

ERIN R FLYNN

Healthy
Progress

Artemis University

17

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ERIN R. FLYNN

Healthy Progress

Artemis University



My name is Tamsin Vale and things are going well. No, really! I know that sounds crazy after I broke down and couldn't tell what was a dream or reality. But I have help. I *asked* for help which is hard for me. I have someone I can trust to get help from.

All of that is progress for my life. Sad, but true.

It was a setback on a better path and those will happen. But people are stepping up to help and defend me. I don't feel so alone handling too much. I feel like a real fairy most days and accepted.

And I have hope for the future. Things are great with Darby, and he's happy about what comes next. School is better, and I'm enjoying that part of my life.

Sure, I have no idea where I'm at with four of my mates, and I wish I could make it all better. I wish I could forgive them for their mistakes and move past what's happened knowing we won't have any issues again, but that's not life. So I'm going to appreciate what I have before the next thing blows up because it will.

Something always does.

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

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

1

“I’ll help you, Tams,” Julian promised over and over again. “We’ll figure this out and figure out what’s going on.”

Why isn’t he hugging me? Julian would hug me and take the opportunity to hug me.

“You told me not to touch you,” he whispered.

“What?” I whispered, still crying no matter how hard I tried to stop.

“You’re projecting your thoughts to me,” he explained, nodding when I winced. “You told me not to touch you. Of course I want to hug and comfort you, but—I never know what to do, Tams. I’m so tied up that—tell me what to do.”

I didn’t know either, but I really did want the hug and comfort even if it came from the asshole who kept breaking me. I needed to feel like I could be solid again instead of this detached mess.

It was probably the wrong, selfish thing to do, but I scooted closer and basically moved between his legs. He had squatted down in front of me at some point in my sobbing, and that would probably be an awkward way to hug me.

He seemed to understand that and sat on the ground, pulling me onto his lap. “I will figure this out. I swear it. And don’t worry, I know this doesn’t make us okay. I won’t take this as anything more than help or read into it. I’ll *try* not to, but I’m stupid and mess everything up. I just need you to be okay. I won’t abuse this.”

It was probably stupid to believe him, but he sounded as lost and scared as I felt. For some reason that comforted me a bit.

“Where are we?” I asked when I finally seemed to calm down some.

“The fucking house I hate that is now mine,” he muttered. “I just want to burn it to the ground. I can’t—sorry, this isn’t—sorry.”

I nodded, understanding he was upset too and things just came out. “I think my mind is broken, Julian.”

“I don’t think that at all,” he whispered as he hugged me tighter. “I don’t think people realize they’re breaking so clearly when they actually do. I think something is going on with our powers and you’ve got a new ability. We will figure this out, my mate.”

I nodded again, not wanting to have him call me that, but it was what we were. “Can I stay here tonight?” I started to pull away when he flinched. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s this *house*, not you. I don’t want you to spend more time in this house so soaked with evil, especially when you’re vulnerable.”

I slowly glanced up at him. “Then why are *you* here?”

“I have to be,” he whispered, looking away.

Okay, that wasn't weird.

“Let's just get a hotel room somewhere no one would think to look, and I'll quietly get you a security detail.”

I wasn't sure what I needed or to do right then so I agreed. It felt like I was also in shock, maybe from coming to Julian for help? But it was like I blinked and I wasn't sitting on his lap anymore, but a plush chair at a hotel.

“There you are,” Stefanie whispered as I blinked around the room. She gave me a tight smile when I focused on her. “Craftsman contacted me asking for help and to not let the others know.”

“I'm sorry.”

“*I'm* sorry I didn't see what was happening, Your Highness.”

“I don't know what's happening and I couldn't tell anyone,” I muttered, accepting that I had probably made this worse than it needed to be. I had only one real reason for that. “I was scared.”

“I know. I know, Tamsin,” she muttered. “You're also exhausted. You can't shoulder what you need to without sleep.”

I agreed with her, but I was scared to fall asleep too, so I wasn't sure what to do with that. And where had Julian gone?

Would he come back or abandon me again?

“You sounded near panic on the phone,” Edelman said, worry thick in his eyes.

When had I called Edelman? I wouldn't have.

"Sorry to upset you and drag you out of your bed, mate," I said.

No, Julian did.

A dream. This is a dream unless I suddenly learned how to speak with a British accent and deepen my voice. Glamour couldn't do that.

Could it?

"What's going on?" Edelman asked.

"I need to take a leave of absence," Julian answered, clearing his throat when Edelman couldn't hide his surprise. "After finals. For all of next semester. I'll talk to Sontar, and there's got to be a fairy who can fill in for me. Their schools aren't even open yet. I will get the—"

"Julian, slow down," he said as he came over and grabbed my arms.

No, Julian's arms. It was so confusing to remember that when it felt like me. I could *feel* Edelman touching my arms. I was experiencing Julian's worry like it was my own.

"Tell me what happened," Edelman ordered.

"My mate is struggling and she came to me for help." He pulled away and paced. "Even after all I've done, she came to me, and I won't fail her again."

"I say this as your friend, but are you in a place to be able to help anyone else?" He sighed at whatever was on Julian's face. "You are *drowning* yourself. You have to finally admit

that, Julian. And to *her*. You cannot keep going on like this and need to just tell her.”

I felt my eyes roll. “I’ll take mating advice from just about anyone else after what you said before landed me in more hot water.”

Edelman winced. “I did warn you that I wasn’t mated. *But*, I said her videos seemed to also ask you to prove you did—and do—truly love her and it wasn’t all a lie. I stand by that. I didn’t think you would hear that advice as being flirty and sexy. That’s not love.”

“It is if I’m willing to make such an ass of myself,” he grumbled, sounding like a petulant kid instead of the confident man I knew. “I have to help her, Kyle. She came to me and has at least this much trust in me. Something inside of me knows I can do this. Even if I can’t get her back, I have to do it.”

“Do you think that’s why the gods made you mates?”

“I think it might be the answer to my prayers which I hate because I didn’t want her to fucking suffer anymore.” He sighed when Edelman frowned. “I’ve been asking for a way to be able to prove I can put her first, show it was real and I’m not as selfish as I keep acting. I didn’t think it would be like this. I didn’t want this. I wanted...”

“I know, I know, Julian,” he whispered, making me realize that Julian was crying. He hugged the younger warlock. “You try so hard, but that is not always what is needed. The simplest explanation is normally the correct one. You know this.”

“What is it?” he choked out. “I don’t even know anymore.”

“*Tell her the truth*, idiot. Tell her what’s really going on with you. Tell her about your depression. Tell her how you hurt. Tell her that you haven’t been sleeping. All of it. Tell her about the panic attacks. How can you ask her to give you another chance when you still won’t fully let her in?”

“She has too much to bear already,” Julian argued. “I can’t make her shoulder more.”

“Julian, she’s already bearing it,” Edelman sighed. “If you explain what has truthfully been going on, you can maybe take some of that pain off her stress. What do you have to lose at this point? Can you not trust her?”

“No, I always trust her. Tamsin does—her soul is good.”

“Then why can you not share the truth with her?”

I felt tears trail down his cheeks faster. “What if I do and she still won’t accept me? No matter what I’ve been through, my mum always accepted me. I don’t have—I miss that.”

“Is that why you love Tamsin?”

“No. She makes me feel everything I didn’t know I could.”

“Then trust her. If you’re willing to put your *career* on hold for her, trust her to hear you, Julian. She might not forgive you, but she deserves to know the truth.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good and get some damn sleep or you won’t be of any good to her.”

I woke with a start, glancing around in confusion as my heart raced and beat in my ears.

Julian moved into view and held his hands out in surrender. “You’re okay. I asked Stefanie to put you to sleep since you were too tired to block her. You slept for...” He glanced at his watch. “Six hours. We’re at the hotel I brought you to.”

I slowly bobbed my head. “Yeah, okay. Got it.”

“Is this normally how you wake up?” He frowned when I didn’t say anything. “I can’t help you if you aren’t honest with me, Tams. I’m sorry if it’s difficult, but I need to know.”

“You first,” I mumbled, looking away from him. “Isn’t there some things you’re supposed to tell me first?” I glanced back at him when he gasped. “What?”

“You—did you see me talking to Edelman?”

I swallowed loudly. “Did you go talk to him?”

He nodded and slowly sat on the bed. He didn’t touch me but more like he needed to sit down at hearing what I said. “What did you see?”

I blew a raspberry. “We’re going to go crazy dancing around each other. This isn’t helping and—”

“Yes, I went to Edelman,” he blurted. “I asked for a leave from Artemis. I’m taking all next semester off.” He studied me closely as I swallowed loudly. “You saw that?”

I slowly nodded. “As if I was you. That’s how I see the dreams.” I glanced from the chair where I’d been sitting to the bed now. “Were you thinking about it while I was sleeping?”

“No, I was thinking of other things.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, but this is still good news.” He nodded when I frowned. “What you’re seeing is *real* then, Tams. You can verify it with people and it’s—you’re not cracking. It’s just a new extension of your power we have to figure out. We can get control of this.”

I really hoped he was right. Still, it was hard to believe it was all real and not—I felt so shattered. “Then be honest and tell me something Edelman wanted you to.”

He pulled his foot up on the bed and hugged his knee, staring at the nightstand instead of meeting my gaze. “You’re going to think I’m trying to be the victim and get sympathy.”

“Why do you never have any faith in me? Was I really so horrible to you?”

“No, never. I have faith in you, Tams. I always have. It’s the *perception*, and you’re normally valid. You’re drowning, and I’m going to sit here and tell you what’s going on with me? That absolutely seems like I’m trying to get sympathy.” He let out a dark bark of laughter. “It seems that way even when I don’t try to. I’ve tried to be honest and it all goes so wrong.”

“Because you push it on me. I’m asking. Tell me something.”

He swallowed loudly but still didn’t meet my gaze. “I haven’t been sleeping.”

“For how long?”

“A while.”

I wanted to reach out and shake him. “How long is a while, Julian? You wanted me to care and I’m asking. Stop

making me feel stupid for giving a shit about you still!”

He slowly looked at me with wide eyes and time seemed to freeze as we both absorbed my outburst. “Since I found out I was next in the Craftsman charter and would take over the family. I don’t think I’ve slept more than three hours a night since that moment.”

I couldn’t get my mouth to work. “I would have felt your exhaustion. Others would have.”

“I’m not lying,” he rasped, turning away like I’d slapped him.

“I know you’re not,” I admitted. “I’m confused. It wasn’t an accusation.” I sighed when he didn’t say anything. “How can I not know you’ve been so exhausted when you’re always around me? What am I missing?” And then it hit me. “You’re using my power level to block me from sensing you.”

He frowned but then slowly looked at me. “You really can’t tell?”

I shook my head. “I can tell with Izzy and Darby. It’s not so much exhaustion but their power level is in the tank. That’s how I can tell. I don’t like scan them.”

He opened his mouth but then closed it. “I’ve been using healing runes.”

“Yeah, but there’s only so much you can do for yourself if you’re exhausted.” I snorted. “I know from personal experience.”

Julian was quiet several moments but then winced. “I think using your power level to make it so you can’t hide from

me might make me hide from you in a way I didn't realize." He sighed and then stared at me, seeming to focus past me.

And then I felt it. I felt his exhaustion *ooze* out of him like a tipped-over paint can that was slowly spreading all over the floor.

"Jesus, Julian," I whispered. It was soaked into every inch of him, and I was honestly surprised he was standing. "You've been hiding this from more than me. People would have noticed."

Pain flared in his eyes and he looked away. No, he thought they did notice and didn't care. No one loved him anymore now that his mom had shown her true colors, and that was most of what ate at him.

I reached out without even realizing it and gave him a healing rune. I slowly gave him energy as well and felt him healing a little bit. I couldn't do too much with such a severe case, but it was a good start.

"You really did care," he whispered. "I thought I had broken us so badly you stopped caring that I was drowning." He shook his head. "No, I thought you were drowning so badly that you couldn't see what was happening to me."

"Or both," I said for him so he was honest. "I couldn't tell. I just felt distance. Before the black magic even it was like you were sand slipping through my fingers again."

"I'm sorry for that," he muttered, focusing on the nightstand again. "I was so scared." He shivered. "I was..."

I listened to his thoughts and sighed. "You're an idiot."

“I’ve never said otherwise,” he chuckled darkly. “But why this time?”

“You were terrified about being in charge of the lives of so many people. Who does that sound like? Who was dealing with the *same* and should have been the person you turned to?”

He winced. “Yeah, I should have turned to you. I swear... It made so much sense what my mum said. I didn’t know she hated you. She seemed... It wasn’t hate. It seemed like sadness that you had to suffer so much, or because of what you suffered you were so rough around the edges. That’s what she’d said.”

“And she told you that I wouldn’t understand what you were going through?” I pushed when he went quiet.

“No, that you had the whole a whole world on your shoulders and I shouldn’t bug you with the management of one family, a family who hurt you so badly.”

I sighed. Heavily. She wasn’t wrong, but the reason behind her advice was meant to drive a wedge between us.

“I’m sorry I listened to her,” he rasped. “I’m sorry I didn’t see that my mum loved her dreams for me more than she actually loved me.”

And that was a deep root of his depression. The person he had loved most in the world for so long hadn’t loved him more than what she wanted. And it had cost him the person who had loved him for who he was and would have given him anything.

I saw it all in his mind in a way I never had before. He took down the wall between us and now I could feel more.

I held him as he cried and finally tried to accept what had really happened and the damage it had done to him instead of pushing forward and ignoring it. That would get him nowhere.

Again, I spoke from experience on that.

We both managed to get some sleep, and I appreciated when he took the couch. He seemed to truly be hearing me when I said what I wanted. I thought about it for a bit and wondered how much would have been different if he had been sleeping as he should have for almost the past *year*. That was a long fucking time to be exhausted.

I knew from experience. It constantly made things seem so much worse than they were. It made me feel even more alone and just... Shredded me.

I woke before him and simply stared at his handsome face, his friggin curls hanging in his face. I realized I had so many questions for him. All I'd been able to see was my anger and pain because of my own exhaustion, but now I wanted answers.

And that scared me. I didn't want to get pulled back in. I didn't *want* to be curious.

His lashes fluttered, and I was staring into his deep emerald green eyes that used to make me feel like he saw me down to my soul. They used to make me feel so many different things than they did now and I hated that.

I hated how much had gone wrong between us.

“Why did you blame me?” I whispered. “Why hate me for what happened with your family? You told me to do it.”

He swallowed loudly and pushed his hair off his forehead as he sat up. “It wasn’t you specifically I blamed. I blamed the world. I hated the position I was in.” He let out a slow breath and leaned his forearms on his knees. “I lashed out at my ma. At Edelman and White. At everyone. I was mostly angry at myself for...”

“For what?” I growled when he didn’t answer and pushed to sit up. “I shared *everything* with you. Why can’t you—”

“I thought of killing myself,” he said so quietly I barely heard him.

My heart thudded in my ears. “What?”

He swallowed loudly again, staring at his hands. “When I found out it was me, and distant relatives started contacting me about the money and all of it—everything I hated about being a Craftsman, I was a mess. They hounded me and just—I was going to leave it all. My mum told me my da would never forgive me if I did that.

“And I don’t think she was being selfish then. I think she was right but not because my da was greedy. There are decent people in that family, and they would totally get screwed if someone else corrupt took over. People who need the trusts for schooling or not getting beat up for having the Craftsman name would be at risk.

“My da would have been disappointed in me if I let that happen, let the good people of his family fall through the cracks and the Craftsman name basically die. I did push you to

do it and I don't regret that, but I was *so angry* at how many of them were so fucking evil. Blood I have in me has that much evil."

"And?" I pushed when he got quiet.

"I kept having nightmares I would become my uncle. I hated that and I wanted to call it all off. I knew I couldn't, of course we couldn't. That's why I was angry at you. I did this mostly to protect you, and I was going to have to live my worst nightmare because of it. It wasn't fair. I knew it then, but I was being swallowed by the responsibility."

"I'm sorry."

He chuckled darkly. "Of course you are because you're perfect even after I've been so horrible." He raised his head and tears were in his beautiful eyes. "I almost killed myself after the black magic. After I was swarmed with memories of what I did to you. I thought about ending it and freeing you of me and that pain."

"That wouldn't have freed me, Julian," I rasped.

"It took me a bit to see that. I still... I can't wrap my mind around what I did. Most days I think I've accepted it, but a lot of days it feels not real and that—you asked me how I could have missed the mark so much on trying to get you back. I think that's part of it. Yes, I misunderstood the advice I got from Edelman and Nelson, but some of it is my own..."

"Desire to pretend that bad never happened to you?"

"I think so," he muttered. "I think that's what was going on with me. I don't know. I'm honestly too exhausted to figure

it out most days. I can't get my footing and figure out what's right or just not drown."

Apparently, we had been living the same nightmare in several ways and neither of us had been able to talk about it. I hadn't seen that one coming.

2

We had breakfast at the hotel, and I quickly talked to Darby. Julian had let everyone know I was safe and with Stefanie as well, but to back off. I assured Darby that we were fine, but no more surprises like that in future. Our lives were too chaotic for those types of surprises.

He completely understood and apologized, sounding relieved I wasn't pissed at him.

No, it wasn't his fault. And I hadn't been honest with him about how bad things had become... Again.

"We need to discuss what's been going on and probably in more detail than you'll want to," Julian said when we were done eating, waiting for me to nod. "Do you want to do it here or somewhere you feel safer?"

I glanced around and shrugged. "This place feels neutral."

"Okay, perfect." He licked his lips and stared just over my shoulder. "Can you start at the beginning?"

"Yes, but... You seem like there's something you want to ask me."

"I'm working on a few theories, but a lot of times magic is amplified by touch. I touched you to comfort you, and then

you saw what happened with Edelman. I want to start at the beginning but also deduce if you were always touching who you had dreams about later.”

I bobbed my head. “How do you know they’re really dreams? I could have cracked.”

“I don’t believe that at all. You had the soundness of mind to ask me for help, and even what you told me when *sobbing* made sense, Tams. I think you’re scared and exhausted, and that makes us miss big things or even little things that could have given you all the signs you needed. So let’s start there and then figure out how we’re going to try and fix this.”

I nodded, sighing when I told him what happened with passing out at the Vogels’s party and then after with Dalyor’s sex dream.

He groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face. “I couldn’t figure out why you wouldn’t tell Lageos. He’s the one who helped block these ghosting thoughts before, and I thought you would tell him, but you can’t tell your da you’re having sex dreams.”

“*Right?*” I winced. “But I did kinda tell him. I mean, he figured out whatever he got from Dalyor, but it got worse and just... It got worse.” I thought of something and sighed. “I think your touch theory is out. I got something from Khan after confronting him in the cafeteria, but he never touched me.”

“Good, that’s a good detail. However, it can still be something close like when you do magic in an area and people can feel it after.”

I mulled that over. “Like he grabbed a tray before me and maybe touched the one I picked?”

“Yes, exactly like that. Or leaning on the rails with your hand.”

“That might...” I blinked at him and wanted to sob in relief. I told him about the random dreams I’d had about scary vampire stuff and I couldn’t even tell *who* I was. That was part of why I thought I’d cracked.

“Fuck, Tams,” he whispered when I was done. “That’s—I’m so sorry. That’s so fucking terrifying.”

“You don’t think I’m being a baby?”

“Not even a little bit. I’ve—I know how it is not to trust your mind and your decisions when you’re so exhausted, but that’s a whole other fucking level of panic and scary. How many times has that happened?”

“Like eight? Seven or eight I think. Sometimes it’s not clear memories, or like I have multiple things in one night and then forget what the first was, but that feeling stays with me. The fear does.” I swallowed loudly and focused on my hands as I explained it. “You really believe it’s my magic and not split personalities or something?”

“100% it’s your magic, Tams. You wouldn’t just—there is a much more rational explanation given it all started after your huge power jump than you are developing an emotional disorder or something. I will get a real answer, but Edelman is right that the simplest answer is normally the correct one. It’s not simple to you because you didn’t grow up with magic.”

“Okay.” I bobbed my head again. “Okay.”

And then I opened the floodgates. I told him everything I had been dreaming and even talking with Darby about looking in the mirror and stuff like that. He pushed a bit to get more details about what was upsetting me, and I told him about things with Hudson. He already knew, so the details wouldn't be that much more mortifying at this point.

Or so I told myself.

It was bizarre talking to one man who abandoned me about the other abandoning me.

“Okay, let's take a break,” he whispered, too much swirling around both of us for me to lock onto anything. “Go take a shower at home and let all of this wash off of you. We can work on ideas and stay here this weekend if you want. We've got the week of review before finals and then it's winter break. I took a sabbatical and—”

“I hate you did that.”

He sighed, scrubbing his neck as he stared over my shoulder. “I should have done it the moment I learned I was taking over the Craftsman family. I regret that most. I shouldn't have listened to my mum.” He shook his head and got off the bed. “It is what it is. I took it now and can figure things out while helping you.”

“Thanks, Julian.”

“I owe you so much more than this. Don't thank me until I actually help.”

It helped that he listened to me and made sure I didn't feel crazy, but I didn't say that. I couldn't put myself out there any more than I already had.

And I was mortified for how much I already confessed to someone who had shattered me.

We agreed to both go home and shower and grab a bag so we could just work in the hotel where I felt safe and everything was neutral. I liked that plan, thanking him again even if he'd said not to.

I went home and was packing while the shower was warming up when I felt a strange tug on my magic. Someone was... Accessing it.

Fuck. Julian.

I teleported to him without even worrying about what I was jumping into or warning people. I thought I was out of my head and dreaming again when I saw him punch Hudson.

Like *punch* the large dragon and with magic so Hudson went flying.

And then the Rothchilds were on him, restraining him as I stood there with my mouth hanging open. He'd used my magic to slip into the Vogel's castle and get to Hudson.

Oh shit.

"You're a fucking git," Julian bellowed. "All she's done for you, all the times she's been patient with your rock head, and you pull the same shite?"

"You're one to talk," Hudson snarled as he got to his feet.

"I have *never* objectified her," Julian shot right back. "She is more than sex and your *mate*. How could you ever treat her like a cheap shag?"

Hudson lost his anger. “That’s not what happened. I wanted to—”

“*Fix her*, right? After you weren’t getting what you wanted in bed, you wanted to give her spice? You’re a selfish git. You should look in the mirror for what’s wrong, not say shite to her.”

“I didn’t say—you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hudson snapped, storming towards Julian, but backing off when more Rothchilds got in his path. “I don’t know what she told you but—”

“Everything was supposed to be better when we came out as mates. I guess not. You clearly liked the fun of keeping it secret better,” Julian bit out. He skipped the part about me being more into the sex and said what Hudson had finished with. “I guess it was better for me if we kept it secret after all.”

Hudson went pale. “I didn’t say that.”

“How else would—”

“I *thought* it,” Hudson said firmly. “I would never have said that to her. Something is wrong with her telepathy if she thinks she heard me say that. I didn’t say that.”

Relief and pain blossomed in my chest all at once. He hadn’t been a monster and a completely different person to say something so horrible to me.

But he’d still thought it.

And that pissed me off. He knew I had telepathy and clearly, *something* had happened for me to have left that day after he went to the bathroom. Was he so blind not to see that?

“Unless the next words out of your mouth are ‘and I’m an asshole for that,’ you are still bastard for thinking that about your mate,” I said firmly, letting everyone know I was there.

He glanced around and frowned. “Let’s talk—”

“Are you kidding me? You’ve had all the chances to talk to me. Your answer was—”

“You can’t hold my thoughts against me, Tams,” he said... With a sigh.

I got so upset so fast that my magic ramped up and my wings popped out. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do or say, but I froze in my tracks when stark fear filled Hudson’s eyes.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, immediately connecting a call. “Get here now. Something is wrong with Tamsin.”

“What?” I gasped, about to lose my shit that he would say that and to someone not there just because I was upset. I saw Julian wince and was about to ask what was going on when Lageos teleported next to Hudson.

“What’s wrong?” Lageos demanded, before locking gazes with me. “Are you hurt? What’s wrong?”

“Her wings,” Hudson breathed. King Xavier and Queen Sasha came racing down the hallway and slid to a halt when they saw the situation was quiet. Clearly, they had been informed someone had hit their son.

Whoops.

“Let’s take this somewhere private,” Julian said firmly. “Now.” He looked at King Xavier’s angered gaze. “You do *not*

want people to hear what comes next.”

I held my hands up in surrender when they both looked at me. “I didn’t do it this time. Julian used my magic to get in here. Hudson’s the one blowing it up.”

Xavier swore under his breath and ordered the Rothchilds to let Julian go and everyone follow him. We walked down the hallway a bit and he showed us into a meeting room. “What is the meaning of all of this?”

“Fuck Julian decking me,” Hudson cut in, focusing on Lageos. “Her wings are broken. They’re not purple anymore.”

My eyes went wide as I felt mind-numbing fear as well, glancing all around for a mirror and finding one to my left.

And my wings were still purple.

What. The. Fuck?

“She’s falling out of love with you,” Julian said quietly. “I don’t always see her wings as purple anymore.”

The room went eerie silent.

“You never told me that,” I whispered when I could find my voice again. “Are they purple now?”

“Yes, but not like they were before,” he admitted. “I figured the color change was that and I asked Iolas to be sure. He said that’s what happens when a fairy falls out of love with a non-fairy.”

“Your bond is dissolving,” Lageos said firmly, focusing on Hudson intently. “I don’t know what the hell you did, but it was impaired when she announced you were mates, but it’s

drastically strained since then. Her bond with Julian is stronger. What the fuck did you do to my daughter?”

“Are you falling out of love with me?” Hudson asked, his voice small.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“What do you know? I know you’re upset about last night, but I was trying—”

“I want a break from you,” I heard myself saying. “This isn’t working, and I’m not repeating past mistakes. I want a break.”

“So you’re running? Again?” he asked, his voice hurt more than angry this time.

“You threw another man at me to try and fix me and my depression instead of trying to figure out what is going on,” I whispered. “I don’t care if you only thought what you did. I left when you went to the bathroom. You had to know something was wrong and maybe I’d heard that.”

“No, no, I didn’t,” he argued. “I thought you had an emergency and had to go. I was trying to not be pissed you didn’t just leave me a note or text so I didn’t worry. When I found out what you were dealing with and crap with Faerie, I forgave it.”

“You sense too much not to know when you hurt me like that,” I snapped.

He was quiet until I looked at him. “I didn’t say it, but it was horrible of me to even think. I know that. I didn’t sense what was coming from you because I was so focused on what

the fuck was wrong with *me* that I thought that about you. That's the truth."

"It is," Lageos confirmed.

Well, that was much better than I had thought about the situation, and I was glad that he finally admitted he was a jerk for it... But it was too little too late for me. The whole thing with Dalyor was over the line and clearly, we weren't working.

"I want a break."

"You just announced you were together," Sasha worried.

I opened my mouth but then closed it, trying again and shaking my head. "Glad that's your priority, but announce the break or don't. I don't care. None of you talked to me about the plan to come out as together so do whatever. I'm allowed to say this isn't healthy for me and I'm taking a break to reevaluate if this is what I want no matter what the fucking gods say."

"Juan said—" Hudson growled.

"Then go be fucking mates with Juan," I snapped. "I don't know what happened to *my* Hudson, but you are not him. My Hudson had a mind of his own and didn't care about what his friends thought constantly or bitched about the optics of me not being a good little mate."

"I never said—Juan said that and—"

Fucking Juan. Did Hudson not even hear himself?

My dad cut in that this wasn't productive and he needed to know what happened last night. I didn't want to be the one to tell him, but Julian had no problem snitching on Hudson. It

wasn't a jealous thing or to make him look better. No, I think he wanted Hudson's parents to hear how badly their son had fucked up.

Maybe so others in the room would tell him he was a huge asshole instead of it only coming from me? I wasn't sure, but my anger was irrationally placed elsewhere.

And I was done standing back and watching the car wreck that was my mating happen right in front of me.

I teleported to Juan who was on his computer in his room. I teleported us to outside his castle so we were on his family lands, but nothing but trees would be ruined when I beat his ass.

Because that was *absolutely* on the agenda.

"What have you done to my mate?" I blasted. "What did *I do* that you hate me so fucking much now? We were friends, Juan."

"Were we?" he asked, glancing around and snorting. He gestured to the open area. "But this is part of it. You just do whatever you want whenever you want, and we're all supposed to accept it."

"I have *never* done anything like this to you," I argued. "You've been saying shit about me and I've let it go. You've poisoned my mate against me and I'm finally calling you on it. Did you think I was going to let this go on forever?"

He snorted. "I don't care what you do, Tamsin. I hope Hudson gets rid of you and finds a real mate."

I stared at him in shock. "Seriously, what the fuck happened, Juan? You knew we were mates before the others."

“Yeah, but that was before I knew you had others,” he blasted. “Hudson doesn’t deserve that shit. He should be king, not one of many for *you*. You fucking play games and fuck with people. Now it’s Lucca too? Fine, dissolve the bond with Hudson like you did Lucca and set them free.”

“Lucca wants to be with me,” I whispered.

“Because he’s not seeing clearly,” Juan growled. “All the drama and pain he went through were *you*. I didn’t know what the fuck went wrong with him, but the answer was you. Now it’s Hudson. You did it to Mason and fuck with his recovery even now!”

I stumbled away like he hit me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I did *nothing* to Mason—”

“Mason stopped eating for three weeks after you screwed with his recovery!” Juan bellowed. “I thought you were the victim, but there was no reason for you to hurt him after—”

“I have every reason after what he did to me, but I didn’t do that, Juan. I didn’t.”

“Bullshit. I don’t believe you. His parents—”

“His parents called me a half-breed and a disgrace to all fucking fairies, so maybe don’t listen to anything those bigots have to say. You have no idea—”

“You being a fairy with multiple mates fucks with—”

“Mason knew I was a fairy, Juan.” I nodded when he froze. “Yeah, he knew. He put a camera on the portal to Faerie at school and caught me because he was stalking me. I did nothing. He tried to *breed me* so he could repopulate the world

with more fairies. Lucca knew he was—you have no idea what I went through.

“And I’m *sorry* I set back his recovery. No one warned me he would be on campus. He was just fucking there saying hi to me. I was so terrified I called my fae dogs. That’s the impact of what he did to me. I freaked out and couldn’t stop screaming until help came. So do not talk to me about what I did to Mason when I still have nightmares about him!”

He frowned. “It wasn’t on campus.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You seriously think I went to that place in Asia to fuck with him? I don’t know where it is or the name. I didn’t want to know because I was so traumatized, you asshole.”

He shook his head. “Fine, he came to campus and scared you. You still overreacted, and he could have died from not eating.”

“I’m sorry it happened, but it wasn’t my fault. I wanted him to get help and never see him again. I said that last part very firmly. You need to talk to Lucca and get the rest of the story because—”

“I don’t want to fucking talk about you anymore!” he thundered. “All everyone does is talk about you and I’m tired of it. My parents *constantly* talk about you and how great it would have been if it was me that was your mate. I could have been the one to stand at your side like I’m just a fucking pawn to be one of your harem.

“And it’s disappointing to them that I’m not. It would have meant so much for everyone else but *me*, and that’s all

that matters. And you. They love you. Gods, do they fucking adore you, and I have to hear it all the fucking time. We could have gotten so much instead of the Vogels if only I'd been your mate. Never mind I wouldn't be king but sure, next kid can go.

“So that's not enough, but I had to hear Mason talk about you all the time, and then you fucked him up. Lucca clearly was into you, and then he blew up and went off the rails. Great, two friends gone because of you. Now it's Hudson, and I'm tired of how fucking spoiled you are. You are not the center of everything, and Hudson needs to see that.”

“You are the spoiled one here, Juan, not me,” I bit out. “Everything you said is about how it affects *you*. My relationship with Hudson is not about you. or Lucca. Hell, we're just friends so if he's not hanging with you, I would guess it has to do with you. Your parents aren't my fault either and—”

“I should matter to all of them more than you!” he roared before lunging for me. He tried to tackle me to the ground, but I flipped up onto his shoulders and behind him, shoving him into the ground with his own momentum.

I flipped off of him in time to get out of range when he shifted into his dragon, trashing his clothes in the process. When his wing came at me, I threw up a barrier and blocked him, something that pissed his dragon off even more.

It wasn't like I was calm right then either. If he wanted to fight, we could fight.

He just might not get up from it.

Fine, I wouldn't kill Juan, but I would make sure it hurt. He was Hudson's trusted friend, and if he was going to push my mate down a path that was hurting us, then I was going to hurt this dragon.

I threw a power clap blast with one hand to knock out his back leg. I got a front one before he swung his tail at me. I could have gotten all of his legs with a full power clap that would *cut* them, but I didn't know if dragons could reattach legs or if Juan would shift back without his damn limbs.

Using my barrier, I smacked his tail like a baseball, and it flipped him onto his side given he was only on two legs. He tried to shoot fire at me, but I put up a wall of ice and dumped a ton of water on him.

Actually, way more than a literal ton of water. It was like the sky opened up on him and drenched the dragon. Maybe my swimming pool full of water?

Either way, the fire stopped fast, and I turned the water under his feet into ice so he was basically dancing for me. I used my barrier to knock him in the face and several spots on his body.

After several more hits, he gave up and shifted back, staring at me with thick anger.

"Good talk. It wasn't even a workout," I taunted. I walked over to him, and just to put the last nail in the coffin of our friendship, I decked him with all I had. He was out before I even finished the punch. I looked up at the sky and asked for the patience to deal with this shit and not let the fallout be too bad when I contacted his guards.

Apparently, I didn't *need* to though. I glanced towards the castle to try and figure out what to do and found Juan's parents along with a dozen of their dragon ninjas.

Except I couldn't hear them and their mouths were moving. I glanced around and saw Lageos smirking while the Vogels and others were behind whatever he had going on.

"He came after me," I grumbled.

Lageos waved his hand to take down the barrier. "I know. We saw."

"I just wanted to—we used to be friends."

"Obviously, he's been listening to the bile of the Rodriguezes instead of sanity," he grumbled. "I'm sorry, Daughter. I know you truly cared for him."

I nodded, glancing over at the Vogels, knowing Hudson was there but not able to look at him. "How much did you see?"

"All of it," he answered. "Lageos brought us the moment he realized you were gone."

"We arrived when he said he hoped Hudson dumps you and finds a real mate," my dad clarified. "Juan's people showed up shortly thereafter and I blocked them from interjecting."

I nodded. "That wasn't the start, but you got most of it." I took in and let out a slow breath. "I'm sorry you guys get tunnel vision, but everyone around us has known Juan hates me now. You didn't and were at his side instead of mine. I'm not *running* when I say I'm taking a break. I'm saying I'm taking a break because I don't deserve that or any of this."

“Tams, I didn’t—” he whispered but stopped when his father grabbed his arm.

I half looked at Juan’s parents who I was allies with. “You pissed I beat up your heir?”

“No,” Mr. Gui whispered. “He went for you, and I thank you for teaching him a lesson instead of ending his life as was well within your right.”

I nodded. “Clearly, he’s got some shit going on. I hope you guys get it straightened out.” I met Mrs. Gui’s scared gaze. “I didn’t go after Mason or screw with him. I’m sorry Mason reacted badly to seeing me, but I was the *victim*.”

“I know,” she whispered. “We know, Tamsin. This was completely Juan’s fault.”

I wasn’t sure about that given how much pain he’d been in when he’d talked about his parents. That was the only reason I had beaten Juan and not seriously hurt him. His anger stemmed from pain.

That still didn’t make any of it my fault or the one he should blame, but I understood being in pain and lashing out.

I understood it way too well if I was honest.

I thanked Lageos and told him I was going home before working with Julian on some things. That worried him, but he said he’d be along soon.

Yeah, we needed to talk about what was going on. I just... It was so hard to talk to him about my piles of crap always when he was grieving my mom.

“You need to hear one thing and take it more seriously than when my daughter has tried to talk to you,” I said to Hudson.

No, my dad did. He was standing back where the fight was.

This is a dream. Fuck, another dream of something I shouldn't see.

“What?” Hudson asked, sounding beat up and exhausted.

“Your bond is almost dissolved on Tamsin's end. It's so frayed that it could snap if one more thing happens,” he warned, his voice clear that he wasn't fucking around.

“I know he's made mistakes, but it can't happen that fast,” Sasha argued.

“It can if the mistakes are that bad and without hope,” Lageos said, his gaze on Hudson. “You don't even apologize to her. She doesn't know if you truly carried her off after the announcement to have sex or if it was your dragon. *You* wanted to be her mate. She was terrified you would regret giving up your throne, and that is how you are acting.

“I'm shocked the bond isn't gone given you pushed her on another man. I *know* it's the way of fairies but not before you're even *mated*. Use your damn head instead of letting your idiot friend put bile in your brain. She gave you everything you wanted, every part of her she had to give. No more chances, Hudson. Realize your part in this or lose her.”

“This is real,” Julian said from my right, making me jump and face him.

But Lageos stayed where he was. I wasn't attached to him anymore. Or I wasn't him in the dream. I was watching it like I had the memories Julian had shown me of my parents.

"You're in a dreamscape with me?" I asked as I studied everything.

"I turned it into a dreamscape, yes."

"Don't hurt yourself like before," I worried.

"No, this is nothing," he promised. "It's your dream, and I used your magic to crash like before when we had dreams together. I couldn't control showing you someone else's memories right now. I'm not..."

"Your exhaustion knocked your power levels," I mumbled, able to feel all of that now.

"I'll get it back," he said easily. "This is more important, and now you know how to break free of this. It will take work, but at least you have the key now."

"Huh?"

He smiled his soft Julian smile at me that still made my stomach flip. "You got distracted from the memory. That's the key. We can work on you doing that and realizing it's not your dream, but someone's memory you got sucked into."

I nodded, hugging myself. "That will help me feel less fractured. I want to stop this though."

"I'm sure we can but as you said, right now is getting you back on solid ground. You were doing so well, and I'm going to make sure you get back there." He cleared his throat and looked towards the scene before us of people arguing. "I had

to break your rule to do it. I couldn't get into your mind without touching you. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I whispered, shocked there was such a change in him lately. Or really, he was changing back to my Julian if that made any sense. "Thanks."

"We'll figure this out." He nodded towards Hudson. "And you will with him too."

I snorted. "Darby said it had to be black magic to make him do all of this."

"No, I checked him. I think the fairies have learned their lesson and are now checking everyone who comes near you regularly."

"I told them to so good they listen." I swallowed loudly as I watched Hudson get angry. "What the fuck happened to us then? I blinked and this is where we are and I barely recognize him."

"Speaking as an idiot who listened to the wrong people that I trusted, I can tell you it can happen easier than you think. Plus, their tunnel vision isn't like ours. I've had it explained to me several times and I don't understand. I mean, I do, but it's... It's like trying to explain to them how I don't need a conduit for magic. We just can't fully get it."

"Why can't I ever be enough for you guys?" I rasped when Hudson started crying. I realized what I'd said out loud and flinched away from Julian.

"You are. You always have been, Tams. We're the idiots. It's not what you were doing, I swear it."

I didn't believe that. I was doing something wrong if my mates pulled away from me like they did or we couldn't get things right.

Or really, we got them so, *so* wrong.

3

“I’m sorry,” Darby whispered for the eight millionth time.

“Please stop,” I sighed as I squeezed his hand. “I get it. I’m not one single bit mad at you. Thank you for trying to do what you felt is best for me, just no more surprises like that. Not when things are so chaotic.” I stopped so he did and faced him. “Now, this is about you. I swear to you that we’re fine. Let’s focus on this and have fun.”

He ignored all the people around us and gave me the sweetest kiss with some heat before hugging me. “I love you, *agra*.”

“I love you too, my prickly pear.” I winked at him and pulled him along.

I had forgotten something big about the weekend away plan, and I felt two inches tall when I’d told Darby I was ditching the rest of the trip. It had hit me early Sunday morning when I’d woken up, and I had scrambled to get ready and catch him. My issues and freak out weren’t more important than Darby’s future, and we had a scheduled tour of Yale Law School.

“I’m sorry that I freaked out so over the top and almost missed this,” I whispered, finally saying what I was feeling. “I didn’t—it shouldn’t have been that crazy. I thought...”

“Your telepathy has been worse than you’ve told me,” he said, his voice a little tight.

“I wasn’t sure that’s what it was. I’m sorry. I just kept thinking if I got more sleep or... I’m sorry.”

“You were going to tell me, right?” He waited until I looked at him. “It kind of hurts you went to Julian instead of me, *agra*.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t make the conscious decision. My magic did.” I shrugged when he sighed. Yeah, it was weird and not a valid excuse really.

Well, for most people.

“I think it’s because of the dreamscapes. Subconsciously, I knew he was the one to ask because he’d been part of weird dreams and projecting memories. Maybe my magic knew what was going on and who to ask for help.”

“It would be nice if your magic just left a note instead of putting you through so much shite.”

“Preaching to the choir.”

We walked around for about thirty minutes before our tour time. I thought it was important to get a vibe for the campus... Even if my security was with us and got us a bit too much attention.

“I feel like you’re doing this mostly to make sure every woman on campus knows I’m taken,” he teased me.

“Unflattering but not untrue,” I chuckled. “It caused more problems later when I was wearing a glamour last time.”

Gossip had swirled all over the place that Darby was seen on the UC Berkley campus with a woman not me. People were *way* too invested in his business than this campus so far and I liked the vibe better, but it wasn't about me. I would support whatever he wanted.

“This feels more me than the other campuses,” he muttered as we headed to meet up with the tour guide. “Though they seemed more interested in trying to get you to attend than me.”

“Sorry.” I smiled when he shot me a look that made it clear he gave *zero* fucks about that. His attitude on things like that was one of the many reasons I loved him.

The tour guide was a woman our age who looked nervous for some reason... Which I understood when a man joined us who was with the dean's something or other. Oh boy.

The tour was laid out well and the information was helpful, but I had more questions to ask. Could he live off campus in an apartment? What was the graduation rate? How about the procedure to dispute grades if needed? Was he allowed to keep his internship if he wanted? Did he get any credits for that? What about security for him if I had a threat against me?

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I realized I'd been shooting all my questions at them rapid-fire. I cleared my throat when Darby tried to smother a chuckle. “Sorry. I think I'm more nervous about this than I thought. Even if I have private planes, this is a long distance.”

“You can always transfer to here, Ms. Vale,” the administrator said with a bit too much eagerness.

“Honestly, I would love to instead of that stuffy campus, but my advisor is really great and helped me get to the point where others would want to steal me away. I’m loyal to that type of dedication.”

“Good to hear. Yes, a wise choice if you’re comfortable with their path for your future,” he gracefully accepted.

Still, he patiently answered all of my questions and brought up several issues I hadn’t even thought of.

“I think this is more about your smartie LSAT and your internship than you’re dating me,” I muttered to Darby after we checked out another building.

“In fact, it is,” the administrator agreed. “It’s rare a student comes in with a year internship at one of the most exclusive law firms. We were also impressed that Mr. Moore took the LSATs three times to push himself as much as possible and get his best score.”

Or he was really too scared to deal with a bad score, but I wasn’t going to snitch on him for that.

Never.

I glanced around and did a double take when I saw Wyn excitedly taking it all in. I mean, the guy practically had anime hearts all around him. He was one of the fairies who had volunteered to go to law school if Darby did, but I had thought he’d done it just for me.

Apparently not.

Rafe was doing it too, and he seemed interested when I looked at him, but nothing like Wyn. Rafe had made it clear that he was 90% doing it to keep Darby safe and ease my worries and 10% because the law fascinated him and he wanted to get updated on the past twenty years.

Fair enough.

When the tour was over, we wrapped up near the university store. That seemed like a standard ploy to get them excited and buy stuff for their new school.

Hopefully.

We thanked both of them, and Darby seemed lost in thought as we went into the store. I was shocked when he went to the tiny baby Yale merch.

“Think Freya will be proud that her older brother went here?” he asked quietly as he touched a onesie.

“I think she will know you’re the best older brother ever no matter where you go or don’t go, Darby.” I hugged his arm, glad when he moved it to over my shoulders.

“I feel guilty I’m not doing more, *agra*. I’m not helping her. I’m not catching when you’re in pain. I made things worse.”

“No, no, you didn’t,” I whispered. “And you did see something was wrong. You did. You didn’t blame me about Neldor and more. I didn’t crack because you were there, I swear it.”

He frowned at me. “But I won’t be there next year.”

I leaned in and kissed his nose. “Don’t be silly. You know I won’t follow the rules.” I meant I wouldn’t stay over in my dorm room and sneak into his apartment instead.

“Part of what I love about you is you never do,” he breathed before kissing me. We both knew that was about more than where I slept at night or opening portals on campus.

“You are amazing, my prickly pear,” I promised as I ran my fingers over his cheek. “I wouldn’t ever have made it without you. I never *dreamed* I would find someone who loved me like you do. I feel it, and you make me whole when I thought I was broken beyond repair.”

“I feel the same, *agra*,” he rasped, hugging me tightly. “I really like it here and it’s the top spot. I thought Harvard would be the fit, but this feels like where I should be.”

“I think the same,” I admitted. “You don’t have to decide today though. Take a bit more and settle with it over break. You’ll still fill out multiple applications too.”

“How did I get so lucky to be with someone so beautiful and smart?” he murmured, sneaking another kiss.

I was shocked at all the PDA and felt my face flush. I picked up the right size for Freya and the largest hoodie they had for myself to wear to bed. Darby knew exactly what I was plotting for it with the heat in his eyes. He also got a shirt for now, and we were all smiles as we headed out.

My soul felt lighter as Darby and Wyn talked excitedly about the classes and campus on the way to the airport. It sucked we had to go through the motions for the humans, but

we studied the whole flight just as we would have if we were home.

There was a commotion when we arrived back at campus, and I wished it had nothing to do with me, but it always did. It was just time to accept if there was a problem, it would undoubtedly involve me.

Professor Nelson saw me first and turned towards me. “I’m sorry. I’m *very sorry* and I didn’t—it wasn’t intentional.”

I swallowed a sigh and turned on my telepathy, hearing it directly from his thoughts what he’d done. I shrugged. “It happens. I’m not mad.”

Everyone around us froze, even the students who had stopped to watch the show between Julian, Nelson, White, Edelman, and several other faculty.

“That’s it? Even I would beat him for this,” Professor Pillay admitted.

Again I shrugged. “I said the same thing and that Julian shouldn’t put his career on hold for me, especially when things are... What they are. I’ve been overheard saying the wrong thing in the wrong place more times than I can *count*, and none of us are robots. People say way worse about me all the time and to my damn face.”

“Wait, what the fuck is going on?” Darby cut in, giving Nelson a look like he was plotting how to kill him quickest.

I moved my hand to his arm. “Nelson felt Julian’s exhaustion and freaked like a good friend should. I fucking freaked as well.” I gave Julian a sad smile. “But I was right. They immediately freaked out and worried.”

He sighed, moving his hands to his hips and nodding. He glanced between the witches and warlocks. “Tamsin didn’t know I was using her power as I was. I didn’t think I used it as I did. I wanted to put up a wall between us so I didn’t burden her.”

“Except she’s more powerful, and you blocked what you’re really carrying from everyone,” Darby surmised, always faster than most to put the pieces together. “Got it because I’m like half panicked at how exhausted you are. It’s ridiculous, and you’ve had to drop several levels of power.” He winced at saying that much.

“He has,” White and Edelman said together, explaining why they were upset.

“I already spoke to one of the royal healers, and they’re going to give him a full assessment before dinner,” I told them before anyone else got upset. “I bet he’ll be given the same prescription I got and to go soak in my family hot spring that I never do because I don’t have time. He will though because he should feel guilty for being sneaky with my power.”

