

EMILIA HARTLEY



FAE  
UNCOVERED

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 10

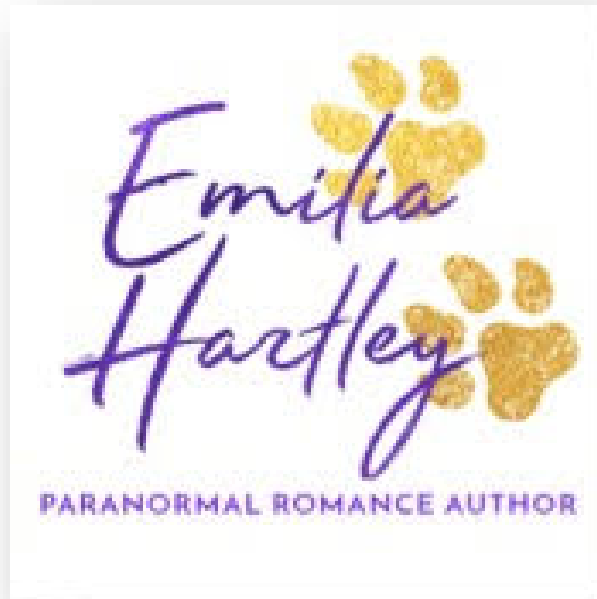
# **F&E UNCOVERED**

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EMILIA HARTLEY

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# EMILIA'S HEARTLIES

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Chapter 31

What's New

Heartlies Box Sets

Thank you!

I didn't know which was worse: the nightmares haunting me, or the cacophony of sound that jolted me awake. I bolted upright. A layer of sweat beaded my skin and sent chills down my spine. The dark of night obscured much of the room, but my supernatural eyes cut through it easily.

There was no one in here with me.

I exhaled, relieved. Then I heard more clattering outside my bedroom. It was coming from the kitchen. The familiar chime of jostled jars told me exactly where the home invader was, though I had no idea what this person thought they were going to find in my jar stash.

With shaking hands, I reached behind my bed and grabbed the metal baseball bat that I kept for situations just like this. I'd been kidnapped one too many times. I wasn't keen on letting it happen again. The baseball bat would make sure of it.

The bat was heavy and reassuring in my hands as I crept towards my bedroom door in the dark. I cracked the door open and peered out at my living space. The kitchen was at the other end of the apartment. From here, I could see the counters and my brewing station—what I couldn't see was the person responsible for making all that noise.

I scowled. That meant the home invader was likely invisible. It made sense, especially here in Lakesedge. This part of Syracuse was home to all sorts of supernatural creatures from shifters to the antichrist herself. It wasn't too far of a stretch to assume my home invader could be invisible.



Now, I wondered how the hell I was going to get this door all the way open without alerting the intruder. I pushed it slowly, but it let out a creak that echoed through the room. The clattering of glass stopped. I froze and waited until it started up again.

If only I had more gumption. I would have run out there, guns ablaze. I would have hoisted up the bat and warned the intruder that they had one chance to get out *or else*. I just wasn't that kind of person, though.

Memories of Alvin's bruising hands returned. The former Pack Alpha had seen weakness in me and used it to his advantage. He'd used me, hurt me, to send a message to the rest of my Pack. I could feel his fingers digging into my arms. My skin burned where he'd dragged a claw over my throat. It made my breath shaky. My knees threatened to give out.

I could do this.

Or, I could go run and hide in my closet. It was a tempting idea.

The smell of death reached my nose even though I knew that Bastien was long gone. The Reaper had been afraid of dying. He'd been after my friend Addie's power with the hopes that it would help keep him alive. When he'd kidnapped me to use me against Addie, I'd blamed myself for being useless. It wasn't until we were right over the local fae court that I found a power hidden in myself.

The chime of clinking glass continued. I let out a breath and pushed forward, sliding my body through the crack between the door and the doorframe. Moonlight from the floor to ceiling windows to my left bathed the room in a pale glow. In the living room, I lifted the bat and took the first few steps towards the invisible home invader.

Once I narrowed down where the invader had to be standing in order to make those sounds, I tiptoed up behind them and swung the bat with everything I had...

Only, it whooshed through empty air. I stopped and blinked in surprise.

A little shadow poked its head out from between my empty jars and looked up at me. I stared down at it for several heartbeats. I couldn't quite parse what I was looking at for the longest while. Then, I slowly realized that I was staring down at a rodent.

Not just any rodent. This wasn't a mouse venturing out of its hiding place. It wasn't one of Syracuse's massive squirrels, either. This wasn't actually a rodent. At least, I didn't think it was part of the rodent family. The body was much slimmer, creating an almost snake-like body. It was...

"Are you a ferret?" I asked, as if the creature could respond.

To my utter shock, it did.

"Astute observation, Cerridwen," the creature pipped.

"The fuck?" was all I could manage to say as the bat dropped down to my side.

"A bit vulgar, but it is to be expected when one has been raised by barbarians." The ferret glided out from between the jars and rose on its hind legs to face me.

I gaped at the little creature. Not only had it just called my parents barbarians, but it did it in a way that was way too eloquent for a *rodent*. Yeah, I knew the creature wasn't *actually* a rodent, but if it continued to give me sass, I would continue to call it a rodent.

"What the fuck are you, little guy?" I asked, because this certainly wasn't any normal rodent.

It gave me the most unimpressed glare, its every feature flat and annoyed. It dragged its little paws over its face in exasperation. "You are not the princess I expected to find. How am I supposed to turn *this* into a queen?"

I recoiled. "Excuse me? Queen?"

There was no way in hell. Queen of *what*? This backwater city full of assholes? I didn't even know how that would even work. There was no seat for me to rule fro—My blood ran cold.

I recalled standing at the edge of Lake Onondaga with Addie. Queen Beryl of the Unseelie Court had been furious to find me there, on her territory. The way she'd spoken to me... I'd tried to not think about it. She'd said things that hadn't made any sense. A door had been kicked open that day, but I'd refused to go through it.

I dropped the bat and crossed my arms over my chest. "No. Nope. No way."

The ferret mirrored my gesture and leaned back so it could give me the most contemptuous look. "You cannot fight your fate, Cerridwen. Your blood demands this of you."

I laughed. "I've seen fate broken by everyone in my life. You think I won't try? Watch me."

I spun and stormed back to bed. It wasn't like I wanted to sleep—not with the nightmares that kept coming back every night. I wasn't looking forward to that. All I wanted was to get away from this damned creature.

The ferret hopped off the counter and loped after me, though.

"You need to listen to me, Cerridwen. There is an entire court waiting for your return. You were always meant to come back and dethrone the usurper." The ferret's voice followed me.

Defiance gripped my spine and drew me upright. In the middle of the living room, I stopped and turned so I could glare down at the rodent. It was cute little thing, but it would have been cuter had it never opened its damn mouth.

Stiff hands vibrating with frustration, I raised them and tried to put my anger into words. Before I could get anything out, the massive floor to ceiling windows exploded. I threw my arms over my head and screamed. Glass rained down everywhere.

*My landlord is going to lose his mind. This is the second time this has happened!*

"Say your final words, Cerridwen Dawnlight." A husky voice approached.

I peered out from behind my arms to see a man in head-to-toe leather gliding towards me. He held a pair of scimitars in his hands. His eyes had a dangerous golden glow, and his ears were pointed like mine. His sudden lunge surprised me because his movements telegraphed absolutely nothing.

A yelp escaped me when I threw myself back out of his reach. My ass hit the floor, which sent my arcana rolling out of me. I felt it unfold like the petals of a blossom. The wood floor unhinged itself and spiraled into fibrous tendrils that shot towards the assassin.

He had to be an assassin. The man moved like the wind. His footsteps made no noise. I rolled onto my hands and knees so I could scramble back onto my feet. Spinning, I tried to get my eye on him again. I found him out of the corner of my eye. The glint of pale city light glanced off his blade as he attacked again.

With the blade careening towards my throat and my feet unsteady beneath me, I had no choice but to throw myself backwards. As my feet came out from under me, I flicked my hand. The vines reacted. They shot towards the man as his blade pierced empty air.

He wasted no time in twisting to direct the second blade towards me. Glass bit into my shoulder blades when I hit the floor. I had no choice but to roll over the shards or else the assassin's scimitar would go right through my neck.

"Shit," I muttered.

My vines had missed. This man was unlike anything I'd ever fought before. I'd dealt with angry shifters and lumbering undead, but I'd never gone up against a fae. To be fair, I avoided them most of my life. They always left me feeling unsettled, and I'd never been able to understand why.

The door in my mind creaked open to reveal a little more truth. I tried to turn my attention away from it. I mean, there was a life-or-death fight happening in the middle of my living room. This distraction wasn't helping. I had to focus, or I was going to die right here.

I shoved the truth back and steeled myself. No one was allowed to bust into my life and threaten my wellbeing anymore. I was tired of it.

Spinning towards the assassin, I lifted both hands. Every piece of wood that made up my flooring sprang to life and curled towards him. The assassin took in the threats coming at him from all angles. When he saw there was no way out, he turned his attention towards me.

*The threat would stop if the source was terminated.*

Shit.

I had to move faster. The assassin sprang towards me. I bit back my yelp and readied myself. I would have appreciated a mate in this situation. All my friends had hot shifter men in their lives. Both Ness and Vi scored nearly indestructible dragon shifters. Addie had herself a wolf shifter that straddled the line between life and death, making him nigh unkillable.

I really needed something like that right about now. There was no man to parry the blade heading my way. The assassin brought the blade down right as I rolled out of the way. The tip of the blade caught my arm and tore through flesh.

Swallowing my scream, I grimaced. It was too late for him, anyway. My wood vines shot through his back and lifted him from the floor. I turned my face away from the sight.

“Well played, Cerridwen Dawnlight,” he sputtered, blood from his lips spraying the floor between us.

I cradled my arm close to my chest and stared at the blood on the twisted floor. When I spoke, my voice was small. “Don’t call me that.”

Dead, the man turned to dust and drifted away on the wind. Fae were kind of like vampires in that way. With no soul, their bodies fell apart as soon as the magic holding them together vanished. Which worked in my favor. I didn’t have a body to hide.

But my window was busted again, and my floor looked like a horrifying art installation inspired by Vlad the Impaler.

The wood spires dripped with blood, both mine and the assassin's.

Now that the fight was over, the pain in my arm really set in. A fiery throb overwhelmed my upper arm and shoulder. Shaky, I got to my feet and picked my way through the glass shards towards the kitchen so I could grab a healing potion. They were there for my other friends. I'd never really needed one myself before.

*Oh gods. This tastes like ass,* I thought as I chugged the bitter drink. It seared my throat like alcohol and left me coughing after. It was a small price to pay. The pain in my shoulder that'd been making my head spin was now fading. The blood on my arm was nothing more than leftovers from the battle now that the gash in my skin had knit itself back together.

"Nifty," I said, exhausted.

Still in nothing more than an oversized shirt and an overwhelming amount of blood, I leaned against the counter and pressed my forehead to the cool surface. The damn ferret skittered between my feet and looked up at me from the floor. I groaned and moved so that the counter obscured my vision.

"You barely survived that encounter, Cerridwen. You need help."

"Stop calling me Cerridwen! Only my mom uses my full name. Call me Cerri or just stop using my name altogether." I groaned as the healing potion worked at the glass cuts along my back.

This shirt was going to be ruined after all this.

"Your mother?" the ferret asked, perplexed. "Your mother has been dead for...ah! You mean the human woman. I forgot that your parents hid you like a changeling baby. They took the human woman's child and replaced it with their own: you."

I swallowed hard, the truth going down like a fat brick. A part of me knew. I'd suspected that I wasn't really their child, but they were still my parents. Jasper and Molly James raised

me. I called them Dad and Mom. They...they were the only parents I knew.

But I was never like them. Dad was a big wolf shifter. He had thick black fur that was speckled with grey now that he was older. I always thought that my wolf would be a tawny version of his. But when Ness and Connor had their first shift, I was left empty handed. I was a confused thirteen-year-old stuck on the outside of her own family.

Now it all made sense. No matter how badly I wanted to throw this truth back up, I knew it would never leave my system.

“Shut up,” I told the ferret.

I stood and turned to take in my apartment. It was a mess. The chill night air swept in and grazed my bare skin. Those windows would have to be boarded up again. I’d snagged this converted warehouse for its view of the lake and the city beyond, but the damn windows were a safety threat, it seemed.

Since I wasn’t going to get back to sleep any time soon, I shoved my feet into a pair of bunny slippers and set about sweeping up the glass. It was a good opportunity to practice my arcana, too. I would have to put these floors back.

The ferret scrambled in front of me, stopping me so fast that I had to shove my golden curls back out of my face after they all came flying forward. I glared down at the little furry menace at my feet.

“You need help.” He stood on his hind legs and put his little hands on his non-existent hips. “There is a man waiting for you. He pledged his service to your parents. He waits for you to return and ask for his help in overthrowing the usurper Beryl. If you ask, this man will protect you.”

I didn’t want some old fart crouched in my apartment at all times. Especially if he was going to nag me to do something I didn’t want to do. If he worked for the fae, he was going to be a damn stickler for vows and deals.

All of this meant nothing to me. It wasn’t like Lakesedge was suffering from a power imbalance. That had been fixed

when Ness and Ryder removed Alvin from the head of the local shifter pack. Now that Ryder was the Alpha, Lakesedge was experiencing a moment of peace.

“If I do what you want, I’ll destroy everything my friends worked for.” I couldn’t be the one to upset the peace in Lakesedge.

My friends would never forgive me.

I looked to where the assassin had been before his body turned to dust. Beryl wanted me dead. I didn’t even have to ask who had sent the assassin after me. I already knew. She’d made it very clear when we last met that she wanted me gone.

Beryl knew that I was a threat to her throne. I didn’t want it, but my blood scared her.

“Who am I?” I whispered under my breath.

*Dawnlight.* That’s what the assassin had called me. It was a family name that I didn’t recognize, though I knew little about fae families.

Maybe it seemed like I’d accepted this new truth a little too easily, but I’d grown up with a suspicion that I wasn’t who everyone told me I had to be. The James family name was mine through love, but not through blood. I’d always known that, even if I hadn’t wanted to admit it.

This new name...I didn’t want it. I wanted nothing to do with it. Maybe some answers would help settle my restless soul, but it wouldn’t give me anything else. I could already see the trouble that came with it.

I could have asked the fae ferret creature what it knew, but I wasn’t ready. I...wanted to bury my head in the sand a little while longer.

Fool that I was, I’d already spoken out loud. So, of course, the ferret had an answer ready for me.

“You are Cerridwen Dawnlight, the last surviving member of the Dawnlight royal family, head of the Seelie Court. Your parents were king and queen of a beautiful court here in this new world.” He bobbed his head in a proud nod.



I groaned. That was more than I wanted, but all the pieces fit together neatly.

There was glass to be swept up. Once I took care of that, then maybe I would think about this information. Maybe...

**A**fter what happened, I slept the daylight hours away. I woke just in time for Feri the ferret nuisance to point me towards a bar at the edge of the city. Thankfully, I recognized the name and realized it was Vi's favorite spot. She and Luca liked to chill there a lot.

I called Vi up and had her help me pick out an appropriate outfit—and I vetoed the first three. We finally settled on a pair of ripped jeans and a sheer top with floral embroidery. My assets were a little too big to go with only a bra underneath the sheer fabric, so I added a spaghetti strap tank top under it.

In the bar, I shuddered as a cold breeze wafted through the incredibly thin sheer fabric. I wrapped my arms around myself and ran my fingers over where the gash from the night before would have been.

As much as I hated it, I needed help.

“So, who are we looking for?” Vi asked as she scanned the crowd.

The antichrist kept her hair cut close to her scalp and a sly grin on her lips. Her dark eyes sparked with mischief. I grabbed her jacket sleeve and yanked her close.

“You stay out of trouble. You hear me?” I hissed between us.

She gave me a wink, but it couldn't hide the wince of hurt that crimped the corners of her previously joyful eyes. Guilt dropped like a stone in my stomach. I tore my gaze away from

her and kept my lips sealed. I hated how I couldn't bring myself to trust her.

She was the *antichrist*. I mean...she'd nearly started the apocalypse more times than I could count. Was it wrong of me to be untrusting?

I shook myself. That didn't matter right now. I had to find an old man to protect me so I could get on with my life.

Did I really have to? I could dye my hair and change my name. I could go into hiding. It would give me time to figure out a way to escape Beryl's attention for good. Right? I could do this on my own.

I didn't need some old man hounding my every step.

When I scanned the bar, I found one grizzled bear of a man with his back to a wall in the far corner. He leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. A thick beard covered his wrinkled face. I grimaced. He looked like he might smell like yeasty beer.

Feri the ferret weaseled his way out of my hair and pointed past my nose. "He's over there!"

I followed the direction of Feri's little clawed paw and found someone else at the end of it. The creature wasn't pointed at the grizzled man in the corner. This man had long black hair flowing down his back. Some of it had been pulled into braids wound with delicate gold and silver wire.

A leather vest covered his broad shoulders, but the short sleeves of the t-shirt beneath left his muscle-bound, tattoo-covered arms bare. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of this unruly looking man. He scowled down into the depths of his amber-colored drink and scratched at the barest hint of stubble on his chiseled chin.

I blinked several times. "Oh," was all I could say.

My heart thumped wildly inside my chest. This man was not at all what I'd expected. He was a total hunk. His hair gleamed in the artificial light. When he turned his head and scowled in my direction, I caught a glimpse of his violet eyes.

## *Rhoan*

Damn women always stared. I didn't know what would ever get them off my back.

This one, a stunner with massive breasts barely contained by the flimsy, see-through top, gaped at me with her jaw nearly on the floor. I sighed and turned back to my drink so I could finish it off. By the time the glass was empty, she stood at my side.

I bit back a growl of frustration and stole another quick glance at the woman. She was damn pretty. Her lips had a berry stain to them. The sun seemed to shine through her golden curls even though we were inside at night. She was otherworldly and lush, and I wanted nothing more than to bury myself inside her.

But women and relationships were off limits.

So, before she could even speak, I said: "I'm not here looking for pussy."

She recoiled, taken aback. I would have chuckled were it not for the look of rage that suffused those green eyes of hers when she gathered herself again. Her hands trembled at her sides.

"What made you think I came over here to offer myself up to you? Is that what you expect of all women?" Venom filled her voice.

She was the kind of woman who could have slapped me across the face, and I would have thanked her.

I paused. Had it really been that long since a woman touched me? Was I really that starved for affection?

"You're an asshole. That's no way to talk to anyone, no matter what they wanted to ask of you." Her lips pursed and her nose wrinkled as she stared me down.

I raised my glass to the bartender. I wasn't nearly drunk enough for this. To the woman, I said, "It's none of your business, but I took a vow of not-interested-in-your-opinion."

Beyond the voluptuous blonde, another blonde laughed. This one was tall and as thin as a reed. A fire burned under her skin. I could almost see it radiating out of her. The core of her aura wasn't bright, though. It was dark at the very center, like she had a bit of darkness hidden away inside her.

Turning back to the voluptuous blonde, I studied her aura. Something about it struck me as familiar. I couldn't quite place where I'd felt power like this before. This woman wasn't human, but her pointed ears could have told me as much.

Still, I didn't need a prickly fae woman telling me what to do with my life.

I'd already given my vow to another: my queen.

"Tell him who you are," a small voice hissed.

I raised a brow and cut a sidelong glance in the woman's direction. A small, tawny ferret had emerged from her voluminous hair. It gripped her earlobe with sharp little fingers, but I didn't think that was why she wore that deep scowl.

The woman puffed out her cheeks, leaned forward, and pointed a finger in my direction. Just as she opened her mouth, her eyes went wide. They dropped to her right shoulder, where a crossbow bolt jutted out from her body.

I shot to my feet. She turned those wide eyes up to me. Her shock lasted barely a heartbeat before she pulled herself together and grabbed the front of my vest.

Teeth clenched tight, she growled, "Take me back to my apartment."

"What in the seven courts is going on?" I scanned the crowd behind her to see who could have fired the bolt.

The bar was unusually full tonight. That's what I thought at first glance. There were repeating faces in the crowd, though. Someone was using an illusion, copying patrons to create a crowd that they could hide behind. I focused my attention and noticed the faint aura of fae magic. I'd almost missed it because it was such a low-level glamour spell.

“Cerridwen!” the little ferret shrieked.

“Shush. I’ll be fine.” The woman turned her attention back to me. “Home. Now.”

That name struck me as familiar, but I couldn’t place it while I searched the bar for the attacker. I put a hand on Cerridwen’s waist and pulled her close to my chest so I could turn her away from the crowd.

Cerridwen...that was a name I’d heard ages ago. A fae child, barely more than a little girl. My queen made me promise that I would pick up my sword in her daughter’s name someday. They’d refused to tell me where Cerridwen was. I’d been heartbroken. My liege hadn’t trusted me.

This woman couldn’t be that very same Cerridwen. I remembered a toddler with a poof of golden curls and a sharp tooth at the corner of her impish smile. This was a full-grown woman of marrying age—with a body meant to entice and please.

“That’s a poisoned bolt from the Unseelie Court,” the ferret whispered.

“Thanks. I can tell it’s poisoned,” Cerridwen snapped. “I didn’t need you to tell me.”

Her knees gave out. I moved to catch her without pressing the bolt into my own chest. Torn between finding the attacker and getting this woman out of the bar, I froze. It’d been too long since I’d saved anyone...I...

“Let’s go. Point the way,” I grumbled as I lifted the woman into my arms to princess carry her out of the bar.

“Hey! Where are you taking her?” the athletic blonde shouted after me in the dark parking lot outside.

She caught up to me with her long legs and shot ahead to block my way. She threw her arms wide. I glared at her. She could have been the attacker. I saw the darkness buried beneath her light arcana. I wouldn’t have put it past her.

“Don’t worry, Vi,” the woman in my arms said to the one in the way. “He’s on our side. I can’t explain how right now.”

Vi sputtered. I pushed past her. If that crossbow bolt was poisoned, we didn't have a lot of time. We had to find an herbalist who could neutralize the poison right away. We weren't going to find one waiting at Cerridwen's apartment, though. The poison must have been addling her mind already.

Vi caught up with us and ran alongside my long strides. "I can burn it away. Let me help!"

I gave her a side-eye when the woman in my arms stiffened. There was something between them that betrayed a problem beneath the surface of their relationship.

"No," Cerridwen said, almost too fast. She swallowed and tried again. "No, don't worry about me. I've got it."

Vi stopped. I glanced back and noted the hurt on her face. Maybe the woman had a core tainted with darkness, but I got the sense that wasn't her fault. A light shone through it, nonetheless.

"Stay," I told Vi. I glanced back at the bar and the people flowing out into the night. "There's an assassin hunting Cerridwen. Your aura screams with power. Use that to distract the assassin while we get away."

Vi stole another look at her friend. There was a chasm between the two women, but that wasn't my problem. At least, it wasn't right now. If this really was the lost princess, then she was going to have to learn to be more diplomatic than this.

The future of her court would rest upon her ability to make friends with people she hated. That's how it worked for every queen.

Vi threaded her fingers together and stretched, cracking her knuckles in the process. A wicked grin spread across her face. Cerridwen lurched in my arms and shouted at Vi, begging her not to start fires.

"I have it under control!" Vi gave us a two-finger salute before spinning back towards trouble.

This would have been easier if I'd been able to spot the assassin's aura, but Beryl hired a smart one. They knew that I

could read auras, so they intentionally kept their magic minimal in order to avoid being picked up.

I had to trust that Vi was capable of making a scene that would keep everyone distracted. The enraged shouts of drunk middle aged men proved me correct. I didn't look back, but I could already hear the beginning of a bar fight breaking out. If we were lucky, the assassin would get trapped in the mosh-pit of a fight.

Once Cerridwen and I were out of the woman's earshot, I asked, "Why don't you trust her?"

"What do you mean? I *do* trust her! She's one of my closest friends."

I snorted. "She offered you help, and you sent her away. This situation is do-or-die right now. This could have been sorted out, but you chose to push her help aside and do it your way. That showed a serious lack of trust."

Cerridwen sighed. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

Fair. The woman was dying in my arms. I could already see her skin turning pale, making her freckles stark. We had to act quickly. There was no time to waste.

"Think about your apartment. Envision yourself walking through the door and looking at your place. Can you do that?" It was an odd request, but if she was who I thought she was, then she would understand.

"I don't get how that helps us right now," she grumbled.

Maybe this wasn't the lost princess. If she wasn't, then who was she?

Still, I wanted to help her. I refused to lose anyone else, even a random woman at the bar.

She closed her eyes and informed me that she had the image of her apartment in her mind's eye. I took a sharp turn towards the nearby motel office. The neon light in the front window blinked to announce the current vacancies, but that wasn't what we'd come here for.



I shoved through the door and stepped in-between. One moment, we were outside in the outer Syracuse wilds. The next moment, we were in a pretty apartment that smelled of blood and wood.

The windows across the way were boarded up, blocking out what could have been a pretty view—if I was to guess from the size of the massive window frame.

*CERRI*

“WHAT IN THE seven courts happened here?” The man cradled me in his arms as he took in the state of my apartment.

I groaned and kicked so I could roll out of his grasp. He lurched forward to catch me, but I put my hand against his chest and shoved myself away from him. My feet hit the ground, and I wobbled a bit, but I was able to stagger to the kitchen where my herbal kit awaited me.

“We should really get you to a healer,” the man said, taking a step towards me like he might sweep me off my feet and whisk me out of here.

There wasn't time. I held my hand out to stop him.

“Shut up and let me work.”

My vision wavered from the poison. I closed my eyes and summoned my willpower to push it back. It shouldn't have worked, but I wasn't in the mood to mess around. When I opened my eyes, the room was still and clear.

For now.

I had moments to get this started. The pain in my chest flared like the flickering fingers of fire. Vi could have chased the poison out. She could have incinerated the bolt, avoiding the need to pull it out altogether.

I should have let her help me. Instead, I'd been stubborn and driven to do this all on my own. I didn't want to look too closely at the reasons why I'd eschewed Vi's help. If I did,

then I would open a can of worms that I didn't have time for right now.

As it was, I didn't even have time to ask the man his name. He stood behind me, awkwardly lingering in the middle of my living room like he didn't know what to do with himself.

First: neutralize poison. Second: remove bolt. Third: heal myself.

Though it was only three steps, it seemed like a lot more. I lifted jars of herbs with shaking hands and narrowed my eyes at the nearly unreadable labels. These had been a lot clearer earlier.

How freaking annoying was it to go to a bar only to get shot by a crossbow? It was ludicrous. Who used a crossbow? Fae.

"This is so stupid. I didn't ask for any of this. I don't even want her damned throne." I scowled as I worked.

The man inched closer. His long black hair danced in the breeze that blew in between the boards over my windows. I would have to cover them with plastic once the temperatures dropped.

"Why aren't we going to a healer?" the man asked as he hovered over me like I might collapse at any moment.

Honestly, it was a valid concern. I was racing the clock here.

Why hadn't I trusted Vi? This would have been so much easier!

I dumped an unmeasured amount of herbs into my cauldron and prayed that this would turn out all right. It had to. I'd been doing this for years. My craft was fine tuned. I would be able to do this poisoned, blindfolded, and with one hand tied behind my back.

"I *am* the healer," I told the fae man.

He jerked back, surprised. Of course, he was. He didn't know anything about the life I'd been forced to live up until now. He didn't know how I'd been trapped under the rule of a

murderous shifter Alpha for most of my life. I'd been forced to adapt and survive.

The propane element under the cauldron clicked several times before flaring to life. Blue flames licked the bottom of the cast iron cauldron, and steam started to rise from within. Had this been a normal pot, it would have taken way longer. I'd seasoned—and enchanted—this cast iron contraption to work with the upmost speed.

“Who *are* you?” the fae man asked.

Feri weaseled his way out of my hair and onto the counter before puffing up and proudly announcing: “She is Princess Cerridwen Dawnlight of the fallen Seelie Court of Lakesedge.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the man's face go white as a sheet. He looked like he'd seen a ghost the way he gaped at me.

“You can't be. There's no way.” He shook his head.

I smirked as the world wavered once again. “Why? Ashamed of what you said to me in the bar?”

The poison had worked its way into my system. I had had the barest moment left, but I kept up my attitude so that he wouldn't notice. My ruse must have been awful because he quickly reached around me and grabbed the mug I'd been reaching for. He set it on the counter with ease.

At this point, I had to accept help. It wasn't like I was trusting him to enter my body and root out the poison himself. I simply had to direct him around the kitchen. He quickly found my tea strainer and set it atop the mug.

This concoction was going to be hot, but there was no time to waste. A burnt tongue would be easy to heal later. Right now, I held my hand over the steaming mouth of the cauldron and waved it clockwise three times. My arcana bloomed within the belly of the cauldron. It danced with the herbs simmering within, unleashing their magical potential.

“Lift this—watch out, it will be hot! Lift this and pour it through the strainer.” I stepped back to let the man take ahold

of the cauldron.

As he worked, he cast several prying glances in my direction. I wanted to know who he was. Feri said that he'd worked for the Seelie Court, and...my parents. I hated calling the Seelie king and queen my parents when they hadn't raised me.

As soon as the man finished pouring the cauldron's contents into the mug, I snatched the handle of the sieve and tapped it against the rim to get the last of the liquid out. The ceramic mug was warm in my other hand. It was almost too warm to handle, but there was little time to waste.

Hands suddenly weak, my grip on the mug slipped. The man caught it before it could crash and spill everywhere, but that put his broad chest against my back. It would have been hot had it not been for the bolt in my back that he jarred.

I hissed in pain. He gingerly slid away from the bolt still in my body, but he didn't move away completely. He kept one hand beneath the mug and brought it up towards my lips.

"Sip," he urged.

I started to tell him that I knew, but the words tangled on my swollen tongue. My throat started to cinch tight. Soon, I wouldn't be able to swallow at all. I tried to lift the mug, but my fingers wouldn't wrap around it. My muscles had no strength to close my hand let alone raise the antidote to my mouth.

I'd taken too long.

"Come on, now," the man said softly.

He wound one arm around my lower back to keep me standing. With his other hand, he pushed the mug against my lips. I was able to open my mouth and gulp down the antidote. At first, I coughed and sputtered because it seared my lips and tongue. It soon cooled—that or I'd burned all the nerves away.

The liquid filled my stomach with warmth. I pulled my arcana inside me and felt it stir like a garden in the wind. The antidote spread through my body. It chased away the weakness

that'd been overtaking me. Now that I could draw a proper breath again, I realized just how close I'd cut it.

The man looked down at me with raised brows and creases at the corners of his eyes. His long hair hung around us like a curtain, making the space between us small and intimate. My breath hitched when he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Princess?”

Yeah, he had to go and ruin it.

I straightened and pulled myself out of his embrace. He quickly snatched my arm to keep me from getting away. I glared at his touch, but he tilted his head, his gaze flicking to the bolt still in my chest.

Sucking in a deep breath, I grimaced. He reached behind me and gripped the bolt from the back. I grabbed at the front of his leather vest to tell him he couldn't yank it out the way it went in. Before I could say anything, he snapped the bolt in half.

The recoil swept through my body like a wildfire across my nerves. I hissed, but it wasn't the worst pain I'd endured before. Alvin's hands had been far worse. This was nothing—and I hated that it was true.

The man gently pinched the pointed tip of the bolt between two fingers and slid it free of my body. That didn't quite hurt as much. Now that it was no longer in my chest, I should have set about cleaning it up.

I couldn't be bothered. My muscles had nothing left. My feet were heavy, and my eyelids sank, threatening to stay closed for the next eight hours.

My knees were still a little wobbly, but they managed to get me from the kitchen to my bedroom—fuck the couch, it was still laced with glass from the first time the window was shattered. I threw myself down onto the bed, yanked my quilt over myself and fell into a deep sleep.

I couldn't believe I was standing over the lost princess. I'd barely met the girl before the court fell. My memories of her were faded and faulty. Our paths never really crossed, so I had almost nothing to compare this woman to. She looked vaguely like the girl I remembered, but my memories were old and vague.

This was a woman, there was no mistaking that. There was no softness in her aside from her body—and most of that softness could be found in her chest. I wondered what had taken the softness from her. She seemed made of steel. Only someone with a tempered core could feasibly make their own poison antidote while actively dying.

It'd been impressive, but foolish. I took a seat in the corner of her bedroom and watched over her while she recovered.

This wasn't at all how I expected any of this to go.

I'd imagined this moment for years. In my mind, a soft little blonde would show up on my doorstep with big, pleading eyes and a tremble in her lip. She would softly ask for my assistance, and I would get down on one knee to pledge my allegiance to her. I would follow the gentle little fae woman to hell and back to save our court.

This woman...wasn't anything like I'd imagined. What happened to make her like this? She should have lived an easy life in the arms of a supernatural family. I knew that the queen, her mother, had her placed in another family's crib like a

changeling child, replacing the daughter that belonged to the family.

It was an old practice, not one traditionally observed anymore. However, the king and queen needed to protect their only heir. They gave her up so she would be safe and have a chance at a peaceful childhood.

Wherever they'd placed Cerridwen, it hadn't been peaceful.

Even from here, I could see the scars on her fair skin. The ones that crossed her throat started a fire in my chest. Rage seethed inside me and turned my veins red-hot. I clenched and unclenched my fists to see if I couldn't shake out some of this anger, but it lingered, growing hotter and hotter by the moment.

The ferret scrambled into the room, stopped, and rose onto his hind legs to peer up at the sleeping Cerridwen. The princess's face twisted in disgust, even in her sleep. It almost made me laugh. If she only knew how much I deserved that look.

"Where was she?" I asked the ferret, clearly a guide sent to help her realize her destiny.

The ferret spread his paws wide in a gesture to indicate that he knew about as much as I did. I sighed and ran a hand over my face.

"I guess that tracks. For her to stay hidden, no one could know where she was. Still, I wish I could have found her long before this." My anger still hadn't banked, but I was good at hiding it from my voice.

"Whatever she endured, it will undoubtedly make her a good queen. No leader should be naïve to the ways of war. It seems that the home she was placed in helped her learn a number of harsh realities. It was for the best." The ferret nodded.

I stood, snatched the little weasel up from the floor, and marched over to the nearby bedroom window. "That's enough from you."

After opening the window, I set the ferret down onto the narrow ledge outside and slammed the window shut in his face. No one needed to be treated so roughly that there were visible scars leftover—certainly not scars like the one on her throat. Someone had touched her with the intention to kill.

The ferret slammed his furry little fists against the outside of the glass. I flipped him the middle finger and went back to my post in the corner of the room. My mouth was dry, and I yearned for a glass of something hard, but I couldn't leave yet. Not until she was awake.

At my post, I thought of Cerridwen's friend, Vi. That woman hadn't been normal. That aura could have made a midnight sky look like day. She was a powerhouse, for sure, and one of Cerridwen's friends. Did Cerridwen have other friends with just as much power? We would need all the help we could get if we were going to overthrow Beryl once and for all.

As I sat there, tiny lights started to twinkle in the air. I realized after a few moments that I was looking at a rainbow myriad of fireflies, all dancing over Cerridwen's bed. As she inhaled in her sleep, the fireflies drifted closer to her. When she exhaled, vines unfurled from her bed. They spread about the room, climbing the walls until they could hang great swaths of purple flowers over her like a veil.

My lips parted in awe.

If I hadn't been convinced that this woman truly was the Seelie Princess, I was now. The landscape spreading around her as she healed was the spitting image of home. A yearning tore my chest open and reminded me of all I'd lost.

Thankfully, Cerridwen slept, so she couldn't see the tears that slipped down my cheek.

*CERRI*



BERYL PLUNGED her razor-sharp fingers through my chest and wrapped them around my heart before pulling it free of my body. I gaped as I watched the still-beating organ thump in her hand. She grinned down at me and licked the blood from her fingers while holding my gaze.

I gasped and woke. The room tilted. I had no idea where I was. A scream sat on my lips, but I couldn't get it out. Though I opened my mouth, there was no sound. I scrabbled, clawing at my throat like that was the problem.

"Shit, all right," a man muttered under his breath.

I looked up to find the fae warrior slowly approaching, his shoulders stooped to make himself less imposing. His hands hovered in the air between us like he didn't know what to do with them.

"Fuck," he whispered as he hung back with a confused grimace on his lips.

His uselessness made me laugh. Sound poured out of me again. I felt a pang of guilt that it was at his expense, but the relief of being able to speak again overwhelmed it.

He rocked back on his heels, a flat look on his face before he shook his head at me. I smiled and let out one last soft laugh. Throwing the sheets aside, I moved to get out of bed.

The room tilted again. The events of the night before came back to me. Though the memories chased away the nightmare haunting me, it wasn't much better. I pressed my hand to where the hole in my chest was. The leftover wound from the crossbow bolt ached fiercely.

"You bled all over the damn place," the man said.

I snorted. "That's not a first."

A fierce flush turned his pale fae skin a bright red. He straightened and turned away. The man was quick, though. I was surprised he caught my meaning so fast.

The smell of fresh flowers tickled my nose and brought my attention away from the bed. My jaw dropped. I wasn't sure how I hadn't noticed it sooner. Wisteria drooped over my bed

like a curtain. It hadn't been there when I'd passed out. The room had been empty. Now, it was a botanical garden.

The sensation of warm sunlight drifted over my bare arms and rushed up my shoulders and neck. My arcana. I must have lost control of it in the night. That was new.

Spinning away from me, the fae warrior put a bit of distance between us. He clapped his hands together and slid a tired sidelong glance in my direction. "I need a drink."

After last night, I wanted one, too. I had work to do first.

The fae warrior stalked towards the bedroom door like he might find a bar in my living room. At the threshold between rooms, he vanished. One step, he was there. The next, he was gone. I gaped at his slick exit and wondered how he'd managed it.

Then I remembered why I'd gone to him in the first place. I needed someone to protect me, not someone who was going to run off for a drink the moment I woke up. Glaring at the doorway, I crossed my arms over my chest only to annoy the bolt wound. I hissed and scurried off to the bathroom so I could take care of it.

"I don't even know your name yet," I grumbled as I pulled out the first aid kit.

I had work anyway. Vi was on the schedule for this morning. With how many times she'd accidentally set Bad Moon Café on fire, I wanted to get there and make sure the place was still standing.

Cleaning my wound was easy, if a bit painful. Once that was done, I gulped down another healing potion to mend the wound. After showering and getting dressed, I headed off to work.

The café was still standing, much to my relief. If Vi burned it down, I would cover her house in poison ivy. Sure, Morgan might hunt me down and kill me, but it would be worth it.

He was there when I arrived. The dragon shifter with salt and pepper hair leaned against the counter and watched Vi

work with open love in his eyes. I turned away from them when jealousy reared its ugly head.

When would it be my turn? I'd had a hot man in my bedroom last night, but he'd made it very clear that he wasn't interested. He'd been insufferably crass upon first impression, too. The fae warrior wasn't an option at all.

Vi didn't see it that way, though.

As soon as the last human left the premises, she turned to me. "Last night was wild! I had no idea who I was supposed to find last night, so I started a bar fight."

Morgan sputtered into his coffee cup. She hadn't told him. And, from the massive smile on Vi's face, she wasn't ashamed of it, either. After the two shared a silent conversation with a single look, Vi turned back to me.

"I got everyone in there fighting. Through it all, I noticed a fae woman. She looked a bit like you with the ears, but her eyes were topaz. I figured she had to be the one we were looking for, so I pretended to be drunk and threw myself at her. Seeing that you managed to get away, I guess it worked."

I bit my lip. Vi had literally thrown herself into the arms of the enemy to keep me safe. I knew that she didn't deserve my mistrust, but I couldn't help it, either. She was the daughter of the greatest demon lord there ever was: Lucifer.

Wasn't that cause for alarm?

I guess he hadn't started life as a demon lord. Lucifer had been an angel before his father cast him out. Since meeting Morgan and preventing the apocalypse, Vi had turned her fire into light. She deserved better than what I gave.

My trust issues weren't really about her, but I wasn't ready to admit that. Instead, I made myself an iced tea and drowned it with enchanted syrup. The blackberry was for sweetness, but the sage brought a bit of wisdom that I was going to need in the coming days.

Morgan paused. He narrowed his eyes. The slight tilt of his head held a question. "What's in the hood of your sweater?"

I'd forgotten about the weight of the small ferret sleeping back there. His body was warm against my shoulder blades. He was cute when he slept, perhaps because he was quiet for once.

"It's an emissary from the Seelie Court," I explained.

Morgan raised a brow. He uncrossed his ankles, standing straight. "There is no Seelie Court here. Last I checked, there was only an Unseelie Court. Queen Beryl runs it, right?"

I nodded. "You are absolutely correct, on all accounts."

Silence hung in the air between us. Morgan seemed perplexed, but he didn't press. Instead, he nodded to his mate and stepped outside. How the two of them worked together so well, I would never know. They barely said a word to one another, but each knew exactly what the other wanted.

Once he was gone, Vi sidled up to me and bumped me with her hip. "So, how did last night go? Was it everything you wanted and more?"

I cut her a disgusted glare. "Are you insinuating that we fucked after he ripped the crossbow bolt from my chest?"

Vi paused, blinked, and gave an appreciative nod. "Well, now that you put it like that...I've had worse first dates. I mean, just the other day, Morgan had to stitch me up after I cut myself on a wire fence."

"What were you doing climbing a fence?" I threw my hands in the air.

She wagged a finger at me. "You're changing the subject."

"Hm. I wonder why?" Sarcasm dripped from my voice.

Vi chuckled and moved to clean a blender. As she worked, she spoke over her shoulder. "There's a lot going on in your life right now. I wanted to lighten the mood with some teasing. Would...would you rather talk about things?"

Though Ness was the one with will-bending arcana, Vi somehow managed to open a floodgate in me. Everything I'd

been worrying about came tumbling out all at once. The tsunami of information didn't drown her, much to my surprise.

We'd all been through the wringer. Most of us, Ness, Addie, and even Vi, were learning something new about ourselves every day. Unloading all of this didn't come as a surprise to Vi.

"I don't want to be a princess. I want to be Cerri James." I was pouting, and I could tell.

Vi put the blender away and turned, crossing her arms over her chest while she leaned against the counter. "Who said you weren't also Cerri James?"

I paused, taken aback. Wasn't I the one sipping the wisdom syrup? How did Vi spit such simple philosophical ideas so easily?

"Even if that's true, I still have to face this new truth, too. I don't want to do what everyone is asking me to do. They're all acting like I'm going to go on some sort of magical crusade like a modern King Arthur." My cup crinkled in my clenched hand until I forced myself to soften my grip before my tea ended up all over the floor.

Pausing, another idea crept to the surface. "I don't like the idea that I'm not my parents' daughter. I belong to a king and queen I don't even remember. Parents who stole a child away just so they could hide me somewhere. Why couldn't they have left the both of us? I could have had a sibling...and I wouldn't have wondered why I wasn't shifting with everyone else."

My fae parents left me in that shifter pack without once looking into what kind of man was running it. It wasn't right of them. They could have done better. I didn't want to trade the parents who raised me for anything, but I did blame my fae parents for their shitty choice.

"Who does that?" I ask under my breath.

"People who are desperate." Vi gave a sorrowful half-smile. "What do you know about the circumstances yet? It's obvious that their court fell. Why?"

I scowled as I thought.

“Beryl,” we said in unison.

I think we all knew it. Who else would be the cause of the Seelie Court’s downfall? Beryl’s reaction to me at the edge of Lake Onondaga had been very obvious.

*I thought I killed you.*

My breath hitched. That meant she’d likely killed the child that had been taken from my parents’ home. The girl hadn’t even had a chance. She’d been a young shifter in a fae world. She was gone. I yearned to turn back time and pluck her out of that timeline so that I could give her back to my parents as a thank you for raising me.

I wanted to scream and stomp my foot at all the injustices, but there was nothing I could do about it. Right now, I had to worry about myself. Beryl wanted me dead.

“If I tell her that I don’t want to upset the current power balance, do you think she’ll spare me?” I asked Vi.

The blonde raised a doubtful brow. “We’re talking about *Beryl* here. She’s the most conniving bitch I’ve ever had the displeasure of living near.”

I winced. Vi had a point, but the fae could be bargained with. If I could somehow convince her that I wanted nothing to do with her throne, I might be able to twist my side of the bargain to my advantage.

I shook myself and straightened my spine. “I’m going to pay Beryl a visit later.”

The tiny creature in my hood stirred. He flailed, trying to get free of the soft fabric. Winding around my neck, he filled my vision as he pressed his little paws to my cheeks.

“You can’t go there! She will kill you if you even step foot near her court!”

Vi’s head tilted almost completely sideways as she gaped at the little talking creature in front of my face.

I grabbed Feri by the scruff of his neck and plucked him from where he sat. He dangled from the tips of my fingers, but that didn't stop him. He threw his paws in the air and kept going.

"You need to go back to Rhoan and lay low. He will keep you safe until you're powerful enough to overthrow Beryl once and for all."

This *Anastasia* fairytale bullshit was getting old. That's not how things worked around here. Beryl was the head of an entire faction. She ruled almost a third of Lakesedge. I couldn't go around waging battles over wars that never involved me. I was just a person trying to live her own life.

"You mean the guy who left me so he could go get blasted at the bar?" I wasn't about to ask him for anything.

Even if he did save me the night before. I would have been fine without him, though. Vi and I could have gotten out of the bar just fine on our own. She could have taken me home. I made the antidote all on my own anyway.

I didn't need Rhoan.

And I didn't need to listen to a rodent.

"I'll handle this on my own. Thanks," I said.

The ferret went wild. He flailed in my grasp, his limbs and tail whipping in every direction. "You can't! She will kill you, and the last hope of the Seelie Court will be gone. There are people waiting for you to fulfill your destiny. Your actions will betray each and every one of them."

My lips curled defiantly. I hadn't asked for this. The café was my life. My friends were the only people I needed. All I wanted was to mind my own damn business and keep my head low. I'd had enough excitement for one life already. I could count my near-death experiences on one hand, and that was already too much for me.

"Lakesedge is doing just fine with Beryl at the head of the fae court. They don't need me. Everyone will be just fine so long as we let her do her own thing," Vi said.

Feri snarled. “You are not thinking about those cast out of their homes! This is the home of the Seelie Court! Not Beryl’s unholy unseelie. She shoved your people out of their homeland.”

“Bruh,” Vi said. “The fae aren’t even from here. They came over with the first colonists. This definitely isn’t their homeland.”

“I meant the court! The court is their homeland. They brought their court with them, and the devious Queen Beryl stole it.” Feri balled his paws into fists.

With a sigh, I bent, grabbed a large storage container, and dropped Feri into it. I made sure to keep the lid cracked so he could breathe, but I slid the container back into its spot on the shelf where other containers kept it upright. When Feri scurried to the top of the container and shoved it upwards, it hit the shelf above.

He dropped back down and glared at me. Of course, he was a ferret. I knew not to underestimate him. It was only a matter of time before he found his way out. At least, I would be free of this fairytale nightmare shit for a while.

I crouched in front of the container and tapped it, which was probably cruel in retrospect. “I don’t want what you’re selling.”

The bell over the door chimed. I shot upright, expecting human customers. Instead, Ness and Addie entered. I let out a sigh of relief upon seeing my friends. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed them in the past few days.

“I heard there was a hot fae man!” Ness announced.

Addie, no longer the sheepish little woman she’d been before, wiggled her brows suggestively. It seemed that a bit of detective shifter dick had done Addie some good. She was way happier than she’d ever been before, and I was...I was happy for her.

I wanted something like that for myself, but it wasn’t going to be Rhoan. I knew that much for sure.



I lifted a finger and pointed it at Ness. “Don’t you even start.”

**A**t the end of the day, I stood outside the café and considered marching up to Beryl's restaurant at the edge of Lake Onondaga. It was too soon. I needed to figure out how I was going to approach her. Entrapping her in her own fae bargain would take finesse; I knew that much, at least.

Instead, I turned towards the warehouse district at the mouth of the river that fed into the lake. I'd called it home, enjoying my refurbished warehouse apartment for the past few years. It was feeling less and less like home lately.

Maybe it'd been Alvin's invasion that made the apartment cold and unwelcoming. It could have been Bastien's army of zombies that'd ruined it for me. I swear I could still smell death in every corner even though Addie promised me that I'd gotten every last scrap of dead-thing out of my place.

Cleaning that mess had been nightmarish, and I never wanted to experience it again.

When I opened the door, I expected to find Rhoan waiting for me inside. He was nowhere to be seen. The place looked just the same as I'd left it. No one had been by. Rhoan hadn't even bothered to come to check up on me.

I didn't know why my stomach sank with disappointment. I didn't need him to protect me. Soon, I wouldn't need anyone. I would get Beryl off my back, and I would settle into my old life once more. That was all I really wanted.

I traced the scar around my throat. My heart trembled with fear. I had to remind myself that Alvin Combs, the former leader of the Lakesedge shifter pack, was truly dead. Ness, Ryder, and Addie had seen to that.

Bastien had used Alvin's corpse more than a few times. The Reaper had invited that monster's soul back and shoved it into the rotten wolf corpse so that he could run rampant over the landscape once more. Bastien had been using Alvin to hunt Addie, but the idea that Alvin could be back struck a chord in me.

Ice slithered through my veins like sudden cold rain on a hot day. I shuddered and turned towards the bathroom so I could take a hot shower and wash away the stickiness of working in a coffee shop.

I was safe...well, at least as safe as I could be with Beryl breathing down my neck. At least, I wasn't the same person I'd been back when Alvin first kidnapped me. He'd used my near-human weakness against Ness in an attempt to make her submit to him. Ness had refused, and it'd almost gotten me killed.

It would have been nice to say that I didn't blame her, but a twinge of anger still simmered inside me. My friends never meant to hurt me. I was just the weak link between them all. My body was fragile compared to someone like Ness. And while Vi and Addie were more like me, they had a wealth of power to keep others away from them.

Up until recently, all I had were my potions. They hadn't prevented anyone from picking me up and carrying me off.

Shoulders hunched, I gripped the edge of my sink and bit back a scream that'd been building inside me since Ness decided to face Alvin head-on. Nothing had been the same since then. While the community was safer, I couldn't find my own peace.

Over and over, someone crashed in and stole it from me. I didn't want to be a princess or a queen. I wanted to be able to sleep without nightmares. Was that so much to ask for? Why

didn't I deserve a bit of safety for once? It didn't make sense to me.

I pulled the collar of my shirt down so I could look at the fading scar puckering the skin on my chest. The wound had healed slowly, like my potion had lost its punch. Though I was tired from work, we would need more healing potions. Ness could heal on her own, but Vi, Addie, and I needed a bit of help.

After my shower, I padded out into the kitchen to get to work. There, I paused. Over time, I'd collected just about every herb I could have wanted. When I trailed my fingers over the jar lids, I felt the pulsing energy within each.

Chamomile hummed softly like someone snoring in their sleep. Lavender had a similar soft energy. Black tea and coffee grounds buzzed with liveliness, one like classical dance and the other like a bustling rave. There were others with more ominous energies, like comfrey and pennyroyal.

I could do almost anything with a handful of herbs and my cauldron. The propane burner clicked beneath the black cauldron before flaring to life. Pale blue flames licked the black iron while I considered what I really wanted to do.

A sensation rippled through me and shoved me into action. I lurched forward, snatched a book from the shelves above my brewing station, and slapped it open on the counter. It was a book that I didn't open often, filled with recipes for potions that could be dangerous. I usually stuck to utilitarian potions because I wasn't about to dabble in dark powers.

This wasn't dark, though. At least, not by the classic definition. I wasn't trying to poison or curse anyone. The potion recipe I needed was meant to explore one's own shadow. There was a side of us that took on everything we didn't want to acknowledge about ourselves. It was a dumpster for our bad memories and our cruel thoughts.

I sprinkled herbs for clarity and guidance into the cauldron and felt their power swell. My conviction slipped. I didn't know what my shadow held. I hoped that it would have memories of the life I'd left behind as a child.

Feri, clearly peeved that I'd been ignoring him all day, stomped up to the edge of the stove where my cauldron sat. His little nose twitched. He cocked his head.

He gave me a disgusted look. "This smells poisonous. Are you crafting a flying ointment?"

Taken aback, I asked, "A *what*? I'm not trying to fly."

"Not what I meant. You're clearly uninformed, so I will tell you what you are doing."

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared down at the rodent trying to ferret-splain my own craft to me. He was lucky that I hadn't punted him into the lake yet. Maybe it was because of his cute stature.

"A *flying ointment* is an old witch potion meant to help the witch astral project, either into their own subconscious or into other planes. It alters your state of mind with powerful hallucinogens so that you can do things your otherwise weak mind would not be able to do on its own." Feri nodded, clearly proud of himself.

I pointed a wooden spoon at him. "If you ever explain my own work to me again, I will lock you in something much less *breathable* than a storage container."

His lip curled, revealing sharp teeth. "You will need to learn to have more grace so that you do not offend absolutely everyone who passes through your court."

I didn't remind Feri that I wanted nothing to do with the fae court. The argument was a losing battle, and I wasn't going to waste energy on it.

"If you plan on taking this flying ointment tonight, you should call Rhoan to stand watch over you. I know that the two of you aren't exactly on good terms yet. I would not argue if you wanted to call your female friends. I would feel much more comfortable if someone were to be here while you made this initial trip." Feri looked into the cauldron dubiously.

No. I didn't want anyone here. A fierce need to be self-sufficient slammed into me. I could do anything on my own. I

didn't need others constantly holding me up, constantly rescuing me. It...it was shameful.

"How about this?" I crossed my arms over my chest before facing the rodent. "I'll leave my phone unlocked. If anything happens, you can call one of my friends. In fact, I'll open it up to Addie's phone number. Her husband is a cop, and he has teleportation powers. Call them, and they'll be here in the blink of an eye."

Feri wrinkled his nose. When he narrowed his eyes at me, I wondered what was going on in his little rodent mind. But he acquiesced, much to my surprise.

