

KELSEY SOLIZ



THREE
TO FIND

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HEMLOCK ACADEMY

Book 3

Three to Find

Hemlock Academy Book 3

Kelsey Soliz

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*This is for all of you that keep reading what I write. Is it over the top?
Maybe. Are you enjoying it? Obviously. You're here, aren't you?*

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Prologue

In a lonely dark cave, under the glittering stars, a heartbroken creature weeps at his misfortunes. Once upon a time, he had known happiness and love and was part of a family that gave him purpose. And there was her.

The whole reason for his existence, the very moon that hung in the sky. The goddess was his first, his only love. When they completed the sacred unification of their souls, he knew that he had everything he'd ever want, everything he'd ever need.

Many years passed and more mates came along. With every love added to their circle, the goddess grew happier and in turn the sad, miserable, heartbroken creature knew more happiness as well, because he saw the way his love was so cared for and cherished.

The goddess created her own children to walk the earth plane; they would be special beings imbued with extra magic, that would call mates to them much the way the goddess did. She would call them conduits, and their family of mates would be circuits. For she knew that they would all need each other order to live a complete life.

She blessed children with marks to elevate them above others, to show that they were special, different. The sad, miserable, heartbroken creature loved the children as well, for his mate, his moon, had created them and took great pride in the love they built and survived on.

These conduits became the leaders of the earth plane's societies, with the foresight and capabilities to be just and fair rulers that had compassion. When they each completed their own circuit, they were blessed with gifts from their mates.

Some conduits held more marks than others, and this is because in some, the goddess saw that they had the potential to do more good than their counterparts and the ability to love harder than them as well. She knew they were strong enough that their hearts wouldn't be torn asunder, nor their lives become too complicated for them to manage by being gifted more mates; in essence, these special blessed children had

more marks because the goddess knew they had a greater capacity for love.

Many more years passed, and things began to change. The beings living on the earth plane began to grow a little greedy, stopped thanking the goddess for their blessings. Some of the goddess' mates grew angry at this and demanded they display gratitude. There was some dissension in the perfect model of mates, but the goddess assured them that all would right itself in time. The sad, miserable, creature wasn't happy with that. He saw how the goddess cried when she thought no one saw. He was her first mate, and knew her longer and deeper than any of the other mates.

The goddess' pain was his pain, and he set out to correct the problem. He had promised the goddess at their union to always support her and to make her happy. He couldn't stop now. He concocted a plan that some may call evil. He saw a way to make his goddess happy again, by showing the beings of the earth plane where their praise should be aimed.

The sad, miserable, lonely creature thought that if he-

"Really, father? You're in your 'evil lair' again, reciting your story to your gilded mirror? How many times must I happen upon you, pouring your heart out as if in narration of a story? Haven't you any pride? You've a kingdom to run!"

The sad, lonely creature straightened his mist and gathered all the pride he could muster and-

"Father, I am still here. Did you forget again that I can hear your every thought? That our mist forms allow complete transparency?"

"Maybe. What's it to you if I did forget again?"

"You are forgetting too much. You are hungry."

"Well I haven't forgotten the way the people instantly began to fear the goddess once more, they took notice of their faults and began to offer sacrifices, praying fervently that she would show mercy and-"

"Okay, that time you just spoke out loud. Father, every time I visit you lately you are staring off into space or into this

ridiculous mirror like a wronged villain, relaying your life history like it was a story. You even add gestures for dramatization, pausing for audience response.”

“I do not.”

“That speech I just overheard could have been mistaken for a book introduction. Anyone who heard easily would have thought you to be reading a prologue of some sort, setting up some epic love story. You know your falling out with the goddess was nothing like-“

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK HER NAME IN MY PRESENCE!”

“Forgive me, father, I only wish to help you. I am worried that you are deteriorating faster than we had hoped.”

“I HAD EVERY REASON TO DO WHAT I DID. SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN GRATEFUL. INSTEAD, SHE CAST ME ASIDE, BANISHING ME TO THE NIGHT REALM TO WITHER AWAY AND WATCH FROM AFAR.”

“Yeah, well maybe if you wanted to stay in her life, you shouldn’t have-“

“YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK OF MY LOSS WITH SUCH LEVITY!”

The remorseful, slightly bitter, and confused son watched his father with a wary eye, unsure what turn the conversation would take next.

“Father, you’re narrating us again. What is it you wished me here for?”

The sad, lonely, miserable creature got a gleam in his eye. He had been concocting this plan for a while, watching the goddess’ favorite creation yet; he watched as she blessed her with mate after mate, and as the pale headed creature wanted to reject them. But she enjoyed riding them too much to turn them away.

“Father, this has to stop. I’m standing right here. You don’t need to speak like I’m your audience.”

But the sad, lonely creature knew this plan would solve everything. His hunger grew every day, but only one thing would stop him from disappearing altogether. He had to have the goddess' favorite creation, for only she could provide the nourishment for his depraved soul.

“Well, I might as well find a comfortable corner to hover in if you're going to continue to mind speak like the mortal man the earth beings call Morgan Freeman.”

“Where was I? Let me see...evil plan, withering away, son...Oh! Yes. I require something of you. I shall grant you your two-legged form so you may walk earthside and claim this strange haired creature as a mate.”

“Excuse you?”

“I have decided that the creatures I have sent to capture the weird-haired girl with too many sticks to play with have been more of a nuisance than a help. I think you are the only one I can trust to bring her to me. If I don't get her magic, my curse will consume me completely and I will degrade until I'm nothing left but a shadow that flits to and fro without direction.”

The son, whom the Night pushed from his own mind, his greatest and only creation, looked at his creator and father with confusion. It was well known that in the realm of Night, two legged forms were forbidden, as were trips to the earth plane.

“Father! Just tell me what you want, for the love of the night! I cannot listen to you rant in that voice any longer! I do not need a wordy artistic description of the inner workings of your mind!”

“I really had hoped I'd pass on my flair for theatre. You wound me with your disinterest. Very well. I am granting you passage to the earth realm. I will unlock your two-legged form so that you may claim the white-haired woman with an entire basketball team of mates as your own.

“You are to make her fall desperately in love with you so that she'll follow you here, falling into my trap to end her once

and for all. MWA HA HA HA HA!!”

The reluctant son sighs deeply in his mist form, exasperation pulsing with the gray pattern of his middle blob section.

“I can’t...you know you’re impossible, right? Do you even have a plan?”

“Of course I do, I am the master of evil plans. One of my generals consumed an earth walker that was in some connection to the woman of a hundred cocks, she fought him before he was consumed. I was able to extract enough remnants from him to bind you to her. The goddess has gifted her with more mates than she could ever physically be with at one time, so I have decided to add one of my own.

“I wish to derail her plans and add you to the mix. I have enough power left from my bond with the goddess to do so, though it will degenerate me faster so you must hurry to secure her.”

“Father, I know almost nothing about humans. Unless you count my oddly complete history of Morgan Freeman, everyone should know that voice. How am I going to blend in?”

“You will find that if you look hard enough, you know everything you need to know. Look deep within yourself, son.”

“Huh?”

The sad, lonely, miserable creature decided that it was best to be straight forward if his plan had any hope of succeeding.

“FATHER! Can we just- your name is Ralph! RALPH!!”

“There is a cache of memories for you to eat and explore. I selected those from souls we received that seemed most pertinent to your situation. You will attend this formal dance they will host in three moon rotations, and she will not be able to help the draw she will feel towards you.

“The goddess showed me how to bind souls, so you are already irrevocably linked to her. She will feel it and all you

must do is make sure she sees you. You have a few days to learn from the memories I delivered to your cave.

“The most important thing I can tell you is that you must not, under any circumstances, believe your heart or your mind if it begins to soften towards the girl of a thousand males. The bond will make you believe in love, believe she’s perfect. You must ignore this.

“Your body might feel strange occasionally, her touch might make you want things. You must not give in. I can tell you that there was a man that once walked the earth named John Kellogg. He created a food specifically meant to inhibit these urges. Do not eat meat or rich foods, these will only exasperate the condition.

“You must find a food called corn flakes and consume them if you ever feel a little funny and wish to do things with your body. The child of the goddess with a full avengers cast of mates will tempt you. You must remain focused on your goal, of helping your sad, lonely, miserable creature father, who will otherwise cease to exist.”

“You realize you’re here because of your own actions? Did you really expect the goddess to thank you after you-“

“NO MORE WORDS. STUDY AND DO NOT DO FEELINGS. ARE WE CLEAR? Very well then. Carry on, your portal will open from your cave in three days. Prepare yourself.”

The sad, miserable, lonely creature wished he could weep as he watched his son exit his cave, he hoped not for the last time. Would he succeed and save the one who gave him life? His father would wait in agony for a response, for proof that his son was successful. Parting words from his son echoed off the damp halls of the cave.

“You need a fucking sound dampener on your room, father. You cannot command respect from your subjects if you continue to narrate your life and the events around you with that weird voice! It’s creepy! And you’re the fucking Night, for night’s sake!”

He was wrong. Everyone enjoyed every word the sad, miserable, lonely creature graced the air with, his thoughts like a gift to all those they lighted upon. The sad, miserable, lonely creature hoped he would soon know an end to at least part of his sufferings.

Grey

“She still smashing shit?”

I’m still high as fuck. After basically adhering myself to Gabby for the past week as she went through her cycle, all her pheromones and blood have wrecked me. I get a few minutes of clarity-ish here and there, but I feel pretty fucking good. Vamp man to the extreme. Was somebody saying something? Oh, right. Dar. The scary one.

“Yeah. Non-stop since the goddess did the ‘poof’ thingy in the mirror. But it’s all good, man. Pearson is sneaking behind her and just fixing shit with his powers as she leaves the room. It’s hella funny because she keeps coming back to see shit she smashed un-smashed. So she smashes it again.”

I laugh. It *was* pretty fucking funny. Gabby was pissed that the goddess ‘gifted’ her with more mate marks.

“You doing okay, man? Your eyes are a little bit....”

“You know that feeling you get when you cream inside her fucking glorious body and it’s like the whole world is fucking puppies and rainbows and shit? I swear, man....”

Gabby comes stomping through again, screaming about the injustice of it, finally collapsing on the couch and just screaming into it. This had been going on for a few hours now. I’m actually impressed she’s lasted so long.

“You going to finish that sentence?”

I look to Dar who is waiting for me to say something.

“Knock knock.”

“Uh...Gabby?”

“No, man. You’re supposed to say ‘who’s there?’”

“Gabby, I think you over-sexed the vampire. Or bled too much? I’m not sure, but he’s being really weird. We kind of need him to be not weird for the thing tomorrow.”

Sexy lady rolls over and sits up on the couch, looking me over. All I can see is the way she looked as I ate her out

nonstop the past week and then railed her until it felt like my dick was going to fall off. Shark week was fucking awesome.

“Ugh. Let me try. Come here, Drac.”

“Drac was my grandfather.”

Gabby face palms at my lame joke but I fall onto her anyways, ignoring the lack of respect for my humor.

“Gabby, he’s just going to make you naked again, and that’s not going to help anybody right now.”

“Not true, it would help me immensely.” My dick is already hard. Gabby kisses me, giggling when I try to lick her neck.

“Oh boy, you are pretty coked up, huh? Let’s see if this works...”

She gives me a fucking titty twister and then laughs maniacally.

“Oh my gods, you’re as bad as he is. Gabby!”

“Sorry old man, it had to be done. For reals though, let me see...”

She puts her hands on my chest under my shirt and her face gets all squinched up in concentration, and all the happy slowly starts leaving me.

“NO! Give it back!”

“Fine, you can keep the rest. I took the edge off, should help.”

Dar comes to help her up as I lay there pouting.

“How’d you do that?”

“Well, I figured that I can give lust pretty easy, I’ve never tried to remove it before but thought the weird sex high I somehow give you all through the bond would be a similar thing so I just tried to reverse what I normally do and pulled.”

She reaches forward and grabs Dar’s arm, I’m assuming to push lust into him because he starts groaning. She takes off before he can really react though, then we’re both lazy and laying on the couch.

“Do I have to go tomorrow?”

“Yes, Gabriella, you have to go to the event where you’re introduced to the conduit community as their leader, where you’re supposed to meet with the conduits and bless unions and run the show...maybe you’ll meet another mate there, who knows?”

Cyrus comes waltzing in at the perfect moment, reminding Gabby that this event is almost basically *for her* this year.

“Come on love, it’s going to be fine.”

“I’ll be allowed to drink, right? You know how many people will be looking at me?”

“Erm, last time I saw the guest list it was four hundred...”

“That was definitely a rhetorical question. I don’t need to know how many people will be there to stare at me. What time do we have to be there? And are we sure I can’t just chill with you guys?”

“You know we’d be there with you the entire time if we could, but tradition is important. Me and the guys will have our room to hang out in and watch as you dazzle everybody and make everybody’s night by dancing with a bunch of them, then when the first half is over everyone that has bonded mates will get to spend the rest of the evening with them.

“I know you’re not feeling ready to take on more right now, but it’s a good opportunity to meet some people. There will be men there that wouldn’t have the opportunity normally to cross paths with you, so you owe it to your goddess given marks to see if you feel any connections.”

Cyrus has been a huge help for all of us, telling us all about the gala and exactly what to expect, representing our family, *fuck* that sounded weird, and being the go-between to the committee running it. They were tripping moons that Gabby would be attending, trying so damn hard to please her and make it perfect.

“And I believe you promised me chicken nuggets afterwards, so we definitely have to go.”

The little reminder of how our relationship started puts a gorgeous smile on her face, and once again I'm hit with how amazing being mated to her is. She had this way of making every single one of us feel wanted and definitely had the stamina to keep up with this many mates.

Plus, it was fucking hot walking into a room to grab something and to see her body on display as she writhes and moans around a cock. Wasn't so keen on seeing so much cock in my life, but I was warming up to them.

Like he knew what I was thinking about, Cyrus leans against the back of the couch where I'm sitting, making me feel weirdly uncomfortable. I was not into dudes. Like, at all. But this dude was...persistent. And helpful when we had Gabby going.

He's leaning too close for it not to be purposeful, like he wanted to numb me to his presence. Damn it, it was totally working.

Gabriella

I'm at the event center way too early, meeting with the lady in charge of everything. Apparently, they needed me to feel good about the way everything was set up and to meet with the conduits that had unfinished circuits so I could get to know them a bit and feel comfortable with my role tonight.

"Gabriella? Hi, I'm Amanda Taylor, it's such an honor to meet you!"

The girl seemed incredibly sweet with her perfect barrel curls and rich brown hair. "Now, I've got the girls through here if you'll follow me, we've got breakfast set up for you all. I'm not sure if you'll feel comfortable doing it or not, but some of them were hoping to get their unions blessed so they could plan a mating ceremony."

I eye all the conduits as I walk in, a few I recognized from the few weeks I was actually a student at Hemlock. The others must live elsewhere or are not enrolled. They look a little nervous, but I really don't want that to be the case.

I wave at them all and grab some coffee, following Amanda to the big conference table where there's room for us to sit.

"You want to introduce yourself?"

I smile at Amanda's bubbly personality, instantly at ease even though it's an awkward situation. The conversations around us stop as I approach their table, some of them mid-bite with food lingering in the air like they forgot what they were doing.

"Hey, I'm Gabriella, I'm sure you've heard about me though..."

"Are you really bonded to eight men?"

I laugh at the girl's wide eyes and check her arm. She's got two marks, and I can't imagine how much simpler her life will be; but, I wouldn't give my men up for anyone or anything. It was the magic dicks for sure.

“Umm...” Okay, I totally had to count my circles. Dar, Cyrus, Balfour, Foster, Grey, Palmer...

“Are you...counting?”

Not even ashamed. “Mated to six, courting one, three empty spots.”

The girls are all failing miserably at hiding their shock.

“Anyway, I would like you to all introduce yourselves, tell her about your mates or mate hopefuls, and then we can all get ready for the event!”

I hang my head as I get a weird feeling pass through me- it seems the goddess had shit she wanted me to do.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. Can we try...it would be better if I was able to talk to them one on one, shake their hands, so I can get a feeling for their magic.”

“Oh, of course.”

“And we’re screening all the unmated males that come tonight, correct? Can I be there?”

“Don’t you have enough men?”

Oh, goody. One of the stuck-up conduits from Hemlock. Trying *real* hard to be pleasant, I breathe good and deep.

“It’s not for me. The goddess seems to want me to get your magical signatures and then meet with the men so I can decipher if any of them are matches for you. It seems she’s less than thrilled by the way some of you have been stringing them along and taking advantage of the attention.

“And by the way, I’ve still got three empty spots. So, if the goddess decides to introduce me to my next mates, there’s really not much I can do about it. Trust me, I’ve tried.” My giant tantrum from yesterday comes to mind. I was really going to have to thank Pearson for cleaning up all my messes.

Amanda looks disapprovingly at the girl that just spoke. And then coughs the name ‘Madison’ super fake-like, reminding them that being a mega bitch already lost one

conduit their power. This makes them all straighten up and try harder.

Except for glarey mc-glareyson over there, the unfortunate woman that Grey had slept with before I claimed him. That was going to make this a rough interaction. She was friends with Madison, so I'm sure she was currently envisioning all the ways to make me bleed right now.

"Right then, here's how I want to do this. Most of you just like, chill here or something, yeah? Let's go over to that quiet corner over there where the armchairs are, and we can each have a little chat. If the goddess wants you to claim the mates she's gifted you, there's not a lot I can do about it. You'll have to try sacrificing small animals or something and hopes she hears your prayers." I give them a minute, and realize they can't tell if I'm being serious or not because a few of them look quite pale suddenly.

"Oh my gods, that was a joke. Please don't slaughter anything."

"I thought only high tier conduits had fated mates? We're supposed to be able to choose."

I smile at the girl in the sunshine yellow dress, because she looks like she's legitimately coming from a place of concern, realizing she might not get something she wants. Or *someone*.

"You are correct, but with all the stuff going down, the goddess has stepped in and decided to take control of the situation. She thinks you're wasting your gifts and sees some patterns emerging that she experienced...oh shit. Yeah, that wouldn't be good."

I get lost in my head for a minute as the goddess floods my mind with images, showing me events that caused the great change. People getting greedy, not respecting the goddess... and who the hell was that?

My apologies, young one. You were not meant to see that last one.

"Here's how it's going to go down. I need to get a mental inventory of your magical signatures, you have all been

assigned a color to represent your circuit, right? Perfect. The goddess wants me to meet every single un-mated man attending tonight, and she will show me if any of them belong to one of you.”

“How do we know you’re not totally bullshitting us?”

I look over to the sassy one that Grey slept with. I didn’t think she had that much backbone in her- I must have pissed her off more than I thought. His dick *was* magnificent though, I’d be pissed if I lost it, too.

The goddess answers that last question for me, taking over my body, again, to address her subjects.

“You dare disrespect my chosen heir, you will find yourself without your gifted marks. You have all been chosen to bear them because I sensed in your souls your ability to love harder and to wield more power from bound mates and chose you to be my daughters.

“Do not question my commands. If you choose not to be bound to the mates I have chosen for you tonight, then you will not get replacements. I see all, I know their hearts. They have been hand-selected because their souls match with yours.

“I do not have everyone’s mates in attendance tonight, some of you will need to be more patient with me as I wait to make sure you are ready. Accept what I give you or Gabby will be more than happy to remove your mate marks.”

I feel the goddess leave me with a whirlwind of air as my hair goes back to normal and my voice returns, leaving me groaning out loud and *begging* these girls in front of me.

“For the love of the goddess, PLEASE do as she says. Gabby would much, much less than happy to remove your mate marks. The last time she removed marks she ‘gifted’ them to me and I cannot handle any more men in my life, okay? Just smile and accept and go ride off into the sunset together. Don’t question her decisions.”

I text Dar and Cyrus to meet me, hoping they’ll help me get my system sorted out so I can figure out how to keep all the mates I’m going to apparently orchestrate tonight straight.

I head to the armchair in the corner as the first girl follows behind me, sinking into the armchair across from me.

“Hi, I’m Charlie.”

Thank the gods we’re starting easy. My mates were already in the building hanging out so when Charlie’s eyes widen like she’s seeing some sort of mythological creature, I assume it’s Dar and Cyrus. I pretty much give them that look on a daily basis; they’re ridiculously sexy and have this insatiable aura around them. Or maybe they just make *me* feel insatiable?

I can feel them as they get near me, my skin starting to buzz a little bit as they drop kisses on my head and grab a seat next to me.

“Charlie, these are two of my mates, Dar and Cyrus.”

They all shake hands and Charlie gives her head an extra shake as she takes in their conduit marks. Seeing a male conduit is pretty trippy actually since they’re so rare.

“What’s up love?”

I explain what the goddess wants from me tonight and they get to work brainstorming while I talk to Charlie.

“So, there’s this guy I’ve been courting, Joshua, and we were really hoping for a blessing so we could start planning a ceremony.”

“Is he around?”

“Um, yes? He was helping with set-up I think until I’m done.”

“Go ahead and text him or something, get him in here so I can meet him. This will be your first mate, I see? How long have you been together, and do you have anyone else you’re currently seeing?”

“Oh, I’ve known Joshua for years. I just haven’t felt ready to make the leap though, you know? It just seems so scary to do something so permanent and I wanted to be sure he was the one. Or, *one* of the ones.”

“Fair enough, it’s important to think it through fully, but it’s good you’re feeling ready now. What changed?”

“To be honest, I’ve been trying to just avoid the topic because, well, I’m not sure really now. Anyway, he finally called me out, we hashed everything out, he proposed, and I’ve realized how perfect he is for me. I love him.”

I smile as I watch all the emotions fly across her face as she goes on about this guy, feeling my own mates appreciating it as well. It’s refreshing to see such honest emotions in people when so often there’s like a barrier erected when you’re around people you don’t know too well. This girl is all heart though and I can tell she means every word she says.

Her eyes light up and she seems like she has to force herself to stay still, then I trace her eyes to see a good-looking guy in a t-shirt walking across the room with eyes only for her. I don’t even have to touch his hand to know they’re meant to be, the goddess just pushes a bunch of yellow sparks across my brain to tell me he belongs to the girl in the yellow dress.

“Is yellow your circuit color?”

She nods as the guy picks her up, plopping her down in his lap and reaching his hand out to shake mine and my mates’. I suddenly get really excited for this job I’ve been a little irritated about, because I’m realizing what a gift it is to see honest matches get together. Being the one that gets to bind them together feels incredible and now I’m realizing how cool tonight might be. I know, I know. I was being a whiny bitch about it before. Just skip my tantrum next time, yeah?

“You ready, then?”

Joshua and Charlie look at me and Dar and Cyrus recline and wink at me, waiting for the show to happen. The goddess gifts me with the words to say to them, and the knowledge of how to push their bond into being.

“Joshua and Charlie, the goddess would like you two to acknowledge that your souls are perfect matches. Do you both agree to be bound together and to be each other’s strength and

support? To be honest with each other always and to stay true?”

They both look at me with raised eyebrows, their hands gripping each other as they try to figure out what I’m trying to do. Typically, because there hasn’t been a high-tier conduit in forever, if anyone wishes to complete a circuit bond, they’d need members of the councils who would set up a big elaborate way of contacting the goddess, using special instruments to channel her power and make their bond into reality.

Not anymore, suckers.

“Um, what’s happening?”

“It’s a yes or no question. You wanted a blessing, did you not?”

They look at each other and when their eyes settle, Joshua kisses her and I get a bunch of warm fuzzies from the love I see. They turn to face me, and both vocalize a yes.

“I just need your hands, please.”

I hold out my palms, face up, and as they place their own on them, I close my eyes and reach for the yellow bond I can feel within them. I pull their magic together, winding it tightly and feeding it back to them, knowing the moment it sinks into their skin and marks them.

When I open my eyes, one of Charlie’s circles are filled in and Joshua bears a claiming ring. Then she starts crying and they start kissing and we usher them out to go celebrate. In private. I can sense faces on me, so I turn to look at the other conduits who are all staring with their mouths agape.

“Holy shit! That was awesome! I didn’t know it could be that easy! Me next!”

Another woman walks over.

“I’m Emilia.”

I assess her color, find out a little about her, and when I’m feeling confident that I’ve got her signature memorized, and Dar and Cyrus have written down my notes on her, the next

one comes. It all goes pretty smoothly through the next handful of women, and I give myself a bathroom break before sitting down with the one I'm dreading most. Crazy eyes.

"You're doing great, love."

Dar has his arms wrapped around me as Cyrus rubs some tension out of my shoulders, leaving me in a state of nirvana that Crazy eyes will surely appreciate.

"It's crazy to be so responsible for so many people's lives."

"The goddess chose you for a reason though, firefox. You've got all the tools you need, you've just got to finish up here and then we can go have a nooner before getting ready to meet the men."

Dar waggles his eyebrows at me, and I roll my eyes, sending out a text to all my other guys to just update them real quick and say hi.

"Right then. Make sure I don't do anything stupid with this next one, okay?"

"You know her?"

"She was one of Madison's minions and slept with Grey a few times. This is the reason he asked me to invite him in the first place. She was clingy and dramatic."

"Is that what we're calling stealing other people's men now, Gabby?"

Crazy eyes hisses out my name and plants her hand on her hip, eyeing my men like they might be on the menu. Look all you want, psycho. Just don't touch.

"Okay we're doing this out here then? Hi, I'm Gabby and you are..."

"Oh come on, you know my name. I'm sure you've heard *all* about me from Grey, right?"

I almost want to apologize to her because I'm not even sure *Grey* knew her name, but she's being pretty fucking rude so I decide to just get on with it.

"Hi, I'm Gabby and you are..."

Dar snorts as she finally, reluctantly, reaches out a hand to shake mine. Her color is an ugly sort of brown that looks semi-dead and I'm a little nervous that she's ruining her gift.

"Mia."

"Here's the deal, Mia. I super, super, like *really* don't want any more marks, okay? If you are going to be whiny and awful then the goddess *will* make me remove yours, and I have a feeling that they won't ever leave my body.

"If you want to keep your marks, find the loves of your life, and go on to live a fulfilling life of bonded bliss, then please, *please* fix your attitude. I'm talking to you right now as your, oh my god I can't believe I have to call myself this, *Conduit Supreme*," I mentally roll my eyes at the goddess for that title. "Just listen to some advice, yeah?"

"Forget that you saw him first. A guy treats you like that, ignores your call after hooking up, doesn't get pissed when their roommate walks in on you, they're not that into you. They're not a keeper. Well, for you, anyway. He was never serious about you, and I know that sucks, and it hurts to hear, but have some pride in yourself, woman.

"You want to have some fun and sleep with someone you find attractive, great. Go for it. But accept it for what it is, and if they don't show interest in a relationship, don't beg. Don't get all crazy and think you have some claim to them just because they showed you their dick.

"The goddess has some guys out there for you and when you meet them, everything will make sense. But. If you keep up this 'wounded and bitter' routine and continue to accost me for meeting one of my soulmates, who was in no way in a relationship with you at the time, we're going to have issues.

"We good?"

Oh, for goodness sake. The girl was crying. I didn't really know what to do with crying girls, I could barely handle *myself* when I cried. Dar and Cyrus immediately jump back like it was contagious, eyeing her as I awkwardly pat her back with only the tips of my fingers.

“I get that Madison was toxic, she manipulated you, made you feel like shit sometimes?”

The girl nods and I want to kick that twat’s ass all over again. I saw how she bullied the girls that thought she was a friend.

“Clean slate, okay? Go put on a pretty dress, clear your mind, and find some way to relax and come back tonight with an open mind.”

“Th-thank you. I’m sorry. I just really liked him, you know?”

“And I’m sorry it didn’t work out for you, but when you meet someone meant for *you*, it will make sense. Just trust the goddess and try to not let the negativity cloud your brain.”

She hugs me and I’m not quite sure what to do with that, either. I’m not good with females, despite being one. I never had more than a few girl friends at a time, and they were all bad ass and not super into the touchy feely shit.

She finally releases me and I go back inside, exhaling a big breath of relief when I see I’ve only got a few women left to meet. I get through them pretty quickly, most of them more excited than anything now, and I can hear them chatting as they hang out talking about the possibility of meeting and being bonded to someone tonight.

There was one other lady that had someone she wanted to get a blessing for, but he wasn’t around so I promised that when I was around tonight, I’d sort it out.

“That was incredible. It’s amazing I get to be here to witness how this all works. I’ve chaired this committee a few years now and it’s never been this exciting! You were so good with them all!”

I like Amanda.

“Thanks, it’s nice to hear that I’m not terrifying anyone else with my threats to bond them.”

Dar and Cyrus smirk and shake their head at me, knowing I’m referring to my own terror now. Amanda just looks

confused.

“I’ve got a lot of mate marks, I had a hard time accepting them when I only had *six*. Then these guys showed up and added two more, now I’ve got the ones from Madison...it’s just been *a lot*. I’m glad to be making other people happy though, its sorta making all this chaos worth it.”

“Thanks again for coming in, everyone is going to be clamoring for a chance to meet you tonight.”

“Well I suppose we should be getting ready then, what time do I need to be here to meet with the guys?”

“They start checking in at three o’clock, so you don’t have too long unfortunately. But I’ll see you tonight with my date!”

She waves as we walk out, and stop by the suite my mates will all be hanging out in tonight for the first half of the event.

“Well at least you guys have a good view of the dance floor.”

They’ve got this sweet little room overlooking the ballroom set up, floor to ceiling windows with a variety of armchairs, a table of snacks, and a bar. They’ll be able to see everything from here, and there are speakers on the wall too so they can hear what’s going on.

Cyrus corners me against the small bar set against the wall, crowding into me like he does so well as Dar eyes us from one of the stools.

“We’ve got the best view because we’ve got the best girl. I don’t suppose you want to leave a little something for your other mates to find in here later, do you?”

He’s pressing his body up against mine as his hands cage me in.

“Um...what?” I still have a hard time thinking or speaking when these two speak to me. I swear, the male conduit sexy over-kill is real.

Dar reaches over the bar and pulls back a polaroid camera, waving it as he waves his eyebrows at me. Ooh, fun time.

Cyrus' hands sink to the button on my jeans as he slides them down, baring me completely to him and spreading my legs so he has full-access. He knows I won't fight him, and he enjoys it so much that I don't bother protesting. I'm here for the tongue ride. Cyrus draws the broad of his tongue all up through my business and his whole body shakes at the contact, the vibrations making me toss my head back as I fist his hair.

I hear the camera go off but all I can focus on is the way Cyrus is trying to get *me* off.

"Fuck, Cyrus."

"No. Your body. Your taste. Fuck, it's delicious."

He moans his approval in between licks, going for gold before lifting me up and putting me *on* the bar, spreading me out like a thanksgiving dinner. Maybe I should be concerned that the door maybe isn't locked, or that if anyone walked out onto the stage down below they'd get a ticket to the Gabby show, but who can think about shit like *that* when you have a Cyrus doing what Cyrus' do?

His voice rumbles against me as Dar comes behind, kissing me spiderman style where my head hangs off the bar and onto the lower countertop behind it.

"You look so good like this, love. I want to leave pictures of you for the rest of your mates to discover later, if you're okay with it? I won't get any vitals in the picture and I have a key to the room so it will stay locked. No one will be entering this room before we come back later."

"Oh gods, yes."

"That might be a response to the tongue shoved up you, but I'm taking it as a response to my proposition."

Cyrus uses his hands to dig into my ass, making me feel each fingertip like a bruise before using them to his advantage, slipping two inside my pussy to work with his tongue.

"Hmm. Maybe we can move this somewhere else in the room? Might be good to make everyone realize we bent her over every surface in here."

“Fuck you’re evil. You know Bal can sense some of that shit now, you’re just making sure that I get jumped when we finally make it home...tonight. Cyrus, fuck!”

He drags me off the bar as Dar assists, making me walk on shaky-ass legs as my body burns down from the almost-orgasm. Shoving me over the back of the couch so my ass is in the air, Dar positions himself behind me and drops his pants, as Cyrus walks in front of us and crouches, getting an up-close shot of my face with Dar standing behind me and our actions incredibly obvious. But, like promised, nothing of note is shown.

Which I don’t even think about as Dar begins to take me slow, trying to build me up again. Cyrus leans in to kiss me, sharing my taste with me and pulling moans from my body. My phone starts ringing and since each of my mates has their own ringtone, I know immediately who’s calling and know that Cyrus and Dar won’t even be offended if I answer. They’ll probably just rub it in Palmer’s face.

“Hey...big guy.”

“Gabriella? Why do you sound out of breath? Are you done with the conduits?”

I hear a dark chuckle behind me. “She’s nowhere near done with us, Palmer.” Technically, I *wasn’t* done with the conduits.

“Motherfucker. Where are you guys?”

Dar increases his speed so our flesh slapping together can be heard through the phone, then Cyrus pinches my nipples through my bra and I fall apart. I drop the phone onto the couch somewhere as Dar hammers it home, scraping along all those nerves as I clamp down on him, making him follow me down.

I stay flopped over the couch, not sure which way is up. Dar begins pulling my pants back up before he gets too high to think straight, cupping my sex through the jeans after they’re buttoned.

“I want you to stay in these soaked panties until you have to shower for tonight, so I know you can feel me dripping out of

you for the next hour.”

Pounding footsteps halt by the door before it flies open, Dar casually turning and leaning back against the couch where I’m finally pulled to standing like a marionette.

“Aww, I missed it already? Fuck. You’re not winning that leaderboard this week, my man.”

I have to think for a minute what he’s talking about. And then I bust out laughing, remembering their stupid idea to keep track of how long each of them lasts, determined to be the one to last the longest before I make them lose it. They had made a stupid trophy out of Styrofoam cups painted gold and glued together, shaped like a giant fucking penis.

Sadly, it wasn’t even the stupidest thing they’ve done. But I’m learning to roll with it.

“Fucking worth it. Gabby, few more pictures?”

“Why the fuck not?”

Cyrus pulls off my shirt and positions me in front of a bowl of fruit, making the apples cover up my breasts. They spend the next twenty minutes or so making me do stupid shit to rile up the guys later, but at this point I’ve given up on trying to maintain a normal relationship. We were all kind of a bunch of weirdos, so I was going to own it.

Palmer snickers the entire time they hide the photos around the room, but I definitely notice he sneaks one or two into his pocket. My crotch is like a damn slip n slide at this point, but it’s so damn hot knowing that Dar keeps smiling at me with that sexy lilt to his lips, clearly thinking about the situation he created in my panties.

When I finally get a shower later I take my time, Foster insisting on helping me. They’re determined that I’m not to lift a finger today to do anything, even if it includes washing my own hair.

“I’m proud of you, wildflower. I can’t wait to see you tonight, standing in front of everyone like the queen you are, fucking dominating the room. Every single guy is going to be drooling over you, and I’m going to take so much fucking joy

in knowing that I get to kiss you and touch you while they have to stay away.”

He’s soaping me up meticulously, massaging my arms and back as he goes. He kneels in front of me with my razor and shaving cream in hand, taking care to aim the shower head to the side slightly so it doesn’t wash away the cream.

I have to grip the bench underneath me tightly to keep from jumping him, something so incredibly sexy about seeing him kneeling for me and shaving my legs. He does a fabulous job and I know that I might have to keep him employed with this for the future, too. The task is way more fun when there’s a giant, naked man doing it.

He smirks up at me, knowing exactly what I’m feeling.

“I want you to be feeling my hands on these gorgeous fucking legs all night as your gown caresses your skin.”

“I’ll be feeling something, alright.”

I can’t take my eyes off of him. His strawberry curls are dripping wet and swept back from his face, freckles covering most of his broad shoulders as water streams over them. Hot damn. He definitely takes his time, then pulls me to stand as he rinses all the residue off of me, spinning me around to rinse the conditioner out of my hair.

“And these gorgeous blonde locks are going to be shiny and soft as you dance all night, making me want to pull them and make you scream my name.”

He’s got my hands plastered to the wall as he nibbles my earlobe, his hands running up and down my sides. I wiggle my ass against him and he laughs, but puts some distance in between us.

“No no, baby. I’ve got to get to this event without being high off of you. You got lucky with Dar and Cyrus earlier, but from here on out we are going to make you wait until you get back home to us, when you let us undo all the work we’re putting in now so we can make you black out from orgasms.”

He shuts the water off and tugs on my lower lip, making my pout fall off.

“No pouting baby, you knew this was going to happen.”

“But...no sex? Really?”

Balfour is ready for me to walk out of the shower, drying me off, on his damn knees as he gets every single nook and cranny, fanning hot air against my bare sex as he reaches down to my toes with the towel.

“We want to make sure you go into tonight thinking about us, so we know you’re crazy for your mates. We want you leaking lust so bad when you catch our gaze later in a room full of people, threatening to start an orgy around us because you’re so needy for the ways that only your mates get to touch you.”

Fuck. They coordinated all this, for sure. Foster kisses me slow and steamy before wrapping a towel around his waist and leaving to get dressed. Bal continues his ascent up, grazing the soft towel over my nipples and sliding behind me to dry my ass and pulling the towel over my back as he bends me over to wrap up my hair in it.

