

ERIN R FLYNN

Balanced
Trajectory

Artemis University

19

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ERIN R FLYNN

Balanced Trajectory

Artemis University



My name is Tamsin Vale and... I don't know what I am. Tired. Yeah, I'm tired and more than normal but also just tired of everything always crazy.

I fix one thing and something else goes wrong.

We handle the councils and we're overstepping. We handle the dragons and that's okay and we should be doing more... But back off our overreaching in how we're handling refilling the councils.

My head just spins, and it doesn't stop there.

The whole last year was like that. Things are going better with Lucca, and everything with Hudson went off the rails. Julian seems to have pulled his head out of his arse, and Neldor is confusing me more than ever. And Darby... We got engaged, but it's not what I thought it would be.

And every time I think I have the commanders in line and marching with me, one—or a few of them—veer off on their own and I feel like an idiot having trusted them. I don't know if I'm fighting a losing battle with them or giving them the trust they deserve.

I just hope that whichever the answer is, it doesn't get me killed before I figure it out.

Artemis University is an ongoing, hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.

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

1

“Fuck off,” I mumbled into my pillow. “If Darby is going to be working all summer then I’m going to lay in the sun and be a bum.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Craftsman, but the princess is exhausted,” a man whose voice I didn’t recognize said. “She hit her alarm and when I tried to wake her, she said she would make me spar with her and then put me on one of Commander Onas’s teams and no one wants that.”

“She wouldn’t, but I understand,” a deep sexy voice with a British accent said easily.

One I knew... Intimately.

Julian.

Lunch.

Fuck.

I sat up and glanced around, flinching when something was wrapped around me, and my entire view was a white shirt. Huh?

“The ties of your bikini came undone, Tams,” Julian said quietly. “You just sat up and gave us an amazing view we didn’t deserve.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, waking enough to take the towel from his hands and tuck it around me. “Sorry.” I glanced around and was confused again. I was in the shade. Then it hit me. “How long was I fucking sleeping?”

“Not as long as you worry, Your Highness,” that same voice said. Julian stepped aside and let me see a dark fairy who was new to my detail. “You said you were just going to sun for thirty minutes before you had to get ready. You fell asleep and I worried about more time in this new harsher sun, so I moved the umbrella over you. I hope that’s okay?”

“Yes, thank you. I know we can heal sunburn, but it still hurts.” I rubbed my hand over my face again and then glanced at Julian. “How late am I? I’m sorry.”

He studied me and then around me to check my aura, those gorgeous emerald green eyes seeing so much when he actually paid attention. “It’s fine as long as you’re not trying to tell me something.”

I flinched, not even getting a chance to answer before my new guard jumped in.

“The princess has been killing herself for her people,” he said in a cold tone. “She not only upped the amount of fairies she’s waking from five hundred to a *thousand* but *daily*. It’s an exorbitant amount of magic she’s using and all of the royal healers—and other talented healers—have begged her to slow down.”

Julian blinked at the guy before sighing and looking back at me. “Well, you have another fan, and I’m thrilled he just saw you topless to want you even more.”

I couldn't get my mouth to work. I wasn't sure how I even felt about what he said I was such a mix but also just so tired.

"Let me scan you," Julian said gently as he squatted down next to the chase lounge I was on. He nodded when I flinched. "Call it payment for blowing off our first date and making me worry for two hours that you changed your mind."

Crap. That was bad and I couldn't even deny it.

I sighed and held out my hand. I felt his magic tickle over me but at my power level since he was tapping into our connection. I winced when anger filled his eyes and steam about came out his ears.

"Barrier, please," he said before his magic stopped.

I swallowed loudly, feeling more like a kid about to get in trouble with her teacher than anything. Still, I put the barrier up because our business wasn't for my guards.

He dropped to one knee and kissed my hand, holding it to his face after he did. "Please, Tams. Please don't—I know the pressure is a lot. I know. I feel it and see it in your aura, plus please put yourself first more. I need you. So many of us need you and—we can't fall back into the same patterns. Please? We were both working so hard to be healthier and do better."

I tried to pull my hand away, but he didn't let go and I didn't want to risk hurting him. "I am doing better. I'm doing more for my people and—"

He raised his head and the anger was back in his eyes. "There is no way you let the royal healers scan you and see this and they didn't sit on you to keep you from waking more

fairies. You hid this from them. You would have hidden it from me, but you can't. Don't even try to tell me otherwise."

"I wasn't going to," I said firmly, miffed he basically called me a liar. But that was actually fair because I had been lying to the royal healers. "I would have told you that it's not your business and it's not, but you're right I was a jerk and late, and I'm sorry for that."

He adjusted his neck but then shocked me when he pushed. He definitely wasn't reverting to old ways of agreeing with me so I didn't break up with him.

Maybe we really had grown... Except he was saying I hadn't.

I sighed when he opened his mouth. "They baby me, Julian. They don't let me push and I need to." I shook my head when he started to argue. "They're pushing Neldor so much harder than they did me, and fairies aren't very sexist. My power scares them, and they all think I'm powerful enough, but they cap me. They want to and I can't—I need to push."

He sighed, kissing my hand again. "I thought you made Dalyor promise not to do that shit."

"Yes, and he didn't, but I'm technically all done with the training for my wings and magical growth timeline."

He studied me again. "But you don't think you're done."

"No, and my magic keeps telling me I'm not."

"Okay, that's fair and so is saying they baby you." He nodded when I couldn't hide my shock. "Lots of fairies think if you die or break the planet does. I don't agree, but it makes them want to put you in a bubble and in your castle and baby

you. I don't think Calarel would if we talked to her on the side."

I did pull my hand away this time and glanced out at the ocean.

"You don't want me involved?" he said quietly, his tone hurt.

I opened my mouth but then closed it, shaking my head and then sighing, pulling my knees to my chest. "You were amazing helping me with my dreams and growing power. You even suggested I was ready way before I felt it and didn't take advantage."

"But?"

"But there will always be a part of me that thinks you love me because I'm the biggest magical puzzle and fascination you'll ever meet."

"Hopefully, not always, just a part of you for now." He let out a slow breath when I shrugged. "I know all isn't forgotten or forgiven starting over. I just want to help. You're more than exhausted, Tams, and if you don't do this right, you could do a lot more than cap your growth. You could injure yourself to the point you can't access all of your magic."

I swallowed loudly, a thrill of fear racing through me.

He reached over and tucked some hair behind my ear. "What's going on, my sweet fairy? Why are you pushing yourself so hard?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but then I didn't want to tell him. I shrugged, but then sighed when he didn't say anything, deciding I could tell him part of it. "They're all

waiting for their loved ones, Julian. We can't wake the kids until all the parents are awake and we have more in place. Now we have more handled and can—could you imagine waiting for me to wake?"

"No, no, I cannot," he sighed. "But you didn't do any of it."

"I didn't. I'm the only one who can wake them though."

He cupped my cheek but then pulled his hand away. "There's more to this, but I know you're not there with me and I don't want to push."

I *almost* asked him since when, but I needed to stop being a shit if we were going to start over. It came from being tired more than I thought he deserved it.

"Will you talk to Lucca?"

I did a double take. "Lucca? Why Lucca?"

"Because he can push you the right way to not hide, and a bear can smell what I'm sensing magically." He adjusted his neck when I clearly didn't understand. "You're not just exhausted. You're *injured*. You went too far. Lucca could smell this pain and state. Talk to him and let him help you, but you need help to ride this line."

That was fair and I did feel really off. I'd been waking a thousand fairies a day for a few weeks now, since finals. It seemed to be compounding though because while I'd been tired at Darby's graduation and almost fallen asleep, I didn't feel this disconnected.

"Okay, I'll talk to him. I promise."

“Good,” he sighed, reaching out and booping my nose before standing. “Since the restaurant was out and your detail told me you were sleeping, I brought a picnic, so let’s eat.”

“Yeah, I’m seriously starving.”

He gave me a worried look but nodded. “As much as I’d love to hope the towel slips while we eat, do you want to go fix your top?”

“While you do what?” I hedged, clearly getting he wanted me gone for a minute.

“To call Shael.” He nodded when I winced. “I was going to say this and not go behind your back. You need two days off but then five hundred a day if you want to push.”

“Six.”

“Deal, but only if Lucca agrees to check you daily and we speak with Calarel.”

I stood and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Julian.” I turned to leave but stopped when he moved his hand to my hip.

“You don’t call me ‘Doc’ anymore. I don’t understand why and I’ve tried to. My therapist said just to ask you.”

I shrugged but looked away. “I used it mostly when you upset me or hurt me because your name was more intimate. I don’t want to think of those times or go back.”

He was quiet a moment before giving my hip a squeeze. “I’m so sorry I hurt you so bad, Tams. I didn’t ever get that. I’m sorry I’m lacking in understanding stuff like that.”

I pulled away. “I don’t get it most times either. It’s fine.” I cleared my throat. “Thanks for caring enough to ask and clear

this up.” I mentally rolled my eyes before walking off. That sounded so stupid to my own ears, but if he was willing to go out on a ledge, I could too.

I fixed my top and threw on a cover-up before checking myself in the mirror. I was back outside quick enough to hear the end of his call and smiled at him when he glanced over.

“You are so beautiful it hurts my eyes sometimes,” he whispered as he hung up, not seeming to realize he’d said it.

Wow.

“You too,” I muttered, glancing away. He was in cargo shorts and a button-up white shirt. I knew lots of people mocked cargo shorts, but I thought they looked great on the right person... Mostly those who didn’t take them too seriously and Julian didn’t.

His hair had grown out even more. He had a short ponytail holding back his curly blond hair that women went crazy over.

Myself included.

“I mean, you look good—in a good spot,” I blurted, trying not to let his hotness completely melt my brain.

But fuck, the man was hot. Built but not too much and a swagger and confidence that just made him so damn sexy.

He took in a slow breath and let it out. “I feel in a better spot. I do.” He smiled at me. “Let me get the food going so it doesn’t get cold after we’ve talked.”

“Yeah, great,” I agreed... While noticing that guy on my detail wasn’t around. Someone else was outside with us.

So Julian got jealous and said something. That was funny.

And something I was totally going to use if he ever had a pretty woman around him that didn't need to be.

I laughed when Julian brought me over to the table and there were several large paper bags filled with containers. He really knew how to make my tummy happy.

He always had.

I pushed down the sadness and focused on right then.

"I went to two different places I was reading on," he told me. "The first is famous for the fried chicken sandwiches with bread and butter pickles slaw and in-house aioli."

"Nummy."

"It made me hungry just reading about it," he admitted as he got everything set up. "I got you four of them and sides."

"Thanks."

"Of course. I also went to this place in Spokane famous for a crazy burger, and you like crazy food."

"Everyone should," I defended.

"It's a burger that uses two grilled cheeses for the buns." He nodded when I simply blinked at him. "And you put toppings in the grilled cheese."

"Oh fuck, show me."

He laughed and hurried to empty two other bags. He set one in front of me and clearly had ordered drinks and ice from the resort I was staying at because there was a cart off to the side.

I moaned when he opened the container for me.

“One of the grilled cheeses has fries in it and the other bacon and tomato for something healthy.”

“Yeah, the tomato will save me from that heart attack in a box,” I said with a chuckle. I sat down and immediately reached for it. “Come to Mama, heart attack.” I took way too big of a bite for a date but fuck, I was hungry. I moaned and tapped my bare feet on the ground it was so damn good.

Julian burst out laughing before fixing us drinks and settling in with his own crazy burger. He only had one though.

I had three.

Yeah, I really did and was still hungry.

“Thanks, Julian, really.”

He nodded and then let out a slow breath. “I thought you changed your mind. Then I felt like a duffer for thinking I should just bring food if you’re tired, but that could be an excuse.”

I took another bite and chewed while I thought of what to say. “I’m not that—I don’t lie to you about that stuff.”

“No, that’s fair. You would tell me you were too tired yourself if you wanted out, not have your security lie for you.” But he gave me a look that he knew I fibbed now and again like being busy with fairy stuff to get out of spending time with Hudson.

However, we all did that, and that night especially was more about not wanting to deal with the dragon royals and their crap. Instead, I’d dealt with Hudson’s parents’ mating but well, that was life.

“So you said you felt good?” I hedged after my second burger, wanting the chicken next.

And yes, it was as amazing as it sounded. So were all the sides except one weird mix of salad that I wasn’t a fan of, but luckily Julian was, so he took it.

“I do,” he said, answering my question after he swallowed his bite. “I *hate* what happened with my ma. You know I do and...” He looked away.

“I know. I know how it killed you,” I whispered. “Thank you for protecting me. I didn’t handle that day well or—”

“You did. We were all shocked. You did *nothing* wrong, Tams. Anything you said—we’re fine. Really.”

“Good.” I pushed a bit when he didn’t say anything more. “But she also set you free.”

He chuckled darkly and took a bite of his burger. “You did. You put the pieces together and made it work. You amaze me. I’ve been struggling so much and the only thing I seemed to be able to do right was help you. I felt like only my magic again. That’s all I’ve ever been is my magic.”

“I’m sorry. That’s—I can’t imagine growing up that way.”

He did a double take and his face softened. “Yeah, you’re the one person who knows how that is now. I’m sorry.” He let out a slow breath. “And I’m sorry I got so angry earlier. It wasn’t really at you.”

It was people pushing me. I completely understood his upset now. I felt the pressure and he knew that pressure. I stared at him for a bit and realized that would explain several

times he'd been an asshole even. He hadn't meant to be an asshole to *me*, simply over the situation.

Wow, taking a step back sometimes really was the way to fit the pieces together.

“You know you're more than your magic, right?” I checked. “I mean, I thought what you could do was cool and you were talented, but—you were never your magic to me, Julian.”

“You were the first,” he admitted. “Or they saw my last name.” He hurried on, clearly not wanting to get into the past either. “But you pushed me to break out of the cage suffocating me.” He smiled when I frowned. “I talked to Taeral's cousin months ago. He's working with me and Katrina. It's—so much is better just with that and everything that was hidden.

“And I'm out of the fucking house. I mean, it was so much better after you renovated it, but no matter how lovely looking it now was, it was still my prison. Plus, so many bad memories of being dragged there to be inspected or lectured by my uncle and—it wasn't good for me. Now I don't have to be there, and I feel like I can make the position my own.”

“And that is wearing something for the beach on a workday?” I teased.

He nodded. “I had a board meeting yesterday.” He cleared his throat.

“What?” I worried when I felt the air shift.

“Geiger was there as your representative,” he said, snickering when I gave him a blank look. “Yeah, you aren't

read-in on any of that stuff, I know.”

“No, I have too much already, and just because I bought out a lot of asshole warlocks doesn’t mean I should be in charge.”

“I have some ideas for one of them that—we shouldn’t talk about this now. It just came up because I enjoyed looking into that more. I know Geiger and his firm did a ton of auditing and cleaned up a lot, but I was looking into certain processes and I felt—it felt good.”

I studied him. “Are you asking me to work on something magical with you?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s logistics.” He shrugged. “I see part of the puzzle fitting wrong as an outsider and I want to make it better.”

It was my turn to shrug. “Talk to Geiger. I’m sure he’d agree.”

“I tried to. He’s very by the book and doing things how they’ve been done.”

That was fair, but it was also why the man was so damn good at his job and the law. I didn’t have time to get involved though. “What about Taeral or Stefanie? Both are very by the book *but* push to update the book to be smarter. If you could get them to see what you do—which you absolutely could because both sides are smart—I bet they could make it work.”

He seemed to mull that over. “Yeah, I could go over with Stefanie. I like her a lot and…” He chuckled and I didn’t understand why until I saw my sandwich was a mess.

Because I’d smashed it without realizing it.

“I don’t like her in that way. I should have said I respect her.”

“Sure, sure,” I grumbled as I hurried to try and act like my sandwich fell apart on its own and eat it. “I get it. Stefanie’s a very attractive woman. She’s very popular. Most of the Guardians think she’s sexy.”

He ignored my jealous moment and brought out another container for me. “Want to watch a movie? There was a lot more to the menu where I got the chicken from. We could order dinner from there. Invite Lucca and Calarel and have a conversation to make sure you’re being careful?”

I hid a smile and took a bite. I nodded and he seemed thrilled as well. For me it was him thinking of how to spend more time with me in a way I needed but also... He wasn’t going to be fake with me like he never noticed Stefanie was gorgeous. Instead, he gave me more attention and focused on me.

It made sense in my head even if it seemed a bit petty.

Fine, pretty damn petty.

2

I didn't see more than two minutes of the movie. I didn't even realize I was falling asleep and woke up on Julian's lap with a blanket over me.

Which was hysterical since I'd been sitting up next to him when it had started.

"Good nap?" he asked when he realized I was awake. He'd been playing with my hair while doing something one-handed on his phone.

"I could use about forty more but yeah, really good."

"I can be available for forty more if you want," he said quietly.

"Let's not go that far when you have a room here too."

I was staying at one of the new Cherrywood resorts I was majority owner of. It hadn't even opened yet. I had demanded we had a test month of letting people we knew and trusted stay there. For one, it was a great way to acclimate fairies back to this world without the wrong eyes watching, but I knew too much slipped through the cracks when places opened.

That had been something I used all of the damn time when I'd worked jobs with Mel before coming to Artemis. I didn't care if it cost a lot of money. We did things right and *safely* or we didn't do them at all.

Plus, we were always expanding and doing more. Too many balls in the air led to things being missed and dropped.

Not when I was the boss.

“Are we feeding me?” I teased as I sat up and stretched. I’d forgotten I was still in a bikini and cover-up until I felt Julian’s eyes on me like a heated caress.

“Yes, and Darby is running late, so I ordered for him, but he might get it cold.”

I sighed, not meaning to react to that, but Julian caught it. I cleared my throat and looked away.

“Are you two okay?”

“Yes,” I answered immediately and it was the truth. “I just miss him. He’s so busy and was before graduation.” I glanced at my ring and smiled. “I wanted a bit of honeymoon before law school, but Geiger’s firm is so busy that he has the chance to learn a lot.”

“Except it’s all your stuff they’re busy with.”

I nodded. “Plus all the pro-bono cases they’re helping with working with the PIs and foster kids in bad homes. They hired two associates just to handle that.” I frowned, not sure I understood what was really going on.

“People need a path. You gave them one to do good instead of being part of the broken system,” Julian explained. “Geiger says most of the partners are fired up. You took out a lot of gits they dealt with all of the time to survive and protect their people. Now they want to push forward.”

“That’s nice.” It made me feel warm inside to think I helped with that, but also it made me sad. Life was complicated like that.

“Lucca should be here soon with the order,” he said when I was quiet. He stood and stretched. “I’m going to use the loo.”

I nodded and watched him walk away before deciding to throw on something else. I changed into shorts and a tank after checking myself in the mirror that I looked presentable after the nap.

Calarel had arrived first and gave me a worried smile.

“Thanks for coming last minute,” I greeted. “Sorry if I pulled you—”

“You lied about how you’ve been feeling, didn’t you, Your Highness?” she blurted.

“Well, she’s figured you out,” Julian chuckled as he walked out onto the terrace.

“That’s not fair,” I bit out, trying to control my reaction. I forced myself not to cross my arms over my chest when he did a double take, but I wanted to. Not to cut myself off from him but really, I always felt like it was a way to physically shield myself when I was upset.

“I was teasing.” Julian frowned as he glanced around me. “You’re blocking me.”

“Because you’re being too...”

“You jumped into dating Tams mode instead of first date and you guys aren’t there,” Lucca said from behind me. “I

don't tease her like that. Starting over means starting over and the comfort levels."

"That's fair," Julian accepted after a moment. "I'm sorry. I am confused though. You did hide it from her."

"Because it's always a damn group event and the commanders were around. I fib because they freak out and they hover. They hear I'm fine and move on. I just—humans see their doctors *privately*. It's not a state affair unless..."

"You're the president," Lucca muttered, guessing where I was. "Well, your life isn't a democracy and you're not human. I think it is fair that going forward you have *your* royal healer that you're most comfortable with and fine, you're not a normal fairy, so one person gets read-in."

"I agree, Your Highness," Calarel stated. "It wasn't like that dealing with the queens or heirs before, but you aren't as protected. It's also because you're the last, and people question if Prince Neldor mates a fairy, he will have a female heir of Faerie."

"Wow, so okay—wow," Lucca said with a whistle.

My thoughts exactly. "I have so many questions with that."

"Me too," Julian grumbled. "Okay, food first." The other two nodded and headed towards the table, but Julian moved in front of me. "I'm sorry. I did fall back into our old ways."

He was trying, so I needed to as well.

"I didn't actually like that old way. You tended to pick on me in a group and I hated it. I'm not always comfortable to that level with the people I'm around. I'm always the odd man

out, and it makes me feel like that more. So I honestly don't want to go back to that. Ever."

I stepped around him and went over to the table, ignoring that they heard what I said along with my security. Crap.

I put up a barrier over us once we were settled and sighed. I told them what I'd discussed with Julian and laid out where I was at.

"A big part of it is fear, Your Highness," Calarel said gently when I was done. "You are nothing like Neldor's mother, but in the end, she was nothing like the woman she'd been. You have the power to end all fairies and our world. You might not be as powerful as she was, but you are much more powerful than she was at your age."

Lucca blew a harsh breath between his lips. "It's so not fair, but even I get it." He nodded when I shot him a hurt look. "Shit happens, Tams. Neldor's a pretty stand-up guy now that he's been smacked around, and people say that was who Neldor was before. His mom couldn't have been a monster to raise him like that."

"But—everyone focuses on that, and I did nothing. I'm not carrying the sins of my parent but another queen in a different realm? How is that fair?"

He reached over and patted my arm when I looked away. He waited until I met his gaze. "It's not. No one is saying it is. Fear isn't rational though." He cleared his throat and glanced around as if warning them they didn't hear what he was about to say. "I saw a feral Alpha bear when I was young. He lost his mate and things went—I don't really know.

“My dad was called in to help and didn’t have the full picture. That’s important because he was really upset I was ever close to the guy. He’s committed enough sins that I don’t want you to think he ever would risk his kids like that.” He seemed relieved when we nodded. “The guy was terrifying. He’d lost all humanity and—it took *four* strong Alphas to take him down.”

“And it terrified you,” Julian said gently. “You now knew there was power like that out there and it’s scary.” He nodded when Lucca and Calarel did. “I felt the same way when I was a boy and saw my uncle do something monstrous and exceedingly powerful.”

I shook my head. “Maybe it’s because I grew up human.” I shrugged when they all looked at me. “There are a *lot* of ways to be monstrous that have nothing to do with magic or animal strength. Terrorists flew a plane into buildings and killed so many, doomed others to die when they helped. Bombs in wars. Shooters with huge weapons taking out innocent people.

“I still don’t look at everyone as the next person to do something horrible. I get it, the world is scary, and I have a ton of power. In the face of a nuke, what does that really matter? Someone gets pissed at us or goes rogue and a nuke lands and we’re all dead. I can’t think of that all of the time and function. People need to stop trying to control what they can’t.”

The three of them stared at me, but I ignored it and focused on my food. It was good but a fancy place, so the portions were smaller, and the steak wasn’t even a real meal for a human.

“Okay, I want like five more of those shrimp sandwiches,” Lucca grumbled. “There’s no way that feeds a human man my size.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I chuckled, sharing a smile with him.

We talked some more, and Lucca put in an order for Italian because he said he wanted pasta, but I doubted I was the only one who knew he really wanted tiramisu. Then again, maybe I was.

“May I scan you without you blocking me this time, Princess?” Calarel checked when we were done and waiting for the next round.

I sighed, taking off all my charms but also all the magic I put on myself to block people. I went over to her and held out my hand. I felt her magic trickle over me, and her reaction made it clear she wasn’t happy with what she found.

“I am *not* babying you when I say you need a week of rest.” She shook her head when I argued. “You’re one more time waking people before you break your magic rivers. Again. You can’t keep going to that line, Your Highness. That’s not pushing yourself like you’re training. That’s breaking *bones* to try and have them fortify differently when they heal. It’s not okay.”

“What would you recommend then to push her past what others won’t want to?” Julian asked before I could say anything.

“First, you need at least five days of rest,” she told me. “Then I would say five hundred one day and two hundred the

next. That is still *massive* amounts of power. It's not your bloodline that allows you to awaken them like unlocking magic between family. It's your power as the conduit to Faerie. No one else can wake even one.

"Now, that's because of your tie, but even Prince Neldor now that he has his wings cannot build the power to wake a hundred. Onas has registered as enough power to wake a hundred. Shael as well, but they cannot gather power as you do, and part of that is your demigod side. Lageos could wake five hundred. Probably more."

"But his magic isn't the same and Faerie would reject him," I muttered, knowing that well. I let out a slow breath when she nodded before taking my seat. "Part of it was..."

"Hey, you don't have to tell us the deets," Lucca cut in. "You didn't know and neither did an experienced royal healer."

"Actually, we all objected," Calarel cut in.

"No one told me that," I drawled.

"Okay, so first, you get a direct line to your own healer. I thought you already did," Lucca grumbled.

"Things have been better, but everyone's busy," I defended. "A lot of people weren't happy I accepted a vampire's proposal. I think the commanders wanted to change the topic to happy because my engagement isn't happy to them."

"People are idiots on any world, Your Highness," Calarel chuckled darkly. "But yes, I will come to you directly. I won't worry about protocols or normalities." She seemed relieved

when I agreed, even ordering her to do so. “After your rest, I’ll come check you. Start that day at two hundred. The next, back to your original five hundred.”

I nodded. “And do that until it’s easy.”

“Yes. You rode the power from your wings coming in to jump levels, and that’s a jump the rest of us don’t have. I *agree* you should keep pushing past what others are comfortable with.” She smiled when I did a double take. “You have too many mirrors in your life, and you kick out the snakes. You will *not* become Neldor’s mother. Never. We need you to be powerful.”

“Thanks, Calarel, really, thanks.”

“Anytime.” She winked at me. “Especially when I get fed this well. The hobgoblins dote on me at your castle because I help you and your mates most, but this isn’t food like we have in Faerie. It’s a nice treat.”

Yeah, every supe let their stomach rule them for sure.

I thanked Julian for dinner and he seemed hesitant to go. I walked him to the area we were using for portals and waited for him to say what he wanted.

But he didn’t.

He cupped my face and leaned down, simply kissing my cheek. “Thank you for letting me spend the day with you.”

“It was nice. I’m sorry I blew off lunch.”

“It was worth the worry to know you’ve got this settled.” He licked his lips when he leaned away. “You can tell me

what's going on. I mean, I want to listen if you're comfortable with it."

"Sorry," I whispered.

"Don't be. You're not there. I just wanted to offer? Yeah, offer. I'm not—I want to communicate better with you."

"I thought we did pretty good today, and that's better than what we were doing."

"Yeah, it was." He kissed my cheek again. "Can I check in on you tomorrow?"

"Sure. Text?" I wanted a bit of space to settle with spending time on a date with him. Sure, it was more casual—and weird with the health stuff—but a date.

He flinched and dropped his hand before checking around me for what he could get from my aura. He seemed okay with what he found because he nodded. "I'll text you. Night, Tams."

"Sleep well, Julian."

He left and then it was just Lucca and me.

"What's really going on, cream puff?" he asked gently as he worked on his second piece of tiramisu.

"It's stupid, so don't judge me, okay? I'm saying it's stupid."

"Fair. Spill."

"I feel kind of left out," I whispered as I sat and pulled my feet up on the chair, hugging my knees to my chest. "I include everyone in my stuff. It's always group activities, and I never want anyone to feel excluded."

“You are the best at that even when we weren’t really friends and just kinda latched onto your plans,” Lucca confirmed, making me feel better about that at least.

“I know things can’t ever be the same with Mel, but I miss her still. I hurt from what she did, and some parts of me that loved her don’t anymore, but I still do love her.”

“I get that,” he accepted after a moment. “Like you can’t go back to being besties, but you’re still willing to be friends. I’m feeling that with Hudson.”

Yeah, but they also loved each other sexually, so that was way more complicated.

“But she doesn’t want a life like her dad’s, so that limits us. I’m glad she’s happy at Artemis and her new life, but it doesn’t include me. We’ve had some lunches and talked about dragon stuff on the down low. That’s it.”

“That’s not stupid, Tams. That’s fucking real and you’re struggling.”

“I know, it’s more the rest.” I sighed when he waved me to go ahead, kinda wondering why he was being pushy but then realized he just knew I needed the push maybe. “Darby’s so fucking busy. He was to finish up his master’s and now he’s living his internship and prepping for law school. I get it. I just feel—we got engaged and didn’t even have a weekend to celebrate.”

“Again, not stupid and fair to feel.”

Was it? Maybe it was. Lucca was honest with that kind of stuff, and it made me feel better to hear. “Izzy’s got her internship with Anya now that she’s an elder and handling the

shit with picking new elders. I get it's the chance of a lifetime but..."

"But you gave White the position, and she took Izzy away from you this summer," he muttered. "*And* White spent a few summers with you basically. You like her too. She's more like an aunt to you than a professor."

That was true and I said as much.

He waited until I met his gaze. "And Katrina is so busy setting up everything with getting your paintings sold she hasn't spent much time with you. Neldor's training crazy for his wings now that school is over, and I doubt you've seen him even if half of the time you wanted to kick him out of your house."

"Is this really not stupid?" I asked, shocked he was hitting the nail on the head.

"No, it's completely valid, Tams. And I've been where you are. I felt it when Hudson's role turned into way more as the son of a king than mine was as the son of one Alpha. He was at huge meetings with councils and elders or other royals and I was partying with my sloths. I felt left behind and like I was wasting my time."

"Yes! Like that. And then I said I thought I could wake more people now that my plate was free from school, but I was going to say more and I didn't get the chance to. Morgan said how great it would be that I could do a thousand every day and how happy everyone would be."

He growled. "And you didn't want to feel like the bad guy and pull it back."

“No.”

“Well, now I get why you were so hurt by what Julian was teasing you about. You felt like you were between a rock and hard place *and* fairies were taking advantage of you again.”

“Lucca, if you got that much from me feeling sad and pouty, then you get me better than I do,” I drawled.

“I’m just that good,” he chuckled. He finished with his dessert and set it down before scooting his chair closer to me. He moved his big hands over my knees and rubbed them. “You’re valid, Tams. What you’re feeling is valid.”

“Thanks, Lucca,” I whispered, tears burning my eyes. I wasn’t that sad about it all, more relieved I wasn’t being a jerk.

3

The next morning, I woke pressed against a large, hard body... And dick. It was pressed against my ass and lower back. That might have made me assume it was Darby except his body wasn't that tall and wide where it surrounded me so much.

I was on complete empty and my brain was sluggish, so I wasn't putting the pieces together.

Until he spoke.

In his sleep.

"I love stretching your pussy, cream puff," he mumbled before a snort escaped his lips.

Lucca. Right, we'd been talking and... My mind was blank. Shit, I really needed food to fuel up. I was too tired.

I tried to wiggle out of bed, but he was a damn barnacle and kept dragging me back. I was about to laugh or smack him, but then he grabbed my breast and I shivered. I forgot how good his huge hands felt.

Wait, focus. Food.

I pulled away enough to move onto my back and then slid away until I was out of reach. It was pretty funny, but I was more focused on the fridge. My heart hurt when I glanced around and Darby wasn't there. Now he wasn't even coming

to where I was to sleep? He had a fairy guard that could open a portal for him whenever.

“Well, you had a fun night,” Darby drawled as I stumbled into the kitchen.

“No, the princess is on empty,” one of my detail growled. He raised his voice for whoever was outside. “Get breakfast here from the kitchen. Now.”

I was up in Darby’s arms before I realized it. He sat me on the counter and the next second I had a glass of juice. I chugged it right down and held out my hand for more. After I drank the refill, I was a bit better.

Then what Darby said hit me and I couldn’t hide my hurt. “Is that why you didn’t come to bed? You thought I had sex with Lucca?”

He frowned. “No, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Ouch, dick,” Lucca grumbled as he joined us.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” Darby argued, scrubbing his hand over his head. “I’m saying we all deserve our alone times with Tams. If you guys had reconnected, I didn’t want to insert myself into something private.”

I nodded I heard him but looked at Lucca. “What did happen?”

He glanced between who was there and sighed when people went tense. “Nothing. We were talking and you zonked out. It was midsentence though, so I stayed because if your body was distressed, I would scent it.”

“Not asleep,” Darby muttered.

“No, it’s woken me up before and with Tams even,” he argued. Lucca sighed when Darby gestured to me like clearly he didn’t catch this. “Her body’s not distressed yet. She’s just on fucking empty.”

Rafe walked into the room, probably in charge of my detail for the day. “Smart, but going forward, if a fairy falls asleep so suddenly, they *must* eat. Or get a royal healer.”

Lucca frowned. “Sorry, Tams. You ate so much just before I didn’t think—I thought you would digest that.”

“I would have thought the same given how much I ate,” I admitted, shrugging it off. “Clearly, Calarel was right and I pushed too hard. I’ll be good.” I rubbed my neck. “I feel loopy, like I can’t wake up and everything aches. I didn’t feel this yesterday, just super tired and needing naps.”

“The repercussions of using too much magic don’t always appear right away but ripple out later,” Rafe reminded me before digging into the fridge. He pulled out a container of washed fae fruit and took off the lid before handing it to me. “Our foods are the quickest help.”

Of course, I knew that, but I was pretty sure he was saying that for Lucca.

Food started arriving and I dove right in. Lucca pulled Darby off to the side and I didn’t hear all of it, but I caught something Darby said.

“I wasn’t being a shit. I heard you all when you said if I’m not in her bed when she goes to sleep, I don’t get to bitch about who is. I want her happy and she loves snuggles. I’m

saying that. I'm exhausted too and it came out wrong. She knows that and I'm not upset."

Well, I did then, but my head wasn't in the game to assess what was going on, so I was glad I heard that part.

I ate and ate and then ate some more, finally feeling fine. Tired, but also wanting to do something... Especially when Darby headed back to the office.

"Okay, that was depressing," Lucca grumbled after Darby left. "Even I felt like you were a trophy wife getting a kiss on the head while he went back to his life."

"It wasn't that bad," I chastised. "He's doing all of this to become my attorney after all. And he likes it. He's helping people with the pro-bono cases."

"I know, I know it was just..." He shrugged.

Cold. That was what he didn't want to say, but I felt it too.

But I didn't know how to fix it.

I didn't know if there was anything to even fix.

"Well, I did a thing and it's a fun thing," Lucca announced, wiggling his eyebrows at me. "We're going kite surfing. I made us a reservation at the place you like and we're going for three days. Just sun, fun, play, and eating." He winked at me and I turned on my telepathy. "*And no hovering.*"

Nice. Really nice.

Except my security was not happy when we arrived and the place told them outside security wasn't allowed. Which was what Lucca had planned.

I shrugged at Rafe and told them to go hang out in the parking lot if they wanted. It was hard not to laugh at the look he gave me. Hey, I was really good about having a detail or two on me about 90% of the time now. I'd been good but yeah, it was taxing to always have people around and watching.

And most of the time I didn't know their names. It hadn't been a set detail in months and months but rotating in people who had just woken up. I knew it was needed and helped the Guardians, but it made it harder on me. I always felt like I had to be on guard as well.

So a few days of kitesurfing without constant eyes sounded great, it really did.

We checked in and ordered food to eat on our balcony before we hit the water. I had a good hour of kitesurfing before I needed to rest. Using too much magic had taken a toll on me. I promised Lucca I was fine and he could keep going. He kissed my cheek and headed for our cabana after I turned back in my equipment.

I'd been wearing my GoPro and so had Lucca since I hadn't livestreamed or posted many videos anymore. I'd taken a lot of shots of the hotel and food.

I set up my phone to take video because I decided to do something silly, something I never had... Make a sandcastle. I was going to send the video to Darby so he felt like he was hanging at the beach with me.

Or as close as he could with all of his work.

I didn't have anything to make a sandcastle with, and I was thinking of the logistics of how to get around that when a

man approached me.

“Hi, I’m a fan,” he said with a smile. It rubbed me the wrong way, but I couldn’t see his eyes with his sunglasses on.

“Oh, thanks.” It always made me feel weird for humans to say they were my fan. Fan of *what*?

I mean, I wasn’t really a model, I modeled for companies I was a part of.

I wasn’t an actress.

I wasn’t a singer or performer.

So they were a fan of me being attractive? Yeah, that was weird.

Okay, except the ones who said they were fans of my livestreams because I got to go to places they couldn’t afford and they were fun. Yeah, be a fan of that for sure. No harm there.

“Let’s take some pictures,” he said with his phone already in his hand.

“Sorry, I don’t take pictures with men,” I said as easily as I could. “My boy—fiancé isn’t a fan of it.” I held up my hand to show my engagement ring.

He waved it off and moved closer. “He doesn’t have to know.”

“I would, and I don’t ever betray Darby like that.” I stepped away when he took another step towards me. “Sorry, it makes me uncomfortable with strangers.”

“You make me sound like some weirdo,” he bitched.

“I didn’t mean that at all. You’re a stranger to me, and I don’t even know your name, so it’s over my comfort level.”

He snorted. “You post yourself mostly naked all of the time. Like taking a picture with a man makes you uncomfortable.”

I stopped smiling. “It does. The pictures make me uncomfortable too, but the companies—I was an investor, so I was a free model then. I’m cutting it back now that we have —”

“You did it for free? So what’s another picture with me?”

Yeah, logic was getting me nowhere with this guy. “Look, I’ll give you permission to take a picture of me solo or have a nice day.”

He frowned and raised his phone, tapping it for pictures because I heard the click. “I don’t need your fucking permission to take pictures of you. Don’t be so full of yourself because you’re hot.”

“I’m not. Everyone should get a say in—”

“These are mine now,” he sneered, waving the phone around. “I own this piece of you now. I can do whatever I want with them and I will. You can’t even use them because *I* took them. They’re mine. You want to be a bitch about taking fan photos like you’re too good for us? Fine, I’ll put them all over, and now you can’t do anything.”

“Geez, I wonder why I don’t take photos with strangers when you’re so fucking sweet,” I drawled.

“It’s not even worth using them to jack off to when you’re such a cunt,” he snapped.

“And you’re a fucking creeper to push to take photos with me to use for that,” I threw right back. He took a step towards me, and I didn’t back up this time. “Try it. You’ve probably seen me sparring if you watch my social media. I would lay your ass out.”

“Yeah, right, your security does that, and they’re not here right now.”

I snorted. “I don’t need them, but you’ll need an ambulance if you touch me, so walk away, creep.”

“Hey, get the fuck away from her!” Lucca bellowed from the water. He’d clearly seen something was up or sensed it because his board was on the beach and his sail falling rapidly.

The guy took one look at Lucca and bailed.

I couldn’t even hide my annoyance, crossing my arms over my chest and glancing between Lucca and the creep hurrying away. “Why do you get that reaction and I get dismissed? I kick your ass when we spar.”

“It’s the height,” he said... While trying not to laugh.

“Yeah, sure it is,” I drawled.

“You okay?” he checked.

I shivered. “Yeah, he didn’t touch me. Just—some people are not okay in the head.” I rubbed my arms. “Let’s bail out of this place. Not having my security hover sounded nice until—yeah, that.”

“Apparently, letting their other guests be assholes is why they don’t allow security.” He shrugged when I frowned. “It’s a private beach. Guests only.”

“Okay, yeah, let’s switch back to Cherrywood. I’m not staying at the same place knowing that guy gets off to my pictures.” I winced when darkness filled Lucca’s eyes.

“He said that to you?” Lucca didn’t wait for an answer, turning towards where the guy was headed.

“Hey! If anyone gets to smack him, it’s me,” I yelled, hurrying over to him and yanking him to turn around. “I’m not bailing you out of jail. Let’s just finish up and go, okay? I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, okay. Fucker.”

We collected our stuff and headed back to our room. We changed and packed before heading to the lobby... Where Lucca made a huge fuss about it. I actually filmed it because the manager was so dismissive of another guest hassling me on their property when “he didn’t even touch her” that it was unnerving.

I pulled Lucca back when I thought he was going to lunge for the manager and we headed outside.

“Did you have fun with your freedom from our hovering?” Dalyor drawled, Rafe standing next to him so clearly the one who called him.

I didn’t even get to ask what he meant because he held up his phone to show that one of the pictures the guy took was already posted. The caption said I was a total bitch and jerk to the people who “made me.”

“Oh, I’m done with that fucker.” I pulled out my phone and uploaded the full video of the altercation with a caption

saying the full story. Then I added the bullshit with the manager too.

“Fine, we should have taken a few of you as friends to be with us, but don’t blame her that guys are assholes,” Lucca snapped. “And stop switching up her detail constantly. How can she rest when she’s always around fucking strangers? Every time I see her, I don’t recognize anyone besides the detail lead. It’s weird for me, and I’m not around it as often.”

“Do you feel this way, Ms. Vale?” Dalyor asked, the rest of the fairies tense.

I sighed, knowing I couldn’t brush it off. I actually felt better Lucca said something. “Normally, it’s one person being traded out and I know the rest. The past two months, it’s been constant changes and mostly new people. That’s a bit much, Dalyor. I don’t like waking up and it’s all strangers where I am. At the house, you guys are outside, but at the resort...” I shrugged.

And to make things worse, we had to go through the hoops of getting back to my resort the human way because the guy had tagged the location. I was honestly relieved when Rafe said that because I was quick to post the hotel and hadn’t realized I’d out us too.

Anger was funny like that.

We picked up food on the way to the airport and ate it before eating at the airport again because we were waiting for one of my private planes to land. Lucca was pissed about the guy and I had to go through that and bummed things didn’t turn out.

I bumped his shoulder once we were loaded on the plane. “Cherrywood just needs a resort at a good kitesurfing place. It’s all good.”

“Or we could just bring the equipment to your home that’s a *castle* on the ocean in Faerie, Your Highness,” one of the guards teased.

I kept my mouth shut, feeling better when Lucca reached over and rubbed my shoulder. I did a double take when I saw Dalyor watching and caught that. I didn’t think it was about Lucca touching me, but he realized it was an issue for me.

Fairies were so used to Faerie being their safe spot and the answer to so much, but to me it was the problem a lot. Who would feel safe there?

“I wonder if we could do that at my house in Italy,” I mumbled, focusing on Lucca and ignoring Dalyor.

Except the damn man didn’t let it go. He waited until we were back at Cherrywood and cornered me.

“Why did that comment upset you and Lucca comforted you?” He sighed when I shot him a look to let it go. “Your Highness, I can’t protect you if you don’t talk to me. I checked with you about switching out your detail and you said it was fine.”

It upset me that he was pushing back on that like it was my fault. “Switching out people doesn’t mean a rotating fucking door, unless you’re an idiot, Captain.” He flinched, but I wasn’t done yet. “It’s not even an effective strategy for guards. The Rothchilds never switch it up like that. They

might trade someone off a detail to keep things fresh but never a hodgepodge.”

“You’re completely right, but you were staying at a location we control, and that’s a time to get people acclimated.”

“Not if you want me to fucking relax,” I snapped. “Can you just relax around strangers all of the time?”

“Yes, but I’m a military man, so I can rest in the barracks. I needed to know it’s not the same for you.”

“You’re an idiot because I can sleep in lots of places or with noise. I slept on the *street* for a fucking *year* before I met Mel. Under highways, near trains—anywhere I could. It’s not about the noise or I’m fragile. It’s the *people*. They watch me, always watching and focused on what I’m doing.

“No one cares if you’re in your room doing whatever. They do me and report it, plus who was here, what we were doing. Just like you were watching and trying to figure out what was up with Lucca.

“No one would blink an eye if your buddy did that because you’re just Captain Dalyor. I’m *never* Tamsin Vale to anyone. I’m always the heir to Faerie. Hell, a few of the guards have made it clear they got the chance of a lifetime to be so close to the future queen. Yeah, you fucking relax during that and not feel like the mother fucking animal at a zoo!”

My chest was heaving when I was done, Dalyor’s eyes full of shock. I was so angry I wanted to punch him even if he didn’t deserve it.

He swallowed loudly. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

Oh, he was really trying to get decked. “Maybe because everyone blames me for everything like you are right now. Maybe because I’ve been *exhausted* from waking a thousand fucking fairies a day like Commander Morgan suggested, and everyone jumped on without asking me? Maybe because everyone gets upset if I do *anything* that’s not what you guys are used to?”

“Fine, just go back to the castle, right? That’s not my fucking home, you dipshit. I don’t know that place. It’s a *weight* on me, one I don’t really want. I feel like I’m on eggshells every time I’m there. *Every fairy* would rather me be my mother, and I feel like a failure to be in her fucking castle. And you have no idea what it’s like being the conduit to that planet!

“You all get excited about the tie, but you don’t understand it and don’t listen to me. That planet *took control of my body*. It fucking shocked me so I couldn’t move away from the magic I was doing because it’s *sentient*. Fine, that’s your planet and home, but it’s not to me! Faerie scares the fuck out of me, and I would love to never go back.

“It’s a *curse* for the heirs and queens. I didn’t win the lottery to be princess there, but a damn prison sentence where the jailer can *puppet me*. I’m sorry you all want me in my castle so I fit with what you know, but give a shit about *me* enough to realize what it means for me! I have to keep my guard up every second I am there, and that’s not a place to call home!”

Dalyor winced, and I glanced over my shoulder to see half of the commanders gathered. Great, just great.

Then I thought about it a moment. Fuck it. Seriously, just fuck it, and I wasn't going to keep it in when Neldor wasn't there. They probably wouldn't hear me this time either.

Not really, at least.

I found Taeral in the group and focused on him, turning so I could see Dalyor as well. "That planet ate someone you loved, and you all push me to spend more time there. I can't help but wonder if you're all not out of your fucking minds. I mean seriously, just think about that. You all worry I'm going to be too powerful and go off the rails.

"It wasn't her *power* that made her go off. It was the ancients and connecting to that planet. From the first time I brought the sun back to Faerie, I've *felt it*. I've felt that planet. Yes, it's gotten better since it's healed, but none of you hear me that it's not gone. It doesn't slumber. It's like a predator waiting for me and wants what it wants, not caring what it can do to me.

"Fine, I'm the last, so it would be more careful, but Neldor's mom was not the only one who went off the rails. The queens don't last all that long. My mom—his mom—neither were all that old when we can live thousands of years. Yes, the job is hard, but fucking pay attention that it's the planet and not our *power* that eats through us.

"And your answer all of the time is to slow me down, not make me as powerful. Except the answer is probably to make damn sure I'm *always* much more powerful than that planet so it can't eat me. So, you want to trap me there knowing I'm at risk *and* giving the planet that wants to puppet me the edge over me. Yeah, sure, let's go hang there all the time."

I shook my head and moved my hands to my hips. I wasn't sure what else to say. Things had gotten much, much better between us, but only work stuff. They never cared about Tamsin or heard me on this.

"I thought things were better," Onas said when no one spoke for several minutes.

I sighed and met his scared gaze. "I don't know what to tell you, Commander. You all think it's fine because I can block Faerie and it hasn't tried to take control of me again. But you don't hear me when I say that the planet abused me. I don't care that it's not a person or without morality like us. That makes it *scarier* to me.

"It abused me, and you all want me to spend time with it. That's like being forced to live with the partner who broke all the bones in your body and act like it never happened. It did. Faerie fried all of my nerve endings, and it felt like bones breaking level of pain. And you push me to return to that and move forward. You fucking live with that and move forward."

"No, fuck that," Lucca cut in. "No, that's fucking insane. That's like making Hudson live on the Vogel mountain knowing it could kill him. I don't care how that planet—that's fucking insane, Tams!"

I glanced over at him and frowned. "Why are you acting like this is a shock? I've talked with you about this before."

