


MIRANDA MAY



SINFUL
SECRETS

A FAE REALMS SERIES
THE SECRETS OF SORLPHI | BOOK TWO

Sinful Secrets

The Secrets of Sorlphi Book Two

Miranda May

Sinful Secrets

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To the Shennanigans Squad.

*I couldn't do this without y'all! Love ya! Yes, I'm being
mushy. Deal with it!*

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Character Directory



Seelie Court

Rules over Spring and Summer Courts.

Seelie Queen Lilian Finnan (Earth and fire elements): Born a Finnan, she married Ethan from the Summer Court. The couple had two children together before drifting apart. Eventually, has an affair with Unseelie King Oliver, which resulted in Hadley's birth. Best friends with Grace, who she had take her forbidden daughter to L'Airid to be raised as a mortal. *Deceased.*

Seelie King Ethan Finnan (Fire element): Eldest son to the current Summer Court Earl and Countess. Fathered two children with Queen Lilian before they grew apart. *Deceased.*

Seelie Princess Emerie Finnan (Earth and fire elements): The eldest child of Lilian and Ethan. She was meant to take the throne once her parents stepped down. *Deceased.*

Seelie Prince Issac Finnan (Earth and fire elements): The youngest child of Lilian and Ethan. Second in line for the throne.

Hadley Dubois-Corbin (Air, earth, fire, and water elements): Raised amongst mortals in L'Airid, she knew nothing of Sorlphi or the circumstances of her birth until Grace showed up and brought her to Sorlphi. The future Fae

Queen was then informed that she had two weeks to learn the ins and outs of the Fae and Sorlphi before her magic would reveal itself to be sure she does have all four elements. Then she finds out that she's meant to take four consorts, one from each of the minor courts (Autumn, Spring, Summer, and Winter), and that she is to announce them at her coronation, which was to be held one month after her birthday.

Grace Lawrence (Earth element): Assistant and best friend to the Seelie Queen. She's the one that Lilian entrusted with the task to bring baby Hadley to L'Airid and swap her with a human baby. She brings Hadley back to Sorlphi and begins her training.

Adaline Lawrence (Mortal): The mortal baby that was swapped with Hadley. Raised by Grace and works at the palace. Befriended Hadley when she arrived in Sorlphi.



Unseelie Court

Rules over Autumn and Winter Courts.

Unseelie King Oliver Russo (Air and water elements):
Born a Russo, he married Caroline from the Winter Court. The couple had three children together before his affair with Seelie Queen Lilian. It is unclear if he was aware of Hadley.
Deceased.

Unseelie Queen Caroline Russo (Water elements):
Youngest sister of the current Winter Court Duke, also known as Hunter's father, Gabe. Bore three children for King Oliver.
Deceased.

Unseelie Princess Peyton Russo (Air and water elements):
The eldest child of Oliver and Caroline. She was meant to take the throne once her parents stepped down. *Deceased.*

Unseelie Princess Layla Russo (Air and water elements):
The middle child of Oliver and Caroline. Second in line for the throne. *Deceased.*

Unseelie Prince Charles Russo (Air and water elements):
The youngest child of Oliver and Caroline. Third in line for the throne. *Deceased.*



Spring Court

Earth element

Duke Sebastian Castillo: The duke usually folds to the other dukes of the other courts, even if he doesn't agree with them. But he often will try to find alternatives that may not be so harmful.

Duchess Iris Castillo: Iris loves her husband and children, but always backs her husband's decisions. She suggested that the heirs try to become Hadley's consorts instead of trying to get rid of her.

Lord Marcos Castillo: Heir to the Spring Court Dukedom. He was the first to be kind to Hadley, even though their parents were urging them to force her to leave. Was romantically involved with Hadley prior to her finding out about their betrayal.

Lord Benjamin Castillo: Marcos's younger brother. They are only a year apart in age, unheard of with the Fae.



Summer Court

Fire element

Duke Carter Murphy: While he doesn't feel as adamantly as the Autumn and Winter Court dukes, he will usually side with them when it comes to decision making.

Duchess Veronica Murphy: Loves her family, but holds some old-fashioned ideas.

Lord Caiden Murphy: The heir to the Summer Court Dukedom. In a secret relationship with Kai. While he tries to get Hadley to leave Sorlphi at first, once he realizes that she has Kai wrapped around her little finger, he stops fighting what he's feeling. Was romantically involved with Hadley prior to her finding out about their betrayal.

Lady Aubrey Murphy: The oldest of Caiden's younger sisters. She is married to an unknown Summer Court member.

Lady Emery Murphy: The second oldest of Caiden's younger sisters. Is being courted by the Summer Court Baron's youngest son.

Lady Morgan Murphy: The youngest of the Murphy siblings. She is only sixteen.

Olivia O'Connor: Veronica's younger sister and Caiden's aunt. Her husband died recently. She takes her children and Hunter's twin siblings to an unknown realm in Silent Secrets.

Blythe O'Connor: Olivia's eldest daughter and Caiden's cousin.

Landry O'Connor: Olivia's eldest son and Caiden's cousin.

Neveah O'Connor: Olivia's youngest daughter and Caiden's cousin.

Reed O'Connor: Olivia's youngest son and Caiden's cousin.



Autumn Court

Air element

Duke Kam Jin: Kai's father. He was a different man prior to the disappearance of his son and the death of his wife. Hates Kai and has abused him since he was a child.

Duchess Rini Jin: Kai's mother who died shortly after his birth. *Deceased.*

Duchess Bella Jin: Kam's second wife who is currently pregnant. Not much is known about her except that she's younger than Kai, marrying Kam just after her twenty-first birthday. Kai believes that she hates him.

Lord Ryder Jin: Kam and Rini's firstborn and the previous heir to the Autumn Court Dukedom. He was best friends with Hunter, Caiden, and eventually Marcos. He went missing twenty-seven years ago. *Presumed dead.*

Lord Kai Jin: **Lord Kai Jin:** The current heir to the Autumn Court Dukedom. His childhood was terrible, being raised and abused by his father. Has dealt with suicidal ideations on more than one occasion. Caiden saved him the night that he considered taking his own life. They began their relationship shortly after. Caiden was the only person he'd been with prior to Hadley.

Unborn Lord or Lady: Kam and Rini's unborn child.



Winter Court

Water element

Duke Gabe Valentino: A hateful, power hungry man. Uses his youngest children to keep Hunter in line. He will do anything he has to do to get the power he feels he deserves.

Duchess Eve Valentino: An absent mother. Always supports her husband.

Lord Hunter Valentino: The heir to the Winter Court Dukedom. Because his father threatened the lives of his younger siblings, he held out the longest when it came to falling for Hadley. He'd just been offered a second chance when Hadley found out about their betrayal.

Lady Haven Valentino: Born five minutes before her brother, she's the eldest of the twins. Was taken to an unknown realm by Caiden's aunt, Olivia, and her children.

Lord Caleb Valentino: Born five minutes after his sister, he's the youngest of the twins. Was taken to an unknown realm by Caiden's aunt, Olivia, and her children.



Sinful Secrets Playlist

Get it on Spotify [HERE](#)

Your Betrayal

by Bullet For My Valentine

Dynasty

by MIIA

Impossible

by James Arthur

Arcade

by Duncan Laurence

Unloveable

by DIAMANTE

Down Below

by Tori Forsyth

buzzkill

by MOTHICA

Hollow

by Jordan Powers

Therefore I Am

by Rain Paris

Breathe

by Melissa Etheridge

Just Say

by Nine One One

I'll Get Through It

by Apocalyptica, Franky Perez & Geezer Butle

you should see me in a crown

by Billie Elish

Killing Me Slowly

by Bad Wolves

Wrong Side of Heaven

by Five Finger Death Punch

Wicked Game

by Daisy Gray

Face My Fears

by Mree

Hurts Like Hell

by Fleurie & Tommee Profitt

Certain Things

by James Arthur (featuring Chasing Grace)

Hear Me Now

by Bad Wolves (featuring DIAMANTE)

Give Me Something

by Seafret

Your Call

by Secondhand Serenade

Suppose

by Secondhand Serenade

Not Strong Enough

by Apocalyptica & Brent Smith

Where The Shadow Ends

by BANNERS & Young Bombs

What Hurts The Most

by State of Mine

You Are The Reason

by Calum Scott & Leona Lewis

What They'll Say About Us

by FINNEAS

The Moment

by Amy Stroup

Seeing Red
by State of Mine

Rise
by Katy Perry

Foreword

Hello readers!

Welcome back to Sorlphi and the Fae Realms! I'm so excited for you all to get to read this book. I can't wait to hear what you think of it. In case you didn't see them, there are some family trees before the table of contents. Hopefully this will let you easily remember who is who!

Please be aware that this series is reverse harem, meaning that Hadley will not have to choose between her men. There will be explicit language and sexual encounters—including group sex. There is also M/M within the harem, so if you're not into this then please don't read.

This book is darker and has more possible triggers than the first one, but they also contain spoilers. Because of this, I'm including them separately so that those of you who don't wish to be spoiled can skip over them.

As usual, the characters did not follow my outline, but I do believe it made the story even better. And when you get to the

end, all I can say is I'm sorry. You can thank my alpha and beta teams for this one. Because it's definitely a bigger cliffhanger than book one.

Happy reading!

Trigger Warnings

As with book one, there are references to suicidal ideation and past child abuse that continues into adulthood. There is discussion of characters worrying about another going on a depression spiral and the possibility that they might have hurt themselves. Other triggers include murder, asphyxiation, and dissociation due to trauma.

If you find something else you think might be triggering, please feel free to reach out to me. Thank you.

Prologue

Hunter

What just happened?

My mind is spinning as I watch Kai storm from the room, just as Hadley had done moments before. Everything had fallen apart in a matter of seconds, and I can't seem to wrap my mind around it. I feel like my entire world has imploded, and yet there's no way Hadley is my world after only knowing her for two weeks. After fighting my attraction to her.

I can't accept that. I won't accept this.

Except, how can I deny it?

Two weeks ago, Grace brought Hadley to Sorlphi and into our world. Following the massacre of the Seelie and Unseelie courts, uncertainty ran rampant in all the courts. Who would rule over us? How would we choose new rulers when there is no one who held more than one element?

Then Grace called together our parents and once the meeting was over, they'd shared the secret Grace had

protected for almost twenty-one years. There was a girl—no, a woman—who'd been born of an affair between the Seelie Queen and Unseelie King. A woman raised in L'Airid who would hold all four elements when her magic revealed on her twenty-first birthday—a Fae Queen. The first Fae Queen to be born in hundreds upon hundreds of years. Not since the murder of the last Fae Queen and her consorts, which is when the Seelie and Unseelie courts formed.

Ruled by a queen and king, the Seelie and Unseelie courts oversaw the running of Sorlphi. New laws were passed that made it illegal to intermingle between minor courts, making it so that no one but the rulers held more than one element. The throne passed down from father to daughter, mother to son. But once more, Sorlphi found itself without a ruler.

Our parents told us in no uncertain terms that we were to get the future Fae Queen to leave Sorlphi by any means necessary. It was their intention to rule over Sorlphi, and they couldn't have anyone ruin that for them. I hadn't wanted to do it—none of us had. But what choice did I have when my father threatened Caleb and Haven?

Grace had requested a tutor from each of the minor courts so that we could teach the future queen all there was to know about who she really was. So the four of us went off to the palace to tutor her while trying to convince her to leave. It should've been simple, but nothing about Hadley is simple.

She's beautiful, and I know that my three friends felt drawn to her immediately, just as I did. I hadn't wanted that—I'm

still not sure I want it now. I fought against it, against her, with everything I had. Meanwhile, my three friends were falling for her. I was jealous of Marcos, Caiden, and Kai, but I refused to let myself falter.

But it did no good. We couldn't chase her away, so a new plan formed. Hadley would take a consort from each of the minor courts, and once they realized she wouldn't leave, our parents demanded that we become her consorts. The other three were well on their way to being named her consorts, but not me. I was so jealous, even when I wouldn't admit it. Sending Caleb and Haven away with Caiden's aunt took away the leverage my father held against me, and finally, for the first time since Yana, I was taking something I wanted.

Only for it to blow up in my face.

"What are we going to do?" Marcos asks, drawing my attention to him.

I shake my head, because I have no fucking clue. "I don't know that there is anything we can do."

"There has to be." Tears fill Caiden's eyes as he continues to stare at the door. "I can't lose them—either of them. We have to fix this, Hunter. We have to."

I want to assure him that we will, but I don't know if we can. I don't know if this is something we can come back from. I don't know if Hadley will ever be able to forgive us for betraying her, and that's exactly what we did. I won't lie to them, choosing to remain silent as I shake my head.

“Fuck,” Marcos curses as he pulls at his hair.

All I can do is nod, head bobbing like an idiot. Fuck is right—we’re all fucked now, and it’s our own damn faults.

Chapter One

Hadley

Somehow, Adaline manages to help me to my room without us running into anyone. Because that's just what I need, for my people to see their future queen falling apart from a broken heart. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to stop the tears.

I never thought that I'd be able to fall for anyone in the short time that I've known these four men, but somehow, I had. And it had bitten me in the ass. I'd been an idiot, allowing myself to fall for the first men who showed me the slightest bit of attention. I never wanted to be this girl, but here I am, proving that I *am* that girl.

"It'll be okay, Hadley," Adaline murmurs as she pushes open the door to my room. "I know it hurts now, but you don't need them. They don't deserve you."

I know Adaline is just trying to help, but it takes everything in me to keep myself from snapping at her. My heart doesn't care that I'm better off without them. All it cares about is that

they hurt me, that they'd betrayed me. All it cares about is that it's broken.

Adaline leads me to the couch, and I collapse onto it, pulling my knees to my chest—not caring what happens to the beautiful dress that I'm wearing as I bury my face into the skirts. My makeup is for sure running now and probably smeared across the material.

Tonight was supposed to be a great night. My powers had revealed, showing that I had access to all four elements, meaning that I am the next Fae Queen. My people were so happy. I'd been able to feel the joy and excitement from the crowd, choosing to ignore the negative emotions that threatened to overwhelm the positive.

And then Hunter had admitted that he'd been wrong about me, and he'd apologized. Elation had bloomed inside me because I couldn't stop thinking about him, hating that he hated me. So I'd put myself out there, telling him I'd give him another chance. I'd chosen three of my four consorts, even if I hadn't informed them of that fact.

When Hunter kissed me, it was even better than I could have imagined. It was everything—they were everything. Or at least they were until Adaline showed me that video, breaking everything.

Sobs rack my body as the tears continue to fall. I shrug off Adaline's hand as she tries to comfort me. I don't want anyone touching me right now. I just can't deal with it. I need to lose myself in my grief to move on. Because I don't have time for

this. There's so much that needs to be done before my coronation.

I have a month to get everything in order and choose new consorts. One month to pick four people that I will spend the rest of my life with, but not ones that I'll love. If I don't love them, they can't hurt me. I will choose people who I can be friends with. Friends I can deal with. This soul-wrenching pain tells me that love isn't something that I should ever seek again.

Dramatic? Absolutely. But the first time I'd allowed people in, they'd betrayed me. The Fae need a queen who will take care of them, and I cannot take care of them if I'm falling apart from a broken heart. I will take tonight, and tomorrow I will begin anew.

My thoughts drift to Kai—my sweet Kai, who turned out to be so much more than he seemed. While he hadn't been in the video, the guilt in his eyes told me he'd been involved somehow. I could've allowed him to explain, but I couldn't remain in the room with the other three. Plus, he's with Caiden. He would've known what was going on, right? Caiden wouldn't keep it from him. While he might have been pretending with me, I know what he feels for Kai.

“What do you need, Hadley? What can I do?”

I scoff, lifting my head to meet Adaline's eyes. “There's nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do.”

“Well, I can at least sit with you so that you're not alone.”

“As much as I appreciate you wanting to help, I want to be alone. I *need* to be alone.” I wince at the hurt that flashes across her face, but I can’t worry about her feelings right now. I’m hurting too much to care. “I’m going to go to bed. Sleep will help. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Without waiting for her response, I climb to my feet and make my way into my bedroom. Shutting the door behind me, I take a moment to lean back against it. Taking a deep breath, I realize that the tears have finally paused. I know it won’t be the last time I cry tonight, but it allows me a moment to breathe.

I pull at my dress, annoyed at how hard it is to get off by myself, but eventually, it pools at my feet. Climbing into my bed wearing nothing but my panties, I bury myself beneath the covers as I curl into myself. Trying to keep my mind blank, I will myself to just go to sleep. I cannot think about them and how they hurt me, or the tears will begin again.

Of course, my mind is having none of that. I can’t help but think about the four of them and how I’d allowed them to hurt me. Tears begin to fall once more, and I know it will be a long night. All I can do now is hope that I exhaust myself so that I can sleep.

I don’t know how long I cry, but I must fall asleep at some point because the next thing I know, light is shining in my window and waking me. I groan as I bury my head under my pillow. My heart is throbbing, and my eyes feel heavy. Even without looking in the mirror, I know that they’ll be red and

puffy—not just from crying, but from lack of sleep. I don't know what time it is, but I'm sure that I haven't slept nearly long enough.

The pillow muffles the knock on my door, and I sigh. I guess it wasn't the light that had woken me. I lift the pillow off my face just enough to call out, "Come in."

I drop the pillow back on my face as I hear the door open, belatedly remembering that I'm naked except for my panties. I yank the covers up to my chin—not that it will hide much.

"Hadley?" The bed dips when Grace sits, her voice soft. I can hear the worry in her tone, telling me that Adaline has told her what has happened. "How are you feeling this morning?"

I really don't want to deal with her pity this morning. Hell, I don't want to deal with anything this morning. But that isn't an option for me. My life is no longer my own. It hasn't been since Grace brought me to Sorlphi.

Shoving the pillow to the side, I turn my head and focus on Grace. I hate the pity on her face but choose to ignore it.

"I'm fine—okay, that's a lie—but I will be. No, I don't want to talk about it or about them. There's too much that needs to be done before my coronation, which is what I want to focus on."

Grace nods. "Of course, if that's what you'd like to do. Adaline went down to get breakfast. She should be here shortly if you want to shower and then meet us in the sitting room?"

“Yes, that sounds like an excellent idea.”

Grace heads for the door, pausing before she pulls it shut behind her.

“I’ll let Adaline know you don’t want to talk about it, but I can’t guarantee that she won’t mention it.”

Without another word, she closes the door, and I squeeze my eyes shut, pushing away the hurt and pain threatening to overwhelm me once more. I’m hoping that focusing on everything that needs to be done will take my mind off of it. I just need to keep my mind off of the four of them while I shower, and then I’ll be too busy to think of them.

I can do that.

I’m in and out of the shower in ten minutes before pulling on a t-shirt and lounge pants. Right now, I just want to be comfortable. I have zero plans to leave my room today, so there is no point in dressing to impress. If Grace has other plans for me, she will have to get over it.

Making my way into the sitting room, I find Adaline and Grace whispering as they eat. Grace gives me a small smile as I sit across from her, but Adaline’s pity is all over her face when I turn to her.

“No,” I cut her off when she opens her mouth to speak. “We will not be speaking about last night, what happened, or the four of them. Thank you for caring, but not only do I not want to talk about it, but I also don’t have the time.”

Turning back to Grace, I sigh. “I don’t know how to go about it, but we need to set it up for me to meet potential consorts from the minor courts, since the guys are no longer options.”

“Of course, Hadley. I can arrange that. Would you like for them to come to the palace, or would you like to travel to the courts to meet them?”

“I can go to the courts?” The only place that I’ve been in Sorlphi has been the palace and the spa just yesterday. I hadn’t been able to see much of the city as the guards had led us straight there and then back again. I’d love to see more of my new home.

Grace nods. “Of course you can. In fact, I think it would be a good idea since we’ve had to keep you in the palace. You need to see more of the realm.”

“Yes, let’s do that. And the sooner, the better. Tomorrow, if you can?”

“Tomorrow?” Grace gapes at me.

“Yes, tomorrow. There’s no time to waste. I have to announce my consorts at my coronation, correct?” I pause, continuing once Grace nods, “Then I have a month to choose them. I have four courts to visit and who knows how many people to meet.”

“Absolutely, you’re correct. I’ll contact the Summer Court as soon as we’re done here. We’ll start there. Depending on

how many people apply, you might need to return for a few days before we move on to the next court.”

I pile food onto my plate, even though the last thing I want to do is eat. I have to keep up my strength, and the only way that I can do that is by eating.

“You’ll make sure that there are both men and women? Aristocrats and commoners? I want to make sure that everyone has a fair chance.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll make sure that all Summer Court citizens know they can apply as long as they are unmarried.”

My hand pauses in the air before I can take a bite of the eggs, my mind going to Caiden and Kai. Their relationship hadn’t bothered me—in fact, I’d rather enjoyed it—but I don’t want to risk being reminded of them. Nor do I wish for anyone else to be hurt because of me. “Or attached in any way. I don’t want someone that is already involved with someone else.”

“I will be sure to word it carefully, I promise.” Grace taps her fingers on the table, and I can tell how anxious she is.

“What is it, Grace?”

Grace makes a face before taking a deep breath and letting it out. “We need to train you on your magic.”

“Obviously.”

“Hunter, Marcos, Caiden, and Kai are the ones that I’d arranged to work with you on the individual elements.”

Oh. Now it makes sense. I'd already told Grace that I didn't wish to speak of the four of them. Just the mention of their names sends a wave of pain through me, but I push through it, because I must.

“Is there no way to arrange for me to work with anyone else?”

“They are the best in their courts. I know you don't want to hear this, but they are the ones that you need to work with. No one will be able to match your power, but they are the closest that there is.”

Fuck. That is not what I wanted to hear. I could always demand that someone else train me, but if they aren't powerful enough, then it will be of little help. I'm going to have to let them train me, aren't I?

“Fine. I will train with them, but I need you to tell them that's all there will be. I won't speak to them about anything that doesn't involve my magic. Or their courts, or whatever the hell else I'll need from them.”

Grace nods. “Yes, Hadley. I'll be sure to have a conversation with them. You'll probably be at the Summer Court all day tomorrow, so we'll set up for magic training in the afternoon of the following day, if that works for you. If you need more days at the Summer Court, you'll have to do half days. And then we'll do the same with the other courts.”

I get two days before I have to see any of them. It's not nearly enough time, but I'll put on my big girl panties and deal with it.

“Is there anything else?”

“No. Anything else we have can wait. I’ll send messages to all the courts as soon as I leave here so that we can make sure your suitors have time to make their way to the court palaces.”

“Thank you, Grace. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Lose your mind?” Adaline speaks, drawing my attention to her. She gives me a timid smile, and guilt rushes through me. All she’d been trying to do was make sure that I was okay, and I’d been rude.

I force a smile and incline my head. “You’re probably right. Adaline, would you like to spend the day with me? We can veg out. Eat our body weight in snacks and binge some movies.”

Adaline perks up, nodding quickly before turning to Grace. “Would that be alright?”

“Of course, Adaline. The two of you enjoy your day. Hadley, I’ll be back in the morning to bring you to the portal room so you can head to the Summer Court.”

With that, Grace stands and heads out, leaving Adaline and me alone. We quickly finish our breakfast, and I can tell that Adaline is fighting to keep herself from asking me something. I’m almost certain that it has something to do with the prior night, which makes me consider ignoring it, but it isn’t her fault. There’s no reason to hurt her just because I’m hurting.

“Just ask whatever it is that you want to ask, Adaline.”

She blinks at me for a moment before shrugging. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re practically vibrating with the need to ask me. This is the one chance I will allow you to ask. After this, we won’t be speaking of it, so ask now, or never ask.”

Adaline chews on her lips for a moment. “So, you’re really done with them?”

“Yes. I can’t trust them any longer. I won’t allow someone—or multiple someones—that I don’t trust to be entrenched so deeply in my life.”

“And you’re not even going to allow them to explain?”

My eyes narrow as I continue to watch her. Is she trying to get me to forgive them?

Adaline throws up her hands in surrender. “I was just asking. I, personally, don’t think that anything they have to say makes up for what they were doing. I just wasn’t sure where you stood on the issue. That’s all, I swear.”

I hum, leaning back in my chair. Do I want to know what they have to say? Some part of me does because it’s hard for me to believe that they faked everything that happened between us. But the bigger part, the part that they hurt, wants nothing to do with them. And what is knowing going to change?

Nothing. It will change absolutely nothing because I don’t have time to allow them to try to earn back my trust, even if

that's what I wanted—which I don't. So, no. I don't want to know. I don't need useless words that will change anything.

“No, I don't need to know why. I don't need to hear their excuses. I just need to move on and choose others as my consorts. I don't have the luxury of time, so I cannot waste any of it on them.”

Adaline considers me before nodding. “Okay. Then onto the most important question.”

What the hell would she consider the most important question? Oh, goddess, she isn't going to ask me about the sex, is she? Because I don't need to be thinking about that, let alone talking about it.

“What movie are we starting with?”

All I can do is stare at her grinning face for a moment before I burst out laughing. It takes me a few moments to get myself under control, and when I turn to her again, my smile is genuine.

“Thank you, Adaline. I needed that. I'm so glad that I have you in my life. Thank you for being such a good friend.”

“You're welcome, Hadley. And thank you for allowing me to be your friend.”

My heart is still heavy with heartbreak, but having Adaline by my side makes it a little bit easier. Having a true friend is something that I've always longed for, and I'm grateful that I've finally found that. With her by my side, I'm sure that I will be able to recover from this heartbreak in no time.

A huge part of me doesn't believe my own thoughts, but I push that aside. It's positive thoughts from here on out. I'll find a way to be okay.

Chapter Two

Hadley

When I wake the next morning, I'm exhausted. I'd napped a few times yesterday during Adaline and my movie day, but I'd still been tired enough to go to bed as soon as I'd finished dinner. I'd managed to hold in my tears while Adaline was here, but as soon as I was alone in my bedroom, they'd started falling once more.

A glance at the clock tells me I've woken before I needed to, but I think that I'll go ahead and make good use of that time. I'll meet suitors today, so I need to look my best. No one will want to become my consort if I show up with red, puffy eyes and crazy hair.

I take a long shower, allowing the hot water to relax my tense muscles before beginning the real work. I work product into my wet hair so that it will behave as it air dries. Looking in the mirror, I realize I'll need more concealer than usual to cover up the dark circles and puffiness.

An hour later, I look a hell of a lot better than I feel. My makeup is on point, and unless someone looks closely, they won't be able to tell what I'm trying to hide. Since I'm heading to the Summer Court, I chose a white sundress. It's snug on top, swirling out at my hips, and stopping mid-thigh. The spaghetti straps cross in the back, leaving most of it bare.

It'll be cool enough for the summer weather, and while it's elegant enough for a future queen, it's also sexy. For practicality, I pair it with sandals because there's no way in

hell I'm going to be traipsing around a new court in heels—that's just asking for blisters.

I lean forward to apply some killer red lipstick when a knock sounds at the door to my room. I glance toward the sound before finishing up, smacking my lips, and deciding that I'm as ready as I can be. Hopefully, Grace will approve of my outfit.

I hurry over to the door and throw it open, grinning. “Good morning, Grace—“ My smile drops, my voice cutting off as I realize Grace isn't the one standing outside my door.

“You look... Wow, Addy. You look amazing.”

My eyes narrow, pain and rage hammering at me as I stare at Caiden. What the fuck is he doing here? Why would he think it was okay to show up at my door after what had happened the other night?

“First of all, my name is Hadley. Addy is a terrible nickname for my name. It suits Adaline much better. Why you would think it's an appropriate nickname, I'll never understand. Regardless of that, you have no right to call me anything beyond my name. You lost that right when you betrayed me.

“Second of all, what the fuck are you doing knocking on my door? You must have balls of fucking steel showing up at my door after the shit that you all pulled. What makes you think I want anything to do with any of you? You know what? I don't care what made you think that because I don't. This is the only time that I will say this to any of you.

“There is nothing between us anymore. I don’t want to see any of you or speak to any of you unless it has to do with magic training. Beyond that, and any fucking politics that come from my being queen and you all the heirs to your courts, you don’t exist. Do you understand?”

Caiden’s eyes are wide as he licks his lips. My eyes follow the movement before I realize what I’m doing, and I jerk my eyes back up to his. There’s a hint of a smirk on his lips, and I realize he noticed. I grit my teeth, trying to keep myself from yelling at him again. He’s such a cocky fucker, and he’s definitely going to read more into that than it actually means.

“Why are you still standing here?” I don’t mean to scream, but I definitely do. And Caiden? He doesn’t even flinch. He just clears his throat, glancing down as he shuffles from foot to foot.

“Grace got tied up on a call, so she asked me to bring you to the Summer Court.”

“No, she didn’t.”

Caiden frowns. “Ummm, yes, she did.”

Seriously, Grace? Why would she think this was a good idea?

“There wasn’t anyone else that could take me? Surely, there is someone else in this palace that can take me.”

“Well, since I was already going with you all, she just told me to go ahead and take you.” He pauses. “She didn’t tell you I’d be accompanying you, did she?”

I grind my teeth because, no, she most definitely did not. That would've been nice to know. Grace and I were going to have to have a talk.

“As the heir, I'm meant to accompany you to my court and show you around before you meet with your—“ Caiden breaks off, grimacing. “Before you meet with your suitors. And then I'm meant to stay by your side in case you need anything from me while in my court.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely *not*,” I tell him. “Escort me if you must. But you will not remain by my side while I meet with suitors. In fact, I want you to leave me at your earliest convenience. I will spend no more time with you than I must. Are we clear?”

I can tell that Caiden is biting his tongue, anger flashing in his eyes. Why he thinks he has the right to be angry, I don't know, but he better think twice before lashing out at me. I'm in no state of mind to deal with that. No one can hold me responsible for the things that will come out of my mouth if he does so.

His eyes fall shut for a moment before his face smoothes out. When he opens them again, he inclines his head. “Your wish is my command, Hadley.”

We both stand there for a moment, neither willing to say anything or move. This is ridiculous. I knew that this would be hard, but I need to get the fuck over it. I have shit to do, and standing here isn't helping me accomplish it.

“Well, can we get going? I have a lot to do today, and I have no idea where I’m going.”

Caiden takes a deep breath before forcing a smile. “Of course. This way.”

I scoff when Caiden offers me his arm, stalking past him in the direction that he indicated. I hear his heavy sigh behind me before he hurries to catch up. I can feel him glancing at me numerous times on the walk to the portaling room, but I keep my eyes forward—refusing to acknowledge his attention.

Neither of us speaks, and I hope he realizes that this is what it will be like for us from here on out. If I could act as if he and the other guys didn’t exist, I would. But since that isn’t an option, this is the best that I can do. I will deal with them when I must, but I won’t make it pleasant for them.

“You haven’t portaled yet, have you?” he asks me as he stops outside a door that I assume leads to the portaling room.

I shake my head. “You know I haven’t.”

He nods before pushing open the door and gesturing for me to go ahead. “It can be a little unsettling the first time, but it’ll be over before you know it. Because it’s your first time, we’ll go through together. Generally, all you need to do is think of where you’re going and step inside.”

“I can do that. I’ll be fine on my own.” I bite my cheek because I know that I’m just being contrary to be contrary. I want to be mature about this, but it’s tough.

“I know you can do it, but let’s just do this together once. We all travel with someone for our first portal. As I said, it can be unsettling and discombobulating. We don’t want you to lose focus on where you’re going and end up who knows where.”

Yeah, that totally sounds like something that would happen to me. I know he’s right, but I don’t want to do anything *with* him. Childish? Absolutely. Do I care? Not a damn bit.

“Fine. Lead the way.”

We step up to the portal, and Caiden reaches for my hand. I yank it out of his grasp, eyes jerking up to him as I snarl, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

His frustration is clear in his locked jaw and how his whole body tenses. But when he speaks, it’s with all the patience in the world. “In order to travel together to the same place, we must be touching. The easiest way to do that is to hold your hand.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You can put your hand on my shoulder or something. I am not holding your hand.”

Caiden just nods, lifting his hand and laying it on my shoulder. I step into the portal with him, already beating myself up for my brilliant idea as he strokes his thumb against my bare shoulder, sending shivers up and down my spine.

As soon as I step into the portal, all thoughts of Caiden rush from my brain. He wasn’t kidding when he said it can be unsettling. I can’t tell which way is up and which way is

down. Darkness presses in on me and I forget how to breathe. But just as quickly as it begins, it ends.

I blink against the bright light as I suck in a deep breath. I lose my balance, and it's only Caiden's hands catching me that keep me from ending up on my ass. I reach out to grab hold of him as the room spins.

"Are you okay?" he asks, hand landing on my cheek and tilting my head up so he can meet my eyes.

All I can do is blink at him for a moment, wondering how we got this close. I get lost in his forest-green eyes, temporarily forgetting how he'd betrayed me. He's just so handsome, his lips so damn kissable.

I wrench myself from his grasp, shaking my head. What the hell am I doing? Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a moment to get myself back under control. I really hope that it isn't like that every time I travel by portal.

Opening my eyes, I find Caiden standing where I'd left him, eyes locked on me. I can read the despair in his eyes. That should make me feel better after the pain he's caused me, but all it does is make my heart break all over again. Why does he hurt? He's the one that betrayed me—not the other way around.

Forcing myself to turn away from him, I take a moment to take in our surroundings. I expected him to take us to the palace, and in a way, he did. The Summer Palace isn't as big as the one that I've been staying in—my palace, I guess—but it's still massive.

But what makes me smile is the fact that it looks like a sandcastle built from the whitest of sand. It's beautiful. Surrounded by palm trees and the smell of the sea in the breeze, I find myself relaxing. It's much warmer than it was on Natsu, but the heat isn't overwhelming. The sun beats down on my bare arms, and it feels like the most perfect summer day.

"It's beautiful here."

Caiden hums. "Living with the warm, sunny weather at all times can be exhausting, but it's home."

I glance at him from the corner of my eye, trying to figure out what I hear in his voice. There's something just a little bit off about how he says it.

Wait, no. I don't care what Caiden is thinking or feeling. I need to get it together.

"You said there was a tour?"

Caiden tears his eyes away from the palace and nods. "Right, of course. I'm sure that you're eager to meet your suitors. This way."

As soon as he turns away, I grin at the jealousy in his voice. Damn right, he should be jealous. He'd had his chance, and he'd blown it. Now he would have to sit by and watch as I picked someone else from his court. Sucks to be him, but it's exactly what he deserves.

And if I enjoy that just a little bit, who can blame me?



The tour turns out to be of the palace and its grounds. Though it's smaller than my palace—how fucking weird is *that* to say—it's still massive and takes us almost two hours. I'm already exhausted, but I don't know if that's from walking or dealing with Caiden for that long. I really need to get away from him.

He tried to explain himself a few times, but I'd cut him off each time by asking a question about the Summer Court. He seems to have given up for now, and I'm hoping that he'll leave me soon. Not that meeting a bunch of new people is appealing, but anything is better than spending so much time with this man that I was at least half in love with, who had betrayed me.

We've finally made our way inside the palace, and hopefully, we're on our way to the ballroom where I'm to meet my suitors.

“Your Majesty. Caiden.”

I turn at the unfamiliar voice, finding a petite blonde rushing over to us. She's a few years younger than me, but she's gorgeous.

“Morgan? What are you doing here?” Caiden hisses, eyes scanning the hallway.

“What do you mean, brother of mine?” She grins as she turns her attention to me, dipping into a curtsy. “Obviously,

I've come to put my name in for consideration as the Summer Court consort."

"No, you're fucking not."

My eyes widen as I glance between the two. I don't think I've ever seen Caiden angry before, but he looks like he's about to lose it on his younger sister.

"And why not?" I ask, hands on my hips, as I turn to glare at Caiden. "You're certainly no longer in the running, so why wouldn't I consider your sister?"

"Because she's only sixteen! She doesn't have access to her magic yet, and, therefore, isn't eligible. Which she knows. She's only here to piss me off."

Morgan blinks up at Caiden innocently, her eyes so much like his that it hurts. "I would never do anything like that."

"Bullshit." Caiden shakes his head, his mouth lifting at the corner. "You're a brat, and I hate you."

Morgan turns to me with a grin. "I'm really not here to present myself as a suitor. I know that I'm not eligible. But if I was, I totally would have. I'm Morgan, by the way. It's very nice to meet you, Queen Hadley."

"I'm not queen yet." I take her offered hand, shaking it lightly. "It's lovely to meet you. If you're not busy, I'd love you to accompany me to the ballroom. I'm sure Caiden has other things to do, and I'll need an ally since I won't know any of these suitors. I'm sure that you can give me the lowdown on all of them, right?"

Morgan grins, glancing at her brother for a moment before nodding. “Of course I can, Your Majesty. I’d love to.”

“It’s just Hadley,” I tell her. I hate the pomp and circumstance that revolves around being the future queen. I now know that this is the role that I’m meant to fill, but there are definitely things I hate about it.

“Hadley,” Caiden begins, cutting off when I turn to glare at him. He holds up his hands in surrender, stepping back. “Morgan, behave. Remember, she is the future Fae Queen.”

Morgan makes a face before slipping her arm into mine. She leads me down the hallway, glancing over her shoulder for a moment before turning back to me. “Okay, spill. Why are you so pissed at my brother?”

I bite my lip, annoyed that I hadn’t hidden my anger better. Because there’s no way in hell that I’m explaining to his little sister what had happened between us. If for no other reason than I don’t want to talk about it.

I just shake my head. “You should ask Caiden.”

The other girl sighs. “I knew you were going to say that. Fine, don’t tell me. I’ll figure it out, eventually.”

I don’t say anything, taking the time to look at the art decorating the hall. Everything that I’ve seen so far has shown that the Summer Fae really stick to the summer decor. I would think that they’d grow tired of looking at endless summer everywhere they look, but what do I know?

“Are you excited about meeting your suitors?”

“Excited?” I wrinkle my nose. “Not exactly. I’m not actually a big fan of new people or crowds. But I’ve been trying to not think about it.”

Morgan sighs, a faraway look forming in her eyes. “I think it’s romantic. What I wouldn’t give to have that many suitors vying for my hand.”

Morgan is so young—even though she’s only five years younger than me, there’s still such a big difference in the lives that we’ve lived. I don’t even know that I would’ve been so naïve, even at her age. Though, to be fair, she and I seem to have very different personalities. She’s an obvious extrovert, and I bet everyone loves her. She probably makes friends easily, which I never excelled at.

Though, if I’d grown up in Sorlphi, would it have been different? Would I have been different?

Shaking my head, I remind myself that thinking of what-ifs does no one any good.

“It’s just slightly overwhelming,” I tell her. “I have to meet who knows how many people and try to find one to become my consort. And it’s not like I have all the time in the world. I have a month to make a decision. Except, it isn’t just one person I have to choose, it’s four.”

“One thousand.”

I frown. “One thousand what?”

“There’s one thousand suitors here to meet you.”

I stop in my tracks, pulling Morgan to a stop with me. “I’m sorry? Did you just say one thousand people are here to apply to be my consort?”

Morgan nods, laughing when my eyes widen. Panic rises in me. How the hell am I supposed to meet a thousand people, and then decide on *one* to be my consort? I can’t do this.

Morgan’s face falls as she continues to watch me. “Are you okay, Hadley?”

I shake my head, breaths coming in gasps. I’m aware in the back of my mind that I’m on my way to having a panic attack, but that isn’t stopping it from happening. I stumble over to the wall as I try to force breaths between my lips, leaning my head against the cool stone, hoping that it’ll help ground me.

“What do I do?” Morgan is beginning to panic. I wish I could assure her that this isn’t the first time that this has happened and that I will eventually be alright, but I can’t. All I can do is try to force myself to continue breathing.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I suck in a breath and try to count to four, but my mind is running away from me. Holding the breath in, I’m fighting to control my mind so that I can count. Letting my breath out, I try to do it slowly, but I find myself panting again. I’ve already lost the thread, and the breathing isn’t helping.

Hands land on my face, and my eyes pop open in surprise. I blink, finding myself staring into Caiden’s green eyes. I can hear his voice and know that he’s talking to me, but I can’t

seem to focus enough to make out the words. All I can do is stare into those beautiful eyes that I want to get lost in.

No, wait. He betrayed me. I shouldn't want to get lost in his eyes. But before I can focus on the anger to try to ground myself, the thread is spiraling off.

Suddenly, his lips are on mine, and I return his kiss before I even realize what I'm doing. It's over in moments, and this time when he speaks, I can begin to make out his words.

“Baby girl, I need you to focus on me. Come on, Hadley.” Worry threads through Caiden's voice as my eyes focus on him once more. “There you are. Let's try something that works for Kai, yeah?”

I blink at him for a moment, trying to figure out what he means before nodding. He gives me a tight smile, keeping his hands on my cheeks.

“Tell me five things you see. Can you do that for me, baby girl?” he asks, his hands dropping from my face.

I turn away from him, eyes scanning the hallway as I realize what he's trying to do. “Uhhh,” I pant out, “you. Morgan. Painting.”

That's only three. My eyes flash around again. “A door and a window.”

Caiden is smiling down at me as he nods. He squeezes my hands in his. “That's very good. Now, what are four things you hear?”

My eyes fall shut as I focus all my attention on what I can physically hear, not the swirling thoughts in my head. “Birds. People. Ummm... Your voice. My breathing.”

“You’re doing so good, baby girl. Now, three things you feel.”

“Your skin. It’s-” I suck in a gasping breath as I break off. “It’s warm. The floor is cold, hard. And ummm... the sun through the window. It’s warm, though not as warm as your hands.”

“Okay, and two things you smell.”

I suck in another gasping breath before inhaling through my nose as my eyes fall open. “Food... some kind of bread? And...” How am I supposed to describe the only other thing that I smell, which is him? That scent that is so inherently Caiden? “And you.”

Right now, I’m so focused on Caiden that he’s all that I can see, hear, smell, or feel. And it’s then that I realize my breathing is much more under control. I squeeze Caiden’s hands before pulling away as I continue to focus on my breathing, making sure that I don’t lose it again.

