."

I shrugged. "Spills happen even with forks." I sighed as I looked at the stacks and piles. "Seriously, fairies need to go paperless."

“Well, you can,” he hedged.

Yeah, I could. I had that beast of a copier, scanner, and printer in my study.

“That’s perfect because I want to do this differently than others want. I want it bigger and...”

“Do what you need, Tams,” he said gently.

We ate and I told him what I wanted to do, glad when at least he thought it was smart. He finished his food before me—not shocking at all—and then brought out his laptop to design the document I wanted.

There were a few parts he tripped over and asked we call Claudia. I was fine with that because she’d always been on my side too, seeing Tamsin from the very beginning instead of everything else.

She *loved* the idea and managed to get some associates to do the “grunt” work of scanning and saving the correct files. Then she handled getting the rest of the files of those waiting for sentencing.

It was fairly daunting when I took in the stacks and stacks of boxes that they had to go fetch... While shooting me worried looks since clearly fairies were bugging them about me.

Iolas showed up while all of that was going on with a good dose of fear in his eyes.

“So you went to go talk to the others instead of coming right here like I asked?” I accused.

“Yes, but—no one likes going into a situation blind,” he said with a sigh. “I knew they did something wrong. I won’t defend it. I do want to *explain it*. It’s not as bad as you’re validly thinking so please, *please* just hear me out so this doesn’t hurt you the way I’m feeling it is.”

Fair enough.

I nodded for him to go ahead as more food arrived with Hudson, Lucca, and Juan came home. I didn’t even get to ask where they’d been or what was up, focused on Iolas and glad when they realized they’d walked into issues.

Then again... When didn’t they? There were always issues around me.

Iolas explained that when Agis, Kerym, and Dalyor reported my idea of letting the Underground know there was dissension in the ranks, it was Commander Talila of all people who had blown her lid.

And not because she was upset at me. No, she was furious for me. She was pissed that I kept being treated unfairly and she exploded, telling people that they had better start supporting me or we would never have another queen at this rate.

*And* given she was the one to explode, people went into high gear. It wasn’t even anyone high up that had gone to nobles, but a few sergeants. They had gone to some nobles who were actually on my side, and they had set this all up to help me, to show their genuine support.

“Idiots,” I sighed when Iolas was done. “You shut it down, right?”

“Yes, the commanders did not know, and we gently reprimanded the sergeants since their hearts were in the right places but were... Idiots,” he answered, rubbing his tired eyes. “I swear to you that no one had bad intentions, Tamsin. They wanted to help and realized they hadn’t been doing enough.”

“It was nice of them to try,” Julian muttered, giving me a look that I would feel the same if I wasn’t so upset.

“It was, but this going behind my back—if people realize what they did with magic, it’s my ass on the line. People will not believe that this was just a comedy of errors and good intent.”

“Agreed, which the commanders are all on the same page about and made it clear that we can’t have people doing stuff like that. If they wanted to go on the record, that’s their choice and call, but they can’t use magic to get their way, even if good intentions. We’re under too much scrutiny and have too many problems. It was the way things used to happen though.”

“Yeah, but half of Faerie’s problems were the actual leaders being in the dark on too fucking much and people believed bullshit,” I snapped.

“Yes, but that’s not what I meant,” Iolas said gently.

“It gives the leaders deniability,” Hudson muttered, nodding when I glanced at him. “It’s not right, but I know nobles under my parents have done the same. If something gets discovered later, my father could give them a slap on the wrist, and there’s a public apology of misguided intentions. That’s what the nobles did here and it would have worked. People are used to that and—”

“If things were normal or it was Neldor, I would agree with that,” I cut in. “A million percent agree. But I’m a loudmouthed female they all hate. And an outsider to fairies. *Everything* gets blamed on me.”

“Which is what we are telling people now,” Iolas agreed. “Though I will say—”

“Don’t,” I whispered, focused on my food. “Just don’t. We know that even if they won’t say it, I’m an outsider to most of Faerie. Even the hobgoblins who don’t know me say it.” I let out a slow breath and met Iolas’s sad gaze. “I’m glad you told me and they’re only getting slaps on the wrist. I *appreciate* the desire to help, and I hope you communicate that.”

He swallowed loudly. “But?”

“But the fact that they still don’t fucking get that I’m supposed to be the boss of you all and I’m not a fucking outsider disgusts me. Even the people who looked like they were going to pound Agis for saying it didn’t *disagree*. I need a break from fairies always up my ass and all over me. I do. I thought things were getting better but...” I looked away and blinked back tears. “They fucking snitched on me like I’m a threat. I’m over it.”

“I understand, but you need—”

“Protection? When they don’t make me feel safe but spied on?” I rolled my eyes. “My barriers keep me safe. They’re a deterrent so people aren’t stupid around me. They’re not worth it.”

“I would feel better if you always kept the dogs with you just in case since you don’t have eyes in the back of your

head,” Julian cut in. “Please, Tams? It might be a headache later if something really happens, but there’s magic for that, and I need you alive.”

“That’s fair when I’ve been asking you guys to do the same,” I accepted after a few moments. “Dad got rid of all of the demons, but that’s just a temporary solution, and the threat is still out there.” I nodded when Julian did. “I’ll talk to some of the other packs and lone dogs. They can guard other places easily for food, and even some of the puppies we rescued aren’t all that little anymore.”

“I will let everyone know of the change,” Iolas accepted, looking like he was heartbroken.

He was. It was just weird to see him showing it. He was my mother’s best friend, and the fact her daughter was being treated like this probably killed him.

It made me wonder if my mom ever saw any of this in her visions. Even if Lageos had been able to escape Faerie and take care of me growing up, I still wouldn’t have been raised in Faerie. I honestly wondered how much that still would have made me an outsider. Was that it or that I was raised with humans and was an unknown?

Either way... It was really horrible to keep holding something against me that wasn’t my fucking fault and the only reason they were all saved.

Neldor came in a bit later and steam was coming out of his ears and he ranted about demoting Agis. I appreciated the support, but I just didn’t have it in me to talk about it.

I really didn’t. Not again.



Not when it always ended up happening no matter how much the “progress.”

## 12

The first thing that I knew would be a problem was that there wasn't any precedent for a lot of the crimes I needed to rule on. The biggest example was the abuse of hobgoblins. People would *never* have pulled that shit when fairies were around, so it was something never punished before.

“We need to set up guides,” I said to Neldor and the others helping. “Like aggravated assault has a range. And jail time and/or fine. Repeat offenders get higher sentencing, but they won't ever have the chance to be repeat offenders.”

“Increase each year,” Neldor muttered as he scrolled through the tablet he was holding. “Not all of these people did it for all twenty years. And the amount of hobgoblins.”

“For sure each hobgoblin,” I agreed.

“It's also like there should be some extra stipulation,” Darby added. “Like the penalties are higher to hit a child or someone underage than an adult. *Obviously*, I don't see hobgoblins as children or—they're vulnerable. They can't fight back or—they were also held as slaves and—it just pisses me off.”

“There is extra for elder abuse,” I muttered, thinking he was onto something. “An extra charge for special circumstances like that. Not a hate crime because they didn’t do it because they were hobgoblins but like that.”

“Though some did for that reason, and I agree we charge them with a hate crime,” Hudson sighed as he looked over his own tablet.

“I also think there should be different levels as to magical items taken or found in their possession,” Julian said. “Some of these people broke into storage facilities. That’s the same as breaking and entering into a house which is more than just a pickpocket. And then there’s crimes for having stolen property. They *knew* it was fairy magic. They can lie all they want that they didn’t know—”

“But we know they’re lying, so it’s bullshit. I agree,” I muttered. “Okay, we need to map this all out and get some references. Not what the councils punish because most of them were—yeah, we know. This says up to five years in prison and/or a five thousand dollar fine for aggravated assault. That’s one time of beating on someone.”

“Aggravated assault and battery is what they should be charged with,” Lucca said. “This says someone pregnant and vulnerable is always put in that category when injured. It’s the extra you were talking about and being unable to fight like the person hurting them.”

“Good. Now we need for each year and how to compound it,” I agreed.

We worked for hours and had the bulk of it all outlined, but there was one part still missing to me.

“We also need some sort of probation,” I muttered. “Most of these rich assholes will just pay what they see as a fine and be done with it.”

“We added it to the line of ‘reckless’ since there was a complete disregard of the outcome from most of them,” Lucca reminded me.

“Yeah, but it’s...” I blew out a harsh breath and stood, trying to dissipate the annoyance I was feeling. “That’s a felony. We’re making this a felony in Faerie basically.”

Darby caught on first. “And there are repercussions of being convicted of a felony. Loss of being able to vote. Carry a firearm. You can’t have certain jobs.”

“Yes, that,” I exclaimed, snapping my fingers. “They can never be on the council or something. There has to be something more that *stays* with them. They can never enter Faerie. They have to keep so many feet away from hobgoblins after abusing them, at least for like five years’ probation or something. *Something more* than just hitting them financially.”

“Cannot hold a leadership position or be directly involved with the legal system including supe law enforcement,” Darby muttered as he quickly typed. “Cannot have any magic or magical item in their possession that could be used as a weapon during the probation period. Any Faerie Guardian may check their person or residence if there is any suspicion or with random inspections as long as assigned by superiors.”

“You’re going to make a damn good attorney,” Lucca praised, and I wasn’t the only one who nodded at that. “Seriously, that’s awesome.”

“Thanks.” Darby cleared his throat but then shot me a look as if wondering if I felt the same.

I did.

“Do something with the banks,” Hudson added after a few moments of thought. “When they sign the acceptance of their crimes that you talked about, make it so they—this says having a felony can hurt your chances of renting apartments or getting loans. Do that.”

“Good,” I agreed. “Yes, the banks have to alert us if they try to take out credit lines or loans as we don’t trust what they’ll do with that money given how much they used to buy stolen magic and whatnot.”

Darby worded that in a much better way and also added restraining orders for hobgoblins during their probation period with hefty punishment if they so much talked to hobgoblins. He also added that they could not become a guardian or have any wards since they couldn’t be trusted.

And lastly, we were going to make this all public record. That was the part I was going off course from what fairies would want. They busted people in public, but they didn’t have an open accountability system. I wanted that so people could look up and have access to the proof and know who these people were for themselves.

I talked to the head of the different supe banks and let them know orders would be issued soon. Once they were signed, they would get copies and money should be transferred. It seemed presumptuous, but I doubted anyone would take the prison time or even community service options I was going to offer.

And if they didn't sign... Well, things were going to get messy.

Personally, there were a few dozen in particular I hoped went that route because I was clearly outlining in my ruling that I was giving one set of penalties if they accepted their wrongdoings and promised to not commit crimes against Faerie in the future... And a very different sentencing if they didn't.

Everything was in place the next morning. The new website was up on supe dark web servers, the official government of Faerie had supe social media, and a channel on the supe YouTube.

All that was left for me to push over the first domino.

"I thought you'd go after the biggest fish first," Neldor admitted when he saw the files I had with me.

"The biggest fishes have the biggest ammo and backing," I reminded him. "What we need is numbers, and the moment someone caves and accepts this is the system, getting anyone else to do it next easier. So picking off those with the smallest sentences is easiest plus, it gives us the precedence the big fish will yell the loudest about."

"Kick ass, baby doll," he muttered before sneaking a quick kiss.

It worked well that it was Saturday morning and even all of the supe kids would still be on winter break. I opened a portal to the first address and went through after Chief, knowing three more of his pack would follow after me.

I knocked on the door and a very shocked woman blinked at me after opening the door. “I’m here for Alfie Fisher.”

She snapped out of it. “I’m sorry, but my mate isn’t—”

“Do you really think it’s smart to lie to me after not greeting me properly?” I purred. “Have him come to the door now or my dogs will drag him out here and burn your house in the process.”

Chief turned on his flames and growled in warning.

At least she believed me.

A man came to the door with a leery look but dipped his head to me. “What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“I’m here to deliver your deferred sentencing of the crimes you were found guilty of, Alfie Fisher. As this is an official proceeding, I’m recording it. Would you like me to read the list of crimes today or do you waive the right to hear them?”

Anger filled his eyes. “I didn’t commit any crimes so—”

“You confessed under runes, and we have the recordings of that too, so don’t make this worse on yourself.” I pulled out something from his folder. “You signed something saying you agreed to a deferred sentencing and I had three years to rule. It’s within the three years and I’m here to rule.”

I put it back in the folder and glanced to the left side where what he was convicted of was listed.

“You were in possession of nine fairy magical objects knowing they were stolen,” I told him. “However, I am only charging you for eight as one you believed would help your

mate carry her pregnancy to term after several miscarriages. I can never condone theft, but given the extreme circumstances, I think any of us would have made the same bad choice for those we love.”

He lost some of his anger and couldn't hide his shock. “Thank you.”

I nodded. “You are sentenced to five years in prison in Faerie. You were a repeat offender having eight items, but since this was your first sentencing, you were shown leniency.” I pulled out the official sentencing document that I had signed. “If you sign the acceptance of your sentencing and pledge to not commit crimes against Faerie again, I will allow you to turn yourself in within thirty days.

“That should give you enough time to get what you need in order.” I hurried on when he opened his mouth. “Also, if you sign and publicly apologize to the people of Faerie, you are being given options to complete your sentence in either community service or fines since you are a first-time offender.”

He swallowed loudly and took the paper from me, his hand shaking as it sank in that this was real and he wasn't getting out of this. “I need to speak with my attorney and council before—”

“You were already convicted,” I reminded him. “It's done. *You* were one of the people who very loudly said that the Faerie Guardians weren't the law or leadership of Faerie and couldn't hand out sentencing. I was. So I am here to do it. Are you now changing your story and disrespecting the heir of



Faerie? I would suggest you not do that or my dogs will mark you for insulting me.”

One of the pack moved forward and sat next to the guy making it clear it was a warning.

“You sign the deal now in my presence, just like how other judicial systems work. If you do not sign it after you agreed to this delayed ruling so it came directly from me, you will be remanded into the custody of the Faerie Guardians tonight to be brought to Faerie to serve a ten-year sentence since you won’t promise not to commit crimes against Faerie nor apologize. Should you try to run, your sentence will be twenty years.”

His eyes went bug wide. “You can’t do that.”

“I absolutely can,” I drawled. “It’s done all of the time when people are shown leniency for agreeing to certain terms or pledging to make amends.” I pulled out something else and handed it to him. “That’s the statute for receiving stolen goods in your state, knowing they were stolen. Each item over a thousand dollars is *five years* in prison and a five hundred dollar fine.

“You have eight counts of that. *Plus*, you went across state lines with the property. That’s federal, and that’s ten years per item plus a reimbursement fine of the time the owner was without it. You used the magic in some of those items. Do you know how much that magic that you cannot do is worth? A lot.” I gave him a moment with that. “You are being shown *immense* leniency. Take it or don’t. The choice is yours.”

He swallowed loudly and bobbed his head. “I’ll take it, Your Highness. Thank you.”

“Good.” I handed him a pen to sign the document. “You have until Monday morning to let us know which option you will be taking.” I waited until he signed and took the document from him, checking it was fine. “If you break the terms of your sentence or probation, you will be immediately taken into custody and serve a twenty-year prison sentence in Faerie without parole.”

“I understand.”

I went to open a portal but then stopped. “I hope you do because I can teleport to anyone I’ve met. Don’t make me and ruin your family like that with my people. We don’t show leniency twice, Alfie Fisher.”

“You have my word that I won’t, Your Highness. Um, how do I—what number do I call to—”

“One of the attorneys from the law firm that represents me will be back with the finalized paperwork including a copy of what you signed. It will have all of the instructions you need to follow and the number of who to call if you have questions.” I smirked at him as I opened the portal. “I suggest your mate not lie again that you’re not home. They won’t leave it with anyone besides you.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

I left and went back home, deciding to change a few things with the way I handled that, including Claudia coming with and having two copies of the sentencing. One we kept and one the person did. I wouldn’t like to have given it back and not have it to go show my mate and discuss it. That seemed a bit too shady or like we could switch it with magic.

Claudia completely agreed and immediately went to deal with Alfie Fisher once a copy was made while we adjusted what I was carrying. She was done by the time I was and came with me while everyone else got things set up on the back end.

Namely, on the supe YouTube channel. Lucca had worked some tech magic with Marisol and once people signed the acceptance of sentencing, we loaded their file on the text-to-speech program, and that was playing on a livestream. I wanted it to be like a legal court reporting sort of thing. It also all got uploaded to the website with case numbers and whatnot.

By lunch, I had fifty-five sentencings signed and done.

By dinner, it was a hundred and sixty since people knew it was coming and there wasn't much of a shock anymore.

Especially since it was all over supe news what had happened to the one guy who had thrown a fit and actually tried to shove me. Chief had immediately tackled him and branded the guy before Faerie Guardians arrived to take him to prison for the triple sentencing without even getting a chance to talk to his family.

His mate was livid and I couldn't even hide my annoyance.

"Are you really this stupid?" I'd snapped, glad when supe media showed up at *their* call. "Your husband just tried to touch the judge. You cannot be this ignorant. What happens if you do that in the human world? Or your councils?" I nodded when she flinched. "If he had gone for a member of your council after a ruling, he'd be *dead*. I'm the sole ruler of Faerie. *Thank me for my mercy, idiot!*"

So yeah, things went fairly smoothly after that.

For the moment. I doubted it would stay that way.

It never did.

Four hundred were sentenced before the weekend was over, and by Monday morning two hundred and thirty-six had signed the correct form to agree to be punished by fines. All of it was sent to the supe banks and the funds were transferred to the new account set up just for this and so it wasn't tied to anything else.

“What are we using these funds for?” Neldor asked as he checked the account again and told me how many millions were already there.

“Housing for the Guardians,” I answered, nodding when he couldn't hide his shock. “The new facility is built in Theripolis and ready to move in. I want one in your area and more throughout the realms.”

“But the fines for abusing hobgoblins are going to their housing, right?”

“Oh yeah, we already decided that. I thought you meant for the rest and stolen items and—yeah, everything else. All the hours put into the work killing themselves and they get better places to live. We still have a lot more to go too. There's too much we've barely scratched the surface on.”

“I know, but all these people on probation give us a lot of leverage and chances to find more we couldn't before,” he comforted me.

Fair enough.

“The only negative feedback we’re getting—besides the bullshit we expected—is people aren’t happy you went to their homes and their families could overhear what happened,” Claudia told me as she walked into my kitchen. “Most have children and they were pissed they couldn’t shield them from it and they were upset.”

“That’s fair, but how many of them would have come to wherever to be sentenced?” I drawled. I let out a heavy breath when she nodded. “Fine, work it out with each council that we’ll have a day that will sentence a bunch of their people in a row, but people better fucking show or I’m making a scene at their house, work—all of it and dragging their asses to jail if they fuck with me now.”

“I think most now believe that,” she chuckled darkly. “The wolves reached out with the same idea and offered to go tonight with all of them supporting your sentencing.”

“Okay, let’s get fairies to give summons to... A hundred of the wolves left?” I offered with a shrug.

She nodded. “I will handle it and get it all scheduled for after work and school for you since you’re going back soon. You have a meeting with Edelman soon, yes?”

“Yes,” I sighed, not looking forward to it. I wanted to change things up with my schedule again.

It wasn’t even the school’s fault this time. I just needed less fairies in my life.

And more focus on what I required to get the most out of my education and time.

That actually seemed pretty damn fair to me.

I just hoped Edelman thought so as well.

# 13

The meeting with Edelman went well. I was fairly sure he was simply ready for me to graduate from Artemis and even the parents were over bitching about me... Mostly.

Publicly at least, and if they were smart, they really would be after what I'd been up to. Seriously.

So my Monday, Wednesday, and Friday schedule would be:

*Faerie Biology II*

*8-9:30*

*Professor Sontar*

*Human History Affecting Supernatural Affairs*

*9:45-10:45*

*Professor Collins*

*Power Training*

*11-12*

*Lageos*

*Lunch*

*12:15-1:15*

*New Magic Development*

*1:30-3*

*Lageos*

And my Tuesday and Thursday classes were:

*History of Shifters & Dragons*

*9:45-10:45*

*Professor Rosini*

*Rules and Regulations of Guardians*

*11 – 12*

*Professor Garza (Iolas)*

*Lunch*

*12:15-1:15*



Other master's students had more free periods than I did for meeting with advisors or working on their thesis papers. Mine was actually governing a real world as the leader, and I never seemed to have enough time to do that. So I would still have my nightly dinner meetings, but I had a lot of time on Tuesdays and Thursdays to handle what I needed to.

And part of that was actually working with Juan. We'd thrown down and gotten his master's thesis to be a topic about the integration of funding leadership and philanthropic projects with business. And since he was taking over all of my businesses and business interests, he was a great case for it.

I also made it clear that the dragon dean wouldn't be in charge of his thesis anymore, but Edelman or Iolas could be. Someone who would behave. Edelman said he would just as he was handling mine and Neldor's.

Perfect.

Next was to handle the part of the schedule that would actually be more difficult for me to convince... My father.

He wasn't on this planet, so I sent someone to Faerie to ask him to see me when he was done and then I went back to work. I had just finished filling in the punishments for the fifty wolves I was sentencing that night when he arrived.

"The last of the ancients and elders involved have been executed," he informed me.

"Good," I sighed, bobbing my head and then rubbing my chest. "I need to see all of their bodies and—I want this put behind me."

“You deserved nothing less, and it should have been much sooner.”

Yeah, it should have been, but we couldn't change the past.

Unfortunately.

“Whatever you're so nervous about I will agree to, so do not—I cannot handle you so stressed, Tamsin,” he said gently as he sat down on the chair across from my desk.