“Damn edible, DG.”

He helps me into a robe that wasn’t there earlier, a dark blue silky one with lace panels on the back. The front is monogrammed with the words “Dream Girl”, making me smile at his nickname for me.

“Thanks, Bal. This is really pretty. And has Foster been giving lessons to everyone on how to talk dirty? Because holy shit. Yes.”

He laughs as he pulls me from the room, helping me into some slippers as he leads me to the vanity. Cyrus is waiting there for me with a glass of champagne and a full array of hair tools spread out.

“Love you, DG. Enjoy your pampering.” He, too, leaves me with a smoldering kiss that I douse with the chilled champagne, leaning back into the padded chair as Cyrus removes the towel from my hair and begins combing through it.

Music starts up and I have to tell myself to breathe when I see Grey sitting on the bed with a violin, playing through something that threatens to tear my heart apart, the notes rising and falling as his fingers make the instrument sing for him.

He stares through my fucking soul as his bow pulls across the strings, barely blinking as his left hand shifts up and down the fingerboard.

“Umm, why haven’t you told me yet that you play?”

He lets me sweat while he plays through more of the music, Cyrus gently sweeping the hair off my neck as he works the comb through it and leaving goosebumps everywhere his fingers touch.

“Hasn’t come up. My mom is a professional violin player, she taught me. I’m nowhere near her level, but it’s something that I enjoy doing still. Just close your eyes and relax, Gabriella. I want you to go into tonight with the strains of my music in your ears, drowning out all the voices that will try to convince you to make them yours.

“When you get lost in the hectic cacophony of strangers and people demanding your attention later, I want you to put your mind back to right now, when you’re in this room while two of your mates worship you. I want you to think about the way my fingers find every note perfectly while you feel your heart come alive in your chest.”

His music starts moving up in intensity, his bow moving faster as he stands and slowly approaches me.

“I want you to remember the way the notes sailed out of my hands, mimicking the way we make you scream when you’re in bed with us.”

Cyrus waits for Grey to finish his current piece before pulling out the hair dryer, the lingering notes and his words hanging in the air for a minute and imprinting themselves onto me. I can almost taste the music notes floating through the air as I close my eyes, my body euphoric from feeling.

Cyrus begins to straighten my hair in small chunks until all of it is straight and smooth, then Grey picks back up with a

softer piece that keeps my whole being engaged while Cyrus does who the hell knows with my hair.

“Um, hey babe? I didn’t even think to ask, do you...know what you’re doing? Should I be concerned you’re styling my hair for this event?”

He trails his fingers through my scalp before kissing my neck.

“I told you, I’ve been waiting for you for a long time. I spent many years trying to learn skills to take care of you, so that when I finally found you, I could be everything and anything to you. I quite like this, being in control of something that the whole world will see.”

“Alright, if all of you are going to continue to say such perfect things, I cannot be blamed for the fact that I’m going to be a hot mess by the time we need to leave. I might need to resort to guerilla tactics to convince at least one of you to stick it in me.”

Grey starts cracking up as I squirm in my cozy chair, Cyrus shaking his head at me in the mirror.

“I think you’ll survive until tonight.”

He’s super wrong.

Cyrus

I put the last pin in her hair and step back to check my work before I cement it with hairspray. I've gotten all her hair into big bouncy curls with the front pinned a little to show off her cheekbones. I pull out the nail polish I chose for her and set about painting her nails, needing to reach up and manually close my girl's mouth when she stares at me.

"Yes?"

"Are we serious right now? You've the sex appeal of a god, know how to wield it, can do hair, *and* you're going to do my nails? I'm sorry, I think that there's got to be some big thing I'm missing, because no way in hell anyone can be *this* perfect."

I coat her toenails with the sparkly dark blue polish that will match her dress before adding a top coat. 100 years is a damn long time to wait for the other half of your soul, and I knew my brother wasn't going to learn how to do any of this stuff that most girls like.

I figured being able to pamper her would give me a good way to ensure one on one time, and I got to put my hands on her while it happened. It was a win-win.

"I put one sock and shoe on before going to the other foot. I can't put both socks on at the same time unless I won't be wearing shoes."

"You monster!"

I chuckle at her but nod at Grey as he starts playing a tune I recognize. Beethoven has always been one of my favorite composers because of the dramatic themes and heart-pulling melodies he wrote. Gabriella lets all her tension go as I continue to work over her, and yes, moving on to her makeup next.

It took me a long time to figure out all the products available, but after a few cosmetology classes and lots of help from willing classmates I learned enough to continue

practicing. Yes, on myself. But in my defense, I didn't feel comfortable really practicing on other women. Too intimate.

When I'm finally done, she blinks her eyes open at me as I finish with a dark nude colored lipstick, her lavender eyes now set off by the eyeliner and rich brown shades of shadow I used. Her lashes are thicker and darker than normal now, her eyebrows framing them perfectly, and her skin looks flawless without being cakey.

I step back to see her reaction, nervous as hell that she'll hate it or laugh at me.

"Holy fuck. I think you did those wings better than I can! Cyrus...did you really learn all this for me?"

Uh-oh, she was going to cry. I dash forward to grab a tissue, carefully blotting at her eyes so she doesn't have to start all over. We're starting to run out of time.

"Gabriella, I love you. I spent years learning everything about anything that I thought might be helpful, and while I still have no idea how to figure out the thought processes you have, things like this I can do. Am *happy* to do.

"When you're spinning around the dancefloor later in some shmuck's arms, I want you to remember the way I caressed your face, the way your lips became mine when I painted them. I want you to think about the way they'll look stretched over one of your mates later tonight when we bring you home.

"I want you to feel strong and fierce when you're giving your time to other males, knowing it was us that helped you get there. You're beautiful without all of this of course, but I hope that I've helped you to feel a little more so than normal for tonight."

She kisses me and I fall to my knees, lost in the berry flavor of her mouth. I was smart and chose lipstick that promised to last several hours without reapplying, so a little kissing wouldn't ruin anything.

Before she can get any ideas about using her body as a weapon against me, I pull back enough to rest my forehead against her, then move down to kiss over her heart.

“Whatever happens tonight, whether you meet more mates or help all of those conduits find all of theirs only, know you are loved and supported, and that all of us think you’re incredible.”

I check the time and know she needs to eat, so I lead her to the room next door where some of the other guys had set up as a candlelit meal. She wraps her arms around me before she goes, and I know that nothing will ever top the way this woman makes me feel.

Palmer

Pearson has been helping me set up and cook some food for Gabby, and we had just finished lighting the candles when I hear Cyrus leading her down the hall.

Pearson looks nervous, but I know he shouldn't be.

"Just breathe, man. You've already got the girl, don't get in your head."

"I know. Well, I don't *really* have her yet, and only by the skin of my teeth. It all moves a little fast, you know?"

"It does, but she makes it work somehow. Once this gala is over with, I know she'll make time to get to know you better."

He's nitpicking the tablecloth, making sure the salt grinder is perfectly centered. Gabriella walks in in a slinky little robe, her hair and makeup making her look like she is ready for a magazine photo shoot. Pearson smiles as she walks in, observing as she takes in the room and then makes a bee line to hug him.

I just stand there like an idiot, feeling wholly inadequate for the goddess approaching me. Pearson smirks and smacks my shoulder.

"Just breathe, man. You've already got the girl. Don't get in your head."

I punch him back for using my own words against me, pulling Gabriella into me so I can kiss her like a starving man. She's always so damn responsive, moaning a little bit against me as I taste her mouth.

"You look...wow. I'm regretting the fact that we have to share you with so many strangers tonight."

She leans up and whispers in my ear as her fingers trail across my chest. "Just for a little bit. Keep holding on to what you want to do with me when we're home." She bites my earlobe before stepping back, Pearson helping her into a chair as I try to control my boner. Ha. Like *that* was possible.

Pearson starts pouring her some wine and holds her hand as she tries everything, licking her lips after each bite.

“Okay, I am learning all kinds of things today. Did both of you cook?”

“It was mostly Pearson, but yeah.”

“Damn. Oh my gods. Pearson, please tell me that’s what I think it is?”

Pearson is pulling something from under his chair, placing it on his head.

“A pink plastic princess tiara? How’d that get under there?”

He’s a total liar, I watched him carry it in and hide it under his chair, but it gets it’s desired effect. Gabriella starts cracking up, leaning forward to kiss his cheek.

“That’s awesome. You have no idea how happy that makes me, pretty princess.”

“I still fucking hate that nickname, but it somehow does nothing to affect how obsessed with you I am.”

Seizing every opportunity she can to show affection, she doesn’t even hesitate to go and sit on his lap. I think this shocks him a little bit seeing as they’d only *just* gotten together yesterday, but when Gabriella went in on something, she went *all in*.

He looks at me with a little bit of panic in his eyes and I have to hide my need to laugh at it with some water. She seems oblivious as she drags her plate closer so she can reach it, continuing on with her meal like she wasn’t using her newest concubine as a human throne.

“We want you to remember the flavors in the meal we’ve provided for you, so that when you’re feeling hungry later, you’re reminded how well your mates take care of you. When you’re trying to sneak appetizers off of poor, unsuspecting servers later, blinding them with your damn sex appeal and glory, you’ll get brought back to this moment when we get to sit together and just be.”

She hangs her head a little bit as her fork pauses on the table, her breathing forced into an even pattern. Then she tilts her head back to the ceiling and blows out slowly. Shit. Did I make her cry?

“Okay, okay. Fuck. I’m good. Why am I such a girl today? Thanks, guys. The food is perfect, the company is perfect, and you have no idea how much I appreciate that you took time out of your day to cook this for me, especially when there’s a full kitchen staff you could have easily just ordered from.

“I know everything has been a little crazy, Palmer, and we haven’t gotten a lot of time together since I claimed you, and I know you’re being thrown into the deep end, Pearson, after just becoming mine yesterday, but please don’t think I don’t notice your efforts.

“Goddess knows there are way too many males in my life, but I wouldn’t trade you guys for anything. This is going to be a long, probably wild night, and I’m already looking forward to collapsing later tonight and finding a new normal after.”

Pulling a page from the Gabby book and ignoring the fact she’s on somebody else, I pull her forward so I can kiss her. No way she was going to get through the meal without that happening.

“You’re going to knock ‘em dead tonight. I’m actually kind of excited to see how many guys you knock down when you come crashing through that ballroom. I fucking love this claiming mark and I’m going to feel so badass displaying it later, showing everyone my claim to you.”

She must sense Pearson’s slight discomfort as she lets her hand linger on top of his left one, leaning against him and tracing his forearm. She’s not really one to ask for permission so she just smirks to herself a little bit as she uses her sculptor magic to give him a temporary mark.

“I’ll take this off after if you want, but I want there to be no doubt who you’re with tonight, Pearson.”

She tilts her head up to kiss him properly, and like a well-oiled machine, I instantly start getting hard.

He looks down to his arm and smirks, kissing her again and then finishes his dinner. Doesn't fight her or anything, loving the fact that it's there too much. She's left his arm with a rendition of her iron crown the goddess made from her from that detention cell, made it slightly more delicate though so if you knew about the pretty princess nickname, you'd get it immediately.

We somehow get through the meal, with her making these sexy as hell sounds as she eats it. I manage to eat about half of it because I just can't take my eyes off of her. I remember the plan luckily as she starts pushing her plate away from her, pulling the flames of the candles under my command.

She stares up in wonder as I focus on making the smoke turn into a fireworks show as Pearson uses his position behind her to massage her shoulders. We were all up pretty late last night trying to think up ways to get her through the day, knowing she was pretty nervous about everything.

We also were under the impression that there was every possibility one or more could be added to our ranks tonight, and I think we all wanted to feel like our place with Gabriella was a for-sure thing, even if we already bore these forever marks on our arms.

Sometimes it felt like living in a frat house with all these dudes around, but when we had a common goal it was pretty fucking helpful. I'm not even sure who brought up the subject initially last night, but when we all realized we'd been individually planning on doing things for her today, it made all the sense in the world to coordinate and to make her feel like a damned queen.

Dar comes to collect her way too soon, but she makes sure to leave us both with the memory of her lips on us before leaving with him, giving us nothing else to do but clean up and get ready for the event ourselves.

Gabriella

We're all riding to the event now and It's taking everything I can muster to leave everyone in their full state of dress. It's considered fully appropriate for them to wear clothing that displays their claiming marks, and even though I've chosen to wear a gown that does a decent job of camouflaging mine, I love that they're all wearing short sleeve button ups with their slacks and dress shoes.

They're all so gods-damned good looking that they're able to pull off the would-be-strange-otherwise combination of formal with most of their arms bared. But, seeing all those arms was doing very bad things to me. I loved seeing my marks on them, and knowing they'd be clearly marked for anyone that thought about making a move made my petty-self happy.

I surprise myself by only freezing momentarily before walking into the venue in my gown, getting a ridiculous case of déjà vu as I stare up at the marble staircase. Most of my guys were already at the top waiting for me, but Grey had been behind me, giving no shits about hiding the fact he was just staring at my ass.

There's a slight breeze pushing through my hair and stirring it a bit and all the stars are on as I close my eyes and try to find my center and new sense of self. Tonight just seemed like a big step in this new life we were building, telling the entire conduit community who I was and what I could do.

I was scared shitless, but I was also looking forward to helping people find their mates. Maybe I was also terrified that I'd find more before I really got to give some time to Grey, Palmer and Pearson. I definitely didn't want to accidentally claim anyone before Pearson, either. That would make me feel shitty.

"You good there, sex kitten?"

"Oh my gods, please never call me that again."

Grey smirks down at me as he puts his hands on my hips, cradling me against his chest as I continue to stare at the staircase like a psycho.

“Yeah, I’m good. I think. Probably not.”

Grey slides something out of his pocket and presses it to my palm, making my eyes light up when I find it to be a flask. Full of raspberry fucking vodka.

“Oh thank fuck. So many fucking people in there. Gods I love you.” He chokes a bit at those words and I didn’t really mean them *that* way, but who the fuck cares right now? The man just gave me a good dose of confidence in liquid form.

I down half of it and kiss him in payment, loving the burn of it as it lights me up from the inside.

“Let’s do this!”

Zero hesitation now as I walk up the stairs holding onto him, kissing each of my men before I have to go handle business. I won’t actually see them again until the event is halfway over and mates join in on the party.

Dar assists me through the meetings with all the eligible bachelors, keeping me steady as I try to grapple with the fact that there are *hundreds* of them. Some of them are there with dates, only checking in because of formalities. This event required a lot of people to put together, so aside from the conduits, there were plenty of people attending that had no interest in getting marked by one.

With every few feet the line shortens and none of them spark with me, I relax a little more. I find plenty of guys that I instantly recognize as being meant for one of the conduits I met this morning, so I have Dar take notes so we can get them proper sashes later.

The circuits all wear their color on a silk sash so they’re easily identifiable. It was pretty damn sexy when all my guys put theirs on, looking all smug and shit in them. We get to the end of the line and I realize that none of them were mine, nearly collapsing into Dar as I realize I get to just enjoy this

event now and not make it any more complicated by trying to figure out what to do with a new mate.

I've got a few minutes to spare before I'm introduced to the masses, so I'm standing backstage, unfortunately alone now, with nothing but the remembered words from all my mates. If I stand to the side and part the curtains I can see into their room, and I get a goofy grin on my face as I see them all razzing each other.

Some of them are holding polaroids up and looking ready to start touching themselves right there, some of them are just laughing, but all of them are happy.

“Looks like you've got a lively bunch.”

I'm caught off guard but smile when I recognize Amanda from this morning. She gives me a small hug, and miraculously I don't freak out about it.

“They're kind of idiots, but they're my idiots. I tell you, there hasn't been a single dull moment.”

We sit there watching for a moment before I start hearing people take places on stage, sound checking the mic. The other conduits are all lined up near me, hence why Amanda is there to be a go-between and coordinator.

“Okay ladies, you're almost on. Remember, they're going to announce your name and you'll be escorted on stage by this handsome fella, Royce, and then you'll be expected to choose someone from the council to share the first dance with as a show of respect.

“Obviously there's not a lot of them, and plenty of you, so there are a few others that work closely with the council and are high in rank that will be standing by as well. After the first dance is over, you may mingle freely with the available populace and dance with whomever you'd like.

“Enjoy your night! I think I've heard that Gabriella has already found a bunch of matches for you?”

I smile and nod at her enthusiasm, kind of looking forward to introducing these women to their soul mates.

“Great! Let’s go have fun!”

Amanda steps forward and Royce wraps his arm around her waist, kissing her on the cheek. They’re a pretty damn cute couple. I’m guessing he must have done some work with the event or the council as well if he’s been asked to escort us all on stage.

The girls get called out one by one in order of mate marks, leaving me to sweat bullets as I wait for the spotlight I don’t want. I feel a little more comfortable knowing my dress won’t turn me into a sideshow with people trying to see all my marks, but I’m still going to have everyone’s attention and that’s nerve-wracking as hell.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. You’ve met all the conduits that this event caters to, but we have the extraordinary honor of being able to introduce to you, for the first time ever, a Conduit Supreme. Gabriella Duncan is a remarkable young woman that was living live as a normal person only a few months ago.

“She was gifted with six mate marks from the goddess and had been using the sculpting magic she inherited from her father to disguise them for an entire year before she accepted the marks that changed her life.

“Since then, she has also been marked as the fated mate of two of the only known male conduits, whom I’m sure you’re all familiar with in name, Dar and Cyrus Helsing. The goddess truly lives within Gabriella, communicating through her when she feels the need.

“Gabriella is unlike anyone you’ll likely meet, and has now also absorbed *two more* marks from the goddess. This amount of mates is unheard of, and lends incredible credence to what we can expect from her as she steps up to become our Queen.

“Her mates will be starting in on the council next week as we welcome in a new era in our community. As of now, Gabriella still has three unfulfilled mate marks, and I’ve heard she has a habit of claiming them without much warning.”

The crowd laughs a little bit at this, and Amanda is rubbing my shoulder soothingly, making me feel incredibly grateful that I have someone here to do that. I'm already feeling that we could be good friends, and this event is making sure it starts off solidly.

“So now, it is my greatest pleasure and an incredible honor to introduce to you, Conduit Supreme, Gabriella Duncan.”

The crowd thunders with applause and Royce extends an elbow in his tux jacket, smiling warmly at me as he leads me on stage. My hand is on the fabric covering his arm the entire time, so it's not until he turns to leave and his hand brushes mine as he pulls it away from me that I realize he's one of mine.

The goddess seems hell bent on making things difficult for me. Wasn't I just thinking how cute he was with Amanda, and admiring how likeable she was? I stand still for a minute frozen, thinking through my options, and arrive at the only one that makes sense.

I can't act on it. I would have it out with the goddess later, but no one needs to know that she has just blatantly told me that he belongs to me. Or that she thinks he does. I've never gotten a zap quite like that before, but she clearly wanted to send a message.

I realize, probably a little late, that the host is waiting for me to take my place at the microphone and say a few words. I glance up at my mates, all of them with their eyes fixed on me and trying to figure out why I'm being a total weirdo right now.

I give them a smile and push this new problem *way* down, focusing on my current task. Public speaking. Puke. When I'm sure my freak out is mostly unnoticeable, I take to the mic.

“Hello, thanks for having me. Everything this nice gentleman has just told you is true, and I uh, am quite new to all this. In fact, amongst the nine men accompanying me tonight is one pretty boy that just started officially courting me yesterday. I somehow haven't chased him off yet, but the night is young.”

The crowd gives me some polite laughter again and I glance up to Pearson, who's shaking his head at me like I'm crazy. I'm suddenly inundated with the ghost of everyone's hands and offerings as they got me ready today, and I know I'm not alone right now.

"They're all pretty amazing, and the goddess has been pretty creative in who she's collected for me." Isn't that the truth.

"Things will work a little differently tonight than you're used to if you've been to one of these galas before; the goddess has informed me that I will be her tool to unite people she believes are destined to be together. I met with all of the bachelors as you signed in, so be prepared that some of you will be offered a bond, tonight, with one of these gorgeous conduits that the goddess has paired you with.

"This promises to be a night full of surprises, so let's get to it, shall we?"

Everyone starts clapping as I bow my head in thanks, stepping off to the side to select a dance partner for the first dance. Since I'm last, it's sort of slim pickings, only a couple of the original council members waiting with slimy smiles on their faces. Gross.

I have to think quickly so I don't offend anyone, but I also, like *super* don't want their hands on me. I notice a guy trying his best to hide in the shadows behind them, bearing the mark of the council on a black and silver sash.

He's got dark skin that helps him blend in with the light-absent corner, his hair long and in dreadlocks as it hangs nearly as long as mine. He's got an earring in each ear and is watching around the room like he's trying to stamp out a threat.

The two older council creeps are actually licking their lips as they think they've trapped me, but I offer a polite smile as I dart behind them to grab the guy who clearly wasn't paying attention. He wasn't expecting to be touched so he reacts instinctively, jabbing out in defense but I'm quick enough to

dodge underneath and pop back up a few inches back, giving him time to see I'm not an enemy.

He stares at me, confused as fuck, scowling even, but the music starts up, so I just grab his hand and pull him past the red-faced old men.

Shadow man seems to put everything together, taking in the council members and seeing all the other conduits ready to dance with the more appealing counterparts. I was hardly shallow, but those guys? No thank you.

“Sorry, it's just one dance and I'll super owe you.”

He carefully places a hand on my hip and extends his other hand out in perfect form, but stiff as hell and acting like he's scared to touch me. He pulls me through the waltz, leading perfectly, but doesn't say a damn thing. I kind of like him all the more for it.

I get to avoid the slime balls *and* I don't have to make awkward small talk? Win-win.

We make it through the dance completely unscathed, but his eyes don't leave me as we move about the dancefloor. It's pretty damn intense, but he still won't say anything. He seems like he's almost trying to scowl at me, but isn't prepared to use his voice to ask me about anything.

When I go to thank him for the dance, he keeps a hand firmly on my waist as he spins behind him, dropping something into a potted ficus and pushing his fingertips into the dirt. I see some green magic pulsating in the soil before a strange white bloom surfaces, and he carefully prunes it with some clippers out of his pocket and spins me around, tucking it into one of my hair pins.

He stares at it for a minute with a finger pressed into his mouth, looking at me like an art exhibit. He gives me one perfunctory nod before lightly brushing a kiss on the top of my hand, then stalking off to hide some more in the shadows, and It's damn near impossible to make him out but I swear I can still feel his eyes on me.

I chalk it up to a quirky personality as I look around, not wanting to stand there awkwardly and wait for someone to come and ask me to dance. I freeze when I spin around because it seems like the entire ballroom is staring at me, mouth agape, and there's about a ten-foot radius around me no one dares to step inside of.

Alright then. Sure was going to make this whole 'not claiming anyone new tonight' thing a lot easier. I glance up at my guys with a shrug, trying to get their take on everyone's strange ass behavior and see Dar and Cyrus laughing their asses off.

The rest of the guys look almost as thrown off as the people in front of me, Dar and Cyrus trying to explain something to them. Maybe I'll just go get some punch.

"Mrs. Duncan, can I have the honor of this dance?"

That voice. Why does it have to sound like skin sliding along skin?

I turn to see Royce holding a hand out and my heart freezes in my damn chest. If I touch his skin, will he become aware of my connection to him? I really can't have that. I don't know what's up with him and Amanda, but they were clearly *together*.

"Umm, really? Shouldn't you be dancing with your date?"

I see Amanda standing off to the side smiling at me, encouraging even.

"Who do you think told me to come ask you?"

What the fuck?

"I- sure. Thanks."

I make an internal deal with the goddess, fucking *begging* her to not do anything stupid right now. I could dance with the guy, and then walk away.

The orchestra starts up on another piece as we take our place on the dance floor, and Royce is relaxed and smiling. Which only makes him more beautiful. He's got this old-world southern charm type of look with perfectly styled hair, thick

eyebrows, a perfect roman nose and blue eyes I want to fall into. His jaw is covered in neatly trimmed scruff and his jaw line is the stuff of superheroes. Fuck. This was bad.

I try to keep my eyes averted, not wanting to make Amanda think I was making a move on her man.

“Amanda really did want me to dance with you, she isn’t going to come out and smite you if you look at me, you know.”

I give a super awkward laugh and let my eyes meet him incredibly briefly before darting away again.

“Sorry, am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No, it’s not that. I’m sorry, I’m being pretty rude, right? Just a dance.”

I give him a more genuine smile but try to keep my body rigid beneath his touch that’s burning a hole into my hip, trying to get lost in the music so I don’t step on his feet and embarrass myself more.

“I, uh, thought that if I stepped up and claimed a dance from you that everyone else would take the hint that it was okay. They’re all about to piss themselves right now.”

Huh?

“You don’t know you just danced with, do you?”

“You mean shadow man?”

Royce barks out a laugh and eyes the flower in my hair a bit warily.

“He’s the council’s top assassin and is considered by most to be terrifying. I don’t think anyone has ever braved approaching him to hold a conversation, let alone claim a dance. The way you darted his attack was hilarious. I’ve never seen anyone move that quick away from him before.”

I look around the room and see that people were still looking scared, but did seem to be gaining a modicum of interest back as they watched me moving with Royce.

“Yeah, I really am new to all this. I was obviously aware of the council, but their dealings never affected me, so I’ve never had a reason to follow much about them.”

“That flower he placed in your hair is one of his most famous creations. He’s a gardener and specializes in cross-breeding poisonous plants. The one you’re wearing is referred to as sweet dreams, because if anyone were to get too close to it and the pollen inside the stamens touched their face, they’d be out cold for 24 hours.”

“He weaponized me? That’s...kind of hot.”

“Oh my gods, you’re perfect for him.”

“Uh, no...I...”

Royce quirks an eyebrow at me, clearly laughing at the way I’m now blushing like a school-girl over the fact that shadow man just put a delicate toxin in my hair as a decoration. I can still feel his eyes on me, though he’s somewhere completely hidden still.

“He’s like a brother to me. We sort of grew up together and I’ve never seen a woman catch his eye before.”

I let this thought sit with me for a minute.

“I don’t think he-“

“He gave you one of his flowers. He just marked you. That’s why everyone backed away from you when the dance ended, they didn’t want him thinking they were making a move on his woman.”

“*His* woman? No. No, no, no, no. That’s not how this works. He literally didn’t even talk to me, not even to introduce himself. Me and him are *not* a thing.”

“His name is-“

“Don’t want to hear it. If he wants me to know it, he can tell me himself. Until then he’s shadow man and whilst I appreciate the flower he gifted me, I’m not reading anything into it.”

Royce throws his head back and laughs, apparently amused by my stubbornness. The song comes to a close and he bends into a bow.

“Thank you for a most delightful dance, Mrs. Duncan. I believe we shall be seeing each other soon.”

He strolls off and collects Amanda, shooting me a wink before relaying what I said and then she’s laughing too. And kissing him. Ugh. That should not feel like a physical bow to the gut, she’s *his* for goddess’ sake!

Two dances in and this was already turning into a shit show. I glare up at my mates and flip them off now that I’m in on the joke, intent on finding somewhere quiet to sit for a few minutes before I turn into a mega bitch.

I already knew that none of the bachelors were mine, so I wasn’t going to miss anything if I sat out for a few dances. I’d be back in a bit and I’d be much better company. I slip behind a bunch of people, offering polite smiles and intimating to anyone that tries to talk to me that I need to use the restroom.

I make a mad dash back to where the kitchens are and the waitstaff are bustling, taking the opportunity to throw some sculptor magic on me and changing my hair and face so that I can sit unrecognized for a few minutes.

He *marked* me? What the hell does that mean?

I find an armchair behind some more greenery that’s pretty well hidden, right outside the swinging metal doors leading to the kitchen. There are bathrooms in front of me and a drinking fountain, and blessed silence. Until some kid in a waiter’s uniform comes stalking out of the bathroom with a mean mug on his face, furiously wiping at a stain on the front of his white shirt.

He stumbles a bit when he sees me, but relaxes when he sees I’m nobody noticeable. I fucking loved being a sculptor. I had made myself look incredibly average so I could blend in.

“Sorry, didn’t realize there was a lady present. I wouldn’t have been cussing like that if I had known.”

“I’m no fucking lady. You okay?”

He smirks and looks around as he gives up trying to get the stain out.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just some holier-than-thou conduits intent on tormenting the help. Nothing new.”

Son of a bitch.

“What happened?”

“Somebody bumped into me and I spilled a bit of the champagne on one of them, getting their toes a little wet. She flipped out and threw an appetizer at me, basically humiliating me and...I’m sorry. You don’t need some stranger’s sob story.

“You’re not working the event, so you must be enjoying yourself, I hope?”

I scoff.

“Egotistical boys. I just needed to get out for a minute and hide.”

He looks at my dress again and then his eyes trace my arm, and his eyes widen as he starts backing up, tripping over a potted plant in the process and sending dirt flying, landing on his ass.

“Oh my gods, are you okay?”

He holds out his hand and waves me off, nearly shaking.

“Sorry, your...majesty. I meant nothing by it.”

The guy couldn’t be more than 18, but I could see by the way he now cowed before me that those 18 years hadn’t been the happiest. I reach out a hand to help him up, his pale skin nearly a match for mine.

Once we’re both standing, I reach up and run my fingers through his hair because it’s such a strange color. Silvery white, kind of like mine, but with opalescent purple and teal woven through. Not something that could come out of a box and his eyes are a perfect match, a swirl of the two colors.

“Sorry. Personal space, Gabriella.”

I take a pointed step back as he just stares at me, leaving me to start twiddle my thumbs and beg for a distraction or subject change.

“It’s fine...I shouldn’t have said what I did about the conduit. Please, I really need this job. I promise it won’t happen again.”

I eye him with my head cocked to the side, wanting to see the past the scars on him that led him to believe in the worst of a total stranger.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. It never happened. Sorry for interrupting your solitude.”

He tries to storm off, flushing beet red and shaking a little, and something in him makes me want to help him out. He almost looks like he’s on the verge of tears.

“Wait!” he pauses mid-step and spins around, head bowed as he waits for the verdict to fall.

“I promise, I’m not going to get you fired. Okay? Honestly. I take it you haven’t heard about the conduit I took down?”

His eyes flash with a slight interest before it shuts down again.

“No? Okay, hmm. Oh, I know. I can get you off the floor, maybe? Where’s your boss? Would you like me to find you a different spot to work for the evening?”

“Really, don’t bother yourself with me. I must be getting back.”

He bows a little bit and walks off, grabbing a new tray from the kitchen before scrambling back to the party. I keep my magic skin on and decide to be a creep for a bit, taking a note out of shadow man’s book as I watch the kid from afar.

If one of my girls was mistreating the help then I needed to know about it, that kind of shit pissed me off. I lurk behind one of the pillars on the outer rings of the room, watching the party go on without me. Some of the conduits are spinning around and smiling, some are talking to potential mates and I

find myself counting down to introducing who the goddess chose for them.

I grab a puff pastry and scarf it down, not worried about looking classy right now because no one currently knows who I am. It's glorious. I wish my dress was a little less noticeable, but hiding in the semi-shadows helped.

It doesn't take long for me to catch sight of my target, the guy I was talking to earlier standing stock still as one of my girls berates him. He had carried out another tray of champagne, and apparently that girl took it upon herself to bully him with it. I send another silent prayer to the goddess, begging her to not give me any more mate marks, because this girl is seriously pissing me off right now.

She's got a puffy orange dress on that looks like a flamingo mated with a cupcake, her hair up in elaborate braids and curls and her face so heavily painted that she would be more at home in an art museum. Except I doubt anyone would be stopping to try and understand this work of art.

I grab a waiter that's walking by as I drop my magic skin, asking her to please bring her boss over to speak with me. She agrees immediately when she sees who I am, and I get angrier by the second as a group of people stand around and laugh at the poor guy that is just standing there and taking it.

“ENOUGH!”

Everyone nearby freezes as their eyes trace my movements, the orange buttercream bully (ooh, what a good villain name!) twisting her face into the fakest smile I've ever seen as I approach them. I look at her for a moment, grabbing the wrist of the server guy to prevent him from leaving, tucking him behind me a little as I take a minute to recall my interaction with this girl from earlier this morning.

She had a horribly fake British accent, and I knew she was putting on a show of sweetness earlier, but it wasn't like I was just going to call her out for doing nothing, so I just smiled back then while silently pretending I was bashing my head against the table. Her nasally voice as nearly as bad as

Madison's had been. Seriously, why were so many conduits so awful?

"Okay, you want to talk to me about why you're humiliating somebody that's being paid to serve you?"

"Who, him? Oh, I wasn't doing anything. He spilled on my shoes and I was just wanting him to apologize."

I can feel the guy's tendons flex under my grip, but he is luckily staying put. A woman in a killer power suit walks up and extends a hand to me, and I take it as we introduce ourselves.

"What can I do for you tonight, Mrs. Duncan? I hope the food and staff has been to your liking?"

"Oh, of course. Everything's great. I was wondering, if it wouldn't be too much of a hassle, could I possibly snag this server from you and have him re-assigned to my suite up there with my mates? I believe he's had enough exposure to the wrong kind of assholes for the night and I know they'll treat him like a human being."

The woman looks a little taken aback but has no issues, so I make eye contact with Bal up in the suite, motioning my head towards the guy behind me and he smiles at me, acting like he knows what the hell I'm asking. Oh gods, I was alone with him earlier, he's probably thinking I claimed him or something.

"Great. I'm sorry, I didn't get your name earlier?"

I spin around to face the guy, who seems to be absolutely hating all the attention, dropping his hand as he finally looks me in the eye again. I swear those colors are alive.

"Pax Amberjack, your majesty."

"For fuck's sake. No one is calling me that. Seriously. It's Gabby."

This finally brings a little smile to his face, but I can nearly feel the rage building in orange buttercream bully next to me.

"Thanks so much. Thanks for not stooping to her level, Pax. Hope the rest of your night gets better."

He nods a thanks, keeping his eyes on me a little before turning and walking out of the room, his boss accompanying him up to the suite. Time to face the music, orange puff.

“Now, for you, I believe your evening has come to an end. Please escort yourself to your ride. Actually, all of your little friends can go, too.” Thankfully there’s only one other conduit, and neither of them had any mates waiting to bind themselves to.

I feel a dark, swirling presence at my back as heat seeps into me, making a rush roll through my body from my toes to my eyebrows. He doesn’t say a thing, but apparently him standing there is enough to scare the shit out of these girls, making them drop any pretense of anger and jumping straight to wanting to piss themselves.

I take my time to address all the conduits that are gathered nearby, knowing that the entire room is probably listening at this point.

“Let me make myself clear. You all heard in my introduction that I disguised my conduit status for an entire year before I came out. If any of you had been wondering why I would do that, you need only look at the blatant display of entitlement before you all.

“Until now, my experience with conduits has been purely negative. I cried the day I found my marks, because I thought that having them would change me into some sort of monster. You all demand this lavish event on an annual basis so you can be worshipped and show yourselves off.”

I try to wrack my brain for this girl’s name, thinking of all the pretentious names I could that started with an E. Nope, no dice.

“I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

She blanches and huffs it out.

“Seriously? Did you really just stomp your foot?”

I start cracking up, amazed at how far from grace some these women have gotten after becoming so high on themselves.

“Yikes. Okay, then. Just go, okay? How dare you treat someone like they’re beneath you, when they are here to try and make your evening enjoyable. That man was just doing his job, trying his best to stay off the radar.”

“His job? I wasn’t aware his job included spilling champagne over the guests of honor!”

Fuck. She was going to do it again. My fingers began to tingle as I felt the goddess awakening again, ready to ruin my life some more.

“Shit. Now you’ve done it. Okay, can we PLEASE come to an agreement that housing these will be TEMPORARY until you can find a suitable host? Seriously can’t.”

“Great she’s crazy.”

Evangeline is trying to whisper this but does a terrible job. The psycho behind me steps closer and I can feel the threat in his body as he starts reaching for the flower in my hair.

“Woah there, shadow. No need to put her out quite yet. I know she’s acting like a toddler missing naptime, but I can handle it, yeah?”

“No one speaks to you that way.”

His eyes are peeled wide open as they track their target, his fingers still hovering near the flower he put in my hair. I take a deliberate step away and he legit growls at me, following me and re-inserting himself against my back, leaving no more than an inch of space.

I peek over my shoulder at him, and he tries to smile, but it comes off as a terrifying grimace instead. Which naturally makes my panties a little bit wet because he’s like the epitome of dangerous. Mama likey. Wait. No, we were irritated with him, weren’t we? Gah.

“Anyway. Back to...whatever we were talking about.” I can’t actually remember. I go to run my fingers through my hair out of habit, yanking on a few strands accidentally as they get caught. The pin holding the flower pops out of my hair and somehow the flower tumbles out with the weight of the pin

still on its stem, so I take a step back right as a band of steal wraps around my abdomen and pulls me out of the way.