“Thank you,” I tell him quietly, eyes drooping. I can’t look at him any longer. I never wanted him to see me like this, especially not after his betrayal. I don’t want to show him—any of them—my weaknesses. I don’t need to give them any more ammunition to use against me, but I can’t stop myself from thanking him.

“Are you alright now, Hadley?” Morgan asks, panic lacing her words.

Glancing up at the younger girl, I try to smile, but I’m sure that it ends up looking more like a grimace. “I’ll be fine. I just got a little overwhelmed.”

“Maybe we should take you back to the palace. I don’t think meeting a bunch of strangers is a good idea.” I can feel the weight of Caiden’s stare, but I refuse to look at him as I keep my eyes locked on Morgan.

“Absolutely not.” I push myself to my feet, brushing off Caiden’s hands as he tries to help me. “It’s unlikely that I’ll be able to meet them all in one day as it is. I cannot put this off.”

“You can-”

My head snaps to him, eyes narrowing as my jaw clenches. “I don’t think that you have any say in what I do. Thank you for helping me with my panic attack, but you can go now.”

Caiden’s jaw drops at the venom in my voice, but he doesn’t leave. With a huff, I turn back to Morgan and link my arm with hers once more.

“I’m sorry if I worried you, Morgan, but we really should hurry. I’ve already wasted enough time.”

Morgan glances over her shoulder at her brother before turning back to me with a nod. “Of course, I know the suitors are excited to meet you.”

“And I’m excited to meet them as well.”

If I act like the panic attack never happened, then maybe she will too. I can still feel Caiden's eyes on me as we walk away. I wish he would leave me alone, but I know that isn't possible, so I guess I will just have to learn how to deal with him—hell, how to deal with all of them. I wish that this could've been easier, but there's not much that I can do about it right now.

We stop in front of a set of double doors, and Morgan turns to me with a smile. "Are you ready for this?"

"Not at all," I tell her with a smile. "But I don't really have a choice, so let's do this."

With one last nod, Morgan pushes open the door and leads me to meet my future consort.

Chapter Three

Caiden

Watching her walk away from me is just as hard as watching her run away from us the night she found out that we'd betrayed her. Not that we'd really betrayed her, but I know that's how she sees it. I fucking hate it, but I understand it. And honestly? That makes it a million times worse.

I get why she's angry and why she's here looking for a consort when it should be me as her consort. It's all made worse by the fact that I haven't seen Kai since that night, either. It's like he just disappeared, and I'm worried. No, I'm more than worried. I'm terrified that he's done something that he can't undo. I'm afraid of the dark place he might have found himself in once more.

To say that I'm a bit of a mess is putting it lightly.

My heart feels shattered because I hurt the man that I love and the woman that I thought was our future. And even if I understand the reasoning behind it, it doesn't make it hurt any less. Seeing her on the ground as she lost herself to a panic

attack broke me, just like it has every time that I've found Kai in a similar position.

But to have her pull away right after and walk away? It hurts so much more than it should. Never before in my life have I been jealous of my sister, but as Hadley leans against her and allows her to lead her down the hallway, I would give anything to switch places with my sister.

I'd tried to convince her to return to the palace on Natsu, and even as the words fell from my lips, I knew she wouldn't listen. But I don't want her to meet these men and women who are here to try to win her favor, to become her consort. I want to be the one by her side, and I've blown my chance. I'd hoped that she'd allow me to explain or at least talk about what had happened, but she's having none of it.

We hurt her, and I hate that.

The ringing of my phone pulls me from my thoughts and forces me to look away from Hadley and Morgan. I really hope that it's Kai, but even as I pull the phone from my pocket, I know that it won't be. A glance at the caller id confirms that fact.

“What do you want?”

There's a moment of silence before Hunter sighs. “Still pissed off at me?”

“Of course, I'm still fucking pissed. You know I wanted to tell her what was going on, but no, Hunter knows best. Now Hadley wants nothing to do with any of us, and Kai is missing.

What part of that would ever lead you to believe that I wouldn't be angry at you?"

"You can't stay mad at me forever."

"You want to bet?" Squeezing my eyes shut, I lift my hand to pinch my brow. "Let's not do this again. Did you need something?"

"Marcos saw Kai—"

"What? Where? Where is he?"

Hunter grunts. "Can I finish my sentence before you start demanding things of me? If you'd just listen, I would have answered your question. He saw him leaving his room at the palace."

"And?" I can't help but pace up and down the hallway. "Did he talk to him? Where is he now?"

"He tried talking to him, but he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't answer when Marcos asked him questions. He said he looked pissed. That's as much as I know. Marcos said he'd follow him to make sure that he's alright, but I haven't heard anything else from him yet."

Part of me is grateful to know that he's okay—at least physically—but the other part can't help worrying about what he's going through right now. I love Kai, but he's not the most stable of people. I don't want him to hurt himself.

Running a hand down my face, I sigh before glancing back up just in time to watch the door close behind Hadley and

Morgan. “Thanks for letting me know. You’ll let me know when you hear from Marcos again?”

“Of course I will.” Hunter pauses for a moment. “Why don’t you just come to my room, and we’ll wait to hear from him together?”

“I can’t.” I snort. “I’m at the Summer Court with Hadley.”

It’s so quiet on the other line that I have to check my phone to make sure that we didn’t get disconnected. “Hunter?”

“Why are you with Hadley?” His voice is tense.

“Did you not read the email that Grace sent?” I ask, not bothering to hide my frustration with my friend. Though, if I’m honest with myself, it’s not just him I’m frustrated with.

“No, I haven’t checked my email today.”

“Well, dumbass,” I huff, “we get the honor of escorting Hadley to our courts so that she can meet with suitors. You know, so she can pick her consorts since we blew our chances.”

Hunter hums but says nothing for a moment. “Did you talk to her?”

“About us?” I laugh, but there’s no humor in the sound. “I tried, but she didn’t want to listen. I don’t know if she’ll ever want to listen. We fucked up.”

“We did, but I think we can fix it.”

“And what makes you think that? The ten minutes that you spent not biting her head off?” I shake my head, not caring that

he can't see me. "You barely know her. It's not going to be easy to get her to forgive us—if she ever will."

"I never said it would be easy," he growls. "And don't act like I don't know her. I might not know her as well as you and Kai or even Marcos, but I know her. Just because I was an asshole doesn't mean that I know nothing about her. I paid attention—even when I didn't want to."

His voice grows quieter with each word, and I'm not sure that he meant to say all of that to me. And I definitely don't know how to respond to him. This isn't the kind of friendship that we have, but that's mainly because Hunter doesn't like others to know what he's thinking or feeling.

"Look, Hunter, I don't want to fight with you. I'm going to let you go. Hadley doesn't want me in there while she's meeting her suitors, but I'm damn well going to be in there to make sure that none of the assholes I know try to pull the wool over Hadley and Morgan's eyes. It's the least I can do. I owe her that, at least."

"Yeah, okay. I'll let you know when I hear from Marcos."

I go to end the call without a goodbye, but then I hear Hunter's quiet, "Cade?"

Lifting the phone back to my ear, I bite back my annoyance. "Yeah, Hunter?"

"I'm sorry. I should've listened to you. I know that this is mostly on me, but we'll figure out a way to fix it."

"I hope so, Hunt. I really fucking hope so."

Disconnecting the call, I duck down another hallway and make my way to the ballroom. There are so many people vying to be her consort; it was the only room that could fit them all. There's more than one entrance into the massive room, and I need to make sure that I keep an eye on my girl—I mean, on Hadley. She might not want me there, but that won't keep me from doing what I can for her.



Hours later, I'm barely holding it together. I hadn't thought that it would be easy to watch men and women alike flirting with Hadley, but I hadn't fully understood how much it would affect me. I've always been slow to anger, and I can count the number of times that I've lost my temper on my fingers. Which is saying a lot, considering the fact that I'm over a hundred years old.

But right now? It's taking all of my control to not storm across the room and beat the shit out of the man leaning over to kiss Hadley's hand as she giggles at something he's just said. Giggling! Hadley doesn't giggle—well, not often. How is she feeling comfortable enough with this man to giggle? And why the hell is it this act that has me about to snap?

Motion in the doorway draws my eyes, and I find my mother stepping into the room. Her eyes lock on Hadley and Morgan as people quickly shuffle out of her way. I make my way over to them, wondering why she's here. A glance at the

clock tells me it's time for dinner. We should've left hours ago, but the one time that I'd attempted to mention this to Hadley, she'd almost bitten my head off.

“Your Majesty.” My mom falls into a quick but deep curtsy. “You must be famished. I'd love it if you joined my family for dinner before returning to the palace.”

There's no room for argument in my mom's voice, but that doesn't stop Hadley from trying.

“I appreciate the thought, duchess, but there are still so many suitors to meet. I'd like to meet as many as I can tonight. I'd hate to take away another day from more people than I need to.”

I can tell that Hadley's words annoy my mom, but that's only because I've been around her so much. She just gives Hadley a small smile and nods.

“I understand the thought behind it, but there are a couple of things you need to keep in mind. Number one is that you're the future queen. All of these people would wait weeks or months to meet you if they had to. Having to come back tomorrow will be no surprise to any of them. Second, these meetings are most unnecessary. If you would just review the files that I had my people put together for you, you would be able to narrow down the applicants to a much more manageable pool of suitors to then meet. You're wasting time that you don't have.”

I wince at the words, knowing that my mom doesn't mean to be insensitive or rude, but she probably could've chosen her

words better. Or just not said anything. A glance at Hadley shows her eyebrows raised in surprise, but she doesn't seem mad.

“Third, you have to eat. I see that you picked at the food I had sent to you for lunch. You must eat to have energy, and you must have energy to do the things that you must to become our queen. So you and Caiden will join us for dinner.”

Hadley gapes up at my mom, mouth opening and closing as if she wants to say something but can't find her words. Morgan laughs. “You should just go ahead and agree now. She won't allow you to say no.”

Hadley's mouth snaps shut, eyes moving to meet mine for a moment before tearing away from me. “I'd be delighted to join you for dinner. Thank you.”

Which is how I find myself at the much too large table with Hadley at my side. Hadley is still mainly ignoring my presence, so I find myself zoning out what's going on around me until I hear my mom calling my name sharply, telling me this isn't the first time that she's said it.

“I swear, Caiden, your attention span has gotten worse the older you've grown.” My mom rolls her eyes but gives me a soft smile.

I return the smile. “Sorry, it's just been a long last few days, and I haven't been sleeping well. I guess I zoned out.”

I can feel Hadley's eyes on me, but when I turn to meet her gaze, she's already turned back to her food. Disappointment

and anger rush through me like a dagger to my heart.

“What were you asking?” I turn back to my mom, knowing that my smile is more forced now.

“I was asking how the boys are.”

“They’re.. Uh...” I don’t even know how to answer this. “Like I said, it’s been a rough few days. We’re all doing as well as we can.”

I can read the confusion on my mom’s face. I haven’t told her that Hadley had found out what our families had planned or that we were no longer being considered for the role of her consorts. Though I would have thought that she would’ve put that together when Grace requested that the court set up for her to meet suitors, but that’s my mom for you—burying her head in the sand about anything she doesn’t want to know.

She just hums. “I’m honestly surprised that Kai isn’t here with you. The two of you have been practically inseparable for years.”

My eyes snap up to my mom as I consider her, and I can’t help but tense at her question. Does she know about Kai and me? Before today, I would’ve said no, but now, I’m not so sure. I’m also unsure what she wants to hear me say.

“I’m actually not sure where Kai is right now,” I finally settle on. “I haven’t seen him since the masquerade.”

My mom frowns as she sets down her fork. “That seems a little out of character for Kai. Is he okay?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. He was... unhappy when he left the masquerade. He’s angry with the three of us,” I add, trying to watch Hadley from the corner of my eye. I need her to know that Kai isn’t the one she should be angry with. Of all of us, Kai is the only one I can say fully deserves her. I don’t know if I can get Hadley to forgive me, but I have to make sure that she forgives Kai. If the two of them are happy, I can live with that—somehow.

“Really?” Morgan asks from her spot next to my mom as she grins. “You’re just pissing off people left and right, aren’t you? First Hadley and now Kai? What the heck did you do?”

I shoot her a glare but don’t answer her. My mom clicks her tongue as she turns to Hadley. “Do I even want to know what my eldest did to make you angry with him?”

I’m curious what Hadley’s answer would be. She saw the video, so she must know that all of our parents were against her in the beginning, at least. Her jaw clenches, her eyes locking on her plate, and her hand is tight around her fork. And I can’t stand it.

“Because she found out how our families didn’t want her to be queen and sent us to do what we could to get rid of her,” I say, as if it’s no big deal.

“Caiden!” my dad roars, hands slamming down onto the table as he stands. “What the hell are you doing?”

Meanwhile, my mom ducks her head and has the good grace to look guilty. Morgan is glancing between the four of us with wide eyes. Hadley leans back in her seat and turns her gaze on

me. I turn my head to look at her and see her surprise and confusion.

“I’ve been trying to tell you, baby girl. I’m aware that we fucked up in the worst possible way by not being honest with you.” I ignore my dad’s huff, turning in my chair to face Hadley. “I won’t do it again. I won’t lie to you, and I won’t keep things from you. I know it’s too late and that it won’t fix what we’ve already broken, but I will do everything in my power to make sure that you become the best queen.”

Something flashes in her eyes for a moment, but before I can try to decipher it, it’s gone, and she’s standing. “I think that it’s time to go home.”

I clamber to my feet as she turns to my parents. “Duke Murphy, Duchess Murphy, I wish I could say it was nice seeing you, but we’d all know that’s a lie. As you recommended, duchess, I will review the files that you provided before returning. I’ll have Grace inform you when I will return and who I will wish to meet. I’d prefer that when I return to not see either of you. Morgan?”

“Yes, Hadley?” My sister sits up in her seat, grinning. I can’t figure out if she has a crush on Hadley or if she’s just in awe of her. Either way, Hadley has a fan in my sister.

“I’d like it if you could be my escort when I return?”

“Of course. I would love nothing more.”

Hadley nods, ignoring my dad’s huffing. “I will get your number from Caiden and have him send you mine. Feel free to

call or text anytime. I think we could be good friends.”

Morgan nods, her smile growing even bigger as she turns to me. I return the smile but find myself jealous of my sister once more. It seems that my sister will have more interactions with Hadley than I will.

“Shall we?” I offer Hadley my arm, surprised when she slips hers through and allows me to lead her from the room.

She must see the surprise on my face because she sighs, telling me, “This doesn’t change anything, Caiden. The four of you not only betrayed me and my trust, but you hurt me. I won’t go through that again, but I know I need allies. Not to mention that I’m going to need you all to teach me how to use my magic. If you can remain professional, then so can I.”

It’s not what I want—it’s really far from what I want—but I’ll take it. At least for myself. But not for Kai.

“You should know that Kai has been against the plan the entire time, and honestly? We’ve left him out of most of it so that we could keep him from his dad.”

Hadley stops at my words, frowning as she looks up at me. “I can’t figure out why you’d tell me that. Are you trying to get me to forgive him so you can send him in as a spy?”

“What? No!” I run my free hand down my face, trying to keep my exasperation off my face and out of my voice. “I’m trying to tell you that he doesn’t deserve to be punished for something that he barely had anything to do with.”

“He still knew and didn’t tell me. You do understand that’s why I’m so pissed, right?” When I nod, she shakes her head. “Then it doesn’t matter how much he did or didn’t have to do with it.”

“I’m worried about Kai.”

Hadley’s arm drops as she takes a step away from me. “I won’t let you guilt me into getting over this.”

“Goddess, that’s not what I’m trying to do!” Throwing my hands in the air, I barely manage to restrain myself from screaming—not at her, but in general frustration. What is it about this woman that makes her take everything I say out of context? Or am I just not expressing myself the way I think I am? “I’m just trying to tell you I’m worried about Kai. He won’t answer my calls, and none of us have seen him since the masquerade. Or, well, we hadn’t until Marcos saw him today. I don’t know where he’s been or what he’s been doing.”

Hadley is shaking her head, refusing to look at me. “I’m not doing this. We’re not having this conversation. I don’t care.”

I run my hands through my hair, grabbing at it and pulling. Why can’t anything be easy between us? Why do I keep messing this up?

“Take me to the portal room without talking to me, or I’ll find someone who can,” Hadley finally says, shoulders going back and head lifting. She still won’t meet my eye, but I just nod and spin on my heel to lead her where she wants to go. I have to figure out a way to stop making this worse, but I don’t even know what I can do at this point.

Fuck.

Chapter Four

Hadley

I'm so over this day. The moment that we're back in the palace, I stalk off and ignore as Caiden calls after me. With his long legs, I know he could catch up if he wanted, but I'm grateful that he doesn't try. I need to get away from him.

Seeing him was hard. Being around him while we toured the Summer Court was harder. Having him tell his parents why I'm angry and then pledging to never keep things from me again? It was heartbreaking. But telling me he's worried about Kai, knowing that I know about what he almost did? It was pure torture. And now I can't stop worrying about what Kai might do to himself, which just pisses me off more.

I don't want to care. I *can't* care. They've proven to me that I can't trust them. I might not be able to remove them completely from my life, but I need to find a way to harden my heart against them. I'd let myself soften with Caiden for just a moment, and he'd tried to use my guilt against me. Or at least that's what it felt like, even if he claimed it wasn't what he was trying to do.

I'm just so tired. I don't know how many men and women I met today. I'm not even sure that I can remember more than a handful of their names. As soon as the duchess had told me that I should review the files and narrow down the candidates, I'd felt stupid for not thinking of that myself. It's nice to meet the Fae that I would soon rule over, but that many people at once doesn't do me any good.

I'll spend the rest of the night and as much time as I can tomorrow reviewing the Summer Court files. I don't know how to narrow it down, but I need to. What I really need is Grace. Not only do I need to make sure that she contacts the other courts so that I can get files from them, but I know that she'll be able to help me figure out how to whittle down the list.

I quickly change course and head for Grace's office instead of my rooms. The door is open when I arrive, so I step inside without knocking.

Grace glances up, jumping up from her seat when she realizes that I'm the one in her office. "Hadley? What can I do for you?"

"Sit back down. Please." I wave at her as I slump into one of the chairs on the other side of her desk. "I just got back from the Summer Court."

"And how did that go?"

I wave my hand in the air. "I don't even want to talk about it, but the duchess did give me a good idea. She said I should review the files that she sent over to narrow down the list of

candidates and then meet those people instead of trying to meet all of them.”

“That makes sense.” Grace makes a face. “I’m sorry that I didn’t think of it.”

“It’s fine. Neither did I. So that’s what I’m going to do tonight and tomorrow, but I was hoping that you might be able to help me?”

Grace frowns, leaning back in her seat as she considers me. “I’m not sure how you think I can help. You’re the one who needs to decide who will be your consort. You don’t need my opinion changing yours.”

“I just don’t know *how* to choose who I should keep on the list and who I shouldn’t. I don’t know what to look for or what might be a red flag. So if you can look at a few with me, then you can help me figure out what I’m looking for, so I can make an informed decision.”

“Of course, Hadley.” She moves to stand up but hesitates for a moment before dropping back into her seat. “Why don’t I meet you in your rooms? I should email the other courts so that they can get files on their potential suitors sent over.”

I smile, so grateful again for this woman. “Thank you, Grace. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

Grace shoots me a distracted smile that has me laughing as I duck out of her office. It’s been a long day, and I wish I could just crawl into bed. But there’s too much to do. I now have a thousand files that I’ll need to go through. There’s no way that

I can go through them all tonight, but I'd like to make a dent in them before heading to bed. Though, who knows if I'll be able to sleep, knowing that I'll see one of the guys tomorrow.

I push that thought away as quickly as I can. Pushing into my room, I see the boxes of files sitting on my desk. I grab the top one and carry it over to the couch. Sitting, I pull the lid off and pull out a file at random. Flipping it open, I find there's more information here than I thought there would be.

There's a picture of a beautiful blonde woman staring back at me next to more information than I could possibly need. There's the obvious information about her name and age. Then there's information on hobbies, her job, her family, and her pets. Her favorite color and foods. Holy crap, they even have her kink preferences listed, which is... interesting.

Turning the page, I find a detailed family tree. It's mostly meaningless to me because I don't know much about the families in the courts. Turning the page again, I'm shocked to find letters of reference from two of her ex-girlfriends. I can't help but laugh. How? Why?

Grace finds me lying on the couch, still laughing minutes later. I've dropped the file, but grab it and try to calm myself as Grace sits beside me.

"I tried knocking, but you must not have heard me," Grace says as she glances at the file I'm holding. "What has you so entertained?"

I turn to the letters of reference and hand them to her. "There are letters of reference from her exes. I don't know

why those are in there or how they would've gotten them. I just... Oh, goddess, help me, Grace. I'm in so far over my head, it's not even funny."

Grace reaches over to pat my hand as she nods. "You'll be fine. Let's see what we have here and then figure out what's actually important."

Thank the goddess for Grace. I don't know how I'd do any of this without her by my side. It takes us well into the night to narrow the pool of suitors to just ten. And if I'm honest with myself, I have no idea why we narrowed it down to these ten. I feel like most of my input was looking at the picture in the file and saying whether I found them attractive. I'm off to a great freaking start as the future queen—*not*.

"This is good, Hadley." Grace reaches over and squeezes my hand. "With as late as it is, I'll contact the Summer Court tomorrow and ask that they delay the meetings until the following day. You'll still need to do your magic training tomorrow, but we can do that in the afternoon so that you can get a bit of sleep and have some time for yourself in the morning."

I suck my bottom lip between my teeth, sucking on it for a moment before straightening my shoulders. "Who will I begin training with?"

The empathy in Grace's eyes is almost my undoing, but somehow I manage to hold it together as she speaks. "Is there any of the four you'd prefer to train with first?"

I'd rather not train with any of them, but I know that isn't an option. Having dealt with Caiden for a good portion of my day today, I don't want to see him again tomorrow. I don't know that I can handle seeing Kai if he's doing as badly as Caiden has implied. Marcos or Hunter? I don't think that Marcos will let the conversation go as easily as Caiden had, but Hunter? He's a wild card. I have no idea how he'll react, partially because I haven't gotten to know him as well as the others. Which might be a positive.

"Hunter," I finally say.

Grace nods as she stands. "I'll make sure that he's aware. One o'clock good for you?"

"It can be earlier, Grace. I know I have a lot to learn. I will have to learn to deal with them at some point."

"And I have no doubt that you'll figure it out, but it's also almost three in the morning. I'd like to let you rest as much as possible."

My eyes are wide as I glance at the clock. "Holy shit, Grace, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. We could've done this tomorrow. I can't believe I kept you up so late."

"If I'd wanted to leave, I would have." Grace's smile is soft as she stands. "I don't require much sleep, and I can always sneak in a nap if I need to. I'll make sure that someone notifies you where to meet Hunter tomorrow afternoon. I should be able to have the files from the other courts no later than tomorrow evening. You can look over them on your own tomorrow night, and then we'll take a look at them together

after you return from the Summer Court. If I have time, I'll make notes on some of the files before they're sent to you."

"You don't need to do that, Grace. Surely I can figure out how to narrow the suitors down on my own." The last thing I need is to give this poor woman more work.

"I would like to assist you with this, Hadley. We both know that I have a better idea of what to look for in the files."

"Yeah, I guess," I grumble, standing and following her to the door. I know she's right, but I don't have to like it.

Grace stops with her hand on the door, turning to look at me over her shoulder. I frown, opening my mouth to ask her what's wrong when she turns and pulls me into her arms. I'm so surprised it takes me a moment to return the hug, but when I do, I melt into it. My eyes fall shut, and I feel tears building behind my eyelids.

Grace might not be my mother, but she's the closest thing that I have to one now, and there's just something comforting about her presence. She presses a kiss to my forehead before stepping back. "You'll be alright, Hadley, and I'll be here for you every step of the way."

I don't respond, afraid that the tears I'm fighting will fall if I try to speak. With one last smile, Grace ducks out the door, and I quickly lock it behind her. Leaning against the wood, I let my eyes fall shut again as I try to get my emotions under control. Even though there's no one here to see me fall apart, I want to be strong for myself.

I need to prove to myself, more than anyone else, that I can be the queen the Fae deserve. And that begins with learning to control myself and my emotions. Is it the healthiest thing to push down what I'm feeling? Probably not, but I can't afford to fall apart right now. There is still too much that I need to do—that I need to learn—before I take my crown.

One day, I'll have the time to fall apart, but that time isn't now.



I do manage to sleep in the next day, waking just before lunch. When I walk into my sitting room, I find that someone has delivered my lunch and a note from Grace. I eat quickly while I read over her note. It seems that I'll be meeting Hunter in a room in the basement because it's one of the few places protected against magic escaping.

It's good to know that I won't burn down my new home while learning how to control my magic. I eat slower than I should, knowing that I'll have to see Hunter soon. By the time I finish, I have to hurry through getting ready, so I won't be late.

I'd chosen Hunter to be the first to train with for a multitude of reasons. The main one is that he and I don't have the same connection that I have—had—with the others. Sure, we'd kissed just before they'd torn my heart from my chest and

stomped on it, but it was just a kiss. A kiss didn't have to mean anything, right?

I hum to myself as I stop outside of the room where I'm supposed to be meeting him. Am I lying to myself? Most definitely, but I'm hopeful that if I keep telling myself the lies, I'll eventually believe them.

The door flies open, revealing a scowling Hunter. "Are you planning to stand out here all day, or are you going to get your ass in here so I can teach you how to control your water?"

My eyes narrow, teeth clenching as I bite back a smart-ass response. And just like that, I recall how much I hated training with this asshole. Hunter really was the right one to pick for my first training session.

"Your default really is asshole, isn't it?" Rolling my eyes, I push past him into the room. It's large and completely empty. "Why are we in a big, empty room?"

"It's magicked to prevent your magic from escaping, princess."

I hadn't heard him move or even shut the door, but suddenly he's standing behind me. His body is warm against my back, and I hate how my body wants to sink into him. I really am going to need my body to get on the same page as my brain. We can't want these men any longer. I can't trust them.

"I know that, but it seems odd to use such a large room and for there to be nothing in it." I laugh, though it sounds forced even to my ears, as I step away from him. I turn to face him,

eyes roaming over his body instead of meeting his. I hate how fucking good he looks in his tank top and sweats that cling to his muscular build. I hate that I want to lick him.

Wait, what? No. I shake my head and finally meet his eyes. He's staring at me silently, and if I look closely enough, I see what I think is remorse in his eyes—which just pisses me off. It's too late for him, for any of them, to feel bad. If they'd only told me, then maybe we could've worked this out. But for Adaline to be the one to tell me that they'd been trying to ruin me or marry me for more power?

Fuck them.

“I thought you were in a hurry to train me?” My hands go to my hips as I glare at him. “So why the fuck are you just standing there?”

Anger flashes in his eyes as his jaw clenches, bringing a small smile to my lips. I shouldn't enjoy pissing him off as much as I do.

“Call your water,” he barks, causing my smile to fall and my eyes to narrow. “What's wrong, princess? Can't do it?”

This motherfucker. I grind my teeth, stretch out my neck, and fight back my annoyance. I know he's just trying to get a response out of me like I did to him, but I'm determined to not give it to him.

Closing my eyes, I reach deep inside myself to where I'd felt my magic sink after it had revealed. It's only been a few days, but I haven't even tried to do anything with it since then.

Even though Hunter had trained me the best that he could before my magic had revealed, I've been so afraid that I wouldn't be able to control it.

It's easy to locate the well of power, but I don't actually know how to call on my water magic. As much as I don't want to admit to Hunter that I don't know how to call forth my water, what choice do I have?

When I open my eyes, I find Hunter has moved closer to me; he seems to have forgotten his temper, at least for now. I frown as I shake my head. "I don't know how."

"Of course not, because you haven't had to yet." Hunter nods. "I don't know what it's like to have access to more than one element, but I do have some ideas about what we can do. I assume you can feel your magic inside of you?"

I just nod, and he continues, "So, when my magic first revealed, I could feel it deep inside—cool and calming. It was so different from what I was used to feeling. I want you to reach down into that well of magic and see if you can find something that feels like that."

I squeeze my eyes shut once more, reaching for my magic. I imagine reaching inside of the well of magic and feeling around inside of it. Sensations wash over me—hot and uncontrollable, cool and calming, light and comforting, steady and grounding. It takes me a moment, but once I realize that they each feel different, I can separate the different strands of my magic.

I pull on the strand that feels just as Hunter described it, hoping that I'm doing this correctly.

“Whoa,” Hunter exclaims, and I hear him shuffling away from me. My eyes pop open, and I realize that I have successfully called my water. It surrounds my entire body, but it's very obviously out of control—splashing off me and across the room.

Hunter's eyes are wide as he watches me. “You have so much power,” he murmurs.

I try to pull back the water, to push it back inside, but it doesn't work—all it does is grow bigger, splashing off the waters and along the floor. “A lot of good that does me when I can't control it. It won't go back.”

My voice holds a hint of panic, something that I wish I could hide, but I'm freaking out so badly that I can't remember anything that Hunter taught me previously.

“You need to calm down,” Hunter says quietly, calmly. He doesn't move any closer, eyes following the paths of my out-of-control water. “Panicking will only make it harder for you to control it. As I told you when we were training before, your emotions will affect your magic. Remember what I taught you. Find your calm space—where you go when you meditate.”

My eyes fall shut, and I find my meditation space quickly after so much practice. Calm settles over me, and I grasp the thread of magic, pulling at it until I have it under control. When I open my eyes again, I smile when I find a small ball of water sitting in the palm of my hand.

“That’s very good, princess.” Hunter makes his way over to me again, running his hand through the water. I flinch, sure that it will collapse to the floor and I’ll lose control of it again. “Once it’s under your control, no one else will be able to take it from you. It is because of you and your power that it even exists.”

My eyes flash up to his, widening.

“Keep it under control,” he says, nodding to the water that is losing its shape. It grows and shrinks over and over again, telling me I’m losing control of it again—even without Hunter’s reminder. Taking a deep breath, I center myself and watch as the water settles back into its shape once again.

“And that’s all it takes.” Hunter’s hand brushes up my arm, pulling a shiver from me. I jerk away from his touch, starting to call back my water before I lose control of it again, but another idea occurs to me.

With a flick of my wrist, I throw the ball of water in his face before pulling the magic back inside of me. Is it petty how much enjoyment I get out of his shocked expression? Absolutely.

“Don’t touch me,” I hiss between my teeth. “I might be training with the four of you, but that doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten what you did. The only reason that I’m still training with you all is because Grace said I don’t have a choice. Apparently, no one else’s magic is as strong as yours. I’m doing this because I want to be the best queen I can be, but I

don't *want* to be here. So keep your hands to yourself and focus on training me."

Hunter's face is blank as he stares at me for a moment before nodding. "Well, you figured out how to pull your magic back on your own. I want you to call it forth again before calling it back into yourself. You're going to do it again and again until it feels second nature. Once you've succeeded, then we'll see about teaching you something else."

It takes everything in me to not roll my eyes. He's doing exactly what I asked him to do, so I can't fault him for that. But I should've known that he'd turn it into a boot camp. But that's fine. I can do whatever he throws at me. So, for the next few hours, I do nothing but call my water to my palm before calling it back inside. When I leave without so much as a backward glance, I'm exhausted. Who knew that using magic was so tiring?

Climbing the stairs and making my way to my rooms, I hate how much I ache. I feel like I've been physically working out. I think I'll take a long soak in my huge bathtub with some of those wonderfully smelling bath salts. That sounds like heaven.

All thoughts of a bath fall from my mind when I push open my door to find boxes piled throughout my sitting room. What the hell?

Pulling the lid off of one, I find that it's filled with files. Well, fuck. These are the files for the suitors from the Autumn, Spring, and Winter Courts. Maybe I can bring some into the

bathtub with me? But even as I have the thought, I know there's no way that I won't end up dropping them into the water. Or just ignoring them altogether. Either way, a bath isn't on the agenda right now.

Chapter Five

Hadley

I let out a sigh of relief as the door shuts behind the last suitor. Morgan's giggle pulls my attention to her, my eyes narrowing at the look on her face.

"Hush," I tell her. I'm not actually annoyed with her. It's more that I'm just over this whole meeting suitors thing. I've officially met all ten suitors that Grace and I had chosen, and I'm no closer to choosing one. Sure, I've just met them all, but I was hoping that someone would stand out enough that I'd be able to just choose them. That certainly hadn't been the case.

Four women and six men, eight from current or past Summer Court aristocrats, and two "commoners." Goddess above, I hate that word.

"They weren't that bad, Hadley." Morgan grins. "They all seemed nice enough, and they were attractive. And most of them weren't dull."

"Yeah, most of them." I shake my head. "I need to narrow it down to two or three today. It would be best if I could just pick

one, but none of them stand out to me. So, tell me what you think. Who do you think I should pick?”

For the next hour, Morgan and I discuss the ten suitors.

I flip through their files again as Morgan drones on, not knowing what the hell I’m looking for, but hoping that something will stand out and scream, “pick me!”

My head snaps up as the door pushes open, and my mood immediately plummets. “What the fuck are you doing here, Caiden?”

Morgan snickers as she watches her brother’s head drop. “Big brother, I know some of what happened, but I know there’s more to it than that—there has to be.” She glances at me, wiggling her eyebrows. “You’re totally going to give me the tea, right? You’ll tell me if it’s more than what got spilled at dinner, won’t you?”

I try to smile, but I’m certain it comes out as more of a grimace. Yes, I want to be friends with Morgan, but I really don’t want to discuss what Caiden and the others had done with her.

Obviously reading the answer on my face, Morgan shrugs. “That’s okay. One day, one of you will tell me everything.”

“Grace sent me. She said you should be done by now, and I need to work with you on your fire magic.”

I barely manage to bite back my groan. “I thought I’d be working with Hunter again.”

“Grace told us you’d work with each of us for a day before cycling back to the beginning. As different as each element is, it’s probably best to work on all of them at once.” Caiden shrugs, shuffling from foot to foot, but doesn’t say anything else.

He’s doing exactly what I asked of him—only talking to me about our training, so why is that pissing me off? Why am I annoyed that he isn’t trying to explain what happened again? I should be happy that he’s listening to me, and yet...

I slam the folder onto the table, annoyed with myself. Both Murphy siblings jump at the noise, making me feel like an asshole. “Sorry.” I offer Morgan a hesitant smile. “There’s just so much going on that I can’t help but get frustrated every once in a while.”

“I can imagine.” She shoots me a quick smile, and I know she isn’t taking it personally.

“So, I don’t think I can make a decision,” I tell her with a shrug. “Why don’t you just pick the three you like best and send me their names? Then I can invite them to the palace to get to know them.”

Morgan’s eyes are wide. “You want *me* to choose the three candidates to become your consort? I can’t—there’s... what?”

Caiden chuckles, and when I glance up, I find him smirking at his sister. “C’mon, little sister. Hadley wouldn’t ask you to do it if she didn’t think you could.”

“Right. Yeah. Sure, I can do that. I’ll send the names to you before I go to bed?”

“That sounds great. Thank you, Morgan.” Shooting her one last smile, I head toward Caiden. “Let’s get this training done and over with. I need to meet with Grace to look at the suitors from the other courts.”

“Of course, Hadley.” Caiden nods as he steps back, gesturing for me to precede him.



I spend my next few days in much the same way. Going over suitor files with Grace, meeting the suitors, and training with the men that I don’t want to have anything to do with—except Kai. He’s been strangely absent, but when I’d asked Grace about it, she’d just said that he’d told her he couldn’t train me on our scheduled day. I’d wanted to ask her for more information, but I hadn’t.

I’ve managed to narrow the pool of suitors to ten people between the four courts and they will join us for dinner tonight. I’m nervous, but not because they’re all going to be in one place. No, I’m nervous because Caiden, Hunter, and Marcos are going to be there. The idea of the men that I’d once considered choosing as my consorts meeting my new suitors has me freaking out, and I hate it.

I’ve already changed my outfit three times, and I know that if I don’t head down soon, I’m going to be late. Not that they

won't wait for me, but I don't want them to have to wait. So, with one last glance in the full-length mirror, I make my way to the dining room.

Voices carry down the hallway, loud and belligerent. My eyes widen, and my feet carry me down the hallway rapidly. As I take in the chaos before me, I can barely believe what I see.

Marcos is the loudest, as he's yelling in the face of his brother Benjamin, causing me to flinch. I'd known that choosing his brother would cause a problem, but Grace had been very clear when we'd been selecting Spring Court suitors that Benjamin was the second-best choice to Marcos. I know that if I'd rejected him, she would've just added him back to the list. There was no way for me to avoid it.

Should I have warned Marcos? Maybe.

Was it petty of me not to? Absolutely.

Am I regretting my choice now? A bit.

My eyes dart around the rest of the room, finding Hunter glaring at the three Winter Court suitors—Kaspian Hunter, Giovanni Rossi, and Isabella Marino. Caiden is chatting with Morgan while the three Summer Court suitors—Connor Kelly, Owen Doyle, and Fiona Walsh—look on. Whenever Morgan attempts to include them, Caiden blatantly ignores them. The other Spring Court suitor, Blanca Ortega, is staring wide-eyed at where the Castillo brothers' argument is getting more heated. Meanwhile, the two Autumn Court suitors—Braxton

Hale and Oscar Chen—are just watching the chaos transpiring around them.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pray for the peace of mind to deal with all of this tonight. I'd known it wouldn't go well, but this is worse than I could've imagined. How the hell am I going to get this under control and then make it through the night?

“Are you okay, angel?”

Tears prickle my eyelids at his voice, my body freezing until his hand brushes down my arm. A full-body shudder runs through me before I turn to face him, eyes popping open to roam over him.

Kai stands before me with a sad smile, eyes filled with regret. It's been almost a week since I laid eyes on him and I hadn't realized just how worried I'd been about him until he stood before me. I barely rein myself in before I throw myself into his arms.

“Kai,” I whisper, hating the fear and longing that laces my voice. “Where have you been?”

Kai turns his head as he bites down on his lip. When his eyes meet mine again, I see the film of unshed tears in them. “I couldn't be around you, angel. It's too hard.”

“But you're here now?” My statement ends up sounding more like a question—just another thing to be annoyed at myself about.

“Grace didn't give me much of a choice.”

I'm fighting back the tears once again at the pain and self-hatred in his voice. I hate that she forced him to be here. I don't want to be the reason that he finds himself drunk on a rooftop again. No matter how angry I am with them, I would never want that for them. Especially not my Kai—no. He's not mine anymore. He can't be. Even if he's the one I'm least angry with.

“If it's too much, you don't need to be here, Kai.” How do I tell him that his mental health means more to me than anything Grace has to say without blurting out that I'm afraid he might hurt himself?

Kai reaches out slowly, taking my hand into his. He doesn't move for a moment, I'm assuming to be sure that I'm okay with his touch, before squeezing my hand.

“I'm alright, angel. I promise. I've found other ways to channel my unhealthy thoughts.”

I frown, not understanding his words. What the hell does he mean he found other ways to channel them? As far as I know, he's been avoiding Caiden, Marcos, and Hunter as well. So what has he been up to?

“As much as I'd love to keep talking to you, angel, I think we might need to break that up before they come to blows.”

I glance over my shoulder and see that Marcos and Benjamin aren't too far off from getting physical. I force a smile on an exhale, lifting my shoulders and calling forth the mask that has been my constant companion since my birthday.

“Allow me?” Kai offers his arm to me, and I hesitate for only a moment before sliding mine through his. We step into the dining room, and it takes a moment for anyone to notice us.

“Kai?” Caiden’s voice is barely above a whisper, but it’s enough to draw some attention to us.

The heirs and suitors, plus Morgan, fall silent as they launch to their feet until only the Castillo brothers haven’t noticed us. I clear my throat, but they don’t seem to hear me as they continue to argue.

In the most unladylike move possible, I stick my fingers in my mouth and let out an ear-piercing whistle. Marcos and Benjamin’s heads whip in my direction, annoyance written all over their faces before their eyes widen almost comically. They both spin, bowing their heads at me.

Forcing myself to smile, I barely manage to contain my eye roll. Kai leads me to my seat before standing behind the empty seat on my right—a seat that I’m confident a suitor is supposed to sit in, but I can’t find it in me to ask him to move.

Everyone moves around to stand behind their empty seats. I let my eyes roam over them all before shaking my head. “I know this situation is causing some tension, but what I walked into is unacceptable.”

“Marcos, Benjamin. The two of you are brothers. Yes, this is an odd situation, but it’s one that you will have to get used to. If I hear of you acting like this again, there will be consequences you won’t like.” What consequences? I have no

clue, but I'll make sure that they're unpleasant. "Caiden and Hunter. The two of you and Marcos don't need to be here, so if you cannot behave, then you will leave the palace, only returning for my training. Am I making myself clear?"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty." Benjamin bows his head. "Mine and Marcos's sibling rivalry can often be... likely due to our close age."

When he peers at me from under his lashes, a smile ghosting along his lips, it takes more effort than it should to keep my face blank. He's honestly too much like Marcos—another reason I would've preferred not to choose him as one of the final suitors.

I turn my attention to Marcos, Caiden, and Hunter, who all wear vastly different expressions. Marcos appears repentant, Caiden nonplussed, and Hunter arrogant. If that doesn't speak to their personalities, I don't know what does.

When none of them speak, I raise my eyebrows. "I asked you three a question, which wasn't rhetorical."

"I'm sorry, Hadley. I understand and promise that both Benjamin and I will do better." Marcos gives me a soft smile that makes my heart ache.

I turn away, eyes landing on Caiden, who just nods. "Yes, ma'am."

My eyes narrow on him, seeing the laughter in his eyes. But there's nothing about what he said or how he said it to indicate that he's anything but serious. I can't very well reprimand him

when, to everyone else, he seems genuine. I continue to glare at him for a moment longer, letting him know that I'm onto him before turning my attention to Hunter.

His surly expression slowly melts into a smirk as I wait for his response. I clench my teeth to keep myself from responding, as I know he wants me to. I don't know how long our stare down lasts, but eventually, he inclines his head slightly. "Of course, Your Majesty."