After the potion brewed, I poured it into a teacup. There was something moderately entertaining about drinking such a poisonous brew out of a delicate cup. It brought a smile to my face while I drank something that could potentially kill me.

Had I balanced the herbs properly? Was it too much? I liked to think that I had my craft perfected, but all it took was one improperly brewed potion to prove me wrong. If anything happened, then Addie could use the ashes of my body to raise my corpse and admonish me one last time.

The room turned hazy. My head floated towards the ceiling. I grabbed at the counter to keep myself from falling.

*So, that's why they call it a flying ointment,* I thought before I promptly blacked out.



*I CRASHED THROUGH THE DARK, slamming into door after door. I almost laughed at the shapes they took. What should have been a rough concept had become actual doors. There were French doors, sliding glass doors, screen doors.*

*Over and over, I hit them. The impact rattled me each time. They started to slam shut as I approached. I couldn't stop my fall. Someone else was trying to block me out. I had no choice but to careen straight into the hard surface.*

*Nothing could stop me, though. Whoever had closed these doors didn't have the power to keep me out. My potion was a little too strong, but that was a problem I would deal with later. Right now, I tore through the magic keeping my memories from me.*

*I'd always thought that I'd forgotten my childhood. My parents told me that one day, I woke up and was just different. They'd had no explanation for why I'd changed. In my mind, I'd blamed Alvin. He'd made my childhood a nightmare, so I blocked it all out.*

*That wasn't entirely true. I couldn't remember anything because someone locked it away.*

*The change my parents noted...that was when the fae took their real child and put me in the little girl's place.*

*A knife slid through my heart at the thought, but I barely had time to process it. I fell into a memory before I could even think to stop. The world bloomed with color and sound all crashing in at once.*

*I blinked away the blur. The world was too large. Everything towered over me. I stared up at the massive marble columns and the flowers hanging from them with my jaw hanging open in awe.*

*"There you are, my little blossom." A woman lifted me from the ground and held me close to her chest.*

*I craned my neck to look up at her. She had long blonde hair the same shade of gold as my own. It hung down her back and revealed pointed ears heavy with a myriad of earrings like she was a magpie collecting shiny objects. When she smiled, I noted a sharp tooth at the corner of her mouth.*

*We looked so similar, this woman and the woman that I saw in my mirror.*

*She cradled the back of my head and pressed a kiss to my forehead. When she pulled back, her grin practically beamed. She was brighter than the sun shining down on us.*

*Was this the queen who'd given birth to me? I refused to call her Mom. She hadn't raised me the way that Molly James*

*had. This woman hadn't patched up my skinned knees. She hadn't been there when my prom date cheated on me, leaving me crying on the curb that night.*

*But this woman mesmerized me in a way I couldn't explain.*

*The man that sidled up behind her had brown hair woven with threads of copper. He pressed a passion-filled kiss to her cheek before turning his attention to me. The eyes that looked back at me were the same color as my own.*

*This is where I'd come from. There was no mistaking it.*

*I just...didn't want to accept it.*

*"We should prepare," the man said.*

*His wife pouted and bounced me on her hip. "I don't want to. I want to stay here with my family. Do we really have to entertain a foreign emissary tonight?"*

*"As much as I would like to stay here and enjoy my time with the two greatest loves of my life, I fear we have no other choice." He ran a hand along his wife's hair. "We need to discuss options for our daughter's future. Her hand in marriage can assure a peaceful future for everyone."*

*The woman scowled, her upper lip curling in disdain. She quickly turned and set me down onto a pile of pillows so she could drag her husband away. Still, I could hear their hushed whispers in the corner.*

*"They do not want an arranged marriage," the woman hissed.*

*Her husband gently gripped her upper arms. He rubbed his thumbs along her ivory skin. "The Unseelie have promised. Their intentions are clear."*

*Her nose wrinkled. "Then why are they sending her? The Unseelie are not sending their princeling. They have sent my devious cousin, Beryl."*

*Beryl? I'm related to her? I mean, it made sense, but I still didn't like the idea of it. The thought of shared blood between the two of us made my stomach turn.*



*“She wants to take my position,” the woman continued. “She has been jealous of me since the very beginning. Our parents were siblings who went separate ways. Her mother went to the Unseelie while mine went to the Seelie. She has never forgiven me for that, or for the position it has afforded me.”*

*Her husband gently tucked his bent knuckle beneath her chin. “No one can take this life from you. I will make sure of it. You are safe here with me, my darling. Nothing may hurt you or our daughter here.”*

*A broken promise. It would curdle between the two of them. I could already feel it coming. Beryl would arrive and take everything from them, breaking the King’s promise to his Queen.*

*Poison curdled in my stomach. I scowled. I’d thought it was the unsettling revelation of my kinship with Beryl, but this was more than that. Queasiness washed over me. It rose up and dragged me down into the darkness. I tumbled away from the memory and found myself scrabbling to get back.*

*A frantic need to return hit me in the gut. I cried and screamed for the world and family that a lost part of me desperately missed. There was still so much more that I needed to remember, more that would give me the answers I needed.*

But I was dying.

I’d consumed too much poison.

Shit.

This hadn’t worked the way I’d wanted. My lungs turned feeble. My heart slowed. The poison turned my body off. What would happen when I died? Would I fade away? Would I turn to ash and fly away on the wind?

*Rhoan*

I CRASHED through the in-between and barreled through Cerridwen's living room. She was slumped on the kitchen floor just like the little ferret promised. Alcohol sang through my veins and made the room wobble, but the moment I saw her, it all bled away.

I dropped to my knees and tapped her cheek. I didn't want to slap the poor woman, but when she didn't respond, I was sorely tempted. My heart thundered in wild fear. I couldn't lose the last member of the family I'd sworn to protect.

"She did this to herself," the ferret said with disdain.

Jars were scattered all across the countertop. I recognized most of them, and all were mildly poisonous on their own. Together, they created a concoction that would tear through her body. Thankfully, she was fae. This shouldn't kill her.

*Shouldn't...*

I spun on him. "You let her do this?"

He puffed up, clearly aggravated. I was going to aggravate his ass across the room for allowing this.

You know what? I gave in to my anger and snatched the rodent off the floor. With a flick of my wrist, I tossed him across the room. Like a cat, he would land on his feet. Or not. I didn't give a fuck.

"Cerridwen," I said softly. Then I recalled her request the night before. "Cerri. Come on. Come back to us."

My heart stuttered. Her pretty pout was turning blue. I had to wake her up.

Frantically looking around, I searched for something that might be labeled *antidote*. She'd made her own on the spot the night before. I doubted she had a stash of them just lying around, but I still had an obligation to look.

Damn woman. I turned my back on her for one night, and she decided that poisoning herself was a good idea? I didn't care what this potion was meant to do. I wasn't going to let her do it ever again.

Gripping her chin, I pulled her close. “If you die on me now, I will never know salvation. Do you really want to do that to me?”

I thought she was unconscious. Yet, a small smile curled at the corners of her mouth. Her head tilted back and thumped against the cabinet behind her. For a moment, I thought she went and died out of spite. Then she cracked open an eye.

Lifting a shaky hand, she pointed at a bottle. “That. Put it in hot water.”

“I don’t think right now is a good time for tea,” I snapped.

This time, she opened both eyes just enough to glare at me. “What do you think I’m trying to do?”

I sat back on my haunches. I didn’t know. While I had a rudimentary understanding of herbs from childhood lessons, I never studied beyond that. This all meant nothing to me. I understood a liquor bottle better than these dusty jars.

Still, I stood and listened as she directed me around the kitchen. The woman had cured herself the night before. She clearly knew what she was doing.

That made me glance down at her again. She stared blankly at the floor with a haunted look in her eyes. Once more, I was reminded that she wasn’t the soft and gentle princess that I’d expected. This was a hardened woman who’d seen a lot.

She sighed and shook herself. Lifting her head, she watched and guided me as I worked for her. My hands were too large and pouring measurements was a fumbling process, but I somehow managed with her guidance.

“Rosemary will protect me from my own idiocy,” she said. “The dandelion and burdock root will purge my system for me.”

I nodded, like any of that meant anything to me. When it was all done and said, I poured the concoction into a glass jar and knelt to carefully hand it to her. Cerri didn’t care that the glass was hot. She grabbed it and took the first tentative sip.

“Woman, that has to burn,” I said, reaching to take the jar from her.

“This is nothing. You met Vi. Her arcana comes from Hell, itself. I’ve felt worse fires than this.” She threw back the rest of the potion.

Scowling, I glanced at the other herbs again. “What were you doing? Don’t tell me you were trying to harm yourself.”

An unexpected growl rippled through my voice. Cerridwen was not allowed to be harmed, even by her own hands. I wouldn’t allow it. A deep-seated part of myself that had nothing to do with my vow wanted to protect her. Maybe it was the scars running along her fair, sun-kissed skin. Maybe it was the look of fear constantly widening her pretty eyes.

I wanted to pull her into my arms and never let go. But she wasn’t a stray cat hiding under someone’s car. This was a grown woman who wasn’t about to let me do jack-shit for her. I was surprised she’d asked me to make this potion, let alone called me here.

“Why are you squatting over me?” she grumbled.

I shook my head. “Don’t change the subject. What were you doing?”

She wouldn’t look at me. Her gaze remained on the floor past me, so I gripped her chin and forced her to face me. Tears gathered in her sage green eyes and made me almost regret my roughness.

Cerri ripped her chin from my grip and locked eyes with me. Her lips flattened into a grim line. A single tear slid down her cheek. I...I reached to wipe it away, but I hesitated. Should I touch the princess again? I must have broken some part of my vow when I grabbed her chin.

Just when I thought I would get the truth from her, she lifted herself from the ground and staggered off towards the bathroom. I heard the sound of running water. Instead of following, I stood, brushed myself off, and went to the cart in the corner of the living room. While Cerri splashed water on her face, I poured myself another drink.

She was going to be a handful; I could tell already. There was no way in hell I was going to be able to contain her. She did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Sure, that was princess behavior, but poisoning one's self didn't quite fit that same bill.

I needed to know what she thought that would accomplish. Clearly, she had intentions other than leaving this world. Her brew had been meant to do *something*. I got the sense that it'd backfired.

Sighing, I poured myself a drink at her bar cart. The amber liquid filled the glass. I raised it to my nose and let it sear my sinuses before I threw it back. The taste of a wide open forest and foggy hills coated the inside of my mouth.

Though it was a double shot, it still wasn't enough. I didn't know how we were going to get through this. So, I poured another, downed it, and marched over to the open bathroom door. The little rodent joined me. The thing sat back on its haunches and put its paws on its hips. I glared down at the little miscreant.

I knew he was here to help and guide Cerridwen towards her destiny, but he was damn crass about it. Little man needed to be better at his job and keep the princess from drinking poison by herself.

Cerri gripped the edge of her sink as she stared down her reflection. I waited for her to see me, but she was entranced by the sight of herself. The way her eyes roved over the shape of her own jaw and her shaky fingers unwound from the sink's edge to tug at her curls, I knew her mind was elsewhere.

"What were you doing?" I asked, voice hoarse from my drink.

Her eyes snapped to mine through her reflection. Her lips twisted as she wrinkled her nose, like she could smell my breath all the way from over there. The woman wasn't a damn shifter, so I knew she couldn't smell me.

"Stop giving me that look. You're not a wolf." I scoffed at her.

She turned and raised herself to her full height, her head tilted ever so...threateningly. It was the stiffness of her form, like a predator about to strike. She narrowed her eyes before saying, "You think I don't know that?"

I'd hit a nerve, but I wasn't sure how. I lifted my hands, palms out, and backed away slowly before the ire in those sage green eyes burned me to ash on the spot.

"You think I didn't realize that when all my friends were shifting for the first time? When my Dad was standing in my bedroom doorway, asking me why I was too afraid to let my wolf out for the first time? I think I already know that I'm not a damn wolf shifter. I had to learn it the hard way."

Her lips curled as she looked me up and down. "You're a disgrace. I don't need a drunk watching over me anyway. I'm fine now. You can go back to your favorite hobby and forget about me."

Fury igniting the alcohol in my gut, I marched right up to her. "Listen here, you brat of a woman. You were given to a safe family. I'm sorry that things got a little mixed up. You should be grateful that you didn't die with the rest of your family. I was there. You were spared everything that I had to endure. You won't judge me for drinking when you find out what I've been through."

We stared each other down. It seemed we were stuck at a rage-fueled impasse. I was fine with that. Spinning, I went right back to the bar cart. My nerves were fried. They burned at the ends, the memories of my court's downfall rising like choking smoke after a wildfire.

I drank to numb that ever-searing pain. Only brown liquor could chase away the guilt sitting heavy inside me. I dragged my stone feet over to the cart and paused. Staring down at the bottle, an urge gripped me. I took the bottle and left the cup behind. If Cerridwen wanted to argue, I would buy her a fresh bottle in the morning.

Lifting the bottle to my lips, I took a long swig before throwing myself down onto the couch.

“**Y**ou can figure this out on your own,” Rhoan rasped, his back to me.

My stomach still threatened to throw up everything I’d put into it. While purging the flying ointment would have been a good idea, I couldn’t risk expunging the cure I’d had Rhoan put together for me.

As badly as I wanted to toss that man out the widow, it was boarded up right now. Besides, he’d helped me make that cure. The man followed instruction well when he wanted to.

A part of me wanted to tell him what I’d seen, but I was afraid of what he’d seen. When I looked him in the eye, I saw depths of rage and despair similar to Ness’s. The man had, as they might say, *seen some shit*. I wasn’t ready to open that door.

I’d already slammed through so many others.

Rhoan was a warrior who’d worked for my fae parents. It’d been his job to protect them. I was afraid that if I knew what he knew, then I would blame him for what’d happened. It didn’t seem fair. I knew that I could be harsh on people, though. Anger at my friends still simmered inside me. I didn’t know how to forgive them for letting me get hurt over and over.

Rhoan had let people *die*.

I swallowed. These feelings weren’t going to help anyone. They were toxic, poisoning me more than the flying ointment

I'd taken. My friends didn't deserve my anger. They'd been trying their best with threats of death hanging over their own heads. Besides, I'd offered them all my help. If I'd wanted to stay safe, I could have run in the other direction.

I knew the cost when I offered to join in their fights. Now, I had to deal with the consequences.

"Go home," I told Rhoan. "You don't have to sleep on the glass couch."

He stiffened. Slowly turning a worried look in my direction, he asked what I meant by that.

Shrugging, I said, "I mean go home. What's so hard to understand about that?"

"Not that part. Fast forward. This couch isn't made of glass. It feels like fabric, wood, and metal springs to me. Just like any other human couch." He bounced on the seat as if he needed to make sure he wasn't imagining it.

I gestured to the wood panels over my floor-to-ceiling windows. "That window has been busted inwards twice in three months. The most recent was the night before I met you. I had...a visitor. That couch has seen glass rain twice now."

His brow furrowed while his eyes went wide. It was a laughable expression, especially when his gaze slowly dropped to the cushion beneath him. When he looked back up at me, there was true concern on his face. "You survived an assassination attempt? How did you escape?"

"I didn't." I turned towards my bedroom. "I killed him."

*Rhoan*

THE GLASS SHARDS in the couch didn't bother me all that much. I barely felt their prickle through the numbness that my drink had brought me. Besides, I had a nice thick layer of leather with my vest.



Most of the night, I stared up at the ceiling and wondered what'd made this woman so damn hard. She'd been forged into a steel blade, and I was in awe of her. Honestly? She barely even needed me.

My hands were useless all over again. I hadn't been able to save her court, and now I couldn't do much to help her get it back. If she even wanted it back. Cerri seemed determined to run in the other direction.

Right now, that wasn't my main concern. It should have been, but I needed to focus on keeping her alive, apparently. That's why I stayed on the couch. I wasn't going to let her out of my sight tonight, just in case she decided to try poisoning herself again.

Morning came faster than I expected. Sleep usually escaped me most nights. I should have been on guard. Instead, I slept peacefully through the night. When the first light of the new day stabbed through my eyelids, I recoiled.

With a groan, I sat up and threw my feet to the floor. Soft music poured from the kitchen. I cracked open an eye and peered towards the source of the sound. What I saw stole my breath away.

Soft light poured in through the open window over the sink. The golden glow grazed over Cerri's plants and highlighted the flour drifting in the air. She stood with her back to the counter, her tongue between her lips while she read from an open book. It wasn't a spell book. At least, I didn't think so from the strawberry smear on her cheek and the flour on her pointed ear.

She wiped her free hand on the ruffled apron tied around her waist. The ruffles almost entirely obscured her ridiculously too small pajama shorts. My heart thumped. There was the soft woman I'd expected. She wasn't a princess, but a *wife*. At this point, I stared with my elbows planted on my knees.

When Cerri looked up from what she was doing, the corner of her mouth lifted in a sly grin. She raised a brow and tapped her temple.

“How’s your head? Hungover?”

I barely heard what she’d said. The blueberry stain on her lips captivated my attention. I caught myself staring, but I couldn’t tear my gaze away.

I looked up over my cookbook at the man staring me down. His expression was unreadable, but his gaze remained intense. I tried not to squirm under his scrutiny. His opinion didn't matter. I didn't have to wipe anything off my face just to make myself presentable for him.

He raised a single brow like he'd just processed what I'd said. "Shouldn't I ask you if you're feeling all right? You're the one who poisoned yourself last night."

I waved it off. "Just another night in the James household. Besides, scotch is a kind of poison, too. And you drank it all."

"If you want another bottle, I'll grab you one later." He stood and ventured into the kitchen.

The sun greeted him in a way that I didn't expect. The dark-haired warrior clad in modern leather was kissed by the golden morning light. A glimmer sparkled along his high cheekbones. Layers of lilac and lavender were revealed in his pale eyes.

I quickly tore my gaze away from his beautiful face and studied the tattoos running up his arms. On one side, there was a black ink sword wrapped in vines that circled his thick forearm. The other arm bore a ball of flame that reached up towards the inside of his elbow. Inky black rings encircled his fingers, sometimes two or three to one finger.

I couldn't help but wonder if they all had meaning behind them. What history did the warrior hide in his tattoos?

When his lavender eyes found mine, I couldn't decipher the thoughts behind them. I could tell he was thinking about *something*, but this ancient fae man kept it all hidden behind a serene mask. In fact, the only expression I'd seen from him had been sarcasm and disappointment so far.

Perhaps his expressionless mask was a kind of tell. What had I done to disarm him and force him to hide behind such a self-preservation instinct? I glanced around at the mess of my kitchen. There was a stack of fresh pancakes and several bowls of fruit. The bowl of heavy cream waited to be whipped into fresh whipped cream.

"What?" I blurted out, confused.

Rhoan stepped back like I'd shocked him. He shook himself. "What do you mean, *what?*"

I couldn't help but laugh. It was obvious, to me, at least.

Then Rhoan gestured to everything I'd accomplished. "Why go through all this effort for someone you're going to kick to the curb in ten minutes? You could have microwaved a shitty frozen breakfast sandwich and sent me on my way."

I bit my lip. Twice now, the man had saved my life. As much as I would have liked to kick him to the curb, I did feel like I owed him this much. It wasn't even that big of a gift. I mean, he'd saved my life. Pancakes weren't exactly on par with a life.

"Just shut up and eat," I told him.

He laughed as I shoved a plate into his hand and turned my back to him. I had cream to whip.

Silence stretched uncomfortably through the room. I kept stealing glances at the man. He plucked a fresh cut strawberry from the bowl and popped it between his lips. The sight made something in my core clench tight.

I turned back to my bowl of whipped cream and worked furiously. To end the strange silence, I started talking. Anything that came to mind came tumbling out of my mouth.

“I have a dream that I’ll be able to open my own café someday. The only place I’ve ever really been comfortable is in a kitchen. I think maybe it’s because I started my magical journey with potion-making, and that kind of translated to cooking. I want to make enchanted cookies and coffee syrups for Lakesedge.”

Pausing, I let the yearning sweep over me. When I closed my eyes, I had a vision for a cozy café that was all mine. While I loved Bad Moon Café, it belonged to Audra Miura. It was her creation, her territory. I craved my own. I would fill it with plants and wooden furniture and colorful pillows.

A simple life. That was all I really wanted. No more fighting, just whipped cream and sugar. Was that too much to ask for? If I never saw blood again, I would be happy.

Rhoan pushed a curl away from my face. I startled and jerked away from him. My heart thumped inside my chest. It wanted to break free of my chest and run for safety. It was just Rhoan, though. He wasn’t going to hurt me...I didn’t think.

Was I foolish to trust him? According to Feri, Rhoan had taken a vow to protect my family. I’d been banking on that, but I’d never stopped to question if maybe he had a grudge against my family for all he’d been through because of them. He could be waiting for the right moment to—

My paranoia was getting the best of me. If Rhoan wanted me dead, he could have left me on the kitchen floor last night. My flying ointment could have finished me off for him. Or he could have used my weakened state to his advantage.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice small as shame curled through my stomach.

Rhoan pressed his lips into a grim line and took a step back before nodding. His silence spoke volumes, but I didn’t know how to tell him that everything scared me lately. Maybe the crossbow bolt to the chest the other night was telling enough.

The warrior looked towards the boarded-up windows. He grabbed a pancake loaded with fruit, folded it in half, and

shoved it in his mouth without taking his eyes off the boards. As he chewed, he lifted his chin in the windows' direction.

“Since you get a lot of unwelcome company, I’m going to go out and do a perimeter sweep.” He carefully set his cleared plate into the sink so as to not make too much noise.

My heart ached for the man. I couldn’t like him. No, I wasn’t going to allow it. Even if he’d noticed my skittish behavior and adjusted his own to accommodate me.

Feri climbed onto the counter after Rhoan left. The ferret snatched up a strawberry and a blueberry, the fruit huge in his little paws.

“Rhoan will be good for you. You can trust him. A vow is for life among the fae. Should he break it, there would be magical consequences.” Feri nodded before shoving the strawberry into his sharp-toothed maw.

I gave the rodent the side-eye. Curious, I moved towards the window over my kitchen sink and stood on my toes to peer outside. The dark-haired fae warrior stalked across the patch of grass between this building and the next. He scanned the area with a grim expression twisting his face.

I hated to admit it, but he was still beautiful. He must have been glorious on the battlefield. I wondered if he missed it. Did he dream of fighting? Was this life boring for him? He moved like a predator with careful, precise steps that gave away his life as a fighter.

If he wanted to go back to war, he would have to look elsewhere. I wasn’t going to give him the fight he wanted. There would be no battle between Beryl and myself because I wasn’t going to subscribe to this fantasy that he and Feri wanted for me.

Okay, so Rhoan hadn’t asked me to fight Beryl.

Yet.

It was only a matter of time. I was convinced that was the only reason he kept saving me. Rhoan saw me only as a princess. He didn’t see the woman who’d lived among wolf

shifters her entire life, who wanted her own café and a peaceful existence.

He and Feri likely saw me as a tool. I wasn't going to have it.

If I went to Beryl, then I could trap her in a deal. I just had to make sure that I worded it correctly. I grabbed a notebook and dragged it over to the table so I could sit down with my pancakes. Twirling my pen between my fingers, I began wording my deal.

It took several revisions, striking out words or phrases that could be misconstrued, to get it right. By the end, I was sure that I had a pretty viable deal. Beryl had to buy into it. If she didn't, then I would remain a threat in her eyes.

Would she rather have me dead? Probably, but this was an option that I couldn't pass up if I was going to get my peaceful life. A happy ending likely wasn't in the works for me. I could tell from my dreams that my fate threads were twisted.

Every night, when I closed my eyes, I saw myself die a different way. Every death was at Beryl's hands. She grinned triumphantly every time. Even now, if I rested my eyes, I could see her Cheshire smile. I pressed my hand to my chest where she'd ripped my heart out. It'd been a dream, but it'd felt so real.

Was I getting a glimpse into other timelines? Addie had done something. She'd reached into fate itself and changed the course of the future. What if she'd managed to fray my thread and split it into a hundred different timelines? I shuddered to think how this one might end if all the others were this bloody.

"What are you writing?" an unfamiliar voice asked over my shoulder.

Shrieking, I leapt out of my seat. My notebook flew through the air. Sheets of paper rained down like fat snow. A fae man grinned up at me. He leaned on the back of my now-vacant chair with his forearms on the back of it.

I knew this man. I'd seen him around town. He worked for a deli in town. Ness had dealt with him a couple of times;

she'd claimed that he was a good man each time. Now, the ash-brown-haired fae man wore a devilish grin while invading my home.

My lip curled. Arcana slipped through my feet and into the floor. If he made the slightest move, I was going to wrap him in woody vines and pin him to the floor. I wasn't in the mood to be toyed with today.

When he pulled away from the chair and bent, I didn't strike. I hesitated. He didn't look like he was going to attack. If anything, he seemed far too relaxed. The fae man plucked a piece of paper from the floor and read it.

"Ah, so you're going to try to reason with my queen," he said before crumpling the paper in his hands. He locked eyes with me. "That's not a good idea."

Fury raged inside me. It made me tremble. I could feel the garden of power inside me shaking, too. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

He cocked his head, his grin spreading wider. "Why? Because you're a *princess*?"

I blew air out between my lips. "Pfft, no. It's because I'm my own person. I don't exist under your jurisdiction."

"You think you're part of the Pack? Okay. Go ahead and shift for me."

I sputtered. He'd struck a nerve, but I didn't want to let him know. Rhoan had gone out to check the perimeter, but this man had waltzed right in without warning. The fae warrior needed to come back and drag our uninvited guest out.

"Why are you here?" I spread my hands wide in question. "You haven't attacked yet, so I'm assuming you're not here to kill me. You want something else."

The corner of his mouth lifted. He pointed a finger at me, as if to say that I'd gotten it right. My stomach sank. Great, someone else wanted something from me.

"You're going to take the throne," he said as he straightened, smoothing the front of his shirt. "When you do, I



want a promise of safety. I will make you a deal and vow to stay out of your way when you come for Beryl if it means that I get to walk away with my skin intact.”

“I don’t want to fight her! I want nothing to do with this throne that everyone keeps telling me to steal.”

This, my pots and pans dirty from cooking all morning, powdered sugar and flour on every surface, and the smell of vanilla and berries in the air, was all I wanted. Yet, no one seemed content to acknowledge it. They all wanted me to risk my life for them.

I was done with putting my neck out for others.

“If you want Beryl gone, do it yourself,” I spat. “I have dishes to do.”

I shoved past the fae man so I could get started on the pile of pans in my sink.

He turned with me. “She’s weak right now. That beast, Fenrir, devoured her right-hand man. While Beryl put me in his place, I’m not as cooperative. Now is your time to strike.”

I stared down into the soapy water filling my sink. This wasn’t what I wanted. Hearing Beryl’s people asking me for help changed things. When I glanced back at the man, he wore a devious expression, but that glimmer of hope still sparked in his eyes.

“Fuck,” I said under my breath.

Stomping echoed up the stairs outside my apartment. The fae man stiffened. His nose twitched. Surprise vaulted his brows as he slid an appreciative look in my direction. I thought he would run away before Rhoan opened the door. Instead, the fae man spun my vacant chair around and took a seat.

Before I could even curse, the door opened. Rhoan froze in the entryway. He pinned the fae man with a murderous glare. When Rhoan took one step into the room, I caught an almost imperceptible flinch from the fae man. Though Beryl’s new right-hand man seemed confident, he was afraid of Rhoan.

Then why did he stay?

I scowled when he filled Rhoan in on the state of the Unseelie Court because Rhoan's eyes went wide with hope. I didn't want to squash it because that seemed mean. However, I wasn't going to start a coup.

Not today. Not tomorrow.

Not ever.

"You guys," I pleaded. "Lakesedge is peaceful for once. The Pack is safe for the first time in years. I can't upset this balance right now. You're asking too much of me."

"Take that up with Fate," the nameless fae man said.

I gripped the handle of a wet frying pan and debated throwing it at the fae man's head. He would vanish before it hit him, anyway. Sighing, I dropped it.

At this point, I wished the two men had attacked each other on sight. It would have saved me from this oppressive silence. Their gazes burned into my back while I stared into the sink. Swallowing, I tried to figure out how to face them.

Feri scrambled onto the windowsill in front of me and rose onto his hind legs.

I pointed at him. "If you utter a single syllable, I am going to drown you in the dishwasher."

He recoiled, disgusted.

I shoved away from the counter and stormed off to my bedroom so I could close a door between myself and everyone begging me to ruin my own life. They weren't thinking about me at all. They made requests. They had plans for me. Not a single one of them considered me.

Dropping to my knees, I let out a silent scream. My arcana unfurled and spread throughout the room. Plants burst in every corner. Vines climbed the walls. Flowers sprouted and bloomed in the blink of an eye. It was like a floral explosion.

When it was all over, when the fury inside me was smoldering instead of a wildfire, I bent and pressed my

forehead to the floor. I wouldn't cry, not for them.

The door behind me creaked as someone opened it. What could I say? Go away?

No one was listening to me as it was.

“Get out,” I grumbled.

The floor rolled and tossed the visitor back through the door. Everything around me had come to life with my arcana. I spared a glance back to see Rhoan on his ass outside my door. Tiny white flowers sprouted between us as he stared me down with shocked awe on his face.

A thought hit me, and I gave in to it. A wall of thorned vines rose between us. It covered the open door like a curtain. I could hear the men on the other side, whispering to each other.

“Your princess is a feisty one,” the fae man laughed.

Rhoan growled. I heard the drag of his heavy boots on the wood floor as he picked himself up. “She’s a damn witch. A right pain in my ass.”

“Would you put anyone else up against the nightmare that is Unseelie Queen Beryl? I wouldn't. If fate thought to put a soft little princess in front of Beryl, your fight would have been lost from the start. Beryl would devour the little sugar plum. This one, though. She would give Beryl the worst indigestion.” The fae man laughed.

His laughter faded as if he were vanishing.

“Damn twink is right,” Rhoan grumbled outside my door. “She’s a damn pain in the ass, but at least I know that means she’ll give Beryl a run for her money.”

I sat upright. “I can hear you!”

*Just leave me alone, already. I don't want this.*

Feri chewed through the bottom of my vine wall and barged inside, much to my annoyance. I needed to get him a cage. He started in on how I needed to move quickly. We'd been given an opening, and I would be a fool to ignore it.

The rodent went on about all the allegiances I would have to make. There were allies of the old Seelie court lying in wait for my return. If I showed them that I was here, then they would be forced to offer their aid.

How did I convince them that I wasn't a princess? The vision showed me that I definitely had royal blood, but that wasn't enough to make me the person they needed. I was a barista with a dream, not a princess sworn to take vengeance for her family. I couldn't even remember the people I was supposed to be fighting for.

"Go on, have your tantrum," Rhoan said outside the green curtain. "I'm going to get me a drink."

I wasn't going to lie. I was pretty annoyed that Rhoan had taken off on me again. For a drink, no less. The man couldn't bear being away from it for more than a few hours at a time. Maybe that should have told me more about his past than about the man himself, but I wasn't in a mood to be understanding.

It was difficult when everyone else was so dead set on misunderstanding me. I didn't want fate-defying adventures. Trials were for those who hadn't already been put through the wringer. If Rhoan and Feri thought they were going to get a champion out of me, then they were horribly mistaken.

There was only one way to get out of this, and that was to make a deal with the devil—or, more accurately, Queen Beryl. I had a plan in place. If I carefully picked my words, then the balance of power in Lakesedge would be safe, and I would be free to do whatever I pleased.

Beryl was a massive pain in the ass, but she was also a responsible leader here. She'd helped Ryder overthrow the serial killer Pack Alpha, Alvin Combs...though she'd done it rather cruelly. Still, Beryl had the community's best intentions at heart.

Right?

I pulled out my phone and called Vi because I wasn't going into this alone. She was a literal firecracker, but she would walk into Hell with me so long as she wasn't cavorting

around with Morgan. When my call went to voicemail, I figured she and Morgan were busy.

As I walked through town, I called Addie. She and I had fought off Beryl together once before. Together, we could be a terrifying force. I could still remember the bone dragon bound with vines as sinew. That'd been the first time that I realized I wasn't exactly who I thought I was. Beryl had taken one look at me and seethed.

But it seemed that Addie was busy, too. Her voicemail informed me that she was out on an assignment with Maddox. They were hunting murderers somewhere. I couldn't interrupt their important work with my silly needs.

That left Ness, but I couldn't ask her to walk into Beryl's den with me. Ness and Beryl had already had a number of bad interactions after Beryl tried to take Ryder as her own. The fae queen had gotten Ryder addicted to fae food in order to make him her puppet.

Besides, Ness had recently revealed her pregnancy. Ryder would kill me if I dragged his pregnant wife into the den of his greatest rival. Beryl would undoubtedly jump on that opportunity... Okay, so Beryl didn't always have Lakesedge's best interests in mind. Sometimes, she just wanted power.

When I closed my phone and looked up, I found myself standing outside Bad Moon Café. While the closed sign was turned out, the door was unlocked as if the space had been waiting for me. I pushed through the door and stepped into the quiet interior of the empty café.

At the back, a single figure lounged with an open newspaper in one hand and a white coffee cup in the other. Audra Miura was an enigmatic figure in Lakesedge. No one quite knew what she was. Her long black hair was swept up into a neat bun with sharp angled bangs hanging down to her chin.

When I entered, she looked up from her mug. Her eyes flashed with a myriad of color. The pupils sharpened, turning into narrow diamonds before snapping back to a normal circle.

My heart flipped in my chest. I dug in my heels by instinct alone.

I'd been attacked too many times in the past few days. Audra wasn't going to hurt me. I let out a sigh and buried my face in my hands. Distantly, I heard the sound of Audra's mug being set atop her table. She was silent in her approach. Only when she gently touched my shoulder did I realize that she'd come to me.

I pulled my hands away from my face and tried to put on a reassuring smile. It was tight and probably did the exact opposite of what I wanted. Audra didn't smile in return. In fact, her expression remained studious. She towered over me, taller than even Vi.

*What is this woman?*

We'd all put money on what Audra could be. While we knew that she was supernatural like the rest of us, we didn't know exactly what she was. Once upon a time, I'd bet vampire, back before I met Luca. Now I knew better. One look at Luca, and anyone could tell that he wasn't human. On the other hand, Audra passed as human pretty well.

She was just...otherworldly in a way that seemed inexplicable.

Audra tucked a stray curl behind my ear. "What brought you here today, Cerridwen?"

I nearly dissolved when I opened my mouth. Nothing came out save for the exhaustion that had been riding me like a soul-sucking ghost.

Audra tilted her head curiously.

"Why did you bring us all together?" I asked, instead.

When I looked to Audra, her eyes flashed brilliantly. A sly smile lifted the corners of her petite lips. "Ah, so you've noticed my hand in things?"

I nodded. "Are you an agent of fate? Is that your purpose? Because that seems antithetical when we look at everything

the others have done so far. Addie literally altered fate to suit herself.”

Addie made the confession late one night when we were all drinking on Ness’s back porch—of course, Ness had a virgin daquiri.

“Fate and I aren’t on the best of terms,” Audra said with a vicious grin.

When she smiled like that, I could see the pointed canines that made me think she was a vampire. If the others asked me again, I would put good money on demon. Not the kind of demon that Vi fought. The Abrahamic pantheon had nothing on the vast power that Audra contained. She seemed like the kind of demon that possessed a divine level of power all on her own.

“I, myself, am a defier of fate. I escaped the prison that my people locked me in and set out to explore the world at my own pace. Fate is a bondage that no one asked for, however it is like any set of rules. It is meant to be followed until you find the best way to break it.” She gently touched my cheek.

I wanted to recoil from her words.

All my life, I’d followed every recipe to the letter. I explored making my own recipes only when I understood every last aspect of the original. Working by the book had gotten me this far. By all means, I should have been the first person to accept fate as it was. That was the kind of person I’d been up until now.

The moment fate turned against me, I rebelled. I didn’t want this. Couldn’t Audra understand that? Or did she not know what fate had asked of me.

“So, it turns out that I could be the lost princess of the local Seelie Court.” I stole a glance in Audra’s direction so I could read her expression.

Nothing changed. She’d known the whole time.

I cocked my head. “How do you know everything? You knew, when you brought all of us together, that we were different from everyone else in Lakesedge.”



Audra's demure smile returned. "I am older than Vi's father. Older than his father. When that many years have passed, you learn to recognize a few things."

"Was this all a chess game to you?" I stepped back, my core stiffening in defiance.

Audra spread her hands wide. "Do I look like I'm trying to rise to power?"

We were standing in the middle of a downtown café that no one really knew about. It was a hole in the wall establishment, and Audra didn't try too hard to promote it. She had four employees on roster, and she seemed content with only us under her wing.

She wasn't trying to gain power. If anything, she was more like the enigmatic aunt who breezed in with advice before drifting back into her own strange life once more—that was how Vi had described Audra once, and it'd never really left me.

"So, what do you want with us, then?" I asked.

"To help you all achieve your best fate." She stepped away, behind the counter, and began making another drink. "I see a bit of myself in all of you. The power each of you holds is vast, greater than any other of your generation."

My jaw tightened. Tears burned my eyes. I didn't want the threads of fate to tie me to a future that was nothing but strife. I'd been a part of enough battles. My flesh had been torn open too many times to count. Just thinking about it had me running my hands up my arms.

Audra pulled my hands away from my own skin and pushed a warm drink into my palms. "While we are here, discussing my involvement with fate, there are people out there hurting."

My head snapped up in surprise.

Audra waved a hand in the air. "Yes. I know. You believe me to be a demon, but that's only a term for something as great as a god without a shrine where I'm from. I am not without kindness, as you should know."

The weight of duty climbed upon my shoulders and tried to weigh me down. I'd been avoiding it up until now. To me, Lakesedge was in a time of peace. I couldn't upset that with frivolous fights over titles.

Yet, Audra insinuated that there was more to this situation than I knew. I'd refused to look past the surface, because that meant acknowledging my hand in all of this. The longer I ignored the situation, the worse it could become.

The warm beverage in my hands suddenly wasn't enough. I needed something harder.

"Every minute you spend running away from your title is a minute that your court suffers." Audra placed her fingertips under the mug and gently lifted the drink so that I would sip it. "Don't run too far, because then you will take longer running back to them when you finally decide to take a stand. I know Beryl does not look like Alvin on the surface, but I can promise you that she is just as bad."

I finished the drink without saying another word. I couldn't. My mind churned with everything that Audra had revealed. Once the drink was empty, I staggered out of the café and down the street.

Of course, the drink didn't sit well. Audra had offered it to comfort me, but my body rebelled at the thought. There was no comforting me right now. A war loomed ahead of me. I'd already survived one. I couldn't bear the thought of leading another.

I turned down an alley and bent as the drink came back up. It was nothing new for Syracuse. This wasn't the prettiest city, but I still felt bad when I wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand.

My arcana swelled like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. Plant life sprang up from the cracks of the concrete and covered the mess I'd made. It was prettier than what I'd left.

Now my stomach was empty, and I needed something a little different to numb the wild thoughts consuming my mind.

*Rhoan*

I SWALLOWED HARD.

There hadn't been a moment where my thoughts weren't consumed by the sight I'd beheld this morning. The wild-haired fae woman standing in a beam of light in her kitchen, her thighs bare and smeared with flour, was the only thing I could think about.

A hundred and fifty years ago, I'd taken a vow. When I dropped to one knee for my king and queen, I pledged my entire life to them. There was no room for wives in the life of a knight. My duty was my entire world. That meant that I was not allowed to even lie with a woman.

Groaning, I pinched my nose. I definitely couldn't lie with the lost princess. What a damn fine woman she made, though. Human life had given her the thick thighs that most fae women didn't have. And her chest...

I shook myself and downed the last of my drink before pushing my glass back towards the bartender. He raised a brow as he looked me up and down. He and I had known each other for a long time. I didn't say anything when he used bottom shelf liquor, and he didn't say anything about how I didn't age.

He sighed, shook his head, and poured me another which I quickly downed. I savored the burning sensation slithering down my throat. The pain was the least I deserved...

I'd lost my entire court, and now that the last savior was back, I couldn't stop thinking about her thighs pressed against my ears. What a pitiful excuse of a knight I was.

The door opened. I glanced back if only because it was still early in the day, and the bar didn't see many patrons at this time of day. Her silhouette backlit by the sun outside hit me first. My mouth went dry. The buzz that'd been slowly overtaking my head suddenly vanished.

What the hell was Cerridwen doing here?

I nearly threw myself out of my seat in my rush to get to her. I lifted her chin and turned her head back and forth. When I started patting her down in search of wounds, she grabbed my wrist and made a disgusted look up at me.

I jerked back as if burned. I'd been in such a rush to ensure her safety that I'd probably crossed several boundaries. If she poisoned me in my sleep, I deserved it.

Clearing my throat, I stepped back and straightened my spine.

Cerri grumbled something under her breath that I couldn't quite understand. She shoved past me, went to the seat I'd vacated, and ordered a drink—neat.

Well, fuck. What'd happened? No one drank straight liquor unless something awful went down.

I trudged up behind her and slowly leaned onto the seat beside her in case any sudden movement might startle her. She, of course, cut me a sidelong glare as if to ask *why on earth are you babying me?*

Considering the fact that she'd nearly died twice in my presence this week, I think she deserved a bit of pampering. I wasn't going to question her if she didn't want it.

Instead, I leaned against the bar and asked, "What's wrong, princess?"

Her upper lip curled. The bartender set a glass in front of her. Before he could even pull back, she swallowed the liquid contents in one gulp.

*Shit*, I thought. This had to be bad.

"Rhoan, what were my parents like?" she asked without looking at me.

I waited for the bartender to go about his business. Did the man listen to his patrons? Would he think twice if I spoke of fae kings and queens? I doubted it. He would blame the liquor and go on with his life.

So, I told her everything I knew. Cerri didn't look at me once while I described her mother, a determined woman who

fought fiercely for her family. She didn't blink as I went on about her father, a tactful politician who did everything he could to protect his people. I admired her family, but she seemed to be unmoved by them.

I sighed. "They were good people. I looked up to them...A part of me admired what they had together. Though their marriage had been arranged, they loved each other more than anything else in this world. It was as if they'd been made for one another and somehow gravitated together as if nothing could stop them from being together."

A yearning tightened my chest. It was a future I could never have. When I stole a sidelong glance at Cerri, I told myself that I could at least love from a distance. Sure, she had a way to go before she became a good queen, but I had faith that she could become the kind of person that I adored. I would be happy with being her knight.

Right?

If that was all I ever knew, then I could be happy.

Cerri set down her glass. What drink was this? Two? Three? I hadn't been paying attention.

"Jasper James lived under the rule of a bastard serial killer for decades," Cerri said.

I nearly recoiled from her words.

"But he still brought me to all of my soccer games. He stood on the sidelines and cheered like the world wasn't falling down around his own ears. Then, when it came time for me to shift for the first time, nothing happened, and I wondered how I could fail my father like that." Cerri wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

The king and queen had meant to keep Cerridwen safe from harm, but I could see just how badly they'd failed.

"Molly James put my first potion book in my hands. She gave me power when I had none. Because of her, I was able to stand by Ness's side when she decided to make her stand against that bastard Alpha. My mother gave me a way to exist in a world that was determined to deny me left and right."

My gaze dropped to the scars on her throat. “Did that bastard Alpha give you those?”

Anger rose, hot flames licking my throat. I kept my jaw clamped tight for fear of what might come out of my mouth next. Already, my muscles coiled, ready to fling me from this seat and into a hunt.

When Cerri nodded, I moved. She caught me, though. Her hand fisted in the front of my shirt, bringing me to a halt. I paused, but my chest was already heaving with untempered rage.

“He’s dead,” she said, low.

I couldn’t help the way my hands fisted at my sides. Useless once again, I couldn’t even offer my princess revenge.

“Twice over, actually. All my friends got a chance at him.” She shook herself. “What I’m saying is that I don’t belong to your world. I grew up in another. I don’t know the first thing about the fae world.”

Silence settled in. We both stared into our drinks. I fought hard to wrangle my thoughts, but most of them were still on a rage-fueled crusade against the dead man who’d hurt Cerri. Here she was, telling me something vital. Her confession meant everything to our path ahead, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how I wanted to wrap my hands around a man’s throat.

“Even Lakesedge alienated me,” Cerri said. “I knew I didn’t belong there, either. I’ve lived in some sort of space in between, unable to connect anywhere. The only people who ever made me feel at home are my friends...even then...”

Cerri’s voice trailed off. Her fingers touched the scars at her throat. If she were to wear one of the gauzy dresses that her mother favored, the scars would be on display. The dress might even reveal more.

I wished I could turn back time and pluck Cerridwen from the fate that her parents unwittingly subjected her to. They’d been in fight or flight. No one had time to look into the shifter pack that Cerri’s foster family had been a part of—not when

Beryl was hunting down everyone in the Seelie Court one by one.

Unfortunately, neither of us were watching our backs. That was my job, and I was already failing at it, miserably. The shot didn't come from the door. It came from the window opposite the pool table. I heard the crack of glass as the bolt pierced it and had just enough time to shove Cerri out of her seat.

Too drunk to catch herself, she dropped to the floor with a startled look on her face. The bolt shattered a bottle behind the bar. The smell of astringent liquor blossomed on the air as I bent to help Cerri back onto her feet.

I slung my arm around her back and hoisted her up, bringing her a little too close. The smell of coffee and vanilla clung to her hair. It activated sensations inside me that heated my blood. Cerri paid me no mind, though. Her attention remained on the window with a hole through it.

Cerri kept one hand carefully pressed to my chest while she raised the other. The warmth of the summer sun radiated across my skin, teleporting me back home through memories long buried. I lifted my face and welcomed the heat of the Seelie Court while my heart clenched tight with a new kind of longing.

“There. Now they're going to have to come inside if they want to take another shot.” Cerri shoved away from my grasp.

I snapped back to the present. A wall of thick greenery covered the window. It completely obscured visuals. There was no looking in or out now. I scowled down at Cerri.

“How am I supposed to see who's targeting you now?” I turned to head towards the window.

Cerri caught me by my sleeve and pulled me back. “Let them come inside to us. Until then, let's drink.”

The princess ordered another round for the both of us. We reclaimed our stools, but I kept glancing over my shoulder. The assassin never came inside, though. Whoever they were, they preferred long range.

I was starting to get an idea of who Beryl might have hired. If I was right, then we were in for a world of trouble. At least, the assassin gave us a bit of space for now.



I didn't tell Rhoan that I'd sent my arcana rushing along the ground outside. With it, I'd found a pair of feet touching the earth. I conjured great vines to climb up the person's legs and wrap them in place so they couldn't do the annoying step-between thing that Rhoan did to disappear on me. Whoever they were, assassin or otherwise, they would be preoccupied for a while.

See? I could take care of myself on my own. I didn't need a drunk fae warrior to look out for me. Never mind the fact that he'd saved my ass by pushing me off my stool. He could have done anything else, though. He shouldn't have knocked the air out of my chest.

Together, we drank ourselves into oblivion at the bar. I had a bit too much tequila, stood, and walked myself to the bathroom where I could throw up in privacy. On one hand, I was proud of my ability to hide my drunken sickness. On the other hand, that was twice in one day that I'd thrown up.

My stomach ached from heaving. I leaned back against the stall wall and looked towards the ceiling like there might be a conveniently placed assassin waiting for me. There was nothing, though.

Still, the fear brought my arcana curling out of me. It spread through the bathroom. Little vines poked out from the drop ceiling panels. Tiny bell flowers unfurled overhead. I grimaced and went to clean my face and wash my mouth before I created a garden inside this little bathroom.

How had I lived my whole life without unlocking this arcana? I'd tapped into it when I started potion brewing, but it'd never felt as powerful as it did now. Something about meeting Beryl had triggered an awakening inside me. It was as if my arcana acted on its own to protect me.

Or like it'd been locked behind the closed doors in my mind. My memories and arcana had been trapped in the same place. If I tapped into more of my childhood, there was a chance I'd be able to access more of my arcana.

I swallowed hard. There was more of this power? Staring at my open palms, I marveled at the capabilities waiting, dormant inside me. Was this mine? Did I even deserve it if I wasn't going to use it to save the court that Beryl oppressed?

Why was that even my job?

There was a knock at the door. I opened my mouth to tell the person that the stall was free.

"Princess?" Rhoan asked on the other side.

I scowled. The name was sweet. Had it been said by any other man, I would have melted a little. Rhoan wasn't trying to be kind or gentle or loving. I doubted he was even capable of such things. The man had taken a vow to war. He was a weapon, and he probably enjoyed it.

Just another reason why we would never get along. I didn't want to fight. It was the very last thing on my list. In fact, it went on the *I'd be happy if I never had to think about this again* list.

I sat silent for a long moment. On the other side of the door, Rhoan grumbled to himself. He wondered out loud if I'd passed out on the toilet or if I'd crawled out the window to escape him. I heard the soft thump of him falling back against the wall outside.

Curiosity brought me closer to the door so I could listen as he talked to himself.

"I wouldn't blame her," he muttered. "The court always said I brought the mood down. I doubt that's gotten better

since then. Woman is tired of fighting for her life, and here I am, probably making things worse.”

Still emboldened by the alcohol in my veins, I whipped the door open. “How could you possibly make things worse?”

Rhoan rushed forward. I didn’t even realize I was falling backwards until he caught me and pulled me back into his arms.

“You’re in no shape to escape,” he said with a shake of his head. “Can’t handle your liquor, can you? I never should have let you drink so much.”

“Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t do?” I shoved away from him and lifted my head high. “I’m the *princess*. Shouldn’t you be listening to me?”

He put his hands on his hips. “Oh, so now you want to wear your title? Now that you think you can use it to boss me around?”

I grinned. A feral laugh bubbled out of me.

A soft blush reached his cheeks, but his face remained otherwise impassive. In fact, he lowered his brow to glare at me.

“All right, *Princess*.” Rhoan bent and tossed me over his shoulder.

This drunk, I couldn’t jump out of the way or even bat at his hands. Rhoan plucked me from the floor as effortlessly as one lifted a bag of mostly-air potato chips.

I couldn’t lie. I was a bit offended.

Then he turned and carried me towards the exit. The bouncing world made my stomach churn. Outside, I tapped his back. He bent and released me so I could vomit again. Yeah, this was *hot*.

But Rhoan knelt beside me and pulled my hair back. His knuckles gently grazed my cheek as he worked. “Get it out. You’ll feel better for it.”

I groaned.

He let out a soft laugh. “We’ve all been there. No shame in it.”

Something in his voice broke me. I leaned back into his open hands and felt tears fill my eyes. I wiped them away, claiming that my eyes were watering from throwing up. He didn’t need to know that his kindness tore through me at an alarming rate, leaving me completely disarmed.

“Let’s get you up,” Rhoan said, completely ignoring my tears.

I could have cried harder in relief. Somehow, I managed to keep it together as Rhoan helped me over to a motorcycle parked at the edge of the lot. I scowled at it and asked him why we couldn’t just do his funny walk-between trick.

“Where we’re going, no one can do the *funny walk-between trick*. Don’t worry, Princess. I’ve got you. Nothing bad will happen while you hold onto me.”

Uncertain, I rocked back on my heels. I could totally see myself losing my grip on him as we raced down an open road. This drunk, I was going to tumble off and break more bones than I knew I had.

Rhoan didn’t give me any other option. He put a helmet over my head and helped me into a leather jacket that he seemingly summoned out of nowhere. It smelled of deep woods, a mossy place where the earth and growing things thrived on fallen logs. I inhaled deep until I caught wind of my own breath and blushed.

“This isn’t just any bike,” Rhoan assured me. “It’s a magical steed. You’re safer here than you are anywhere else.”

Rhoan threw his leg over the massive bike. I balked. How the hell was I supposed to get on that thing? I would have to climb it like a damn mountain. Somehow, I managed. Perhaps it was the magic in the motorcycle. Maybe it was my drunken determination.

I wrapped my arms around Rhoan’s middle and pressed my cheek to his back. He kicked the bike into gear. It seemed to whinny in greeting beneath us. As I drifted off behind

Rhoan, I imagined we were atop a sleek black horse, galloping away into the night.

Out here, under the veil of the quiet night, I was safe with Rhoan. His broad, muscled back promised to be there for me. If anything happened, I knew that he wouldn't hesitate to put himself in harm's way. For once, I could breathe easy.

It was startlingly unexpected.

Before I knew it, we stopped. Rhoan helped me off the bike. Tired and drunk, I stumbled into him. He caught me and chuckled. When he touched my cheek to make sure I was okay, I tilted my head back and leaned into his touch.

He wasn't the worst person. And he was *really* hot. The long hair and tattoos activated something in my mind, a part of me that was suddenly starved for attention. My lips parted. I looked up at him and wondered what it would be like to lie beneath him. Then I would be able to go back to my friends and answer their expectant questions for once.

I let myself stumble into him. When he caught me with both hands on my hips, I looked up at him with what I thought to be a demure smile on my lips. I ran my hands up his chest and curled one behind his neck.

Rising onto my tiptoes, I puckered my lips. My head spun, but I kept myself steady. That was, until a finger pressed against my lips.

Blinking, I found Rhoan staring down at me with wide eyes and a single finger pushing my lips away. Dejection tore my chest in two. I flopped back flat onto my feet and flung myself away from him. With my back to Rhoan, my cheeks flamed. I realized just how dumb I'd been.

"Don't take it personally, Princess." Gravel crunched under his feet when he stepped closer. "I took a vow of celibacy. You might be the prettiest thing I've ever laid eyes on in my century of life, but a vow is a vow. I can't break it, even for a lovely little thing like yourself."

His words shouldn't have helped, but they did. I could hide behind the quickly crafted lie and pretend that I believed it. Of

course, he wasn't going to kiss a drunk woman. That was for the best, even if my heart still ached.

Rhoan picked me up and cradled me in his arms. "Let's get you to bed."

I turned my face towards his chest. The rest melted away. His presence lulled me to sleep so quickly that I almost thought he'd placed a spell over me.

**T**he next morning was hell on earth. I couldn't bear to open my eyes. With the way my head throbbed, I knew that the morning light would be worse than any other pain I'd endured to date. Which said a lot after what I'd been through.