In a slow-motion fall, the flower bounces off the shoulder of Evangeline, sending a small cloud of pollen straight into her horrified face as she watches it happen. Fuck, that was kind of funny. I reach my hand out to her other hand, letting the goddess do her thing before the girl passed out.

“I, THE GODDESS, HAVE FOUND YOU WANTING. YOU DISGRACE ME AS A CHILD AND WILL NO LONGER BEAR THE MARKS OF A CONDUIT. FOR TREATING PEOPLE AS YOU HAVE YOU SHALL BECOME ONE OF THEM. SOMEBODY THAT HAS TO WORK FOR EVERYTHING THEY WANT. IT SHALL NO LONGER BE HANDED TO YOU.”

And then the magic flares up and sucks the marks off her arm, letting them fly to my bare right arm like a fucking ticking time bomb. Ew. Nope, nope. That felt so ugly. I shake my arm like they’re just going to fly off and land on somebody else, but they stay hopelessly stuck as I stand there and flap my arm like I’m doing the chicken dance.

As if that wasn’t dramatic enough, orange buttercream passes out from the flower, and then shadow steps forward to collect the fallen bloom with a napkin, rolling it up and burying it in the trash.

“Let’s not be jerks, okay? I don’t care if you think anyone in this room is beneath you, I promise you they’re not. We’re all on an even playing field, some of us just are a bit more decorated. Can you all just *please* play nice? Please? Do you see what you all are doing to me?? Seriously! Both arms? Are we serious right now??”

I feel a familiar presence and let myself collapse against Foster’s gigantic chest, soaking up his scent and letting it calm me.

“Fuck off and don’t be a dick.”

The crowd disperses and I’m never been more thankful for someone to wield the word ‘dick’ for me.

“Better?”

I don't feel like I'm suffocating anymore as he holds me, but I've still got my arm sticking out because I'm scared to look at it. I'm just going to keep believing the goddess will find a new home for them, but until then, avoiding it couldn't hurt, right?

“So much better. Come on, dance with me?”

“Of course, baby. Have I mentioned how hot it is when you get all power hungry and channel the goddess?”

“Power hungry? For fuck's sake. That girl was a piece of work!”

Foster laughs at me, definitely trying to provoke me.

“At least I didn't punch anyone this time.”

“There is that.”

We dance for several songs before someone is brave enough to try and cut in, and Foster has no qualms about throwing me to the wolves. Wait, he's the wolf in this scenario so... throwing me *away* from the wolves? Eh. I'll work on it.

“Hi, beautiful. I'm Liam. And I am so glad my sister made me come tonight.”

Okay. Maybe I'm a little immature. I bite my lip and try so hard to keep my laughter contained but he seems to realize what he just said and starts backtracking immediately as he laughs at himself.

“Wow, can I start over?”

“As long as you can assure me that your sister won't be competition for me.”

“That's fucking gross. Sorry. I meant to say my sister is one of the conduits and she invited me, and I'm happy I accepted her invitation. I've never been so entertained by a conduit before.”

Again. So. Hard. To not make that into a sex joke.

“Glad you're enjoying yourself.”

We dance for a few minutes awkwardly, but he's kind of cute.

"So, what do you normally do on Saturday nights when you're not wearing formalwear?"

"I own a little bar, so that's pretty much where I always am if I'm not at home. Which happens to be an apartment right above it."

"Wow, that's convenient. What kind of bar is it?"

"Old and eclectic? It's cool though, meet lots of interesting people."

"I bet. I envy that. The simplicity of just taking care of your own business and doing what you want."

"I bet your life is pretty crazy, huh?"

"That's an understatement." I smile up at my guys though and see them just watching me as Foster re-enters the room. Pax is lurking up there, straightening up drinks or something on the bar and the guys are trying to pull him away and put one in his hand instead.

"You're not what I expected at all."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

He steals me for another dance, being all charming and telling jokes at the right time, but I'm not feeling anything. So it continues for a few more turns, his face turning into another, which gets exchanged for another, men trying to give me compliments and make me smile.

Another song is winding down, I think my current dance partner's name is Ben? Again, very cute, but way too normal to hang with my brand of crazy. I had the chance to dance with a few of the guys meant for a different conduit, but other than Royce, who we've agreed is strictly off limits, there's no one here for me.

I'm ready to go and hide for the last few dances when the lights all dim and the music cuts off, leaving a sole voice to be heard from somewhere in the back of the room. Conveniently

close to where my mates were just a minute ago, but now seem to be missing from.

“You’re just too good to be true...Can’t take my eyes off of you...You’d be like heaven to touch...I wanna hold you so much...at long last, love has arrived...and I thank God I’m alive...You’re just too good to be true...can’t take my eyes off of you...”

Damnit, they were going to make me cry in front of everyone, and then my whole ‘I’m a bad bitch’ routine will have been for nothing. We had just watched 10 things I hate about you a few nights ago, and I had mentioned to Palmer that it was like hands down one of my most favorite romantic comedy moments. Apparently, he listened because it seemed he was about to replicate the scene with Heath Ledger.

I find him slowly moving down the staircase as somebody steps behind me, wrapping their arms around me and putting a sunflower in my hand. Foster kisses me like he means it and then heads away.

The speakers start up again with background music as I watch Palmer serenade me in front of all these people, eyes only for me as he does what he does best and makes a big damn scene. I’m mesmerized by him. Next up is Balfour, who dips me before kissing me, and then puts a few daisies into my hand.

As soon as he wanders off Grey is there, grabbing my hips and lifting me, wrapping me up possessively as he tries to inhale me, then puts a zinnia in my hand and saunters off with a wink. In between I’m still watching Palmer as he walks towards me slowly, waiting for the rest of my mates to do whatever it is they’ve planned out. Because it’s obvious to me this wasn’t some spur-of-the-moment wooing.

Dar slides in next, running a hand up my thigh and using his sexy self to tease me a bit before he kisses me, sucking on my bottom lip and giving zero fucks about our audience as his tongue comes out to play. I want to cling to him and rub myself all over him, but he pulls away with pure sex in his eyes after putting a pink rose into my growing bouquet.

Pearson is next and is a bit shy and awkward since we're so new, but he still makes me give him my full attention before stealing my lips for a brief but sweet kiss, putting some violets into my hand before spinning around and joining my guys.

Cyrus slinks up to me from behind, watching as Palmer finishes his serenade, handing his mic off to someone before the two of them sandwich me in and kiss my neck together, slipping a magnolia and a purple coneflower into my bouquet before pulling me to the stage where the rest of them are waiting.

Once I'm on stage, they all drop to one knee together, hands over their heart as Bal takes another microphone and addresses me.

"Gabriella, you've not had any of the proper courting fun, or been given the time to let us convince you how much we need you to breathe before we were all claimed. We feel like you lost some experiences when your choices were taken from you, and though we wouldn't change a damn thing in our story, we want you to feel wanted."

He passes the mic to Dar.

"Gabriella, after a century of searching for the other half of us, my brother and I cannot even describe to you what we spent that time doing. The moment you entered the picture and connected us together, the time before you ceased to exist. You are all that matters to us now." On to Palmer.

Sweet, sweet Amanda steps on stage and hands me a tissue thankfully, giving me a tool to remove some black tears from my face before I really started scaring people. Should have worn waterproof makeup.

"Gabriella, that first day in the cafeteria when I gave you that ring pop and asked you to the movies, we started joking about you being obsessed with me and I always knew it would be you that asked me to marry you. Clearly, I was right, but the details of it happening are probably not the best for public story time."

I blush as I remember that night, all of us together as I claimed Palmer. He steps back and passes it to Pearson.

“Pretty girl, we’re brand new but I knew when I saw you barefoot and running through my house, taking down enemies with your nerf gun, that you were mine. I’m so grateful for the chance you’ve given me to be with you and get to know you better, and for the time you allow for me to make myself inevitable to you.”

Last is Grey and I already know that it’s going to be bad. This boy had some serious game.

“I love you...I know this must come as something of a surprise...but I have loved you for several hours now, and every second, more. I thought an hour ago that I loved you more than any man has ever loved a woman, but a half hour after that I knew that what I felt before was nothing compared to what I felt then. But ten minutes after that, I understood that my previous love was a puddle compared to the high seas before a storm...How many minutes ago was I? Twenty? Had I brought my feelings up to then? It doesn’t matter...I love you so much more now than I did twenty minutes ago that there cannot be comparison...There is no room in my body for anything but you. My arms love you, my ears adore you, my knees shake with blind affection. My mind begs you to ask it something so it can obey. Do you want me to follow you the rest of your days? I will do that. Do you want me to crawl? I will crawl. I will be quiet for you or sing for you, or if you are hungry, let me bring you food, or if you have thirst and nothing will quench it but Arabian wine, I will go to Araby, even though it is across the world, and bring a bottle back for your lunch. Anything there is that I can do for you, I will do for you; anything there is that I cannot do, I will learn to do... whisper that I have a chance to win your love.”

He places the microphone back into Bal’s hand as he finishes the quote from Princess Bride, the book, not the movie this time, making me fucking bawl. Whatever, I have no dignity left. Let everyone see what true attachment looks like, give them something to measure their partners by. They

probably wouldn't find it, because I was persuaded that I had been already given the best of the best.

Part of me was almost sad in this moment, knowing I still had three more men out there somewhere. Okay Royce was literally nearby, but we've talked about that. It was going to hurt while I got over the fact that the goddess somehow made a mistake, but I wanted my family complete. Who else was going to-

Shadow man stands at the edge of the stage. I should really find out his name soon if he was going to keep inserting himself in my story. His dark eyes bore into me as he gently extends a delicate looking bloom that is the exact purple of my eyes with white streaks running through it.

I'm kind of scared to touch it since the last flower he gave me incapacitated a fully grown human being in seconds, but psycho as he seemed, I had a feeling that he was trying to protect me. I look to the guys, not sure what to do.

Without a mic to amplify his voice, Dar keeps us in an intimate group as he speaks out.

"He is asking to court you, love. If you accept that flower you welcome him into the family. We can't answer that question for you though, you just need to listen to your heart."

I look down at him and flinch a little when I see Royce standing nearby with his arm around Amanda, who is also crying, then try to figure out what to do on the spot. Shadow man looks like he's about to fly away, panic growing bigger every second I leave him vulnerable in front of this room full of strangers.

The fact that he was in fact making a show of affection when he seemed to be so withdrawn and private spoke volumes, and I couldn't deny how attracted to him I was or how his somewhat psycho tendencies intrigued me. Plus, it's not like I was declaring undying love and promising an eternal bond- it was courting. The chance to get to know each other with the understanding that if it worked out, we could be more.

I tried to imagine turning him down, and shadow pain hit me hard, driving me to reach down and grab his hand, an unspoken sentiment floating between us as I deliberately add his flower to my bouquet. His scary grimace smile makes an appearance, though it seemed a bit warmer this time, then he steps back and nods towards the guys to finish their show.

Shadow man instantly- “Wait!”

He comes walking back and I hop off stage, throwing up a privacy rune so we won't be overheard. He seems to appreciate this, a small tenseness in his shoulders relaxing a bit once it's done.

“I don't even know your name. Is this truly what you want?”

Had he even spoken to me yet? What did his voice sound like?

“Jericho. My name is Jericho Mather. How did you see me earlier? I am sure I was well hidden in the shadows.”

His voice sounds like the darkness he keeps hiding himself in, mixed with the danger he fully exudes.

“Well, you saw my other choices. You were hidden, but I saw you. I remember you from the council gathering last week as well, you were on the outskirts when the goddess declared me in front of them. You'll never escape my notice, how could you?”

He stares into me, pulling something off his wrist and placing it on mine. I look down to see a leather cord with three small blue beads on it tightened onto my wrist.

“No one ever sees me. I hide. But with you, I don't think I want to. You know I'm dangerous, right? I've killed...I don't even know how many. The council has been kind of spiraling, but I'm pretty sure all that I've ended mostly deserved it.”

I place my palm over his heart, feeling the warmth beating life into his body. I can feel my magic wanting to respond and lay claim but I already kind of gathered that we were compatible, that he was mine.

“You don’t frighten me. You probably should, but...”

“Yes?”

I try to keep a lock on the lust that wants to come out and play, the blatant danger vibes this guy radiates like the sun doing little more than encouraging my basal desires. What did it say about me that hearing him talk of his own lethality wanted to make him come undone? How beautiful would that be to witness? Fuck. I was leaking.

Two couples standing behind Jericho start going at it hardcore, right in the middle of the dance floor. I pull back on the sex drugs and mouth a ‘sorry’ to whoever wants it.

“That. You make me want to do that.”

He turns to see one couple falling to the floor, tearing at each other’s clothes and dry humping each other, scooting around the floor like bugs.

He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, well like not *exactly* that. But you know what I’m trying to say. You want to...protect me. That’s what you make me feel. And I fully understand that you’re a terrifying assassin, but, I like your weird ass smile and when you threatened that conduit earlier for me I got more giddy than the situation probably warranted. I like you, and I want to get to know you?”

“Why did that sound like a question?”

“Because you’re incredibly hard to read.”

He leans forward and kisses me. Mouth closed, but his pillowy lips are fucking perfect and makes tingles shoot all over my marks that are starting to demand attention like a teenage girl.

“Does that clear things up?”

“So, what now? Are you going to come on stage with...all that?”

He grimaces while the guys all stand up there, looking like an odd collection of beautiful models, Palmer trying to

entertain people with some weird 90's dance moves. Ok, that's probably what the grimace was for. But hey, the man was adorable so he could do the sprinkler as long as he wanted to.

“Must I?”

“You know we're a package deal, right?”

“Hmm. I perhaps should have considered that before...”

I stare at him, mouth agape, trying to ascertain if he's dumping me or making a joke. Either one would be wholly unexpected right then.

He grabs my hand and runs his thumb over the beads laying on my wrist now and the corner of his mouth twitches up a bit and a small rumble escapes his chest.

“Lead the way.”

Dar

Jericho. Fucking. Mathers.

The man, the myth, the legend.

Pretty sure this is *the* guy that started that phrase. No one fucked with Jericho Mathers if they valued their life. He was top five deadliest people I had ever heard of in our country, luckily he was on our side of the law. And now apparently in our family?

But really, with a woman like Gabriella, what did I expect? At this point I wouldn't be surprised if *the* Night himself crawled from his hidey hole and decided she was worth being good for. She was just *that* incredible.

Aside from the sex that literally crippled you for a little while it was so good, she was a constant source of wonder. You never could predict what she would do or say next, but she loved hard, and she was just...everything. So, am I surprised that the man that self isolates and growls at anybody that approaches him grew her a fucking flower? It didn't even have any poison in it!

I know this because I gave him 'the look' when he first extended it as an offering, and he met my eyes and shook his head to tell me it was harmless. I don't care if he's Jericho fucking Mathers. If he was about to give my wife a poisonous flower, I would find a way to end him.

See? She was already making him soft. Cyrus and I had worked with the guy a handful of times, he was ruthless. His poisons were world renown for their efficiency and untraceability, taking out his marks in a plethora of creative ways.

He was a gardener, so had control over plants, but the way he was able to combine different ones and create new, deadly poisons that only *he* understood, he was a rich man and was constantly turning down hits. Honestly, I think he just enjoyed killing people.

Hmm. Maybe I should be concerned?

I watch him and Gabby dance, and though they're barely speaking, their connection is hard to miss. I was thoroughly satisfied that our little plan to woo her a bit on stage earlier worked out so well, us sliding a bunch of interlocking rings we had specially ordered onto her right hand.

Obviously, we were already mated to her, but we wanted to give her the satisfaction of a real proposal, so she knew she was the prize and not just something the goddess had planned. I'm staring at my watch, waiting for the blessed hour to arrive when it's acceptable to get her the hell out of here.

It's been torture seeing her look so good but be so off limits all night. After I helped her dress earlier before we left, I knew exactly what she was rocking under that dress. We were all worked up, those polaroids we hid around the room excellent fodder for constant raging hard-ons for our girl.

We'd been dancing with her since the stage thing, rotating and playing nice. We'd all gotten several dances in and felt good about the night overall. We get the notification finally that they're ready for the conduits to receive blessings, and Gabriella lights up.

She kisses us all on the cheek as she runs up to the guys she had us pull aside, and I go to gather the pile of sashes that she had already earmarked. I was confused because there were two dark blue ones, and Jericho was the only one that didn't have one. I guess we'd figure it out soon.

"You need help sir?"

I look to the kid Gabriella had safeguarded earlier, the one that had been trying way too damn hard to prove his worth all night. I was grateful Gabby was able to get him away from that fluffy orange lady that thought a little too much of herself, and I wasn't even super worried about the extra marks she was carrying. We'd figure it out one way or another.

"You know what? Sure. Just hold these for me so I can help my wife match them to their new owners."

The kid nods and follows me on stage, Gabby pointing out who gets what color as the guys all stand in a confused line.

We get to the conduit in yellow and Gabby seems to freeze for a moment, smiling at me like a damn maniac.

“Just go with it yeah? Help me get this damn thing off my arm.”

She grabs both mine and the poor girl’s arm and I feel some of my magic flaring up, wanting to be directed. Because even my magic laid down and waited for orders from Gabby. Gabby was mumbling shit under her breath, every other word ‘fuck’ or ‘fucker’. I reach up to turn her mic off as she stares at those marks on her arm like they owe her a life debt.

Once she starts threatening them, she finally manages to get them to behave- odd- and one of them kind of shimmies down her arm and she starts cackling like a witch as it finds it’s way onto the other conduit’s arm. Shit, I can’t remember any names.

Once it’s sitting pretty underneath the girl’s other three marks gabby drops her hand like a hot potato and flips off the ceiling, though I imagine she’s imagining the goddess as she does this. Surely, she thinks she just pulled a fast one on the goddess, getting rid of yet another mate mark that she doesn’t want. I needed to contemplate later why the goddess seems to enjoy giving them to her a little too much.

“NO TAKE BACKSIES! SIONARA BITCH!”

She bolts to the next couple, and I have to reassure *Charlie*, that’s right, that she was talking to the mark, not her. But I invite her and her two new mates over for dinner anyway, as a sign of goodwill. Probably best if they don’t think we’re completely bonkers. Maybe seeing us in our home, eating a meal, would convince them otherwise? Fuck. That’s just going to make things worse.

Eh.

Gabby zooms down the line and bonds a bunch of people, the crowd silent as she makes it happen so fast. Pretty sure Gabby was about to have her own fanclub.

She finally gets to Jericho and kisses him on the cheek before putting his blue sash on him, not bonding him or

Pearson yet, but seeming proud when he joins the ranks of the rest of us idiots. I hold out the other blue sash as a question and she recoils from it. What the hell?

“Sorry...must have made a mistake. Won't be needing that.”

I don't buy it but I'm not going to push her right now. We'd talk about it when she was ready. Finally, we're able to leave, and I grab her in a bridal carry as we head to the limo. I set her down as we all get ready to climb in, everyone taking their chance to kiss her before they jump in.

I'm just about to help her in when there's a swirl of pure black mist in between us, and I instantly start to panic as it covers her up. It disappears as fast as it appeared, but with it, so does Gabby. I can hear the guys all laughing and joking inside the limo, only Jericho still outside to witness her literally disappear into thin air.

“What the hell?”

Jericho looks ready to murder, no I mean *literally* murder. But how do you even track down somebody that just up and vanishes?

Apollo

Oh my night, fucking *finally*. My *Morgan Freeman voice* *Father*, *end Morgan Freeman voice*, okay, that shit was kind of fun. Maybe there was a reason the asshole did it so much. Whoops, I was in the middle of kidnapping somebody. Woman napping?

Anyway, he wanted me to steal the woman and comply with his demands, something I had spent way too much damn time doing in my existence. The guy was a fucking madman. I swear, half the shit he said wasn't even actual words. No joke, last week I caught him having a conversation with himself, jumping back and forth to portray different personalities, but instead of speaking, he was barking and mooing. Apparently, dogs and cows had lots of beef with each other. Ha! That was hilarious.

So, bring this strange creature for him to devour? Hmm...hard pass. It was strange, being on two legs and with a solid form, though the shadows were just as easy to call to me as ever. My father made a mistake by giving me this freedom. All the years I had spent kissing his ass gave me a plausibility of belief that I definitely didn't deserve.

He had sent so many of his creatures to this realm to try and capture the conduits, but as far as I know, has been wholly unsuccessful. As my father's condition deteriorates, so do that of those weird-ass creatures. They are multiplying like rabbits, but they have nearly no capacity for self-intellect and the more he sends, the easier they are to off.

I had made sure to stay on top of my *Father's* (when I speak like that, please just save me the trouble of alerting you I'm using Morgan Freeman's voice in my head. It will make this all so much more dramatic, I promise) plans, and he had sent his heaviest cavalry with the last attack. The short alliance with the tasty human called Robert sapped much of his remaining strength, and now Father was relying on the multitude of creatures to continue to create fear in the earth dwellers.

I knew better, however.

I was his hail mary, but, the only touchdown I was completing was getting the fuck out of that stupid-ass cave. Let's get something else straight, shall we? That whole bullshit about not knowing anything about earth dwellers was, well, bullshit. My father said he had memories for me to consume, to help me acclimate to my settlement here, but I'm not sure how the memories of nothing but game show hosts was supposed to be helpful.

Lucky for him, I had been sneaking information from souls on my own as often as possible, and while I had no practical experience, their culture was well known to me.

“What the fuck...where are we?”

I glance around the small home I had procured- my shadow abilities allowed me to form things out of the mists with very little effort. I had decided that it would be easiest to remain far from civilization, so I had just gone into a barren, rocky mountain range and pulled a home together near its summit. It would disappear when I did.

“Good morning, Gabriella. I'm sorry for the abrupt location change, sometimes pulling others through the dark lands makes them pass out. If there were an easier form of travel for me, I'd take advantage.”

The woman scrambles away from me, eyes wide as she looks around the unfamiliar setting.

“Is this...a *waterbed*?”

Some things should have never stopped trending.

“Weird. Who are you? And why...why do you seem familiar?”

“I am Apollo Jade, and I have been sent by the *Night*, my father, to capture you and bring you home with me. He is in dire need of sustenance, and it seems that you are the only one capable of providing it at this point.”

“Fuck you! I'm not somebody's fucking snack! Bring me home right this instant!”

Hmm. Note to self- this little woman was kind of funny when she was incensed. I take a minute to observe her body, the way she moves, the frantic way she's looking for something to use as a weapon. She throws a lamp at my face but I make myself go incorporeal, so it just sails through me, shattering against the wall behind me before I pull another one together with a flick of my hand and replace it.

"Well, that was rude."

"So is kidnapping people and bringing them home as a meal!"

"Are you hungry? Thirsty? I do not require such sustenance, but if you are, I can acquire anything that would please you."

"Why?? So you can fatten me up more! No chance, sun god! Why the fuck is your name Apollo if you're the son of *the Night*?? That makes no fucking sense!"

Maybe if I kept goading her to yell, she'd wear herself out? She storms out of the room, checking the house for exits. She stumbles a bit when she looks out the window in the front room, nothing but mountains visible. Also, no front door. Not really necessary for me, and if there was, she'd literally just be stepping out onto the face of a mountain and plummeting to her likely death. That would make me a terrible host.

"Yes, well, it seems my father had a sense of humor when he chose my name. Apollo is also known as the god of plagues though, if that helps you."

Her eyes widen and she drops to the floor.

"Wait, where are my mates?? Shit, they're probably freaking out!"

"Oh, they definitely are. I checked on them right before you woke up. Destructive, those ones."

"Okay, okay. Let's just...can we talk about this? I don't have any other options? You're literally just going to bring me home to daddy so he can eat my soul? That makes you pretty fucking awful! AND WHY THE FUCK DO YOU SEEM SO FAMILIAR??"

“No, if I was planning on doing that, we’d be there right now. I find it rather amusing to thwart his plans though, so here we are. I likely seem familiar because my father bound our souls together before he sent me earthside.”

“WHAT??”

“Yes, I was supposed to get you to fall in love with me and then turn on you.”

“And you’re telling me, what? That you’re not going to do that? Why the night should I even believe you? You just fucking kidnapped me and are holding me hostage on a GODS DAMNED MOUNTAIN!”

“Well, I thought it might be easier to explain things here, away from that basketball team of yours, and then you can present me to them.”

“Fat fucking chance!”

I decide that maybe she just needs time to get comfortable with me, so I set about procuring her a feast. It seemed to be common knowledge that well fed women were much more amenable to pleasantries. A few days of being locked up here together and we’d be solid, and she’d understand why I wasn’t going to fall in line with my father’s plans. Then we could return to her home with the thousand other cocks and sip bourbon while my father wasted away. Fail proof.

Gabriella

Okay, I was definitely getting more and more frustrated with this situation. I had gotten a hold of the goddess for like a heartbeat, but whatever *Apollo Jade* did, gods his name sounded pretentious and hot as hell, she couldn't connect to me like she normally could.

So, it seemed I was stranded here. With this infuriating, gorgeous, lickable, asshole. Ugh, why did he have to be so *pretty*? His vibes were more than a little emo with his shaggy black hair and kohl rimmed eyes, but I was only half convinced that was cosmetic. Shadows seemed to literally be a part of him, so the near neon blue hue of his eyes glowed with the dark frames.

Plus, a nose ring and a lip ring, and what the hell? Who even had cheekbones like those? Another one of my apparent soul mates, that's who. I couldn't even be mad at the goddess for this one, because if evil misty dude was to be believed, it was his father that bound us.

And boy, did he.

I was trying so damn hard to resist him, but you know when you're lying in bed at night and there's no one around? Maybe your partner had to work late or is out with friends and you're just like *super* frisky so you close and lock your bedroom door for prosperity's sake and just let your fingers wander?

The pull to do something a little naughty with no one around to witness? Well this guy was like that feeling personified. He was completely odd, and he kept eating cornflakes, even though he told me he doesn't *require* sustenance. What was up with that? I swear, that's all he's eaten. I would ask him about it, but I was scared that if I opened my mouth, I'd end up licking his adam's apple by accident.

"Can we go home yet?"

"Are you going to continue to scream at me and deny our bond?"

I start rolling back and forth on the waterbed, because why the hell not, letting the oceanic movements put a giggle into me. I really fucking missed my guys. Palmer and I could get up to some shit on this thing- can you imagine if I had like three of these side by side, and they were all sex high? Oh man, that seems like a tv special waiting to happen. *Sexcapades: What Happens When It's Too Good*. But like, waterbed edition.

“I can’t really deny the bond, now can I? I’m still not sure what you want with me, though.”

“I’ve told you- simply my father’s ultimate demise. I’ve kept a tally. Look: we’ve literally held this conversation 8.5 times.”

“8.5?”

“Yes, remember, you began asking me this morning, but then had to use the restroom and when you got back you got distracted by the television.”

“Right... Yeah, sorry, that’s still a little unbelievable. And if he’s just going to apparently waste away, I don’t see why you even need me.”

He looks a bit morose for a few moments, averting his eyes like I just said something super mean. Oh, I kind of did. What if the situation was reversed and he was my only soul bond and he kept questioning my intentions? That would...okay, that wouldn’t really be easy. But, I’m also not the daughter of his biggest nemesis.

“Sorry. Can we like, start over? It’s hard for me, to be away from them. I’m getting cranky.”

He reaches out a tentative hand to rub some of my hair between his fingers, watching the strands fall through them.

“Gabriella, I don’t really know what to do here, either. We’ve been holed up here for nearly two days, and I can’t help but think you hate me.”

“I don’t...I’m scared, okay? I just found them, and there’s still two waiting for me, and I need time with them. If I lose it all now just so some crazed villain gets to continue to act out

soliloquies in a fake golden mirror, can you see why that might make me hesitant to let you in?

“I know you keep saying you don’t want to do anything for him, but, he’s still your father; and even though he figured out a way to tie us together, that doesn’t equate to instant trust. You’re asking me to put my fate, as well as the fate of all of my mates, into your hands.

“I want to trust your intentions, but...”

“But my father is Night. No, I get it.”

He lays beside me and his body kind of hovers a little bit above the bed, the smoke that follows him around supporting him and cradling him. He looks like he’s in pain, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s ever had anybody actually show up for him.

“What was your life like, in the shadow realm?”

“Tedious. I was just this...shapeless form. I could think and mind speak, and move at will, but nothing there is...happy. I’ve spent my existence trying to keep my father from flipping out, trying to avoid him and his weird missions, subtly trying to fight against him while making sure I didn’t lose his trust.

“I didn’t think I’d ever get out of there, to be honest. With him falling apart, and I mean that in every sense of the word, I was kind of just counting down the days until he fell *too* far, and I inherited everything. At least then I could do as I pleased. I could maybe get out and finally claim my two-legged form and do more than simply exist.

“He created me right after the goddess pushed him from this realm, and it’s difficult to remain near somebody so evil for so long and not turn into a complete asshole.”

“How did you do it? I mean, not saying you’re not at least *part* asshole, you did kidnap me after all, but...how did you keep your mind as your own?”

“This is going to sound stupid, probably.”

This bond is different than my others- our souls were melded, so I could feel echoes of him throughout my chest,

throughout my body. I'd been stubborn the past few days, refusing to admit that he had feelings, because I'm angry that I'm here. Surely there would have been a better way to speak with me? I feel completely trapped up here in this mountain house, and I'm completely at his mercy.

But he's letting me in right now, and he feels completely hollow. It kind of hurts.

"Tell me anyway."

"Well, my father insists I didn't inherit his flair for theatrics, because why else wouldn't I be standing around practicing evil speeches in front of a mirror when I'm alone? But, I found some poetry once, inside this soul I ate..."

"Hold the fuck on. What?"

"I consume souls. I'm my father's son. But really, that was a bit of a turning point. Whatever actual nourishment that place lacked, I found in poetry. It was a little difficult to come by, not many damned souls really care about art, but I held onto what I found and let it carry me."

I scoot a few inches away, but the waterbed just makes me bob up and down while the water settles again, bringing a bit more levity than I'd like to the situation. I know it was stupid, because a few inches of space wouldn't do a damn thing if he thought my soul looked like strawberry shortcake or something, but it made me feel a bit better.

"You. Consume. Souls."

"I'm not going to consume *yours*, obviously."

"No, that wasn't obvious, actually."

In a breath he's hovering on top of me, coldness seeping into my clothing. But it's tingly and stimulating, and very distracting.

"You're mine, Gabriella. *Nothing* has ever been mine before. I don't know how to get you to like me, or to trust me, but I would never harm you."

"What about my mates?"

“Would it hurt you, if I consumed their souls?”

“Umm, yes. Definitely.”

“Then they are safe.”

“Do you need to...consume them, to survive?”

“It is how my magic stays full. It is not like my father, because he’s cursed by the goddess. But he did make me, which makes me need to occasionally if I want to continue to use my other gifts.”

“And how, exactly do you see that playing out, here on earth?”

“I’ve thought about that. I figured I could play like the anti-hero or something. I can ride shadows anywhere I want. I figured it would be easy to appear in prisons or similar places of darkness and get my fill there. The more tainted the soul, the more filling it is for me.”

His breath is falling across my face and I swear, after getting so much dick on the regular, and suddenly being denied, it was a little hard to keep my hands where they were. This man above me was absolutely beautiful. And apparently *way* more terrifying than I’d been giving him credit for. Between him and Jericho, no one was going to think twice about getting anywhere near me. Why were terrifying, deadly males such a turn on? Another topic to file into ‘topics for therapy’.

“Why is he cursed, by the way? The goddess won’t speak of him, and it’s not really like common knowledge, now is it? What did he do to get cast out?”

“You sure you want to know? It’s not a pretty story.”

“Yes?”

“Just promise you won’t judge me for the sins of my father? And...would it be alright if I held you? It is incredibly distracting seeing you underneath me. And I don’t think I can stomach any more cornflakes right now. I’m beginning to think that was bullshit, anyway.”

“Okay, you lost me.”

“John Kellogg, inventor of corn flakes, created the food to be specifically bland to help curb...urges, in young people.”

What the hell? I can't help but laugh at how ridiculous that is. Seriously?

“It's not true, is it?”

“Oh my gods, is *that* why you've been eating cornflakes left and right? Because you've been trying to not think about fucking me?”

“Well it's not like you're amenable to the idea, and I didn't exactly have a lot of other options. This body is completely new to me. It's not exactly like our mist forms can have intercourse.”

There's that hurt again. I go back to thinking that no one's ever really been there for him, and now this, and I was pushing him away.

I pull him in for a kiss, making him lose control of his shadows as he puts his weight fully onto me.

“What was that for?”

I shrug, watching his eyes.

“You said I'm yours, right? It seemed like the right thing to do.”

He kisses *me* this time, a yearning sound falling from his lips as he grabs hold of my face, his lips getting bolder by the second.

“This feeling in my body...it's strange. But I don't think I can give in to anything, or let you give in to anything, if you still think I'm here to harm you or your family.”

“Apollo, I can feel you, in here.” I rub my hand over my chest. “I don't like feeling...helpless. I've worked hard to become strong and feel in control of my life, and that's the only thing that's kept me sane in the past few months as everything has completely flipped around on me.

“I'm in an unfamiliar place, against my will, pulled from the arms of men I trust. Can you blame me for being a bit wary? I

feel completely out of control and weak, so it's not necessarily *you* I don't trust at this point, because I *can* feel your sincerity now that I'm allowing myself to.

"It's that it's somewhat difficult to enjoy whatever this might be, while I'm still here without the rest of them near me. We can't work if you can't respect that they are mine as well."

"Am I not allowed time alone with you, then?"

"Of *course* you are, but we need to discuss it ahead of time and let them know what's going on. They've got to be out of their minds right now, wondering where the hell I am, and now I feel guilty for being so calm and relaxed on this ridiculous bed, kissing your ridiculous face, knowing that they need me right now."

He leans his forehead against me, as if to soak in the moment a bit longer.

"You're right, I'm sorry. I just...I tried all night to get your attention at that ball, but someone was always in my way. Nothing worked, and I got desperate. I figured once you were home, that it would be kind of creepy if I just appeared and demanded attention."

"I promise, that would have been preferable to being kidnapped."

"Really? Hm. Well I'm sorry for that as well, then. I don't exactly have experience trying to make favorable impressions on people, especially ones that look like you. I can take you back to your mates, but can we continue this conversation? Maybe they'd like to hear the story as well. You won't shut me out, will you?"

"If you can respect them, then no. They're going to be pissed but finding me whole and uninjured should help with that. The fact that you can become incorporeal should help as well. They're probably going to want to punch you or something."

"Noted."

I wrap my arms around him as the shadows start to creep over us, falling into oblivion as the cold tingles dance along

my skin.

Balfour

I was losing my fucking mind.

Gabriella had been gone for two whole days at this point, and none of us had really slept or eaten. We don't know who the fuck took her or why, or where they were now. The *only* consolation we had, was that we hadn't felt any sort of big damage or severing through our mate bonds.

Jericho had gone missing yesterday, the scary fucker practically steaming from his ears as he used contacts to try and get eyes on her. How was it possible that between all these men set to protect her, we had all failed so spectacularly? What was the point of having so many mates, if something could appear and pull her away from us with zero warning and zero chance of us preventing it?

I definitely smelled like ass, as did most of us, but we were all a little nervous to shower in case something happened during those few minutes of being unavailable.

“You know, I'd expect the mates I chose for Gabriella to have a little more faith in her.”

We all flinch from our posts on the couches as an apparition of the goddess appears, nearly see-through and shimmering, hard to really see details of, but there, nonetheless.

“You know where she is then?”

None of us had been successful in contacting the goddess yet- she was Gabby's pet, not ours.

“Umm, kind of? I know she is unharmed, but she is also trapped. Not in a bad way, she is being well cared for, but she's more than a little angry at her...captor. It seems a wrench has been thrown in our plans.”

We all just stare at her, waiting for her to cut to the point. Where the fuck is our wife?

“Okay, okay, hard crowd. Here's what I've been able to gather from her. My ex-lover, the Night himself, has created an offspring of his own. A creature of darkness that holds

nearly as much power as he does, and the Night has used the lingering remains of our bonding magic to create one between his son and Gabriela.

“Unfortunately, he shut me out and I have not been able to learn more than that. They were in some house and she seemed well though.”

“So, she has been kidnapped by the crazed offspring of this realm’s greatest villain, and you are unable to reach her? They are soul bound and he is keeping her hostage somewhere. Did we miss anything?”

“No, no. That is all. Thought you might appreciate a status update. I do not know if he plans to offer her up to the Night or not, though that seems a logical explanation for his presence on earth.”

Dar starts throwing shit and the whole room erupts in chaos. I throw up a rune to freeze everybody, because when Gabriella does come back, it would be ideal if we weren’t all going apeshit. Their eyes are all boring into me as they sit frozen, but I decide to just revel in the temporary silence.

I can’t think.