"Good. Now that we've established that, let's eat." I sit, and slowly everyone else follows suit. The staff steps into the room as soon as the last person sits, and I once again wonder how they know exactly when to enter.

I pull my attention away from my thoughts when Kai touches my hand softly. "No demands of me, angel?"

I glance around to see if anyone else has heard his whispered words, but no one seems to be paying us any attention except Caiden, who is too far away to have heard Kai's words.

"At the moment? No. You've been well-behaved in the few moments that I've seen you this week."

"Did you miss me?"

His words are like a fist to my stomach. I have to fight to keep my emotions off my face, and I don't even know how successful I am. What is it about this man that always seems to get to me so easily?

“I’ve been worried about you,” is how I decide to answer. Of course, I’d missed him. I’d missed all four of them. But what does that matter? Caring for them, missing them—it doesn’t change what they’d done. It doesn’t change the fact that I can’t trust them. It doesn’t change the hurt that regularly threatens to overwhelm me.

Kai nods. “Well, I missed you. You’re the only thing I could think about. How badly we’d messed up, and how I can keep you safe from our families.”

“Not Caiden?”

Why the hell did I feel the need to bring him up? Why am I even entertaining this conversation?

Kai hesitates, waiting until the staff has placed our soups in front of us, before turning to meet Caiden’s gaze. He huffs out a breath, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

“No,” he finally answers. “Caiden made his bed, and now he can lie in it.”

I gasp louder than I mean to at his words, drawing the table’s attention. Picking up my spoon, I taste the soup and let out a small moan. “French onion—my favorite.”

I can still feel the others’ eyes on me as I continue eating my soup. I can’t help but look between Kai and Caiden, hoping that I’m being at least somewhat discreet. It hurts me to think that I’ve come between these two men, but have I really? It wasn’t me who decided to lie and conspire behind their backs. No, they’d been the ones to do that.

Except Kai seems to be just as mad at Caiden as I am, which I don't fully understand. Biting at my lip, I turn back to Kai. I know I should be getting to know my suitors, but now I need to know.

“If you didn't agree with what they were doing, then why didn't you stop them? Why didn't you tell me?”

Shame washes over Kai's face. His eyes flash around the table before he leans over to me. I don't hesitate to lean closer, needing to hear this from him.

“I love Caiden. I think I always will, no matter what happens between us. I love Marcos and Hunter, too—though that's obviously different. I selfishly wanted this for the four of us. I wanted you for all of us.” He hesitates, shaking his head before continuing, “And if I'm honest, I'm terrified of my father. I don't want you to see me as weak, but I also don't want to ever lie to you again. As much as I wanted this for us, I feared he'd kill me if I refused. He doesn't love me—he never has. He only puts up with me because he needs an heir, but he has another baby on the way. He doesn't need me any longer.”

I feel sick at his words. Having met Kam, I want to deny his words. After all, his father had put on a good show for me, but I'd seen the video. I'd seen the true Kam, and I can't say for certain that he wouldn't try to kill his son. And that breaks my heart.

Giving his hand a squeeze, I nod. “I won't let him do that.”

“No, angel. *I* won’t let him do it. Nor will I let him do anything to hurt you or keep you from taking your crown. My father’s days are limited. I will make sure of that.”

What does it say about me that his words turn me on?

“So, Hadley,” Benjamin says, pulling my attention away from Kai and down the table to my suitors—where it should have been this entire time. “Now that you’ve visited each of the courts, which is your favorite?”

“Hmmm. I honestly don’t know that I can pick a favorite. They’re all beautiful in their own ways, aren’t they?”

“Such a diplomatic answer.”

My eyes find the Winter Court suitor who’d spoken. Kaspian, age sixty-eight. Shoulder-length silver hair pulled back into a bun—something I will admit that I’ve never found overly attractive, but looks damn hot on him. His coloring is one of the reasons that I felt drawn to pick him. I’ve seen silver hair on a few of the Fae while visiting the different courts, but it doesn’t seem common. His silver eyes, on the other hand? I’ve seen no other with those piercing eyes.

“One thing I can promise you, Kaspian,” I tell him, “is that anything I do or say is not just to be diplomatic. I might be the future queen, but I’m someone who will tell it exactly as it is. I won’t be anyone but myself, and I won’t fake an opinion to not offend someone.”

Kaspian looks abashed. “Of course, Your Majesty. I didn’t mean any offense. I just... I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s fine. I’m not offended. It takes a lot more than that to offend me. You all don’t know me yet. How could you? Just like I don’t know any of you. There hasn’t been enough time for that. That’s the point of inviting all of you to stay at the palace so that we can spend time getting to know one another. I have just over three weeks until my coronation, when I must announce who I’ve chosen for my four consorts.

“It’s not a lot of time. It’s not remotely enough time to decide if we can spend the rest of our lives together, but it’s all that I have. With that being said, please don’t try to be the person you think I want you to be. I need to get to know the real you, just as I wish for you to know the real me. This will never work otherwise. Don’t worry about offending me. If you do, I’ll let you know. I can promise you that I’m not worrying about whether I’m offending you or anyone else. I don’t have the time to worry about that. And it’s best that all of you realize that now, so you can decide if this is what you really want. Better not to waste any of our time.”

I look around the table once more, making sure to lock eyes with each of my suitors to make sure they realize just how serious I’m being. I don’t have time to waste with niceties that would just piss me off.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” This time it’s one of the Autumn Court suitors that speaks. Braxton, age ninety-three. She’s gorgeous with her long, wavy, deep auburn hair and sea-foam green eyes. She’s edgier than most of the other suitors with her punk style, earrings running up and down her ears, pierced eyebrow, and tattoos over her hands and fingers.

“As I’ve told all of you, please call me Hadley. I know that it’s not the proper thing to do, but again, I don’t have time to waste. I need you to stop seeing me as the future queen and start seeing me as a future spouse.”

“I understand, Your—” Braxton cuts off, a blush spreading over her cheeks. “I understand, Hadley. I need to be honest with you. I’m not into women.”

I frown, confused. “Then why are you here? You are aware that a consort is a spouse, right?”

“I am. I thought maybe you could do with a consort that is a confidant and not a lover.” Braxton shrugs. “I probably should have made that clear when we first met, but I will admit to being awestruck upon meeting you.”

A smile pulls at my lips unbidden. I’d already decided that love is out of the question with my consorts, so is it such a terrible idea to take one that isn’t sexually attracted to me? It’s something that I’ll need to think about.

“Thank you for telling me.”

Braxton nods, but it’s obvious that she’s waiting for me to say something else. I can’t make this decision right now without thinking about it. But I guess I can share that with her.

“You may remain as a suitor for now. I will have to think about it and decide if that’s what I want in my relationship with my consort. Once I’ve made my decision, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you, Hadley.”

The staff enters with the main course, ending the conversation for now. I don't realize just how hungry I am until I bite into the potatoes. I try to pay attention to the conversation as it carries on around me, but most of my attention is on my delicious dinner.

Soon, we've made it through both the main course and dessert. I'm full, and the table is looking at me expectantly. I should invite the suitors, or at least a few of them, to do something so that we get on with getting to know one another, but as my eyes land on Kai, I know I need to speak with him more.

"Morgan, since you're here, why don't you, Connor, Fiona, and Owen join me for a nightcap?"

"Hadley, you remember that she's only sixteen, right?" Caiden asks.

"Yes, Caiden. I'm aware of your sister's age, but thank you for the unnecessary reminder." I don't even look at him as I reply, keeping my eyes locked on the suitors.

All three nod their agreement while Morgan scowls at Caiden. I clear my throat until the younger girl turns her attention to me. Her face quickly transforms when she smiles up at me. "I'd love nothing more."

I hear Caiden mumbling under his breath, but it's too quiet for me to understand, so I choose to ignore it. The rest of the table stands when I do.

“I’ll see the rest of you tomorrow at breakfast. Have a good rest of your evening.” When I turn to head for the door, I pause next to Kai. “Would you meet me in my room in about an hour?”

His head whips around to stare at me before he gives a quick nod when he realizes I don’t intend to say anything else. I find Morgan, Connor, Fiona, and Owen waiting for me at the door.

Morgan slides her arm through mine and begins to drag me down the hallway. “Have I mentioned lately how much I love that you put my brother in his place? Nothing could make me happier, honestly.”

I throw an apologetic smile over my shoulder at the three suitors and gesture for them to follow us as Morgan continues to speak. I love the girl dearly and am definitely at the point of considering her a friend, but damn, can she talk—a lot. At least she helps break up the awkwardness of trying to get to know the Summer Court suitors.

Chapter Six

Kai

All I can do is watch as Hadley walks out the door. Why does she want to see me in her rooms? I don't want to get my hopes up, but I'd seen the look on her face when I'd told her why I hadn't told her about what our parents had planned. I never wanted to hurt her. I hate that we hurt her, but I also hate that my three friends had continued to go along with our parents' plans. It's why I've been avoiding them—especially Caiden.

“Kai, can we talk?”

Speak of the devil, and he will appear.

I grind my teeth, not wanting to turn to him. I don't want to talk to him—to any of them—but I know I need to. I also know that it's going to be harder to stay angry with Caiden when he's standing in front of me.

I do love him—so fucking much that it's made the last few days almost unbearable, on top of missing Hadley. He's the first person who I've ever loved at all. I never loved my father.

How could I? With the way he's always treated me? The only people who ever showed me love are my brother's best friends—my best friends. It's been hard being away from all of them, on my own, and I need their help.

Turning slowly, I lift my head to meet Caiden's eyes, and what I see breaks my heart. He's hurting; it's so obvious. But I can't allow his hurt to affect me. His pain is not more important than my own, than Hadley's. I just need to remember that.

"I actually need to speak with all three of you," I say when I feel Marcos and Hunter step up behind me.

"Where the hell have you been, Kai?" Hunter demands. "We've been going out of our minds worrying about you."

"Really?" I quirk an eyebrow. "I thought that once you had Marcos trailing me, you'd see I was fine."

Marcos grins. "I guess I'm not as stealthy as I thought I was if you noticed me."

"You're about as stealthy as a baby elephant." I shake my head. "Look, I don't want to talk about that. Can we go somewhere to talk? This isn't really anything that needs to be heard by others."

Hunter grunts, jerking his head towards the door. "Yeah, come on. We'll go meet in my room."

The four of us make our way up to the wing that holds our rooms while I studiously attempt to ignore Caiden, who is trying to get my attention. I'm not ready to talk to him about

us. I don't know if I ever will. I feel betrayed by all three of them, but especially him. He hadn't told me just how bad things had gotten—though I guess I was being willfully oblivious. I was so happy with Caiden and Hadley that I didn't want to know what was going on. That's on me.

But I'm just not ready to have that conversation with him yet. A fact that he doesn't seem to be getting. He grabs my arm, pulling me to a stop right outside Hunter's room. I let the other two step inside; the door closing behind them, before turning to face one of the loves of my life.

“What, Caiden?”

“What?” Caiden scoffs. “Don't act like you don't know what I want to talk about. You went missing for almost a week without a word, Kai. You weren't answering my calls or texts. You weren't answering any of us. No one had seen you or heard from you. You were so upset when you left us, and I didn't know where the hell you were or if you were alright. I didn't know if you were even alive. For all I knew, you could've fallen into a depressive state and killed yourself. How could you do that to me?”

“How could I do that to you?” I bite my lip, holding my hands up between us. “No, I can't have this conversation right now. As you can see, I'm just fine. I haven't gone down a depression spiral. I need space from you right now. I'll let you know when I'm ready to talk to you about this. Until then, I expect you to respect my wishes and give me some space.”

Caiden blinks down at me, mouth gaping. I know he and the others are used to me being more submissive, but I've finally found something that's worth fighting for.

"Look, I need to talk to the three of you because I need your help. Hadley isn't safe, and I can't keep her safe on my own."

Caiden straightens, eyes narrowing. "What do you mean? What's going on?"

I bite back my sigh, gesturing to Hunter's door. "Like I said, I need to talk to all three of you. Do you think you can get *this*," I gesture in front of him, "under control long enough to listen?"

"Yeah. Of course I can. Let's go."

I roll my eyes at the back of Caiden's head as he pushes open Hunter's door. I follow him inside to find Marcos and Hunter sitting on the couch, drinks in their hands.

"Did either of you want a drink?" Hunter holds up his glass, and I shake my head.

"No. I don't have much time. Hadley asked me to meet her in her rooms in an hour, so I only have so much time before I have to leave."

"Wait," Marcos cuts me off. "Hadley wants to talk to you? Why?"

All three of them lock their eyes on me, practically begging me to fill them in. Why had I mentioned that she wanted to see me? I'd known they would react this way. It was stupid of me.

“That’s not important. What is important is what I’ve found over the last few days.” I pull the envelopes from the inside pocket of my jacket and throw them onto the coffee table.

The three stare at the envelopes like idiots before Marcos glances up at me. “What are those?”

“Why don’t you open them and find out?” I huff, gesturing toward the letters.

There are only two, but I watch as the three of them pass them back and forth, the anger and worry growing with each passing minute.

“What the fuck are these, Kai?” Hunter growls as he jumps to his feet, throwing one of the letters at my feet.

“They’re letters I found sitting outside of Hadley’s room over the last few days.”

Marcos laughs. “I want to ask why you were outside Hadley’s room, but I’m not going to. Instead, I just want to make sure that I’m reading these correctly. Someone is threatening her life if she doesn’t renounce the throne, right?”

“I’m not sure how else to take them,” I tell them as I snatch the letter Hunter had thrown at me.

“You’re not what our people need. You’re unworthy. Abdicate, or I’ll make sure you never have a chance to rule,” I read.

Hunter stalks around the room, growling under his breath, too quietly for me to hear what he’s saying. I jump when his hand smashes into the wall. “Mother fucker. This is our dads.”

I shrug. “That was my initial thought as well.”

“The way you say it, it doesn’t sound like you still think that.” Caiden leans back on the couch, crossing his legs as he watches me. “So, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t think that Kam and Gabe would be so subtle. I think that they’d just threaten her either to her face or, at the very least, to our faces. This isn’t exactly their style.”

Marcos nods his agreement. “But if it’s not them, then who could it be?”

Sighing, I drop onto the couch beside him. “That’s what I can’t figure out. I don’t know who else would want her gone. I guess it could be someone that our parents put up to it, but that doesn’t help narrow the field, does it? This is why I need your help. I don’t know about the three of you, but even if she never forgives me, I plan to do everything in my power to protect her—to keep her safe.”

“Of course that’s what we want,” Caiden bites out, brow furrowed.

“I’m still hopeful that she’ll forgive us.” Marcos chuckles. “But if she doesn’t, then I’ll do my part to keep her safe. Whatever I can to make it easier for her.”

Hunter’s fist meets the wall again. “You’re all whipped by a woman who wants nothing to do with you.”

“So are you.” Caiden grins as he turns to watch Hunter grimace. “You fought it the hardest and for the longest, but I know you, man. You care about her.”

Hunter grinds his teeth, jaw clenched so tightly I can hear it from across the room. “I want her safe.”

“You want to be her consort.” Caiden shakes his head as he glances at me and Marcos, a smirk gracing his lips. He waggles his eyebrows at us before turning his attention back to Hunter. “Keep telling yourself that you just want to keep her safe—that you don’t care. I’ll just keep calling you a liar and reminding you of what you really feel.”

There’s a pause before Hunter’s fist plows into the wall again, followed by grumbling. Then he’s dropping back to the couch beside Caiden. “I hate you.”

“Nah, you love me, but you can tell yourself that you hate me if it makes you feel better.”

“As much fun as it is to listen to the two of you,” I cut them off. “I need to leave in a few minutes, so we need to start brainstorming. What are our next steps? How do we find out who is threatening Hadley?”



By the time I manage to break away from the guys, we’re no closer to figuring out who is threatening Hadley or how to keep her safe, and I’m almost late making it to her rooms. Standing outside her door, I hesitate with my hand poised to knock. She’d invited the Summer Court suitors back to her room. What if this was all some kind of revenge plot? What if

she's on the other side of this door fucking one of them so that I have to walk in on them?

Fuck.

Shaking my head, I push away those thoughts. I might not have known Hadley for long, but I know she's not like that. She wouldn't treat me like that, I'm sure of it.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I knock on her door and wait for her to answer. My mind is racing in a million different directions because I don't know why she wants to talk to me. While I've been avoiding everyone, I've been keeping an eye on her. I've turned into a minor stalker the last few days, trailing my father and Gabe, but I've been spending most of my time following Hadley. I *need* to make sure that she's safe.

The door swings open to reveal a pajama-clad Hadley. She gives me a small smile. "Hey, Kai."

"Hey," I whisper, eyes roaming over the barely there tank top and shorts she wears. Looking at the long line of her legs and how the tank top cups her tits makes my cock hard and raring to go.

"My eyes are up here," Hadley laughs before stepping back when my eyes snap up to hers. "Come in?"

I nod, following her into the sitting room and over to the couch. She sits, situating herself until she's snug in the corner with a blanket wrapped around her. She gestures for me to sit as well, so I sit beside her.

She doesn't speak right away, and I can't help but fidget as she just watches me. Finally, I can't take it any longer. "I'm grateful that you asked me to come, but may I ask *why* you wanted me to come?"

Hadley pulls her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms around them as she rests her chin on her knees. "I feel like we didn't get to finish the conversation that we were having at dinner."

"I wasn't aware that you cared about our side of the story," I say before realizing how much of an asshole I sound like. "Oh, shit. That's not what I meant. With what we did, there's no reason that you should care about why we did what we did. We fucked up, and that's all that matters. That's what I meant."

I run my hands through my hair, hating how awkward I feel. I hate this. Before her birthday, I'd never felt anything but comfortable in Hadley's presence. Not even when we were first getting to know her. I hate this so much.

"I shouldn't care." She pauses, huffing after a moment. "But I can't seem to stop caring—about any of you."

My eyes shoot up to meet hers, hope rushing through me for the first time.

"That doesn't mean that I can ever trust any of you again. You all hurt me." Hadley averts her eyes, but not before I see the tears in them. "But I also think that the reasons that you went along with your parents' plans and the reasons that the others did are two very different stories. So I want to hear your side, the full story. I need to hear it."

“And I need to tell you. But it’s not going to be easy for me to tell or for you to hear it. You know parts of my story, but you don’t know everything. Are you sure you want to open this can of worms? There won’t be any putting it back once you know.”

Hadley considers me for a few moments, and I appreciate that she’s actually thinking about my words and not just answering immediately. Finally, she nods. “I want to know, Kai. Tell me. Please.”

Which is how I end up telling Hadley every terrible moment of my childhood that led up to the night I’d almost taken my own life—the night that Caiden had saved my life. I tell her every dark detail of every beating, every hateful word that was spat at me. How things began to look up as I got older and the guys took me under their wings. How I’d fallen for Caiden and how our relationship had progressed.

After spilling every detail to her, I feel empty. I’m hoping that by telling her everything, she can understand why I’d gone along with our parents’ plan—at least to their faces. But I also know that I owe it to her to say the words aloud.

“If I’d tried to tell my father no, he would’ve beat me into submission. Plus, Hunter was one hundred percent behind the idea, and Caiden was going along because Hunter wanted it so badly. Marcos just didn’t want to rock the boat, and neither did I. But that doesn’t mean that I should’ve kept it from you when I realized I was falling for you. I should’ve told you.”

I shake my head because hindsight is always twenty-twenty, right?

“I didn’t want to betray my friends, but after they kept that last meeting from me? I understand just how you felt when you realized what we were keeping from you. It’s a terrible feeling that I wouldn’t wish on anyone—especially not you. I’m sorry that I hurt you—that we hurt you.”

Hadley’s hands cup my cheeks, lifting my face until I’m looking at her. “Don’t apologize for them. What they did is on them, not on you. I’m sorry that you didn’t feel safe enough to not go along with their plan. No one should have to grow up that way, and I hate that you had to. I hate that your dad treated you so badly—that you spent so long not knowing love.”

“It’s not your fault, angel. You have nothing to apologize for.”

She nods, looking away but not releasing her hold on my face. “I’m still so angry, Kai. I vowed I would never forgive any of you—never allow you to tell me your side of the story, because it didn’t matter. You’d betrayed me and it didn’t matter why. But that was short-sighted.”

When she breaks off, I try to push down the hope rising in me. Just because she sounds like she might be giving me another chance doesn’t mean that she is. She could just be letting me down easily.

“I’m not sure that I can trust you,” she finally says as she locks eyes with me once more. “I’d like to see if I can, but I’m

not anywhere near ready to even consider forgiving the others. If that's too much for you, then I understand."

"I don't care if you never forgive them," I force out. "If you give me a chance to prove that you can trust me, there's nothing more I could ask for."

She nods slowly. "And what of Caiden?"

It takes a moment for me to process her words, and I slump back at the realization. "You can't give me another chance if I forgive him, can you? I'll have to choose."

"No!" Her eyes are wide as she launches herself into my lap, shaking her head adamantly. "I would never ask that of you. Not only were the two of you together before we ever met, but you would end up resenting me. I would never want that. But can you be with two people that can't be in the same room together? That might never be able to be in the same room together? Can you possibly become my consort knowing that you'll officially be mine, never able to officially claim him as yours?"

My immediate response is to tell her yes, of course. Because I'd give anything for another chance with her. Instead, I take the time to think about her words and really consider them. I'd be giving up a chance at something that I never thought would be possible anyway, but I'd be gaining the world.

"Yes," I say simply. "I'm still angry with Caiden, and I don't know when—or if—I'll be able to forgive him. And I'm not going to sit around waiting for that to happen and waste this chance you're giving me. Would it be nice if you could

forgive both of us so that all three of us could be together? Absolutely, but I'm not going to hold my breath. All I want is a chance to prove to you how much you mean to me—how much I love you.”

And there it is—the truth. Yes, I love Caiden, but I also love Hadley. I might not have known love growing up, but it's allowed me to recognize it easier—to admit it sooner than her might be wise, but I don't care. I love her, and she deserves to know it.

The smile she gives me is a little sad. “I'm not there yet, Kai. Especially not with the feeling of betrayal burning me up on the inside, but I am getting there.”

“I didn't say it with any expectations of anything in return. I just want you to know how I feel.” Leaning forward, I brush my lips against hers.

“You're much too good for this world, Kai,” she murmurs before kissing me again, opening her mouth to deepen it. It doesn't take us long to lose ourselves to our kisses, my hand snaking under her shirt until I take her tit in my hand. She moans against my lip as I roll her nipple between my fingers before pulling away.

“I'm not ready for that either.”

I nod as she climbs off of me, adjusting my hard cock. “Of course not. It's getting late, so I'll see you at breakfast.”

Her hand on my arm stops me, and when I turn to her, there's a look of vulnerability on her face. “Would you stay

with me, please? Just to sleep.”

“Of course, angel.”

I gather her into my arms and carry her into her room. Setting her onto the bed, I pull my shirt off before shucking my pants and climbing in behind her. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her flush against me. She’s asleep before my head even hits the pillow, and I follow shortly after, knowing that I’ll be able to sleep well for the first time in almost a week.

Chapter Seven

Hadley

Waking up, feeling Kai's arm wrapped around me and his legs tangled with mine, brings a smile to my face. I wasn't lying when I told him last night that I'm not sure I can trust him again, and as much as I wanted to hold on to my anger, I couldn't—at least not with him. Am I being dumb? It's possible, but if I don't give him another chance, then how will I ever know?

Of all the guys, Kai seems to be the one that was least involved in the plot to remove me from Sorlphi or from seizing power by becoming my consorts. I'm still not ready to even speak with the others, but giving Kai this second chance just feels right.

“Good morning, angel,” Kai murmurs against my neck, sending a shiver down my spine.

I snuggle back into him, grinning when my ass rubs against his hard cock and pulls a hiss from his lips. I might be willing to give him a second chance, but that doesn't mean I'll make it easy on him.

“Good morning, Kai.”

My eyes fall shut, and I enjoy being in his arms for a few moments before pulling away. Rolling onto my other side, I lean on my hand as I look down at him. He gives me a lazy grin, eyes only half-cast as he stares up at me.

“So fucking hot,” I mumble before leaning down to press my lips to his. When he tries to deepen the kiss, I pull back with a laugh. “None of that. I need to get ready so I can get down to breakfast. I have to spend time with my suitors, after all.”

Kai wrinkles up his nose before sitting up. “So, does this mean I’m one of your suitors now?”

“Do you want to be one of my suitors?”

“Fuck, yeah.” He laughs, shrugging his shoulders. “Actually, I’d prefer to just be your consort, but I know that isn’t realistic.”

I don’t bother to hide my grin. “Then I guess we’ll announce it at breakfast.”

Climbing from bed, I head towards the bathroom, calling over my shoulder, “Now, get out. I need to get ready, and so do you. Don’t want to be late for breakfast.”

A small part of me hopes he won’t listen and joins me for my shower, but alas, he does not. Probably for the best. I really need to think with my head and not my pussy. As much as I want Kai to be genuine, I need to be careful until I’m sure he is.

I hurry through my shower and get ready, wanting to see him again—which should be a red flag. I need to get myself under control, for real. A small part of me also looks forward to seeing Caiden’s, Marcos’s, and Hunter’s reactions when I announce that Kai is now one of my suitors. Petty of me, I know, but I don’t really give a damn.

That’s the thing about being hurt and betrayed by people you care about. It often makes you a petty little bitch who wants to see them hurt just like you. And I’m definitely not above it. I can admit to myself that I’m not that mature, and I’m okay with it.

Or at least, I thought I was.

But I find myself standing outside the dining room, hesitating to make that step inside. I’m going to make the announcement, regardless, because the other suitors deserve to know. Because if Kai can prove to me that I can trust him? The Autumn Court consort will be his, no questions asked. They should be prepared for that—though I don’t plan on wording it that way. I’m not that big of a douche.

“You planning on standing out there all day, princess?”

My nose wrinkles at Hunter’s voice, and I have to force myself to not grind my teeth. What is it about this asshole that has always set me on edge? It’s only gotten worse since finding out about his betrayal.

Stepping into the room with my head held high, I easily find him lounging in his chair. “No, Hunter, I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t walking into another scene like last night.”

“Hmmm,” Hunter hums, the look on his face telling me he doesn’t believe me as he stands.

Choosing to ignore him, I make my way to my chair at the head of the table as the others quickly stand. Before I can touch my chair, Kai is there. He pulls it out, grinning.

“Let me, Hadley.”

I shake my head at his little show but sit down and allow him to push my chair in before he moves back to the chair at my right again. “You may sit.”

Once again, as soon as the last person has returned to their chair, the staff comes in with trays of breakfast foods that they place in the center of the table. I wait until they leave before clearing my throat to get everyone’s attention.

“As you know, I told you all that the ten of you were my final pool of suitors.” They nod before I continue, “Well, that has changed slightly. Kai Jin will be joining the Autumn Court suitors.”

There’s total silence around the table. I scan the table, trying to get an idea of what everyone is thinking. None of the suitors seem surprised. Marcos’s face reveals his jealousy as he glances between me and Kai. Hunter’s face is blank as usual, but Caiden’s longing is obvious as he stares first at Kai and then at me.

“Hell, yeah!” Benjamin grins at Kai, looking much too much like his brother. “Good on you, bro.”

I roll my eyes, laughing aloud when he lets out a grunt courtesy of Marcos's elbow in his side.

“Don't be a douche, Benjamin,” Marcos hisses, shaking his head at his younger brother.

“And on that note, let's eat.”

I make a concerted effort to speak with the other suitors and not focus all my attention on Kai as I want to. As we finish eating, he lays a hand on my arm to get my attention.

“Since I was busy and haven't been able to work with you on your air magic, I'd like to do that today.”

“I'm supposed to work with Marcos today.”

“Yeah, Kai. Your day is tomorrow.” Marcos grins to show that he's giving the other man a hard time. “But seriously, we can push back our time so that you can also work with Kai today.”

I sigh, glancing at the suitors. I'm supposed to spend the mornings getting to know them before joining the guys after lunch for training. But I had already missed the first day of working with Kai, and I needed to be able to work with all four of my elemental magics.

“I'm sorry,” I tell the suitors, making sure to meet each of their eyes before I continue, “As much as I'd like to spend the morning getting to know you all as planned, I must train with my magic. As you are all aware, I've only been in Sorlphi for a few weeks, so while I'm powerful, using magic isn't as

second nature to me as it would be to someone who has lived here their whole life.”

Fiona leans forward, pushing her pale, almost white blond hair from her face with a soft smile on her lips. “Of course, Hadley. We can busy ourselves getting to know one another. We’re happy that you’re able to make time for us at all. I am sure that being the future queen doesn’t leave you much free time.”

“Honestly, you’ve gone above and beyond what we’d have expected,” Giovanni says with a nod. My confusion must be apparent because the Winter Court suitor laughs before glancing nervously at the heirs. He runs a hand through his thick brown hair while his brown eyes bounce from face to face.

“What Giovanni is afraid to say is that the court aristocracy doesn’t really make time for anyone within their courts. They’re quite self-centered.” Hunter nods to Giovanni before turning to look at me.

“That explains so much about you, then.” It’s out of my mouth before I can even think about it.

Well, damn. Probably not the best word choice or the correct company to be saying it in, but what’s done is done. And it’s not like it’s a lie.

Hunter inclines his head in acquiescence. “You’re not wrong.”

All I can do is blink at him in surprise. Hunter admitting to something being wrong with him? I never thought I'd see the day. I do keep that particular thought to myself, though.

“I guess that is one upside to being raised in L’Airid.” I shoot Giovanni a grin. “So, what did you all expect from me during this process?”

“Do you wish for us to be honest?” It’s another Winter Court suitor who speaks up this time—Isabella, age twenty-two. She’s gorgeous with her raven black hair cut into a chin-length bob, hazel eyes, and curvaceous body that I wouldn’t mind exploring.

“Always.”

I watch as all the suitors glance around the table, studiously avoiding the gaze of the four heirs. Finally, Isabella nods before turning her attention to me once more. “We thought that you’d just pick the eldest of the suitors from the most powerful families.”

“I thought that you’d just take the heirs as consorts.” I turn to look at Blanca when she speaks. She sits beside Benjamin, and I recall that the pair are friends, both seventy-one and from the Spring Court aristocracy. Her hair and eyes are a honey brown, an almost identical shade that intrigues me.

My eyes drift to Benjamin, who winces slightly, and I can’t help but wonder what he knows about the plans against me from his and the other families in charge of the courts. I wonder if Marcos has told him that up until my birthday, taking the heirs as consorts had been the plan.

“I guess I can see why you all would think that.” My eyes move around the table before landing on Kai. I can’t help but return his smile. “Kai is the only heir who is in consideration for the role of consort. I don’t care who your family is or where you fall in the aristocracy. That is not what I plan to base my decision on. My advisor did help me narrow down my selection based on your individual power level, but your families? I couldn’t care less who they are.”

“And that’s why our people are in for a bit of a shock,” Benjamin says with a laugh. “They’re not going to know what to do with you.”

I’m not sure what to make of his words. I can’t figure out if he’s attempting to compliment or insult me—if either. So, I choose to ignore him.

“Since I will be busy until dinner, I will ask that Benjamin and Blanca join me tonight after dinner. We’ll have drinks in my room as I did with the Summer Court suitors last night. Then tomorrow, after breakfast, I will spend time with all the suitors. Tomorrow night, the Winter Court suitors will join me for a drink, and then the night after, the Autumn Court. Hopefully, my mornings will be free over the next few days, but I cannot guarantee it, but I will make sure to have time to get to know each of you to the best of my ability.”

When no one speaks, I nod before standing. Turning to Kai, I ask, “Shall we?”

Kai stands, gesturing for me to precede him. By now, I know my way to the room that we’ve been using for my

training so well that I'm sure I could find my way there blindfolded. Neither of us speaks until the door closes behind us.

“So—”

“Hadley—”

We both pause before laughing together. I gesture for him to speak first.

“I just... I don't know exactly how to act or how to go about this being a suitor thing. I'm afraid that I'll do something wrong and you'll want nothing to do with me again. I think I need you to tell me what you expect of me so that I don't ruin this chance you've given me.”

“Oh, Kai.” I stand in front of him, lifting my hand to cup his cheek. “All I want is for you to be yourself. Unless you're planning to hide plots to keep me from my throne again, there isn't anything you can do that will ruin this.”

Something flashes in his eyes for a moment—that guilt and shame I'd seen on his face the night before. I can't help but wonder if he's keeping something else from me. Shaking my head, I force those thoughts from my head. He wouldn't be that stupid—not again. If he did? That would be the end of us forever.

He chews on his lip for a moment before nodding. I can tell that he wants to say something else but must decide against it.

“As far as being a suitor, I don't even know how they should behave, so I'm not sure I can tell you what to do.”

Kai lifts his hand to lie over mine, still on his cheek. “Am I allowed to kiss you?”

A smile spreads across my face as I nod. “I would be offended if you didn’t.”

“And what about more? You told me last night you weren’t ready for more, so you’ll let me know when you are ready?”

My smile just continues to grow. I love that he’s talking to me about the things he’s unsure of—that he doesn’t want to push me too far, too fast.

“I will.”

“Good.” He ducks down, lips barely brushing mine before he steps back. “Now, was there something you wanted to say, or should we get to work on your training?”

“I honestly don’t remember what I was going to say,” I tell him with a shrug. “So training sounds good.”

“Alright. I know you’ve worked with the others, but I haven’t discussed it with them, so I don’t know how far you’ve advanced. Are you able to call forth the individual elements?”

I nod. “I haven’t called my air yet, since we weren’t training. But I know what the other three feel like, so I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Go ahead and call each one and then dismiss them, leaving air for last. There’s a lot that you can do with air that you wouldn’t think of, and we’ll definitely cover that, but I think

we should see if we can't get you to use more than one element at a time."

I look up at him, surprised. "You think I'll be able to do that?"

"Of course. The Seelie and Unseelie queens and kings that held two elements could combine their elements and use them at the same time. I think that you'll be able to use all four at the same time eventually, but I can't be sure. This would be easier if there was still someone around who held more than one element. Because right now, it's just guesswork for us."

I also wish that there was someone who was like me. Well, I guess there isn't anyone else that holds all four elements, and there hasn't been anyone in a very long time. But if my parents were alive, they'd be able to teach me what it's like to have two elements.

I lift my hand to rub at the pang in my chest at the thought of what it would be like if my birth parents were still alive. I wish they were still here more than anything, but would I even be here if they were?

"Are you okay, angel?"

My head jerks up, eyes locking with Kai's. He seems worried, and I realize I'd lost myself in my thoughts—something that's been happening far too much lately. I nod, trying to reassure him.

"Yes... well, mostly. I was just thinking about my birth parents and how they'd be able to help me if they were still

alive. But mostly, I just wish that I could've gotten to know them. Grace tells me stories about my birth mother all the time, but it's not quite the same, you know?"

Kai nods. "I do know—well, kind of. My father never told me anything about my mother while I was growing up. It was our servants, and then the guys, who told me about what a wonderful person she was. About how everyone loved her—my father most of all. I wish I could've known her. I think she would've loved me."

I grab his hand, squeezing until his eyes find mine once more. "I don't think it. I *know* it, Kai. There's no one who actually knows you that wouldn't love you." His mouth opens, and I know he's about to argue with me. "Your father doesn't count. He's an unfeeling asshole who has never known you or ever tried to get to know you. He doesn't deserve you, and he most certainly didn't deserve your mother if she was as wonderful as the stories you were told make her out to be."

Something tells me that Kai still doesn't believe my words even as he nods. I already hate Kam, but this right here? It makes me feel especially stabby—and I don't even consider myself a stabby person. There's just something about Kai that makes me want to protect him from everything, especially his father. Maybe it's knowing the hell he experienced growing up. Maybe it's his admission that he hadn't known love before Caiden, Hunter, and Marcos.

"Is there a particular element that you feel more drawn to than the others?" Kai asks as he steps back from me, obviously

not wanting to continue with this conversation. While I think this conversation is far from over, I know that we have other things to focus on, so I'll let it go for now.

“Not especially. They all feel different, comforting in their own way.”

He just nods, considering me. “Hunter was the first to work with you?” At my nod, he continues. “Then Caiden and Marcos?”

It's interesting that he says he didn't discuss my training with the guys, but he seems to know exactly who I trained with and when. There are definitely things he isn't telling me, but I'm willing to let that go for now. I can only hope he'll talk to me about it when he feels comfortable. And that he isn't carrying yet another secret that will break my heart.

“That's right.”

“Go ahead and call your water, then your fire. Then call on your earth and, finally, your air. While you do that, I'll try to figure out which elements might work best together.”

I just nod, doing as he says. After just a few sessions with the guys, I no longer need to close my eyes to locate my magic and call it forth. Now that I know what I'm looking for, it's almost second nature. I form a ball of water in my palm before making it disappear. The flame of my fire forms almost before I've sent the water away, making me realize Kai is right. I absolutely can use more than one element at a time.

This realization makes me brave as I call forth my earth magic, calling vines from the ground and making the tile break apart as they burst through before wrapping around my leg. The flame doesn't even flicker, so I push it even further and call forth my air.

Wind whips around me, causing my hair to fly into my face. As I push it away, I worry that the wind will have caused my flame to die out, but it's still flickering in my palm. Grinning, I glance up at Kai with wide eyes.

"I guess I don't need to try to figure out how to get you to use more than one element at a time," he says with a laugh. "You seem to already have a really good grip on your elements, though it's obvious you need practice with air. I'm assuming you didn't mean to call forth so much wind?"

Abashed, I shake my head. "I think I got too excited and pulled on the thread too hard. Even as it was happening, I knew it was too much. I just couldn't believe that I could call forth three of my elements."

"I'm fairly certain you can call all four of them to you at once, Hadley. The amount of power inside of you is insane. I've never seen anyone with that much power."

My head drops as my cheeks flush. Why do I find it more embarrassing that he seems to just be stating a fact and not trying to compliment me? The other three and Grace have all been telling me over and over again how powerful I am, but there's just something about Kai saying it that really seems to

hit home for me. And I don't know how to feel about it or how to handle it.

“Since we know you can call more than one element at a time, let's focus on your air magic. I want to make sure you have that under control before we try adding it to another element.”

With a sharp nod, I let go of my earth and fire magic. The flame flickers before disappearing. The vines unwind themselves from around me before sinking back into the floor. I focus on the floor and push my magic into it until I realign the tiles.

“Wow, angel,” he says as he moves in behind me. “If I hadn't seen the vines come through the floor, I'd never be able to tell. It's amazing that you've been able to develop your skills so well in such a short time. I don't think you'll need to do too many sessions with us individually. I'll talk to the guys so we can start trying to work out a schedule where we can get together with you in pairs or all together. That way, you can work on combining the elements.”

I beam up at him, feeling proud of myself. I hadn't known if I'd be good at using my magic, and hearing Kai tell me what a good job I'm doing? It means everything to me.

Chapter Eight

Hadley

I'm tired after training with Kai, but I don't feel as exhausted as I had the first few days after training. I have a quick lunch with Kai in my rooms before heading back to the training room. I haven't heard from Marcos, so I assume we're meant to meet there.

When I push open the door, I find not just him, but Benjamin as well. "Hi?"

"Hey, Hadley." Benjamin's eyes crinkle as he smiles at me from his spot, leaning against the wall.

"Benjamin. I wasn't expecting you."

Marcos moves into my line of sight. "While Benjamin's magic isn't as strong as mine—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Rub it in." Benjamin shoots me a wink as he smirks at his brother.

"Benjamin, I swear to the goddess, if you're going to act like this, you can leave right now." Marcos shakes his head.

“We don’t have time to fuck around. Hadley’s coronation is only three weeks away.”

Benjamin straightens, the smile falling from his face. “I know what’s at stake here, big brother. But that doesn’t mean we need to act like we have sticks up our asses like Hunter, does it?”

I can’t help the snicker that falls from my lips. I jerk my hand up to try to cover the sound and the smile that has formed, but I know both men see right through it.

“Hunter does have a stick up his ass, doesn’t he?” I say, dropping my hand. “But we’re not here to discuss that, are we? What were you saying, Marcos?”

Benjamin ducks his head, trying to hide his smile. Ignoring him, I focus on his brother.

“While Benjamin’s magic isn’t quite as powerful as mine, it’s close. We were both trained by the same teacher, but he tends to think of things differently than I do. I thought it might do both of us some good to have him sit in on a session.” He hesitates. “How was your session with Kai?”

“It was good. He had me try to call more than one element at a time. I managed to call three at once, but my air magic wasn’t exactly under control. He said he’d be talking to you all about doing less individual sessions, so I can practice using more than one element at a time.”

Marcos rubs his chin. “That’s actually really smart. I’m sure we can talk after dinner.”

“So besides air, what other elements did you call at once?”

Turning to Benjamin, I figure I might as well just show them. With my hand extended, I call forth my fire at the same time I call my earth. The flame forms easily in my hand while the vines break through the floor quicker than they had earlier. Once I’m sure I have control of both of them, I call on my air. A smile forms when I feel a gentle breeze instead of the gusty wind that I’d called forth earlier.

“That is so fucking cool.” Benjamin’s eyes widen as he watches the vines and flame dance in the breeze.

“It really is, kitten. You’ve got great control.”

I tense up at Marcos’s use of his nickname for me. Eyes narrowed, I release my hold on my magic and call it back into me as I turn to him. He’s already grimacing, an apology on his face.

“Kitten? That’s a good fit for you,” Benjamin muses, seemingly oblivious to the sudden tension in the room. “Maybe that’s what I’ll call you.”

“Like hell you will,” Marcos hisses, moving toward his brother.

“I think not,” I say at the same time.

Benjamin’s eyes snap between us, a smirk on his face. “Oh, so that’s just something between you two. And big brother done fucked that up. That’s okay. I’m sure that I can come up with my own nickname for you.”

When his eyes meet mine, I realize this little shit knows exactly what he's doing. "You're a shit stirrer, aren't you?" I ask him, my exasperation bleeding into my words.

