

Changeling Press

ALEXA PIPER

BLOOD
& FATE

BLOOD & FATE (MONSTER APOCALYPSE 3)

Alexa Piper

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Alexa Piper

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Rory has accepted love. So what if his lover is blue, horned, and very protective? Actually, a bagu mate suits Rory just fine, especially since Inkiri loves doting on Rory. But after the attack on Esaka, Rory once more finds himself frustrated with the magic he has access to, and he'd prefer to get rid of it. If that's not an option, he'd prefer never to be in a situation where he has to use it.

Inkiri, ever the supportive mate, does his best to encourage Rory to learn about his magic, and new friends are more than happy to help Rory with that. Actually, Rory discovers that learning about magic isn't all that bad, especially if no one wants to murder you or your friends. However, Rory's power attracts those who would use him to their own ends, and escaping those forces forever is not possible. Which leaves Rory with a choice: hide and run, or fight.

Warning: Blood & Fate ends on a cliffhanger which will be resolved in the next book in the series.

DEAR READER

Here we are again, and haven't you missed doting Inkiri and clueless Rory? I have. Inkiri continues on being very gallant and loving. You'd expect a big guy like him to be a lot more possessive than he is, but then again, Inkiri has all the faith in his human mate. He's such a sappy romantic!

Anyway, I'm really mad at the Koa Esher for coming in there back in *Magic & Home* and preventing us all from experiencing more of Esaka's touristy but awesome cuisine. I really hope Rory and the guys get to go back there and do some culinary exploring.

But even as the writer, I don't always get what I want. I'm just here to tell you a story, and most of the time, even I am amazed at where it goes. What I can tell you about Rory's and Inki's story is that it won't end after this book, so you can read on without worrying too much. However, this book ends on a cliffhanger, so please take that into account!

All right, now let's see where *Blood & Fate* takes us. If you want to read this while soaking in your tub, be careful not to drop your e-reader, please!

Alexa Piper

CHAPTER ONE

The rain that had welcomed me back to Earth, back to Ireland, and back from being unconscious for days hadn't let up. It beat down in sheets and slicked against the kitchen window to our left, but Inkiri's body radiated warmth. There was a chicken on the kitchen table in Donna's farmhouse, and it was looking at my bagu mate, the chicken's beady eyes bright, her mottled gray feathers freckled with white.

Inkiri clicked — possibly at both me and the chicken — and ran his hand over me, double-checking that the blanket was drawn tight around me. Donna was at the counter between the large fridge and induction hub, filling an espresso maker with ground coffee, her head half-turned, her long brown hair braided over one shoulder.

“I'll be honest with you, Rory. You looked like a corpse who'd foregone the beautifying appointment with the mortuary technician,” Donna said and glanced at me. The chicken clucked at Inkiri and lifted a clawed foot as if she were about to jump into Inkiri's lap except, of course, I was in that lap.

“Yes, you were very pale, sadir,” my mate said and used the opportunity to lick over my neck.

My throat constricted. I remembered the streets of Esaka, the chaos, the Koa Esher... or maybe I could call them cola ass hats now that Vergis's dad had approved of my abuse of the Lugarran language. At any rate, I remembered the

magic and how that voice in my head had said something about how that same magic that had saved Nokim and Vergis might hurt me so badly that some rest — well, a three days' time-out in this case — wouldn't make me better. I shuddered to think what the magic could have done to me. Could it have made me sleep forever?

I didn't want to share that with Inkiri, so I swallowed the lump in my throat and wiggled around under my blankets.

“Yeah, but look.” I pointed at myself when I'd successfully extracted my hand from under the folds. The chicken followed my fingers with her black eyes. “I'm all better now. Uhm. Donna, do you think I could take a quick shower here?” The thing was, even if Inkiri had cleaned me up with a cloth back in the tent, he still produced a lot... just a lot. Of stuff. Well, cum was the stuff he produced a lot of, and it was still trickling out of me.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Sure, honey. There's a bathroom upstairs with fresh towels in the cabinet.”

Inkiri huffed and clicked. “I will take care of you,” he said and stood. Still with me in his arms, which was excessive. I also maybe kind of liked it, because my mate's nearness was such a huge comfort, but I was pretty sure I could stand and do stuff, never mind that I knew I needed more rest after the drain of the magic.

“I'm fine,” I said. “Put me down. I can shower by myself, Ink. I told you, that's a human thing.”

“But, sadir —”

Donna turned to face the bagu, who was some two heads taller than her. “What have we been talking about when it comes to touching others and randomly carrying people?” she said to Inkiri and crossed her arms.

Inkiri made a purring noise with only a hint of a growl in there, but he ended in a soft click. “But Donna, this is my mate. He’s so frail. He —”

“Oh, put him on his feet, you overgrown blue goat,” she said.

Inkiri huffed, but slowly and with exceeding care, put me down. His touches lingered, indigo cat eyes searching my face for any hint that I’d forgotten how legs worked all of a sudden.

“I’m fine,” I told him. And me. The verbal confirmation was good.

“I brought fresh clothes for you,” Inkiri said and took a step toward a honey-brown kitchen cabinet and pulled open the bagu-made backpack that sat next to it on the floor. It was a pretty big backpack, the kind of size hikers would like, and it looked heavy. “It’s shibiya. You liked those before.”

“I did. I do. Thanks for packing for me.”

Inkiri frowned as he rifled through the backpack. “It’s a small thing, sadir.”

I curled my toes in my cat socks as I stood there and looked around the kitchen. The farm was an old building like so many in Ireland. Wooden beams in the ceiling showed their exposed ebony, and copper pots looked like they’d been here

for no less than a century. There were four chairs around the generous kitchen table and a bench running underneath the window, which was framed by blue-and-white checkered curtains. Also, there was that chicken. She behaved like she belonged in this kitchen, eyeing all of us as if we were intruding on her day.

“Hey, where are the rest of the guys?” I asked.

“Good point,” Donna said. “And why did you only bring the acquired taste and his daddy?”

I smirked a little at Donna calling Vergis that. I was suspecting he wasn't as bad as he pretended to be, maybe, even if he was still plenty murderous. After all, he'd used a bear as a weapon, so at the very least, he was happy to facilitate carnage. Also, he'd killed that bear.

From the backpack, Inkiri pulled out a set of clothes consisting of a light gray shirt and darker pants. The material looked silky soft and was still the informal bagu clothing I'd been wearing back on Aër — not the complicated ensemble I'd been dressed in for what had essentially been our wedding, but the really comfy clothes the hotel had given all of us.

“The others are all back in Canada with Vergis's human father. We decided to split up so they could watch over Charles while we would find out if Kinnek's theory was accurate or not.”

I took the clothes from Inkiri. The fabric really was smooth against my skin, like silk, but unlike silk, it felt like something that would keep one warm. I wanted to snuggle up in those clothes and ask my mate to wrap me in his arms.

“Vergis’s dad is called Charles?” I asked.

“Yes,” Inkiri said. “Why? You know him?”

“What have I been explaining about not all humans knowing one another, Inkiri?” Donna said, and I smiled. I liked Donna.

“I just meant, you know. I thought his father would be a Rambo. Or a Rocky.”

Donna giggled. “I’d like to think you are talking about Rocky Horror. Golly, I could use something campy right about now, and imagining Vergis in drag just about does it.”

My eyes widened, and I grinned at Donna. Musical theater was not my thing on the stage, but I loved watching it as much as any gay theater major would. “Glitter and a wig,” I said. “And nails.”

Donna’s eyes sparkled. The chicken clucked.

“I am not sure what you are talking about,” Inkiri said. “Rory, didn’t you say camping was bad?”

Donna and I looked at each other for about three seconds. Then we couldn’t hold it in any longer and broke out laughing.

Inkiri looked back and forth between us a little helplessly, and the chicken saw her opening, so she jump-fluttered off the table and took another step toward him, and my fowl-loving mate reached down to pick her up and stroke her tiny chicken head even as Donna and I went to the belly-aching laughter.

“Can you explain camp to him while I take a shower?” I asked as I finally headed to the creaky wooden staircase that separated the large kitchen from a living room and a conservatory beyond that. Well, Ireland clearly made farming fancy.

“Oh, honey, I’m good, but I don’t know that I’m that good,” Donna called after me. “Will try, though.”

At the top of the stairs, I heard my mate’s confused huff. “What does he want, Donna? Tell me.”

I smiled to myself, because, yeah. We’d gone from a city that was being overrun by white-clad magical a-holes to worrying about explaining the intricacies and esthetics of camp to the bagua. Life was good. Now it just had to stay that way, or ideally, I could get things back on track toward becoming Inkiri’s trophy mate. It was a more realistic life goal than the acting had been, that was for sure.

* * *

Donna’s towels had roses embroidered on them, and her bathroom smelled of lemon peel. A look in the mirror made me wince, because I really, really resembled a corpse who should’ve kept that final makeup appointment.

I quickly took my clothes off — and they were fresh bagu clothes, not the ones I’d been wearing when the cola a-holes had come to Esaka to wreak havoc. I’d been so totally benched that Inkiri had dressed me while I was unconscious, or at least I hoped he’d done that. At any rate, when I stepped under the warm spray of the shower, cold crept into my limbs, and not even when I cranked the heat up all the way did it

keep me from shivering, so I hurried up and toweled myself dry fast.

The bathroom had gotten steamed up, which was good, because it meant I wouldn't have to look at myself in the mirror again. I was a pale mess with dry lips and drier skin, and that seriously hampered my confidence.

The change of clothes felt just as good on my skin as I'd imagined, and being clean made everything better still. I found a cross between slippers and socks in there as well, so I reluctantly rolled up my cat socks and old clothes for laundry and put the new ones on. With the rain still coming down in sheets, I wasn't dressed at all for going outside. Then again, maybe that was Inkiri's intent all along.

Come to think of it, the way he'd been holding on to me, had been reluctant to let me walk by myself, that wasn't such a bad thing, right? After all, I really, really preferred him coddling me over all the fighting and the magic and whatnot. I preferred it over trying to figure out where my magic had come from, over camping in the outdoors because Vergis's dad had a theory — a ridiculous theory — and over any kind of dangerous situations or activities altogether.

With a pang, I remembered that I was the cause for most of those dangerous situations lately. It made my fingers tremble as I tied my bagu shirt at the side. The Koa Esher had wanted me. The realization hit home, strengthened with the force of that foreign *knowing* that had all but haunted me every time I'd needed to use my magic. Or no, every time I'd ended up accidentally doing magic while I was talking to a

disembodied voice in my head.

That kind of thing needed to stop.

Still feeling cold but also with conviction about going without magic for the rest of my life, I made my way downstairs. The bagu shoe-slippers were odd to walk in since they were pretty padded on the soles, but that was fine. I could just about imagine Inkiri telling some shoe vendor that the shoes had to be very, very soft because I was so very, very soft. Honestly, the image made my swoon a little.

When I got back into the kitchen, Inkiri's eyes locked on me. He'd taken a chair and was attentively listening to Donna explaining that "camp was an aesthetic, but not just an aesthetic." The damn chicken had totally stolen my spot and was now sitting all primly in my mate's lap. Her beady eyes locked gazes with me. Could chickens be aloof?

"There he is," Donna said. "Inkiri said you wanted waffles. You should've brought Nokim for anything fancy, but I've got frozen ones in the toaster oven for you."

She was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee but got up to pour me one as well, and pulled some steaming waffles out of a small oven set against the wall of her tidy kitchen.

"T-thanks," I mumbled. "That's so nice of you." Donna had an au-pair vibe. Not that she was a motherly type, but just a nice person who didn't mind going out of her way to do something for another person.

"Well, I wouldn't want to let Inkiri's mate starve," she said.

“Are you feeling better, sadir?” Inkiri said and set the chicken down on a chair next to him. She clucked with indignation, but I couldn’t help grinning triumphantly at her when my mate stood to hug me and kiss me human-style.

I let out a contented sigh and leaned into him.

“Now I feel better. I was beginning to think you loved the chicken more than me.”

Inkiri chuckled and Donna laughed.

“Yes, the blue softie is a bird person. Wilson usually isn’t that friendly. Then again, it’s not like I get visitors, so she has only me,” Donna said as Inkiri sat and pulled me back into his lap. “Can I interest you in chocolate spread?”

My mouth watered as soon as she said “chocolate,” and I bobbed my head.

“Yes, please.” I watched as she slathered the waffles with the glistening spread. “The chicken’s name is Wilson? It’s a girl chicken, though, right?”

“Yeah, but she’s definitely a Wilson, keeping me company on this lonely island of solitude in the Irish countryside.” Donna put the waffles down in front of me with a smile and a wink. “Enjoy. You look starved.”

For the next few minutes, I couldn’t really focus on anything other than the food Donna had put down in front of me, and not even the glaring chicken upset me. It was like my body needed fuel and couldn’t be distracted until it’d had it.

Eventually, I focused again on my mate’s clicking, but before I could swallow and apologize for just wolfing down

my food, I heard the door, then nothing, then noticed the double shadow of Vergis and his daddy coming into the kitchen. They were damp from the rain, their dark blue horns slick with it. Kinnek's long braids with the silver highlights were matted against his clothes, and I noticed he'd taken his shoes off. I didn't mean to stare at the pawlike bagu feet with the skin folds that protected their claws, but I couldn't help myself.

“Well, sweet pea, you have a bit of a chocolate mouth going there. Muffin, do you remember when you were little and refused to eat anything but chocolate for a week? Your chocolate mouth was worse than our Loathly Lady's here.”

Okay, so maybe Kinnek could be fun. I still found it difficult to get over how alike he and Vergis looked apart from Kinnek's longer hair and the bluish gray strands in there that I was beginning to think really might be dyed rather than a sign of aging. Kinnek looked pretty darn spry, and unless they'd gotten distracted or had given up due to inclement weather, the two of them had just killed one of the purple beasts, the kind which seemed to think I was food. And both looked like they'd done nothing more strenuous than admire the roses.

“Except I was a kid, and he's a grown twink,” Vergis said, nonplussed and very much not annoyed at Kinnek's jibe.

“I cannot imagine you as a child, Vergis,” Donna said. “You were this big?” She lifted her hand to hip height.

“Oh, he was smaller.” Kinnek nudged his head toward Wilson. “Maybe a little bigger than the chicken.”

Vergis narrowed his eyes at his father. “Do not

compare me to that bird.”

“Aw, baby Vergis must’ve been adorable!” Donna cooed.

“Oh, he was the most precious little bagu baby,” Kinnek said, rocking back and forth on his paw feet.

“You have any photographic evidence on you?” Donna said, and dang it, but I *loved* Donna.

“Oh, afraid not, fair Donna,” Kinnek said. “My Vergis gets very cross with me when my fatherly love does anything to threaten his carefully curated reputation.” He leaned closer to Donna. “Don’t get me wrong, he was the sweetest baby, but he also didn’t shed a tear for the sacrifice he had to make for his first spell. I am quite proud. Got the job done on the first slice.”

Inkiri was very much focused on me while I remained focused on chewing and swallowing and watching Donna’s eyes go wide as Kinnek spoke. The stupid chicken was back on the table and sort of prowling. Clearly, she was waiting for her opening to get back on my mate’s lap.

“The chicken loves you,” I said around a mouthful of food.

“Hmm. Birds are easy to please,” Inkiri said.

“I’m easy to please,” I said and reached for the napkin Donna had put out for me. “I’m just like a chicken.”

“What’d I tell you?” Vergis said and turned to his dad. “Chicken-brained twink gold-digger. Isn’t the Loathly Lady supposed to be graceful, not stuffing their face with chocolate

waffles?”

“Chocolate waffles never did feature in the myths,” Kinnek said. “Who knows? It might be a distinguishing trait.”

“You two aren’t blaming us poor humans for our cravings, are you?” Donna said.

“I don’t have cravings,” I said quickly, then licked some chocolate off my left index finger. “No uterus, no cravings.”

“Honey, you sound a bit misogynistic there,” Donna said to me, and my face flushed.

Vergis giggled. “He’s very obsessed with uteruses. Has been like that since we found him, Donna. Between you and me, I think he was trying to find women’s underwear.”

“I — no! Just the cat socks. I’ve just been saying I don’t have one, a uterus that is. And I don’t want one. I mean, no offense to... erm.” I gestured toward Donna.

“To the trans woman in the room who doesn’t have one and the bagua who do have them?” Donna suggested.

I wanted to go back to being unconscious, even if it meant sleeping in the tent. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Gran had said something about silence and grace or something. Maybe I should talk less. Yes. Shrubbery did not speak. I wondered whether my third-grade teacher had, after all, tried to give me a life lesson. It did bear considering.

While Vergis kept up his lurking, Kinnek pulled out a chair, his eyes on me. “Mmh. He does sound a little bit

Canadian, muffin. You're right about that. But —" and the bagu shifted his mood and smoothly glided into the chair across from me. "— all joking and making light of the situation aside. You are feeling better, aren't you? You look a bit paler again now than you did when you smelled of your mate's pleasure."

Oh, dear effing gosh. My face heated all over again, but I managed to nod and take another bite from my waffle. Gosh, but food was good.

"He's no longer as cold to the touch," Inkiri said.

He was right, but that had something to do with him touching me. I jerked a little, because that grain of knowledge had just come to me, but it was true: my mate's touch helped after the drain of magic, that's why I needed him near, why I'd physically craved the closeness of sex. It was also why the animal part of my brain was signaling "mate, mate, mate" whenever I saw him even though I'd only recently started thinking of Inkiri as... husband and spouse, the handsome blue guy with the horns I'd fallen for.

"Well, that excludes ice maiden from my list of theories for good, but I really think we hit it on the head with Loathly Lady." Kinnek steepled his fingers in front of him. "Vergis said you knew things by some magical means and heard voices in your head. Care to tell me about that? And you just looked as if you thought of something important. Penny for your thoughts?"

I stuffed the last bit of waffle in my mouth, more a move to stall than anything. I didn't think that Kinnek or

anyone would think I'd lost my mind, but I simply didn't want to talk about it. About the magic.

After the events at the Stone, I'd had enough — enough adventure, enough violence. Now, after Esaka, I had most definitely seen more than I wanted to see of any and all kinds of conflict. I just... wanted a quiet life somewhere with Inkiri, maybe somewhere close to my guys.

But I got the feeling Kinnek wouldn't let me weasel out of telling him.

"I... I know stuff," I said. "It's like... when you watch some spy show, right, and you get to see what the bad guys do and what the good guys do. You always know more about what's going on than either side, and it's sort of like that? I can tell it's not my own knowledge, but it's... I just know that it's true."

I looked at my plate, because this sounded bonkers, and I was aware of how bonkers it sounded. Inkiri clicked at me and pulled my coffee mug closer to me so that I had an easy time reaching it and taking a sip. I put it back down with a tap that was loud while everyone was waiting for me to go on. Inkiri rubbed my upper arm as if he wanted to make sure I knew he was there for whatever kind of support I needed.

"I heard that voice the first time at the Stone. It asked me what I wanted, and I said I wanted my guys to be okay, and so it did that. And then, I got this cold feeling in Esaka, like I said, and it was there again."

"And it told you that you were far away," Kinnek said, repeating what I'd told him when we'd crawled out of the tent.

“When you say you spoke, did you use actual words? Or think the words?”

I shrugged and looked up. “I thought them. In my head, you know.”

“Well, where else would you think but in your head?” Kinnek smiled brightly. “Is that voice a foreign thing? Can you feel it, or do you just, for lack of a better word, hear it?”

That made my eyebrows go up. “It’s... I can kind of feel it? In my mind. And when I tell it something I want, it’s like it rummages around up there.”

“Mmh. And if you try to think back to before you woke up in the tent... did you feel that disembodied presence?”

I licked my lips. This was where I had to wonder whether maybe, just maybe, I should tell him that, no, I’d felt nothing.

And I was about to, but before I could, Inkiri leaned in and said, “Tell us, sweet thing. Did you feel that presence when we brought you here to help you heal?”

His voice was steady, but he was anxious for me to answer. He’d been worried about me, I knew that. Had he slept? Had he held me? Sat by my bedside all this time?

I was pretty sure the answer to all of that was, yeah, he’d taken care of me more than himself, and I wasn’t about to lie to his face.

“I, uhm. I kind of felt it. But in the distance, and it greeted me. Or acknowledged that I was back home, you

know.”

Kinneke tilted his head in the bagu way. “Home? I understand you came here vacationing.”

“Yeah, but... I don’t know. Maybe home as in, Earth, you know. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Very, very interesting,” Kinneke said and examined me with sharp eyes. His were a dark Prussian blue rather than Vergis’s steel gray, but there was something about Kinneke that made me think he had the kind of X-ray vision that allowed him to look through my skull and straight into my thoughts.

Everyone in the room went quiet, everyone except for Wilson, who hopped over and landed in my lap where she promptly sat and pecked at my sleeve, so I petted her, and she settled.

“If Donna is agreeable, I think we should stay here a few days, so Rory can fully recover,” Kinneke said.

Donna shrugged. “If Wilson is okay with that, I’m okay with it. Inkiri and the others are always welcome anyway. Plus, there’ve been a lot of those purple monsters here since yesterday.”

Kinneke broke out in a grin and stood. “Wonderful! Muffin, we should step out and tell your daddy. And the monsters, I expect, might be attracted by the magic. The pull might have been stronger while Rory was hurt and easy prey, and it should lessen now that he is better.”

Vergis eyed the coffee maker longingly. “As I said, a twink trouble magnet. You really need me to make a phone

call?”

Kinneck clicked. “I don’t need you, but you don’t call anywhere near often enough, and only because Daddy grunts rather than use his words doesn’t mean he’d not like to hear your voice more often. Plus, did I not ground you a mere hour ago? You should consider your umbilical reestablished until I decide otherwise.”

Kinneck’s tone of voice implied the *chop-chop*. He headed back out, and Vergis grumbled, but followed his dad.

“Well, those two are very extra, aren’t they?” Donna said. Then she got up and poured the rest of her coffee into her mug.

“It’s a hangu thing,” Inkiri said.

“You sure?” Donna and I said in chorus, and Wilson clucked happily.

Inkiri’s chest rattled with a growly purr. “Some of it is a hangu thing at least.”

I relaxed against him, letting all the tension bleed out of my body.

“I’m deciding not to care. Hey, Ink, thanks for taking care of me. When I was out, you know. And Donna? Sorry. About bringing the monsters here.”

“Aaaah,” Donna cooed. “And don’t you worry. Vergis times two seems like they can handle all the extermination I might need done around the place. Plus, so far the electric fence has been doing its job pretty well.”

Inkiri clicked. “It’s nothing, sweet thing. I will always take care of you. I’m just overjoyed you are feeling better again.”

I was, and I would, provided I had my mate near. The knowledge sank into me with the same certainty with which Inkiri wrapped me in his arms.

CHAPTER TWO

The rain went on all day, and I zoned out on Donna's couch, Inkiri's chest rising and falling evenly beneath my head. He'd become my voluntary pillow and kept himself occupied with a book he'd picked out from Donna's shelf. It was a romance, and he'd sunken into that, an expression of tense concentration on his light blue face.

We ended up falling asleep on this couch, or at least I did. Just as soon as I drifted off, my awareness spread, and I *knew* Donna was busy pickling apples in a shed outside. Wilson had followed her, and the chicken stared up at Donna, because humans could be mesmerized into doing all kinds of things for a chicken, such as dropping a few apple slices. If that didn't work, there were always the snails the rain brought.

Kinneke and Vergis were actually not around, or at least, they were not anywhere near the farm.

That made me jolt and groan in my half-sleep, and Inkiri clicked softly and checked to make sure I was under the blanket and tugged snugly against him. Seriously, how had I deserved someone so caring and kind?

I found Kinneke and Vergis moments later when my awareness drifted farther out, looking for them. They had just hopped through the veils I was pretty sure, because right now, they were at the Stone of Destiny. The Hill of Tara was bathed in red and golden sunset, the rain that had made the day look gray on our end not stretching that far to the east.

Kinneke and Vergis were both armed, their hands resting on the handles of their pistols holstered on their sides.

“I can see the spent cartridges,” Kinneke said. “That must’ve been quite a fight.”

“You have no idea. It was more like an ambush. They were coming from all sides. Inki’s group said they checked the area, though.”

“Vergis, he’s *Inkiri* to you,” Kinneke said. He sounded stern, almost like he was ready to cut Vergis’s allowance on top of grounding him.

“Gee, sorry. But anyway, they said there wasn’t any sign of people here. And they’re good. They wouldn’t have missed that many humans hiding in the bushes.”

Kinneke gave a clipped nod. “Yes, I’m inclined to trust them on that as well, but I think we should check the area for more traces of magic, not just the Stone.”

Vergis nodded, and the two of them walked around the Hill. I wanted to leave them to it and sink into proper sleep, but it made me uneasy. What if there were more people lying in wait there to ambush them? What if they needed help?

With a pang, I realized that no one was anywhere close enough to help them, if that happened, and that grain of panic rolled down the steep hills of my mind, gathering momentum.

I am here, I heard — or felt — that foreign yet familiar presence say in my mind. *They will be safe, Rory.*

And that opened up so many questions. I wanted to ask, but wasn’t even sure where to begin, especially since... a

part of me didn't want to know all the answers.

What I did was trust in the voice and fall back into sleep, for real this time. Inkiri brushed a finger over my cheek, and I smiled just before I slipped off.

* * *

Sleep came, but it was the magic-tinged kind of sleep I'd experienced right after the shootout at the Stone, only worse. If worse was even the right word to describe this.

I was, once more and for one too many times, back on the Hill of Tara, or at least near it. Everything looked different. The church was gone. There were more trees. This vegetation grew where earlier, Vergis and Kinnek had looked out over the sunset-tinged field. But the place was the same, I just *knew*.

I also knew I wasn't there in person, because the scene took a while to sharpen to something more realistic, but when it did, I could see smoke rise in the distance and feel rain on my skin. At the same time, I knew I wasn't really there. It was a suspended and unreal feeling while I understood that all of it was real in some sense of the word.

"Hello?" I said. I heard myself speak over the rain even if I shouldn't have had a voice here that could carry.