My brain feels like it’s pulsing, trying to run through so many scenarios and wondering which, if any, would bring my wife back to me. My mate. Then you’ve got 6 other guys here, all with hearts broken and fully strung out. Foster has been in his wolf form since we returned to the house, Cyrus won’t speak, we’re all losing our shit.

If anything, I’m realizing we’re not a group yet. We might all belong to Gabby, but we really haven’t turned ourselves into a family yet. No one has taken charge of the situation, and since Gabby has been gone, no one has told anybody what the hell to do. So, no one’s doing anything but whine, mope, and yell.

“Here’s how this is going to work. *When* Gabriella gets back, we will deal with the situation somehow. Until that happens, we’re done falling apart. Not saying it hasn’t been warranted, but if she were to walk through those doors right

now...she'd see that we're not leaning on each other. We're hers, but we need to belong to each other as well.

“If we really want to defeat this threat, we need to work as a unit and calm the fuck down. Let's go shower and I'll order pizzas and we'll meet back down here and talk.”

I unfreeze everybody and they seem a bit stunned. They all take in the destruction of the room, and luckily, we have a matter wielder with us now that can easily put things back together. They all start looking at each other then and seem to come to the same conclusion I just did. We are acting as separate entities instead of brothers.

The shower feels fucking grand, the scalding water and rich lather of the cedar soap cutting through all the grime from sitting around and having a melt-down. I glance at my sad, flaccid cock and pet it encouragingly, hoping he'll get to play soon.

It's not that I'm a sex addict or anything, but fuck. I really fucking missed fucking Gabriella. I don't give a shit it's only been a few nights. Waking up without her now is wrong and falling asleep alone is wrong, and not sticking my cock in her at least once a day is fucking *wrong*.

I slip into some grey sweats and a plain white t-shirt, combing my hair back with a bit of product so I don't look homeless when she comes back to me. The pizza should be about here now, so I head downstairs to grab beers and wait for the rest of the guys to show up, only to find some new dude looking around the room and running his hand through some crazy dark hair and looking nervous as all get-out.

“Um...can I help you?”

He takes a step forward and extends a hand, his all-black ensemble vibing with the rest of his emo look.

“Apollo Jade. I am one of Gabby's mates now.”

What the fuck?

“Where did you...does *she* know this? I hate to break it to ya, but she's kind of missing right now. Probably not the best time to move in.”

“Oh, yes, she’s well aware. And she’s upstairs somewhere changing and showering.”

I don’t even reply, I just sprint. I hear her sweet giggle and trip over about three or five non-existent obstacles before finding her in the shower, being double teamed by Foster and Palmer. Her eyes connect with mine and I’m naked again before she needs to invite me.

Naked wet dudes with their cocks out? Not a deterrent to getting to my mate. I kiss her and everything falls back into place around me. I stick my head out of the shower long enough to yell for the other guys, grateful Gabby chose the bathroom with the biggest shower.

Not sure if we can actually fit that many naked dudes in here, but I guess we were about to find out.

Grey flies in next, scanning her to check for injuries, sliding into Palmer’s spot as his knees collapse and he calls out his release. He stays nearby with his hand resting on her leg, watching Grey sink those scary ass fangs into her neck.

She starts writhing in ecstasy, then he’s sliding into her ass and Foster is barely moving, just leaning his head against her chest as she cradles his head and comforts him.

“What happened, love?”

Dar and Cyrus slip in next, but Pearson stays at the door of the bathroom, definitely a bit intimidated by his first orgy. Aww, we should make him a commemorative mug or something. This was going to be fun to break him into. She’s reaching her hands out trying to reassure each of us, trying to connect with everyone, and the exhaustion and stress breaks and I lose my shit laughing.

Cyrus wraps an arm around me since Gabby is otherwise occupied, and I lean on the little dude as I find air.

“Oh shit. We had all been too scared to shower Gabriella, we’ve been sitting in our own filth since the damn gala because we thought we’d miss you coming home if we did. I forced everyone to get their shit together and clean themselves up and guess what happened? Oh, that was good timing.”

“Well, I appreciate the hygiene. Sorry to freak you guys all out, I didn’t have any control over the situation. I promise I’m completely fine though. He was a bit of a dick for awhile, but I think we’re good now.”

“Wait wait. Apollo...that guy I just shook hands with? *That’s* who had you?? I was nice to him, damnit!”

“It’s okay to be. Look, I doubt any of you will believe me, you’ll need to reach your own conclusions, but...I think he needs us.”

“The son of Night...needs us? How do you figure?”

She smiles at Pearson and blows him a kiss, then a dark figure storms through the room, eyes roaming frantically until they land on Gabriella and we all freeze and just take a few steps back. Well, except for Grey, because he’s still got his dick inside her.

Jericho thunders into the shower with all his clothes on, eyes trapped on her face. He puts his hands on her shoulders and takes a few breaths, leaning his forehead against hers and finding his calm. Man, we were a weird assortment of men.

“Are you unharmed, my queen?”

Oh damn. If I was a chick I’d be panting right now.

“I am completely well, Jericho. Sorry to frighten you.”

“I want you to claim me. You left. And I felt...empty. I had no way of finding you and I had no right to you because you aren’t mine yet. But I need to be.”

“We’ll get there, I promise. Maybe we should all get dressed and go downstairs and talk to Apollo?”

“Fuck that. He’s had you alone for two days. I say we make you scream a few times, make him sweat, and then watch in satisfaction as you walk downstairs bow-legged. That should do the trick.” Dar was an evil genius.

He picks her up and we all work together to dry her off a bit before he throws her on the massive master bed, her eyes widening as she realizes it’s happening. The door is clearly still open but none of us make a move to close it.

Foster

My beast had been mourning his mate for two days and now she was here, and he was ready to fuck shit up.

“Pearson, go kiss our girl. Strip down to your boxers first.”

Game on.

We all move forward just a half an inch as Pearson does as he’s asked, unused to seeing Gabby in this state. They hadn’t been together long, and I know he’s been through it since he started courting her, but I also know he’s been pining after her for months.

I felt it that night at the party, his interest in her. His obsession. It nearly rivalled my own.

He moves towards her slowly, his eyes openly charting her gorgeous skin before slipping one knee right in front of her apex and caging her head with his arms. He maintains eye contact with her as he slowly sinks his face towards her, brushing his lips so lightly against hers that I’m not even positive he made contact.

Gabriella is instantly reacting, trying to reach for more.

“I’ll hold this arm down. Grey, get her left. Palmer, I want you on that ankle and Dar you take her right ankle. Don’t let her do anything I don’t command.”

My cock is already long and strong again, completely unsated even though we just had her. Seeing her trussed up by my new brothers though was really fucking hot.

Pearson kisses her a bit stronger this time, their tongues joining in a sensual seduction as his hand wanders right past her breasts and lands on her stomach, floating strokes across her flesh.

“Cyrus. Eat her.”

He slips by me, his hand brushing across my waist and *definitely* on purpose grazing the tip of my weeping cock as he licks his lips. He leaves a hand near my knee as he gets into position, and I’ve got to say, I don’t hate it. I don’t necessarily

want to punish myself and hold out, I just want to see my mate destroyed in the best possible way, so she knows who she belongs to.

“Wait. Before...anything else happens. I want to clear the air. I don’t know what my magic will do once I’m really getting in it; Jericho, Pearson- if either of you are opposed to being marked then I suggest you stay back. I can’t guarantee it will happen but it’s pretty likely.”

Pearson kisses down her neck and then swirls his tongue around her nipple, glancing up at her as he does so.

“I’m fucking yours, Gabriella. Whether we court for three days or a hundred. I’ve wanted you since I met you and having you disappear on us has made me even more desperate. I’m yours to do with as you like.”

He steps back to the edge of the bed as Jericho slides in.

“We don’t have to get physical yet, I want to build a firm foundation with you first, but I will watch if you’re okay with it?” She nods and licks her lips. “I, too, am here as your puppet. When you pulled me onto that dance floor my world changed. If you don’t give me a mark that tells everyone I belong to you I might lose my mind.

“I am drawn to you and cannot resist the pull. Time will not make a difference to me, I am ready.”

He presses a kiss onto her mouth and then steps back as well, giving Cyrus the opening he wants as he fucking dives into her pussy. He doesn’t come up for air for quite awhile, making us all groan at the sounds he plants in Gabriella’s vocal chords.

His hand reaches out for my ankle and for some reason it relaxes me more. I’ve never, not once, looked at a dude and thought, ‘yeah, let’s play.’ And I’m sure it has everything to do with the subtle ways he’s been trying to get me comfortable with him, but ever since he asked me about carnal relations at breakfast that day I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious.

And really, would it be so wrong if some of us got a bit handsy when Gabriella was being serviced? The woman was a

sex goddess, and even though she could go all day without blinking, sometimes it might be nice to not wait my turn.

Cyrus makes eye contact with me as he plunges his tongue inside of her, making her gasp. I reach out to her glorious breast and pull on her nipple, letting my warm palm encompass it as best I can. I'm freaking out a little bit, but this is family now. I give him a slight nod and his hand starts stroking my balls as he continues to eat out our mate, making me instinctively widen my legs.

Magic fucking fingers. As his fingers trail up the side of my cock I don't even care that it's not Gabby. And the look in her eyes when she looks at my distraction is more than worth the slight discomfort from a new touch, because she looks positively feral.

I can see the wolf in her eyes and, *fuck*.

Dar nudges Cyrus out of the way, kneeling in between Gabby's legs and taking her full to the hilt in one go. Cyrus slides closer and keeps his eyes on mine, still seeking permission but I physically can't deny how much I want this right now.

My left hand is still working Gabby's breast as I sit next to her, my hips above her shoulder. When Cyrus kneels in between my wide-open legs he's almost in line with Gabby and he uses that to his benefit as he leans across my hard dick to kiss her. His pecs brush against me and it's so difficult to not thrust into the touch.

He's totally teasing me right now, but I think I'm into it. I let my hand wander up to Gabby's head, threading my hand through her hair as Cyrus continues to slide across my dick and kiss her, no doubt smearing pre-cum against his chest.

I'm too scared to see the other guys' reactions to what's happening between me and Cyrus right now, but Gabriella getting nailed by Dar is a good distraction. I'm sure they're all sitting there holding their dicks and wishing somebody would touch theirs, too.

Finally, Cyrus returns his attention to me, eyeing my cock like it's a mountain he needs to map out. I'm a big dude, so I appreciate the effort.

I can't look away as his hot mouth sinks onto me, the rough way he handles me in complete contrast to the sexy way Gabby does. There's no mistaking it's a man that is touching me as his tongue wraps around me and his lips hit all the sensitive spots he clearly is familiar with on his own anatomy.

The pleasure slowly builds as his hips move against the bed, seeking out friction, and I finally lift my eyes to the rest of the guys, needing to control the situation at least a little.

"Fuck. Cyrus...don't fucking stop. Bal, come fuck her mouth."

I want to laugh when I see how bugged out Pearson's eyes are at the tableau, he looks so overwhelmed by all the flesh on display that it's amusing. But then Cyrus smashes himself down, my pubic bone hitting his nose and making my toes twitch as my balls start drawing up.

Giving up on being tentative, I use my free hand to hold on to his head, chasing the feeling with all I've got as I fuck his mouth in the same rhythm Bal is fucking Gabby's mouth.

He doesn't disappoint, roughly taking everything I give him and humming around me as I come down his throat, my body shaking as my release winds down. Not sure if that release in quick succession to my last one with Gabby cancelled out the normal post-gabby behavior, but I'm strangely sober as I look around the room.

Palmer, however, is decidedly *not*. I think I was too gone last time we had a group anything to see Palmer's reaction to Gabby's special feel-good juice, but man was I going to enjoy it now. Apparently, nailing our wife made him turn into a wannabe male-model with bad pickup lines. And apparently a bit hungry for dick.

He's currently leaning against the foot of the bed, eyeing Cyrus' ass that's still in the air as he catches his breath. He's slowly stroking his own dick with a strangely plastic smile on

his face. I watch in slow horror as he walks around to Cyrus' side, runs his hand down his back and leans down to whisper in his ear.

“It's handy that I have my library card, because I'm totally checking you out.”

Then he slaps his ass, fucking *licks* it, and saunters off to the corner of the room to stare at us all. Cyrus looks at me and I think we're all a little lost on what to do with that one.

“Fuck I missed you guys and your weird-ass behaviors.”

Gabriella

After another shower, well, on my part at least, I get the sober ones to help me at least round up the sex-high ones and we end up downstairs. I wanted to keep going and have a proper reunion with everyone, but Palmer hitting on Cyrus, then Bal, then Foster, and then Grey blacking out, Bal doing his weird sport announcer thing...Pearson seemed a bit weary to join the fray and Jericho actually cracked a fucking smile. That had to be one of the only times that's ever happened.

I wander down in somebody's t-shirt and nothing else because Foster refused to let me cover myself any further. Apollo is eating a big fucking bowl of cornflakes again and the guys that remember what's happening are glaring at him and cracking their knuckles like they're part of some old school gangster film.

"The sex goddess has returned to her kidnapper, will she Stockholm folks? Oh, Palmer is going in for the score! Swagger on, dick out and swinging, approaching the blue-eyed shadow man with...what's that? If he were a transformer, he'd be Optimus *Fine*?? My oh, my I think we have a homerun!"

I lose it. I mean, how on earth do you not when you've got this going on? Apollo looks so fucking confused and it's honestly glorious.

"Just...ignore?"

"Gabriella, why do you have goons as mates? Did you do something to offend the goddess? Is that why most of them seem defective?"

I get snagged out of the air by Foster with his growly, possessive beast surfacing. He was kind enough to carry the unconscious Grey downstairs and he's currently propped up on the couch, a very high Dar putting him into different poses and using a pen to decorate him.

"Dar, no penises on the face, yeah?"

He blows a raspberry at me like a toddler and draws one on the side of his neck instead, maintaining eye contact the entire

time and then producing a mega-watt smile as he side-steps my decree. You know what? I'm going to pick my battles here.

I reach out to Grey and suck the lust back out of him, leaving enough to just make sure he's a bit extra happy and he immediately comes to on the defensive, grabbing my breasts like they need protection from somebody. Prying his hand off of me, I hold it in my hand instead.

"They're not...defective. They're quirky. They'll be back to normal in like 10-15 more minutes, max. Side effect to having sex with your bonded bodysmith, apparently. I see you've already got your...favorite snack. Anybody else need anything?"

Foster begins inching his fingers up my thighs, grazing his fingers against my bare pussy and just resting his hand there in a possessive hold that just...yep. I'm ready again.

"You're all a bunch of sexual fiends, aren't you? Ok, can we talk about adult things now?"

Palmer takes this as his cue to begin fake modelling poses again, making a duck face as he shoves his ass out behind him. "Oh we can talk adult, baby. I'm on top of things. Would you like to be one of them?"

I reach out to smack his ass and yank him over, letting him collapse next to me and Foster with his head on my lap. I suck the lust out of the rest of them so we can actually be productive for a minute, savoring the feeling as it runs through my body before it settles.

"Gabriella, I'm not entirely sure I can do this."

"Oh woman up. You wanted the bond, you've got the bond *and* the bondeds. Proceed."

"Er, right..." He looks around the room and it looks like he's trying to calculate how exactly we all get busy together in bed. I mean, I'd be wondering too. There are *a lot* of guys here. Speaking of which...

"Hey, Cyrus, thanks for the assist." I wink at him and feel Foster try to adjust himself behind me, but there's no hiding that reaction. He totally enjoyed being sucked off by Cyrus.

And really, I might have enjoyed it even more than he did. Fuck that was hot.

“Okay, just...introductions are probably a good place to start. Everybody, this is Apollo. Son of the Night, and apparently, thanks to daddy dearest, is bound to my soul. He’s staying. Apollo, we’ve got Bal, Dar, Cyrus, Pearson, Jericho, Grey, Foster, and Palmer.”

“And where are your other mates?”

Fuck. Does he know?

“Um...unknown?”

“No, you’ve met them both, I can tell. I just don’t know why they aren’t here. Unless you found them unworthy?”

Everyone turns to look at me, like they want answers or some shit. Ugh, fine.

“Um, yeah. I met...one. He’s...let’s just say not an option at this time, okay? I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Dar and Cyrus are definitely not letting that one just go.

“Gabriella, you met somebody? Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“Because he doesn’t know, and he really is unavailable. I don’t know what the goddess was thinking, but it’s not going to happen, okay? Please, I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Just thinking about it was painful, even though that was so damn stupid because his perfect gods damned smile was only in my face for like five minutes. And the other times I saw him he had his arms wrapped around another woman, showing her affection. Not. *Mine*.

Grey pulls me in and just holds me, kissing me on the cheek and taking my hand as he settles back.

“Okay, what about the other one?”

“I really don’t know what you’re on about.”

“I can read it in your...for lack of a better word, aura. Being soul bound lets me see things they probably won’t.”

“Well, if I met him, I didn’t get the memo he was mine. Are you telling me you seriously don’t think there’s enough males in this room as it is?”

“I’m telling you that with your circuit incomplete, there are still threats to you.”

“But you said your dad was too weak to be a threat.”

“Yes...mostly. But he still has control over me, and can summon me at will. Which means he can summon *you* at will if we’re together.”

“Woah, woah, woah. Why wouldn’t the Night be a threat, and how could he summon you?”

“Okay let’s just start at the beginning. If you enjoy fermented beverages, now might be the time to collect some.”

“He means alcohol.”

Bal hops up and returns with some beers, passing them around and damn if I don’t chug the bottle in nearly one go because I was just a little too much in the feels right now. Then I remember Palmer and how he’s trying to not drink and I feel *terrible*.

“Shit. Sorry, Palmer. That was stupid. Hold on.”

I run and throw mine away, coming back with some sodas.

He kisses me in thanks and then we cheers with our soda cans, just like we did at that picnic in that creepy storage room.

“Okay. The big change. That’s really where the story starts. The goddess was losing followers, losing respect, and she was greatly saddened by the treatment she was getting from her children. My father used to be mated to her, and so even though she insisted she was fine, he took it upon himself to look for a solution.

“He went about this completely rogue, going behind the goddess’ back and her other mates’ backs, wanting to be the hero that rode in on a white horse and saved the day. She wouldn’t admit how low her spirits were, but things on earth weren’t good for her.

“So, my father, being the self-centered prick he is, came up with a plan to make her children worship her again. He thought the best way to do this, was to answer prayers. Now, he says some of the loudest ones they’d get were from mates that couldn’t conceive.

“He sought out women, on earth, that had been praying to the goddess for years, begging to have a child. He impersonated their mates, laid on some pretty speech about how the goddess contacted them and told them they would have a child, and to thank her.

“He seduced them, and used his creator magic to make his seed take root inside of them. Now, you might be thinking that maybe that’s not so bad. But, he did this to probably at least a hundred women, knowing the stories would spread of how the goddess was merciful and gifted them with children after so long of trying.

“He basically raped them- there was no consent involved, they all thought they were with their husbands. And so, the stories *did* spread, but, the husbands clearly realized that the stories their wives were spreading weren’t true, and that they hadn’t been a participant.

“So my father had to go and alter their memories as well. The women gave birth, but to all new species. This is why after the great change we see all kinds of sub-species emerge, because they were born half god and half human, taking on powers from both.

“Sure, the goddess started getting more praise, more notoriety, but she also realized that her first mate had just been unfaithful to her, blatantly and recklessly. He harmed the very beings she vowed to care for, creating a whole host of new species that would have to be catalogued and figured out, but more importantly, he betrayed her.

“So, she cast him aside, rejecting him, sending him to the barren wasteland of the shadow realm, where he’s resided ever since. She cut off his connection to the realm of the goddess, so his power kept shrinking. Unless he consumed souls from the magical beings he helped to sire; his own children.

“The goddess was distraught at the loss of a mate, and when she realized what he was doing to her creations, she stopped blessing high tier conduits, hoping that they’d stay under the Night’s radar and be safe from him.”

“So that’s why I’m...the only one with more than three marks?”

“Precisely. I think the goddess started to see though, that my father was weakening, and to put it bluntly, got sick of his shit. His brain is deteriorating, his sanity far from stable, and his entire being is slowly returning back to the mists.

“He created me from the mists themselves, so I’m not human whatsoever, and not even from his flesh and blood. He created me with his powers so that he could have a secondary source to help him feed. I never truly had a childhood because I was technically never a child, just a being with little knowledge of the world.

“As time passed and I understood the ways of my father, I began to find ways to go against him and to make myself separate from him. I’ve wanted to escape for many, many years, and he gave me the opportunity, trusting me like I’ve taught him to that I’d go along with his plan.

“Which is for me to trick Gabby into returning to the shadowlands with me, so he can consume her magic; which would be enough to not only return him to his full glory, but to give him the power to roam freely over the earth again. Obviously, that wouldn’t be an ideal situation.”

“And how do we know what you say is trustworthy? Why should we believe that you aren’t going to just give her up the second we let down our guards?”

“Gabby, may I see your arm?”

Foster doesn’t let me walk, growling at me when I try to. He carries me across the comfy living room, sitting on the armchair right next to Apollo. Apollo brushes a kiss against my knuckles on my right hand, then starts canting some misty sounds over my arm.

I feel my soul stir in response, rushing forward to greet him in a primal dance as his words paint goosebumps up and down my skin. He brings a hand up to my forearm, right over the extra mate mark I was still *holding* for somebody else, transforming it into a large moon and then painting a broken-up scene of a ghost tree trying to block out the light of the moon behind it, shadows dancing around the images.

He leans back and waits for my reaction, and suddenly I feel like I can read his entire mind. Whatever he did, he linked us together somehow, so that now he couldn't lie at all without me knowing immediately.

You see, my beautiful one? I cannot betray myself, as I cannot betray you. Feel my truth.

I scramble backwards as I hear his voice inside my damn skull.

We truly are one, now.

“Gabby?”

I look to Bal who is ready to leap forward and yank me away from Apollo, halting him with my eyes.

“He...I...yeah. Um. Shit that's weird. He's clear, guys. I can't...he just fully opened up his mind to me. There's nothing he could do that would hide his true motives. I can see it all. He really does want to defeat his father.”

And as that statement settles into me, the reality of our bond hits and I realize how badly I need to kiss him. So I do. Scrambling up, I leap at him, straddling him and pulling his face to mine. He tastes of ice and shadows, something that shouldn't be tangibly labelled, but is, nonetheless.

When I pull back he's breathing as hard as I am, and Foster finally seems to pull back on his caveman routine, graciously allowing me to retain my new seat.

“Okay, so that's settled. What else?”

“You need to claim your mates, Gabby. That has to take priority because if my father were to get his hands on you, I would burn the world down to get you back.”

“Tell me about this other mate, Gabby and why he’s unavailable to you. Who shall I take down to change that?”

Fuck, Jericho was a bit psycho. “No need to take anyone down, shadow man. Especially since...fine. You probably all want the truth, and I owe it to you since you’re offering to smite and burn things to keep me safe. Just...Jericho, please stay calm? I worry about your reactions to things...”

“My reactions are mine to worry about.”

“That’s what concerns me.”

“Why are you warning *me*, specifically? Do your other mates *not* pledge to eliminate threats?”

Foster growls in response to this, making my little inner wolfie want to respond and take him up on that kinky wolf sex he mentioned. Apollo splutters behind me.

You can hear my thoughts, can’t you?

Affirmative. You have a wolf form?

I send him an image of me shifting that one time to protect Pearson, making me miss the pretty princess. Time to play musical Gabby. I get up and straddle him next, pulling his arms around my waist. He hadn’t really touched me much earlier, and I had a feeling claiming him might be best done with just the two of us.

He reacts instantly, nearly shaking as he takes what he wants from me.

“Okay, Gabriella. I didn’t mean like, literally claim them, right this instant, in this room.”

I pull away from Pearson enough to smirk at Apollo. “Just manifest some more cornflakes for yourself, you’ll be fine.”

Fuck cornflakes.

I smile against Pearson’s mouth, enjoying the taste of him and the hesitant but sure way he grips my skin under my t-shirt. I pull his off for him, needing skin on skin.

“Better run now, Apollo if you’re not ready to see how babies are made.”

Are you serious right now? You're just going to fuck him in front of all of your mates? No closed doors?

I shrug in response, not caring that my mates are all around. In fact, it feels better with them all around. Pearson will get his one-on-one time he needs to affirm our bond, my mates will get a free show. And all of their sober asses will be there to witness whatever Pearson will do to likely humiliate himself afterwards.

Pulling Pearson off the chair he's sitting on, I let my full bodysmith powers come out to play for the first time in awhile, no doubt hitting most of the other guys with a small dose. I hear a chorus of groans slip out, but no one makes a move closer, sensing what Pearson and I need right now.

Once he's on the floor and I'm on top of him, I slide my way down his body, pulling off his sweats and letting him pull off my t-shirt. I'm proud of the body I wear so I'm not really worried that I'm about to shove my most intimate places into the air for display.

I let my tongue lick up and down the seams between his thighs, grazing over his balls, and inhaling his scent as I finally take him into my mouth. I ease him into my rhythm, letting him feel how deep I can take him and how I can make my tongue roll over him.

I want to show him what he gets by claiming me as a mate, how I can make him feel. I let my teeth graze lightly against his shaft, nibbling the soft tip as he weeps for me. Each drop I harvest sends me higher, the throbbing in between my own legs building to a near painful level as his hips swivel and his passion rises to meet mine.

He pulls me off of him before he can finish, pinning me onto my back and tasting me. His eyes roll back into his head as my essence coats his tongue, a string of profanities falling from his plush lips.

"Fuck. Fuckity fucking fuckers. Why does she taste so fucking good?"

The guys all smirk as they rub themselves over their pants, Pearson circling my clit and putting a perfect amount of pressure on it as he pushes me farther and farther towards release. He lets one hand wander up to my breasts, rolling my nipple as my legs begin to shake.

Taking this as encouragement, he uses his other hand to stimulate my ass before inserting two fingers deep inside of my pussy, curling into me and immediately finding my g-spot.

“Fuck, pretty princess! Oh gods, Pearson!” I keep letting incoherencies drip from my tongue as I scream my release into the room full of sexed up mates, getting turned on when I see some of them with dicks in their hands.

You are a demon, Gabriella. That...cornflakes didn't work. I didn't even fucking touch myself, and yet I find myself sitting in a rather large mess inside my pants.

I send him thoughts of how it feels to go down on my mates and his mental reverb almost makes me come again. Or maybe that was Pearson mounting me.

“Gabriella, thank you for choosing me. For putting me out of my misery and welcoming me into your family. I can't make poisons or chop heads off or rip out throats, but if it comes down to it, I will use whatever means necessary to protect you. You're mine now, and you will be cherished the rest of our lives together.”

His sweet words and dark gaze keep me hypnotized as he thrusts in and out of my body, claiming me as I claim him. All my extra muscles are working hard, milking him for all he's got. I know one of these idiots is probably timing him like a creeper, ready to add his name to the ranks. I have no idea who won the Styrofoam penis sculpture last, but I'm sure Jericho and Apollo will have a field day with it.

Pearson is longer than most of my other mates, hitting deep inside of me as I give myself over to the pleasure. My full lust snakes out to ensnare him, pulling him under as I go off and trembling as he cries out in harmony with me.

When we both stop twitching, somebody starts a slow clap and then a few others join in.

“Sorry man, no trophy for you this week. It was an admirable effort, though.”

Pearson blinks back at Dar, trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about. I don’t even know half the time, so I’m not much help. He rolls to the side of me to admire his new mark, a large depiction of a roman numeral seven made up of what looks like a mix of natural materials.

Matter welder. My next mark is now filled with a mixture of stone, raw wood, and an Arabic 7 that looks to be metallicized. Pearson rubs his hand over my new mark, sending tingles up my arm and then leads forward to kiss it, then pulls me back to him to kiss my mouth again.

“Never thought I’d claim my life partner with an audience.”

“Life, huh? So sure of it then?”

Pearson pulls me closer to his body so my head falls to his chest, his arms twining around me tightly. “I told you. Since the nerf guns. I mean, you haven’t hand fed me ice cream yet but I think there’s still some time for that to happen.”

I snort at the memory of drunk Pearson whining about me. It was pretty sweet. It’s so comfortable just lying there with him, our bodies meshed together and covered in sweat and other, more sticky fluids. *Okay, goddess* I think to myself. *I guess I have to apologize for not trusting you.*

Being fated for each other is making the bonding process feel a bit too easy; It’s like once we realize that we’re meant for each other, put in a little effort to hang out, all the deep, sweeping feelings just fall into place. I’m not a mushy person, and yet, I find myself constantly gushing over these men when I’m alone with my thoughts. Like now, when I’m laying here on one of them.

“Gabby, what’s that on your back?”

“Pearson’s hand? Did I mess you guys up when I pulled the lust back?”

I feel Cyrus creep closer with the other guys close behind, forming a bit of a circle as hands start brushing my skin, pushing me on top of Pearson so they can see my back better.

“Gabby, who all did you talk to at the Gala? This guy you claim is unavailable...what’s his affinity?”

“Um, shit. I actually don’t know. I bet Jericho does, though.”

“We’re going to pause on that for a minute, because I feel like we need to discuss this, but your lower back has some iridescence to it...like scales or something.”

I peel my head back to see if Bal is pulling my leg or not, but his face looks pretty convincing. So then I try like an idiot to crane my neck enough to catch a glimpse, but it definitely doesn’t bend that way.

“Scales? What kind of scales? Why the fuck do I have scales on me?”

Bal pulls me up and brings me to the bathroom, handing me a small mirror before placing me in front of a big one. Through the handheld one I’m able to angle it so I can get a clear glimpse of my still very naked backside, and, sure enough, around my hips and flaring down for a few inches is a spray of light blue and purplish scales. Fuck. I knew where I had seen those colors before.

“You look like you just figured something out.”

“Well, I mean, I just recognize the colors, but they could be from something else...no one knows what this is? Some sort of freaky magical rash? Do we need to call a healer?”

Cyrus steps forward, spinning me around and getting up close and personal with my ass. He’s definitely not complaining, either. He runs a hand over it lightly and it’s definitely more sensitive than I remember, then I see the scales spread a few inches lower so they cover my whole pelvis and end at the top of my thighs. It’s still barely there, nearly holographic, but it’s definitely real.

“Hm. I’m not too familiar with aquatic species...but I think I remember reading something sometime about how aquatic

shifters recognize their mates?”

“You think I’m somebody’s mate? I wasn’t alone with anybody though at the gala, I never....ooooh wait a minute, yes I was. Fuck. No, we barely even spoke. You really think this is an indication of him claiming me? How does that work?”

Cyrus looks like he’s thinking real hard about details, all of the other guys just kind of staring at my strange skin.

“Maybe we should go to the pool downstairs? See what happens?”

“I’m not going to turn into a fish, foster.”

“Fish, no. Mermaid? Maybe...”

“A mermaid? You think I’m a mermaid now? Yeah, not buying it. But I’m also not going to swim.”

“Scared, wildflower?”

I push Foster back into the hallway, a sudden urge to dominate him pushing me. I keep his eye contact, slowly backing him up until he’s trapped against a wall. His beast rises to his eyes and I feel mine flair in response, a growl ripping from my throat as he refuses to give me the upperhand.

“Okay, little one, let’s just put a lid on that. Let’s get you cleaned up and fed, and then we’ll talk.”

Jericho and Pearson each grab one of my hands, pulling me upstairs as I blink out of whatever little trance I was just in, Foster laughing his ass off as I walk off. I do what I’m good at and flip him off as we walk upstairs.

I feel your magic level rising, Gabriella.

I just want a normal life. Why is it that every time I feel like I’ve settled something, something else pops up to figure out? This is getting rather tedious.

You need a quiet night. I will make it happen. Go take a bath and let your mates take care of you.

I nod even though Apollo isn’t in sight, following Jericho and Pearson to the master bath where the giant jacuzzi tub is. I

start running it and Jericho pulls something out of his pocket, diggings his fingers into what looks like a small leather pouch and then flowers are growing up out of it as he pours his magic into it.

As the bathtub fills, the air is filled with a thick floral aroma, jasmine and something else recognizable. As soon as the blooms are finished maturing, he plucks them off and places them in the rising water, perfuming the bath with them.

“You know, for an assassin, you seem to have a way with romantic gestures.”

“They are just flowers, Gabriella, and I am a gardener. I can grow them in my sleep.”

“Don’t you need like the seeds with you though to do that?”

“Erm, yes. I created those for you, I’ve been carrying them around.”

“Are you serious?”

He slowly and methodically pulls off his clothing, folding it neatly as he goes and placing them on the vanity.

“Maybe it was a bit pre-emptive of me, but I moved my greenhouse here while you were gone. I wasn’t sure what else to do, and I was told if I kept trying to injure people in my quest for you, I’d be imprisoned.”

“Well, thank you then, for not letting that happen. I know we haven’t gotten a lot of time to talk yet, but clearly you made an impression on me when we were at the gala.”

Pearson and I climb into the steaming water as Jericho neatly tucks his things into the corner, wrapping his long hair up and on top of his head so it stays dry. He’s beastly with his clothes off, scars shimmering all over his dark skin and thick, well-defined muscles built from years of using his body against enemies.

“How’d you become an assassin?”

Pearson pulls me onto his lap, our new bonded mojo making it difficult to be apart at the moment.

“Well, I grew up with kind of shitty parents, leaving me to fend for myself more often than not. I got into a lot of trouble and fought a lot, I always got teased by other kids. When I was sixteen, they disappeared altogether with just a note saying that I was old enough to take care of myself and that was that.

“Didn’t take long for me to get a bit desperate, and one time this senior, who knew I was a gardener, offered to pay me if I grew him something that would make him ill. Not kill the or incapacitate, just enough to make it look like the flu or something.

“I guess he was trying to get out of something his parents wanted him to do, and he had the means to make it happen. I did it, gave him an antidote as well, and word spread from there. I began experimenting with different plants, using any and all seeds I could get my hands on, thinking that it would be an easy way for me to take care of myself.

“Never really thought about the repercussions of it, who it was affecting, I was more concerned with keeping a roof over my head and food in my fridge. Eventually, I caught the attention of the council, and they were less than thrilled about the reputation I was building.

“You remember Royce from the gala? His family took me in, his father was on the council at the time. Royce and I were about the same age, 17 or so I think, and he fought against me being incarcerated. Thought that with a little guidance I could be a useful tool for the council.

“I moved in with them, Royce and I started talking more and more, and soon the council asked me to demonstrate things and began giving me tasks to create things. They said they had never met someone with such an aptitude for combining plants or creating extracts, all things that they realized would be invaluable for a weapon.

“They trained me, paid me well, and here I am.”

“Royce mentioned you were like a brother to him. Also said it was unlike you to get your head turned by a woman.”

“Yes, well, Royce should keep his mouth shut.”

I could see the easy affection between the two men, both of them making similar faces when they spoke of the other. It was pretty cute.

“Him and his girlfriend are sweet together.”

Gods that was difficult to say.

“Oh, Amanda? I guess.”

What wasn't he saying?

“You don't think so?”

“It's not really my place to say.”

“I kind of liked her at the gala, was thinking about asking her to hang out sometime... anything I should know?”

Jericho cocks his head to the side as my heart races a bit, needing to hear that Royce was happy so I could feel better about not pursuing it.

“It's important, Jericho. I promise. I'm not into gossip, I don't usually care much about what other people do, but please? Since you know him so well? Just tell me he's happy?”

“Shit. it's him, isn't it?”

I glance at the empty spot on my arm that will stay empty, nodding a little as I watch the flowers drift around through the water.

“I see. That's why you said he was unavailable. Huh. I actually really like that, you'd be good for him.”

“It doesn't matter. He's with someone.”

“He doesn't have to be though, they're not married or anything.”

“Okay, I'm a bit lost.”

“Sorry, Pearson. That guy that I danced with right after Jericho at the gala? The one that accompanied me on stage when they were announcing the conduits to everyone? His hand brushed mine and it was like the goddess sent alarm bells ringing through my head. I knew she had him marked for me,

but I had seen him with Amanda, the woman that was the go-between for the conduits at the event.

“They had their hands all over each other at the event, and I knew I couldn’t act on anything, but it still kind of sucked. The goddess has done so well until now, too. He is happy, right?”

“For now, yes, but...their relationship isn’t without it’s hurdles. They’ve been dating a few years now, and when he first met her it was cute and I thought she was a nice girl, but I think I always freaked her out a bit.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“I’m assuming that was sarcasm. She’s never really liked me too well, thought I was a bad influence or something on Royce. Plus, she’s broken his heart a few times already but he’s like addicted or something. Keeps going back when she changes her mind.”

“But it’s all good now? She seemed so sweet.”

“I suppose she is. Royce and I haven’t gotten to hang out as much since they’ve been together, she’s a little controlling. The last time they broke up, she told him he wasn’t taking it seriously enough and ghosted him for three weeks before showing back up and he took her back like nothing happened.”

“That’s strange. But not much I can do about it.”

“Tell him, that’s something.”

“I can’t do that, Pearson.”

