



Anne Hall

MONSTER
GIRL

AWAKENED

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ANNE HALL

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DISCLAIMER

Hi, Anne Hall here. This novel is written in British/Australian English, so please be prepared for there to be lots of s's where you are used to seeing z's and such. There will also probably be some Australian slang and/or sayings.

Though this book has been through several rounds of edits, I'm sure there are some that have somehow snuck past us. We're only human. If you notice any, please feel free to email me at annehall2004@icloud.com to let me know, and I'll update the file. Or even just for a chat.

I hope you're having a great day, and if not, I hope this book gives you a laugh. Please enjoy the book.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the people who believe in Unicorns.

CHAPTER ONE

Nessa

I flop down onto the porch seat with a sigh. One that has Azure—one of my fathers—quirking a brow at me. I'm sulking and we both know it. My familiar Unicorn plops down onto my lap with a chirp. Everything that could've possibly gone wrong over my first term at the Academy, did. Who can blame me for being just a teensy weensy bit sour about it. That and I met the guys. I suppose they were—or *are* a positive that came of this year's first term. I can now officially say that I have three guy friends, woot woot. Well. Guys who I hang out with mostly in a platonic sense, but I am attracted to, and one of which I have kissed. *Hmm*. I say Confucius to that. *Sooo moving on...*

Giving Unicorn's chin a scratch, I tip my head back and stare out at the forest in which our house is situated. The *Téras* Forest is to outsiders, something to be feared. With its twisted gnarled, dead trees and the everpresent fog, I suppose I can understand why they see it that way. To me though, it's always been beautiful. Beautiful in a sort of ethereal sort of way.

My thoughts shift back to the guys and Lexi. Guilt slams into me once again, and my fingers clench into loose fists. Lexi. Goddess, it's my fault she got taken. We got her back, but it doesn't erase the fact that it happened. Or stop the guilt. Swallowing hard, I shove the emotion away. It's been two weeks since the incident—as I have mentally dubbed it—and I haven't seen any of the guys since I woke up in the healers

ward a few hours after the attack. The memory washes over me.

The first thing I registered was low masculine voices echoing around me, then a bright light through my eyelids. Wriggling my fingers and toes, consciousness returned slowly. Odd scents swirled around me, herbs, ozone—like magic was used recently—blood, sweat and a number of other confusing things. How did they all fit together? And why wouldn't my eyes open?

A high pitched whine erupted from me, and my heart thudded in my ears. Where the hell was I? What's going on? Memories seemed just out of reach and when I started to flail my arms around trying to sit up, someone grabbed me. I let out a mewl this time, sweat beading on my brow as my head throbbed. Why did it hurt?

Before I could struggle anymore, or fully register that the room had erupted into shuffling fabric and thudding feet, a deep rumble had me pausing. My ears pricked and some foreign part of me cocked her head at the sound. The purr. It thickened and became louder, and all at once my mind and body settled. The room was silent beyond that sound and after a few minutes, when I attempted to open my eyes it worked. I winced against the harsh light, my eyelids like sandpaper against my eyeballs. I blinked repeatedly and when my eyes adjusted they clashed with those of Corin, who I realised was responsible for the purring. Scanning the room, I spotted Dylan seated on my other side, and Unicorn was perched on

the end of my bed. Judging by the curtains, I must have been in the healers ward.

It was then that my memories finally caught up. The killer. Lexi being taken. Ghost Girl. The fight.

I sat up straight, ignored my throbbing head and forced words past my dry throat. “Where are Lexi and Oscar? Are they okay? Is she okay?”

Dylan leaned forward, his expression gentle—probably the gentlest I’d ever gotten from him. “She’s going to be fine, physically. Oscar is alright as well. He’s with her, since you were—are too injured to be with her right now. Her mates are with her as well.” He paused, those bright blue eyes darted to Corin before he continued. “You can rest. Your parents have been alerted and are on the way. We’ll watch over you.” Corin dipped his head in agreement and I relaxed back, allowing sleep to claim me again.

True to their word they stayed until my fathers got there. Then I was whisked away home to recuperate, only getting a quick goodbye from the guys before I left. The professors and Headmaster were suspiciously hush hush about the whole ordeal. It wasn’t something that occurred to me until afterwards, with the injuries I was sufficiently dazed. Throughout the whole process of alerting them to what had happened, getting taken to the healers, then the school closed as they supposedly called the supernatural police, it was extremely rushed. We were practically shoved out the door and

I don't think they informed my parents about what actually happened.

I bite the inside of my cheek, hand pausing where I've been petting Unicorn and making her get up with a sassy huff to flutter to the porch railing instead. Not up for it mentally and dazed from the attack, my parents let me keep my secrets when I first came back home. But I can tell that their restraint in making me tell them what the hell happened is wearing thin. The sulking probably isn't helping.

I still haven't been able to see Lexi yet since the attack—which is part of the reason I'm sulking—though we've spoken on the phone. She says she needs time and though I'm not exactly happy to give her the space she wants, I'll do whatever she needs to help her feel better. Even if it pains me to do it. We've always been so close and gone to each other when we need comfort or to feel safe, so her pulling away hurts more than I care to admit. It also doesn't help alleviate any of my guilt over dragging her into the whole cat and mouse game we had going with Ethan either. It's my fucking fault she got hurt, so I'm going to do whatever she wants of me, whether that means staying away or waiting on her hand and foot.

So I've put myself on a self-imposed break from doing anything that even relates to my murder board, or the Drákon group. None of which is helping with my sulkiness and my dads definitely haven't missed it. So that's what I've been doing for the last two weeks. Diddly, fucking squat.

Who knew that resting could be so painful. I assumed that I wouldn't mind it because I love books, but I was really wrong. A concussion and reading just don't go hand in hand—not to mention my broken ribs—which make it impossible to read because I read a book like people watch movies. I roll around, laugh, cry, kick my legs, and fist pump when the character succeeds at something she's been struggling with. And all manner of other odd body movements that do not work with broken ribs.

A few days after I got back home, my dad Diarmuid caught me in our home gym, practising using my magic and thankfully didn't ban that activity, though he did dob me in to Morrigan and Azure. They agreed that I'm allowed to practise as much as I want so long as I'm physically staying still and not exerting myself. Every day since then we've spent a few hours working on my magic together. They take turns, each having a type of magic that they're more equipped to help me with. My magic has come in leaps and bounds, as has my control over the past two weeks and I have them to thank for it. They built on everything I've been learning at the Academy and it's such a relief to not be struggling with it for once. Our training sessions have been the highlights of my day for the duration of the holidays so far. It's something that I've never really been able to share with them before. Not in a positive way, because it was always so frustrating to try and get my magic to cooperate.

Though I have been holding back in my sessions with them. I'm not quite sure why exactly. Something about when my

magic is interacting with theirs it holds back, like a subconscious thing that I can't control or hope to understand. I've even read through a few books that Azure owns to try and figure out what could be causing it, but haven't been able to come up with anything. I also believe that's why I haven't healed quickly like I usually would, and when my fathers try to show me how to channel my magic into myself it hasn't worked. It's strange.

Other than that though, I've mostly been stuck on bed rest with nothing to do and too chicken shit to call up the guys to come entertain me. I don't want to be that annoying girl friend—two separate words, not girlfriend, because I am not that to them, just that annoying friend—that pesters them about coming to hang out with my needy self. I can't help it though, at the Academy we got so close, and then after the incident it's like they disappeared, cold fucking turkey. Not even a message here and there, like dammit, one day I had a great circle of friends and the next they just all vanished at once. Or at least that's what it feels like.

So, I'm sulking. Productive, I know.

“You know, daughter. I never took you to be someone who waited around for a guy to call them.”

I scowl, and groan. “Can't you just let me be dramatic? And how do you know if this is about a guy? I could be sulking over one of my books sucking.”

Azure peers at me again, setting his book on his lap. Uh-oh, did I just earn myself one of his famous lectures? “It doesn't

suit you, sweetheart, and don't think we didn't notice those two young men hovering over you at the Academy. That, plus the sulking means there's a pretty good chance it's about a guy."

I huff, though a slight blush crawls up my cheeks. "What's this I hear about a guy?" Diarmuid asks, poking his head out the back door. I groan and hide my face, garnering a laugh from both my fathers. What the hell is happening to me? *The guys are making me soft.* I grumble under my breath and turn my back to them both, but Diarmuid plops down next to me. He pats me on the head, gently. "We're just playing around, Ness. Didn't mean to embarrass you."

I sit up, resigned for this conversation, but I still don't meet either of their eyes. "So is this about a guy?" Azure prods, his quizzical eyes examining me.

"If he's done something, I can fix it. Just tell me who and he's dead," Diarmuid chips in.

I snort and shake my head. And people wonder how I turned out the way I am. Answer, my fathers.

"What have we spoken about, Diar. Plausible deniability. If we're planning to kill someone, Nessa doesn't need to know."

Diarmuid mutters under his breath and flops back, stretching out in the sun like I was. Morrigan takes that moment to join us and he plops down next to Azure. "Is Nessa finally going to admit to us who she's been sulking about?" he asks, the question aimed at the other two.

“I’m right here you know and fine, since you’re all so interested,” I growl. “It’s not *a* guy, it’s three and we’re just friends—uh, sort of. And I’m not sulking because of them, it’s because of everything. They haven’t spoken to me, and Lexi doesn’t want to see me, I just...” I trail off, surprised to find my eyes burning. I try to blink back the tears and go to dart inside, but I’m caught. Diarmuid picks me up like I’m light as a feather and wraps me in a bear hug. The dam bursts.

He coos at me like I’m a babe, stroking my hair soothingly when a few tears fall, and maybe a few hiccups that sound suspiciously like sobs, but no one draws attention to it. Unicorn, sensing my distress, leaves the porch railing to land in front of me, offering a low coo of her own. We stay like that a while, Morrigan and Azure in silent support, while Diarmuid hugs me like he can keep all the bad things out with his magical hugs, as Unicorn watches on.

When I’m all cried out, I hide my face in his shirt, cheeks burning. I haven’t broken down like that in front of anyone, let alone my fathers in *years*. It makes me cringe. “None of that now,” Azure says softly, his hand coming to rest on my shoulder.

“Now explain from the start, sweetheart. Get it all off your chest. It will make you feel a thousand times better.”

“You can share the burden with us, Ness,” Diarmuid adds, petting my hair again as I sit back. I keep my chin dipped as I lay it all out there. Well almost all of it. I leave out the parts involving my investigation board and everything that goes

along with that, including the severity of my injuries from the altercation with Ethan. They obviously are aware that I am injured, just not the full extent. I'm not ready to share all of that stuff yet—maybe not ever. But I share everything else; the deaths at the school, the guys coming into my life, my magic awakening, the trauma it has brought up with Ethan's involvement all the while trying to navigate my classes with all the chaos and struggling with my magic. By the end of it they all appear downright furious. Not at me, but for me.

“I wish you would have felt comfortable enough to bring this to us sooner. Something's not right. The Academy's faculty shouldn't have let it get this far and they should have contacted us about everything that happened,” Azure murmurs, anger making his voice rougher than usual. His brows are drawn down, lips pursed as he stares out at the forest pensively. Even though I already have my suspicions about something going on with the Academy, hearing my fathers having the same suspicions is gratifying. I'm not just overthinking it, something actually is going on.

“You don't have to go back, we can keep working on your magic here and you can commute again or even apply to another supernatural Academy,” Diarmuid bursts out, arms tightening around me slightly.

A lump rises in my throat at how much they care, but I can't just run away now. Despite all the speed bumps, I've learnt so much. About myself, my magic and I've made new friends. Other than Lexi, I've never been able to connect with others like this before. Plus, though they have been helping me work

with my magic, they don't know the extent of my power. I mean, I'm sure they can feel it and assume that I'm not telling them everything, but I know that they won't be able to offer me what an academy designed to teach young supes is able to. "I have to stay," I say firmly.

Though he doesn't argue, Diarmuid's lips purse. I carefully shuffle back from my position—which was half on his lap—and wipe a hand over my face. Taking a few controlled breaths I collect myself and my shoulders feel a little lighter.

"If you're sure, Nessa," Morrigan says firmly. "Just know that we'll back you whatever you choose."

My chest tightens and I look between the three men surrounding me. A smile curls my lips, I've got the best fathers in the fucking realm. "Thank you."

We're quiet for a few minutes before Diarmuid perks up, his mouth pulling into a sly grin. "So about those *three* guys?"

I groan and shove his shoulder and poke him in the ribs simultaneously, making him jump away with a laugh—though he's careful to avoid aggravating my still bruised body.



I stare down at the message on my phone with pursed lips. It's like they're goddamn mind readers. Did their ears burn when we were talking about them today or something?

Two notifications sit on my lock screen. One's an alert that I've been added to a group chat—with the guys no less—and the other is a message notification. My thumb hovers over the message one as I contemplate answering it right away or not. It's from the group chat that Oscar has dubbed *Nessa's Fan Club*, so I know it's definitely from one of them, but not much else. I shake my head at the name but chuckle despite myself. Running a hand through my hair, I give in and open the message.

Oscar: What's everyone been up to?

I snort. I was agonising over it for no reason. When I reread the message though, my eyes narrow and annoyance flares through me. What's everyone been up to? *Couldn't you have sent me a message a week ago, you dickhead!*

I delete it instead of hitting send and toss my phone onto my bed with a grunt. I flop onto my back on my bed and wrinkle my nose. Obviously they've just been busy... or something. I jerk back up into a sitting position and watch the birds flit between the dead tree branches through my window.

Of all things, guys, attraction and dating are some of the things that I have the least experience with. Don't get me wrong, I'm not some blushing virgin when it comes to sex. I have hooked up with a few guys, but they're nothing compared to the attraction I experience with Corin, Dylan and Oscar. I wince. Those hookups definitely weren't anything to crow about either.

The kiss with Oscar flashes through my mind and a shiver rolls down my spine. That simple interaction inspired more lust than some of my past hookups—which isn't the guys' faults. I can be finicky with things like that and it's never worked out before so having such a strong reaction with these three is confusing and exciting as hell. Along with a hundred other mixed emotions. In other words, a conundrum that I don't have a hope of unpacking.

Blowing out a breath, I dive onto the bed on my stomach and tug my phone over to me. Unicorn flutters into the room and sets about fiddling with a hair tie I dropped on the floor, batting at it like an earth-realm cat. I laugh, eyebrows dipping a little in disbelief. I swear sometimes she acts more like a normal pet than a familiar, well a pet who is half wild. Unlike other supernatural's familiars who are stuck to them like glue, Unicorn definitely prefers to be outdoors. She'd rather spend most of her waking hours exploring the forest and hunting, than she would cooped up with me.

It really doesn't bother me though, she's there when I need her and seems to like me well enough. I do remember reading somewhere that sometimes it takes longer for that bond to form between supe and familiar, which in turn means that they like more space before it's solidified. I personally believe it's just Unicorn's personality though.

I shrug, refocusing on my phone, and decide to keep the message simple.

Nessa: Not much.

I hit send and a small part of me buzzes, satisfiedly at the underhanded *I'm annoyed at you* vibe the text aims at him. Then I grimace. They haven't really done anything wrong... just sort of ghosted me a little. Before I have a chance to overthink it further my phone vibrates with an incoming text.

Oscar: Sounds awfully boring.

My lips quirk.

Corin: Not much either.

Oscar: Definitely boring.

Corin: There isn't much to do at the Academy during the holidays.

My eyebrows raise as I absorb that information. Corin doesn't go home for the holidays? Either he doesn't like his family, doesn't have one, or they live really far away. I wonder which it is, but I decide not to pry.

Dylan: At home with my family. Not doing much.

Oscar: So what I'm hearing is that we should meet up to hang out, since we're all really bored.

I snort, shaking my head.

Nessa: Technically it'd be what you're **seeing** not hearing.

Oscar: Whatever **pouty face emoji**

Laughter rumbles in my chest as a mental image of Oscar sending me a mock scowl before saying that sassily.

Oscar: None of y'all have answered, so hang out? Yes. No?

Nessa: Sure...

Dylan: Okay.

Corin: Sounds good, so where is this meeting going to take place?

Oscar: I vote, Nessa's place.

I sputter, eyes narrowing.

Dylan: Works for me.

Corin: Alright, what's your address?

I scowl, fingers moving over the letters quickly.

Nessa: Now wait a minute. Do I get a say in this?

Oscar: No.

Dylan: No.

Corin: Nope.

I bite the inside of my cheek, amusement rolling through me, followed closely by foreboding. Goddess, a hundred bucks says that at some point during this little get-together my dads are going to break out the photo album.

Nessa: You guys know I live with my parents right?

Oscar: ...

Dylan: *shrugging emoji* I assumed that was so, unless they'll have a problem with it? Then I don't mind.

Always so logical, but it has my lips pursing again. I'm a grown ass woman, I don't need to ask permission.

Nessa: No problem. Just wanted to make sure you knew.

I can't help but notice that the other two haven't answered and it has me smirking. Does the idea of meeting my parents scare them off? I mean, if it were the other way around then I'd be backing up with my hands up like I had a loaded gun in my face, but that's just me.

My phone buzzes again and I laugh at their answers.

Corin: Okay.

Oscar: ☐

We talk a little more and organise it for in a few days time, then I get up with a groan. Now to tell my dads. *This should be fun.*

CHAPTER TWO

Nessa

I pull on a baggy mens T-shirt—one of many that I own—and some black leggings, fluff up my short hair a little and call myself good. I stick out my tongue at my reflection before shimmying to my door. I'm in a good mood, sue me.

The guys are supposed to be here in about thirty minutes and I've decided that I'm going to just roll with any metaphorical punches that come at me today. Worry shall not be present. Just fun and whatever else we're gonna do. Haven't thought that far ahead yet.

I'd like to say that I skip down our staircase, but with my coordination on top of my injuries, I'd probably break my neck so I descend them at a more sedate pace. My fathers are milling around in the kitchen and I playfully hip check Diarmuid as I pass him. He shakes his head, lips tipping up slightly as he tries to hold back a smile and I grin.

I grab a coffee mug down, doing a little happy dance when I find the stovetop kettle freshly boiled. I dump a cappuccino sachet in, humming under my breath as I get it ready.

“Are you sure you want to have caffeine right now, Ness?”
Morrigan asks casually.

I turn around and peer at him with narrowed eyes, hugging my freshly made coffee to my chest.

“He has a point, you're practically bouncing around already,” Diarmuid chimes in with a snort.

I flip him the bird with one hand while I take a large sip of coffee.

“*Nessa.*” I cringe and drop my hand, sending Azure a sheepish grin. He raises a brow at me, having set his tablet aside on the dining table.

I’m saved from a lecture on good manners by a knock on the front door. Thank the Goddess. I set down my coffee and use my thumb to point over my shoulder towards the front door. “I’m gonna go get that.”

Scurrying out of the room with a grin, I tug the door open, still chuckling under my breath. Oscar’s attention jerks to me and I smile wider, my eyes running over his pink hair, sharp features and swimmers build. Those glowing silver eyes locked on me have flashes of our kiss running through my head and a faint blush crawls onto my cheeks. “Hi,” I mumble in a low voice.

“Hey.”

I swallow hard and mentally shake myself. *What was that about not being a blushing virgin, Nessa? Goddess.* Blinking, I step back and wave him inside, doing a quick scan of the street to make sure the others aren’t here yet before closing the door.

Poppy—yes that nickname has stuck—peers around the wide hallway and into what he can see of the other rooms from here, curiosity clear in his eyes. He slips off his shoes and socks, placing them neatly on our rack before looking to me for direction and an odd flutter starts in my stomach. There’s

something intimate about having him here, barefoot. Or I could just be odd. Yeah that's probably what it is.

With a wave of my hand to have him follow, I lead him to the kitchen. May as well get the introductions over with first. Azure's in the same place I left him, sitting at the dining table, but he's got his fingers steepled in front of him. All of his focus is on Oscar. Diarmuid has shifted to lean back against the kitchen bench, casually cleaning his fingernails with a dagger, his eyes too on the man behind me. Dear lord, give me strength. Morrigan stands against the dining room wall, arms crossed like a silent sentry, ready to fuck someone up if he needs to.

“Guys, this is Oscar. Oscar, these are my fathers.” I leave it at that and step aside, giving Oscar a pat on the shoulder before ditching him to settle in against the kitchen bench opposite Diarmuid with my coffee. Better to just let them get on with the inquisition. Hopefully they'll get all the energy out with Oscar and not bother repeating it with Dylan and Corin. I scan my dads' expressions again. Ahh fuck, who am I kidding—they're totally gonna do that.

Props to Oscar though, he doesn't duck his chin when faced with them, though he doesn't make eye contact either.

“Good morning, uh, sirs.” He walks up to where Azure is seated at the head of the table and offers a hand, somehow knowing he's the leader. My brows raise at that.

Diarmuid perks up, grinning in a way that has me suppressing a groan. He abruptly flips the knife he's holding,

catching it by the blade intentionally—like the crazy person he is—drawing Oscar’s attention as he gives him a finger wave with his now bloody palm. *Well, this is shaping up to be a fun first meeting*, I mentally grumble to myself.



Oscar

My eyes widen slightly as they settle on one of Nessa's fathers. He gives me a finger wave, flashing his bloody palm at me, clutching his dagger in his opposite hand. Out of the three of them, strangely enough he's not the one who sets me on edge the most, no, it's the man leaning against the dining room wall, watching me silently, green eyes intent behind his glasses.

After leaving my hand hovering awkwardly over the table between us for a few seconds, the man standing in front of me reaches forwards to grip it, dipping our joined hands once before releasing me. *I hope he didn't notice the faint tremble of nerves.* If he did he doesn't make a comment on it.

"It's nice to meet you, Oscar," The man seated at the head of the dining room table says, still watching me. He's eyeing me intently, expression blank so it's impossible to tell how he feels about me, but it's unnerving.

Even though outwardly I'm standing tall with all their eyes fixed on me, I can't help but feel like they can tell how nervous I am on the inside. As though knowing my thoughts, Azure's lips curl up in a way that makes me think he's hiding a smile, but his black eyes remain kind.

"Well Oscar, I'm Azure. This is Morrigan." He gestures to the green eyed man before half turning to point at the man who is standing behind the kitchen island. Bloody palm now resting on the counter top alongside his knife. When Azure

catches sight of him, he rolls his eyes, before returning his focus to me. “And Diarmuid.”

“He likes to play with knives, in case you missed that,” Nessa adds, cocking an eyebrow at Diarmuid as if in challenge.

I bite down on a smile at the lilt of sarcasm in her words and drag my eyes back to Azure. “How about we move this to the lounge room. Would you like something to drink, Oscar?” Azure asks, dark eyes intent.

I keep mine focused on his nose—the man puts off some insane A-class vibes. “Yes thank you. Could I please have a glass of water or juice if you have any?”

He nods, finally allowing a smile to tilt his lips then pushes up to his feet. My shoulders relax slightly, only to stiffen again when Diarmuid swaggers around the counter and drops his arm around my shoulders, giving me a cheshire grin, dagger perched in his fingertips. “Well come on then, the lounge room is this way.”

He steers me to the lounge room before nudging me onto one of the couches, then leaves me to perch on the arm of the one opposite this one. I glance around the room, making note of the TV behind him and the haphazard way the coffee table has been moved out of the way, like they shifted the couch so they had a better position to question me from. Nessa steps into the room and further confirms my suspicions when she sends a wide eyed ‘*are you serious*’ look to Diarmuid and Morrigan when he comes in a few steps behind her. He shrugs,

smiling a little as he sits on the couch beside Diarmuid. Nessa shakes her head at them before taking up a place leaning against the doorframe of the lounge room door. *At least she has a clean getaway path if she decides to run.*

I can't help but notice how much healthier she looks than when she was in the infirmary. The pale pallor to her skin tone has been replaced with a healthy rosiness and she's standing tall and steady. Her golden eyes also have their spark back. She's beautiful and faintly amused if her slight smile is anything to go by. I've missed seeing her, and it took a lot of effort to not smother her after what went down with Lexi. Corin, Dylan and I spoke and settled on giving her some space, so we agreed to give her a break to spend time with her family.

I've missed her though, sassiness and quirks included. I'm excited to take her out today, and have fun with her. I let out a little breath then let my focus return to Nessa's fathers.

Now that everyone is settled, it seems they're ready to centre their attention on me, and her dads' attention zone in on me and that's when the real inquisition starts.



Nessa

“So what exactly are your intentions with our daughter?” Diarmuid asks point blank. I smother a groan, and rub my forehead when Oscar blanches ever so slightly.

Azure chooses that moment to enter the room and shoots Diarmuid a narrow eyed look, one that practically screams *behave*. Oscar’s lips part as though he’s going to answer, when Azure promptly sets down a glass of what appears to be orange juice in front of him before sitting beside Morrigan. How lovely now they’re all facing off with him. Dear Goddess, give me strength. No, you know what? Give Oscar strength.

“Respectfully, I believe that is something for Nessa and I to discuss,” Oscar says slowly, eyes flicking to me.

They don’t linger, taking that at face value though it does pique my interest. The way he said it implies that he has intentions with me. I roll my lips in to hide a smile, and promptly think of anything other than the pink haired troll across the room. I refuse to let my mind go nuts with fantasies involving him with my fathers in the room.

Diarmuid catches my attention when he wiggles his fingers as Oscar goes to take a sip from his juice only to abruptly jerk back from it, narrowly avoiding spilling it. His lip curls back slightly in a grimace, setting the cup down. “Is there alcohol in this?”

Diarmuid smiles, and leans forward to brace his elbow on his knee, resting his chin in his hand. “That reminds me, how much do you drink? Are you a partier, Oscar?” Diarmuid inquires, and Azure sucks in a deep breath. Morrigan remains silent, eyes practically drilling into Oscar’s forehead.

Azure waves a hand, presumably to remove the alcohol from the orange juice, before steeping his hands together in his lap. “I believe what Diarmuid means to say is, what does your idea of a fun night equate to?”

“A night out at the cinemas, or perhaps going out to try new foods at a marketplace or restaurant I haven’t been to before,” Oscar answers and it has me cocking my head to the side curiously. Both of his answers pique my interest as something I’d be interested in doing as well.

Diarmuid drums his fingers on his thigh, eyes intent. “What are you studying at the Academy and where do you see yourself in a few years time?” he asks, bluntly.

Azure’s lips tighten. “What he means to ask is, do you have a career in mind for after you’ve finished your time at the Academy?” Azure says, rephrasing Diarmuid’s questions.

Oscar tenses slightly, rubbing the palms of his hands on his thighs. “I haven’t settled on a career path yet, but I am taking almost all of the classes they offer in my year at the Academy and that keeps all of my potential options open.

Diarmuid’s eyes narrow even further at the way Oscar is managing to politely handle their questioning, and when his

lips part to ask something else, I cringe already knowing it's going to be bad. "Are you sleeping with my daughter, Oscar?"

Morrigan swings his head around to face Diarmuid in disbelief and Azure makes a strangled sound. Me, well I just internally fucking scream while outwardly scrubbing a hand over my face. "Goddess Dad, I'm pretty sure Oscar covered that line of questioning earlier when you asked him about his intentions with me. That's our business."

Oscar blushes scarlett at me, not outright denying that we're having sex, and I bite the inside of my cheek at the way it makes his cheeks deepen from their natural lighter pink colour. My attention is drawn back to everyone else when my dads' heads all swing around to me in question and I let out a disgruntled breath. Rolling my eyes to the ceiling I grumble, "Not that it is any of your information, but no, we are not sleeping together." *Yet*, I add silently before pushing the thought aside for now and refocusing on the room where Diarmuid has switched onto a new line of questioning.

I barely suppress another eye roll, I can already tell that this is going to be my reality for the next hour of my life. Goddess, I hope wherever we're going doesn't depend on us getting there at a certain time, we might be here a while. Also, where the hell are the others?

CHAPTER THREE

Oscar

I grin as I lead Nessa towards the portal, gripping her hand tight in mine as I do. Goddess, I'm not going to lie, that was a stressful experience having all of her dads' eyes on me. All the questions. I can't believe I let the guys talk me into coming here alone to meet them. The majority of the tension in my shoulders disappeared as we said our goodbyes though, because I'm at least ninety percent sure that her family doesn't hate me, and I made it through the first meeting without being killed, so I count that as a win.

My mind flashes back to Nessa saying goodbye to Unicorn when we left and my smile widens. They seem to have grown closer since the fiasco with Ethan, which is good. She couldn't come tonight though, Nessa's surprise is in a place that would be quite stressful for a creature like Unicorn, and it should be a safe outing.

She laughs when we make eye contact again and swings our joined hands between us. "Where the hell are we going, Oscar? I thought we were all meeting up here, but they haven't?"

"You'll see. Just be patient."

"Can you at least tell me if you're all in on this together? Because otherwise Corin and Dylan are going to be in for one awkward surprise when they turn up at my place and I'm not there."

I chuckle at the slight whine in her tone. She's adorable. "They know about this—we decided I would be the only one to be thrown to the wolves today—so you don't need to worry."

She lets out a huff of air, clearly hoping I'd divulge more information. My grin widens and I shake my head, knowing I'm no amateur. I press a palm to the portal, using my magic to key it up to the correct location before stepping back. "Alright Nessa, there's going to be a step up and then we'll be going through a portal. Don't break contact with me and you'll be fine." My eyes slide to her face as I let her process my instructions, and I wait for her to jerk away from me. But she doesn't. In fact she doesn't appear even remotely bothered by the fact that she's placing her well-being in my hands.

She trusts me, I realise with a start. Somehow, I have gained this amazing woman's trust. I swallow hard, unexpected emotion rolling through me at the revelation. Clearing my throat I step into her side, wrapping an arm around her waist before walking her closer to the portal. "Ready?"

She nods, one of her hands snaking out to grip my shirt and she flashes me a toothy smile. "Yep."

"Step up," I murmur, guiding her and then we're being sucked into the portal. Icy tar presses over us from all sides and I groan. Goddess, I hate portals. Some people refer to their travel experience as taking a refreshing walk through water, but for me it's like jumping into a vat of black jello that's hell

bent on ensnaring me until I asphyxiate. Magic is so lovely at times.

We're in limbo for a few seconds before we're finally spat out on the other side. I've never been a graceful portaller and it seems that the same goes for Nessa as we're literally tossed a few feet when we appear out of the portal. I yelp as my body makes contact with the ground, instinctively shoving Nessa away from me so I didn't crush her on impact, and her echoing shriek rings through the air as she lands beside me and groans.

"Awe hell. What did I ever do to you? This is the second time you've thrown me like that. That's just asshole-ish behaviour if you ask me," Nessa mutters along with a string of colourful obscenities at the portal behind us, and my chest shakes with amusement as I watch her. She rubs at her ribs and a hint of concern goes through me, but she aims a smile at me.

Pushing up into a standing position, I help Nessa to her feet. *Fingers crossed she likes our idea.*

She blinks as her eyes adjust, face scrunched up and I wring my hands. Nessa scans the space, taking in the bustling crowd of people, stalls selling all sorts of things and the tops of rides in the distance, face blank. I swallow hard and open my mouth, ready to offer to go somewhere else, but a giddy grin finally bursts across her face and she laughs.

"Holy shit, are we at the famous Travelling Marketplace?" She spins in a slow circle, just taking it all in, joy practically radiating off of her. It travels throughout the Supernatural Realm every few weeks, moving between all the different

cities and villages, alike. They are not usually open the entire time they're stopped somewhere so it can be hard to organise a trip when they aren't staying in a spot close to where you live. They do usually travel here around this time of year though. It seems to be a favourite place of theirs to visit because they seem to come here often.

I duck my head in a nod, clearing my throat when she aims the full force of her happiness at me. Then she shocks the fucking shit out of me when she leaps at me, her arms looping around my waist, hugging me tightly for a few moments before bouncing away again. I blink at her repeatedly, but she ignores my stupor and grabs my hand, leading us further into the rush of the crowd. "So where are we going, Poppy?"

"I was thinking we could check out the stalls first," I say, watching her expression. It doesn't waver.

"Sounds good. I have a confession to make, I've never been to this before so you're going to have to be my guide."

I stand up taller, excitement bubbling in my stomach even more than before at the prospect of offering her a new and fun experience. I give her a playful bow, tipping my head back to grin at her before I straighten up. "This way it is then."

I offer her my arm, totally feeling the old fashioned vibe, and she chuckles before she slips her hand into the crook of my elbow, following my lead.

We move past stalls of all kinds and I wait for her to find one that catches her eye, but she seems enamoured with them all. Candy, jewellery, clothing, potions, supernatural creatures

—she jolts to a stop when her eyes land on that one. “Poor little ones,” she murmurs, her words only just audible over the noise of the market.

This stall is one of the larger ones and I too grimace at the animals in cages. Most are full grown—stolen from their natural habitat most likely. It is technically against the law, but with it being difficult to prove their origin it is a practice that is rarely policed.

Nessa’s grip on my hand tightens and she steps into the tent, taking in the space slowly. It’s not one of the better setups. Creatures of all sorts line wire racks along the walls of it, most in cages too small for animals of their size and species. My jaw clenches, and I suck in a calming breath. Places like this always rile me up, but there’s nothing we can do. As we reach the end of the aisle, the owner comes into view, a stout older woman, with a scowl permanently etched into her features.

Nessa smiles at her politely, as do I. “Good afternoon, Ma’am. How are you doing?”

My eyes shoot to Nessa, eyebrows rising ever so slightly. *What’s her angle here?*

“You’ve got some beautiful animals here. My family owns a good sized livestock farm that backs onto a large forest and we’ve been looking to purchase a creature we could let loose into the woods. We’ve been having problems with bat rats weaselling into our feed stock.” I fight the urge to raise my eyebrows at her lie. Or at least from what I saw of her place, her words don’t seem to match.

The woman's eyes light up at the prospect of a good sale and she eases to her feet, her claws flexing before she gestures down another aisle. "This way dear, I believe I have the perfect creature for you."

Nessa's brows draw together before she drops her chin, shoulders slumping. "I'm sure it's beautiful, but alas without its wild instincts it'll be useless to my family. Thanks anyways." She turns as if to go and I place a hand on her shoulder, playing along. I'm more than a little confused but I also kind of want to see how this is going to play out.

"It'll be okay, I'm sure we'll find something."

"Wait!" The woman calls, her voice sharp.

Nessa glances at her over her shoulder. "Yes?"

The woman visibly works to soften her body and when she speaks again her words have a sweet lilt to them. "There's no need for that dear. All my creatures are of the finest stock and captured directly from the wild. For purposes such as this."

Nessa spins on her feet, her eyes large and curious. Playing up her naive and slightly desperate act perfectly. "Really? But how were you able to catch so many creatures? Weren't you hurt?"

The woman's lips tug up into a slight smile, baring her shark like yellowing teeth. "Come here girl and I'll let you in on a little secret."

She nods, lips parted in awe. Nessa walks up to her, leaning in eagerly. The woman follows suit, but her low words still

reach my sensitive ears. “Magical traps, girlie. The best you can buy. I’m the head creator so if your daddy ever needs some, have him give me a call. I’ll even throw in a five percent discount.” The woman produces a card from her person and passes it to Nessa.

I cock my head to the side, eyes narrowing as I try to figure out where Nessa is going with this. Even having the woman confess that these are wild caught, it will be our word against hers *and* draw the supernatural council’s eye to us. Which is never a good thing. I’d be lying though if I said that Nessa’s acting skills don’t have me even more interested in seeing this little skit through, though.

I’m distracted from my thoughts when Nessa and the woman head down the aisle she gestured to earlier. She stops beside a cage that’s probably the size of a coffee table with a tiger-like creature shoved inside. I’m not well-versed in creature studies, but you’d assume that if wild it would be going nuts locked in a tiny cage like that, but it just watches us blankly.

Nessa drops down to her haunches, bracing her elbows on her thighs. “What’s wrong with it?”

The woman pats her shoulder patronisingly, her gaze full of pity—like she feels sorry for her level of stupidity. “He’s magically drugged up, of course. A few whispered words to dissipate the spell once he’s where you want him and he’ll be right as rain. Back to the ferocious beast he was in the wild.”

A mean glint enters the shop owner's eyes as she stares at the beast and I tense. If she harms it in front of me, I don't think I could hold myself back. Turns out I needn't worry though.

Nessa stands, dropping the act, pushing her shoulders back as she meets the woman's beady gaze head on. She takes a slow breath as though centering herself then the candy scent of her magic fills the space and her eyes begin to shift. Red spiderwebs weave through her eyes, turning the gold to a fragmented marble-like mixture. "I've heard and seen enough. I'm going to return them to the places you stole them from then set them free from your spell. Then you're going to free any others you have imprisoned, and finally you're going to destroy each and every one of your horrendous traps. And you're never going to come in contact with another creature again, no traps, no pets, no nothing. If I find out that you've gone against any of this, I will hunt you down and do to you everything that you've done to these creatures."

I swallow hard and step back from Nessa. The power building inside her is like physical waves of hot air brushing against my skin uncomfortably as she centres her focus on the woman. My lips part and I take yet another step back as the red totally eclipses the gold of her eyes and her irises start to glow like burning embers. Sense smacks into me when she focuses all that power on the owner of the store and I quickly conjure a barrier sealing the tent from everyone, making it so no one can enter—also in hopes to contain Nessa's power in case she loses control. It's also soundproof and the need for

that becomes abundantly clear when the woman starts screaming like the hounds of hell are coming down on her.

Then the seizing starts. *Goddess, what is Nessa doing to her?*

The woman's complexion shifts to a concerning shade of grey and her knees buckle, her face contorted in terror, eyes flickering behind her eyelids as though she's being chased by an unseen villain.

Nessa on the other hand appears rejuvenated, her skin glowing, posture confident, yet relaxed at the same time and her power is an audible electrical buzz through the air.

I swallow as her head cocks to the side slowly, eyes never wavering from the shop owner. This time when she speaks her voice is full of magic. "You will do everything I have said or I will be back and next time I won't stop. Count your lucky stars that I haven't taken this any further."

It's eerie as hell and I suck in a centering breath, then consciously work to relax my body. The woman falls to her knees, eyes open wide, as she gazes at Nessa. "I will, you have my word."

Apparently Nessa deems that enough as she lets go of her magic and once it's gone it's as though my ears have popped. Children scream, people talk, babies cry, laughter and other sounds from the market filter back in. It's surreal. As though everything that just happened was a daydream.

I blink repeatedly as I shove the thoughts away and meet Nessa's—thankfully—golden eyes, her magic now safely tucked away. She sends me a smile and grabs my hand, dragging me out of the shop, that happy bounciness from earlier returning full force. “What do you want to do next?”

“I think I saw some carnival game stalls that way,” I answer absently, gesturing to our right, but I'm too busy watching Nessa incredulously to really focus on anything else. How the hell does she just switch it on and off like that? Most supes would be extremely drained after using that much magic and probably need to go into a healing sleep for a few days to recuperate, but Nessa looks like she's just had a few cans of Fae juice—the fae's version of human energy drinks. My brows draw low as we move through the crowd, still lost in my head.

My stomach clenches and I break out in a cold sweat. What if something's wrong? There are tales of supernatural's close to burnout who become delirious and energetic as though everything is fine only to push it too far. I rub my free hand on my jeans, breathing going a little choppy. What if that woman calls the authorities about us? A distressed noise leaves me and my hands start to shake. My eyes slide over the crowd and my shoulders curl down. Too many people. The laughs, squeals and chatter hammer into my brain and I shudder. Then realise with a start what's happening. A panic attack. Goddess, not here. Not in front of Nessa.

I'm so lost in my own head that I don't notice that Nessa's turned around, trying to see if I'm alright. I mutely shake my

head and dry swallow, nausea swelling in my stomach.

Then suddenly we're on the move. Nessa's firm grip on my hand filters through the panic as she drags me, stumbling behind her between two large tents. She keeps walking until we're a decent distance from the people then throws her hands up—still clutching one of mine in hers—and closes her eyes. A barrier *pops* into existence around us and the overwhelming sound disappears, leaving us with only our heavy breathing.

I drop to the ground, letting go of Nessa's hand and scoot backwards until my back is braced against the barrier, trying to ground myself.



Nessa

I watch on, heart pounding in my ears as Oscar drops to the ground, scooting back against my barrier. I feel completely useless. I have no clue how to help him. It doesn't help that my mind is racing with the realisation that this is my fault. He was fine before I confronted that evil woman, then I was so swept up in trying to help those creatures that I didn't even realise it was stressing Oscar out. I let out a ragged breath, running a hand over my face. It must have been my fault, I can't see any other clear cause for his panic attack.

After a few seconds, frustration pulls at his features and he brings trembling hands to his hair, tugging on it roughly. I make a sound low in my throat. Witnessing him hurt himself sends an ache through my chest, so damn the consequences, I drop to my knees in front of him. It leaves me still looking down at him because of the way he's hunched over, but his head snaps up, those silver eyes locking with mine. The pain in them has a whine rising in my chest but I shove it down, reaching out towards him slowly giving him ample chance to stop me, but he doesn't.

I slide my hands over his, gently untangling them from his hair, guiding them to rest in his lap before threading my own hands into his hair. I keep my touch light and soothing, trailing my fingers from his forehead to his hair and back. It takes a few moments, but then some of the tension leaves his shoulders, and he slumps forwards even more until his

forehead is pressed to my shoulder. I manoeuvre us until I have my back pressed to the barrier and him still leaning against me, then we just *be*.

The silence is comforting rather than awkward as we sit there, Oscar slowly centering himself. His breathing steadies and his arms slide around my lower back, curling into me more. The position he's in can't possibly be comfortable so I use my magic to conjure a thick blanket beneath us. As soon as it's there Oscar stretches out, sliding down until his cheek is resting on my upper thigh, arms still wrapped around me as he slowly comes back to himself.

With everything calm for the moment, my mind takes that as an opening and starts to spin again. I'm silent though as guilt rolls through me, realising how bad that scene must have looked to him, and my hands pause in Oscar's hair for a moment before I jolt back to what I was doing. Continuing to fiddle with his hair, I have another realisation, though this one isn't bad. It's crazy how far my magic has come since the beginning of last term—when I barely had *any* magic. I know a lot of that progress is thanks to my family's help over the holidays, Dylan's tutoring last term, and my relentless practice, as of late. I need to get stronger though, otherwise I'll fail to protect the people I care about, *again*.

I feel the moment he becomes aware of the position we're in. His body tenses, but my hands don't falter in his hair and he soon relaxes again, letting out a long breath.

It should be awkward considering this is the most intimate we've ever been, but for some reason it's just, not. Well not on my end. "How are you going down there?" I ask, eyes scanning the half of Oscar's face I can see.

He meets my eyes for a moment before flushing bright red and turning to hide his face against my thigh. It sends tingles through my thigh and I jolt, sucking in a breath. His arms tighten around me and I clear my throat. "You know this isn't what I thought we'd be doing when you dragged me between two tents today," I say playfully, making it obvious that I'm joking around. I waggle my eyebrows at him, even though he can't see it. He laughs, and his breath is hot through my leggings. I bite my tongue and wince.

Lady bits, it's really not the time to be getting excited, the man just had a panic attack, have some fucking decorum. I scowl down at the clothing covered bits in question when Oscar bursts out laughing, shoulders shaking with the power of it. *Oh shit, did I say that out loud?* Heat crawls up my cheeks and I let my head drop back to thud against the barrier.

"Lady bits, huh?" Oscar says, voice husky.

My lips purse, eyes narrowing down at the pink haired man using my lap as a cushion. "Hey! I'm not a robot, your face is inches from said lady bits. And yes, I'm not creative enough to name them."

He snorts, then tips his head back, finally meeting my eyes. "Thank you," he says, his voice soft.

I simply stroke his hair again, and smile down at him not making a big deal about it. “Nothing to thank me for, Poppy. Now, would you like to talk about it, or are you ready for me to win you the biggest Troll plushie I can find?”

His silver eyes roll up to look at me, forehead wrinkling slightly as he searches my expression as though he’s trying to figure out how sincere I’m being. “Do you really mean that?” he whispers.

I wet my lips, face tightening with determination. “I do.”

Oscar stares at me, eyes a little hazy as though he’s having an internal debate over confiding in me, so I decide to offer him a piece of my vulnerability to help make his decision. “I’m sorry,” I say, voice rough, guilty eyes dropping from Oscar’s gaze.

He seems to startle at that, clarity snapping back into gaze. “What?”

“I’m sorry for acting so brashly, without letting you know or even considering how you felt being dragged into a situation like that.” My words successfully shove away any lingering happy buzz from feeding off of the shop owner’s fear earlier and I swallow hard.

Then Oscar does the strangest thing. He starts to laugh, head lolling back on my lap with the strength of it. When he notices my face screw up in hurt and confusion though, his laughter cuts off abruptly though a smile lingers on his mouth. He reaches up to gently cup my jaw, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Nessa, you take on the guilt of too much stuff. It wasn’t just

you, it was a mix of a ton of things and nothing at all. Whenever something too chaotic happens, be it good or bad, I tend to spiral into a panic attack as soon as the crazy moment is over and I'm safe or calm." He lets out a breath, face serene as I absorb that. It lifts some of the weight off my shoulders and clearly his expression of vulnerability does the same for him as he sits up in my lap slightly.

"So, about that giant Troll plushie?" he asks, voice a little raw from his panic attack, but he's no longer white as a sheet or trembling slightly. He's also smiling again, his mood and overall aura much lighter.

Giving my head a physical shake to shove away any lingering negative emotions I grin, eyes locked on his. "You bet. You won't know what's hit you when that giant plushie knocks you on your ass."

He laughs and pushes up to his knees, before helping me up as well. After dusting off my butt I lower the barrier, watching Oscar out of the corner of my eye to make sure he's okay before we make our way to the section with the arcade game stalls. I rub my hands together, grinning like a fiend. Time to win Oscar the Troll plushie I promised.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nessa

Sadly I wasn't able to get Oscar the Troll plushie I promised—the stalls were seriously lacking in any sort of human memorabilia—so I had to go the old fashioned route and win him a giant horned bear teddy. My eyes slide to the man in question who's walking beside me, a huge smile stretching his lips, his arms wrapped around the bear. It's at least five feet tall, covered in shaggy fur and has four curled horns sprouting from its head. The beady eyes though, they're creepy if you ask me. I wrinkle my nose before knocking my arm into Oscar's playfully.

“So where to now, Poppy?”

His silver eyes slide to me before flicking to look at someone a ways in front of us. When I follow his gaze I find Dylan striding towards us. “I've got something I need to do so I'm going to leave you in Dylan's capable hands and will see you later on.”

That sentence in itself has suspicion niggling at me, but the man in question walking toward us with a small smile fixed on his face, and those bright blue eyes glittering in the sunlight have me distracted enough to forget about that for now. His T-shirt and jeans don't do much to hide his broad shoulders and swimmer-build. If anything it has my tongue darting out to wet my lips. His brown hair is messy and has grown since I last saw him, but it's his missing black glasses that captures my interest. His eyes are so bloody bright without a layer of glass

between them and my gaze. They have my interest piqued about what type of supernatural he is, since I still don't know.

"Hi," Dylan murmurs as he comes to a stop a few feet from us. I mumble a greeting back, a little confusion swirling through me. It's not that I'm unhappy to see him, just a little suspicious about the way Oscar met him here and is sort of handing me off to him. *Like this was planned. Hmm.* I also can't help but recall that he never actually gave me an answer about where the guys were earlier, just distracted me.

"What have you guys been up to?" Dylan asks, smiling as he watches me, his cheeks a little flushed. It has me grinning, excited as anticipation over what he wants to show me today bubbles up in my gut.

"Oh you know, just the usual. Sightseeing, food, Nessa putting the fear of the Goddess through a woman to save a bunch of wild-caught exotic creatures. Rather uneventful for Nessa's standards I suppose," Oscar says casually, then his eyes light up. "And she won me this giant bear." He holds it up proudly, before patting it on the head gently like it's a living being.

I chuckle and Poppy tosses me a wink. Shaking my head, I stick my tongue out at him before refocusing on Dylan. He's watching me, his eyebrows practically touching his hairline and I cringe slightly. *Oh right, Oscar mentioned the shop owner.* I groan and rub a hand over my face. My impulsiveness will be the death of me one day, I swear. Until then, the attention it draws to me can be my fucking karma. Dylan's

blue eyes dart to Oscar before he strikes up a conversation about the *incident*, which I zone out of.

My eyes drift around the marketplace, over the stalls and the individuals laughing and having fun. It has an ache throbbing in my chest, the sudden urge to call Lexi filling me. This is exactly the kind of thing we'd do together. Impulsively, I reach for my phone only to pause. I'm supposed to be giving her space, so I cross my arms instead and force my thoughts to something else.

The something that has been nagging at me since I got over how hot Dylan looks. My brows draw down and I narrow my eyes at the crafty troll beside me. I swear this is coordinated. Which means Corin is probably involved, too. Oscar, the brat, must have spoken to them about today without including me. I open my mouth ready to question him when his focus returns to me, but Oscar darts in close and cuts me off by wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me into a tight hug. I jump, surprised, but then my arms come up to return the embrace, the plush teddy pressed between us.

“Thank you again for earlier, Nessa. It really means a lot.” He pulls back slightly so he can meet my eyes to fully convey how grateful he is. I smile and nod, an odd bubbly feeling rising in my chest. He nods once, then darts in, pressing a chaste kiss to the corner of my lips before dancing away with a silly grin on his face. “See you later, and thanks again for my new friend.” He holds up the bear, showing it off to Dylan once more, before turning around and dissipating into the flow of the crowd. Watching after him, it's a moment before I

realise I didn't get a chance to question him. I shake my head, deciding to leave it be for now, and grin at Dylan.

“So where are we going?” They clearly have a plan and I'm happy to go with the flow and get to know them more.

He tips his head down, hair falling forwards to partially cover his face before looking at me through his lashes. “I, uh, was thinking we could go to a quieter part of the market. If you want to, or we can stay here if you—”

I cut him off with a gentle smile to let him know I'm not upset by the idea. “Going somewhere quieter sounds great. My ears have been protesting for a while.”

Some of the tension in Dylan's shoulders eases and I relax with him. He's strung tighter than a bow string and all the chaos going on around us isn't helping, so I'm quick to follow him when he takes off through the crowd. It takes a few minutes, but then the crowds start to thin and Dylan eases through a small space between a pair of tents, and it's as though the sound of the fair eases immediately. My eyebrows raise and I turn around, squinting my eyes to see the magic barrier that's woven in a giant dome over what looks to be the entire Travelling Market. “Holy shit,” I breathe. *So much power.* My own magic flare's in response, having been a constant hum under my skin since using the animal abuser woman's greatest fear against her. I've come to the conclusion that I'm literally feeding on their fear. A thrill goes down my spine as the echo of her terror rolls over me before I shake it off.

“It’s crazy hey? It takes thirty A-class monsters to keep it running at full capacity, and the other supes who work here contribute alongside that whenever they are able to,” Dylan says quietly.

“That is crazy.”

Blinking out of the magic’s thrall, I continue after Dylan when he heads into the forestry surrounding the marketplace. I have a second of hesitation before stepping in after him. It takes me a few minutes before I realise that we’re walking around the marketplace and that Dylan somehow seems to know exactly where to go without actually being able to see the barrier through the trees. “How...” I trail off, my voice thick with confusion.

Dylan glances at me, his blue eyes glinting in the sun. “I grew up about a thirty minute walk from here and would sneak here every year. I’d spend full days here, figuring out all the hidden places, finding all of the less used or abandoned exhibits that this place carries with it whenever they travel to the next place.”

I don’t ask him about his family, because if the sad note in his voice is anything to go by, then his childhood home wasn’t all fun and games so I leave it be.

“One of my favourite places was always empty, and when one of the performers caught me there they gave me permission to stay as long as I’d like.”

I’m about to inquire what it was when we come to a stop just outside a blank tent. The fabric is weathered and frayed,

and it's only just inside the barrier, but I can also feel the strong magic that's woven into the structure, protecting it. Dylan holds the tent door open and steps aside to let me in. My skin tingles as I enter the space. So much old magic. It's as though it's radiating through the place.

The feeling is so intense that it takes me a moment to actually take in the space, but when I do, an audible gasp falls from my lips. "Goddess." It's an awed whisper and the heat from Dylan's body prickles my back as he steps closer to me.

The room is hexagonal in shape and probably about thirty feet from corner to corner. Floor to ceiling dark wood bookshelves line the walls, but that's not what grabs my attention, *no*, it's that even when I tip my head back I can't see the ceiling. Or the tops of the bookshelves. That's how tall the ceiling is, it's just a faint blob in the distance and the shelves go all the way up it. Every so often on one wall there is a small balcony, then more bookshelves. It's amazing. The shelves are full to the brim with books, and I spy tall rolling ladders staggered up the space, attached to the shelving. The lowest one across from me is practically begging to be used. Great arcs of sunlight beam through the space, bathing everything in golden light, giving the space a calming ambience. It's so beautiful that it's *unreal*.

I take in a deep breath and am flooded with the scent of old books, candle wax and clean laundry. It has my eyes sliding to Dylan, his scent so similar that it has a smile tugging at my lips. Tension that I didn't even realise was there, releases while a giddy feeling bubbles up in my chest. *The urge to explore.*

I do a quick scan of the rest of the room, too focused on the bookshelves before, to take in the rest. Two wooden desks—their colour and style matching that of the bookshelves—stand on opposite sides of the room, surrounded by beanbags, pillows, and fuzzy blankets. It's literally like my fantasy safe space. It's overwhelming.

I swallow roughly. “Wow, I can see why you came here as a kid.”

His breath ghost's the back of my neck and I arch it to the side before I realise what I'm doing. I don't move though, it's like an impulse that's humming just beneath my skin. An itch that I don't know how to scratch. Dylan doesn't react the way I think he will—which is in confusion, because I'm acting like I'm a weirdo—and it has me letting out a breath, my shoulders relaxing in relief. He cups my upper throat, drawing a gasp from me though, before skating his fingers down the length of my neck, bringing goosebumps to my skin, then breaks contact. I have to swallow a whine at the loss, but that odd impulse seems to have abated now that he's not so close to my throat. *Thank the Goddess.*

My brows lower though as Dylan glides past me, heading to the ladder I was eyeing earlier. It's like he could sense what was happening to me and knew exactly how to soothe it. My jaw twitches, eyes narrowing. *Another unanswered question.* After today I need to dive back into my search, I have so much to catch up on; The Drákon group, my magic, this new odd side of me, and of course, Ethan, so we can catch the bastard. This self proclaimed sabbatical I've been on ends now. With a

decisive nod, I refocus on the present and find Dylan halfway up the ladder.

My thoughts shift back to that of this new, softer, almost more... primal side of me. It's new and a little worrying, but I can't be sure if it's because of my magic or if it has always been there and the guys are just bringing it closer to the surface. Unintentionally coaxing it out of me.

Dylan looks at me over his broad shoulder, and it snaps me out of my thoughts, my focus zoning in on the way his blue eyes are twinkling with a playful light that I don't think I've seen them have before. "You coming or what?"

A grin springs to my lips and I walk over to him, dancing around the comfortable furnishings on the ground then pausing to look up at his ass. The bastard has a fine fucking ass.

"Like what you see?" He rumbles. My eyes snap to his face, a witty comeback ready on my tongue, until I realise that he isn't mocking me, but genuinely asking.

My grin turns downright goofy as any embarrassment I had vanishes. "Yeah. You've got an awesome ass."

I laugh when he ducks his chin, a slight blush heating his cheeks. He's fricking adorable, and it's so at odds with the more dominant side of his that I've gotten peeks of. When we reach the first balcony I lean over the railing to the ground floor and whistle at how high up we are, with so much to go. "This is amazing. Is this magic? Or is the building actually this high? The tent seemed large from the outside, but nothing to

this extent,” I ask Dylan, since he seems so knowledgeable on the space.

He rolls his shoulders before reaching out to grip a rung on the next ladder. “It’s a combination of both, well, sort of. This is one of the oldest buildings they have on the grounds so it was created using methods that are seldom used in our time. It originated back before the Monster classifications of A, B, and O class existed. Back then, your power level wasn’t outright labelled and if you were more powerful than deemed socially acceptable, then it was something you kept to yourself, rather than shared because people would fear you. When it was being made with natural materials, they wove their magic into everything. Sort of like crocheting a web into it. Which, though rewarding, is a very time consuming process. There is enough magic in this place to keep it pristine for hundreds—possibly thousands of years, including any novels added to the space.” He pauses, continuing the climb and I follow him. “The tent we saw outside is just an illusion spell to further dissuade bad people from entering due to the misleading rundown appearance,” Dylan finishes explaining, his stronger tutoring voice ringing through the quiet room.

Now my throat is dry for a whole other reason and those damn goosebumps are back. The next landing is slightly narrower, but no less trippy, but it also draws my attention to something else. “So bright, yet no artificial lighting or windows...?” I trail off.

“Magic,” he confirms with a nod.

We're quiet for the rest of our climb other than me making a few comments on the books we pass and him interjecting interesting facts about the place. One of which being that with the amount of magic it contains, the building is able to pick and choose who enters. That little tidbit has happiness bubbling up in my chest, despite knowing it's *just* a building. But hey, they've been wrong before. Just think about Ghost Girl back at school, which no one seems to know about—somehow.

I shake my head again. As much as the silence is comfortable between us, it gives me too much time to get lost in my head, which is never a good idea when it comes to me.

Dylan's hand on my shoulder startles me out of my musings and my eyes snap to his, an apologetic grimace on my face for zoning out. "Sorry," I murmur.

He searches my face, barely a foot of space between us. "You okay?"

My breath catches before I force it to be normal, but apparently Dylan's more attentive than he seems because his focus flicks to my chest briefly before returning to my face. "Yeah, I'm fine. So what was it you wanted to show me?"

If I was hoping that would appease him, I was severely mistaken. His eyebrows rise before he lifts his hands to my shoulders and manually turns me around.

It puts my line of sight to the view beyond a monstrous window and I suck in a breath. It's the only window in the building that I've seen and it's taller than Oscar. Dome-like in

shape, it overlooks the entire marketplace and shows parts of the land beyond. Holy moly. “It’s gorgeous,” I whisper.

“Yeah.” His voice is low and when I look over my shoulder I find his gaze fixed to me instead of at the view. I shiver at the intensity in his eyes, and a flush works its way through my body. My focus shifts to his mouth and my tongue darts out to wet my lips. Dylan eyes follow the movement then he’s turning me again and stepping into me until my back is against the window. The glass is cold against my overheated skin as it seeps through the fabric of my top. Then his lips are on mine, one hand winding around my lower back to tug us even closer together while the other comes up to loosely grip my nape.

I melt into his touch like an attention starved kitten, hands coming up to clutch his shirt. He angles my head the way he wants and *owns* my mouth, teasing my tongue and nipping at my lips. My grip on his shirt tightens and a strangled sound leaves me when we break apart. I suck in air, lips parted, watching Dylan with wide eyes. The intensity behind his kiss is so unexpected but appreciated nonetheless. He’s usually so shy that it’s hard to get a read on what he’s feeling. That, mixed with the hints of his more dominant side that shines through sometimes, I have no idea what to expect.

He reaches out to cup my jaw, and I lean into his palm, the urge to purr rising again. He strokes my cheek, blue eyes bright as he studies my features like he’s trying to figure me out. Then a sudden beeping starts up and I jump, smacking the back of my head against the window. I yelp, only for it to turn

into a laugh when Dylan's hand shifts from my jaw to the back of my head.

"Sorry," he murmurs, clicking a button on his watch while checking time.

"It's fine."

His eyes dart to mine and he gives me a tiny smile. "Are you hungry?"

As though it was waiting for an acknowledgment, my stomach lets out a loud rumble and I grin. "I could eat."

Dylan nods, but rather than heading back to the ladders he crosses the balcony to a bare white wall and turns back to me. I walk up to him at a slow pace, my brows rising. "Whatcha doing?"

That little smile morphs into a cheeky smirk as he presses his hands against the wall. There's a click then part of the wall pops open, and Dylan pulls the previously hidden door open and steps in the dark space behind it. There's another click before a light sputters on. "Is that a..."

"Yep." Dylan brushes a hand through his hair, watching me carefully.

"Oh my gods," I squeal, doing a happy dance. It's the top of a slide. It appears to be made of heavily stained wood, so the surface has a resin-like shine. A slide that if I'm guessing correctly, goes right to the ground level of the library. I reach out and squeeze Dylan's hand, grinning like a fool.

He steps aside smiling as he gestures for me to take a seat. I don't hesitate, plopping down, gripping the sides of the slide loosely as I peer down into the dark hole that is where the slide disappears into. *This is going to be freakin' epic.*

As if it can't get any better, Dylan presses his hand to the wall above the entrance to the slide and his clean laundry scent washes over me as he uses his magic. A semi circle of runes start to glow beside his hand, then the previously dark tunnel lights up like a galaxy. I suck in a breath, in awe. Before I get a chance to comment, Dylan shifts so he's behind me, hands gripping the sides of the slide just beside mine.

"Ready?" he asks and I nod.

I shuffle forwards and let go of the sides. The moment I do, Dylan's magic explodes out of him and into the slide, and suddenly it's smooth and I'm sliding easily. I scream as I go flying, the magic galaxy on the tunnel's ceiling nothing more than a blur. The scream turns into a cackle of pure euphoria as I'm tilted to the side, the slide walls morphing until it's a cylinder around me. I end up laid flat on my back for the rest of the trip, still laughing when I shoot out of the end of the slide and land on something soft, body rolling and bouncing a few times before I come to a complete stop. I have to fight to suck in air and shove down my amusement. "I don't think I've ever had that much fun. *Ever,*" I say under my breath. Then I realise that Dylan's probably about to come flying out the end of the slide too so I scramble off what I now notice is a huge mattress, covered in dozens of pillows and wrapped in warding to create the perfect landing site. I purse my lips,

trying not to break into a fit of laughter again, but Dylan comes flying out of the slide, letting out a bunch of undignified oofs as he rolls a few times, trying to stop, and I crack. I flop down onto the mattress beside him, clutching my stomach as giggles shake through me. All control of my amusement is gone.

After a few seconds, someone pokes my shoulder and I crack open one eye to glare at Dylan as I struggle to not crack up again. He's braced on his hands and knees in front of me, a foot or so between us. "This is your fault," I accuse, pointing a finger at him, then think better of that and boop him on the nose instead. He stares at me incredulously, eyebrows practically touching his hairline and of course I crack up again. Sitting up, I fumble around blindly behind me until my hand closes around just the item I was searching for. Then I proceed to smack Dylan with it.

He lets out an oof as the pillow collides with his face and I cackle like a fiend.

"Oh it's on now," he growls, lunging for the closest pillow he can reach. I scurry back with a shriek, but he grabs my ankle, yanking me back to him. I go to protest but end up with a mouthful of cotton instead. Laughing, I grapple for a bunch of throw pillows and launch them at his face one after the other until he lets go of my ankle.

I scramble away and dive behind a fluffy body pillow, using it like a shield. Peering over it, I drag any pillows within arms

reach closer to me. “I declare this a pillow war,” I say diplomatically.

“To the death,” Dylan adds, his face serious.

I nod. “Or until you decide to surrender.” He scowls and I cackle again, building up my barrier, then launching several more pillows in his direction. He lets out a few dramatic grunts of discomfort as they hit him, before launching a ton of them back at me. I fall back with a hand to my forehead, feigning great injury.

The sweetheart falls for it, getting to his knees and shuffling over to me. When he’s close enough, I spring up and tackle him. He goes down with a strangled sound, clearly not expecting it and it sets off another round of limb weakening giggles that allow him to get the upper hand.

“I surrender,” I say through heaving breaths as he hovers over me, hands pressing my wrists to the mattress gently, a proud grin twisting his lips.

“That was quick after such brazen words earlier.” He quirks a brow and I scowl.

Intending to prove him wrong, I lunge up and bite his throat, teeth clamping around his jugular. I keep the pressure light, barely enough to leave a mark, but it gets the point across. “Bang you’re dead, and I win,” I mumble around his throat.

He shivers, and a guttural sound rattles in his chest. He jerks back suddenly and I bite down in surprise, and wind up nipping his throat, *hard*. Another sound leaves him and this

time *I'm* the one that shivers. When I meet his eyes, I suck in a breath. They're almost completely black. His pupils are so dilated that only a thin strip of blue is visible around them.

"I wouldn't do that, Nessa," he warns, his voice the lowest I've ever heard it. It's also slightly muffled and I cock my head to the side. Then he *smiles* and my eyes widen as I focus on his mouth. Two thin fangs rest where his normal canines usually would. I mentally smack myself in the face. *Goddess, Nessa. Only you would bite a vampire in a taunting manner.* It's like you want to be bitten. Goosebumps pepper my skin, and another shiver wracks through me as my mind locks onto that while my imagination goes wild.

I swallow so hard that my throat clicks and Dylan zeros in on that movement. He leans forward, tongue darting out to wet his lips, eyes narrowed on my throat, breathing ragged. Then he's jerking back, and is suddenly in the opposite corner of the room from me. He blinks rapidly, knuckles white as he clenches the back of the chair in front of him. Like it's a lifeline.

I too blink, unsure how to take that reaction. My gut clenches, and my eyes burn, something inside me writhing around as a feeling of rejection rolls through me. I logically know that it isn't necessarily a rejection, but it's like this other side of me has the reins of my emotions right now. But I shake it off. Clenching my jaw and focusing on a spot on the wall away from Dylan, I give myself time to get it together as I push to my feet. Sucking in measured breaths, I bite the inside of my cheek and count back from one hundred to distract my

racing mind. My counting doesn't get very far before the side of my head prickles as Dylan's burning gaze settles on me and I shuffle my feet, suppressing a groan. Awkwardness blankets the space between us, the silence becoming more and more strained as the seconds tick by.

A knock on the library's main door breaks the silence and my shoulders slump in relief when I feel Dylan's burning gaze leave me and land on the door. His footsteps are loud in the quiet room as he walks to the door and I fidget, brushing imaginary lint off of my clothing. I don't excel in awkward situations. It's almost as bad as me in an overly social setting like a party.

The hinges on the door creak as Dylan pulls it open then a throat clearing draws my eyes to the source. "Ahh, am I interrupting something? I can come ba—"

Dylan grimaces, eyes sliding to me for a moment before returning to the man standing in the doorway. "It's fine. Thank you."

Dylan steps back allowing the young man entry and I perk up as he strolls into the room, tugging a cart behind him. How curious. And not at all what you'd expect in a place like this. Then again, neither is this amazing library so I can't really judge.

I'm distracted from my thoughts when the scent hits me. Ohmygods, fried sweet potato chips, horned piglet sausages on a stick, and butter cakes just to name a few, have my stomach growling. My feet carry me towards the cart like they're

freaking possessed and my stomach lets out another godawful grow demanding food.

The man who had been avoiding eye contact since entering the library, finally cracks a small, but kind smile and glances at me. “Hi, Miss.”

That has my shoulders loosening even further and I chuckle. “Nessa, please. That smells amazing.” I inch closer to the cart about ready to snatch one of the covered dishes and run away with it. Thankfully, he starts setting them on one of the study desks and I grin. I’m practically rubbing my hands together like an evil mastermind. Dylan grabs another chair and places it on the opposite side of the desk so we can both sit there and I force my expression not to waver.

Who knew that emotions could change so quickly. One second we were messing about and having a fun moment, one that could have shifted to steamy, then the next it was awkward as all hell. Dammit, another potential smexy moment ruined. I’m going to die of lady blue-balls. *Hmm, I wonder if that’s something you can actually die from.* I cock my head, actually considering it for a second before snorting. I shake my head to myself, grinning, then roll my lips in, eyes widening when I look up to find both Dylan and food cart guy staring at me. *Whoops*, fingers crossed I didn’t say any of that outloud.

I clear my throat and settle into my seat. Food cart guy finishes up quickly then tips his tophat—yeah, literal black tophat—at me before hightailing it out of the room with his cart.

Dylan takes a seat across from me but doesn't make a move to grab anything, merely watches me. Goddess, having his attention centred on me is intense. Is it hot in here? Maybe it's just me. I blow out a breath and wiggle around to get comfortable. "Thank you for the food and for bringing me here. I can tell how important this place is to you." I'm honestly just trying to make conversation now, as well as prompt him to start grabbing food so I can too. Yeah, mostly the second thing.

He blinks at me then nods, gesturing to the food. "Feel free to start."

I don't question it, and start piling food onto my plate. So many yummy foods are present that little happy noises rumble from my throat as I eat. I let myself zone out, particularly enjoying the butter-cakes after drowning them in strawberry sauce and icing sugar. *Yum.*

Once I've cleared about three-quarters of my plate I take a large gulp of my coffee and sit back with a happy groan. Yep, despite the lingering tension—which I'm currently ignoring—this has been an epic hangout session with Dylan. The thought that this has a lot of similarities to a date niggles at the back of my mind, but I shove it aside. If it were, he'd tell me that, right? Or at least you'd think he would. Or that they would because the time I spent with Oscar is eerily similar to a date as we—

No Nessa, you're just reading into shit. Cut it out.

I clear my throat and hum under my breath trying to ignore my inner turmoil. Sometimes my mind can be my biggest enemy.

“As I told you earlier, I found this place the first time I came here when I was a child.”

My eyes jerk up, eyes settling on Dylan and I nod so he knows I’m listening.

“I, uh, didn’t spend a lot of time at home if I could help it. My mother is lovely, but my older brothers...” he trails off, eyes going distant as though he’s caught up in a memory.

He braces a hand on the table and I set mine down next to it, tracing patterns over his knuckles while I wait for him to continue. He grimaces, then refocuses on me.

“Anyway, libraries were always my favourite place. Finding a new world to disappear into.” A smile plays on his lips and he flips his hand over, fingers fiddling with mine. “The second time the Travelling Marketplace came to town I explored it more and discovered the slide. Adding my magic to it came later, and the first time I went down it the landing spot was only an old ward. I dislocated my shoulder and almost fractured my wrist. My mother’s a healer, so she was able to pop my shoulder back in.”

I chuckle softly. “I bet she was pretty furious.”

He nods, blue eyes studying me in that way he does so often. “She was. She’s a gentle soul though, so she babied me for a few days after that.”

I smile, my mind conjuring up a young cherub cheeked version of Dylan being hugged by a slender woman with his eyes. I don't ask if his father's in the picture, he can tell me in his own time if he wants to. "She sounds lovely," I say, my voice soft. I've never really had a mother figure—don't get me wrong, my fathers are amazing. But it always makes me wonder what it would be like.

"She is."

I take a few more bites as the conversation fades out and Dylan does the same.

"I—I'm sorry about earlier," Dylan blurts out of the blue, just as I'm about to have the last bite of my food. I pause, fork hovering inches from my lips as I lock eyes with him. I blink, processing his words, my lips tightening and eyebrows drawing together. I set the utensil down, staring at the last bite of food forlornly for a few seconds before returning my attention to the worried looking part-vampire in front of me.

"What do you mean?" It seems that wasn't what he was expecting me to say as it's Dylan's turn to be confused.

"When we were messing around, I didn't mean to scare you or nearly lose control."

I bite the inside of my cheek, something inside me soothed by his words, and the reassurance that he *didn't* reject me earlier. When I don't respond right away, a flush creeps onto Dylan's cheeks and he tugs at the collar of his T-shirt, eyes darting around the room.

I lean forward and brace my elbows on the table in front of me, trying to convey as much of my seriousness into my tone that I can. “Dylan, I didn’t and don’t think any of that. I trust you and wasn’t for one moment worried that you’d lose control.” Worried, *no*. For some strange reason hoping you’d bite me? *Yes*. “I didn’t actually realise you were a vampire hybrid until you flashed your fangs at me earlier...” I trail off, somewhat embarrassed about that. I’m usually more on point with things like that. I don’t know much about vampires, or vampire hybrids other than the fact that hybrids are looked down upon by purebreds and depending on what species they’re mixed with their level of power can range dramatically. They do still need blood to sustain their vampire side, though.

He sits back, practically melting into the seat as relief washes through him. Then his head jerks up, narrowed blue eyes gleaming as he scans me. As though something has just occurred to him. “If you weren’t scared then I was reading you correctly...” he trails off, his eyes sharpening even more, and I press my thighs together, tongue darting out to wet my bottom lip.

“Dilated pupils, sweet scent, lips parted,” he murmurs, forehead wrinkling cutely as he cocks his head as though cataloguing my expression for future reference. Goddess, I may as well be broadcasting ‘*I’m turned the fuck on, do me already*’ to the world.

I sit back and scrub a hand over my face. Dylan’s scent clogging up the space isn’t helping me clear my head. Much

more of this and I'll have to call for a bathroom break and use a cleaning rune on my panties or just go without—*no, bad Nessa.*

The moment is broken when Dylan's watch beeps again and my eyebrow's rise as he gets to his feet, brushing off his shirt. I can't say I'm not curious about his punctuality, but I leave it be for now and stand up too. I'm only slightly mournful when he magics away the food, leaving the dishes spotless before leading me to a comfy spot amongst the cushions and beanbags.

“So I took the liberty of picking out a few books that I thought you might like, but if you don't, then you can browse for others. You can take them with you and once you've finished them, the magic will return them to the library.”

I grin and rub my hands together. *Awesome, time to see just how well Mr. Vampire knows me.*



Turns out Dylan knows me pretty well. One of the books he chose was one I've already read and loved, and while the other two are a little different to the ones I'd usually read, they're definitely interesting. All of them are reverse harems and that little niggle at the back of my brain about the whole coordinated dates idea tries to scream at me, but I once again push it away. Unless they bring it up to me, I'm not going to

go assuming only to get my heart—*lust-addled brain* broken when it's something I've made up in my head.

I pick one of the books and we both settle in to relax and read for a while. It's something that I need after the hectic morning and by the time Dylan's watch beeps again, I'm feeling rejuvenated and am buzzing with energy, ready to explore more of the marketplace.

So when he helps me to my feet, I go willingly. He leads me out of the library and I take a moment to press my hand to a wall and push my thankfulness into it. My magic responds, lurching forward to mingle playfully with that of the library and I sigh, shoulders slumping happily. This place is amazing and even if I only contributed to a few more years of life, it seems to have plenty of juice to keep up and running. The corner of my lip kicks up and I shove my hands in my pockets, strolling after Dylan. I'll have to come back here for sure.

My brain is preoccupied as we walk through the bush to wherever I'm guessing Corin is waiting, so we don't speak, a comfortable silence between us. My eyes narrow when it occurs to me. Personal portal travel. If I can figure out how to, or can unlock the ability to create and set my own portal, then I can come here or anywhere else, whenever I want. My brain had been skipping back to Oscar and the portal he activated for me to go through. With how unreliable and weak my powers were, it was never an option, but now if I can master it, it could be a game changer. In the past to get around, I had used an amulet I bought imbued with portal travel magic, but it's limited compared to the possibilities it would open up for me

if I could do it with my own magic. I'd also be able to get a lot of my information from trusted second parties and informants rather than go out in the field myself. I add it to my mental whiteboard of things to do until I can go back to the Academy, and nod decisively. I have a few days until I can leave, so now's the perfect time to start studying.

Taking a deep breath, I hold it for several moments before releasing it slowly. I release all my tension with it and simply relish in the nature surrounding us. Though I can't help but wonder what Corin has planned for me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nessa

“Yes,” I say adamantly, crossing my arms as I stare at the ride in front of us, excitement bubbling under my skin.

“Yes? Are you sure, sweetheart?” His voice is low, expression serious as my eyes flick to his. “Once we’re on it, we’re stuck there so you won’t be able to change your mind.”

I laugh, gesturing to the unique looking ride with my hand and widen my eyes at him as though he’s insane. “This looks fucking amazing, why the heck would I change my mind?” I pull a face at him. *This is nothing scary to me.*

Alright, I might be behaving a little bratty at the moment, but I can’t seem to help it. After spending more time with the other two, less uptight supernatural’s, I wasn’t expecting Corin to be doing the whole blank-emotions-and-scowl-routine and it’s irritating me just a smidge. I figured he’d show me some more of that hidden fun side. The one he revealed to me that day in runes—if I didn’t imagine it—then it’s buried somewhere deep today. Speaking of, his eyebrow quirks as his sceptical eyes dart between the ride and me, lips pressed into a flat line.