Benjamin shrugs, eyes locking on Marcos, who is still advancing toward him. "Maybe just a little."

"Marcos," I bark out when he keeps moving towards his brother.

Marcos freezes, body tensing before he spins to face me. "Yes?"

"You're the one who wanted your brother here. Considering your close ages, I assume you know exactly how he is. And yet, you're letting him get to you. Didn't you say that we didn't have time to waste? What exactly do you think you're doing right now?"

Marcos moves his head from side to side as if stretching out the tension before taking a deep breath. "You're right. I'm sorry. While we're close in age, we haven't been around each other for any extended time in years, so it's causing a bit of an adjustment period for me. I won't allow it to affect anything else in the future."

I frown, not liking how serious Marcos sounds right now. In the weeks that I've known him, I've never seen him so serious. Even after my birthday, he continued to flirt with me. He's always the one with an easy smile and a quippy remark. I'm not sure I like this serious side of him.

Not that it matters. I don't need to like anything about him. After all, I'm not supposed to care about him at all, right? Too bad my heart hasn't gotten that memo yet.

Today seems worse than usual at remembering that I'm still angry with him and the others. It's like my allowing Kai a second chance has my heart expecting me to give the others the same chance—which is *not* happening. I know it's only been a week, but I expected this all to get easier and not harder as more time passed.

I wave a hand through the air in dismissal. “Let's just get to it, yeah?”



By the time I've finished eating dinner, I'm so exhausted that I want to tell Benjamin and Blanca that I can't meet with them tonight, but I know that isn't an option. Sure, I'd spent time with Benjamin today while he and Marcos trained me, but it's not like I could really get to know him while Marcos was there.

And Blanca? I've barely spoken to the woman. I mean, I've barely spoken to any of them, but Blanca doesn't speak much when we're all together. I don't know if it's because she's shy or she just doesn't have anything to say.

But that's the exact reason I can't cancel on them tonight. I need to at least have a conversation with her. Though, how easily that'll be with Benjamin there, who knows? Since

they're friends, I have to hope he won't dominate the conversation as he often does.

I push away my plate, nodding to Benjamin and Blanca. "Are the two of you done?"

They both nod, and I stand before turning to Kai. "May I speak to you outside for a moment before we go?"

"Of course." Kai pushes away from the table, and I feel bad when I realize he hasn't finished eating. He follows my line of sight and laughs. "It's fine. It'll still be here when I return."

I head to the hallway, Kai at my heels. Before I can open my mouth, Benjamin and Blanca step out behind us. Well, shit. I can't ask him what I want with them standing there.

Benjamin seems to pick up on my thoughts as he glances between me and Kai. "If you'll tell us where your room is, Blanca and I can head up and wait for you."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I nod and do exactly that. I walk them to the stairs so that we're out of sight of the dining room before watching as they walk away. I feel Kai step up behind me until his front is flush with my back. I lean back into his warmth as he wraps his arms around my waist.

"What did you want to talk about, angel?" he asks, his lips brushing against my ear. My eyes fall shut at the sensation, forgetting for a moment why I asked him out here. Heat rushes through me, straight to my core, causing me to squeeze my thighs together. It's only been a week since I had anyone in my bed, and my body is telling me that's a week too long.

“Stop it,” I chastise as I step out of his arms. Turning around, I find him grinning down at me. He obviously knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

“Don’t be smug. It’s not attractive.”

“Liar.”

I open my mouth to argue, but he’s not wrong. I end up growling in frustration. “Stop being an asshole, or I won’t ask you to come stay the night with me like I was planning to.”

That immediately wipes the grin from his face as he grows serious. “Really?”

I nod, unable to fight the small smile that makes its way onto my face. “I need to spend some time with Benjamin and Blanca, and I know you need to speak with the guys about my training schedule. But I slept better last night than I have since my birthday. I’d really like another good night of sleep.”

Kai reaches up and brushes his knuckles along my cheek. “It’s the best I’ve slept, too, angel. I’ll come to your rooms after I’ve spoken with the guys. Thank you.”

“For?”

He shrugs. “For giving me a second chance? For asking me to sleep with you? For being you? I guess, for everything.”

Going up on my toes, I wrap my arm around his neck and pull him down into a kiss. His arms wrap around me, pulling me firmly against him, and I can feel his cock hardening against my stomach.

It would be so easy to lose myself in him and his kiss, but I have two other suitors waiting for me in my rooms. As much as I don't want to deal with them, I need to. Does the fact that I really just want to pick someone from each court and be done with it make me a terrible person?

But that wouldn't be fair, and the one thing I absolutely plan to be as the Fae Queen is to be fair. I pull back reluctantly. "I really need to go, and you should go finish your food."

Kai hums, eyes at half-mast. "You taste so much better than my dinner."

My whole body flushes because I'm not sure that he just means the taste of my kiss.

"And on that note, I'll see you later." Without waiting for a response, I haul ass up the stairs. I hear Kai chuckle behind me, but I know that if I stop and call him out on it, I won't be making it to my room anytime soon.

Making my way to my room, I try to get my libido under control. The last thing I need is to meet with Benjamin and Blanca while turned on. Though, the idea of taking both of them to bed together isn't an altogether unwelcome idea.

No. Nope. Knock it off, Hadley. You're not sleeping with your suitors.

It's one thing I'd decided on after asking Grace to set up meetings with potential suitors. I love sex—a LOT—but I also know that it can muddle things, and after the disaster of my birthday, I don't need to muddle anything. I want to choose my

consorts with a clear head, which is less likely if I sleep with any of them. I'm actually quite proud of myself for realizing that.

I find Benjamin and Blanca leaning against the wall across from my room, leaning close and whispering. Luckily, I've managed to cool off on my walk, and I give them a quick smile.

"Sorry about that."

"It's no problem. I never mind waiting on a beautiful woman."

My back is to them as I push open my door, meaning Benjamin misses how I roll my eyes. He really is too much like his brother. I don't know if I can choose him as a consort if he continues to remind me so much of one of the men who hurt me.

"Me, either," Blanca says quietly, and coming from her, it doesn't seem so smug. I beam at her over my shoulder.

"You know what? Neither do I." I gesture for them to come in before heading to the small bar in the corner of my sitting room. "What can I get you two?"

"Just a water, please." Blanca ducks her head, and I'm just beginning to realize how shy she is.

"I'll take a water, too."

"That makes this easy." I lean down and grab three bottles of water from the small fridge before leading them over to the couch. I sit in the corner to face them both while we talk.

I'm surprised when Benjamin signals for Blanca to sit beside me before sitting on her other side. Looking between the two of them, it's hard for me to believe that they're friends with how different they are. So, I might as well ask them about it. It's a good way to get to know them.

“How is it that the two of you became friends? You're quite different.”

Blanca giggles, her head ducking. She peers at Benjamin, who nods for her to answer before she turns back to me. “We were born only days apart. My parents are the baron and baroness, which means that our parents were... I wouldn't call them friends? Allies might be the right word?”

“Either way, we ended up spending a lot of time together from the time we were born—or so we've been told. And when we started school, some kids tried to pick on me because of how shy I am, but Benjamin was having none of it.”

Benjamin shrugs as his cheeks pinken. “What can I say? I have a savior complex.”

“Don't do that,” I tell him with a twitch of my head. “Don't play down what you did. Don't make light of something that I assume meant the world to a child. I wish I'd had someone to stand up to the kids that picked on me.”

Benjamin's eyes slit at my words. “Tell me who they are, and I'll take care of them.”

I throw my head back and laugh. I can't help it. He seems quite sincere in his words, and I can just imagine him showing

up in L’Airid to beat up some guy who bullied me in elementary school.

“Thank you for being willing to do that, but it was a long time ago. I don’t need you to avenge my childhood bullying.”

Blanca reaches out hesitantly before laying her hand on my leg. “But I don’t understand. Why would anyone bully you? You’re the Fae Queen.”

“Sure, I’m the Fae Queen here in Sorlphi, but I didn’t even know the Fae existed when I was a child. All I, and every other child, knew was that I was different. And mortals? They don’t deal well with things or people that are different. You’re expected to conform. And if you don’t? That’s when the bullying commences.”

I shrug as if it’s no big deal, and it’s not now, but back then? Back then, it had shattered me. It wasn’t until high school that I realized that it didn’t matter what others thought of me. So what if I was different? So what if I didn’t have any friends? At least I wasn’t fake. Most of the people I went to school with couldn’t say that.

“That’s terrible. I mean, obviously, bullying still happens here. And I guess they picked on me because I was shy, which was different from them.” She laughs. “Apparently, Fae children and mortal children aren’t that different.”

“Apparently not,” I say with a laugh.

From there, our topics get a little lighter, but I’m beginning to get an idea of who these two are as actual people and not

just the mask they put forth for others. Looking at the clock, I realize how late it's gotten. Kai could be here any time.

I'm not hiding the fact that he's staying over, per se. I just don't want to rub it in anyone's face. Kai has an unfair advantage because he'd spent weeks with me before I'd met any of the other suitors. Not to mention that we'd already been intimate, and I'd already fallen for him. Those poor Autumn Court suitors. As long as Kai doesn't break my trust, they don't stand a chance, do they?

"I should get ready for bed."

Blanca nods as she looks at her watch. "Of course. I'm sorry. I didn't realize how late it had gotten. We want you to get plenty of sleep."

"Absolutely. We wouldn't want you to bite someone's head off because you're tired." Benjamin grins, but I can tell he's just teasing.

I walk them to the door, holding it open for them. Blanca starts to leave before spinning around. She leans over and kisses my cheek before ducking her head and rushing from the room.

As shy as Blanca is, I feel like she really opened up over the time we spent together. She's a nice girl, though I don't know that she's cut out for this world. There's absolutely nothing wrong with being shy, but I can't imagine her going up against any of the ruling court members. They'd eat her alive.

"Well, if she gets a kiss, does that mean I do too?"

I make a face. “Do you think you deserve a kiss?”

He grins, nodding. “I do. I was so good. I made sure that Blanca talked to you, so you could get to know her. I didn’t antagonize my brother at dinner even once.”

“Fine.” Even though I make it sound like kissing him will be a chore, it’s anything but. Even a small part of me is excited to kiss him—not that I’ll admit that to him. After all, we don’t need him to be any cockier.

He leans down, pausing with our lips millimeters apart. Cocky asshole. I know he’s waiting for me to close the distance, and as much as I’d like to stand here until he breaks, Kai could be here any moment. So I lean into him and press our lips together as my eyes fall shut.

Benjamin immediately tries to deepen the kiss, running his tongue along the seam of my mouth. Instead of pulling away, I open for him.

I wait for fireworks, or anything really, but there’s nothing. He’s a great kisser—there’s no denying it, but there’s no spark—and I hate that. I’d prefer to have some kind of chemistry with my consorts, seeing as we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

Chapter Nine

Marcos

After dinner, we head up to Hunter's room as always. I feel kind of bad that we're basically ignoring all of Hadley's suitors, but also, they're trying to become her consorts—a role that I thought the four of us would hold. Though, I guess Kai still has a chance at it. Unlike the rest of us.

Goddess, I miss her so much. A fact that is only made worse by the fact that I understand why she's so angry with us. I would be too. I just wish she would allow us to tell her why we'd gone along with our parents' plans, even after we'd gotten to know her. But I'd learned very quickly to not bring it up with her. Every time I did, she walked away. It's hard to talk about something when the person you want to talk to keeps walking away from you.

Once we're settled on the couches, drinks in hand, Caiden turns to Kai. "Since Hadley announced you as one of her suitors, I'm assuming last night went well?"

I'm fairly certain I detect jealousy in his tone, but the real question is, who is he jealous of? I know that before last night, Kai hadn't spoken to him, or any of us, really, since Hadley's birthday. Kai rarely holds grudges, especially not against Caiden, so I'm surprised.

"It did."

I try to hold my tongue, but I can't. I need to know. "How did you get her to forgive you?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not sure that she has fully. But I think not being in her face for a week helped. Knowing the two of you," he gestures between me and Caiden, "you've done nothing but try to get her to listen to your side of the story?"

A glance at Caiden shows that he's just as chagrined as I am.

"Of course they did. They don't know how to let things go."

"And you do?" I ask, eyebrows raised.

Hunter stares down into his glass, refusing to look at me as he answers, "Well, I haven't been bothering her about forgiving me, have I?"

"Maybe not, but you are the one that kept pushing her away in the first place," I argue. I don't know why I'm bringing this up right now. It's not going to change anything or make anything right. I'm just so pissed off.

Hadley is literally the girl of my dreams, and I've blown it. It wasn't just my choices that left me here, but I am well aware

that it's on me that I lost her. I could've come clean at any time, and I didn't.

“This isn't helping anything.” Kai sighs. “She's hurt, and she's pissed. My part in our parents' scheme was different from yours. We all know what would have happened if I said no to my father.”

“And we all know what would've happened if I'd said no.” Anger pours off Hunter as his eyes slice up to meet Kai's.

Kai just nods. “I know, and I'm going to try to talk to her about it. About all of you. I know why you did what you did—why we all did what we did. And I think that she'll understand if she just listens to us, but she's not ready for that.”

“We don't have much time,” Caiden says as he buries his head in his hands. “She has three weeks to decide who her consorts will be. I don't know if that's enough time to get her to listen to us, let alone long enough for her to forgive us.”

He isn't wrong, and it's not what we want to hear. There's not much we can do to change it, but I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet. Until she announces her consorts at her coronation, I still have a chance.

I hum, an idea coming to me.

“What if we court her?”

Hunter's brow furrows as he frowns at me. “What the fuck do you mean, court her?”

“Instead of trying to force her to listen to our side of the story, maybe we should be focusing on showing her how much

we care. Flowers, gifts. I don't know. I've never had to work at wooing a woman before."

Caiden snickers. "Yeah, we can tell."

"Oh, shut up. You're no better. You stumbled on your relationship with Kai, and before that, men and women just fell into your bed."

Caiden winces, glancing at Kai, and I wish I had thought about my words before blurting them out. Their relationship isn't in a good place, and here I am throwing it in his face.

I'm an asshole.

But Caiden surprises me when he nods. "You're right. None of us have ever had to try. But Hadley is worth it, and I'm willing to try. I'll talk to my sisters. I'm sure they'll *love* telling me how to fix my fuck-up."

"Oh, they definitely will." Kai grins, locking eyes with Caiden. They stare at one another across the room, the tension in the air ratcheting. Kai's the first to break away, looking down as he sucks his bottom lip between his teeth.

"That would be great, Cade," I tell him. "We can use all the help we can get."

Hunter just grunts, but I can see that he's considering our words. He might still deny it, but he wants Hadley and hates that she's pissed at us.

"Hadley told me during our session that you wanted to talk to us about changing up the training schedule," I say as I focus

on Kai. “So that we can work with her on trying to figure out how to work with more than one element at a time?”

Kai nods, and we focus on the things we can actually do for Hadley now—training her and keeping her safe. Once we’ve hammered out some ideas to help her with her magic, the topic turns to the threatening notes being left for Hadley.

“There was another one outside her door again today. It’s in my room, but I can get it for you all later.” He shakes his head. “They’re getting worse.”

“What did it say?” Hunter leans forward, hand tightening on his glass as his body tenses.

Kai rolls his eyes. “It called her a whore—I’m assuming that has something to do with me spending the night in her room—and told her to leave before she or someone she cares about gets hurt. It was a bunch of bullshit.”

“Wait a minute,” I demand. “I’m going to need you to back up a minute. You spent the night with Hadley? Why are you just now telling us about this?”

Kai lowers his head as a flush creeps up his neck. “It wasn’t relevant to the conversation until now.”

“Did you fuck her?” Caiden’s voice comes out hoarse, and he’s grasping the arm of the couch as if his life depends on it.

Kai glares at Caiden. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I didn’t. And she asked me to come stay the night with her again.”

“Damn, man. The other Autumn Court suitors should just go home now.” I bite back on my jealousy. I hate feeling this way.

Kai makes a noise, his head jerking from side to side. Poor guy is freaking the fuck out right now.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Reaching over, I lay a hand on his leg. “We’re just jealous. We’re not upset with you. We’re happy for you. Or, at least, I’m happy for you. You deserve this.”

Kai gulps, keeping his eyes averted from Caiden as he nods. “Speaking of, we need to tell Hadley about the letters.”

“Why the hell would we do that?” Hunter growls.

“She’s giving me a second chance, Hunt. I can’t blow that.” Kai’s voice is barely above a whisper as he speaks. “She flat out told me that if I keep anything like that from her again, we’re done. I can’t mess this up. I can’t lose her again. It’ll break me.”

Caiden jumps up from his spot, moving to sit beside Kai. He wraps his arm around him, pulling him to his chest. “Then we’ll tell her.”

Hunter’s mouth opens, and I know he’s about to disagree, so I quickly conjure a ball of dirt and smack him in the face with it. His mouth snaps shut, eyes wide as he turns to me. A quick jerk of my head is all the answer he gets.

We’re all usually happy to go along with Hunter’s choices, but in this? In this, Caiden and I are of one mind with Kai. If

we want to have any chance of winning back Hadley's trust, we need to be honest with her.

“She asked me to meet her in her rooms again tonight. I think you all should come with me, and we can tell her about them together. We can share our plans to keep her safe. I think it'll help your case if you're all with me.”

Which is how we find ourselves walking toward her room an hour later. I know she was with my brother and his best friend, but I really hope they're gone by the time we get there. I love my brother, but I've never in my life been so jealous of him before. And I hate it. But this is my own doing, and I'm trying to be mature about it—even though all I want to do is beat the crap out of him and tell him to stay the hell away.

As we turn the corner, something catches my eye from outside Hadley's room. My heart jumps into my throat as I wonder if we're going to catch the person writing the notes red-handed. It takes me longer than it should to process what I'm seeing—my brother kissing the woman that I'm half in love with.

“You've got to be fucking kidding me!” I don't mean to say it aloud, but my voice echoes through the hallway.

Locking my jaw, hands squeezing into fists, I spin on my heel as the pair breaks apart. I head back the way we came, knowing that if I don't get out of there, I won't be able to keep from punching my brother in the face.

Intellectually, I understand why my brother put forth his name as a potential suitor. He didn't know about the plot

against Hadley or the part I played in it when he applied. He also didn't know how I felt about her. But he knows now, and I don't think he means to hurt me, but seeing them kiss? It's tearing me apart. There's no way that he could've known that we'd be coming to see Hadley, but that doesn't help the pain at seeing the two of them together.

I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't forgive me and take me as her consort. Because I have no doubt that she'll choose my brother if she doesn't, and I don't know that I can spend the rest of my long life watching the two of them together.

“Marcos, wait!”

I squeeze my eyes shut at the sound of my brother's voice, but I don't slow my pace. “Benjamin, you need to leave me alone. You don't want to talk to me right now.”

His hand wraps around my bicep as he tries to stop me. Without thinking, I whirl around, launching my fist toward his face. He's ready for me and easily dodges the half-hearted attempt to knock him out.

“Look, big brother, I'm sorry. If I'd known you were going to walk up then, I wouldn't have kissed her. I just needed to know.”

His words cause me to pause in confusion. “Needed to know what?”

“If there was any kind of spark between us. There isn't.” He shakes his head. “I'm going to remove myself from the running as her consort.”

“No,” I bite out. “You can’t. I don’t know if she’ll forgive me, and if I can’t be with her, then I need to know that she’s with someone who can keep her safe. As much as I adore Blanca, she can’t do that.”

“That’s not fair to me or Hadley, Marc. You don’t want that for either of us, and if you think about it, you’ll realize it. Not to mention, once I tell Blanca I’m leaving, she won’t be far behind me. You know that.”

I wobble my head from side to side with indecision. While I understand what he’s saying, I don’t think it will go in my favor as much as he thinks it is. “Then she’ll just find other suitors. The two of you must stay while I try to win her back. Please, Benny. For me?”

Now, it’s Benjamin’s turn to look indecisive as he swipes a hand over his face. His head jerks forward once as he lets out a loud exhale. “Fine. But you better fix this. If either Blanca or myself end up in a lifelong marriage to someone we don’t love, I will beat your ass.”

With a grin, I loop an arm around his neck and pull his head down to ruffle his hair. “I’d like to see you try.”

The two of us tussle about for a few moments before I hear movement coming up behind us. I let go of him, spinning around to find Caiden standing there with an eyebrow raised. “Everything good here?”

“We’re great. Right?” I grin as I tilt my head in my brother’s direction.

“Yup.” Benjamin pops the ‘p’ with a grin of his own. “I need to head to bed. I’m assuming the four of you were heading to Hadley’s rooms for a reason, so maybe you should go deal with that.”

“Night, Ben.”

“Night, Marcos.”

Watching him walk away, I feel something inside me settle. My brother and I aren’t vying for the same woman any longer. It’s an immense weight off my shoulders. I just hope I can convince Hadley to forgive me before her coronation. Because I won’t trap my brother or Blanca in a marriage that they don’t want. And I definitely don’t want to leave Hadley with no choice but to choose me because she’s out of time and her two suitors walked away. Though, I guess it would at least give me more of a chance to earn her forgiveness.

I push those thoughts away. “Did you really leave Kai and Hunter alone with Hadley?”

Caiden shrugs. “I figure she wants Kai there, so hopefully, he’ll offset any annoyance she feels towards Hunter. Assuming he doesn’t say anything to piss her off.”

“Does that really sound like something Hunter would be able to do?”

“Not really. We should probably get back there.”

With a chuckle, the two of us hurry down the hallway. I wince as we near her door, hearing raised voices from inside.

“Well, fuck.” I knock on the door, hearing Hadley’s voice cut off moments before the door flies open to reveal her.

She is *pissed*.

“No. Leave now, and take this asshole with you.” She jerks a thumb over her shoulder to where Hunter is leaning against the wall, glowering in her direction. “I invited Kai here, not all of you.”

“Angel, please,” Kai pleads. “I asked them to come with me. We have something we need to tell you.”

Hadley’s eyes narrow in Kai’s direction. “I told you that just because I was willing to give you a second chance, it didn’t mean I was ready to listen to them.”

“That’s not what this is about, Hadley. Please. This is important.” I beg her with my eyes to allow us in. We need to tell her about the threats against her.

Tension radiates through her body as she slowly faces me. She takes a quick look at Caiden over my shoulder before she deflates. I don’t know what she sees on our faces, but I’m grateful when she steps back and nods for us to enter.

“Have a seat, I guess.” Hadley sounds defeated as she heads towards the sitting area, curling up into an armchair with her legs pulled up to her chest.

Kai settles onto the couch as close to her as he can get while Hunter remains leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. This asshole is determined to remain closed off to her, and it’s not helping any of our cases.

Idiot.

Caiden and I move to sit on the couch as one, him next to Kai and me on the other end. No one speaks right away, and I can see that it's really getting to Hadley—not just the silence, but us being here in her space. I hate it. I hate this whole situation, and I kind of hate myself.

“Someone has been leaving threatening notes for you,” I blurt, unable to stand her uncomfortableness any longer.

Her head shoots up. “I’m sorry. What?”

Kai shoots me a dirty look as he clears his throat. “You told me I needed to be honest with you, so that’s what we’re here to do. While I was off the grid, I was looking into my and Hunter’s fathers. I’ve been trying to figure out what they’re up to so that we can stop them.”

I’m surprised by Kai’s words, as is Caiden. He hadn’t mentioned this to us. When I spin around to Hunter, I see that he also has no idea what our friend has been up to.

“But that’s not the only thing I was doing. I was keeping an eye on you to make sure that they weren’t going to come after you while you were at odds with the four of us. During that time, I found two different letters outside your rooms. I found another one this morning.”

“And you’re just now telling me about it? You should’ve told me last night.” Hadley is back to being pissed.

“I know, angel. But there’s a reason I didn’t.” He glances over his shoulder at Caiden and me. “Last night, I told the

guys about the letters and asked them to help me keep you safe. We came up with a plan to do just that. But after last night, I realized I couldn't keep this from you. Not telling you about the threat won't keep you safe. It's more apt to cause the opposite to happen. But I wanted to talk to the three of them before I told you because we were already putting our plan into place."

"I want to see the letters."

"Of course." Kai stands, pulling the letters from his pocket before handing them to her. "After you read them, I'd like to tell you what we have in place to keep you safe."

Hadley's eyes stay locked on the letters in her hands even when she speaks. "I want all of you to leave now."

"But angel..."

"No, Kai. I'm pissed off and can't stand looking at any of you right now." Hadley looks up, eyes flashing with anger. "I'll read the letters tonight, and tomorrow, when I'm calmer, I'll talk to you. I don't appreciate the fact that you all went behind my back again—no matter your intentions. With that being said, I appreciate that you wish to keep your future queen safe. So I want to hear whatever plan you have concocted, but not right now. Right now, I need to be alone."

Kai looks like he wants to argue, but I don't think she will hear anything he has to say right now—something the others must also realize. Caiden stands, placing his hand on Kai's shoulder and giving it a light squeeze.

“Kai, you heard her. She wants us to leave,” Hunter grunts from behind me. Standing, I’m surprised to see that he’s moved up to stand behind the couch. I hadn’t even heard him move. For such a big guy, he sure can move silently.

Hadley’s head jerks up at Hunter’s words, and she seems flabbergasted at his words. Which I get. After all, he’d been the one arguing with her when Caiden and I arrived, and now he’s agreeing with her? I want to tell her that she isn’t alone in her confusion when it comes to him. It’s obvious that he wants her, but he keeps going from hot to cold and back again.

Caiden leads Kai from the room by his shoulder, Hunter following close behind them. I start to follow them, but hesitate. Turning back, I give Hadley a sad smile. “It might not seem like it, but we care about you. We don’t want to see you hurt.”

Hadley stares up at me. The anger is still there in her eyes, but I see the fear and the vulnerability behind it. With a nod, I follow her wish and head out. I find Caiden, Kai, and Hunter waiting in the hallway for me.

Kai’s eyes are glassy with unshed tears. “What if I lost her for good? I can’t lose her, Cade.”

Caiden pulls Kai into his arms, allowing the other man to cling to him as his body begins to shake. Concern with an edge of panic fills his eyes as they meet mine. We all know what it’ll mean if Hadley pushes Kai away now—or at least, what it could mean. Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.

Chapter Ten

Hadley

After Marcos leaves, all I can do is stare at the door for a few moments as I try to wrap my mind around all of what has happened tonight. My life has been nothing but turmoil since Grace brought me to Sorlphi. I'd hoped that it would start to settle by now, but it seems that I can't get away from it.

Screwing my eyes shut, I try to center myself. It seems that Hunter's lessons on meditation are good for more than just staying in control of my magic. It takes longer than I'd like, but I'm finally feeling calm enough to read the letters Kai had placed in my hands.

My stomach drops as I read the words, and nausea threatens to overwhelm me. Why would anyone feel the need to threaten my life? Why are they so set on me never being queen? Sure, I didn't grow up here, but that doesn't mean I don't care about my people. It certainly doesn't mean I won't be a great queen.

My first thought is that it must be the guys' parents. After all, they've been plotting my downfall since I arrived in

Sorlphi. But if that was the case, wouldn't Kai have just said his dad or Hunter's dad were leaving me threatening notes? Does that mean I have yet another person, or group of people, who don't wish to see me as queen?

Fuck.

I crumble the last note in my hand as tears fill my eyes. Whoever wrote these notes hates me. I can practically feel it pouring off the pages. Why would anyone hate me? I've always tried to be kind to others, even when I was living in L'Airid. And it's not like I've had much of a chance to interact with many Fae. So, it must not be me they hate, but what I stand for. How the hell am I supposed to fix that?

For the first time, I'm sorry that I told the four men to leave. I don't feel comfortable being here in my rooms by myself. But I can't call them back. Not only am I pissed that they once again kept something from me, but more than that, I don't want to rely on them. I can't rely on them. Tomorrow, I will listen to this plan they supposedly came up with, but then I'll bring it to Grace so she can implement it. I don't need the four of them any more involved in my life than they already are.

Three. The three of them. Even though I'm annoyed that Kai didn't tell me about the letters last night, I understand. Annoyed—yes. Betrayed—no. I think a lot of my reaction came from just how angry I still am at the other three. Because I can live with that, though I swear to Bria, if Kai keeps anything else from me, I will skin him alive. I'd seen the despair on his face when Caiden had led him from the room,

and I'm sure that he's worrying that he's lost me again. As much as I don't want him to hurt, I'll let him sit with this tonight.

He needs to understand what will happen if he keeps anything else from me. There are consequences for his actions, and I need him to see just how serious I am about this. Even if it breaks my heart to hurt him.

I grab my phone off the coffee table and shoot a quick text to Adaline, asking if she'd come stay with me tonight. Not only do I not want to be alone, but I need someone to talk to about everything. Maybe it should be Grace because of the threatening letters, but I need a friend, not an advisor, right now.

A knock on my door startles me from my thoughts. I light up my phone to find that Adaline hasn't responded, so I don't know who's at my door right now. I chew on my lip, standing when the knock sounds again.

Should I answer it? Ignore it? I don't know what to do. Anxiety rushes through me, bordering on terror. Those letters freaked me out more than I'd thought they had.

“Hadley? It's Adaline.”

A sigh of relief escapes me, my body relaxing as I rush over to the door and throw it open. A frown mars her pretty face. “What took you so long?”

Peering over her shoulder, I don't see anyone in the hallway, but that doesn't mean anything. I grab her arm and yank her

inside, making sure that the door is locked and bolted behind her.

“Hadley, you’re freaking me out.”

I laugh, but it sounds hysteric, even to my ears. “I’m freaking me out, too.”

I suck in a breath, but it stutters in my chest as tears begin to fall.

“What’s going on?” Adaline throws her arms around me, leading me over to the couch as I sob against her shoulder. She rubs a hand up and down my back until my sobs recede. Pulling back from me, she waits until my eyes meet hers before speaking, “What happened, Hadley? What’s wrong?”

“So much has happened that I don’t even know where to begin.” I run my hands over my face to wipe away the tears, using the time to gather my scattered thoughts. “Let’s start with the personal stuff, which is a little overwhelming, but mostly good. Then I’ll tell you about the rest.”

“Kai and I talked. I can’t tell you what he said as it’s not my story to tell, but let’s just say that he had no way of saying no to the plot by the guys’ parents against me. I already knew some of his past, which is the only reason that I allowed him to explain his side in the first place. I’ve decided to give him a second chance and named him one of the Autumn Court suitors.”

Adaline blinks at me. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

My brow furrows as I lean away from her, not understanding her words. She knows the whole story, considering she'd been the one to show me the video. She knows Kai wasn't there. Why isn't she happy for me?

She reaches for my hand, and I jerk it out of reach. "Hadley, I'm just worried about you being hurt. You're not even over their first betrayal. If you're willing to give him another chance, then he'll just do it again."

"Look, I get that you're just looking out for me, but you need to believe me when I tell you that Kai knows how badly he fucked up and won't betray me again."

She makes a face, telling me she doesn't believe me even as she nods. "Okay, I'm sorry I upset you. I just don't want to see you go through that again. Especially not so soon after the first betrayal. I'm happy for you if you're happy."

And why don't I believe her? She's saying the right words, but there's just something off with the way she's saying them.

"Is there something you'd like to add before we change topics?" I ask her, voice haughtier than I'd like it to be. "I'd rather you tell me now than try to figure out what's bothering you."

"I'm just afraid that the others might be using Kai to weasel their way back into your good graces. If you say Kai wasn't involved willingly, then I believe you. But the others were, so we have to assume that their goal is still to help their parents."

I nod slowly. “I understand what you’re saying. I don’t think that’s the case, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good.”

Something still doesn’t feel right to me, but I think I’m just paranoid after reading the letters. “Benjamin kissed me tonight, and the four of them saw.”

“Benjamin? Really?” Adaline wiggles her eyebrows. For the first time since she arrived in my rooms, I feel like my friend is here with me. “And how was that? He’s hot as hell.”

I shrug. “We didn’t really have a spark. Don’t get me wrong, he’s an amazing kisser, but I don’t know.”

“Aren’t you the one who said you wanted to pick consorts that you *might* be able to fall for? Sparks can grow between people over the years, or they can fade. I don’t think you should discount him just because there wasn’t a spark when you kissed.”

“You’re absolutely right. I don’t think your mom will allow me to choose anyone besides Benjamin now that Marcos is no longer an option.” We laugh together because she’s been there for a few conversations where Grace has pushed Benjamin on me.

“What else do you have for me? Because I know that’s not all of it.”

I stand up and grab the letters I’d dropped to the floor when she knocked on the door. “Apparently, someone has been leaving them outside my door.”

“Apparently?” she asks with raised eyebrows as she takes the letters from me. She doesn’t wait for an answer, opening the first one and reading it.

I’m grateful that I have a moment to think about my answer. Based on her response to finding out about Kai, I know if I tell her that he had been the one to find them and that he’d kept them from me, she’ll tell me I can’t trust him. I don’t want to lie to her, so maybe I can just leave out some details.

Once she’s done reading all three letters, she turns her attention back to me. “What the hell, Hadley?”

“I know. The guys saw me kissing Benjamin because they were bringing these to me. Apparently, they’d found them outside my door and came up with a plan to ‘keep me safe.’ Yes, I know,” I tell her as I raise my hand, indicating for her to wait. “When Kai found out, he told them they needed to tell me.”

“That’s... Wow, this is crazy, Hadley.” Her face screws up in thought. “What if no one left outside your room? What if they wrote them and brought them to you so that you have to let them back into your life?”

My immediate response is to defend them, but I snap my mouth shut without saying a word. Instead, I actually think about her words. Is it possible? Could she be right? Could all of this just be another ploy?

Obviously, I don’t want that to be true because Kai is the one who told me about it, and I don’t want to begin to doubt

him already. But it does kind of feel like something they would do, doesn't it? I don't know what to think.

"I mean, it could be their parents, too. We know they have it out for me," I say, not wanting to let her know that I'm considering her idea as a possibility.

"I guess it could be." She shrugs. "Though it doesn't really seem like something they would do, does it?"

She's not wrong.

"Yeah... maybe not?" Before I can say anything else, a yawn escapes me. "You know what? I don't want to worry about this anymore tonight. I'm exhausted. But I'm also kind of freaking out. Would you mind staying with me tonight?"

"Of course. Anything to make you feel more comfortable. I'll head back to my room and change, then come straight back."

"Or you can just wear one of the many pairs of pajamas that I own," I offer.

She shrugs. "I won't say no to that."

With a laugh, I head into my bedroom with Adaline at my heels. I am exhausted, but I also know it's unlikely that I'll be able to go straight to sleep. My thoughts are all over the place, and I need to think about what Adaline had said. I need to figure out if it's a possibility or not. Because if it is? It means that I can't trust Kai, and that breaks my heart.



As predicted, sleep didn't come easily, and I wake up the next morning feeling just as tired as I had last night. I wish I could just pull the covers back over my head and go back to sleep, but I don't have time for that. I have a full morning after breakfast with the suitors and then magic training after lunch. And, of course, I have the Winter Court suitors coming to my rooms after dinner.

Is it sad that I almost miss the days when I wouldn't speak to anyone all day? This girl was meant to be an introvert, not an extrovert.

“Good morning.”

I jump at the sound of Adaline's voice from the foot of the bed. She's already dressed, which is crazy to me. It's too early to be out of bed and dressed. “When did you get up?”

“An hour ago. I'm sure it's easy to forget, but I do work at the palace. Not all of us are powerful future Fae Queens.”

My eyes snap up at the resentment I swear I hear in her voice, but then she's laughing, and I realize I must've imagined it. I'm too tired to function.

“Yeah, I guess I did forget. Sorry, Adaline.”

“It's fine. You have a lot going on, so I can see how you'd forget little things like that.” She grabs the covers, pulling them down and off my body. She ignores my whining as she

moves around to my side of the bed. “You were tossing and turning all night, so I brought you up some coffee. Maybe have a cup before jumping in the shower? It might help wake you up.”

I roll out of bed at the mention of coffee, pausing to shoot her a smile. “Thank you, Adaline. You’re a good friend.”

I hurry out to the sitting room and pour myself a large cup of coffee, adding sugar and creamer until it’s perfect. Adaline is heading for the door when I take the first gulp, burning my tongue and not caring.

“Have a good day, Adaline. I’ll text you later?”

She tosses me a grin and nods her agreement before ducking out. I gulp down the rest of my coffee before jumping in the shower. Once I’m dressed, I do feel a bit better. I send Adaline a text, thanking her again for the coffee as I make my way to the dining room.

Voices carry from the room once more, which has me hurrying my steps to make sure another fight isn’t about to break out. Pausing in the doorway, I’m surprised to realize that everyone is talking and laughing. They’re all getting along. Marcos and Benjamin sit side by side, ribbing one another while chatting with everyone else. Even Hunter is talking to the Winter Court suitors.

Caiden is the first to notice me, shooting me a wink. “Good morning, Hadley,” he says as he stands.

Everyone else's attention swings to me as they stand. I walk in cautiously, concerned about the sudden change in their behavior. My eyes seek out Kai as I near the head of the table. He's standing behind my chair, worry and anxiety clear on his face.

I give him a soft smile, reaching out to run my hand over his arm. He seems to understand that I'm not angry with him, his body immediately relaxing. After I'm seated, he pushes my seat forward.

"You may sit." I look around the table as the servants hurry into the room. Conversation doesn't immediately start back up, and I wonder if they were just putting on a show for my sake. "You all seem to be getting on better this morning."

Oscar leans forward. "We realized we were making things harder on you. There are only four consorts, one from each court. We thought that meant we needed to keep one another at arm's length since we were each other's competition. But then we saw how hard that was on you, and we don't want that. So, we got together with the heirs this morning and realized there wasn't actually anything keeping us from getting along except ourselves."

"That's... very mature of you. And I'm definitely grateful. I'd much rather start my meals with laughter than with fistfights." There's laughter around the table. I wasn't actually joking, but I don't bother pointing that out. Instead, I allow myself to be pulled into conversation with those around me. It

ends up being one of the most enjoyable meals I've had since arriving.

Afterward, the suitors and I head to the gardens. Grace has set up outdoor activities for us, including a putt-putt course—which I find hilarious. The others look at me like I'm crazy, but putt-putt is the last thing I expected to play after finding out I was to be queen.

It's the small things, I guess.

I learn about each of their families and their dreams throughout the day. It's the first time I really feel like I've gotten to know any of them besides Kai, Benjamin, and Blanca. We talk about what it was like for them growing up in Sorlphi and how different it was in L'Airid. It's just an altogether nice morning.

As the others leave to go inside for lunch, I grab Kai's arm and hold him back from the group. Once they're far enough away, I ask him, "Would you like to join me on a walk?"

"I'd love nothing more."

We meander across the grounds, not speaking as we walk. As we near the hedge maze, I grin and pull him inside. Linking my hand in his, we walk along the path before I pull him down an aisle that I know leads to a dead end.

While I'd allowed Adaline's words to cause me to doubt Kai's intentions last night, I know she is wrong. I also know that I allowed him to spend the night worrying that he'd blown the second chance I'd bestowed on him, and I want to make

that up to him. I want to show him what he means to me and that I trust him. That he's what I want.

Kai frowns when we hit the dead end. "Why did we go this way? I know you know your way through the maze."

"So we could be alone," is all I say before leaning up to kiss him. I obviously take him by surprise at first, but he's quick on the uptake as he deepens the kiss. Our tongues move together, his arms wrapping around me to pull me flush against his body. I can't contain the whine when his hard cock presses against my stomach.

"What's wrong, angel? Do you want my cock?"

Fuuuuuuck. Why is that so hot?

"Yes," I pant. "I need you, Kai. It's been too long."

His hands slide down and under my ass, lifting me in the air. My legs wrap around his hips until my center aligns with his cock—the only thing separating us is the thin lace of my damp panties and the denim of the pants he wears. I grind against him even as he walks forward until my back hits the hedge wall.

"Kai, you better not let me fall into the hedge."

Kai laughs as he flexes his hips, causing his cock to rub against my pussy. "I won't let you fall, angel."

His hand snakes between us and under my skirt. He runs his fingers over my panties before slipping beneath the material. He groans as he leans forward to rest his forehead against mine. "You're soaked, and we've barely even done anything."

“Well, I might have been thinking about bringing you here for most of the morning.”

“You little vixen.” He kisses me as he slides a finger inside of me. He thrusts it in and out of me before adding a second. My hips move of their own accord to meet the movement of his hands, but it’s not enough.

“As much as I love foreplay, Kai, I need you inside of me now.”

“Goddess, I want you so bad, but I don’t have a condom on me. They’re not something I just carry on me.” Kai continues to fuck me with his fingers, but I need more.

“I’m clean,” I tell him. “Grace set me up with a doctor to make sure everything was good after my birthday and they got a birth control spell for me, so I’m covered.”

Kai freezes. “You’re sure?”

“Are you clean?”

“Yes. Even Caiden and I use condoms because it’s not as messy. We also get tested every few months just to be on the safe side.”

“Thank the goddess,” I whimper as his fingers begin to move again. “Now, will you please replace your fingers with your cock?”

Kai chuckles before ducking his head down to kiss me again, but he doesn’t remove his fingers. Instead, he doubles down. He slides a third finger inside of me, using his palm to brush against my clit with each thrust of his hand.

I really want his cock inside of me, but I can feel my orgasm building. It doesn't take long before I'm biting his lip as I clamp down on his fingers. My head falls back as my body arches, coming hard with his name on my lips. Kai continues to move his fingers in and out of me, albeit at a slower pace, until I'm limp in his arms.

“Can you stand for me, angel?” he asks as his fingers slide from my soaked pussy.

I'm not sure that I can, but I allow my legs to fall away from his hips until my feet hit the ground. It takes a moment to steady myself, but then I can stand with only a little wobble.

Kai steps away, ripping his shirt off. I lick my lips as his hand falls to his pants. I watch his fingers nimbly flip the button before lowering the zipper. He pushes them down his hips, along with his boxer briefs, until his cock springs free. It slaps against his flat stomach before he reaches up to give it a couple of strokes.