I gave him a tired smile. “Thanks, Dad.” I flipped through stacks on my desk and found the printout of my schedule, handing it over to him. “This is what I asked Edelman for my schedule to be—what I need it to be. I need to focus on getting stronger and working on my growth as I should have been instead of everything else. I want your help.”

He bobbed his head as he looked it over. “Okay, then I'll do my best to help you. I want this lunch to be off campus and cleansing though. You're going to need it if I only have a few months to really push your magic.” He met my gaze as he handed back the paper. “You can become queen once you're twenty-five and have graduated. That means this semester and one more year only.”

I nodded. “I know. People have said after I graduate.” I swallowed loudly knowing what he was getting at. “But I would have to set the current queens free first.”

“Yes, you would have to,” he said sadly. “We always knew that day would come.” He glanced away and wiped under his eyes. “And what will come after.”

“Do you have any idea how fast it will happen?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“No, but my soul wants your mother no matter how much I love you, my daughter. The moment she will fully be gone from that world, this existence, I doubt I will linger long. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, you didn’t do it,” I said, my voice full of more venom than I meant to show.

“Don’t hate her for what she did. I agreed. It was both of our choice.”

I gave him a look not to lie to me. He would have done just about anything else and we both knew it. He supported her in the decision, but in the end, she made the decision to sacrifice both of them and leave me alone.

“I’ll speak to Edelman and get some sort of outline to him with what I’m plotting.” He stood and wiped his eyes again. “I’m not—I don’t know that I’ll be what—”

“Dad, you’re one of the best teachers I’ve ever had,” I told him firmly. “I should have asked you sooner, but I didn’t want to be... I know you struggle and—it’s hard for me, but I need your help if I’m going to make it through all of this. I need to get stronger now that I know I’m not capped. I need to... I need you.”

“Good. Then I’ll do my best. Next year too. I have hope now that you’re blocked from Faerie. I will make it so that it’s cut off from you or destroy that fucking planet. I promise you, Tamsin. I will not leave you with things in the state they are.”

That was what I needed to hear more than anything.

Food arrived, and I didn't need two guesses it was Darby who ordered it for all of us, but mostly me since I was buried in work now that I was taking this on. Also, I read over all the reports that the Faerie Guardians had cleaned up all the spots of evil from Lageos killing all the demons.

I also went over the reports of the geodes being used and how the wildlife was flourishing better than projections. There was so much food for them to have now in the newly opened areas I'd taken over it was amazing.

But that also meant going over all the farms and handling how I'd made changes in all of the areas before. No one was fighting me anymore, everyone more than ready to get back to their homes, but we still needed more Guardians then. That meant waking more people up and needing to get back into Faerie.

I hadn't had the vision of Darby leaving or Faerie eating me in weeks, so I was pretty sure that wasn't the future I would have anymore, but I thought it prudent to wait until I was back at school to wake fairies again. Maybe the week after.

And talk to my healer about ramping up to wake more than a thousand a day. Not a lot, maybe an extra hundred for a couple of weeks and add as I could as long as it wasn't hurting me. I should be able to with my power jumps.

I was done killing myself. I'd learned my lesson a while ago... Just my power didn't always listen.

The wolf elders were very accommodating that night when I arrived and had everything set up. I flew through the sentencings with Darby, Claudia, Neldor, and Taeral's help. I

only allowed Taeral because I'd demanded Iolas take the week off before school started. Now that Onas was back on, he was taking time off.

Before we all exploded. Seriously.

"I'm glad that's over," Councilman Chin said once I'd gotten through the fifty summoned.

"Yes, that was much easier, thank you for your support," I accepted. "Does next Monday night work for you again?" I glanced around when I felt the tension shoot up.

Councilman Brooks, who was the head of the council, cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Princess, but we thought tonight was it and all of our people."

"No, I'm sorry, but you have more," I told them, shrugging when they couldn't hide their shock. "You had the lowest amount of people who abused hobgoblins, but wolves were actually the worst stealing and illegally having fairy magic behind witches and warlocks. We have many more to sentence."

"We had no idea," a different elder muttered, glancing between the others. "That's disturbing." He adjusted his neck and met my gaze, a bit too much fire in his eyes. "Forgive me, but I think we needed to know that."

"You assume we didn't try to tell you, Councilman," Taeral cut in. "We did. Many times especially when people were blowing up about our leadership doling out the punishments. You all kept assuming it was everyone else and didn't concern the wolves really. I personally told you that your assumptions were wrong."

He opened his mouth but then closed it. “You’re not lying, but I don’t remember that conversation. I apologize. There has been too much on all of our plates. I never meant to be dismissive.” He dipped his head to me to apologize as well.

Fair enough. Even if no one worked as hard as we were on all of this, none of the good leaders just sat around and watched paint dry in between issues.

“Next Monday works for us, Your Highness,” Councilman Brooks accepted. “And as many as you need. I would like to request any information you would be willing to share with us.”

“I’m making it all public record,” I reminded him. “But I will have copies made specifically of the files on wolves and delivered to your office directly if that’s what you want?” I nodded when he did. “Of course. I’ll have the copy of the final sentencing paperwork included so you know what they agreed to and probation we will be following up with.”

“Thank you for including us. We are willing partners in this for whatever you need.”

I believed him now that they understood. Again, I wasn’t mad. There was too much bullshit, and it was hard to cut through what was the truth versus what was being shouted loudly.

I thanked them again before we left. They really didn’t do much besides having their aides at the ready to make copies of the signed sentencing papers and doing grunt work. It was really nice to have the final papers all given out right at that time. Plus, with their elders watching, several authorized the

fines right then and agreed to publicly apologize in the morning.

Even better.

That night I sat down with the journal my mother wrote to me and finally opened it to read more. I should have done this a while ago after what I'd already learned and... I was being a jerk, but none of this was easy.

It was difficult.

Really, really, *really* fucking difficult, and I didn't care what people said otherwise.

Just to prove my point, the whole next section after she explained visions to me was her apologizing that she used Neldor in a ploy to betroth us to save his father knowing we were mates. So she knew. And she knew I would hate her setting up a bullshit betrothal and it would cause problems between us, but she did it anyways to try and save his father.

Yeah, this was all super easy, and I was too sensitive for not looking at it all sooner.

Though I wasn't mad at her on this one. I would have done the same. Some tension and issues between Neldor and I were nothing in the long run if she'd been able to save the life of his dad, and it wasn't her fault that she couldn't.

"I forgive you this one, Mom," I whispered as I kept reading. I froze in reading what came next.

*There was more to my ploy than trying to save Prince Alok, Daughter. There was a sickness in their family that I did*

*not want to infect your future mate. I needed to see myself that he hadn't been touched by it.*

*For as much as his mother pitied me for my visions, I pitied her for her family. Your grandmother was a hard woman and unloving in a way no mother should be. She was broken and knew it, shielding me from it as much as she could even if she didn't give me the love she should.*

*Queen Elora did not have the same shield as her mother was the one to worry over most.*

My heart beat in my ears. My breath was caught in my throat.

I finally knew her name.

Neldor's mother's name was Elora.

And my mother wrote it knowing what she would do and that people would never utter her name again.

Wow.

I shook off my shock and focused on the warning, rereading that last line even because it had to be important.

*Queen Elora did not have the same shield as her mother was the one to worry over most. Her elder female relatives were beaten down too early by their male relatives. Just as the ancients overstep, the male royals push and push beyond reason when the heirs and queens have the power.*

*The royal family of the dark realm was a warning for our family and one my mother took to heart, always keeping her*



*brother at arm's length and making his position clear. Luckily, he was of a good heart and didn't want power but to simply see Theripolis thrive.*

*But if Elora's uncle survives the war, never trust him, Tamsin. Do not let him speak his filth in Neldor's ears or your daughter will never be safe from the same sickness of that family. Elora only escaped it because she met Alok and they were fated mates, otherwise she would have been forced to mate her uncle at her mother's insistence.*

Oh, *ohhhhhh!* Like incest sickness. *Yikes!*

Okay then. Wow.

Gross.

I read more and the details, fighting the need to vomit when my mom warned that after Neldor's dad died, that the uncle tried to force Elora to mate him using that it had been her mother's wishes before.

But Neldor had told me we were all that was left.

"Yeah, I'm not sleeping without checking," I muttered, throwing on enough to go out and stashing the journal.

I teleported to the dark fairy hotel where the commanders were normally working in the conference room. I was glad when Taeral was there even if it was past time for all of us to relax. He was looking over stacks of files and probably everything I had already given sentences on.

People immediately froze since I had been avoiding all of them, and he couldn't hide his shock when he looked up and I

was there. “What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“What happened to Neldor’s great-uncle?” I asked. “My mother wrote about him in her journal and I had—”

“He died in the war,” he answered.

Oh, there was more to it than that. My magic was crawling all over my skin in warning. “I thought Neldor said we were the last. Thank you.” I hurried on like that wasn’t the main reason I was there. “I had some questions about the files I’m sentencing tomorrow and you oversaw them. Since you’re already awake, let’s get some food and go over them.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” He turned to one of the captains helping them and gave a few orders to finish up for him before he came towards me. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Your choice,” I said, instead having the feeling it might be his last meal for some reason.

He gave me a sad look and nodded, understanding I knew more than I was saying. He opened a portal and we arrived at Culver’s, his favorite fast food by far. He waited until we were through the portal and alone. “Please let me explain.”

“That’s why we’re alone, but you need to tell Neldor,” I said gently. I grabbed his arm when he shook his head. “My mother wrote about pitying Elora and her family, Taeral. Her uncle groomed her, didn’t he?”

Tears filled his eyes and he nodded. “Gods above, it sounds too horrible to believe and I was such a—I didn’t believe her, Tamsin. When we were young, I didn’t believe her. I thought... Her father died young and I—I think he did it

for a chance to have her. It's all such—her mother was such—she was so beaten down and believed it all. He was so angry when she met Alok and—”

I pulled him into a hug and let the man cry out the secrets he'd been carrying for too long. I texted Neldor and Lageos that we needed to talk and I was getting food. To meet at home and find each other if someone was in Faerie, that it was important.

Taeral pulled it together enough that we were able to get bags and bags of food and then we went home.

“We have to tell them,” I said gently when he flinched at who was waiting.

Lageos glanced between us and then studied Taeral. “I already know. I promised Meira that if he lived, I would kill the man before I ever let him around you.” He studied Taeral. “But you did and used the war as an excuse. Good.”

“Who?” Neldor demanded.

I put a barrier around him when I felt his magic flare, shaking my head when he shot me a pissed look. “Let him tell you. Don't use a telepathy—not this time. Please.” I was glad when he nodded.”

We all sat down with food, but then Taeral couldn't seem to get his mouth to work.

So I started. “I read something in the journal my mother wrote me. I'll let you read it as well so it's not just what Taeral knows. And it's bad.” I cleared my throat when Taeral still couldn't seem to get his mouth to work. “It's about your great-uncle.”

Neldor's face went pale. "Nothing ever happened. I'm not born of incest."

Whoa. Okay, so he clearly knew something but... Had the pieces wrong?

Yes, he very much did.

There had been rumors that Elora and her uncle had had feelings and maybe an affair. Some saying that was why she'd had a boy as her firstborn instead of an heir since Neldor was a bastard born of incest and not from her mate.

Wow. So... He'd really put up with a lot.

I moved over to him and hugged him, shocking everyone there. "They're so fucking fucked to you as much as they are to me sometimes. Seriously. You're an incest baby because you were born a boy? That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard. I just can't—don't ever listen to that shit, Neldor. Not ever."

"And your mother did *not* have feelings for her uncle," Taeral said firmly. "He preyed on her and tried to force her—force himself on her even so they would have to mate. I was—I failed your mother as her friend so many times."

"It wasn't your fault to think it was insane," Lageos muttered.

"No, it was my fault," Taeral yelled as he jumped to his feet. "She told me she was uncomfortable around him. That was enough. I was horrible to say she was sensitive. She was a brat to think it was more. I victim-blamed and... I left her to feel so alone. Her mother wanted her to give in and—people

would have been horrified, but she could have blamed it all on Elora instead of having to be strong.”

Neldor flinched at hearing his mother’s name, but I simply rubbed his back. I didn’t care. I knew it wasn’t the way of fairies, but it was just us there and this needed to be talked out.

So we did.

My heart hurt for his mother the more Taeral told us. It really did. She’d had such a fucked childhood with a disaster of a mother. It messed her up so badly that I felt like... I understood why Taeral said I was so like her.

From the moment he’d heard I’d had to run from a foster dad who tried to rape me young, I understood why he’d seen Elora when he looked at me.

And I understood better why losing Alok was so much worse for Elora. It wasn’t simply losing her mate, but her protector from her uncle. If he’d come back and tried to prey on her again... Yeah, what she’d done wasn’t something I could forgive, but I hated her less.

The ancients trying to use her.

Her uncle trying to abuse her.

There were a lot of people responsible for what happened, not just her.

Neldor looked destroyed.

“I shouldn’t have left her to side with Meira,” he choked out. “I left her to be victimized. I used to judge her that she’d had feelings for her own uncle. I’d thought it was a childhood confused crush maybe, but it led to me having to deal with

stupid, and she would never talk about it. She would get upset and I thought...”

“She never wanted you to know,” Taeral sighed. “The moment your grandmother died, he was banned from the castle, and she threatened to kill him no matter his supporters if he came near you. But when Alok died and the war was raging—everything was such a mess. I found him trying to pressure her and I...”

“You killed him,” I finished for him.

“I murdered him,” he corrected.

“The fuck you did,” I growled. “She gave an order and he went against it. She banished him from the castle. Hurting people isn’t always physical and she was grieving. That’s special circumstances abuse if I’ve ever heard of it, Taeral. Seriously.”

“I agree,” Neldor said firmly. “You didn’t go seek him out. He came to do damage to her.” He stood and hugged Taeral. “Thank you for protecting her as best as you could. We *all* failed each other. She did as well for not telling me. Grandmother did. You were a child when she was going through this, so forgive yourself for not understanding. You’ve done better since.”

“Have I?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“You have with me,” I said firmly. “You were always on my side with the ancients when so many others weren’t. And you barely knew me.”

And I meant it. The problems Taeral and I had had in the beginning were he’d had all of the faith in Neldor and Neldor

hadn't deserved it. When Taeral had seen that for himself he'd apologized, but when I'd told the truth about the ancients, elders, and nobles, he'd believed me. Even over Iolas at times.

He'd learned from his mistakes.

Even Elora would have forgiven him for that, especially with the way he was protecting her son.

# 14

I showed Neldor what my mother had written and held him that night as he cried. The next day, he went with Taeral, and they retrieved the body of his great uncle and brought it to this world where the beheaded ancients and elders were. I met them there with Lageos and finally decided to move past my own traumas as well.

I started with Ancient Simimar, and when my brain finally settled with the fact he was gone for good, I used fae fire to burn him. It took most of the morning, but over half of them were nothing but particles by then.

And so was Neldor's great-uncle.

The next day, we handled the rest and finally, *finally*, that part of my worries, upset, and nightmares were over.

Well, the reality of them. I wasn't sure anyone could ever truly control their nightmares and declare them done.

Though it would be great if we could. Truly.

The rest of the week was working on getting more people sentenced, handling where the fines were all going to be used, more governing than most did in a few months, and fueling up to make geodes to push my power.



Oh, and getting ready to go back to school.

And I wasn't the only one doing that.

Lageos, Iolas, and Taeral had teamed up to not only make sure I would be as powerful as possible so Faerie never ate me, but also so Neldor would be as powerful as possible so he could protect me *and* no member of the royal family would ever be abused again. By anyone. No noble, elder, or ancient would ever get a leg up or get in their head or pressure a royal again. Not while they were alive.

And especially after they were gone.

Something Lageos especially was worried about.

"I want to eat popcorn and watch the show, but I'm also worried we're next," Lucca muttered as we sat at my training facility in Colorado Springs that had been basically abandoned for a while and was now the focus again.

"I hope so," Hudson and Juan of all people said as well, the dragons sharing a look shocked they were on the same page.

Then again, they were probably both having the same issues with their dragons being on the outs with their parents.

"Yes, I will work with all of you," Lageos called over, more than able to hear them. "And Julian. I need to figure out his schedule, but as your power grows, his body needs to be able to handle more, or tapping into your power as your mate could kill him."

"Maybe don't say that offhandedly or the panic attack I have from it might kill *me*," I bitched, spots forming in my visions as it suddenly became hard to breathe.

Still, I did agree he worked with all of my mates if he was willing. We could all do better, and a fairy that was related to me that wanted me dead was someone we had to take seriously.

They were *not* happy that meant they had to wake up three hours before our first class Monday morning.

Even Darby.

Rafe and Wyn came with as his guards and wanted to get a workout in, but they were going to do their own thing off to the side basically. Juan was going to sneak in with them and didn't seem like he planned on coming back now that he knew how much earlier we were getting up.

Even Iolas and Taeral seemed like it was over the top.

And they weren't wrong.

Lageos was a *beast* pushing us. We didn't just run up the mountains outside of the facility... We sprint-climbed them.

Yeah, I didn't even know that was a thing.

I used everything I had to leap from holds to holds, falling multiple times and having to keep going like I hadn't just fallen down a damn mountain. Or like I wasn't wearing a harness. Taeral was right by me using magic to catch me. The point was to do the best I could with speed and strength, but honestly even the two commanders were having trouble doing it.

"Fucking weaklings," Lageos bitched and tossed them both up higher a few times.

Hudson and Juan actually did the best going up, reminding us that they were born of mountains basically. But I shocked everyone doing the best going down. My flexibility bouncing off different areas and able to slide between holds without falling or getting hurt was impressive.

Especially for someone who had sucked at gymnastics big time.

I needed to thank Ara for her training. Clearly, it had helped.

But that part of training wasn't something Julian, Lucca, or Darby were going to be able to do. Lucca maybe one day, but not anytime soon. He just wasn't flexible like that or fluid enough like a dragon. They did enough running up the trail as best as they could.

"Your father is a fucking crazy fucking sadist," Juan bitched as we reached the cafeteria. "And I say that as someone who has a crazy fucking father."

"Every inch of me hurts," Neldor groaned, handing over his ID to be swiped in.

The others echoed them, but I shared a look with Hudson, and he simply winked at me as we swiped in at the same time... And then raced for our table.

"I win," I announced, doing a little dance before he caught me around the waist and flipped me over his shoulder. "I'm the beastie and you're the shorty."

"Yeah, that's how that works," he chuckled, setting me on my seat and rubbing his shoulder as he plopped down next to me. "I'm not sure I'll have the energy to take a shower."

“That’s where we come in, Prince Hudson,” one of the hobgoblins chuckled as several carts were wheeled over. We were still doing the family style of eating at our table for meals plus extras from Faerie.

Darby ate with us but then had to get to Yale for his own classes, and I found myself leaning in and giving him a kiss on the cheek. It felt awkward but... Did I really want to keep things the way they were now?

No.

Not even remotely.

No, I wanted things to be much better than they were last semester.

Which was why I brought Lucca and Hudson back to my house after breakfast to make out in my shower instead of taking one alone. Something they were very, *very* hopeful could become a regular thing.

My first class was in Faerie with Neldor, and I was jumping back into waking fairies, Lageos standing there watching just to be safe. So I did eleven hundred with Calarel’s approval and a quick checkup.

“Keep on this routine of pushing your magic,” she informed me, loudly for others to hear. “Taking the break was the best decision. Your magic is still ramping up. It was easy, yes?”

“I barely felt it,” I admitted.

People couldn’t hide their shock, and I knew it would be all over Faerie before lunch.

It was nice to have class with Hudson, Lucca, and even Juan again, but people were amused instead of annoyed when second breakfast was delivered for Neldor and me. Professor Collins—Dean Collins outside of class when he wasn't our teacher—was easily bribed with a few muffins full of fae fruit and ignored the rest.

Then it was back to Colorado Springs to work with Lagoes on power training while Iolas and Taeral worked mostly with Neldor.

And then we stuffed our faces with lunch. Like we both *inhaled* food and we weren't gentle about it. I couldn't even get mad at the jokes about trying to unhinge our jaws to get more food in. Seriously, we were *both* that bad.

Neldor had an Artemis class that I'd already taken next, but I was in a separate class with Lagoes that Sontar asked to be involved in just for his own curiosity. It was in the same lab we'd had our crystal classes since it had dampeners and magical protections in place. I was excited to work with my dad on making new magic and open to all of the possibilities.

Until I saw him standing up front with a three-piece suit...  
And a monocle.

At first, I thought he was mocking the idea of being my teacher, but when I saw more tension in his shoulders than amusement in his eyes, I knew why he'd done it.

And I laughed. I laughed and then he laughed and even Sontar chuckled a bit.

“What do you want to create?” he asked me when we calmed down. “Anything you want. I would suggest starting

small like the geode that pushed you.”

I bobbed my head and then went to the window to look outside and let my mind wander. I saw some squirrels playing on a tree near us and instantly had it.

Turning back to Lageos, I smiled. “The animals that survived are weak. The babies they’re having are weaker than they were before according to the biologists. Just like you can transfer energy to me—we need to strengthen the animals, not just have them make babies. Yes, we want more babies, but we want stronger ones too.”

“So you want to make some sort of magical multivitamins for them or like magical steroids?” he hedged, studying me.

“How about both?” I challenged. “One of each.”

“I like the way you think, Daughter.”

We went outside to play around with the idea.

And had mixed results.

Unfortunately, there were a few rabbits that sort of exploded like we’d pumped them full of air instead of given them some magic. Whoops.

Then there were a few birds that looked like mutants out of a sci-fi movie and shouldn’t be a thing. Lageos muttered something about sending them to a farm to have happy lives, but I wasn’t stupid and knew he killed the birds. It was better to put them out of their misery.

I had no problem with animals dying but for food. I felt bad when it was because I fucked up with my magic. It was in the name of helping though and not just for Faerie, so I

promised myself to do some serious cleansing in the rainforest this weekend to make up for the animals I was accidentally harming in the name of progress.