I spun around. The Stone of Destiny was not that far away. I could see it through the bushes and trees that now grew here, but something coming from my other side made me peer through the rain. There. People were moving, two of them, cloaked and huddling under their cloaks against the weather.

One person was taller than the other, and when they looked up, I saw they were a woman with green eyes, her expression haunted. The other person turned their head to look over their shoulder, and they were just a girl, wide-eyed and scared.

They said something, and the rain carried away the words.

The two of them were holding hands and all but running toward the Stone.

“Spergho,” I heard the taller say, voice hushed, as she passed by me. There was a moment there where she looked up, and I could’ve sworn she locked eyes with me, but the moment passed.

With nothing better to do and no reason that I could see for having a weird dream like this, I followed them. The girls’ clothing was rough and muddy, a thin, thorny piece of branch sticking to the hem of the younger girl’s coat, and their shoes were leather, sewn together and tied with rough string. I had seen shoes just like those two years ago when Mel and Derek and I had spent a few days in Dublin. While Mel and Derek had made use of the hotel bed, I’d gone to the museum where a bog body’s clothes had been on display, and the shoes looked really similar to that. Couldn’t I dream about standing naked on stage in front of a booked theater like a normal person?

The taller of the girls took a step back when the two of them reached the Stone, and she put her hands on the younger’s shoulders, and then, she turned her head and looked straight at me again.

“Hey, can you see me?” I asked.

From her expression, I knew she'd heard me. There was hesitation there, but then, she shook her head, bent forward, and whispered something in the other girl's ear.

The smaller girl reached out with both hands to touch the Stone, a lot like I had done before the shooting had happened. Her palms connected, and she leaned forward toward the Stone as if she were waiting for something. Except nothing happened. The Stone wasn't singing.

The taller girl sighed and bent her head.

Over the pelting rain, the panting and hoofbeats of horses echoed, and just a moment after I'd heard it, the girls looked up. Their green eyes went wide, and they broke out running the other direction at full speed.

I had no idea what the point was of me being here or if there was one. This was already uncomfortably like the damn commune where all the girls had been afraid most of the time that I'd been there, and I so didn't need to be thinking of that.

Still, I ran with the girls. Maybe I could help them, distract the horses or something. Oh, was it possible that I'd died while I'd been asleep on Inkiri and was a ghost now? I hoped not, and it wouldn't explain why the place looked older, felt older.

Either way, I ran and watched as two of the horses closed in on the smaller girl. Everything happened so fast. One of the riders bent low and picked her up out of her run. She started kicking and screaming, and I think I did too, until a

flash of auburn hair from my other side caught my eye.

The taller girl was still running, and she took a sharp left and dropped to the ground, then rolled into a thicket of branches and thorns.

I slowed. The riders were screaming. I couldn't understand what they were saying, because I didn't understand the language. There was something familiar about it, something in the cadence that made me think I could almost deduce the words, just not quite.

The girl the rider had picked up was like a wild raccoon, and the rider who had her on his horse was hissing, because she'd kicked him where it hurt, I hoped.

I jogged to where I'd seen the taller girl fall. The riders were circling. Looking. The one with the girl was trying to get her restrained, and that girl, she was fighting him tooth and nail. She was losing, but she didn't care. She kept going. The horse was getting agitated, and the rider was cursing. He pulled his hand back, and hit her, his fist descending so hard, the poor girl went still, then groaned as he tied her hands and legs.

"Shit, motherfucking motherfucker," I said, firstly, because if ever there was an exception to cussing, it was this, and secondly, I was either a ghost or dreaming, and whichever it was, I was sure language was the least of my worries.

I saw a flash of skin from under a bush, then made out green eyes even as the rain picked up and the riders were doing some cursing of their own, judging by their tone of voice.

The taller girl had somehow huddled under a bush and several branches, and she was nearly invisible, her sodden hair streaking over her face and acting like camouflage. I snuck up to her, and her eyes were tracking me. She was on her side, looking at me, but watching the horses whenever they came close to where she was.

The rain picked up, and the riders got more and more frustrated. The smaller girl, now tied to the horse, was getting some of her strength back. She tried kicking the horse, which was none too happy about the situation, going by how it was prancing around.

After a little while longer, one of the riders said something. I didn't catch the words, but he sounded pissed all right. All three of them were pissed. They had no right to be, seeing as how they were fucking assholes abducting and hitting people. The girl on the horse's back was also pissed, and she had all the right.

They rode off, though, heads swiveling as if they were hoping to catch sight of the other girl, the one who was still looking back and forth between me and them. She looked furious. Instead of being scared like I would have been in her situation, she looked determined, her jaw set, the muscles there working.

She spent several more long minutes under that bush, even after the riders had gone.

"I think you can come out now," I said. I walked to where they had ridden off to, because if I was a ghost after all, I was apparently haunting this girl, and I might as well do a

good job of it.

The underbrush rustled, but she didn't make a ton of noise as she came back out and stood. Her cloak was muddy and soaked as was the rest of her. She wore fantasy movie clothing, by which I mean, old clothing. Or no — old-timey clothing. It was neatly woven and tidy, or had been, before her ordeal, but the cut was simple, and there was not a piece of metal on her clothes that I could see, no zippers, no shiny buttons, not buckles or traces of bright dyes. She did, however, have a dagger in her cloth belt. That reminded me a lot of my guys since they were the only people I knew to carry around pointy weapons.

“Hey, do you know if I am haunting you?” I asked and jogged back toward her.

She looked at me, then shook her head all over again.

“Hey.” I jumped in front of her.

She sighed and stopped, then walked around me. So at a minimum, she could definitely see me.

“Hey, wait.” I hurried after her.

The girl was making her way back to the stone.

“Excuse me, but do you think maybe you could stop for a moment and talk to me or give me a sign or something, because I don't know about you, but I'm freaking out a little because I'm either dead or dreaming, and if this is a dream, then dang it, I should go see a doctor.”

The girl sighed, stopped, and looked at me over her shoulder. She gave a quick headshake, then jerked her head

back toward the Stone. She wanted me to follow her then. Well, what else was I going to do?

Despite her cloak, her hair was sticking to her face and neck in wet strands. She walked right back up to the Stone, and this time, she put her palm out, just like the other girl had done. Before she touched the Stone, she looked at me, and then, holding my gaze, she put her palms against the rough surface.

I felt the Stone singing more than I heard it. I couldn't say for certain that this was like it had been for me, especially since the girl didn't seem surprised at all.

She did something too, and not in the fumbling way I'd done — just needing my guys to be okay. No, she used the Stone's power as if she'd done it before and had a good handle on the how-to.

She pulled her hands back, but even so, she was still doing something, which I could feel like I felt the raindrops on my skin, and all the while, she was watching me.

A thick fog blossomed up as if out of nowhere, and it hid everything, distorted the sound.

The girl had done this, there wasn't a doubt in my mind about that. She pulled her hood down over her face and waved at me. She made a noise that sounded a lot like *shoo*.

“Look, it's not like I want to be here,” I said.

She made the shooing gesture and noise again, slower and more pronounced this time, as if she thought I was slow.

Well, what else was new?

“You know what? Fine. I guess if I am haunting you, I’ll find you again anyway.”

I walked off into the fog, because I had no idea what else to do.

The fog thickened, and the rain stopped. I kept walking for a while before something felt different. At that point, I knew I’d left. Not just walked a mile, but left that place and time, if it was a place and time and not just my imagination.

Some of the awareness that had shown me Kinnek and Vergis remained, and with a quick glance, I made sure they were safe and sound, doing their thing on the Hill of Tara, the light just slightly more purplish.

I was still alive, I realized, still in my mate’s arms, and with the same perspective shift that had let me see the darn Hill of Tara, I saw Inkiri smile at me. His face was positively serene, so much so that it hurt to watch him, for no good reason I could tell.

How I was drifting back and forth between places and times, I had no idea, but I wanted it to stop. I wanted to just sleep. My knowledge told me that the more of that I did, the faster I’d be recovered from the magic I’d done in Esaka.

In the end, I tried standing still and closing my eyes, and that worked. The blackness of true sleep and simple dreams came for me and swallowed me up whole.

CHAPTER THREE

Sometime early the next morning — it felt early, but that could have been me being exhausted and healing — I woke to the sound of *hmmmm* very close to my ear. I cracked my eyes and swatted at the annoying mosquito. Which was not a mosquito.

“Oh, good! You are up,” Kinnek said when I blinked the sleep from my eyes. His nose was about two inches away from mine, and as soon as I stirred, Inkiri started clicking.

“What?” I said and turned back around to Inkiri. “Sorry, did I fall asleep on you? Sorry.”

“You really are one apologetic human,” Kinnek said and straightened.

“He doesn’t want to be a burden,” Inkiri said. He smiled at me fondly.

What I wanted was not be the center of attention, but from how Kinnek was looking at me, I was not succeeding. Also, Vergis was taking apart and possibly cleaning his gun at the coffee table and glaring at me. I lifted my head farther off Inkiri’s chest. Okay, maybe Vergis was just looking. That bagu definitely had resting bitch face.

“Look at the sweet human and his doting mate,” Kinnek said. “Anyway. Sweet pea, we’re going to do a little bit of magic this morning.”

I groaned. “I don’t feel too well.” That immediately got

Inkiri to fuss.

“Perhaps it’s best to let him rest more?” Inkiri said to Kinnek and inclined his head. Then he pulled the blanket up and over me again.

Kinnek made a very human noise of total dismissal. “When I say a little, that’s exactly what I mean. I want to see him draw from the land.”

“Huh?”

“Kinnek wants to see your Lady magic,” Vergis sneered.

“I do not have — *you* said I was a conduit and couldn’t do magic!” I said and pointed a finger at Vergis. Was it possible to clean your gun in a derisive and mildly threatening way? If so, that’s what he was doing. Did it even need cleaning? How often did you clean guns, and did you really have to when you were a guest in someone’s home?

Kinnek shrugged. “A mistake that could have happened to anyone. But you are clearly not a conduit, are you?”

Footsteps approached, and Donna, hands on her hips, cleared her throat.

“You are cleaning that paint stuff off my patio when you’re done, yes?”

Wilson had followed her and sauntered over to Vergis. The chicken eyed Vergis for a moment before she pecked at his ankle.

Vergis hissed. “Chicken soup,” he mumbled. Wilson strode off, and it looked like she was doing it with attitude.

“Snickerdoodle, leave the fowl be,” Kinnek said. “And of course, Vergis will clean your patio for you once we are done, Donna. He’ll be happy to.”

This time, I could definitely see Vergis glower. “I need more coffee,” he said. Vergis reassembled his gun with scary efficient speed, holstered it, and went to the kitchen.

“Sadir. Shall we see if Kinnek can help you with your magic?” Inkiri said. “Do you think you feel well enough?”

And if he hadn’t sounded so hopeful and so darn optimistic about all the magic stuff, I would have told him I was having a migraine, but how could I lie to a bagu who cared for me as if... as if I were someone special?

The answer was, I couldn’t.

“Sure. Let’s.” I managed a smile at Inkiri even if I hoped that all the magic I might have ever touched had vanished, fizzled out, like a bottle of soda left in the fridge for a week.

The only problem was, if I was being honest with myself, I knew it hadn’t. But then again, maybe Kinnek could help me get rid of it, and then, I could go about my normal, non-magical life.

* * *

The rain had let up, and the weather was getting back to being sunny, maybe even a little bit too sunny for my liking. I blinked up at the bright blue sky and the sunlight filtering

through the leafy trees surrounding the property.

There were a lot of fields with rows upon rows of plants along with several greenhouses here, and some goats in a pen. I spotted a large white dog as well, lounging on the grass, and a calico kitty sleeping on the dog's back. It reminded me a lot of Inkiri and I.

What I was trying to ignore, hard, was the ko circle, the magic circle, right in the center of the patio.

I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt and tried to look anywhere but that circle, drawn on a large patio with a big fire bowl in one corner and a comfy lounge chair in the other.

Kinneke stretched and made his shoulder joints pop, clearly eager to get started, but Inkiri drew me to the side.

"It'll be fine, sadir," he said, his hand steady on my back. "Kinneke is very skilled. I've heard rumors about him, back on Aër." Inkiri paused. "If anyone can help you control what you can do so you don't get hurt like this in the future, it's him."

Fudge, but Inkiri's eyes were overflowing with love. I couldn't disappoint someone who was looking at me like that. I just could not.

I remembered our conversation about magic — my magic — back on Aër after we'd gotten married... when, a week ago? This was supposed to be our honeymoon and not him taking care of me like he had. It should have been constant ravishing, and instead, cola asshats with guns had ruined it all.

“I really don’t want it,” I blurted out without intending to. “The magic. I don’t want it.” My eyes started to water, but I didn’t want to fall apart. I mean, I totally wanted to, but I didn’t want to make Inkiri the guy who had to take care of his husband all the time and didn’t have a life and joy of his own, so I did my best to... woman up. Mel, when she’d still been alive before the darn Apocalypse, she’d always said that to me: *Woman up, Rory.*

Inkiri clicked and hugged me close. “Sadir, I’ve been thinking, and Kinnek has hinted at it. Your magic may have been what planted the mate call in my heart and mind. Of course, before, I thought the mate call happened *after* the fusing of the veils, but what if it came at the same time, the moment you first reached for your magic?”

“I’m pretty sure I’d still love you without any kind of mate call, Ink,” I said.

He rubbed my back. “Oh, sadir. You keep rewarding me with your love, and it feels like I never did anything to earn it. But regardless. We might never have met without it. I felt you that day in the department store, knew that my mate was finally, finally near. Say I hadn’t —”

“The monster would have eaten me.”

“Well, I like to think you would have managed to outrun it, but you’d still be alone. Lonely. Rory, my precious human mate, you have spoken of your reservations about your own magic before, but even if you fear its power, I adore it. I am convinced it brought me to you, my true mate, but also the man who loves me.” He pulled back and smiled down at me.

Dang it. He looked composed, in the most supportive way. “And an adventurous human who enjoys my barb and lets me take care of his average-size cock.”

“Pfft.” I flicked a finger at his chest, but my bagu was solid. “Keep my cock out of this.”

He tilted his head this way and that. “I enjoy it too much to keep it out of my mouth.”

And, okay, fine, what was that thing about how it was good to have a humorous mate? I loved that Inkiri was trying to cheer me up here, and he was succeeding, which honestly begged the question: how had I landed this guy?

Woman up, I told myself. I tried standing up straighter. “Okay, I’ll do this. Even if just so I can learn how to never do magic again.”

Inkiri smiled down at me. “Learn who you are, sadir. That will be enough.”

And with that ominous piece of advice out of my mate’s mouth, I walked over to the ko circle. Vergis had sneaked, well, walked, back out to join us, a ginormous mug with steaming coffee in hand, and Donna, Wilson in her arms, stood behind him as if she thought Vergis made for a good shield. He probably did at that, considering how he had handled himself during the attack on Esaka.

“Got your head in the magical mind space, sugarplum?” Kinnek asked with a beaming smile.

“Can we please just get this over with?” I said and hated that I sounded like a petulant three-year-old who wanted

a marshmallow.

Kinneb batted his eyes at me, slowly, in just the way I'd recently discovered was an excellent survival strategy for the Apocalypse.

"You saved my only child from a fate worse than a clean death. The least I can do is help you realize what power lies within you and do it properly."

"Okay, right. Sorry," I said.

He tilted his head, and his smile brightened. "Ancestors, you are easy to wrap around one's finger." He stepped aside as I frowned and pointed to the center of the circle. "Sit down there."

Inkiri growl-purred behind Kinnek. "You cannot mean for him to sit on the bare ground, Kinnek."

Kinneb clicked. "I think that will actually make it easier for him to use his magic, just like he healed faster when you two were camping outside. It's about proximity to the land, you see."

I sat down cross-legged. Inkiri looked none too happy about that. He reluctantly took two steps back from the circle when Kinnek waved him off.

"Okey dokey," Kinnek said. "Muffin, come here and watch."

"Oy, ruining my spot," Donna said and sidled up behind Inkiri instead when Vergis walked closer to the ko circle. Wilson looked at me like the chicken was wondering what I, a human with access to all the cabinets food was kept

in, was doing on the floor.

“I’ve seen it,” Vergis said when he stood next to Kinnek.

“Well, snickerdoodle, it’s not just about the design of the thing. You need to watch and feel and talk the user through it. Potential user typically, but our red-headed Loathly Lady here is a doozy.”

Vergis rolled his eyes and gulped down some more coffee, but he was watching me intently.

“Well, Rory, you magical candy bar, you. How about you go ahead and close your eyes? Good. The goal is going to be connecting with that voice you’ve been hearing, and what we want it to do is just pour some power into the magic circle around you, to start with. See if you can call it.”

I knew that I could absolutely call it, mostly because that presence seemed to be around most of the time, ever since we’d come back to Earth or to Ireland in particular. And of course, since my eyes were closed, I could definitely *feel* that presence stir the moment Kinnek said he wanted me to call it.

Still, maybe nothing would happen. Maybe they were wrong, and it had all been a mistake and I was just some weird type of human conduit with a medical condition that made me hear voices in my head. Then again, Inkiri would be so disappointed, and I didn’t want that. Darn it, but life was so much easier without magic in it.

Hello? I thought. Into the echo chamber of my head. I felt stupid.

But that presence was all there for it. In fact, it was right there, or rather, approached rapidly. I got the sense of rustling leaves, but this time, there was a wariness there as well as if the presence had to step over or around a barrier.

Hello, Rory.

“Oy, why’s my patio glowing?” I heard Donna say.

“Don’t mind it. It’s just a touch of magic,” Kinnek told her. “Rory, can you tell me if you feel anything happen around you?”

The presence showed some mild interest in Kinnek, then told me, *He is like your knight, strong like the one the Lady saved for you, but more experienced. He was at the Singing Stone not long ago and felt the tattered human magic there.*

I remembered that from last night right before I’d fallen asleep. *Is that why you showed me that? Him and Vergis at the Stone?* I asked that thing in my head.

It felt like it shrugged, which was weird. How on Earth did I get a mental image of a voice in my head shrugging? *You were worried about your own and sought them out. I did nothing. Do you wish me to do something now?*

“Rory?” Kinnek said. Right. He’d asked me something.

I opened my mouth to tell him the presence was already settled in my head, but that was as far as I got. The moment I decided I wanted to say words out loud, I got hit with... not vertigo exactly, but a sense of not really knowing

where I was in the world.

The presence observed unconcerned and unbothered by my mental flailing.

“It’s... here,” I managed in the end, but I felt dizzy. I didn’t want to open my eyes, because I was sure I’d find the world spinning.

Kinnef frowned — which I wasn’t seeing, not with my eyes at least. Like back in Esaka, I *knew* my surroundings, but just like then, my vantage point wasn’t me and my physical body. Instead, I was just wherever I focused on in that moment. Vergis was looking at the circle with wide eyes and his mouth half open in surprise. A red band like a piece of string wound around his right wrist drew my attention.

The Lady’s mark, the presence told me. You need not worry. It doesn’t hurt your knight, and it fits snugly. He seems to have been receptive for her demands, and the Lady is kind wherever she can be.

Well, that was... unsettling? And all of a sudden, everything felt very big, the farm, the trees beyond, the animals going about their day and the abandoned village about a mile away...

“See if you can make it pour magic into the circle,” Kinnek said, and his words at least made me focus on the ko circle again.

This time around, I noticed that Inkiri was looking at me, and he was smiling as if he were proud. That also helped me settle and stay where I was rather than drift away again.

Can you do that? What he asked? I said to the presence.

Of course, it responded, and I felt it do something. The impression I got was that the effort it took the presence was akin to flicking a piece of lint off your sleeve, but the others all gasped.

“Well, fuck me sideways,” Vergis mumbled. “I’m guessing this isn’t exactly standard.”

“Not as such,” Kinnek said, then he looked around and pointed to the sleeping giant dog and calico cat, who was now grooming herself on the dog’s back. “Donna, are those sunflowers you planted over there?”

“Yes, for the birds,” she said.

“Rory, ask the voice to make the sunflowers across the lawn bloom,” Kinnek said.

I got the sense that the presence found Kinnek amusing. *I do*, it confirmed. *Interesting as well. The magic of your mate’s people is strange, but our worlds are bound now. And if worlds are bound, magic must be bound, and it will be done through blood, one way or the other.*

I knew my jaw dropped, even if my body felt far away. *No, we are definitely not doing any bloodletting at all! Can I wish for you to not do that?*

You cannot, because bloodletting was never in my power to begin with, Rory. The presence seemed as amused with me as it had been with Kinnek. *Your mate’s life and yours are one, the two of you bound in blood and breath, close as*

our two worlds and our two magics. I did that when you were finally anointed. Do you want me to make those flowers think that summer has already given them the strength to bloom?

Right, because Kinnek had asked for that. Yes, I let it know. I wanted to ask the presence what it meant by anointed, but the notion that Inkiri and I had been some powerful entity's random choice made me reel.

Not random, the presence said. I could tell it was getting the flowers to bloom. The dog and kitty looked up, bewildered, but not bewildered enough to stop their nap. The way the presence worked, I knew this didn't take it much effort. *A chosen one must always be worthy, and he is.*

That hit me like a gut punch, and all of a sudden, I was done with this. I already knew what type of guy Inkiri was, and he didn't need to be chosen to be worthy. He was a prince after all. And kind. And so damn patient. And also willing to carry me places.

Can you leave me alone for a while? I asked, and the presence acquiesced silently, and with a rustling of leaves, it vanished to wherever it had come from.

As it faded, I could tell my attention was getting pulled back to, well, me. It felt like a rubber band was snapping back, only I hadn't even noticed it had been pulled. The whole experience was scary.

I blinked my eyes open.

“Now what? The light show is over, and I have early sunflowers?” Donna asked.

I turned around to look at Inkiri, and when our eyes met, he didn't need me to say anything. Without waiting for Kinnek's okay, Inkiri closed the distance between us and pulled me up and off the ground.

"Yugano en enki, my light in darkness," he said even as he felt me over. Felt whether I was cold, I realized when he was brushing my cheek and forehead. "My precious Rory."

"I really didn't do anything," I said and tried to escape his attention, but Inkiri wasn't having that. My throat was licked, and he clicked happily when I submitted to him pulling me against his chest.

"I thought all protectors know it's generally a bad idea to cross into a ko circle when it is being used," Kinnek said. He'd come around the circle and was looking at me with sharp eyes.

"Now you're telling me that?" Donna said.

"Ah, apologies, fair Donna. This ko circle wouldn't have done anything to you, I promise. It's something that's rather used to test someone's abilities before you teach them."

"You ever put me in one of these?" Vergis asked. He'd snuck up — walked up — behind his dad.

"Of course, muffin. You did very well, but then, you are mine, so that was expected."

Kinnek smiled at me. I had it on the tip of my tongue to ask him how he could take my magical abilities away, but then I remembered the stupid *blood needs to be bound to blood* speech, and I ate my words.

“You, however,” Kinnek said when I remained silent, “aren’t such a straightforward case.”

“I... didn’t really do anything, you do get that?” I said. “That voice in my head did all that.”

Kinnek tsk-ed. “Here, see that?” He pointed at some chalk squiggles on Donna’s patio. They could have been anything, worms, abstract clouds, overcooked noodles. “Those indicate sacrifice sources and the efficacy with which a mage will be able to utilize them. After Vergis told me about how you used loogas branches to make rain, I added a... what’s that word, a slipknot to the veils or sources of its ilk, and that lit up like fireworks. Which is what I expect from a Loathly Lady. And if you don’t like being called a Loathly Lady, even though it best describes how you use the power of the land to get things done, consider yourself a... dispenser of the magic of the land and assorted inanimate objects.”

Inkiri clicked. I frowned up at Kinnek.

Vergis was grinning. “Magic dispenser. I like it.”

Kinnek nodded. “Yes. You know, muffin, it does explain how you’ve been able to use his power.”

“It means he’s better than a conduit,” Vergis said, and both of them eyed me.

“Does that explain why the humans would want Rory?” Inkiri asked, touching on yet another subject I was so done with.

“I think all you blokes could just give the poor kid some room to breathe,” Donna said. “In fact, what was that

thing you said about cleaning my porch, Vergis?”

“It’s just chalk, you can see that, right?” Vergis said.

“Muffin —”

“The rain’s going to take care of it,” Vergis said and finished his coffee with one long swallow.

“Well, I’m not waiting for rain when there are magic squiggles on my porch. I don’t want your bagu magic to go and mess with my plants, Vergis. C’mon, I’ll show you where the brooms are.”

“But —”

“Muffin, you promised Donna you would clean her porch,” Kinnek said and turned toward his son.

“*You* promised her I’d do that!”

Kinnek clicked in the bagu way. “Oh, sugar cookie, that’s the same thing. Squeaky clean, please, you know I’ll just make you do it over if it’s not.”

Vergis glared at me. “Your fault. I hate mopping floors,” he said and stomped off with Donna and Wilson.

“Kinnek, can the humans find Rory? I’ve been worried about that since Esaka.” Inkiri clicked.

I pushed him off me gently, if only so I had an easier time taking part in this conversation. I didn’t mind burying my face in his chest if I could do that for the rest of time, but this sounded too important.

“I’ll not use the magic again,” I said after swallowing against the lump in my throat. Kinnek’s eyebrows shot up, but

I soldiered on. “I don’t want anything like what happened in Esaka to happen ever again. Or... like back at the Stone two years ago.” Also, if Inkiri was some kind of chosen one and I the trouble magnet, we’d all be better off if I did my utmost to... not do anything at all. I looked up at Inkiri and tried my eyelash batting. “I want to see the others anyway. And... I get why people in Esaka would chase us out of town, but isn’t there another place back on Aër where we can all just... be? Or what about your House? You could go back to being a prince, and then you’d never have to fight again, right?”

“Sweet thing,” Inkiri said, his voice pained. He reached for my wrist and rubbed the inside of it with his thumb. “We can go back to Esaka if you want that. Hove would be happy, I am sure. Delighted, even.” His gaze hardened. “There is much to do close to the border, and I could show you that I am a protector worthy of being your mate.”