“Ye, have little faith,” I mutter, refocusing on the ride. The way it works seems fairly simple. Like all the rides here, it is mainly controlled and powered by magic. From where we’re standing, it looks as if the riders ahead of us are getting into a clear human sized bubble-thingy that has two seats in it. Once

they're strapped in, then they start the ride. Grinning wickedly, I watch as another pair of supes step into their bubble.

There are a few dozen of these large volcano shaped thingies of varying heights that are dotted sporadically around an oval field that has a rainbow fence as a barrier. The oval appears to be about the size of two football fields long, and two wide. Straining up on my tiptoes I try to count exactly how many volcano things there are but it's too hard from this angle.

Once the bubble's door has been shut and everyone is strapped in securely, the fae worker steps back and starts the ride. Which is where the fun begins. Cackling, I watch as the bubble is launched up into the air at a slight angle and the two supe's scream. Their fear is more watered down than when I incite it, but I get a boost from it nonetheless. Squinting my eyes, I make a mental note to come back to that new tidbit later. The bubble is airborne for a few seconds before careening back down and hitting just above another volcano thingy before being launched up in the air again. This is repeated on the other volcanoes, but it must have a pattern because there are at least twelve other balls filled with people being tossed around the space, and I've yet to see any collide with each other.

Yep this is going to be epic. Turning back to Corin, I try to imbue every ounce of confidence I'm feeling in my smile as I beam at him. "I'm so ready for this."

The grumpy bastard's eyes narrow on my expression, but he doesn't return my smile. I lick my slightly chapped lips and run my eyes over him from head to toe, trying to find evidence of what's up his ass today, but I can't spot anything. His usually black shaggy unkempt hair is tied back in a low ponytail, with a Viking braid running down each side of his head—probably to catch the wispy bits. The hairstyle allows me to actually see his features properly for the first time and I will admit to no one that I may have had to consciously pick my jaw up off the floor when I first saw him today. Something that amused him to no end if his little smirk was anything to go by. *Ass*. He shifts on his feet and the silver clamps dotted through his hair glint in the sunlight, drawing my attention. He's dressed in a simple, black long sleeved button up shirt and dark jeans. I mentally melt just a teensy weensy bit. *Why does he have to be so gosh darn hot?* Then my eyes snag on that scowl again and I groan.

“That's it. Who pissed in your Fruit Loops this morning?” I brace my hands on my hips, narrowed eyes practically fixed on him.

As what I said registers, a startled laugh bursts from him. “What?” he asks, brows raised.

I take a few heavy steps closer, leaving barely a foot of space between us. “I said, who pissed in your Fruit Loops this morning?”

That cool calm returns and I grunt, head tipping back to sigh loudly. *Yep, I'm definitely still feeling bratty*. Turns out I like

to be spoiled, who knew?

“Fruit Loops?”

I huff another sigh and turn away so I can pace. “Of course you don’t know what Fruit Loops are. The horror. You may as well be telling me you don’t know what a unicorn is,” I mutter to myself. No wonder he’s so grumpy all the time. Going through life without trying those delicious sugary rainbow rings is a travesty. *Stupid Mountain Man.*

“So?” he questions patiently, returning my focus to him. “Are we going on the ride or not?”

I throw my hands up in an exasperated fashion. *That’s only what I’ve been trying to convince you I want to do for the last ten minutes.* “Yes, I am so ready. Come on, let’s go.” I turn to stare at the fae ride again and my grin returns as we start towards it.

“If I die I’m going to come back and haunt your ass forever,” he mutters, trudging after me.

“Noted,” I say, then pause. “Wait, were you checking in with me so much because you don’t want to go on this ride?” I turn to him, eyebrows practically touching my hairline. *Well this is a new development.*

Those rainbow iris’s flit away from mine as a pink flush touches his cheeks. *Goddess, I’m right.* He dips his head, rubbing his palms on his thighs. “Naw, are you scared of heights, big guy?”

His flush deepens, but he scowls, shoulders hunching in a little. “No, I’m not *scared* of heights, I just avoid them if I can.”

Feeling bad about teasing him, I gently knock my shoulder against his and rock back on my heels. “Don’t worry, I avoid Bat-rats if I can, too.” *Shifty little bastards they are.* Smiling, I refocus on the bubble ride, wanting to get on so bad, but I recognise that it’s probably someone who hates heights’ worst nightmare. “Do you want to go on a different ride then? I think I saw a rollercoaster over that way that was closer to the ground and circled the park? We can do that instead?” I offer. I mean, I’d suggest we do something else entirely, but he literally led me to this section of the marketplace when we met up and told me to pick a ride.

Shaking his head, Corin moves toward the fae worker in front of the empty stationary bubble and I follow. Dipping his head in a nod, he passes our tickets to the fae worker then ushers me into the awaiting bubble.

“We can do the rollercoaster after,” he murmurs, observing how the worker straps us in. His face goes slightly green when the door closes behind us, sealing us in.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say, my worry warring with excitement as the ride gears up, a whirring beneath us. *Goddess, this is going to be awesome.* I look at Corin again. *Probably.*



Corin

A groan gets stuck in my throat as my fingers clamp down on the arms of my seat, body tense enough to crack. *Shit, maybe this was a bad idea.* I wasn't going to choose this section of the marketplace to hang out with Nessa. In fact, when we discussed it, I was adamantly against it, but both Oscar and Dylan had plans already in mind so I didn't say anything. I hadn't thought about it much and was open to ideas, plus I don't know them as well as they do each other so I didn't want to get laughed at for being *nervous* when it comes to heights. Insecurities are a bitch sometimes.

Whirring sounds come to life below us and the bubble shifts. A squeak sneaks past my tightly sealed lips and I blush, *again. Goddess, give me fucking strength.* Nessa's eyes are practically burning into the side of my head, but I don't meet her eyes, instead I brace waiting for the bubble to be thrown into the air like an upside-down yoyo then fall back to the ground just to repeat the action.

When the ball shoots upward, I shout, shock and adrenaline needling through me even though I was expecting it. Nessa stays silent, but my eyes are glued shut so I can't tell if she's enjoying this or not. We seem to reach a peak and my stomach swoops with a moment of weightlessness before we plummet back down to the ground. Another yelp escapes me as we hit the pocket of air above one of the launching mechanisms then we're up again.

I was right—this is absolutely awful. I swear I'm about to have an actual fucking heart attack when Nessa's voice pierces through the sounds of my blood rushing in my ears and frantic panting breaths. "Corin."

I groan in reply, biting my tongue with the next jolt of the ball.

"*Corin.*" She's more insistent this time and I crack an eyelid a tiny bit, but not enough to see.

"Grab my hand." Her request stuns me enough that my eyes pop open in question, only to slam back shut as the sky and all the itty bitty buildings filter in through the clear bubble surrounding us.

"We're gonna die. My god. Why the hell did I agree to this, woman?" I ramble, fingers like fucking claws, gouging into the seat.

"I swear to the gods, you stubborn man, grab my fucking hand," she growls, concern laced into her voice.

Doing as she says at the command in her voice, I reach out blindly, locating her hand as our bubble swoops through the air again. First my fingers find hers and I thread our fingers together, then all of the sudden my fear just vanishes. My eyes pop open, head turned to the left, staring at her in utter fucking amazement. What the hell? "How are you doing that?" I ask, wonder in my voice.

Nessa smiles at me, cheeks a little pale, breathing laboured and it hits me. She was feeding off of my fear. She doesn't

look as floaty as she usually does after she feeds, though, which is unusual. “I’m not completely sure, I just somehow knew that if you touched me I could take your fear away. Don’t let go of me or it’ll come back, alright?”

I nod, body and mind struggling to catch up after having so much adrenaline running through me, only for the thing causing it to disappear so quickly. “Thank you,” I murmur. Then I realise the ride is still going, we’re still being tossed about, but now I can actually enjoy it. A laugh bursts out of me as we fall towards the ground before being thrown back up, that weightlessness rushing back.

I take in the view and Nessa joins in, enjoying the ride with me, though she’s more subdued about it then when we started. When the ride comes to a stop, we’re unstrapped and I let go of Nessa’s hand, almost expecting all that fear to come rushing back, but it doesn’t. I climb out of the bubble on shaky legs, the stable ground odd after being at the mercy of gravity for the last ten minutes. Smiling, I glance at Nessa and find her watching me, her expression solemn.

“What’s wrong?” My brows draw down, unsure as anger tightens her features.

“*What’s wrong?*” she asks, throwing her arms up again, before staring at me wide eyed, nostrils flaring like an angry bull. I swallow and take a step back. This is a side of Nessa I haven’t had directed at me before. She’s actually a little terrifying. Tugging at the collar of my shirt, I watch her carefully. “You seriously did not just say that!”

She starts pacing, muttering to herself about stupid, idiot men. I roll my lips in, determined not to laugh. What started out as scary, now reminds me a little of an angry kitten. She whirls on me, jabbing her pointer finger into my chest. “Don’t you dare laugh at me, Mister. You gave me a freaking heart attack.” My eyebrows dip, my amusement fading a tiny bit. “Scared of heights. *What? Me? Nooo.* I just avoid heights,” she says in a mocking voice, drawing out the words sarcastically. I’d be offended but I know this is stemming from a place of worry. It makes my primal side purr. The side that was mysteriously fucking absent from my panic on the bubble ride.

A furious growl tumbles from Nessa’s lips and my focus jerks back to her. “Don’t you dare make that sound right now, big guy. I’m mad at you.” The purr I didn’t realise I was making so loudly falters before I cut it off. I reach out to her, ready to apologise, but the vixen spins around staying out of reach and storms off in the direction of the rollercoaster.

Fingers crossed she isn’t so mad at me that she decides to withhold her power of removing my fear from me. I groan, rubbing a hand over my face as I try to get my thoughts in order. All I can focus on though is the warmth growing in my chest at how worried she was about me. I had no idea my little mate cared about me so much.

Focus. Apologise, and get in her good graces again. Preferably before she chooses to put the fear of the Goddess through you. Shaking my head, I jog after her. My long strides have me catching up quickly and I go to say something, but

she huffs at me and takes off at a run. My eyebrows furrow, and I halt. *The heck?* As she's about to dip down a path between two rides though, she peers over her shoulder at me, a challenging smirk on her lips. *Oh, so that's how she wants to work off her anger at me, huh?*

My nostrils flare and I take off at a run, a low growl rumbling in my chest. I'm going to catch her so fast. Knowing where she's heading helps and I take another track, one that'll put me out right where she'll be. Little does she know I came early this morning and canvased this entire area so I could keep us safe. Turns out that's paid off. My arms pump at my sides, chest rising and falling sharply as I gain on her. A strong whiff of her scent ghosts over me before I launch out of the alley and pounce on her.

To her credit, she doesn't scream. In fact, she shocks the shit out of me. Rather than go limp or try to fight like a wildcat, she simply rolls me over her shoulder, taking me down to the ground. She has a knife at my throat and another digging into my cock through my jeans before I can even get my hands beneath me. *Holy shit.*

My breathing speeds up, heat rolling over me. *Goddamn that was fucking hot.* Swallowing hard, I try to will my erection away with no luck. She's looking right at me, but doesn't seem to recognise me, her eyes blank and cold. I croak, "It's me, princess."

She drops her weapons immediately and climbs off my chest, shaking her head as if in a daze. Though the sun is

starting to set, it's plenty bright enough to recognise me, but it's like she was suddenly shocked into kill mode. Or ninja mode. I don't know, but either way it's an intriguing new tidbit I now know about her. I file it away for later and refocus on the situation.

Nessa doesn't react the way I'd expect. She's already hidden her knives while I was distracted and leans down to offer me a hand. I take it and she yanks me to my feet, surprising me again at her strength. "So, rollercoaster?" she asks casually.

Blinking at her stupidly, I nod and follow her, still a little dazed from her taking me out. As we continue on to the line for the rollercoaster, a tiny grin curls my lips. Even though our chase was cut short, my mind floods with images of another scenario where it is just us and our chase ends differently.

An elbow to the gut draws me out of my mind and my head jerks up, landing on the supernatural worker who's holding out her hand expectantly. *Ticket, dumbass.* I pass it to her and she leads us to an empty cart on the rollercoaster. Each individual cart is protected by a barrier rune so if anything were to malfunction the occupants would be fine. It also offers privacy so only the people in each cart—which seats two people each—can hear what the other is saying. While somehow maintaining the true experience of the ride, you still get your face blown off by the wind.

Clearing my throat, I strap myself in under the watchful eye of the employee and Nessa does the same. This time, before the ride even starts up, her blackened, claw tipped fingers

wrap around my wrist, the calluses on her palms rough against my skin while that heady buzz of my fear zipping through me disappears. It's another intriguing fact that I add to the ever growing pile of things I have in my mental file on Nessa.

“Thank you,” I murmur. I guess she decided not to torture me then. Clearing my throat, my eyes drift to the flow of supernaturals on either side of us while the ride attendant helps other supes onto the roller coaster.

If Nessa wasn't touching me right now, I would be having a panic attack. It's almost unreal that I'm sitting on a roller coaster with a complete lack of fear. Curiosity piques my brain as I scan her features. Nessa's dark hair is blowing around her face as she rubs her hair tie clad wrist against her knee, eyes unfocused. *Lost in her head.*

“Is it hard to take away my fear like this?” I inquire, voice low. Still her eyes jerk to mine as though I've surprised her by speaking.

“No, not really. It's rather easy actually.” She cocks her head to the side, brows drawn low. “All I have to do is gain access to your head then it's almost like I can see the switch in your mind controlling your fear. From there I can turn it on or off as I please, but it would be damaging to let go of you while you're without fear, so I have a failsafe when I do it with you. The moment our skin to skin contact is broken your fear will come back.”

I nod sagely at her explanation. I can't say it's what I expected, but it does let me know that she is capable of doing

this to other people. I'm about to ask her another question when the ride below us clicks, starting to climb the first hill on the railing it's attached to.

This particular roller coaster is the most tame of the ones in the marketplace in terms of heights and loops in its track, but it is the longest and fastest one. Its track takes you all the way around the outskirts of the marketplace.

Rubbing my hands together—careful not to shake Nessa off—a tiny smirk quirks my lips. Time to see how fun this is.

The first decline isn't all that large, but it sends the roller coaster train flying. It careens down its track, dragging a whoop from Nessa and I as the wind screams around us, yanking our hair back and stinging against my cheek. When we hit the next incline the train slows, rattling as it climbs the hill and Nessa nudges my arm.

“What's up?” I ask, voice raised to be heard over the wind.

“What's that for?” She points at a giant stage that's empty for the moment. Smothering a smile at her interest, I lean into her so I don't have to shout.

“That's for the performance later on tonight. They're just setting up right now.”

Her golden eyes widen and curiosity floods her expression as she goes to ask about it, when the train tips over the peak of the hill, sending us flying again and cutting off her words.

As we zoom over the first quarter of the track, I can't help but admire the views. I didn't get much of a chance in the

bubble ride, too overwhelmed by my fear disappearing. Thick forestry rims the marketplace and the buildings are intriguing with their various shapes and sizes. *Yep, this is definitely awesome.*



Nope, this is definitely not awesome. I've changed my mind. Can I go back and talk my stupid ass, past self out of getting on this nausea inducing ride.

Groaning, I hang my head as my gut rolls, threatening to have me retching for a second time. I lost my lunch about two minutes ago, though thankfully I made it off the roller coaster before I upchucked. *Never a-fucking-gain.*

I was alright for the first three quarters, enjoying the sights, not having to worry about the heights, then the last quarter was a mix of fast turns and weaves. All of which my stomach was not prepared for. It rolls again and my fists clench. *Stop thinking about it, dumbass.*

Nessa's warmth sinks into my back as she rubs it, hands gently coasting over my shoulders comfortingly. Of course she's not afraid of puke. She's freaking perfect. Shaking my head at my insane thoughts, I suck in a deep breath before straightening. Groaning again as my gut protests, I shuffle away from my puke and collapse onto a park bench. Nessa disappears and I let my head drop, forehead hitting the table

with a thunk. *Great, now I've scared her off. Definitely no more rides for me.*

A few minutes later, a thud from something landing beside my head has me jerking up, eyes searching for the source only to find an unopened water bottle, some bland crackers and I lean in to take a sniff. *Peppermint tea?* Nessa grins at me. “That should make you feel better. Oh,” she says, holding up her index finger at me in the universal wait a moment, gesture. “And you can use this to wash your mouth out if you’d like.” She holds up a mini travel mouthwash bottle and sets it on the table alongside the other stuff. “How are you feeling, big guy?”

Huffing out a laugh, I crack the water bottle and rinse out my mouth, before taking a few swallows. When my stomach doesn’t protest I go for the peppermint tea and plain crackers. *At least motion sickness passes quickly.*

“Better, thank you,” I say after a few minutes. She nods, eyes scanning the area around us as she hums under her breath, seeming unbothered by me losing my lunch.

“So... how long have you been scared of heights?” Nessa asks after a while, tone curious.

Chewing thoughtfully, I swallow the dry cracker and take a sip of water before I answer her. “Since I was a kid.”

Swirling a finger on the table, following some unseen pattern, Nessa’s eyes flick to me. “Is there a story there, or...?”

A crooked grin cracks my lips and I look up at her. “Sort of.” I thread my fingers together and lean back a little, trying to get comfortable on the wooden seat. “When I was a kid my mother and I didn’t have much. I grew up in the Mikró Mageia town, on the poor side of town.” My eyes slip from Nessa’s and land on the tree as memories flood through my head. “We lived in a tall ass apartment building that was practically falling apart. We were in one of the top apartments and one night there was a fire, I had to jump out of a window. She didn’t make it.” Swallowing hard, I shake my head. “I would’ve died too if the adrenaline hadn’t awoken my powers.”

Clearing my throat, my eyes dart back to Nessa and I can *feel* them swirling with my magic. She watches me, concern practically streaming from her pores. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she says quietly.

I offer her a small smile at her words. We’re quiet for a minute or so, both lost in thought until she blurts out, “I want to become an SFBI agent when I’m older.”

I can tell by the sudden tension in her form that she regrets telling me the moment she stops talking so I attempt to censor my reaction. *An SFBI agent, really?* It depends what part of the organisation she’s aiming to work in, because I think some parts might be a little strict for someone with her personality and willingness to maim and terrify people. The main part of the SFBI can be so stuffy sometimes that she’d bore of it the moment they started training her to become part of their run of the mill agents. My eyes narrow as I scan her, cataloguing all

the powers I'm aware of, and knowledge of her skills. She'd be perfect for me though. For the type of work I do. I need to speak with my boss.

Refocusing on the woman in front of me, a miniscule smile tips my lips. *Later*. Right now I need to focus on answering her correctly. "I didn't expect that," I say slowly. Trying to feel her out on how set she is to that specific career path—while preferably not offending her.

Her eyebrows draw down, red flecks dotting her gold iris's for half a second before her eyes clear. "It seemed like the best option for my goal." It's a murmur. Not something she wanted me to hear by the way she clears her throat before saying, "It seemed like a good choice. Like something I'd enjoy." She shrugs her shoulders, trying to make her words seem more casual, but failing.

Her eyes flick to the side before a teasing smile curls her lips and she changes the subject. "So if you're so afraid of heights, why the hell would you get on that first ride with me?"

Groaning, I rub a hand over my face and huff out a breath. That embarrassment from earlier floods to my cheeks again. When the guys and I first came up with the plan for today, they already knew what they wanted to do with Nessa. Whereas, I assumed we'd brainstorm together so I just went along with the first thing I thought of. Rides. You really can't go wrong with rides. Oh wait, yes you can. When you're absolutely fucking petrified of heights.

I didn't realise I'd react quite that bad though. I reach up and grip the back of my neck, rubbing it awkwardly. Turns out when I'm trapped in a ride that I don't trust, I freak out a lot more than usual. I can't tell Nessa any of that though because we agreed not to mention that today has been coordinated. She's a smart woman, so I'm sure she already suspects, but I'm sure as hell not going to confirm it.

"I figured it would be something that you'd enjoy and didn't realise how much it would freak me out at the time," I say weakly.

She cocks her head to the side. "I would have enjoyed doing something fun at ground level just as much." Shaking her head she runs a hand through her hair. "*Unbelievable male,*" she mumbles and I smile as that warm feeling from before blooms in my chest again.

We quiet again, before I figure fair is fair and say quietly, "I want to become a potions master." It's not a lie, I've had to pretend to fail and repeat my years at the Academy over and over to hold up my cover, but I've learnt enough to pass everything with flying colours the moment I don't have to pretend anymore. My boss has been kind enough to take that into consideration and has set me up to shadow with a potions master when I finish my time here. You need to do that before you can earn that label. Hopefully it will be soon so we can figure out what the hell is going on with the Academy and sort it out. Make it safe again for everyone.

Shaking my head to clear it of my thoughts, my eyes refocus on Nessa who is watching me intently. “I wouldn’t have expected that either. Though, I’m sure if you *try* hard enough you’ll be able to accomplish it.”

She puts heavy emphasis on the word *try* and I have to bite back a smile. Yep, she’s totally on to me. Not that I’ve tried all that hard to hide it. She’s definitely a good candidate for what I have in mind to ask my boss. It’s just icing on the fucking cake that she’s my mate, and I’ll be able to protect her better if she’s by my side and knows more about me.

Changing the subject, just like she did a few minutes ago, I get to my feet. Thankfully, my stomach has successfully settled. “So, would you like to go get some food?” I check my watch before adding. “Afterwards would you like to check out the performer section of the marketplace? It’s set up sort of like a street for people to walk down with supes performing their short performances on the sides.”

With a grin Nessa nods, golden eyes lighting up, getting to her feet as well. “I’m always up for food and that sounds awesome. I hope we see some supes on stilts, I love seeing people on stilts, their balance is insane.” Her eyes slide to me. “I’d love to see you try it.” She waggles her eyebrows at me and my lips part in surprise at her reference to my fear of heights. “Just kidding,” Nessa adds after a moment and I grin, shaking my head as I lean forward, resting my forearms on the table between us.

“Brat, you had me worried for a minute there.” She laughs and I stretch my arms over my head, still smiling as I watch Nessa. Her golden eyes glittering in the sunlight.

CHAPTER SIX

Dylan

My fingers drum against my thigh as I peer around the room from my slouched position against the wall. I'm waiting on Nessa and Corin. He's had most of the afternoon with her and just took her for an early dinner. Fae, Trolls, Pixies, and all other species and mixed breeds fill the entryway. The doors to the seating area haven't been unlocked yet so we're all clustered here waiting. The noise level is well past annoying and encroaching on fucking painful. This is always the worst part, one that I usually avoid, but Nessa deserves the full experience, even if I don't love it myself.

This part of the night was Corin's idea. The performances the marketplace puts on are always amazing. He's lucky that I know people here and visit a lot, so I called in some favours to get us tickets. I really hope Nessa likes it. Everything she's experiencing while here feels so personal. Like she's meeting my family and seeing my home for the first time rather than just a marketplace. This is one of my favourite places, it has become a part of what has shaped my life, and it's important to me that she likes it too. My nose crinkles. Goddess, that was pretty sappy. *Keep a lid on it, Dylan.*

Oscar and I relaxed at the library while Corin was on his date with Nessa, until it got close to time for the seating to open at the stadium for our last surprise. Oscar and Corin hung back this morning when I was spending time with Nessa. We've each made sure the others have had plenty of one-on-

one time with her and it has me so relieved that we organised today, otherwise there is no way it would have gone this smoothly. Despite the small hiccups, it has been a great day. The reminder of my time spent with Nessa has a smile curling my lips, tingling at the thought of our first kiss—yep today was totally worth it.

Oscar shifts next to me, grunting when a supe bumps into him before scurrying back. He's a lot quieter when Nessa isn't around and seems rather distracted at the moment. "Are you alright?" I murmur, having to lean into his shoulder so he can hear me. He jumps a little at my proximity, clearly not expecting it, before relaxing as he scans the room.

His pale pink eyes flick to me, and he nods in answer, but his phone buzzes in his hand and he tenses again. A pained expression crosses his face and I shuffle a little closer, trying to offer him some support. I'm not sure what it is that's upsetting him, although I have noticed some tension between him and his family when they contact him—but I want to offer my support anyway. The pink haired Troll is always kind to me so comforting him makes sense. I don't have many genuine friends so I'm not exactly well versed in situations like this, but I'm willing to attempt to put him at ease.

I awkwardly pat him on the shoulder, unsure if I'm helping or making it worse. It draws a smile from him though, so I count it as a win. I've never been great at expressing my feelings or comforting people. Body language and physical touch is easier for me to use to convey my thoughts than actual

words. Rubbing a hand over my face, I stay close even once we spot Corin and Nessa.

I nudge Oscar and he peers up at me from his phone. “They’re here.” He helps wave them down through the crowd and Nessa practically dives between us, so she’s surrounded by the three of us and separated from the crowd.

“Damn there are a lot of supes here.” Her sweet candy scent fills my lungs and I have to hold back the urge to purr. Her scent seems to be stronger than it was earlier today and I’m not complaining. It swirls around us, calming one of my overstimulated senses. It seems to have a similar effect on Oscar and the visible tension in his body melts away. Her eyes dart around the space before returning to us. “So what are we doing?”

Leaning down, I nudge her arm gently to capture her attention then point out a poster on the wall that’s partially obscured by the crowd. But after a few seconds, a slow smile blooms on her face and I know she’s managed to read what’s on it. *The Great Michail*

Storyteller.

“Really? Gods, I can’t wait. I’ve never been to something as big as this before. Corin and I saw the stage and huge stadium style seating on the rollercoaster earlier.” She’s practically beaming and my shoulders drop, the tension in them releasing. *She’s excited.* Glancing at Corin, I find him watching Nessa with a relieved expression and I smile.

Clearing my throat, I lean back against the wall and brush my hair out of my face. “Have you heard a lot about it?”

She shakes her head, golden eyes locked on mine. “Not really, only a few words in passing. I’ve seen a few articles on it, but they didn’t go into detail.”

“They like to keep what the actual performance entails fairly under wraps. I’ve been quite a few times and they change it up all the time. Lots of crazy, but well controlled magic and supes doing dangerous things.”

That smile grows and a mischievous glint sparks in her eyes. “Sounds right up my alley.”

Fingers crossed. My eyes flick to the entryway doors when a soft click comes from that direction. It’s familiar. Almost show time. Grabbing Nessa’s hand, I press back against the wall a little more, making sure she stays with me. Corin and Oscar take the hint and close rank around her—just in time too. The doors creak open and the crowd rushes through the narrow door frame. It’s chaos, and I swallow hard, shaking my head at the mass of supes.

There is no reason to rush, not that they realise it. Seeing that this place goes from town to town so frequently, its set up has been fine-tuned. If they tried to stampede into the seating area like that then people would be knocked down stairs, pushed over and trampled. I blink slowly once the room has cleared out then still holding Nessa’s hand, I lead her through the large doors.

The room we enter is basic. The light blue walls and grey flecked, white resin floor give the room a light airy feel, as do the white floating lights spread throughout the room. It is bare other than the dozen or so photo booth-like curtained boxes lining the walls.

I lead Nessa towards them, digging all of our tickets out of my pocket. “These are specially designed with a mixture of magic and mechanics to make seating a carefree process.” My eyes dart down to Nessa’s wide ones. “You insert your ticket into the machine here, and it will portal you directly to your seat. If you’re with a group, you choose that on the screen and insert all the tickets for your group, then it will portal you once it has registered everyone. When the show ends, you will automatically be teleported back here with whoever is in your group. It does it in a random order so people don’t get pissed off and it’s fast and efficient,” I explain, setting it for a group before inserting my ticket.

“Damn, that’s smart. This entire marketplace seems to run so smoothly, it is amazing how everything is a complex weave of both magic and mechanics,” Nessa says softly, slipping her ticket into the machine.

I nod, a smile quirking my lips. I remember how in awe I was as a child when I first started coming here. It’s crazy how much it has evolved since then. Corin inserts his ticket last and I hit the button to activate the magic. In moments, a wave of tingling is rolling over my body then I’m blinking my eyes open to find us standing in front of our allocated seats. It always trips me out how fast the magic works here. We settle

into our seats, and I wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the stadium-like seating area.

It's large enough to seat around three thousand people, so fairly exclusive considering the size of the marketplace. Most of the seats are already full of supes, so the noise is steadily climbing and I grimace, jaw clenching. With vampire being my primary species, my ears are incredibly sensitive so I usually bring ear muffs with me—as weird as that sounds. To avoid appearing like I'm trying to avoid Nessa though, I simply rub my temples to ease the tension and leave them off.

Once the show actually starts the crowd will quiet down, they always do. I'm watching the stage when I spot a familiar form shuffling across it. He's wearing dark clothes intentionally trying to go unnoticed as he leans down to grab something on the edge of the stage. He looks up, locking eyes with me and laughter rumbles in my chest.

Peter, a kind older fae worker who spent a lot of time with me when I was younger—and a good friend now—grins at me from the dark stage, giving me spirit fingers in a hello. *He's a real character.* I snort, and wave. Rocking back on his heels he gestures to Nessa, waggling his eyebrows. I shake my head, heat touching my cheeks when I feel her eyes on me. My focus flicks to her before returning to Peter and she follows my gaze until she spots him. Noticing her attention he blows her a kiss before waddling off stage. She snickers next to me and leans in to whisper in my ear. “Who is that? He seems like bestfriend material.”

Shaking my head I let out a breathy laugh. “Peter. I’ve known him since I was a kid. He’s definitely bestfriend material.”

Nessa grins and clasps her hands together. When she rolls her bottom lip between her teeth it takes everything in me to drag my eyes away from her mouth when Oscar leans in on my other side to ask me a question. “I’ve totally got to meet him too.”

Corin smirks, eyes darting between Nessa and Oscar. My cheeks burn, face probably like a tomato. “I can find him after the show. He’s part of it so you’ll see him again soon.”

Nessa opens her mouth to agree when a voice booms through the stadium. “Welcome everyone.” A hush flies through the crowd until you could hear a pin drop. I grin, watching Nessa’s reaction when her eyes focus on the stage. Her jaw drops open and I laugh quietly, chest shaking. Peter stands front and centre in all his glory, most of his body covered by a floor length black and gold ceremonial robe. Twin gnarled glowing horns protrude from his head and his eyes are now entirely white.

“I am Peter, Keeper of the Story Lands. Tonight I will be telling you a tale of two packs. The first is the Fotiá pack.” He whirls and throws out his hand behind him and a cloud of crackling orange and red flames erupt from his palm, lighting up half of the stage. A wave of heat rolls over me from it and the crowd gasps. I squint at the sudden light, skin prickling at

the heat, the smile never leaving my face. I love it when he chooses a tale like this.

After a few seconds the flames die down, revealing a pack of a dozen people, all have beautiful dark red skin, and pale pink butterfly wings. They're dressed in old fashioned light brown clothing and are standing around a beautiful onyx statue of a woman. The onyx woman is wearing fine gold jewellery and draped in food, clothing and offerings. *A Goddess*. The thing that stands out about her though is her necklace, shimmering gold with a glowing red jewel as the centrepiece. As we watch, one by one everyone in the pack—women, children and men—get down one knee and bow their heads, offering the statue their reverence and faith.

Peter turns back to the crowd and walks to the other half of the stage that's still empty. "The second is the Págos pack." Once again he holds out his hand and magic erupts from his palm. This time though it's a pale blue cloud, and a cold fog rushes through the seats, making goosebumps rise on my skin.

I take a glance at Nessa and find her leaning forward in her seat, elbows braced on her knees as she watches the stage intently.

My eyes return to the stage as the cloud fades to reveal the Págos pack. They're made up of a few dozen members and they're gathered around a campfire. Unlike the first pack, there is an empty throne behind the fireplace and all the members dip their heads in reverence to the space. Some hold offerings and children place carved ice objects at the foot of the throne.

Neither pack has a clear leader shown and I can guess what Peter's about to do.

He turns to the crowd and moves until he's only about a foot from the edge and peers out at us. His white eyes are unnerving as they scan the crowd, lingering on our group before moving on. "I ask for a pair to volunteer to be the pack leaders."

I nudge Nessa and lean in so my lips are close to her ear. "You and Corin should volunteer. It was his idea to come to the performance," I whisper. She doesn't hesitate, flinging her hand up in the air and leaning into Corin. He throws me a grumpy look, to which I smirk in response, before he raises his hand. A spotlight flashes through the crowd, roaming over people as Peter searches for people to choose. Just like I predicted, Peter chooses them, the spotlight pausing on all of us as he points from the stage. He clicks his fingers and they vanish from their seats and appear at his side.

Oscar wiggles a little closer to me as Peter has a quick word with them. "Should I be worried?"

I shake my head and meet his pale pink eyes that look almost purple in this lighting. "No, I've been to tons of his shows. Even been part of one of his tale retellings and they'll be fine. He wraps his magic around them—once he has their permission—then basically controls them with it. But it's more like a knowledge of what their body is supposed to do than it is forcing them, so they can refuse it any time they want to."

Letting out a breath, Oscar relaxes back into his seat.
“Okay.”

My eyebrows draw together as I study him, confused about his reaction. I suppose it could be because there is a stranger’s magic involved. I blink slowly, my mind still stuck on it, before I’m distracted by Peter. He straightens up, then gives us a broad grin. “It appears we have found our pack leaders. Now let’s make them look the part, shall we.” Waving a hand at them, twin clouds of white smoke engulf them. As it dissipates I bite my fucking tongue. *Holy shit.*

“Holy shit,” Oscar mutters, echoing my thoughts exactly. Nessa’s cute oversized T-shirt and leggings have been replaced by an old fashioned fae warrior’s outfit. Half of her free flowing short hair is now woven into intricate braids with silver clasps dotted through it. She has dark paint wiped under her eyes and on the hollow of her cheeks, making her face look sharp. It seems like her magic might be reacting to Peter’s slightly because her eyes are a swirling mixture of red and gold, but it suits the style perfectly and she doesn’t seem worried. It’s the clothing that’s really unique though, the Nessa I see and am coming to adore, is usually dressed in comfy baggy clothes, or a simple pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

This outfit is rather basic, and is quite conservative, except that it’s practically *skin tight*. Dark brown leather boots fade into lighter brown pants that match her tight vest. Her arms are free so she has plenty of movement and fine gold chains are draped all over her. She has a tight layered gold choker that fades into the rest of the jewellery. There’s also a hunting knife

strapped to her thigh, but she appears otherwise unarmed. Without prompting she walks regally to the Págos packs side and sits on the throne, leaning back in the chair with ease. Owning it.

Corin is dressed in scuffed black boots, dark brown leather pants and shirt-less. He too wears dark paint on his face, though his is ombre coloured and streaked across his forehead as well as his cheeks. Thick tattoos cover the skin of his chest and upper arms, but they're partially obscured by the painted artwork that is now splashed over his body. My eyebrows raise as I watch him move into place too, his being in front of the Fotiá pack, before dropping to one knee in a reverent bow as well.

Then Peter gets this show on the road. Returning to the front of the stage, he moves off to the side slightly and continues his retelling of the story. "The packs lived side by side, at peace for many years." The scene changes, each pack's members laughing and talking amongst themselves. "The Fotiá pack worshipping their Goddess, and the Págos pack worshipping their leader." The scene shifts again, the packs returning to their positions of worship.

Peter walks around the Fotiá pack, robes flowing around him. "The Fotiá's Goddess is believed to be powerful, but kind, and is beloved by their people. So when their ancestors happened across a magical necklace that gave its wearer the strength and magic of a dragon they assumed it was a gift from their Goddess. One to be revered and looked upon, but never to be used. So each generation, young and old, maintained the

tradition as the years went on. The pack also made a vow to never tell anyone outside of their people about the necklace.” Peter’s expression grows grim and he stalks over to the Págos’ side of the stage.

“But being in such close proximity with their neighbouring pack—the Págos—someone eventually discovered the necklace.” The scene behind Peter changes, his magic swirling until the pack’s people are distracted and a lone teenager from the Págos pack, lost in a temper, crosses onto the Fotiá’s land. He kicks at the earth, muttering under his breath, not paying any attention to his surroundings until he stumbles into the Fotiá’s temple, the place where they worship their Goddess. When he realises where he is, the gangly teen’s eyes grow wide and he takes in the room, its beautiful gold walls and all the gifts and treasure lining the room. His eyes land on the statue before being drawn to the necklace resting at the hollow of her throat. “Discovering it, he then steals it as an offering for his leader.”

Without a second thought he darts forwards, unclasping the thin chain and shoving the piece of jewellery in his pocket. His frantic eyes dart around the place once more before he runs from the temple, crossing back onto the Págos’ land. The scene shifts again to show the boy bowing to the Págos pack’s leader—Nessa—presenting the necklace. “The boy offers it to her, before explaining how he came into possession of it. At first she’s angry, snarling at him as she snatches it off of him and yelling at the boy, astounded at his stupidity. ‘We are at peace with the pack, why would you do something like this

that could cause a war?' she tells him," Peter says. "But the longer she holds the necklace, the more her curiosity about it increases. What could it do to be so special to the Fotiá's people? Why would they worship such a thing? It eventually gets the best of her and she clasps it around her neck."

The moment it's on, the pack leader sucks in a breath, eyes lighting up as an ethereal glow engulfs her. Her fists clench and a tinkling laugh falls from her lips. "A sense of euphoria washes through her as the necklace's power floods through her. 'The power, it's extraordinary,' she states, awe covering her features." Peter's expression grows darker and I swallow, something in my gut coiling anxiously. Logically I know it is not really Nessa and doesn't actually affect her, but it's still her face. Fear isn't always rational.

The Págos pack leader smiles, but it's not a pretty one. It's one that's tainted by her new weapon. "She thanks the boy before sending him away. 'Let the Fotiá come,' she says," Peter states, shaking his head at the woman.

Peter moves back to the Fotiá's side of the stage. "The Fotiá pack trusts their people to take care of the temple, and that they'd never dare steal from it, which means they've never had the need for guards. So when they go to their temple for their afternoon prayer, and they discover that the necklace has been stolen, they're shocked. The pack leader trusts his people and knows that they would never do something like this so their suspicions turn to that of the Págos pack." Peter steps back, now remaining off to the side of both packs, his voice echoing through the quiet room.

The scene shifts, showing the leader of the Fotiá pack taking two guards with him to meet with the Págos' people. "The Fotiá are a peaceful people, so when they request a meeting with the Págos' leader they offer her a deal. 'Return the necklace to us and we can go our separate ways with no consequences,' the Fotiá offer. But the Págos' leader refuses, so the Fotiá leader is forced to return home empty handed and prepare for war. For they must avenge that which was stolen from their Goddess."

The scene swirls showing flashes of both packs preparing for war. "While they ready for battle though, turmoil is fraught in the Págos pack. Their leader has begun to demand taxes at the end of each week, and extra gifts of food, clothing and other extravagant displays of worship at the end of each day. Bleeding her own pack dry."

The scene skips to the day of the battle. Each pack stands in a group, weapons at the ready. The leaders are at the front of the group and with shouts for justice, they run at each other. "And so they fight—Págos and Fotiá at war for the first time in history." The people clash, swords, knives and many other weapons, even some magic is used to try and gain the upperhand. "It is at the Págos leader's hand that the first man is slayed." She severs his head with a clean swipe of her blade and he vanishes in a cloud of grey smoke.

"Eventually, the Fotiá pack falls, all dead but their leader, who stands unarmed in front of his enemies." The Fotiá spreads his arms wide, expression resigned as the Págos leader stands before him. "She strikes him down before commanding

her warriors to slaughter the remaining woman and children. That night she feasts, relishing in her win and all of the treasures from the Fotiá pack she now has, endless riches, and many items of worship.” As the cloud of smoke engulfs where Corin was just standing, he appears in his seat again, sucking in a quick breath but appearing fine otherwise.

The Fotiá’s small village fades away so only the Págos remain. Peter moves to their side slowly, features drawn. “But it isn’t enough,” Peter says, voice sad as he observes the Págos pack.

Time speeds up, showing the daily life of their pack over a few weeks in under a minute. We watch as the Págos’ people grow weaker, the people freezing in their houses as winter sets in and the first death occurs. Snow swirls through the village and covers the surrounding landscape. “Their leader demands too much. Slowly her people starve. All of the riches, clothing and necessities she’s been gifted, sit around her home unused while her people die. Yet still she wants more. She dreams of searching for more packs to rob, ways to gain more power until she’s as strong as ten dragons, not just one. She grows blind to her people’s suffering and ignores their pleading for help. Too focused on her own hunger for power to care, until they’re all gone. And it’s too late.”

“One by one, her people die. Women, children and men alike. They attempt to steal from her at first, when they realise she’s not going to help, but by then it’s too late, they’re too weak and die at her hand. Everyone vanishes into those lifeless grey clouds of smoke. Just gone.” The scene shows it all, the

pain and terror on her peoples faces as they realise that they're going to die. The families curl up together as they fade away with no other choice, while the harsh winter rages around them.

“By the time she realises that she's alone, the Págos pack leader is confused and distraught and goes on a rampage through her village to try and find her people. When she realises that they're all gone, she shatters.” The Págos pack leader falls to her knees in the snow, screaming until her throat is hoarse. Tears roll down her cheeks, turning to ice in moments and in a fit of rage she tears off the necklace and tosses it away from her. “All at once she realises how lost she became to the need for power. How weak she was for allowing the greed for power to control her like that. As the realisations slam into her she curls up into a ball in the snow. If she allowed her people to freeze and starve to death, then she too deserves that fate. And so the last member of the Págos pack dies.”

Nessa vanishes in a puff of smoke, only to reappear flickering in an ethereal light in the centre of the stage. Peter moves around her as the Págos' village disappears as well, leaving only Nessa and him on the stage. “Though the tale of the two packs ends in tragedy, it teaches you a valuable lesson. Don't let your greed for power rule you, or your greed in general. It will only end in bloodshed and tragedy.”

Peter waves his hand around Nessa and she disappears, reappearing in the seat beside me. Peter keeps speaking, finishing up his show but I lean in to make sure she's okay.



Nessa

I sit back in my seat, my mind racing through everything that just happened and scrub a hand over my face. Looking down I find that I'm back in my leggings and comfy T-shirt, rather than my warrior outfit. *That was intense*, but the lesson is now ingrained in my head and it's a good one too.

The rest of Peter's words are a blur to me and I wave away Dylan when he leans in to make sure I'm alright. I'm fine, just thinking about my magic.

The world doesn't come back into focus until Corin's hand cups my throat gently and my eyes lock on his. "How are you doing? That was a little intense."

I let out a slow breath, his touch centering me, and his eyes swirling. Goddess that is cool. "How do you do that?" I murmur with a slow blink, feeling sleepy all of the sudden.

He cocks his head, studying me with an intensity that from a stranger would make me uncomfortable, but Corin is not a stranger anymore. He doesn't answer my question, but his hand tightens around my throat infinitesimally and goosebumps prick my skin.

"You haven't answered my question," he says, voice low, and I don't bother mentioning that he hasn't answered my question either.

"I'm fine, big guy. How about you?"

His eyes don't leave me and he doesn't loosen his grip. I don't think my Mountain Man believes me—I mean, *the* Mountain Man. “I'm alright,” he finally answers, then releases my throat, rubbing my jaw gently before he pulls away completely.

I honestly have to fight the urge to pout at the loss of contact. *What the hell is wrong with me?* Oscar swoops in and wraps his arm around my shoulders, guiding me to a side door of the concert building. When my brows draw down in confusion, Dylan laughs. “You wanted to meet Peter properly, remember. Though I suppose you probably got acquainted with him on stage.”

Oh, that's right. I smile and follow them inside. Hopefully it's quick, after the performance and the huge day, I'm exhausted.

As though he knows exactly what I'm thinking, Oscar leans in and whispers, “Don't worry, we know you're tired. We're just going to pop in to say a quick hello, then take you home.”

My shoulders slump in relief and I nestle into Oscar's side more, smothering a yawn.

Peter is all smiles when we step into the empty entrance hall and he's changed out of his fancy robe get-up. “Dylan speaks very highly of you, my dear. It is lovely to meet you properly,” Peter says, grabbing my hand in both of his, giving it a gentle shake before releasing me. He offers a firm shake to Oscar and Corin as well.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I say, somewhat flustered by the fact that Dylan has mentioned me to him.

The guys pepper Peter with questions about the marketplace and I just listen with a smile, too tired to add anything. After we’ve had a thorough introduction and Peter tells us a funny tale of Dylan when he was younger, his eyes laser in on me. “You look really tired, dear. I’ll let you guys go, but it was great to meet you and I look forward to seeing you again.”

I nod and thank him for the amazing show, my eyes half closed and I smother another yawn. Goddess, the day’s definitely caught up to me. The guys lead me out and through the still busy marketplace, towards the place Oscar first portalled me through.



Dylan

Nessa is practically asleep on her feet when we step out of the portal in front of her home, so Corin scoops her up into his arms and Oscar grins at him. How the hell Corin is so calm, I don't know. We're about to meet Nessa's fathers. Gods, I'm practically sweating buckets. Yet Corin is cool as a cucumber while he's carrying Nessa. I swallow hard, and my eyes flick to Oscar. He's met them and he's still standing so obviously they can't be too bad. Scanning Nessa's face to make sure she's asleep, I move so I'm closer to Oscar as we trek up to the house.

“Uh, so should we be worried?” I ask, stomach rolling with unease. I don't have the best track record with male supernaturals that are in authoritative positions. Or just male supernatural's in general.

Oscar's silver eyes meet mine, corners crinkled in concern. Guess my nerves are obvious then. “They're nice people, but I will forewarn you that they'll probably hit you with like a hundred questions.” He grins at me and some of my unease fades. *Yep, alright, everything is going to be fine. Completely fine.*

I still hang back and let Oscar knock on the door when we reach the house, eyes flitting around. It's a nice house and despite the eeriness of the forest surrounding it, it seems well taken care of. Nessa stirs in Corin's arms when the front door opens and she peers up at the man who's opened the door and

owns it, grinning at him. He just shakes his head before focusing on us guys.

“Diarmuid,” Oscar greets, dipping his head before his eyes return to Nessa, sparkling with amusement.

Before Corin or I can offer a greeting, Diarmuid steps back and gestures for us to come in. Still carrying a now awake Nessa, Corin goes first, spying the lounge room and setting her down gently on the couch. Her other two fathers are waiting there and Nessa greets both of them with sheepish smiles. I stay beside Oscar, body stiff, and unsure how to proceed from here.



Corin

Once I set Nessa down on the couch, I take a moment to survey the room and catalogue how everyone is feeling. Nessa's parents are calm, as are Oscar and Nessa, but Dylan's scent is tinged with anxiety, though he appears outwardly calm. I take initiative for both of us and step up to Azure, offering my hand. "Good evening, I'm Corin. It's nice to meet you all." He is the head of the household, and I'm careful to keep my eyes on his nose rather than meeting his gaze. It is an old custom, but that's how I was raised and my primal side understands those dominance rules. I made sure to read up on my limited file on Nessa and her family before coming today, and even without that information, the power Azure exudes makes it obvious that he's the head of their family group.

Following my lead, Dylan steps up beside me and offers the same greeting. I don't know much about his background, but his anxiety over a meeting like this hints at their possibly being something in his past that I'm unaware of, so I tread carefully. If they're perceptive, then Nessa's fathers—being A-class monsters, other than Morrigan who is a B-class—should pick up on it.

Azure takes a seat so we're above him, Morrigan following suit and he offers us a smile. "It's nice to meet you both, I'm Azure and this is Morrigan. In case you missed it at the door, the brute over there is Diarmuid."

“Hey, I’m perfectly within average size for a monster, you ass,” Diarmuid complains and I smile, nudging Dylan in Nessa’s direction. He lets out a breath and takes a seat beside her, relaxing somewhat. *Good.*

We settle in and just like Oscar said would happen, they pepper us with questions. There are a few uncomfortable ones, but I think they can sense Dylan’s unease so they take it easier on us than they did with Oscar earlier today—if his account of what happened was accurate when we hung out while Nessa was spending time with Dylan today. They don’t keep us for too long though as Nessa crashes quickly, curled up next to Dylan. We nudge her awake to say a quick goodbye, then head out, a silly grin on my face. I’d say that the day went well. Not to mention that I got to know Nessa better—all three of us did. It also got her out of the house and we all had a ton of fun, minus a few parts of the carnival rides, ordeal. I shiver at the memory then shake it off, refocusing on the day as a whole.

I’m honestly not sure if Nessa has realised that we’ve started courting her or not, but it doesn’t matter at this point. With how high her emotional defences are—the guys and I discussed—that we’re going to give her time to come to the conclusion that we want to date her, on her own. Or at least let her adjust to our interest before we actually come out and ask her.

Not to mention the timing isn’t the greatest with Ethan still on the loose and the secrets I have to keep from her.

I shake my head and take a deep breath. That's all problems for the future, for now I'm going to relish in the good memories from today.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nessa

I grab my carry bag, the only one I brought with me, and say one last goodbye to my room before heading downstairs. My dad's are all loitering in the lounge room and I grin when I catch them. Diarmuid is striking his classic scary guy pose—at least that's what he calls it—and leaning against the wall, cleaning his nails with his favourite dagger. Azure and Morrigan are a little more inconspicuous, sitting haphazardly on the couch, pretending to read books. They almost pull it off, but one is staring out the window and the other seems lost in his head. They're the best dads ever for caring so much, honestly, and my grin shifts to a goofy smile.

I crash tackle Diarmuid with a hug and he lets out an almighty *oof*, dropping his blade as his arms loop around me. "Are you going to be alright, Ness? Truly?" he whispers, pulling back.

I lock eyes with him, letting my determination shine through to show him that I'm telling the truth. "Everything will be fine and I'm not on my own." I step back so I can face all of them, Azure and Morrigan both on their feet now. "I have the guys and Lexi." I stumble over her name, but keep going. "And of course you guys. Not to mention I'm amazing and can totally kick people's asses, now."

Azure cocks a brow at my language, but lets it slide and I grin. Goddess, I'm going to miss them. I suppose that's one positive of being so busy throughout the term.

“We trust you, Nessa. I need to know that you’ll call us if something goes wrong though? That you trust us enough, to know that no matter what’s wrong, even if the hounds of hell are chasing you—we’ll come to your aid,” Azure intones gruffly.

“You’re our little girl, Nessa. We love you and you’ll always have a place here, even if you end up with a whole army of mates. We’ll be here,” Morrigan adds.

My chest goes all gooey, but then I sputter as my brain catches up. “An army full? Nuh-uh. There is no way. I have my hands full with the guys, and we’re just friends.”

Diarmuid smirks and I groan before he even starts speaking, dropping my face into my hands. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that, Ness.” I peek at him through my fingers and he cackles when my cheeks flush. Bastard.

I go to give him the finger then catch myself, eyes flicking to Azure to see if he caught my almost movement. He rolls his eyes, but both Morrigan and him are sporting grins.

“You guys are the worst,” I mutter, then do the rounds, giving the other two hugs before heading for the front door. Before they can say anything I call over my shoulder, “Love you guys, and no I won’t talk to strangers. Yes I will call you once I’m safe in my dorm. Talk soon, byeee.” Then I close the door behind me and let out a breath. When I look up I get the strangest sense of *deja vu* and I scan the street, chest clenching. Goddess, I miss Lexi. I bite my lip, swallowing

roughly, before sucking in a deep breath and pushing my shoulders back. I can do this.

Then I set off down the street towards the carriage that is no doubt waiting at the edge of the forest for me. Academy of Magic here I come.



Being back at school is surreal. It's only been a few days, but it feels like longer. It's strange being here in my dorm without Lexi with me. I'm glad that I have Unicorn, otherwise I'd be completely alone with Lexi gone. It's also a constant reminder that she and I aren't really speaking, as well. I shake my head, biting my cheek as I re-centre my thoughts.

My hand's fist as I stare down at the photo in my hand. *Ethan*. So many questions and theories roll around in my head but I have no idea what to do with any of them. He's always hovering on the edge of my thoughts, despite my attempts to banish him from my mind, even when I was away from the Academy. There are so many reminders of him at home. All those memories were stirred up in the aftermath of what happened with Ethan, and just seeing his face. So similar to Anna's. I blink, scanning the photo harder.

With everything that happened at the end of the last term, I knew that I needed to try and give myself a break. Some time to reset and absorb everything. I couldn't risk burning out, not while he's still out there. So I forced myself to not think about

any of the stuff involving him or the Drákon group over the holidays. Or I at least tried to. I told myself that I'd take a break. But now that I'm back at the Academy, the self imposed ban is over, and my gut roils with what if's. *What if someone else has been hurt or captured because I haven't been working on this? What if he's managed to leave the academy grounds? Hell, what if he hasn't left the grounds?* Gods, my head is a mess.

I swallow hard. It's been nearly three weeks since Lexi was kidnapped and the showdown between the guys, me and the murderer—Ethan—and I feel so fucking lost. My eyes shift to the free standing cork board that's a few feet away from me, covered head to toe in photos. Some are not much different than the candid shot in my hand and others of more gruesome things. Things that I no longer flinch at and haven't for quite some time now.

For so long I've been trying to figure it all out. *What the hell happened to Anna? What is the name of the creature who did it and how the fuck can I end them?* Asking so many questions, tracking down leads, protecting others—or attempting to. So much that it's become an obsession. I *need* to know. But Ethan puts a wrench in things. *To what degree was he involved in what happened to her? Was he involved at all? Are my theories all wrong? Have I been going after the wrong group of people this entire time? Where the hell has he been all these years?* Even with the use of all my accumulated contacts, I'd been unsuccessful in locating him, only to run into him by chance in my friend's—Dylan's—dorm room.

I flop back onto my bed, legs dangling off the end as I roughly tug on my hair. The almost shoulder length strands of my A-line bob prevent my fingers from tangling and I release a huff. The thought of my haircut though, just makes my thoughts shift to Lexi. Guilt slides through me and I place a hand on my stomach as it roils dangerously with nausea. *It's my fault she was taken. Should I have stopped digging?* Yet another reason I needed a break. I have no fucking idea what the right move was. It's too late to go back now, but I have a choice to make on whether I stop or keep going. I swallow roughly, only to groan, making Unicorn chirp from where she's taking a nap on the window sill in my room.

My phone pings with a notification and I grab it, tapping into the news notification. I'm following all of them to keep tabs on the Drákon groups, keeping an eye on what new horrors they've been doing. I flick through the article and my stomach drops. There have been more kidnappings. So many. All of them aged between eighteen and thirty. All of them are powerful. I grit my teeth before letting out a careful breath to steady myself. I have to keep pursuing Ethan and doing my part, with the Drákon group upping the ante on the amount of kidnappings, the SFBI is going to be scrambling to keep up, as is the supernatural police force.

I shut off my screen and toss it onto my bed, thoughts drifting back to the Academy and how the next term is going to go. I rub my dry eyes and grab one of my pillows, hugging it to my chest. The Academy has been surprisingly kind and understanding, though as distant and removed from the

situation as they could get away with. I still can't believe that the last two weeks of our first term were cancelled, extending our two-week break to four weeks. It's going to be an insane term, especially now that all of our assignments and tests we hadn't done yet at the end of last term, have been pushed forward to be completed over the first two weeks of the new term.

I shake my head. The inkling that had been niggling at the back of my head telling me there was something fishy going on in the Academy before the attack, has been confirmed by so many things that have happened.

I'm going to figure out what the hell is going on. Preferably with the help of the guys. They've been really supportive in the aftermath, even though nothing really happened to me. And they don't even know the significance behind the girl I conjured up accidentally with my powers to terrify Ethan. *Anna*. Or why it has been messing with my head. I have not been sleeping well. Though it's more so since I've been back at the Academy. Alone in my dorm room. Unicorn's great, but it's not the same as the people I usually have around me. She also prefers to go out at night to hunt in the forestry and shift to her full size which she isn't able to do while cooped up in my dorm. It's my plan to do a little research on her specific species and figure out what she prefers and how to cater for that.

I shake my head again and push to my feet, checking my phone. Ten to four. If I leave now I'll have enough time to get across campus to La La's Coffeehouse to meet Lexi. She's

finally agreed to meet up with me. I grab my bag and give Unicorn a scratch on the cheek in a goodbye, making sure a window is open so she can leave if she wants to. She'll probably end up following me at a distance to keep an eye on me, but she doesn't love to be in places with lots of people so I make sure she doesn't feel forced to tag along. Content that she's taken care of, I make my way across campus.

I get there before Lex and I choose a seat in the back, after ordering a cappuccino for me and a latte for her. My fingers drum against my thigh absently as nerves swarm my stomach. This will be the first time I've seen her in three weeks. After the attack, she tried to stay with her parents but struggled with her mates being so far away, and when she had a bad panic attack, they couldn't get near her, so we talked it over and she decided to move in with her mates earlier than expected. Which also means she moved out of our shared dorm room. The school allowed it because of the unique circumstances and though I've been texting with her back and forth, I haven't seen her in person since then.

The door jingles and my head snaps up, eyes clashing with Lexi's before sliding to her mate, Dan. We've only met a few times. From what I've managed to learn about his personality, I like him. He seems like a good fit for my bestie and so far they've been stuck to her side like glue since the incident, which soothes something inside me.

My jaw twitches with concern as I take in both of their rumpled appearances and the deep bags underneath their eyes. Both Lexi and Dan appear as though they haven't slept in a

week, and she seems checked out. The fire that was previously in her eyes is gone.

I stand when they reach the booth I chose and Lexi gives me a stiff hug before sitting down across from me. Dan gives me a tired smile before leaning down to whisper to Lex. She nods and he heads back out of the shop, leaving us alone to talk.

I suck in a steadying breath. “I ordered you your usual.”

She nods again, not speaking.

I swallow hard. Not wanting to push, but needing to check-in, I ask, “How are you doing?”

She puffs out a ragged breath and those almost translucent blue eyes finally focus on mine, some of that dazed look fading. Seemingly in an unconscious movement, she starts scratching at her wrist. “Not the best.” She swallows, eyes darting away from mine, her fingers speeding up as she scratches at her skin, not seeming to notice when she draws blood. “I c-can’t sleep, I struggle to keep anything down, and I feel like I see him everywhere.”

When a drop of blood rolls down her hand and onto the table I slowly reach over and rest my fingers on her hand that’s still vigorously gouging at her other wrist, pausing her frantic movements. I don’t mention it, though she looks down, her eyes widening when she realises what she did. That dissociated look flashes over her expression again and I worry that she’s going to disappear mentally once more, but she doesn’t. Thankfully.

She doesn't move her hands, sucking in a deep breath. "I have tried to go out with the guys since, but it's not great. My skin crawls and knowing that he's still out there terrifies me."

That ever-present guilt surfaces again, but I'm careful to keep it off my features as I give her unharmed wrist a reassuring squeeze. "We'll get him, and if we don't then the SFBI will."

She shivers, removing her hand from my grip but nods. I get the feeling that she doesn't believe me, and I make a silent vow to myself that I'll do anything in my power—that doesn't put others at risk—to help the SFBI put him away.

We make idle conversation for a little while—well I do—before Dan returns and Lex heads off with him, this time giving me a slightly more relaxed hug before she goes.

My worry doesn't ease though and I walk back to my dorm lost in thought. My dorm now. Alone. I roll my shoulders, feeling oddly uncomfortable when I enter the place. I've been back for a few days, but it still feels odd being here all by myself. I'm alone here now at night, other than Unicorn, but it just isn't the same. I'm so used to having other people near me when I sleep that I feel like I have to constantly be on alert now that there isn't anyone else in the dorm but me.

My eyes snag on Lexi's closed door. Her mates and Oscar helped move her stuff out a few days after the school gave her permission to move out. Lex is very talented with spells and transported a lot of her own furniture and belongings over to her dorm room when we moved in at the start of our first term,

so there was more than usual for them to move physically since Lexi hasn't been comfortable enough to use her magic after being abducted. At least as far as I know.

Rubbing my eyes, I let out a world-weary groan. It's as though I have bricks on my eyelids and I focus on my clock. It's only late afternoon but I cave and decide to shower and go to bed. It might end up being another restless night, but my bed is my safe space.

I gather my things and set them on the bathroom counter before stripping. With meticulous, yet slightly robotic motions, I set the right temperature and step into the shower. My mind's still whirring, and I growl, slamming my palms against the tiled wall. "Shut up," I mutter, ready to lose my ever-loving shit at the voices in my head. Anxiety is like a slow, never-ending torture and I'm about ready to chop off my head to get some peace from it, just for a few minutes.

I bring my teeth down on my bottom lip, *hard*, drawing blood, but it centres me.

Since coming to the academy I've been holding myself back, giving myself time to focus solely on my studies for the first term, or at least before the murders started. I put a hold on everything I've been doing to find who is responsible for Anna's death and learn anything I can about my blood heritage. I also stopped branching out on my research on the Drákon groups rampaging the Supernatural Realm, but I think it's time to stop hiding that side of myself and beg the Goddess that it releases some of the ever growing tension inside me.

It's time to get back to my old haunts and pay a few piece-of-shit-men a visit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nessa

My legs swing back and forth leisurely as I watch the scene unfolding below me with growing amusement. The fighting rings are an excellent place to get information and before I started attending the Academy, a common hunting ground of mine, be it digitally or occasionally in person. I have a ton of contacts that frequent this place. None of them know me by my real name, I have a number of digital aliases that I use and am known by. I also have the owner of this establishment on my radar and enough dirt on him to easily have him under my thumb if I want, though I haven't found a need to use it though.

I discovered this place in my early days when one of my more frequently used contacts mentioned it. It wasn't safe without magic to actually go out and scope out places like this in person so I set up a network of contacts on the dark web, offering jobs that I could do from a safe distance—AKA behind a computer screen—to earn their trust and favours from them.

On this particular occasion, I'd had my contact following a supe I had suspected was a Drákon member, and my contact had revealed to me just how useful the place is. The worst of the worst practically live in places like this, including Drákon members. This one in particular is set up in a large six bay warehouse. It's divided into two main sections, while half is split into two cage-covered fight circles with a small raised

platform for an announcer in between them. The fight circles are surrounded by a few levels of raised seating like those in a stadium. The other side is full of tables and booths with a rowdy bar off to the side that serves shitty drinks and cheap food. The place is always packed with people, though personally I don't get the appeal of coming here for pleasure, or a night out. If I'm not here for my *hobby*, to get information or watch someone of interest, then it's to challenge someone to my own cage fight so I can blow off some steam. It was something I was able to do without needing magic. I utilised the extensive fighting skills that my fathers taught me. It always gave me the best rush. I'm still not sure if that makes me a bad person or not. I squint, tilting my head to the side for a moment before I shrug and refocus on the club.

I allow my eyes to scan the space, my mind thankfully quiet for the moment. The floor is a mixture of clay and compacted sand, and floating fae lights glow red above everyone's heads, bathing the room in a unique ambiance. It's giving me major wrath and murder vibes.

The warehouse is full of supernaturals of all genders, classes, and species, and noisy as hell. There aren't many security measures, only a few bouncers placed on the doors, but that's so they can stop any bar brawls that break out, so nothing gets damaged—not to help people stay safe.

I'm perched high above the crowd on one of several metal beams crisscrossing eight or so feet below the ceiling. It's an excellent vantage point and I can also see anyone coming for me a mile away, which is handy.

I'm sticking true to my mental agreement and launching back into my research and my murder board. One of those things I'm following up tonight. I've definitely slacked off when it comes to keeping track of the local Drákon groups movements, but that's about to change. A girl's body turned up in a back alley last night in the town and two guys are missing. Twin brothers, both strong for their age magic wise, and only twenty. After doing some digging and using one of Lexi's amazing programs to hack into the polices' files, I found several factors that lead me to believe that the Drákon group is responsible for both incidents. Or I suppose that there is a chance that Ethan was behind the girl's death. Along with those files, I also uncovered several other missing persons reports for the last few weeks, though those were kept out of the media along with two other murders, both women.

If they've been this rampant in the area and the police haven't been able to do anything, then it seems like I need to get back to some of my old vigilante ways. Plus, if there is a chance that Ethan could be involved than I need to figure out what the connection is—if there is one—between him and the Drákon group and the murders of course. The town is the closest to the Academy so if he is responsible then it would make sense that he's still using the school as a base.

Refocusing on the task at hand, I narrow my eyes, trying to tap into my magic so I can enhance my sight and let out a pleased hum when it works. My vision sharpens so I can distinguish people's facial features and as a bonus my hearing gets a power boost too. I give myself a moment to adjust to the

cacophony of sounds assaulting me, then search the crowd for the faces I'm looking for. It takes me a few minutes, but then my gaze snags on one. A tall, broad shouldered man with deep blue skin. That's not what catches my eye though—it's the set of four curled horns protruding from his head and the tusks peeking from his mouth. *Bingo.*

I stand in a fluid motion, feet silent as I jump between the beams to keep eyes on the man. His friends shouldn't be too far away. He walks through the crowd at an unhurried pace, but sweat dots his brow and the way he keeps fidgeting with his clothing belies his nerves. He proves me right when he ducks into a large booth at the back of the club in the bar section.

He's an informant for a group of Drákon members that I've seen quite a few times in pictures my contacts have sent me. Before attending the school I mostly stuck to researching behind my computer rather than actually going out to do my own reconnaissance. Not that I don't have the stealth training—I do, thanks to my fathers. I just didn't have the experience in the field to go out and do it, plus I have lots of great contacts.

Over recent years I used my portal amulet to get to and from the main club I use to gain information—thanks to one of my informants directing me there. I have been gathering information on the local group of Drákon members for a few years now via my computer, informants, and the dark web—leaving out that I took the last term off to focus primarily on my magic—so his features are quite recognisable to me. At

least not much seems to have changed while I took a break. They seem to be middle to upper level lackeys for the organisation and have inadvertently given me quite a bit of information. My goal is to get close enough to plant a bug on the female Drákon member tonight. She may look like a normal mid-level member, but she's actually the local Drákon group leader.

The bug I'm going to plant doubles as a tracker so I can trace her movements and hopefully she'll lead me to their stronghold. The cacophony of the supes below me grows louder, and I peer down at them where some dance sensually on a makeshift dance floor, while others are chatting and laughing with each other. *Goddess, I can't wait to get out of here.*

Refocusing on my task, I continue along the beams until I'm almost directly above their booth and squat down. The booth is on the larger side and the two members of the Drákon group I'm interested in—a female and a male—that I recognise from the group I've been following, are seated there. Four guards, judging by the sheer muscle they're displaying, surround the booth in normal clubbing clothes to blend in. I settle in to observe them, needing to wait for the perfect time to enact my plan.

Before leaving my dorm I had the forethought to use a rune to mask my scent, which means I don't flinch when one of the lackeys lingering by the booth begins to sniff the air. The movement does cause the tusked informant to shift nervously though. *Weasel.* Rolling my eyes, I strain my ears trying to

catch what they're saying, but give up when I sense the barrier surrounding them.

In the past they haven't been so careful, but then again they don't usually do meets like this in such a public place. Either that or something happened over the term I was at the Academy and on sabbatical from this side of my life, to make them more leery of people listening in.

After roughly fifteen minutes the male from the group and the tusked informant shake hands and I take that as my cue. Running along the beam, I reach the wall in seconds and slide into the hidden nook there. It's heavily shadowed, pressed between two circular concrete poles that run from floor to ceiling. Rubbing my hands together, I dive into my mind to access my magic. "Time to see if I can pull this off in a high-pressure situation," I mutter to myself.

My magic responds eagerly, rushing to my fingertips to answer my call. *Portal magic*. I've been working tirelessly since the idea occurred to me while I was at the marketplace with the guys and I've *mostly* got it down to a fine art.

I fling the circle of runes I have stored in my mind onto the wall, then flood them with my magic. The portal snaps into place in less than a second, purple magic now swirling in the centre of the human sized rune circle. Imagining the spot I want the portal to lead to, I step through it, shoulders tense. The world becomes distorted, and the air heavy like sludge as I continue through it. When I come out the other end, it's on a gasp that I quickly smother. Damn, I'm never going to get

used to that whole under-wet-cement feeling. It sucks to high heavens.

Shaking it off, I blow out a breath when I realise that it spit me out at the right spot. Without a single thought I tug my magic back into me and those runes snap right back into my mind. It took me hours to craft them perfectly so they'd mask any magical signature my magic could leave behind. It's ingenious really, the way you can manipulate a portal like that.

Focus Nessa. Huffing, I rush through the crowd with a happy grin pasted on my face. *Blend in. Move fast but don't run.* Going onto my tiptoes I spot the booth and my grin widens as I watch them get to their feet. *Action time.* I fluff my hair until it's a dishevelled mess, then undo the top three buttons of my black dress shirt, baring the tops of my girls to the world—well anyone in the club who deigns to look—and careen into the person next to me. She lets out a yelp and the fruity, but alcohol heavy fae drink spills down my top, coating me in the tangy scent. Before she can get upset, I raise my hands, arranging my face in an apologetic expression. “I'm so sorry. Here.” I shove a shiny twenty-dollar fae coin at her to cover her drink, and she instantly relaxes, shrugging me off with a smile.

That's parts two and three done. Now to test out my acting skills. Keeping my eye on the two Drákon members, I let my limbs become loose and clumsy, body swaying as I move through the crowd. Giggles fall from my lips unchecked as I almost tip over. Licking my lips, I palm the small tracking tag and intentionally pretend I'm looking at something interesting

to my left as I careen into the Drákon female standing to my right. She lets out an almighty oof and snarls as my arms come around her, using her to catch my fall. I hiccup, acting dazed as I tip my head back to look at her, lips parted in an O. “I’m sooo sssorry.” I slur my words and add a hiccup, laying it on thick. While she’s preoccupied with that I press the applicator to the bare skin of her lower back, digging my nails in ever so slightly to distract her from the sting of it as I activate it and the needle pierces her skin, inserting the tracker. The tracker itself is tiny, thin and shaped much like a grain of rice. The applicator is small too, no bigger than a thin eraser, and the needle used in the applicator to insert the tracker is coated with a magical numbing spell that makes it virtually painless. Once it’s inserted it’s almost impossible to detect with the naked eye and she won’t feel it once the miniscule puncture mark from the needle has healed.

I pull back a little, stumbling as I hold onto her and just like I was hoping it would, her posture relaxes. She grabs my shoulders, helping to right me, barely bothering to look at my face, too busy scanning the area around us. “It’s no problem.” Dipping my chin I cast my eyes demurely to the floor and nod.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

She pats my shoulder once before moving on and I keep up the innocent-drunk act until I’m safely out a side door and portalling back to the Academy.



“Well I’d call that a success,” I say as I watch the little red blip moving along the map on my computer screen. The tracker took and I’m now safe in my dorm, showered and relaxing on the couch with Unicorn in my lap. Yep, best night since being back at the Academy, for sure.

Unicorn lets out a little growly sound in response to my words and I stop scratching her head for a moment to lightly flick her nose. “I know, I know. I should have brought you with me, but I didn’t want to risk the barrier around the Academy frying you. It should have fried me.” My brows draw down as I try to puzzle it out, but fail to come up with a reason to explain it. The Dome of Academy warding that covers the entirety of the grounds, and a fair portion of the sky above it, is imbued with dozens of protection and defensive spells to both keep us in and protect the Academy and all of the people on the grounds from outside threats. It’s supposed to either severely injure or kill anyone who touches it, and give anyone who attempts to portal through it with their own magic a hefty zap. For some unknown reason though, it doesn’t appear to be working properly, but I’m not risking Unicorn if it decides to snap back online again. Unicorn nudges my hand, drawing me out of my thoughts for a moment and I return to petting her with a laugh.

I actually discovered I could get through the barrier by accident. I was practising my portal magic in the forest surrounding the Academy and my mind drifted to the sky right as I went through the portal, so naturally it spat me out a few

thousand feet above the Academy, falling to my death. Unable to portal out of there, I was stuck helpless, falling until I came back through the barrier and Unicorn caught me. Without my familiar I'd be a very dead monster right now.

I thought for sure I was done. That one fuck-up would have me expelled from the Academy or dying a painful death when the warding caught up with me. But no one came and no magic tried to kill me.

With a groan I drop my head into my hands. "Here's to praying to the Goddess that this term will be less crazy than the last," I mutter to myself.

CHAPTER NINE

Nessa

I turn on the stovetop kettle. *Another coffee is just what I need. And hopefully it will keep me awake.* I toss the empty takeaway coffee cup I'm still holding from earlier, in the bin and flop down onto the couch to wait for the signature *whistle* that'll let me know the water is boiling.

My ass has barely hit the seat when a knock sounds on my door and I let my head thump back against the tight back style couch with a huff, rubbing at my eyes. After a moment I shove back up to my feet and relax slightly as I near the door and recognise the person's A-class magical signature to be Dylan's.

I've definitely been more on edge since the incident and being here alone, well other than Unicorn. I swing the door open, taking a step back as I do, ready to wave him in, only to pause when my eyes slide over his 6 foot 8 frame and meet his bright blue eyes. His lips quirk into a tiny smile and his clean laundry and old book smell wraps around me.

I'm snapped out of my blatant staring when his smile widens into a grin, that damn lone dimple popping as his head cocks to the side. I roll my lower lip between my teeth and turn away from him abruptly, waving him in over my shoulder. "Hi, how are you doing?"

I busy myself with making a cappuccino with an instant coffee sachet, dumping three sugars in before sliding a glance over my shoulder at Dylan who has moved to lean against the

kitchen island, watching me with that piercing gaze of his. “Hello. I’m good.”

I’m distracted slightly when I realise he’s not wearing his glasses, and some hot water from the kettle splashes onto my wrist. I mentally curse as I brush off the water and stare at the red mark, pursing my lips. I’m busy mentally debating whether I should run some cold water over it to avoid a blister or not when Dylan is suddenly at my side, hands gently cupping my forearm to get a better look at the red mark. “Are you okay?” he asks, already turning on the cold water for me, blue eyes flicking up from the burn to meet mine.

My lips part, and I blink repeatedly, a little stupefied at both his quick reaction and how much he cares. It’s just a little burn. Getting myself together, I give a slow shake of my head. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just a tiny burn,” I say, holding my arm up a little higher to illustrate my point, but he doesn’t respond, instead guiding my hand under the running water before letting go and returning to his spot from before. “Would you like a drink?” I ask, stirring my coffee with my free hand.

He shakes his head and I nod, adding some lactose free milk to my drink before taking a sip with one hand while still holding the one with the burn under the tap.

While the water runs, I twist around to face Dylan, and my brows dip slightly when I scan his face. “So what’s up?”

A slight flush dusts his cheeks, and he breaks our heavy eye contact. I take a sip of my coffee to hide my smile. “I just wanted to check in and see how you are going and what you

are up to. Are you ready for this term? Do you need help to study anything.”

Tomorrow is the start of the new term and I can't say I'm not a little worried about it. After everything that happened last term, I really just want to be able to focus on my surveillance of the Drákon group and my course load, but with the threat of Ethan looming I doubt it's going to be that easy. Unbidden, my mind flicks through a mental checklist of everything I had to hand in and the presentation Corin and I have to do at the end of the first week for runes class. We're prepared, but we're still meeting up to do a run-through of the presentation this week so we can iron out any kinks. The presentation is one thing I'm actually excited about. We've worked so hard and I'm almost positive that with the both of us sending power into it, the rune circle we've created should work. It wasn't a requirement of the assignment, but either way, it was interesting to research runes and their inner workings.

I refocus on the man in front of me, realising I've yet to answer him. “Yep, I'm ready. Thanks for the offer, but so far I think I'm alright. What about you?” I take another gulp of my cappuccino and hum. *Yep, definitely a good coffee.*

“I am too.”

My eyebrows furrow and I cock my head to the side as I watch him, a small smile playing on my lips. The coffee is warm in my hands and I scan his face, trying to figure out why he's here.



Dylan

Nessa cocks her head to the side as she watches me, face scrunched up adorably as she obviously tries to puzzle out the reason I'm here. *So freakin' cute.*

Truth is I was craving her and figured subtly offering to tutor her this term would give me an excuse to see her again before the chaos of our next term. That idea crashed and burned. I snort at myself and shake my head, eyes still locked on Nessa.