“Why not? If I was with someone that was clearly all wrong for me, based on what Jericho just laid out, and this sexy, incredibly goddess of a woman walked up and told me I was fate marked to be hers, I don’t think I would even hesitate to drop the baggage and jump ship.”

“Yes, but that isn’t fair to either of them. There’s got to be a reason they keep getting back together, and it’s not my place to step in and give them a reason to do otherwise. It’s not going to happen.”

“But then your circuit can’t close.”

“Maybe not, but at least I’ll know that I didn’t become a homewrecker to make it happen.”

Jericho begins rubbing my feet across from us in the bath, kneading tension out of my arches and replacing some of my stress with zen.

“You need to at least tell him, Gabriella. You don’t need to break them up, even though I think he would be happier for it eventually, but if the goddess has told you he’s yours, he should have a say in it, don’t you think?”

“He’ll think I’m crazy, and Amanda would hate me. I can’t, okay?”

I get out of the bath and hurry to dry off, nearly bolting to the closet that my clothes are in so I can get a moment to think. Was he right? *Did* Royce deserve to know the path the goddess wanted him to take? You know what? If goddess wanted me to mate him, she would have to make it happen. If she was capable of choosing him for me, she was capable of telling him and making it happen.

I step out of my giant closet to see Jericho waiting patiently for me, a calmness surrounding him. He doesn’t move a muscle as I approach him, a little embarrassed about the way I stormed off a bit ago.

“Sorry, it’s just kind of hard to talk about. I can feel the connection that wants to be there, but knowing he’s in somebody else’s arms kind of sucks.”

“I’m sorry if I pushed it too far, I just want my brother to be happy like I am and I don’t think he’s getting it with her.”

“How can I possibly make you happy? I’m immature and exhausting.”

Jericho rumbles a laugh as he tenderly pulls me close to him, one hand cradling my face and the other slung across my lower back, pressing our bodies together.

“You are exhausting, but like you said, I can feel the connection. I see your light and it makes me want to smile. A disturbing thought for me. All I’ve known most of my life is violence and running, hiding. It’s strange to me that I want to

grow flowers that smell good, just so I can impress you a little or bring a smile to your face. I don't do that shit. My hands know how to handle countless toxins and mix them into untraceable mediums, and now I'm taking bubble baths and pouring out my life story.

"I don't feel alone. And I won't push this anymore, I can tell it's difficult for you, but I want you to think about at least telling him, okay? Just think about it, that's all I ask."

"When would I even see him?"

"He works at the capital. He's a go-between for the human level magic persons, which is how he even met Amanda. They work together."

"Lovely. What is his affinity, by the way?"

"He's a hardcore illusionist. He can make your eyes think anything he wants them to."

Grey

After things finally settled down once Gabriella was home, we had no choice but to jump right into our new roles as the supe community council. I kind of worried for the people, knowing it was *us* responsible for their laws and complaints. I mean, just last night we had a throw down in the middle of the living room over who got to sit by Gabby at dinner. I won of course, because I just bypassed their stupidity and put her on my lap. I think I may be the smartest of them; must be my superior vampiric skills. Or my *charisma*.

We've been in the office a few times so far, slowly getting our spaces set up to our liking and getting a handle on who works directly for us, how to contact other resources, and how all the computer systems worked. I could tell that a lot of the people that currently worked in the offices around ours didn't have much faith in us, we were rather young compared to the last council.

But, the last council was straight up *terrible*. We had brought some cases that were in progress home with us, going over details and discussing them together. It was kind of cool being able to work with all my bond-mates, I think that might give us a bit of an advantage over the previous council. We worked well together when we had a singular focus. Take Gabby's unending orgasms, for example. We knocked that shit out of the park.

We had fucking assistants. Pretty sure I was younger than her, hopefully that wouldn't be awkward. Then again, I'd probably make it plenty awkward all on my own, or with Gabby when she came to visit me. If you catch my drift. We were good at making others feel awkward. Something about not being able to stay in control of the lust we both produced as I fed on her and touched her. Not my problem, though.

“Councilman Grogan? Are you all ready for the meeting?”

I kick myself out of my dirty thoughts to see my assistant hovering in the doorway, chest puffed out and skirt a bit short.

She might have been attractive if I had normal man standards, but I was mated to a sex goddess.

“Yes. Can we please add something to the itinerary?”

“Of course, I’ll put it in for you. What would you like me to write?”

I glance at her outfit again. “Dress code. After the meeting, I’d like you to head home and put something more professional on, please.”

She reddens a bit but nods, swaying her hips a bit as she goes. Yikes. Gathering my notes, I meet the other guys in the large hearing room, Gabby flirting with Jericho as she waits for whatever is about to happen to happen. Honestly, most of the cases we were wrapping up right now from the previous council were total shit.

I kind of feel like a fraud sitting here in my button up shirt, glancing through the notes again to make sure I don’t embarrass myself anymore than I normally do.

“Did you see what the hearing is about?”

I glance through to see which one is up first today and have to try not to laugh at the absurdity of it.

“Is this real?”

Palmer looks as humored as I do, biting his fist as he reads through the case notes.

“Oh my gods, this is going to be difficult to get through straight faced. What’s the most minimum punishment we can afford?”

Dar quirks a lip, clearly amused too but better at hiding it.

“Community service? I mean, that shit’s just funny.”

“Community service...yeah, I think I’m good with that.”

The room comes to a halted quiet as the rear doors open, a couple guys about our age being led in in magic-hindering cuffs by some security guards. All of them start checking out Gabriella as she sits off to the side with her legs crossed.

She looked way too fuckable to be in here, accomplishing the sexier version of what my assistant was going for, but coming off far less desperate. Nothing this woman put on her body looked bad on her. She somehow squeezed herself into a black leather skirt that cut off right above the knee, completely molded to her figure and working like a second skin. Her top half was actually covered up with a black turtleneck, but it was so fitted to her, and her figure was so ridiculous, that it came off looking like bedroom wear.

“Court in session.”

Cyrus was taking the lead since he had the most experience with the council workings aside from his brother, but that was fair since they were hella old. I have to pry my eyes off my wife as Jericho keeps right beside her, an arm slung around the back of her chair.

“Alright, I want to recap what I’ve got here, and then I want to ask for the defendant’s input. We are resuming this case from the previous council, so if some of the details are wrong, we can correct them. I have here that you two were brought in for...biting humans?”

“We’re vampires, councilman.”

“And were the humans consenting?”

I have to hold in laughter because Dar is clearly trying to get them to just spill the story.

“We live in a bit of a smaller town, councilman. We didn’t mean harm by our actions, we were just trying to amuse ourselves.”

“By...trying to turn vegans into vampires?”

There’s more than a few smothered laughs and the two defendants look like they’re about to lose it as well.

“We don’t have the ability to transform, councilman. Our bite merely gives them a temporary craving for blood.”

“How temporary?”

I intercede, since I’m the resident vampire and all.

“Those without the transformation ability can willingly infuse others with temporary vampirism, but it only holds for 24-48 hours.”

“And why vegans, specifically, might I ask?” Palmer totally already knows the answer to that but he’s wanting everyone in on the genius of these two idiots.

“I’m sorry, councilmen. We went after vegans because they get so damn mad when they have to fight their inner tofu agenda to seek out an animal product for sustenance.”

“And were any of your...victims...harmed by your actions?”

“No sir, we always made sure they came out of the temporary state in good health.”

“And how long until they returned to their normal lifestyles?”

Bal was doing much better than I would be if I was doing the questioning, I’m imagining vegans going on a blood spree and then throwing a tantrum.

“Within 24 hours, for the most part.”

“The most part?”

“Yes, well some of them started wanting meat after the vampirism cleared from their system.”

“I see. Can we hear a testament from one of the victims?”

A thin, angry woman steps forward with her eyes shooting daggers at the two juveniles. “My name is Karen Sophia, councilmembers. I was victimized by those two after I got done grocery shopping. I felt completely violated and was quite ill afterwards from the influx of...non-plant matter into my system.”

She hands some sort of papers to a guard to present to us, copies being distributed. Doctor notes from her visit, but it looks like she was just being whiny. I wasn’t very good at this, was I?

“Are you still suffering any side affects, Ms. Sophie?”

“Other than traumatic memories, no.”

“Okay, thank you Ms. Sophie.”

She glared at the two vampires as she stalked back to her seat, but they didn't seem even slightly offended, just snickering at their own jokes.

More posturing takes place, a few more witnesses and a bunch of more questions directed at the defendants, then we break to discuss everything before announcing our verdict. None of the victims are thrilled that the guys are only paying reparation in terms of community service, but whatever.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur of computer work and forms, but it's not completely unpleasant.

“You about ready to head home, babe?”

Gabby is leaning against my door as I drum a pencil against the desk, leaning back and trying to stretch a bit.

“Quitting time, huh?”

“You look entirely too good behind that desk, Grey.”

I nod my head towards her to get her to come all the way in my office, gesturing again for her to close the door. She knows exactly what I want, perching on my lap and pulling her hair out of the way as I pull the offensive clothing away from her delectable skin.

“You always smell so fucking good.”

Just having her sit on my lap was already making me hard, and the stress from the day was making me a bit more irritable than normal. It was going to take me a bit to settle into this new role, but if I had my mate here to help dull the edges of boredom and insanity I could definitely cope.

My mouth waters as I taste her skin, her hands shaking a little as I take my time. My fangs scrape along her skin, teasing her, as one of my arms wraps around her waist to hold her firmly against me. The second I slip under her skin and that hot rush of metallic ambrosia floods my mouth, the door opens and my assistant is standing here with a surprised smile on her face which quickly turns to disappointment.

“Can we help you? Do you normally waltz right through closed doors without notice?”

I want to whine as I pull my teeth from Gabby’s neck, but she halts me, keeping me buried inside her. I can’t stop at this point, her taste so addictive and drugging that I lose sight of my surroundings a bit as I feed from her.

“Sorry...your majesty.”

She stares for a minute more at me, not Gabby, and Gabby has to snarl a bit at her to get her to stop. She leaves as a blush overtakes her face and stumbles out of the office, not fully closing the door as she departs.

“She’s going to be a problem. Fuck, Grey. That always feels so damn good.”

She sinks against me, my lust dulling the pain and coating her body in my own brand of magic. I can tell the moment her body decides to let go, taking my last mouthful as she spasms on top of me, twisting her hips and gouging her nails into the skin of my arm that’s wrapped around her as she falls apart.

I lick her wound and seal it, feeling fully relaxed now and ready to take on a million more cases. I kiss her neck a few times before re-covering it, spinning her face towards me to kiss her mouth instead.

“You were a problem today, in the hearings.”

She looks at me wide-eyed.

“Me? I didn’t do anything! I just wanted to see how the hearings normally went!”

“Mm. But no one could care about the problems we were trying to solve when your fine ass was sitting in there.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“I’m serious. We might start to see an influx of hearings if word gets out that you’re sitting in on them.”

She rolls her eyes at me and gets up to leave, letting me gather my things before following behind her. She lets out a

loud ‘umph’ as she turns the corner, stumbling back from someone right as I exit.

“Oh, hey, Royce. Sorry about that.”

She starts fiddling with her hair, running her hand through it and looking kind of nervous. Her body language is all over the place, wrapping her arms around her waist and fidgeting. Interesting.

This Royce guy smiles at her, a little too lingeringly, before reaching a hand out to introduce himself.

“Hey man, I’m Royce. I work over in the human relations department. I was just looking for Jericho, but it looks like he might have already left.”

“Grey. Yeah, he had to go fill an order back at the house. Did you need something?”

“Oh, um just kind of wanted his advice on something. I guess I can find him tomorrow. See you around, Gabby.”

She grabs his arm as he starts to walk off. “Would you...and Amanda like to come over for dinner? I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“Thanks for the offer, but she’s got plans tonight.” He’s leaning in towards her a little, his brow a bit furrowed like he’s trying to make sense of something.

“Well, you’re welcome over, if you’d like. Offer still stands. The house is plenty big, his greenhouse is pretty crazy. He mentioned he wanted you to see his new setup.”

“Oh, he did? You sure that wouldn’t be an inconvenience?”

“Not at all.”

I wrap my arm around Gabby’s waist, pulling her into me and tucking my hair behind my ears.

“Yeah, you’re welcome, man. We always have plenty of food.”

“Cool, that sounds much better than going home to an empty apartment. Can I bring anything?”

“Nah, the staff will have it handled. You want to ride with us or follow?”

“I’ll just follow behind you so I don’t have to inconvenience anyone to run me back over here.”

Gabby is sweating a bit, offering up a vague smile before we wander off to our car.

Gabriella

Fuck. Why the fuck did I invite Royce over? I haven't been able to eat much, pushing food around my plate as I listen to Jericho and Royce talk, laughing about stuff that I can't hear. It's a little unsettling hearing Jericho laugh because he's so intimidating and growly usually, but there's definitely a lightness to him when Royce is around.

He sees me staring and absent-mindedly brings my hand up to kiss the back of it, shooting me a wink before resuming his conversation. Royce stops mid-word as his eyes grow enormous, staring at his friend who is being so openly affectionate with me.

Dinner wraps up and I quietly excuse myself, needing to vent some adrenaline so I can calm myself down a bit. I slip into some yoga pants and a sports bra, pulling my hair into a ponytail before lacing up my tennis shoes and heading down to our gym.

I start off on the treadmill, needing a slow warm up to get my body moving and soon I'm full out running, pushing myself so that I'll stop feeling whatever it is I'm feeling. Luckily the guys seemed to sense that I needed some time to myself, so I put myself through the motions of a full workout so I can exhaust myself and not worry over the one guy that I can't have.

It's stupid, really, that I'm getting so hung up on him. I didn't even know the guy, and I had all these other guys in my life that were perfect for me. I still hadn't even sealed the deal with Jericho or Apollo yet, but I was enjoying the small intimacies we were building and the way we were forming our lives together.

By the time I'm done with all the equipment I wanted to use I'm sweating like crazy and barely able to suck in air, but my mind is blessedly empty of it's previous train of thought, so the workout did its job. I give myself a minute to find my breath before sucking down some water and heading back upstairs to shower and get ready for bed.

Royce is sitting on the stairs that lead up to the rest of the house, contemplating something when I find myself right back in the state of mind I'd just kicked my butt to escape from.

“Oh, did you lose Jericho again?”

“No, I was actually waiting for you.”

He stands up and leans against the wall, looking at me weird.

“He, uh, told me, about...”

He looks pointedly towards my arm and I let out a few cusses.

“I'm sorry, he shouldn't have done that.”

“Were you going to tell me?”

I shrug, drinking more water to give me something to do.

“It didn't seem appropriate, considering you're not single. Wasn't my place.”

He nods at this.

“For what it's worth, if I was single, I'd be as smitten as the rest of them are, I'm sure. You've got yourself a hell of a set-up here.”

He's eyeing the pool behind me and the gym from whence I just came. I take his words for the rejection they are, knowing that it was stupid of me to have any hope of him 'jumping ship' like Pearson said.

“It's fine, Royce. I'm not expecting anything. I'm really not sure what the goddess had planned...but I'm not going to do anything about it, okay? I know you're in a happy relationship and I don't intend to come between you two.”

I wait for him to back away and leave, to do something, but he just stays there like he has more to say but isn't sure how to get it out.

“You okay?”

“It's just...never mind. I couldn't make you happy anyway, and it's probably for the best that we don't....”

“You don’t have to keep rejecting me. I get it, okay? That’s why I didn’t say anything myself. You’re not beholden to me, you don’t owe me anything. I’m sorry I invited you over and pulled you into this. You’re welcome whenever you want, of course. Jericho’s happier when you’re here.”

“Thanks.”

He finally turns to go without so much as a backwards glance and it hurts. Logically I know he’s not mine, and that he never was, but I’m so angry that the goddess put these feelings in my heart, these desires in my body, and it was all for naught because they couldn’t be allowed to flourish.

Not ready to face anyone else after being turned down from something I hadn’t even had the chance to offer, I let the anger build up in me until I feel that familiar burning in my chest that I felt when I was fighting the Night creatures. I pull off my clothes, dropping by the back door as the fur covers my body.

Soon I’m in a new body and running through the back of the property, the pain of rejection less so in this form. I’m more instinctual like this and it’s nice to not have so much room to think about things I can’t control.

My hearing is better though, and I can hear some of my mates inside talking and laughing, the house glowing a cheery color in the darkness. I was happy. I still wasn’t sure who my other mate was, but I would figure out how to work past this craving for Royce.

I hear footsteps padding behind me as I run through trees, away from the human comforts. My wolf perks her ears up and smells our mate gaining on us, in his wolf form. I’m rushed with hormones as he nears, nipping at my flanks and herding me deeper into the woods.

I wish I could talk to him, but then again it was kind of interesting to have to communicate without words. We weren’t fully beast, but we also didn’t have the full capacity of our human minds in this form. We stumble into some sort of cave type space that looks newly dug out and smells richly of earth.

I can smell my mate in the room, some of his fur lying on the floor in the corner like he'd been lying there before. He gets behind me and I know what he wants, the pheromones thick between us as the urge to mate takes over us.

All I can think of now is the way he smells, the way his strong body can protect us and hunt with us, the way his teeth are trying to sink into my skin and the strength of his body as it pushes me to submit. He enters me from behind and it's so different than my human body, but I can still tell it's him. My wolf goes limp and soaks up the mating, our chest rumbling as he ruts against us and a knot forms between us, locking us together.

Each tug hits me so deep and it's a strangely human sensation. Right as he fills me with warmth his hands shift back, followed by the rest of him and I follow immediately, him still mounting me from behind as I kneel in the dirt in my human form.

"You're the sexiest wolf I've ever seen, babe. My beast is fucking thrilled he got to claim you in his own form, and takes great pride to have such a strong mate."

I moan as his hard length continues to pound into me, dirt sinking under my nails and painting my bare skin.

"We built this den for you, so you have a safe place to be with him. I know you don't want to talk about it, but I can feel your anguish and I had to have you. Did I freak you out too much, taking you in my other form?"

"Gods no. I thought it would be weird, but I felt so connected to you."

"I can make the knot happen in this form too, you know. We can have kinky wolf sex in our non-wolf forms."

He swells inside of me, lodging into my body and forcing me to adjust as he growls out in pleasure.

"Fuuuck Foster. Why haven't you used that before? Damn that feels...I don't have words."

He tries to pound into me but can barely move, each tug just burning up my nerves and leaving me weak-kneed underneath

him.

“You’re so beautiful out here, framed in moonlight. Submissive in front of me. You were made for me, Gabriella.”

It seems he has taken the capacity to speak from me, the intensity of our connection nearly overwhelming. I start leaking lust and he grows impossibly harder and bigger inside of me, making both of us groan as a slight breeze comes from the mouth of the den, stirring the sediment in the filtered moonlight.

He fucks me like he owns me, bruising my hips with his hold and marking my neck with his teeth, sinking some very non-human canines into my shoulder and making me convulse against him as I cry out, his knot finally deflating as he falls over, pulling me on top of him.

We’re both boneless, slicked in sweat, panting.

“That was fucking amazing. I always wondered what that would feel like.”

I spin around to see his cute face.

“You’ve never...”

“No, Gabriella. That knot is only for my mate. My beast wouldn’t mount anyone else or take control of anyone else.”

“Damn that’s sexy.”

He licks up the column of my throat, nipping at the bite marks he’s left all over me.

“Did I hurt you?”

“These? Pfft. No. That felt...incredible. Heightened everything else going on.”

“We are truly mated, now, if you would mark me?”

“I thought...”

“Shifters are a bit different. Our human forms were fully mated, but our beast forms need their own ritual.”

He pulls my leg over his hip and is somehow already hard again, his giant length sliding right inside as my head falls

back and all the tender tissue starts dancing in renewed pleasure.

“Fuck, I can’t handle those sounds you make, Gabriella. I don’t think I can last as long the second time around. You’re destroying me.”

I flip him over so I can take him how I want to, his length so impossibly deep at this angle. He swells again inside of me, making me whimper in a very wolf-like way as my hips still and my mouth freezes in yet another orgasm.

I sit there on him, watching his face contort and his chest heave. I try to gyrate my hips a bit, making him dig his fingers into my hips as he pushes into me from below. His hands slide up to my breasts and he sits up to taste them, hot tongue followed by cool air from his perfect lips.

Here it’s just us, alone, and everything is reduced to what we have between us. The intimacy we’ve built since I first claimed him as my second mate, and as the knot tugs against me, my mouth waters and I feel my beast try to surface again, my mouth producing pointed canines of its own with the sole intention of sinking into his flesh.

The next time I come I muffle it with the taste of his skin, sinking into the muscle and tasting his blood as he growls and starts frenzying inside of me. He flips us over and pounds into me at an animalistic pace while I can do nothing but scream and call his name, my whole body on fire as he fills me with his essence and then collapses on top of me.

“My gods...the way we fit together. I know you don’t want to talk about it, but I know he’ll come around eventually. Just be patient, wildflower. I don’t think there’s a man alive that could willingly resist you for any length of time. He feels obligated to see this thing through with Amanda right now, but the goddess doesn’t make mistakes. She chose him for a reason. I’m not saying it’s going to be fun to wait, but it will happen.”

I consider this for a moment, wishing not for the first time that the goddess would let me in on the plan.

“It just seems so selfish to hope that his relationship fails so that I can have him. I don’t want to be that girl...I had hoped that Amanda might be a friend.”

“That does complicate things, but one day at a time. You still have Jericho and Apollo waiting for you to fully accept them- you think that will happen soon?”

“I can barely handle the ones I’ve got...I’m worried about you guys not getting enough time with me.”

“I don’t think any of us would turn down one on one sessions any time you offered it, but the nature of this relationship means a lot of group time, which you have to admit is pretty damn fun.”

That was one way to put it. I still couldn’t get the image of Cyrus going down on Foster out of my head, it had been a naughty daydream for me since it happened.

“Yeah, no complaints from me there.”

“Good. Until things pan out, just...let us love you and everything will fall into place. Okay, there’s something crawling on my leg. You ready to head inside? I have a trophy to claim and a woman to wash up.”

Cyrus

Gabby had been a bit down since we had Royce over for dinner, putting on a happy face whenever she thought she ought to. I knew she loved us all and that if the goddess hadn't gifted her more marks, she would be more than happy to live out her days in marital mated bliss with her collection of men at home.

I also knew what it was like to be missing part of your soul. All the years I had spent searching for Gabriella had been incredibly difficult, painful more than not. To have this weight pressing on your soul, telling you you weren't whole; even though you are satisfied with the life you're living, knowing you are missing something meant for you hurts.

Gabriella was also a good person though, and she wouldn't be the woman of my sole obsession if she wasn't. She wasn't selfish enough to try and hurt somebody else's chance at happiness, even if the cost was her own.

I think she just needed a good distraction, so I figured it would be a good day to take her out to lunch. We'd been barricaded inside the capital all week working cases and dealing with stupid people, glaring at assistants that wanted to get handsy with some of our guys, and firing people that were loyal to the last council and were completely incompetent.

I find her in her big fancy office that someone fixed up for her, a light and airy space with lots of white but flower prints everywhere, giving it an almost garden-like feel. She had a diffuser going in the corner so it smelled like all things gabby-oranges and jasmine. And fresh berries. And gods, I wanted the woman. Discreetly adjusting myself, I give her a little knock to let her know I'm standing there creeping before she catches me, and her smile is completely genuine.

I need her mouth like I need my heart to pump blood, so I claim it as a means of saying hello. I hadn't seen her since we left the house before work this morning, and she looked a little extra frazzled today. Her sexy professional attire was spot on, a cheetah print conservative top with another pencil skirt, but

her hair looked like she'd been pulling at it a bit so I start there, pulling a comb out of her purse and smoothing it out for her as I give her a little head massage.

“Ugh, thank the goddess for you, Cyrus, and your magical fucking fingers.”

I kiss her neck before continuing, relaxing more myself when I see her shoulders slump and tension lines leave her face. She's got big shadows under her eyes and doesn't look like her normal sparkly self, and I hate that this is something I can't interfere in.

“How's your morning been, love?”

“I think I need to get to the academy next week, Pearson's mom is having some issues with some of the conduits.”

“I'm sure he'd love to go with you, get a little one-on-one time in.”

She nods at this as she continues to relax under my tutelage, small wisps of dirty sounds escaping her mouth as she does.

“Hey, Gabby- OH! Sorry, I can come back if it's a bad time?”

Gabby snaps her head up and winces a bit as Amanda stands there, the tension going right back into her face.

“No, you're fine. What's up?”

She steps inside the office and I move my hands down to Gabriella's shoulders, kneading some knots out.

“I uh...well this isn't really a professional visit...you mind if I sit?”

Gabby gestures to the chairs in front of her desk as her hands interlace in front of her.

“There's not really anyone here I feel comfortable talking to about this, and I kind of thought, well, since you were the queen of relationships, that maybe...I could get some input?”

Fuck. I know Gabby wouldn't send her packing, even if she had to sit here and listen to details on the intimacies of Royce's relationship with Amanda.

“Not sure how helpful I’ll be, but I’ll give it a go.”

That pasted-on smile is back.

“So, you remember Royce, right? I’m sorry, is this okay? I don’t have a lot of girl friends and you just seem so down to earth. We’re kind of friends now, right?”

Gabby gives her a terse nod.

“Just tell me, Amanda. I’ll help if I can, but none of my relationships are what you’d call normal.”

I laugh at that, remembering the sticks and dirt all in Gabby and Foster’s hair when they came out from the woods a few days ago, and Foster’s gloating swagger as he put his name at the top of the leaderboard and claimed his gold Styrofoam dick trophy. Yeah, we were far from normal.

“Well that’s fine, I’m sure with all the different relationships you’re juggling, you’ve learned a lot more than I have in the few years it’s been since I got together with Royce.”

“Doubt that’s true, but if our weird shenanigans can help somebody, I’m game. What’s going on?”

“Well, we’ve talked about it before but last night seemed a bit more...serious? He told me he wants to marry me, showed me a ring and everything...but I just wasn’t excited, you know? Gods, that sounds horrible. He’s amazing. Sure, we’ve had some problems, but gods is he good in bed, and he’s just sweet, you know?”

“He...proposed?”

The mood shifts as I feel like Gabby is about to throw up, her face a sickly green color all of a sudden and her skin clammy.

“Yes, and it was an incredible proposal...”

“What did you say?”

“I told him yes...”

“Congratulations, Amanda.”

“Er...thanks. But I couldn't sleep last night with the weight of this thing on my finger, and then I thought how that wasn't really fair to me, because what if...well you won't judge me because you're with so many men, right? Right. So, I met someone about six months ago, we've gone on a few dates...I just think it would be difficult to continue seeing him if I commit to Royce, and well, what do I do?”

“I'm sorry, I need to use the restroom real quick. I'll be right back and we can...yeah.”

She darts out and I just know she's throwing up. I grab her some water from the dispenser in the hall so it's ready when she comes back in, legs trembling a little as she reclaims her seat and sips the cool water. I smooth the hair away from her face, braiding her hair for her so it's not sticking to her neck. Amanda shoots me a sweet smile, like she thinks we're cute or something. Fuck this is a shitty situation.

“Sorry about that. So...you and Royce are...open? To others?”

“Oh, gods no. He doesn't know about Damien, that would be a nightmare! How do you juggle them all? It's exhausting!”

“Amanda, look. I'm...mated to all of my guys. And frankly, I'm kind of offended that you think I won't judge you because of the nature of my relationship with them. Yes, I regularly fuck an entire harem of men, but we're a family. I love them, and they all work together to make things work.

“Have you and...Damien...?”

“Had sex? Well yeah, we've been seeing each other for six months! Did I mention how handsome he is?”

“But...you agreed to marry Royce?”

“Now you see my dilemma.”

“Gods...this is too much. Okay, so do you want Royce or do you want Damien? That's really what it comes down to. Oh gods, you wanted advice on how to talk Royce into sharing, didn't you?”

“Do you think he would go for that? Could you...like, I don't know, talk with him? Jericho is friends with him, maybe he could like, mention things about how your dynamic works?”

“You want me to...wingman so you can keep your side piece?”

“Well, that's not a very nice way to look at it.”

“I'm not going to sugarcoat it to make you feel better. You're cheating on a good man, and he wants to marry you.”

“So you don't think he'd agree? I have to admit I've been thinking about leaving him, for good this time. He...well after seeing how all your mates dote on you so much, I kind of feel like something is lacking with us. We're good together, and he comes from a good family and my parents like him, but lately when we're in bed, it seems like his mind is elsewhere.”

Gabby starts squirming a little bit and I know she's not going to take this torture much longer before she blows.

“But marrying him would make my life nice and tidy, and we get along well enough. Hm. You've given me something to think about. The ring is gorgeous, don't you think?”

She waves the ring in front of Gabby and I have to restrain her, nervous she'll pull some shit if it gets too close to her.

“So...you'll talk to him? Or no? Either way, I appreciate your ear. It's been rough trying to keep this all to myself, do you want to go get lunch or something?”

“You know, I'm not really hungry just now. Some other time maybe?”

“Of course! Us girls got to stick together. Y'all are just so cute together I could squeeze you both! And the way they sang to you and those words they said at the gala? I think every woman in there was swooning. You're making some of the single women around here raise their standards, that's for sure!”

Jericho and Royce appear in the doorway next, and I give Jericho a panicked shake of the head, hoping to convey that he

needs to get Royce out. Royce is laughing from whatever he and Jericho were talking about, though Jericho looks as gloomy as ever. Though I've learned to notice the way his eyes change a bit when he sees Gabby, so I know that this is his 'happy-to-see-her' face.

Royce's eyes land on Amanda who is still staring at her ring and then he traces the sightline to Gabby and he pales a bit, looking ready to run.

"I hear a congratulations are in order, Royce. Amanda... think about what we talked about."

Amanda's head spins around at the newcomers, bouncing out of her seat to kiss Royce right on the fucking mouth before waving and admitting a 'thanks' to Gabby while she walks out. Royce whispers something in her ear and then she's gone, leaving Royce to stand there looking guilty.

"Gabby, I..."

"Please. Just don't, okay? I have told you several times I don't expect anything. You are free to live your life how you choose, of course. If she makes you happy, then I'm happy. Though...nevermind."

"Why was she in here? Were you trying to talk her into leaving me?"

"What the fuck?"

Gabby puts her hand on my chest and I can see Jericho tense a bit. Dude may be like a brother to him, but if he disrespects Gabby in front of him they'd be having problems.

"Royce, man, Gabby is the least manipulative person you'll meet. She wouldn't do that."

Jericho crosses the room, stealing a kiss from Gabby and making her kind of lose control for a second. I knew exactly what he was doing, making Gabby make those delicious sounds with every stroke of his tongue. Royce couldn't tear his eyes away, but he for damn sure wasn't watching Jericho.

When Jericho finally lets Gabriella breathe again, it's rapid and her pupils are blown, her focus on something entirely

different than it was a few minutes ago.

“Excuse us, we have a lunch date to get to. You hungry, shadow man?”

He wraps an arm around her hips as she stands, copping a feel of her ass as he does, and Royce doesn't miss that either.

“You two have fun. I'll meet up with you tonight. I was hoping...Gabriella, can I take you out tonight? Just us?”

She presses into him and steals another steamy kiss, looking about two seconds away from ripping his clothes off. That would be a show for Royce for real.

“O...kay?”

I pull Gabriella into me, taking her hand as Jericho makes to leave the office, winking at Gabby before she goes.

“I can't...Royce, I...I can't do this. Talk to your fiancée if you want to know why she was in here. Like Jericho said, I'm not manipulative and we're not exactly friends. So...I'm going to be the bigger person and let things lie where they may. Excuse us.”

The second we're in the car I'm pulling her onto my lap, breathing her in and comforting her.

“I'm so sorry you had to just deal with all that...I'm not going to ask if you're okay, but is there anything I can do to help you feel a little better?”

“I just...fat kid food. I want some tacos, and an hour or so to just not think about anything.”

“I do love to eat tacos.”

She scoffs at me as she returns to her own seat, buckling in before taking my hand.

“I'm glad you were there. I don't know what I would have done if I had to listen to that bitch drone on and I was alone.”

“I thought you wanted to be friends?”

I'm totally giving her shit, but luckily she smirks at my poor attempt at humor.

“Well, maybe before she admitted she’s been cheating on *my* fucking soul mate for six months, and seemed meh about the proposal. I can’t tell him, right? He would just think I’m inserting myself into their relationship for my own personal gain.”

“You could tell him, but...”

“But it would be better if he came to me of his own desire to be with me, not because he got dumped and knew I’d take him.”

“You got all that from those few words?”

She kisses my hand. “I think we think very similarly, and I don’t want to be his backup plan or his default. If he decided Amanda wasn’t right for him and wanted to get to know me, then I’d be happy to do so. But it just feels slimy to tell him his fiancée is a bitch and hope he falls into my arms, you know?”

“And this is why you’re so incredible. Every other girl would be shitting themselves to break up the poorly matched duo so they could get the man.”

“Well, lucky for you I’m fully toilet trained. I want real, I don’t want to scheme my way into a mating. This is for life.”

We pull up into one of my favorite Mexican places and it looks a little busy, but we manage to snag a table outside that I leave Gabby at while I go inside to order. I come back with our drinks, her face tilted up to the sun and she’s so fucking gorgeous I nearly trip and spill everything.

I still get a kick watching other people drool over her.

“Here you go, beautiful.”

She shoots me a smile taking a sip of her horchata, sighing in pleasure as the cinnamon coats her palette.

“You’ve done it again.”

“Done what?”

“Made everybody in your vicinity hopelessly in love with you. So...you and Jericho, you think you’ll seal the deal

tonight?”

I waggle my eyebrows at her, making her laugh. Which was my only goal, of course.

“When are you going to let us knock you up, by the way?”

She starts choking on her drink, eyes round and terrified.

“You want to...r-really?”

“Put a baby in you? Hell yeah.”

“I’m not ready for that, Cyrus. I need...I don’t know what. But I want time with you guys before we even *think* of that topic.”

“You’ll be a total MILF.”

“Anyway...changing the subject...”

I smile and sip my own drink. “Can’t blame a guy for trying. At least it’s on your radar now. You’d make the cutest babies ever. So, I got an interesting email earlier from the company that looks after that property we stayed at after I claimed you...”

She eyes me all innocent like, as if she has no clue where this is going.

“You did, huh?”

“It seems they needed approval to install a very interesting piece of furniture.”

“What, like a bookcase or something?”

“You ordered the sex swing, didn’t you? Is that what you were giggling about in the car when we went shopping?”

“If you’re happy about the purchase, then yes. If you’re not...maybe Bal or Foster know something.”

I laugh because she’s just so...yeah. “You’re pretty fucking adorable. I think we’ll need to make a trip up there soon to test that out. Family get away after your circuit is complete?”

“Yeah...we still have to figure that out. If Royce is out of the picture and the last is unknown...”

Our food arrives then, the server blushing profusely as he hands Gabby her meal, amusement dripping from her face as he stumbles away from the table. He comes back two seconds later because he likely forgot he was still holding on to my meal, but he places it in front of Gabby as well, making her laugh before he leaves again.

“Here. I’m thinking you didn’t mean for me to eat both of these.”

“Poor sap. He’ll be blushing all day now.”

“Whatever. Thanks for taking me out, nice to get out of the office.”

Would it be altruistic or selfish of me to offer her some happy juice to pep her up a bit?

“After lunch, you want to swing by the house for a few minutes and see Apollo? He wanted to check out the offices a bit I think, he seems to be in need of some sort of amusement. I think he’s getting rather bored waiting for us all to come home everyday.”

“I’m sure we could find something for him to do. I don’t know how to...progress things with him. We don’t get so much time together and he’s a little...”

“Trust me?”

“Yes...”

We finish lunch soon and we’re heading home, luckily very close to the headquarters we work at now. The house is pretty empty with all the guys gone, but we find Apollo easily enough lingering in the library.

“Can we borrow you for a minute, man?”

He blinks up at us, eyes warming a bit when he sees Gabby behind me.

“Of course.”

I grab his hand as he gets closer, winking at Gabby as I lead them both to the master bedroom that we’ve all been rotating through.

“Now, Gabby, I was thinking...if you have to go back to the offices and deal with all that shit we just learned, maybe we could make your time a bit easier to manage?”

“How do you mean?”

I kiss her, pushing her back onto the bed without letting go of Apollo, making sure he falls behind her.

“How does you guys getting high help me?”

“I thought maybe we could get you high?”

“Oh!”

She instantly looks giddy, licking her lips and looking between the two of us.

“Ok, I’m not sure I understand. Aren’t drugs frowned up on or illegal?”

Poor Apollo.

“Apollo, do you know what happens when a bodysmith ingests the cum from one of her bonded mates?”

He stiffens a bit, swallowing audibly as his finger taps along Gabby’s hips.

“Erm...Gabby?”