I want to lick the pre-cum from the tip, but he's kneeling in the grass and motioning for me to come to him. “What are you doing?”

“I told you I wouldn't drop you, and if I try to fuck you with you in my arms like that? I'm going to drop you. But I don't want either of us to get dirt or grass in any sensitive places, so we're going to get creative.”

Kai reaches beneath my skirt, pulling down my panties until I can step out of them. He slides them into his pocket before pulling me down into his lap. He pushes his legs apart as he

leans back against his feet. It doesn't look overly comfortable for him, and it makes my legs spread wider than usual. I'm not sure how well this position will work, but before I can question it, he has his cock in hand, rubbing it between my wet folds.

“You're sure this is what you want?” he asks me again, and I love that he wants to be sure that this is what I want.

“Yes, Kai. I trust you. I want to feel your cock fucking me bare.”

“Fuck,” he grinds out as he lines me up with his cock. “We need to make this quick, angel. We have to meet the guys for your training soon.”

Tired of how long he's taking, I push down so he slides inside of me. “Shut up, Kai.”

My head falls back as I take him inside of me completely. Kai's hands move to my hips as we moan together. “You're so fucking tight, Hadley. I need you to move, please.”

Laying my arms over his shoulders, I use them for leverage as I lift up before slamming back down on his cock. He feels fucking amazing. I don't have the patience to drag this out as I begin to ride him hard. He fucks up into me from below, and when he hits my g-spot the first time, I swear I see fireworks.

“Yes, right there. Fuck, Kai. Harder.” I pant out the words as I force myself to move faster. Kai tilts my hips, and suddenly I'm hitting my clit on every pass. My nails dig into his shoulders as I feel the orgasm barreling toward me.

Kai's grasp tightens, and suddenly he's yanking me down to meet his thrusts, harder and faster. "I'm so close, Hadley. I need you to come. Please."

His words seem to be the last thing I need as my body lets go. My orgasm rushes through me, and I lose all control of my body. I gush as I fall apart, fluid spilling from me, and for a moment, I'm horrified as I scream. But it feels too good, and I can't hold on to the feeling as I shake through my pleasure.

Kai can't hold on any longer, and as my pussy pulses around him, he comes hard and fills me with his seed. We're both panting as we come down from our high.

When I'm able to breathe again, I bring my lips to his with a sigh. "Damn."

"Damn is right," he says with a laugh. "You squirted all over me."

Glancing down, I realize I've completely soaked the front of his pants. "Holy shit. Is that what that was?"

Kai shrugs. "I mean, I think so? You know I've never been with another woman, but Caiden says he's had it happen before."

"Well... I'm sorry?"

"I'm not." Kai chuckles, pulling me in for another kiss. "But we should probably go get showered and changed before we're late for your training."

Kai helps me stand, catching me when my legs fail me. "You fucked me so good, I can't stand."

Once I'm steadier on my feet, Kai stands. He quickly tucks away his cock as I feel gravity kick in, his cum sliding down my thigh. I make a face and hold out my hand to Kai. "I need my panties. Your cum is sliding out."

Kai's grin is wicked as he steps up to me, his hand moving between my legs. He gathers up the cum before pushing his fingers back inside of me. "No, angel. I think I'll hold on to those."

He doesn't move his fingers, just holds them there.

"Are you holding your cum inside of me?" I ask him, shocked.

Kai shrugs, a slight blush creeping up his neck. "Maybe."

That shouldn't make me hot, should it?

I yank him down for another kiss before breaking away from him. I manage to hold in my grimace when the cum begins to slide out again once his fingers are gone. "We don't have time for that. Let's hurry up and hope it doesn't slide too far down."

As I turn to leave, Kai swings me around and kisses me once more, but this kiss is different. It's slow and loving and very fucking disarming.

"I love you, angel."

Chapter Eleven

Hadley

I love you, angel.

Kai's words continue to echo through my thoughts as I shower, readying myself to face all the guys without anyone there as a buffer. I'd all but ran from him the moment we made it into the palace. I don't know why his words terrified me so much, but they had. I'd frozen in place before choosing to pretend I hadn't heard him, dragging him from the maze.

I know he loves me. He'd told me as much. I don't understand why it's hitting me so much harder this time. Why did it leave me feeling more vulnerable than ever? On the one hand, I'm glad that he loves me. On the other hand, now that he's admitted it aloud, it's forcing me to focus on what I'm feeling.

Do I love Kai?

Yes, absolutely, yes.

Do I want to admit that I love him?

Nope. I sure the fuck don't. And that's what it is, isn't it? It's that when he said it to me, the words were so close to spilling from my lips. And that terrifies me, because admitting that I love him means making myself vulnerable.

But that isn't fair to him, is it? He'd been brave enough to admit his feelings. And what had I done? I'd fled. Admitting that I love him is proof that he makes me weak—that he could break me easily.

I know it's my fear talking, and I have no problem admitting that I'm afraid, unlike admitting that I love him.

Fuck. Why are emotions so hard?

Sighing, I soap up my body and try to push all thoughts of love and Kai from my mind. My mind turns to the fact that I'm going to have to see the guys very soon. I almost don't want to wash Kai from my skin, hoping that the other three would be able to scent him on me. At the same time, that's gross, so I'm definitely cleaning myself up.

I hate the part of myself that wants to hurt them as they hurt me. I don't want to be that person, but I don't know how to make it stop. I don't know how to get over the pain they made me feel—that I still feel. People say the pain will ease with time, but my pain hasn't eased in the least. It could be because so little time has passed, or it could be because I still have to face them day after day. All I know is that it kills me every time I see one of them.

Dressing quickly, I decide to take the time to apply makeup—not allowing myself to think about why I want to look my

best when they see me. I don't want to dwell on that because I'm afraid of what the answer might be. But it's also a bit of armor for me, making me feel stronger and better about myself.

I'm running behind as I hurry down to the training room. The door is closed, and because it's soundproofed, I can't be sure they're on the other side, but part of me knows they are. Just as I know, I will have my ass handed to me for being late by Hunter. I *know* these men, even if I hadn't known they were working against me.

I don't know how long I stand outside the room, but it's long enough to know if I don't enter on my own, one of them will come search me out. And the last thing I want is for them to find me standing outside the door as I try to find the courage to face them. I won't allow them to see that weakness. I can't allow it. They've already broken me once, and I won't let them know that they still hold that much power over me.

Locking my emotions down, I lift my head and push my shoulders back. Fake it till I make it, right?

Shoving the door open with more power than necessary, four heads swivel in my direction as it slams into the wall. The expressions on their faces are just what I expect, which settles something in me. Hunter glowers at me, body tense as he stares me down. It's easy to see the desire on Marcos's face as he scans me from head to toe, while guilt and longing hide in Caiden's eyes as he fights to keep his face blank.

It's Kai who steps forward, smiling at me with love shining from his eyes. He doesn't even hesitate as he leans down to press his lips against mine. I melt against him, unable to do anything else as his arms wrap around me. When he pulls back, he leans his forehead against mine.

Opening my eyes, I find him staring back at me. "I love you."

Fuck. We're really doing this right now, aren't we?

I swallow audibly, knowing that the other three men can hear our every word; I try to force myself to tell him how I feel. But I just can't get the words out, mouth opening and closing as words fail me.

"It's okay, angel," Kai says, a soft smile gracing his lips. "I can wait until you're ready. But don't think I'm going to stop saying it. I'm going to tell you as often as I can until you get used to the words. Until you're comfortable not only hearing them, but comfortable enough to tell me how you feel."

Still at a loss for words, all I can do is watch as Kai steps back and moves toward the others. I can't look away from him. I really *do* love him, but I'm just not ready to say it aloud, which he seems to understand. As his eyes meet mine once more, I pray he can see what I'm feeling in my eyes and hope it's enough for now.

"Are the two of you done yet?" Hunter growls. "We're already behind schedule since the princess decided to be late. Can we not waste any more time?"

I turn my head slowly, eyes narrowing as they lock on Hunter. I don't say anything as our eyes clash. I'm tired of the way he treats me, even though I was grateful for it at first. I am his future queen, and yet, he treats me as if I'm trash. I'm done with it and with him.

Anger slowly seeps into me, snaking through my veins as I feel it building and building. Taking a deep breath, I raise my head without breaking our stare off. I raise my eyebrows as he refuses to do the same. Why does he have to be so stubborn? And why do I continue to let him get to me?

Without moving, I call on all four elements of my magic. I feel the power rising within me and wonder how I can use them to show Hunter—no, all of them. I need to show all of them what I can do. They need to learn to respect me as their queen. I think they often forget that I'm not just their peer, that I will rule over them.

Picturing what I want in my head, my magic lashes out at Hunter. My water surrounds him, capturing him in a sphere of water that I slowly lift off the ground with my air magic. Not wanting him to drown, I use the air magic to slap a bubble of air over his nose and mouth that will allow him to breathe at least well enough while I demonstrate just how powerful I am. Vines burst through the floor courtesy of my earth magic and wrap around Hunter's legs and arms to keep him from struggling.

It takes a moment for anyone to react, but then Marcos and Caiden move towards Hunter as if they can save him. I call

forth my fire, flames licking up from the floor to cut them off from their friend.

Kai turns to me, a question on his face, but he doesn't move or say a word. The side of my mouth quirks up in a half smile, and I hope he understands that I have no intention of hurting Hunter. I just have something to prove to them and to myself. When he inclines his head, I know he understands.

I turn back to the other three, taking a deep breath. "The two of you need to back off. I won't hurt him, but I need the three of you to understand a few things."

Caiden and Marcos spin on their heels, watching me as I move closer, but neither of them makes a move to step away. With a sigh and a flick of my hand, I send my air magic at them. They slide across the floor until their backs hit the wall and I use it to hold them there.

Dropping the fire, I lock eyes with Hunter, whose eyes are wide. I can see the fury there, but also fear. I smile as I lower the sphere of water to the floor once more. I call back the water and air magic that surrounds him, but leave the vines remaining.

"No," I snap when his mouth opens to speak. "I've allowed you to speak more than enough. Now it's time for you to listen to me. If you can't shut up, then I'll make you shut up. Is that clear?"

Hunter's mouth snaps shut, and he hesitates before giving me a small nod. Turning to the other two still pinned against

the wall, I ask, “Can you behave, or do you need to remain restrained as well?”

“I’ll listen to anything you have to say,” Marcos tells me before a cocky grin takes over his face. “I never needed to be restrained to listen to you, but I can’t say I minded it much.”

Rolling my eyes, I lift an eyebrow at Caiden as I wait for his answer. “I’ll listen.”

“Good.” Dropping the magic, I focus all of my energy on the vines that continue to slither up and down Hunter’s arms and legs. I allow them to loosen but refuse to call them back, not trusting him.

“I am your queen, or at least I will be in just a few weeks. I think you may have forgotten that since you were the ones to teach me about a world I never knew and how to control my magic, but it doesn’t change the facts. I am the future Fae Queen, and I won’t allow you to continue to treat me with the disrespect you’ve shown me again and again since I arrived in Sorlphi.

“I can almost understand why you acted the way you did when I arrived, knowing what I know now. But you have to know there’s no keeping me from the throne now. Your parents’ plans? They’re over now. Isn’t that why they told you to become one of my consorts when you failed to convince me to abandon my throne?” I shake my head as I move to stand before Hunter.

“What I don’t understand is why you continue to treat me like shit. Why do you still berate me and make me feel like

I'm less than you? Does it make you feel better about yourself? I might not have gotten to know you as well as I did the others, but that doesn't feel like the reason." I tap a finger against my chin as I try to figure it out. "Is it because you're embarrassed that I found out about what you all were doing? What you were planning? I honestly can't figure it out, no matter how hard I rack my brain. So, tell me, Hunter. Why do you act this way?"

Hunter's eyes fall from mine for the first time since I walked into the training room. His face remains blank, a mask that I know he's perfected as I've seen it time and time again. But his one tell now is that he won't meet my eyes as they bounce around the room as he struggles for an answer to my question.

"Do you even know why you act the way you do?"

"Fuck," he hisses as the vines begin to tighten the longer he goes without answering me. Finally, his eyes snap up. "Fine. You really want to know why?"

I nod. "If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't have asked."

He raises his eyebrows as he chuckles, making a face that says he thinks I will regret demanding he answer me. "Sure, I was an asshole when you first got here because that's what my father wanted. But it was never just that—at least not once I got to know you. I acted the way I did to push you away, to protect you from me and our families. I knew you'd find out eventually about the plots against you. How could you not? There were too many people that knew.

“But it was also to protect myself, so you wouldn’t get the chance to hurt me. My heart shattered when Yana died, and I never thought I could care about another person like I did her. But I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were someone I could grow to love—another person who could hurt me or be used against me.” Hunter shakes his head. “You’ve refused to hear us out, but you need to hear what I have to say to understand my answer to your question.”

I shift from foot to foot, uncomfortable with where this conversation is going. None of this is what I expected him to say, but I don’t detect a lie in what he tells me—though, would I even be able to tell with him? Do I want to hear more?

I turn my head so that I can look at the other three men. Caiden and Marcos have moved up to stand next to Kai. All three of their eyes plead with me to listen to what Hunter is saying. My heart pounds in my chest, fear rushing through me. I’m afraid what he has to say will force another crack in my will to keep them all at arm’s length—the first of which formed when I allowed Kai close to me once more.

But if I don’t listen to him, will I regret it? Will I always wonder what he might have said and what it might change?

“I’m listening.”

Hunter seems surprised by my response, but he continues, “My father was never a loving man—at least not to me. I know he loves my mother and will do anything she asks. But I’ve never felt like he loved me. At least with my mother, I occasionally felt like she loved me—mostly when I was little,

but at least someone showed me love. I won't go into my miserable childhood. It wasn't as bad as Kai's, but it wasn't pleasant. When Caleb and Honor were born, I knew I'd do anything to keep them from living through the hell I did. Which is something my father figured out very quickly.

“He no longer threatened me when he wanted me to go along with whatever plans he had. No, he threatened to punish them if I failed the tasks he gave me. The first time he followed through with it, they were three. From then on, I made sure to do whatever he asked of me. It was just easier, and it allowed me to protect them.”

My hand lifts to my mouth in horror. I knew Gabe was a terrible human being, but using Hunter's siblings to make him behave is unbelievable. What kind of person does that?

“But...” I trail off, not sure how to phrase my question.

Luckily, Hunter seems to understand what I'm trying to ask of him. “We sent Caleb and Honor with Caiden's aunt and her kids to another realm the night of your birthday. We'd decided that we couldn't continue with his and Kam's plans, so I had to keep them safe. We had to make sure that my father couldn't find them, so we don't even know which realm they went to. We just know they're safe with Caiden's aunt.”

Tears fill my eyes and my heart breaks for Hunter. I've never had a sibling, so I don't know exactly what he's been through, or is still going through, but I can guess. And now he has no idea where they are after spending their lives protecting

them? All because of me. No wonder he's continued to treat me as he has.

If I'd never shown up, then his brother and sister would still be here. Sure, Gabe would still be using them against him, but he'd be able to know they're safe. Now, he's had to place his trust in someone else to keep them safe. Something I know wouldn't come easy to him.

"I knew that if I allowed myself to fall for you, he'd just use you against me, too. It's not a good reason for the way I've acted, but we all know I'm an asshole at my core."

Letting my hand fall away from my face, I call back my earth magic. Once the vines have released him, Hunter doesn't move. He remains right where he is as he watches me.

"I understand," I tell him quietly. "I probably would've acted in the same manner if I'd been in your position. But it doesn't change anything between us. You know that, right? You've lost your chance at power by becoming my consort."

"I don't give a fuck about power, princess," he cuts me off with a scowl. "It was my father who cared about power, and I will do everything in my power to be sure he never gets it, to be sure he never hurts you. You will take the throne and become our Fae Queen, no matter what I have to do. Do you understand me?"

I shake my head, eyes dropping so he can't see the tears I'm fighting. There goes another crack in my armor, but I refuse to allow him to see it. I can't forgive him—they. I can't trust them. I don't think I can ever trust them.

“So, what is it you want, then?”

Hunter reaches up, using his finger to tilt my head back until I meet his eyes. His hand falls away as he speaks. “I don’t expect you to forgive me. That’s not why I told you this. But you need me. No, you need us. Choose whoever the hell you want as your consorts. Pick people you can trust that can make you happy. But you need to let us help you. You need to let us keep you safe and take care of our parents so that they aren’t a threat to you. Let us protect you, please.”

Another crack.

Fuck me. I can’t do this.

Stepping back, I shake my head vehemently. “You want me to trust you to keep me safe? How can I do that when you were once the threat against me? How can I be sure that your pretty words aren’t just pretty lies? You’re asking too much of me.”

Kai is suddenly at my back, pulling me into his arms. “No one is asking you to trust them, or even me, blindly. But give us a chance to keep you safe, please. We’re going to do everything we can to protect you, but that’ll be easier if you’re not fighting us every step of the way.”

“Please, Hadley,” Marcos pleads with me as he moves up into my line of sight, with Caiden right behind him. “I understand why you’re fighting us, but please just let us do this one thing. Let us prove to you that you can trust us.”

“Just don’t fight us on this. Let us find out who left you those letters—whether it’s related to our parents’ power grab or not—and let us keep you safe from the threats against you.” Caiden pleads not only with his words, but with his eyes.

“Fine. I’ll try to allow you all to protect me, but I expect you to tell me if there is a threat against me and what you plan to do about it. You can’t keep me in the dark, and you all will treat me with the respect that my position demands.” My eyes flash to Hunter, who nods. “There will be no more demanding things of me or treating me as if I’m an insolent child. You will speak to me with respect, and you will request things from me. If you do that, then I will try my best not to allow your betrayal to color my response to you.”

Kai tenses behind me, and I shake my head, glancing over my shoulder at him. “That’s all I can promise to them, Kai. I will try. What’s between the two of us is separate from this. It’s only between the two of us.”

Making a face, I turn back to Caiden. “And Caiden, when the two of you work out your issues.”

“If we work out our issues,” Kai murmurs, head dropping to my shoulder.

“No.” I shake my head. “When. We both know it’s not a question of if, but when. But Caiden, understand this. When Kai does forgive you, it doesn’t mean I forgive you. We will keep you in the loop when it comes to our relationship, but that is only out of respect for what you share. It won’t change the relationship between me and you.”

Caiden nods slowly as he glances between my face and Kai's. "I understand."

"Excellent." I step away from Kai. "As far as training goes, I think I need a break. I will continue to work with my magic on my own, but as I already showed you, I can control all four elements at once with no problem. We can talk about more training later. Preferably after my coronation..." I trail off at the look on Hunter's face.

"But we'll check in next week on the subject to make sure Hunter doesn't have a coronary."

I look between the four of them, waiting for each of them to agree. Once they have, I let out a sigh of relief. "Then I'm going back to my room to relax before dinner. I'll see you all there."

I head for the door, hesitating with my hand on the knob. Turning around, I make my way back to Kai and lift up on my heels. Pressing a kiss to his cheek, I squeeze his hand. "We're okay, I promise."

He shoots me a grateful smile, and I return it.

Chapter Twelve

Caiden

It's like a knife to my heart watching how at ease with one another Kai and Hadley are now. It's bad enough losing Hadley, but losing Kai on top of it? It wasn't something I'd considered and definitely wasn't worth it.

At least he's back now. I get to see him every day, and he'll even occasionally speak to me. He'd let me hold him while he fell apart worrying if Hadley would forgive him. And Hadley seems to have no doubts that I'll be able to fix what I broke between Kai and myself—I just wish I could be as sure of it as she is.

“Now what the hell are we supposed to do if we're not training her?” Hunter runs his hand through his hair as he looks between the three of us.

“Since when did your life start centering around Hadley?” I ask him with a nudge of my elbow to his side.

“The same time yours did,” Marcos says with a grin. “Let's face it, boys, we all have it bad, and we all blew it. Well,

except Kai, who apparently is the only one of us getting laid right now.”

“I’m not... uhhhh...”

My head snaps around to take in Kai, whose face is reddening as he refuses to meet any of our eyes. Jealousy rushes through me, sharp and hot—and I fucking hate it. I can’t help but wonder when they could have slept together. She’d been pissed last night, and Kai had been so upset he’d fallen asleep in my room. Then they were with all the suitors for the morning.

“Holy shit! That’s why you weren’t at lunch!” I shake my head, but find myself smiling despite my jealousy. “You sly dog, you.”

Kai peers up at me from beneath his eyelashes. “Is this really something you want to talk about? I mean, considering...”

“Considering that I’m currently without either of you?” I shrug. “Kind of my own fault. If you want to talk about it, of course, I want to listen. Will I be jealous? Abso-fucking-lutely. But I can deal with that.”

Kai bites down on his bottom lip as his eyes return to the floor. I can tell he wants to talk to me—that he needs to talk to me—but something is preventing him from doing so. And then it hits me.

I turn to Hunter and Marcos, eyes wide as I gesture for them to get the fuck out. Hunter just stares at me like I’m an idiot,

and Marcos is too busy staring at Kai, obviously wanting the details.

Fucking idiots.

“How about we go for a walk, Kai? It’s a nice day out, so we might as well take advantage of it.”

Kai’s head jerks up, a small smile on his lips as he considers me before nodding. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Stepping up beside him, I lay my hand on his lower back and lead him from the room. But not before throwing a glare over my shoulder at my idiot friends.

Marcos grins, giving me a thumbs-up that has me rolling my eyes.

Neither of us speaks as we make our way outside, and since Kai doesn’t move away from me, I take a chance. Sliding my arm fully around him, I pull him into my side. I can feel him watching me from the corner of his eye, but he doesn’t pull away or tell me to get off him, so I consider it a win.

Once outside, I head for the hedge maze, but Kai stops me. “Not in there.”

“Huh?” Glancing down at him, I find that he’s bright red and refusing to meet my eyes again. Why is he embarrassed?

Oh. *Oh.*

“Is that where you and Hadley...” I trail off, hoping that he’ll fill in the blanks. At the very least, it’ll give him a starting place to talk.

Kai leads me through the gardens until we come to a bench.
“Can we sit?”

“Of course.” I sit down, throwing my arm over the back of the bench and turning slightly so I’m facing him when he sits.

“Before we talk about this, I just wanted to say thank you again for last night.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to thank me for that, Kai.”

“I do. We’re not exactly in a good place right now, but you were still there for me when I needed you. That means a lot to me.”

“I’ll always be here for you, no matter what. But you’re welcome, and I’m glad I could be there for you.”

Kai turns to the side to better face me, reaching for my free hand. I don’t hesitate to link our fingers together. A small smile forms on Kai’s lips as he looks at where we’re connected.

And me? I’m ecstatic that he isn’t pulling away from me anymore.

“So, obviously, we were with the other suitors this morning. I didn’t really get to talk to her because of that, but when the others were heading off to lunch, she asked if I wanted to go for a walk. Obviously, I said yes.”

“Obviously,” I echo because he’s not an idiot, and only an idiot would’ve denied that request.

“She led me into the hedge maze and we ended up at a dead end. Turns out she did it on purpose—because we both know she doesn’t get lost in that maze anymore. Apparently, she brought me in there so we could be alone, and she admitted that she’d been planning to bring me out there. With the way she practically attacked me, I assumed it was to sleep with me.” He laughs. “I told her I loved her.”

“You did?” I blink against the tears I can feel forming behind my eyes. There’s a part of me that’s so happy for him because he deserves all the love in the world, but the other part of me? The other part of me wants to scream at the unfairness of it all. We were both supposed to be with Hadley. If we’re both with her, then there would never be a question of anyone having to choose. Especially considering she has to take four consorts.

But her being with Kai and not me? I’m so afraid that one day he’ll choose her. I might be his first love, but what if she’s his true love?

“Cade?” Kai’s hand lands on my cheek, and it’s only then that I realize tears are streaming down my face. As I’d begun to spiral, they snuck out. “I knew I shouldn’t talk about this with you.”

“No,” I force out, my hand moving up to lie on his and keeping him from moving away from me. “It’s not what you think.”

I reach up to brush away my tears, but Kai beats me there. “Okay, if it’s not that, then what is it?”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to lose you to her.”

Kai seems shocked by my declaration, though I’m not sure why.

“Why would you think that?” Kai asks, but I notice he doesn’t deny it.

My heart drops into my stomach as I begin to contemplate what my life would be like without Kai in it by my side. It’s not a pretty picture, and not something I’d ever allowed myself to imagine.

“You’re angry with me,” I tell him. “Justifiably angry with me. Hadley is pissed at me, as she should be. The two of you are together now. It won’t be long until she announces that you’re to be the Autumn Court consort. Maybe you’ll forgive me, and maybe you won’t. Though, please, for the love of everything, please forgive me eventually. I don’t think I can live like this forever.”

“Cade...”

“Let me finish before you say anything. Please,” I beg him. I wait until he nods before continuing, “If you forgive me and we get back together, how long will Hadley be willing to allow us to be together? How long until you’ll choose her? Being your first love doesn’t mean I’ll be your last love. What if you love her more? I... I don’t know if I can live without you in my life.”

“Goddess, Caiden. Why is your mind going there?” Kai moves across the bench until he’s kneeling in front of me,

taking my face in both of his hands. “You were in that room when Hadley said it wasn’t an if I forgive you, but a when. As much as I’d love to deny that just to make you suffer, even I know that’s true.

“You’ve been my everything for so long. I never expected Hadley, but she’s the best surprise I could’ve asked for. Did I think it would be the three of us together? Of course. We both did. I still hope that she forgives you so that we can have that. But if she doesn’t? That doesn’t mean I’m just going to give you up. I love you, Caiden.”

“And I love you.”

“I know that. I don’t know what I can do to make you believe me when I tell you that I won’t ever choose between the two of you. All I can do is tell you just that anytime you doubt me—doubt *us*. There’s room in my heart for both of you, and there always will be.”

I want to believe him—Goddess above, I’ve never wanted anything more—but there’s still a voice whispering in my head, telling me that he’s just saying what I want to hear. But I need to trust him, and trust that he’s telling the truth. That’s what a relationship is, after all.

“I can’t promise to never doubt it again, but I promise to tell you if I do.” All I want to do is kiss him, but I don’t know how he’ll react. I’m not sure that I can deal with rejection from him right now. But that doesn’t stop my eyes from dropping to his lips.

When his tongue snakes out, dragging across his lips, my eyes snap up to find his eyes on my own lips. You know what? Fuck it.

Leaning down, I brush my lips across his. It's just a chaste kiss, barely a brush of my lips on his, before I pull back to see his reaction. Only, I don't get very far before he pulls me back to him.

His tongue drags against my bottom lip, so I allow him to deepen the kiss. As our tongues brush together, my cock starts to harden. It's been over a week since I've had his lips on mine, and I've fucking missed him.

Grasping his hips, I pull him onto my lap until he's straddling me. He doesn't break the kiss as he begins to grind down on me, his hands sliding into my hair.

I let out a moan as I feel his hard cock against mine, and I want nothing more than to strip him naked and fuck him right here. I pull back, and Kai chases my lips. I lift a finger to his lips, applying pressure so he can't kiss me again. A quiet chuckle escapes me at his whine, causing his eyes to pop open.

"I don't want to take this any further until you've fully forgiven me," I tell him.

Kai shifts his hips, grinding against me again. I can't hold back the hiss that falls from my lips, but I just laugh at the smirk that makes its way onto his face.

"You're not being a very good boy, are you?"

Kai shakes his head. “No, I’m not.” He stares at me for a minute before nodding and climbing off me.

I’m sad when his weight disappears, but I know it’s the right choice. Especially when he leans down to press his lips to mine once more before pulling away.

“Thank you, Cade—for everything. And waiting is a good idea. I promise I’m trying. I want to be over this, but part of me just isn’t ready yet.”

“And that’s perfectly fine. I’ll be here. And in the meantime, if you need someone to talk about Hadley with, I want you to come to me. It’s all a little bit mixed up right now for all of us, but not only do I need to know, but I want to know. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Smiling what feels like the first genuine smile I’ve had since the masquerade, I stand and take his hand in mine. Intertwining our fingers, I look up at him. “Is this okay?”

He nods slowly. “Yeah. It’s nice.”

I begin leading him back toward the palace. “Do you have any plans until dinner?”

“You know I don’t.” He laughs. “We were supposed to be training with Hadley.”

“I didn’t want to assume. Would you like to watch a movie with me?”

“More than anything.”

Which is how I find myself on the couch of my room with my arms around the man I love while we watch a movie that I pay zero attention to. But it's not the movie that's important; it's the man in my arms.



Later that night, I find myself in Hunter's room when Kai makes his way to Hadley's room once more. We'll have to work something out once he forgives me. He can't stay with her every night, or I'll go crazy. I'm used to him being in my room, in my arms, while we sleep. It's hard to sleep alone anymore, but we're not there yet. That's a future problem.

"Have you talked to your sisters yet?" Marcos asks, surprising me when he steps from the bathroom.

"Damn, you startled me. I didn't know you were here."

"Where else would he be?" Hunter crashes down onto the couch beside me, offering me a glass of whiskey, which I take gratefully. "It's not like any of us have anywhere else to be."

"True story," I sigh before turning my attention back to Marcos. "I haven't had time. But I can call Morgan now. I'll have to wait to call Aubrey and Emery tomorrow."

Marcos nods. "Yes, now." He grabs Hunter's laptop, handing it to me.

"I was just going to use my phone—"

“Nope,” Marcos says, popping his p. “Morgan will want to see our faces while we ask for her help. If you don’t video call her, she’s just going to hang up on you when she figures out what you want.”

Damn it, he’s right, and I hate it. She’s going to love that we’re coming to her for help, and she’s definitely going to hold this over my head forever. If I wasn’t so desperate, I wouldn’t bother asking for her help. But of my three sisters, she’s the one who’s most likely to help and to actually offer helpful information since she knows Hadley.

Opening the screen, I hand it off to Hunter so he can enter his password. When he passes it back, he’s already opened the video chat with her name selected. Setting it in my lap, I eye my friends. “Do we really need to ask for her help? She’s never going to let us live this down.”

“Unless you’ve suddenly come up with a brilliant idea of how we can win back Hadley, then yes, we have to ask her for help.”

“Fuck.” I grimace before hitting the button to call her.

It rings for a minute before she picks up. She’s very confused when her face appears on the screen. “Hunter? Why are you calling me?”

“Hey, little sister.” I wave, and she jerks back as she notices me on the screen.

“Cade? Why are you calling me from Hunter’s account? Is everything okay?”

“Hunter and Marcos are here too.” I turn the laptop to show her Hunter before turning it so she can see Marcos as well.

“Oookay,” she drawls. “So, what can I do for the three of you?”

“Well, we were... uhhh... I mean. Shit.”

Morgan giggles. “Come on, it can’t be that bad. Just spit it out.”

“We need your help to figure out how to get Hadley to forgive us,” Marcos says as he plops down on my other side, leaning in so he can see the screen. “We need ideas on how to woo her.”

Morgan just blinks at us before bursting out into laughter. I run my hand down my face before tipping my head to the side to look at Marcos. “This right here is why I didn’t want to ask for her help.”

“Dude, it was your idea to ask her in the first place,” Marcos laughs.

“Alright, big brother, I’ll help you out.”

“What? Seriously? Just like that?” Maybe she’s finally growing up. I never thought she’d agree so quickly, and after only laughing at us? I’m shocked, honestly.

“Sure. On one condition.”

And there it is. Of course, she can’t make it easy. “And what’s your condition?”

“I want you to tell me everything that went down that caused Hadley to be so pissed at all four of you. I know the little bit I picked up at dinner, but I know that isn’t everything.”

Yeah, I don’t want to do that.

“That’s not important, Morgan. Are you going to help us or not?”

Morgan taps a finger against her chin. “Sure. As soon as you tell me what happened.”

Hunter grunts. “This was a terrible idea. She doesn’t need to know what happened. She doesn’t need to be involved—”

“Fine,” Marcos bites out. “I’ll tell you if you really want to know, but you’re not going to like what we have to say.”

“Marc—” I start.

Marcos shakes his head, cutting me off as he takes the laptop from me. “No, Caiden. It’s time to stop babying her. She’s old enough to hear this. You can’t protect her forever. We can’t protect them forever. They have to grow up at some point.”

So Marcos tells her the whole story about our parents’ plan and how we went along with it. When he’s done, he hands the laptop back to me. Morgan stares back at me, complete shock written all over her face.

“Yeah, that’s so much more than what I caught from the conversation at dinner. All of your parents? Our parents? How could they? Goddess, poor Hadley.”

I pray for patience. I need to remember that Morgan didn't know any of this information before today. Of course, it's going to take time for her to take it all in. I can't just force her to accept it and help us with Hadley. Even if that's all I want to do.

"No wonder she's so pissed at you guys. This isn't a small fuck up, either."

"Language," I chastise her, more out of habit than anything else.

Morgan does not look impressed. "I'm sixteen, not six, Caiden. Suck it the fuck up, big brother. It's not the first, nor will it be the last time I say fuck."

"Morgan, can you help us or not?" I sigh, running my hand through my hair.

My sister watches me through the camera before speaking. "I can, but should I? That's the real question. Hadley's amazing—a badass. I don't know if you deserve to earn her forgiveness."

"We don't," Marcos offers her. "But that doesn't mean we don't want it, regardless."

"Look, Morgan, I get it. Hadley's befriended you, taken you under her wing. You feel protective of your new friend. But I want you to think about the fact that I'm coming to you for help. Would I do that if I just wanted to screw her over again? Or if I didn't care about her?"

She shakes her head slowly. “No. In fact, I’ve never seen you give a shit about anyone except your friends and me.”

“Hey, now. I give a shit about Aubrey and Emery, too.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. Your friends and your sisters.”

“Then you’ll help us?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to need to feel Hadley out to see what would work best. She’s not someone whose forgiveness you can buy. You won’t be able to buy her off with some fancy jewelry. See if you can’t find out what her favorite flowers are. You can send some to her every day with a heartfelt note. That might be hard for you guys, but that’s what it’s going to take.”

Hunter scoffs. “So flowers and pretty words are all it’s going to take to get her to forgive us? I somehow doubt that.”

“Of course not, jackass. But it’s somewhere to start. As I said before, I’m going to need to talk to Hadley, and once I have a better idea of what she wants, then I’ll get back to you.”

“You can’t just ask her. Then she’ll know you’re helping us.” Maybe this wasn’t the best idea. She’s going to blow this for us before we even get started.

“Take a deep breath, big brother. I know what I’m doing. Now, focus on your task—find out her favorite flowers and work on those heartfelt notes. I’ll call you when I have more.”

She disconnects the call without even saying goodbye, leaving us staring at the blank screen.

Marcos leans back as he asks, “How do we find out her favorite flowers? It’s not like we can just ask.”

“We could have Kai ask her?” I offer.

“No.” Hunter shakes his head. “That’s too obvious. We should ask Grace. I think she’ll help us.”

Damn. Maybe we should’ve asked for her help before going to my sister. It’s too late now, but I think Hunter’s right. Grace has always liked us, so I think she’ll be keen to help us make up for what we’ve done.

I stand up, heading for the door.

“Where are you going?” Hunter calls after me.

“I’m going to talk to Grace, obviously. We don’t have any time to waste. So get your asses off the couch.”

They both stare at me blankly before glancing at one another. With a shrug, they stand and follow me from the room.

For the first time in a week, I feel like we might have a chance to get Hadley back—it’s a small chance, but a little bit of hope is all I need.

Chapter Thirteen

Hadley

Another week has come and gone, and I'm no closer to choosing my consorts. Well, that's not entirely true. Kai will be my Autumn Court consort, which I've already informed Grace of. Not that I've told him that. It's probably a bit douche-y of me, but I haven't been able to bring myself to tell him. Nor have I managed to tell him I love him.

I'm working on it.

I also discussed bringing Braxton on as an advisor—something I've been considering since she admitted she wasn't here for a romantic relationship. Because no matter how much I deny it, I want there to be a chance of falling in love with my consorts. With Braxton, that was never going to be an option, but I really like her. I like the fact that she doesn't mind speaking her mind. On more than one occasion, we've debated changes I'm considering when I take the crown. I think she'll be a good fit for my team—something that Grace seems to agree with.

I make a note to speak with the Autumn Court suitors this week. It's only fair to let Oscar and Braxton know I've made my decision. That way Oscar can return home if he wishes, and I can see if Braxton has any interest in an advisory role. I only wish choosing the other court consorts was as easy.

I adore Benjamin and Blanca, but as friends. Benjamin feels too much like a little brother, and Blanca just isn't cut out for the life of a royal consort. But if I have to choose one of them, it'll be Benjamin. I just don't *want* to choose him.

As for the Winter and Summer Court suitors, they're all fine. But nothing really sets any of them apart from one another. Obviously, their personalities are different, but there's nothing about any of them that calls to me. I don't feel drawn to any of them as I did with Caiden, Marcos, Hunter, and Kai.

Speaking of the assholes, I can't seem to get away from them. I'd hoped that when I called off our training sessions, I would see them less—except Kai, of course. But they keep popping up everywhere, and it's driving me absolutely batty. I need time away from them to heal, but I can't get it.

Not only are they at meals, sitting as close to me as they can and pulling me into their conversations, but they're regularly popping up to ask me to take a walk in the gardens or to escort me to dinner. Then there are the bouquets of lavender dahlias that were delivered to my room each morning. How they found out my favorite flowers, I'll never know.

A knock sounds on my door and I make my way over, knowing it'll be another bouquet. I also know that by the time

I open the door, whoever delivered it will be gone. None of them have mentioned the flowers and the notes to me, and they don't sign the notes, but I know it's them. I've seen their handwriting enough to recognize them.

Swinging open the door, I pick up the bouquet from the floor, and even though I know they'll be gone, I step out of the doorway. A glance in each direction reveals no one, just as I knew it would. Moving back into my sitting room, I put the flowers into the waiting vase and take out the note. Today it's from Marcos.

You took my breath away from the very first moment I saw you. I knew that my life would never be the same, and that you were meant for me. If only I'd thought of the consequences of my actions, I would have done things so differently. I know saying I'm sorry isn't enough, but I am. I'm sorry that my actions caused you pain. I'm sorry that I broke the trust that you gave me. Please know that I will do anything to make this right. Please, give me another chance to do this right. You won't regret it.

With each note they write to me, the more my resolve cracks. It's obvious that they regret their actions, but is that reason enough to forgive them? As much as I want to forgive them, I always circle back to the same question—how can I be sure that they won't betray me again?

And the answer is, I can't. It comes down to trusting that they'll keep their word, and I'm just not ready to do that. No matter what my heart seems to have to say on the matter.

I stalk across the room to the desk, yank open the top drawer, and throw the note on top of the others before slamming it shut. My hand hesitates to let go of the handle, and I find myself sinking into the chair as I open the drawer slowly. No matter how many times I swear I won't read the notes again, I find myself reading them over every day.

There are two from each of them—three from Marcos as of today. Caiden's letters speak of his despair at losing not just me, but Kai. They state that he's happier than he could've ever thought at the fact that I've forgiven Kai, even as jealousy rages through him. He talks of the regret he feels knowing that he damaged what could have been between the three of us.

Hunter's are short and to the point. He's always been an asshole and will always remain one, but he wants to be different for me. He wants to try to be something else for me. He wants nothing more than to keep me safe, and that my happiness means everything to him. He'll do whatever he has to do to see me happy, even if that means being happy with someone other than him.

Marcos's words are the prettiest. He likes to talk about staring into my eyes and how they're captivating. How he can't look away from me when I'm in a room, unable to tear his eyes away from my beauty. But more than that, he talks about what he feels. While he's never said he loved me, I can read in between the lines.

Placing the notes back in the drawer, I close it carefully this time. As much as it pains me to admit, I cherish these notes.

They mean the world to me. But they're not enough, and I don't know what will be enough. I don't know what it'll take to get me past my distrust and my pain.

Deciding that it's doing me no good to dwell on this again, I pull my phone from my pocket to call Grace. She answers on the first ring.

“Good afternoon, Hadley. What can I do for you?”

“Hi, Grace. I think it's time that I speak with Kai, Braxton, and Oscar. I wasn't sure if there were some protocols that I needed to know about before I speak to them.”

There is a momentary hesitation before Grace speaks. “No, there's nothing like that. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“I thought this would make you happy, Grace? That I've made a decision, and that I chose one of the heirs. Why does it feel like you disapprove?”

“No, that's not it.” Her sigh filters through the line. “It's just that you still have two weeks. Are you sure you want to make this decision now? If you do this, you're going to be showing favor to Kai. Because I assume you're no closer to making a decision about the other courts?”

I suck on my teeth, uncaring about the noise as I consider her words. I understand where she's coming from, but I've been showing favor to Kai since the moment I announced he would be joining the suitors.

“Grace, I love him and he needs to know that. He needs to know that his place with me is secure. If that causes issues with some of the other suitors, then I don’t want them as consorts. I’ve known Kai for longer, so of course I’m closer to him. Of course, it’s easier for me to make my decision with him. If they can’t understand that, then they’re not the people I think they are.”

“I’m happy for you, Hadley. I’m glad you have Kai. He’s good for you, and you for him.”

Ummm... Okay. This conversation has officially confused the hell out of me.

“Cool... so, what happens now? Do I need to talk to them separately? Together? Do you need to be there?”

“I think it might be easier for all parties involved if we have this conversation in my office. I’ll send for the three of them if you want to head down here?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Hanging up the phone, I slide my feet into my heels and run my hands down my pants. I’m suddenly nervous, and I’m definitely not a fan of the feeling. It’s best I get this done and over with.

As I head to Grace’s office, my mind is running in a million directions. Making the decision wasn’t nearly as nerve-racking as actually telling them the decision. I don’t think any of them will be surprised by me choosing Kai, but that doesn’t mean they won’t be disappointed—especially Oscar.

I'm surprised when I find myself standing outside of Grace's office. I'd been so lost in my thoughts I hadn't been paying attention to where I'd been going. I really need to be more aware of my surroundings, something that the guys have pointed out to me on more than one occasion.