"Not like that." He sighed when I looked away and came over to me. He cupped my face and made me look at him. "You explained it, but not like that, and I heard you differently—both probably."

I went to brush him off but then saw more of the fear in his eyes. “What did you hear then?”

He opened his mouth but then closed it. “More like a vamp getting crazy when it needed to feed. Faerie was injured and dying and needed the blood and latched onto you. Or even like I actually clawed someone when I was injured and didn’t know what was fully going on. That’s what I heard and thought—of course, it was traumatic for you, and that feeling doesn’t go away.”

“But you thought it was over?”

“Not...” He sighed. “I know you think it ate Neldor’s mom. So no, not *over*, but not in a position to take control of you and puppet you. That part was over since it’s not injured.”

“Yeah, but how do I know it was because it was injured and not just got a chance on me because *I* was tapped out? Everyone assumes that’s why, but I can’t read Faerie’s mind. Look how much else people got wrong with the ancients and bullshit right in front of them. I’m not trusting that it was because of something they don’t actually understand fully. Would you?”

“No,” he said firmly... And so did a few others.

I couldn’t hide my shock and glanced around at the fairies. “Who just agreed with me besides Lucca?” I could have been pushed over with a feather when Onas raised his hand first.

Wow, so maybe something could come out of my meltdowns.

Sometimes, at least.

4

Apparently, people needed to be slapped in the face with reality to change their attitudes... And I didn't mean the commanders.

People lost their minds about the videos I posted. Most were going after the asshole who tried to say I was the bitch when he was a creep. Plus, people were going off on the resort online. Women were coming forward saying they were drugged at the bar of that place and it was a playground of wealthy assholes who did what they wanted.

And the resort knew it was like that but didn't care as long as rooms were rented. Wow.

So the place finally put out a statement that they apologized for not taking the accusation more seriously and didn't understand the situation until they saw the video.

To which the PR person for Cherrywood responded with that was too little too late and no one was ever allowed to be harassed at a Cherrywood property. It turned into a whole promo for the resorts as they listed rules and even reasons they'd kicked people out, specifying the safety of guests was more important than always having rooms booked.

Which turned into rooms being booked. Like all the resorts were completely booked through fall. I hadn't seen that

coming, and it was extra amusing because I was majority owner.

But yeah, also the commanders. Lageos told me five of them approached him about if there was a chance my power could still be ramped up on my demigod side.

That was why I still had hope for those people. They *truly* wanted to help and do better. They were just so stuck in their ways, and I could imagine how hard it was to listen to a kid to them. Fine, I was in my twenties now and not a kid... But the youngest of them was like three hundred years old. I was a *kid* to them.

Well, besides Taeral and Iolas. They were kids to most of the commanders too because they were under three hundred. Sure they were.

And things were back to normal with my detail. It was a huge relief.

Plus, I was feeling better. I did what Calarel said and after five days she cleared me to get back to it at a much lower rate. I even took it a step further and woke two hundred fairies a day for a week.

That was what I did that morning, and I talked to her about going to her plan of five hundred and then two hundred until that was easy and I could add. She thought it was great as long as I increased my physical workouts and food intake to balance and grow my power.

Fair enough.

And that was why I had eaten about four normal fairy meals before I had to squeeze myself into a fitted dress. The

event would only have appetizers and pretty food, and I needed more than that... Plus, some patience when I heard Darby was running late.

He held up his hands in surrender when I gave him a shit look. “I already talked to Geiger. I couldn’t leave court, but I don’t need to be the one in court on days you have events. It was a miscalculation that won’t happen again.”

That took the steam out of me and I nodded. “Or arrangements need to be made. I can’t ever show up to events stag as the heir of Faerie, Darby.” Something filled his eyes and I hurried on. “I could have asked Izzy or Katrina. That’s what I meant. I wouldn’t ever—”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” He let out a slow breath. “I’m sorry. You never throw your mates in my face. I’m just—I’m—law school is going to be rougher than I thought.” He frowned when I snorted.

“Darby, you’re so fucking hard on yourself. Geiger is *tough*. I’m sure you’re doing shit associates at law firms don’t do yet and you’re only an intern. I think you’re going to be *bored* at law school you’ve already learned so much.”

“That would be nice,” he sighed.

“Okay, go get in your tux,” I said when he seemed to want to talk more. “We have to really go.”

“Right, sorry.”

Luckily, he was quick about it because I was ready, and it took forever with my hair and makeup and everything else fairies wanted perfect when their heir was in public.

People had been salivating at the idea of buying my paintings and for a while. It was something never done before by any royal of Faerie, so like most things, it all snowballed. It couldn't be simple sales then or even a "normal" auction.

And supe auctions were always fancy, fancy affairs compared to human ones. But that was too mundane for such a night.

At first, I had fought against the idea, but once Katrina convinced the commanders it had been a lost cause. I understood what she was saying and the way things were.

I wanted the way things were to *change* though, and so playing into the games too often seemed accepting of things. She was right that something like a party didn't count for that. However, if we made things too much like a circus, then I was the ringmaster instead of the future queen.

And I'd said that quite loudly when people suggested a floor show. Like acrobatics and people hanging from the ceiling. I'd gotten pissed and accidentally broken the table the plans had been sitting on. I was pretty sure people understood how I felt after that.

So I kept the fancy and extravagance, but we went another direction. No fucking trapeze act for an art auction. This wasn't a movie or a joke. Not when this money could do a lot for Faerie.

Plus, the supe world. No, I didn't think my paintings would change the world, it was what we had planned during the event.

Namely, catching bad people. Hopefully, lots of them.

I'd said time and time again that most wouldn't want to buy my art to have pretty, pretty or something considered a blessing from the future queen of Faerie. No, they wanted to try and steal my power or use it to link with me—a variety of horrible things that kept me up some nights.

But most wouldn't think I'd know this because I was a stupid woman or a whore or whatever else they called me. I wasn't stupid actually and I trusted no one, so of course I thought they would all use it for bad things. And with a lot of work, we were ready for them to try.

Plus, I added a lot more enticements.

Katrina was horrified when I first told her the venue would be the largest NFL stadium. The commanders had looked at me like I'd lost my mind as well.

But I was ready for that, and I reminded them that supes thrived on experiencing new things or seeing what others couldn't have access to. And how many people got to see the locker room of a pro team? Fine, people could see that on a tour of the stadium, but how many wealthy supes would do that?

None.

Also, if the background was bland and not meant for the occasion, that gave us the chance to shine brighter.

People would assume what they did or it was a huge venue and we couldn't cover it completely. But we would. We would have everything perfect so no one got a chance to steal anything or pull a fast one.

We would be the only ones doing that.

The one thing we all agreed on was that I wouldn't be front and center. The commanders would be the "hosts" of the event. I would be visible, and people would immediately recognize me with my bright red mane, but I wouldn't be speaking. I preferred that for sure.

But I also had to be presented. I could suffer through that and move on at least.

Once we arrived, we were led to the correct entrance to wait for. Someone must have given the signal I was there now that the party was going. It wasn't invitation-only since we wanted people to attend that we didn't know, but people had to RSVP and get a basic check.

Yeah, we knew lots would lie. We were counting on it even, but we needed at least a headcount and to know who to watch.

So no one could just show up without having been confirmed, and it had been made clear that they had to arrive on time or early or they wouldn't be let in. I didn't care how fashionably late people thought they could be because they were so important.

I was the damn heir of a whole world. They got their asses there before me and on time.

"Welcome to the first ever black and white masquerade art auction," Onas greeted. His voice was loud on its own, but the place was huge so he used his magic to be his microphone. "Tonight we will auction off the first public paintings our future queen is allowing to be sold. It's an auspicious moment in our history and one she wanted to be with its own fun.

“And no night with fairies would be complete without magic and a bit of trickery. Many of you were shocked at the location, but there is no place better to host a night of entertainment and challenges than this gorgeous stadium. I know you’re all ready to start the night and have fun, so let’s begin with the rules and limits of the night.”

Shael took over for that part. “As you can see, the playing field has been transformed into a dance floor. This is where your evening starts. Around the edges are where Princess Tamsin’s pieces will be displayed. As such, there is no food or drink allowed on this level. This level is for dancing or viewing the art.

“No exceptions. There will be portals to take you to the other levels as I refuse to walk up stairs in heels and no one should have to in formal attire.” I felt the flair of magic for the first portals being opened. “The flowers you see in the first level seating section are not simply for show or decoration. While pretty, they serve a tricky purpose.

“Each of you was given an envelope when you arrived. If you look inside, one of the cards has a section number on the first level. You may pick any flower in your designated section and it will reveal if you won a prize or another chance in a different section. Not everyone is here to bid, but our future queen wanted to make sure everyone had fun.”

That was true, but we also rigged the game.

Of course, we did. We had people who were well versed with using telepathy runes and knew how to spot trouble a mile away.

Yeah, we totally rigged the whole night to trap assholes and criminals. But for the normal person, they would most likely get a gift certificate for free gelato or a sweater from the co-op. It was meant to bring something amusing to the night instead of a standard swag bag at an event.

The bigger prizes were tours of my castle or a weekend in Faerie with personal guards and more.

“As Princess Tamsin reminds us regularly, our world is not the only world there is. So the second level is trivia challenges, and all of the topics are about the human world. You may try any section as many times as you wish. For example, section 223 is pearlberries. For every question you answer correctly, you will win a quart of pearlberries to be delivered to your house.

“Now, so things are fair, it is not a group activity. The fairies running that section will put up a privacy bubble around you and your date so no one can help. Also, it will cut back on the teasing when you miss an answer. Princess Tamsin added that after several of us failed miserably on the topic of human history. The questions get quite difficult for the bigger prizes.

“*But*, Princess Tamsin knew the answer to every question tonight.” I held my breath when I heard the murmurs in the crowd. “We verified all of the questions. I was shocked how studious our princess truly was in her schooling. She was not the best with dates, and neither will any of us be after a few drinks, so she left those questions out to keep the challenge fun.

“The third level is all games for our world. You may try as many or as few as you like. Some are simpler like rune

matching to bring you back to your school days, or others are more difficult knowledge challenges. The fourth level is for our Faerie Guardians stationed to be the eyes and ears to make sure everyone is safe and behaving.

“Servers will be around all three levels with drinks, or designated bar areas are on the third level with the vast array of foods native to Faerie. The second floor has infusion options with some fae ingredients but more common to this world. And lastly, there are the private viewing suites. Each suite has its own priceless artifact from Faerie on display.

“The amount of people in the room at a time will be limited and they are heavily guarded. *However*, Princess Tamsin thought it would be fun to test her demigod father, Lageos. All of the protections were put in place by him, but anyone can attempt to outdo his magic. If you do, you may keep the artifact.”

People were practically giddy at the idea, and I knew a lot of them not for the fun but thinking they were better than us and able to handle what we had set up.

Well, the joke was on them because none of the items were really there. Of course not. They were all glamoured and in display cases. Lageos and I worked with dozens of reservoirs to set it up and have it going. The power was hidden with my new way no one had cracked yet and it was all illusions.

The real goal was to filter off people. There were going to be a lot of asshole warlocks who went for those rooms to try and get more power. But criminals, seasoned and smart *criminals*, were never going to risk being trapped in a room

with guards. No way, and this wasn't an event for Underground newbies.

The big dogs would come out for this, and they wouldn't risk getting trapped or caught.

It was for us to identify potential threats and get more people on our radar, but those who hadn't made a move yet... But clearly were thinking about it.

Fine, some would just go to have fun with the challenge, maybe lots to see artifacts from Faerie that no one had laid eyes on. I would have been in that bucket, but we had eyes and ears and *cameras* looking for all of that.

"Of course, there are rules for those challenges as well," Shael continued. "There can be no outside charms or help. One person is allowed to challenge at a time, and there is no repeating the attempt per item. There will be others who wish to try. If you would like to work more with the magic or breaking the protections for educational purposes, arrangements can be made later."

Like never. We couldn't be the jerks to shut it down, but I'd made them say that part so there was an option. Even if no one would take it or we'd find a problem with any who wanted it, we offered.

"We thank you for your understanding and acceptance of our rules for this never before held event," Onas cut in. "Please take the portals to the third level and help yourselves to refreshments. Once the main floor is cleared, we'll introduce the star of the evening and start unveiling the art."

I let out a slow breath, glad when Darby squeezed my hand before hurrying to drop it. I was supposed to walk out first with him a bit behind me to the side. It was royal protocol since we weren't mated.

There were going to be thirty paintings auctioned that night. One from each of the collections I had worked on. I went to thirty different famous or gorgeous places and painted eighty paintings with my magic. So the paintings I made at Victoria Falls were going to be known as the Victoria Falls Collection.

There would be one from that collection auctioned tonight, and eventually I would allow fifty of the collection to be sold. The remaining thirty I planned to house in a gallery people could attend and see how far magic could take something as simple as painting.

I didn't mean making art was simple. No, that was extraordinarily difficult in all forms.

I meant magical painting didn't take much magic and was looked down on as something cute that students or housewives did. That was the perception I wanted to change by showing it was only at that level because people had limited themselves. The gallery would be a showcase of pushing the line and thinking broader than most were taught.

Plus, I knew people and their minds after growing up hearing thoughts. People liked to have the whole set of something or have more than others. It was a competition in its own, and someone would undoubtedly try to buy all fifty paintings available in a collection.

Or at least make sure they had as many as possible.

But a lot was riding on tonight and setting the stage for that. I knew it wasn't likely, but I had a fear that the assholes in the supe community would work together and only bid like ten dollars for each painting, as if to put me in my place and that was all my art was worth. It absolutely seemed like something they would do if they could.

I doubted it though because so many were backstabbers and liars. No one would trust each other or risk losing out.

The other reason I had wanted to use this stadium was the company I was the main stockholder of was the sponsor, so we got a great deal to use it for the event and setup a day earlier. Normally, it was like a hundred and fifty thousand for a four-hour event.

We got it for less and a lot longer. Hell, we were investing in enough for the prizes and food. If people didn't seriously bid big it would be a flop.

And I would be humiliated.

The commanders all agreed that individual greed would win the night and not to worry, but of course I still did. I wasn't a narcissist who thought everyone was dying to be like me or want what I painted.

Onas's voice boomed and snapped me out of my thoughts. "It is my genuine honor to present Princess Tamsin Vale, daughter of Queen Meira, rightful heir to the light realm, and the future queen of Faerie."

The doors were opened and I walked out, careful not to look up or note all of the people. As I moved along the floor, any fairy near me knelt. It didn't matter the level or how close

they were, by the time I reached the middle of the floor to the designated stage, every fairy in the building was kneeling.

“All hail Princess Tamsin,” Shael called out, all of the fairies echoing her and almost exploding my ears it was so loud. “Gods bless our heir and our future.”

I smiled out at the ones on the first floor. “Thank you for attending, and I hope you enjoy the evening.” They stood and I nodded to the commanders before Darby took my arm and led me towards the correct portal.

My entire detail was higher rank given the event, and they were in full gear ready to go and not hiding that.

And I was pointedly not looking at Dalyor and his friends who looked ridiculously hot. It was honestly distracting.

Shit, I need to get laid.

I forced myself not to frown at that realization and that I was having trouble remembering when the last time I’d had sex was. Over a week.

Wasn’t that sad when I’d just gotten engaged?

Darby noticed a difference in me though because he forgot protocols and moved his arm around my waist... And I wanted to pull away.

“Barrier?” he asked under his breath.

“It’s fine,” I lied.

“It’s not and I have a feeling I know what it is and I want to apologize.”

I swallowed a sigh and put up a barrier around the two of us as he led me off to the side towards food.

“I’m sorry I’ve not been attentive, *agra*. I’m struggling.”

“I know you are. I support you wanting to do this. I support your education and internship. Completely.”

“You always have. But what’s going on?”

I looked away and smiled at a couple who walked by. “Nothing. I was being silly.” I sighed when he didn’t say anything. “I just thought there would be a bit of a honeymoon period after getting engaged instead of feeling such distance.” I hurried on when he opened his mouth. “But this is really not the time, so it’s fine and let’s just have a nice night.”

He nodded, leaning in and kissing my cheek. “You look breathtaking, *agra*.”

“You look handsome too.” And I meant it... Except I pulled away from him and he frowned. “I’m going to find Izzy and make sure she’s okay.”

“I’ll come—”

“I have my detail. You can—I’m sure you’re hungry.” I was overreacting and being rude, but I needed a moment. I needed this not to blow up, and I just needed a breath which was really hard when I was constantly surrounded by people.

All my upset melted away when I saw Izzy standing with a woman I didn’t know. I was confused at first, but then I saw them leaning in and talking in a way that I knew it was a date. I couldn’t—Izzy was on a date!

Her date saw me first, curtsying when I approached. “It’s an honor to meet you, Your Majesty.”

Everyone around me went tense and she reacted. “I’m not queen yet. I get the bigger title when I am.”

“Sorry, sorry. I knew that,” she rambled, her cheeks flushing brightly. “Sorry, it’s just I’ve never met any type of royal.” She cleared her throat and tried again. “I love your dress.”

“Izzy picked it out.” I leaned in and kissed Izzy’s cheek. “Everything okay? You good?”

“Yes, all good and set. I expected you earlier before it all started. Where’s Darby?”

“He was running late. He’s getting food.”

She studied me and frowned. “I’ll talk to him.”

“It’s fine.”

“Tams, you have way too much going on. You juggle too much, so you get some passes and help. I’ll talk to him. Trust me.”

“It’s really fine, Izzy,” I whispered, feeling like I was being disloyal to Darby.

“Then it will be a quick conversation to check in.” She winked at me but then grabbed her date’s hand. “Go schmooze. We’re going to make the rounds too.”

I blinked and they were walking away. I didn’t even get the woman’s name. What the hell was that?

“Make sure someone runs a background check on that woman,” I instructed Dalyor. “A deep one. I want to make sure no snakes are getting close to Izzy.”

“Already being done, Your Highness,” he promised.

Good.

“Wow, you really wear that dress, Princess,” a deep voice I knew well said from behind me. I turned to face Lucca and heat filled his eyes. “Dayumn, Tams. Like for real, that dress was made for you.”

“Charming,” Mrs. Von Thann drawled, looking like she wanted to smack him.

But I loved it. I felt my face heat up and I cleared my throat. “Thanks. I was really nervous, and no one said anything about it.” I mentally winced. No, Darby hadn’t. He hadn’t said anything when he’d first seen me, but only after like he was placating me when I got miffed.

And Lucca clearly caught onto that Darby hadn’t said anything which I hadn’t meant to give away. I had truly been worried. The dress was daring and a big deal. It was a fairy fashion, and with the train and more, I was nervous wearing it.

It was a black ball gown with a front lace-up bodice that had been a bitch to get into. The main skirt—if it could be

called that—barely covered my ass. Then there were several layers of see-through skirts over that with slits all around so none of the three layers covered everything.

The skirts were awesome and made with fae material in a way that looked like flowing feathers. But yeah, revealing, and they were much longer in the back. Plus, I had like a cape attached to the back of my bodice that came up and gave me a collar from behind while leaving my front and arms exposed.

“It’s lovely to see you again, Your Highness,” Mrs. Von Thann greeted, dipping her head to me. “How have you been?”

“The crazy hasn’t eaten me yet,” I answered easily, knowing we had ears around us. “How are you?”

“About the same,” she answered, but I saw the sadness in her eyes. She was still separated from her mate and even if he was a jerk, she’d loved him once. I could only imagine the regrets she had and that she was wondering if she could have done something sooner.

Wow, that felt a bit pointed with how I was feeling about Darby.

“Thank you for attending. I hope you have a great time.”

“I’m sure we will,” she replied. “Lucca is a great date, and we’re excited to try all of the cuisines. Congratulations, the party is already a success.”

Not until the bidding started and everything worked out that way, but I appreciated her saying that for the ears around us. I was about to leave when I saw Hudson and Queen Sasha approach us.

“You looked breathtaking, Your Highness,” Hudson greeted, reaching for my hand and leaning over as he brought it to his lips. “Truly, the gods must be jealous of how beautiful you look tonight.”

“Wow,” Lucca said under his breath.

Yeah, really.

“You look dashing in your tux,” I said, truly meaning it.

Hudson was a handsome, sexy man that would make any woman drool. His blue eyes turned purple with desire, and he eyed me over like I was too pretty to be real. He stood back up to his seven-foot height and took up so much space with his wide shoulders and frame. Seriously, he was delicious.

And I wanted to take a bite. Things were still hesitant with us, but my hormones were steering at the moment as I eyed him over the same way. His ear-length hair was perfectly styled, and all I wanted to do was mess it up and see him with bedhead after we had fun.

Except my heart wasn't there yet.

Shocker.

“May I escort you around for a bit?” he asked as he stepped closer. “Dalyor would be blessed to escort Mother who is your closest ally.”

“I would be, Prince Hudson,” Dalyor confirmed. “But I'm on the princess's detail.”

“I'll protect her with my life,” Hudson promised, not even looking at the fairy. “Tams?”

“Sure, I want to try the food,” I whispered, my heart racing when he smiled at me, that smile that he only gave me or his family. I accepted his arm and felt better.

“Do you have plans later with Darby?” he asked under his breath when he led me towards the first setup. He held my arm when I flinched away. “That’s not how I meant it, Tams. You know me better than that. I thought maybe we could blow off some steam and swim at the resort.”

“You’re right, I do,” I mumbled. “But you were a different person before, and you used to talk to me like that, like you would find me for the sex after. It was the only time you talked to me some days.”

He was quiet for several moments. He turned me to face him and cupped my cheek. “I’m so sorry, shorty. I didn’t realize that’s how it came off. I really—even all messed up, I never meant it like that. You were so damn busy that I was trying to fit in with your schedule and see you, spend time with you.”

“If you only spend the time in bed, that’s not a relationship, it’s a booty call and makes the woman feel cheap.” I glanced over to see Darby standing there with two drinks in his hand.

And looking like he’d been punched in the gut.

I was about to apologize and explain to him what I had meant and we’d been talking about, but then I realized it didn’t *not* apply to Darby too. It had been about six weeks of him constantly busy and only crawling into bed with me after I’d fallen asleep or the rare time we had sex.

Hudson was the reason it was hitting me so hard. It had been what he'd done to me when I'd not been what he wanted or Juan had gotten in his head—whatever the reason was, that had been the result.

I stared down at my dress he hadn't even really noticed and felt cheap, abandoned. Fair or not, I couldn't help how I felt and my past traumas. I tried really, *really* hard, but they would never fully leave me.

Lucca cleared his throat until I looked at him and he tapped his temple, glancing around.

Right, we were in public.

Queen Sasha and Mrs. Von Thann realized something was going on because they greeted each other very loudly like it had been years since they'd seen each other. But we all knew they were giving us cover and something for people to watch.

I didn't want to, but Lucca was the smart one right then and I linked our minds.

"She was talking about us, but clearly you know it applies to you as well," Hudson started. *"You had the most beautiful woman in the world on a date with you tonight and you didn't even plan time for after? That's not like you."*

"Or compliment her dress or how she looked? Since when are you that guy?" Lucca added.

"I wasn't—I didn't mean to say that," I blurted when Darby gave me a hurt look. *"I just—I was nervous about the dress and said I was glad it worked for me. I wasn't..."*

"Tamsin would never and you know that," Lucca cut in.

I flinched when anger filled Darby's eyes. He was about to lash out and that wasn't what I wanted.

"Dude, don't be a dick," Lucca sighed. *"You've rightfully called us on our shit. We all want what's best for Tams and that's you, but you're—when was the last time you took a fucking break? Since your vacation over spring break? You're burnt out. Seriously, it's coming off of you in like waves even with Tams charging you all the time."*

"I noticed the same," Hudson added. *"I know that feeling. You're pushing too hard. Tams won't tell you because she'll worry she's not being supportive, but we will. How many times have we all begged her to slow down? You need to take that advice."*

"Hey, okay, don't gang up—"

"Fuck, it really is bad if you're defending me like you used to them when they were assholes," Darby said, finally joining in. He moved closer and studied Hudson. *"This is going to come off wrong, but since when are you the one to judge about communication?"*

Lucca snorted in our heads, and we all looked at him like he wasn't one to talk... Which he actually accepted.

"Since I started seeing the same therapist Julian has been," Hudson admitted, the huge dragon flushing a bit.

"What?" I gasped. *"Since when?"*

"A few sessions. It's helped. I feel... It's helped."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

He frowned at me and cupped my face again. *“Why the hell should you apologize?”*

“Don’t take away from him wanting to better himself because your couples counseling didn’t go well, cream puff,” Lucca said gently. *“I want to go see that person too. If they can get Julian unknotted from all of his shit, the person could help all of us.”*

They all mentally sighed when I flinched. I tried to pull away, but Hudson slid his arm around me and lowered his forehead to mine.

“Tams, stop. You have valid and real traumas in your past. Therapy won’t help you. You are trying. We all know that. We’re still talking with Katrina. Everything is not always on you. Partnerships mean carrying different parts of the load. I accept that, I want that. When it was hard for me to talk, you made it easy for me.

“Now it’s my turn. You’ll have struggles to deal with because I’m a dragon and you did lots to learn how it is for us. I heard all about it, and even you went to that Underground guy so you could understand. This is my turn. I will become the best communicator I can because that’s going to help us. Okay? You give me allowances and I’m giving this one.”

I nodded, feeling tears burn in my eyes but because I was so touched now. *“Thanks, beastie.”*

“Always, shorty.” He kissed my nose and pulled away so we could focus on the group.

Lucca took the cue and brought us back to the topic at hand. *“Look, you were cool about what’s going on and us*

trying to get back with Tams. This isn't an attack or trying to get you out so lose the anger. This is two friends saying you need a break. For real."

"I talked to the therapist about how planning dates made me nervous," Hudson admitted. "And she asked me if I thought I was better than Tams. It threw me and I told her of course not. She said then I needed to understand that if I wanted to be made a priority, I needed to make Tams a priority and put myself out there.

"You're not making her a priority, and soon she will stop. That's what I did. I didn't show Tams I was in this all the way but demanded she be. That's the line you're riding, and Tams has enough crap in her life, so if we're all going to be with her, we need to watch out for those lines and help. That's what I want. I want us as a team to be best for Tams."

"Love you too, beastie," I whispered, my face flushing so hot I knew it reached my ears.

"Whatever you all are doing over here is clearly not suitable for the public if the princess is blushing like that," a woman said loudly, snapping us out of our discussion... And getting the attention of everyone around us.

Bitch.

I broke the link and slapped on a fake smile. "My mate was being incredibly romantic, and that's not something I like other ears to hear or I'll have even more women trying to steal him from me." I smiled up at Hudson and decided to give him an inch. "And yes, I would love to go help the harvest in Faerie next weekend and have a picnic."

“Good, it’s a date then,” he easily accepted and leaned down to kiss my forehead. “I’ll let you get back to your date now. I want to have some fun with Mother and the contests you worked hard to set up.”

“How far can you link us?” Lucca asked under his breath. “I wasn’t done.”

“Give me a second,” I breathed and kissed his cheek. I let them walk off and accepted my drink from Darby, noting that woman and most of the other gawkers had moved on. I relinked us as we headed to the railing to stare out at the event.

“Hey, hi, sorry. I wanted to make one more point so Darby knew we weren’t riding his ass or being shits,” Lucca rambled. *“We want to see Tams, but it’s not about taking over your date or punishing you. I have busted my ass to help make this night a reality. I was dragging roses all over and typing up question sheets. Hudson was doing that too.”*

That was news to me, and I blinked out at the event. I hadn’t known that at all.

“So we were busy supporting her and wanted to hang after. You couldn’t, that’s cool, but you’re her date after you got engaged. You look ready to drop though, dude. So take the night and get some rest so you can pull your head out of your ass and we’ll hang with Tams. That’s what Hudson was asking.”

“I wasn’t saying that much though,” Hudson drawled. *“But yeah.”*

“I didn’t know you were helping,” I admitted.

“You’ve been distracted with Darby’s stuff and how to handle that plus getting this all together when it wasn’t what the commanders had wanted. Plus, you were recovering.”

“Recovering from what?” Darby demanded, and the other two swore in our minds. *“What have I missed?”*

“I tried to tell you, but you fell asleep,” I defended when he shot me a look. *“And you were gone before I got up. You’ve been... Okay, so we can hang after the event. Thanks for being pushy brats. I’m cutting the connection.”* And I did. I tossed back my drink and sighed. *“I’m hungry.”*

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he pushed as we walked towards food.

“Yes, but we have eyes on us so later. I’m fine. I pushed too hard.” I shot him the look this time like I wasn’t the only one.

The commanders started unveiling the paintings and projecting them to the Jumbotron. They read the scripts and explained the collections and more.

And my heart sank.

I listened to the thoughts around me as we stopped at each of the food areas and found my worst fears were true. *No one* cared about the paintings or art. No one cared about the locations or landscapes. All of it was about the power.

Or the people who came for the freebies and assumed something big would happen at the event.

“Turn it off, Your Highness,” Rafe said as he turned us away from the crowd.

I realized he'd also put up a barrier, but I didn't realize why until Darby reached up and wiped a tear off my cheek. "It's fine."

"It's not, and I don't get what's going on," Darby muttered.

"She was listening in on selfish assholes. What do you think happened?" he grumbled.

"It's fine," I repeated, quickly wiping under my eyes. "I knew no one would care about the paintings." I almost said more but snapped my mouth shut, but Darby caught on from the glance I shot him before I could stop myself.

"I'm sorry, *agra*," he whispered. "I did want to see them. I do care—I've supported your painting lots. I just—two thousand paintings is a *lot* and they were always in different spots. I didn't know where, and I didn't want to—the commanders kind of just took over."

"They did," I accepted. "It's fine."

"Please stop saying that when it's not," he muttered.

"Well, it has to be fine because we're at a huge event," I snapped, muttering an apology right away. I glanced at Rafe. "Take down the barrier before people talk more and let's just eat. This whole thing cost a fortune, so at least they better bid high for their chance to steal my magic since no one gives a fuck about the art."

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness," Rafe whispered sadly. "I knew there were going to be people who felt that way, but I truly believed most would want the chance to own a piece of

history. No heir or queen has done this, and I thought that would be what most saw.”

“They were beloved, and I’m hated,” I chuckled darkly. “Don’t ever have that much faith that anything involving me will turn out that well.” I was done with the conversation though and moved towards the barrier in warning that I would take it down if he didn’t.

Luckily, he did and we ate and ate.

I got really nervous once all the reveals were done because that meant the bidding would start on the first painting in thirty minutes. There were lots of people looking around at everything but not many focused on the pieces. More were dancing with the fairies that were helping that night.

Apparently, it was a normal addition to any fairy-held parties that there would be a line of fairies waiting to take your date or mate for a spin around the dance floor.

Yes, I found that was as weird as it sounded. It was more like escorts or something you could find at clubs, not at sophisticated parties. Hell, I’d been hired to dance with people at parties when I went undercover as an escort or call girl.

I really needed to get fairies up to date and see how some of the opinions people had of them were brought on themselves. I did understand that it went back to olden practices where single men were expected to always be dancing and invite women to dance. But that was to hopefully make potential marriage matches.

This was just hiring fairies to be dance partners. That was weird.

Even Izzy had said as much. Oh well. People seemed to be enjoying the chance. It was way more popular than my paintings. I tried not to take offense to that, but it also made my people seem like animals at the zoo that humans wanted to take pictures with or feed for the novel experience.

Seriously, my life was too weird.

Headmaster Edelman found me and gave me a chance to be distracted when he admitted—in a large group—that some of the trivia questions had tripped him up. He was impressed how I knew so many facts about the human world and wasn't shocked at all that I was the top student of my year.

Fine, he was getting it in that I attended the school, but right then I would take any distraction short of pulling my own hair out.

Maybe even that.

“Alright, now that people have had a chance to view the pieces, we will start the bidding on the first one and take a ten-minute break before the next one,” Onas announced.

“I don't know if I can stand here and keep my face blank for this,” I admitted to Darby, feeling like I was going to throw up.

“That's fine,” Dalyor cut in, back from his escorting Queen Sasha around. “It would probably look better if you didn't seem to care at all and knew it would be a success. Let's go check in on the raffles.”

“Smart,” Darby muttered and handed off our plates to someone. “Come on, *agra*, I want to see if I can keep up with your knowledge of the human world.”

I nodded and let him lead me to the correct portal. Just as we stepped out, Onas said the painting and collection and opened the bidding with a hundred thousand dollars.

“Twenty million,” a deep voice called out from the dance floor. “I bid twenty million dollars for the first ever auctioned painting from the future queen of Faerie.”

I knew that voice. I loved the man whose voice it was.

And currently, he looked ready to throw down and do whatever it took to get that painting.

The amount hit me and I felt light-headed, realizing I’d been an idiot. He had gone with me that day to watch me paint, pushing even that he wanted to see it once and help me out when I’d been stressed about it. Then he’d gotten involved in the function, fine, that was normal for him.

But he had wanted to be involved in the ordering and choosing of pieces. I hadn’t understood that, but he knew more about the supe world than I did, and the commanders had appreciated his help.

Now I fully understood why.

I was down the stairs of that section before I even realized it, holding onto the railing as I leaned on it. “Why? Why would you ever bid that much? I would give you any painting I made for free. You know that.”

Julian turned and smiled up at me. “Because I value you, Princess. I always have. Long before you learned you were a royal, you were top tier to me. I watched you take down a damn mountain on a whim and donate the money because you didn’t need it. I watched you help a witch with her magic the

first time testing runes after she talked bad about you to her friends.

“I’ve been there as you saved the day and got the bad guys and broken through everything we ever thought impossible. I was there when you painted this collection.” He swallowed loudly and tears filled his eyes. “I held you and we cried when we found hobgoblins in cages and fae dogs being used in fights. But I’ve also been a duffer and missed too much.

“I’ve missed when you were struggling and lost in my head. I’ve missed how people never give you a fair shot and treated you. And I can’t miss anything else. I won’t. I’m more than your mate; I’m your biggest fan and always have been. So yes, I want your first painting auctioned and to show everyone here someone knows your true value.”

I couldn’t even get my mouth to work, and he looked at Onas and nodded.

“Wow, even I’m swooning for you,” Dalyor muttered. “And someone is *not* happy. Clearly, Neldor wasn’t read-in on the plan.”

I followed his gaze and saw Neldor standing about ten feet away and steam about coming out of his ears. Had he seriously planned to bid on the painting as well?

No way.

“No objections?” Onas hedged, staring at Neldor as well.

He swallowed down what he was feeling and dipped his head to Julian. “I wished to be first as well, but you have a tie to that collection. I would never step on something so personal and important you share with our mate.”

Oh boy.

“Sold, to Dr. Julian Craftsman for twenty million dollars,” Onas announced loudly.

“Damn. He just set the stage and level in a big fucking way,” Darby whispered from my left, his tone impressed. “I get it. I wish I could do it, but I have a few hundred in my checking and mounting credit card debt. Wow. Seriously.”

Wait—huh? I couldn’t even handle that right then and shot Dalyor a look to get with Darby on that.

“There’s no need to wait for the next painting,” Neldor said loudly. “And while I respect Dr. Craftsman and his exquisite taste, I cannot be outdone again. Thirty million for the next painting.”

“Oh boy,” Dalyor whispered.

Spots formed in front of my eyes, and suddenly two arms were around me.

“I’ve got her,” Darby bit out.

“Just make it look like we’re all standing super close together because of the space,” Dalyor hissed under his breath.

Right, I’d started to faint. I couldn’t get my mind or mouth to work and before I could, the painting was sold to Neldor for thirty fucking million dollars.

Next, it was Liluth as part owner of the hobgoblin co-op. They wanted the painting for the co-op offices to bless them and the farms. They paid twenty million as well.

Commander Stefanie bought the next one. I always forgot she was from a noble family but yeah, she had money.

Commander Morgan went next offering fifteen million and an apology that it was all his family could reasonably afford. Sure, yeah, apologize for that. People snapped out of their shock and did try to bid against him, but Onas pretended not to hear them.

“What the fuck is going on?” I whispered.

Mallory—the noble who ran a major city in Faerie for me after I killed her brother—pushed for the next painting. Onas let people bid against her, but she won them out at eighteen million.

And then a noble who *hated me* was next. He’d begrudgingly agreed to my terms to reopen his area because people were protesting and threatening to revolt. But the man did not hide how much he loathed me.

So he wanted to steal my magic.

No. Dalyor clearly knew where my mind was and asked me to have faith.

Huh?

Each of the dragon royal families—including the two I put back in power—each bought a painting.

More nobles who didn’t like me and a few who did bought the rest.

Everyone was stunned. Like *stunned*, and I was the most shocked of them all, unable to hide my reaction and questions to all of it.

Once it was all over, one of the dark fairy nobles who didn’t hide he hated me addressed my confusion, bowing to

me before meeting my gaze. “We will never agree on politics, Your Highness, and I think you are too rash at times. *But* you are our future, and I want Faerie and her people to thrive. More than that, I won’t let anyone look down on any fairy, certainly not our ruler.

“You are making changes to better our world that you barely know and help our people. That is to be respected, and if the people of this world will not, Faerie will make it clear we do. I never thought to stand in the same room as one light fairy much less so many working for the same goal. You did that. You put your worries and emotions aside and put tonight together.

“We all know you didn’t want to do this. None of this was of your making, but you *listened* to the concerns of your people and those with more years on you. That is to be *appreciated* in a ruler and I do. I appreciate it so much that I put my money where my mouth is and am honored to have one of your paintings bless my home.

“And the money you are using to make Faerie even more magical and better for her people. I would give my last dollar for that, and many of us would. You simply gave us the opportunity after showing us who you are. And while your mother was said to be a great woman, she could not have pulled this off.”

People gasped at him saying that, but he pushed on.

“I wish she still lived and our queen too. I *wish* we could turn back time and fix so much, but we cannot. You are the reason—the bull in the china shop—that brought us to this point and why we have a future. So I stand ready to serve you,

my future queen. May the gods bless Faerie and *peace* reign within our lands during your rule.”

He knelt and lowered his head to me, other fairies following until all of them were kneeling. The Guardians popped up pretty quickly since they were also the guards of the night, but I saw the gesture for what it was.

Fairies accepted me. For real.

Wow.

6

I was supposed to meet with every person who purchased a painting, mostly to get a feel for them and so security could focus on them. But now I didn't know what to do, especially for our plans to catch bad people.

It seemed the commanders had thought ahead on that as well though because a dozen people stormed for the exit after the speech, and I saw Guardians waiting to check them out.

Okay then. People really didn't understand how often they ran the maze of someone else because of their egos, but I was glad there was a backup plan.

Plus, apparently, lots of people had tried for the artifacts, and that would give us lots of leads to follow up on.

"For the record, I planned to buy one, but I didn't know they would go that high," Lucca mumbled as I joined others on the main floor.

"You're all nuts," I whispered. I locked eyes with Neldor. "You especially. You laughed when you found out I was doing something so trivial."

He winced. "I was an ass. I thought... My mind went to splotches the children make. Your art is nothing like that. I've been to where the painting is depicting and it's just as magical as the real thing."

I nodded and went over to Julian, standing in front of him with so many questions and thoughts I couldn't lock on one over the other.

"I love you, my sweet fairy," he breathed before kissing my forehead. "And I'm so damn proud of you. You did more than any sane person could ever have thought possible. People who hated you and wanted to steal your power backed you tonight after seeing you are the leader they needed. I'm in awe of you."

"That part wasn't planned," Onas chuckled. He was looking out at the crowd as he rubbed his neck. He felt my eyes on him and met my gaze. "It wasn't. I only knew that Craftsman and Morgan talked to me. I figured the dragons would, but—I—that wasn't planned. Not by us."

"Wow," someone whispered, and I nodded. There wasn't much else to say.

"What are you planning to use the money for, Your Highness?" Mallory asked as she joined us.

I still couldn't get my mouth to work.

"The princess never dreamed the end total would be so high," Darby said easily. "I'm sure there is lots that can be done, but this outscaled her plans."

Mallory snorted. "She would never be so optimistic to expect five hundred and forty-five million be the total."

I fainted. Yeah, I totally fainted. I hadn't done the math in much shock, but hearing that thirty of my paintings went for that much was more surprise than a brain could handle and I fainted.

Did anyone really blame me?

“Everything’s fine,” Izzy assured me when I came back around. “The commanders told people you were overwhelmed by the generosity of your people and needed a time-out. Dalyor threw up a barrier before you fainted so no one outside saw. Unfortunately, he did that instead of catching you, but Julian managed to snag you before you cracked your head open on the floor.”

“We *all* tried to catch her at once, Izzy,” Darby grumbled. “I told you that. I have a damn bump from Lucca’s thick skull.”

“Pot, kettle,” Lucca threw right back from behind the wall of people behind me. “You good, Tams?”

“Yeah, just give me some space,” I muttered, rubbing my forehead. “Onas or Shael?”

“We’re both here, Your Highness,” Shael said as she came into view. “What did you need?”

“Set a meeting with all of the commanders and nobles who have their areas opened or supported tonight. It’s time to take the next step.”

“And that would be?” Onas muttered, moving Dalyor out of the way and coming into view.

I frowned at him. “What the plan has always been.”

“I don’t think you shared that with them, *agra*,” Darby chuckled, waving me quiet. “To give more people a voice, Commander. She always wanted them to have a voice on how things went in Faerie but not until the bad ones were weeded

out. That and smacking others around until they realized she wasn't a pushover or would cave to them."

"Yeah, what he said," I agreed, my head still throbbing. I sighed when Julian healed me.

Except it wasn't Julian. It was Neldor. I shot him a look that I knew he'd figured out how to get past my blocking everyone as my mate. We were going to discuss that later and at length. He simply sighed.

Fine, he never did it besides to help me, and he did pay thirty million dollars for my painting tonight, so I could leave it for now. But if he ever crossed the line, I would smack him back over it.

And with a smile.

I focused on Izzy. "How is the rest of the party? The assholes are pissed but we still identified them. Awesome. What about everyone else?"

"You're a hit." She nodded when I seemed skeptical. "A huge hit from what I heard, and even some of the biggest assholes we know were saying it. People were floored by the trivia games. Others happy with the door prizes and everyone adores the food. I heard whispers of trying to talk you into making the event a yearly fundraiser."

"That's not a bad idea because she's not going to have every auction be this huge," Darby muttered.

"No, Katrina is doing 'normal' auctions after this," I muttered. "Okay, another idea for the list. I really don't feel well. I think—can someone get Calarel?"

“You’re asking for a healer?” Shael muttered before everyone seemed desperate to get their phones out at once.

“I’m not dying. I just want to confirm this is stress and no one actually attacked me when we were distracted. Actually, someone get Lageos then too.”

“We were worried about his reaction if someone started problems at your event,” Shael hedged. “But that part is over. We should update him anyways.”

Yeah, they should.

Lageos appeared moments later and promised it was exhaustion and stress, not an attack. He charged me up and made my promise to take the next two days off completely. I promised, shocking the others around us. Please, I wasn’t that big of a pain. I’d had a lot of shocks in my life and not fainted twice like that.

Calarel arrived right after, making me feel like an idiot because clearly she’d attended. Or maybe the commanders were for not having her around after I fainted. Either way, she agreed with what my dad said.

I thanked them both but then looked at Lageos. “Do you have time to look around with me? I wanted you to see some of my ideas.”

“Of course, Daughter,” he accepted as he helped me stand and took my arm. “I snooped earlier today and saw lots already. I even had fun playing the games. You really are amazing. You know how to get to people and their pride without making it obvious. The magical challenges have been going well from what I heard.”

I beamed at his praise. One of the stations was a power meter like I'd used before and broken. The people who ranked the highest won prizes... And we had their names for when they entered. Knowing who to watch when being powerful was half of the battle at surviving in life when you were in the public eye like I was.

Or at least as a leader like I was. I didn't think Instagram influencers had to worry about that too much.

Hopefully not, or the world was in serious shit.

We walked past Julian and I reached out for his hand, saying he could join us. He gladly accepted, ignoring Lageos glancing between us. My dad would hear from the warlock's thoughts or get caught up later.

He did before we reached the portal for the first seating level. "Well done, warlock. One day you might truly be worthy of my daughter, but for now her love for you is the only thing that has stopped me from squishing you for hurting her."

"Well, I know where I got my violent side from," I drawled before walking through the portal. Geez, the demigod did not hold back any punches for sure.

I ended up holding Julian's arm while Lageos escorted Mrs. Von Thann because Lucca and Hudson joined us with their mothers. Lucca escorted Queen Sasha and they seemed to be on better terms now that he wasn't fighting with Hudson.

At least not publicly. It would take a lot to repair that relationship as well.

People were *full* of praise. Every single person we came across raved how much fun they were having and that they were shocked I didn't charge for the ticket with everything we were giving away.

I had fun in the end, but I was thrilled when it was time to call it a night. Luckily, I had nothing to do with the cleanup and even the people who had helped didn't either. Though Julian said he did hire the house cleaning company he used personally to help out. I didn't understand that until he said they were light on hours and worried they'd have to lay someone off.

Yeah, he was awesome. He'd come into money and started immediately doing good with it. We were two peas in a pod like that.

We all said goodnight, and Lageos said he'd stay and make sure everyone behaved as they should. More like take down the glammers once all the guests were gone. Some of the commanders came with to the resort though, and I had a feeling I knew what they wanted to talk about.

"Yes, I saw Luke," I told them bluntly. "He was with someone who he didn't seem friendly with and was probably teamed up with to keep eyes on him. But there was also someone shadowing him and spying. I would guess he was being watched by attending with someone and they also had eyes on him."

"I thought the same," Taeral muttered. "His tail was good, but it was clear he didn't want to be seen, not that he was security."

“Luke undoubtedly knows he was being watched, but it still worries me.” I shook my head when several people frowned. “He has given us invaluable intel. It probably saved Lucca’s life. Do I wish I could save him? Yes, but this is not the first time I’ve liked someone and knew I couldn’t save them. He doesn’t *want* to be saved. He wants to complete his mission.”

“Which you do not know for sure,” Onas reminded me. “It could be to take over the Underground and change its practices but still be criminal.”

“I’ve considered that as well.” I shrugged when I got several shocked looks. “When have I *ever* been trusting and not assumed the worst of people? Seriously, you guys are way more naïve and trusting at times than I am.”

“She’s not wrong,” Taeral admitted. “Still, he is a useful asset and I worry.”

“No one sensed us using your new way to cloak and glamour,” Onas muttered. “We were reading thoughts and they were clueless. Two of the Underground lower leadership were stupid enough to try for the ‘artifacts.’” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I would guess you thinning their ranks so much had them promote some idiots.”

“Score one for me for playing the long game.”

“Your patience on these matters is impressive. You first learned of them almost four years ago, and even flying solo I would have wanted to cut off the head of the beast when it was that bad.” Onas meant it as a compliment, I knew that even if it sounded like I didn’t care as much as him.

No, I did, I simply cared about my life more. So I took the compliment and left the rest alone.

“I’m hungry,” I announced as the commanders were leaving.

“Yeah, you really did a number on yourself and your magic,” Julian said with a sigh.

“No, it’s growing,” I defended, wincing when the commanders froze.

Taeral turned his head slightly but still opened a portal. “Good. That will keep you safe when we haven’t protected our queens. I will tell the hobgoblins at the hotel and see what they have made.”

“Thanks.”

The others nodded and left but didn’t agree or disagree with him. That was progress in a way.

“It’s growing?” Julian checked when it was only him, Darby, Lucca, Hudson, and I.