“Well since you're already here do you want to watch a show with me? Ohh, I just read a great book too. I'm not sure if it's something you'll like but figured I'd share it with you anyway.” She gives me a semi awkward smile, her nose crinkling.

I nod, following her to the lounge room, flopping onto the couch as she sets her coffee down on the bench then flicks on the TV before ducking into her room. I flick on something for background sound and wait for her to come back. It doesn't take long. She comes back practically bouncing on her toes as she hands the book to me. “It was sooo good!” she praises, eyes lit up. It's a struggle to drag my eyes away from her face, but I do, focusing on the book in my hands. *Not Many Options* by Jillian West. Flipping it over I read the blurb and it successfully sucks me in. *Guess I've found my next read.*

Grinning, I look up at Nessa. “It sounds great, I'll have to find the ebook when I go back to my dorm.”

She returns my smile but waves her hand. “No, it’s fine. Just take my copy and give it back to me when you’re done,” she says.

I carefully set it on the arm of the couch and shuffle over so there is room for Nessa to sit beside me. “Thank you, I’ll take good care of it.”

Still smiling, she settles in beside me, her thigh pressed against mine as she grabs the remote from me. “I just put something I’ve seen a hundred times on,” I explain with a shrug.

Nessa nods in understanding and backs out of it, flicking through the options. “What about this one?” she asks with a shrug after a few minutes. It’s a romantic comedy I haven’t seen before and I agree easily. I don’t care what we do, as long as I’m not cooped up in my empty dorm. I haven’t gone near Ethan’s room since I found out who he actually was. *A murderer*. My place feels incredibly lonely sometimes. Clearing my throat, I refocus on the present and shift a little to get comfortable. I refuse to let my mind drag me down.

Too bad Nessa’s intuitive. “What are you thinking about?” she asks, large golden eyes focused on mine.

“What do you mean?” I’m playing dumb and we both know it.

She plays along. “You got this little crinkle right here, and your scent went sad,” she says, touching her index finger to the skin between my eyebrows.

Well damn, so much for playing along. She totally just called me out. I laugh and playfully grab a throw pillow and smack it into her shoulder. She jumps to her feet with a shriek, a wide grin stretching her lips.

She dances away and I stand up as well. “Oh, you didn’t,” she accuses in a mock serious voice, eyes narrowed.

I smirk. “Oh, I definitely did.”

She gasps in outrage and throws another pillow at me and it has my mind flashing back to our massive pillow fight in the library and our *kiss*. Heat flushes through me and my expression must change because some of her laughter fades and her pupils dilate, then she *runs*. The worst possible thing she could have done.

“Nessa, I wouldn’t do that if I were you, love.”

She swallows hard, eyes widening, but then she takes another step back and a low growl rises in my throat. “Nessa,” I warn, voice gravelly.

The little minx smirks before sticking out her tongue at me and bolting towards the kitchen. I chuckle, shaking my head before I lunge for her and she jerks away with a shriek. My increased speed and reflexes due to my vampire side give me an advantage, so I gain on her quickly. She pauses on the other side of the kitchen island, bracing her hands on it as she stares at me, still grinning like a maniac.

I copy her movements and lean forwards, eyes burning into hers. “Give up now, love, and I’ll go easy on you.”

She cocks her head to the side, pressing her index finger to her chin thoughtfully. “Hmm, no, I don’t think I want to.”

Shaking my head, I reach around the island and growl playfully as I try to grab her and she laughs in surprise, once again just managing to skip out of reach. It’s then that the chase is really on. Nessa takes off across the room and launches over the back of the couch—or at least she tries to. Her foot catches between two cushions and she goes down with a loud squeak that sends panic through my chest. I’m too close to her to stop my trajectory fully so I end up sprawled halfway over the couch and looking down at a very amused Nessa. Cackling, she squirms from her place half on the floor and half on the couch, our faces only inches apart. I sag, shaking my head as I realise she’s fine. *Thank fuck.*

Climbing the rest of the way over the couch, I’m ready to help her up when she rolls over onto all fours and starts crawling away from me. I freeze, watching her as she keeps going until there is a few feet between us, then she shifts so she’s facing me and continues scooting back on her butt. Her eyes meet mine and hold, those golden orbs practically egging me on. *Goddess she’s a brat.*

My eyes narrow and I leap at her like a fucking cat, landing braced over her on all fours with ease. She flinches back, her mouth parting in an O of surprise and I catch the back of her head in my palm so it doesn’t smack against the ground. My eyebrows draw down even more. “You have to be more careful,” I grumble. She could have seriously hurt herself, *again.*

She still looks put out by my jump though. “So unfair,” she mutters. I just shake my head again and thread my hand into her hair, making her attention snap to me.

“Stubborn woman,” I mutter, then press my lips to hers. For a moment she’s still, then she moves. One hand clutches my shirt and the other threads into my hair at my nape as she returns my kiss tenfold.

Mouth moving against hers, my hand tightens in her hair and I angle her head so I can deepen the kiss. When I lightly trace the seam of her lips with my tongue she opens for me and I groan, cock hardening almost to the point of pain. Her sweet scent swirls around us in a thick cloud that has my nostrils flaring as I try to breathe in as much as possible. She’s like a drug.

She shifts closer so our lower bodies are pressed together, my hard length pressed to the apex of her thighs. My hips cant forwards and her hand shifts from my nape to tangle in my hair, tugging on the strands. She whimpers, and I slow the kiss to deep drugging sips at her lips. Pleasant shivers roll down my spine when her tongue swirls over mine, and I never want this moment to end.

When we finally break apart the sound of our ragged breathing is the only sound in the quiet. I suck down large gulps of air, my head spinning with pleasure at the strength of our intermingled scents. Her sweet candy-like scent compliments my old book smell. It reminds me of sitting back with a sweet hot chocolate and a good book.

A bout of contentment hits me and I scoop Nessa into my arms and settle on the couch with her. Contented, she snuggles into me, resting her cheek on my shoulder and tucks her nose against my throat. My body is relaxed and my mind thankfully quiet as the last of my lingering lust cools.

I peer down at the gorgeous woman in my arms and the strangest urge to purr rises in my chest. I don't fight it and she lets out an echoing higher pitched rumble. It has goosebumps breaking out on my skin and I tuck my nose into her hair, eyes closing as exhaustion rolls over me. It would be way too easy to fall asleep like this.

I trail my hand up and down her back, drawing swirling patterns that have her melting into me even more. When sleep tries to drag me under I don't fight it, Nessa's purr like a lullaby.

CHAPTER TEN

Oscar

I roll my shoulders, trying to relieve the building pressure as I stare down at my plate, my mother's voice grating to my brain, like nails against a chalkboard. I pick at the food, a muscle in my jaw twitching as I tune back into the conversation.

“—Well, we can't all be big shots like Syn, now, can we?” I suck in a careful breath and glance at the sister in question from under my lashes. She throws me an awkward look before simply nodding at our mother's praise. We both know she doesn't mean it. She's just sucking up to her in the hopes that she'll let her borrow some money. Not that mother needs any more at the moment, she's already cornered me about it.

I inwardly cringe at the thought of what she could possibly need it for now. *Does she owe someone again? Or has something expensive caught her attention?* Something that she 'just *has* to have'—her words not mine. It's gotten to the point where I don't even want to know.

Clearing her throat, my sister Syn pipes up. “As you know, the first term was pretty great—” she pauses, eyes sliding to me then away again before she continues. “—despite the murders. I was thinking of taking fae dance as one of my extra studies for this term.”

Thankfully, that sends my mother off on a tangent about her youth and dancing with some fae royalty when she was young. I know better than to trust what she says at face value and instead of adding my input, I take a sip of my orange juice. I

opted out of drinking the wine she offered, preferring to keep a clear head for this dinner.

After everything that went down just before the end of term with Nessa and the others, I stayed at the Academy for the majority of our extended holiday, managing to avoid my hometown and mother. Alas, my sister Syn called up and begged me to just come to one dinner, so she wouldn't have to face her alone. Of course I caved which led me to this moment, one day before classes resume, stuck in a hellish dinner with my mother and sibling. Well, Syn makes it somewhat bearable, but being around my mother is just anxiety inducing.

When I feel my mothers gaze land on me, I swallow hard and mentally curse myself for being rational. Alcohol sounds great right about now.

“So my son, how was your first term? Have you found any females worth courting yet? As heir to the estate you need a beautiful mate by your side.” I don't respond right away, shoving away the rage that flares in my gut. No matter how many times I've explained to her the fact that I didn't spend years focusing on my education so I could be accepted on a scholarship into the Academy, just for me to find a rich mate, she won't drop the idea. In her mind what else would I be wasting four years of my life for, if not to find some rich supernatural to leech off for the rest of my life. I don't bother to remind her that we only still have the estate because my father pays for it, and he only does so because when I come of age it will be mine. He's not rich, but he is comfortable. Years

ago he offered to pay for my fees, and I explained that I wanted to prove to myself that I could get in on my own. I didn't need anyone but myself, or no-one else's money. No pressure. It was *my* achievement and no-one can take that from me. And I did it, I got in on a scholarship.

My father got tired of my mothers crap years ago, refusing to send her money. Instead he makes sure the house is stocked with food and leaves the rest up to her and us. My eyes slide back to the table for a second and I smile to myself. He really tries his best, despite not being in a relationship with mother. She's more powerful than him so she won in the battle of custody for us, but I like to believe that my sister and I turned out okay.

Our father has set up a trust fund for my sister as well, which she'll gain access to when she comes of age. He also covers her school fees and gives her a small monthly stipend to use on top of her part time job. He entrusted me with the estate because he knows that I would never kick my mother or my sister out. That's something that my mother knows, so I'm sure in her mind when I mate she believes that she'll get this house to herself. That I'll move in with my mate, rather than use this estate as my home and have my mate move in with me. I blink, *yeah that's probably not a bad idea, I don't want to live with my mother.*

My mother isn't a bad person, just wrapped up in her issues and addictions. I honestly don't believe that I'd be able to handle the stress of living with her again. Not to mention the monetary chaos she'd cause. I cringe just thinking about it.

“Oscar.”

Her irritated hiss has me snapping back to the present and an ache flares in my chest.

“No. Though my classes are going well.” I don’t mention Nessa, but she crosses my mind as I answer mother. I’d *never* use her like that though, my mother is only asking to see if she can use her somehow. Not to mention, we’re only friends, well, for now at least. Hopefully not for much longer though, if our kiss means as much to her as it does to me. Tingles bubble up in my chest at the thought, as the memory of her pillowy lips pressed to mine flash through my head. I lower my head again, not missing the sly look my sister throws at me as I refocus on my food, ignoring my mothers annoyed huff, and quickly finish my plate.

I zone out of the idle chatter for the rest of dinner, my mind focused on what I have to do after. My mind flashes back to my mother cornering me as soon as I walked in the door and I cringe.

I was focused on my phone, about to text Syn to let her know I was here so I could avoid being alone with our mother, when the front door opened. My eyes darted up and I sighed, shoving my phone in my pocket. I tried to summon a smile, eyes focused over her shoulder, knowing what she’s after by the desperation clinging to her scent. “Oscar, it’s been so long. I wasn’t sure if you’d be coming tonight or not.”

I barely managed not to groan, forcing the fake smile on my lips to widen. “Mother, how have you been?”

From my peripheral vision I could see her lower lip start to tremble and she hugged herself. My body tensed. Here it fucking comes. “Oh, just awful, sweetheart. I’ve been so lonely, your father won’t come see me. You hardly ever stop in, never answer my calls—” she kept on going and my body got tighter and tighter until I was sure my spine would fucking snap. She guilt tripped me until I felt awful, and frustration burned up my throat. As a B-class monster, I was hardwired to want to take care of people, and my mother knew exactly how to press all the right buttons.

It was always the same thing. Money. That’s all she wanted and cared about, it fueled her addictions and she turned into a freaking horror to be around when she ran out of it. My jaw twitched, teeth gritted together.

My fingers curled into fists and when the first tear rolled down her cheek, I broke. “I’ll have it to you tonight,” I said, voice dead and lifeless before I brushed past her, taking care not to actually touch her.

Shaking off the memory, I stay as long as is polite before excusing myself. Letting out a long breath, I quickly scrub off my plate before grabbing my coat. I’m about to pull it on when a hand grabs my forearm and drags me into the large coat closet. “What the heck?” I grunt, whirling on my sister with an annoyed frown, though amusement battles for supremacy inside me.

She grins at me, letting go of my arm to pull me into a short hug. “Brother, I wasn’t sure if you’d make an appearance

tonight or not.”

I roll my shoulders, lips twitching as I fight a smile and watch the door. “Well, I’m here. So, what’s up? Couldn’t you have texted me later?”

Letting out a little huff, Syn sets her large eyes on me, curiosity practically shining from her pores. “Who is she?”

My eyes snap to hers in surprise. “What?”

“The girl. *Nessa*. Don’t think I didn’t catch some of those thoughts, brother. Your mental shields are just as crappy as they used to be. You really should work on that,” she complains, nose wrinkling.

I cringe. Telepathy is as much of a blessing as it is a curse and Syn still hasn’t found the off switch for hers yet. I’d hate to know what she’s caught from our mother in the past. I can only assume with her addictions that her mental shields would be weak. Especially when she’s at her lowest. Mine might suck with average thoughts, but so far I’ve been successful in concealing how I keep our mother stable.

“So, I’ll ask again, brother. Who is she and what’s she like? I hope she’s treating you well. And how come I haven’t heard about her?”

I earn a glare for that last question and I let my head fall back with a quiet groan. I really don’t want to get into this here.

“Tell you what, sister. Let’s meet up sometime and we can talk about it.” As I speak, I shrug on my coat and throw hers at

her, before peering out into the hall to see if our mother has drifted this way or not. Satisfied that the coast is clear, I tug Syn out of the closet then usher her towards the front door as she complains.

When we're safely out the front in the brisk air, my shoulders relax a little. Thank the goddess I made it through that.

Taking a hold of Syn's shoulders, I tug her into a soft hug before pulling back with a forced grin. "We'll talk about it, I promise, but for now I have somewhere I need to be."

Her eyes tighten with worry and she sucks in a breath as though she's about to question me, so I ruffle her hair and start walking down the path. Pretending not to see her look and calling over my shoulder. "Bye sis."

"Bye," her voice is a whisper, but I ignore it and the tension that her fear brings to my shoulders. She's never known what I do to support my mother when she's going through a rough patch, but she's always suspected it was something risky and she couldn't be more right.



The intermingled sharp scents of blood and fear permeate the warehouse with a strength that has my stomach turning and I consciously switch to breathing through my mouth, not that it helps much. I keep my head bowed, meticulously unwrapping,

then rewrapping my hands. Trying to block out the roar of the crowd, their calls for blood and the thwack of fists against flesh, it eats away at my soul, not that my outward expression would hint at my thoughts.

No. To everyone else I'm sure I appear to be stoic, unfeeling and give zero fucks about what I'm about to do. The thud of a body hitting the ground a split second before the crowd goes wild signals that it's my turn and I stand in an easy movement, swaggering towards the crude, cage-covered ring.

My opponent is busy grinning at the crowd when I enter the ring, waving his arms to amp them up. When he turns to face me, he scans me up and down so I can see the dismissal in his eyes. It happens a lot. Big brawny supes take one look at my pink hair and skin, swimmers build and pretty face and think I'm not a threat. Stupid if you ask me.

Two lackey's come in to grab the bloodied supe that's still unconscious in the corner of the ring and my opponents eyes flick to them to watch. I block it out, still ignoring it when he's dragged out by his ankles and instead stare blankly at my opponent. I don't have to imagine what it's like to be on the receiving end of my dead eyed stare as I've seen it whenever I look in the mirror after a fight. It seems to have an effect on this guy though; he pales slightly and puffs up his chest, trying to appear threatening, but I merely crack a smile. His facade crumbles, he looks genuinely worried now. *Good.*

I let my features fall back into a blank mask and focus straight ahead as the announcer dribbles on about us, the rules

and hyping up of the crowd. He's mostly spinning some epic tale about a rivalry or something to get them more blood thirsty, but I don't bother paying attention. *No.* I shift to stare at the guy who's the reason I'm here tonight. Well, one of the reasons. The bastard watching me outside of the cage. He flashes me a smarmy grin, that slowly fades into annoyance when I don't allow my expression to change.

It actually reminds me of my first night here, which has me swallowing hard, jaw twitching. I was young, stupid and desperate.

I squeezed past the bouncer as I moved through the entrance of the club, shoving my hands deep into my black hoodie's pockets. My mind was still spinning from my mothers frantic words the night before, and the urgency to her words sat in my gut like a rock. "Oscar, baby, I'm in trouble. So much trouble. He's going to come after us. Gods, I need money and I need money fast." That rambling went on for a while, as did the sporadic pacing and hand movements. It was enough to terrify me, and have me agreeing immediately when she told me that I needed to help her earn the money back before directing me here.

The moment my eyes adjusted to the red ambience, crowded room, and fight cages, I knew that I was in over my head and went to take a step back, but a hand on my arm stopped me. "Now what do we have here?" He looked me up and down with interest.

Blinking, I rushed out, "A job." I cleared my throat, eyes wide. "I mean, I'm looking for a job, Sir." His dark eyes lit up, a smile curling his lips, but it didn't instil much confidence in me.

"I think I have the perfect one for you, my boy. Have you ever fought someone before?" Keeping his grip on me he led me further into the club, the scent of blood and sweat assaulting me.

Hill—as he told me his name was—dragged me to the bar, and poured himself a drink before showing me a handful of cash. The cash I needed for my mother, then he threw me in a cage with a guy a few years older than me and said, *"Win and you get this, no questions asked."*

That's how I got drawn into the underbelly of the supe world, and with me using all my spare time to study, it seemed like the best option for work. Get knocked around once or twice a month for a big payout and spend the rest of my time at school or studying, it was a win-win. But the older I got the dirtier it felt and now I don't know how to climb out of the pit I've dug myself, that is basically enabling my mother. I'm too weak to cut her off myself and too ashamed to tell anyone. When we were younger I could tell myself that I didn't cut her off because it would be bad for my little sister, but she's moved out now. Safe living at the Academy so I really have no excuse other than being weak.

I shake my head, snapping back to the present when the announcer starts a verbal countdown, not bothering to shake

off the shame coating my insides. I don't bother sizing up my opponent as the bell rings, signalling the start of the fight. Nor do I react at the first punch to land on my cheek. I let him land another, this one glancing off my cheekbone, creating a pleasant sting of pain while maintaining eye contact with Hill before turning my full attention to the fight. Sidestepping another punch, I trip him and dance away. We trade blows for a few seconds before my mind starts to wander.

I wonder what Nessa is doing right now? Is she hanging out with Dylan? How would she react if she knew about this side of my life? Would she be disgusted? Would she turn me in? I'm jolted out of my thoughts when my opponent's knuckles crack against my left eyebrow, splitting the skin so blood blocks out my sight. *Asshole. Can't he see I've been taking it easy on him?*

Shedding the ruse, I land a swift combination of blows on his body, drawing out the win by toying with him longer than I need before finally knocking him out and winning the match. The screams of the crowd finally start to penetrate the barrier I've wrapped around me and I stalk back to my things, ignoring the uproar.

I ignore everything and everyone, the crowd parting to create a path as I move through the room. The owner of this place has his office setup on a raised platform on the far side of the building. When I reach the bottom of the steps, the same uneasy feeling I always get when I see him hits me in the gut, but I shake it off, climbing the stairs. Hill is waiting for me when I knock and he opens the door immediately. The

weaselly suit throws me a duffel bag full of cash, five grand. I leaf through it to double check and he scoffs at me, but I ignore him.

When I'm sure it's all there I give him a nod and hustle out of the place. One more stop before I can go back to the Academy, to my real home—for now at least.

Using the portal I have set up in the forestry surrounding the club, I travel to the park down the street from my mothers house. Shoulders drooping, I tug my hood over my head, low so it covers most of my face and hike the duffel up more comfortably on my shoulder. I placed a rune on it so it's not visible, so I don't draw attention to myself.

The street is quiet, with only the occasional dog bark in the distance as I make my way through the dark into our backyard. The back porch gate is never locked so I push it open and remove my winnings from the bag, leaving it on my mothers doorstep.

I don't stick around, instead walking away from her place at a clipped pace. When I reach the portal and go through, it's a relief and I let out a huge breath, shoulders relaxing. Safe at the Academy. Away from the hell that is my birth town and my mother. *Thank the Goddess.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Corin

I let out a ragged breath, staring out the windows to my left as I wait for Nessa to turn up. It's our first day attending classes since the incident with Ethan and over the extended break I wasn't able to see her as much as I'd have liked to. Even though we're mates and the bond has been straining in my chest, I missed Nessa in general. Her quirkiess, sass and sweet side that she's only really given me hints of. Oscar and Dylan have tried to be there for her too. Any jealousy I thought I'd feel over them is absent, the same going for my other half. Which in itself is strange. She's our mate, yet he hasn't killed or attempted to kill the two other males that are hanging around her. I'm glad we were able to go to the Travelling Marketplace with her, it gave me the chance to get to know her better and get some more insight into her past.

I'm jolted out of my thoughts when the classroom door opens with a bang and Nessa scrambles in with a sheepish expression. The bell rings as she mumbles an apology to our professor and heads my way. I cock my head as I take in her, cataloguing her rumpled clothing and her unbrushed hair. She looks all sleep mussed and adorable. As she reaches down to grab out her notebook her candy sweet scent washes over me and I suppress a groan, scrubbing a hand over my face.

When she straightens up her eyes dart to me for a moment before she mumbles, "Hello," then focuses on the professor.

His voice drones through the room but I tune it out as I stare at the woman beside me. My gut clenches in concern—she doesn't seem like the same firecracker that I was getting to know and that doesn't sit well with me. My eyes narrow and before I can overthink the action, I find myself leaning in so my lips hover beside her ear. "Are you okay?"

When I pull back a smug grin quirks my lips as a visible shiver rolls over her from our proximity, only for it to fall away when her features tighten. "*Goddess, I'm getting sick of people asking me that,*" she hisses under her breath before turning to level a glare in my direction. "I'm fine."

I shift so I'm gripping her wrist that's closest to me and stroke it with my thumb in a soothing pattern. I smile crookedly and flick my eyes from hers to where Unicorn is seated on her shoulder, swishing her tail lazily. "That's good to hear, but I was actually speaking to Unicorn. She's looking rather floppy today." I purse my lips and tip my head as I look her over. The said familiar, hisses at me and flicks me with her tail before crawling over to Nessa's other shoulder. "So testy," I grunt, while rubbing my cheek.

Nessa's shoulders start to shake and my eyes jerk away from Unicorn to study her face only to freeze when I see she's laughing silently, one hand covering her mouth as she watches me. Her eyes dance with amusement and I feel mine swirl with magic in response. Goddess, she's beautiful, those big gold eyes and silky black hair that I crave to run my fingers through, draw me in all over again. I swallow hard and some of her amusement fades, interest sparking in her expression as

she scans my features. My cheeks flush at the attention and I duck my head, my shaggy hair shifting to cover my face as I force my mind back to the professor. I feel Nessa's eyes on me more than once as we make it through the theory side of class, and give her arm a reassuring squeeze every time I do.

When it's finally time to do the practical side of things, I have a crick in my neck and my chest is thrumming with the faint bond between Nessa and I. So in other words I'm ready to *do* something.

I push up from the desk and grab the papers I was working on, setting them on Nessa's so Mr James doesn't get the wrong idea and see through my dumb facade. I don't need the questions it would bring, especially with all the heat on the school since the incident with Ethan. So far there haven't been any more murders on the Academy grounds, but I doubt it's the last we've seen of him.

While organising my bag I have to break contact with Nessa and a pang hits me as the bond riots, but I ignore it. I'm not going to rush her, she has to come to her own conclusions. At least until I can tell her. My eyes slide to her face, studying her.

"Where do you want to practice?" Nessa's voice breaks through my chaotic thoughts.

I stretch lazily while I contemplate it, a pleased purr rumbling in my chest when her eyes stray to my stomach that's been exposed by my movements. "I think we're ready to complete the final steps of the rune circle, so we should do it

in the forest and get a feel for the magic we'll need to connect to. That way we're prepared."

She nods distractedly and I let my arms drop, lips twitching when she startles, her eyes meeting mine shamelessly. She spins on her heel, not blushing in the least. "Well, come on then," she calls over her shoulder when I don't immediately follow her.

I roll my bottom lip between my teeth to suppress a smile. *That's more like her.* Some of the tension in my shoulders eases and I let out a breath. "Coming."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nessa

I stalk off ahead, swallowing a groan. *He totally caught me ogling him.* Biting the inside of my cheek to suppress the blush that wants to surface, I act like I'm owning that shit on the outside, when internally I'm cringing. I've been doing that a lot lately, more so than before attending the Academy of Magic. Shaking off the odd feeling squirming in my stomach, I turn my focus to the campus as I push through the door. Fresh air swirls around me and I suck it in gratefully. It clears away some of Corin's bonfire scent. It's surprisingly strong even for an A-level monster, which is unusual. My head cocks to the side as I contemplate it. Adding that, along with the multiple other unusual things about the man, I honestly have no idea what to believe and it's like an itch I can't scratch, not knowing his secrets.

Now that we're outside, Unicorn launches off of my shoulder to fly beside me, staying cat-sized for now. I let out a breath and some of the stiffness in my body releases when I step into the forest, its calming ambience wrapping around me. I move a few feet into the treeline to wait for Corin and plop down onto a boulder.

After about twenty seconds or so, the spot between my shoulderblades begins to tingle and I have to consciously keep my body loose. Someone's watching me. I examine the feeling as I surreptitiously glance around the area and don't spot anyone, other than a faint flash of white, but that could just be

the light playing tricks on my eyes. Picking up on my change in mood, Unicorn lands on my shoulder and chirps softly. I focus on dissecting what my magic is picking up on, and realise whoever it is doesn't have any obvious malicious intent and ignore the feeling for now. I give Unicorn a chin scratch, mumbling that it's okay to her before she takes off again, flying through the trees around me but still sticking close.

Fiddling with a stick, I grin lazily at Corin when he finally reaches me. "What took you so long?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow.

"Had to take a phone call."

I dip my head once in acknowledgement then get to my feet again. "So, which clearing do you want to go to?"

"I found a new spot the other day. It's a little further in than we usually go, though..."

I bounce on my toes, excitement buzzing through me. I've explored a lot of this part of the forestry, but I'm also pretty cautious about running into guards so I tend to stick to denser areas and away from the outer edges. The Academy only hires strong A-class monsters to work for them, usually more volatile species mixtures to protect us if the barrier should fail. "Sounds good."

I easily keep up with Corin's long strides as he leads me off the path and towards some unknown location. It hits me that in light of the recent events with Ethan, I should probably be worried right now, but there's something inside me that just explicitly and intrinsically trusts Corin. That he would never

intentionally hurt me or Unicorn. And having that level of trust with someone I've only known for a few months scares me far more than being alone in the middle of the Epikíndynos Forest with him does.

After a few minutes, I'm questioning Corin as I look around. Unicorn lands on my shoulder, having given up trying to fly through the dense forestry and I'm biting the inside of my cheek, debating on whether I should question Corin on if he's sure we're going the right way. All I can see is thick tree trunks. The tree's trunks have grown so big that he has to turn his massive frame sideways to fit through the gaps between them. I've been this way before and stopped a ways back because of how dense it gets. It is also super dark and when I tip my head back all I can see is the shadowy underside of the treetops that are blocking out the sun.

I'm about to voice my confusion when he shoves through a seemingly impenetrable wall of trees. Like literally walks through them as though they aren't there.

I stumble to a stop, blinking stupidly at the spot he was before he vanished. Unicorn jerks on my shoulder, almost tumbling off at my sudden stop and lets out a chuff, sticking her head out to sniff at the trees *he passed through*. *What the...?* I suck in a quick breath. Suddenly Corin's head and upper body appear again, sticking out of the spot he disappeared through. Unicorn flinches and shoots him a dirty look. He has a frown on his face as he gestures at me, merely quirking a brow at Unicorn. "Well, come on."

Startled, my body responds to his words instantly and I find my feet bring me closer as my brain struggles to catch up. He disappears again and as I step through the trees I glimpse movement to my left and swear that I see Ghost Girl, watching me. Then I'm through the trees. Unicorn lets out an undignified squawk as we come through the other side of the glamoured trees and promptly jumps off my shoulder to flutter into the air. She seems visibly uninjured so I turn around to face the trees, face scrunched up. "Did you see that?" I ask, ready to step back through the trees to see if she was actually there or not, the question aimed at both Unicorn and Corin.

"See what?" Corin asks, and I spin around to face him only to pause so my eyes can adjust. Too focused on Unicorn, then the flash of Ghost Girl, I didn't have a chance to see what was beyond the glamoured trees we just passed through. The area is substantially darker than the forestry we were just walking through, even with it shaded by the treetops, so it takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust. It's as dark as night here. A night with no moon or starlight. That has to be some strong cloaking magic, done by a strong A-class or even possibly an O-class monster for it to look so realistic. I blink repeatedly, squinting for a moment before freezing as my eyes get used to the different lighting. The sight has my mind blanking.

"Nevermind," I murmur, staring past Corin. He's standing a few feet away from me, but I barely acknowledge him as my eyes lock onto the tree standing in the centre of a clearing that the magic was cloaking. It must be at least four stories high and the base is so thick that if Corin and I stood on either side

of it and hugged it, our hands wouldn't touch. It would probably take six or seven Corin-sized people to hug the tree and have their hands touch. And he's long-limbed at seven feet tall. Large reticulated roots span out around the base and faintly glowing plantation sprouts amongst it. The kicker though? Is that the entire thing is glowing faintly like it's covered from head to toe in blue bioluminescence. I tip my head back and squint to study the highest spot of the tree's branches that I can see and find glowing moss, flowers, vines and other unidentifiable glowing plant matter clinging to the tree's bark. Their glow seems to have a more greenish hue and is brighter than the tree itself.

The glow doesn't seem to be off-putting to Unicorn, and I gasp when she lets out a roar and shifts mid-flight to her full size. Her usually skeletal appearing, scale covered body, is now more gold and dark blue. Faint flashes of purple rippling over her when she comes in contact with one of the plants as she glides through the space, having an absolute ball. It makes me wonder if she's been here before.

A shaky puff of air falls from my lips and I drag my eyes off of the beautiful view in front of me and focus on Corin, who has turned to watch Unicorn as well, lips parted in surprise. "What the hell is this place?" I whisper.

His eyebrows furrow as he turns to gaze at the tree. Though he's side-on to me, my eyes catch the moment he bites his bottom lip in thought as he watches Unicorn briefly land on one of the tree's branches, only to launch off again with a loud series of happy chuffs. I roll my lips in, holding back a smile.

She's like a kid in a candy-shop, and it's frankly, fucking adorable. "I'm not really sure. I haven't had a chance to look around much, but there is something I wanted to ask you about. Something else I found here. To get your opinion on," he says slowly.

"Sure," I murmur, dragging my eyes away from Unicorn long enough to give him a nod.

"It's something I kind of have to show you for it to make sense. It's at the top of the tree though..." He trails off, giving me a crooked smile.

I purse my lips like I'm seriously reconsidering it, then laugh when his eyes widen as though he's worried I'll leave. "You're giving me an invitation to check out the top of a giant glowing tree, of course, I'm in," I say, still chuckling. My eyes flit from his swirling ones to the top of the tree and I bite my cheek. "One problem though, how the hell are we going to get up there? Actually, how are you going to handle getting up there? It's high as hell."

Unicorn swoops by us letting out another roar and an idea pops into my head, but before I can voice it, Corin ruins my fun. "Don't worry, there are stairs that go up the trunk of the tree."

I twist my lips to the side, giving him my best version of innocent eyes. "Are you sure you'll be okay on the stairs? I'm sure I could convince Unicorn to give us a ride—"

"No!" Corin blurts, eyes like saucers as they jump between Unicorn and I. She's still having the time of her life exploring

the space, moving her body through the air in all different ways. She lets herself fall, spiralling before she catches herself at the last second then doing it all over again. Corin clears his throat, face a little paler than before. “Thank you for the offer Nessa, but the stairs are good. Great actually.”

I nod, chest shaking with silent laughter. Goddess, I’m an ass, but it’s so humanising to see the big, strong Corin scared of something, I can’t seem to help it. To make up for it I dart past him and pause to kiss him on the cheek before racing off towards Unicorn with my hands in the air. She swoops low, banking around me before flying back up in the air.

Laughing, I walk back over to Corin, who gives me a searching look, before we head towards the tree. The area itself inside the glamour is huge, and I’m not quite sure how something of this size even fits inside the forest on the Academy grounds, unseen. Hell, as we stride across the large field, that’s full of knee-high grass—that strangely doesn’t make my legs itchy—and I can’t help but wonder how a place this big could fit on the Academy grounds at all. It’s probably about the size of the main campus, minus the forest surrounding the edges and is mostly made up of this grass field and small foliage closer to the reticulated roots at the base of the massive tree trunk.

I open my mouth ready to ask Corin if the grass feels silky to him too, when a sudden cloud of bright purple erupts from the grass making the both of us flinch back. It takes me a moment to realise what it is. Butterflies. Giant, glowing butterflies. They’re roughly the size of my hand, some closer

to Corin's hand size and they're fluttering around us lazily. I pause to watch them, in awe at the beauty of this place. It's like a paradise.

Unable to resist the urge, I do a twirl, arms splayed out at my sides as I move through them. Corin laughs at me, but grabs my hand when I hold it out to him and clumsily guides me into another spin. It has me cackling with joy, a permanent smile on my face as we continue through the field side by side.

It's when we get about fifty feet from the end of the first tree root that I feel it. A shiver rolls through me and my body starts to hum; it's a barely there feeling at first so I brush it off, but by the time we're almost at the base and climbing over the large roots it's almost unbearable. Unicorn has taken to hovering near me, watching me. Corin moved ahead of me a few minutes ago to help lead the way, so he hasn't noticed yet and I don't want to alarm him, so I send Unicorn a stern look. *Don't tell him a thing.* I try to tell her with my eyes.

Fine trembles wrack through my limbs and I clench my hands, unable to keep from groaning at the pain. *Fucking hell,* it's like I'm being skinned from the inside out. Corin glances back at me, hearing the noise and when he sees me he steps into my space, grabbing my forearms gently—which isn't a bad idea since weakness is now steadily weighing down my body—concern creating a groove in his forehead.

“Goddess, are you okay? What's going on?”

I swallow roughly and Unicorn lets out a whine. “I-I'm not s-sure. It s-started when we got-t closer to the t-tree,” I

whisper.

Still holding onto my arms, Corin starts pushing me back and I take a few steps with him before freezing as a sharp tug rocks through my sternum, forcing me to jolt forward into Corin's chest, whimpering. "No, we can't move b-back. I have to get up there," I cry, pointing up to a place partway up the trunk, somehow innately knowing that's where I need to go. I don't know why but I need to fucking get there. Get there and the pain will go away.

Corin's face pinches in concern, but he obeys and slides his arm around my waist, helping me hobble closer to the tree. In my distraction I missed a narrow staircase that spirals up the trunk. It must be the one he was talking about before and appears to be made of the same wood as the tree which helps it blend in well.

I go to take the first step, but I miss it. The shaking is so bad now that my teeth are audibly chattering. Corin lets out a scoff and before I know what's happening he has me up in his arms in a bridal carry pose and is climbing the stairs at a steady pace. I chuckle weakly. "I h-hope y-you know that if-f you d-did this any oth-ther day I w-would f-fight you tooth and nail t-to get down, r-right?" I clarify, grinning despite the discomfort rolling through me.

I catch his eye roll and chuckle again. "Yes. I know you're a badass, Nessa. Now shut up, and save your breath, we're almost there."

Unicorn shifts to her cat-sized form and lands on Corin's shoulder, nosing me gently with her snout, the worry clear in her expressive eyes. I relax into his arms, trying to control the shakes wracking through me, but they only get worse as the steps level out and Corin steps onto a deck of sorts. I suck in an unsteady breath as the well of magic in my chest suddenly flares to life, writhing around angrily. I let out a yelp and scramble out of Corin's arms—or at least I *try* to—but the big bastard simply tightens his hold and scowls down at me. I dislodge Unicorn from him in the process, but I'm in too much pain at the moment to worry about that.

“Put me down now! You big grumpy Mountain Man ,” I growl in frustration, tensing further as I swallow the urge to gag when my magic rolls again violently, tears streaming from my eyes.

The aggravating man simply raises an eyebrow at me. “No.”

I snarl, an animalistic sound, deepened by the powerful magic rising inside of me. “Please, I don't want to hurt you. My magi—”

I'm cut off when it hits its tipping point and explodes out of me, hitting Corin's body, Unicorn and everything around us. Pain shoots through me, nothing like I've ever known, and I let out a silent scream, body seizing like I'm being electrocuted. My ears ring and everything goes white for a few moments before my vision returns and Corin, and I find ourselves standing side by side in the corner of the deck, only everything looks different and Ghost Girl is standing in front

of us—corporeal. I suck in a startled breath and my eyes dart to Corin's to make sure he's seeing this as well and he looks confused as hell, but is staring at Ghost Girl. He can see it too. *Great, I'm not going completely crazy then. That's always a positive.* My attention goes back to the scene in front of us, catching on Unicorn who is standing beside us watching the same thing we are. I'm about to make sure she's okay when a guy appears at the top of the staircase, focused on Ghost Girl as well. I tense at the anger wafting off him, the strong spicy scent burning my nose.

Ghost Girl flinches when she catches sight of him and backs up. Flexing her hands as she glares at him, a look of horror dawns as she looks down at her hands. “*No,*” it's barely a whisper.

My brows furrow as I try to figure out what's going on.

The man takes a step closer and Ghost Girl falls back against the wall. “This is *all* your fault, Aurora. You know why I need to do this. You deserve this,” he growls.

Her gaze is hollow as she stares at the floor, accepting whatever is about to happen. “What did you do to my magic, Steven?”

His head tilts to the side. “I blocked it.”

A shiver rolls down my spine as a smile tilts his cracked lips. Ghost Girl's fear slams into me and I stumble back a step, gasping as the wind is knocked out of me. I can't look away as the man purses his lips before reaching out his right hand in a quick movement. As he does, the air tingles with his power

and Ghost Girl is pressed back against the wall, grasping at her throat, eyes wide with panic.

I have to fight the urge to groan as her absolute terror rolls through me. My mind goes fuzzy with pleasure at the feel of it and I can feel my body growing physically stronger. *Holy shit she's powerful.* My slightly dazed mind is fighting against both my body's and power's instincts as I try to focus on what's happening instead of falling into the pleasant haze of my powers.

Ghost Girl's face turns purple, the whites of her eyes red from the blood vessels bursting as she slowly suffocates.

Finally, as though breaking out of a daze in my peripheral vision, Corin lunges forward, aiming for the man using his powers on Ghost Girl. I swallow thickly and shake my head, trying to shake off the pleasure racing through me as my powers relish in the fear coursing through the room, and help Corin, but it seems that his efforts are futile anyway. When he reaches the blonde haired man, instead of slamming into him, he passes straight through his form without causing so much as a ripple let alone drawing the man's attention. It's as though we're not even here. Like we're watching a memory or flashback that's in third person.

My eyes dart back to Ghost Girl as the fear coursing through the room vanishes and I find her unconscious against the wall, the man moving closer, hand still outstretched in front of her, strangling her with his magic. I sink to the floor as the feeling my powers evoked falls away, my shaky limbs

giving out on me. It was so much more potent than when it happened last time and I can't help but ponder whether it's because in this scenario the person the fear was coming off was being physically harmed and thought they were going to die. I lick my lips, my eyes half-lidded as I suck in shaky breaths.

Minutes must pass as I try to get myself together and Corin, having given up, stands off to my side staring at the gruesome scene in front of us with a resigned slump to his shoulders. I hear the moment Ghost Girl's heart gives out and the man releases his powers, allowing her lifeless body to fall to the floor with a sickening thud. *Disrespectful asshole*. Then again I suppose he did just murder her. I blink, my eyes narrowed. "I don't get it, what was the point?" I ask Corin in a low voice, my nose crinkled. "Why only show us this part?" I murmur.

Those swirling rainbow eyes slide to mine, but he doesn't speak. I return my focus to the man and find him now crouched over Ghost Girl, holding something while muttering under his breath. "Uh oh, that can't be good."

I don't realise I've spoken aloud until Corin grunts under his breath in agreement and we watch helplessly as the man's chants grow louder until he's shouting, his magic filling the space. I have to swallow the urge to gag as its scent hits me, changing as the enchantment progresses and the smell of death, rot, and stagnant water overtakes everything. Unicorn lets out a grunt, lips peeled back in a snarl as she watches the man and Ghost Girl. Finally it reaches a pinnacle before sinking into Ghost Girl's body with a resounding boom that

rolls through her and into the deck. Almost immediately the ground starts trembling and I claw at the floor in surprise, trying to gain a hold. Corin drops to his haunches, leaning over me protectively, seeming unaffected by the magic induced earthquake and is instead glaring daggers at the man who is now standing—despite the earthquake—over Ghost Girl’s body with a smug expression on his face.

Then the oddest thing starts to happen. The wooden floor splinters and thick branches burst through to wrap around Ghost Girl’s body. The tremors stop as the *glowing* branches curl around her limbs like snakes and drag her towards the back of the room which I now realise is the trunk of the tree.

I make a sound low in my throat in astonishment. *What the hell is going on?* I share a glance with Corin and find the same confusion I’m experiencing mirrored in his expression. Unicorn takes a few steps forward, watching the scene intently, too.

The roots drag her lifeless body until her back is pressed flat against the trunk in an upright position. As soon as she’s positioned there it’s as though the branches half melt into the trunk and Ghost Girl’s body is encased in a green tinted glass casket. I suck in a breath when another pulse of strong magic rolls from her body, into the tree, whooshing into the ground. It’s powering the academy—no, correction—*Ghost Girl* is powering the academy. “Holy shit,” I breathe.

Glowing flowers sprout around Ghost Girl’s body and thin leaves and vines adorn her limbs. Then the most disconcerting

thing happens, her eyes open—no longer red in colour, but milky blue—and she turns her head to stare blankly at Steven.

Corin makes a sound low in his throat and shuffles his feet. The faintest waft of fear hits me from behind, and a shiver rolls over me, but unlike before it's because of the feeling of *wrongness* Corin's fear sent through me. My brows furrow as my hand shoots out before I can consciously stop it and I turn sideways to grip Corin by the shirt and drag him closer. He's so taken off guard by my actions that he falls into me, his chest pressing against my left shoulder and back, his heat enveloping me. All rational thought goes out the window as his bonfire scent wraps around me. I suck in greedy lungfuls and lean into him slightly. My tongue darts out to wet my lower lip and I'm about to do something colosally stupid like nibble the firm shirt covered pec when a voice I recognise rings through the room.

“Well that was intense. I don't think I've had anything this interesting happen other than this—and you being able to see me—in the last hundred years.”

My eyebrows shoot up as my head whips around and my eyes land on Ghost Girl, who is standing in front of her body, stroking her chin while studying it intensely. Mumbling random things, “Hmm, that Steven though, I didn't need to see that asshole again. It's still hard to believe he was smart enough to pull this off, but I suppose he's off doing *greater* things now.” She frames the word *greater* with finger quotation marks and a heavy dose of sarcasm.

I shift to my knees and look over my shoulder into Corin's dark green eyes, searching them while I try to decipher whether he can hear or see her, or not. His eyes are wide, expression confused as his attention flicks between me and Ghost Girl who is still prattling on to herself. A wide, uncontrollable grin stretches my lips. *He can see her as well*, thank the Goddess. Unicorn cocks her head and slowly approaches her, chirping happily when she reaches her feet. Greeting her like an old friend.

"I don't understand..." Corin trails off, his voice low and gruff.

I tilt my head as I consider Ghost Girl. "Yeah, I was a little startled at first, too, but you get used to it. Though I suppose I'll have to stop calling her Ghost Girl in my head now as she clearly isn't a ghost. Hmm. Well not completely anyway. I'm not sure what she is."

The Mountain Man beside me jerks and his attention jumps to my face, eyes narrowed. "Wait, you've seen her before. I swear I recognise her from somewhere..."

I swallow, averting my eyes as my cheeks heat up under his scrutiny, barely registering his words under his hot gaze. Which is peculiar because I rarely feel put on the spot, but there is just something about Corin's deep voice growling at me with an undertone of implied command that makes my cheeks and *cough* *cough* other places heat up. It has serious "tell me now or I'll put you over my knee and spank you" vibes. My thighs clench and I fight down a groan.

Goddess, those are not images I need going through my head right now. *Focus woman!*

Clearing my throat, I gnaw on my bottom lip and focus on what he said. After running through my recent memories I remember where he's seen her before, but it had totally slipped my mind after everything that happened. It also reminds me of Corin's other form. The one none of us have brought up or questioned him about, despite my burning curiosity. Curiosity killed the cat, or my dad's used to say something along those lines.

“*Nessa.*”

I groan. “Yes, I've seen her a few times and we've spoken. I think you recognise her because she helped us find the secret entryway to the room Lexi was being held in.” I don't make eye contact, instead shifting my focus back to the girl in question, well woman. Ghost woman just doesn't have the same ring as Ghost Girl. I huff out a breath as Corin quietly processes my response and call out. “Hey, Ghost Gi—I mean, Aurora...” I trail off, unsure what exactly to ask. I mean the few times I've spoken to her, she's either been really weak and unable to speak to me for long or not focused on me.

She turns, her features lighting up when those red eyes land on me. They seem to have returned to their normal colour now that she's back in semi-ghost form. “*Nessa.*” She dips her head in greeting, a resigned smile playing on her lips. Her eyes drop to Unicorn and her smile widens slightly. “Unicorn.”

“I suppose you saw all of that, huh?” she says softly.

I dip my head in affirmation and she huffs out a sigh.

“After you were able to see me, then when I kept getting pulled to help you, I had a feeling that our paths were intertwined, but I hoped that it was just a coincidence.”

My brows furrow as I stare at her intently. *Well what the hell is that supposed to mean?* I feel Corin shift closer to my side and stiffen at the implication that I’m somehow tangled up with what we just saw happen. I’m not exactly comforted by it, somehow being connected to a murder that took place over a century ago. My lips twist ruefully. Though with my luck something like this *would* happen to me.

“What do you mean?” Corin asks.

She swallows hard, an unsure expression pinching her elf-like features and she sucks in a breath as though she’s about to speak, but before she can, her form wavers then she vanishes. I swear she rolls her eyes to the sky in irritation before she’s gone, frustration at disappearing before I can get any information, *again*.

I growl under my breath. “Well that was very helpful and not at all confusing.” Sarcasm is a girl’s best friend. Honestly I should make a T-shirt with that saying, hmm, yep that’s a great idea. I wonder how I’d go about doing that...

I’m drawn out of my random thoughts when Corin tosses his hands up in exasperation. “Would it kill the Goddess to make something simple. I not only have no answers, I now have more questions.” Unicorn flutters onto his shoulder, still watching the spot where Ghost Girl vanished from and lets out

a low chirp before lying down. My eyebrows draw together at her strange behaviour but I add it into my ever-growing pile of oddities and leave it for now.

Corin continues to mutter under his breath as he stalks over to Aurora's resting place, staring at it as though it will give him all the answers. I hesitantly move to his side. "Is that why you brought me here today? You found this place? Found her and wanted to know if I knew something?"

Puffing out a harsh breath, Corin peers at me from the corner of his eye. "Something like that."

I nod. "Well, I think it's safe to say I know nothing about this." Well, mostly nothing. Not for long though. It has definitely been pushed to one of the first things I'm going to research after today. It seems whatever is going on with Ghost Girl could be connected to the other odd things that are going on at the Academy.

Corin makes a frustrated sound, low in his throat that goes right to my core and I stop myself from pressing my thighs together. *What the hell is wrong with me today?* I clear my throat. "I'm feeling better, if a little tired, so what I think we should do is go back to the edge of the forest and practise connecting with the magic we need for our runes presentation. Then revisit this and all the strangeness, later. Hmm? What do you say?" I ask, my tone low and reassuring.

Rolling his shoulders before sucking in a long breath of air, Corin straightens, being careful with Unicorn on his shoulder, giving me a nod before heading for the doorway and we move

down the steps at a more sedate pace than when we ascended them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Corin

I take one last glance at the magical oasis around us then follow Nessa back through the glamour and into the forest, Unicorn still on my shoulder. She didn't fly around on her way down the tree, instead choosing to sleep on my shoulder, purring softly.

I shake my head to myself. *I never should have shown her the place*, but for some reason when I stumbled on it the first thing that popped into my head was Nessa. Something about that place's magic and Nessa's are similar, it's one of the reasons I brought her here. The other being that with some of the odd things I've picked up about Nessa, like her willingness to jump into danger and get her hands dirty, I thought she might know something about this part of the forest. Or have already come across it and explored it. I just can't figure out what makes it feel so similar, or why.

Either way, my judgement was clouded. If my boss Ezra finds out about this then I'm going to get the tongue lashing of the century. *No*, I need to remember why I'm here and keep my feelings and interactions with Ness separate from my job. Nodding to myself to solidify the decision, I refocus on the girl in question.

Her silky black hair dances around her shoulders in the wind as she forges through the forest ahead of me. My eyes narrow at her easy gait, and the speed she's moving. After a moment I realise that something's different. She's moving

more like that of a vampire, that ease and grace most purebloods seem to have in abundance. Plus, when I search her features it's almost as if she's glowing. Skin clear, golden eyes standing out more than usual, and just more powerful overall. It's only since touching Ghost Girl's casket, because I didn't notice anything different about her in class earlier other than her looking a little tired. And nothing unusual when she was in the hidden part of the forest. It's unusual to say the least, but worry nags the back of my mind as I replay everything that happened. *What if it somehow unlocked more of her powers?*

I suck in a sharp breath, ready to ask if she's feeling any different when we step out of the forestry and Nessa plops down onto the grass in a cross-legged position. *I must have been lost in my head longer than I realised.*

Those liquid gold eyes shift to me. "So are you ready to try to link in with the tree's magic?"

Deciding to hold off for now, I drop down in front of her and clear my throat. "Yeah."

"Unicorn you can go for a fly if you want, and I'll meet you back at my dorm," Nessa says to her familiar. Unicorn stands up, little claws digging into my shoulder as she stretches. When I give Nessa a questioning look she explains. "I'm feeling a little amped up, magic-wise, and don't want to have another living being to worry about frying."

I laugh, and Nessa gives me a tiny smile. Unicorn leaps off my shoulder into the air and vanishes into the trees like she

was never here to begin with. She's quite independent for a familiar.

Nessa's tongue darts over her lower lip as her focus darts around for a moment as though she's sensing something. Her brows furrow and I reach out to grip her knee instinctively, to ease her nerves. She jolts at the contact, her attention snapping back to me like I fired a gun rather than initiated contact. I search her expression, fully prepared to remove my hand in case I've caused her discomfort, but her hand latching onto mine has the tension draining from my body. She wants my touch. I didn't scare her. Thank the Goddess. Then again, she's never outwardly shown any sign of being afraid of me, but I've grown accustomed to it. Most people see my size, the scruffy appearance and are uncomfortable or afraid. Judging me before I get to open my mouth. Before any actual interaction with me. That reaction only gets a hundred times worse if they find out that I'm a Lycan.

She makes me forget how people usually react to me. Her natural ease and confidence are intriguing. They're also part of the reason I'm so attracted to her. I may be able to sense the mate bond, but that is my more primal side's connection. Though I may not have a different creature inside me like a shifter, I can still separate the urges driven by my other half and the more rational ones that are more human.

I puff out a sigh. *Distracted, again.* Scrubbing the hand that's not on Nessa's thigh, over my face, I try to settle my mind. I've barely slept since what happened with Ethan and it's catching up to me.

I give her knee a gentle squeeze and a tiny smile. “You ready?”

“Yes.” She nods once in affirmation, her lips pinching while a determined glint fills her eyes. There’s the strong girl I know. *My mate.*

I close my eyes and focus on the well of magic in my chest. It swirls and spits like a rainbow coloured pit of lava, and I mentally will it to chill the fuck out before dragging a thin strand out. I direct it to my hand and send the magic into Nessa. For the rune circle to work, I have to send magic into her and she then directs both mine and hers into the rune. But since we aren’t allowed to activate the actual rune circles until the test, today she’s just working on connecting with the type of magic the rune circle we created will be working with.

I flinch when my magic connects with hers and clench my jaw, biting my tongue in the process, hard enough to taste blood. I swallow down a groan. It’s like a fucking aphrodisiac. Her magic. She tugs on the power I’ve lent her and it’s as though she’s stroked my cock instead. I hiss, sweat dotting my brow as I painstakingly focus on that thin strand of magic she’s linked to, making sure she can’t feel the full extent of my magic. I hold onto it until I’m sure the strength of forcing back the rest of my magic is going to knock me out, but thankfully Nessa stops. My eyes pop open and I suck in deep breaths, my heart hammering in my ears as my crazed gaze locks with hers.

I can tell from the way that her eyes widen that I probably appear to be on the edge of feral and I lean back, trying to calm the hell down. *Goddess, Corin, get a grip on yourself.* My wilder instincts thrash around in the cage where I keep them locked up and I mentally wrestle with them. *No, we can't mark up her neck with our teeth. Bad, Corin.*

She swallows convulsively, her eyes not moving from mine. “Your eyes... They’re so beautiful. Like a rainbow, hmm, no not exactly. That would probably make you a leprechaun. Do they have rainbow eyes? A galaxy, maybe? Yeah that seems more likely. Or like a rainbow galaxy...” her words trail off as I stare at her, my eyebrows practically touching my hairline. But her nervous rambling gives me the distraction I need to get my urges and magic back under control, and some of the tension in my shoulders eases.

“A leprechaun? I don’t know whether to be flattered or offended,” I say slowly. My mind is trying to catch up with all that she said. Damn. That would be a pretty cool supernatural to be if they were still around. Powerful, but shifty little buggers who like to drink too much and swindle you out of your Fae coins.

Getting to my feet, I turn away from Nessa for a moment. I let my head hang forwards and puff out a breath of air. Though our magic is separate again, the thin mate bond connecting us has brightened and a few hesitant buds have popped up along the magical bridge between us. As our bond develops it will grow thicker and stronger with various vegetation growing along it to signify our relationship is flourishing.

My jaw twitches as I peer down at the beautiful woman beside me. If we don't nurture our budding relationship—whether it's platonic or not so far—and things go downhill, then it will reflect in our bond and it will begin to die, and if she chooses, Nessa can break our connection.

A pang stabs through my chest at the thought of that happening and I take a few more measured breaths. I force myself back to the present. Forcing a miniscule smile to my lips, I meet Nessa's eyes over my shoulder. "Are you ready to head back? I think that's enough for today."

Pursing her lips, she nods, grabbing her book bag before getting to her feet. She swallows hard, then sends me a grin that doesn't quite reach her eyes before leaving. Instead of heading to my dorm, I throw my head back and let out a growl.

Goddess, I don't know how much longer I can keep the knowledge of us being mates contained. I have no problem with her other potential suitors, but every time she's alone and struggling, I should be there with her. By her side so she knows that she isn't alone. That no matter what, she has me to lean on and protect her when she's vulnerable. It just doesn't feel right to reveal something like that to her now, when I know that I won't be able to tell her about the real reason I'm at the Academy. Even though she's my mate, I can't tell her about my job and it would kill me more to reveal how deep our connection is, then have to lie to her about my work or risk getting pulled. I've been working on this for *so* long that it would be absolutely devastating to get pulled. There is also the

added factor that I would be putting her in so much extra danger by revealing to her that we are mates. Suddenly I'd have a huge weakness for anyone I go up against to exploit.

Restless energy has my skin crawling and I take a few measured breaths, trying unsuccessfully to calm down. "Fuck it." I let the shift come over me, relishing in the burn as my body morphs to my supernatural form. For a moment the chaotic clash of everything my enhanced senses make me aware of, overwhelms me and I slam my eyes closed, sorting through the hundreds of scents and sounds assaulting me. Turning those I have no use for to white noise, I hone in on my primary focus. *Nessa*.

My pointed ears twitch as I strain to find her, a smirk pulling at my lips when I do. "*Stupid, Mountain Man. Hot one minute, cold the next. And don't even get me started on my body, Unicorn. The hell was the crazy thing that just happened when my magic touched his? It was like a frickin aphrodisiac to me.*" Her muttered words are barely audible as she hisses them to her familiar, but I'm so surprised to hear her say that she could feel her magic reacting to mine, that the rest of the world's sounds drown out her voice. A frown tugs at my brows when the rest of what she said fully catches up with me. Hot and cold? *Shit*. That wasn't my intention at all.

Goddess, I haven't even told her that we're mates yet and I'm already stuffing all of it up.

Having heard enough and with the comforting knowledge that *Nessa* is safe with her familiar, I allow my more primal

side to come forward and take off at a run, needing to work off my frustration.



Nessa

Pressing the palm of my hand to my forehead, I groan. *Goddammit*, so much for the whole ‘we’re going to ignore boys until I’ve dealt with my demons’. Peeking at Unicorn again, I can’t help but laugh at the judgemental look she’s throwing my way. *Little brat*.

Still smiling, I push to my feet from the couch. I think this calls for a coffee. Shuffling to the stove-top kettle, I fill it up before turning on the gas stove’s element with a click, and open my cupboard to grab a cup. That’s when I notice it. *That scent*. I freeze, hackles rising as it washes over me. *Ethan*. He’s been here. Letting out a slow breath, I force my body to relax and set my mug down on the bench. I don’t move to investigate until Unicorn snarls from where she’s hovering in front of my cracked bedroom door.

If he’s watching me, I want him to underestimate me as much as possible. And believing that I didn’t even notice that he’s been here? That will tell him that I’m weaker than he assumed. I can tell that he’s not physically here right now by his lack of magical signature. I have enough magic to establish that my apartment is empty, even if I don’t know how to see through glamours yet.

Stepping away from the bench, I walk towards my familiar. “What’s wrong, Unicorn?” I ask. She chirps and lands on my shoulder, growling quietly, eyes never moving from my room.

Sucking in a deep, measured breath, I mentally prepare myself for what I might find and nudge open my door with my foot.

My room is almost the same as I left it, except for my window. It's open, the cool breeze swirling through my otherwise untouched room, but that's not what has my attention. Even though I know for a fact that the window was latched and locked before I left earlier. No, that would be the photograph pinned to the sill with a bloody knife. Beneath that on my window sill is a thick lock of braided hair, each end tied with a ribbon. It appears to be real.

Swallowing, my eyes narrow as irritation bubbles up in my chest. *How dare this bastard violate my space like this.* As I stalk towards the window my magic flares, brought out by my strong emotions, but I stagger to a stop when, unlike my usual magic, something strange and powerful bursts to life in my sternum. It sears through my chest, bringing tears of pain to my eyes and I shove the magic down quickly. "What the hell was that?"

My eyes dip down to my chest, tugging my shirt away from my body to check that I don't have any visible marks on my skin. It was like a searing poker was pressed to my insides. Not pleasant at all. Shaking my head, when I don't find any marks I focus on the most immediate threat. The photograph, lock of hair, and knife.

My eyes scan it and the window, before I send out a soft blast of my magic to feel for any residual spell or rune. Thankfully that painful experience doesn't flare again, but

unfortunately no residue is there either. Either Ethan didn't leave a magical trap for me, or he scrubbed his signature from the space. I suppose I'll just have to take the risk. Shrugging a shoulder, I dip out of the room and grab a pair of gloves and take a picture of the knife, polaroid and lock of hair, before slipping the gloves on. I reach out and tug out the blade, and catch the *photos*, then bag the knife. What first appeared to be a single image is actually several all pinned behind the first.

Biting my tongue, I leaf through the photos. They're all of me and all from a distance. "Looks like someone's been stalking me," I murmur to myself. And by someone, it's clearly Ethan. If what happened last term wasn't enough for me to point the finger at him, the note scrawled on the top photo is. *Getting cosy with the enemy, huh?* The photo is one of Corin and I from this afternoon, facing each other, hands linked as we practised joining our magic together.

I grit my jaw and a low growl starts up in my chest. I have no idea what to make of that. Is he trying to let me know that Corin's the enemy to him—Ethan—or that Corin is *the enemy* to me? Or are we both Ethan's enemy? But if that's what he meant then why would he specify Corin. Clearly I need to look into Corin more. I don't like the uncomfortable seed of doubt that Ethan has managed to plant. I'm too cautious to not double check that I know Corin isn't a threat to me.

Eyebrows drawn low, I drop the polaroids into a separate bag. Then I take my time examining the lock of hair. It's dark, almost the same shade of black as mine, but seems to have a slight curl to it. I try using my magic on it again, but I come

back empty on any residue. The lack of any information from the person it came from is frustrating to say the least. Giving up for now, I put the lock of hair in another bag before setting it, the knife and the polaroids in a magically locked box that's hidden under my bed. I tug off the pair of gloves and throw them in the bin with a groan.

Wrapping my arms around myself I close my eyes, casting my magic around every corner of my dorm, not leaving anywhere out, not even the empty room that used to be Lexi's. My magic will pick up anything from hidden cameras and technology to anything that's been touched by Ethan's DNA. I come up empty, other than a trace amount of his magic which is lingering all over my dorm. He must have used a spell to cover his other tracks. Just like I would have if I were in his position. With him having done that it makes it virtually impossible to feel where and what he's actually done in my apartment, which has my skin crawling. I let out a centering breath then, still focused on my magic, and I throw up barrier after barrier around the place, layering them until I have six separate layers protecting the space, all that only certain people have permission to go through. Only me, Unicorn, Lexi, Corin, Dylan and Oscar, for the moment.

The lack of a permanent barrier was a gross oversight on my part, especially when I've been leaving my window open for Unicorn to come and go as she pleases. I've been using a portable barrier to protect me which leaves my apartment vulnerable when I'm not here, and I have been meaning to put up a permanent one. It was never a top priority of mine—

having another barrier keeping me safe anyway—but I now see that it should have been. It seems that time is now.

When it's done, I fall back to my bed with a grunt and don't bother changing before curling up in a ball. I do use a cleaning rune to sanitise it though, and the rest of my dorm, just in case. My eyes linger on the ceiling, sleep evading me for the moment even with the exhaustion weighing down my limbs. I bite my cheek, mind racing. I should tell the guys. They were involved in trying to find him last term and proved that they're willing to help me with stuff like this, but... I blink, irrational anxiety tightening in my gut.

I don't confide in anyone other than Lexi. Even my parents only know the parts I choose to share about some things, and I love and trust them so much. There are just so many what ifs. What if I tell them and it ends up being too much for them and they leave? What if me telling them gets them all hurt? Or worse, *killed*. I couldn't handle that. *Can't* handle it. I may have only known them for a few months now, but I'm already fucking attached to them. Enough that I definitely don't want them to die, or be hurt because of me. What he did to Lexi was more than enough, so if something else happened to any of them, I don't think I would ever be able to come back for that.

At this stage I'm not telling Lexi either. She needs to focus on her own mental health and getting better. I'm not going to fuck all that up by telling her that the guy who abducted her, is now stalking me. Yeah that would be really helpful, *not*.

My eyebrows draw down and I suck in a steadying breath, resolving not to tell anyone about it for now. Who knows, maybe this is only a one off?

With that now sorted out, I roll over, tucking my hands under my head and let sleep drag me under.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nessa

Fingers trail across my cheek in a feather-like caress and I sigh, leaning into the touch. The mattress dips behind me before an arm curls around my waist and their body heat radiates from them, tugging me back so their hard length is pressed against my ass, only thin pyjama pants separating us.

“Hello, love,” his deep voice rumbles through me and I arch back into him, baring my throat. My breathing picks up at his touch and the scent of clean laundry and old books washes over me. A breathy sound falls from my lips as his hand slides around the top of my throat to loosely grip it. His thumb strokes my jaw in a tender movement and I make a needy sound, head tipping back as need pools low in my gut.

His other hand trails down my body before dipping to the apex of my thighs and I shoot up into a sitting position as I wake up, adrenaline and lust coursing through me as remnants of the dream I just had with Dylan linger in my mind. Skin flushed, chest heaving, and the pulsing between my legs, reminds me that I didn't orgasm.

As some of the fog from sleep dissipates I glance around my dorm room and sigh. *Goddess, I need to get laid.* I flop back with a thud, groaning at the arousal still announcing itself between my thighs. Running my hands through my hair roughly, I hold out for all of thirty seconds before giving in. “Fuck it,” I growl.

Rolling onto my side, I reach into my side table and pull out my trusty wand. Good old Harry has been my trusty buddy for a while now.

Having grown up in a supernatural household with people that all have uncomfortably good hearing, I had to get creative and modify a barrier rune that takes little actual magic to use. It soundproofs the room of my choice from others but allows me to hear sounds from the outside.

I quickly activate the runes I already inscribed on the bed head then kick off my underwear. I toss off my oversized shirt and turn on Harry, settling back on my bed. I set the vibrations to low and let my head drop back, closing my eyes as I build off of my dream with Dylan and get lost in the fantasy.

I trail the toy over my collar bone, and down lower, tracing loose circles around my bare breasts as Dylan's light scruff scrapes against my throat. His minty breath puffing against my shoulder before he places a sharp nip to the sensitive skin below my ear. A breathy sound falls from my lips and a shiver rolls over me.

Goosebumps prick my skin as my core clenches around nothing, and I stop teasing myself, dragging the smooth toy down my stomach. I pass the head over my lower lips, coating it in my wetness before circling my clit. My back arches, heels digging into the mattress as pleasure courses through me and I groan at the sensation.

Dylan's lips trail along my chest before closing around my nipple and I jolt at the phantom sensation. Ready for more, I

up the vibration speed and with how amped up I am it only takes a few strokes before I'm right on the brink of coming. My breathing speeds up and my body clenches, ready to fall over that cliff, when someone knocks on my door.

I jump, pausing for a moment, letting out a strangled sound of frustration, before returning to my actions with renewed enthusiasm. *I'm too fucking close to stop now.*

“Good morning, Nessa. Sorry I'm a little early, I let myself in,” Dylan calls, his deep voice clear—jarringly so—like he's in the room with me and I almost swallow my tongue. The fact that he's a few feet away with only a door and a spell between us only stokes my desire higher.

My fantasy and reality clash together and it's too much, toes curling, thighs clenching, I bite down hard on my free hand to muffle my moan as the orgasm sweeps through me. A metallic taste floods through my mouth, but it barely registers as pleasure buzzes through my body.

After riding through the aftershocks, I switch off the toy and flop back with a breathless grunt, letting my hand fall away from my mouth. *Holy shit, did I really just do that?* Chuckling nervously, I pull myself together, and realise I still haven't answered Dylan. Whispering a cleaning spell, I sanitise Harry and shove it back in my bedside table before deactivating the runes quickly. “No problem,” I call out, my voice breaking as butterflies swarm my stomach and my nose crinkles as I roll my eyes at myself. *Get it the fuck together, Nessa!*

There's a moment of silence before Dylan shuffles on his feet. "Okay, still, sorry." He clears his throat.

I scramble out of bed, throwing on what I was wearing before and grab my uniform and some clean undergarments before reaching for the door, only to pause. My eyes flicker all over my room as indecision fills me and I give myself a little pep talk. *You got yourself into this mess, now you're going to get yourself out of it.*

Taking a deep breath, I harden my resolve before straightening my appearance up the best I can before throwing the door open. I pause, midstep when I find Dylan less than three feet away from me, frozen, his expression that of a deer in headlights, his nose flaring. I duck my head like a coward before I have the chance to meet his wide eyes, and scramble past him to the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I lean against it, hanging my head. *Dammit, I'm an idiot.* Of course the moment I opened my door he was able to smell what I'd been up to. *Fucking supernaturals.*

Throwing my clothes down on the bathroom vanity, I focus on the mirror and look my reflection in the eye—something that I'll never be able to do with Dylan ever again—and resolve to have more self restraint. After a few seconds of that, I let my shoulders droop, all my bravado vanishing. "Yeah, like that's ever going to happen," I mutter under my breath.



Dylan

Holy shit. I stare at the closed bathroom door in a fucking daze. All I can focus on is that scent. Nessa. Her clear arousal and satisfaction.

The moment she opened her door, all rational thought left me and all the blood in my body rushed to my cock. Leaving me lightheaded and dazed as hell. It's a good thing she practically ran to the bathroom; my self control right now is balanced on a knife's edge and if she'd gazed up at me with those huge golden eyes, there's no telling what the hell I would have done.

I blink and shake my head, and holding my breath, I move to the doorway of her bedroom and close the door. My attempt at trying to contain some of the scent there. It's so strong in there that it's practically embedded in the walls. With that task done, I move to the opposite side of the room and throw open a window, sticking my head out to gulp down lungfuls of fresh air.

It helps enough and some of the tension in my shoulders releases. I flop down onto the couch, rubbing the bridge of my nose. I don't know how I'm going to keep my eyes off Nessa today. Not after knowing what she was getting up to in there this morning. *Did she use her hands or a toy? Who was she thinking about? Was she naked? All that silky skin on display...* My fangs lengthen and I gnash my teeth, snarling under my breath.

How close was she when I knocked on her door? Did it give her a thrill, working herself to orgasm with only a door between us? I groan, hands flexing. I can practically see it. Nessa sprawled out in her bed naked, thighs trembling and head thrown back in pleasure as she comes. Little whimpers falling from her lips or better yet, crying out someone's name... I jump up from the couch, jerking my hand away from where it had been headed to my jeans. Focus, Dylan. Get your fucking shit together.

Dropping my head onto the back of the couch I sigh. My fingers tap a quick rhythm on the arm of the couch as I run through everything that happened over the academy break and some of the lust cools. I'm still really glad I got to show her the marketplace. It was like my second home. I push to my feet, straightening my shoulders as the water shuts off in the bathroom.

I shift so I'm more comfortable and try to look casual. I'll let Nessa take the lead and decide how she wants to deal with it.



Nessa

I nudge the door open with my chin held high and my usual swagger, having come to the conclusion whilst in the shower that the best route to take is to own that shit. With that resolve firmly in the forefront of my mind, I meet Dylan's eyes and hold his gaze as I walk towards the kitchen. "So what brings you to my humble abode this early?"

When I reach the stove top kettle I light the burner before reaching to grab a mug, the corner of my lip quirking up when Dylan snorts at my choice of cup. "*In my defence, I was left unsupervised*" the writing printed on the side reads. I dump a cappuccino sachet in, then my sugar, waiting impatiently for the kettle to boil. I gesture to the cup in silent question, to see if he wants something, but he just smiles and shakes his head.

"I discovered that we have a new class together this term, so I figured we could walk together," Dylan announces, a smile on his face, but it looks slightly forced. Awkward. Sometimes I wish I could read peoples minds, but then other times I'm really, really glad I can't. This is one of the times where knowing his thoughts would be helpful.

I set down my teaspoon and cock my head to the side, scanning the guy from head to toe. His blue eyes and dilated pupils catch my attention and I swallow hard. Leaning back, I ignore the clear giveaway to his lust and cross my ankles. "And how, pray tell, do you know I'm in this class?" My eyes narrow on him.

A flush creeps onto his cheeks and he rubs the back of his neck, glancing away from me. “I may have glanced at your timetable last time we hung out.”

I drop my mock annoyed expression and flash him a smile. He drops his hand and for the first time this morning I get a *genuine*—albeit, small—smile. The kettle whistles, announcing it’s boiling and I spin around, turning off the burner and making up my coffee. The damn sachet coffees always take so long to stir, but boy is it worth it for the taste.

“So, what is this class together? I can’t remember what we have up first today.” I squint, wracking my brain only to come up blank. *Herbology maybe?*

“Potions.” I pause my manic stirring for a moment and throw Dylan a look over my shoulder, eyebrows drawing together.

“Are you sure?” I ask, rubbing my cheek with my free hand.

Shoving his hair out of his face he nods, before digging out a crinkled piece of paper from his pocket, offering it to me. “Yeah, it’s definitely potions.”

I drop my spoon and hustle over to Dylan, grabbing the page and reading over it carefully. He wouldn’t lie to me, so I must be in the same class as him. I blink rapidly as I try to figure out how I ended up in potions. It was the one thing I didn’t want to study more of.

Reading my expression, Dylan’s lips purse. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just odd, I didn’t sign up for potions,” I murmur. Clearing my throat, I shake my head. “It’s fine though. Some of the other classes I chose might have been full so they placed me in potions instead.” I shrug my shoulders and hand back the schedule to him, then turn to my coffee.

I keep my posture casual and outward energy serene while internally I’m having a minor freakout. I’m a tiny, itty bit of a control freak when it comes to certain things. Things that I thought were set in stone are certainly one of the things that if changed can trigger me slightly. I breathe through it and paste a small smile on my face as I take a sip of my coffee. Utilising the extra moment of privacy it gives me, I face the bench and pop a travel lid on my cup then grab my bag.

“Alright, I’m ready.”

Dylan merely quirks a brow at me and follows me out the door. *Goddess, please let this lesson not be as awful as I’m pretty sure it’s going to be.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nessa

I pause mid step in the doorway to our potions class when I get a proper glimpse into the room, doing a double-take when I see not only Corin, but Oscar as well. I blink rapidly, processing for a moment and Dylan slams into my back, sending me stumbling forwards with a loud *oof*.

I have a moment to realise that I'm about to hit the ground hard and squeeze my eyes closed, face scrunching up as I brace for impact. Strong arms snap around my waist, and a hard body presses against my back as someone saves me from my impending doom. I brush my hair out of my eyes and peer over my shoulder, meeting Dylan's eyes, a sheepish smile tugging at my lips. "Sorry," he murmurs, his voice low and rough, completely aware that we've become the focus of the class.

"It wasn't your fault." I hold his blue eyed gaze for a moment longer, my eyes darting between his—searching for something, what exactly, I'm not sure—before I drag my focus to the other two that round out my odd group of friends, minus Lexi.

Their reactions to what just happened are similar yet so different. Both are now standing, braced over their benches like they're ready to race over to help me if they need to, but their expressions are... *interesting*.

Corin's eyebrows are drawn low, those colourful eyes swirling with intensity as they stay locked on me. Body coiled

tight, his fingers spread wide on his bench, like he's ready to burn down the world for me if I say the word. A shiver rolls down my spine, heat blooming between my thighs and I swallow roughly.

I force my attention to Oscar before I can get lost in the feeling and my brows furrow as I try to decipher the complex mix of emotions he seems to be struggling with. His head is cocked to the side, nose scrunched up, brows drawn together as he blinks at me slowly, as though he's trying to examine his own emotions. He bites down on the inside of his cheek, his lips pursing before his gaze clears and he blanks his expression like he's only just realised I'm watching him.

I suck in a breath and slowly disentangle myself from Dylan, squeezing his shoulder in thanks, before moving towards a free bench in the back. It happens to be the one behind Oscar and Corin, who each give me a smile before turning back to face the front of the room. The benches each have a few feet between them so their stools aren't squished against the bench I've chosen in the back. I shake my head to myself. I don't know why I'm trying to examine their emotions when I have no idea what the hell *I'm* feeling.

So I distract myself—one of my favourite coping mechanisms. It's my first time in a room like this and my eyes widen. Unlike the lecture-room-esc type setups that most of my other classes are, this one is set up similarly to that of a human highschool science classroom. Long benches run along the sides of the room, branching out intermittently in the place of where desks would usually be, creating four rows on either

side of the room with an aisle down the middle separating them. Each bench is allocated four stools and has individual hotplates spread out across it. I tilt my head as I look at the benches setup. With the size of supes like Corin, Dylan and Oscar who have broad shoulders, it would be an uncomfortably tight squeeze to fit more than two people spread out per bench. Even me, who is quite broad shouldered for a woman. If all four hotplates held cauldrons at the same time it would take up a lot of bench space, too. Yep, we still brew potions in cauldrons most of the time. *Cliche?* Yeah, but then again so are a lot of supernatural things.