That seemed fair, right?

“I think it’s something they need to ingest on their own will like a salt lick for a deer or vitamin one might feed a dog hidden in a treat,” Sontar said when we were trying to do it again. “These aren’t magical animals like on Faerie.”

Good point. Lageos and I shared a guilty look like kids who’d gotten too excited and floored the gas instead of going slowly.

Great, and Lageos was the one who was supposed to rein me in. More like Sontar was going to keep an eye on both of us.

It worked much better after that. It was a bit like a vitamin shot and caffeine bite all in one, but the birds were zooming all over after eating them.

And none exploded, so that was always a good start.

Sontar said he would take the two options we’d made to Faerie and let the biologists work with them and see what they thought of them. Just to be safe, we made a bunch more and decided I would come up with something like a salt lick for herbivores for my homework.

Cool.

I had a meeting with Juan and Neldor after class and we went over projections and what was going on with Symbiotic. The numbers were up from him taking over already and he was all over the spring launch, busting his ass during break to

get us to what was needed. This was actually all about the summer spread and designs.

Done and done.

Right before dinner, Taeral showed up with a frown and handed me a slip of paper.

“It’s a trap,” I muttered as I read the note Luke had left for his tail.

“Why bother telling us it’s a trap instead of ignoring it?” he asked, his tone worried. “Is he being watched to leave us a trap?”

“No, he’s warning us it’s a trap, but it’s going all over soon through channels so we’ll find out,” I explained. “They know we set up the children of fairies at a place. They *assume* that’s our new strike force to get our more children and grandchildren. They’re setting this up to capture them back. That’s the warning.” I smirked at Taeral. “I think we should show them that we care about our cousins more than that, yes?”

“Oh yes, most definitely,” he chuckled darkly. “I’ll see who has the intel and get our forces geared up.”

“And the dogs.” I nodded when he did a double take. “We need to start taking people off the board, Commander. That is the mistake we’ve made over and over again playing too nice and worried about—we take our enemies off the board.”

“Yes, Princess.”

By the time dinner was over, the Underground might as well have announced it on the news that they were setting up an auction of grandchildren of fairies being handled by



children of fairies for the amount of intel we had. Neldor and I arrived to sentence wolves and barely muttered apologies when we were both still eating, the wolves clearly knowing what was going on.

They probably had heard the rumors and intel as well.

The moment we were done with the wolves, we gathered to go into battle. I had one thing I wanted to change from normal when we did this sort of thing.

“I want any of those coins they use for communicating with each other handled tonight,” I told them. “Those all lead to people, people who are still active and will be a problem for us in the future. I want any captain or lieutenant who has been awakened more than a year and feels comfortable with the task to immediately trace the magic and use the combination rune to knock the person out and drag them back to us.”

“Smart,” Stefanie praised. “I will get more mobilized with the specific assignment.”

It didn’t even take ten minutes and then we opened portals and poured out of them like they weren’t waiting for company.

But *clearly*, they weren’t expecting us or the amount of people who arrived.

“I don’t underestimate people,” I chuckled darkly to the restrained guy who had the most power. I glanced around and sighed. “Damn, they had enough kids here to make sure we would really come or move in, but there’s only a dozen.”

“Yes, it’s a disappointing outcome,” Taeral agreed.

“Get someone to—not Onas—to interrogate this guy and whoever else we catch that is important,” I ordered. “Move on

the information as you need. I trust you to handle it. Do *not* underestimate them, Taeral. We do not make mistakes. Not while I'm in charge."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Good, because otherwise I'll handle it all and fuck up my schooling, and then you'll have to explain that to my dad." I smirked when several people flinched at the idea.

We caught a few captains and a commander getting coins off of them and following the magic. It was probably a trick we could only use once, but maybe not if no one was able to report how it had happened. Most would assume someone was stupid or knew something they let slip out instead of us being good enough to know about the coins or be able to track the magic.

Still, it was a win.

And Neldor and I were still able to head to bed at a decent time given when we had to wake in the morning.

After we ate some more.

# 15

Tuesday started with another crazy workout, but instead of hurrying off to class after breakfast, Neldor and I stayed in the cafeteria and kept eating as we had meetings. I ducked into Faerie real quick to wake eleven hundred fairies and then we had History of Shifters & Dragons.

Next was Rules and Regulations of Guardians which was technically taught by Iolas, but really a dark fairy commander was joining him. I wasn't shocked it was Onas. He wasn't the top dog anymore since he'd been spanked, but he was the oldest dark fairy with the most experience.

The class was to teach us—mostly me—all the rules and regulations of the Light and Dark Guardians that were now the Faerie Guardians... But also what we'd changed, wanted to adjust, or planned to after I was queen since some things I could only do then.

So that was part of the final really and our master's projects in a way.

Yeah, nothing was ever simple, but it was nice that my actual job was counting for school more.

Then it was lunch, another meeting with the nobles, and then we went for the launch of the new factory to support Goblin Goodies. They'd been struggling for *way* too long, and it was the first thing Juan had made happen after taking everything over. He'd hit the brakes on a lot and made it clear the hobgoblins were exploding out of the current facility to do the numbers they were.

There had been a lot of guilt on my part to not have realized that, but then they'd hidden it, so I hadn't felt bad and well... We were all too busy. Now they had a nice big place with all the machines they wanted and had hired a bunch of fairies to help. Yay progress and business that funded progress in Faerie.

And nummies. I couldn't ever forget nummies.

There was another meeting and some homework before dinner, and then I met up with the Diazes who were helping the dragon royal who took back over in Australia after we took out the Alpha ruling there. I had a shit ton of dragons to sentence there, so we would be seeing them for a while before we could even handle Africa or other areas.

What did shock me was when Trigger Rothchild was waiting for me afterwards. I nodded for him to move off to the side and finished what I was doing.

"We need to eat again," Neldor reminded me.

"Trigger's a friend," I reminded *him*. I smiled at Trigger. "You game to eat?" I smiled when he did, opening a portal to home, glad when food was waiting. "While I'm sorry you and your family are in the middle of what's going on, I won't apologize for what I did or said."

“Nor should you,” Trigger accepted, thanking me when I told him to eat whatever he wanted. “I wanted to explain that it wasn’t about you or their lack of respect for you, but the Vogels valuing us—my family.”

I studied him as I took too big of a bite of the deli sandwich someone had picked up from heaven. Not really, but it tasted like it. I nodded after a second bite, hearing what he was saying. “They don’t think any words matter over the lives of their knights. I agree. I fully agree and I value you guys as much. I hope you know that.”

He snorted. “We know that. No one thinks—you would die a hundred times over so no one under you would. Everyone knows that, Tamsin.”

“I used to also agree with them to rise above it and ignore it, but I’ve *seen* how it gets worse if unchecked, Trigger. I’m sorry, but it’s—people just snowballed and—”

“I agree,” he said gently. “You took the blinders off on how much worse the other species were than I realized. I was in battle mode, always ready for the next invasion attempt and focused on keeping people alive. That takes a long time to—the years of adrenaline always flooding me—my family always on—”

“Most of the commanders understand that feeling more than the princess ever can given how she grew up,” Taeral said as he walked in with more food. “She had other horrible struggles, but *war* wasn’t one of them. I understand what the Vogels have suffered. I saw it with—”

“Queen Elora,” I said firmly, shocking everyone there. I shook my head when he objected, Neldor staying overly quiet.

“I won’t ever forgive her, but we’ve proven that many people had a hand in what happened. I’m tired of laying it all at her feet. If we stop saying her name, we stop saying their names as well. All the people who had a hand in it still *alive* as well. You both loved her. I’m not—enough.”

“If that’s what you wish, but I need more time,” Taeral said after a moment.

“I would never force you. Either of you,” I replied gently. “And I don’t know where my dad lands on it. I’m saying that’s how I feel.” I was glad when they both nodded. I met Trigger’s curious gaze. “I’m hurt, not angry with Sasha and Xavier. I get it. I know how serious it all is. It’s also fair for me to be hurt and bail when they wouldn’t protect me as their guest in their home.”

“I agree. I also agree with Hudson, but...” He sighed, shaking his head. “I also know that if we were threatened, you would come in with a million fairies to protect us all as you said. Xavier is hesitant to rely on that as his political strategy. They hate they hurt you, Tamsin. They hate Hudson was hurt. I don’t—they are prudent people.”

I realized why he was there. “Thank you.”

“I’m confused,” Taeral admitted.

“He’s here to clarify they’re not being flippant or dismissive of what happened, but they’re still deciding how to handle it all,” Neldor explained, knowing them better than Taeral did. Or at least had seen more of them given he’d been in this world longer.

“Let them know that I understand what they’re going through and I’m sorry for what they went through,” I said after we finished eating.

“But?” Trigger pushed.

“But as they pushed back their line in the sand of what was acceptable, people saw it as being able to walk all over them. That has consequences as well. Dangerous ones as we’ve found as well. *Very* dangerous and I’m not risking that. I’m more than their future daughter-in-law and if they won’t respect that in their house, I won’t be a guest in their house anymore.

“And they were cowardly to kick it back to me. I shouldn’t have to defend myself in their house and I was disappointed in them. They used to defend me when I was no one. That was something I respected most about them and I never thought that would change. I understand how scared they’ve been, but as we’ve said, their position has changed.

“It’s time to move that line up in the sand or you’re all at risk. I won’t allow it to get bad, but we know how fast things can go wrong and I left that night and you guys had snakes all around you. How fast could someone have been killed if the snakes attacked? It’s time to get the snakes out. I’m done placating them and I want them off the board, certainly out of the places I am. I hope they see reason too.”

“I will convey the message. Thank you for your understanding and patience.”

“Always, Trigger.” I gave the big dragon a hug, knowing that he was struggling as well. This wasn’t easy for any of them because making waves was dangerous.

And making any changes made waves.

But that was also life and allowing yourself to be walked all over wasn't a life worth living.

Wednesday was another rough workout and day of classes. The biologists we were working with in Faerie said what I'd invented worked well and it was a subtle difference but worth leaving out for the animals to help their health after what they'd been through. I'd made a salt lick for the herbivores that were like deer, elk, and such that Faerie had, and they were going to study that next.

After class, it was a meeting with Juan about adding groves at one of the prisons that held non-fairies. He was suggesting having it a working prison in a way. More like they could have time outside if they worked hard in the groves and they'd get a bit of extra food as well. But only the best prisoners.

He'd already spoken with the warden and several seasoned ranking officers, and they said it was more than doable as long as they had a few extra civilian staff added to facilitate it all. We had the land. That wasn't the problem. It was worth adding the trees even if others harvested them and gave the guards something for them to even have on their breaks.

Plus, we needed so much more fruit for the demand of sorbet. We'd already purchased another facility and the orders were never ending. It was the favorite treat of supes. Even Artemis went through the stuff like water. Students paid extra for the pints constantly. We could have sold only to the schools and run out of stock every day.



I left it for them to handle and promised to get it done when it was ready.

Thursday morning—with Calarel’s approval—I woke twelve hundred fairies and it was still easy. I ate and ate during my meetings and made more geodes to push my magic.

Friday, we got word the salt licks were great, and the biologists had a theory that they would help the predators in Faerie as well. It made sense. If the herbivores were in better shape and the animals like tigers, wolves, and bears went after them... That would make them stronger as well. The circle of life and all of that.

Which was how I spent most of Friday eating more and more and making them.

I had a meeting after dinner—at the request of the nobles—and showed them both the salt licks and the original feed to help the animals. I taught them how to make it and most seemed to be able to handle one or the other and promised to start working on it. I was surprised they were so willing to help but also why they were pushing hard to jump on it.

“We can’t make the geodes, Your Highness,” Mallory explained. “That takes a level of magic we don’t have even if it doesn’t take that much magic to make. “This is a huge help to Faerie and—it hurts all of our souls to see the weaker animals and the planet we grew up adoring not what it was. We can help with this. We want to.”

I nodded, accepting the help but then had another idea. “What other deficits could we fix? Not what is possible, but what other things—the idea is to come up with new ideas.”

“We will think on that, Your Highness, but most of us do not have the imagination you do,” a different noble admitted.

Fair enough.

Saturday, I cleansed.

That was it. I cleansed in the rain-forest and ate. People brought me food, and I cleansed in the most secluded and remote area of nowhere with my dogs around to protect me.

Sunday I woke thirteen hundred fairies—again with Calarel’s approval—and blessed hobgoblins in Faerie, before riding my unicorns and having a flying lesson with Hudson. Honestly, it wasn’t much of a lesson anymore and just us spending time... And having hot sex after.

*Really* hot sex if I was honest.

Monday, it was back to the crazy workouts and my new routine... Including Hudson and Lucca talking me into a spicy shower before class.

Tuesday was a list of meetings that made my head spin, but Tuesday night we were able to find another twenty grandchildren of fairies that we rescued and took to the new safe houses. I got the huge grove at the prison going and inspected the new facility for the sorbet company that was ready to get going tomorrow with all the new hires we had.

Wednesday was great and I spoke with some of the rescues from HAVEN and they were going to help take care of the rescued grandchildren so they could become independent. Two were going to work with the hobgoblins at the bakery to handle catering gigs and large orders. All great progress and made me feel like things were really working out.

Maybe on a small scale, but it was multiple days in a row without anything knocking me back and that meant a lot.

Especially since I was still sentencing about fifty people a night for crimes that had been pushed to the side. And people had mostly given up trying to fight it or kick up a fuss.

Normally, there was one out of fifty. The worst of the group or the most connected, but we reminded them what they risked if they didn't sign the acceptance and one out of three shut their mouths. Some didn't and they went to prison.

Thursday was more meetings and I was waking fourteen hundred fairies by then. I invented a nutritional supplement for new mothers that worked for most of the mammal animals in Faerie that were lactating. That hadn't really been my goal, but if it worked, that was great. I'd meant it more for the babies, but they'd get the perk in the milk so... I sort of aced it getting two mammals with one supplement?

Friday, I was "abducted" during lunch and Julian made it clear that he felt neglected while somehow it was all about me. Like I was naked on his desk and he feasted on my body over and over and *over again* until all I did was lie there and twitch.

"I want sex tonight," I muttered. "Lots and lots of sex tonight. All over your condo."

"Well, that turned out better than I'd hoped," he admitted, smirking down at me before leaning over and licking my nipple.

"I reward good behavior," I teased, laughing when he pinched my side.

Yeah, but seriously, the man had just spent almost my entire lunch hour eating me out.

Which made it really awkward when my next class was with my *dad*. I blushed so hot as I walked into the lab and he just shook his head, muttering he didn't want to know and we would just get food and work outside.

At least he was nice and still fed me.

I cleansed again on Saturday and realized I was getting so much done, but there was a lot I wanted to focus on. I always handled what everyone else told me to and while I knew leaders had advisors... Maybe that was why everyone saw me as more of a dependent instead of the boss? Then again, it probably had to do more with me not committing fully to the role.

But how could I when they treated me as they did and wouldn't behave?

Yeah, it was a lot of chicken/egg issues.

Saturday night, I had dinner with Shael and told her what I wanted. She mostly blinked at me and clearly didn't understand it. I got a bit frustrated. I knew it wasn't what had happened before... But that was sort of the point.

"I want to hold court, Shael," I finally sighed. "But not with the nobles. I don't want the nobles to come tell me their concerns and the bullshit they used to whisper in the ears of the queens or heirs—this is the new court. I want to hold it in the town center of Theripolis and listen to the *people*. Theripolis has been open over a year now. It's been open the longest. What is working? What isn't? What do they need?"

“That’s not—”

“How things are done. Yes, I understand that. That’s the point, Shael. I get reports and people pass along a lot of everything. I get a lot of feedback and information. I’m not denying that, but sometimes things get lost along the way or dismissed. Things that shouldn’t be.”

“Yes, but nothing is perfect.”

“It’s not. And I will never be able to handle everything. But I can take Tuesday afternoon and spend a few hours in different areas and listen to concerns directly from the people of the realms. That’s not too difficult or crazy.” I waved off her next objection. “Think of how many times people were so quick to brush off what I was going to say because I was an unknown or they thought no one?”

“And I had some of the best ideas for Artemis. Some of the ideas that have kept them safest. Even you have admitted that my ideas have helped because I had a different viewpoint—an outside viewpoint. That is what I want here. A lot of them might be too focused or only help one person when we have too many huge things, but we could find some ideas that could be good for later.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” she muttered, looking like she’d agree because it was what I’d want but didn’t expect anything to come from it.

At least she wouldn’t fight me on it and would support it.

That was progress in itself.

# 16

When Darby and Julian had heard what I wanted to do, both of them had said they wanted to be there to support me. That had surprised me and even more than that, they both had the same... Memory to it?

“Do you remember when you laid into King Xavier about his opinion of scholarship students and he promised to think about it?” Darby asked me. “How shocked you were at the change and how proud Mel was because she said that was why people valued the Vogels as their leaders? That’s what this reminds me of.”

I flinched. “It was what I was actually thinking of. I talked to Trigger recently and felt like they got stuck in their heads with the changes, and I’ve felt the same. I feel like I’m locked in with the Faerie Guardians and nobles, and I don’t want to be that kind of leader.”

“You won’t be, *cariño*,” Julian said firmly, leaning in and kissing my hair. “I thought of the same thing. You’ve said since that you wanted to be a leader like Xavier and open to the opinions you needed to hear no matter who they came from. I’m proud of you. I’m proud you’re listening to yourself

and really doing what you need. Not just this, but the cleansing—all of it. You're doing great, Tams."

"You really are," Darby agreed. "You're pushing hard to balance and—I'm so impressed, *agra*. I crashed and burned when I tried to find my footing and I had so much less. I drowned and hurt you. You're doing—I'm in awe."

"I asked for help," I muttered, not wanting to rub salt in his wounds, but that was the big difference.

He gave me a sad look. "Yeah, that was the mistake I made. I thought I..." He shook his head and glanced away. "I kept feeling like managing everything was just out of reach and I was right there. Just a bit more and I had it. I thought I was so damn close, but I was—I'm sorry."

"I know." It hurt, but I was... Time was helping. His patience with the pain he'd caused and consideration of me helped. I felt like we were slowly getting back in sync again and while I flinched at too much still, especially the idea of him in bed at night after the damage that had been done, I felt better when he was around during the day. He was always tuned in instead of tuned out.

But there was still such a distance between us that hurt.

And I still hadn't put back on the engagement ring. I wanted to, but I was scared.

Shocker.

I was actually excited more than scared when Tuesday afternoon rolled around and it was time to talk to people, so nothing upset me more when no one said anything.

Not. One. Damn. Word.

Everyone just stared at me. And then each other. No one said anything and seemed to just come and want to watch the show.

I stood there for a good five minutes like an *idiot* with no one saying anything.

I shared a look with Darby. He couldn't say anything as the vampire most didn't want in Faerie or with me. *I* couldn't poke people into bitching about the world I was going to be queen of like I was trying to make them say I was doing a bad job. I mean, that sounded like... Oh boy.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but I have a small concern if it wouldn't upset you to hear?" a younger fairy I would guess about my age said.

"No, not at all," I told him. "I don't know many of you and what I want is..." I moved to sit on the edge of the stage that was set up so I wasn't so elevated above them all. "I didn't grow up here. I wouldn't have lived where you do even if I had. I receive a lot of reports and updates and that doesn't tell me everything. I can't make this world perfect, but I'd like to hear more directly from people. As much as I can."

He nodded. "It makes sense that there are no roads between towns or villages. We all use portals to travel, even if we bring our carts or goods. But the roads in Theripolis are rather uneven and a problem in certain parts. Most don't note it or think it petty to bring up because we use portals, but I don't waste magic for a portal to move my cart with the sun at the market."

"And it gets stuck on the cobble a lot?" I checked, nodding when he did. "People trip?"



“The children do a lot now that you mention it, Your Highness,” a woman answered. “It is difficult to navigate at times when I’m carrying a bit of this or that and my arms are loaded. I don’t always have the energy to carry things magically.”

I felt better when I saw several people nod. “Okay, that’s good feedback, thank you.” I glanced at Darby. “Let’s get that on the list.” I smiled at the man. “That’s not something that will go over building new houses, but it is something we can fill in here and there and certainly start at the market. Thank you.”

Darby cleared his throat and I glanced at him, nodding for him to go ahead. “From what I saw reading over the government structure and laws, Faerie didn’t seem to have a system of like streets and sanitation in place given most didn’t have running water or—you might want to think of implementing that government department. That way the roads would be covered and other problems that could pop up later.”

“Yeah, that’s even better,” I agreed. I saw many were confused as to what we were talking about, so I explained how in the human world there were street cleaners that went through cities and they took care of the trees and sidewalks. They handled if the streetlights went out and if there were issues with broken streets or problems.

People seemed happy with the idea of having something like that make life around Theripolis better. The rest of what they brought up was more questions about when things would be brought back. Like they could get meals at the rest stops, but it was hard to buy milk since we didn’t have enough cows

making babies yet. I promised we were working on that and would keep them updated.

It was good that they heard a lot of the answers directly from me, and I asked them to spread the word since it was impossible for me to be able to speak with every fairy and hobgoblin. I felt bad when it was time to wrap up, but I did promise that I planned to make this something I did weekly and rotate through the cities in the realm. It would take me a while, but I would be back to Theripolis.

“You need to rest too, Your Highness,” that first man said, his voice worried. “You have aides that can update us too. I think knowing we can hear from someone you trust on Tuesday afternoons is more than enough. That is much more than we used to have. May the gods bless your mother and we all loved her, but it’s the truth. You are—” He closed his mouth when someone elbowed him.