Kinnech chuckled. “You two are missing each other’s subtext, and it is adorable. Inkiri, I don’t think your mate means to criticize your abilities to —”

“Criticize!” I said. “When’d I criticize him? He’s the most... the best. Thing. Person! He’s the best person ever, and I don’t know how I got so darn impossibly lucky with him. I never criticized him. Did I?”

“When you told him he should never fight again, butter cookie.”

I looked at Inkiri. “No, that’s so not what I mean, I just — you don’t have to fight. I mean, I don’t want you to fight like some chosen one just because some disembodied voice is

all weird about blood and whatnot. I want you to be safe.” I pointed at my neck. “And you promised me all those scarves, remember? Can’t buy me scarves when you go out and fight the cola ash people.”

“Sadir, do you think you need to protect me?” Inkiri said.

“Yeah?”

Inkiri sighed.

“Before this goes on,” Kinnek said. “I gather that voice told you Inkiri was chosen to be your mate?”

Dang it, had I said that out loud? Was the brain giving up on quality control altogether now?

“It’s — it’s not like I know what to believe,” I said, and that was true enough.

Kinnek tilted his head. “Well, let’s abandon belief then and go to what we know. You use the magic of the land and there are people who want that. This ko circle —” Kinnek tapped the one I’d just sat in with a claw that pushed out from his paw shoes. “— is pretty strongly secured against anyone from the outside picking it up, because assuming we are dealing with human mages, they might be able to track you, at least to a point, especially when you are not at your strongest.

“The cola assholes simply knew you were headed to Esaka because it is a close hop through the veils for one thing from where you started, and for another, Vergis didn’t have the time to properly disguise how he had folded through the veils when he got you all out of there. I don’t think they would

know how to track you, Rory, and they might not even have the strength to spare to do it. The way they are holding power requires them to regularly display the worst of that power to their people back in Kankarraz, you see.”

Kinneke’s words made a shiver run down my spine. Kankarraz was their home country. I remembered that Lissir had told me that. I hadn’t really considered that those white mages didn’t just terrorize Inkiri’s — my — people, but also their own. Was it possible to hate the Koa Esher more than I already did?

“We need not worry him with the details of all that, Kinneke,” Inkiri said.

Kinneke shrugged. “We might as well, because who knows when he’ll need the knowledge.” The bagu sighed. “That aside, I’m sure you can agree, Inkiri, that it will be better to put some distance between your mate and possible human pursuers.”

“Of course.”

“Does that mean we can finally go back to Aër? With Lissir and Nokim and Fellisse?” I asked, suddenly hopeful. I really liked Aër.

“I was going to suggest staying at our place, because that puts you closer to the land, Rory, and Vergis and I will be able to train you without risking you overexerting yourself again,” Kinneke said. “Did Vergis ever tell you that good conduits are trained, just like a good mage? And with you, that’s even more important, since you are a dispenser.”

“I really don’t like that name,” I said. Vergis was rounding the corner of the farmhouse, a mop and bucket in his hands.

“Loathly Lady then. It doesn’t matter. What matters is, if you find yourself in a fight again, you and the protectors with you need to know what to do about it, and right this moment, you do not. Neither of you.”

Inkiri growled. “Kinnek, my mate is soft and never trained for fighting. He has my word that I will protect him. I do not want him to fight alongside me.”

My heart gave a swoop. That right there was why I loved my bagu. Inkiri just got me. Or had my back at least.

“Not relevant when you are attacked. The way he finds himself connected to you and your sentenmen will always make him use his magic regardless of what you and your warrior pride dictates, and that is a reality. You can ignore it, or you can plan for it.” Then, Kinnek looked down at me. “Although, really, it’s your choice, Rory, and not your mate’s.”

Vergis snorted as he slapped the wet mop down on the circle opposite us. “Time to not be a princess for once in your life, Princess,” he said.

There was something in Vergis’s voice that made me wait and think before I said that, no, thank you, I didn’t need to know how to be a good magic dispenser, because I would never ever do it again. A flicker of that knowledge burned in my mind. Vergis was scared I’d eventually get Inkiri and the others killed if I didn’t know what I was doing, and he was certain that the humans weren’t done with their attempt to get

to me, nor the Koa Esher.

And that made me reconsider. Maybe there was some trick where I'd be able to *know* when someone was going to get hurt, and if I could just learn that, then I could make it so no one would end up bleeding or dead again. And that was not ideal, but maybe, just maybe, it would be enough, and then we could all head back to Aër, and I could spend the rest of my days on my back in my blue prince's bed, and there would be ravishing from sunrise to sunset.

"Dude, you look like you're about to drool," Vergis said and swiped at the chalk, which seemed to want to stick.

"Yes, you really do," Kinnek said. "Not unheard of when one is freshly mated."

"Oh, can we — fine. Fine. I'll learn spells or whatever. I'm good at learning lines, not that I ever got cast in a lead role. Anyway, it's fine. When do we need to leave?"

Kinnek looked over his shoulder. "Butterscotch, don't hurry. I believe our Loathly Lady wants his mate's barb before we leave."

"What, I didn't —"

"Sadir," Inkiri said, his voice dark and husky and so seductively British. "Is that true?"

Well, marriage was all about not lying to your husband, was it?

"Let's talk about it inside," I said and took Inkiri by the wrist rather than the hand. From the low clicking, he liked that, a lot.

CHAPTER FOUR

The conservatory housed an army of Japanese peace lilies, and as soon as we opened the door and walked inside, I got anxious. What was I doing? It wasn't the time to get naked with my boyfr — husband, was it? Had I really just let Vergis talk me into learning magic and becoming a mage or at least a magical magic dispenser?

“Sadir?” Inkiri said.

I'd stopped in front of the glass door that led from the conservatory to the den with the book wall and the couch the two of us had fallen asleep on. Where I had dreamed that dream about the girl at the Stone, the green-eyed witch who had called fog from the Stone. I couldn't even begin to think about that.

I wanted to think about Inkiri. Not random, the presence had said. Inkiri's and my connection wasn't random. I spun and looked up at him.

“Do you think, I mean, say you'd come to Earth, but just to see the place. Not for a mate call. Imagine you'd have run into me, and still no mate call. Do you think you would have liked me?”

Inkiri tilted his head. “This is still going through your head, sadir? It's still bothering you?” He bent down and licked over my neck. “Very well. I would have. You are not bagu, you look different and smell different, that is true. But the way in which you are different would have drawn me to you. Once

I was drawn, maybe we would have spoken. And then, I would have really liked you.” He gave me another lick, his rough tongue gliding over my pulse point.

“You make that sound so simple.” Not to mention, he was being very flattering. I knew perfectly well I didn’t have the kind of charming personality you just fell for after a conversation.

“Because it is simple, sweet thing. A mate call doesn’t equal affection, it just assures the kind of attraction that pulls you to the other. What makes you stay and endure needs to come from whether or not your mate accepts you. From whether or not you can fully accept them, and I do.”

I managed a shaky smile, but I couldn’t hold his gaze. “You say the silliest things.”

“Sweet thing, look at me.” He gently tapped my chin up with his index finger. “I say it because it is true.”

“Vergis said I basically had to just date you. When you first brought me home to the rest of the guys. After you fed all those magpies.”

Inkiri chuckled. “Well, I would not have allowed you to wander off by yourself. This world is dangerous. And while I like the birds of this world, I also hoped you would see I was gentle and generous when I fed them.” He took my wrists in his hands. “Sweet thing, my Rory, how about we talk of other things? Was Kinnek right when he said you wanted my barb before we leave?”

“Subtle.”

He grinned down at me. "I'm afraid my barb isn't subtle at all, sadir."

And because he was the cutest, sweetest, and best darn husband anyone could want, he made me smile, just like that.

I glanced back at the couch. "Not here, though. Not on Donna's couch. Is there anywhere more private?"

He bobbed his head. "There's the guest room upstairs that Kinnek and Vergis shared."

Well, I didn't know what Inkiri was thinking about giving me his beautiful cock in the same room Vergis had slept in, but horny beggars couldn't choose where to get their needs met in the Apocalypse.

"Okay," I said. "That could work. But, like, let's try to keep it quiet, all right? I don't want everyone to know... you know."

Inkiri chuckled as he led me to the stairs and up them by my wrist. "Sadir, they already know. Being intimate and savoring the joys of the other's body is something mates do all the time. It is something you should celebrate, especially if your hangu-na is skilled and pleasing?"

There was the lift of a question there. I flushed a little, but it helped that we were alone in the house.

"You are. Pleasing," I said, and because some operator in my brain was fiddling with priorities, I went on, "I mean, your cock weirded me out at first, and then there was the barb thing, but now I really like it as well as that tongue, which just feels so good. I really like you licking my neck. And... I think

it looks hot. Down there.” I gestured to his crotch. “With your testicles inside but with your cockhead when it’s all swollen and glistening.”

Inkiri’s low clicks blended with a kind of throaty purr, and he turned on the stairs, those indigo eyes almost swallowed by black. “Sadir, that makes me so happy, especially since I cannot get enough of all of you. I love getting you to come in my mouth so I can savor you. But barbing and holding you after while your body relaxes and clenches around my cock —” he shivered. “It’s pure bliss. And when your skin heats and changes color, it makes my heart leap in my chest every time. Because I know I did that.”

That was a lot to take in, and I didn’t say anything as we walked down the hallway to the guest room. I hadn’t paid much of attention to the layout of the house before, but Inkiri knew his way around. He’d probably been here, back when they’d first met Donna.

He pulled me across the threshold of a corner room with a large bed in there, wooden beams exposed and stark against the whitewashed walls and ceiling. The cream blankets and bed linen softened everything out, and there were pale pink pillows on a small cream-colored pullout couch that brightened the room even more and made it cheery.

I thought we’d end up on the bed — or that I would, at least, because getting ravished by my bagu husband was the best. Instead. Inkiri closed the door, then pushed me back against it.

“There is something I read in the romance novel

downstairs that I would like to try, if you are willing.”

I swallowed. “Are we... we’re not roleplaying, are we?” I could do random shrubbery. I had no idea if I could be a sexy barista asking if Inkiri wanted extra cream with that. Not that I had a barista fantasy or anything of the kind, because I’d never imagined being a barista about to be ravished by a customer, horned or otherwise. *Never*.

He chuckled. “I read about that too, but no. I just want to hold you in my arms while you take me inside you. Carry you while you writhe in your pleasure around me.”

I glanced at the bed, then up at him. “You can hold me, right? I mean, I know you can. Right?”

Inkiri bent his head, crowding into my space, and I heard him breathe, heard his thrumming purr.

“I can, sweet thing. And I’d like to show you that I can. Will you let me?”

My cock was bobbing in my loose pants, already filling and on board with this scenario even before news of such enthusiasm could pass through the brain and to my mouth.

“Y-yeah. Okay.”

“Okay,” Inkiri repeated, and then, he took charge, just like I liked.

He started out by tilting my chin up so he had access to my throat and neck. I briefly wondered where my scarf and brooch had gone, but I was pretty sure Inkiri had been keeping that for me, so I let the thought go and focused on his rough

tongue, slowly exploring and tasting me. It made me shiver, but at the same time, my skin heated up with it.

My eyelids were growing heavy, but when I blinked lazily, I saw Inkiri's beautiful horns close to my face, and at one point, I was pretty sure he angled his head in such a way that his right horn was brushing over my cheek.

As he kissed me, one hand traveled down my back and to my ass, and he squeezed, then rubbed my butt cheeks through the soft fabric of my pants.

Very soon, I was breathless and desperate, soft huffs echoing out of my mouth. "Ink..."

Inkiri pulled back and cradled the back of my head with one hand. I was already a gasping, incoherent mess, but he looked at me as if I were... just more. I couldn't wrap my head around it, and the focus in his eyes, the impossible love I could see written all over his face, it scared me, because I didn't understand it, couldn't quite make it connect to me, and so I reached up and cupped his head in turn. My thumb brushed over the pointy tip of his left ear, and I felt his braid there, but what I wanted were his lips. I dragged his head down to me, and he gave in to my pull, fusing our lips in a rush and showing me just how good a kisser he had become in such a short time.

He got the pressure just right, and the way he ran his teeth over my bottom lip excited me. Inkiri timed it with his hand going down to the front of my pants. His other hand had never left my ass, and my shoulders were still pressed against the door. I was completely at his mercy, but then again, I

wanted that. I liked it so much.

While his rough tongue stroked against my own, Inkiri worked my pants open and then used both hands to push them down to my thighs. My cock ached for his touch or his mouth — frankly, whatever he wanted to give, but he didn't give me anything, except a quick, cursory tug on my nuts.

I groaned into his mouth, frustrated, and he had the audacity to chuckle.

“It is so easy with you, every time, sweet thing,” he said. “I touch you, kiss you, and you surrender. It makes me want to rub my scent all over you and leave my bite marks on your neck. It makes me want to be inside you and have your cock in my mouth so I can taste you all at the same time.”

“I'm not that flexible,” I said.

He laughed, rocked back slightly on his paw feet, and focused entirely on getting all my clothes off. There weren't really a lot of them, just the soft pants and shirt, not even underwear, and those shoes I was wearing instead of my socks.

He flicked and squeezed my nipple with a few clicks and smiled when I sucked in air through gritted teeth. Happy to have my attention, he quickly stripped, though he was wearing a full set of clothing, his usual black, complete with his belt sash and everything. A beam of sunlight caught on one of the green stones in his friendship bracelet.

I had a moment of wonder when he stood in front of me, muscular chest bare and not a trace of nipples there, his bulbous cock straining as if it couldn't wait to be inside me.

Inkiri ran a hand through my hair, his touch tender, which was when I became aware that I'd been staring at that cock. It was a monster cock just going by the sheer size of it, and there was no denying that. Frankly, I was a bit incredulous about how that thing had fit inside of me, but it had, and more than that, I'd liked it. I wanted it again.

"I need to make sure you are ready first," Inkiri said and spun me around so that I was facing the door, my back to him.

I couldn't speak, half thrilled, half anxious about what was going to happen. Inkiri nudged my feet open with his feet, his claws sheathed, then he sank down to his knees and drew me with him. I ended up on my knees, sitting in his lap, my ass facing him, his knees between mine. He supported and controlled my upper body with a hand on the center of my chest, and with his other hand on my hips, he controlled my lower body.

And that was just fine with me, especially when I felt the slickness of his cock against my butt cheeks.

Inkiri thrummed happily, but he adjusted me so that his cock was instead rubbing over my taint, the bulbous tip brushing against my balls. It was an altogether different, gasp-worthy sensation, and his wandering fingers managed to stroke my nipples even as he held me pretty tightly. My knees were sliding over the carpet, opening wider to allow him access to... everything. All of me.

I made a low keening noise when he tilted my hips a little and his cockhead slipped upward, straining for my hole.

“Mmh.” He sounded pleased, and I was there for that, loved being the center of attention, or his attention.

For a while, I just moved, grinding against Inkiri’s self-lubing cock at his direction. It was good, even if my leg muscles were straining to keep up and my composure was slipping. Between gasps, I ended up making strangled howling noises, but I couldn’t help myself. I loved how he touched me.

“Now relax,” Inkiri said and pulled me more firmly onto his lap, the hand from my hips traveling down and to my ass. “Let me be inside you.”

“Yes, please. Now.” I mean, I had been clear about that, hadn’t I?

Inkiri chuckled. “Always eager, but you need to relax for me first.”

His finger drew circles around my hole, making clear just which part needed to do all the relaxing. And I tried. His fingers slipped inside. There was a moment there where he drew out of me to get more slick from his own cock to prep me for him, and I thought this was it, the thing I wanted for the rest of all time. None of it was just about the sex, though, but about having it *with him*.

I knew I’d get him for the rest of all time since the mate call had bound us together, had fused our very lives together, blood and bone, or whatever that voice in my head had said about it. And that was good, perfect. I’d be my best, mated self, and I’d do my utmost to be as little of an embarrassment or burden to Inkiri, which should have been easy, considering that trophy mate was still the ideal I was

striving for.

“I love you,” I said between panting breaths, because I wasn’t sure how else to communicate everything I was feeling in that moment.

“Mmnn.” Inkiri scissored his fingers inside me to get my ring to stretch for him. “Sadir. I love you too. So much. My precious mate.”

His head dipped forward, and his tongue licked over my neck, followed by a nipping bite that made me shiver.

The small shiver turned into a full body shiver a heartbeat later, my hole quivering with anticipation. Inkiri growled, his fingers moving in and out of me to make sure his cock’s lubrication was all over me, but then, finally, he moved and pulled me up with him.

My legs were shaky when he spun me around to face him, and I probably had a stupid, needy look on my face. Not that I cared. I cared how he looked down at me — hungry and willing — as if I were everything. I felt something inside me hum in joy, something I hadn’t noticed before, something... new.

I paid it no more mind when Inkiri bent down again and said, “Lean on my shoulders so I can lift you.”

“You sure?” I asked, but really, he was probably just telling me to let me know what he was about to do.

“So sure,” he said when he’d already swept me off my feet, my arms coming around his neck, my cheek brushing against the base of his horn.

He chuckled as he let me adjust to this. He had my knees over his arms, his hands supporting the small of my back. I looked down on myself, spread open and in a pretty vulnerable position above the ground. Well, above his cock, which was flushed, leaking and straining toward me. I tightened my hold on him, but he was lowering his arms and me with them until I was looking up at his face again instead of burying my nose in his hair.

He grinned at me. "I won't drop you. You can relax."

"Well... this is a first," I said lamely, and of course, it was. He was my first and only one, or so I hoped.

I did relax, though, because I trusted him.

It didn't take long for me to feel his cockhead nudge at my entrance, and strangely, the moment I felt him there, it was even easier to let go. Because I wanted him, wanted to feel him.

With my own weight doing most of the work, I sank down on Inkiri's cock. He made a pleased purring sound as he slipped past my ring and deeper, and I moaned at the feel of him, the sharp bite of being stretched, the waves of desire as he filled me.

He took his time, stopping and stilling so his cock could make me all slippery.

When he was satisfied, he moved me. I gasped out a strangled breath, and my head fell back. At the same time, my hands scrambled for something to hold on to, and I somehow ended up holding on to Inkiri's horns.

He growled deeply, and his hips jerked a few times, arms steady around me. I might have screamed. I wasn't sure. The position, strange though it was, meant I was at his mercy, my whole body at his mercy, and it was the best.

I lifted my head when he was between thrusts, yowled when the next thrusts came, then stammered while he pounded into me: "You o-oh! -kay with m-me holding on h-here?" I tapped one of his horns with my fingers.

"I like you touching my horns, sadir," he said. His face was tense with a single-minded concentration, and from that point forward, there was no more speaking.

My skin was getting damp with sweat, and my toes curled. My cock bobbed against my belly, neglected but still leaking and just generally glad to be here. Inkiri hit my happy spot all the time, and I was pretty sure I could come like this.

That suspicion was confirmed an indeterminate amount of time later, my mate humming and clicking at me, his eyes roving over me with so much intensity it made my chest tight and wide at the same time.

I heard my own scream echoing through the guest room, long and strained, voice hoarse from all the sounds I'd been making.

Inkiri growl-purred, eyes watching my cock twitch with each spurt even as I had to work hard not to pass out.

He sped up even as my cock was still shooting, and when I felt him pulse into me, it was kind of like this inevitable thing, this exhale after the inhale.

The next thing I knew, I'd sagged against him, had become heavy in his arms, and the slight pinch from deep inside me let me know his barbs were hooking into me.

My head had rolled forward onto my chest, forehead resting against his chin as he clicked. I looked up.

“You sure you're okay to hold me?”

“Yes,” he said. He'd moved, though, and I hadn't even noticed. He'd sat down on the bed carefully, doing his best to avoid jostling me.

I smiled up at him and relaxed as he let my legs slide off his arms so he could wrap them fully around me, could hold me close. This really was the best, and while it lasted, nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Well, you really are a screamer,” Donna said when I came down the stairs, Inkiri behind me.

Donna was in the kitchen, boiling the kettle, and Wilson was standing at the foot of the stairs and staring up at us.

“I think you traumatized Wilson,” she said, pointing at the chicken with her as yet empty mug.

I turned cabbage red. “I, uhm. I thought you were outside?”

“Honey, I live here. And frankly, you two should’ve put a sock on the front door. A really, really big sock.”

Inkiri clicked and walked past me to pull me along all the rest of the way down the stairs, past Wilson, who clucked as soon as she saw Inkiri.

“Donna, do not joke. My mate is already sensitive when it comes to talking about his pleasure.”

Donna giggled, and Wilson followed as we walked over to the kitchen.

“Communication, Rory. It’s so important in a relationship,” Donna said to me. I was trying to hide behind Inkiri, but he was pulling me against his side. “Especially with these guys. Although I really drilled the consensual carrying into them. You may thank me.”

I flushed deeper, wondering how she knew, but then I realized that she wasn't talking about Inkiri carrying me while being speared on his cock, just... random carrying when walking would have sufficed.

I cleared my throat. "Thank you very much. He definitely asked when we first met."

Donna chuckled to herself and poured her boiling water over her tea bag.

The sound of the conservatory door and then the glass door into the living room saved me from talking about carrying or pleasure any further.

"Good, you are dressed already," Kinnek said. "Buttercup, you really are happy with your bagu mate, aren't you?" I almost breathed a sigh of relief, because that seemed unusually innocuous for Kinnek — or any bagu, really — but then he tagged on: "Even with his barb?"

I hadn't really appreciated how good being unconscious was when the people around you wanted to talk about everything like a horde of sex ed teachers.

I heard Donna gasp. Wilson clucked, but there was no way the chicken understood what a barb was. Right?

"Did he just — did you just — wait," Donna said, her tea steaming on the counter and getting ignored. She was in front of me now and looking up at Inkiri, then down at me, then up again. "Are you telling me your bagu cock is like a cat's cock? That's... fascinating."

"Fascinating?" I asked.

She shrugged. “I’m a biologist by training, so yeah. Fascinating.”

The glass door opened and closed again, which was my only indication that Vergis had come in.

“So your penises lock inside your partner?” Donna went on, looking from Kinnek to Inkiri now.

“Only a hangu-na’s,” Kinnek said, which felt like too much information.

“Oh, are we discussing fetishes?” Vergis piped in innocently.

“No, just dicks,” Donna said. “Although to be clear, even if I weren’t ace, I’d prefer girl parts, but this is intriguing.” She looked down at me. “So how does it feel?”

Vergis sniggered.

“Donna, did you not explain you were trans? What is ace?” Inkiri said. I honestly wasn’t sure whether he was running interference for me or just genuinely interested.

Donna sighed as if she’d struggled to explain all this before. “Asexual means I’m not aroused by just the sight of a nice pair of shoulders.” She poked Inkiri’s set, which really was nice. “Or even a nice penis, barbed or otherwise, although I can appreciate it if it’s pretty.” I was blushing furiously, and no one was stopping Donna. “Trans means that I am not the sex I was born with, but thank fuck for hormone therapy and surgical options.”

Inkiri gave a grunt of acknowledgement. “We will try to accompany you to Dublin for your regular hormone therapy.

We haven't forgotten.”

That made me pipe up. “Wait, are you saying there are still doctors in Dublin?”

Donna looked at me like I had grown a second head, which I preferred to her looking at me like I was about to tell her what a barb up my ass felt like.

“Yes, there are still doctors there. Emergency services are still running, and medical staff are providing essential treatment to survivors. Were you thinking it was all the Wild West out here? Didn't you pick up anything from the news?”

Her eyebrows had climbed up her forehead, and fine. Maybe I hadn't paid attention, but that just went to show how... out of it I had been. Traumatized. I was still in the process of realizing that, mostly because all the stress was slowly leaving me, which was thanks to Inkiri, who made me feel safe for the first time in two years. There was new stress with the cola ash people, of course, but at least I could sleep without waking every two hours from freaky dreams or any tiny little sound that might have been a monster out to eat me.

“I was —”

But Inkiri clicked and cupped my neck with his palm. “Rory was very scared after the Apocalypse happened. He moved around a lot to run from the monsters, and he encountered other humans who were not as friendly as one would hope.”

And that right there, that was why Inkiri was the best. I burrowed closer against his side, and he clicked soothingly

and held me.

Donna sighed. “Well, shit. I’m sorry about that, honey. And you’re not from around here, which can’t have been easy either.” She scooped up Wilson. “I’m good on my own, out here on the farm, but I’m still glad I have Wilson. And the other animals. And even the random, loudly fucking houseguests.”

Vergis snorted. “Do not throw me in with those two.”

“Muffin, you sound like your daddy sometimes,” Kinnek said, eyes dreamy.

“Weren’t we, I mean, didn’t we want to leave?” I asked, hopeful. We were far too close to talking about penises again.

“Mmh, yes,” Inkiri said. “Before we go, I have something for you.”

He left me standing with the others and went over to his massive backpack again. This time, he had to do far less rummaging to find what he was looking for, even though what he drew out was smaller, a colorful cloth wrapped very artfully. The cloth itself looked like the clothes I’d seen people wear in Esaka. It had decorations in it that had been created by cutting it open and then artfully folding it back to create patterns, a lot like the arts and crafts you did with colored paper in pre-school.

Inkiri handed me the small bundle and looked at me expectantly.

“You got me a present?”

“Oh, he’s such a keeper,” Donna said. “Now, don’t dally. Open it!”

Inkiri watched as I worked the knot open to reveal the contents inside. I immediately recognized the brooch Nokim had made. It was bedded on several scarves, most of them soft and shimmery, although one or two were plainer. But next to the brooch, there was a necklace. It had three pendants. I recognized the adder stone and the coin from our wedding. The third was a vial, maybe a bit smaller than the coin but teardrop-shaped.

Inkiri clicked. “You like it.”

I was feeling hot and cold, overwhelmed in the best of ways. “Ink. Yes, of course. No, wait, I love it. Did you get Nokim to make this?” I traced my index finger over the necklace, and Kinnek and Donna craned their necks to see.

“He is an exceptional maker,” Kinnek said.