Nope, don't start thinking about them, Hadley. I have more important things to think about.

With that, I knock on Grace's door, waiting until she calls out before opening it.

Grace looks up in surprise as I step inside. "That was fast."

"You told me to come down, so I came right down. Do you want me to leave and come back?"

Grace laughs, shaking her head. "No, Hadley. I just expected it to take you longer to get here. That's all. Come. Sit."

Following her over to the couch and chairs, she sits in one armchair before gesturing for me to sit in the other.

"I know you know this, but I'm going to say it, anyway. You need to be... careful in your wording. You don't want to insult someone who could be a future ally. There are likely to be hurt feelings, and while they may not respond professionally, it's important that you remain so."

"I understand, Grace. It wouldn't do for the future Fae Queen to lose her temper and all that."

Grace nods. "Right. Well, they should be here soon. In the meantime, how are you doing? I know there's been a lot going

on for you.”

“I’m okay.” I shrug.

“Are you? Really?” She hesitates. “How are things going with the other heirs? Are they... behaving?”

I laugh at the idea of the guys behaving, but I pull up short when I realize they have been. Which is... weird. “Yeah, they have. It’s actually a little out of character for them. They want me to forgive them.”

“Of course they do. No one wants the queen as an enemy. Even if they’re set to rule their individual courts, you will still hold power over them.”

“No, it’s more than that. They’ve been sending notes with apologies and compliments. I’m fairly certain they’re trying to win me back. They want to be my consorts.”

Grace rests her chin on her hand as she considers me. “And how do you feel about that?”

Burying my face in my hands, I laugh—the sound a bit hysterical. “I’m so confused about it, Grace. Part of me wants them to keep groveling—not for me to forgive them, but to feel... vindicated? I’m not sure that’s the word I’m going for, but it works well enough. That part of me likes the idea of them on their knees, begging for forgiveness while I deny them. The other part is begging for me to forgive and go right back to how things were before. I’m not sure which side scares me the most.”

“You were able to forgive Kai, so what’s really keeping you from forgiving the others?”

“My pride,” I bite out, surprising both of us. But when I think about it, it makes sense. They hadn’t only broken my heart and my trust, but they’d hurt my pride. And that’s one of the hardest things for me to come back from. I don’t have a problem admitting when I’m wrong about something, but this? I was so wrong about so much, and that hurts me in ways I don’t want to admit.

“I wasn’t expecting you to admit that,” she tells me.

A heavy knock on the door pulls us from our conversation.

Grace reaches over to pat my hand before calling out, “Come in.”

The door opens to reveal Oscar, Braxton, and Kai. The three of them hesitate in the doorway. I stand up and gesture for them to enter. “Come on in. I need to talk to the three of you.”

They glance at one another before heading inside. I avoid Kai when he tries to catch my eye. I settle back into my seat as the three of them line up along the couch, backs stiff.

“First, I want to thank each of you for giving me the chance to get to know you. I know the circumstances of our... courtships haven’t been ideal, but you have all put forth the effort to not only get to know me, but to allow me to get to know you. That means the world to me.”

Peering at Grace from the corner of my eye, she gives me a small nod. Taking this as her approval, I continue. “With that

being said, I've decided which of you I will be taking as the Autumn Court consort."

I pause, trying to steel myself for whatever may come following my announcement. "Kai Jin, I would like to officially ask you to become my Autumn Court consort."

Turning my attention to him, I find him blinking at me. When he doesn't say anything, I clear my throat. "Kai?"

Kai jumps up and hurries over, dropping to his knees before me. He takes my hands in his before leaning forward to lay his forehead on them. "Nothing would make me happier than being your consort. I promise to love you and honor you for the rest of our lives. I will never allow you to regret making this decision."

When he leans back, there are tears in his eyes, and I have to blink against the ones forming in my own. And then we're kissing, though I'm unsure which of us initiated the kiss. My hands go to his face, needing to feel him closer. I forget everything else but Kai as he deepens the kiss. As our tongues intertwine, I know I made the right decision.

Someone clears their throat, causing us to jump apart. I flush, head ducking as I laugh. "Sorry."

Grace shakes her head, her amusement clear. "Wasn't there something else you wished to say?"

"Right, sorry." I pull away from Kai, who climbs to his feet and moves to stand behind me. "Braxton, you told me that you came here in hopes of becoming my consort, but as a

confidant and not a lover. I would like to offer you a position as an advisor here at the palace. Your opinions and the debates that we've had regarding changes I wish to implement showed me I need someone by my side who isn't afraid to tell me they don't agree with me. I believe you could help me in making the best decisions for the Fae and for Sorlphi as a whole."

"You want me to be one of your advisors?" she asks, shock coloring her words.

A smile graces my lips. "Yes, I do."

"Holy shit." Braxton shakes her head. "I mean, of course, Your Majesty. I would love to be your advisor."

"It's still just Hadley," I tell her, realizing that this is going to be an ongoing fight with her. Maybe I ought to just allow her to call me what she wishes.

"And what of me?" Oscar demands. "If he is to be your consort, and she is to be your advisor, what will you have of me?"

My brow furrows at his tone. "You will return to the Autumn Court with my thanks."

"This is such bullshit." Oscar jumps to his feet, anger flashing in his eyes. "I never stood a chance against the fucking Autumn Court heir. If you'd already decided, then why did you even have us come here? Do you think it's fun to toy with our emotions like this?"

My own anger is building within me, and I can feel the tension radiating from Kai. But instead of losing my temper, I

lean back in my seat. Kai lays his hand on my shoulder, squeezing to let me know he's there if I need him.

“I understand that you're upset with my decision, but you came here knowing that you were not the only one in the running to become my consort. As soon as I made my decision, I informed Grace, and she set up this meeting. I most certainly have not been toying with you in any way. Now, I believe it would be in everyone's best interests if you were to return to the Autumn Court immediately.”

“Why? Afraid I'll tell your other suitors what a cold bitch you are?”

“You can't speak—”

I hold up my hand, cutting Kai off from whatever he is about to say. I stand slowly, tilting my head as I lock eyes with Oscar. Hiding behind the anger, I can see the hurt in his eyes, and I understand. I truly do, but I also will not allow anyone to speak to me like this.

“You might know me better than most in your court, Oscar, but that does not mean you can forget who and what I am. I am your future queen, and you will not disrespect your queen. This situation is unique and can cause emotions to rise, so I will forgive you for your outbursts. But if you say one more word, I will not be so forgiving. I will have you escorted directly to the portal room, where you will promptly return to the Autumn Court. Someone will pack up your belongings and have them sent to you.

“If you decide that this isn’t the course of action you would like to follow and instead want to go against my wishes, I will gladly have you locked in the dungeons until after my coronation.” I pause, stepping closer to him. “You get to decide how you want this experience to end. Do you want to have an ally in the future queen, or an enemy? I can make your life easier, or I can make it so, so much harder.”

Without waiting for a response, I give him my back and head for the door. Opening it, I raise an eyebrow. “Well?”

Oscar glances between the occupants in the room, looking for something he obviously doesn’t find. His shoulders slump forward as he loses his indignation. When he moves towards the door, I call out to Kai, “Can you please escort Oscar to the portal room? I expect you to inform me if he gives you any trouble.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Kai bows at the waist, and for once, I don’t correct him on my title. It’s important that Oscar realizes just how much he’s messed up, and having my future consort refer to me by my title will help nail that point home.

Kai leads Oscar from the room, and I shut it quietly behind them as soon as they’re out the door. Turning my attention to Grace, I find her beaming at me.

“You handled that very well, Your Majesty,” Braxton tells me. “That could have gone much worse.”

“Thank you, Braxton. Grace, is now a good time for you and Braxton to discuss what happens now?”

“I have time to speak with her now, yes.”

“Excellent. Do I need to be present for this conversation?”

When Grace shakes her head, I barely manage to bite back my sigh of relief. “In that case, I do believe I will take a nap until dinner.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Grace says, a twinkle in her eyes.

I shoot her a glare, shaking my head, but I don’t correct her. Knowing that she’s only said it to give me a hard time, I let myself out of her office and head back to my room. My head is pounding from that confrontation, and I am hopeful that a nap will help.

Chapter Fourteen

Hadley

I wake up to lips on my neck and hands roaming down my side. I lean back into Kai's touch, turning my head until our lips connect. Now, this is a good way to wake up. I hum into the kiss, rolling so I can face him, and sliding my hands under his shirt.

His skin is warm under my fingers, and we quickly lose ourselves to the kiss. When his leg slides between mine, I don't hesitate to rock against his thigh. I sigh into our kiss as my clit makes contact with his hard muscles. I rock my hips back and forth, slowly riding his thigh.

Kai's hand moves underneath my shirt, gliding over my skin until his fingers brush my nipple. A cry falls from my lips as my head flies back at the small touch.

“Again. More. Please, Kai.”

“Whatever you wish, angel.” Kai pulls at the hem of my shirt before ripping it over my head. He pushes me onto my

back, lowering his head to lap at my nipple. His tongue circles the tightened nub before sucking it between his lips.

My hips rise up towards him, needing friction now that our movement has removed his leg from between mine. Kai grinds his hips against mine, letting me feel his hard cock beneath his pants as he switches his attention to my other nipple.

“Too many clothes,” I pant, pulling at his shirt.

When he pulls away from me, reaching behind him to yank the shirt off, my hands fall to his pants. I yank down the zipper and reach inside to stroke his cock through his underwear. Kai hisses at the contact, grabbing my wrist and gently extracting my hand from his pants.

“Not yet, angel.” He moves off the bed, pulling a whine from me as I reach for him. He gives a small laugh as he slides his pants down his hips, and he’s back on the bed as soon as they’re on the floor. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He yanks on the shorts I’d changed into before my nap, pulling my panties down with them until I’m naked before him. “So fucking gorgeous.”

His hands roam over my bare skin, and I need him inside of me as soon as possible.

“Kai, stop with the teasing, please. I need you.”

His hands roam over my hips as he smirks down at me. Letting out a growl, I attempt to switch our positions, but he just laughs and lays his weight atop me until my back is flat against the bed once more.

“So impatient,” he whispers against my lips before kissing me. His hand moves between us, running along my slit and collecting my juices. “So fucking wet.”

Before I can yell at him about teasing me again, his thumb brushes over my hips, causing a mewl to fall from my lips. He pushes his finger inside of me, and I move as much as I can beneath him to meet the thrust of his finger. Then he’s adding a second finger and my back is bowing.

“Yes, Kai. Fuck. More, please.”

A noise in the doorway causes us both to freeze. My eyes are wide when they meet Caiden’s.

Fuck.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” he says, eyes locking in on Kai’s fingers buried in my pussy. “But I think Kai forgot I was here. I’m all for you continuing, but I thought you should know I was here before you did so.”

Turning my head back to Kai, I see the question in his eyes. He’s going to leave this up to me. As much as I don’t want to stop, do I really want to do this with Caiden here? My attention falls back to Caiden as he grabs his cock through his pants, squeezing.

“Goddess, could the two of you be any hotter?” The growl in his voice sends a shiver through me, and I clench down on Kai’s fingers. My hips begin to move of their own accord, and I know there’s no stopping this now.

“You can stay,” I manage to bite out as Kai begins to fuck me on his fingers once more, even adding a third finger. My gasp cuts me off when he brushes over my g-spot. “Fuck, Kai, yes, right there.”

Remembering Caiden, my head rolls to the side to see he’s pulled his cock out, stroking it to match the pace of Kai’s fingers.

Oh, *fuuuuuck*. Why is that so hot?

“Stay over there. No touching,” I finally grind out, and Caiden nods without taking his eyes off my pussy.

With each pass of his fingers, Kai bumps my g-spot, and my orgasm goes from zero to sixty in no time at all. The entire time, my eyes stay locked on Caiden as he strokes his cock. He’s pushed his pants and boxers further down his hips, reaching down to roll his balls in his other hand.

I lick my lips, wanting to suck his cock down until he falls apart from my mouth alone.

“Come on, angel. I need to be inside of you, need to take you, but I need you to come first. Come for me, baby.”

“Come for Kai, baby girl. Come all over his fingers, just like you’ll come on his big cock. Squeeze him with that fucking gorgeous pussy,” Caiden pants, and his dirty words send me over the edge.

Pleasure washes over me as I scream out. My back arches and my pussy convulses around Kai’s fingers as he continues

to fuck me through my orgasm. When I collapse onto the pillow, Kai slides his fingers from me and leans in to kiss me.

“Are you really okay with this, angel? I can tell him to leave.”

“No.” I shake my head, eyes locking with Caiden’s once more. “Come sit on the bed—the other side. It’ll give both of us the best view.”

Caiden doesn’t hesitate, immediately moving to the far side of the bed. He climbs up, kneeling at the foot of the bed—his hand continues to move the entire time, and I can’t tear my eyes off him.

Should I stop this? Absolutely.

Am I going to? Fuck no.

“I have an idea,” Kai says as he rolls onto his back. He grabs my hips to help me sit up, but when I go to straddle him, he stops me. “No, face the other way. Face Caiden so you can watch him watching us.”

I do as he says, turning until I’m facing Caiden before straddling Kai’s hips. I reach down and stroke Kai a few times before lining him up with my center. My head falls back, temporarily forgetting about watching Caiden as I slide down Kai’s cock.

“You take his cock so well, and it’s a damn good cock, isn’t it?” Caiden rasps out, my head rolling forward so my attention is on him. “Ride him for me, baby girl? Please? Ride him for both of us.”

And I do. I ride Kai hard and fast with his hands on my hips, helping me keep my pace as my attention stays locked on Caiden as he strokes his cock. Kai feels fucking amazing inside of me, brushing against my walls and hitting me in all the right places. It's all made hotter by Caiden watching, his eyes flicking between the spot where Kai fucks me from below to my tits, bouncing as I continue to ride Kai.

It's all so hot, but it's just not quite enough. Reaching down, I find my clit and circle it the way I know will set me off with next to no effort.

"Oh, yes," Caiden murmurs. "Make yourself feel good. I want to see you come on his cock."

I'm so close and with just a few more flicks of my finger, I'm falling apart. Kai's hips jerk erratically as he follows me over the edge. Kai's hands on my hips are the only thing keeping me upright as Caiden shuffles up the bed toward us. He's close, I can tell.

"Can I?" he begs.

I nod, not actually sure what I'm agreeing to. Kai sits up, one arm circling my waist while he leans his weight on the other. Kai must understand what Caiden is up to, because when Caiden straddles Kai's legs, he tips me back against his chest. It still allows me to watch Caiden, but also pulls me slightly off his cock.

Caiden hisses, coming hard. His cum lands on the place where Kai and I are connected, the warmth surprising me. Surprising me even more is Kai's hand as he runs his hands

through Caiden's cum before bringing his fingers back to my clit.

"I can't," I cry as he flicks his cum-covered fingers against me.

"You can, and you will," Kai demands, biting down on my neck. I'm so sensitive that it's slightly uncomfortable, but that quickly morphs into an intense pleasure before I'm unexpectedly flying over the edge.

Kai's softening cock slips from me moments before he's pushing his fingers inside of me. I open my mouth to tell him to stop trying to keep his cum inside of me when he pulls them free, offering his hand to Caiden.

Caiden grasps Kai's wrist, lowering his head to suck Kai's drenched fingers into his mouth. I bite back a moan as Caiden sucks our combined cum from Kai's fingers. When he's done, Caiden pulls off Kai's fingers with a pop and grins at us. "Bet you weren't expecting that kind of wake-up call, were you?"

"Seriously, Cade? Get the fuck out of here." Kai sighs, falling back onto the bed and pulling me with him. "Go clean up. I'm gonna hold my girl for a few minutes before we get ready for dinner. And shut the door behind you!"

Kai pulls me against him, our backs to the door. Neither of us speaks until we hear the click of the door closing. "Are you okay?"

I don't even know how to answer his question. I know I should be pissed off about what just happened, but I'm... not.

As surprised as I am by that revelation, it's kind of a relief. If I'd been more awake, more aware of the situation, I might not have allowed it to continue, but I can't find it in myself to regret it.

"I'm confused, and not sure why I allowed that to happen. But I think I'm okay with it." I roll over so I can see his face. Laying my hand on his cheek, I give him a small smile. "I don't know if I'm up for a repeat anytime soon, but it was bound to happen, right? Because you've forgiven him, haven't you?"

"Pretty much," he admits. "Though I haven't told him that yet. I think I will tonight. After dinner? Will you be alright on your own tonight?"

"Of course I will, Kai. I'm happy for you. You know that, right?"

He nods slowly, brushing his lips over mine. "I love you, angel."

"I love you, too."

A grin breaks out on Kai's face. "Say it again."

Laughing, I shake my head. "Fine, but only once. I love you, Kai."

Kai kisses me then, though we're both smiling too much for it to be a good kiss.

"Come on, let's get ready for dinner before Caiden comes looking for us again," I tell him, pushing for him to get out of bed. I follow him into the bathroom, and we shower quickly—

barely any funny business to be had. But that's mainly because when we started getting distracted, Caiden had pounded on the door and reminded us he was still there.

Thirty minutes later, we step into the sitting room to find Caiden on the couch reading one of my smutty books. His eyes lift to us before dropping back down to the book in his hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" I run over and try to grab it from him, but he holds it out of my reach.

"Stop it. This is really good, and I'm in the middle of a *very* spicy scene. We can go when I finish."

Kai grabs the book from Caiden and hands it to me. "Knock it off. We need to go before we're late."

"Fine, but I want to borrow that," Caiden tells me, and I can't tell if he's serious or not. So I say nothing as I toss it onto the coffee table.

Caiden's the first one to the door, but Kai and I are right behind him. He stops suddenly, bending to grab something off the floor. "What the hell is this?"

"What?" I try to peer around him to see what he's picked up.

"You were warned?" Caiden turns around, holding it up for us to see.

It looks like the other letters that were left for me, but that's all it says. It doesn't make any sense.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Kai asks, taking it from Caiden.

“I don’t know, but I’m damn well going to find out.”

Caiden spins on his heel, grabs the door, and throws it open.

I shake my head as Kai and I follow him. “What are you going to—”

Only, I don’t get to finish my sentence. The world goes brilliantly white as a loud screeching noise rings in my ears.

Then I’m flying through the air.

My back slams into the far wall, my entire body screaming at me before my head bounces off the wall.

As the world goes black and silent around me, my last conscious thought is of Kai and Caiden.

Chapter Fifteen

Hunter

I t's been almost a week since a magical explosion rocked both the palace and my life. Marcos, the suitors, and I stood waiting in the dining room for dinner when a loud boom sounded, followed by a shockwave that knocked all of us off our feet.

I was on my feet within seconds and rushing from the room, Marcos hot on my heels. I hesitated for a moment, unsure where the explosion had originated, but realizing I didn't care. We'd taken off for the stairs, clamoring up them as quickly as possible and ignoring the palace guards that called out to us.

The scene before me when I'd turned the corner for the hallway that led to Hadley's rooms is one I will have to live with for the rest of my life.

Walls and ceiling crumbling. Debris scattered amongst the rubble. The bloody, lifeless hand.

Everything after that is a blur. I can't even begin to recall what happened. My next clear memory is of Hadley, Kai, and

Caiden being rushed off to the healers while Marcos and I watched helplessly, with no idea if they would live or not.

“Hunt?”

Shaking my head to clear away the memories of that night, I turn my head to find Marcos leaning in the doorway. “I thought I heard you out here. Are you coming in, or are you planning to stay out here all night?”

“Right. Yeah, I was planning on coming in.” I move towards the door, glancing around Marcos as he steps back. “How are they?”

“Why don’t you come in and find out?”

My eyes flash around the room, taking in each occupant. Caiden is still too pale, eyes closed as he lies on the bed. Kai sits in a chair beside him, clinging to Caiden with one hand while his head lies on the other man’s chest. His eyes meet mine, and I can see the pain there, telling me that our friend still hasn’t woken.

“Hunter,” Hadley sighs, relief clear in her voice as she stands. She rushes over to me and throws her arms around me.

I allow my arms to close around her, resting my chin on her head for a moment.

A lot has changed in the last week, and sometimes I feel like I’m still catching up.

By the time Marcos and I had arrived in the healer’s wing that night, Kai had been awake and wailing for his two loves. My heart had dropped into my stomach, so sure that they were

gone. But no, the healers were only trying to heal him without updating him on Hadley and Caiden's status.

Our healers aren't Fae; they actually come from Cruthanna—the mage realm. We don't have access to magic beyond our elements unless they're spells or potions that the people of Cruthanna have taught us. The mages in their realm don't have access to elemental magic, so we regularly do an exchange program that allows us to help the other realm with the differing magics.

Marcos had moved to calm Kai while I went to check on Caiden and Hadley, afraid of what I would find. But they were both with their own healers as they worked to save their lives. It had been a terrible night as we'd tried our best to reassure Kai while he watched his loves lay lifeless in their beds.

Luckily, Hadley had woken the next day. But Caiden had taken the brunt of the explosion and sustained the worst injuries. The healers healed everything they could, but magic isn't able to fully heal head wounds. So, while we're all hopeful that Caiden will wake up, we can't be sure of anything.

Both Kai and Hadley have refused to leave Caiden's side, afraid that something would happen and they wouldn't be here. Which means it's been up to me and Marcos to meet with Grace and the investigators as they've tried to piece together what happened.

Once Kai and Hadley told us about the letter that had appeared from beneath the door, we'd had to catch Grace up

on the letters being left for Hadley. Obviously, they escalated as they had threatened to and I've been beating myself up for not being able to protect them—protect Hadley—as I swore I would.

“What did Gabe and Kam have to say?” she asks as she pulls away from me, moving back to her seat beside Caiden.

“They still swear they knew nothing about the explosion.” I shrug. “And I think they're telling the truth. I have no doubt that they're planning something, but I don't think they had anything to do with the explosion.”

“Which leaves us back at square one. We have no idea who did it.” Marcos slams his fist into the wall, wincing as he shakes out his hand.

I hate the defeat in his voice. “I wouldn't say we're at square one. We know the bomb originated in Cruthanna, so either someone went there to purchase it or brought it here. If they registered their trip, then we should be able to narrow down the search.”

“Yeah? Would you register your trip if you were buying something illegal and planning to assassinate the future queen?”

I'm actually quite proud of myself for not losing my shit with Marcos right then. He's not wrong, but we don't need to freak out Hadley any more than necessary. Something I plan to address with him later.

Hadley hums under her breath as she runs a hand through Caiden's hair. "Unless you want to escape suspicion and have another legitimate reason for traveling to another realm. That's what I would do."

"That would be the smart play. And the chances of anyone from Sorlphi being able to sneak past the guards to travel to another realm are slim to none." I rub the palm of my hand against my forehead, trying to rid myself of the headache I feel building. "The main issue when looking at the realm travelers is how far back do we look? We're starting with those that have traveled since a month before the murder of the Seelie and Unseelie royals."

"Wait. You think the assassination attempt and the actual assassinations are related? Fuck, that makes sense. And we're sure Gabe and Kam had nothing to do with that?"

I shrug. "As sure as we can be. We can't rule it out, and they've definitely traveled between realms in that time. But they still deny that they had anything to do with either incident."

"I love that more than one group of people is trying to get rid of me." Hadley laughs, but the sound holds no humor. "We need to figure out who did this. They need to pay for this. Especially if Caiden doesn't make it."

Marcos is at Hadley's side in seconds, dropping to his knees and taking her face in his hands. "Nope. We've talked about this. Caiden will wake up. He's not going to leave you and

Kai. You know he's in there fighting like hell to get back to you."

Tears well up in her eyes, and though she tries to fight them, they fall down her cheeks. "He has to wake up. I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't."

Marcos pulls her into his arms as sobs begin to rack her body. My eyes move to Kai, watching as tears slide down his cheeks. He doesn't make a sound, but the pain and fear are obvious in his eyes. The two of them falling apart is something we've had to deal with a lot.

They've both fallen apart in our arms, sobbing out their fears of never being able to tell him that they forgive him. I hate that this tragedy is what has brought us all closer to Hadley. While she hasn't admitted that she's forgiven us, I think this has changed a lot for her. We won't push her on it—not while our friend lays in bed fighting for his life.

There's a quiet knock on the door, and not wanting anyone to see Hadley falling apart, I hurry to it. Opening it a crack, I sigh when I see Grace and Adaline there. A quick scan of the hall shows they're alone, so I step back to allow them inside.

Grace's face falls the moment her eyes land on Hadley. "Did something happen?" she asks quietly.

A sharp shake of my head is my answer. She lets out a sigh of relief before moving to lay her hand on Hadley's back.

A small hand on my arm draws my attention back to Adaline. Her eyes are wide as she stares up at me. "How are

you doing, Hunter?”

“I’m fine.”

Adaline huffs. “You always take on so much for all of them. It’s okay if you’re not fine. And I’m always here to talk if you need to.”

I pat her hand and nod, turning my attention back to my friends—my family. Adaline’s hand falls away before she steps over to Kai, running a hand through his hair and leaning down to murmur something in his ear.

I remember when Grace introduced us to baby Adaline. We always knew she was human but were never given an explanation as to why she had a human baby. And we all knew better than to question Grace. Because of their close ages, Adaline and Kai had played together as children, and once they’d gotten older we’d befriended her, in a manner.

She would never have the same relationship that the four of us had, but she was a little sister to us. We always watched out for her, especially since she’s human. I know life hasn’t been easy for her here, being one of only a handful of humans. While Sorlphi does have some people who travel here from other realms who decide to stay, humans don’t usually stay for too long. There’s something about the magic swirling in the air and their inability to access it that causes something in them to break.

Somehow, Adaline has lived here for twenty-one years and managed to avoid it. I’ve often wondered if it’s because she grew up here. Maybe that’s the only way that humans can

remain sane. Which really isn't something I should be worrying about right now.

I don't think I've gotten more than an hour or two of sleep each night, and it's beginning to take its toll. The fact that my mind keeps wandering to inconsequential things is the first clue that I'm in need of a good night's sleep. The headache I can't seem to shake is another. I just haven't been able to bring myself to leave this room any more than necessary. It's bad enough that I've had to leave to investigate the bomb.

The worst part is I know I'll have to travel to Cruthanna in the next few days. Grace hadn't asked me to look into it, but I know she's worried about it and who might be coming for Hadley—we all are. I have no choice but to look into it, because I don't trust anyone outside of this room.

“Hunter?”

Blinking, I find Marcos standing in front of me. When did he move? Looking over his shoulder, I find that Hadley and Kai have climbed into the bed beside Caiden. Kai has his arm wrapped around Hadley so she's flush against him, and they're as close to Caiden as they can without actually hurting him.

Trying to convince the healers to put Caiden into a big enough bed, so that the two of them could sleep beside him, had been a pain in the ass. But I refused to allow the two of them to go without sleep, and I knew they wouldn't leave Caiden's side.

Grace has Adaline gathered against her as they hustle to the door, and I wonder how much time I lost this time. My body is

starting to shut down where I'm standing.

“Man, you've got to get some sleep. You can't keep this up. It's not good for you.”

Shaking my head, I sigh. “I don't want to leave them any more than I have to.”

“Well, you *have* to get some sleep. If you don't go willingly, I will find a sleep potion, force it down your throat, and leave you to sleep on the floor where you fall.” Marcos's face softens. “Get some sleep tonight, and tomorrow when you come back, I'll go grab some sleep for a while, yeah?”

I want to argue with him and send him to get some sleep, as I have a lot over the last few days, but he's right. I can't keep up like this. If I don't do this willingly, my body will force me to do it. Or Marcos will.

“Fine. But as soon as I wake up, you're off to bed. I'm only going to the room next door. If anything happens, you'll wake me up.” It's not a question, but he nods his agreement, regardless.

With a backward glance at the bed, I make my way to the door and head next door. Marcos has been the one to use this room the most, but that's only because I've bullied him into it. I probably should have been using it more than I have been, but I'm a bit stubborn.

Kicking my shoes off, I climb into the bed and feel sleep pulling me under before my head even hits the pillow.



“Hunt!” Someone shakes my arm, and I swat at them, not ready to wake up.

“Leave me alone. Sleeping.”

“Goddess damn it,” someone curses, but at least they stop shaking me. I roll over, pulling the blankets more snugly around myself, and start to drift off once more.

Cold water rushes over my head, shocking me to wakefulness as I jerk up in bed. A growl spills from my lips, eyes narrowing as I take in the empty glass Marcos is holding.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Marcos is unbothered by my grumpiness, a wide grin on his face. “You’re the asshole who wouldn’t wake up. Caiden is awake.”

“Seriously?” Jumping from the bed, I follow Marcos into Caiden’s temporary room.

Tears fill my eyes when they land on the bed. Caiden is sitting up, arms full of Kai and Hadley, as they sob into his chest. His eyes are wide when they meet mine, but he shoots me a smile.

“There’s my other brother. It’s good to see you, man.”

Not stopping to think about it, I hurry across the room and throw my arms around all three of them. I feel Caiden’s laughter before I hear it.

Pulling away, I find Hadley staring up at me in shock. I swipe at my face, trying to wipe away the evidence of my tears. “Glad you’re alive, asshole.”

Caiden’s laughter is loud and booming at my words, and it’s the best fucking sound I’ve heard in my life. “I’m glad to know you all would’ve missed me if I died.”

“Too soon,” Hadley yells, slapping her hand on his chest. “Don’t joke about that.”

“Seriously, man,” Marcos says as he shakes his head. “It’s way too soon for those kinds of jokes.”

“Sorry,” Caiden says with a shrug. “So, what the hell happened?”

Kai grabs his face in his hands, leaning in to kiss him. “Before we get into that, I need you to know I love you, and I don’t want to spend another day without you by my side.”

I didn’t know Caiden’s smile could get any bigger, but somehow it does before he ducks his head down to kiss Kai again. “I love you, too,” he murmurs against Kai’s ear before pulling away, eyes flashing to Hadley, who has backed out of his arms.

“I just didn’t want to intrude,” she says quietly, head ducking.

Kai grabs her hand, pulling on her until she settles back on Caiden’s other side. “You’re never intruding.”

She nods at Kai before looking up at Caiden. She bites her lip, glancing at me and Marcos before returning her eyes to

Caiden. “The five of us need to have a conversation soon, but not right now. Right now, I just want to be here with you. Caiden’s awake, and I don’t want to think about anything else right now.”

“Of course, angel.” Kai squeezes her hand before he settles into Caiden’s side. Hadley follows suit, laying her head on Caiden’s chest.

“Well, then, do one of you want to tell me what the hell happened?” Caiden’s eyes move from me to Marcos and back again.

Marcos and I settle onto the foot of the bed before I ask. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I remember being in Hadley’s rooms and watching a *very* entertaining show.” Caiden grins, glancing down between Hadley and Kai, who both blush, ducking their heads and making me wonder what exactly he’s talking about. “Then we were getting ready to go to dinner.”

Caiden frowns, hesitating. “I found a letter. I’m assuming it had been shoved under the door, but I can’t remember what it said. And then nothing until now.”

“The letter said, ‘You’ve been warned.’ We weren’t there,” I nod to Marcos as I speak, “but apparently, you opened the door, and as you stepped into the hallway, there was an explosion. Or, at least, that’s what we’ve been able to piece together based on what Kai and Hadley have been able to remember.”

“An explosion?”

Marcos nods at Caiden’s words. “Someone set up a magical bomb from Cruthanna to go off when Hadley’s door opened. The assumption is that it was an assassination attempt, but they didn’t know she had someone with her.”

“Fuck.” Caiden runs his hands up and down Kai’s and Hadley’s arms. “Are the two of you alright?”

They both nod and assure him they’re fine before he meets my eyes again. They’re flashing with anger and a need to avenge Hadley. I just wish I had something to give. I wish we could find whoever did this and punish them.

“We don’t know who it was yet, but we don’t believe it was mine or Kai’s fathers. The palace guards interrogated them, and then I took a pass at them. They seemed genuinely surprised, though I don’t doubt that they’ll try to use it to their advantage.”

“So what now?” Caiden asks.

“Now? We should probably get a healer to look over you and make sure that everything is okay. Then we should all get some sleep.” I hold my hand up when they all begin to argue. “Now that we’re all awake and at least mostly okay, we need to come up with a plan on what to do next. We need to figure out a way to find out who did this and how to keep Hadley safe—how to keep all of us safe.”

Chapter Sixteen

Hadley

I wake to a soft knock on the door. I blink at the bright light shining through the window, and a glance at the clock tells me it's after one in the afternoon. I try to sit up, but Caiden's arm tightens around me.

Turning my head, I find that both he and Kai are still sleeping. The knock comes again, and I don't want it to wake them, so I extract myself from Caiden's arm and hurry over to the door.

Swinging it open, I find Grace with her hand raised to knock again. It falls to her side when she sees me, offering me a quick smile. "I'm sorry Hadley, I let you sleep as long as I could, but your coronation is in less than a week and there's still so much to be done. I didn't want to bother you while we were waiting for Caiden to wake up, but we really can't put it off any longer."

Sighing, I know she's right, even if I don't actually want her to be. I don't really want to leave them, but I'm not sure I want to wake them up either. Before I can decide, it's taken out of

my hands when I hear movement behind me moments before Kai wraps his arms around me.

“Good morning, angel. Grace.” He kisses the top of my head before resting his chin there. “What’s up?”

“Good morning, Kai. I need to steal Hadley away. We need to nail down some details about her coronation next week.” Grace’s smile has turned apologetic.

I lean my head back so I can look up at him. “Why don’t you go back to bed and keep Caiden company while I go with Grace?”

“I don’t think so,” Caiden calls out, and I can hear him climbing out of bed to join us. “Grace, do you mind if we join as well?”

“Ummm...” Grace’s eyes drop to mine, eyebrows rising.

“I don’t know what we need to do, Grace, but if they won’t be in the way, I don’t care if they join us.” I shrug. “Honestly, we’d probably all worry less if the five of us were in the same place.”

Grace nods, understanding in her eyes. “That’s completely understandable. We do need to have you fitted for your dress, but besides that, it’ll be fine if they’re with you.”

“We all need showers, and I need some new clothes....” I trail off, realizing I don’t know if I even have any clothes after the explosion. I certainly no longer have a bedroom.

“Ahhh, yes. I was wondering when you would begin to question that.” Grace laughs. “Not much was salvageable from

your room, but I've already taken care of getting a new wardrobe ordered for you and in your new suite. We've gone ahead and moved you into the Fae Queen's suite since we're so close to the coronation. I can show you where it is and give you a quick tour as well."

I bite my lip because it sounds like she wants me to go on my own, and I really don't want to leave the guys. Sure, Hunter and Marcos are in the room next door, but I know they're close by.

Caiden and Kai must notice my hesitancy because they pull me back into the room until I'm pressed between them. Kai is still at my back as Caiden presses to my front. He reaches up to cup my face in his hands.

"Hey, if you don't want to go alone, you don't have to. We can go wake up Marcos and Hunter, then head to our rooms. We'll grab our stuff and then have Grace bring all five of us up to your suite. I'm assuming that there's more than one bathroom?" I assume he's asking Grace, but his eyes never leave mine.

"There are," she says after a momentary hesitation.

Caiden grins. "See? Then we're all in the same place, and no one has to worry. Is that what you want, baby girl?"

My heart feels like it's going to burst as I fight against tears. Caiden's face drops. "What's wrong? Shit, I did it again. I'm sorry, Hadley. I promise I didn't mean to."

“No,” I laugh through the tears. “I’m not... I was afraid I’d never get to hear you call me baby girl again. I’m just really glad you’re alright.”

Caiden yanks both me and Kai into his arms, hugging us close. “Me too, baby girl, me too.”

Grace clears her throat, reminding us she’s there. The three of us separate slowly before I turn back to Grace.

“I’m sorry, Grace. I’m a little emotional right now, apparently.” I laugh, rolling my eyes. “I’d really like to grab the others and stay together.”

Grace nods. “I understand. We’ll do whatever you want, Hadley—whatever makes you the most comfortable. Why don’t I meet you up in the boys’ wing in fifteen minutes or so? That should hopefully give you enough time to wake the other two and for everyone to gather their things.”

“Thank you, Grace.”

With a quick smile and a nod, she disappears down the hallway. “I need to use the bathroom. Will you two go wake up Hunter and Marcos?”

They look like they want to argue, but I just raise my eyebrow. “It’s literally next door.”

Kai leans down, kissing me softly. “Of course, angel.”

“I’m going to do it because I know you’re an independent woman who needs to be able to do things on her own,” Caiden tells me as he pulls me into his arms, hugging me tightly. “But I don’t like it.”

“Noted.” I laugh, pulling away reluctantly. As soon as they leave, I head to the bathroom and relieve my very full bladder. Washing my hands, I barely recognize the woman in the mirror. I’ve been through so much since arriving in Sorlphi less than three months ago.

Up until the explosion, I would’ve said that the masquerade was the worst thing that could’ve happened to me. Okay, not the masquerade itself, but the guys’ betrayal. But now? That night feels so far away. Their betrayal feels so far removed.

I can admit to myself that I’d already begun to forgive them before the bombing. When I woke up the day after the explosion, dread filled me. I was so sure that Caiden or Kai hadn’t made it. As soon as I’d locked eyes with Kai, my heart broke because I hadn’t had a chance to forgive Caiden. He’d never know how I felt about him—that I loved him, and a part of me had always known I’d forgive him.

Seeing him lying in the bed, so pale but alive, had given me hope. But as hours turned to days, and days into a week, that hope was slipping away. When he opened his eyes, I lost it. All I wanted to do was kiss him, but I didn’t. I haven’t. Because I know a conversation needs to happen between the five of us before anything happens.

Because I’ve decided that life is too short, and while I hate it, I get where the four of them were coming from. Of course, they wanted to do what their parents asked of them. They hadn’t known me then. They didn’t know anything about me. Should they have told me later? Absolutely. But why should I

make all of us miserable—myself most of all—for something they obviously regret?

As long as they understand nothing like this can ever happen again—that they have to be honest with me—then I plan to take them as my consorts. I feel kind of like an asshole for making the suitors believe they had a chance, but at the time, I thought I'd never be able to forgive the guys. I just hope the suitors understand.

It feels selfish to choose myself and my feelings, but really? If I'm meant to spend the rest of my very long life with four people, why shouldn't it be with men that I love? Or could love? Because I certainly don't know Hunter well enough to love him.

Like him? Sure.

Want to fuck him? Hell, yes.

But we're not there yet. But the other three? I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but I love them. Kai already knows, but Marcos and Caiden don't. Even though I'd almost blurted it out after Caiden woke up.

“Angel?” Kai's voice causes me to jump as he knocks on the door. “Are you okay?”

Turning the water off, I laugh at myself. Who gets lost in thought while washing their hands? Goddess only knows how long I've been in here for Kai to come hunt me down.

“Yeah, sorry,” I call out to him as I dry my hands off. Pulling the door open, I find all four of them standing there,

anxious expressions on their faces. “Sorry, I let my thoughts get away from me and stood there washing my hands for however long I was in there.”

“It’s fine, Hadley,” Hunter grunts. “We’re all just a little on edge. But let’s go grab our stuff and meet Grace so she can show us to your new suite.”

Nodding, I allow Caiden to pull me between him and Kai before we follow Hunter and Marcos out. By the time we make it to their wing, Grace is already waiting for us.

“Sorry, Grace.” I step away from the guys and walk over to her before turning back to them. “I’ll wait here with Grace.”

I watch as all four of them open their mouths to argue, but Grace beats them to it. “Get your things. Hadley will be safe here. Eight guards are manning this hallway. They will be with Hadley wherever she is from now on.”

I frown because I hadn’t noticed them as we walked up, only seeing them when Grace pointed them out. Grace laughs when she sees my face.

“Our head of security spent a couple of years in Cruthanna. He learned some very helpful spells, like an invisibility spell that allows you to reveal yourself only to those you wish.”

“That is so cool,” I tell her with a laugh. Realizing the guys are still standing there, I roll my eyes. “What are you still doing out here? Go. Get a few days’ worth of clothes and your bathroom stuff.”

“A few days’ worth?” Marcos asks, wagging his eyebrows.

Hunter cuffs him on the back of the head before grabbing him by the neck towards his room. I have to bite my lip to keep myself from laughing as all four of them disappear into their rooms.

When I catch Grace's eye, I see the laughter there and it sends me over the edge. The laughter bursts from me and once I start, I can't stop. I laugh so hard tears fall down my cheeks, and I have to lean against the wall to keep myself upright. Grace giggles beside me, but we manage to get ourselves under control by the time the four men reappear.

It feels nice to let it all go for a few moments. There's so much going on, and so much uncertainty in my life right now that I haven't even had just a moment to relax. And sadly, it doesn't seem like that will change any time soon.

Grace leads us up the stairs to the third floor, and I realize I've never been up here. It turns out that it is split into three wings—one for the Seelie royalty, one for the Unseelie royalty, and the last for the Fae Queen. I'm shocked by how much room there is in my wing. There are ten rooms besides the Fae Queen's suite that I'm to decorate and utilize in any way I wish.

When Grace shows me the consort bedrooms that are a part of the Fae Queen's suite, I don't know why I'm surprised. It makes sense that the four consorts would share a space with me. And when she shows me to my room, I'm blown away. It holds the largest bed I've ever seen, spanning most of the wall on one side of the large room.

While I'm looking around the room and checking out the exquisite but over-the-top en suite bathroom, Grace and the guys disappear. When I step back into the bedroom, I find Grace standing next to the bed with a garment bag over her arm.

“Where are the guys?”

“I sent them to the consort rooms to shower and get ready. Those are their rooms, after all. Aren't they?” I freeze mid-step, gaping after Grace as she smirks. “You did decide that already, didn't you?”

“Yes, but how did you know that? I only made the decision this morning.”

Grace takes my hand and squeezes, a soft smile gracing her lips. “It was obvious how you felt about them at the masquerade, and I was sure you would tell me you had chosen them. When you came to me about their betrayal and wanting to arrange to meet suitors from the courts, I wondered if you might choose someone else. But even as you chose the men and women to be your final ten? It was obvious that you were still drawn to those four men—even though they'd hurt you. You weren't excited about any of the suitors.