I nodded. “I felt it and it’s—I don’t think I’m supposed to have big jumps like that anymore. Maybe it’s because I’m not a real fairy yet.” I mentally winced, my snark overruling my mind. “It’s fine, just—I’m done adulating tonight. I want to eat and chill and maybe have a bottle of wine.”

“Sounds grand,” Darby agreed.

“Hey, you were grounded for not being a better date,” Lucca cut in. “We were going swimming with her.”

“I was a shit date for letting everyone else escort me and not even dancing with him,” I defended.

“No, he’s right, and I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate you better. Go swim. Julian and I will be the sober lifeguards.”

Hudson snorted. “And voyeurs.”

“That’s not mutually exclusive,” Darby accepted.

Pervs... But they were my pervs.

He went with me to the bedroom to help me out of the dress and get it hung so it was safe. He kissed my naked shoulder before I could slip on a robe. “You looked perfect tonight, *agra*. Truly. I’m not just saying that.”

“You never would,” I agreed, turning to face him. “You’ll really take a break, right? You didn’t just say it because they harped on you?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I can’t lose you.” He sighed when I frowned. “I need to rest. I’m fine with pushing and pushing but not if it could cost me what we have. Nothing is worth that to me.”

“I guess that’s better than being stubborn and not taking a break,” I sighed. That was a win enough maybe.

“Please don’t be mad,” he said as he hurried to take his tux off. “I’m just—it’s hard to balance and—”

“I get that. Believe me I get that,” I promised as I took off my shoes and everything else, including my tiara. “But you can’t save everyone, Darby. I know these pro-bono cases are important to you. They are to me too and I’m proud of you, but you were the one who made me see that if I break, I can’t help anyone. Please see that yourself and value yourself as well.”

“I thought I was still doing okay,” he admitted. “I didn’t realize I’d gone that far.”

I nodded. I knew that feeling too, but Darby had helped me see that. I was disappointed in myself that I hadn’t been the one to make him see the same.

“It wasn’t me alone,” he whispered as if knowing where my mind was. “You didn’t fail me, Tams. I’m responsible for my mistakes just as you are for yours.”

Fair enough, and I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I headed out to the pool, snickering when two chairs had a tux each. “You’re savages. You couldn’t at least put them in the living room?”

“Shorty, I needed this so much I almost jumped in with it on,” Hudson grumbled. He was leaned back on his arms and face up to the night, but his eyes were closed like he was soaking up sun that wasn’t there.

I took off my robe and jumped in, not caring that my makeup would be a mess. It would wash off or someone would wipe it away.

Or really, I didn’t care then either.

I swam over to him, noting Lucca was sitting on the stairs and in about the same mood. “What’s going on?”

Hudson shrugged. “Mother is just so damn sad. She’s still staying at your vacation home—”

“And apparently, my mom is going to join her for a week,” Lucca mumbled.

Hudson sighed. “It’s a mess. My father is broken without her. I don’t think he’s shaved or trained since she left. He’s ditched meetings and doesn’t seem to give a single fuck.”

“So that’s his answer? Not trying to win her back or beg her to return? He doesn’t deserve her.”

Hudson raised his head and there was anger in his eyes. I didn’t think about what I’d said but maybe more I was choosing sides? “She asked for space. He’d be the asshole if he pushed, right?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “That is a tough one. You can give space and still show you care. Just don’t go on social media and try to be sexy to songs like the idiot over there.”

“Thanks,” Julian drawled. “I thought it was enticing.”

“Yeah, but you were partially in trouble for enticing a lot of women, idiot,” Lucca drawled.

“Wait, my parents before the past,” Hudson cut in. “What would you do then?”

I shrugged. “Has he asked to go to counseling? He has to show he’s willing to take the steps to fix this. What about making sure she’s set at my house? Sending her favorite foods to take care of his *mate* isn’t pushing. You’re thinking about us, but we weren’t even dating yet. That’s way different. Even Darby and I being engaged is different.

“I would be honest and ask if they can just talk, that I want to hear her out so I fully understand what she’s feeling. Have they even spoken since I meddled? I would think she wanted more answers than I gave her. Send flowers that he misses her

and her favorite food. Whatever she needs to feel comforted and still loved.”

“I’ll tell him,” Hudson said after a moment. “Thanks. Yeah, that’s—he’s just lost, and we can’t have that right now. Our family can’t. Not after what’s gone down and the council is out.”

“Agreed, but then his brother needs to step in for the moment.” I nodded when Hudson couldn’t hide his shock. “They are people before king and queen, beastie. Ask her on a vacation for just them, even a week, and work on their mating. He kept major shit from her and she bailed because that was more important than her. Time to show she is most important.”

“Why is it always so complicated?” he sighed, sounding a bit like he was blaming his mom.

“Because men are fucking stupid and don’t listen to the wise women around them.”

He snorted. “Glad you’re being neutral.”

“I’m not neutral. I know quite well how stupid the Vogel men can be. I’m a hundred percent on your mom’s side, and even I want to kick your dad in the nuts. He was—fuck, I know life is hard, but don’t make it more difficult by keeping promises to people who are dead over the living.”

I stuck my tongue out at him after the jab about Vogel men and swam over to Lucca.

“Shit, I have fantasies that start like this,” he said, pushing to sit up more.

“So do I,” Julian and Darby agreed.

I flipped onto my back and pointed at Darby. “I’ve been here waiting for any damn fantasy you wanted. I can’t even remember the last time we’ve had sex. Can you?” I felt *extremely* vindicated when he opened his mouth but then closed it a few times.

And bummed out. Sex with Darby was amazing, and I wanted it always on my schedule.

Stupid men.

“Well, we can’t have your needs neglected,” Lucca said before snagging me around the waist in an impressive move since I’d still been about ten feet from him. Or maybe not.

He turned me around and mashed his mouth to mine as he sat down on the middle stair and had me on his lap.

I pulled away when he moved his hand up my thigh. “Wait, stolen pecks isn’t—”

“We’re still just friends, cream puff,” he murmured as he brushed his lips over mine. “We’re simply going to be friends who mess around now too. If you want. I would never push you on that.”

I wanted to ask since when given all he’d done was push, but not since I’d really ended things. Fine, he was pushy about sneaking kisses and calling me cream puff, but not really.

Either way, I wanted what he offered, leaning in so his hand moved up my thigh. And then he pushed his finger inside of me, smirking when I gasped and whimpered.

“Shit, you have been neglected,” he moaned. “One finger and you’re gripping me so tight.”

“Your fingers are huge,” I argued.

“Not that big,” he snickered, kissing along my neck... As other lips kissed the other side.

Hudson. Apparently, he was done relaxing and wanted in on the fun. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I agreed, wanting it too. It would be a while before I was okay with having sex with him again, but I wanted him. I would always want Hudson.

He pushed one of his fingers inside of me as well while leaning me back against his massive chest. He kept kissing my neck as his other hand played with my breast.

“Barrier,” Julian said. “Food and drink are here.”

Fine by me. I threw up a barrier and kissed Lucca with all that I had. He moaned and shoved his finger in me deeper, the difference between what he and Hudson were doing setting me off. I whimpered as I came, wanting more and more.

Except I was exhausted and needed fuel.

I slumped against him and mumbled I was tired. Once we were alone again, I took down the barrier and they hurried to get me more food before I fell asleep.

And then I woke up the next morning with my period. I smacked Darby several times as his wakeup, ranting that now I really couldn't get sex and he was a stupid dummyhead.

Yes, that really was what I called my fiancé.

I would be forever embarrassed at that, but I was pissed. And horny but now out of commission.

However, I did feel better knowing some of the day before had been PMS. Not the fainting, that was stress, but every woman knew they stressed easier when their body was all over. Plus, that would make me cry easier.

Oh, and female fairies took PMS eating to the extreme. Even I knew when Shael and Stefanie were about to start their periods because they became extreme garbage disposals.

And it didn't get better during our period. As long as we ate and ate, we didn't get many cramps though which was nice. There were also runes for upset stomachs and backaches so yeah, that was positive of being a fairy.

A couple of days later, I was still salty with Darby. He found it amusing but was very careful to not let me know. Dick.

Not that I could have that for a few more days. Jackass.

I informed Hudson I was going to cleanse at Faerie while the harvest was going on so I could help. Granted, I had just thrown that out for the ears at the party and I had said the next weekend, but I wanted to do it now. He could come or not.

Julian did though. He got word of it and said he wanted to work with me and get a better idea of the cleansing I needed. I hadn't wanted him to come and it be about magic then, but he pulled me off to the side and away from ears.

"Lageos asked me to," he whispered. "Yes, I want to be with you in everything you do, and I found the way you cleanse fascinating, but after Lageos keeps hearing how you block people—you can't block me anymore. He asked—well, ordered—me to go with you next time and learn how this works without him hovering."

Because Lageos wouldn't always be there to do it himself. Tears filled my eyes and I nodded, knowing it was smart.

Damn period. I *hated* when people blamed everything on that or hormones, but it really was true. Yes, I teared up all on

my own thinking about how I would lose my father soon, but I wanted to sob right then, and that wasn't my normal reaction.

Other times on my period, I barely blinked different. This one was just hitting me harder. It was like I wasn't a robot and the program didn't run the same each time.

I woke two hundred fairies and left with my detail for others to handle the aftermath. I stopped into one of the rest stops and the hobgoblins were all about feeding me a massive breakfast. I listened to several of them about how things were going and their concerns.

I couldn't always hear it directly from the source, but it was nice when I got to. It also changed where I was going to be cleansing that day. I arrived at the largest fae wheat farm Theripolis had. The farming had all been restructured, and I'd worked a lot with this family to make that happen, so I knew them well. And I was honest.

"Too many people are helping wake fairies and are extra hungry because of that and without the funds to buy food," I told the eldest of the family. "The rest stops are packed and they're almost out of basics."

"I would love to help more, but we are doing extra harvests to—"

"I know and you've been great," I cut in before gesturing to the already-harvested field behind me. "If I regrow this now, can you harvest it in four days when it dries? Say split that with the rest stops and have extra to sell then too?"

He blinked behind me at the *vast* harvested field. "Princess, you woke fairies this morning, right? Please do not

hurt yourself using so much more magic.”

“I got this,” I promised. “Can you harvest it?”

“I’ll talk to Commander Taeral and get help out here if you need it,” Rafe offered since he was on my detail.

The farmer said they might need a couple, but they could put in the extra hours for as much as they ate at the rest stop too.

“We need more food with everyone waking,” I told Hudson in the way of greeting. “Work with Shael and tell your parents that can be their gift to us to help heal our planet. You have chefs that can help make meals—all of the royals do, but your mom can spearhead it.”

And she would have to talk to his dad.

He caught on immediately and gave me a heated kiss before promising to be right back. He had to leave Faerie to make the call, and I yelled after him to bring more food because I was starving.

“You’re always hungry, shorty.”

I didn’t know what he meant until several Rothchilds set down paper totes loaded with food. Apparently, all specially made by his chefs for me at Hudson’s request.

“Aww, the stupid dragon does love me,” I cooed. I shrugged when Julian burst out laughing. I opened the first bag and moaned when I found it filled with dragon donuts. “Okay, so I don’t pay attention much during this, so let’s move and start at the end and I can just wander.”

“Fair enough,” Julian agreed and gathered the bags with my detail.

I definitely got my steps in that morning. I stuffed my face and walked down a long strip of the field and regrew the wheat.

The creepy part of that?

The seeds hadn't been planted. The fields had just been harvested and there were the bottoms to dig up and... Do farming things with. But the field hadn't been replanted. My magic just did whatever and fully grown, *huge* wheat stalks were there.

I cleansed and ate, and every so often I felt Julian's magic brush mine or Hudson turned me a different direction. It was almost amusing to think of the two of them herding me around like a toddler learning to walk and the parents worried about them tripping.

They seemed to find it amusing as well.

“Okay, take a break and really fuel,” Julian said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I glanced around and saw that one whole field was done. “How long?”

“About an hour,” Julian muttered as he touched my face and his magic ran over me. “How do you feel? You feel tired. Are you all cleansed?”

I snorted and reached out with my magic for his. I sort of held his hand and led him to where I felt the need to cleanse... But all magically.

Yes, that felt as weird as it sounded.

“I don’t really understand it,” I told him when he opened his mouth. “It sort of feels like when the top of your head is about to pop off from stress, but my magic feels that. And no, I’m not good at telling when it’s happening either. More like I’m extra exhausted or stressed and kinda wonder if that is what’s going on.”

“So complicated, got it,” he muttered and closed his eyes. They popped open when I let out a giggle.

I cleared my throat and looked away. “It felt like you were tickling me, my magic. I don’t know, it just came out.”

“That’s a new one even for me,” he chuckled before going back to looking over what he wanted. “From what I’m seeing, you still need a lot of cleansing. You weren’t doing it very often and for months. Yes?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “There’s a lot on the plate.”

“I wasn’t judging. When was the last time?” He nodded when I winced. “My arboretum. Got it. Okay, well now I know, and I’ll be the boss of your cleansing and check in.”

I almost snapped that he would bail on that like everything else, but honestly it had been over a year of him focused on me constantly. Even if he missed the mark trying to win me back, he *always* had me in his view.

I didn’t think I could snap at him validly anymore.

Right, because emotions were ever all that valid.

I accepted it though and sat down for food... And inhaled it all.

“I’m still hungry,” I grumbled. I glanced over and was glad it was one of my regular detail teams with *one* trade out. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. “Wyn, your choice but get lots. Take the newbie to hold and not talk.”

“Fried chicken?” he checked, beaming at me as he took my debit card.

“You’re seriously addicted,” I chuckled. “You’re going to start clucking.”

He shrugged it off. “I’ve done stranger things.”

Rafe told him a different area to meet up with us. The captain answered my unasked question once Wyn and the newbie were off. “I informed Taeral it was a big cleansing day. He has other places lined up with the same deal. He spoke to a few more rest stops and got a list of what they need. The good news is it’s fruit.”

Nice. Really. People were always willing to help harvest fruit. It had become an after-dinner time thing even. It wasn’t a stroll to help digestion but picking fruit that was the freshest and healthiest dessert ever. No one cared if the volunteer helpers helped themselves to fruit which was also nice.

I went to a *massive* grove in the dark realm and got started, happy when the chicken arrived. I ate and ate and someone else went to go get tacos. Irma found us and brought over more food and I kept eating.

I honestly ate so much my damn jaw hurt.

And my feet, which was weird given how much I ran and worked out. Then again, super slow walking was more like

standing almost and I didn't stretch or spread out the stress on the area.

Plus, apparently, I'd done it for four hours without sitting. I didn't know that until I whined about my feet. Julian said I just kept reaching for food, but now he knew to force me to stop.

I let out a heavy sigh and went to let out one last shot to get the rest of the grove so I could rest... Except things rarely went to plan and it wasn't a shot but a fucking nuke of power.

I felt it like an explosion come out of me, my wings popping out and shredding the shirt I was wearing. I blinked out at the huge fields across the road and watched as my magic grew everything like a wave of people standing at a sporting event.

"Well, shit," I sighed.

"Nope, they were next on the list so... Good job?" Rafe offered, staring out at the crazy and clearly not processing what he was seeing either.

"Your magic just hit a new level," Julian muttered as he fussed over me. "Apparently, cleansing does that. I need to speak to Lageos."

I nodded but grabbed his arm. "Don't push if he doesn't know. He doesn't remember thousands and thousands of years ago vividly. Plus, he gets—his misses his siblings. Badly."

He leaned in and kissed my hair, promising he'd keep it casual and it was fine if he didn't know. Julian liked answers and not unknowns, so I knew he was lying, but all of it was weird to me, so I didn't stress over that.

And I'd long since learned to tune everyone out when they worried about me doing new things. Half of the time they really didn't have the answers after all. I mean, the prime example was the doctor at Artemis who had hidden so much about my power being stunted and me burning out only for none of it to be true.

For me at least.

Word got around about what happened because a portal opened and five of the commanders came through it with worried expressions on their faces.

"Aren't we over this shtick?" I drawled.

"You need to be checked by the healers, Your Highness," Shael worried.

I leaned my forearms on my thighs and let my head drop, groaning that I was back in this situation with these fools. I let them talk for a bit and then lifted my head, telling them to shut it.

"This isn't how you want things to be," Julian said gently. "So tell them how it will be, Tams."

"I do and they don't listen," I grumbled.

He moved and squatted in front of me so I met his gaze. "You tell them to cut it out. I've heard you, but you need to give them an alternative like you did with Dalyor and training. You can't just cut out a step they're used to without replacing it."

"You're pretty smart sometimes," I teased, leaning in and kissing his cheek. I met the gazes of the commanders. "Fine, name Calarel my super supreme healer. She's like the personal

physician to the president then. If you have concerns, you can discuss them with her, and as my doctor she will decide.

“However, you will not order her around. If you bully that sweet woman, I will tell Lageos to deck you with magic every day for a year. She’s not under you and reports directly to *me*. So you can go tell her about this, and if it’s her professional opinion to check me out, I’ll allow it and *never* hide anything from her again. But you have to play fair too.”

“That sounds amazing, Your Highness, yes,” Shael agreed... For all of the commanders. “I will inform the rest of the new procedure and speak to Calarel right now.” She opened a portal and walked right through it.

“Awesome, then I want a nap,” I muttered.

“It’s a lovely afternoon to have one in the beauty of Faerie,” Morgan agreed, doing a double take when I shot him a look of horror. “I apologize, Your Highness, I wasn’t thinking. Well, I was, and napping in the sun of Faerie is one of my favorite simple past times.”

Fair enough and I said as much.

Instead, I napped in the sun in a bikini in the world that was my home. I wasn’t surprised when Calarel was there when I woke up. “Did they bully you?”

“Nope, they didn’t even push me because they knew my answer.” She shrugged when I sighed. “Anytime you do something new *for you* I would recommend seeing a healer. Is it overkill? Yes, but you are also the only fairy born of a demigod. Any heir and queen has these hoops as well. We need your magic and body to be in the best shape possible.”

I let her check me out and then Julian spoke with her a bit about my cleansing. He asked me first, and I allowed it because she should know how it worked... Even if I didn't always. It was a lot of guessing and assuming which wasn't a line most fairies or people liked.

Me neither, but it was a lot of how life went.

I ate more than I would have thought physically possible to stuff into one body before we hit the next fields Taeral had lined up. There were a few more after dinner, and then I had a list of one a day for the next few weeks.

Well, my detail did. I didn't know where most of the places were or specifics, so they were in charge of that so we didn't get lost.

Darby woke me at two in the morning to climb into bed with me, but I told him to go sleep on the couch. He couldn't hide his shock, but I was tired of him coming in that late. It was upsetting me and I was done pretending it was fine.

Plus, it always woke me up and I needed way more sleep than him. I charged him up when I woke and went for a run before handling what I needed to with waking fairies and then cleansing. I realized there was something I wanted to do and something to handle while I was there. I talked to Irma before going back to the resort to shower and change.

Everything was ready by the time I was done and I went back to get it.

And then I went to Geiger's firm with lunch for Darby. I wanted to make sure he understood I was supporting him

when I told him to slow down or take breaks. It wasn't me being selfish and demanding all of his time.

Far from it.

People were shocked to see me, but someone guided me to where the interns worked. I thanked them and moved into the bigger room with cubicles... Just in time to see some woman lean all over Darby's back as he focused on something on his monitor.

I quietly walked right up to them, both of them talking softly about whatever they were looking over and completely lost in their world. I dropped the bag of lunch I'd brought for him on the desk and both of them jumped in surprise.

I gave him a hard look before focusing on the woman who still had her hand on Darby's shoulder. I stared at the hand until she removed it, but it took her a bit which made steam about come out of my ears.

"What are you doing here, Tams?" he asked, glancing between me and the woman I was staring down.

"This is fun," I chuckled darkly.

"Were you all raised in a barn?" a voice bellowed behind me. I turned to see Claudia looking horrified and shooting daggers with her eyes. "She is the future queen of Faerie. She is their ruler. Why the hell are none of you behaving like you should be?"

People jumped up from their seats all around us and bowed.

I shot Claudia an amused look. "Can you make everyone do that? You wouldn't believe how rarely anyone calls people

out on that.”

She bowed deeply to me before raising her head. “I wish I had that magic, Your Highness, but I don’t. However, I can fire any of these idiots at any moment. They represent this firm and need to always remember that.”

“Oh, well, I walked in on this one sexually harassing my fiancé,” I snitched, nodding when Claudia went pale.

“Wait, I did no such thing,” the woman argued, slapping on a “Your Highness” at whatever was on Claudia’s expression.

I was already looking at her though and raised an eyebrow. “You weren’t?” I looked at Darby. “So you asked for this woman to lean all over you? Lean over you with her hands on your shoulders?”

“No, of course not,” he muttered, pushing his chair back and standing as well now that he’d gotten over his initial shock.

“Do you touch her like that?”

“Of course not, Tams!” he gasped, hurt filling his eyes.

I nodded, glancing over at Claudia. “Ask my security.” I pointed to the cameras I caught when I walked in. “Check those. At a minimum, that’s inappropriate workplace behavior. If a man did that to you or me, we would immediately call it sexual harassment. That doesn’t change because she’s a woman.”

“Darby and I are friends,” the woman cut in. “Respectfully, just because you’re jealous doesn’t make what I did inappropriate and certainly not sexual harassment.”

“Probably not on that last one because I doubt Darby told you to cut it out. He’s oblivious like that.” I shot Darby a very unamused amused look. “He shouldn’t be though. Enjoy your lunch, *agra*.” I didn’t wait for a response, turning and walking towards Claudia. “How have you been?”

“I’ll handle this,” she promised as she leaned down to hug me.

“It’s for him to report or not.” I shrugged like I didn’t care... But of course I did. On so many levels. “Irma made you lunch as well when I told her I set a meeting with you.”

“You have a whole world on your shoulders and still you remember to spoil your friends,” she said with a grin. We moved apart and she led the way to her office.

“How are you really?” I asked when we were alone and a barrier up.

One of the reasons I respected Claudia was she didn’t bullshit people or try to hide the truth from them. “I’m—nothing can bring my brother back, but I feel like he can be at peace now at least. It’s brought up a whole new layer of grieving though. Thank you, Tamsin. Truly.”

“I was glad to do it.” I studied her and decided to tell her something we weren’t telling most people. “Alec told me he regrets it and he wasn’t lying. He made the call and choices, but I feel damn good knowing he regrets it and the power ate him, not he enjoyed it.”

“I don’t know if that will help me or not, but thank you for telling me.” She cleared her throat and quickly wiped under

her eyes just in case. “Now, why did you make time to see me in your busy schedule?”

I swallowed a snort, annoyed I was taking time to help Darby after what I’d walked in on, but I let that go for the moment. “Is Darby the only poor intern you have?”

Her eyes flashed shock, probably at my bluntness, but then she nodded. “Yes, we have one from a more middle-class background, but Darby is the only one I would consider from a poor family or now he’s on his own.”

“And racking up a lot of credit card debt apparently.”

“And he won’t let you help with that.” She smiled when I snorted. “You didn’t even offer to cover your proud Irishman, of course not.” She cleared her throat and fidgeted with the bag. “Internships aren’t paid in our world, Tamsin. I’m sorry, but—”

“Don’t get nervous and say something rude,” I cut in, smiling to take the bite out of my words. “This isn’t about Darby. He’s the reason I learned this is the way things are. I get that’s the way things have been done, but we’re killing ourselves all the time to make things better. Just hear me out.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. I’m just not a partner.”

“No, but if I went to the partners, they would just throw money at Darby and not hear me.” I waited until she nodded. “I get this firm worked with a lot of wealthy families and of course that was the pool to pick promising interns from. However, I bet you could get even better ones if a few things changed. Who is the top intern you have?”

“Darby,” she answered without hesitation. And because Claudia was normally the smartest person in the room and caught on incredibly fast, she put the rest together before I even finished. “You’re saying we’re missing other gems like him because they can’t afford to take an unpaid internship.”

“They’ve found that repeatedly in the human world, yes. I understand the concept of an unpaid internship. He will be light-years in front of his classmates because of what he’s learned here. We both know it. You pay for the education of college, but you pay in hours to learn work experience like here.”

“Yes, and the partners believe in that. They’ve seen the results as well.”

“I agree.” I nodded when she shot me a hesitant look. “I absolutely agree, Claudia. However, there are always real-life exceptions we need to take into account. Exams can’t be missed, but people die and life happens. You want people to earn what you teach them and get a taste of how hard this life will be, but they have money in the bank and family to take care of them.

“So I’m not saying change the system, but be better than the current system and help those who can’t afford no pay. Give them a monthly stipend if they’ve qualified for financial aid at the colleges. Wouldn’t you think Darby was worth even five grand over the summer to help him live? He has to have earned that with how much he does over other interns.”

She snorted and then apologized. “Sorry, I was thinking I would personally give him that from my paycheck for all the

help he's given me. And you're right he is years ahead of the others here and what the students will be at law school."

"Unfortunately, he doesn't believe that," I sighed, nodding when her eyes went bug wide. "He's struggling with balance and all the eyes on him. He thinks he's going to embarrass me and another shot will be taken against him that he's not worthy of the heir to Faerie. I know he's killing himself to do good, but he's also doing it for me."

"I can help with that," she said after a moment. She shook her head when I asked what she meant. "It's something we do at the firm in these instances. I've got this. It's best you stay out of this part. I also agree with you on the stipend. We could have much better applicants next year if we offered living expenses. If people don't pull their weight, we toss them."

"Good to know."

"We've already tossed one from this year's interns." She snorted when I looked worried. "Tamsin, Darby is a rockstar. He's a better intern than I was. I'll talk to Geiger and we'll get him sorted out. I promise."

"Thank you, Claudia, really. I just didn't know how to help him, but I think this is bigger than him too like the messed up scholarship program Artemis had."

"Agreed, and you were right there too. Look how well that turned out because you plowed through the way things were done." She gave me a kind smile. "This will turn out the same as well."

I was 100% sure she meant the future queen of Faerie being engaged to a vampire by that statement and not giving

stipends. Claudia paid attention like that.

Too bad Darby didn't.

8

Darby didn't come back to the resort that night, so when I woke in the morning, I packed up my stuff and left.

And he didn't have anything there to worry about. He always went back home in the morning and used our bathroom and his closet there.

I didn't bother seeing if he had stayed there either, going to one of my other vacation homes and feeling as much of a spoiled brat as I was probably acting. I was valid in being upset, but I wasn't sure if I should be as much as I was, and I was damn sure I needed to apologize for making a scene at his job.

Probably big time. I just couldn't find it in me after he didn't come to where I was after it happened.

And didn't try to find me or text me the next day either.

Awesome. Really.

I was glad I had the distraction of the sword tournament the next day, but I was bummed I wasn't in all the rounds this year. Seriously, because I was brimming with aggression and the need to beat some ass.

Instead, I sat in the stands like a pretty, pretty princess and watched, politely clapping when people won.

All while Darby was probably flirting with his work wife or whatever the fuck that hoe was to him.

Fine, the competition wasn't much of a distraction. My mind was cooking up everything bad and spinning out.

"Seriously, just cut it out," Neldor muttered from next to me. "I practically see you spinning crazy ideas and thinking he's having a nooner with that woman. He's not. Darby is loyal and completely in love with you. He's just dense. We all are."

"Then why didn't he come to bed or contact me?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"I don't know, but if it was me, I would be worried you'd dump me." He shrugged when I looked at him and couldn't hide my shock. "You are *ridiculously* careful, Tams. I've always found that endearing. You make it clear all of the time where the line is and do your best to not land in tricky situations.

"Lucca and Hudson have said it many times how you ducked when Juan went to lean on you or be playful. You were involved with Hudson and Julian and you didn't want them to be upset. I've never seen you touch anyone haphazardly or allow the same."

"No, but sometimes that's because I was abused," I admitted. "I'm not normal with that kind of stuff either. Mel is very touchy-feely. Lots of people are."

"Then why are you so upset?"

"It was the place," I answered honestly. "Even if they were the best of friends, a competitive internship he fought

hard to get isn't the place for that. Not during normal work hours. I've seen him with his Artemis scholarship friends while they're studying. A few leaned all over him like that, but it's not during class with professors watching."

"And?"

"And she fucking saw me. I was standing there and she kept her hands on him possessively, so it wasn't innocent on her part. That's what pisses me off so much."

"Yeah, that would have gotten me to blow on it too."

"Oh fuck, I know I was the jerk when you say I was valid," I said with a groan. "You're a total hothead."

"See if I try to make you feel better again," he grumbled, shooting me a wink when I chuckled.

"Thanks, Neldor."

"I'm always here to help your relationship with the damn vampire it seems."

I don't know why I found that so funny, it really wasn't, but stress did weird things to us.

I decided to bring up something sensitive since it was just us sitting in the box seats and a barrier was up for protection. "I heard you're starting flying lessons soon."

"No, I'm not ready. I told them I need more time." He said it easily as if it was no big deal.

But he was fucking lying. His thoughts were begging me not to listen in.

"Don't do that. Don't do more of that—yes, you helped me by attending Artemis too, but you can't keep coming down

to my level.” I sighed when he snorted. “You know what I mean. Don’t do it this time. It could hurt you magically and—fucking do what’s best for you, Neldor. We’re not even together. You can’t risk yourself like that.”

“Lots of fairies don’t learn to fly until their magic is done ramping up,” he defended, not looking at me. “This has nothing to do with you.”

I adjusted my neck. “You know I’m a telepath, right?” I snickered when he shrugged. “Don’t fucking lie to me about it. At least respect me enough for that.”

He looked at me then, an edge in his gaze. “I respect you enough to try and save your feelings.”

“I don’t want that on this, not when I’m being frank with you. Don’t do this for me. I don’t want it this time. Yes, I was drowning, and you helped me by going to Artemis. I was in danger even from fairies wanting to pull shit. I appreciate what you did. I’m telling you that this time it’s stupid.”

“It’s not,” he snapped.

“Neldor, let people talk then,” I sighed, giving him a torn look because part of me wanted to strangle the stubborn ass and another part of me wanted to hug him. “Most accept it’s because I’m part demigod or whatever.” I rubbed my neck. “Besides, it’s about to get out that my magic is still jumping levels. It makes sense that I’m not training how to fly.”

He was quiet several moments. “Now who’s lying, baby doll?”

That was fair, but I ignored it and moved my hand to his arm. “Please, I want what’s best for you too. Please learn to

use your wings. Taeral was saying how you've always wanted to learn to fly and soar. He was worried that you would be upset that your dad isn't here to teach you and I get that, but Taeral was his friend. Let him help you when you need it."

"It is partly that," he admitted as he covered my hand with his. "I do need a bit of time. I just need... Fine, I won't hold off because I'm worried about whispers. I do think it's too fast with how I'm jumping crazy levels too."

"It's because you're a perfectionist and want all your ducks in a row so you never have to worry about anything. Life isn't like that and honestly, I think you should listen to what your dad would tell you. You know what he would want."

I jumped when people started clapping, pulling my hand back to do the same. Another fight had finished up and I hadn't paid attention to any of it.

All I really cared about was how much this was making for the havens. That and after the bracket winners fought the commanders I got to take on the finalist. At least I got to fight that day and people were willing to pay more for the chance to knock me on my ass.

Yeah, fine, whatever.

"Just don't be stupid, stupid," I told Neldor once the next fight started and people were focused on that.

"I'll keep that in mind," he drawled. "I'm not sure I can if I'm stupid." He snorted. "Seriously, you are so childish sometimes."

“It’s not being childish but not wanting to be overly harsh,” I defended. “You’re not being an asshole, you’re just being stupid. Just like the bear can be a stupid bear or the dragon a stupid dragon. It means I’m not mad, *mad* but like you’re a twit. You don’t deserve the cussing names.”

Neldor looked at me before bursting out laughing. He laughed so loudly that it actually echoed inside of the barrier.

And his fucking dimples were showing. Damn those things for being so damn sexy on the Prince of Darkness.

Neldor was a handsome man, no one could deny that. He was six feet of perfect male in any species, lean and toned muscle in a way that you could tell held strength. His longer black hair was being held back by two fairy braids that made me always want to take them out and mess up his hair.

But it was his light green eyes that always pulled me in. Everyone said Neldor was stoic and hard to read, but to me they weren’t really paying attention. I always knew what he was feeling and thinking just by his eyes.

Not to mention they were super pretty and the array of greens and tones he had were amazing. Maybe the budding artist in me noticed now that I’d learned a lot about paints and shades.

Or I was a woman sitting in front of a hot man I had feelings for.

Both? Probably both if I was honest.

He stopped laughing and his smile faded. “If you stare at me like that, Tams, I’m going to change the barrier to a glamour and pull you on my lap.”

Whoa. Like whoa. I immediately looked away and then reached over to my bag to grab my tablet. “Okay, let’s talk work then, Mr. Horny.”

“You have no idea,” he grumbled under his breath.

Except I heard him. Wow.

We worked on ideas for the fall collection for our company based on what the co-op had already done. I had modeled all of the clothes, so I could say what was most comfortable or got the best reception. Apparently, he’d worn everything the co-op had ever made for men, so he was up to speed as well.

That was something I valued about Neldor, not just as a business partner, but a friend. He *always* put in the work. He never half-assed anything or assumed he already knew enough. He was dedicated and wanted to be knowledgeable on anything he had to decide.

I felt the same, so I always respected that. Truly I did.

It turned out he’d scoped out some failing resorts that Cherrywood could possibly buy and refurbish instead of taking over land where we would have to tear up nature. I loved the idea and looked over the printouts he had of the properties.

It was hard not to laugh that he’d printed it all out... Except it wasn’t funny because he was still set in the old-school mindset because of what had happened to all of Faerie. I had to remind myself of that all of the time and not tease people.

I wasn’t perfect though and sometimes forgot.

I was pleased with what he found and looked them up on my tablet, sending things to Geiger and the dragon royals to get their feedback as well.

Then we moved on to the bakery. He wasn't an owner, but he had more business experience than I did, and I never turned away good help.

Next, we moved on to the carpet cleaning company which we did own with others. That was going ridiculously well and people abuzz on social media about the job quality and what we were selling pulled out from landfills. That was the one to focus on for sure because everyone hated how much was in landfills or the local dump.

Plus, we weren't selling them for high prices. It was the littlest bit of magic to do, but we still had the videos and more going for show.

Someone suggested car detailing, but the owners of cars liked to watch that and it could lead to problems. Or accusations that we were switching parts when we took the vehicles in back, so Neldor and I agreed not to branch out. We could always open more rug cleaner shops.

I showed him the numbers for the gelato company and he couldn't hide his shock. Yeah, we were selling huge even with pumping up the production. Yes, it was summer, and that made everyone think frozen treats, but also it was so damn good and made people feel good since it was fae produce.

He had some ideas of how to pick up the pace with production again but not until we had food covered for Faerie. The dragon royals were on board with their chefs helping, but

we were still lower than I liked when so many people were using their magic to help others.

I was about to text Sasha, asking her what she thought we could do, when Shael came into the box with us.

“People are asking what you are doing on your cute date up here,” she informed us. “The announcers are even talking about it more than the fights.”

I blinked at her a moment and then burst out laughing, Neldor right behind me.

“So clearly it was work,” she drawled.

“So much work my eyes are about to fall out at the numbers,” Neldor said as he recovered first. He reached over and tapped my phone. “I’ll tell the announcers and handle it while getting us food. You keep going with where your head was.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I shot Shael another amused look before hurrying to text Sasha.

“I didn’t say I thought it was a date,” Shael defended.

Fair enough.

She sat and gave me updates while Neldor was gone, but then he came back with a ton of food and we dug right in. The fights were going fast, but there were a ton of them, so we had a second lunch as well before we even got to those battling the commanders.

Then it was the commanders against each other since none of the contestants had beaten them.

They better not.

“So they had beef recently,” Neldor muttered as Onas fought dirty with Iolas. It was within the rules but yeah, it was a bit dirty.

Just like how I fought.

I swallowed a chuckle at Neldor saying “had beef” as he got updated on slang. Sometimes the fairies were fucking hysterical with that but again, the reason they had to be updated on the world made the mood die. Hard.

“Don’t they always?” I drawled. “Onas is a huge pain in the ass.”

“And probably who you’ll end up fighting,” he worried.

I shrugged. “If I get beat, I get beat. I never cared about it as much as the rest of you. I’ve been training with swords for not even four years. He’s trained for a couple hundred years? Yeah, I’m fine with it.”

“Sure you are,” he purred. “That’s why you never tap out.”

“Hey, I never said I’d give up. I fight until I’m out of fight. Always. But it’s never about pride.” I shrugged. What else was there really to say?

I headed down and took off my Guardian uniform so I was in sparring clothes and stretched. I was super tight in a few places, and it made me realize I couldn’t remember the last time I’d picked up a sword.

Okay, so I’d been a bit lazy with training and I was regretting that. I needed to get back to it and I would. Sometimes getting my ass handed to me was the biggest motivator out there.

And given no one seemed to care about my training anymore now that Neldor had gotten his wings and he was *their* prince, I couldn't imagine why I had slacked off. Fine, I was being a brat.

It happened.

Sure enough, Onas won against the rest and I was facing him.

Which several of the commanders took issue with and promised retribution for from the looks they were giving him. Oh boy.

"It's fine, especially since you all put on kid gloves when we fight. People paid for all out and Onas will go all out," I cut in.

And did he ever. He came at me hard, and I was seriously regretting not training.

"Are you rethinking being lazy now?" he taunted when I jumped away.

I narrowed my eyes at him, not happy he said that when the mics picked up everything for the livestream. "Fine, I'll train harder and you go wake fairies. Oh, right, you can't so shut your face."

Anger filled his eyes as he stormed towards me again. "I take that into account. You've been bratty and not training like you should."

"You're not even involved in that aspect of my life because you get way too involved," I threw right back as I blocked his next attack. I fought dirty and kicked at his knee as I swung and landed a good hit.

Again, not against the rules, but considered dirty fighting.

“You didn’t have to fight dirty last time.”

“You piss me off, and I always fight however I need to. Don’t worry about me and focus on yourself.” The words were barely out of my mouth and he tried to make me regret taunting him, coming at me hard and harder.

Shit.

I was gasping after another few minutes, but at least he was too. It was do-or-die time because I had like nothing left in the tank and my arms were weak from his hits. I raced towards him, throwing him off from the way I’d been fighting, and when he raised up to block, I went low, sliding into the splits and pointing my sword up to his neck. “Boo.”

He bared his teeth at me but tossed his sword away. “You’re better than that.”

“Don’t tell me what I am,” I snapped as I lowered my sword.

“It’s my job to be honest with you and you need to train more. Less late-night swims and more training is exactly what you need.”

I snorted as I rolled to my feet. “You’re just jealous that you won’t *ever* be invited to those swims, asshole.”

Yes, yes he was. It was in his eyes thick enough that I could almost reach out and touch it. His obsession with having me was as strong as ever.

And creepy. He was an intense guy but too much for me. No thanks. Being sexy did *not* forgive everything else. No

way.

“Yeah, well, I heard you fell asleep on them, so clearly they weren’t all that great either. Plus, I doubt one will stick around after you show him what’s in the crates you’re hiding.” He smirked when I flinched.

“You’re wrong.”

“I don’t think I am.”

I dropped my sword and stormed over to him, using my magic as part of my fist like Lageos had taught me and decking Onas in the face. “Don’t talk to me about my relationships when just about every woman I’ve met says your hot but off your rocker so they won’t touch you. You’ve got no room to talk about my life when you have *zero* relationships.”

Stefanie came racing towards us, but I used magic to freeze her and the other commanders I saw coming.

“It’s fine,” I told them as I backed away from Onas. “Let it go. We’re sparring and it happens.” I pulled back my magic and they started to argue. “I’m just Tamsin when I’m sparring and he’s just Onas.” Still, he had gone over the line with the event being livestreamed, so I did what I did best.

Be a shit.

I opened a portal under Onas and sent him to the ocean. “There, now he can cool off.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Stefanie sighed, looking at where Onas had been and shaking her head. “Idiot.”

“Yes, but he’s *our* idiot,” I said with fake sweetness. I wasn’t the only one who laughed then, so that was something.

Plus, the money we'd made for the havens was worth Onas and his shots. Mostly.

9

Darby was waiting for me when I arrived back at my family vacation home in the mountains I had ended up at. I froze when I saw him sitting there clearly waiting for me.

“If this is going to be a fight, I just had shit with Onas and I’m steaming from it so your choice,” I said as I dropped all of my stuff off on the counter. I took off my uniform and tossed it in a hamper bag so the hobgoblins could wash it however they needed to.

Apparently, they couldn’t just be tossed into a washing machine. I’d made that mistake the first time. Whoops.

He didn’t say anything as I moved around, and I took that as... I wasn’t sure, but mostly he wasn’t going to talk to me then.

I bit my lip to keep from saying something shitty and opened the front door handing my card out to Rafe. “Dealer’s choice.”

“I think I want whatever puts you in a better mood right now, Your Highness,” he hedged as he took the card. “And is Darby having food too?”

“I have no clue. He hasn’t spoken yet,” I replied before closing the door. I didn’t want my security getting involved.

“I’m sorry,” Darby blurted just as I was about to leave the main area. “Tams, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I have a problem believing that when it took you this long to come find me after you didn’t come home that night.” I held up my hand to him. “But I’m going to go shower and try to change my mood because it’s not fair to you. Your choice if you want to stick around or get food.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, taking a long shower to calm down and then flipping the temperature to freezing cold so I hopefully chilled out. I wasn’t sure, but I did seem to burn through my adrenaline from dealing with Onas.

I arrived back to the kitchen in a robe and my hair wrapped up to find food coming in.

“The hobgoblins said they’re not feeding Onas again,” Rafe informed me. Nodding when I snickered. “I thought that would make your night.”

“I expected as much, so I don’t think that’s enough to make my night,” I drawled. I waved him and the other fairies to leave when they were looking like they might stay. They could eat outside just fine and they were being nosy.

Like always.

“Are you okay from what Onas did?” Darby asked hesitantly as he started opening containers.

“They told you?” I asked as I took the first one he offered me.

“No, I watched the livestream.” He swore when I dropped the container in surprise. “Okay, I really am an asshole if you’re so feckin’ shocked.”

“No, it’s just...” There really wasn’t anything good to say to that. I waved him off trying to handle the container. Rafe ordered the huge tacos we liked and there were two in the container. I now had a taco salad with shell pieces. Whatever. “So you caught the end?”

He cleared his throat. “No, the whole thing. I was told I needed to take the weekend off.”

“I didn’t do that,” I blurted.

He gave me a soft smile. “I know. Apparently, someone was fucking with the poor intern engaged to the richest woman in our world and mucked with my timesheets.”

“I wondered about that,” I admitted, shrugging when he shot me a confused look. “There are laws about allowing people to work too much. There are caps, especially for unpaid interns. I wanted to bring that up, but I thought you would smack me.”

He gave me a horrified look. “I would *never*—”

“Of course, you wouldn’t,” I cut in. “I meant figuratively or whatever.”

“But you did talk to Claudia,” he stated, not bothering to ask me.

“Yes, it was about you but also—I’m the only paying client they have now. Me and my companies. I don’t like the system they have if you’re fucking racking up credit card debt and killing yourself. That’s not okay.”

“The partners agree, but when Claudia got the ammo to make her case, she looked at my timesheets and laughed because she knew she saw me at the office at times my sheets

said I was off. So she asked me for mine—knowing I took copies before I turned them in—and she immediately pulled me into her office for a chat.”

“About your hours.”

“And other things.” He sighed when I stabbed my food harder than needed. “I’m trying to get this all straight in my head. I’m not—I’m not mad at you. You did nothing wrong.”

“No, I did,” I sighed. “I shouldn’t have started a fuss and used my relationship with Claudia or my position to make it a big thing. I would be pissed if you’d done that to me.”

“Except you wouldn’t ever have allowed yourself to be put in that situation,” he argued, nodding when I couldn’t hide my hesitation. “Tams, you’re careful. You’re so careful you watch how Neldor touches you around others and you’re mates.

“The only time I’ve seen a man touch you when you didn’t immediately remove yourself from the situation or beat his ass is when that photographer was trying to get certain shots and he moved you into position. And that was only because you weren’t understanding what he was doing and we all know he’s gay and has a partner. Still, you were careful.”

“I don’t like giving you guys any reason to get upset or think something that’s not true. We have too much going on already,” I muttered, glad they all noticed I did that though. I winced at how pointed my comment was.

“You’re right and I thought you were overreacting. I thought you were pissed at me for being a neglectful and

inattentive dick and jumped all over something innocent. I really did.”

“I’m not sure that sounds like me,” I grumbled.

“No, but we all mess up, and things between us have been tense. I haven’t been spending time with you and I have with her for work so—I could see it. It seemed cliché, but I get jealous all the fucking time, and I thought that was what it was. I did. That was why I didn’t come home because I was pissed you let it leak into my internship.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Two of the other guys came up to me and said to tell you thank you because she makes them uncomfortable and they were glad you called her out on her shit. That she’s from a powerful family and they didn’t feel like they could say anything but they were really grateful you did.”

I blinked at him for like a full minute. “I did not see that coming.”

“Me neither, and it made me realize I wanted to see that camera angle you’d pointed to.”

“And?” I asked when he hesitated.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he hedged, hurrying on when I felt steam practically come out of my ears. “*However*, I would have not been happy if I’d seen the reverse when I came to visit you. If Rafe or Dalyor were leaning on you like that, that close over work when not your friend outside of work, I would absolutely have been upset.

“So I got that, I did. But then I saw she kept her hand on me in a challenge of you almost and it pissed me off. No one

disrespects you like that. I talked to those guys again and a few others who sit around me, and apparently she did that all of the time.

“Enough that they were talking about it and wondering if we were okay. And that is not okay—ever. My actions cannot ever allow people to gossip and whisper shit like that. So I was wrong. I was 100% wrong and didn’t realize it and for that, I’m sorry. I really, really am.”

“But?” I hedged.

He shook his head. “No but. *Additionally*, you’re right I was working too much. I didn’t realize how bad I was until Claudia laid it out. The next intern is working like twenty hours less than me a week and most thirty.” He let out a slow breath. “I got worked up and it’s a bit hazy. In my mind I was—I’m the first scholarship student to get that internship, Tams.”

“I know, and that’s why I went to battle. Did Claudia tell you?”

“Stipends and you’re right and not just because it’s me,” he muttered, rubbing his head.

I felt like an asshole, realizing what was going on. I stood and leaned towards him... Except he moved away.

“No, no more charging me up,” he blurted.

I reacted like he slapped me. “Sorry.”

“No, you shouldn’t feel sorry. You have—you’re awesome, Tams.”

“I’m just not *agra* to you anymore,” I whispered, feeling déjà vu in a way that hurt. I blinked at my food and watched a tear fall before dropping my napkin and heading to my room.

He caught me before I could close the door, and I stopped, not willing to hurt him, so he got inside. “You are my *agra*. Of course, you are. I just didn’t want—I hate guys who use love to apologize. I didn’t want to call you that when you’re upset with me. I’m sorry, *agra*. I love you, *agra*. Please don’t cry. I’m so sorry. Let me explain.”

He hugged me when I tried to pull away, saying he wasn’t going to let me go.

I caved and he picked me up, muttering I needed to eat and carrying me back to the kitchen. Fine, I could be bribed with good food.

“I didn’t realize how far I was going because you are amazing and take care of me,” he confessed. “Yes, I’ve been exhausted, but I didn’t—it didn’t seem as bad.”

I understood what he was saying but also thought he was an idiot. “Did clocks not work around you?”

“I deserve that,” he sighed. “I do, and I won’t work any more weekends. Maybe I’ll bring something home if I need to study, but the weekends are for us. Plus, being better when you have events. I promise.”