“Also a pretty good cook. Can’t believe that bagu is still single,” Donna said.

“I asked him, back in Esaka. I know you wanted to do that, but I wanted you to have this when you woke up. The tiny glass container has a lock of my hair, which Vergis suggested. Do you like that, sweet thing?”

I nodded. “A piece of Aër, a piece of Earth, and a piece of you.”

“Yes,” Inkiri said. “And a few scarves. Nothing exceptional, just something you can wear until I can find you nicer ones. Sonyo was eager to find these for you, back in

Esaka.”

My heart squeezed tightly at the thought of that sweet bagu kid shopping for scarves for me all over Esaka.

I ran my fingers over the scarves. “I’ll have to thank him.”

“When we are next in Esaka,” Inkiri said.

Vergis groaned. “If you can’t put your necklace on yourself, Princess, maybe ask your mate to do it,” he said. “We should get going before I get roped into doing any more chores.”

Kinneck chuckled. “Muffin, doing your chores keeps you humble.”

I ignored the two of them and looked up at Inkiri. “Will you? Put the necklace on me?”

Donna cooed, and Wilson clucked. My bagu beamed. I loved him so much.

* * *

Donna let us go, but not without extracting a promise that we would return, ideally with Fellisse, Nokim, and Lissir as well.

Kinneck and Vergis hopped us through the veils using bunnies in a burlap sack. I’d gaped at the sack, and Kinneck had proudly told me that Vergis had snared all of them himself.

The flare of magic around us ebbed, and the burlap sack hung empty in Vergis’s hand when we got where we were

going, which was... a gazebo on a lawn behind a large, two-story house with a flat roof topped with solar panels.

“Home, sweet home,” Kinnek said and walked down the gazebo steps, Vergis in his wake.

“Where are we?” I asked and looked around.

The lawn the gazebo stood on was not pristine, no manicured grass-scape. Rather, there were wildflowers and moss and butterflies as well as bees zipping from one sappy flower to the next. A garden path led from the gazebo to the house, and Inkiri made me follow Kinnek and Vergis while he brought up the rear.

“Welcome to Canada,” Kinnek said. “More precisely, our home. Vergis’s daddy built that gazebo.”

“Huh,” I said, but there wasn’t any more room for talking, because the back door to the house flew open, and Fellisse took the stairs two at a time, then jogged toward us.

“You are back,” he said, smiling a toothy smile before zeroing in on me. “And Rory is better, thank the ancestors.”

Fellisse was hugging me before I could do so much as wave at him, but he was being pretty careful and pulled back quickly.

“Uhm, thanks. And good to see you too,” I told the big, ocean-colored bagu.

“It is very good to see you indeed, Rory. You were right, then, Kinnek?” Fellisse asked and gave Inkiri a hug, rubbing cheeks with him.

“So it would seem. Muffin, go inside and make sure the bath is ready for Inkiri and his mate. I’m sure a bit of soaking would do them both good.”

Vergis rolled his eyes and mumbled something I didn’t catch.

“Kinnek’s bath is wonderful,” Fellisse told me and Inkiri. “There is a steam bath too. Human engineering fused with bagua sensibilities, Nokim calls it.”

“It really is kind of you to open your home to us,” Inkiri said to Kinnek.

“Ach, it’s nothing,” Kinnek said. “Not when I am so deeply in your mate’s debt.”

Fellisse tilted his head. “What?”

“Much to talk about,” Inkiri said.

Kinnek clapped his hands and beamed. “We should all soak together so we can talk and get to know each other better.”

My jaw dropped, but before I could ask for clarification on whether any swimsuits would be involved, all the bagua broke out in grunting agreement, and I was led toward the house and what would be my first public and naked soaking.

* * *

Lissir and Nokim were the next people to hug me, almost the moment we got into the house.

“That is more than enough,” Lissir said and pulled

Nokim off me. “Have you no shame?”

Inkiri just clicked, relaxed and content.

“It’s not like it would matter much, seeing how Inki has marked him,” Nokim said and pointed at the necklace. “And even I with my poor sense of nose can smell they shared pleasure.” Inkiri broke out in a growl-purr, sounding smug. I tried not turning crimson.

We were in a large mudroom lined with metal shelves on one side. I spotted bagu shoes and coats for various temperatures, snowshoes too, and several pairs of skis.

“My mate does not want another,” Inkiri said. He definitely sounded smug. “And he made sure everyone heard when he took my barb not an hour ago.” Well, *weirdo husband who liked to embarrass me* smug, but smug all the same.

“He saved my life all over again, and I am grateful,” Nokim said, eyes focused on mine. Then he grinned. “And he explained to me that banana bread is awesome, and Charles agrees, so that is good.”

Lissir tilted his head. “I cannot argue with the quality of your banana bread.”

Lissir’s fiery eyes looked me over as if he wanted to make sure I was back to normal, but when I did the same to him, I noticed marks on his silver gray skin.

“Hey, are you okay?” I pointed to a scab on his left hand, and he looked down and lifted his hand so the friendship bracelet there jingled.

“Yes, it’s nothing. Fellisse finally let me take the

bandage off only this morning.”

I took a step toward him. “That happened in Esaka, right? I... sorry. I ruined one of the new shirts you got me.”

Lissir reached for my hand, his brows arched. “You cannot be serious. Nokim took a bullet to the chest, and through your magic, you saved him from dying. Again. Yet, you are sorry *about a shirt?*”

“Was a nice shirt,” I mumbled.

The three bagua around me fell silent for a heartbeat, but then they all started clicking at me.

“We are all soaking together, yes?” Lissir asked, and that seemed to be that.

“Yes,” Inkiri said. “Our stay with Donna, short though it was, has been interesting.”

“Ink met a chicken,” I said. We went deeper into the house, through a door Fellisse and Kinnek had already walked through ahead of us.

I noticed that the lintels and ceilings here were pretty high, so high that none of my guys had to duck under or hunch over while they walked. All in all, the place was spacious, honey-colored wood for the floorboards and white wallpaper on the walls.

That surprised me for a moment, because I’d seen the murals in the Esaka hotel, but then we rounded a corner.

“Wow,” I said.

“Charles said Kinnek did the walls,” Lissir said. “And

all the paintings in the house, of which there are many.”

I'd been impressed by the hotel, but this was, without a doubt, even more impressive. The wallpaper's white faded into the colors of Aër. At the far end, I could see sunset pinks and purples, three moons like pearls shimmering in the sky, but on this end, flowers bloomed and a silent river looked so realistic that I could almost hear its gurgling.

Nokim leaned over Lissir's shoulder and pointed at a bird sitting on a tree branch, copper feathers splayed and beak open as if it were about to sing.

“Rory, do you recognize this one?”

I nodded and grinned back at him. “Kind tack bird? The phoenix thing from my brooch?”

“Kintek, yes.”

Vergis looked around a corner from ahead of us. “Can you move it, please, Princess? Kinnek wants to get in the water.”

“Yes! Finally a nice, quiet soak with all the sentenmen!” Nokim said. He was practically bouncing on the balls of his paws.

“Getting naked with everyone, yay,” I said, far less enthusiastically.

Inkiri was either oblivious or eager to get soaking as well, because he just led me along and followed the others.

I turned my head when something in the mural caught my interest, a bagu, half-hidden by branches and leaves and

his back turned toward the viewer, sitting on the soft grass not too far away from the kintek bird.

I wondered who he was, because the light blue horns weren't Kinnek's, but then Inkiri put an arm around my shoulders, firmly grounding me in the here and now.

“Come on, sweet thing. Let's soak with the others and celebrate that you are back with us.”

* * *

The more of the house I saw, the clearer it got this had been built with bagu creature comforts in mind.

The bath was huge as a result, no normal shower there, but two sinks for washing, a lot like there had been in the hotel.

There was a sauna in the bathroom as well, the door open, but the wood dark with moisture, indicating it had been used not too long ago.

An oval pool sat in the floor in the opposite end of the room, and Kinnek and Fellisse were already in there while Vergis was about to join them, another — perfectly naked — human holding him up.

“Are you eating?” the human said. It had to be Charles, and I had imagined him as older, but he didn't look a day over forty, lush brown hair glossy and untouched by gray, his face wrinkle free, apart from a few laugh lines.

Vergis rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad, of course I'm eating.”

“Well, you could use a haircut, unless you’re growing it out. Pardon me for wondering whether you are taking care of yourself,” Charles said.

Vergis looked at Kinnek. “This is your fault. You didn’t have to tell him anything.”

Kinnek tsked. “Muffin, your daddy loves you very much. I cannot see why you have to be such a human rebel whenever he wants to take care of you.”

“What your father said.” Charles crossed his arms in front of his massive chest.

Vergis’s eyes found mine. “This? Your fault.”

“How —” But Inkiri nudged me forward and whisked the towel I’d been clutching to me away from me, just like he had done with my clothing, though noticeably not my jewelry. I owned more precious bling now than ever before in my life, and my mate clearly liked me displaying it. Which still made me feel all naked. Not that I thought I was the most impressive person in the room, naked or not, especially seeing as how Lissir and Nokim were just in the process of rinsing off, and then of course, there was Inkiri, and he was one nice piece of eye candy.

Charles turned around, giving me a full frontal and testing my ability to maintain eye contact in the face of adversity. Years and years of theater had not prepared me for acting cool in a hot bath. Drama teachers needed to change their curriculum.

“Hi,” I mumbled.

“Huh. You look a lot livelier than when your mate brought you in here,” Charles said. And damn, he was toned. Which I noticed out of the corners of my eyes.

“I told you he was a tough little twink,” Vergis said and finally lowered himself into the pool.

“Aaw, Muffin, you’re making friends,” Kinnek said. “Oh, Charlie, that reminds me, he is grounded.”

“Who? Vergis?” Charles went into the pool as well, and Inkiri nudged me forward. It took everything I had for me not to cup any of my parts, but I remembered all too well how that had ended for me the first time: with the bagua assuming I was about to masturbate.

“Yes. On account of how the Loathly Lady had to save him from the cola asshats.”

Charles giggled. “That’s what we’re calling them now?”

“No,” Vergis said.

“Yes,” Kinnek said.

“I’m *not* a Loathly Lady.”

“We’ve been through that, snapdragon. It’s that or magic dispenser.” Kinnek snuggled up next to Charles.

“Didn’t we settle on magic dispenser?” Vergis settled in the pool across from his parents, closer to Fellisse.

Inkiri stepped into the pool ahead of me and helped me down, which was unnecessary, but nice. Like back at the hotel on Aër, there were steps leading into the water as well as a

submerged bench running along the side so the soaking was actually possible and comfortable.

I wanted to just sit down as far away as I could from pretty much everyone who wasn't Inkiri, but then it occurred to me that there was some kind of etiquette to this, and as per usual, I wasn't aware whether there was or not. So I let Inkiri completely take charge, which he did easily.

That way, we ended up between Fellisse and Vergis with me sitting closer to Vergis, between him and Inkiri.

"I'm *not* a magic dispenser," I grumbled at Vergis. This wasn't in fact all that bad, once one was underwater. The pool was fairly deep after all, and the tile or whatever it was lined with was a light gray, nothing that made me stand out too much, if compared to the bagua.

Vergis snorted.

"If you are grounded," Charles went on at length, "you can go up the roof and deal with the pigeons."

"What pigeons?" Vergis asked.

"The ones that have been nesting all around the solar panels."

"You want me to climb up the roof so I can do pest control for you?"

"Well, are you telling me you are making your father go up there to do it? The front door needs a fresh coat of paint as well."

Yup, Charles was the best. I mean, Donna was good,

and Lissir could handle Vergis, but Charles was like a truck bulldozing over Vergis's attitude, and I loved it. I might have giggled.

Vergis's head turned toward me. "Are you volunteering to come up on the roof and murder pigeons with me?"

"Oh! I'll do that," Nokim said and excitedly lowered himself into the pool. He sat on Vergis's other side. "Rory, Charles knows *everything* about solar panels. He was an engineer in the military, and his scientific training is impressive. He explained all about microwaves!"

"Oh, cool," I said and looked across the pool at Charles. With a pang, I realized that judging by the way Kinnek was smoothed against Charles's side, one horn rubbing over Charles's temple, those two were probably in love. "How — you survived the Apocalypse? What I mean — I mean — that's..." My throat closed up, and tears threatened. I couldn't really account for them. They were lovers. They weren't dead. Thank *fuck*, just thank fuck.

Vergis groaned. "When those humans got him to start the spell, they did it by making him wish for something, and our tortured twink here wished for all lovers to disappear."

Kinnek's jaw dropped. "Oh, sugar cake, that's — Muffin, did you explain to the poor thing that whatever he did, it just gave the people using him access to a vast well of sacrificial power?"

Vergis shrugged. "Yeah."

Kinnek turned to me. "Snapdragon, I warded this place

thoroughly. It was and remains quite safe.”

Inkiri clicked. “My mate has been blaming himself for the death of the humans for a long time, Kinnek.” He stroked my arms and flanks as I tried getting my breathing under control.

Fellisse growled, and it wasn’t friendly at all. “The next time we meet those humans, I’d like to get the jump on *them*. They almost — without Rory there to do magic, Nokim would be dead, and Lissir likely as well.”

“That was the first time,” Nokim said somewhat sheepishly to Charles. “When I got injured and Rory did magic to save me.”

Charles looked at me. “Huh. Lucky Charm.”

“I just...” but I didn’t know what I’d just. My heart was racing in my chest.

Inkiri clicked. “Kinnek and Vergis have offered to train Rory. Here.”

Head tilts went all around, apart from Vergis and Kinnek.

“That is a very good idea. For various reasons,” Lissir said.

“Yes,” Inkiri said, maybe a bit too quickly. Kinnek looked at Lissir and tilted his head but said nothing.

“I just... I don’t want anyone to ever be in mortal danger again. Couldn’t we maybe work on that first?” I asked.

Vergis snorted. “I’ll tell you if anyone is about to keel

over. Because I apparently do that now.”

“Oh?” Lissir asked, orange eyes settling on Vergis.

“Ach, Rory told us that the cola assholes were about to take my baby, and so he called on death to prevent that.”

“I don’t understand,” Fellisse said. “Everyone knows that magic cannot be used to kill, and yet, Rory did that. We saw it.”

Kinneke inclined his head. “Correct. But that’s the rules for our magic. Aër magic, bagu magic. Rory’s is nothing like that. Well, in a way it is, because the magic goes through him.

“When you start learning to ko, the first steps are relatively easy, and a koa — that’s a mage, Rory — can handle the amount of ko that he is naturally able to handle. Like a metal straw that will only allow so much liquid through in one drag. Unlike a muscle, *that* particular aspect of ko is fixed, and ultimately decides the limits of the koa’s practical capabilities.”

He was talking to me, mostly, so I said, “Like someone’s height? The way only tall people can get stuff from the top shelf?”

Kinneke considered that. “Yes, essentially. Of course, there is the skill of preparing sacrifices, and sensing magic is another aspect of ko all over again. Now you, little chocolate cookie, you can handle varying amounts of ko. As if you were a rubber man and could stretch as far as you needed to in order to reach the top shelf.”

I leaned against Inkiri. This soaking thing, once you

were in the tub, really wasn't too bad. Still awkward, but I would be able to learn to handle it, I was pretty sure.

Vergis sighed. "Ever stretched a rubber band too far, Princess?"

"Muffin," Kinnek said, a warning in his voice. "What my darling child, who seems to forget I have *dozens* of embarrassing childhood photos of him, wants to say is, you need to learn better how much magic you can handle. Less of a firehose approach, more of a controlled trickle."

"That's why he's been unwell so much," Fellisse said as if he'd finally realized something painfully obvious.

"He improved markedly faster when he was near the land, and I am quite certain closeness with his mate helps also," Kinnek went on.

"Aah," Nokim cooed.

Inkiri clicked. "Protecting you by being close to you almost feels too easy, *sadir*." He licked my throat, slowly, and angled his head so his horn glided over my chin and cheek.

I almost told them what had happened back in Esaka, how that presence had told me doing magic might leave me hurt or scarred permanently. But then I couldn't bring this up. Should I bring up that freaky dream with the two girls, who had been running for their lives? I had no idea what that meant, and at the end of the day, it might have just been an actual dream.

Charles cleared his throat. "Are we expecting incoming?"

“Incoming what?” Lissir said.

“He means, are we expecting an attack,” Vergis clarified.

Kinneck clicked. “This area is very well warded, and Charles keeps quite a few weapons.”

“Are you... a prepper?” I asked. He didn’t look like one, mostly because he was lounging in a pool with a bunch of horned people, but what did I know.

“No, but living anywhere closer to civilization with my horned spouse and our horned kid didn’t seem like a feasible option.”

I nodded, because duh. Then I looked over to Vergis. “So, uhm. You’re half human?”

Vergis looked at me as if I’d asked him whether he wanted to go to prom with me or something. “Still fixated on biology, are you, Princess?” Vergis’s voice was dry as a desert.

“Well, Muffin, he can be forgiven, because I almost mistake you for a human some days.” He smiled at me. “Charles isn’t Vergis’s biological father.” Kinneck cocked his head. “But even if you wanted to try for children of your own with your mate, that wouldn’t work with a hangu-na.” Kinneck looked at the others. “Surely someone has explained that to the human?”

“He said he didn’t want to procreate,” Inkiri offered.

“And that he has no uterus,” Nokim said.

“The vestigial uterus really was a joke?” Fellisse

asked, his voice doubtful.

I was flushing, but I was going to blame it on the water if anyone decided to comment.

Lissir was watching me pretty intently in that way he had.

Charles swallowed a laugh. “Vestigial uterus?”

Fellisse tilted his head. “We had noticed your teats, Charles —”

“Nipples,” Inkiri corrected, because, yes, while we were having this ridiculous discussion, we could at least practice our vocabulary.

Fellisse grunted in acknowledgement. “Nipples. We noticed. And it makes you wonder. Stranger things have happened.”

Charles snorted. “Name one.”

“Well, I died twice, and Rory brought me back,” Nokim said. He was very chill about his near-death experiences.

“Necromantic fuckery around here,” Vergis grumbled. “Made me see death approach as well.”

“We are getting off track,” Kinnek said. “But just to be clear, pregnancy is not an option for a hangu-na, Rory. However —”

I flushed, and this time the water wouldn’t be able to hide it. “Do not tell me I should have put a condom on Inkiri.”

“What? No. Please remain realistic. What I was going

to say was that in olden times when bagua still had more magic and when mate calls were strong, it would generally fuse life force and make both share longer lives than either would have by themselves.”

“Oh, that,” I said and looked up at Inkiri. “I sort of gathered that. Well, I kind of knew? Like, I have this thing where I just know stuff, which is also new.”

Kinneke lifted a brow. “Vergis mentioned something about that, and I’d like to find out what exactly it is. It might be how our ability to sense magic translates in you.”

“We’re staying, yes?” Nokim said.

“Of course, you are staying,” Charles said. “I need Vergis to clean the garage.”

“You just said you wanted me to slaughter pigeons,” Vergis said.

“I’ll help!” Nokim said, and the excitement with which he volunteered made me wonder whether he had ever seen a human garage. I mean, even though neither of my parents were outdoorsy nor into handicrafts, the garage had still been packed.

Vergis slowly turned his head toward me. “Your Fault.”

“Charlie, see? I told you our Muffin had it in him to make friends.”

I inched closer to Inkiri. “Muffin threatened to murder me once or twice.” Which made Muffin glare at me.

Charles chuckled. “Next thing we know, they’ll be braiding each other’s hair. Oh, that’s why you haven’t been cutting it, Vergis?”

“Oh, for the sake of — you know, this is precisely why I don’t tell people about you two nutheads.”

Kinneke’s grin widened. “Because we are beautiful and mysterious?”

“Try nosy and weird.” He turned to me. “Also —”

“My fault?”

Fellisse chuckled, and Nokim clapped his hands. “We are going to have the best time, all of us.”

“Except for the pigeons,” Vergis said, but he was glaring at me... fondly?

CHAPTER SIX

The next three weeks were like a vacation, at least for me, and for the rest of the guys other than Vergis. Who did murder the pigeons with Nokim as an accomplice and then “accidentally” dropped a pigeon corpse almost on my head when I was coming back into the house from the vegetable patch with some carrots Charles had asked me to dig up for dinner. Vergis had apologized with a shit-eating grin from up atop the roof.

Other than escaping pigeon corpses, Kinnek thought I needed to learn the Lugarran alphabet and a few words in it, because they’d get used in ko circles and sacrifices, he said. And he made me do magic all the time. Either alone, not fun, because it meant I’d have that voice in my head, or with Vergis, also not fun because I’d get sarcastic comments. On the plus side, Vergis might’ve been sarcastic, but he was easy to work with.

When Kinnek suggested Vergis take me to feed the bunnies, my eyes lit up, and I made some comment about cuddling them. It got me blank stares, followed by Vergis’s suggestion that maybe I stick with learning the alphabet.

“But why?” I’d asked, crestfallen.

Vergis had snorted. “They’re not for cuddling, but for sacrifices, Princess.”

And I agreed the alphabet was more my speed than meeting the bunnies I might have to do magic with.

But the really vacation like bits were the ones where no magic happened.

The morning after we got there from Donna's place, I was treated to my guys working out, which meant they did some sparring in the backyard, near the gazebo. When Inkiri joined, he made a point of finding a camping chair for me in the mudroom and depositing me in the shade so I could watch. He didn't say so, but me watching was clearly important to him, and so I did.

How my guys managed the throws and all the falling and rolling without hurting their horns at all baffled me. Charles walked past me, watched for about three minutes, and then asked whether he could have a go. Three minutes later, Kinnek came out with another folding chair and joined me.

"Charles enjoys a new challenge," Kinnek said. "And a nice, bulky hangu-na like your mate and Fellisse are a lure he can't resist."

The workouts in the mornings were a regular occurrence from that point on, and after, Inkiri unfailingly came to have me kiss him before eventually going to wash up and soak or steam with the others.

Five days in, I got back to the guest room I shared with Inkiri on the second floor one afternoon. Kinnek had made me write Lugarran words in the unfamiliar script for the past two hours, and I was exhausted from concentrating and not taking any breaks. I was looking for a quiet corner to hide in for a half hour or so.

Inkiri found me moments later, clicked at me, licked

my throat, and... handed me my backpack from behind his back. My Apocalypse backpack.

“I asked Vergis to help me get it back for you, sadir,” Inkiri said, maybe a little smug.

“You and Vergis went to Ireland while I was doing writing exercises?” I asked.

Inkiri tilted his head. “I may have asked Kinnek to make sure you were busy while we were gone.”

I went through the contents of my bag, and everything was still there. Everything I’d barely missed, and the cat socks Inkiri had gotten for me the day — the very hour — that he’d found and saved me.

We didn’t leave our room that night, more specifically, we didn’t leave the bed, because I felt he deserved a reward.

Apart from that day, which really left me exhausted as far as the pleasure play went, Inkiri and I settled into a comfortable routine. While he was extremely caring and just the kind of supporting spouse who deserved to be called my greatest cheerleader, he liked to spend our evenings in bed together talking, which led to more sometimes, but other times, we just cuddled and fell asleep like that.

“Do you worship a pantheon?” he’d wanted to know. It had bothered him that he hadn’t known, he told me, when I’d been out cold after Esaka. He’d hoped I would be able to hear and know he’d been there, and he’d have said prayers to any gods I held dear to comfort me.

Which made me feel so seen. I told him I wasn’t

religious, told him my parents hadn't been up for any sort of nonsense of that kind and hadn't even bothered making me think Santa was real.

However, I'd told him about the things my Gran had told me. The Fair Folk. Brownies. How you were supposed to be able to tell the first initial of your soul mate's name by peeling an entire apple and then tossing the whole string of skin over your shoulder without making it break through the process. How sometimes at night, you could hear the Wild Hunt outside.

He listened, fascinated. When he brought up brownies over breakfast the next morning, Kinnek piped up with the folk wisdom he'd collected on Earth, and soon, my guys were all over that, reading Kinnek's books and papers, although Nokim was more interested in the chocolate fudge brownie recipe Charles mentioned.

Inkiri also managed to make friends with the residential murder of crows and the two magpie couples in record time. He'd have probably been able to talk the pigeons off the roof, but by that time, Vergis had happened.

Really, all in all, I was beginning to think that life was, surprisingly, good. I hadn't had any of the weird dreams involving the Stone and those two girls again. Sure, there were also monsters sometimes, screaming, barking and hissing at the wards, but I wasn't idiot enough to step outside of the boundaries Kinnek had showed me, and one of the guys or Charles would always take care of the beasts.

One hot day in June, Kinnek had kept me at the kitchen

table for most of the morning, doing things to a glass of water. He had swung himself up to sit on one of the honey-brown and cream kitchen counters, his bare paws dangling. He wore a crop top and shorts and was winding a strand of his hair around a finger. He looked like a teenager for some reason, and by this point, I was definitely sure those blue gray strands were dyed.

“Make it freeze again, snapdragon,” he said for about the millionth time.

The presence was still in my head, less chatty these days now that it was there so often, which had probably been the point of all this magic training. It was easier to still interact with the outside world while I made the presence do things for me that way.

I sighed and propped my head up on my hand. The presence did the rest, and the water turned to ice. There was still condensation misting the glass, and much of it had soaked into the placemat while I'd been sitting here. Part of me felt like sitting in on rehearsals for plays I'd not been cast for, learning the lines in the hopes someone broke a leg or something.

“There.”

“You're better than the fridge,” Kinnek said. “Now make it liquid again.”

“We've been at this for hours.”

“And you're doing so well.” He then looked at the actual fridge. Kinnek had a weakness for iced tea, especially if

Charles made it, and there was a fresh batch in there. “Tell you what, you boil it, and you can take a break, yes?”

I had the water in the glass bubbling and radiating heat in less than a minute.

“That’s your break, then, sweet pea.”

I stood and stretched, yawned. “And iced tea for you.”

Kinneke slid off the counter, grabbed two glasses, and filled them with ice and iced tea, then handed me one. “It’s one of the many human things I’d miss on Aër. Same as Chai tea in the winter.” He brightened. “And chocolate.”