“When you came to me about Kai, I knew it wouldn't be much longer until you realized that it couldn't be anyone besides those four. And then seeing you sit beside Caiden's bed every day for a week?” Grace chuckles, leaning forward to run her hand down my cheek. “My sweet girl, you're so obviously in love with them. I knew that if you hadn't already

come to the realization that you soon would. The five of you are meant to be. This was all foretold in the prophecy.”

“The prophecy...” I trail off, realizing she’s right. It’s right there at the end.

“Betrayed, she thinks she is; they would never.

Trust is proven; the five are the future.

The crown and the throne they will take as theirs.

Once more, prosperity will rule the land.

Love and unity, the Fae will be one.”

I laugh because I’d honestly forgotten about the damned prophecy. Mainly because I’ve never believed much in fate. I’ve always believed that we make our own destinies. And I guess we do to an extent, but that doesn’t mean fate doesn’t play a part in it.

“They’re mine,” I tell her simply.

“I know they are, and they were always meant to be. The five of you will bring our people back to the old ways, and we will be as we were always meant to be.”

I’m not going to lie. Grace’s words feel like a weight on my shoulders. There are so many expectations of me and what will come from my rule. But I also know that with those four men beside me, there’s nothing I can’t do, and I’m so damn glad that I managed to get over my hurt to see that.

“Let us not worry about that just now. Before you shower, I had a few designers come up with designs for a coronation

dress. I picked the ones I thought would work best based on your personal preferences. They've all been delivered." She holds up the garment bag. "This is the last one. Before you shower, I'd like you to try them on and see if you can decide which one you like best. If they need alterations, I'll mark them down and have it taken care of."

"I definitely prefer this to the last time you had me choose a dress." I laugh as I follow her into the massive walk-in closet that's even larger than the last one. There are only enough clothes, shoes, and accessories to fill about a quarter of the room, and I wonder how I'll ever fill it.

Grace hangs the garment bag alongside another half dozen before unzipping all of them and removing the dresses. They're all gorgeous, and I can tell that Grace really did try to balance my preferred style with what would be deemed appropriate for the coronation.

"Designers have already begun sending over clothes for you. I've been going through them and choosing pieces that I believe will work in your wardrobe. I've made appointments with the seven designers of these dresses after your coronation. You'll work with them to design your new wardrobe, but what they've sent over already should suffice until then."

I just nod along to Grace's words as I undress, overwhelmed at the idea of designing my own wardrobe. We make quick work of trying on the dresses. They're all gorgeous, but Grace

and I both knew which one was the winner as soon as I put it on.

Then I'm hurrying off to shower, knowing that there is so much to get done today. We spend the rest of the day going over the details of the coronation and what is expected of me. The four guys are never far from me, and I know this has to be boring the hell out of them, but they never complain once. We end up having a late lunch in Grace's office as there's still so much to go over.

It's past dinner time when we finish, and I'm honestly glad, as I don't feel like I can face the suitors yet. I need to have a conversation with my men before I can face them. I will have to discuss with Grace how we should proceed with letting the suitors know of my decision, but that will also wait until tomorrow.

"Grace, would you please send our apologies to the suitors? I didn't mean to miss dinner with them again. But if we're done, the guys and I have a lot to talk about, and it can't be put off any longer. And would we be able to have dinner brought up to my suite?"

"Of course. I will have Adaline bring your dinner up and let the suitors know you will not be joining them again tonight. I'm sure they will understand." Grace bows her head in agreement.

Turning to face the guys, I lift an eyebrow. "Shall we?"

No one speaks as they stand, and we make our way back to the third-floor suite. I'm thankful for the silence because I'm

so nervous I'm not sure I could even follow a conversation.

My stomach rolls, nausea rising as I wipe my damp palms on my pants. I'm fidgeting and don't know how to make myself stop. Why am I so freaking nervous? This conversation should be easy. After all, I'm giving them exactly what they want. But it's not just that, is it? I'll have to admit how I feel, and talking about my feelings is not something I excel at.

A hand wraps around mine, startling me. Looking up, I find Kai smiling down at me. I'm returning his smile before I even have time to think about it. He lifts our intertwined hands to his lips, placing a kiss on the back of my hand.

“Take a deep breath, angel. There's no reason to worry; it's just us. And I'll be there the whole time.”

And somehow, that's all I needed to hear. The tension in my body slowly leeches away as I move closer to Kai. He always calms me, something I'm ever so grateful for. I don't know what I'd do without him.

Chapter Seventeen

Hadley

By the time we make it to the suite, Adaline is already there, offloading the platters of food onto the table. Her head pops up when the door opens, offering me a smile that dims when she sees the four men behind me.

Frowning, I wonder what that's about. I know she's been worried they'll hurt me again, which is why she's been against me getting back with them. But she can't seriously be upset to see me with them, can she? She's my friend—the first real friend I've ever had—so she has to be happy if I'm happy, right? Isn't that the way friendship is supposed to work?

“My mom didn't tell me that the heirs would be dining with you,” Adaline says as her smile evens out again. “Caiden, it's good to see you up and about. I'm really glad you're okay.”

Caiden nods. “Thank you Adaline. Hadley tells me that you and your mom both visited me while I was unconscious, so thank you for that.”

“Of course. I was worried about you.”

There's an awkward silence as she stands beside the table while the five of us shuffle from foot to foot as we wait for her to leave. A fact that she doesn't seem to be picking up on.

"Thank you so much for bringing up our dinner, Adaline. The five of us have a lot to talk about and didn't want to do it on an empty stomach," I tell her with a soft smile, hoping she'll take the hint.

"Oh." The smile falls from her face and something flashes in her eyes as she turns back to the cart she'd used to bring up the food. When she looks up again, it's gone, making me think I must've been seeing things. "Of course. Enjoy your dinner."

The five of us shuffle over to the table. When I go to sit in my seat, I find Adaline standing in the doorway, staring back at us. I frown, wondering what is going on. Why is she acting so weirdly? I need to make sure to take the time tomorrow to talk to her and make sure everything is alright with her.

Her eyes flash to mine, her face blank before she smiles and ducks out.

That was weird as fuck.

Looking up, I realize the guys are all standing next to their chairs. Rolling my eyes, I gesture for them to sit. "When we're in here, you don't need to follow all the royal bullshit. That gets old really quickly, and I don't want it here amongst the five of us."

They don't respond with anything but a nod as they all drop into their seats. We fill our plates, but I'm too nervous to eat. I

need to get this done and over with so I can enjoy my dinner.

“I’m sure you’re all hungry, but I need to do this before I eat.” My eyes lock on my plate as I take a deep breath. “You already know that the four of you hurt me when I found out about you all helping your families in their quests for more power. We don’t need to talk about that again. You know you fucked up.”

Lifting my eyes, I find all four of them staring at me. I’m not sure I can do this with them looking at me like that, but I need to. It’s only fair that they get to see my eyes while I speak to them.

“After what happened with Caiden, I realized I was holding on to my anger for the wrong reasons. You hurt my pride, and that was the hardest thing for me to get over. But Caiden could’ve died, and I’m not okay with that.”

Caiden leans over, placing his hand on mine and squeezing. “It’s okay, baby girl. I’m fine. You don’t have to worry about that. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That you know of.” I sigh. “Someone is trying to kill me. They made that very clear with the magical bomb. If you continue to be around me, it’s possible that you could be collateral damage. I don’t want that.”

I wince, not liking the way my words are coming out. The tension in the four of them ratchets up as they wait for me to continue.

“What are you trying to say?” Kai asks, worry in his voice.

“Almost losing Caiden made me realize I don’t want to live my life without the four of you in it. I don’t want to lose you—not to my pride. I’ve already spoken to Grace and informed her that I plan to announce the four of you as my consorts at my coronation. Assuming that’s still what you want.”

Silence greets my words as I glance between the four of them. The longer they stare back at me without saying anything, the more worried I become. Had they changed their minds?

“You already know my answer, angel.” Kai squeezes my hand, bringing a smile to my face.

“It would be an honor, Hadley,” Caiden says, waiting until I turn to him before continuing, “I hate that it took me almost dying for you to forgive me, but I’ll take it. I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for my mistakes.”

Marcos hums. “I hoped you’d forgive us, but I didn’t think you actually would. What we did? It wasn’t right or fair to you. We should’ve told you once we got to know you, and I promise I won’t keep anything like that from you again.”

I turn my attention to Hunter, who is just blinking back at me with a blank face. I have no idea what he’s thinking, and it’s driving me crazy. He’s the one I know the least, and we haven’t had the chance to get to know one another as well. Sure, he’d opened up to me about his fiancée who’d died, and about the threats his dad made against his younger siblings, but I don’t know what makes him tick.

“Hunter?” I hate how my voice shakes on his name, but I’m terrified he’ll say he’s changed his mind—that I’m not worth the danger.

“I... I don’t know what to say.” His voice is gruff, and his eyes never leave mine. “You really want me to be your Winter Court consort? Truly?”

Trepidation flashes in his eyes, and I realize I’m not the only one doubting our almost non-existent relationship. Letting go of Kai and Caiden’s hands, I move around the table until I stand beside Hunter.

My hand shakes when I lift it to cup his face. “We haven’t had an easy time of it, have we? And we’re both so terrified of making it worse that we’ve allowed ourselves to not get to know one another. I want to change that. I’ve been drawn to you since the very first moment, and then you opened your mouth and my back went up. I’ve been fighting it since then, and I don’t want to keep fighting it. Will you give us this chance?”

His eyes soften, melting into a look I’ve never seen on this man’s face—awed and astonished. “Yes.”

His hand moves up to caress my cheek before diving into my hair. He pulls me to him, lips ravenously against mine as he kisses me. I allow myself to become lost in his kiss, in his touch. I’ve wanted to for longer than I’ve admitted to myself, and like our first kiss, it sets my body alight.

“As hot as this is, and as much as I’d love to continue watching, you need to eat, Hadley.” Caiden’s voice breaks us

apart.

My face flushes when I realize I'd climbed into Hunter's lap at some point and had been grinding against his hard cock. I stumble off his lap and would've fallen if he didn't catch me.

"Careful, princess." His husky voice sends shivers down my spine, making me want to climb him like a tree.

Fucking hell.

I pull myself from his arms before going back to my seat. I avoid their eyes as I lift my fork and shove food in my mouth. I hate that I'm embarrassed by what I'd just done, but it's not kissing Hunter that has me embarrassed. It's the fact that I'd gotten so lost in the kiss that I'd forgotten they were in the room.

Juggling four men isn't a problem I thought I'd ever have, but here we are. I don't want any of them to feel like I favor one of them over the others, and that's what I feel like I've done losing myself in Hunter just now.

"Hadley." I look up at Marcos's demanding tone, eyes wide.

"Hmmm?" I mumble around my food, which I'm sure is super sexy.

"Why are you embarrassed? We've all seen you kiss Hunter before. We were there for your first kiss, in case you forgot."

I swallow my food before letting out a snort. "Like I could ever forget that night."

I feel like shit when the four of them wince. Why is this so hard? Why can't I just say what I feel without it coming out wrong?

"That's not what I meant." I shake my head. "Look. While I'm still working on my trust issues because of what happened that night, I've told you I forgive you. You can't react like that every time it gets brought up. It makes me feel bad, even if I know I didn't do anything wrong. If it gets brought up, it's not to hurt you."

"I think we're all just a little sensitive," Kai says tentatively. "But we'll try. Won't we?"

Kai looks around the table and they all nod before Marcos turns his attention back to me. "You didn't answer my question. Changing the subject won't get you out of answering it. We've vowed to be honest with you, and you need to do the same with us."

I hate that his words make sense. I don't want to talk about what I'm feeling, but what's fair is fair.

"I forgot the three of you were still in the room," I blurt.

"So?" Caiden shrugs. Looking around, none of them understands what I'm trying to explain.

"There's four of you and only one of me. I don't want you to think I favor one of you. Forgetting that you were in the room feels too much like favoring one of you. I don't like it."

Marcos chuckles. "Kitten... we know you don't favor Hunter over us."

“If you favor anyone, it’s Kai,” Caiden says with a grin, telling me he’s joking.

“You don’t need to worry about us,” Kai says quietly. “If we get jealous, or worried that you’re favoring one of us, we’ll tell you. But we want you to lose yourself in us—whether that’s all of us at once or one-on-one. Please never doubt that.”

I consider his words carefully. They like when I get lost in how they’re making me feel, even when it’s not them but one of the others? I guess that makes sense. Maybe this can work.

“Okay. If you say it doesn’t bother you, then I believe you. I’m sure I’ll doubt it sometimes, but I will try to remember this.”

We go back to eating, and the conversation picks up easily, talking about mundane things. It’s nice and a glimpse into what our future might look like. I like it. After we’re finished, we migrate to the couch that sits before the massive fireplace that dominates half of one of the walls.

I’ve never seen a couch like this before as it’s all one piece and u-shaped, but I love it because it allows all of us to sit together. Not wanting to choose who I sit next to, I sit in one of the corners of the couch and watch as Kai, Caiden, and Marcos scramble to sit next to me. Caiden ends up beating Kai to my right side by a millisecond before pulling him to sit on his other side, while Marcos crashes down on my left side.

Hunter stands at the end of the couch, shaking his head. “Seriously?”

Marcos and Caiden smirk at their friend as Caiden's arms go around me and Kai. Hunter just lifts his eyebrows at their cockiness and walks over to stand in front of me. He picks me up, spinning around and taking my seat as his own with me in his lap.

I crane my neck around to look at him and find him smirking. Asshole. Rolling my eyes, I lay back against him, deciding to just enjoy the moment. The fireplace isn't lit, and there isn't a television in the sitting room, so I quickly find myself fidgeting in Hunter's lap.

"You're going to want to stop that, princess," Hunter whispers in my ear.

"Oh?" I laugh, purposefully wiggling on his lap this time.

Hunter's hands grasp my hips before he spins me around to face him. He yanks me down so I'm flush against him, my center landing on his hard cock.

"Ohhhh," I murmur, hips tilting to rub against him.

"Yeah, oh." Hunter chuckles before leaning in to kiss me. When he pulls back, his eyes are serious. "I don't want to push you to do something you're not ready for, so I need you to tell me what you want, Hadley."

"You. I want you." My words are barely audible, but I know he hears me when he smirks.

"That's not enough. What do you want me to do?"

Asshole. He's really going to make me spell it out to him, isn't he? He's never going to make things easy, is he?

“I want you to fuck me.”

I didn't think it was possible, but Hunter's smirk grows as he leans in to kiss me again.

“Wait.” Marcos runs a hand down my back, waiting until Hunter and I turn to him. “This is your first time together, so if you want us to leave, we will.”

“That's up to you, princess,” Hunter says as I glance at him. “This might be our first time together, but it won't be our last. I'm perfectly fine with them staying, if that's what you want.”

All four of them at the same time? I've only been with Caiden and Kai together. We never got a chance for Marcos to join us. But while I'm not sure exactly how it'll work, the idea of all of them together at once is hot as hell. Heat rushes through me and straight to my pussy. I clench down on nothing, wiggling around at the feel of my damp panties moving against me.

“I'd like you all to stay. Please,” I say, and my voice is breathy with just a hint of a whine.

“Thank the goddess,” Caiden blurts.

Hunter's lips brush against mine, and then he's standing with me still in his arms. “In that case, let's bring this to the bedroom and break in the bed.”

I wrap my legs around his hips. His hands drop to grip my ass, and my arms go around his neck. I hear the others scrambling behind us, but all my attention is on Hunter as he

takes my lips once again. Opening for him, our tongues slide together sensually.

I break the kiss with a laugh when he bounces me off the door. “Maybe you should watch where you’re walking when carrying me?”

“Will someone get the door, please?” Hunter calls over his shoulder and Marcos ducks between us, wrenching it open before hurrying inside.

Hunter carries me over to the bed, dropping me down onto it, and I let out a squeal. Giggling, I smile up at him.

“A little warning next time would be nice.”

Hunter just smirks, reaching behind him to grab his shirt, and pulls it off. He throws it somewhere, but I have no idea where because I’m too busy ogling his bare chest. With the way he’s built and the amount of time he spends in the gym, I knew he had to look good under his shirts. But knowing and seeing are two different things.

I lick my lips, really wanting to lick his abs. Is that a weird thing to want to do? Probably.

“Hey, kitten.” Marcos pops up behind me, startling me. “You’ve got a bit of drool there.”

I smack away his hand that’s reaching for the corner of my foot. “Shut it, Marcos. Green isn’t a good color on you.”

“Oh, I’m not jealous. I know I look good.”

Then he's pressing up against my back, reaching down to grab the bottom of my shirt. I lift my arms, allowing him to pull it off my body. When I look back down, Hunter is kneeling in front of me.

"You're sure this is what you want?"

I nod. "Yes, I'm sure."

He doesn't ask again as Kai and Caiden climb onto the bed on each side of me. Hunter reaches down and undoes my pants. I lift my hips as he tugs the material down my legs until I sit before the four of them in nothing but my lacy bra and panty set.

"So fucking gorgeous." Hunter lifts my leg, pressing his lips to my ankle before moving higher and kissing along my calf.

"Need to see those pretty tits," Marcos murmurs against my neck in between kisses as he unsnaps my bra. Kai and Caiden slide it down my shoulders, and one of them tosses it away once it's off.

Marcos's hands circle around me until he's cupping my breasts. "Here, boys, why don't you have a taste? I'll hold them nice and steady for you. Kitten, give me your lips."

I lean my head back so Marcos can take my lips as Hunter steadily makes his way up my leg, placing a kiss every few inches. Kai and Caiden's heads duck down and work my nipples in their mouths, using their tongues and teeth.

I whine into the kiss when I feel Hunter's hot breath ghosting over my pussy. I want to tell him to take off my

panties, but Marcos won't allow me to break our kiss. Hunter's fingers ghost over the damp panties and my hips lift, silently begging for more. While he doesn't pull my panties off, he does shift them to the side moments before his tongue slides between my folds.

"Fuck," I curse into Marcos's mouth, and he pulls away with a grin as he looks down to watch as Hunter buries his face in my pussy. He moans against me, pulling a whimper from my lips as he fucks me with his tongue.

He pulls away just enough to look up at me. "You taste amazing, princess."

Then he's ducking back down, tongue circling my clit as he traces my slit with his finger. I gasp when he slides his finger in, thrusting a few times before adding a second finger.

Marcos's mouth finds its way back to my neck, and my eyes fall shut as I lose myself to the sensations they're pulling from my body. Hunter picks up speed as he sucks my clit between his lips and bites down on it gently. My entire body tenses, and instead of building gently, I'm suddenly teetering on the edge of what promises to be an explosive orgasm. Linking my hand in Hunter's hair, I pull him more firmly against me, rolling my hips to meet his mouth and fingers.

Caiden bites down on my nipple, and it's just enough to push me over the edge. I scream out, back arching as I grind my pussy against Hunter's face. Pleasure rushes through me from head to toe, all of their hands roaming my skin as Hunter

continues to fuck me with his fingers and tongue until I collapse between them.

Kai and Caiden release my tits with a pop while Hunter leans back to grin up at me, face covered in my juices. Marcos is still pressed against my back, keeping me upright, since my body refuses to do anything.

“You’re so gorgeous when you come.” Hunter slowly moves up the bed until his face is hovering over mine. “I need to see it again.”

“Then I guess one of you should get to fucking me then, huh?”

“Such a smart mouth,” Hunter murmurs, lips brushing against mine with his words.

I wet my lips with my tongue, dragging it across his at the same time. The taste that is wholly Hunter mixed with my juices is exquisite. I moan as the taste explodes across my taste buds, leaning forward to kiss him. My tongue snakes along his lips until I’ve cleaned the taste of myself from him before tangling with his tongue.

“You’re going to have to learn how to share, Hunter.” Marcos’s words are quiet, but they’re enough to break us apart.

Hunter doesn’t move away, but he does pull back enough for me to tilt my head back so Marcos can take my lips. Having the four of them at once is going to be interesting, and I can’t fucking wait.

I feel movement beside me, someone climbing off the bed, but when I attempt to pull away, Marcos just kisses me deeper. I hear the door open, and I begin to struggle in their hold, but Hunter murmurs against my ear, “Caiden went to grab something from his room. He’ll be right back.”

His lips move to my neck, licking and sucking along the length of it. His lips brush against the junction where my neck and shoulder meet before biting down. I arch into him, and Marcos catches my cry in his mouth. A hand slides between Hunter’s body and mine, fingers quickly finding my clit.

Hunter slides to the side with a laugh. “Your hands are a little too close to my dick, Kai.”

“Better get used to it. Group sex means you get up close and personal, even if you’re not having sex with someone.”

Marcos pulls away at Caiden’s words, and my eyes quickly find him standing at the foot of the bed. I raise my eyebrows in question, and he holds up a bottle of something in one hand and condoms in the other.

“Lube and condoms, baby girl. There are too many dicks in this party to not need the lube, and we want to be safe.”

I giggle, feeling the three men on the bed with me chuckle along with me. His words are true, but they also make me apprehensive about how this is going to work.

“We don’t need the condoms, if you’re clean,” I tell them. “I’m taking the birth control potion now, and all my tests came back clean. Kai and I have been fucking without them.”

“Hell, yeah, we have.” Kai grins.

“You’re sure?” It’s Marcos that asks, but I can see the same question in all of their eyes.

I nod slowly. “Absolutely sure—about that, at least. But how exactly is this going to work? Kai, Caiden, and I have been together at the same time, but I’m assuming the two of you are new to group sex?” I turn my attention to Marcos and Hunter, who nod.

Caiden climbs onto the bed beside Kai, tossing the bottle of lube near Kai and me. Kai’s fingers have continued to circle my clit, providing just enough stimulation to keep me on edge but still able to carry on this conversation.

“How about Kai and I occupy ourselves while Hunter and Marcos learn how to share?”

I pout. “But I want all four of you.”

“And you’ll have us, angel.” Kai leans down to kiss me. “Caiden and I will have you after. We’re just going to have a little foreplay while these two take care of you. We’ve got the rest of our lives for us to figure out how you can take all four of us at the same time.”

My jaw drops open, a shuddering breath escaping me at not only his words but also the way his fingers have picked up speed. I can’t help but imagine how I can take all four of them at once. And when Kai’s head ducks between my thighs, tongue running up and down my slit? I absolutely lose my shit.

My hands clamp down on his head as his tongue slips inside of me, curling inside of me and working me over in a whole different way from the rapid movement of his fingers. My thighs clamp around his head, and I wish I could be riding his face right now, but then I realize I still can. Kai groans into me, the vibrations helping me along as I work myself against him to find my orgasm.

Around me I can hear the grunts of the others, followed by the sound of skin on skin, and I know they have their cocks in hand as they watch me take my pleasure. It builds and builds inside of me until my body goes rigid, breath leaving my body as my orgasm hits me.

Kai groans as my pussy clenches down, his tongue not at all what it wants to be squeezing. He laps at me lazily as I come down from the high. I can see the satisfied smile on his face as he pulls away, my body completely relaxed. He pulls Caiden in for a kiss, pulling a groan from the other man as he tastes me on Kai's lips.

Caiden yanks Kai from between my legs, rolling them until he can press his back into the bed. I can't help but watch them until Hunter hooks his finger under my chin, turning my attention back to him.

"You're mine and Marcos's for now. You'll pay attention to us." He glances up to look at Marcos, and they seem to have some kind of silent conversation before Hunter's eyes drop to mine once more. He grabs the bottle of lube, setting it in Marcos's hands.

Hunter rolls onto his back, taking me with him until I straddle him. My slick pussy sits against his abdomen, his cock rubbing against my ass. He grabs a handful of my ass cheek as he asks, “Has anyone fucked this ass before?”

I nod. “A few.”

“I want you to ride me while Marcos gets you ready for his cock.” He laughs when I grind against him. “Like the sound of that, do you?”

A whine spills from my lips. “Yes. Let’s do that.”

Before either of them can say anything else, I rise to my knees and slip down Hunter’s body. Taking his hard cock in my hand, I lick my lips. As much as I’d like to get my mouth on it, I want it inside me more. So instead of ducking down, I line it up with my pussy, and begin to sink down onto him.

While Hunter doesn’t have the length of some of the others, he’s wide as hell, and I love the way my pussy stretches to take him in. Considering that I’m already two orgasms in and drenched, it should be easy for me to take him, but it’s not. I have to slide up and back down him twice more before he’s balls deep inside of me.

I hum and begin to ride him, leaning back and placing my hands on his thighs so he can watch the way my tits bounce with the movement. He’s momentarily hypnotized by their movements, and it makes me grin. Once he notices it, he leans up to grab me by the neck as he fucks up into me.

“Just because I’m on the bottom doesn’t mean you’re the one in charge,” he grumbles before our lips meet. He lays back, pulling me with him until I’m laid flat against his chest.

It’s harder for me to move when I’m this low, but I find the leverage to begin fucking myself on his thick cock. I hesitate for a moment when I feel Marcos’s hand on my ass and break away from Hunter’s kiss to look at him over my shoulder.

Marcos squeezes lube onto the fingers of his right hand, spreading it between them before holding it up for my inspection. With a nod, I turn my attention back to Hunter as Marcos’s finger brushes across my puckered hole. He circles it, letting the lube warm up before he pushes his finger inside.

I tense up and Marcos freezes. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to relax. Kissing Hunter helps as I try to ignore the pressure. It doesn’t hurt; it’s just a foreign feeling. I’d not had great experiences with anal in the past, as most men just want to shove their cocks inside without the prep work. I’m not worried about that with these men.

Marcos works himself into the second knuckle and fucks in and out of my ass for a moment before pushing his finger inside fully. I begin to rock against Hunter once more as Marcos works his finger in and out, adding a second and scissoring them inside of me.

Hunter’s tongue twines with mine, and I lose myself in the kiss, grinding my clit as I rock and circle my hips leisurely against him. When Marcos adds a third finger into my ass, I can no longer ignore him.

My head falls to Hunter's chest. I feel full already, and I can only imagine how full I'll feel when Marcos pushes his cock inside of me. Because his pierced cock is definitely bigger than his fingers. I'm momentarily distracted by the sight of Caiden and Kai. Caiden is behind Kai, with Kai leaning back on his chest. One of Caiden's hands wraps around the other man's cock, while the other moves between them. I can't tell for sure if he's stroking himself or if he's fucking Kai on his fingers—but both options are hot as hell.

Caiden's eyes flash up to meet mine, and he smirks. "I'm getting Kai's ass ready so I can fuck him while he fucks you."

Hunter and Marcos let out loud groans, making me realize I've clenched down on them.

"She really likes that idea," Hunter says. "Like a lot from how hard she's bearing down on us."

"Good."

Marcos chuckles behind me, leaning down to press his chest to my back. "I'm going to fuck your ass with my cock now."

"Yes, please," I breathe out, pushing back against his fingers.

"Such a good fucking girl," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the side of my head before pulling away.

A whimper leaves me at the loss of his fingers. "Are you ready for my cock, kitten?"

I don't answer him out loud, instead lifting my ass to him again. He laughs again, and I hear the click of the bottle of

lube as it closes. I can hear him working the lube up and down his cock, and then he's pushing into me.

My nails dig into Hunter's arms while forcing the rest of my body to remain relaxed. Hunter lifts my chin until I meet his eyes. "Are you okay, Hadley? Just say the word and we'll stop."

"Don't stop," I pant as Marcos's cock slides further into me. The bars of his piercing glide inside of me, a sensation unlike anything else I've ever felt. He takes it slow, which I both appreciate and hate in equal measures. But finally, he's fully seated inside of me, and it's the best damn feeling I've ever felt—being filled by both him and Hunter at the same time.

Marcos pulls back before pushing back in, still moving slowly while we all grow accustomed to it. Hunter curses under me.

"I can feel your dick," he says, eyes wide. "I can feel your piercings. Fucking hell, it feels amazing."

"It really does," I agree. "Now, I need the two of you to fuck me."

They both hesitate for a moment, but then they both move, and there's nothing I can do but go along for the ride. At first, they alternate, with one sliding out as the other pushes in. It doesn't take long, or too much begging on my part, for them to be fucking me together, fast and hard—just the way I like it.

I'm overwhelmed by the sensations. I can't seem to focus on anything; my thoughts are there and gone again in seconds.

Being full of them as they both hit all the right spots inside of me. They move in just the right way that my clit slides against Hunter with each thrust.

I'm flying high, on the edge of orgasming for what feels like forever, until I feel a mouth on my tit. Turning my head to the side, I find Kai bent over, sucking my nipple into his mouth as Caiden pushes into him from behind. I'm not sure which of those two things it is that pushes me over the edge, but over the edge I spill.

I cry out, all their names babbling forth from me as I shake between Hunter and Marcos. Both men tense and stop moving.

"Fuck, I'm going to come," Hunter manages to spit out before his hips hammer back into me.

"Me too. Goddess, your ass is squeezing me so fucking hard." Marcos begins to fuck me again. Their movements no longer match as they both chase down their own finish, but I can't find it in myself to care, as they're both prolonging my own orgasm.

Hunter lets out a long groan, my name on the tip of his tongue as his hips grind into me, and I feel his cum spurting inside of me. With just two more thrusts, Marcos follows him over the edge, his cum filling my ass and spilling out.

The three of us collapse together as Kai lets go of my nipple with a pop. Marcos is heavy against my back, but I don't have the energy to tell him to get off me. Kai grins down at me, and my returning smile is lazy.

“Don’t go to sleep, angel. I still have to get my cock inside that pretty pussy of yours.” His eyes fall shut, groaning as Caiden picks up speed behind him. “Though I don’t know how long I’ll last if Caiden keeps this up.”

That gets me moving as I wiggle between Hunter and Marcos. “Marcos, off. Now.”

“Don’t wanna,” he slurs, but leans his weight on his hands once more before slowly pulling his softening cock from my ass. His hands slam down on my ass cheeks as he groans. “Why is that so hot?”

“Are you watching your cum spill out of my ass, perv?”

“Yup,” he pops the p as he chuckles. “And watching it slide down to your pussy and onto Hunter’s balls.”

“Alright, that’s it. I’m out. Move your ass, Marcos,” Hunter barks, and as soon as he’s out of the way, Hunter lifts me off of him. His head tilts. “Though he is right, that is kind of hot.”

“You are both ridiculous,” I huff, to which they just laugh.

Hunter climbs off the bed, leaning back over to kiss me. “I’m going to shower. I can’t sit here with Marcos’s cum on my balls. Have fun, princess. And thank you.”

Then he’s gone. Marcos settles against the headboard. “I assume the three of you don’t mind an audience.”

“Never,” Kai moans, and it has me turning back to my other two men. Caiden is pounding into Kai from behind, and the pure pleasure on Kai’s face has my thighs clamping together. “But I’m going to need you to be a more active participant

than that, Marcos. I'm not going to last long, and I want Hadley to come again before I do."

Marcos is already moving down the bed. "Where do you need me?"

"Angel, on your hands and knees over here." Kai curses. "Damn it, Cade. I need you to stop for a minute. I want to be in her pussy when I come."

Caiden chuckles but stills his movements as I follow Kai's instructions, backing up until Kai's hands land on my hips. His cock slides between my ass cheeks, and though I'd been tired moments before, I need him to fuck me.

"Marcos, get under her and get your mouth on her clit." Kai hesitates. "Unless that puts you too close to my cock."

Marcos considers us for a moment before moving to my side and lying on his back. "Get your dick in her so I can suck on her clit, Kai."

Kai leans away from me, and then his cock is sliding along my pussy. He slides inside of me easily, and in the next moment, Marcos's mouth is on my clit. Kai's hand wraps around my shoulder. "Better hold on, angel. Caiden's going to fuck you through me."

That's all the warning I get before he's sliding out of me before slamming back into me as Caiden fucks him. The three of us move together with Marcos working my clit with his lips, teeth, and tongue. With Kai slamming into my g-spot with each pass, I'm almost instantly back on edge.

It doesn't take long before Kai is tensing behind me. "I'm going to come. Sorry, angel, I lasted as long as I could."

His hips stutter against me, his cock jerking inside of me just before I feel his hot cum filling me. Then I'm screaming, my orgasm ripping through me. My arms shake, and I half collapse on Marcos as I jerk through my orgasm.

I feel Caiden slam into Kai again, pulling a grunt from both of us, and then a groan of Kai's name tells me that Caiden has followed us over the edge.

Marcos crawls out from under me, and then he's collecting me in his arms, lifting me from the bed. "Let's get you a quick shower before you pass out."

I mumble my agreement as I lay my head on his shoulder. Hunter is just stepping out of the shower, but he turns around to flick the water back on. After that, I can't keep my eyes open, and when Marcos tries to set me on my feet, my legs won't hold me.

I'm fairly certain that all four of them end up with me in the shower, but I can't force my eyes open. Somehow, they manage to get my body cleaned off and even wash my hair without any help from me. By the time they're stepping out of the shower and drying me off, I'm already drifting off to sleep.

"We've got you, princess," is the last thing I hear before sleep takes over.

Chapter Eighteen

Marcos

Waking up naked in bed with three other men isn't something I ever expected to happen—or at least not before I met Hadley. But I guess it's something I should get used to.

Holding Hadley in my arms is definitely something I could get used to. I run my fingers through her hair as she lies on my chest, still knocked out. I've been awake for about half an hour at this point but haven't wanted to disturb her. Instead, I've been running through my memories of the night before, meaning my morning wood definitely hasn't gone down.

I feel movement to my right, turning to find Caiden has rolled on his back, with Kai still cuddled up to his side.

“They still out?” he asks quietly.

Checking on Hadley and Hunter, I find that they're both still fast asleep. Hunter presses against her back with his arm thrown over her waist and just a little too close to my cock to

be comfortable, but it's fine. Like I said, sharing a bed with three other men will take some getting used to.

"Yup, but if we don't get up soon, we'll miss breakfast."

"Shhhh," Hadley mumbles against my chest. "Sleeping."

I smile down at her. "You're adorable, kitten. But we all know how you get if you miss a meal, so it's time to wake up."

"Don't wanna. Can't make me." Hadley tries to roll off me, but she's pinned by Hunter. "Get off me, you big oaf."

"No, I don't think I will," Hunter grumbles against her neck as he rolls his hips, pushing what I'm sure is a hard cock against her ass.

"Nuh-uh, none of that," I chastise. "We don't have time for that, or we'll miss breakfast, and Hadley will be grumpy all morning."

Hadley lifts her head to rest her chin on my chest so she can look up at me with a pout. "Cock blocker."

Hunter chuckles before rolling off her. He sits up and slaps his hand across her ass, pulling a squeak from her as she jerks up. "Get ready, princess."

"Did you just spank me?" Hadley glares, hands going to her hips.

"I did, and I'll do it again if you don't get your ass out of bed and get ready." Hunter turns his attention to me, Caiden, and Kai. "That goes for the three of you as well."

“Ohhhh, Daddy, are you gonna spank me if I’m a bad boy?”
I grin, wiggling my eyebrows at my friend.

“Nope, I’m out.” Caiden sits up. “Come on, Kai. Time to get up and get ready. Quickly, because some weird shit is about to go down, and I don’t want to be here for it.”

Hadley snickers, biting her lip as she tries to hold in her laughter. But as soon as I laugh, she loses it and the two of us collapse on the bed in peels of laughter.

“I hate you,” Hunter growls as he stalks out of the bedroom with Caiden and Kai hot on his heels.

Rolling to my side, I grin when Hadley does the same.
“Morning, kitten.”

“Morning, Marcos.”

When I lean over to kiss her, she jerks her head back.
“Morning breath.”

“And? I don’t care. Give me a kiss and then you can go brush your teeth.”

She hesitates for another moment before leaning in to kiss me. Then she’s bouncing out of bed and into the bathroom, leaving me alone. I drag myself out of bed, walking my naked ass to my room with my hard cock on display for anyone to see—not that there’s anyone to see it, since everyone else is getting ready.

Once in my room, I can’t help but take my cock in my hand and give it a few strokes. I wonder if I have time to take care of this before everyone gets ready. I could always take a

shower and jack off in there. A glance at the clock tells me I regretfully don't have time for that. I throw on some clothes and walk into the sitting room to find the others waiting for me.

"Took you long enough," Hadley grouches at me. "C'mon, I'm starving."

She doesn't wait for us, throwing open the door to the suite. I follow her with a grin. I love this girl.

Shit.

My grin falters for a moment before growing. I throw my arm over her shoulders and press a kiss to the top of her head just before we head down the stairs. She gives me a funny look.

"What was that for?"

"For being yourself." I shrug. "You should get used to the fact that the four of us always want to touch and kiss you."

Her head ducks, a flush creeping up her cheeks as she hurries down the stairs. Hadley hasn't known enough love in her life, and I'm determined to shower her with it.

Finally, we make it to the dining room, and Hadley's suitors jump to their feet, eyes wide when they see us.

"Hadley, we didn't expect you this morning." Kaspian hurries around to pull out her chair, and my eyes narrow.

Hadley glances over her shoulder at us, eyes wide. I bite back the desire to punch Kaspian in his face because he has no

idea that she's asked us to be her consorts, so of course he's still trying to impress her.

A glance at Hunter shows him glowering at his fellow Winter Court Fae. Knowing that Hadley wouldn't want to cause a scene, I lay a hand on Hunter's arm and wait until he turns to me to give a sharp shake of my head.

Hadley shoots me a grateful smile before she makes her way to her chair. "Thank you, Kaspian."

The four of us make our way to open chairs at the opposite end of the table, and as soon as we're standing behind them, Hadley tells us to sit. I spend the entirety of breakfast trying to get Hunter to calm the fuck down as the suitors all clamor to get Hadley's attention.

"They don't know she's chosen us, Hunt," I hiss. "They haven't seen her in a week, and the coronation is in mere days. They're just doing what they can to get her to choose them."

"Well, she's not going to," he growls, chest puffing up. "She's already chosen. She's ours."

I nod. "She is, but they don't know that. And she won't appreciate you blurting that out to them. I'm sure she plans to speak to Grace about the correct way to handle it, but if you spill the beans now, she will be pissed."

Understanding dawns on his face as he nods. "Fine, but I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it," I tell him. "But you need to get this whole growly alphahole thing under control before you

fuck this up.”

“What the fuck is an alphahole?” Hunter demands, louder than he probably means to.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head as the rest of the table turns their attention to us. Idiot.

“An alphahole?” Hadley giggles. “That definitely describes you, Hunter.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Hunter flushes, though I don’t know if it’s from frustration or embarrassment.

“An alphahole is an alpha male who is an asshole. AKA, you.” Hadley winks to soften her words.

Hunter turns his glare on me. “I hate you.”

“Nah, you *love* me,” I singsong.

Honestly? I’m surprised when he doesn’t punch me, choosing to turn back to his breakfast instead. When my eyes meet Hadley’s, she giggles again before turning back to Fiona.

Somehow we make it through breakfast, and Hadley makes excuses to the suitors. She promises that she’ll see them at lunch and that she’ll spend some time with them afterward. I hate the jealousy that runs through me, even though I know it’ll only be for her to tell them that she’s chosen us as her consorts. Maybe she’ll let us be there when she talks to them. Though, that probably depends on what Grace has to say.

Hunter, Caiden, Kai, and I wait outside the dining room while Hadley says goodbye to the suitors. As soon as she steps

out, Hunter grabs her hand and drags her down the hallway. I frown when they turn around a corner before following them. Caiden and Kai hesitate for another moment, but they quickly catch up to me.

Turning the corner, I find Hadley with her legs wrapped around Hunter's hips as he pins her to the wall, devouring her with his kiss. They break apart when they hear us, but Hunter doesn't take his eyes off Hadley.

“You're ours. Not theirs.”

I slap my hand over my mouth to keep the laughter in.

Hadley frowns, eye level with Hunter for once since he still holds up aloft between him and the wall. “I know that, Hunter, but they don't.”

“Well, they should.”

“And they will—this afternoon.” She shakes her head. “Definitely an alphahole. Now let me down.”

Hunter growls. “The two of you need to stop calling me that. I don't like it.”

“Then maybe you should stop acting like one.” Hadley raises her eyebrows. “Now, put me down.”

Hunter makes no move to put her down, and it's taking everything in me to not lose my shit. He just can't help himself, can he? Never in my life have I met someone who fits the term alphahole as much as he. He's never going to change, and he and Hadley will continue to butt heads over it. At least things will never be boring.

Hadley shakes her head when Hunter still doesn't relinquish his hold on her. I see her hand moving, but it takes me a moment to figure out what she's doing. My eyes widen when I see the vines climbing through the window across from where he has her pinned.

Before he has time to realize what's happening, Hadley has vines wrapped around Hunter's arms and legs. She yanks her arm back and the vines pull Hunter's arms away. I suck in a breath, afraid she's going to fall on her ass, but she calls on her air magic and floats in the air for a moment before lowering herself.

I make my way over to my girl, grinning at Hunter. "You know, I think there are definitely some bedroom uses for our earth magic."

Hadley looks intrigued as she turns to look at me—something I make sure to make a note of. I reach down to adjust my now hard cock, relishing the idea of restraining my girl with vines while I fuck her to oblivion.

"Alright, Marcos. Get that under control, please." Caiden laughs. "Baby girl, if you want to talk to Grace, you should probably let Hunter go."

She shrugs. "Or I could just leave him here like this while we go talk to her. I'm not going to put up with this possessive jealousy bullshit, Hunter." She pauses. "Actually, I don't mind the possessiveness, but the jealousy needs to go. Got it?"

"You're so hot when you're bossy." I move behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and bending to bury my

head in the crook of her neck. She leans back into my touch, pressing against my cock and pulling a groan from me.

“Goddess above,” Caiden curses, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from Hadley. “When did you turn into such a horndog?”

I shrug, an unapologetic grin spreading across my face as I shoot Hadley a wink. “Since I met Hadley.”

Hadley just rolls her eyes as she turns back to Hunter. “I’m serious, Hunter.”

“Fine,” he bites out. “Will you please let me go?”