She winks at him and pins me to the bed, feasting on my mouth before sinking to the floor in front of me, unsnapping my belt and pants and licking me from root to tip, the entirety of me disappearing in and out of her lips.

I feel her tongue run all along my veins, pulsing around the sensitive tip, suctioning me and warming me up from the inside and out. It’s impossible to not buck into her heat and lose myself immediately, but I still want to enjoy my time with her, not just what she can do for me.

I pull the hair away from her face and neck, the braid I put in earlier falling apart as wisps of hair start to frame her face. Her fingers reach up to stroke my balls and I start losing it, lost to sensation and the wild way her eyes take me in and the pure satisfaction that lies on her face.

Remembering Apollo, I place my hand on his knee right as Gabby does the same, inching higher and watching him kind of freak the fuck out a little. Gabby pauses her demonstration long enough to sit up and kiss Apollo, fully in her element now as her eyes blaze with lust. She looks like the goddess incarnate as she takes control of him, straddling him and taking every ounce from his lips that she's able.

He's moaning around her, his hands flexing on her hips as he pushes against her body. She kneels before him as well, looking to him for permission before unbuckling his pants and sliding them down to his ankles so we're both sitting there half naked, begging for her touch.

I'd feel a little selfish about asking for a blow job if I didn't know how absolutely insane giving them drove her. She really got off on it, and the way the substance affected her body was not only hilarious, but I knew she needed some levity to her day. I didn't want this whole situation with Royce to keep getting her down.

She starts licking me again, her hand stroking Apollo as he grabs my hand, likely needing something to help him stay on the bed. Myself, I was floating somewhere along the ceiling as she sucked my soul out of my dick.

"You always make us feel so good, lovely. I want you to forget all about this morning, just be here with us."

She nods as she somehow summons more enthusiasm, switching back and forth between us and touching us with her slender fingers. I can feel some of her lust soaking into us, making my erection as big as she's ever made it.

Apollo has his jaw clenched as she touches him, squirming closer to where Gabby's mouth is so he can chase his release.

"Apollo...would you feel comfortable if you guys were touching?"

Gabby's voice is raspy with sex, dripping with saliva and her eyes are hypnotizing.

"Little one, I will touch any of them, probably anywhere, if it meant you touching me as well. This is...words don't exist

for how you feel wrapped around me. I didn't think you desired me in this way."

"Then that's my fault for letting you believe that."

She pulls us both to stand as she sinks between the two of us, then she's positioning us so our hips are nearly flush against each other, our weeping cocks rubbing against each other as we both move into the feeling, lost to the moment as the friction sends us a bit higher.

"Fuck that's hot. Okay, let's see if we can make this happen."

Gabby then takes us both into her fucking mouth, stretching her lips wide to accommodate us side by side, her hands holding our asses as I use my hands to keep Apollo as parallel to me as I can. I can't help but stroke us together as I do this, the added touch overwhelming with everything else Gabby is doing.

And then I'm about to fall over as she hits us with full lust, somehow getting us even further into our mouth as we thrust together, completely filling her mouth with our combined efforts but she sucks it down like an icee and then slows down her movements, pulling us out of our stupor slowly.

We both fall back onto the bed as Gabby just sits there with cum on her face looking incredibly pleased with herself. Not wanting to leave anything one-sided, I manage to pull myself off the bed and crawl up her legs, lifting her skirt with me as I go.

Apollo is still trying to find himself on the bed as I taste Gabriella, sucking her folds into my mouth and seeking out that little spot that I know for a fucking iron-clad fact will destroy her. I work quicky, knowing we both need to get back to the office soon but also unwilling to let up before I feel her detonate underneath me, my fingers curling up inside her channel and rubbing along the walls as she starts screaming incoherencies.

Then we're all limp and breathing hard, but we somehow manage to get a little cleaned up before Apollo drives us back

to HQ.

Gabriella

Rainbows and...skittles and...cotton candy...and kittens...

The clouds float past us as I giggle at all the people we pass in the car, parking up front in our assigned spot where I'm expected to do something...or some shit. Eh.

Cyrus is stumbling along with me as we take in the pastel hilarity of everything happening around us, marching past that sweet lady at the front reception desk and spotting some of my guys near their office.

"Apollo, I want you to meet...my first husband...BAL! I'm sorry, I hope you two aren't angry with me for keeping it a secret. Ssh!!"

Bal looks at us and want to say something but he's too damn cute so I just kiss him instead.

"Okay, who got the lust queen high as a kite? You okay, love?"

"Did you know the sky looks like cotton candy? Oh man. Today wasn't fun. I had to listen to Amanda talk about her new engagement to Royce, and hey Jericho! Anyway, I was sad because she didn't seem very excited...Oh!"

I leap at Jericho, knowing he'll catch me because he's strong and stuff. I lick his neck because he's so yummy, twirling my fingers through his dreads as he holds me.

"I'm supposed to tell you...Oh you remember Apollo, right? My last soul mate? Well it would be anyway if we could figure out who my mermaid friend was and get Royce to dump Amanda's cheating ass. That reminds me.

"Jericho, ya big teddy bear I'm gonna squeeze you!"

"Is she alright?"

I laugh and look for Cyrus, seeing him with a floaty smile as he traces designs on the carpet with his hands.

"Is *he* alright?"

"Raspberries and cream."

I reach out my hands for Cyrus, needing him to get close and kiss me again.

Fucking Royce, all handsome and shit, walks out next, looking quite angry. Oops.

“You’re pretty, Royce. Royce looks very noyce. Hey, you’d look so sexy with your hair all tousled. But I won’t touch, don’t worry. I’ll leave that to your *fiancée*. Oh, they’re gonna get married, did you all hear? But me and Jericho are supposed to talk to you about how fun it is to share so she can keep her side piece.

“Personally I don’t think that’s something I want to do, but she was kind of sad about losing Damien when she married you. But I don’t really think I can talk about fairness when I want the same thing! Look at all these dicks!”

“Okay, I’ll take her up to her office...come on love.”

“Ooh, my first husband! Yes! This day gets better and better! Sorry Apollo, I have to tell you I’m married to this hottie too!”

I giggle at this and Apollo just shakes his head at me, his blue eyes looking at me like I’m entertaining or something.

Bal tries to carry me but I jump down like a ninja, spinning out and landing on my feet but then tripping and landing right on my back. Hmm.

“There’s a water stain, just there...looks exactly like a Pomeranian riding on top of a dragon with an ice cream crown on his fluffy head.”

“What the fuck is happening?”

“We got Gabby to stop being a bummer about you not wanting her so she’s not sad. She didn’t want you to know she’s sad, but you’re fiancée is kind of a bitch. Oh! Hi Amanda!”

“Amanda? Amanda! Ooh, your face is red. Were you with Damien or Royce?”

“You bitch! You weren’t supposed to talk about that!!”

Hmm. Is that true? “No... I specifically remember you telling me *to* talk to Royce about how awesome it is to share. Apollo, care to give some input? Did you enjoy my mouth on both of you?? Mmm. You tasted yummy.”

“Okay, fun time is over. Everybody back to work. Sorry, I’ll uh...take care of them.”

“Good talk! Bye Amanda, good luck! Royce...you sexy thing, sorry you got stuck with me as a soulmate, the goddess be cray cray!”

“WHAT??”

Amanda looks so cute with her ears steaming. I’m hanging upside down on somebody... “Jericho, you have an amazing ass. So firm and bubbly! Don’t worry Bal, I like your ass too.”

I wink at him as we walk to my office, Apollo slipping in as Bal shuts the door behind me and Jericho.

I try to muster up a deep, authoritative voice. “Is it time for more sexy make-Gabby-happy times?? Where’s Palmer?? PALMER!!”

“Goddess alive, Gabby. You don’t have to yell. What happened this morning?”

“Amanda came into my office and was all ‘I’m Amanda. Royce proposed.’ And I was all ‘I gotta go puke now.’ And then Cyrus took care of me and I came back. And then Amanda was still here, talking about how she liked Royce’s dick and stuff, but how she had been seeing someone else and could I talk to Royce about sharing?’ Obvs, I couldn’t tell her he’s mine, because he’s really not, is he? I don’t think he will be, either. He loves her. S,o then Cyrus was all ‘let’s feed you and then we’ll slip you the good stuff’ and I was all ‘yes please, I love the good stuff!’”

Jericho is looking like he wants to say something to me about, well any of that really, but instead he just asks Bal if I’m okay and did I ever breathe.

“Woah, I’m right here! Hey Bal, Jericho wants to take me on a date tonight. Cyrus thinks I should seal the deal but I was all ‘I don’t know I just want to spend time with him’. Oh, look

he smiled! You can't tell me that didn't just happen! I need witnesses! Where is Palmer?"

I grab my phone and text him, knowing he'll back me up. He's into the big awkward displays. The two guys talk amongst themselves while I await my knight in shining armor, Apollo just standing around like giant man candy, unsure where he fits.

"Beautiful, I need to go talk to Royce, you going to be okay for a bit?"

"I'm tony the tiger."

"What?"

"I'm grrreeeat!"

"Apollo, you broke this, you fix it. I'll see you tonight, Gabby."

Jericho kisses me but try as I might, I can't manage to wrestle him to the ground with me. He's too big. He chuckles at my efforts but leaves anyway, letting Palmer in as he does.

"Palmer! They won't let me skinny dip in the fountain."

"Wow, high at work? That's, uh..."

"Gabriella you never even asked us if you could skinny dip in the fountain. Mainly because there isn't a fountain around here...but let's keep clothes on for public consumption?"

"Bal, Bal, Bal. Oh. Shit. I think I'm coming down. Hold up."

Palmer scoops me up and puts me on the sofa in the corner, Apollo still looking like he's unsure how to handle this situation.

"I heard what happened. You dealing?"

"Mmm. Kiss me."

He does.

"Now I'm dealing. Bal?"

He does as well.

“More dealing...”

I bat my eyelashes at Apollo next, who of course gives in.

“It sucked, but I can’t change anything. He still doesn’t want me and I mean, he proposed, so that’s a pretty strong indication he’s not going to. How’re your days going?”

“Well, pretty run of the mill. Aquatic shifters conspiring with air mages to send water predators into tornadoes, but we handled it.”

“Isn’t that the plot of sharknado?”

Palmer winks at me as he runs his hand up and down my arm. “You’ll never know. Speaking of aquatic shifters...any more word on those scales you have? Have we figured anything out?”

Bal grabs his phone out of his pocket, pulling something out.

“Yeah, I reached out to an aquatic shifter we have working here for answers, didn’t mention who it affected, just described what was happening.”

“And?”

“He said...that aquatic shifters-”

“Can we just call them mermaids??”

“That’s politically incorrect, Gabriella.” Seriously?

“Anyway, he said that when an aquatic shifter comes into contact with their mate, that their colors will bleed onto them to mark them as theirs. So, Gabriella definitely was near one at the Gala. Honestly, Gabriella. We really can’t leave you alone with anyone without repercussions, can we?”

“Who, me? I’m sure I don’t know any relevant examples.”

Apollo snorts.

“Besides us, who were you with that night?”

“Just that guy that was working the event that I had to run interference for...”

“Wait, hold up. Let me call Dar.”

Bal has his phone out before we can ask him why, but is asking him to send a picture and asking what time the case was being heard.

“Okay, Pax Amberjack?”

He shows me his phone and it’s definitely the strangely beautiful guy I was talking to at the gala. Turquoise and light purple hair, matching eyes...

“Yeah, that’s him alright.”

“His species is listed as an aquatic shifter.”

“Wait, he’s coming for a hearing? Why?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

“Ugh. Seriously? What is wrong with people??”

“I don’t get it.”

“Sorry, Apollo. Before you...kidnapped me...” he at least looks *slightly* embarrassed by the term, “this guy was working the event and was being bullied by one of my girls because he accidentally spilled a bit of champagne on them.

“I overheard her giving him shit so I confronted her, then the goddess used me to take her marks away. She was kind of terrible.”

“So if *he* was bullied, why is he on trial?”

“Because sometimes these conduits are so high on themselves, they think everyone should fall into worship at their feet. Let’s see. Her and her family are pissed that she’s no longer a conduit darling, and that she lost status, and is trying to sue Pax for it?”

“You got it. But she’s already gotten him fired for it, so I’m not sure what else she wants to accomplish.”

“Probably just to humiliate him further. I’m guessing she didn’t get the memo that my mates are the new council? This could be funny.”

A few hours later, at the last hearing of the day, my mates are all in their council panel chairs as I sit off to the side,

waiting for my first glimpse of Pax or Evangaline, loving that Apollo gets to sit in on this. He's got shadows gathered around him, making him look creepy as hell but weirdly, all I want to do is climb on him and show him a good time. I grab his hand, taking him a bit by surprise. We hadn't been super touchy feely, but kind of hard not to after I had deepthroated him and Cyrus earlier. Stop judging me.

"This suits you."

"What does?"

"Watching over your people, villainously waiting to pounce on unsuspecting victims that completely deserve it. You look as if you are about to take an electric fly swatter to a bug party."

"Hmm. I think *you* suit me."

He initiates a kiss and it's impossible to keep my hips on my chair, but I manage, clinging to his arm and loving the way he feels against my lips. One of my mates wolf whistles at us which just makes me giggle, but then the doors are opening and Evangeline is waltzing in with her nose actually in the air, another awful orange dress draped on her body.

She has tunnel vision for the desk assigned to her, sitting with exaggerated self-importance next to her legal counsel. I narrow my eyes at her as she starts looking around the room, giving a smug smile to some people seated behind her, but then her eyes begin to widen a bit as she looks down my line of incredibly attractive mates, all sitting there with zero sympathy for her.

Her eyes land on mine and I give her a petty little wave. The air gets sucked out of the room a bit when Pax finally walks in, dark shadows under his eyes and his hair out of sorts. He freezes when he sees me, his eyes saying more than our voices can at this distance.

He knows he marked me.

"Okay, court is in session. Let's make this quick, folks. Evangaline, please plead your case."

Dar is looking as imposing as ever, his gorgeous light green eyes lasering into the woman. She gives an extremely skewed re-telling of the events at the gala, mustering some crocodile tears as she weeps over her loss of status, pointing a finger at Pax as he just sits there with his eyes still locked on me. And oh, the things that gaze makes me think about.

“Okay, thank you. Witnesses?”

I stand up and address the panel.

“I was there, councilmen. I witnessed most of the events, though I don’t recall them being quite so dramatic as all that.”

“I see. Can you tell us what you witnessed, your majesty?”

I roll my eyes at Grey’s mock formality, knowing he’s trying hard not to crack a smile as the words escape his mouth. I look to Pax with a question, needing to know if he’s going to fight us like Royce has been, or if he means to become a part of what we’re all building together.

“He’s innocent, obviously. The events that transpired were accidental, he provided an apology, and Evangeline didn’t like the fact that she wasn’t the top dog. The goddess claimed her marks because she wasn’t worthy. There’s nothing to discuss.”

“He owes me for that loss of status! I had an allowance, which I have lost, and I have been forced to pare down my expenses so I can keep my home! If *he* hadn’t spilled wine on me, I wouldn’t have lashed out! Cause and effect!”

Evangeline is getting all kinds of worked up, speaking out of turn and actually *yelling* at me as I finally get the acknowledgement from Pax I was waiting for. He wants this. He looks nervous, and maybe doesn’t feel he deserves it, but when my magic seeks him out across the room, he pulls it into himself, his arm glowing as my mark lands on his arm.

I break off eye contact to address Evangeline.

“I suggest, ma’am, that you *get a job* if you are feeling the loss of support. That support is afforded by the council, for conduits, for leadership positions and other things. We do not owe you anything. If you had had a modicum of respect for someone other than yourself, if you had acknowledged the

truth behind the apology that Mr. Amberjack sincerely offered, you would have kept a hold of your status.

“The goddess chooses whom to bestow her gifts upon, and she found you wanting. Get over it, get over yourself, and do *not* speak to any of my mates with that tone. Are we clear?”

She looks over to Pax and sees the new claiming mark on his arm, deflating as she realizes she’s lost. My second to last mate mark is now filled with wooden boards and a nautical anchor, while Pax’s arm has a vivid depiction of a busty mermaid with waves crashing behind her. Like Grey, his tattoo is so clearly my face and body that I want to be a bit embarrassed, but damn. I look *hot* as a mermaid.

“Your queen has spoken. No reparations will be made, please see yourself out. Council adjourned.”

The Night

Sad, miserable, heartbroken creature weeps as he feels more of him start to disintegrate. He didn't really need that small misty blob on the right side of him, but he had gotten used to carting it around the last several hundred years.

This creature felt no pain, for all the pain he had already suffered in this lifetime eclipsed any minor physical ailments. His soul could still feel though, and as the creature of the goddess claimed yet another mate, the sad, miserable, heartbroken creature thought for sure that he was done for.

His only hope was to consume this woman's magic, yet she continues to defy his needs and continues living. Selfish creature, really.

“Minion 28!”

Minion 28 scrambles into the glittering cave that houses his Loneliness.

“Yes, sire?”

Minion 28 vibrates from fear, knowing that his Loneliness' magic is the only thing sustaining his life spark. His Loneliness could inhale the magics from all his creatures to better sustain himself, but there was nothing quite so potent as the magic from somebody that lived in the sun and loved greatly. That shit was lit.

“I wish to converse with my son. He has been gone too long, and I fear he has fallen under the trap that the woman of 1000 cocks has set. I have not felt the telltale wave of magic to insist he has bedded her, and if he has not done that to fully claim her, that means messy emotions must be involved. This must be stopped.”

“Yes, your Nightlyness. I shall arrange it. Would you like the looking glass set up in here or in your theatre room?”

“IS THAT A QUESTION?? I DO NOT HAVE PROPER LIGHTING IN THIS ROOM, MINION! MY GREY SHADES LOOK POSITIVELY GHOSTLY UNDER THE

LACKLUSTER GLOW WORMS THAT INHABIT THIS CAVE! ‘tHiS rOoM oR tHaT??’ Honestly, Minion 28, what do I pay you for??”

“I am a slave, your Nightlyness. I do not receive financial compensation. BUT I love to serve such a worthy lead star.”

Sad, miserable, and lonely preens under the careful compliment. He is a worthy lead star, even if the world has labelled him ‘murderous’ or ‘evil’ or ‘blobby’.

“I could have just as easily enlisted the help of minion 37. Don’t get your blobby head too big.”

“I apologize, your Nightlyness, sir. I was out of place. My soul receives all the compensation required for a job well done. I shall get Minion 15 ready for hair and makeup?”

The sad, miserable, lonely creature sits in front of his enchanted looking glass, several hours later. Minion 15 has done an admirable job fluffing up his deep black mist on top of his shapeless form, and the moon dust he added to enhance the creature’s lumps and valleys makes him sparkle with bad intent.

When the Loneliness’ only son appears in the looking glass, he is in a strange room but alone, looking very odd as a two-legged.

“Yes, father?”

“I wish to have a mission report.”

“Erm, right. Well, I have her nearly in my trust...”

“Why haven’t you bedded her yet, son?”

“You know she keeps a large harem. It has not been easy to convince them that I’m one of them, and she’s surprisingly not slutty for being what they call a bodysmith. She doesn’t sleep with everything that approaches her. One might even say she has scruples.”

“Be careful, Night Inherit. You sound like you are fond of the woman.”

“Fond, no. She...anyway. How are you faring, father? Are things...much worse since I left?”

“No thanks to you and your useless cock. She has claimed another mate, and I grow weary of her power increase when I can’t sample it. She only has two left to fill before I will be unable to eat her!”

“Of course. And you, father?”

“I lost this blob over here this morning! And I believe that the roundish sort of blobs I usually have on the bottom of me have begun to flatten. Do I look somewhat transparent to you?”

“You look...as dastardly and dark as ever.”

“Oh, you know how to flatter an old man. I can give you two more days before I recall you, but I *will* recall you if you haven’t brought her to me first. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Pax

I had been stressing out all week, looking at the situation from any and all angles. Losing my job had been near catastrophic; I wasn't paid enough to have a savings account, and rent was due. I had chosen to save what I could to put towards that instead of food, knowing it might take me a few weeks or more to find another situation.

When I realized that Gabriella was my mate, I was terrified. It is near impossible for aquatic shifters to live without their mates; once realized, we weaken continually unless we fully claim them and become one. I cannot imagine that she would want anything to do with me though, so I was also kind of thinking that having somewhere to lay my head at night might not be a problem much longer.

I could go home and beg for help, but the way my family cast me out years ago meant that I would likely be arrested instantly if I was found within the bounds of their realm. I had always been a disappointment, so why shouldn't I be one to my mate, as well?

I had expected to find my mate amongst someone of similar station as myself; to realize that the new Conduit Supreme was my destined? Truth be told, that was why the champagne had spilled in the first place at that gala.

I saw her across the room and her magic resonated with me, called to me. The way my magic made liquids dance was proof enough. I wish I would have recognized her quicker when she was in disguise so that I might have given myself some room to avoid her, but she was determined to help.

No one ever wanted to help me. My boss had been kind enough, but with the pressure of a conduit telling her I was incompetent, who was she to argue? She needed the business and keeping me on the payroll when I had offended one so greatly was a great way to lose it.

I didn't think Gabriella would ever hear about it. I knew my hearing had been set for today, I knew her mates were the new council even. I had been praying to the goddess that Gabriella

herself wouldn't be in the room, while also praying she would be, because I couldn't decide if I was more scared of acknowledging the bond we shared, or of it *not* being acknowledged.

I knew my magic had marked her with my colors, it is the way of all aquatic shifters born into a pure bloodline. True mates. I had been sure she would reject me; she had the Helsing brothers as mates, an esteemed potions professor, a polyshifter...what on earth would she see in me? What I could I offer her?

But when I walked in the room and saw her sitting there, it was as if my brain froze. I could not see anyone else in the room, only the way her lavender eyes fixed upon me and the way her body looked ready to fly towards me. And there was a pulsing in my chest, my heart most likely, trying to escape my body and join to hers. I didn't hear most of what was said during the hearing, I only knew that the way she looked at me said she would protect me.

I know males are the ones that customarily do the protecting, but I wasn't ashamed to admit she was stronger than I. My mate was incredible, but I still wasn't sure if I could actually have her. When she finally stood and spoke in my defense, the way her voice filled the space of the room held me captive.

I think she was looking for proof of acknowledgement; did she really think I would deny the bond that existed between us? I could not deny it, though she could refuse to accept it. Just being near her had made breathing easier, and when my arm began to warm and tingle from her marks I scrubbed at it to be sure it was real.

Had the Conduit Supreme really just claimed me? I was on the brink of being homeless, rejected by my family, raised by fosters, and jobless. But she was claiming me? How?

The room emptied around us, and I watched as her mates one by one greeted her in some way; a hug, a kiss to the forehead, a kiss to the lips. What must those lips taste like, I wonder? She gestures to a back entrance and my legal counsel

doesn't say a word as he packs up and leaves. I hadn't needed him, he was a boon from the council anyway since I couldn't afford to supply one myself.

When we're the only two beings in the hallway, she grabs my hand and smiles at me, but I think both of us are a bit nervous to say anything quite yet. We don't want to shatter the delicate newness of being near each other by misunderstanding or assuming.

Gabriella leads me up to an office that I assume to be hers based on scent and the ease with which she moves around the space, closing the doors behind us as she curls up on the small sofa tucked along the back wall.

"Is this okay? If you're uncomfortable we can go elsewhere or get someone to chaperone..."

"Chaperone? Why would I need a chaperone when I am with my mate? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?"

She giggles and I swear my whole body goes rigid. That. Fucking. Sound.

"Yes, I suppose...I just...do I make you uncomfortable?"

"Only because I am not sure yet what you want from me. I don't want to step out of place or offend you."

She stands up and turns around, baring the gorgeous flesh of her lower back to me. I see my colors imprinted on her skin and I'm instantly grateful for the way my jeans hide any reaction. Without a second thought I reach out to touch the iridescent scales, in awe of how beautiful they look on her.

"Are you angry? Because I can't control it. It just...happens when we meet our mates."

She shivers a bit under my touch and resumes her spot on the couch, though slightly closer now so our knees are touching.

"Why would I be angry? Do you know how many of my mates I marked without any sort of permission whatsoever? I'm pretty sure I only actively warned like, one of them. But, I also have someone that is supposedly meant for me but that

was already with someone else when I met him, so I need to know where you stand.”

“If I denied you it would literally kill me. And even if it didn’t, I could not. My only concern is whether or not you can accept me, because of the clear disparity of our stations.”

“You think I don’t want you?”

“It might have occurred to me once or a thousand times since the gala, yes.”

“What do you mean, it would literally kill you to deny me?”

“Once an aquatic shifter finds their mate, if they deny the bond it will eat away at them and destroy them. Their organs shut down, they die.”

“Holy fuck, that’s a bit dramatic.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t make the rules.”

“Well, I have no intention of refusing you. I think you’re... beautiful. And I’m intrigued. Tell me about yourself.”

“You truly hold no loyalty to that conduit you just dismissed downstairs?”

“No more than the mosquito that I had to smash when it tried to bite me the other day. Look, I know conduits have a bad rap, I get it. I hated them just as vehemently before I became one, and likely even more now that I’m seeing the extent of their selfishness.

“But you’re mine, and that means that you automatically get my loyalty. If you want it, anyway.”

I’m moving before I can tell myself to, pinning her against the arm of the sofa to taste her lips. They’re soft and incredibly plush, and her breath is like nectar.

“Sorry, I-“

She shuts me up with another kiss, pulling back after we’re both panting and turned the fuck on. Shit. These jeans were good, but they weren’t *that* good. Kind of hard to hide an erection this insistent. It knew it’s mate was nearby and was demanding entrance.

I settle back on the couch and do my best to draw attention away from my Eiffel tower dick, but she inhales and moans a little.

“Nothing to be ashamed of. I can smell lust, and it smells delicious on you. Okay, so now that we know our lips get along, tell me about you.”

“Well...fuck. You might not be so ready to kiss me or claim me once you hear it all, but if you want to know I’ll give you anything you want. In a nutshell? I was born with this weird... anomaly of colors. Too pale and mixed to be good enough for my family so I was cast out when I came of age, 15 for aquatic shifters.

“Sent out and exiled, basically, for being an embarrassment. The council kept me in the foster system until I turned 18 a few months ago, finished up high school online. I’ve been working odd jobs since trying to keep myself fed, but clearly, I’m not doing well since I just got fired.

“Honestly, I have nothing to offer you. I’m broke, nearly homeless, I have no family that will acknowledge me...I’m probably a terrible choice of mate. I’m also younger than you and have very little experience in the world the council runs in. You feel untouchable to me, and I can’t imagine your other mates will be thrilled that I’m your pick.”

She slowly rises and inches closer, folding herself on my lap and wrapping arms around my head, pulling me into her. I’m not sure the last time someone hugged me, but damn it felt good. Even before I was cast out from my family, I was kept as a dirty secret- hidden and left to my own devices more often than not.

I feel myself wanting to fall apart, and strangely she feels like a safe place to do that.

“You’re home now, Pax. I don’t care how you ended up here today, I only care that you want to be here. You feel...sad to me. I can’t really explain it, just that like your aura or whatever is dark and lonely. Is it okay if I hold you for a bit?”

I nod against her, letting her perfume and natural scent soak into my skin and further calm me. *Home.*

“Do you mean that?”

“What?”

“Do you mean that I’m home? I haven’t had one of those, that actually felt like it, ever. I’ve never been...wanted.”

She kisses me again, squeezing me tightly like she can milk the depression out of me.

“Yes. It’s a bit ostentatious, where we’re staying right now, but we want you there. Let’s head out and you can have dinner with us. Please? Do you have a lease or something we need to end?”

“Just like that? You want me to move in?”

“Well, either that or we’re going to be wasting a lot of time driving back and forth.”

I laugh a little as the incredible pressure I’ve been holding onto for the longest time begins to ease. I couldn’t let it go, not entirely yet, because there was every possibility her mates wouldn’t see me as a good match and kick me out. And she wouldn’t go against her own mates.

“I...we can get my clothes, I guess. I don’t have much, but it’s a month-by-month lease so I won’t have to deal with any paperwork...you’re sure you want me at your house? You don’t want to wait and get to know me better?”

“Would that change the fact that I can feel the destiny claiming us?”

“Probably not...”

“Then there’s no point waiting. The house is ridiculous. You can have your own room as we get to know each other, your own space...but you have as much right to it any of my other mates.”

“You’re way too chill about this.”

“You know, I’ve kind of learned to roll with the punches. I’m relieved I found you, relieved that you’re not going to

push me away, or that you're not already spoken for. I had no idea what I was looking for when the goddess gave me these marks. I might not have wanted this in the beginning, but now that everyone is in my life, I see its value and can't deny how whole I feel when I'm with my mates. That includes you, now."

"Shit this is weird. Okay, lead the way."

Royce

I'm pacing in Jericho's office, as I had been all fucking day in my own. How had I gotten everything so wrong? So messy? I didn't deserve the loyalty that Jericho was showing me right now, not after how many times my *ex-fiance* had treated him like a pariah.

"What are you the most upset about, right now?"

"Two fucking years of my life. She can keep the damned ring, I don't give a flying fuck about the money spent. It's tainted now. I'm most upset that I stood up for her, told Gabriella I was happy, and then..."

"Are you worried that Gabriella won't take you?"

"Well why should she, but she's just going to think I want her because I'm no longer obligated to Amanda."

"And you're not?"

"Jericho, what was it like when Gabby chose you for that dance? When you held her and she fucking *saw* you?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose it was a lot like when I find that perfect way to combine two plants, get that perfect poison that I've spent months perfecting, but like it ends up more incredible than anything I...no. That was shit. It's kind of like...when winter has been long, and cold, and dreary. But then one day, the sun comes out and it's not any of those things, but it touches your soul and you- no, that's shit too.

"It was *her*. Like my whole life had brought me to that exact moment, teaching me how to exist until she was there."

I can't help smile at my oldest friend, because he's not one to use words so generously. Hell, when he did speak, he got right to the point and made it. I had never seen him in a situation where he was unable to describe what he wanted to.

"It was *her*. Jericho, I've been obsessing over Gabriella since the gala. I couldn't figure out why she wouldn't get out of my head, why I was dreaming about her...why I couldn't...with Amanda...I don't know. I haven't been able to get it up,

and every time Amanda has spoken to me this week it was...I felt slimy when she touched me, and my ears hurt when she tried to tell me things.”

“Then why the hell did you propose?”

“I didn’t want anything telling me who to be with. I have been with Amanda for two years, and she’s always been... safe. Well, except when she wasn’t. I don’t know, man, it just felt like what I needed to do. I thought that if we took that step, everything would work out and I’d stop daydreaming about the way Gabby’s body fills out anything she wears, or the way her smile just fucking sucker punches me in the gut.

“I was lusting after another woman and I felt damn guilty. I’m not that guy.”

“You’re not. But, apparently Amanda is that woman.”

“Yeah, well...I’m honestly not too surprised that she hasn’t been faithful. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, man. I am mortified that she thought to ask you and Gabriella for tips on how to share a woman...how did Gabriella sit through that, knowing that the goddess told her I was meant for her?”

“She’s strong. She knows that we have to choose this, not just go with what the goddess says.”

“What is it like, sharing her?”

“We haven’t...we’re kind of taking things at our own pace.”

“Oh. Really?”

“But I’ve...watched...and believe me when I say it’s not a hardship.”

“Why not? I’ve never had to share a woman with anyone other than a mother that oversteps. How can it be okay to share your lover with so many other men? Don’t you get jealous when one of them touches her?”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s like...when she has her head thrown back and they’re making her feel good, you just want to make sure those sounds keep coming out of her. And she doesn’t get tired. Like...ever. I’ve seen her go *hours* with

absolutely no reduction of passion or enthusiasm. She's like every man's wet dream made real."

"Fuck."

"So, what do you want?"

We both spin around as Gabriella enters the room, clinging on to some kid with weird hair.

"I'm sorry to intrude, I just...I'm sorry Amanda hurt you. I'm here if you need someone to listen to you, I can be a friend, just tell me."

"Why? After I've been pushing you away all week?"

She shrugs, and even that looks sexy on her. Wet dream, indeed.

"I just want to help you. We don't have to be anything to each other, but I'd still help you if you wanted me to."

"And if I *wanted* to be something to you?"

"I need to know you want it for the right reasons. Not because your other option is gone. Is she gone? Or are you..."

"She's fucking gone, Gabriella. The ring was a bad idea, and I'm sorry if that hurt you. I just thought that I could prove that I make my own decisions, even though doing that wasn't one I wanted to make. She's...not you."

I'm scared to get close to her, not sure how to keep my hands from reaching from her if I did.

"I felt it at the gala, the...spark. I just tried so hard to ignore it because I didn't want to hurt Amanda."

Even if it meant you living a life that wasn't meant for you?"

"She deserved better than some guy that threw her aside the second he saw something he couldn't live without."

She inhales sharply, backing into the kid as he puts his around her, calming her.

"I was with her for two years. My whole family knew she was wrong for me, but duty is something that has been

instilled in me. I thought I owed it to her after so much time spent together.”

“Well, I can’t say I understand that train of thought, why you would do something you knew would likely make you at least a little miserable, just so you didn’t hurt someone’s feelings. I don’t know if it helps, but she said she was thinking of leaving you for good anyway. I don’t think the marriage would have really gone through.”

“I’m so fucking sorry you had to listen to that. And then I accused you...fuck I’m an ass. I’m so sorry.”

She studies me for a minute, smiling back at the tall lanky dude before stepping to Jericho’s side and burying her face in his chest for a moment. He instantly wraps her up, another shock to me. That dude didn’t touch people.

When he had women, it was a quick fuck and then he was done. Maybe some women he’d be with a few times before running, but to see him so soft, so absolutely enthralled, he looked so fucking *happy*. I wanted that. I almost felt the kiss he gave her, could nearly see the way their souls were trying to merge.

My magic gets out of hand, creating an environment that matched what they were putting out. Gabriella squeaks and jumps into Jericho, looking around at the tropical jungle that just appeared in the middle of his office. A giant butterfly flits in front of Gabriella and rests on her shoulder before taking off again.

My illusions are nearly impossible to see as fake. The humidity, the smells, the sounds of the forest...

“That’s right, he said you were an illusionist. This is incredible.”

She walks up to a giant tree and places her palm against the rough bark of it, looking up to the canopy as it just continues to climb, covered in vines as giant flowers and plants dot the branches and birds fly about.

“Sorry, I didn’t actually mean to do that.”

I let it fade softly so it's not an abrupt change, then the office furniture reappears between the white walls of Jericho's actual office. Jericho looks like he's about to start cracking up, because he knows what it means when I lose control of my powers like that. It's not from the sort of feelings *friendship* inspired.

"Sorry."

"Wow. Anyway, guys, this is Pax. Pax, this is my mate Jericho, and this is...Royce. Jericho's friend."

"Ouch. I deserved that. Hey man, nice to meet you."

I try to be jovial, but that mark on his arm, with Gabriella front and center is making my blood boil a bit. Would she want me still if she has this guy? Did he just take my spot? Jericho greets him with nothing but good intention, going straight for a bro hug when he sees the mark.

"Congratulations, man. Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

"Oh, that's right. That's why I came up here in the first place. I didn't mean to interrupt. It's your night, hon. Pax, can we get you settled at the house while Jer takes me out? The other guys can help you get your stuff moved in."

He's moving in? Fuck. Where was I going to sleep tonight? Couldn't exactly go back to Amanda's place...

"If you need somewhere to crash, Royce we've got plenty of room. You won't even see me if you don't want to."

"Uh, thanks...I was just trying to figure that out. That won't be weird for you?"

"Weird is relative. Just let Jericho know. I'm going to introduce Pax to the guys and head home to get ready. What time we leaving?"

Jericho has another stupid smile on his face and I don't even want to know what he's imagining right now. I'm terrified I fucked everything up by pushing Gabby away when I should have been running to her instead.

"Wear black...and 6:30?"

Jericho

Maybe it was strange that I wasn't even slightly offput by the fact the new kid got claimed before I did, but I knew I had a place with Gabriella, so, yeah. I meant what I told Royce. I didn't get jealous. I knew she cared for all of us, so it didn't really matter to me when she showed attention to who. It also meant that when she did finally give me her mark to wear it would mean that much more.

I was a bit nervous to take her out tonight, I wasn't sure if she would find tagging along on this job absolutely crazy or if she would appreciate what I do and accept me for it. I'm really hoping it's the latter, but either way I feel like we can't really take many more steps forward without her knowing exactly who I am.

What I do is a big part of who I am, so she needs to be okay with my job. I could always get another one, I suppose, but I actually enjoyed working with toxic plants. Okay, maybe I *was* a bit crazy.

We have dinner in my greenhouse before we leave, just the two of us at a table I had put in specifically for occasions like this. The plants I grew in here were carefully organized, curated in a way that I knew exactly where to find anything and everything, but labelled in a way that if someone broke in, they'd have to try and decode everything before they could figure out which way was up.