My stomach rebelled. It clenched tight in vicious anger at what I'd done to it the night before. I pressed a hand to my forehead and groaned. A bit of light sliced across my eyelids. Grimacing, I turned my face into the sheets.

They didn't smell of lavender, like they did at home. Instead, I caught the familiar scent of moss and hidden forests. The pain in my head vanished when my heart raced. I cracked open one eye and took in the unfamiliar brick-red sheets beneath me.

A woven tapestry, soft from long use, covered my body. I ran my fingers over the threads before looking to the rest of the room. It was stuffed to the brim, but nothing about it seemed over the top. Instead, I saw Rhoan's long years in all the things covering the walls and furniture.

There were glints of metal here and there. Several moments passed before I realized I was looking at weaponry, hanging beneath layers of pennants, climbing vines, and other things. One pennant had a rising sun embroidered across it. Another had a collection of stars with little lines sewn between them.

I kicked off the tapestry so that I could get up and get a closer look at the pennants, but my head throbbed once again. Hissing, I grasped at my skull.

“Yeah, it can be like that the morning after,” Rhoan said nearby.

Cracking open an eye, I glared at the man standing in the doorway. The rest of his small home sprawled beyond him. It was just as heavily decorated as the bedroom. Thin layers of fabric had been draped over the windows. It blocked out just enough light to let in a gentle glow and nothing else. The glow caught on tiny crystal beads hanging against the fabric.

“I feel like I’ve been dragged into a crow’s nest,” I grumbled.

The dark haired fae warrior with glinting beads woven into his long braids looked around. Perhaps crow had been an accurate description of him. It was easy to imagine him with massive black wings that glinted with oil-slick colors in the light.

All at once, I was reminded how beautiful he was. The man radiated effortless beauty in a way that I never could. I caught a glimpse of myself in a half-buried mirror and saw just how out of control my curls had become.

“You know,” Rhoan began. “I’m not sure where you got the curls from. Your mother’s hair was straight as can be.”

I had no answer for him. The woman from my vision flickered in my mind’s eye again. I shoved it away the best I could because I had no time for a trip down memory lane right now. Just thinking about it made my stomach clench tight and churn.

Instead, I lurched towards the bathroom and emptied the last of my stomach’s contents into the toilet. It was a glamorous sight; I was certain of it.

With a groan, I started to rest my head on the toilet seat before I remembered myself.

*Ew, Cerri. Just...ew.*



“Here we go.” Rhoan ran a washcloth under the faucet before kneeling to press it to my forehead.

He gently wiped at my mouth while holding my chin in the palm of his hand. It was tender and too much for my lonely heart. I had to turn away before I developed more feelings for this unattainable man.

“Let’s get you something greasy to eat, then you can take a shower. I’m sure I have some ladies’ clothing in here somewhere.”

The prospect of food almost made me want to throw up again. How many times could I puke in front of this man? Surely, he thought I was absolutely disgusting by now. He didn’t bat an eye, though. I was willing to bet that he’d seen worse on the battlefield. What was a little vomit when you’d seen the insides of people?

The thought didn’t comfort me. In fact, panic slammed into my heart. That’s what they wanted me to start. Both Rhoan and Feri were begging me to incite a war. I thought of the people we lost when we pushed back against Alvin. The old pack Alpha killed three people in his warpath.

I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. Couldn’t they understand that? Was it so bad that I wanted to spare lives, to keep blood from being spilled upon the earth?

Rhoan led me over to the small table for two tucked in the corner of his kitchen. The air smelled of bacon and eggs. To my surprise, my stomach started begging loudly. I glanced down at my own lap in awe.

The man chuckled before returning with a sandwich bigger than my fist. I lifted a single brow when I looked up at him. If he thought I would be able to fit that in my mouth, he was going to be sorely disappointed. The English muffin had been stacked high with a small omelet, thick slices of bacon, pepper studded cheese, and...

“Is that avocado?” I asked as I lifted the top of the English muffin.

Rhoan nodded. “Why are you surprised?”

“I don’t know. You don’t strike me as an avocado kind of guy. You seem more like a...like a bacon-flavored toothpaste kind of guy.”

Rhoan’s laughter soothed every small ache plaguing my body. My muscles relaxed, and a soft, content sigh slipped out of me. I looked up at him in astonishment. How could a sound do something like that to me? I felt disarmed.

For the first time, I was forced to take him in. I didn’t dissect him, pinpointing all the little nuances of his tattoos or the way he positioned his feet like he might leap into action at any moment. Instead, I took in the man as a whole. He’d tied his hair back and had avocado on the front of his pants, revealing just how hard he’d worked to make breakfast.

The kitchen behind him was a war zone. There were pans all over the place. Somehow, cheese had gotten on the ceiling above him. It slowly unstuck itself from the popcorn texture and plopped onto the floor at his feet.

I started to ask him if he’d ever cooked before, but he spoke before I could.

“I wasn’t ever into the bacon craze, but I did enjoy those little toys that pooped candy. I have a collection of them somewhere in this...” He gestured to the trailer with his spatula. “They’re somewhere in this mess.”

Nervous, I lifted the greasy sandwich. It dripped hot sauce onto the plate. My mouth watered despite the fact that my stomach had been all too happy to heave-ho barely minutes ago.

Unable to take the first bite just yet, I glanced at Rhoan’s décor. “It’s not a mess. It’s a roadmap to all the things you find interesting. I like it. If I look close enough, I can see little glimpses into you.”

Rhoan snorted. “If you look close enough, something is going to jump out at you. I don’t know what’s living in there anymore.”

As if he’d summoned it, I caught movement among the knick-knacks and gathered fabric. A curtain of beads rustled

against the wall. I paused and tried to catch sight of the thing moving along the walls.

It had to be a fae. Right? A pixie or a sprite?

No.

A small, tawny furred face popped out from behind a pile of fabric. Feri grinned, revealing itty-bitty canines. I scowled at the small creature.

“Did you follow me here?” I snapped.

Feri bobbed his head. “Of course, I did. Princess, you need as much help as you can get while we discuss our strategies moving forward. You were not raised by your parents, much to our disappointment. It is to be expected that you know nothing of strategy or tactics. Do not be ashamed.”

While I wanted to bite the creature’s head off, I took a big bite of my sandwich instead. The bacon cracked and the avocado melted across my tongue. I nearly moaned in ecstasy when the flavors exploded in my mouth.

Already, my headache seemed to ease. The throbbing wasn’t as intense as it had been, which allowed more room for bitter resentment. I lifted my gaze from my sandwich and pinned Feri with a dark glare that I hoped would keep him from saying anything more.

Rhoan passed me a napkin and gestured to the corner of his mouth. My face warmed. I quickly wiped the lingering egg away. The mess vanished, but my embarrassment lingered for several heartbeats. Rhoan spun around and pretended not to notice. I would have melted for the man were it not for Feri’s irritating presence.

Feri leapt from the nearby shelf onto the table. He slid towards my plate with big eyes on a piece of bacon that’d fallen from the sandwich. Just to be mean, I shoved the chunk of bacon in my mouth. Feri tried to hide his disappointment, but I caught it.

While the fae ferret was annoying, he wasn’t all that bad. I had no right being this cruel to him. Wrinkling my nose at my own guilt, I broke a piece of bacon off from my sandwich and

passed it over to the little guy. He accepted it with both hands...then immediately started talking again.

“It is important that we garner allies for you before making any moves against Beryl. These allies will be able to teach you everything that you missed out on while you were living with wolves.” Feri chuckled to himself. “You were raised by *wolves*. It really does explain your manners. And that temperament. I hope you know that will have to change if you’re going to be respected as a queen.”

The sandwich in my hands squelched from how hard I gripped it. Rhoan jumped into action. He plucked the ferret from the table, opened a nearby window, and plopped Feri outside.

I sighed, knowing that wouldn’t be the end of it. Though Rhoan said nothing, I knew he wanted the same thing from me. He simply had more patience...and more social awareness. Rhoan knew I would bite his head off if he said anything of the sort right now.

I dropped the sandwich. A scream gathered in my throat, but it had nowhere to go when I wouldn’t let it out. The sound turned into a knot that I could barely swallow past.

“Eat,” Rhoan said, gently. “You’ll feel better if you do.”

I tilted my head as I lifted the top muffin to peer inside the sandwich. “Why? Did you enchant it somehow?”

A smile curled across his lips. The corners of his eyes creased with laughter. He shook his head. “It’s a simple hangover cure and nothing more. You don’t have to act like there’s something hidden behind every door.”

Groaning, I said, “You’d be surprised how often trouble is hiding behind a simple door.”

“You’re completely safe here.” His voice was low and reassuring. “Only those I allow in can enter.”

I swallowed, sudden emotion blindsiding me. All I could do was nod. If I spoke, I would have cried. The idea of safety seemed so foreign, yet so welcome all at once.

Rhoan lifted a glass from the counter and threw back its contents. My jaw dropped. The smell of alcohol drifted through the air. It made my stomach churn and my toes curl uncomfortably.

“How can you do that?” I asked.

“Nothing like the hair of the dog that bit you,” he said with a wild grin.

My head throbbed in response. I turned away from him and his own hangover cure. “How can we be fae and still get hangovers?”

I didn’t want to talk about my future. I would much rather talk about our physiology than discuss the prospect of attacking Queen Beryl.

Rhoan leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “If you think this is bad, wait until you’ve had fae wine. Fae food will knock your socks off, Princess.”

My heart skipped an excited beat. I didn’t know why I’d never thought of it, but a whole new world of exploration awaited me in the form of fae fruits and wines. While they had intoxicating properties for those who weren’t fae, those like Rhoan and myself were safe from the effects.

That meant I could make fae fruit preserves laced with flower petals or brew my own wines from sweet fae pomegranates. The idea had me desperate to leap out of my seat and hunt down the next Goblin Market.

Rhoan caught on. “Oh, no. We’re not going anywhere near a vendor stall. It’s going to get you killed. You’ll be a target for every assassin looking to get an easy paycheck.”

I pouted, even if he was right. An idea struck me and pushed me forward. “What if I pay you to go get it for me?”

While I wanted to experience the fabled Goblin Market for myself, I didn’t want to wait to cook with fae food. Besides, once I found a way to make a deal with Beryl, then I would be able to go all by myself. By then, I wouldn’t have Rhoan at my side to guide me, though.

The thought made me hesitate. My heart fumbled. I lifted my gaze up to the dark-haired fae warrior. While I hadn't known him for long, I wasn't exactly ready to give him up. The cozy home surrounding us, and the sandwich cooked with care gave me pause. There was so much more to this man than I'd first thought.

I could draw this out and spend more time with him, but the moment I cut a deal with Beryl, he was going to leave. He clearly wanted his court back in power. I didn't see the point. Both courts did the same thing. They just had different fae behind the steering wheel.

Wasn't it selfish of him to want his own people in control? Why couldn't he let it go and move on with his life? Then he would be able to live fully for himself, and not for a cause that had faded years ago.

I bit the tip of my thumb while my mind roiled with thought after thought. On some level, I realized that I was being selfish, too. Which was worse, though? I wanted to avoid a war. He wanted to start one. To me, the answer was obvious.

Audra warned that fae were suffering, though. I wanted to ask *where*? On the surface, everything seemed fine.

I had to talk to Beryl. I wouldn't be able to know anything for sure until I was able to get an audience with her.

*Rhoan*

I DIDN'T KNOW what I was going to do with this woman. She sat back in her seat, devious eyes hiding her machinations as she braided her wild curls. There were thoughts going through that head, but she didn't bother to share any of them with me.

It kept me on my toes. There was no pushing her. If I did, she would strike back. This woman had power. While I had years of training at my disposal, it could only do so much against someone with raw ability and nothing to lose. A fight

with her would turn my trailer to rubble, and I couldn't afford a new place.

"You want me to supply you with fae food," I guessed.

At first, Cerri seemed startled. Then a smile curled across her lips. The moment of hesitation was enough. I could tell that wasn't what'd been on her mind. Maybe the thought had occurred to her earlier, but she'd strayed since then.

So, what'd been on her devious little mind? I couldn't blame her for being overwhelmed with thought. She'd come into a wealth of unexpected information recently. Unfortunately, that information had come with a target on her back. Her life had become running from one danger to another.

I knew what I was going to do, even though I knew it wasn't going to end well. I couldn't bear to tell her no. Was it because she was a princess? Was it in the way she looked up at me with excitement sparkling in her sage-colored eyes?

"Fine." The word came out of me before I could think twice about it. "I'll get you some fae food, but you need to promise me that you're going to lay low and stay safe."

She perked up, suddenly bouncing in her seat. "Deal."

She wasn't going to listen to me. I could already tell. She gripped the edge of her seat like she needed the leverage to propel herself out of it and into trouble. I never thought my King and Queen would bring such a wild child into this world, but I had a feeling she was a problem for me and me alone.

I'd seen the way she worked. Her potion station was immaculate. She knew everything there was to know about the herbs carefully labeled in her cupboards. Cerri had a proper demeanor about her, but she became a twister in my presence. She came in like a whirlwind and ripped up everything I thought immovable.

Like my heart.

I shouldn't have these feelings. I wasn't supposed to look at her like she was the sun. She was my princess, the person who would send me to my final battle someday. I couldn't

come home to her in the evening and sip sweet fae wine while she rested her head on my chest.

The vision was so real that I swatted at the air to shove it away.

Cerri lifted a confused brow. “Flies?”

“Hm? Oh. It’s nothing.” I leaned and opened the nearby window to let the little fae ferret back inside. “The two of you stay here. I’m going to go out and see what I can do for the princess.”

Cerri sat up straight. “Right now?”

I sucked my teeth and slid a suspicious glance in her direction. “Why do you seem surprised? Do you have somewhere to be? I thought that the two of you could rest here, where it’s safe. If not, I’m sure Feri will come running to me. He’ll let me know where you are, so I can pick you up and drag you right back.”

Cerri’s expression flattened. A challenge gleamed in those green eyes. Even though she hadn’t been raised in the court, she was still determined to get her way. It was one of the few princess-like qualities she’d retained.

I would spoil her later, but we needed to make sure that there would be a later. That meant keeping her here while I was away. The ferret wouldn’t be enough incentive to make her stay. The creature was simply an alarm for when Cerri inevitably left.

That said, I knew how to buy myself some time. I twisted, yanked open my junk drawer and plucked a pair of silver bracelets from the mess. Before Cerri could catch onto what I was doing, I closed the distance between us, gently took her wrist in my hand, and slapped the first silver bracelet onto it.

Her eyes went wide. Realization spread across her face. By the time her jaw hit the floor, I’d already kicked a latch in the linoleum to reveal a metal loop. I gave her a gentle tug forward and stretched her arm towards the hook. The other *bracelet* attached to it with ease.



“I dabbled in magical bounty hunting a while back. It gave me something to do with my free time that didn’t involve drinking. While I don’t do it very often anymore...” I grinned wide. “It prepared me for just about *anything*.”

Cerri sputtered as she glared up at me with one hand stretched between her knees. “You can’t just handcuff me and leave me alone here! What if someone comes by to kill me? Someone took a shot at us while we were at the bar yesterday! They’re going to find me here and shoot me like a fish in a barrel.”

I crouched in front of her. “Princess, this is the safest place for you right now. I have fae wards on every inch of this trailer. No one is going to get you while I’m gone. Sit tight and be a good girl for me. If you do, I’ll be back with a treat.”

Her face turned red. I couldn’t tell if it was with embarrassment or anger. It was probably safest to assume a mix of both.

Feri sighed. “This is what happens when you are unruly and prevent the man from doing his job. You should put more trust in Rhoan. Maybe then he won’t have to go to such extremes.”

I could have sworn I heard the eerie creak in Cerri’s neck as her head twisted in Feri’s direction. If that ferret was alive when I returned, I would be surprised.



**T**hat bastard handcuffed me to the floor!

The trailer should have been quiet without him, but I couldn't stop seething. I shouted and screamed. If anyone passed by, they would hear me. I should have been lying low. Life would be easier if I stayed hidden.

I had other plans, though. No one could hold me here forever. I took in the simple pair of handcuffs. The little stamp on them revealed that they'd been made out of silver. While they would burn a shifter, he'd made sure to avoid the steel and iron that would have hurt me.

Looking back, so much more of my life made sense. As a child, I'd been weak. Mom took me to doctor after doctor to figure out what was wrong with me. At that point, they'd assumed that I would be a shifter. It didn't make sense for me to be so weak and sick all the time.

As it turned out, I wasn't a shifter. I was a fae with an acute allergy to iron.

Thankfully, all of the iron in my warehouse loft apartment had been thoroughly covered or painted over. That was the benefit to modern remodeling.

I slid off my chair and planted my butt on the floor so I could glare at the metal hook embedded into the floor. Tugging the handcuffs did nothing, not that I was surprised. I didn't have super shifter strength. And my glare couldn't melt through it, either.

My friends had all sorts of nifty abilities that would have been handy in this moment. I had to stop and ask myself what Addie would do. She had mortal strength and an arcana that had to be used cleverly.

When I lifted my head to look around, my gaze settled on a spider plant hanging from the ceiling a few feet away. I laughed and extended a hand towards it. Arcana blossomed from my open palm and settled into the plant's pot. A curling vine snaked its way towards me while the rest spread out, consuming the walls.

I directed the tiny, sapling-green vine into the handcuff keyhole.

“What are you doing?” Feri snapped.

I stopped. Slowly lifting my head, I fixed my stare on the little ferret. He flinched, as if struck. Guilt turned my stomach sour.

Sighing, I said, “I will not be forced to do anything. It's cruel to expect me to behave like a dog.”

I waited for Feri to make a joke about being raised by wolves, but he didn't. I appreciated his silence while I latched the tiny vine around the mechanism inside the handcuff. The bracelet popped open, setting me free.

Triumphant, I leapt to my feet and brushed myself off.

“Where are you going to go?” Feri asked, hot on my heels as I walked.

I stopped in the bathroom doorway and turned towards Feri. “First, I'm going to take a shower. Then, I'm going to head out and put this all to rest.”

Feri didn't like the sound of that, but he stayed quiet. The little fae ferret seemed tired. There was an air about him that betrayed his exasperation. When I returned from my shower with one of Rhoan's shirts tied into a crop-top, Feri scurried after me.

I shoved my feet into my Converse and stepped outside. The walk back into the city would be long—like, all day long.

Thankfully, I still had my phone. I called a ride-share that could drive me downtown. It cost a pretty penny, but I didn't really have any other options.

Thankfully, the driver wasn't a fae assassin, contrary to what Feri assumed. The little ferret whispered all the ways the driver could kill me while we were zooming into the city. My heart thumped wildly, but we arrived safely, nonetheless.

I stepped out into the part of Lakesedge that butted right up against the lake. The last time I'd been this close, a crazed Reaper had been trying to use me as leverage against Addie. No one expected me to find so much power that day. Addie and I had used our combined arcana to create a beast made of bone and foliage. I had the pleasure of flying away on the creature.

Now, the lake glittered in welcome. It beckoned me forward, but Beryl's restaurant sat between me and the lake. I knew that beneath those waters, the local fae court waited for me. The fae court belonged to me, and I think that it knew it.

*Return to me.*

*Take your throne.*

*Bring me back to life.*

The court whispered from beneath the lake waves. Or... maybe that was just the sound of the waves, and I was hearing things. I glanced back over my shoulder, but there was no one there. It was just me and the lake.

"Queen Beryl will stop at nothing to kill you. She wishes to see you dead and gone so that there is no more contest to her throne. Why would you deliver yourself to her?" Feri pinched my ear as he spoke.

I had no excuse that would placate the ferret. His nervousness leaked into me, though. My stomach churned like wild waves under a torrential wind. My breath hitched as the waves slammed into my lungs. If I didn't do something soon, I would drown on dry land from the overwhelming emotions trying to drag me down.

For a heartbeat, I saw myself. Not as a future queen, but as a child from long ago.

A door slammed open in my brain. I'd been here before. This restaurant hadn't always belonged to Beryl. Before she'd stormed in and stolen the court, it had belonged to my mother. There'd been a garden at the center, a small courtyard where people could eat under the gentle sun.

I remembered following my fae mother from the courtyard and into the kitchen to watch her taste something the cooks had been working on. When she lifted the wooden spoon to her lips, a smile brightened her face. She cried out in joy before crouching in front of me. Hand beneath the wooden spoon, she lifted it to my lips next.

Taste burst across my tongue. It was sweet and delicate, a summer jam laden with berries that must have stained my mouth for days. Even now, when I brought my fingers to my lips, I could taste the sweet fruit.

“Cerridwen!” Feri yanked on my earring.

“Ow!” I hissed, lurching in the direction the little ferret had pulled.

I snapped back to the moment and saw the figure looming ahead of us. My stomach hit the ground. I hadn't expected to be this afraid. Beryl waited for me outside the restaurant's front doors. Her fists were clenched at her sides, but her chin was held high.

When I tried to force myself forward, my body rebelled. My instincts started screaming. Every part of me wanted to run in the other direction. Arcana spilled out of me. It shoved up from the ground beneath my feet. Vines and saplings shattered the concrete beneath me. I couldn't stop it. There was no holding it back.

“You foolish woman.” An arm wound around my waist.

A man plucked me from the ground. My back hit his chest. I didn't have it in me to fight. My entire body had locked up in response.

Beryl's image flickered. It wavered and turned see-through. I gasped. She hadn't been there at all. I should have known. If Beryl had been there, I wouldn't have been able to garner an audience. She would have struck.

Rhoan threw me on his enchanted motorcycle and kick-started it. The engine whinnied and we sped off. The entire time, Rhoan muttered under his breath. The wind whipped the words away before they could reach me. We tilted towards a highway on-ramp. Magic prickled my skin, though I couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Meanwhile, I berated myself for being so bold. I knew better than this. If I was going to get an audience with Beryl, I couldn't just walk up to the front door. With a woman like her, it would be war on sight. I needed to pique her curiosity first. If I teased her with an intriguing invitation, she might be interested in hearing me out.

Rhoan and Feri were right. I was being foolish. I could outsmart Beryl. I knew I had it in me.

Rhoan slowed and came to a stop in the middle of nowhere. I blinked, confused. How had we left the city so quickly? Had he done the magic teleportation trick again? I still didn't understand how that worked. At first, I thought it had something to do with doors, but now I wasn't so sure.

Rhoan planted his heavy booted feet on either side of the bike. He gripped my chin and twisted my head so that I had to look up at him. His eyes gleamed with a feral intensity. A muscle in his jaw twitched with the force of his anger.

"I stepped outside to do something nice for you," he growled in my face. "This is how you return the favor?"

His touch disarmed me. It wasn't the force. I wasn't afraid of this man. No, there was something else to the way he handled me that made my breath hitch. I heard a slight wobble in his growl that made me pause.

Rhoan was legitimately afraid for my safety.

Too bad I knew that he valued me as a chess piece and nothing else. I ripped my face out of his grasp and threw

myself off the bike. He snatched me by the back of my shirt and yanked me back into his arms. The man kicked the bike-stand down and stood, which lifted me from the ground so that I hung from his hooked arm.

Son of a...

We were in rural New York now, though. I threw my arcana out towards the trees lining the side of the road. The branches stretched towards Rhoan and grabbed ahold of him the same way he held me. The man didn't let me go, even when his own feet left the ground. So, we both hung in the air at awkward angles, neither of us ready to relent yet.

"Is this your form of a royal temper tantrum?" Rhoan grumbled.

I had the urge to shake him, but I was still in his arms. If I gave in, I'd shake myself, too. It was almost worth it. However, I wasn't going to give in and let this be a temper tantrum.

"Put me down and let me get on with my life," I demanded.

Rhoan laughed. "Not a chance in hell. You don't know how to keep yourself safe. Right now, you and I are two stationary targets. There's a fae assassin down the road, setting up their crossbow. The way you're dangling, it'll be easy to shoot you right through the heart."

"Then let me go!" I threw my hand in the air.

"Never," he said.

His voice dropped into a possessive growl that made my heart skip an unexpected beat. His arm around me became warm. I was made aware of the way his hand pressed flat against my exposed skin.

I swallowed the rising feelings back down. There was no time to indulge in such thoughts.

If we didn't resolve this, Rhoan's prediction would come true. Somewhere, an assassin was setting up for the shot of a lifetime. If he wasn't going to relent, then I had to. I dropped



Rhoan and sent us both crashing to the ground. He twisted mid-fall so that his back hit the pavement and his body cushioned my fall.

Meanwhile, I turned the outstretched tree branches into a canopy with dense foliage that blocked us from view. It would buy us a bit of time, but not much. A good hunter would be able to estimate their next shot.

That was *if* there was someone out there. If there wasn't... then I didn't mind lingering in Rhoan's arms for a short while. He could have let me hit the ground all by myself. I would have scraped my knees and maybe learned a lesson. Instead, he made sure that every part of me was safe.

It was kinder than I deserved...

A crossbow bolt ripped through the foliage above our heads. My stomach lurched as adrenaline hit my system. Another crossbow pierced the canopy and hit the seat of Rhoan's bike. The motorcycle let out a pained sound.

Rhoan cursed, a real strain in his voice. He carefully extracted himself from the pile we'd been in. He army crawled towards the bike and ripped the crossbow bolt from the leather. He threw it to the ground with a snarl. When he ran his hand over the seat of the bike, his tattoos rippled. His hand fell away and the hole was gone.

I desperately wanted to know how his magic worked. Was this a kind of magic that I had access to? I wouldn't be able to find out if I kept disrespecting him. That meant I had to play along while I figured out how to contact Beryl's court for an audience.

Rhoan rose to a crouch and beckoned me forward. "We need to leave. I don't have a fast exit the same way we left."

*Rhoan*

I COULD NOT BELIEVE this woman.

She marched her ass right up to Beryl like a damned sacrifice on a silver platter while I'd been out getting her the fae fruit that she practically begged for. This woman vexed me more than anyone I'd ever met on the face of this mortal planet. There was only one other woman with as much gumption, and I was pretty sure that she was the one firing at us from a distance.

I quickly tossed Cerri back onto the bike and urged my steed forward. The bike whined in pain. See, it wasn't really a bike. At least, it hadn't always been a bike. Back in the day, before my court fell and I found myself adrift in the mortal world, the mechanical beast beneath me had been a horse. We'd charged into battle together, like one creature with the same instincts and strengths.

Now, she took the form of a motorcycle so that I could blend into the mortal world. I had no idea what a poisoned crossbow bolt would do to my beloved steed. The faster we got out of here, the faster we could get to the bottom of this issue. If the princess thought she was going to waste more of my time, then she was wrong.

I would sacrifice many things for her safety, but I didn't want to have to sacrifice one of my oldest companions. I'd already lost too much. I wasn't sure if my court was worth this kind of loss. My own life was expendable. My steed's was not.

"Hold on, Princess," I growled.

She tightened her grip around my waist. Having her pressed against my back awakened a hunger in me that I hadn't felt in a very long time. A beast writhed inside me. It had sharp teeth and an insatiable hunger. I could almost feel its dark wings trying to rip free from my skin.

I would never become that monster ever again. If I'd been an honest man, I would have told the princess and warned her to keep me from crossing that line. I couldn't risk speaking the creature into existence, though. It was too dangerous.

Her touch raised the beast from its slumber. The last time it'd moved like this, I'd been preparing for war. While that

made sense, to some degree, I didn't understand why her touch did this to me. There was no need for the creature just yet.

It shouldn't have stirred at a woman's gentle touch. Cerridwen's grasp around my waist shouldn't have awakened it, but the beast laughed inside me all the same. The thunderous sound shook my bones and set my teeth on edge. The hunger turning into heat in my core only intensified, though.

I had to get the princess back to my trailer before the assassin caught up to us. There was a chance that if Cerri was in mortal danger, then the beast would make its first appearance in two decades.

A four way intersection appeared ahead. I nearly breathed a sigh of relief. It was a bit too soon for that, though. Another bolt split through my hair. I cursed the fae woman hunting us down. If I could have gotten her alone, then maybe I could strike a deal with her. I didn't have much in the way of gold, but I had many skills to offer...

Not like *that*.

Delphine and I went way back. I could help her on her next hunt for free. I could even offer her a position in Cerridwen's future court. The elven assassin had been without a home for centuries, far longer than me.

Cerri yelped and flinched. A bolt flew past my ear, grazing it ever so slightly. Already, Delphine's signature poison unfurled through my blood. If I hadn't been sure that it was her hunting us, I was now. That bitch had poisoned me with this before. It took a special kind of antidote...

And Cerri had brewed it all by herself on instinct alone. I had a new appreciation for my future queen's abilities. Even now, she clung to me with her sharp nails digging into my flesh as she turned to look back in Delphine's direction.

A wall of foliage sprang out of nowhere between us and Delphine. I pulled on my fae magic as we hit the intersection. If I didn't slow down between one transition and the other, we were going to go flying. However, I couldn't risk letting up.

So, we raced from the four-way intersection into the driveway at my trailer. The bike's tires skidded over the loose gravel drive. The handlebars wobbled in my grasp. I held them firm, but the bike was already out of control. It slid sideways and threatened to launch us into the gravel—that would surely grind us up like a blender.



**T**he world canted sideways. My heart leapt into my throat like that might protect it from getting splattered across the blue-gray gravel. A scream left my lips. Rhoan leapt and twisted, pulling me tight into his arms as he shoved us away from the speeding bike.

I reached out with my arcana. It answered with glee. Tiny tree seeds burst to life and reached high into the air. They bent and curved towards us like arms. The branches would hurt, so I asked the trees to create a soft bedding for us. It bloomed, moss puffing up like a cloud. We hit it and sank into the natural cushion while our hearts hammered in our chests.

At least, mine did. I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of my own heartbeat, but I imagined Rhoan's had to be pumping, too. He held me tight a moment longer. I felt his body relax against mine once he was sure the threat was over.

I sat up and looked back in the direction we'd come. The last I remembered, we'd hit a four-way intersection. When I looked, there was no intersection. There was only a narrow stretch of road butting up against the short driveway leading up to Rhoan's trailer.

He'd done it again. First, Rhoan had somehow transported us from a highway on-ramp in the city to a road far outside the urban sprawl. Then, he'd done it again at the intersection. I turned to him and got on my hands and knees so I could look the fallen man in the eye.

“Tell me how you did that.”

His upper lip curled. He stood, brushed himself off, and grabbed me by the back of my shirt. I couldn't help the sound of surprise that escaped me when he cradled me in his arms. I'd expected him to carry me like a dog by the scruff of the neck. Instead, Rhoan held me gently, almost reverently.

My heart skipped a beat. It was a traitorous little bastard that yearned for the fae warrior's affection. I wouldn't fall prey to the same desires. I would make sure of it.

Rhoan kicked the door closed behind us. He dropped me onto the couch and stalked back outside without another word.

Yeah, I guessed I deserved that.

Creeping towards the nearby window, I slowly peeled the curtain aside to peer out. Rhoan gingerly picked up his bike from the gravel. He ran a hand over the scratches along the side of the motorcycle. I could see the grief in his body. It gripped him like a cage made of guilt.

The tattoos on his arms writhed once more. Their slithering distracted me from the magic happening beneath his hands. Where there had been a black motorcycle now stood a towering mare. Her black mane fluttered softly in the wind. She tossed her head and nudged Rhoan affectionately.

The motorcycle had been...a horse this whole time?

What kind of fae fuckery was this? That did explain the whinny when the engine started. Rhoan checked the horse up and down for scratches, but as I watched, his movements slowed. He stopped and put his hands on his knees like he was out of breath.

That couldn't be right. He was a fae warrior. There was no way that our little escapade had him tired out.

Then I saw it. There was a slight nick on his ear; one of the crossbow bolts had grazed him. Red trickled down his pointed ear, and purple spread out from the wound. I knew how the poison on those bolts felt. Though the dose was small, I doubted it was any less effective. I leapt to my feet and rushed out the door. The porch steps tripped me up, but only barely. Nothing would stop me from dragging that man inside.

His mare looked up and stepped between us. I glared at the massive beast.

“He’s sick,” I said, as if a horse could understand me.

Maybe it could. I didn’t know anything about fae beasts. The creature could have been sentient like Feri. I waited for the horse to start spouting nonsense about my fate and duty as a future queen.

Instead, the horse glanced back at Rhoan. He’d straightened and raised his chin confidently, but I could still see the yellow cast to his skin. The purple veins slithered across his ear and stretched over his face.

He was trying to hide his discomfort from the both of us. I wasn’t stupid.

“Follow me, you idiot.” I darted past the horse and grabbed the front of Rhoan’s leather vest.

He grumbled something, but he didn’t fight me. Behind us, the horse whined with worry.

“I’ll take good care of him! I promise!” I shouted back to the beast. Then, to Rhoan, I said, “You’re not allowed to die of stupidity.”

He huffed. “I wish you would learn that same lesson.”

My face warmed. He had a point, but this wasn’t about me right now. We needed to get an antidote in him before he keeled over on me. But when we got inside, he stopped me. He gestured to a drawer in the kitchen. It had a keyhole that I hadn’t noticed before.

“What do you keep in a locked drawer in your *kitchen*?” I asked.

He chuckled.

“Now is not the time to laugh!” I grabbed his vest in both hands and shook him.

I wasn’t ready to admit how my hands were shaking in fear. The purple veins spread across his cheek. His pale lavender eyes were swimming in another, darker color. It



reminded me of the way crow's feathers shimmered in the presence of light.

He clenched his jaw, pressed his eyes closed, and turned away from me. The muscles in his neck flexed. Pain must have been tearing through him.

*Rhoan*

MY BEAST RESPONDED to her concern. I couldn't bear it. The monster tried to rip its way out of me so that it could greet the princess for itself. I wasn't going to let the damned thing out. Not now, not ever.

It would stay locked in me, trapped in this flesh prison I'd crafted for it. I didn't want to be that monster anymore. It'd failed me in the war to save my court. I would never trust it again.

When I closed my eyes, I could see it all over again. The scene sprawled out before me. It was bathed in horror, in things that no one should have to see anytime they stopped drinking. I blew out a frustrated breath through my nose, but when I inhaled, all I could smell was blood.

The queen, face down with her fingers outstretched towards her husband, was already gone. He rose to hand and knees to crawl towards her. The click of heels on the stone floor warned of Beryl's approach. My heart thumped in time with it.

The king turned his attention in my direction and gave one last order.

*Escape.*

Distantly, I heard Cerridwen working in my kitchen. She muttered to herself as she jostled jars and plastic containers. The small sounds pulled me out of the bloody vision. The ache in my chest slowly eased. The beast's snarl faded and vanished altogether.

“I’m working with limited resources here. If you could jump us to my apartment, then I’d be able to brew a complete antidote.” She kicked something. Jars rattled like angry bells. “You still haven’t told me what’s in this damn drawer.”

Sluggish, I tugged a chain out from behind my shirt. A set of thin keys danced in front of my vision. They doubled as the room wavered. The cut on my ear barely broke the surface, yet Delphine’s poison tore through me as if it’d been a full dose. I marveled at the woman’s poison brewing skills even while it killed me.

It seemed that she’d changed the recipe recently. I really hoped this antidote could keep up.

“You had the key on you this whole time?” Cerridwen snatched the chain from my hand.

She didn’t even hesitate to snap the fragile silver cord. It tore free with barely a tug at the back of my neck. I watched as two of her knelt and jammed the key into the lock. I flopped back, hitting the wall. It supported me for now, but I knew I would start sliding down it.

Exhaustion gripped me. It turned my breath shallow. I wanted nothing more than to lay down and rest my eyes for a short while. That was all a part of the poison, though. The deadly concoction whispered sweet nothings in my ear, begging me to lay down and accept my fate.

Before me, Cerri’s jaw dropped at the sight of the thin vials I’d kept locked away. She ran her fingers over them. I started to tell her which one to grab, but she plucked it out before I could say anything. Sparkling arcana dripped from her fingertips.

She didn’t need me telling her what to do. Her magic had spoken to her and guided her to the right vial. I extended my hand and ignored the way it shook in the air between us. Cerri eyed my unsteady palm and shook her head.

Cerri stepped past my outstretched hand and gripped my chin. My heart thumped wildly, and the beast rose to purr at her touch. She pressed the mouth of the glass vial to my lips

and tilted it. The antidote poured past my lips, into my mouth, and down my throat in a very intimate moment.

When the vial was empty, Cerri remained. She watched me with wide, worried eyes. Her touch on my chin turned soft and anticipatory. Her fingertips grazed the beard stubble growing along my skin.

No one had ever shown me this much care. To all those who came before her, I was nothing more than a tool. I was a weapon crafted to keep a court safe. Tools were kept sharpened and tucked away, not touched with loving caresses. No one watched me with such open fear while I bandaged my wounds.

These thoughts roused the creature inside me and made it restless. It paced, feathers bristled and tail lashing. It had no name, no way to define it. I didn't want to think about its constructed form or the way it'd been forced into me. Not when Cerridwen was only a step away.

I could pull her to me. I could hold her tight to my body and kiss her hard to reassure her that I would be all right.

The princess didn't want that. She backed away. Her hand dropped back to her side. She studied the vial with a droplet of antidote left lingering in the bottom.

"Where did you get this? Why is it a near perfect antidote to that specific poison?" She lifted her gaze to meet mine. Her eyes were narrowed, the softness gone.

Already, I could feel the effects of the antidote. My lungs expanded and allowed me to suck in a fresh breath, filling my body with new life. I straightened myself and pulled away from the wall.

"Tell me why you were at Beryl's restaurant then. You tell me first, then we can talk about where I got that antidote from." I snatched the glass vial from her hand.

Cerridwen went suspiciously quiet. After pushing past her, I glanced back. She remained motionless, much to my dismay. Whatever was on her mind would remain locked behind her impassive stance. I would glean nothing from her right now.

Anger swelled in my chest. It set me on fire and filled my lungs with acrid smoke. I wanted to spit it up, but I knew that would only lead to pain. She would suffer...Perhaps that was what she needed. If she had secret plans, then I would need her to understand the true gravity of the situation.

“I watched your parents—your biological—ones die.” The words dropped like stones in the space between us.

Cerri flinched, as if struck by each word. I didn't want to go on. Regret soured my tongue. If I didn't, she would continue to get in trouble. I couldn't risk losing her, though. If she didn't understand the danger she was in, then she would do something foolish and get herself killed.

“I was there when Beryl overtook your court. She wasted no time in spilling blood. To her, it was simply a pretty decoration. When it dried, she spilled it again to keep it a gleaming crimson.

“Your mother stood up to her first. They were cousins, so your mother thought that she could reason with Beryl. Beryl struck her without hesitation. There was no familial love between them. If there was, Beryl must have faked it. She attacked your mother with a vicious grin.”

I paused, pain lancing across my chest.

“I took Beryl's second blow. I'd been too slow to take the first.”

Cerridwen's mother had warded me off at first. She'd used her affinity for air magic to create a barrier between us. It was only after Beryl's first blow that the barrier weakened enough for me to get between the women.

From there, the fight turned vicious. Beryl's minions swarmed the court. There'd been assassins with spider limbs, banshees with haunting howls, and pookahs with nightmarish auras. The denizens of her Unseelie court still live in her hollow, the part of the court that still remained to this day.

Beryl had turned the glimmering court into a hole in the ground. It was unsightly. The portals to the Seelie castle were

lost in Beryl's underground labyrinth, just another attempt to keep us away from the throne.

"If you were there," Cerridwen growled, "then why didn't you save them?"

I swallowed. Extending my right hand, I opened it to show her the brand in my palm. Her breath hitched in a nearly inaudible gasp. She reached for the raised skin that she must have overlooked when feeding me the potion.

"This is the mark of my vow. When given a command by those who hold my loyalty, I am unable to disobey." I closed my fist around the mark. "I was told to escape. My body betrayed me and did exactly as your father wanted, even though I'd been ready to die in that battle."

Cerridwen's eyes gleamed with thought. When the corner of her mouth lifted, I knew she hadn't learned anything. She was thinking about all the ways she could use my mark to her advantage.

Too bad she was a fool who didn't have my loyalty yet. My vow had been given to the king and queen. As a princess, she couldn't command me the same way. She would have to take control of her court if she wanted to order me around.

I wished she would listen. There were important lessons in my story, but she was thinking only of the ways that she could use me to her advantage. I wanted her to use me, but only if she was going to save our people.

Cerri pulled back. She clutched her hand close to her chest and averted her gaze.

"I have a lot to think about. I...I need time to gather my thoughts."

She pulled away. As she made her way to the exit, the little ferret skittered up to her feet and climbed her body so it could rest around her neck.



Feri wound himself around the back of my neck but said nothing. I appreciated the little beast's silence. He must have been listening. What could one say after a conversation like that?

Nothing.

Rhoan had emptied his heart and horrors to me, and my first thought had been of how I could use the mark against him. Guilt sat heavy in the pit of my stomach. It turned into a weight that made my feet drag against the ground.

I had nothing that I really wanted to ask of him. My only desire would be to make him stop asking me to start a war. If he wanted to fight, I would let him have it...No, I wouldn't. There was a balance in Lakesedge that I couldn't risk upsetting right now.

I just wanted them all to stop. I wanted Rhoan and Feri to stop begging me for war. I wanted the assassins to leave me alone. I wanted Beryl to understand that she wasn't in danger.

I paused and crouched, clutching the sides of my head as I fought back a scream. Feri scrambled off my shoulders and scurried away. The scream built in my throat.

A door slammed open in the back of my mind. Memories came pouring forth. There'd been gentle gardens. The waters had glimmered like pools of gemstones. My mother's laugh rang like cheery bells. The sound of it brought my father out of hiding. He would sweep her into his arms and kiss her passionately.

Once upon a time, a family had been happy.

I shoved the memories back with ones of my own family. Molly James cheered me from the sidelines at the school swim-meet. Jasper James taught me how to drive a stick shift. They played friendly pranks on me every Christmas. One year, Dad wrapped the biggest box he could find. Inside it had been another, wrapped box. In that had been...you guessed it, another wrapped box.

We'd laughed so much that year. They were my real family. This ghostly image of a sparkling fairy court meant nothing to me. It was a fanciful dream compared to my reality. Why should that court mean anything to me when I spent years with Alvin Combs? The fae hadn't been there to stop him from hurting us. Jasper James had been the one to stand between us and danger.

Two worlds had me in a chokehold. For a moment, I thought about visiting my parents. I didn't want to bring danger to their doorstep, though. There were still assassins hot on my heels. I had one other heavily-warded refuge to hide in.

When I looked up, I found myself wrapped in a cocoon of growing things. Plants twisted together to become an eggshell barrier between me and any danger. I reached towards it, and it unfurled to caress my hand.

No matter how I wanted to believe that I was part of the Lakesedge Pack, I wasn't a shifter. It was becoming more and more obvious, and I hated it.

Still, I made my way to Ness's place. There, I let myself in and took up a corner of the couch, pulling a pillow close so I could clutch it tight. After a while, Ness came out and found me. She must have caught my scent on the air. She curled up beside me while others moved in and out of the Pack hub.

I let go of my arcana and let it suffuse the hanging house plants. It reached out into the garden out back, making it flourish all over again despite the shifting autumn weather. I sighed as my power stretched like a tired cat.



“What brought you here?” Ness asked with her head on my knee.

I grumbled. Words piled up inside my skull, but I didn't know how to shake it to let them out yet. We sat there together for a long while, silence comfortable like a weighted blanket. Eventually, I would have to cast it off when it became too much.

By then, Ryder appeared. He leaned in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and a gentle smile on his face. He would be a father, soon. He and Ness were expecting their first child. It would be an adorable little shifter, likely a dragon just like Ryder.

But all I could think about was the day that Alvin held me by the throat and neither of them moved to stop him. Logically, I knew they'd hesitated to pull me free of Alvin's grasp in order to keep him from hurting me. It hadn't really worked out the way they'd wanted, though. Alvin had fractured bones. He'd covered me in bruises and scars that I would never be free of.

I swallowed my bitterness. It wasn't fair, and I knew it. The frustration from everything going on was getting to me, and I couldn't let it poison my friendships. I had to shove it back down.

Locking eyes with Ryder, I asked, “Can you help me get an audience with Queen Beryl? I need you to make it sound like I have an offer she won't be able to resist.”

Ryder's lip curled. While he and Beryl were allies, it wasn't out of friendship or trust. It was for the safety of Lakesedge, and nothing more.

Ness sat upright. She gave me a worried look. The way her lips pursed together, I knew she had a command waiting behind them, but she kept it to herself out of respect for our friendship.

They weren't going to help me. I could tell already, but that didn't stop me from charging ahead. If Rhoan wouldn't

help me, if Feri wouldn't help me, then I needed *someone* on my side.

"She might listen to you," I said. "All I need is a chance to talk her down."

Ryder erupted. "Talk her down? There's no talking with that woman! She has everything planned out for you. She's nothing but a spider with a sticky web. If you think you're going to go in there and trick her, then you're going to get killed."

I shot up from my seat with my hands balled at my sides. "I don't have any other choice! You aren't being pestered by everyone in your life. They're not telling you to go on a crusade for a family you can't even remember. I can't turn around without running into someone trying to kill me."

Every bone in my body trembled with rage. I was tired of being everyone's punching bag. I didn't want to be a martyr for anyone. All I wanted was a life to myself. That's the very least that I deserved at this point.

But it seemed like no one wanted to help me. My breath shuddered. I was all alone. When I looked at Ness, she gave me pleading eyes. She sided with her husband. He'd warned me before that he didn't want a part in this, but I'd hoped that someone would be willing to stick out their neck the way I'd had to in the past.

"Let us help you find another way," Ness said, putting a hand on my arm.

I jerked away from her. "What do you think you can do? Will your command *arcana* work on a fae queen? Can you command her to leave me alone?"

Ness hesitated. She wasn't sure. We'd been fighting stronger and stronger beings lately. Ness's commands would work for a while, but they weren't permanent. If she gave Beryl a command, then Beryl would shake it off and come after everyone.

A sigh ripped out of me. I was exhausted.

“I’m going to go upstairs and take a nap,” I said, turning away from my friends.

There were rooms for other Pack members to use. I was still Pack...right? I paused at the stairs and looked back as if for confirmation, but the two of them were having a silent conversation.

### *Rhoan*

I KEPT my feet planted on the ground with the bike between my legs. The princess had entered a house about fifty feet down the road. I lingered to make sure that she was okay. At first, I’d been on guard because she’d gone into the local Pack Alpha’s house.

Then I remembered that Cerri had been raised in the Pack. This had to be a safe place for her. The Pack Alpha would have a protected home. I could feel the wards around it trying to feel me out, even from this distance.

Whatever witch they’d paid had done a good job, but I questioned the evil prickle of her power. There was a hunger in it that threatened to feed on my fae magic. The Pack Alpha needed to have a conversation with his witch.

I leaned forward and folded my arms on the handlebars. The leaves of the surrounding trees rustled and whispered warning. Someone had joined me, but I had no need to fear him. His aura wasn’t familiar, at least not personally. However, everyone in Lakesedge knew about the thunderous new Pack Alpha.

Ryder stepped up beside me like he’d appeared through the in-between. I knew better. This man didn’t have fae blood, or even a fae blessing—not anymore. He’d bowed to Beryl for a short while if only to gain her assistance while overturning the previous Pack Alpha. According to my sources, it didn’t take long for Ryder and his mate to push back against Beryl’s contract.

“Can I ask why you’re staking out my home?” Ryder asked, his voice dripping with potential hostility.

He wasn’t going to strike. Not yet. The man had questions, and I’d been on my best behavior so far. He had reason to give me the benefit of the doubt.

“My princess is in your house. Consider me an added layer of protection.”

Ryder’s lips twisted in thought. A low growl rumbled in his chest like thunder. There was a massive dragon tucked away in that man, but I also had my own beast. I didn’t want to let it out. In fact, that was the last thing I wanted. If Ryder pushed, I would hold my ground, though.

I wasn’t going to leave Cerridwen’s side anymore. She needed someone to keep watch over her if Beryl had hired assassins on Delphine’s level. That elf was dangerous, and I couldn’t trust just anyone to keep her away from my princess.

Not even Cerridwen’s friends.

I’d seen the scars on Cerri’s skin. Her friends hadn’t prevented those. How was I to believe that they could keep her safe from a well-trained elven assassin? The answer was that I couldn’t.

Not that I would tell Ryder that to his face. I’d let him believe that I was here because of my vow, not because of a massive lack of trust.

Ryder sighed and rocked back on his heels. “You can’t make any of those women do anything. In fact, if you tell them to do something, they will go out of their way to do the opposite. Be careful with what you ask of her.”

“A duty is a duty,” I growled between clenched teeth.

Ryder spread his hands wide in a shrug. “The only one of those women with a sense of *duty* is mine. The rest look fate in the eye and give it the middle finger. Yours isn’t going to be any different.”

*Yours?*

Ryder spoke of his mate the same way he spoke of my relationship with Cerridwen. I gave him an odd sidelong glance like that might shake him out of his tragic misconception. Cerridwen was beautiful and sweet and a quick thinker in times of stress, but...I couldn't love her the way that Ryder loved his mate.

It wasn't allowed.

So, I ignored Ryder's implications. If I gave no voice to his misbegotten ideas, then they didn't exist.

"Cerridwen will learn. There are still people depending on her. I don't think she knows that."

Ryder ran a hand along his beard. "Ness answered the call to save her Pack because she lived among them. She saw how she and the others were being treated. Her resolve came from everything she experienced alongside them. What makes you think that Cerridwen will answer similarly? She lived with Ness. Her life has been one battle after another up until now."

I knew that. Cerridwen had explained this to me when we were drinking. I looked this man up and down. Anger flared hot inside me when I realized that he'd killed the man that'd laid hands on my princess. Because of Ryder, I couldn't get vengeance for Cerridwen.

Sure, she'd gotten vengeance once. Alvin Combs, the former leader of the Lakesedge Pack, was dead and gone. Ryder had made sure of that. However...I couldn't help but feel a need to wrap my hands around Alvin's throat and watch the light leave his eyes.

"What's stopping the fae from turning against Beryl?" Ryder asked. "If they want freedom so badly, then why aren't they banding together to take her down themselves? It seems a bit cowardly to wait for a young woman to come of age. They've been resting on their laurels for no perceivable reason."

A shiver raced down my spine. I shuddered and lifted my head. Ryder's question faded, falling to the back of my mind. There was another threat on the air.

Delphine had caught up. It'd only been a matter of time, really. I'd wasted it standing out here with Ryder.

"Can't stay," I said while dismounting my steed. "I have a princess to protect."

Ryder's stance widened like he could sense the threat, too. While he searched for the source of the ominous aura, I stepped in-between.

The rules for stepping in-between were strange. Fae magic never really worked along a predictable format. Since Ryder and I were in the middle of a conversation and at a turning point in it, that counted as standing *in-between* the same way that doors or highway onramps counted.

Between one breath and the next, I moved from the road to a doorway inside Ryder's home. The wards on the house recoiled in frustration. They tried to lance out at me, but I ignored their biting presence.

Ahead, Cerridwen slept on a bed, her back turned to me. I rushed forward and scooped her up. She'd had a long day. We'd already survived one fight. All I had to do was get her back to my trailer and we would be safe.

Feri scurried up my bicep and over my shoulders.

Cerridwen roused and kicked out her legs. "What the hell are you doing?"

She tumbled out of my arms and landed on the floor on all fours. Her wince told me that the fall must have hurt. I refused to feel bad for something she'd done to herself...all right, I felt a little bad.

Bending, I brought her back onto her feet. "All right, Princess. It's time to go. Our friend caught up with us."

Cerridwen jerked her arm out of my grasp. "Why are you trying to leave then? Shouldn't we stay here? There are wards all over the house!"

I laughed in her face. It was rude of me, but I couldn't help it. As we spoke, the wards were trying to throw me out. These boundaries had been made to combat mortal threats. They

would keep out all sorts of local problems, but they weren't going to do anything against the fae.

Immortal creatures didn't work the same way as mortals. These wards were digging through my body in search of something more, but they were going to be sorely disappointed when they found nothing but magic where my soul should be.

Cerri didn't know how useless the wards really were since she was always welcome on Pack grounds. The witch's magic never pinched her skin like an annoyed bug and nothing more. These wards weren't going to stop an elf older than moonlight. Delphine had no kingdom. She had nothing to lose by stepping on Pack grounds.

"Let's go," I said. Now wasn't the time to argue with the princess.





**T**he bastard apparated into my life once again. I hadn't even gotten to sleep before Rhoan stormed into the bedroom and yanked me out of bed. Then he had the nerve to drop me on the floor.

Okay, that part had been my fault. Fight or flight had kicked in. I'd chosen flight and tried to throw myself out of the situation before realizing that it was Rhoan. While I knew I didn't have to run from the fae warrior, he wasn't exactly easy on my frayed nerves.

"Why are we running?" I asked, unmoving.

Rhoan whipped around. He towered over me despite my own height. He leaned in close. His eyes burned with that oil slick darkness. When his lips curled, I could almost feel the heat of his frustration rolling off him.

"A mortal witch's wards aren't going to save anyone right now. Look at me. Where am I? Huh? I'm inside, where I shouldn't be. No one invited me in. I wasn't added to the ward's list of acceptable visitors. Is that enough to convince you that we're in danger?"

My breath rushed out of me.

Ness.

She was still here, somewhere. I couldn't invite trouble into her house while she was pregnant. If something happened and she lost the baby...it was still early in the pregnancy. She

was only a few weeks into her first trimester. A lot could go wrong...

“Shit. Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

I let Rhoan sweep me into his arms. He rushed towards the doorway. Fae magic bubbled in the air around us, but before we could slip away the window behind us shattered. The glass burst inward. Rhoan wrapped himself around me. Shards pelted his back.

Though I shouted in warning, the glass wasn't a problem. The pieces hit his leather vest and dropped to the floor with a tinkling chime that didn't fit the urgency of the situation.

“Come on, darling,” a woman purred. “Time to give up and let me win. You know I always do in the end.”

The elven woman came to a sliding halt, one leather-clad leg extended for balance. She rose like a lithe cat. Her white hair swung around her face and revealed plum-colored eyes with feline pupils. When she grinned, her lilac stained lips split into a perfect smile.