“Fine, you can have him if you take that good of care of him,” Nelson muttered, shrugging when several of us gave him shit looks. “I’m still sorry.”

I wanted to groan as I caught the rest of it. “Everyone knows my telepathy is having issues and I can’t block.” I sighed when he nodded. “Still, we’ve all had slips and it’s not what they all would assume. I can still block, it’s... I catch their dreams later when I sleep and normally not the good stuff. Like a vampire being a monster and desiring that.”

It sucked to overshare, but that example specifically would make people think twice about screwing with me so I didn't get anything bad from them. Or that was my hope at least since I was doing this on the fly.

"Anyone who intentionally messes with Tamsin after learning that she's having issues with her telepathy after her power jump will deal with me," Mel announced loudly from next to me. It scared me so bad that I flinched away, but she ignored that. "We've all been there or had problems after shifting, and we should all understand that.

"If you don't, I can't do what I'd want to, but every student in Artemis attends my class, and I will make yours hell. That I can do, and I will, so spread the word. I won't take the excuse no one told someone with how everything flies around this place. If people won't be the upstanding people they should be, I will make them regret that."

"Thanks, Mel," I said under my breath.

"No problem, kid," she said quietly. "Take it as my apology that I didn't try harder with Hudson." She sighed when I faced her. "I told him several times that I thought something was wrong with your telepathy. He brushed me off and said you were fine. I didn't know you guys were..."

"Yeah, I didn't know we'd gotten that bad either," I admitted, swallowing loudly. "I missed a lot of things."

"What the fuck happened to Juan?" She shook her head. "He's always been a selfish bratty prince, but something..."

"He said Mason stopped eating for three weeks after I bumped into him here over the summer."

“Shit,” she hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. She did a double take at whatever was on my face. “Tams, I’m not taking his side. I’m thinking how I would feel if you stopped eating for three weeks because of something. Even if it was your fault, I love you and it would destroy me. I’d fucking be out for blood.”

I opened my mouth to argue but then blew out a slow breath. “Yeah, I didn’t think about it that way. I can’t be objective.”

“That’s my point about Juan. He can’t be either.”

I finally let out the sigh I was holding back. “So you’re saying most of the major drama in my life is because two *idiots* have dragon tunnel vision going on, and one is fixated on me irrationally because I locked up his best friend for what he did to me? A delayed reaction?”

“Basically.” She shrugged. “Don’t look for logic when it’s someone they love. Mason could have died starving himself like that. I would have seen red and gone for your throat before checking if what the Rodriguezes said was true.”

“You get that’s nuts, right?”

“I never said it any of us were sane, Tams, dragon or not.”

No, no, she hadn’t. Still, I forgave Nelson and told Julian to just let it go. I wasn’t happy that people were so shocked by that. I was a reasonable woman and not a bitch.

“It was a pretty big fuck up, Your Highness, not that people don’t believe in you,” one of my security said. “I mean, he leaked private information about the leader of Faerie.”

“True,” I sighed. “But I’m just Julian’s girlfriend to him and a student before I was the heir of Faerie, so I see it all from that side.”

“Understandable, but we all see it from the other side, so it’s really not a slight against you. You’re being ridiculously understanding.”

“It’s my good deed for that day,” I teased, sounding tired to my own ears and was comforted when Darby squeezed my hand.

He dropped me off at my room and I got ready for my first final. After some back and forth, we were doing another livestream to raise money for Faerie’s updating and development. So it made sense to do it before finals started so more people could be available and up the ratings.

What the main debates were about was letting the master’s students be involved in the final. I was shocked when Onas was the one who laughed that none of them could remotely hurt me and I’d be fine. Plus, it was good training for me and to show how seriously I took my commitments.

Rock on. At least we agreed on some things.

We’d eaten before coming back to campus, so I really only had time to change and put a few things away before I had to get to the school’s arena. I swallowed a heavy sigh when I arrived and there was clearly a problem.

“I’m going to gut that fucking cat and dance over his tiny, tiny penis,” Stefanie seethed. “I’m so over this and playing nice. I will sharpen my sword on his bones.”

“Okay, who are we killing? Because if they pissed *you* off like this, they totally deserve it,” I asked, letting them all know I was there.

Iolas and Taeral did their best to try and smother their reactions, but one of them let a snicker out. I would put money on Iolas.

Yeah, that was a smart bet.

“Khan,” several replied, Stefanie’s more of a snarl.

Oh damn, that shifter was toast.

“Your Highness, I beg your indulgence to let me go before you and Prince Neldor fight so I might finally be rid of this pest,” she said, steam practically coming out of her ears.

“Yeah, sure, beat his ass. What set this off though?” My eyes went wide when Stefanie let out a string of cuss words.

“Wow,” Neldor whispered from behind me. “Who is about to die?”

“*Right?*” I chuckled.

“Coach Khan was caught saying he was curious to see how many of the master’s students you’d slept with that will let you win like in his class,” Onas bit out. “But he knows a few for sure you haven’t since they’re on his teams, and he will enjoy watching you be beaten before he shows Stefanie her place.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “He so has a death wish.”

“Yes, yes, he does,” Stefanie seethed. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been so angry at a shifter so fast that I just see his blood all over the ground.”

“Do it to it, Commander,” Neldor chuckled. “The world would be better without him.”

“No killing faculty,” I mumbled as I elbowed him. “But yes, please, show that man his place. He’s had it coming for years.”

Onas handled the change in plans and checked all the cameras were running, and we confirmed the livestream was up. Stefanie was shaking with adrenaline as she headed to the middle of the arena.

While I sat off to the side with a drink and wished I had popcorn like Izzy. I would have put money on Izzy sitting with snacks. She was one of the few let in the arena to watch and she definitely brought food.

I couldn’t judge when I included food into as much as possible.

Khan pulled off his shirt like a cliché and started bouncing on the balls of his feet as one of his guys counted it down. He had insisted his people be involved so there was no cheating.

Asshole.

The moment his guy blew the whistle, Stefanie let loose a beautiful kick.

My mouth fell open as Khan went flying, clearly unconscious. He would have landed in a heap if Taeral hadn’t caught the shifter with his magic and lowered him to the ground.

“I *wanted* him to feel that,” Stefanie snapped.

“I just bet she did,” Neldor said under his breath, shaking his head. “Well, at least we don’t have to deal with Khan anymore.”

I snorted. “You don’t. Even if he’s gone, he’ll go all around bitching and running his mouth that it was all fake and women are weak.”

“How’s that frozen tundra area that you kept sending evil humans to?”

“Shit, we’d get in trouble, but I so want to.” I really, *really* wanted to, but sometimes I had to behave and not piss people off.

I got up to fight and noticed Neldor was watching me stretch.

Or my ass really.

I couldn’t hide my shock, and he cleared his throat when he met my gaze and realized he was busted. I shook it off and headed to meet up with my first opponent. The offer was open to all of the master’s students for some extra credit on their own final.

From what Mel had told Iolas, most were taking it as the challenge and fun intended. There was only a handful that were being jerks and wanting to make me look bad.

I took it as progress. As bad as that was, it was a lot of progress from how people felt about me my freshman year or even last year.

The fights were fun, and it was interesting to experience the styles of other people. That was the point of it all. It was educational for them too and most took it as that. Three looked

like they were going to start shit for my making them look bad or whatever bluster but chilled when Taeral cleared his throat and showed them he was holding his sword.

Nice.

I turned to wish Neldor good luck and I was grabbed in a bear hug. Lucca let out a whoop of triumphant and swung me around.

He set me down after a few spins, beaming at me with a huge grin. “That was *awesome*, Tams. I mean, you moved and just—shit, it was so cool. Our fights aren’t like that. I want to practice more of that with you. I mean, I know I’m not nearly in your league, but I so want to learn to be badass like that.”

I threw back my head and laughed. It was maybe the most exuberant congratulations I’d gotten on any of my many matches and tournaments.

And just to make my night better?

Khan woke up to find out he was out of the job and the guy who had officiated was getting his job. He said it loudly for the cameras that it was *undoubtedly* a fair fight and there wasn’t magic used. That lots of them had known Khan was all talk for a while and he was glad the guy was out of Artemis.

Nice.

4

Review week went by in a flash. The only hiccup in my week was Hudson sitting down to breakfast with me. The shock felt around the cafeteria was so strong it surrounded me in a suffocating way like too-tight clothes. Juan sat at their normal table with his friends and Hudson came to sit by me.

Yeah, so that was a thing. He didn't say anything and seemed to be deep in thought, but he just plopped down across from me.

Okay. What the fuck did that mean?

I had no idea, and it was what he did all week. It was distracting, so I was going to say something when Izzy finally broke on it too and cornered me.

"He's taking the break seriously," she told me Friday night. "That's why he's not talking to you or doing much when he sits with us. He's taking your side over Juan and his bullshit, but he heard you that he's fucked up and you need a break. That's what's happening in his mind."

I sighed. "How do you know this?"

"He asked me what I thought," she admitted before hugging me. "Boys are stupid. That's always been my stance."

He doesn't want to make things worse with finals. Let him do this for show but take his time to realize he was an absolute dipshit."

What other choice did I really have?

Saturday I woke to find a few grocery bags sitting outside of our door. They were completely full and there was a note on one. I yanked it off and sighed when I saw who it was from.

Tams,

I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say, but I am sorry. I'm trying to figure out what happened. It all seemed to fit in my head. I'm sorry I'm not handling it better. I thought Juan was on our side, not selfishly mine. I thought my dragon was being stupid, and all the fighting between us made it so much worse. I'll figure out how to fix this.

Love,

Beastie

Huh? I mean... Huh? What fighting?

I sighed when I saw the bags were *loaded* with dragon donuts. "At least he gives good apologies."

I headed out to train after having two of the donuts. I couldn't resist, but at least it didn't affect my workout.

My mood when I saw Dalyor did. I had managed to avoid him so far, but it was time for an evaluation of my progress. I was shocked when we were alone, but then I saw in his eyes he'd done it on purpose.

“I’m sorry, Tamsin,” he whispered. “I’m so, *so* sorry.”

“No, I am,” I mumbled as I stared at my feet. “You didn’t do anything wrong and—”

“I did. I knew it was a stupid idea, but I went along with it because I wanted to be with you. I let my cock and my desire for you take priority, and I’m *ashamed* I did that after I promised to put you first. I can’t deny I still want you, but not how things went. I wanted the dragon to...”

I glanced up at him with a frown. “What?”

“Part of me wanted him to see how the plan wasn’t the answer, but I wanted the chance to be with you. I knew Darby didn’t like it and you were struggling. I *truly* thought even if you rejected me, at least you’d lay the line down with your mate and beat him. I never thought—I’m so sorry. I should have paid better attention to you.”

I bobbed my head, glad that was how he felt. “I am attracted to you, Dalyor. Anyone with eyes would be. I just can’t. Maybe you’re right and in the future it can be wild fun, but I just *can’t* right now. Not when millions of people rely on me to stay sane.”

“I know. I was selfish to push and try, and I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Can I eat like shit all during finals and you won’t punish me in training?”

He chuckled, looking a bit less destroyed. “It will be our secret. I think you should have as much of what you want during finals and on break as well.”

“I should have asked for something else then,” I grumbled, amusing him to no end and breaking the rest of the tension between us.

I trained hard and found a couple of bakery boxes at my room. Not from the hobgoblin bakery, but one I’d never heard of. I brought them inside and my eyes went wide when I opened the first box and it was full of gigantic cream puffs. Ridiculously big ones with fruit and all kinds of extras for different combinations.

And there was a note on the middle one.

Good luck on exams, Tams! Something to help you get through it. Thanks for all the help on our final.

Lucca

I chuckled. Our love of cream puffs and bakery treats was so bad that I couldn’t count the number of times we’d talked about that on our runs. Damn these were some awesome ones though.

I dug right in, and Izzy woke to me ungraciously trying to shove in something that wouldn’t fit into my mouth.

“Not even remotely the weirdest thing I’ve seen in this room,” she drawled as she rolled to her feet. “Why does our room smell like a bakery?”

“Like heaven?” I teased as I wiped my mouth.

“Yeah, same thing to you,” she chuckled. She went over to the bags on my desk and her eyes flashed shock. “Hudson

pulled his head out of his ass?”

“Kind of?” I told her what the note said and did a double take when she sighed. “What do you know?”

“Nothing really. Mel asked me once why Hudson was tearing up the dragon’s territory again. I don’t think *all* of Hudson was on board with how he was treating you. It was such a change for him that I asked Stefanie to check him for black magic.”

I froze in my next bite. “Did they find anything?”

She snorted. “No, nothing but an idiot man according to her. She said a man who had too turbulent a childhood to ever have had the chance to act out and be a bratty prince.”

“Yeah, I heard someone else talking about how shocked they were that he let himself get swept up in Juan’s egotistical princely ways.”

Izzy picked out a donut and came to sit by me. “I get it, but I don’t. I reached that point of so fed up with my parents that I just told them to do whatever and let me know the answer. I *think* it was something like that plus too much of the crazy. It’s knocked me off a few times as your best friend. Plus, if he was fighting with his dragon, I think that’s a big thing for them.”

“I would think so.”

“No, like it can fuck with your head big time,” she said before taking a bite. “I heard once it’s like a witch not being able to use her magic. It’s like some piece of you is missing, and it’s a panic along with everything else going on.”

I nodded that I heard her and left it alone while we kept eating.

There weren't hobgoblins on campus anymore, but some of the ones that worked for me still insisted on cleaning our room and doing our laundry. They showed up with some breakfast sandwiches and jugs of fae juice from Irma, so at least I had some protein with my tons of carbs.

Izzy studied while I worked on paperwork for Faerie and the approval of several new plans. Right before it was time for lunch, I heard a soft thump outside the door.

I went to check it out and found two large catering trays there with a note from Darby.

I love you, agra. Just so you have some fun before the hell of finals. We should visit this place soon again, yeah? Or let's do a few new food challenges over break.

Darby

I smiled so brightly my face started to hurt. I brought the trays inside and they were *loaded* with wings and fries. It took me a minute, but then I threw back my head and laughed.

“He got them from the place we had one of our first dates. The chicken wing food challenge that Sean and Marshall came with us on.”

“That’s nice. They smell good,” Izzy muttered. “Are you sharing?”

“When have I not?”

“Never, but it’s still nice to check.”

And that was why I would always share with her. We skipped the cafeteria—which was always a perk—and went back to work.

A few hours later, Izzy offered to fill our metal water jugs with hot water so we could make some fae tea. That sounded perfect with all the super sweet we’d been having. She let out a yelp when she opened the door, and I was on my feet in a flash.

“What is going on today?” she asked as she stared down her feet... Where several large to-go containers were. “What did you get now?”

I squatted down and opened the first one, snickering. “Crepes.”

I had a craving and thought you and Izzy could use some fuel for studying. You had a dream about crepes the other night, and I can't stop thinking about them.

Nor how you helped me figure out what I was feeling about my mum. Thanks for that.

Julian

“Am I in an alternate reality?” Izzy whispered as she read the note over my shoulder. “Did someone smack them all around to stop being idiots?”

“Besides Darby.”

“That goes without saying,” she snickered. “I mean...”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’m glad Hudson, yeah. Lucca’s actually been... I don’t know if I—I didn’t crumble because of Hudson and that’s thanks to Lucca. Even though he was pissed, he said it was Hudson getting off track and being stupid and he’d find the path back. It saved me from going off the deep too much.”

“Yeah, I like him as your friend,” she muttered. Izzy had made it clear that she had serious issues with Lucca and how emotionally abusive he had been towards me.

Mostly because that was what she’d grown up with in her family and she hadn’t ever seen it get better. She absolutely believed he would do it all again if I let him back in.

So did I, which was why I wouldn’t. At least not yet, if ever.

“Still, it’s nice to be appreciated,” I muttered. I had helped Lucca not just with our final we partnered up on for our class, but a different final of his as well. “There’s something I want to tell you about Julian, but I don’t know I should.”

Izzy helped me bring it inside and sat me down. “Tell me. He would want you to get help sorting out how you feel. I believe at least that of him.”

That was true. “He thought about suicide after he found out he was taking over the Craftsman family. His mom put some guilt on him about doing it, and he—he says he’s been suffering from depression.”

“I see it now. He was blocking himself and nothing was wrong. I mean, I saw things but yeah, it was like seeing it through water because of the help from your power. Or that

fairy magic thing Kramer had to downplay his thoughts and emotions. He's not in a good place, Tams."

"I know. He broke down that his mom loves her plans for him more than she loves him. It killed me. He was so—I don't get it because of how I grew up, but his mom was his constant no matter his crazy. Going to college at *thirteen* and not having friends ever. Getting his doctorate. All of it was because his mom had his back."

"Yeah, but none of that is your fault and he dumped it on you. He should have turned to you instead of pushed you away."

"I know. I know that. I just..."

"What?" she asked gently.

"Immediately, he went to Edelman and said he'd take a leave of absence. Yes, he wanted to anyways maybe, but he prayed for me, Izzy. He didn't know I was there and prayed to the gods to give me strength. And I don't think it was a one-time thing."

"No, I don't think it was either. I saw him praying once in the kitchen when he used to have a room at your house. I think it's how he gets out what he can't otherwise." She sighed and handed me one of the containers. "I won't judge you for getting back with him. You guys have a real love that burns hot and crazy. Just make him see you better this time."

"If I knew how to do that, he wouldn't have left me," I bitched, wincing when I heard myself. I'd gotten defensive when it sounded like she was partially blaming me.

She wiggled the container in my face. “This is a good first step. This is what I mean. You deserve these sorts of nice things and to be taken care of.”

I wasn’t sure that was the same as seeing me, and I really didn’t know how to make people do that, but I realized Izzy was exhausted from finals and studying, so I let it go. It made sense in her head and gave me something to think about, so that was enough for right now.

I did also charge her up when we ate. She seemed relieved and a bit guilty, and I knew she’d probably thought something harsh about me for not noticing sooner. That was enough to make Izzy feel guilty. And that was what made her so damn loveable.

We enjoyed our crepes and Izzy did make us tea. We got back to work, and I was like done and done by the time dinner rolled around. I was just about to ask if she wanted to be bad with some Portal Chow when there was a knock at the door.

“Five for five,” she chuckled.

That didn’t make sense until she opened the door and Neldor walked in with a monster stack of pizzas. “I cannot take any more fucking budgets. And if I’m fed up, you’re at wit’s end. That means we need pizza and maybe to just stop accepting budget proposals.”

I would have struggled with that many pizzas, but the way he set them down I realized he had used his magic to move them more than his hands. I wish I had that kind of focus.

Or maybe the chance to practice without witnesses all around that would mock me when I failed. It was something to

work on over break maybe because it was common for fairies to use in that way and it was helpful.

“Hello? Did your brain break?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

“No, sorry, was wishing I could learn to do that,” I admitted. “Carry things around with magic, not order food. I do that just fine. And yes, pizza sounds great. I have a few questions on the budgets and things I want to change because it all hurts my brain.”

“I don’t even know which budgets you started with. There were fucking huge piles of fucking shit.” He cleared his throat when we both stared at him. “I don’t like budgets. It’s not about the math, but money doesn’t bring out the best in people. I hate seeing that so blatantly in front of my face. I don’t know how Mother...” He cleared his throat and looked away.

“You can talk about her, Neldor,” I said gently. “I would never blame you for that. She was your mom. You just can’t defend her to me, and you never have.”

“No, there is no defense for what she did,” he agreed, clearing his throat again. “She made it look easy. That was what I was going to say. I’m sure your mother did too. I don’t understand how this task of leading gets easy.”

“It’s complicated for me for other reasons.” I shrugged when he looked at me. “I always assume people are greedy. As someone who grew up with nothing and handouts, I even understand it. I would be greedy when I got a chance too because I didn’t always know there would be any left when I needed it later.”

He gave a swift nod and we got settled in with our pizza. He thanked Izzy when she distributed drinks and tucked into his first slice. It wasn't until the fifth slice that he said anything.

"I never saw things like that. I don't like talking about your past because the idea of what you lived terrifies me. I can't always make it fit with what a queen needs to be. I've judged you so harshly for that or maybe judged your capabilities of adapting to being like us because of that but..."

"Please give that statement a *but*," Izzy drawled.

"There is, but I'm trying to figure out how to say the compliment as I mean it," he promised. "I've never heard that perspective before, and you give so much more of the arguments I've heard on numbers validity."

"Thank you," I accepted. "I also know that people freak out when things are over budget. I would think that is not a mistake people ever made to either queen and got a chance to mess that up again. Coming in under budget is always better."

"You're thinking of the contractors you've worked with. And you're not even wrong in this instance, but you don't have to pay more when a contractor comes under budget. In government, normally someone pockets the extra or sneakily puts it for what they want."

"Well, now I hate budgets even more. There has to be a way to change that."

He snorted and shook his head. "I was about to say there isn't, but if it's you, Tamsin, I think maybe there is. I have learned to always bet on you. If there is one person who would

change the way budgets and government spending worked, it would absolutely be you. I look forward to seeing you show me how.”

I blinked at him a moment, seeing Izzy was doing the same and sharing a look with her. I was pretty damn sure that was one of the nicest things Neldor had ever said about me.

And the fact he said it to me so flippantly shocked me. If he kept this up, I wasn't sure we would be able to call him the Prince of Darkness anymore.

No, we always would.

5

The next morning I was ready for my Nature Magics 301 final. After the crazy of midterms, I had demanded more precautions taken. I didn't care if magical mistakes happened, or others did it—I didn't want to. This was the one time people had to take into consideration that I wasn't raised with magic and I needed something different.

I had been *gutted* about what I'd done in the cafeteria burying everyone in flowers. To Dean White. No more. For one, I didn't need those rumors as the leader of Faerie.

As a person, I didn't need the guilt.

Edelman agreed. He gave me the exception to have a couple of the commanders at my final and to test with them first. No more crazy.

I needed to get that tattooed somewhere on my body for the new year. Maybe if I showed that much commitment to the sentiment, it would push my magic into it.

As if to challenge my positive mental state, there was something going on in the cafeteria during breakfast. I got a glimpse of a magical projection, and that normally meant it had something to do with me. I was about to turn right back

around, but the cafeteria worker barely gave me a glimpse as he swiped me in.

So... Not about me?

Nice.

No, not nice. I saw everyone either focused on Lucca or Juan.

Shit. Just shit. That meant I had to pay attention.

“Restart it,” someone called out behind me. “I missed it.”

“Left screen,” a guy hollered back.

I couldn't fully suppress a groan when I saw Ronald Von Thann come on screen. So Lucca's father. Got it.

But what did that have to do with Juan?

“Enough, Rodriguez,” Ronald snapped. “Just enough. I don't like the woman. I don't. And I have a hard time accepting people can have multiple mates. It goes against my beliefs and my ideas of the gods. But maybe the fairies have different gods, or something about them being from Faerie makes them the exception. I don't know.”

Oh good, this was most definitely about me. Awesome.

“But that woman gave you a blessing you are shitting on and we are all tired of hearing it. I don't care if she flirted with him. I don't care if she slept with him a million times or slept with your entire sloth in front of him. She could have walked around naked in front of him constantly. Nothing she could have done justifies what your son did.

“Nothing. It is our most sacred law that one does not force a mating. He tried to force her to mate. It goes against

everything we believe in as shifters and supes. So the fault is not hers. End of story. And we all feel that way.” He gave him a moment to let that sink in. “However, I know the rumors about her being loose are false.

“I have seen the woman blush up to her ears because people flirted with her. Someone said she got flustered because she saw one of the commanders in a towel where the fairies are staying. That is not an experienced woman. I never cared how many she was with.

“I cared she was cheating on my son, but he swore to me she wasn’t. That she cannot stand the idea of cheating and he wasn’t lying. He also said that she never flirted with Mason. That she was actually uncomfortable around your son.”

“You’re lying,” Rodriguez argued.

“I’m not,” Von Thann sighed. “I’m not. Lucca said it was clear Mason did things that made the woman uncomfortable. The only reason she didn’t flat-out ignore him was because she was friends with the rest and isn’t rude. She was also confused because she thought Lucca’s bear was Mason’s. He told me how that was his mistake.

“Still, she showed phone records to the commanders after she ran into Mason on campus for his recovery. She was so upset that you accused her of messing with his mind that she pulled phone records to show she never called. Not once. She never answered his calls either. There were a handful of texts and normally, Mason asking where she was.

“So enough, Rodriguez. Stop fixating on this and telling lies. Admit this is about your biases and racist beliefs. You called the future queen of Faerie a half-breed. Are you insane?”

You know that's not how it works. She's a damn fairy with demigod blood."

"Which basically makes you the stupidest person you keep pissing her off and making bears look bad," someone said from off camera.

"Exactly," Von Thann agreed, sighing when people called him a hypocrite. "I made mistakes and I will fix them. Focus on this so we can put it to bed." People settled then and he kept focused on Mason's dad. "She is not a half-breed. Your family has fairy blood in it—we all do. None of us are fucking half-breeds. You are either a bear or not.

"The same with fairies. She has her damn wings and connects to Faerie. She is one. This is your bias and it puts us all in danger. Enough." He gave Mr. Rodriguez a moment again. "Mason was a good kid, but something went wrong. Focus on getting your son back. That is where your attention needs to be, not on the woman he wronged.

"He only has that chance because she was merciful and gave it to you. The rest of us are astounded. I am and I don't like her. I don't. Sometimes I don't like her for being right and making me see I'm wrong, but there are other reasons. So this isn't me being her friend or her ties to my son defending her. It is logic.

"It is being fair. We cannot go on like this so settle with it now. It's been almost three years, and you turned your opinion when you found out she was a fairy born of a demigod. You risk too much for all of us because of your bigotry."

"Agreed," someone called out, several saying something along the same lines.

“And that was before we found out you were telling lies to the Gui heir. You told him that the future queen of Faerie went to the facility Mason’s at and... Poked at his recovery? Did what? It wasn’t clear what you told him. Evidently, you’ve been telling him lies or half-truths. You tried to use him to fight the grudge you have against her.

“The Guis could squash your sloth in a heartbeat. Any of our sloths. So can Tamsin Vale. There are ripples, and I heard from some parents that the Vogel heir was listening to the Gui boy and it caused issues between them. That’s her mate and now you’ve got two dragon princes fighting. You will get us all killed if you do not stop this. You were given a gift. Accept it and move on.”

“I can’t,” Mr. Rodriguez bit out.

“Then we will vote to gag you,” Von Thann threatened. “A group of us is ready to speak to the council and get you officially gagged and reprimanded. That is the next step if you don’t pull your head out of your fucking ass.”

Whoa. Like *whoa*.

The video ended there, and my heart went out to Lucca that his family was in the spotlight again. I honestly didn’t care it was about me and what had happened with Mason. I was finally starting to be a bit desensitized to people talking about it unless it wasn’t to my face.

But right then was about Lucca and everyone staring at him.

I ignored them and went right to him, putting my hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay? I’m sorry he’s causing you

problems again.” I flinched when he jumped to his feet.

Power flashed in his eyes as he adjusted his neck. “I don’t care about my dad or what he was saying about us. He should defend you, and you are amazing for how you handled everything with the *monster* who did horrible things.”

“Then what’s—”

“It’s *him*,” he snarled, pointing over towards Juan. “People have been saying the Rodriguezes are bigots, and it’s shit they changed their mind about you when they learned your dad is a demigod and running their mouths about your Mom embarrassing fairies. People who know them knew they were bigots. Mason is against vamps.”

“Ok yeah, he’s an ass. I know,” I said gently, worried a bit that he was shaking with rage and steam about came out of his ears.

“Those are the people he listened to over *us*, his supposed *friends*. He’s blaming *you* for me bailing on him? It’s him. Everything has to be about him, and I got tired of hearing about poor Mason. You were the victim.” He looked past me. “I fucking rescued her that night, asshole. I told you that and you blew me off. You have *no idea* how crazy it all was and —”

I reached up and bopped him on the forehead. I did it a second time when he only stopped talking and didn’t look at me. “Let it go, you stupid bear.”

He turned to me and frowned, hurt in his eyes. “But he was pushing Hudson on all this—”

I gave him a softer bop this time. “I know. I also know we have *finals* and you studied hard. Ignore the stupid dragon and the drama of old things and the Rodriguezes holding grudges that aren’t there. Be a good bear and keep your head in the game so we can get the break we deserve. Okay?”

He sighed, rubbing his forehead even if it clearly didn’t hurt him. “Sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. I appreciate you defending me and the support.” I swallowed loudly and kept his eyes. “That night was hard on both of us. I know I don’t say that as I should, but I know it was and what you did. I was dead without you.” I chuckled when he gave me a bear hug, patting him on the back. “How about those huge tacos after your last final today?”

He pulled away from me so fast my body lurched with him. “Like a date?”

My eyes went wide as my face flushed until my ears were hot.

“Sorry, not a date,” he chuckled, not making me say it. “I got ahead of myself.”

“Study buddies refueling?” I offered weakly.

“How do people seriously still keep with the shit she’s a slut. She’s blushing like that over tacos,” a guy muttered from a couple of tables away.

Oh yeah, like that helped.

Lucca caught on and kissed my hair. “Those big ones you had with Darby, right? I want three-pound tacos for sure.”

“Yeah, they were awesome,” I agreed as I led him over towards the trays. “Sorry I smacked you.”

“No, I appreciate it. You’re right and pounding him wouldn’t help anything. It would just feel good.”

“It did,” I agreed, wincing when he slowly looked at me. He hadn’t been there for what I’d done to Juan and I don’t think he knew about it. Oh well, I’d still tell him.

That was the only hiccup in the day at least. My Nature Magics 301 and Gymnastics finals were a cakewalk. I’d already handed in my project for Local Government and Regulations of Faerie. It was pretty funny that my college class final was actually a proposal for all of the world I ruled, but I tried to enjoy the amusement instead of seeing it as crazy.

I was trying to. I think from the moment Julian confirmed I wasn’t crazy and I was seeing other people’s dreams something lifted off of me. I’d maybe felt crazy from the moment I’d dropped into this world and now I didn’t feel it.

At least for the moment.

And the tacos were just as amazing as I remembered. We got a bunch and ate in my room with Izzy and Darby. We even got extras for my security, so it was all around a good day.

Plus, an even better night. Darby and I had amazing sex and smiled at each other after like only two people who knew they rocked their partner’s world.

He was gentle as he pulled out of me and moved to the side with a kiss.

“I feel like I was waiting in the world’s best line,” Lucca teased as he took Darby’s place. He kissed my nose when I

opened my mouth. “Don’t be mad, kitt—no, not that.” He frowned. “No, you’re not my kitten anymore. That—I don’t want to go back.”

“Me either,” I agreed.

“Cream puff.”

“What?”

He beamed at me. “Yeah, you’re my cream puff now.”

“You’re not calling me that,” I chuckled.

“Yes, yes, I am,” he pushed as he started tickling my sides. “Yeah, my tasty cream puff. She’s got some crunch and harder shell to her, but inside she’s soft and yummy. She changes things up and always gives you the best of her flavor.”

“I don’t know if I’m hungry or that’s sweet,” I admitted as I pulled him down for a kiss.

“I’m good with both,” he chuckled. “I’ve needed you so much, cream puff.”

“Me too.” I gasped as he pushed inside of me and then pulled us up so he was sitting on his feet and I straddled his lap. I laughed at what I saw around my bedroom.

Namely Julian, Hudson, and Neldor looking like they were ready to knock Lucca out of the way.

“I’m a lucky, lucky woman to have such a line waiting for me,” I teased.

“Then no more waiting,” Lucca growled as he thrust up.

I moaned and hung onto him as he took me for a ride. Hudson moved on the bed with us and kissed me while his

best friend fucked me. He moved his hands over Lucca's body and turned us both on even more. It was so fucking hot it wasn't even funny.

I came with a scream and was impressed Lucca held out to bring me again. I knew what I wanted and looked over at Julian. None of my men were small, but he was the least crazy in size, and that was why I wanted him to be the one to take me with Hudson. Plus, he was gentle with me, and I knew he would be gentle for my first anal sex.

Just as I opened my mouth to tell him, I saw him move out of the corner of my eye.

Wait... What?

My head snapped to the right, and Julian was standing there fully clothed and his face red.

We stared at each other for several beats before I caught on. "Dream. It's a dream."

"Yes," Julian said and hurried to stare at the ground.

I looked around and hurried to cover up. "Who's dream?"

"Um, yours. You're you."

I wrapped the sheet around me and swallowed a yelp when the others disappeared. Even the original naked Julian, and now it was only clothed Julian and me.

Yeah, I couldn't imagine why I'd worried I was crazy?

"Wait, *mine*?"

"Yes, yours," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that. You were making—I thought you were scared. I didn't realize they were happy noises."

“Fuck my life,” I groaned. “Seriously?”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not mad at you,” I admitted as I got settled better on the bed. “Thank you for checking on me. I just...”

“What?” he asked gently as he moved closer.

“I’ve never had that dream before or one like it and that’s what you see.”

“Never?”

I shook my head, swallowing loudly when he sat next to me. “I’ve had threesome fantasies, but we’re never all getting along where I could ever think of something like this. Plus, I don’t... The dreams I had of being with Neldor were *his*. This is...”

“It’s the first time he’s been in your dreams.”

“I think so,” I muttered. “It’s really hard to tell and I don’t remember it all. Or mine at least. So I can’t say it’s the first, but I don’t remember any.” I shut my mouth when I realized I was rambling.

We were quiet for several minutes, lost in our own heads. When he broke the silence, he said maybe the last thing I would ever have imagined.

“Am I really that hot in your eyes?”

“What?”

He cleared his throat and leaned forward on his knees. “Sorry. I just—I can’t believe you see me like that. It’s so different than what I see when I look in the mirror.”

No, it wasn't. "I'm not the only one with self-esteem issues, Julian."

"No, you're not," he agreed quietly. "I still see the twerpy kid who was years ahead of school and bullied constantly." He chuckled darkly. "I honestly wonder how fucked I was in the head to come teach at this school where so much bad happened to me."

"Why did you then?" I flinched. "Right, everything with Edelman's dad. They wanted you here instead of teaching anywhere else."

"Yeah, and now I'm free of that. It never crossed my mind to leave because..."

"Your mom would have thrown a fit," I sighed.

"Well, yeah, but no, that wasn't it." He smiled when I glanced at him. "You were here, Tams. I wouldn't ever have thought to leave you especially when you were in so much danger."

I felt my eyes burn and I stood, taking the sheet with me. "But you did leave me. Twice."

"I don't know about that second time," he whispered. "I pushed you away, but part of that was I worried what people would say if I was next to you while you were holding a trial on my family. I missed you. I was angry about it all and irrationally blamed you partly, but I remembered missing you and wanting to be with you. I was going to..."

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's foggy. I don't remember everything from the black magic. I think I was going to ask

you to go away with me for a long weekend from school at the beginning of the semester. I had a hotel reservation confirmation printed out and it would only have been with you, but I don't remember."

"I would have thought the memories got foggier the longer the magic."

"That's logical, but Edelman things I fought so hard in the beginning that it took out some of my recent memory. There are parts of the trial and those days I don't remember." He let out a slow breath and looked up at me. "I don't think I was pushing you away for long. I think just during the trial, and I'm an asshole for not discussing that. I am."

I nodded I heard him, but I didn't want to talk about this. I wanted to get through finals and have some easy right then.

Apparently, I wanted that so much that I woke up. I blinked at him sitting next to me and holding my hand.

"Sorry, I just can't right now," I whispered, hating that I couldn't hear him yet.

But also that I would even think to listen to him.

He nodded, giving me a tired smile and letting my hand go. "Get some sleep. I'll make sure nothing bad touches you, okay?"

"Thanks, Julian," I mumbled as I snuggled into my pillow. I was still so shocked he was willing to do this. He couldn't even sleep while he did a dreamscape. Basically, he was signing up to be awake all night and help me and sleep during the day. It was crazy.

And I was pretty sure he was only doing it to pay penance for the hurt he had caused me. I had to see it like that at least and not as letting him weasel his way back into my life and heart.

I couldn't do that again.

6

By Wednesday I was done with my finals besides Magical Art and Singing. I was glad I aced them all, but the last one was the biggest in my mind and made me the most nervous for some very good reasons. So I was almost twitchy with anxiety when I went to breakfast. I technically could have left, but Izzy had two more left that day and I wanted to be supportive.

“Hey, hi, Princess,” someone said as I walked by with my tray. “Um, hi, can I bother you for a moment?”

I turned towards her and nodded. “What did you need?”

“Will you bless my dress?” she blurted way too loudly.

I blinked at her, not able to make that fit in my mind. “Huh?”

“Oh for the love of fuck,” Izzy growled. “Are you having a laugh and seriously thought to bug the future queen of a whole damn planet with that stupidity? No, just no. Run along, freshman.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” I asked when the freshman turned to leave. She froze and looked at me with hope. That wasn’t what I’d meant but was asking Izzy.

“People were talking about how you’re already powerful enough to bless stuff if you did it with the royal dragon crowns,” Izzy said. “We didn’t grow up with fairies. We just had stories, but that one is true. The queens can bless stuff.”

“Yeah, I even read that in books.”

“Right, but the stories never say the heirs, so that’s what people are freaking out about.”

“They normally freak out, sure. What does that have to do with her *dress*?”

Izzy snorted, looking more amused and less pissed with my reaction. “Your mom used to bless marriages and *babies*, important stuff.”

“Yeah, I’m learning all about that next semester,” I drawled. Then it hit me, and I stared at the freshman like she’d grown another head. “You want me to bless your dress like I would a marriage?” I waited for her to nod. “*Why?*”

Several people around me had a hard time stifling their reactions.

“It’s for the Vogel’s ball,” she whispered, fidgeting when she realized all eyes were on her. “People were saying if you blessed our dresses, it’s like the best magical luck to get the best matches and engagements.”

My annoyance instantly deflated even as Izzy sighed. “Someone is pulling your leg. I’m sorry, but that’s not a thing. Yes, it would bless you with magic, but there’s no real *luck* magic from what I know. Protection, good health—that kind of stuff.” I waited until she nodded and gestured towards the

garment bag she held. “Plus, it’s not like I just say a Hail Mary over your dress.”

“What does football have to do with a dress?” she asked, glancing between her friends.

“Okay, so over break, look into humans more because you’re seriously behind,” I drawled. “It’s a prayer in one of their main religions. I think the biggest. So that came before the football reference.” I shook my head when she opened her mouth. “But the point is it’s not a quick thing. I have to take it to Faerie and do—it’s a whole process.”

“You could do multiple dresses at once then,” someone in the group suggested.

Now I was annoyed. “So I should take a couple *hours* with your dresses to bless them to the *gods* so you might get a better husband match?” I waited for her to comprehend how stupid that was.

She didn’t.

“Instead of *governing* or helping wake my people from magic, I should bless your dresses? That is what I’m hearing you say.”

“I would run,” Mel drawled from behind the group. “Run fast.”

They did.

I shook my head. “Just when I think there can’t be any weirder of rumors or ideas, people want me to bless dresses so they get better engagements. Un-fucking-real. Seriously.”

“Oh, not just dresses,” Mel drawled, nodding when I looked at her. “That’s what I was coming over to warn you about. Got a minute?”

“Sure,” I accepted, noting how quiet Izzy got. She had accepted Mel’s apology, but she couldn’t let her back in after all the pain the dragon had caused. I understood. She hadn’t done it just to me, but Izzy, and Izzy hadn’t done anything wrong.

We sat down and Mel gestured around us so I knew to put up a barrier. I nodded when it was in place.

“That freshman won’t be the last to ask you,” she informed me. “People have started circling now that they know an heir can bless like a fairy queen.” She shrugged when I winced. “They probably knew heirs could, but it didn’t matter when the queen was alive.”

“Because you’d want the most powerful blessing and a queen would be stronger,” Izzy muttered. “Yeah, makes sense.”

“Yes, but you don’t have a queen to protect you,” Mel sighed.

“I have a demigod. It’s better than a Hulk,” I drawled.

“For protection, but people don’t see Lageos getting all involved in fairy stuff like say, Queen Sasha. It’s different and—it doesn’t matter. It’s the perception.”

“So they’re getting ready to pounce? Is that why you’re warning her?” Izzy asked.

Mel nodded. “My family’s gotten word that people plan to make it a *thing* at the Vogel’s party.”

That left me with one question. “Why didn’t they tell me?”

She gave me a sad look. “They’re still debating how to handle it and what to do.” She shook her head when the fork in my hand shattered. “It’s not like you’re thinking. It’s not about controlling you. You’re not theirs, Tams. They don’t treat you that way.”

“They don’t,” Izzy muttered. “They treat you like some of the people who knew you before you were a princess. They have other things going on, and they’re used to being the bosses.”

“That’s fair, but anything about me should be reported to at least the commanders.”

“They’re going to,” Mel promised. “Hard stop. Already decided. This is new intel. We heard whispers about people talking like that freshman and bringing stuff you might bless. Idiot stuff.”

I sighed, stabbing my food harder than needed with the backup fork I always picked up. I’d shattered more than a few forks before learning to grab a backup. “So what’s the debate? That’s not acceptable behavior.”

“Right, but it puts them in an awkward position,” Mel muttered. “Yes, people have to act polite in their house, but it’s not asking for you to date their son or anything horrible. We can’t bless stuff like that, so it’s not like an obvious line for us. But of course they don’t like it. They would be put in the middle and people pressuring you both to play nice.”

“If she had come up to you at the Vogel’s party and asked you to bless her dress and you could have, you would have felt pressured,” Izzy agreed.

I snorted. “No, I wouldn’t have. It’s a stupid thing and waste of magic. Their baby? Yeah, I would have done that, but I’m not wasting magic no matter who or what is going on. But I also haven’t done it besides the crowns, and I’m not really supposed to unless it’s like...” I sighed.

“You have no idea yet, do you?” Mel chuckled.

“No, and it makes my head hurt, but I’m learning it next semester,” I grumbled. “It kinda sounds like how the US president can’t officially accept gifts. There are formal channels and all kinds of stuff. I can’t just go around blessing this or that as I want.”

“I see you keeping to that rule,” Mel drawled.

“Yeah, I don’t think so either, but for now, Onas made it clear that once I open the flood gates, they’re opened. And I do agree with that. Plus, what I said is true. It’s not like a prayer I say over a couple or baby. It’s an *object* I bless in our temples praying to the gods and a whole *thing*. Hell, it’s disrespectful to the gods to do it over a damn dress to find a husband.”

“Agreed,” Mel said gently when I ramped back up. “I just wanted you to know this was going on and the Vogels are struggling with it.”

I nodded and we were quiet for several minutes, simply eating. “What do you suggest I do?”

“If it was me, I’d take the out until you learn more,” she admitted. “People know about your telepathy. You shouldn’t be around that many people you don’t know and not on your own turf. Just in case because you believe in not encroaching on people’s private thoughts. This is more than you simply listening to what they put out. Take that as a concession and skip the party.”

“Which the Vogels won’t want because me being their daughter-in-law makes them untouchable.”

“They don’t want to *ask* you not to come,” Mel clarified. “It’s horrible if they told you to skip it especially because you and Hudson are taking a break. That’s their biggest worry.”

“Which is why you came and told me on the side.” I waited for her to half shrug. “Thanks, Mel.”

“I’m still, and always, on your side, kid. No matter how I’ve acted in the past,” she said quietly. “Or my hang-ups about becoming a sidekick instead of flying free.”

“Mel, you shine too bright to ever be a sidekick. An advisor isn’t a sidekick.” I let it go when she simply nodded, her shoulders a bit tense. She grew up hearing Trigger Rothchild was King Xavier’s guard dog and bullshit that affected her. It so wasn’t the truth, but we couldn’t always see our lives clearly because we were in the middle of them.

She’d made progress, and us having a nice breakfast talking about life was an improvement. That was enough for now.

Luckily for my nerves, I had tons of everything to do before my final and jumped right into it all. My midterm had

been for the singing section, and the final would be my painting. Shael had outlined it all after finding out what I had been plotting in a crappy area of Theripolis.

When it was time, three squads made a big show of escorting Edelman, several of the deans, and a handful of faculty to the portal to Faerie. There had been some back and forth, but I agreed their mates should be allowed as well. I hadn't even seen Professor Richardson all year but even if I would never like him, he did help me reach this point in my life.

Plus, I liked his mate. Same with Dean Collins.

Instructor Larson didn't teach at Artemis or work with me much anymore, but he'd protected me so my people could come back. He and his mate—who I hadn't met yet—received an invitation and were picked up as well.

The remaining nobles were invited that night to see the gallery opening after the private showing for my final. For once they accepted the circumstances and didn't start shit. Part of me assumed they thought I'd fall flat on my face and didn't want to be associated with that.

I doubted that would be the outcome. Even if my paintings were complete shit—which they weren't—the renovated building was *stunning*. The construction company I'd hired to completely overhaul and restore the place to fit in with Theripolis did an outstanding job.

I felt like I couldn't breathe when everyone was gathered. This was more exposing than any of my social media stuff or taking tons of pictures in bikinis and lingerie. This was showing them my soul.

I explained how everything had started and the process of getting the place done. People seemed to accept that and were excited to see the exhibit.

“This is what became of a mistake,” I said quietly. “Both in my painting and because of the warring fairies allowed. In that sense, it’s really a cumulation of mistakes, but as I stared at the painting I didn’t mean to make, I realized it was what weighed on my soul. What I went through to get Faerie and her people back was such a deep wound on my soul and my magic knew it.

“And more than that, it’s our history. This is a reminder of what our warring brings and I hope we never forget that. I hope this can be a timeline for people to see and feel what happened. I want them to see how close they came to never getting their lives back and many times. None of them have seen Faerie as I did and that has to change to accept our mistakes.”

I stepped aside and waved for the first people to go ahead into the main gallery. I held my breath as Edelman and White stepped through the doorway.

She gasped as she laid eyes on the first painting I’d done weeks ago. It was a shadow holding a lantern in suffocating darkness.

Geiger came through next with his mate, Cluym. Claudia was after them with some more of the faculty.

“You were so scared that it was heartbreaking,” Geiger said as the big dragon hugged me. “This is amazing, Your Highness. I feel like I’m back in that darkness and terrified it had swallowed my mate.”

“You saw this?” Cluym whispered, glancing at the paintings that were slowly moving on the tracks.

“There,” Geiger said, pointing down the line a bit. “That’s Claudia and I. It was when she brought us in and admitted what she’d found.”

Cluym narrowed his eyes and said a date. “You were there then?”

Geiger glanced at Claudia and they nodded. “Yes, that was the date.” He looked down at me. “Yes, that was the date, right?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Cluym did a double take. “You have to know, Your Highness.”

I frowned at him. “I could look it up. I can’t tell you off the top of my head though. I mean, I know it was the fall of my freshman year.”

“No, I mean, you know because you painted in the date,” he said as he gestured to the painting. He moved closer and showed me a few blended in symbols. “That’s the date in Faerie.”

“Princess Tamsin doesn’t know Faerie,” Shael muttered as she moved closer. Her eyes flashed shock and she moved to the next painting. “Here too. This has a date.” Her mouth dropped open at me. “Your magic understood what you were doing and put dates in to mark this historically as you wanted.”

“That’s astounding,” someone else said, people abuzz about what my magic had done.

“Sometimes your magic is a bit over the top,” Darby muttered as he pulled me from Geiger and held me to his chest. “You okay?”

I sighed. “This is all still weird to me, Darby. You guys get freaked out because I do something new from what you know, but it’s *all* new from what I knew. I think I’m just numb to that stuff now after years of always being anxiety-riddled.”