The room itself is pretty big, which makes sense because for safety reasons each student needs their own workspace. Or so my theory research of this subject has told me. I grimace and set my books down, Dylan doing the same in the place beside me, leaving a seat between us though. I think it's best that I try to keep a little space between me and the rest of the class if I can—hence sitting in the back row. Me and potions never go well together. Great, he'll have a front row seat to me failing. Just *so* great.

Already knowing how this is going to end, I start mumbling a shielding spell under my breath.



I add the ground-up Rainbow Root into my cauldron and grimace, sucking in a breath through my teeth. When all the

liquid does is bubble angrily, I count that as a win. Rainbow Root is commonly used in potions to help make it easier for magic to mix into the potion. “Maybe this isn’t so bad after all,” I mutter under my breath.

Eyeing the potion, I debate whether I’m ready to add my magic or not. When brewed and activated correctly the potion is supposed to change to a pretty light blue colour. Then it’s ready to be drunk. It is supposed to make the person who drinks it find everything hilarious for the next 10 to 20 minutes depending on the strength of the potion maker’s magic.

Having reached the moment of truth, I hover a hand over my cauldron and whisper the incantation. Usually my magic moves at a reasonable pace when I call on it, but this time it rises up only to be eclipsed by another more forceful magic inside of me, one that crashes over me like a tsunami, and I gasp, eyes fluttering against the wave of pain as I try to hold it back. *BOOM!*

The potion explodes with a god awful sound that mixes with several screams that erupt around the room. The hot blast radiates through the air, glancing over me and clashing into the shield I have up around my station. When it hits my shield it rebounds back at me in a cycle that repeats until my ears are ringing and the singed stench of everything is so thick I can taste it. *What the hell just happened?* My magic has acted up before, but it’s never felt so *foreign* to me before. It’s almost as though there is *something else* writhing in my chest.

I don't realise I have my eyes pinched shut until an incessant tapping pushes through my still ringing ears and I pry my sticky eyelids open, finding Dylan's wide eyes staring back at me through my barrier. *Holy shit*, he mouths.

I don't reply, just sigh, my shoulders sagging. Despite the protection I placed on myself before starting, my skin is stinging and a warm feeling is running down the sides of my neck. I must look a fucking fright. Note to self, avoid mirrors for a few days—or possibly forever. My brows furrow as I throw a glance at my work station. Potions have never reacted to my magic well, but I don't understand why my magic performed that uncontrollably. *That* has never happened before, or at least not to this extent.

My attention slides to our professor's pale face and I grimace harder, dipping my chin as a flush creeps onto my cheeks. She makes a sweeping motion with her hand, indicating for me to lower my barrier and I do as she asks.

“Are you alright?” Her voice is threaded with panic and I can see she really wasn't expecting that. Which I suppose makes sense when she's teaching a third year class and this was a basic introductory potion. Incidents like this when it comes to potions have always been a knack of mine. One that I wish I could shake.

“Yeah, I'm alright.” I scratch at my hairline and glance away, not meeting any of the guy's eyes.

“You need to head to the infirmary. Dylan, dear, if you could escort her please? Don't worry about the mess, I'll have

it fixed up in a jiff.”

“Of course,” he replies. He’s hanging off to the side now and blinks rapidly when I meet his bright blue eyes.

I grab my bag from Dylan’s section of the bench—I was smart enough to think ahead when I was setting up—briefly making eye contact before moving towards the door. I blockout the whispers and other eyes on me, keeping my shoulders back and chin held high. *Fuck them*. No one is perfect.

I know the way so I head in that direction, not waiting for Dylan to catch up. I huff out another breath and bite the inside of my cheek trying to ignore the way my skin is stinging. It seems to be getting worse. Footsteps sound behind me, alerting me to Dylan’s presence before he appears at my side. My eyes slide to his face and I can tell that he’s snapped out of his shock. “Holy shit, Nessa. Are you okay? Here, let me take your bag for you.”

It’s my turn to blink stupidly, not releasing my bag when he reaches for it. I was expecting more along the lines of, *‘What the hell was that Nessa, you could have killed someone?’*. Then again, Dylan hasn’t really been one to scold me before. “I’m fine,” I blurt out after a few long seconds. I clear my throat. “And don’t worry about it, I can carry it.”

The vamps’ eyes narrow before scanning my body. “No.”

“What?” I ask, tone incredulous.

“No. You’re in fucking pain, and that strap is clearly hurting you, so you’re going to give me your bag.”

I stare, somewhat bewildered and turned on. I almost give in to him, his demand perfectly reasonable, but I decide to push instead. Maintaining eye contact I wet my bottom lip and tip my head to the side. “No.”

A delicious little growl comes from his chest before he stalks closer to me, only stopping when our chests are brushing. He leans down, bright blue eyes darting between mine and smiles. “You know, I forgot to mention it earlier, but you smelt fucking delectable this morning,” he murmurs, his smile growing when all I can do is stare at him, mouth parted in surprise.

In my shock I don’t react when he plucks the bag from my shoulder and gently settles his hand on my lower back, guiding me down the hall.

It’s the sound of fluttering wings that breaks me out of my trance and I turn around, eyes searching for Unicorn. I told her that she didn’t have to come with me to classes today because I assumed potions wouldn’t go well and didn’t want to worry her. So much for that. She makes a distressed noise and hovers above me, going to land on me only to change her mind when she notices the red state of my arms. That’s probably a good thing because the stinging seems to be steadily getting worse. She settles on Dylan’s shoulder instead and I reach over to scratch her head, reassuring her that I’m okay.

Dylan doesn't protest having my familiar on his shoulder, merely sending me a small smile, to which I give him an inquiring look. His mention of my scent confirms that he knows exactly what I was doing in my room this morning and I'm not quite sure how to feel about that. I do know that it's hot as fuck that he liked my scent. And his words—used as a distraction to get my bag or not—will be featured in some of my fantasy's for fucking sure.

When we reach the infirmary I knock on the doorframe and poke my head into the large room and a smiling nurse steps out of their back room. It flattens into a frown when she sees the state of me and ushers me in, unbothered by Unicorn. Last time I was here I didn't get much of a chance to get a proper look at the place so I take a moment to do that now. The room is similar to a gymnasium in size and style, but filled with privacy curtains to create private rooms. And for some strange reason, everything is a bright in-your-face yellow. Maybe they like torturing people? I cock my head. I could get behind that.

The nurse—Haley, if her ID badge is anything to go off—directs Dylan and I into one of the curtained rooms, and motions for me to get on the bed. I do as she says, and Dylan awkwardly wedges himself into a plastic chair on my other side, setting my backpack on the floor beside him. Unicorn chirps, sitting up a little, eyes darting between the nurse and me. My lips twitch at his tall, broad shouldered form perched on the small chair and I smother a snort. It's almost comical. I'd outright laugh, but the stinging has devolved into more of a burn and the skin on my arms and legs has tightened

uncomfortably. With that going on, I don't want to see what tears if I test my skin's malleability right now.

Nurse Haley dips out after I assure her that I have no life threatening injuries and leaves Dylan, Unicorn and me in silence.

“So,” I say, drawing out the word, just to fill in the silence. It's uncomfortable in such a sterile environment. It seems pretty empty in here at the moment. “You stole my backpack,” I eventually land on then purse my lips to hide my smile.

“Don't know if stolen is the right word to describe what happened. Removed it for your comfort? Sure. Was an upstanding gentleman and carried your bag? Sums it up pretty great if you ask me. Either of those would work,” he says, face mock serious.

I laugh, making my skin pinch uncomfortably, but unable to hold it in. “You're a real charmer, you know? And what you said earlier about my scent—”

“Was true. *Is* true. You smelt fucking amazing. You do smell amazing,” he says, all humour gone. Gaze intent on mine, completely serious, his eyes dipping from my face to my body. I'm sure I don't look very attractive right now, skin pinkish and scent tinged with burnt potion, but the lust that flare's in his eyes says that he doesn't care. It has me sucking in a breath, a pulse starting up at the apex of my thighs.

I'm about ready to get up out of this bed—despite the pain I'm in—and say fuck it and drag Dylan into the nearest closet to have my fucking way with him. Then Unicorn does the

funniest shit ever and successfully breaks up the mood. Letting out an especially squeaky-roar, she dives off of Dylan's shoulder into his lap, effectively getting his attention. He curls in on himself with a groan, shoving her off of him gently as he cups himself.

Unicorn jumps onto the end of the hospital bed chuffing, quite happy with herself. My eyes grow wide as saucers, a shocked bark of laughter falling from my lips. Dylan gives me a dirty look before glaring at my naughty familiar.

Haley comes into the room with a worried expression, probably wondering what the hell is going on before relaxing when she sees that none of us are hurt. Well, not fatally so. She sends us a scolding look that has me grimacing and offering her an apologetic smile. She's holding a vial of dark green liquid in her hand and moves up to the side of my bed to ask me a few questions that I answer the best I can.

“Okay, this should fix you right up.” I take the vile from her and pop off the cap. She sets down a shot glass full of orange juice on the table beside me and my brows furrow. “To chase it.” My eyes slide to hers and I lean in and take a whiff of the mixture. My nose wrinkles and I jerk back from the concoction, thoroughly regretting putting my nose anywhere near that. Rotten eggs smell more appetising. Haley grimaces at my reaction. “It tastes pretty awful, so I suggest you take it all in one go if you can.”

Lips pursed, I take a deep breath—away from the vile—then set it at my lips and tip my head back, gulping down the

wretched mixture.

The thick mixture clings to my throat, and I hold back a gag when the rancid fish and sour milk taste assaults me. I force myself to swallow, my lip curling, body rigid. As soon as it's down, I lunge for the orange juice and scull it. The zingy taste, mercifully, is refreshing and smooth after whatever fresh hell that vile was. *It better fucking work.*

As I think about it, I realise that it already is. Tingles roll over me, almost like when you're ill and have hot and cold flushes, but it quickly turns to a pleasant tickling sensation before stopping altogether. I sit up and admire my freshly healed skin. Flexing my fingers and relishing that the action doesn't hurt anymore. If it weren't for the potion I'd've been on bed rest for at least a week for those burns. I glance at Dylan and he offers me a small smile.

Haley sends me a grin. "Looking a lot better, Nessa." She checks over a chart and asks me another set of questions before stepping back again. "It seems like the potion has worked fully. You are free to go, but stay out of trouble. I'm sure you don't want to drink that potion again?"

I shudder and shake my head. "Thank you, Haley, you've been truly amazing." Like it was waiting for me to finish up, the sound signalling our next class chimes and I get to my feet and head for Dylan who seems to have recovered from Unicorn hurting him.

She cocks a brow at me, then ushers us out. Back at full strength, I shrug my backpack onto my shoulder and hurry to

the hall, Unicorn perching on my newly-healed shoulder.
“Thank you, Dylan. Talk later, okay? I gotta...”

“Go to your next class, I know. See you later.” He waves and I turn on my heel, jogging in the direction of my next class.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nessa

I'm walking down the hallway towards my earth magic class when the hair on my arms stands on end. It has me pausing as I scan the space with my eyes. The hallway is empty because I'm running late, no students in sight, which isn't exactly reassuring. Someone would be less likely to try something if there was a crowd of witnesses. The air to my right tingles before there's a flash and Ghost Girl appears. My eyes narrow on her, taking in the neutrality of her expression. "What's going on?" I murmur, talking out loud to myself as much as I'm asking her.

She doesn't answer, just stares at me. I groan. "Never a clear answer, is there?"

Taking a deep breath, I sweep a tiny bit of my magic out to search for any magical residue in the hallway and it lights up on a trail. My jaw clenches as I scan the magic. Ethan. *Why the hell would he just leave it here, out in the open where anyone could stumble upon it?* I shake my head. *There must be a reason.*

I go to follow it, but Ghost Girl darts in front of me with a weird hiss and I flinch back, stumbling away from the magic. Good thing too because it flares to life before catching on *fire*. Blue fire. I suck in a breath. It's fucking enchanted to cause me severe pain if I come into contact with it, but not leave a mark. A spell that's usually reserved for torture. I'd be in a shit ton of pain right now if it weren't for Ghost Girl. I swallow

hard. My magic didn't get a read on any rune or spell when I scanned the trail so I don't know where the hell that came from.

"Thank you." I stare at Ghost Girl for a moment before shaking off the adrenaline and stepping carefully around the magic. Ghost Girl—or Aurora as I should start calling her—follows after me as I follow the trail down the hallway until we go around a corner and come to a dead end. I stare at the wall in confusion before reaching out to touch it, my eyes darting to Aurora before I make contact.

When she doesn't jump in between me and the wall I don't hesitate, pressing my fingers to the stone. It's warm to the touch, but that's not what grabs my attention or sends my stomach churning. No, that would be because the stone vanishes to reveal a leg. A motherfucking severed leg in a compartment in the wall. I tug my hand away, a chill creeping down my spine. My eyes slant from the very real and very severed leg, to look at Aurora only to find the spot where she was standing, empty.

Eyebrows drawing down I spin around, searching the space to confirm that she's gone. Yep, nowhere in sight. Pursing my lips, I turn back to the leg and conjure a pair of gloves. Slipping them on quickly, I get to work.

This isn't even close to the worst thing I've come across in my lifetime. That trophy is currently reserved for *Anna*. I swallow roughly and shake my head, focusing on the task at hand rather than the memories. The leg itself is fairly small,

both in circumference and length. It's been cut off mid thigh, and is discoloured at the base where the blood has pooled, which hints that it was left to sit in this position for a long while. Oddly there is no puddle of blood where the limb was severed at the thigh. The skin of the leg is pale, almost grey coloured and has no obvious supernatural features.

The foot attached to it is small as well and dainty, with a woven anklet around it. "Probably from a woman then, or possibly a teenage girl," I say quietly. I work the best when talking out loud. The toenails are painted dark purple and my eyebrows furrow, a thought hovering at the edge of my mind that I can't quite reach. It's like a memory that's all but forgotten, until someone brings it up again.

Blowing out a breath, I draw back and peer over the leg. Ethan has either created or found this hidden compartment in the stone wall, and it's the perfect size for this leg.

Refocusing on the leg itself, I use a thin strand of my magic to examine it and snag on a spell. It's a stasis spell so when the caster—Ethan—created the spell, the leg was frozen in time as it was in that moment. "Explains the lack of blood," I whisper to myself, eyebrows drawn.

I sigh and tip my head back, groaning at the ceiling. If a stasis spell has been used then I have no way of knowing when the person was killed and the leg severed. Gritting my jaw, I barely suppress a snarl. I don't know what the hell Ethan is trying to convey with this. Other than the fact that he's escalated and is clearly killing again.

That same question that sits at the edge of my mind constantly, raises its head. *Should I tell the guys?*

Footsteps sound to my left and I jerk into action. Using my magic I bag the leg and create a mini portal to send it to my dorm room. I then create an illusion on the compartment in the wall to hide it and jog back to the door of my classroom, taking a moment to compose myself before ducking inside.



I lean back in my seat squinting at the instructions on the blackboard, and bite the inside of my cheek. The exercise we're supposed to complete is a simple growing spell. We're given a seed and we're supposed to feed our magic into it until it's grown into a seedling that's a few inches tall. Then, next week we'll go bury them and coax them a little taller and repeat the next week and so on, until the end of the term. It's supposed to be an exercise of magical control because a small amount of earth power flows through all with magic, though some tend to be stronger in some elements more so than others. Unicorn still seemed to be quite anxious after what happened to me in potions so I sent her away after we left the infirmary, unable to focus with her nervous energy. Every few minutes I see her swoop past the classroom windows to give me a toothy grin. She's definitely happier when she is not cooped up inside.

I twist my hands together and glance surreptitiously at Corin, who's seated next to me. Unlike last term, he and I have quite a few classes together. He's sprawled out in his chair, messy hair half hiding his face, fingers tapping out a lazy rhythm on his thigh. In other words, he doesn't have a care in the world. My nostrils flare and he cocks his head to the side. I avert my gaze, but his eyes burning into the side of my head allude to the fact that he caught me staring at him. Stubbornly, I drum my fingers against the edge of my desk as the professor walks around handing out seeds and small pots filled with soil. *Goddess, is it hot in here or is it just me?*

“Did you know that dragons can't fly backwards?” My fingers pause, head swinging around to Corin.

The corner of my lip tugs up into a half smile and my brows draw together. “I did not.”

“So, tiny earth realm hummingbirds can do something that dragons can't,” he says casually.

I bite my tongue, amusement bubbling up in my chest.

He threads his long fingers together, setting them on his lap. “They can also be very touchy about the size of their horns.”

I choke on the breath I was taking and a bark of shocked laughter escapes me. Of course my dirty mind twists that up, but I know he's referring to the horns on their *head*. I clear my throat, pursing my lips. “I'll be sure to bring that up next time I speak to a dragon shifter. I'm sure it will make for an interesting conversation.” Corin grins and straightens up in his seat.

“Here, you go. I’ll be making rounds of the room if you need any help,” the professor says to the class and sets down two pots and baggies with a seed in each in front of us, before moving on to the people at the next set of desks. Corin and I are seated off to the side of the room with a gap between us and other people on our right and the wall to our left, so I utilise the extra room and get to my feet, leaning over the desk to grab my pot and seed. Corin stays seated, dragging his pot closer to inspect it.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I reread the instructions at the front of the room, rolling the seed between my fingers. Swallowing hard, I try to shove aside my nerves and poke a hole in the soil with my finger then plop the seed in. Gently covering it with a layer of soil, I pour some water onto it then lean back, fingers tingling with nerves. It’s a new experience for me, I don’t usually tend to encounter the vulnerable type of emotions very often. I’m finding out that I don’t love it. If it weren’t for the absolute disaster that was my previous class—AKA potions—then I wouldn’t be so stressed over this simple assignment. I have no idea how this new *thing* inside me is going to react. I’m still not quite sure what has activated it, but I have a creeping suspicion that it could have been touching Aurora’s casket. Coming into contact with magic as powerful as hers would be a perfectly plausible reason to have unlocked a new power inside me, or something like that. Maybe. It’s something I need to look into when I have a spare moment.

Huffing out a breath of air, I close my eyes for a moment, reaching for the usual calm I keep wrapped around myself. I

let it fall over me and I stand tall, shoulders drawing back as I approach my pot. *Okay Nessa, you can do this.* I can do this.

Pulling the pot to the edge of the desk, I lean over it, tucking a stray strand of my dark hair behind my ear, and I once again close my eyes and reach for that well of magic in my sternum. My forehead pinches, finding it a lot darker than it usually is. Not only that but when I hone on it even more I can almost make out two separate balls of magic warring for dominance. *What the actual hell is going on?* Ignoring the weirdness, I refocus on the task at hand. My fingers curl into fists, determination flaring through me and I forge on not allowing the oddity to dissuade me.

I bury my fingers into the soil, the damp clumps gritty against my skin. The earthy scent wafts over me and I cock my head, touching my magic well. It jumps at my command, even though I only give it the tiniest tug, and it floods through me. My limbs burn at the sudden rush and the scent of ozone assaults me as the pressure inside me rises to unbearable levels. With a cry, it bursts from my fingers—much like in my previous class—and I gasp as magic floods into the seed. I flinch back, though, when the magic doesn't die down but continues to build, wave after wave flooding through me until I'm struggling to stay upright. It *burns*. Drowning in the power, my eyelids flutter and I fall to my knees clawing at my throat. "It-t is too m-much," I groan, mewling in pain. It's then that my eyes snag on the corner of the room where Aurora's wavering frame is hovering. Her eyes are on me, expression blank, just watching.

Then hands are on my shoulders, dragging my attention from her and Corin is kneeling in front of me, pale face close to mine. “Nessa, you need to let it out or it’ll consume you.” His words waver in and out as though I’m under water, and I go limp, but he catches me, holding me upright. “The wards, Nessa. Push it into the ground and the wards will absorb it.” I falter, unable to focus and his lips tug up in a snarl. “Do it now, Nessa.” I jolt as the magic infused words roll over me and I slam my hands down to the floor, doing as he says automatically.

I shove the power out of me on a scream, the pain like nothing I’ve ever felt before. The force of it leaving creates an almost bomb-like effect and my body is thrown back by the blast. I slam into the wall, head cracking off it with a sickening thud, before crashing to the ground with a loud grunt, and the world goes dark.



Light filters through my eyelids and frantic voices ricochet around me, making my ears ring. Or that could be connected to the pain in my shoulder. I hiss as it is jostled, and startle when I realise someone is holding me. Their arms are thick, warm bands looped around my upper thighs and the middle of my back. I automatically tense before giving up on that idea when pain reverberates through me. I groan. *Goddess I feel like shit. What the hell happened?*

The voices seem to get louder before a menacing snarl rattles through me from the chest of the person who's holding me. That gets my attention. I force my eyes open and they clash with twin kaleidoscopes of colour. Corin stares down at me with an almost feral expression, his features sharper and more animalistic than I've seen before. He looks more beast than human at the moment. Like he's a hair trigger away from shifting into his other form. The one I saw the night we rescued Lexi.

I suck in a deep breath only to pause when his bonfire scent wraps around me, my toes curling and cheeks flushing with the intoxicating fragrance. It's deeper and cloying, and my lashes flutter while I have to consciously fight the urge to press my nose to his throat. *What the hell is happening right now?* I lean forward, aiming to sit up a little more to take a look at the room to figure out what's going on, only for my ribs to grind together sharply, and I fall back with a yelp, my head clearing enough for the memory of what happened to filter back in. *Project. Magic going haywire. Another explosion.*

People are still talking around us and Corin is still growling, a low constant warning to anyone that dares get any closer. I drag my focus from him and cast my blurry gaze around the room, my eyes widening when I do. Then I take a moment to process the utter chaos my magic has once again caused.

Rather than a cute little seedling in a pot, there is an entire mother-fucking tree in front of me. Its thick trunk is curled around the room like a roller coaster, the branches turning the

room into a tangled prison. Leaves litter the floor and obscure my view in sections, but if the glittering shards of glass on the floor are to be trusted, I may have shattered a few windows. *Whoops...*

The completely inappropriate urge to laugh hits me and I bite my lip hard, trying—and failing—to contain it. It bursts from me in sharp slightly hysterical barks, making me curl over as my ribs and bruised body spasm in protest. That sure as hell gets everyone to shut up, even Corin pauses to peer at me with pinched brows. I laugh until tears fall from my eyes and I finally get a handle on it. I'm done, today's been too much. I bite my cheek to distract me from my burning eyes so I don't cry. *Goddess, there is only so much a girl can take in under twenty-four hours.*

Letting my head fall back against Corin's broad shoulder, I take another look at the room before scowling down at my palms. "For fucks sake. That's it, you're in time out. Enjoy the fucking naughty corner, magic." It's then that I also realise Unicorn is beside us, nuzzling at my arm.

I blow out a sighing breath before everyone launches back into whatever it is they're trying to say to me and I groan again. Their voices are too intermingled to decipher anything and my fingers curl into my palms, anger curling in my gut. "Shut up!" I shout, wincing at the uncomfortable pull it causes in my chest. I wait for the room to go quiet before continuing. "One at a time. You first." I point to the person I don't know, the only one who was standing back in silence, waiting for their fucking turn. He appears to be some sort of professor,

maybe? He has an authoritative vibe, and feels like an A-class Monster though. His black hair is speckled with grey, hinting at his age despite his supernatural genetics, which means he's most likely not a student.

He clears his throat, blue eyes kind. "I believe we need to get you to a nurse before we continue on with anything else."

Some of the tension in my shoulders eases. *Yay, someone in this room other than Corin cares about my wellbeing.* Almost immediately protests go up around the room and my Mountain Man starts to rumble again. I mean, *the* Mountain Man holding me, starts to rumble again. He's not *my* anything.

The professor and a shorter woman with sharp features glare at the state the classroom is in before focusing on the blue eyed man. "We'll bring the healer to her while this young woman explains what caused this to happen. We take students using enhancers to fake higher power levels very seriously."

My eyebrows lower and I blink repeatedly. *They think I'm taking enhancers? Are they insane?* Only supernaturals with a death wish use enhancers. They're essentially poison, addictive, and the supernatural rulers' consequences for using them or even carrying them are so severe that you'd have to be extremely desperate to risk something like that. Or very naive. Trying to centre myself, I start petting Unicorn, her little chirps in response settling me some.

A niggling feeling that something strange is going on with the professors pushes to the forefront of my mind and my stomach sinks. I might not actually be doing enhancers, but if

the professors plant something it could lead to my expulsion or worse. I'm not quite sure why they would, but with the fishiness surrounding their accusation and my instincts on high alert, anything is possible. I swallow hard and my stomach tightens with anxiety.

I'm mentally and physically exhausted. Today's just been one hit after another and I have no capacity for more, yet magic is practically humming under my skin, the well inside me swirling dangerously.

My breathing speeds up and spots dance in front of my eyes. *Great, just great. This is an awesome time to have a panic attack.* Suddenly we're on the move and I'm briefly distracted as my hands jump out to grip Corin's shirt as he steps around stuff, walking to the wall where part of the tree trunk is lying horizontally. He takes a seat, careful not to jostle me, and I suck in deep breaths trying to calm myself. My eyes dart around the room, searching for another distraction when a gentle hand touches my forehead.

I tense up, unsure, but Corin leans down and makes a low humming sound in my ear. He splays his fingers on my head, caressing it in a soothing movement. One that he repeats, methodically and I melt after the third pass. My eyelids droop and I curl further into him. He's... patting me and I like it. If you'd asked me before now, my vehement response would have been no, but this feels fucking amazing. Something in my chest practically glows and I lean in to nuzzle Corin's throat.



Corin

I curl around my mate, eyes scanning the room, instincts riding me hard as I stroke a hand over her head. The moment the panic in her scent reached me it was pure instinct and I'm grateful for it. The wave of magic she let off when she funnelled it into her seed had supes from around the Academy being drawn to her in droves, including professors and faculty. They portalled in almost immediately and they aren't helping with how on edge I feel.

Nessa seems to be fairly oblivious to that right now, at least. She's like a contented kitten in my arms. I risk taking my focus off the people in the room for a second to look down at Nessa and my jaw clenches, teeth grinding. Bruises are already blooming on her pale skin, her uniform also dirty and torn. Despite knowing of the corruption within the academy, it's hard to believe that they can see the state their student is in and not be jumping to get a healer.

"Someone better be either on the way to retrieve a healer, or have sent for one." My voice is low so as to not disturb Nessa, but the threat is clear.

One of the female professors clears her throat. "We have sent for one."

I nod, but otherwise don't respond. My sensitive ears are bombarded with the whispers of the crowd in the hallway outside the room and I scowl. Goddess, the way gossip travels through the walls of this academy is worse than highschool. It

reminds me of another potential issue though. *Did the professors see me magically command Nessa to do as I asked?* It's a power I rarely use and at a way higher level than that of what they believe I'm capable of. Not that I regret doing it, but if they did notice, then it could draw me into the spotlight, which could blow my cover or force my boss Ezra's hand and make him withdraw me from the academy.

I swallow hard and refocus on the woman in my arms. *I'd never let that happen.* But apparently we're going to need to work on her magic. I cock my head, scanning her face. I don't understand, it seemed like she was doing fairly well with her control. This seems very out of the blue. Our growing connection wouldn't cause anything like this. Those golden eyes meet mine and flash red as her power flares for a moment before receding and it hits me like a freight train. The cloaked section of the forest. Where she interacted with the Ghost woman—Aurora's—magic. It must have unlocked something within Nessa's magic.

My chest tightens and an icky feeling hits my stomach. *This is my fault.* My gaze flits around the room. I should have checked in with her to make sure she wasn't feeling any different. I stupidly figured that because our practise went fine after I took her there, that nothing had changed. Clearly not.

And now look at her. My thoughts and emotions rise and swirl until it's like I've got a tornado in my head. I swallow hard and my arms tighten around the woman in my arms. My shift tries to overtake me, but I force it back. Where the fuck is that healer? I snarl and some of my features slip to that of my

Lycan and everyone scurries back. My face tightens, teeth sharpening as fur sprouts on my shoulders and down the backs of my arms. The faculty are aware of my supernatural species, but they believe that I'm a mindless beast when I shift, because I'm not very powerful, when really it's the opposite and I *am* aware in my other form. I am merely more ruled by my instincts than in my human skin, but am still mentally there. I'm comforted by the fact that Unicorn is here though. She's an added layer of protection for Nessa should it come to it.

Finally, the healer hurries into the room, only pausing briefly when she realises the state it's in, then her eyes zero in on us and she forgets the rest of the room. She doesn't seem worried about my partially shifted state and goes straight for Nessa.

I lean back to give her room when she places a hand on Nessa's forehead, but I don't let her go. The lemon-y scent of the woman's healing magic floods the room and Nessa lets out a groan of protest. It has me tensing and fighting the urge to shove the healer away, but I know that she's helping her. First she'll scan her body, sort of like a magical X-ray, then she'll send her magic to the parts of Nessa that are the most injured or potentially life threatening and heal them. If she's too badly hurt then she may have to spend the night in the infirmary and take a few potions to speed up her healing.

The fact that the healer is still working on her isn't helping my anxiety and I fight the urge to growl again. My protective instincts are riding me hard and Nessa is the only thing

stopping me from losing control right now. After about a minute of silence, a rumble rises in my chest. “Is... Is she going to be alright?”

The healer looks up at me sharply, her brown eyes narrowing before they take in the room again. “Yes, but she needs rest. Time to recover from expelling this amount of power. From what I can tell, she’s had a massive power jump and this could be the first of many outbursts like this. It may take her a while to figure out how to control them.” I know she’s saying this as much to the gallery of professors as she is to me, making it clear this is not the result of an enhancer, like Nessa was accused of using, and my jaw clenches when I take in the greedy glint that’s appeared in several of their eyes. Unicorn lets out a little growl and shifts to be the size of a large dog, opposed to her usual cat size, and stands in front of us, making the group take a few steps back.

It’s now that I have a chance to process who is actually in the room, and it isn’t good. Several of the professors that I know for a fact are corrupt, hover around the room including the Headmaster Rudd himself. His excited scent has my jaw clenching. No one is getting my fucking mate and if they think that she’s a good target after this then they have another think coming. The other few are school faculty and a couple other professors who seem unaware of the corrupt nature of their coworkers. This is a fucking clusterfuck if I’ve ever seen one. Goddess, I need to get her back to her dorm and keep an eye on her until she’s back to full strength.

Clearing my throat, I shift my focus to the healer. “Thank you. May I take her back to her dorm now?” She gives me a nod then follows us out as we leave, following Unicorn as she creates a barrier between the professors and us.

As we step into the hallway I spot Oscar and Dylan hovering a few paces back, their eyes widening on us. They head straight for us, but I wave for them to wait as the healer stops and turns back to me. She grabs my elbow and I freeze, having to consciously stop myself from shaking her off. “I wouldn’t leave her alone, she’s not fully healed and quite vulnerable at the moment. Her magic will be focusing on healing her body, and it’s highly likely that her magic will force her into a recovery sleep which will leave her unconscious.” She pauses, eyes flicking towards the classroom we just left, before returning to me. “Keep her safe and don’t leave her alone,” she repeats, before returning her voice to a normal volume, eyes flicking to Oscar and Dylan before returning to me. “If she hasn’t recovered enough for classes tomorrow then come see me and I’ll excuse her.”

I thank her, eyebrows drawn down in thought. It seems that not all the faculty are as oblivious as they seem. We part ways and I turn to the guys who are now peering into the destroyed classroom. Oscar opens his mouth clearly about to pepper me with questions, but I cut him off with a shake of my head. “I’ll fill you guys in when we get back to her dorm.”

They both nod and Oscar leans down to hold out a hand for Unicorn and she climbs up his arm to perch on his shoulder, then we head back to the dorm.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nessa

As I come to, the first thing I register is that I'm surrounded by familiar scents, and when I force one of my gritty eyes open, my view confirms that I am in fact in my room. *How the heck did I get here?*

"I really need to stop passing out. It's getting seriously annoying waking up in random places," I mutter under my breath.

A low chuckle comes from my left and I jump, head whipping around to find the source of the sound. My nose wrinkles when the movement draws my attention to my aching body. Goddess, it feels like I've been trampled by a herd of horses. Dylan watches me from a seat beside my bed, blue eyes sparkling as he grins at me. I let out a huff. "What are you doing here?"

"Och, what a nice way to treat your guard. One that volunteered by the way." His tone is playful, but his cheeks flush.

Unicorn chirps, alerting me to her presence by my side as well, and I try to sit up only to pause when the room spins. "Woah." Grimacing, I brace my hands behind me on the mattress and breathe through the feeling. Once I've got my spinning head *mostly* under control I focus on Dylan. "My apologies, good sir. I am forever grateful for your presence." I do a fake bow and everything, forgetting my dizziness then freeze with a groan when the room blurs. Ugh, being dizzy

sucks. Unicorn whines and noses my side, peering up at me inquiringly.

I set a hand on her head. “I’m alright, just dizzy,” I reassure her.

Dylan shakes his head, a tiny smile playing on his lips before reaching behind me to rearrange the several pillows scattered around me until I can settle back into them comfortably. I do just that and let out another little groan, though this one is because I’m content. After smoothing out the blanket on my lap, I clear my throat, ready to pepper the man across from me with questions.

“First off, why are you guarding me? Second, what the hell happened? I remember fragments, but not enough to piece it together. How did I get into these pyjamas? Whose balls do I need to remove?” As I speak my words increase in speed until they’re almost running together.

The man blinks at me once I’ve finished speaking and I thread my fingers together on my lap. *Seems I have rendered him mute, for the moment.* He snaps out of it after about thirty seconds, blue eyes bright as he sucks in a deep breath and answers each one of my questions in turn. “Because the healing sleep you were in made you extremely vulnerable. Your magic went a little crazy in your earth magic class—”

“A little? You grew a twenty-five foot high tree in under thirty seconds—if what Corin informed us is accurate. Destroyed not just your classroom but the ones above and below it as well, before your magic nearly imploded. Oh, and

you somehow pushed that atomic-bomb-level magic into the Academy's wards and survived it? I think *A little crazy* is underselling it just a tad, Dylan," Oscar butts in from the doorway, a lazy grin on his face to soften the blow of his words.

The memories slam into me, and I blink rapidly as they sink in, trying not to let myself get overwhelmed. To distract me or because he wants to, Dylan continues, "Lexi changed you, so I hope that saves our family jewels. She also asked for you to call her once you're up to it, so she knows you're okay. And I'm—well we're— guarding you because using so much magic in one go left you vulnerable and we wanted to make sure you were safe."

At the end of his little rant Dylan nods his head decisively and a godawful giggle snort falls from my lips. Dylan's expression is absolutely adorable. Like he's, concerned, befuddled and reluctantly amused all at once as he lists everything out for me. I slap a hand over my mouth, eyes widening in horror at the sound that just left my mouth, but I end up grinning behind it in response to the guy's reactions to my horror at giggling. Oscar falls back against the wall, laughing, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement. Dylan quirks his eyebrow at me playfully, eyes intense, and I can't help but feel like if I weren't bedridden, Dylan and I would be having a replay of our little chasing game.

My tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip as I drop my hand from where it's still hiding my grin, and Dylan's eyes fall to my mouth. My grin widens and I straighten tentatively. The

pinch that runs down my spine has my expression faltering for a moment before I force it to steady. With a few deep breaths, I shuffle to the edge of the bed and swing my legs around until they're touching the floor then pause, ignoring the guys' protests. Unicorn moves with me, offering her support. It takes a moment, but the spinning stops and I look between the guys with a smile until something occurs to me. "Wait, how did you guys know what happened?"

"We were both in the class down the hall and heard the commotion, so we ventured to your classroom to see what happened and if anyone needed help. We ran into you and Corin as he came out of the classroom," Oscar says, still eyeing me with concern as I go to get up.

Unicorn lets out a huff and he grins at her. "Alright, once Unicorn and Corin got you back here safely," Oscar amends and Unicorn chuffs before taking off from the bed and hovering over Dylan's shoulder.

I nod, smiling at Unicorn's sass, then push myself up from the bed, stumbling the moment I'm on two feet. I almost go down, but both Oscar and Dylan were clearly ready for it to happen and they each grab one of my arms, holding me steady as I wait for the room to stop spinning.

When it does, I give them a grin, looking between them. "So what's the plan for dinner?"



“Corin is my new favourite, I’m just going to come out and say it,” I say, groaning around a mouthful of the best burger I’ve ever eaten—well other than the ones that Morrigan makes, but he’s the king of anything food related so there’s really no comparison. When I stumbled out of my room—not my finest moment, I’ll admit—to find Corin lingering in the kitchen with no food to be seen, I may have been just a tad grumpy. Okay maybe I was pouting, just a smidge.

The bastard had just grinned at me. At least he ignored that I stumbled. Then he managed to absolutely flip my feelings on him with just three words. “I ordered takeout.”

The corner of my lip kicks up at the memory. Oscar nudges my shoulder playfully, and I scowl at him. Brat almost made me drop a fry.

“How are you feeling?” Corin asks, his voice breaking through the comfortable sounds of cutlery scraping plates echoing through the lounge room. They’ve been avoiding that question since I came out of my room, but I suppose their patience has ended.

His question reminds me of my bruised body, but I don’t let it show that I’m in pain. Instead I smile wide, flashing my teeth—silently praying that I don’t have anything stuck in them—before answering him. “Fantastic. How about you guys?”

Oscar snorts, while Dylan cocks his head at me as though I’m a puzzle he’s trying to work out. I’m finding he does that a lot around me. Corin’s eyes narrow at my words, his head

dipping forwards slightly so his hair partially obscures his face.

Although I am avoiding how much pain I'm in, I steeple my fingers together and look between them. "I am wondering if you guys have any thoughts as to what caused that to happen though. I've never had my magic go crazy like that..." I trail off silently adding in, *never except with potions class earlier today.*

Dylan's eyebrows practically touch his hairline. "So what happened in potions this morning is a normal occurrence?"

My cheeks flush and I send him a dirty look. "Yeah, everytime I go near a cauldron I blow up a classroom," I say sarcastically, and in true Dylan fashion his eyes flare, one eyebrow quirking in challenge. I sigh. "Fine, I suppose I did imply that." Groaning, I rub a hand over my face, not missing the way Corin and Oscar's eyes are darting between the two of us. "I've always struggled with potion work, even before today's weird boost with my magic. Though it's not usually an explosion, more like I just ruin the potion and possibly set it on fire or a tiny boom, not like a bomb has gone off. That's why I had the barrier around me. I knew something would go wrong," I explain.

Corin nods slowly, eyes fixed on my face. "I think it's because you touched Aurora's casket. When that spell activated it could have unlocked a new magic in you..." he trails off seeing Oscar and Dylan's confusion. Yeah I haven't filled them in on it yet and by the looks of it neither has Corin.

I launch into a quick rundown of what happened at the hidden magical tree in the forest, which leaves them staring at us in shock. Yeah, it's probably the last thing they expected to hear today.

After they process, Oscar meets Dylan's eyes. "I'd say that seems like the most plausible reason for your magic going so crazy," he says slowly, and Dylan dips his head in agreement.

I bite my cheek. "Now I've just got to figure out how to control it," I mutter to myself, brows furrowed.

Dylan perks up. "I'm always here if you want."

"Me too," both Corin and Oscar say at the same time, drawing a laugh from me.

"Thanks you guys, but I think I'm going to try and figure it out on my own first, and if I can't get it, I'll let you's know."

"Are you ready for the assignments? Mine's ready," Oscar says, changing the subject.

My eyes flit to Corin, then my runes notebook that's sitting on the kitchen counter. I was feeling confident about our runes assignment, even with it having been pushed back because of the incident with Ethan, but with my magic going so haywire all of the sudden, I'm not sure if I'll be able to do my part. I swallow hard. Worrying my bottom lip, my eyebrows draw down as I force myself to think positive thoughts. *It'll be fine. Upside, I didn't kill anyone today.* And I have help literally all around me if I can't figure it out by myself. It'll be fine.

I don't realise I'm pulling a face until Dylan chuckles and my eyes jump to him, only to find him already watching me. I flip him off and return to my burger.

"I'm pretty sure I'm ready," Dylan says, before taking a bite of his food and I realise I never actually answered Oscar's question out loud.

I swallow then add, "Yeah, we're ready."

Corin nods, though his piercing eyes remain on me, searching my face as though he's trying to pick my brain to see how I really feel. *The opposite of confident.* With a mental groan, I slap mental me's face and eat the last bite of my food. Goodbye heaven. I get up and wash up my plate, packing up the empty takeout bags in the trash before rubbing my hands together.

The shakiness to my limbs seems to have disappeared and the room is thankfully no longer spinning when I turn my head, so I count that as a win. Checking my watch I figure I can be showered, dressed and ready to follow the Drákon group's leader tonight. After how shitty and out of control today was, I'm craving the simplicity and accomplishment gathering information on the Drákon group will bring me. I had already planned to go out tonight too and I abhor not doing something that I've put on my mental calendar.

I scratch my temple, taking note of how gritty my eyes feel and check my watch again. I might even have time to nap between then and now. *Hmm.*

A throat clearing behind me has my head jerking around though and I groan when the room blurs. Damn it, so much for the spinning being better. When the room comes back into focus, I find myself staring at a very firm T-shirt covered chest. Damn those are some broad shoulders. I reach out to touch them without conscious thought, before jerking back. *Okay, maybe I'm not quite as alright as I thought.* I completely forgot they were here. *Whoops.* Corin's eyebrows raise and before I can try to explain my actions, I'm scooped up in his arms in a bridal carry. I let out a shriek that I'm not proud of, but the Mountain Man just lets out a low rumble.

I peer up at his face, brushing his hair out of the way so I can see his eyes. "Excuse me, are you going to tell me what you think you're doing, big guy?" I murmur, not willing to admit how much I want to curl into his chest and take a nap. He's like a damn space heater.

Footsteps behind Corin have me straining to see over his shoulder, only to find Dylan and Oscar sharing a look with each other, close lipped smiles on their faces, shoulders shaking. *The bastards are laughing at me.* I narrow my eyes and melt into Corin's arms. "You have to relax," he finally says, his voice rougher than usual. "Take a break, before you fall over."

I scoff and wiggle in his arms, the urge to prove him wrong taking precedence over my health. "I'm fine and I have plans tonight." I wince as soon as the words leave my mouth, knowing saying them was a mistake. It came out more suggestively than I meant to. As though I have a *date* or am

meeting up with someone when that's not the case at all. As one, Corin stops and the footsteps behind us cease.

Cautiously, I drag my eyes from Corin's throat, up his cheek, until I reach his intense gaze. His features are drawn tight, eyes narrowed, head cocked thoughtfully. *Uh-oh. Mountain Man's grumpy.* Now how to get out of this without explaining...

Before I can think up an excuse, I'm gently set down and Corin draws back to stand beside Dylan and Oscar, putting a few feet between us. "Alright, well we'll leave you to it then. Give us a call if you need us. I mean it."

My eyebrows draw down at their sudden three-sixty when it comes to protecting me, but I don't look the gift horse in the mouth. "Okay. I will. Thank you," I murmur slowly. *Odd.*

Corin dips his head, expression blank as he nods and grabs his phone, slipping it into his pocket before gripping Dylan and Oscar by the shoulders and leading them from my dorm. They're tense, faces contorted in disbelief as they stare at Corin, but they don't resist him, then the door is closing, cutting off my view. I blink rapidly as the click of the door latches loud in the resounding silence. Clearing my throat, I shake my head and run my fingers through my hair, frazzled by their sudden departure. My emotions are too muddled from everything today to send me into a confused spiral. I'm just... exhausted.

Unicorn chirps at me before leaping out my open window, presumably for her evening hunt. I wrap my arms around

myself, suddenly feeling alone. *No, Nessa. Get your shit together, you have work to do. Plus you wanted this, dumbass.* Letting out a controlled breath, I force my shoulders back and lift my chin—ignoring the pounding in my head and slight weakness to my body. Plus, doing something that I excel at is exactly the confidence boost I need right now. *Time to get to fucking work.*



Smothering a yawn, I roll my shoulders, peering through the binoculars. Unlike my reconnaissance in the club, this surveillance takes a more... spy-like touch. Which means, I'm freezing my ass off, perched on a rooftop squinting through a pair of high quality binoculars to watch the local Drákon group's leader meeting up with a group of people in a downtown street cafe.

I'm in the city that's closest to the Academy and using the portal to get here was torture. I grimace at the memory. It increased my dizziness tenfold and had my stomach rolling for the next ten minutes. It's been about an hour since they got here and so far I haven't seen much. Leaving things the way I did with the guys isn't sitting great with me either, but I also don't want to drag them into my shady hobby any more than they are already involved. Or at least that's what I tell myself. Since going to the Travelling Marketplace with them, that's been seeming more and more like an excuse. Unicorn had left

to hunt by the time I left the dorm so I left her a magical message. Chances are though, that she's going to be pissed when I get back that I left without her. She won't care about my hesitance to let her tag along when I go through portals of my creation, just in case the Academy's wards decide to react.

It's fucking miserable up here and has a part of me wishing I'd stayed in my dorm with the guys and let them take care of me. A shiver rolls down my spine and my eyes narrow as I glance around the rooftop. It's bare, with no places to hide, but for some reason I swear I can feel eyes on me. I have since I left my apartment. *Like what the fuck is going on?* I was especially careful because of Ethan. I went in circles once I left the school via the portal I have set up in the forest—one that no one should be able to follow me through, yet the feeling hasn't gone away. I'm also not sure if others can leave the school or not through portals like me, so I need to be extra careful. Gritting my teeth, I set my binoculars back in their case and throw it in my spelled pants pocket. I reach over my head and stretch, ready to stalk the leader from the ground for a while. Since placing the tracker on her, it's been a lot easier to find her location and watch her movements, but it has no speaker or camera so I need to watch her in person to gain knowledge on these things.

I was hoping that I'd be able to figure out enough of what was happening by just observing, but this meeting seems like it could be important so it's better that I go listen in, just in case. If I don't get anything then this is pretty much a wasted trip.

After double checking I haven't left anything in the spot I was sitting, I mutter a basic spell to wipe away any evidence of me being here as well. It's a handy thing to know in my line of work—or well, when you have hobbies like mine. I also take a moment to wonder at the fact that I'm able to do something like this so easily when six months ago I was barely able to do any magic.

Shaking my head at my own thoughts, I scale down the side of the building and drop into the dark alleyway. My dark, spelled clothing should guarantee that I'm noticed by no one. The enchantment means that unless they're looking for me specifically their eyes will glance off me without actually seeing me. Straightening my jacket, I slip into the flow of supes in the street, flopping into a seat at the table directly behind the Drákon group in the coffee place. Setting my book down on the table, I grin at the waitress, order my drink, then settle in to read. Thanks to the soft lighting floating around the dozen or so tables I can see the words easily enough.

Fingers crossed they say something of interest and this isn't just a waste of my time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Corin

I duck out of the dorm room, keeping my body languid and unbothered so Nessa thinks I'm fine with leaving her alone. Yeah fucking right. Letting my hands fall from the guys shoulders, they round on me the moment we're out of hearing range.

“What the hell was that?” Oscar asks, eyebrows practically touching his eyebrows. I expected his outburst, he lets his emotions rule him a lot—what I'm not expecting is Dylan's sharp words.

“You can't be serious? She was passed out an hour ago, and we don't know what's going on with her magic—we can't leave her alone.” His voice is low and controlled, but the dangerous edge below that false calm is intriguing. He's usually so unemotional and removed from situations that it's surprising that this is what's getting an emotional reaction.

My eyes flick between theirs and I stand up straighter. “Don't worry, I'm not going to. What we can't do is crowd her when she asks for space though,” I say steadily.

Oscar snorts, a strand of pink hair falling in his eyes as he shakes his head. “So you stalking her every night is better?”

Damn, I must be getting sloppy if he knows about that. He must read it in my expression because his lips quirk, cocking an eyebrow knowingly, and slowly shaking his head, confirming that he knows exactly what I do every night.

Dylan's expression relaxes though. "I knew about it too. I'm fine as long as I know she's not being left alone." His sharp blue eyes float between us before he dips his head. "I'm going to head back to my dorm. Give me a call if anything happens, I'll keep my phone on me."

I nod and he vanishes around the corner, but the moment he's gone Oscar rounds on me. "Seriously, did you think we weren't aware of the stalking?"

I growl, my primal side lurching forward at his dominance, even though he's only a B-class monster. "I knew you'd both find out eventually. It keeps her safe, and it satisfies my monster half." I don't bother trying to deny it, holding the angry Troll's eyes so he can see I'm not hiding anything from him—or at least nothing when it comes to this.

His shoulders droop and he steps back. "Sorry, I just want to make sure she's okay."

I nod, my mouth a grim line. I know he meant nothing personal by it. "It's no problem. I'll keep an eye on her and let you know if anything happens."

"Good." He meets my eyes once more before heading down the hall in the direction of his dorm.

Letting out a breath, I shift so I'm invisible. Time to get this show on the road. Flexing my fingers, I walk through the building, my mind distracted. Hopefully I won't have to kill anyone in front of Nessa tonight. That might not be the best impression. She made it sound like she has a date tonight, but I'm pretty confident—with how much I know about Nessa

now—that is not what she’s doing tonight. It seems more likely that she’s going to get some information about something from someone shady. Possibly ideas on why her powers went haywire today. It seems like something Nessa would do. I’m not sure how I feel about her not talking with us about things like that, but I also know it’s not fair to expect her to be fully honest with me when I’m not doing the same for her.

My primal side vehemently disagrees, purring at the thought of gifting our mate with the body of someone who is a threat to her—*maybe... No. I’m not doing that.* Shaking my head, I haul myself up the tree outside Nessa’s window and settle in on the thick branch that gives me a perfect view into her window. This really is a safety hazard. Good thing I’m here to protect her.



She spends most of the afternoon napping before she gets up to an alarm and my eyes narrow. The crazy woman leaves her window open at all hours for her familiar, who is out by the looks of it. *Maybe I can find her an auto locking earth-realm cat door?* I snort, imagining the expression on Unicorn’s face at being asked to wear a collar. *Hah. Nevermind.*

My attention is drawn back to the window when Nessa darts past in only a towel. My throat closes up and my eyes flare, taking in her lean curves and short wet hair. I bite my cheek,

suppressing a smile when I realise she's talking to herself. Gods, she's fucking adorable. I mean hot as fuck too, but adorable as all hell.

Wrapping her hair up in a separate towel, she shuffle-slide dances around her living room before dipping back into the bathroom, coming back with a toothbrush in her mouth. She must have a soundproofing barrier up around her apartment because I can't hear her or any music playing, but it's amusing no less.

After brushing her teeth she disappears into her room to get dressed. My mind drifts, doubts creeping in. If she is going on a date tonight, why wouldn't she tell us about it? She's been secretive about some things, but her withholding something like that doesn't make sense with what I know about her so far. I shake my head. No, it seems more likely that it's what I thought earlier. She's meeting up with someone to get information.

When she comes out of her room, my eyes narrow at her outfit. It's completely black, covering her from neck to toe and when I reach my magic out, I find them drenched in spells and runes. She's taken a lot of time to deck these pieces of clothing out in a tone of magic so she's virtually undetectable when she's wearing it. Her hair is also pulled up in a messy bun, face make-up free—but then again, it almost always is anyways.

“Where are you going, Love?” I whisper to myself as I get to my feet. She shoves a few things into her pockets which must be spelled—before climbing out of the window and

easily strolling along the branch until she's almost touching me. She freezes when my eyes land on her and she drops to her haunches, scanning the area as though she can sense me. Sucking in a slow breath, I inch back until she has room to walk by me and my eyebrows draw down at her ability to sense me. *I wonder if it has something to do with us being mates?*

After another thirty seconds, she shakes her head and pushes to her feet. "Imagining shit, Nessa. Goddess. Get your head together," she mutters under her breath. She climbs down the tree with ease, then shoves her hands into her pockets as she walks towards the forest.

My eyebrows practically touch my hairline as I climb down the tree with caution. Gods, I hate heights. At least I know the tree is stable, so it's nowhere near as fear inducing as the carnival rides I went on with Nessa.

I follow her until we're deep in the forest and she climbs another tree. My brows furrow in confusion until she opens a fucking portal with ease, like a pro. My eyes widen and I scramble up the tree as she goes through, diving in behind her before it can close.

Thanks to my invisibility and fast reflexes, I manage to land next to Nessa, rather than on top of her and give myself away. I roll, then pop up to my feet, intentionally kicking a bin so rodents go scurrying to make sense of the scuffing sound my clothing against the cobblestone made. We're in some kind of dark alley and I shake my head to myself. Alright, what the

hell is my girl up to? And how did she go through the Academy's barrier without being fried? It has to be something to do with her magic, otherwise I would be fried too.

It's yet another thing I file away to analyse later, and I focus on following Nessa.



I follow her through the streets and up onto a rooftop where she settles in, and I choose to settle a few feet behind her. Luckily I brought my own set of binoculars so I find the target she's locked onto and jerk back in surprise. It's Kristen, the fucking leader of the local Drákon group. *What the hell is Nessa doing stalking her?* Well I suppose I can rule out Nessa being part of their group, and I really need to speak with Ezra about her. This is the final deciding factor. If he agrees to it then the guys will need to be brought in as well. But that's a choice they'll just have to make, because Nessa's too good for our organisation to pass up. My mate is fucking amazing. And apparently a woman of many talents.

Shaking my head, I realise that while I was lost in my head, she packed up. *Where are you headed now?* She scales down the side of the building and I follow, keeping my movements as quiet as possible. She slips into the flow of supes walking through the street while I hang back, leaning against the wall as I watch her. When she gets close to the cafe Kristen is at—the one we were watching—my breath stalls in my chest and I

tense. *What the hell is she doing? Was I completely wrong about her?*

When she steps over the threshold of the street cafe's seating area her demeanour completely changes. Her shoulders curl inwards, chin touching her chest as her hair hangs over her face like a curtain. She takes a seat at the table behind Kristen and the people with her, then she pulls out a thick novel. My heart stutters for a moment when she takes one look at her. Thankfully she decides she's not a threat, her eyes canvassing the rest of the seating area again before returning focus to the group.

My thoughts grind to a halt as I contemplate their interaction. I suppose I can rule out her being part of her group for the moment, she had me fucking worried for a second there. Goddess, she's insane. Sitting right beside them to try and listen in on her conversation. She'd have no reason to use a barrier to mute their words in a place like this. It's not busy enough to warrant it and she doesn't view any of the people around them as a threat. That's her first mistake. A tiny grin curls my lips and I dig my phone out of my pocket. I think it is time to give my boss a call.

I hit dial, making sure to keep my eyes on Nessa. Should anything go wrong, I'm going to have her back. *Crazy fucking woman. Gods, she's perfect.*

"Corin," he says in greeting and it refocuses my thoughts.

"Ezra." The waitress sets a coffee in front of Nessa and she shoots her a grin of thanks and leans back in her seat.

“I’m assuming you’re in a secure location?” he inquires and I nod even though he can’t see me.

“Yes I am. Cloaked and have a sound barrier up.” Ezra is perfectly aware of my gifts, so he knows what I mean when I say cloaked.

“Good. What’s going on?” His voice has relaxed and the familiar creak of his old vinyl chair echoes through the line. He’s in his office. And presumably alone.

I clear my throat, tongue darting out to wet my lips. “I’m requesting that you keep this conversation between us for now please, Sir?”

I’ve spent enough time with him that I can practically picture him as he considers my request. The man may not appear or sound any older than me, but I know that’s not the case. You’d have to be stupid not to recognise his age by his strength and the power that practically freaking wafts off of him. Not all that different to Nessa actually, though she’s younger than me and decades younger than Ezra. My eyes narrow, but I file that away for later. So many questions, the list keeps growing.

“Understood. I’m alone and providing this isn’t about a potential danger that my superiors need to know about, I’m happy for this matter to remain confidential.”

I let out a slow breath, eyes still focused on Nessa. I’m about to speak, then change my mind at the last minute, cocking my head to the side. “Is there any chance I could speak with you about this matter in person?”

It's a little risky, with Kristen being so close, but Ezra is perfectly capable of cloaking himself and his magical signature. I need to be able to see his expressions while I tell him about Nessa, and this works perfectly because he can see her in action. "It is unlike you to make such a request, so I'll be there in a few minutes. I'll be cloaked."

There's a beep as he hangs up and I tug my phone away from my ear, shutting it off and shoving it back in my pocket. Fingers crossed this isn't a bad idea.



Ezra takes more than five minutes, and my eyes scan over him with curiosity. He's usually quite put together when I see him in the office, dressed in a tailored suit, slacks and unscuffed shiny black shoes. He's a lot less put together right now.

He lets out a huff as he approaches me, brushing at his torn and *smouldering* suit jacket. His albino white hair is all over the place, and his purple eyes glint with mild irritation. "My apologies for being late, something came up."

I nod, but don't question him; it is none of my business. He takes a minute or so to get himself together, eventually deciding to shuck off his jacket and shove it into his spelled pocket. I'm sure if he were in his office he'd just magic it back to its original glory, but Kristen might pick up on something like that here. "Alright, so what did you want to speak with me

about?” He scans the area as he speaks, eyes narrowing when they land on Kristen. He’s aware of all the Drákon members in the area, especially Kristen. She’s a fucking monster at heart—morally, not by her supernatural race.

“You are aware of the incident that happened with Ethan at the end of last term?” I confirm.

Ezra nods, expression tightening at whatever emotions are swirling through me. Empaths are rather annoying in that sense. “I read your report, yes.”

I lick my lips and avert my eyes from his to check in on Nessa. She’s still reading her book, casual and calm as ever. A low strangled sound comes from Ezra and my eyes snap to him. He’s watching me incredulously, eyebrows practically touching his hairline. “You found your mate?”

I swallow as I nod. Here is where it gets tricky. “I kept her out of the report. She was in no way working with him or part of the Drákon group, I’m almost positive. But some information about her has come to light recently and I’ve been considering bringing her to your attention as a potential recruit for a while now.”

Ezra’s face is now worryingly blank and I straighten up, ready for a tongue lashing, but he’s calm when he speaks. “I can understand why you kept her out of it, though I’m not happy about it. Mates are the exception, but leave something like that out on me again, and you’ll be pulled. Understand?”

I dip my head and nod. “Yes Sir.”

“Now, fill me in,” he orders, eyes studying Nessa. It would send me feral if it were anything other than a completely neutral assessment of her weapons, stature and other information he can garner by looking at her.

“She was gathering information on Ethan before we knew of his true identity, trying to catch him. Lexi, the supernatural woman we recovered from him, is her best friend. It was a taunt, and a threat to Nessa for looking into him. From what I have observed, she is fluent in most weapons and fighting styles. She has at least moderate computer skills and is very well-versed in the theory side of most forms of magic. To give you an example of this, she taught herself how to open her own portals to get on and off of the Academy grounds. She only came into her magic’s full potential during this year’s first term, but she is a natural and focused on learning control. Her primary gift is very... unique, and to my knowledge we don’t have anyone on our side who can do what she can. She is also being courted by two other males at the Academy. They would both be valuable members. I realise they wouldn’t be able to become full members until they have graduated, but I’m worried that she’s going to get herself killed if she isn’t brought into the fold.” I watch his expression closely, unsure how he feels about the subject.

“I’m assuming the unnamed men who were present in the fight are the men courting her?” he finally asks.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to also assume your worry has to do with her being here right now. And Kristen.”

I dip my head in a nod, clasping my hands together behind my back as I stand beside Ezra. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Alright, here is what we’re going to do. You are going to tell me everything you know. Then, if I think they sound like they can handle it, I’m going to set up a test for them. Depending on how they perform, I’ll make my decision on recruiting them. I’ll also be keeping an eye on all of you.”

My eyebrows draw down and I go to open my mouth to question him—stupid on my part, really—but he cuts me off. “No, I will not be recognizable to her, her suitors or you. You forget that I have many aliases,” Ezra says, a mild censure to his tone.

I swallow hard, but nod then I proceed to fill him in and after I’m finished, a slow smile creeps onto his lips. The first one I’ve seen from him today. He pats me on the shoulder with a chuckle, shaking his head. “She sounds perfect for you. Congratulations, Corin. You deserve to find your people, and it seems like you have. I can’t wait to meet her properly, have a good night.” He gives me one last smile before tucking his hands in his pockets and strolling down the street.

The second he is out of sight, I bend over, sucking in hard breaths, hands braced on my knees. *Goddess, for a moment there I was worried I’d gotten Nessa in trouble and pissed off Ezra.* He’s a fucking scary bastard when he’s pissed. I’ve only

seen it happen once and I hope to never witness it again—and it wasn't even aimed at me.

Shaking my head, I settle in to keep watching Nessa. My mind is stuck on the new knowledge of this test. I have no doubt that they'll pass it, but I have no idea how I'm going to explain it to her afterwards. It went unsaid that I can't disclose anything to her about this until the test is done and Ezra either calls her in for a meeting or not. He didn't give me a time frame either. Shit. She's going to threaten to take my balls. Possibly try to actually chop them off. I flop back with a groan, though amusement wars with my stress.

I never expected to find my mate while I was working this job, and even though it makes things a lot more complicated, I definitely wouldn't change it.

Kristen pushes to her feet and I straighten, body tensing. She strides past the waitress without sparing a glance at anyone and by the looks of it, doesn't leave a tip. *Asshole*. I wait for Nessa to follow, but she doesn't. She's smart. Doesn't even glance up from her book for more than a cursory look at Kristen as the woman gets up from her chair, before returning to her reading.

Kristen pauses under a tree, in the shadows to survey the cafe, double checking that none of the patrons were watching her. After five minutes, Kristen straightens, brushes off her shirt and ducks into an alley.

It doesn't matter that Nessa handled it so well, it still has me sweating and my gut roiling. And I can't give away the fact

that I'm perfectly aware of what she's doing. I growl, my frustration flaring. I force my fists to unclench and run them through my hair, taking slow, deep breaths until I'm centred again.

It seems I'm going to have to watch her more often. She's basically just handed me a free fucking pass, but I can't say that I'm too upset about that part.

After another ten minutes she gets to her feet, tucking her book in her pocket and stretching. Her golden eyes glint, reflecting the soft cafe's lights like a cat's would, as she scans the area. Then she digs around in her purse and slips a hundred dollars worth in Fae coins under the edge of her coffee mug. She waves the waitress over and thanks her before walking from the establishment at a brisk pace. So when the waitress checks the table and finds the money, she misses the way the woman clutches it to her chest, relief stark on her expression. Being a supernatural can be hard sometimes, it doesn't have the same support systems as that of the earth realm either. It is more like every supe for themselves unless you are a pureblood and have extraordinary powers.

With the Drákon group running rampant at the moment though, it's not safe to be powerful either. I shake my head then take off down the street, following Nessa. I wonder where she's taking me next.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nessa

I snort, dropping my face into my palm. “I can’t believe you waited twenty-four hours to call me and tell me you’re okay,” Lexi says. Her tone is playful, but I want to make sure she’s truly not pissed at me.

“I know, I’m an asshole.” I groan, rubbing at my face. I’d meant to call her before I left to spy on the local Drákon leader—AKA Kristen as I finally learned tonight. For some reason I haven’t been able to get her name. It was irritating me, so at least I can put a label on her now. After what was supposed to be a short nap, it was late so I didn’t want to panic her by calling in the middle of the night. I don’t bother making excuses. There are none. “I’m sorry, I’ll try harder.”

She lets out a low laugh. “Nessa, we both know how you’re wired. When you are focused on something like you are, the Drákon group and finding... Ethan, you struggle to remember or think about anything else.”

I grimace, even though it’s true. “I’m still sorry,” I say firmly.

“I accept your apology. I’m glad you’re doing alright. How are you feeling today? I’m assuming you still went out last night, otherwise you would have called me.”

She’s not stupid. If I didn’t call then she knows I was doing reconnaissance or something risky like that. I sigh and scrub a hand over my face. “Yeah, I did. Other than a name, I didn’t

really learn anything new though. They were discussing the kidnappings, but we already know about that.” I sit down on the end of my bed gingerly. “I’m alright—feel kind of like I fell off a three story building, but I’m alive.”

She snorts. “Are you going to take the day off?”

My shoulders droop and Unicorn lands beside me, before climbing into my lap. “Yeah, I think I will. I need to recuperate all I can before my assignment with Corin.” It’s in three days time, which isn’t long.

The hum of someone else speaking comes from Lexi’s end and she mumbles something back. “Sorry, I’ve got to go. But seriously, call me next time. Oh, and good luck with your assignment,” Lex says, then hangs up. It draws a chuckle from me, glad she seems to be feeling better.

I’m both extremely anxious about it and a little excited. The new boost to my magic is the primary reason for my anxiety, and a lot of frustration. I don’t have very much time to get a handle on it before the assignment either. My eyebrows draw down then I reach for my phone again. Maybe, I should give Corin a call, he might be able to help give me some pointers on controlling my magic. As I scroll through my contacts to find his number, a smile touches my lips. I am a little excited too because of how much we’ve prepared for it. The rune circle is definitely solid—provided all our calculations are correct, if I can get my magic to cooperate, it should go swimmingly. Fingers crossed Corin can help, and maybe I’ll

enlist Dylan too, he was my tutor last term after all. *I wonder if he's supposed to be offering that role for me this term or not?*

I shake my head. *Come back to that later, Nessa. Now is not the time.* I hit dial and cross my toes as well. Here is to hoping I don't blow anyone or anything up.



Smiling to myself, I climb out my dorm window, book in hand, and settle on the thick tree branch. I lie back, eyes darting between the stars for a moment before I grab my book and start reading, flashlight rune aimed at the pages. The night is serene and quiet for a whole earth shattering ten minutes before a familiar pale figure appears in my peripheral vision. I flop back with a groan, my focus on the fantasy world full of Omegas, and hot Alphas and Betas, broken.

“Dammit, what now?” I ask, peering up at Aurora through the darkness, deactivating my flashlight rune as I do so my eyes can adjust.

She blinks at me, blank expression not faltering, and I can't help but laugh. It's mostly out of exasperation, but it has some of the tension in my shoulders easing anyway. Taking a few deep breaths, I roll my shoulders and get my head in the game. “Alright, show me.”

Though her expression barely flickers, Aurora floats away. I bite the inside of my cheek unsure how to feel about the

zombie-like characteristics that she has recently adopted. It's definitely odd. Though she only appeared a few times last term, she acted like any other supernatural personality and mannerism wise, other than the flickering and fading out. Now though, it's like her brain is there but she can't change or control her body.

Shaking my head, I put my book on the inside ledge of my dorm before climbing down the tree to follow Ghost Girl who is almost at the edge of the forest. It's quiet, as the sun went down not long ago and students avoid the forest at night. Well other students avoid it at night, not me though. Even though it's quiet and seemingly empty, I carefully use my magic to check the area for people and come up empty. I also make sure the barrier covering me is at full strength.

"So where are we headed?" I ask even though I'm aware that she probably won't answer.

She turns to blink at me again before moving into the trees. She doesn't take the main path that is kept specifically for students, no, she takes the one that I use. It has a sinking feeling hitting me in the gut. I was hoping she was going to show me something else, not lead me to another *present* from Ethan. I shake my head and force myself to maintain my cheery disposition. Lets just call it a coping mechanism, but the constant stress is draining me, so if I have to pretend to be happy to deal with everything, then you bet I'm going to be. I don't let my smile drop even as the aura of Ethan's magic hits me. It's just the residue of his magical signature but it confirms my thoughts.

“So is it fun being a ghost?” I ask casually, making her ghostly form pause for a moment before she continues on. I make a humming noise in the back of my throat, undeterred by her lack of a response. “Do you miss things? Food, books, music, a pet? Oooh, do you miss jokes? I’m sure all those other ghosts you hang out with are terribly dull. Or you could say, terribly boo-ring.” I grin, even as my proximity to Ethan’s present sets off the spell he has there. This time I’m going to focus on that more than the present itself. It will make my senses more fine tuned to the presents in the future.

This one is in plain sight and doesn’t seem to have a trap attached to it. No hellfire thankfully. It’s a pair of hands, severed at the wrist. Aurora shifts to hover beside the present, gazing down at it. I bite my cheek, eyes on the hands. “How does a ghost buy their food?” I pause, and Aurora turns to me, head cocked slightly. “At the ghost-ery store.” I stare at her, grinning and swear that she’s internally rolling her eyes at my horrible joke. Snorting, I tug on a pair of gloves. I’ve taken to keeping a pack of them in my magical pant pockets in case I come across any more of Ethan’s presents.

A quick prodding of my magic reveals that these hands have the same stasis spell on them, but they appear to have been... frozen? My eyebrows draw down at the paler colour and the drops of still frozen blood at the wounds where they were hacked off. I grit my jaw. The hands are also visually different from the leg I found. The skin is more tan, the fingers long and dainty, but the hand itself isn’t all that big. The nails are painted black this time, and silver dress jewellery rings adorn

them. I blink repeatedly, as I stare. There is something so familiar about the whole thing. I just can't put my finger on it.

Shifting my focus back to the spell I tug at the threads of it and it reveals that the caster has woven my magic into it as a trigger. It makes a lot more sense now that no one else found it. I let out a breath, eyebrows drawing down. From what I can tell it seems like there is a clause written into it that makes it only activate if it's only my magical signature it senses and no one else. That's all I'm able to get from the spell so I pull back a little and let my mind swirl around all the new details.

I have no way to tell if this is someone else's hand or another limb from the same body, but as this was spelled within a different time frame of the person it belonged to's death, I have to assume it's someone else. I growl low in my throat, my frustration getting the better of me for the moment.

Aurora shifts closer in my peripheral vision and I blow out a breath. "What kind of street do ghosts prefer to live on?" I ask as I carefully bag the hands before portaling them to my dorm room. I lift my hands above my head, stretching and turn to face Aurora, face completely serious. "A dead end."

I swear her lips twitch before she vanishes and I tip my head back to look at the sky. "You can't give me a break universe, can you?"

Shaking my head I take off my gloves and sanitise my hands before scrubbing at my face. I think it's time to reach out to some of my more questionable contacts to examine the

limbs I've been sent. Clearly it wasn't a one-off like I was hoping.

So much for having a break for a few days...

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nessa

I stride towards the forest with my shoulders back and chin held high, Corin by my side. We've spent every spare minute of the last two days working on my magic. Our focus has been on how to control it with the crazy power boost I've had, but there's one thing I can't seem to do now. No matter how many times we practised.

If I use my magic for anything that requires more power than a basic spell, I can't switch it off after I've used it—I'm forced to send it into the academy or risk becoming a living magical bomb.

Corin can't seem to understand it, and none of the books I've read have ever mentioned anything like this happening to anyone in the past.

My lips purse. *More stuff to figure out.* I'll just add it to the ever growing pile, right alongside the worryingly quiet—other than his presents—Ethan. I don't believe that he's gone from the Academy, well at least I'm pretty sure he's using somewhere here as a base. So far he hasn't killed anyone on the Academy grounds again, which means he must be able to get through the barrier like I can to find new victims across the realm via a self-made portal. If he's fixated on me at the moment, I don't want him to target someone close to me again. Goddess, I need to check in on Lexi again. I don't know how or when he's going to strike next, at this point I'd rather he come directly after me, just me so I can face him head on.

All these mind games are starting to irritate the fuck out of me. Not to mention, playing on my guilt. He's killed at least one person to leave limbs for me.

Blowing out a slow breath, I shove all that back in its box for now, compartmentalising the fuck out of it and refocusing on the challenge we're about to face. Corin and I's runes assignment. Unicorn chuffs at me, headbutting my neck. It has me smiling and I give her chin a scratch. "I know, it'll be fine," I murmur to her. My steps slow when I catch sight of our professor and part of the class. Mr James has been staggering the presentations over the last several days so we all have enough time to do it properly.

When we reach them, I plop down onto the grass gracelessly, and tug my paper copy of the speech part of our presentation out of my bag. Then I proceed to reread it over and over, until I'm one hundred percent sure that I could recite it perfectly, even if I was blindfolded, spun in a circle and dropped into a half frozen lake.

I glance at the Mountain Man beside me and my brows raise slightly when I find him watching the pair that are currently doing their presentation while he fidgets with the collar of his shirt.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice low, but he jolts as though I shouted at him.

He clears his throat and side eyes me with those expressive irises. "Yeah, why?"

I raise my brows as my lips pull into a slow smile. “Because, you’re looking a little nervous there, big guy.”

He scowls—if it’s at the nickname or the insinuation that he has feelings, I’m not sure—but it has my shoulders shaking with silent laughter. I scoot closer to him and nudge his side with my elbow, grinning. “It’s okay, everybody gets nervous sometimes.”

Unicorn chitters at me before leaping onto Corin and strutting along his broad shoulders like she owns him. His disgruntled, but amused look sends me into another fit of silent giggles and I have to turn away so I don’t offend the pair finishing up their rune circle demonstration.

That has my humour fading. We’re up next. As though I’ve summoned it with just the thought, polite applause erupts around us and our professor stands from the stump he’s been using as a seat. “Corin and Nessa, you’re up.”

I get to my feet as does Corin, and we head to the front of the class, calm falling over me. The build up is always worse for me. It gives me time to second guess every little detail. So once we’re standing in front of everyone, that all fades away and I clear my throat, about to start when Mr James interrupts. “You’ll need to set your familiar aside before you start so they can’t influence your magic. It is policy.”

I blink, then ask Unicorn to do as he says. I wasn’t aware that familiars could have that much influence over your magic—another thing to research—but I have no problem asking her to watch from a few feet away instead of on Corin’s shoulder.

The vixen gives a little growl before leaping away from Corin to glide down to the space beside where the professor is seated and shifts, growing until she's towering over him. My eyes widen and I take a step towards her as she opens her giant maw, sharp teeth glittering in the sun, worried she's going to *eat* the rune professor. His complexion goes whiter than Aurora as he stares at her, but after making a sound of discontent she settles in, turning her head to watch us.

I let out a breath then launch into my part of our spiel, "Good morning everyone. Corin and I have come to you with what we believe is the answer to the human world's deforestation crisis..." We continue on, explaining their issues and how we've incorporated many things into our rune circle that would help, if supernaturals ever choose to.

"... so with all of that in mind, we created this rune circle and are here to give you a demonstration on how it works and show you what it's capable of," Corin finishes. He then walks with me further back to a patch of dirt and crouches down. I copy his movements and trace our rune circle in the soil, careful to make sure it's exact. It would suck to mess up because of something that could have easily been avoided. Once that's done, I finally drag my eyes to his, our gazes locking. Swallowing hard, I take a moment then let out a shaky breath, settling into a cross legged position. Holding out my hands to Corin, he takes them, the skin of his palms warm and calloused against mine. I vaguely register the professor putting up a barrier spell between us and the class, then the forest is all that I can hear.

Magic pounds through me the second I try to call it and the moment I release my hold on it, it snaps into Corin, greeting his power like they're old friends. My eyelids flutter as pleasure rolls over me, just like the last time we connected, and my mouth parts. I find the thread of earth magic below us and grip it gently, weaving it into our magic then funnel it into the rune circle between us. The moment of truth. It lights up like a green beacon, but I don't let my eyes leave Corin's swirling ones. Even when the scent of rich earth, running water and the air before a rainstorm bombard me.

The rune circle amplifies the connection between us, along with the earth magic dozens of times over, until I can sense the spider web of fine strings that interconnect beneath all of the trees, at all stages of life, even those that are merely seeds waiting beneath the soil to sprout. I choose to aim the rune circle's power at the trees in our immediate radius, which encompasses about twenty-five trees.

Once I'm locked onto them, I pulse Corin and I's combined magic to them, watching as it rolls down their magical threads like blue and gold waves. The earth magic's delight is immediate and I smile, basking in its thanks before carefully severing my connection to it. Then I go to do the same with Corin, only to pause, panic rolling through me at the thought for some reason. My hands tighten around his and a strangled sound escapes me. My breathing speeds up, chest constricting.