She was—for a lack of a better term in the midst of danger—*gorgeous*. How was I supposed to compete with such a beautiful fae woman? Her pointed ears were longer than my own, which must have been an elf thing. They were dotted with tiny purple gems and black metal rings.

She locked eyes with me. “Nothing personal, Princess Cerridwen.”

I didn't notice the crossbow until she'd already fired it. With a wave of my hand, I summoned a wall of foliage. But I wasn't fast enough. The bolt cut through the air faster than my arcana could grow.

Rhoan slung an arm around my waist. When his feet moved, mine did, too. We worked in unison to swap places. It wasn't until he stood where I'd been that I realized what that meant. I let out a scream when the bolt pierced his chest.

The only indication of pain that he gave was the barest wrinkle of his nose as he scooped me up from the ground and lunged for the nearby door. The bolt grazed my body from the

way he held me. I wrapped my hand around it to see if perhaps the projectile was made of wood.

Much to my dismay, the bolt was made entirely of metal. There was nothing I could do to help him until we were somewhere safe again. It'd hit him right in the heart. I didn't know how much time he had left.

He growled in pain when I touched the bolt. I flinched and jerked back apologetically.

“Are you really going to sacrifice yourself for a court that sent you away?” the elven woman asked.

She stalked up behind Rhoan. Even as we lurched through the doorway and fae magic transported us from Ness's house to Rhoan's trailer, the woman followed. She was in no rush. It was as if she'd simply walked through the door that Rhoan had opened.

He stumbled forward, and I tumbled out of his arms. I crashed into the table while he caught himself against the wall. When he twisted and grabbed at the bolt in his chest, I cried out for him to stop.

“That's how people bleed out!” I gritted my teeth and tried to roll off the table.

Before I could roll away, the woman planted her boot on my chest. She pointed her hand-crossbow in my face. There was an apology in the wry twist of her lips, but it wasn't aimed at me. She spared half a second to glance at Rhoan as if they had some sort of history that she was about to tarnish.

My heart clenched—not in anticipation of certain death. This was a more wrenching pain. In this split instant, I realized this woman had a deeper relationship with Rhoan than I ever would, especially if my life ended here.

Her finger squeezed the trigger. Rhoan flew into action. He pulled the assassin's arm upwards so that the hand crossbow pointed towards his chest. When their eyes locked, my heart broke. Something else shattered as the bolt pierced his heart.

“You would die for her?” the woman howled at him.

Blood painted Rhoan's lips when he grinned at her. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and wet. "It's my job."

Rhoan struck. He twisted to guard me with his body while bringing his blade down with the other. The sharp edge struck the woman, but I felt Rhoan tense and pull back at the last second. He could have carved through her.

He spared her.

Now was my chance. I had to strike. The plant life in here desperately wanted to save us; I only had to tell it how. Yet, I froze. My hands trembled. I found myself on my knees, looking up at Alvin all over again.

This wasn't the same situation. I wasn't completely defenseless. In me was a wealth of power that I barely understood. All I had to do was call upon it.

But nothing would come to me. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. My body betrayed me while Rhoan bled out.

He, however, was undaunted even with a bolt through his heart. He'd taken two now, and he acted like both were nothing more than paper cuts as he pushed the woman out the door of his small trailer. Their blades clashed, ringing out so loud that my ears ached.

*Move, Cerri. Don't be a disappointment. Don't let this man die yet.*

The assassin hadn't come here to kill him. She'd come to kill me. That meant wherever I went, she would follow me. I needed to find a way to escape. Maybe then she would hunt me down.

That plan was intrinsically flawed. I got to my hands and knees and looked up. Rhoan and the assassin were trading blows, almost a perfect match for one another. They moved so fast, I could barely keep up with their fight.

Watching them reminded me that I was nothing more than a hindrance. Rhoan and I would never move that well together. Even though they were fighting against one another, their relationship was still obvious in the way their weapons

danced. Rhoan lifted his hand, fingers splayed. When he closed his fist, a sword hilt appeared in his hand.

He brought it down and caught the woman's dagger along the edge of his own blade. The woman's attention slid sideways, back towards me. My heart leapt. Arcana swirled around me. I had to figure out how to use it to protect myself. Addie wasn't here to make a bone beast with me. I had to do this on my own...

Rhoan hit the assassin in the back of the head. She fixed him with a glare.

*Come on, Cerri. You're not this useless. You've survived this long.*

I did it using potions. While I didn't have access to my cauldron, I could still make do with a bowl and a microwave. It felt sacrilegious, but I still leapt to my feet and rushed into the kitchen so I could yank open the spice cabinet. Rhoan's dried herbs cried out to me. Their abilities hummed with urgency.

Now wasn't the time to sigh with relief. My shoulders were still tight. The sound of clanging metal rushed me. I poured aggressive herbs into the bottom of a coffee mug, topped it off with tap water, and jammed it into the microwave.

This would be gross, but the potion would be explosive. I put my hand to the microwave's window and let my arcana fill the inside of the contraption. With my foot, I nudged open the drawer filled with vials. Where was the one we'd emptied earlier?

I tucked several more antidotes into my pants pocket and cursed the shallowness of women's pockets. The fashion industry could suck an egg right about now.

Just as the microwave beeped, I found the empty vial in the sink. It sat on top of a pile of unwashed dishes. They weren't going to get done any time soon. I had just enough time to rinse the empty vial before I carefully poured the explosive potion into it like it was nitroglycerin.

I had one shot, and my hands were shaking. This wasn't going to end well.

Stepping outside, my arcana seeped into the ground like rainwater soaking parched land. Plants burst up from my every step. They rose into lush flowering bushes and towering trees. Behind me was an oasis that hadn't been there before.

The assassin woman laughed. "You think that's intimidating? I'm not afraid of a bunch of flowers!"

Rhoan clocked her in the side of the head while she was distracted. She reeled from the powerful blow. He opened his arm to me, and I jumped into his embrace without a second thought.

How was he still standing? He'd been poisoned by the barest graze of the assassin's poison earlier. Since then, he'd taken two bolts worth of the poison, and he was somehow still standing. We needed to get somewhere that the assassin couldn't find us.

Or, rather, someplace the assassin couldn't enter.

She'd slipped past Rhoan's wards using his own magic. I clutched him close and rose onto my tiptoes so I could whisper in his ear. There was only one place that had everything I needed, and I could make sure that she couldn't follow us.

"Take me home," I whispered to him.



**H**is arm on me tightened. He glanced back at the assassin who was steadying herself for another blow. She wavered on her feet, but the way she pinned us with her glare told me that she was far from done.

“How much is Beryl paying you?” I said before I could think twice.

The assassin laughed again. “Do you think you can afford to pay me better? You work at a café, *Princess*. Your court is dead. You aren’t a queen with centuries of wealth at your disposal. You’re just a mutt’s daughter.”

I nearly flung myself out of Rhoan’s arms so I could punch her myself. The assassin had done her homework, apparently. I didn’t like the conclusion she’d come to. It filled me with an indignant fury that I’d never tasted before.

My arcana unfurled again. Rhoan’s lawn grew lush. A garden slowly rose around us. Hedges sprang forth, cutting the assassin off from us. Before they could rise too high, I asked Rhoan if he was ready, and I threw the explosive potion.

The explosion rocked the tangled bush branches. Rhoan didn’t stick around to see if that worked. He spun with me in his arms and raced towards the nearest hedge corner.

I opened my mouth to ask him why he didn’t just teleport. Before I could say anything, he rounded the corner, and we were suddenly in my living room. Rhoan let me tumble out of his arms. He bent double, his chest heaving as he struggled to



breathe. Blood dripped from his chest and splattered on the floor beneath him.

“We can’t stay here long,” he said between breaths. “Get what you need, and we’ll run.”

Nose wrinkled, I stretched out my hands. There was still so much arcana inside me. The garden in my core wanted to extend further and further. All I had to do was let it out.

A thick tree trunk rose and covered the apartment door. Behind me, the wood panels over my windows thickened and sprouted tiny green leaves. A myriad of blue flowers blossomed at the bottom. When they wavered, they looked like dancing waters.

The thick barriers gleamed like metal. I ran a hand along the wood and marveled at the feeling under my fingertips. They were like bunker walls. Nothing was getting past these. Not even sunlight.

A light burst into being behind me. I twisted and found Rhoan slumped on the floor with a ball of fire floating in his palm.

Taken aback, I asked, “Since when can you control fire?”

Eyes half-lidded, he grimaced. “This? This is nothing. It’s a cantrip.”

“Sure, buddy.” I walked around him in a wide circle and started to light lamps around the room, so he didn’t have to hold an open flame in my living room.

It made me uncomfortable in ways that I didn’t quite understand. After a moment, I realized that feeling wasn’t mine. It belonged to the plants around me. They quaked in the presence of an open flame.

I paused and reached up to the nearest hanging plant to comfort it.

*Rhoan*

WHAT A DAY.

I hadn't had this much excitement in my life since the fall of the Seelie Court. All right, I wouldn't call that excitement. Still, the concept was similar. Perhaps I should have called it adrenaline. That's all I was running on anymore.

Now that we were safely trapped inside Cerri's apartment, the adrenaline faded. I couldn't support myself anymore. If Delphine crashed through the thin wood panels over those windows, we were done for.

But those panels weren't thin anymore. Cerri had turned them into something more than just wood. They gleamed in the light like thick sheets of metal. The way Cerri rose, her spine stiff with solid resolve, I could see where the wood learned it.

Cerri paused and reached up to a shaking plant. She spoke softly to it until the thing stopped trembling like a cornered animal. In her presence, the plants had taken on a kind of sentience that I'd never seen before.

Her wild curls had escaped their binding. The tenderness in her face stole my breath away, but that look vanished the moment she turned her attention on me. I almost laughed at the sudden change in her demeanor.

I didn't deserve the same kind of love, not even while I was actively dying. Or...was it passively dying? I wasn't sure. I just knew that my body was not happy to have two more doses of Delphine's damn poison. My heart struggled to beat around the bolt through it—which made all the more worse when Cerri turned her green eyes on me and made my stomach do backflips.

My body couldn't handle this.

I would die here, just from the sexy anger on the princess's face. Though, her expression softened when her gaze dropped to the bolt in my chest. I gave her a tight smile and accepted my fate. Head falling back, it hit the wall behind me, but I couldn't be bothered to care.

Cerri crouched in front of me, grabbed my chin, and yanked so that I had to look at her. “No dying on me.”

Her firm voice was laced with the soft break of someone truly terrified. I reached up and touched her arm. Her hand shook. She jerked away from me and closed her hand into a fist to hide the tremble in it.

I let my head fall back again. “Fine. I won’t die.”

She laughed, barely a soft huff of air with the tension this thick between us. “Is it that easy? Are you telling me I don’t even have to brew an antidote?”

*For her? Anything was possible.*

How the hell had she created that explosive on the fly? It wasn’t something that I’d had in the house. She’d made it and used the empty vial from the antidote I’d taken earlier. There was a reason she’d survived this long.

I admired her resolve. She’d been terrified. I’d seen it in her eyes and in the way she’d moved. Yet, nothing stopped her. This woman was like her parents in some ways, and completely unlike them in others.

Her mother would have stood in the face of danger and faced it without flinching, but the woman wouldn’t have been able to overcome those same obstacles with quick thinking. Cerridwen had been shaking in her boots while brewing a potion that could explode on contact.

That was the difference between honor and duty. Few considered the two as separate entities. Honor was an idea. It infused your being and pushed you into situations that called for duty. That was when action happened. Duty called upon us to do things that we would never have considered before.

I wished I could have spared Cerridwen from her duty. I knew that she was trying her hardest to escape it. There wasn’t much either of us could do to stop fate from bearing down on us. Eventually, she would have to accept her duty. When that happened, I would be there beside her.

I wasn’t going to die today. This poison could try its hardest. The bolt was barely in the way.

At least, that's what I told myself as I watched the princess move about her kitchen. She had a purpose in her step, and it made her movements precise. She poured a certain amount of herbs into her cauldron before quickly placing the jars back onto the shelf.

Everything about her was beautiful. Women were out of my reach. I was not allowed to marry. My line ended with me. Yet, I could still love.

And I was pretty sure that this feeling was the beginning of that.

Now, if only I could get the damned woman to listen to me. Would she trust me after this? I wasn't sure that I even deserved trust. If she knew what I'd done and how I'd failed her parents, she might never love me the way I loved her.

Damn these feelings. It had to be infatuation. This was far too quick. No one fell in love like this. I had no idea what love felt like. Devotion? Sure. That came as part of my vow package. Loyalty? Absolutely. My court deserved everything I could give, my blood, my life, everything.

This couldn't be love.

Once upon a time, I'd thought I felt something like love for Delphine. We'd worked together for a few years. Our movements became synchronous. Fighting her again had sparked something in me. I felt alive again. Muscles that hadn't found use in years were suddenly singing with joy, even if I was dying from her damned poison.

That feeling still couldn't compare to the flare of joy and heat that happened every time I laid eyes on Cerridwen. The princess barely acknowledged me as she worked, but I could see the tight cinch between her shoulder blades. She moved quickly, precisely. Any misstep, and time would be lost.

All of this care for me, a drunkard who kept yelling at her.

I should stop drinking. The thought slipped through my mind. It seemed like the right thing to do until the memories came flooding back in. How long had it been since my last

drink? If I was going to die here, I wanted some whiskey so I could drown out the screams still howling inside my skull.

This is what I deserved, though. I didn't deserve to die in peace. These were the screams of my people, of the fae that I'd failed when I obeyed my final orders. I should have pushed back. The order to escape and survive had only doomed me to a tortured existence. How could I continue living when there were so many ghosts inside me now?

Cerridwen interrupted my sour thoughts when she crouched in front of me. She gripped my chin once again, tilted my head back, and poured a hot liquid down my throat. I would have done it myself, but I quickly realized that the poison had shut down all muscle movement. Nothing worked, not even my fingers or toes.

When she finished, she grazed my cheek with her palm. Heat consumed my body. I inhaled sharply and clenched my fists to push back the need trying to take over. I could move again. The potion barely had time to do its job, which meant that my body had reacted to Cerridwen's touch.

She could raise a man from the dead with nothing more than a gentle touch. She certainly raised *something* for me. That was a fact that I needed to hide. The princess didn't need to know that something so simple as an affectionate touch could turn me on.

Damn. Was my life really that sad? Was that all it took?

Shit. It made sense, but I didn't have to like it.

At least, I wasn't going to die here. I gripped the bolt still in my heart and braced to pull it out. Cerri reached to stop me. A look of disdain twisted her expression as she shook her head.

"Don't kill yourself after I just saved your ass. If you pull that out now, you're going to cause a massive amount of damage."

I groaned. "I'm not going to heal with the damn thing stuck in my chest. Am I?"

Cerri narrowed her eyes and snatched my chin in her hand. “There are better ways to do this, you little barbarian of a man.”

“*Little?* What are you talking about? I’m a massive barbarian!” I bellowed.

The corners of her mouth lifted. She bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. Still, I could see the glimmer of laughter hidden in her eyes.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered under her breath as she turned back to her brewing station.

Cerri opened cupboards and moved jars around in search of something; of what, I wasn’t sure because she wasn’t being all that talkative about her process. I could only sit back and watch while she worked. When she lifted a jar filled with something red, I paused. The jar’s contents had dried like rust-colored paint.

I sniffed the air and caught a hint of metal and brimstone drifting about when she shook the jar. Recoiling, I bit my tongue.

No, this wasn’t an instance where I could stay silent.

“Is that demon blood?” I blurted.

Cerri’s brows furrowed, her eyes sliding towards the jar. She opened her mouth and paused. A heartbeat passed while she considered the jar’s contents. “Not *exactly*.”

I leaned forward only to be brought up short by the bolt in my chest. The tip shifted in my heart and sent a flicker of pain radiating through my chest. My breath hitched, but I swallowed the sound and the pain.

Cerri raised one hand, palm out. “I can explain. This doesn’t belong to an imp, a demon, or even a demon general. I’ve seen a couple of those, and I would never deal in their blood.”

Taken aback, I blinked. “You’ve dealt with demon generals before? That’s a story I need to hear. Maybe not right now, but eventually.”

“My friends have stopped two different apocalypses now. They’re...so accident prone. I don’t understand how either of them stumbled into the rapture or Ragnarök.” She shook her head in disdain.

Cerri pried the cap off the jar of dried blood and poured the bits into her cauldron. “Violet is the daughter of a human woman and Lucifer. He really does love her mother. The two have been dating again now that Lucifer can walk the mortal plane.”

“So, what do you think you can do with her blood?” I gripped the bolt in my chest again. “I don’t get why I’m sitting here with this thing inside me when I can just rip it out.”

Cerri hissed when I tugged at the bolt. “Quit that! Just let me help you.”

“I thought that’s what I’ve been doing?” I grumbled and plopped backwards.

Was I really letting her help? I didn’t really have a choice in the matter when Delphine’s poison rendered me immobile. Now that I could move again, I wanted nothing more than to get this over so that I could start the dreaded healing process. Ripping it out was going to hurt, and healing was going to take forever.

Surely, Cerri had to understand that. I didn’t know why she insisted on dragging this out when I could take care of it on my own. Did she not want to see me suffer? It was going to happen eventually. Hell, the woman had seen me suffer every day since we met. This couldn’t be any different than any other time.

I groaned when I realized that I was being stubborn. I had to admit that I wasn’t used to having people around to take care of me. Even back when the court had been at its best, I’d always had to bandage my own wounds. There’d never been a pretty lady around to help me patch myself up. Putting myself back together had always been my own duty.

Not even Delphine helped while we’d been working together. She’d refused to touch me. In fact, the woman had

told me to man-up more than once.

Cerri rose onto her tiptoes to peer into the back of her cabinet. She muttered curses under her breath as she shoved bottles aside and found the back empty. When she dropped back, flat on her feet again, she rolled her shoulders back and grabbed another pot.

I watched her brew two potions at the same time. When I was sure that she was distracted, I went to pull the bolt out. Cerri flicked a hand in my direction. The sensation of warm sunlight washed over my skin right before a tendril of wood wrapped around my wrist and yanked my arm back.

“Bitch,” I muttered, frustrated.

“Idiot,” she fired back without hesitation.

I couldn’t help the dumb smile that reached my lips. Sure, I felt bad about calling my princess a *bitch*, but the casual air between us set me at ease. She wasn’t just a pretty noble who thought she was above me. Cerri was a person and possibly...a friend.

Finally, she grabbed a pair of tongs and used them to hold a jar under the spout of her cauldron. She held her breath as a glimmering red potion filled the bottle. A timer went off and startled her. She slammed a cork into the mouth of the first jar and raced towards the second pot on the stove so she could pour the surprisingly cum-like substance into another bottle.

I pointed at it and said, “You’re not getting that one anywhere near my mouth.”

Cerri paused and took in the jar. “I don’t get—oh, now I understand.”

She shook her head, grabbed the red potion, and slowly dropped to her knees in front of me. When she gave the red potion a dubious, slightly terrified look, my heart thumped around the accursed bolt.

“What are you planning on doing with that? Is that the potion with demon blood? I’m not looking to mess around with infernal powers beyond our understanding.” I wasn’t



afraid so much as I really didn't want another monster roaming around inside me.

There wasn't room inside me for a demon when I had my own beast taking up way too much space in there already. The feathered creature snarled and gnashed its great fangs. It was a chimera of sorts, though its visage had been scrubbed from my memory with too much whiskey. I could remember its crow-black wings and long teeth because that's what it showed me often, but the rest of it I'd chosen to forget.

I didn't want to remember what fae magic had turned me into.

Cerri clicked her tongue. "I just explained that this blood didn't come from a real demon. It belongs to Vi. The woman has a small, nuclear-powered incinerator inside her. This potion, if I made it correctly, should burn away the bolt without harming you. That way we don't cause more damage by ripping it out like a barbarian."

"This is metal, woman!" I tilted my head back and rolled my eyes at the ceiling.

A simple fire potion wasn't going to burn away a solid metal rod. She was out of her mind if she thought that this was going to help. All she was doing was dragging this out. I had become tired of this act.

I started to rise. Cerri snapped at me, and another wave of her arcana filled the room. She strapped me down with a number of wood tendrils. I struggled against them with a growl ripping from my lips. They held on tight and kept me stationary while she stuck a little glass dropper into the bottle.

A droplet of the red potion fell from the dropper onto the bolt. Heat flared in the room. It bloomed like a small explosion and made my hair curl and burn. I watched in awe as the bolt turned to smoldering ash and disintegrated. The little cinders hit the floor and burned tiny holes through the wood.

I sucked in a breath. Shock didn't last long. That'd been impressive and unexpected, but now there was a hole in my heart.

Cerri reached for the white potion and gave me an apologetic smile. “This will heal the physical wound. You’re just going to have to pretend that it’s...yogurt.”

She jammed the mouth of the bottle against my lips.



I sat between the bound man's legs and got comfortable while the healing potion worked its way through his system. Rhoan refused to look me in the eye after that, but I understood. The healing potion looked interesting, to say the least.

But Rhoan was healing, and that was all that mattered. I leaned into his now-healed chest and rested my head over his heart. I claimed it was so that I could make sure his heart was mending correctly, but I just wanted to relax into him. Releasing the wooden tendrils that I'd used to hold him still while I burned away the bolt, I waited for Rhoan to push me away.

Instead, he wrapped his arms around me and sighed. We sat there, together, for a long while. Tears slowly started to build in my eyes. They made my chest tight. I pulled them back, but only barely.

"I'm..." Rhoan started and stopped. He groaned which pulled my attention upwards. He stared at the ceiling while thought after thought careened across his face. "I'm not used to people taking care of me."

Well, that explained why he'd fought me every step of the way. Helping him had been like helping a stray cat that I'd lured into a carrier with the promise of food. The moment I'd closed the door behind him, he'd started howling bloody murder.

He ran his hand up and down my arm as he held me. His eyes were still distant when he spoke. “I did all sorts of things in the name of your court. More often than not, I got hurt. That was just part of the job to me. I would slink off and take care of my wounds myself.”

I tightened my fist in his shirt. He shouldn't have had to live like that. I couldn't imagine my mortal parents would have treated him like that, so it hurt to think that my fae parents *used* him. Rhoan deserved better. He wasn't a tool—at least, not in the literal sense.

Metaphorically, the man was a total tool.

“I'm always going to be there to help you,” I promised him.

He scoffed. “You have a job to do. That job doesn't involve me. If you spend all your time worrying about your guard, then you're not going to be able to do what you have to do.”

“Shut up.” I didn't mince my words. “I'm the princess, and you're the guard. It's your job to listen to me. So, when I say I'm going to care for you, you let me care for you.”

Rhoan laughed. He tightened his grip on me like he was afraid that a good thing might vanish into thin air if he didn't hold on tight. I let him crush me in his arms. It felt too good to move just yet.

This felt wrong, like sleeping with a co-worker. I knew better, but I wanted more. He took a vow as a knight. That wasn't something I could just order away to selfishly have him all to myself.

Why did I even want him? He was a drunkard, a blustering fool, and a bit of an ass. Yet, he'd kept me safe. He'd been there every time I needed him—even if he did totter off to guzzle liquor. He always came back to protect me.

Safety was a feeling I'd forgotten. I'd become too used to flinching at the slightest of sounds. My shoulders had forgotten what it meant to be truly relaxed. Here, in Rhoan's arms, I could imagine what comfort felt like. I could exhale

and release a bit of the tension that'd been holding me together.

I couldn't let go of it all or else I might completely fall apart, but this...this was nice.

Here, I could imagine a future where there was no more fighting. I could see my café and the long hours spent in the kitchen where the only danger was a few burns from the oven. That was nothing that I couldn't heal. In my daydream, Rhoan came in and cupped the back of my head so that he could plant a kiss on my forehead.

Gasping, I tore myself out of Rhoan's arms. I flung myself across the room before he could say anything. The man didn't love me. He was here out of duty. I was dreaming up impossible circumstances, which were bound to hurt my own feelings in the long run.

"Where are you going?" Rhoan asked, startled.

"To bed." I threw myself headlong towards my bedroom door.

Already, my arcana swelled. The garden that I'd conjured a while back spread and grew into a canopy that I could hide in. I let the wall of flowers and vines close behind me before I crawled into bed and pulled the blanket over my head.

What had I been thinking? Rhoan didn't love me. He was here because he'd promised my biological parents that he would come back to protect me. He was here because he wanted me to start a war with the woman who'd killed my biological parents.

I snorted.

Fat chance. I wasn't going to follow in my parents' footsteps. If anything, I would carve a path that led away from here. I would pick up and find myself somewhere safe to settle down, even if it meant leaving my friends behind. Surely, they would understand. They would realize that I couldn't stay here.

Addie had left. She'd moved out into the mountains with her new husband. They rented out her old family home to

people staying in the city. No one batted an eye when she up and left. Surely Ness and Vi would be all right if I left, too.

Where would I go? Somewhere where fields stretched for days and where water lapped at rocky shores. The northern part of the state could be beautiful if you could get used to the smell of cows.

Just as I wrinkled my nose at the thought, I heard the creak of the wood floor. I tensed, prepared for another fight. It wasn't a threat, though. It was only Rhoan.

I swallowed my frustrated curse and sat upright. He hadn't yet breached the canopy of vines and flowers. Annoyed, I reached for the drawer of my nightstand and pulled out my latest research material.

Yeah, I used research to relax. Note-taking is unbelievably therapeutic. Don't believe me? Neither do I, some days.

Feri climbed onto the nightstand. The little ferret said nothing. He simply looked between me and where we both knew Rhoan to be standing. The fae warrior still hadn't breached the canopy. When Feri tilted his head, I shot a look of warning in his direction.

He seemed indignant, like there was a lot that he wanted to say right on the tip of his tongue. The little ferret swallowed it back down with a big gulp sound. I almost laughed. My pen slid across the page and brought my frustration back to the surface.

Ripping the page out, I crumpled it and threw it to the floor before returning back to the utilitarian properties of love draughts. This should keep me busy for a long while.

"Do you think I can slip Beryl a love potion? Make her love me like a niece and not a potential usurper?" I asked through the canopy.

Rhoan sighed. I could almost imagine him running both hands down his face in distress. The thought brought a smile to my lips.

*Rhoan*

CERRIDWEN DIDN'T WANT to fight.

I couldn't blame her, but she needed to know that there was more at stake than just her own safety here. Her court had waited long enough for her to grow into a woman. It wasn't their fault that she'd suffered in the mortal world. She needed to buck up and accept her duty.

So long as she had me at her side, I would make sure that no harm fell to her. I would fall before anyone struck her again.

Unable to bear the distance between us, I parted the curtain of foliage and peered into her bedroom. The only reason I felt comfortable doing so was because of the soft scratching sound of pen on paper that told me what she was up to. The princess was bent over an old book. She had a finger on a line in the crumbling book and her pen quickly scribbling notes in a modern notebook.

I leaned in closer and read the subject matter. "Love potions? Seriously? I thought you were joking."

She lifted her head and narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm not going to send Beryl a love potion. She's too smart to fall for a simplistic trick like that, and I know it."

"Then why are you wasting your time here? You don't need to know how to make people fall in love with you. Despite your prickly exterior, you can be a likable person... sometimes."

Cerridwen chucked her pen at my head. I dodged it easily. A laugh spilled out of me when the pen hit the wall behind me. The curtain of vines caught the pen and tossed it back to Cerridwen so she could snatch it out of the air without breaking eye contact with me.

I gave her an impressed nod. It was just a trick, though. The act might have been impressive, but it wasn't going to save her from what she had to do. She wanted me to see her as



an independent individual, and I did. However, that didn't absolve her of her responsibilities.

Her gaze roved across my face like she was looking for an out. I wasn't going to give it to her. She would find no leeway with me. There was a court—my entire world—that needed her. If she could just do this, then we could get it over with and go back to a normal life.

Cerri's lips tightened. Her brows slid together. A bit of moisture filled her eyes. She quickly blinked it all away and lowered her head. Before I could direct the conversation, Cerri went back to her notes. I inched closer to see what she thought of the love potions.

Who did she want to seduce? That was the only use for love potions that I could think of. I couldn't imagine this woman needing anyone so deeply that she had to make a love potion. Who wouldn't trip over themselves for a chance to love her?

Cerridwen had other ideas, though. I skimmed over her notes, but my gaze caught on a single line.

*Reverse love potion? Protect myself from wanting someone...?*

Who did she have feelings for? If he hurt her, then I was going to go break some bones. Now wasn't the time to get the information from her, though. Instead, I went back out to her bar cart and searched for something else to numb the pain of simply existing.

I waited for Cerri to catch up to me and admonish me for drinking so soon after a harrowing fight for my life, but she kept to herself in her miniature bedroom garden. Alone, I chugged down half a bottle of gin and savored the burn of it as it swirled in my stomach.

*Soon, I thought. We're coming for you soon, Court. Just hold out a little longer.*

*She's a good princess. She's just...a little wounded. You'll have to go easy on her. Give her forgiveness. She's suffered, too.*



Since I didn't want to go back to Rhoan's wrecked trailer, he grumpily got up and went out to set up wards outside my building again. This time, the process took a lot longer. So, I sat back with my morning tea and continued the research that I'd started the night before.

It made for a wonderfully peaceful morning, unlike any I'd had in a very long time. However, peaceful translated to boring after being on guard for so long. I quickly became restless. Feri took my distraction as an opportunity to preach to me.

I leapt out of my seat and paced. The inside of the apartment had become dark and dismal with the boards over the windows, so I stretched and touched the thick wood barriers that I'd conjured the night before. The panels peeled back to let in the bright morning sunshine.

From here, I could see Rhoan stalking across the grass outside. When the sun touched his tattoos, they illuminated with the oil-slick rainbow that I was starting to associate with him. He stopped, rolled his shoulders, and lifted his hands—palms out.

I felt his magic rise and cover this side of the building. It was reassuring like warm comforter at the end of a long day. I sighed and lowered my tense shoulders.

At least, Rhoan was distracted for the time being. That meant I could busy myself with other projects. I pulled out my notebook once again and peered over my notes. Later, when I

had more time to myself, I would craft a potion that would protect my heart from any unwanted feelings of love.

I'd found a way to blend traditional love spell components with protective ingredients. Done correctly, it would keep me from falling for anyone, especially Rhoan. I couldn't love him. He wasn't right for me. Falling for him would be a mistake, and I didn't have room for those in my life right now. He was a drunkard and a stubborn bastard. We would spend every moment fighting.

He would never gently kiss me on the forehead like I wanted. He would never let me have the soft, gentle future that I so desperately craved. If Rhoan had his way, he would put me in a pretty dress and plant my ass on a throne that I didn't want.

The thought made me want to scream. Pressure built in my throat until I grabbed a pen and a piece of paper. I would write a letter to Beryl. If no one wanted to help me get an audience with her, then I would have to do it on my own.

Beryl's new right-hand man worked at a deli down the road from Bad Moon Café. I would make a stop there before work and ask him to hand-deliver the letter to Beryl. I could always pick up a sandwich to use as an alibi if anyone asked why I needed to go to that deli.

With the letter written, I grabbed my cardigan and purse. Slipping out undetected would be difficult. I waited for Rhoan to start work on another ward. Once I was sure he was working, I grabbed Feri, told him he was coming with me, and bolted out the door.

I felt a little guilty running off without Rhoan. The ferret climbed my knit cardigan and settled around the back of my neck where he could admonish me for slipping off on my own again. I told him that he wasn't the boss of me.

"You're going to die before you can do anything of importance," Feri grumbled.

My heart skipped a beat. All the times I'd come close to dying flashed before my eyes. Chest tight, I struggled to

breathe. Somehow, I kept it all to myself. I kept a smile on my face and fear out of my eyes as I walked down the street.

“I’m doing this because I want to survive,” I told the small creature on my shoulders.

“What makes you think that this will work?” Feri scurried down my arm. He ripped the letter from my hand and lifted it up. Shaking it at me, he continued. “If there was a ploy that would stop Beryl, someone would have tried it already. You would be a real princess back in a safe Seelie Court instead of this mutt-daughter you’ve become.”

I snatched the letter from Feri’s little hands and shook the creature off my arm. He fell and landed on his feet like a cat. The little beast didn’t know how to keep his mouth shut.

A shiver ran down my spine. My head snapped up. I looked around, expecting to find the assassin woman breathing down my neck. No one appeared, much to my dismay because the feeling of being watched never went away.

Swallowing, I continued to turn. I tried to narrow down the direction the sensation was coming from. Feri seemed to notice. He stood upright and cocked his head. In the end, both of us stared at a small grove of trees crammed between two old buildings. Instead of a tall wrought iron fence, a small wood fence rose between us and the little garden.

I spared a glance down at Feri. I wasn’t asking for permission, but I did want the little guy’s opinion. If he thought heading closer was unsafe, then he was probably right. But Feri didn’t look back at me. The creature sprang onto all fours and rushed towards the little garden.

Following, my heart raced in nervous anticipation. Magic crawled across my skin when we got closer. It wasn’t the harrowing sensation of violent magic. This was soft and sweet, leaving the air tasting of blackberries.

Feri darted between the slats of the wood fence. It was low enough that I could hop over it, if I wanted to. I paused and put my hands on the top of the fence so I could lean in and peer around. The trees here were old, older than any tree in the

heart of Syracuse could have been. It was as if the city had been built around this section of land.

The thick bushes gathered by the building walls were laden with all sorts of berries. My mouth watered until I noticed movement. Startled, I blinked. The movement wasn't obvious. It was the rustle of bramble leaves, then the blur of little wings.

"Pixies," Feri said, excitedly.

Several little faces appeared, all at once, then vanished in the same instant as they rushed towards hiding places. I looked down at Feri and clicked my tongue at him for scaring everyone.

"You could have shown better manners," I said to Feri. "Next time, calmly introduce yourself and ask for permission before entering."

Feri puffed up and put his paws on his waist. Before he could snap back at me for being a mannerless heathen, a number of faces poked out from the bramble.

"I'm going to have to agree with the lovely little lady here," a slow and lethargic voice said above us.

A green form descended from the branches of one of the old trees. At first, I thought a branch had fallen, albeit quite slowly. But no, this wasn't a branch. It was a fae. He was massive and oddly human shaped, though his entire form was covered in the long leaves of a weeping willow. When his feet touched the ground, he softly lowered into a frog-like crouch and smiled gently at us. The leafy tendrils gathered over his wide mouth like a grandfatherly moustache.

"A leshy?" Feri asked, bemused.

The tree-man-frog-fae nodded. "That is what I am. I have lived in this plot for eighty years. The trees and garden are mine to protect, as are the pixies that tend to the berries here."

I spared no time launching right into conversation. "Why were you all watching me?"

The leshy's big eyes, so wide and brown, looked me up and down. He tilted his head and the leaves covering his body rustled. "You look...familiar. I cannot remember where I have seen you before, though. Forgive me for my wandering eye. The others and I were trying to remember who you are."

*Remember? Have I been stricken from their memory?*

Feri looked up at me with the same question on his furry little face. There was a chance that the community had been cursed to forget the Seelie Court ever existed. I had no idea how to go about breaking such a curse. Would they even want that? Who would want to remember their fallen home? They were likely better off this way.

I bit back my sigh and rocked on my heels. "I don't know."

The leshy's expression faltered. Open confusion lowered his brows and pursed his lips. Just as I expected, a prickle of magic turned the air tart. It was subtle, nearly blending in with the smell of the blackberries. Something blocked me from their memories.

I wanted to keep it that way. If no one remembered me, then they weren't waiting for me to come back and save them. They could go on and live their lives like normal. There was no other life for them to crave other than the one they knew and loved.

Feri was a loud-mouthed *rodent*, though. "This is Princess Cerridwen of the Seelie Court! She has returned to save us all!"

The urge to punt the little fae ferret made me clench my fists at my sides.

"Seelie...Court?" The leshy tilted his head curiously.

"Seelie? Seelie?" Echoes darted around the garden from the pixies now fluttering in the air. "Seelie!"

Their excitement tasted like sugar. It filled the air and coated my tongue. They drifted up, their wings humming and flickering with brilliant color, like rainbow-dipped fireflies. The pixies had no sense of personal space. They touched down on my shoulders, in my hair, and on my purse.

One touched my cheek with her tiny little hands. “We have to hide. The Unseelie like to snatch us up and eat us like little snacks.”

“That’s why we ran when you came over,” another said.

Their weight tugged at my hair like how their words tugged at my heart. I bit my lower lip and thought of the letter in my purse. Freedom was a few carefully chosen words away. I was this close to getting what I wanted, but these pixies threatened to shatter my rose-colored glasses.

“The Unseelie...eat you?” I asked, my voice cracking nervously.

“We lost Nixie and Pike this week alone,” the one on my purse said.

I covered my mouth with my hand. Looking to the leshy, I found him studying me. There was a wry, disappointed twist to his lips. His eyes were dark, perhaps hiding his doubt. He must have been thinking *how could this little blonde girl be a princess?*

But they’d been cursed to forge their own court. They couldn’t remember a time when things were safe.

My heart clenched. Neither could I, really. No point of my life had ever been safe. Alvin had been a dark figure with an aura of violence. Sometimes, I wondered if I survived only because he’d been distracted by Ness’s prophecy. Otherwise, he would have let me loose in the woods and hunted me like he’d done to those human girls.

I backpedaled. I had to get out of here. My world was crumbling again. If I didn’t run, the ground would fall out from under my feet, and I would plummet into the hard truth. I didn’t have it in me to face it yet. When I spun, I crashed into the fence and nearly tumbled over it. I had just enough coordination to clumsily throw myself over it again.

The pixies held onto me while I ran down the road. One by one, they fell off. They fluttered behind me. Their confused voices filled the air. They cried out for me to come back, but I couldn’t. Not right now.



Instead, I slammed into the deli door and crashed through into the shop. The smell of bread and sliced meat comforted me while the dust of the shelves tickled my nose. A man behind the counter looked up.

His glamour, an illusion wrapped around him to hide his appearance, rippled and disappeared to reveal Beryl's right-hand man. He cocked his head and looked me up and down before his attention flicked to someone else.

I recognized her white hair before she even had time to turn around.

A curse slipped out of my mouth. I lurched towards the exit. She moved at the same time and slid between me and the door. Heart in my throat, I spun and lurched right into a shelf full of chip bags.

The man behind the counter sighed, mumbled something, and time stopped. My feet lifted from the floor. Weightless, I twisted and drifted through the air. No matter how I moved, I couldn't get my feet back on the floor. I couldn't even swim through the air.

Behind me, the assassin woman also struggled in the air. She flailed rather ungracefully with a scowl on her face. Her dark eyes flicked to the man behind the counter. He grinned in response.

I understood why Beryl had taken him as her second in command. He wasn't the most loyal of subjects, but he was powerful. He'd stopped a fight from breaking out in his shop with barely more than one word. At least, that's what I thought he did.

"Let's not destroy my boss's place. All right?" he said as he wiped his hands on his apron and tugged it over his head.

When he stepped out from behind the deli counter, his outfit changed. He wore a sleek blue-silver suit made of silk. Tiny fae details were embroidered around the cuff and along the lapels. He twisted his head from side to side, cracking his neck almost menacingly.

His gaze settled on the assassin woman. Her lips curled in a snarl. She was almost feral in the way she moved. Once he let her go, she would attack. Even I could tell that much.

I slid my hand into my purse and gripped a tiny bottle hidden in a pocket. I'd learned a long time ago to never go anywhere without emergency potions. This one would create a big gas cloud. It would make everyone else in it cough just enough to buy me time to slip out unnoticed.

This fae man could deal with the assassin on his own.

Though, I wasn't sure why he'd stopped her. Beryl paid this assassin to kill me. Since he was Beryl's second in command, he could get in big trouble for openly disobeying her like this. The man really had little regard for his life.

But as he moved, I noticed the way the light rippled over his suit. The silk seemed to shift. It moved from a dusky silver to a bloom of lavender then on to pink and finally daylight blue. Gold shimmered across his shoulders.

My feet touched the ground. I pulled the potion from my purse and raised my arm to throw it. The man appeared behind me and snatched my wrist to keep me from throwing the potion.

"Princess," he warned.

The assassin continued to silently glare at us. Her body spun slowly in the air. No matter how she kicked or lashed out, she couldn't get upright.

This man was a secret supporter of the Seelie Court—or, he had been until he revealed his allegiance with that over-the-top suit change. He slowly lowered my arm and released my wrist.

"I'm calling your babysitter," he said to me. He raised the envelope from my purse and tapped his temple. "Don't worry. I'll deliver this for you. Though, I'm not sure it will make a difference. Maybe you know that already, Princess."

Rhoan

I JAMMED a finger in Taliesin's direction. "There better be a sandwich in this for me."

The Seelie man smiled and leaned onto the counter so he could put his chin in his hand. Beside him, Delphine floated in the air with her arms crossed over her chest like a petulant child. The moment she touched the ground, she would turn into a murder machine. For now, she was rendered immobile.

That was a simple reminder of just how strong Taliesin was and just how much stronger Beryl was. This fight was going to be an uphill battle, especially if Taliesin remained a turncoat. He'd been part of the Seelie Court, but he'd chosen life over honor when Beryl showed up. The man had joined her the moment she'd declared her uprising.

While Taliesin had kept to himself during the fighting, his actions still rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe he didn't kill any of his own, but he hadn't helped them either. He'd shown that his own life meant more to him than his court.

I groaned. That reminded me that I needed to pick up my princess. She, too, cared more about her own life than her court. In time, I knew that would change. She would see the reality of living under Beryl's control, and she would learn that nowhere was safe with Beryl in power.

From the conflicted, distracted look in Cerri's face, I had a feeling that she'd had her first epiphany. I wondered what'd caused it. She looked to Taliesin, who waggled his fingers at her. A silent question that I couldn't translate crossed her expression. Taliesin nodded in response, which bothered me.

I grabbed Cerri's upper arm and tugged her close. In her ear, I whispered, "You can't trust him."

"I'm going to skin that girl alive in front of you all!" Delphine screamed.

I turned all my ire and frustration on the elven assassin. "No. You won't."

That just wasn't like Delphine. She was angry and screaming anything to get our attention. While she would absolutely continue to pursue her contract, she wouldn't go that far. And I wasn't going to let her get anywhere near Cerri.

"Can you stop running off on me?" I asked the princess.

"I wanted to get a sandwich before work," she pouted.

Yeah, that was a lie, but I wasn't about to challenge it here. I needed her to trust me enough that she stopped running away to do things on her own. I wasn't even pushing her towards her duty. If anything, I spent all my time just trying to keep her alive.

I needed to strike a deal with Delphine. If I could find out what Beryl had promised her, then I could offer more. I just needed to know, so I had something to work with. Everyone could be bought, I just needed to know her price.

Taliesin appeared by the door. He lifted a brown paper bag and smiled like this was nothing more than customer service. He'd been a high noble back when I'd known him. Now he slung sandwiches with the best pesto in town.

I yanked the bag from Taliesin's grasp and pushed Cerri through the door. Outside, I shoved the bag into her arms, turned her towards Bad Moon Café, and sulked behind her. This search and rescue mission was getting tiring. I wanted nothing more than to whisk her away and hide her somewhere safe where Beryl would never find her.

Hell, court be damned. I sounded like Taliesin now, but I just wanted Cerri to survive. She'd been through enough. I knew this was all a wild and desperate attempt to find a way to live through this duty pushed onto her. I didn't blame her, but I wished she would let me help her.

The taste of whiskey burned my tongue. The craving seized my core, but I shoved it aside. I had to stop drinking. It was part of the reason that Cerri didn't trust me. She saw me as a drunkard who couldn't keep his shit together. I had to prove her wrong and be the kind of man that she needed.

That was my job, after all.

Inside the café, I gave her friends a two-finger salute and pushed Cerri towards the table situated all the way at the back. There, she dropped into a chair and glared up at me. She didn't cross her arms over her chest and pout. No, this woman gripped the sides of her seat with every ounce of fury in her fae body.

A crack outside came right before a plant shoved its way out from beneath the sidewalk. Cerri gave the plant outside the window an ashamed look before turning her attention back on me. The outburst was cute, if anything, but I wasn't going to let this slide.

Leaning forward, I planted both hands on the table between us. "Stop trying to die."

"I'm not!" She growled under her breath.

"I know you're not doing it on purpose. You keep making a lot of really dumb decisions. We both know that deli is run by the fae. Walking in there was a gamble, one that you didn't take just for a sandwich."

Her cheeks turned red. I'd caught her in her lie, and she knew it now. Her gaze dropped. I watched her study the beads in my braids for a long while.

"Uhh, is everything all right over here?" a mortal woman asked.

I spun on her only to find that she wasn't a mortal woman. Her pale eyes burned with an otherworldly light. Dark hair had been pulled away from her face, revealing a pair of bone earrings in her ears. She looked between me and Cerri.

The air around her turned cold. Blue firelight appeared in her eyes. She gave me a deadly stare.

"It's fine, Addie. He's a friend. Even if he is a bit of a dick about it." Cerri sat upright and dug her sandwich out of the bag.

The woman named Addie gave me a once over. She didn't look convinced, but she also didn't look scared. I lifted my chain and slid into a prepared stance to see if she might notice.

The way she flinched, almost imperceptibly, told me that this woman had been in fights before.

“Keep it up and her husband is going to phase out of nowhere and kick your ass,” Cerri warned before biting into her sandwich.

“Like I couldn’t handle myself?” Addie asked.

Cerri rolled her eyes despite her smile. “I didn’t say you couldn’t. We both know Maddox would just beat you to it.”

Addie preened. “You’re right. I barely have to lift a finger.”

Arcana popped in the air. The bone beads in my hair snapped free, clattered to the floor, and grew into fully formed creatures. A rabbit and a lynx appeared between me and the necromancer. She knelt and held out a hand to each. Both creatures nuzzled her without any regard for each other even though the lynx should have naturally hunted the rabbit.

The animals sat and kept their attention on Addie like she owned their souls.

I twisted. “Is this the witch that put wards over your friends’ house? The shifter house?”

Cerri’s head snapped up. “Excuse me? No. Don’t you dare compare Addie’s magic to that witch’s.”

I gave the animals a sidelong glance. It was amazing that no mortals had come in for their midday coffee yet. The café was still blissfully empty.

“This isn’t natural,” I said with a grimace.

Cerri lifted her head primly. “It is, in fact, very natural. Addie’s arcana is the natural opposite of my own. While I have power over life, she has power over death. If I can use my arcana to kill, it makes sense that she can use hers to bring things back to life.”

When the princess fixed a narrow-eyed glare on me, I knew I’d treaded into dangerous territory. This was one of her friends, and I’d insulted the woman. This was why she couldn’t trust me.

Still, Addie's magic seemed wrong. The animals obeyed her like they had no other choice. How was that right?

Addie looked up at me with a gentle smile. She waved her hand, and the creatures shrank, falling back into the small bone pieces that they'd been. "I promise I got their permission before calling them back."

Addie's arcana touched me one more time. This probing wave of cold power seemed to question my existence. The beast inside me moved and growled in response. I felt the arcana slide into the beast and fill the creature's hollow bones.

That made Addie narrow her eyes at me, too. She'd discovered my dirty little secret. I would have said that I knew hers, too, but it seemed that everyone did. The little necromancer was an open book about her otherworldly abilities.

I, on the other hand, wanted to keep my beast to myself. Cerri didn't need to know about the thing that'd been shoved inside me. I was a cage for something that no one could truly kill. So long as I held it, the creature would likely die with me. I wanted to reassure Addie of that, but I wasn't about to open my mouth right here and now.

Addie paid little attention to me, though. Her attention went back to Cerri. A worried look took up space between Addie's brows. I caught a hint of guilt weighing her down, too. Addie nodded and stepped back, hesitating before returning to her post behind the front counter.

"She's an interesting one," I said quietly.

Cerri snorted. "Remember when I said two of my friends have stopped apocalypses from happening. She's one of them."

I straightened and leaned back to steal another peek at Addie in the front of the café. The woman was small and unassuming. That aura around her, though, told of a different story. She had nigh god-level power packed into that small frame.

A tall man with shaggy platinum hair walked out of the nearby restroom. He shook out his trench coat and flicked his hair out of his face. He paused, looking me up and down, before heading towards the front of the café.

“When did you get here?” Addie exclaimed to the man.

“I snuck in.” His voice was low and kind—to her, at the very least.

Addie bristled. When she spoke, her voice was a hushed whisper. “I told you to stop teleporting into the bathroom. What if there’s someone in there? You’ve gotten lucky so far, but that’s going to run out eventually.”

Near me, Cerri laughed under her breath. She must have been eavesdropping on the conversation, too. These were her friends, the people she spent all of her time with.

And yet, they hadn’t been able to keep her from getting those scars. Her powerful friends hadn’t lifted a finger to keep Cerri safe. The thought made me stiffen. My beast stirred and gnashed its sharp teeth. Claws dug into my insides.

“You’re upset with them,” Cerri said. Her voice was just loud enough to be heard between the two of us.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the two at the front of the café. They smiled up at each other like the rest of the world didn’t matter. Addie had a fistful of the man’s shirt so she could pull him closer.

“I am, too, but I know I don’t have any right.” Cerri crumpled the paper wrapper of her sandwich and tossed it into the paper bag.

“They could have done *something*.” My beast prepared for a pounce.

I dragged in a ragged breath and hauled the creature away from the surface.

“We all came into our power at different times,” Cerri explained, her hand going to the scars at her throat. Her gaze remained low, pointed at the table though I was sure her mind was elsewhere. “This happened before Addie or Vi truly



realized their full potential. They did what they could to help, but it...”

“Wasn’t enough?” I supplied.

Cerri canted her head in disapproval. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

She stood and started packing up her things. She claimed that her shift was coming and that she would have to get ready, but I knew she just wanted to disappear behind a door that I couldn’t follow her through.

Feri offered to shadow her for me, but I told the little creature to stay with me for now. Cerri needed some space.



Work went by surprisingly quickly. I kept waiting for the assassin, or Delphine as Rhoan called her, to show up. It seemed that she didn't want to cause a scene in the middle of Audra's café. Once again, Audra's name kept us safe.

I loved my boss, but I wished I knew what she really was. Why did everyone in the community fear her so much? And why did she feel the need to protect us? I knew, on some level, that we were fate-defying people. She kept us safe so we could grow into our power and, perhaps, rival hers.

At the end of the day, I was hesitant to step out into the night. Walking home would put a big target on my back. Once again, I wished I knew how to do that nifty teleportation trick that Rhoan had. He called it walking in-between. No matter what I did, I couldn't figure it out on my own.

Though...I'd only been halfheartedly trying during my shift. Every time I walked through the storeroom door, I thought about home—and then quickly worried what I would do if I teleported home and couldn't get back. Would I have to run through the streets?

My hesitation likely stopped any real magic from happening. I would play with it when I got home. One way or another, I would make this work all on my own.

“Are you ready?” Rhoan asked out of nowhere.

I yelped and spun. Hand over my heart, I gave him an admonishing glare. He simply smiled and laughed.

“What? Jumpy today?” he asked.

Once again, I just gave him a *look*.

Rhoan paused. “Taliesin stopped Delphine from killing you. I don’t know why you’re still upset.”

I threw my hands in the air. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because she could be around any corner. Maybe it’s because I ran into a group of fairies that can’t even remember the Seelie Court’s existence. I also learned that Unseelie fae just come around and eat them like berries off a bush!”

“So, you got a taste of what it’s like to live as a Seelie in Beryl’s world?” Rhoan sauntered up to me. “How did it feel?”

I stiffened, irritated. “The same as every other day of my life.”

When Rhoan leaned in with that smug look on his face, I had to stifle the urge to smack it off.

“Well, then you should have been sympathetic to their plight from the start. Do you need help getting that stick out of your ass, princess? Bend over for me.”

My lip curled. I wanted to yell and shout and tell him what an awful person he was being. The problem was that he was right. I couldn’t outright admit that, so I tore my gaze away from his.

Rhoan stayed close. He kept one hand on the door, holding it shut so I couldn’t escape. Now would be a good time for my fae magic to kick in. It’d be really nice if I could walk in-between right about now. Instead, I held my ground.

The pixies had been so scared earlier. They’d startled at the slightest of sounds. Two of them had been eaten this week. Their friends were gone, and nothing could bring them back. Not even Addie’s magic could revive the little pixies.

Though their lives seemed small and insignificant, others could say that about me. I’d been the weakest in the Lakesedge Pack for most of my life. To them, I’d been small and insignificant, too. They deserved to have someone care about them.

I just...I didn't know why it had to be me. I was scared and tired. There was no fight left in me. I could stand up to Rhoan, but there was no way that I could take down Beryl. It just wasn't going to happen, at least not the way that everyone wanted it to happen.

Rhoan hadn't been pushing my duty up until now.

"What happened while I was working?" I asked breathlessly as the realization hit me.

Rhoan's flat hand on the door curled into a fist. He looked away. Tension rippled over him. The anger that'd been radiating off him suddenly turned inward. He threw himself backwards, away from me.

Before he could get far, I grabbed at the front of his shirt and pulled him back towards me. He crashed into me. His hands went to my hips to steady himself. This close, he had to look me in the eye. There, I found sorrow and grief and frustration.

"What. Happened?" I pressed.

Rhoan seemed to think about it for a long while. His heart thumped against my chest in a violent beat. When his gaze slid sideways towards the door, he asked:

"Is that locked?"

I nodded.

He took my hand and led me to the stockroom door. As we passed through it, the café changed into an alley. I marveled at the near-seamless transition before smoke tickled my nose.

Red and blue lights flashed, glinting off the surrounding buildings. Though it was night, the scenery was still familiar. We stood outside the deli where Taliesin worked. Firetrucks, cop cars, and other emergency service vehicles made a crowded halfmoon around the front of the deli.

My stomach hit the ground. The deli had been gutted. Smoke poured out of the broken windows. The acrid smell in the air was more than just vehicle exhaust. There was sour magic at work here.