“Oh, so you thought about going back?” I had. Despite everything, I’d liked Aër and the people. Well, if they weren’t cola asshats.

Kinneke sipped his tea, the ice clinking against the rim of his glass. “Not really. This is home. It’s just that it’s become a little more work since all the monsters started coming here when the veils fused.” He sat down at the table and propped his feet up on it, toes flexing to reveal those sharp bagu claws. “That spider Vergis said was about to eat you on the monster world? We had one of those earlier this year out in the forest. Charles found it when he was picking wood garlic, and he said he was feeling like Ripley and the space marines walking into the colony in that movie. We have a flamethrower in the basement now as a result of that.”

I paled. I didn’t want to remember the orange spider. Ever. “I… need to change the subject. You know what, I’ll go out and pick some raspberries.” I stood and put my empty

glass in the sink.

“Do. I’m making vinné for dinner tonight, and they’ll go great with fresh berries.”

There was a basket on the cabinet used for fruit picking, and I grabbed it. “Are you going to turn the raspberries into, erm, dissent jelly?”

“Oh, you mean disset? I hadn’t thought to. It’s usually cooked with a tuber that turns to jelly like pectin when you heat it, but I guess I could try to flavor the raspberries like disset. Which reminds me, Vergis said you fell in love with massa buns when you were on Aër?”

I gasped. “Those damn cilantro raisin massacre buns! No. They’re one of the most disgusting things I’ve ever eaten. No offense to Lugarran culture or cuisine,” I hurried to add.

Kinneke tilted his head. “None taken. Charles is very much with you on the... massacre buns, but I thought maybe massa were like blue cheese or natto to the human palate, either favorites or very much not.”

“Very much not,” I said. “Vergis and his fudging jokes.”

Kinneke giggled. “He called you a ‘bearable human’ the other day. Don’t take his jabs too personally. I was lucky to run into Charles and that Charles didn’t give a single fuck about the horns or about me being blue and pregnant. Let’s just say my baby wasn’t always as lucky as me when interacting with humans.”

Well, that made sense. It also made me feel bad for

Vergis all over again. Vergis, who'd have happily fed me massacre buns and dropped dead pigeons on me. Not to mention, that memorable incident with the furious bear.

"I'm... really sorry." I gripped the basket's handle tightly.

"Not your fault, sweet pea. And remember, his daddy taught him where to punch any bigoted assholes so it'd hurt, something he took to, much faster than most five-year-old bagua I've known."

"Ah. Well, that's... talent."

Kinneke beamed. "I know! He's such a cute little marvel."

Since I didn't want to talk any more about how the cute little marvel had learned to maim and murder, I waved my basket and excused myself.

Fellisse was outside helping Charles with the tomatoes, tying them to poles. Fellisse perked up and clicked louder.

"Rory! Put on your hat if you are going out. We don't want you to get sick with sunstroke."

"Sunburn, more likely," Charles said.

Fellisse grunted. He watched me in a way that made very clear he would grab me and carry me back inside to put a hat on me if I didn't do it myself.

"Oh, fine," I said and turned on my heel. "I was just going to pick berries." I waved the basket for emphasis. Fellisse looked unimpressed, and Charles was back to the

tomatoes. The man had a talent for remaining unfazed that I admired. That a flamethrower was his solution to a problem didn't really surprise me.

With a hat that was Charles's, judging by the fact that it had no holes for horns, I headed out to the berries. The bushes were planted next to the fruit trees, between the vegetable patch and the larger potato, bean, and pumpkin patch.

I walked through the rows of bushes, minding the thorns as I picked the ripest fruits, red and golden raspberries, some blueberries. I ate probably as many as I picked. It was so nice, just this. The garden was warded, monsters wouldn't come here, even if they came close often enough. Inkiri was fine. He and Lissir had been restringing some fairy lights in the garden earlier. The others were fine. Life was good. A yellow butterfly fluttered past the new growth branches of the berries and toward the sun, and I smiled as I looked after it... and froze.

A Koa Esher stood at the end of the raspberry row, clad in muddy white clothes that definitely looked like they'd seen better days, his twisted horns dull in the sunlight.

We both looked at each other for a moment that stretched. Then he said something and lifted his hands, palm out, and I reacted on fear and instinct.

I clutched the basket tightly and *called* for the presence.

It came immediately. *Such bright kennings of fear in you*, it said, more to itself than me. Which was weird. Maybe I could have a conversation with it about how weird it was that

it was conversing with me in the first place, but not right then.

I need my guys. And Kinnek. And the flamethrower.

Or did I need the cola asshot on fire? I wasn't sure. An icy wind flooded toward the Koa Esher. He turned his head away, shielding his face with his hands.

“Rory!” Fellisse’s voice was close, and he sprinted around the raspberries just a second later, a knife in hand that was most decidedly not a gardening tool.

Charles had a gun out, and he moved like military dudes did in movies.

Fellisse reached me first, pushed me behind himself, and hissed out something at the Koa Esher, then Charles took up position next to Fellisse, and I was behind them both.

Protect them, protect them, protect them, I said to the presence.

Nothing to protect them from, it said, sounding bored like a commuter waiting for a train that was always late. The icy wind wouldn't let up, but it was changing direction, and very soon, green leaves tore off the berry branches and circled around us in a maelstrom of foliage.

Something from behind me caught my attention, and I saw Kinnek sprinting toward us. “What is —” he began, then went silent when he saw the Koa Esher. The next thing he said started out in Lugarra, I could tell that much, but then, something about the cadence of the words changed. The anger I could still hear, even if I had no clue what Kinnek was saying.

The wind picked up, and it got louder. I put my hands over my ears to dampen the howling of it.

“What fresh fuckery is this?” Vergis had appeared on my left. And he pinched me in the arm.

“Ow!”

“Stop this fucking nonsense. It’s not tornado season yet.”

“Did I...”

Did you make the wind? I asked the presence.

More you than me, Rory. Kennings of fear are never good for control.

Make it stop, I told it. I felt it shrug, and the storm died down.

Which was when Inkiri and Lissir got to us. Nokim was also there, but he was hanging back and looking the other way, clearly making sure there was no ambush about to happen, which made me reach out to the presence even as Inkiri reached me and pulled me close.

“Rory, you’re well,” he said, and nearly made me tip over the contents of my basket when he locked me in the comfort of his embrace.

Are there others here? I asked the presence. I felt it look.

No. This one came in through an opening in the veils to the north and then walked. He must’ve avoided the perimeter wards.

“He’s alone,” I said out loud. “Came in through the veils from the north.”

Inkiri had taken firm hold of my wrist, and so I patted his hand. He didn’t go into an aggressive growling mood, but he was calm, focused, and tense, which was worrisome all on its own.

I didn’t know if anyone cared, but Inkiri relaxed marginally at the news that the Koa Esher was alone, not that he was letting go of me any.

I peeked through the gaps between the wall of bodies in front of me. The Koa Esher was speaking. I didn’t understand a single word of it, but I could tell it wasn’t Lugarra. It sounded... clickier, rougher.

“What’s he saying?”

Inkiri growled. “He begs not to be killed. He wishes to talk. He says he has turned away from the Koa Esher and offers all he knows and his magic if we protect him from their retaliation.”

“He’s full of shit,” Vergis said.

“Does he have sacrifices on him?” Lissir asked.

Kinneb barked something out in the Koa Esher tongue, then said, “I’ll search him. Shoot him if he does anything.” Kinnek sounded strained, like his heart was going a million beats a minute.

Charles cocked his gun. Kinnek walked toward the Koa Esher, who was cowering now, head inclined and pale blue eyes looking up at Kinnek, who barked out something at

the Koa Esher that made him look away and to the ground.

Vergis next to me had pulled a knife at some point, his magic knife. The gleaming tip caught the light.

Kinneke searched the Koa Esher none too gently before kicking out the intruder's legs from under him. That had the Koa Esher kneeling in the grass, trembling. He was sweating too, his blue skin shiny with perspiration. Unlike some of the Koa Esher I'd seen back in Ireland and even in Esaka, this one didn't have the spotty skin, just the unusually shaped and dull horns.

He said something, the words muffled by fear, and then he glanced up, his eyes meeting mine.

That had Inkiri make a growly hissing noise and pull me back even farther behind him.

"Nokim, Fellisse, will you take Rory inside and watch over him?" Inkiri bit out. "It is not safe here."

"We could always just kill the Koa Esher," Vergis said. "That'd make it safe."

The Koa Esher didn't seem to understand them, but he looked scared now, saying something in a low voice.

Kinneke grabbed one of the asymmetrical horns and twisted, revealing the Koa Esher's throat. My jaw dropped when Kinneke whispered something into the Koa Esher's ear, because just the way he said it, eyes wide, lips pulled back, all humor or joviality gone, it was enough to make my blood curdle.

"But he said he wanted to talk," I said as Fellisse

stepped back and took me by the upper arm. Nokim had walked up next to Vergis, but was stepping back now as well.

“There is never much talking that goes on with them, sweet thing, but they are deceiving. Go with Fellisse and Nokim.” Inkiri pushed me and my berry basket toward the big bagu, and Nokim glanced at Vergis, but then came up on my other side.

I had the sinking feeling that this was going to turn bloody, and it was a sickening déjà vu of a situation, taking me back to the religious compound. Really, I hadn't been in that place long, and the stuff I'd seen there during that short time made my mind reel, because it had clearly been an everyday occurrence.

I turned toward the presence, who was still lingering. It was a little curious about the Koa Esher, because his magic was different, not as familiar as Vergis's smooth if relentless spells, not as comforting as Kinnek's highly sophisticated yet humble workings.

Can you tell me for certain if the cola ash dude is lying? I asked the presence, because maybe if it could, I wouldn't have to worry about under which pumpkin he'd end up buried.

The presence turned to me, but it didn't answer outright. Instead, vertigo and nausea hit me hard, and the world slipped away from me, fast.

I was back on the Hill of Tara, fog everywhere, vegetation where there shouldn't be any.

The girl was here as well, walking into the fog, tendrils curling after her... or no, the tendrils did something else. They were gathering the cold air into the shape of a face, and the face spoke with the voice of the presence.

Before, when one of you was anointed, they were sacred, not to be harmed. Their people dressed them in white linen and gold, and the people would bleed to protect them.

I walked closer to where the fog was still coiling as if it were a living thing. Maybe it was.

“What... are you?”

The fog sighed. *Now you ask. I am the land and the sky above the land, the water that runs through the land's bedrock like blood and breath.*

“Where are the others? My guys? I didn't just die of a heart attack, did I?”

The fog shivered, and leaves shuddered. Laughter. *No, Rory. They are where they were, as are you. But my memory is long, and I remember this well. They found her in the end, although she fought. She had no knights like you, and as you saw, they'd already taken her sister, her last remaining relative. She was tired from running and hiding. They did to her what they would have done to your mage knight, the one held dear by our Lady Death.*

As I was standing in what was apparently the land's memory, I wondered how I had ended up here. I also considered that I was not exactly the best person to be here, because clearly, the situation at hand demanded some primo

adulting skills, and I didn't have them. I lived for my cute cat socks and loved my big strong mate, but I'd never done taxes, had never done a job interview, nor had I done anything more involved than booking the trip to Ireland, really.

And the land, if that was what the presence was, clearly wanted to tell me things, things I didn't want to know, because I didn't want to think about what the cola asshats would have done to Vergis, what the humans had done to the girl who'd had fire in those green eyes when I'd seen her running and hiding and calling the fog. I just... wanted to be background. Sweet shrubbery, swaying in imagined wind. I wanted nothing to do with danger and murder and things.

"I don't understand what any of this means," I said, digging my fingers into my hair and almost screaming at the fog. "I don't even know what all this anointing means."

When one of you drinks from a sacred spring or bathes in them, when one of you touches a sacred stone or sleeps in a sacred clearing, that is anointing. Though the clearings are gone now, and the springs have been tainted a long time ago. There is only this now. The fog curled around the Stone. Before you, I thought there'd never be another, not when the last of your bloodline left these shores.

"Right. Sorry Gran emigrated. Look, can I go back to the guys now? They were about to kill the cola asshat, but maybe I can get them to just kick him out, so uhm..." I gestured. At wibbly-wobbly fog.

The presence sort of pushed into my mind like a migraine. It was frustrated, I realized. It was stalling.

They stole from your bloodline. They tried to make themselves better than they were. As if they could ever be anointed like the true bloodline, as if kingship were magic.

I sighed. “Okay, so people are assholes. What else is new?”

The presence was still agitated. It wanted me to see something.

Before, they clad your kind in white, but it was respect. It was not so you’d be used.

“You mean... okay. You mean you don’t like the Koa Esher because... I don’t know. They use mages?”

The presence was displeased. One time in seventh grade, one of the actors had caught a stomach bug, and the teacher had put me in for rehearsals, because I was there and knew the lines. She’d given me that same vibe of deep displeasure. At the time, I’d hoped that maybe she’d caught the stomach bug as well, but no. It’d been me. When the actor had said he was good enough to go on stage for the premiere, the teacher had been so relieved.

Hoofbeats rang out through the fog, and I spun around, scanning the wavering tendrils of fog for the riders who’d been hunting the girl and had captured her friend. Her sister.

Not respect. They used you.

“The — wait. Used me. You mean back two years ago? At the stone? The humans?”

Yes. The presence was relieved finally. You were just anointed, unsure. Untrained. They would have kept you if you

hadn't listened and ran.

“Wait. Wait, are you saying you told me to run? I don't remember most of that day.”

Yes, I made you run. And the kennings of fear helped. Even under ideal circumstances when they were watched and helped and supported, the anointing could be confusing for those who came before you. Draining.

The landscape shifted to a bright and sunny day, and I saw the Stone on the wide-open Hill as a three-dimensional photograph. There, just like I remembered, was what was left of a class of school children in their uniforms, running past the Stone in a flurry.

What I hadn't seen then — or didn't remember seeing — were three broad-shouldered guys, their jaws set firmly, their eyes focused... on me.

I was on the other side of the students, looking pale and wide-eyed. I barely even recognized myself.

“You used the students to get in between me and... those men?”

Yes.

“Okay. Okay. Thanks, I guess.” So Fellisse had been right when Inkiri had first brought me home. Someone *was* after me, someone *did* want me. “Can you get me back to my guys now?”

The pressure in my skull came back, and the scene shifted. We were in the fog again.

They want to use you still.

I turned, looked around. “The humans? Oh, you mean those people from back at the Stone? The ones that —” It hit me. “The cola ash people were teaming up with humans. Back in Esaka.”

That place is far away, but they shook hands here. Back home. It is difficult yet for me to know what happens where your mate was born.

“You are trying to tell me that the humans who want me are in cahoots with the cola ash people, and they want me too now? Or me and Vergis?”

In a way. They would cut you down your middle and each keep a piece of you, if they could.

Well, that was... not comforting.

“That means... if this Koa Esher isn’t lying, we want to talk to him, right?”

Since I wasn’t getting poked with a migraine, I was guessing the presence thought that was a halfway decent idea.

Humans do many things, and time stretches, makes grand efforts matter little. But when one of your kind is anointed, time is precious since they are precious. It is good your mate binds life with life so both extend, grow more solid. Not as precious as a human life is for its brevity, but special.

The fogscape vanished, and I was back in the sunny garden. Fellisse was walking me back toward the house, but I jerked back.

“Hey, wait!”

Nokim and Fellisse clicked at me. Fellisse never let go, but he stopped and looked at me, startled.

“Inki will be fine, you need not worry,” Nokim said with a smile.

“No. Kinnek, wait, I think... I don’t know. I think the cola ash people and the humans who made me do the things back at the Stone two years ago are working together. Or something. The land said so.”

I couldn’t really see much, because there were still enough bagua between me and the Koa Esher to make me feel like a small, helpless human. Which I totally was. Or wanted to be.

“The land said so?” That was Charles. It occurred to me now to wonder whether he’d been gardening while carrying a gun on him.

“Well, kinda?”

Charles cleared his throat. “Baby, trust me, I’d be the first to shoot any of them between the eyes if they ever come near you or Vergis, but getting what intel we can while we can might be worth letting him breathe for a little while longer.”

The silence after that was tense. I heard the Koa Esher whisper something, though, even if I couldn’t see him. He sounded desperate.

Lissir’s voice was soft, soothing. “Kinnek, there is only one of him and seven of us. We can watch him.”

The tension didn't ease, not even a bit. In the end, Vergis sighed, and I saw him relax some, cock his hip.

“Dad, you said this weird Death thing everyone's favorite twink gave me is a gift. Well, no one here is really marked for death, so by your own logic, you should at least go for delayed gratification here. On the plus side, being here with all of us will keep the guy in constant fear since he can't be sure we aren't discussing how to butcher him slowly right now.”

My mouth was dry, but I said, “I'm sure he already peed himself a little.”

“Fine,” Kinnek finally said into the silence. “We will not judge him for all the crimes his people have committed, nor will we do to him any of the things his people would do to us.”

I heard the Koa Esher yelp, and then Kinnek pushed past the others and strode off toward the house, bubbling with... not just anger, I was pretty sure.

“Do you have handcuffs, or do I go find the zip ties?” Vergis asked.

Charles snorted. “Me and your dad have handcuffs, but not the kind you're thinking.”

“Oh, for the sake of fuck, do you really have to?”

“What's happening?” I asked. Fellisse was still holding me, and Inkiri had been angling himself so he blocked my view. Or the Koa Esher's view.

“What's happening is, I'm wondering how you can go

berry picking and find a fucking Koa Esher in the bushes,” Vergis said and looked at me over his shoulder.

Inkiri growled. “Rory did not look for their kind. We need to find out how the Koa Esher managed to find Rory.” He turned to me. I saw Charles and Lissir moving, and Vergis headed toward the house as well, presumably for the zip ties. “Sweet thing, please let Fellisse and Nokim take you inside and watch over you.” He cupped my neck, and of course, I turned all gooey within seconds and nodded.

“Okay, but you be careful. I need you,” I told Inkiri, and his gaze heated.

He reeled that in pretty quick, going back to business. To being a protector.

Fellisse and Nokim hurried me inside after that, and I just barely spotted Inkiri and Lissir on either side of the Koa Esher, Charles following at a distance, his gun ready.

Fellisse left me in the mudroom to take my shoes off, and he went around to check the rest of the house while Nokim watched the door to the mudroom itself.

I headed along the hallway but stopped. Kinnek was sitting on the floor, back leaning against the wall, his head bowed. His midnight dark horns almost touched the beautiful landscape that lived on the walls. The landscape he had created.

I still had my stupid basket, and not a single fucking idea of what I should be doing. Kinnek was upset, and it wasn't just anger, I could tell that much. I wished Lissir had

been here, or even better, Charles. This, like the fogscape and the upset voice in my head, was too much adulting for me, more adulting than anyone should have to do. Unless they were an adult, of course. Which I wanted about as much as I wanted the magic, apart from the few side benefits like occasional access to alcohol and the legal liberty to go to bed with whoever I wanted.

Just walking past Kinnek would have felt rude, and also, I cared about him and didn't want him to sit there by himself. I sat next to him and put my basket down on my other side.

There were probably proper things to say here, I just didn't know what those were. I awkwardly crossed my legs, cleared my throat, and said, "Well."

Kinnek let out a stuttering breath, glanced at me, then back at the wall opposite.

I followed his line of sight and cocked my head. He was looking at the painting of the bagu, the one with his back turned I'd first noticed when coming here.

"I have a few photographs of him, but it hurts to look at them. It hurt so much after I quit the Raiken and came here, and I honestly don't know why Charlie put up with it."

"Erm. That... did the Koa Esher, I mean. Do you want to tell me a little more?"

Kinnek snorted out a laugh that was almost a sob. "Vergis's biological father. Another hangu mage. Not as skilled as me, but — he was better than me in all other ways.

He deserved better. We were sent on a mission to free Raikengana who had been captured. It turned bad. They took Aragis when we tried to get away, but we'd made a pact, we'd promised to each other." He wiped his eyes when tears started falling, and I carefully reached out to take his hand like Lissir had done with me before. I hoped that was right. Kinnek closed his fingers around mine. "I didn't have it in me to make him a sacrifice. Maybe he always knew that about me. He took a Koa Esher's knife and slit his own throat. He smiled at me, but I'll never forget the blood. Sometimes, I still see it in my dreams."

Don't suppose you have anything for that? I said to the presence, the land. Wisely, it didn't respond.

"I... do you... I don't know what to do. Can I do anything? Anything at all?"

Kinnek looked away from the painted back of the bagu he'd loved — he still loved. His eyes lingered on the floor for long moments while all I did was hold his hand and not let go. After a while, he squeezed my fingers and looked at me. "Look at you, Rory. You really are a sweet thing." He took a deep breath. "You held on to that basket, did you, snapdragon?"

"Guess I did."

"You want to help me with the... what did you call it? Discourse jelly?"

I smiled at Kinnek. His eyes had gone puffy, and his skin looked blotchy. "Dissent jelly."

“I see. Wanna make some?”

“Can we have iced tea while we work?”

Kinneke nodded. “We can. I love Charlie’s iced tea.” He got to his paws slowly, and he wasn’t his chatty self while we worked in the kitchen, but that was fine. He didn’t have to be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They put the cola ash dude in the bunker, because of course there was a bunker here. I was not allowed to go there, and Charles hugged Kinnek close when he told us there was no chance of the Koa Esher getting out.

That first day was pretty tense, and Inkiri, who'd been happy to let me walk around the homestead before without going all clingy, suddenly didn't want to leave my side, apart from taking care of monsters testing the wards or the times when he was on guard duty down in the bunker. Because that was a thing now that everyone other than Kinnek and me were doing: guard duty.

It went on like that for over two weeks. The thing was, if I hadn't known that there was a bunker with an evil mage stuck inside, I'd never even have suspected because the guys didn't talk about it, Charles wasn't chatty to begin with, and there were no noises, no screams or whatever was to be expected when you kept someone in a bunker under your backyard. The guys did their morning workouts and sometimes Charles joined, dragging Vergis along every now and then. Kinnek and I worked on magic and my Lugarra skills. It was surreal, and I could have written the cola ash guy off as a dream.

For our magic lessons, Kinnek would pull Vergis in more often than not now. We'd do smaller things like parting and passing through the veils around the property, but for our

first lesson together, Kinnek sat us down at the kitchen table with a large pot filled with water in front of us.

“As a magic dispenser, you need to practice dispensing, and Vergis needs to practice using you. In a consensual, mutually beneficial way, of course,” Kinnek said brightly. It was a hot day in July, and he was wearing hot pink shorts that Gran would have called “indecent in the best of ways.”

“Dad, unless you let me gag him, I don’t see where the benefit lies,” Vergis said, because he was being Vergis like effing always.

“Must the bagu be so base?” I said in halting Lugarra.

From the look both Kinnek and Vergis gave me, I had overacted. Or asked why the bagu had to be so smelly.

“A gag you say?” Kinnek said, and for a second there, I wasn’t sure he was joking.

But of course, even as Vergis and I figured out how to do magic together without committing verbal or actual murder against one another, a part of me wouldn’t let go of the anxiety that came from some dude who was being kept prisoner in the bunker outside. After all, there was always another shoe, and it had to drop.

When it did, I was picking tomatoes for lunch with Inkiri and Fellisse, the latter of which looked like he couldn’t decide whether to rush inside and get my hat or whether to carry me inside bodily where my hat was so I could put it on and be safe from sunstroke sickness.

“Rory,” Fellisse said, and I mentally prepared.

“Hey, Fellisse, do you think you could go and get me my hat?” I said and batted my eyes at him. We were still living in the Apocalypse after all, and I needed to work on my survival skills.

Fellisse beamed and nodded. “Gladly.”

Before Fellisse got into to the house, Charles rushed outside and down the back staircase, taking two steps at a time.

“What?” Inkiri asked. He took my wrist right away, almost casually, but I knew I’d never be able to make him let go.

“Saw something on the camera system. You wanna come along?”

“Wait — camera system? Is that new?”

“Nah,” Charles was one of the fast walker types, and sadly, so were the two bagua with me. I had to jog to keep up. “Always had it but didn’t have constant coverage with the motion sensors only activating when something came close. Fixed that after the raspberry incident.”

“That is what we are calling it? The raspberry incident?” But I looked down to my free hand, where I carried the same basket, only this time, there were red and yellow and pink heirloom tomatoes in there. “We are having a tomato incident.” I said, and immediately reached out to the presence.

Does anyone want to kill us?

It stretched and blinked blearily, or that's what it felt like before it looked around.

Not them. Their leader is your mate's blood.

I looked up at Inkiri. "The land says they don't want to kill us, but the leader is related to you? That ring a bell?"

Charles looked at us curiously.

Inkiri groaned. "Zeddira. You might be wrong about him not wanting to at least attempt murder."

I cleared my throat. "Should we... bring Vergis?"

"Should we bring me where?" Vergis asked, and if Inkiri hadn't been holding me, I'd have faceplanted all over again. As it was, I yelped a little.

"Where'd you come from?"

He was behind us and walking soundlessly. Shrugging, he said. "The lettuces. There was an issue with snails. There isn't anymore."

"Mothertrucker."

Charles chuckled.

"Who is Mother Trucker?" Fellisse asked, which got Vergis to join in the chuckling.

I looked up to my mate, who was... trying to stifle a grin as well.

"Just... I'll tell you later," I said as we headed through the raspberries and toward the pumpkin field. A group of bagua, some wearing black, some taupe, was walking around

the field, eyeing the pumpkins warily as if they thought they might rise up from the soil and attack. Maybe they'd seen some tacky Halloween movie at some point.

“Sadir, no matter what Zeddira does or says, you stay by my side. Hold on to me. Do you understand?” Inkiri said.

I had no idea why that would be an issue, but then Inkiri let go of me. I gave him a quick nod and put my arm around his waist, not caring whether that was considered proper by other bagua or not, but the group of them — Raikengana, by their looks — didn't give any indication that they thought I was doing something I shouldn't be doing, so that was good.