I waited for more... But it didn’t come.

“You stupid vampire,” I rasped when at least five minutes had passed of silence. I couldn’t even eat, my stomach turned sour so fast. “Work all you want. I don’t care anymore.”

“What? Why?” he whispered, worry filling his eyes.
“What did I say wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s what you didn’t say.” I stood and was about to maybe lay into him or say something so I could get out of there, but I didn’t get a chance to.

Rafe and two others came barging in the front door. “Your Highness, you’re needed to—”

“Prince Neldor is trying to kill Commander Onas,” one of the other guys blurted at the same time.

I stared up at the ceiling and asked for patience. “The men in my life just always try to break me.” I looked at Rafe. “Where? Here or Faerie?”

“Here,” Rafe sighed.

I nodded and glanced at Darby. “Don’t stop working at your unpaid internship because you might lose me, you stupid vampire. Go work all you want until you croak for all I care.”

“Wait, I don’t get what I said wrong?” he worried as he grabbed my arm. He winced when I yanked it away, probably hurting his hand in the process.

“When did you say you *missed me*, dumbass? Did you say you missed spending time with me, or is this just because I’m upset? I include you in *everything* because I love you and love spending time with you. When do you do that for me? You didn’t even want me at your job to drop off lunch. Don’t you get that what you *didn’t* say is the part that’s killing me?”

I didn’t wait for an answer, teleporting to Neldor and finding him beating the living shit out of Onas. I wrapped my magic around each of them and flung them into walls on

opposite sides of the hotel. I found Taeral in the group and raised an eyebrow, asking without words what the fuck was going on.

“Neldor had some choice words for Onas and how he treated you earlier today,” he explained, smirking like he was proud of Neldor.

Except I was pissed. Like *super* pissed.

I let go of Onas with my magic and even healed him from where I stood, people gasping as they saw what I did. I turned to Neldor and didn't hide how pissed I was.

“I'm not *yours* to defend, dipshit. This will be exactly the sort of thing people latch onto and talk more that you're the boss of me. I reprimanded Onas for what he said about *me*. I handled it, and I told everyone it was done. Now you're getting involved like you have a right to? You don't.”

“I'm your mate,” he argued. “Whether we're together or not doesn't change that.”

“It does *to me*,” I bellowed. “I am mine. I don't give a fuck if the gods, Faerie, or aliens promised me to you. The only person who gives access to me is *me*. So unless you're in my bed every mother fucking night because I allow you to be there, you don't have a fucking right to insert yourself into my shit.

“You want to throw down about how people speak to royals, fine, that involves you and even protects the kids you have later. I was fine with that. I would have done the same as your friend. But this was about *me* and Onas being obsessed

with fucking me. You are *not* fucking me, so you don't have any skin in that game nor are involved. Do you get it now?"

"He shouldn't disparage our future queen as he did," he argued.

"Lie to me that this was about me being queen one day and not you acting like the man in my life when you're not and I swear to fuck I will peel the skin off your body and never speak to you again," I threatened.

He swallowed loudly, getting there was more going on than just this. "I'm sorry."

"Fine, we all fuck up. Leave Onas alone and go cool off."

And then I sent him to the ocean as I had more times than I could count now. I glanced around at the shocked room. "I said it was done. Fucking listen to me or realize *you* are the ones disrespecting me by not following what I say. I won't be a princess or queen just in name so pull your heads out of your asses."

Again, I didn't wait for an answer, deciding to handle what else was bothering me before having a good cry. I showed up to where Julian was and found him reading his phone.

"Can we talk?" I whispered, trying not to startle him.

He jumped to his feet and looked guilty.

I let out a dark chuckle. "What, are you sending dick pics to women or something? That would just be the absolute perfect ending to my fucked day and all the men in my life being so stupid."

“No, of course I wasn’t,” he said, his eyes going bug wide. He immediately extended his hand and tried to give me his phone. “Darby texted me about you and him being a duffer. I was—I felt bad that you would think I was taking his side, but I haven’t read it all yet.”

I snorted. “There’s not much to it. He’s going to work less because he’s exhausted and he doesn’t want me to leave him. He didn’t ever say he likes spending time with me more than work or he misses me. It’s been almost two months now that we’ve barely spent any time together, me desperately missing him, and he doesn’t miss me it seems. Another one is just slipping away.”

“That’s not true.” He studied me and frowned. “Why are you looking at me with grief? What’s happened with us?”

“Onas took—”

“He’s a git.”

“Yes, but he’s not wrong,” I admitted. “You might end things with me when you see what I have in hidden crates and I think I’ve known that and I did eventually want you back or I would have already shown you. I would have run if it was reversed. I said I wanted you to leave me alone, but I didn’t play the card I knew would end us forever.”

“Unless you have trophies of my executed family members in those crates, I can’t think of a single thing you could show me that would make me end things, my sweet fairy,” he said gently, looking like he worried I might break right in front of him.

I felt like I might.

He stuck his phone in his pocket and then held out his empty hand to me. “Show me. I promise it will be fine. I’m that in love with you. Trust me this once, okay?”

I didn’t know what to say, but I needed this to be over in my head as well, so I took his hand and brought him to my studio.

He glanced around and recognized the place from my livestreams or maybe pictures he’d seen on social media. He did a double take and scrunched up his eyebrows at me. “Paintings? You have your valuable paintings in crates?”

“I would never sell these ones,” I defended.

Then it really hit him. He came closer and cupped my face with his large, warm hand. “Tams, I saw that video. I know you’ve painted me and your pain. Onas is stupid if he wanted to throw that in your face. I’ve seen them all.”

I swallowed loudly. “You really didn’t. Not even close.”

“Show me?”

I nodded and then turned towards the back staircase... But I couldn’t make my feet move. “I don’t know I can.”

“You can. We can handle this.”

“I can’t,” I whispered, shaking and my wings trying to come out. “You can look in any of the crates here. They’re all still here. I can’t watch your face or hear your thoughts on this. I wouldn’t survive your disappointment again.”

My wings came out and I teleported away.

I didn’t realize where I was at first since I hadn’t thought of a destination in particular.

“I will never get used to you being able to teleport,” Queen Sasha said from behind me.

“I’ll never get used to any of this fucking stuff,” I grumbled as I turned to Mrs. Von Thann there as well. “Or having five fucking mates. You each only have one stupid asshole. I have *five*. Why would that ever be a good fucking idea?”

“I’d lose what was left of my mind if I had to deal with more than one,” Mrs. Von Thann grumbled. “Are you okay?”

“No, and I think I just blew my chance with Julian after all he did and—honesty maybe isn’t the best policy.” I winced as Sasha frowned. “Not in your case.”

“Then spill because that hurt my feelings,” she admitted. “We dipped into your wine. I have been lots.”

I winced again. “Which ones? Some of those are like priceless fairy stuff I don’t understand.”

“Not those ones,” she promised. “The new ones you have coming out and those fruit wines you like that humans make. Irma and the hobgoblins know how to stock you up. They need a restock.”

“Yeah, I don’t care about that then,” I forgave. “Just none of the older stuff. I don’t need anyone chewing into me that I don’t respect my heritage or I’m too stupid to understand it.”

“I thought most of those comments died,” Mrs. Von Thann muttered as she reached over and poured me a glass. They were sitting on chaise lounges by the fire pit that was going.

Yeah, that sounded like perfect. I took the offered glass from her and sat carefully because of my wings.

And then it just all came gushing out. How much I missed Darby, and I felt stupid for having faith I was worthy of a normal, *healthy* relationship when I was so broken. That I worried he proposed because he thought he had to and not because he loved me. How could he really love me and not seem to want to spend time with me?

Yes, I knew he was pushing to have a future helping me, but the woman he said he loved was waiting every night in bed for him for what *I'd* thought was hot sex. And he turned that down? Turned me down? Constantly? Like fuck. I wasn't just talking about catching movies, but we barely ate together. I barely saw him. Why didn't he want to spend time with me?

Then I told them how obsessive I was with my love for Julian. It was so twisted to me that we'd been apart much longer than we'd been together, and still I was so, *so* in love with him. I knew I'd given part of my soul to him, but it was crazy to be so in love with someone like that.

I thought maybe that was why I hated Onas so much sometimes; I saw myself in him. He was so obsessed with me, and his thoughts reminded me of mine regarding Julian. That if I could just get Julian to look at me and see me, we'd be able to connect. And I'd finally gotten to a place where I'd felt like we could make it work, but Onas threw the paintings in my face.

Now I didn't know, but I couldn't have that hanging over my head, so I had to show him. It would probably ruin us, but I couldn't hide something so obsessive from him.

"How many are there?" Mrs. Von Thann cut in. "So you did a hundred paintings of him or something. Lucca said you

did eighty like nothing in a night. That's understandable."

"Yes, I saw that video you put out with the paintings of Craftsman," Sasha added. "It hurt me to see. There were a lot, but that was understandable. Hudson said you had a room full of crates, but all of those aren't of Craftsman."

I swallowed loudly. "It's not just a room. It's several, and I didn't pack the crates with finished paintings like I should have. I basically put paper between them and stuffed them full." I nodded when both of them froze. "It's not just a hundred paintings."

"Okay, a few hundred is still understandable," Sasha said, sighing when I winced. "How bad, Tamsin?"

"If it was under a thousand, I would be very, very shocked," I whispered, nodding when they both flinched. "Yeah, so that's my crazy that any sane person should run from."

Mrs. Von Thann snorted. "I wished I was loved with that passion. Ronald wouldn't make a thousand paintings from losing me. He sent a few fucking texts. If Craftsman is half as smart as his IQ, he'll realize how he can't lose you and fight harder to fix things."

I was shocked when Sasha nodded in agreement. It gave me hope and I didn't think that was smart.

Hope bit me in the ass way too much, and I couldn't handle that right then.

10

I started my day with a hangover and waking fairies. Then I went to the rest stop in Theripolis and tried to eat everything they had made for many that morning. I also got read-in on how the situation was going and ideas they had to fill in the gaps.

We already ordered a ton of food from the human world, and they were experiencing inflation from corporate greed. Every time I turned on the news, everyone was pointing the finger at each other as to the reason the record inflation was happening, but the truth was right in front of them. The greedy corporations having record profits should have been a big red flag.

Nope, just bicker and fight and toss out bullshit. That would ever help.

So yeah, it was better to try and handle this ourselves.

Next was some cleansing, and I was surprised when Hudson showed up. I didn't see him when he arrived, but I heard arguing behind me, and it snapped me out of the sort of trance I got into when I did cleansing. I turned and saw him talking with Iolas and the tone seemed agitated.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked as I walked towards them.

Hudson did a double take and cleared his throat. “He’s lecturing me about the pro teams when he’s decades behind.”

“And I said the rules of the game didn’t change, so I’m still more knowledgeable,” Iolas added. “Sorry, we bothered you, Princess.”

I glanced between them, absolutely knowing that wasn’t what they were discussing. But if they were going to stick to the same story, I wasn’t about to out them in front of others. They could be stupid boys if they wanted then.

“So what’s up?” I asked Hudson.

“You keep promising River that we’ll go flying in Faerie. He made it clear that’s today or he’s going to throw a fit.”

“River will, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then we go flying after this,” I said easily, glad when he beamed at me. I glanced over at Iolas. “See if we can get some ships in a remote location to go fishing. The hobgoblins said we need more protein for the rest stops, but the fish populations haven’t recovered enough in Faerie.”

He nodded. “That’s true. The large predators survived being frozen, but they’re eating too many of the recovering fish. We may need to cull them to restabilize our waters.”

“Or pump more energy into Faerie so the smaller animals breed faster,” I muttered, sighing when he did. It was all such a balancing act but also *weird* that the planet was so involved in every aspect of life.

I finished up with the fields that had just been harvested and focused on Hudson, opening my mouth and rubbing my belly like a cartoon character saying they were hungry.

He chuckled and leaned down for a kiss. “I have all the picnic baskets for you to steal all you want, shorty.”

I didn’t think that was the same cartoon, but it was a cute joke nonetheless.

He picked a really pretty, wide-open spot that he said was on my family lands. I smiled as he set up the blanket with flare, and several of his guards and my detail started setting down tons of food.

And all of my favorites. Some clearly came from his castle, but some were takeout containers, so he’d sent people to grab food too.

“Thanks, beastie,” I whispered, leaning in and kissing his cheek.

“Mother said you had a rough night,” he told me gently. “She didn’t tell me specifics and said it wasn’t about us, but you were struggling. I don’t want you to struggle alone anymore, Tams. I want to be the one you turn to again.”

“I’m trying. I am. It’s going to take time to feel like you’re really here with me again.”

“I know. I’m not pushing, and I’m not trying to start trouble by being the good mate or something. I just wanted to explain where my head was.”

That was fair and I thanked him again. It was really, *really* nice of him to simply show support and be here when it hurt to be alone.

We had a great second breakfast but left some for after flying a bit. Hudson was stoked to really get to fly, and Faerie and seemed extra excited and nervous for some reason. Then again, I didn't think many dragons had flown in Faerie, so it was probably nerve-racking from that side.

"You've never flown on me, so make sure your telepathy is going," he instructed as he started pulling off clothes. He froze and glanced around, pointing to the ground next to the blanket. "And remember that spot. Focus on it or whatever so you can teleport there if you need to."

I burst out laughing. "You're not going to drop me. It's fine." He looked worried and I lost my amusement. "Am I the first to ride you?"

"Yes. We don't—normal dragons might, but it's frowned upon that a royal be ridden like a horse." He shrugged when I frowned. "It's stupid stuff like you're used to. It's fine because you're my mate though. I've never done it though."

"Okay, we got this. I can teleport super easy even if I cliff jump and have played with it."

"Right, yeah, good, okay." He stole a quick kiss and lost his pants before turning into his huge dragon. River was about the size of a semi-trailer but with a huge head bigger than a semi-truck cab. He immediately huffed at me and I remembered to turn on my telepathy.

"Sorry, River."

"Kiss River." He chuffed when I kissed his nose and then explained the best way for me to climb up. I did and checked I

wasn't hurting him by holding on where I was. He said it wasn't as nice as when I petted him, but it was fine.

Goofy dragon.

We moved away from the others a bit, and I swallowed a squeal when his large wings started moving. Then he pushed off with all four legs at once and we were airborne.

Holy shit could dragons jump! He pushed off so he was a good twenty feet off the ground with just that, and then his wings moved to catch air and really get us going.

Wow.

Wow!

I let out a squeal when we really were above the ground and cruising. That amused River a lot, and he wanted praise for making me happy.

Done and done.

"Forgive River."

"For what?"

"Tamsin has wings. Use and glide."

I didn't understand why he brought that up and was going to ask more... But then the fucking dragon did a barrel roll and I lost my grip, falling off and hurtling towards the ground.

Then what he said hit me.

My wings popped out without me even thinking about it and caught air enough that I stopped falling so fast. I tried to catch more, picturing a glider in my mind and how they worked. Lots of noises came out of my mouth—along with

cussing—when a gust of wind came in hard and moved me off balance. I tried to get my right wing to adjust for that, but I started dropping again.

Fuck.

I leveled them out and started gliding a bit. It was hard, like *really* hard and exhausting. But I was kind of getting it. I was scared where the ground was and finally looked down... And saw the huge purple dragon keeping pace under me.

“Tired,” I warned.

River didn't even hesitate, flapping his wings hard and coming up to where I was so I landed on his back in the right spot as before. My ass was going to be a bit sore from it but yeah, it worked perfectly.

“River sorry. Hudson said no warning or you argue, but Tamsin needed us. No one teach her. Flying keep Tamsin safe. We teach.”

“Thanks, River. I'm not mad. Scared and freaked but not mad.”

“Take break and do again. River always catch Tamsin.”

“I don't think this is how fairies are supposed to learn.”

“Stupid fairies not teach Tamsin. Mate will. Learn like dragon and love flying.”

“You're the boss, River.”

“Feed River after as gift? Hudson promised it.”

“Yes, you're the best and I'll feed you.”

“River love Tamsin.”

“I love you too, River.” It was always such a trip to talk with Hudson’s dragon. It was him, but it wasn’t and... Yeah, it was trippy, and I did love them both. *“What advice do you have for me now that I know the plan?”*

“Don’t flap wings. Too hard first time. Hurts wings. Need to build up like other muscles. Glide. Tamsin did good. Better than River first time. Mate proud.”

“Thanks, River. Okay, so just try to keep them level during gliding?” He didn’t understand “level” like a person would, but when I showed him what I’d been trying to do he said that was good, but too much pressure on my wings the first day of practicing and to angle them more.

To which I replied I got dumped off a back and was scared to hit the ground too hard, so that was his fault.

I was pretty sure Hudson was going to be apologizing for that for a while because River said I was going to be super sore for days.

“Okay, I’m ready. Don’t do the roll. That was super disorienting.”

“Nope, now Tamsin extend wings and let wind catch her. River stay right under her and tell when tired. Hudson says no pushing or being stupid. He only stupid one.”

Fair enough.

“Tell him he’s also giving me a back rub for scaring the shit out of me.” I extended my wings and let out a huge yelp as the wind caught and I was yanked off the dragon’s back.

I would have thought it’d be easier this time, but it was actually more difficult, my wings tired from being used. That

initial yank was like pulling a muscle too and my wings felt tender from that. I told that to River when I landed and he apologized, saying that wasn't the same for dragons because they had much longer wings to not have it be so jarring.

Fair enough.

“River starving. Hudson was too nervous to eat much. Haven't been flying this long.”

I wasn't sure what to do about that, but then I realized I could maybe kill two birds with one stone. *“Can you tell where the water is from here? We have too many predator fish. Can you nab one while flying?”*

“River can have Faerie animal? Really? Tamsin love River that much?”

“Of course! But it has to be a predator. There aren't enough small fish.”

“River will get the biggest. River love Tamsin most.”

“Love you too, River.”

We got close to the water, and he actually landed and let me off his back, the dragon saying he was going to show off for his mate. I laughed and did as he wanted, feeling the portals open from my detail and them joining us.

“He was hungry, and we have too many predator fish,” I explained, shrugging as if that explained it all.

Except shrugging hurt, like *hurt*.

“This was why I said he couldn't just dump you off of his back like dragons do,” Iolas growled as he came storming towards me.

“I thought it was fucking brilliant,” Lageos praised, shoving Iolas away and reaching me first. “I can heal my own daughter.” He did and kissed my hair. “You were magnificent, Daughter. Truly. You handled that like a pro.”

“You saw?”

He nodded, beaming at me. “Hudson made sure I was warned so I could see your first time. Same with Iolas, but he’s a pain in the ass.”

“I’m protective of her,” Iolas snapped. “She shouldn’t learn how to fly from a dragon.”

“Well, none of you fuckers were teaching her like we’ve both been demanding. I can’t teach her since I don’t understand it. I could just keep magically catching her but that—you said that plan sucked.”

I wasn’t sure what Iolas was going to reply, but apparently River didn’t like me not paying attention to him because he let out a huge roar. I told him I was watching and that was impressive.

My eyes about bugged out of my head as he flew full speed *into* the water. He just dove right in.

And then flew right back out. Fish went flying all around him, but they landed right back in the water as River was out of the water as quickly as he’d gone in.

“He’s holding a shark,” someone whispered.

“What?” I gasped. I’d been so focused on what he’d done to the water I hadn’t seen what he’d grabbed. “Holy shit!” Sure enough, my mate had a huge shark in his mouth. “Can he eat that? Are they poisonous or anything?”

“Good you ask after,” Iolas drawled, sighing when I winced. “No, that’s fine for him to eat. I wouldn’t recommend he eat the head though. Their teeth are denser than normal bones, and I would think it would not end well for him to try and digest.”

“Yeah, they’re like diamond-tough and huge,” someone else worried.

I relayed all of that to River in his mind and made him promise to be safe because I loved him. He heard me, and I told the others it was fine.

He landed with the shark, and I almost lost both my breakfasts watching the dragon tear into its catch.

“What kind of shark was that?” I asked Iolas. “That wasn’t as big as a whale shark, but it was bigger than the great white skeleton I saw in a museum. Like twice as big.” I glanced at Iolas when he didn’t answer and did a double take at the look of sadness he gave me. “What?”

“It kills me how you always think of everything in terms of that world and never your world,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, but it does.”

River turned from his meal and growled at Iolas in warning, and I agreed with my mate. Even if Iolas felt that way, he needed to stop pointing it out around people.

Wyn took pity on me and answered.

“Diamond reef shark, Your Highness, and that wasn’t a full-grown one even. They’re called that because their teeth are tougher than diamonds like we said, but they like to hunt along reefs. Other smaller predators go digging for food in the

reefs and normally scare the animals out and right into the waiting shark they didn't see thinking it was only a shadow."

What he said hit me and I blinked at him. "Their skin changes color?"

"A bit, but mostly it looks like a shadow of something blocking the light way above. It can't—it's not like a chameleon or anything."

"Wow, that's sick."

"And tasty," Wyn chuckled, nodding when I looked at him. "Fishing sharks is normally outlawed in both realms. Or fishing for them, but now and again fishermen will catch an older one in a net and won't get in trouble. But every shark caught has to be reported, and Guardians make the call after using runes. I had it once as a kid and it was amazing."

"Your mother loved it," Lageos confirmed. "But she too only had it once. She said it was a rare delicacy and to be tried by every fairy once when it was the time of the shark to pass, not something just for royals or nobles."

"That sounds like her," I praised. "Or the dragon brave enough to piss off all fairies and teach his mate to fly."

River gave a happy chuff and finished up his meal... Completely grossing me out as he did. Oh well.

But he ate the whole damn shark besides the head. He was not messing around.

"I'll have the teeth harvested and collected," Iolas grumbled when he was done.

I nodded like it was no big deal but then did a double take. “Right, if it’s rare to get a shark, those teeth probably cost a lot, huh?”

The fairies all there glanced at each other and burst out laughing... Until River roared at them.

“Sorry, yes, yes, very valuable,” Iolas said giving me an apologetic look.

I shrugged it off, Lageos and the Rothchilds hadn’t known either. I just wanted the answer. Apparently, using one of the smaller teeth for cutting was better than diamond drill bits and... Stuff. I listened, but I didn’t know a lot about drills and craft cutting besides what I’d learned in school about cutting straight with scissors.

And I’d honestly never been good at that either.

River wanted attention after he cleaned off his muzzle in the water. He told me we were going flying a bit more and then I needed to eat after my first lesson. Sounded good to me.

I only “flew” once more, and I enjoyed simply riding on River for a good twenty minutes. We landed and Hudson shifted back, giving me hesitant looks like he was waiting to get yelled at.

I didn’t. I understood what he’d done and the risk he took even doing it. Once he was dressed, I leaned on him as we ate and said I needed that back rub when we were done.

I brought us back to my house instead of my vacation house in the mountains in case Darby was there. I definitely needed a shower after flying and everything else I’d already had in my day.

And I wanted Hudson to join me.

Yeah, I found that shocking too.

“You were awesome, shorty,” he praised after we set our stuff down in the kitchen and headed upstairs. “Seriously, you just went with it and—I was so damn impressed. Even River was complimenting how you corrected after that gust knocked you off balance and he’s kind of a snob when it comes to flying.”

I chuckled and shot him an amused look. “Really?”

He shrugged as he came into my room and I closed the door behind him. “He’s much stronger than most dragons because we’ve got royal blood. Plus, he gets pissed at dragons who act more human than dragon. We’re not human. We’re not even born in person form but from eggs and as dragons.”

Yeah, that had thrown me. I’d known that, but when I’d learned the details, it had been weird to think that was how Hudson was born.

Sometimes I thought maybe that was why I’d always felt so close with him. He and I had been really close friends always, not just lovers. Yes, I was an alien, but he was born from a damn egg.

That was pretty alien too. I always thought that connected us somehow or made us mostly understand each other better. Now it was flying and wings.

Maybe?

“So yeah, he gets pretty judgy,” Hudson went on as he followed me into the bathroom and I started the shower. “But he was saying how pretty your wings are and he was

impressed how strong they were. He thought you'd need a break much faster than you did."

"I honestly didn't know that was an option," I confessed. "I was too scared to look down at first and didn't realize you were there."

He moved closer and cupped my face. "I wouldn't ever bail on you like that, Tams. I know it was a shit move, but I needed—you—I couldn't stand you not learning. Flying is *amazing*. I can't imagine that being kept from me when I have wings." He let out a slow breath and brushed his lips over mine. "And it kills me how you resent your wings."

"I'm trying," I said, not willing to blow it off when it was Hudson.

"I know you are and I'm here for you. Always, Tams."

I hoped so because I couldn't lose Hudson. I loved him too much, and him pulling away and being a dick had almost broken me. We needed to always be a team for me to survive.

I was scared only I felt that way though. Maybe that was normal to feel?

11

“So about that backrub,” I purred when he pulled away.

“Oh, right, you want to shower,” he muttered, turning around. “Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. I’ll rub your back after.”

I took off my sports bra and tossed it at him, chuckling when it landed on his shoulder. Then I yanked off my sparring shorts and hit him in the back with them.

“Tams, I don’t want to be presumptuous, but I get the feeling you’re inviting me to join you,” he hedged.

“Yes, you stupid dragon,” I chuckled, smirking when he glanced at me in the mirror. “I need a full body rubdown and hair wash. My arms are sore.”

He spun around in a flash and moved closer. “Are they really? How bad?”

“They’re not. I’m just lazy.”

Heat filled his eyes. “I love when you’re lazy.” He seemed to hear how silly that sounded and chuckled.

I opened the shower door and checked the water, glad when it seemed warm enough. I didn’t have to worry though because a moment after I stepped in and under the water, Hudson came in too and he was always radiating heat better than a damn furnace.

He buried his face against my neck. “Fuck, I love this scent. You smell like outside, the sun, and River. It’s fucking hot. I need inside of you now.”

Okay, so much for getting clean first. Hudson and Lucca and smelling things on me to the point it turned them on was such a weird thing for me.

And most supes. Darby and Julian weren’t like that. I doubted Neldor was when I didn’t smell things like that.

“If we have sex I won’t have the strength to shower and I need one bad,” I hedged.

“I’ll shower you, shorty.”

“You suck at getting all the shampoo and condition out,” I grumbled.

“I won’t be this time. All clean, I promise.”

Oh boy.

He didn’t wait for me to reply, turning me around and leaning me against the tile. Hudson kissed me like he was dying for me and pushed two fingers inside of me. I moaned and rolled my hips to get more. He went deeper and deeper before adding another finger and flicking my clit. That was it, I came, but it was a mild one.

And we both knew why. Still, I wanted to be there with him like that and have sex. That was a big step, and even if the orgasms weren’t amazing, totally worth it.

Right?

He snapped me out of my thoughts with a soft kiss. “Yes? If you’re not ready, we can stop. I love you and this was

amazing.”

“We can.” I wanted to. Yes, I was scared and my heart still ached, but I loved Hudson. I wanted him and us to be back together for real.

He lifted me up and slowly pushed in my body. We both moaned because I was so tight still from lack of sex. He gave me a few moments to adjust before pulling out slowly and pushing back in. Once he knew he wouldn't hurt me, he picked up the pace.

He kissed along my neck and lifted me higher. “Fuck, nothing feels as good as you do, shorty. I'm not going to last.”

I almost made a snarky comment that I was glad he hadn't become a cheater like Juan too, but that was too petty. I felt bad even thinking it. Hudson wasn't Juan, and I knew he would never cheat on me.

He finished a few minutes later and I didn't, worry immediately filled his face.

“I enjoyed it. It can't always be a home run and I'm exhausted. Really.”

He slowly nodded, studying my eyes. “But things aren't just all better or where they were. That's going to take time.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, sounding disappointed to my own ears. “I think it will.”

“You're worth the wait and amazing for forgiving me. Seriously, that's how I feel, Tams.”

That made me feel better, but I was super tired and couldn't hide it. He meticulously showered me and gave extra

care to washing out all of the shampoo and conditioner. I wanted to purr and nap at the scalp massage he gave me before he rubbed my back. It was great.

Until the shower was over.

He brought me out to the bedroom and I froze. “What?”

“I’m so not ready to be in a bed with you after sex,” I heard myself admit. “Sorry.”

“I did it. Take all the time you need.”

I was really tired though, so even if I couldn’t be in bed with Hudson after or during sex yet, I wanted to lie down. I suggested we order food and just chill out at my very nice pool. He loved it, probably sensing how tired I was and said he’d handle the food. Even better.

I got settled in the sun and felt like I barely closed my eyes and was out... And woke into a dream.

“Tams talks in her sleep, you know this,” Lucca said to Hudson. “This flying thing is really hurting her. Darby acting like he’s got a ring on her and doesn’t have to try anymore and —”

“He’s acting like that?” Hudson demanded.

Lucca gave him a dry look. “He would never be that stupid and he loves her. He’s so busy trying to prove he’s worthy to stand at her side, he’s forgetting about *her*. He’s gotta get over that.”

“He doesn’t have your lovely ego,” Hudson drawled.

“Hey, pot—kettle, dickhead,” Lucca threw right back, raising an eyebrow when Hudson looked like he might argue.

“At least I never let Juan get in my head. He’s the ultimate spoiled prince.”

“He didn’t use to be,” Hudson sighed, shaking his head when Lucca argued. “Dude, I knew him better. He used his position to get perks. Yeah, that’s spoiled, but people put shit on him because he’s the next in line, and he—he did it to even the playing field. He used to say if he was going to get the shit before he ruled, he wanted the perks too.”

“Yeah, I get you.” Lucca was quiet a moment. “It got worse senior year of high school when he started sleeping with everyone he could.”

“Pot—kettle,” Hudson muttered.

“Fair.” Lucca waved his hand in front of his face. “That’s so not the point of this. Darby’s gotta pull his head out of his ass, and Tams needs to learn to fly. And I can’t teach her.”

“She’s not a dragon,” Hudson worried. “I can’t teach a fairy to fly either.”

“No, but they’re never going to teach her,” Lucca yelled, throwing his hands up in the air. “She’s too powerful and that scares them. Even fucking Dalyor has bailed on her training to work with Neldor. At first, he balanced with both of them, but it’s like since he knows he’s never having sex with her, he’s bailed. And she’s noted it.”

Hudson snorted. “She catches everything, way more than people give her credit for.” He winced. “I’m part of the reason Dalyor isn’t around much. I told him to take a hike basically after...”

“After you tried to throw another man at your mate in hopes it fixed her?” Lucca drawled. “Dude, I stand by that. You were an asshole.”

“I was an asshole,” Hudson sighed, but then frowned. “No fairy is training with her?”

“Dalyor’s friends are keeping track of her runs I think. I don’t know, but she wasn’t in the gym much before finals, and now they’ve got her focused on waking fairies and painting. She’s *exhausted* and that—she can’t keep going like that and not taking care of her body.”

“Flying won’t help her if she’s not training,” Hudson worried.

“Have you met Tams? If flying makes her sore, you know she’ll be in the gym the next day and telling them all to shove it.” He sighed when Hudson didn’t seem to want to budge. “She cried in her sleep. She took a nap and was crying that she’d never be a real fairy but they love Neldor.”

“What does Neldor have to do with this?” he asked.

Lucca did a double take. “Okay, so let’s start this again. Neldor’s about to start learning how to fly.” He nodded when Hudson couldn’t hide his shock. “I heard Taeral talk to him about it before finals and so did Tams. She was *destroyed* and locked everything down. I could barely smell it was her she locked down so hard with her magic.”

“How could they seriously teach him before her? And just months after getting his wings? Isn’t that reckless?”

“No, it’s *standard*,” Lucca bitched. “It’s normally under six months after a fairy gets their wings. I asked Ara and she

fessed up. She's upset Tams doesn't know either. Several of the Guardians on her detail were working out ideas to train her, but someone found out and snitched. They were told not to interfere, and if they injured the heir of Faerie, it would be their head."

"Those fucking nobles again? Who are they—"

"It was Shael," Lucca cut in.

"Shael *likes* Tams. She loves her now."

"She does, but she fully believes that if Tams dies, so does Faerie. Most of the commanders do. They think if her power grows, she'll explode before she can have an heir and Faerie will die. I've heard her say it. Onas too."

"They really don't pay attention to you," Hudson drawled. "You're like the worst spy ever but get all the good info."

"Yeah, well, they've all made it clear they never think she'll forgive me enough to be her mate even if I can see her wings now."

"Is this what's been going on with you?" Julian asked from my right, making me jump and let out a yelp. "Something else was going on with you pushing so hard, but you wouldn't tell me. It was that they were going to teach Neldor to fly, right?"

I hugged myself and nodded. "I thought maybe if I..." I shook my head, disappointed in myself. "I revert back to how I used to be with them. I feel like the commanders are foster parents sometimes, and I just want them to like me so they'll keep me."

Then I remembered what had happened between us and backed away from him. My mind wasn't as quick in a dreamscape, and I totally forgot the last time I talked to Julian we were in my studio.

He was suddenly behind me, changing the dream so I moved into him. He hugged me to him and kissed my neck. "I still love you, Tams. Nothing has changed, I promise. Let's see what you need to know from this and then we can talk."

Except I felt like someone shoved me and I popped out of the dream.

"Wake up, shorty," Hudson begged while shaking me.

"I'm up," I gasped, feeling like I'd just surfaced from too-cold water it was so jarring.

"Thank fuck," he whispered as he lowered his face to my stomach. "Jesus fuck, Tams."

"What happened?" I worried. A portal opened to my right, and I wasn't surprised when Julian walked out of it with worry in his eyes as well. "Hudson was trying to wake me."

"She wouldn't wake up," Hudson rasped. "Food arrived and I tried to wake her and she wouldn't get up. I thought—" He let out a choked sob and I got the rest from his mind.

"No, fuck, no, I'm fine," I whispered as I leaned over and hugged his head and body as much as I could. I glanced at Julian. "He took me to fly today, and he thought he'd broken my magic by helping me fly before I was ready."

"Oh fuck, yeah, I'd be a mess too, mate," Julian said as he sat at my feet and rubbed Hudson's back. "I'll catch you up on

her dreams and stuff. It's hard to wake her then. She gets locked in and—”

“Give me a minute,” Hudson cut in, hugging me tighter. “I can't ever lose you, Tams. I thought I would die if you got hurt.”

“I'm totally fine, just a weirdo, beastie,” I promised, kissing his hair over and over again. I gave him a soft smile when he finally sat up and plopped his butt on the ground.

“Shit, I don't think—there have been only a few times I've ever panicked like that. Okay, well, I got food, and explain this to me like I don't understand dreamscapes because really I don't.”

I nodded and then gave him a hesitant look. “And then will you tell me about your conversation with Lucca about helping me fly?”

He flinched and then glanced at Julian before back to me. “You saw that?”

“I don't know how much. You pulled me out of it.”

“I wasn't going to hide it from you,” he blurted.

“Okay, good, then let's all talk.” I shot Julian a worried look. “If you want.”

He stood when I did and cupped my cheek. “Mine is really short, Tams. I still love you. It kills me how much pain I felt of yours in those paintings. That's it. I'm thrilled you love me that much even if it hurt you that much. I made videos on the internet that I cringe at now. We all do things to deal, but it is *not* obsessive. We were—are in love.”

I nodded, admitting that was what Queen Sasha and Mrs. Von Thann had said, but it was still over the top. Julian wasn't lying when he said he was over the moon that I loved him that much, so I took the win he wasn't putting me in a padded room or leaving me.

At least not that day.

Oh and we filled in Hudson. I thought he already knew all of this, but apparently he'd only gotten the short version skirting over it because no one knew if he'd be in my life for real again. Fair enough.

Now he got the full thing of how weird I was.

Well, it wasn't like the first time I was the weirdest one in the room.

Any room.

Hudson was still so shaken he couldn't wake me up that I didn't have the heart to ask him about the dream. And apparently, I didn't need to. Julian replayed the dream that night and I got the rest of it.

The short version was once Hudson realized how fairies were fucking with me again—even innocently—they confronted Neldor and demanded he order people to teach me. Or teach me himself.

Except he couldn't. They didn't teach about flying until someone got their wings and learned, and then it was an oath they took not to teach anyone without wings or that was deemed not ready. I was shocked they had rules like that, but it stemmed from the mentality that a village raised a child.

Fairies did not let their own learn about flying until they were deemed ready. It sounded crazy, but I believed it. All of the journals I'd read and none of them had ever mentioned tricks or advice on flying.

And fairies had advice on *everything*.

Just not that. They didn't want to risk anyone not ready dying because they tried to teach themselves to fly. And it worked because no fairy had ever died falling to their death in a training accident or attempt to learn to fly.

That was honestly impressive, but I was annoyed that they were gatekeeping information from me again.

Or at least the assholes should have warned me that I wouldn't find it in journals. They had no idea how many hours I'd spent trying to learn the information on my own. Apparently, I needed a dragon to teach me about my wings.

12

Julian had crashed in my bed so he could show me the rest of that memory, but he was gone when I woke up... And Darby was sitting at the end of our bed with a dozen yellow magical roses.

And a very scared look in his eyes.

“I love you, *agra*,” he whispered, before he broke down crying.

I moved faster than my tired brain could keep up with and hugged him. He dropped the flowers and curled around me, hugging my waist and letting out all of his upset.

“Talk to me, you stupid vampire,” I mumbled when he started to settle.

Thankfully, he did. Darby told me how hard he was trying to work to show everyone he was worth anything and could stand next to me. He was also worried about his baby sister and how his choices and family would doom her, so he wanted to get into a good position on his own.

“I would love nothing more than to spend every hour of every day with you and do everything or nothing,” he rambled. “Nothing is better than spending time with you. Sex, no sex, all the crazy, or sitting reading a book. I never thought *ever*

that you would worry I didn't want to spend time with you. All I want to do is spend time with you."

I charged him up even if he'd told me not to. He was on super empty and I knew it was stress, me throwing a fit upsetting him and more. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Yes, what I felt was valid, but I didn't handle it right, and I went off the deeper end than needed."

He bobbed his head. "Why didn't you tell me that you were hurt that Neldor was going to learn to fly first?"

I sighed, sitting back when he did. "Because it sounded petty like I was being a jealous brat." I sighed again and knew I had to be honest. "And when would I have told you? You've been mostly brain-dead when I see you. Do you know how many times I've woken up and you're still in your suit? I have to undress you so you can actually sleep."

He frowned. "I thought I'd done that."

"No, I've been doing it," I drawled.

"I messed up and I'm a jerk, but everything stops if we need each other, *agra*. I made you promise that so I didn't feel left behind. Of course, I wanted the same for you."

"I have abandonment issues, Darby. I don't know if I can ever be the one to smack someone around to pay attention to me. I *tried* with Julian after all of my shit and shitty past and it didn't work. I just... Shut down. I don't run anymore because I love you and can't leave, but I felt like my body was just eating itself, I was collapsing into myself."

"I'm so sorry." He tucked my hair behind my ear, and I could only imagine how it looked. It was always all over the

place after I slept on it. “I didn’t get to tell you the rest of my meeting with Claudia.”

“What happened?” I worried.

He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. “I’m such a fucking idiot. I feel like this is the LSATs all over again. I was so scared I was failing and behind that I didn’t see what was really going on.”

“She tested you?” I surmised.

He nodded. “She gave me a first-year law school *final*. I didn’t know what it was but just something for interns or to show progress. I was halfway through and getting annoyed the questions were so basic and she thought I was such a moron. She pushed me into admitting why I was getting miffed and then burst out laughing.”

“Oh boy. So she’s not mad?”

“No, but she told me I seriously need more rest because I’m better at controlling my emotions than I have been lately. That’s true.”

That was fair. I wasn’t ever that good at controlling my emotions, but Darby was.

“It also wasn’t just any law school final but one of hers from *Georgetown*,” he added, nodding when I snorted. “I’m sorry, *agra*.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t handle it better.”

“Forgive me?” He swallowed loudly when I didn’t answer right away, simply reaching over and picking up the roses. “Please? Please, forgive me. I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t,” I whispered, smelling the flowers and touching the soft petals. “I’m just scared I’m not what you want and this is just the beginning. We got engaged and you were just gone. Yes, I wasn’t staying at home, but you came home to me every night and it was—what is you being a law school going to be like?”

“We’ll be fine, better than fine now that I’ve had my head adjusting. I promise. I did miss you and wanted things different. I just thought—I blinked and it was weeks.”

That was understandable and I’d done the same. I nodded, but I had this clawing fear one morning soon I would wake up and he’d be gone, not just mentally and emotionally. I was as sure I would lose Darby as I was of my name.

“Tams, I’m not going to ever leave you,” he whispered as he hugged me to him. “I promise it. I know you get scared and feel that, but it’s just not true. I have that fear you will leave me too.”

“It feels inevitable, not just a fear. I thought I was watching it and I couldn’t stop it. I missed you so, so much.”

“I’m here, *agra*. I won’t ever leave you. I want you to be my mate. That’s forever and nothing would make me happier.”

Some part of me wanted to demand we mate right then and that way he couldn’t leave me, but people would freak, like freak the fuck out. Plus, we deserved better than some quickie mating no one knew about.

Even if it sounded like the best way to do it since it was about *us* and not them.

“What’s so funny?” Darby asked when I chuckled.

“I was thinking how many heads would explode if people knew their future queen wanted to elope when she gets mated instead of a huge thing.” I felt nerves pour off of Darby, and I leaned back so I could see his face. “You don’t want to mate me?”

“Of course, I do,” he chuckled, kissing my nose. “I just don’t want the huge wedding either. That sounds horrible.”

“Yeah, it does,” I sighed. “We could have the real one just be us and like Izzy and my dad, and then have the big thing for everyone else?”

“I’d really like that,” he agreed after a moment. “It—I don’t want to share something so important with all those strangers. We can go through the motions for them after.”

“Oh good, now I want to kill two of her mates,” I heard Onas say from down the hall.

“What the fuck are you doing in her house without permission and listening in?” Darby shouted, going to roll out of bed and head after him.

But I stopped him. “I love you, so don’t get flattened, okay? Just wait here and I’ll handle this. It’s not about you. This is about what Hudson and I did.”

“What is it his business that you guys had sex?” he asked, glancing from me to the door.

“Not that, but Onas still would hate that as well. Just hang here.”

“I’m not hiding from that asshole.”

“It’s not going to be just him.”

“Okay, you’re not helping me want to let you walk out there knowing more people will be upset with you.”

“The princess will be fine,” Taeral called over. “We’ve restrained the asshole.” I couldn’t hear Onas’s response, but Taeral snorted. “You are an asshole. We said a calm conversation with her, and you go portaling here like you own the fucking place. She’s going to demote you one day, and you will absolutely deserve it.”

“He does,” I agreed, throwing on a robe and taking Darby’s hand before heading for the door.

“Wait, us first,” he muttered. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yes, but you—we have to take time-outs and check in. I can’t feel like you love your internship more than me again. And I don’t want you working with that hoe. She was intentionally challenging our relationship in public. That’s not a good look for us.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s out, but I will make damn sure no one touches me at work like that again. Five feet away from me at all times.”

“Sure, that will make working on cases and going to court viable.” I tugged on his hand, but he pulled me back and brushed his lips over mine. “You’re still in trouble. That hurt a lot.”

“I know. No more working on weekends unless an emergency. Plus, I will be home for dinner at least three times a week.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I didn’t realize how overboard I went. Even if you weren’t in my life, I don’t want to become that workaholic drone with no life.”

I took in a slow breath and then let it out. “Okay, I forgive you. Let’s go handle the crazy.” I sighed when he opened the door for me and then got grumpy this cut into our makeup time. “I wanted hot morning makeup sex with my mate, but instead I got you idiots barging in. Someone better have breakfast sandwiches and fucking donuts.”

“Get them, fast,” Shael ordered someone. “You’re a fucking moron, Onas. We had every right to be upset, but you blew that with your temper and tantrums.”

I teleported us to the kitchen in front of Shael. “No, you didn’t have any right to be upset. I have asked and asked for someone to teach me. You all denied me like you are my bosses again.”

“In this *singular* area, we are,” Shael reminded me. “You need older fairies to agree you are ready to be taught to fly.”

I squeezed Darby’s hand and nodded towards the coffee, saying he should go make some.

“No, coffee can wait and I’m on your—you flew?” He spun me to face him and grabbed my arms. “Are you okay? Yes, okay, you’re okay. So what—how? Who did you go with?”

“Me,” Hudson said from behind the group. “And apparently, it’s causing an inter-species incident that I helped my mate use her own fucking body as she wanted.”

I turned on my telepathy to get the answers on that and when I heard what had happened, I pulled away from Darby and stormed over to Onas. To the shock of everyone there, I backhanded the commander. “You are suspended. I’ve put up

with a *lot* from you, but this is too far. You are not the boss of me or the voice of Faerie.”

“What did he do with the dragons?” Shael asked, her tone shaky.

“He stopped by the Vogel’s before throwing his fit here and told them that if they ever want help from Guardians or any fairy again, they better get their son and heir under control and not shit on our ways. That he would not allow our mating if Hudson ever tried to overrule the commanders again.”

Iolas launched at Onas, and luckily Shael caught him, barely holding back the seething fairy. “Fuck you, Onas! Who are you to speak for her like that? I’m her fucking godsfather and her father is *alive*. You allow her to mate? I will fucking gut you.”

My kitchen exploded into yelling and fighting.

I let out a heavy sigh and waved for Darby and Hudson to follow me. They did, and we walked out to the garage and then out front... Where I had been teleporting all of the fairies one by one.

And dropping them from about five feet off the ground. It didn’t hurt them, but it cut into their crazy.

A bit at least. It didn’t really work, and they started fighting again. In all of the confusion and me trying to play mom with idiots, I didn’t notice the portal flare up again or who joined us.

I turned just in time to see Julian strut over in a three-piece slate gray suit looking stylish and hot as fuck. His curly hair

was pulled back in a ponytail and his eyes were ablaze with something.

That was the part I should have paid attention to. Unfortunately, my hormones were driving.

“You have a bit of drool there, *agra*,” Darby muttered.

I couldn’t even deny it. I went to tease him though, but my mouth dropped open when Julian punched Onas with all he had.

No, not with all *he* had, with all *I* had. He used our link to tap into my magic. That was the only way Onas could have gone down like a rock.

“Lageos,” I said at the same time Darby and Hudson did. Only my dad would have taught my mate how to tap into *that* ability.

Julian grabbed Onas’s collar and dragged him away from the group and back towards the garage. He let out a whistle that stunned all of the fairies. It wasn’t like how we could whistle, but it had magic in it. It was like how hobgoblins could whistle for fae dogs.

Even more shocking?

The pack who lived on the property listened. They came racing around the corner and their Alpha, Chief, slid to a halt in front of Julian. He plopped down and assessed what was going on before reaching out his paw and putting it to Onas’s neck.

“Oh fuck,” Taeral whispered.

I was so shocked at all of this that I didn't catch on to what was going on until it was already done. Chief had burned Onas with the mark fae dogs give when a person has done something wrong against their master.

"Chief!" I gasped, hurrying over there and staring at the dog like he'd grown another head.

He plopped down with a huff and offered me his other paw.

I knelt and accepted it, our minds joining, and I got caught up faster than speaking words ever could. I sighed and sat back on my feet. "He's not the boss of you. I am."

"Mate. Favorite mate."

"Oh good, now my damn dogs are joining in that discussion." I stood and went to jump on Julian, but he leaned in and kissed me breathless.

"I won't stand by and watch them hurt you, *cariño*," he whispered. "I had to watch so much when I was trying to win you back, even when the world thought we were back together. But you said we are. You want us to be together. Now I don't have to watch and can get involved, and I'm going to bloody the gits if that's what it takes."