Several people winced, but I ignored it and focused on what was in front of us. Dates were cool. Freaky because I didn’t consciously remember them but yeah, cool.

White gasped a few minutes later and looked at me with tears in her eyes. “This is what you did to bring back the sun. You almost died to do it, but you were so relieved there was big progress. I remember how—you were so relieved after so much struggle.”

I swallowed loudly and nodded. “Figuring out how to do it had been so much and then I just—that pain was unbearable.”

“I feel it here,” someone said near the painting of me lying in the sun among all my reservoirs and boxes of crystals.

“You put the pain in the painting,” White said as she moved to it. “I can feel it radiating. In a lot of these.”

Oh boy. I hadn’t meant to do that.

Then again, maybe people should feel the echoes of it so they understood it wasn’t simply a painting.

“I was here when you painted a lot of these, but seeing it all put together and positioned as you have is so profound, I’m speechless, *agra*.” He kissed my hair and we moved along.

I was really glad he said that because people weren't saying much and had made me worried. Now I got they were just soaking it all up and maybe overwhelmed. That had been the goal, so it would be nice if that worked out.

Edelman found me after he finished, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief. It was clear it wasn't the first time, and White was doing the same. "Well, that was... I don't have the words. Soul changing."

"Yes," White rasped. "Needless to say, you aced your final, Your Highness. Excuse me, I wish to see my father. I need to be with him."

I blinked after her as she abruptly walked away and out of the gallery. I looked back at Edelman with so many questions.

He gave me a soft smile. "She kept saying that she had almost lost him more than she'd known. It's overwhelming for me who didn't have fairy family. I had only a few fairy friends, and I had time to grieve their loss since I knew they had died before everything was sealed off. That is a much different position than White."

I nodded, thanking him for coming. I was *shocked* how many people I saw crying... And hurried to leave after they saw the last painting.

"I'm sorry," Neldor said from my left.

I jumped, not even having seen him in the group or known he was coming. "For?"

"A lot more than I realized I needed to apologize for," he rasped. "Excuse me."

Shocked wasn't a strong enough word for what I felt when I saw tears streaming down his cheeks and his eyes were puffy. His whole damn sleeve was soaked, so clearly it hadn't just started.

"He felt the pain, fear, and *disappointment* from his painting," Taeral muttered as he took Neldor's spot. "We all did. I've heard you tell him that was how you felt, but experiencing it ourselves even if an echo..." He lowered himself to one knee in front of me. "I am so sorry I did not understand or pay attention as I should, Your Highness. I am so very, very sorry."

"It's fine," I whispered. "You were dealing with too much too. I didn't..." I flinched when the other commanders came closer and did the same. "I don't understand. I didn't do this to make you feel guilty."

"But we should feel that," Morgan stated loudly. "I knew getting us back wasn't easy, but I never—I couldn't fathom this struggle. It's not a concept I could wrap my mind around when the heirs and queens are so powerful. You knew nothing. You struggled through tar trying to drown you the entire time. I am sorry as well, Your Highness, and for my judgments."

They *all* said something similar. Even Onas.

It did a lot to soothe my soul and the pain they'd caused me. I accepted their apologies and kind words, but like I'd told others, I needed more than time to forgive them. I needed to see their behavior changed.

And I thought that was fair.

Watery eyes and too many emotions to keep up with seemed to be the response from everyone. Darby quietly asked me not to stay when the nobles viewed it and I agreed. Shael did as well because she promised she'd handle them with Taeral and lock up.

Perfect.

I was pretty sure it was a win for the progress I wanted for fairies.

Maybe?

7

“Let’s get back to campus to pack,” I sighed as we came through the portal to Faerie.

“Not yet,” Darby muttered. “One thing first.”

I just wanted to go to bed I was so tired, but when he smiled at me with hesitation in his eyes, I would have agreed to just about anything. Darby went with the flow so often that anytime he asked for anything, I gave it to him because it was so rare.

And I just wanted him to be happy always.

He glanced over at my security and nodded, thanking the fairy when he opened a portal for us and went through first. We went through and then Darby led us down the block to a fancy-looking bakery.

“We have to celebrate the wins,” he said quietly. “We need to. Life is more than surviving.”

I nodded, tears filling my eyes this time that he was so good to me. “Thanks, my mate.”

“Always.” He opened the door for me and guided me over to the display cases. He pointed out a few suggestions of what he’d read was really good from reviews.

Of course, he checked out the reviews. Darby was so perfect that I sometimes wondered if he wasn't real.

We loaded up a tray to eat there and some more to box for later. I tried to pay when we got to the register, but he beat me to it.

"I got it tonight," he muttered.

"Darby, this place—I have so much money," I whispered. I hated that money could be a thing with us. He gave me so much more and I wanted him to see that.

"It's not my money," he admitted after the employee gave him back change. He sighed when I frowned. "Hudson gave me a bunch of bills. He knew I would take you out after and said to make sure it was sweet stuff because you'd be emotional. I knew that but yeah, he gave me the money to pay."

"I didn't think he knew about this," I muttered, suddenly fascinated with the display case.

"I think he's pulled his head out of his ass. I asked why he wasn't coming, and he said he didn't want to add pressure to you or make your night about him." He cleared his throat when I didn't answer. "I think he's struggling. A lot."

"I can't be the one to help him after what he did," I said... But really kind of asked myself. Could I be?

"No, that's too much for anyone," Darby replied firmly. "And he knows that. I think..."

"What?"

"It's not for me to say."

“No, it affects you,” I argued, looking at him. “I won’t get mad. Please? It’s hard for me to juggle when I’m being over the top or what to do.”

He waited until our stuff was boxed and then brought me outside. We’d gotten hot chocolates since it was winter in New York City where the bakery was. The moment we sat, I also used a rune to heat the area a bit for us so we could be comfortable.

“I think this is for him to figure out, but it’s not—I wouldn’t consider it time abandoning you,” he blurted as I took my first bite of heaven. “He’s clearly paying attention and not being a tunnel vision idiot. This is—he needs to fix what’s going on with him before it could hurt you more like you did.”

“Plus, I’m the one who said I was taking a break,” I agreed, nodding at what he said.

“But tonight is about the opening,” he said when I got lost in my head. “We’re celebrating how amazing you are. I am.”

I narrowed my eyes as I picked up one of the mini cakes. “Oh, but I can’t do that when you get a rocking LSAT score? I remember someone telling me that I couldn’t.”

“Until after finals,” he mumbled, looking completely busted. “You can now if you want.”

“Good.” I winked at him as I happily ate my treat. “Thanks, Darby.”

“I’m really proud of you, *agra*. You put yourself first and did what you needed instead of what everyone told you to. I think it will help you more than you realize.”

“And maybe others too,” I muttered, thinking about the reactions people had to my paintings.

“Yeah, that too.”

Some of the commanders had followed us but sat at other tables and had their own fun. I got a few thoughts that they were worried, but I didn't know if for me or all of Faerie. I left it alone and was simply grateful they were letting me have this with Darby.

We went back to campus and basically had everything ready to go. The paparazzi had long since given up hounding me at the school. They'd probably come back at the start of next school year just to try and see who else might attend here, but we were done with most of the hoops.

So we were home in no time. I had to repack for the mountain villa we were staying at over break, but I could do that in the morning. Packing was never a worry when you could open portals and just grab anything else you needed or wanted.

“Can I give you the rest of your congratulations?” Darby asked when we were alone in our room.

I smirked at him. “I think sex with me is just as much of a treat for you.”

“It is, but that's not what I'm planning.” He held up a satiny-looking sleep mask. “I messed up last time wanting to do something fun and new when you're stressed. I won't this time, I promise.”

“You didn't mess up,” I whispered, brushing my lips over his. “Yes, I want to play.” Honestly, I just wanted to go to bed,

but I could feel his excitement and nerves.

“Trust me,” he murmured before slipping the mask over my eyes. He kissed my cheek and then down my neck before working his way up the other side. He nipped my earlobe but didn’t touch me in any other way, leaving me standing there blind to what was going on.

It was interesting and definitely required me to trust him.

Luckily, I had no problem with that.

He moved around me and unzipped the dress I was wearing, kissing along the path of the zipper until it stopped right above my butt. He didn’t take it off though, slowly exposing more of my skin to the air and kissing what he could now. It was slow and tender. Feeling his lips on my skin made me shiver more than once, especially if he changed the area.

“You are so fucking beautiful, it’s blinding, *agra*,” he praised a few minutes later as the dress finally fell to the floor. He knelt in front of me and kissed down my thigh. Darby went all the way down to my feet and kissed them after he took off my shoe. Then he did the same on my other leg and foot. “Hold your hands behind your back.”

Oh boy. He was doing it so I didn’t hold his head while he ate me out. I loved doing that and he was changing things up.

Yeah, he was but not in the way I thought. He didn’t give me oral sex. He simply stood and went back to touching and kissing my skin. It was fascinating and a bit overwhelming. I felt the lingering traces of him like when I was dreaming. It scared me and I felt my anxiety shoot up.

“Why are you scared?” he worried, stopping what he was doing immediately.

“It echoed my dream or the feeling lingering,” I admitted. “I started to worry I’m dreaming.”

“No, you’re awake,” he mumbled. “That doesn’t prove it to you.”

I thought about what Julian had already shown me. “No, this is real. I know that. It just startled me and—sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you’re being honest with me and feel you can.” He gave me a soft kiss on the lips and went back to touching me. That was it for several minutes. His fingers simply trailed all over my skin.

It was maddening and amazing and just *everything*.

“I hate running,” he whispered, making me flinch since it was right in my ear after that long of silence. “I hate it. It’s boring and annoying.” His fingers moved up my breast. “But watching your delicious tits bounce when you run makes it the best thing to do ever. Even if I do it hard for you.” He chuckled when I shivered.

That was quite the compliment, but it was only the beginning. He praised me on so much. He brought up outfits I’d worn recently or how my hair looked on certain days. Apparently, Darby was a big fan of fairy braids when I was the one wearing them. He thought they were sexy as fuck when the rest of my hair was wildly curly.

But it wasn’t only my looks. No, he talked about how hard I worked and how smart I was. He listed everything he loved about me down to how I checked if he wanted the last of

anything we ate. He noticed so much and appreciated everything I ever did for him. It made me feel so many things, completely overwhelmed and spinning, especially after the gallery opening.

It felt like forever he drowned me in praise and touches before he picked me up and positioned me on the bed kneeling.

“Keep your hands behind your back again,” he murmured. “I don’t want to restrain you, but I want you to pretend you are.”

I nodded, thanking him for being so considerate. I could handle him holding me down, but after being abducted and restrained, I could react badly to even playing that way. Shocking after it had happened twice.

“Do you want your present now?” he asked as he got on the bed with me.

“Yes,” I hissed, very, *very* ready for the fun and sex with him.

Except I only got one of those.

Something rubbed against my clit. It wasn’t his fingers. It was too big for that.

And it wasn’t his dick... Because it was ribbed.

I was about to ask when it started vibrating, cluing me in. “Toys?”

“Mm-hm,” he murmured as he leaned in and nibbled on my earlobe. “Tonight is all about you, *agra*. I’m going to make

you a mess and pass out from pleasure. I'm going to push you and show you how addicted to you I am. Are you game?"

I nodded, shocked but also a bit excited. Screw going to bed. I'd much rather play with Darby all night and pass out later.

He teased me with the toy until I orgasmed.

Then he fingered me while moving the toy from my clit to my nipples and more to drive me crazy.

Then the toy was in me and he fingered my ass.

Then the toy was in my ass and his fingers got rough with my pussy. It was insane. After several orgasms, I couldn't stay kneeling like that. I told him that as my body shook from aftershocks.

"Sit on your feet and lay back that way, hands behind your back still. I want to see my mate be that flexible for me."

Wow. Okay. I did as he wanted, thanking him when he moved a pillow behind my head. It wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't bad either. I completely forgot about the position when he spread my knees wider and fucked me with the toy... While it was on max level no less. I didn't know when one orgasm started and the next ended. It was such a wave of pleasure it was crazy.

And he did make me a mess. If I was in my head more, I would have been mortified at the noises I was making. He seemed excited how I'd gotten the comforter wet I was orgasming so much. I could push aside my embarrassment because he was so into it but really, I was pretty glad he kept me blindfolded.

He also made me pass out from pleasure. One moment I was riding the crazy and then just nothing.

Wow.

Like *wow*.

Okay, what did I have to do to get that again?

Probably not do what I was plotting, but it was something I needed.

A few days later after we were settled at the villa and rested after finals, I grabbed everything I had ordered from the bakery and asked Irma to make me. I swallowed loudly when her skin was changing colors between fear, anger, and worry.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised. “I swear he won’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know that, Tamsin.”

“I do. He’s had lots of chances. Something is going on and he’s not what seems. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think we were related. He’s that protective of me.”

Irma sighed, shaking her head. “You’d know. Fairies and fair folk can sense their family. It’s like a zip of your magic. Or how the hounds get excited for no reason that you understand. They know someone in another pack is related to them or someone they’re friends with.”

I sighed. “I didn’t know that, but he won’t hurt me.”

“You would be a fool to think him a good person.”

“I don’t. I absolutely don’t think he’s a good guy,” I promised her, waiting until she settled some. “But a lot of people wouldn’t have said I was either, Irma. I beat up bad people which was still against the law.”

Her skin flared bright red like my hair. “Yes, but he’s murdered people.”

“I know. I know.” Again, I let her settle with that. “*But* if I was going to infiltrate the Underground, I would murder a bad person.” I shrugged when she looked horrified. “If I hadn’t been the heir, I had exactly some of those plans to take out the Underground. He could have found someone selling witches on the black market like I did.”

She sighed, her skin calming while she nodded. “I understand and that’s not a point I’ve thought of. I will concede you could be right if you hear me that it might not be that either.”

“I agree.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I’m not looking for the good in him, Irma. I’m saying he’s shown me that I’m safe with him and he won’t lie to me. That’s it. That’s better than a lot of the supposedly *good* people I’m told to trust. So trust me.”

“Always. I *always* trust you, Tamsin.”

That was better than most, and I knew she worried because she loved me. I loved Irma too, but something was telling me that this was the right thing to do. My gut was spot on mostly, so it would be stupid not to listen to it.

And I wasn’t stupid.

I teleported to a beach I liked to go kitesurfing at. I found an area tucked away from any foot traffic and a good distance from the water so no one would be looking for this place. Setting everything up didn’t curb my nerves, but when it was done, I still sucked it up and opened a portal to Luke.

He came storming right through. “Are you like stupid?” Steam about came out of his ears when I simply blinked at him. “You have no idea who I was meeting with. What if it was a room full of—”

“I locked the portal to you,” I cut in. “Only you could have walked through.”

He sighed. “Fine, you’re a little less stupid, but that’s not enough. If people saw a portal open and only I could walk through, they would have opened portals to follow.”

“The area is locked as well.”

“Fine, you’re not stupid but don’t do it again.”

“I might be able to cloak a portal from a distance when I open it on your end,” I muttered.

“Others can sense fairy magic,” he argued. “Teleporting me was better.” He waved me off as he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled something out. “Use this if you need to see me. Throw it on natural stone, not like bricks or pavement.”

I caught it when he tossed it at me, snorting when I saw it was an older-looking coin. “Nine pieces of eight? Yeah, you guys aren’t pirates.”

He did a double take. “How do you know about that?”

I frowned. “Darby likes *Pirates of the Caribbean*. I watched it with him a couple of months ago.” My eyes went wide as I glanced back at the coin. “Seriously, how much did supes leak to Disney?”

“It’s not that, but I can’t tell you.”

I studied him closely and used my magic to see what was on him like I had White after learning her father put magic on her. I frowned at what I found and had no idea what I was looking at. “You can if I’m in the know.”

“Yes.” He smirked when he said it, clearly impressed I’d figured that out.

That gave me an idea. “What can you tell me, Lieutenant?”

“Up one,” he chuckled.

“Captain of the Underground, huh?”

He opened his mouth but then sighed. “Okay, so you’ve kinda opened an area like in gaming. I can talk about being a captain.” He narrowed his eyes at me as he moved closer. “So know that there are commanders and generals above me. And we have one big boss.”

“So like cartels,” I muttered, studying the coin. “And I would bet like some cartels, you don’t know who the other people are. One contact, right?”

“You are impressive,” he muttered as he plopped down next to me. “Yes, I’m at the level that I speak with one commander now. For the record, I’ve identified three other commanders and one general. That’s it. That’s how hard it is to uncover who they are.”

“I believe you, but you’ve been working alone.”

“Don’t. You have enough to deal with and keep focused on. You poke these bears and they will kill you.”

I nodded, not willing to say more. I'd had a lot of people threaten that but if they were magically stronger than Luke, I would take these guys seriously.

I wasn't stupid after all.

"This has magic on it and not yours," I said as I wiggled the coin. "It's not Aztec gold like the movie, but you got nervous. It's Spanish though." I was taking a guess because there was no way the magic that let the Underground become so big was that easy to break or they wouldn't have made it that far.

He sighed but then flinched. "Wow, okay, I think if you know *anything* it messes with the magic because you're so powerful. I've had people poke that and I still couldn't talk."

"I'll take the win."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "That still doesn't mean I'll just tell you everything."

"Tell me this and we'll move on to why I wanted to see you," I pushed after a moment, setting the first containers out in front of him. "A picnic should have pleasant conversation after all."

He swallowed a moan when he saw it was full of fae treats. The way to a supe's heart was through their stomach.

I knew because I was the same.

"It's not Aztec gold," he confirmed as he dug right in. "But yes, what we were doing was leaked to Disney."

"Because people would assume you were jokes then. The movies were made after fairies were locked away, and no

matter how people act like you guys started after that, you didn't."

"No, the Underground is at least fifty years old," he confirmed. "Without the boring history lesson, a powerful warlock family used to be the royal family of Spain. Way before my time even. The boss of the Underground is called our King."

"Of that family?"

"No, but he was party to wiping them out. I've heard whispers of the story from my commander, but that's it." He nodded to the coin I was still playing with. "That's part of the loot that the Spanish king at the time had blessed for his daughter's dowery. Spain and France were going to combine under warlocks or something."

I snorted. "That wasn't in any history I was taught."

He rolled his eyes. "You're shocked what's written in books isn't the truth? You're smarter than that."

"Yeah, I am. I just—I'm not shocked, but it's still surprising sometimes."

He nodded, clearly not wanting to get into it anymore. "What did you need?"

I cleared my throat and tucked away the coin. "So what do you know about a dragon's tunnel vision?"

He froze in his next bite, studying me closely. He finished eating what was in his hand before reaching for something next. "I know it's bad, and that's why most don't mate dragons besides other dragons. It's why I was upset you were mates

with a dragon, especially one who was given everything and would be a pain in your ass.”

“Hudson’s not like that.”

“I’m going to call you stupid again if you defend him after everything he’s done to you,” Luke threatened.

He could say it all he wanted. *My* Hudson wasn’t like that.

And I wanted my Hudson back. I wanted to understand this side of him.

I needed to.

8

“I also find it interesting you’re asking this now and clearly didn’t when it was your friend Melody,” he added when I didn’t reply.

I flinched and reached for my own food. “I did what I did to save her life. A bunch of lives. She came at me. She made me the villain and I didn’t deserve that. Especially after all we’d been through.” I took a bite of a delicious breakfast sandwich. “That’s way different than the situation with Hudson. I was partially at fault.

“I do have too much always around me, and he got pushed back again and again. It was a bit too much of an ultimatum, but I get being fed up and just...” I shook my head. “I’m not defending him. He was a jerk. I just didn’t help the way I should have. But there’s also nothing to *fix* with Mel. She doesn’t want the life I have to lead. Hudson does.”

He sighed, leaning back on his elbow as he kept eating so he was still facing me. “You ever have a panic attack?”

“Yeah, but I would have sensed if he was scared or panicking.”

“Just listen,” he grumbled, waiting until I nodded. “It’s like that for them. It’s not panicking, but it’s that fixating on one thing that... It’s not irrational. It’s something that can change the course of their life. Affect their future. For Mel, it was not being able to get her deserved revenge. For Hudson, it was probably always feeling like he wouldn’t be first in your life.

“Something about this was more than just going public, and until he figures it out and addresses it, he could be thrown right back into his tunnel vision.” He waited for me to nod again. “But their tunnel vision is that fixation. They can’t focus on anything else. They go through the motions. I would bet his grades fell some.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, feeling small and like a shitty girlfriend, much less mate.

“It’s also part OCD to put it into what you’d understand. Have you ever dealt with someone with severe OCD?”

I slowly nodded. “A foster mom I was with for a bit. She’d scream if I didn’t put stuff back in the fridge the right way.”

He held up a finger to hold me off and finished chewing his bite. “No, dragons don’t have OCD. It’s that panic again. That fixation that something is wrong. You were out of place in his mind the way whatever was in the fridge you messed up for that human.”

“That seems a bit much,” I sighed.

“It is and only other dragons can really understand.” He cleared his throat and sat up, pulling his shirt over his head. He

chuckled when I shot up and moved away. “Simmer down, Princess.” He gestured to his perfectly toned chest. “You see a conduit?”

“No, but I knew people didn’t keep the rules of only those who graduate supe schools. There’s a black market for anything.”

“You’re right and smarter than the councils because they’ve always thought they control that. *However*, I did graduate.” He winked at me and then used several runes.

Runes a wolf shifter shouldn’t be able to without a conduit.

“Being fairy-born has evolved in what powers other species can have.”

“Yes, very good,” he praised as he called his magic back. “I’m rare and that was why I was recruited. *But* being able to explain how I can do that to other wolf shifters is like trying to explain color to someone not just color-blind, but completely without vision. Someone who’s never seen anything and I’m talking about shades of purple.”

I swallowed loudly. “Yeah, I felt that with the demigod way of cleansing and getting stress out.”

“Yes, that’s what dragons go through. It’s also a distance thing.”

“How?”

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know. A dragon buddy of mine used to make it sound like how I felt when I was out of juice. Like my magic betrayed me or I just couldn’t reach it. That’s how they feel with their dragons

when they've got tunnel vision. They can't *sync* with their dragons because dragons don't understand our complicated emotions."

"Someone said Hudson was tearing up the dragon territory at school."

"Oh, not just there from what I heard," he drawled, nodding when I raised an eyebrow. "The Vogels have a huge section missing trees that they had replanted and paid for someone to regrow so no one noticed. That is part of the tunnel vision, but also he was on the outs with his mate. You weren't pushing him away."

"No, no, I wasn't."

"So next time the idiot gives you shit about running, remind him that he ran from every conversation you tried to have with him."

I snorted. "Can you? I sound petty and a bratty lover when I do it." I pulled my knees to my chest. "I don't know what to do. I want my Hudson back, but if Juan could turn him into such an asshole so fast... Did we have as strong of a relationship as I'd thought?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask for relationship advice, Princess."

"Because you lost your mate to the Underground?" I asked, shooting him a look that I'd figured that out at least.

He swallowed loudly and stared out at the water. "You know the line and how often you have to jump over it to get the bad guys. My mate never jumped back over. She was abused young, and as much as the wolf council is better than

most, it's not full of good people. One tried to sell her just like others have their families.”

“Her fear of ever being that helpless made her turn to the bad guys and believe the lie they were her only option.”

“Something like that,” he whispered. “Either way, I know she won't be in Paradise. She went too far.” He stood and gathered up several of the containers and put them in two of the totes. “So have I, so don't make the mistake of wanting to save me, Princess. Not everyone can be saved.”

And then the dick opened a portal and left.

With my totes, the food, and containers.

Dick.

“I really hit a nerve there, huh, Luke?” I muttered. Still, if he knew there was no going back and he'd done too much wrong, then he wasn't without hope.

But I did agree with him that not everyone could be saved. He clearly didn't want to be.

And I had a whole world of people to save.

Still, the outing had been worth it and gave me a few ideas of what to do next... After I was done being annoyed that Luke figured out how to get around my magic when I locked an area from portals. Most couldn't open them out still even when I locked a place from allowing portals to come in.

Dick.

I cleaned up the rest of everything and opened three portals.

Neldor came through his first with a yawn. He glanced around and shot me a pissed look. “Are you like fucking stupid being out here all on your own? What were you doing now?”

“Getting information,” I muttered, glancing over at Commander Talila when she walked through... And raising an eyebrow when Taeral and Onas followed. “It’s never just one of you guys.”

“Good morning to you as well, Your Highness,” Onas drawled. “Why are we on a beach?”

I held up a finger and waited until Rainbow came out of his portal, greeting my dog and giving him love. Then I focused on Talila. “Everyone had strong reactions to the showing at the gallery, but yours worried me.”

I was impressed when she didn’t even deny it.

“Every time a new layer is peeled back on the mess we ignored and the results of it, I find myself...” She shook her head and looked off towards the water.

“It’s a lot, but I’m glad you’re finally admitting to yourself that you’re not handling it well.”

“I’m not sure why we’re having a meeting to discuss this, Your Highness,” she said, anger flowing off of her.

“Because we *all* hide too fucking much that the others need to know to keep us in check,” I snapped. “I once again couldn’t come to any of you with my problems because you all freak out or don’t handle your own shit well. So why would I trust you with mine?” I waited until she seemed to accept that.

“I’m also very understanding if people are honest with themselves.”

“You are,” Taeral agreed.

I kept my gaze on Talila. “You are struggling to adjust, but what if you could stop focusing on the changes and more on what you know?”

She frowned as she looked at me. “I don’t understand.”

I pulled the coin out of my pocket and held it up. “The Underground uses these to connect to each other in stealth. Luke said I had to throw it down on natural rock and he would know I wanted to talk to him.”

Neldor reached over and snagged it from me. “Meaning they’re tied to people.”

“Yes, and considering Luke is only a captain of the Underground, there are others above him more powerful. They sense fairy magic.” I focused on Talila. “Shael said you worked mostly with the fae dogs and investigations involving them.” I waited until she nodded. “Then do that.”

“We’re stretched too thin to handle this,” Onas argued.

“I didn’t say handle it,” I clarified. “I said investigate it. Start to. We need to start finding the people we’ll have to deal with.” I took the coin back and knelt in front of Rainbow. “What can you sense from this? Do you sense Luke’s magic or the one it’s originally tied to? Can you find other magic *like* it?”

Rainbow sniffed it and then told me to set it down so he could touch it. It took him a few minutes to get a real feel for it, but then I had my answer.

I winked at the dog and picked back up the coin. “They can find others like it. He’s certain he can now sense that magic.”

“And the dogs can hide better than we can,” Onas muttered.

“Good to know,” I muttered. It made sense though since supes had had time to study fairy magical objects. A few might have managed to catch fae dogs and set up breeders, but not everyone could do that.

Clearly, the Underground hadn’t, so fair folk magic was still mostly a mystery to them.

Interesting.

I focused back on Talila. “You in?”

She flinched. “I will do whatever you order me to, Your Highness.

“I’m asking because ordering you when you’re struggling is a shit move. I could put you on lighter duty or force you to take a break. I don’t want to do that. So I’m asking, Commander. What do you need? Can working on this keep you focused and busy while slowly allowing you to adjust to your new reality?”

She swallowed loudly. “I don’t know, but it’s worth a shot because what I’m doing isn’t working.”

“Okay, keep me updated.” I glanced at Neldor. “You good with this?”

“Yeah, it’s the smart play.”

“Good.” I gave Rainbow some more love. “Work with the commander and come to me if you have any questions. I expect reports too.” I nodded at what he said in my mind, looking at Talila. “Please make sure this pack gets more runs in Faerie. They keep getting pushed to the last in line and they need the recharge to do this right.”

“I will see it done.” She cleared her throat. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

I nodded. “We all need to do better accepting what we need. I’m not just saying that. I’m focusing on it this break, starting with something today.”

“What?” Neldor muttered.

“Something you wouldn’t understand growing up as a prince,” I admitted. I shrugged when they pushed. I wasn’t about to tell them since it was personal.

They would live not knowing.

But that was how I ended up at one of the prisons in Faerie with a second breakfast waiting for a prisoner to be brought in. I dropped the donut in my hand when Blake Ward was brought in.

“If *anyone* gets to beat her up, it’s me,” I seethed as I jumped to my feet. “Who is doing—”

“You misunderstand her condition, Your Highness,” the guard cut in, looking like I’d kicked him in the nuts.

I opened my mouth but then slowly closed it. “I apologize. Please explain it to me.” I gestured at Blake, especially focused on her bruised face. “Because this barely looks like the Blake Ward I know.”

“Fuck you, Vale,” Blake bit out. “I’m still prettier than you.”

The fact she truly believed that made me want to gag, but it wasn’t true.

Not in the slightest.

“Speak to the princess as you should or your rations will be decreased *again*,” the guard warned, smirking when Blake flinched. “I would suggest apologizing as well.”

“I apologize,” Blake bit out.

I simply blinked at her before the guard. “Did you put a chip in her brain?”

He badly smothered a snort. “You are used to the wealthy and well taken care of vampires, Your Highness. This is one of the underbellies of their species they don’t like to speak of. Some like Ms. Ward here didn’t *believe* it because she was so spoiled.”

“I’m so confused,” I admitted, glancing between them.

“You will receive extra time in the exercise yard if you show the princess what I mean,” the guard said the Blake.

She snorted. “Pacing in a cage isn’t a reward. I want a couple of books and from this century. Fiction. Something *fun*. Not your educational training bullshit.”

I nodded. “If you use them as rewards, I’m fine with an updated library,” I told the guards. “Who is in charge of that? I’ll speak with them. Or please make sure they speak with Iolas and he can handle it.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Blake narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t try to win me over. You’re still...” She trailed off when the guard cleared his throat.

Seriously, they had to have put some sort of chip in her brain. That was the only explanation I could come up with.

I raised an eyebrow as Blake pulled up the sleeve of her prison uniform and lightly smacked her shoulder into the wall. And I mean *lightly* smacked. It was just a slight bump that didn’t even make any noise.

My eyes almost popped out of my head as I saw a massive bruise form.

And didn’t heal.

“What the hell?” I whispered, glancing at the guard. Then it hit me. “She’s only getting the minimum blood she needs, right?”

“How can you be in charge of everything when you know *nothing?*” Blake seethed.

I held up my hand to the guard. “One, I say the same all of the time. Two, I can only learn so much so fast, and this is not remotely anything that could take the top of my priorities. Three, apparently you didn’t even believe this so shut your face.”

“Well said, Your Highness,” he chuckled. “And yes, without... It’s like hydration or fae food to us. If we’re not well hydrated, we can’t heal or use magic as we would want. When we have fae food, we can do more. That’s blood for vampires. They can’t heal on their own without blood.

“The blood in them wasn’t of their own making so when they are at the surviving level, it’s not working through their bodies as you’re used to seeing. I’ve heard it’s like older humans and how thin their skin is that bruises too easily. The same for vampires. Plus, other side effects. For our purposes, it’s meant to keep their strength down so none are a problem.”

I nodded along. “Thank you for explaining. I’m sorry I assumed the worst. It truly came from a place that I understand the desire to constantly smack Blake.”

He snickered. “Yes, she is trying some of the most patient fairies I know, but we’re well trained to handle prisoners and all of their tricks. It is one of the calmer roles for Guardians, and most of us here prefer the routine and consistency. The training is interesting as well and—”

“I don’t need to be here for her education into her own damn people,” Blake cut in.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said to the guard when he sighed. “I will look into it. It’s on the agenda, but everything has been so up in the air, that learning how things were hasn’t taken priority over what needs to be.” I glanced back at the vampire. “Sit down, Blake.”

“Good, I want a real breakfast,” she grumbled as she moved by the table and went to lean over.

“Fuck you and sit down,” I drawled. “This is *my* breakfast because I’m busy.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Then what do you want from me? I won’t give it just because you’re being a bitch.”

I swallowed a snort. She was so damn easy to manipulate. If I had just given her something she would have demanded more. Pushing her buttons to make it like she won something I would have done anyways made everything so much easier.

It always did with idiots.

“Fine, two fae bakery muffins and you answer all my questions, no bullshit.”

She studied me closely and I could practically see the wheels of her mind turning... But slower than I remembered. Wow, that had to be another side effect of not getting all the blood she wanted.

Interesting.

“Fine, but I’m not implicating anyone or letting you just mess with me.”

“I’m too busy to simply mess with you and our interrogators do the rest.”

“Fine, but I want meat. Egg. Anything protein.”

“I only have one left and it’s much bigger than two muffins,” I countered.

“Done.”

I reached into the one bag and pulled out the massive breakfast sandwich, tossing it over to her. And just to be nice, I tossed a muffin with fae fruit to the guard.

“How did you never care what was said about you?” I asked Blake after she started *tearing* into the sandwich.

She shrugged. “Idiots and jealous people said it. It’s just barking then from useless animals.”

I sighed. “Okay, yeah, but I’m not an idiot and I wasn’t jealous of you and I said some of the stuff. How could you simply ignore it?”

She snorted, smirking at me when she looked up. “Of course you were jealous of me.”

“No, I wasn’t, Blake. I mostly pitied you.” I flinched when she threw back her head and laughed.

“In what world would you ever pity me? That’s insane.”

I tapped my fingers on the table and thought how to phrase it without pissing her off since that wouldn’t help me cause. “You were so sheltered and completely ignorant of the big world outside of your immediate view. You were spoiled to the extreme, and that wouldn’t help you in the long run.”

“I knew what I needed to.”

“Okay, but I hear thoughts, Blake. A lot of people weren’t jealous of you. And some of their criticism was valid. How did you let that slide off of you so easily?”

She sighed, put out that I wasn’t going to let this go. Blake proceeded to explain to me how misguided *I was* for the next ten minutes. How she was perfect and of course people would be jealous. That I was deluded to think any other way and that any criticism was the same. And if they thought anything else, they were simply lying to themselves.

I was so shocked I couldn’t even eat as she went on.

And on.

And on.

“Right, so be fucking delusional,” I whispered. “That’s the answer. The shit will affect me, or I have to become a sociopath and completely delusional. Okay then.” I glanced over at the guard when he snorted. “Do you disagree?”

“No, Your Highness, she’s completely delusional, and we’ve all learned that too.” His face softened. “I do think you will learn to filter out some of the noise as you mature and have the role longer. I know that’s what it took for me.”

“How so?” I asked, reaching over and smacking Blake’s hand away when she reached for more of my food. I internally winced when a huge bruise formed, but it was her fault for being a criminal.

“I would think prison guards are still looked down on and mocked in the human world. It’s the same for supes.”

I swallowed down a comment that most human ones probably deserved it, but that would simply make his point. Plus, I had seen the wrong side of the “justice” system too often.

So I simply nodded.

“What else can I school you in? There’s lots you need to learn,” Blake rattled. “And I’m the perfect teacher. Work with me more and you won’t be trash. Well, *you* would still be, but I can make you not so bad.”

“I’m born of the light queen of Faerie and a demigod,” I drawled. “Enough with me being trash.”

She snorted. “Demigods aren’t real. Your mom made all that up to hide she was a slut like you and boinked a non-fairy.”

“You have way better patience than even I do, Your Highness,” the guard breathed when I didn’t lunge for Blake. “Even I’m struggling and she didn’t speak of my mother.”

I shrugged. “I’m used to this side. Plus, Blake was born of an affair, so it’s really hard to take that criticism from her.”

“What are you talking about?” Blake demanded.

I gave her my most innocent face. “That came out in your mom’s interrogation. They had to have told you?”

The guard caught on to what I was doing and shook his head. “No, we don’t relay testimonies between inmates even if family or it affects them.”

“Oh, my bad. Let them know I did it,” I said easily as I gathered my stuff. “Thanks for bringing her out and letting me interrupt your day.”

“You fucking lie, Vale!” Blake screamed, finally snapping out of her shock. She practically exploded mentally and verbally, railing against the idea she was a bastard and not a real Ward.

Wow. Just *wow*. That mattered to her so much it was insane.

She was.

What a waste of time. Still, it was better to have checked for myself and gone through the motions.

Or so I hoped. I didn’t have time I could afford to waste.

9

Darby wasn't happy to hear that I'd set up a "date" to meet Luke or that I wanted to talk to him at all. But like Darby always did, he accepted it without fuss. I did promise I would tell him in the future and not make it such an intimate affair.

Plus, I made a much nicer picnic for him and there was lots of hot sex. That seemed to make him more accepting as well.

Oh, and he laughed his ass off hearing about my visiting Blake. It was a bit cruel and petty to enjoy it so much, but all of that went out the window when it came to Blake.

A week into break I was able to identify when I was in a dream on my own. I knew part of it was that Julian was right there to tag in if I had a problem, and that was ridiculously comforting.

Ridiculous especially feeling that about someone who was so unreliable.

It was still great that I knew for sure I wasn't cracking. There were other things I noticed though when that relief started filling me.

Namely I was agitated.

Like wound up and just... Agitated.

I wasn't mad at anyone really. It wasn't one thing I could really pinpoint either. It was a bunch of little annoyances that kept piling.

People pushing for me to come to the Vogel's party after I sent my regrets. It was all over the news that I was blowing idiot plans to corner me and it was unfair of me.

Seriously?

And there was pressure to make up with Hudson because it made the lives of others easier.

Okay then.

People also wanted my paintings. Word got out that I did a showing in Faerie, and supe art critics were *demanding* to view the paintings. Also for me to have an auction with my other work.

Sure, that was something they demand.

Then there was the stuff I had to do. I had to finalize the budgets, but I didn't want to yet after talking with Neldor. There was pressure on that, but it wasn't like a normal year for anyone, and it was people wanting to get back to the way things were pushing me.

Right, but I didn't want fairies to go back to the way things *were*.

The way things were got fairies and their *royals* killed.

Yeah, so that was stupid.

It left me agitated.

I woke up early and promised Julian I was fine when he shot up from where he was working in the corner of my room. That had taken some getting used to. Darby clearly didn't like it, but he liked me not having nightmares and issues more.

So Julian went to bed then and something he said irked me. He wanted to crash at the house we were staying at again because he needed a break from the Craftsman house.

That irked me. Where he lived should be his sanctuary and peaceful.

Except to him it wasn't. I learned what his comment that he had to live there meant. He really had to live there.

Duh, someone lived in their house. Of course, they did.

But the charter for the Craftsman family stated specifically that the head of the family had to live in that house. That seemed stupid, but it seriously was a rule.

I put in my earbuds and turned on Em Beihold's "Numb Little Bug" that I had become obsessed with. It said exactly what I was feeling with some extra annoyance.

I didn't feel like going for a run though. And I didn't want to go downstairs for breakfast yet. I already had my earbuds in, so I wasn't going to shower.

Yeah, all around I was agitated.

I thought about something I'd read in a fairy's journal last year that I'd never had a chance to play with. It had interested me because not only had it come from my family's library, *but* it was also relevant. The writer was actually a royal etiquette teacher who specialized in working with the heirs in what they needed to know when they took over.

And oddly enough, one of the first things was cleansing the castle.

Yeah, weird, right?

It was a tradition of the new queen to cleanse the castle to show the clean slate of her reign. I had thought it crass given how often people took over when their mother's died, but there were rules for that and how long the mourning period. That was the private residence, but the ruling and official areas were still to be done.

I wasn't thinking about it to do for myself, but... It was interesting.

And apparently, my magic agreed with me and testing it out when I realized I'd teleported to Craftsman's house.

"Fuck it." I mentally shrugged and restarted the song as I headed towards the front door.

Might as well start at the beginning.

I focused my vision on the door in a way that wasn't like I had before. It was almost as if I was seeing through the door with how the journal had described it. I wanted to see what was in the very air. Almost how humans used sage to purify a place and that smoke changed the air and... Burned away the negativity?

I wasn't really sure if that was how it worked, but I understood the goal.

This was more like wanting to act as an air purifier. I called the energy in the room to me and used my magic to make it neutral again. I shivered when I felt darkness stick to me almost like a magical film.

Yeah, I wasn't shocked that a lot of bad things had happened to that place.

I wiggled out my arms as if that would get it off of me, but I knew that wouldn't be enough. I started really grooving to the music and noticed a larger, newer scratch on the wood flooring. I was about to fix it when I realized the floors were tacky. The shade was off from the paint on the walls and hideous wallpaper border that was in the middle of the wall.

Oh and the pretentiously painted crown molding. I doubted it was real silver paint, but it was tacky. I studied it and realized it was a glamour put into the paint.

Well, I could fix that. I pulled it off and then used a rune to pull off the wallpaper.

And the huge rug that was undoubtedly a fortune had to go. It was gross. I mean, it was clean, but the design was just... Yeah, gross.

I stripped the floors with a rune and found a gorgeous ash that undoubtedly cost an arm and a leg. Using a different rune, I sealed it so it kept the natural look. Most needed the actual stain and a sander to do that—Natalie's family had when they'd renovated my house—but fairy runes didn't if the person was powerful enough.

And I was.

Another good song came on, and I kept dancing as I changed the crown molding to a bright white and the wall color to a blueish gray. It wasn't light, but it wasn't super dark. Just enough to stand out against the crown molding and didn't make the room look smaller.

I wasn't sure that was even possible, the entryway was so huge.

It looked much better... Until I noticed the "art" that was on the walls. It was old ass paintings of people I assumed to be his family posing like they were super important. Fine, the Craftsman family was a big deal in the supe world, but none of them had been the king of England or anything.

Gag me. I couldn't see every doing something like that.

I mentally winced. I would probably have to *absolutely* do something like that.

To be fair, I was an actual ruler of a world. I probably should have portraits painted of me for history.

Something I would undoubtedly stress out about later.

Right then, I had some paintings to deal with. I ducked into a room a few back from the foyer and saw it wasn't being used from the gathered dust. Perfect.

I scanned the space and used my magic to move the paintings like I had furniture before in my own house. I smiled as I thought about Natalie and her family. I hadn't seen them much since she graduated, and I missed them and our other witch friends.

I went back and changed up the fancy looking big table that was meant to hold a vase of flowers or something decorative. There were several more touches I handled, including the banisters for the stairs and window dressings.

It was a job well done and a good start to the project.

The project that wasn't *mine*.

In a house that wasn't mine either.

That didn't hit me until I was back at where we were staying and was tucking into my breakfast while flipping through ideas of what to decorate his foyer with. Darby asked me what I was looking at as he stumbled into the kitchen wanting coffee, and what I'd done hit me like a ton of bricks.

"I'm such a jerk," I whispered as I tossed my phone on the table.

"Why? What happened?" he worried.

I shook my head. "I was—I overstepped. Big time. Shit, he's going to kill me. *I'd* kill him if it was reverse."

Darby pushed me again to fill him in, so I explained what had happened.

Mostly. It wasn't so much about my mental state but just I wanted to put in place something I'd read and it got out of hand. I was worried about how Julian would react but also pouting because I felt so much better than earlier. I'd sorted out that whole foyer and I was more settled. I couldn't fix everything in my life but right then, I could handle that one room and problem.

That had felt good.

I worked all day but was antsy, glad when dinner rolled around and Julian would be up. I could confess then and deal with the fallout instead of this knot of what was going to come.

He snorted when I told him. "Tamsin, do whatever you want to that cesspool of evil. I would burn it to the ground if I could get away with it and not lose the position."

“Why keep it if it makes you so miserable?” Darby muttered.

Julian shrugged, focused on his food. “The next three after me aren’t good people. They would love to become just like my uncle if they could have the money and power. They haven’t done anything *yet* to be arrested for. I’m pretty sure that will change in the future, but I can’t hand it off to them. I just can’t.”

Fair enough.

“You’re really not mad?” I muttered. “I just did it. I mean, I redid part of your *house* without even checking.”

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced at me. “Do you want me to yell at you?” He snorted when I winced. “You knew it was over the line. Clearly you do, and you didn’t have any bad intentions. You’re talking to someone who gets lost in magic all of the time. I get it.”

“You also know she tortured herself all day with guilt,” Darby drawled.

“I’m very sure of that,” Julian snickered. “Do what you want to the place, Tams. I can’t. I know I should, but I can’t bring myself to put in any effort for that fucking house when it’s my prison and I put so much into saving that fucking family.” He cleared his throat when we all stared at him with wide eyes.

“Thanks,” I whispered as we all recovered. “It was nice to have something simple to handle and without pressure when everything else is huge and has tons of pressure.”

“I’m glad.” He studied me over the lip of his glass. “You seem lighter. That wasn’t just the foyer.”

“No, no, it wasn’t only that,” I admitted. “It was something bigger.”

Which was why I was standing in a meeting I had called a few hours later. I stared around at the large group, ignoring the grumblings and mutterings of annoyance that I’d pulled the nobles into a meeting at the last minute. They would live.

Seriously, what else were they even doing? Most of their cities and areas weren’t open yet.

But I did bring in every newly appointed hobgoblin to manage areas, the commanders, Neldor, and all nobles eligible to lead an area. I’d made it clear that the ones in charge might not stay in charge, so I was making sure to include the rest of their siblings or cousins who could take over the posts.

Plus, the ones who I could have manage the areas I’d seized back like I had with Mallory.

I moved my hands to the two huge stacks of documents on the table in front of me. “These are the budgets that were submitted for my approval and people are pushing for Neldor and I to sign off on so we can get things back to the way they were. Except, my main goal is to not have things simply go back to the way things were.”

“I approve of a lot of the changes you’ve made, Your Highness, but most things need to return to normal. Budgets are one of them,” a man said from the crowd.

I couldn’t pinpoint the voice, but I wasn’t upset with what they’d said since it was respectful.

I simply disagreed.

“Neldor threw down a challenge for me that there wasn’t a way to improve on the budget system or the greasing of palms and tucking away the remaining funds into pockets. I thought about that long and hard because—”

“Are you accusing us of stealing or—”

“Silence!” I snapped, pushing my magic in it. I stared down the female noble who had spoken. “You will have your chance to discuss what I propose, but this is my time to speak. I wasn’t pointing fingers or throwing around accusations for what happened before I was born. I was saying it happened. Of course it did. Every system has corruption in it. It’s a fact.”

“I find it interesting how quickly you felt the need to defend yourself when Tamsin wasn’t pointing a finger or mentioning specifics,” Neldor muttered from my right. “I would like your royal account to audit the books of that area.”

I snorted. “Yeah, you have fun with that. I wouldn’t know what any of the projects or itemizations would be.”

“It is very difficult to leave the funds to run the government in your hands when you say things like that, Your Highness. It scares many of us.”

I shrugged. “I don’t blame you for that. It scares me too. I’d rather be honest and us work together like we should and get to the right answers. That is what I’m working on here.”

“And the princess understands a lot more than she thinks,” Commander Morgan interjected, dipping his head to me as if apologizing for interjecting. “She doesn’t understand the shorthand and asks. Her honesty is admirable instead of her

pride getting in the way of what is needed. She also works well with Prince Neldor who does understand all of this and has for many years.”

“I’m glad, truly,” the man said after a moment. “I meant no offense and I want this honesty. I’m simply terrified.”

“Fair enough.” What else was there really to say? I understood what he was saying. I glanced around again and sighed. “I’m proposing an escrow system.”

“You’re not buying houses in the human world though,” someone muttered, a group all glancing at each other in confusion.

“It’s not only for houses,” I clarified. “There are governments who work in escrows on their budgets. It’s like safety rails.” I held up my hand to silence people. “There has been corruption. It’s happened. People are extra scared now and just like when I was at a group home or with a foster family after not getting what I needed, I ate more than my share.

“I took extra clothes because I was scared when I’d get the chance at more clothes. It’s *natural* for that to be the response. It comes out of fear and the need for security. I’m not judging.” I gave people a moment to let that sink in. “I am going to adjust for it. You don’t serve alcohol to a scared alcoholic. You just don’t.”