When the lights glinted off the brick building, they revealed a hidden message. I reached over and grabbed Rhoan's hand. He squeezed me in return, mirroring my own frantic fear. The neon letters glowing in the spinning red and blue lights read:

*Kneel in the blood of the Seelie.*

Indignant fury filled my throat. A scream begged to be released. It clawed its way out of me. I had to turn and lurch away from the scene before the sound escaped me. My feet slapped the sidewalk. Buildings blurred past me.

The echo of footsteps behind me told me that Rhoan was right behind me. That meant, two blocks away, I could drop to my knees, clutch the sides of my head, and unleash the building scream. It turned my throat hoarse and raw. Pain seared my throat, but I didn't care.

I deserved it.

Taliesin had been punished because of me. He'd taken a side today, and it'd gotten him in trouble.

"He's not dead," Rhoan said, though his tone was not comforting.

I lifted my head and twisted to peer back at him.

"Beryl has him strung up in her court." Rhoan's lips turned into a grim line when he paused. It was like he was debating how much he really wanted to tell me. "If you see a fae with red knees, know that they pledged their fealty to Beryl."

"Red...knees?" The gears in my brain moved slowly.

When the realization hit me, I sobbed. I clamped my hand over my mouth to stifle the sound.

*Kneel in the blood of the Seelie* wasn't a warning. It was a command. She was bleeding Taliesin and telling others to kneel in his blood as a show of servitude. The man that'd stopped time and negated gravity had been bested by Beryl. She'd caught him and was now using him as a message to everyone.

“How can you expect me to stand up against her?” I choked out.

Feri popped out of Rhoan’s vest pocket. “You are stronger than her. Your allies will rally behind you when you come to realize that.”

I didn’t feel stronger. I’d barely been able to do anything when Taliesin turned me topsy turvy. If I couldn’t stop him from rendering me useless, then there was absolutely nothing I could do against Beryl.

Everything had been fine until I tried to do something. I needed to stay out of this. Beryl would stop hurting people if I disappeared—

“She won’t stop,” Rhoan said, as if reading my mind. “You heard it yourself. The Unseelie are still terrorizing what’s left of your court. They won’t let up. There will be no peace for your court until she’s gone.”

Guilt turned into a heavy stone in the pit of my fallen stomach. I wrapped my arms around myself and bent, curling into a ball. Rhoan put his hand on my back, like that would help.

“You’re not alone,” he said.

The image of Rhoan, hanging in Beryl’s court like a morbid Halloween decoration, barely hanging onto life, filled my mind. I recoiled and gagged. That was worse than suffering by myself. I’d rather do this on my own than let anyone get hurt again.

I’d survived this far. There was a lot that I’d learned along the way. For instance, I could handle a large threshold of pain. If anyone had to do this, it was me.

I just...needed to find a way.



THE DREAMS CAME BACK that night. There was no rest to be had. In my dreams, I ran from Beryl. No matter what corner I

turned, she was there. She was ready and waiting like a spider leading me into a trap.

I'd lost count of the number of times I died in those dreams. Each time, I thought I would wake. I thought I'd come to, gasping and covered in sweat. Instead, I fell into another dream that would end in blood and pain.

Breathless, I rounded one last corner. Maybe this would be it. Maybe I would be able to escape her and run free once and for all...

Beryl's long, bony fingers closed around my jaw. She grinned wildly down at me as she lifted me from the ground. My feet swung as I tried to find purchase again. I scrabbled, trying to pry her fingers away from my face.

"Cerridwen!" Rhoan shouted in the distance.

Rhoan was coming to my aid. He was going to get caught in this and get hurt. I couldn't let that happen. He'd suffered enough. If I ended this quickly, then he would have no reason to stay. He would be able to run and save his own skin.

I unleashed my arcana. It burst free in all directions. Plant life unfurled like the tight petals of a flower. Thick tree roots rose from the ground behind Beryl. I knew I might hurt myself, but that was a price I was willing to pay.

"Cerri! Wake up! You're having a nightmare." Rhoan's voice echoed as if trying to find his way through alleys.

That's right. This was another dream.

Rhoan wasn't here.

Was he?

"That's right. Wake up for me, Princess. You're safe here." Rhoan's warm hand replaced Beryl's cold touch on my face.

My eyes snapped open. I didn't gasp. In fact, I couldn't breathe. Not because my lungs refused to, but because I was afraid of what might happen if I moved.

I saw that the burst of arcana in my dream had been reflected in real life. Wooden roots stretched from the panels



in the living room and aimed sharp points at Rhoan's back. I reached up to pull him closer to me and felt the trickle of something warm along his ribs.

With my heart in my throat, I apologized. My voice was quiet in the dark. I couldn't quite bring myself to speak any louder. Forehead against Rhoan's chest, I pushed back the roots with my arcana. I could feel the pointed tips pulling free of his flesh, and it twisted my heart.

I muttered a curse under my breath and wound my arms around Rhoan's torso. He lowered himself just enough so that his weight pressed comfortably against my body. I sighed and savored his presence, his broad shoulders covering me. Here, I could hide in safety.

The dreams—the nightmares could not find me here, not when Rhoan held me. He lowered his forehead to my shoulder. His hair brushed against my cheek like a knuckle graze that I wanted to lean into. I couldn't have this man, but I could pretend for the night that he was mine to love.

He was mine to keep safe, but not mine to love, and it was starting to pain me. I needed to make that potion. If he kept doing this for me, kept risking his own safety to wake me from nightmares, I would fall so hard only to shatter later.

My arcana rose and swelled in the palms of my hands. Pressed flat against his back, my hands turned warm. My arcana with the potential for limitless life slid into him. His breath hitched and he arched into me as my magic healed the wounds in his back.

Breath ragged, he asked, “Have you always been able to do that? Was the cum potion a farce?”

I laughed into his chest.

“I'm serious here. You pulled a prank on me that day, didn't you? I mean, I don't blame you, but I kind of was dying in that moment.”

“I'm not used to using raw arcana,” I explained. “I've only done this once or twice before. So...I'm...it's...”

My words failed me. Beryl's face still flashed through my mind. While I couldn't feel her hands on me anymore, I could still see her smug grin while she crushed my bones. My breath turned ragged again. The hands on Rhoan's back turned into clawed fists. He groaned ever so softly when my nails dragged along his skin.

That's when I felt the growth of his desire along my thigh. My lips trembled. Words failed me, but for an entirely different reason. The urge to rock my hips hit me. If I did, then maybe we could both indulge in a night of lust before going back to normal. We could pretend that it never happened after both of our desires had been sated.

Then, I could protect my heart with an anti-love potion like nothing ever happened.

Or...Rhoan could open his mouth. "That's not where my blood should be right now. You'd think it would be in my back where the healing is happening."

I snorted. "Yeah, sure. Blame me."

"I didn't." He braced himself and rose so he could look down at me with those shifting violet eyes. His hair hung in a veil around us. "You saw right through me, though. This is definitely because of you, Princess."

I expected him to grind his hips into mine, but he carefully extracted himself from the bed and turned his back to me as he shoved the curtain of hanging flowers out of his way. I was left, alone and cold in bed.

Grasping the empty air, I wished I hadn't said anything. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Rhoan's shape lingering just past the flowers. He turned his head towards me. The silhouette of his profile distracted me. I noticed the slight bump in the arch of his nose, as if it'd been broken in a few fights.

"I took a vow to your family. So long as I live, I cannot take wives or even lovers. I am allowed no distraction from my duty." His voice remained monotone, like he was afraid to let emotion into it.

I flopped back, arms spread wide, and stared at the ceiling. While there were potential loopholes running through my mind, I didn't dare speak them into existence. Rhoan would only turn them down. He was committed to one thing: his vow.

He would never love me the way I craved. If I asked him back into bed, it would be out of duty. His heart wasn't mine. He saw me as a chance to get his old life back. That's what every fae saw when I walked in—well, the ones that could remember me.

I let Rhoan disappear. There was too much on my mind now. How did Taliesin remember me if the others could not? How could Rhoan? What kept them free of Beryl's carefully crafted curse? Would it even help me to find out.

While I was here, thirsting after Rhoan's dick, Taliesin was strung up like a birthday banner. The other Cerri's were dying in their attempt to overthrow Beryl. I'd felt their individual deaths.

I'd noticed Addie watching me earlier. The Reaper had confessed to tampering with Fate. As far as I knew, though her power had diminished after her fight with the world devouring wolf Fenrir, she could still access Fate. It was something a god had taught her, and she'd selfishly used the power to craft her own happy future.

Had her tampering affected my timeline? I felt oddly split, as if there wasn't enough of me here. My path had been frayed. Now I wondered if all the other threads were getting cut short because they were only a fraction of the whole. I wouldn't be able to do anything until I could pull my fate thread back together.

Running away felt like a pretty good option right about now. Yet, the pixies entered the forefront of my mind again. I thought of Rhoan's warning that anyone with red knees had knelt in Taliesin's blood to pledge their allegiance to Beryl.

What kind of person would I be if I just did...nothing? That didn't seem right. I hated that this responsibility fell on my shoulders after all I'd been through, but maybe that made me all the more prepared to handle this.

I wasn't alone. I had Rhoan. If I could save Taliesin, then we would have his help, too. We could do this.

A dangerous thought occurred to me. There was no precedent for this, so far as I knew. I didn't dare bring it up to Rhoan. He would die inside. To him, honor meant everything. The man had been waiting for the day that he could return to his vow and protect his court once again. If he knew what I wanted to do, he would hate me forever.

That was fine. I would protect my heart with a potion, then we could pull my fate thread back together, save Taliesin, and overthrow Beryl's court. I wouldn't tell Rhoan what I really wanted to do until all was said and done.

I could live with his hatred.

At least, that's what I told myself.

### *Rhoan*

I APPROACHED THE BAR CART. It was getting empty. Rolling my shoulders back, there was no pain. The wounds from Cerri's piercing roots had been healed completely. There wasn't any trace of the injuries left.

All I had left was the throbbing erection that refused to go away. Cerri had been warm beneath me. I could still feel her hands on my back as she healed me. Twice now, she'd cared for me when all others left me to lick my own wounds.

The beast inside me moved. A hunger gripped my core. It wasn't for sustenance, but for the soft touch of a woman's body—specifically Cerri's. My lips parted as I thought about cupping the back of her head and pulling her close for a deep kiss.

I shook my head. The thoughts refused to leave. I could almost feel her pressed against my front. Cerridwen was the princess of the Seelie Court. These feelings were wrong. While she was beautiful and sweet and strong, that didn't mean that I could think of her this way. I had no right to

imagine bending her over and hearing her scream my name while I held her hair.

“Fuck,” I muttered reaching for the nearest bottle of alcohol.

I popped the top and took a swig. Immediately, I cringed from the peppery burn of tequila. That was all that was left, though. I’d told myself that I would stop drinking, but it seemed that I wasn’t going to run out of reasons any time soon. There were too many thoughts bouncing around this skull that needed to be drowned.

Though, when I sat down with the bottle and closed my eyes, I could see Taliesin in the dark. It wasn’t his wry smile and conniving eyes that I saw. In place of his normal expression, I saw a pained countenance, gray from lack of blood.

We needed to be more careful. If we kept running around like this, we were going to get people hurt. Then there would be no one from the Seelie Court left.



I bit the tip of my thumb while I considered this recipe. It was a shot in the dark, but I was pretty sure that I had a potion brewing down to a science now. Reversing a love potion shouldn't be that hard. I dropped in rose petals for access to the heart, added cloves for protection, and cringed when I had to add a strand of Rhoan's hair.

I really didn't want to have to drink something with hair in it, but that seemed to be how my day was going to go so far.

Feri scurried out of nowhere and clambered across my open notebook. He looked down at the scribbled text. For a moment, I wondered if the ferret could read. He straightened and looked over at my bubbling cauldron.

"Why did you pick up this hobby?" he asked. "It is not fitting for a princess. You seem more like a witch, the kind that curses good princesses simply for being pretty."

I was tired of explaining necessity to these fae. They refused to listen. My arcana had been locked away with my memories. This had been the only way to access it, so now it was my go-to whenever I needed anything.

"Because," I said, instead.

I dipped a metal ladle into the frothing mixture inside my cauldron and poured the concoction into a simple glass. There was no need for fancy bottles when I was going to choke this down immediately. It warmed my hand as I watched it with mixed feelings.

One sip of this and I would never have to worry about my feelings for the drunkard fae warrior ever again. He'd vanished bright and early this morning. His penchant for disappearing on me when I expected him to stay had gotten old already. If he wanted to be the protector he claimed to be, then I needed him to stick around.

Or he could tell me where he was going.

To be fair, I hadn't really been giving him the same effort. Every chance I got, I slipped off to do something against his better judgement. And every time, Rhoan had to come in and save me.

I should cut him some slack.

Or, I could remove these burgeoning emotions and turn this into a simple work relationship. He'd do what I needed him to do, and I'd sit on a throne for all of five minutes while I planned my escape. Sounded simple. Right?

Before I could bring the glass to my lips, it shattered. Shards flew in every direction. Blood dripped down my hand and into the rest of the potion. It turned a soft pink as I stared in shock. The pain hadn't yet settled in.

Neither had the danger.

The glass in my hand wasn't the only thing that'd shattered. Foolishly, I'd left the window over the sink unblocked. The glass now bore a pretty little hole the shape of a crossbow bolt.

I didn't want to look down at myself because I knew what I would find.

*Rhoan*

I HAD THINGS TO DO, things that didn't need to involve Cerri. If I'd brought her with me, I only would have been putting her in harm's way.



To my surprise, when I reached out, Delphine agreed to meet with me. That should have been my first warning that something was up. I'd leaned on our old history and assumed that she would have no problem talking to me. That was the very least she could offer.

So, she'd given me a time and place. Early in the morning. Outside the city so that we weren't on anyone's territory. I'd thought that meant she expected this to come to a fight. We could trade blows so long as it was far away from Beryl's territory.

No.

I stood in the middle of a field for fifteen minutes before I realized that I'd been played. Not only had Delphine not shown up, she'd made sure to put me somewhere with no in-betweens. The open field stretched on either side of me. I could run back to the road and use the space between field and road to step in-between, but I was still losing time.

Delphine was a smart hunter. While I was here, she was back at the refurbished warehouse turned apartments, hunting my princess.



I was so tired of living in fear. This time, the only cold I felt was the cool wave of shock keeping me standing. Behind it, my arcana burned like the blazing heat of the desert sun. Where once it had been a nourishing warmth, it now threatened to scorch the earth and everything upon it.

Looking down, I found exactly what I expected. The bolt had pierced my chest. Thankfully, the glass in my hand must have slowed it down a bit. The tip of the bolt hadn't reached my heart.

Well, I guess the potion really had worked. It'd protected my heart, just in a different way.

Before another shot could fly through the window and take out my eye, I dove to the side where I kept my potions. The one I'd made using Vi's blood was still here somewhere. If I poured a bit of it on the bolt in my chest, it would remove the bolt and cauterize the wound.

Better than letting it stay in.

I also planned on throwing the rest at Delphine. What would happen? Would I take out half the block? Most of the other buildings in the area were empty. The plans to turn the old warehouses into apartments had backfired when the contracted company ran out of money. The buildings were old and devoured resources greedily.

*That's why my rent is so cheap. No one wants to live near all these creepy abandoned buildings in a decrepit neighborhood.*

I gripped the potion while my heart hammered wildly. With trembling hands, I poured a drop from the bottle and missed the bolt. The droplet hit the floor and started to burn away at it. I shoved my arcana into the wood floor and pulled it back together with new growth so that it didn't fall out from beneath my feet.

This was all a waste of time. The longer this took, the closer the assassin could get. While I was out of sight for now, she would catch up soon. I shoved my arcana at the door and turned it into thick wood as hard as stone. I did the same with the window over the sink.

My home had become a bunker. Tears burned my eyes. I didn't know how to get out of here on my own. This assassin was determined and, more importantly, skilled. She knew what she was doing. I had no one on my side to save me this time.

I tried to gulp down fresh breaths of air, but my lungs refused to work. I needed to get out of here. If I didn't, then I would die like every other Cerri in my dreams. A part of me liked to think that I was better than the other Cerridwens.

Where they'd died, I would survive. I'd survived everything else thrown my way. Nothing would stop me now.

With careful hands, I tried to burn away the bolt one more time. The golden liquid hit it and turned the bolt to ash. I cringed when the heat reached my chest and seared the wound. The pain made my lips tremble, but at least that's all that was shaking now.

I stood and considered my options.

"Where are you when I need you, Rhoan?" I almost stomped.

Foot mid-air, I heard a creak downstairs. Last I knew, the apartment below was empty.

Feri leapt off the countertop and rushed towards me. A bolt pierced the floor where he'd landed. The ferret startled and rushed towards me. I cursed him for leading the assassin right to me, but at least we were together now.

“She’s far more clever than you are,” Feri noted. “Your brute force use of your arcana isn’t going to help you today. To survive this, you’ll have to use your brain. Can you do that for me?”

I grabbed the ferret by the scruff of his neck and brought him eye level with myself. “I’m going to feed you to a dragon shifter. If Ryder won’t eat you, I can probably pay Morgan to do it.”

Feri recoiled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Barbaric.”

The only way out of this apartment was via some sort of teleportation arcana. I had no idea how to do that on my own because Rhoan hadn’t taken the time to show me how it worked. However, I did know someone with similar abilities.

Addie had explained Maddox’s teleportation to me once before. Apparently, the man could step through the afterlife and reappear elsewhere. As a fae with no soul, could I take advantage of this? Or would I be left behind? The afterlife was for souls.

I heard a soft creaking beneath me. My heart leapt. Without lifting my feet, I slid to the side so that I made the least amount of sound as I ran away.

“This is rather unhelpful,” Feri whispered into my ear.

“Then you try saving our asses,” I hissed back.

He stayed quiet this time. I had a plan. It was risky, but it was more than Feri had. The little bastard could probably step in-between by himself. I almost picked him up and shook him to make him open a portal for the both of us. Since I didn’t know if a Feri sized portal could transport us both, I settled for someone that I knew could help.

The soft ring of my phone made me hold my breath. I stared down at the reinforced floor. My apartment was a lockbox made of unnatural wood at this point. The floor was slick. It gleamed like polished metal and was just about as strong. It would keep us safe for now, but I wished I didn’t have to keep ruining my floors and walls.

I was never getting the security deposit back.

Maddox picked up. His greeting was slightly hesitant, if not completely confused. To be fair, I didn't reach out to him that much. He was new to our group and often kept to himself. The only person this man showed emotion to was his mate, Addie.

"Can you come pick me up?" I kept my voice barely more than a whisper in case the assassin was still tracking me down with her big elf ears.

Immediately, I heard Maddox's growl. I imagined him stiffening as he caught the fear in my voice. There wasn't much you could hide from a shifter, especially one that doubled as a detective.

"What's wrong? Are you safe? What kind of pick up do you need?"

I bit my lip. If he would just jump on over here and get me out, then we could talk. Right now, I waited for the assassin to burn her way through my floor. Did elven assassins walk around with flamethrowers? Probably not, but I'm sure she had a magic that would allow her to do it.

"Arcana ride share," I said.

"Got it," Maddox said right beside me.

He pulled the phone away from his ear and hung up before winding an arm around my middle. Deathly chill arcana surged through the air. It was met with unnatural heat.

"Cerri!" Rhoan's voice echoed across the room.

I threw my arms over my face to protect myself as the floor buckled inwards and flames erupted between Rhoan and me. The last thing I saw was his countenance twisted in rage as he rushed towards us.

There was no time to tell him that Maddox was on my side. Rhoan had seen him the other day. I remembered watching Rhoan size Maddox up at the café. Yet, Rhoan wasn't in a rational state of mind.

"Hands off her!" Rhoan roared.

He leapt across the burning void at Maddox. I tried to shout that Maddox wasn't the danger, but the fire stole the oxygen from my lips. It plucked the air from my very lungs and left me gasping. I covered my mouth with my hand, but that did nothing to fight off the searing heat.

Maddox tugged me out of the way of both the fire and Rhoan. While I wasn't literally between the two men, I definitely felt trapped between them in other ways. The elven assassin would weasel her way in if these two started fighting. I would be left on my own all over again.

Her white head breached the newly formed hole in the floor. I leapt into action. Before she could climb all the way up into the room, I darted out from beneath Maddox's arms. Rushing to Rhoan, I threw myself into his embrace.

"Cerri," Maddox exclaimed, confused all over again.

The assassin pulled herself up and stood. She took in the two men in the room before turning her attention to me. A smile curled over her face.

*The poison.*

In my panic, I'd completely forgotten. This whole time it'd been working its way through my system. I couldn't reach my cauldron. There was no time to brew another antidote. If we went to Rhoan's trailer, I might steal a few minutes to brew an antidote, but Delphine could rush us and come through the portal all over again.

Adrenaline kept me standing, but it would soon run out. My body would start to fail despite the chemicals rushing through my blood. I turned to Rhoan with an apology on my lips. His eyes were wide. His lips formed a trembling O as he cupped the side of my face.

I gripped the front of his shirt and held on tight. So much for protecting my heart. I didn't want to leave him yet.

"I came here as fast as I could," he said. "I left to find a way to protect us. In doing so, I failed you. I never meant for you to be alone. I thought..."

He'd been trying to keep me safe. So few tried to protect me. They all left me to my own devices. I was friends with three of the strongest people I'd ever met. They all seemed to think that I could handle my own problems, as if I was just as strong as them.

*I could be.*

The thought fluttered through my mind. At first, it didn't feel like the truth. I was lying to myself. There was no way that I could rival Ness, Vi, or Addie. They were all gifted with divine power. One had even twisted *fate* in her own favor.

But my arcana grew. It doubled, making my body sun-kissed warm. The way it pressed against the inside of my skin made me rethink my previous assumptions. Greater and greater, it swelled to the point where it bloomed beyond my skin.

The floor curled with plant life. It spread in all directions like a rug being unfurled. It slapped the floor at the assassin's feet and made her look up with an odd expression. Confusion and laughter mingled on her face.

I had no time for her dismissal. With a flick of my hand, my arcana sprang forth and wound around her. Thick wood, the same that I'd been covering my windows with, wrapped around her like a coffin. It left only her head free. Her eyes went wide.

Shit, why hadn't I done that in the first place? I'd doubted myself so much that I hadn't even wanted to try. I'd held back out of fear of failure. Yet, I was capable of so much.

Tired, my knees gave out beneath me. Rhoan caught me with one arm. With his free hand, he flipped the assassin woman the bird. It seemed that there was something between the two of them, something that I didn't really want to look too closely at.

Rhoan tilted my chin upwards so that I would look at him. A proud smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "You amaze me," he said quietly.



My heart thumped wildly. Now, why did he have to go and say something like that? Didn't he know that he was only teasing me? I clung tighter to him because I couldn't bear to let go yet. Right now, I could pretend that this fae warrior was all mine.

In a way, he was. In many—lustful—ways, he would never be.

Maddox, on the other side of the room, pursed his lips while he looked around. “Well...that was certainly an *experience*. Why am I here?”

“Just let me kill her!” the assassin howled. “Everything would be so much easier if you would just let me get this over with!”

Maddox was taken aback. He gaped at the assassin's bold words. That wasn't something people said in front of a detective all that often. He was probably surprised by the forwardness.

He gestured to her as if to ask *want me to take care of this?* I shook my head. There was no way that he was going to keep her in a human prison. Addie assured me that was a lesson that Maddox had finally learned, yet it seemed like the instinct was still there.

“Delphine and I need to have a conversation,” Rhoan interjected.

My attention snapped to him. “*Delphine?* You're on a first name basis with this woman?”

He never took his glare off the white-haired elven woman. She stared back at him with the foulest twist to her lips. I would have bet good money that her fists were quaking at her sides inside my little prison.

She was trapped, but now I had a confused homicide detective and a massive hole in my living room floor. I stepped up to the edge while still keeping one hand fisted in Rhoan's shirt and looked down into the apartment below. Like I'd thought, it was empty. I breathed a sigh of relief and pulled back.

Could I fix the floor? Did I have the patience to even try right now?

Nope.

I rocked back on my heels and let Rhoan catch me. He kept me upright while Maddox picked his way around the hole in the floor.

Maddox put his hands on his hips and leaned in. “What is going on here? Do I need to put a detail around your place at all times?”

“I have one,” I said, tugging at Rhoan’s shirt. Twisting, I glared up at him. “He wasn’t here when he was supposed to be. It was fine. I handled this all on my own.”

Rhoan gestured to the hole in the floor. “You *handled* this?”

I pulled away. “Yeah, and now your girlfriend is restrained for the time being. I didn’t need your help at all!”

Maddox took a cautious step back and raised his hands. He didn’t leave like I expected, though. Instead, he carefully watched us like we were a couple that had the cops called on them for a domestic disturbance.

I groaned and ran my hands down my face.

“I went to go barter with this wench,” Rhoan said. “I thought if I could offer her something of value, then she would leave us alone, and we would be able to focus on what’s actually important.”

My head snapped up. If he said that overthrowing Beryl was more important, I was going to—

“Like unlocking your memories. I know your past is still a blur to you. There were people in the Seelie Court who loved you, and I think remembering them could help you.” Rhoan’s expression softened.

Damn man had to go and make me feel things for him again. I couldn’t bear it.

Then he leaned around me and pointed a finger in Delphine's direction. "You. You baited me and left me in a damned field all by myself!"

She laughed. "That's what you deserve for being a gullible and naïve fool. Did you really think you could offer me more than Beryl? She's a queen!"

I turned. The woman's hardened expression almost hid the sparkling tears in her eyes. I was shocked by the slightest show of emotion on her face, if I was being honest. It made my heart twist for her. I found a kindred soul in her—metaphorically, since neither of us had mortal souls.

This was a woman who'd experienced hardship and wanted nothing more than independence now. While I wanted to run away to safety and solitude, she'd chosen to fight back to assert her independence.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath, embarrassed. Turning back to Delphine, I asked, "What is Beryl offering you? At this point, I doubt it's money. It's something far more important. Isn't it?"

Delphine glared in response. So, I knew I'd hit the nail on the head. However, I didn't know how to get anymore information out of her. I could have brewed a truth potion, but there was something—or someone—far better here.

I cast a glance in Maddox's direction. His shoulders slumped but he quickly lifted his head and rolled his shoulders back before approaching Delphine.

Meanwhile, I couldn't bring myself to look at Rhoan. It wasn't because I was mad at him. If anything, he'd been trying to help. It'd just backfired. I understood, but I couldn't tell him that just yet. Every time I looked at him, my heart clenched with need.

So, while Maddox interrogated Delphine, I knelt on the floor and placed both palms flat to the wood panels. Sunshine warmth spread across my shoulders and down my arms. The wood beneath me spread with new growth, especially when I

transferred life from the foliage that'd spawned earlier. I was able to fix both the floor and the structural damage underneath.

Still, the apartment didn't look the same. The finish on the floor was completely gone. It smelled of fresh cut wood in here, like I'd had it all replaced. I didn't *need* my security deposit back, but it would have been nice.

Now...about the poison in my system. Funny how I cared more about my apartment than I did about my own health at this point. Having encountered this poison a handful of times already, I knew the antidote like the back of my hand.

### *Rhoan*

EVERY ATTEMPT I made to help seemed to blow up in my face. I looked from Cerri, who kept her back to me, over to the pale-haired man grilling Delphine. At first, I thought it silly that Cerri would ask this man that Delphine never met to talk to her.

It seemed to be working though. Delphine was talking down to the poor guy, but he was eating up everything she said. He stepped into a role and made her comfortable. Once she thought he was an idiot, she started to spill everything. She didn't think he would understand, but he'd played her like she was a fiddle, and he was a master musician.

I had to give him credit where credit was due. Delphine spilled that she would earn absolute immunity on Beryl's territory, meaning that Delphine would never have to ask for permission to hunt on Beryl's court grounds. The bounty hunter could do as she pleased here. Once she killed Cerri, no one would be safe.

The thing was, Delphine wasn't a monster. She wasn't out to hurt people for the fun of it like the Unseelie Court liked to do. The elf that I knew wanted nothing more than to keep the fae world clean and safe. She hunted bounties not only for the money, but to get justice.

“Del,” I said, trying to appeal to my old friend.

Immediately, Cerri stopped moving. Her head tilted. What had she heard in my voice that I hadn't? I needed to watch my tone before I gave Cerri the wrong idea. There was only one woman in my life that deserved my attention right now, and it was her.

Delphine only took up my time because she was a risk to my future queen. This wasn't something I wanted to do. It was only something I had to do.

“Is immunity worth more than a place in a court?” I asked with my attention on Delphine.

“You keep offering me something that doesn't exist,” she said with a laugh. “I don't want to fight for you and your court. It means nothing to me when it doesn't even exist right now. Why should I fight for *your* dream? It seems foolish in my opinion.”

She had a point. I sucked my teeth while I tried to find the right words. Before I could say anything, Cerri stood and turned her gaze upon Delphine.

“If you don't stand with us, I will make sure that you end up beneath us. You have no right to hunt me and make every waking moment of my life a nightmare. Beryl already does that.” The hard edge of Cerri's tone took everyone by surprise.

The pale haired detective and I shared a look. I understood the warning in his eyes. There was a police badge at this guy's hip. He didn't want to hear Cerri talk about killing people.

Before I could say anything, she turned her dark glare on him, too.

“Don't act like you haven't killed to keep others safe,” she snarled.

His jaw clenched. My beast reacted, nearly slamming into the surface the moment it saw this man as a potential threat. The man didn't like what Cerri had to say. He wanted to stop her. My beast would throw itself in the path of that man's wrath without a second thought.

While I wanted to think that it was in service of a good queen, I knew better. I just took those feelings and pushed them back. The beast could take them and sit in the corner while it thought about the consequences of such thoughts.

Breathing through my nose, I prepared myself for a fight.

“I like you, girlie,” Delphine said, cutting through the tension with her wit. “You’ve seen some shit. Trading blows with you was fun while it lasted.”

Cerri slowly tilted her head in question, like she wouldn’t waste energy asking the question out loud. Delphine didn’t deserve that much effort.

I was going to get an earful from Delphine later. I almost put a hand on Cerri’s shoulder to ask her to back off. This was the first time she’d acted like a queen, though. I couldn’t interrupt her now.

“Do you know what happens to those who refuse Beryl’s offer?” Delphine asked. “I would help you, but I don’t want to end up like Taliesin.”

She had a point. There was no way I could argue with self-preservation. I ran both hands over my face and tried to push back the feeling of impending doom.

If Cerri had run into some Seelie fae, then that meant they were beginning to stir. They were coming out of hibernation. The Seelie still in the mortal realm were waking now that Cerri had come into her power. And Beryl knew it. She would stop at nothing until Cerri was dead and gone so that the Seelie court would stay under the curse she wrought so long ago.

“What can I give you to make you abandon this mission?” I asked. “You and I go back. We’ve known each other for a long time, Del.”

I could feel Cerri’s gaze on the back of my neck. I had no time to explain. What would it matter even if I did? My relationship with Delphine was of no consequence to my duty. The two would only ever cross paths in instances like this.

Cerri had to understand that my vow was to her and her family by now.

Delphine's shoulders dropped. "You could have killed me the other day."

I knew exactly what she was talking about. Del had landed a blow on me and opened herself to a lethal attack in the process. I could have carved through her with my blade, but I'd chosen to spare her. Cerri had been my priority that day.

Though...if I had killed Delphine, we wouldn't be in this situation over and over. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I'd seen enough death in my time. I didn't want to see the bodies of people I loved turn to ash and blow away on the wind anymore. It broke my heart over and over. The pieces of my heart were too small to keep shattering like this.

"You spared my life, so I'll spare your princess's." Delphine nodded to confirm her statement.

It wasn't exactly a vow, but I was inclined to trust her. A life for a life seemed like a fair deal. What I really wanted was her help getting Taliesin back so that we could have more allies on our side, but I would settle for this if it was all I could get.

"Release me, and I'll be on my way," Delphine said a little too eagerly.

Cerri snorted. "I'm not releasing you. I'm going to have Maddox teleport your ass into the middle of nowhere. You'll have all the time in the world to figure out how to get out of this."

Maddox, the man in question, gave me the most exasperated *help me* look. He wasn't part of our problem. I didn't see why Cerri had to involve him, but he groaned and struck up a negotiation. Once the man realized that this woman would not stay in a mortal prison, he begrudgingly agreed to release Delphine somewhere far away from here.

Cerri knocked on the wood around Delphine's body. It wouldn't hold Del forever, but it was going to be a big pain in the ass. I guess it was what she deserved, though there was a bitter tone in Cerri's voice that left me unsettled.

I took her arm and pulled her back towards her bedroom. We ducked under the veil of flowers still growing like an indoor garden. It gave us a semblance of privacy when I turned to her.

“You’re angry and it’s going to turn you into the kind of person you won’t like,” I warned her when I leaned in close.

I watched her jaw clench. She narrowed those pretty eyes at me. They were filled with fury and fear. She wasn’t afraid of what she might become. I knew that she was afraid of what could happen to her. And I hadn’t made that any easier on her. I’d left her alone this morning when I should have been here.

My beast stirred and agreed. It filled me with sour shame. I lowered my head and considered my next move carefully. It’d been a long time since I’d had to act as a knight. Had I forgotten what I needed to do? Or was I just really bad at my job?

I couldn’t risk the second option. I had to push it out of my mind and do everything in my power to keep Cerri safe. Taking her hands in mine, I dropped to one knee in front of her.

“From here on out, I will never leave your side. I promise to stay close so that I can answer your every need.”





**S** hit.

My breath caught at the sight of Rhoan on one knee in front of me. His hands turned mine to fire as something sparked between us. Was it just me? Was it only my heart hammering like this?

Biting back a nervous laugh, I asked, “Even when I’m on the toilet?”

I had to alleviate this fluttering in my chest somehow. The only way I knew how was to make a joke.

The poison was still in my system. Maybe that fluttering wasn’t Rhoan’s effect on me. There’s was a strong chance that I was about to pass out, but I wasn’t going to walk away from Rhoan just yet. Arcana in a chokehold, I used a part of my attention to keep the poison at bay for a while longer.

Rhoan rolled his eyes, but a slight smile curled his lips. “Will that help you put more trust in me?”

I couldn’t bring myself to trust anyone other than myself right now. No one could give me what I needed, so I was on my own more often than not. No one would stay by my side all day and through the night. I had to be on guard at all times.

Rhoan promised me constant protection, but I didn’t believe he really meant it. The man had left me vulnerable more than once. While I wanted to love him and the pretty words he said to me, I didn’t believe in them.

I fought for my life every waking moment and died in every dream. It was exhausting. I couldn't handle it anymore. I had to be ruthless if I was going to survive...

I ripped my hand out of Rhoan's. "You think I'm going to end up like Beryl."

He inhaled and tilted his head to the side like he was bracing himself for a fight. Every breath was ammunition for the argument he was preparing.

I backpedaled and stormed out of the room. Since Delphine was still trapped in the wooden case, I could actually go outside and look at the sky for once. Before I could exit the room, Delphine called out to stop me.

"If you see me again..." She paused with a grim set to her lips and an emptiness in her eyes. "If my poison doesn't take you today and you see me again, know it is against my will."

A shiver raced down my spine. I looked her up and down. She seemed strong and capable, impossibly so. With a hand pressed to the wound still in my chest, I wondered what would happen if a power stronger than her got ahold of her. Would I survive that assault?

"You can't kill me with that poison anymore," I told her before leaving the room.

I stomped up the stairwell to the roof. Maybe I should have had more compassion, but I was exhausted. All I had left was my well of arcana. The garden bloomed and the sunlight rippled inside me, but my muscles slackened. My feet dragged with every step.

Outside, under the true sun, I lifted my face and waited for the light to burn away all the negativity tainting my blood.

No.

Wait.

That wasn't negativity. That was Delphine's poison. At this point, I'd been hit with her bolts so many times that I should have been developing a resistance to it. Since I was still standing, maybe there was some truth to that assumption.

I collapsed in a folding chair that was left out here and closed my eyes. This time, I turned my arcana inwards. I flooded my body with the regenerative properties of plants and did my best to chase away the poison hurting me. The sensation pulled a sigh from my lips. I sank further into my seat the moment the poison vanished altogether.

“Well, shit,” I muttered under my breath.

I didn’t need to make antidotes. I could use this arcana to heal.

When I cracked open my eyes, there were two young trees on either side of me that hadn’t been there before. If I left them, their roots would do irrevocable damage to the building. For now, I let them spread their branches wide in greeting to the sun. More flowers sprang up beneath my feet in a myriad of colors.

Beryl couldn’t do this. Everything she touched turned to blood and pain. I created life and beauty. We weren’t the same...

But I could hear my own voice in my head. The way I’d spoken to Delphine had been cold. If she’d endured as much as I had in her lifetime, then she deserved kindness. Who was I to deny her that when it would be so easy to offer? My own bitterness had gotten in the way of a simple gift.

Of course, Delphine wouldn’t be my friend if I showed her a bit of kindness, but I didn’t want that. I just wanted her to know that it was possible. Things could get better.

They had to.

Why else would I still be fighting?

My chest tightened when I thought about the other Cerris, the ones that died in all of my dreams. I didn’t know how I knew for sure, but the sinking feeling in my gut told me that I was seeing the end of other versions of myself. If I couldn’t fix what Addie had frayed and pull my timeline back together, there wouldn’t be much of me left.

How was I supposed to defeat Beryl like this?

“Hey,” Rhoan said from the other side of my foliage curtain.

He pushed his hand through the weeping willow veil and parted the branches before stepping through. Pausing, he took in my little abode and the circle of light that shone down on me from the convenient hole in the canopy above.

“Every time you’re alone, you make a shell for yourself. It’s like you’re retreating.” He came to sit on the roof beside me.

I scowled. “I’m not retreating.”

*Yes. I was.*

Was I going to admit that out loud? Never.

“Do you really think I’m going to end up like Beryl?” I asked, softer than I’d meant to.

My voice left me, breaking at Beryl’s name because I couldn’t bear the idea of being anything like her. I wasn’t going to hurt anyone. That wasn’t what I wanted. Couldn’t Rhoan see that all I wanted was a bit of safety?

He reached over and put a hand on my knee and squeezed. Warmth flooded my body, but I wanted nothing to do with it. I didn’t want feelings for a man who could barely uphold his empty promises. My heart ached for him every time he uttered another vow, but then he couldn’t even follow through on them.

This time...this time I hoped he would. I wasn’t ready to give up on him, no matter how tired my broken little heart had become. We could still survive this. There was a possibility.

“I don’t think you’re like Beryl, and I never said that you were.” He hesitated.

“I hear a *but*.”

He sighed and looked away. His hand stayed, though. He held my knee tight like that might reassure me when he opened his mouth again.

“You can’t let your pain get the better of you. A real queen smiles through everything. She keeps a soft heart for her people. When she can’t...then she’s no longer the woman they need.”

My jaw tightened. Words piled on my lips but couldn’t make it past my clenched teeth. Little did he know, I refused to be a queen. When time came, I would run. I would find a way to escape the duty that fate wanted to put upon me.

“I’m not perfect,” I said, instead. “I’ll never be the queen you used to know. That woman died.”

“You mean your mother?”

I cringed. “She might have given birth to me, but she’s not my mother.”

The look Rhoan gave me was pained. He didn’t push it, though. This conversation was getting old, and even he knew it. There were bigger things at hand, anyway.

*Set me free. I’m not a princess. And I’m certainly not a queen. I don’t want this. Let me escape while I’m still breathing.*

I didn’t say any of that, though. I kept my mouth shut as I pulled my knees up to my chest and studied the canopy above me. It was perfect proof that I was, in fact, exactly who he thought I was. There was no denying it.

Accepting the truth of my situation had been the easiest part. I’d always felt wrong, like I didn’t belong. To learn that I was the daughter of a fae family hadn’t really come as any big surprise. It was the rest of it that I didn’t want.

But people needed help. Taliesin was suffering. Delphine was afraid of her own future. The pixies were being eaten like snacks. I couldn’t leave them all on their own.

“I’m going to try to free Taliesin,” Rhoan said, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. “Stay here for a while. Keep the windows and doors locked down. I won’t be long.”

I shot out of my seat, hands clenched into tight fists at my sides. “You’re leaving me again?”

Rhoan rose to tower over me. He didn't push into my space, though. The man held his ground and kept a firm set to his determined shoulders. "He needs help, and we need him."

The fight bled out of me. Rhoan wasn't wrong.

"Then..." Was I really about to offer help? Could I do anything? Or would I be a liability? "Do you want me to go with you? You said you weren't going to leave my side...like barely a handful of minutes ago."

He shook his head, his jaw clenched tight.

"Let me go with you!" I fought the urge to stamp my feet like a child.

*He promised he wouldn't leave.*

But my impending tantrum was proof that I didn't have it in me tonight. Knowing what Tal was going through right now, how Beryl was using him as a warning, he couldn't stay there another night.

I couldn't help, and Tal couldn't wait.

I rocked back, annoyed. I didn't want to be alone, but I wasn't about to tell him that. I was too proud to grab ahold of him and hold him close. Despite his promise, I begrudgingly accepted the time alone. I needed to make another potion to protect my heart from these feelings I had for his stupid ass...

Okay, so his ass was really nice. It was round and perfect and—I needed to stop.

"Call one of your friends. Have them come over. As much as I hate to make this decision, we need Tal, and I can't bring you into harms way tonight. You've been through enough."

Rhoan stepped forward and cupped my cheek. His lavender eyes turned soft. When his lips parted, I thought he might have something else to say. Instead, he pulled back as if burned. He closed his fist at his side and kept it that way as he stalked back to the door.





**T**he need to make this mission as quick as possible made me as sloppy as possible. When I stepped in-between and found myself in Beryl's underground court, I knew this would be a trap. There was no going back, though.

Before me, Taliesin hung, suspended from the ceiling by swaths of silk. The ribbons were hastily tied around his wrists, waist, and ankles. Blood dripped from his hands and throat, staining the silk with Taliesin's perceived sins.

The puddle beneath him gleamed in the light trickling in from the lake window. Beryl hadn't bothered to have anyone clean up the mess left behind from those she'd forced to kneel in the puddle. There were footprints leading away from Taliesin in all directions.

I held my breath and waited for Beryl to step out of the shadows. Hell, Delphine had been deposited earlier in the day, meaning the assassin was likely free and running about already. I wouldn't have been surprised if she stepped out to greet me. It would have been better than looking Beryl in her cold, red eyes.

Hand out, I summoned my blade. With a flick of my wrist, I threw it up and sliced through one of the silk ribbons holding Taliesin aloft. His wrist flopped down at his side. Though he didn't react, I knew he was alive simply because he was still here. Fae didn't linger after death.

I summoned my blade back to myself and cut the second ribbon. Taliesin flopped forward with only the waist ribbon

holding him up. Now would have been a good time to stop me. Yet, no one showed up.

Not until I had Taliesin over my shoulder. He shifted, ever so slightly, and whispered:

“Watch out.”

I lunged to the right just as a dark form slammed into the ground where I'd been. Taliesin bounced on my shoulder and groaned. The dark form immediately rebounded and struck, forcing me back again.

If I dropped Taliesin, I would have been able to run. The man, despite being a fae, was heavy on my shoulder. Cerri needed me. While Taliesin would have been a good ally, if I died here then Cerri would have no one on her side.

“Stairs,” Taliesin whispered.

For a moment, I wondered if I'd picked up a decoy meant to lead me into Beryl's waiting hands. I glanced back at the lake window. Only magic kept the water from spilling into Beryl's underground court. I could leap through it and swim to the surface. The water would slow the shadowed assassin down.

But Taliesin might suffer in the water. The man had been through enough. I didn't know if he could hold his breath long enough, and I'd come all this way to save him. I had to trust that this was the real Taliesin—the aura felt right, and I wasn't sure if Beryl knew about my ability to read auras.

*Behind you,* my beast whispered.

I pushed into action, bolting for the door. Something hit the ground where I'd been. While I should have been worried about the assassin, my beast's movement had me more concerned.

The creature inside me paced with purpose. It set its sights on the assassin behind me. My muscles nearly locked with tension. The creature wanted out. It recognized this scent, and it wanted to kill.

Snarling, I fought back my unruly beast. It slashed at me. My feet tangled on the stairs, sending me falling forward. Sucking in a breath, I quickly righted myself. There was no way we would get out of here if my beast and I kept fighting.

*They destroyed our Court. They deserve to suffer for what they did. It was our job to protect. Now all we can do is get vengeance.*

I flew up the stairs and into the restaurant dining room above. It was empty for the night. I wasn't sure what I would have done had there been dining patrons. This way, I could plow through the tables with abandon.

The door stood ahead. I could walk in-between and take us somewhere safe once I reached it.

But a cold blade bit into the side of my neck before I could take another step. I rocked back, my gaze sliding in the direction of the shadowed assassin now standing beside me. The figure laughed, a familiar voice booming through the room.

His grin split wide, revealing sharp white teeth that nearly glowed in the darkness. "Back for more, Rhoan Glenwood? I thought you would have learned your lesson the first time. You're no match for the Unseelie Court, not even with that monster crouched inside your pathetic vessel."

Fury stirred inside me. My beast lashed out, but it couldn't make contact with him. I bore the brunt of my beast's assault. Pain from its claws lanced through me, but I managed to keep it off my face.

"Shut your yapper, Faust," Taliesin said from my shoulder.

While Taliesin rolled out of my grasp and landed like a cat on his feet, I struck. I summoned my blade and thrust forward.

Faust vanished in a puff of smoke. He reappeared behind us with a maniacal cackle. I would have called it overdone, but the man was a Pookah. He fed on fear and nightmares. His kind was responsible for the nightmare now living inside of me.

My beast twisted. Faust reappeared behind me. Without question, I spun and struck. Taliesin threw out his hand and the room seemed to stop for a moment, but Taliesin's power was weak. Time slowed before crashing back again.

Chairs and tables clattered to the floor. I charged through them with rage driving my movements. It made me clumsy, but I made up for it in strength when I struck through Faust's form.

Once more, his body split apart into smoke, and he vanished again.

"Run," Taliesin called out to me. "I've been freed. Faust alone can't hold me."

I shot Tal a knowing look. "Fat chance, sir. You're not in one piece right now."

Tal pulled himself upright and straightened the lapels of his rumpled coat. Though the smile on his lips faltered ever so slightly, there was a furious blaze in his eyes. They gleamed silver like the passing moon in the sky before he turned them upon Faust.

The assassin stepped out of the shadows and bowed low, his blades dancing in the air as he did.

"You know, we could have used you," I shot at Tal.

He laughed boldly. "Do you think, back then, that I was half the man I am now? I was not capable of nearly as much when the court fell. I knew that I needed to survive so that I could become more when it came time to put it all back together."

My beast stamped its foot at the statement. He could have stayed. He could have fought. The beast didn't want to trust him, but I knew we didn't have many other options. So, I turned to face Faust alongside my new ally.

I wouldn't trust Tal anywhere near Cerri. That was something the beast and I agreed upon. No one was allowed near the princess. The moment anyone tried to lay a hand on her, the creature would rip its way out of me. I was lucky that it hadn't so far.

Faust laughed. The sound echoed from all directions. The world tilted. Tal didn't seem as affected. The pookah assassin was inside my head.

"Your beast wants out," Faust whispered in my ear, though he was still ten paces ahead of me. "Let it out, let it destroy, let it consume..."

At the sound of Faust's command, the beast exploded. I clutched my middle and tried to force the creature back. It was too much for my body. The creature would break free of me at any moment.

"You're no use to me in this fight," Tal said.

He reached out and put a hand to my forehead. The beast snarled and gnashed its teeth at Tal's touch. My skin stretched too tight. I could already feel claws on the inside of my body. They reached to twist my hands into talons.

No. I didn't want this. I never wanted to let this monstrosity out again. It was an aberration, a creation made by the pookahs and their terrifying imaginations. It never should have been put inside me. I should have never needed this extra strength.

If I hadn't been weak in the first place...If I hadn't needed these tattoos...and more. I failed, over and over again. I'd been too weak to uphold my vow, and so I'd sought out another source of power so that I could be the knight that my court needed.

The plan had backfired. I'd agreed to a curse.

Tal shoved. The world spun. Beyond Tal, I saw the shadowed blur of Faust bolting towards us. I tried to shout, but a snarl was all that came out. The beast twisted my vocal cords. It bent my facial structure.

Magic sprang up as I turned. Tal accessed a level of in-between that I thought out of reach. He tapped into the moment in my spin between one direction and another and shoved me through.

Of course, my first thought was of Cerri. I thought of her bedroom and its veil of soft flowers. It was an oasis, a safe

place. And, most importantly, it was where I could find Cerri.

### *CERRI*

“I’M GOING to stay at your side as long as you need,” I mocked as I dumped rose petals into my cauldron.

I felt like a crotchety old witch while I worked. Misery had taken ahold of me and changed me into a little monster hunched over the cauldron. Steam rose and made my curly hair extra wild. Not even my usual bandana could hold it at bay.

Pushing it back, I sighed. The steam rolled away from me and curled in the air before dissipating all together. It fell apart, just like I wanted to. The urge to crawl back into bed almost overwhelmed my desire to get this potion done.

Sleep still escaped me. It wasn’t made any easier knowing that Rhoan wasn’t here when he’d promised me he would stay again. His priorities were to the Seelie Court. I should have understood that from the beginning, but I’d been wrapped up in the idea of being protected for once.

“I’m not your tool,” I grumbled.

“Not whose what?” Rhoan asked walking through my bedroom door.

I jumped. The spoon in my hand lurched forward. The cauldron tipped and spilled its contents all over the stovetop. I let out a screech of frustration before pulling the cauldron upright again. It was too late. The potion had been spilled.

Again.

I snatched my kitchen towel from the front of the oven and started grumpily mopping up the mess while muttering under my breath.

I waited for Rhoan to ask me what I was up to. He normally came up to me and poked his nose in everything, but

he was oddly silent. Halfway through cleaning, I paused and looked back.

The man flopped face first down onto my sketchy couch despite the glass that was probably still embedded in the damn thing. At first, I thought he was tired from being up all night doing god-knows-what. Then I noticed the way his chest heaved. He gripped the cushions with a furious strength, testing the fabric's limitations.

Potion forgotten, I rushed over to his side. I grabbed him and tried to push him over so I could check for wounds. There was no blood. I couldn't smell it on the air or see it on the couch, but the way Rhoan snarled told me that there was definitely something wrong.

"Leave me be," he snarled.

His voice echoed with a familiar sound. It was more than just his own growling rumble. I heard the roar of a beast inside him. It took me aback. I wasn't a spoiled princess, though. I'd been raised by shifters. This was nothing new to me.

"Rhoan," I said, softly as I cupped his cheek.

This was dangerous. Usually, only mates could approach angry shifters when they were on the verge of losing control. Now, I noticed the other signs. His fingers were tipped with sharp, black talons that pierced the thick fabric of my couch. The texture of his bare skin had changed as if there was something pressing on it from the inside.

"Rhoan," I tried again, tugging his face towards me.

This wasn't going to end well. He would lash out at me at any moment. I had to brace myself for the coming attack. At least, I knew I could heal it on my own. I had a new healing ability, one that I'd needed ages ago.

Rhoan didn't lash out at me. He firmly kept his face planted in the cushion like he could hide what was happening. I watched as his shoulders rippled. He rolled them uncomfortably as the shape of what looked like wings lifted his leather vest.

“You’re safe here,” I said, trying to echo things I’d heard mates tell their shifter partners. “I’m right here. Nothing can hurt us.”

Rhoan dragged in a ragged breath. The shape of wings fell, becoming human shoulders once more. He reached out and grasped my hand, squeezing it like he needed to know I was here.

While it tightened my heart to be needed by him, I knew that he was only making sure that his future queen was in one piece. I wasn’t near and dear to his heart. My place was beside his vow.

Still, I ran my hand through his hair and tried to ignore the fact that black feathers were falling to the floor each time I made a pass. The tiny little down feathers glimmered with the same oil-slick color that I saw in his eyes from time to time.

This man had a beast. I wasn’t sure why I was surprised, but I was. At least, I knew how to deal with men like this. I’d had plenty of practice while growing up. Perhaps that was why my biological parents chose Jasper and Molly James. Living with them prepared me to deal with the knight that my biological parents had set aside for me.

“Where were you?” I asked as I ran my hand through his hair again.

His hair was soft as silk. I couldn’t get enough of the sensation it conjured as it slipped between my fingers. Finally, he turned his face towards me. His eyes had been consumed by his beast, and his cheekbones were sharper, more angled.

I waggled the fingers of my free hand, greeting the beast for the first time. Color flickered over his lavender eyes. The beast acknowledged me, rather kindly actually.

“I went to save Taliesin,” Rhoan confessed.

Betrayal stabbed me in the heart. I clenched my fist in his hair in warning. “We could have done that together.”

“You knew where I was going.”



I had. And I'd asked if I could go with him. Rhoan had told me to stay here. I could have butted my way into this mission, but I'd allowed him to slip away without me. I didn't even put up a fight.

Shame curled inside me. Rhoan wouldn't be in this shape had I gone with him. Then again, I would have been a liability. Right? I had no idea how to fight. All his attention would have been on keeping me safe.

Rhoan pressed his eyes shut and grimaced. A growl rumbled in his throat. He caught my hand in his and tightened his grip on my hand almost painfully. Talons pressed into my skin and pulled back at the last possible moment before breaking my skin. When Rhoan exhaled, I heard the tremble in his breath.

"Is it still fighting you?" I squeezed his hand in return.

His lip curled in response. When his mouth twitched, I could tell the beast was nearly in control. I did the only thing I could think of—though, it was dumb and selfish in retrospect.

I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips. Rhoan went completely still. He inhaled sharply, probably in surprise. I expected him to sink into me, to pull me close and take everything I offered.

Instead, Rhoan shot upright. He was across the room before I could even blink. Had he teleported? Or was he just that fast with his beast in the pilot's seat?

He stood on the other side of the kitchen island with both palms pressed flat against the counter. The way he stared me down, with heated eyes, told me that he wanted to stay. He'd forced himself away.