There was so much to that statement to unpack, but I was stuck on one part. "*Cariño?*"

He smiled at me. "I took some advice from Marisol. Ask her."

Or I could just Google it later. That was so not the point.

He pulled away and looked at his watch. "I have to go. Hudson caught me right as I was walking into a board meeting. I'm supposed to be on the East Coast." He gave me another quick kiss and glanced over at the commanders. "Get your shite together and control this git or there will be one less of you. You might brush off who she loves as immature college kids, but I'm *not*."

And then as fast as he had arrived, he strutted back to the portal in my garage and activated it.

"I think I'm turned on for you, Princess," Stefanie admitted, shrugging when I shot her a shocked look. "I never saw the appeal in Dr. Craftsman besides he was the one who found you and there was a bond with that. I think I understand much better. That man would put his soul on the line for you to be safe because Onas will not forgive this."

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. "But he also knows I wouldn't have gone to battle for this, but I would if he tried to touch Julian." I nodded when people seemed hesitant. "You guys need to understand how vicious I can be. If any of you went after the people I love, I would end you. It's not about that those guys were Underground who went after Lucca."

"I'm trying not to be offended here, shorty," Hudson said quietly.

I opened my mouth but then closed it. "I need more information. I only got it from Onas's mind. If he tried to hurt you, I would absolutely kick his ass all over the place. What I saw was just bluster."

That seemed to appease Hudson. "It's not when it comes from the most senior and powerful commander of the dark

realm, Tams. He also walked in like he owned the place.”

“We’re on a high alert status, Princess,” one of Mel’s cousins informed me. “We didn’t want Prince Hudson here, but he made it clear he was coming for his mate and to make sure you were safe, so we could try to protect him or stay home.”

I didn’t realize what I was doing until I’d already kicked Onas in the nuts. It was horrible that I’d done it to an unconscious man, but I was barefoot, so really it wouldn’t hurt that much and was for my own temper. I let out a few slow breaths and focused on Iolas. “How did he do that when you were the only one besides me who gave the dragons crystals?”

“Onas is almost a thousand years old and knows more about security than I do,” Iolas admitted. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck before looking at Mel’s cousins. “Did he open a portal into the castle or come through the family portal when he isn’t listed there.”

“The latter,” that same guy answered.

Iolas nodded. “That’s not very hard for someone as old as Onas. The enchantments on the portals were all done by powerful witches and warlocks, but we can undo those just as you can break through our barriers.”

“So any fairy can just breeze in there?” I whispered in horror.

“No, just the powerful ones,” he answered easily.

I wasn’t the only one who cussed up a storm there. Hudson was in a near panic. “I will handle this. Today. I promise.”

“We have to warn the others,” he worried.

“I’m missing the upset here,” Shael admitted, and I couldn’t hide the look I gave her that she was a moron.

I felt better when Darby snorted and answered. “There are gobs of fairies who want Hudson out of the way so she might focus more on Neldor. Others who don’t like the alliance with the dragons because it gives Tams other allies besides fairies. Those are normally the ones who disagree with locking up the elders and ancients.

“And you’ve been sitting on the knowledge that one of them could slip into their fucking castles against their protections and take Hudson out? Or start a war with the families like Tams did something bad? Or the dark realm, and the realms could have war again like some want? I don’t know how you’re *not* seeing the problem here, Commander.”

“Well said,” one of the other Rothchilds said.

“You have too much faith in fairies and you need to stop that,” I told the commanders firmly. “You’ve been better, but for fuck’s sake, *stop* assuming fairies won’t do heinous things. They will. There are a few nobles who I think would have already taken out Hudson if they’d realized this or could.” I felt the portal again and saw Neldor come out.

“Where is Onas?” he bellowed, the ground under us practically shaking he was so pissed.

And my new electric SUV in the driveway fell to the ground in pieces. He was so upset he’d shattered the metal in it.

“I hadn’t even gotten to drive that thing,” I sighed.

Neldor winced. "I will replace it."

"It was a gift from... Someone who wants something. I forgot whom," I admitted.

"I'll fix it, Tams." He locked on Onas and stormed towards him. He glanced from me to the unconscious fairy. "So you handled it?" He looked at Hudson next. "Thank you for informing me. I was in Faerie and got the message when I was back here."

"I figured that. Thanks for being so pissed," Hudson accepted, before glancing at me. "I warned all of your mates. This affects all of us."

"It does," I sighed, rubbing my tired shoulder. "We have another serious fucking problem." I filled in Neldor about the royal castles, and he gave me a horrified... And guilty look. "You knew."

"Yes, but no," he defended. "Yes, I knew that could be done, *but* I thought that the crystals you and Iolas made would counter it and add layers of protection. I assumed they added to their existing protection like a barrier over a barrier."

"I would have thought as well," Stefanie admitted. "But Onas is more powerful than Iolas. And you made those crystals before your wings came in, Your Highness. That might be the piece we're missing. Others would think as Prince Neldor did, so that is protection for the moment."

"Okay, well, we need to figure out a plan. Today. Top priority without letting people know," I ordered, shooting Hudson and his detail a worried look. "We can't tell people yet. We will fix this today, I swear it."

“We’ll tell Uncle Trigger later,” the first Rothchild agreed with a sigh. “Please, just fix this. We had no idea and the castle is freaking.”

“I will go there immediately and stand guard so they are safe and calm the situation down once we get the rest of this handled, Your Highness,” Stefanie promised.

“Good.”

Except I knew the rest of “this” was my flying. Fuckheads.

“I’m glad you’re here because you understand the Guardians’ structure better than I do,” I admitted to Neldor. “I suspended Onas. I didn’t give specifics but—I’m open to suggestion, but I cannot let this go this time. He cannot speak for me—*us*—to any leadership.” I looked at Hudson. “You were there?” I waited until he nodded. “Tell us exactly what happened. Please.”

He let out a slow breath. “We were having a family breakfast. Father has started making that a Sunday morning requirement like it used to be. He thinks it will get the Vogel family back on track and on the same page. Onas came through the portal and froze every Rothchild he came across, storming into the private family dining hall.”

I wasn’t the only one who cussed up a storm at that. Now we were in trouble with the Rothchilds as well... As we should be. Onas had gone way too far.

“He told my father that if he didn’t get control of me, our alliance is off,” Hudson added, gesturing between us. “As will our being mates because if I ever overstepped again, he would never allow you to mate me and the other commanders would agree with him.” Hudson looked relieved when several of the commanders snorted.

Yeah, even Neldor rolled his eyes at that one. “Some of the commanders love you as her match more than me, and she needs a fairy mate eventually.”

That really helped because I saw a lot of worry leave Hudson’s eyes before he continued.

“He then banned our family from entering Faerie until he said otherwise,” Hudson continued, nodding when most of us couldn’t hide our horror. “And I was lucky you didn’t get hurt because he would have killed me. That our flying was over and if I tried again, he would permanently maul my dragon so I couldn’t ever fly again.”

I launched myself at Onas, not caring he was still unconscious. Neldor caught me and spun me back around. “Move or I will hurt you to get to him. He fucking threatened my mate, the man I love in—so fucking far over the line, Neldor.”

“Yeah, it was, but you cannot kill him for a threat. Please, I’ve known Onas my whole life and he wouldn’t have done it.”

“Agreed,” said a few commanders.

“Yeah, but you’re thinking about rational Onas, and he’s rather obsessive with me,” I argued but calmed down a bit.

“Yes, but it would kill you inside of Hudson was hurt, his dragon mauled. He wouldn’t have done it just for that when he believes if you break, Faerie will break,” Neldor muttered. He looked past me to Hudson. “I swear to you it’s the truth and I will check his mind myself. If I thought he was a true threat to you—I won’t risk Tamsin either.”

“Make damn sure,” Hudson agreed after a moment.

I went over to Hudson and hugged him with all I had. “I didn’t hear that in his thoughts. I’m so sorry, beastie. I would have—fuck that’s—I won’t let that happen.”

“Glad you love me almost as much as I love you,” he chuckled, kissing my forehead. “He stormed out after that, and the moment he went back through the portal, his magic slipped off the Rothchilds. Then I came here before my father could order me not to.”

“Oh boy,” I sighed, standing on my toes for a kiss, smiling when he kissed my nose instead. “I want options on how to fucking punish him for real. I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t wait for anyone to argue and teleported right to Xavier. He was still in the family dining hall with most of the Vogels.

I knelt right in front of him, wincing when I realized I was still in just a robe. “I’m so sorry, Xavier. This won’t ever happen again, I promise. I won’t ever let anyone hurt Hudson like that, certainly not one of my own commanders.”

“Thank you, Princess,” he sighed. “But please stand. Clearly, you just heard about it too given your attire.”

“Yeah, and I’m starving,” I drawled as I stood. “It’s been a fun morning, but Julian used my magic to punch him in a way that will hurt for a while, and Chief burned that fairy mark on Onas.” I nodded when he couldn’t hide his shock. “If you can manage it, I would like you and Sasha to be involved in the punishment discussion. Quietly.”

“None of this can be made public,” Sasha agreed.

“I’ve already ordered it, but there has been some argument,” Xavier worried.

“I rescind my objection,” one of Hudson’s uncles said. “The heir of Faerie is clearly taking this seriously. That was my sole hesitation.”

I met his gaze and let him see the lethality in my eyes. “His death is still on the table. No one goes after Hudson like that. The only reason he’s still alive is because he bluffed.” No one bought that, but I explained it how Neldor did and crippling Hudson would cripple me and that would hurt Faerie and her people.

“Well, I feel better after hearing that,” Sasha admitted, wincing at how that probably sounded.

I shrugged it off. I was glad when they agreed to join us, along with Hudson’s younger brother who would become Xavier’s heir if Hudson and I mated. The kid didn’t like me much, but he was always polite, so I was the same.

I opened a portal for us and arrived back home to find another heated debate.

“What now?” I demanded, my voice making it clear I was at the end of my rope and might bash heads in soon.

At least it was clear to me.

They were idiots if they didn’t hear it as well.

Most everyone stopped what they were saying and turned towards me... Except Neldor who took that moment they were distracted and cut off two of Onas’s braids.

“That’s a big deal, right?” I whispered. “Like a really big deal?” I mentally winced when people nodded, their mouths hanging open.

“I meant it to be,” Neldor chuckled darkly.

“He will never forgive you for that, Nel,” Taeral sighed, using a name I’d never heard anyone call Neldor. Clearly, it was more in his role as Neldor’s godfather.

And yes, Taeral truly was the dark realm’s Iolas like that. He had been best friends with Neldor’s dad and adored his mom.

“I won’t forgive him!” Neldor bellowed. “Ignoring the fact that Tamsin is my *mate* and he pulled this shit on her *once again*.” He pointed at Hudson. “That dragon has been our biggest ally and help. *Me personally*, he has helped time and time again. He is my damn friend, and Onas had the balls to threaten him and his family like he’s the boss of our future queen.”

“What does it mean?” I sighed when no one seemed to know what to say.

“It’s like the mark your dog gave him,” Iolas answered. “Except it’s not just an insult or misdeed against a fairy or family, but all of Faerie.”

I blinked at him a moment and then looked at Neldor. “Shave his whole fucking head.”

Neldor threw back his head and burst out laughing. “And you said she wouldn’t approve. Seriously, you guys think her too sweet because she’s not cold like a normal royal or because she is Meira’s daughter, but she will gut people first of

any of us.” He beamed at me, letting me know it wasn’t an insult. “I adore that about you.”

I watched as he walked over to Hudson and offered him Onas’s braids, Hudson looking like he didn’t want them.

“You accept the crime was as severe as Prince Neldor is saying by accepting them,” Iolas explained. “And that is not public knowledge. You are in the loop because you are Tamsin’s mate.”

Hudson swiped the braids faster than I could see after he heard that. “Shave his fucking head.”

“I agree,” King Xavier, Queen Sasha, *and* Darby all said.

They looked at the vampire and he simply shrugged. “Hudson is my friend too. We’ve pulled each other out of shit and watched each other’s backs for years now. I’m fuming Onas threatened to cripple his dragon and did this to Tams as well. Shave his whole everything. Public flogging of the git too.”

“Ooooh, do we do those?” I asked... A little too hopefully.

“No,” several people answered at once, Shael continuing. “We haven’t in hundreds of years.”

“Damn.” I shrugged when people gave me shocked looks. “He won’t listen to me. He won’t listen to any of you. I was kinda hoping some public shaming would get his head out of his ass.”

“That’s the braids and haircut,” Neldor explained. “Plus, Onas is the one who best shakes off the mob mentality and easily swayed opinions of the general public.” He sighed when people gave him shocked looks. “Yes, yes, there is a nicer way

to say that, but I'm still miffed I've been degraded to only Tam's possible baby daddy."

"Salty. You're validly salty," I told him, winking when he snorted. Hey, I would want people to update my vernacular if I was frozen for twenty years.

Plus, it always tickled Izzy and me when refined and perfect Prince Neldor spoke in slang.

"If I was making this call and Trigger had done something so heinous," Xavier hedged, bringing us back to the problem ruining all of our mornings. "I would have him imprisoned for at least three months. I would also demand he no longer be head of the Rothchild family."

"I agree with that last part," I muttered. "He can't be top commander anymore. He should be demoted even, but I don't know if that would make him *worse*."

"I think demoting him on top of his braids being cut off would push Onas not in a good way," Stefanie admitted. "But why do you not want him imprisoned?"

"I think he would be radicalized," I admitted, sighing when the commanders gave me horrified looks. "Where would we send him? Not to normal prison, he would be in danger. So we would send him to Sanaur."

"Oh no," Sasha gasped, catching on first. "With all the elders and ancients who think you're their property? That's—no, he can't be allowed to be influenced by those monsters any more than he already has been."

"Exactly." I sighed and glanced at the commanders before walking over to Onas and healing him a bit so he could wake

up. Once he did, I gagged and froze him so he couldn't figure out his hair yet. "So let's address the flying so we can focus and you can all see you're idiots."

Several people snorted, but most of the commanders were frowning, completely believing they were in the right on this.

I focused on Shael because I liked her even though she believed she was right on this. "I agree with the way fairies handle flying *in general*. It's a good plan, and you've never had any deaths because of the system. That's amazing. Even dragons have had a handful according to Hudson. So I'm not knocking the system or shitting on traditions."

"But?" Shael sighed.

"Your decision this time is purely selfish." I nodded when most of them flinched. "You believe down to your soul that if I die, Faerie dies. If I'm crippled, it would cripple Faerie."

"Yes, we included the bigger picture in the decision, Your Highness," Morgan agreed.

"I understand," Sasha muttered. "If I may?" She waited until I nodded. "She's saying you didn't separate church and state from your decision. Those are your *beliefs*, not rules or facts. No one knows what happens to Faerie if she dies, it's never been tested. I've met many fairies who do not believe that. Some even believe that Faerie would thrive better if the royal bloodlines died out."

"Well, let's not push that belief," Neldor drawled.

I agreed with him on that one.

"Of course, but the point is, not everyone agrees on the outcome. It's a faith-based factor you put in your government-

driven decision. You wouldn't be the ones to decide for Tamsin if you weren't the commanders. That means your beliefs cannot affect the decision."

"Exactly," I said, nodding to her in thanks and taking back over. "All you did was let your judgment be clouded and people talk more shit about me. I'm out of control. I need Neldor to curb me. Even my most trusted supporters don't have faith in me. All because you believe I'm too powerful and will implode and your planet will die. You have to hear how crazy that sounds, right?"

"It is to your ears, but it is what I believe, Your Highness," Talila answered. We didn't get along, but I appreciated her always being honest with me.

"Now take that belief out because it's your belief and not fact and tell me to my face all of you wouldn't change your answer on me flying," I pushed.

Taeral sighed and I knew I had him at least. One by one, over half started nodding.

"I don't know," Talila admitted when I focused on her. "Even if I take that out, people are injured during their training, and what would we do if it was you? There is no queen to work with the heir like normal. I still think it's too big of a risk."

"She has a demigod as a father, Talila," Iolas drawled. "You're splitting hairs. If we had included him like *I* wanted, there would be no damn risk. Instead of a safe, controlled environment, she went on her own like I worried she would after the bungee jumping and kitesurfing. The fact she's waited this long shows she has patience none of us do."

I didn't see it like that, more I resented my wings like Hudson called me on.

“So it's time to end this nonsense and start her in a real training program to—” Iolas demanded.

“No,” I cut in, shaking my head when Iolas, Neldor, and a few others started to argue.

Except Hudson. I felt his upset and grief he would lose this with me when it was bringing us back together.

Silly dragon, he should have known better than that.

I went and stood right in front of him, wrapping his arms around me. “This is my flying team. You had the chance to let me be a fairy, but you denied me that *again*. Fine, that was your decision and this is mine. I trust Hudson, and he will push me to do my best *safely*. It's now our thing as mates. If that upsets you, too bad, and look in the mirror.”

“Damn right, shorty,” Hudson chuffed, River riding him hard hearing that from me. He kissed my neck and hugged me to him tightly. “I'll be the hottest teach you've ever had too.”

Everyone winced given Julian had been my teacher as well. I chuckled, knowing the dragon knew that and was being a shit.

“So now that the topic is resolved and won't be an issue again, let's deal with Onas,” I said, ignoring the upset from the commanders. They would absolutely bitch about me learning to fly from Hudson.

Again, they should have done it themselves sooner than. They couldn't have it both ways always.

Jerks.

Neldor wanted to interrogate Onas under runes to answer some questions first. I agreed and relief filled me when the commander swore he would never have really hurt Hudson. He just wanted to scare the prince and see the possible ripples of his rash decisions and giving me what I wanted because he wanted me back in his bed.

Asshole.

“I would never risk Tamsin,” Hudson snapped. “Even if we never got back together or never had sex ever again, I would never risk hurting her.”

“I know, River,” I whispered when he started chuffing.

“I’m going to eat that fucker one day.”

“He won’t be as tasty as a shark,” I teased him.

Hudson’s parents didn’t know about that yet and were floored that I’d let Hudson eat such a priceless animal, especially in dragon form that would waste meat.

“I love him,” I muttered as if that said it all. “River was doing all kinds of crazy flying to help me.”

“It was fun.”

“Good, we can do it again,” I said easily as I tilted my head and stared up at him. He gave me a sweet kiss and then we focused back on Onas.

My stomach growling interrupted and I would have sighed, but I heard it echo.

Neldor shrugged. “I didn’t eat after training. We’re growing fairies still.”

“Food is almost here,” Shael said after looking at her phone. “So what is the punishment, Your Highness?”

I shared a gaze with Xavier and he nodded for me to go ahead. “Shave his head. I know that’s big, but I want it to be. He is now the lowest ranked commander, so not a demotion, but he lost his top place and has to defer to every other commander instead of him thinking he’s the fucking boss.”

“Well done,” Sasha praised.

“He will be confined to Faerie for six months during his suspension,” I said after thinking a bit more. “He left our world and started trouble in this one, speaking like he was the voice of us, so he’s grounded from coming here. Unpaid suspension and with a work detail.”

“Work detail?” Taeral hedged.

I explained what that was, not for him, but a few of the commanders didn’t know it. Taeral had simply been asking what the work detail would be. “Onas is a cranky fucker, and part of that is because he always heads up the dark stuff. I fully believe that goes hand in hand as we toss all the corruption shit and interrogations to him.”

“Yes, and I’ve seen it affect him, but he always demands it as well because he knows it best,” Talila said with a sigh.

“Well, it’s turned him into a complete asshole and dangerous to have the voice he does, so we need to reassign it all. He might be the best, but none of us are bad at it. It will take more time, but that’s fine. Onas is about to fall over the edge and it’s way past time to pull him back. Which is why his work detail will be the repopulation of animals program.”

“Making him work with nature and be outside instead of in the prisons and interrogating people sixteen hours a day or more,” Stefanie muttered.

“I would be the world’s biggest asshole then too,” Sasha commented, giving me a look that was a big problem.

Except we had big problems all over the place.

“It was needed when everyone was riding us for the councils to be released or show our proof,” I grumbled. “But we do need to do better. We can assign more Guardians or whatever. We should have one day a week the assignment be to help the repopulation or growing extra food. They need it.”

“Agreed,” several people said at once.

We had started that but well, more shit happened, and we had viable leads for Underground and blah, blah, bullshit and adulating. It was always a lot.

“In six months we should have a lot more animals, especially the big ones,” I muttered. “And Onas will personally present one animal to each Vogel to eat in dragon form for threatening their family. Plus, Xavier and Sasha can have a shark. We were talking about needing to cull them anyways, but everyone doesn’t know that.”

“Again, none of this is done publicly, just our family and fairies?” Sasha checked, nodding when the commanders did. “Yes, there is too much upset and unrest to make this public. So many dragons were happy you took out Berman, Alec, and our *council* that even the liars couldn’t say you overstepped. But if they find a gap in our alliance, they will.”

“We can’t afford that either,” Shael sighed, before shooting Onas a nasty glance. “I’m going to kick you in the balls as well.”

Glad I was starting that as a new trend.

No, not really, but at least everyone agreed with my decision and Xavier and Sasha were pleased with the punishment.

And the chance to hunt a shark.

The look of thanks Xavier gave me was big as well because he had another chance to spend time with Sasha.

Yeah, yeah, I was a softie and wanted them to reconcile. I truly did. They were the best couple I’d ever met, and I selfishly needed them to be okay so I had faith and hope in love.

Especially when I had five idiots to deal with.

A few weeks later, I was sitting down to deal with another problem with a dragon royal, but this time it wasn't the fault of fairies.

But it might require some cleanup after I killed this fool in front of me once I heard what he wanted.

I sat back in my chair and couldn't hide my shock. "Fuck you."

Juan adjusted his neck but let out a few chuffs to let me know he was just as pissed now.

Good.

"Your Highness, you have to at least consider his request," Shael said gently.

"No, I have to of leaders. He's not a fucking leader. This is just bullshit, and I'm pissed we're even having this conversation." My saying that chilled Juan out some which confused me.

"I am my parents' named heir, that makes me the Crowned Prince and I can make the request then," he explained. "It puts me on the same level as my mother as queen consort and Alpha mate."

"So any firstborn of any pack can make any request of me?" I asked, thinking that was bullshit. "No, Professor Rosini

said only leaders.”

“Correct, but he is considered one with a position now,” Shael explained. “The packs are different than the royals. King Xavier’s brother could make a request as his second.”

I opened my mouth but then closed it and nodded. Right, I did remember that. “So you being named officially takes that power away from your uncle? It was your uncle, right?”

“Yes, and between us so you get I’m not using this frivolously, my father named me earlier than normal because my uncle was one of the people who wanted to push Hudson. He thought we weren’t utilizing you as we should and wanted to start making requests.” He shrugged as if saying there was one power-hungry douche in every family.

Fair enough.

Except I would probably have preferred his uncle’s requests as opposed to what Juan was asking me.

“This isn’t fair to ask me as the ruler or Faerie,” I rasped, hating myself for the tears that still burned in my eyes and my voice cracking. “This is personal and really not fair. Especially when you’ve *blamed me* for—”

“I was wrong,” Juan cut in. “I’m sorry, Tams, really.”

“We aren’t friends anymore,” I snapped. “Don’t call me nicknames and try to—you’re here as a prince already using something political for your personal gain.”

He cleared his throat and nodded, accepting that. “You’re right, and I’m sorry for that too.” He blew out a slow breath. “Look, I wasn’t wrong that too much is always about you and I felt my friends weren’t there for me because they were busy

chasing you, but it wasn't your fault. I was wrong to blame you.

“It was really wrong to blame you for how my parents were acting, and I'm sorry for that too. I still resent you for it and—I'm not perfect. I can't—I've tried to be logical, but I'm hurt and I resent you. If you hadn't come into our lives, a lot would be different. That's not fair of me but well, fuck, neither is life.”

I nodded as he spoke. I could actually understand all of that, and I hated him less for admitting that. “You blamed me for what happened to Mason. It wasn't my fucking fault.”

He was quiet several moments. “I didn't at first, but I did let his parents change my mind and listened to them. I was wrong for that and I'm sorry I blamed you. I don't understand all of it, and it did make sense that maybe you having multiple mates made Mason's...”

“Unhinged obsession and stalking of me confuse him?” I pushed.

“I wasn't going to say it like that, but...” He blew out a harsh breath. “I don't know. I didn't realize they were as racist as I thought. They didn't say shit about you being a half-breed to me which is ridiculous.”

“Glad you didn't go that far over the edge,” I grumbled, but really meant it. I had liked Juan once, stuck up for him even. It hurt he didn't do the same when it came time and then turned on me. “Did you even get the real story?”

He nodded. “I got Lucca to tell me everything that night and how you almost died after. I tried to ask Hudson about it

but well, he burned me with fire as is his normal greeting now unless at royal functions.”

“I’ve told him to stop,” I defended. “You did a lot of damage shitting on me and making me—you weren’t being fair. I understand you resenting me, but you weren’t fair as you shit on me. Hudson’s a good person and believes his *friends* when they tell him things. You were being a selfish douche.”

Juan shrugged, anger in his eyes I was saying this in front of people.

Yeah, well, fuck him. He deserved much worse. I should have told him to fuck off and shove any request out of spite, but the fact he was asking me something in my nightmares was even worse.

“I made it clear when I agreed not to have Mason sentenced to death that I wanted him to have the chance to get better but far, *far* away from me. You’re asking me to go see him. After accusing me that I went to see him to fuck with him and set him back. A less trusting person would think you’re setting me up to be the villain here. Again.”

I felt better when Juan’s guards winced, probably not having understood the layers.

“I’m not, I swear it,” Juan whispered. “His progress has stalled. I’ve talked to his doctors, and they don’t think they can move forward unless he sees you and apologizes. I *know* this is too much to ask and my parents are going to fucking beat me, but I’m begging you. Please, I want to save my friend.”

“You’re assuming it even would. You understand you could completely traumatize *me* and it wouldn’t help him. It’s

not a math equation, but they're *guessing*. Even I know that about mental health and traumas. You could traumatize the heir of Faerie and your ally to make him even *worse*. You need to understand that and not blame me."

He sat with that for several moments. "You wouldn't intentionally hurt him so—" His eyes went wide when I snorted.

"I still have nightmares, Juan. All I've been through and I have nightmares about what he did to me. I almost died. I would have if Lucca hadn't found me. What he gave me was toxic to fairies. The recovery was horrible and—"

"You can't ask this of her," Wyn growled, sighing when Shael shot him a look. "I'm sorry, Commander, but she is too traumatized. She's crying even talking about it. This isn't what the requests are supposed to be. This is hurting her even listening to it. That's not okay."

"It's not," Juan accepted, shocking all of us. "I know I'm being a rat bastard here. I do." He gave me a pleading look. "But you know you would do the same if it was Izzy. If she went off the rails and you missed it, you would do *anything* to try and help her. I know you would. You would make a deal with the devil if it would save her.

"You're not the devil, but I would make that deal to help my oldest and dearest friend. Even if you hate me forever, I ask this because while I know it will probably traumatize you, you have the support system in place to recover. You have people in your life that adore you and will help you. No one can help Mason like that right now, so I'm asking you to."

He wasn't wrong, but it was still too much to ask.

“And I need to ask you not to take too long to decide because this will reach my parents’ ears and they will withdraw the request,” he added, sighing when Shael looked horrified. Apparently, doing it on his own knowing his parents would beat him was one thing, but doing it knowing they would overrule him was something different?

No, I didn’t see the difference either.

“I won’t let them do that, the request is the request and made,” I declared... Mostly because I did need the time to think about it. “But I have to think about it. I need to—I can’t decide this on a whim.” I growled when he tried to argue. “I want to talk to my fucking fiancé, okay?”

“Do you know how many times I woke up *screaming* and Darby had to hold me and tell me that I was safe? I want to talk to Julian because he’s *seen* my nightmares and relived what happened with me. Fuck, I even want to talk to Lucca and get information from a bear’s perspective. I think you’re a rat bastard for asking this of me. Full stop.

“I didn’t want Mason dead when he was unhinged, but I want him to hurt for what he did to me, Juan. I want to gut him still, but that’s not fair for someone mentally ill. I know that, but like you said, logic doesn’t always prevail. So I can’t promise what will come out of my mouth if *he* triggers *me*. And you need to understand that.

“I might actually consider this but not if I walk away more damaged. Yes, I have people who could help me recover, but I have *millions* of fairies who depend on me, not to mention fair folk and a whole damn planet. If I break, so do they, and

fairies are trapped for eternity in darkness. That is not more important than one man even if your friend.”

“No, it’s not, but I truly believe he just wants to apologize and see you’re okay. That his feelings aren’t what he thought, and it was something his brain made up out of nothing. It’s not like I’m asking you to have a meal with him. Five minutes. You can handle five minutes. You’re more than strong enough for that.”

I didn’t know that I was. I believed that Juan believed that since I heard it in his thoughts. He completely believed I would go home and cry and have a bad night after seeing Mason, but I could save his friend and that bad night was worth it.

I just didn’t know if that was all it would end up being.

I really didn’t see it going that way.

Everyone was against it. Darby said he understood if I went, but he couldn’t be near Mason and not try to drain him and that wouldn’t help me.

I completely understood.

Julian was of the same opinion but said he would go if I wanted him to. I heard in his thoughts he was scared he would tap into my magic once he saw Mason and obliterate the bear.

Yes, he actually thought that word specifically. I saw in his mind that he would make Mason explode like I did metal.

Well, fuck.

Lucca supported whatever I wanted to do but said his bear would kill him and he could hurt the hospital staff in the

process.

Hudson went after Juan when he heard what was going on. Like showed up at the Gui family vacation home and full out went for Juan. Luckily, it didn't start a real incident and Juan forgave it... As long as Hudson stopped dousing him in fire every time they saw each other because it was now a meme on social media and that wasn't okay.

I actually agreed with him and promised River I would beat up Juan as many times as he wanted, but he had to be good. Or no more sharks.

Apparently, River could absolutely be bought off with food. He asked me to put a barrier over us so he could get real sharks out of the ocean and humans would never know. Fine, I could bribe him with that.

Goof.

But in the end, I stupidly agreed to do it. Mostly because of the optics. If I said no, people would have one of two views on it.

One, I was being a petty bitch with Juan and that I didn't value the alliance with the dragon royals as much as I said I did.

Two, I was broken and couldn't handle accepting an apology from someone who had wronged me years ago.

And that was dangerous.

Very, *very* dangerous given how many enemies I had.

So I agreed.

I really was a fucking moron some days.

A week after my meeting with Juan, I was seeing him again which normally would have made me grumpy, but I was too busy being terrified at seeing Mason. I had been having nightmares every night and the people close to me were worried.

Hell, I was waiting for Julian to go after Juan after experiencing my nightmares a few times.

He still might once this was over, and I wasn't going to stop him.

When it was time to go, I was glad I'd pushed to have people I trusted on my detail. They all looked worried and ready to pull the plug on this if anything remotely went wrong.

"You didn't really think I would sit back and not involve myself, did you?" Neldor drawled when I couldn't hide my shock he was there. He snorted when I shrugged. "Yeah, not happening. I'm not letting you go there without me."

"Look, I get you're mates, but she's stronger than you," Juan cut in. "And you are a wild card."

He smirked at Juan. "I am because I don't give a flying fuck about you or your friend, but only *her*."

"And he can stop me," I muttered under my breath. I nodded when Juan gave me a disbelieving look. "He figured

out how to tap into my magic as my mate. We'd be at an impasse, and he has more magical knowledge than me."

Juan was not happy to hear that, but his reaction made me realize Neldor was the perfect person to have come.

"Thank you," I said to Neldor, shocking everyone... Including Neldor. "My guards and his guards won't interject because they would get caught up in the political storm." I adjusted that when my detail looked affronted. "I wouldn't *want* you guys to. It's not your fight, but I can't see it clearly. Juan is here advocating for Mason. I should have someone for me."

"If that's what it takes to make this happen, I'm good with it," Juan easily agreed, shocking all of us.

Even his security.

"I don't want you hurt, Tamsin. I want to save Mason, not have your mental break on my conscious. If Neldor being there gives you strength, fine, let him be there."

"That's a change from my being a wild card," Neldor hedged.

"You are, but you're not an idiot." Juan shrugged again as if to say there was nothing more to say on that.

Fair enough.

We headed out and everything was okay until it was time for me to walk into the room Mason was sitting in.

And then I had the mother of all panic attacks.

"Minute," I wheezed, leaning against the wall and closing my eyes. "Need a minute."

“You cannot put yourself through this,” Neldor growled. “Don’t do this, baby doll. My heart can’t take you doing this to yourself. You tried. You came and you tried, but I’ve never seen you this scared. Fuck the bear and you tried.”

“I can do this,” I argued, my voice sounding distant to my own ears.

I could do this.

I totally couldn’t fucking do this.

Neldor’s attitude changed from worried to *pissed* in a flash and I didn’t understand why. I was trying to make my mouth work to ask, but then his magic flared and he froze both security details.

And went into the room Mason was in.

Oh. Fuck.

I forced myself to turn around and at least go over to the window to view the room through the two-way mirror. Juan was standing there as well and frozen, but I caught him looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I hadn’t realized I was shaking until then. My whole body felt like mush.

And not in the good way.

“Do you know who I am?” Neldor asked Mason.

“No,” Mason answered, barely glancing at him but focused on the door. “Where’s Tams?”

I actually slapped my hand over my mouth to keep from puking hearing him call me that again.

“Do not *ever* speak so familiarly about her,” Neldor seethed as he leaned on the table and made Mason focus on

him. “She is Her Royal Highness, Princess Tamsin Vale to you, you piece of shit.” He didn’t back down when Mason let out a soft growl. “Do you get me? You don’t ever speak so informally to or about my mate.”

That got Mason’s attention. He did a double take and darkness filled his eyes.

I unfroze everyone because I wanted my detail to help Neldor if need be. That was ridiculous given he was a million times more powerful than Mason, but I was scared after seeing that darkness.

And so was Juan. I heard him swallow loudly, so clearly he’d never seen this side of his friend.

“You’re not her mate,” Mason bit out. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not the liar here,” Neldor chuckled darkly. “But I’ll tell you what, if you can pick out Tamsin, I’ll leave and let you stay with her. If you can’t tell her from glamour, then we continue this chat how I want.”

There was so much in that statement that my mind spun out. I couldn’t tell what was going on because I was still panicked at going in there, but I knew Neldor. I knew him well enough to know there were layers to what he said and his plan. He always had something to his plans and chose his words carefully.

The door opened next to me and it startled me so I jumped, but I couldn’t see who was going in since the door opened towards me.

My eyes went wide when Ara and another female of my detail walked into view... And they both looked like me in the

mirror.

That was what Neldor meant. He didn't say one of them would be me, but if Mason could pick me out.

I gagged Juan magically and he shot me a shit look. So he had been planning on saying something, but maybe wasn't going to bust it? Or he was pissed I wasn't playing fair?

Fair was for fairytales, and this was my fucking life.

"I can't tell when she won't talk," Mason argued, something dark moving behind his eyes.

That I'd seen before and I flinched away from the mirror. It was how he'd be when he didn't like my answer or tried to corner me into something, pushed too hard. I had given him the benefit of the doubt, but now I saw it for what it was.

And Mason wasn't a victim. He wasn't twisted because he was mentally ill... He was simply twisted. Neldor had caught onto that somehow and was busting him.

But what was I missing?

"I don't want Neldor to leave even if we speak," the other female guard said, trying to sound like me. Or maybe they would hear her as me. I didn't know how that worked as a glamour.

"Neldor, why are you butting in?" Ara asked, sounding pretty much like me. "You're going to make people think you're the boss of me and you're not."

Mason chuckled and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yeah, the choice is easy. Hey, Tams."

Both fairies changed back and smirked at Mason. Then they turned to Neldor and bowed, asking forgiveness for speaking so informally with him and not addressing him properly.

“No, thank you for helping me and your future queen,” Neldor forgave. He smirked when steam about came out of Mason’s ears. “We haven’t officially met.” He extended his hand. “I’m Prince Neldor Donovan, the only living royal of the dark realm and fated mate to the future queen of Faerie, Tamsin Vale.”

I think every person held their breath to see how that would go over, but Neldor wasn’t done yet.

“Oh, and Queen Meira approved of the match and had us betrothed.”

Yup, that did it. Only Neldor could piss people off as fast as I could.

Sometimes faster.

Mason launched for Neldor, but the fairy was ready, putting up a barrier that the bear crashed into with a snarl.

“As much as I would *love* to fucking end you and you attacking me would give me every reason to, I want the truth out first,” Neldor said with a purr. “And I don’t want Juan to shit all over my mate anymore.”

“She isn’t your mate, she’s *mine*,” Mason growled.

“You know she’s not,” Neldor chuckled. “You know it. I heard your thoughts. That’s why *I* came in here and not Tamsin. I didn’t trust this or Juan to see the situation clearly. And the first thought I caught was you hoped my mate was too

scared to have her telepathy on because you aren't allowed a telepathy-blocking charm like you used to use around her."

I felt the floor fall out from under me and almost fell when my body went weak. Ara caught me in time and hugged me to her, whispering I could handle this and I needed to hear the truth.

What had Neldor said in her mind?

I could be impressed how he already managed that so soon into his telepathy rune training.

"Come on now, fess up," Neldor pushed, smiling darkly at the bear.

"Of course, she's not my mate," Mason blurted out, his eyes going wide in horror.

"Yeah, see, you agreed to have the conversation I wanted if you lost, so I can't get in trouble for this either," Neldor taunted. "And the conversation I want is with you wearing a confession rune. So no more bullshit between us."

"Fuck you. You're not her mate. I will be," Mason snapped.

"I am her mate, and you won't ever be. Darby would never—"

"The leech is dead the moment I'm let out of here."

Neldor threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, I would put money on Darby for that fight. He's very protective of his fiancée." He smiled brightly when Mason frowned. "They're engaged. Tamsin's father gave his blessing and Tamsin accepted."

“No, you’re lying. You would never allow that if you were her mate, and a demigod can’t want a leech near his daughter.”

“I congratulated them both,” Neldor corrected. “And I meant it. I have my own valid issues with vampires because of my history with them, but Darby is an exceptional person. He’s helped me immensely to see vampires are more than sharks and brainless when blood is involved. I think he’s great for my mate.”

“I’ll fucking kill him when I get out of here,” Mason repeated.

“You’re never getting out of here, dipshit. She said you could get help instead of dying, but there is no cure for a psychopath, is there?” Neldor laughed again, which shocked me. “So you knew, huh? You know you are a rare and genuine psychopath.”

“I suspected,” Mason said against his will. “I fit the parameters.” He ignored that and focused on what he wanted. “I’ll get out of here. Juan will make sure.”

“Juan used his last ounce of power to get Tamsin to come today, but I blocked her when I learned the truth,” Neldor argued. “You’ve used that trump card for the last time.”

Mason snorted. “Juan will do whatever I want, he always has. He’s so desperate for anyone to care for him, he’ll be loyal until his end if that’s what it comes to. His parents set him up to make him a prime target. He’s never good enough for them. They always praised Hudson and gave attention to just about anyone else but Juan.

“He’s been so neglected and unloved by his family, seen as a disappointment next to his *amazing* king father, that he’s never going to be whole. My friendship made him whole enough to keep going. It always has. He won’t let me waste away in here, and the moment I get out, Tamsin will be mine.”

I gave myself a healing rune before I threw up.

“But it was always fake,” Neldor pushed. “You don’t really care about Juan.”

“He’s useful, that’s it and always has been. He gets me into the right circles and out of that fucked sloth and their backwards mindset.”

I barely noticed when Juan leaned heavily on the glass. He probably felt as nauseous as I did, but right now wasn’t about him. I would be selfish because he put us in this situation.

Then again, this might help me more than hearing Mason was sorry ever could have.

After I blew out my liver drinking for a week or so.

“Even Juan deserves better than you,” Neldor said, shaking his head. “But I want the leverage I need. You faked it when you stopped eating, right?”

Mason snorted. “Of course, I did. This place is so easy to manipulate. They’ve been trying to get Tams in here for a while, but the fairies blocked it.”

That was news to me, and for once I loved the commanders and their overprotective nature.

“But Juan listened and gave me what I wanted. I’ll reward him. Once I own Tamsin, I’ll make sure he’s rewarded. There

don't need to be so many dragon kings. There aren't even as many dragons as fairies from what I hear. He can rule all of the areas, and Tamsin will make it happen when I tell her to."

"Oh, so on top of it, you're going to control my mate? Yeah, good one." Neldor did a double take, so clearly it was something he heard. "You knew. You knew who she was."

Mason slowly smiled at Neldor, and for the first time I was seeing the depth of his crazy. "Vale is the surname of the light fairy royal line. Yes, I knew. The red hair and how clueless she was is what threw me. But once I confirmed she was a fairy, yeah, I knew she would be queen and my mate."

"How did you know that and everyone else was so clueless?" Neldor asked, nodding when he heard the answer in Mason's thoughts before he spoke.

"Don't," Ara begged under her breath, clearly understanding I was thinking of turning on my telepathy. "We're listening too. Don't listen to this."

I nodded, glad I was off the hook actually.

"You find the most interesting things in books," Mason said with a shrug. "I did a project on fairies my freshman year in high school. Extra credit, and I remembered the name from that. I wasn't the only one who did that project even because it was a standard option for extra credit. *Lucca* did it as well, but he's always been an idiot.

"So all of those people could have put it together but didn't. It never occurred to the brainless masses because she was an unknown and worthless in our society then. Because they assumed she was born of no one and they're so much

better than everyone. But I didn't. I knew the name and saw the fight in her like fairies all supposedly had.

“I just needed to verify she was a fairy and then she would be mine, an unbreakable bond no one could argue with. And people would sweep under the rug how it happened so it didn't shame her realm. The queens belong to the realm rather than the boss of them like dragons. I read that in a few different places how the queens weren't heroes but everyone's victims, just like Tamsin was. Is.”

This day was going to be in my nightmares for a long, *long* time... Mostly because Mason wasn't wrong.

“I bet those are the books that call fair folk our slaves and have no idea of the real bonds we have with them. How I feel physical pain if a hobgoblin is upset around me.” He nodded when Mason snorted. “You stalked her. You had to have seen how she would give the hobgoblins anything if they wanted.”

“She's a softie. She's desperate to be loved and wanted. Why else would she have put up with us always crashing her plans? She loved it. She wanted the attention. It's why she's always on the news and all over social media.” Mason frowned. “That will stop when she's my mate.”

“I can't keep watching this,” I said under my breath. “I can't hear him say that.”

“What do you need, Princess?” Ara asked just as quietly so Mason didn't hear us through the wall. “I will tell Prince Neldor.”

I was about to say nothing, but then there was something I needed that might help. Not for me to settle with Mason or

what he did to me, but with Lucca. “Make him shift. I’ve never seen his bear.”

“You haven’t?” Juan yelled, wincing when I jumped and rubbed my chest. “He said that was what messed with him most. That you were affectionate with his bear.”

I blinked at Juan and shook my head. “Everyone knew I thought Lucca’s bear was Mason. That’s why I forgave the warning signs, because I thought he was my jogging buddy. It was always Lucca.”

“Hello, Tams,” Mason said, clearly hearing I was there. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’m not everyone’s victim, certainly not this piece of shit.” I pulled away from Ara, reaching deep for strength and using my anger at what he’d done to me—all of us—to make my body move. I opened the door and used my magic to wrap Mason in a barrier like I had Lucca before. “Show me your bear, you fucking lying sadist piece of shit.”

He opened his mouth to say something that would probably haunt my nightmares, but instead let out a roar as he changed to a bear right there.

And his bear looked *nothing* like Lucca’s.

The difference was like night and day, and finally I felt like I could separate them in my mind and nightmares.

The bear raged against the barrier, clearly wanting to go for Neldor now that he was more lethal.

Instead, Neldor used his magic to puppet Mason. I watched as the bear froze and then started dancing in jerky

movements. The look of shock and horror on the bear's face was what made it so fucking hysterical.

“I got you, baby doll,” Neldor whispered as he moved closer and hugged me to him, turning us so we could both see the bear. “Look at this clown. He should be in the circus, not your thoughts. Never in your thoughts again.”

If only life could ever be that simple.

But at least Juan was right, and I did have the support to handle what I needed to no matter how difficult it was.

However, Juan didn't have the support in place to handle what he had to. That was clear from what even Mason had said about his parents. Which was why the moment I left that room, I texted Lucca and Hudson that things had taken a turn and we were giving Juan a pass for the day.

"He's coming with," I said to my security, nodding to the dragon prince. I gave them a look it wasn't open for debate and they all accepted it.

"What about the psychopath?" Ara muttered.

I didn't have an answer for that.

Neldor did though. He snorted and looked at one of the doctors. "His stay here is over. So is the deal that was worked out with Tamsin. He *knew* who she was, and that changes everything."

The staff were smart and didn't argue or get involved.

"Wyn, take the bear into custody and talk to Shael," Neldor ordered before looking at the staff again. "You have video and audio on those cameras?" Someone must have nodded because he sighed in relief. "Good, give it to me now. The only copy. This is now fairy business and our investigation. We will decide what gets aired, not leaked. I suggest there be no leaks."

“Yes, Prince Neldor,” the doctor said, hearing the threat in Neldor’s voice.

More happened, but I zoned out. I blinked, and suddenly I was sitting outside on my terrace with Chief and his pack trying to give me love at once.

“There you are,” Stefanie said gently. “How are you feeling?”

“Too much at once,” I admitted. “I’m spinning out.”

“Which is why I’m going to give you a light sedative rune,” Calarel said gently.

“No, but I would like to drink. A lot. And food. Nothing that reminds me of Mason. I just—don’t turn it off. I can’t push this down anymore. I know the wound was reopened, but maybe it can really heal this time. So much has changed in my mind.”

“Yeah, all the booze in the world sounds good,” Juan agreed, his voice hollow.

Right, he’d come with. I glanced around and didn’t see Lucca or Hudson, so not much time had passed then.

Maybe?

I went right over to the outside bar as I put the rune on to protect myself from human alcohol. I started setting it all out on the counter along with glasses and the ice bin from the small freezer out there. I glanced up at the shocked faces and shrugged.

“This is happening. Accept it. Either get mixes so we’re not having straight booze or food to soak it up, but get the fuck

out of the way and leave your judgmental looks and comments at the door or I will teleport you under the ocean.”

“Here, here,” Juan muttered as he came over and checked out what I had. He picked an expensive tequila and poured us both doubles. He waited for me to grab a glass before taking his and tossing it back. “Of all the fucking outcomes I’d worried and stressed over, I didn’t see this one in a million fucking years.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I admitted. “I’ve spent so much time being—people were trying to host fucking vigils for him to spite me. All of this rubbed in my face and brought up so often—I could never heal. And it was all a lie.” I reached over to grab the bottle and pour more, but Neldor snagged it first.

“I’m making you a pitcher of lovely drinks,” he promised. “Why don’t you change into a swimsuit and take a dip to wash off what you’re feeling? Juan, someone can get you shorts or —”

“Whatever, I have boxer briefs on,” Juan muttered, yanking off his suit jacket and tossing it on a chair. “Yeah, wash it off, but I need brain bleach which isn’t really a thing.”

No, but there were runes that would alter memories, and fairies excelled at them. I wouldn’t do it, and no one should even if he was in pain. Taking the memory away wouldn’t always take away the pain and would simply make someone feel they were missing something. I couldn’t see things turning out any other way.

I wasn’t lucky enough for them to.

I changed, and there were huge sub sandwiches when I came back downstairs. I knew it was Neldor. We'd found that place together so nothing to do with Mason or anything that could make me think of him.

Then again, all I could think about right then was him.