She taps her finger on her chin as if she’s considering his question. “Fine, but you better behave.”

She walks away but doesn’t call off the vines. She links her fingers with Kai’s while Hunter calls after her, but she just ignores him as she keeps walking. Caiden follows them, but I wait with Hunter. The vines fall away once they’ve turned the corner.

Hunter grumbles, shaking out his arms before stomping after them.

“Don’t worry about me, asshole. It’s not like I was waiting for you or anything.” Rolling my eyes, I follow after them.



I pace along the floor of the sitting room of Hadley’s suite—*our* suite. After talking to Grace, Hadley decided that she

would talk to the suitors in the dining room once they'd finished lunch, but she'd told us we weren't allowed to be there. Which on the one hand, I understand, but on the other hand, I'm so not okay with it. We have no way of knowing what's happening.

The chances of the suitors being dumb enough to do anything to her are slim to none, but it's not zero. Benjamin's there, which makes me feel better. He'll make sure no one fucks with her, but we should be there. It should be us keeping her safe.

Even as the thought crosses my mind, I can hear Hadley in my head.

'I can take care of my damn self.'

And she can. I'm aware of that, but it doesn't change how I feel.

"Marcos, you're acting like Hunter right now." Kai appears in my path, startling me.

"Fuck, I didn't even hear you move."

Kai laughs. "That's because you're not paying attention. Now, come sit down with us, or go find Hunter in the gym. I'm sure he'd love some company."

Maybe I should've joined Hunter. He'd stomped off to the gym as soon as Hadley announced that we weren't allowed to join her. I don't mind the gym or working out, but Hunter is a little obsessive about the time he spends in the gym. It's why I

don't usually join him, but it probably would've helped with this nervous energy that I can't seem to get rid of.

“Did you say I was acting like Hunter?”

“Well, I mean... you are growling under your breath as you pace the room,” Caiden offers. “Does that remind you of someone?”

Damn it, they're right. With a sigh, I follow Kai back to the couch. “We need to get a TV in here and a gaming console. There's nothing to do in here.”

Kai settles beside Caiden before lifting his book. “You could read?”

“Yeah, no. I think I'll pass on that one.”

Kai rolls his eyes before leaning into Caiden's side as they both go back to reading their books. I lay back on the couch, covering my eyes with my hands. I guess I could try to take a nap, though I'm not sure if my mind will shut up enough for that. But I might as well try. It's better than reading—not that there's anything wrong with reading; I actually enjoy it sometimes. I just have to be in the mood, and I'm definitely not in the mood right now.

I've just started to doze off when a scream wrenches me from my state of half-sleep.

“Hadley?” I cry, jumping to my feet.

Caiden has already launched himself over the back of the couch and is halfway to the door. Kai and I hurry after him. He

throws the door open and comes to a sudden stop. I barely manage to stop before I barrel into him.

“What the fuck, Cade?”

Caiden doesn't respond but jumps over something before scooping up a sobbing Hadley into his arms. As soon as he's cleared it, I realize there's a pile of something in front of the door.

“What the fuck is that?” I ask as I lean down to take a closer look. It takes me a moment to realize it's a mutilated animal of some kind. I gag, the stench hitting me, and it takes everything to keep myself from losing the entire contents of my stomach.

“That's not all,” Kai says quietly, gesturing to the door.

Written in blood is another message for Hadley.

They can't protect you forever. Run, little fox. Run.

It's a mutilated fox outside the door. Motherfuckers.

“What the hell is wrong with this psycho?” Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dial Hunter. When he picks up, I fill him in and ask him to get someone to come take care of it.

“Caiden, bring her to the bedroom. I don't want her out here while they clean this up.” I step out of the doorway, signaling for him to bring her inside. He steps over the dead fox, keeping Hadley's head buried in his neck so she can't look, and hurries past me to the bedroom.

Kai swings the door shut and shakes his head. “We have to figure out who is doing this. There are cameras all over the

palace. We should have been able to figure out who it was by now.”

“I don’t know, Kai. I really don’t. But right now, we need to go check on Hadley and make sure she’s okay. Hunter is going to talk to Grace to find out how no one saw anything. Those damn guards are supposed to be out there preventing this from happening. They better have a good explanation about how this happened.”

Only they don’t, or at least that’s what Grace informs us of after speaking to them. It had taken us an hour to get Hadley to calm down, but by then, she’d exhausted herself. She’d fallen asleep with the four of us surrounding her. We’d stayed there until about ten minutes ago when Grace arrived.

“This is bullshit, Grace. How the hell does someone keep slipping past everyone? This shouldn’t be able to happen.” Hunter slams his fist down on the table, and Grace jumps at the noise.

“I’m just as upset as you are, Hunter, but you need to get that temper under control. It’s not helping anyone.” Grace shakes her head. “The guards all say they didn’t see anything, and I watched the videos. The doors outside this wing only opened four times before Hadley came through. The first is when you all came down for breakfast. The next two are when Adaline came to pick up the dishes from last night and left again. The fourth was when you all came up here. It didn’t open again until Hadley came in.”

“And what did the video show? Did it show who was at the door?” I demand.

“There are no cameras on the door to the suite. This hallway is a dead spot, which is on me. I should’ve noticed it before now. That will be remedied immediately, but we’ve still been unable to find anything on the videos from the other instances. It’s like it all just appears out of thin air.”

“They have to be using magic from Cruthanna. There’s no other explanation.” Kai leans forward. “We need to find out if they have a way to trace their magic. Maybe they can trace it back to whoever is using it. Or at least be able to tell us what spell or potion is being used.”

Grace shakes her head. “I’ve spoken to our healers and the head of security. None of them know of any way to trace the magic.”

“But—“

“Let me finish,” Grace snaps. “I’ve sent someone directly to Cruthanna. They’re going to the Mage Guild to see if they can think of anything that can help us. If it’s possible, they’ll know how.”

“Mage Guild?”

We all jump at the sound of Hadley’s voice. She’s standing at the door to her bedroom, hair a mess as she wipes her hands down her face.

“What did I miss?”

Hunter waves for her to join us. When she gets close, he pulls her into his lap and buries his face in her neck.

Hadley chuckles. “That’s not answering my question, alphahole.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.”

“We believe that whoever was leaving the notes and the bomb is using magic from Cruthanna. We’re trying to find out if there’s a way to trace it. I sent a messenger to the Mage Guild—they’re the ones who oversee the mages in Cruthanna—to see if they know of any way to trace it. If it’s possible, they’re the ones who will know.”

“Good. Now fill me in on whatever else I need to know.”

Chapter Nineteen

Hadley

Grace had been so sure that the Mage Guild would be able to help us to trace the Cruthanna magic that's being used, but they'd sent back a response advising that it just wasn't possible. So, here we are on the day of my coronation with no idea who wants me dead.

To say that we're all a little tense is putting things lightly. We've received two more notes since they left the fox. The first one warned me that if I went through with the coronation, I'd regret it. The second one came this morning, and I haven't been able to work up the courage to open it.

Can the words hurt me? No, of course not. But I'm so afraid of what this person could be planning. I know I have to look, but I just can't bring myself to do so.

"Why don't you just let one of us open it?" Hunter asks as he sits down beside me, placing a plate in front of me.

All I can do is stare at the plate blankly before turning my attention back to the envelope in my hand. I don't want them

to open it either because I don't want it opened at all. If we open it, it becomes real. If we don't, then I can ignore it.

I know that isn't true, which is why I hand the envelope to Hunter without a word.

We're all quiet as he tears open the envelope. He reads over it, letting forth a deep sigh.

"Don't say you weren't warned. You should've listened, you stupid girl. This is all on you."

Hunter turns the note over before throwing it on the table. "That's all it says. This could mean anything. The least they could do is tell us what the hell they have planned."

"Yes, because that's how it works," Caiden snarks. "The bad guy always reveals their hand, so they can be stopped. This is real life, not some movie, Hunt."

"Please, don't." I suck in a deep breath as I bury my face in my hands. "We don't need to fight amongst ourselves. We will keep an eye out for anything suspicious and hope that we can prevent whatever they have planned. There's nothing else we can do at this point."

A knock has our heads jerking to the door. I still have another hour before Grace and Adaline are supposed to arrive to help me get ready, so I have no idea who could be at the door.

Marcos is the closest to the door, so he makes his way over and throws it open.

“Oh, hell, no,” he says before trying to swing the door shut, but whoever is on the other side just forces it back open.

Standing in the doorway to our suite are Gabe and Kam. Hunter and Kai are on their feet in seconds, both moving toward their fathers.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” Hunter demands, throwing out an arm to prevent Kai from going after Kam.

Gabe smiles, acting as if he doesn’t notice the animosity in the air. “Well, we came to congratulate our future queen on her coronation. Oh, and to congratulate our sons on finally doing what we asked of them. After all, I hear that Hadley has chosen the four of you as her consorts. It’s nice to finally have you not disappoint us.”

“We didn’t do this for you, and if you thought you’d shock Hadley with your words?” Kai laughs as he glares at Kam. “She already knows what you tried to force us to do. She knows, forgave us, and still chose us. And it has nothing to do with the two of you, so you can see yourselves out.”

“We just wanted to speak to our future daughter-in-law,” Kam says, smile predatory as he keeps his eyes locked on Kai. “I don’t know what you think we plan to do to her.”

“I don’t know, and I really don’t care. But you won’t get the chance—whatever it is.”

Kai moves so quickly that Hunter doesn’t have a chance to stop him this time. He slams into Kam, shoving him back until

his back hits the wall. “You’ll never get a chance to hurt anyone again.”

At first, I don’t understand Kai’s words or what’s happening before me. Kai pins Kam to the wall, eyes never leaving his father’s as Kam begins to struggle.

Kai steps away, and Kam’s hands grasp at his face. I watch as his mouth opens and closes as if he’s trying to speak, but nothing comes out. Then I notice the way Kai has clenched his hands.

Standing from my chair, I move over to Kai and grasp his arm. “Kai? What are you doing?”

Kai looks down at me, a small smile on his lips that doesn’t match the darkness I see swirling in his eyes. “I’m making sure that Kam can’t hurt you, or me, or anyone else I care about, ever again.”

“Are you...” I trail off, glancing between father and son. “Are you sucking the air from his lungs?”

He doesn’t answer, and I turn to the others, eyes wide. He’s killing his father. We can’t allow that to happen—can we?

Hunter is in Gabe’s face, and the two of them seem to be about to come to blows, so he’ll be of no help. Marcos is hovering near them as if to break them up, but he’s making no move to do so. My eyes meet Caiden’s across the room, and he just shakes his head.

Turning my attention back to Kai, I find his eyes still on me. “Are you sure this is what you want, Kai?”

Kai glances from me to Kam and back again. He gives me a sharp nod, and my heart drops into my stomach. He has made his mind up, and I can't even say that I blame him. Kam made Kai's life a living hell.

I unclench Kai's hand, intertwining our fingers while he looks on with a question in his eyes.

"I'm not going to let you do this on your own. If this is what you want to do, then we'll do it together."

"Angel—no. This is for me to do, not you."

I shake my head. "No, we'll do it together."

Calling forth my air magic, I reach for the air around Kam. I smile when I recognize the feel of Kai's magic and wrap my own around it, strengthening it as I help him kill his father.

I should probably be more upset over this, but I feel rather apathetic about it. Kam Jin deserves worse than death for the things he's done to Kai, but death is what Kai wants for him. At least this way, Kam won't be able to damage the child his new wife carries. He'll never be able to harm it or anyone ever again.

Kam grabs at his throat and chest as if he could force air into his lungs, and it takes me a moment to realize he's trying to use his own air magic to do just that. I pull harder at him, and his eyes meet mine in horror when he realizes that he doesn't stand a chance against us.

I don't know if Kai's magic is stronger than his, but mine is. And combined with Kai's? I watch in fascination as his skin

begins to take on a blue hue, telling me that his body is beginning to shut down even as he struggles. It takes longer than I would expect for someone to die from a lack of oxygen. He loses consciousness somewhere around the one minute mark. We continue to pour our magic into him, but when Kam collapses onto the floor, we move over to him.

Kai drops my hand to press his fingers to Kam's neck until he finds his pulse. It's another two or three minutes before Kai's hand falls away, his eyes lifting to meet mine. "He's gone."

It takes a few seconds for the sound of the rest of the room to return to me.

"What have you done?" Gabe is screaming.

I turn my head slowly to find that it's taking all three men to hold Gabe from barreling over to where Kai and I kneel. I just blink at them, unsure why he seems so upset.

"I don't know what you're so upset about. Kam only got what was coming to him. Wouldn't it be a shame if the same happened to you?" I tilt my head, watching as Gabe goes still at my words. "Oh, no. That wouldn't be a shame at all, would it?"

"You'll pay for this. You might have stopped what we had planned for today, but you won't remain queen for long. I'll make sure of it." Gabe jerks himself from the hold of the three men before stomping out of the room.

“We probably shouldn’t let him go,” I tell them, watching as they turn to me with worried expressions. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” Hunter’s eyebrows shoot up. “You and Kai just killed someone, and you’re acting like nothing has changed.”

Glancing down at Kam’s body, I shrug. It should worry me that I feel nothing over his death, but I can’t seem to feel anything right now. Not even worry over the lack of feeling. Maybe they’re right to be worried.

“He deserved it.”

Marcos suddenly stands in front of me, though I never saw him move. He cups my face in his hands. “Kitten?”

“I think she’s in shock,” Kai says, voice heavy with what I think is guilt. “I didn’t want her to do that. She shouldn’t have helped me kill him. She shouldn’t have that on her conscience.”

“A little too late for that,” Hunter growls. “What a disaster. Her coronation is in hours, and Grace will be here any minute.”

“Yes.” I nod. “Grace and Adaline are coming to help me get ready. I become the Fae Queen today.”

My voice doesn’t sound right. Something is definitely wrong, but I’m not worried. I almost feel like I’m floating, like I’m disconnected from everything that is happening around me. Like everything is happening to someone else. I don’t feel like I’m in control of my body.

“It’s fine. They’ll help me get ready. You’ll love my dress. I’ll make a beautiful queen.”

“Fuck,” Marcos curses at the knock that sounds.

“That’ll be Grace and Adaline.” I try to step away from the hands grasping me, but they just tighten. “You need to let me go so I can answer the door. Or at least one of you needs to answer it. We can’t let them just stand out there.”

“She’s not wrong,” Caiden says from behind me. When did he get there? Hadn’t he been by Hunter a moment ago?

Wait, where is Hunter? I turn my head and find him standing beside me, staring down at me. Huh, I guess they both moved over here. I don’t know how I missed that.

“Are you going to get the door?” I ask when another knock sounds.

Caiden grunts behind me, and then I see him from the corner of my eye heading towards the door. I try to peer over Marcos’s shoulder to watch him, but they’re all so damn tall. I end up leaning over and sticking my head between his and Kai’s arms.

“We have a problem,” Caiden says by way of greeting. “It might be best if Adaline wasn’t here.”

“Why?” I call out. “I want Adaline here. She’s going to help make me a beautiful queen. Let them in, Cade.”

Grace pushes into the room, Adaline at her heels. Both women freeze when they see Kam lying on the floor, unmoving.

“He got what he deserved, don’t you think?” I try to break away from the guys again, but they hold me in place. “I’m just trying to move closer to Grace and Adaline. They’re not going to hurt me.”

“What the hell happened?” Grace demands, hands on her hips.

“Gabe and Kam came for a visit,” I tell her, much to the annoyance of my guys. “They wanted to cause trouble, but we took care of Kam, and when I mentioned to Gabe what a shame it would be if the same thing happened to him, he ran like the chicken he is.”

“What is wrong with Hadley?” Grace asks, eyes round.

“We think she’s in shock....” Kai runs his hand down my cheek, and I turn to smile at him. He’s so handsome. “Honestly? I think she’s disassociated.”

“Her coronation is in four hours. We don’t have time for this.” Grace pulls at her hair as she stares between me and Kam’s body. “Adaline, I need you to go find the head healer. Tell him to bring a sedative, just in case. I don’t know what we’re supposed to do about him. He can’t just disappear.”

Grace pulls out her phone, calling someone. I focus my attention back on Kai, pulling him down for a kiss. “I love you, Kai. I’m glad that your monster is dead. Now, you’re safe.”

“Fuck, angel,” he curses, shaking his head. “I need you to come back to us. You have to deal with what just happened.

You can't do this—especially not today.”

I shrug, something pulling inside of me at his words. I turn my focus to Marcos, not wanting to deal with it. “Is there time for another orgy? I could totally go for another one.”

“Goddess above, Hadley.” Marcos slams his hand over my mouth. “You can't just say things like that when other people can hear.”

Another shrug as I turn away. “I'm going to my bedroom. I need to get ready.”

This time, they finally let me break free from their grasp. I can feel their eyes on me as I walk to the double doors leading to my bedroom. I know how I'm responding to this isn't right, but it's like every time I try to grasp at the threads of thoughts about it, they just fly away.

I don't bother closing the door behind me and head to the bed. Climbing onto it, I stare at the ceiling. It's not especially interesting, but neither is anything else. But laying there seems to allow me to focus better on my thoughts.

Kam is dead.

I helped kill a man.

A man is dead because of me.

Fuck.

I try to suck in a breath as a weight seems to settle on my chest, but I can't seem to force it past my lips.

Fuck.

And now I recall the word that Kai had used—disassociation. I've read about it, and as I rush back to myself, I have to agree with his assessment. Sitting up, I clutch at my chest as I try to call out to my men—to any of them. I need them, and I need them now, but I can't get enough air in my lungs to be able to call out.

Panicking, I pull on my magic and send a blast of air at the doors. They fly open and slam against the walls. Five heads snap in the direction of the bedroom, and then they're running to me. Thank the goddess.

Caiden is the first one to make it to me as he gathers me into his arms. "Breathe, baby girl. You have to breathe."

I gasp, trying to follow his directions, but my body won't let me. He settles behind me, pulling my back to his chest. "Breathe with me. In for three and out for three."

I try, I really do, but I can't. All I can do is stare into the other room where Kam's body lies lifeless on the floor. Hunter steps into my line of sight, cutting off my view of Kam. His mouth is moving, and I know he's saying something, but I can't make it out. All I hear is a high-pitched cry ringing in my ears. It takes me a moment to realize I'm the one making that noise.

My vision begins to darken around the edges, telling me I'm losing myself to a full-blown panic attack. Marcos's face appears in front of me, mouth moving, but all I can do is shake my head. I can't hear him—I can't hear any of them.

There's a pinch in my arm, and then I don't feel anything. Darkness closes in on me, and then there's nothing.



Blinking my eyes against the bright lights streaming in the windows. Turning my head, I realize I'm in my bedroom, but I don't remember how I got here. The last thing I remember is sitting at the table after Hunter opened the note that had been left for me.

There's nothing after that.

"You're going to have to cancel the coronation. She can't go out there like this!" Why is Hunter yelling?

"You can't just cancel a coronation. She must be crowned within a month of her twenty-first birthday, or she loses her crown. That cannot happen, Hunter. It can't." I'm not sure I've ever heard Grace snap before. It's weird.

I sit up, lifting a hand to my head as it wobbles. I shake away the dizziness, once again trying to remember what the hell happened.

"Why would we cancel the coronation?" I ask, carefully climbing to my feet.

Six heads snap in my direction, eyes wide. I start to walk toward them but end up staggering and leaning against the bed.

"What the fuck happened to me?"

Hunter and Caiden grab each of my arms, helping me back onto the bed.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Grace asks, coming to stand in front of me.

“There was a knock on the door,” I say, surprising myself. I hadn’t remembered that before. “Gabe and Kam—”

I break off, raising a hand to my mouth in horror as my eyes seek out Kai. He’s leaning against the wall, face downcast and filled with guilt. He shakes his head and turns away.

“Kai, don’t you turn away from me,” I bark out. “Come here.”

He hesitates before turning around and coming over to kneel in front of me, eyes locked on the floor. I lift his chin until his eyes meet mine, blinking away tears.

“He deserved to die, Kai, and you didn’t deserve to bear that burden alone. I love you, and I will always have your back. We probably could’ve picked a better day to do it, but I don’t regret helping you. Do you hear me?”

He nods slowly, tears filling his eyes and spilling over. I pull him to me, and he rests his head against my stomach as he sobs. I run my hands through his hair, attempting to soothe him as I turn to Grace.

“How long do we have until the coronation?”

“It’s supposed to start in an hour.”

I wince. “Do we have anyone that can do my hair and makeup in that amount of time?”

“I had to send away the people who we hired for it.” Grace shakes her head.

“My sisters!” Caiden exclaims. “They’re all here for the coronation. Between the three of them, I’m sure they can get it done. Hold on.”

My eyes widen as he walks to the sitting room to call them. “I have to meet his other two sisters? I adore Morgan, but this day is stressful enough without me having to meet his sisters.”

“Breathe, princess. It’ll be okay.” Hunter leans over and brushes his lips against mine. “If you want to make it to your coronation on time, we have to do what we have to do.”

“And if it starts late, it’ll be fine,” Grace says, nodding. “Yeah, I can make excuses if they can get you ready.”

“I can help too.”

I turn to find Adaline standing in the doorway. I give her a small smile. “I think having the three of them up here will be enough. I’m sure Grace can use your help.”

Her face falls, and she steps back into the sitting room without another word. I frown because I hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings, but there is such a thing as too many cooks in one kitchen.

My thoughts are diverted when a grimacing Caiden ducks back into the room.

“They can’t help?” I ask with a sigh.

“Oh, they’re coming to help. They also threatened to castrate me and the other guys if we were in the room when they arrived. I tried to explain to them that our rooms are in your suite, but Aubrey didn’t want to hear it.” He’s pale as he moves to help Kai to his feet. “C’mon, guys. Off to our rooms to get ready.”

“Are you *afraid* of your younger sister?” I laugh.

“Petrified.”

The corner of Kai’s mouth lifts as he tries to smile, and I reach out to squeeze his hand. He leans in and kisses me softly.

“Thank you, angel. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I call after him as Caiden drags him from the room. Hunter and Marcos both press kisses to the top of my head before they disappear to their rooms as well.

Grace shrugs when I turn to her in question. “I’ll go wait in the other room to let Caiden’s sisters in when they arrive. Why don’t you go take a shower?”

I nod, watching her go and wondering what I’ve gotten myself into this time.

Chapter Twenty

Hadley

An hour and a half later, I'm somehow more relaxed than I've been all day but also a hell of a lot more nervous. At least I look damn good with Caiden's sisters having worked their magic. I'm even more in love with this dress than I was with the one I'd worn to the masquerade, which is saying something as I absolutely adored that dress.

This one is much less risque—something that Grace and I had gone back and forth over, but we'd managed to find a dress that we both approved of. It's strapless with a sweetheart neckline, hugging my curves down to my hips, showing just the right amount of cleavage. The back of the dress dips scandalously low, stopping just above my ass with a bow. The skirt of the dress is an A-line but is covered with enough chiffon that it reminds me of what I used to call a princess dress.

The bodice is silver, and the skirt is an ombre pink—beginning with a dusty pink and lightening to the palest of pinks at the bottom. Strappy silver stilettos add an extra couple

of inches to my height. Elbow-length gloves in a matching silver grace my arms, giving the outfit a dignified look. The necklace I wear drapes across my collarbone, a collar of pink diamonds with matching earrings. I'm sure the jewelry I wear costs more than I've made in my lifetime in L'Airid.

Morgan had been placed in charge of my makeup, and she's gone with a dramatic smokey eye in pinks and grays and my lips are painted a rose gold. Aubry and Emery had tag teamed my hair and I've ended up with a messy but elegant updo. A loose braid across the front runs from ear to ear with a low, messy bun at the nape of my neck, and the hair on my crown has been teased. They guaranteed it would look amazing with or without the crown I was about to have placed on my head.

I press a hand to my stomach, trying to calm my nerves. Morgan grabs my hand, squeezing it.

"You've got this, Hadley. You look fierce, and we both know you will make an amazing queen. So just walk in there, and own your badassness. Show them how awesome you are."

Yeah, as if it was that simple.

"Thanks, Morgan," I tell her with a smile. "You should probably go find your seat, so Grace can get this show on the road."

Morgan nods, and then she's scurrying off to find her seat, leaving me alone in the room just down the hallway from the ballroom. It's the same ballroom where the masquerade was held, although Grace told me it would be set up differently.

“Are you ready?”

My head snaps up at Grace’s voice, pulling me from my thoughts. “No, I’m really not.”

Grace just smiles, coming to stand in front of me and taking my hands in hers. “You look so much like your mother. You know she wore this exact jewelry set on her coronation day.”

I shake my head, surprised she hadn’t told me that when I’d chosen the set. I ran my hands over the necklace, making me feel closer to the mother I’ll never know. I wish she could be here today, and I wish my mom—the woman who’d raised me—could be here as well. But while they might not be able to be here, Grace is here, and that does settle some of my nerves.

“You have this. All you have to do is walk down the stairs, and then down the aisle with your head held high. Myself and a member of each minor court will be waiting for you in front of the dais. At your request, instead of the dukes and duchesses, Caiden, Kai, Marcos, and Hunter will act as the court representatives. Though it would have fallen to Kai regardless, what with Kam... unavailable. Do you remember the vow you must repeat?”

I nod because even with as nervous as I am, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget the words that both Grace and the guys have quizzed me on for the last week.

Grace nods. “Then that’s all you need to remember. You will be prompted for everything else. There’s no reason to be nervous.”

“Except that someone wants to kill me.” I laugh, only there’s nothing humorous about my words.

“Let’s just get through the coronation and then go from there. All we can do is focus on one thing at a time. We have extra guards spread throughout the ballroom and the palace. We’ve done everything that we could to make it safe for you, and for everyone in attendance. So focus on the coronation and let the security team worry about everything else.” At my nod, Grace squeezes my hands and leads me from the room. At the entrance, she shoots me one last smile before leaving me to take her place for the ceremony.

I know she’s right. There’s nothing else I can do about whoever wants me gone—whatever wants me dead. If they come for me, I have my magic to protect me. Not to mention my guys and the security team. Plus, there’s no way they’d be stupid enough to try something with this many witnesses. Grace had told me there would be close to five hundred people attending my coronation. There are far too many people in one place for anyone to try anything. At least that’s what I try to reassure myself of.

I don’t think this person would care about hurting others to get to me, but I am hopeful they don’t want witnesses. Though, it wouldn’t be the first time I’d been wrong since arriving in Sorlphi, would it?

After what seems both like an eternity and only seconds, the doors open before me. The guards stand at attention, and the

only sound I can hear from the ballroom is a harp playing quietly.

Taking a deep breath, I step forward, and the gauzy curtains are lifted to allow my entrance. Coming to the top of the stairs, I pause. Letting my eyes roam over those in attendance, I find hundreds of eyes on me. They're seated in elegant silver chairs, and most are faces I don't recognize.

As my eyes move to the front of the room, I find the minor court aristocracy seated in the first few rows. I see Morgan beaming at me, but my eyes are already moving on to where my guys and Grace are waiting.

They all look hot as hell. Caiden is rocking a more casual look that is definitely doing it for me. A tan suit with a white button-down shirt. The jacket is undone, as are the top few buttons of his shirt, revealing a nice peek of his chest. He's paired it with brown loafers and no socks, leaving his ankles bare where the pants stop.

Meanwhile, Hunter is dressed completely opposite to Caiden—prim and proper. His slate gray glen check three-piece suit is fitted and is obviously tailor-made for him. Paired with a black button-down shirt, a white tie, and a pair of shiny black wingtip Oxfords, he looks delicious enough to lick.

Kai is dressed similarly to Hunter, though his three-piece suit is a pale gray, bordering on white. His pressed white button-down and black tie look amazing against his skin tone. While his suit isn't as snug as Hunter's, it fits just right, and I

find myself biting back a moan. I didn't realize how much I loved a man in a suit until right now.

Marcos looks just as prim and proper as Hunter and Kai, but instead of gray, his suit is in a deep blue. His shirt is white, and he's paired it with a tie that's a slightly paler shade of blue than his suit and a pair of white dress boots. They even have a bit of a heel to them. Why is that hot?

Finally, I begin my descent down the stairs, making sure to gather my skirts so I won't trip on them. I remind myself to keep my shoulders back and head held high as Grace taught me. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I let my skirts fall back to the ground before slowly making my way up the aisle with my eyes locked on my men.

Mine.

They're all fucking mine.

Will this be what it's like walking down the aisle on the day of our wedding? Another event looming on the horizon. In just a month, I'll make this same walk to them in a different dress to make them my husbands—my consorts. Will I be as nervous then as I am now?

Once I've passed the first row, I pause with about ten feet between me and the guys. They're lined up in a row with Grace in the middle at the end of the aisle, crown in her hands. I step forward until I stop before Marcos, standing in the leftmost position.

“Your Majesty.” Marcos bows at his waist. “I am Lord Marcos Castillo, representative of the Spring Court, holders of the element earth.” He raises his hand, a rose forming from nothing, which he offers to me. “We ask for your vow today before you take the crown.”

I drop into a curtsy before accepting the rose. “Thank you, My Lord, for your gift. It is my vow you shall receive today to you for the people of the Spring Court. It is my vow to always protect all Fae, especially and including those who reside in the Spring Court. I vow to be fair and just during my rule—to be open and honest at all times. I vow to be clear and concise in my decision-making, to always communicate with the citizens of the Spring Court. I vow to uphold our laws so long as they are fair to all citizens. If I discover a law that is no longer fair or just, I vow that I will immediately put it to rights. I vow that when considering laws, new and old, that they will be fair to all citizens of the Spring Court. I vow to never favor one court over another. I vow to always hold all members of the Spring Court, and those outside it, in the same regard. My life, my reign, is for the people of the Spring Court. It is my desire and my oath that I will uphold what we hold most sacred, protecting our lands and our people. For now and forevermore.”

I use my earth magic to form another rose and then twine the stems together. Handing the offering back, Marcos inclines his head as he takes my offering before stepping backward while I step to my right.

“Your Majesty.” Caiden bows. “I am Lord Caiden Murphy, representative of the Summer Court, holders of the element fire.” His palm lifts, a fire dragon forming in his palm, which he offers to me. “We ask for your vow today before you take the crown.”

I drop into another curtsey before taking the offered fire dragon. “Thank you, My Lord, for your gift.” I repeat the same vow, only to the Summer Court. I form a second fire dragon before merging them into one large dragon that’s about the size of a house cat. I set it on the ground, using my magic to have it move around Caiden’s legs as he steps back.

I move past Grace until I stop in front of Kai.

“Your Majesty.” It’s Kai’s turn to bow. “I am Lord Kai Jin, representative of the Autumn Court, holders of the element air.” When he lifts his hand, a small cyclone spins around his palm. “We ask for your vow today before you take the crown.”

Another curtsey before accepting his gift and a repeating of the vow. Like with the fire, I create another cyclone before combining the two and sending it to dance around Kai’s feet as he steps away from me. Another step to the right for my last court.

“Your Majesty.” I have to fight a shiver at the sound of Hunter’s deep voice as he bows to me. “I am Lord Hunter Valentino, representative of the Winter Court, holders of the element water.” In his palm, he offers me a water heart. “We ask you for your vow today before you take the crown.”

Once again, I drop into a curtsy, accepting the water heart. I repeat the vow before forming a second heart of water, merging it together into one, and passing it back to Hunter.

With the vows to the courts completed, I move back to the aisle in front of Grace. I turn to the audience. “To those of you here today. Witness my vow to you, to your courts, to all of Sorlphi.” And one last time, I repeat the vow.

Turning back to Grace, I drop to my knees before her and bow my head. Grace lifts the crown in the air as she steps before me.

“May Bria, the goddess of creation, bless you and your rule. May she guide you to bring peace and prosperity to our people, and to our lands. May she guide you in your decisions, counseling you so you will always know what is right for Sorlphi. May your reign be long and happy. Bria, I ask you for your blessing of our Fae Queen.”

She places the crown on my head, and the hairs on my arms raise, power radiating throughout the room. I feel the press of lips to my forehead before a hand wraps around my arm, helping me to my feet. But as I lift my eyes, I find that Grace has stepped back, and no one is near me.

“I bless you and your reign,” whispers in the air as I feel a presence wash over me, surrounding me as if pulling me into a hug. The presence releases me, and for just a moment, there’s a shimmering shape before me—tall, lithe, and feminine. The brush of lips across my forehead. *“Long live the Fae Queen.”*

Then it's gone, leaving me confused and a little off balance as Grace announces, "I present the Fae Queen, Hadley Dubois-Corbin."

I hear the audience stand as I step onto the stairs of the dais, stopping in front of the throne—*my* throne—before turning. As one, everyone in the audience, plus Grace and the guys, drop to their knees with their heads bowed.

"Long live the Fae Queen," echoes throughout the room as it's yelled three times.

"You may be seated." I pause as everyone sits, taking a moment to gaze out at the crowd. These are my people. They are the ones I must protect. Warmth fills me as I think of the changes I plan to make, of how I plan to make Sorlphi a better place for them. For all of us, really. This is our home, and I look forward to making it a place that every single citizen is proud to call home. I look forward to making them proud of me.

But that's for a later date. For now, it's time that I address them as their new queen and announce my consorts. I know that many in the audience are here for just that. I do notice some of the suitors in the crowd, and I hope they kept their word to not tell anyone who'd been chosen as my suitors. If they didn't, I guess there's nothing I can do about it now. All I want is for my people to be as happy for me as I'm feeling right now. I want them to be happy with my choices, and I want them to be happy for me.

“Now that I have been crowned as your queen and I have given all of you my vows, I am to announce my consorts. Before I do this, it is my greatest pleasure to inform you that we will hold an annual celebration here in the palace on this day each year, to which all citizens of all courts will be invited. This will be to not only celebrate my rule but to celebrate our coming together as one people.

“Now, for the part that I know you all have been waiting for. I will announce my chosen consorts. Our dedication ceremony will happen one month from today. I wish to thank each and every citizen who put forth their name for consideration to become my consort. My decision wasn’t easy, but I have chosen the four whom I believe to be the best choice—not just for me, but for all of Sorlphi. I know that these four individuals will help me continue to shape Sorlphi into the best it can be.

“From the Spring Court, Lord Marcos Castillo. From the Summer Court, Lord Caiden Murphy. From the Autumn Court, Lord Kai Jin. And from the Winter Court, Lord Hunter Valentino. If the four of you will join me?”

Caiden is the first up the stairs, pressing a kiss to my cheek before moving back to stand beside my throne. Kai, Marcos, and Hunter repeat the kiss before moving to stand next to the throne—Kai next to Caiden and the other two on the opposite side.

Grace nods to me and makes to turn back to the crowd, but that’s when everything goes terribly wrong. A booming noise

echoes through the room, and the ground begins to shake. A bright white light forms at the top of the stairs, growing and growing until I have to lift an arm to cover my eyes. There's a sharp, whining noise, and then I'm flying backward.

I crash into my throne, and its weight is the only thing that keeps it—and me—from falling backwards. My head is swimming from the impact, but I hear something slam against the wall behind me, and I just know it's the four men who had just moments ago stood behind my throne. Worry pushes into my senses, a tugging in my chest that screams to know if they are injured. But it's not just them I must worry about.

Screams and shrieks fill my ears as I attempt to find the breath that was knocked from me. Blinking, my eyes can't seem to focus after the wash of light. Slowly, my sight begins to return, though it's still black around the edges. The sight before me causes my heart to seize in my chest.

The chairs and people who'd sat in them have been blown about the room. Chairs are splintered, and people are collapsed on the floor. Some are sitting slowly, holding their heads, but most lie unmoving.

I force my eyes to the stairs, needing to know what caused this chaos. My eyes widen in shock at the sight that awaits me, my mind unable to make sense of what I'm seeing—not wanting to believe it.

Blinking my eyes, I try to clear my vision once again. I'm sure that I must have been seeing things. A shake of my head, and I'm sure I'll see something different. Only, I don't.

How can this be happening? Why is this happening? What *is* happening? This can't be real.

“What? Why?”

Epilogue

Unknown

The shock on her face makes it all worth it. I love that she had no idea that it was me working against her this entire time. Now I won't have to pretend any longer—a thought that is particularly satisfying. I can't wait to take everything from her, just as she took everything from me.

She thought today would be the perfect day—the day she becomes queen and the day she takes Caiden, Hunter, Kai, and Marcos as hers. But I was never going to let that happen. She might wear the crown for now, but only because I wanted her to have a taste of it before I took it all away. There's nothing more satisfying than allowing someone a moment of thinking they have everything they've ever wanted before ripping it from them.

Hadley doesn't deserve what's been given to her—what she's taken. She doesn't know Sorlphi, and she doesn't know the Fae. Not like I do. How could she when she wasn't raised here? How anyone thought she could become the Fae Queen is beyond me. All because of some stupid prophecy that

someone surely made up hundreds of years ago. The gods aren't real. They never were. The prophecy is nothing more than pretty words to give people hope.

I've been planning this from the moment I found out Hadley existed, and I've played my part perfectly. It's obvious from the shock on her face that she never suspected me, which makes me happier than I can put into words.

I'd known she would poison those around her, and I was right. But I will correct that. I will fix everything she's broken. And if I get to cause a little chaos in the process? All the better.

I smile as my eyes scan the room. Should I feel bad for possibly killing those in attendance? Probably, but I don't. They chose to be here—chose to support her. The only ones I feel a little bad about are the heirs, but they need to see the error of their ways.

It's time for everyone to realize the poison that is Hadley. I can't wait to see the realization on their faces when they realize just how toxic she is for them, for Sorlphi. I will prove to them that she isn't worthy of their love and their support. That she was never meant to be queen.

Power courses through me, the magic begging to be used. And use it, I will. But first, there are a few things I'd like to say to Hadley. I see her mouth move and it takes me a moment to realize what she's said because I'm too far away to hear her words.

“What? Why?”

Oh, she wants to know why? Well, I'll gladly tell her—tell all of them—why this happened. I'm just glad that my friend isn't here. I would never want to hurt them, and I don't think that they would approve of my choices today. But I'll make sure they understand why this was the right thing to do. All my friend will care about is that Hadley's taken care of, I'm sure of it. The end result is all that matters.

Because my friend means everything to me. My friend is the only one who has ever *really* cared about me, and they made sure that I had everything I could possibly need to rid Sorlphi of Hadley. Even making sure that I had a way to weaken Hadley's magic.

Shaking my head, I push away thoughts of my friend. I blink, forcing myself to focus on Hadley. That's been happening more frequently—my mind wandering off on tangents that aren't important. I don't know what's causing it, but I know I'm not a fan. With so much at risk, I need to be able to focus on the task at hand, which is taking down the pretender queen.

Hadley.

She's what needs to be my focus. Not the four men I see on their backs behind the throne she pretends is hers. Not my friend who has helped me. Not the hundreds of other people who surround us. Destroying Hadley. That's what matters.

Stupid, stupid Hadley. Always Hadley. Everything is always about Hadley, and has been since she arrived in Sorlphi.

Resentment rushes through me, and I try to push it down. Yes, she'd taken everything from me, but I will pay her back for that. That's why I'm here. I'm taking back my life. Taking back what she's stolen from me. Proving to everyone that I'm strong. That I'm more than what they see. That I'm more than Hadley.

Hadley is a joke. She's the woman who is so oblivious to what's going on around her that she didn't realize I was stealing her magic. I made her weaker, while making myself stronger.

That's the best part of all of this. Hadley will be confident that she can protect herself and those around her, but I've made sure that she can't. I've weakened her without her even knowing it. I can't wait to see the look on her face when she realizes her magic isn't as strong as it once was. When she realizes I've thought of everything and she doesn't stand a chance.

When she realizes she should've listened and left Sorlphi. That it's her own stubbornness, her own hubris, that has led to her downfall—to her death. Because that's what it will come to now. If she'd only left, then she wouldn't be staring down the barrel of the metaphorical gun I now hold to her head. There is no other outcome for today. This is what must happen—what I will make happen. Hadley will die today, and it will be by my hand.

Then everything can be as it should have always been.

*...to be continued in Sinister Secrets, the conclusion to The
Secrets of Sorlphi series.*

Author's Note

So... are you angry with me? I hope not. But if you are, I'm always willing to listen to you. But I promise, you'll find out who it is very quickly in Sinister Secrets. I've already started on Sinister Secrets, but it's not my main focus. I'm currently working on getting Knot My Reality written so I can share that with you all. But as soon as it's done, I'll be diving into Sinister Secrets full-time. I can't believe I now have two books and two anthologies to my name. And by spring of 2023, I'll have a complete series.

I want to thank each and every one of you, my readers. Without you, I wouldn't be able to write my stories. Those of you who recommend my books? You don't know how much I appreciate you. Those of you who review my books? I appreciate you. Without these things, no one would know who I am, or who these characters are. Imagine the sadness of no one ever meeting Kai... I mean, any of them. Because I'd never show favoritism to any of my characters.

A special shout out to Laura Beltran and Jacquelin Gipson. The two of them won the chance to create characters for this book and created Kaspian and Braxton for us. Braxton will definitely be around for more now that she's Hadley's advisor. As for Kaspian? Who knows. After all, this isn't the only series planned in this world.

Thank you to the Shennanigans crew for always being there for me, supporting and listening to me whenever they can. Without y'all, I'd have lost my mind by now. Of that, I have no doubt.

Also, thank you to my alpha, beta, and ARC teams. All of y'all are a huge part of making these books a success!

About the Author

Miranda is a baby author who has been writing since high school, but never considered being published until now. When she discovered reverse harem books, she knew it was time to share her stories. She has plans to write paranormal romance, urban fantasy, omegaverse, and contemporary—all reverse harem/why choose/polyam stories.

Growing up a Navy brat, Miranda has lived in many places. She currently makes her home in Piney Flats, TN with her husband and adorable corgi, Luna. Don't worry if you've never heard of it, it's a teeny tiny town less than an hour from the Tennessee/Virginia border. When not writing, Miranda spends most of her time reading or playing Dungeons and Dragons like a true geek. She also has an almost unhealthy obsession with corgis—so don't be surprised if she brings them up.

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