“How do you see the changes working then, Your Highness?” Stefanie asked after several moments of people mulling over what I’d said.

I nodded to her in thanks, tapping the budgets again. “Neldor and I have some changes to these that need to be discussed, but the ones that are fine, we approve them. The funds are transferred to either the Bank of Faerie in the light or dark realm since we’re still keeping the taxes and fiscal part of the governments separate for now.

“Each budget and project goes into a separate account. A savings one so we also get interest on the money. Some of these budgets are for the summer. Leaving the money to sit with the person heading the project is silly and wasteful.”

“That has been a main complaint in previous years,” Shael muttered. “I would assume for the dark realm as well.” She seemed relieved it wasn’t only the light realm when several dark fairies nodded.

“At each bank there is a new position created for a hobgoblin to oversee and audit the accounts. We assign them, they give reports to Neldor and I, but they work for the bank meaning they have a vested interest in things being above board. Please, hobgoblins can’t lie or be sneaky like fairies.”

“Smart,” someone praised.

“There will be a weekly submission of receipts and project accounting to my office. That way there is no more of this surprise going over budget and no one knows where things went wrong and it’s an emergency to get more funds or everything is for nothing and blah, blah, bullshit. Lastly, it will keep contractors in check.”

“What do you mean by that, Your Highness?” a woman asked near the front.

“It’s a common thing in the human world that when the project is with the government, they overcharge because they know the payday is there. When the payment is guaranteed, people get greedy. Except now we’ll see in real time if company A is charging us too much for road maintenance because they’re 150% over company B in a different area.”

“That is a good way of keeping them in line instead of them always acting as if they’re our only choice,” a different noble agreed. “But it’s frowned upon by the locals if we don’t use their companies to keep the area up.”

“Right, but then they overcharge us,” Neldor interjected. “Except there hasn’t been such a stern idea for accounting. This would give them the numbers to show people the contractors are taking advantage of *their* taxes.”

“That’s the goal,” I promised. “Also, I am making a provision in the budgets that they’re all new contracts. I want our attorneys to write clauses in specifically that if they inflate the prices over our other contractors and without real cause then they’re out.” I shrugged when people gave me a range of looks. “I get why humans need unions.

“I do. Most of the time unions protect workers. *But* if you spend any time in the human world you also learn that the unions abuse their protections. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve driven by roadwork and four people are watching one guy pour concrete or something. No, I’m not dealing with that shit. The hobgoblins will be there to make sure workers are treated well.”

“And this will allow the workers to treat the government with respect,” Neldor threw in. “It’s win-win for people with

integrity which we pride ourselves on as fairies. It's time to prove it, especially after all we've been through."

I got pissed when a few shot him looks that he was the last person who should be saying that. "I'm sorry, was Neldor not frozen like the rest of you? He nearly broke himself trying to help me get you all back, so enough with the resentment for what his *mother* did. If *I* can look past that and work with him, you all fucking can too."

No one could hide their shock at the harshness of my tone... Especially Neldor.

I let out a slow breath. "The guilt of what she did kills you and as your friend it guts me to see. You did nothing, Neldor. You're not even a legal adult in Faerie. Fuck, just enough."

"Thanks, Tamsin," he whispered, clearing his throat and looking down at the table. "Thanks."

I nodded and focused us back on the meeting.

And to my utter amazement... People liked the idea. It was subtle changes to make things more efficient and respected the taxes people worked hard to pay. Everyone thought it would go over well except with anyone who was shady.

Nice. Really nice. People were relieved that something so customary as passing the budgets for the next year could happen and cut through some of the fear everyone had.

I was proud that we had progressed to this point.

Exhausted, but proud.

10

“I swear you are a walking ‘hold my beer’ meme,” Neldor muttered after the meeting was over. “I tell you I can’t think of a way to get it done, and you just always say to hold your beer and get into it.”

“Maybe but I think it’s why we make such a good team,” I admitted, shrugging when he was confused. “You know this stuff so well you know the problems and pitfalls. I know very little and then it’s not all set in stone with me. I can adjust easier, and then you can recorrect what will actually work.”

“That is a rather diplomatic and rewarding compliment you just paid our prince,” one of the dark fairy nobles said, giving me a funny look.

“I think Neldor more than deserves it. I didn’t push for him to be my prime minister because he was a dark fairy or the only other royal. It’s because of who he is and his morals. He fights for every fairy constantly and even when we disagree, we mostly can be civil. That’s better than 99% of the governments in any world.”

“Let’s leave before you make people faint,” Neldor chuckled.

“Yeah, I want to focus on each budget with you and make sure we’re on the same page before we approve them,” I admitted.

He sighed. “You are ridiculously thorough. You looked it over. I looked it over. One of the commanders look them over before they reached us.”

“And the royal accountants,” someone interjected.

I scrubbed my hand over my hair. “It’s my first time. I should be this diligent. Also, a ton of the projects are like nothing either realm has done before. I looked over the last budgets my mother approved and it’s vastly different. I’m not allowing any mistakes when so much has to be done.”

“Fine, but you’ll need sugar. I know the place,” Neldor said as he opened a portal for us.

I was about to walk through when I noticed that Taeral was beaming with pride... And Iolas was frowning.

Then I caught a thought from someone else.

“Only Prince Neldor could be smooth enough to finagle a date with the heir of Faerie involving budgets.”

Shit. He really had, hadn’t he?

Dick.

Still, I followed along because we needed to get this done and it was extra work for him. Something he wasn’t even complaining about. I took that as a win with the bonus points of treats.

“What is this place?” I asked as I glanced around that the place we’d portaled right into.

He carried the four boxes of budgets with his magic over to a booth in the back, glancing at me as if asking if it was fine. He waited until I nodded and set it all down, waving his hand in front of it to put a barrier up so it was protected. “It’s an all-you-can-eat treat shop.”

I snorted. “We’ll put them out of business.”

“It’s owned by supes and meant for supes,” he explained as he came closer and guided me towards the front. “They have added a surcharge for fairies after a few squads visited on my recommendation.”

“How do you know about places like this, but I don’t?” I wondered as we reached the menu and display cases.

“You don’t care what’s trendy,” he muttered. “However, people know I do and tell me things.”

Which meant he was liked better than me, but he didn’t want to say it. Plus, he’d known that supes had places like this when I didn’t. I was pretty sure there were also ones he remembered with longer histories. Twenty years was a long time but not as long to people who lived much longer than humans.

He moved to order and pay for us and probably the security that would show up for us momentarily.

“Hey, Vale, heard you’re not going to the Vogel’s party,” a guy said from down the display cases. He was smirking when I glanced over at him. “The dragon already dumped you, huh?”

I snorted. “Is that the new rumor? Boring.”

“Boring, huh? He not exciting enough for you?” He was stupid enough to move closer with his four buddies. “Then how about hanging with us tonight? You could give us those blessings now that you’re not going.”

“Yeah, like my dick,” his buddy chuckled. “We can keep you entertained, *Princess*. We’ll give you more than one dragon can so bless our dicks tonight.”

“That’s not how it works, but I will gladly make them fall off,” Neldor seethed from next to me. “If you *think* to speak in such a vulgar way to her again, it will be my pleasure to give *you* all the excitement you could ever handle from peeing through tubes the rest of your lives.”

I wasn’t the only one who stared at Neldor in shock.

The first guy recovered and snorted at him. “Don’t act like her lover. You’re not even together, and you’ve made it clear you want her to bless your dick too.”

Neldor stepped in front of me when the guy moved like he was going to reach for me. “I’ve made it clear I want to *court* her. I want her to be my lover so even if she hasn’t accepted, you’re insane to treat her like this in my presence.” He shook his head. “Or even any fairy. We don’t allow our females to be treated this way.”

The second guy rolled his eyes even as two of their group started backing away. “You want to be king. That’s why you want her. We all know that. *She* knows it and that’s why she’s ignored you.”

It was hard not to react or wince. He pretty much hit the nail on the head there, but I was standing with Neldor that this

behavior was wrong no matter what.

“Yes, please tell me my intentions and what *she* feels when you can’t even behave as you should,” Neldor drawled. “I’ve waved my right to lead. I signed a royal vow that I would never, not *ever* try to take power.”

“What?” I gasped. I grabbed his arm and turned him to face me. “You did what?”

Pain filled his eyes, but then it was gone as fast as it appeared. “Sometimes you really don’t listen to me.”

I let him go and stared back at the display case. “I don’t think you should blame me for that given what’s all happened.”

“I don’t, but I’m not discussing this with trash in your presence.” He held out his hand and a portal appeared under the guys. They fell through and then he closed it back up. “Go sit in the booth and I’ll bring our first course.”

I couldn’t get my mouth to work and simply nodded. Had he really done that? No, he was saying that for assholes, right?

Those assholes gave me an idea though, and I opened portals to Lageos and Onas. They both came through the one since they’d probably still been at the meeting place.

“A group of men just asked me to bless their dicks,” I said without any leadup, shrugging when both men got pissed. “Whatever, Neldor handled it and guys are jerks.” I held up a hand to hold them both off. “It gives us the ammo we’ve needed.”

Lageos put it together first, smirking. “The reason we can announce that approaching you asking for things to be blessed

is not only uncouth but strains any goodwill between the species.”

“Exactly. And we’re going to use this opportunity to give power to women of other species instead of how much has been taken from them.”

“How so?” Neldor asked as he joined us with an overloaded tray.

“I haven’t learned yet how blessings worked, but everything has changed anyways, and now I mostly live in this world. So going forward, *any* request for a blessing must be told to their group’s leader. That leader can submit the proper proposal and background to—”

“One of your aides in the different species,” Lageos surmised, waiting until I nodded. “Well done. Yes, so it’s one of their own being the gatekeeper and with authority to turn down the group leaders which are mostly males.”

“And takes away the councils getting involved because they’ve been discussing all blessings needing to go through them,” Onas muttered.

I hadn’t known that, steam practically coming out of my ears as those *men* tried to act like they owned me. Again. They never would and never could, and I was tired of them giving this perception they could.

“Announce it tonight before they can. Also that any blessing request that does not follow the designated path will be brought to those group leaders to punish. And it better be harshly, or we will cut off the requests from that group and maybe other things. The fact that men tried to corner me

asking for sexual blessings was so far over the line, we are disgusted as a people.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” he agreed, biting back a grin. “Just so I have the specifics, what species?”

“Puma shifters,” Neldor answered. He opened a portal. “That’s where I sent them but be prepared to get wet.”

I snorted, glad he was learning to be a snot with his magic like I was.

Onas thanked us and went through... But Lageos didn’t.

“This had better not be a date,” he warned Neldor. “I heard you were worming your way into a date with my daughter over the budgets.”

“It’s fine, Dad. He made sure there wasn’t a scene when we don’t need one, and if he wants to do the budgets here *again* because I’m nervous, it’s nice of him to be so willing.”

“Fine.” He gave Neldor a warning look before kissing my hair and teleporting to home probably.

“He is terrifying,” Neldor admitted under his breath. “His power is especially. It’s always simmering around him like it’s waiting to attack.”

I snorted. “That might just be for you.”

He gave me a serious look. “No, I’m not the only one who feels it. It’s why so many are terrified of him.”

That was news to me. Most seemed dismissive and rude to him.

But that could be out of fear. I’d done the same at times.

Interesting.

He turned so we were facing each other after he set down the tray. He started to reach up like he was going to touch my face, but then dropped his hand. “I signed a royal vow I would never try to take power from you. Not even from behind the throne. It states that I promise the gods I believe queens rule Faerie as they want.”

“When?” I breathed when I could make my mouth work.

“A few months ago.” He sighed when I did a double take. “I did tell you. A few times. I thought you were just pissed and blocking me.”

I cleared my throat and looked away. “I was struggling with what was real and...”

“Yeah, I know, baby doll. I’m sorry you couldn’t come to me.”

I nodded, not sure what else to say. I swallowed as I thought about what he’d signed. “Did you put in anything...”

“What?” he asked when I stared at the wall. “I won’t get mad.”

“Did you say anything about unless you were the last option?”

“No. Why would I add that?”

I snorted until I realized he was genuinely confused. “Neldor, a lot of people would assassinate me so you’d rule. If you take away their hope you’ll take over if we mate, that’s probably their next best option.”

His eyes went wide with fear. For as much darkness as he'd seen and pain he'd suffered, sometimes the Dark Prince was a bit too naïve and trusting.

Sometimes.

“I'll change it and announce it,” he declared firmly. “That I won't take rule no matter what if you are alive or not. Only if you pass of natural causes—no, not even then. Never. If you die, I'll turn our world into a democracy. A queen of royal birth rules Faerie or if we fail protecting you then the next best thing is one of us elected.”

“I need a minute,” I whispered when I realized he was serious. I moved away and went to go out the door I thought would lead me out back of the building so I could get some fresh air. Instead, I ended up in a kiddy playroom like some fast-food restaurants had... But the type in a world with magic.

I took it in, but my gaze almost immediately locked onto four boys under ten giving a couple of girls about the same age a hard time. My feet were moving before I even realized it, noting that the parents around them were simply watching and not doing anything.

Right as I reached them, the boy out front raised his hand to hit the girl closest to him.

I caught his wrist and turned him towards me. “I don't know what you've been taught, but you can't hit people.”

The little shit snorted at me. “Warlocks are the bosses of women and witches. She wouldn't listen to me.”

It was my turn to snort. “You’re the boss of me? Kid, you better learn some survival instincts or you’ll be dead fast.” *That* had some of the parents react and move towards me, but I was faster, freezing them all in place. I moved so I could see the boys and girls. “Now what is the problem here?”

“Stealing is wrong,” the girl told me as her lower lip quivered. “I got this as a present. We were playing and they wanted it. But it’s mine.”

“It is and stealing is wrong,” I agreed. “They’re little shits, and you never give in to bullies.”

“Witches—” the kid started.

“Silence,” I bit out, mentally smirking when he finally realized he wasn’t the strong one there, even his friends backing away a bit. “I’ll deal with you next.” I smiled at the girls. “You should share your toys though. Did you offer that?”

“Yes,” the second girl said. “I have one too, and I said they could play with that if they left us alone. They said we had to give both to them.”

“And you said no?” I checked, smiling at both of them when they nodded. “Good. Never give in to the bullies.”

“They’re stronger,” the first girl whispered. “I have to if they’re stronger.”

“No, you don’t,” I argued. “I’m the strongest one here and I came to protect you. Anything else is unacceptable.” I shot the boys a nasty look. “I’m stronger than you. Should I demand your toys? Your clothes? I’m a princess, so you’d have to listen, right?”

I snorted when they all looked between themselves and then to their parents.

“Don’t look at them. You started this. So finish it. You were bullying them because you’re stronger. I’m stronger than you. How about I take everything? I’m stronger than your *parents*. Should I take their houses? Their money? Everything?”

“No, that would be wrong,” the boy in the back said. He looked the youngest and like he was trying to truly figure out the answer. “It was just bubbles though.”

“But they weren’t *yours*. You can’t just take things because you’re stronger. Do the gods take all you have because they’re stronger?”

“No, they protect us?” he... Asked? Yeah, it sounded like he was asking.

“We thank them for what they’ve given us,” I clarified. “For being good to us and yes, not taking away what we have.” I stared the four of them down. “So shouldn’t you live like the gods do? Or do you want to live like the bad guys? The bad guys take what they can and steal.”

“I’m stronger,” the first boy muttered, not sounding so sure anymore.

“How? Are you physically stronger?” I waited until he nodded. “But are you magically stronger? Are you mentally stronger? She seems pretty sharp so maybe her grades are better.” I gave them a moment to let that sink in. “Why should *physical* be the way you judge strength? That’s what bullies and bad people do.”

“Dad says men are stronger at everything and that’s why witches give us babies. That’s all they can do.”

Neldor had followed, whistling when he heard that. “Whichever one of you said that, say goodbye to your balls.”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

“Which are your moms? I want to meet the pathetic excuses for women who allow that bile to be taught to their children.”

Neldor snorted. “Or allow it said in front of them without beating someone.”

Again, I couldn’t have agreed more.

The first boy frowned. “She’s not here.”

“Why not?” Neldor asked, clearly picking up on something I wasn’t. He sighed when the kid wouldn’t answer, glancing at the man who was clearly his father. Neldor waved his hand as his magic flared.

“She ran away,” the boy blurted. “Dad lies that she died when my little brother died, but she didn’t. She ran away. She told me because dad hurt her after she had a carriage.”

“Miscarriage,” I muttered, listening to the boy’s thoughts. I flinched when he thought her first name. “I know where she is. She’s at one of the havens.” I shot the dad a death look, noting his surprise. “And now I know who to punish. She wouldn’t tell us who *almost killed her* because she was horrified she left her child to save her own life. But now I know.”

“You know nothing, you whore,” the man bit out.

Instantly my security team was there grabbing the guy out of the group. Clearly, they hadn't been able to tell the fairies were there cloaked.

I decided to get into that later because the kids were getting scared, and I didn't want that as their impression of fairies. We weren't the scary ones.

Normally it was the rest of the world.

I squatted down and took the bottle of bubbles. "Well, since I can't teach you boys how wrong you really are, let's pick another way to handle this." I focused on it and added a few runes before giving it back to the first girl with a smile. "Try it now. I bet the boys won't want it anymore."

She glanced towards who I thought to be her parents, but then nodded, taking it from me and blowing bubbles.

Which were much bigger than normal bubbles. The girls gasped and then squealed in delight when they popped and huge, sparkling roses appeared and floated to the ground like feathers.

"It's *real!*" the second girl shrieked as she grabbed one at her feet. "They're really roses!"

"Yes, they are," I chuckled, beaming at how excited they were. I raised an eyebrow at the four boys. "And you wouldn't want sparkly *flowers*, would you? I mean, that can't be what manly men play with, right? Right? You big strong boys don't want girly flowers and sparkles."

The boy at the back started sniffing. "But they're pretty and I like pretty."

“I do too,” Neldor admitted as he moved by the boy. “Remember this moment and to make your own choices. Don’t be a sheep and simply listen to bile.”

I bit back a smile when he made other sparkly flowers for the boy after he promised he wouldn’t be a sheep.

“You’re just as big of a troublemaker as I am,” I accused.

“I used to be Faerie’s *biggest* troublemaker,” he chuckled as he moved closer. “A title you have since taken. It suits you better though.” He pulled out a bouquet from behind his back and gave me a wink.

And for some insane reason, I found myself taking it. It was a huge bunch of iridescent calla lilies with massive blossoms. I was struck stupid with the beauty of them. It was so much pretty in one boutique of flowers and I wanted them.

But maybe I wanted them from him as well.

“Let’s finish this, ya?” he whispered, pulling my attention from the flowers.

We spent the next fifteen minutes laying into those parents. Mostly I dug into the mothers of those young witches. It was bullshit they were standing there letting their kids get bullied. The lame excuses that the other parents had money or intimidated them were crap.

“Then don’t have kids if you won’t fucking protect them!” I blasted, shocking everyone there. “*You* wanted kids. They didn’t ask you to be born. You took the responsibility to do it so own up to that, and it doesn’t matter if you are chicken shit. You protect them. You could have left. No, you were weak and left them to get bullied alone. Great parenting. Really. Stellar.”

What we said probably went in one ear and out the other, but I felt better for getting it off my chest. I wanted to groan when I saw another customer was recording. Probably the whole thing.

Sure enough, when we went back to our booth and desserts, it was all over supe social media... And that I had taken Neldor's flowers. Crap.

It put me in a shit mood for budgets and then the people who tried to act like they didn't show up because I was there. My security blocked them all and I let them.

"I'm glad you like our goods so much, Your Highness," the owner said as another tray was brought to us. "I was hoping to talk to you about partnering up on using fae fruit in ___"

"No, that won't be happening. Not ever," I said firmly not even bothering to look at her.

"Why ever not? You clearly like our food," she said, getting loud because so many other people were around.

"Bad move," one of my security chuckled.

Yeah, it was.

I looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. "You saw men harassing me to bless their dicks and did nothing. You let your customers harass another customer and you did nothing."

She gaped at me. "You had it well in hand with Prince Neldor. You have security. Why should I get involved?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," I drawled. "You were right there when those young witches were being bullied. You

did nothing. Again. So no, there will be no deal with fairies or fair folk with any business that won't protect their customers."

She sputtered at me for a good couple of minutes. "That's —that—I..."

"You let us know when you think of how to finish that," Neldor drawled.

That snapped her out of it. "Please leave my store. If that is how you will treat *me* then you're no longer welcome here."

I shook my head in disappointment. "Things will never get better if people keep on the same path and don't do what is right." I held up my hand when Neldor went to argue with her. "It's not worth it. The treats are basic, and it was the fun of a supe place. We both know it. We can go to a human place and get better service."

"And we have," Neldor bit out. "A human was bullying Tamsin because of an eating challenge and the owner came over and demanded those people leave. Good you can't even have the manners of humans." He flung his hand out angrily and made all the budgets lift off the table with him.

"Glad you all enjoyed the show," I purred as we headed for the door. I shot the owner a mocking glance. "They all came for me so good job getting rid of the real draw."

And then we left, Neldor full of apologies.

"Why? I saw how much you were on my side, and we got to yell at stupid people." I shrugged when he gave me a surprised look. "It's about the best budgets can get to me." I glanced around and realized what city we were in. "There's a place with ten-pound burgers. That sounds good after sweets."

“Yeah, it does,” he agreed, following after me.

We ate two each, and he never brought up what he promised to do or that I took the flowers. Miracles could happen after all it seemed.

11

“No, I forbid it!” a male fairy shouted at Lageos. “I cannot accept this or her presence in this sacred place of our queen’s. I tried to tell you nicely and lead you to see the answer yourself, but you are just as dumb as ever. My queen’s soul is dying that you have allowed all of this, and that whore is her daughter. Bringing in unicorns from the dark realm—I won’t allow—”

I watched as Lageos lunged for the fairy, Iolas and several Guardians getting barreled over in the process when they tried to stop him.

A snort echoed behind me as Lageos grabbed the guy by the neck and strangled him. “I’d almost feel bad for that fairy if he wasn’t such a git.”

Julian. I had already figured out I was in a dream, but Julian’s familiar voice was what hit my ears.

“So this isn’t your memory then?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “No, it’s Lageos’s.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “How did you know that?” I blinked at what was in his hands. “Are you eating *popcorn* to watch my dreams?”

He winced. “Sorry, I’m also trying to work on my control of the dreamscapes. Izzy said something about how she’d make popcorn and enjoy the show if she could do this and... It was what came into my head.”

That was interesting. “Can you share it?”

His eyebrows pinched together. “I don’t know.” He moved closer and held it out to me.

I took a few pieces and couldn’t hide my shock when I tasted them. “Fuck, you like it drenched in butter.”

“I do. Wow.”

“You’re more pleased with it than I would have thought,” I muttered.

“Wait, we keep always jumping around on everything,” he chuckled, gesturing to all the Guardians trying to keep Lageos from killing that fairy. “What is this?”

“The reason I didn’t meet unicorns sooner,” I sighed. “Apparently, the royal stable caretaker, or whatever the fuck his title is, isn’t a fan of mine. He kept giving Lageos bullshit about the unicorns reeling from being frozen or my mom’s death. That everything had to grow back in that area first.”

“You knew this?” he muttered, glancing between me and the chaos we were watching.

“No, Lageos admitted it after he heard what Neldor did and apologized. The excuses were in one ear and out the other with all we’ve been dealing with. That’s fine, I understood. But he is so upset that Neldor showed me my first unicorn and gave me one when it should have been his job. He got pissed and confronted the guy after I went to Neldor’s.”

I wasn't sure what else to say, gesturing to the screaming fairy who was now freed. He was screaming for Iolas to kill Lageos and get me under control since he loved my mother.

"That's a whole lot of crazy," Julian muttered. "Wow."

"Awesome it was right near me at the castle."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Especially when I made it clear they needed to check everyone diligently and not just give jobs back."

"I look forward to watching you kick their arses all over the place."

"I'm so tired of needing to do it," I admitted, mentally wincing at saying too much.

He was kind and let it go. We didn't say anything for several minutes and simply ate popcorn as we watched the Guardians now pulling Iolas off the fairy. That dude seriously didn't have much time left in life if Lageos *and* Iolas wanted his head.

Seriously.

"I figured out why this happens," Julian said quietly as if not to startle me.

"How? What? I mean... How?" I demanded, spinning to face him, the crazy forgotten.

"Wait, first, why are you thinking of this now?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "I guess it took a few weeks to find this guy's replacement. Lageos told me I could see my mom's unicorns tomorrow. I guess he thought about this then." I shrugged

again. “I didn’t know about any of this or there was a replacement.”

Julian nodded. “I put a few things together and talked with one of the royal healers about your barriers and protections. The short version is some of the thoughts you block stick to your mental barrier. I *think* they stick because they’re always memories or thoughts of high emotion.”

“Makes sense,” I muttered. “I guess I always thought of it more as bouncing off like magic does but yeah, I understand that.”

He nodded again. “When you sleep, your mental barrier is weaker than your telepathy. You can hear people speak outside of any of your barriers. It’s like that. When you sleep and *relax*, they seep through, and your telepathy can hear them in your sleep.”

“But nothing’s wrong with me?” I asked quietly.

“No. Not at all. I’ve told you that.” It sounded harsh, but I saw the worry in his eyes. “You believe me on this, right? I mean, I know I’m not the authority on it, but I’ve helped, yeah?”

“Yeah, you have,” I cut in when he started to get upset. “I believe you. I do. It’s just...”

“You spent so much time thinking you were broken,” he muttered, sighing when I nodded.

“So what do I do now?” I asked quietly as the memory in front of us ended and he changed the dreamscape to my kitchen.

“I don’t think you can fix it until you’re done with the huge growths in your magic,” he admitted. “I’m sorry.” He sighed when I shot him a distrusting look. “I deserve that, but you’re too powerful for any of the readings I’ve been doing to match up, Tamsin. You’re the first and only child of a *demigod*.”

“That’s fair.”

“And I won’t risk doing damage to you with just random theories,” he added. “I think for now, we keep what we’re doing. It’s getting easier and faster for you to recognize when they’re dreams, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I knew almost immediately today. It took me a few moments to snap myself out of being Lageos.”

“That’s much better. So much better than a few weeks ago. I think we keep on this path until you feel stable again.” He cleared his throat when I didn’t respond. “You do feel more stable, right?”

“Yes, just agitated,” I sighed. “It’s weird. I’m not pissed or sad, just irked all the time. Like jumpy and agitated.”

“That’s okay. It’s better than feeling nuts.”

“Much better, yeah,” I accepted. “Thanks, Julian.”

“I’m just glad I could help. I’m going to talk with Lageos and the royal healers. Maybe we could eventually work some sort of barrier pendant with his magic to protect you when you sleep. I know you want that option now—”

“But I need to learn how to do this and handle it,” I muttered, bobbing my head. “We kept pushing it all to the side

and the dam broke. That can't keep being the answer, and I have to learn at least this. Pendants can break or magic fail."

"Exactly." He was quiet for several moments. "I'm sorry you're going through this. I really am."

"I know. You can't block from me very well when we're in here. I've felt all of your pity and upset."

"I don't pity you," he argued.

"You do and it's okay." I shrugged when he frowned. "I don't get all weird about my pride and fighting when people pity me. I've had a rough life. This is a shit situation. People *should* pity someone struggling. It doesn't mean they look down on them. They're sad that I'm struggling. They wish it wasn't me. That's a kindness, not something to yell at them for."

"You are so much smarter than all of us. You really are," he whispered. "I've never thought of it that way, and people have pitied me lots."

"Now you can change that."

"Maybe." He cleared his throat for the umpteenth time. "You asked me about the popcorn and changing things."

I nodded. "You're always curious about magic and pushing what you know." I focused on the cabinets to my right instead of looking at him. It still hurt so much that he was focused on magic more than me always.

"Being able to walk in dreams isn't easy," he muttered. "It's a rare talent."

“You’re always talented,” I whispered, moving away from him.

He followed but was careful not to touch me. It was almost silly because I knew he was in the real world while I slept.

Still, I appreciated him actually listening to me.

“It’s not a skill most fairies can even learn,” he pushed, nodding when I glanced at him. “You guys are all too powerful, and it forces a certain level of trust. Vulnerability.”

“Makes sense.” I let out a slow breath when he clearly had more he wanted to say. “What are you getting at?”

“It can help people,” he muttered, looking like he was rethinking the conversation.

I reached deep for patience. He was trying to let me in. Even if it was too late for us, I should help him learn *how* to let someone in and share himself.

Right?

“It’s helped me lots.”

“Yes, but it also has an application in therapy. The royal healers were talking about it and how astounding my progress has been with you.” He sighed when I flinched. “Not—I’ve gotten better at it. I’m not telling them about this, Tams.”

“I get it.”

“They think since I can tap into your power, it’s a really helpful tool since people won’t be able to keep me out. Maybe. I don’t know, but it sounds...”

“You love teaching.”

“Do I?” he whispered, staring out the windows when I glanced at him again. “I think I was told that was my best option. I liked helping people. I honestly liked working with the supe police more and backing them up. I *loved* rescuing hobgoblins with you. Not only because it hurt me to think of them trapped, but what we were doing was...”

“Tangible,” I muttered. “You could see the results then. It wasn’t like teaching runes.”

“No, no, it wasn’t,” he agreed.

“Especially when some used that teaching to hurt people later.” Clearly, that old wound hadn’t healed. I broke out of the dream before he could respond. I shot up in bed and yanked my hand from his even as I was shaking off sleep.

“Don’t,” Darby said firmly.

I flinched, not having realized he was awake and looking at him.

And he was focused on Julian. “Whatever just happened, leave it alone. You promised you were here to help her, not weasel your way back in.”

“That’s true. I haven’t been pushing her,” Julian muttered.

“No, you haven’t, but you’re still getting the blessing of time with her and to talk to her. Whatever just happened, her pain woke me. So leave it alone.”

“I was only going to apologize,” Julian said as he stood, shooting Darby an annoyed look. “Is that fine with you?”

I moved my hand to Darby’s leg, asking him to let it go. I kissed his cheek when he sighed before looking at Julian.

“Thank you for trying to let me in. I know it’s hard for you. It’s hard for me to accept it when it was all I used to want. I’m glad you’re finding your way, the one you want. If that’s what you want to do, I support it. We’re not together, so I don’t get a vote but—”

“You are together,” Darby corrected. “To the world, you’re together.”

“Only until he lets me go.”

Darby snorted, moving away from me and rolling out of bed. “That will be never, *agra*. Please stop fooling yourself that he will ever do what’s best for you and leave you be. He’s in our room every night desperate for a way to get closer to you. He’s never leaving. I have to keep watching this car crash *again* because I see it coming and can’t stop it.”

I blinked after him, tears filling my eyes.

And I got agitated again. I understood his upset, but what did he want me to do? I needed the help, and I couldn’t control Julian. I knew he’d never be out of my life completely, but I thought we could maybe work towards being friends and...

Maybe I was just stupid. Probably.

Either way, I left the room and went to use another bathroom before I found myself at Julian’s and cleaned up some mess in what looked like a guest bedroom. The place hadn’t been touched in a while. I stared around the room and wondered what had happened. Who had stayed there to make this mess?

It was easier than thinking about the messes in my life.

At this rate I was going to completely clean and renovate his whole house.

Seriously.

When it was almost time for my meeting, I left his house and snagged some breakfast before heading to Faerie. I also made sure I had treats for the unicorns this time to get in good with them so what they felt about me wasn't only based on the stabler keeper.

Especially since the last one apparently hated me.

Asshole.

I arrived at my family's castle and was tempted to see my mom, but I didn't want to interact with the detail of Guardians that always protected her frozen in death. The looks they gave me left me unsettled.

There was no good way to handle something so difficult, but it was normally a range of sadness like they wanted me to comfort them all the way to... I wasn't sure. It felt like they thought I was weird or morbid for visiting. Humans did it to graves all of the time.

How did fairies handle death then?

And should they maybe not judge such a complicated situation?

I tried to shake off my morose thoughts and used a fairy rune to race over to the pastures on the far back of the castle grounds. At the last second, I remembered to take off all my charms and stash them in my bag. I hopped the fence since I wanted to see them up close before dealing with the caretaker.

And got caught.

Vivid blue eyes were locked onto mine. They reminded me so much of Hudson's that I swallowed a flinch. They were softer though as if knowing I was someone they needed to be gentle with. The zing of a bond was instant like it had been with Amethyst.

That was before the shit stole the marble in my hand I had been pulling out.

"Yeah, you're my unicorn," I chuckled as I stared over the most handsome unicorn in the history of unicorns. He was different shades of blue and deeper purples that couldn't be a coincidence. If I was to bond to this unicorn and my mate's eyes were those colors, making me think immediately of Hudson... I glanced up at the sky and frowned. "How involved are you guys getting, seriously?"

The unicorn didn't care about my crisis and booped my shoulder to get my attention.

I smiled when I heard in his mind that he wanted a super cool name. "Gambit. He was my favorite in the X-Men comics and was mischievous." I snorted as he pushed his nose in my bag. "Clearly that's fitting." I yanked the bag away and he gave me puppy dog eyes better than Hudson's.

And maybe the fae dogs as well.

"Okay, you can't do that and be such a handsome boy. That's just cheating."

"Well, this is a fitting pair," a male voice chuckled from behind me.

I turned to see a fairy smiling widely at me. "I'm sorry?"

He nodded towards the unicorn. “This is the eldest offspring of your mother’s unicorn from what I was told. And he doesn’t follow norms well, is a bit wild. I just won a lot of money if you two instantly bonded. I said that was the perfect match for you, but others thought you needed a different side of the coin.”

“We bonded,” I said with a shrug. “Glad you made some money.”

“Always nice to have something extra in the pockets. Let’s get him saddled and you can have a ride, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.” I followed after him when he waved me to.

The fairy was *very* excited about his new position and to get rid of the last guy. Apparently, everyone knew he was toxic and full of shit, but he had been beloved by my grandmother, so Mom never had the heart to toss him out. I listened as he got Gambit ready and took my things from me. Then he hoisted me up and told me to have a great ride.

I blinked after the man and couldn’t get my mouth to work.

First, I’d barely ridden Amethyst that *one* time.

Second, the man hadn’t even told me his damn name.

“*Be gentle with me,*” I told Gambit in his mind. “*I have no idea what I’m doing. I just wore two super support sports bras.*”

He mentally snorted at me that I didn’t know how to ride and clearly didn’t understand the sports bra thing. He made it clear he’d show me what to do and to basically just hang on.

I was supposed to be the boss of my unicorn, right?

I doubted anyone had ever told him that.

He decided I was only up for trotting, and his thoughts timed me out when to basically work my hips? I was supposed to sort of stand and tap my butt to the saddle as he moved. It was very weird, but my unicorn speaking to me in my mind made it much easier.

Seriously. I mean, *seriously*, my unicorn was giving me riding lessons.

I couldn't imagine why I had worried I'd lost my mind.

Oh and I needed to stop touching his mane. He didn't care that I loved his coloring, I needed to leave his deep blue and purple hair alone.

"I get to touch it a bit or I'm not petting you anywhere else," I threatened.

Fine, as long as I focused more on his training me.

Yeah, my unicorn really thought that at me.

I couldn't really argue with him when he was teaching me how to ride.

We went for a good twenty minutes before my butt and thighs started to feel funny from exercising in a way I wasn't used to. Once we were back near the stable, I slide down to get off... And almost fell flat on my face. I managed to grab the saddle and keep myself upright, but it had been close since my legs were mush.

"That's a new feeling," I muttered, trying to recover. I rolled my eyes when Gambit snorted at me. "You want

treats?” I snickered when he moved to nuzzle my face. “Yeah, you’re all sweet now. Brat.”

I walked over to my bag on shaky legs as I felt a portal opening. There were only a handful of people who could open portals on the castle grounds, so I knew it had to be someone trusted. Probably one of the commanders trying to catch me.

I turned to see Iolas and Taeral heading in my direction with Amethyst trailing behind them. I hadn’t realized they were bringing her over today finally and I was excited to see her.

And I wasn’t the only one.

Gambit swung around so fast to see the gorgeous unicorn that his ass smacked me hard enough that I stumbled a few feet.

“Dick,” I chuckled as I retrieved my bag. I headed over to the commanders and my unicorn as my new unicorn walked with me.

Sure, he could be invited.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I cooed to Amethyst. I unlatched the gate there so they could come in and held out a marble to her when she came closer. I reached up to pet her... And she practically barreled me over.

Iolas was faster than I was and caught my arm, spinning me out of danger and over towards Taeral.

“Amazing. I have not seen this in many years,” Taeral whispered as he checked I was steady.

“Unicorns that apparently want to abuse their bonded?” I drawled.

“They’re mates,” Iolas explained. He turned me to face the unicorns and leaned in so I was looking down his arm as he gestured in an arch above them. “Search for the magic as you do in other areas. All around them.”

I nodded and then gasped. “It’s like fucking sparkles and rainbows. Holy shit.” I moved to get a closer look, but Taeral grabbed the back of my sweater.

“Nope, you’re not going near them,” he chuckled.

“Wait, I can’t even get to say hi to Amethyst?” I asked... Well, sort of whined, but they ignored that.

As if to answer my question, both unicorns glanced over and snorted.

“Did they just tell me to piss off?” I whispered, unable to wrap my mind around it.

“Yes, yes, they did,” Iolas said, losing the battle with laughing. “And to answer your next question, yes, fair folk can be mates. Not hobgoblins, but the animals like dogs and unicorns. However, there are fewer and fewer matches every year.”

“And I think this proves the theory of why,” Taeral sighed. “Some people are going to explode over this.”

I didn’t need him to connect the pieces for me. “Light and dark realms being separate kept them apart. Even more reason why we need the unicorns back from Earth.” I gave a firm nod as I decided something. “Tell every fairy that to the other world, unicorns didn’t survive here. We thought some might

have, but they died weeks after being unfrozen and we didn't want people to know."

"That's why you've been buying them up," Iolas said, snickering when I winced. "We're getting better at keeping up with you, Your Highness."

"Sometimes," Taeral drawled. "I would suggest you buy more and then use that for the last."

"That will drive up the price," Iolas argued.

"Yes, but people won't hold out for trades then and from what I know that's what they want most. Especially the royal unicorn bloodlines which they all will think I'm too stupid to know none have ever left Faerie to other homes."

"No, it's strictly against our laws," Iolas confirmed.

"People don't give a shit about that if they can get what they want." I sighed and retrieved my bag. "Okay, bye, my unicorns. Have fun mating."

"For the next month at least," Taeral warned me.

"Well, Neldor will be happy." I snorted when they both shot me looks. My mind was a dark place, and the comment on the tip of my tongue was something crass about our unicorns were at least having sex.

Even if we weren't.

12

A few days later—and after another renovation project at Julian’s—I sat down with Queen Sasha to discuss a few things. Unfortunately, it wasn’t about Hudson or our mating. I felt a bit guilty when her disappointment filled the room.

No, it was about school. I was done with a lot, and my time was too important to dance around people’s misguided feelings and hurt pride I was better than their kids.

“I only technically agreed to go to Artemis for college,” I informed her. “College is four years. I didn’t say no when I found it was longer, but I didn’t actually agree to it. Hell, I promised to behave for a semester if others did and clearly, they didn’t.”

“Tell me what you are hoping for, Tamsin, and I’ll make it happen,” she promised.

“I know, but I wanted you to have that leverage because we both know my fully graduating from there is what the school and school board wants even if they act like they don’t. They just want it on their terms. Too fucking bad. I’m over it.” I waited until she nodded. “I’m done taking the classes they have to adjust for me.

“I’m not taking the next crystals for people to take pictures or try and steal what I work on because it’s lightyears ahead of what they can do. That’s not my fault and I don’t rub it in their faces, but those classes drastically hold me back. And it’s a joke that I’m jumping these hoops. I’m fucking tired of it, Sasha! I can’t keep dancing like a monkey for everyone.”

“Clearly,” she whispered, her voice a bit shaky.

I sighed when I saw why. I had shattered the metal in a table and set of chairs off to the side from where we were. “Tell me those weren’t some awesome heirloom or something.”

She winced. “They might have been.” She looked over my shoulder. “If you could contact one of the commanders to quietly restore this, I think that would be best.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I know this topic upsets you that much instead of your control being bad. The fact that you had enough control to only do it away from us is much better than before.”

That was something at least.

I pulled out a folder and handed it to her. “I’m open to input, but I’m too behind to play any more games. There can be some sitting in but no recording and no more open classes where people can try to soak up my magic or learn fairy secrets. I’m going to be the queen of Faerie. Fuck this bullshit and if they don’t agree, I’m done after this semester.”

“It’s a threat that will work, especially with all the progress you’re making and schools will open soon. At least enough to teach you what you need.”

I snorted. “It was made clear to me that it would have already been done for me.” I thanked Stefanie when she arrived and was filled in. “They’re intentionally holding me back. Some fairies are because they like me looking like an idiot and are pissed a light fairy saved them. I’m done.”

“I think you’ve been *more* than patient,” she agreed as she opened the folder and looked it over. “You clearly aren’t trying to slack on the Artemis name. There should be no objections to this. Anything else?”

“I need a medical exemption to sleep off campus,” I said firmly. I nodded when she and Stefanie did a double take. “Julian’s figured out what’s happening to me and it’s—I’m just going to sneak out and that’s stupid. I’m sorry it’s the rule but again, I’m going to be queen of a whole world. They give exceptions for everything. They can for this.”

“Agreed, and people don’t need to know. Edelman does and will keep it quiet. He’ll know if anything happens later,” Stefanie said.

“Exactly.” I sighed in relief when I saw she fixed my mess. Then I told them both so they knew what was going on with my telepathy.

“That sounds terrifying,” Sasha whispered, her eyes full of fear.

“It has been.” I glanced away. “And one of my mates was so focused on the bullshit his friend was saying about me being the center of attention and everything always about me that I didn’t feel I could tell people. Again.”

“That’s why your bond is so damaged,” she muttered.

I shrugged. “He wasn’t the only one saying it. I *know* everything is always about me. I hate that. I do.”

“We know,” Stefanie whispered. “Don’t cry, Your Highness.”

I quickly mopped up my face and met Sasha’s gaze. “I still don’t want all of this, but I have to. I am the only option. He has no idea how much harder this makes it all for me. I announced us being together that way because of him, and it blew up in my face. Again. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

“I know. I know you don’t. You did not deserve how he treated you and acted.”

“But?” Stefanie hedged.

“Tunnel vision,” I muttered. “It always comes back to that.”

“Unfortunately for us, it does,” Sasha sighed.

“I could forgive him that. I was trying to snap him out of it. It’s what happened after and acting like it was all over and we were perfect. While ignoring what was right in front of him and taking a spoiled prince attitude with me. Letting his *friends* say shit about me and treat me like crap. I never let anyone talk bad about him even if he isn’t around.”

“He didn’t want to fight your battles and upset you that he thought you were weak.”

“He is a moron,” I grumbled. “I’ve let him fight my battles and get involved.”

“Yes, all men are fucking idiots,” Sasha seethed, steam practically coming out her ears.

Wow. So King Xavier stepped in something for sure. “We have a few extra guest rooms where we’re staying,” I offered, completely serious.

“I might take them. Stupid men. Vogel pride. Idiots.”

Okay then, glad to know she really understood me. She promised she would handle my school stuff and get back to me soon.

And knowing Sasha, that probably meant tomorrow.

“You could have entrusted that to us,” Stefanie whispered when we were through the portal back to where I was staying.

“You guys are wearing too many hats and need to placate people to keep peace too often. Sasha has peace and can start a bit of trouble. Plus, she’s now head of the trustees for the school board. It should have been her.”

I was glad when she left it at that and made her exit. I noticed that Darby wasn’t around once again. He was studying so hard, but it was more than that.

More than what happened with Julian the other night.

“Let’s go somewhere to talk,” Izzy suggested. “I’m legal now so take me to a real bar.” She was all dolled up and ready to go even, handing me my purse.

“Okay then,” I chuckled, wondering what was up with her. I cloaked us from security and opened a portal that led to a nicer pub place. If it was Izzy’s first real time, then I was gonna do it right by my bestie.

Which meant shots and food which I immediately ordered after we went inside.

“So we need to talk,” she hedged, waiting until I nodded. “You accepted Neldor’s flowers. That’s what’s going on with Darby. Even Julian. And Lucca. I heard Hudson’s not happy either.”

She blurted that out so fast that I even had trouble keeping up with it. Then I started cussing. “I thought that woman only recorded us chewing out those parents.”

“No, almost everything. For the record, people are *overwhelmingly* on your side. Those parents are assholes. You were awesome with the kids and people are praising that. *And* everyone and their brother wants the bubbles you invented.”

“Invented?” I asked, thanking the server when she brought our drinks. I had thought to sit at the bar to give Izzy the full experience, but I didn’t want to get caught using my barrier to hide what we were saying.

“Yeah, you invented something awesome,” she sighed when we were alone again. “Of course, you don’t know.”

“Dude, those budgets made my eyes bleed and then my ears when I got yelled at for the changes we made. I’m lucky to be alive. But I am glad the public is on my side. For once.” I toasted her with my glass and took the shot since I already had the fairy rune to protect me on. “So they saw me take his flowers. Okay, not great, but it wasn’t like I put them in my room.”

Izzy took her shot and handled it better than I would have thought since it was tequila. That trip she took with Natalie

and our friends clearly paid off.

“So that’s your line?” she asked as we moved on to our main drinks. “It’s not romantic if you don’t put it in your room?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “He meant it as romantic. I’m not that dense. It was a nice gesture though, and he had backed me up, a few times even, and they were really pretty. I didn’t want to make it a thing by rejecting them, they were super cool and yeah, I just put them in the kitchen.”

“You blushed,” she accused.

“Izzy, I blush sometimes when you fake hit on me,” I drawled. “I still should have mentioned it to Darby, and that was shitty of me. Shitty he had to find out that way and with what people are probably saying.”

“Yeah, that’s his main damage. I’ll talk to him.”

“No, I will. He’s my mate.”

“This one really stung, Tams. He’s worried about Neldor and that fairies will push him out when you get together.” She ignored my nasty look on the *when* there and stuck to it.

“Okay, well, thanks for that and let’s have some fun. Unless this was all a ploy to talk seriously?”

“No, I just wanted it out of the way. It was something to handle, but I’m glad I was right and you didn’t want to start trouble so you accepted them.”

“Plus, I wanted them,” I said to be fair.

“Maybe don’t make that the focus like all the flowers Darby gave you weren’t enough or his weren’t as good. I

would absolutely feel that way if I was him and always so attentive.”

I winced. Yeah, that... I had meant to say something, but my life was always such chaos.

I needed to stop blaming that and do better. Darby deserved it, and I wouldn't become one of those people who used everything in their lives as excuses. Reasons happened, but if it was reoccurring and constant, it just became excuses.

The answer was more shots. At least for me, and Izzy seemed down. I listened to her talk about her current crush that she said would never happen. She was all sparkles and hearts as she talked about the woman. I hoped the woman would take her seriously if she was into women. There was no one she would ever find better than Izzy.

It was infuriating that Izzy wouldn't tell me who it was though. I had a few guesses but yeah, she wanted it private for her.

Fair enough.

We talked about school and had a lot of fun. We probably had too much to drink, but that was part of college life too, and it was nice. Easy and just... Nice.

Until I woke up the next morning and found out I was completely wrong.

Like *completely wrong*.

“No, *no*,” I whimpered. “This didn't happen.” I shook the phone at Julian. “This was a *dream*. It was... It was supposed to be a dream!” I screamed in frustration and teleported away as my wings popped out.