The leader person was pretty easy to spot. His robes were gray rather than plain black or even taupe, and he had thin strings of shimmery fabric in the same color wound around both dark blue horns. He had darker hair than Inkiri, and wasn't quite as fair, more cornflower blue where Inkiri's skin was baby blue. In fact, I'd never have guessed the two of them were related. Kinnek and Vergis looked way more alike than those two did.

Vergis said something in Lugarra that was too fast for me to catch, and so, to my shock, did Charles. Zeddira looked at both of them in turn before he addressed them, then he said something to his brother. When his eyes settled on me, he smiled. I wasn't the right person to pick up on subtleties in most situations, but I knew that smile. It was the one my parents had used on me when they just wanted to get me to do something that they wanted. I'd always thought of it as their

handler's smile.

A bagu to the right of Zeddira started talking. "The second high counselor is glad to see his brother's mate recovered. He wishes to welcome you into the Raiken and into the House of Livim and assures you that both are your home."

"Uhm. Thanks. I mean, thank you. That's very kind. Of the second high counselor." I sidled closer to Inkiri, because Zeddira was still looking at me. He had yellow eyes with flecks of dark blue in there, and his attention made me feel very exposed, as if I were on stage.

The interpreter returned what I'd said, and I picked out the al-lesh for *thank you*.

Zeddira spoke again.

"The second high counselor has brought healers with him, but servants also. He does not wish you to overexert yourself again, since you are a precious member of his own family now."

Fellisse gave a single low click, and I could practically hear Vergis's eyes roll around in their sockets. My fingers closed around the fabric of Inkiri's shirt, and with my other hand, I reached for the necklace half hidden by my scarf.

"That's really kind, but Fellisse is my doctor. Or healer. And I don't need any servants. My mate takes really good care of me, you know."

Zeddira's look remained level. Before the interpreter could talk, Kinnek joined us. He looked as if he were just out for a stroll, but I didn't fail to notice he was wearing bagu

clothes now rather than his normal shorts, and he had shoes on for a change.

I had no idea what he was saying, because he spoke too fast for me to follow, but he was doing so with an attitude that matched Zeddira's, at least as far as I could tell.

Zeddira nodded and smiled right back at Kinnek. If I hadn't been so much smaller — if my weirdo husband hadn't been this tall hunk — I would've whispered in his ear to tell me what was going on.

At some unspoken agreement — well, unspoken in English — we all turned and headed back to the house, and Kinnek fell in step next to Zeddira.

I ended up walking between Fellisse and Inkiri. The translator caught up and looked at me from Fellisse's other side. That bagu had lighter skin, a lot like Inkiri and Zeddira and hair somewhere between teal and blue with horns so inky, they almost looked black.

“Might I translate for you, sir?”

Both Inkiri and Fellisse clicked low in their throats. I was wondering whether that was self-soothing more than to comfort me. This definitely wasn't the easy camaraderie they'd had with Hove.

“Uhm,” I said, because I did desperately want to know what was going on, but then again, this all felt like it was easy to offend someone, and no one knew better how capable I was of inadvertently doing that than I myself.

“He's fine,” Vergis said and pushed between Fellisse

and me. “Aren’t you, Princess?” He was basically my prompter, and I was as relieved as I would have been if this were some Oscar Wilde, and I was cast as Ernest.

“Right. Sure. I’m fine.”

You don’t happen to translate, do you? I asked the presence, because magically being able to understand everyone would definitely be a bonus.

It rustled around in my mind, amused. *You want me to fix your mate’s language in your brain so you do not have to learn the subtleties of communicating in it and understanding all the subtleties in turn?*

Yeah?

More rustling. *That is not what magic does. Nothing in magic is free, and I cannot gift you the experience it takes to speak and listen.*

That seemed unfair. Where was a universal translator when you needed one?

I wasn’t involved in the conversation anymore, though. Kinnek and Zeddira were chatting still when we got back to the house, and once we were there, Fellisse clicked at me and said, slowly and in Lugarra, what I actually understood on account of the fact it had the word “sun hat” in there, and also, I’d learned that “to need something” was “lak.”

The guys got me inside through the front door, which we hardly ever used even if Nokim and Vergis had freshly painted it not too long ago. Once we got inside, Inkiri took hold of me and clicked happily.

“You did so well, sadir,” he said.

“Uhm, thanks, I think. Not that I did anything.”

Vergis snorted and led the way past the stairs and to the kitchen. “It’s noteworthy to see you not mess up a situation, Princess. Maybe we should declare it a holiday or something.”

Lissir and Nokim were in the kitchen. Nokim had been cooking, making garden vegetable stew, and he took my tomato basket from me to add them to his cooking. Lissir had been lounging on the couch in the living room last I’d seen him, reading something called *Moonlight Cherries*. He’d briefly looked up and asked me to explain what a giraffe was, and when I’d gotten to how they had horns, he’d cooed and smiled happily and reburied his nose in the text. Now they both looked at us expectantly.

In a very neutral tone, Lissir said, “How exciting to see Zeddira here.”

“He brought a lot of the best makers along,” Nokim said.

“Hey, is the cola ash dude in the bunker going to be a problem?” I asked. Then looked around. “Who is watching him anyway?”

I poked the presence to check if bunker ash person was still here, living his best life underground.

Yes, and sleeping, it told me.

“Dad has the place wired up like a spy’s wet dream,” Vergis said and stole some of the yellow carrot coins Nokim had prepped, ignoring the orange and red ones. “Our guest

isn't going to be a problem.”

Inkiri absentmindedly hugged me to his chest and stroked my back.

“Technically, Zeddira should be told.”

Vergis went from stealing carrots to nibbling on celery and spring squash. “All the good little Raikengana and their good little rules.”

“It's not like he needs to be told right this second. Or like he can do anything about who Kinnek chooses to keep in his bunker.” Lissir crossed his arms and smiled at Vergis sweetly. “And I think you would have made a wonderful Raikenga. In fact, I think I should go outside and make introductions.”

Nokim cast a longing look in Vergis's direction even as Vergis frowned.

“You mean, you are going to use me to find out what exactly they want here. It's pretty obvious, though.”

Inkiri growl-purred. “Vergis, do not.”

I was flat against Inkiri's chest, but I craned my neck up at him. “What? Are you not telling me stuff? I always miss things. What's going on?”

When no one said a thing, I could at least be certain that they were not telling me stuff.

Inkiri sighed. “Sweet thing, how about we lie down for a little while?”

Vergis groaned. “Imma go find my earplugs.”

Lissir tilted his head. “No, you are going outside with me, and you are going to attempt smiling. And no playing with your knife in front of all the nice Raikengana. Fellisse can help Nokim with the food. I’m assuming Kinnek will not kick them out without inviting them to eat.”

“Sadly, you are assuming correctly,” Vergis said, but even as Lissir was about to drag him outside, Inkiri was almost at the stairs with me.

I heard Fellisse chuckle and clap Nokim on the back. “Don’t forget to open a window, Inki. Rory needs fresh air.”

We got up the stairs and to our room before it dawned on me.

“Wait,” I said, but weirdo spouse was already cracking a window. “You didn’t just drag me up here so you could... so we could —”

Inkiri wrapped his arms around me and explored, fingers going down to my butt. Yeah, he totally had, and he totally would. My brain’s control unit immediately went about diverting blood flow to my nether regions and turning on the sexual gratification auto drive, because that’s just how much of a pillow queen I was. And Inkiri very readily did all the work.

“We soaked, earlier, with Kinnek and Charles,” Inkiri said and unfastened my brooch. It left the thin material of my scarf slithering around my sensitive skin and over the thin chain of my necklace when Inkiri slowly pulled down one end of the scarf while his tongue distracted me.

“I know we soaked.” I dipped my head back to give him better access, and his low clicks made me melt. “Why’s that a problem?”

He growled and pulled back so he could look me in the eyes. “You smell of soap and shampoo. My scent barely lingers on you.”

“But you lick and kiss my throat all the time,” I said.

“Yes, but I want my brother to know this is beyond anything casual or practical for you. I want him to know we are properly mated, that our mate call is true and strong like the stuff of legends.”

He picked me up, and because my weirdo spouse had conditioned my body to react to his touch, I wrapped my legs around him. I glanced at the open window in our room across from the double bed that was barely big enough for Inkiri and his horns. I didn’t think I could make a run for it and close the window before I ended up on my back on the bed.

As if Inkiri had heard my thoughts, he closed the distance to the bed frame and dropped me. Well, he carefully lowered me, supporting my neck with a firm palm and making sure the back of my head came to rest on a pillow. He was good at ravishing someone softly like that.

Inkiri stood over me, slit eyes not wavering as he undressed. He had a casual way of doing that. A striptease wasn’t exactly his thing, though he took his time with undressing.

Maybe it was that he was not at all self-conscious

about being naked. That, and of course, Inkiri had a beautiful body, muscles toned and skin smooth. Like he often did, he remained where he was to let me feast my eyes on the savory hunk he was while he undid his braids and combed his hair through with his fingers, pushing it back behind his pointy ears.

“Do you want to be on your back while you take my cock, sweet thing?” he asked when he was all done. His flushed cock shimmered with lubrication and strained toward me.

I nodded like I always did when he asked me this. To be fair, I didn't really care, so long as he was in charge and made it good, and Inkiri always made it good.

He tilted his head this way and that. “I see. What if I put you on your belly instead? You like that too, yes?”

I felt heat rise up my cheeks, not from embarrassment, but from arousal.

“If you want to spin me around and push me into the pillows, you'll have to do it yourself. I'm not doing it for you.” I was very much overacting, but Inkiri didn't care. He'd never once made fun of me for the acting. We'd sat up awake some nights, and I'd recited plays to him I'd memorized over the years, doing all the characters in different voices, and he'd listened, completely engrossed and — to all appearances — sucked in by my superior performance.

He crooked up his lip in a grin. “I'm stronger than you, my mate. You forget how easily I can control you and make you take my barb however I like.”

This really was the pinnacle of all the roleplaying we'd gotten to, and I loved it, because hearing Inkiri say this made me have trouble breathing.

“But I will have you naked first so I can examine every crack of your soft body.”

I sucked in a desperate breath and nodded, and Inkiri bent over me. I was wearing one of Kinnek's old and modified T-shirts with decorative buttons sewn on along where an opening had been added so it could be worn by horned people. It was sort of baggy on me but would have been almost skimpy on Kinnek. It was pink and white, with a cherry and half-moon pattern repeating all over it, and I loved that shirt.

Inkiri undid the buttons and peeled the shirt open so he could run his fingers over my chest. His touch was so soft, it tickled just enough to make me shiver and squirm, but today, I clearly wasn't squirming enough, and he squeezed my nipples with both hands, rolling them between his fingers.

I whimpered, but he didn't let up, not until I bucked up against him and nearly screamed with the sharpness of the sensation, the intensity of it. My cock was hard and leaking in my pants.

“Good,” Inkiri said. “Just from the smallest of touches, you moan for me.”

I blinked my eyes clear and stared up at him, and he... did it again. This time, I screamed.

My blood was rushing in my ears when he finally let up, but only so he could get me out of my pants. He licked

over my lower belly, sucking the precum off my skin, and I might have said his name and grabbed hold of one of his horns. I let go when he licked his way to my balls. Inkiri could have given me more of the divine sensation of his rough tongue on me, but he spun me around and onto my belly.

Instead of moving ahead at full throttle, he lowered himself on top of me, making himself the best blue blanket I had ever had.

“Sadir, are you happy?” he whispered into my ear.

I turned my head, so we could look at one another better. “Yeah. You know I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He palmed my side. “I don’t know. I think maybe it is too easy. Making you happy. You are a human after all, and there must be human things you want. Human things I should tell you, human ways of touching you or holding you. Do I kiss you enough, my sweet Rory?”

My skin grew hotter, and my heart beat louder, almost like Inkiri was meant to hear and recognize it beat for him.

“You do so much,” I said. I felt the sting of tears threatening, but I knew he’d just hold me tight if I started happy crying now. “I... I like that you are different. You are the right kind of different, at least for me, and no one has ever treated me like you do. Like I’m special.”

He bowed his head to lick the junction of my neck and shoulder. “Then they misjudged you. I swear to you, sadir, I will never make that mistake. I will never forget how special you are.”

“Ink —”

“Let me make you feel good now.”

“No, wait.” He let up immediately and gave me room to turn back around on my back so that I could look him in the face. I reached up to run my hands along his horns, and his eyes fluttered in pleasure, but remained firmly focused on my face. “You’re special too. I... I was scared, that’s why I didn’t want to say anything. And maybe I was hoping to get rid of it. Get rid of the magic.” His eyes cleared, and I knew he was about to tell me that it was part of me and that I shouldn’t discard it. “No, let me finish. That presence told me. When we were at Donna’s? That now that our worlds are bound, the magics of the two places must be bound as well, and that it chose you to do that. With me. And it said that you are worthy, because a chosen one must be worthy.” I ran my hands along his horns, and watched him as he took that in.

“You... Sadir, you are still — were you scared of the magic, sweet thing, or of something else?”

I couldn’t keep looking at him, but he deserved the truth, not least because I had sworn to myself that I wouldn’t resort to lying in this marriage. “Maybe I already knew you were worthy, but maybe I wasn’t sure if I was?”

He grunted and tilted his head. “That is why you asked about whether I would have still loved you without the mate call. Did you really think I wouldn’t have?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. You’re this blue prince from another world, and I’m just a theater major without any acting skill or any love life to speak of, at least before I met you.

You're a dream, and sometimes, I'm scared I'll wake up back in my dorm room, and none of it will have happened." The guilt hit me as soon as I'd said the words. "I mean, I would take that. Sorry. But all the people. If it meant all the people could be alive again. I'd obviously take the dream of you. Forever."

"Rory." His eyes went wide and dark, and it was like he was seeing only me. He dipped his head and pressed his lips to my mouth. The kiss was gentle, careful, comforting. I gave myself over completely, but Inkiri left it there. It didn't change that my body was still very ready for more than this, and so was his.

"We must tell Kinnek and Vergis this, about our worlds binding. Not right now. Tell me what you want right now, and I'll give it to you, whatever it is."

I traced his jawline with the fingers of my right hand and smiled up at him. "Can I... you always give me what I want, you know. I'd like to do what you want today. You want me to turn back around?"

He grinned at me, and there was a tiny, mischievous flicker in his eyes. "What I want, sadir? Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Anything."

That flicker definitely grew. "Good. In that case, yes, I want you on your belly, on your knees, and I want you to scream without holding back."

I glanced to the window.

"Yes, sweet thing. I want them to hear you. I want

them to know what being with me does to you.”

I'd been really proud of the fact that taking my clothes off in front of everyone in that large downstairs bath had almost become normal. Almost. The urge to cup my dick was still there, but I'd become better at controlling it. This was something else, but I had promised him.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “All right. If you can make me scream, that is.”

He full-on grinned at me. “Sadir, I know your body well by now. Turn around, and I will prove that.”

He was my mate, and about to ravish me, so I obeyed. I tried my eye batting before I turned around, and it got me a low, growly purr.

When I was lying flat, he brushed my hair off my neck and licked that spot, then kissed it the human way. “You look so good like this. Very enticing. But,” he pulled the pillow out from under my head so I was flat on the mattress, then pulled me up by the hips so my ass was in the air, “this is even better.”

He nudged me to spread my legs, and I was wondering how he thought he could get me to scream with my head buried in the sheets like this. Not that I was about to argue with Inkiri. When I felt him explore between my butt cheeks with slicked fingers, criticizing his approach to things was the last thing on my mind.

Inkiri was a bagu of his word, and he so ended up having the last word by the time he was done stretching me. At

first, he'd just gotten me to whimpering and clutching the sheets, but dang it, he knew where my happy spot was, and he knew how to take advantage of that. When I'd tossed my head back to scream, I'd heard him chuckling behind me. Somehow, that had not been enough to get my mate to finally move on to the next logical step of this bedroom encounter, oh no.

Inkiri had enjoyed exploring my balls over the past few weeks. I'd pretty much assumed it was because he had none of his own to have played with growing up, and now he was catching up. As it turned out, I'd married a fudging master of pleasure play, and what he was doing do to my balls and taint after he'd already stretched me should have been illegal, and maybe was in some places on the planet.

"Please... mmmnnn... no more. Please, I can't — your tongue —" I yowled when he tugged on my straining cock. My thighs were trembling, and I was slick with sweat all over.

"Yes, sadir, that's right. Enjoy it," Inkiri said. He licked up my taint one last time. "You are ready now, I think."

I let out a shuddering breath when he took a firm hold of my hips with one hand while he lined up with the other. I bore down when his slick head pressed inside of me, but it was like my body automatically opened up for him. He slipped right in, and waves of heat washed over me when his fullness settled inside of me.

Like always, he made it slow so he could share his lubrication with me. I moaned. I couldn't control that anymore. I couldn't control anything anymore. Then he rocked

back slowly, slammed our hips together. And repeated it.

“Yes, *yes*,” Inkiri said, breath rumbling in his chest.

What followed after was frenzied fucking, pardon the French. It was so good. I came first, and hard. I probably did some screaming, and Inkiri probably got his wish about the bagua outside hearing it, but I was a trembling, sweaty mess, and had just made the sheets beneath me even messier, and I did not care.

He came a few moments later. I loved the feeling of that, his heat flooding into me, and then, while we were both still panting, his barb setting in.

Normally, we collapsed on the bed, but this time, Inkiri lifted my chest up and sat back, taking me with him so that I ended in his lap, my legs still splayed and draped over his knees, my back resting against his chest.

That’s how he held me when his barb took hold of me, and as always, his arms pinned me in place firmly so I didn’t shift and hurt myself.

“Sadir, do you still doubt I can make you scream during pleasure play?” he said, sounding very pleased with his accomplishment.

I snorted. “Right. Guess you win.”

“And what did I just win?”

I placed my hand on top of his. “A kiss. And my undying love.”

Inkiri chuckled. “I will take the kiss, but didn’t I

already have your undying love?”

“Pfft, you had it, but now you won it fair and square. Also, I’m not sure I will be able to ever look your brother in the eye after this, but that’s on you.”

Inkiri clicked. “That would be a bonus, sweet thing, believe me.” He rocked back and forth a little. “You said you wanted to eventually live back on Aër, and I’d been meaning to talk to you about what that might entail.”

I tensed with excitement at hearing about that, and Inkiri clicked and held me tighter.

“Sorry. Are we going to leave with your brother? I mean, that makes sense, doesn’t it? The guys in black he brought along are protectors. Fighters, right?”

He sighed. “Yes, that’s right. I’m not sure how wise Kinnek will think leaving is, but it is something we can discuss. It wasn’t the thing I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh. Okay.” I tried not to sound disappointed. I liked being here after all, but I was still looking forward to that quiet life of trophy mate back on Aër.

“You need to understand Zeddira is not here without an agenda, as humans like to say. Back in Esaka, you did magic that very few bagua would have been able to do. The Raikengana saw, and so did the Koa Esher, who ran. Zeddira is hangu, and very good at collecting influence and power, both in House Livim and in the Raiken. The knowledge you have, did it show you he came to Esaka after the fight?”

I shook my head. “No. Did he see me drooling on a

pillow or something?”

Inkiri clicked. “You were not drooling on any pillows, sadir, and no. I would not have let him go to you then. But he came to suggest how well House Livim would take care of you and our sentenmen. Or if we chose to stay in the Raiken, how well you’d be cared for there.”

“Okay? You sound like I should be putting together something here, but I’m not.”

Inkiri sighed. “Undoubtedly, you would be taken care of very well in either place. But there are politics involved with such a choice, and if there is a powerful mage who takes advantage of status in a House or in the Raiken, they would be expected to do magic as is needed.”

I jerked again, only to be reeled in closer by Inkiri all over again. “I don’t — wait. You had me signed up, though? When we got married? Does that mean —”

He clicked. “No. What I did was make your status clear to all who would doubt it. It has nothing to do with what Zeddira is wishing for. You see, mates get to live with a Raikenga, that is not a question. A part of the Raikenga’s pay is used for housing and such, a lot like taxes here on Earth. And should anything happen to me, the Raiken would make sure you get to keep your housing rights and have access to all my funds, and you would receive a regular sum if I died in service, all of which you deserve. That assumes you take up no office or other position in the Raiken.

“If you did — which is what Zeddira hopes you will do — you would be holding office yourself. And you would be

expected to perform that office, perform your magic. Zeddira likes the idea because you are clearly powerful, but also no doubt because you are related to him through the mate call.”

“Didn’t you say there were tests? Back at the wedding?”

Inkiri grunted. “For power such as yours, there would be an exception, or minimal testing to see you can perform some basic magic, know to warn protectors with you not to get too close to you when you are doing magic. That sort of thing. But also, Zeddira would want to know how much more magic you can perform. He’d want to know the breadth and depth of your skill after all.”

I wiggled a little, but Inkiri kept me still. I’d never considered I’d be able to make money with magic, but that’s what it sounded like. I’d never thought about money to begin with.

And that really was an inconsiderate thing of me. I really was a gold-digger after all. Vergis had called it, and he’d been right.

“Well, I mean, I’ll do my share,” I said. I didn’t like the thought of having to figure out what the depth and breadth of my magic was. I’d just really imagined we’d go live somewhere, and perhaps I could have done something like waiting tables. After all, the dream of becoming an actor prepared you for that career path like nothing else.

“Your share? I’m not sure exactly what you mean. Do you want to position yourself in the Raiken? I will support you if that is the case, but, sweet thing, I don’t think you will be

happy, and while the choice is yours, I'd rather you didn't."

"Mmh," I said. "I mean, like, the past two years have made life before seem almost surreal, but I know that things cost money. And I'm willing to do my share. Earning said money. Especially if we go live on Aër where life is still normal."

Inkiri clicked. "Sweet thing, this is not at all what you should be taking away from this conversation. It's not even something that you need to be worried about. Our sentenmen... We have been very well paid since we've worked in the border region since we graduated, and on top of that, my fathers pay all their children in the Raiken an allowance. Or a stipend? I'm not sure what the best word is. Money isn't something that you should be concerned about, because if it were, it would be the House that would offer you the most of that.

"No, what my brother wishes of you is power, and what you would gain from it is influence, but such things, like magic itself, live in a delicate balance, and they require constant maintenance. Again, if you want that, I will support you, but from all you've told me, from how much more relaxed you are here at Kinnek's house, it would not be what brings you happiness."

I considered that for a long time, so long I felt Inkiri's barb relax and slide free of my body with that delicious spike of arousal that always came with it. Inkiri cleaned me up with one of a set of several small hand towels we kept in our room specifically for that purpose.

“And the House? That’s not something you want me to do either?” I asked when he’d settled back down with me, this time against the headboard of the bed.

Inkiri clicked at me and stroked my cooling skin. “What I want doesn’t matter all that much, sadir,” he said after a while. “I have thought about it, ever since Zeddira first mentioned it.”

“So you’ve been doing a pro and con list already? Why don’t you share?” I said. I wasn’t sure whether I should be annoyed Inkiri hadn’t told me about any of this, but to be honest, I loved that my greatest worry over the past few weeks had been the cola ash dude in the bunker. It was a good, solid worry with clear solutions ranging from messy to less messy, and in a wicked way, there was something neat about the clarity of that. But politics and influence? I was out of my depth all over again.

“I have no list like that. It’s a very human idea to decide with a list, as if you could measure the decision in that way.”

“Hey!” I turned to him and kissed his warm chest. “Humans are very advanced when it comes to making decisions, so don’t be like that. I think my parents decided to get divorced after making a pro and con list.”

“Mmh.”

He looked down at me, one of his inky eyebrows raised.

“Okay, so maybe we could make better decisions.” I

settled back against him. “Seriously, though, what have you been thinking?”

“That you would like House Livim. You’d be treasured, cosseted. And according to Zeddira, the sentenmen would be welcome as well. They would want you to perform magic to serve the greater good of the House, but they certainly wouldn’t endanger your well-being. Hmm. They might try more aggressively to set you up with a hangu than Zeddira is currently attempting.”

“Huh?”

Inkiri tilted his head. “Isn’t it obvious? I missed his intent the first time around, but then you were not well, and I was distracted. He is clearly trying to catch your eye, and the interpreter he brought along is dressed in finery that isn’t suitable for a mission to Earth. For any mission that might entail battling monsters. Likely, he is someone very trusted by Zeddira and there to present you with yet another option.”

I gaped. “Your own brother... is trying to seduce me? Or set me up with the interpreter? What for?” The information processing team in my brain submitted another question. “Was that why you needed me to scream so they all could hear it?”

And my mate clicked, a pleased and very satisfied expression on his beautiful face.

“I always like it when you scream. And they are trying to seduce you for influence, of course. And because it is well understood that a hangu and hangu pairing would mean your young have magic as well.”

Processing that took a lot of effort, especially given that my brain was still saturated with the really good happy cocktail of post-orgasmic joy.

“But —” I pointed to me. “I’m, like, another species. And also? What did we discuss about the uterus, the one I do not have, at all?”

“There are stories about humans and bagua having children. There are stories about humans and fae or elves having children together. Kinnek would be the better person to ask, but as far as I know, there have been no occurrences like that in recent memory, which, to me, suggests that magic would make it more likely. Zeddira will have come to the same conclusion. And in his reasoning, it is worth the effort for the influence alone, you can be quite certain of that.”

“But — wow. You do remember how we talked about not doing the polycule thing your people are so fond of?” I wasn’t even going to touch the procreation talk, because I just couldn’t handle that.

“I do, but Zeddira doesn’t know that.”

“To that I would like to add: ew. I mean, you and he are brothers. He gets that, right? It’s basically like the cola asshats.”

That seemed to trip Inkiri up, judging by the head tilts I was getting. “Sadir, Zeddira would not suggest I go to bed with him, obviously. I may have opinions about my brother, but he is not depraved like that or in fact depraved in any way. He and I may not agree on some points, but I don’t want you to get the wrong impression of him.”

“Yeah, but, seriously. Well, okay. I guess it’s not so weird to date first one brother and then the other — although I’m not considering that, just to be clear. I’m just mentally working through this. Wow. Won’t ever date him, promise.”

“You said. I remember.”

“And I meant it!”