I dove into the pool and did a couple of laps just to... I wasn't sure, but my body needed the movement. I got out and accepted the towel from Stefanie and a large, pretty blue drink. I sat on one of the plush outdoor couches and mumbled a thanks when my favorites were brought to me.

Juan sat across from me on a chair and had his own spread. "How young does being a psychopath start?"

"I think it's something you're born with," I hedged, thinking back to what I'd ever read about it. "Yeah, I think their brains are different, so that has to be from birth or really young as they develop?"

Juan shook his head. "We met in first grade. I wasn't in school in Asia because of the threats against my family, and I was in a well-protected smaller school. I was terrified and everything was so far off from what I knew, even if I knew English. I just remember that fear and Mason. He walked right up to me and said he had a tail too, so we could be friends."

That sounded so adorable, and knowing it was fake cut through my heart.

"How could that not be real?" he whispered. "Is a six-year-old able to manipulate like that?" He raised his head and met my gaze, tears streaming down his cheeks. "How can that be a lie?"

I swallowed loudly and took a long sip of my drink. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t respond right away. “But you believe it was possible, don’t you?”

I sighed. “I can’t be objective on Mason. It would be stupid for me to even try.” I met his curious gaze though and reminded myself that I wasn’t friends with Juan anymore. But I did have the answer he needed. “I was in a group home for a bit around that age and I saw liars all around. I saw kids lying that they got good grades and weren’t troublemakers when they were.

“I saw so much fakeness it was gross. It was for survival though sometimes as the group homes could be more dangerous than foster homes. It was because kids wanted families and to be loved and maybe thought they could change into a good kid if loved. I don’t know but yes, I believe manipulation is possible that young.”

He shook his head and tossed back half of his drink. “I knew so few things in my life, but one of them was Mason was my best friend, that we were bros through everything. I feel like I don’t know anything now.”

“Yeah, I’m feeling a bit of that too,” I whispered. We were quiet as we drank that pitcher and another but each had a few sandwiches and bags of chips to soak it up.

“What is he doing here?” Darby demanded as he came storming over towards us. He slowed down when I shook my head, asking him to back off.

“What are you doing home?” I asked instead.

“Neldor called. I’m sorry, I was in the middle of a meeting and didn’t get the message until it was over.”

“You didn’t have to bail on your internship for this,” I argued.

“You’re day drinking. Yeah, I think I needed to, *agra*,” he said gently. “I was planning on coming home early anyways. I’m sorry, I thought the meeting was after lunch.”

“I bumped it up so she wouldn’t bail,” Juan chuckled darkly and then threw back his head to laugh, not sounding all that sane as he did.

I didn’t blame him.

“Don’t make her tell you,” Neldor said quietly, handing Darby his phone.

“Where did you take Mason?” I asked. “I don’t ever want him in Faerie, not after learning he planned to rule and abuse me forever.”

“He’s locked down at one of my family homes and will never enter Faerie,” Neldor said firmly. “Just until the trial and he’s executed.”

“What the fuck happened today?” Darby whispered, snatching the phone from Neldor.

Lucca showed up loaded with bags that smelled good. He barely got to set them down before Darby and Neldor pulled him away.

Which left Juan and me alone with the booze. We were done with the tequila by the time they returned, and I was pretty sure that bottle started at half full.

Hudson showed up next with Sasha and White. They didn't even get filled in before Julian came strutting over to me in another sexy suit and looking like he was going to murder anyone who upset me.

Neldor got them all to watch the video of the meeting before they came near us.

"Your Highness, your parents request you come home," one of Juan's detail said quietly.

"Well, they found out," Juan chuckled darkly. "And we all know it's not a request."

"Fuck your fucking parents," I interjected, snorting when the Gui's guards and the Rothchilds with Hudson and Sasha stared at me like they'd never seen me before. "Yes, fine, we're allies, but I don't like them as *parents*. I've said that before, and they were assholes to Juan after we hashed things out over winter break.

"I might be new to having a parent, but Lageos is always on my side. Always. I'm *far* from perfect and he sees my flaws, but he is always on my side. Hell, even when I met the Guis, they were poking at Juan and I defended him. That's so fucking shitty, and clearly enough people know it that they put him on the radar of predators.

"They also didn't protect him from a psychopath. I get there was lots of shit with invasions and more, but you can't pick on your kid for not being amazing when you were responsible for how they grew up. If you dropped the ball, *you dropped it*. So they're double assholes as parents, and it's always fucking annoyed me. Tell them to shove their spanking him."

“No, please don’t tell them that,” Stefanie muttered.

I gave her a dry look. “They’re going to tell the moment they see them if they aren’t texting it already. You guys wouldn’t keep that quiet either.”

“Fine, but please tell them at least that she’s inebriated.”

“I’d tell them that sober,” I drawled, shrugging when Juan snickered.

“Of course, you would.”

Julian came back then and looked lost. “I’m not going to ask how you are because clearly you’re a mess. And that’s okay. Anyone would be a mess right now because this is real and serious so whatever you need, okay? If you want to run away from home, I’m driving the car. If you want to get drunk, I’m pouring the drinks.

“If you want to kick us all out and have some peace and quiet, that’s fine too, but I’ll be here when you’re ready. Or if you want to be distracted, I’ll ramble about anything and everything you want. Any or all of those options are on the table all the time because there’s no right way to deal with this, and it’s whatever you need.”

I bobbed my head as he talked, falling in love with my sexy warlock all over again. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

“We were careful. It always bothered me how he figured it out when we were so careful. I was screwing Hudson all over the place and he didn’t know. Darby figured it out because... I forget because of tequila. It never made sense he remembered one offhanded comment Von Thann made.

“But I was careful. Every time someone busted me like White or even Mel saying she knew from hugging me, I adjusted how I behaved and was careful. We wore runes and charms always. I was so, *so* fucking careful.” I started crying in the middle of my ramble. “I was so disappointed in myself that he’d caught me because of the portal.

“I yelled at myself and beat myself up all the fucking time that I pushed for answers about my people and to try and find them instead of being smarter and not using the portal at school anymore. I resented fairies that I had to go through that because of them and the pull to fix the darkness.

“I’ve had so many nightmares about his stalking and feeling stupid I missed the camera. But none of it was—he always knew. He knew *before me*. It’s like bile in my heart that he knew who I was before I fucking did. All my life I wanted answers, and of all things he did, I think I hate him the most for not telling me the truth when he knew. How fucked is that?”

“It’s not,” Julian promised as he tried to sit down next to me, shocked when I pushed him away.

“That suit is too expensive to get snot all over. Go change, idiot.”

“Yes, my sweet fairy,” he chuckled. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“How about some Italian?” Lucca offered. “I got you that lasagna made with mushroom ravioli instead of lasagna noodles.”

“That shit is fucking bomb,” I moaned, holding out my hands for it while chanting “gimmie, gimmie.”

Julian came back out in cargo shorts and a tank top looking as delicious as my meal. Hudson was in swim trunks only and so was Lucca the next time I looked. All I needed was Neldor and Darby to lose some of what they were wearing and my day would be looking up for sure.

I blinked around when people burst out laughing... And Darby started taking off his suit.

“You projected that to everyone here, Your Highness,” Ara explained.

“Of course, I did,” I sighed. “Expect more of it with me drinking.” I dug into my food and glanced over to Neldor and about swallowed my tongue as I watched him undress. “How is Onas adjusting?”

“Better than we expected,” Stefanie admitted, nodding when I focused on her. “He was burnt out. He was far too burnt out and—he was horrified at what he’d done. He said he didn’t even remember some of it. He just heard you were flying with Prince Hudson and without a safety net and his mind exploded, picturing you permanently crippled or with a broken wing.”

“Most are impressed that he’s not hiding his shaved head,” Neldor said as he plopped down next to me wearing only his nice dress pants. He picked up a fork and tried my food. “That’s lovely. Shit, well done.”

“Go change,” I grumbled, elbowing him away. “And don’t eat my food.”

“I ordered six portions of that, Tams,” Lucca teased.

“That’s just an appetizer,” I whined. I thanked Julian when he brought us a pitcher of drinks and poured me one. “Pretty.”

“Yes, that is the important part with drinks,” Julian chuckled as he sat on the other side of me. “I blended in some fae fruit and we’ll call it healthy.”

“Thanks.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek before holding out a bite of my meal for him.

“Shit, that’s bloody divine. That’s not just ground beef in that sauce.”

Lucca snorted. “It better not be for the price. It’s ground steak.”

I elbowed Neldor again until he got up with a huff. I glanced up and saw Taeral was there. “How did it go with Luke?”

“He knew he was being followed,” Taeral answered with a shrug. “He doesn’t want our help and said to stay out of it or we could draw more attention. If you need him, still contact him, but he won’t be dropping by any events or giving us warnings anytime soon.” He nodded when I sighed. “He doesn’t want to be saved. It’s a shame.”

“We have lots of people who need saving and want it. I learned fighting the ones who don’t is a fruitless endeavor that leaves me in more pain.”

Juan snorted, apologizing when people looked at him, but he only focused on me. “You say that—I’ve heard you say that lots, but you pushed people to be saved all the damn time, especially at school.”

“That’s different,” I defended. “They were so damn sheltered it was more like being part of a cult where they can’t make the choice until they’re deprogrammed, Juan. I’m not kidding. There are so many women there who fully believe they are nothing but breeders and whatever their fathers tell them to be. It’s disgusting.”

“At least a quarter,” Stefanie muttered. “It’s incredibly disconcerting. Supe society used to be like that before we left, but the women didn’t believe it. They fought and pushed back all over the place. The amount of women who truly believe the crap about being weaker is terrifying.”

“The lies are easier to sell when more people say them, especially when they’re the ones who are supposed to love you,” I said... While keeping Juan’s gaze.

He did a double take and then focused on his food.

I got other updates about the harvests coming in from Faerie and the food situation picking up. Every dragon royal had ordered the nobles to help out as well, and we were picking up extra meals every day. Nothing big or over the top, but if they owned a damn castle and had a huge staff to run it, a couple dozen extra meals wouldn’t be much of a burden.

And they were all willing to help. Even the ones in Africa and Australia. Some to get in good with us and others because they hated that Berman and Alec had taken over.

Figuring out who was whom would take some time and not our job. At least not until it was asked of us.

But the situation was doing much better and that made me happy.

“The nobles are all in agreement with Alea’s proposal that the money from your first auction be used to help work on infrastructure in Faerie, namely water,” Stefanie added.

“Well, that’s something. I didn’t know we could all agree on anything,” I admitted.

“It was a damn good proposal,” she chuckled.

That it was.

Alea was a hobgoblin that had worked for my mother and was actually Ryfon’s cousin who I’d known from Artemis. I’d made Alea basically my manager of Theripolis since a city that big needed one and I was busy focused on all of Faerie. It was a great honor, and she was thrilled for the chance to shine and show how far hobgoblins could truly soar.

And she was showing it all right.

We were rebuilding hobgoblin and low-income housing in each major area of Faerie that was open, now having at least one or two projects done. Along with that, we had solar panels going up to get energy to the city via the stones I had created with Julian and Lageos. Lageos and I also made ones for bringing in clean water and taking out sewage waste.

However, there hadn’t been much available clean water for the hobgoblins and “slums” before the war, and with the damage from the war, most was in shambles.

Alea’s proposal was to expand the water reservoirs near the cities and put more collection areas out by farmers that stored underground. It took much less magic to move water for crops than to use a water rune to make water. For cute little spurts of magic with runes was nothing. But to give a whole

wheat field the hydration it needed with water runes was more than a normal family could handle.

Fair enough and good to know.

The proposal had been layered and detailed, putting in stages and ideas for extra expansion if the first steps went well. Basically, it was a damn good proposal as Stefanie had said.

Honestly, it was awesome and better than I could have come up with. I was glad that people agreed and we were all facing the same direction on what came next for Faerie.

For now.

I was too sauced to catch much of the updates after that. The second auction of my paintings had gone well and the money was ridiculous. It was all the assholes and bad people this time, so we got a lot of leads with the cloaked Guardians watching everything. Even more than we'd thought given more came out since it wasn't such a spectacle.

The amounts would calm down, but people would always want some form of magic from the future queen of Faerie, so Katrina estimated that the paintings would never fall below a million in value. At least not for the foreseeable future. That was insane to me but yeah, I could keep painting for that.

I was mostly focused on Neldor as he sat and ate while talking to Lucca. They were having a fun conversation about something. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but my gaze just kept finding him. I couldn't get over what he'd done for me with Mason.

"I think he really has feelings for you," Juan mumbled, his gaze on Neldor as well when I glanced at him. "He's always defending you at school. I thought it was because of all you've done and toeing the line like we do as royals, but no matter what people throw at him about his family or mother, he never cracks.

“And I don’t even know the details. None of us do, but it’s clear his mother did something bad. Still, he doesn’t crack or show emotion. But with you? Oh yeah, he blows like a fucking volcano. I thought it was playing nice, but he might really like you, Tams. For real.”

“You don’t think he wants power?”

Juan didn’t answer right away. “I did at first. I think he did at first, but that’s changed. He gets mad when people suggest it now. I think he saw the baby you were when he was unfrozen, and as he’s adjusted with all of it, he’s realized you grew up to be smarter than him. Almost every fairy adores you.”

“We toe the party line pretty well,” I drawled.

“Fairies do, but my family had friends in the dark realm mostly, so that’s what my parents hear. And they sing your damn praises. They didn’t at first. They wanted you handled and Neldor to take over but... You converted them, girl. You really did. It’s impressive.”

“Don’t go making me think you’ve lost your mind by praising me,” I drawled.

“I never said you weren’t impressive, simply a pain in my fucking ass.” He sighed and tossed back his drink. “And I’ve also said I’ve not been fair about it. I haven’t. I know that. I just can’t...” I shook my head.

“We’re not perfect,” I forgave... Somewhat. “I feel that way with Mel still. I forgive her, but when push comes to shove, I still see her coming at me that I was the enemy when I did what I did to save her life. It’s hard to let her back in.”

“Being a ‘plus one’ isn’t the life Melody Rothchild wants,” he drawled. “She has such a messed up view on that and I get it, I have messed up views too, but Trigger Fucking Rothchild is *revered* by most dragons. More than Xavier because not a single Vogel was lost. We lost a few Guis and our knights are awesome. But not one Vogel. So her view is messed up too.”

“It is and I can’t change that. I can’t change the fact that millions of fairies need me. I don’t *want* to be the center of attention.” I shook my head when he snorted. “If you only knew, Juan. I fucking hate it. I *hate* it. I wish so often I could go back to being *Mel’s* sidekick. I wouldn’t even want to be Hudson’s queen if things were different. I wanted a...”

“What?” he asked, truly curious. “What did you want?”

I sighed and poured myself another drink. “I would tell the truth right now, and this isn’t something I should tell you when I haven’t even told Darby.”

“That’s fair.” He snorted. “I hate how good of a person you are sometimes. Seriously, even drunk, you’re so fucking fair.”

“Want me to beat your ass again and give you a reason to be pissed at me instead of your bullshit?”

He snorted again but into his drink this time. “No, because even my fucking dragon was impressed at how well you fought. Bitch.”

“Asshole.”

We shared the first smile we had in so, so long... Even if it was a drunk one.

“Where is he?” a deep voice demanded.

“Well, the fun’s over, time for the reckoning,” Juan chuckled darkly before tossing back the rest of his drink.

King Dae Gui appeared and locked gazes with the head of Juan’s security detail. “How could you allow this to happen?”

“They’re not the boss of our heir,” Queen Sofia muttered before glancing around and finding me. She curtsied to me. “Your Highness, I apologize for barging in and acting in this manner.”

King Dae did a double take and winced, quickly bowing deeply. “Princess, I’m very sorry. I didn’t realize we were coming to your house. I thought my son—I cannot apologize enough for what he has done and for him.”

“Wow,” I whispered, shaking my head before reaching over and pouring Juan another drink and staring down his father.

Stefanie cleared her throat. “The princess has been drinking and—”

“Don’t act as badly as they are,” I cut in. “I’d do this sober, Stefanie. And you have no right to try to excuse my behavior. I’m mine.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” she accepted, kneeling down where she was. “I wasn’t excusing it. I was giving context I would want to know if I walked into this situation. All I was going to add was you invited Prince Juan to join you.”

Yeah, sure she was.

I glanced between Guis. “I’m not the one you owe the apology to.” I gestured to Juan with my head. “It’s him.”

King Dae flinched. “With all due respect, Your Highness, that’s—”

“Which mean’s ‘keep my nose out of it,’ but I won’t because I’m the only person who can stick my nose in it and not get in trouble for it.”

“I do respect you and it does involve you, but I will handle things with my son as I see fit. And we are sorry how he acted towards you on behalf of our family. He shouldn’t have asked for what he did.”

I sat back on the couch so my arm was over the back and folded my legs up. “Actually, Juan was very careful in choosing his words. He made it damn clear that he was writing the check for future him, not the current leadership.”

“You caught that, huh?” Juan chuckled.

“I’m smarter than most give me credit for, but you’ve never treated me like an idiot. As much as you wanted me to go, you couldn’t be an asshole and force me. You gave me the out and we both know it.”

I nodded when the Guis looked like they weren’t buying it.

“He told me you wouldn’t have allowed him to ask. He knew I could pull the plug by telling you. So I told him this deal was between us. The request was. So it’s not between my family and yours. This was Tamsin and Juan.”

“I’m glad to hear that you aren’t upset with our family, but Juan still did it knowing it would upset me and over the line of

his authority,” King Dae said. “He is my son and heir, and he will answer to me for that.”

“According to my advisors, it wasn’t over his authority,” I chuckled darkly. “So the answer is you’re just really shitty parents.” I shrugged when people couldn’t hide their shock, most unable to make their mouths work.

Except Juan.

“Why would you push this?” he whispered, his hand shaking on his drink. “I’ve been a fucking bastard to you at times. I’ve not been fair and a fuckhead. Why would you be on my side when I’m never on yours?”

I waited until he looked at me, ignoring the tears in his eyes. “Because I’ve been in your seat. They weren’t my real parents, but I’ve been where you are, and all I wanted was for one person to say they were the assholes. I would have given *anything* for one adult to stand up and say I was worth more than I was being treated.

“That I wasn’t *lucky* that they took me in. That *they* were lucky to have me. That I wasn’t fucking theirs like they owned me. That I was *mine*, and it was their *duty* to take care of me and give *me* what I needed. And I’m sorry I didn’t say this sooner, but I didn’t know I was anyone back then and scared out of my mind.

“Even when I knew more, I was scared and had too much to lose and worry about. So I’m sorry I put myself and my people first, but now I’m saying it as the adult who can.” I took in a slow breath and let it out. “Juan, you deserve better than they treat you. You are your own. You aren’t *theirs*. You aren’t just a stud horse or one in a line of kids.

“You have the potential to become an amazing man and someone we all have seen that spark in. I didn’t go for Mason. I went for *you* because I don’t hate you, and I understand a lot of why you lashed out. I got so angry because it hurt Hudson and he didn’t deserve that. I know I didn’t but fine, we’re complicated, but he’s always had your back.

“So hear me when I say that your family doesn’t deserve you. That they haven’t done their job in taking care of you. They are lucky to have you and haven’t appreciated you. They haven’t seen that spark because they’re selfish and care about their image and power most. That’s not your fault, that’s their shitty parenting.”

I met King Dae’s furious gaze without fear.

“And I can prove it.” I smirked at him and opened a portal to Lageos.

He came through immediately, looking up from something he was reading and froze when he realized something was going on. He glanced around and fear filled his eyes before he found me. “Are you okay? Who am I killing or at least maiming?”

I smiled at him. “I’ll be okay, I promise, Dad.” I nodded. “Talk to Neldor. He’ll fill you in. And he did good. He did really good and saved me big time.”

He let out a slow breath and glanced around again. “Okay. What can I do to help?”

“I would like that burger with the grilled cheese buns Julian got us before. You’d like it. One for Juan too. We’re forgiving him today.”

“Whatever you need, Daughter.” He teleported to me and kissed my hair. “I love you. You are the strongest person I know and will make it through this too.”

“Thank you.” I kissed his cheek and watched him walk off, tears filling my eyes as it hit me in the chest how hard it would be to lose him one day. I quickly wiped them away and focused on the Guis. “Your son went through the same horrors I did today. You came in here as king and queen. Where the fuck were the parents worried about their kid?”

They both winced like I’d stabbed them in the heart, and I was glad because I’d wanted them to feel that.

Well, emotionally at least. They deserved that.

“Thanks, Tams, but honestly, you just made the blowup even worse,” Juan said with a dark chuckle. He pushed to stand and faced off with his parents. “They’ll say whatever now to save face and act like they care at all, but the moment we’re through the portal I’ll be an ungrateful embarrassment who made them look bad.”

“Watch your—” King Dae started to say, but I silenced him with magic.

Fuck him. My house, my rules.

Fine, I still would have done it anyways, but this was Juan’s moment to speak.

“It will all be my fault and I humiliated them. I’m an extension of them and everything I do is a reflection on them, which is hysterical because I’m also supposed to be a man and make my own choices, but let’s be real, and the only

acceptable decision is what they want. But yeah, it will all be about cleaning up my mess and how this falls on them.

“That I don’t deserve them and I’m so ungrateful. That they’re tired of everything I do reflecting badly on their perfection when really their whole image is being perfect, loving parents. So it’s bullshit. That’s the catch twenty-two. It’s complete bullshit because half of the time they can’t keep us straight and treat us like a fucking set.

“And it’s to the point I have no fucking clue who I am because I’ve never had the chance to find out. I’m a slut because I can turn all the noise off during sex even if people laugh about it later or I hate the image it gives people. But that’s acceptable as a prince sowing his oats, right?” He scrubbed his hand over his head. “It’s all such fucking bullshit and I’m so done.

“I can’t go through one more lecture of how fucking *blessed* I am. How lucky I am.” He gave his parents a hard look. “I’m not fucking *lucky* to have been born to you. I’m not your fucking robot or doll you can just mold however. You fucking answer for me or commit to things for me and never, not *ever* give a shit how I feel or how things affect me.

“The only person I thought ever gave a shit about me for real turns out to be a godsdamn psychopath! So no more bullshit threats of kicking me out or disowning me. You never would because of how that would look to the world and we both know it. But I will.” He took in a slow breath and let it out. “I disown you both. I’m not a fucking Gui anymore.

“I wash my hands of this family and *blessed* life without love or anyone giving a fuck about *me!*” He turned to me with

tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just realizing part of why I hated you. You feel a lot of what I do, and for some reason fate gave you five people to love you and a father that would blow up the world for you.

“And I have no one. Your realm believes you owe them your very soul if they need it and so do the Asian dragons. My family at least because I was so *lucky* to be born first. They own me. I’m theirs, never mine. I’ve always hated that, and you were the first to really deal with the same but instead of it quietly eating you, you fought back and thrived.

“I didn’t see that was part of why I started hating you until today and I’m sorry.” He turned back to his parents. “But I’m not going to let it eat me. I’m not going to be everyone’s fucking victim or be a bastard to one of the few people who saw Juan instead of a prince. I’m out. Pick one of your set of sons who would be blessed to take over. I renounce my title.”

Everyone was frozen in shock as Juan went for the portal, but I couldn’t control my telepathy when drinking and I caught something that sent chills down my spine. I teleported Rafe to Juan and made it clear to watch the dragon and take him someplace safe. He knew the list of my properties and where they could go.

Once he was gone, I took my magic off of King Dae and glanced at Stefanie. “Let’s get one of the royal healers to check out Juan, okay?”

“What’s wrong with my son?” Queen Sofia worried.

I met her gaze with a cold one. “Maybe he’d still be your son if you’d come in here asking that instead of pissed. Either way, he just said you’re not his family anymore and I’m not a

gossip. I think our business is concluded today, so you know the way out.” I smirked when King Dae looked like he had something to say. “Unless you’d like a problem with fairies?”

“No, Your Highness, I’m sorry we interrupted your day,” he said, before turning on his heel and storming out.

Yeah, I didn’t blame him for not bowing or anything either. I also didn’t care.

“You have balls the size of all the planets,” Sasha said with a whistle after the Guis and all of their guards left, even the ones who had been there for Juan.

“They fucking piss me off,” I bitched before looking over at Hudson. “For now, we give Juan a pass. Seriously, just give him a damn pass.”

“What did you hear that you’re calling a healer, shorty?” he worried.

I glanced around and was glad no one was there that would run their mouths. “That he didn’t want to live anymore.” I held up my hand to hold off the million questions they all probably had. “I don’t know if it was now or before and an echo. It sounded like he said, ‘I don’t have anything to live for,’ right now, but I’m drunk. I sent Rafe with him. We watch him.”

“I’ll get him back,” Lucca said. “I’ll tell him you kicked out his parents and we’re on a time-out. Let’s get him back here.”

“See if that’s what he wants,” I hedged. “There’s a lot of confusion around me always, and that might be when we’re not watching. We won’t forgive ourselves if he kills himself.”

My voice cracked, and I felt my eyes overflow with tears before I realized it.

“It takes a *lot* for one of us to die, shorty,” Hudson said gently as he came and sat next to me. “You’re thinking of your human friend and it’s just not like that. We’ll watch him. There are other signs we can sense as well. Now we know. Assign a fairy to listen all of the time. Not to be nosy, but to be safe.”

That was smart and I thanked him.

But I was drunk and stupid, and the moment Juan came back I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. “Mason isn’t worth it. You’ll heal and we’ll fix things and you’ll find real friends. He’s not worth your life.”

Horror filled Juan’s face and then anger, but then he sighed. “You’re such a pain in the ass, but I bet you’re drunk and didn’t mean to.”

“No, and it kind of came out in surround sound, so I have no fucking clue if it was now or before or if my magic is being a bitch,” I admitted, sounding grumpy to my own ears.

Juan let it go and took his seat again, thanking me for letting him back and then being invited to stay with me. He seemed lost and also a bit freer. I wasn’t sure how it was all going to play out for him—or the backlash I was going to maybe face later—but right then I was happy for him.

And a bit jealous. He had a whole world of possibilities in front of him and I was trapped in my destiny.

I smiled at Darby as he sat next to me. Then again, maybe that wasn’t so bad. I had people who loved me and would make sure Faerie didn’t eat me. Fairies seemed to mostly be

on my side now and fair folk always had my back so yeah, things were definitely better now.

It was still too big of a responsibility that I wouldn't wish on anyone.

The burgers with grilled cheese buns came and everyone enjoyed them. I'd drunk so much by then that I had to stumble my ass to the bathroom. Neldor was in the kitchen mixing something when I finished, and I went over to him to see what he was doing.

He looked so damn good and I was so floored by what he'd done for me. I didn't even realize what was going on, but then we were kissing. It felt amazing and I loved his body pressed against mine. I wanted his hands all over me and to feel him inside of me.

"Fuck, you're killing me, baby doll," he groaned, leaning his head against my shoulder. "I know you're not projecting that on purpose, but like *fuckkkkk*." He cleared his throat and kissed my shoulder before moving away which confused me. He met my gaze and gave me a sad smile. "I'm willing to be a lot of things for you, but a regret isn't one of them."

And then he walked away with the pitchers of drinks.

"Shit, I'm turned on for you," Lucca said from behind me. "That was hot."

"Huh?" I asked, feeling light-headed when I turned to look at him.

"Yeah, you're trashed."

"Yup," I agreed after a moment.

He chuckled as he picked me up and sat me on the counter. “You jumped Neldor.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I used the other bathroom and came downstairs in time to see you jump him, you horny drunk. And he just turned you down so you didn’t regret him sober. That’s hot.”

“It is,” I agreed. “Shit, I think he’s serious about me.”

“I think so too.” He kissed my nose. “I’m sorry about today. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to handle going with you, but I’m really glad he did. Fuck, I’m so grateful he did that I...” He shook his head. “Do you think it will—do you think this will make things easier?”

I opened my mouth to say yes but then closed it, shrugging. I didn’t want to talk about it right then. Or maybe with him. That wasn’t fair when he’d saved me from Mason, but he hadn’t been there today and it was all too fresh.

In the long run, I thought I might be able to heal better now that I knew the truth about Mason. I didn’t know how the backlash would be though. Any new backlash would be horrible given how much I’d already suffered when I was the fucking victim of it all.

“Okay, sorry,” he whispered, kissing my nose. “Let’s drink and not think about it.”

Yeah, that was the best plan, at least as much as possible.

I went back outside and plopped on Darby’s lap. He gave me a curious look and I showed him what happened, making it clear in his mind that he wasn’t getting a blow job and hot sex because I’d jumped Neldor this time.

And he definitely wasn't getting a blow job from me anytime soon after how big of a neglectful dipshit he'd been.

"I did *not* need to see any of that," Lageos bitched. "I'm going to get more food and then I leave you in their capable hands."

I didn't realize what he meant until several people seemed uncomfortable or were laughing.

"You showed all of us that, shorty," Hudson drawled. "And the last time you were intimate with Darby like that."

"I need to be put in a fucking bubble when I drink," I grumbled, hiding against Darby as best as I could.

"Trust me?" Julian asked quietly. I felt his magic on me when I agreed and after a moment of him testing things, he stopped, so I was pretty sure he figured out how to lock me down.

Well, at least I could drink in peace without embarrassing myself anymore.

With my thoughts at least. I still had my actions and words to worry about.

And not just drunk.

I couldn't be objective when it came to Mason, so I made Neldor the boss of it all after I sobered up. He was my right hand and along with Shael as the highest-ranking commander, they could decide what to do and how to handle the situation. They hadn't been directly involved and had the best chance to handle it and stay detached.

That went out the window when Neldor saw the original case file and learned Mason had taken naked pictures of me that the police hadn't found.

So Shael was the boss after that.

The bear council originally gave pushback that the matter had been resolved and to leave it alone. That healing didn't go well and they were sorry that trying to heal Mason had triggered me but enough with dragging bears through the mud over one insignificant situation.

Wow. *Wow*.

And bad move. Shael was pissed that their sexist, stupid asses hadn't sent us that message but had said that publicly.

So in response, she held a press conference that she was disappointed in the bear leadership and that she'd wanted to handle this quietly, but since they clearly wanted to embarrass

the leader of Faerie, she wouldn't worry about embarrassing the bears anymore... And she didn't.

Not. Even. Close.

She played clips from the original meeting with Mason where Neldor busted him on so much and clips from Mason's interrogations since. She even added in clips of Mason's parents blaming me and calling me a half-breed among other things.

Needless to say the public was very much on our side.

But I realized I was setting a dangerous precedent for fairies by being so accepting of what happened.

And I was going to change that.

Every bear Alpha met in a monthly meeting with their council to discuss matters and issues in their community. The meeting for that month was three days after Shael's press conference.

Yeah, I took that as a sign too.

I crashed the meeting wearing a traditional—but casual—fairy garb. It was a romper with short shorts and mostly open back so our wings could be out. It had a halter top and a lot of hanging cloth from the top. At first, I'd thought so to protect from the sun, but fairies used runes to protect from getting sunburnt and liked the sun.

No, it was to help with bugs since it was mostly used in working the fields. Also, those hanging scraps of fabric worked well to wipe sweat when needed. Still, I wanted to make it a fashion statement and something other supes wanted since it was popular and common in Faerie.

Which meant supes would want it.

Yes, I was always multitasking.

For right then, it showed a lot of skin and I wanted that for the meeting.

I strutted right in like I owned the place wearing high heels, my revealing romper, and my hair wild.

And yes, I knew the meetings were recorded. The bears did it to be transparent like other human governing bodies even if they didn't do it live or show the whole meeting. I was counting on someone releasing this to try and make me look bad.

Or maybe because they were on my side and knew the bears would look bad. I could never honestly know what was in the minds of others when I didn't always understand my own damn brain or thoughts.

Right then I knew what I was doing and my goals.

The tone was set in the wrong way when some idiot stood and said, "This is a private meeting, Ms. Vale."

Bad call.

I teleported the guy to the light fairy hotel, and he could explain why the hell he was there.

And hopefully get a long fucking lecture about calling me "Ms. Vale."

I ignored the murmurs among the men—because there wasn't a single female Alpha and all the bear leadership was a sausage-fest—and walked right up to Alpha Rodriguez.

He stood and growled. “It’s unwise for you to be around me right now.”

I snorted. “Your ego needs to be checked if you think I—or any fairy—would ever be afraid of you.” I pulled back my arm and decked him with all I had, using only a sliver of my magic in the punch.

I wanted him conscious to hear what I said next.

I used my magic to force him to shift into a bear and held him in a barrier that was too small to be comfortable. It also silenced him, so I smirked when his mouth moved and nothing came out.

“You’ve run your mouth enough.” I snorted. “And women get the bad rap of being full of shit or talking out of their asses. It’s all you’ve fucking done and I’m done taking it. Apparently, *idiots* haven’t understood that I was being kind and giving you certain allowances as a grieving, wounded, and traumatized parent.

“No, *apparently*, you fools think it’s the standard now.” I snorted again. “It’s not.” I found the councilmen and stared them down, a few of whom were the ones who had spoken to Shael. “If you *ever* speak with any fairy with the dismissive tone you did to Commander Shael, I will permanently injure your bears.” I nodded when they couldn’t hide their shock.

The first to recover cleared his throat and dipped his head to me. “Forgive me, Princess, I don’t know what the commander told you, but that’s a bit—”

“It’s *not*. I was in the room when she made the call. I heard your sighs and cutting her off with whining that you

were busy. She was calling you about the leader of Faerie. Were you high?" I glanced around and channeled Julian. "Are you all having a laugh that you think that acceptable? It's not. I'm here to make it crystal clear that it's *not*."

I walked over to Alpha Rodriguez and punched the bear again, more than able to reach through the barrier since it was my magic.

"Here you're constantly harassing the victim of your son's crazy and she's *kind* enough not to fight back and you just keep running your mouth. On and on to the point people who hate me tell you to shut it. All your righteous indignation that it's somehow my fault and you've raised a *psychopath!* Your son is a confirmed psychopath.

"And you don't even try to apologize for all the ways you harassed me that it was my fault? Instead, you warn me not to be around you like this is once again my fault? Seriously, you have a major screw loose that I'm going to more than tighten right now, bear."

Just because I was trying not to cuss for once, I punched him instead.

No, I didn't see that as better than cursing, but it was in the supe world.

And I was the weird one?

I glanced around and found Ronald Von Thann, shocking everyone by nodding to him in acknowledgment. "Let's start at the top of the insanity you were spewing, shall we? I don't care what I or anyone from Faerie wears. You are *shifters* and

deal with nudity.” I gestured to what I was wearing. “This is a traditional romper fairies wear.

“If *you* cannot control yourself or your reaction to seeing my people in it, that is *your* issue. Any fairy could be naked around you and you, nor any other shifter, will make them uncomfortable or dear touch them. Lucca Von Thann has reminded shifters on campus time and time again that ‘they’re just boobs and dicks so don’t be an ass about nudity and embarrass shifters.’

“His father preaches that and beats it into any bear in his sloth. I’ve heard that from others in that sloth and that any disrespecting of women is not tolerated. You will *adapt* that practice going forward. If I hear otherwise, you will not like the outcome.”

“Forgive me, Princess, but you don’t have the authority to declare that,” a very pissed off Alpha stated.

“I do for the people of Faerie,” I purred. “*And* any who ask it of me.” I nodded when he flinched. “I am the head of the Faerie Guardians, and it is written into the bylaws of every council that any of their people can ask one of ours for aid. So I might not be able to kick all of your asses as I want until I’m queen, but I can still make you miserable and I will.”

“It’s her favorite pastime if you go against her,” Von Thann joked... While looking impressed.

Well, I hadn’t seen that one coming. Then again, the bear had hated all of the corruption and bullshit from the councils and leadership, so he definitely wanted to clean it up.

He simply wanted to have been the hero to do it wielding me as the weapon.

Too bad. Asshole.

“So enough with this crap that anything I wore confused your *psychopath* son. Or any man. Or woman.” I glanced around and gave them a hard look. “Or what we say or do. Control yourselves. Remember that my people are daughters and sons just like your daughters and sons. Unlike your people, mine have a princess with a temper and the ability to teleport you to the moon for a champion.”

I felt better when a few people swallowed loudly, clearly believing me.

Focusing back on Alpha Rodriguez, I let my wings out. “I am a full fairy. I’m not a half-breed. There is no such thing as a damn half-breed.” I got pissed and punched him again. “And that’s for everything you said about my deceased mother, you sexist, racist, *jealous* monster.”

“Jealous?” someone called out.

I nodded, smirking at Alpha Rodriguez and the rage in his eyes. “He’s jealous. He’s pissed how powerful fairies are. He thought bears would go up the power ladder with fairies gone and didn’t want us back. Now there’s a demigod known to the supe world and I’m his daughter and he’s *oozing* jealousy. That’s what his slurs are all about.”

“Idiot,” several grumbled.

I couldn’t have agreed more.

And yes, I punched Alpha Rodriguez again.

I turned and looked at each of the councilmen. “I want him removed as the Alpha of his sloth.” I snorted when they looked appalled. “I’m pissed you didn’t do it already and I have to be the one to suggest it. He, his mate, and next eldest child have *repeatedly* harassed me, the victim, that it was my fault and I’m a whore.

“I didn’t want to pull rank or use my position, but apparently *not* doing that has let insanity leak into minds, and people think it’s acceptable to treat fairies poorly. So let me correct my mistake. They publicly said this about the leader for Faerie. Yes, strip him of being Alpha and the family of their position.

“Do whatever you guys do to pick another Alpha—not of that family or blood—and kick the Rodriguezes to the curb. It’s ridiculous that Von Thann was the only one who said anything about this. And before I get any more crap that I’m involving myself where I shouldn’t, I’ve given you *more* than enough time to handle this internally. You didn’t.”

“Or what?” the head of the council asked after several tense moments. He raised an eyebrow when I didn’t reply, crossing his arms over his massive chest. “That was clearly a threat, so finish it, Princess. What happens if we don’t do as you request?”

I was up by him before anyone could blink and punched him much harder than I had Alpha Rodriguez. He hit the wall hard enough that the paneling splintered. I didn’t hesitate, grabbing him by the shirt and launching him to the middle of the room. I was already there when he landed, smiling down at him.

“That wasn’t a request, you condescending, insecure man. It wasn’t a threat.” I winked at him. “It was a fucking order. Do it. No threat. No asking permission. I’m telling you to do it.” I moved my foot to his chest and kept him on the ground... Much to his annoyance. “Who is next in charge after this fool?”

People glanced around, but after a bit they seemed to settle on one person in particular. He stood and bowed to me. “I would be one of the contenders to take the high councilman position, Your Highness.”

“I think you would be the one they’d pick after that response,” I said, meaning it as a compliment. “And you will be if this fool doesn’t get Alpha Rodriguez out. Unless you disagree with my position?”

“No, Your Highness, I have said as much from the beginning. From the first time he publicly slandered you after we learned you were a fairy, much less Queen Meira’s daughter, I said he should step down or at least take leave.”

“It’s good that there’s some wisdom still in this council.” I looked down at the guy under my foot and raised an eyebrow. “I would hate to clean up another council if this insanity continued.” I tilted my head and studied the man when he stopped struggling. “Now that was a threat. Do you see the difference?”

He slowly nodded and I let him up, moving over to Alpha Rodriguez.

“If you ever slander or publicly try to shame anyone from Faerie or her people again, it will be your last day alive. I gave you all the rope you wanted, and now you’ve hung yourself

with it by blaming me for everything when you birthed, raised, and defended a fucking psychopath who attacked the heir of Faerie planning on taking over the light realm.

“Do you understand these words I’ve spoken, or do you want them branded on your body magically and your tongue cut out permanently because you can’t control yourself to behave? Take a moment and think carefully because your very life depends on the decision you make. So you should choose wisely.”

I smiled at him before releasing the barrier without fear, practically daring him and his bear to try for me in front of all of those witnesses.

He didn’t.

Alpha Rodriguez shifted back and knelt, lowering his head to me. “I, nor my family, will never speak another word against you or any from Faerie again, Your Highness. I swear it.”

“That’s a good start.”

“However, I will not willingly give up my position. It’s not our way. If the council decides it, so be it, and I will agree with their ruling, but a bear doesn’t give up their position when they’re the strongest.”

“Well, you’re not only an animal last I checked,” I drawled. “And a good *leader* does what is best for their people. I don’t actually *like* confrontation. I hated having to come here today and start all of this.” I snorted when people gave me looks like I was crazy.

Except Von Thann. I did a double take when his eyes were almost full of pity.

He answered my unasked question. “You never start it, but you will finish, Your Highness. I was there in that meeting after you were hurt, almost killed. You weren’t about wrath and fury. You cared about plugging the holes and protecting fairies.

“You were scared for those you loved and didn’t want to draw attention to the situation because your friends—my son included—could be hurt. You’re here today because you’ve been told bears aren’t treating your people well because you didn’t make a fight of this. It’s a shame, but being an asshole protects your people.

“I hope you never fall into the traps some of us have and become the assholes we pretended to be to protect the people we love. I truly do. It’s a mistake many of us have made and fallen into thinking we were fine or were still acting. Then suddenly we become the monster we swore to never become and once fought against.”

I considered that, still hating him, but honestly hearing and understanding what he was saying. “I think if you see the mistakes you’ve made then there’s still hope, Ronald. If you want to make the change and be saved, then there’s still a chance as long as you can find that line again and step back over it. I can’t think there’s anything you’ve done that you can’t come back from.”

I left it at that, not there for Von Thann... However, there was one thing to address.

“I have also heard the nonsense that you all will have me in your back pocket because Lucca Von Thann will one day be a prince of Faerie.” I saw the worry from several as their eyes practically begged I not name them specifically. “Forgive me for laughing at you idiots but...” I burst out laughing. “Actually, no, I’m not sorry for it at all.”

I moved back over to the head of the council and stared him down.

He adjusted his neck and knelt before me, bowing his head as well. “We will handle our oversight and revisit the topic of Alpha Rodriguez’s leadership immediately, Your Highness.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I purred. “Also, if any of you are retiring soon or spots open up, know that Faerie will be backing Ronald Von Thann for the seat.” A fly farting could be heard from several states away people were so shocked, but I met Ronald’s gaze. “We hate each other and that may never change.

“*However*, you did what was right by your sloth and all bears. You did what was right by telling Alpha Rodriguez to stop his madness and call him out on it when others stayed silent. You were the first to condemn those puma shifters who demanded *blessings* of the heir of Faerie like I was a whore because people are allowed to speak of me like that.

“Fine, I’m an advocate of free speech, but we are also not democracies, and leadership hasn’t stepped up to condemn what they should. *You have*. You praised our corruption cleanups and ousting of illegitimate Alpha dragons. You have

used your power and voice to help supe society at risk to yourself and your position because it was the right thing to do.

“So we won’t ever be friends, but that’s a leader I’d back. You threw your weight around when it was right and so will I.” I glanced around at the group and teleported a folder to me that I’d prepared. “But I would recommend that you all pull your heads from your asses and educate yourselves a bit. I am not the first heir of a realm to have a fated shifter mate.”

“You’re serious, Your Highness?” someone whispered from my right.

I nodded as I waved the folder. “I am. I’m also not the first future queen to have multiple mates. Species did everything short of sacrificing virgins to get the heirs and queens of Faerie to take consorts of other species. And no, they never became kings or even princes.” I glanced at Von Thann. “And I bet you knew that because you never said Lucca would be a prince. Not that I remember.”

“I might have, but I knew he would be a prince consort if anything, Your Highness,” he accepted. “It’s insanity to think a shifter would rule Faerie.”

And yet he’d had some serious ideas of grandeur about the power he could have gathered too... But not anymore. I was shocked at what I heard from his head and in that moment, even in his own mind, he felt a fool to have thought some of the crazy he’d once had.

Maybe there was a path back for Von Thann after all.

But not a quick one.

I left the folder there, but it wasn't the only copy of what I'd found.

And not only from one ancestor. I'd struggled a lot with revealing what I'd found when I'd gone looking. It had been Neldor I'd gone to and talked it over with for hours. His advice had been simple.

“Normally, this would all be frowned upon, but what we're involved in isn't normal. It's so far from any normal Faerie has ever experienced that the rules don't apply, Tams,” he had comforted. “If your family was anything like mine—and I do believe they taught this as well—they would agree to do this. Protecting yourself and your future family has to always be first. Always.”

I knew he meant not at the cost of fairies or Faerie or whatever, but... I got it. We had to do what was needed to protect ourselves even if our hands got dirty or things were messy. I got that.

I got it more than most. I fully understood why the queens scorched the ground around the heirs and their families. I knew why Lageos wanted to do the same to me. I got it.

It simply wasn't easy to be the one to do it or out family secrets.

But of course, I wasn't the only one to do it.

Sneaky Prince of Darkness.

I sat down that night planning on seeing the news about what *I'd* done, but instead I was in for a shock.

“‘They offered me another suitor today as if a dress to show off at an event and discard after,’ she writes, ‘a

newscaster said as she looked over something. “They have no shame as they offer these willing, brainless men to be stud horses all so I might birth a shifter that will become the most powerful Alpha.

“The amount of men they have offered hoping that one new Alpha shifter will be born of me this generation is sickening. Men are worth more than standing at stud to father offspring for me. It is rare for a child to be born of an heir or queen to not be a fairy, but still they try for their ultimate prize of a shifter child born of their blood to a queen of the light or dark realm.

“The gifts are ridiculous. Why would I ever need so much land in a world I rarely travel to? I know they stole it from humans. Why can they not use this energy for something productive and to better their world and society? If they would educate their children more instead of this mentality that they have this one chance to rise above their station, it wouldn't be so disheartening.

“The poor who have handsome sons throw them at the heirs with promises to serve our families and Faerie for generations to come. I know that deal has been made in the past, but times were different then. Pressures to accept were different, and I cannot judge the queens before me. The rich are worse. Using a term like ‘dowry’ doesn't make it better.

“And I find it insulting. They offer me gold and jewels enough to fill ships and carriages for miles to take their son as my consort as if that is the price to be in my bed. The gifts to even meet me are—their world is a very strange place. We bring gifts when we visit as well, and it is common to bring

gifts when visiting, but a carriage of gold to see me in Faerie is unseemly.

“These men are the most insulting. The one yesterday who spoke to me of being the best choice for other women of his species after having bedded me was the worst. It excited him, completely ignorant that it made him a whore. I understand he was not worldly, but one must know what not to boast about and remain civilized. I shudder at the idea of having his child.”

“It’s astounding,” the other broadcaster said, shaking his head. “Hearing it directly from Prince Neldor’s ancestor is truly astounding. How our ancestors used to throw men at the heirs and queens of the light and dark realm is—well, it’s embarrassing.”

The woman who had been reading the passage snorted. “More embarrassing than how most in our society have treated Princess Tamsin like she’s the embarrassment when the gods have matched her with fated mates? I think we all need to take a long look in the mirror and reassess how we’ve treated that woman and our place in the world.”

Okay, maybe I couldn’t call Neldor the Prince of Darkness anymore.

Seriously.

A week before we had to head back to campus, I asked Lucca to spend some time in Faerie with me. Or really, I wanted to spend time with him, and part of it was in Faerie after learning he was dying to see something there.

We had breakfast, and then I brought him to a place I'd not been in a very long time for our second breakfast.

"Is it safe to be here?" he asked as he glanced around the dilapidated park in a bad neighborhood.

I snorted but then realized he was serious, clearing my throat. "This is where I used to play when I was a kid and yes, it was always this shitty." I sat over on the concrete bench and glanced around. "And there were normally drug deals going on right in the open and no one batted an eyelash. This place is one of my oldest memories."