And I hadn't even seen all of it yet.

I sat down on the top of the mountain I'd teleported to and restarted the video of me.

At the bar last night.

Completely drunk.

And without any filter.

Without any clue I was being filmed.

It started not too bad. It was just Izzy and I having drinks and dinner, laughing and clearly enjoying ourselves. But then I had too much to drink and my barrier started faltering.

The real audio of us came in and out, and mostly I was gushing how amazing Darby was. There was a bit of my worries about him going to Yale and not just him being in danger, but him falling for someone who was what he wanted. I knew I wasn't. Or more my life wasn't what he wanted, but I wanted him.

I needed him, and I would leave Faerie forever if I needed to for him. I would in a heartbeat. I loved him that much.

It was actually touching, but I wasn't sure how most fairies would feel about that.

But then it got so much worse.

So much worse.

My fear of Darby leaving me was how I got on the topic of Hudson and how fast he'd turned on me. I didn't do that one thing right as he wanted, when he wanted, and it was like I was dead to him. It triggered me so badly that he could do that with all the families that tossed me aside for little things.

And then I went into how I hated myself for caving to what he wanted. I was so desperate for him to love me how I loved him that I gave him what he wanted. I announced us in the best way I could possibly think of, scared out of my mind and feeling more alone than I had ever had, but I did it for him.

But he didn't appreciate it. Didn't see me. That was what it all boiled down to. I was tired of not being seen. Fairies didn't see anything but the label or what I did wrong. Fair folk saw me as their savior and hero but never *me*.

So I wasn't surprised that the men the gods forced me to be with couldn't see me either. I *hated* that the gods declared me theirs and that was just it. I was stuck. I had fallen for the trap and in toxic loves that hurt so much I wanted to die sometimes.

It was the ultimate abusive relationship. I'd never asked for the match or to have mates, but I was forced to stay like a prison sentence instead of a loving relationship. Or they could go off the rails or feral. It was one of the worst things about being a supe to me, and it had made me wish I still lived in the human world even if my power ate me alive.

It seemed better than my soul slowly dying, being killed by the people who lied that they loved me when they didn't even see me.

And I said it all on video, clearly catching every fucking word.

But I wasn't done yet.

Oh no, that wouldn't be possible in my life.

I went into how I was tired of everyone pushing me towards Neldor and how it made me resent him. I hated myself for that because it wasn't fair, but I did resent him. I knew there was more to him, but I had trouble seeing past that and how he'd originally felt about me, wanting my power more than me. I couldn't get over that, and it made me feel small and petty.

Izzy tried to comfort me that things were getting better with Lucca, and I accepted that and how much I liked being his friend. But the pressure there was too much. He'd broken the bond because it was what was best for me, but it was still a trap because *everyone* expected us to get together still. That wasn't much different than the bond if the ending was written for us.

At least it wasn't to me.

And to round out my humiliation, I went into everything with Julian. How I'd never felt more special and loved when he kept his focus on me, but the moment he didn't, it was like cold darkness. It *killed me* how hard I'd tried to keep him with me and I was never enough. I couldn't ever be enough for him.

He was focused on me now because my telepathy intrigued him and I was doing things unlike anyone else. The moment it was figured out and he wasn't curious about me anymore, he'd focus on whatever caught his fancy next. It made me feel cheap, and that had been too much of my life.

Still, I kept letting him back in. I hated myself for still loving him. I hated that I turned to him for help and hurt Darby. I hated I couldn't see ice cream without thinking of Julian and how I wasn't enough for him. All that wasted effort

on someone who never felt I was worth sticking around for haunted me.

On and on I went about all of them and how suffocating it all was. That I was tired of everyone constantly saying I was running. I got to say when it was too much and I needed time. It wasn't fair I was always the jerk of everything.

It was about then Izzy realized something was wrong. I had barely noticed her cutting glances at whoever was holding the camera, but from the angle it seemed like they'd probably been pretending to text someone.

Except that was a really long fucking text to catch that much video.

And at a bar.

Izzy was smooth as she pulled out her phone. Not even thirty seconds later, portals started opening around us and Iolas came through first. He locked on the problem, but whoever it was knew the jig was up and went through their own portal.

That was the end of the video... And my world. This would blow everything up and big time.

But I had no one to blame but myself.

I had ignored everything that had been coming in while watching the video, but right as I closed the player a message popped up that I caught.

Darby: Tamsin, contact me right now or I swear I won't forgive you this time.

I started sobbing all over again, but I hurried to call him. I couldn't even form words I got so upset. He was going to leave me too. I'd pushed him too far.

"You make this too easy," a deep voice said from behind me.

And then power hit my barrier.

Power almost as strong as mine.

I didn't hesitate, teleporting to my dad. "Someone attacked me. A fairy. Scary powerful."

"Who?" he demanded, grabbing my arms and steadying me.

"I don't know. I came right to you."

"Take me there."

I nodded, teleporting us right back.

But the person was gone.

Others followed us through portals and checked out the area.

"I can feel the magic and it was a fairy," Onas confirmed. "The portal was cloaked and we can't follow it." He pointed a finger at me. "Will you seriously fucking take protection with you now? We can't take anymore—"

"Over the line," Darby snapped as he pulled me closer. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I threatened to not forgive you. I was scared. I was so scared you'd go off the deep end."

"I'm sorry," I choked out, holding him with all I had. "I'm so fucking sorry. I thought it was a dream." I must have

repeated how sorry I was a million times as he held me. It felt like it at least.

“I know. We’ll be okay,” he whispered the whole time, seeming to realize this was about more than the video.

And it was. I was terrified I didn’t know my own mind again. That had affected others now, and I was scared about what else I would do.

Plus, how people would respond.

“Go get this out,” he begged when I settled. “Get it out but come back to me, *agra*. I know you need to shut out the world for a bit, but *not me*. I can’t—please, no more.”

I nodded, kissing his cheek and standing before squaring off with Onas. “Don’t get in the way and you came come with. It’s not *my fault* I don’t feel I can turn to you guys. Stop being so damn judgy.”

He adjusted his neck and then nodded. “I’m trying.”

That was true, and I’d seen most of them come a long way. It was why I kept giving them chances.

Plus, I was an idiot.

I teleported the two of us to one of my packs that I knew wanted to see me. I didn’t know how I knew that, I just did. It was amazing that I didn’t think I was crazier earlier.

Kneeling down and taking the offered paw in my hand, I felt my tears burn off with my rage. I praised the small pack and teleported my sword to me. “Kill any who flee and make it clear you will.” I thought the fairy rune for running and took

off. I hopped the fence and was at the stable before anyone could tell I was there.

I saw the horror with my own eyes and knew it would haunt me for the rest of my life. I blasted several hawk shifters away from the unicorns they were trying to force to mate.

Onas was right there with me getting the rest before opening portals for reinforcements. “Detain everyone. Get healers here for the unicorns and trainers to help them.” He glanced over at me. “This is a win, Your Highness. This family is done for and even whoever sold them the unicorns to be so mistreated.”

“Can we do that?”

He nodded. “Any that originally left Faerie had very tight contracts with a list of rules.”

“Right, but that doesn’t hold for the ones they then sell.”

“It does,” Taeral said as he joined us. “Every contract they have ever had after was to include the original provisions or everything was forfeit, including their lives. Please don’t ever think unicorns were treated as humans do their horses. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“It was originally only a handful of them, and they were gifted,” Onas explained.

I nodded, relieved that fairies thought enough about the future to try their best. They weren’t perfect and were learning that. It was a good step.

“It’s a good distraction for the press as well,” Onas muttered. “People will worry we’re coming for them next and not about some drunken ramble.”

“That’s not why I did it.”

“Then why do it right now?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“Because it all has to mean something,” I whispered before heading towards the dogs to see what else I needed to know. All the pain I went through to do what I must had to mean something and have some fucking good to it.

Especially when I kept messing up.

13

Nothing could have shocked me more than the outpouring of support for me. I saw at least a dozen interviews in the press that spoke with supes who had fated mates and said they'd gone through a lot of the same. That people didn't understand that any "gift" came with a price and normally a steep one to have the answer given to them.

One woman especially broke my heart as she talked about how her mate had beat her for years because he'd been in love with someone else when they'd met. He blamed her for losing that woman and being forced into the prison of their mating. It had twisted him up to the point he couldn't see her without being enraged, and she was forced to accept that.

People were coming forward left and right that they were tired of people acting like they'd hit the lottery, and most times they felt like puppets. Most of the couples *did* work out in the end but not without a high cost and a lot more upset than if they had gotten together conventionally.

"She needs to do what's best for her," one man had said firmly. "They're *kids* and having all these monumental, terrifying things thrown at them all of the time. She's doing things no one else can and still not even a damn adult

according to fairies. I hope Princess Tamsin takes all the breaks she needs and remembers not everything has to be today. Or next year. Five years even.”

That was maybe what helped me the most. I had sent that to Lucca and asked him if he could ever feel that way?

His answer made me cry.

Lucca: Tams, all I see in my future is you. I broke our relationship by taking it for granted. If it takes twenty years, then it takes twenty years. Forty. I don't care. I care we do this better and I can become a man who deserves you. Zack and Ray waited twenty damn years to find their mates without knowing if they could ever see them again. I get to see you all the time and know you're okay. The rest will happen when it happens IF it happens. I am not pressuring you, and I'm the only one in our relationship besides you.

Lucca: You're going to be okay. We will be. I know it. Hang in there for me, okay? I'm not upset about the video. None of us are. It hurts me that I hurt you, nothing else. And I'm sorry I ever caused you pain. Truly.

“I'm starting to have faith he's really changed,” Izzy had muttered when I showed her.

Yeah, me too.

It also made things easier on me. Darby forgave me and the reactions from 90% of people were sympathetic. It really helped.

Honestly, people were more focused on the other video from the dessert place. And not just because people wanted the bubbles I'd invented, but there was a push to boycott the place after how they'd treated me and what they'd let go on at their business.

Even better?

People were pissed at the guys who wanted me to bless their dicks. Seriously *pissed*.

They were suspended from their college and their council apologized to me. I hadn't even known their names and they weren't in the video. Apparently, Neldor had made a point to track them down and call them out on what they'd done.

I had whiplash from the change on that one, but Stefanie explained it to me that it was clear I would make it to be the queen now. I was the leader of Faerie now and would be crowned one day. There were no more rumors of nobles getting me in line or dissension among fairies.

That upset me. A lot.

If fairies had been better to me, a lot of this constant bullshit I dealt with would have worked out like this situation. I did so much for them and they couldn't even do the basics sometimes.

The only silver lining was she said most fairies seemed to realize what they'd done and felt guilty about it. More were speaking up more in support of my changes and liked the progress of my programs so far.

So that was something.

Plus, Neldor very publicly signed a royal vow that he would never try to take the throne from me or take it over. If I died for any reason and there was no adult heir that was well protected, he would oversee turning Faerie into a democracy as I would have wanted.

Yeah, I was still reeling from shock as well.

An investigation was launched into who tried to attack me. Onas headed it up. He believed me since he'd felt the magic, but he—and many others—doubted the power level I'd told them. At first it was on the table, but after every prisoner at Ankthus was accounted for, people started thinking it was my distress that made me misread the power.

I couldn't deny that as a possibility, but I didn't really understand it. Onas was actually patient with me when he told me that unless it had been an elder or ancient of a noble bloodline, there wasn't anyone I could instantly read as almost as powerful as me.

It simply wasn't possible from a quick attack. *But* they all praised me for instantly teleporting to Lageos instead of being prideful and trying to take on the attacker myself.

I couldn't always be such a pain in the ass, and I know the position I'd been in. Even if I didn't get to see the guy's face, living to fight another day was always most important. For right then, I had to stick a pin in who'd tried to attack me.

Awesome. There were so many metaphorical pins in so many different things it made my head explode some days.

Finding the unicorn breeding operation gave us a treasure trove of information and leverage to get more of the unicorns

back instead of my sneaky ways. After we made the arrests and investigations public, people started trying to sell off their unicorns.

Yes, that was the smart way to not draw attention to yourselves when you were doing bad things. Fine, you might distract us for the moment and give us what we wanted, but we'd remember who it was.

Fairies had really long memories and held grudges like that.

Still, we managed to buy over twenty unicorns in a week and return them safely to Faerie, so I took that as a win.

Another thing that shocked me? Julian didn't push me about the video. He told me he would like to talk about it if I was ever ready to, but it was all on my timeline. I could have been pushed over by a feather as I stared at him.

Wow.

Were pigs flying? Seriously?

And he still helped me with the dreams. We agreed I not drink much until I had the issues with my telepathy under control. It made sense. I had honestly thought it was only the fun with Izzy and the rest in my dreams, ready to be mortified at what Julian had seen. That was a line I couldn't afford not to see clearly.

I was simply happy we were starting to have more good than bad. It seemed a miracle in my life, and I was going to appreciate it.

Like when Queen Sasha informed me that the school board had accepted *all* of my requests.

Every.

Single.

One.

Wow. And without a fight. I was stunned.

She gave me the same reasoning that Stefanie had. People saw I was going to be the ruler. Fairies were backing me and we were a united front... And a terrifying group to risk pissing off.

Okay then. After some back and forth and with the input of the commanders, plus what *I* wanted for my schooling, my schedule was set.

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I had:

Faerie Botany

8-9:30

Professor Sontar

Independent Study: Light Realm Royal History

9:45-10:45

Professor Rosini

Gymnastics II

11-12

Ara

Lunch

12:15-1:15

Rune Combining I

1:30-3

Professor Sontar

Power Training

7-9

Tuesdays and Thursdays I had:

Physical Training

8-9:30

Captain Dalyor

*Independent Study: Ancient Light Fairy Artifacts and
Magical Objects*

9:45-10:45

Professor Rosini

*Royal Etiquette and Diplomatic Relations with Other
Species*

11 – 12

Professor Rosini

Lunch

12:15-1:15

Fairy Crystals II

1:30-3

Professor Sontar

The first question Izzy had when she saw my schedule was who the other professor was. I actually knew that answer but had learned a bit more as well since I'd already asked that too.

I'd actually met Professor Rosini when I'd met Sontar. She was the light fairy scholar who had offered to teach and work with me to catch up. What I hadn't known was she was actually the decorated teacher who would have been tapped to give me tutoring and extra lessons.

Just as she had my mother.

I had worried about the toes I'd stepped on or another way people would be upset I'd snubbed tradition, but it wasn't like that. *She* wasn't like that and had made it clear I did what I did for the right reasons.

Apparently, she was a huge advocate for uniting the realms and thought my making the point to trust a respected

dark fairy scholar had been the right move. Rosini even told me to my face that it was an impressive diplomatic move that she applauded, and she looked forward to what else I would do in the future.

Wow, so this was what it was like to be supported?

I liked it.

Before I'd talked with Queen Sasha and given her the classes I wanted, I'd discussed the matter with Professor Sontar. He—and several others—had asked me what I wanted to learn, and there was something I was desperate to know about, but I hadn't been ready.

Now I was.

I wanted to know about my family. Not just the history of the Vales or royals, but all the artifacts in the vault and castle. It hurt to be there with my mother frozen outside, but it was my future, and it was time to start accepting that.

My life would never be easy, but this was a mountain I thought I was ready to climb. I hoped I was at least.

Plus, I owed it to my family. They were all gone, I was it, and they'd built all of this so I could live comfortably. I wanted to respect that and the family I'd always longed for. So I was really excited to start.

And scared, but at least equal parts.

Most days.

So that was Ancient Light Fairy Artifacts and Magical Objects. Neldor wouldn't be a part of it for now, *but* there was talk I would get the same teachings as his about the dark fairy

royal stuff. I thought it was smart, but it could wait. It should wait for now.

Faerie Botany was just as it sounded, and I was glad to be able to finally focus on what I needed to as opposed to dancing to what others wanted me to. I knew how to grow plants and look them up like humans did. It had annoyed me we had a whole fucking year of that at the *best* college supes had.

Seriously, step it up.

Light Realm Royal History was going to be all about my family and the inception of the light realm as we knew it. Neldor had wanted to take that class with me but hadn't pushed it when he'd seen I was uncomfortable. He knew more about my family than I did, and I wanted this to be for me.

At least for now. He accepted that, and it was nice he could be considerate.

Sometimes at least.

I had another semester of gymnastics with Ara, and that was my easier class basically. Then it was Rune Combining I. I had thought that odd, but Professor Sontar had been adamant about it being on my agenda. I had combined runes already, and it seemed like teaching me what I already knew.

Nope, not even close. Apparently, what I'd been doing was dangerous.

Like blow shit up seriously fucking dangerous.

I had simply blinked at the man when he'd told me that. Seriously, shouldn't someone have told me that fucking sooner?

Apparently, a few had. Yeah, try harder.

There were runes that couldn't ever be combined and yeah, *boom* when people tried. Yikes. Okay, so yeah, I was fine with taking a few steps back.

Power Training was always going to be on my schedule, and we were planning to have more of the livestream events to raise money. I could give my nights for that.

Same with Physical Training in the morning. I was at the point where everything was easier and small pushes now that I'd had my huge power jump, but I would always focus on my physical health.

It was the only way I stayed sane.

Then there was the class I'd talked about several times and my needing to learn stuff about protocol for the blessings and more. Royal Etiquette and Diplomatic Relations with Other Species was a topic Neldor knew well, but we agreed we should both take the same class that was designed to be taught to the future queen.

Fine, the queen of the light realm, but we could make changes if needed. He needed to learn this stuff not as a "useless" prince but as my right hand. Unfortunately, the fairy who taught his mother had died in the war, but she had had a protégé that hadn't been found yet. Once she was and got a chance to catch up to her life, we could loop her in.

That was the plan at least. I thought it was a good one. Flexible plans were always the best.

Last was Fairy Crystals II. It was some backtracking as well which annoyed me, but winging it always was dangerous.

I knew that.

I knew that. The crystals simply irked me because of how everything had happened with them and then how I basically lost Julian over them. Not really, but it *felt* like that, and so studying them was hard for me.

Oddly enough, that upset Neldor because he said it was one of the coolest aspects of fairy magic and I was missing out.

So that was my class schedule for my second semester senior year. Plus, my senior thesis. I had that almost done though. I was working on an invention that I was plotting to also sell for another revenue stream to help Faerie rebuild and upgrade.

I blinked and the rest of break was over, we were back on campus, and classes were going to start in the morning.

But before that, some hobgoblins had a bone to pick with me... Or the kids did. I had no idea what was going on, but Elasha, Darfin, and the others were yelling at me while crying. They made more sense now that they were about eight or nine, but not when they were so upset, and it killed me to see them that way.

“I will fix it,” I promised as I knelt there hugging them. “Whatever it is, I will fix it. Please, guys, don’t cry. I will make it better.”

“You don’t love us anymore,” Elasha wailed, finally one of them saying something I could understand instead of all of them talking at once.

I moved her away so I could see her face. “Who said that? Who told such lies? I *adore* you guys. I love you tons!”

“Really?” she checked, waiting until I nodded before crying even more. “No visits. Other toys. You don’t!”

I was at a loss and finally looked to Irma who had brought them to visit.

She was just as stunned but seemed to snap out of it. “It was the first break they didn’t spend with you, Your Highness. Plus, you gave those bubbles to others while not being with them.”

Crap. It was so adorable my heart melted while hurting they were upset. “I will make you better bubbles. All the bubbles, okay? I’m sorry I got so busy, but I promise you that I don’t love other kids more. I don’t even know their names. They were being bullied and we hate bullies, right?”

“We do,” Darfin sniffled. “You did good. You didn’t visit after.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll visit more. You guys can come over more, okay? We’ll play in the castle.”

“We can really see your home?” one of the other kids asked as she calmed down. “Mommy says that’s for friends. You never invite us anymore.”

“I promise,” I swore. “We can have a picnic there this weekend if you guys can.” That seemed to help but wasn’t enough. “I’ll bring the bubbles. All the bubbles. *Huge* bubble wands and more.”

“Bubble gun?” Darfin pushed. “I saw one on TV.”

“Yes, bubble guns for everyone,” I agreed, relief flooding me when that seemed to work.

“Well, this is clearly the way to get you to behave,” Onas said from behind me, mirth in his tone.

I turned to see Iolas dying of laughter, along with Neldor and my entire detail. “Oh stuff it. You’d all be the same.”

“Prince Hudson!” Elasha squealed in my ear, practically blowing out my eardrum she was so loud. “Can Prince Hudson come to the picnic too?” Her lower lip started to quiver when I hesitated.

“Yes,” I blurted. “Yes, he can come. He’ll help with the bubbles. Please, just don’t cry. I’ll ask him to change into his dragon too.”

“Oh dear,” Irma chuckled, several of the hobgoblins looking guilty that the kids had pushed me in such a way. A few were embarrassed from their skin tones, but I assured them it was okay. It was my fault for neglecting the kids and the ones I loved.

Neldor lost his amusement when I agreed that Hudson could attend the picnic. I caught a thought that he wanted to be the only prince in my life after how the dragon had treated me.

And that was when I shut off my telepathy.

Yeah, that seemed smart.

Sometimes I could be at least.

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I had thought Neldor would be in Faerie Botany with me. He'd said he would be, but it turned out it was way behind what he'd learned already, and we were too busy to waste time. Then I found out he didn't have enough power yet to be in Combing Runes I with me since it was such an advanced class even for fairies. Well, at my age.

In my mind, that balanced out my studies, but it also left me as the only student in my classes all day. It was just me.

And it was fucking amazing.

Seriously, *amazing*.

It put me in the best mood for lunch which shocked everyone.

I simply shrugged. "I like my teachers, no problems there. The curriculum is fascinating and it's going to be challenging. This was what I thought I would get when I agreed to come to Artemis. They said they didn't believe in holding back and would adjust curriculums to the students. I'm *finally* getting what everyone else gets here."

Unfortunately, I said it a little too loudly and a lot of others heard me. Well, it was the truth even if it pissed people

off.

Either way, I wasn't going to let that rain on my parade.

It got even better with Rune Combining I. I was vibrating with excitement simply reading over the syllabus.

And maybe understood Julian a bit better.

My mind was ready to explode with possibilities, and it was like this whole other world opened to me in a good way... In a world with too much bullshit. That was alluring. It was like getting sucked into a good book, but it was *real*. I could just focus on that and let everything else melt away.

It wasn't okay and he should feel bad about it. I wasn't excusing him or forgiving him, but I understood it better.

If that made sense.

I saw Neldor that night for Power Training and then again in the morning for Physical Training. He went off to another class next, but then we met up again. We had lunch together with the others and Darby was tense.

"What's wrong?" I worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Adjusting," he muttered, giving me a weak smile. He sighed when it was clear I wouldn't let it go. "I'm glad you're getting the classes you wanted and need, but it's hard to know it's only you and Neldor so often."

I had to swallow a snort. "And the teacher. Believe me, Neldor isn't going to so much as flirt around the two fairy professors."

"Not in this lifetime," Neldor agreed from across the table, shivering at the idea even. Yeah, it was a weird idea when both

of them gave off such a serious and... Adult vibe? It would be bizarre.

Fairy Crystals II was with Neldor which surprised me. He admitted it wasn't his best subject, and the war starting and politics had distracted most of that year of his schooling. He wanted the chance to retake it without people judging him for it and he was using me as cover really.

That took a lot for him to admit, and I made it clear that I appreciated the honesty. He was the perfect prince on so much and had looked down on me about everything when I'd first unfrozen him. I was glad he had come so far.

Really, I was, even if it had nothing to do with us.

I had lunch with Geiger and his mate Cluym on Wednesday and mentioned it. They were both thrilled to hear that, and I couldn't hide my confusion. Cluym told me that was how his friend used to be. He used to be a great person and always honest, pushing others to be better even. Even Geiger said the Neldor I'd known was new and upset them.

They were so happy that I was bringing him back to how he'd used to be.

Wait... I was? I doubted that and said as much.

And they both gave me looks not to be daft.

Okay then.

The lunch was also another change, or rather that we were having lunch in the cafeteria. The conference room was out for the semester, and I was over paying for that extra feature instead of the exception given to a leader of a people.

Plus, the day before classes, my security found magic in that room that would have recorded any meetings and fed it back to whoever had put it there. My normal table was messed with in the cafeteria. Stefanie thought by two different people, but clearly too many people had access to campus.

Clearly.

The table was the scarier one for me. It was set up to be almost a siphon from what I understood. As I sat there and ate, filling my magical tank, the person could channel my power and use it as their own.

It had unnerved me. A lot. Stefanie assured me that it wasn't my magic they would use, only what that person could accomplish on their own and I was simply the battery.

Yeah, that didn't make it any better. It was still horrid.

But now I had an assigned table for whatever I needed, my security checking it all the time, and any meetings were taken with a barrier up in full view of them. And the extra team Lageos had demanded be on campus after two big breaches like that.

Plus, he'd personally searched all of campus for anything else. I had a feeling he would always make that a habit from now on.

Good. It would help me sleep at night even if I wasn't sleeping on campus at night. Izzy assured me she was fine the first night before I grabbed Darby and we went home. Julian had been waiting and asked me about classes, how everything was.

I'd been worried he missed his job but nope, not at all. His thoughts were only excited for me to take the classes I really wanted.

Okay, what alien had taken over him?

Well, besides me. I was an alien.

Yeah, it was a miracle I hadn't completely lost my mind yet.

"There's something you need to see," Izzy warned me Friday morning before we were going to have breakfast at the hobgoblin bakery. There was a new line of treats they wanted to launch for Valentine's Day and we were going to try them.

I would love them all, so I wasn't sure why they kept asking me. Probably so I would get all the goodies I wanted and a break from bigger things.

"Is it going to ruin my morning?" I asked when she held out her phone to me.

"I don't know," she sighed, shrugging when I frowned. "I don't know. I like him a bit better, but... I'm not his mate. It's a minefield then."

"Oh boy," I grumbled, not even sure which one we were talking about.

Julian. It was Julian and on his supe "YouTube" channel again.

"I thought he got rid of this thing?" I muttered.

"No, he just stopped posting. He's been doing stuff on his human social media as well. It finally reached Natalie's ears and she sent it to me. I would bet anything it's only because

she was in the industry. I looked into the traffic and chatter, but it's like it veers around anyone who might tell you. Like private chats about it only."

"The idiots get creative for all the wrong reasons," I bitched before playing the video.

And was confused why Julian was in his foyer. My eyes went wide as he started detailing all the changes *I* made to his house.

"This is my favorite feature," he said as he went over to the prints I'd had framed for him. "They're photos of flowers only found in Faerie. It looks like it would be digital art, but it's not. It's her world hidden in plain sight and exactly what was needed to make this foyer shine. The floors—I would never have thought to bring them to their original state and I love it."

I swallowed loudly as he went on and on, touching on every change and making it clear he knew exactly where my mind had been.

And he was right.

"So he's that close," Izzy muttered as she sat next to me.

I blinked around and realized I'd sat on my bed at some point. What she'd said hit me and I nodded. "All of it. He's right on the colors and—all of it. It's exactly what I was thinking at the time."

"I guess he sees you more than you realized," she said gently as she tucked my hair behind my ear.

"Yeah, but for how long? How long can I hold his attention this time?"

“It’s been from the moment he was healed of the black magic, Tams. That’s almost a year. Take all the time you need, but I have a feeling the doc won’t ever let his focus drift from you ever again.”

“I would love to believe that. I would.”

“I know,” she whispered. “There are more videos.”

Five more. A tear slid down my cheek as I finished watching them. Everything was exact. He noted every detail, every decision, and praised me for all of it.

The comments were full of praise for the updates and even my *talent* at redesigning spaces. One of the videos was the guest room that had become almost a junk room where everything got tossed into so it was out of the way. He’d had a picture of it before I’d touched.

Apparently, he’d gone through the whole house after I’d done the foyer and took pictures of everything so he could see the changes or keep it all straight. But he showed the pictures of the disaster the room had been and then how I’d renovated and organized it all.

The tear was because of what he said at the end.

“All she has on her shoulders, and she still takes the few minutes she has of free time to help me when I’m drowning. She makes it all look so easy, and I get why people are annoyed by how perfect she is, but she just wants to help. That’s all she tries to do and make lives better. She always does mine.”

“He’s going to be doing a whole series,” Izzy said when I stared at her phone that offered to play the video again. “That’s

episode six. Each room he's doing as a short episode."

"He doesn't have time for that," I whispered, sniffing and handing her the phone. "I'm glad he likes the changes." I cleared my throat and stood, hurrying to change so we could go.

"Tams, he's making the time for you. This touched you more than the music videos ever did."

"I cried for those all the time."

"Yeah, but that was your pain." She grabbed my arm and spun me to face her, waving the phone in her hand. "I saw your aura. You're so fucking excited someone *appreciated* your hard work and effort. You're over the fucking moon how he's valuing you. Admit it."

I nodded. "I don't know about over the moon but yeah, I feel..."

"Valued. He's valuing you."

"Yeah, I feel valued," I whispered, knowing that was what she wanted me to say.

"Are you going to tell him that?"

"No, I don't want to give him false hope."

"That's for him to decide, Tams. If you put in the time he is to prove he sees—if it was reverse, you would want to hear your message got through."

"Maybe." I was glad when she left it at that.

But that "maybe" was how Julian got an invite to the picnic the next day.

The picnic had actually spun out and was a huge thing. It was completely my fault because I wanted the other hobgoblin children I knew to attend as well.

And I couldn't exclude the fairy children awake... Which ended up being a lot more than I had realized. So I invited all the hobgoblins kids that could attend.

So the small gathering turned into a picnic with thousands of kids.

Whoops?

"Make sure no one goes near the unicorns," Stefanie said when people started arriving. She snickered when I shivered. "It's completely natural."

"Dude, just don't," I grumbled. "But yeah, make sure we don't scar the kiddies for life."

"I am," Izzy bitched.

"Me too. They're my damn unicorns." I shivered again. Izzy and I had planned to just swing by and leave Gambit and Amethyst some marbles, but instead got something that would be found on the Faerie version of Animal Planet.

On crack.

"I feel like I should say something, but everything that pops into my mind sounds so twisted because they're unicorns," Izzy muttered.

"Yeah, like 'good for them' is just *weird*, but I still think of them in the context of horses and—let's just forget about it."

"I wish I could."

I swallowed a snort as she walked off with a huff. Yeah, I wished I could too.

Of course, Neldor came, and after I invited Julian, I ended up inviting Lucca. It seemed fair since he was my friend and on good terms with me when I invited Hudson who I was... I honestly had no fucking clue, but he sat with us at meals and wasn't talking to Juan.

We hadn't talked yet and that needed to change. Izzy kept saying that he was waiting for me to make a move since I'd asked for a break, but he'd said he would let me know when he got himself sorted out.

So that seemed like the ball was in his court.

Either way, I refused to think about it right then when only fun was allowed for my day. I sat with the hobgoblin children I knew and listen to them excitedly tell me about the fountains the castle had and how they had barely slept the night before. They were too cute and exactly what I needed.

"Bubbles!" Darfin shouted as a huge box of bubble solution was brought over to me.

"Yes, the princess ordered enough bubbles for all the children on Earth," Shael teased as she came with more. She'd made several squads of Guardians who had some problems recently sit for hours and put batteries in the bubble guns or unbox things.

I'd been worried what was going on, but she said it wasn't bad, some lingering resentments against dark fairies they had fought against and adjusting to being on the same side as

them. It was a difficult situation and they didn't want to blow it up, but they couldn't let it go either.

So she kept giving them tasks that basically sent them to their separate corners to think about what they'd done. The adult version at least.

That worked for me.

"Okay, so what kind of bubbles do you guys want?" I asked the kids.

"Roses?" Elasha asked, glancing at the others and giving me a confused look.

"Why stop there?" I asked, winking at her. "What else?"

"I can't think of what else you could do," Izzy admitted when the kids were clearly stumped. "I'm dying to see it live as well, Tams. It's seriously cool."

I thought we could do better. I focused on the first big bottle I grabbed and tried to put what I wanted into my magic. Then I handed it to Neldor who waved for it and loaded up a few of the bubble guns.

He pulled the trigger and gasped. "How?"

"I don't know. I just do it," I chuckled.

"What? What did she do?" someone behind us asked.

Neldor tossed the gun over to one of the other commanders. "Look into the bubbles."

"Unicorns!" Darfin shouted. "The bubbles have unicorns in them!"

"My unicorns," I corrected. "I could only focus on them."

“This is astounding, Your Highness,” Stefanie praised... While using one of the bubble guns. That was an image I might not ever forget, the super serious and hardcore warrior playing with a bubble gun.

“I still think we can do better,” I muttered as I grabbed another bottle and focused. I frowned when my magic kind of fizzled, glancing at Neldor.

“It means it was something you shouldn’t do,” he muttered as he squatted down next to me. “Most fairies don’t have the level we do, so they wouldn’t know the answer to that. Some of your magic lessons might have to come from me.” He shook his head when I went to object. “I learned that from my *father* who went over lots of this with my grandfather before I was born.”

“Royal secrets,” I muttered, nodding when he did.

“What were you trying to do?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it, realizing why my magic would have stopped me. I didn’t answer and instead changed what I wanted, handing him the bubbles when I was done.

He shot me an unfriendly look for not telling him but loaded up another bubble gun. He smiled when he pulled the trigger and all the kids started going crazy. “Nicely done.”

“That’s cool,” Izzy whispered as she stared at the colored bubbles even if the liquid wasn’t dyed. No, they were all different colors. She reached out and touched one, popping it. She rubbed her fingers together and chuckled. “No food coloring or whatever to stain us. Nice, Tams.”

Neldor glanced over at me. “You wanted to make these like lights, right?”

I nodded. “I was thinking of mini disco balls instead of the big ones at nightclubs.”

“That could blind someone or cause headaches—seizures even. Your magic wouldn’t have let you accidentally hurt someone like that. Intentionally? Sure, but you didn’t have that intent.”

“Makes sense,” I muttered as I stared at my hands even if that wasn’t where my magic came from. “So fucking cool.”

“It is,” Izzy giggled still staring at the bubbles that were also changing colors like they had LED lights in them. “This is sick, Tams. You could make a fortune selling these.”

“I already have many fortunes,” I drawled.

“Right, but *fairies* could have a whole other income source. That’s new businesses in your cities and fixing buildings to have them.”

“We’ll see.” I couldn’t think that no one had thought of this before if I had so easily. There probably were tons of shops who sold cool things like this for kids, simply not to all supes. I really didn’t want to steal someone’s business and have people pissed at me all over again because I wasn’t a *real* fairy.

I was honestly focused more on the fact that Hudson hadn’t shown up yet. If he didn’t show, it wasn’t just me he was ditching, and that upset me more than I would like to have admitted.

Or so I told myself it wasn’t about him ditching me.

“What did you do this time?” Neldor asked as he grabbed the new bottle of bubbles from me.

I glanced from the bottle to his eyes. “Huh?”

“So you don’t know what you did because you were distracted. Oh boy.”

I was a bit shocked he was reading my magic so well but then again, Julian could do a lot of that because we were mates. It would make sense Neldor got a lot of that too.

“Nothing,” he whispered, snapping me out of my thoughts. “The bubbles do nothing?”

“Let them land,” Irma chuckled. “This is astounding, Your Highness.”

I glanced down and flinched.

“Fishies!” one of the very young fairy kids squealed as he went over to the magical puddle. “Momma, fishies!”

“Yes, yes, I see them,” she chuckled and snagged the boy around the waist.

They weren’t real fish, but an illusion. The bubbles popped when they landed and my magic made a small puddle appear that looked to have koi fish in them.

“What’s going on?” Izzy muttered, giving me a worried look.

“I saw this once in your dreams,” Julian whispered as he joined us, coming from wherever he had been hanging out. “This exact fish even. It was a hotel.”

I glanced away from everyone and nodded, reaching for another bottle of bubbles. “There was a group of male

employees working with the manager of a super posh hotel. They would drug women at the bar, bring them up to rooms with cameras, and make..." I remember the kids that last moment. "Tapes of *stuff* and their crimes."

"You busted them all and saved the day?" Izzy asked hopefully.

I shrugged, staring into the puddle near me and watching the fish. "I busted them, but they ruined so many lives that I doubt I did much saving other than the next women they would have done it to."

"And there was a koi pond in the lobby?" Julian pushed.

I bobbed my head. "Yeah, I used to watch it for hours. Something about it was so calming in so much chaos that I would just sit there and watch it. I almost blew everything a few times because I kept staring at the damn pond." I shook myself out of my thoughts and reached for another bottle. "Okay, what else should we do?"

"I think you've done enough, Tamsin," Julian said gently, reaching to take the bottle away.

There was a small commotion to my left, and I glanced over to see Hudson with a bunch of the Rothchilds. He nodded to several people as he got closer, relief all over his face when he stopped in front of me. "Can I speak with you a moment? Privately? Please?"

There was no way I could deny him after inviting him.

So much for today being fun.

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We moved off to the side from the picnic and I put up a barrier, staring at his chest instead of his face. “What’s up?”

“I asked Lageos for help,” he said after a moment, handing me something.

I took it from him with a frown. “A charm?”

“I couldn’t think past the mating energy between us. It’s so much worse than before and the old charm wasn’t doing shit,” he whispered. He cleared his throat as I simply stared at the charm. “It was only me, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

That one word hung in the air, and I felt the tension between us crawling over my skin.

“Please don’t leave me, Tams,” he rasped. “I’ll figure this out. I’ll—I’m sorry. I’ll give you however long of a break as you want. I—”

“I can’t do this today,” I whispered. “Not with everyone watching.”

“Right, of course, sorry.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to talk to me. You said you would.”

“I couldn’t form words around you,” he mumbled. “I was trying to control myself. Control River. Control *anything* and I couldn’t.” He swallowed loudly when I didn’t say anything again. “River misses you. A lot.”

“I miss him too.” I glanced over my shoulder at the picnic and shrugged. “Let him out. The kids would get a kick out of it. He might not get raw steak from me, but he likes sandwiches too.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I know how that energy can make you crazy. I can...” I shrugged. I wasn’t just going to forgive him, but he was understanding with a *lot*. There was one thing he hadn’t been though. “I need you to stop accusing me of running. It’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed after a few moments. “I have nightmares that you’re just gone though. You hit your limit and you just bail. It terrifies me. I wake up panicked.”

“I’ve made it clear I would never just bail on *you*. I think I’ve proven that.”

“I don’t know we’ve been stable and committed enough where I’ve felt that.”

I nodded. That was fair. “Did the charm help?”

“Yes. It’s still hard with what I’m dealing with, but I can think around you.”

“Okay. Shift and let River enjoy the fun.”

He snorted. “You just want me to suffer with the kids climbing all over me.”

I couldn't even deny it. So I didn't, taking down the barrier and moving back towards the party. I picked out an area not too far off and asked if several groups could relocate so we could have River come out and let the kids see him. They were more than willing, and after a few minutes we had a huge space for the dragon to shift.

After I put up the barrier for him so he could undress, not scare the kiddies, and not shred his clothes. I turned around to give him privacy and I heard him let out a shaky breath.

What did he seriously expect?

When I felt him start to shift and knew he wouldn't be naked for the kids as a man, I dropped the barrier so they could see the rest. They were super excited to see him.

“He's going to be hungry, so anyone who wants to share their food with him can come say hi,” I announced over all of the cheering and joy.

River was more than willing to get food from the kids as long as I stayed by him. He chuffed the minute I went to move away and tried to block me from going further.

I chuckled and plopped down by the dragon, using his leg as my backrest like I had so many times. I asked for some more food, and one of the Guardians brought me a box of bubble guns that were already filled up. I wasn't sure if that was a hint to goof around or try more magic with the bubbles, but I took it as both.

I studied the bubbles with my magic as I ate. If I could do something living like roses, it made sense I could make other organic things. After a few sandwiches and figuring out the logistics, I was pretty sure I had it.

Pulling the trigger of the bubble gun, I smiled as bubbles came out and then turned into either fae blueberries or pearlberries when they popped. No one was really paying attention to me, so it was a nice moment to simply appreciate my magic.

Until a large tongue moved over my cheek and then scooped up a bunch of the fruit.

“Sure, help yourself, River,” I chuckled as I pet his snout.

People went wild when they realized what was going on. Onas came over and snatched the gun from me.

“How did you do that? How did you make—” He let out a deep shout as he was flung away.

I burst out laughing, realizing that River had smacked the commander away with his wing. “He’s fine. Don’t be mean.”

River chuffed and then growled in warning when Onas came back.

“I apologize, Your Highness,” he muttered, trying to give me back the bubble gun.

I waved it off. “It’s fine. I was trying to come up with something different, so hopefully no one’s done that yet.”

He studied me closely. “Princess, no one has ever used magic on bubbles like this.”

I snickered. “Someone has.” I rolled my eyes when he tried to argue. “Are you familiar with all the kids’ toys and trends in your realm? In the light realm?”

“I am,” Commander Morgan said as he joined us. “I have nieces and nephews, and I’ve never seen anything like this. Many of us are wondering how you came up with it, Your Highness.”

I shrugged. “I wanted the kids to smile. I saw a cartoon when I was younger, and the fireworks made hearts and flowers when they exploded. I just kinda thought about that and how roses make me happy. From there I’ve sort of just been playing. I wanted pretty and fun.” I felt weird saying that extra especially when people went quiet.

Until River licked my face so forcefully, I almost fell over.

“Pushy dragon.” I swallowed loudly and added something under my breath so the fairies wouldn’t hear me. “I missed you.”

I grabbed another bubble gun and focused on it, handing it over to Commander Morgan when I was done. “For your nieces and nephews.”

He didn’t ask what I did, simply pulling the trigger. People gasped as bubbles didn’t come out but what looked like fireflies. They flew up and when the “bubble” would pop, simply vanished into the sky.

“Forget kids, adults would love that for romantic dates, weddings, all kinds of everything, Your Highness,” Onas said firmly.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, but River got pushy again. I realized he wanted me to flip on my telepathy.

“Hudson says make deal if light and dark fairies make friends. They can sell together.”

I stared into River's eye, seeing Hudson there too. “That's smart. Glad you learned how to be a diplomat like that.” I focused on the commanders to explain. “Hudson said we can make it into a business venture if a light fairy pairs up with a dark fairy for partnership.”

“That's a tall order, Your Highness,” Shael admitted. “Getting the Guardians to work together is difficult, but they're more willing because it's better than warring. The average fairy thinks that the realms will still mostly be separate, but you simply rule it all.”

“Toys for kids would be the best way to start combatting that,” Iolas muttered. “It would have the best chance. Especially if it was something invented by our future queen who they do trust.”

“People will do a lot to get out of poverty and help their families,” I added. “Get a list of widows with kids. Fallen Guardians, light or dark. It doesn't matter what side as they fought for their queen and we're attempting to move past that, but we won't forget their service. If they can—”

“I will, Your Highness!” a woman shouted, waving her hand in the air, several echoing her. She raced over to me, stopping when Morgan stepped in front of her. She bowed deeply, and I realized she had two babies strapped to her that she was cradling. “I will gladly take a deal like that, Princess.

As long as there is a contract agreement in place protecting me. I would love it.”

She was a light fairy, but several others that had called out were dark fairies.

“I understand. Why don’t you all sit together and see who you might click with. The days one works, the other might help with the children or something to make it more a two-adult household. Commander Morgan can get your names, and we will contact you after we work out the idea.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. Thank you,” she whispered as I practically saw some of her worries and burdens leave her shoulders.

I glanced down at the bubble guns. Wow, I wouldn’t have thought something so small and silly could maybe change someone’s life. I swallowed loudly, feeling pressure to come up with more and help people.

Trying to swallow the anxiety that was starting to brew in me, I grabbed another bubble gun and sat it on my lap. River clearly felt what was going on with me because he became extra snuggly and nuzzled my face.

“What did you do now?” Neldor asked, snatching the gun off my lap.

River went for him, but the Dark Prince was ready, a barrier up that River crashed into.

“Hey, don’t be mean,” I growled, jumping to my feet and healing River.

“The big dragon is fine,” Neldor drawled. “I felt your magic flare.”

“I didn’t,” Onas muttered. “How did you?”

“I’ve spent more time around her,” Neldor sighed.

But he was lying. He defaulted to extra annoyed and deflecting when he was fibbing. So it was because we were mates. If he didn’t shut it, he would get us busted. Something I planned to remind him about later.

“How? How did you know?” Neldor rasped.

I looked at him over my shoulder and did a double take when I saw tears in his eyes, one slipping out. “Know what?”

“What my father’s cologne smells like?” He hurried to wipe his eyes. “How could you possibly know that?”

“That’s not what I smell,” Onas argued, sniffing where one of the bubbles just pop. He blinked and then focused on me. “That smelled like my grandmother’s special birthday dish she made all of us.”

“I remember her doing that when I was in training,” Taeral muttered, sniffing the air. “I don’t smell food. It’s a different scent for me.” Emotions overflowed his eyes. “My favorite scent. How have you done this, Your Highness?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“What were you thinking about?” Onas pushed.

It hit me hard, and I instantly took my hands off of River, stepping away. “Something I loved and missed. Something I wanted to smell again.” I closed my eyes against my own tears as one of the bubbles popped by me.

The smell of Hudson on my sheets after he’d slept over and we’d been together filled my senses. I had loved that smell

so, *so* much.

“Why can I never be enough for any of you?” I breathed as I fought tears.

Except River heard me... Or Hudson did. I felt the air shift behind me, and someone must have put up a barrier fast enough to cover him.

“I-I,” Hudson started to say in a slur, but then I heard people gasp.

I turned in time to see Hudson caught by magic before he landed on the ground. “Get the healers!”

“He’s fine,” Iolas promised when I dove to the ground next to Hudson. “Exhausted.” He shot a look at the Rothchilds near us, and I did as well.

“I cannot comment on the state of our prince or anything private,” the guy I didn’t know muttered, staring at his feet. “We’ll get him home and tended to.”

Hudson moved to curl around me, almost protectively, but then I realized it was more to snuggle. “Love you, shorty. Don’t leave me. I’ll be better.”

“Stupid dragon,” I whispered as I pushed his hair out of his face. “He needs to sit in the hot spring for a bit.”

“We’ll take him, Your Highness,” a fairy said.

One I had never seen before.

And with *way* too much enthusiasm.

I reacted without even thinking, throwing up a barrier over Hudson and me. People gasped, but I ignored that and kept the

gaze of the man I didn't know, noting two more with him. "Thank you for the offer, but I have someone in mind."

The man reacted like I'd kicked him in the nuts. "I would never hurt your mate."

Luckily my telepathy was still on, so I caught something that made me seem less paranoid to the shocked people around me. "I believe that, but I don't know you, and your excitement to be near my castle's hot spring would give anyone pause."

He winced but not as big this time. "I apologize. It is legendary and was spoken of many times in my training. The opportunity was too great to let pass."

"I appreciate your honesty, but it's off-limits to anyone but a trusted few." I hurried on when his thoughts were going to argue. "Thank you for understanding." I dismissed him and found Colton behind a few of the other Rothchilds. "Take him with Iolas. And tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Yes, Your Highness. With less ears."

"Of course." I snagged the blanket I'd been sitting on and threw it over Hudson's groin before lifting him with my magic. Then I secured it so I didn't need to bring the person who put the barrier around him.

"I've got him," Iolas muttered, catching Hudson with his magic when mine wavered. "You're new to this and upset."

I nodded, glad he was there to help. I told everyone to continue with the fun and went with Iolas, walking behind a bit so I was in step with Colton. "Tell me."