Which confused him, apparently.

“You mentioned being worried about cheating. Are you trying to assure me that you won’t be doing that?”

“Well, kind of?”

He bent forward to lick my throat. “Thank you, although it’s not needed. You are my light in darkness. I trust you, always.”

We were not done talking, but he made me feel so warm and safe.

And also, someone knocked on the door, and because life sucked sometimes, Kinnek didn’t wait for us to tell him to stay outside. He just came in.

“It sounded like you were done,” he said and casually walked to the window while my face turned cabbage red. “You are not going for another round, are you?” Kinnek closed the window silently and plopped down on the side of the bed. Everything was out and on display. With any luck, Inkiri’s knee was hiding the goods, my goods, but I wasn’t sure.

“It might be wise for me to go to Zeddira and see if he wishes to talk,” weirdo husband said, unbothered. So

unbothered.

I cleared my throat. Kinnek rolled his eyes but fished my shirt from the ground and handed it to me. I mumbled my thanks and scrambled into it.

“True, your brother would like your company,” Kinnek said. “By the way, I told him about our guest in the bunker.”

“You what now?” I said, buttoning up.

Kinnek shrugged. “Well, I didn’t want to put your mate and my son’s sentenmen in an uncomfortable position with the second high counselor of the Raiken. I just wanted to fill you in on what the cola asshole in the bunker said, because he’s been readily telling us everything.”

Kinnek looked at me. I didn’t like that look. The cola asshat had probably talked about me, and not the harmless gossipy kind of talk.

“Maybe he doesn’t need to know, Kinnek,” Inkiri said.

And really, if weirdo husband said that, he was probably right, so I nodded.

“I don’t need to know,” I said.

Kinnek looked amused. “You two really are quite a match. I’ll be direct.”

“Do you have to?” I asked.

“No, but I want to. The cola asshole in the bunker said that the other cola assholes want you a lot, but so do the humans. The cola assholes thought about stabbing the humans in the back, but then they came to a solution that would benefit

the both of them.” The way Kinnek said that made me think that I really, really didn’t need to know more. He reached out to take my hand, which was weird, considering I was still sitting between Inkiri’s legs and leaning against him, but okay, just another step toward bridging the cultural divide.

I could see Kinnek take a breath before he said, “The humans want to cement the joining of Earth and the place the monsters come from, and according to them, it needs to be done by blood, specifically yours, and their idea from the get-go was to sacrifice you to one of the monsters. Let it eat you. After some conversation and negotiation with the Koa Esher, they are now pretty certain that a pair of legs will do just as well, and that the Koa Esher can have the rest of you.”

The blood drained from my face. I had to go over what Kinnek had said. Inkiri clicked and clicked and rubbed my skin, now cold rather than cool. I curled my legs in under me. The presence had said something like that, hadn’t it, about how they would just love splitting me in two. That hadn’t been hyperbole.

The realization that I was having something like a panic attack was distant. The overwhelming fear was immediate.

I’m here, your knights are near, and you need not be afraid.

The presence stepped into my mind with the soft force of sunlight shining through a window.

Your mate is with you as well. Those things the humans want... they must not happen.

The presence did something that didn't exactly switch off whatever thing had been happening to me, but it made it ebb away faster.

“Shit,” I said. “Shit.”

“Pretty much that,” Kinnek said.

“Are you well?” Inkiri asked. He was feeling me over. He was more tense than he'd been a moment ago.

“I wouldn't say that, just —” I gestured to my head. “Magic.”

Inkiri kissed my temple the human way.

“W-what now?” I asked.

Kinnek stood. “Maybe you put on pants as well and come down to dinner.”

“Or you could stay in bed, sadir, if you prefer,” Inkiri said. “I will bring you up some food, and you can rest.”

I shook my head. “No. Not that. What happens now with the... the guy. In the bunker. And the other guys outside.”

Kinnek looked over his shoulder. “The second high counselor has not yet been told what I told you just now, but I will tell him soon. He'll want to leave extra protectors here, I'm sure, and if you do in fact decide to settle back on Aër, it'll be good for them to know to be on guard.”

Because the Koa Esher might not give up when it came to getting me. I sat up straighter. Would the Koa Esher help the humans come to Aër, with guns and an intent to murder anyone who tried protecting me? “Can humans get to Aër?

The mages? The human ones who did this? Who stitched the veils together?”

“Some already have,” Inkiri said. “The veils are no longer as impermeable, and just as we bagua can walk through the fusing points from Aër, so can humans from Earth.”

That changed everything. Esaka had been terrible for several reasons. They had wanted to take me and hurt my guys, they had succeeded in hurting Nokim, because Nokim simply got into the way of bullets far too often than was right.

But more than that, Esaka was people’s home. There were kids there. Sonyo came to mind, the little pupil at the Raiken who’d been so interested in strange human me and had gotten me a good half dozen beautiful scarves. And if either Koa Esher or human mages — or worse, both — came after me again, they might hurt others. Who had nothing to do with any of this.

I pushed myself up from Inkiri’s chest and kneeled on the bed instead, hands folded in my lap. No matter what I did, where I went, I might not be able to escape. I had a feeling that the fear that had ridden me to run and never spend too long in one place had probably saved me. And maybe... maybe all the monsters had been so interested in me because they had sensed something about me, some need to... eat me. So they would always have a foothold on Earth.

The presence, still there, gave a subtle nod.

Well, darn it all.

My head was reeling. I couldn’t put other people in

danger, I just couldn't. Not after I'd had at least some part in bringing the Apocalypse about. But I couldn't let the monsters eat me and allow them to become a permanent fixture here on Earth either, and the only way to achieve that was if I wasn't on Earth anymore. The thought, bleak and terrifying, was the only thing that made sense. I remembered Vergis and the pigeons. He'd probably help me out, if I explained it.

The presence curled and coiled through my consciousness, unsettled, but I pushed it out with some effort, something I hadn't realized until that moment I could do.

"Don't be an idiot," Kinnek said. He was looking at me, his arms folded in front of his chest.

"Huh?"

"I know the look. Don't be an idiot who can't think of another solution but sacrificing himself. They didn't manage to feed you to the monsters the day they merged the veils. The day your mate's mate call snapped into place. Doesn't that tell you something, snapdragon?"

I blinked. Then my eyes went wide. "Aër and Earth are bound, but the monster place and Earth aren't. For that place, it's like a ko circle you haven't fed enough sacrificial power, it sort of works, but not really."

Kinnek smiled. "Look at the human, Inkiri. An expert in magic all of a sudden."

Inkiri clicked. "He is a survivor, and one has to be smart to survive what he survived."

"We can get the veils to the monster world closed,

can't we?" I asked.

"I think so, yes," Kinnek said.

"You didn't tell me that was an option!" I pointed an index finger at Kinnek. "Nor did you." I pointed another at my husband, who was still sitting there, naked and at ease.

"Magic is Kinnek's field of expertise, and he asked me not to," Inkiri said.

"You asked him not to?"

"Well, snapdragon, are you going to walk into danger and help close the veil to where the monsters come from?"

My jaw dropped. "Yes, of course!"

Kinnek grinned and nodded. "See? Took me a while to get you to where you'd say that to my face, sugarplum, but doesn't it feel so very right to want to go out and fight the monsters and the cola assholes and the humans they are in league with?"

I paled. "Well, if you put it like that —"

The door opened again. Vergis didn't cross the threshold, but he glared. Was it his happy glare? I decided to go with it was his happy glare. "He forgot to say that we'll all come along, because clearly, everyone in this house has turned philanthropist all of a sudden, and we want to keep humans safe. Endangered species that they are, would be such a loss, yada yada. So you two fucking again? Because I'm getting my earplugs if you're fucking again, no matter what anyone thinks."

Kinneck clicked his tongue. “Muffin, just because me and your daddy are very quiet in the bedroom doesn’t mean everyone has to be.”

Vergis’s eyes widened. “You aren’t — you know, never mind. I don’t want to talk about how noisy everyone in this house is, because it’s not a contest. Bye.”

The door fell shut again. I couldn’t hear Vergis, but I imagined he was stomping down the hallway to the stairs.

“Well, then,” Kinneck said. “You two have another go —”

“No, we are good,” I said.

Kinneck shrugged. “If you say so. I’ll continue showing Zeddira around and telling him about everything the twisted little mage in the bunker told us.” He opened the door but looked back at me. “I’m so very proud of you, snapdragon. You’ve become a Loathly Lady to be reckoned with.”

He giggled at the face I was making when he called me that but left us alone again. I made a mental note to flick the lock closed the next time around me and weirdo husband — who’d been comfortably lounging, not worried about hiding any part of his goods — were doing anything in the bedroom again.

“We could get the beasts to go away,” I said to Inkiri.

He nodded. “We could keep them from coming. Those who remain would have to be dispatched, but there would not be any new ones after them.” His face hardened, and I knew what he was going to say.

“You’ll keep me safe, right?” I gave him my best puppy eyes. I hoped he’d like that.

“Of course, sweet thing. We all will.”

I wanted to tell him that I was going to keep him safe too. I wasn’t a fan of the magic I could do, and having the presence in my head wasn’t my ideal state of being. But if it meant I could make sure none of my guys died protecting me, I was okay with that.

I felt the intensity in Inkiri’s gaze, and when I looked back at him, I could see it too. He really, really liked the idea of me asking him to protect and care for me.

“Uhm...”

“It would be a shame if Vergis got his earplugs for nothing, wouldn’t it, sweet thing?”

Well, what was a mate to do? I reached for the hastily fastened buttons of my shirt and flicked them back open. “Sure would.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

We left our room for dinner. I wasn't sore exactly, but even with my supreme pillow queen energy, there was no way I could take Inkiri's barb twice in less than an hour and not feel it. It was pleasure pain, as I assured him when I put on my pants after he'd suggested we could go soak after dinner.

"I will go and see if Nokim needs my help in the kitchen before I find Zeddira," Inkiri said when we'd made it down the stairs. "You relax."

"Okay, I can do that," I said and wandered off to the living room.

The room was spacious and had low couches, which I knew my guys liked, because it was such an Aër thing. In a corner next to an indoor lemon tree, there was a pile of floor cushions, which soaked up the sunshine's warmth since the room was south facing. That also meant Kinnek's paintings could really let their colors shine. He'd painted humans as if he'd learned to look past the differences with the tip of his paint brushes, but there were landscapes and abstract, playful images as well.

Vergis sat on the couch. Three of the bagu guests were literally sitting at his feet on the floor cushions my guys preferred to the couches sometimes, two of the bagua in black, one in taupe. The interpreter was by the wall filled with bookshelves and going through a volume, fingers turning the pages reverently. He and Vergis both looked up at me, and I

froze, like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Hi,” I said.

“You need my help?” Vergis grumbled.

“Uhm, no, Ink just told me to park myself on the couch.”

Vergis frowned and glared while the interpreter tilted his head. “You mean, you are going to sit?” He closed the book. Just like Fellisse or Nokim when I’d first met them, his accent was far more pronounced, but I liked how it made the English sound smoother and rounder in places. “Might I perhaps join you, sir?”

I shrugged and headed over to one of the three couches, not the one Vergis was sitting on, because he radiated mild murderous intent, and I wasn’t as daring as the three bagua at his feet.

“Sure, but you don’t have to call me ‘sir.’ That’s weird. Just call me Rory,” I said. “What’s your name?”

The interpreter beamed. He was still clutching the book as he sat some good two arms’ lengths away from me.

“I’m Luëris,” he said. “Of House Livim, originally.”

I glanced over to Vergis and his newfound entourage. The three bagua clicked softly. Vergis ignored them. *Your fault*, he mouthed at me.

“Cool,” I said to Luëris.

He tilted his head. “Are you asking about House Livim? I can assure you, the grounds are quite comfortable,

even in the cold season, but it is very nice at this time of year, although I don't mind admitting that I prefer it during the second planting season. You should come and visit, Rory." He inched a bit closer. "I would be happy to show you around myself. It really is a beautiful place, the Asshar Mountains almost as close as Volkon Lake."

I fumbled with my friendship bracelet absentmindedly. The place did sound interesting, and I was kind of curious to meet Inkiri's dads, the ones he exchanged cordial letters with. Then again, I wasn't sure whether Luëris would think I accepted the invite if I said it sounded interesting, and then I didn't know if that would put Inkiri in an awkward position.

Oh, those bygone days of youth when I could just talk to people without having to worry about the meaning between the lines.

"I'll have to talk with Inkiri about that," I said.

Luëris tilted his head this way and that. "Does your mate desire to have a say in where you go, Rory?"

Something told me I was potentially getting Inkiri in trouble.

"What he means is, he likes his mate to talk with our sentenmen first," Vergis said. "Some humans have a funny little habit of doing that before accepting such kind invitations as you extend, Luëris."

Well, darn it, but who'd have thought that Vergis could be that smooth.

Luëris smiled and nodded. "Of course. I apologize. I

know my language skills are lacking, but it seems my knowledge of human customs and habits is even worse, and I need to improve. Please be patient with me, Rory.”

“Sure. No worries,” I said, which seemed to settle that.

Before Luëris could open his mouth again to say whatever else he wanted to say, Nokim came in and said in Lugarra that “tokka” was “sen,” or that dinner was ready. His eyes lingered on Vergis and his entourage.

Normally, dinner happened around the large kitchen table, which had taken me a while to get used to, because it could get to be a pleasantly loud affair. Now, because there were a good twenty people with Zeddira, we were outside in the backyard, a stone’s throw away from the gazebo with the ko circle we’d used to get here that first time. Instead of garden chairs or tables, which I knew existed because Vergis had cursed them to the nth circle of hell when he’d cleaned out the garage, there were lots and lots of picnic blankets and floor pillows, all of which would make this more comfortable and familiar for the bagua.

The evening light was waning. Someone had switched on the fairy lights that crisscrossed the garden to the gazebo and from there to the large oak nearby.

“This is very beautiful,” Luëris said. He’d caught up with me. The gaggle of bagua Vergis had attracted were chatting to him, and he responded in monosyllables or with a grunt here and there, which did not deter them as far as I could tell.

Nokim was trailing behind but turned back on his heel

when Charles said something about a breadbasket. I spotted Inkiri and Kinnek on one picnic blanket along with Zeddira, who looked damn near regal, the way he was sitting there and talking with them and somehow looking down on them even if Inkiri was taller.

“Come, I will translate for you,” Luëris said, which was how I ended up sitting between him and Inkiri, Zeddira on Luëris’s other side.

Inkiri turned his full attention on me so he could greet me by pushing my scarf aside and licking my throat. It was just a brief smack for him, because normally, he liked to linger.

“Guess what, snapdragon. Your bagu-in-law has decided it would be irresponsible not to accompany us to the Stone for our attempt to close up the veils to the monster place.” Kinnek looked much happier about that than he should. Luëris jumped into translating for Zeddira.

“Oh, that’s very kind,” I said to Zeddira, who looked at me steadily with his yellow eyes.

“The second high counselor says it hardly needs mentioning. He thinks of you fondly already, in the way family would,” Luëris said.

Inkiri’s hand had ventured under my shirt and up my back. I had the vague sense that something annoyed him. Maybe he just really didn’t get along with Zeddira.

“I really do appreciate that. That he’s risking himself and his people.”

I saw Kinnek smile out of the corner of my eyes, and there was a minute tic setting Zeddira's upper lip atremble.

“The second high counselor wants to assure you the Raiken readily protects their own, much like you have done in Esaka,” Luëris said. “He hopes you won't mind sharing the attention you gift your family with him while we travel.”

“That was a question, actually,” Kinnek chimed in.

I got that all right from how Zeddira was eyeing me. To be fair, I knew that look. Inkiri had looked at me like that, back in the women's clothing store, and I was less clueless now than I had been then. Still very clueless if I said so myself, but just a bit less.

“I look forward to having meals together,” I said, which seemed the safest option, both then and now. More now that I knew for certain human wasn't ever going to be on the menu. The way Kinnek was trying to curb his grin told me I hadn't made a mistake here for once in my life.

The dinner conversation went on in a mostly exhausting way. It took me a while to figure out that Inkiri only got involved in it when he was addressed directly, which was strange, but then he was bagu royalty, and what did I know about anything?

At one point, Kinnek and Zeddira started talking about whether Zeddira would be allowed to have a look at the cola ash dude in the bunker. I hadn't gotten a look at him, not that I wanted to look at him, at all.

Luëris flawlessly picked up any slow spots in the

conversation so that Inkiri sat beside me, mostly silent and concerned with making sure I had food I liked on my plate.

We sat there maybe for an hour, when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder.

“You,” Vergis said.

“Huh?”

“We’re doing the thing that you asked me to do with you, because you asked me to do it with you earlier, remember? That thing you asked me to do?” Vergis said. He was already dragging me to my feet.

“Uhm, okay? Ink, you good here?”

Inkiri clicked and stuffed another piece of homemade vinné into my mouth.

“Very much so, sadir. Do the thing with Vergis.”

“Well, you make that sound dirtier than it needs to be,” Vergis mumbled, but he was already marching me toward the house. It didn’t escape my notice that several of the bagua closer to the gazebo were tracking him with their eyes. Lissir was sitting on that end of the garden as well, deep in conversation and making googly eyes at a bagu who was about as broad as Fellisse.

“What are we doing?” I said when we were in the kitchen.

Charles sat at the kitchen table with his laptop and a bowl of stew with some bread on the side.

“How did you get out of this?” Vergis asked his father.

Charles looked up, unimpressed. “Because I’m the human hangu-na no one cares about, kid. What’s gotten into you two?”

“That *ass* has been throwing me at those — at those bagua.”

Charles looked at me, but I shook my head. “Not me. I’ll just take blame for him needing earplugs, but even that was more Ink than me.”

“Oh, Lissir, the ass,” Vergis said.

“The three guys in the living room looked more like they were throwing themselves at you, though,” I said.

Vergis glared at me.

Charles sighed and turned back to his screen. “Make good choices and tell me if you settle on one or however many of them so I can show them my flamethrower and explain to them why I might be moved to use it.”

“Dad, are you for real? I think *now* is when you are supposed to show them your flamethrower.”

“We’re talking about the actual flamethrower, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, Princess, just like I will show you one of my actual knives if you don’t stop making light of this. I have been... used. For my looks.” Vergis made the last sound dirty. “And on top of that, I’m not supposed to show those bagua my knives?”

Charles narrowed his eyes at his son. “Huh. Nobody

puts my baby in a corner, son.”

I almost burst out laughing, but I managed not to.

“This is serious!” Vergis turned on me. “And how can you be such a hypocrite when you wanted nothing to do with your one true mate when he first brought you back from the store?”

“Bought you like a mail-order bride, did he?” Charles asked before scooping up some of his soup with a piece of bread.

“Charles, I’ve been having the time of my life since then,” I said.

“Mm-hmm.” Charles grinned while he kept finishing his soup, and Vergis fumed.

“You two are both so bad,” Vergis said before stealing a piece of bread from his dad.

I shrugged and peeked around the screen of Charles’s computer. It showed what I assumed was the bunker. The Koa Esher was sitting at a metal table and eating food someone had brought him.

“You dragged me with you to do a thing,” I said, because I didn’t want to think about how we all had had dinner under the fairy lights, and how the cola ash in the bunker was eating alone, by himself, in the dark.

Charles looked up at us. “Huh. You two are sneaking out of the party. So unsociable.”

“Well, we cannot stay here,” Vergis said. “They’ll

probably come into the kitchen at some point to look for me. Come on.”

“Good choices,” Charles called after us.

“Not with the twink, thank you,” Vergis said.

“I’m feeling used,” I said when I followed him up the stairs. “Where are we even going?”

“The roof.”

“What, your pigeon murder roof?”

Vergis snorted. “One, it’s nice up there. Two, the roof is pretty substantial, and the noise of certain people fucking like rabbits doesn’t carry up that far.”

“I’m feeling judged. Or are you still jealous? You know, I am kind of sorry, but it’s not like I can change anything about me and Inkiri. And I wouldn’t even if I could.” I would not have told Vergis this a month ago, but while we’d never be braiding each other’s hair, we were... friendly. Ish. He wasn’t so bad, once you got past his mood and sarcasm, and the fact that he always needed an extra clothesbasket for all his knives when we got ready to soak.

“Didn’t experience enough awkwardness for the day and needed some more, did you? We are not talking about something that never happened, because it only makes you more annoyingly likable. Now move your butt, unless you’re feeling too sore.”

I followed Vergis up the stairs, because I did feel some camaraderie here about not enjoying the dinner conversation.

Vergis opened the door to the guest room Nokim and Fellisse were in, which was really just a kind of studio for Kinnek, but set up like an office apart from the easel in one corner. There was a desk by the window and an old couch that was the kind of brown that never fit in anywhere, and Kinnek's supply of paints and brushes was on a wall-length shelf along with more books. The guys had their bedding rolled up against a wall, and their backpacks sat neatly next to the couch.

Also on that wall, there was a painted frame to mark where a child had drawn squiggly stick people on the wallpaper before it had been painted light mauve. One stick person clearly had horns, and the child stick person had small, stubbly horns, while the human had a beard.

Vergis noticed me looking at what could only be his childhood artwork.

“Not a word,” he said.

I shrugged but decided not to tell him that how Kinnek had immortalized his son's first attempts with paint made me kind of jealous.

“I've never seen your dad paint since we got here,” I said instead as Vergis headed for a ladder fastened to the shelf. It was one of those library ladders that you could move along a metal railing to get to the top shelves, but when I looked up, there was a hatch in the ceiling by the outside wall of the room, and the ladder functioned as an access point for that as well.

“He does creative bursts, then nothing for a while, then

painting nonstop again. That's why Dad put the couch in here. Kinnek would just sleep in a chair or on the floor sometimes, and Dad didn't like that." Vergis loped up the rungs easily and slid the deadbolt back from the lock. "Come on."

I looked back at the door, then up at Vergis. I didn't mind heights, or I didn't think I did. Well, since it was this or dinner with Zeddira, who was apparently trying to seduce me while the brother I was actually mated to was right there, I followed Vergis up the ladder, far less graceful.

"Wow," I said when I got to the roof.

There was Astroturf up here, and a hammock hung between the solar panel mount and some pipe thing that was probably there for some reason. There was more camping gear, but because I didn't know anything about survival in the outdoors, I only recognized chairs and one of those really substantial yoga mats you used for camping. There was also a telescope up here.

"You can have the hammock," Vergis said and dropped into one of the chairs.

"Can we look through the telescope? I always wanted a telescope. Can I have a look?" I asked. It was one of the big kinds, and I was pointing at it, too scared I'd break it if I touched it.

Vergis sighed. "Yeah. Moon's almost full. You can look at that. Nokim was very excited about seeing all the craters up there."

"You have been coming up here with Nokim?" I said

and bumped him in the shoulder. That was a bit weird since Vergis didn't move and was about as solid as Inkiri. "Way to go."

Vergis growled. "It's not like that. And anyway, it's none of your business." He fumbled with the telescope, looked up, then fumbled some more, and stepped back. "Here, gaze your pretty green eyes out. You can adjust it here and here."

"Oh, cool, thank you so much."

"Yeah, whatever." He walked back to the chair and sat back down.

"This is really cool. Have you always been interested in astronomy?"

"Dad is. And then Dad — Kinnek — had this idea that it would help me know my place in the universe if I learned about it."

I looked up from the telescope. "Did you ever go to school? I mean, you couldn't have, but with magic, is there something that made it possible?"

"Mmh. What you'd call a glamour, yeah, but not really good for prolonged exposure, and it makes it so humans don't really notice you and forget about you more than anything. Those two uber-dads down there took it upon themselves to homeschool me, and now they are on my case for not being home often enough and living a nomadic lifestyle between worlds. They'd probably love it if I found myself a set of several bagua to move in with me and help around the house. Fucking empty-nest syndrome."

I looked back at the moon. “My parents handed me off to the next best au pair ever since I was weaned, basically, and I can’t really say that we grew any closer during the Apocalypse. I think you got lucky with those two.”

That shut Vergis up for a solid minute. It got so quiet that I looked up again to check if he was still there. He was looking at me like he’d never really seen me before, then he fished for a bag by the foot of the chair.

“So I guess we are jealous together.” He pulled a baggy out of the bag, and I recognized the dried white flowers in there from my first trip to Aër. “Wanna get high together?”

I looked over to where the roof ended. There wasn’t a railing, and the balustrade just went up to my hips.

Vergis rolled his eyes. “I promise I’ll tie you to the hammock the moment you mention flying, Princess.”

I scratched the back of my head. “Okay, fine, but just one, and you make sure I don’t do anything stupid.”

“Dude, remember how I valiantly saved you from a bloodworm when we were high together the last time?”

I snorted and sat in the chair next to his. “We were not high together, because that was just you being high. I’d just almost gotten eaten —”

“Again, because that happens a lot to you.”

“Whatever. Give me that.” I snatched the little baggy from him. The flowers looked actually candied and not just dried, and after some last-minute consideration, I popped one into my mouth and started chewing. It tasted like violet and

candies. It couldn't possibly be all that bad.

* * *

The stars were really pretty. "Hey, Vergis, look! The stars are really pretty."

"Stop grabbing my horns, you ass."

"But you need to look up."

"I'm looking. Damn it, will you keep your hands to yourself? You don't go around grabbing people by the horns."

There was a funny noise. It was me snort-giggling. "Lissir grabbed you by the horns. When you told me I should just date Ink."

"Because Lissir is an ass who likes to have the last word and pimps me out to your brother-in-law's entourage like nobody's business. You know what, fuck it."

"Aaw, Vergis, don't leave me."

"God, you're so weird when you're high."

I was snort-giggling again, but louder this time. "Did I ever tell you Ink is my weirdo husband? Because he's a great big weirdo who doesn't mind walking around naked and talking about pleasure play out in public?"

"Hate to break it to you, human, but you're the weirdo in that particular relationship."

"Na-ah. Hey, you said I could have the hammock."

"Well, I have the hammock now. What? Why are you looking at me like that? Oh no, don't you fucking dare, you

can't —”

“See? It’s big enough for the both of us. Because of my soft human frame.”