“My mother wasn’t perfect. No one is,” I assured him. “You won’t offend me. She was the first to admit that in her journals. My father says the same.” I moved off the stage and took his hand. “It’s okay. You’re not being mean. Just tell me.”

He nodded. “You’re one of us, Your Highness. She wasn’t.”

“I don’t understand,” I hedged.

A woman cleared her throat and gestured to the gathered group. “You’re one of *us*, Princess. You’re not like the other royals who have ruled before. You grew up normal, poor even given the human system took care of you. Your mother cared and gave her life to save us, but she was always up there,

untouchable, and in her castle. You're fine here and comfortable with us. You're not an outsider with us."

"Thank you," I whispered, shocked she said it.

"Oh, you poor lass," she rasped, reaching over and wiping a tear that fell down my cheek that I didn't even realize. She cleared her throat and yanked her hand back when people went tense. "I apologize, Your Highness."

"No, thank you, truly. No one—so many treat me like an outsider. No one has said it like that before."

She shrugged. "You are an outsider from what they're used to." She moved her hand to my arm and waited until I met her gaze. "But a princess is inherently an outsider from the rest of us too, my sweet lass. You were never meant to fit in with the rest of us and lead us. You can't be average and be extraordinary. Wear that badge with honor and stop letting the fucking idiots make it an insult."

"I'll try." I swallowed loudly. "I'm trying my best."

"That's all we can all do. Know we're all rooting for you and proud you're our future. I've not had this much hope for our future in a very, *very* long time. Many of us feel the same."

Wow. I glanced around the hundreds of people gathered and was shocked to see them all nodding.

Okay then.

I did a double take when I saw Hudson was leaning against a building off to the side. He winked at me and said something to Rafe before nodding to me that we needed to get going.

Yeah, I needed to get dinner before everything else on the agenda. I thanked everyone for coming and we all went to eat at the rest stop.

Julian stopped me when everyone else headed inside, giving me a soft kiss when we were alone. “You were amazing, my sweet fairy.” He shook his head when I tried to brush him off. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes, but the one thing I’ve always been right on was having faith in you. From the moment I met you, I knew putting my faith in you was the right thing to do.

“Before I knew you were my mate or your lineage. I saw your aura and your fight and knew you were the first person in my life to believe in with my whole heart. I knew you would never quit and would be the reason others could have faith in life and what was right again. If I’ve done nothing else right in life, I was right to believe in you and I’m so glad that I did.”

Wow. Like... *Wow*.

“Thanks, Julian. Really.” I let out a slow breath and kissed him. “I felt it so many times, and it was what kept me going when the darkness tried to swallow me.”

“I’m sorry I failed you and it wasn’t always. I always felt the faith in you, even when the darkness almost swallowed me.”

I believed him. I’d always believed him about that part of me even if he’d gotten distracted and lost sight of me.

Darby pulled me off to the side after dinner before I had to head to sentence some people. “From the day I met you, you fought the fights you could. I couldn’t—you said to me about

Holly that you never regretted being able to look at yourself in the mirror and that always stuck with me. I think that was the moment I knew you were unlike anyone else and I needed you in my life, *agra*.

“You still are that same woman. You fight the fights you can and never forget to make sure you can always look at yourself in the mirror at night. It was what I fell in love with you for first and always makes me fall in love with you deeper. You will never stop fighting for what you can.” He blew out a slow breath when I simply stared at him. “It’s not about the uneven roads.

“You knew this wasn’t how the system was and you just say ‘fuck it’ where the rest of us would never have the balls to do that, Tams. It hurts you when they treat you like an outsider or different, but you never just fall in line and that makes you—you’re more than a fairy with wings. You’re a fucking angel that none of us deserve to always fight and never stop.”

And then he kissed me. He slid his hand in my hair, cupping my head, and gently pressed his lips to mine.

My hands seemed to move on their own and found his hips as I kissed him back.

“I’m proud of you, *agra*,” he murmured against my lips. “That’s what I’m trying to say in my inelegant way.”

“I thought it was incredibly elegant. It was pretty amazing even.”

“Good. That’s how I feel about you.”

“Um, I have to go,” I muttered, pulling away.

“Right.” He cleared his throat and grabbed my arm before I could get away. “Maybe we could watch a movie at Julian’s when you’re done? You’ve been in meetings and going hard for weeks. An early night would be nice.”

“It would, but I will probably fall asleep,” I worried.

“Snuggles are good too.”

I nodded. “If Julian’s fine with it.”

He was. After I was done with the sentencing, I went over to his place and there was second dinner and dessert. I barely got to eat it all before I fell asleep between them on the couch.

At least they got to pick the movie if I was going to sleep through it.

Darby woke me up and checked if I was comfortable if he stayed overnight at Julian’s too. I appreciated him asking and agreed. It was nice.

It was progress.

Progress we were both happy with even.

And apparently “progress” was the theme of my semester.

By Thursday, I was waking fifteen hundred fairies a day, and I’d invented a fish feed that was everything that the fish in Faerie could ever want. Large and small, if it had gills and swam in our waters, it was good for them from what the biologists had already seen.

There was more cleansing in the rainforest and blessing hobgoblins over the weekend, and by Monday I was up to sixteen hundred fairies.

Seventeen hundred by Friday.

Eighteen hundred by Tuesday.

Nineteen hundred by Thursday.

And two thousand a day by Monday.

“This new routine is clearly working for the princess,” Calarel told the commanders. “Her magic and soul are balanced in a way I’ve not seen before. Her soul is healing and less burdened.”

“I don’t understand how when she’s doing more work than ever,” Morgan worried.

“Because you’re letting me do it my fucking way,” I drawled as I headed for the portal.

Not even two weeks later and I was waking two thousand, five hundred fairies a day and everyone agreed that even if it wasn’t taxing on me, that it was enough with everything else I was doing. I agreed, but I was glad for the chance to push my magic. It was growing and growing, and Faerie seemed more and more distant from me.

It was like a lingering, annoying thought in the back of my mind instead of feeling like it was always watching me or constantly over my shoulder. That was great progress, but the problem was that I still would never want to have an heir or daughter if they could still have Faerie ride them the way it had others. I would not let my own child suffer that.

No fucking way.

But that was a problem for later.

Much, *much* later.

I was surprised when my calendar was cleared Thursday afternoon, but happy when I saw that Hudson had done it and we were going flying. He still wasn't on good terms with his parents—though they had finally spoken—so we weren't going to his mountain and he didn't want to go to Faerie.

We went to one of the sanctuary lands I'd set up for fairies or supes to use and hide at if they ever needed. There were always two squads of Faerie Guardians stationed there and at least half a dozen lone fae dogs normally hung out there going back and forth between there and Faerie. Normally, the ones that had had to leave Faerie too young or didn't trust going back for too long just yet.

We had a picnic lunch since it was somewhere warm and then flew for a while.

I landed first when I was tired and laid down on the lush grass and watched my dragon fly overhead. I would never get tired of watching how gorgeous and majestic it was to see River soar. Something seemed off though because he was pushing more than normal like he had too much on his mind or energy to burn.

I was glad when he finally landed and I patted the spot next to me, hoping he would talk to me about what was going on.

Instead, he pulled me to sit up and face him.

“What's wrong, beastie?” I asked softly as I cupped his face. “Something's been on your mind for a while now.”

“Of course, you noticed,” he mumbled as he rubbed his cheek against my hand.



“I’m not the best at this stuff, but you get extra broody sometimes. I didn’t think it was just about your parents or school.”

“It wasn’t.” He kissed my hand before taking both of mine in his large ones. “I want you to hear me out before you say anything, okay?”

“Always.” I smiled and nodded that it was okay. Hudson had gotten much, *much* better at communicating, but it was something that would always be difficult for him given how he’d grown up.

“I thought long and hard about how things have been going and yes, things came to a head at my parents’ party, but it was more the last straw to make my decision obvious, not something I decided in anger or on a whim.” He waited until I nodded.

Yeah, Hudson wasn’t generally someone to act rashly unless it was about sex or food.

“I don’t want to be king. No matter what happens with us, I want to abdicate and let Connor become Father’s heir.” He waited for some sort of signal from me, but my mind was a bit of fuzz and I simply swallowed loudly.

It took me another few moments, but then I managed to say what was in my heart. “You know yourself best, and I believe you wouldn’t decide this rashly, but I want you to know that I think no one could do it better than you, Hudson. You have—you are an amazing man, and they would be *blessed* to have you be their king with the heart you have and how brave you are.”

He leaned in and gave me a soft kiss. “Thank you, shorty. Really.” He let out a slow breath. “I don’t want it. I don’t want to lead like that. I realized I’ve grown... I feel more like Trigger most days than I do my father.” He shook his head. “No, I feel more like you than I do my father. I want to do more and protect—yeah, I feel like Trigger more than a king.”

He wanted to protect me. That was what he wasn’t saying because he didn’t want to put pressure on me.

Wow, I was one lucky, lucky woman.

“Connor is better at the politics than I am. I’m better at other things, but I’ve also been tainted by certain things because of what happened. I’ve seen too much of what Father had to allow. Connor has a chance to let the slate be cleared and a better future be set for so many. I want that for our people. I do. I want to support him in that. It’s where my heart is. What my head tells me is best.”

“I love you and I’m on your side for whatever you want, beastie.”

He gave me another kiss. “Thank you. Really, Tams.” He let out another slow breath. “Yes, you were a factor in this but honestly, you helped me see that I would have wanted this even without you. So this is my choice, full stop.” He waited until I nodded before leaning down and kissing each of my fingertips. “I love you more than I ever thought I could love another person, Tamsin Vale.

“Something has been here from the moment we first saw each other, and we both know that it was more than the mating bond. You have become my best friend, biggest cheerleader, harshest critic that I’ve needed, and an amazing person to

make sure I always stayed on the path to be the best version of the man I wanted to be. We have overcome my stupid and your running and our social differences—”

I snorted and he smiled.

“And finding out that we didn’t have social differences and you fucking outranked me. Me losing my mind and you almost drowning in too much. We’ve overcome a lot and we’re still here and in love. We’re stronger than ever and River and I cannot live without you. I don’t want to live in a world that doesn’t have you in it.”

I swallowed loudly, wondering what was going on here and not sure if I was scared or excited, but my heart was definitely beating too loudly.

“I made my mind up about my future with my family so you didn’t feel pressure about your future.” He let out another slow breath and kissed my fingers again. “My choice is you, Tams. If you want to become the queen of Faerie, I’m in. If you don’t want that, I’m still in. If you want to pretend to be a rich human in this world and keep reinventing yourself, I’m in.

“If you want to make Faerie a democracy and maybe be president for a while, I’m in. If you want to figure out a way to teleport us to Saturn and colonize it so we have the most peaceful life ever, I’m in. If you want some sort of crazy fuck combo that only you could pull off because you’re my shorty and there isn’t anything that you can’t do, I’m still in.”

“I think that makes you the crazy fucking one here, beastie,” I whispered.

“Probably,” he chuckled. He reached over and pulled something out from his clothes, and I swallowed loudly again when I saw it was a necklace of what looked like scales.

Dragon scales.

River’s scales from the coloring of them.

“Tamsin Vale, will you mate me?” he whispered as he held out the necklace to me.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. My mind was empty, not even static.

He moved until we were almost touching, his breath tickling my ear and hair. "Say yes."

Instantly, I was thrown into a memory from years ago. We weren't facing each other then, but he was behind me. I didn't even know his name then and we weren't outside but in a closet.

The mating bond roared over my skin and he moaned as he felt it too.

"Yes." I wasn't sure if I meant it to his question or what we both needed in that moment.

Both?

Everything?

My clothes were just gone somehow and his hands were everywhere, mine all over his.

"Someday I will finally be in your firm fucking ass," he growled against my mouth. "I've never wanted to before meeting you, but all I thought about that night was tracking

you down and begging you to let me have you again and let me take you that way too. I hated that I didn't hold you that night in my bed, and I hated letting you go instead of carrying you off."

Hudson had never told me all of that and I couldn't hide my shock, but then he kissed me again and I forgot what I would have responded anyways. He fisted my breasts as he left a trail of marks on my neck I knew would be visible later and I moaned at how good it felt. Then his fingers were inside of me and I spread for him wider.

"You're still not having my ass out here without stuff," I said firmly, remembering what he'd brought up.

"I'm not waiting four and half more years," he growled.

Fair enough. Then again, we weren't together all of that time, and even the time we were it wasn't official.

"Pushy dragon," I grumbled without any real feeling in my words.

"You love it," he chuckled before kissing down my body and eating me out.

Yeah, I really did.

He gave me two orgasms before lifting his head and smirking at me. "Tell me to fuck you, shorty. I want my fiancée to tell me she wants me to fuck her."

Soooo I guess he assumed I said yes to that question.

Had I?

I stared into his beautiful eyes and melted.

Yes, yes, I had.

I wanted to be with this pushy dragon and wonderful man and everything he was for the rest of my life.

The rest of our very, *very* long lives.

I stretched my arms up above my head and angled my body so he got to see me from all kinds of sides and my muscles moving. “I want my future husband to fuck me so hard and so many times that I can’t move and he has to take care of me. I want him to *fuck me* so that I’m sated and sore for days and even all my magic and healing runes can’t take care of after.”

“Damn right,” he growled before thrusting in me rougher to start than he normally did.

He was careful not to pin down my wrists since that could still trigger me sometimes, but he moved one hand above my head there and I actually grabbed onto his arm instead... Which was something he liked from the almost feral look he got in his eyes. His other hand was on my hip and he moved faster and faster. I put my feet up on his back and worked my body with his until I came apart.

My dragon kept going though, not even slowing down as I orgasmed longer than I thought possible. When he did finally finish deep in my pussy, he flipped me over and fucked me into the ground until my tits and ribcage actually hurt from the pressure.

My hips too.

I groaned, but he wasn’t done with me, turning us on our sides and slamming into me until I couldn’t climax anymore and held on for the ride.

“I want more,” he growled when he was done that time.

“Whatever you need, beastie,” I mumbled, spent and sore.

“I won’t ever be a selfish asshole with you again, my mate,” he whispered as he kissed my shoulder. “My future.” He hugged me to him and buried his face against my neck. “I was so scared you’d say no. I really thought you would after what I’d done. I thought you’d never love me again after how I hurt you.”

I hugged his arms to me. “I would never have trusted you to teach me to fly if I couldn’t let you back in, Hudson,” I told him honestly, meaning it down to my soul. I blinked back tears though. “I know it’s not fair, and I know you don’t deserve what I’m about to say, but please, *please* don’t pull away or be —”

“I won’t,” he whispered. “I won’t—I’m your dragon barnacle. I promise.” He gently pulled out of me and turned me over so we were facing each other. Tears were in his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere and even if Darby fucked up, he wasn’t either. I know it. I know—I’m not mad you brought it up. I know it’s all complicated because it’s not just us, but right now, it’s just us, okay?”

I nodded, knowing it wasn’t fair of me to talk about, but I would die inside if I accepted another proposal from someone I loved and it went to shit. I knew my limits and I wouldn’t recover.

“Open a portal to your room for us and I’ll take care of everything. I promise. We’ll talk after.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” I worried, pushing to sit up.



He chuckled and kissed my nose. “I wore you out. Your eyes were closing. That’s all I meant.”

“You don’t do my hair right,” I grumbled.

“I will. Julian gave us all the lecture. I even watched the videos.”

Wow, the warlock could really be trained.

And apparently, the dragon could be as well. I woke completely clean, hair dried the right way, and everything.

“You good?” he asked gently when I touched the necklace with his dragon scales I was now wearing.

I nodded. “In a bit of shock. It was really easy to say yes and I... I didn’t think we were there, but—did you ask my dad?”

“No, but I did talk to Darby first. I thought that was fair.”

I bobbed my head, thinking that he was right. “What did he say?”

“That he appreciated me talking to him but he didn’t really have a right to say anything after he fucked up so badly.”

Good point.

“I ordered food, and I was hoping we could talk privately,” Hudson hedged.

I nodded, thanking him when he grabbed my robe. He had one in my closet too. I used a healing rune and we grabbed the food and I actually brought us out to the greenhouses I had at my house so we could be alone and somewhere relaxing. “You’re worrying me that you want to talk.”

“Nothing is wrong.” He cleared his throat as we sat down at the small table there. “I think that was what was missing from when you and Darby got engaged. You guys didn’t talk. Like at all from what he said, and he said that was his biggest regret.”

“Mine too,” I admitted, nodding that I understood what was going on now. “Plus, you have family and he doesn’t.”

“Right and I actually don’t want to tell them, and—no, I don’t want to go public about this.”

“You don’t want to tell people we’re engaged?” I whispered, not hiding my hurt.

“Let me explain. Please, shorty?” he said gently, handing me a huge taco which was one of my favorites.

I accepted it and a bottle of Sprite, nodding for him to go ahead.

“If we announce we’re engaged, everyone will assume that’s why I’m not taking the throne and that’s why Connor is. I don’t want to do that to my brother. You heard everyone at the party that he’s the backup. He deserves better than that. It’s two separate things to me. I want to announce I’m abdicating and I feel he’s the better candidate and I support him.”

“You are such a good man and I’m so proud to be your mate, Hudson,” I said before I even realized I was going to, my face flushing lava hot when I did.

And then I very inelegantly stuffed most of a taco in my mouth.

“Thanks,” he chuckled. “But that’s why I don’t want to tell anyone.” He cleared his throat. “I actually wanted to talk

to you about maybe never telling anyone and eloping.” He shrugged when I couldn’t hide my shock. “We’re not extroverts. We have to be in the spotlight because of the positions we were born into, except I’m giving that up. It won’t matter because I won’t be king.

“And you’ll still have a huge mating ceremony with whatever fairy you mate.” He gave me a look like we both knew who it would be eventually and not to bother trying to argue right then. “That’s what everyone in Faerie will focus on most. If you give them that, they won’t rag on you about giving them *five* and spending a ton of money. Others might, but like who cares?”

I thought about that a few moments and shot him a few hesitant looks. “You’d really be okay with that?”

He snorted. “Tams, I would love you even more if you’d agreed to just elope and we could have a quiet thing after with our close friends and my family. The idea I’d have to have some huge mating ceremony in front of thousands of people *and* a coronation ceremony was one of my biggest fucking nightmares. That alone was enough to make me want to give up being Father’s heir.”

Yeah, he really hated that shit as much as I did.

“Could we still have a honeymoon?” I hedged, fidgeting with my drink. “I was actually thinking of an idea for my last summer break. I never got to do that tour of all the theme parks and roller coasters like I wanted to. I thought maybe I’d do that and like a planned tour of all the food challenges all around with the big parks all over the world. I know you

couldn't go on the rollercoasters as a dragon—I don't know if I—”

“It doesn't bug fairies from what we heard,” he told me, wincing.

“We?” I caught.

“You weren't the only one plotting that,” he mumbled. “Darby and I were actually talking about that as a honeymoon.” He cleared his throat. “Darby actually thought he could elope with you too, especially since most fairies don't want you to mate him. That's why he didn't talk much about the engagement. He—he can talk to you about whatever and so can... It doesn't matter. I want to talk about us.”

I blinked at him and opened my mouth to ask who the fuck else was talking to him about being engaged to me or mating me, but then slowly closed my mouth. There was only one who really could have been in that category.

Right?

Nope, I didn't want to know. My brain would explode, and I was doing really, *really* well with not overloading myself and taking things at the pace I needed. I wasn't going to go looking for problems.

Apparently, they were already plotting them for me anyways?

“So, um, what happens after graduation for you now?” I hedged.

“I don't think I should be your aide to the dragons like others have suggested,” he answered just as hesitantly. “You don't really need one when you're in business with all of the

royal families and have such good alliances. The council is being rebuilt with knight families as you suggested. It's just not needed."

"I agree."

"I want to be your prince who works with the Faerie Guardians. I have the most experience in that area. Not so much policing and keeping order like Neldor does, but in protection. I learned a *lot* from Trigger and the Rothchilds. I've helped with the commanders already. Even your father has said as much."

"So basically, you're the boss of the castle and securing Theripolis and Faerie if there's a problem? Like the security and our army whereas Neldor knows the police side and I'm the government part?" I nodded when he did. That was actually a really smart way to divide things up given we would have three royals in our relationship.

Which meant I'd just admitted there would be *three* royals in our relationship and not just Neldor as my vice-president basically.

Whatever.

I talked Hudson into messaging his parents and brother that he wanted to talk to them after dinner. He didn't want to leave our bubble, but he agreed after I said I would go with and be his moral support. He knew it was the right thing to do, but he felt like he would disappoint his parents, or they'd tell him that he was... Ungrateful for all they'd done for him?

I understood it, but I also didn't because I hadn't grown up as he had. Plus, Lageos would want me to tell Faerie to fuck

off if that was what I wanted.

But it would have crushed my mom, so I did understand it even if I didn't know her. Life was complicated like that, and I wanted to be there for him.

It gave us a bit longer in our bubble though and we enjoyed it, feeding each other and talking about plans. He was asking a bit about where we were going to live, but really he wanted to know more about what I felt with Faerie and how that was going.

"I won't have children if something doesn't happen with that bond," I told him. "I can't. Or I'll give up the throne and change the government so we can have kids safely. I can't—I won't risk a daughter being a slave to that planet and people."

"You know even if you turn that place into a democracy, someone could push your descendants into going back to a monarchy and ruling again, Tams. You can't trap them in a role of *not* ruling any more than you were trapped in the future of ruling."

Damn. Like... *Dayumn*. The sigh I let out could probably be heard in Faerie. "This is why I need you in my life, beastie."

"Glad I have such an important role," he chuckled, leaning in and kissing me. "I have faith it will work out before we're ready to have all of the ankle biters we could want." He shrugged when I couldn't hide my shock at his lax attitude. "Tams, that bond has eaten all of the queens in the history of Faerie, but you've got it in a barrier in a few years. I'm not worried anymore."