"Why are we here, Tams?" he asked gently when I didn't say anything else for a few minutes.

I let out a slow breath and pulled out one of the huge bagel breakfast sandwiches and gave it over to him before taking one for myself. "I didn't understand the concept of hair well when I was young, like really little. The foster family I stayed with here used me as an income and didn't take care of me.

“Yeah, things were tight in a poor neighborhood, but they didn’t care and wanted the money. But they used to bitch about my mane. I remember that. I didn’t know it was my hair. My hair would get so tangled and frizzy that I had kids call it a fro, but I wasn’t Black and most of the other kids at my school were. So I got bullied if I said that because I was White.

“And who would teach me those things? People who didn’t care? Of course not. But I had a teacher say she was going to cut my fur for dough and I didn’t get that either. I did later and my color was exotic to be natural and curly. It was worth a lot to make a wig if taken care of. I know that because I had another foster parent sell it later. But I didn’t understand hair.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I wouldn’t judge you for that, cream puff,” he said gently, understanding I was trying to open up to him. “It hurts me that you suffered like that.” He cleared his throat. “I know my hair isn’t like most Black hair and—you’ve moved your hand from it a few times when touching it. I worried you didn’t like the texture.”

“I love it,” I admitted quietly. “I just didn’t want to be—I was thinking about the past. I realized I might... Dreadlocks scare me.”

“They scare you?” he hedged.

“Their real son hated me and said I should be like family, and did my hair like that and then his friends cut one—it was—I don’t—it—they trigger—”

“Hey, you’re okay,” he whispered, pulling me onto his lap. “Can we go somewhere else? I love you’re letting me in, but

you have too much on your shoulders always and going on to rip the wounds open like this, Tams.”

“I didn’t think I was,” I admitted, hugging him tightly. “I wanna leave here. I’m sorry.”

“Open a portal,” Lucca ordered my security as he brought me to them. “Anywhere quiet that she’s safe.”

I felt the tightness in my chest of a portal, and then there weren’t the busy city noises anymore and the temperature was different. It was quiet and cooler, a nice breeze. “Sorry.”

“I got you, Superman,” he whispered. “The past is sometimes your kryptonite. No shame in that.”

It took me a few more minutes, but then I finally felt like I was in my head again. “Sorry. I had a flash of a memory and realized I was sitting in the exact spot someone had tried to kidnap me from.” I rubbed my arm even if the scar was gone. “He held a knife to me and said he’d cut me if I screamed or fought. I still did and got cut.”

“Fuck, Tams. Someone tried to kidnap you?” Lucca said with a hiss.

“A few times,” I chuckled darkly. “Kids who aren’t cared about and are paychecks are super easy targets. Predators aren’t always stupid and know who to target. Neglected kids who the system doesn’t care about are the easiest ones to sell or be forgotten about.”

“Wow, okay, how you ever smile amazes me,” he mumbled, rubbing his cheek against mine to take the sting out of his words.

I felt the same some days, so I wasn’t mad.

I moved off his lap and frowned when I saw my hands were empty. “I ruined second breakfast. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, Princess,” Rafe said gently. “I’ve got someone getting more sandwiches. We ate some as well, so we needed to replace them.”

“Thanks.” I cleared my throat and focused back on Lucca. After a moment, I saw we were on the beach in Italy, my private beach, and felt easier. Good, I loved this place. I moved off Lucca’s lap and faced him, putting up a barrier over us. “Can I see your bear?”

His eyes filled with shock but then worry. “I don’t want to scare you after you saw him.”

“I finally saw his bear. I know the difference now.”

He nodded, but I felt the worry pouring off of him. I understood it. I felt it too, but I needed to try and move past this. It had been such an issue between us because his bear was jealous of how I treated Hudson’s dragon and fought me for dominance because I wasn’t as nice to him.

Which wasn’t fair when it was Lucca’s fault for hiding it was him jogging with me but well, that was life.

I had forgotten he would need to get naked for my request. I did a double take when he stood and pulled off his shirt... And then I about had to fan myself. Fuck, Lucca was hot.

“Like what you see, Tams?” he teased.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, the ocean is pretty.”

“Uh-huh, sure, cream puff,” he muttered under his breath. “The barrier’s up, right?”

“Yup.”

He squatted down in front of me in only his boxer briefs and leaned in. “How do you do that?”

I swallowed loudly and met his gaze. “Do what?”

“You just look at me and I get hard. Just that little bit of interest from you and I’m hard and desperate. I get looks all of the time and never care. But you? You barely notice me and I’m wound up and ready to go. How do you do that to me?”

I ignored most of that and focused on what was most important to me. “You get looks all of the time, huh? Are you posting more thirst traps on Instagram and other social media?”

“Not a one,” he whispered as he ran his nose along my cheek. “But I’ll send as many as you want to you. I’ll send video. I’ll do a fucking live stream for my cream puff anytime you want if that gets you hot.” He touched my hand and gave me a moment to pull away, but I didn’t. Then he moved it to his cock and groaned. “He doesn’t even get hard for anyone else.”

“Oh?” My mouth went dry and I got wet remembering how good it felt to have his dick inside of me. My hand seemed to have a mind of its own as it moved to stroke him.

“He hasn’t gotten hard for anyone else from the first moment I saw you, Tams,” he whispered in my ear. “And fuck, I got so hard when I first saw you. Your bright blue eyes were a zing to me and I was sunk. Getting to know you, seeing the real you—no one else could ever stack up. I’m yours. Fuck the gods. I’m yours because you’re you and I’m me and we fit.”

“I’m scared everything will be like last time,” I admitted.

“I know,” he whispered against my lips. “I know and that’s my fault. I’m not the same guy. You’re not the same person either. You won’t let me step over the line.”

I didn’t believe that for a second, but clearly I was doing something right if others now thought I wasn’t such a pushover or doormat.

“I want you to be the boss of me. I’m not such a mess. I want us to grow together and it’s not—I’m finding who I am, and that’s okay since we’re doing it together. No rush. No labels. We’re just us.” He moaned and kissed me. “Okay, I can’t fucking think or make sense anymore. “I’ve been dying for you to touch me for so long. Please, just *please* make me come, Tams.”

Shit, that was hot. I moved my hand faster and even slipped it in his shorts so I touched his skin. He pushed me to lay back and moved over me as I stroked him faster. Not long later he came with a grunt, and I shivered feeling it all over my hand and wrist.

Damn, he’d really needed that.

“Fuck, that was better than before,” he panted in my ear. “I want to return the favor, but I know you’re trying to let me in. Let’s do what you need and then later let me show you how much I appreciate you letting me in. Please? I want to fucking eat you out tonight. Shit, I dream of—let me show you? Let me show you how I’ve changed and what I want has changed?”

“Okay,” I whispered, really hoping we could be different this time.

And I didn’t mean just Lucca. Maybe I could be and see that I was worth demanding more or not simply blowing up or throwing fits but saying when things hurt me like a mature adult.

Or something close to it. Maybe.

Then again, I hadn’t been running, and that was a big fucking step in just a few years. I had to keep remembering that and give myself more credit for it.

Right?

Lucca quickly took off his boxer briefs and shifted into his bear, plopping down in front of me and clearly letting me take the lead.

Except I kinda choked on my prepared speech and idea. Getting sexual after freaking out threw me, and I couldn’t switch gears as fast as the stupid bear. But I also wanted to look at him, see the good bear and my buddy now that I’d seen Mason’s bear.

I reached out and petted his arm, smiling when he immediately laid down so his head was on my lap. “Cheeky brat.” Still, I stroked him, chuckling when his tongue hung out of his mouth like he was trying to be a goofy dog and make me laugh.

Which it did, and I felt at ease again so I could talk.

“So like I said, I didn’t understand the concept of hair well,” I whispered as I petted him. “Something happened with that family. I don’t really remember, but I think they were

doing something illegal or maybe were part of a gang? I don't know, but the police came one night, and I ended up in the hospital because they took one look at me being a hot mess and thought I was hurt.

“I was malnourished, but there was a super nice nurse I met that night who gave me a real shower and cleaned me up. She didn't just brush my hair where it hurt but conditioned it and used a pick to get every damn tangle out. She hummed to me the whole time and told me I would be okay and I was a good kid.

“I asked if I could go home with her, and she said she wished she could, but she took care of her mom and that was more than she could handle already.” I sighed as I pet him. “I feel horrible now that I realize how hard it is to tell people no in bad spots, but I cried and begged her to keep me. I promised to help out and—I didn't understand.

“She had to help other patients, but eventually I fell asleep. I woke and I was holding a small teddy bear. I knew it had been her. I'd never had a stuffed animal or toy before.” I smiled at the memory. “It was really the only one I had, but I don't really count it since it was taken from me right away, but that was why the Squishmallows meant so much to me when you did that.

“I remember his fur being so soft, but because I didn't understand hair and fur or any of it, I kept saying he was hairy. So I named him Harry Beary.” Lucca chuckled, leaning up and kissing my cheek as if saying he thought that was cute. I kissed his nose and went back to petting him. “So I was kind of thinking I might name you Harry.”

He sat up so fast I swallowed a yelp and moved out of the way. He jumped to his feet and darted towards the right, and that was when I saw one of my detail coming. I nodded and dropped the barrier, the fairy flinching when he saw Lucca as a bear.

“More breakfast, Princess,” the fairy said as he handed over the bags to the bear.

“Thanks.” I smiled and let Lucca grab them before putting the barrier back up. Even if we were on my property and secluded, we were still on a beach and people could always be watching. I wasn’t sure what was going on or Lucca’s reaction though.

He shifted back and set the bag down before kissing me. Like *kissing* me.

Wait—huh?

“Shit, Tams, my bear is so fucking thrilled you want to name him. Like all over the place and freaking he heard your stomach growl and that’s why he jumped up. Yes. He says yes and loves the name. He’ll be your Harry Beary or anything you want. He loves it.” He swallowed loudly and searched my eyes. “He loves you.”

“He does?” I breathed.

“He does. For now.”

“Okay.”

He nodded. “Okay.” He swallowed loudly again. “And your wings love me?”

“I have no idea.”

“Friends love each other. That’s all that matters and we’ll respect that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He nodded and sat back down before pulling me onto his lap. I thought at first it was to hide he was naked, but there were his clothes right there. No, he was fussing over me and helped me eat to the point I was waiting for him to tear off bites for me.

“Goofy bear,” I chuckled when I was done. “Glad we worked this out.” I stood and cleared my throat. “But I haven’t told others that story. I’m not ready to yet so if we could keep this between us, I’d appreciate it.”

“Yeah, whatever you need, Tams.” He moved behind me and kissed my shoulder. “Thanks for trusting me.”

He quickly dressed and I took down the barrier. We headed towards the house for a better place to open a portal and found his mom and Queen Sasha returning from somewhere.

“Oh, this is a nice surprise,” Mrs. Von Thann greeted. “I was about to ask what you’re doing here, but it is your house we’re crashing at.”

“Still, I apologize for not letting you know I was going to use the beach,” I replied. “There was an issue, and my security thought of here as a safe place.” I hurried on when I saw their worry. “We’re fine. I just needed to tell Lucca about something difficult, and it was a little too difficult for me.”

“Well, I’m glad you could trust him with it,” she said easily.

They both seemed so sad that I ended up changing my plans. “We were heading to Faerie so I could show him something. Why don’t you join us and then use my family hot springs? I’ll let the guards at the castle know it’s fine.”

“I think that would be frowned upon, but we’re honored you offered,” Queen Sasha said.

“I get frowned at all the time.” I moved my hand to her arm so she looked at me. “Please? They help, really.”

“I’m okay.”

“You could be better,” I whispered. “We’re worried.”

“I don’t know how to forgive him,” she admitted, tears filling her eyes.

“I’m the last person to ask about emotional stuff or healthy relationships, but if you want to talk to a healer or—shit, sit with Katrina and let her smack him around. She’s doing great with your son.” I shrugged when they both seemed shocked. “Katrina is really good at telling you that you’re being an idiot without making you feel like you’re being an idiot.”

“Yeah, she is,” Lucca agreed.

We talked them into it, and I ignored some of the worried looks my detail exchanged. I wasn’t surprised when Commander Morgan was there to greet us at the castle, someone obviously having alerted him.

Before he could even say anything to curb what I’d decided, I told him in his mind that the two women would probably be the mothers-in-law of the queen of Faerie one day and to treat them with that level of respect. He actually

accepted that—easily even—and had simply wanted clarification of what level of guest they were in my house.

Along with hearing it from me that I'd given permission instead of risking any messages being passed along incorrectly.

I stopped walking and dipped my head to him. “I apologize, Commander, for not being fair and assuming what I shouldn't have. You are completely correct in how you handled this, and I would like to make it the very wise standard. You wanted to corroborate my decision and clarify my invitation, not question my decision. Thank you. Truly.”

He bowed to me. “Of course, Your Highness. If any of us ever questioned your decisions on these matters, it was out of worry for your safety. Personally, it was because I knew you hadn't had a chance to learn what you needed to and people were taking advantage of that. I thank you for reminding me that I needed to work on my delivery explaining that.”

He wasn't wrong on both points.

I glanced at Sasha when she elegantly cleared her throat. I nodded for her to go ahead.

She shared a look with Mrs. Von Thann and then focused back on me. “We didn't want to make it a big thing or when more people were around, but we have discussed—I hoped I might get the chance to pay my respects to your mother. Not publicly or—mother to mother. I wanted to tell her...” She swallowed loudly and gave me a kind look that I couldn't read.

But Morgan of all people seemed to understand.

He dipped his head to me. “I believe an exception can be made when you trust both women as you do, Your Highness. One at a time and with a privacy barrier if they allow me inside it. The vast guards stationed there don’t need to know what is said, but someone should.”

I studied him and slowly nodded. “But I shouldn’t. My father should though.”

“It’s probably what Xavier has already told Lageos to his face,” Sasha said gently as tears filled her eyes and she looked away.

Then it hit me. It was what any caring parent would want to hear from another one.

Their child would be looked after. Sasha wanted to tell my mom that she would watch over me. Yeah, she was really the right person to have put so much trust in.

I nodded, mumbling a thanks and feeling awkward about it.

We left them to go have a soak and visit with my mom, and I focused on getting my day with Lucca back on track. Something else would derail it, that was my life, but that didn’t mean I ever stopped trying.

“Oh fuck, we’re seeing unicorns,” Lucca whispered. “Seriously? Like, seriously? Can I actually like really touch one?”

“Glad I’m not the only one with this reaction,” I chuckled.

“No, Tams, anyone our age would freak,” he said before snagging his arm around me and spinning us. “Shit, I’ve been dying to do more than see them from a distance or—I’ve seen them or it’s always like in passing. Or getting them from bad owners or—yeah, I’m not all in the loop and well, people don’t know what to do with me.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I muttered after he set me on my feet. “I haven’t gotten much of a chance and well—yeah, I’m a twit.”

He snuck a quick kiss. “You have a whole world you’re in charge of, Tams. Your workout buddy who used to be your mate but wants to be with you again getting to hang with unicorns and probably breaking rules hanging with your royal bloodline unicorns isn’t high on the priority list.”

“I agree with him when he puts it like that, Your Highness,” Ara chuckled.

Fair enough.

“Okay, unicorn time.”

“You’re kinda cute like this, goofy bear,” I mumbled as he grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

We stopped at the fence and Amethyst came racing towards us. I smiled and hopped up on the fence to greet her. “This is Amethyst. She’s...” I blinked as she went right past me and stopped by Lucca. “Seriously, it’s like I don’t matter to them at all.”

I watched as she soaked up the attention he gave her, running her lips all over his face and hair which I always took as how a horse or unicorn basically gave kisses. She turned to give him more room to touch her and would have knocked me off the fence if I didn’t jump out of the way in time.

I glanced at my security who were having a hard time not falling over laughing. Yeah, I felt the same even if I was a bit hurt that once again my own damn unicorns didn’t care I was there.

Still, as a woman, I understood caring more about Lucca, so it was amusing. Lucca was clueless though, adorably in awe of Amethyst and being able to touch her. He had no clue this wasn’t how unicorns normally acted as she practically batted her eyelashes at him.

So yeah, we all found it amusing.

Well, not *all* of us.

Her mate, Gambit, was not amused.

Not in the slightest.

I felt him approach but thought it was to greet us. At the last minute, I felt his upset though and turned to see him jump to clear the fence.

And his focus was Lucca.

I moved on instinct, spinning off the fence and into Gambit's path as I threw up a barrier. The unicorn crashed into it and bounced off hard, clearly having been using some sort of magic as well.

I quickly caught him with a barrier as well so he didn't get hurt when he landed. I sat him down but kept him there as I stormed over to him.

"He is *mine*," I snarled in warning. "How dare you think to hurt him!" I shook my head when he tried to argue in my mind that he was just going to knock him away from his mate. "Don't even lie to me. You were pissed and planning to hurt him. He didn't deserve that.

"Ignoring the fact he's mine, my bear, he's a guest here. You will not *ever* treat a guest here like that. Yes, she is your mate and if you have to protect her, you do it. There are guards all over who will do so as well, but he wasn't a threat. You do not resort to *violence* in my home!"

I reeled away from him at what he said to me, and he realized he went too far, dipping his head to me.

"Be that as it may, that doesn't change the fact that all of it is mine and you live here because I allow it. Do not ever behave like this again. You are completely in the wrong. You acted like a spoiled *bully* and jealous asshole. You want to be pissed at her for flirting? You go right ahead, but don't blame him, and don't ever treat a guest at my home like that again."

I released him and went to see the caretaker, explaining to punish Gambit however one would punish a unicorn and

harshly without abusing him. After a bit, we decided he wouldn't have access to the main pens and fields but the back ones that had higher fences for untrusted unicorns if he wouldn't behave.

Also, he wasn't to get the treats and spoiling he normally did. Simply his food. After a bit more consideration, I realized I was worried for Amethyst after his behavior and ordered they weren't to be alone. Gambit reacted like I'd kicked him in the nuts and tried to object.

"You have a temper," I snapped. "You also didn't care if you plowed me over to get to him. You saw me jump in the way. So yes, I worry you could hurt your mate. You get your shit together, and you can have your freedoms back."

I nodded as he argued with me and listed all the reasons I was being unfair.

"I hear you, but I'm still not wrong," I stated firmly. "Everything you just said sounded like I was talking to Juan and you being a spoiled royal unicorn bullshit. You fucked up. Take ownership of it and realize you just blew up something small into something big. I hear why you did it, but your traumas can't hurt others. I know. I have more than you do."

Again he argued with me and I got pissed.

"My mom is dead too. Don't throw the dead mom card at me," I snapped. "I'm sorry you lost yours. *We* lost our mothers. I didn't almost plow you over and plan to hurt your mate because I lost mine, now did I?"

That shut him up pretty damn fast.

“Now reflect on what you did. For real. You are a hundred percent in the wrong. If I was Amethyst, I’d dump your stupid ass.” I nodded when he couldn’t hide his shock. “She was a bit flirty because she’s never seen a Black man before. Fucking grow up. You’re fair folk and know how fae are even. You should have pouted or told her to quit if it hurt you, not try to kill him.”

I stormed off, some of his shots landing, and I didn’t want to say anything I might regret.

Plus, I was pretty annoyed that unicorns seriously weren’t living up to the hype.

I was pretty sure Amethyst realized that because she came over to me and bumped my shoulder. I turned and gave her some love, nodding along with what she said in my mind.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Yes, it would have hurt my feelings a bit if I was your mate, but you weren’t—you were being a goof, not a bad girl. He went over the top. I love you both, but we need to be good. Help him see he was wrong. That’s what I need right now, okay? I’ll bring Lucca back and we’ll move past this.”

I kissed her muzzle and gave Lucca a sad look as I walked up to him, extending my hand to him.

He stared at it and blinked back tears. “It’s because I’m Black, isn’t it?”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, reaching for him. He pulled away. “Please hear me out. He doesn’t understand. Please? I yelled at him and—I’m not taking his side. I’m not. There’s more to this.”

He wiped under his eyes and gave a slow nod. “What did he say that upset you so much?”

I wasn’t going to hide that—or any of it—from him, but I glanced around, not wanting everyone to have heard this. “That it was more his home than mine since he’d grown up here and really lived there and I didn’t.”

Rage filled Lucca’s eyes and he stormed towards the stable.

I grabbed his arm. “Please don’t. He knew it was too far. He—please, let’s talk. Please?”

He flinched when my voice cracked and pulled me to him. “He’s an asshole. Unicorns aren’t supposed to be assholes. I’m pissed.”

“Me too, but we can all be assholes. He’s spoiled, but he’s been good too.”

“I can’t believe your own damn linked unicorn hurt you like this,” he grumbled, kissing my hair.

“I can’t believe he’s fucking racist,” I bitched.

“Me neither.” He let out a huff and hugged me tighter before letting me go. “You punished him?”

“Yeah, after I talked with the caretaker on what is like allowed.” I shrugged when Lucca frowned. “Gambit’s fair folk. It’s not like punishing a horse like we’re used to. I’m a bit out of my depth here.”

“Your Highness, I would suggest speaking with Commander Stefanie,” Ara said quietly. “She was raised with unicorns as a noble and is an accomplished rider.”

“Thank you,” I sighed, feeling better that I knew who to turn to. I hugged Lucca’s arm. “Let’s eat. What does my favorite bear want to eat?”

“I better be,” he said with a playful pout, but I saw almost a haunted look in his eyes. Clearly, racism had been something Lucca had experienced before in his life and left a mark on him.

I was fairly sure that was true for everyone who was Black.

I was *very* sure it was something I would never be able to understand being White. I said the same thing about sexism and how men would never truly get it. I wasn’t a hypocrite, so I understood that I would never understand it.

But I wanted to try to understand Lucca and how it hurt him.

I waited until we had our food and were sitting a bit away from my security. “It triggered Gambit. He was frozen in the darkness like fairies. He didn’t see us approach, but he saw his mate loving all up on you and his mind...” I shook my head and sighed. “His thought was like ‘the darkness can’t take anything else from me.’”

“So he didn’t see me as Black but as dark?” he hedged, staring at me like that sounded ridiculous.

And it did. I couldn’t even deny that.

“His mind isn’t like ours and even talking to him—it’s not like talking to your bear. It’s also not like talking to Irma who is fair folk too. She’s a person, Gambit isn’t.” I waited for Lucca to nod. “In Gambit’s mind, I saw flashes of him seeing

that darkness cling to frozen people still. He saw it on his siblings and his mom, and then his mom died when it came off.”

“But you woke everyone in Faerie, so how did he see it first?” he hedged.

Right, that was part of the disconnect. “I didn’t wake any animals or fair folk that were in Faerie.” I bounced that around and sighed. “Well, I might have woken some. I wasn’t needed to wake them like fairies. Others have pumped enough magic into Faerie that they just pulled off the darkness, and the fair folk could wake on their own after a bit.”

“That’s fucking confusing as all fuck, Tams,” Lucca mumbled.

“It is. And it’s hard to keep it all straight for all of us. It’s also not fair and Gambit was an asshole. Full stop. He’s an asshole who didn’t see you as a Black man and got bitchy but saw black on skin and thought death because of what he went through. It’s so not fair, but it’s not the same. It hurts you the same and I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Don’t cry, cream puff,” he whispered, before reaching over and pulling my chair next to him. He leaned in and hugged me to him.

“I’m so sorry they hurt you.”

“Oh, Tams, stop,” he murmured. “I’m fine. I don’t get it, but I get it. He hurt you more than me.”

“He ruined your excitement to see unicorns,” I mumbled. “I at least got that cool first time.”

“We’ll go back right after lunch and see different unicorns and it won’t be a big deal. We’ll go see unicorns who lived in our world, okay?”

That made me realize something. “Why didn’t you see unicorns when they were in our world?”

“Most didn’t acknowledge they had them because they were targets to be stolen,” Lucca said with a sigh. “There was like one known breeder, and you had to have a lot of zeros in your bank account to even be allowed at their stable. More than my family has.”

Wow. Like *wow* because his family had a lot.

Right, okay, then. He told me how the place was like a military base with protection and more. I still felt horrible that he didn’t get his moment with unicorns then, but at least his upset on unicorns being racist was a bit better.

Sort of? Weirdly maybe?

I mean, he didn’t seem happy that Amethyst had loved him more because he was Black than say meeting Darby. *But* he had loved on her because she was a unicorn, not just a horse. Yeah, not the same but again, it was something I would never understand. I simply was there for him and promised next time would be better and our day would be awesome.

Instead, the shit hit the fan.

I felt a portal open outside the restaurant and glanced over at Ara who nodded it was for us. I sighed when she seemed upset and whispered an apology to Lucca to warn him something was up. I did a double take when Iolas came in with steam practically coming out of his ears.

“I apologize for interrupting your lunch, but we have a situation,” he told me, handing me his phone.

I was glamoured to be someone else since I was out with Lucca, and Tamsin Vale was only with Darby to the world. So fairies were careful not to use any name or title for me then... And yes, that had been a headache to get into place with their ways.

I took the phone and understood his upset after watching the video of Lucca’s younger brother, Jason, run his mouth about me. He was drinking at a party—but not drunk—and boasting how I was finally being of *use* to his family if I was going to make his dad a councilman.

So maybe it was worth it that I clipped his brother’s balls and made him a simp.

Oh, that little shit was dead meat.

“Handle the bill and get the rest of our food boxed to go please,” I told Wyn as I handed the phone back to Iolas. “Lucca, let’s go hear your brother’s last words.”

“Right there with you,” he growled, already on his feet and shaking with anger.

We left with an apology to the staff and went behind the place. I opened a portal to where Jason was and found the asshole partying without a care in the world.

I was so pissed that Lucca was getting hurt once again and I couldn’t stop it that I stormed right over to the jerk. He must have realized something was going on because people around him went quiet and he turned around to see what was happening.

And that was when I bitch-slapped him. Full out backhanded him and not caring he was almost a foot taller than me.

“The only bitch here is you,” I sneered. “Your brother isn’t a *simp*, you worthless little shit. He’s a man who owns his mistakes and tries to be better. He should get me in line? You need to fucking get in line and realize your damn place in life. You’ll never be half the fucking man he is.” I snorted. “You’ll never be half the man *I am* and I’m a fucking woman.”

People hissed or laughed at the jab.

Jason got on his feet and moved like he was going to come at me, but in a flash there were a dozen fairies with their blades at his throat.

“Don’t even think about it, stupid,” Iolas bit out. “You’re in enough trouble.”

“I used words; she touched me,” Jason growled. “I have every right to defend myself no matter who she is.”

“No, you don’t, and don’t lie to us,” Iolas threw right back, putting his sword away to de-escalate the situation.

But I didn’t want that, throwing fuel on the fire I was so furious. I snorted. “Let him go. Let him try to hurt me. I’d love to see him sitting to pee the rest of his life like us weak women.”

Unfortunately, the jerk had some self-preservation behind all of his bluster and settled down.

Lucca moved up next to me and kissed my cheek. “Any more shots you want to take at him?” He cleared his throat when I snorted. He didn’t say anything until I looked at him.

“Then it’s my turn.” He gave me a quick peck when I frowned.
“Trust me?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “Of course.” I stepped back when he guided me with his arm. I flinched and went to pull him away when he pulled off his shirt.

Lucca glanced at the fairies holding his brother. “Let him go.”

They did since I’d given the signal he could handle this, but backed up the crowd as well. Iolas made sure to move near me as my protection in case someone acted stupid because someone normally did.

“Shift,” he ordered his brother. “Now.”

“This is why you’re a simp and a loser. You’re picking a fight with me over a stupid woman,” Jason bitched.

Lucca moved faster than most could keep up with, grabbing his brother by the throat and baring his teeth in his face. “Fucking shift, you coward. I warned you. I gave you *several* warnings. You want to act out and be a shit, fine, do it about me, say shit about me. But if you say it about *her*, we will handle it like bears.

“I’m a lot of things, one of which is a man of my word. So call me what you want, but I’m keeping that promise. *You* are the asshole here. You’re my *brother* and I want to be with her. What the fuck is wrong with you, Jason? Where is *your* loyalty to your family, huh? You trash her publicly when I want her to be my future! What kind of brother does that?”

He tossed Jason about ten feet away and people got the idea, stepping way back to give them space.

But Ara stepped in front of me, her eyes wide and begging me to understand. I hadn't even realized that I'd moved, but she was also frantically tapping her ear.

"It's a bear thing, Princess. Forgive me and please, please, let this play out. Do not interject. I know it's hard. We want to as fairies, you more than most as you are the strongest. People see us as overbearing because of it, but that's not in our hearts. I understand, but the world doesn't. I promise it's not sexist, but the ways of bears. He can explain later."

I let out a slow breath and thanked her in our minds. I would need to hear that from his lips later, but I trusted Ara. Yeah, it seemed like Lucca was about to go over the line and pound his brother for talking trash about me instead of letting me handle it. I could even accept it might be a family thing I might not understand since I didn't have siblings.

But fine, I was a bit broken, and I automatically went to thinking things were sexist and people dismissing me.

I wasn't always wrong though, so it was hard to see anything else.

Jason jumped to his feet and snarled in Lucca's direction. "You want to talk about being a shit brother? Fine, let me give you the list again! You fucking bailed on us to—"

"I went to college. You know how to fucking portal to me," Lucca snapped. "You haven't called. You don't answer my calls. So enough with that bullshit. Dad and I were at an impasse. He told me to get in line or get out. I moved out. Why the fuck didn't you back me that he was being a douche? No, you blamed Tamsin. She didn't do a damn thing!"

“She didn’t fucking back you!” he bellowed. “She should have dumped the others the moment she learned you were mates! Everyone laughs how weak you are—”

Lucca decked him, Jason falling back down. “Assholes say that shit. People *jealous* say that shit. You want my spot. You always have, and I got that when I was firstborn and next to take over but fuck, now you can have that place. But *still*, you’re jealous. You fucking want to be a prince. You see her and see royalty and fame.

“You know *nothing!*” Lucca let out a wordless scream and hit his brother again when Jason stood. “You don’t see her pain. She kills herself constantly to help so many. You want parties and riches, and she never gives herself the time to experience any of that. She is a leader because she *sacrifices* for others. All she does, and she was so hard on herself that I haven’t met her unicorns yet.

“And you would have thrown a fit. You would have bitched her out. I would have before too because we’ve had it easy and we’re spoiled. So I’m not a simp, I’ve grown the fuck up. Now I see how she doesn’t get enough sleep and has millions of people who need her, not just me. I see how her rare free afternoon is full of making me happy.

“And you’re taking that from us! You could have been my brother and loved *me* and come with us today. Mother came with. Tam’s invited her for something special. Something she probably shouldn’t even get to experience because we’re not mated, but Tams likes Mother and appreciates her. So don’t fucking put this on Tams.

“This is *you*. This is you being a spoiled little shit thinking you’re awesome. You’re not. And honestly, it’s why I’ve not given up my spot.” He nodded when everyone froze. “Dad can kick me out or declare whatever he wants, but he cannot change I was born first. That’s done. The spot is mine unless you take it from me.

“I already checked, and there’s no rule against me leading our pack and being mated to Tams. There’s never been an Alpha consort or whatever term, but so what? Who cares what was? The future is what matters, and if I told Tams it was what I wanted, she’d support me. She wouldn’t make me choose just like I’d never make her choose.

“Would I give it up for her? Yeah, if we work out, I’ve said that. But not if it would screw over our sloth, and you being their leader would screw them over. So until you grow the fuck up and pull your damn head out of your ass, I’m not giving the spot up, Jason. You shouldn’t have been signing checks you couldn’t cash yet, and you shouldn’t have said shit about Tams.”

And then he shifted. He’d pissed Jason off enough as well that his brother turned into his bear, but a high school senior was no match for my very, *very* pissed off bear.

It was honestly a bit hard to watch. I had no problem beating ass, but it was *brutal*, and I wasn’t the only one who felt that way from the tension I felt from the fairies. The rest were bears there, so it had to be his school friends or someone throwing the party.

Tears burned in my eyes when Jason let out more cries of pain, his bear hurt bad and so many bones broken. Everything

in me itched to stop it and heal him.

But I had to trust Lucca. I had to trust he wouldn't go too far anymore and... Wouldn't ever be a douche? We all could be, so I wasn't sure that was the right way to think of it.

After what felt like too long, Jason made some other kind of noise and Lucca stopped. I had no idea what it was, but clearly the bears did, and I assumed it was some sort of sign of submission? Maybe an apology?

Lucca—or Harry now—backed away and turned to find me. He was hesitant when he came towards me, hiding his paws behind his back as if he didn't want me to see the blood.

Yeah, funny when his fur was caked in it.

I reached out my hand and rubbed his nose. "I trust you. You did good." I wasn't sure what else to say.

He licked my hand and then he shifted back to Lucca. He picked me up and kissed me, clearly excited from the fight and victory.

Maybe? It was hard to see it that way when he'd broken the body of a kid. All the semantics and extras aside, that was what he'd done.

"Okay, okay, we're just friends still," I reminded him when he tried to chase my lips.

"Right." He cleared his throat and set me down. "Right."

I glanced over at Jason, his bear whimpering in pain slicing through my heart. "Does it undo anything if I heal him?"

“Why would you do that when Lucca punished him for you?” a guy called out, quickly tacking on a “Your Highness” when one of my security probably scared him.

I realized a lot of them had the same question, so I shrugged, going to explain it to Lucca, but he was smiling at me.

Because he already knew.

“Yeah, go ahead.” He kissed my nose.

“Thanks.” I glanced around and found a towel, grabbing it and moving over to Jason. Then I glanced back at Iolas. “Is it the same if he’s a bear, or does he have to shift back first?” I didn’t even get an answer before Jason did change back. I quickly moved the towel over his groin, ignoring when people chuckled. “Do you consent to me healing you?”

“Yes,” he hissed.

“She seriously just asked,” a woman whispered.

“He hates me,” I defended. “I wouldn’t want the magic of someone I hated touching me even if it was healing. It’s wrong to force it.”

“Yeah, fair,” she agreed.

I healed him as much as he could handle and then backed away, not turning my back on him and making it clear that I didn’t trust him that much even when he was injured.

“You didn’t need the towel. He doesn’t care,” someone said as I walked past them.

I stopped and met the guy’s confused gaze. “I know. I cared. It made me feel uncomfortable that he was naked and I

had to touch him. I'm involved with his brother and he's a kid." I sighed when he gave me a look like I was speaking another language. "Is that really so weird?"

"No," several of the fairies said together and I felt better.

After we left and were alone, Lucca answered my question before I could even ask.

"It wasn't a guy thing. I promise you. It wasn't comparing dick sizes or being a douche. That was a 100% bear and even family shit and even me being that brutal. He could have tapped out anytime. He just had to yield and basically admit he was wrong, call uncle. He tested me especially after I said I was going to be the boss. You know what that means."

I sighed. "Yeah, being the boss means you have to be harsh."

"Yeah, it does. But it meant everything that you cried for my brother's pain when he's been such an asshole to you. I'm sorry he has, but I adore how good you are."

The strangest things could bring people closer.

And that day, it was my unicorn being racist—but also not really—and Lucca's little brother shitting on me.

Sure, my life wasn't weird.

“Princess, someone is pushing to speak with you,” Wyn warned me as I stepped out of a meeting.

I had come to campus to finalize a few things with my schedule since there was some pushback with assholes trying to use the new Dean of Witches and Warlocks as a way to get to me. They were innocent in it, but we still needed the meeting and to decide what to do and how to handle things.

My answer—as per usual—was to be a shit about it.

Luckily, the new dean agreed with me.

I’d always like Professor Pillay... Now Dean Pillay.

I glanced up and swallowed a sigh when I saw Ronald Von Thann standing there. I quickly looked at my phone and nodded. “I can talk if we eat. Something came up and my schedule is tight.”

“Um, yes—that would be—thank you, Princess,” he mumbled, not hiding his shock well.

I nodded and glanced at Rafe. “Where am I eating, Captain? I remember someone saying something about... Something?”

His lips twitched as he led us towards the student union for the portal. “Yes, people say so much around you that my head spins, Your Highness. You’re eating at Goblin Goodies to

sample their ideas for the fall menu, and Irma is bringing extras so you don't get yelled at for having a meal of only sweets."

I sighed. "Why do they keep asking me? I'm no help deciding the menu."

"You do own the place, Your Highness," Wyn reminded me.

I gave the look he deserved. "The people in charge are more than capable to make the call. *I've* never stated they need me to decide. I've actually said the opposite several times, so they're technically being bad employees who don't listen to me when they do this to me."

"Are you going to tell them that?" he hedged.

I snorted. "Hell no, they feed me. I'll eat all of it and love it. I don't know what else to tell them. I've said to ask people who—talk to Katrina or Sasha."

"They've already decided menus," Wyn reminded me.

"Izzy."

"She about panicked at the responsibility," Wyn threw right back.

Yeah, I felt the same, but I made big decisions all of the time. I caught sight of Ronald then, and that gave me an idea. "Oh, ask, Mrs. Von Thann. She's staying at my house still, right? She'd be way better at it than me."

"I think it unwise to allow her to be the one," Rafe hedged, sighing when I shot him a nasty look. "Publicly."

“Then don’t ask her over fucking Twitter,” I drawled, glad at least when Von Thann snorted. “Fine, we thanked the others publicly or whatever, but she’s a nice person and probably doesn’t care about that. We can cater a party for the sloth or something.”

“I will be a problem there,” Von Thann warned me.

I wasn’t sure what he meant until we reached the bakery and he wasn’t allowed inside... Because he’d been banned.

Because he’d been mean to me.

Right, whoops.

“Please allow him for the day?” I asked the hobgoblins. “He was polite and we need to talk. It would help me out.”

“Yes, of course, Princess,” Esta, the manager of the bakery, agreed immediately. “We’ll bring out extra portions for —”

“What you had planned is fine,” I cut in. “It’s fine, really. We can share. You guys have a lot going on, and I have a meeting soon.” I frowned when she sighed. “We both know I’m going to be useless, so just use the excuse to make me happy and take a break, okay? I love you too.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she sighed, the color of her skin changing to show she was ready to strangle me.

That was fairly normal for people to feel.

We sat down and a cart was wheeled out of everything amazing and I dove right in.

“Thank you for not ending my son,” Von Thann started with a bang, hurrying on when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I

know you wouldn't, but—he's been a shit. He came at you. I saw the video people took.”

I flinched. “I was too angry to think of people recording. Lucca was—Jason has really hurt him. I shouldn't have done it so publicly.”

“No, you should have. I didn't come here to chastise you in any way. I came to thank you for letting Lucca handle it and your restraint. Truly.” He sighed when I couldn't hide my shock. He blew out a harsh breath when I didn't say anything. “Look, parenting isn't easy.” He frowned when I snorted.

“I know it's not.” I nodded when he didn't seem to buy that. “I absolutely believe that. It's why I never wanted to be one.” I sighed when the tension shot up in the room. I glanced around and sighed again. “Just leave it, okay? Yes, I'll have an heir one day far into the future, but I... I'm allowed my feelings. I don't even *want* kids. Leave it.”

“I'm sorry,” Von Thann said again.

“Did you get taken over by an alien or something?” I blurted, looking at him like he'd grown a second head. “You're apologizing again? You?”

He blew out a slow breath this time. “I think hearing some of the Gui boy's rant about blaming you for things he shouldn't has made me realize I've been acting like a spoiled jackass.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Wow. Just... *Wow*.

I chuckled when he looked like he was waiting for me to respond. “Please, go on and tell me more.” I smirked when he

frowned. “Oh, I think you’ve owed me this for years. Yeah, I’m going to enjoy this and try not to faint from shock.”

He snorted. “At least I’m being fed the finest food with my helping of humble pie.”

In another life I might actually have liked Ronald... Or maybe before the world had made him turn into the bad guy.

Or really, he’d allowed it to.

I listened to him explain that the more the world cut into him, the more he’d tried to teach his children to strike first and show no weakness. He’d been wrong, and he regretted how that had worked out. That he was grateful that Lucca was finding his own path and he was sorry Jason had behaved as he did.

“Thank you for what you said, but Jason made his own bed.”

“With respect, he’s a child,” he argued. “He’s my child and not yet eighteen. That’s my fault and while Lucca handled the situation as a bear, I understand Jason went way too far. I wanted to make it clear I appreciate what you did, and I accept whatever punishment you will give him as his father.”

I sighed, accepting the next plate from Esta who seemed amused. I didn’t know why until she looked at Dalyor. “Do you have something to interject, Captain?”

“With your permission, I do, Your Highness.” He waited until I nodded. “This latest video isn’t the one that upset many of us as much even if he spoke the harshest. It was clearly done without his knowledge and by someone who betrayed his

confidence. I know that is why you aren't punishing him more harshly as well."

I nodded, confirming it for Von Thann. "If he'd held a press conference or said at an event, yeah, I'd be super pissed and it would be too far. He was drinking at a party, and someone pulled a bitch move. He needs to be smarter on that kind of thing because it won't be the last time someone does that to him."

"Something I made clear to him," Von Thann agreed on. "At length."

"As I would assume of a respected Alpha," Dalyor accepted. "But your son has run his mouth about our leader's training and things he doesn't understand about her power and *wings*." He nodded when Ronald winced. "It has upset many of us, but Princess Tamsin didn't want to..." He sighed when I flinched.

"I know, I know," I sighed. "I should have handled it sooner just like other things. I don't care if people run their mouths about me. It's just words, but like with the bear leadership and Mason's family, it carries over to others. I was wrong. I'm sorry." I met Dalyor's gaze and let him see how tired I was. "But I'm the bitch when I always push back.

"I know we always fight the fights we can as fairies, but even sometimes I have to say it's more than I can handle or we can. Which fight will be the one that's too far, Captain? Which button or problem I push back on will be the one to snap people and come at us head-on? We can handle a lot, but could we really handle everyone attacking us at once?"

Ronald of all people snorted, apologizing before wiping his mouth. “Yes, your people could. Probably easily. Most of our species talk a big game, but you see how we aren’t very unified besides the dragons, and fairies are just too powerful. I *applaud* your prudence and for considering that as a leader. I wasn’t mocking you.”

“I appreciate that, but as many have pointed out, I’m ignorant to the supe world still and I don’t underestimate people.” It was my turn to snort. “And most of you had no idea the Underground was remotely as big as it was.”

“No, no, we didn’t,” Ronald agreed, his voice taking on a quiet, almost hollow tone that rang of fear. He shook it off and looked at Dalyor. “If you have a suggestion to help fix this situation, I would absolutely value it, Captain. Especially from such a legendary and decorated warrior.”

Okay then. I didn’t know that was Dalyor’s rep. Just that most supe women swooned when he came into a room.

“I would like Jason to train with our recruits,” Dalyor said plainly. “Let him see how hard the training is that our future queen has *surpassed*. His brother took that seriously and worked with her to understand how her magic and power worked. His bear has—”

“Yes, my son’s bear is—people felt his power when he reprimanded Jason,” Ronald whispered, shaking his head. “I’ve not been around him when he’s been upset and shifted. I talked to a few of the older kids who were there, and they said Lucca’s jumped huge levels.”

“We did that?” I asked Dalyor.

His lips twitched. “No, Lucca did, and he worked hard to do it, but we gave him the path. We push much, *much* harder than the curriculum of Artemis. Plus, as much as a bond with a mate can strengthen a pair, sometimes it can weaken an individual. By breaking it, in Lucca’s specific case, it caused him to strengthen and grow his own potential.”

“He’s worked really hard, in a lot of ways,” I agreed.

“Because of you,” Ronald whispered.

“No, because of him,” I argued. I shrugged when he frowned. “I maybe pulled back the curtain to realize he wasn’t the man he thought he was, but he was a good enough man to want to be better when he realized that. That was all your son, Von Thann. Don’t take that from him. Yes, being with the right person can make you better.

“Darby makes me push myself and pull myself back. He makes me—I’ve learned how to try and handle things calmly because he’s calm when I’ve had only chaos. But that was on me to make the choice and put in the work. That’s mine to own if I can ever see a damn good thing about myself. So we share the credit I guess.”

“What has Lucca done for you like that?” he asked, seeming truly curious on that. He nodded when I didn’t respond. “I guess that’s why you’re engaged to Darby and not my son. You don’t have that sort of bond yet.”

“We do,” I whispered, staring intently at my food. “It’s just harder to trust after what’s happened and we’re not friends.” I didn’t want to tell Ronald Von Thann of all people that Lucca saw the abused little girl I’d been and wanted her to

be healed, from the Squishmallows to the goofy fun of cream puffs and calling me that as a pet name.

It was also part of who he was but yeah, he saw that side of me and wanted to help heal me there. He'd had a good childhood with a loving family and wanted me to feel supported like that. I knew that. I saw it.

But I wasn't going to tell Ronald that.

I could give him an answer though. "He knows I have trouble pushing when people don't listen to me or brush off my feelings. So he really pays attention and pushes for me, even on stuff I don't know I need. Several times now he's set things up and gone to the mat for me. It's helping me to see I need to do that more too.

"Even saying we can talk if we keep to my schedule is—I'm not good at that stuff. It's too bitchy for me." I shrugged when I felt Von Thann's shock. "I was a neglected foster child who didn't matter. I was abused. Going with the flow didn't get me yelled at or in trouble. I wasn't allowed to cause trouble.

"I default to that. Lucca helps me see when I'm valid in being upset or... Normal? What's normal, I think. Yeah, let's go with that. He just lets me talk and I can work it out myself, or he just tells me that my feelings are valid and—it's the time he's invested that really is everything. No one ever invested that much time in me. Not when I was just a paycheck."

I cleared my throat and hurried to eat what was next, ignoring the way people were staring at me.

“I’m sorry that was so personal, but I worry as his father. I know he hurt you and it was his fault, but I worry he will forever love a woman who can’t love him back.”

“I don’t know what we are, but Lucca is worth loving, and I would never mistreat him. Not on purpose and... We’re going at our pace.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“You don’t believe a person can have multiple mates,” I drawled.

He sighed. “It’s what my son wants, and I love my son. I will—I can’t ever see it in my life. If Lucca can truly be loved and happy—I cared too much about how it would look, and that was stupid of me.” He was quiet and waited for me to respond, but I didn’t know what to say. “I love my son.”

“I believe that, but I still think you love your power or chance to take more power more than you love him,” I said honestly.

“I don’t, but that’s what I’ve shown you. I can’t fault your opinion of me.” He cleared his throat and pointed to the dish in front of him. “This is extra exceptional. Whatever this one is, I would recommend adding. It’s—my bear is happy with the mixture, so it’s something he would want in the wild.”

“That’s excellent to know, thank you, Alpha,” Esta muttered, immediately writing something down. “That’s actually a good idea on how to form menus.”

“As long as I get to eat it all,” I joked.

“And I accept your idea, Captain. If the princess agrees, I think it’s a fitting punishment and education for Jason.

However you see it working as long as it doesn't hurt his studies and schooling. It will fit with him being very, *very* grounded for the semester.”

“Glad to hear it,” Dalyor purred.

I snorted. “It’s always nice when you have someone to torture.”

It was Dalyor’s turn to snort. “I’m way too high ranked to deal with one brat of one Alpha, Your Highness. I know a squad leader who has potential and will kick Jason into line or at least get the experience of learning more patience.”

Okay then.

“We need to get going, Your Highness,” Wyn warned me. “The meeting starts in fifteen.”

“Thanks.” I finished the last plate and looked at Ronald. “I appreciate the apology, and I’m glad we can settle this with Jason. Thank you for coming to see me, and I’m even glad we could have a civil conversation. Have a nice day.” I stood but froze at his next words.

“Please forgive me so my mate will come home and love me again,” he blurted too loudly.