Not that the place wasn't heavily warded, but I had to protect my plant babies. See? I was a total softie.

“These plants are incredible.”

I look around again, trying to see it through her eyes.

“Thank you. Would you like a tour?”

The space wasn't overly large, but there were enough rows and shelves of plants that we could spend some time. She finishes her last bite of pasta- thanks to Bal for the suggestion, and then I have an excuse to get my hands on her like I've been looking for all week.

Crowding behind her, I tower over her as I reach out to the plants.

“Most of these are completely modified from their original plants, though I have seeds for the base plants secured over there. They don’t have names like you’d recognize since I created most of them over the past few years, instead I have them organized by what they do.

“This section over here all produce toxins that are more inconvenience than lethal. Bad stomachache, headache, slight fever...etc. They will last in the system a day or two but act immediately. Good for when I need to take someone down temporarily but don’t wish to actually harm them.

“These ones, are all different variations of nightshade, and I’ve manipulated each one to be a different level of toxicity.”

“They’re so...pretty. It’s hard to believe something so beautiful and delicate could be so dangerous.”

“You are, are you not? I’ve heard stories, seen how you move. Beauty and lethality are not mutually exclusive.”

I trace her hips as I tell her this, earning a rolling shudder through her spine and earning her a kiss on her neck.

“I can make these into wines or infuse into balms to irritate the skin, but it will paralyze the victim’s involuntary muscles in varying degrees. I’ve been able to work my intent into the different tones of purple so that I can affect specific muscles.”

Gabby takes a decided step back and I have to laugh at it a bit because to her, I’m the least dangerous man around.

“Gabriella, they will not harm you. They are my creations, they obey me. Come over here.”

I point her to the living wall of plants I had created, a literal rainbow of petals living next to each other.

“Wow. How do...I’ve never seen colors like this exist in plants before.”

It’s true. Redder than a normal rose, bright fuchsia, neon orange...and every shade in between all the way to a deep, nearly sparkling indigo.

“Carefully cross breeding different plants, using different ratios to achieve the shades I wanted.”

“What do they all do?”

“Not everything in here is meant as a weapon. These I created for pleasure only. In fact, the ones with the pink and orange tones could even be used as an aphrodisiac.”

“Lust can absolutely be a weapon.”

I pull her closer to me, inhaling her jasmine scent and enjoying the way her eyes trail over my creations.

“I don’t think there’s a guy in this house that would disagree with that. You taunt us every single second of every day by just existing. It’s torture, you know.”

She pushes her phenomenal ass against my groin, using my hand to hold us together.

“Tour?”

I can’t help but laugh a little as she teases me more, leading her through the rest of the greenhouse to show her the more exotic of my decorative plants, ones that fetch a good sum to people that want extreme color palettes in their gardens, and then end up with my most deadly plants I grow, ensconced in their own area in the corner of the greenhouse.

“Anything in here will kill with a mere touch. I can use them in food, as extracts, I can make them completely tasteless and untraceable and affect the person nearly any which way. These ones all slowly make a person lose their mind, these ones shut down vital organs one by one, these ones cut off the senses until a person slowly suffocates on stale air.

“Gabriella, you need to know that I’m dangerous. Well, not to you. I asked you out tonight to not only get some much-needed time with you, but to show you some of the more dangerous aspects of my job. I’m a hired assassin.

“Sometimes, there are people who do bad things and have magic that prevents them from being caught easily, or its too defensive or manipulative to make them captured or killed easily. I can tailor a poison to a specific target to do the most

damage, making it look like they simply decided to stop living.”

“Who do you kill?”

I’m surprised she doesn’t seem shocked or nervous around me, but it’s a good sign.

“I do not take jobs that benefit evil. Lately, it’s been working on cutting down Night sympathizers, and organization heads that are importing drugs and other dangerous magical elements into the country. Can I put this on you?”

I slip off the necklace I had made for her, a long chain containing five tiny vials that were shatterproof and looked more decorative and whimsical than useful. I wore a similar one, though mine wasn’t quite so refined looking.

It rests in between her breasts and I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing she has some protection on her now.

“The light blue one will create a cloud of solid smoke to give you cover if you need to escape a situation. The dark blue one will lock up your opponent, like a binding spell, making them completely immobile so you can get away or haul them away.

The pink one creates a fume so noxious that anyone within a 25 foot radius will pass out from the smell. If you use that one, you need to either hold your breath while you run or you need to filter your air through a thick piece of cloth, like a sweatshirt. You can also uncap it and throw it so you’re not in the cloud when it happens.

The white one is a poison you can slip into a drink or onto food and it will kill within minutes. The red one does the same, but doesn’t need to be ingested, only touched. Gabriella, can you remember all this?”

She looks a little alarmed to have it all resting on her chest, but we’ll get to that. She repeats the colors back to me several times, committing them to memory so that she knows which to use when.

“Now, there is an incantation you can do, to keep them from being disturbed by anyone other than yourself. Donec liberabo te solum tutum. It means ‘Safe until I alone free you’ and it will keep them from being used against you or accidentally engaged. Can you activate the spell?”

She nods and hovers her hand over the necklace, a pulse of magic settling as the necklace falls into place once again.

“Thank you. Really. No one’s ever given me something like this.”

“Are you smiling from a gift of poisons?”

“We all have our kinks, right?”

“Have I terrified you away yet?”

She kisses my palm before wrapping arms around me. “Jericho, I’m safe with you. I trust your judgements and I’m not going to lie, the way that you have several hundred ways to kill or incapacitate your enemies is a bit of a turn on.”

“Gods, you’re perfect.”

I kiss her mouth this time, forgetting that I have somewhere to be soon. She’s just so responsive to everything. You’d think that with as many mates as she has, as often as she gets touched in every innocuous way throughout her days, that she’d become almost numb to these slight touches.

Instead, it’s as if she’s more attuned to the way they affect her.

I indulge for an unhurried minute, tasting her and letting her make me crazy as she nips at my lips, strokes her tongue against mine, runs her little fingers up my chest and across my neck. I knew quite well lust could be lethal- she had me under her spell and because of the way she makes me feel she just became the handler to the most feared poison dealer in the country.

“Have I thanked you for choosing me recently?”

She sighs and smiles up at me, straining on her tip toes so she can gain better access to the parts of me she wants most right now. I help her out, because I can be a nice guy, and lift

her so her legs are wrapped around me, making me even harder as I feel the heat from her body against the planes of my chest.

“You’re not mad that I ruined your lone wolf routine?”

“There is nothing fulfilling about hiding and shying away from 98% of the population. I was just waiting for you to come sweep me off my feet, I suppose.”

“Is that what happened?”

I run my hands over her ass, squeezing her to me as she tightens her hold as well. Hugs were nice. I’m not sure how I went so long without them.

“That is absolutely what happened. I don’t dance, Gabriella. I know how, but I don’t do it. I still don’t understand how you noticed me that night.”

“You’re mine.”

She offers this explanation like it solves everything. In some ways, maybe it does.

“Without exception.”

She kisses me again, and this time there’s something more to it. An intensity that wasn’t there the last time our lips got mixed together. Stirrings in my chest, warmth flooding my veins. If I didn’t know for a fact that I wasn’t dying, I’d assume I was going into cardiac arrest or something. This woman was dangerous, because she had all of us at her beck and call, willing to do whatever to continue to get her to look at us this way.

“Didn’t you say you had a job tonight? What are we doing?”

“First, just know I *will* protect you. This will bring no danger to you, am I understood?”

She kisses my cheek as she extracts herself, landing back on her feet but still within my arms.

“Got it.”

“This is actually a fun one. There’s this man, he calls himself Exodus, thinks it’s his gods-given mission to rid the planet of high magic carriers. Thinks we’re abominations, and that our souls are corrupted. He’s killed dozens already, and no one has been able to get a location that was accurate long enough to use it.”

“But you know where he is?”

“I have my ways. Imagine my surprise when I found out he’s a magic user himself, but it’s distorted. His powers never developed as they ought because he was tortured as a child, his father worked for the government and ran experimental trials.”

“I feel like I’m in the plot of a movie or something.”

“Does that mean we get a happy ending?”

She elbows me playfully as we walk through the house, saying her goodbyes to the guys as we get to my car. The new kid looked pretty relaxed, and I felt kind of bad I was taking her away from him right after they found each other, but I really did think this was going to be fun for her to see. Romance, and all that shit.

It’s not until we’re driving again that our conversation resumes, the darkness of the night around us seeping into my stealthy car as we hug the curves in the road, heading to our destination.

“So I’m not going to ask how you found his location, I’m sure that would be a terrifying conversation. How are we...”

“Removing his pawn? Well, funny thing.”

I dig through the middle console, extracting a packet of popcorn seeds and handing it to her.

“Popcorn?”

“He has a corn allergy. He’s tried to have it expunged from his medical records, but anything can be found with enough motivation.”

“So...we’re going to popcorn him to death?”

I bark out a laugh, but she’s not too far off the mark.

“He’s meeting with a client tonight. They’re supposed to be discussing the details for their next hit, a university that panders to conduits and is well-known for the top-tier education they provide.”

“They’re trying to hit Hemlock?”

“They think they are. They won’t get close enough.”

“So, who’s the client?”

I smile at her, handing her a picture. A woman she likely recognizes.

“Holy fuck. That’s Madison’s mom, right?”

“Aurelia Gantry, 44 years of age. Recently had her magic stripped and has become an activist for evening the playing field. Unhinged, you might say.”

“Yeah, well her daughter wasn’t much better.”

“She’s already dead.”

“Then how...”

I smile again, and then she gets it and actually gets excited.

“I told you it would be fun. All I need you to do is have dinner with the guy, go along with whatever bullshit he’s spewing. Read through this file if you want to know some more details so you’re not caught off guard on anything. But really, my plan will happen before you have to deal with many pleasantries. Just humor the idiot for a few minutes and then we’re good.”

We park down the street from the meet up, and it’s freaky as fuck watching her stare at the picture and try to emulate the face. It’s not 100% identical, but most people wouldn’t know the difference. This guy we were dealing with was an idiot, so I wasn’t worried about our cover being blown.

I get into position as she walks in, acting all haughty and angry as she takes her seat. The guy is trying to offer her wine, but she’s smart enough take one small polite sip before ignoring it.

I can't hear what they're saying, but the guy looks like a lovesick fool, so I'm sure she's using her other abilities on him as well. I find my contact in the kitchen, using the super concentrated corn powder I was able to create. As per usual, he won't see or taste it but it will definitely take a bite out of him. Once the food is brought out, I resume my earlier post, making sure I can see Gabriella. She looks like she's losing patience with his sermons, so I am happy to be able to offer her relief in the form of his death.

Each bite he takes has him scratching at his neck more, his face reddening. Gabby backs up as he starts clawing at her for help, his airways closing up as he goes into anaphylactic shock. Not a pretty way to go- no scratch that. He's a very becoming shade of blue, and his eyes are panicking so beautifully.

The whole thing takes less than an hour before we're back in the car, zooming away and towards the house we now share.

"You knew Hemlock was special to me- thank you, for helping to protect the people there."

"I would do anything to make you happy, Gabriella."

It seems the house is quiet and dark when we return home, and I don't even ask her if she wants to come to my room with me. I lead her there and she tells me she'll go brush her teeth and come back. I'm in bed when she walks back in, wearing one of my shirts I hadn't even realized was missing. Sneaky thing.

Her hair is down around her shoulders, the paleness of it contrasting so strongly to the dark tones in my skin as she doesn't hesitate to crawl in next to me, tucking her ice cube feet against my legs and making me yelp a bit. But all the discomfort gets forgotten when she tucks herself against me, her scent hitting me like a ton of bricks.

The way she feels underneath my fingertips as I run them along her bare legs...I don't think I've ever wanted to possess a woman the way I want to possess Gabby. Even better? I don't have to let her go. The goddess thinks we're soul matches.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I don’t. I just kiss her instead, because surely that will get the point across much quicker. She kisses with her whole body. The kind of kiss you feel the next day, the reverberations pounding through you long after it’s over. Her head angles towards me, her voice making sounds, reassuring me that she’s as far gone as I am.

Her hands are combing through my long dreads, testing the texture and using them as a leading rope to chase down to my abdomen. I didn’t bother putting a new shirt on, I never sleep with them on. Then her palm is flush against my chest, tracing all my contours as her leg hooks over mine and her whole body begins to squirm and move with me more and more the longer I hold her mouth captive.

I whip my shirt off of *her* so we’re evenly matched, nearly dying when I get to see her breasts up close and touch them, taste them. The softness of her skin, the hard as sin pebbling of her nipples as she arches into my tongue, the way her skin tastes like honey.

I taste her other breast to be sure it’s the same experience, then I’m covering her abdomen in invisible marks, nipping across her hipbones and diving into her gloriously wet pussy. I had been dreaming of this moment all week, wondering if she possibly tasted as good as all her other mates insisted. This had never been my favorite activity to do with bed partners, but mostly because I never held enough affection to care about how they really felt.

Sure, I made sure they got something out of it, but I didn’t take joy out of putting my mouth on them, so I didn’t do it much. Gabby though, holy fuck.

“Gods damned it Gabby. You’re fucking ruining me. How the hell am I supposed to get out of this bed and do shit now that I know what this tastes like?”

Her legs splayed to near splits, her knees hooked over my shoulders, I’m sucking, licking, biting anything and everything I find. Her hands are pulling at my hair, keeping a firm grip on it as we both find pleasure in the act, time stopping as the two

of us create a symphony of strained cries and fevered demands, whimpering pleas.

She has to pry me off of her after who knows how many climaxes, leaving me panting, my blood racing, and my pupils locked on her face. I feel like a shark circling blood infested waters, my cock pulsing so heavily that I'm almost concerned it's going to strangle itself.

I reach down to stroke it as I watch her body, but she stops me. She's up and straddling me before I know what's up, impaling herself on me. Her eyes close as she enjoys the first stretch, her cream running down her legs and onto my pelvis. There's a perfume in the air from her body, a cloud that seems to drive me even wilder.

And then there's this near terrifying feeling with how hard it hits me, a deep pull within Gabby's body that seems to infuse into every vein in my dick, threatening to lock it inside Gabby's body by sheer force.

“What the hell is that?”

“Bodysmith muscles. Is it hurting you? I can try to reign it in.”

“Don't you fucking dare. I just wanted this to last a hell of a lot longer.”

“It seems unfair to ask now, I had planned on checking earlier, but you sure you want this?”

“Gabriella, if you don't give me your fucking mark I'm likely to start begging.”

The next time she kisses me, I feel her magic pulse into my left arm, settling around my finger and burning an image along my forearm. I feel...strange. I look down to see a litany of toxic and exotic plants of my own making wrapped around my skin protectively, and Gabriella's second to last mate mark has a skull and crossbones. Huh. I was a badass bitch now.

“Oh my gods. Did you just call yourself a badass bitch?”

“You'll never prove it.”

I shut her pretty little mouth up with my tongue, pinning her underneath me as I pound into her, evoking more screams that are surely making everyone else in the house get off, too. The bed is sounding more and more like it's going to give itself up as tribute as I relentlessly fuck her, holding her down so she can do nothing but take it.

The orgasm fucking rips through me, obliterating all rational thought as the mattress finally crashes to the floor, the sound of wood splintering a nice background to us gasping for air. A knock on the door precedes it being thrown open, a very amused Grey and Foster standing there with Pearson.

“She still breathing?”

“Fuck.”

I roll off of Gabriella, pulling her on top of me as my heartrate tries to return to earth, Gabby's sweat stained body making no friction as she slides against me, her back to my front and staring at the ceiling.

“You guys always insert yourself in other men's bedroom activities?”

Grey slides to the bed, not even blinking at my nudity as his eyes roam up and down Gabriella, his hand stroking her leg.

“We do when it involves Gabriella screaming at earth-shattering decibels. Pearson can fix the bed.”

Pearson smirks at us and winks at Gabriella, concentrating on the splinters of wood before it begins to lift us back to it's normal height, all the small pieces of wood finding their place.

“Okay, I can move.”

“Don't you fucking dare.”

Gabriella

I have no idea what just happened. I've been fucked plenty of times by these guys, but that...I don't even know. He broke the fucking bed. Every girl needs a dicking like that, at least once in her life.

"Thanks, Pearson. You're the best."

I try to sit up but Jericho's definitely not having it. He's got my body completely cemented to him still, so I just nod for Grey to come close to me instead. If Jericho was going to be all possessive, then he was going to have to deal with other mates getting up close and personal with him.

"I missed you. Did you have fun tonight, pretty girl?"

"Sure did. Jericho let me poison somebody!"

"What the fuck dude?"

"It was hot."

Grey shakes his head at Jericho, and then Foster is closing in, stealing a kiss as I lay plastered to the man meat underneath me.

"Hey wildflower."

"What did you guys do all night? Pax settle in okay?"

"I'm sorry I can't talk to you when your breasts are just sitting out in the open staring at me."

Grey nips at them and then drags Jericho's blanket over me.

"Yeah, I think so. He's kind of a nervous kid, but you'll be good for him."

"Hey. Did you guys know that penguins don't speak Chinese? How fucking racist is that?"

We all pause for a bit, wondering if Jericho was going somewhere with that.

"And like...how are we supposed to make breakfast when we're up here, and the kitchen is way the fuck down the stairs."

And with blue walls on the stairs? Naw, man. That shit is scary.”

The guys all lose it, and someone passes Foster money. Apparently, they were making bets now on what kind of behavior would come out when I got my mates high?

“Jericho, love, do you want me to make the room stop spinning?”

“Heh. I broke the bed. My penis broke the bed.”

Jericho sits bolt upright with a big inhale as he finally slides me off his insane chest, looking around his room with wide eyes.

“You good, man?”

Pearson is trying not to laugh but, like, *c'mon*.

“That door. Where have I seen that door before??”

“Oh gods. Okay, hold on there, shadow man.”

I suck the lust out of him a bit so he's not out of his mind, but then he's just giggling uncontrollably so I stop. The next round is a bit more tame, and when I wake up the next morning it's to find him already gone and way too many voices echoing from the downstairs vicinity.

Well, I guess I did live with a lot of guys, so *too many* voices was probably a judgement call.

I allow myself a few moments alone to stretch and put my body back together after last night's sexual olympics...hmm, interesting idea there, Gabby. I'm sore in all the best ways, which is weird because I don't get sore after sex. It's in the rule book.

But damn. Jericho fucks like an animal, and I've been fucked by an animal so I should know. I smile down at my conduit marks, I know, I know, it's a big improvement from the scowls they normally get. But now that they were near full, they looked pretty fucking sweet, and I was proud of who they represented.

When I can't ignore my bladder anymore, I stumble out of bed, snagging Jericho's t-shirt he discarded last night and slip it over my body, so I don't accidentally start another breakfast orgy. Hmm. Maybe I should re-think the wearing the clothing around the house thing. If I walked around naked, would anyone know what to do with me?? Maybe that belonged under 'topics for therapy'.

I wash my hands and completely ignore the crazy sex hair I'm sporting like a freaking champ, humming to myself as I wander downstairs, trying to figure out why I'm like extra frisky this morning. I follow my nose to the smells and sounds of the kitchen, sighing in pleasure when Cyrus hands me a hot cup of chai tea that he's perfected. It's like a warm hug in beverage form and mmmmm.

"You look happy this morning, love."

I kiss him, because I can, feeling pretty bullet proof. "I am happy. Jericho broke the bed last night."

I waggle my eyebrows as he laughs, passing me along to Bal who is sipping his mint tea, offering me a mint-infused kiss that I can't refuse. His hands wander under the hem of my shirt, cupping my bare ass and groaning at what he finds.

"This is unfair, DG. You can't just walk in here like this and expect us to keep our hands to ourselves."

I spin out of reach with a laugh, on the hunt for more pretty boys to kiss good morning. I find Foster and then dart away down the hall to the living room where the rest are gathered... along with some unexpected guests.

I freeze in the doorway, continuing to sip at my tea with wide-eyes as I stare and hope for inspiration to strike. Royce is there, staring at me much the way Bal just was, so I just stare back. I'm good at that. Except when there are douche bags sitting next to him.

"What the fuck is that guy doing here?"

I don't blink or pull my mug away from my face as I stare down my very ex-boyfriend, currently sitting on my couch and talking to Royce and Jericho. Dar and Pearson are sitting on

another couch, with *my mother*, who is looking like she's ready to sample my goods.

“And what the fuck is she doing here? Damn it, this morning was so good, too.”

Apollo and Pax are on the last sofa and I go there because, hell no, I'm not sitting with the other people in the room. Apollo throws his arm around me, everyone kind of staring like I'm being rude, and Pax just sits there blushing, likely at my lack of actual clothes. I cross my legs and lean in to kiss him good morning.

“Hey.”

“Wait, wait, wait. How do you know my brother?”

“Fuck. No, Royce, tell me that Braxton isn't *actually* related to you?? Damn it! Now I've been rejected by 2/2 of you. Perfect.”

I catch everybody up that's unaware.

“Ex boyfriend. Cheated on me. Major case of the douchies.”

Royce groans and covers his face with his hands as I try to ignore the way that Braxton's eyes are rolling over me. “What the fuck man? Nothing? You- godsdamn it, Braxton. And wait, wait, wait. He had *you* in his bed and he...am I in an alternate universe?”

“No. You have no fucking room to talk. You put a ring on you-know-who while knowing *that* was your calling? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Points to Braxton for finally trying to stand up for me, but, you know. Too little too late and all that.

“Wow. Okay, ‘that’ is still in the room.”

“Has anyone seen Gabby? We should warn her-“ Palmer's voice is echoing down the halls as it gets closer and closer.

“In here, big guy. Too late for warning.”

Palmer comes in and dutifully glares at Brax before standing behind me.

“Okay, dear, no greeting for your mother??”

“Fuck. How did I forget about that one? Yes, yes. Boys, please step away from the parental unit. I promise she has no good intentions with you. Mom, my boys are off limit. No touching.”

She stamps her foot and rolls her eyes, whining as she side eyes the fuck out of her couch partners. Who very intelligently choose to come squeeze in on the couch with me, Pax, and Apollo.

“Well, Pax, I guess you’re getting a full initiation this morning.”

“Babe, a full initiation would be you fucking him on the floor in front of all of us like you did with Pearson. This ain’t nothing.”

I shrug. He’s not wrong.

“Why are you here, mom?”

“I can’t come visit my only daughter?”

“You just usually don’t.”

“Hmm. Really? I guess you’re right. Do comb that hair, child. Fine, I’ll go. You sure none of you boys want to try out a *real* bodysmith?”

I jump from the couch, screaming at her and pushing her out of the room, barely covering my ass as I go.

“Mom! These are my fucking mates! You can’t come in here and try to poach them. You’ve got the entire ocean to fish from. Back. Off.”

“But...but.”

“NO.”

“They’re so pretty! What about the one that’s not marked?”

“Royce is off limits, too. These are your sons-in-law and that’s fucking gross.”

She pouts and looks back one more time at my menagerie before stomping out the door with a little wave.

“Well, that was kind of rude.”

I spin to see Cyrus frowning at my mother's exit.

"It wasn't, I promise. She only came to try and poach you guys. She doesn't do visits. Trust me. If I hadn't thrown her out, she'd be trying to corner you guys. We, uh, don't do the whole 'mother-daughter' thing. She's pretty much available for sex advice, and that's about it. I took too long to put out, so I was quite the disappointment to her. She's probably just trying to get in my good graces now because she wanted to get a good look at you. This is wrong on so many levels."

I rub my eyes, desperately trying to get the awful images out of my head that my mother hitting on my husbands just induced.

"I told you she touched my ass when I sat down."

I glare at Pearson. "She better not have." I thrust my tea at Cyrus, but Palmer catches me around the waist, hauling me back in the room so I can't go out and fight her.

"You're mine, Pretty princess."

He holds his hands up and smirks. "I know, but *damn* you're cute when you're feisty. We should probably feed her before she gets angrier, guys."

Bal walks in and hands me a plate as soon as Grey pulls me down into an open armchair with him.

"You eat your breakfast, I'll eat mine. You look way too fucking good right now and I'm starving from watching those legs move around the room."

His teeth are in me as I bring the first bite of eggs to my mouth, loving his possessive display. I know he's probably just trying to rile up Royce and Brax, but it feels so damn good I don't even care. I shove the lust to Foster as he walks in to join the circus, smirking as he keels over and grunts, spasming as pleasure runs through me and into him. I keep enough to feel tingling and warm, maybe even a bit moist. Suck it up. I'm not avoiding the word just because you have a strange aversion to it.

"What the fuck is going on right now?" Poor, sweet, uninvolved Royce. Maybe we'll really scare him away for

good this time.

We all laugh as Foster stares at me with pure heat in his eyes and a very *moist* crotch area as he walks backwards out of the room. I wink at him as he disappears into the bathroom, then I hear the shower turn on.

“You’re in our house. We’re not going to hide behind masks and pleasantries. This is who we are. Real and unashamed of what we share.”

I hold up a hand for Dar for an air high-five then shrug as I finish my breakfast, Royce and Brax finishing a conversation before the icky one blessedly leaves, the door shutting a welcome addition to the room’s other noises.

“Wow. All of you in one room. Well, minus messy boy. This is weird.”

Grey releases me with a groan, throwing his head back against the chair in a gluttonous recline.

“You fucked my brother?”

“Umm, excuse you, you don’t get to talk to me that way. I dated your brother. He’s an asshole. But I’m not sure why you care since you don’t want this anyway.”

“Gabriella-“

“Nope. We’re done with bitter words for the morning. Who’s got something good?”

Apollo gestures for me to come sit back with him, so I kiss Grey before putting my plate on the coffee table and sitting between him and Pax again.

“Foster, you coming? I got something to tell you guys.”

Foster waltzes in, kneeling in front of me and kissing me unabashedly, water still dripping down his very naked chest, letting his hands trail up my legs and under the hem of my shirt. Luckily his body is shielding my now exposed core from Royce, but I kind of just want to pull his pants down and fuck him. But, I’ll play hostess for now.

“I’m getting you back for that, wildflower. That was mean.”

He goes to sit where Braxton was, the lust in the room flowing good.

“Okay, so...my father contacted me yesterday.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, pretty much. He, uh, said he’s recalling me tomorrow if I don’t bring you back today.”

“Fuck. Are you okay?”

“Am I...am *I* okay? Gabriella...he’s trying to eat your soul.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“You are underestimating him.”

“I’m not. Just not a lot I can do about it since I can’t close my circuit. What’s the plan?”

Jericho tries to talk to Royce, but I throw a pillow at his very shocked face, shutting him up.

“Don’t. If he doesn’t want me freely, he doesn’t want me. Now. Plan?”

Like it was coordinated, every face in the room turns to Royce for answers. Bal steps up as first mate, acting as the voice of the group.

“Royce. What’s going on? I know you’re in a rough place right now, but if you’re going to stay in this room for family chat, she’s going to think it means something. It’s cool if you need a place to stay, but-“

“Wow, can we all just stop, please. Can I talk?”

Hmm. Feisty *is* kind of cute.

Royce is running his hands through his hair as he looks around the room, eyes zeroing in on me in a tortured way.

“Look, I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. All I know is that last week, I thought Amanda and I were finally figuring things out. Then the gala happened and my whole world got twisted inside out.”

“Welcome to the club.”

I try to scowl at Foster, but he hasn't lost that 'I-want-to-fuck-you' look yet, so it doesn't really hold.

"I thought I was losing my mind. After the gala, when we went home, I...things were weird. Things had never been great with Amanda, but, Gabriella, I couldn't see her at all. I saw you every time I closed my eyes. I felt my hands holding you as we danced. I saw the look in your eyes when you were talking with one of these guys. I've never felt that I was missing out on something this badly before.

"Like looking from the outside, everything just...shifted. I convinced myself that I needed to just go all in with Amanda so that I could stop being a jerk. She didn't deserve me to think about another woman in order to get turned on. She didn't deserve me imagining she was someone else when I touched her.

"So I proposed. Worst mistake I've ever made."

He comes closer, kneeling right in front of me so I can see his eyes as he explains everything, making it really fucking hard to stay mad even though I really thought he had every right to behave the way he did. I kind of did come in and flip his world around. Well, the goddess did, anyway.

"I had had the ring for a while. I honestly never thought I'd actually use it, because I bought it on a whim when we had a big fight a while back. Regardless, no man wants to propose to a woman he *thought* loved him and have her seem so mild-mannered and unsure when saying 'yes' like it's a question.

"When Jericho told me that the goddess chose me to be your last mate, I didn't want to admit that I had wasted two years with a woman so wrong for me. I was determined to be the guy that stays loyal to his girl, fighting to keep her and proving his worth. Imagine how stupid I felt when I realized she had been cheating on me for six months and wanted to break up."

"Royce, we have time. You need time to get past that relationship, to heal. Time to understand everything that happened and work through it. If you're interested in getting to know each other and being friends, that's great. I'm not expecting you to jump into my bed or declare eternal love for

me, though. You were with Amanda for a long time, and I know that takes time to get over.”

“Are you done telling me what I need to think and feel?”

He smirks as he lays a tentative hand on my bare foot.

“Sorry. I just don’t want you to think I’m pressuring you or expecting anything.”

“And you haven’t. This whole week, you’ve made it very clear that you don’t expect anything. I’ve made it painfully obvious I didn’t want it, except that every time I was telling you no, I was actually telling you I’m fucking yours. Maybe I hoped Amanda would say no, so I had a fail-proof reason to run. I don’t know. My heart fell through my stomach when I realized why she was in your office.

“I can’t imagine how uncomfortable that had to have been for you. I don’t know how you actually feel about me because we haven’t really done this, but I feel this pull to you, Gabriella. Whatever freaky shit the goddess did when she picked me, she did it good because my heart is miles and miles away from any sort of affections for Amanda.

“I’m not saying that to placate you or as an excuse to push forward. I just...I need you, okay? Please tell me I didn’t fuck it all up by pushing you away.”

“You didn’t fuck it up, I just want you to be happy.”

“Then let me. Will you have me? However slow we need to take things, fine. But I’m in. I want what they have. I want you to look at me like I hung the moon. I want to be in on all your inside jokes and weird public sexual displays. When you’re ready, that is. Please?”

I can feel the sincerity wafting off of him, and as badly as I want to kiss him, I hold off. It’s going to take some time.

“I can’t believe your Braxton’s brother.” “I mean, you were pretty right. He *is* a douche. He had told me about a girl he dated last summer, it’s going to be kind of epic to hold over him that I’m mated to his one that got away. That shit will never get old.”

Hmm. Maybe that had merit.

“You just said you were mated to me.”

“I hope to be. When you’re ready. When *we’re* ready for that. This is so different than anything I’ve felt before. We’ve hardly even had any time together, yet there’s just this weird...like I have to see you and touch you and...I just want to take care of you and...shit.”

“He gets it.” Palmer claps Royce on the back, giving him his weird man initiation to our group.

“This is touching and all, but we need to figure out what to do about my father.”

“Right. The Night that wants to eat me. Serious stuff.”

As if on cue, the room goes a bit dark as the lights begin to flicker, all of my mates circling around me instinctively as they lose power completely. There’s a bright apparition of the goddess in front of us, screaming in silent terror as her arms fly out behind her, and then she flickers and disappears as well.

The windows begin to rattle and there is a sudden windstorm kicking branches and dirt at them, then it feels like an earthquake hits as the floor begins to rumble, shaking the whole place and sending picture frames and lamps to the floor.

No one says anything as books start flying off shelves, the door flies open, and we all start to fade as we link hands, shaking and gripping onto each other, hoping that whatever is happening won’t rip us apart. I get this feeling of being completely incorporeal as we swirl around, nothing around me making sense until we’re dropped onto a hard rock floor.

There’s a gasp and applause from someone as we blink against the bright spotlights that are on us, all of my mates again grabbing onto me and thrusting me in the middle of a mega-man sandwich. If I wasn’t absolutely certain somebody was about to try and kill us right now, I’d probably be getting some very naughty ideas.

“Oh well done, well done! That was *marvelous!* Such an entrance! Such authentic reactions!”

Some madman begins to giggle maniacally as Apollo glues himself to me, kissing me to reassure me he's with me. I can't see anything other than his chest with his arms around me so tightly, but I feel safe. Well, as safe as one can feel while in the presence of what I'm assuming is a homicidal god type-creature that is hell-bent on eating your soul.

"Gabby, you have to fucking Mark Royce. NOW!"

"Oh, is that this one, here? More's the pity."

I look over to see Royce being suspended in the air, held together in a haze of smoke chains that seem to be slowly choking him. He's trying to stay calm, but the way his eyes are looking to me for help is going to haunt me.

"You want my magic? Just fucking take it. Let him go."

"Gabiella, you can't bargain with him."

"Hmm. Apollo, did you know that since I linked the two of you, and you marked her, I have access to her other links? Ooh, this is such a fulfilling finale! Okay. Minion 15??"

"You ate him for breakfast, your Nightlyness."

"Oh yes, I did, didn't I? Who is available for hair and makeup, then?"

"Minion 22.5, sire."

"Very well. I suppose he'll do. Minion 22.5? I require your presence!"

A weird blobby thing floats into the room, hovering with oddly sentient eyes as he approaches his master. In his two legged form, I suppose I can see the appeal the Night had for the goddess. He's got similar looks to apollo with dark hair that sucks in light, eyes lined in shadows that seem to glow blue, and a firm figure that looks like it's made to bring pleasure.

But, clearly he gets off on pain instead. And not even the fun kind.

There's a sharp knife-like cutting sensation on my arm as fire runs rampant through my body, crumpling my legs as I

feel part of my soul start to shatter. Bal's entire mark begins to disappear as Bal goes to join Royce in his floating holding cell, though he's completely unconscious. I realize that somehow, the Night has just severed our bond.

I scream out my anger, my pain, my wrath, as he just stands there clapping happily, enraptured in his show.

"Oh, that felt so real. You have a gift for theatre, earth dweller!"

"What the fuck just happened?"

"He cut Bal's link to her."

I can tell they're all scared for real now, and if they're scared then I'm fucking terrified. I'm panting, trying to make sense of the situation as the pain continues to ravage me, the direct result of having the love of someone simply cut out of me. I can't feel him at all. I look at him and know I'm supposed to love him, but I can't feel a damn thing.

"Father, this has gone on long enough! You cannot do this!"

Apollo leaps at his father in a strange amalgamation of human parts and mist, rolling him and nearly merging together as they fight for control.

"You're...ruining...the sequence!"

I feel kind of weak, kind of pissed, and a whole lot of confused as I sit there with my head in scrambles.

"Gabby, love, I know you're hurting but you need to put your mark on me while he's distracted."

I hadn't realized that Apollo's well-executed leap had succeeded in freeing Royce from the death chains, but suddenly he's in my face and those eyes are trying to connect to my fractured soul.

Royce kisses me to illustrate his seriousness, and it takes me a minute to feel anything, but it's there. Something screeches in the background, and I'm hoping like hell it's the Night and not Apollo, but I push all I have in me towards Royce, my desperation helping to lock him down.

My last circle fills with a strange illusionary design of shapes, making us both break the kiss and gasp out loud.

“You have got get Bal back.”

“I can’t even feel him. Gods why can’t I feel him??”

I begin to panic as Grey scoops me up, and then there’s another weird screeching sound and my arm starts to light on fire again. I watch in horror as Foster’s mark begins to disappear as well, collapsing on the floor in front of me as I throw myself on top of him.

“Foster! Foster wake the fuck up! I need you!”

My beast is broken inside of me, handicapped now that her mate has been removed, taking my ability to shift with it. I’m dealing with both of our anguish as we lie there on top of him, sobbing and feeling utterly useless as my mates get pulled away from me.

“We’ll figure them out later, Gabriella, we will, but the rest of us need you NOW! You need to fight this, fight him, somehow!”

Apollo flashes out of the hurricane of mist to deliver his message, then is pulled back in. Dar and Cyrus activate their watch swords as I realize I have the hidden one they gave me as well, and I feel a foreign power infiltrate my body as I pull in the goddess. She is struggling somehow as well, something trying to dismantle her, and seeing Apollo on the receiving end of some power spikes I lose my terror and regain my confidence.

These guys were fucking *mine*, and I don’t care who the fuck this guy thinks he is, he is not going to take them from me.

I stand up straight and square my shoulders as my sword materializes, the magic its imbued with pulsing under my hands and seeking blood. I reach out to my connection with Apollo, letting the taste of his magic fill my mouth as my body loses its rigid borders.

I reach for the taste of Grey as the lust for blood fills my veins, amping up my senses and giving me laser focus. I reach

for Cyrus and Dar's connections, letting their enhanced monster hunting abilities flood me as I become a weapon designed for death. One by one, I gather my mates' powers through my link to them, twisting them all up inside of me to make me unbreakable.

When I feel the familiar tug of another mark trying to be cut off, I leap, screaming out my outrage and landing right in between Apollo and his father.