Rather than get upset with me for my weirdness, Corin sends a flow of comforting magic into me and my skin tightens, goosebumps erupting on my limbs. His thumbs start

to trace patterns on my wrists and my eyes pop open, once again clashing with his. I scan his features with confusion at the emotions running rampant through me, but it breaks the spell and I'm able to separate our magic, and I slowly remove my hands from his, missing his warmth immediately. *What the hell is happening right now?*

I'm drawn out of my self-reflection when I catch sight of the class and our professor. He's watching us with wide eyes, his mouth ajar as though he too is struggling to process what the hell is going on. Yeah, same here buddy. Swallowing hard, I try to shake off the lust that's still coursing through my veins, along with the echo of Corin's magic. A pang hits my chest and I have to curl my nails into my palm hard to keep from reaching out to him, a fine tremble working its way through my body. *Yeah, that's some confusing stuff. What the hell is going on with me lately?* My brows furrow only to practically touch my hairline when I become aware of our surroundings.

I blink stupidly, struggling to process. "Holy fucking shit."

The trees that we targeted no longer appear to be only a few years old. I tip my head back, eyes squinting as I try to find the top, but fail with the thick canopy that's been created. Not to mention the trunks. If Corin and I were to stand on either side of one and hug it, our hands wouldn't touch. But that's not all—the undergrowth, shrubs and pretty much all living plant matter have grown as well, making this section appear more like a rainforest. I swallow hard. *Goddess, why can't I ever just be normal. Being medium level just isn't a thing anymore and it kind of sucks.* As though summoned by my thoughts, magic

starts to rise inside me in waves and I curse under my breath, trying to fight it. My lashes flutter and I sway on my feet as pain swims through me. Like a flame burning me from the inside out. Corin is by my side in an instant, leaving only a foot or so between us as he rumbles reassuringly, the sound almost like a purr. Unicorn joins us, her wings raised defensively as she stands by my side, shielding me.

“You need to do it now, Nessa,” Corin whispers and I groan. I can feel the entire class’s eyes on me and even though I was expecting this to happen, it still has my limbs tightening with tension. I’m so vulnerable when I’m in this state. As if sensing my thoughts, Unicorn chitters and shifts so she’s covering me fully from everyone and I relax slightly. Corin growls and my attention wavers to him as he inches even closer. “Do it now. We’ve got you. Now do it before your magic tears you apart from the inside out.” His words are a low bark. A magical command again and I jolt into action, stumbling to the nearest tree and slamming my palms to the trunk. The bark is rough against my fingers, but the sensation is barely a blip in my mind as I force the excess of my power into it and subsequently into the Academy’s barrier just like the last time I had a large excess of magic.

My body contorts, a scream catching in my throat as it drains from me. This is by far the largest amount I’ve sent into the Academy, and when it’s finished draining from me, I slump against the tree, breathing hard. I swear the barrier sends a gentle pulse of magic to me in thank you. Hands land on my shoulders, kneading the muscles gently and I relax even

further, utter exhaustion weighing down my limbs. I just want to go back to my dorm and make a comfortable nest of blankets on the couch, eat a bunch of junk food, and watch a show. Just let my mind switch off.

I sigh, shoulders drooping. I have afternoon classes though, and I have to check in with Lexi. That isn't a chore. My brows draw down and an unexpected feeling of helplessness rushes over me, making my eyes water. There's been so much going on. Too much. My shoulders start to tremble, my chest constricting as it all becomes too much. Before I can descend into a full breakdown in front of everyone, Corin has me scooped up in his arms and his long strides are removing us from the situation altogether. So when the first tear slips free, I bury my face into his chest and for the first time in forever, I don't hold back or try to force the emotion away, just let it roll through me. Crying silently as he takes us away from there. The only positive is that I didn't pass out this time, thank the Goddess.



Corin walks through what used to be Lexi and I's dorm with ease, seeming completely comfortable with where everything is, which is a little odd considering he's only been here a few times. My eyes narrow in thought for a moment, before I let it go for now. That can be a problem for tomorrow Nessa, today Nessa just wants to curl up in a ball and relax.

I've cried myself out, and am a little spacy so I'm not fully paying attention to where he's taking me until we're under the fluorescent lights of my bathroom where he sets me on the counter. I blink at him, cocking my head to the side, my nose crinkled. Before I have a chance to ask though, he holds up his index finger and gently presses it to my lips in a gesture for me to shush. I huff, but do as he asks.

The Mountain Man turns so he's facing my shower and holds out a hand to it, muttering under his breath. Soft waves of his magic roll off of him, making my skin tingle as he utters the spell and I sit up straighter. After a moment, my shower shimmers, before disappearing completely, a porcelain bathtub with a rain shower head above it, taking its place.

"Wow," I whisper. My skin tingles for a whole new reason and a pulse starts between my thighs as Corin fiddles with the taps. *Taking care of me.* I swallow hard, and my eyes water, again. *Goddess, Nessa, get yourself together.* I blink the tears away. *One cry-fest is enough for one day, thank you very much.* When the bath is three quarters full, Corin dips his hand in and the water explodes into a kaleidoscope of colour, much like the eyes of the man beside me. The last thing he does is magic half a dozen lit candles around the room and flick off the light switch. I bite the inside of my cheek, heart pounding.

I slide off the counter and shuffle to Corin's side, happy energy bursting through me. Launching at him, my arms wrapping around his waist, face smooshed into his ribs. I suck in a lungful of his bonfire scent. "Thank you."

I dance away before he really has a chance to react and when I meet his eyes I find him staring at me dazedly. Blinking rapidly, he turns on his heel and practically runs to the door, almost tripping as he ducks out. “Take your time, I’ll be out here.” His head pops back in the doorway, gaze finding mine. “If that’s okay with you, I mean?” he asks and I nod, something in my gut unclenching with the knowledge that I’m not going to be all alone here in the dorm. He ducks out, closing the door behind him and I shrug off my clothes.

I love Unicorn, but it’s just not the same as having another person living with you or spending downtime with you.

Shaking off my somewhat sombre thoughts, I dip a toe into the rainbow liquid and am pleasantly surprised to find it’s the perfect temperature. I sink into the bath with a sigh, all the tension in my body draining away and I let my head fall back against the headrest—yeah this bath has a head rest, Corin is a bloody god.

With a groan, I doze, letting my random daydreams flow through my head.



When I emerge from my bedroom, my head is clearer and my muscles more relaxed. I hightail it to my bedroom wrapped in a towel to get dressed and double check that none of Ethan’s presents are on display. I’ve sent off the body parts he left for me, but still have all the other stuff with me, plus the

photographs I took of the hands and legs once I got them back to my dorm. As much as I want to fully trust these guys, it's hard and I can handle it on my own. If they ask, I won't lie, but I'm not going to bring it up if I can help it.

Returning fully dressed, I spy Corin in the kitchen and my eyebrows rise when I take in his position at the stove. He's got a whole collection of ingredients strewn over the countertops and I tiptoe closer to peer over his shoulder. It's enough stuff for the makings of a delicious brunch-ish type meal and my stomach gurgles in excitement. Corin lets out a chuckle and I smile, stepping back from him.

I clear my throat. "Thank you for this." My voice comes out weak and thready, and I cringe at the weakness. Corin, the fucking saint that he is, doesn't draw attention to it. He turns around and leans back against the bench, keeping an eye on the stuff he's just thrown into a pan.

"So I had an idea, but it's up to you whether you want to do it or not..." he trails off and my eyes snap away from the food to examine his face. He's watching me intently, a calm presence in the room.

"Yeah?" I prompt.

"I was thinking you could call up Lexi and I could message the guys and we could all hang out here for the afternoon. Watch a movie and just relax. Forget about all the shit that's been going on, for a bit." He turns around again and fiddles with the stove for a moment as I let his words sink in.

That sounds freaking amazing. Fun, relaxing and no expectations. Now for me to coax Lexi into coming. Fingers crossed she's up for it. When Corin glances at me over his shoulder I realise that I haven't answered him out loud. I laugh under my breath. Goddess, I can be a dumbass sometimes. "That sounds great. I'll go call Lexi now." He gives me a small smile before refocusing on the food.

I duck into my room and dial Lexi, fidgeting while I wait for her to pick up. I hope she's up for this. That familiar guilt rises in my gut, but I shove it away. Now isn't the time. *No, we're going to have a good afternoon and relax, not stress out.*

Just when I'm sure she isn't going to answer, her voice comes through the line. "Hello?"

My shoulders relax and I flop down onto my bed. "Hey, how are you going?"

Lexi lets out a breathy laugh, and it's such a familiar sound that I can mentally picture her wiping a hand over her face while she picks through all the stressful shit that's going on in her head. "Everything is good here, so what's up?"

My brows draw down as her words ring false, but I don't press her. "I was wondering if you'd like to come over and watch a movie here this afternoon? The guys are coming over too, well if they're all free." I scratch my head, squirming a little. It's never been awkward with Lexi before, but since she was taken I feel like I have to walk on eggshells around her or she's going to blow up at me for what happened. Logically I realise that it's unlikely to happen, but that anxious voice in

the back of my head doesn't care about logic. It has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with me and my guilt. I swallow hard, jumping back to the present when she speaks.

“Sure, sounds great. I need to get out of the house, I'm starting to get claustrophobic.” A relieved breath falls from my lips, and I smile.

I finish up the call with her and head back out to the lounge room. I plop down on the couch, and groan when the smell hits me. Turning around, I peak over the back of the couch to watch Corin. “Goddess, that smells amazing.”

“It's almost ready.”

I go to get up, but he growls and I freeze in place, my skin heating instantly. It cuts off and Corin winces, glancing at me sheepishly. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

I don't respond, once again confused by my body's reaction to him. Someone growled at me, so let's get all hot and bothered, because that makes complete sense—not. I try to shake it off, and I stay seated as Corin makes his way around the kitchen, filling a plate with a mixture of everything. A cheese toastie, a hashbrown, some pancakes and other delicious things. My stomach lets out another rumble and my mouth waters.

When the plate is practically overflowing with food, Corin sets it down on the coffee table in front of me, setting a coffee beside it as well. My eyes narrow on him and his smile widens. “Cappuccino, three sugars, lactose free milk.” Butterflies erupt in my stomach and I tear my eyes from

Corin's. *Settle the fuck down*, I think, chastising my stomach, but it doesn't help. Goddess, I'm like a pre-teen with my first crush.

"Thank you," I mumble, and that feeling of being pampered only increases when Corin sets down all manner of spreads on the table in front of me for my pancakes. It's practically singing to something inside me, and I swallow hard, unsure how to deal with it.

I wait till he's sitting down with his own plate of food before I dig into mine and moan. Damn, it tastes even better than it smells.

"You need to buy a fucking restaurant. This is amazing. I can't believe I thought the takeout you got was good, it's nothing compared to this," I say between mouthfuls. When Corin doesn't respond, I glance up at him and find him staring at me, his cheeks flushed red, an expression I can't decipher on his face. Before I have a chance to try though, he ducks his head, letting his hair fall to cover his face.

A sound of discontent nearly slips from my lips, at him hiding from me, but I choke it back. *What the actual hell is going on with me?* It's like there's a side inside of me that's just starting to wake up, and it's completely foreign to me. I bite the inside of my cheek and pull myself together. It'll work out. It has to. And at least I'm not alone. I glance over at Corin through my lashes, while Lexi and the other guys' faces flash through my head. Yeah, I'm definitely not alone. My dads too,

not to mention my familiar. I'll get through whatever this is,
and my power flare-ups. It'll all be fine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nessa

When there's a knock on the door I'm curled up in a corner of the couch, wrapped in a velvety blanket and surrounded by a barrier of pillows. Belly full, relaxed and pampered. My eyes slide to Corin as he gets up from his place beside me to answer the door. Unicorn chirps from where she's snuggled in my lap and I don't even try to get up to see who is here. Corin has successfully pampered me into a coma of contentment. Hell, I've lost count of how many times I've had to force away the urge to purr—something I've *never* wanted to do for someone before. Well not before I came to the academy, anyways.

When Dylan's clean laundry and old books scent reaches me, a shiver rolls down my spine. These men are going to kill me. His low voice reaches my ears as he speaks quietly with Corin before stepping into my dorm. When I make eye contact with Dylan, memories of what we did flash through my head and my eyes go half-lidded. As though he knows exactly what I'm thinking about, a flush creeps onto his cheeks and his blue eyes dart from mine. I settle back into my comfy corner, shuffling the blankets around to make a little room for the grumpy part-vampire supe. Unicorn nuzzles at my hand before getting to her feet with a yawn. I stroke a hand down her back and she chitters before flying to the window. I give her a smile. She's been cooped up with me since we came back to my dorm earlier after my runes assignment, so I can understand why she'd want to stretch her wings. She launches

out the window, circling back around once before heading for the forest and my attention returns to Dylan.

He steps closer, cautiously, eyeing my pile of blankets with an unreadable expression on his face. After what seems to be a moment of internal deliberation he goes to walk past me to sit on one of the other couches but my hand snaps out, fingers clamping around his wrist. It's not a conscious movement and my brows draw down as I eye my hand like it's an alien. My lips part, ready to make up some explanation for my odd behaviour, but when I look up at Dylan's expression I find him watching me, pupils dilated. My head cocks to the side as I take in the way his chest is rising and falling sharply. Experimentally I tug on his arm and he comes closer without protest. Giving in to me immediately.

I swallow hard, a shudder rolling through me at the control he's offering. Reaching out, I grab his shirt with my other hand and pull him down so he's leaning over me, our faces now only inches apart. My eyes dart down to his lips and that is all the permission he needs.

His hand comes up to cup my nape, collaring me with his long fingers. He angles my head as he closes the space between us, his lips meeting mine. I melt into him, my hands sliding to his chest to grip his shirt as he kisses me. It's deep and slow, his lips soft against mine before he pulls back a little, placing a sharp nip to my lower lip before he backs away fully. I meet his eyes, body flushed with arousal and a whine falls from my lips. I mentally flinch away from the sound, but that new, untapped side of me is at the forefront of my mind

right now. And she has no problem making sounds like that. The normal me, though, wants to growl in frustration. It's like having two sides of me fighting a battle for supremacy in my brain.

The noise does something to Dylan though—he's in my space instantly, only pausing briefly to get my permission before reaching for me. All it takes is half a nod, then I'm scooped up in his arms and settled onto his lap as he joins me in my pile of blankets. Having his arms caging me has a part of me I didn't even realise was tense, relaxing. His clean laundry and old books scent perfumes the air around us, mingling with mine. Content, I settle into him happily. *I'm never washing these blankets again.* The thought rolls through my head, prompted by that new side of me as I bring the tip of some of the fabric around us to my nose and inhale. *Damn.* I have to suppress a moan. *These guys' scents just do something to me.* It's then that I realise Corin's bonfire scent is swirling through the room too.

My head snaps up and my gaze clashes with Corin's and I freeze, eyes going wide and an apology on my tongue. *He just saw me acting like a complete weirdo aaand kiss Dylan. Awkward.* I shrink back a little, unsure how to react to the knowledge that he just watched the display of obvious affection I unintentionally showed Dylan in front of him.

It's like I'm playing a game of hide and seek with my issues, just waiting for one to jump out and scare these guys away from me. Just like Dylan though, Corin doesn't seem put

off by my fascination with their scents at all, merely curious and if I'm not mistaken, a little aroused.

I cock my head to the side, brows drawing down. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with that reaction. Before I have a chance to decide whether I'm going to question them about it or not, there is another knock at the door.

Corin opens it and I crane my neck over Dylan's shoulder to see who it is. Lexi and Oscar stand in the doorway, somewhat awkwardly before Corin welcomes them in. When Lexi's eyes land on me, her steps falter, but she sends me a small smile before making her way over to the couch opposite the one I'm on. "Hi."

Though her voice is quiet she doesn't seem to be nervous, and her grey skin has a healthy silver sheen to it, gold scales shining prettily. She's looking a hundred times better than she was at the start of the term. It's a huge relief and one of the many things weighing down my shoulders vanishes. I relax back into Dylan's chest, a soft smile on my lips.

Oscar moves into the room as well, plopping down on the floor by Dylan's legs, leaning against the couch and resting his head against a cushion that's next to my thigh. It has a waft of his peppermint and dark chocolate scent hitting me, and it's mingling with Dylan's creating a calming effect. Corin's the last to be seated and he settles in on the couch opposite Lexi's, sprawling out. Surrounded by my favourite people, I'm all ready to watch a movie from the human realm. Grabbing the remote, I choose a comedy that looks new and sit back to

enjoy the show. The first thirty or so minutes go by without incident, with us making comments here and there and laughing, but then it devolves into utter chaos.

I snort chuckle as the main actor—with chronically bad luck—goes sprawling across a shop aisle after tripping over a puddle of some questionable liquid. Popcorn in hand—thanks to Corin—Lex boos at the screen, launching a piece at it.

“Too predictable,” she complains and I mock scowl.

“Hey, what are you talking about, my choice of movie is amazing.”

It’s her turn to snort now. Poking her tongue out at me, she rolls her eyes playfully and I grin. The movie draws both of our attention again when a high pitched shriek comes from her. The dumb-ass actress decided to grab a shelf and proceeded to pull half the shelf down on top of herself. Okay maybe Lex has a point. But I also want to be right so I laugh and pretend like this is the funniest shit I’ve ever seen, then gesture to the screen as if to say “*see this is hilarious.*”

The guys’ eyes ping-pong between us and as one we grin. “Oh it is *so* on,” I mutter, eyes narrowed. Scooping up a giant handful of buttery popcorn, I shove a few pieces in my mouth before launching the rest at Lexi’s face. A shocked laugh bursts from her as they rain down on her head and a few ping off her clothes. I may have imbued just a teensy weensy bit of magic in them to assure they stayed on the proper projectile.

Grabbing my bowl, I dive for cover behind my couch before Lex has a chance to recover from her shock, cackling all the

while. *I'm going to totally kick her ass.* It's only a few moments before clothing rustles and quick footsteps tap behind me. Startled, I tilt my head back and find a grinning Oscar leaning over the couch, his bowl held over my head already half-tipped. "Gotcha."

Oh shit. My eyes widen and I go to scramble back, but it's too late. I yelp as the popcorn rains down on me, the buttery beads sticking to my clothing and hair, its buttery scent surrounding me. *Dammit.* Determination rolls through me and I grab my bowl quickly and army crawl with it towards the couch Corin was on. *Fingers crossed he's either moved or on my side.* When I reach it, I'm pleasantly surprised to find it's empty and set up shop behind it. Using a simple duplication rune, I amass as much popcorn as I can, trying to think of strategies that don't involve magic, to kick their asses. Other than the tiny nudge I used my magic for before, and the duplication rune which takes little to no magic, I'm not willing to risk using it when we're just mucking about. As I work, I keep an eye on Lexi, Corin and Oscar, all of which are perched half behind her couch talking strategy. *Bastards ganged up on me.* So when there's a scuff behind me, I whirl around, a handful of popcorn at the ready.

Dylan's perched behind my back, hands raised in a show of good faith. "What are you doing here?" I whisper, eyes narrowed questioningly. Is he playing double agent?

"I want to be on your team, silly."

A little growl rumbles in the back of my throat, trying to appear menacing while I scan his body as though it'll tell me if he's actually on my team or not. "Are you lying to me?"

His eyes light up, the corner of his mouth kicking up. "Do you think I'd tell you if I were?"

I shake my head and flop back a little. "No, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and trust you for now. So this is the game plan..." I say, then fill him in.



With Dylan's help, our tiny, but strong team is ready for battle in under five minutes and I have to purse my lips to keep from laughing whenever our plan pops into my head. It's absolute gold.

We begin our attack with me diving over the couch and pretending to fall on my face—yeah, not my best moment, but we're working with what we have. Of course, both Corin and Oscar jump to their feet revealing their hiding place. *Bingo*. Cackling, I roll over and pull up my shirt revealing a DIY pouch I tied together to hold a bunch of popcorn and start launching handfuls at them. Simultaneously, Dylan casts a spell that sends roughly two bathtubs worth of the fluffy kernels raining over the three of them, sending Lexi diving out from behind their couch barracks spluttering. Oscar and Corin follow suit, wiping their eyes and mouths, trying to get out of the storm of buttery goodness.

Dylan walks to my side, a wide grin stretching his lips as he joins me in watching the chaos. There is now a literal, nearly knee deep, pile of popcorn surrounding their couch and Oscar flops to the floor, laughing when he catches sight of it. Waving his hand, Dylan cuts off the popcorn rain and Lexi and Corin start laughing too. I move to her side, nudging her shoulder with mine playfully and she throws me a look, smiling as she wipes her eyes, the laughter making her eyes water.

I flop on the couch, breathless and Lex follows me down. Her cheeks are rosy as she sucks in deep breaths and I'm not quite sure what comes over me but I launch at her, wrapping her up in a bear hug. She lets out a short squeak before returning the embrace and I rest my chin on her head, content to snuggle for a little while. The guys have yet to see this side of me, but I'm too content to fret over what they think right now.

I may be strong, confident and sarcastic ninety percent of the time, but when I'm at home and around people I trust and care about, I tend to turn into a big teddy bear. Lex pets my arm in a soothing motion and I relax even further. She's used to me displaying my affection like this so she doesn't even question it. My gaze settles on a loose strand of fabric sticking out of the couch cushion as my focus drifts, throat constricting. *Goddess, I've missed her.* My first term was so hectic, and then since the incident with *Ethan*, she's chosen to stay close to her mates and new home with them on campus. I swallow past the lump in my throat and hold her tighter for a second before pulling back and flopping down beside her, leg

thrown over hers. The contact is soothing after being away from her for so long.

Yep, I really needed this. My eyes dart to Corin who is already watching me. *Thank you*, I say in my head, shoving the thought at him as hard as I can, to try and convey what I'm thinking with my expression. He doesn't have quite the reaction I was expecting though. His entire body jolts, eyes widening as he stares at me, cocking his head to the side and shaking it back and forth. *What the hell?* I lean forwards in my seat, feet landing on the floor with a greasy crunch. Pausing, I wrinkle my nose as I peer down at them. Squished popcorn is wedged between my toenails and the soles are slick with cold butter.

The aftermath of a popcorn war definitely isn't as fun as the battle. Swallowing a laugh at the chaos of the room, my eyes return to Corin to check on him, but he shakes his head and mouths the word *later*. Nodding, I sit back, pursing my lips. "So, uh, did we have a clean-up plan in mind or am I just living in a popcorn land for the foreseeable future?" I say conversationally. I mean, I'm the one who started the food fight, but the cleaning spells and runes I know, clean *everything*. So they're out of the question, unless I'm prepared to ask the guys to roll around on my blanket nest. Hmm, or my bed. Yeah, bed sounds even better. I don't realise a quiet purr has started rumbling from my chest until Lexi elbows me in the tit, successfully cutting the sound off.

"Hey," I mutter, rubbing it. "That was uncalled for." I land a quick open palmed slap to her thigh and she shrieks, jumping

away from me with a laugh. Shaking my head I get to my feet, hands reaching for the ceiling as I stretch.

“So, cleaning plan...”

The guys all share a look then Corin takes the lead, muttering something, before a vibrant purple rune appears in the middle of the room and all the popcorn vanishes, along with its mess. Like it was never there to begin with. Trying to be inconspicuous, I dive into my nest on the couch and take a quick whiff before straightening and acting all prim and proper. Oh my gods, it still smells like Dylan. My smile kicks up a notch and I settle in. “Thank you. So, another movie?”

Lexi snorts, but calls for a toilet break and Corin says he’s going to put together some more snacks. My bottomless pit of a stomach rumbles in agreement. I grab the TV remote and back out of the comedy we were watching. I didn’t even notice it playing as background noise, so definitely time to pick another movie.

Flicking through the multiple choices, I settle on an action flick that has good reviews, then wait for the guys and Lexi to come back. Oscar tries to settle back on the floor at my feet but I playfully push him towards Corin. “Nope you guys are traitors, you ditched me.” I grin, blowing him a kiss as he pouts. Dylan passes me and I once again tug him into my nest where he scoops me up into his lap again. Settling back against his chest, I steal a cracker, scooping it in some dip when Corin sets a tray down on the coffee table in front of me. Shoving it in my mouth, I give him a big thumbs up and he

smiles, setting another tray down in front of Lexi. She curls up all comfy, and grabs a chunk of cheese from the platter in front of her, thanking Corin. I thank him as well before turning to the TV again. Action movie time. When looking through the films, I intentionally checked the main actors to find some eye candy. The slow motion, torn shirt, walking away from an explosion scene is half the reason I like action flicks.

Shaking off my thoughts, I press play on the movie. When the opening scene rolls, a wicked grin slants my lips as I take in the main male character. *So fricking hot.* I share a look with Lex and she laughs quietly, shaking her head at me. Leaning back, I shuffle a little on Dylan's lap and his thumb strokes my knee. Sucking in a breath, my awareness zones in on that one touch.

Dylan's hand shifts again, his fingers trailing from my knee to my upper thigh, before pausing there to curl around it. I jump when he brushes the sensitive skin, so close to my core. It has need curling through my lower stomach.

I hold my breath, cheeks flushed with anticipation, but thirty seconds go by and he doesn't move. A tiny disappointed groan falls from my lips, the sound covered by an explosion on screen. The heat swirling through me turns into an unfulfilled ache. Accepting defeat—and that it's probably a good thing I'm not getting an orgasm right now, due to the fact that my friend is sitting only a few feet away—I slump a little and refocus on the TV. The broad shouldered main character is currently sprinting through busy city streets as an armoured gunman chases him down. I cock my head to the side as I

study the man. *Hmm, those muscles have got nothing on what I've seen through Corin's clothing.* True to his nickname—Mountain Man .

I'm still busy comparing those two mental images when Dylan's hand moves, fingers dipping down slightly to stroke the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. My thighs clamp together, and a pulse starts in my core. Forcing myself to relax, I let out a shaky breath. Once again I tense in anticipation, focused completely on that touch. On the way his fingertips trace featherlight circles, pointed fingernails making goosebumps prickle my skin. But after a minute of teasing his hand stills.

This time when I growl, it's audible and everyone turns to look at me. I don't bother explaining, just cross my arms and stare at the TV until they resume watching the show. *At this rate, I'm going to need to go to the bathroom and finish myself off.* The arousal coursing through me has my skin ultra sensitive. The couch's fabric is rough against my arms and the back of my thighs. A faint sheen of sweat rests on my hairline and I dig my fingernails into Dylan's thighs. His old book scent teases me, and irritation swarms me. I tense, ready to stand, but Dylan's other hand snakes around my thigh, forcing me to stay on his lap. My lips draw back in a snarl and I toss my head back to see his expression, only to pause when his lips press to the ticklish spot beneath my ear. I stay frozen, neck bared to him, nails digging into his thighs as I wait for him to speak, my arousal like little knives skating over my skin.

The man has the nerve to tut at me like I'm a misbehaving child, and a growl rumbles in my chest, but his words have me pausing. "I really thought you'd last longer. A little teasing and you're running away?"

My body goes limp at the seductive purr his voice melds into, but my head stays frustrated at the bastard. I've never been patient and I'm not starting now. I mutter as much to him and he chuckles under his breath.

"Hold out until Lexi's gone and I'll reward you, or I can let you go now...?"

"Fine," I say, just to prove how stubborn I can be, despite my lack of patience. "I'll stay." Why use my fingers to get an unsatisfying orgasm, when I can hold out and get at least one, great orgasm?



An hour and a half later and I'm seriously regretting my decision. I wiggle against Dylan's leg, his thigh trapped between mine as I try to be inconspicuous about my movements. *Five more minutes, then this hell will be over.* I'm panting, and my tongue darts out to wet my dry lips. Being edged for an hour and a half will do that to a person. Dylan graduated from stroking my thigh to teasing my pussy. Stroking my bundle of nerves through my pants until I'm on the cusp of coming, then pulling away.

I shoved his hand away minutes ago. *I'm done. I can't hold out any longer.* I try to keep my grinding from being obvious as I glance at Lexi out of the corner of my eye. It's a good thing the couch she's on puts her off to the right but still in front of us, so unless she turns on her side, she can't see what's going on. I have no idea how she hasn't noticed my scent though. It's thick and cloying around Dylan and I, his clean laundry and old books scent intermingling with my sweet scent. My eyes dart between Oscar and Corin to see if they've noticed and I suck in a quick breath when I find them both watching us. Corin's nostrils are flared, and both their pupils are huge, lust burning in their eyes. Oddly-enough their attention doesn't bother me, just drives my arousal to new heights.

With a groan I roll my hips again, my clit hitting his thigh in a way that makes me gasp. Dylan promptly grabs me by the nape and tugs me back so I'm resting against his chest, stopping the friction I was getting from his thigh. A high pitched but quiet whine falls from my lips. This graduated from frustrating to painful about half an hour ago, my core empty and stomach aching with unfulfilled arousal. At the sound Dylan's grip tightens and all of the sudden I'm on the move again. He releases my throat to grab my waist, hauling me back so I'm perched more comfortably on his lap before he shifts my legs so they're on either side of his thighs, splayed open. I freeze, heart hammering, body too hot. With the way we're now positioned, the sides of my blanket nest hide my

lower half from view, so when Dylan spreads his thighs, baring my legs wide open, I relax into him.

The fact that my body is mostly hidden from view doesn't seem to matter to the guys though, they watch on, bodies subtly leaning in my direction. Oscar's lips part, tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip and I copy the movement. Corin's sucking in deep breaths of my scent, jaw clenched as he restrains himself.

My attention is drawn back to Dylan when he dips his hand into my leggings and under my panties, zeroing in on my clit. My hips cant up at the first unobstructed brush of his fingers and a low moan falls from my lips. It has both Oscar and Corin's scents flaring, the room filling with a peppermint, chocolate and bonfire cloud that I breathe in eagerly. Dylan's fingers halt again, and my fists clench, ready to tell him off when his lips touch my ear. "You've been very good, Nessa. I'm going to make you come, but you need to keep quiet alright? You don't want Lexi to hear you, do you?"

Swallowing hard, I shake my head and agree quickly. "I—I'll be quiet. Please, it hurts," I whine, writhing in place, a bead of sweat rolling down my spine. I can *feel* how wet I am. I'm too far gone to really care that Lexi's in the room or that the other guys are too. Their hot gazes fade into the background as my focus condenses, until only Dylan is all I can feel.

Dylan's free hand returns to my throat, his thumb stroking the skin. "Shh, Love. I'm going to help you."

A mewl falls from my lips when his hand starts to move, fingers dipping down to slide through my slick before circling my clit. I'm so amped up that my thighs are trembling, body tense and on the cusp of falling over that cliff in under a minute. My toes curl, and I'm ready to fucking beg. "Please," I whimper. *So fucking close.*

"I've got you, Love." Dylan's fingers speed up, his other hand shifting to cover my mouth before he dips two fingers into my core curling them to hit my G-spot, while grinding his palm against my clit and I detonate. My teeth clamp down hard on his palm, the sweet copper taste of his blood filling my mouth as I orgasm. I grind against his hand trying to wring out every ounce of pleasure I can, my body shaking with the pleasure of *finally* getting my release. His movements slow, as the orgasm winds down and I go limp in his arms, body still trembling slightly. My mind too hazy to register much, or to panic over the fact that I just bit a vampire.

Breathing hard, I let my head flop back, lolling against his shoulder as he murmurs sweet words to me. Kissing up my neck, and nuzzling me intermittently. He lets his hand fall away from my mouth but my hands snap up, clutching his wrist as I lick his hand clean. He tenses under me for a moment before relaxing again, but I'm too lost in the urge to taste his blood again to fully register his reaction. That rich taste of his blood hits my tongue once more and I groan, not stopping until his hand is clean, and... *healed?* My brows furrow and I draw back, eyes intent on his palm. *What the hell?* In fact, what the heck was that whole drinking blood

business? It was so *good*. My tongue darts out to swipe over my lower lip, making sure to catch any drops that are painting my mouth.

My breathing speeds up as I draw back from Dylan, a new hunger springing up in my stomach. It has my stomach cramping painfully as an angry yowl comes from it. *What the actual hell*. I swallow hard again, panting, but this time with confusion as to what in this realm is happening to me. My jaw aches and I shake my head, hands pressing to my ears as new sounds assault me. Looking up, my eyes find Dylan's and he jerks to his feet, face pinched with worry and panic. *Great, he has no idea what's happening either*. I groan and snarl, backing up even more as my magic reacts, swirling through me.

The others seem to realise something's wrong and jump to their feet, Lexi included. Suddenly a strange sensation fills my mouth before every odd sensation in my body stops. Everything except that new hunger.

Swallowing again, I bring my tongue up to press against my canines, already knowing what I'm going to find. *Fangs*. I have fucking *fangs*. *Goddess*, as if I don't have enough problems, let's add another supernatural species and their powers to my body. It's just so unexpected, vampires can be both born and made. I know for a fact that I haven't been turned, because I definitely haven't been bitten, or partially drained of my blood then injected with a vampire's venom. That would have knocked me out for at least two days where I'd basically be dead, and would stay dead unless the venom

takes and I would then be a made vampire. So the only possibility is that this is something that's only just awakening in me. The question is *why*? And what else do my mystery genetics have in store for me? I sit back with a huff, trying to blot out that hunger and ignore the way my eyes keep drifting to Dylan's throat. The vein throbbing in his nec—*no Nessa. Behave.*

"I'm okay," I croak. Reaching up to scratch my temple, I cringe a little when I find my nails have lengthened and sharpened to points as well. I have nothing against vampires, or part vampires, but I really didn't need another surprise like this. Sighing, I get to my feet. I curl my fingers slightly to hide my big-ass nails, trying to hide my new vampire characteristics for now. I need a chance to absorb this on my own before I tell them about it. Relaxation time, over. Exhaustion weighs down my eyelids, but I force a close-mouthed grin, not meeting anyones eyes again. I need time to figure this out on my own. Plus I can practically feel all the guys' eyes drilling into me. I can't deal with a bunch of questions right now.

"Thank you for this afternoon, it was really fun. I'm suddenly not feeling the best, sorry. So we're going to have to finish this another day." The guys step closer to me, faces all painted with concern, but I step back and shake my head, eyes focused on the floor. "Please, I need to speak with Lexi."

I meet Dylan's eyes and give him a tiny, but genuine smile. I also try to convey my apology for asking him to leave right after what we just did, but I know that if I don't get some

space, I'm going to lash out at the wrong person. And I don't want that. Running a hand through my hair, I walk them to the door. Awkwardly, I squeeze Dylan's hand when he passes me, and he smiles, letting me know he's not upset. It makes my shoulders relax. Oscar gives me a gentle look and follows him, but Corin pauses. Leaning in he says quietly, "We need to talk tomorrow about what happened in the lounge room. I *heard* you."

My brows furrow in confusion at his words, but I nod and agree to speak with him. I also notice the way he sucks in a deep breath, scenting me before he steps away from me. It has my cheeks flushing despite knowing that he literally watched Dylan get me off minutes ago. He leaves, giving me a tiny smile on his way out.

I suck in a full breath for the first time in the last ten minutes when they've all left. Then I let my shields drop, my shoulders curling forwards as I let my head hang forwards. Goddess give me fucking strength. A small hand comes to rest on my shoulders and I break down, eyes welling up as I wrap my arms around Lexi. Shame rolls through me for losing it over something so simple, but this means everything's changed, *again*.

Again everything is up in the air. I *hate* feeling out of control like this. It's driving me insane and there is no way to fix it. *How the hell can I fix it when it's my own body betraying me?* I let out a growl and force myself to stop with the pity party. I suck in Lexi's comforting scent, and hug her tighter. Gods, I'm a bad friend. I pull back a little and meet her eyes,

scanning her expression. “How are you going?” I ask, brows drawn down. Anything is easier than discussing my own problems, so I’m happy to focus on her instead.

My bestie won’t put up with that though. Her eyebrows practically touch her hairline and some of that spunk that’s been missing recently, radiates from her expression. “Yeah, no. We’re not doing that, Nessa. You’re going to get your cute butt in that bathroom, wash your face, take a breath then sit down with me and we’re going to have a long chat. I’ll put the kettle on. Now get,” she says, giving me a little nudge towards said bathroom. Laughing a little, I rub my eyes and do as she says, shaking my head as I go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nessa

I settle on the couch in my blanket nest, curling my legs beneath me as I blow on my hot chocolate. Sometimes situations call for something more sweet than coffee. It reminds me of morning's with my dads' when I was younger. Smiling softly, I let out a breath.

That is until a stern-faced Lexi pushes the coffee table back half a foot, before sitting on it. She sips her hot chocolate as she watches me, waiting me out. It doesn't take long. "What?" I ask, eyes focused on my cup.

"You know what. I know it's partially my fault I'm so out of the loop, but I'm doing a lot better now and am ready to be filled in. When did you get so close with the guys?" Her stern facade drops and she simply stares at me, curiosity gleaming in her eyes.

"What are you talki—" I try to deny, but she cuts me off with a quirked eyebrow. "Fine, I've been getting to know them more." It's vague and I can tell she wants more information.

"Oh, I see. So that's all you're going to give me when Dylan just finger—"

"Oh Gods, stop," I squeak, cutting her off while simultaneously almost spilling my hot chocolate all over myself as I throw my hands up, cheeks burning. I had no idea she knew what was happening. Groaning, I set my cup down

so I can hide my face but she just laughs, shoving it back into my hands.

“Don’t stress about it, honestly. I remember those early days with my mates.” Lexi’s eyes turn far away for a second, a smile playing on her lips before she refocuses on me. “So, fill me in on what’s got you so out of sorts. I don’t think I have ever seen you like this, Nessa. What is going on?”

Swallowing hard, I focus on my drink again, taking a sip. “Everything is just so crazy at the moment. My magic has never been normal, but now that it’s unlocked, it’s been going a little haywire and everytime I think I have a solid grasp on it, it changes and then I’m back to square one. It is one hit after another and I’m losing the battle to keep it together,” I confess, hanging my head with guilt. I couldn’t even kill or capture Ethan. I still haven’t been able to and it’s been weeks since the attack with Lexi. Him taking a break from his murder spree—well taking a break from killing anyone on campus—has my freaking anxiety dancing on a tightrope and the control I usually have over my emotions slipping. It doesn’t help that he’s been leaving me gifts. The hair, the photos and severed body parts stuff. With those ‘gifts’ he’s been leaving me, unless he has a deep freezer somewhere full of questionable items, he must be able to leave the Academy grounds to find his victims. Even with my decent list of contacts it’s hard to keep track of everyone who goes missing or is killed. The Supernatural Realm is a harsh place. I’m antsy as hell about it all. I don’t tell her all of that though, because no matter how

well she's doing, I don't want to bring that up for her. To shove my failure in her face. *She could have died.*

Pushing the thoughts away, I paste on a smile and look at her. "But I'm fine. So back to you?"

Snorting, she shakes her head. "No way."

I growl, setting my half empty cup down on the table beside her. "What else do you want me to say? That I'm slowly going insane because of everything? That being unable to catch or even locate Ethan makes me feel like I'm failing you? That I'm terrified that if these guys find out everything, they're going to leave me? Well then, fine. All of that and a hundred thousand other little things." I thread my fingers through my hair, tugging on it as my wild eyes fly around the room before meeting Lexi's. "You know it feels good when I draw someone's worst fear out? That I crave it. It gives me a boost of energy that's indescribable and I'm trying my hardest not to feel like a freak because of that. It's like I feed off of their terror and pain. I'm not equipped to handle how that makes me feel." I swallow roughly, my voice lowering to a croak. "And now I'm craving blood as well. My stomach is aching with it. Dylan's blood was sweet and appealing. I wanted to take more, *so badly*. Now I have these," I say, ramping up again as I flash my fangs at her and show her my sharp nails again, my hands visibly trembling.

Her eyes grow wide, eyebrows drawing down as she watches me lose my shit, but she doesn't flinch at my new extra long claws and fangs. She leans forward, concern

practically radiating from her pores. I can tell that she just wants to wrap me up in a hug, pat me on the head and solve all of my problems, but life doesn't work like that. Life sucks.

That exhaustion from earlier bare's down on my shoulders after getting it off my chest, and I can no longer meet her eyes. Unicorn flies in through the window and lands in my lap, nuzzling her nose into my stomach. I instantly start stroking her back, her scales smooth against my palm while I count the movements as I go.

Once again, hands brace my shoulders and I look up to meet Lexi's eyes. "No matter what happens, you have me. I can't speak for the guys and I'm not even going to pretend that you've told me everything that's going on, or how far your reach goes into shady dealings." I look away for a moment, guilt rolling through me again, but she grabs my chin and forces me to look at her again. "Don't do that, shithead. I'm not daft; you keep me out of it to protect me." She rolls her eyes and I laugh softly. Her face turns serious again. "Like I said, I can't speak for the guys, but I'm going to be here for you whether they stick around or not. I could die tomorrow and you'd still be stuck with me cause I'd haunt your ass," she says with a smirk. "Don't forget your dads, they would literally walk through hell for you. You are not alone, you're stuck with me. And don't you dare try to keep me out of the loop when it comes to Ethan and the Drákon group. It's personal for me now, and I want to catch that bastard just as much, if not more than you do. I have a feeling the two are connected."

I nod and let determination steal through me. I'm not alone. I never will be, if Lex has anything to say about it. I snort again and quip, "I love you Lex, but I really don't need another ghost haunting me." She knows I'm just playing, but she questions me of course so I fill her in on what's been happening with Aurora. I catch her up on nearly everything, but for now I leave out that Ethan has been leaving me 'gifts'. I don't want to stress her out with it after what he did to her. If he ramps up again, or she asks directly then I'll fill her in, but until then I'm going to keep it to myself.

Once I'm finished she gets to her feet, grabbing both of our cups and walking to the sink. Deep in thought, she washes them up and I follow her, ready to hear her input. Unicorn flies to her perch and I smile at her, then return my focus to Lex.

"As you are aware, I'm better with computers than you," she says, her smirk returning as she winks at me. "So I say, you let me stay here for the night, and I sort out your computer. I'll go back through all the recent things I've missed and take a look at that tracker you placed on the head Drákon team member. For now let's put a pin in your new powers and come up with a game plan tomorrow, unless the urge to feed is too much?"

Swallowing, I shake my head even though it's nagging at me. I can handle it. "I'll be fine," I say, voice more confident than I'm actually feeling. I rub at my eyes, limbs heavy and Lexi ushers me towards my room.

“You head to bed and get some sleep. I’ll be fine and I’ll wake you up if I find something.”

Yawning, I nod and leave her be to take a shower. When I crawl into bed I’m out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nessa

I startle awake, throwing myself into a crouch as I scan my surroundings, breathing hard. Though dark, I can make out my dorm room clearly and I groan, flopping back to the mattress. Goddamn new vampire powers. I swear to the Goddess, if I'm suddenly nocturnal now, I'ma kill a bitch. Grumbling under my breath I recheck the room until I'm certain I'm alone.

My face screws up as I try to figure out what woke me up, when a moan comes from the living room and my brain catches up to the scent floating into my room. *Lexi*. I snort, and get up, keeping my footsteps near silent as I throw on some clothes and a pair of comfy boots. The shit forgot to put up a sound and scent barrier. Hell she's lucky that she brought him in through the front door otherwise my barrier would have burned the shit out of him. I shake my head. Guess she couldn't go a night without getting railed by one of her mates. I raise a fist to the sky in silent tribute. You frickin get it girl. Unlike me. Fingers and my vibrator really don't make up for a good fuck. Not that I'd know what a good fuck is like. Scowling again at my lack of good bed partners, I push open my window. Instantly there is a rustling in the tree a few feet from me and I tense, head snapping up as I search for the cause of the movement, only for there to be nothing. Squinting my eyes and putting my newfound talent to good use, I see something move, then a large bat rat launches from a branch, screeching its disgruntlement as it goes.

Snorting to myself, I step up onto the window stoop, and easily jump onto the thick branch only a couple feet from my window. *Hmm.* “This is definitely a security risk even with my barrier,” I murmur as I walk along the thick branch. “Can’t believe I haven’t thought to create a magical blurring enchantment so people can’t watch me from here,” I say, shaking my head at my own stupidity. I add the charm, lost in thought as I climb down the tree, envying those supes with wings, only to freeze. *No, nope, body that was not a signal to give me some sort of wings or other supernatural powers.* Proceeding to give it a very stern mental lecture, I carry on my way.

A walk through the forest should clear my head and give Lexi and her partner ample time to finish up. Too bad Unicorn is already out hunting, we could have explored together. Or we could have gone back to Aurora’s enchanted part of the forest. When I reach the forest my shoulders sag. The overgrown path and looming trees are comforting. I scuff my shoe against the ground as I go, walking until I’m deep in the thick forestry that surrounds the school grounds, trying to get away from my thoughts.

I suck in a breath, the clean night air filling my lungs as I try to centre myself and fail miserably. “Goddess,” I mutter under my breath, exasperation swirling through me.

I came out here to give Lexi space, but also as a distraction, something to keep away my still swirling thoughts of everything that’s stressing me out.

My fingers drum against my clothed thigh and I sigh. Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all. My eyes dart around the area again, the moonlight casting everything in an almost eerie glow. I suppose there is a murderer on the loose, so I probably shouldn't have come here in the middle of the night, but I've never claimed to be a rational supernatural. As though hearing my thoughts, a twig snaps to my left and I whirl around, eyes narrowed, fingers twitching as I search for a possible threat. A mutant squirrel-like creature freezes where it's crouched at the base of a thick tree trunk, its beady red eyes focused on me before it scurries off.

My body relaxes and I shake my head to myself, *Goddess, now I'm jumping at poor defenceless creatures. I'm definitely losing it.* My thundering heart slows a little as I resume my movements, heading further into the forest, despite the little voice in my head that tells me it's not a good idea.

"It's a bit late for an evening stroll, don't you think?" a deep voice calls out casually, shattering the comfortable silence, and I flinch. How the hell did I miss that someone else was out here with me? I must be losing my touch. It's too deep to be Ethan's voice, and I can't sense any magic that would hint at the person manipulating the tone, so that mostly rules out him. I also don't sense any sort of malicious intent from them.

Adrenaline once again rushes through me and my eyes flit around, trying to figure out who the hell just spoke. "I don't know. I believe the forest is quite charming at night," I quip back, somewhat distracted when my eyes don't immediately

land on the culprit. *Where the fuck is he? Or I'm assuming they're a he, by the deep baritone of their voice.*

“Charming. Huh, I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard the Epikíndynos Forest referred to as charming, before. Especially at night. How... *intriguing.*”

As the lilting voice echoes through the trees, I finally find its source. It’s a man, lounging on a tree branch about ten feet above me. His form is bathed in moonlight, one leg swaying leisurely in the air while the other lies stretched out in front of him on the thick branch he’s using as a seat. He shifts something on his lap, but I can’t tell what it is from where I’m standing and those plush lips tip up in a small smile. His dark eyes seem to glow around the edges with an amber tint in the moonlight, the soft light catching on the blond tips of his wavy black hair.

“Really?” I quirk my head to the side, a brow raised. “I can’t possibly imagine why.” The poor forest gets a bad rap, but the creatures I’ve encountered so far haven’t bothered me, so I don’t have the faintest clue what all the hype is about.

“Well,” he drawls. “It could have something to do with the name literally translating to perilous.”

My lips tip up into a smile. “We supes do seem to love our Greek and hidden meanings, don’t we.”

Twinkling dimples wink at me when his lips spread in a lazy grin, and I can’t help but feel my expression echo his. “From what I’ve read, it seems that the older generations tended to be a tad dramatic.”

I squint at him and the reference to the ancients of the realm. They're not spoken about very often, mostly because most supernaturals are superstitious when it comes to them. As if they say a bad word, the supes of old will just appear and smite them. I reckon it's quite amusing. Like an ancient being that has much better things to do, would take the time and effort to do that over a random supernatural's thoughts. That's not to say that the ancients are people to mess around with, they're extremely powerful and really fucking old supernaturals, so it's definitely a little odd for a random student to know. *If* he is a student, but for some reason I'm starting to doubt it though.

His features shutter slightly, eyes narrowing for a beat at something in my expression before his relaxed demeanour returns as though he couldn't have a care in the world.

Tiring of standing still and feeling a cramp bloom in my neck from looking up, I resume my walk. I have no idea if this guy is supposed to be here or not, but so far he hasn't made any bad moves against me, and my instincts aren't going off to say he's a threat, so I let my eyes leave him. There's no point messing up my neck for no reason.

"Sick of me already?" he calls, and I glance back at him, my eyes falling to his toned arms as he stretches them above his head, before sliding something under his arm and getting to his feet in one smooth action. My tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip in a subconscious movement. One that his eyes track, and I force my gaze away from him, instead focusing on the landscape. I idly wonder whereabouts on the Academy

grounds Unicorn is. I know she's around here somewhere, having a fly and probably keeping an eye on me.

Refocusing on the forest in front of me, I answer, "Sick of standing still." Not confirming or denying that he's bothering me. You gotta keep a guy guessing.

My attention is drawn back to the stranger once again when in a surprisingly lithe movement, he leaps off the branch and lands in a one handed crouch a few feet away from me on a boulder. They're prominent in the forest, in all different shapes and sizes, and short, deep, grey ones line the pathways, covered in age-old markings. Probably back from the time when these paths were cared for and well-kept. Now it seems like they've been forgotten.

He easily keeps balance as he steps down onto a boulder that lines the path and keeps pace with me, using them like a balance beam. "So, should I be worried? Usually, a girl walking alone in the woods would be at least a little nervous if a random guy started following them," he asks in an inquisitive tone. My brows furrow and my eyes dart to his. He pauses all of the sudden and leans in closer, his expression serious for once. "Are you a serial killer?"

A surprised laugh bursts from me and his mock-serious expression cracks, a smile breaking through. "If I were, do you think I'd tell you?" I waggle my eyebrows when he pauses as though actually considering it.

He looks me up and down, cocking his head to the side, pursing his lips thoughtfully. His shaggy hair flops forward

with the movement and I have the strangest urge to step into him and run my fingers through it. I shake it off and realise that he's sizing me up and the corner of my lip quirks up.

"I reckon I could take you," he says confidently, then tucks his hands into his pockets, humming under his breath while strolling ahead of me.

I snort quietly. The power of being underestimated is a true skill. We continue to stroll in comfortable silence for a while, and I take subtle peeks at him from the corner of my eye as we do. His tall, yet swimmer-like body leads me to believe that he's a B-class Monster, but his intoxicating scent and the power that seems to be flowing off him in gentle waves, belies that. I'm pretty sure he's an A-class and a powerful one at that. I'm not too worried though. I take a right turn when we reach the point that if we were to keep going, we'd hit an Academy stationed guard and I'd prefer to avoid that, so I head back towards the Academy. Unfortunately, the forest isn't all that large, unless you follow it around the school, rather than towards the edge of the Academy's land.

During my subtle, or hopefully subtle examination I notice that it's a notebook of some sort that he has tucked under his arm. My nose crinkles as I cock my head to the side, my curiosity piqued. "What were you doing out here?"

He pauses, that intense gaze locking onto me again and now that we're closer I can see that his eyes are a dark chocolate brown. The amber sheen is gone without the moonlight hitting them. "What were you doing out here?"

I purse my lips and raise an eyebrow. “I asked first.”

A slow smile tugs at his lips as he hums. “Are you sure? Cause I’m pretty sure that was the first thing I said to you.”

My eyes narrow. “No, you didn’t.”

That smile grows and a spark of irritation hits me. “Hmm, I’m pretty sure it was implied.”

“I really don’t think it was.”

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree, then,” he says with a nod, that infuriating smile still on his face. Obviously he’s enjoying getting a rise out of me.

“Are you going to answer the question, or not?”

He holds up the book with a grin. “I was sketching.” He brushes his hair back to reveal a short pencil tucked behind his ear and grabs it, pointing it at me. “Your turn.”

With a reluctant smile, I ignore the curiosity that pings through me about seeing his art and instead tip my head back to gaze up at the starry night sky that’s peeking out between the treetops. “I couldn’t sleep, and I thought getting some fresh air might help.” I look back at the intriguing man beside me and realise I haven’t even asked him for his name. My subpar social skills are shining right now.

I’m about to ask him when he speaks up. “Hmm, late night stroll in the middle of a dark, scary forest? Yep, that always helps me sleep,” he says, sarcasm practically dripping from his words.

I shove his shoulder playfully, then pause at the friendly action. I feel comfortable around him, like we've been friends for years instead of strangers who just met, and that sends a panicky feeling rising up in my chest. I swallow hard and shove it away for now, trying to act normal as I refocus on him. *Damn, I really need to ask what his name is.* If he notices my momentary weirdness he doesn't mention it. Instead, he pretends to stumble from my shove and laughs, raising his hands up in mock surrender.

I chuckle, that feeling of ease returning. I'll examine that odd bout of anxiety later.

A chirp and flapping wings draw my attention and give me a few moments warning before Unicorn lands on my shoulder. She's larger than normal, and I grunt a little at the weight. Instead of being the size of a small rabbit, she's that of a large and fricking heavy, Maine Coon cat. I reach up to scratch her chin and study the man's reaction. His eyes widen as though he's just realised something and after a moment of his focus darting between me and my creature, his shoulders stiffen.

My eyebrows draw down and I take a step back. For some reason, my hackles rise at the change in body language, and the already wriggling power in my chest edges towards a more volatile state. I don't know this man from Adam, and I certainly don't trust him despite how easygoing our banter was. "Who are you?" I mumble, taking another step back. My lips part and I suck in a startled breath as a huge set of black feathered wings unfurl from behind him and he takes a few

measured steps back, before dipping his chin to me. “Until next time.”

Then he vanishes. Literally, just fucking disappears. I spin around in a circle trying to spot him, but no, he’s really gone. *What the hell?* I toss my head back and let out a frustrated growl. *I really wish people would stop being so fucking mysterious.* As though reading my mind, Unicorn chirps, eyes narrowed at me. Alright, I suppose that’s not fair, considering I haven’t been completely honest with the guys either. Ugh. So much for relaxing.

I honestly have no clue how to feel about that encounter. On one hand, the guy is intriguing, but on the other his quick exit is suspicious and I really don’t need any more trouble right now. I close my eyes and take a few centering breaths. You know what? I’m going to take my ass back to bed and not think about it again until tomorrow. Who knows, maybe I’ll never see the guy again.



Foster

I have no idea why I showed her my wings. If any of my people had seen me... I cringe, and speed up, soaring above the clouds. Once I'm sure I'm high enough that she can't see me I release my glamour and become visible. My eyes flash to the trees I was under moments ago. She mustn't have learnt how to see through glammers yet, because she's more powerful than me, which would typically enable her to easily see through my magic. Her power practically radiates off of her.

I shake my head and focus on circling the Academy grounds, careful to stay under the dome of warding that nets the sky above. It keeps us from going out and stops threats from coming in.

Unbidden, my thoughts circle back to the unique creature I just met. Nessa. I honestly didn't think I'd meet her for a few days, but as luck would have it I run into her on my first night at the Academy. I'm not sure what it is about her, but I'm intrigued and can't wait to find out more.



Nessa

I'm walking through the forest on my way to go back to bed when I feel it. Ethan's magic. That same buzz that's made my hair stand on end every time I find a present or the trail to one.

Unicorn checked in with me then took off to continue her hunting and whatever else she gets up to in the forest, so I'm out here all alone again. It doesn't bother me, but it does make my eyes narrow. The guy I just met didn't seem to have any malicious intent when it came to me, but he did depart abruptly and now I'm sensing Ethan's magic. Is it a coincidence or something more?

I shake my head and silently thank my new vampire traits for my ability to see so well in the dark. Narrowing my eyes, I veer off the path I like to use, following what appears to be glowing, magical dust.

On cue Aurora appears, that same grim expression on her face and I groan. "How the hell are you and Ethan connected? Why are you helping me?"

All she does is stare and the frustration swells up inside of me, making my hands shake and magic both new and old writhe dangerously inside me. Then I swallow and force out a slow breath, controlling myself. I can deal with this another time, go somewhere to release my frustration. A thought pops up in my head. I should go back to Aurora's resting place, explore and release the tension in my magic. I just need to let

go, plus no one will expect me to go there, so I should be safe on my own.

I blink away my thoughts. *Present from Ethan that is probably a body part of some sort, focus Nessa.* Scrubbing a hand through my hair, I slap on my game face and give Aurora a nod before following the trail. It leads me to a hollow tree this time, and contains... something. I swallow hard, and blink repeatedly trying to get my brain to catch up. It's a human torso...a child's torso going by the size and choice of clothing.

I steal my emotions, shoving away the horror and disgust, forcing myself to be analytical about this gift just like the others. The head, and arms are missing, as are the legs. The rest of the body—from what I can make out through the clothing they are wearing—is still intact. The same stasis spell is in place, but it's stronger than the others were, probably because there are all the organs to preserve as well. The torso is dressed in clothing that a young teenager would wear; a baggy black t-shirt, and comfortable shorts. It doesn't give me much to go on gender wise and I cringe, already reaching for my phone to contact the guy off campus who has been helping me with examining the body parts, and giving me all the information I could possibly need to know about them. Hopefully he's awake.

I've known Ridge for a few years after we crossed paths when I was hanging out in a shady bar watching a Drákon member. We got to chatting and he told me about what he does for a living—examine dead people. He seemed rather intrigued

by me and since then he's been a reliable contact for all things involving dead bodies.

He picks up on the second ring, low voice rough with disuse. "Hello?"

"Why hello, Ridge, how are you going?" I infuse a happy tone in my voice to avoid revealing to him that something is up, but it has the opposite effect.

"What's happened?" he says, more alert, voice lilting slightly due to his intrigue. Great, I've piqued his curiosity. I'm eighty-percent sure the man is a sociopath.

I let out a slow breath. "I've been left another present, this one a child's torso... I need your help, I can't..." I swallow around the lump in my throat and turn away from the body, too many memories of that afternoon.

For a few moments the line is silent before he makes a sound low in his throat, like he's lost in thought. "I have no problem examining a child. I can be there in ten, just fill me in on your location."

I let out a breath of relief, tension easing, and relay directions before hanging up. Looks like it's going to be a long night, or early morning depending on which way you want to look at it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nessa

I trudge into my afternoon class with a groan, scrubbing a hand over my face. I'm fucking exhausted. Exhausted and hungry. Unfortunately, not for food. I was honestly hoping it was all a fever dream, biting Dylan and loving the taste of his blood. After meeting the mysterious guy in the forest, and finding Ethan's present, I snuck back into my room and promptly passed out, but it barely made a dent in my lack of energy. Lexi and her mate were quiet when I got back, but I could still sense their presence in the dorm so I wasn't worried.

Knowing that I have some major potential of causing another explosion, I told Unicorn she couldn't come to the class, so she's flying around outside the classroom window. As though my thoughts have summoned her, she glides past, black and white skeletal wings shining in the sun.

My mind flashes back to the guy from last night and curiosity picks at me. If he is a student here, why haven't I run into him before last night, especially if he likes to spend time in the forest. I'm there almost every day. I let out a sigh and find a seat, all but collapsing beside Dylan. Of course my first class of the day is potions, that's just my luck. All of the guys getting a front row seat to my failure. *Again.*

To make matters worse, as our professor outlines today's task at the front of the classroom, there's a knock on the door and who should peek his head in but the guy from last night—

or well, really early this morning. My eyes narrow on him. It's a little strange that I ran into him last night and now he's in the same class as me, but for now I dismiss it as a coincidence. I am exhausted, craving caffeine and about to be put through an entire class of humiliation, so my ability to sugar coat my words is currently missing.

So when the professor gestures for him to take a seat, I wave him over to the spare cauldron at the bench to my right, across the aisle beside me. Spotting me, he grins, brushing his blonde-tipped black hair out of his face and heads in my direction. "Why hello again," he offers, sliding onto the stool I gestured to.

Corin's eyes on me from the row in front of us has my skin tickling, but I don't turn to look at the suddenly tense man in front of me, or Dylan who's beside me to the left, instead remaining focused on Mr. I-like-to-sketch-in-the-forest-guy.

"Hi," I say slowly, turning in my seat a little to the guy so I can see his expression properly while I talk to him. "I didn't happen to catch your name last night."

He flashes me a grin as he sets his backpack under the bench. "Foster, and yours is?"

I have the most uncanny feeling that he already knows what my name is but doesn't want me to be aware of that. I don't let my expression falter, instead I give him a smile, quirking an eyebrow at him. "Nessa, but you already knew that, didn't you?"

He doesn't answer—I expected as much—his eyes slide to mine, and my smile kicks up a notch. “So, potions, huh?” I question, voice casual.

“Yep.” He leaves it at that and my lips purse, eyes narrowing. I suppose that's all I'm going to get for now. Shifting in my seat, I glance forward and find Corin studying Foster and me over his shoulder with curiosity. When I search his expression, I can safely say I have absolutely no idea what the man is thinking. Seems to be common with me.

Shaking my head, I refocus on the task at hand. The potion. Gosh dang, I'm most likely going to blow shit up, *again*. Le sigh. Smiling to myself, I get up and grab the ingredients I need from the front of the class. The professor has everything written up on the board in large words and the page number for our textbooks, so we can find the method to prepare the potion.

I complete those steps with ease, it's no different than the theory I've studied extensively. It's now time to add my magic though, I'm preparing for when the potion goes downhill—or explodes—and I fail. Ready myself, I throw up a protective barrier to contain any potential explosions then I try something different. I've been thinking about it a lot and I'm hoping it will help with my recent lack of control. I visualise my magical core—or I attempt to. Instead of the usual dark blue mass of my magic, I'm shoved away from that part of my mind completely. My eyes jerk open as I suck in a surprised breath. *What the hell is up with that? There is definitely something odd going on with my magic still.*

I roll my lips in before raising my hands to hover over the cauldron. Fuck it, guess I'm just going to have to do it the same way as I did last time. I call on my magic and once again it's like there is a brief war inside me, then that new—foreign feeling—magic smashes my old magic out of the way and tries to burst from me and into the cauldron. Before it can though, hands clamp around mine and a hiss comes from their owner as he stops the flow of my magic before it can leave my fingertips. I peek open my eyes, my golden irises darting from his hands curled around mine, up his muscular arms, before landing on Foster's chocolate brown eyes. I swear I can physically feel the men around me tense at Foster's hand on my wrist, but they wait, watching, ready to intervene if I need them to.

I swallow hard, tongue darting out to lick my lower lip as our magic brushes against each others. A shiver rolls down my spine as a confusing concoction of emotions swirls through me. What is it with this guy? In fact, it's getting to the point where I'm just gonna blame the Academy. Way too many guys who speak to something inside me and my magic, attend this fucking Academy.

Foster's thumb strokes over my wrist and it jolts me back to the present. "If you do it like that, it's going to fry your potion and ruin all your hard work," he murmurs, voice low.

My eyes narrow ever so slightly as they roam his face, trying to gauge how truthful he's being. *I mean, clearly that was the expected outcome, but how the heck did he know that?* When all I do is stare, he cracks a smile.

“When you send your magic into the cauldron, how are you visualising it?” he questions, his expression thoughtful.

“I just visualise aiming my magic at it...” I trail off when his eyebrows draw down. My cheeks flush bright red, a squirmy feeling springing to life in my gut and I drop my eyes.

“Has no one ever taught you how to send your magic into potions before?” My cheeks heat even more, something about having the intensity of this monster’s eyes on me while he picks at one of my weaknesses—even though he’s saying it kindly—is embarrassing as hell. *This is something I should know.*

“I didn’t realise there was a science to it,” I mumble, and swallow hard. *Goddess, my emotions are all over the place at the moment.* As though that thought draws the urge back to the surface, my mouth goes dry and an ache unfurls in my gut. *Shit, not now.* The urge to drink blood has been fairly absent since the guys left last night, but it flares to life with a vengeance at the prolonged skin contact between Foster and me.

“Usually there isn’t, but with the power wafting off of you, I’d assume you won’t be able to imbue magic into a potion without a balance stone until you become more proficient in the art of doing it.” My eyes snap to his, the information distracting me from the urge for a moment. So there is an actual reason I’m struggling so badly with this? But my magic wasn’t unlocked when I was younger and attempted this? Foster continues. “When someone’s magic is powerful, its

potency is high and that's what affects the potion, not the power itself, so even before you awakened, an explosion would have been likely if you attempted to create a potion."

Something in my chest loosens at the explanation. It's exactly what I needed. It's not something I'm doing wrong, so much as I wasn't given the right information or the material necessary for a fair chance. "Thank you," I say, flipping my hands and lightly squeezing Foster's hands which now rest in my grasp. "I don't understand why the professor didn't say something though?"

My eyes narrow and anger flares in my chest as I search out the professor. In my peripheral vision I see the guys turn to find her with their gaze as well. She's standing at the front of the room, eyes focused on a pair in the front row. Whenever I worked on this with my dads it was always such a struggle to just get my magic to work at all that we never worked through how to use it to activate a potion properly. I haven't worked on potions with my fathers since before my magic awakened so it makes sense that they had no idea I'd need it, and my friends don't teach for a living, so it's understandable that they wouldn't have thought my magic's potency could be causing an issue, but the professor absolutely *should*. When my eyes return to Foster, his jaw is clenched, and his nostrils flare as he watches the professor as well. After a few moments his focus returns to me. "I don't know," he finally answers after watching me for a few seconds too long.

Yeah, there is definitely something weird going on around here, and Foster is just the frosting on top of the cake. Despite

my body innately seeming to trust him, just like with the other guys, I think I should keep my distance for now. With everything that happened last term, I think I should err on the side of caution when it comes to making new friends, or anything else. Getting close to someone I don't know could seriously backfire right now. Swallowing hard, my eyes dart back to the professor, and I mentally change my plan to look into the teachers to one of my top priorities.

“Thanks again,” I say to Foster, and mean it. He simply nods before returning to his own assignment. Dylan moves closer to me, and Oscar and Corin step up to our bench. “Are you okay?” Dylan asks, leaning in to me.

I nod sedately, eyes finding the professor again. “Yes, just frustrated.”

“Understandably so,” Corin says, a low growl rattling in his chest, tracking the professor as she crosses the room, his eyes flickering to the glowing amber of his Lycan for a moment before returning to the usual kaleidoscope of colour.

I shake my head and refocus on my work as the guys return to their own stuff. Looks like I'm stuck leaving my potions unfinished until I can get my hands on a balancing stone. The professor will be able to tell if someone else activates my potions so I can't ask for help either. I don't want to draw her attention to me, but I'm going to have to let her know that I'm unable to use potion magic for a few weeks. Or until I can get my hands on a balance stone. Well, if my research confirms

that that is what I need. It's something I can ask my dads about, too, when I call them this afternoon to check in.

With my plan now organised, I settle my gaze on the flames under the simmering unfinished potion in front of me and let myself get lost in my head.



I slide my backpack on and move through the crowd of people leaving the potions classroom mindlessly, still lost in my head. So much so that someone manages to grab me by the arm and tug me into a private alcove while I'm making my way through the hallway. I don't yelp, instead I already have a knife unsheathed from my thigh holster that's under my uniform with the tip of the blade pressed tight to the person's lower stomach. Ready to gut them if they try anything.

"It's just me, Nessa," Corin rumbles and his bonfire scent washes over me quickly, clouding the small space.

Goosebumps rise on my arms at his rougher-than-usual voice and I swallow, my throat suddenly dry as my teeth throb. *Goddess*, he smells so fucking good. How do vampires deal with this all day? My eyes zone in on the vein pulsing in his neck and heat unfurls low in my stomach, a soft growl rumbling in my throat. A red haze descends over my brain and Corin curses, ducking down to study my face closer. "Nessa, are you still with me?"

I cock my head to the side, quickly slotting the knife back into its holster before I advance on Corin. *Need to bite him. So thirsty.* Groaning, he doesn't resist as I stalk towards him—but he does retreat—the footsteps he puts between us making a primal urge to *chase*, rise up and attempt to smother me. “Stop,” I bark as I back him into a corner. He's making it worse and the rational Nessa is fighting the haze, but him moving away from me isn't fucking helping.

He stops at my words and doesn't try to squeeze out of the corner, just stares at me. *Good boy.* I don't stop until we're so close our chests are pressed together and I shove my nose into the crook of his neck and shoulder, taking a deep breath. *Fucking heaven.* I run my nose up his neck and flick my tongue out, tasting his skin. His taste explodes on my tongue and a tremble rolls through my body as I force myself to hold back. *He didn't consent to this, back the fuck up for a second, Nessa.*

Taking another deep inhale of his scent, my mind clears enough to force a few coherent words out. “I'm sorry. Thought I could control it. Can I bite you? Please?” My voice is practically a croak by the time I get to my request and the shaking from holding back is getting worse.

“Yes,” Corin says firmly. It still takes a moment for it to fully register though, and when it does my eyes snap to his, flared wide. His pupils are huge, no fear or indecision present in his expression. Still I hesitate. “Bite me, Nessa.”

It's a growl. A command—though there is no magic behind it. He's giving me his permission and I finally give in. I strike his throat, newly acquired fangs sliding through his skin like it's butter. The second his blood touches my tongue, I'm gone.

The growl that was still rumbling in my chest transforms into a satisfied purr and I climb up Corin, legs locking around his waist, one hand sliding into his hair so I can tug his head further to the side so more of his throat is exposed. I gulp down mouthfuls of his blood, fingers curling into his scalp when his hands move to grip my thighs hard enough to leave bruises. I buck into him, arousal pulsing through me in overwhelming waves. So many sensations, almost too many.

I take one more mouthful of his rich blood before pulling back to tend to the wound on his throat. The twin pricks on his throat are jarring. *I did that. I just drank blood.* Strangely, now that I've done it, it doesn't seem nearly as odd as I thought it would. I blink slowly, before licking at his throat, cleaning up any drops I missed while simultaneously clotting the wounds. With his supe blood, I'm sure the marks will be nonexistent in a couple of hours and I'm not quite sure what to make of the fact that I'm disappointed at that knowledge. *I want him to wear my marks. Want people to know he's mine.*

The thoughts have me jerking and I blink repeatedly, staring over Corin's shoulder at the crumbly texture of the stone wall. Goddess, I must be losing my marbles. His blood settles pleasantly in my stomach and contentment floods through me as it hits my system. The urge to feed is gone and my system feels rejuvenated while at the same time, exhausted.

Tightening my thighs around Corin's waste, I rest my head on his shoulder, hand shifting from his hair to loop around his shoulder.

"Better?" he murmurs after about a minute and I nod, making a humming sound low in my throat that sounds suspiciously close to a purr. "Good."

He walks across the alcove and settles on the stone seat that's built into the wall, so I'm now comfortably on his lap. It's strangely not awkward. I honestly don't know when I let Corin slide so far past my defences. He releases my thighs and starts running his fingers through my hair, soothingly. "I did have a reason for tugging you in here. Three actually." I hum in response, no intention of going anywhere even though I'm supposed to have another class right now. "Last night you spoke in my head."

My head jerks back, eyes wide as I meet Corin's gaze. "What?"

"You spoke in my head last night," he repeats, eyes not leaving mine. Still, I feel the need to confirm it.

"Are you sure? Maybe you just have a really vivid imagination." He quirks an eyebrow at me.

"Well, last night you told me thank you." His lips twitch as he fights a smile. "There was also the begging I overheard while Dylan was edging you, Nessa." Corin's pupils dilate. "Practically screaming for him to let you come." He says it while maintaining eye contact, not looking bothered at all by his own words, yet my cheeks practically catch on fire. I bite

my cheek, embarrassment flooding through me and I go to hide my face when he adds, “It was one of the hottest things I have ever fucking experienced. I wanted to give in and do everything you wanted.”

All the embarrassment I was feeling abruptly falls away, and my skin flushes for a completely different reason. After a moment I clear my throat, and tip my head back as I let out a sigh. “I guess that means I have yet another new power. Yay me,” I say sarcastically, though it comes out weaker than I intended.

It’s a power that I never expected to have so I’ve never thought about what I could use it for. Now though, my imagination goes wild. It would be a fantastic tactical advantage, you could totally annoy the shit out of someone whenever you wanted to, but then something occurs to me. “Wait, so you’re the only one who heard me? I wonder if it’s limited to you then and if it is, why you...?” I trail off, head cocked as I stare at the man in front of me. He gets the oddest expression for a moment before he blanks it and my brows draw down.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says softly and I accept it for now, passing off his odd expression. I return my head to Corin’s shoulder, that contented laziness still flowing through me and he pets me on the head.

Something about the way he says *we*—as in *we’ll* do this together, rather than just *I*—as in *I will* have to do this on my

own, has warmth blossoming in my chest. Okay, maybe the Academy and its supply of guys I'm drawn to isn't so bad.

Nuzzling his throat, I let out a puff of air, fiddling with his black T-shirt with one hand. The material's well-worn and huge. I kind of want to steal it. Blinking, I roll my head to the side and poke Corin in the cheek. "Three things."

"Hmm?" he says, tone questioning.

"You said there were three reasons you pulled me in here for, and can I have your shirt?" His eyes widen, lips parting at my words, but I have no idea why. I like his shirt, plus it smells like him, so I want it. I'm sure he has plenty of other shirts.

"I saw you bite Dylan last night. That's actually what made me realise that's what you needed today so quickly. I'm not sure if you're ready to talk about it right now, but I want you to know that if you ever want to I'm here. Plus, I'm sure Dylan wouldn't hesitate to walk you through a few things..." Corin trails off, eyebrows drawn down in concern when I avert my eyes, and scrunch my face up in embarrassment. Yeah, I'm not ready to talk about it yet. So I clear my throat and change the subject because I'm a fucking wimp.

"What was the third thing?"

"I was just wondering where you know Foster from, I've just never seen him around campus before..." he trails off, seeming to be more focused on my request for his shirt than what he wanted to know about Foster.

“I ran into him in the forest last night. I hadn’t met or seen him before then. I wasn’t worried at all, I didn’t get any bad vibes from Foster, and he was calm and nice the entire time. Literally all we did was talk a little while I was going for my walk.” I shrug, fingers returning to their fiddling with his shirt. I cock my head to the side, studying it. It’s probably big enough for me to fit in it while Corin’s still wearing it. *Hmm.*

“What were you doing in the forest late at night?” I’d be annoyed at his pushy question, but he’s not coming across as jealous or upset, more like concerned for my safety. Seriously, what is it with everyone thinking that forests at night are something to be afraid of? I have magic, for the Goddess’ sake, and lots of combat training. I find the forest to be the most soothing at night.

“I went for a walk to clear my head and get some fresh air. We spoke a little, then he left and I went back to my dorm.” I shrug again. It’s not a lie, exactly. I’m not going to invade Lexi’s privacy by revealing that she was shagging her mate and woke me up. I purse my lips forcing myself not to laugh. Nope, I’m definitely not going to be telling Corin that.

He doesn’t push though, just nods, trusting me. Good. Because with all my secrets, I try to be as truthful as I can. Though, he still seems a little tense, eyes distant, eyebrows furrowed like he’s lost in his head. Mentally I give myself a shake and change the subject, hoping to lighten up his mood again. I huff and scowl at him. “So, shirt?”

He grins, seeming to push any lingering worries he has aside for now and gets to his feet but doesn't say anything. Instead, he presses the wall behind him and opens a portal. I squeak at the surprise display of magic, then laugh when he steps through, taking me—still in his arms—with him. His magic tickles my skin like we're walking through hundreds of falling silky feathers rather than a portal, then he's stepping out of it and into my lounge room.

My scowl returns, eyebrows furrowing. "How the heck did you do that? I have the place warded," I question. Goddess, if Corin can get in that means Ethan can too. Anxiety blooms in my stomach and I go to pull away from Corin, but he must notice the change in my scent as a purr starts up in his chest.

"With you in my arms your warding recognised your magical signature and didn't react to me." My chest relaxes an increment, but just to be sure I reach up and grip his chin.

"Promise that no one else can get in like you just did?"

His swirling eyes don't waver from mine as he answers. "I promise that no one else could get through your warding unless they worked to dismantle it—which because you're here every day to replenish them with magic, has a low probability of working."

I nod, choosing to believe him. Hopefully that's not the wrong choice.