"He's been fighting with his dragon for a while," Colton confessed with a sigh. "We didn't know why before. Now we

do. You. The shit that was going on with you and him. Now he's having problems ditching Juan for being an asshole.”

I stopped and turned to face him. “Why? River likes me. He would be on my side and—”

“Of course. Of *course*, he would, Princess,” Colton assured me as he faced me too. “Full stop. No doubt there.”

“But?”

“But Juan's been his friend since they were babies. They might not have been as tight as he was with Lucca, but that friendship has been strained as well. Again, because of stuff with you and Juan.” He held up his hand when I opened my mouth. “You're in the right. You are. You *know* when you miss stuff and try harder.

“I adore Hudson, and I'm loyal to my prince and his family. My personal view is with you. *But* I get it from being a dragon. You understand it from how quickly things can crumble or snowball. You went through that with Mel, and then anything else that happened was so much worse. Right or wrong, it's what happens.

“Hudson saw you pulling away and shutting him down on going public. *While* shit started with Lucca from what I know, and then slowly Juan became a bigger figure in his life. He felt like he was losing you both and turned to the one staying at his side.” He sighed when I bobbed my head. “You're all kids and have this crazy pressure on you.

“It's insane. You especially. The fate of a *world* is on your shoulders.” He waited until I sighed, clearly feeling the same. “But now it's going to be on Hudson's as your mate. He was

raised for an important role, but this is more than even he was prepped for, and he's not a fairy to stand at your side. The pressure is *crazy*."

"I know that. It's why I've been careful to not rush anything."

"Yes, but to him who was so certain his future would have you, it seemed like you weren't certain of *him* or he could handle it."

"He doesn't talk to me about stuff. It just—he could have —"

"Which is why he's an idiot," Colton comforted. "He was in the wrong. I'm explaining his perspective. Which he's still an idiot because he should be explaining it."

I snorted, absolutely agreeing. "So he was on the outs with his dragon. I get it."

"Yes, but you don't," he sighed. "It's bad for us. We're born as dragons and can shift to people, Princess. We're not humans with animals more like shifters. We're dragons who can change into people. To be on the outs with our dragons is like..." He shook his head. "I can't put it into words. A mental break? I've only been through it once and it still gives me nightmares."

"Like finding out you'd have extra appendages one day, but when it happens you can't get over it and hate them," I whispered to myself. I flinched when I realized Colton had heard me. "So he's fighting with River now because Hudson is bailing on a friend?"

“Yes. His dragon doesn’t get bullying and all the *people* stuff you’re going through.” Colton blew a raspberry as he scrubbed his head. It was almost comical to see on such a huge man if the situation was different.

But it wasn’t.

“Look, I’ve heard the rumors it’s black magic or some other magic or even an alien body-snatched him.”

“I am the alien in that scenario,” I grumbled, folding my arms over my chest.

“You stole his heart, Princess, not body-snatched him,” he said with a chuckle. “But this is love. He loves you completely. That makes everything more complicated, not simpler. You can’t see everything clearly when in love, and the fear you could lose the one you love most is crippling sometimes.”

“I know.”

“I believe that, so you’ll understand this too.” Colton waited until I met his gaze again. “He saw you slipping away. You did what was best, but it scared him. Then he wasn’t getting looped in like you were cutting him off. Yes, it was an oversight, but he was *terrified*. We all felt it.

“All that worry doesn’t just disappear, and when he pushed you to go public and you said no, his head and heart basically shut down. He spiraled into depression and listened to a trusted friend telling him he deserved better. A friend he *thought* was helping him pick himself back up and be put together again so he was stronger.”

I sighed, having had the same happen to me when I trusted the wrong people. “I tried to talk to him. I’ve tried to talk to him since and—”

“The mating bond was driving him nuts. He couldn’t think around you it was so nuts. I heard him admit that to his father, and it made everything so much worse.”

I sighed even heavier, remembering how it practically brought me to insanity and it was worse for dragons.

“But you weren’t affected. Why? Is it true you don’t love him anymore?”

“What he said—what I *thought* he said to me after I caved and had sex with him when I didn’t even want to broke something inside of me, Colton. I can barely look at him it hurts so much. Fine, he didn’t say it, but I heard it. It’s not something I can unhear along with everything else.”

“Do you not love him anymore?” he asked again.

“It wouldn’t hurt this much if I didn’t still love him,” I rasped, feeling like I was going to break right then. I didn’t want that. I had really needed this day to have fun.

So I was going to.

“Make sure he gets healed and tell him I want to talk to River soon. He can’t risk them fighting.” I didn’t wait for a response, turning on my heel and heading back to the party.

I did have fun, but my heart wasn’t as into it. Julian sat with me and was excited about the bubbles, talking ideas with me and helping me focus on my magic to tell me what was possible.

After talking with the healers a bit, I ended up doing a version of nighttime bubbles for the kids where the scent was lavender and a bit of soothing magic. Nothing that would hurt the kids, but just make them settle when it was bedtime.

Then Julian helped me with the last one, bubbles that popped into paper butterflies and floated into the sky to dissolve into sparkles. It was great.

Really great. I stared at him as he watched it, having forgotten how good he was at teaching and working with me. I'd forgotten how much I had loved these moments when we worked together. All the pain and hurt he'd made me feel had pushed this aside, clouded it.

Someone laughing startled me and I went to look at the butterflies again... But caught an unhappy gaze.

Darby's.

Shit.

I moved away from Julian and went to sit by him, snuggling up to him when he moved his arm around me.

"You're such a miracle, *agra*."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not," he promised as he kissed my hair. "Nothing is ever easy when dealing with anything extraordinary and you are. We're fine, better than fine."

I took his word on that because everything was too crazy in my head and I couldn't trust myself on how I felt. So for right then, I left it alone and simply enjoyed the day with him and the others.

16

Gymnastics II kicked my ass Friday morning, and I was very ready for lunch. I couldn't get over how damn flexible and agile fairies were. I'd seen so much of it, but *clearly* people were holding back around me so I didn't feel bad or out of place.

I always did, so it was better that I was informed and not always ignorant as to my own species.

And I'd said as much to Ara in a less than friendly tone.

I wasn't in the best mood, ready for the weekend, and definitely hangry. I was texting Julian about my Combining Runes I assignment I had to turn in by Monday when I saw Darby racing towards me.

I only had a second to worry something was wrong before he grabbed me around the waist and swung me around. He set me back on my feet and dipped me in a movie-style kiss. It wasn't our normal short kiss when we were around others, and it was exactly what I needed. So much so, I threw my arms around his neck and completely forgot where we were or who was around.

And all I wanted was the nearest flat surface.

Or he was strong enough to take me standing. I didn't care. I just wanted him.

Now.

He seemed to realize that too, chuckling as we pulled apart, and he lowered his forehead to me. "I got in, *agra*."

"You got in," I panted, trying to focus on his words instead of my hormones. "You got in."

"Aye, I did."

Then it hit me. "You got in?"

"Yes. Yes, I did." He beamed at me as we stood back.

"You got in!" I squealed as I dropped my bag and jumped to hug him, completely wrapping myself around him.

He burst out laughing, nodding as he held me under my ass so my face was above his. "I got in. Full ride."

I let out a happy scream before peppering his face with kisses. I kept going as he spun us around, both of us laughing like loons. Then he seemed to get dizzy and set me on my feet, but I wasn't letting him go just yet, kissing him with everything I had.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," I kept saying in between kisses, squealing now and again while doing happy dances. "This is amazing!"

"I have no idea what is going on, but *everyone* is watching," Neldor said from behind us. "And your demigod side is showing so tone it down."

I turned to tell him to fuck off and not ruin this moment, but then I caught sight of what he was talking about beyond

the barrier he'd put up. *Everyone* around us was smiling, and that was never the case at Artemis. Campus was full of jerks and salty people who played the victim on everything. There was never a day full of smiles and fun.

Unless people were enjoying something that made them horrible.

Still, it didn't make sense to me.

Neldor sighed when I glanced at him. "You know how you feel when Lageos is happy around you."

"Yeah, like life is perfect and my soul feels lighter. But he..." I trailed off as I glanced around again. "Shit."

"Making people happy when you are isn't a bad thing, *agra*," Darby said.

"No, but it's another reason she's special and something people would want to pressure her for," Neldor cut in. "So what is going on?"

"Darby got into Yale Law School with a full ride," I answered as I tried to calm down a bit. "So it's not about me right now and it's fine. Thank you for letting me know."

Neldor sighed, nodding and backing off. In his world, everything should be about me because I was the heir and a royal, but he was a spoiled, pompous prince, and I didn't ever want to be like that.

Ever.

I beamed at Darby. "We're going to celebrate tonight. Fun and fun, nothing else. I promise."

He nodded, giving me the softest kiss that made me give a happy sigh. “Aye, let’s go dancing, *agra*. Tell me your favorite places to dance and I’ll handle the security with the commanders.”

I blinked at him, shocked he was offering to take such a proactive role. “I’m confused.”

“Darby put his foot down over break that dictating to you how things will be and what you should do keeps pushing you further away and he’s not allowing them to take you from him,” Neldor said quickly, looking out at people nervously. “I agree. I tell my security what I’m doing and they make it happen. They go too far with you in their fear.”

“I never...” I trailed off, not really sure what I was even going to say.

“You don’t like bossing people around,” Darby said for me.

“I do it all the time though,” I mumbled, confused to my own ears.

“Because it’s stuff that needs to get done and you do it well,” Neldor defended. “You are reluctant, but you do it especially when there’s a problem. You don’t for yourself. That is the line with you that makes you seem bossy, plus those assholes who kept calling you selfish and other crap because you wouldn’t stay locked in your castle in Faerie.”

“Why are you so agitated?” Darby asked him, shocked—as I was—that Neldor was saying all of that so clearly and easily.

“This makes me nervous,” he admitted, nodding to the people gathered. “They know enough of her secrets, and I don’t like people knowing more. Especially when it’s not a fairy thing. She gets torn down enough.”

“Hey, I’m fine,” I whispered, giving him a confused look.

Neldor cleared his throat. “Sorry, I have a lot going on. Congratulations, Darby. You’ve earned it.” He took down the barrier and walked away.

“At least he’s being nice when he’s weird now, right?” I asked Darby under my breath. He sighed and nodded, none of us ever really able to get a lock on Neldor.

Then again, I didn’t think we ever would with all Neldor struggled with. My life had been rough, no one could ever deny that, but Neldor’s mother had tried to kill him. I wasn’t sure that was something *anyone* could ever fully recover from.

“Let’s go eat and I’ll speak with Shael,” Darby offered.

“Yes,” I immediately agreed. “Today is all about you. This weekend. I’m so proud of you.” I kissed him and grabbed his hand as we walked towards the cafeteria. I was thrilled and my day looking up. Hell, I was so fucking relieved from anxiety I hadn’t even known I’d had about Darby getting in.

And with a full ride. I hadn’t expected that with all the money I had. I know that didn’t work for him because we weren’t married, but in my mind it was a factor.

Clearly not and I worried about too much too often.

Headmaster Edelman made an announcement during lunch about Darby getting accepted so early and with a full ride. I smirked at the assholes who were shocked that the guy

they'd bullied and treated like shit because he was a tutor did something they couldn't ever dream of even with all their money.

A lot of his scholarship friends were thrilled for him, congratulating him and truly on his side.

"So how are we celebrating?" one asked him.

"I'm going to check with Tamsin's security which of the clubs she likes best they can manage keeping her safe at, and we're going there tonight," Darby told them, his tone saying it was just us.

"We'll let you guys know then," I told them, nodding when Darby shot me a hesitant look. "Sure. More people we know is better too. I'll buy drinks tonight, and we can have some late-night burgers after clubbing. It will be great."

"You don't have to buy drinks," he argued.

"She's rich," one of the master's students I saw in that group a lot snorted. She gave me a wink. "Let the woman buy drinks and celebrate you."

"Exactly. And we'll go to that place first that you loved that sushi at."

"That was in Japan, *agra*," he chuckled. "We can't just go there for dinner our time."

"Right, I'll get a reservation for tomorrow and figure it out." Then I had an idea. "We'll do that taco truck tonight. You loved that place. It's not far from the club I like best in LA."

"Perfect," he agreed, smiling at me with love.

Yeah, it was and so was he.

Shael was coming for a meeting anyways, so I filled her in and asked her to announce it throughout Faerie. She couldn't hide her shock, but I simply snorted.

“He gets shit on constantly as not being worthy of me, but he got in on his own. He's that awesome, and we'll use magic to get the others in to guard him. No shade on that, but he earned this. He's built himself up from humble beginnings, and I'm going to brag about that for him if he won't. So people better start treating him with the respect he deserves.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she agreed, noting the details down. “I will also get started on inserting our people into the rest of the acceptance process so the two volunteers can be added.” She turned to Darby and smiled. “Your application was not messed with, Lord Darby. The princess was crystal clear if anyone messed with it—good or bad—that they'd be expelled from Faerie.”

“You didn't tell me that,” Darby muttered.

I sighed. “I said it in anger and honestly in passing, but I'm the ruler and everything I say has impact. They took it seriously and declared it for real.”

“Good.” He nodded when I glanced at him. “Good. They should take you and what you say more seriously. I'm glad they're doing it now.”

“We have big egos, but we do respect our royals more than we have shown,” Shael agreed. “Stress and upset after what happened to us knocked a lot of us down to a level we're not proud of. And yes, I speak for myself as well.”

I left it at that, hoping that was true and we could stop with the nonsense.

The commanders handled everything, and Captain Dalyor even let our Power Training class be earlier than normal so we could go have some fun.

I was ready by nine and dressed to impress. The black bandage top couldn't be worn with a bra, but it wrapped my breasts in and lifted them better than any push-up bra. My shoulders were completely bare, but there were sleeves that came off the main part of the shirt just like the fabric that went around my neck a few times.

The black skirt was one Darby had noted when I'd gotten it. He had asked where the rest of it was since I wasn't one to wear tiny skirts. I'd laughed and left him guessing. It was short and flowing so lots of trouble, but it was meant to be worn with the boy short panties I had on. Those covered me better than what cheerleaders wore and I wasn't worried.

Izzy had quickly done my bright red hair wild with some fairy-type braids so it wasn't all in my face. Also so it wouldn't feel so heavy on my neck when getting a workout dancing.

And to wrap up the outfit, I had bright red heels on that matched my hair. They were perfect for dancing and sliding on spins. They would also make me as tall as Darby which he always loved and said was perfect for dates.

It sounded like something someone insecure about his height would say, but honestly Darby looked at super high heels like they were evil. I didn't get it when I'd caught that,

but he'd explained they looked so painful to wear that it was all he could think about when they were on my feet.

How did people seriously not think he was good enough for me?

Idiots.

"Wow, *agra*," Darby breathed when he saw me approaching. "I should get into law school more often."

I threw back my head and laughed. "No, once is perfect. We just need more nights out and to have fun."

"All the nights out," he agreed, eyeing me over in a way that made it clear he would be taking off what I was wearing later.

Yes. Please.

We met up with my waiting security and several extra people I hadn't thought would come. I was thrilled to see Natalie and our friends, glad they could make it with their busy schedules.

I was less than thrilled when Hudson, Lucca, Julian, *and* Neldor were there.

"I invited them," Darby told me quietly, nodding when I gave him a shocked look. "They were very supportive. Julian actually looked over my application and—they all helped. Especially after what happened with my family."

I smiled when he seemed worried. "Whatever you want. It's your night, and I'll remove the balls of anyone who even thinks to ruin it for you."

A few people coughed or snickered, but I let it stand. We *needed* this fun and we were going to have it.

The taco truck was better than I remembered, and I was glad we were able to catch it before it closed. They were shocked at the huge group but were thrilled that they sold out completely. Onas had told me that, and I was impressed that he knew Spanish so well.

Until he chuckled at whatever he got from me. Probably my expression, but then it hit me.

Right, there was definitely a rune to understand people speaking other languages. No way that fairies didn't invent that. Oh well, something to learn later.

Hopefully?

I found myself moving closer to Lucca as he tried to stuff a whole taco in his mouth at once. I wasn't judging it since I'd done the same, but it was amusing to watch. "How is he doing?"

He knew who I was talking about, waiting to answer after he swallowed his bite. "Better."

"You've talked to him?"

"No, but I scent a lot. He's not so tired and he seems a bit calmer. I think River really needed to see you. He spun out way worse than I realized." He turned away and rubbed his arm over his eyes.

"Lucca, you've not been a good place either and so much on you," I comforted. "Seriously, I feel guilty for not seeing either, but he was closing us out too. We can't help much if he won't let us."

He stared at me a minute and swore under his breath. “You let people help you all the time, Tams.”

I gave him a sad smile. “But I close you guys out more times than I accept the help. I know that. I just...” I shook my head. “I never blame you guys for not helping when I shut down or I close you out. He shouldn’t blame us either. You shouldn’t feel guilty about it. Okay?”

“I’ll try. He’s just always pulled me out of my own shit before and I couldn’t do the same. I got pissed and bailed.” He stared down at his tacos as his eyes misted. “How can I even think I’ve grown if I did that?”

“You didn’t. You have grown.”

“Why are you so calm about it?” he asked curiously, clearly not trying to judge me.

“I talked to Colton about it and it helped,” I admitted after a minute. “A lot. We’re not dragons so yeah, it helped.” I went to move away but then sighed. “I plan on talking with River. I will. I just...”

“He hurt you. I get it. I feel the same.”

“Yeah, and it’s another week of him not talking to me and just sitting there.”

“I don’t think he knows what to do. You’re going to have to be the adult on this one, Tams.” He shrugged when I shot him an unfriendly look. “We all have our strengths. Talking isn’t one of Hudson’s. You know how hard it is for him after all he’s been through. He freezes up. I think this is one of the legit times you have to give him a pass.”

“Fair enough.” Or at least I thought so. Hudson was understanding of my issues.

I used to feel that. Maybe not so much after all his blowing up that I was running away, but I would think more on it later.

And definitely overthink it as well.

I felt more fairies when we arrived at the club, nodding to Rafe who was talking to the bouncer. So *clearly* my security had used some sort of magic to make it fine for our whole huge group to go right in.

Especially when there was a long line.

“You do a lot to help a *lot* of people, humans too,” Neldor said under his breath as we found our reserved tables. “That should come with perks and you getting priority when you finally have time off. You’re important and appreciate it, work hard to deserve it. Don’t feel guilty when you finally enjoy the fun of that.”

I met his pretty green eyes and nodded. “Yeah, your dad was really a good guy.”

He quickly looked away. “My mother taught me that. She said ruling and leading by example was the hardest job there could ever be. She hated to ever seem like she abused the perks, but once in a while she put herself first. She thought it was important to teach me that even if she didn’t do it much for herself.”

“I’m sorry.”

He ignored that. “You’ll also spend a lot tonight, so it’s not all our magic but money making the world go around.” He

moved over to another table and I let him, not wanting any issues, and the night was about Darby.

I did agree with his mother though.

And I once again cursed that I didn't know her name even. No one would tell me since it wasn't the ways of fairies. It irked me though because she was Neldor's mother. It wasn't about the woman but getting to know *him*.

Wait, why do I care about getting to know him better?

I shook off the thought and smiled at Darby, taking the shot he offered before he pulled me out to the dance floor.

A guy bumped into my shoulder as we went along, a total accident and something I would never have paid attention to... If I hadn't met his gaze.

And knew those eyes.

I froze.

Completely.

Darby tugged me a step more but then realized something was going on and stopped. I barely registered it besides I'd stopped moving.

I was too focused on what was in front of me.

Who was.

His lips formed the disarming smile that used to make my heart race when I'd been too stupid to realize it was fake. He was fake and his eyes never showed anything but amusement and greed. "Wow, this brings back good memories."

I snorted, the music covering it to human ears for sure.

“You really grew into a beauty, Tamsie,” he praised, eyeing me over in a way that made me feel dirty. “I’m glad you came to find me.”

That snapped me out of my shock. I threw back my head and laughed. “You egotistical fucking prick. Why would I *ever* come looking for the worst lay in the world?”

Darkness filled his eyes to show his true colors. “That wasn’t *my* fault. You were the idiot virgin who wouldn’t be trained.”

I snorted. “The real men I’ve been with since never complained, nor tried to *train* me because they’re that insecure in their dick size.”

“Don’t push me, Tamsie,” he bit out as a few people came towards us. He was friends with them from the way they acted, probably realizing he’d stopped. “You won’t get what you need tonight if you aren’t good.”

I laughed again, pissing him off even more.

Good, now we were *both* angry.

I held up my hand that was still in Darby’s. “I ain’t here for you, fool. I’m with my boyfriend. A real man. I ain’t ever tried to find you and haven’t thought about you in years. Pretty much since I told you to go fuck yourself.”

“Oh, that’s not what you really said, Tamsie,” he reminded me. “You were crying and begging me not to touch other women or you would leave.”

“You’re right, but I’m not that kid anymore, and I still told you to get lost when you wouldn’t be faithful and a real man.”

I half shrugged. “And why would I ever come looking for you *here*? We didn’t meet in LA.”

“It’s been all over my social media that I moved here last year and—”

I snorted. “I’m not following you. I’m never even on my socials. I have a team that handles that for me.” I snorted again. “You are not worth the ego you have, Preston.”

“Bullshit. If I said I’d give you attention, you’d drop that loser you’re with and do whatever I wanted.”

I laughed so hard it hurt. “Clearly not saying what I should have last time warped your mind. Let me spell it out completely.”

I dropped Darby's hand—much to his shock—and headed towards the DJ booth. I was about to figure out the magic I should use, but I saw Shael out of the corner of my eye already lounging against the wall. She gave me a nod it was handled.

Wow, cool.

I asked the DJ for what I wanted to play and grabbed the mic they had to hype people up. It wasn't a karaoke bar or anything but a good setup like what the club had could do what I wanted.

People were a bit confused with the music suddenly changing but got something was going on because they stepped out of my way.

Or that was magic again. I honestly wasn't sure I was so steamed that my past was leaking on the fun night I'd promised Darby.

I felt a lot of worry as I opened my mouth, but I'd worked hard to learn how to never hurt humans when I sang. Josie had been reluctant to teach me how to “downplay” my astounding voice, but it was *always* smart to learn how to blend, and I'd told her I wanted everyone to learn that just in case.

There was nothing more perfect than Halsey's "You Should Be Sad" for this fool. I sang it as I danced closer to Preston, loving the rage in his eyes. About halfway through he went to come towards me, but Hudson was suddenly there with his hand on Preston's chest.

I couldn't tell what Hudson said, but Preston went visibly pale and kept his spot. I'd have to thank the dragon for his backup later. Darby could have more than handled the human, but Preston was too full of himself to consider someone his size a threat.

Everyone with a brain would consider Hudson a threat with how big he was.

I smirked at Preston when the song was over and I was standing right in front of him. "Did I clear up the situation for you now? You're trash. I was a fool for accepting scraps from *trash* like you. I'm dating a *man* now who treats me like a princess."

"He ain't got shit on me besides being pussy whipped by you instead of controlling you like I did."

I rolled my eyes. "You didn't *control* me. I was stupid and fell for your bullshit but don't go rewriting history. And Darby is *leagues* above you. We're here to celebrate him getting into Yale Law School." I nodded when his eyes flashed shock. "Yeah, you baller compared to him as a high school dropout drug dealer."

"You dropped out too."

"I got my degree. I'm graduating college this year."

“*Agra*, don’t waste your breath with such a maggot. He’s lusting after ya something fierce. Don’t give him the attention he be seeking.”

I nodded, leaning in and brushing my lips over his. “I sang to the jackass, so I owe you a song too.”

“Aye, ya do,” he agreed, putting a bit of extra thickness on his accent that he knew made me melt.

I hurried over back to the DJ that had already switched songs and told him what I wanted next. When the music started, I strutted right to Darby and dipped down so low that my skirt touched the floor. I smirked up at him as I slowly came up again. The heat in his eyes was unreal and I was completely captivated by him.

Dancing all around and on him, I sang Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love” featuring JAY Z. He gave me light touches or had his hand on my hip now and again in a possessive gesture for people watching, but otherwise let me do my thing.

When the song was over, Darby took the microphone from me and brought us to the middle of the dance floor. He let me go there and kept going towards the DJ booth. The smirk on his face when he confidently strutted back to me set my body on fire.

I threw back my head and laughed when Ed Sheeran’s “2step” featuring Lil Baby came on. I was still laughing when he slid his arm around my waist and grasped my hand.

We danced as he quietly sang to me, no one else able to hear something that was just for me. He spun me back one

way and another, both of us smiling as we enjoyed the dance and forgot about everything else.

“Just enjoy it,” he whispered in my ear when the song ended. I didn’t understand what he meant and was distracted when he spun me away... And let go of my hand.

Julian caught it but didn’t do anything else, not moving and simply staring into my eyes.

I could have been knocked over by a feather when I realized he was waiting for me to give permission to dance. I slowly nodded, swallowing loudly when he slid his arm around me. After a few moments, I relaxed and thought about what Darby said, simply feeling the music and dancing.

“Your former lover left,” he said as the first song was ending.

I flinched. “I honestly forgot about Preston.”

He snorted. “Your security has not. He was muttering shite about getting you back and tearing you down on social media because you disrespected him.”

I shrugged. “That won’t matter. Besides, I have tons of people tear me down constantly.”

“He said he has a sex tape of you,” Julian worried.

I snickered, shocking Julian. “Preston is one of the biggest liars on the planet. He will say *anything* in the moment to be cool and then makes up another lie later to cover his precious pride.” I glanced over and saw Shael, nodding that she should still check and make sure. I didn’t believe it for a second, but it was always smarter to check.

“I’m a bit surprised you dated such a git.”

I chuckled darkly this time. “We didn’t date. We *hung out* and I ate up the scraps of affection like a stupid, abused kid. I kept going back for those scraps and sex that hurt because it was all about him. I let him tear me down and fell for his bullshit.”

“Until you didn’t,” he pushed, studying my eyes. “That song has a line in it that scared lots of people here.”

I looked away from his intense gaze. “Yeah, I was stupid enough to have sex with him without condoms. There was a pregnancy scare. It wasn’t though because my period got messed up a lot when I finally started getting real food to eat and working out with Mel.”

“Plus, a human can’t have a child with you. You’re not even old enough yet,” he said gently.

I frowned at him. “I know that.”

“I know you do. I’m reminding some of the panicked twits listening in who *are* like you and seemed to have forgotten that’s how it goes when they’re upset.” He chuckled when I sighed and spun me out so I came back closer to his body. “I love you, Tams.” He wouldn’t let me go when I went to pull away. “This is just a dance. I know. Have fun, but I wanted you to know...”

He seemed confused on what to say, and I wasn’t going to help him on that one. I hadn’t wanted to hear it.

But my soul had, and I was sure he knew that.

After the song I moved away from him and went for Izzy. I glanced over my shoulder, and the desperate look in Julian’s

eyes hit me right in the heart.

Izzy and I danced a few songs, and we took a break for water and shots. We were about to step back on the dance floor when she leaned into me. “Just have fun and enjoy it.”

I wasn't sure what she meant until a large hand took my free one. I shivered, knowing those hands all too well. Staring up into deep blue eyes, I saw them turn purple with desire for me.

“Can we dance?” Hudson asked quietly.

“You can't dance to this kind of music.”

He glanced around and shrugged. “You like this. I can wiggle my butt or whatever.” He moved in closer. “I don't care if I look like an ass. I want to dance with you.”

I swallowed loudly. “This doesn't make things okay between us.”

“I know.”

Okay, as long as they knew this wasn't like me accepting them back or whatever. We went out on the dance floor off to the side and I let him pull me close.

He lowered his forehead to mine. “Tams, I don't know what to do and it's all fallen apart. I can't find my way out. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry.”

I slid my arms up around his neck as tears burned in my eyes. “You hurt me so fucking bad. I was dying inside. I couldn't reach you no matter how hard I tried. You were just gone.”

“I wasn't. You were...”

“Why can I never be enough for you guys? Why won’t any of you stick it out with me?” I pulled away when the first tear fell.

Hudson grabbed me closer, hugging me tightly with his arms over my back. He lowered his face to my shoulder. “You are. I got lost. I feel so lost. I was losing you. Lucca. Things were so messed up with my parents getting so much pushback because we knew about you and you wouldn’t even go public with me.”

“I *wanted to*,” I argued, thumping on his chest. “You wouldn’t let me in. I tried to get you to let me in. Why can’t you be a team with me?”

“I wanted to be, but it seemed like you didn’t want to.”

“Stupid dragon.”

“Yeah, I really am,” he whispered as I felt tears on my shoulder. “Please don’t leave me. I want to make it right, but I just can’t get past this panic you’re gone. You wanted a break, but Lucca said you’re waiting for me. I just—how? I was the jerk. It’s all on your terms.”

“Stupid dragon,” I repeated, my voice cutting out. “You said you’d figure it out and come to me.”

“Oh, I meant once you—I didn’t want to push you when you wanted a break.”

“I took the break because you weren’t hearing me there were problems,” I bitched, thumping his chest again. “You kept—I didn’t know what else to do.”

“So no more break?”

I was about to scream in frustration, but then my magic sort of squirmed inside of me. It cut through what I was feeling and I used it to scan Hudson. My heart raced in worry at what I found. He was *so* messed up in ways my magic was trying to tell me, but I didn't understand.

As much as I wanted to put myself first and demand the apologies and steps that I deserved after what he did, I was more scared for my mate than my pride. Hudson was struggling bad and I'd been there before. I'd *been* in the dark hole he was talking about.

"If you do one thing for me, I'll cancel the break and we can start working on our relationship," I heard myself whisper.

His eyes flashed shock. "Yes, anything. I'll do *anything*, Tams."

I let out a slow breath and leaned away a bit so I could see his face better. "This darkness you feel? The deep hole that you're so lost in? That was how I felt this summer, *plus* my magic was going wild. Everything was such a mess and it wasn't getting better."

He searched my eyes a moment and swallowed loudly. "I really hurt you by getting upset and saying you were running all the time, didn't I?"

There was my Hudson. He was finally not being such an idiot. I nodded. "I didn't run. I had to stop the crazy. It's not *running* if I'm still here, Hudson. I need to feel safe to say I can't handle anymore. You should support that."

He leaned in and kissed my hair. "You're right. I hear you this time, shorty, I do. I saw it as something different. Pushing

aside what you needed to do as a royal. That's how I was raised and—I'm sorry. I'm sorry I made it worse for you."

"Will you think it over seriously this weekend? Please?"

"Yes, absolutely. I didn't—I hear you this time."

"Okay, then we can—break over but everything not just okay, okay?"

"Thanks, Tams. Thank you so much." He pulled me back into a bear hug and started crying.

Damn men.

Damn my love for them.

"What did you say to Preston?" I asked when he started to settle. I clarified when I realized he had no idea the human's name. "The guy who thought I was here for him."

"I said you were never the problem because you were perfect with me and that he should believe me because if he didn't, I'd show him but only after I ripped out his eyes because I didn't allow trash to see your body."

I blinked at him, shocked how fast Hudson of all people blurted it out. Then I threw back my head and laughed before hugging him.

He was my Hudson again.

That didn't mean everything was miraculously fine or we didn't have issues, but in that moment I felt we could be okay. That was the laugh more than what he'd said. I felt my soul have hope and that I hadn't made one of the biggest mistakes of my life by loving him.

“We’ll be okay,” he whispered, realizing I’d started crying before I had.

“When you said that to me, I thought I’d never be okay ever again,” I admitted.

He didn’t correct me that he’d never said it, nor ignore the topic. “I shouldn’t have ever thought it. I don’t know what was going on with me. I mean, things were so far off and I was just *angry*. I was angry I couldn’t put the pieces together.” He swallowed loudly and leaned back. “And I was angry that you agreed to have sex that day.”

I couldn’t hide my shock. “You were all over me. I—you—how was that my fault?”

“You didn’t want to, Tams. Admit it.”

“I wasn’t in the mood. I wanted to just...” I shrugged, trying to pull away.

But he didn’t let me. “Yeah, I didn’t get that at first with the energy all over me and River riding me to connect with you better. I missed that you weren’t into it until the end. Then I was furious you just caved.”

“It was what you wanted,” I whispered.

“I don’t *ever* want us to have sex if you don’t. Not *ever*. Full stop. Hard pass from me. I don’t care what else is going on or if I’m out of my head being a stupid dragon.” He sighed when I frowned. “Please *value* yourself more and never just cave. I won’t ever be that asshole. Not again.”

I swallowed loudly and nodded.

“Promise me. Say it. If you don’t want it, you will tell me. Any of it. I won’t be an asshole.”

“But you were,” I argued, pulling away. “I tried a lot to get you to talk to me, but you wouldn’t. You just wanted to fuck.”

“I wanted to *connect* with you,” he argued. “I wanted to show you how I felt. Yes, the mating energy drove me nuts, but it wasn’t about getting my rocks off, Tams. I wanted us to fight the world, not this divide. I was drowning and I wanted you to pull me out. Us being together to get us back on solid footing.”

“I’ll try,” I whispered after several moments, shrugging when he narrowed his eyes at me. “I don’t know what else to say, Hudson, okay? You bailed and you had a problem with my *performance*. It’s tied to me. Julian wasn’t getting what he wanted from me and bailed. Hell, he bailed after I gave him what he said was the greatest sex of his life but I wouldn’t give him other stuff.

“It’s all *connected* to me. Darby and I had issues during sex because of stuff. Lucca and I did. It’s all intertwined and I just—you have no idea how it is from my view. I’m not sure why it matters when I consented. You didn’t assault me or take advantage of me. I agreed. I could have said no at any time, so I didn’t make you the bad guy. You did that on your own.”

I yanked away from him and even put up a small barrier so people would bump into that if they came close instead of actually touching me.

Hudson broke right through it and grabbed my arm, spinning me to face him. He cupped my cheek and leaned in. “Yes, I did that. 100%. I admit I’ve been the asshole and even

worse than I thought if that's how I've made you feel. Completely my fault."

"But?" I hedged.

"Not but. My fault. I'm a jerk and this is on me."

"*But,*" I pushed.

"But I need you to help me at times. If you *agree*, I assume it's fine. If you let me touch you—you don't let the guys here who want to touch you do it. Why should that change for me?"

And then I understood. I was basically making him an extra bad guy by not drawing clearer lines.

"Fine, I'll try. Really." I shrugged when he went tense. "I have my issues too, Hudson. You met one of them tonight and why I don't have the best emotionally healthy habits."

"Yeah, okay, that's fair, and I can be understanding of that when I'm asking you to be of me," he uttered. "Okay, I got it." He gave me a soft smile when I met his gaze. "If you're not in the mood and I push or try, tell me to go get you donuts."

"Donuts?" I sighed.

"Yes, because I know that's a sensitive thing for us. I will *hear you* that something is going on. River too. I promise."

I thought about that a moment, studying his eyes. "So it's like our safe word that I'm not okay?"

"Yes, exactly that. Also that you need space, but you still want me to come back." He sighed when I flinched. "Tams, needing space is okay. You tend to shut down, and that's like

cutting me off. River *freaks* then and yeah, he doesn't handle it well."

I tried to not smile, but I felt my lips twitch. "River does, huh?"

"Yes, it's all River's fault. For sure." He rubbed his thumb over my cheek. "So just tell me you want donuts when you need a *temporary* break and I'm being stupid. I will hear you. I promise. Or if I don't get it, I will tell Mother and she can beat me."

"Yeah, okay, donuts." I snickered. "Your poor baker is going to be busy and confused."

He frowned. "I'm not that big of an asshole all the time."

"All the time? No, not at all. But you were for *months* and then it got worse. Things aren't remotely okay between us and I'm going to need a lot of time outs from you if we even try to fix this."

He nodded, leaning his forehead down to mine again. "Don't give up on me, Tams. I love you so much that it's killed me to be apart and upset between us."

"Me too, you stupid dragon." I pulled away and he let me this time. I didn't go back to the group, seeing Taeral standing off to the side watching the crowd for problems. "Care to dance?"

He did a double take and his face softened when he saw the state I was in. "It would be my honor, Tamsin." He took my hand and kissed it before leading me back to the dance floor.

We dance fast and hard to the music, but it wasn't booty grinding or anything typical for the club. It was more like swing dancing with a faster beat and crazy spins.

For both of us.

At one point we were waltzing at a clipped pace all along the outskirts of the dance floor. It was exactly what I needed. After about ten minutes, he spun me away harder than before.

I caught on when he clearly wanted to hand off the dance to someone else. I gave him a shocked look, but he simply shrugged.

"His father was my best friend and his mother like a sister to me. Of course I'm rooting for him."

Neldor laughed so hard at my jaw dropping open but still wasn't giving up the dance. He slid his arm around me as he moved his leg between mine. Then he pressed his hand against my lower back so I moved closer.

A bit too close.

He ran his nose over my cheek. "You look beautiful tonight, baby doll."

"Don't call me that," I whispered. "We're not together. We won't be together."

"I know you feel that way, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop trying."

"You don't want me. You want my power."

He stepped into me more, his hand making me stay where he wanted so my thigh and hip felt every inch of him. "My dick is not hard for your power, Tamsin. It's hard for you." His

breath was warm on my ear as he rubbed his face in my hair. “I’m always so fucking hard around you. It drives me insane. How did the baby I resented become the woman I crave constantly?”

“I don’t—this is—”

“It’s just a dance,” he promised, getting where my mind was before I could even form the words. “I checked with Darby first.”

“You didn’t check with me.”

“Then push me away,” he chuckled darkly. “We both know you’re stronger than me. Physically and magically.”

My heart thudded in my ears and my throat was suddenly ridiculously dry as I swallowed loudly.

“You want me too.”

“My body does,” I corrected, mentally wincing that I’d even admitted that.

“I’ll take that. It’s a good start. Hell, relationships have started from a lot less.”

“Can you just not tonight?”

He nodded, smirking at me as he spun us and got into the dancing more. He was good, like *good*, and it made my body heat up a lot.

More than I would ever admit.

I noted his eyes were a bit glazed over and let go what he’d said. He was getting friendly when drinking. Nothing more, nothing less.

Sure it wasn't.

"I don't want your power, Tamsin," he murmured in my ear as we dipped low together, completely plastered against each other. "I don't want to be the boss anymore. You will save our world in a way I can't. I see that now."

"It's hard for me to believe such a quick change."

He snorted. "That's not been quick. It's been slowly happening, but I get it. You have too much always going on. I do too." He spun me under his arm several times until I actually got a bit light-headed and he pulled me back against him. "You feel so perfect against me. It's like yin and yang with us."

"Leave it alone tonight, Neldor."

"I can't. It kills me you still think I want power. I would never *use* you like that. I thought we were going to be an alliance mating and fine, I wanted to take over. That is *different* than having feelings for you and betraying you. I couldn't ever do that. I'm freaked out enough that I want you because—" He snapped his mouth so fast that he winced when he bit his tongue.

I stopped dancing, catching him when he went off balance. "Why? What is freaking you out about wanting me?"

He cleared his throat and moved away. "You said not tonight and you were right. Thank you for the dance."

I stood there shocked as he slipped through the crowd away from me. The Dark Prince was just always going to give me a migraine if I let him. I wanted a break though and took

the opportunity to go get some water, noting the line of frowning fairies. “What?”

“The boy just can’t get out of his own way sometimes,” one of the guys tight with Onas said, shaking his head. He shrugged when I kept staring at him. “A lot of us are rooting for him, Your Highness.”

“Not because of why you’re thinking,” Taeral cut in before I could snap at the fairy. “It’s not about him taking over. He’s been clear things have changed and for a while now.”

“A lot of his backers are pissed that he was soft and truly developed feelings for you,” Rafe added. “Neldor told them all to fuck off.”

“What am I missing then?”

Rafe shrugged. “You make him a better man, Tamsin. He truly cares for you.”

“Plus, it’s funny to watch him get knocked down a few pegs tripping over himself trying to be smooth with you,” Dalyor added. “It always annoyed me how damn smooth he was with people, and especially women ate him up.”

“You’re salty that healer wouldn’t even look at you because she was so into Neldor,” Rafe ribbed.

“No, I was salty he was such a damn flirt she was swooning, but he never had any intentions to be with her. I don’t like that shit.”

“Yeah, but when we shut people down or draw lines, we’re the assholes. It’s not easy and honestly, if I could figure it out better, I might be the same,” I defended. “Then again, I would just be a slut when he can be a smooth stud.”

“You’re right, it’s sexist, but I also understood it from Neldor’s side. That doesn’t mean I won’t enjoy him tripping all over himself trying to be with you who he has real feelings for.”

I didn’t agree that was what was really going on, so I left it alone and accepted a water from Taeral. I found myself glancing across the club and wondering if Neldor’s feelings could ever be real for me.

I didn’t think so nor would I ever be able to trust them.

How sad.

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I did end up dancing with Lucca too, so he wasn't left out.

Well, I more danced *on* him. The huge bear wasn't really cut out for dancing in a club. I was shocked when he could waltz but yeah, the dance floor wasn't his scene.

However, after a lot of shots, I was determined to get him out there. So I danced all around him and on him while he sort of... Bounced? Wiggled? He found the beat but yeah, he sort of just moved his shoulders. At one point I moved his arm out so I could spin and twirl under it, and I thought everyone was going to die laughing.

Izzy and I danced a few more times, and I was excited when I saw her dancing with a woman. She finally got the chance to ask a woman to dance and was accepted. That alone made the night amazing.

I'd danced out so much of the booze and drank a lot of water, so I only had a slight buzz when we arrived at my house.

"Put up a barrier, *agra*," Darby demanded the moment we were in our room.

I glanced over my shoulder at him in confusion but did what he wanted. “I always put a protective barrier over the house. So does Lageos.”

“You’re still a bit buzzed,” he chuckled as he molded his body to my back. He kissed my shoulder. “Put up a sound barrier. We’re going to need it.”

“Oh. *Oh*,” I gasped, hurrying to do that too.

“It’s my night, right? I get whatever I want?”

“All weekend. I said all weekend.”

“Damn right, you did.” He moved his hand from my stomach up to cup my breast and then possessively touched my neck. “Undress for me. All those feckin’ men wanted you tonight and drove me insane. Show me you’re mine, *agra*.”

I did one better. I pulled away and turned to face him as I touched my body. Smirking at him, I started singing for him as I danced as well. It was slow and seductive as I lost my skirt. Then I unwrapped my top but used my arms to cover my breasts while still swaying to the song.

“Show me the tits that are mine,” he demanded.

I shivered, loving when he got so possessive and pushy with me. He rarely did it and it was our fun in bed, so I loved it.

I lowered my arms and ran my hands up my neck and into my hair, flipping it one way and then another. “Whatever my mate wants.”

“Really? I want a lot tonight, some of what we haven’t done.”

“Whatever you want tonight, Darby,” I promised.

“Turn for me.” He moaned as I did. “Perfect. You are so fucking perfect, *agra*.”

“What else do you want?” I asked, excited and ready for what came next.

“Show me that pert ass. Take off those shorts while showing your ass to me.”

I nodded, turning around and slowly pulling them down as I bent at the waist. I stepped out of them that way and went to stand back up.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, swallowing loudly when I stayed there. “Shit, this is a lot of fun. I really should get into law school more often.”

“We can play this without something so big,” I offered. I gasped when he was suddenly behind me, running his fingers over my skin. “Tell me what to do, Darby. I’m your obedient mate tonight.”

“Shit, I’m going to explode if you keep saying stuff like that.” He moved his fingers over my pussy and then pushed two in. “Is this cunt hot and wet for me?”

“Yes.”

“Is it all mine?”

“Yes, I swear yes.”

“Don’t come until I say.”

I whimpered but nodded, still bent over so my hands were touching the ground with my ass pushed up for him. My legs

started shaking as he moved faster, brought me closer, and gave me everything I needed.

Until he stopped.

Huh?

I heard the disappointed groan come out of my mouth before I could stop it.

“Turn and kneel, *agra*,” he whispered, not being as forceful this time so I knew he was okay if I said no.

I did it. I had planned on giving him a blow job anyways. I spun around and dropped to my knees with the heels still on. “Do you want me to suck you?”

“Aye, suck me off and swallow it. Show me how much you want my cock in your cunt.”

Fuck, he was really turned on to talk such Irish dirty to me.

I kept his gaze as I undid his belt and jeans. I reached into his boxer briefs and pulled out his hard dick, not hesitating at all as I leaned in and licked him.

“That’s it, lick it like your favorite lolly before sucking me good.”

I shivered, his accent thicker as his dick grew in my hand. The desire in his eyes practically drowned me, and I was still on edge since he hadn’t let me finish.

He cleared his throat when I ran my tongue around the head. “Can I touch your hair? I won’t push or shove you.” He waited until I nodded, smiling at me. “Thanks for trusting me.”

I winked at him, not sure what else to do before focusing back on my task. I took as much of him in my mouth as I could and remembered to breathe through my nose. I was so focused on my form and trying to get it right without scraping him with my teeth I hadn't realized how ready he'd been until his body went stiff.

He groaned my name as his hand tightened on my hair, but he didn't move me at all. I basically pulled my own hair when I took more of him deeper, and it kind of turned me on.

I swallowed what he gave me and then sat back on my feet when his dick got sensitive and he pulled away.

"Shit, that was fucking ridiculous," he panted as he raised his hands to his neck and laced his fingers behind his head. "I really saw fucking stars you made me come so hard. That's—fuck."

I cleared my throat. "Glad you liked it."

His gaze immediately met mine. "What's wrong? Did I do something? Did I thrust? I didn't—"

"No, no, it's fine," I hurried to say.

He bent down and grabbed my arms, pulling me to my feet and studying my face. "Something happened. Your heart is racing in—"

"I think I want you to pull my hair," I blurted, hating I was ruining the fun.

He blinked at me for several moments and then I practically saw his mind explode. Thick heat filled his eyes as they also glazed over. "Lay on the bed, *agra*. Spread those toned legs and lay on the bed. On your back."

I nodded, stepping away from him as he quickly got undressed. He was on me the moment I lay on the bed.

And grabbed my hair. He pulled me to sit back up by my hair.

“Fuck, you do love that,” he groaned. “Ya nipples are hard and ya cheeks flushed. Is your cunt dripping?”

“Yes, but from before. I don’t know it’s my hair,” I admitted. “I just thought...”

“Tell me,” he demanded.

I didn’t. I got embarrassed, so I showed him instead.

“Fuck, yeah, we’re doing that. On your hands and knees.”

I swallowed loudly. “Really?”

“Now,” he bit out looking like he was about to lose his mind.

The second he let go of my hair, I rolled over on the bed and moved how he wanted me. I moaned as his fingers found my pussy again. Then he grabbed my hair and pulled me up on my knees as he kept finger fucking me. I whimpered when his fangs ran over my neck.

“I’m gonna fuck ya cunt all night, *agra*,” he hissed in my ear. “I’m gonna fuck ya with ya toys too. Ya gonna soak the bedding and it only stops when you pass out.” He licked the shell of my ear. “Use that rune.”

“Which one?”

“The one I know ya want to try.”

I whimpered and nodded after I put it on. I had been *mortified* when he'd seen that I'd flagged the rune that allowed my partner to control my orgasms. Darby only had to tell me to climax and my magic and body would listen. It had shocked me because I wasn't a passive or submissive woman, but there was something about Darby that just... I trusted him enough to play like this.

"I love you," I whispered as my body felt like I was going to orgasm. "Thank you."

"Oh, this is a gift for me, *agra*," he chuckled as his fingers moved faster.

"Thank you for loving me so much I could feel this comfortable with you," I clarified.

"Thank you for loving me so much you'll let me explore what I want as well." He kissed my neck before running his fangs over my skin again. "I can't make you hold out when you're being so perfect. Climax."