I almost asked him why he was running. Instead, I swallowed the question and bit my tongue. I had to stop being a total idiot.

Raven-wing colors danced across Rhoan's eyes before he winced and pressed them shut again. "I ran into someone with...with influence over the thing inside me."

“Thing?” I asked incredulously. “That’s no way to talk about a part of yourself.”

Rhoan snorted, but he didn’t explain. There was clear animosity between himself and his beast. It wasn’t my place to push the issue. He might have seen me as his future queen, but that’s not what I wanted to be, so I wasn’t going to act like one.

His business was his own.

So, I stood and stepped up to the opposite side of the kitchen island. “What do you need? What will help you get control again?”

“I want—” He stopped, cutting himself off with a shake of his head.

“What do you want? Waffles? A bottle of whiskey? A bit of both?”

He chuckled. “That’s such a Cerridwen offer. Waffles and whiskey. Do you know what I would give for a morning of waffles, whiskey, and...” Once more, he paused.

It was like there was something on the tip of his tongue that he had to keep pulling back. My heart leapt in nervous anticipation. He wasn’t going to say it. Even if he did, I had a feeling that I was just a body in this scenario. He didn’t want me, he wanted the warmth of a woman to settle the hungry beast lurking inside him.

It happened to most shifters. Their animals had an insatiable appetite for food and flesh. He probably wasn’t much different. Though...Rhoan had explained his vow. He couldn’t take women in that way. Which likely meant his beast was extra frustrated.

I stepped into the kitchen so that I could make him something to eat. The entire time, I was aware of his presence. His heat warmed me like the sun shining down on my skin. There wasn’t a moment where I couldn’t feel him near.

I had to stop giving him so much thought. He didn’t deserve my heart like that. Even if he was a smoking hot fae

warrior with a mysterious beast hidden just beneath the surface.

A blush reached my cheeks. I rolled my eyes at myself. I was ridiculous. The last thing I needed in my life was a man, especially an unpredictable one like Rhoan. He said one thing and did another. Maybe he was competent, as I'd seen several times over, but he wasn't reliable in the least.

When I finished making him a thick sandwich laden with meat, I paused and laughed at the ridiculous stereotype. This wasn't because I wanted to serve him. I just wanted him to deal with his damned beast so I could stop romanticizing him.

I shoved the sandwich in front of him and moved to the opposite side of the kitchen island to put space between us. As he ate, I thought back to the time when I'd still been under the impression that I would become a shifter like my father. I'd been so excited to have a mate someday.

Then, when my first shift never came, I'd had to deal with the disappointment of knowing that I would never have that kind of all-consuming love that my parents had. No one would ever hold me the way that Ryder held Ness. No one would look at me the way that Morgan watched Vi.

No one would protect me the way Maddox protected Addie.

"You're crying," Rhoan said, his voice like gravel.

I shoved away from the kitchen island and put my back to him. Before I could get far, a pair of arms wrapped around my middle. Rhoan pulled me back into him and held me close to his chest. When he buried his face in the crook of my neck, I nearly broke.

He held me tight. My lungs clenched as the ache in my chest spread and nearly turned me into a sobbing mess. This was what I wanted. This was what I *needed*.

"It's going to be okay," Rhoan whispered into my shoulder the same way I'd said to him earlier.

I held onto his arm for dear life. This moment would end, but I would hold onto it for as long as I possibly could. He'd

seen my struggle, no matter how hard I'd tried to hide it. The man had seen right through me.

He turned me around and pulled me even closer, this time cupping the back of my head. He made soft sounds to comfort me as I balled my fists in the front of his shirt.

He huffed a laugh and said, "This isn't how I expected the night to go."

I couldn't help but laugh into his shirt. It nearly dissipated the tears building in my eyes.

Almost.



I woke to a ferret on my face. The little creature pried my eyes open, exposing them to the sun. I groaned and swatted at him, but he skittered out of the way and scrambled back onto my face where he snatched up a fallen tear from my cheek.

“Why are you crying in your sleep, Princess?”

*Because every time I closed my eyes, another version of me died.*

I didn't say that, though. I let Feri crawl off my face and onto a pillow. When I turned onto my side, I saw Rhoan standing with his arms over his chest just past the veil of flowers. His shoulders were pulled up tight, nearly to his ears, like he was concerned and ready for a fight.

I sighed. I'd been keeping this to myself, but for what? There didn't seem to be a good reason for my hesitation anymore.

“I think my timeline is frayed,” I confessed. “I don't know why it's just me, but I can tell that Beryl is taking advantage of it. She's figured out how to kill other versions of me.”

Rhoan and Feri shared a look. I couldn't read what passed between them. I was too busy staring at the growing wet spot on my pillow from the tears still running down my face. At this point, I wasn't crying.

The other versions of me were.

“I think they’re just nightmares,” Feri said once he turned back to me. He hopped closer and put a little paw to my cheek. “You are stressed from the weight of your duties. Beryl has been showing you the consequences of your hesitation as of late. It makes sense that you would grow to fear her.”

Rhoan watched me. I could feel his gaze on me. I’d shown fear and reluctance up until this point, so I didn’t blame him for doubting me. Touching the scars on my throat, I understood.

But this wasn’t right. I could feel their deaths. I could hear Beryl’s triumphant laughter. She knew that she was winning.

Reaching out, I tried to summon a flower. My arcana had been powerful, almost limitless up until this point. I could feel it waning. The flowers in the room turned in my direction and tried to stretch towards me, but they couldn’t quite reach. My arcana was like the sun behind a wall of clouds.

There was no warmth to it now.

“Something is wrong,” I reiterated.

Rhoan sighed. “How would we even go about fixing a timeline?”

*If I knew, I would have done it already.*

But I didn’t say that. Arguing wouldn’t fix anything. We needed a plan, and I had an idea of where we could start.

Before that, I rolled over and grabbed my phone. There was a message from Ness. She was planning a cookout later today. It was another Pack bonding experience. I shouldn’t have been invited anymore. I wasn’t really Pack, and Beryl was still hunting me down, but I craved the feeling of belonging somewhere.

Though I had things I should have been doing, my heart yearned to see my Pack family, even if only for a little while.

An hour later, I was showered and dressed. I wove my wet hair into a braid that would tame my curls for the time being. An oversized sweater hung off my shoulders and covered the comfortable yet nearly threadbare leggings that I’d tossed on.

I stepped up to Rhoan and put my hands on my hips. “Teach me how to walk in-between. I want to be able to do it.”

He looked down at me. When he lifted a dubious brow, I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him close. A smile curled across his lips as determination settled over his brow. The look he gave me would have stolen my breath had it not been for my own desire to learn more about my arcana.

At this point, I was a little worried that I wouldn’t have enough power to pull this off. Beryl had drained me, but not enough that I was completely useless. After my shower, I could feel the heat of the sun inside me again. It was like all I needed was to wash off the nightmares.

I gestured to the doorway between my bedroom and the living room. “Shall we begin?”

Rhoan leaned in a bit closer. “Show me what you’ve got, Princess.”

My cheeks warmed. Before he could notice, I grabbed his shoulders, spun him around, and shoved him towards the door.

He explained how the ability should work. For the fae, all in-betweens are a kind of doorway. Depending on your level of finesse, a fae could access all sorts of in-betweens. He explained how Taliesin had shoved him and used the moment between upright and falling as an in-between.

“So...it works on concept alone?” I cocked my head curiously.

“More or less.” Rhoan backed through the bedroom door and appeared in the bathroom door. “This is the easiest to access. It’s simple. Everyone perceives this as an in-between.”

“So, how do I activate it? Is...is it as simple as believing that I’m entering another room?”

Rhoan rocked and vanished only to appear in front of me. He snatched my hand and pulled me with him when he fell through another portal. I let out a cry and heard it in the distance behind us when he appeared across the room.



Looking up, we stood behind the kitchen island. He'd used the transition from living room to kitchen proper as an in-between. Jealousy that he could do something I couldn't flared in me before I realized he'd found another reason to hold me. I didn't want to leave, either.

It was like we couldn't get enough of these small moments. Only, he had a damned vow of celibacy and an inability to be reliable. I'd been surprised to wake up to him. He should have been with Taliesin or something. The two probably wanted to plan a raid on Beryl's domain soon.

I pulled away and planted my feet apart. "Show me how to do it."

Rhoan led me back to the doorway between the living room and my bedroom. He stopped me with his hands on my hips. My heart thumped happily until I grabbed ahold of the thing and told it to behave.

Now wasn't the time. Eventually, I would make that potion, and I would be free of these feelings.

"Tap into your arcana and think about where you want to be. Believe that it is right on the other side of this door. It might be difficult with the door open. If we close it, you can open it to your destination."

Nope. I wasn't going to do this the easy way. I wanted to jump into the deep end and prove that I didn't need anyone to baby me. I was more than capable all on my own.

"It all boils down to belief. That's the power of our magic," Rhoan whispered in my ear when he sidled closer. "If you believe something to be an in-between moment, then you can tap into its power. If you believe something else is on the other side of that moment, then it will be. Are you ready?"

Absolutely. I lurched forward and threw myself through the doorway. Where did I want to go, though? I hadn't quite figured that out before moving. So, the doorway led nowhere. I stumbled into the veil of hanging flowers still growing in my bedroom. They tickled my face and got stuck in my mouth.

I spat them out and tumbled into the bed. Behind me, Rhoan laughed.

“It’s all right. Not everyone gets it on their first try,” he said as if all fae learned this at my age.

I absolutely refused to believe that. I knew that this was probably something *toddlers* could do. Knowing that, I rolled off the bed and faced the doorway again. This time, I pulled my arcana up and wrapped it around myself. The flowers shuddered in response.

When the canopy shook, I caught glimpses of Rhoan on the other side. He extended a hand towards me like he expected me to step up to him so I could try again with him. There was an in-between before me, though. I had one more chance to do this on my own.

Where did I want to go?

Ness was having that cookout later. I imagined my oldest friend. Her face appeared as clear as day in my mind. I could see each individual freckle on her olive-tinted skin. So, when I stepped forward, I told myself that she would be on the other side of this door.

The scar at my throat tingled. The image of Ness in my mind changed. I saw her face twisted with despair as she watched in horror while Alvin shoved me to my knees. The lawn was burned into my mind. I could still feel the freshly cut grass on my bare skin.

Magic rippled over me. I tumbled forward and landed on my knees. Crumpling forward, my open palms met grass—though it was long overgrown now. I knew what I would see when I lifted my head, but I wasn’t ready. My blood thundered in my ears. The scar on my throat burned fiercely.

*Rhoan*

THE VEIL of flowers parted for a split second. I caught a glimpse of Cerri’s face and her far-away eyes and knew that

something was wrong. I reached out to grab ahold of her, but she vanished through the in-between before I could touch her.

“Well, that was impressive,” Feri said near my feet.

I gaped down at the little creature. He hadn't seen the warning signs. The ferret saw Cerri successfully step in-between, while I knew that she hadn't gone where she wanted. Bending, I snatched up the little creature and tucked him in my pocket.

I lunged for the doorway and used this lost moment as an in-between. So long as Cerri didn't know where she was, I could tap into the power of that and appear beside her. Instead, I fumbled through into her bedroom.

That meant Cerri already knew where she was. She'd landed somewhere familiar. I snatched up my phone and thanked the fates for such convenient technology. We didn't have anything like this back in the hey-day of the Seelie Court. Now, I could send Cerri a quick message to ask where she was.

However, my princess didn't respond. I tried calling her, but her phone rang from the nightstand beside her bed. My hope sputtered and died. A curse reached my lips. I snatched the device up from her nightstand and shoved it in my pocket. My blood pumped, filling me with a momentum that I had to let out somehow.

If I stopped moving, my beast would rip its way out of me. I had to go, I had to find Cerri.



**N**ot here. Please. Anywhere but here. I never wanted to come back here.

I would have said that my soul trembled, but I didn't have one. This shaky feeling was nothing more than adrenaline and pure fear. No matter how many times I told myself that Alvin was dead and gone, I couldn't escape the horror that I'd endured here.

Cautious, I lifted my gaze ever so slightly. My sight roved over the lawn but never reached the house ahead of me. The grass was darker in some areas—from my own blood, perhaps.

The feeling of hands digging into my arms and shoulders returned. I fell forward, my cheek slamming into the ground. A whimper escaped me when I felt the pointed tip of a claw pierce my skin all over again. Warmth spilled over my skin.

I thought I was going to die that day.

That could have been the end of everything, and I wouldn't have been able to stop him. Why couldn't my arcana have revealed itself that day? Why did it have to wait so long? I'd been helpless, weak as a mortal. Alvin could have done *anything*.

I could remember the pain—the sensation of my rib snapping when he kicked me, the dull throb of my bones crying as he fractured them all. The suffering had seemed endless, and there'd been no one to save me.

While Ness had Ryder, I'd been all on my own. Alvin had used that against me. He'd hunted me down and dragged me out of my own home.

A scream built in my throat. My past came roaring back. I couldn't escape the way it rushed over my body. Everything hurt all at once. I shook from the force of it.

Someone cursed softly and dropped beside me. Strong arms pulled me into their embrace. The smell of Rhoan filled my senses. I exhaled, the memory rushing away from me like it couldn't get past Rhoan's arms.

I clung to him while my breath shuddered. My whole body shook. While I wished he didn't have to see this, there was no escaping it.

Finally safe, I lifted my gaze and glared at the white-paneled house ahead of us. It was no longer the nightmare I remembered. It'd burned down a while back. There was nothing more than the bones of what could have been a house rising out of ashes.

"I was so worried," Rhoan said into my hair as he held me.

Pulling in a shaky breath, I asked, "How did you find me?"

He huffed a laugh, though the sound was strained. "I accessed your contacts and called your friends. You're all so close, I figured they would know. All I had to do was explain the look on your face for Vanessa to tell me where I could find you.

"So, this is where it happened?"

"Yes," I ground out.

Rhoan's fingers traced the scar on my neck. The burning sensation vanished, replaced by the warmth of his touch. I exhaled and leaned into him.

"You're not the same person you were back then," he told me.

The man didn't promise me that he would be there. I think he was realizing that he wasn't the most reliable man. Instead, he went in another direction.

“There’s no way that monster would be able to hurt you like that anymore. Were he alive, you would overpower him easily. You’ve come into so much power, and you don’t even realize it. *Look.*”

I was looking, I didn’t...A slow and steady growth had overtaken the ruins of Alvin’s old manor. Greenery climbed over the crumbling frame and tore it down. I flinched at the echo of charred wood hitting the ground.

Rhoan tightened his grip on me and ran a hand along my arm. I felt it then. My arcana leaked out of me and sank into the ground, turning it a bright emerald green. Where my blood had stained the grass, a red-leafed tree sprang to life. It climbed high and reached broad branches towards the sun above.

Before my eyes, the place that’d haunted me turned into a brilliant garden. Vines and bushes unleashed bright blossoms with curling petals. The smell of new life drifted on the air, making me sneeze.

I sighed and felt the tension bleed out of my body. Still, I clenched my fists as fury took place of my fear. The vines tightened around the structure. They crushed what was left until it all came raining down. A cloud of ash erupted, but a swift wind swept through and cleared it all away so that there was only green left.

“It’s all over,” I repeated.

Rhoan made a sound of pride. “That’s my princess.”

My heart tripped over itself. I froze as my body reacted with a flush of warmth and wetness. For a moment, I gaped at myself and the simplicity of the statement that’d drawn such a dramatic response out of me.

I wanted to twist in Rhoan’s arms and push him to the ground before climbing atop him. I wanted to see what kind of garden would spring up around us when I rode him. Instead, I took those thoughts and shoved them away. There was no room for such foolish behavior when he was a knight, and I was his would-be queen.

If I got attached to him and he to me, then it would go up in flames when he learned what I planned to do.

*Rhoan*

STANDING, I extended a hand down to help Cerri back onto her feet. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the wiggling leaves of a blood-red tree. The sight of it made my beast snarl possessively. There was nothing we could do about it. The leaves smelled of Cerri's blood, but that was long past.

I hadn't been in her life back then.

I was here now, and all I could do was uphold the promise I'd made early on. No one was allowed to hurt her ever again. I would hold her close and keep her...

If only I could *keep* her. Cerri amazed me. She was strong and determined and yet so soft. When I held her and she leaned into me, my beast had surged forward with a fierce need. The creature had claimed her in ways that I never could. Though Cerri meant everything to me, I needed to remind the beast that there were rules in the way.

Rules that we could not break.

Should I break my vow, I would lose everything.

I couldn't let her know that, though. If she knew what I had inside me and how it could consume me, then she would never trust me. Our trust was already in a precarious position because of how I'd failed her in the past. She could never find out.

Cerri had caught a glimpse the other night. When Taliesin sent me back to my princess, he'd failed to take my state into account. I'd stumbled into her apartment with my beast tearing through me in a desperate attempt to claim freedom.

She'd taken one look at me and recognized all the signs. The woman had been raised by a shifter pack. It made sense that she could see that I had a beast in me. However, I would



never let her know what this creature was made from or how it'd gotten placed in me. That was a secret I would take to my grave.

Had Taliesin defeated Faust? Or was the pookah on the loose? If the pookah assassin with a lust for nightmares was still running around, then I was in trouble. I could call in a favor from Delphine and have her take care of him, but I was sure she would have as much of a problem with him as I did.

A pookah's greatest weapon was his opponent's nightmares. Delphine had plenty.

I wanted to talk to her again. If Taliesin could handle Faust and keep him far away, then maybe there was still a chance that I could turn Delphine to our side. However, I couldn't leave Cerri alone. She was going to have to sit in on that conversation again.

I plucked Feri from my vest pocket and held him up. "Do me a favor. Go get Delphine and tell her we need to talk."

Cerri gave me a dark look. I wasn't sure what she thought of my relationship with Delphine, but I wasn't going to correct her. So long as Cerri thought that I had some sort of romance with Del, then that meant there would always be a distance between Cerri and myself.

As much as I hated it, I needed Cerri to see me as a tool and nothing more. Because if she loved me the way I loved her, then we were doomed.



I sulked over my iced pumpkin chai. Elbow on the counter and chin in my hand, I glared at the back of Rhoan's head. Beyond him, Delphine slouched on the bench seat with her arms crossed over her chest. She had a glare painted on her face, too.

When had she gotten free of my cage? How long had it taken her? I needed the answers so I could make adjustments for the next time I needed to cage the feral elf.

“Thank goodness you're not Vi or that woman would have combusted into flames already,” Addie said.

I'd agreed to meet at Bad Moon Café not only because it was a neutral safe zone, but because I knew Addie would be here. Yet, I hadn't asked her a single question.

Instead, I was moping over something I couldn't even have. The way Rhoan held me at Alvin's manor had only solidified the tentative feelings that'd been budding for him. Now they were full blown blossoms—and I couldn't wait for them to wilt.

Maybe then I'd be free of this unrequited desire. I just wanted someone in my life. I was lonely and needed someone around to feel safe. It wasn't about Rhoan. These feelings came from an emptiness in my life.

That was all.

It wasn't like I wanted *Rhoan*.

“Stop it,” Addie hissed, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

Delphine’s eyes flicked over to us. My face heated. I shoved back from the counter, snatched up my pumpkin chai, and turned my back to them. Addie sighed, but I shot her a dirty look for bringing attention to us.

Maybe I should ignore Rhoan and Delphine. It sucked to watch him talk so kindly to someone who’d been trying to kill me merely twenty-four hours ago, but there were things that I needed to ask Addie.

Turning to her, I considered my words carefully. While Addie deserved everything that she’d fought for, I needed to let her know that she’d taken something from me in the process. How did I say that to one of my closest friends?

I twisted my straw in my plastic cup. “Did you feel any repercussions from changing fate?”

Addie tilted her head curiously. She studied me for a long moment.

It was clear that I had an ulterior motive, but I wasn’t going to give it away so quickly. I needed to figure out how to ask this. It seemed like nothing would come out the way I wanted it to.

*Hey, did you realize you would fuck up other lives?*

*Can you help me fix what you messed up?*

It was clear that I had a bitterness lurking inside me that I hadn’t yet resolved. My nightmares and memories were tainting my life. I needed to shake free of them before I became a monster like Beryl. If I let this bitterness consume me, I would become ruthless in my pursuit of safety.

I didn’t want to hurt others. A part of me felt bad for putting Delphine in that cage and leaving her, even if it hadn’t held her all that long in the end. I still wanted to be a better person than Alvin, Bastien, and Beryl.

I refused to follow the path they’d carved for me. I could deviate from it and plot my own way forward so long as I

could get away from this horrible anger lurking inside me.

“I was afraid that I would mess up something,” Addie said softly. She lifted her gaze from the counter and met mine. “Did it hurt you?”

I bit my tongue to keep back the onslaught of mean things floating through my mind. Addie didn’t deserve my anger. I had to temper it so that it wouldn’t burn those around me. However, that meant the vine plant in the front window started to grow out of control. Vines climbed across the glass expanse in search of something to cling onto.

Addie noticed the plant and leaned across the counter to pinch me. I yelped and jumped away from her. Rubbing the red spot on my arm, I pouted. Addie bit back a laugh before the mood sobered again.

“Talk to me,” she pleaded. “I want to help fix things.”

We were old friends. I could trust her and the others. My reluctance to work with them would only hurt me in the long run. I pinched the bridge of my nose. Being the center of attention was new to me. I’d spent so much of my life being an extra in the stories of others that I didn’t want to pull attention to myself.

Historically speaking, pulling attention to myself used to be dangerous. Even now, it was a bit risky, but that was only when Beryl was involved. I could let my friends help me.

Together, Addie and I bent over the counter and prepared a plan to fix the fraying timeline. Our magic worked well together. We’d always been able to help each other. When we put our heads together, magic happened. Perhaps that’s what it was like being the weakest of our group. She and I were fragile, and our magic didn’t really offer a whole lot to our lives—Addie had denied hers and mine had been locked away.

“What are the two of you up to?” Rhoan asked when he approached us. He scratched the back of his head as he scanned the stacks of napkins with scribbled notes. “This looks like some sort of witchery...Is that good? Are you

making a potion to make my balls fall off? Even if I'm not using them, I'd like them attached to my body."

Addie sputtered, laughter spilling out of her. She seemed happier than ever. The once demure and quiet woman had grown into a confidence all her own. Perhaps that's what yelling at gods did for one's self esteem. She'd told us the number of times that she'd put the Norse goddess Hel in her place.

I yearned for that kind of confidence. I could fake it, but inside I was still shaking in fear. Every corner held an enemy I couldn't see. Every step led me closer to danger.

"We're brainstorming ways to fix what's happening to me," I explained, filling Rhoan in on Addie's power set so that he would stop worrying about his balls.

I mean...what was he even thinking? Why would I go after his balls like that?

Then I saw the woman lingering behind him. Delphine stood a little too close to Rhoan for my comfort. I pulled a vine from the plant hanging in the front window, had it crawl low behind the front counter, and reach around behind Delphine to grab her by the middle and yank her away from Rhoan.

Delphine made no noise when she stumbled back, but a dark glare sparked in her eyes. I flashed her a quick smile. When her attention flicked between Rhoan and myself, her lips parted with recognition. She shook her head, rounded Rhoan, and grabbed my arm so she could drag me outside.

I tried to dig in my heels, but the woman was abnormally strong. I couldn't get away from her until she released me with a shove outside. The ice in my chai rattled as I looked at her aghast.

She planted her hands on her hips and shook her head. "No."

Both confused and taken aback, I fumbled for the right response. The drink in my hand turned slick in the last heat of

the summer. I tightened my grip on it and nearly crumpled the plastic cup in the process.

“You cannot have him like that,” Delphine said.

I scowled. “You think I don’t know that? He told me all about his vow. I’m not going to ask him to break it.”

“That’s...” Delphine paused, studying me like she was searching for some sort of information on my face. Finally, she held up both hands, palms out. “You know what? Fine. I don’t want to get in the middle of this. It’s bad enough that Rho has convinced me to help your stupid ass.”

*She calls him by pet names?*

Fury scorched the garden inside me. My arcana turned into a searing desert sun laying waste to everything in its path. The cup in my hand crinkled again as I clenched my fists.

Why was I so jealous? It made no sense. I couldn’t have Rhoan. Delphine couldn’t have him either. No one could. That was the whole point of his vow. He’d promised himself to eternal servitude—to my forthcoming crown, but I was willing to ignore that point for now.

I shook my head and backed up. “I have a cookout to go to.”

Shoving my way past Delphine, I went inside to grab Rhoan so we could head out. All the while, Delphine watched me with a knowing look. What she knew, I had no idea.

Addie and I agreed to meet up at the cookout after the café was closed up for the day. There, with Ness and Vi at our sides, we would try to put the threads of fate back together in a way that worked for everyone.

I just had to survive until then. That should have been easy considering the fact that we’d brought Beryl’s assassin to our side.

*Rhoan*

I DIDN'T LIKE what Delphine had to say. Our chances were looking bleaker by the moment. She'd overheard quite a bit while visiting Beryl to take the contract on Cerri. Beryl had no intention of preparing for a fight, which meant that she didn't think it would ever come to a full-on battle.

I wondered just what the Unseelie Queen had up her sleeve. The fact that she didn't think she would have to fight meant that there was something else going on behind the scenes that made her think she had this won already.

We had allies on our side now. Taliesin had sent a message to tell me he was somewhere safe, though he hadn't bothered to tell me whether or not Faust had been dealt with. Delphine had reluctantly agreed to work for us for the time being—that was until my money ran out.

Okay, so our allies weren't the best. Maybe Beryl had a point. Taliesin had proven himself to be unreliable in the past. Delphine would only stay so long as I could pay her. This made me hope that Cerri's friends were dedicated. Even if they weren't as capable as Tal or Del, there was still a chance that their loyalty to Cerri could prove useful.

While Cerri spoke highly of her friends' capabilities, I doubted the objective truth of her statements. How could that be true if Cerri bore so many scars? Where were her friends when Cerri was being hurt? Why hadn't they helped? The only excuse I could think of was that they'd been too weak.

I took Cerri's hand in mind and gave it a reassuring squeeze—though, perhaps the reassurance was only for myself. I needed to know that she was still there and in one piece. Stealing a sidelong glance in her direction as we walked, I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't want to look down and see that there was nothing but a hand and no princess attached to it.

“What's that for?” Cerri asked, taken aback.

I gave her a wry grin and tugged her through an open doorway. We stepped out into the familiar driveway leading up to the Lakesedge Pack hub. The Alpha's wife threw her arms wide and bounded down the steps of the front porch so she



could throw her arms around Cerri, which forced me aside in the process.

I didn't want to let go, but the curly haired woman hugged Cerri fiercely.

And for too long.

"All right," I said, reaching to pry the two of them apart as my heart kicked up nervously.

What if this was a trap? This woman could be a doppelganger. There were fae assassins around every corner. Pretending to be one of Cerri's closest friends would have been an easy way to get close enough to kill. Though the woman's aura remained the same, and she still reeked of canine, I couldn't help but wonder if that was a glamour wrapped around her to further hide the assassin's identity.

"Leave us alone," the woman said in a firm tone.

The words slammed into my skull. I spun on my heel and marched away from the two ladies before realizing what I'd even done. My beast snarled and shoved the magical force out of my body, leaving me in control of myself once more.

When I turned, the woman wore a smug smile. Her aura hadn't changed from the last time I saw her, but this was a power that she'd never exhibited before.

"Ness," Cerri chided, as if this was an everyday occurrence.

"He was looking at me funny!" Ness exclaimed.

Cerri stepped back and buried her face in her hands, which almost smothered her exhausted sigh. Everyone had heard it, so I wasn't too sure why she'd bothered to try hiding it.

Meanwhile, I scanned the shifter woman. Her aura rippled with shades of black and white in an odd way. Most auras were colorful. The only time I saw such darkness in an aura was with those like Faust. This was...still somehow different.

The darkness didn't reek of evil intentions. It simply was, the same way that the light in her aura simply was. This shifter wasn't just a shifter. That much was clear.

I didn't know why I was surprised. Of course, Cerri had an odd set of friends. There was a necromancer among them. Another had blood that could burn through anything because of her demonic lineage. They were an odd bunch, much more capable than I'd wanted to admit.

We weren't alone. We had allies.

But the way Ness stared me down, I could tell that she didn't trust me. She clung to Cerri's arm and pulled my princess along like she didn't want to let Cerri out of sight.

As if danger were lurking out of sight, waiting to strike.

How I wished that weren't true.



I wasn't sure if I was imagining things, but it seemed that Ness was further along than I remembered. That or she'd put on some weight, which wasn't easy for a pregnant shifter. I couldn't even imagine the calories she would have to consume to put on any weight while her beast and child used all that energy.

Had more time passed than I remembered? I hadn't been put under an enchanted sleep like Hel had done to Addie. If that'd happened, Audra would have noticed my missing hours at work and gone on a man hunt to drag her favorite employee back to work.

"Do you think I could ask Audra for help?" I kept my voice low, barely more than a whisper as I helped Ness prepare meat and cheese trays in the kitchen.

She shook her head and ripped a piece of pumpernickel into rough chunks for the dill dip. "She wouldn't help me when people were dying. The most I got out of her was when she chased Alvin away from the café. And that was just to save her café."

Our mysterious boss refused to help out even when the sky was falling on our heads. While she would keep us safe on her territory and find us if we missed too many shifts, she wasn't going to go head-to-head with any force of power in Lakesedge. It was as if she'd made a deal to stay out of the local politics so she could exist here without trouble.

With Ryder now at the head of the Lakesedge Pack, I wondered if Audra had approached him to keep that deal in place. Would she speak to me the same way if I became the local fae queen?

I glanced to Rhoan, who was keeping a soft distance from us while he scanned our surroundings for danger. Would he uphold a treaty with Audra? She meant a lot to me. The woman provided a safe haven for all of us—for Ness, Vi, Addie, and myself. When we had no community, she brought us together.

Ness bumped me with her hip. The big smile on her face warmed my heart.

“I have important news to share with everyone today,” she said.

She wiggled her shoulders and carried the dill dip tray outside before I could ask anything. I sent a wave of magic out behind her to bring more color to the back yard. At first, my arcana met the resistance of the witch’s wards, but my power was unthreatening. I pushed under the wards and suffused the plant roots with life so that everything bloomed anew.

Ness paused and gaped in awe at the flowering garden all around her. I couldn’t blame my friend for what happened in the past. We had to move forward and welcome this new chapter of happiness for everyone. I just hoped there was happiness in my future, too.

Rhoan sidled up beside me and leaned in. “What the Hell is she?”

His sudden appearance didn’t make me flinch, much to my surprise. After today, I thought I would jump at every small sound. Rhoan’s presence wrapped around me and set my jumpy nerves at ease.

“Ness is a Barghest. She’s the Black Hound of Judgement. They’re born into Packs with cruel Alphas to cast judgement and bring about an era of peace.” I watched Ness set down the tray and approach her husband for a kiss. “We had a prophecy of her arrival, and it set Alvin on a witchhunt. When she

shifted into a hound and not a wolf, Alvin started to target her. Kind of set off that whole chain of events.”

Rhoan’s upper lip curled. “I don’t like her arcana. It’s cruel.”

I gave a halfhearted shrug. “Then don’t get on her bad side. She’s a good person.”

And I meant it. Ness never wanted me to get in the middle of her war. She didn’t throw me at Alvin. He’d hunted me down all on his own.

Rhoan kept an eye on my best friend..

My mom took the dill dip tray from Ness and touched Ness’s shoulder after setting it on the table. The two stood off to the side, chatting. I wanted to run up to my mom and throw my arms around her, but I was afraid I wouldn’t find the solace I craved in her embrace. That wasn’t the woman who’d given birth to me, and the truth hammered itself against the inside of my skull now.

The backyard filled with shifters. Dad was among them. He raised his beer and cheered when Vi won cornhole. They hoisted Vi high while she waved a bottle of tequila in the air. Their cheer was raucous and filled with so much joy. I marveled at how lively the pack had become and how they’d accepted our little family into the fold.

But then I caught the look etched into Rhoan’s face. He watched with grief darkening his eyes. The lines of his face were deeper than ever. I could almost see memories swirling in the depths of those eyes, dragging him back to a time when the Seelie Court must have been like this.

I touched his arm. “We’ll fix it,” I promised.

There was no way that he could make me stay, but I did want to help him take back his home. That was the least I could do.

While I studied Rhoan’s face, I didn’t notice the little fae flying down from the dark leaves of the surrounding trees. Instead, I heard someone stumble away from the crowd and vomit in the bushes.

I tilted my head. We'd only been here for a short while. The party had barely begun. Were people pre-gaming before a Pack cookout? It seemed a little silly.

The bottle in Vi's hand wasn't the cube-shaped tequila bottle. It was a long wine bottle with glimmering liquid inside. I grabbed Rhoan's arm. My heart stuttered and stopped altogether. His attention went to Vi while I slowly twisted to peer at the tables.

Little cackling fae with ashen wings cackled before shoving off from the tables now laden with fae fruit. A half-eaten golden apple rolled off the table and hit the ground with a sickening splat.

*No. No, this wasn't allowed. Beryl wouldn't...She couldn't!*

But the Unseelie Queen had, in fact, swapped the party's food with fae fruits and wine. The red-cheeked faces of the pack were all marked with glimmering eyes as they tripped over themselves in a drunken stupor.

"What's going on?" Ness asked beside me.

My heart leapt into my throat. My gaze dropped to the pear in her hand. It was whole—she hadn't yet taken a bite. I had time to slap it out of her grasp. She gasped, clearly offended until she looked down and realized what she'd been holding.

Magic rippled in the air. A kind of glamour had been placed on the fruit to disguise it. That was why I saw Vi's bottle as a tequila bottle at first. The magic couldn't hold me, though. It wasn't strong enough.

Spinning, I turned to Rhoan. "We need to stop anyone from eating anything else."

My best friend was pregnant. Had she eaten any of the fruit...Ryder would have never forgiven me. I never meant to bring this fight here of all places. I'd thought we were safe. Beryl shouldn't have gone this far.

His lips twisted to the side. "I can knock them all out, but I don't think that's what you really want."

Past Rhoan, I could see my dad. He stumbled, swaying on his feet. A broad smile painted his rosy tinted face. The gleam of fae magic illuminated his eyes. My heart clenched with anger. When he lifted a hand in the air to capture something that wasn't there, I knew that the wine was had conjured hallucinations.

When Mom stumbled out of the house with her hands close to her chest, I cocked my head curiously. She extended her arms and held a metal wire up to the light. I watched the sun reveal the fae magic in her eyes, too. Mom pushed the metal wire towards Dad right as I realized what she had.

Rhoan followed my gaze. Between one step and the next, he appeared between my parents and snatched the *silver* wire from Mom's hand before she could press it into Dad's cheek. Rhoan reappeared beside me.

In the trees, the small fae responsible for swapping our food cackled at us. There was another rustle of something larger, perhaps the fae that'd cast the glamour. I pointed Rhoan in that direction and told him to deal with the intruders.

He gave a curt nod before snapping out his hand. A ball of flame appeared in his palm. I yelped and flung myself in front of him.

"You can't set the woods on fire!" I gaped at him.

He grumbled under his breath, squashed the fireball with his fist, and flicked out his other hand. In it, a sword appeared. The slick metal caught the light and flashed across my face, making me grimace.

Rhoan whispered a soft apology, cupped the back of my head to place a soft kiss on my forehead, and lunged past me into the trees. I stood there, stunned by the show of protective affection. After a heartbeat, I was able to swallow it back down and turn towards the gaggle of drunken shifters...and a drunk anti-christ.

Vi stumbled up towards me with a big smile on her face. Heat radiated off her. It warmed the air and made it ripple. The



grass curled and burned beneath every step she took. I scowled at it and raised my arcana from the ground beneath us.

I pulled thick tree roots from the ground and wrapped them around the fumbling bodies so that I could lift them from the ground. While most of the pack shouted in surprise all at once, I knew that Vi would be a bigger problem.

Ness hadn't eaten the fruit. So, I twisted and found her in Ryder's arms. Ness tried to push him away, but the man held her tight and turned so that his body shielded her from what was going on. He should have been protecting his pack, but his pregnant wife took precedence—I couldn't say I blamed him, but Ness would later. She was going to rip him a new asshole.

“Vi, sweetie,” Morgan said softly.

The dark-haired dragon shifter approached his mate with caution. The man kept his distance though. Even he knew just how dangerous Vi could be while drunk on fae wine. Perhaps not from experience, but just because Vi set things on fire while completely sober.

Flames began to lick the ground at the edge of her heat aura. They curled higher and reached towards the tables covered in food. The stupid cornhole panels burst into flames, sending wisps of smoke curling into the air.

“Damn it, you little demon,” Morgan grumbled as he stamped out a small fire at his feet.

Vi chuckled and lurched towards him with her arms open. Morgan seemed pained when he leapt away from her. I got it, though. He wanted to love and comfort his mate, but she would incinerate him with one touch.

“Hey!” Rhoan shouted from behind us.

A hot fireball raced past my face and slammed into Vi's. She recoiled from the impact. Behind her, the trapped Pack members cheered as if this were a pay-per-view fight. I cursed under my breath. There had to be a way to cleanse their bodies of the fruit and wine.

There had to be...

Ryder had gotten over it, but I could remember how hard it was for him after Beryl tricked him into consuming fae food. She'd done her best to control him with it, and it'd taken days to get it out of his system.

Unfortunately, Vi took precedence. Morgan snarled at Rhoan for throwing a fireball in Vi's face, but even I knew that was like throwing a pillow at her. It barely even fazed the drunk demi-angel. She staggered and giggled like it'd tickled.

When she lurched in my direction as if she expected me to catch her, Rhoan appeared at my side and swept me out of the way. I raised a soft grass bed to catch her, but she burned through it. Flames erupted around her.

"Ness!" I shouted over Rhoan's shoulder. "Tell her to turn it off!"

Ryder growled at me, but my request wouldn't put Ness in harm's way. His dragon was simply being over-protective. I understood, but it wasn't helping in this situation. What we needed was Ness's arcana.

"Vi isn't going to lash out! Your mate will stay safe," I called out. To Ness, I said, "Just tell her to go to sleep."

Ness did exactly what I asked. A smile curled over Vi's face. She folded her hands beneath her head and curled up like a cat for a nap in the sun. The ground continued to smolder around her for a little while, but it slowly faded until she was only slightly too warm to the touch.

Morgan put a hand on his mate and breathed a sigh of relief...before turning his anger towards me. Rhoan stepped between us and summoned his blade again. This time, it was slick with the blood of fae that he hadn't had a chance to clean off. Right before my eyes, the blood disintegrated and turned to dust on the wind.

Ryder looked at me with the rage of betrayal twisting his features, too. Ness grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him back, but the damage had already been done.

"I didn't do this! I'm not the one who swapped the foods. I would never hurt my friends like that." My heart thundered

behind my sternum.

Silence stretched between us all. It was interrupted by the stray giggle from the ensnared shifters still hanging from my root traps. They would need to detox soon. I could make a potion that would help, but only if my friends and Pack trusted me.

“Cerri handled this like a true queen,” Rhoan declared. “She saw danger and acted in everyone’s best interest. Hardly anyone was harmed. You should be thankful.”

I grabbed the back of his vest and tugged as if that might stop him. It wouldn’t. He rolled his shoulders back in preparation for a fight, like everyone was going to dogpile him. It certainly felt like it.

I bowed my head and turned, defeated.

Beryl wanted to take everything from me, and she’d succeeded. While we’d turned her right-hand man and her favorite assassin away from her, she’d wasted no time in turning the tables on me.

Vi slept. Addie wasn’t here. And Ness argued loudly with her husband. While I could tell that Ness wasn’t having any of Ryder’s complaints, I also knew he was speaking from a dark place, a place that Beryl had dragged him to without his consent. I should have been smarter.

Now that I was a fae that’d brought fae food and wine close to his family and Pack, Ryder would never trust me again. Like that, Beryl had used her past with Ryder to completely undermine my alliance with the Lakesedge Pack.

Rhoan turned and caught me before I could leave. He gently tugged me close and whispered, “You did everything perfectly. All these lives were saved because of you and your quick thinking. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

At first, I didn’t see what he meant. My gaze fell to the sleeping antichrist on the ground. The fae wine had completely undone her control. Though Vi had put in a lot of work to manage her fire—and the brilliant searing light that it’d

become in recent months—the magical wine had stolen all of her inhibitions and left her without any walls at all.

She could have easily destroyed the house and hurt several Pack members had this gone unchecked. I thought it a stroke of luck that I'd noticed the bottle in Vi's hands, however I wasn't so sure anymore.

I shook my head. "This is what Beryl wanted. She used a cheap glamour to cause chaos and sow mistrust. She never meant for anyone to get hurt, only to drive me out of my home."

Home. The Pack had always been my home, even when Alvin stood at the head of it. Though he'd been an asshole, the others had my back. They'd kept me safe and out of Alvin's sight. Ness had been there for me when Alvin had caught me and used me as a pawn.

Now, Beryl had taken that from me.

"You know that's bullshit!" Ness stomped her foot.

Everyone, even the fae-drunk Pack shifters, fell silent. All eyes turned on the furious Barghest. Thunder crackled overhead. Lightning slammed into the ground at her feet. Ryder didn't flinch. Was he used to his wife's electrical fury? I mean, he was a storm dragon. The man could handle it.

"I will not allow that wench to get her way again," Ness growled at her mate.

Ryder's sigh turned into a nasty snarl. He wouldn't make that kind of sound at his wife, would he?

"Best run while you can," Morgan said, voice monotone while he hoisted his own sleeping mate from the ground.

I sensed that he didn't want to help me, but he also knew that the argument between his brother and sister-in-law might get a bit explosive. Instead of retreating completely like Rhoan wanted to do when he touched my arm, I tugged my fae warrior into the kitchen so we could start working on a fae-food-detox potion.

Rhoan posted up near the window while I worked. I'd never made anything like this, though I figured I could treat it like a poison. I'd made enough antidotes to fight Delphine's poison lately. It had to work the same way.

But my confidence wavered when I placed my hand over the pot on the stove and felt the weakness of my potion. It was lacking something. I wasn't sure what I needed—not yet, at least. I ran out to grab a bit of the fae food and wine, but even that couldn't provide what I needed. I'd thought that it could work the same way Rhoan's hangover shot worked.

That wasn't quite right, though. I could spend all day in here, trying to figure out the right composition. I didn't have the time, though. I wanted my friends to see that I was on their side.

“What do I need?” I slammed the countertop.

Everything jumped and rattled. When nothing fell over, I snatched up the nearest spice bottle and pulled my hand back to throw it. With a frustrated growl in my throat, I forced myself to set it back down.

Nothing was working. My Pack family was suffering.

Rhoan didn't jump. He didn't even flinch. I assumed he was used to loud sounds at the bar...and perhaps in war.

In my head, I could imagine Beryl laughing at me. She knew something I didn't. In that moment, I realized what she wanted. Beryl was holding all the secrets.

She wanted me to visit her.

I glanced over my shoulder at Rhoan still standing in the window. He didn't even look back at me. How was I going to escape? The minute I tried to walk in-between, he would grab me. I would need to be sneaky about this.

My friends and family needed me to find the missing ingredient to this potion. Beryl had formulated the attack so that I would have to come crawling to her for the last piece for my antidote. It was an obvious trap, of course.

But when I looked out the window beside Rhoan, I could see my parents hanging from the root tethers. Their faces were slack while the fae wine dragged them down into a dreamlike state. The hangover would be immense if I couldn't fix this. They would eschew human food and try to find any way to get more fae wine.

It would slowly destroy them from the inside out. They would waste away.

Not if I had anything to say about it. As I turned, my braid swung out and smacked Rhoan—wait, no. It didn't. It went right through him.

Jaw nearly hitting the floor, I swiped at the apparition of Rhoan. He'd left a fake with me!

Well, sneaking away would be a lot easier than I thought.

### *Rhoan*

CERRI DIDN'T KNOW IT, but I left a glamoured copy of myself in the kitchen. I left the copy standing at the kitchen window with his fingers between the blinds so he could peer outside at the potential fight going down in the backyard. She was busy, tearing open the cabinets in search of potion ingredients anyway.

The fae that'd attacked and ruined the Pack cookout had left no trace. While that was largely because their bodies turned to dust upon their death, that left me with nothing to throw at the Alpha's feet other than myself.

Quiet as I could, I went outside. The dark clouds in the sky gathered over the angry couple still fervently arguing under their breath. Occasionally, lightning slammed into the ground near them. Neither flinched, which told me exactly what kind of people they were.

This was the couple that'd killed the previous Pack Alpha, the one that'd hurt Cerri. I owed them for what they'd done,

even if they'd killed him to keep the Pack safe. They'd protected my princess in the process.

So, regardless of the electrical storm, I dropped to my knees before the couple and bowed my head in apology. It didn't feel great. I only wanted to do this for Cerri. She was the only one who deserved me on my knees, but I knew that this would help my princess in the long run.

The devastation on Cerri's face had been too much for me to bear. One look at the tremble of her lower lip and my resolve slammed into place. There was no way that I would let Beryl win this battle.

"If blame should be placed on anyone, it should be me," I said to the ground. I lifted my head and met the Alpha's gaze, a bold move on my part considering that it would have been an open challenge were I a shifter. "I have the ability to sense the auras of those nearby, and the fae went unnoticed even by me. I should have been more aware. Now your pack has to suffer because of my failing."

Damn, that hurt to say. I'd failed my own court so long ago. They were all but gone because I hadn't been able to help them the day Beryl took over. It was happening all over again. Beryl had gotten the best of me. The Unseelie Queen proved that I was not the knight that I needed to be. I fell short time and time again.

The storm dragon, Ryder, sighed and ran a hand through his hair as he turned his gaze towards the heavens.

This was it. He would strike me with a divine bolt as proper punishment, like a child of Zeus or some shit.

*Even my inner monologue was starting to sound human. I'd spent too much time drinking among them.*

"Get off your knees, damn it," the dragon man grumbled.

He extended a hand down to help me up. Taken aback, I gave him a questioning look. Of course, I was having trouble trusting. These were Cerri's friends, but this man had turned his back on her in the blink of an eye.

His wife, however, was another story. She still stared daggers at him. When she jammed a finger into his shoulder, she hit him so hard I thought her finger would go right through skin and flesh.

“I didn’t let you run me through so we could abandon our Pack members,” she snapped.

That sentence brought a whole slew of questions that I wasn’t sure I wanted to ask right here and now. Maybe I would ask Cerri later, once we were far away from this squabbling couple.

Ryder’s brow flattened. “Cerri is fa—”

“She’s part of the pack!” Ness howled.

Ryder crossed his arms over his chest.

I saw what was happening. Licking my lips, I prepared myself to jump into the middle of this. “You had an interaction with Queen Beryl, from what I understand. Correct? It left a poison in your heart that you have not yet been able to shake. While I apologize for what you’ve endured, please understand that we’re trying to defeat her so that she may never hurt another soul the way she’s hurt you.”

“I know you’re not working for her.” Ryder gestured to the party and his suspended Packmates. “What I can’t forgive is how you brought your battle into my home.”

“She didn’t do that on purpose, and you know it,” Ness hissed. She put her hands on her hips and stepped around to stand beside me.

All the while, my back was turned. I couldn’t see Cerri working in the kitchen. I’d assumed that since she wanted me with her at all times that she wouldn’t run off. That was my first mistake. I should have known the women in this friend group would have bold and stupid ideas.

Feri hopped into view below me. He stood on his back legs and waved his arms to get my attention. I’d had him watching over Cerri. The fact that he was here and not in the kitchen with her should have been enough to tell me that she’d gone and done something stupid.



“The princess!” he cried out.

Everyone stopped talking and looked down at the furry familiar on the ground.

“The princess has had a lapse in judgement and left the premises!” He clutched the sides of his head as he shook it. “I watched her walk in-between and disappear. Where she went, I do not know, though I worry about the possibilities.”

My stomach dropped. Every time I lost Cerri, she tried to visit Beryl.



This was dumb. I knew better, but here I was, still marching my way through Beryl's restaurant with purpose in my step. My breath trembled and there were nervous butterflies in the pit of my gut, but I had to do this. My determination remained steady, as did my arcana.

The only plants inside the restaurant were the rose buds placed on each table. When my arcana met the little flowers, I felt a twinge of shadowy magic. With a wave of my hand, I cast sunlight over the shadows and shoved them away so I could take over the roses and turned them into all-consuming vines that smothered the tables.

Patrons screamed and leapt back from their tables. While chaos erupted upstairs, I found the door that led down into Beryl's underground court. My feet knew the way like I'd been here before even though I'd never set foot near Beryl's overpriced restaurant.

This was the kind of place that flaunted tiny plates and expensive ingredients as if that meant anything. It was the antithesis of my style. I wanted to fill plates and leave my patrons brimming with contented joy rather than with a starving emptiness.

But this restaurant used to belong to my parents. The Seelie Court had existed here, too. It wasn't like Beryl had built this up around herself. She'd snuck in like a foreign bird overtaking another nest to make it her own. That's how my feet knew the way down into Beryl's dark court.

This deep into the earth, I couldn't smell the dirt or even the nearby lake. Instead, the smell of blood permeated my senses. Cold rushed over my skin and chased away the warmth of my sunny arcana. For a moment, I paused and gasped for air like it'd been forced out of me.

My arcana came back, but slowly. I gripped the railing and wondered if this would be a good idea. There was no going back. I could walk in-between, using each step down as a moment between. But if I did, then nothing would ever stop.

Beryl would continue to harass my friends. She would continue to hunt me. This needed to end now. I would give her what she wanted today, but I would make it insanely hard for her. I would put up the fight of a lifetime, even with my timeline horrendously split.

The moment that I realized the version of Rhoan standing in the kitchen with me was a glamour, I'd sent a quick text off to Addie. I warned her that I was going to do something stupid and that I needed her to give my fate threads the Duct Tape treatment. If she could hold them together for a short while, then there was a chance that I would survive this.

Addie hadn't asked questions. We were all a little foolhardy. If one jumped, then the others would follow. When I'd left, Ness had still been defending me. I had more people on my side than I'd wanted to believe. My friends were like sisters to me. They were the family that I never got to have, and they would have my back no matter what stupid stunt I pulled.

Right when I should have reached the bottom of the staircase and stepped into Beryl's court, the scenery changed. Magic rippled over my skin, but it wasn't beryl's flavor of Unseelie magic. This felt more familiar.

I stepped into a hedge maze with tall, green walls on either side of me. I scowled up at the hedges and the sliver of sky above.

"What the heck?" I asked under my breath.

No one answered.

I guess I hadn't been expecting an answer, but disappointment still made my stomach heavy. I'd wanted someone here, someone to guide me forward. There was no golden thread here. There wasn't even an exit.

When I turned, the staircase was gone. There was no hint of where I'd come from at all. I groaned and faced forward. Though my feet seemed to weigh more than a ton of bricks, I still pushed forward.

The hedges slowly changed. Their green foliage glimmered like emeralds. Tiny flowers blossomed on the surface while sharp thorns wounds into tight knots underneath. I reached out and grazed the rim of a flower only to jerk back when something pierced my skin.

Thumb in my mouth, I glared at the savage landscape. It shook at me in warning.

"Don't be such a prick," I snapped.

The hedge seemed to laugh at my pun. Could I make friends with the plant-life around me? I reached out with my arcana only to have it kicked back at me. I recoiled.

"All right. Fine then," I grumbled before moving on.

*Rhoan*

"THAT LITTLE—" I cut myself off before I said something offensive about my princess.

Ness covered her mouth and laughed, but the corners of her eyes soon pinched with worry as the reality of the situation settled in. Together, the three of us and Feri stood in the kitchen where Cerri *should* have been.

But she wasn't anywhere to be found. The woman had taken off, using the very trick that I'd taught her so she could throw herself at Beryl's feet. What had she been thinking? There was no way that Cerri stood to gain anything from a head-to-head battle this early.

We needed more allies, more plans, more everything!

Glancing to Ryder and Ness, I quickly crossed them off my potential ally list. This wasn't out of spite or anger. I'd learned that Ness was pregnant. Even if she wanted to help her oldest friend, there was no way that Ryder would let her get involved. I was inclined to agree with the Pack Alpha for once.

That meant I needed to find the other allies on my side. Cerri's friends were out of commission. One was pregnant. One was sleeping off the drunken stupor of fae wine, and the last one knew too much about what lurked inside me.

I needed to reach Taliesin, though I didn't know if he'd healed enough to help me. Del wouldn't do it unless I offered her more money, which I definitely didn't have.

Running both hands down my face, I steeled myself for what was to come. I pulled on the magic that allowed me to step in-between and felt my beast stir with concern for Cerri.

*We'll get our princess back. I promise. Or we'll die trying.*

I no longer cared if my beast ripped its way out of me. If I had to rely on the creature to save Cerri, then I would...I just hoped Faust wouldn't be there. That was the last thing I needed.



No matter how long I circled this obnoxious hedgemaze, the sun above didn't budge an inch. It felt like it'd been hours...no, *days*. I knew time moved oddly in the fae realms. Had I been pulled into one?

Okay, I knew that absolutely made sense. What else could this be? No one could blame me for being a little slow on the uptake. It'd been a long day and my reserves were running out. My skin was stretched tight under the constant light of the sun. Freckles had cropped up along my shoulders and along my collarbones.

The deeper I went, the eerier the landscape became. The sun took on an awful orange hue. Small cages were caught deep in the thorny bramble of the hedges. When I peered deep into the bramble, I could see tiny sleeping bodies. These weren't like the pixies I'd met in the tiny park back in Syracuse.

These were people, shrunken down to fit in the little cages. Though they slept, their faces were contorted with horror and pain like they were trapped in nightmares.

I lifted my head and peered forward. Above the hedges, I could see the crumbling peak of a castle ahead. My breath hitched. Memory tried to crawl its way out of the depths of my mind, but there were too many magical barriers. It banged against the inside of my skull in a desperate plea to escape. I couldn't let it out, though.

Not on my own.