Breaking eye contact, I try to lighten the mood and use my new form of transportation to my advantage. "To the kitchen, chariot," I command with a grin, and Corin snorts but does as I

ask. He sets me down on the kitchen island and stands between my legs—mostly because I haven't fully unlocked my legs from around his waist.

“Now what?” he asks, pupils dilating as he watches me.

My lips part, ready to command him to kiss the fuck out of me, but my stomach lets out a godawful yowl that has him leaning back with a laugh. *Godsdammit. Stupid, cockblocking stomach.* Rubbing a hand over my face I groan and Corin chuckles again. “How the hell can I be hungry right now? I just drank your blood?” I say, incredulously, glaring down at my stomach.

Corin laughs. “Think of blood as a food source for your magic, more specifically your vampire traits. Your body still needs lots of human food for your body and to recharge your other types of magic. If you were a bitten vampire instead of a born one—somewhere in your heritage anyway—then you could survive solely off of blood.”

My lips form an O as I take that in. I've never really looked into vampires as I never showed any traits that meant I could have it in my family tree. “I suppose that's another thing to research later,” I grumble.

Corin smiles down at me. “Remember the offer is there. I don't mind helping you with this stuff and I'm sure Dylan and Oscar wouldn't mind either. For now though, how would you feel about some cheese toasties?”

Dropping my hand, a reluctant grin curls my lips. “Add some vegemite to that order and I think I can be persuaded.”

He shakes his head, wrinkling his nose but nods and I unwrap my legs from around his waist. He takes a step back and I reach out and clasp his wrist, meeting his eyes again. “Thank you,” I murmur, trying to make sure he knows how much I mean it. He successfully kept me from freaking out, multiple times in the last hour, and is slowly turning into my rock. Which is a terrifying thought, putting that much trust and becoming reliant on someone like that. All these guys—Dylan, Corin and Oscar—have slipped under my defences and are slowly gaining my trust and respect.

Sucking in a careful breath, I hold it for a few seconds before letting it out. Whenever I ponder it for too long, the overthinking rises up, so rather than letting myself succumb to it, I let go of Corin’s arm and slide off the bench. “I’m going to take a quick shower, then I call dibs on choosing the show we put on.”

He doesn’t protest, just shakes his head with a smile and turns to start rummaging around for ingredients. I, on the other hand, head to my room, grab a set of comfy sweatpants and a tank top, then head to shower.



Steam billows out the door behind me as I step out of the bathroom, lower lip trapped between my teeth as I focus on drying my hair. After doing the best I can, I hang up my towel and go for my bed, ready to snag some pillows to set up on the

couch, only to freeze. Neatly folded and set at the end of my bed is Corin's T-shirt, the one I asked him for. Butterflies explode in my stomach and I dive for it, shucking off my tanktop as I climb into the shirt. It's huge on me, the fabric more like a baggy dress than a shirt, but I don't care how frumpy it'll make me look. His scent wraps around me and my eyelids droop, that exhaustion from earlier hitting me again.

Still snuggled up in the shirt, but now with pillows and a blanket in tow, I head for the couch. Corin's finished making the toastie and he sets my plate down on my lap before settling on the couch beside me, his own plate in hand.

“So what are we watching?” he asks.

I grin. I reckon it's time for a TV series marathon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Nessa

I purse my lips, hiding a smile as Unicorn drops into a crouch, tail flicking much like a cats would. She creeps along the bench, using her wings to keep balance as she stalks her prey... Oscar. He's completely unaware, staring at the checkers board that's between us in concentration. His pink hair is hanging over his eyes, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. My focus catches on his mouth and my tongue darts out to lick my lips. His lips slowly curl up into a smile and my eyes jerk up to meet his, finding him already watching me. Shit, I guess I've been caught.

I grin, owning that shit. He's attractive, he can't sit there looking that cute and expect me to not notice. It doesn't help that his mouth-watering peppermint and dark chocolate scent is practically blanketing the room. It has me sucking in deep breaths through my nose to draw in as much of the scent as I can.

The troll stopped by earlier to ask if he could hang out with me for a while. I sent the other two a message inviting them, but Corin had another class and Dylan had to catch up on an assignment he needs to hand in tomorrow, so that left the two of us. Both of us had free time after our classes so it was a no-brainer for me to say yes. We've been lounging around my dorm for the last hour or so, eating junk food and watching a show before I pulled out the checkers board.

The pink of his cheeks grows deeper as he watches me and my smile widens. With perfect timing as always, Unicorn chooses that moment to leap on his head scaring the shit out of him. Oscar yelps and gets to his feet. Unicorn somehow manages to stay on his head, gripping his hair for dear life. She lets out a bout of chattering noises, wings outstretched and I can't help but burst out laughing at the picture they make.

My laughter has Oscar pausing, eyes narrowed on me and I choose that moment to slide out my phone and snap a few pictures. "Smile!" I can't help it. I tug my lower lip into my mouth, trying to contain my amusement as I lower the phone. The disgruntled look on Oscar's face is everything.

Oscar's expression suddenly shifts, a smirk tugging at his lips that makes me squint at him suspiciously. Before I have a chance to figure out his plan, Oscar lunges for the phone in my hands, jolting Unicorn from his head in the process. It's my turn to let out a yelp as I try to whirl away from him. He's too quick though.

With gentle hands and quick steps, he has me backed up against my lounge room wall, both my wrists pinned above my head with one hand. He uses the other to pluck the phone from my fingers and set it on the arm of the couch beside us. "That wasn't very nice, sweetheart," he says, voice rough, those silver eyes intent on mine.

My brain blanks. Literally just shuts off, and I stare at him with eyes that are probably like saucers. I swallow, mouth dry, and my attention darts from his eyes to his lips. Oscar's hand

flexes on my wrists, pressing them tighter to the wall, making my back arch. My nipples tighten to sharp points, that brush against his chest every time I inhale, making them ache. A sensation that's echoed at the apex of my thighs. "I'm sorry," I say breathily, once my brain comes back online.

Oscar quirks an eyebrow, and inches closer. "I don't think you are."

I laugh. "Oh really?" I say in a mock serious voice.

Oscar shakes his head, smile growing. "Really."

"Now, what would ever make you think that?" I blink at him all doe eyed, the picture of innocence and he laughs under his breath.

I open my mouth ready to say something but he doesn't give me the chance. He closes the rest of the space between us, pressing his lips to mine. Any hesitance from him disappears as I arch to get closer to him, kissing him back with enthusiasm.

He presses closer, hand dropping from my wrists to grip my thighs. I take that as an invitation and use his shoulders as leverage to hook my legs around his waist. His hand shifts so it's closer to my ass to support my weight and I tangle my hands in his hair, placing a sharp nip to his bottom lip before kissing my way along his jaw, then down his throat, making him groan. The raw sound has me squirming against him, the ache for release spiking.

He cups my jaw—holding me up with one hand—and guides my lips back to his, kissing me slowly. After a few seconds I draw back. “Sooo... checkers?” I ask, voice husky.

Oscar’s hands tighten on my thighs, a smile curling his lips as his eyes meet mine. “Checkers.”

He doesn’t put me down though, eyes slowly dropping to my lips. “I’m kicking your ass, you know? I’m so going to win,” he says, his words rougher than usual.

I laugh, and shake my head. He’s dreaming, I’m totally going to win.



I did, in fact, not win. Well not on that game anyway, I won the other two though. I purse my lips, squinting at my laptop screen. I’ve been going over some of my notes on evidence I’ve compiled for a few hours and my eyes are gritty and sore. Letting out a breath, I shut the screen gently, the snip of it closing, loud in the quiet room.

I shake out my hands, eyes sliding to my window, looking out towards the forest. I need a break, so despite the fact that the sun set a little while ago, I’m going to go for a walk.

After putting on my boots, I climb out my window, stepping onto the thick tree branch. It has become my go-to exit from my dorm. It gives me a little thrill every time I step out onto the branch. This time though something is different. My

eyebrows draw down as I squint into the darkness. I take another step, and that's when I feel it—the brush of Ethan's magical signature against my skin. Like clock-work, Aurora appears at my side and I step into his magic's residue, knowing it will activate the spell he's left.

Two things happen, one good and one bad. My mind chooses to register the good news first, then the bad news. I don't get eviscerated by hellfire... Yay. The bad news though, is that when Ethan's magic peels back it reveals a severed head sitting a few feet away from me on the branch. I curse, taking a few steps back. "*Good fucking Goddess,*" I hiss. That's the last thing I expected to find tonight.

I'm not even sure if it didn't still have hair attached to it, that I'd call it a head with the way the face has been brutally beaten beyond recognition. *Far* beyond. I tip my head back with a sigh, rolling my eyes skyward. "Goddess, can't I have one night without a severed something being involved, please?" I grunt, staring at the faint stars. I then shake my head. "You know what? That wasn't specific enough. I want a night where I can lie on the grass in a field somewhere and read a book without coming across dead body parts, being attacked or watched by *something* or any other bad shit." I bite down on my tongue until I taste blood, then rub a hand over my face. "But that's not a realistic request when it comes to me, so never-fucking-mind."

With a blank expression, I ignore Aurora hovering nearby, already knowing that she isn't going to be much help when it comes to dealing with the actual gift from Ethan.

I grab my phone from my pocket and dial for Ridge. He picks up on the third ring. “What?”

“Well hello to you too,” I respond playfully. I’m not actually feeling playful, but I’m in the mood to annoy someone just as much as the fucking universe and Ethan are pissing me off. I also know that it needles the hell out of Ridge when I’m in a chirpy mood, so cue that.

“Nessa,” he mutters, already sounding disgruntled and I smile, this one real.

“Don’t worry, this is a work call. I’m not going to pester you to hang out with me.” I sigh and roll my eyes at the immediate rustling sound on the other end of the call. Ooh, someones eager tonight. “What’s happened?” he asks.

I groan. “Jeez, there is no reason to sound so excited, frankly it gives me the heebie jeebies and I’m a pretty desensitised person.”

Ridge laughs. Like, actually laughs. *Him*. It has me frozen, eyes wide in utter fucking disbelief as I stare down at the severed head. “Nessa, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you’re a fucking psycho and that’s coming from me. Don’t sell yourself short like that, and don’t let anyone try to convince you otherwise,” he says, voice still filled with amusement.

I clutch a hand to my chest like the bastard can see me and put on my most *touched* voice. “Oh my Goddess, Ridge, I think that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Ridge snorts and I can practically hear him rolling his eyes. Wow, a laugh and a snort tonight, I must've turned into a comedian somewhere along the line... or he got laid. I cock my head to the side and raise my eyebrows. Yeah the latter seems more likely. "Have you finally found a person to date?" I ask the sociopath, my surprise clear, but I would be happy if he had. He fucking deserves it, the shit head. We're not really close per say, but we've worked together enough for me to know that he's capable of forming close personal connections, he just seems to see everyone else as pawns.

The man growls and lets out a scoff which tells me everything I need to know. "Oh my gosh you actually have! I'm so happy for you," I say honestly, some of my faith in supernatural beings restored.

He grunts. "Where are you and what do you need?"

I let out a disgruntled breath at him not wanting to talk about his new lady or man friend before I reveal why and where I need him. "Outside my dorm and it's a severed head."

He lets out another laugh and I send Aurora a *can you believe this guy* look before I hang up the call. It's going to be a long night.



Humming under my breath—quite out of tune, might I add—I move through the forest. I've had some time to cool off

and it's done my chaotic brain and emotions wonders. I left Ridge with the head not long after he arrived at the base of the tree outside of my dorm. Other than noting the dark hair that was a similar shade to mine. When I saw that, I immediately connected it to the lock of braided hair that was part of my first 'gift'. The severed head's hair doesn't appear to be cut though, and the braided lock of hair I received was also lighter in colour, where the head is pretty much identical to my shade of black. So I'm assuming it must be from two different people. Other than that, I couldn't help get any information on it so there was no reason for me to stay.

It's a still night, the bugs quiet and sky alight with stars and the moon. The moon Goddess watching over us. I may not worship a specific God or Goddess of the realm, but I do respect them all.

Unicorn is out hunting so I've decided to do something I've been wanting to do for a while. Return to Aurora's death site and explore. Explore the magical place Aurora and her magic created.

I locate the illusion barrier with ease and give myself a moment to study how realistic it appears before I step through it. As my eyes adjust to the lighting, I can't help but let out a breath of relief that it seems like nothing has changed. The place is so unbelievably beautiful that it's almost hard to accept the fact that it's actually real.

“Wow.”

I flinch at the unexpected sound and whip around—magic flaring—to face the person who spoke, lips parted in shock only to find Foster standing just inside the illusion barrier that surrounds Aurora’s resting place. Immediately my magic settles down, but my body remains tense. “What the hell are you doing here?” I hiss, jaw gritted.

Foster’s eyebrows furrow and he cocks his head, watching me curiously. “Following you, I thought that would’ve been obvious at this point.”

I widen my eyes at him and give him my best, *are you serious* face before throwing my head back with a groan. “Corin is going to kill me,” I mutter under my breath, scrubbing a hand over my face. I mean we didn’t explicitly agree to keep this place a secret, but for some reason I feel like I shouldn’t have shared it with someone else without him knowing. That’s something I’m going to have to puzzle over later.

“What was that?” Foster asks leaning closer to me, expression innocent.

I roll my eyes and turn away from him, ignoring how cute his stupefied expression is as he takes everything in. “Stupid supes and their good hearing.”

Foster snorts behind me, and I flip him off over my shoulder, which has his snort morphing into a full laugh as I let my eyes roam over the area. It’s just as amazing this time around as it was the first time seeing it. The bioluminescent plants of varying colours and the huge tree. The odd glowing

blue butterfly floating lazily over the grass field. It's all fucking beautiful, in a way that seems almost too perfect for it to be real.

I shake my head, and weigh my options. It seems like I have two main ones, grab Foster, chain him up then let Unicorn eat him, or I could stick with my original plan and explore this place, just with him as a tag-along. Or, I could put a rune on him that prohibits him from being able to say anything about what he sees here? Yeah, that's an easy one, clearly feed him to Unicorn—ha, just kidding. I roll my eyes upwards and mumble to myself, "I guess I'm going to be testing out a new rune today."

I turn to face Foster and flash him a grin, which immediately has his face paling a little and he takes a step back. Damn, I really do love it when I have that effect on people. I open my mouth, ready to tell him what I'm about to do, then think better of it and just throw my magic at him, the rune branding his sternum.

Foster yelps as it takes effect before his lips draw down into a pout rather than anger like I was expecting. "Really, a censoring rune? Fine, here." Foster walks over to me, arms out in a gesture of good faith I'm assuming. His knowledge of the rune is intriguing and it has me curious about how he learnt it. It's an uncommon rune that I wouldn't even be aware of if I hadn't come across it in one of my many nights reading in my father's library. They have a ton of factual books rather than my massive collection of smutty fiction books.

Since he's offering I hesitantly reach out and brush my fingertips against his shirt covered sternum. I've never used this rune before and my magic is still not cooperating a hundred percent, so I reason that it's safer to be closer to the rune for me to activate it. I imbue it with a tiny trickle of my magic and my intent—which is that Foster can't tell anyone about this place or anything he learns here. I bite the inside of my cheek when I'm done and draw my hand back, Foster's chest rising and falling quicker than it was before. I tip my head back, focus locking in on his face, and a low sound slips from my throat at the intensity in his glowing eyes as he looks down at me. I'm snared in his gaze for a moment before I snap out of it with a shaky breath as I slowly let my hand drop and take a few steps back.

Clearing my throat, I turn around and drag my focus to the massive tree to give myself a few seconds to get myself together. Light footsteps move in my direction until Foster's body is a blur in my peripheral vision, alerting me that he's stopped at my side. That and his vanilla scent swirls around me, slightly richer than it usually is. "So what's the plan?" he asks, voice slightly gravelly.

"The plan is... that there is no plan," I say, wanting to face palm as soon as I say it. *Goddess, that's it Nessa, just let the world know how frazzled the man beside you has managed to make you.* I puff out a slow breath and tug my shoulders back, owning the stupidity. Rolling my eyes at myself, I take off, walking at a fast clip into the field that's filled with long grass.

I'm not planning to actually go into the treehouse thingy today, but I do want to look around everywhere else.

As I move through the field, blue butterflies erupt from the grass, their glowing bodies beautiful. A tiny smile tugs at my lips and I peer over my shoulder to find Foster paused at the edge of the field watching both the cloud of butterflies and me, face curiously blank.

“What are you waiting for?” I call, a playful lilt to my voice despite his lack of expression. The man quirks a brow at me, before a giddy grin curls his lips and he lets out a whoop, taking off at a run into the field with me. I stare, eyes wide, as he moves through the grass, a trail of butterflies appearing in his wake. He's surprisingly light on his feet, and effortless as he comes to a stop in front of me, that same giddy expression still on his face. Letting out another laugh, he throws his hands above his head and wiggles his fingers. Suddenly the thrumming beat of a fast-paced fae hymn winds through the space and my limbs tingle with the urge to dance. I've never been the best dancer, but I'm also not one to resist the urge to move to a good beat.

“Well, what are *you* waiting for?” he asks, holding out a hand to me. My eyebrows furrow slightly, but I grab his hand and he gives my arm a gentle tug before he goes back to his crazy antics, dragging me after him. At first I'm a little hesitant, as he lets me go to do a clumsy spin that somehow stays on beat then darts back in, urging me to do the same. I do, finally letting myself go and a burst of laughter escapes me, his happy energy infectious as I let him go so I can run

through the grass too. I spread my arms wide so I can trail my fingertips through the silky grass and do a circle around the place where Foster has stopped to watch me. I then pause to admire my handy work as a literal cloud of butterflies rises from the grass to float around us, body still swaying to the music's beat. Several land on me, their little legs tickling my cheeks and I hold still so they don't fly away, a huge smile on my face.

After a few seconds I turn my head slowly and find Foster in a similar position as me, butterflies clinging to his arms and a couple in his hair as the song winds down before coming to an end. I can't help but laugh at his wide brown eyes, and the butterflies pour off of me at the movement, taking flight once again. Foster narrows his eyes in a mock glare, and I raise an eyebrow before turning around and making my way through the rest of the field.

He follows me, hands shoved casually in his pockets as he balances on one of the tree's massive roots. I keep my surprise at his ability to not fall off as he scales it with ease, even as the root gains height until the top of it is far above my head. "So where are we going?" he asks.

Studying the wildlife and base of the tree as we bypass the steps to the treehouse, I shrug. "I'm not really sure. I wasn't lying when I said there isn't a plan, I'm just going to wander around and explore."

Foster nods, brown eyes flitting to me for a moment before he looks around and pauses. "Uh, Nessa there is something

over here,” he says, eyes fixed on something to the left that’s hidden by the tall root he’s standing on.

My eyes light up and exhilaration sends my limbs tingling. I’ve always liked treasure hunts and this has a similar feel. I speed up, searching for a way around the root only to find none. Figuring out what I’m looking for, Foster shifts his foot placement so he can see the base of the roots from his elevated position to try and find a door. While he does that I circle back to the low part of the root that he first climbed onto and find that it’s next to a much taller root that seems almost out of place where it is, like someone has grown it themselves with magic.

Following it, I realise with frustration that it continues to curve around until it hits the tree trunk where it first grew from. “Well that’s helpful,” I mutter under my breath, the sarcasm thick in my tone.

Glancing down at my claws, I resolve to climb over it, very aware of Foster’s eyes on me as I try to dig my claws into the root. The key word being try. They slip right off, refusing to sink into the root. My eyebrows furrow because never have I had this issue, usually they easily pierce through anything and everything. After my seventh or eighth attempt over various places, a frustrated huff falls from my lips. I also attempt to open a portal into the room, but seeing as I haven’t *seen* the space, it’s pretty much impossible to do because I don’t know where to put the portal. *Dammit.*

Before I have the chance to lose my shit in a very uncool way, Foster clears his throat. “You know, I have no problem flying you in, if you want?”

My shoulders tense as I consider it, factoring in how he was kind enough not to mention me getting pissed off. I cock my head as I look up at him, and quirk a brow. “Are you sure you’ll be able to carry me?”

He grins. “Guess we’ll have to find out.” With that, a pair of massive black feathered wings sprout from his back. They glisten with an almost blue-ish sheen in the lighting from the bioluminescent plants as he stretches them out, before jumping off the root to glide down to me. He lands with barely a sound and I narrow my eyes at him.

“So, how are we going to do this?” I ask, already guessing the answer. He can’t exactly give me a piggyback ride can he?

I swear his grin gets even bigger, but before I can complain he’s grabbing me by the bottom of my oversized shirt and tugging me closer. He pauses when our chests are brushing. “This is going to go how you want, just hold onto me and I’ll get you over there. You can choose how to hold on,” he says, face going serious for a moment before his easy smile returns again.

That gains him a point if you ask me, letting me choose. I really don’t need another grumpy Alpha man in my life. Mentally rolling my eyes at myself, I raise my hands to his shoulders, pausing before I make contact to wait for his permission, and he gives me a nod. With the go ahead, I use

them as leverage to jump up and wrap my legs around his waist, then cling onto his shoulders with my hands, waiting for him to take off.

He laughs, seemingly a little startled at my move, and my eyebrows draw down. *How did he think I was going to get up?* I don't want to fall and break something. That'd be a bitch to heal and another injury I don't need. I've already been to the infirmary more times than I'd have liked this term. Foster seems to shake it off quickly though and his forearms wrap around my lower back, unmoving. My lower stomach clenches at our proximity, and I tell it to chill the fuck out as his sweet vanillar scent swirls around me.

Taking deep calming breaths through my nose, I wait for Foster to speak. "Ready?"

"Yes," I reply, voice soft.

"Good, hold on tight."

I nod, and tuck my nose into his throat, which probably isn't the sanest idea, but for now I say fuck it. My fingers clench as his vanilla scent floods into my lungs but I control myself—just barely—as he launches us up into the sky.

Adrenaline floods through me, and I let out out a whoop as my stomach drops, wind rushing through my hair and whipping at my clothes and then we're dropping down on top of the root and I'm leaning back a little, but I don't drop my legs from around Fosters waist, heart racing in my chest. "Can we...?" I trail off, but Foster reads the question in my eyes and gives me a cheshire grin.

“Yes, we certainly can, but are you sure?” he asks, wagging his eyebrows.

Now it’s my turn to grin. “Holy fuck yes,” I say, chest bubbling up with excitement.

The man still holding me, gives a casual shrug and then he’s leaning back and we’re free falling. I let out a squeal of delight, the ground rushing towards us as he rolls us over, then his wings are snapping out and we’re gliding over the butterfly field smoothly. From my position I can mainly see over his shoulder, but like he can tell that I want more, his vanilla scent is suddenly rolling over me as his magic encases my body. It has no ill intent so I don’t react other than with curiosity as I try to figure out what he’s doing. Through the rushing wind, I don’t get a chance to try and ask before he’s letting go of me with one arm and using the other—with the help of his magic—to flip me so I’m now facing the ground.

I laugh, the movement making my stomach drop and a giddy feeling buzz in my chest. With the help of his magic he locks my legs to his, but leaves my arms free to do whatever I want with them and returns his other hand to where it was wrapped around my waist.

Foster flies me all around the magical world Aurora created at least a century ago, and it’s beautiful. We soar around the tree, and I reach out my hand so it brushes against the silky glowing leaves. We glide around the outskirts of the illusion barrier, flashing past the shrubs that hold glowing creatures too small to make out at this speed. I laugh, as Foster rolls us to

the side, taking us dangerously close to a tall bush before righting us again. We pass over the roots and around the field once more before Foster glides down into the hidden place he found. For a moment, I'm stuck to him, his magic and arms locking me in place and then he's slowly releasing me.

I step away and turn around, barely noticing my surroundings as I face him. I'm sure my cheeks are flushed to high hell, and that my hair looks like I've been through a fuckfest, but I don't care. I launch forward and grab his hands, doing a little happy dance, cheeks hurting from how hard I'm smiling. "Thank you, thank you, *so* much. That was amazing. So amazing," I say breathlessly.

A slow smile that I've yet to see on Foster's face, blooms at my words and he runs a hand through his hair, almost sheepishly. "It's no problem, Nessa. I can take you any time. All you have to do is ask."

I do another happy wiggle and narrow my eyes on him. "Careful, I might just hold you to that."

He laughs and I smile before finally turning around to see what he found. I blink, at how unexpected it is. We're in what looks to be... an office? "But, there's no roof?" I say, stating the obvious, but so confused I can't help it.

The room isn't as big as you'd think when you look at it from the outside, it's probably only a 10 by 10 foot room that's filled to the brim with a heavy-set wooden desk that takes up most of one corner, a tiny couch probably to read on, and walls of just dark wood bookshelves, brimming with books. The

entire room is colour coordinated and there is even a little coffee machine set on a lone, short bench off to the side that has a small sink.

“Wow, it’s like heaven in here,” I murmur, noting how a very fine layer of dust covers everything, but there is no apparent water or wildlife damage despite the lack of roof.

Foster tucks his wings behind him and they vanish. *I’ve really got to ask him how he does that.* He moves around the room, leaning in close to a few of the bookshelves to read some of the titles. “It’s definitely cosy. Most of these titles seem to be nonfiction and old, really old.”

I nod in acknowledgement to his words then tip my head back. “I’m assuming there was a barrier in place of a roof,” I say, working through my thoughts out loud. “I wonder if there is still a grounding element here somewhere that I can recharge.”

Foster tilts his head back and forth, a thoughtful expression on his face. “It might not be the best idea. If we activate it, and it won’t let us through, we could be killed or trapped.”

I nod, the thought already hitting me as he’s saying it. “Then I’ll just make my own. I’m also going to clean everything and fix the books.” Then I pause. I haven’t practised a lot with this sort of magic and I don’t want to risk damaging anything. Foster, who is watching me, catches my moment of hesitation and scans the space, his brown eyes seeming to take everything in.

“I can do it if you’d like, I’ve done stuff like this before,” Foster offers, quiet confidence radiating from him.

My eyebrows furrow as a small amount of tension rolls through me, but I nod and take a step back. “Okay.”

Foster focuses on a wall across from him, his brown eyes unfocusing then without his body moving even a millimetre, his magic swells in the room. I suck in a shaky breath, shoulders tensing as the richest vanilla I’ve ever smelled fills the room. It’s fantastic and I can’t help but take a deep breath. Vanilla is one of my favourite scents. I even keep vanilla scented candles in my room back home. I shake off the thought and focus on Foster’s magic, which is what I should have been doing this entire time.

His magic is weaving its way around the room in a dark blue crackling trail, leaving a dust-free, rejuvenated trail in its wake. As it brushes past me, blowing my hair back in a gentle gust, a chill rolls down my spine making me shiver. His magic has a distinctly playful feel about it and it has mine wanting to rise up and respond in kind.

When Foster is finished, I blow out a slow breath and focus on meeting his eyes when he turns around, trying to act like my magic isn’t jumping around inside of me giddily. His brown eyes meet mine and a faint flush dusts my cheeks, but he doesn’t question it so I act like I’m totally cool and scan the room. “It looks great,” I tell him honestly. It really does, it’s like everything has been refurbished to its original state. I walk up to a book and carefully open it up, body relaxing in relief

when its pages hold firm, the paper silky and strong like it's brand new rather than a relic.

“I also added individual stasis spells to each object in here that should last a few years before they need to be re-charged,” Foster adds, and my limbs turn to lead.

Guilt that I probably shouldn't be feeling, but can't seem to help, slams into me and I let out a slightly shaky breath at all the fun Foster and I have had together today. His mention of a stasis spell, while perfectly innocent, sends my mind on a downward spiral of all the 'gifts' I've been left over the last few weeks. The fucking *severed head* I was left this morning. I grimace, but quickly force a smile, attempting to appear normal to Foster. The reminder of everything—even though it was unintentional—has my mood souring and I can't help but feel the sudden urge to leave. To go hide away in my room and be alone—after I check-in with Ridge that is.

I clear my throat and force my body to relax. “Thank you, Foster,” I say softly, then set the book down and tug out my phone, swiping through it. A message that I need to go somewhere seems like a plausible excuse, plus it's getting late.

I contort my features into a concerned expression and quickly tap out a random message to send to Lexi, and deem that good. “I'm sorry, but I have to go, something has come up with one of my friends,” I say, then flick my eyes up to meet Foster's.

He stares at me, brown eyes intent for a few seconds like he can see through me. Through my lie and right into my soul,

but by the twitch of his brow he doesn't understand what triggered me enough to make me bail. Thankfully the man takes me bailing gracefully, and all he does is offer me a concerned look and a nod. "Of course, Nessa."

This time when he flies me over the wall, I'm distracted and focused on what else I have to do tonight. One thing I have to do straight away is call Ridge to see how he's progressing with the head. I tilt my head slightly before amending the thought. Slightly bashed in head. The face is definitely gone and I didn't check for teeth that I could use to identify who it was before.

The slight jolt that moves through Foster as we land alerts me to the fact that we're on the ground and I pull away with a thank you. I immediately turn my focus to erecting a barrier over the top of the strange room, sealing it against anyone other than me. At least now that I've been in there, I know that I can use a portal to get in and out of the room, and can come here to explore more if I want to.

The walk back to the edge of the illusion barrier that's hiding this place is a tense one, and both Foster and I pause once we're through it. The silence between us is slightly strained and I know it's my fault. I puff out a harried breath, then throw the man a genuine smile. He's been nothing but kind to me so I've got to snap out of it. At my expression, tension I didn't realise was there eases out of Foster's posture and he offers me a tiny grin in reply.

I give him a wave and go to leave, but his hand on my shoulder stops me. He ducks down so his face is closer to mine, sending a cloud of vanilla over me. “Nessa, for what it’s worth, I had lots of fun with you today.” His words are smooth, and silky in a way that has me softening even more despite my worries.

“Me too, Foster.” Gnawing on my bottom lip I give him another wave then disappear into the trees, leaving him behind. I also throw up a bunch of barriers I know he can’t sense me through. Now that I’m aware he can trail me without my knowledge I will have to be more cautious. One more thing to check off on tonight, I tug my phone back out and tap on Ridges contact. Time to check on how that head is going.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Nessa

I fall back into the seat with a snort. “No shit, seriously?”

Dylan grins, blue eyes practically glittering as they study my face. “Yeah, seriously.”

Shaking my head in disbelief, I can’t help but laugh. Who would have known—Dylan being in a Petó

Bála team when he was younger, it was not something I expected. I’ve seen the sport and even at a highschool level it is intense. It’s like a mixture of the Human Realms football, ice hockey and magic. “Did you enjoy it?”

His eyes land on the table, a soft smile playing on his lips. “Yeah, I did.”

I cock my head, studying him. His openness and gentle body language only makes him more attractive to me. The gentleness to his expression as he thinks back on his time playing makes me want to curl up in his lap and cuddle with him. It’s an urge that not many people can draw out of me. I really am starting to let these guys past my emotional walls. I’m learning more and more about them every day and it’s intriguing. He looks up and catches me watching him. A light flush dusts his cheeks, but I don’t look away and he clears his throat, tension building around us. The dim lighting in the part of the library we’re sitting in, and the high bookshelves around us, make the space feel small and cosy.

I shift, placing my hands on the table between us, fingers curling around my open textbook, still holding Dylan's eyes. Abruptly he clears his throat and looks down at his notebook, breaking the connection. His eyebrows draw low over his eyes as though he's deep in thought and I blink repeatedly, drawing back slowly and swallowing hard. Damn, this neediness is getting out of control. *Focus, Nessa. You're supposed to be studying, not eye fucking him.*

I bite my lip, jaw tense, eyes darting to Dylan who is still lost in thought, before dropping back to the desk. I'm not quite sure where we're at and it's messing with my head a little. Making insecurities leap up that I can usually keep away. I know we need to talk about what happened the other night after our popcorn fight, but I'm not quite sure how to bring it up. There is also the fact that I like all three of them. Even though it's a fairly common practice to have more than one partner in the supernatural community, it doesn't make it any easier to bring up.

There is also the fact that a small part of me wonders if that's something they would want. To be in a relationship together, or if they haven't brought it up either, because they view this as a friends-with-benefits sort of a deal. That's probably just my insecurities talking though.

I also need to talk to him about this whole drinking blood and new vampire powers issue. I've done a little research on it, but couldn't find anything that correlated with my circumstances. But of everyone I know, he should be my first

choice to get some real answers about what to expect at the very least.

I blow a strand of my black hair out of my face and peer back down at the potions book in front of me. I specifically searched for one about powerful supernatural's, hoping to find something that backs up what Foster said in potions. I'm hoping that there might be a way around needing to get a balancing stone, so I'm looking for more information on that too, but so far no such luck. Well, I've found some information on why I need a balance stone, but nothing on how they actually work. Or ways to get away with not having one. The books are also curiously missing any mention of where the hell I can get one.

Groaning, I dig my palms into my tired eyes. After a minute of that, I let my hands drop back to the table with a thud. "Dylan, have you ever heard of a balance stone before? You know what Foster mentioned in our potions class?"

Those blue eyes flick up to me from his book, narrowing as he cocks his head to the side in thought. "A vague reference maybe? But nothing specific, sorry."

Rolling my bottom lip between my teeth, I shake my head. "That's okay, it's just frustrating, I can't seem to find much of anything about them," I mumble. Guess I'm going to have to call my fathers. It's something I meant to do last night but it slipped my mind. Which I completely blame Corin for, the bastard pampered me into a fucking coma and I fell asleep on the couch in the middle of our TV marathon. The sweetheart

carried me to my bed and tucked me in before leaving. He left a note too, good thing, otherwise I would've panicked over how I got to my bed, especially with Ethan hanging around like a bad smell.

I grind my jaw before shaking my head. No need to linger on the creep. How the serial killer has morphed into my stalker is irritating as fuck and has me worried. Not for myself but for others. *He's obviously still killing to get the body parts, but the question is where and how since he's clearly not killing on the Academy grounds. Evidently he's focused most of that craziness onto me at the moment.* I sigh, Goddess so much for this term being easier. I have been trying to track him down, but I can't for the life of me find the bastard. I don't have the same level of computer skills that Lexi does so without her help I'm limited. If I can't come up with something soon then I'm going to have to cave and tell the guys and Lexi about what's going on. I know Lexi said she was alright to do this now, but I want to shield her from this for as long as possible. Still, I don't want him to escalate.

I've also been seeing Ghost Girl—or as I now know, Aurora—around the place a lot lately, not just when Ethan has a gift for me. She's constantly hovering in my peripheral vision of whatever room I'm in. Always watching blankly, even when I try to interact with her, and I'm not sure why that's happening.

Checking the time on my phone, I start packing up my stuff. “Are you done for today?” Dylan inquires, sitting back to watch me.

“Yep, meeting up with Lex this afternoon.” It takes me hardly any time to have everything packed up and slip my backpack onto my shoulders. Excitement bubbles in my gut and I lift my hands up, stretching them towards the ceiling to relieve the soreness in my back from sitting down for so long.

I grab my phone and keep it in my hand, may as well call my fathers on my walk back to the dorm. Grinning, I look down at Dylan. “Thanks for inviting me, I learnt some interesting stuff,” I say, gesturing over my shoulder to my backpack with my thumb.

“Of course, you can find me anytime. I spend lots of it here.” He lowers his eyes again, that cute shyness coming out full force. He’s fucking adorable.

I move around the table to plop down beside the shy vampire and pull him into a loose hug, placing a firm nip to his jaw before I’m up and strolling down the library aisle. “See you later,” I call over my shoulder. I bite my cheek to contain my laughter when a strangled sound comes from behind me. Yep, fucking adorable.

I’m still lost in my head, thoughts of Dylan clouding my mind when the tingle of Ethan’s magical residue surrounds me and my foot catches on something that sends me sprawling. I let out an *Oof* as I land on my elbows and knees, the full weight of my backpack slamming down on me. *Godsdammit*. Textbooks are a bastard to carry around. I say as much out loud as I climb to my feet. Thankfully, I’m far enough away

from Dylan that he doesn't hear or come running as I straighten from dusting off my busted knees.

Dozens of photos litter the aisle in front of me, some even tacked to the bookcases, and I let out a ragged breath. Girls. All dead or being tortured, brutally. Some are screaming while Ethan hurts them, his features shadowed, but recognisable and others the women are dead and unidentifiable. *Goddess*. I don't even take a moment to collect myself, *no*. Instead, I quickly step back, careful not to hit the taut knee-height wire that tripped me in the first place. The photos aren't the part that has my gut twisting though, no, that would be the bright red blood splattered on the ground underneath and around the photos. Bloody splatters weave a path through the bookshelves and out of sight. "For fucks sake Ethan, all these presents are really starting to piss me off," I mutter hotly.

Ethan had to have known exactly where Dylan and I were to set this up, knowing that I'd come this way. I immediately triple the warding covering myself and send a message to Dylan to do the same, not bothering to explain why. I know he'll do it.

I snap pictures of everything, because I don't have time to bag it myself then ward it, so everything is hidden behind my magic, and send Ridge a message with the location and a link to track my phone. He's become quite fascinated with Ethan's mind and has expressed his interest in helping me with things when it comes to him. He says it's because he wants to gain an understanding of Ethan's mind and thought process. I shake my head and refocus on the task at hand.

He's getting bolder. It's all I can think about as I scan the space once more before taking a step towards the bloody trail, intending to figure out where it leads when I see it. The photo that is pinned the highest, and I know it's because he wanted to make sure I'd see it. *See them*. They're all of Lexi while she was being tortured.

"That sick fuck." My lip curls into a snarl and rage has my fingers curling into fists, my body trembling. That foreign magic inside me, rises at my emotional turmoil, but I forcefully shove it back down. I don't have time for that right now.

I shake my head and force myself to count back from a hundred to calm myself down. He better not mean that as a threat or else I'm not just going to hand him over to the SFBI when I catch him, I'm going to take his balls and his cock as well. Make him watch as I slice them off with a rusty fucking knife, then shove them down his throat. *Nobody* threatens my family. Hell, I might even kill him. Even with everything he's done, there was this small part of me that struggled with it. The part of me that still sees him as the innocent and kind older brother of one of my best friends. Well that part of me? It crumbles and fucking *dies*, vanishing like it wasn't there to begin with. He's going to pay for what he's done. For what he did to Lexi. For everything.

Shaking my head, I pull myself together and continue following his bloody trail. I feel the moment Aurora joins me, trailing behind me, and I mumble a greeting. She's silent as

always and it doesn't help with my volatile emotions. I'm not frustrated with *her* though, just the situation.

We weave through the tall library shelves and a bad feeling settles low in my gut when we get closer and I feel Ethan's magic. It's so much stronger this time. The waves of his magical signature are brushing against my skin, making it buzz rather than tingle uncomfortably like it usually does.

The trail is taking us deeper into the library, the walkways between the shelves growing ominously dark. That sense of foreboding in my stomach grows and I take a deep breath, hesitating slightly before I step around the corner that will reveal Ethan's latest present. When I do, I go rigid with shock, a cold panic washing over me as I'm drawn into the past.



Nessa, eleven years ago

A laugh fell from my lips as I raced into the clearing. My dad's let me come out to meet up with one of my best friends this afternoon. Anna. My eyebrows furrowed as I got closer to our treehouse, and I stopped. It was so quiet all of the sudden. No birds singing or forest animals scurrying through the trees. Even the trees didn't sway.

I was running a little late because I'd forgotten to do one of my chores, so maybe Anna was mad at me? Yeah, that's probably the reason she hadn't come out to say hello like she normally would. I let out a shaky breath when I reached the bottom of the stairs. My hands trembled slightly as I took them one at a time, the air thick with the scent of old pennies. A gentle breeze rolled through the clearing and a slow rhythmic woosh and creak started up.

I sucked in a breath, tipping my head back to look at the front of the treehouse. Its door was open and swinging in the breeze. That dread in the pit of my stomach deepened and I swallowed hard. Something's wrong.

I bit the inside of my cheek. No, don't be silly Nessa, it's just the stupid tenth graders playing a prank on me. On us. Taking the rest of the steps two by two I called out, "You don't scare me, Dummies." There was no reply.

I paused at the door which had swung partially closed, blocking my view. Wiping my sweaty hands on my pants, I

pulled the door open and stepped inside, a whimper falling from my lips as I processed the scene in front of me.

Anna. “No, no, no, please,” I whisper, blinking rapidly as my stomach churned dangerously. Blood. So much blood. It painted the room like someone had taken a can of red paint, dipped the tip of a brush in and flicked it everywhere. When my eyes landed on Anna’s body, my brain went blank. Everything but her faded away, and as though unable to stop it, my brain began cataloguing everything that I could see. The way her throat, wrists and ankles were tied, so she was strung up against the wall. Her eyes stared past me lifelessly, head tilted at an odd angle, face sliced.

I swallowed, ears ringing. Her clothing was in tatters, wounds and blood coating almost all of her.



I stood there like that until Lexi found me. Apparently her father had changed his mind and said she could come hangout with us. She dragged me away from the macabre scene and called her dad, and mine. Lexi was scared over what had happened to Anna and worried about my lack of response. They called the police and the rest is a blur. It’s honestly like a nightmare.

I’ve asked Lexi what she remembers before, in the early days when I wanted to try and write down every detail that could possibly be a clue, but Lexi insisted that she barely saw

it. She saw a flash of it and focused on dragging me away. I spent so many hours pouring over everything I could find out about what happened to Anna. So many hours thinking about that day, reliving what I saw. I let out a shaky breath. None of it could have prepared me for this though.

A child-sized realistic doll is strung up across from me against the library's back wall. Ropes wrapped around its throat, wrists, and ankles. It's a mirror image of Anna when I found her. Right down to the torn clothing and blood splattered on and around it. That's not what has chills rolling over me though—or at least that's not the only reason. The life-like doll is me. It's identical to eleven year old me. The age I was when Anna died.

Suddenly everything clicks together in my head. Ethan's presents. How each one of them had a trait or object that hinted at this. The ankle bracelet, the nail polish, the child's torso. *Goddess*.

I step back, barely noticing that Aurora is beside me, and slide down the bookshelf until I'm sitting on the ground, knees drawn up to my chest. This has me rattled. It's brought every bit of trauma from that night, and the guilt from the weeks that followed, to the surface. I stare blankly at the wall for I'm not sure how long, until a hand touches my shoulder. "Nessa?"

I jolt back to the present, eyes jerking up to meet pale green ones. Ridge. Thank the gods, I'm not sure how I'd react right now if one of the guys found me. I'm not in the headspace to field those sorts of questions. My eyes dart around the space,

noting that Aurora is gone, before my gaze returns to Ridge. “Yeah?” I croak, giving the man a weak smile.

He studies me intently, probably puzzling over my emotional reaction. I’m usually rather impersonal and outwardly neutral with my emotions around my contacts so I can understand why he’d be a little confused. I get a hint of his clean lemony scent and my nose crinkles slightly. It’s a nice scent, but it doesn’t inspire any attraction inside me unlike Dylan, Oscar and Corin’s do. It merely offers me a sense of comfort and familiarity.

Scanning the room he steps back from me, straightening up to his full height. He’s around the same height as Corin—roughly 7 feet tall—but he has a swimmer’s build. He’s helped me with quite a few things over the years and I’d consider him a friend of sorts. I’m not quite sure what he thinks of me though. Probably an irritation. The thought draws a smile from me and he blinks at me slowly before gesturing to the macabre scene. “It’s not a real person, but would you like me to deal with this as well? It’s an interesting move on his part.”

I nod. “Please.”

He shrugs then steps back, already presuming that I’m going to want to take some photos before he starts cleaning up. I take them then let him get to work, offering my thanks.

Scrubbing a still shaking hand over my face as I leave Ridge to clean up, I pull up Diarmuid’s number and hit facetime, now walking across campus. I’m not worried about running into anyone as they’re parting around me like the red sea. Good. I

might just make them scream if they get in my way right now. My magic hums in response, only to be smothered by the new magic inside me. Goddess that's getting fucking annoying. Good thing Lexi's going to help me figure out what the hell is going on with that this afternoon.

His smiling face fills the screen as he answers and I instantly soundproof my barriers and solidify them so I'm essentially walking around in a giant bubble. Fuckers get in the way now and they'll get a zap and shoved out of the way. Usually that would be amusing but I'm too focused on the issue that is motherfucking Ethan.

I'm not sure what he takes from my facial expression, but Diarmuid's smile drops the moment he sees me and a dangerous glint enters his eyes. "Who do I need to kill?"

That—despite everything—draws a laugh from me and some of the tension in my shoulders releases. "No one that I don't already have on my list." I sigh and scrub a hand over my face.

"What's going on, Ness?" he asks, then over his shoulder, "Azure, Morrigan, get your asses in here." I snort. Goddess, I miss them.

In under thirty seconds, I have three concerned faces peering at me through my phone screen. "So?" Diarmuid prompts.

"Well, first, hi," I say with a forced grin, making my eyebrows jump to try and lighten the mood. Azure just quirks a brow at me and my shoulders droop. "I have sort of a tiny

problem—well, two actually.” Everyone’s faces grow serious and I groan. Goddamn, I really was hoping to avoid this. When I told my fathers about a ton of stuff that went down in the first term, one of the things I conveniently left out—or more accurately talked down—was my powers. I made it seem like they weren’t anything to crow about, but me needing a balancing stone is going to give away that fact. Puffing out a breath, I focus on the path in front of me rather than look at them—I’m almost to my dorm.

“My potions have been exploding. Somehow I ended up with potions as one of my classes for this term—probably because I excelled at the theory side of it. As you guys know though, I always fail at putting it into practice when I try to imbue my magic into it.” I clear my throat, pausing. Gods, I really hope that Foster and the books I looked into are right and that I really do need a balance stone. “It’s been brought to my attention that I’m failing because I don’t have a balance stone.” I swear I can hear crickets and my eyes flit to the screen. They’re all watching me with furrowed brows, more confused than anything else. “Any chance you know what that is and where I can get one?” That gets a reaction. They all start to talk over each other.

I just wait and they get the hint quickly. “Are you sure? We didn’t press you about your magic and you haven’t said a ton about it. I mean we trained with you but I, *we*, didn’t realise you were holding back...” Azure trails off and I grimace. Reaching my dorm door, I quickly open it and settle on the

couch after setting down my backpack. Lex isn't here yet so I let down my magic barriers.

“I'm not sure what class I am, but if I had to guess I'd say I'm a strong A-class,” I finally admit, though a thought niggles at me in the back of my head. *I can do so many things that others can't, what if I'm more? What if I'm an O-class?* But that would be impossible, right? I bite my lip. *Right.* I rub my hand on my thigh and set my phone down on my coffee table, propped up on a coffee cup from this morning. “I did some research after someone mentioned it to me, and it seems like something I need to check out.” I shrug to make out like it's not a big deal, but their concerned expressions lead me to believe that it's a bigger deal than I realised.

Thankfully they don't press, and instead Morrigan clears his throat. “I know where to get one, I'll have it shipped to your dorm. Okay?”

I bite the inside of my cheek and focus out the window for a moment before letting out a breath. “Thank you, dad.”

A beaming smile curls his lips and it draws a tiny one out of me, too. “What's the second problem?” Diarmuid rumbles, and I thread my fingers together and set them on my lap.

“Ethan is stalking me.”



I groan, thumping my head against the table repeatedly to shake the last twenty minutes out of my head. They were understandably pissed off, worried, and wanted me to come home. I love them so much, but they don't know all of me. Well, I think Diarmuid suspects, but he's still really overprotective too. Me revealing that Ethan's been stalking me since the start of the term went down as expected—like a lead fart.

I needed to let them know though, I did tell them I'd keep them more in the loop and this is me trying. Although I did put it off as long as possible. I'm pretty sure it's time to loop the guys and Lexi in as well. She turned up five minutes ago and shot me a wink before ducking into the bathroom so I could finish my conversation in private. She's a dear, like that.

The bathroom door clicks open. "Is the coast clear or do you need me to hide out for a little longer?" Lexi asks, a playful lilt to her voice and I look up at her. She's got her head sticking out the bathroom but nothing else.

I snort. "You can come out now."

"That looked intense, is everything okay?" Her beautiful grey skin is flushed with health and those dark circles under her eyes are gone. It's great to see her this happy and healthy again, which just makes what I'm about to admit all the harder.

"I need to tell you something," I say seriously.

She plops down onto the arm of the couch and clutches my arm. "Goddess, you're pregnant aren't you? Three guys railing you all the time will do that, you numpty! Birth control,

woman. How many ti—” I cover her mouth with my hand, eyes practically fucking saucers.

“Damn, Lexi, no I am not pregnant. For your information, I haven’t slept with any of the guys yet,” I grumble, removing my hand from her mouth and crossing my arms like a petulant child. Gods, one, I’d never be so careless because I’m in no way ready for a child, and two, because I don’t want kids. That is why I am already very much on a foolproof birth control potion. I take it every six months. Shaking the thoughts on children away, I refocus on Lex. “What I need to tell you is about Ethan. He’s stalking me.”

Lexi’s features pinch as she absorbs the information, and her scales flare before returning to normal. “Say that again,” she murmurs, eyes narrowing on me.

Shit, she’s going to fucking kill me for keeping this from her. Cringing I oblige. “Ethan is stalking me.”

She cocks her head to the side, lips pressed into a line. “Since when? Because you haven’t said a damn word about this to me. So this better be a recent thing.” She gets to her feet, pacing back and forth as what I’ve said sinks in. She whirls on me, pale blue eyes glinting dangerously when I take too long to answer.

“Since the beginning of term.” I hang my head to avoid her eyes. I should have just told her. But I didn’t want to set her back, goddammit. She’s doing so well now.

She lets out a long sigh and I see her shoulders sag in my peripheral vision. “Why didn’t you tell me? I can understand

at the start, but once I was doing better? I mean, I *am* doing better.”

I bite my lip, fumbling for an answer for a few seconds before letting out a tired breath. “I know.” Swallowing hard, I meet her eyes. “I just...didn’t want to lose you again.” It was weak of me. That image of her in my head when we found her and when she first started seeing me again will haunt me forever. I couldn’t let her go back to that, so I withheld the information about Ethan. I also wanted to protect her, but I’m sure she already knows that.

My eyes burn, threatening to tear up but I shove the urge away. I won’t use my tears against her, I’m in the wrong for keeping this from her, I’m not going to turn myself into the victim instead.

Lexi stands, paused in front of the TV, eyes fixed out the window. She clenches and unclenches her jaw and I stay where I am, happy to give her as long as she needs to figure out how she feels. She usually takes the big-sister-slash-mama-bird role in our friendship. Taking care of me, offering me wisdom, giving me shit so I don’t get a big head, and bailing me out when I need it. I do all the same for her, but she hardly ever needs it.

Finally she lets out a breath, the rigidness to her body melts away and she sets her shoulders back. Those pale blue eyes land on me, lips pursed. Lexi’s throat bobs as she seems to search for the right words. “I... I can see why you kept it from me. If our positions were reversed then I can’t say I wouldn’t

have done the same thing... And I know that if he were displaying any type of behaviour that hinted towards hurting us or you, then you would've told me." Her eyes flit around the room and she walks back to the couch and sets her hands down on the arm of it. "Which means that he's either escalated, or threatened someone other than you." I snort despite the serious issue and duck my chin, a tiny smile dancing on my lips. She knows me too well.

"Something like that," I mutter and push to my feet. It's time I show her everything, then she can fill me in on what we originally met up this afternoon to talk about.

Shoving my emotions to the back of my mind, I grab the stack of photos I've been compiling—the ones I've taken of Ethan's presents. I hand them over to her, then after she's flicked through them, her face paling but expression not shifting from neutral, I give her the ones of the doll and the photographs he'd left for me to find. While she looks through them I take a few steps back, and stay silent, giving her all the time she needs.

After she's had some time to absorb everything, her pale eyes meet mine. "Have you told the guys yet?"

I cringe, and shake my head prompting her to toss a throw pillow at my head. "Why the hell not? Please, please, please don't tell me that it's because you want to keep them out of trouble, or safe, hun. Because, trust me those boys are halfway to head-over-heels for you, Nessa. They would not hesitate to help, and if you think that they aren't opinionated enough to

tell you no, on the off chance that they don't want to help you, then you don't know them very well. They're fucking monsters, Nessa. Strong ones. Corin is literally a Lycan, you have nothing to worry about," she says, completely serious before chucking another pillow at my head.

I let my head drop back. "I know. I'm a fucking dumbass alright." I purse my lips and quirk a brow at her. "Well, I'm not so sure about the whole head-over-heels thing, but the rest of everything you said. You know I struggle with stuff like this." I drop my eyes, but square my shoulders. "I'm going to tell them. I was already going to before I spoke with you, but you've made me feel better about my decision."

"Good," Lexi says, dipping her head in a nod while muttering under her breath about dumbasses and stupid monsters. I press my lips together to hold in a laugh at her, and toss a pillow back at her.

"Now on the subject of the guys, have they gotten their heads out of their asses yet and asked you to date them?" Lexi asks casually, and I almost swallow my own tongue.

"Say what now?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. You might not have slept with any of them, but don't think I don't see what's going on between all of you. Halfway to head-over-heels, remember?" she says tapping the side of her head.

I shake my head at her. "No they haven't asked me out."

“Well get ready for it, hun, because it’s coming. And if they don’t hurry up, then I’ll smack some sense into them.”

I shake my head and say weakly, “Hey, I could always ask them.”

“Oh Nessa, I love you, but I also know you. This is one area you’re unsure about, which is perfectly fine because you have three confident men who can bring it up for you. You don’t have to be the leader in every part of your life, you can let others help you out,” she says sternly and I nod, some of the tension in my shoulders easing.

When I let out a breath she stands up and does a little shimmy, grinning at me. Alright, let’s do some research on the dark web.” I laugh at her enthusiasm and get to my feet as well. Damn, I should have enlisted her to help with Ethan earlier.



“So I think I’ve figured out what’s going on with your magic,” Lexi says, not looking away from her computer screen. “But first, I’d like to mention that I’ve alerted all my online contacts in the area and yours about Ethan.”

I freeze, body tensing. “What?”

She sends me a slightly impatient look over her shoulder at my hard tone. “Relax, Nessa. I alerted them to the fact that we wanted information about Ethan or anyone who had his

description and/or hunting style. I'm not stupid, I know you didn't share everything with me, but we've worked together enough to know that I have your back."

My shoulders slump a little, as the tension releases and I nod. Taking that as a sign that I'm not going to snap at her, she turns back to her screen and explains more. "I assumed you wouldn't have done it because it's risky. What if someone who is in Ethan's pocket gets information? Right?"

"Yes, that kept me from alerting anyone I didn't at least mostly trust."

Lexi nods. "That was a good move, but now that Ethan is escalating quickly, we need to throw caution out the window and have as many eyes and ears on the lookout for him as possible. He clearly already knows plenty about you, and your weekly routine if he's managed to place his presents in your path, so it's time to up our game. I'll keep you updated on that, but let's circle back to your magic. I think I've managed to piece together what I believe happened.

I get up from the couch and walk over to her, peering at her screen. "Really?" I know she's been researching like crazy since the last time we started working. I have been too, but with no such luck for me.

She glances at me a moment, before her eyes return to her screen. "Yeah. Well, I have a theory..." She trails off and I laugh. She doesn't give herself enough credit, ninety-eight percent of the time her 'theories' are spot on.

“Okay, hit me,” I prompt, then flop back onto the lounge, settling in.

Clearing her throat, Lex shifts around to face me, the office chair she’s on squealing obnoxiously as she swivels it. “I’ve gone over all the stuff you told me about what happened in that illusion or warded section of the forest, hundreds of times and I kept coming back to the casket that Aurora’s body was imprisoned in.” She pauses, rolling a pencil between her fingers. “Steven, the man who killed her and trapped her, I figured out who he was or *is*, assuming he’s still alive.”

I push to my feet, ready to see if she has a copy of his Academy ID. Back then it took time and magic to create a photograph-like portrait painting for things like Academy ID’s. It was also only something that the best Academies in the realm offered. “You think he could still be alive?” I ask, my jaw clenching at the thought.

Lexi grimaces, turning back to her laptop. “I can almost guarantee that he is still alive and practically untouchable. If his ID is to be believed, he’s an O-class Monster, and Academy royalty. He was the Headmaster’s son—next in line to become the Headmaster—the year that Aurora disappeared.”

I thread my fingers through my hair. *Damn, well things on that front just got a hell of a lot harder.* I push that aside for now, and even if he is still alive, I doubt he’d be thinking of this place still. He’s certainly not the Headmaster at the moment. Lexi pulls up a scanned piece of paper that has a row

of ID cards, one of which stands out. Steven. My upper lip curls into a snarl and I point at him. “That’s him.”

Lexi nods, posture relaxing and I drop back onto the couch. “It sounds like the spell he cast was designed to trap not just Aurora’s body in the casket, but also her spirit—which includes her magic. Since you’ve confirmed it’s him, I confess that I left something out earlier.” Lexi’s pale eyes flit to mine. “Ghost Girl, aka Aurora—when she was alive and most likely in death—had great power. It was assumed but never confirmed, from what I’ve found, that she was an O-class monster. Magic like no one has seen before. There were also whispers from the things I went through that she was being considered for the role of Headmaster. She was a lot better with people and more morally sound than he was.”

Drumming my fingers on my thigh, my eyebrows furrow as I try to figure out where Lexi is going with this. Then it hits me. “A syphoning spell,” I murmur. It’s ingenious really, he gets a power boost plus gets rid of the competition.

Lexi grins at me. “Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. The only thing I’m not quite sure about is why he’d need that when he was already so powerful...” She trails off and I shake my head, all the random instances with Aurora slotting into place.

“He didn’t syphon her magic into him, he attached it to the Academy.” When a headmaster—a true one of old times—was said to take over the Academy, they also accepted the burden that is the dome of wards protecting the floating Academy. The person has to use their own magic, a large part of it, to

power the wards. It's draining and weakens the person, but as headmaster, the Academy is supposed to become the centre of your focus. You have to dedicate yourself to it. Or at least that's what all my old books on the Academies in the Supernatural Realm speak of, though that clearly isn't true about the weasel currently in control.

Lexi's eyes light up at the revelation. "I bet when you touched the casket it had already weakened enough that you touching it broke it and released Aurora's spirit. Instead of going into the Academy though—because she would be recognised as the true headmaster—you absorbed it. Both her spirit and her magic."

My lips part. *Holy shit. It makes sense.* "So the reason my magic has been so insane since that day is because I have Aurora's magic stuck inside of me. That's probably why I've been seeing her around the Academy since then too. It's been different since I touched her casket, like she's what an actual ghost would be like. It makes so much sense." It's a whisper. Said more to help it sink in, and not posed as a question.

"That doesn't explain why you were so drawn to it in the first place though," Lexi murmurs, and sits back in her seat, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Let's put a pin in that for now. We need to figure out how the hell I'm going to get Aurora's magic and *spirit* out of me."

Lexi snorts and pins me with an amused look. "Of course, *that* freaks you out."

I wave a hand at her, going for nonchalance. “I don’t know what you are speaking of.”

This time she full out laughs and flings a pencil at me. “Bullshit. Having another person’s spirit inside of you freaks you out, admit it.”

Her pencil bounces off my chest before skittering to the floor and Unicorn chuffs from her perch. Crossing my arms like a petulant child I let out a breath. “I’d like to see someone who doesn’t get the heebee jeebies about having another persons fucking spirit inside you without your knowledge.”

Lex shakes her head, expression sobering as she pushes to her feet. “We’ll get through this, just like everything else—including your stalker.” She squeezes my wrist as she passes me, heading for the kitchen. “Now, do you want a fresh coffee before we start researching the sudden appearance of your vampire traits?”

I say yes of course, that liquid gold can get me through anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Corin

“Ethan has been stalking me,” Nessa says, voice and eye contact not wavering as she informs me and the guys. I swear to the Goddess that my heart fucking stops for a second.

Ethan’s stalking her? Rage flares in my gut hot and fast. *How the hell did I miss that?* My fingers curl into fists, my primal side leaping forwards at the revelation. How the hell did *we* miss that? My eyes flick between Dylan and Oscar and I’m satisfied to find them just as pissed off as me.

I swallow hard, my glare returning to Nessa. How could she not tell us? “How long?” I grit out. That gets us a reaction. For a moment her calm facade slips and irritation flashes across her features, but she answers truthfully.

“Since the beginning of the term.”

“Goddess,” Dylan mutters under his breath and turns around, starting to pace behind her couch. Oscar shoves his hands into his pink hair and tugs on the strands, a panicked expression on his face.

I suck in a breath as the knowledge settles in my brain. She’s known about this for weeks and didn’t come to me. To any of us. Any anger I had at her for keeping this from us promptly drains from my body and my shoulders slump in defeat. *Does she still not know me enough to trust me?* To come to me when she’s in trouble. It’s like a punch in the face, but I shove it aside and take a step closer to her. “Why didn’t

you come to us?” My words are soft, but she flinches like I shouted them.

She breaks eye contact, those golden eyes darting around the room before landing on my chest. “I-I don’t know,” she says, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth. The usually confident woman I know is suddenly nowhere to be seen. Her nostrils are flared, and she keeps shifting on her feet, still gnawing on her bottom lip.

A low rumble starts up in my chest and I step into her, leaving barely a foot of space between us before cupping her chin. I tug her abused bottom lip from between her teeth and tilt her head back so her eyes are on mine. “I’m not mad, you know? I don’t like it, but I understand why you didn’t tell us earlier.” I can feel Dylan and Oscar’s eyes on us, but it doesn’t bother me. I’m too focused on the determination that’s rushing through me. Determination to prove to Nessa that she can trust me. Trust *us*. “But I am glad you’ve told us now. That you trusted us enough to tell us. We’re here for you, as your friends, and possibly more.” At that she tries to duck her head, cheeks pinking slightly, but I keep her head still with the gentle grip I have on her chin. I smile, eyes searching her face. “I need you to know that. To know that you believe us.” The others chime in as well and draw closer, framing Nessa between us, while still giving her space to move if she wants to. She doesn’t though.

She swallows, elegant throat bobbing as her eyes flit between us. Her lips part, pupils dilating and the urge to kiss her hits me hard. I lean in slowly, giving her plenty of time to

pull away, but she doesn't, and instead she closes the remaining distance between us. That rumble in my chest deepens as our mouths come together, and my hand shifts from her chin to her nape, as my other curls around her waist, tugging our bodies together. She nips my bottom lip and I part for her. As she explores my mouth, I nudge her legs open and press my thigh between them. She gasps and rolls her hips, pulling back from the kiss to suck in deep breaths as she grinds against me again.

I growl, hands dropping to her hips to press her against me harder. She moans, then jolts when Oscar echoes her groan, as though she just remembered that we're not alone. I pause, waiting for her reaction, ready to pull away if she's uncomfortable, but she tilts her head up to capture my lips in a slow kiss. My hands flex on her hips as I reign myself in, before letting her go when she pulls back. We need to take this slow for her.

She looks fucking glorious. Lips swollen, eyes dazed, cheeks flushed. If this is how she looks just from my kiss, I can't wait to see her after I've given her an orgasm. I groan at the mental image and reach down to adjust my hard length. Nessa eyes us all, not missing when Oscar and Dylan do the same thing. Her scent that's already flooding the room, spikes with lust and I groan again. *Goddess*. I need to take a walk and get some fresh air before I do something stupid, like tear Nessa's clothes off and bend her over the back of the couch. My cock pulses and I wince. And maybe a cold shower, yeah that sounds like a great idea.

Swallowing, I clear my throat and refocus on Nessa. “I need to go, before I do something stupid, but I will be back to talk this over more.”

“We can work out a time to meet up in our group chat later,” Oscar says, and we all make sounds of agreement.

I lean in and give her a lingering kiss and brush her mussed hair back with my fingers so it’s out of her face before leaving her dorm. The second I have the door closed behind me, I throw up a barrier and turn invisible.

My steps are weighted with anger as I walk in the direction of my dorm, but I tug out my phone. I need to talk to Ezra. Dialling his number, I press the phone to my ear and he picks up on the first ring.

“Corin,” he greets.

“Ezra.”

He’s silent in response and I know he’s waiting for me to tell him what’s going on. I let out a sigh and use my free hand to rub my face. “Ethan has been stalking Nessa. I somehow missed it and she didn’t tell us about it until today.”

“Us?”

“Yes, Dylan, Oscar and me.”

He’s quiet for a moment before he hums and static comes through the phone for a moment. I’m about to pull my phone away from my ear, thinking I’ve lost the connection, when he clears his throat. “I’ll look into it.” It’s all he says before he hangs up.

I grit my teeth in frustration and pick up the pace. Somehow the conversation hasn't affected my raging libido and my length is still painfully hard. So I have my clothes stripped off and shower running in thirty seconds flat, hand fisting my cock as the hot water sleuths over my back the moment I get in my dorm. However unsatisfying it is, I need release or I'm going to fucking snap. Even as I pump my painfully hard cock, precum beading at the tip, I can feel my primal side just under the surface snarling for our mate. I brace a hand on the tile, pumping my cock in hard, punishing jerks, the borderline pain pushing me to the edge quickly. It's the mental image of Nessa between Dylan, Oscar and me that throws me over the edge with a growl, and I paint my shower wall with my cum.

It doesn't help. If anything it makes it worse and I bend over, bracing my hands on my thighs as my primal side fights for control. Black fur sprouts on my arms and my instincts roar to life for a few seconds before dipping away again. Groaning, pain jolts through me before disappearing and I pant out a breath. This could literally not be happening at a worse time. I have to fight this, if I lose, I don't know what I'll do.

Straightening up, I turn off the shower taps, fighting through another wave of pain as I fight off my instincts that are practically screaming through my head. Find Nessa. *Rut her. Bite her. Breed her.* A pitiful sound escapes my throat as I dry myself off then tug on clothes. I'm not going to win, I know it. *Shit.*

A shiver rolls up my spine, then I snap, bracing my hands on my bathroom basin, eyeing my reflection. My pupils blow,

the change coming over me. I grow taller, shoulders broadening as fur covers the backs of my arms, back, and my legs. My nails shift to thick dark brown claws, and my now glowing amber eyes stare back at me from the mirror behind my sharpened facial features. Instantly, all of my heightened senses swirl through my mind, all blaring different information at me, but I shove it all away. Trying to fight the chaos that is in my head right now.

Panting, the instincts I was fighting overwhelms me and I press my hands over my ears, snarling. *Nessa*. I need to go to her. With no regard for her reaction, I turn invisible and launch from my window, landing on the ground in a crouch, then I'm stalking towards her dorm.



She's alone. I've been standing outside her window for the last ten minutes, a low growl rattling in my chest as I watch her move around her apartment. She's put a distorting effect on her windows since I looked in on her last, but I'm strong enough, magic wise, to see through it. She seems to be frustrated, but she hasn't given me a hint as to why. Not that she's aware I'm here. Her dorm is warded, but being her mate, her magic doesn't work on me. Another reason I can see through the distortion spell.

My mind is foggy, instincts ruling me, so when I portal directly into her lounge room and turn visible—still in my

primal form—I'm a little confused as to why she looks startled. She's my mate and should be happy to see me. A purr starts up in my chest as I stalk towards her, planning to reach out and snatch her into my arms. It doesn't quite work out like that though.



Nessa

I blink repeatedly as Corin—in his beast form, mind you—*appears* in my lounge room. The shock of it snaps me out of the chaotic pacing I was doing and has all that hyper energy honing in on him. Ever since he and the other guys left I've had this strange energy hovering under my skin. It was driving me insane, not to mention that my lust just keeps ramping up to the point where even a round with my vibe Harry didn't help at all.

I'm still recovering from the shock of his appearance when he starts to stalk towards me, a purr rattling in his chest. The Corin I know doesn't seem to be fully there right now. No. I think he's lost to his Lycan instincts right now. My nostrils flare, taking in his spicier than usual bonfire scent. I also get the chance to take him in properly in his Lycan form. Corin in his normal form is giant, but Corin in his Lycan form? That is a whole other fucking beast—pun intended. His facial features are sharper than usual, his cheek bones and jaw could fucking cut glass, and his hair is the same length but thicker than it

usually is. I also notice that his ears have lengthened slightly and are now pointed at the tips. He's got to be at least seven and a half feet tall, with thick muscle rippling from head to toe. I'm not sure if he's realised it, but his shirt and jeans are half torn, exposing some of his thick tattoos and the black fur that's now covering his shoulders, the backs of his arms and his back, I'm guessing. He's barefoot and his feet and lower legs appear to be more wolf-like than human, but he's standing fully upright. The long claws he has in place of his nails have my tongue darting out to wet my lips. Goddess, even though it probably shouldn't, the sight of him in his shifted form is hot as fuck and isn't helping me get control of my raging libido at all.

I refuse to look too closely at the part of me that's suddenly writhing with lust. It whispers at me to *run*. To make him chase me down. Make him earn it. All that suppressed desire and fucking push and pull energy from the last few months flares through me, and I lean forwards, eyeing him intently.

He thinks he has me caught. *He's fucking dead wrong*. A shiver rolls over me and goosebumps prickle my flesh. A smirk curls my lips before I tap into the new vampire abilities inside me and bolt away from him, throwing the window open with my magic before leaping through it. "Catch me if you can," I call over my shoulder, heart fluttering in my chest like a rabbit's. A snarl is all I get in response.

I haul ass, using my claws to scale down the tree before free falling the rest of the way down, dropping into a roll before launching to my feet. I take off at a run, the thud as Corin

lands on the ground behind me, ringing in my ears. It's dark out, but thanks to my vampire powers I can see fine. I sweep out my magic to double check that there is no one around then I aim for the forest, breath coming out in pants as adrenaline buzzes in my veins. His footsteps pound behind me and I dive into the thick wall of trees, scaling a tree as soon as I'm a few feet into the bush.

Corin growls, the sound too close for comfort, but I don't dare look over my shoulder, simply forging on. I use the trees like a bridge, making my way deeper into the forest from above, while Corin stalks me from below. I pause for a second, frozen, sensitive ears pricked as I search for his footsteps. He's about two trees away from me and I bite my bottom lip, toes curling, before I leap to another tree only to realise, it's as far as I can go through the trees. I have to get back to the ground. Dropping down, I try to take off at a run, but a body slams into me, taking me to the ground.

Corin rolls so his body takes the impact and I'm cushioned as I try to scabble out of his grip. The mixture of us grappling, bodies pressed together, and the chase, has me so worked up that my underwear is drenched. My arousal coating my thighs.

With Corin's massive Lycan form encasing mine, my attempts at escape are futile and when his sharper than usual teeth clamp down on the space where my throat and shoulder join, I melt, body going completely lax in his arms. He doesn't break the skin, and isn't drinking my blood, yet euphoria curls through me and my thighs press together as a weak orgasm rolls through me. I shudder and his body freezes, purr pausing.

Pulling back, he cocks his head as he examines my expression, his lips twitching into a tiny smile. “Did you... Did you just come?” he asks, his voice deeper than usual and rough. It has a shiver rolling down my spine. His nostrils flare as he scents me, pupils expanding to cover almost all of the glowing amber of his irises.

I wiggle against him, forcing back the low whine that wants to escape. “Yes,” I force out. “But please, I need more. *Please.*” I’ve never felt like this before. This time when the urge hits me, I don’t bother holding back the needy whine and Corin doesn’t hesitate. He growls and wraps an arm around my waist before doing a press up, holding both of us up, and getting into a standing position, still holding my weight with ease. As soon as we’re standing, he grips me by the back of my thighs and lifts me up. I lock my legs around his waist and groan when the position has my clit pressed directly against his hard length with only a thin pair of leggings and his jeans separating us. It’s times like this when I wish pants weren’t a thing, scratch that, I wish clothes weren’t a thing.

Once I’m comfortable, he’s on the move, to where I’m not sure. I grind against him, unable to help it and he stumbles but continues on. I’m not sure where he’s taking me, but I don’t care right now. I’m too focused on the arousal roaring through me and how much I need him. I don’t think I’ve ever been this worked up before. Before I can ponder it more though, Corin growls and then my view on the world tilts as I’m set down on the ground. Corin follows after me and I claw at his back when he lets his weight settle over me, the silky black fur under my

fingertips confirming my earlier thoughts. It sends shivers through me and a sense of ultimate safety suddenly floods through me. It's glorious.

I melt into the soft foliage, the earthy soils scent mixing pleasantly with Corin's heady bonfire. He laves my throat with a mixture of nips and kisses, leaving me arching my neck for more before he pulls back. His kaleidoscope eyes that are usually a mess of colours, are almost fully black, pupils so huge that only a thin band of rainbow is visible.

My chest heaves as my eyes dart between his, my body and mind quieting for a moment. "Are you sure?" he asks, voice barely audible.

"Yes." My nostrils flare and I suck in another lungful of his scent before diving in to capture his lips. I unlock my legs from around his waist and my Mountain Man shifts so his thick thighs are straddling mine. He grips my shirt by the collar and tears it in two. *Tears. It. In. Fucking. Two.* Why is that so hot? I have no idea, but it has me sitting up to press a hand to his chest. Flames burst from my fingertips and eat away at his shirt without burning his skin, before it reappears beside him.

Corin laughs, the sound gravelly and I nip his pec, careful not to draw blood with my sharp canines. That shuts him up and he magics my leggings off of me, leaving me in a sports bra and a simple black pair of underwear. It's nothing special, but Corin growls and stares like it's the best thing he's ever seen. It has a flush crawling to my cheeks. "So fucking

beautiful.” I make a strangled sound but he leans down, placing a kiss to my chin before working his way down my body until his head is between my thighs.

I thread my fingers into his hair and he takes that as a go ahead. He slides his fingers under the edge of my underwear then proceeds to tear them off, making me jump before I let my thighs fall open. Then he doesn't hold back, his tongue works at a languishing pace, circling my bundle of nerves before dipping into my core, making my hips jump and fingers clench. *Goddess*. He teases me until I'm about ready to tear his hair out if he doesn't let me have a proper orgasm.

Chest rumbling, I use my grip on his hair to jerk his head up, and he bares his pointed teeth at me in a smile. “Enough. Let me come,” I say firmly.

He cocks a brow at me nonchalantly, through the fire in his eyes bellies his casual attitude. “Or what, sweetheart?”

I don't deign that with a response. Instead I keep his head still as I scabble out from under him, too quick for him to catch me. Letting go of his hair, I go to launch away from him, intentionally trying to rile him up, but he catches me, bringing me down so he's pressed to my back. My knees and palms smart from smacking into the ground, but the hint of pain just adds to the lust inside me. It's enough to make the man behind me snap and a silent purr starts to rattle in my chest. *Game fucking on*.

One hand comes around my throat and the other clamps down in the dimple of my hip, using it as a handle. My lips

part, body practically on fire from the rough treatment and I moan when the head of his cock nudges my entrance. I don't know when he took off his pants, but who the fuck cares. I rock my hips back, trying to impale myself on his hard length but his grip on me foils that plan and his hand around my throat tightens. He leans down, his lips hovering at my ear, his breathing ragged. "Naughty, baby girl. Stay still."

"No," I mutter and try to rock back again, ignoring the way his words send my stomach fluttering. His reaction is instant. A low snarl leaves him then he's shoving into me in one sharp thrust before holding still. Despite how aroused I am, it burns because of his size, and I hang my head, groaning as I adjust to him. My fingernails claw at the soil, the burn turning into pleasure and I experimentally rock on his length. A moan falls from my lips and his hand on my hip tightens before he leans on me more fully, covering my back like a heated blanket.

He rocks into me, using his grip on my hip to control my body. Every sound I make spurs him on and he quickens his pace, strokes getting shorter and sharper. His hips snapping against my ass every time he sheaths himself in me and my cries grow louder. It only amps up my euphoria. I whimper as my orgasm approaches and his hand slips from my hip to my clit, his arm hooked around my thigh. His hand on my throat tightens and his movements get deeper, him grinding into me as I hover on the cusp of my release. I swear his cock swells more, but before I can think on it more he pinches my clit, his hand tightens around my throat, and I come. A strangled breathy sound falls from my lips as I shudder, back arching

and body seizing up as my orgasm finally rocks through me. Spots dance behind my eyelids before Corin's grip disappears from my throat, dropping to my chest instead. His teeth scrape over my shoulder as he ruts into me, his fingers plucking expertly at my nipple.