I sighed and then thought “fuck it” before thumping the bear on his head harder than I probably should have. “You stupid, stupid bear. She’s not away from you because of me. Try sending more than a few fucking texts! Tell her you love her and win her back or—she’s dying inside. I’m not keeping her from you!”

He rubbed his head a lot like Lucca did, not because it hurt, but more like he was pouting. “She said to give her space

and leave her alone. I did.”

“Oh gods, it really is just all men are stupid,” I sighed. I glanced at Esta. “Please let him buy something for his lovely mate or take some of this to her to sample and discuss. It will give them a chance to talk.” I thanked her when she nodded. I gave Ronald a warning look not to fuck up. “Talk to her. Tell her what you told me.

“Or fuck, talk to your son. He’s put in the work and come back from what I didn’t think was possible. We have a chance and he was... He was emotionally abusive and manipulated me. Yeah, you’ve done more, but you also have a real history with her and deep love. We didn’t have that, so talk to someone, get counseling—everything to win her back. You won’t find better.”

And then I left. I wasn’t sure what else to say.

Idiot. Men were such fucking idiots sometimes.

But at least I felt better for Mrs. Von Thann that she was truly loved and not just left in the dust as she’d thought.

Later that day, I went over my schedule with Darby as we finalized packing him for Yale. The next day, we were moving him into his apartment there. That had been a bit of a fight because living with me was different somehow than me paying for his apartment.

No, I didn't see the difference either. Especially when two fairies were living with him and I was paying for that too. Rafe and Wyn were going to be with him all of the time and I was covering that and his security. Didn't he realize how little the cost of that apartment was in comparison?

Apparently not.

So it was best not to bring his attention to that then.

Twit.

But I was excited for my classes as well.

Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays I had:

Faerie Biology

8-9:30

Professor Sontar

Independent Study: Dark Realm Royal History

9:45-10:45

Professor Rosini

Lunch

11-12

Rune Combining II

12:15-1:15

Professor Sontar

Power Training

7-9

I was excited to learn about the animals of Faerie more than reports and meetings to repopulate the planet. I wanted to really know about the world so I could feel confident to make decisions. Plus, it was all just so damn cool.

And it was awesome I would start my days in Faerie. It wasn't a classroom class. Cool, right?

That was also one of the reasons a bunch of warlocks who thought they would become councilmen soon and be in charge of me decided to flaunt their perceived power and start trouble. They wanted to be involved and know what I was learning,

object to a student of Artemis learning topics they didn't even have knowledge of.

It was laughable... And yes, I did laugh in their faces which amused Headmaster Edelman and Dean Pillay.

They weren't even going to pass the vetting process, and they were trying to put me under them when their former actual councilmen couldn't? Seriously?

Like... Seriously?

Next, I had the same class I'd had last semester but about the dark realm this time and it would be with Neldor. We agreed we should be on the same page. That was fine.

Us being the only two with that time of lunch wasn't as fine. Even Darby wasn't happy that everyone else had the later lunchtime and it was set up to be an intimate mealtime for just Neldor and me.

Yeah, and a cafeteria full of people.

Still, I took his feelings into consideration, especially when he'd be so far away, and we moved our dinner meeting to lunch three days a week. That freed me up to have off time with Izzy, Lucca, Hudson, and whoever I wanted. Even Neldor agreed and said the move was smart.

That had surprised me, but he was a man of efficiency and admitted that the commanders tended to ramble on because they had all of dinner and we could eat forever. Limiting them to the hour for lunch would be better.

Rock on.

I had one less class now that I was a master's student, supposedly to work on my main project, but mine and Neldor's was really running a damn government so yeah, we just needed more time for that. Which was great. I was also excited for Runes Combining II.

The class was fascinating, and this semester I was hoping to invent some new things instead of all the warnings. I was pretty sure I'd learned all the ones *not* to ever combine, and now I wanted to play with the limitless other options.

I mean... Who wouldn't?

I did also still have power training at night, but that would also be more flexible because I would be traveling more to visit Darby. I had to be conscious of the human aspect and eyes on my life. Plus, I was doing more than other college students, *and* I'd put down my foot that I'd have Saturday flying lessons with Hudson if I wanted.

Plus, I was still waking fairies every day. I was up to five hundred a day now, doing it *safely* and pushing my power.

Tuesday and Thursdays I had:

Physical Training

8-9:30

Captain Dalyor

History of Witches/Vampires

9:45-10:45

Professor Rosini

*Royal Etiquette and Diplomatic Relations with Other
Species II*

11 – 12

Professor Rosini

Lunch

12:15-1:15

Fairy Crystals III & IV

1:30-3

Professor Sontar

Darby raised an eyebrow at the History of Witches/Vampires given I'd had that class freshman year and he'd been my tutor for it. Yes, but this was from the *fairy* perspective and a class they taught in college. That was also one of the reasons those idiot warlocks had started a ton of shit. They demanded to know what fairies said of them.

Yeah, sure thing. Of course, they had that right just because I was a student. Ignoring fairies were super secretive and I would be the future queen... Sure, they could hold their breath and wait.

Fuckers.

And then I really should have only had Fairy Crystals III, but after talking with both Professor Rosini and Sontar, we decided Neldor and I were at such a good spot, we could squeeze both classes into one semester. Also that *I* wanted the additional class of Royal Etiquette and Diplomatic Relations with Other Species II.

There was undoubtedly more I could—and should—learn even if I didn't get course credit. I would more than be able to handle my course load, and I still had a lot of catching up to do. They both agreed, and there was even going to be a bit of “princess lessons” included that Neldor would handle. We'd put off teaching me fairy royal secrets for as long as we could.

Yeah, it was more than past time.

Darby understood, but *I* understood that he wasn't a fan of it happening after he'd graduated like we'd been waiting for that. I was very considerate of his feelings, and I'd gotten a bit miffed at the jab and told him he didn't use the time he had with me, so he really shouldn't say much about the time he didn't have with me then.

To say the tension between us was high after that was an understatement. We didn't even sleep in the same bed the night before going to Yale. Honestly, I didn't know why I was even going. I felt like he was leaving me, not going to law school.

Things had gotten better, but they weren't best. It wasn't what we were, and I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know how to help him, and I felt like I was forever standing there holding out my hand to him to be ignored. I knew that wasn't

the truth, but it was how I felt. Even when we were spending weekends together now, I still felt a disconnect.

Funny how getting engaged seemed to put space between us instead of bringing us closer together.

“You go,” I whispered when we were getting our bags out of the car at the airport.

“That is the plan, *agra*,” Darby chuckled as he went to take my overnight bag.

But I stopped him, taking it and putting it back in the trunk. “No, um, just you.”

“What?” he gasped.

I stared at the bag and swallowed loudly. “I feel like I’m intruding. I—I shouldn’t be a part of this. This isn’t mine. It’s yours. I’m just going to...”

“*Agra*, if you don’t get on that plane, I’m not getting on either,” he whispered as he pulled me to him. He cupped my face so I had to look at him. I closed my eyes though, not wanting to cry at whatever I saw in his eyes.

He was going to leave me and not just to go to law school. I knew it. I knew it in my soul.

“I love you so, *so* much. Please, *please* believe me. I don’t know what’s happened or what you’re feeling but it’s not what’s in my heart, Tamsin Vale. It’s not. I know you feel too much, but all I feel is you. You are my life, my love, and my future. This is for *us*. Everything is *us* now, okay?”

“Your Highness, we have to go,” Rafe said quietly. “We only have a quick takeoff window.”

“Yes, of course, I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, hurrying to grab my bag and pulling away from Darby.

He spun me around. “Then fuck the fucking takeoff and we can wait.” He lowered his forehead to mine. “You’ve gotta be in this with me, Tams. I can’t do this without you. I can’t get on that plane without you and worry this will be our end.”

“I won’t ever leave you, but I feel like you’re already out the door,” I admitted. “It’s all I’ve felt.”

“Then I’ve failed you because that’s the last thing I feel.” He took my bag and handed it over before he lifted me in his arms. “It’s us together. Trust me. Please, trust in me. It won’t be as bad as it feels. You’ll fucking teleport to me every night and we’ll be together. It will be fine. I won’t be—I’ve been struggling, but I will be better. Please believe in me a bit longer.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” I felt his worry and nerves, hugging him tightly as he carried me onto the plane. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this about me or do this. I just... I realized maybe you wanted to have this yourself and I was—I get in the way, and I didn’t want to ruin this for you. I didn’t—I don’t know what to do ever. I want this perfect for you.”

“You make it perfect for me always. Please don’t think anything else,” he whispered.

He sat me on a bench and took the spot next to me, fussing over getting me belted in before checking everything else got loaded. Then he came back to me and kissed me softly, tears in his eyes.

“I couldn’t do any of this without, Tams. Please, don’t ever think you ruin anything for me, okay? You give me everything. You don’t understand how amazing you make my life. My life would be shite and miserable if you hadn’t come crashing into my world. Everything is better. I would have walked away from Freya, and that would have been a mistake.

“But I made the right call because of you. I made the right call about law school because you helped me. Artemis. All of it I could do because of you. It’s us against the world. Once I know I can handle this, I will show you. I promise you, *agra*. I know it. We’ll get over this hiccup and laugh how I was such a duffer one day very soon.”

“Okay. Okay, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have a fucking thing to apologize for,” he promised, giving me another soft kiss.

No, I did. I should have handled it better. I just never knew how. It built and then burst from me. Well, I wasn’t perfect yet.

And never would be.

The flight was too long and not long enough with the tension. We didn’t say much. Darby kept his arm around me and rubbed my arm as if trying to tell me something, but my security was around. I’d done enough in front of them and felt bad for that, so I just kept my mouth shut.

We landed and our ride was waiting. We met up with the moving truck to bring all the furniture and stuff needed for the three-bedroom apartment. The moment we arrived, I nodded

to the security team to go ahead first once the keys were given over.

“Ms. Vale was right,” one of the fairies said after about five minutes, coming out with a mini camera in his hand. “We found one in the big bedroom, probably thinking that Mr. Moore would take it and she would sleep in there at times.”

“Damn, that’s way more bold than I would think any idiot would be,” Rafe whispered, taking it from him. “Contact the cousins, Zack and Ray James. I don’t want any mistakes.” He glanced at me and dipped his head. “I can admit when I’m wrong and I—you weren’t being paranoid. I’m sorry.”

I nodded. “Make an example of this.” I nodded when he hesitated. “People will try again and fuck with you guys if you don’t scorch the ground that you’re not to be fucked with. Please trust me on this.”

“Of course.”

We decided to get a hotel room for the night while we went through the hoops of having Zack and Ray come in and sweep the whole place. I was a mess, unable to even look at Darby for ruining this for him. The moment we were alone in the hotel room, I pulled away from him and headed for the minibar.

He caught me about halfway there and hugged me to him. “Please, I can’t take the sadness coming off of you. Please don’t be so sad. It’s nothing we can’t handle.”

“I’m sorry I’m ruining your dream for you.”

“I didn’t have a dream before you, *agra*. I had a goal to survive and not become my family. I wanted to get to the

finish line. I had no fucking path or anything past that.” He turned me around and ran his thumbs under my eyes, making me realize wetness was there. “Please, hear me on this. I’m not mad. Nothing is ruined. I’m fine as long as you’re here with me.”

I swallowed loudly and nodded. I let him lead me over to the sofa, and he sat me down before kneeling in front of me.

He held my hand and ran his fingers over my engagement ring. “Thank you for never taking this off.” He swallowed loudly as my eyes snapped to his. “I know you had to have thought of it.”

I looked away, focusing on the pretty ring instead. It was gorgeous and exactly what I would have picked for myself, especially once I’d learned the history of it.

Ice agate, only found in Faerie, had once been common. It was maybe like sapphires to the human world, pretty and valued but not hard to find and only worth much if huge or perfect clarity. Maybe even more common than sapphires, but that was what I had thought of when I’d heard the story.

So it had actually been an insult to my ancestor that she’d received a ring from a noble with an ice agate stone. It was his way of saying that she was common in looks and probably more, but not worthy of being the light realm’s queen. People had been horrified that he’d been so brazen, but from the story Professor Rosini had found, the gesture had amused my ancestor.

Hell, she’d embraced it and worn the ring to most major events.

About five years later, people were baffled as their ice agate stones were going missing. At first, people assumed there was some master thief stealing from people, but that was thrown out because why would they target such a lower-costing stone? It was common, and even if the mines found were mostly stripped, there were many of them on the market.

Until someone saw the answer with their own eyes. The stones dissolved over time. They weren't meant to be exposed to air, some sort of reaction to an element in breathable air reacting with them was the theory.

But then after some study, they figured out it was the magic. Ice agate was a magical gem that held the magic and properties of Faerie. It had been so slight that no one had noticed or bothered to consider it when such large deposits were found.

Word spread far and wide between both realms, and people hurried to infuse their magic into the stones, but they were too late. It needed to be done at the time of mining. All of the stones currently in jewelry were in danger.

Except one.

The power of my ancestor was so great that hers was fine, thriving and had been slowly holding extra power for her even. No one had even noticed, it was so slight and fed into her aura.

So the gift that had been meant to be an insult ended up showing just how special my ancestor truly was. People gifted her ice agate left and right because the chance she could save any part of Faerie was better than it being destroyed by their neglect. Only those she had the best ties to did she save their stones and give them back to them.

The rest she kept.

That noble ended up giving her the mine he'd owned since it was now protected by Faerie laws and couldn't be used anymore. She closed it down except for one small section, and every few years she would personally harvest a few with her magic and gift them out.

And never to that noble.

She was the ultimate story and badass that reminded me of that TikTok trend and the song "Power" that talked about being the man but the woman had the power. Yeah, she did.

So the ring was priceless and not of this world. Which was why it came with a glamour so that most thought it was just a huge diamond.

But it was so, *so* much more.

It was actually a flat stone and yes, large, but didn't get in the way for me. I did wear it on a necklace when I trained to be safe after I learned that was fine for fairy customs. It was gorgeous and subtle, which I loved. It looked kind of like a diamond, like a blue diamond actually, but it would have been tossed since it had bad clarity.

But that was what made this stone worth so much. That iced look through it was power. It pulsed if you had the magic to see it. Not too many could, but Julian had been in awe when he realized it pulsed with my heartbeat. The ring, magic, and stone had almost bonded with me in that way, and now its magic was part of my aura.

I knew none of that was why Darby had picked it. It looked a bit like the swirling of my blue eyes to him, the

lighter parts at least. He'd told me that, but more than that, it was the flare off the stone that had caught his attention.

Because they looked like black wings.

And I knew his mind had immediately gone to his image of me being like Maleficent as he had years ago.

When I'd finally looked at the ring and focused on it instead of being happy he wanted me forever, it was the first thing I'd noticed. That all the smaller black stones on two sides to show contrast from the large emerald-cut stone were set to look like black wings. So I asked and yes, it was where his mind had been.

What had happened to us since then, or was this all really in my head?

He leaned down and kissed my hand again, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Thank you for not giving up on me, *agra*. I know I’ve not handled this all well and neglected you, made you feel abandoned—and that’s all on me. I’m not saying it’s you. I’m saying it’s not how I feel and I won’t ever leave you. You’re amazing for sticking it out and supporting me.”

“I love you.” What else was there really to say? I cleared my throat. “We’re fine.”

He raised his head and tears filled his eyes. “You’re not. You’re so hurt by what I’ve been doing, and I can’t reach you again. I’m so scared that the moment school starts you’re gone and will take off this ring. I don’t know how to reach you after I neglected our relationship. I’ve been trying, but I don’t want to push.”

Trying how? I didn’t know what he’d been trying to do. He just took weekends off now and was more available to be around me. He didn’t plan anything or showed much initiative. Was he afraid I’d run if he did?

Seriously, were all men stupid?

Here I’d been dying for him to be my damn fiancé for real and he’d been walking on glass?

And the gods gave me five of these morons to deal with?
And they expected me to be sane?

“You’re such a fucking idiot,” I whispered, shoving him back on his ass and standing, moving away from him. “You didn’t want to push me? All I wanted was for you—I’ve been holding my hand out to you waiting for you to want me more than your internship or studies or anything. Or want me as much. All you did was work less and just be there.

“What does that tell me? You didn’t try to be my fiancé. You tried to hang out. I don’t deserve more than that? What happened to the guy who planned food challenges and worked with my schedule and meetings all of the time? Where did he go, or do I not get that anymore because I got a damn ring? I mean, clearly we don’t have intimate times anymore.”

I actually went to take off the ring, but he got over his shock and stopped me.

“Please, please, don’t take it off, *agra*,” he begged me. “I want you. I want all of that with you. I’ve been so lost and scared. I didn’t—I’ve felt frozen in fear. You run when scared, and I get too scared to move.” He tried to kiss me, but I shoved at his chest. “Of *course*, I want you. I ache for you. You told me to piss off, and I’ve been scared to touch you.”

“I told you that for the night or maybe the week,” I growled. “You weren’t—I was wearing everything sexy to bed, and you would just come home to crash, gone before I got up sometimes. Do you know how ugly and undesired I felt?”

He blinked at me like I was a moron. “How could you ever think you were ugly?”

It was my turn to look at him like he was a moron. “Because my fucking fiancé wouldn’t touch me when I was in lingerie waiting for him in bed. Maybe that had something to do with it?”

“I think I was too tired to notice,” he muttered.

“Oh yeah, that fucking helps,” I bitched and pulled away.

“No, nope, you’re not—we’re having this out,” he growled, snagging me around the waist.

And he was hard.

“Are you turned on that we’re fighting?”

“I’m *always* turned on around you, *agra*,” he chuckled, running his nose along my neck. “And yes, apparently, I want angry sex. Fuck, I’ve wanted all of the sex. I just didn’t want to be an asshole who treated you like only sex or make you feel like Hudson did.” He moved his hand over my stomach and his other over my thigh. “Have you really wanted sex?”

“You guys are going to kill me,” I growled and pushed his hand off of me.

He caught me again and pushed me up against the wall, running his nose over mine. “I want sex. I’m saying it clearly. I want you. Are you saying you don’t want me?”

I bared my teeth at him. Of course, I wanted him.

I also wanted to beat his ass when he smirked at me.

“Tell me you don’t want me, Tams, and I’ll respect that,” he whispered as he kissed along my jaw. “Say you’re not in the mood or that you don’t want me inside of you. But you have to say it.”

“Why is this turning you on?” I demanded instead.

“I’ve *been* turned on, you silly woman,” he chuckled as he ran his fingers inside the band of my jeans. “I didn’t want you to hurt anymore or make you feel like you were only sex to me. If I knew you were waiting for me like that, we would have been having sex all over the place.”

“You’re a fucking moron,” I hissed.

“I’ve never said otherwise,” he agreed as he undid the button of my jeans. “So is that a yes? Or are you going to tell me you don’t want me?”

Oh, he wanted to play games?

Fine, we could fucking play games.

I pushed him off of me and headed to the shower, taking off my clothes as I went... And locking the bathroom door behind me.

“Mean,” he groaned when he realized the door was locked. “That was mean, *agra*.”

“I believe I deserve a better game than you just saying we can have sex,” I threw right back.

“Yes, but none of the blood was in my brain,” he grumbled before I heard a slight thump on the door. I didn’t think it was his fist.

No, his forehead. I chuckled when I realized that was probably what it was.

I took a long shower and got ready for sex because of course I was going to have sex with Darby before I left him at Yale. Duh.

I wanted us to work out, and I knew if I denied him right then, there would be no going back... Plus, I didn't want to. I didn't want games or problems between us. I'd been dying for him in all of the ways.

I just wanted to wash the flight and upset off of me first. Angry sex sounded fun, but after us not having sex for *months*, I wanted better for us.

And apparently, so did Darby when he thought with blood to his brain.

There were magical roses all over the bed and room service delivered. I pretended that I didn't know he'd used too much magic to do it all and charged him up as I walked past him.

I sat at the table and was ready to tuck into my meal, simply raising an eyebrow at him. "Don't you want to get cleaned up for your *agra* and get ready to bring her your best?"

He simply nodded when I took the towel off of my hair and let my wet mane fall all around me. I felt much better when he practically had a bit of drool forming.

"If I was mean, I'd sit here eating naked," I teased as I picked up the burger and intentionally made my bite a bit messy so I had to lick my lips and then suck my fingers."

"I'm never working ever again if I seriously was too tired to not realize I'd neglected you," he muttered before storming towards the bathroom.

Well, that helped.

A bit.

Just to be a bit evil, I ate my food super fast and before he finished showering. I wished I could have gotten a chance to brush my teeth, but I was worth burger and fries breath. I laid down on the bed with the flowers and fanned out my hair.

And opened my towel.

“Do you want to gobble up me or the food?” I asked as he stepped out of the bathroom.

“Fuck the fucking food,” he growled, dropping his towel and immediately coming towards me. He moved over me in a flash but didn’t immediately kiss me, worry in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Tams.” I looked away, but he turned my face back to him. “I’m sorry, Tams. I am. I’m so sorry. I love you. Thank you for staying and having faith in me.”

I did, but if I was honest, truly honest with myself, it was more that I didn’t have enough faith in myself to walk away when I should. He hadn’t done anything to that level, but looking in his eyes right then, we both knew that Darby could neglect me the rest of my life and I would never leave.

And that was fucking terrifying. I loved him that much that no matter what he did to me, I would never leave.

The idiot better fucking appreciate that. I think in that moment he did, truly realizing the depth of my love and how much he was an idiot that he hadn’t understood that before.

Hopefully, he really did now.

He kissed me and kept apologizing, promising me that he’d get his shit together and be the fiancé I wanted.

I pushed on the top of his head, and he simply blinked at me a moment. I never called him on things when he guided me

to what he wanted, so I got sassy with him. “It’s been *months*. Do you want me to tell you to fuck off and just start using my toys and handling things myself, or do you want to give the apology you should to my girls and pussy as well?”

“You are so ridiculously fucking sexy it should be a crime,” he mumbled before attacking my breasts.

Glad he thought so because I felt fairly crude saying it but yes, I felt every apology should come with lots of oral sex.

I couldn’t really be the only one who felt that way, right?

Hell, I should have gotten tons of oral sex after he’d proposed. At least in my world.

I was going to be queen... Could I make that into a law?

Probably not.

Wouldn’t that be nice if that was the way things worked?

“*Agra*, where is your mind when I’m trying to apologize?” he mumbled as he kissed down my stomach.

I couldn’t think of what to come up with fast enough that would make sense, so I told him honestly.

He laughed so hard that the whole bed shook. Yeah, I kind of couldn’t blame him.

But it did kill the mood. I sighed and pushed him off and went to roll away, but he was too fast for that. He snagged my leg and yanked me back, folding me in a ball on my side... And eating me out that way.

Well, that was new.

And good. Holy shit was it good.

He buried his face between my legs like a flipped sixty-nine almost where his chest was against my back and just went to town on me.

A few times.

And then a few times more.

I didn't even have a chance to recover from all of that before he pushed deep into me. I whimpered as he pressed me in the bed. He pulled back out and thrust forward again... And finished.

"Fuck, and I took the edge off in the shower," he groaned as he orgasmed. "I fucking forgot how amazing you felt. Fuck, fuck."

Okay then. I'd had like a million orgasms from his mouth so yeah, it made sense he was all wound up.

But luckily, he was still hard and not nearly done with me. He flipped me on my back and melded our bodies together as he took me slowly and deeply. We didn't say anything the whole time, staring into each other's eyes as if that said it all.

"We'll make it through this too," he promised when it was over. "I'll get my shit together. Just hold on for me a bit longer."

"Fine, but don't neglect your fiancée who spent so many years neglected and abused, dumbass," I whispered, not knowing what else to say. "I deserve better."

"Yeah, you do. I'll make it up to you."

I really hoped he did.

That was a good start, but I hoped he could.

The next day, the apartment was clean of anything else, and we moved him in along with Rafe and Wyn. It was hard to leave him even if I knew it was for only two years.

“Not even two years,” he corrected when I said that. “Like sixteen months at most with breaks and vacations. We can do that easy, *agra*. After that, we won’t ever have to be apart or jump through hoops again. It’s us together every night.” He cleared his throat and leaned in more. “And always in the same room. Even if it’s not my turn in your bed that night.”

So he’d been thinking about that. Okay, fine, I could handle that.

And maybe that wasn’t a bad idea. Maybe it would be a really big room with a few beds and that way it was just everyone’s?

What the hell was I thinking about? Seriously? I couldn’t get any of them to behave to the point I had them in my bed all of the time, and I was thinking crazy with five in my room all the time.

Whatever.

I kissed him and wished him luck, feeling much better about him being there than when we’d arrived at the airport, so that was all that mattered.

At least to me.

The first couple of weeks of school were rough because Darby wouldn't have a regular schedule getting used to Yale and law school and all of his new stuff. So we agreed that I not show up via portal at night. Mostly so he didn't slip during the day and say something about seeing me the night before.

I had complained he could make the excuse of Facetime, but if that was what he wanted, I would give him space. I didn't know why he needed it, but fine, whatever.

Stupid vampire.

But it made me grumpy. I was giving him all the chances, and apparently he was going to keep fucking them up.

My own school was going great and I loved it all.

I was in a good place with a lot of things and oddly enough, Juan started sitting with us again, and I was the one who was least bothered by that.

Yeah, I found that funny as well when he'd said the most shit to and about me. But I'd grown up abused and around people who had been abused. I was more forgiving of lashing out and being an asshole when dealing with that. Did I forgive him?

No, but he was in *vast* pain, and anyone who paid attention even a little could sense it, so for the moment, Juan

got a pass.

It was a few weeks into the semester and I wasn't paying attention to a meeting, instead thinking about showing up in Darby's bed naked and demanding attention. I felt weird magic flare—weird magic that was *mine*. I didn't understand it, but dread filled me and I had images of my fae dogs.

I took down the barrier I'd put over the meeting since it was in the cafeteria like normal and met Neldor's worried gaze. "Something's wrong. Follow with everyone."

I didn't wait for a response, teleporting with my sword to where I felt my magic. Dozens of my dogs had shown up and were on fire, a ring of them around a barrier.

Geiger. He was holding his mate Cluym who had a failing barrier up around them.

But why?

Then I felt my skin crawl and the sense of evil.

Demons. We were surrounded by at least a dozen demons. I saw spots on the ground and knew some had bled or something.

"Protect them," I ordered as I stabbed my sword into the ground and made fae fire form.

"That's not possible," the demon nearest me hissed.

"You've not seen anything yet, kid," I purred before shooting it at several of them at once. I handled at least a dozen before the rest realized they were fucked and tried to flee. I felt the other portals open and knew we didn't need to worry. "Burn the rest."

The dogs barked and took off to handle the demons.

“Take it down,” Neldor ordered, and I felt the magic pull out of Cluym’s barrier.

“Stay back,” Cluym coughed.

“You can’t, Prince Neldor,” someone said as they held Neldor back. “He’s been cut.”

Shael was there and grabbed my arm before I could get close. “I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

“No, *no*,” Geiger rasped, clutching his mate to him. He looked around and his eyes locked with me. “Please, *please*, I cannot lose him. Please, I know I shouldn’t have—he told me not to call the dogs.”

I shoved Shael off of me. “Of course, you should have. That’s why I gave you the fucking rune to do it!”

“You would have come,” Cluym said before coughing up blood. “There were too many.”

“You fucking fool,” I growled as I moved closer. My magic tingled along my fingers, and I knew I had to get closer. “Your life is not less valuable than mine—”

Neldor grabbed my arm and yanked me back. “Yes, it is.”

“Not to him!” I bellowed, pointing to Geiger, and tried to shove Neldor off of me.

“I love him too, but he’s been cut by a demon, Tamsin. There’s no saving him,” Neldor yelled. “He couldn’t risk you when we all need you to live! If that evil gets in you, you’ll be dead too!”

I wasn't hearing that shit, breaking his hold and throwing up a barrier the moment I was close enough to Cluym and Geiger. I met the dragon's freaked-out and terrified gaze. "I have no idea what I'm doing. My magic is telling me to save him, but I could kill him."

"Get out of here," Cluym choked out. "Leave."

"Idiots don't get a vote," I snapped, not even sparing him a look. "And if this works, I'm beating your ass later."

"Do whatever you can, please," Geiger rasped. "Please, I beg you."

I nodded and made the fae fire appear again... But altered it somehow. It wasn't a normal bright flame.

But a black flame. It was more like nothing. Honestly, it might have been a white flame it burned so hot and couldn't be seen. Either way, black or white, nothing or something, it wasn't what fae fire should be.

And I burned Cluym with it.

He screamed in a way that hurt my soul and his body seized off the ground. I yelled at Geiger to hold him down when Cluym instinctively tried to make me stop and the dragon did, helping me to hurt his mate in a horrible way.

But then it stopped. My magic stopped the flame and Cluym passed out.

I took down the barrier and looked to Shael. "Check him. See if I healed him."

"What did you do, Your Highness?" she whispered.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “My magic just itched to do it like it always does.”

Neldor grabbed me and pulled me away from Cluym and the burnt demons just to be safe, and I didn’t fight him this time. All of the dogs came back and confirmed they got every single one while everyone checked out Cluym. Healers and then royal healers were even called to make sure and figure out what the fuck I’d just done.

Yeah, I had no clue either.

But I had been clued-in on demons, a while ago even.

The whole thing had given me enough nightmares after all so yeah, I was all read up.

Basically, the movies had gotten some parts right and some of it wrong, which was what I found on most things in life.

Or the supe world even.

Demons did possess humans.

But not live ones.

Corpses wouldn’t go over well, and apparently they’d done that a long time ago, and that was when humans had figured out to cut up zombies and living dead stories circulated. Totally gross, and bodies weren’t even preserved way back centuries ago.

Yeah, I’d made Taeral gloss over that gross.

Nowadays—at least in recent centuries—demons picked brain-dead bodies. They were basically dead and the soul had

moved on, but the body still medically worked. That was the religious ideology behind it.

It was also how animal slaughtering for religious sacrifice came about. It used to be a thing to slaughter a pig or goat to pray for health for a sick family member. Total bullshit. Demons had pushed that lie and worked it for people to believe by putting their own into brain-dead bodies that then rose and were fine.

Because demons needed a blood sacrifice to take over a human body.

Gross.

It wasn't just enough for the supposed soul to have moved on, something else had to spark the transfer of the demon into the "host." There were theories, and lots of dark fairy scholars had studied on how it all played out, but no matter the how or why, that was the way things worked.

Animal sacrifice by brain-dead or mostly dead human equaled demon taking up residence. There was no way to get them back out after. The real gross started when Taeral told me he'd seen demons snap their heads back around and all kinds of stuff. Fae fire was about the only way to handle a demon.

Now if they really died or just the body did and the demon went back to hell, fairies didn't know. They honestly didn't care because they knew they'd never get them all and just handled the ones they could.

Fair enough.

It used to not be a big deal, and there was a demon here and a demon there. Humans died or lived, and many didn't

spend much time in between the two... Until their knowledge evolved, especially about medicine.

It got *really* bad once they started grouping their comatose patients together for demons to have an array of choices to pick from. So yeah, that had made the last hundred years more complicated.

Especially a few decades before the last war.

Demons were smart though—as one would think from starting a whole religious belief system around killing animals that helped them. They weren't helpless, and they had ways to harm humans and make them do horrible things. They also could be hurt by fairy weapons, our metals like fire to them, but only fae fire could kill them.

However, they could kill us. Quite easily even.

If they wanted, demons could alter the bodies they were in and could look fairly monstrous. I'd seen it the first time that night live and was glad that Taeral had shown me drawings to prepare me. Their teeth weren't like vampire fangs but just all longer and freaky as shit.

Yes, that was the technical term. They were just feral and freaky looking.

Their nails also grew like wolfman kind of claws, thicker and longer, black even, which was super weird in a whole bag of weird. They could run faster but only for a very short distance and used up pretty much all of their energy to take that one chance to flee.

If those teeth or claws cut a human, the human would eventually die like a rotting sickness. For a fairy that had

magic and a pure soul, it was a sped-up version, and our bodies pretty much ate themselves within the hour from what Taeral had told me.

I'd learned all of this months and months ago. That was fine, I'd accepted it like everything else. That wasn't what was on my mind.

Why now? That was the question plaguing me. The demons hadn't blinked at us since I'd reopened Faerie. Yes, they threatened me to leave it alone, but they hadn't known what I'd been up to or how far I'd gotten. They'd not gotten a chance to really get a response before I'd found Neldor and then honestly should have struck but again missed their chance.

From there, they were smart and hid mostly after I was waking more and more fairies.

So what the fuck had changed? Why the hell would they go after Cluym? Or Geiger? Who was the target? Could this have been random?

"We cannot sense any evil on him, Your Highness," Calarel declared after about twenty minutes of everyone and their brother checking out Cluym. "He's healed himself even which means he can still access his magic. For the safety of everyone, I suggest he stay for at least a month somewhere secluded on this world and we can monitor him."

I nodded. "Do it. If this has never been healed before, then we take every precaution."

Neldor snorted. "Oh, now you want to take precautions?"

I elbowed him. “My magic has never led me astray, and I knew I could save him. Just shut it.” I went over to the group and waved everyone quiet, knowing they would have a million questions I probably couldn’t answer, but they would have to wait. “What happened? Who was the target?”

“I was, Princess,” Geiger said firmly. “They came for me. This is my land and a place I let my dragon out. I had it on my calendar—not as to let my dragon out, of course. I list this as my mediation. Many in the firm know that’s what it is and where to reach me in an emergency.”

“So it wouldn’t be hard to know the location and it’s yours,” I muttered, nodding when he did. “So Cluym opened a portal and you had an ambush?”

“I went through first even though he always yells at me,” Geiger grumbled. “I didn’t feel—he came through and two launched at him, one cutting him and the other doing something to the portal.”

“Demons can take out our portals?” I asked, not having been told that.

“Yes, but no,” Taeral sighed. “They cannot take out the portal, but they can taint that spot on the ground, and our magic doesn’t work there really.”

I could track with that. In my mind, the demon bled on the ground, and our magic kind didn’t want to be there then. Fine, good to know.

“Cluym put up a barrier,” Geiger rasped, his eyes begging me to understand. “He was dying.”

I moved over to the dragon and kissed his hair. “Stop apologizing. You’re not the one I’m mad at.”

“Me?” Cluym gasped as others did. “You’re mad at me, Your Highness? Why? I did—I risked us to protect—”

I turned and slapped him. “Who the fuck asked you to do that?” I shoved Neldor away when he tried to grab me. “You think you did something noble, but you *didn’t*, Cluym.” I glanced around at everyone staring at me in shock and some with disgust, shaking my head. I pointed at Geiger. “Love *him* as much as you love your fucking *duty*, you idiot!

“What would have happened to your *mate* if you died because you were worried about me? I can handle myself. I brought everyone with me. I do what I should if others do. I ordered him to use that rune at any trouble. Why didn’t you listen to me? Huh? Why did you disobey me? Why didn’t you trust me to protect *you*? That’s my job.

“If we were in the shit and you took a bullet for me, that’s honorable. This was just stupid, and I’m fucking pissed at you. People love you. Lots of us do. We need you too. Don’t fall on your sword when it’s not *needed*. Did you call anyone? Did you try to get other help?”

“You were too fast, Your Highness,” Geiger said quietly. “It all happened so fast.”

I backed down then a bit. “I’m glad you didn’t listen to him then.” I moved closer to Cluym and ignored when he flinched, this time flicking him in the forehead. “I’m going to assume your pain overrode your intelligence this time, but don’t do this to any of us again. Do you know the hell I would feel if you died trying to protect me when there was no need?

“The dogs didn’t even make a move because they knew they didn’t need to. I trust you guys to protect me, but you have to trust in me too. That’s the only way this works.” I bit back a sob and he nodded, getting all of this anger was from my fear he’d almost died. “I know all of us won’t live forever and have easy lives.

“No matter what that’s just not reality, but don’t you dare ask me to be the boss of losing people when we can avoid it. I can’t. I can’t be the boss of that. I can’t be the queen of people dying when they don’t have to. I’ll fucking walk around and burn every demon before I allow one of us to die trying to block me from getting a damn boo-boo. Promise me.”

“I promise, Your Highness,” he rasped, bobbing his head before breaking down crying. I kissed his hair and let Geiger comfort him.

Or comfort each other really.

“You’re such a pain in the ass,” Neldor mumbled as I glanced around.

“Yeah, but I’m not wrong, and if people want me to behave, then they need to as well,” I muttered before focusing on Shael. “Comb over Geiger’s life. I want ideas and theories like yesterday.”

“Your Highness?” she hedged, people glancing between each other.

“Why did the demons suddenly try to take out Geiger, Commander?” I asked, opening my arms wide and gesturing around to the burnt areas around us. “What the hell has changed that they’re coming after one of us or someone on our

team? My main damn attorney that they knew would get my attention and in a big way.”

“Geiger found or did something that pissed off the demons,” Neldor whispered, swearing several times under his breath when I nodded.

“Yeah, and I want to know what. Don’t you guys?”

“Yes, of course, Your Highness,” Shael drawled, sighing when I gave her a look that she wasn’t acting like it. “Tamsin, you just pulled a miracle out of your ass like none of us have ever heard of. You saved a fairy from a demon cut. That’s never happened in the thousands and hundreds of thousands of years of our history. We’re in a bit of shock here.”

Yeah, okay, fair enough but seriously... Weren’t they used to that from me by now?

Shouldn’t they have been?

Maybe there were some things people never got used to.

The End

THANK YOU for reading this book!!

Thank you so much for reading the next book in Artemis University. I loves all of you lots for your support and wanting more of my books. Please, *please* leave a review. It

really helps me out to know which series people are eager for. I appreciate the time it takes!

I'm keeping my promise to update you guys so everyone keeps the pressure off and announcing the next Enchantress book is in editing already and SHOULD be released in April.

I've already 20k deep into another book that you guys have been harassing—asking for so hopefully it comes together this month and maybe it can be out May/June. Maybe. I do appreciate how most of you guys have backed off and are internalizing your excitement more instead of it exploding all over me. I'm glad your excited, but until my living situation and a few other things are stable, I'm just feeling overwhelmed by a lot.

Also, if you have the time, please, PLEASE go show the podcast some love. So many of you guys said you wanted to hear from me more so I put in a lot of time and money to get the podcast going and now no one listens. It's been a bit hurtful after so many people were interested like I didn't do it right and I'm just hoping people don't know about it yet. So please share it and give it love. It's really fun and something for you guys to get more behind the scenes and learn about the process and authoring in general!

Happy St. Patrick's Day to all. It's the one day where everyone is Irish and yes, you look fab in green, just don't drink too much green beer. The next day will get weird.

All my best,

Erin

And Mr. Sassy Pants giving me the stink eye because I'm late with his lunch. Spoiled.

Find A New Series To Love...

Accidentally Wolf: Seraphine Thomas 1

Gives New Meaning To Workplace Injury

Special Agent in Charge, Seraphine Thomas, lives for her job at the FBI. One of the youngest female agents with her own team, she thrives in undercover work to make the city she loves safer. But Sera's on-track life is thrown into chaos when she's attacked during a bust gone bad and is left figuring out what it means to be a werewolf.

Right away, she learns that she's more powerful and able to do things that she shouldn't be able to do so quickly after her transition. The rules of her old life don't seem to apply to much now that she's a shifter, and knowing who she can trust is even more complicated.

When she's transferred to a special branch of the FBI made up of paranormals policing others of their kind and given a promotion, things start looking up—until her abnormal level of power creates a list of enemies for her before she's even learned who her allies are.

Upended Life: Artemis University 1

My name is Tamsin Vale and my life is about to get real... Really complicated and ridiculously dangerous. Which is almost funny given at nineteen I already know too much of the darkness of the world and people, the secrets they keep.

Or so I thought.

Turns out those quirky abilities I've been keeping secret expose me to a world I didn't know existed. Sure, I knew I wasn't human—but how exactly do I find out more without ending up in the wrong hands?

And I'm not so sure I'm in the right hands now given some of the reactions to finding me. They say I'm the last fairy. I'm not sure I should trust them when their thoughts are mostly of power and how to use me.

But I'm also not sure I have much of a choice. My powers are dangerous and I don't know how to use them. They promise to teach me what I need to know and give me a chance at something I've never had before.

A normal life. I don't think anything about Artemis University and those who attend is normal, but it's still better than the life I've been living if they keep half their promises.

I think hoping they'll keep half is generous.

Artemis University is a hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.

My name is Inez Garner, and my story has sort of been told... But not. I'm turning twenty-three and find out I'm not human; I'm apparently a vampire. Sure, who hasn't read that story? Oh, but I'm a princess. And there's a zombie apocalypse—although I'm debating where the line is of apocalypse vs. post-apocalypse. There's also a quest that I'm compelled to be on, and it might all be coming from the Goddess.

Awesome. It seems She has big plans for me. And I have to deal with ghosts. When I kill corrupted—the nice PC name people call zombies, as it's not their fault they eat people—I then have to deal with their ghosts. Which is super when being hunted for years by some guys I don't want to know better.

Add to everything, I have to apologize to heroines for judging them when they fall in bed with the hot guy and buy the story he gives. I get it now. Sex is splendid. I'm not one to believe a con, but he's got answers I need, like why I have no memories before I was eighteen.

Plus, the fangs sort of sold it for me. I hope he forgives me for shooting him.

House of Garner is an apocalyptic hot burning WhyChoose romance with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine that doesn't let anyone get in her way.

Undisclosed Assets: Untraceable Succubus 1

A succubus working as a stripper sounds like a cliché or start of a bad joke, but Lola Chase is in a human only province in Canada for other reasons. Someone is murdering women society looks down on, and she's there to stop it. As a demon,

she's bottom of the supernatural food chain and knows how often people ignore crimes against them.

From the start there isn't much to go on, and she ends up getting in a bit of trouble following any leads she gets. Things get complicated when an ancient, big name vampire takes interest in her and getting away from him proves to be much harder than her normal admirers.

Thankfully, although her cover is a stripper, Lola loves to dance and the fun she has helps balance out the stress and worry of the case.

Plus, she finds some very hot men to play with and feed from. The question is whether or not she can balance it all and find a murderer before he kills again.

Untraceable Succubus is a murder mystery series where the sex is hot and often and the main character kicks some serious ass on the road to finding out if she can have real love in her life even if it comes from multiple men.

Demon of Death: Enchantress 1

Soraya Devil is the Enchantress, one of the most powerful magics in the world... But she's so much more than that, and everyone's constantly attempting to unravel her past and secrets. She's not worried though, as many have tried and never find out the truth.

It's safer for everyone that way.

The owner of Paranormal Investigations—among other companies—she has her own answers to find. Though she’s continuously pulled in too many directions, she always answers the calls that make even her magic tingle in warning at the danger.

When a sprite begins killing people in Chicago, she has to team up with SPU—Supernatural Police Unit—to figure out who summoned the demon and why before more die. While that’s enough of a challenge, the main hurdle is the team lead on the case who loathes all magics. But when he can’t seem to get past his hate and do his job, can Soraya make an ally from an enemy, or will the evil unleashed in the city she loves win the day?

Rough Beginnings: Karma Bakery 1

Starting a New Business Takes Magic

Imagine there weren’t three main gods of Olympus, but four. A sister who went through something so horrible, so traumatic she left and was written out of history.

Arabella Baker and her two adopted daughters are moving to Boston to open a new business and start over. Things will be different this time with the new names and new life. The twins will live on their own at college—though still right in Boston—and experience something a bit more normal. The store she bought has a hefty price, but the location is fantastic, and she got the best spot in the new development... Which apparently comes with an immensely attractive man who owns it all.

Nothing goes smoothly in opening a new business though, sample days, crazy busy, and fluff interviews taking dark turns. Honestly, it leaves Arabella asking one main question—why did she think opening in such a large city and right before the holidays was such a great idea?

Meave: Naughty Witches 1

Leaving NYC and a troubling past, Meave Washington is starting over. She has a good plan, but she's probably bit off more than she can chew. So she embraces the chance of fate that lands help at her feet—and if he's smoking hot, all the better.

Distracted by a text while driving, Ashton Perry injures Meave. He's horrified that he could have killed someone, and steps up to make it right... And not just because she's the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

Sparks immediately start flying and the desire is undeniable but it's not that simple to take the leap. But Ashton's barely a man, and Meave is hiding something important. When the woman is older, age isn't just a number and Meave isn't sure Ashton can be who she needs.

Ashton steps up to prove he's not just a man, but the man his bewitching lady deserves. He doesn't care what she is—only who she is. And he'll do whatever it takes to prove it.

Naughty Witches is a burning paranormal romance novella series with strong female leads, fun so sexy it raises the temperature, and mismatched people who find HEAs that give

us all hope fate won't forget us. Each book is a new pairing in the same world, with an overall series arc.

The Turning: Dr. Kelly Murphy 1

One Bite Can Change Everything

Graduate medical school, start competitive internship, don't get cut from the program, become a surgeon. It was a great plan. One Kelly Murphy loved and had dreamed of most of her life... And it was blown to hell in a night with an uninvited bite.

Now she's missing three days of her life, trying to handle her freaked out best friend and parents who called the police when she went missing, all as she realizes she's not the same person she was before. She's different. Like has fangs different.

When he shows up on her doorstep claiming to know what happened to her, Kelly's not sure that makes things any less confusing. But at least he can guide her, right? Either way, she has a plan and a choice she didn't make won't stop her... Even if she might have the urge to bite her patients from now on.

Owned: Secure Settings 1

Kate Boyle has lived through more loss than most people twice her age. She's strong and independent, so letting people in to help her handle her grief or problems is next to impossible for her.

The owner of a successful company, Secure Settings, Kate devotes all her time to keeping people safe and rescuing those who can't save themselves. When she gets the call that her grandpa died and she's now inherited his ranch, a storm of epic proportions starts. Smart enough to know she can't watch out for danger while grieving, she calls in a favor for help.

Jared and Dean Acker just got out of the Marines and are a little lost as to what comes next for them. So when they're asked to back up a friend of a friend, they're in... And meet the woman of their dreams. Now, if they could just convince her.

Wounded: In My Dreams 1

Authors Dream Of Their Happiness Too

Gas station coffee is the highlight of Lily Slone's boring outing until fate intervenes... Along with the barrel of a gun and a lost soldier who saves her life.

Jasper Hutson—a homeless Marine, discarded by his family after returning home from the war wounded—reacted on instinct. But this one act brings him to Lily's attention, and not because he saves her life. She sees something else in him. Something no one else sees.

Refusing to give up on him when everyone else does, Lily offers Jasper a place to stay and an opportunity to get back on his feet. That one offer will change her world. When they grow closer and Jasper makes Lily's life so much easier, she's not sure she can go back to living without him.

As life moves forward and they get into their own rhythm, Lily discover something about Jasper that he's kept hidden.

Will she continue to reach for her happily ever after or will they both remain wounded?

About the Author

Erin is a born Chicagoan who has lived in several states which gives her an interesting perspective from which to write characters. Still a loyal Cubs fan, she also cheers for her alma mater, the Illini from her home outside Boston. To date, she has published hundreds of paranormal books in different genres that have dedicated readers who await each release to her numerous series. With her canine editor-in-chief Lord Vader Flynn at her side, she has no plans of stopping anytime soon and looks forward to new adventures and worlds on the horizon.

ErinRFlynn.com

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Heartful Secrets

NAUGHTY WITCHES

Meave

Briony

Sia

DR. KELLY MURPHY

The Turning

The Transition

The Decision

SECURE SETTINGS

Owned

Claimed

IN MY DREAMS

Wounded

Alone

Broken

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Artemis University 19: Balanced Trajectory

eBook ISBN:

First E-book Publication: March 2023

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