I did. Fuck, did I ever. I tightened around his fingers and ground my hips against his hand as best as I could.

When my orgasm was over, I figured he would have taken me next, but he grabbed a toy out of my nightstand and told me to lie on my back. He spread me wide and fucked me with the toy until I about lost my mind with the orgasms he kept ordering me to have.

"Lick me again, *agra*," he said as he finally shut off the toy. He chuckled when I gave him a shocked look. "No, I'm not asking for another blow job. I just want you to give me a lick and make me leak for you."

Okay, I could do that. I even went further and took him fully in my mouth.

And then he used another toy on me.

Then he had me give his dick kisses before sucking on his balls.

Another toy and more TLC for his dick with my mouth.

Yeah, I liked this game. Whatever it was, we should totally play it again.

I was a complete mess and exhausted by the time we ran out of toys. One look at Darby and it was clear he wasn't remotely done with me.

"Where did that prince touch you, *agra*?" he demanded as he moved over me, groping my breasts as he leaned down closer. "Where?"

I swallowed loudly. "It wasn't like—"

"*Where?*" he growled in anger but not at me. The situation maybe?

The jealousy and worry were thick in his eyes. He fully believed he would be pushed aside too often if I ever had a relationship with Neldor, my *real* fairy mate and all of that crap I didn't believe in.

"My hips. Lower back. Arms. Face."

"Where did he *kiss* my *agra*?"

I swallowed even louder the second time. "My ears and neck. My cheeks."

He attacked my right ear. "Here?"

“Yes, yes, there,” I moaned as he nipped the lobe.

“Did he touch these tits that are mine?”

“No.”

“Were they pressed up against his chest?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to punish you for that.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded so fast my head was about to pop off. Fuck, yes, Darby could do whatever he wanted to me. I was so into all of this I didn’t care what he did. I trusted him more than enough to not worry.

He turned me on my side and pushed my knee up, thrusting in me harder than he normally did to start. There’d been *more* than enough prep with all the toys and fun but yeah, it was rougher than Darby normally was, and I loved it.

I gasped when he pulled my hair and growled I was his and only his. The next several minutes he fucked my brains out while saying the most jealous and possessive *everything* that I would never have thought he would. I was agreeing to all his demands and begging for more while desperate to climax.

He finished but didn’t let me. I couldn’t even hide my shock which made him smirk at me as he gasped for air.

And then he moved me to my other side and did it all over again.

Still without letting me finish.

We'd gone for hours and hours by then, and I could feel how tired Darby was. I had a moment to wonder if he was really going to leave me hanging in the end even after all of the attention I got.

He flipped me onto my back and spread my legs wide, smiling down evilly at me. He pinched my clit harder than I would have thought after all our sex, almost to the point it hurt. "Climax."

Instantly I did. My body arched off the bed as I screamed my head off in pleasure. I couldn't tell if I was coming or going nor feel most of my body. Darby got what he wanted, and I ended up passing out while in the middle of my orgasm it had been so good.

Wow.

Just *wow*.

The next morning I woke a bit sore and used a healing rune before climbing on my sleeping mate and taking him inside of me. He woke with a groan, his eyes flying open and full of shock as I started riding him.

"Payback can be a bitch and so am I."

"Show me, *agra*," he panted, growling when I smacked his hands away when he tried to touch me. He moved his hands behind his head and resigned himself to simply enjoying the fun.

We went twice with me on top. I didn't even slow down after his first climax. It was so fucking good that I collapsed on him and couldn't feel my body when it was over.

“That was the best revenge I’ve ever had,” he purred, hugging me tightly when I burst out laughing. “Let’s shower. We have the meeting with the co-op.”

“Shit, I forgot.”

We raced to shower and get dressed, out the door ten minutes before the meeting, which was fine with portals, but I didn’t like cutting it so close. I hated keeping people waiting. I opened a portal for us to arrive right in the party room of the main location for HAVEN.

I was still too tired and everything in me spinning—especially since I was starving—so my mouth worked faster than my brain when I saw Neldor. “We should go dancing again soon. I mean, you can crash when we go.”

He did a double take. “You’re not angry.” He couldn’t hide his shock when I shook my head. “I’m glad you had fun too. I did. Yes—I mean, sure, I’ll crash when you go dancing and—”

Darby’s loud laugh cut through what he was saying. It echoed in the large room, and the conversations all around us died off as they focused on what was going on with us.

When I realized what he’d pieced together and found so amusing, my face flushed lava hot.

“So you want a repeat of last night, *agra?*” Darby murmured as he hugged me from behind. “Yeah, I bet you want to dance with him again.”

I wanted to melt into the floor. Seriously, just disappear right then in front of all the eyes.

Neldor frowned as he glanced between us. After a few moments I practically saw the light bulb go off over his head. “Glad I could help your sex life. Truly, I’m glad that’s what I’m here for.”

“Well, it’s one way for you to get into her bed even if it’s just your name being brought up,” Dalyor taunted Neldor. He was beaming when the prince gave him a look of death.

“How good?” Stefanie teased me.

“She had a sound barrier up for hours after we got home. I went to get some water from the kitchen and I felt it still up,” Izzy said brightly.

“You’re getting much better at sensing what type of barriers are being used around you,” I praised, trying to change the topic.

Except I’d just confirmed she was right about the barrier.

Fuck.

“Yes, yes, Darby is a good mate and treats the princess well,” Liluth said as she joined us with a bunch of the hobgoblins from the co-op. “We have a tight deadline.”

“You’re my favorite today, Liluth,” I called over, dragging Darby with me to take a seat so we could get started.

Stefanie gave chase and sat next to me. “How good?”

“Un-fucking-real,” I said under my breath.

“Well done, Darby,” she praised, setting everyone off all over again.

After that we got down to business, and there was a lot of it to handle with the spring line coming out.

But yeah, well done, Darby.

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The next couple of weeks were without drama and really nice. School was great and I was learning a ton. I loved the material and was excited to listen to the lectures. It was what I'd thought college would be.

More and more fairies were being woken up and on board with the agenda, so a ton was getting done. Like ridiculous progress and way more than I could ever have hoped. Fairies were capable of *amazing* things when they got out of their own way and focused on the real problems.

For instance, that whole shit area of Theripolis was completely overhauled. There were now a few dozen nice shops and three buildings that were low-income dwellings. That's how fairies referred to multilevel homes that multiple fairies lived in, but really with the redesigns and upgrades to be more like what humans had, they were nice apartments. Basic, but nice.

And while the buildings didn't look so big, they really were because of the cute facades. It reminded me of walking around Italy and all the houses and buildings were all attached in town. That's what the outside seemed like with different

personalities, but really it was a lot of apartments. The biggest building had five hundred one-bedroom apartments.

That was amazing. It was *amazing* for a family who had been living in hovels and shit.

The first ones had moved in a few weeks ago and now that they had water, electricity, and working bathrooms. Their lives were completely changed. No more walking down the street to fucking pee or using all of their magic to simply *survive*.

When people started to truly see the progress, anything negative the nobles tried to say about me was met with fierce upset. The average fairy was shutting them down.

And hard.

Now that some had real hope for a better future, the goodness of fairies that people had talked about was shining through. I got reports all of the time that people were using their magic on the groves or farms after their own jobs were done for the day to help get the food production up. People were getting extra food from that and then putting more energy into Faerie so the planet could heal.

And it needed a lot of healing. The darkness was all gone, but that didn't mean our world was just all better. We had issues all over the place with too many animals having died and even a list that people were worrying went extinct. So it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine, but people were stepping up as they should have.

Ten cities were now completely open and being worked on for a better future. Faerie Guardians were constantly helping with construction crews after their shifts, mostly using

the time as their training and exercise. It put most of the projects way ahead and soon the holdup would be the funds, not the rest.

So that was a lot of pressure on me. We were eating through the budget for the whole year with my pushing for more and more to be fixed up. I'd done about half of Theripolis with my own money since it was my family lands... Except I'd taken over a lot of other territories. That meant I needed to do the same because the realm couldn't afford to handle it all.

Not at the rate I was pushing to upgrade and revamp all of Faerie.

It put me in a tight place and made me have to push up plans much faster than I had expected.

And me staying up at night writing lists of other ideas and ways to make my vision of a better Faerie work.

But that was just part of me being the boss. My life was really going well, and I was appreciating it every second of every day. I had much better control over my dreams, and only *once* in the past couple of weeks did I need Julian to help me. He was always there ready to catch me but yeah, it was amazing progress.

And so were things between us. I didn't forgive him—I didn't know if I ever could—but we were working together well and it was... Easy. No, not easy. Comfortable? I didn't feel the need to hurry from him or feel pressure from him. I was pretty sure he was taking a page from Lucca's playbook and realizing that being my friend was about the best he could ever hope for.

Realistically.

Hudson and I were still iffy and kind of in a holding pattern until he got more settled. But at least he was *talking* to me about what was going on. He'd done a real number to himself and especially his bond with River.

River was doing better now that I was spending time with him and I'd told him all about how Juan had been a jerk to me and it wasn't Hudson's fault.

In response, the damn dragon had gone after Juan and lit the asshole on fire in the middle of the quad. I had panicked until I saw everyone else laughing.

"Dragons don't catch fire," Lucca had explained to me. "River is being a shit, not trying to hurt him."

I still didn't understand until the fire died down and Juan was standing there completely naked. His clothes had turned to ash, everything he'd had on him, but he was fine. Not even his hair smoking.

"That's fucking cool. If my house is ever on fire, I'm not worrying about Hudson then."

Lucca had found that hysterical and had laughed even harder when River had come over to me and practically flopped onto his back to show me his stomach like a dog asking for forgiveness.

Yeah, I laughed then too. It was so damn goofy that I couldn't resist giving love to the pushy dragon.

So yeah, things were going really well, and I was excited for the warmer weather. The winter had been rough and as much as I loved snow, there had been too much freezing rain,

sleet, and ice. My mood was bright with spring on the horizon and how great things were going.

Which meant something had to fuck it up.

Of course and big time.

I was walking to lunch with Lucca when I saw Neldor in front of us with several women trying to flirt and get his attention. He had on his super fake prince smile to be nice, but I could see how dull his eyes were.

Seriously, I need to get him to teach me how to do that. I can't ever hide what I'm feeling and be so diplomatic.

Horror filled me as a scream tore from his lips that I felt all the way down to my soul. His bag fell off his shoulder, and he reached for his back as if something was wrong there.

It's his wings.

I knew it instantly. I'd never forget the pain I'd felt when they'd come in, worrying I'd been shot in the back it hurt so much.

I was there before I even blinked. "Back up!"

Throwing up a barrier when people didn't listen, I forced them to move as I widened it. I opened portals to all my fae dog packs as I opened more to all the commanders and healers. The dogs came through immediately and I focused on them.

"Secure the school. Get people away and burn any who try to come onto campus."

Chief barked that he understood and then took charge of my other packs, giving orders to the Alphas sworn to me. That

wasn't normally how fae dogs worked, but after explaining to the other packs that I needed Chief to be my right hand, they agreed to listen to him giving orders for me to save time in an emergency.

But they were the Alpha of their own packs and he'd better not step on that line.

Fair enough.

Neldor let out another scream and started to fall. I darted over and slid with one leg folded under me just in time to catch him.

"I got you," I whispered, mentally wincing when he gripped my hand like a vice. "I got you, Neldor. Your wings will be beautiful."

The fear lessened in his eyes. Most might think he was stupid for not figuring it out when he grew up knowing about wings, his wings *late* even, but no one could think clearly through that kind of pain.

I certainly hadn't been able to.

I pushed my magic into the school's barrier and strengthened the wards, my vision wavering when I did. His screams focused me back on him, but I felt like I couldn't sit up much longer.

"Your Highness, please let him go," Onas bellowed, snapping me out of my haze. "We have him."

"Why is Tamsin *gushing* magic?" Lageos demanded.

"She opened over fifty portals at the same time to all of us, you, and her dogs," Shael answered.

“But she’s still using so much magic,” he argued.

“The wards,” I groaned.

“Tamsin, he’s in no danger,” Lageos whispered as he moved behind me to help. “He’ll be fine.”

“This is when I would attack,” I mumbled.

“You’re right and I’ll handle the wards. I promise. Stop and rest.” He shook me when I argued. “Tamsin, you did too much too fast. You’re not even being effective.”

Well, fuck. I shut down my magic and leaned heavily on him, my ears ringing with Neldor’s next screams. I realized he wasn’t on my lap then and tried to reach for him.

“He’s fine, Your Highness,” Onas promised. “You can’t touch him. The healers know how to move him safely once his wings come in.”

“Block people,” I ordered.

“Already done,” Iolas promised. “I covered your protection barrier with an opaque one.”

“Father!” Neldor bellowed. “Where’s my father? Why isn’t he here?”

I glanced over just in time to see him pass out, tears filling my eyes that he couldn’t have his dad around when he needed him. “At least it’s over.”

“It’s just starting, Your Highness,” Iolas argued.

I blinked at him and then flinched. “Right, you guys said I kept screaming. I only remember this part and feeling like I was going to die. Then it was blank.”

“That’s normal, but this is far from over,” Onas said, his face grim.

“We can move him,” one of his mother’s healers that I recognized said. “Fast. Where?”

“He hasn’t told us,” Onas sighed. “He wouldn’t talk about it.”

Yeah, but he’d already given us the answer. “Did his father sleep in a separate room from his mother?”

“Yes, that’s standard for the queens because...” Onas cleared his throat and looked away.

I ignored it and focused on the healer. “His father’s room in his family’s castle.” I held up my hand to the objections. “He can’t have them, but he can have the comfort and familiarity of that room when he needs it most.”

“I agree with her,” Commander Talila said when others seemed to waiver.

“So do I,” Taeral declared firmly. “Yes, that’s the answer. Move.”

“Iolas, take her, and I’ll get us safely to the portal,” Lageos said as he stood with me in his arms.

“Dad, I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Iolas sighed as he took me. “You panicked and opened *all* of your magic, Princess. Yes, you did a lot, but you’ve done more easily before. Your fear tied in with your magic and you let way too much out.”

I simply nodded, not able to feel what they could. It was probably the same as when we’d had to seek sanctuary at the

Vogel's castle and I'd overreacted.

Hey, I wasn't perfect, and this was still all too new to me and freaked me out.

"The portal here is downstairs and the path narrow. We need an easier portal," the healer told Lageos

Except I was the only one who could open a portal in my barrier. I took it down when Lageos said Iolas's was strong enough and he opened a huge portal. It was the size of a few garage doors so we could all go through at once and easily. I watched as the healers used minimal magic to move Neldor.

"The gloves?" I asked Iolas.

"You catch everything," he praised as we moved towards the portal as well.

"Wait, Tamsin, call your dogs," Lageos said.

"Once everyone is through and Iolas can take down the barrier," I said after a moment. "Just protect the portal until we're through." I looked at Iolas for the answer as people moved fast.

"They're filters. It's like layer upon layer of water purifiers so it's completely clean before you have it. Same with the magic. It's the only way any magic can be used on someone in such a delicate state. We did the same when you had your wings."

Right, people had said no one could touch me, and I hadn't been able to get myself home. I'd never asked about how it had all gone down. Then again, I'd been so out of it, and the mess that had come after would have distracted anyone from thinking on something so small.

The moment everyone else was through, Iolas took down the barrier, and I whistled for the dogs. They all came flying towards me, flames off, but still scaring the crap out of people who had gathered to try and see whatever they could.

“Chief, decide how many we need to protect Neldor’s family castle. I want it locked down, but I know we have priorities here too.”

He gave several yips before they all piled through the portal.

I caught a few people moving towards the portal like they were going to sneak through.

Not on my watch.

“You come through this portal or try and follow, and I will teleport you to the bottom of the ocean so the pressure crushes your body instantly,” I threatened.

Needless to say, they backed off and gave me a terrified look.

So they had a brain at least.

We went through an outside portal to Faerie and then another to Neldor’s castle. I must have dozed for a bit, but Neldor’s screams had me shooting up from the couch I’d been on.

It took me a moment to catch up, and then I was on my feet moving closer to him.

“Your Highness, no one can touch him,” one of the healers reminded me.

I looked at Iolas. “Wait, Neldor carried me. I remember saying that. How—no, wait, it was Julian.”

“He is your mate. That’s different. He could touch you when it was safe. Even if you were Neldor’s mate, you couldn’t touch him until later now that the process has truly started. No one can touch him until his wings—”

Neldor let out a scream that was even more horrid than the last, and I gasped as the left side of his back completely split open.

“Do something!” I bellowed at the healers.

“This is the process, Princess,” he told me, nodding when I couldn’t hide my shock.

Holy fuck. This was seriously *normal* for fairies?

I spent the several hours horrified and nauseous as I watched something more painful than anyone should have had to endure. I kept wanting to make some sort of *Alien* reference with the thing breaking out of the guy’s chest, but even I knew that would be crass.

It was definitely that gory, and Neldor did cough up blood several times. It also leaked from his ears at one point, pushing me to panic again. The healers were monitoring his health and kept promising he was fine.

This wasn’t fucking *fine*. Nothing about this was fine. It was like the world’s most violent childbirth where all I kept thinking was how did that come out of there? I broke down crying for him when the other side of his back sliced open. He woke for that and screamed in pain until he passed out again.

Each wave of his growing magic was building one wing, or the other would grow and form more. It was *horrible* and I felt gutted the whole time. I saw the others did too, and even if they were handling it better, I caught Onas and Taeral with tears in their eyes several times throughout it all.

Lageos begged me to eat, but there was no way I could stomach anything with this going on. They pushed me to leave, but I wouldn't. I wouldn't leave Neldor to suffer this alone.

He hadn't left me. Everyone had told me that from the moment Julian had brought me home that he, Neldor, and Darby never left my side. I wasn't sure when Hudson had joined them but yeah, they all had gone through what I was right then.

Lucca too? Had he been there?

I shook my head, the memories getting all mashed together in my upset. What I'd gone through didn't matter. They had endured this, and I'd never understand how horrible it had been. I felt horrible that I'd never thanked them or apologized for putting them through this gut-wrenching experience.

It felt like days and days of agony for Neldor and us watching it before finally his wings seemed to be full-size. When he passed out that time, several of the healers each checked him and talked about his vitals. I saw some sort of glimmer and realized it was the length of his second wing to come in.

"It's over, Your Highness," the woman told me. "His wings are the right length to his size and magic. The worst is

over, and there's nothing to fear now."

"We told you that no royal has ever died from their wings coming in," Onas reminded me.

"Yeah, logic and history help when he's been screaming for this long," I snapped, focusing back on the healers. "So he's safe to touch now?"

"Only his parents or mate could touch him right now and for a while," she clarified.

"Tamsin, don't," Lageos said, but I was already moving.

The room was full of gasps as I climbed on the bed and knelt next to Neldor. "You did good. You did really good."

I leaned down and kissed his hair, deciding tight braids wouldn't feel great after what he'd been through. I remembered how badly my head had hurt and felt like it was splitting.

"I'm proud of you," I whispered as I took them out. "You're such an asshole to worry me like that. Do you have any idea how scared I was? I didn't grow up with this. And you just go down like—you're lucky I'm so smart and figured it out."

I realized I couldn't hear anything other than my voice and glanced up to see people losing their shit and several shoving each other on the other side of the room. Looking around, I met Taeral's gaze and he nodded. He was blocking us from it all.

Good. Neldor didn't need this shit right then.

Well, neither did I, so it was better for them to get their freak outs over with and done before I handled that situation. I didn't care the commanders or royal healers knew when Neldor needed someone to help and I was the only option. I'd gut them if they told anyone, and I was pretty sure that was my dad was about to deck Onas from what I could see.

I ignored it, talking to Neldor as I stroked his hair. He moved in his sleep and went tense in pain. I moved him to lay his upper body on my lap, not sure that was better than the soft bed, but I knew it had helped me feel comforted when Hudson had done the same.

It was quiet when I looked up again. My legs were numb and I needed to pee, so I carefully slid out from under Neldor and off the bed. It took a minute for the tingling to go away and push to my feet. I sighed when I did, not even having a clue where the bathroom was, and everyone had stepped out.

Luckily people were in the hallway. I was about to ask when Onas cornered me, grabbing my arm before anyone could stop him and spinning me around to face him.

I thought the rune for fire before I even realized it was him, burning his hand so he let me go. I shrugged when he shot me a surprised look. "You don't have the right to touch me or anyone else, especially not in anger."

He ignored that and healed his hand. "You should have told me—us. We had a right to know."

"*You* had a right to know?" I snickered when he bared his teeth at my mocking tone. "The fuck you did, Onas. That's personal and no one's business."

“You are going to be queen and he’s our prince. You aren’t normal people, and you aren’t naïve to think that. We deserved to know the truth and what was really going on.”

What he was getting at hit me hard. “We haven’t been playing you or anyone. We’re not together.”

Anger filled his eyes. “You immediately hurried to comfort—”

“Onas, I would have done that for *you* if you were going through that much fucking pain and I could help. I’m a nice person with a heart. It wasn’t about us being—he has no family. They’re gone and he suffers because of how he lost them. I had Hudson and Julian to help me get through my wings. It was rough, but they helped. I can’t be with him, but I will help him when I can.”

“What do you *mean* you can’t be with him? How could you—so much would be better in the realm if you were with him.”

“Why? So you get your dream of him taking me over?” I drawled. I nodded when he flinched. “The amount of power battles people would push us into is enough of a reason to never be with him, and *you* aren’t stupid enough to think that is all that would happen. Light and dark nobles were *immediately* pushing for me to mate him.

“For him to take me over because they could control him better than the daughter of demigod. They oppressed and abused the queens before in ways none of you understood, but most of them figured it out fast they couldn’t do the same to me. But they could pressure Neldor, make him my weakness, even if we got together.

“Not to mention the fact I *hated* Neldor when we first met. It’s taken all these months just to feel like we could be *friends*, Onas. I hated him. I *loathed* him and wanted to push him back into the darkness more times than I can count. I feel guilty about that. Neldor wanted to bind my power. You think we have that level of trust to mate after any one of those things?”

“He would never hurt you like that,” Onas argued. “It’s not even possible.”

“Oh, several people thought they could make it work, a lot of the ancients even,” I said, chuckling darkly as I thought back to all that shit I’d endured. “But I do believe you that he won’t ever try to do it. I *do* think his fear of me becoming his mother or going off the rails will make him one of the last people I could be with and it be healthy for me.”

“You need a fairy mate to have heirs, and the gods gave you one, Your Highness,” he said in a gentler but still pushy tone.

“Then the gods can come down here and tell me that themselves. Until then, I’m taking it as a *suggestion*—which is how everyone should—and agreeing he should be in my life, simply not as my husband.” I spun on my heel and walked away, almost forgetting to ask where the bathroom was in my upset.

Fuck any of them upset or thought I owed them anything. If they wanted to try and blame someone for Neldor and I not getting together, they only had to look in the mirror for who was to blame.

Well, and Neldor too. Yeah, a lot of it was Neldor.

20

At some point I must have fallen asleep because I woke when an arm tightened around me. I was on my back and Neldor was half on me, his head resting on my breast as he held me tighter. I cleared my throat and went to move out from under him.

“Don’t leave me, Tamsin,” he whispered, his arm holding me closer as his leg moved over mine. “I have nothing without you. Please don’t leave me.”

I was going to ask him what the hell he was talking about, but a soft snore escaped his lips. I sighed and resigned myself to being his pillow for a while. Honestly, if it helped him even a bit, I was fine with it. I remembered the pain and upset after my wings came in, dealing with it all.

“How long have I been out?” a deep, groggy voice asked me.

I hadn’t even realized I’d woken back up and slowly opened my eyes. I flinched when I saw Neldor was lying on his stomach next to me and our heads were turned facing each other. His question hit me as I looked away and yawned. “I have no idea.”

“You outed we’re mates,” he whispered. “Why?”

“You know why,” I sighed.

He was quiet for several moments. “I would have done the same if there wasn’t Hudson and Julian to help you.”

I’d never thought about that, frowning as I pulled away from him.

“You didn’t need me and I still wasn’t...”

“You weren’t my favorite person, no,” I chuckled darkly as I sat up. “I get it. I’m not mad. And yes, the commanders and royal healers know. I’m sorry I made that decision for both of us.”

“Thank you for caring enough to help me,” he whispered.

“What do you remember?” I worried.

He pushed up and hissed in pain, slowly moving to sit at the edge of the bed so his wings would be safe. “I remember you talking to me. You kept giving me crap about worrying you and grossing you out. I remember that.” He frowned before meeting my gaze. “I remember you opening a ton of portals and I was scared that would hurt you.”

“I’m fine. Ready to eat the entire bakery and several fast-food restaurants. I bet you’re the same.”

“Yeah, fuck, I’m starving,” he whispered as if not having realized that until I mentioned it. He glanced around and did a double take. “I’m in Father’s room.”

I swallowed loudly. “You kept asking for him and your mother. This was all I could think to do.”

Tears filled his eyes and he stared at the bedding, bobbing his head after a minute. “Thanks. Yeah, this was—thanks.”

I didn’t even think about what I was doing, my body seeming to move on its own. Kneeling in front of him, I carefully hugged him, making sure my hands were below his wings because I remembered how sore that area was.

He held me weakly and cried out his pain. It took several minutes, but then I muttered he really needed to eat and we had to tell the healers.

“Thanks, my mate,” he breathed in my ear.

The door opened and we both jumped, not because we were doing anything wrong, but we were in our own little world.

“You seriously expect any of us will believe you haven’t been together behind our backs when we find you like this?” Onas said with a growl.

I sighed and moved away, shooting him an unfriendly look.

Neldor had a vastly different reaction, bursting out laughing so hard he almost fell off the bed. “Onas, I swear you understand women less than I do. Instead of seeing she’s a goddess to have helped me when we’re not together and she refuses to ever acknowledge we’re mates, you think we’re hiding we’re dating like kids. Fuck, that—you’re a *moron*.”

“I think that fairly accurate,” Taeral drawled. “How are you?”

“Fuck, I hurt,” Neldor admitted as he slowly got off the bed. He started to go down, but I dove off the bed and caught

him, wrapping his arm over my shoulders. “Wow, that’s—I knew it was bad and I—how did you take this like such a champ?”

I snorted. “I was a hot mess, sobbing several times that I had extra appendages and completely broken from that mind fuck.” I sighed when everyone in the room went tense. “I grew up thinking it was all a *myth*. Please stop making me feel like a freak for not adjusting my entire view on life faster.”

“That’s not why the tension shot up, Your Highness,” Stefanie clarified. “We hate you suffered so. I never know what to say, and I get upset I could make it worse.”

I nodded, thinking that was much better than what it had seemed to me. I glanced around and frowned. “Are we seriously back to dark and light fairy splits?”

Onas actually chuckled at that one which surprised me. “No, they’re out in the hall and some helping to prepare the feast. The light fairies agreed on their own that *they* were uncomfortable and felt like they were intruding on something we’d prepared to help Prince Neldor with. Especially going into the room of a man they’d never met.”

“That’s nice of them,” I accepted. “As long as no one’s making them feel kicked out or excluded.”

“I truly appreciate it,” Neldor admitted. “Yeah, I would have hated to have strangers to my Father in his room. He was very particular about this being his space.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, feeling his words like a punch to the gut. “I never—”

“Tams, that doesn’t include you,” he drawled. “Stop, just stop.”

“His father would have adored you,” Taeral said fondly. “Gods, he would have been your biggest cheerleader. You’ve been pushing so much of the change he wanted.” He cleared his throat and looked away. “Neldor’s mother as well, but things were more complicated there.”

Yeah, that was the understatement of the year. We left it at that which I thought was best.

We headed down to the huge feast that was prepared. I wasn’t shocked at the amount of food—feeding fairies was the hobgoblins’ default setting—but how many people had their wings out gave me pause.

“It’s a showing of support, a reminder to Prince Neldor we went through the same,” Taeral explained to me quietly.

I nodded but hurt filled me.

“I’m the reason they didn’t do it for you,” Neldor muttered. “It’s considered rude to bring your wings out in front of a royal that doesn’t have them. I was always around when you got yours. Sorry, I didn’t think about that and I took this from you.”

I forgave it, knowing everything had been so crazy and Neldor had helped out a lot with that at the time. But as I looked around the huge dining hall at the hundred-plus fairies with their wings out, I acknowledged to myself how nice it would have been to have that support. I had struggled so much, and seeing this was awesome.

It might have helped me.

Maybe it could still help me some now?

We ate and ate, and then Neldor had to go with the healers and wanted to get cleaned up. It was two days since he'd collapsed on campus, and after all of that he had to feel nasty.

Yeah, I remembered how gross I'd been.

"In case Tamsin hasn't made it clear, listen to my next words as if your life depends on them, because they do," Neldor addressed the group. "Some of you came into *private* information because she helped me. If you *ever* speak of it when she's not ready or willing to share it, you will face my wrath."

"We gave the order it was not to be discussed or shared," Stefanie assured him. "And the circumstances will be dire for any who dared to. We contained the situation."

"Good, I expected nothing less, but I'm adding in my own threats. She did it to help me, and I will protect her in this. Do not test me."

My mouth fell open. I wasn't sure there was any other reaction to have there. He was throwing down with his closest allies and dark fairies to keep we were mates quiet because it was what I wanted. Wow, the Dark Prince really might care for me.

That was locked in my head as I slipped away, needing a moment to myself. I walked around and distantly noted how pretty the castle was, everything meticulous and clean-looking... But cold. I took it all in as much as I could while lost in my own thoughts.

I ended up at a massive room with a dais in the center of it. There were a few ridiculous chairs off to the side that filled me in.

The throne room. This is almost like the one in my castle.

I shook my head. So much was identical between the realms down to the damn throne rooms in each queen's castles. It was so bizarre to me but completely accepted by both realms. Maybe me being an outsider was helpful, but it made my life way more difficult.

Then again, I wouldn't have wanted to just accept so much of the weird.

I saw large glass doors off to my right and snorted. Fine, they were different because my mother's throne room didn't have a balcony. Still, I wanted to see the view of Faerie from there. It wasn't simply because it would be peaceful, but I wanted to see the view Neldor's mother had been used to. Maybe that could help me and what else was on my mind.

The door stuck when I opened it which was why I didn't notice there were people out on the balcony... Not until they surrounded me with their swords out.

"I apologize, Your Highness," the guy closest to me said as he lowered his sword and bowed to me. "We didn't realize it was you."

I nodded, swallowing loudly as I tried to control my body's reaction to instantly being on high alert like that. The rest lowered their swords and the tension eased.

"I'm sorry, but you're not allowed out here," he continued, his voice tight.

Well, that was a first. I was so shocked that I had trouble getting my mouth to work. “Why not? I was given permission to be a guest here. Neldor’s—”

“I’m sorry, I thought you knew where you were,” he cut in, his tone gentler. “This is where his mother is frozen.”

“Oh,” I said so softly I barely heard it. “No, I didn’t know.” I swallowed loudly again. “And I’m not allowed here why?”

He cleared his throat nervously. “I couldn’t answer that with any real knowledge, Your Highness.”

That said it all. “Neldor’s afraid I’d hurt his already dead mother?” It sounded so ridiculous to my ears that I felt like I’d walked into an alternate universe.

“No, it wasn’t Prince Neldor,” another guy said. “The commanders agreed you not be in this area. I don’t believe they think you have any malice.”

I sighed, heavily. “They aren’t the boss of me. Please remind them of that when you see them.” I glanced between them. “Step inside for a bit.” I sighed when they all went tense. “You’re fairies. You know I can’t just not see her after all of this buildup and drama. You’d be just as curious.”

“I’m not stepping in the middle of this,” one in the back grumbled. “Please make sure I don’t lose my job is all I ask, Princess.”

“I promise I’ll thump the commanders and make it clear I beat you all up.” I smiled when a few chuckled and went inside the throne room. I waited until the rest did before I

glanced around and took in the picturesque view. It was astounding.

My gaze focused on the woman frozen in death then, and my heart thudded in my ears as I moved closer. She was *brehtaking*, more beautiful than people said—more beautiful than could be put into words. But that wasn't what struck me first. No, it was the deep, *deep* pain in her expression.

Also the contrast to my mother. Queen Meira was frozen focusing up as if trying to shield everyone from the magic unleashed to kill them. Neldor's mother was focused down, her hands splayed out at her sides. I knew her goal was the planet below her, but the position she was in reminded me of someone standing who was feeling shame.

Her head was down, pain all over her face, and even her shoulders were slumped. Did the crazy that had overtaken her clear in her last minutes and the shame of what she'd done swarm her? I think that would be the worst way for her to die, locked in that moment of not being able to take it back.

"He survived getting his wings," I said quietly, not sure what else to say or do as I stood in front of the woman who'd killed my mother but was also my *mate's* mom.

My life was too fucking crazy sometimes. Izzy might be right that I needed to drink more. Seriously.

"They came in late because he was frozen, but the healers say that's been happening a lot and there's no reason to worry," I continued as if she could actually hear me. I spent the next ten minutes updating her on his life and how things were going. I wasn't sure if I simply needed to talk about it all

or if I was trying to alleviate her guilt that her plan hadn't worked.

Some psychologist could make a lot of money trying to study my brain and the weird way it worked, that was for damn sure.

When I was done, the guards took back their positions, seeming confused and like they had questions for me. Too bad. I understood their need to guard her—as others guarded my mother—but I didn't even know their names, and I didn't answer to them.

Or anyone in the Faerie Guardians. Something I reminded the commanders in detail when I found them later. It turned out that they had wanted me to put a pin in that issue and drama and skip it for the moment if I had ever gone searching for her, nothing more. I could understand that, but they still weren't the bosses of me.

Twits.

21

I was back at school the next day. Neldor would be out for at least a week, but I couldn't take that time off and needed to keep up with my studies. We'd made announcements that he was fine and doing well, apologizing for it happening on campus even, so people could focus on other things.

Or so I thought.

Well, it was sort of different.

I was finishing up my run with Lucca, Dalyor, and a few of his friends I hadn't met yet he'd wanted to observe me and get some insight from. Apparently, one especially was thought to be one of the best trainers in both realms. The man didn't seem to like me from his quick greeting and grunts instead of words, but I was fine with not being liked.

There were lots of people I didn't like and still worked with.

But my mind had been on that and so much else, so I didn't see what was going on until others reacted.

Dalyor moved in front of me and threw up a barrier as his wings popped out so he had full use of his magic. The other three took up defensive positions, and the guy who had only

grunted sent a very large fireball that didn't burn anyone but set up a line of fire in warning.

“Shit, teach me how to do that,” I whispered in awe. I flinched when Lucca shifted next to me and let out a roar. “Good bear.” I tried to peek around Dalyor to see more, but his wings were blocking me. “What’s going on?”

“Press got on campus somehow,” he explained, lowering his wings some so I could see. “They came out of a portal and rushed towards us.”

“That’s not supposed to be allowed,” I muttered.

“No, but they keep the level low so most students can’t do it, but the teachers can sneak off without eyes if they want to,” Dalyor said under his breath.

Fair enough.

“Princess, are you really mates with Prince Neldor and will name him king soon?” someone yelled once people recovered from their shock at the fire and more.

Others shouted more questions as well, but that first one made me see red. I moved Dalyor aside and used my magic to silence the crowd of thirty. “*Queens* rule in Faerie. That’s the *law*. It’s not a hard concept. The highest office in our world is queen. There is *no position of king* recognized by our laws, Faerie itself, or our gods.

“We have repeatedly said this, so please stop acting like the dumbest person in the room who embarrasses their family and friends by saying nonsense. No matter who the fairy male is that I mate—since I have to *eventually* birth heirs—they will

never have the rank over prince. I will be queen ruler. I'm the big boss. Done. It's law. Get it?"

"Don't," Dalyor breathed when I cleared my throat.

"I have to. It killed me when Julian denied me, black magic or not," I said back quietly. "Yes, Neldor is my... Fated mate. To fairies it's more a suggestion from the gods and definitely not a given. We haven't even tested it the way fairies do but yes, we are."

"When will you mate?" someone called out from the back, clearly having come into the group later so they didn't get my silencing rune.

"I have no intention of getting into a relationship with Neldor beyond the friendship we have, and all of you are a big reason why," I answered honestly shocking them all. "Immediately you assumed he would be king and take me over. You think I want that in my life constantly? *No man* is worth that, and all the people who would try to use us as pawns for power.

"I won't have everything I'm killing myself to accomplish be undermined by the rampant *sexism* in this world, way worse than the human world. I am the boss. He was never going to be boss but because I *respect him*, we've made an agreement for him to be my vice president basically. He's made a royal vow he will never try to take my power.

"So maybe *you* should take a page from him and learn how things work and your actual place in life instead of spewing nonsense he's going to be king over me. That is *all* I will say on the topic because none of it is anyone's business

besides Neldor's and mine. Do not ask me again and follow the godsdamn rules before you piss me off."

I opened a portal under all of them and dropped them in the Vogels's lake since I knew no one would have random eyes to see them. I let out a slow breath and petted Lucca's head when he plopped down on his butt with a huff.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" Dalyor asked me.

"Warn Neldor, get the commanders on damage control or at least make a statement to beat these idiots and their reports, and get me whoever the fuck leaked such private information by lunch. Find them before I do because if I have to get directly involved to track them down, I will do what I should even if it makes a mess."

I headed for the cafeteria but not before I remembered the state Lucca was in and opened a portal under him to gently send him back to his room. I figured it was better than making him strut around campus naked.

"You okay?" Izzy asked me as she caught me in front of the cafeteria.

"No."

"Yeah, I didn't think so," she sighed.

I felt better when Darby hugged me and gave me a sweet kiss. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry this will hurt you, but I couldn't deny it."

"I would have been disappointed in you if you had lied about something so important," he whispered gently. "And I have an idea how to get out this upset and fix a few issues. So

please just hold it together today, and we'll get to work tonight for your training.”

“I love you.” Yeah, I needed some Friday night blow-off for sure with the turn this week was taking.

He went for coffee and I went for juice, making the rookie mistake of splitting up when there was some sort of new drama.

“She’s just selfish. *Five?* I mean, *five* men and they’re all top quality and the hottest matches anyone could want? It’s insane and she’s just a—”

“A *what?*” I seethed from behind the three women talking, focused on the middle woman’s phone. “What am I?”

They spun around, and I got annoyed with myself when I saw one was Andy, the shifter who was in love with Darby. The other two looked guilty and like they wanted to die, but she simply eyed me up and down.

“A slut. Call them your mates all you want, but you’re fucking five guys.”

“I’m not actually,” I chuckled. “I’ve never touched Neldor. I’m not with Lucca. Julian and I aren’t really either. Hudson and I haven’t been in months. This is about *Darby* and your obsession with him.”

“No, it’s valid upset that you’re taking some of the best mating options off the market and not even appreciating them,” a woman said from my right.

I turned to see her standing with four other women and all of them looking like they wanted to pound me. “You think I asked for this? Wanted it? Fuck, take Neldor off my hands.” I

snickered when they shot each other confused looks. “I would give just about *anything* for him to be mates with someone else. A few of the others too. Take them. Please.”

“You don’t mean that,” she muttered, not looking so sure.

I threw back my head and laughed. “The fuck I don’t. Fuck, if I could make someone else their mate, I would in a fucking heartbeat. I’m *exhausted* and tired of all the shit I get from people. I wanted normal with Darby, and while I can’t help loving a few of them, I never wanted this. Please, take a few—”

I let out a yelp when I was snagged around the waist and thrown over someone’s shoulder.

“The absolute last thing you need right now is a soundbite or recording of your being a sarcastic shit,” Dalyor grumbled. “Wipe their minds.”

I saw his friends out of the corner of my eyes doing Jedi mind tricks with all the shifters. I couldn’t even argue that I’d been an idiot. At least the juice dispensers and fruit area were off to the side and not visible from the main buffet or tables.

Still, I wasn’t about to have people see me being carried off by Dalyor.

“We’re cloaked,” he said, obviously getting where my head was. “You’re stressed out and still worried about Neldor. Even if you don’t admit it, you are. It’s been a lot and we saw that during your training. So just zip it with people today and put up barriers.”

“Fine, but I’m kicking your ass,” I grumbled.

“I’d expect nothing less and I deserve it, but I’m doing it as your friend, not your underling or a captain of the Faerie Guardians. You might not regret it later, but you don’t need the headaches it would cause.”

I might have grumbled a thanks, but I wasn’t sure.

He plopped me down at my table and walked off, the cloaking coming down then from the surprised reactions around me. Everyone who sat down with me had extra on their trays for me so I didn’t have to get up and go into the den of snakes. The fairies brought me more later which I appreciated it.

I made it through my morning classes, but there was another crowd gathered before lunch, but this time it was fairies. Several of the commanders and a lot of worried faces.

The moment I flipped on my telepathy I knew why. I didn’t hesitate, walking right up to the woman in front and backhanding her across the face as hard as I could. She fell to the ground and grabbed her cheek.

“People are watching, Your Highness,” Shael worried under their breath.

“Let them. Let them see exactly how unforgiving I am,” I said without even looking at her.

“Why?” Darby bellowed as he joined us. “Why would you ever do this to Tamsin? She kills herself for fairies and you betray her like this. Tell me why!”

I caught his arm when he stepped beyond where I stood and he got the idea, backing down and moving next to me in support.

“They offered so much money,” the woman choked out. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but—”

I chuckled darkly, shocking everyone there. I smirked at the woman as I squatted down so we were at the same eye level. “Don’t fucking lie to a telepath, the *heir of Faerie*, bitch. Stop the crocodile tears and tell the truth. I already know it.” I smiled when she flinched and the crying stopped. “Everyone always thinks they’re so much smarter than me.

“I don’t get how you all keep underestimating me. The ancients? Fine, they’re fucking ancient. The elder nobles, okay, yeah, I have more power, but they’re old. You? You’re no one but a *traitor*. How did you ever think you’d get away with this and survive my wrath?” I threw back my head and laughed before standing again so I was looking down at her.

In more ways than one.

“Neldor flirted with you, huh? Oh well, yeah, outing us as mates will really help you there. Idiot.”

She jumped to her feet faster than most were ready for, but someone froze her with magic before I even could. “The world deserves to see you for what you are. *You’re* nothing to deny our beloved prince. He deserves everything and to rule, a true royal and one of us. You’re practically human being raised by them. We all know your father is human, not a demigod.

“No one believes that nonsense. No one. And we all know the war was your mother’s fault, killing Neldor’s father. She ruined our queen as well and deserves the painful death she had a million times—”

My hand flew again before I even realized it. “Speak that way of my mother again who isn’t alive to address it and I will put you in the *ground*.”

“This is why you can’t ever be queen,” she bit out. “You’re a *thug*. You’re trash and all of Faerie feels it.”

Onas snorted. “No, they don’t. And we all knew of your infatuation with our prince. He was *polite* to you. I never once saw him flirt with any of the castle’s staff.” He shot me a look that he wasn’t kidding.

I appreciated the information, but even if Neldor had, it wasn’t for me to judge.

Okay, fine, I would have judged him if he was a playboy dick and led people on. But he was an adult, and he could have had as many lovers as he wanted. We weren’t together.

“You are hereby banished from Faerie,” I declared, smirking when her eyes went wide. “What did you think was going to happen?”

“Prince Neldor won’t let this stand,” she seethed, trying to spit at me, but the magic only let her move her mouth to talk.

“Are you so sure of that?” Neldor chuckled darkly.

I glanced around and saw Stefanie holding up her phone, Neldor visible from a video call.

“Prince Neldor, let me—” the woman started to say.

“Silence!” Neldor bellowed, shocking me he was so pissed. “Take my mate’s mercy because if it was up to me, I would behead you. You give an *oath of loyalty* to the royal family when you work for and are trusted by us. You broke it,

and that comes with a hefty sentence. I would double it because of the pain you have caused our future queen who saves us more every day.”

I wasn't the only one surprised from the looks and expressions people were trying to hide. I grabbed the phone from Stefanie and slapped on a smile. “It's fine, I've got this. You're not supposed to be getting riled up and *resting*. Why aren't you in Faerie?”

“Cluym wanted to baby me, and Geiger can't take the calls he needs to in Faerie,” he answered, some of that being the truth, but I could see from his eyes that wasn't all of it. “I apologize, but I took over one of your open vacation homes. Portal Chow can deliver here too, and one minute I want tacos and the next donuts. I'm not making the hobgoblins deal with my whims.”

“Yeah, I remember that and the not knowing which way is up,” I muttered. “It's fine. Make yourself at home and rest. I'll check on you later. Bye.” I hung up before he could respond and gave Stefanie her phone. “He's supposed to be *resting*. I got chewed out all over the place for not taking better care of myself. Don't bug him with shit. I can handle this stupid.”

The fairy I'd just banished was not happy that I'd gestured to her.

Stefanie nodded, but then smothered a chuckle. “Prince Neldor says to run and hide in this world because if he ever sees you again, he will hand you over to Lageos and let the demigod—who is a demigod and not a damn human—obliterate you. Cause no trouble ever again and he will let you live. Poke your head out or be known and he will chop it off.”

“I simply told the truth,” she yelled, the tears starting again. “The world deserved to know and—”

I smacked her again, loving the feeling but hating I couldn't keep doing it forever. “Your tears are fake. Keep pissing me off and I'll go with what Neldor wants, not just banishment.” I smiled evilly at her. “Actually, wipe her memory. She probably overheard a lot in her years of service. Take it all.”

“I was going to make sure you included it,” Onas muttered.

I smirked at the woman. “You should have accepted your punishment and left before I thought to add it.” I leaned in, my eyes clearly mocking her. “Anything else to say? Wanna try to play the victim more? I can add more punishments and have them stick because I'm not just like a human. I'm going to be queen of Faerie, you psycho.”

“We have also locked the minds of all the other staff of both castles and anyone who is regularly around behind the scenes,” Shael informed me.

“Good. Get this trash out of here before I keep smacking her all day. I have too much going on for that,” I ordered. The damage had already been done, but it was smart to try and prevent any other issues that we could.

On the rare occasion we could and were all on the same page about it.

I was more than ready for classes to be over, and Darby had talked to Dalyor about my training being something different. I didn't know exactly how that conversation had gone down and for all I knew I was really ditching, but I was so pissy and out of sorts that I didn't care.

When Darby gave me what he'd alluded to that morning, I couldn't get my mouth to work. I tried several times but then told him I needed to think about it.

Something I was fairly sure shocked him.

We went home—campus just too hot for me—and walked in on Lageos playing with Darby's little sister. He gave me a worried look, but I simply shrugged. The truth about Neldor and I was bound to come out at some point. I hated how it was done, but I'd braced for the day people found out.

Or so I told myself.

Darby had slowly warmed up to his baby sister. He was still hesitant, and honestly it wasn't even about her but how she'd come into our lives and what his dad had done. How she was his only family left. He didn't blame her. He didn't resent

her or anything. From what I'd overheard of his thoughts, he simply didn't want to let any of it leak onto her.

It made sense. She wouldn't remember any of this. If Darby needed to take things slow so he wasn't a jerk to her when she didn't deserve it—something he would never forgive himself for—it was a smart move.

I watched him take Freya from Lageos and offer to change her diaper. I stared out the back window and felt Lageos move up next to me.

“What troubles you, Daughter?”

“What was Mom's sense of morality? How clear were the lines to her?”

He blew out a long breath. “That's a tough question to try and answer when it's that vague. I don't know what to say.”

I thought that was his full answer when he went quiet and I went to turn away.

“She thought the cost should never outweigh the results. She very much cared about the path to get to the goal, like you do. I will say that her morality wasn't always compatible with the laws of humans and even some of fairies. She would never have punished a light fairy for being with a dark fairy, but she didn't have the backing to change it. That was what she could do.”