"Come again," he commands against my ear before his hips stutter and he pulls us flush together, teeth clamping down on my shoulder, harder than before but still not quite breaking the skin as he finds his release. It's as though he swells inside me and I suddenly find my vision going white as another orgasm hits me out of nowhere, this one even more intense than the last one. My lips part in a silent cry as it rockets through me, and my arms give out. The pleasure is almost too much, the sensation so different than it usually is. I feel so full.

Then it *is too much. It's too much.* I don't realise I'm repeating that out loud until my awareness returns a few seconds later with me on my side and Corin wrapped around me, cooing at me like I'm a fussing babe. My eyes flit around the space, my breathing speeding up. I don't feel right. I feel weird. Everything is hazy and it's like my limbs have weights weighing them down. I whimper and try to scramble onto all fours only to cry out in pain and freeze when pain echoes through my core.

I'm stuck. What the hell is going on?

My fingers claw into the dirt, and I try again despite the discomfort and Corin's shout of pain, but then he's on me.

I fight like a cornered cat but he has me caught. “Shh, Nessa, it’s okay. It’s alright. You’re going to hurt yourself. I’ve got you. I need you to listen to me, okay? Can you do that for me, sweetheart?”

His words slowly sink in and I pause, relaxing a little in his grip. I swallow hard. I think this is the closest thing to fear for myself that I’ve felt before. Mostly I’m confused, dazed, and anxious to work out what the hell is going on. I swallow again, trying to wet my dry mouth. “I-I can.”

“Good girl, you’re doing so well,” he praises and I relax a miniscule amount. “Do you know what a knot is, sweetheart?”

I freeze at the question, mind slamming to a halt. I’ve never been with a shifter before but I can vaguely recall mentions of it. I say as much and Corin blows out a breath against my hair.

“I’m sorry, Nessa. I just assumed that you knew about it because you know I’m a Lycan. We’re like shifters, and if we’re an Alpha Lycan then we have a knot. Whenever we have sex it swells and locks us together for a little while afterwards. It’s supposed to increase the chance of pregnancy in the female we’re with, but you are—shit, you are on birth control aren’t you? I’m sorry we should have had this conversation before. Fuck, I kind of jumped you didn’t I? I totally lost control.”

Corin is frazzled. A normally put together, acts-like-a-stuffy-forty-year-old Corin, is flustered and frazzled as hell. It’d be cute if he didn’t sound like he’s genuinely panicking. My head is clearing and the remaining tension in my body

completely drains away. Knots. I have come across information on them before and I'm stupid to not have realised that Corin would have one. I'm so lost in my head that I don't realise I still haven't answered Corin until he lets out a worried sound which jerks me back to reality. "It's okay. I'm okay. You're okay. And yes, I am on birth control, I take the potion. We're safe." Then more quietly I add, "Sorry, I freaked out."

He lets out a breath, his body relaxing behind mine then nuzzles the back of my neck. "You don't need to apologise, I'm sorry I didn't check in with you before knotting you. If I was in my right mind then I wouldn't have without clear permission."

I swallow hard, and grit my jaw. "Did... Did you actually want to be with me then or was it all you losing control?" My cheeks flush with embarrassment at the thought and I have to fight the urge to try and crawl away from him again.

Before my emotions get the best of me, a purr starts up in his chest and his arms tighten around me. "Yes, Nessa. I have wanted you since I first laid eyes on you. My instincts just gave me the nudge I needed to put myself out there."

Appeased, I settle in again, eyes getting droopy as the adrenaline wears off. It doesn't help that Corin is like a space heater and practically wrapped around me like the cosiest blanket in the world. A purr of my own starts to thrum in my chest and he places another kiss to my shoulder before sleep steals me away.



Corin

My mate is curled up in my arms right now. It's un-fucking-real. If someone had told me that this is how today would go this morning, I would've laughed at them. Now though... I shake my head, a tiny smile curling my lips. She's adorable, cheeks still flushed, hands tucked to her chest. It's a reminder that I'm still in my Lycan form and how Nessa has accepted me fully. She barely blinked at the fact I was in my Lycan form when I appeared in her room. Then there is how she wanted me to chase her. Fucking hell, that little smirk she gave me before she ran is going to be burned into my brain forever.

I suck in a breath as Dylan and Oscar cross my mind. I wonder how they'd feel about what just happened between Nessa and me? Would they be upset that I treated her so rough? Will they be jealous when they find out that we've been together? I don't think they will be, for one, we've discussed the three of us being in a relationship with Nessa together. And second is, I've gotten the vibe from Dylan that he'd absolutely love to chase Nessa like I just did. He's got a more dominant side that she seems to bring out in him. I grin. Goddess, she's going to have her hands full if she agrees to date us.

That sobers me a little, when a snapping twig catches my attention, making my head jerk up, ears straining. It's quiet though, the only sound is the forest creatures. Still, a growl rumbles in my chest. The forest floor, while mostly naked,

isn't exactly the best place to take a nap. Thankfully my knot chooses that moment to release and I shift into a seated position, bringing a sleeping Nessa with me.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I wake up Nessa enough to convince her to put on my shirt because I tore hers. It's more like a baggy dress on her and it has that purr starting up in my chest again. *I love her wearing my clothes.* Blinking, I shake myself out of those thoughts and scoop her into my arms. She's asleep again almost immediately and I quickly use a spell to collect the rest of our tattered clothing then head through the forest.

I have portals setup throughout the Academy grounds in case of emergencies, which is where I aim for now. My instincts are going haywire right now, needing to get my mate somewhere safe.

It took everything in me to hold back when I came close to her neck, not to mention when I actually bit her. No broken skin means no mate mark. Yet. That has yet another thought swirling. She accepted my primal form. It sends a buzz through my veins. Most of my life I've had to hide that side. Supernaturals and even other monsters avoid me once they know, and they treat me differently. The stigma surrounding Lycans is still very much present in the monster community. Ever since I revealed as a Lycan and shifted for the first time when I was a young teenager, I've been an outcast. Being so powerful didn't help.

There aren't many Lycan's left in the realm, be it hybrids or fullbloods. There are only a handful of full or pureblooded Lycans known in the realm and a few hundred hybrids. We're super rare so that in itself means that lots of supernaturals don't know much about us. So when they usually do hear about us, it's usually not good things. No. It's when one of us has lost control and killed a bunch of people and a supernatural news station is covering the story. I'm a full blooded Lycan, but very few people know about that.

With our kind being portrayed as rabid monsters due to newscasts like that, we end up shunned by the community. A Lycan, unlike a shifter, has added animal instincts built into them constantly, not just when they're shifted. They're even more heightened when in their Lycan form and if the supernatural hasn't been taught proper impulse control, and how to govern those urges from a young age, then they tend to be completely wild whenever they shift. Lycan's with less power tend to struggle with it more, but either way it's still a very large, dangerous magical creature on the loose. My family are all Lycans so I was taught correctly and I usually have fucking amazing control. My eyes drop to Nessa curled up in my arms. Usually.

I like to think that I did pretty well though, considering Lycan's with less control would've lost it the second they caught their mate's scent and fell into a mating rut immediately. For a non-Lycan mate that can be a terrifying experience and a forced mating. I would never do that. Even with my loss of control today, I was with it enough that if

Nessa had shown an ounce of fear or said no then I would've backed off. I shake my head, eyebrows drawing down slightly. I still feel shitty over how I let my control slip today though, and I'm going to make it up to her.

When we reach the portal, I imbue it with my magic and set it for Nessa's room. Portalling is always smoother when Nessa is with me, it's odd. After a few uncomfortable—but not painful—seconds I step into her room. I set her down on the couch and wrap her in a blanket, then move to the kitchen to make her a late lunch.

Humming under my breath, I get out the fixings for a sandwich then set about putting it together. Fingers crossed she's not mad at me when she wakes up. I don't know what I'd do if she wakes up and regrets what we did. I let out a breath, knowing I'll just have to wait and see.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nessa

It has been so hectic since the start of the term between classes, following the local Drákon groups movements, and working with Lexi to research my powers and try to locate Ethan. I'm long overdue for a fucking holiday at this point.

We're pretty sure we have a lead on Ethan's whereabouts, most likely on the Academy grounds, but we won't know for sure until tomorrow afternoon when I go check it out. I have a good feeling about it though. Having his hideout on the Academy grounds makes the most sense for multiple reasons. One is that it's safer for him in a sense, more supes will be looking for him off the grounds and with his little obsession with me it's logical that he'd want to stay close. Somewhere where he can watch me, take pictures and leave me 'gifts' like he's been doing. I scrunch up my nose and shake my head, letting my thoughts drift.

After disclosing to the guys a few days ago that Ethan has been stalking me, we met up to discuss some of the other things Lexi and I have been working on. So when we go to the location we were given by one of Lexi's contacts, the guys will be tagging along. Lexi has had her network of contacts listening out for any chatter of Ethan or anything that could possibly be him. It seems like it's paid off, if this actually turns out to be a solid lead.

My thoughts circle back to the guys and I bite my cheek. It did feel good to get some of my secrets off my chest. I feel

like I don't have to hide as much from them as I would've last term. And of course another good thing came from telling them about Ethan.

I swallow as flashes of what Corin and I did later that day flash through my mind. Gods, that made up for all the recent sexual tension and build up, the only issue now is that he's given me a taste and I want more. With him and with the others. A squirmy feeling starts up in my gut as I recall afterwards though.

I woke up on my couch and Corin had food and a fresh coffee ready for me. It was sweet as hell, but I could see in his eyes that he wanted to talk with me about what happened between us. Of course I did the most Nessa fucking thing I could have done, I ate my food in silence, tugged him in for a heated kiss, then bailed with excuses of meeting up with Lexi that afternoon. Damn it. Now I haven't seen him since and I have no idea how to bring it up or what to say. This is one of these areas where I have hardly any experience. I haven't had a single boyfriend before, and I shake my head just thinking about it. I didn't exactly stick around after the few subpar hookups I had either. With a groan I shake my head at myself again. *Focus Nessa, you have a job to do. You can think about all that later.*

I grunt as I step through my portal into a dark field. I'm dressed in my spelled clothing, plus a small bag with the gear Lexi had me bring. I'd use my spelled pockets, but smaller things can have a tendency to get lost, sort of like things in big handbags.

Flexing my hand, I hold it out in front of me and close my eyes, pushing magic out to sense if there are any magical traps in the area. I doubt there will be, but you can never be too careful. When I don't sense any, I let out a breath and continue on.

That's one thing that Lexi and I have managed to accomplish, a way to get around Aurora's magic and use my own. Through trial and error, I figured out that if I focus on both of the magics inside of me separately, then I can create a sort of wall with my magic to keep Ghost Girl—Aurora's—down. It is incredibly hard to do when I'm in a highly emotional state so I need to make sure I have my emotions under control as well, to make the method work. We've been working on the technique every day and it seems like I've got a decent hold on it—providing I'm calm—so no more explosions. I've even managed to not destroy any classrooms in the last forty-eight hours, so there is that.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to work when it comes to potions though, so I'm still going to need that balance stone my fathers are having sent to me.

Grimacing at the thought, I reach out and press my fingers to a wooden fence paling. *Touch wood.* Never can be too superstitious either.

Blowing out a breath, I brush a stray hair out of my face then glare down at the little red dot on my screen as I walk down the dark street. I'm in the middle of butt fuck nowhere because that asshole Kristen was just at the warehouse *again*. I

swear to the Goddess, she has to get off on either watching people fight or the sounds of it because she's there almost every second day. Unlike other days though, Lexi has me here on an assignment this time. She gave me a handful of little devices to attach to each wall of the warehouse. When they're all up around the building we'll be able to access any and everyone's devices that are brought into it.

My head cocks to the side as I think about it. Hmm, I guess that's one good thing about Kristen frequenting the place. There are enough depraved idiots that go to the place that it'll take Lex a while to sift through all of them, but she said she should be able to handle it alright. I'm going to leave her to that; I prefer to avoid seeing the files they have stored on their phone if I can help it. I shudder. *Yep, no thanks.*

When I approach the bouncers manning the door, I draw my shoulders back, exuding as much confidence as I can. I'm not worried at all, but I've had more than one bouncer in this place either try to hit on me or tell me this isn't the place for a sweet girl like me to last a lifetime. Thankfully these two let me pass without a fuss and I make sure to tip them both handsomely, along with my entrance fee. The moment I'm inside, I head to my corner, keeping my senses peeled for threats on the way, but otherwise ignoring people. When I reach it, I portal up to the rafters and dance between the beams, placing the little devices as I go until I've made a complete rectangle. Nodding to myself, I portal back to the ground and do the same thing on ground level, but act like I'm drunk off my ass or distracted so

I don't draw any attention to myself—well other than the occasional lewd offer. *No thank you.*

I'm placing the last one when a particularly angry bellow catches my attention. With it set, I then drift towards the fighting cage that's closest to me, brushing through the tight crowd of people as I go. Usually I try to avoid the fight cages, but when I get close enough to this one and grab the bars it becomes obvious what drew me to it. Sucking in a quick breath, a strangled sound gets caught in my throat. *Oscar.*

He's shirtless, sweating and covered in dozens of forming bruises and cuts. The pink-haired troll is ripped, but that's not what's got my attention right now. No. It's his opponent who has got to be at least twice his width and two feet taller than him. Oscar dances around his opponent who appears to be a mixed blood Giant. Fucking hell, I'm about to watch Oscar die. I grit my teeth, anger flaring through me. And if he doesn't die I'm going to kill him myself once this match is done.

Oscar's quick on his feet, I've got to give him that. After a few seconds of eyeing each other off, the giant gets fed up and takes a swing that Oscar manages to evade. He gets in tight and pops two punches to his kidney from behind him before darting back as the Giant turns around and aims for him again, but Oscar is too quick. I let out a breath, thinking maybe this will be alright, until Oscar's pink eyes meet mine over the Giant's shoulder and widen in shock. My entire body locks up at being the cause of his distraction, and being unfocused costs him. The Giant takes a swing at his head and Oscar's too slow,

only managing to move enough so it bounces off of him, rather than break his face, or pop his head off his shoulders. The Giants fists are the same size as Oscar's fucking *head*.

I groan softly and bite my tongue. There is nothing I can do to help him and if he's here then I can only assume he knows what he's doing. Oscar stumbles back but rights himself like the blow is nothing, going back to dancing around him while leaping in to land little hits then darting back out again. *Taunting* the Giant. I close my eyes and shake my head. Maybe Oscar is more like me than I realised.

Lets just hope he really does know what he's doing.



Oscar

I continue to bounce around my opponent trying to keep my head on the fight, and not on the *what the fuck*, that keeps going through my head. Why is Nessa of all people *here*?

I don't get any time to think about it though, because the bastard takes a swing at my face again, like seriously dude, keep those gorilla hands to yourself. Shaking my head, I shove everything else away and focus solely on the matter at hand. *Kicking this bastard's ass.*

“Soo, Giant man. Do you have a name? Or do you prefer to go by Mr. Giant?” I question, grinning as I continue to irritate the fuck out of him by evading his blows and landing little love taps all over him. If I can piss him off enough his brain should switch over to pissed off bull mode and he'll try to charge me, then I can use that to my advantage by tiring the fucker out.

He snarls at my words and takes another swipe at me. “You're a little slow there, mate. Once this is over I can give you some tips if you'd like?” I say innocently, hiding my smirk when smoke practically comes out of his nose. So predictable.

Dancing back from yet another attempted punch, I do a little spin to show him how unbothered of him I am and laugh when he looks like he wants to murder me. *Almost there.*

I narrow my eyes as I inspect him. “So are you on fae juicers or what? You totally are, aren’t you?” I tease, making my voice sound like I’m cooing to a baby. His face turns beet red with rage. “Naw, compensating for something are we?” I deliberately look down at his crotch before I meet his eyes and quirk an eyebrow at him. *Bingo, we have reached bull level rage, I repeat, we have reached bull level rage.*

Mr. Giant roars and drops his shoulder, before barreling at me. I make my eyes go wide and throw my hands up to cover my face like I wasn’t expecting this outcome at all as he thuds towards me. At the last second I spin out of the way—which of course pisses him off more—and he turns around to charge at me a second time. This time when I dart out of the way I use the momentum of my spin to add oomph to my hit and punch him *hard* right on the temple. He doesn’t go down, but it does stun him enough for me to advance on him and start wailing blows to his head and face. When he reaches up to cover his head, I dart around him rattling his fucking kidneys with all I got, and he spins, growling at me. It’s about this time when I know he’s exhausted and dazed so this move should work.

Using the cage to my advantage, I run at it and climb up it like a cat before launching off of it with enough air to allow me to land on Mr. Giant’s back and lock my arm around his throat in a solid choke hold. My legs lock around his chest, and I hold on for the ride. He manages to smack me into the cage once before dropping like a rock. I hold on like a leech though until the referee pulls me off with his magic. I snarl at him automatically, then let it go before getting my shit

together and moving backwards a few steps so he can rile up the crowd about my win. My magic and more primal instincts are always closer to the surface in high stimulation situations like this, which can make it difficult to control myself. It can make it difficult to hold back knee-jerk reactions like automatically assuming that a stranger grabbing you is a threat.

My other senses kick back online as my mind clears, the sound of the crowd filtering back in, some are cheering and others are cursing—those who just lost bets most likely. Then I remember and wince. *Nessa's here*. Goddess, what did I do to deserve this kind of timing? Tonight of all nights, it's the first time I've been here since before the start of the term. I look like absolute hell too, because this is my third fight for the night, and last, so long as the pay is as good as I'm guessing it will be. I've brought quite a lot of entertainment tonight.

Shaking my head, I leave the cage, ignoring Mr. Giant who is groaning on the ground as he wakes up. Fingers crossed he doesn't try to come after me outside the club tonight, he seems like one of those types. Letting out a sigh, I don't look up when I exit the cage, praying that I just imagined seeing Nessa tonight. *Or maybe I'll get lucky and she's already left?* A pair of callused hands land on my cheeks and Nessa's candy sweet scent wraps around me. *No such luck*. I look up and meet her golden eyes.

“Why the hell did you let me distract you like that? You could have gotten your head torn off!” she growls at me. Her words are so unexpected I just blink at her stupidly. *What?* I

must say as much out loud because she shakes her head at me and grabs my hand lightly, careful not to put pressure on my split knuckles. “What are you doing here anyways?”

My hackles immediately rise, even though her voice is neutral, not angry or accusing. “I could ask the same about you.” My words come out sharp as a whip and I grimace again. Gods, this really isn’t the time for me to hang out with her, I don’t have enough energy to force my happy go lucky facade at the moment.

Unlike the tongue lashing I’m expecting from her, Nessa throws me a narrow eyed look over her shoulder but otherwise doesn’t mention my tone. “That’s fair,” she says with a shrug and leaves it at that, still leading me through the club.

“You don’t have any of your stuff here do you?”

“No,” I say in a gruff voice, exhaustion sweeping through me. I’m not really sure about her angle. Is she playing it cool now just so she can go crazy about it once we’re alone? Or is she genuinely going to leave it alone? I clear my throat. “I do have to collect my winnings though.”

She nods, but doesn’t say anything. When we reach the stairs to the office, I realise that she was already leading me there. She already knew. Just another piece to add to the puzzle that is Nessa. She gestures for me to go ahead of her and I do, expecting her to wait for me, but she doesn’t. She pauses for a moment and digs an amulet-looking thing out of her pocket to slip over her head, then whispers a spell. Suddenly I’m looking at a tall, blue-haired man with black

eyes, and a swimmers' build. "What the hell?" I blurt out, eyes wide.

"Hush," Nessa says, but rather than her husky, feminine voice, a male's low baritone reaches my ears and all I can do is blink at her. I know it's because of the amulet, but I've never seen one in action before and it's tripping me out. Not to mention I'm confused as to why the hell she has it, why she's here in the first place, and the fact that she hasn't run away screaming yet. *What the fuck is going on?*

My nostrils flare as I suck in a calming breath before going to question her, but she—he—shakes his head. "No time now, if you still insist on knowing I'll explain later. Go do what you have to do, Oscar. Oh, and don't mention my name."

My lips part, but I snap my mouth shut and shake my head, deciding to go along with it. "Alright," I mumble, drawing the word out before spinning on my heel and climbing the stairs. She follows me up, her new form making me twitchy and throwing me off completely.

The only reason I can think of is that she doesn't want to get on Hill's radar, but I don't understand how she could be aware of him in the first place. I bite my bottom lip as I reach the top of the stairs and knock on the door.

Nessa hangs back and I let out a breath of relief for it. *Yay, we might just make it out of this alive.*

As the door opens, my body stiffens and I can feel Nessa's eyes on me while my gaze meets that of the bar's owner.



Nessa

“Hill,” Oscar greets, and the bar owner nods at him before Hill’s eyes find me over Oscar’s shoulder.

“And who might you be?” Hill asks, a calculating glint in his eyes as he catalogues the broad shoulders and sinewy muscle of my enchantments illusion. I’m sure he thinks I could be new meat. I have to suppress a scoff. I’ve used a different alias when I have come here to let off steam in the rings a few times in the past, so I’m going to look like a complete stranger to him. I offer the man a lazy blink but otherwise don’t respond. I’m not going to offer him any information—not even my name—until he gives me a valid reason to.

Oscar clears his throat and shifts uncomfortably. “I’ve just come to collect my winnings,” he says, bypassing the question completely.

Hill drags his eyes from me and turns, gesturing for us to step into his office. He heads for his desk as we step into the room and my eyebrows lift slightly as I take in the big-ass spelled safe, taking up a quarter of one of his walls. It’s built-in and looks and *feels* heavily protected.

For all the dirt I’ve got on him, I’ve never actually been in his office before, so I store the layout in my mind, ready to use at a later date should I need it.

My attention is drawn back to Oscar and Hill when the latter hands the troll a duffle bag. “Two thousand dollars worth in

fae currency,” Hill says and my eyes narrow, head cocking to the side. *Well what do we have here?* A slow smile tugs at my lips.

Oscar accepts the bag and goes to step back, only to pause when I clear my throat, still smiling. “Oscar, acquaintance of mine, how long have you been fighting here for?” I ask.

“Several years, once or twice a month. Less, in the last two years,” he answers slowly, cautiously. My question is meant to be for his benefit though, not to call him out for his actions.

All I can do is blink at him stupidly for a moment as that information sinks in. Holy shit, he was practically a child when he started here. Rage coils in my gut at him needing to do something so awful to get by, but I shove it down to deal with at a later date and funnel the energy into dealing with Hill. The shithead who has apparently been stiffing Oscar for at least the last two years.

I may not fight here a lot, but I have looked into the payment expectations behind it in our realm, and the laws—though there aren’t many of those—so I know enough to understand that Oscar is getting cheated. He’s being paid in the lowest bracket—as a new fighter would—when he should be getting paid as a seasoned fighter who has multiple wins under his belt. I’m assuming he would be fairly recognised by regulars in a place like this.

I ask Oscar and he confirms that his win rate is around eighty-percent which is fantastic for business, and the profits

Hill would be making off of him has my mood plummeting even more.

“Hill is ripping you off, Oscar. You should be earning around triple of what you are now. At least six grand in fae coins just to appear, and another two if you were to win. You’re getting paid beginner rates.”

I hold Hill’s eyes as I explain how payment is sorted out and that since Oscar didn’t do the research, it was partially his fault. He should have negotiated a higher rate after his first year of fighting, but I’m not going to let his lack of knowledge get Hill off of having to pay him the full rate this time around, so I step closer with a grin.

Oscar is silent as I approach his boss, face a little pale, but also running through a host of emotions that I can’t keep up with. Hill is sputtering, face red. “How dare you! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Phoenix,” I say easily, and cock my head to the side as I wait for him to connect the dots. I’m sure there have been whispers, though no one would have put a face to the name. I don’t pull it out unless I really need to throw my weight around, and always with a different visual enchantment. It’s well known as the tag I use when blackmailing people for information via computer.

I watch Hill’s face drain of colour as it clicks and a sheen appears on his forehead. “I’m sure, now that Oscar realises his mistake, you’re happy to raise his pay for future fights and bump up the agreed upon amount for this payout.” I casually

draw a dagger from where it's strapped at my thigh and start cleaning my nails with the blade tip. "Unless you'd like an anonymous tip about the Pixie dust you're illegally distributing and making in the district, to be sent in to the SFBI?"

I swear the man somehow pales even further and a bead of sweat rolls down his forehead. "O-of course, just a moment. I can have the agreement written up in a second, with Phoenix present?"

Oscar nods mutely, those silver eyes fixed on my face, the confusion and slight distrust there evident. The new caution when he looks at me has me biting my tongue, but I don't let my face change from the bored expression it's portraying.

Hill gets everything together quickly and after glancing over their new contract, I give it my tick of approval and we head out of his office, Oscar a few thousand fae coins richer than he was expecting, and me lost in my head.

I suck in a breath when we hit the bottom of the steps, my ears starting to ring with all the noise, and make a beeline through the club, the illusion of my male body making people part for us to pass through the crowd. I assume that Oscar is still following me, and don't check behind me as I burst out one of the exits. I immediately take several deep breaths, moving away from the club, letting the cool night air wash over me. The doors bang open again and I peer over my shoulder at Oscar who—still carrying his duffle bag full of

money—stalks after me, face tense. Actually his whole body seems tense.

I squint at him, taking in his cuts and try to guesstimate how long it will take them to heal. He needs to clean them before his supernatural healing closes them, otherwise they'll have to be re-cut open to get the sand and grime out so he doesn't get an infection. There are some downsides to supernatural healing.

“So, what was all that about?” Oscar questions as soon as we're down the road a ways, the club getting smaller in the distance behind us.

I turn to face him, walking backwards so I can examine his expression. He looks angry and confused at the same time, his silver eyes drifting over my face, that peppermint and dark chocolate scent sharper than usual due to his volatile mood. I shrug, and blink slowly. “Why have you been fighting at the club for years?” I counter. It might be a bit of a bitch move, but I'm tired, and fair is fair. I'm not going to bare my soul to him, when I'm sure he's not ready to do the same. I'm not angry at Oscar. He has his secrets and I have mine, he can't be mad at me for that.

He seems to realise that too because his shoulders sag, a hesitant smile touching his lips. “Truce?” he asks.

I grin. “Truce.”

Just like that, the tension between us snaps and he speeds up so we're walking side by side.

Oscar doesn't question me as I continue to lead him down the dark road, but his footsteps get heavier as his energy wanes. That's fine, we're almost far enough for me to use a portal. This is one secret that I feel comfortable enough sharing with Oscar, but it does beg the question, *does this mean he can portal off the Academy grounds like me? If so, what does that mean?* I swear, I have enough fucking questions to last me a lifetime.

When we reach the fourth paddock, I let out a sigh of relief and open a portal. Oscar startles and lets out a yelp. "How the hell did you just do that?"

My eyebrows draw down in confusion. "What do you mean? You must have portalled here?" I'm so confused right now.

"Yeah, but not like that. You just opened one out of thin air. I use the same one each time. I created a portal circle here and one at the Academy, both only activated for my magic. That way I can safely jump between them. I also have a few set up in other places in case of an emergency," he explains, tone awed as he watches my portal. We can't stand around here all night with my portal open so I step through it, tugging him with me then close it behind us. Now that we're through I also take off my amulet, my body returning to how it usually looks.

"So, I'm guessing that means you've been able to portal through the Academy barriers as well? I thought you weren't supposed to be able to do that? I only figured out that I could by accident."

He grins at me sheepishly. “Most people still believe you can’t, but for about the last decade or so the barrier has weakened so much that providing you’re an A-class monster you can override it.”

My expression tightens. That’s not good at all. If we can portal through it, who is to say A-class monsters who want to attack us can’t break through with their magic? Or hell, just portal in? It also supports my theory on how Ethan is getting on and off of campus to find his victims. I’m going to have to look into that. I blink, eyes falling to the forest floor as something occurs to me. *Could that be why it so willingly absorbs the excess magic I’ve been giving off? Because it needs the power to build up the barriers again?* I huff out a breath, and add it to the mountain of things I have to look into later.

Still holding onto Oscar’s hand, I lead him to my dorm and he doesn’t protest, simply trailing behind me. He doesn’t hesitate until I open my door and try to lead him inside. When he pauses in the doorway, I turn to him in question. His silver eyes search mine and after a few seconds he lets me lead him inside my dorm.

Although he no longer seems to be mad at me for not explaining what happened at the club, he’s still wound up from the fight. His body is tense, yet exhaustion seems to radiate from his pores. He eyes my dorm, gaze landing on me before bouncing away again.

Now that we're completely alone I can tell he's nervous, so I give him some space and duck into my cupboard to grab two towels, a wash cloth, then a set of clothes for me and a baggy set of sweats for him, before returning to the lounge room. "Come on," I murmur. Walking to my bathroom, I leave the door open behind me in a silent request, and strip off my clothing and shove them out of the way for now. They reek of the club and strangers. I lean over the edge of the large bathtub—courtesy of Corin's magic—and turn on the rain shower head, fiddling with the temperature. When it's perfect, I get in, the room silent other than the water and Oscar's heavy breaths from the doorway. My eyes flick up to examine his expression and I find his silver gaze already locked onto my face. His pupils are dilated, lips parted as he watches me, but that tension in his shoulders and the furrow to his brow remains. Exhaustion lines his features and it's like his brain is going in circles. I blink at him, giving him a tiny smile.

He clears his throat, letting out a shaky breath. "You're beautiful. So fucking beautiful, sweetheart," he says in a low voice, his eyes not wavering from mine. It has my smile widening, even as a slight flush touches my cheeks.

I don't speak and neither does he as I watch him slowly peel off his grimy pants. I bite my cheek when I see the extent of his bruising and shallow cuts in the harsh bathroom light, my smile fading. He joins me under the showerhead and I shuffle back to make a little room as he closes the glass door. It's quite large, but so is Oscar so our chests still almost brush as we stand facing each other.

Swallowing hard, I tip my head back to examine his expression and find him looking off to the side, lost in his head. My brows draw down. *We can't have that.* I don't like the look in his eye. It's worrying. Sucking in a deep breath, I reach up and grab the clean washcloth I hung over the top of the shower and put a small drop of soap on it. I don't want to aggravate his cuts by using too much, but the dirt needs to come out. I hover my palms over his chest in question and his gaze jumps from my hands to my face. His breathing stutters, eyes darting between mine before he dips his head in a nod.

I let out a shaky breath of my own then press my hands to his firm chest, his heartbeat thudding a quick beat under my palm. I rub the cloth over his skin, starting at his broad shoulders, and working my way down over his toned stomach and waist—gentle on his bruises. The bruises are fairly easy to spot on his pink skin, the spots where the bruises are forming, deepening to a purple-ish colour. Washing out any cuts I find with water, I take care and clean around them. My eyes drop to his body, but I can feel his gaze burning into my face. I work my way down each leg, admiring his toned thighs and calves as I move down them. A tiny smile touches his lips when I get him to lift them up in turn to wash his feet. I rise again and twirl my index finger for him to turn around. While I work my way down his back, he washes his privates. There is nothing sexual about this. He's in an odd headspace—one that I've been in before—and I want to offer him the comfort I craved when it happened to me.

Still behind him, I tap on his shoulder and guessing what I want him to do, he tips his head back under the shower stream, wetting it thoroughly before returning to his place in front of me. I can't help but notice as he wets his hair that if the showerhead was much lower, he'd have to duck down to fit underneath it. Next I pump out a coin sized dollop of shampoo, and work it into a lather on my hand before massaging it into his shaggy hair. The strands are a darker pink than usual because of the water that's clinging to them. As I massage his scalp, the tension in Oscar's shoulders visibly falls away, his silver eyes fixed on my face. His expression is hard to read as we watch each other, so if it weren't for his relaxing body language, I would probably think he wasn't enjoying this. When I'm done, he rinses off then grabs the other washcloth and holds it up to my body, head cocked in question.

My eyes widen and goosebumps prick my arms. I nod, but duck my chin slightly so my eyes aren't quite meeting his. As he soaps up the cloth and begins to wash me, the intimacy is almost overwhelming. I've never washed or been washed by anyone like this before. I swallow the lump in my throat at the goey warmth that's pulsing in my chest. That other side of me, the one that's becoming more and more present is practically purring at our treatment and my eyes grow half-lidded as he finishes. He washes my hair as well, his fingers drawing a hum of pleasure from me when he lightly scratches my scalp.

After we've rinsed and dried off, I tug on my clothes, Oscar doing the same. The sweats fit him and I mentally give myself

a high five for enjoying mens sweats. They're so comfy, and I must have at least three or four pairs. By now Oscar's dragging his feet and my eyes are gritty with exhaustion. I double check his bare chest and face to find that his cuts are all almost healed so he doesn't need to be bandaged, then stretch my arms above my head.

My eyes land on my bed and my gut clenches. I really don't want to sleep alone tonight. "Will you stay with me?" I ask, eyes flitting over his face. A range of emotions cross his face but it eventually settles on exhaustion and he nods, following me and climbing in beside me.

I snuggle up under the cool sheets and roll over to face Oscar, searching his face. "I'm not going to demand any information about tonight, but I do need to ask you one thing." He tenses, only to relax at my words after a moment. "Are you okay?"

That tiny, crooked smile returns to his lips. "I am right now. Thank yo—"

I cut him off with a hard look, which he chuckles at. "Don't thank me, I'm sure you would have done the same for me." He nods, expression sobering slightly.

"Good, now roll over," I demand, and he does as I ask, though he seems a little confused.

As soon as he's settled on his side, his back to me, I curl around him, being the big spoon. His chest shakes with a soft laugh, but other than that he doesn't say anything and I drift

off with his comforting dark chocolate and peppermint scent filling my lungs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Nessa

Unicorn swoops down in front of me, landing on Oscar's shoulder and I bite back a smile at his disgruntled huff. Their love hate relationship is as funny as it is endearing. Just the other day we were studying in my dorm and Oscar had her curled up his lap, giving her chin rubs while quizzing me on the runes test at the end of term, so I know it's all an act on his end.

Corin, Oscar, Dylan and I are following the lead Lexi got on Ethan's location. The path we're following is completely overgrown, like most of them through the forest seem to be. My eyes slide to Corin and I grimace, just a little. It's been pretty awkward between us today. No, okay, let me rephrase, I've been pretty awkward around him today and that shit is probably obvious to everyone. I don't know where I'm supposed to look—is eye contact even a thing anymore? Goddess. I've never actually stuck around properly after I've hooked up with someone and I certainly haven't slept with anyone that I have an emotional connection to—other than Corin. I mean, I've done some other stuff with Oscar and Dylan, but it's just not the same as me sleeping with him the way I did. I cringe, I really need to figure out how to act normal around him again.

My attention is drawn back to the present when Oscar yelps and throws his arms up. He stumbles down the path a few steps as Unicorn flaps away chittering, a couple of pink

strands hanging from her maw. *The little shit tore out some of his hair.* My eyes widen, a shocked bark of laughter escaping me. Corin and Dylan burst into laughter, the former darting out of the way, when Oscar goes to shove him in mock anger. “Are you okay?” I ask, unable to keep the amusement out of my voice. Some of that bubblyness in my chest is also relief as most of the tension between Corin and I today abruptly vanishes with the laughter.

I roll my lips in, chest rumbling with my contained laughter and Poppy throws me a look over his shoulder. “Really, you too?” he says, pouting.

Grinning, I close the distance between us and knock my shoulder into his. “Sorry.”

“Liar,” he whispers, but the amusement is clear in his voice and he drops his arm around my shoulders. His dark chocolate and peppermint scent washes over me and makes my heart speed up. Ignoring the effect he has on me, I tip my head back and meet his eyes, the corner of my mouth quirked.

“You see straight through me.”

Poppy simply shakes his head and I laugh at his nonchalance before ducking out from under his arm. Grabbing his hand, I drag him after me in the direction of the location Lexi gave me. “Holy shit, is that real or am I hallucinating?” I ask, eyes widening.

When Lexi got a lead on a potential sighting of Ethan, I was sceptical, but we agreed that it needed to be checked out so I rounded up the guys so I wouldn’t be doing this on my own,

and they agreed easily. If it comes to nothing, then it's at least a break from the stress of classes. But the anonymous tip didn't mention anything about a graveyard on the Academy grounds.

Corin shakes his head, eyes scanning the graves. "You're not hallucinating."

Dylan adjusts his glasses before walking up to the closest headstone. He places his hand on the top of the grave then after a few seconds cocks his head. "From what I could get from the headstone, it seems this place is for students who die at the Academy. I won't use magic on the actual body though, because that is very disrespectful and bordering on death magic."

I nod, already knowing that. It's one of the few things that is deeply frowned upon in the magic community including the monster community. Death Magic. Unless you are born with necromancy then it is considered disrespectful and sometimes illegal to practise it in some places.

I approach another gravestone only to pause at the name engraved on it. Aurora. I swallow hard, eyes narrowing. I know for a fact that her body isn't buried here. *What the hell?* Knowing that I won't be disrespecting an empty grave, I use a cleaning rune to restore the headstone to its original form.

Aurora, missing and presumed dead.

No family or friends are listed as loved ones and no date. Only her name and those words. She really had no one. I swallow hard and feel the guys approach behind me.

“Are you alright?” Dylan asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I let out a breath. “I guess I assumed that they had to have never found her body with the glamoured area in the forest being untouched, but I still thought they’d do more for her than this.”

“If her killer really was the next headmaster then when he took over he could be responsible for this too. Perhaps the instigator for these deaths as well. We should split up in pairs and check the dates on the stones to see if they match up with the year he took over. I know Aurora isn’t marked, but hopefully the others are,” Corin says, face grim.

I take a moment to gather myself then nod. Grabbing ahold of Dylan’s hand, I lead him towards the back of the cemetery. It puts roughly twenty feet between us and the other guys so we have the illusion of privacy.

“So how are you really going with all of this?” he asks after a few minutes of checking graves. All of them, other than three students whose deaths were spread out over a decade, are dated to have happened in the years after Aurora’s murderer became headmaster. Goddess, that says *a lot* about the type of Headmaster Steven was.

“I’m alright.” My voice is steady. I’m in control of myself. It’s one thing all this chaos can’t steal from me.

“Really? Cause I don’t believe you,” Dylan says, voice low.

His casual certainty has my hackles rising and I turn to him with a scowl. “What the hell would make you think that? Do I look like I’m falling apart?” I say, putting up a sound barrier around us so I don’t have to worry about alerting Ethan to our presence if his hideout really is around here.

Dylan purses his lips then leans back against a tree, hands shoved in his pockets and ankles crossed. “On the outside? No. Do I think you’re struggling mentally and emotionally? Yes. And that is nothing to be ashamed of.” He shakes his head, not breaking eye contact with me. “You’re probably the strongest person I’ve ever met, and what I know of your past is probably a drop in a bucket to what you’ve actually been through and experienced. I can’t say that I can understand everything that’s driving you or how anxiety inducing it is, but I want you to talk to me about it. I can tell that unless someone pushes you, you’re going to keep bottling everything up until one day you explode. Then it will be too late, so Nessa, talk to me. Right here, right fucking now. I don’t know what’s happened in the last few days to have your scent radiating with such stress and worry, but you’re going to tell me and I’m going to help you untangle it.”

I stare at Dylan open mouthed. *Holy shit.* Him taking command is so fucking hot. I mumble as much and he quirks an eyebrow at me.

“You’re not going to distract me, Nessa. Talk, now.”

Those blue eyes burn into mine and I let out a shaky breath. *Alright then, he wants me to do an emotional dump on him*

right now? Fine, we can fucking do that.

I blurt out everything; how stressed I am about Ethan stalking me, worried about Lexi's mental health, about my classes, my new powers and my magic. Then we get to the new stresses. I tell him about sleeping with Corin then running away like a coward, as well as about discovering something new about Oscar—I don't mention specifics, that's his business—then I'm all fucking worried and emotioned-out. I can't help that my thoughts drift to Foster as I blurt everything out, but I don't mention that one. I'm still not sure how I feel about it. We had... fun together, lots of fun exploring Aurora's hidden place in the forest and I'm not really sure what to do after the awkwardness of our last encounter. So for now I push it to the side to deal with at a later date.

Feeling drained, I stare at the ground as we stand in silence. I can't help but wonder if I've finally scared him off? I grit my teeth and suck in a breath, ready to turn and walk away when he's there. Dylan grips my chin and applies gentle pressure until I give in and tip my head back to meet his eyes. "Good job, love. Doesn't that feel better? You shouldn't be keeping all that trapped inside."

My shoulders slump at the sincerity in his expression. "Yes, a little better," I agree somewhat reluctantly.

He smiles and cocks his head. "So, Corin...?" he trails off and my cheeks burn. I'm so not used to this confident side of Dylan.

I groan, my eyes sliding away from Dylan's. *Corin*. Yeah, what the hell to do about that. "I don't know," I admit, lost for words.

Dylan shrugs and quirks a brow at me. "You need to figure out what you want first. What you want with him... what you want with *us*." My eyes jump to his and I blink repeatedly.

The smile playing on his lips grows as the seconds stretch and I only get more flustered. Then he does possibly the best thing he can to distract me. Leaning in, Dylan presses his lips to mine and I respond with enthusiasm, getting lost in the kiss. It has hunger stirring in my stomach, reminding me that I'll need blood soon. I've been going to *Corin* when the urge gets unbearable, but it seems like I can usually go roughly two days before I get to that point.

As though he knows my line of thought, Dylan pulls back from me a little, and searches my expression. "Nessa, I want you to know that I'm always here if you want to talk about your new powers."

He's referring to my vampire ones, but I'm just not ready to talk about it yet so I open my mouth ready to stall, only for Oscar to unintentionally save me from having to. "Hey, um I think I found something," he calls out from the other side of the graveyard and it has me taking a few steps back from Dylan. I give the vampire a wobbly grin before heading in the direction Oscar's voice came from.

I'm stepping around a tree's trunk when an arm loops around my waist from behind me, my back bumping into

someone's chest and stopping me in my tracks. I'm about to lash out with my magic when Dylan's old book scent wraps around me and I huff out a breath. "Are you insane? I could've seriously hurt you!" I whisper yell, but he just laughs quietly.

"I trust you," he says, lips hovering by my ear causing goosebumps to rise on my arms. "Just think about what I said, okay? I'm ready to talk about it whenever you are." He nips the sensitive spot below my ear and I jump, pleasure zinging through me, then he lets me go, strolling off towards Oscar. I stay frozen in place feeling all sorts of things. It doesn't help that when I refocus on my surroundings I find Corin grinning at me, eyes flitting between Dylan and I. It has my cheeks burning. Goddamn blushing. Up until I met these guys I never had an issue with it, but now I'm blushing every five seconds. *Like what the actual hell?*

I drop my head back and let out a groan, searching the sky like it holds all the answers. The glimmer of the warded barrier covering the school catches my attention and I pause, several things snapping into place in my mind all of the sudden. *I wonder...*

"You coming, Nessa?" Corin calls, and I straighten, eyes searching him out. While I was distracted he started moving towards Oscar. I shove my realisation to the side for now and walk over to Oscar.

Him and the others are standing around a lone headstone that's a fair ways away from the others and crumbling with age. Other than it appearing to have aged more than the others

there isn't anything significant about it. My eyebrows furrow, eyes searching out Oscar's questioningly.

“Corin, can you throw up a barrier around all of us please? A soundproof one that can't be sensed by other supernatural's?” Oscar mumbles. I tense imperceptibly, on high alert at his words but I'm careful not to make it obvious.

Corin doesn't respond, simply blinks slowly then the faintest tingle of magic washes over me along with a crackling bonfire scent. “We're safe,” he says after a few seconds. “I also added an illusion so it looks and sounds like we're laughing and talking amongst ourselves so it's less suspicious.”

Oscar doesn't question it. “There was a faint magical signature on one of the gravestones I passed over there. I didn't want to draw attention to the fact that I picked up on it so I called you all over here,” Oscar explains.

I suck in a breath, ready to describe the magical signature when something smashes into the side of Corin's barrier with a *BOOM*, sending me crashing to the ground with a yelp, the earth shaking beneath me. My head smacks into the ground, the ringing in my ears the last thing I hear before everything goes white.

My awareness snaps back to me almost instantaneously when I regain consciousness and I jolt up into a sitting position, adrenaline buzzing through my veins like I'm connected to a live wire. Even so, as I stumble to my feet it takes a moment for my vision to clear. Blinking away the

spots, the first thing I notice is that I'm the only one on my feet, and standing not twenty feet from me is Ethan. In the fucking flesh. My eyes narrow. After nearly two months of not being able to track him down, suddenly he's just here? Something isn't adding up.

There's no time to ponder that though, because as my brain catches up, the realisation that I'm the only one standing fully sinks in. Panic. Real fucking panic has my chest seizing and while keeping Ethan in my sights I drop to my knees and use my newly acquired vampire hearing to check my mens heartbeats. I have the fleeting thought that I'm glad Lexi didn't come today as I confirm that they're all breathing, thank the Goddess, then I quickly catalogue their visible injuries. Rage like I've only felt a few times in my life floods through me. Dylan's arm sits at an odd angle, like it's possibly broken and he's covered in scrapes. Oscar isn't much better with bruises fast forming on his visible skin and a large gash on his cheek. It's Corin that has me worried though, as he has a large cut along his temple and a decent sized lump growing beneath it.

I need to get them to healers and fast, but first I need to deal with the pathetic excuse for a supernatural being that caused this mess. *Ethan*. I climb to my feet, a serene expression on my face. That dangerous calm, that high pressure situations seem to bring out in me, floats through me and I'm grateful for it. I'm so fucking glad that I'm wired this way, it means I can fuck up the person who hurt my men.

"Ethan," I greet, voice cold and emotionless.

He blinks at my words, eyebrows twitching for a moment before smoothing out. “Nessa.”

I cock my head to the side, holding his attention as I carefully, and at a painfully slow pace, build a tri layered barrier around my men while simultaneously calling my familiar to me. “It’s great that I finally get to speak with you, I have a lot for you to catch me up on. I have lots of questions,” I say casually and his eyebrows furrow. His lips part as though he’s going to speak, but I cut him off. “Let’s start with an easy one, hey? Where have you been getting my ‘gifts’ from?”

Ethan’s lips twist into a snarl. “From all over the Realm, you dumb bitch.”

I ignore his slurs and simply nod at him confirming what I’d already figured out. I take a step closer, and tilt my head. “How have you been getting off of the Academy grounds, I didn’t think anyone could do that?” I ask, twisting my expression into one of confusion like I don’t already know.

He scoffs, shoulders tensing as though he’s getting ready to launch at me. “Personal portals, but you should know this. I really thought I was facing a better opponent than this,” he says, appearing genuinely confused.

I don’t trust it though, I don’t trust anything about *him*. Deciding to push him a little more, I give him a slow blink, the barrier behind me now complete. “Why did all the gifts you left me, resemble something from me when I was a child? I don’t understand. Why leave the doll? What was the purpose of any of that?”

He laughs, but it's a broken sound. "Are you serious?" His eyes narrow on me, overgrown hair dangling in his eyes as he watches me.

I dip my head in a nod and he shakes his head, face incredulous. Then his eyebrows draw low over his eyes, jaw clenching as his expression morphs into one of anger. "I did all of it, because it's *your* fault! It's your fault that she's dead. Yet, you got to live. No, no, no, not any more. You deserve to die the way she did. You deserve it fucking *all*." Then he's lunging at me, a wave of magic spraying from his fingertips wildly. I vaguely notice that Aurora is hovering in her ghostly form along the edge of the graveyard, but I don't allow myself to linger on that.

I dart and spin out of the way and growl at him, my anger and frustration from the last two terms compiling until I'm practically spitting mad. "Let's pretend all that shit you spouted was true, how the hell could you hurt Lexi like that? She was your friend back then too, she was Anna's friend," I yell, ignoring the way hearing Anna's name seems to turn him feral and he goes to leap at me again only to falter when I start taking measured steps towards him instead.

All of the sudden he doesn't look so confident. I can't focus on that though, not while a red haze is descending over my vision. All I can see in my mind's eye are snapshots of Lexi after she was taken by him, all the 'gifts' he's been leaving me and all the supernatural's he's hurt. My men hurt behind me. The telltale sound of wings has a smile tipping my lips. "Unicorn, look after them, please," I instruct her, then

promptly shove her into my bubble of protection with them. I'll probably pay for that later, but who the hell cares. *My men are safe so I can play.*

I let out a breath, exhaling all my inhibitions simultaneously. *It's time to fuck some shit up.*

This time when I advance on Ethan he comes to his senses and starts launching magic at me. Mine has been buzzing under my skin since I woke up on the ground, so I'm ready and manage to deflect all his attacks without much of an effort. After about the tenth deflection a new problem becomes apparent. *I'm starving.* My lips part and my vision starts flickering, a literal red haze descending over my vision. I run my tongue over my sharpened teeth and Ethan stiffens.

"You didn't answer my questions," I say, voice gravelly.

He gets a crazed glint in his eyes and brings his hands together over his head, conjuring a *giant* fucking fireball. I release a breath of annoyance and tap into my enhanced speed to dart around it and launch right at him, claws extended to the extra, slightly curved length that my vampire side offers me. He tries to throw himself out of the way but he's not quick enough and I take him to the ground. I end up straddling his waist and his head thwacks into the ground so hard I'm surprised it doesn't crack open like a watermelon. Hmm, wouldn't that be a site to see?

I grab his wrists and shove them to the ground using a rune to shackle them to the ground, then do the same with his ankles. With him trapped, my hands go directly to his temples

and I dive into his mind. I'm going to put him through what he's put me and my family through and then some, plus gather some more information on his bosses.

I take a stroll through his fears—carefully avoiding the ones with Anna—until I find a few good ones then lock onto them. Pulling back out, I throw up another barrier around us so no one can get to us, then use Aurora's powers to summon the school healers to the guys. Unicorn can let them and only them through the barrier and I trust her to keep my guys safe.

Ethan is unconscious. “We can't have that now, can we?” I mutter, and summon a large ball of ice cold water over his head then dump it on him. It works like a charm in waking him up. His eyes spring open as he coughs and gags on the water. After a few seconds I cut it off and he stares up at me with panicked eyes. “Hello, Ethan,” I purr. “Are you ready to answer my questions now?”

His nostrils flare and he shakes his head, spewing half a dozen insults at me making my eyes narrow in irritation. *Clearly he needs something else to do with his mouth. Screaming should work.* I nod decisively and bring forth one of those nightmares of his.

Suddenly we're smothered in complete darkness and utter silence. The only sound is our breathing, one ragged and slightly panicked and the other deep and slow. A grin curls my lips when Ethan begins to tremble underneath me. I'm guessing he's just realised we're not alone in here. Then the

screaming starts. I tip my head back and laugh. I guess the spiders have made contact.

Ethan struggles beneath me, my magic keeping him pinned to the ground, his body writhing like he's being electrocuted and I get to my feet to observe him from above. My enhanced eyesight allows me to see his outline even with the lack of light, while the hundreds of eight-legged creatures climb all over him. I cock my head at the panic on his face, nose crinkling as a particularly large one climbs into his mouth, muffling his screams. He starts to gag and I lean back on my heels, a smile playing on my lips. "Are you ready to talk now?" I inquire, unbothered either way. His fear is quite pleasant, the buzz of energy it's giving me, refreshing.

He mumbles around the spider, eyes wide and bloodshot. Whoops, I didn't think about that. I click my fingers to make it disappear and he pants for a second, still twitching at the small bodies creeping over him before he spits out, "Yes. Yes, please. I'm ready to talk."

I draw the spiders back to me but keep them by my feet, ready to return them to him if I need to. Ethan practically melts into the ground and a little thrill goes through me at how uncomfortable he was. "Go on then." My voice is deep with my anger at his actions and he shudders.

"I-I went after Lexi because I wanted to get back at you... and her," he stutters out.

"Why?" My nostrils flare and I take a step closer so I'm hovering over him. Wanting to see more clearly, I lighten the

space around us just enough to read his expressions.

“Because if it weren’t for you both, Anna would be here right now!” He yells, practically frothing at the mouth as his eyes lock on mine, wide and half crazed. It’s like a punch in the gut but I don’t outwardly react.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. Flashes of that day assault me and I grit my teeth, inwardly grimacing. *Blood. There was so much blood.* Swallowing past the growing lump in my throat, I force myself to focus on Ethan.

“You were late, so late. Why? Both of you. Maybe if all three of you were there then whoever did it would’ve been scared off and she’d still be here,” he says, the strength in his voice fading as he speaks. “She promised that you’d be there. You were almost an hour late. What was so important that it took you that long to get there?”

His response actually makes me stumble back a step in confusion. “What are you talking about? I was only a few minutes late. When did Anna leave?” Mouth pressed in a thin line, my eyebrows draw down. I don’t understand. My breathing speeds up and my lips pull back in a snarl. “Are you telling me that she left early? I’ve been basing everything off of the theory that she got there at the time we agreed to. Why would you not mention that to the cop who took your statement?” I’m hyperventilating, but I can’t seem to stop. I swallow repeatedly and whirl around, starting to pace and thread my fingers into my hair. I just don’t understand.

A tiny shift in the air behind me draws me back to the present and I barely manage to dodge in time as a lightning bolt shoots past me, narrowly missing my chest. I drop into a crouch and scan the space, locking down my shield tenfold. My eyes land on the broken handcuffs first, then the figure standing across from me. The bastard must have been working on them while he distracted me. “Is what you said true?” I demand, fingers curling into trembling fists. I need to know, it could change everything.

He laughs but I don’t move yet. He needs to think that he has a chance or he’ll never respond. “Yes, and do you want to know the kicker? It was in my statement, but what the hell does that matter?”

I let out a sharp breath, everything coming together in my mind and it mentally slams into me so hard that I actually fall back against my barrier. Swallowing hard, a smile curls my lips, but it’s not a nice one. “You are part of the Drákon group,” I state, gaze lifting from the ground to settle on his face.

He watches me with a pinched expression, his confusion obvious. “Yes, but you already know that?”

I settle my hands behind my back and slowly shake my head at him. “Ethan, the statement didn’t mention anything about Anna having left at that time. The officer who took down the notes changed it. He lied and if he did then what is the most likely scenario?”

Ethan's nostrils flare and he starts shaking his head, but I just let out an even breath.

“That he was a plant from the very Drákon group you work for, and what does that mean?” I prompt.

The colour drains from Ethan's face so fast that for a moment I worry he's going to pass out before he can come to the realisation. “That it was someone from their organisation that killed her. Someone that I work with,” he chokes.

I've been studying their movements for a long time and have suspected for a while that it was someone from their group that killed her, so I'm quite familiar with their practices. Having plants in the supernatural FBI and the supernatural police force is child's play for them. My guess would be that's why the officer was impossible for me to track down. He lied or misplaced evidence one too many times and had to go underground. All the realisation does is bring me a sense of peace, plus a new angle to explore what happened to Anna, but Ethan isn't taking it quite that well. He actually appears to be losing his shit. Great. I've had enough of him anyway.

While the dummy is lost in his head, I stride towards him. My teeth sharpen and lengthen, body loose and ready to leap at him. It's time to get some of that blood I've been craving. It won't be as good as my guys', but it will kill two birds with one stone.

He notices me when I'm a few feet away, his eyes widening and he throws his hands up, but I'm quicker. I launch at him and have him in a secure hold with my teeth millimetres from

his jugular in under a second, ready to tear his throat out. As I go to strike though, someone steps through my barrier, like it's air. I'm so shocked that I pause in my attack and throw a defensive spell at him. The purple eyed, albino man deflects it with ease and I growl at him. All I succeed in doing is drawing a smirk to his lips. My nostrils flare. *What the actual hell is going on?* Couldn't this guy have barged in here in like twenty seconds time, *after* I had Ethan bleeding out on the ground?

Suddenly Ethan and I are yanked apart and in a blink I find myself chained to *my own motherfucking barrier*, a few feet down from Ethan. Yeah it's official, I'm pissed as hell and have no clue what's going on.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ezra

When I made the decision to break through Nessa's barrier, I honestly wasn't sure what I'd find. All I knew was that her rage had spiked and his fear had skyrocketed, prompting me into action. I didn't expect to find Corin's sweet if slightly innocent looking mate moments away from tearing out Ethan's throat. My eyes narrow as I read his magical signature and find it worryingly weak. Don't get me wrong, the man deserves to die in a number of painful ways, but that isn't protocol. Plus, Nessa doesn't need the SFBI coming down on her for losing her cool for a second.

At least part of my plan worked. When Corin called me, furious about Ethan stalking his mate, Nessa and her mates' test became obvious. Give them a tip to help them find Ethan then let them try to catch him. It was simple... for all of five seconds, then everything went to hell. I underestimated both Ethan and Nessa's powers. No one on my side was supposed to get any serious injuries, and I'm not quite sure what Nessa has done to Ethan, but he looks worse for wear.

She on the other hand is practically glowing with health and power. And rage. If the shackles holding her weren't magic blockers I don't doubt that I'd be in trouble right now.

I cock my head to the side and let out a breath. "I'm going to assume by your expression that you have no idea who I am," I say, voice patient. I conjure a seat and settle into it, ready to wait her out if I need to. Though I'm sure Corin will

possibly kill me if I draw it out for too long. They really are perfect for each other it seems.

Surprisingly she straightens up as much as she can while shackled and pastes a neutral expression on her face. “I’m sorry, SFBI Director Ezra, how are you going?”

I roll my lips in to hide my smile at her snark, and hide my surprise at her knowledge of me. I tend to use aliases when I work, so it’s unexpectedly thorough of her to know my real name. A wave of her emotions rolls over me and the mix of begrudging respect and irritation, only makes her all the more endearing to me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Nessa.” Her nostrils flare for half a second in response to me using her name, but other than that she holds her poker face. I forge on, “I’m not going to bore you with any more small talk, alright? I’m here for two reasons, one of which...” I raise my left arm and gesture at Ethan, throwing magic at the same time. He’s too out of it to react as my magic coats him before his form disappears in a cloud of smoke.

Nessa reacts though, but again not in the way I expect. An intense wave of anger assaults me but she doesn’t display any of it outwardly. “I wasn’t done with him,” she says, voice flat, and jerks her head towards the now empty spot where Ethan was.

“That’s understandable, he hurt your friend and your mates,” I say sincerely. “But unfortunately there is protocol when it comes to handling prisoners. I can’t let you kill him.”

Clearing my throat, I get to my feet and release the magic that was holding my chair together. “I would like to have a conversation with you, but I think we’d both prefer it if you were unchained while that takes place.”

She dips her head in a nod and I sigh internally as I release her. Her emotions are the opposite of friendly, so I guess we’re going to have to do this then.

She’s against the barrier one second, then on me, hands gripping my temples in the next, a grim expression tugging at her features. My vision wavers before going black and surprise flits through me when I come too. She managed to knock me out? I must be softening in my old age, letting a baby supernatural get past my defences like that.

I’m unshackled at least, and as my eyesight clears I find Nessa standing over me, her head cocked, confusion and interest twisting her features. “What is wrong with you? Your...your fears are my fears, whenever I try to access them it’s like looking into a mirror...” she trails off, face paler than before.

“I’m an empath,” I whisper. It’s only fair, she revealed her power to me and her emotions have done a complete three-sixty. All the murderous vibes have disappeared, replaced by a weighty mental exhaustion and vague curiosity. I’m not going to fault her—a barely manifested, supernatural literally learning how to deal with being supernatural—for losing control for a minute. The important thing is that she got control of herself. I can also understand her distrust in me,

knowing my position of power. With how corrupt the Academy's professors are, it's not unusual at all.

She slow-blinks at me before she offers me a hand. I take it and let her help me to my feet, a grin tugging at my lips. "So about that conversation," she mutters, still studying me. It's a little unnerving, like I'm a bug under a microscope, but I act unbothered, still trying to puzzle this curious creature out.

"I've been observing you for a while now." Not a lie. "And I'd like to offer you and your mates a position with the SFBI when you graduate from the Academy." I internally grimace when her eyes narrow.

"Why did you start watching us in the first place? Why would you do the reconnaissance personally? And finally, why are you telling me this now, when I'm still a year and a half away from graduating. What's the catch? Before you answer, I'd like to make you aware that I'll know if you lie and I *hate* liars," she says, and I believe her. Her mottled gold and red eye'd glare is intense.

I grit my teeth. Corin is going to kill me, so let's just hope I don't screw this up too much for him, but she clearly knows too much about the SFBI and Drákon group to pull out now. Plus she would clearly be a huge asset to our team.

When I don't respond immediately, Nessa's cheeks flush with irritation and she crosses her arms. "You have a plant here, don't you? Several, probably." I open my mouth ready to explain, but she puts it together in her mind too quickly. "One of the guys works for you."

The intense emotional pain that lashes into me from Nessa at the betrayal pulls a gasp from me and I groan, rubbing at my chest. The betrayal quickly morphs into understanding, then acceptance then a tentative curiosity. It's times like this that I despise being an empath. It's like permanently being stuck on a roller coaster with no exit in sight. She somehow manages to stay completely calm on the outside through all that, though I have absolutely no clue as to how.

“Answer the rest of my questions right now, then tell me whose ass I need to kick, please potential boss of mine,” she says with a sigh.



Nessa

The man blinks at me, seemingly stupefied for a few seconds. Yeah, knowing that he's an empath, I can understand that. I'm not exactly the most emotionally stable person in the world. He shakes it off fairly quickly though and rattles everything off, answering my demands in order. "Because my informant drew my attention to you. Let's just say that I am invested in the outcome of what we're looking into when it comes to the Academy. I'm telling you this now, and will be telling your mates this in a few minutes because although I can't fully hire you until you graduate, you can still work for me under the guise of an internship and help me with investigating. Before you ask, no, I'm not saying anymore on that until you decide whether you want to work with the SFBI or not. There is only one potential catch." Ezra grimaces, eyes sliding away from mine. My shoulders stiffen.

"Spit it out," I grumble after thirty seconds without an answer and his expression hardens, but my brain is partially stuck on his words. His *informant*.

"If you do agree to intern with us, then you will need to hand over any and all research and information you have gathered on the Drákon group. You will regain access to it the second you have graduated from the Academy and officially work for the SFBI. I'd also like to mention that I'm going to offer Lexi a job as well..." Ezra keeps speaking, but it's all static. I've intentionally ignored some of the things he said

like, cough, cough, that the guys are my mates, but this offer and the clause if I were to accept is... I don't even know how to react.

Since I was old enough to actually do something about what happened to Anna, I've been worming my way into the Supernatural Realm's dark side and digging up as much information on the Drákon group as I can. Without that, what am I supposed to do? How can I avenge Anna? I swallow, my throat is suddenly dry, and my breathing speeds up. Curiously, the urge to find one of the guys slams into me and alongside that, the need to see them and know they're all okay. *Goddess, I'm selfish.* I got lost in pouring my pain and anger into Ethan, and now Ezra is here.

I force myself back into the present and it's as though my ears have popped with how loud the silence is. Ezra is no longer speaking, instead he's watching me with concern and I swallow again. "Are they okay?" Maintaining eye contact, Ezra gives a firm nod. "Yes. Corin took a fairly hard hit to the head, but I stood by while the healers checked him, Dylan and Oscar over. One of Dylan's arm's had a small break, but the healers have already mended it. They are all okay, now."

I still need to see them, and my eyes flit over Ezra's shoulder to the spot they were when I created the barrier.

"Come on, I'm sure they're fretting over your whereabouts and want to make sure you're okay. My offer isn't about to disappear, here is my number." Ezra hands me a card then

continues. “Call me anytime. I’ll speak to the guys and Lexi about the offer, and you guys can talk it over.”

He turns away, but my voice has him stopping. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” he asks, not looking over his shoulder at me.

I swallow and shake my head a little. “It was you who gave Lexi’s informant the information about Ethan’s whereabouts. This was all some fucking test wasn’t it?” I snarl the last part at him, my respect for the man dropping by the second. They could have fucking *died*.

He finally turns to look at me over his shoulder, expression grim. “I know you think I’m some heartless monster right now, but I just used the tools at my disposal to speed up a scenario that was already going to happen. You were searching for Ethan’s hideout, were you not? I merely helped you find it faster while gauging you and your group’s skills at the same time,” he says, voice even and my shoulders sag as his reasoning sinks in. His reasoning makes perfect sense and that doesn’t help with my already sour mood.

Satisfied that I understand, he heads towards the barrier and I follow him, about to let go of the magic holding up my barrier, when I realise something.

“Ezra, who is the plant?” I ask, my voice soft.

He pauses, purple eyes meeting mine over his shoulder. “Corin.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek until I taste blood, then nod and give him a close-mouthed smile. He doesn't say anything, merely searches my expression for a second, eyebrows furrowing as I'm sure he's puzzling over my warring emotions before he faces forwards again. I drop the barrier and am pleasantly surprised to find that there is no chaos for once. Ezra steps aside so he's not in the way and stays where he is, giving me space.

The guys are all sitting on the ground with a single healer keeping an eye on them from a distance. Unicorn is lying a few feet away from them, but other than that the graveyard is empty. I take note of the way that Corin stiffens almost imperceptibly when his eyes land on Ezra before focusing on me.

I head straight for the guys and check them over with my eyes, needing to see for myself that they're actually okay. I make sure Dylan's arm really is healed and catching my eye as I look them over, Dylan and Oscar send me reassuring smiles. When I get to Corin though, I suck in an unsteady breath. He looks like utter shit. He was closest to the blast and the swelling on his face is awful. His dark hair is tangled and dark bags shadow his eyes. He looks exhausted. As I reach them, that hunger I've been ignoring pangs in my gut, reminding me that I still haven't fed. I shove the pain aside though and focus on the guys.

They get to their feet and pepper me with questions, checking if I'm alright, what happened with Ethan and who the guy behind me is. I answer them as best as I can, then the

man in question is approaching us and shocking Oscar and Dylan with his offer. By this point, I'm running on my last reserves and am past ready to go home.

As Ezra goes into more detail about his offer, I tune out everyone, and tug my phone out of my pocket to send Lexi a brief message, letting her know that we're all alive and that Ethan has been captured. I also promise her that I'll give her a call first thing tomorrow. I send a similar one to my fathers. Before we came out today I let them know about the plan, including them more like I said I would try to. After that, I'm done and I get to my feet, telling the guys and Ezra as much before walking away. I'm at my limit for the day and I have his card. They're silent, and thankfully let me go without any fuss.



With the cacophony of turmoil that's currently swirling around my head and the magic buzzing beneath my skin, I knew I couldn't just go back to my dorm. So I ended up here instead.

The quiet of the forest is like a balm on my soul, a balm that I can't currently enjoy. Not yet. There is something I need to do first.

Letting out a long breath, I erect a large square barrier around myself. I seal it fully so even the earth under my feet is

protected by it and I'm fully sealed into my barrier, then I unleash.

I scream, I curse, I let my magic tear out of me in a fiery purple and gold explosion. I scream and fucking scream until my voice is nothing but a croak, tears streaming down my cheeks. Chaos follows, lashing out with my power until the air is practically buzzing with the magic contained within my barrier. I don't stop until the last of my energy winks out and I crumple to my knees with a laugh.

Tired, but finally calm, I let go of the barrier and my magic fades from sight, the energy absorbed by the forest surrounding me. The sounds of the forest wash over me and I stay, relishing in the simplicity of it all. It's dusk and the long shadows dance from the gentle breeze. Birds chatter amongst each other and the low muttering of the night creatures waking from their slumber adds to the forest's music.

I stay for a long time just watching and listening. Thinking about everything and nothing. Processing the emotional roller coaster that today has been.

It's late when I finally push to my feet, legs weak from both the day and sitting in one place for so long. A tiny smile curls my lips as I walk back to my dorm and I let my head tip back so I can look at the stars. It's all going to be okay, no matter what I decide.

Steam billows from the doorway behind me as I step out of the bathroom, a towel in hand. I fumble with it as I wrap it

around my wet hair, then head to the kitchen, switching on my stovetop kettle. I'm only half paying attention to what I'm doing as I make my coffee then sit down at the kitchen island, and Unicorn settles into my lap as I stare off into space.

Ezra's offer has me all twisted up. It took me a minute, but I realised that I'd seen him before. A year or so ago an informant threw in his picture as a bonus on top of their payment for a job well done. Ezra. He's practically one of the top bosses in the SFBI, a director of an entire branch, so it's befuddling to have him take an interest in me, Lexi, and the guys. Even with Corin's recommendation.

Corin.

I'm not mad at him. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to tear his balls off and feed them to him when Ezra revealed that one of my guys—the guys, I mean. *Damn, I really need to stop slipping up with that or I'm going to accidentally say it out loud*—had kept something so big from me. It took me a minute to process it, but then reality crashed in. It was his job, and there is no way he, as a plant for the SFBI, could have told me the truth.

I can't say that it hasn't created some seeds of doubt, though. Did he only get close to me because it helped his cause? Did what we have start out as him faking it? It's so much to try and process. I swallow roughly and run a hand through my hair.

Okay, let's start with making a plan of attack, Nessa. I pet Unicorn as I start to compile it, hot cup of coffee in my other

hand. I need to have a conversation about this with Corin, preferably with the other guys present to make sure they're okay because he betrayed them too by not revealing this. Then I need to talk to Ezra about his offer. First though, I need to get some sleep, take a break from classes for a few days, and feed. My tongue runs over my sharpened teeth and I groan. *Tomorrow. Yeah, you can wait for tomorrow, Nessa.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Nessa

With an easy smile I head through the school corridors. I sent an email to all my professors letting them know that I'm taking a week off as a break starting today, and I organised a meet-up with the guys in an hour's time to speak about Ezra's offer and how Corin is a plant. I was so out of it when Ezra spoke to them that I'm not sure if Dylan and Oscar are aware of that yet or not.

I roll my lips between my teeth as a pang of hunger rolls through my gut. Leaving it this long between feeds was a mistake. It's been an incessant need since I woke up this morning. So much so that I called Lexi to ask if she could do me a massive favour and I could feed from her, because until I've spoken with Corin I don't feel comfortable doing something so intimate with him. I flex my hands, trying to distract myself, fangs literally burning with need. I'm so out of sorts from it that I couldn't even stomach coffee this morning. Coffee! Letting out a breath, I do my best to ignore it and continue moving through the flow of students.

I'm almost at the stairs I need to go down to get outside when I'm stopped by a woman from my runes class. A scowl tightens my features, but it doesn't seem to dissuade her as she starts droning on about our end of term assignment and how she'd love my help on some stuff if I have time. She seems like a sweet girl, but I honestly don't have the time or patience right now so I'm seconds from snapping at her that I have

somewhere I need to be right now when a hint of the most glorious scent reaches my nose. It's sweet—mouthwateringly so. Like the best vanilla cupcake in the world is calling out to me, and Goddess do I want to take a *bite*. It has me breaking out in chills and my world narrows in on that one smell. I need to find the source. If possible my fangs seem to get even longer and I brush past the girl, my other senses distant as I hunt down the person who's creating that delicious smell.

It doesn't take me long to locate the source. My eyes lock onto Foster and a groan rumbles low in my throat. He's in the library standing beside a booth, looking down at his finger with a frown on his face. A single bead of blood rests on the pad of his index finger. A paper cut by my guess, and a small one at that. It doesn't matter though, his blood is calling to me like a siren's song. I find myself walking towards him, focus narrowed in on that single bead of blood. I *need* it.

His head snaps up when I'm about ten feet away and his eyes flare wide. "Nessa?" he asks, but it barely registers. Before he has a chance to react, I have my hand wrapped around his wrist and I'm licking the blood off of his finger. The intoxicating vanilla taste explodes on my tongue and I groan again. *It's like the fucking nectar of the gods.*

Foster goes curiously still and for a second the haze in my head clears and I let go of his wrist, jerking back in horror. The worry that I'm biting someone without their consent outweighs the need to feed, briefly. The urge for blood is almost like food in an extreme way where it hits you in waves—a brief reprieve only to lose your mind completely the next.

I hold my hands up, noting my extended black claws as I blink repeatedly, while simultaneously battling with the part of my brain that wants me to dive for his throat and sink my fangs into his throat. “I’m so sorry,” I croak, stumbling back another few steps.

His eyebrows draw down and instead of bolting like you’d expect someone to do when a person randomly comes up and licks the blood off of your finger, he advances on me, nothing but concern in his expression. “What’s going on? You look like you’re starving,” he intones softly.

“I am,” I grunt, bending over and wrapping an arm around my stomach.

“Have you fed since yesterday? I heard there was an altercation and when vampires and vampire hybrids use a lot of magic it always leaves them starving afterwards.”

Panting, I shake my head. “I did not know that. That information would have been extremely useful yesterday, and no I haven’t fed. Clearly,” I say, gesturing to his finger that I defiled not three minutes ago.

He cracks a smile and I glare at him. He shakes his head and rolls his lips in. “Alright, who do I need to get you to then? To feed from, I mean.” My eyes drop to his throat and the vein pulsing there as his scent lingers around us still. My lips part, tongue darting over my lower lip. “Nessa, do you have someone?” Foster prompts again, but I struggle to drag my attention away from his neck. Saliva floods my mouth and I

can tell I'm too far gone. When the next wave of hunger floods me, I pounce.

Foster catches me with a strained laugh, and spins me around so I'm in a hold, unable to reach his throat. "Nessa, I know you're probably too far gone to register this, but I give you my permission to drink from me," Foster says, voice firm.

I don't get a chance to try and process his words or answer him because he releases me and then all I can think about is getting my teeth into his vein.

I spin around and thread my fingers into his hair, then jerk his head back to expose his throat, my other hand going to his waist. I'm practically vibrating with the need to bite when Foster's calm words filter through the haze in my head. "You've got me, Nessa. I'm not going anywhere, okay?"

My eyebrows furrow as I try to make sense of his words, but they soothe some of the urgency in my movements and my hands unclench so I'm simply holding him rather than my death grip.

"That's it, see? I'm still right here." He arches his neck to the side even more, exposing the full length of his throat and I lean in slowly, eyes locked on the throbbing artery in his throat. "Remember that my throat is very vulnerable, so you need to be gentle when you bite me, okay?" His words are low and soothing.

Taking a deep breath, I listen to his instructions and rather than strike his neck like I've been doing when feeding from Corin for the last few weeks, I treat it like I'm giving him a

harder than usual love bite. My teeth sink in with ease and Foster and I shudder simultaneously as his rich blood floods my mouth. I lap at his throat, removing my fangs so I can take large draws of his blood. It has lust curling through me and a flush starting at my chest steadily works its way over my body until I'm moaning and bracing my hands on Foster's shoulders so I can wrap my thighs around his waist.

He doesn't protest and I begin to rock my hips against him, still lapping at his throat. The hunger in my gut slowly fades, but I don't stop straight away, and he cups the nape of my neck gently. "You don't need any more, Nessa. You can stop now." I let out a soft whine of complaint, still lost in the adrenaline rush that feeding always seems to give me. Still, I pull back enough to lick the skin around the cut until it heals, then I kiss my way up his throat, hips still rocking against his. I'm so fucking close and Foster's hands drop to my ass, helping me grind against him. He drops his forehead to my shoulder, breathing erratic and I do the same, my lips resting at the base of his throat. I can tell he's close and my orgasm slams into me, drawing a whimper from my lips, and on instinct I bite down on his throat again. He stiffens, hips stuttering against mine and I shiver, the orgasm intensifying as I release his throat, closing up the new bite. *Whoops.*

I sag in his arms, a gooey sated mess, barely noticing when he walks to his booth and sits down with me on his lap. He pets my hair, the quiet between us comfortable. That is until my brain starts to catch up with what we just did.

In a public space!

Holy fucking shit, I just mauled Foster in the middle of the school library! My eyes widen and I tip my head back to look at Foster's face only to find him already looking down at me. Goddess, I barely fucking know the guy, but his blood. It was fucking *chefs kiss*. I shiver at the memory of it then groan, hiding my burning face against his chest. He laughs softly, the sound vibrating through me and I groan again. "Please tell me that didn't just happen? I'm so sorry." I swallow hard, a sick feeling pooling in my gut. *Did... I just assault him? I did, didn't I?*

My breathing speeds up and I stiffen, pulling away as I search my hazy memories. I think I vaguely heard him give me permission, but I don't know if it's real or not. I suck in a quick breath. I know for sure that his permission didn't include grinding to orgasm either.