“You’re Tamsin Vale. You’ll cut the bond or stuff Faerie in a corner. Or Lageos will beat the shit out of the core of Faerie until it’s not sentient anymore or passive or—something. As much as I hate everything that happened and it cost you your mom, maybe that’s what was needed to cut the bond or be the catalyst so the bond *could* be cut. Maybe Neldor’s mother saw that in her crazy?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. Trying again several times before just giving up.

Maybe it wasn’t Neldor’s mother but mine. In her journal, my mother had said several times that the sacrifice was more than she wanted to pay, but it was the only way she saw me able to have a future.

Maybe she didn’t mean being alive but a future where I wasn’t trapped as a captive to Faerie and her people as she was?

And that was something Lageos would have given his life for a million times over. If that was what she’d really seen then I’d have to forgive her for sacrificing his life as well.

Being an adult really did suck some days.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” Connor said, skipping to what he saw as the end.

Brat.

“That’s not what this is about,” I replied firmly. “I’m here as Hudson’s partner—person to support him as he—this isn’t an easy conversation. I’m not here as the heir of Faerie or Princess of the light realm. I’m just Tamsin.” I sighed when the three of them shared looks. “I’m his emotional support squishy.”

“Thanks, shorty, really, that helped,” Hudson sighed.

“‘Doll’ would have been worse,” I grumbled, glad when we just sat down.

Hudson told them what he’d told me a few hours earlier, and I was glad when they quietly listened, stunned but not as stunned as I would have thought. Then he focused only on Connor. “You don’t deserve what you’ve been getting about being my backup and shit. *But* it’s time to be honest, even if it’s just between us. Forget Mother and Father being here. You want the job.”



Connor swallowed loudly and glanced at me, which surprised me.

“Hudson’s made his decision,” I said quietly, moving my hands over his. “I support him. I will always think he’s the best man for the job—any job, but my opinion is biased because I’m in love with him. I don’t know you very well, but I think you’re a decent guy, Connor.” I nodded when he couldn’t hide his shock. “Look, this isn’t an easy situation, but you’ve been good about it.

“You’ve never talked shit about me and always been polite to me. I know this hasn’t been easy on you and you’ve been jerked around by *our* relationship. I’m sorry for that. I am. Seriously, I know it sucks ass for you, but you know it hasn’t been easy for us either and I’m not going to jump into mating Hudson when it’s an unbreakable bond because of the succession line.

“And you don’t want that for your brother. If we jump too fast and he’s stuck with me—and fairies live longer than dragons—that could be thousands of years stuck together in something that wasn’t meant to be. So there’s no bad blood between us.” I snorted. “I’d take a few more of you over Lucca’s brother. Or dad. Or Julian’s mother. Or *Darby’s family*. Fuck, those lunatics are...” I shook my head.

Connor nodded and focused back on Hudson. “Yes, I want the job and I do agree that I’m built for it more than you are.” He ignored his parents’ reactions, his mother’s one of disappointment whereas Xavier’s was pure shock. “And I don’t mean that as a slight. Nor your fault.”

“I know, Connor. I know you don’t even mean it as Mother or Father’s fault. Maybe it was part of how things turned out with the takeovers and keeping me safe as heir.” Hudson shrugged. “I think part of it was just how I hatched. I’m not an extrovert and you are.”

Connor nodded. “You like to be the one standing next to the person in charge. You’re—you’re more Trigger than Father, and one position is not more important than the other, Brother. Both are needed to make things work.”

“Hudson said the same,” I said gently when Connor looked worried. “I’ve seen instances when Hudson has stepped up and taken over situations where I thought he did better than your father could have. It’s in him, but if he doesn’t want the job that’s the important part.” I sighed when they both looked at me with amusement. “My situation is *vastly* different. I don’t have a sister as an option to do the job.”

“And Neldor will never be as powerful as you, and that could spell disaster for him,” Connor muttered. “Plus, he’s already your mate, so you’d still be pulled in.”

“Let’s not sign checks for me on that,” I cut in when he seemed to have it all settled in his head.

He nodded but then glanced at me again. “And where does Faerie sit on this potential outcome?” He shocked his parents again by holding his hand up to his father when Xavier went to cut in.

I bit back a smile and focused on him. “Faerie will give you her full support. Neldor is fond of you as well. He’s said it several times that you’re incredibly sharp and has sat in meetings with you more than I have.”

“Wait, this isn’t—this isn’t needed unless you are mating,” Xavier cut in.

Hudson gave him a disappointed look. “You set Connor up to fail if the only reason you see him as the future king is if I mate Tamsin, Father. That’s exactly why I’m doing this separately. I don’t *want it*. I don’t want to be king. Connor does and will do a better job.”

“It’s not about setting him up to fail,” Sasha cut in. “This is the way the line of succession works. You were born first, and the role is yours unless something happens, something *changes*.”

“It’s changing right now,” I reminded her. “Hudson is abdicating. He’s stepping aside. That is his right. He’s not the first to do that. Hell, I think he’s the bravest fucking person we know to do it. I gave Juan credit for having huge fucking balls for doing it so his dad didn’t puppet him because he had *nothing* if he left, but he had reason to bail.

“You guys are awesome parents and Hudson loves you deeply. That makes this so much harder. People won’t understand because Hudson is *amazing*. He is doing the right thing because he’s that awesome, and that makes him the bravest of everyone sitting here. It makes him the most *selfless* of the five of us because he’s making the hardest decision knowing people won’t understand and it will upset people he loves.”

All four of them blinked at me in shock, and I felt my face slowly flush hot and hotter until even my chest and ears felt lava hot the longer they all stared at me. Then I finally tried to

pull Hudson in front of me to hide and he chuckled, hugging me to him and kissing my hair, getting the hint to stop staring.

“Thanks, shorty.”

“You’re welcome. You might be a stupid dragon in our relationship sometimes but you’re not stupid. You’re one of the smartest people I know. I can’t do cute and stupid, no matter how hot and all your muscles.”

“For the love of the gods,” Connor muttered and then chuckled.

Glad I was there for comic relief.

“But you two *are* mating, yes?” Xavier pushed. “You said you were going to ask her and she’s wearing your scales.”

Okay, so that was clearly confusing things, and I didn’t know they could sense that. That explained it better to me.

“Yes, I asked Tamsin and she agreed,” Hudson answered. “But it’s separate, Father. I decided this first. I told her this was what I wanted before I asked.”

“That’s true.” I cleared my throat and squeezed his hands in support. “I was surprised he’d made the decision officially, but I wasn’t shocked. He’d talked to me about this before. Several times even. Before we were even official. He’d said he’d thought Connor was the right person for the role and—we’re not going to announce we’re engaged. Only that he’s abdicating and Connor will be heir.”

“We don’t understand that,” Sasha sighed.

“You don’t need to, Mother, only accept it,” Hudson muttered, looking sad and a bit like he was expecting to get

yelled at.

“They’re doing it to protect me and support me in a way you haven’t been willing to,” Connor said, showing his bite in a way that impressed me.

“We’ve apologized for that and said we were wrong,” Xavier said quietly. “Tamsin is right, and we were living in fear and the past. We do want to—we have a different future now. We’re sorry, Connor.”

“That’s part of why Hudson thinks Connor is the best choice,” I informed them, willing to share that so maybe they get it. “He didn’t live with so much of the turmoil and having to—people remember too much. They’ll remember that Hudson was in his mid-twenties having to swallow shit sandwiches. Connor isn’t even of age. That’s different. That will be on you. Connor can have a different story. A stronger one.”

“That’s not Hudson’s fault. That’s ours. He shouldn’t be punished for our mistakes,” Sasha rasped.

And that was at the core of this. Sasha and Xavier saw this as their fault and their son was being punished.

“Mother, I don’t want it. It’s not being taken from me,” Hudson said gently, understanding the disconnect now. He raised our joined hands and kissed my skin. “I’m getting everything I want instead. Our people will have a better king with Connor even if Tams and I don’t work out. I believe we will, and now we won’t be pressured. Connor isn’t waiting to see what happens.

“I’m not feeling *guilty* every fucking day for not making a choice or pressuring Tams. I was full of anxiety that people were waiting on me. I just—I’m free. Now everyone knows and Connor can have the job he wants—will be awesome at. I’m not—he’s not taking my toy like when we were kids. I’m giving him my golf clubs because I suck at golf and he was amazing from the moment he picked them up.”

Understanding filled her eyes, but there was still a lot of trepidation there. That was fair, but I was glad she was willing to accept it.

Xavier didn’t seem like he could.

I gave him a warning look like I would flatten him when he started to open his mouth. He did a double take and anger filled his eyes. But then he did another double take and his anger slowly melted away... And he was focused on Hudson.

Because my mate was crying.

“There is nothing wrong with a man who doesn’t...”

My soul hurt when Hudson’s voice cracked. “He’s not abandoning his family or people. He’s not picking me over his duty. There is nothing wrong with Connor, and I’ve heard you say that Connor is just as good as Hudson when people said it’s a shame Hudson would mate me and not be king. So what the fuck is your problem that he would abdicate?”

“I don’t know,” Xavier quietly admitted after several long minutes. “I don’t know. It feels wrong in my stomach. My dragon wants to smack sense into my son, but you’re right. As a father I’m proud of my son for being brave and seeing what

he thinks is the best move for our family and our people, but to my dragon it's—"

"Hudson's dragon is stronger than mine. He is stronger than me," Connor muttered.

"He's almost a decade older than you," I drawled. "Of course, he is."

The dragons there shared a look and Hudson cleared his throat. "It's more than that. My dragon was stronger than Connor's at that age."

"Fine, then fucking train harder. So what. Survival is more than who has the biggest dick or muscles. Evolve and don't be stupid, stupid." They were less than thrilled at my assessment—besides Hudson at least—but I wasn't done yet, gesturing between them and my body. "Hey, you're all much bigger than me, and I could take you out before you could think to blink. What does that teach us?"

"Fair point," Connor accepted. "And I would like to train harder, train with one of your trainers even if you're open to it. Trigger suggested it and said he learned a lot from working with Dalyor as you learned from us."

"You're more than welcome to keep Dalyor, Agis, and Kerym for as long as you want. Then you can bury them in your mountains when you're done," I said so sweetly my voice practically dripped with fake syrup.

Yeah, they left it alone when Hudson gave me a half hug.

At least Xavier seemed to be able to move on with Hudson abdicating and this was really happening.

Good.

“Eventually, you will announce your engagement though, yes?” Sasha asked, her eyes full of excitement. “You’ll have to have a party and—I’m so glad you accepted and made it back to each other. The mating ceremony will be—here or in Faerie? Either will be magical and—”

I gave Hudson a look that *clearly* said, *good luck, she’s your mother.*

He simply sighed and nodded before interrupting. “We’re not planning on announcing our engagement and we don’t want a mating ceremony. We want to elope and a small something with just family after.”

“What?” Sasha gasped, glancing between us. “You cannot be serious.” She reached over and smacked Xavier. “Tell them that they can’t do this.”

He couldn’t hide his surprise. “He can abdicate the throne, but he can’t elope? That’s your line?”

It was rather amusing when he put it like that. “We don’t want—we don’t like to be in the spotlight, Sasha.” I winced when she gave me a look like I’d run over all of her puppies. “You can help me plan whatever mating ceremony I’ll have to eventually have with Neldor?” I shrugged when they all looked at me like I’d grown another head. “I mean that’s a disaster in the making just waiting to happen otherwise.

“Seriously, look at who will be there to handle it. Neldor. And *me*? Oh, and our godsfathers, Iolas and Taeral? Taeral might be the only saving grace. I would have a buffet, and with Iolas we’d invite every asshole supe left and arrest them all before the cake. We all know that. Or a sword fight. Neldor



would beat people up who pick on me, and Taeral would be—he might not, but maybe.”

Sasha blinked at me for a full minute before the always calm and collected queen finally cursed in some interesting combinations. She dropped f-bombs and everything.

And that was what it took for me to get the wish I’d wanted for the second time. I’d tried a lot over the four years I’d known Xavier and Hudson, but I’d only cracked the two serious and stoic men once before.

Apparently, seeing Sasha swear up a storm at hearing what my idea of a royal mating ceremony would be and not even to her son made Hudson and Xavier both finally burst out laughing... Along with Connor. All three huge, steadfast men *burst* out laughing so hard that they almost fell off their chairs, slapped the table, or grabbed their stomachs.

Or at least two of three options.

“Really? That’s what cracks them?” I drawled.

“It’s enough to almost put me in a fucking padded room,” Sasha grumbled, rubbing her forehead. “I’ve been plotting ideas for the greatest mating ceremony any supe has ever seen in either Faerie or this world since we learned who you were.”

“By the gods, she really just turned green,” Xavier muttered.

At first, I thought she meant Sasha, but then I realized he meant me when Hudson rubbed my back. I opened my mouth but then closed it, getting a bit lightheaded at what Sasha described and she hadn’t even gone into detail.

“That’s her version of hell, Mother,” Hudson said gently as he hugged me closer. “She’d rather fight every damn supe in both worlds. Even if we had one, I’d never let it be that big. You know she would never want that.”

“Yes, well, but—”

“Don’t pout, Sasha,” Xavier chuckled.

“I’ll pay for the greatest one ever for whoever Connor mates,” I groaned, rubbing my stomach. “Please don’t do that to me. It’s going to be bad enough if I really do mate Neldor. I can’t do five of those.”

“I think you can get away with two, and if you do mate Lucca, we can get him to do something more intimate even though he is an extrovert,” Hudson muttered.

“Yeah, we need to stop talking about this before I teleport away without meaning to,” I warned. “We were talking about your serious adult stuff, not mine. I’m seriously at my limit and we—I’ve been doing *really well* at handling more and being healthy about it. Please, *please* don’t pile it on.”

Hudson pulled me onto his lap and hugged me. “I got you, shorty. Nothing is done or planned. We’re good and everything is fine, okay? Connor’s on board and now we don’t have to have a huge ceremony. That’s all that matters. We can do what we want.”

“What we want,” I repeated, letting out a slow breath. “Sorry, Sasha.”

Something happened and I heard the word “surrogate” before what sounded like a hand slapped over someone’s mouth. If I had to guess, Xavier covered Sasha’s mouth when

she tried to ask if I was going to be open to that so Hudson could have a dragon child.

Oh boy. That was another barrel of monkeys.

Or dragons.

And it took me a moment to think about why we'd need a damn surrogate.

Right, dragons had their children in dragon form and hatched out of eggs. They weren't born in human form, so fairy *males* could have children with dragon females. But fairy females could not have children with dragon males. I couldn't change forms to lay the egg and... Stuff.

It wasn't for Sasha to know, but when we were home later and ready for bed, I actually wanted to talk about it, sitting up and staring into his pretty, pretty eyes.

“Would you want a surrogate?”

He swallowed loudly. “That would be a very, *very* complicated question given we're not normal people and you're going to be queen of all Faerie, Tams. I don't need a dragon child to be happy. I want our child one day, but not until they'd be safe from Faerie.” He leaned in and kissed my nose. “I'd still teach them to fly just as I did you, my mate. That's what would matter most.”

Yeah, agreeing to mate this amazing man was the right decision.

Damn, I was a very lucky woman.

# 19

The next morning after our training, Hudson and I took Lageos out to breakfast so we could tell him the same thing we did his parents. Then he said he asked me to mate and I accepted.

Lageos froze in his bite. “You did it without asking my permission?”

“I asked her to mate me, not you,” Hudson answered with a half shrug. “I’m asking for your blessing now, but to be honest, the gods already gave it, so I hope you’ll accept it, but Tams’s opinion is the only one that matters to me. She didn’t ask my parents for their blessing.”

I blinked at Hudson and couldn’t hide how impressed I was. Like... *Dayumn*. “You got balls the size of the moon, beastie.”

“He does,” Lageos agreed, looking impressed but also like he might be plotting the best way to flatten Hudson.

I gave him a glance that it would be unwise for him to think much on that last part.

He was happy when Hudson clearly knew me enough that we weren’t going to announce we were engaged or have a

mating ceremony. He was impressed that eloping was enough for Hudson and there was no rush, us being together for real was enough, even saying we'd already done it before we actually did to get people off our backs something we were considering.

Mostly that his dragon was willing to do that and not all about possessing me. Hudson actually snorted and said that River was already mine and that was all that mattered. I'd accepted River's scales and given Hudson part of my soul. That was what the dragon needed to feel secure. Maybe feeling more settled that we had a home ready for once school was over, but that was it.

Fair enough. Really, I was good with that and being mated basically without the *forever* bond that was unbreakable.

Then again, I was kidding myself. He was right and it was unbreakable from the moment I'd given him that piece of my soul. Seriously, we both knew it. I'd basically mated him from that moment. The rest was just signing the marriage certificate and I was fine with that, but tying lifelines seemed... We could do that in a decade or two. I liked the idea of just telling people it was done and leaving it alone.

"We're going to have some bonding time as father-in-law and son-in-law," Lageos announced when we were done eating. "Let his teacher know he'll be missing his first class."

And then he teleported them away... And I couldn't follow.

Mother. Fucker.

Seriously?

I growled and teleported to Lucca hoping he knew what class Hudson had. It was the same one he had, and he promised he would tell their professor, giving me questioning looks. I promised it was fine, hoping that was the truth.

I was a wreck in my first class though, Professor Sontar and Neldor both noticing but being kind and ignoring it.

I paced outside of my next class until Hudson showed up.

“Your father is *terrifying*,” he mumbled, looking a bit pale when he showed up. “Seriously, he’s fucking terrifying, Tams.”

“I’m so sorry, beastie,” I whispered, giving him a big hug. “Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, right?”

“No, but he made it clear that if I was stupid like Darby that he’d skin me.”

“I’d do it too,” I admitted, shrugging when Hudson gave me the look I deserved. We went inside, and I waved off Lucca and Juan’s curious looks, saying it was political stuff that was going to be announced. We would tell Lucca later, but let everyone else listening in think it was about Connor and what was going to be announced later. It was the cover we needed.

But I was annoyed with Lageos. I understood why he was being protective of me, but it wasn’t the time to draw attention or start problems.

So I had a bug up my ass after class, and I was ready to beat a demigod and not ready for any more surprises.

Except I got one, yelping when someone grabbed my arm and I was yanked down a hallway. I shoved Juan off of me and bared my teeth at him.

“You guys are engaged, right? That’s what this morning was?” he asked under his breath.

“The Vogels will make an announcement about—” I started to say.

“Don’t bullshit me,” he interrupted, narrowing his eyes at me. “I can sense his scales on you.” He nodded when I flinched. “I’m not just a dragon. I’m the firstborn royal of a powerful line too. You’re wearing his scales. If you want to keep your engagement a secret, don’t wear that in public, dummy.”

“He’s the dummy then,” I defended. “I thought only his parents could sense it since he’s their son.”

“He is the dummy,” he chuckled, leaning down and kissing my hair. “So you are engaged?” He waited until I nodded before letting out a shaky breath... And tears rolling down his cheeks. “Thank fuck.”

Nothing shocked me more when he let out a silent sob and sank to his knees.

I had no idea what was going on, but somehow I ended up hugging a crying Juan and comforting him that I was engaged? It took him a bit, but then he pulled it together enough to admit that he worried he’d broken our relationship with his bullshit and bile. That of all of his sins that was the one that weighed on him the most because Hudson had always been a good guy and friend to him.

And I had been as well and honestly better than a lot of his actual “friends” and family and he’d hurt me a lot by poisoning Hudson. He hadn’t known how to fix what he’d

broken, and he didn't think he could because even if he'd had a hand in it, it was Hudson who had actually done it and Darby had made it worse and not let us be able to make it back together faster.

Plus, Juan was too broken to know what healthy was, and his only example of a loving mating was his parents and they were vipers to each other most days and seriously toxic to their own children, so every time he wanted to try and help he was scared to make it worse. So he did nothing and felt like a chicken asshole and was worried we'd never be together again and that broke his heart.

I glanced up and saw Hudson and Lucca both standing there smiling at Juan being so honest with himself and me for once that he truly cared about all of us. I winked at Lucca, seeing he wasn't surprised that Hudson and I were engaged, so clearly Hudson had given him the heads-up he was going to ask.

Of course, my dragon had.

"You got this?" I asked Hudson gently before taking off the necklace. I winced at the hurt in his eyes. "He sensed it. Your parents and brother sensed it. We're not announcing it and people can sense it. I will magically tattoo it on my booty that I'm yours, beastie, but you gotta hold onto this for now."

"I like that better," he admitted.

"Of course, you do," I drawled, realizing Lucca echoed me. We shared an amused look on that.

"We've got Juan," Hudson promised. "We've got to get to class."



I snorted. “I have a demigod to beat up.”

“I don’t think you’d win that battle, cream puff,” Lucca worried.

Hudson snorted this time. “You’ve seen Tams pissed. My money is *always* on her. I want to find Izzy and her stash of popcorn she’s always got ready for good drama and ditch class to watch what’s about to go down.”

Fair enough.

I found Lageos waiting for me in Colorado Springs, but I didn’t want to destroy my facility, so I brought him to one of the portals to Faerie and powered it up, growling at him to use it.

“We’re not going to Faerie when you’re distracted and not in control of your emotions,” he argued, teleporting us to one of the sanctuaries I’d bought for any supes to use with Faerie Guardians stationed in case they were in trouble. He gave me a look like I was just making his point that he’d been able to teleport me.

Except I didn’t know how to block him teleporting me.

I’d never really tried.

I threw a power clap at him enough to really hurt him but not like maim him or take a body part. I got really pissed when he easily absorbed it... With a smirk.

“Did he really run to you and complain that we had a talk man to man?” he drawled, his tone full of disapproval.

“No, he said you were fucking scary and I know you can be as a demigod, but I’m pissed you were to the man I love.