“I’ll throw you down this roof myself if you don’t get off me.”

“Nooo, you promised. I’m no pigeon. You can’t murder me on your man-cave pigeon-murder roof.”

“The fuck even is wrong with you? You are not ever getting drugs from me ever again. Fucking human weirdo.”

“I really like you, Vergis. I think you and Nokim should totally get together. He’d bake you flower brownies, and then we could all have brownies together.”

“He already suggested that.”

“Hah! See? I know love.”

“You’re high and even less useful than when you aren’t.”

“I am a fucking delight. Pardon the French. I really like cuddling with you, Vergis.”

“Sadir? What are you two doing up here?”

“Oh, weirdo husband!” The weirdo husband had climbed up through the little hole in the roof. “You’re so, so handsome. And tall.”

“Please can you take your mate downstairs? We got a little high on kaminni.”

My weirdo husband had the best clickity chuckle, and

the best warm arms. I totally forgot to tell him when he tickled my throat with his tongue, and he made me giggle.

“Everyone else is downstairs and soaking, Vergis. Some of the protectors are wondering if you’ll join.”

“Naaah, Vergis is saving himself!”

“Shut the fuck up, Princess.”

I did my best googly eyes at Inkiri, the bestest weirdo spouse between here and Aër. “Can we not go soak? I don’t want to see anyone else’s dick tonight. Just want yours.”

“Sadir, you’ll want your bed more quite soon. Come on, let’s get you down.”

“But I don’t like stairs.”

“Can always kick you off the roof and call it a day, Princess.”

“Aw, I love you too, Vergis, you big, horny sourpuss.”

“I’ll carry you, sadir. Hold on to me.”

“Always.”

“Glad to hear that.”

The rest of the evening, the bestest, bluest husband took care of me, and maybe I talked too much. But he totally listened.

* * *

All the bagua had been camping out in the large, downstairs living room, apart from the ones who had been keeping watch, and lucky for me, most of them were having

their breakfast outside and not back in the kitchen. That meant me and my coffee, we could be miserable together, although my coffee was actually fine. Nokim had gotten really good with the fancy machine.

“I did tell you to make good choices,” Charles said to me from across the table. He was watching the video feed again.

“Some food will make you feel better, sweet thing,” Inkiri said.

Nokim had gotten to sweetened oatmeal mixed with nuts and seeds and topped with fruit, but then he'd discovered polenta, and that's what was on the menu today, along with fresh raspberries and raspberry dissent jelly. The stuff was really good, but I wasn't sure my stomach would be on board with it just yet.

“In a little while,” I said and leaned against Inkiri. “Guess it's fine, though. If we are going to try to close up the monsters' access to here, just getting high once in my life beforehand seems like a good choice. I might get eaten.”

Inkiri clicked. “You will not get eaten, sweet thing.”

“We have to talk about whether we bring the prisoner or set up a system to keep him here.” Charles looked up at Inkiri. “It's not like I trust him, but if some of what he's saying is true, I don't think he deserves to die. And between you and I, I think Kinnek thinks so too.”

Inkiri nodded while he rubbed my back in a very relaxing way. “I agree, but we cannot expect you to come

along with us, Charles.”

“Look, I get why you’re saying that, but I was a soldier, and I’ve seen actual combat. I’m not letting my kid and the man I love more than anything go into whatever battle you might encounter there without me.” He leaned back in his chair. “I’m an asset as well when it comes to human tactics. If we run into those fuckers, I’ll be useful.”

All the talk of battles and combat did nothing to settle my stomach.

Inkiri nodded at Charles. “We will be lucky to have you. But it does leave the matter of the Koa Esher.”

We didn’t discuss that further, because Vergis came into the kitchen. He gave me one look, then grinned. “How are you feeling this beautiful morning, Princess?”

“For all the things you say are my fault, this —” I pointed to my face. I’d seen the bags under my eyes, and my bloodshot eyeballs. “— This is all your fault.”

“Mmh, but you were quite happy last night, sadir, in the hammock with Vergis.”

“Ooh?” Charles said.

“Not what it sounds like,” Vergis and I said together.

“Sounds like you had a party just for the two of you,” Charles said. “It’s always the quiet guys. Anyway, I suggest we take the prisoner along, make sure we know where he is at all times.”

“The Koa Esher from the basement?” Vergis asked. He

walked to the coffee maker, but Nokim handed him a fresh mug before Vergis had a chance to pour his own. “Thanks, Nokim.”

I blinked sleepily. That was possibly the first morning ever Vergis had thanked Nokim for the coffee, and as a result, Nokim was sporting a beaming smile.

“Anytime,” Nokim said, but Vergis was already sitting down next to his dad.

“I may have a solution to how we can take him along safely.” Vergis looked at me. “Remember the bear?”

I groaned, and Inkiri clicked. “How could I forget the bear?” I said.

“Magicky stuff?” Charles asked.

Vergis nodded and sipped his coffee. “Yup.”

“You double-check that with your dad.” Charles looked back to Inkiri. “A week from now is still the plan?”

“Uh, wait, are we... already planning when we’ll do... whatever we will do?” I asked.

“We talked about it last night, sadir. Zeddira and Kinnek headed back to Aër this morning to select more protectors to help us.”

My jaw about dropped. “We are bringing more people into this?”

Inkiri nodded. “After you were gone, as Zeddira and Kinnek talked, Zeddira said that the Koa Esher have been using the beasts to attack just past the border with Kankarraz.

There is magic the humans have shown the Koa Esher that makes it possible to control the beasts to some degree. That is what the prisoner has said before, and Zeddira confirmed that the Koa Esher were already using that. As a result, the Koa Esher must still be working with humans. Which they would only be if they had come to an agreement regarding you.”

“Yeah, basically, we’ve been able to confirm that our bunker-dwelling bagu has been giving us solid intel so far,” Charles clarified.

“Oh. That’s bad. I mean, good about the intel, though. Bad what is happening.”

“It’s all the more reason to close the veils to the monsters’ world as soon as possible,” Nokim said before finally joining us. He sat next to Vergis and put down a bowl of his polenta breakfast delight in front of the latter. “The veils between Aër and Earth, our plan will not harm that connection? I would hate being cut off from Earth.”

Vergis leaned back in his chair. “Nah. Those two make Aër and Earth stick together.” He gestured back and forth between Inkiri and me.

A door in the house opened and shut. “Ah!” Lissir walked into the kitchen from the direction of the mud room. “Mostly everyone is here. Fellisse?”

“Bunker,” Charles said.

“That can’t be helped then,” Lissir said and sat down with us, though not before he checked both entrances to the kitchen. “I have news,” he said when he joined us at the table.

“You found another Raikenga to keep you company last night?” Vergis said.

“Well, yes, I did,” Lissir said. “Another one from Livim, by the way, because most of the people Zeddira has brought are from Livim. But that’s not important. What is important is that the Raiken is setting up outposts here on Earth, because the recent reports indicate that the Koa Esher are doing that too, only they are working with humans, which we know already.”

“They are all colonizing the place?” I asked.

“I don’t think you have any right to get upset about anyone colonizing a place,” Vergis said to me.

“I didn’t mean it like that, but just... you know. There are going to be issues.”

Lissir nodded. “Yes, the Raiken expects that, but they are not looking for war. They are looking to extend the prosperity they have already brought to parts of Aër. And they are looking to work with the humans who still remain in the regions, especially the ones who might be in a bad situation.” Lissir looked at me. “You said something about a religious group when Inkiri first brought you home? Tador mentioned something like that.”

I blinked. My eyes were not handling the light too well. “Tador?”

“The guy he was cozying up to last night,” Vergis said.

“Their tactician,” Lissir said. “And yes. Also a decent lover. But from what Tador said, they came across a human

settlement a good four days' walk away from where we found Rory, and since the humans attacked first and were unwilling to talk or even listen, they decided to storm the place. It was in a relevant position, from a tactical standpoint. They were prepared to let the humans be after they took all their weapons, but then they discovered children — young girls, he said — with babies of their own, made to work the fields and bearing the marks of fists and worse.”

I wasn't even particularly interested in the coffee anymore. “That sounds about right,” I said.

“Zeddira was in part on Earth to decide what would happen to the men of that group, or most of them. He came to the agreement with survivors and other humans they have established relations with that Raiken law should apply.”

Charles chuckled. “Love it.”

“What's that mean?” I asked.

“Mistreating a hangu in that way, and doing it repeatedly?” Inkiri rubbed my back. “Sakkir. You know that word, don't you?”

“The de-horning that basically means killing? After cutting their dicks off? Yeah.”

“Good riddance,” Vergis said.

Lissir tapped the table with his fingers. “Yes, yes, a good thing. Are you all listening to me? Our people are expanding their reach to Earth, which, on the balance, I think will be good, but the Koa Esher are doing the same. I've been reading everything Kinnek has collected on the Loathly Lady,

and from my understanding, her favor would be very relevant in such a situation.”

Inkiri clicked. “Zeddira has learned some of this from Kinnek yesterday.”

“I thought he would have. It’s a good thing.”

All eyes turned to me.

Inkiri pulled me close against his side, and I relaxed into him. “He wants a quiet life, Lissir. Not to be what the Raiken might wish him to be in this expanded territory.”

“Oh, come on,” Vergis said. “I’ll be the first person to say I liked things better before Earth became the new Wild West for all and sundry bagua, but what’s done is done.” He looked at me. “And you know — with great power, yada yada, get yourself a cape and say smart stuff. Or skip the cape and don’t speak all that much, but just be the twinkly magic dispenser nature has selected you to be.”

Charles cleared his throat. “Son, this was not a pep talk.”

I had to agree with Charles, but it was also maybe possible that Vergis was right. A little bit. And I hated all of that. The presence pricked the fringes of my mind, though, just enough I could feel something like a nod of agreement with Vergis’s words.

CHAPTER NINE

We had the next week to mentally prepare for leaving, and who really knew what we'd be finding when we got back to the Stone? Well, I did, because the presence told me. There were sentinels placed there, near the Hill of Tara, it said, and if we passed through the veils, they would know we were there, just like last time.

Which meant last time, Vergis and me hopping the veils from Aër was what had brought them down on us. I told him when I told everyone. We were in the kitchen once more, although this time around, Luëris had managed to sneak in there as well. He was quietly observing.

“You couldn't have known they were watching that place,” Inkiri said to Vergis. “There was no reason to assume that.”

“Plus, in the end, everything was fine,” I said.

“My shoulder was better after than before, even,” Lissir added.

“Yes, and you managed to keep Rory and yourself safe from the attack before, the one by that lake on our way to the Stone.”

Charles looked up from his laptop. “Wait, what attack are they talking about?” he asked Vergis.

“It was nothing. And you're all a bunch of lovey-dovey hippies,” Vergis said. Then he turned to Nokim. “Thanks for

the sweet potato pie, by the way.”

Nokim beamed. He'd been spending most of his time in the kitchen recently, or ever since Vergis couldn't seem to step out of the house without attracting several of the protectors outside. I was pretty sure Nokim was baking his longing for Vergis into everything he cooked up in here.

“Such a small thing. I will make you more.” Nokim very unsubtly moved one of the bowls with candied walnuts he'd made earlier that day closer to Vergis.

Charles brought up a map of the area on his laptop. “Rory, can the land tell you where those sentinels are?”

In the trees to the north, but they move.

Charles turned the laptop my way.

“It said in the trees to the north, but also that they move. Guess there's the only area that has any trees.” I pointed. Tara was mostly open fields and grass. We had been sitting ducks.

Charles nodded and turned the laptop back around. “Does it know whether they are changing guards regularly?”

I asked the land, but I got the impression of a blank stare.

They watch the place to see if you will be back or if others of your mate's people might come to use the spot or claim it.

“Uhm, I don't think the land thinks in guard changes and that sort of thing.” I gave him an apologetic shrug.

Vergis leaned over his dad's shoulder. "There is a natural fuse point to the veils right there. That's about four klicks away from the Hill. It's one of the old fuse points, the ones that always existed and just demanded a dash of magic to move through. If we use that instead of pushing the veils open as we go through, they won't be able to tell."

Charles nodded. "And it's to the south. They might not even expect anything to come from there. We'd use an open door instead of breaking one down ourselves. I like that."

"Dad, my magic isn't like breaking down doors."

"I know, kiddo, your magic is the best." Charles absentmindedly patted Vergis's head. When I giggled, I got glared at by Vergis, but if he was thinking he'd scare me to the point where I'd pee myself, well, that ship had sailed.

"Rory and Vergis should stay close to one another and between the rest of us," Inkiri said, and I was not going to argue that, because I didn't really like the thought of being out there and possibly facing a repeat of that first ambush.

"That won't work," Charles and Vergis said together.

"There might be Koa Esher there," Inkiri said. He put a warm hand on my knee and stroked gently. It felt like he was soothing himself more than me.

I did a quick check with the presence about whether there really were cola ass hats there.

"The land says they do come to the Hill sometimes, but they aren't there always. When they come, it's as a group, and some of them are always gifted with the same strange magic

the cola ash dude in the bunker has, the land's words, not mine.”

Inkiri squeezed my knee. “You will check right when we get there if Koa Esher are near.” I nodded, and he looked over at Charles and Vergis. “Until then —”

Charles shook his head. “No, you don't get it. Vergis is too good a shooter to have him in the middle of a bunch of Raikengana who think getting in front of him is helping. He and I are going to advance ahead and cover you guys.”

Vergis propped one arm up on the back of his chair, all swagger. “It'll be fine. And Kinnek has better training to stick with you and provide magical cover if we need it.” Vergis reached for some of the candied walnuts Nokim had made. “And stop looking at me like that, Inkiri. You're not the boss of me. You know I've been in Koa Esher territory before, and I've dealt them losses.” He grinned. “Plus, that death vision your twink mate got me should help me with my aim.”

“Not a twink, but I'm pretty sure the land will let me help. Or the land will help by itself.” I reached for Inkiri's wrist and massaged the inside of it with my thumb, which got him to make those low, seductive clicks at me. “It'll be fine.”

My acting skills really weren't good enough to make me sound credible even to myself, but I hoped everything would be fine. It had to be.

The planning session went on, but there was only so much that could be decided while Zeddira and Kinnek were gone.

The days went on, and we were waiting for Kinnek and Zeddira to get back. While Inkiri, Fellisse, and Lissir spent a good amount of time with our Raiken guests, Vergis hid on the roof a lot. He let me come along, but he didn't offer me any more drugs, thankfully.

Somewhere in there, I was beginning to believe that everything would work out perfectly. We would close the veils to the monster place. We'd help kill off the remaining monsters on Earth. The Raiken would manage to take care of the cola ash people somehow, and the human mages who'd started this whole mess as well. Then, they would end up signing some kind of treaty with the human survivors, and everything would be better. Religious compounds wouldn't be allowed to abuse children anymore, and maybe more bagua would find their human mates and live happily ever after. The world could be good again.

I was in the hammock and probably getting a bit sunburned. Vergis lay stretched out on the Astroturf, and after a lengthy discussion on the matter, we'd been able to agree to have musicals play from his Bluetooth speakers. Life was good.

Vergis and I both jolted up somewhere in the middle of the Phantom soundtrack when the blood-curdling screams echoed up to us from the gazebo.

* * *

I was slower. Vergis was down the ladder and the stairs like a graceful shadow, and I made noises as my feet hit the rungs and then clapped down the stairs.

Luëris was in the living room where he had been reading, and he was on me fast when I tried running past along the hallway and to the mudroom.

He jumped in front of me, arms wide like one of those sports people who played ball games and tried to keep other players from passing them. Gosh, but I didn't know sports.

“You cannot go out there. It might not be safe.”

Luëris wore protector black, but much like Lissir, he didn't come across as someone who was into physical altercations. Then again, I'd seen Lissir and Inkiri spar, and that was something else.

“I need to go check what happened,” I said and tried getting past him. I might have even managed that if I'd been good at all the sports I couldn't even adequately put a name to. “Come with me. Make sure nothing hits me in the face or whatever you need to do.”

Luëris tilted his head. “Has your mate taught you the basics of the knife at all?”

“What? No. Why would he hand me a knife? Knives are scary. It's bad enough Vergis makes me touch his knife sometimes. Fudge, that wasn't an innuendo. I meant his actual knife. Which he makes me touch. For magical reasons.” Which was when the brain quality control realized coffee break was over, and we were no longer listening to Erik being an egocentric narcissist.

“I do not understand all that,” Luëris said. “But you must stay behind me and run when I tell you to. Agreed?”

“Fine, whatever.”

Luëris pulled a weapon from some fold of his clothing. It was smaller than a dagger and looked for all the world like a very, very sharp pencil. He had a good hold on that, and the pointy tip was formed by four edges converging into a point. It looked very sturdy for something so small.

We didn't have to go all the way outside, though, because the mudroom door was flung open, hard, and Inkiri, Fellisse, and Nokim came in, carrying Zeddira between them. Vergis was running ahead.

“Out of the way!” he shouted.

Zeddira was bleeding. I didn't even really see at first. The guys' black clothes hid it, and he'd changed into something that was a darker gray at some point, and for a moment, I thought it was just water, thought maybe he'd been dragged into a lake by Kinnek much like Vergis had dragged me into a lake.

But Zeddira's face was ashen with pain, his yellow eyes wild, and he was frantically talking, looking at Inkiri.

They brushed past us. I stood there, pressed against the wall of the hallway, which looked like a piece of art thanks to Kinnek's mural. There were drops of blood on the hardwood floor now.

Luëris ran outside, and I heard him say something, presumably giving orders to the bagua out there.

I looked left. Zeddira was screaming, and for once, I wasn't frozen with fear or shock, but actually managed to

follow the sound.

There was a basement door at the end of the hallway, and it stood open. The noises came from down there. I lost all memory of going down the steps, but the next thing I knew, I was standing there. Zeddira was on a table. There were medical supplies here. In fact, it looked a lot like a treatment room, complete with excellent lighting, which made me see the blood. When Fellisse cut away Zeddira's clothes, I saw the gash in his abdomen, deep and oozing. He was so pale.

Over the frantic movement of the guys, I caught Vergis's eye, and something passed between us. I could tell he knew, had seen with his uncanny death gaze the Lady had given him that Zeddira wouldn't survive this.

Are you there? I need you.

I am always here, Rory. The land never moves, even if the people may.

Help him. Please. You helped Nokim.

Because he is your knight. This man is not your knight. He might take the gift of life and squander it, or worse, he might take it and use it to harm you.

The scenery shifted rapidly, and I was back in the foggy landscape. It was the scene I'd seen already, the two girls running, the men on horses after them.

No! I pushed the vision away, and the basement was back. *He'll... he totally sakkired men like that. You must have noticed. Plus, he's Ink's brother.*

The presence seemed to consider that. I felt it examine

Zeddira idly, almost like you might examine an apple you were considering buying to see if it had brown spots, or worse, a worm living inside.

I will not heal him fully like I would your knights. That would force more strain on you since it is much harder to do with someone who is not your knight. If he is kept here on Earth, I will help his cuts and broken bones mend.

Fine, please help him now?

But even as I thought it, I felt the flow of power through me. It was far more than it took to boil some water or freeze it, far more than it took to slip through the veils around the homestead with Vergis. This one I felt, like hyperventilating or almost passing out after you'd run for your life with a monster at your heels.

Vergis's eyes widened, and then he looked at me. "You did that," he said. I totally had, but I needed some timeout, so I sat on the ground. Because I'd have fainted if I hadn't. Vergis dashed forward. Fellisse had gone to speaking all in Lugarra as he worked on his patient, and he was giving Nokim and Inkiri orders.

"Sadir. Sadir!" I looked at Inkiri dazedly. "I said, are you well?"

I nodded. "I'll just take a moment. He'll heal better if we don't move him back to Aër."

"You did that?" Fellisse asked. I couldn't watch what he was doing. There was too much blood involved and watching any doctor or surgeon work at piecing a person back

together was too much like a mechanic popping a car's hood and digging around in there with grease up to his elbows. I couldn't handle it.

“I tried. Sorry. Couldn't do more.”

Vergis spoke to Zeddira in rapid Lugarra. Zeddira only had the strength to mumble back.

“What's happening?” said Charles, who was on the stairs and looking down, but Vergis was already running toward the stairs, then took them two at a time.

“They took Dad. The Koa Esher took Dad.”

“Vergis, wait!” Inkiri said. I *knew* what Vergis was going to do. I knew he was going to hop to where Zeddira had been, and when he got where he was going, he would do something stupid.

I was not a runner, and sports were not my thing, but I begged the presence to give me running legs, just for a minute or so. *Longer if you are barefoot. Much, much longer*, it told me, but I didn't really want to do any kind of running if I could avoid it.

I just wanted to catch up with Vergis, and I got in tackling range — overtaking Inkiri by about two bagua lengths — and then I did the actual tackle. Except, because I couldn't do sporty things, I ended up sort of clinging to Vergis instead without actually getting him off his feet, but it still worked, because he slowed down. “Get off me, you little shit!”

“You can't go there by yourself,” I said.

“Stop!” Inkiri's voice was by far the more booming,

and I totally froze, because I hadn't thought he'd be that good at commanding.

“The fuckers have my father! Do you even know —”

“Yes, Vergis, and we will go after them, but we will do it together.”

A loud whistling got us to turn to the house. I was still half hanging on to Vergis, but I wasn't going to relinquish that hold I had on his arm. “I'm coming with,” Charles said. And Charles was effing Rambo after all. He was carrying two of those long guns and a duffel.

“We leave in three,” he barked. “Everyone, get your gear.” He strode right up to Vergis and me, peeled me off Vergis, and handed Vergis a gun. “What did I fucking tell you about being a fucking hothead? It's not going to help us get your father back, so pull yourself together and act like the smart killer I know you can be.”

Well, okay then. At least someone in this family was good at pep talks.

You know where Kinnek is? I asked the presence as all around us, frantic activity broke out. Lissir met Inkiri on his way to the house and handed my mate his three swords. Luëris jogged up with a curved sword at his side now, four of the bulky Raikengana who'd been so interested in catching Vergis's eye with him.

Yes, I know where he is. They are not moving to take him back to your mate's world yet, but they are taking him back to where they have made a settlement. They will put him

with the other slaves there.

“Slaves, just perfect,” I mumbled, but Vergis heard, and he stared at me. “I know where Kinnek is. Where they are taking him.” I checked back in with the presence. “We can get close.”

Inkiri got there, still fastening his swords to his side. I saw him open his mouth, but I lifted my finger to him. “No. You are not telling me to stay back. Kinnek is... well, like family. We are not leaving him behind to those — those inbred motherfuckers with the twisted horns. We’re getting him back and I am helping.” I was feeling plenty of drama queen energy all of a sudden, and I had no idea where that was coming from. But it felt good. It felt right.

Inkiri smiled at me as if he were proud. “I was about to tell you to be vigilant and to stay behind me, my sweet mate.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Charles clapped his hands. “Is everyone who’s going ready to go?” which Luëris translated. There were mostly grunts but some actual words of agreement all around. “Then let’s go and bring my husband home. Maybe put some bullets and a few knives in those assholes who took him.” Charles was made for speeches, and we all headed to the gazebo and lined up in the circumference of the ko circle.

Vergis and I held hands. “Ready, Princess?”

“Just do your best magic and treat the cola assholes like they were pigeons,” I told him.

Vergis grinned the murderous kind of grin that I was

sure could get even the most hardened fighters to lose a few drops of pee. “Sure thing,” he said, and off we went.

LEXICON

Human, humans — Closer to extinction than they used to be. Not believed to possess any magic prior to Rory's experience at the Stone right before the Apocalypse.

Aër — the world of all bagua

Bagu, bagua — the people of Aër

Raiken — started off as a school, but is now closer to a government

Hangu, hangua — bagua with uterus

Hangu-na, hangu-naga — bagua without uterus

Sentenmen — a close-knit group like a found family.

Members of a sentenmen will take responsibility for and care of one another. A Sentenmen is recognized by the Raiken and by all Houses.

Sadir — a sweet cake only eaten on special festivals

Koa Esher; “the cola ash people” — an order of mages who inbreed in order to keep the magic strong in their bloodlines

Lugarra; “LaGuardia” — one of the languages of Aër

Sakkir — de-horn

Esaka — a city near the Kankarraz border. It's a tourist destination because of the moors that surround it. The moors are believed to be haunted by some.

Kankarraz — the country of the Koa Esher, who rule there.

Rikori — hotel. Most rikori work like early banks on Earth, a service at first only open to Raikengana but later extended to all bagua.

Shibiya — relaxing clothes, leisure clothes. It is acceptable to wear these in public.

Honkora — seed week. A festival celebrated after both the first and second harvest.

Ligu, ligua; “lick war” — cute omnivores. They hatch from eggs and are the preferred sacrifices for all koa or mages because they are easy to keep.

Vinné — a cracker-like food that you can get everywhere in a lot of different varieties

Disset; “dissent” — a jelly often eaten with vinné.

Massa bun; “massacre bun” — slightly fermented and thickened tuber juice. Some hate it, some love it.

Lesh — thank you, but familiar

Al-lesh — thank you, more polite

Uma, Tuma, and Ledis — the three moons of Aër.

Koto-sa-ko — a place of magic. The koro-sa-ko used to be magic academies, but magical learning has since been incorporated into the Raiken, mostly because there were less and less koa or mages to fill a whole koto-sa-ko.

Kodesh — similar to a car. The fancier ones are run on magic. Many of the koa or mages who produce such magic are either Raikengana or belong to a House.

Lagasar — a tear in fabric, what the Apocalypse is called

on Aër

Kantik — the phoenix-like bird who watches over lovers

**billet bean; “millet bean” — is a bean often made into
sweet dishes, but it can be used for savory ones**

Gu — a question suffix

ALEXA PIPER

Alexa (she/her) has a lot of characters living in her head and wanting their stories told. Many of these people get snarky and won't stop complaining if Alexa is too slow writing them, which means that for this author, sleep is a luxury. Consequently, Alexa is a coffee addict, but she is sure she has it under control (six cups of coffee are normal in a morning, right? Right!?)

Reading Order [Monster Apocalypse](#)

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