I had to keep pushing forward, even if this was a trap. The thought had crossed my mind more than once. I knew that this had to be Beryl's work. It wasn't like the gateways into fae realms would just magically open up for me. That's not how this worked. Fae magic was all about intention.

I needed belief for the magic to answer to me. Right now, all I had were questions.

"Are you going to trap me here with the rest of my biological parents' court?" I dragged my fingers along the hedges.

This time, they didn't try to bite me. This close to the center of the maze, the hedges seemed to be quaking in fear. I felt some of them try to reach out to me like hands reaching for help. I couldn't give them what they wanted.

I was nothing more than a fool who'd walked right into a trap.

Shaking myself, I wondered where that thought had come from. Fear tried to crawl out of the pit of my stomach, but I was tired of cowering. I'd survived Alvin and Bastien already. Fear wasn't going to have any hold over me anymore.

There was something in the air. It was the same force causing the sleeping fae to have nightmares in their magical slumber. The magic tried to take ahold of me, but I threw my arcana out. I reached into the sky and tried something new.

While my arcana always felt like sunlight, I'd never considered manipulating the sun with it. This wasn't the mortal world, so I figured magic might work differently here. Instead of summoning plants that might quake in fear like the others, I reached for whatever was making the sun orange.

When my arcana grabbed ahold of something tangible, I almost leapt in triumph. I shoved and pulled, but the force refused to budge. That's when I dug in my heels and wrapped steadying vines around my calves and thighs. They held me in place while I put everything I had into moving that force.

Finally, after a layer of sweat beaded my forehead and my lungs burned with effort like I'd been physically pushing a

boulder uphill for hours, the force slid out of the way and fresh sunlight shone over head.

A glow washed over the maze, but it didn't wake the sleeping fae. I was thankful if only because I didn't know how to free them yet. I didn't want them to be trapped in a waking nightmare even if they were already in a sleeping one.

Guilt turned into a stone in the pit of my stomach. I looked around, taking in everything that was supposed to be mine. I could already tell, even without the unlocked memory, that this was my parents' court. This was the home they'd desperately tried to defend and the people they'd wanted to save.

They were trapped here in this cursed existence.

"Look at what your parents left behind," Beryl said, suddenly appearing beside me.

She towered over me. Her spine bent forward, making her even more inhuman with her too long limbs and fingers that seemed to have too many knuckles. She was just *too much*.

She turned her gleaming red eyes towards me. Her slick, blood-colored lips split into a smug grin that I wanted to slap off her face.

Yeah, that would end great. Bitch-slapping an evil fae queen would absolutely backfire right about now. But that didn't stop the urge from gripping me like an addiction I hadn't given into in months.

"This isn't mine," I said, though my heart wasn't in the argument anymore.

There were people here. It wasn't about the grounds or the castle. I recalled the faces all trapped in moments of suffering. I'd passed so many on the way here. They needed someone to set them free. The longer I hesitated, the longer they were stuck here.

If I didn't do something, then no one would. The Seelie were all waiting for directions from their princess. If I had to play that role to save these people, then I would.

Beryl stepped around behind me. She slid a hand over my chest and made my heart thump in fear. To that, she laughed. The sound almost made my ears bleed. Again, it was just a little *too much*.

“I’ve killed almost every other version of you already,” Beryl crooned in my ear. “Do you want to join the pile of your bodies waiting in the center of the castle?”

My breath hitched. Beryl’s hand slid higher. Her long nails grazed the scar on my throat. A tremble overcame me as memories of Alvin’s brutal hands came flooding back all over again. I thought I’d locked them away for the day, but Beryl brought them out like trained dogs.

I shoved her hand away.

She laughed as if that meant nothing. The Unseelie Queen knew she still had more power. I wondered what she had up her non-existent sleeve.

*Damn, that dress dipped really low and revealed...nothing.*

Beryl was flat-chested today. I could see every bone in her body. She’d donned this visage to intimidate me. She seemed so *other*. The woman wanted to be monstrous.

And she was. Her visage wasn’t the monstrous part of her, though. It was in her cruel intentions, the way she kept my court trapped here like a menagerie of pain that she could peruse any time she wanted.

This was my legacy. These were my people.

I’d failed them by coming here. I realized that now.

Beryl gripped my chin and turned my attention towards her. I stiffened and glared up at the woman towering over me. Though Addie was elsewhere, doing her best to hold my fraying timeline together, I’d failed to keep myself safe. Beryl would end every timeline right here and now.

In my mind’s eye, I could see Beryl dragging my dead body through the maze so she could throw it into a pile with her other trophies. Then the court would be lost forever. No one would dare stand up to the villainous queen. Those who

tried would be strung up the same way she'd hung Taliesin. She would bathe her loyal servants in the blood of her conquests.

I grimaced and squeezed my eyes shut like that would banish the cruel vision inside my own mind. It did nothing. Guilt still weighed heavy in the pit of my stomach—but it sat so close to the garden filled with arcana inside me. Could I turn that shame into power?

Beryl's claws dug into my cheeks while she laughed. To her, she was a spider with the fly trapped in her sticky web. I wasn't ready to let her win, though.



**M**ore beast than man, I rushed down the winding stairs of Beryl's domain. Oily black feathers protruded from the outsides of my forearms. My fingers hooked into black-stained claws. Talons burst out of my steel-toed boots and pierced the metal stairs beneath my feet.

My surroundings bled from one image into another. The dark stairwell vanished, and a familiar kingdom sprawled out around me. The smell of pain filled the air. It reminded me of blood, in a way.

With my beast so close to escaping my body, I could see auras brighter than ever. Every little being danced with brilliant, flickering light. Yet, the last time I'd been here, there'd been a stronger aura smothering the landscape.

Beryl's curse over the Seelie Court no longer hovered in the skies. The sun shone down on the place once more. For a heartbeat, I stood there and stared into the light. Tears of relief filled my eyes. I couldn't afford to linger and let them run down my cheeks.

There was a hedge maze ahead of me. The green walls trembled. Though I didn't want to give my beast any more ground, I had to escape the maze as soon as possible. I could already hear Beryl's triumphant laughter.

*Can we call a truce,* I asked my beast.

The creature growled in response. That would have to be enough. I couldn't waste any more time. I flung open the path

between us and let a little more of the nightmare beast surge through my body.

Great black wings burst free from my back. I lifted off from the ground, leaving behind a rain of oily black feathers. My heart stretched towards Cerri, deep in the maze. From here, I could see the crumbling ruins of her legacy. Her ancestral home, the castle that marked the heart of the Seelie Court, was falling apart. It could come crashing to the ground for all I cared. My concern was for my princess.

The beast gashed its teeth in agreement. It poured Unseelie power into my veins. As badly as I wanted to push it back, I knew that I would need the nightmarish power that the pookah creation could give me. This deal that I'd struck to become stronger would kill me someday, but not before I saved Cerridwen.

### *CERRI*

ANNOYED, I jerked my face out of Beryl's grasp. My lungs trembled and made my breath shallow, but I wasn't going to stand here and let Beryl bully me before killing me. That just sounded doubly annoying.

She narrowed her eyes at me when I met her gaze head-on. Though she let her hand fall back down at her side, I knew that she wanted to hurt me. I could see it in the shake of her entire body. Here, I was, the heir that could take away everything that she'd rightfully stolen, and I was giving her *sass*.

She hated to see it.

A grin stretched across my lips. I fought back the urge to laugh at her. That might be pushing it a bit too far, even if adrenaline was making me overly cocky. While Beryl struggled to contain her wrath, I reached to cradle the heavy lump of guilt in my gut like it was a seedling in need of nurturing.

I poured power into my guilt and turned it into something green and brimming with life. It was no longer the weight of my failure, but a new start to everything that was to come. It made me think of Addie. I acknowledged the death of things long gone so that we could all welcome new growth.

Beryl spoke, but I couldn't hear her. I was sure that she was spouting some sort of rhetoric about how the Seelie were the weaker fae and that only the Unseelie could survive. We no longer had to rely on survival of the fittest. When there was love and community, all could thrive.

I shoved the new seed into the ground as Beryl entertained herself like a proper monologuing villain. Before I could ask the seedling to grow, Beryl thrust her hand into my chest.

Stunned, I looked down at her too-long fingers embedded in my flesh.

Well, I'd royally messed up.

A black monster dropped out of the sky and onto Beryl's head. Her startled cry split the air as she tumbled back, her fingers ripping free of my body. I, too, fell. My back slammed into the ground.

I couldn't see the fight beside me. My stunned stare stayed on the sky while I listened to snarls and grunts. Beneath me, the seed of new growth thumped in time with my stuttering heart.

"Cerri!" Rhoan's monstrous voice roared.

I touched my chest and lifted my fingers to find them coated with blood.

Though I wanted to find my endeavor foolish, I thought of the people back home who still needed an antidote so that the taint of fae food didn't make them waste away. Without the antidote, Ness and Ryder would have to watch over each and every poisoned Pack member to help them through a rough detox. They were two people. They couldn't do everything on their own. They couldn't stand watch over my parents and Vi while keeping an eye on everyone else. It was too much to ask of two people.



I had to get back to them. If I died here, then I wouldn't be able to fulfil the promise I'd made.

Beneath me, the ground rumbled. The hedges shook and stones fell in the distance. My blood trickled into the ground and sank down towards the seed of new growth. When the two touched, the seed exploded. Power unfurled in all directions like the new pink petals of a fresh blossom.

I gasped as that power slammed into my chest. Healing energy coursed through my body and pulled my flesh together.

Before anything else could happen, a dark shape blotted out the sun. I shrieked when feathered arms wrapped around me and lifted me high into the sky. The familiar smell of leather and whisky told me who'd grabbed me, but my eyes refused to believe.

Together, the monster that smelled like Rhoan and I careened towards the crumbling castle at the center of the hedge maze. The monster pulled his wings into his body and sent us tumbling through an open window. We hit the floor and rolled across it. The monstrous man cradled me in his arms. He kept a taloned hand on the back of my head so that I wouldn't crack my skull.

This had to be Rhoan.

Here was the beast he'd tried so hard to hide from me the night that he'd saved Taliesin. This was the reason that he hid his true self from me.

Rhoan braced himself above me and looked down to study my chest. At first, my face burned red-hot. *Now was not the time*—Rhoan lifted my shirt and cocked his head at the healed wounds. He wasn't checking me out. The man had been prepared to tend wounds.

"I watched her hurt you," Rhoan said, softly. He lifted his angered gaze to meet mine. "How could you just stand there and let her attack you like that? It was like you weren't even paying attention to her. I tried to reach you, but I...I was..."

I cupped his face in my hands and stared into his glowing beast eyes. His pupils had slitted, and his irises were bright

with a myriad of colors dancing over a deep darkness. Blots of black speckled his cheeks before turning into feathers at the edge of his jaw. Even his ears were longer.

This was what he'd been trying to hide from me. I ran my thumb along his lip and felt the sharp fangs beneath. Worry pinched the corners of his bright eyes when he pulled away from my touch.

*Fuck it, I thought.*

I wanted Rhoan to know that I felt the same about this form as I did about his fae body. There was only one way I could think of showing him.

I yanked him close and pressed my lips to his. Once more, I expected him to pull away and remind me of his vow. This time, his beast took over. Rhoan opened to me with a lust-filled growl and pinned me to the floor. His tongue explored my mouth while his teeth grazed my lips. My heart leapt in excited anticipation.

The seed of power that I'd planted in the earth thumped in time with my heart, which was now fluttering at Rhoan's touch. He pressed the length of his body into mine so I could feel just how grateful he was for my show of trust and affection.

*Yeah, that's what this was. It was trust and affection.*

My heart didn't belong to him, this man who'd attacked a fae queen to save me from bleeding out on the ground by myself.

Rhoan pulled back. His breath was heavy in my ear. I felt him shudder under my hands. "I thought you were dead," he whispered, the words strangled. "I didn't know what I would have done if you'd died."

I tightened my grip on the man. His feathers tickled my fingers, but I didn't mind.

The seed of power still hummed. It spread far and wide, slowly waking up the entire court. We still had a chance. I still had Rhoan.

I cupped the back of his head and pulled him into me so that our foreheads touched. “I’m still here.”

“I’m so sorry,” he rasped. “I went to beseech your friends for their trust again. When I turned back, you were—”

“I ran off on my own. I’m not going to blame you for that.”

Beryl still had the answer to the antidote that I needed. I couldn’t leave here without it. My parents needed me to pull through. There was no way that I could die here. Especially not now that Rhoan was here.

In the distance, Beryl screeched. A blast of Unselie arcana shot out in every direction. The seed of power I’d planted recoiled. I grimaced, pain ripping through my core. Her power slashed across the garden inside me and left behind a wilted slash. The trees and flowers turned black.

I clutched my chest and fought for air. The urge to scream and curse Beryl’s name slammed into me even though I couldn’t breathe. Anger boiled inside me. It did nothing to help the blackened streak.

“Cerri!” Rhoan cried out.

When I laid eyes on him, I knew there was nothing wrong with a little darkness. He’d been carved out of shadows older than the world itself, yet he was the most noble man I’d ever met.

The dark, wilted streak across my power would have to wait. It couldn’t stop me right now. We had a task. I lifted my head and peered around at the inside of the crumbling castle. This was the place my parents had called home. It was made of magic and love.

Even now, after all these years under Beryl’s curse, I could feel the love emanating from everything. We were in the middle of a bedroom. The pillows and blankets piled high were covered in a layer of dust, but they were still soft. I rolled away from Rhoan and onto my knees so I could reach for a dusty white rabbit plush.

“Was this mine?” I asked Rhoan.

He scowled at the rabbit plush. “I wouldn’t know. I didn’t spend a lot of time around you when you were a child.”

I brushed the dust from the plush and held it close while I looked around. The palace still radiated magic. Its presence felt like a waiting servant, eager to please. I had an idea, though I wasn’t sure how well it would work.

“Palace? Do you know a way to cure mortals of fae food poisoning?” I asked out loud to the magical presence.

Rhoan cocked his head and raised a curious brow, but he otherwise said nothing.

Outside, Beryl’s sounds of rage were growing closer.

“I can’t fight her off,” Rhoan warned. “If she catches up to us, I’ll hold her off as long as I can. Promise me you will not come back here without an army at your side. You can’t face her alone. Not yet.”

Immediately, I snatched Rhoan’s taloned hand and pinned him with my hard stare. “You’re not sacrificing yourself.”

His lips parted. I noticed the slight tremble of his lower lip and the way his eyes widened with shocked surprise.

The sound of stone scraping against stone interrupted our conversation. To my left, a stone door had slid open to reveal a staircase. While I was a little wary of stairs after walking down Beryl’s only to end up in a maze, I knew that I had to trust the castle. It wanted to help its only savior. The castle would never know love and laughter under the bright sun if it didn’t help me get what I needed.

I raced forward, hauling Rhoan behind me. The man made a sound of argument, but he quickly swallowed it when Beryl screeched and asked where we’d gone. She was close. The magic of the castle rippled when she slammed into an invisible barrier outside.

The barrier and I were one, in an odd way. I could feel her hitting it. The castle was drawing on the seed of power that I’d planted. That meant we were all tied together, and I would know the minute that Beryl broke past the barrier.

Was this how my biological parents felt? Had they been tied to the center of their Court, too? I didn't have time to think too hard about what I'd done. Planting my arcana like a seed and watering it with my own blood might have been a bad idea, but it was working in my favor today and that was all that mattered.

We needed to get the final piece to my antidote and leave. When Beryl caught up to us, we would be goners. I wished that I had the power to fight her for all those who were still trapped here, but if I made a stand here then I would fall, and everything would be lost.

I knew now that I needed to stop her. Of course, I'd known that for a while. I'd abandoned my plan to bargain with her. No fae deal would free the people sleeping in the hedge cages. There was nothing I could say to lift the curse over the small Seelie fae still living in Lakesedge.

Beryl had to be stopped.

Rhoan and I reached the top of a tower. The round room was stuffed to the brim with alchemical tools. Winding glass tubes snaked over several cauldrons. My heart leapt into my throat at the sight of the tools. Shelves filled with dusty jars of herbs and other ingredients lined the walls. Tomes and notebooks were strewn over wood tables.

A table bucked and threw a notebook to the floor. I rushed to snatch it up. The curling handwriting in the book was unfamiliar, but Rhoan's slight gasp told me that it must have belonged to one of my parents. I tucked away the little piece of information and told myself that I would process it later, when danger wasn't bearing down on us.

"Is this all I need?" I asked the castle.

The air warmed. I took that as a yes, though I didn't speak *castle*. It was kind of hard to decipher.

I threw myself into Rhoan's arms. "Step us out of here."

He gave me an incredulous look. My heart sank. The excitement of finding a connection to my biological parents wore off. Fear slid in.

The barrier holding Beryl back shattered. The impact ricocheted through me. I grimaced. My knees went out from under me. Rhoan had to catch me before I collapsed to the floor.

“What is it?” he growled.

“She’s coming.”

Beryl’s laughter echoed downstairs. She was far below us on the first floor of the castle. I could feel her feet like they were on me—and I hated it. This was such a gross, intrusive feeling now that the castle and I were one.

“Why can’t we step in-between?” I asked in a hushed whisper.

“Beryl has the Court trapped in a pocket of her Unseelie Court. She controls all the entrances and exits. I was only able to enter because she’d been sloppy and left the front door open.”

“That means the front door should still be open. Can you fly us out?” I hugged the notebook close to my chest.

My gaze slid sideways towards the other tomes and notes. A greedy curiosity overwhelmed me. For the first time, I wanted to know more about my biological parents. Here was evidence that I shared something tangible with them. One of my parents practiced potion-making. The cauldrons and ingredients covered in dust were proof.

While I wanted to ask Rhoan why he hadn’t told me, the fact that this had been hidden behind an enchanted door was enough to tell me that this had been a family secret. Rhoan hadn’t known. No one had.

Why did my biological parents hide this? What was so wrong with potion-making? What did they know that I didn’t?

Rhoan wrapped an arm around my waist and twisted towards the window we’d come through. At the same time, curiosity got the better of me. I lurched away from him and grabbed an ancient book wrapped in worn leather. Rhoan hissed in annoyance and beckoned me back into his arms so we could attempt to escape.

“Come downstairs, Cerridewen.” Beryl’s croon swept over the castle.

Thorned vines sprang up over the windows. I tried to shove out with my own arcana, but it bounced off. The castle shuddered when the vines tightened. I noticed then that these vines were not made of anything living. They were more like tentacles made of shadow and malice.

I grabbed at one to rip open a hole so we could escape. A thorn ripped through my hand and made me jerk back. The blood pouring from my palm bubbled and turned black.

Rhoan growled. “That can’t be good.”

I felt nothing. There was no pain, no sense of poison. This wasn’t Beryl’s doing—at least it wasn’t because of her vines. This was the consequence of the dark blot in my power. I wasn’t the perfect Seelie princess anymore...

Which was a bit laughable because I’d never been perfect. What I’d meant to say was that my arcana was corrupted and had a touch of Unseelie now. Now wasn’t the time to consider what that meant. The castle didn’t seem to care, so I plowed forward with our escape. If we could get out of here, I could use these books to save both my family and myself.

We just had to escape first.





No matter where we looked, every exit was blocked by the thorned vines. I cradled my bleeding hand with the other while carrying the heavy tomes under my arms. It was cumbersome, but I couldn't heal the wound no matter how I tried. It kept bleeding, kept dripping black blood throughout the castle.

When we realized that Beryl had forced our hand and left us only one exit, Rhoan and I shared a look. His eyes blazed with the inhuman light of his beast. He seemed to flinch when the beast moved inside him, like he hated the creature trying to help us right now.

If I could have reached over and taken his hand without dropping the books or covering him in ichor-tainted blood, I would have. Instead, I bumped him with my shoulder.

"Now is not the end," I told him.

He met my gaze. A small smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he sucked in a fresh breath and raised his chin. "Now is not the end."

Together, we went downstairs to meet Beryl. I would have felt like a princess walking down the wide, velvet covered stairs leading down to the main foyer had it not been for the sight of Beryl sitting on a pile of bodies. Beryl had one knee carefully balanced over the other. She picked her teeth with a long talon until my foot touched the main floor.

This close, I could see my own face over and over in the pile beneath her. I told myself that this was a glamour. It was

an illusion meant to intimidate me. However, I could remember each and every death I'd endured in my nightmares. The mortal wounds in each body added up.

They were real.

Beryl waved a hand at the heap. "I will send a gift to your friend, Adeline. She did me a favor when she split your fate thread for me. It was all too easy to pick off the other pieces of you."

*Dead.*

*Dead.*

*The other versions of me were...*

The throat burned. Alvin's hands returned. I could feel Bastien's grip crushing my arms. My knees gave out. I dropped to the floor and tumbled forward, the books falling from my grasp.

Beryl laughed while I relived all the times I could have died.

The future I wanted for myself slid out of my grasp. I would never be safe again.

While I knew that this was a panic attack, the swirling thoughts wouldn't stop. More black ichor bubbled out of the wound in my hand. The wilted blot in my arcana seemed to pulse. Bitter darkness gathered on my tongue.

*Rhoan*

CERRI SCREAMED WHEN SHE FELL. The sound shook the walls. Green life burst out of the pile of bodies—the pile of dead Cerridwens...

The bodies turned into vines and trees and flowers. Petals and pale green leaves floated on a wind that tore at my feathers until oily black feathers dotted the air, too. I reached for Cerri to help her up, but the wind pushed me back.

“Cute temper tantrum,” Beryl said under Cerri’s screaming.

The thick tree boughs all bent towards Beryl. I rushed for Cerri right as the branches all descended upon Beryl at once. A gleaming black pool covered the floor under Cerri. It sank into the stones and turned the walls dark. Black veins climbed the trees and stained the hearts of the flowers growing on them.

I grabbed the fallen books before pulling Cerri into my arms. Carrying all three was a bit difficult. The beast offered help. It could transform my body in a great number of ways, but I didn’t want to give in to the darkness of it just yet. We could still escape this.

I didn’t have to give myself over to an Unseelie creation.

Cerri’s weight was solid against my chest. Her presence settled the beast inside me. I thought of her lips against mine up in the tower, how she kissed me so thoroughly that I thought she would absolve me of the darkness still lurking in my core.

Not even the princess’s soft kiss could cure me of my past sins. I’d made this mistake all on my own, and I would have to live with it for the rest of my life.

“What will you do when your knight turns on you?” Beryl asked.

Gutted, I faltered. My feet tangled beneath me. Only my wings kept me upright as they beat against the air to keep me from falling.

“Little Cerridwen, with your trusting soul. Do you know what your knight has done? Do you know the darkness that resides in him?”

I glanced back, over my shoulder. Beryl was trapped behind a celtic knot of tree branches. They reflected light like metal, proving just how fortified they were. Cerridwen had done her best to keep the queen at bay.

But the monstrous Unseelie *wench* swiped her talons across the wood and sent it all crumbling to the ground. She

stepped out from the cage and dusted off her dress. When she looked up, she tilted her head and pinned me with her predatorial glare.

Beryl's magic lanced out at me and slammed into my spine. I bucked as her ghostly talons grabbed my beast and dragged it out of me.

"No," I growled.

Cerri raised her head. Black ichor covered her chest from where she cradled her bleeding hand to her heart. "You don't scare me."

The words stole my breath. My knees hit the ground. This time—perhaps for the first time ever—when my beast tore its way out of me, I wasn't afraid. Four massive taloned paws touched the ground. I shook out my black fur and tossed my horned head.

I had the face of a lion and the horns of a goat. The chimera creature that the pookah had shoved inside me had a taste for blood, but I padded over to Cerri and gently licked her darkened, bleeding hand. It should have tasted bitter, but there was a sweetness in it that made my head spin.

Cerri smiled up at me. Her eyes went wide, brows flying high like she was looking at an adorable puppy and not a nightmare dreamed up by the Unseelie armies.

This was the price I'd paid for power. How could my princess look upon me and not flinch?

"Well, shit. That backfired," Beryl grumbled behind us.

Cerri's laughter echoed through the halls. I spun, put myself between Beryl and Cerri, and lowered my head with a growl ripping from my muzzle. Cerri buried a hand in my fur.

"That's not enough to save you," Beryl warned with a smile slapped on her face. "Even if you were to escape, you still don't have what you need to save everyone back in the mortal realm. You'll return empty handed to a Pack of feral wolves that can't trust you anymore."

“Oh, shut your mouth,” Cerri said. “I’m tired of your grandstanding. You never had what I needed, and even if you did, you had no intention of giving it to me.”

Beryl’s laughter confirmed Cerri’s suspicion. However, the castle had led us to the books in the top of the tower. They had to hold an answer. We already had what we needed. Now, I had to get my princess out of here.

So long as Beryl was distracted with her mind games, we had a chance to slip past her.

I felt him a split second before he struck. Faust dove out of the shadows with his blade at the ready. His magic grabbed at me. It tried to leash the uncaged beast, but the arcana slid off me. Faust’s eyes went wide and his attack fumbled. I, too, stared in shock.

The pookah and I held each other’s gaze in a highly unexpected moment of confusion.

“He belongs to me,” Cerri said in a husky voice that made my monstrous heart skip a beat.

I hadn’t even told her about my connection to Faust. How had she known to place a barrier between us? She hadn’t. The connection between Cerri and I was stronger now that she’d looked my beast in the eye.

She had become my queen once and for all.

Now, I just had to keep her from taking my heart, too.



The silver haired fae assassin seemed taken aback.

“Well?” Beryl shouted at him. “Do your job! I don’t pay you to stand there.”

Rhoan pulled back his paw and smacked the thin fae assassin across the room. He crumpled into a heap in the heart of my twisting trees. I quickly bound him with thick roots and tugged him into the stone floor so that he had little room to escape.

“I underestimated you, little mutt princess,” Beryl said with a shake of her head as she pulled her gaze away from the trapped assassin.

Beryl rolled her eyes and lifted a hand in our direction. I gasped. The wilted blot in my power spread across the garden. Beryl bit her lip and grinned, her eyes wide and manic. She cocked her head as the darkness spread across my body.

“You forget that I’m your aunt. We share blood, Cerridwen. You are two steps away from being Unseelie. What will you do when I take you over and turn you into an evil creature like myself? Will you be able to look yourself in the mirror? Will you come to kneel at my side once and for all?”

To Beryl, there was a fine line between good and evil. It depended on where someone stood between the light and dark, but that was a jaded way of thinking. I was friends with the antichrist. I’d broken curses with a necromancer’s help.

Good and evil wasn't about ability. It was all about what one chose to do with their abilities.

I lifted a middle finger to Beryl.

This was my domain. The seed of my power still pulsed in the heart of this small realm.

Rhoan said that Beryl controlled everything here, even the exits. I refused to accept that. This was my home. I'd given it my heart's blood. It didn't matter if I was Seelie, Unseelie, or just a fool.

If I wanted to step in-between, I *would*.

I buried my hand in Rhoan's fur as Beryl approached us. With a cocky smile on my face, I clutched my knight and my books and threw myself backwards. Magic wrapped around me. While it wasn't as bright as the sun anymore, it was still all mine, and it would take me anywhere I wanted.



WE LANDED in a heap in the middle of Ness and Ryder's living room. They yelped and leapt out of their seats. Ryder swept his mate up from the floor and whisked her to the opposite side of the room. When Ryder turned on Rhoan, who was still full-beast-mode, I dropped my books and threw up my hands.

"It's Rhoan! I promise! This is just Rhoan. He helped me get what I needed to save our Pack." Blood dripped down my wounded palm and splattered on the floor.

I jerked back and cursed the still bleeding wound.

"Cerri! Are you all right?" Ness shoved her way past her husband and came to cradle my hand.

Rhoan pressed against my left side. I would have said thigh, but he was a truly massive creature and towered over me. He pressed against my thigh, hip, shoulder, and the side of my head.

"I think I'm okay." I summoned my healing power and tried to wrap it around my palm.



I thought it wouldn't work. I was prepared for it to fail, so when my skin knit itself back together again, I nearly whooped with joy. Tired and out of adrenaline, I wanted to fall to the floor and take a moment to breathe.

However, there was a Pack of shifters waiting for me. It was time to get to work.

*Rhoan*

I'D TOLD Cerri that she would become like Beryl if she wasn't careful, but I had no idea how true those words would become. I stared at the princess and studied the white streak that now ran through her curls.

What had she given up in order to save her Pack? What'd taken up residence in her arcana to make her bleed black ichor?

I bent and wiped the blood up from the floor so that no one else would see it. When I stood, the Pack Alpha watched me curiously. He jerked his head back and said that he would get me some clothes.

Surprised, I looked down. When had I shifted back? It'd taken me days to find my natural body last time the beast had taken over. This time, the creature had willingly stepped back inside.

I'd gained a peace with my beast, while Cerri had taken on a whole new burden.

Ryder shoved clothes at me and let me get dressed in peace before retreating from us all. The man was not happy with how we'd dropped in, but he watched from a distance to see if Cerri would follow through on her promise.

Cerri slammed one of the retrieved books down and scanned its contents. Barely fifteen minutes later, she cried out triumphantly and stepped in-between. A heartbeat later, she returned with her cauldron cradled in her arms.

We'd survived and returned with the missing piece to save her family, but we needed to acknowledge how we'd barely made it out. Beryl hadn't even laid a hand on us. Had she tried any harder, we would have been added to that pile of bodies in the foyer.

I couldn't let Cerri run off like that again.

Nor could I leave her side. Even when she walked in-between for barely a moment, I panicked and lost the ability to breathe. Only when she returned and was in sight again did my chest unrestrict.

Moving forward would be difficult. We had a rocky path ahead of us.

Especially when I loved her this much. I couldn't kiss her again.

She needed a knight, not a monster.



I nearly cried when I hugged my mom.

With Ness and Ryder's help, we administered the antidote to everyone hanging around the backyard. Many of them had been crying and screaming for more fae wine. The hangover had hit while I'd been brewing the potion. Hearing them had torn my heart in half, especially when I'd heard my father's pained howl among them all.

Dad wrapped me in his arms and clutched my head close to his chest while whispering his thanks. Didn't he realize this was all my fault? I hadn't taken the time to tell them, though. They didn't know I wasn't their real daughter, and I didn't have the heart to tell them right now.

Not when I found myself thinking of my biological parents and my ties to their magic while Dad held me. I felt guilty for my wandering thoughts, but I wanted to know more about my fae parents. I wanted to know what pulled me to the same magic that they'd practiced. How had I known to brew potions? Was it written into my blood?

Dad pulled back and kissed my forehead.

"Who's the hunk brooding in the corner?" Mom whispered and pointed towards Rhoan.

I extended a hand to him. He shook his head and tried to slink back into the shadows, but I jumped forward and caught his arm before he could get away.

“You’re my knight and you will do as I say,” I growled under my breath at him.

Rhoan snarled in response, but he managed to plaster a smile on his face before meeting my parents. All the while, he kept giving me strange sidelong glances. There was a question in his eyes that I couldn’t quite decipher.

It made my heart flutter unexpectedly.

We’d done a lot together, all in the span of one day. He’d watched me explore my ancestral home and its secrets. I’d come face to face with the beast he’d been trying to hide from me this whole time.

“I see where you get your disposition from,” Rhoan said with a smirk as he watched my Pack parents get into their car.

I gave him a questioning look, one that I hoped prodded him hard enough for an honest answer. “What does that mean?”

Though Rhoan rocked back on his heels, away from me, the smile remained on his face. He gave a half-nod towards the car pulling out of the driveway. “They’re tough but kind. I’m glad that they’re the ones who raised you.”

My face warmed with bashful pride as I turned away. Rhoan and I had seen the worst of each other throughout this, though I didn’t think his worst was as bad as he thought. Meeting his beast had been a wonderful experience, one that I savored.

“I didn’t mind getting a peek behind your curtain, either,” I teased, reaching to touch his arm.

Though there was a slight curve to Rhoan’s lips when I spoke, his smile seemed almost sad, and I couldn’t figure out where I’d went wrong. His gaze dropped to my hand on his forearm. For a moment, we lingered there in silence.

Neither of us moved. My heart leapt into my throat. We were getting somewhere... Then Rhoan pulled away.

The fight was over for today. We didn’t need defenses. We didn’t need to hide from one another. And yet...Rhoan took a

step away from me. He kept his back to me and his arms crossed over his chest.

I wanted to pull him back. I wanted to shout and scream. Instead, I kept my desire tamped down because there was no use forcing something when I wasn't going to stick around in the long run, either.

I would have thought that would bring us closer. Yet, Rhoan seemed further away than ever.

When we returned to my apartment that night, I crashed into my bed and welcomed him over. Instead, he threw himself onto the glass-studded couch and let his head fall back. I watched him stare at the ceiling for a long while.

What'd happened? Where had this chasm between us come from? It was like he was trying to distance himself from me to be a better knight when I saw this man as my friend—as potentially more than a friend.

He had something that he wasn't telling me.

“We should begin making plans to take back your castle,” Rhoan said from the couch. “In the morning, I'll call our allies over to discuss it. You can...make breakfast or something for them.”

*Bastard*, I wanted to say.

We bared our souls to each other, and you treat me like... like...like a queen? I didn't want to be his friend. I wanted to be so much more.

But I had a blot on my arcana now. I wasn't completely Seelie anymore. Neither was Rhoan. He hadn't been this whole time. Yet, I wondered if he saw me differently now. Was his hope for a perfect Seelie princess smashed to bits? Was that the part of me he could have loved?

I fought the urge to flip him off and rolled over to face the wall.

“Sure,” I called back to him.

*Rhoan*

IF I ALLOWED myself to truly fall for Cerri, then my deal for power would turn into a curse.

When I made this deal with the pookah for a beast that would help me defeat my enemies, I thought myself safe from their trickery. As a knight, I'd taken a vow of celibacy. I had no fear of falling in love because I had no plans to get close to any woman.

Now that I had Cerri in my life, I treaded dangerously close to the very thing I thought would never happen. The pookah gave me this beast and the power that came with it, but they warned me that should I fall in love and give my heart to another, then I would become nothing more than a beast.

I needed to help Cerri take back her kingdom.

If I could hold out for that long, if I could keep my love contained until the very end, then I could at least leave her knowing that she was safe.

# WHAT'S NEW



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# REAPER'S REWARD

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 9

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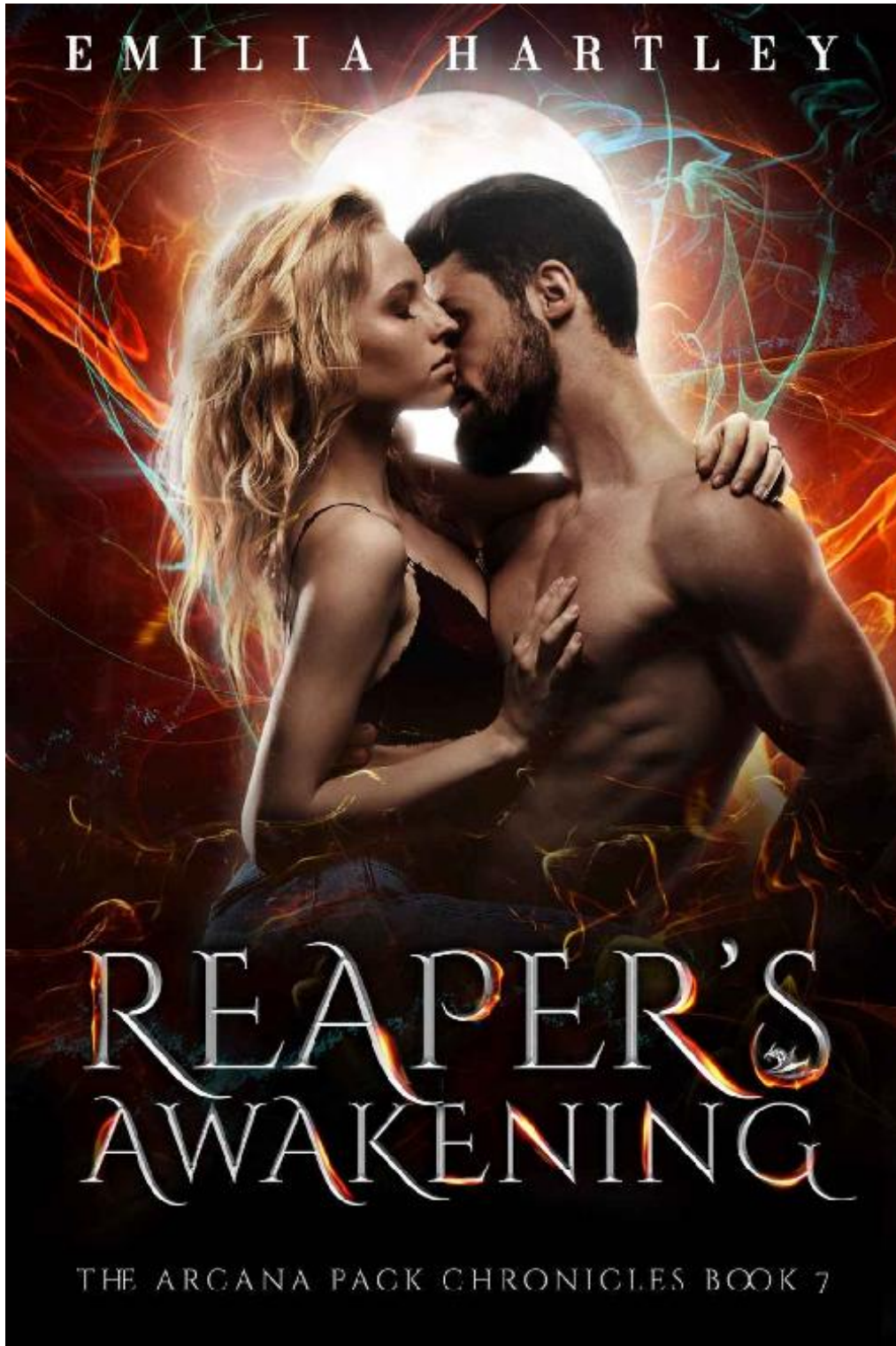


REAPER'S  
RISE

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 8



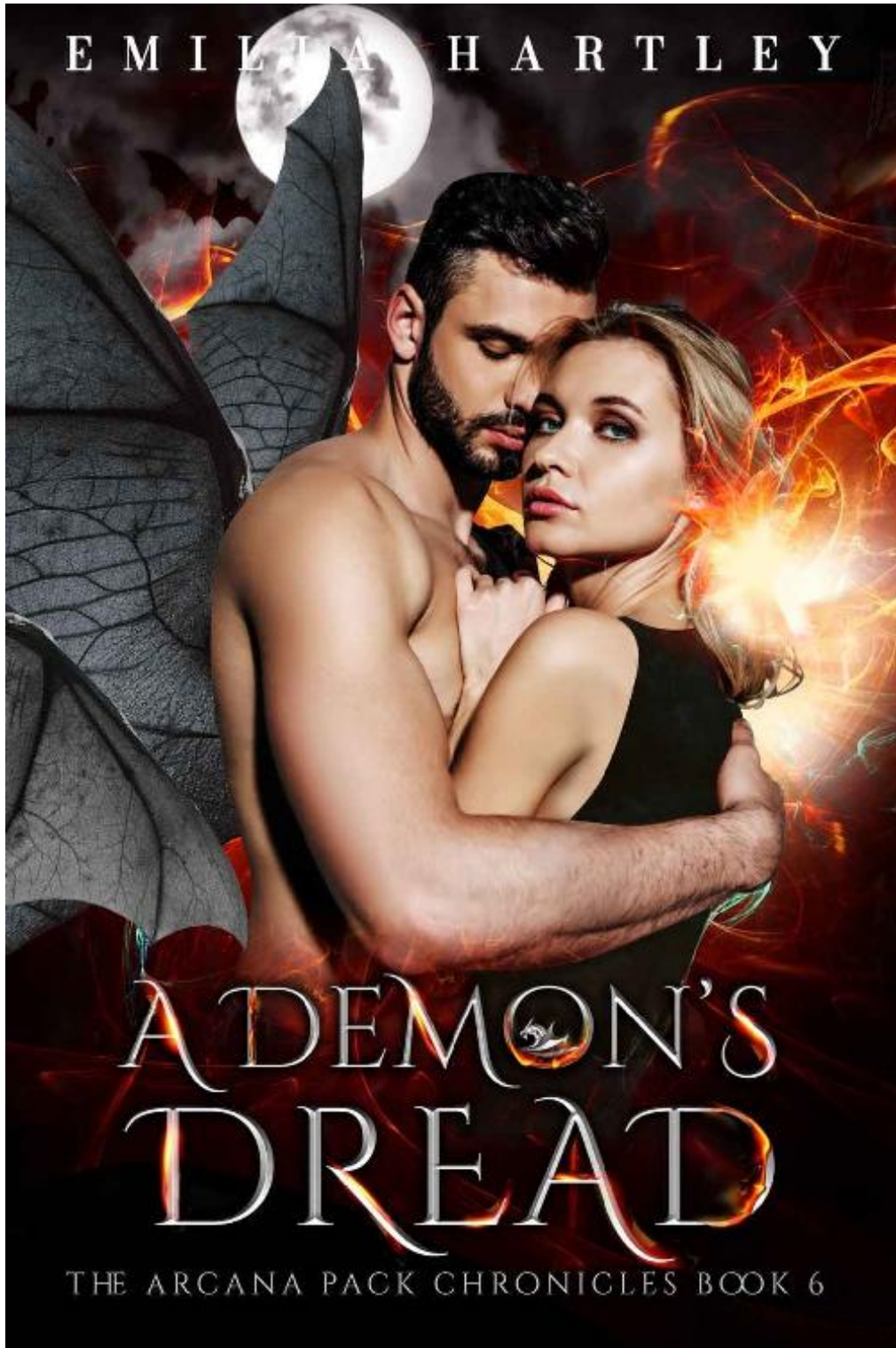
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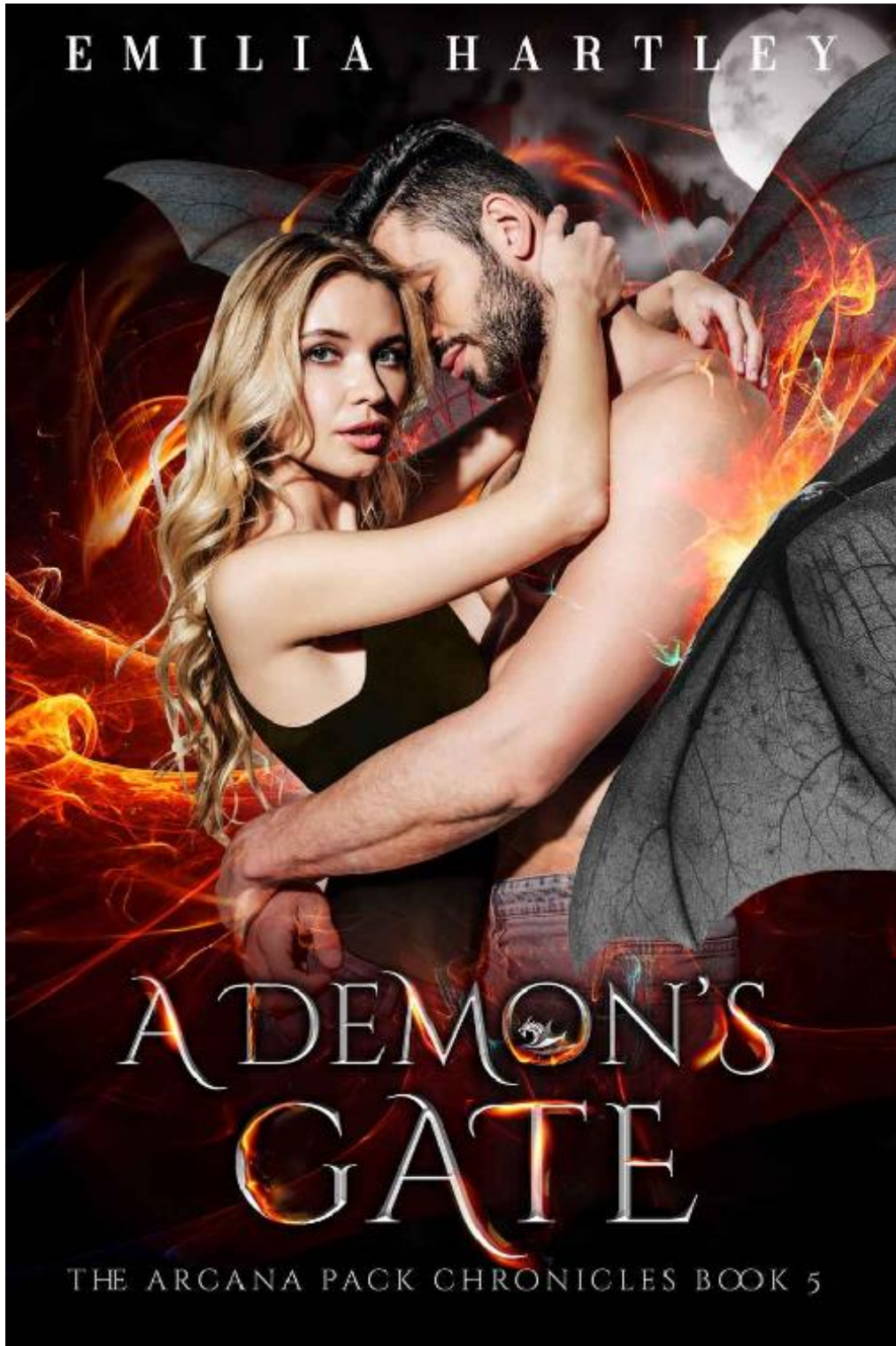


# A DEMON'S DREAD

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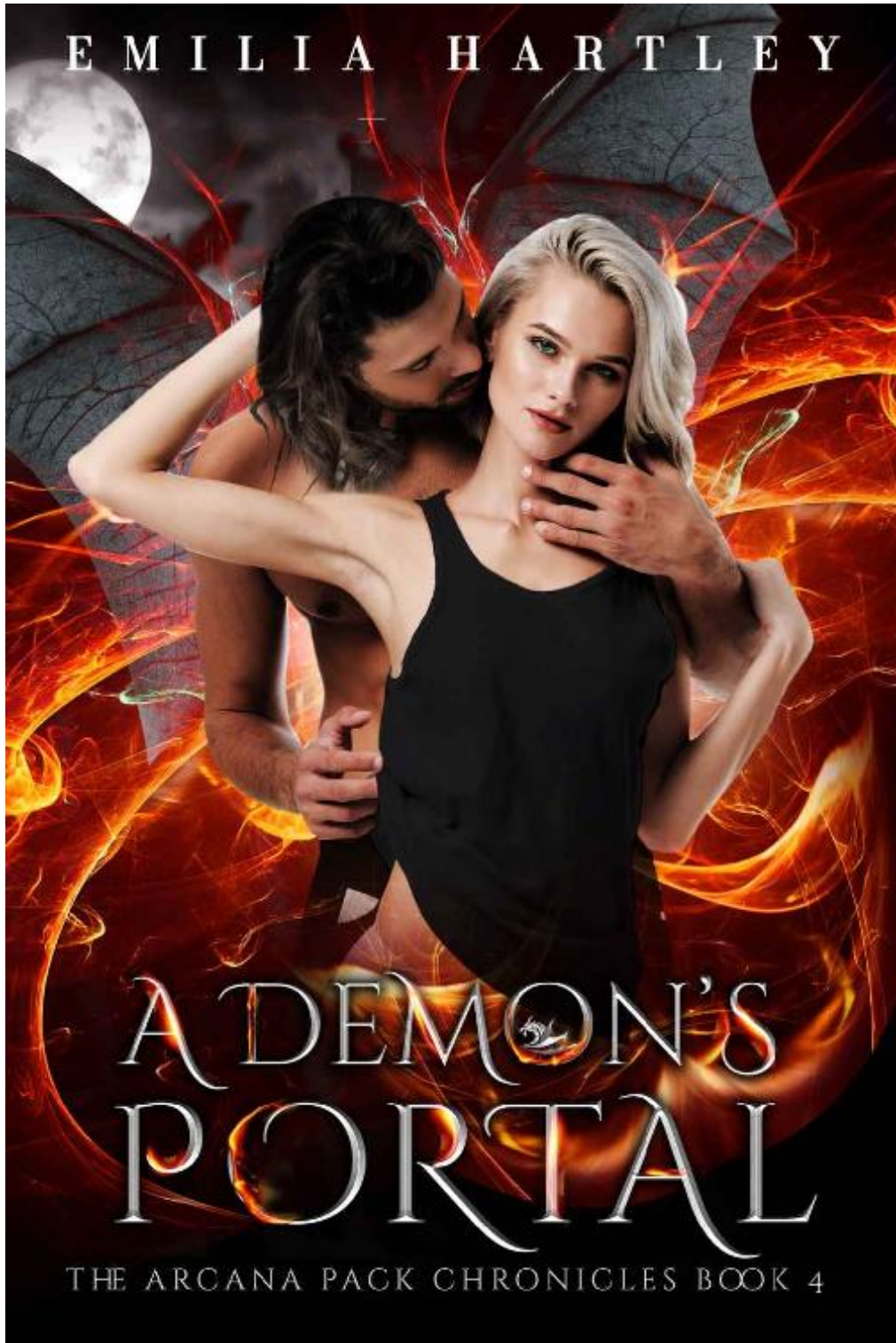
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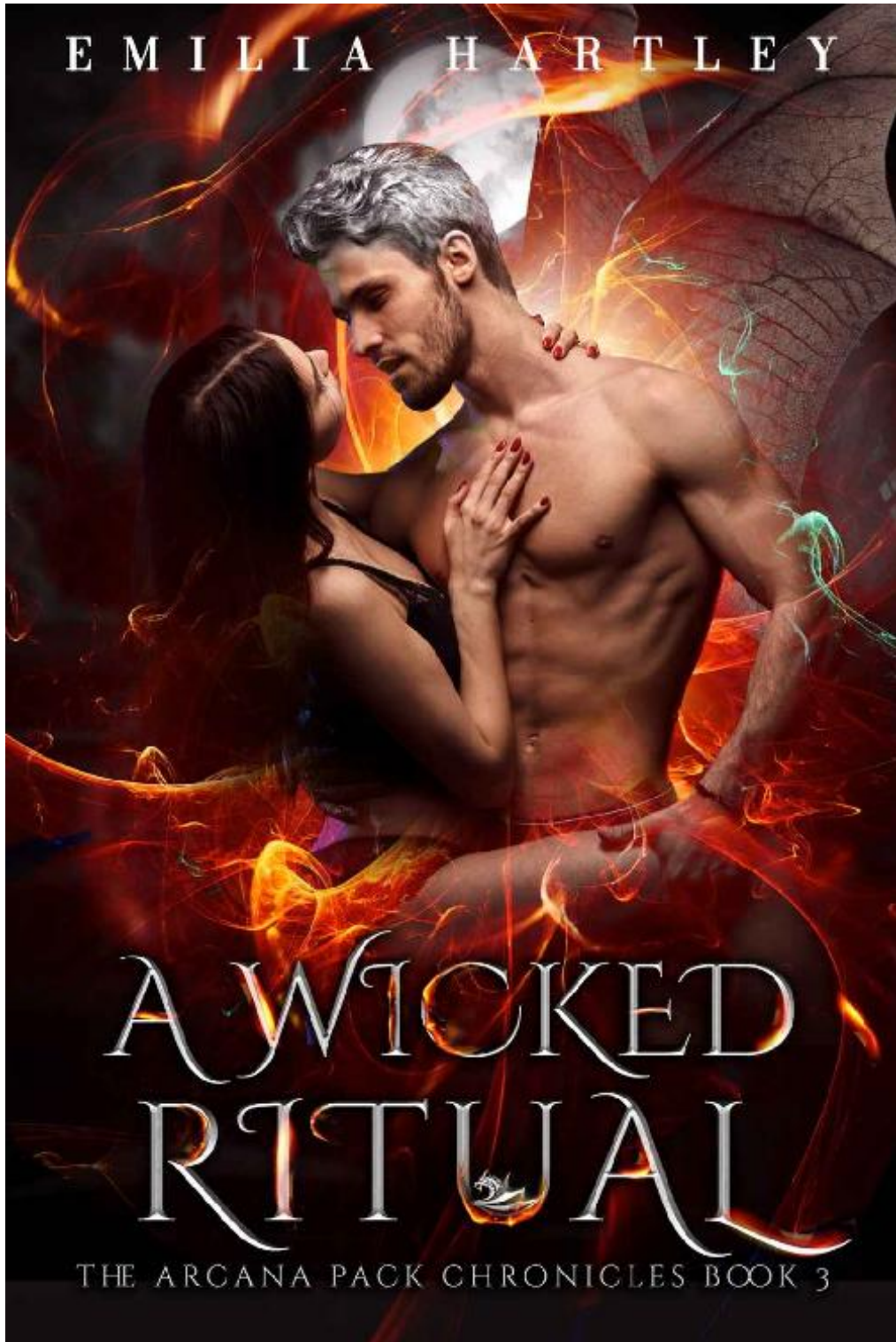