What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I clearly didn’t warn the last one the way I should have and he almost completely broke you and I was seconds from losing you to fucking Faerie like I did your mother,” he snapped.

“Hudson isn’t Darby.”

“No, he’s dumber than the vampire,” he drawled.

That made me mad, and I shot another power clap, a bigger one this time.

And the damn man just absorbed it like I’d tossed a towel at him.

Fine, I opened a portal under him, but he teleported out of the way at the last second.

Asshole.

“I didn’t say he was dumb. He is dumber than the genius vampire who paid better attention to you.”

“You don’t know that,” I snapped. “Hudson—they’re—you can’t just make blanket statements like that, and you shouldn’t get involved like that.”

“It’s my job as your father,” he threw right back. “And it was just like a year ago that Hudson had his head up his ass? You took a break then and barely forgave him? Fine, he’s put in the work to deserve your forgiveness, but mating is forever and none of these idiots deserve you.”

“His parents probably feel the same, but they didn’t pull me to the side and—”

“I’d fucking kill them if they tried,” he growled.

“Yeah, that’s not an overreaction,” I drawled as I used a rune to dump a lot of rain over him.

And he simply held up his hand to block it.

Fucker.

I held out my hands and shot water at him next and then electricity when he blocked it. I growled when he deflected all of it. I did more and more and then he seemed to get tired of it because suddenly he opened a portal under me, but I used my magic to shut down his portal, something that seemed to impress him. He couldn’t open another one.

Finally, I could smirk at him.

Except then he used magic to knock me on my ass.

Two could play that game. My magic was rooted more in nature than his. I grew the grass and weeds under his feet so he was tangled up in them before the trees near him grabbed him around the arms and I dangled him. It only worked because he wasn’t willing to hurt the poor trees.

Still, it worked.

And then I dumped about a lake’s worth of water on him, annoying the shit out of my dad.

Ha.

I got up a barrier in time when he tried to do the same but the fucker made ice under me so I slid from the force of the water he was hitting me with. I crouched down so I didn’t fall but went with the sliding and then used a fairy rune so it felt like things were poking him in the ass and fire ants were basically biting his groin.

“Not sure I deserve that, Tamsin,” he growled.

“My brave and strong dragon mate was pale after talking to you,” I drawled. “And I don’t like that sexist shit of needing to talk to him man to man. I know you’re older than dirt, but you should be more evolved. You mated the big boss and didn’t need to take over. You’ve pushed your daughter to kick ass and beat up all the stupid men. Don’t be a stupid man now, Dad.”

“It’s tradition and a nice one,” he grumbled. “I’ll miss too many other things. I don’t like feeling disrespected.”

“Fine, I get that and he was a bit sassy, but you could have gone drinking tonight or something nice and not bully him,” I snapped before shooting some more magic at him from behind my barrier that was a bubble. “And don’t drink him under the table. He doesn’t have a demigod liver. Nor runes like I do. He liked you a lot and now he’s scared of you. So what did you accomplish?”

“Darby hurt you. I couldn’t see another do that to you.”

Dummy. I couldn’t be mad at him when he was basically pouting. “We can’t both be stupid, Dad. I already begged him not to be stupid like Darby and hurt me. He’s not Darby and we can’t—do you have any idea how difficult it is for them that they have others to deal with? We wouldn’t put up with that. There are *five* of them. I’d lose my mind if I had four other women to deal with to love Hudson. I’d die.”

“I couldn’t have shared your mother,” he admitted. “I offered to let her have flings since it was the way of fairies if things ever got boring or stale, but we never got the chance since...”

Ouch. Since they never got enough time together for things to get old enough.

“Yeah, I hope we ever have that problem instead of all the stupid shit we’ve fucked up now,” I said quietly and shut down my magic. I went over to him and healed him from the fairy runes. “Are you done bullying my mate? I love him, Dad. Don’t be mean to my dragon.”

He sighed and glanced up at me. “I wasn’t. I can’t even fib when you look like you’re going to cry that you might have to pick between us.”

“Huh?”

“I wasn’t mean to Hudson. I just used my power to put a bit of fear in him before we came back to you. I told him to say I was scary because I wanted you to finally push your power in training. You were never going to do much against me because you’re scared to risk hurting someone. You still didn’t, you twit. I pissed you off, maybe for the first time, and this was all you did? You’re supposed to have a temper?”

I teleported him to the ocean before he knew what was happening.

Idiot. Fucking idiot. Like I didn’t have enough drama and he was starting more?

To say I wasn’t happy when I arrived at lunch was an understatement.

Hudson held his hands up in surrender and gave me puppy dragon eyes. “He told me to do it or he’d really do something bad to me and upset you for real and it was for your own good

and it would keep you safe. I told him it was stupid and you'd really never do it."

"Well, you're the smart one today," I mumbled, leaning in and kissing him.

"What did you do to him?"

"I gave him the fairy rune for fire ant bites on his groin basically besides shit he basically deflected with a smirk before finally teleporting him to the ocean." I shrugged when he chuckled. "I can shut down his ability to open portals. That impressed him."

"Well, that's something. He's taking us all out drinking tonight."

I called that one. I thumped Hudson on the forehead. "Don't be stupid and try to outdrink a demigod, okay? Seriously. I will be pissed if you hurt River."

"I promise to be good."

The Vogels released their statement that Hudson abdicated the throne and officially named Connor as their heir. It was all over lunch, and to say people were shocked was an understatement. Supe news reporters were trying to sneak onto campus and get some sort of statement from him or anyone close to him.

I saw one report that people thought it was ridiculous that he made such a decision if he wasn't getting an "upgrade" of being king of Faerie... To which Iolas issued a statement once again saying that none of my mates would be *king* of our damn world. If we mated, Hudson would still be a prince, and it wasn't a hard concept so to please stop being stupid.

I liked that last part best. Idiots.

I decided to take one for the team and accepted an interview to discuss the topic... While ditching my last class so I didn't yell at my dad.

"Our world is shocked by the news announced today. How did you feel when you learned about it?" the interviewer asked me.

"Not surprised at all," I chuckled, smiling at her when she simply blinked at me. "Hudson is a leader and an amazing man. I don't think anyone could do the job better, but I'm *biased*. I'm in love with him. But I also know him very well and I know he doesn't want the job. He—we are a lot alike, and if I had a younger sister who wanted the job, I would *gladly* pass off heir to Faerie to her as well.

"I don't have that though. Hudson does and Connor wants the job. From what I've seen, Connor is an incredible option for the job. I look forward to working with him as an ally as I have his parents. Even more so because I know he'll be in a different position because of our alliance and my very close relationship with Hudson as opposed to what his parents had to deal with to keep their family and people safe."

"You understand how many people will look down on your mate for stepping aside, right?"

"Those people would be idiots," I chuckled lightly. "Knuckle-dragging idiots who are probably the same people who keep saying that Hudson will become *king* of Faerie when he's a dragon. It's in our laws that there cannot ever be a king of Faerie, and certainly not one who isn't a damn fairy."

“What do you feel about your mate and the decision?”

“That’s he’s the bravest man I’ve ever met.” I nodded that I wasn’t kidding, saying the same thing I’d said to his family. “Look, if the Vogels had only one child and he walked away, I would understand people judging him. That’s the position I am in and it complicates things. I will never say Connor is a better option because Hudson is always the best to me, but as I’ve said, I’m biased.

“But *Hudson* thinks Connor is the best option for the job. That doesn’t mean Connor is a better man than my mate. It means he’s better suited to be king. He wants the job which is a huge part in succeeding in any role, especially such a challenging one. Taking on such a challenging and ridiculously difficult role because of pressure when someone doesn’t want it is setting them up to fail.

“And it wouldn’t only be Hudson that was hurt by that, but all of the dragons and people he’s meant to protect. I think it makes him the smartest person around to see that and handle it when he was sure of the decision. Everything with us aside, he made the best choice for his people, Connor, and himself that will have the best future for all of them.”

“The fact you’re together has to have had an impact on his decision,” she pushed. “He asked you to get engaged. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I’m sorry that you’re so shortsighted that you see the lives of millions of people don’t matter unless he gets the woman he wants, but they matter more than our relationship, especially to them,” I chastised, giving her a moment to settle with what I said. “This is all independent of our relationship.



Hudson was clear that he was doing it that way so everyone could stop putting pressure on us.

“We *constantly* get people hassling us to mate already so we stop screwing with all of the dragons of North America. Do you have any idea how much *pressure* that puts on us? Two kids in their twenties? When he will live hundreds of years and I’ll live *thousands* of years? You have to hear how *insane* that sounds. An unbreakable bond that can’t be undone even in death?

“And people just want us to jump to it because it’s easier for them and makes things settled for the line of succession? That’s not our fault. We didn’t ask for this. The *gods* made us mates and people are constantly salty with us for not being mated already. Hell, I’ve gotten yelled at for being a fairy and *biology* that I won’t give Hudson a baby for too many years and make him wait.

“I can’t have one until I’m thirty. That’s not even—that’s too many? People need to calm down. Like seriously calm down about lives that aren’t theirs. And even when I can have children, I’m not having them at *thirty*. It’s not happening. That’s still barely a child to fairies and I’ll be the youngest queen ever, so being vulnerable and pregnant is stupid. And I’m not stupid.”

“Plus, you seem a bit panicked at the idea of being a mother,” the interviewer muttered, not hiding her shock well.

“I don’t hide that the idea gives me panic attacks,” I grumbled, fanning my face. “All of it does. Ruling. Mating. Unbreakable bonds and edicts from the gods.” I sighed and accepted a cold drink from Izzy who’d come with me for the

interview. “I love Hudson and he’s my favorite dragon in the world. I cannot imagine my life without him. Why can’t that just be enough for people? Just be happy for us.”

“What do you say to the people who say that you’re selfish? That you’ve taken a good man who should have been king and now he’s given up the role for you and you have four other men you won’t give up for him even?” she pushed, something dark dancing in her eyes.

Fine, she wanted to be a bitch and play it that way?

“I say they should have the balls to say that to my face instead of being petty and chicken to post it online or say it ‘politely’ in some backhanded way so they’re not really saying it and then laugh that I’m being sensitive when I call them out on it,” I replied with a smirk. “Seriously, come say it to my face.”

I gave the address of my training facility in Colorado Springs, chuckling when Izzy swore off camera.

“I’ll be there all day tomorrow working on projects for Faerie and handling what I need to that no one else can in two different worlds. But yeah, come tell me that I’m selfish and you’re a better match for my dragon. Try and take him from me, and I’ll show you what you look like as a fucking pretzel. But you better put on your big girl panties and say it to my face or shut up.

“A lot of us are over this crap of giving insults online and acting like you didn’t do anything wrong or at parties and it’s acceptable. So suck it up and stop being chicken shits and do it like an adult with pride and stand behind what you really think or *shut up*. I’ve let a lot of people talk shit about me for years,

more than I should, but if they think I'll let it go about Hudson, they are *mistaken*."

"What if people really show up to try and take him from you?" she asked, her eyes excited for the story and drama she could report on. "There are many very strong dragons who would want him as their mate."

I barely stopped myself from asking if she was a fucking moron. "As much as I'm not a fan of the gods interjecting themselves into my love life, they did, and if they want me together with Hudson, I don't think others should really try to overrule them. But they can try all they want. I'm very sure I've shown time and time again I'm not someone to trifle with."

"Right, but dragons are—"

"Is she an idiot?" Izzy asked someone off camera...  
*Loudly.*

It was hard not to laugh when the woman shot Izzy an annoyed look. "Size isn't everything. I'm the most powerful magical user on two planets. I'm the daughter of a *demigod*. I'm better at swords than Trigger Rothchild. Do I really need to list more of my resume for people to get why they won't beat me?" I saved my breath when the woman looked at me like she wasn't buying it.

Clearly, some dragons did deserve being called "rockheads" for a reason.

And apparently, so did my mate.

## 20

“Seriously?” I sighed the next morning when I saw the state Hudson was in when he and the others arrived at the training facility for our workout.

“Everything hurts, shorty,” he grumbled as he hugged me.

I growled when Julian plopped down against the wall.  
“You too?”

“Your da is really, *really* good at instigating people, Tams,” he mumbled. “I know where you got it from.” He rubbed his head. “There’s a fucking line outside of women ready to fight you. Yeah, you’re his daughter.”

I shrugged. “I like beating stupid. Apparently, so does my *da*. It’s a shame you all fall into that category.”

“I resent your implications that I am not not stupid,” Neldor slurred so bad that I barely understood him.

“He was the worst one and he’s not even with you,” Lageos announced, looking more than amused at the turn of events... And not even remotely hungover.

“Is he still drunk?” I demanded.

“He is not the only fucking one,” Taeral groaned.

“You went with to be the damn parent of this,” I reminded him.

“So did Iolas,” he snitched.

“Thanks, asshole,” Iolas bitched as he stumbled towards a chair and missed the mark, plopping down on the ground instead. “You’ve always been such a fucker, Lag. Seriously. Meira’s gonna beat your ass.”

“She never did. She called you stupid for falling for the same shit,” Lageos said with a snicker. “I don’t get drunk, drunk like you mortals do. No matter how many times I tell you that, you still try to prove—”

“Shut up,” several people said together.

“I’m sorry I missed this,” Izzy muttered.

“It was amusing,” Ara admitted, shrugging when I shot her a look. “Several of us were called in to take over the detail when the two commanders started tossing back shots like water.”

“Lovely,” I sighed. “Okay, let’s get food and—”

“Taco Bell,” Hudson whined.

“Donuts,” Julian mumbled. “Krispy Kreme donuts, I beg you.”

“Pancakes, please, *agra*,” Darby begged.

“Anything with grease, cream puff. And Gatorade,” Lucca groaned. “I will give you all the foot rubs ever and learn to really wash your hair like Julian and Hudson have. I promise. Please, just—I’m sorry. Beat me up later, but the room won’t stop spinning.”

“I would like it to stop spinning as well,” Neldor agreed.

“Get the royal healer for this idiot,” I instructed Wyn. “All we need is my father to have killed him with alcohol poisoning and start another damn war. Also, get people here for food. I have a line of asses to kick for entertainment. Just about every damn female dragon has shown up to take me up on my offer and a lot of them are *mated* even.”

“That’s just extra insulting,” Hudson grumbled. “So I’m a prize to win and not even enough to be respected that I’m a side bitch?”

“Now you know how too many women feel,” I chuckled, kissing his hair. “I’ll defend your honor.”

“Kick their asses and punch boobs,” he mumbled before plopping down next to Julian.

“Punch boobs?” Julian chuckled.

“That’s a thing. I heard Mel say lots of times she was going to boob-punch something. It’s like threatening to kick a guy in the nuts. I don’t know if it hurts as much.”

“I would think it did if it was like directly in the nipple, but I don’t know how you’d manage that,” Lucca muttered.

“Don’t be daft,” Julian drawled. “We have nipples too, and that’s just getting punched in the chest basically. Their breasts are more sensitive and—is it because they hang like balls?”

The look I shared with Izzy and Ara made me feel better that they agreed men were idiots.

Which made it so, *so* much funnier when *they* shared a glance like they didn't know how I put up with the five of them or I was still sane.

Fair enough.

"I'm gonna hurl," Neldor announced. "And stop talking about tits, you fuckers. You keep making me think of her tits with her father standing here."

"Oh, not that I'm standing here, that my dad is," I drawled. "Or that you're thinking of them while you're nauseous."

"Baby doll, I will figure out a way to beg forgiveness later, just please, *please*—your dad is mean."

"Did he force you to drink?" I purred.

"No," Lageos chuckled, smiling brightly and turning on his demigod happy power... Which made them all more miserable somehow.

Nice.

Neldor's designated royal healer showed up and looked shocked beyond words at the state the prince was in. He shot Lageos a scathing look when he was filled in which annoyed me.

"He is a grown ass man," I reminded the healer. "You gave me a lecture and intentionally gave it loudly when I got my first real hangover after I was of age about propriety and being a royal. Give it to him, you sexist shit, not blame my dad because Neldor tried to prove he had the biggest dick around and didn't know how to cut himself off."

“Report to Commander Shael and inform her of what the princess just said and you will be aiding the Guardians in waking injured fairies going forward,” Neldor informed the healer, his voice deadly. “If you *ever* disrespect our future queen again, I will let her dogs burn you and smile as they do. Now get out of my sight.”

“That’s why I didn’t let him drink himself to death,” Lageos admitted after the healer was gone in a huff.

“Yeah, he’s not always an idiot. Julian, can you get Calarel for all of you?”

“Oh lovely, I could use some of her as well,” he sighed, catching my phone when I tossed it to him.

I didn’t even say anything at his wording, but the others gave him an earful. Seriously, idiot men.

I had a date with a lot of idiot women, so my morning was already booked.

It got even better when the line of women decided that I wasn’t allowed to use a sword or any weapons, nor magic.

Nor have my wings out.

I laughed. I laughed and laughed and *laughed* some more, feeling better when Stefanie, Shael, and even Talila, who had showed up in the middle of the mob informing me of this, laughed as well.

“First, our wings out is our natural form,” Stefanie informed them.

“Being a dragon is our natural form,” the designated leader of the group replied with a smirk, focused on me. “You



want to fight us like that, Princess?”

I shrugged. “Sure. It wouldn’t make much of a difference. And I won’t use runes, but I can’t shut off my magic. It’s infused in my blood and body just as yours is.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” she argued.

“It does if you know about fairies and think of magic more than—you’re equating us like more powerful witches,” Shael lectured. “Forgive the startling analogy, but the princess has said it often and she’s not wrong. We’re not from this planet. We’re aliens. We’re not supercharged witches. That’s why we don’t have to write runes, we simply think them.”

“Plus, it’s humorous that you think you get to dictate *anything* when you’re here as a guest at the princess’s invitation to make a point,” Talila said firmly. “Might I suggest if they’re imposing rules on you, that you impose some as well, Your Highness?”

“Such as?” I hedged.

She gave a half shrug. “Donate fifty bucks to one of your projects in Faerie. Prince Hudson’s choice even. That’s one fast food dinner for a dragon. Everyone here can afford that if they drop everything to come wait for hours for the chance to beat you instead of at work or tending to their lives.”

“That’s fair,” Shael agreed. “You’re doing this instead of using your magic to help with construction or grow food. You could wake extra fairies. Other tournaments you’ve done it’s a million dollars.”

“Yeah, those are staged,” that same dragon argued.

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Hudson was on his feet and in the dragon's face before we could reply. "Don't fucking disrespect her or your beef will be with me. She is my *mate*, and Tamsin has never cheated at anything in her life. People cheat around her all of the fucking time and she always follows the rules and is honest. Always."

"Except apparently at Vegas," I muttered under my breath, shrugging when people gave me confused looks. That wasn't important at the moment.

"If you attest that those tournaments were legit, I will believe, Prince Hudson," the woman said, dipping her head.

"What has Tamsin done that you don't believe her?" he growled. "You don't even know her. Don't be fucking rockheads." He glanced at Talila. "A hundred dollars for the hobgoblin housing. At a minimum unless they ask for a pass because they can't afford it and they better not be lying. The hobgoblins are always feeding our people and guards when we visit. Dragons can be nice to them."

"Especially when they won't be to our future queen," Talila said, her voice showing she wasn't happy about it.

"Let's pick up the pace," I cut in when there seemed like there might be an issue. "I've got a lot on my plate and fairies to wake up soon." I glanced at the waiting line. "This is going to go fast. Get ready." I snorted when they all glanced among each other. "No, I'm not kidding." I yanked off my sweats and moved to the middle of the mats and waved the first person forward. "Pay the money. Let's go."

The woman dipped her head to Hudson. "I don't have cash on me."

Yeah, that was fair. A lot of people didn't keep cash on them.

"I have Venmo," Lucca offered. "I was actually going to talk to you about..." He grabbed his head and let out a huge burp, amusing more than just the women I liked but a lot of the female dragons as well.

"Go ahead while the line gets ready," I told him. "What's up?" I did some kicks and moving, non-static stretches.

"The Faerie Guardian housing is finished in Theripolis and they're moving in. Several hobgoblin apartment complexes are done around the realm and they're moved in. What—I know your paintings are crazy expensive, but what would you think about some smaller like 8x10 canvases they could pick from as a blessing from you? That's what they're seen as, right?"

I stopped stretching and sighed, glancing at Stefanie. "I have no problem painting as many as people want, but I worry..."

"This is why people don't like you and most of us are here," the first dragon growled. "You're too full of yourself."

"Shut up," Lucca snarled. "You don't fucking know her, and her answer is she's not full of herself at all. Shut your fucking mouth and listen because you're believing bullshit *still* and full of pride. It's oozing from you and blurring your vision." He let out a slow breath and looked at me. "Go ahead, Tams."

Now I felt like my answer had to be really good. "Fuck it." I sighed and just talked to Stefanie. "People would feel like

they had to take them. Like it would be insulting if they refused a gift from the future queen. It would be like a thing. We couldn't just leave them for people to take because someone would take a bunch and try to sell them because everyone in Faerie isn't a saint.

“And I don't—it's weird to me still. I get it's a blessing, but people don't know me personally. It's weird. I don't like making people feel weird and like they have to have a piece of me in their home. I'd rather buy a lot of candles and do the blessing thing at the temples. That might be a lot more magic and time, but then it's the gods' blessing. That's less weird.”

“Is she for real?” a different dragon asked.

“Only because you grew up human, Your Highness,” Stefanie said gently, waving off everyone else. “You grew up being exposed to human religions where a priest or pastor would bring over something blessed for a new home or food from the church to celebrate.” She waited until I nodded. “You didn't even grow up with a monarchy and most are now simply figureheads.”