“Did she ever get dirt on her hands to help others?”

“Yes,” he immediately answered. “All the time. It's the nature of being a ruler.” He moved in front of me and caught my gaze. “What weighs on you, Tamsin? You know your own morality well.”

“That was before I had parents or people who might be disappointed in me. I’ve made decisions that the men I cared for judged and it wounded me. It’s made me stop before I do things that people might not like and worry about my actions more.”

“The men who love you accept you. They might not always understand right away, but that’s when you smack them around to behave and get it. And I will never judge you. If you worry about the lines, I’m never going to worry you will go over them, Tamsin. Never. You know what’s right and wrong. Even if it’s gray, the reason can be just.”

I nodded, thanking him for his help. It didn’t give me an official answer yet, but it was a big help.

“I need to think a bit,” I told Darby when he came back down with Freya. I smiled when worry filled his eyes. “Thank you for thinking of this and working on it, but I just need a bit.”

“Whatever you need, *agra*,” he agreed, leaning in and kissing my cheek. “I’ll hang here with Freya and your dad. What do you want for dinner?”

I heard his hint loud and clear—be back for dinner so he didn’t worry. That was fair with everything going on. “Irma said she was bringing some dishes right from Faerie. There are still too few animals, but a few were slaughtered to help Neldor’s recover, and they wanted me to try some native dishes I haven’t yet.”

“Good. Very good,” he agreed. “Be safe. There’s too much unrest with what people learned.”

Fair enough. I promised and then teleported away. I was about to unblock Luke or open a portal to him since I'd given over the coin to contact him, but I honestly didn't want to rely on him so often. But thinking of him made me think of the gray area I lived in that I could talk to someone ranking in the Underground.

It was the right move even if it was "wrong." He was a bad person and a criminal, but there had been good that came out of my dealing with him.

I thought Darby's idea was the same.

Cloaking myself, I visited the bakery and watched the hobgoblin kids playing in the back that was a makeshift daycare now. Then I went to the co-op and did the same. Their lives were so much better, but a lot of them were haunted with what they'd been through and seen.

I'd seen dozens that were stunted in growth and more because they were raised in cages and abused by their "masters." Not enough had been done about that.

Nowhere near enough.

I would. I would do more and get them what I could, but there was so much scrambling with what we had to handle that too much fell to the back burner. I hated that. I *hated* that. And the only way I could speed up the process and get more in place was with money.

So much in life came back to money. Now that fairies were on board with a lot of my ideas—either from the agreement they'd made or seeing how great the progress was—we were working faster than I could have ever hoped for. I

didn't want that slowing down yet. I wanted ramping up and riding the wave of success for as long as I could.

And not just in this.

But I needed a lot more money. I had some ideas and was about to launch one soon, but it wasn't enough. We needed more.

I ended up in Faerie, walking around and taking in the progress, thrilled to see another apartment building up that would house hundreds. Stores were converted and rebuilt in shitty areas that were now gleaming with hope and promise if I could get more done.

There was a building out of place in all the updating and construction, and I saw there were guards there. That meant a few different possibilities, but I was pretty sure I knew the reason, my feet moving on my own.

Sure enough, it had been a community center of sorts, and it was being guarded because it was full of children. During the last battles of the war, most of Faerie's children were grouped together and protected as best as the warriors and parents could. Both sides knew they were off-limits zones and for all the faults of fairies, risking innocents in war wasn't one of them.

We might kill each other and have thousands of years of history doing it, but never was a child hurt unless an accident or something collapsed. Never were women raped and cities burned just to be cruel like in human wars. Fairies never went over the lines of honor. They believed in their stupid wars, but at least they had clear lines.

Still, the children frozen in that community center had been scared. I felt it even if I didn't see it on their faces. There were so many of them, hundreds and hundreds.

And we couldn't unfreeze them yet. I knew it killed the parents who were awake, but we just didn't have the resources. We didn't have enough in place and that was my fault. I hadn't let people go back to the way things were. I hadn't let the nobles handle their areas and opened them.

It was the right move, I knew that and never doubted it, but these children were still frozen because of me. My decisions.

And by the gods, I would make sure it was worth it to them when they were old enough to understand. I would make sure those parents who suffered by not being with their kids would have better lives because of the choices I'd made.

I had to. It had to all be worth it in the end.

I visited Marisol next, glad when I found her alone... Except she was in a bubble bath. "I apologize, I'll come back."

"It's fine, *chica*," she chuckled. "As long as you ignore that I've had some drinks. What is on your mind?" She did a double take at whatever was on my face. "You talked to your Darby about his plan."

"Yes."

She sighed. Heavily. "*Chica*, I feel like that song when I see you sometimes. You forget you are a bad bitch and it's tragic."

"Things are different, Marisol. I'm *supposed* to be the ultimate role model, the pinnacle of honor, grace, and

everything good. Like my mother.”

“Bullshit. That is such bullshit that those evil men pushed to keep queens *quiet* and pretty faces,” she growled. “You will never make them all happy, so please hear me from a place of experience when I say *stop trying to.*”

“I hear you but my mother—”

“You are not your *madre*, and I don’t want to disrespect the dead, but your *madre* messed up as well. She was not perfect.”

I was quiet several moments. “I don’t understand.”

Her face softened as she patted the edge of the huge tub near her. She waited until I sat before taking my hand. “I do not judge your *madre*, I don’t. She tried her best which is much more than my own, but the woman was not perfect. She *allowed* those dirty to keep her down instead of fighting. You locked up those ancients. It wasn’t popular. She could have done the same.

“But she didn’t. That was a huge mistake. We all make mistakes but please see hers. She and your father made one too. The moment I learned of that evil magic, I immediately thought everyone would also be trapped on that world. The evil queen wanted Faerie destroyed. Of course, that meant the portals.” She sighed when I flinched. “I’m not judging her.”

“No, I get it. Hindsight is 20/20, and all their panic and upset made them blind to certain things.” I nodded when she did. “I worry that’s what I’m about to do though, Marisol. I’m so worried and overwhelmed all the time, I’m scared I’m doing things that will make everything worse later.”

“That is what makes you a good leader, *chica*. I worry about the same all of the time. You might not get it right. You will absolutely make mistakes in the future. I do as well.” She shrugged as if to say “so what?” She let go of my hand and sipped her drink. “I made one yesterday. It is why I’m in this condition and being harsh on you.”

“What happened?”

“A child died and it was my fault,” she rasped.

“How?” I whispered, reaching out and petting her wet hair.

“We were late for the supplies pickup for the compound. I should have pushed it until today, but I live and die by my stupid schedules. I ordered them to do it while too dark, not enough lights.” She let out a choked sound. “Children were sleeping up on the crates, nowhere else that was safe from bad eyes.”

“One of them fell off and died,” I surmised when she couldn’t seem to finish. “That’s not your fault, Marisol.”

“It is. It was my mistake, and I will carry the guilt of it.”

I sighed. “I can’t tell you not to feel guilt, but it wasn’t *solely* your fault. The government not taking better care of their people and *kids* share the blame. Those assholes’ kids have to hide from share the blame. So does that store or whatever that doesn’t have fucking lights in their damn loading area. That’s just bullshit.”

She tossed back the rest of her drink and stared off into space. “Yes, you are right, *chica*. Even the operator of the forklift is wrong as well. All of us. All of us had a hand in it.”

“Yeah, I would feel the same even if it was an accident.” I leaned in and kissed her hair, feeling horrible that I’d been selfish with her when she was upset. Then I had an idea, teleporting something to me.

“I will never get used to you being able to do that or just show up.”

“Yeah, me either, and I’m the one doing it,” I chuckled darkly. “Sleep with this tonight.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Am I a child who needs a blankie to feel better?”

“No, it’s magic, and something I’m planning to launch soon. Maybe even for humans if people can confirm that humans won’t be able to figure out it’s magic.”

“You are very innovative, *chica*, that is for damn sure.”

“Thanks for the talk, and I’m sorry I bothered you when you were upset.”

“Why? You made me feel better. I cannot feel completely okay right now, but I feel better.” She reached out and grabbed my wrist when I stood. “You are too burdened, so I will give you the rest of the answer that I was leading you to.” She waited until I nodded. “Do you think these people *only* illegally gamble? No, they do much more.”

“Maybe.”

She clucked her tongue at me. “They do. I know. You never focused on gambling when you had time to be a vigilante. I know that world well and it’s not only gambling. It’s money laundering for other bad deeds. It’s preying on people with *sickness*. Gambling is an addiction and they prey

on it. Prey on those with misfortune who would risk it all to win big.

“They have their hands in many pies and are evil. You will help the world in many ways. Your Darby would never have suggested it otherwise. Bad people do many bad things, never just one. You know this. You *know this* and how dirty travels.”

“Yeah, I do, but aren’t I just as dirty to steal from thieves?”

“No.” She said it so firmly that it surprised me, Marisol smiling at whatever was on my face. “No, you are stepping in on a system that fails to keep their people safe. Just as you did before. This time you are simply keeping the spoils.” She snorted. “No, you’re not. You will buy food for many and spend the money at places that need that income.”

“Thanks, Marisol.”

She gave a firm nod. “Now off with you. Go be my hero and maybe bring me back something pretty.”

“Did you take care of the other kids you found?” I asked gently, already knowing the answer.

“They are being looked after by our doctor and will start chores to help soon,” she mumbled, knowing most would think her weak for caring.

I wasn’t most people. “Yeah, that deserves something pretty.”

Her laughter filled the bathroom as I teleported away. Well, that was my good deed for the day at least.

I appeared back in my kitchen, Darby and Lageos looking stressed until they saw me. “Did Darby fill you in?”

“Yes, he confessed that he thought he pushed you too much to help,” Lageos said as he stood. “I understand your questions earlier, and I can absolutely answer now, Daughter.” He tapped the list on the table. “This might not have been your mother’s way to solve the problem, but it is a *good* idea she would never have dismissed. She would be proud and like Darby very much.”

Darby snorted which surprised me.

Lageos sighed. “Yes, Meira had a fear of vampires, but she did not know any besides the evil of your council, so that did not help. Her mother was attacked by feral vampires once as Neldor had been. The insane go for the most powerful blood.” He met Darby’s gaze with certainty in his eyes. “But you are a good soul who she would have seen past her fear. I know it.”

“I’ll take your word on it,” Darby sighed. “I just get the whispers all the time that Queen Meira thought vampires garbage and she would be disappointed in Tamsin for dating one, loving one especially.”

“Why have you not told me this?” I demanded.

He sighed again. “*Agra*, if I told you everything bad everyone ever said and not just about me, your head would explode. I can handle it. We all can just as you do.”

Fair enough. It was my turn to sigh and then I looked to my dad. “Wanna go have some fun and steal a lot of money from bad people to fund my projects?”

“Daughter, that sounds like the best Friday night we’ve ever had,” he teased with a wink.

It depended on what we found, but it had potential.

23

We spent dinner plotting and had a good deal of everything laid out. We were just about to start when my phone beeped in my pocket.

Unknown: They're going to move on the news. They assume security lax and overconfident. Best way to cripple who they're really after.

Fuck. Just *fuck*.

And I said as much.

“What?” Lageos demanded.

“Luke just messaged me the Underground is going to go after Neldor when he's vulnerable.” I shrugged and showed him the text. “They know he's my mate and it would hurt me. I'm a problem to them.”

“And a lot of magic they want as theirs,” Darby worried.

“Yeah, that too,” I sighed, realizing what I needed to do. I took a deep breath and made the call for the smartest plan.

“Hello?” a confused deep voice answered.

I couldn't even blame him. I hadn't reached out first in... A long time. "I need a favor. Can I stash Neldor there? I got a warning the Underground is going to go for him. He needs to eat tons and has cravings, so he'll be a fucking pain and not want to be in Faerie."

Hudson snorted. "Which you won't judge because you would feel the same and be the same pain."

"Unkind but not untrue," I admitted. "It's also the best place they won't think of because we're..."

"Getting better?" he asked hopefully, knowing full well what I meant.

"More comfortable?" I offered. "I want to beat your ass less."

"I will take that," he sighed. "I deserve worse." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry you guys got outed. For the record, not to whine, but so you're informed, my parents are taking serious heat. Like *serious* heat."

"They didn't know," I mumbled. "Did they?" I rubbed my forehead. I couldn't remember who knew what anymore, it was all so confusing. "I will make a statement they and others didn't know. That's not fair for them to get shit for. You'll probably still get shit then for not telling them."

He snorted. "Not from dragons. I'd be banished to hell if I spilled your secrets to my parents as your mate."

"Now why can't they get that sort of loyalty pass?" I grumbled. "So the family of the mate still has to put dragons first, but with you it's fine? You hear the hypocrisy there, right?"

“Don’t expect fair of the world, Tams,” he sighed, sounding as tired as I felt over it. “Yeah, Neldor can come here if one of the commanders babysits as well. We need that kind of backup just in case.”

“You’re going to take a commander off my hands as well? That’s not a concession but a damn perk,” I said happily. I smiled when he burst out laughing, loving the sound of that even if we were still rocky.

Very rocky.

We hung up and I teleported to Neldor, glad when I found him asleep and Commander Talila with him. That would work well. I told her about the threat, where to take him, and not to leave him for one second unless another commander would watch him.

She immediately agreed and jumped to it, even moving Neldor with magic so he could rest... And not argue with her. She could say it was about resting all she wanted, but we *both* knew it was because Neldor was a pain in the ass too.

Duh.

“You’re up to something,” Taeral accused me when I stepped into the hallway.

I smirked at him. “I normally am. You’re just figuring this out now?” I didn’t give him a chance to answer, teleporting back home so we could get going. I brought Darby and Lageos to the warehouse I’d recently purchased to branch out into my new business, glad when they didn’t ask me why I had a warehouse they didn’t know about.

Then again, I had a *lot* of things they didn't know about and too much to keep straight.

"Make sure to teleport back with everything so it doesn't land on me," Darby reminded us. "Like last time."

I winced, leaning over and giving him a kiss. "My bad."

"I put wards over this place," Lageos said after glancing around. "No one will feel the magic here nor see anything if humans barge in. Darby, you're cloaked as well besides from us."

"Good, thank you." He cupped my cheek. "Have fun and remember to bring some of the money counting machines or scales."

"I can't believe you wanted to be involved when you're going to law school," I muttered, floored beyond relief.

He simply shrugged. "I'll defend us both if we get in trouble. It's not like I'm trying to be a *cop, agra*. We live in the world of gray every damn day."

"Fair enough." I took charge of the list and brought us to the first place. Lageos froze everyone in the building as we'd planned and then I teleported us inside. He was going to use magic to knock everyone out and make it look like smoke bombs had done it... After I'd shown him what smoke bombs now looked like and how to fake them basically.

I focused my magic and looked at the printout Darby had given me. My mate was so damn detail-oriented that he'd even printed out what the denominations of the Brazilian currency, the real, looked like for me.

Lageos moved his hand over the page. “Don’t get this detailed when you’re so young. Just call paper to you. It might be a mess, but it could give you more than you wanted. Not everyone here has that currency only. You do that, and I will do any coins and metals. I have more experience.”

I blinked at him. “*Clearly*. What else have you been robbing?”

He smirked at me. “This is not my first casino heist, Daughter. Not even close.”

Okay then.

Wow. The demigod was a master thief.

Well, at least I was obviously his daughter.

I did as he said and brought it all back with me to the corner of the warehouse we were starting in. It came with as if still on tables and in pockets so it was off the ground until I released it. Then it was just a mess... And I’d accidentally stolen a lot of wallets and purses.

Well, *shit*.

Lageos came next with so many coins and frigging *gold* I couldn’t hide my shock. He shrugged when I told him about the extras. “Now you can find the homes of bad people. I’m sure there’s a lot of loot there too they do bad things with.”

“Wow, we’re going fully slippery slope here,” I chuckled nervously.

He shrugged. “Or do nothing with it.” He held up several empty cloth sacks. “I think I have a way to not dump it all on the floor.”

“Yeah, way better,” I admitted, feeling like an idiot.

Well, it was my first robbery of an illegal gambling hall, so I should get a pass then.

I went in the back to find seven huge safes. I had a moment to worry they had a body or two in there before dismissing it given how many people were around. Bringing them back to the warehouse to break into later, I left the rest in that room for Lageos to handle.

It took us about thirty minutes to handle the first on the list for Rio de Janeiro. That was way too long if we were going to handle as much as I wanted to given we had to worry about time zones as well.

I sighed and decided to be cheeky, burning the Batman symbol in the wood of the far wall.

“What is that?” Lageos asked as he moved next to me.

“A comic book guy. Not really a hero, but kind of. Rough vigilante I guess?”

“You really are my daughter,” he sighed, stepping aside.

I burst out laughing when I saw he’d done the same in the other wall except he’d signed “Love, Robin Hood.”

“As I said, I’ve done this before.”

“We’re not giving to the poor, and most of these people aren’t rich.” I snorted. “But at least we both picked fictional characters. Putting both should confuse them.”

He frowned at me. “Robin Hood wasn’t fictional. I very much liked him.”

I slowly blinked at him several times before shaking my head. “Okay, well, I want to hear about that, but we have to pick up the pace.”

“Agreed. You get the safes and hidden fun in back areas, I will handle the main room.”

Yeah, that was better since he was so experienced. Dear gods, my demigod father had that kind of experience.

And I’d been worried he and my mother would judge me for doing this?

Something hit me when we arrived at the next place. “I don’t like taking jewelry and stuff. What if it’s family heirlooms or something important? I mean, some are probably wedding rings we took. That feels dirty.”

Lageos mulled it over a moment and nodded. “That’s fair. Yes, and we can work on you tracing the owners of the ones we took with magic. It’s a very important skill you will need.”

Yeah, and it sounded cool. I liked learning cool things.

The next two places in Rio, I listened to him tell me the story of Robin Locke the real Robin Hood. *Not* Robin of Locksley or any of the names he had been called.

And the story was completely different than any of the movies, TV shows, or books.

He had been married and an earl when he was ordered to help in one of the Crusades. His *wife* was the real villain who had had an affair with the prince under the pretenses of wanting to be with him, but he had to send her husband off to war to be free. A few months after Robin was gone, they made up the story that he’d died.

However, there's no honor among assholes, and she went back on her promise to the prince. She wanted to become earl, but that wasn't the law. They had no male heir, so she couldn't inherit until the child was older. Instead, it was supposed to go to Robin's eldest nephew.

Surprise, surprise, Robin's sister, nephew, and entire family had an "accident" and died. So she became the only option to inherit the title as the grieving widow. Apparently, she was quite the black widow because when Robin came back alive, she was working on a marquess to marry. No doubt she planned on doing the same thing to that guy that she had to Robin.

"Okay, new plan, you write this all down in a screenplay and we make millions off of it," I said as we arrived at the warehouse. "That's so much better than the Robin Hood movies."

"That's just the background of the story. I found Robin a mess in a tavern mourning his family and the lie of a loving woman he'd believed in."

"What did you do?"

Lageos shrugged. "I told him to get his revenge and vengeance. That he owed that to his family at least. That was the estate of his ancestors, and they deserved better than some lying, murderous wench in charge. After sobering up, he agreed, and I helped him. We amassed a fortune stealing from corruption and evil.

"We used that money to buy soldiers and mercenaries. They ended up not being needed in the end because Robin's knights were quite loyal to him and hated his bitch wife. She

was put to death, and after Robin revealed to the king what his son had done, the king gifted Robin a title of marquess, so a step up and what his wife had wanted.”

“Yeah, much better story.” I flinched when I saw Darby racing towards us. “What’s wrong?”

“The commanders are trying to find you,” he said, holding out his phone to me. “Something is wrong with Neldor.”

I teleported to Neldor, not even bothering to swear or be upset. I appeared in the larger healer room of the Vogel’s castle. I recognized it because I’d spent time in it as a patient.

“The prince is fine,” Iolas said from behind me. I turned to find almost all of them gathered, and whatever was on my face when I realized they’d played me was dark enough that he flinched.

“For the record, I was asleep when they decided to use me as a ploy,” Neldor drawled from bed. “I woke just moments ago. I was laying into them about using me like that and when I’m able, they better be ready for the beating so bad they end up in this bed.”

“Well said,” I purred. “But you’re about as threatening as a bunny right now.”

“I’m scarier than a damn bunny,” he grumbled under his breath.

It was almost amusing enough to curb my anger.

Almost.

I used my magic and forced the commanders to drop to their knees, smirking as they all groaned. “If you *ever* use us

against each other like that, you will not only lose your position but be banned from Faerie.”

Neldor sighed when he saw their horrified expressions. “This is why she doesn’t trust us. Even *I* wouldn’t pull such underhanded bullshit. She is not a fucking child, you stupid fucking assholes.”

I wasn’t the only one who slowly looked to him.

“I fucking hurt,” he whined.

“Okay, bunny,” I teased.

“Bite me.”

“Do *not* pull this again,” I warned, staring them all down. “And this is part of why I didn’t want any of you to find out. You’ve known for *days*, and already you used the information for what you want. Yeah, I can’t imagine why I have such problems trusting you all.”

“We can’t help it when you bolt on us,” Onas defended.

“You have that backwards, Commander,” I chuckled darkly. “You were pulling this shit, so I ditched you. Don’t rewrite history.”

“You’re right,” Iolas cut in. “And you’re right it was over the line. I didn’t think of it like that. I got worried when your security said they lost you and said the first thing I thought of to get you here, which was there’s a threat on Neldor which means you too.”

He said it all so fast it took me a minute to catch up on. I got annoyed with his excuse though.

“If you had *said that*, I would have assured you I was fine.”

“But not told us what you were doing,” Taeral muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “You said you were up to something. That worries me.”

“I would have said that to you even if I was watching movies with Darby, so don’t act like I’m such a handful.” I felt better when at least he nodded. “And it was a miscommunication. I assumed Lageos or Darby said we were going out. They probably thought I did. You can say no one knows where I am or if I’m safe without being my bosses.

“You are not my board of fucking directors. You are my subordinates. You forget that too often, and I’ve seen it even with Neldor, so don’t act like it’s just me or the unprecedented times. I have a feeling a lot of you did it too often with the queens so *enough* with the bullshit. Use your fucking words and treat me like the boss or fuck off.”

I saw several wince, so I knew I’d hit the nail on the head pretty hard that they’d stepped over the line before.

“It always comes from a place of fear,” Onas muttered. “Even me. If we lose you, we lose everything. Yes, I went over the line with the former queen too, but it was always when I was afraid for her.”

“Fine, but I’ve been much better because you guys have been. Don’t use Neldor and I against each other ever again. Just fucking say no one knows where I am. I don’t want my detail freaking out or getting into trouble. I would have just said I was with my *demigod* father. Geez, you blow everything up into drama and then blame me. This wasn’t me.”

“Amen, Sister,” Neldor mumbled from the bed.

And then let out a soft snore. Okay, that was amusing. Several of the commanders even smiled or shook their heads.

“Fine, you’re with Lageos, but where are you both? What are you doing?” Onas pushed.

“It’s not your business.” I shrugged when they didn’t like that answer. “Again, you’re not my bosses.”

“No, but we are charged with keeping you safe, and how can we do that when we have no idea what you’re doing, Your Highness?” Shael pushed back.

I sighed. Heavily. “You’ll judge. You’ll be jerks about this. You already are, and I’m wasting valuable time explaining myself.”

“We won’t,” Iolas blurted, his eyes begging me to believe him. “Not one bad word. We promise. I can feel your amusement and that you’re a bit conflicted, Princess. That worries us.”

“Fine, not one word,” I caved. “You’re not telling people later or bringing it up to use against me. No bitching, no judgment—none of it. Get on board or fucking bail. I was having fun with my dad, and I don’t have enough time with him before he leaves me. I want to enjoy it!” I swallowed loudly when I saw their pitying looks.

Yeah, I felt bad for me too, but even though it would kill me when he died, I didn’t want to miss out on getting to know him as best as I could.

“We’ll be good, Your Highness,” Stefanie promised quietly. “And we can help.”

That I believed. They were ridiculously efficient and good at their jobs plus any other task they undertook. It was the only reason I didn't drop them all off a mountain constantly.

"Fine." I opened a portal back to the warehouse, sighing when Darby and Lageos couldn't hide their shock. I explained what'd happened and I thought Darby was going to explode.

Instead, Lageos used his magic to punch each of them in the face. "Do *not* scare my daughter like that again. Not ever. Be better subordinates and she won't feel like she has to exclude you."

"Can you give them one from me?" Darby muttered. "They used me and our relationship. That should never be allowed."

"Agreed," Lageos and I said together, smirking when my dad did it again.

"You've gotta teach me that," I chuckled darkly.

"Please don't," Onas groaned. "Fuck, I'm sorry, just don't do that again. It's harder to heal when a demigod does anything to us."

"Good!" Darby, Lageos, and I all said together, sharing a laugh now that we felt better.

"Okay, so what are you guys up to?" Taeral asked once they recovered.

To say they were shocked was an understatement. A few because Darby was the one to come up with this when he was always on the right side of things.

“Let’s go over the list then,” Onas said—without judgment—once he’d moved past his surprise. “You arrive, knock everyone out, take down the cameras—”

“Fuck,” Lageos growled.

“I did that,” I promised, nodding when he did a double take. “I took down their security totally and wiped everything.”

“I have studied technology diligently since I’ve come back,” Iolas muttered. “I think taking their hard drives and towers with us could give us more later.” He shrugged when I frowned. “These bad people have bank accounts we could drain as well.”

Darby threw back his head and burst out laughing. “And you were so, *so* worried people would oust you if they found out about this. They’re just as willing to steal from bad people to help Faerie.”

“I wouldn’t be the first time,” Onas drawled.

Okay then. I wasn’t even going to get into that.

We went over the rest of it, and everyone had their job for the next one.

Which took us less than five minutes to completely handle. *Completely*. They opened portals and carried everything with magic, setting it down in a much more organized way and just... Done and done.

Wow.

And all I had to do was find any hidden safes since my magic was so good at locating—and breaking—metal. Nice.

That got us back on track fast. I blinked and we had a page of the list done.

Three in Rio.

One in Sao Paulo.

Six in Montevideo.

Three in Buenos Aires.

Two in Caracas, Aruba, and Barbados each.

Eight in Bogotá, but they were smaller. Still, weird.

One big one in Lima.

Two in Santiago.

And that got us caught up to the timeline we'd been hoping for. Like *dayumn*. We took care of South America before the places on the East Coast we'd plotted really got busy. That meant it was better for us to get in and out cleanly.

Then it was NYC, Philadelphia, Jacksonville, Charlotte, Washington DC, Boston, Baltimore, Atlanta, Miami, Raleigh, Virginia Beach, Orlando, Newark, Jersey City, Norfolk, and many more. They all had at least two or three, NYC taking the prize of fifteen including the surrounding areas.

Yikes.

By then it was more than we could manage and make sense of. They *asked* me to stay with Captain Dalyor and a bunch of his friends they would swear to secrecy and manage the warehouse. Shael asked for food as well, and I was much better at knowing where to go when and getting the good stuff.

“Sure,” I immediately agreed, smirking when I got a range of looks. “See how easy it is when you use your words and just talk to me? No judgment, no bullshit, just lovely logic and the best plan for what we need.”

“I’m converted,” Commander Morgan chuckled, holding his hands up in surrender. “Especially because you always get the best fries. I never understood how they were so good when they’re just fried potatoes, but they’ve gotten better topped with everything good.”

It was amusing when several of them agreed, their love of fast food making them not such jerks.

They handled the other fairies for a break, and I went with Lageos to get gobs of food. We made sure it was all easy to eat while walking or thieving, so mostly big burritos and sandwiches. Onas actually had an endearing addiction to pop, so I made sure we got lots of that too.

“I just got a text from Neldor whining we’re ‘playing’ without him and he wants in on the fun,” Darby told me when we got back.

“I’m not sure what he could do besides sit here.”

He shrugged. “Then let him. You had a rough time when it was you, and he said he’s slept so much he’s not tired.”

Fair enough. We grabbed some chairs from the main address of HAVEN and some tables to help with the chaos. Then I grabbed Neldor and Commander Talila who was guarding him. She disapproved of most things, but she kept her mouth shut when she learned what was going on.

Neldor did *not*, loving the plan and how much we'd already collected. I thought he was going to die of laughter when he found out they were leaving Batman signs like I had.

"You are so damn adorable it drives me nuts sometimes," he said as he reached for a sandwich. "Really, life is boring without you, and I can't even imagine it anymore."

I wasn't the only one who blinked at him in shock.

He seemed to realize the change in mood and shrugged. "People know now. I don't have to curb what I say or worry if I praise or flirt with you."

"I'll still pound you if you go over the line and upset her," Lageos warned.

Neldor took the warning seriously. Lageos had cracked him enough times that he'd be an idiot not to take the warning seriously.

We got back to work, and every half an hour I'd go with Dalyor to grab some more food from somewhere... Mostly for Neldor. Again, I didn't judge or mock, remembering how hungry I'd constantly been after getting my wings in.

At some point I fell asleep because I woke leaning over one of the tables. I smothered a chuckle when Darby and Neldor were in the same uncomfortable positions. Rubbing my eyes, I looked around to see what I had missed.

"Young princesses should go back to bed," Rafe teased me quietly from the next table over.

"Fuck my back hurts," I grumbled, realizing I had a blanket over me. "Where?"

“Lageos grabbed some for all of you. I’m sure he’ll get you a pillow bed or fuck, teleport a sofa over.”

“Best idea ever,” I agreed, doing just that. I brought the huge sectional I had in my living room, scaring the shit out of Dalyor who had only been a few feet away. I apologized, and he moved Neldor while I did Darby.

Then I face-planted, promising I’d just be a bit.

Yeah right.

I woke when sunshine filled the warehouse and the smells of breakfast filled my nose.

“Thanks for the couch, *agra*,” Darby said as he squatted down by me and offered juice. “That would have been bad otherwise.”

I nodded and sat up with a yawn. “Yeah, my back didn’t like it.”

“I appreciate you too,” Neldor mumbled from a different part of the couch. “And I apologize for even thinking you were a baby about this. Everyone else made it look so easy around me, but now I get it was because they didn’t have them out much near me. This is fucking ridiculous and I’m tired of it.”

“Yeah, I was that grumpy too,” I chuckled. I thanked Darby and took the juice as I stood... And almost dropped it. “What the fuck? How long were we asleep?”

“A while,” Lageos chuckled from where he sat at a different table tucking into his breakfast. “It’s noon the next day. We’re taking a break before the next time zone to move to.”

I blinked around the almost completely full warehouse.
“*How?* I mean...”

Shael snorted. “Yes, it added up quickly. I was shocked how many had crates of money. They put it in wood crates like it was goods for sale at a market. The fact they don’t use banks is just asking for someone to do what we did.”

“Banks have to report any deposits over ten thousand dollars and are heavily watched and regulated,” I muttered as I stared around at the crazy. “It’s why I was thinking of how to expand. Geiger says I’m absolutely going to be audited this tax season and we’ll handle it fine but yeah, time to figure out things better and under the table.”

I threw back my head and laughed. Fuck, we were doing it now. I had almost a warehouse full of funds. Awesome. Just *awesome*.

And they even got more. We stored some at the house and several other houses that had large party rooms. It was a huge score and took the pressure off me. *Really* took the pressure off of me. We had to come up with plans on how to spend it better without paper trails but yeah, this was a huge thing done.

Thank fuck.

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After getting something handled so completely that had weighed on me, people noticed a difference in me. I was less anxious and didn't feel like I would break anymore. I felt mentally healthier and stronger emotionally. I could handle what I needed to. A big part of it was conquering the dreams with Julian and weeks of him putting me first.

Also, Hudson pulling his head out of his ass and making sure I knew it had been him. I could be dismissive when he brought up things and I accepted that. I could be because I was so overwhelmed. We agreed we needed a better way to take a time out and hear each other because he wasn't good at pushing and bringing things up again once shut down.

We were talking about counseling. I thought that was an issue for both of us and I wanted to work on it. Not just for Hudson, but for myself. I wanted to not shut down when I felt unheard or unseen. I deserved better.

I was worth better.

But with things getting better and feeling like I could balance better, I decided to handle something else that weighed on me.

Heavily.

And I hadn't been able to talk about it like I needed to. I needed to be more honest with *myself* first and this time just take the leap that I knew what to do. I had everything in place and simply needed to pull the trigger.

No more stalling or pushing back what I needed.

Part of me had worried I was doing it for the wrong reasons and it would send a message I could be bullied but no, I didn't allow myself to be bullied. I could take fair, constructive criticism. And I was done letting the bad stuff affect me when I knew the truth and how many people I'd helped.

It was maybe the hardest video I would ever record, but I had hope.

I needed to have hope.

Geiger was involved in the plans, and his support was what made me able to push through my own pain. It had taken a bit to get the rights to use the song I wanted, but after learning why we wanted it, they didn't even charge us to use it which seemed like fate telling me this was the right thing to do.

I worked on the signs for a whole weekend, writing and rewriting what I wanted to say. Finally, I was happy.

Sunday night I set up the camera and loaded Nickelback's "Lullaby" before sitting down with the signs. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly and hit play, holding up the first sign.

"When I was five, my foster dad shoved me and I fell down the stairs and I broke my leg. He was so mad that he had

to take me to the hospital and pay for the emergency room, he beat me so badly when we got home that I know I should have gone back to the hospital. He left me alone to handle how to do anything with a cast on my leg so young.”

I dropped the first card after slowly reading the words in the mirror I had set up behind the camera. That was the only way I could think of how to time it right.

“That was my first memory, but it wasn’t the only abuse I suffered in foster care. When I was ten, the family who took me in used me like a nanny for their ‘real’ kids. I did everything for those three kids and a lot around the house. If I messed up, they wouldn’t feed me for days.”

“I had several families abuse me, one tossing me into their gross pond for fun or when I asked for anything. I had to run for my life at fifteen when my foster dad tried to rape me. He turned out to be a murderer. That’s who they allowed to take in young girls even after several went missing, presumed to have run away.”

“But I knew the drill. I was the problem. I was troubled. I was the liar when I told the social workers any of this. I got booted from homes after I told, and no one thought they would do that so they wouldn’t be investigated. It still astounds me how easily government workers would ignore what was right in front of them and *always* blame any of the kids they were in charge of.”

“They were supposed to protect us, and they constantly failed many of us. I barely survived and others haven’t, but people don’t care because we tax the system. Funny, because the same people who say that and blame *children* for the

problems adults create are normally so-called 'pro-life.' Funny, because they didn't care about my life."

"So you only love a child until it's born and then we're on our own? We're the problem and not you? We're not the troubled ones. You are, and one day your hypocrisy will be judged."

I let out a slow breath before dropping the card and moving on to the next.

"Many people have criticized me for not doing anything to help or not being an advocate for foster care reform after what I went through and have money. While I agree that I could do more, you don't know me and have no right to judge me. You don't know the hell I barely survived. I am a *victim* of the foster care system, and yelling at me to tell my story and relive what I still struggle with is cruel."

"I can't go back. I can't go there and try to fight with lawmakers or social workers to do more. I can't live in that fight and try to heal the damage done to me. Not when I'm still struggling so much with it. I can't do that. I wish I could, but I would spiral and go back to the place I once was in where I worried I'd end my life to stop the pain."

Tears fell as I dropped the card.

"I know the pain some of you are in. I've been there. I know how hard it is to worry the next place you'll be sent to is even worse. I know how horrible other students and teachers treat you because you're in foster care. I've lived that and the prejudice you've gone through. I can't fix any of that. I'm just one person no matter how much money I have."

“But hang on. I know it’s too hard and you’re struggling, but trust me when I say you can make it. You can survive too. Please don’t give up. I know how hard it is, but you can make it to eighteen and get free. It can seem like an eternity, but it’s not as long as you think. I promise. I promise it won’t always be this bad. It will be better.”

“I can’t change the system, but I want to help. I care about you. I *believe you* that it’s not you. I will listen to you unlike everyone else. I promise. I won’t leave you to be harmed by the monsters meant to take care of you. Someone will be in your corner now, I swear it.

“I have put a hundred private investigators on retainer across the US. If you are in foster care and you call this number, someone will listen and believe you. If you call and report you’re being abused, we will investigate and get the proof needed to get you out. I personally spoke to every investigator, and they were glad to take this on.”

“So hang on. Help is coming to get you out. We will believe you and help you. Please keep going and fight a bit longer. I can’t promise to fix everything or make the next home or shelter better, but I will fight for you. I wish I could do more, but the system is too messed up and too many need to be saved. I will do what I can so hang on. Hang on and believe you can survive.”

“I did. I survived. You can too. It gets better. Don’t give up.”

I held that sign with the phone number listed for the rest of the song, breaking down sobbing when it was over. I cried out

my pain at having to admit what I'd been through to the world. Even that small bit was so difficult for me.

But if it could help one person to hang on, then it was worth it. If we saved even a few from abusive homes, it was all worth it.

“Why this song?” Geiger had asked me when I'd told him the plan. “You wish to comfort them with a lullaby?”

I had swallowed loudly and looked out of the window of his office. “It's about suicide. It's a song about not being the only one to have thought about it and begging for people to not do it. It's about pushing through the pain and fighting.” I turned to face him. “It's the song that saved me from ending my life when I was at my darkest.”

Horror had filled his eyes at what I'd admitted that I never had before, not to anyone. “I will make sure we get the rights. I don't care if I go there myself in front of them and bang on their door. I will get it, Princess.”

“Thank you. And tell them why. Tell them the song saved me, and I want to help save others. That's the purpose of all of this. If opening this can of worms can save people, it's worth doing.”

I still stood by that. No matter how hard it was to share this part of myself with others, it was worth doing.

And it was how I could confidently face forward towards the future I knew would be better.

The End

THANK YOU for reading this book!!

Thank you so much for continuing on Tamsin's ride with me. I loves all of you lots for your support and wanting more of my books. Please, *please* leave a review. It really helps me out to know which series people are eager for. I appreciate the time it takes!

I know some of you get uncomfortable when the books have content concerning mental health. A lot of it is from personal experience and my way of processing my own struggles. I know sometimes you don't want to read it but sometimes it helps people and that's worth all of us being a bit uncomfortable at times. It's hard for me to talk about but we all need to be more understanding with what people go through.

If you are currently struggling, please listen to me, listen to Tamsin, and hang on. There are websites and numbers you can call whatever your country. Life is a struggle but there are days it's worth it. Please hold on until you feel those days and reach out for help. Please.

You are loved even if you don't feel it.

The next release will be House of Garner #7. I don't have a date yet, but I'm getting it to editing this week. After that, might be another Artemis or Enchantress. Not sure. I'll keep you guys posted.

I'm also doing another merch drop soon. It's not book content but just for fun. I had some time and wanted to design something goofy. I'm waiting on the sample and we'll go from there! I'll post it on my socials and website, but it's really cute and I think you guys will like it.

Bring on autumn and cooler temps! Hope you all get your pumpkin everything and be safe.

All my best,

Erin

And Vader.

Find A New Series To Love...

Accidentally Wolf: Seraphine Thomas 1

Gives New Meaning To Workplace Injury

Special Agent in Charge, Seraphine Thomas, lives for her job at the FBI. One of the youngest female agents with her own team, she thrives in undercover work to make the city she loves safer. But Sera's on-track life is thrown into chaos when she's attacked during a bust gone bad and is left figuring out what it means to be a werewolf.

Right away, she learns that she's more powerful and able to do things that she shouldn't be able to do so quickly after her transition. The rules of her old life don't seem to apply to much now that she's a shifter, and knowing who she can trust is even more complicated.

When she's transferred to a special branch of the FBI made up of paranormals policing others of their kind and given a promotion, things start looking up—until her abnormal level of power creates a list of enemies for her before she's even learned who her allies are.

Upended Life: Artemis University 1

My name is Tamsin Vale and my life is about to get real... Really complicated and ridiculously dangerous. Which is almost funny given at nineteen I already know too much of the darkness of the world and people, the secrets they keep.

Or so I thought.

Turns out those quirky abilities I've been keeping secret expose me to a world I didn't know existed. Sure, I knew I wasn't human—but how exactly do I find out more without ending up in the wrong hands?

And I'm not so sure I'm in the right hands now given some of the reactions to finding me. They say I'm the last fairy. I'm not sure I should trust them when their thoughts are mostly of power and how to use me.

But I'm also not sure I have much of a choice. My powers are dangerous and I don't know how to use them. They promise to teach me what I need to know and give me a chance at something I've never had before.

A normal life. I don't think anything about Artemis University and those who attend is normal, but it's still better than the life I've been living if they keep half their promises.

I think hoping they'll keep half is generous.

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

My name is Inez Garner, and my story has sort of been told... But not. I'm turning twenty-three and find out I'm not human; I'm apparently a vampire. Sure, who hasn't read that story? Oh, but I'm a princess. And there's a zombie apocalypse—although I'm debating where the line is of apocalypse vs. post-apocalypse. There's also a quest that I'm compelled to be on, and it might all be coming from the Goddess.

Awesome. It seems She has big plans for me. And I have to deal with ghosts. When I kill corrupted—the nice PC name people call zombies, as it's not their fault they eat people—I then have to deal with their ghosts. Which is super when being hunted for years by some guys I don't want to know better.

Add to everything, I have to apologize to heroines for judging them when they fall in bed with the hot guy and buy the story he gives. I get it now. Sex is splendid. I'm not one to believe a con, but he's got answers I need, like why I have no memories before I was eighteen.

Plus, the fangs sort of sold it for me. I hope he forgives me for shooting him.

House of Garner is an apocalyptic hot burning WhyChoose romance with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine that doesn't let anyone get in her way.

Undisclosed Assets: Untraceable Succubus 1

A succubus working as a stripper sounds like a cliché or start of a bad joke, but Lola Chase is in a human only province in Canada for other reasons. Someone is murdering women society looks down on, and she's there to stop it. As a demon,

she's bottom of the supernatural food chain and knows how often people ignore crimes against them.

From the start there isn't much to go on, and she ends up getting in a bit of trouble following any leads she gets. Things get complicated when an ancient, big name vampire takes interest in her and getting away from him proves to be much harder than her normal admirers.

Thankfully, although her cover is a stripper, Lola loves to dance and the fun she has helps balance out the stress and worry of the case.

Plus, she finds some very hot men to play with and feed from. The question is whether or not she can balance it all and find a murderer before he kills again.

Untraceable Succubus is a murder mystery series where the sex is hot and often and the main character kicks some serious ass on the road to finding out if she can have real love in her life even if it comes from multiple men.

Demon of Death: Enchantress 1

Soraya Devil is the Enchantress, one of the most powerful magics in the world... But she's so much more than that, and everyone's constantly attempting to unravel her past and secrets. She's not worried though, as many have tried and never find out the truth.

It's safer for everyone that way.

The owner of Paranormal Investigations—among other companies—she has her own answers to find. Though she’s continuously pulled in too many directions, she always answers the calls that make even her magic tingle in warning at the danger.

When a sprite begins killing people in Chicago, she has to team up with SPU—Supernatural Police Unit—to figure out who summoned the demon and why before more die. While that’s enough of a challenge, the main hurdle is the team lead on the case who loathes all magics. But when he can’t seem to get past his hate and do his job, can Soraya make an ally from an enemy, or will the evil unleashed in the city she loves win the day?

Rough Beginnings: Karma Bakery 1

Starting a New Business Takes Magic

Imagine there weren’t three main gods of Olympus, but four. A sister who went through something so horrible, so traumatic she left and was written out of history.

Arabella Baker and her two adopted daughters are moving to Boston to open a new business and start over. Things will be different this time with the new names and new life. The twins will live on their own at college—though still right in Boston—and experience something a bit more normal. The store she bought has a hefty price, but the location is fantastic, and she got the best spot in the new development... Which apparently comes with an immensely attractive man who owns it all.

Nothing goes smoothly in opening a new business though, sample days, crazy busy, and fluff interviews taking dark turns. Honestly, it leaves Arabella asking one main question—why did she think opening in such a large city and right before the holidays was such a great idea?

Meave: Naughty Witches 1

Leaving NYC and a troubling past, Meave Washington is starting over. She has a good plan, but she's probably bit off more than she can chew. So she embraces the chance of fate that lands help at her feet—and if he's smoking hot, all the better.

Distracted by a text while driving, Ashton Perry injures Meave. He's horrified that he could have killed someone, and steps up to make it right... And not just because she's the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

Sparks immediately start flying and the desire is undeniable but it's not that simple to take the leap. But Ashton's barely a man, and Meave is hiding something important. When the woman is older, age isn't just a number and Meave isn't sure Ashton can be who she needs.

Ashton steps up to prove he's not just a man, but the man his bewitching lady deserves. He doesn't care what she is—only who she is. And he'll do whatever it takes to prove it.

Naughty Witches is a burning paranormal romance novella series with strong female leads, fun so sexy it raises the temperature, and mismatched people who find HEAs that give

us all hope fate won't forget us. Each book is a new pairing in the same world, with an overall series arc.

The Turning: Dr. Kelly Murphy 1

One Bite Can Change Everything

Graduate medical school, start competitive internship, don't get cut from the program, become a surgeon. It was a great plan. One Kelly Murphy loved and had dreamed of most of her life... And it was blown to hell in a night with an uninvited bite.

Now she's missing three days of her life, trying to handle her freaked out best friend and parents who called the police when she went missing, all as she realizes she's not the same person she was before. She's different. Like has fangs different.

When he shows up on her doorstep claiming to know what happened to her, Kelly's not sure that makes things any less confusing. But at least he can guide her, right? Either way, she has a plan and a choice she didn't make won't stop her... Even if she might have the urge to bite her patients from now on.

Owned: Secure Settings 1

Kate Boyle has lived through more loss than most people twice her age. She's strong and independent, so letting people in to help her handle her grief or problems is next to impossible for her.

The owner of a successful company, Secure Settings, Kate devotes all her time to keeping people safe and rescuing those who can't save themselves. When she gets the call that her grandpa died and she's now inherited his ranch, a storm of epic proportions starts. Smart enough to know she can't watch out for danger while grieving, she calls in a favor for help.

Jared and Dean Acker just got out of the Marines and are a little lost as to what comes next for them. So when they're asked to back up a friend of a friend, they're in... And meet the woman of their dreams. Now, if they could just convince her.

Wounded: In My Dreams 1

Authors Dream Of Their Happiness Too

Gas station coffee is the highlight of Lily Slone's boring outing until fate intervenes... Along with the barrel of a gun and a lost soldier who saves her life.

Jasper Hutson—a homeless Marine, discarded by his family after returning home from the war wounded—reacted on instinct. But this one act brings him to Lily's attention, and not because he saves her life. She sees something else in him. Something no one else sees.

Refusing to give up on him when everyone else does, Lily offers Jasper a place to stay and an opportunity to get back on his feet. That one offer will change her world. When they grow closer and Jasper makes Lily's life so much easier, she's not sure she can go back to living without him.

As life moves forward and they get into their own rhythm, Lily discover something about Jasper that he's kept hidden.

Will she continue to reach for her happily ever after or will they both remain wounded?

About the Author

Erin is a Midwest girl at heart, born a Chicagoan with the mouth to prove it, a loyal Cubs fan, but still a die-hard Green Bay Packers gal who cheers for her alma mater, the Illini from Augusta, Georgia, where she lives. She has always been interested in the darker aspects of life and mythologies—especially vampires, shifters, the occult, and anything paranormal.

To date, she has published over 100 paranormal books in different genres with dedicated readers who await each release to her numerous series under any of the three Flynn names she writes under.

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