# A DEMON'S PORTAL

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# A WICKED RITUAL

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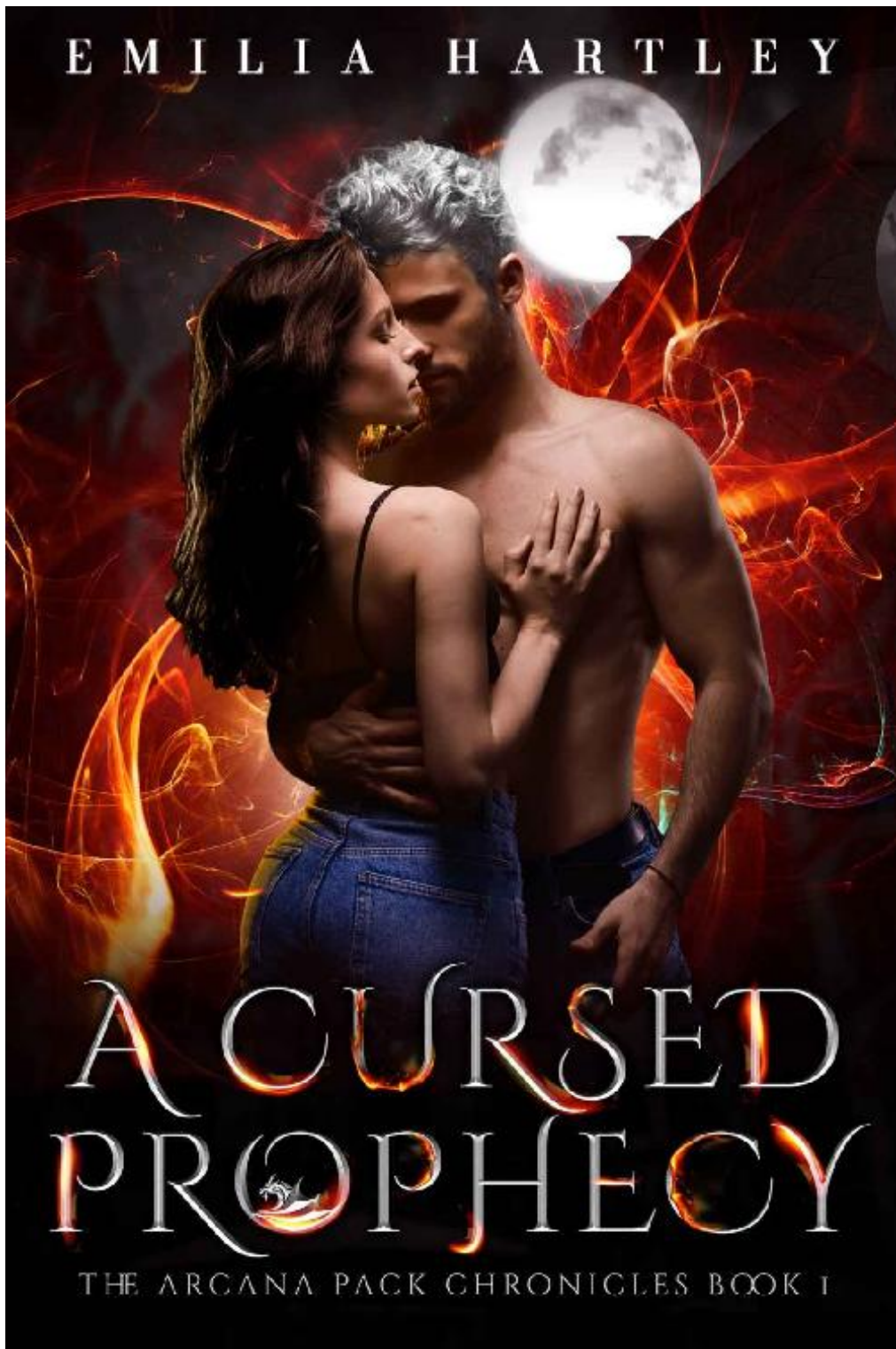


# A DANGEROUS PACT

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 2



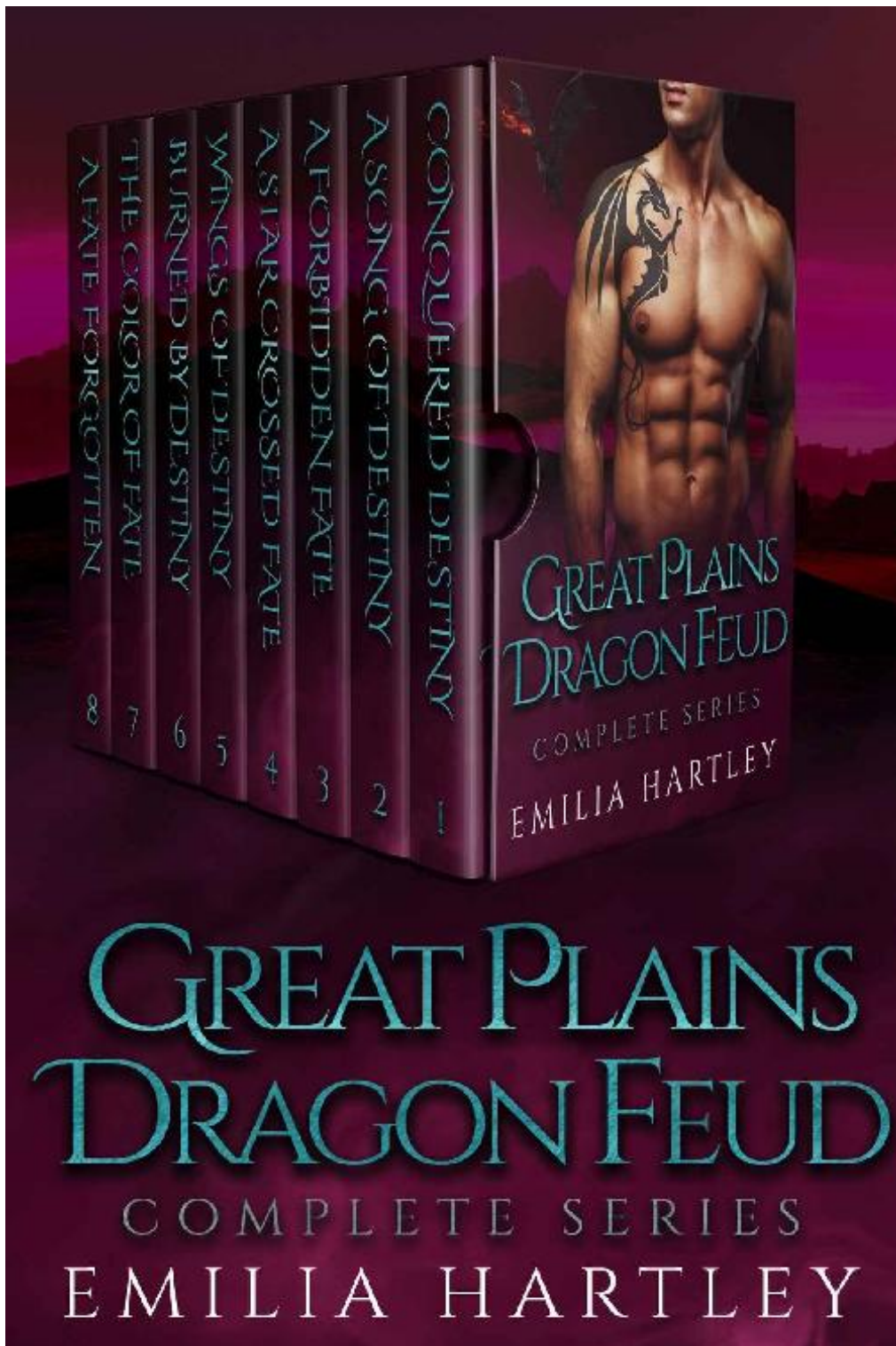
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A CURSED  
PROPHECY

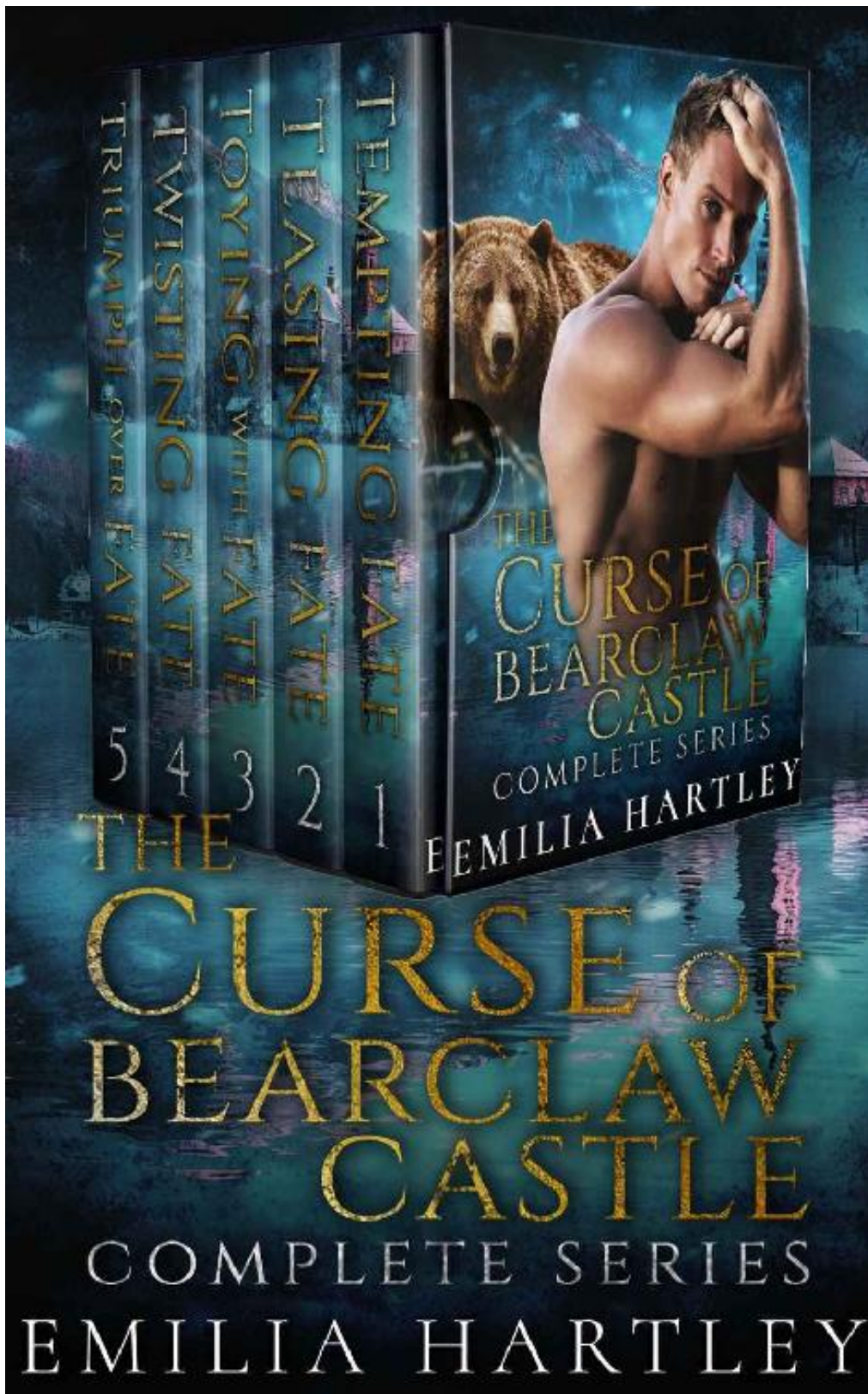
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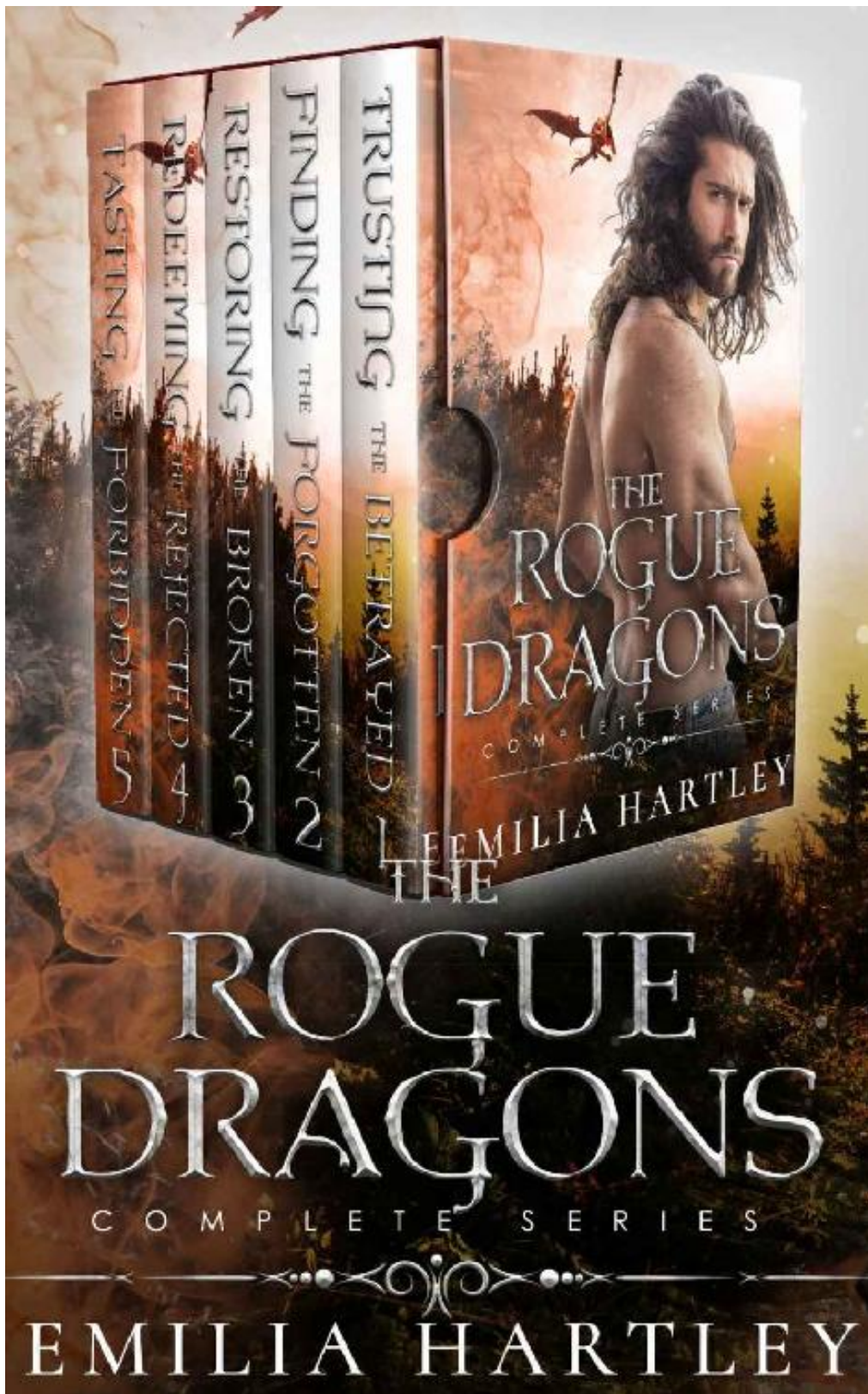




TEMPTING FATE 1  
TEASING FATE 2  
TOYING WITH FATE 3  
TWISTING FATE 4  
TRIUMPH OVER FATE 5

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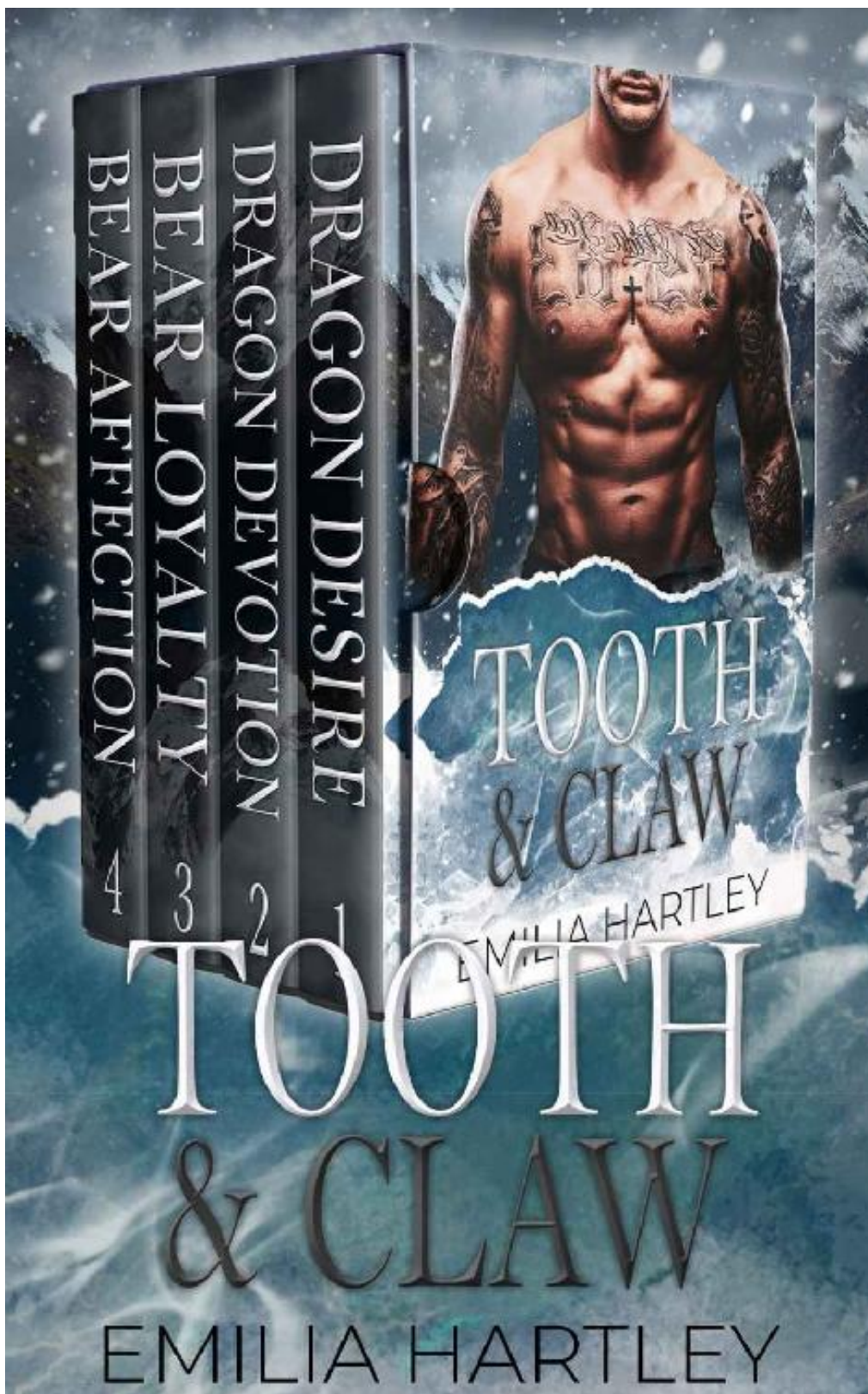
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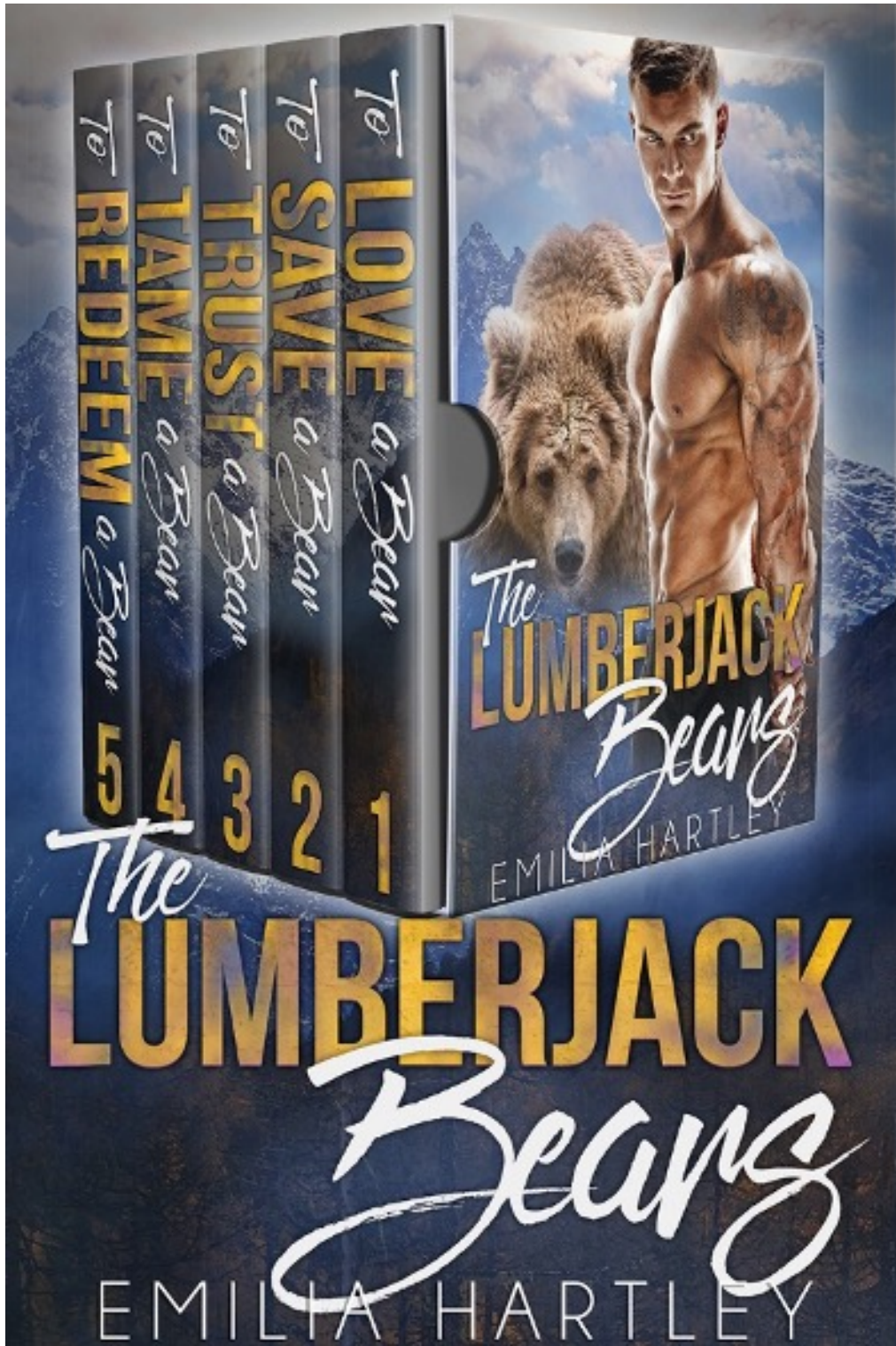




DRAGON DESIRE  
DRAGON DEVOTION  
BEAR LOYALTY  
BEAR AFFECTION

TOOTH  
& CLAW

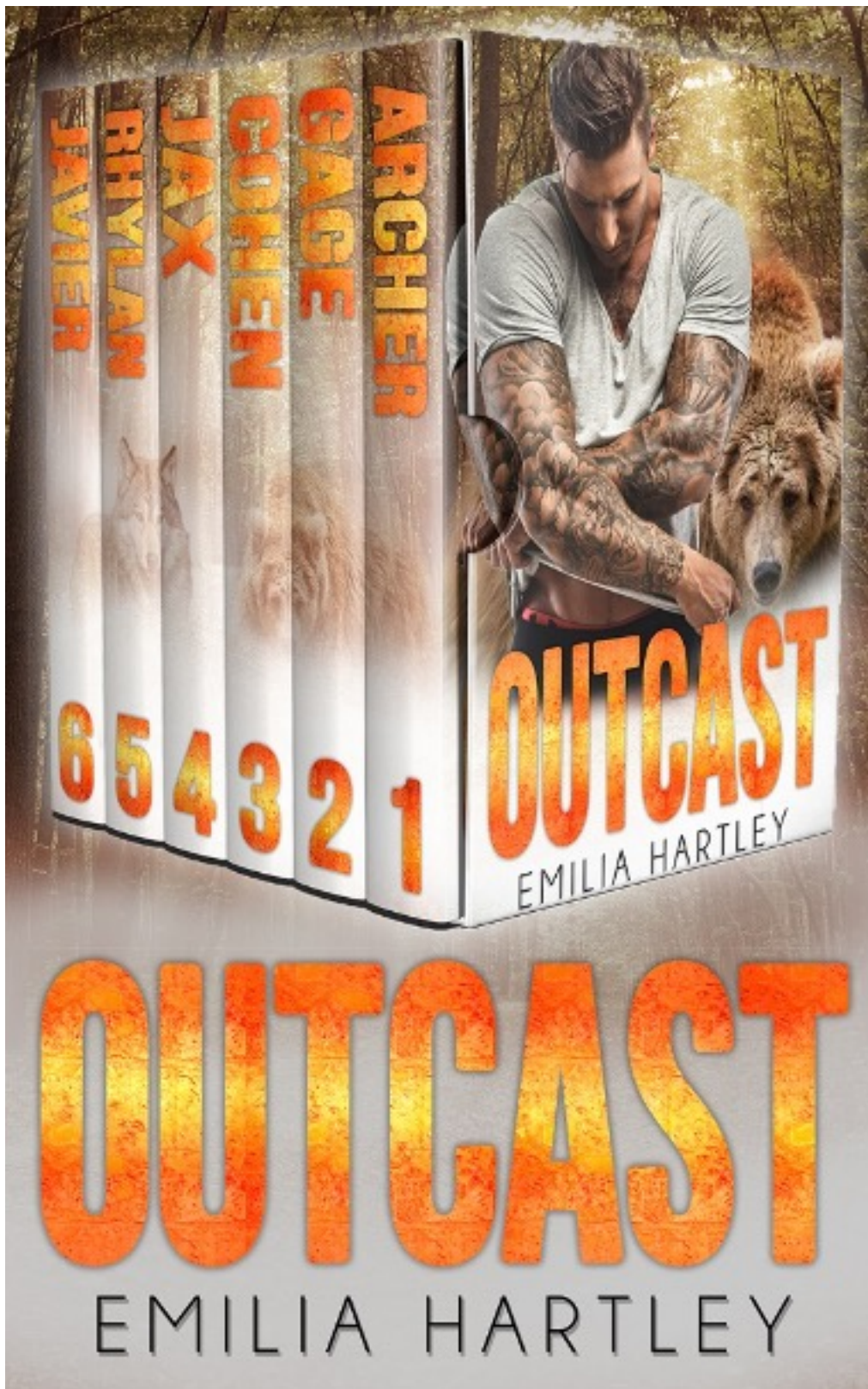
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To Love a Bear  
To Save a Bear  
To Trust a Bear  
To Tame a Bear  
To Redeem a Bear

*The*  
**LUMBERJACK**  
*Bears*  
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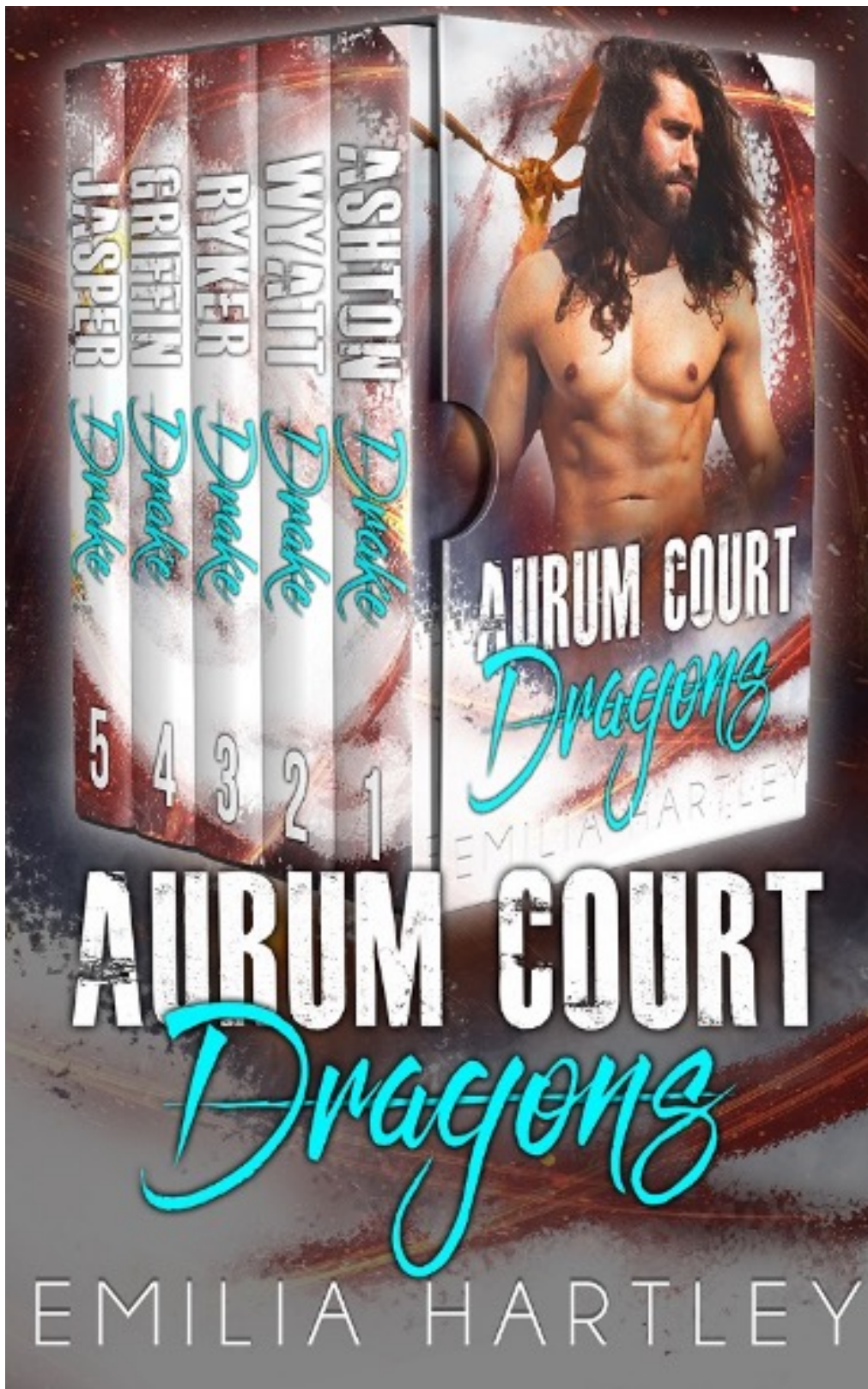




# OUTCAST

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ASHTON  
Snake  
1

WYATT  
Snake  
2

RYKER  
Snake  
3

GRIFFIN  
Snake  
4

JASPER  
Snake  
5

AURUM COURT  
*Dragons*  
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AURUM COURT  
*Dragons*

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THE BEAR'S MATCHMAKER  
HER TRUE ALPHA MATE 2  
HER ALPHA MISMATCH 3  
HER ENCHANTED ALPHA MATCH 4

THE SHIFTER'S  
MATCHMAKER  
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THE SHIFTER'S  
MATCHMAKER

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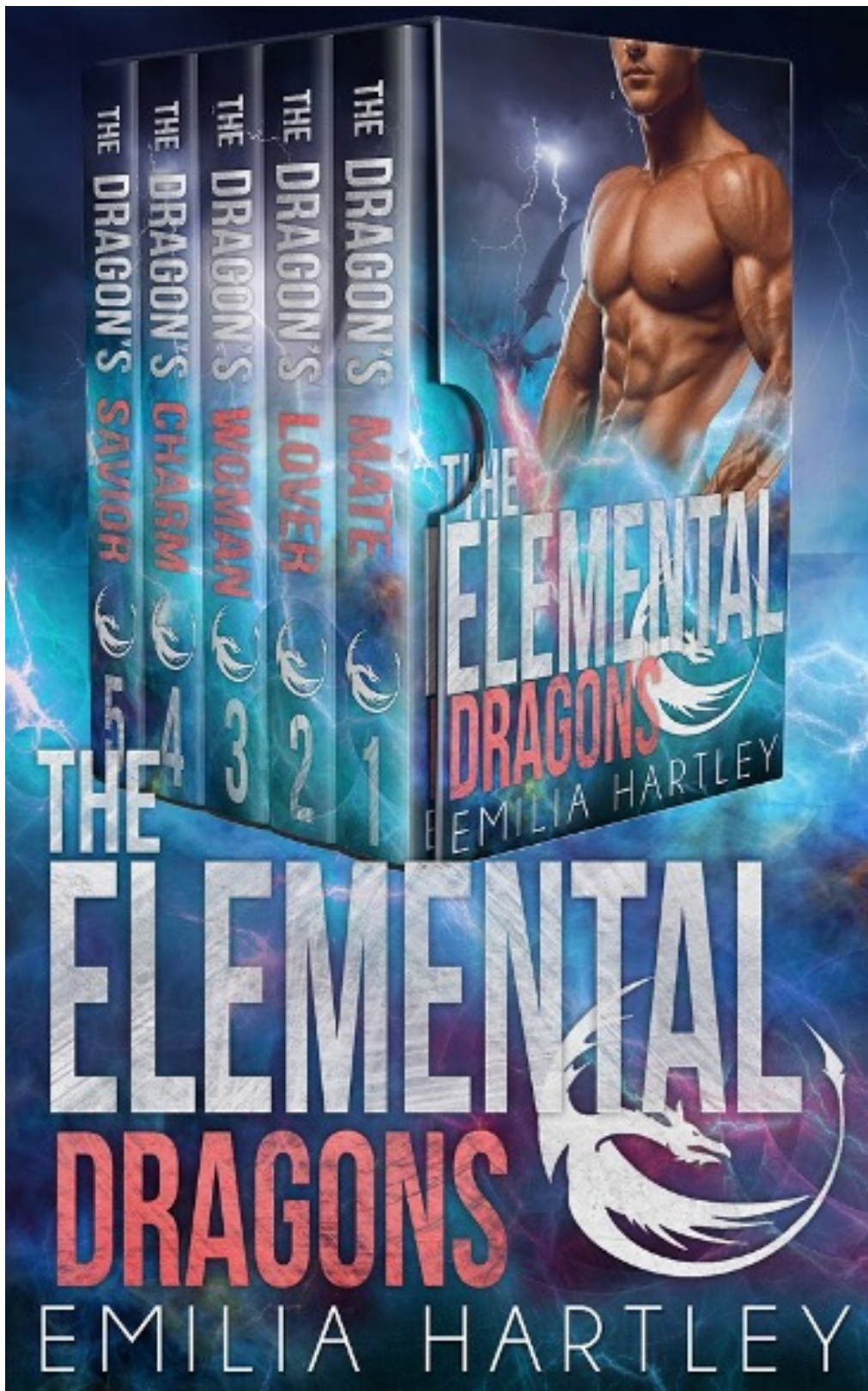


*Mated to the DRAGON*  
*Rescued by the DRAGON*  
*Falling for the DRAGON*  
*Claimed by the DRAGON*

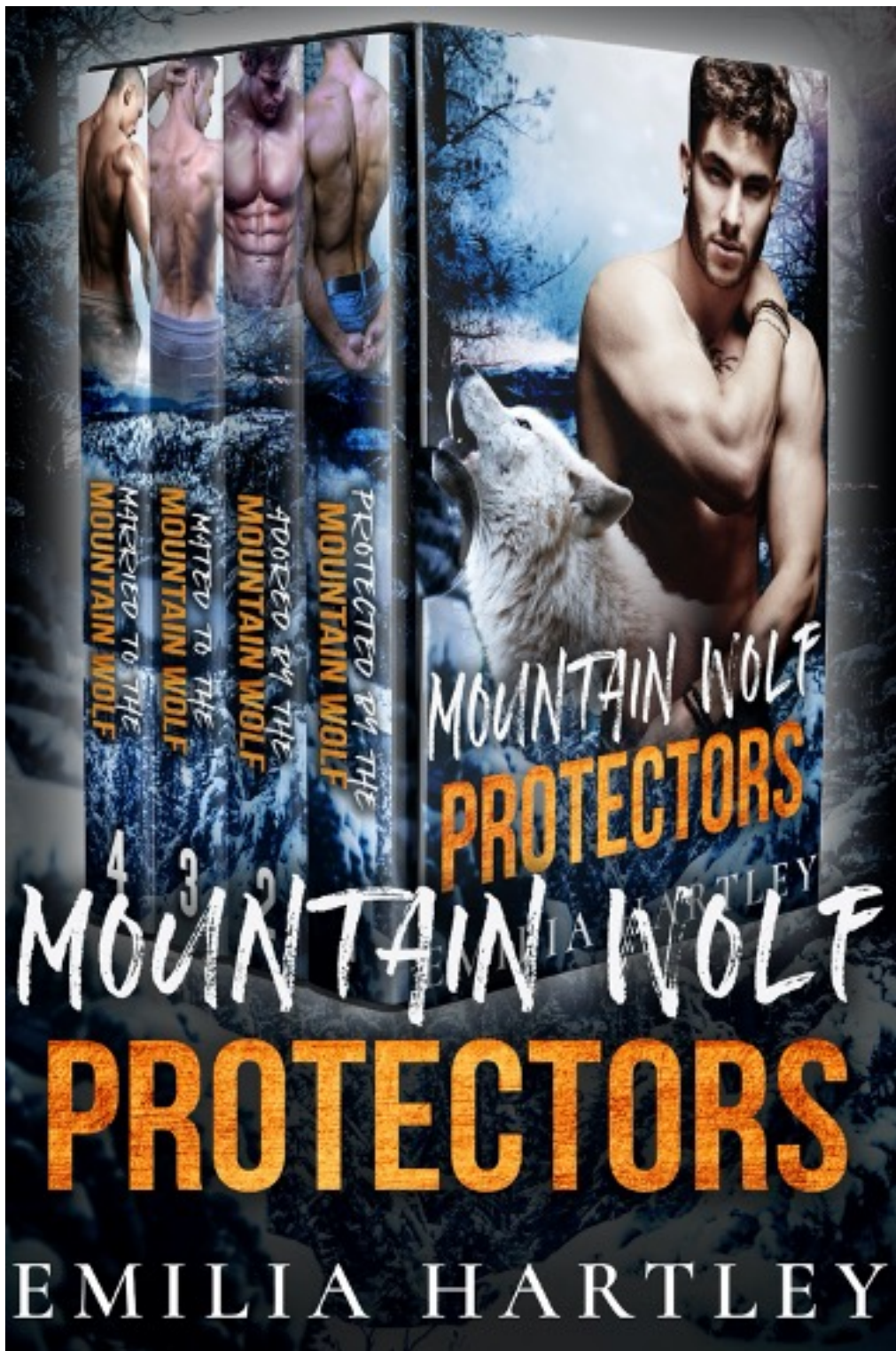
1  
2  
3  
4  
5

*Fated*  
**DRAGONS**

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PROTECTED BY THE  
MOUNTAIN WOLF

PROTECTED BY THE  
MOUNTAIN WOLF

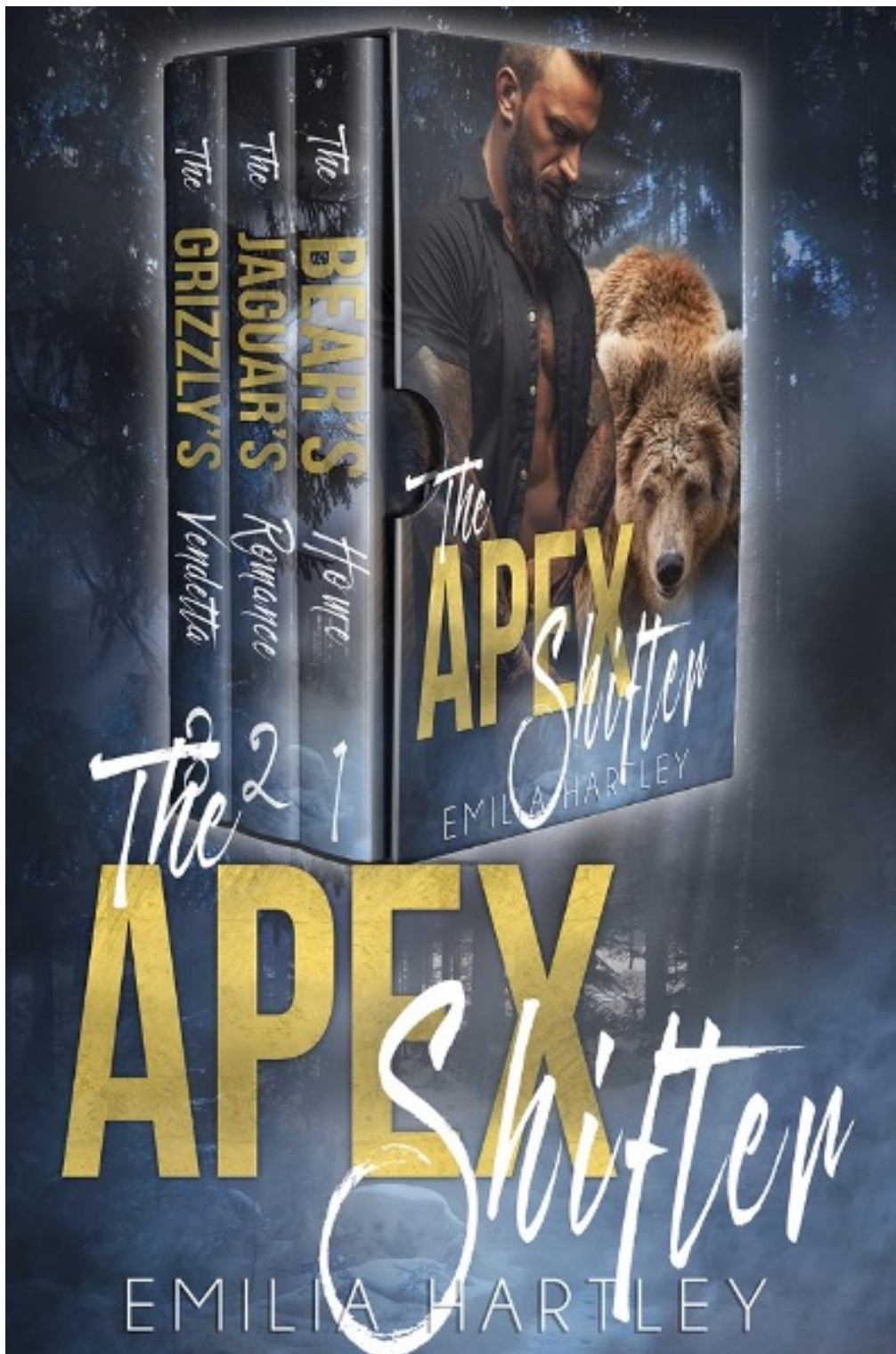
MATED TO THE  
MOUNTAIN WOLF

MATED TO THE  
MOUNTAIN WOLF

MOUNTAIN WOLF  
PROTECTORS

4  
3  
MOUNTAIN WOLF  
PROTECTORS

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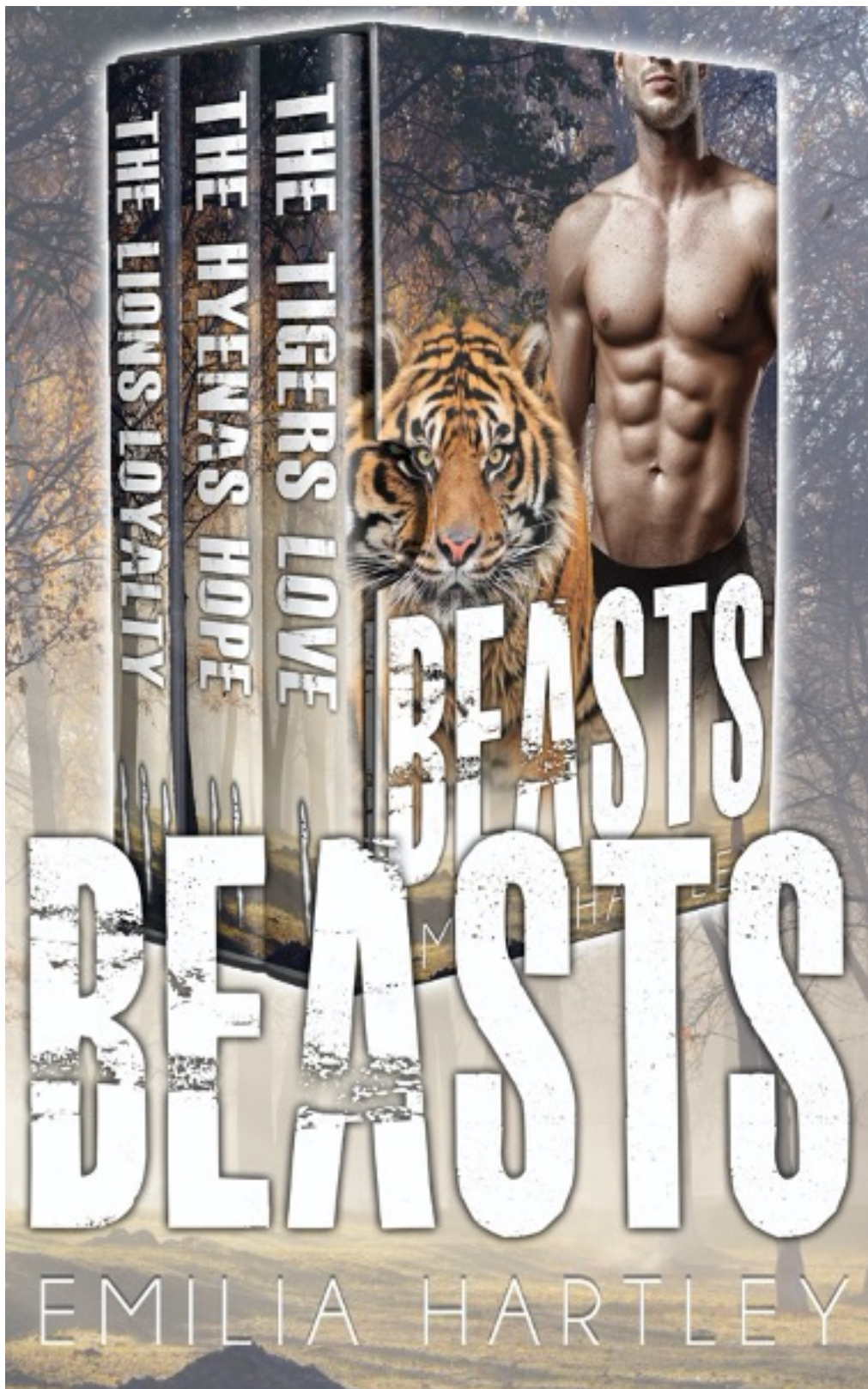


The  
BEAR'S  
HEART  
The  
GRIZZLY'S  
Vendetta

The  
APEX  
Shifter  
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The 21  
APEX  
Shifter  
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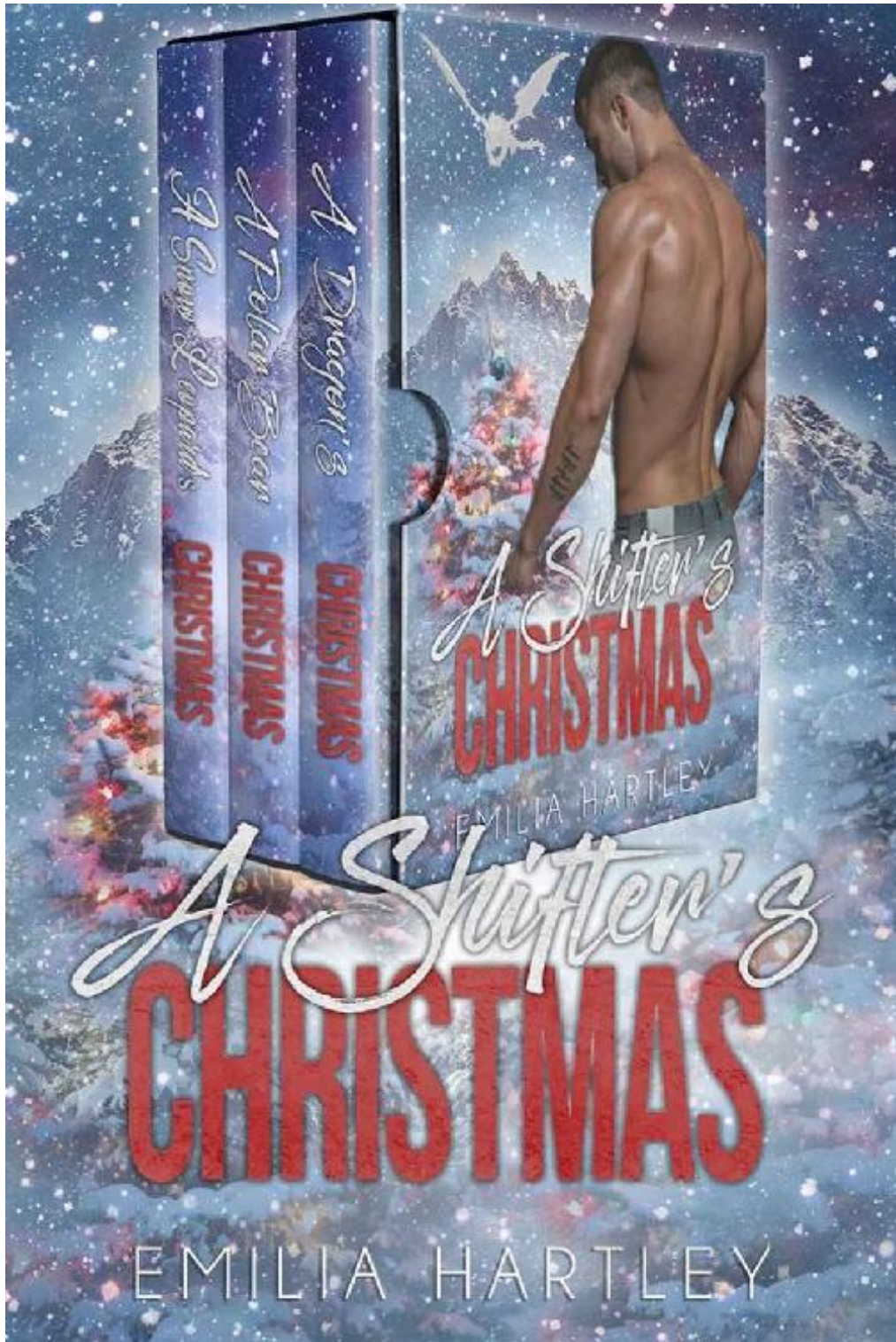
THE LIONS LOYALTY

THE HYENAS HOPE

THE TIGERS LOVE

# WILD BEASTS

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*A Shifter's Christmas*  
*A Dragon's Christmas*  
*A Polar Bear's Christmas*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
**CHRISTMAS**  
**CHRISTMAS**

*A Shifter's*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
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*A Shifter's*  
**CHRISTMAS**

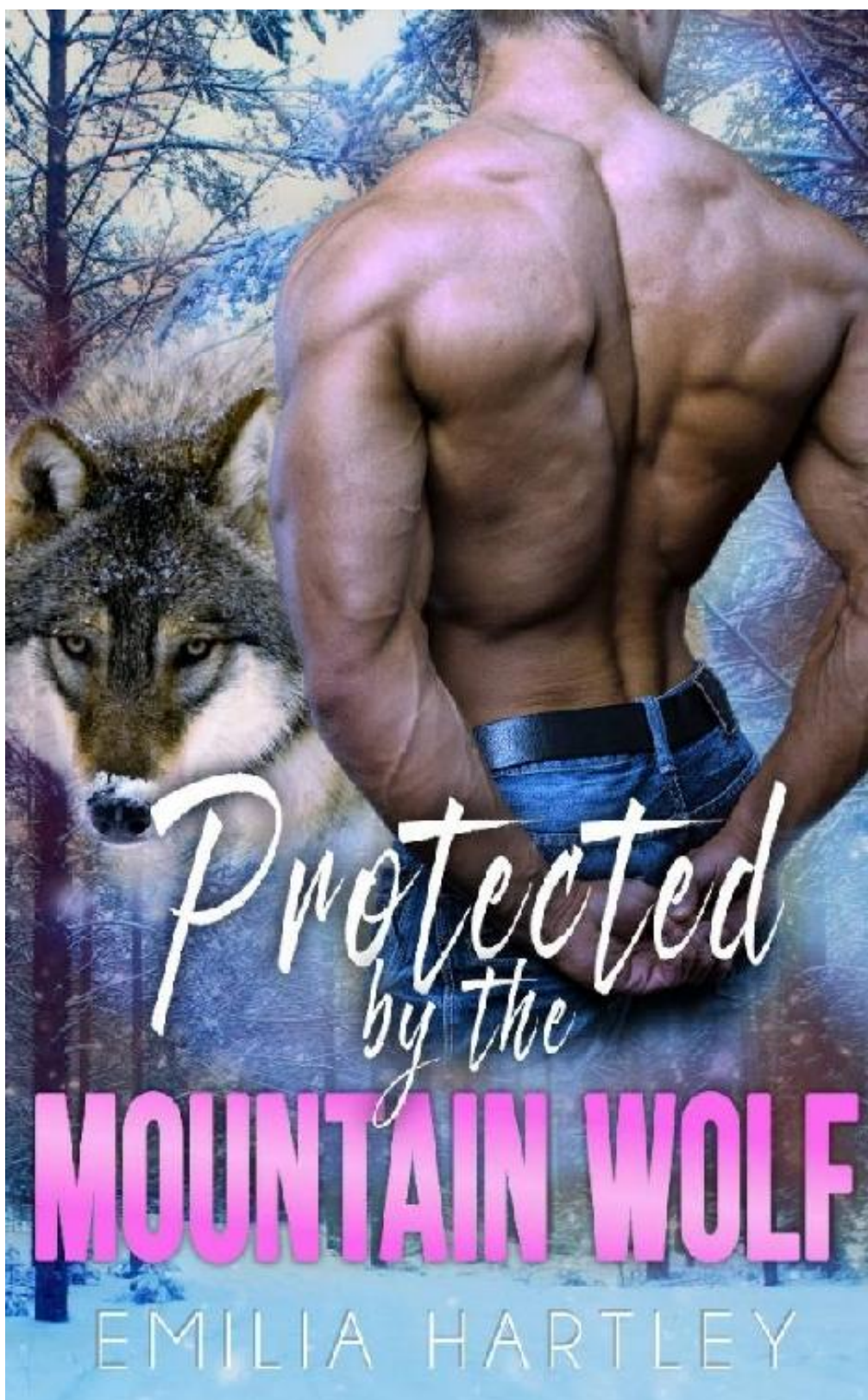
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*Protected*  
*by the*

**MOUNTAIN WOLF**

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