“A candle blessed by the gods sounds lovely, but your time is too valuable,” Talila said firmly. “And we're constantly worried about you overexerting yourself and not getting enough rest. A painting of your magic and your blessing, the shield to protect all of us and Faerie in my home—nothing would honor me more.”

“Make me feel safer and more watched over at night,” Shael added. “And we can figure out a way to not force people nor have people run off with piles of them. Plus, if someone

doesn't want it, they can do the very normal thing you do when you receive a gift you don't want."

That made me feel much better. "Sell it or regift it. Yeah, that could work. Okay, yeah." I went over to Lucca and kissed his cheek. "You win as the smart one today. Thanks."

"We'll use the funds for that and to buy canvases," Hudson declared. "The hobgoblins have been through so much hell, anything to make them safer and better protected is the best thing to give them."

I went over to him and stood on my toes, kissing his cheek next. "Thanks, beastie."

Lucca had Venmo and I had PayPal, so Izzy was in charge of that and people were fine with a hundred dollars. The first woman put her money where her mouth was and actually gave three hundred.

I almost felt bad when I knocked her out with one shot after ducking her punch.

Almost.

Not really.

"Before you all talk out of your ass and look stupid, I suggest you kindly ask the princess if she would be willing to go lift weights over there," Stefanie said loudly to the shocked line of dragons. "You might understand better what we meant about our magic becoming part of us. It's why we train so much when our wings come in."

I went over and did a few squats with the "weights" set up at my current level. The runes were visible for the current weight. It just wasn't physically possible to have that many

plates on a bar without it cracking or losing balance. The dragons went over and couldn't hide their shock.

"That's where I'm currently at since I train with Tamsin in the morning," Hudson said, pointing up at the large boards on the wall with our information that Lageos kept track of. He was currently at about two-thirds of what I lifted.

Everyone who tried couldn't even lift the bar... Except one. She couldn't do it and dropped it, Stefanie catching it with magic, but she got it off the rack and on her shoulders.

"What do you deadlift, Princess?" she asked, not hiding her curiosity.

I gestured up to the board. "I can't keep it all straight. Not with everything else I have on my mind and being in charge of a planet that is recovering from a huge war." I was glad when several people snorted. At least they gave me that.

People seemed to chill out a bit after that and see I was legit. That was the biggest thing. They thought it was still all a lot of bullshit and some of them I even understood. They'd been lied to for so many years and didn't have any faith left that anyone could be telling the truth anymore. I actually got it and they wanted to take the chance to see it with their own eyes.

Yeah, I was good with that and we didn't have any bad blood.

The ones who were truly there to try and win Hudson from me... We had bad blood. He wasn't a fucking prize, and I felt how hurt he was that people saw him that way.

My dragon was going to get some serious loving that night. The super-hot kind.

It was always harder to fight someone taller than you, but that was most people for me since the start of learning how to fight. I had trained more with fairies and gotten used to having people my size to fight, but that was just for a while and not as much besides now Neldor.

But if I had a choice, yeah, I would always choose someone my size just for balance and semantics, but it really wasn't a bit deal since I was used to it.

Something the line of dragons was figuring out fast.

Normally, as I stepped over someone I knocked out and just moved to another area of the mat as I waved the next person to come meet up with me.

"Your Highness, I don't want this person near you," Stefanie cut in about thirty minutes in when I was distracted by the sounds of Neldor puking his guts out.

Which amused Lageos.

"I could make you puke right next to him," I reminded my dad. I smiled evilly when my dad didn't seem to believe me. "Want me to show you in vivid detail what I plan on doing with any one of them tonight?"

He wisely held up his hands in surrender. "Having a bit of fun drinking and bonding is all good, but they're making Neldor puke for his safety. That's too much. I get it. I didn't mean for it to go that far."

"I'm his fucking godfather and I didn't realize it went that far," Taeral grumbled.

“Fair enough, but that’s dangerous, and stop being amused someone’s that sick,” I said, making it clear what I got annoyed at. “And get him something to help.” Then I turned back to Stefanie. “What’s the problem, Commander?”

“This woman hates you.” She sighed when I snorted. “It’s unreasonable and—don’t listen, but she doesn’t—this isn’t fun and games. She’s part of the problem of society.”

The dragon snarled at Stefanie, turning her simmering rage on the older fairy.

Stupidly doing that.

“This is the problem I have with all of you fairy bitches. You’re all so fucking judgmental. I don’t care about the prince or want him; I just want the chance to pound her face in and make her bleed.”

That was rather angry and bitchy, more so than the others who might have just wanted to give me a smack. “Why? You don’t know me.”

“You don’t know me either, but you’ve always got a lot to fucking say about everyone,” she snapped. “The nobles are assholes. The councils are fucked. Everyone at Artemis is a monster. You just run your mouth and spew your judgment and bullshit about everyone looking down your nose at everyone like you’re fucking perfect and—”

“What the fuck does *any* of that have to do with you?” I cut in, just as pissed now. “You’re a regular dragon. You’re not a noble. You’re not on the councils. You’re not a student at Artemis. Did you graduate from there before?” No. It was



written on her face that she didn't go there. "Plus, I never just write *everyone* off like that. *I* go to Artemis, idiot.

"My best friend and all of my mates went there, so clearly not everyone at Artemis sucks. Not every noble is an asshole either. I've liked a bunch of them, dragon and fairy. I've liked a bunch of the council members. I think they need more women, even the decent ones. As a woman, I would hope you agreed with that. So seriously, do you have anything real to bitch at me about or am I just a target for you to—"

She launched for me but crashed into Stefanie's barrier.

"Take it down," I ordered, seeing an older version of who I used to be in the very, *very* angry woman before me. I growled when Stefanie didn't do it, glad when she sighed and listened. The dragon launched at me again and I easily dodged her, shoving her shoulder so she landed on her face. "I get it. The world sucks. You got a shit hand dealt you and you hate *everything*."

"Fuck you. You don't know me."

"No, I don't, but I got a shit hand too."

"You're a fucking princess," she roared, slamming her hands on the mats as she jumped to her feet.

"Yeah, and my mom's dead. She died to save everyone." She flinched and that clued me in on something. "Your mom bailed? Or is she dead but not to save people?"

"Shut up. You don't fucking know anything."

"I know it fucking hurts either way," I argued. "I didn't know my mom died to save all of Faerie." I slapped her arm away when she tried to hit me. I smacked her on the forehead.

“I thought I was abandoned, not wanted. Trash dumped at a fire station. That pain doesn’t go away because it wasn’t the truth. I grew up hating *everyone*. I hated *everything* because of that. You don’t get rid of that hate.”

“You still don’t get it,” she snarled, trying to grab my arm.

“I don’t?” I chuckled darkly, pivoting so she moved past me. “Let me guess, family didn’t want you?” I nodded when she flinched. “I can’t imagine how that hurt.”

“Shut up! You have a dad that loves you,” she bellowed.

“Yeah, I do, but I didn’t know that,” I shouted back. “I grew up in foster homes telling me that my family didn’t want me. That no one would take trash like me. That I wasn’t worthy of love. That I was just a paycheck. I had them chop my hair and sell it for the color. I had—don’t tell me I don’t know how horrible people can be. Don’t tell me I don’t understand how shitty life can be because I’m a fucking princess.”

“It all worked out for you in the end though,” she whispered, some of her anger deflating. “We don’t all get that ending. It’s not fair.”

“You don’t know my life either,” I chuckled darkly. “You’re a perfect example of why my story won’t ever get a happy ending.” I nodded when she flinched. “I’ve done nothing to you, but you hate me because you see it all as unfair. You would have taken all of your anger out on me and beaten me dead if you could have gotten away with it.” I moved until we were touching. “You can’t think you’re the only one, right?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea how many dark fairies want my death for their loved ones who died in the war that happened before I was even fucking born? Just because I was Queen Meira’s daughter?”

Her eyes flashed shock. “No.”

“Wanna guess how many fairies would sacrifice me to Faerie if it meant there was never another war?” I leaned in and lowered my voice a bit like no one else would hear them. “All of them. Every single fucking one.” I nodded as I leaned away, smirking at her. “You sure you got the raw end of that deal? Because I hear their thoughts. Deep in their hearts where they don’t want to admit it, they would.”

Every dragon there who didn’t know me glanced around in horror as the fairies there couldn’t meet the eyes of anyone there... And they definitely couldn’t deny it.

I ignored it and patted the arm of the dragon. “But I can help you. So talk to me. What’s going on that’s so bad? Why haven’t you gone to the havens or gotten a job with us?”

Pride. It was all over her face that she’d been too full of pride that she couldn’t have gone to the woman she hated and asked for help.

“Don’t be stupid, stupid,” I said gently. “Even when I hated the world, I still asked Melody Rothchild for help when she found me not knowing she was a dragon. Get help. Don’t live like this when you just don’t have to. You deserve better. We all do.”

I glanced at the clock and sighed. It was time to go wake more fairies. I muttered that I'd be right back and made sure Neldor would live first before teleporting to the portal to Faerie.

Being the heir never ended.

## 21

Surprisingly, a bunch of people donated money but bailed after seeing the way I helped that dragon. Over half were gone when I came back.

Yeah, that shocked me too.

I knew women weren't the dumber sex... At least most days. Tomorrow someone would prove me wrong for sure.

The ones left more seemed to want to just have the story that they tried to take a punch at me or never thought they'd get the chance to get so close to me or Hudson again. Sure, that was... Fine? Whatever, I flew through the rest and we raised a good deal of money.

I didn't get much of a workout though, but Izzy was already ordering everything I needed and getting it all set up since I was supposed to be cleansing. Stefanie, Shael, and Talila all offered to help and make sure it was all handled the right way. I was surprised, but then I realized it was their guilt.

Their guilt that they couldn't deny what I'd said earlier and they'd sacrifice me to keep Faerie from ever having another war. Yeah, but to be fair, there were a lot of people

who would sacrifice one person so a whole planet would never have another war. I couldn't even blame people for that one.

I was simply the one person they would all sacrifice because they thought I basically belonged to them and Faerie. That was the weird part. It really, *really* was.

But it gave me a reprieve, and all of the commanders were super nice to me all weekend.

I cleansed and ate and quickly went to paint all the set-up canvases and then went back to cleansing. That was my routine all Saturday.

At first, I had no idea what to paint. Like what would someone want in their house from their queen? It was all so weird to me.

Izzy said to keep it simple. "Think of the hobgoblins and see what comes up?"

So I did... And one time there was a whole set of shadows dabbing.

Yeah, dabbing like we'd taught the kids to do.

This was why it was scary that I was in charge of anything.

Seriously.

At least I wasn't the only one who laughed. And I made Izzy promise to save me one of those paintings. I wanted one for the castle. Seeing the hobgoblin kids dab for me was still one of the best things I'd ever seen.

Even Neldor had to laugh when it happened. He couldn't resist the cuteness even if others thought we were nuts.

We were... But it was seriously fucking cute.

“My parents are saying I have to go home now that we’ve made up, but I don’t want to and just because they’re accepting my choice I—that’s not making up,” Hudson told me when I came home from cleansing all day and he was sitting in my kitchen looking beat to shit. “I don’t know what to do this time, shorty. I think I’m right and I don’t want to just accept it to keep peace in my family.

“They let people hurt you when they shouldn’t have.” He looked up at me with tears in his eyes. “You’re my family now too. You’re my mate, and we’re going to be mated one day. You’re going to be mine forever, and they let people talk down to you because you were there as my mate and it was easier for them. I can’t just let that go. It’s not okay. I don’t *want* to act like that’s okay.”

“So don’t, beastie.”

“What do I do?”

“Don’t go home,” I answered, nodding when he couldn’t hide his shock. “Move in here. Even if it’s not publicly, it’s to your family and what people do after they get engaged or even before. It’s not my castle yet, but I don’t know that I will feel at home there until I figure out the shit with Faerie or whatever. Don’t do it out of anger, but tell them that you’re not okay with what happened and this is your team now. You get to say that.”

“You’re sure?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it. A chuckle slipped out of me and I nodded. “Yeah. I’m totally cool with it.”

“I find that shocking. If I’m honest, I’m shocked.”

“Me too, but if you’re cool with doing your own laundry, yeah, move in.” I winked at him. “Flying together changed a lot.”

“Yeah, it did.”

I wasn’t sure what else there was to say. We bonded in a way that sex couldn’t even make us closer. It wasn’t even like Lucca and I loving hang gliding and cream puffs.

It was so much more than that. You had to trust someone to a level of life and death to trust them to watch your back when you were flying. Fine, Hudson was an accomplished flyer, but I hadn’t been, and I’d never doubted that I was completely fine with him.

“Plus Vegas,” he admitted. He nodded when I frowned. “Maybe it was weird that we all slept in the same room with cots or extra beds, but it didn’t feel weird. It felt like that was where we should be.” He moved closer and hugged me. “And we were having sex in a bed again. It felt like we could.”

I swallowed loudly and looked up at him, leaning my head on his chest. “Just not in your dorm room. Maybe not in a dorm room type of room?”

“I will never, not *ever* be so fucking selfish and dismissive with you ever again, Tams,” he whispered as he cupped my face. “I don’t know what... I felt—everyone kept seeing my position and saying shit about Connor and—I was completely wrong. I was. Full stop.”

“But?”



“I felt a bit too much of what Juan did, and that was what I latched onto too much,” he admitted.

I nodded, knowing what he meant without wanting to get into it. That he was one of many options or just the current heir. That he was the title of prince and no one saw Hudson. Yeah, I got that.

I *got that* more than most ever could, especially since I was the only option and most treated me like they owned me and I belonged to Faerie. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, but I do want to do this now before I lose my nerve,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve been at school, but I haven’t come home on weekends. That’s what people have noticed and made comments about. That’s what they were talking about.”

I nodded, especially with spring break coming up.

His last spring break.

I stood on my toes and smiled when he gave me a soft kiss. “Go do what you need to, my fiancé, and I’ll be here waiting when you get home, okay? I’ll give you something nice to come home to so don’t take too long.”

“Great, now I’m going to be hard,” he chuckled, but I saw relief in his eyes that I was really happy to have him move in and take this step with him.

I really was which did shock me. It felt right and I was ready for it.

And not just with him which shocked me and was something to deal with later. Right then was about Hudson and me.

I ordered food and showered, checking on Neldor and glad when he promised he was fine. Izzy was on a date with her girlfriend. I grabbed my food from my security—allowing fairies to be on the property again but still not having a detail to spy on me—and leaving some food with them before heading to my study.

I swore under my breath before realizing there was someone I had to tell about what I'd done.

Me: I offered to let Hudson move in with us and he accepted. Something happened with his parents and things moved fast. I should have talked with you first. I'm sorry.

Darby: I fully understand and thank you for making sure I knew the situation.

Darby: I'm glad. The situation there was getting worse instead of better. His dad is taking everything personally and seems hurt the more people are saying Hudson is like Trigger instead of him. I don't really understand why but—I think their marital problems are leaking over on everything. I understand that to some extent.

Me: You do?

Darby: Yeah even if we're not mated. It affects everything. I know you feel that.

Me: Of course, but I guess I never knew you felt it. I've never seen that.

Darby: I feel like I should be insulted or maybe apologize that you don't think I love you enough that it would affect me? It does. Tamsin. A lot.

Darby: I almost ended up on probation last semester for telling a professor to fuck off when he said something disparaging about you.

Me: Like what? How did I even come up in class?

Darby: He's an old asshole and looks down on women. Someone said something about wishing you were around more and people thought you might want to come here if I did. Someone made a "Legally Blonde" joke but red hair—it was lame, but we all got it. He said Yale wasn't Harvard and had better standards.

Darby: I told him to fuck off and you were smarter than he was and I'd put money on your IQ vs. his any day, plus you were never stupid enough to underestimate someone you'd never even spoken with and that was only something the biggest idiots did. He kicked me out of class and the only reason I didn't get in serious trouble was because one of the Tas went on the record that the professor said something else about you being loose or some shit.

Darby: He's a git. We both know it. The point is we also know I hold my temper better than that. I wouldn't have let him talk shit about you, but I handle things better, but you were slipping through my fingers like sand and I just lost it. I think that's what's going on with Xavier and Sasha. They just almost lost each other and now Hudson is breaking away.

Me: Maybe. I would tell Hudson that. It's insightful. They just couldn't seem to hear it until we admitted we were engaged. And Sasha is still upset there won't be some huge mating ceremony. She knows me really well. She knows I would hate that. Like was she taken over by aliens?

Darby: No, she doesn't have daughters. All moms get a bit selfish then. Even Lucca's mom will lose her head with that. It might be the only time Julian's mom might pretend to like you.

I shivered. That woman was so out of her head that I hated the idea of even being near her again.

Me: No thanks. I agree that as long as I have a real ceremony with whatever fairy I mate, the rest can be elopements. My mother got away with it after all.

Darby: Yeah, everyone was very shady when I asked how she managed that. Clearly, they didn't want to let me know so we could pull it off.

Me: I wish you had told me that. You never brought it up.

Darby: It was one of the many things I messed up.

I didn't know what to say to that and I didn't want to sound like I was picking a fight.

Darby: I was wondering if I should propose again since things went so wrong but I thought acting like I could just get a Mulligan was disrespectful of you and our relationship. Then I thought maybe I should buy a ring because you took off the ring and seeing that has to hurt you.

Darby: But you loved that ring and the meaning behind it, but I don't know how to get you to put it back on and my soul dies every time I know it's not on your finger, *agra*. What I really want is to turn back time and not even go to law school or do anything but become a barnacle on you but that's stupid too.

Darby: I want to go back and not fuck up the perfect relationship we had—as close to perfect as possible. Perfect for us. Perfect together even if everything else was crazy. Even if our lives were not what we would have picked. I know we wouldn't pick the futures we'll have but I do now. I pick the future we'll have because I'll have it with you.

Darby: That's all that matters to me, Tams. I just want to have a future with YOU. Queen of Faerie or queen of nothing. Lawyer or stay-at-home dad. Rich or broke.

Darby: Let's not be broke. We've both been poor, and it sucks. But you get my point. I pick any future we'll have. All the events in front of people and kissing babies and shaking hands. I don't care. I'll do all of it gladly if I get to do it with you. Please? Just tell me what to do so we have that future. I'll do anything. Anything at all besides ever leave you.

I swallowed loudly, reading his texts three times before I knew what to respond.

Me: Saying all of that was a good start, you stupid vampire. I don't want to be poor either and you'd be miserable as a stay-at-home father. Be a lawyer because you're super smart and I find that sexy. The rest... I don't know yet. I hurt a little less than I did earlier today. That's all I know.

Me: I want to see you in the morning and spend time with you instead of worrying it will be awkward next time I see you and I'll be sad. Can that be enough for right now?

Darby: Yeah, that's awesome. That's—let's do something fun tomorrow after you bless hobgoblins? I've got a brief I've gotta work on but I can do that anywhere.

Me: I've gotta review the people to sentence this week. We've not had a snuggle date in the library at home? That would be nice.

Darby: Yeah, it really would. Sounds great. See you then. Thanks, Tams.

Me: Thanks for saying all of that. I know it's not easy.

Darby: I'll say it a million times even if I feel like an idiot if you're open to hearing it. I just don't want to make things worse. I felt like all I kept doing was making everything worse.

Me: It would be really nice if anything had an instruction manual.

I smiled when he sent me some agreeing GIFs and then some cute kissy ones which weren't normal for Darby, so I knew he was glad we were going to meet up tomorrow. That was nice. It was... Normal.

Not awkward which was really nice.

Hudson was taking a bit longer than I'd thought, so I grabbed my card and went out to one of my security and asked for a favor. The guy chuckled thinking it was for me, but it was for my dragon even if I added a few things at the last minute and let them add whatever they wanted.

I wasn't shocked when a few asked for Slurpees. Apparently, it was some sort of nostalgia that helped fairies. The recipe was the exact same or... I wasn't sure, but it was comforting to a lot of the newly awakened fairies. Izzy had

made a few jokes that no 7-Eleven had been updated in over twenty years, but I didn't know what the reason really was.

As long as it helped the people waking up every day, I was glad.

I accepted the bags when they got back and focused on what I wanted to get done while watching some interrogations. I finished a bit before I felt the portal activate. I took out my earbuds and set work off to the side as Hudson came through the door with several bags.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“You okay?”

He let out a slow breath. “I don't know what I am, but I'm fucking pissed that I'm all over the place instead of happy to celebrate us moving in together.”

That actually meant a lot to me.

“We can do that over spring break,” I offered after a moment.

“Thanks, shorty. Really.”

“Just remember I'm perfect next time you're stupid and think to doubt that,” I teased, glad when some of the tension left his shoulders and he dropped a few of the bags on the ground. “I have something goofy for you in case it didn't go well and something naughty in case you were in the mood for that. I'm not sure which is the right play, so tell me what you want, beastie.”

He dropped the rest of his bags and came over to me, giving me a huge hug. “Honestly, my answer is both. I want

goofy and naughty and all of it. I want everything. The full experience of living with you now.”

“Well, let’s not go that far,” I chuckled. “Darby and I have been living together for a while and I still don’t let him in the bathroom while I’m pooping.”

“You’d kick me out if you had to suffer through my shits,” he mumbled, trying so hard to joke with me.

Yeah, we were going for goofy. My pouty dragon needed to smile.

I ducked under his arm and led him over to the table. I handed him the two packages of Double Stuffed Oreos.

“My favorite,” he sighed. “You got... Of course, you do.”

“I couldn’t forget your strawberry milk,” I chuckled, picking it up off the table. “But I also fixed them up. Open the top one.”

He did and burst out laughing. “I love you so much, shorty.”

“I love you too.”

We sat down and I smiled as my huge dragon looked more like a little boy as he sat and tried to eat one massive Oreo instead of a sleeve of them. He honestly really only liked the damn crème filling, so I’d scooped it all out from a sleeve of the cookies and put it between only two of the chocolate caps.