I stumble to my feet and back away, not waiting for his reply, because I know the answer. It very much did happen. "Nessa, wait." I have my hands thrown out in front of me, eyes open but unseeing as I back away from him. A vague part of me realises that this is just everything from the last few days catching up to me, on top of the stress from biting Foster, and I'm having a panic attack, but recognising what it is doesn't help me stop it.



Foster

One second Nessa is calm and cuddled up in my arms, the next she's up and having a panic attack. It's a perfectly reasonable reaction though, considering she's only spoken to me a handful of times. I approach her cautiously, hands raised, reflecting her stance.

I feel even shittier about what just happened as I take in her pale face and taut expression. I did give her permission, but I'm not sure if she remembers that and I didn't mean to let the feeding get away from me so much. I lost control and the stickiness in my boxers is a reminder of that. I can't believe I lost control like that with her. Possibly worst of all is that I don't know if I can bring myself to regret it. Clearly it's not good circumstances that led us here, but as long as Nessa doesn't regret it or hate me after this, then I think we'll be okay. Letting out a breath, I paste a gentle expression on my face and force all of the self-deprecating thoughts out of my head for now.

Nessa's back touches the edge of my barrier and she slides down until she's sitting with her knees hugged to her chest, eyes fixed on the ground. The first thing I did when I realised that it was too late to find her preferred choice of person to drink from, was put it up to protect her privacy and keep us safe. You never know who is watching and even with the murderer that was on Academy grounds, now in SFBI custody, there are plenty of other threats within the school grounds.

I drop to my knees so I'm not hovering over her, leaving a few feet of space between us as she works through her panic attack. I have enough insight with being around others who are experiencing them to remain calm. Nessa reaches out with shaky hands and presses her palms to the ground, mumbling under her breath. "What can you feel? The carpet is rough under my fingers. What can you hear? Fosters calm breathing. His heartbeat..." She lists an example of every one of her senses and then sucks in her first deep breath in the last five minutes. I don't move, just let her work through it on her own. She seems familiar enough with them and her own coping mechanisms. After another minute or so her golden eyes rise to meet mine. "Sorry, I'm alright now."

"Nothing to apologise for," I murmur then clear my throat. "I did just want to clarify that I did give you my permission. I... I hope that I didn't push you into anything you didn't want, either." I grimace. If I did then I would hand myself in immediately.

She lets out a breath, a relieved chuckle falling from her lips. "Thank god. No you didn't do anything wrong and again, I am so sorry. I'm struggling a little with this whole vampire thing, it's a little new to me." I nod in understanding, shifting to brace my hands behind me so I can lean back and sit more comfortably.

I decide to change the subject, figuring that she doesn't want to linger on her panic attack or her loss of control. "Did you end up looking into getting a balance stone?"

She nods absently, running her fingers through her hair as she stares off into space. “I-I need to go.”

My brows furrow, but I simply nod then drop my barrier. It’s like she only notices it then and her shoulders slump. “You had that up while I drank from you?”

I nod. “Yes, as soon as I gave you permission I put it up around us.”

She seems to take a moment to process that before she gets to her feet and turns to go, lost in her head again. Swallowing as I watch her go, I search myself and find that I definitely feel a lot better about what happened between us now that I know she’s not upset about it, but I don’t like the furrow in her brow that she has as she leaves. Sometimes I wish that I could read people’s emotions or their minds, it would make it so much easier. I glance down at my hands and a smile curls my lips. I wouldn’t trade the powers I was born with for the world though.

Getting to my feet, I resolve to check in with Nessa tomorrow to make sure that she really is alright. What happened this morning hasn’t changed what I’ve already made the decision to do either. If she’ll have me, I’d like to court her, like her three men are doing. I’ve never been around someone who I feel so comfortable with, let alone allowed me to be my carefree, odd self. The one that is the real me under everything else.

No, she might not realise it yet, but the moment she joined me in my dance in the butterfly field, she had me wrapped

around her little finger and I don't intend on that changing anytime soon. I stare after her, a tiny smile curling my lips. Yep, she's stuck with me now.



Nessa

I stumble from the library in a daze. What just happened is on repeat in my mind and I groan, rubbing at my eyes. How could I lose control like that? And now I have to see the guys. Three men who all see me in a romantic sense, two of which have openly asked for a relationship between all of us. I groan again. What a cluster fuck. There's a pit in my stomach that's swirling with a mixture of nausea and guilt. Even though it wasn't exactly intentional, I can't help but feel like I just cheated on them.

I pause and step into a quiet alcove that's thankfully empty. First I send Lexi a brief message to let her know that I actually won't be by, but leave it at that, then I press my forehead to the cool stone wall, taking a moment to just breathe. Once I've successfully shored up my mental defences and gotten my head—mostly—in order, I push my shoulders back and head for Corin's dorm. I'm going to be a little early and I'm probably drenched in Foster's scent, but those barely register to me. I may have gotten some of my thoughts straight, but I still feel somewhat dissociated from everything. Like I'm floating beside my body and watching everything afar, rather than actually living it.

Corin's door swings open on the second knock and the moment his eyes land on me a growl starts up in his chest. I blink at him rapidly and go to speak, when I'm suddenly no longer standing but in his arms. Goddess, he can move fast

when he wants to. He presses his nose to my throat and sniffs before that rumbling growl gets deeper and his hands on my body tighten.

I know that I should probably be worried right now, being at an angry Lycan's mercy, but I'm not. No, I'm the crazy woman who clenches her thighs as arousal spears through me. *Dammit, get yourself together, woman!*

I clear my throat as Corin slams the door shut and heads to what looks to be his kitchen. I've never actually been in his dorm before, but it doesn't look too different from mine—other than it being slightly larger. “Corin, I'm okay.” He chuffs, and pulls back from me enough for me to take in his form. His very shifted form. I swallow, biting my lip. Gods, he really is giant in this form. Everywhere if my memory serves me right.

The fur covering his shoulders is silky under my fingers and I fiddle with it subconsciously as my eyes trail over his sharpened facial features. Those glowing amber eyes fixed on mine.

“What did he do?” His voice is low and rough, like gravel. I blink again and catch myself leaning closer to him. Forcing myself to still, I clear my throat again. My cheeks flush and I have to fight to keep from dipping my head. Then it gets a hundred times worse.

“Who?” Dylan asks, his voice coming from somewhere in the room.

“Who do we need to fuck up?” Oscar chimes in, and I jolt.

How the hell did I miss the fact that they were here? I shake my head to myself and decide to just blurt it out, then explain afterwards. “*He* didn’t do anything. I lost control this morning because I left it too long between feedings. Foster helped me and somehow isn’t pissed at me for... biting him... or crossing a line.” I keep my head lowered slightly and wiggle out of Corin’s grasp, then plop my ass onto the kitchen island. Hopefully he isn’t a neat freak.

Finally rolling my eyes up, I get my first proper look at his dorm room and find the three of the guys having a silent conversation between them. *Gods, I wish they wouldn’t do shit like that*, I grumble in my head. It’s irritating, like, I’m right here. I’m about to go check out a particularly interesting looking knife perched on a cloth across the kitchen counter when I realise that the guys are all watching me. “What?” I snap. I’ll admit it, I may be just a tad touchy at the moment. It’s been an emotional morning, alright.

Dylan’s the one who speaks up first. “Nessa, you just spoke in my head.”

Shit. My eyes dart between them all before landing on Corin. Since the incident with him, I haven’t had a recurring incident so I assumed that it was a fluke. “Are you sure?”

Oscar hums, lips twitching and cocks his head. “You said, ‘Gods, I wish they wouldn’t do shit like that.’ I’m pretty sure that was you.”

I press my lips together and groan. Could this day get any worse?

Dylan leans back against the lounge room wall, his face scrunched up in adorable confusion. “May I ask what you were referring to?”

I brace an elbow on my knee and rest my chin in my palm. “That silent speaking thing you guys have started to do recently without me. It’s annoying.”

Corin snorts, a smile playing on his lips and the other two chuckle quietly. Bunch of children, all of them. I scoff and get up. It turns out that hard countertops aren’t very comfortable for you to sit on. Rubbing my semi-numb ass, I plop down onto one of the two, three seater couches and gently elbow Oscar in the side as he drops into the seat beside me. He lets out a yelp and gives me a dirty look. I laugh, my mood lightening substantially.

“I can’t help but feel like you two don’t seem to be surprised about this new power,” Dylan states, eyes bouncing between Corin and I. He walks over to the couch across from us and takes a seat.

Corin settles onto the arm of the couch beside Dylan and scrubs a hand over his face. When his claws almost poke his eye out he jolts, seeming to realise that he’s still in his Lycan form and he shifts back, much to my disappointment. I was enjoying getting a proper look at his Lycan form. He’s hot as fuck in both forms, but the primal edge he has when in his Lycan form is just... different. Different and intriguing.

I purposely don’t outwardly react though, he seems to be not quite shy about his Lycan form but... uncomfortable with

people seeing it, maybe? I don't quite know, but it's enough for me to have picked up on it. My eyes narrow on him ever so slightly and I bite my bottom lip. I'm going to have to make it extra clear to him when I sleep with him next—in his Lycan form—how much I like it.

I'm drawn out of my dirty little fantasy when Oscar knocks his knee into mine. My eyes jump to his and I take in his dilated pupils and flared nostrils. *Damn scent. It's so fucking annoying. Can't a gal have a dirty thought without announcing how turned on she is to the whole damn room?*

Oscar barks a laugh with the others echoing it, and I grab a throw pillow and shove my face into it. "This whole projecting my thoughts by accident thing is going to get old, fast," I grumble, the words distorted by the pillow. The guys must get the gist of it though.

"Don't worry, Love. I can help you with your mental barriers and help teach you how to control it. If you'd like?" Dylan offers.

It draws a reluctant smile from me and I drop the pillow to my lap, fiddling with the frilly accents along its edges. "Thank you, I'd love that." It has another thing that's been weighing on my shoulders, lifting.

The offer reminds me though of everything we have to talk about, and the fact that I should have gone to Dylan sooner about my new vampire powers and needs. I bite my lip, eyes lingering on his face as I organise my thoughts. "So...?" I inquire tentatively, drawing out the word.

Dylan quirks an eyebrow at me. “Is that your attempt at requesting some lessons about vampires? If so, I don’t think I’m inclined to accept.” He shakes his head and I laugh, shoulders relaxing a little.

“It was a pretty shitty way to ask, wasn’t it?” I say, voice soft.

“Yes,” Oscar chimes in, before Corin elbows him in the side, making me laugh again. But I force my face to relax into a helpless expression.

“Dylan, Oh great vampire God, will you tutor me on all things vamp-ish?” I ask, clasping my fingers together and holding them out in front of me, begging. I even hunch over a little towards him to make it seem more real.

Dylan laughs, the sound deep and throaty, while the corners of his eyes crinkle with humour. “Alright, I accept.”

Grinning, I straighten up, only to pause as a new glint enters Dylan’s eyes. His expression turns thoughtful as everyone’s eyes return to me again. “Circling back to what happened with Foster, I suppose my main question is why did you decide to feed on Foster? What made you go to him?” Dylan asks, his tone that of his tutor slash teacher voice. As it did last term, it has my full focus on his question and I let my mind drift back to the moment I caught Foster’s scent. The moment I lost control. *The heady vanilla scent hit my nose and had my mouth watering. Every thought vanished other than getting to him. To that scent.*

“It was his scent,” I say slowly, blinking out of the memory. “I remember walking through the school on my way to Lexi.” My eyes dart between the men. “I was going to feed off of her.” My gaze drops to the floor, eyebrows furrowing. “But I’d left it too long. I caught his scent and it’s like my brain just switched off and the only thing I could think about was finding the source of that scent to feed from them.” I swallow, noting that my teeth have lengthened into fangs at the memory of Foster’s blood. That sweet scent.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts of the haze that’s trying to pull me under. *Goddess, Nessa, get your shit together.*

“Hmm.” Dylan makes the sound low in his throat, lips pursed. My focus jumps to his hand as he drums them against his thigh. I cock my head to the side, eyes fixed on the veins roping the back of his hand and up his forearm. “Curious.” My eyes jerk up to meet his, only to find those startlingly blue eyes already fixed on me.

“What is?” I ask, confused.

Dylan blinks. “Do you know what hybrid you are?” he blurts, and I flinch slightly at the abrupt subject change.

My brows furrow. “No, my fathers found me in the woods near their home when I was a baby. Both my parents—or who they assumed were my birth parents—bodies were nearby.” I deliver the words like one would about the weather and my emotions echo that. There are so many other things to worry about right now that I don’t get close to the boatload of

questions I have about that. I blink. I'm not even sure why I told them about it, they didn't ask for or need the information.

Oscar sucks in a quick breath at the news and Dylan's eyebrows furrow, but Corin remains grim-faced. "I suppose you knew about that, then?" I ask him.

His jaw twitches, but he shakes his head. "I wasn't aware, I'm just good at internalising my reactions."

Wow, apparently we're all sharing. I'm about to make a—probably ill-timed—quip about that when Dylan speaks. "Are you aware that most supernatural species in the Realm have fated mates, or soul bonds, depending on the supe type?" My body goes preternaturally still before I nod, unsure where he's going with this.

The odd thing though is, he doesn't. The blue-eyed vamp just stares at me as though waiting for something to click. I blink back stupidly. There is no way that Foster is my mate, or at least I haven't gotten to know him well enough to be able to tell even with our adventure in the woods... My brain glitches and I suck in a breath, my memory flashing back to Ezra's words. *'Your mates.'* He literally called them that.

A low growl rumbles from Corin's chest and he leans closer to me, Oscar shuffles closer too. "I think there is a chance that we might be... soul bonds," Dylan says quietly. Those glowing blue eyes search my face as I struggle to absorb his words. Then, as if the universe is laughing at me, Corin's fingers glide over my throat before gripping my chin. I can tell

it's him by the smoky, bonfire that washes over me as he uses his hold on my chin to turn my head.

“Not just Dylan, sweetheart,” Corin says, voice rough. “We’re fated mates.” I let out a low sound as I struggle to process what they’re saying, my chest rising and falling faster. His thumb strokes my jaw in a soothing pattern, but the movement doesn’t erase the words he’s said. The words that Dylan has said. I swallow, mouth dry as a fucking desert.

Then spicy peppermint and dark chocolate washes over me, mingling with the other heady scents in the room. The fog of their scents has my brain going slightly hazy, but it seems to help dull the sharp edge of my anxiety though, so I welcome it with open arms. I’m going to need all the help I can fucking get to process this. A hand gently curls around my lower back and then I’m being nudged onto Oscar’s lap, the pink-haired man’s scent giving him away. Possibly the most surprising thing of all though is how easily Corin lets me go so Oscar can curl his arms around me. I search their faces and don’t find a hint of jealousy or anxiety. Wow, wouldn’t it be nice to be anxiety free like them.

I huff a slightly ragged breath, only for the move to backfire as their combined scents hit the back of my throat and burst into a bright mash of flavours that have my fangs aching and stomach clenching with need. *Goddess, now is not the time you hussy of a body.* I shake off the effect and peer into Oscar’s silver eyes, marvelling at the way they’re glowing right now. He swallows audibly and I find my hands reaching

up to stroke his shoulders in a soothing pattern. “Nessa...” He searches my eyes. “I believe we might be soul bonds, too.”

It doesn't take a genius to predict my reaction, no, I freeze as the information struggles to sink in and then my brain fucking implodes. Not a calm rational implosion, a violent internal nuclear fucking bomb that's all *psh-psh-pew-ka-fucking-boooooom*.

I'm perfectly still on the outside as my brain turns into a tornado of information and moments. *I have mates*. Three mates if their instincts are correct. Three mother-fucking mates. What the hell am I supposed to do with that information? Memories flash through my head, combining and aligning with all the facts I know about fated mates and soul bonds and I honestly don't know how I didn't pick up on it sooner. Me swooning at their scents, my willingness to befriend them, the ways they've each managed to slither their way into my tight knit circle of people I trust. Then there is the biggest giveaway, my intense need to feed on their blood above anyone else's. I choose to ignore the way a little voice in the back of my head whispers '*what about Foster? Aren't you forgetting about him and his intoxicating scent?*' Because I can't deal with that right now.

I realise that by now I'm probably worrying the guys so I snap back into focus with a jolt and all of them flinch like I've electrocuted them. Both Dylan and Corin have moved to squat in front of Oscar, and his arms have tightened around me as they all peer at my face.

“Sorry,” I croak, trying to reassure them that I’m alright, so I move onto the one thing that at the moment seems the most important to me; where do we go from here? Licking my slightly chapped lips, I take a steadying breath. “I need to know what you’re expecting of me?” I question, that dull wave of anxiety still lingering low in my gut, ready to spring up if given the chance.

The men look between each other, having one of those irritating silent conversations before they all nod in turn and return their focus to me. Corin—like usual—takes the lead and rearranges his legs so he’s kneeling with his butt resting on his heels rather than squatting so he’s more comfortable. He gives me a smile, but his expression has hints of a sort of sad amusement. “Nothing,” he says, so softly that at first I think I’ve misheard.

My eyebrows furrow as I search his face, those beautiful eyes a swirling kaleidoscope of colour, yet that slight crinkle between his eyebrows doesn’t fade. The tightness to the corners of his mouth doesn’t disappear and the slightly shaky breaths falling from his lips don’t smooth out. “What?” I ask, biting my cheek.

“Nothing.” He blinks, eyes searching mine, for something, I’m not sure what. “We don’t expect anything. Don’t get the wrong idea, sweetheart, we all want to give this—us—a go, but being mates changes nothing. It’s up to you, we don’t want you to feel forced, or like any of this changes anything that’s already happened between us. We just want you, going ahead, to know everything.”

Corin's words sound good in theory, but I suddenly realise something that has my fingers curling into fists. He knew. He *knew* that we were mates and didn't tell me. How fucking dare he know something like that and not tell me? A low growl rattles in my throat and my knuckles turn white where they're resting on my thighs. Corin flinches back, expression tensing.

"You knew," I say, voice like gravel. He doesn't even try and deny it, just ducks his head, breathing growing deeper.

I shake my head and gently push away from Oscar so I can get some space. I'm not mad at him and I make sure to trail a hand over his shoulder to let him know that before I start pacing a few feet away from them. It's clear as day in the different ways they admitted their suspicions. Both Dylan and Oscar spoke in a way that they thought or believed that we might be mates, whereas Corin stated that we were. A fact.

I swallow hard before whirling on him. "Why the hell would you keep something like that from me? Something that could have such a big impact on my life? Hell, you've been here, becoming my friend, becoming... more nearly every step of the fucking way since I got onto the Academy grounds..." I trail off, unsure where I'm even going with that. I'm not sure about anything anymore.

I spin around to face the wall, and to my horror my eyes start to burn, the need to cry is almost all consuming, but there is no way in hell that I'm letting these guys see me cry at the moment so I force the urge away and turn back to them. "Well, answer me!" I say to Corin, voice just shy of a yell. "And I

know about your real reason for being here,” I add, my voice a whisper.

He flinches, his shoulders slumped. “I don’t have an excuse, not a decent one, not really. I-my job, I couldn’t tell you about it and I didn’t want us to jump into a relationship based on the fact that we were mates, when I knew that I wouldn’t be able to tell you about it. That was my main reason. Then... then I was a coward. As I started learning more about you, your personality, your little mannerisms, and realised that I could trust you with my secret and that you’d be on my side, I was a coward and didn’t want to risk it. Didn’t want to risk telling you that I was your mate and have you reject me. Or possibly worse, feel like you were forced to try and have a relationship with me because we are mates...” he trails off, his gaze fixed on the floor and I blink slowly, absorbing his words.

I rub a hand over my face, then notice Dylan and Oscar’s confused expressions as they look between us. I grit my jaw, I guess that confirms what I’d already assumed, that Ezra didn’t fill them in on what Corin does for a living. I suppose it was wishful thinking to assume he would. “Here is what we’re going to do, I am going to put a pin in the mates conversation. I like you guys,” I say, averting my eyes and feeling extremely awkward. “But I need time to think it over and we need to have the talk I originally came here today to have. It will clear up a lot of confusion.” I clear my throat. “The reason I wanted to meet up today is to talk about Ezra’s offer, but also about something he told me while we were inside my barrier.” I pause, and Dylan and Oscar wait, expressions still showing

their confusion, but Corin is tense, already knowing what's coming.

“Ezra revealed to me that Corin is a plant for the SFBI,” I say, voice even as I hold Corin's eyes. He pales and swallows. Dylan and Oscar face him so quickly that I wouldn't be surprised if they've given themselves whiplash. My tongue darts out, wetting my lips before I continue. “I just wanted to get that out there and make sure we're all aware. I also want you to know that I'm not mad at you for keeping it from me. That part, I'm not mad about.” I blink then smile. “Well, let me rephrase. I'm not mad, exactly. At first I wanted to tear off your balls and shove them down your fucking throat for not revealing something like that to me, but I've had a chance to process it better since then.” I relish the way he pales even further at my words.

The truth is that I don't know exactly how I feel about him keeping such a big thing from me, well now it's two big fucking things. The rational side of me understands completely about him keeping his SFBI plant status under wraps. It's his job, he wasn't legally allowed to tell me about it, but the emotional side of me isn't rational. Then there's the fact that I know I still haven't told him everything that I've been getting up to either. It has me so conflicted. I do know that I'm tired. Tired of all the secrets between us, and that it's time to get everything out there. *Everything*. Starting with revealing all the work Lexi and I have been doing. So I do.

I meet all of the guys' eyes in turn. “There are too many secrets between us, and I for one and fucking tired of it, so I'm

just going to lay it all there for you, and you can decide what to do with the information,” I say, voice firm, not giving away my underlying nerves at the prospect of opening up so much.

I tell them all about the network of informants and information I’ve been collecting for years via my computer and the dark web. How much of my life I’ve put into that. I tell them about my murder board. I choke back my pride and tell them about the fucking guilt I drown in sometimes because of everything that’s happened. And finally, I reveal how I’ve been leaving the Academy grounds to follow Drákon group members. I also explain how it was through an informant that Ezra gave us Ethan’s location. I talk them through every fucking thing I can think of until I’m sure I’ve gotten it all out there.

Dylan, Oscar and Corin’s silence isn’t the most confidence instilling, but I ignore my nerves and add, “I’ve been gathering information for years, with Lexi’s help. I roped her into it when we were younger. I became sort of obsessed with everything to do with the Drákon group. I’ve practically dedicated all my free time to gathering information on them since I was a teenager. I’m sure it doesn’t make much sense to you, so I’m going to explain.” I take a deep breath. “When we were young, Lexi and I used to be part of a trio of friends. It was me, Lexi and Anna. She... she was murdered and it sent me into a tailspin. I don’t always deal with things the best, so the way I coped was by trying to find her killer. Or at least why it happened. It still remains unsolved, but I am almost positive that the Drákon organisation was involved.” I meet

each of their eyes and explain everything from how I found out the other day how Ethan fits into this, how Ethan went to work with them after everything that happened with his little sister—Anna. And then I tell them the amount of information I have compiled against the Drákon group.

Afterwards they're silent and I'm officially and completely emotionally done for the day. Possibly forever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Dylan

It's a lot to process. A shit ton. I shake my head as my thoughts swirl around my head like a fucking merry-go-round. I'm lucky enough to have a fairly rational thought process so I'm able to separate my emotions from the new information and look at it with neutrality. I can completely understand why Corin didn't tell us about his job before, the same about Nessa's borderline vigilante behaviour.

The difference between them though, is that she told us it willingly whereas Corin didn't tell any of us and I can't help but wonder, if it wasn't revealed, how long would he continue to keep it a secret? Out of everything that has been revealed today, that is what I'm caught up on. To my understanding, he is on board with Oscar's and my idea to court Nessa together. For her to date all of us. But his job is a big secret to keep in a relationship. It breaks a lot of trust, whether you weren't legally able to tell people, or not.

I suck in a breath, eyes flitting between everyone before landing on Corin who is still beside me. "When would you have told us if Ezra hadn't outed you?" I ask, a curious sensation pinching in my chest.

The large man averts his eyes and I grit my teeth, the urge to growl rising in my throat. "After my assignment is complete," he whispers with a grimace. My nostrils flare, that pain intensifying. It's then that I realise what it is. Hurt and betrayal. Over the last few months we've gotten closer, he's

one of my few friends. One that I've let a lot of my defences down around. It hurts that he didn't trust me to protect his secret. My eyes drop to the floor, only flicking up briefly to see an echoing flash of hurt tighten Nessa's expression.

The silence is thick with anger and everything unsaid. It's me who speaks up again, to get us back on track. We didn't meet up to put Corin's head on the metaphorical chopping block, we met up to come to a decision on working with Ezra. "I want to hear more of what Ezra wants to say, because I would be interested in a position with the SFBI," I say.

Oscar straightens, still appearing slightly dazed by the information overload. "I'm not sure how to feel about everything you've both kept from me, but I have my own secret that I should tell you, since we're sharing." My eyebrows raise in surprise. I really wouldn't have expected Oscar to have anything to this level. My head cocks to the side and he waggles his eyebrows at me, a small grin showing at my interest. His attempt at lightening the mood draws a weak chuckle from Nessa and a tiny smile from Corin. "I have a job outside the Academy." Nessa gives him a pointed look and he groans, running a hand through his pink hair. "I fight at a club every few weeks to support my mother. Nessa and I ran into each other their the other day."

I sit back, concern rising in my chest. *Goddess, he can't be much older than twenty, how long has he had to do this to help his mother?*



Oscar

I force a somewhat natural looking smile onto my face, careful not to make full eye contact with anyone as everyone's focus narrows in on me, pity and sympathy practically radiating from their pores. I know they mean well, but I'm not going to crack open the cluster fuck of issues I have surrounding my mother yet, so I do what I always do, deflect with humour.

Letting out a chuckle, I nudge Nessa playfully, eyes meeting hers. "Now that you are all aware that I possess the amazing skill set needed for this job, I'm gonna add my decision, which is that I'd like to talk to Ezra about it more." I waggle my eyebrows as I mention my amazing skill set and manage to draw some chuckles, the mood in the room lightening considerably. It has some of the tightness in my shoulders easing.

Dylan pushes to his feet, eyes locked on Nessa. "I suppose this means that we've come to a decision then. We're going to meet with Ezra about everything."

I nod in agreement as does Nessa, but I don't miss the slight tightening of her expression. Biting the inside of my cheek, I lean over to cup her elbow, stroking her skin with my thumb. "Are you okay? I can't hope to understand what it's like to have to give up something that you've spent years working on..." I trail off, words escaping me. She's so strong to do this. Then again, with her double life and research into the SFBI,

she may have already prepared herself for this being a clause in the future when she applied to work with them.

Nessa's golden eyes drop to the ground for a moment and she seems to get lost in her thoughts, shoulders curling inwards a little, before she snaps back to the present. After letting out a long breath, she straightens, eyes hardening. "I'll be alright." She then looks down at her watch, lips tipping up into a smile. "Sorry, I've got to go. My dad's are going to give me a call in fifteen minutes and I got a package delivered this morning that I'm pretty sure is the balance stone they promised to send. I've got to pick it up from the mailroom."

I grin, her happiness infectious. "See you later," I murmur, the other two saying their goodbyes too before she ducks out of Corin's dorm room. The second the door clicks shut I'm on my feet, stalking towards Corin. All that anger and confusion I pushed down with Nessa present, rising to the surface. "*You lied to us.*"

Dylan steps into Corin's space too, and the Mountain Man, as Nessa has dubbed him, rises from his place on the couch, expression blank.

"I don't get it, you had so many opportunities to tell us yet you didn't," Dylan says in a soft voice, the hurt he's feeling clear in his pinched expression. "You could have told us then put a rune on us to make sure that information was locked away. Anything, but you didn't."

That has Corin's facade fading and he scrubs a hand over his face. "I know. I know and I'm sorry. In case you haven't

already noticed, I'm pretty shit at trusting people. It's no excuse though, and I understand completely if you're pissed at me, but please don't push any of that anger onto Ezra or what he's offering. It's an amazing opportunity and he really is a good boss. And although I know it's not much, I am sorry." Corin looks between us, sincerity heavy in his gaze. It has me letting out a breath, all the anger draining from me.

"Okay," I say, rolling my lips in. "I'm not going to lie and say that I'm not still upset, but we're okay."

Dylan draws back too but looks less sure about his feelings over Corin, and I draw closer to him. The vamp is too sweet for his own good, despite the slightly clinical demeanour he takes on most of the time. "I'm not sure," Dylan says, voice low, not meeting Corin's eyes. "I won't let it cloud my judgement on Ezra though."

Corin lets out a slow breath and nods, body still tense. "I'll speak with Ezra and we can meet up to discuss it when he gives me a time and day to meet."

I mumble an agreement, exhausted. We silently exchange another look between each other before we go our separate ways. We need to work it out though, for Nessa's sake.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Nessa

I sit back on the couch, coffee in hand, eyes fixed on Lexi as she stares off into space. We met up to talk about the offer that Ezra has made both of us, but so far all we've done is make coffee and stare into space. My eyes slide to the opal-like stone that is sitting on my dining room table, and I can't help the tingle of excitement that zaps through me at the thought of using it in my next potions class. The package that came was in fact the balance stone from my fathers, though I haven't had the chance to test it out yet. They gave me a brief rundown on how to use it when they called earlier and it seems like I might finally be able to create a potion to completion, without ruining it or making it explode. It's honestly a shame that you can't just use a balance stone as an instant fix for any other type of magic.

I blink away the thoughts, and refocus on the reason we met up today in the first place. "So," I inquire, drawing the word out.

The woman in question shoves her hand through her rainbow hair, before letting out a huff. "Yes, Ezra spoke with me about the job offer." She pauses, pale eyes flitting over my expression before she lets out a breath. "And the clause."

My jaw tightens as a rush of opposing emotions crash over me about that clause. Even though I've mentally decided to accept Ezra's deal, I haven't fully figured out how I feel about it yet. I know it's the most logical step for me to take, but it

doesn't make it easy to give up this vendetta that I've had for years. I shake my head at my own thoughts, now is not the time to work through this emotionally. I need to be here to support Lexi's decision.

My eyes settle on the woman in question as I nod in acknowledgement to her words and she continues. "I made it clear to him that if I agreed, I'm only going to be sitting behind a desk, no field work. He accepted that right off the bat, and I said that I needed to speak with you before I made my decision..." she trails off, eyebrows furrowing and it hits me.

I sit back, eyes flaring wide as I search her expression. "You already know what you want to do?"

She dips her head in a nod. "I want to say yes, to take him up on his offer," she says, expression relaxed.

She seems so calm about it, like the decision was easy and I can't help but prod at her. "You're not upset about having to hand over so many years worth of work over to them?" I ask, shock thick in my voice.

Lexi's jaw tenses, nostrils flaring as she finally meets my eyes. "No. No, I'm not. I have been done with everything like that for a while." She lets out a breath, fingers drumming against her thigh. I can't believe it, my chest locks up, my entire body tensing. My reaction has her rubbing a hand over her face. "Nessa, I loved Anna. She was my best friend, but I never had the same drive as you. Never had the guilt. After the first year or so it became more of a chore for me, a painful

reminder that we hadn't come any closer to catching who hurt her and the fact that she was gone. As the years went by I continued to help you with it, because I love you. You're my best friend—no, more like a sister, but I can't keep doing this. I don't *want* to keep doing this." She sucks in a shaky breath while I struggle to absorb her words.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I whisper, but even as I say it, I know why, because she knows that I wouldn't have handled it well. I would have seen it as her abandoning me when I'd already lost Anna, and screwed up our friendship. Her lips part to explain what I already know and I cut her off gently, shaking my head. "It's okay, I... understand."

It's quiet between us for a few long minutes as I sort through my emotions and accept Lexi's feelings. Eventually, I clear my throat, drawing her attention to me. "I'm sorry for making you feel like you had to help me. For forcing you to do something that brought you emotional pain like that. I'm not mad at you—not that I have any right to be—for needing to leave all of that behind. I love you, and I hope that this doesn't come between us," I say, chest pinching as I study her.

Her face lights up, grey cheeks flushing pink slightly as a smile curls her lips. "It won't, and I'm sorry it took me so long to tell you the truth."

Her soft words have my more cuddly side coming to the surface and I leap at her—careful of the empty coffee cup in her hand that she sets down so she can wrap her arms around me. I squeeze her tight, my relief at us being okay, swirling

through me. She laughs. “Okay, get off me you brat, I want another coffee.”

I draw back, but I can't help the giddy smile that curls my lips.



I shove my fingers in my pockets as I trudge through the bush. Unicorn stayed back at my dorm, napping on her favourite windowsill and Lexi left my dorm a little while ago. The path ended about half a kilometre back, the forestry and wildlife having destroyed it years ago. I've finally made time to test a theory of mine, and a thrill of anticipation runs up my spine as I step over another large root and push away a branch. As I do, I silently thank my enhanced vampire eyesight for allowing me to see in the dark. Without it I would've fallen on my face at least ten times over by now. I tilt my head back to try and glimpse the sky through the treetops, but am unable to spot the moon or any stars, just small patches of dark blue. It's that time right after dusk as the stars wake up and the moon begins its ascent so it's dark as hell, but if I really focus, I can hear students still mingling on the campus.

I've been trying to be more transparent with the guys since we had our chat, so they know I'm out here to use my magic, they just don't know exactly what I'm planning to do with it. I also may be avoiding them, just a little which is the only reason I didn't ask them to tag along. Corin especially. I'm not

sure how to process the fact that we're mates and that the bastard didn't fucking tell me. My nostrils flare, but I force my anger away and focus my thoughts on Oscar and Dylan. Ever since they—and Corin—basically told me that they want to all be in a relationship with me it's been a thought in the back of my mind. I swallow and let out a careful breath. I think I'm ready to give it a go. I need to sort out my feelings about Corin keeping our mate status a secret from me, but I'm willing to give them all a chance.

I am terrified though—yes, *me* of all people—because I don't want to lose the three men in my life that have become very important to me. If—no, when—I screw up, I need to know that they're not going to run away. That they're going to give me a chance to get used to having them there as support that I can trust completely.

I scowl, brows drawing down. Oh who the hell am I kidding, clearly I just need to stop being a wimp and go for it. With a decisive head nod, I make the decision here and now that the second I get back from this little trip I'm going to agree to date them. Or ask them to date me? Hmm, Goddess, I can already tell this is going to be an extremely awkward experience for me. I suck at this sort of stuff.

Shaking my head, I refocus on real life rather than my chaotic thoughts. I'm not too far away from the edge of the school so I have my eyes peeled for the guard that should be stationed not far from here. They're supposed to be patrolling a certain area, but from what I've observed on my nightly

explorations, this particular guard sleeps away his shift, which works perfectly for me.

A twig snaps behind me and the corner of my mouth kicks up. Foster is following me. I noticed his presence a while ago and am curious as to what he's up to. At first I was worried that it was a random person, but then I caught a hint of his mouth-watering vanilla scent and realised it was him. He's kept enough space between us for me to assume that he wants to keep his presence hidden and if I wasn't so attuned to his scent then I doubt that I would've noticed it. I bite my cheek and mentally shake my head. I'm really not sure what to make of the man from the limited interactions we've had. I do firmly believe that he isn't a threat to me though, he's had far too many opportunities to kill me for that to be his goal.

Blinking out of my thoughts, I duck behind a boulder and ignite a new rune circle that I've been fiddling with to create an undetectable barrier. I carry the best version on my person—a small stone for me to activate whenever I want. Foster was far enough back that I know he couldn't have had eyes on me, so he should be rather dumbfounded.

When he cautiously steps into view I bite my lip. His eyes are glowing. It sends a shiver down my back and I suck in a sharp breath when a wave of his magic washes over me. It's like a vanilla cupcake that's fresh out of the oven. Fucking delicious, a little warm, sweet, and something I very much want to take a bite of. All of which aren't good thoughts to have when I recently decided to pursue a relationship with the guys. Damn it, I'm going to have to tell them that I may have a

teensy-weensy crush on Foster, aren't I? I let out a little huff, but add it to my mental checklist. I have a feeling that Dylan already suspects it too.

I refocus on the man in question. My eyebrows furrow as I watch his expression tense and I wonder if he can sense me or not. The rune circle isn't perfect yet, so he should still be able to magically sense that I'm close, but not my exact location, and I should be invisible to all his other senses.

"Looks like you caught me," he says casually, shoving his hands into his pockets before leaning against a thick tree trunk. A smile curls my lips as I watch him. I feel like I should probably be embarrassed to be in his presence since the last time we spoke, I was practically running away from him after I drank his blood, but for some reason I'm not. There has always been something soothing about his presence, like I've known him forever. And I'm not embarrassed—okay maybe a teeny-tiny bit—but I don't feel awkward or uncomfortable around him.

Still smiling, I walk towards him and deactivate the rune when I'm in his line of sight with only a few feet of space between us. "Yes, I did. I sincerely hope that that wasn't your best attempt at following someone unbeknown to them." I cock my head to the side. "I would have thought you'd at least have used your disappearing trick from the first time we met," I say, smile widening at the little jump he does when I appear out of thin air. *Hah, it's not fun is it! People just appearing and disappearing randomly.* I snort at my own thoughts and shake my head.

Foster grins, and it reminds me of the cheshire cat out of the human Alice in Wonderland movies. “I guess you’ll never know.”

I roll my eyes and turn around to continue on through the woods. I still have a plan to enact, of course. His footsteps sound behind me and for some reason that has bubblyness rising up in my chest. I internally scoff at my emotions and try to refocus. *Theory to test Nessa. Tons of other stuff to work out. Plus let’s not forget about a certain conversation with the guys you have mentally agreed to have.*

“So whatcha doing out here again, anyways? Or do you just have something for walking through forests after dark?” Foster inquires after a few minutes of quiet.

I snort, and peer at him over my shoulder. He’s standing on a large fallen branch, head tipped back to look at the night sky and I pause to watch him. “I have something I want to test out with my magic,” I murmur, eyes still locked onto Foster. His features appear sharper in the darkness, his eyes more like black holes.

Straightening, his eyes land on me, catching me staring. I don’t drop my eyes or look away, instead we end up trapped staring at each other. “Is this something you are testing out, safe?”

I grin and finally manage to tear my eyes from his. “Where would the fun be in that?”

I can practically hear him shaking his head as I walk through the forest then pause at the edge of the tree line. Past

that there is an open, grassy area about thirty feet wide and spans the entire outer edge of the island. On the very edge of that is the barrier. My fingers curl into fists when I get my first real sense of it. I've never been this close to it in a calm moment like this to really get a read on it, and my chest pangs at the state it's in. It's weak, barely a gentle brush of magic from its greeting of me, when it should be humming with power.

I forget about Foster, as well as keeping a lookout for the guard. I forget about everything except getting to the barrier. It *needs* me. I stride towards it, Ghost Girl's magic instantly flooding me. My magic is drowned out, as is rational thought. All I am and all I know is that I need to touch the barrier. *Now*.

In my peripheral vision I see Aurora manifest, her arms outstretched towards the barrier and it only makes the need to touch it stronger.

I vaguely register Foster calling out for me, but it's not enough to snap me out of the desperate haze and I press my palm to the barrier.

For a moment, nothing happens, and then I'm being torn apart. I scream, body seizing, back arching in pain as Aurora's magic is torn from me. It's awful, like thousands of sewing needles pricking my nerves over and over, before having my insides ripped out.

I'm not sure how long it takes, or when I black out, but when I come to, it's with Foster's hands on my cheeks, his face close to mine. For a moment, all I can do is stare up at

him, eyes running over his features. The faint light from the rising moon, now that it's no longer hidden by the trees, makes his pale skin tone almost glow and his dark eyes glow orange. He looks ethereal. My head flops to the side and I offer him a goofy smile. "Why so worried?" I half ask, half slur, before booping him on the nose. Then something occurs to me. Blinking slowly, I focus on his cheeks. "You know, I've always wondered why grandmas squish peoples cheeks. *Hmm.*" I reach up and do just that, clumsily pressing my hands to Foster's cheeks and squishing the shit out of them.

He tries to talk, eyebrows lifting to practically touch his hairline, and I laugh at the way his squished lips look as he attempts to speak. The corners of his pretty brown eyes crinkle and he settles his hands over mine, gently pulling them away from his face. "Are you alright, Nessa?"

My head jerks back at the question, but I must put too much energy into the movement because the back of my head bounces off of the ground and I groan. Wait, when did I lay down? I start laughing again and Foster presses a hand to my forehead. Scowling at that, I slap his hands away. "I'm fine. I was just doing... something. *Hmm, what was it?*" I feel my forehead scrunch up at my slow brain before a glowing butterfly catches my attention. *Holy shit, where did that come from?* I say as much out loud, pointing at it over Foster's shoulder.

I shove to my feet, determined to chase the little bugger so I can get a closer look, but I stumble over my own feet and end up crashing down onto my knees in the long grass. My

disturbance has dozens more of the beautiful blue glowing butterflies erupting from the grass around us and my eyes widen. *Wow*. Either I really have lost it, or there are magical butterflies like we saw in the hidden place in the forest, swarming us. I turn around to peer at Foster who is standing behind me and chuckle. He has several perched on him, all up his arms, shoulders, and head. There is even one on his nose. I laugh, and get to my feet, doing a clumsy little twirl while my body buzzes with happy energy. When I come to a stop, my eyes settle on Foster, his awed expression is adorable and it makes me itch to take a picture.

Blinking, I go to step closer to him and Foster links his arm with mine. It has me looking up at him in surprise, but he just chuckles and shakes his head, making his black and blonde hair fall in his eyes. “Can’t have you falling over again, can we?”

I huff at that. “Excuse me, mister, I have perfect balance.”

It’s his turn to snort at me and I pout, turning back to watch the butterflies, but I lean on him slightly, sucking in a lungful of his vanilla scent as I do. The world is a little swirly at the moment. “They look just like the ones in that hidden place in the forest,” he murmurs, putting the connection together like I already had. I’m just not sure what it means that they’re here. When I’m quiet he lets out a breath that tickles the back of my neck. “I’m guessing it has something to do with whatever you did to the barrier.”

I shrug and act nonchalant, the strange high from Aurora's magic being torn from me, fading. I also notice that the ghost in question is no longer in the field with us. "You could guess that."

My attention turns to the barrier, which I realise I'm now quite far back from, and I swallow hard. It is vibrating with power and visibly thicker than it was. And that's with me not close to it, Foster and I are almost at the treeline again. As I watch the barrier I realise that though I'm no longer innately drawn to it, I can still sense a connection to it. Almost like... no it can't possibly be. I shake the thoughts off and reach for my magic. It jumps at my touch—no sign of Aurora's magic—and a laugh bursts from me. Her magic really is gone. My magic is definitely stronger though, and when I think of blood, my fangs tingle. I'm going to need to feed soon, though the need isn't urgent, just a background hum. That's a problem for future Nessa, though, so I don't let my mind linger on it.

Letting out a breath, a weird shiver rolls through me and my instincts are suddenly on high alert. *Something is wrong.* I tense and gently pull away from Foster, eyes turning towards the Academy. The feeling is coming from there. Alert now, I take off at a fast jog, letting my vampire traits wash over me to increase my speed. I keep my footsteps quiet and growl at Foster to do the same when he catches up, keeping pace at my side. "Nessa, what is going on?"

"Something is wrong at the Academy," I murmur, diving into my magic's well and drawing it up, ready to use at a moment's notice.

“How do you know?” he asks, confusion heavy in his voice.

“Just a hunch,” I mutter, then push myself to go faster, weaving through the trees. I’m surprised that Foster can keep up honestly, and I track him in my peripheral vision. He’s not even breathing hard. “How the hell are you able to keep up with me? What type of Monster are you?” I complain. Seriously though, I’m starting to pant despite my new vamp powers. “Goddess, I hate fucking running.”

Foster laughs under his breath. “You really should be more careful about asking things like that.” He’s not angry so I roll my eyes.

“I suppose that’s all I’m gonna get for an answer.” He doesn’t get a chance to answer because we burst out of the forest and onto the Academy’s main campus. Supes close to us flinch and scatter away from us, but otherwise it’s quiet. There are still a dozen or so small groups of supernatural’s mingling on the Academy’s campus, but the majority of the population is safe inside.

It doesn’t seem to matter though, because that ominous feeling inside me intensifies and thunder cracks overhead, the clouds forming inside the barrier, visible as they obscure the stars and moon. My eyebrows dip and I grit my jaw. *Great, what have I fucked up now.* Ignoring Foster as I stop in my tracks, I dig out my phone from my pocket and I call Lexi. She answers on the second ring. “Are you okay?” I bark out.

“I’m fine, at the dorm with Dan and Layla. What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure yet. Are you sure you’re all okay there?” I double check, chewing my cheek.

“Positive, Ness.”

“Okay, call me if anything happens, alright? I’ve got to go.”

“Nessa, wait—” I hang up the call and immediately find Corin in my contacts, calling him next. The clouds thicken, growing inky in colour, blocking out the moon, and stars, plunging the Academy grounds into deeper darkness. The supernatural’s around us have paused, muttering amongst themselves about the odd weather. I start walking towards the Academy as I wait for Corin to pick up. Foster follows me, that vanilla scent of his swirling around me. I cut him a curious look at him including me in his magical barrier, but I’m distracted by Corin’s voice.

“Nessa, are you alright?” he asks, voice low.

“Yes, are you?”

“We’re fine. I’m with Oscar and Dylan. Something is wrong, I know. I can feel it,” he mutters. I hear voices in the background before he shushes them and my eyes flick to Fosters as I stop.

“Where are you?”

“In my dorm, why?”

“Look out your window.” I’m assuming he, like me, has a permanent barrier protecting his dorm room that’s sound proof. He would have missed the thunder and chaos. As if to prove my point a thick spear of lightning jumps out of the

clouds above us and strikes the roof of the Academy with an almighty bang. Foster flinches and curses under his breath, thickening his shield around us. I don't react other than adding my own magic to his barrier. Our magic weaves together easily, the scents of the ocean and candy swirling around the space. My eyes stay fixed on the place where the lightning struck the roof though. There isn't a scratch and it's my turn to curse.

Thunder booming around us drowns out Corin's voice as he obviously gets his first look at the violent weather, and I tip my head back to look at the sky with an irritated sigh. "*Motherfucker.*"

"What?" both Foster and Corin question at the same time, but I don't answer, too busy cursing colourfully as more forks of lightning strike the Academy, the grounds and several trees.

People are now letting out screams and ducking for cover in a panic. Which means they're being stupid and running around like headless chooks. I take off at a run with Foster hot on my heels, aiming for the centre of the field, ignoring the chaos. "I released Aurora's magic into the Academy wards," I shout to be heard over the noise, filling them in, though I'm sure Foster has no idea who Aurora is. Suddenly the sky opens up, rain and hail pelting everyone and everything. We're protected by our barrier, but others aren't as lucky. Using my magic I hold out my hand and conjure a tall stone platform in the middle of the campus, taking half a second to marvel at how easy it is to use my magic again, after struggling with it for most of the term. I climb onto the stone platform, and use a projection

rune on my voice. “Take cover in the Academy!” I shout. It should be the obvious thing to do, but far too many people are taking cover in the trees or under half formed barriers.

It seems all they needed was someone to give them direction though, because they immediately bolt for the Academy. Cocking my head to the side, I watch everyone run. “Well that sort of worked,” I say.

Foster snorts and lets out a ragged breath. “Yeah.”

I smile and shake my head. The crazy weather has nothing on our combined barrier and it’s then that I realise I still have my phone in my hand that’s at my side. Whoops, Corin is probably freaking out right now. I never hung up.

I quickly bring it back to my ear and catch the tail end of what he’s saying. “—Swear to the gods Nessa if you don’t answer me right now I’m going to put you over my fucking kne—” I squeak and quickly answer him, cheeks flushing bright red.

“I’m here.” I can feel Foster’s eyes on me but I don’t risk a look in his direction. Dear Goddess, I really hope he didn’t overhear that.

“Finally. Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Are you alright?”

I let out a breath. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m with Foster.”

There is a pause and then. “Good.”

I finally peer at Foster and find him grinning at me, eyes heated. I’m going to kill Corin. I mentally groan when my

lower stomach tightens at the look Foster's giving me. Thankfully the universe has fabulous timing and a voice rings across the campus making both of us jerk our heads in the direction it's coming from.

"Everyone back out here, now," she snarls. With her appearance, the clouds seem to swell even more, though the dangerous lightning calms a little. The woman standing at the front of the field is Aurora, but not like I usually see her. Her body is illuminated by an ethereal glow that seems to emanate from her and her usually wavering, almost translucent form is nowhere to be seen. Instead, her form appears to be almost solid, as though she is closer to the living plane than the undead side. Her eyes are also glowing bright red as she throws her arms up, bright blue magic flaring from her fingertips. Her form grows until she's as tall as a two story house and towering over the field.

I'm trying to figure out what she's doing when dozens of portals open up a few feet above the ground and students start appearing on the field. "Holy shit, she's portalling everyone here," I whisper. Foster nods, stepping closer to me so his arm is pressed against my shoulder. It's chaotic, the flashes of portals and the mass of confused students being dumped onto the campus. I lean forwards, eyes scanning the dark area, attempting to spot Lexi or Corin. I hold up the phone to my ear, but all I get is static, so with a growl I hang up and slide it back in my pocket. Even with my vampire eyesight, between the flashes of lightning, glowing portal magic and darkness, it's impossible to see the features of anyone that's not right

next to our platform. So far all I can make out are students though, I haven't seen a single professor or the Headmaster.

In under five minutes the entire campus is packed with people, the only sound is the rolling thunder as everyone stays silent, fear wriggling through the lot of them. Foster and I on my platform are practically smack bang in the middle of everyone, with some people ducked half under us to avoid—what I'm assuming is—the freezing cold rain. I have to keep pinching myself to keep away the euphoria as their fear is absorbed into me. I have to stay present to figure out what the fuck is going on.

“Students of the Academy of Magic, first off, I welcome you to my school,” Aurora calls out over the silent crowd. The thunder seems to calm, only low rumbles remaining so Aurora's voice can be heard. “Second, I would like to introduce myself. I am Aurora, the Academy's new, and rightful Headmaster. I apologise for the way I called you all here, but I do have a few things to go over, if you all don't mind?” She phrases it as a question, but it's pretty obvious that she'll keep us here even if we disagree.

My eyebrows are practically touching my hairline, surprise radiating through me. This is such a different side to Aurora than the one she usually shows me. Frankly, I'm not quite sure how I feel about it.

Everyone murmurs their ascent to her words and she smiles, calming some. “With me being in charge there will be a few things changing around here. All of the portals are locked until

further notice and the barrier will no longer allow people through it for the foreseeable future. Any other changes have been sent to each of your dorms. You will find an envelope on the end of your bed. I advise that all of you read them very carefully and adjust your behaviour as such,” Aurora says, a serene if slightly cheshire smile on her face.

Then she claps her hands. “Oh, and I almost forgot.” Roughly two dozen portals open up in front of her and the professors I’d thought were missing from the fray earlier, appear. As does the ex-Headmaster. Once they’re all through, Aurora conjures a large platform beneath them and lifts them up, lighting up the sky with constant flickering lightning so we see them all clearly. She then snaps her fingers and shackles appear on their wrists, each set connected to its own chain that’s attached to the floor of the platform. Now grinning like the cat that got the canary, Aurora’s eyes fix on the Headmaster. “As I’m sure you were all wondering, your previous Headmaster is unable to continue his job, as he has been arrested by the SFBI.”

She gives it a moment for the information to sink in and a wave of murmurs rises up in the crowd, then with another snap of her fingers a portal opens up under the shackled ex-Headmaster and he’s sucked into it. I can’t help but grin. I don’t know how the fuck she’s managed to do it, but I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Aurora’s shoulders draw back, and she clasps her hands in front of her as she stares down each one of the professors. “Let this be a warning to you all.” That’s all she says on the matter,

probably confusing the shit out of innocent parties, but terrifying others who are now trapped on Academy grounds like sitting ducks. Excitement buzzes in my veins and I bite my cheek.

With that serene smile back in place she addresses the crowd. “Thank you all for listening. You are all dismissed.” She releases her hold on the group, including the professors, before turning her sights directly on me. “Except for; Nessa, you and your mates, Lexi and Foster, to my office, please.” She then abruptly disappears.

With that it’s like all the fear in the group abruptly falls away and it’s like being pulled away from a livewire. I suck in a quick breath before half falling onto Foster, laughing hysterically. Good fucking God. I scrub my hands over my face, the high from feeding on fear still buzzing in my veins. Goddess, this is probably the worst timing to have a partial breakdown, but then again, when have I ever had good timing?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Foster

I loop an arm around Nessa's waist, worried she's going to fall off of the platform we're on with the amount of semi-hysterical laughing she's doing. I'm honestly quite confused. There are a few very obvious reasons in my mind that I could have been summoned to the new headmaster's office, one of which is in my arms. Still, Nessa's reaction to the magical fuck around that was the last thirty minutes, is more than a little out there. Also, if I'm not mistaken the new headmaster is a *ghost*.

Anxiety is a tight knot in my chest, but I learnt how to dissociate myself from it a long time ago. In my line of work you really can't have crippling anxiety when things get stressful. I'm also a little confused about getting lumped in with Nessa, her mates and Lexi. I don't understand how Aurora could possibly be aware of my budding...*something* with Nessa, and I've hardly interacted with her guys or Lexi. Then again, I'm pretty sure I caught a flash of her before Nessa touched the barrier. I caught a flash of her, then I was too focused on Nessa.

I shake my head to myself, arm tightening around Nessa's waist as she leans against me and wipes at her eyes. She seems to have mostly gotten control of her laughter and when I look down at her, I find her already peering up at me, eyes shining slightly. "Sorry about that," she whispers.

Unsure what comes over me, a smile curls my lips and I pat her on the head gently. "Don't worry about it, giggles.

Everyone needs to laugh every now and then.”

Just like I thought it would, her nose scrunches up at the nickname and she elbows me, before ducking out of my grip. “You are not calling me that,” she says adamantly, pointing a finger at me.

“And if I do, *giggles*? What are you gonna do about it?” I like giving her shit, I admit it. She gets this adorable crinkle in her forehead when she’s angry. Like a—tall—angry, dark fairy.

Her eyes narrow as she searches for something. Those golden eyes visibly light up when she thinks of something and it has my smile growing. “I’ll call you mister glitter pickle, forever.”

A bark of laughter escapes me at the utter randomness of it. “Please do, *giggles*. I absolutely adore the name.”

Her eyes flare wide and she tips her head back in exasperation, letting out a huff. “You are impossible,” she growls before leaping off the platform we’re on. I laugh, but take a moment to check our surroundings before jumping down and note that all of her guys and Lexi are making their way towards us through the crowd. There are also two supes trailing after Lexi. I’m guessing they’re her mates. Otherwise there don’t appear to be any threats.

Refocusing on Nessa I lean over the edge of the platform to where she’s striding across the campus, then cup my hands around my mouth. “Thank you, *giggles*. I take that as a compliment.”

She flips me the bird over her shoulder and I shake my head, about to jump off the platform when it disappears from underneath me as the minx holds up a hand and wiggles her fingers. Cursing, my wings uncurl to spread wide, catching me. When my feet touch the ground, I tuck them away again and giggles, literal giggles, have my head snapping up. Nessa is watching me, standing beside Corin as I get myself together.

Brat.

I shake my head, surprised at my ability to be so lighthearted and playful with Nessa when I know there is a good chance that I've been caught out, but I just can't seem to help it when I'm around Nessa. It's like she's a blue flame that eclipses everything around her and makes me forget all my worries so all I can focus on is her.

Dylan and Oscar join them, the latter ribbing her playfully. I can't help but notice as I move towards them that Nessa and her entourage of men seem to be considerably less confused about what just went down than I am. It eases some of my worry to see that they aren't freaking out so I know that they aren't afraid for Nessa's fate, which oddly has something in my chest relaxing.

Lexi reaches them and launches at Nessa to wrap her in a bear hug, which she returns while we watch on. I slow down in my approach to give them the illusion of privacy as they whisper between themselves. After a minute or so they break apart and Lexi moves back to her mates who hung back, keeping several feet between Nessa and the guys. Deeming it safe, I resume my approach to Nessa's group again.

When I reach them, they turn towards the office, with me in step beside them, and Lexi stopped to speak with her mates. Their discussion seems a little heated and they move even farther back from our little rag-tag group so I avert my eyes.

“So, sweetheart, how do you feel now that you are free of Aurora’s magic?” Oscar inquires. My eyes jump to Nessa, her reaction after touching the barrier making more sense—sort of—her releasing a whole other person’s magic into an object would cause a sort of high, like she experienced.

She groans and rubs at her eyes. “Tired, but alright.” Her attention slides to me and she drops back slightly so she’s walking next to me instead of me trailing after them. “Although, I’m pretty sure I went a little loopy for a bit afterwards.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling and tilt my head to the side, quirking an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that you don’t remember, giggles?”

She answers while simultaneously flipping me the bird. “Yes, well, mostly.” I stare at her in silence and she grumbles under her breath. “Fine, it’s a little hazy. I remember the butterflies though.”

I nod and grin. “Yes, she went a little loopy,” I confirm. “Imagine a very bubbly, drunk Nessa, then add in like a few drops of clumsiness and you’ve got her post-giving-magic-to-the-barrier.”

Oscar cackles, rubbing his hands together like a gleeful kid. Corin throws Nessa a crinkle-eyed smile over his shoulder,

also keeping the lightheartedness, while Dylan watches her curiously. I'm wondering about his odd reaction when he talks to himself in a low voice, clearly lost in thought. "Hmm, I wonder why she reacted like that? The exhaustion makes sense but not the high." He continues to process it but his words are too quiet for me to hear. I only catch them in the first place because he's closest to me. Not knowing him well enough to add in my thought-process on the ordeal, I pretend I didn't hear him and let him come to his own conclusions.

As we step into the Academy, almost at the office, a thought occurs to me. "What did it feel like to be portalled to the campus grounds?"

Corin turns to look at me as we come to a stop at the entrance to the office, eyebrows drawn low. "It didn't feel like a normal portal. In fact, I didn't even realise we'd been portalled until I was on the field and actually saw the portals. It felt more like magic had latched onto me, and before I had a chance to react, I was appearing on campus surrounded by a ton of people," he explains with a shrug.

Dylan and Oscar murmur that their experience was the same then Corin knocks on the office door. A voice from inside calls for us to enter, but I'm distracted by a sudden flutter of wings. My magic instinctively rises to defend us from a threat, but Nessa grabs my arm. "Foster, don't. It's just Unicorn." I relax and step back as her familiar flies into sight. She chirps her greeting before landing gracefully on Nessa's shoulder. She then proceeds to chirp and growl to her as if she's actually speaking. Huh, how strange.

After a moment, Nessa coos at her. “Aw, I’m alright. No need to worry.” Then those golden eyes flick to us. “She was locked inside my dorm by magic, probably so she wouldn’t freak out over new management.”

My eyebrows climb my forehead. “You can understand her?”

Nessa cocks her head, lips pursed thoughtfully as she stares at the familiar on her shoulder. “Not exactly, and not all the time. Sometimes it’s like I just look at her and suddenly I just know.” She shrugs, shaking her head when we all just stare at her. “I know, it doesn’t make much sense...” she says, trailing off.

I give her a small smile, shrugging too. “Most magic doesn’t make sense.”

Nessa’s phone pings with a message, and she tugs it out of her pocket, eyebrows furrowing as she reads it before tapping out a reply. “We can head in, Lexi said something’s come up with her mates so she’s going to be here in ten minutes instead.”

Corin nods and pushes the office door open. When we enter, the chair behind the administration desk is empty and the new headmaster is standing in the doorway of her office. Aurora is back to the size of the average supernatural now, and it’s almost odd seeing her look so normal after how she was outside. Her form—just like it was outside—is clearly not fully corporeal, but it also isn’t quite ghost-like either. She’s smiling, one that appears to be genuine, eyes fixed on Nessa

and I have to resist the urge to drop my eyes. *She has so much power.* Nothing like our previous headmaster who felt no different than any other supernatural and carried a distinctly weasley aura about him.

Headmaster Aurora, completely sheds her serious persona and launches forward to wrap Nessa in a hug, careful of Unicorn who is perched on her shoulder. I suck in a surprised breath as Nessa jolts, hands frozen at her sides for a moment before she moves to rest her hands on the Headmaster's back. Immediately my head is swirling with questions. *Why is she hugging Nessa? What the hell is going on? How can she touch her, she's a ghost, or at least I thought she was—now I'm not so sure.* The urge to pepper everyone with questions hits me hard but I hold back, observing instead.

After a few seconds and a few awkward pats on the back from Nessa, the Headmaster pulls back, a smile on her face. Unicorn offers the woman some happy chitters and practically bounces in excitement on Nessa's shoulder as she greets the new Headmaster. Aurora laughs and offers her some mumbled baby talk and a chin scratch. "Thank you so much. For freeing me and restoring me, and in turn the Academy's magic to full power," she says, her focus returning to Nessa. It's then that I notice something. Their... their eyes are the same. The shape is similar and the colour is almost the exact same as Nessa's when she's using her magic.

Although I'm still pretty sure the Headmaster is a ghost, it means she must be extremely powerful to have colour, rather than just being a grey-ish white colour that most ghosts are—

clothes and all. She still appears to be semi translucent though, but even with that, her red eyes are startlingly similar to Nessa's. It has me noting the other similarities in their faces and my eyes flit to Dylan who I've found to be the most observant one in their group, to see if he's noticed it too. He's looking between the two with his eyebrows drawn down.

It's definitely odd and it doesn't help that when I looked into Nessa's background I couldn't find out much about her. Like literally almost nothing. Her parents have done an amazing job at protecting her privacy.

I zone back into the conversation when the Headmaster turns to Dylan, Corin, and Oscar in turn, offering them thanks before landing on me.



Nessa

“And thank you all as well. I know how you’ve stuck by Nessa’s side through all the crazy.”

I snort quietly and bite my lip to hide my smile as Aurora thanks the guys. I mean, she isn’t wrong, I have certainly dragged them into some crazy and dangerous situations, but I can’t help but laugh at their expressions right now. I swear Corin looks constipated, while Dylan is flushing slightly, nodding his acceptance of the thanks, and Oscar is outright grinning. The personality differences are astonishing. My eyes snag on Foster who is hanging back slightly, head cocked in thought as his eyes flit between the guys before landing on me. He catches me watching him and gives me a look I can’t exactly decipher before Aurora’s full attention lands on him. *Oooh, this should be good.*

“Foster, I’m sure you are confused as to the reason I asked you here. All of you probably to some extent.” She waves a hand to us absently and a chill runs down my spine, reminding me of the way it felt to be hugged by her. I’m not even sure how to describe the feeling, almost how I’d imagine it would be like being hugged by a malleable human ice cube. “It’s because I have a job for all of you.”

That gains mine and everyone else’s attention. “What?” Oscar blurts, then clears his throat, mumbling an apology.

Ghost Girl—Aurora—The Headmaster, as I should start calling her—waves his apology off and walks over to her desk.

“Well as you all saw, me taking this position was rather public and abrupt. All the professors were in attendance. They, along with others, are corrupt. There are lots of them, students and professors alike. My job for you all is to clean up my Academy, because I’m not going to lift the portal lockdown until every single corrupt soul on the grounds has either been captured or is in the ground, preferably mangled beyond repair.” She pauses to shuffle a stack of paperwork that’s on her desk and I let what she just said sink in.

Excitement bubbles up in the pit of my stomach and I bite the inside of my cheek. It’s probably not a normal response to being asked to do something like this, but I can’t help it. Just the thought of it has me buzzing with adrenaline.

She looks up at us again, lips pressing into a flat line. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I can’t just take care of it myself. Two reasons, one is that when I magically swore into the Academy’s barrier to agree to be the next Headmaster, I took an oath to never harm any students or faculty. Two is that I simply won’t have the time to figure out who is corrupt, while running the school, and getting the education back on track at the same time, but you guys will. I’m going to offer you this as an after hours extracurricular activity that goes towards your final score at the end of the year. Plus, it’s work experience for you if you choose to take Ezra up on his offer.”

My eyes jump to hers in surprise and she offers me a cheeky grin. “While you had my magic inside of you, I wasn’t just around when Ethan left his gifts for you. I was sort of magically attached to you and around you a lot.” I grimace at

that revelation, cheeks heating, and she laughs but doesn't tell me if she was present for any of my more intimate times with the guys. How fucking awkward. I'm all for them watching, but preferably no one else. Hmm, that's definitely something to explore once I get the chance to tell them that I'm ready to try the whole relationship thing.

Aurora perches her butt on the edge of her desk, still smiling. "Plus, Foster and Corin, you both have plenty of experience with this sort of work, being lackeys for the SFBI of course," she casually reveals.

Foster mutters a curse, eyes snapping to me and all I can do is watch him eyes wide, but Corin actually laughs. It's a loud booming laugh, before he points at Foster once he's settled. "I was worried you were a plant for the Drákon group because of the whole secretive, yet knowledgeable thing you had going on," Corin explains, shaking his head while still smiling. Meanwhile I'm stunned silent, brain blank. Aurora's words echoing through my head.

Foster relaxes a little for the first time since entering the office and scrubs a hand over his face. "You work for a branch of the agency too?"

Corin nods, and Foster groans before refocusing on all of us, his eyes snagging on my expression for a moment before settling on the Headmaster. Though whatever he sees on my face has his eyebrows drawing down in concern. "So are we going to accept or...?" he asks.

I bite my lip, and decide to shove aside my emotions on missing the fact that Foster is a plant. I force my mind to stay on the topic of Aurora's offer and I cross my fingers at my side for luck, hoping everyone wants to do it. "I say we take a vote," I add, forcing myself to contain my excitement at the prospect of working on something like this. "All for working with our new Headmaster, raise a hand."

Every single one of us puts a hand in the air, including Foster, and I laugh, finally letting the excitement bubble over. Other confusing shit aside, doing this is going to be amazing. I let out a whoop and do a little shimmy, drawing a few chuckles from the guys. "It looks like we're going to have an interesting next few months," I declare, magic crackling happily inside me in agreement.

To be continued...



Find book 3, the final book in The Academy of Magic series, [here](#).

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And, of course, thank you, all of my readers! You are all fantastic. I hope you all enjoyed my book and have a great day/night.

If you're interested in taking a peek at the first chapter of the first book in my complete duet, *Tortured Heart*, turn the page...

TORTURED HEART

Trigger warning

- Physical abuse as both a teenager and a young child, Mental abuse, Assault, Sexual abuse (no rape), PTSD, Anxiety, Graphic torture, Abuse by a parent/caregiver, Mentions of discomfort with their bodily image, Heavily scarred heroine.

Sidenote; I would like to add that none of the love interests in this book partake in any of the abuse, or harm of the Main female character. They are all sweet to and protective of her.

CHAPTER I

MIA

I startle awake to the sound of my alarm, scrambling to turn it off so it doesn't wake up mother. A shudder runs through me at the thought. Finger-brushing my knee length hair to the best of my ability, I sigh when my fingers get caught. Glancing at the time on my barely functioning alarm clock, I jump to my feet and wrench on my worn brown shorts and matching t-shirt. Before racing up the basement steps on silent feet, ignoring my still aching ribs. A punishment I received the previous day from accidentally lingering too long in my mother's presence. Though they were broken yesterday; they'll be completely healed in a few days. I've had abnormally fast healing ever since I can remember. Pushing my thoughts aside as I reach the kitchen, I focus on preparing breakfast. Perfectly toasted bread with avocado and poached eggs for my father, fresh coffee, and cereal for mother with buttered toast on the side. I quickly finish up while keeping an eye on the time. Breakfast must be set on the table by six-thirty each morning, no later. With practiced ease I lay everything on the dining room table, keeping my eyes on the

floor as I hear a bedroom door open upstairs. I slip silently back into the kitchen to complete the dishes I just made. Re-entering the dining room, I keep my head bowed and hands behind my back. Shuffling to stand in the corner of the room with my back to the wall. Waiting for them to start their breakfast while silently hoping the food is perfect so I don't earn myself another punishment. They ignore me. My limbs begin to tremble as mother raises her coffee to her lips. After swallowing she gives me an almost imperceptible nod and a small amount of the tension in my body drains away. Once they have finished and I've cleared the breakfast dishes without meeting anyone's gaze, I return to the dining room. Freezing when I see mother standing primly beside the table. "Mia today your father and I both have a very special meeting to attend with our pack. You know the rules. I expect the house to be spotless when we return and of course use your common sense and don't leave the house or the consequences will be dire," my mother states her voice filled with ice. Though a manic grin slips through her cold facade for a second before she smothers it. I simply nod, hiding my excitement at them leaving. I have been mute since I was around eight. After I realized that it only angered my mother if I spoke to her or made noise, especially while being punished. Mother waves her hand dismissively causing me to flinch at the sudden movement. She ignores my reaction before she swiftly exits the room. I wait in the dining room until I know there's enough distance between us that I won't risk running into her on my way back to the basement. Reaching the top of the basement steps I quietly close the door behind me. Letting out

a sigh of relief that I made it unscathed. A small smile breaks onto my face and I practically skip down the steps. Too happy to allow my jostling ribs to stop my excited movement. My parents will be gone today so I can sneak out into the backyard for a few minutes. I have only had a few opportunities to do this in the past, once a year if I'm lucky. As I glance over the basement which triples as a laundry, toilet, and my bedroom, if you could even call it that. I glance over my thin mattress and ratty blankets. The neatly piled three sets of clothing beside it are the only ones I have other than what I'm wearing. I only have one tiny window that is ground level and barely clean enough to see through. I place a load of washing on before using the toilet. My skin feels gritty but I ignore the feeling. I'm only allocated a two-minute cold shower once a week in the main floor bathroom. I don't have enough time to wash my long hair and am only allowed to use an unscented bar of soap when I do get a chance to wash it. I have a toothbrush that I keep with my bedding and that's all of my belongings. I shake my head before gliding around the house quiet as a mouse and completing all of my chores as fast as possible while avoiding my parents. When I'm nearly finished scrubbing the kitchen floors mother opens the door and I pause, shifting to a seated position leaving my eyes on the bubbly floor. In my peripheral vision I see her survey the floor I have already cleaned before screwing up her nose. "We are leaving now. This floor is still filthy, clean it again", she snarls before stepping closer and daintily pushing the bucket of soapy water over with the sharp tip of her heels. I catch her smirk out of the corner of my eye. Outwardly I don't react even as the bleach and water puddles

around my knees causing the joints to burn and ache. Mother flicks her hair over her shoulder before leaving. I faintly hear her growling at my father over something he's done and I cringe for him. She's almost as awful to him as she is to me. I quickly rise to my feet, mopping the water up and finishing the floor. My sensitive nose burning at the strong chemical smell, causing my head to pound. I suppress a whimper as the scent sends me into a memory of when I was younger and used to still try and argue with my mother. She'd hold me down and pour bleach down my throat until I'd gag. Then repeat the action once I'd stopped choking. It was a fairly regular occurrence. I stopped talking partially because of how much that damaged my throat, also because I learnt that arguing didn't get me anything except pain. I vaguely wonder if those punishments caused any permanent damage to my vocal cords. I shake my head at myself, flicking my ears back and forwards as I strain to hear my mother's car doors close. The quiet engine purrs to life before quieting as it heads down the long driveway and onto the road. I wait several minutes nervously. Making sure that they are really gone before I sprint to the back door ignoring the constant growling of my stomach. I pause for just a second when my fingers land on the handle. Biting my lip, I flick the lock off before gently pushing the door open. Feeling the warm sun on my face for the first time, in what I'm almost positive has been over a year and finally having the cold bone-deep ache in my limbs dissipate under the sun's rays has my shoulders drooping in relief. I walk farther outside until I'm at least ten paces from the back door and spread my pale arms out at my sides, tilting my head back.

Just soaking in the sounds of wildlife and the faint noise of other people going about their lives. I plop my butt down onto the grass and lay back. I was around fourteen when I started to realize that it can't be normal to live like this. I observed countless families and children interact with each other through my blurry basement window. I saw the children's smiling faces and parents hand in hand. I watched kids chuck tantrums and only get a stern talking to while I cowered and waited for them to be struck, only for it not to happen. For their parents to gently coddle them until they calmed. From catching snips of conversation off of the television and when my father rewarded me sometimes when mother was not around and allowed me to watch a movie or TV show with him. I know that most kids go to school and learn how to count and read. Stuff that I'd never had the chance to learn. I only knew how to tell time as the kind live-in chef my parents had when I was younger taught it to me out of necessity. I know how they're making me live can't be normal. But I have no money to escape and my whole life, my mother has told me that other people are bad and that if I ever tried to run she would send her whole pack after me. Which made me hesitant. Especially if they are all like her. Shudder at the possibility. I snap out of my thoughts suddenly when I hear footsteps and voices approaching. Leaping into a crouch knowing I had only been outside for mere minutes and I could hear it wasn't mother or father, they would have come up the drive by car. I straighten up to my full height slowly backing towards the door while scanning the yard from side to side. I freeze as my gaze collides with someone in the neighbour's yard over the

short fence and only mere meters away. When she gets a good look at my face, her jaw drops and I flinch. My shoulders curling inwards I know what she sees. My long-knotted hair hanging down my sickly thin frame, worn clothing, and the large raised scar that runs from my eyebrow down one side of my face, over my eye, ending at my chin. Courtesy of my mother from the first-ever beating she gave me, where her hands had changed to inhuman claws when she attacked me. One of my eyes is a stark blue-white from the scarring and damage although I can still see out of it perfectly. The other is a bright inhuman green. I'm tense expecting her to attack just like my mother had said all other people would. Though curiously she stays as frozen as me, until as though suddenly shaken out of a stupor she speaks softly, "Hi, darling I've never seen you before. Are you alright?" I jump at the sound of her voice before taking a slow step backward as I tremble in fear. Seeing my retreat, she takes a step closer and raises her hands quickly out in front of her. I full-body flinch backwards and bolt back inside, closing the door behind me quickly and re-locking it, before bolting back down to the basement and curling up on my mattress while trembling so hard my teeth start to chatter. She saw me. she'll tell mother or worse she might call the police. I don't know if I'll survive the beating I'll get for this. Mother was always repeating three phrases: 'never draw attention.', 'Never leave the house.', and the last one makes me shudder just thinking about it, 'I'm doing this because I love you.'

That last phrase she repeats over and over when I'm getting punished. She also consistently mentioned this pack she and father belonged to, though I'd never seen them. But, I'm terrified they might be like us. Like my mother who could grow claws on command and was completely insane. I also knew that for some reason I healed faster than normal people. Broken bones healed in days and bruises overnight. My senses all seemed enhanced. I cower in the corner of the basement waiting for the inevitable beating. A sudden screeching of tires has my head lurching up from my knees. I must've fallen asleep. I hear my mother shriek of rage, so loud it sounds like she's already in the room with me. I jump scrambling backwards along the wall to get as far away from the door as possible. Flinching when she opens the basement door so hard it bangs against the wall. She stalks towards me, her lips pulled back in a vicious snarl. Soundless whimpers fall from my mouth. By the time she's reached me her fingernails have extended into claws and her face looks slightly morphed. Her teeth have sharpened and are protruding past her lips. She leans down reeling me up painfully by the hair before smacking the back of my head against the wall twice. Sparks light up behind my eyes, time seeming to slow as mother begins raining blows to my chest and stomach. Before seeming to get bored of that, she began raking her claws down my back and thighs. My ears ring, and sound wavers in and out as she wraps her hands around my throat while cursing at me. "You stupid ungrateful bitch how dare you let yourself be seen?"

It's the last thing I hear before I lose sound completely. I can tell by the manic gleam in her eyes that she isn't going to stop this time. My vision tunnels and I find a small piece of me is at peace with the fact that I'm finally going to be free of this hell.

Tortured Heart by Anne Hall, Available on Amazon & Kindle Unlimited. Here is the link -