I want to be horrified when I realize that Apollo is missing pieces of himself, but there will be time for that *after* I destroy his father.

“You cannot take that which does not belong to you. I've watched as you destroyed life after life on my home, fueling yourself with false power and becoming drunk on magic that does not belong to you. You have infected the minds of too many and it ends now.

“You stole mates from me and for that I will act as executioner.”

Cyrus

It might be an inappropriate time to feel turned on, but seeing Gabriella glowing and promising death to the Night himself is basically the best thing I've ever witnessed. She's fucking pissed, and I know she's worried about Bal and Foster, but she's channeling that as she launches her attack.

I feel a pull through our connection, like she's using me to power herself, and the way the other guys around me are kind of bracing themselves tells me she's using them as well. Apollo goes flying across the room and disappears through a wall as Gabriella continues to inflate herself.

Whatever strange thing was happening with the Goddess when she appeared to us right before we got delivered here, she seems to have recovered from because she's clearly inhabiting Gabby now to some degree. Gabby's voice has taken on that strange multi-tone and I can tell it's kind of scaring the Night.

Gabby floats closer to him, trapping him in a corner and using her hands like she's miming pulling a rope. I'm not sure what it's trying to accomplish until I realize she's literally unravelling him. Ropes of dark mist are being twisted and compressed as they wrap around her arm, and I'm sure he's fighting her but I'm also pretty sure the goddess gave her so many fucking mates because she was ready for a fight like this to happen.

She made Gabby way too formidable to be beaten, and now she was going to protect us.

Pearson

Well, I guess I'm playing the part of damsel in distress again. Time to polish my tiara. Honestly, I just feel so fucking useless right now. I can fix things and manipulate them, but down here in this weird shadow cave place, those abilities wouldn't do a lick of good. Gabby was kind of terrifying me right now, and I was honestly having a hard time believing this was the same woman that pinned me down a few days ago and claimed me in front of everyone.

She was so soft and warm then. Now, she looked like a vengeful monster. She does this creepy evil laugh as the Night tries to pull more marks from her, which I somehow feel since she's connected us all for this mega-boss battle, but I also feel how it's not going to happen again.

Gabriella's form transforms more into that kinetic mist stuff that seems to be so popular down here, her maw opening like she's going to fucking eat him. Oh my gods. She just fucking ate him.

Jericho

Umm. What?

Pax

What the hell did I sign up for? Oh, right. A terrifying woman so bent on protecting me she just ate the fucking Night for second breakfast. SHE FUCKING ATE HIM.

Apollo

Ouch. I know it probably doesn't seem possible, but pain was still very much a thing when I was in shadow form. My father was too strong for me somehow, and I knew I was losing, but I had hoped that I was at least buying Gabby enough time to make a plan to escape or...something.

I just couldn't figure out how the night my father got us all down here. His weakening wasn't an act. He was a terrible actor. He didn't have enough strength to portal that many people through unless- fuck. Shit, this was going to make things a bit complicated with Gabby and her mother. I wonder if Gabby has figured out yet the real purpose for her random visit this morning?

I was pretty fucking glad I marked her when I did, linking us together, because I felt when she discovered she could manufacture a mist form as well, pulling me and her other mates into a big link as she turned herself into the ultimate weapon.

I find all my misty pieces that dear old dad had magicked off, reattaching them and rushing back to my mate just in time to see her...what the fuck? My wife just consumed my father. I might need therapy after this.

Royce

Amanda who? No, I don't know any Amandas. I was mated to...that terrifyingly sexy woman that holyfuckingshit just gulped the most terrifying creature known to man like it was a milkshake.

Bal

I have no idea what's happening.

Foster

Who the fuck are all these people?

Palmer

Yeah, we're not inviting Apollo's family over for thanksgiving. This shit is fucked up. Right. So, that just happened. You know, I'm almost kind of seeing the appeal of creating your own epic narration at the moment. Maybe Apollo's dead dad was onto something. Too soon?

Grey

I know my diet consisted of *actual* blood...but...would it be rude if I asked Gabby to brush her teeth before I kissed her again?

Dar

I rush towards Gabby as all the excess power escapes her body, catching her right before she would have cracked her skull against the rough stone floor. She's completely limp in my arms, Bal and Foster are looking around the room like it's the first day of kindergarten and they aren't sure who to make friends with, and the rest of the guys are stuck somewhere in between shock and...no, it was pretty much just shock.

There's a strange vacuum through the room as Apollo's whole body begins to light up like times square, his chest pulsing with dark light and mist ensconcing him in sneaky tendrils before ripping his jaw open and descending into his body.

Is it too much to ask for my family to stop consuming weird things?

"Is she...okay?"

Bal looks concerned at Gabby's prone form, but I can't see the familiar affection or heat I'm so used to witnessing when he looks at her. His arm is bare, too. Apollo lets out a big gasp as he falls to the floor on his knees, his eyes darkening as he surveys his surroundings. The guys give him a bit of space, but then he's up and brushing off his knees, running towards Gabriella to feel for a pulse.

"Just knocked out. All that power...then no power, and those two..."

"Hey, mates. I don't mean to be rude, but where am I? And am I supposed to know any of you? I mean, even passed out that chick is fucking fine as hell, but I think I need to get back to campus? Am I missing a class right now?"

Bal looks at him. "Hm. Yes, I'm sure I ought to be teaching now. You sure she's okay?"

Neither one of them can help themselves, gravitating closer towards her to get a better look.

“She feels like she’s in some sort of magic coma thing. Not surprising after the damage her body just took and the way it just burned through all our powers. Don’t leave her fucking side. I get you are confused right now, but she’ll freak out if she wakes and neither one of you are there. We ready to get home?”

Everyone shows some sort of affirmation so Apollo waves his hands and once again it feels like my body doesn’t exist for a few minutes, though I can tell Gabby is still nearby. We land back in our living room we were just in a short time ago, relaxing and making Gabby uncomfortable.

We all seem to know exactly what we need to do, everyone herding towards the master bedroom as I lay Gabby down and we take care of her as best we can as we wait for her to come back to us.

Gabriella

I'm definitely not in Kansas anymore.

There's this big, gorgeous tree that pulses with life, almost willow-like but not quite, surrounded by plush armchairs, sofas, soft rugs, and lots of open space and fresh, crisp air. Each leaf on the tree is glowing slightly, pulsating, and as I get closer to the nearest branch, I can hear laughter echoing faintly from it.

I startle to realize each leaf is producing voices, but it sounds like they're being broadcast from somewhere far away. Like...earth.

I hear a voice I'd know anywhere, the timbre wrapping me up and promising comfort. I hear a lot of voices like that, actually.

I reach towards the leaf that glows brighter than the rest, the edges looking like liquid gold. At my touch it shoots off harmless sparks of gold light, like it's happy. My soul settles and I feel air reach the bottom of my lungs for the first time in a while.

I'm not sure how long I've been here. I'm not sure I can measure time, or if time even *exists* here.

I don't want to leave the happy leaf, but I'm drawn towards the massive trunk of the tree that spans wider than I'd thought would be possible. The bark is a bit rough under my palm, but it feels pleasantly warm and reassuring, healing.

"There you are, daughter. It took you awhile to find us."

The voice is familiar, but sounds so much purer here. Wherever here is. There is a stunning woman with hair to her ankles falling in soft brown waves, luminescent mocha skin wrapped in living fabric that pulses in time with the tree.

Behind her are a collection of men, nay, gods, who are all glowing and looking at me proudly.

"Come, child. We have much to discuss."

She beckons and I follow, leading me a few paces away to a sunk-in circular living space that is filled to the brim with various textured throw pillows and cushions, my feet sinking into a cloud-like substrate as I allow myself to sit. The clouds caress me and seem to purify me as I rest, unsure why I feel the need to.

“We are proud of you, daughter. You did what none have been able to accomplish.”

“What-“

One of the men leans forward with his palm extended in offering, and when I place my palm, I’m awarded an instant replay of the scene in the shadow realm. I was there, obviously, though the goddess was using me to some extent and...whatever the hell I did seemed like it fried a lot of my operating systems.

“Yes. You did that. You liberated our people.”

“I’m so confused.”

Can I just rest in her pretty smile? Honestly, it’s so perfect.

“She’s getting a little loopy, love.”

“I will adjust.”

The deep voices of who I’m assuming are the goddess’ mates are all so low and ancient, sending chills over me anytime they speak. Not in a weird way, but it’d be impossible to deny that I was in the presence of more power than I’ve ever been before.

At his words, the feeling of the clouds under me dissipates somewhat, clinging to my skin like puff balls. But the purifying tingles are absent.

“My mates! He took them!”

“It was devastating to watch, and I’m so sorry that you had to sacrifice that in order to be the savior.”

“Sacrifice?? NO. Nope, sorry. I need them.”

“There are ways of re-affirming the mate bonds, though I’m ashamed to admit I’m weaker than I’d like to be right now.

Somehow, Ralph powered up enough to use the last remnants of our bond to set a power drain trap. It weakened me, but I was able to assist you enough to fortify you in the fight.

“You used the gifts I gave you well, daughter. Your mates are so proud of you for understanding how their connection to you could strengthen you. You did everything exactly right.”

“I didn’t! I lost two of my mates! There are these gaping holes where they should be in my chest...and how do I make the pain stop?”

The goddess weeps, golden tears trailing down her face.

“I am so sorry, little one. I know that pain. It is unlike anything else. We will fix this.”

She pulls a vial out of thin air, trapping some of her metallic tears and stoppering them before offering it to me.

“Tears of pain. We will do what we can to make it a quick process, there will be four trials you all must face if you wish to add them back to your marks. I cannot add more like I did before, because they’ve already been ripped from you once. My magic is powerful, but there are limits to how I can use it.

“This is a hard limit. I could gift you more marks, but they’d have to be assigned to different partners.”

“NO! I need *those* ones! Foster is my strength. Bal is my love. I...can’t. Not without them.”

“I understand. I am happy to see that I chose so well for you. While we prepare the four trials, you will need to work together as a family to reaffirm your bonds. They will need to be like brothers, to learn to support and lean on each other.

“You will need to love them all over again, because they won’t have the original memories. They will believe what you tell them, but the way Ralph-“

“I’m sorry, who is ‘Ralph’?”

“I believe he went by ‘The Night’?”

I somehow find a way to giggle a tiny bit, because that was just such a normal fucking name.

“Anyway, the way he cut them from you, those memories cannot be re-made. You must make new ones, make sure you make true bonds so that upon completion of the trials the bonding will take. They must want the bonds, or it won’t work. You can’t trick them into it, they need to develop honest love and affection for you.

“If you cannot secure it by the end of the trials, there isn’t much we can do.”

My stomach drops as I listen to what is too painful to say. There’s a chance I might not get them back. At least not how they were, bonded and infused with my soul.

“I have faith in you, young one. You truly are the savior of our people now. With the Night out of the picture, things should calm down and peace may be possible. I send you back to your bonded and unbonded mates now, rest, and begin to build new bonds.”

I’m surrounded in warmth and light as I float, losing my consciousness once more while searching for my corporeal body.

Epilogue

Pax

It's been about two weeks since Gabby finally woke up after several days of not being able to look in her eyes. We'd all been panicking but we could feel the bond intact so we knew she would come back to us when she was ready. Well, except for her first two mates, who had spent those weeks mostly confused.

We'd all been hanging out with them, her other mates talking to them and sharing stories, trying to explain who she was to them and what had happened, and I think they finally were believing us that they had their memories altered. It helped that their forearms had strange scars where their marks once stood, a shimmery shadow that indicated wrongdoing had been committed.

After Gabriella explained to us her meeting with the goddess, we had been solidified in the fact that we needed Balfour and Foster reunited with us. We could all feel echoes of her pain from their loss, and knew she couldn't be happy without regaining them.

She was finally feeling strong enough to return to normal activities, so today was our first official family bonding activity. After much deliberation, we had decided to just throw a bunch of activity suggestions in a bowl and choose one to do when we could.

Our first outing was a ropes course up in the mountains, involving some rock climbing and lots of trust. I wasn't too excited, it was way too far from any sort of water for me to feel truly at ease, but Gabby had a flush in her cheeks that said she hoped this would work, so we were all going to give it the good ol' college try.

No, maybe that was a bad example. A bunch of my new brothers just dropped out of college.

“You good down there, Pax?”

I look up to see Gabby smiling at me, her glorious ass hugged by the blessed harnesses and wrapped in spandex.

“Oh, I’m good alright.”

We were all silently counting down to when she’d be ready for sexy fun times again, but we were respecting her because we kind of got the feeling she wouldn’t be ready until Balfour and Foster were ready to jump in on the action.

They were all exchanging cute flirts and smiles, and I knew they were infatuated already. Kind of hard not to be with a woman that is so wholly in that you have actual proof of the incredible lengths she’ll go to to demonstrate her devotion.

“Palmer! Stop it! You’re making me nervous!”

He was definitely the one that liked to joke around the most, I think he took it as his personal mission to make Gabby smile as much as possible.

“If you’re really worried about me, sexy, you better get up here and make me feel safe!”

He shakes his ass a bit at her, which makes her laugh, but then he loses his grip and goes falling over the ledge we had just surpassed. He’s harnessed in, so although it will take some work to get him up again, he definitely won’t like, die, or anything. I’m pretty sure.

“I’m good, baby! Hey! How appropriate is this fucking situation right now? We seem to find ourselves at the end of another book, and there’s *literally* a cliff hanger!”



Hahahahahahahahahahaha....are you laughing as hard as I am right now? No? Sorry, strange sense of humor. I had this errant idea to make an *actual* cliff hanger and couldn’t escape this book without making it happen. YOU’RE WELCOME.

Okay, so if you want to know when Gabby’s story will be finished, be sure to follow my author page for updates! I

promise it won't take as long as it says it will to release.
[Facebook.com/ksolizauthor](https://www.facebook.com/ksolizauthor)

Also, come join my reader group! We're slowly growing and trying to have fun sharing ridiculous book memes and obsessing over books in general.
[Facebook.com/groups/bookmarksmakemerandy](https://www.facebook.com/groups/bookmarksmakemerandy)

Please leave me reviews! And it goes without saying I love you all. I hope I've brightened your day a bit with my off-the-wall story ideas. I've got lots of projects on the back burner after this series is done, so I'll be extra nice and include an excerpt from the one I want to release next.

Since y'all like to be extra and pre-order books like it's nobody's business, I'll get that link set up soon. Again, track my author page for updates on that! Now keep reading if you want to see what my next series will be about! Go on, turn the page. I dare you.

Territory One

Ninety eight....ninety nine...one hundred.

I flop onto my back, breath heaving as I wipe the sweat off my brow. For the past two years, I have been training like crazy and tomorrow all that training would finally be put to use. Never mind the fact that my family thinks I've completely lost my mind, they can't comprehend the fact that I actually want to do a territory walk, when one hundred years ago I'd have been called crazy not to.

My abs were perfectly sore after today's workout, and I swear I can feel those defining lines popping out after that last set of reps. I smile to myself as I run my hands over my stomach. If I wanted all my efforts to not be futile, then I was going to burn every ounce of self-determination into tomorrow's journey as I could. I walk by our dilapidated barn, letting my fingers trail across the rough sun-bleached wood.

I scream embarrassingly loud when my hand runs over a spider egg sac, the felted material making me want to hurl. You are a badass warrior. Spiders cannot tame you. No beast can tame you. You are a badass warrior...

There we go, much better. No one saw that, right? I shake out my hand a few more times, trying to dispel the touch memory from that goddess-forsaken abomination. Alas, we shall not talk about it anymore. Bringing my messy braid over my shoulder, I stumble as my foot goes into a hole that I swear wasn't there when I was ten feet back.

I pick myself up, dust off my ass and put my shoulders back. No one saw that. You are a badass warrior...

I round the corner, ready to head inside to shower off and get the rest of my affairs in order. Of *course* Caden is there, leaning against the fence, which also needs repairing, and that smirk on his face means he either just told himself something hilarious, or he saw my embarrassing display of badassery. Is that a word? Fuck it. I'm going with it.

“I don’t know how you expect to survive one day on the road, Rory. You were just nearly taken out by I don’t even know what? An offensive piece of barn siding and a pothole?”

I glare at him, scrunching my nose up as much as I can to show him my distaste. “For your information, there was a spider sac. Probably for some super poisonous species. I need these pretty little hands intact so I can complete all my ninja tasks.”

Cade snorts at me, following behind me as I walk towards my house.

“Not possible. There’s no such thing as a poisonous spider.”

I stop mid-stride, needing to see his infuriating face up close before I smack it.

“What?”

“Poisonous spiders. Not a thing. Venomous spiders? That is a thing.”

“Whatever. Why are you following me?” I roll my eyes at him, as pretentiously as possible, so he can see how much business I mean.

“You okay there, Scraps? Are you having a seizure or something? I’m pretty sure it’s not healthy for your eyes to roll that far back in your head. They could get stuck, you know.”

I flinch. Is that true? Shit. He’s laughing at me again. That’s a no, then.

“Asshole.”

Even more determined now to make it inside to the glorious cascade of hot water waiting for me, I pick up my pace and try to rush inside before he can so I can lock him out. Ha. That would show him.

Fuck. Someone must have cleaned the slider again, now I feel bad for laughing at that crow that flew into it last week.

Of course, Caden is now doubled over, absolutely losing his shit over my inability to walk properly. I rub my nose and glare at him again, opening the door this time before sliding in

and locking it. When he finally gathers his wits about him and dries his eyes, he looks up to see me, inside, sticking my tongue out at him. Because that's the ultimate insult.

“Wow, real mature there, Scraps. Come on, let me in.”

I hold my hand up to my ear, shaking my head and mouthing the words “I can't hear you!” as I back away. I only slightly bump into the chair, sending it sprawling before righting it and finally getting to the hallway bathroom. I hear more laughter behind me, then the sound of the back door opening again. Shit. He got in.

I bolt into the bathroom, locking the door quickly behind me before stripping down and getting the shower ready. As soon as I'm lathering up my hair, I am horror struck because I realize that in my haste to get away from him, I failed to grab a towel. Or you know, clothing. Shit, shit, shit. Well, I guess I'll figure that out when I'm done.

When I shut the water off, I squeeze as much water out of my hair as I can, shaking my body as I sing the chorus to the chicken dance. When I've gotten as much off as I can, I step onto the bath mat and dig through the drawers, hoping beyond hope that there's at least a hand towel in there I can use.

“Forget something Scraps?”

No wonder this guy was still single. He was infuriating!

“Stop calling me that! That was ONE TIME!”

“I grabbed you a towel. I'll leave it outside the door.”

Hmm. That was surprisingly thoughtful. It feels like a trap. I count to sixty three times, trying to buy myself some time. Hopefully he's not just chilling in the hallway waiting for me to appear in the nude.

As soon as I peek my head out, a flash goes off in my face before a towel is thrown over it. I duck back into the bathroom, my red face giving away my irritation. I had to get out of this house. A woman was not meant to live with this many males! I smack my head at that revelation. Wasn't that exactly what I was setting out to do?

I wrap the towel around my body, wincing at the childish cartoon now covering up my behind.

“Really, Cade? You couldn’t have gotten a towel intended for an adult?”

I walk out into the hall, holding my hand over my backside to ensure nothing popped out unbidden. This towel was tiny.

Cade drops his phone as I walk out, eyes blown wide and a hand thrown to his chest as he starts coughing.

“Oh, chill. It’s not like you’ve never seen a woman in a towel before. Pretty sure I’ve seen at least five the past couple weeks alone, all emerging from your bedroom.”

I walk past him without sparing another glance, not letting the flash of jealousy appear. I shove it way, way, way down inside my chest, then continue walking up into my attic bedroom to change. Once I shut and lock the door, I take the towel off my body, using it to wrap up my hair instead as I grab some clothes and glance in my floor-length mirror.

I can physically see how much stronger my body has gotten, my adolescent fluff now turned into harsher lines and wider curves. I let out a happy squeal when I realize I actually can see the outlines of my abs, then note how my legs have become shapelier, too. Always on the short end, my legs have never been something I’d admired about myself.

Now, however, I looked at them with pride because I knew they’d be strong enough to carry me through all the territories as I sought out my future. Was I crazy for wanting to do this? Probably. The internet kind of made it a non-necessity to walk through all the territories, blindly wandering in hopes of finding my mates. But I just had this niggling feeling in my brain that wouldn’t quit.

Could I hop online and join one of the many chatrooms specifically intended for connecting people with their mates across the territories? Sure. Would it be the same? No. I remember the stories my mom used to tell us when we were all little, how she fell in love when she completed her territory walk.

Romantic stories of haphazardly running into fate, being swept away as they slept under the stars on their journey, the depth of the bonds created when they helped each other across the country. The strength she gained, mentally, physically, emotionally, magically, when she finalized her mates. That's what I wanted.

To take a shortcut, chatting up digital entities, seemed like cheating. Plus, how much harder would it be to develop an unbreakable bond if it was all created over texts and phone calls? Sure, my brothers seemed happy enough, but my sister-in-law Laney was...okay she was pretty awesome.

Women supposedly used to gain special skills when they picked up mates in each territory. The whole point of the territory walk, was to complete goddess-determined tasks and challenges, ambling your way through each territory as you searched for a mate. Each mate gained added strength to the cluster bond, and supposedly gifted the connector with extra talents. My mom gained the ability to manipulate plants, and her garden was always the most beautiful thing.

She created a masterpiece of plants, flowers so big and fragrant that they nearly blinded you. Fruits and vegetables so sweet and crunchy that we always had a full pantry. Clusters bonded electronically usually lacked the special gifts. Sure, my brothers were all a little freakishly strong and Laney had a way of willing things to happen, but nothing like the tales of old.

I continue dressing, snapping my jeans and pulling my favorite t-shirt over my head right as there's a knock on the door. When I open it, I see Cade leaning against the wall, hands in his pocket and looking a little sheepish.

I tilt my head to the side, waiting for him to speak up.

"I didn't know you knew about them."

I huff out my irritation. "Is that all you came up here to say? Cool. You're not very discreet."

I try to shut the door on him, but his boot stops me. He runs his hand through his hair, trying to get some words to form but

failing.

“I’m sorry.”

“Cade, I’m not sure why you’re apologizing. You’re the only unbonded male in the house, I’m sure most single men in your position would be bringing home countless women too. If that’s all? I need to finish packing.”

“I’m coming with you.”

I stop dead in my tracks, which makes me trip over my tennis shoes. Shit. I really should put things away. With as much pride as I can muster, I start standing up, only for Cade to grab my hand and pull me up the rest of the way. I drop his hand like a hot potato, hating how tingly his touch still makes me feel. Say it with me, Rory, he’s a jerk wad. Jerk. Wad. Jerk. Wad....

“Did you just call me a jerk wad?”

I snap my head up, blood rushing to my cheeks as I throw my suitcase on the bed.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be? Why aren’t you at work?”

“Seriously? It’s your last day here. Why would I be at work?”

I shake my head at the confusing statement and keep packing.

“Wow I’m not doing this very well, am I?”

“If you’re trying to stop me from going, you might as well give up now. We’ve been over this as a family over and over. I realize most women don’t do this anymore, but it’s just something I need to do.”

Caden sits on my bed, helping me to roll up the clothes as I lay them in there.

“I wouldn’t stop you, I know how important this is to you.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I remember the stories your mom used to tell just as well as you do. The way your face used to light up when you’d demand her to retell them all. I get why you’re doing it.”

That makes me stop again. “You do?”

“Did you forget that I’ve lived here since I was six? I know you, Scraps. Your brothers might not get it, but I do. You’re doing this for her.”

He points to the picture on my nightstand of my mom, surrounded by my dads and my face lit up in laughter. I feel the familiar tugging in my gut every time I thought of them and then move to grab it, knowing that the frame needed to come with me.

Carefully tucking the frame in the middle of my sweatshirt, I continue on with my task.

“Would you just look at me for a minute?”

I drop the socks I was piling in and climb on the bed, leaning against my headboard as I study him. What was his game?

“Look, you have to know that those women were nothing to me.”

Bile rushes to my throat but I start to get up again so I can distract myself. I needed a clear head for tomorrow. “Like I said, you’re a single man. You can do whatever you want. I really don’t understand why you’re apologizing to me.”

Caden stops my hand as I try to force another t-shirt in, compacting it as much as possible. “I’m apologizing because you deserve better. If the roles were reversed....fuck. I don’t even know what I’d do.”

That surprises me. Caden has never ever showed an interest in me. Surely that’s not what he was getting at.

“Look, Caden. We’ve been friends for forever, you’re basically like another brother to me.” I shudder involuntarily, knowing full well that my mind and body saw him as something completely different. “But that’s all this is. I don’t

know where you're going with this, but surely you have something more important to do right now than watch me stuff things into a suitcase."

He sighs again, his hands mussing up his hair even more. Was he nervous about something? He was the cockiest person I knew. If he was feeling nervous, then something was seriously up. Not sure I wanted to know what was on his mind. I just had a bad feeling about the way this conversation was going.

I walk over to my closet, flipping through everything to make sure I got everything I wanted to bring. I couldn't bring everything, I had to be able to cart whatever I'd need. If I needed something more, I could always purchase it on the road.

I turn to back to my suitcase but suddenly Caden is right there, breathing his delicious breath into my face and spreading those traitorous tingles all over my face and neck. I shudder again, unable to control my body's reaction to his close proximity.

"No way you can stand here and tell me you don't feel it."

I slowly open my eyes, looking over his shoulder because I know that as soon as I let myself look into his stupidly pretty hazel eyes I'll get sucked in and say something even stupider. More stupid? Eh.

"Caden. I need to pack."

He leans forward even more, running his nose along the base of my throat and trailing up to my ear.

"Take me with you."

"What?"

Oh, goddess, now he was breathing directly on my neck. I needed to evade him before my legs collapse and my body outs my ill-awarded feelings for him.

"You know you need a mate from this territory."

That makes me suck in my breath and...shit. I looked into his eyes.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying what we’ve both been too pigheaded to say. I know this is last minute, and I know you were planning on doing this territory last, but you can just skip right over it. You know I’m it for you.”

I literally don’t know what to say, so I just stand there staring at him like an idiot. He peels back a few inches, letting his face hover inches above mine, putting his lips waaaayyy too close to mine. I suck my lips in so they don’t get any rogue ideas.

Caden chuckles at me, the deep tones sending vibrations through me.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“I know. I meant to talk to you about this so many times, but I just kept chickening out.”

I finally shake myself out of his tractor beam, pushing past him to stick my head out the window and pull in some non-tainted air. When my head feels clearer, I regain the ability to speak like a human being.

“Caden, we can’t be mates.”

“Why not?”

Damn. I didn’t know how to answer that so I just zip up my suitcase and lug it off the bed so I can throw myself on it. I didn’t think about the implications of lying on a bed with Caden in the room, because usually he was his normal jerkwad self and treated me like an annoying little sister. I can feel the shift in energy though, and I’m suddenly extra nervous around him.

“Where is this coming from, Caden? Is this some sick joke? Did one of my brothers put you up to this? See how foolish you could make me look before bowing out and then going to pick up more women?”

“I’m a fucking idiot. That should never have happened, and you definitely should not have had to see them.”

“Well, I did. Not only that, but did you know that my heat vent connects to your room?”

His face pales as he looks at the offending heat vent and then he pulls out his phone.

“Hey Zack. Can you grab something out of my room for me? I left a phone number on my desk I need.”

We wait a minute and then we hear feet walking through the room directly below mine and papers being rustled. I watch with satisfaction as Caden’s face gets paler and paler, until I think he might either pass out or puke.

“No, it’s okay I must have put it somewhere else. Thanks for looking, man.”

He stands there still for a minute, no doubt running over all the scenarios he’s put himself in that might paint him in a bad light if he’s seriously asking me to consider him.

The next thing I know he’s on his knees, head bent as he lets his palms rest on the floor. Is he? No....

“I, Caden Stanner vow to give my life up as a single entity, choosing to bind it to yours.”

I rush him, throwing my hand over his mouth before he can continue. We fall to the ground and he lays there underneath me, completely still as I continue to keep his mouth covered.

“Shit, Caden. Warn a girl, would you? You can’t go just throwing out unbreakable bonding words like that! Do you realize what would have happened if you got through them all? What is wrong with you?!”

He looks like I just struck him. “If I move my hand can you promise not to continue with whatever idiocy is running through your mind right now?” He looks up at me with eyes wide open, color still pale.

“Hey Rory, dinner’s ready. Oh. Oh....oh. Sorry, I’ll just... okay, come down when you’re...done with...ok bye.”

Laney disappears as quick as she appeared, and I curse myself for putting us in such a compromising situation.

“Good job asshole. Now she thinks we’re doing something we weren’t.”

I stand up and give him a death glare, then high tail it out of there so I can remove myself from the crazy situation that just popped up. I run down the stairs, miraculously not falling once, and go straight to the kitchen to talk to Laney. I pull her into the pantry and close the door behind us.

I sit there breathing for a minute, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

“Is there a reason we’re in here?”

I jump a little at her voice, almost forgetting she was in here with me. “Caden...”

She rolls her lips in, biting down to hide a smile. “He finally manned up, huh?”

“What?! You knew??”

“Honey, everyone knows. That boy’s been obsessed with you for at least a decade.”

“No. No, that’s not possible. He thinks I’m an idiot. He’s an ass.”

“Is that what you keep telling yourself?”

I look up at Laney, pleading with her. “No shit, Laney. What on earth is happening? He just came and told me he wanted to come with me, insisting there was something between us, and nearly...”

“Nearly what?”

“Fuck. Shit!”

“Okay, can I make a suggestion? I know that were not in the 1800’s anymore, but is cussing so much really going to help you find your mates? Aren’t you at least a little concerned it will turn them off?”

I giggle, and then snort. The weirdest sound comes out and I realize I actually did both at the same time and that just makes me giggle harder.

“Are you okay? Are you even mentally sound enough to be going on this trip?”

I slap my cheek a few times, trying to sober up. “Sorry, I’m good. He can’t be a mate for me.”

“Oh goddess, not this garbage again. What’s your excuse today?”

“Huh?”

“Rory, that boy has been trying to get your attention desperately since you announced this crazy plan of yours two years ago. I know you’re not so obtuse that you’d take his constant comments and jibes as being uninterested.”

“Are you fucking with me right now? He brings home a new woman every few days! The boy has never pulled a single move on me, all he does is make fun of me and give me shit. You’re trying to tell me that much like being in third grade, I should have taken the teasing as affection? Have you lost your mind? Would you have considered any of your mates if you regularly saw them bringing home rando women?”

“No, surely you’re mistaken. He wouldn’t do that, I know you two are intended.”

“Laney, I’ve seen them, half naked, emerging from his room and ducking into the bathroom. I’ve fucking heard every encounter he’s had. Do you know what kind of sick torture that is? I’ve tried twelve different kinds of earplugs! TWELVE! Did you even know that many existed? Nothing works!

“Is there a weird-ass energy between us? Yeah! Does that mean I’m obligated to bind myself to him? No! I don’t want a mate that can willingly sleep with other women while we’re under the SAME FUCKING ROOF! If he had ANY intentions with me then he wouldn’t have acted LIKE SUCH A DAMN PIG!”

The door behind us flies open and I see all my brothers peeking in, with Caden on his knees in front of them, staring at me with those stupid eyes of his. “Goddess! What now? Come to do something else to humiliate me?”

“Okay, I’m just going to...yeah. Boys? I need help setting the table.” Laney bolts out and pulls all my brothers with her. Okay, so only one of them is my brother by blood but they’re all bonded now so yeah, they’re all my brothers.

When it’s just me and Caden again I sink to the floor, letting the pain I’ve kept bottled up finally erupt, and I collapse. I feel Caden get closer, but I’m too upset to do anything about it.

“I’m so sorry, Rory. I know there’s nothing I can say that can take away the hurt I’ve caused you, but you should know that every time I’ve been with someone, I always imagined it as being you. I only pick up women that look like you. When I’m with them, it’s your face I’m imagining, your body I’m thinking about.”

“Do you fucking hear yourself right now?”

“Please, Rory. What do I have to do to get you to give me a chance?”

“Are you truly serious? You actually want to be with me?”

I look at him to gauge his reaction. He may be an asshole but he’s at least an honest asshole. He’s never been deceptive or shady, always unable to hide anything with his face.

“Rory, I’ve wanted you from the day I understood what it meant to want a girl. You’ve been my ultimate fantasy since I realized why I have a dick. Every time your mom would tell us stories from her territory walk, I always envisioned us embarking on one together. You’re it for me. Those other women shouldn’t have happened. But I was so scared of messing up with you that I was too scared to make a move.

“I figured if I could let off a little steam from all this pent up frustration I get from merely being around you then I could control myself until I found the courage to tell you how I felt. I didn’t want to ruin what could be between us by getting physical before you were ready.”

“So, you thought the best way to *not* fuck things up between us would be to fuck a bunch of women literally right under my nose?”

“I can see now how that was a horrible idea.”

“Oh, good.”

His eyes close and a tremor runs through his shoulders. “Rory, if I could change what I’ve done and take a different path, I would. No matter the cost. I’m sorry for hurting you, I never meant to. Please. I’m begging you, give me a chance? I’m never going to find anybody as perfect as you. You are the reason my heart beats, my purpose for living. I can’t stand the thought of you going off to find the rest of your mates without being secured to you. I don’t think I’d survive.”

I look at him, really look at him, and I’m shocked to see the honesty in his words. Just saying the words out loud seems to haunt him. He takes my silence as encouragement.

“Please. I will wait to pledge myself to you, if that’s what you want, but just please don’t leave me behind. You’ll annihilate me. Take me with you? Let me help you on your journey at least, and if you decide that there’s nothing between us after you consider it, then I will let you go. But you should know that if you turn me away, I can’t be in your life for a while. I’d need time to come to terms with being locked out of my intended cluster.”

“You really think we’re mates? Caden, why haven’t you ever said anything?”

He holds out his hand, palm up. I look at it dubiously, then place mine on top of it. The electricity from earlier sparks right up, making my bloodstream boil.

“That. That’s how I know.”

I keep my hand in place, closing my eyes as I let the sparks rush up my arm. I hold out my other hand, hoping he’ll understand what I’m asking. When his other palm meets mine the electricity shoots up my other arm, making me gasp. In the semi-darkness of the pantry, I can see *actual* sparks dancing around our palms and I’m mesmerized by it.

“Shit.”

Caden gives me a hopeful smile, pulling me closer when I make no move to retreat. When he has me on his lap, he pulls my legs around his waist and lets his hands rest on my hips.

We've never been this physically close before and it's doing things to me.

“You're not going to drop me when you meet someone better, are you? I want to believe you Caden, but I'm scared. I have no idea what I'm doing on this whole mates thing. I don't want to be an idiot and trust somebody when they are being disingenuous. I've been waiting for my twenty first birthday for twenty one years. This journey is arguably the most important thing I've ever done, I don't want to start it off with misplaced trust or broken hope.”

And then he's kissing me, pulling my face to his and letting his tongue push its way in. I moan at the sudden contact, electricity rushing through my brain and throughout my nervous system.

“I'm yours, Rory. I, Caden Stanner, vow to give my life up as a single entity, choosing to bind it to yours.” Kiss. “I vow to fortify this sacred bond, blessed upon us by the goddess, with the entirety of my soul.” Kiss. Hip thrust. “I vow to take you as my only mate, to give myself to you as one of your chosen mates. I vow to spend my life chasing your happiness, to dedicate my life to building one with you.” Kiss. “If you'll have me, Rory Taylor, I vow to be a strong contributor to your cluster, to respect your status as my connector, and to offer my soul up for you to bind to.” Another soul searing kiss. With the completion of his words, I feel the bond snap into place and my head goes dizzy, my body overwhelmed with the connection we just established.

Catching me before I hit my head on the floor, Caden gives me the biggest smile and lays my head in his lap. “Believe me now?”

Ass. I put my hand over my heart, feeling the erratic beating as it works to sync up with it's new counterpart. “Caden...”

“You already accepted me, Scraps. That bond wouldn't have taken if you didn't accept me. You can't get rid of me now. Plus, there's the matter of this bar on your arm. Undeniable proof. You're mine.”

He brushes my hair off my face and I close my eyes again, reveling in the way his fingertips feel against the sensitive skin of my temple. I don't even know what I should do right now. How does one react to having their life irretrievably bound to someone else? I just was not expecting any of that.

“I think I might need you to pinch me.”

I feel the low rumble of his laughter against me. I get up, pulling myself to eye level again.

“Why wait so long?”

“Because you were waiting for your twenty first birthday to go in search of mates. You had a plan, and I didn't want to throw a wrench into it by asking you to amend it. I've loved you forever.”

“Say that again.”

Caden pulls me onto his lap again, arms twining around me. “I love you, Rory.” My body finally gives up its fight, reality sinking in as our bond runs rampant through my veins.

“I love you too, Caden.” And then I kiss him, because as his official mate, I'm allowed to do that.

“I suppose we should go tell everyone?”

“If you want.”

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