The other package was full of all the chocolate cookies since that was what Darby preferred and didn’t really like the crème.



“Are you glad you did it?” I asked after he had his first stack of crèmes.

“It was the right thing to do,” he answered instead. “I don’t know what is going on with my parents, Tams. I’m honestly—I’m more disappointed in them than hurt. They were more worried about what people would say or think than if I was happy or if we were ready for this step. I wanted to ask who they were and where my parents were. Where are the people who sent me away to protect me for so many years?”

“Darby had a few ideas about that. I wasn’t gossiping but I —”

“You warned him I was moving in,” he guessed, nodding when I did. “Yeah, I was going to say something. I didn’t want to blindside him especially when things are weird between you guys.”

“They actually got better tonight,” I admitted.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, he finally said something I think I’ve needed to hear for a while,” I said quietly. “That he doesn’t care what our future is as long as it’s together.”

“I’ve heard him say that before, Tams,” he hedged.

Maybe. Maybe he had, but I hadn’t heard it that way. Then I shook my head. “I’ve heard him say he loves me anyways or he’ll do it for me. Maybe the way I’ve heard it or the way he’s framed it always sounded like it could be something to resent me for later or we just weren’t at the point yet that we were settled with it—he was settled with it and that was fair because I wasn’t decided.”

“But then things took a turn, and it seemed like he couldn’t handle it.”

“I don’t know what the fuck I feel half the time, Hudson. I’m too broken on that stuff.”

“You do better than you think, Tams.” He gestured to the setup I had for him. “You care so much and try so damn hard. Most people want to hear that you’ll do anything to make it better and mean it. And you do. I bet you’ve had something planned since earlier today when you realized my feelings were hurt that too many of those women saw me as a prize.”

“The same thing you’d do for me,” I said easily.

He froze with the milk halfway to his lips. “Seriously?”

I snorted. “I said I had something naughty planned.”

“Fuck the cookies. Show me what room I’m using,” he demanded with a growl.

“Hudson!” I exclaimed as I was suddenly over his shoulder and we were halfway to the stairs. I couldn’t help but laugh. My damn goofy dragon.

Whatever, as long as he was in a better mood. Seriously.

I didn’t even get to say anything. He took the one across from Darby since the other one in that hallway Julian used to use.

He dumped me on the bed and barely glanced around. “It’s nice. Better than my old room.”

No, it wasn’t. He was a big fat liar, and I didn’t even hide that I wanted to say that.

He simply shrugged. “It will have you naked in it more often than my last room did, and my parents won’t give me shit when you are. The guards won’t run their mouths about how fucking loud you are and we won’t have to be quiet.”

“All true, but I used to get donuts after.”

“That chef still loves you best because you get his mate fae fruit,” he reminded me. “Go teleport for donuts all you want as their daughter-in-law.”

“Yeah, that’s way better.”

“I’m dying now that you said it, Tams,” he said but mostly whined.

“How do you want it, my sexy dragon?” I purred as I slid off the bed and onto my knees. “Do you want me naked? Do you want to be king of your fiancée tonight? Do you want—”

“Yes to all of it,” he growled. “Teleport your clothes away.”

Oh, we were playing like that then?

Yeah, I was into that for sure. I bobbed my head and did it, heat filling his eyes as I was instantly naked for him. Then he practically fucking tore his clothes off so he was naked too.

“Suck your fiancé’s cock, shorty,” he demanded, even as he gently took my hand and moved it to his dick. He knew this was still difficult for me and would never be rough with me. I was grateful for that, and I made sure he saw that in my eyes.

I kissed along his very large dick that was incredibly hard for me. I licked it up and down, letting it rub against my breasts as well.

“I never understood how men wanted to come on their partners, thinking it was stupid, crude shit humans did in porn to demean women, but I fucking want to mark every inch of you, and it’s freaking me out a bit if I’m honest,” Hudson whispered like if he said it any louder that I’d run away from him.

I shrugged. “We’ve done a little bit of that. I’m okay with a little more over time. You can tonight since I know—we got engaged. I could see you wanted to mark me as yours. A bit. Nothing—”

“I want to come on your tits,” he warned me.

“Okay,” I accepted after a moment. “Tonight. Not a regular thing.”

“Yeah, not a regular thing.” He studied me a moment. “I also want your wetness on my chest over my heart?”

That was one I hadn’t heard of and was sort of weirdly romantic.

“We could try that for tonight too,” I accepted.

Again, we’d done weirder, and he was going through some shit with life.

He frowned down at me. “Are you like worried that I’m having a mental breakdown that you’ll just say yes to anything? I don’t want you to do anything you’re not really comfortable with, Tams.”

“You didn’t ask me to blow Juan or fuck all of my guards,” I said with a snicker. I nuzzled his dick and smiled up at him. “Thanks for checking though. I’m good. You’re having

a rough time. That's it. If you ask for too much I'll let you know." I winked at him. "You can even eat cookies in bed."

"Fuck cookies. I'm eating you."

Even better.

And he did.

I gave him a blow job and he finished on my breasts. He seemed satisfied on one hand but also like he wasn't into it on the other hand.

Yeah, life was weird like that.

He was *way* more into eating me out when I sat on his face and then fingered me while I sat on his chest until I dripped all over his skin. That was weird, but he was super into smelling like me in such a carnal way.

I was too into how good it felt that I didn't really care if it was weird or not.

But we stopped there. We didn't have sex. For a moment I worried that I'd done something wrong or it wasn't the right time for us to have played around, but then I realized Hudson was just exhausted.

Mentally. Emotionally.

All around exhausted and wanted the connection of my being there for him more than anything.

"You're going to be okay, Hudson," I said as we snuggled down to sleep.

"Promise?" he whispered, his voice cracking as he hugged me tighter.

“Yeah, because I have that kind of magic. I’ll make sure.”

“Thanks, shorty.” He kissed my hair and fell asleep not long after.

*Please let me be able to keep that promise.*

## 22

I had expected Sasha to come speak with me about Hudson moving in, but I was pretty sure she didn't know how to handle it or what to do. So for the moment, I was in the clear and we were in our bubble of being engaged and enjoying it without people knowing or being assholes about it.

It was honestly really great, and I wondered how much others knowing had really done damage to Darby and me. The amount of pressure he must have felt and had to endure that I didn't even realize or had seen made me feel bad. I forgave him a little more over the next week as I saw how Hudson and I simply got to *relish* it.

Yes, part of that had been Darby's fault, but I also knew how hard that pressure could be.

And lonely. Isolating. *Disorienting*.

A lot of things that could easily point someone in the wrong direction.

So yeah, I was a little less angry and hurt.

How weird was my life that being engaged to someone else helped my relationship with Darby?

Seriously, my life was weird.

As if that wasn't enough, I was pouring over proof of why the demons had gone after Geiger. They had been using the flaws in AT&P's procedures to find out a lot of information about too many people—and not just their customers—and Julian's proposed changes would have closed their loops. Honestly, it was *terrifying* how much information cellular carriers had access to.

And not just about their customers. Oh no, I was looking at scores of information about people who had never had a contract with AT&P. I was fairly sure there were a lot of governments and law enforcement agencies that would want this information.

Plus, a lot of senate committees should be asking a lot of fucking questions as to why they had access to all of this as well.

Information was always valuable, but what specifically they might want amongst this huge cache of it we just didn't know. Or was it that AT&P had information they weren't supposed to?

And was this the part that the demons themselves wanted or was it that the guy who was related to me wanted it and this was why he was working with demons for it?

Yeah, so seriously, there were more questions than answers. And it all agitated me. Really, really, *really* agitated me.

Honestly, more than normal, but then I realized I was going over all of this instead of cleansing like I had been on Saturdays. Plus, I wasn't going to get any answers simply



staring at it, and I was too damn busy to waste my time simply staring at things like that.

But then my magic seemed to be more than simply anxious. It was irritated. It didn't want me inside. I needed to be outside.

I needed to be... Flying?

I accepted it because I was tired and had been too focused on work and school and just inside.

Except a thrill of terror raced through me, and I felt that sort of warning I got sometimes that I just knew something was wrong. That gut feeling and even more than that. This time it was like in Vegas where I could see the numbers of the roulette wheel.

But this time I saw Neldor's face... And somehow I knew he was in Faerie for a flying lesson.

Fuck.

I teleported down to the portal and activated it, letting the dogs know to follow me and alert people. The moment I went through, my wings were out, and I was airborne, teleporting to Neldor.

I came in fast above where he was gliding down, Dalyor and Kerym beneath him just in case. I met Dalyor's gaze and nodded something was wrong. His eyes went wide, and he nodded that he understood and for me to act.

Just as Taeral realized something was going on, I dove down for Neldor and grabbed him, teleporting us about a hundred feet higher in the air than where we had been.

“Hold on!” I ordered him, wrapping him around me and using magic to hold me to him. Right as I said it, magic exploded where he had been, obviously having been trying to hit him but landing against the barrier Taeral had had up.

Taeral went for the source fast, but whoever had come for him saw me enter the area. I felt the mood change and teleported out of where we’d been, seeing magic hit there too.

Suddenly, Morgan was there flying towards us, and for a moment I was scared he was the problem, but it was clear someone had told him what was going on. I heard him bellow to land right before magic came hurling towards him.

I had just enough time to teleport to him with Neldor and grab his hand before teleporting the three of us out of the way and closer to the portal I’d come out of. I had to let go of Morgan though and hope he could handle his own landing and whatnot. Iolas was on the ground and gestured for me to let go of Neldor.

“He’ll catch me,” Neldor said, getting what was going on better than I did. “Drop me, baby doll.”

No. No, I couldn’t do that yet.

Something was still wrong.

I threw up a barrier around Iolas just in time, the magic stronger than I would have expected. He could probably have handled it just fine, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

“We’re going in hard,” I warned Neldor. “Hang on.”

“Shit, what did Lageos teach you?” he growled.

“Be glad he did,” I yelled right back.

Honestly, it was more my own invention. I wrapped my wings around Neldor and wrapped us in a barrier before teleporting us closer to the ground so we sort of barrel-rolled together in my barrier. It wasn't fun. It was definitely going to fucking hurt and maybe break a few things.

But we'd live.

And we went right through the portal Iolas had already activated.

We came out on the other side and my dogs were already waiting, flames up and protective magic of fair folk pretty much able to handle anything. Even better?

My dad was there ready to kill anything and everything.

"Someone tried to take out Neldor," I groaned.

"I don't know that was enough to kill him," Iolas said. "I think it was to take out a wing. There are a lot easier times to try and assassinate either of you. During a flying lesson isn't a good time. We're on high alert already."

"He's right," Neldor agreed. "Look how fast Morgan and Iolas were there. Most of the commanders make sure to be in Faerie when I have a lesson. They were on the same planet as you when you had one too." He pushed Lageos away when he tried to help Neldor up. "I'm fine. She broke a lot of everything."

"Just some ribs and my leg," I argued.

"Yeah, only that," he snapped.

I gasped as my dad healed me. "Just say thank you."

“You’re an idiot,” he said instead. “Iolas had us covered and—”

“Princess Tamsin made the right call,” Iolas argued. “She knew her dogs were here waiting. I didn’t. We’ve had too many unknown attacks and problems. She secured an exit and saw magic coming that I didn’t. I don’t want her hurt either and I certainly wouldn’t have suggested she be the one to get you to safety, but given she did, her exit was the smartest.”

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” I grumbled.

“I really am as big of an asshole as Meira always said I was,” Iolas muttered. “But that’s for another day. *Today*, we need to figure out who the fuck wanted to cripple Prince Neldor’s magic and take him out of the running to be your fairy mate.” He gave me a serious look and nodded. “You could never mate a fairy who cannot reach his full magical potential, Your Highness. It would leave your child—”

“Almost a witch or warlock level of magic,” Neldor whispered, swallowing loudly, not able to meet my eyes. “So someone’s pissed that they can’t control me or kill me. This is the new ploy now? That’s lovely.”

Yeah, that was the understatement of the year.

Seriously, like we didn’t have enough on our fucking plates?

***The End***

## ***THANK YOU for reading this book!!***

Thank you so much for reading the next book in Artemis University. I woves all of you lots for your support and wanting more of my books. Please, *please* leave a review. It really helps me out to know which series people are eager for. I appreciate the time it takes!

Please, PLEASE watch the spoilers on social media. There are always new people coming into the series or people who are several books behind waiting for the series to finish before the read the rest. So please be respectful of that. There are ALWAYS people in my discord that will talk about everything going on in the Artemis channel. Go wild there or in DM's.

Thanks for understanding.

Welcome pumpkin season and fall, I've missed you!

All my best,

Erin

And Vader

## Find A New Series To Love...

Accidentally Wolf: Seraphine Thomas 1

*Gives New Meaning To Workplace Injury*

Special Agent in Charge, Seraphine Thomas, lives for her job at the FBI. One of the youngest female agents with her own team, she thrives in undercover work to make the city she loves safer. But Sera's on-track life is thrown into chaos when she's attacked during a bust gone bad and is left figuring out what it means to be a werewolf.

Right away, she learns that she's more powerful and able to do things that she shouldn't be able to do so quickly after her transition. The rules of her old life don't seem to apply to much now that she's a shifter, and knowing who she can trust is even more complicated.

When she's transferred to a special branch of the FBI made up of paranormals policing others of their kind and given a promotion, things start looking up—until her abnormal level of power creates a list of enemies for her before she's even learned who her allies are.

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Upended Life: Artemis University 1

My name is Tamsin Vale and my life is about to get real... Really complicated and ridiculously dangerous. Which is almost funny given at nineteen I already know too much of the darkness of the world and people, the secrets they keep.

Or so I thought.

Turns out those quirky abilities I've been keeping secret expose me to a world I didn't know existed. Sure, I knew I wasn't human—but how exactly do I find out more without ending up in the wrong hands?

And I'm not so sure I'm in the right hands now given some of the reactions to finding me. They say I'm the last fairy. I'm not sure I should trust them when their thoughts are mostly of power and how to use me.

But I'm also not sure I have much of a choice. My powers are dangerous and I don't know how to use them. They promise to teach me what I need to know and give me a chance at something I've never had before.

A normal life. I don't think anything about Artemis University and those who attend is normal, but it's still better than the life I've been living if they keep half their promises.

I think hoping they'll keep half is generous.

Artemis University is a hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.

My name is Inez Garner, and my story has sort of been told... But not. I'm turning twenty-three and find out I'm not human; I'm apparently a vampire. Sure, who hasn't read that story? Oh, but I'm a princess. And there's a zombie apocalypse—although I'm debating where the line is of apocalypse vs. post-apocalypse. There's also a quest that I'm compelled to be on, and it might all be coming from the Goddess.

Awesome. It seems She has big plans for me. And I have to deal with ghosts. When I kill corrupted—the nice PC name people call zombies, as it's not their fault they eat people—I then have to deal with their ghosts. Which is super when being hunted for years by some guys I don't want to know better.

Add to everything, I have to apologize to heroines for judging them when they fall in bed with the hot guy and buy the story he gives. I get it now. Sex is splendid. I'm not one to believe a con, but he's got answers I need, like why I have no memories before I was eighteen.

Plus, the fangs sort of sold it for me. I hope he forgives me for shooting him.

House of Garner is an apocalyptic hot burning WhyChoose romance with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine that doesn't let anyone get in her way.

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## Undisclosed Assets: Untraceable Succubus 1

A succubus working as a stripper sounds like a cliché or start of a bad joke, but Lola Chase is in a human only province in Canada for other reasons. Someone is murdering women society looks down on, and she's there to stop it. As a demon,



she's bottom of the supernatural food chain and knows how often people ignore crimes against them.

From the start there isn't much to go on, and she ends up getting in a bit of trouble following any leads she gets. Things get complicated when an ancient, big name vampire takes interest in her and getting away from him proves to be much harder than her normal admirers.

Thankfully, although her cover is a stripper, Lola loves to dance and the fun she has helps balance out the stress and worry of the case.

Plus, she finds some very hot men to play with and feed from. The question is whether or not she can balance it all and find a murderer before he kills again.

Untraceable Succubus is a murder mystery series where the sex is hot and often and the main character kicks some serious ass on the road to finding out if she can have real love in her life even if it comes from multiple men.

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### Demon of Death: Enchantress 1

Soraya Devil is the Enchantress, one of the most powerful magics in the world... But she's so much more than that, and everyone's constantly attempting to unravel her past and secrets. She's not worried though, as many have tried and never find out the truth.

It's safer for everyone that way.

The owner of Paranormal Investigations—among other companies—she has her own answers to find. Though she’s continuously pulled in too many directions, she always answers the calls that make even her magic tingle in warning at the danger.

When a sprite begins killing people in Chicago, she has to team up with SPU—Supernatural Police Unit—to figure out who summoned the demon and why before more die. While that’s enough of a challenge, the main hurdle is the team lead on the case who loathes all magics. But when he can’t seem to get past his hate and do his job, can Soraya make an ally from an enemy, or will the evil unleashed in the city she loves win the day?

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## Rough Beginnings: Karma Bakery 1

### *Starting a New Business Takes Magic*

Imagine there weren’t three main gods of Olympus, but four. A sister who went through something so horrible, so traumatic she left and was written out of history.

Arabella Baker and her two adopted daughters are moving to Boston to open a new business and start over. Things will be different this time with the new names and new life. The twins will live on their own at college—though still right in Boston—and experience something a bit more normal. The store she bought has a hefty price, but the location is fantastic, and she got the best spot in the new development... Which apparently comes with an immensely attractive man who owns it all.

Nothing goes smoothly in opening a new business though, sample days, crazy busy, and fluff interviews taking dark turns. Honestly, it leaves Arabella asking one main question—why did she think opening in such a large city and right before the holidays was such a great idea?

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## Meave: Naughty Witches 1

Leaving NYC and a troubling past, Meave Washington is starting over. She has a good plan, but she's probably bit off more than she can chew. So she embraces the chance of fate that lands help at her feet—and if he's smoking hot, all the better.

Distracted by a text while driving, Ashton Perry injures Meave. He's horrified that he could have killed someone, and steps up to make it right... And not just because she's the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

Sparks immediately start flying and the desire is undeniable but it's not that simple to take the leap. But Ashton's barely a man, and Meave is hiding something important. When the woman is older, age isn't just a number and Meave isn't sure Ashton can be who she needs.

Ashton steps up to prove he's not just a man, but the man his bewitching lady deserves. He doesn't care what she is—only who she is. And he'll do whatever it takes to prove it.

Naughty Witches is a burning paranormal romance novella series with strong female leads, fun so sexy it raises the temperature, and mismatched people who find HEAs that give

us all hope fate won't forget us. Each book is a new pairing in the same world, with an overall series arc.

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The Turning: Dr. Kelly Murphy 1

*One Bite Can Change Everything*

Graduate medical school, start competitive internship, don't get cut from the program, become a surgeon. It was a great plan. One Kelly Murphy loved and had dreamed of most of her life... And it was blown to hell in a night with an uninvited bite.

Now she's missing three days of her life, trying to handle her freaked out best friend and parents who called the police when she went missing, all as she realizes she's not the same person she was before. She's different. Like has fangs different.

When he shows up on her doorstep claiming to know what happened to her, Kelly's not sure that makes things any less confusing. But at least he can guide her, right? Either way, she has a plan and a choice she didn't make won't stop her... Even if she might have the urge to bite her patients from now on.

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Owned: Secure Settings 1

Kate Boyle has lived through more loss than most people twice her age. She's strong and independent, so letting people in to help her handle her grief or problems is next to impossible for her.

The owner of a successful company, Secure Settings, Kate devotes all her time to keeping people safe and rescuing those who can't save themselves. When she gets the call that her grandpa died and she's now inherited his ranch, a storm of epic proportions starts. Smart enough to know she can't watch out for danger while grieving, she calls in a favor for help.

Jared and Dean Acker just got out of the Marines and are a little lost as to what comes next for them. So when they're asked to back up a friend of a friend, they're in... And meet the woman of their dreams. Now, if they could just convince her.

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## Wounded: In My Dreams 1

### *Authors Dream Of Their Happiness Too*

Gas station coffee is the highlight of Lily Slone's boring outing until fate intervenes... Along with the barrel of a gun and a lost soldier who saves her life.

Jasper Hutson—a homeless Marine, discarded by his family after returning home from the war wounded—reacted on instinct. But this one act brings him to Lily's attention, and not because he saves her life. She sees something else in him. Something no one else sees.

Refusing to give up on him when everyone else does, Lily offers Jasper a place to stay and an opportunity to get back on his feet. That one offer will change her world. When they grow closer and Jasper makes Lily's life so much easier, she's not sure she can go back to living without him.

As life moves forward and they get into their own rhythm, Lily discover something about Jasper that he's kept hidden.

Will she continue to reach for her happily ever after or will they both remain wounded?

## About the Author

Erin is a born Chicagoan who has lived in several states which gives her an interesting perspective from which to write characters. Still a loyal Cubs fan, she also cheers for her alma mater, the Illini from her home outside Boston. To date, she has published hundreds of paranormal books in different genres that have dedicated readers who await each release to her numerous series. With her canine editor-in-chief Lord Vader Flynn at her side, she has no plans of stopping anytime soon and looks forward to new adventures and worlds on the horizon.

**[ErinRFlynn.com](http://ErinRFlynn.com)**

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*Siren's Battle*

*Abusing the Alpha*

*Siren's Kiss*

*Hunted Wolf*

*Shattered Alpha*

*Rebuilding the Wolf*

*Invading Alpha*

*Recovering the Siren*

*Provoked Wolf*

*Reorganized Wolf*

*Woman In Demand*

*Growing Alpha*

Disrespected Chief

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ARTEMIS UNIVERSITY

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*Drowning Studies*

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*Weakened Mountains*

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*Compounding Traumas*

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