

CLAWS CLAUSE BOOK SEVEN



UPTOWN GIRL

JESSICA LYNCH

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

Thank you for checking out [*Uptown Girl!*](#)

This is the seventh book in the **Claws Clause** series, and while it's part of a long-running universe, it's designed to be read as a standalone. Of course, you'll understand more of the character's relationships if you've read the other books—especially since a few of them show up in this book—but the focus of this book is on Bradley and Rose's romance.

Well, and the rift, too. If you've followed along with the series from the beginning, the rift was introduced at the end of book five and I'm so excited that you're finally going to see what's going on inside of there!

In the last book, the romance featured Brad's older brother, Travis, and his psychic witch mate, Virginia. As they settled down in Woodbridge, helping to figure out what the mysterious rift could be, it was Brad's turn to set out and find his mate. Which he does in a pampered, coddled vampire princess—but, like some of the other shifter heroes in the series, it's not so easy as his body simply recognizing that Rose is meant for him.

Brad is different in another way. Like his brother, he's a dominant jaguar shifter, but as the second-born son, he has a hard time dealing with being stronger than Travis. For that—and other reasons—Brad has a tendency to self-harm in a bid to regain a little control. It was mentioned briefly in [*Born to Run*](#), but now that he's the main character of his own story, I wanted to give a heads up to any readers who might be uncomfortable in that subject matter. It's not overly graphic;

when he feels like he's losing his hold on his beastly half, he uses the pain as a reminder that he's dangerous. He's never any threat to his heroine, though, and since she's a vampire... well, she doesn't mind a little blood.

Just in case, I wanted to add that in the foreword. And I hope you enjoy reading about Princess Rose, her jaguar bodyguard, and a kidnapping that will change the world as they know it...

xoxo,

Jessica

PROLOGUE



On the subject of attacks on a fully recognized union:

1. A bonded union (also referred to colloquially as *matings, claimings, bloodings, soulmates, etc.*), in which at least one part of the union is a registered Paranormal, is subject to the bylaws outlined in Ordinance 7304, Section IV, part iii and below.
2. Once recognized, with a duly-issued Bonding License to serve as proof to the registration, any bonded Paranormal is responsible for the safety, protection, and guidance of said “mate”.
3. As such, there are no limits in this Ordinance to what a Paranormal can do to protect said “mate”. In the event that a “mate” is threatened or endangered, none of the clauses outlined in this Ordinance apply.
4. However, in the event that one party in the union becomes deceased, this Ordinance requires that, should the remaining party be a Paranormal, the broken “bond” must be neutralized in order to keep the Paranormal from becoming a danger to the rest of society.
5. As such, the guidelines outlined in Section IV, in regards to a broken union, shall apply, up to and including voluntary incarceration in a state-run facility. In some severe cases, the result can also be state-sanctioned execution.

Section IV, part iii

CHAPTER 1

JUST ONE STEP



Maybe staying back in the warded-off witch town of Woodbridge, acting as backup to the Beta and his mate, wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Sure, both Shea and Colt now made it obvious they knew that he'd developed feelings for the pretty witch healer over the last few months. It wasn't like he was ever going to act on them.

He was a shifter. He physically *couldn't*.

Not to mention, if he did, Colt would pop his head off of the stump of his neck like it was a cork in a cheap bottle of wine. Colt had done it before to the former Nightwalker king. Not even being packmates would stop the territorial wolf from letting another male pine after his mate.

He wasn't worried about losing his head. His heart, either; as much as he loved Shea, he wasn't *in* love with her for the sole reason that she wasn't *his* mate. But he *was* worried about losing his formerly iron tight hold on his inner beast's leash—which was precisely why he'd decided to leave Woodbridge. He would've gone anywhere the Alpha or the Omega sent him so he could get himself back under control.

Except, he realized, *here*.

As his jaguar prowled around inside of his brawny chest, Bradley Fenton stood motionless just outside of the southern border of Eastern Pack land. It had already been five minutes, and he wasn't so sure he was going to get the nerve to lift his booted foot and step past the invisible border anytime soon.

Wasn't that something? A dominant alpha in his own right, pushing thirty, with the express invitation to visit the Alpha and his mate... and he couldn't bring himself to take that step.

It was pathetic, but he knew that. Just like how every member of the Eastern Pack knew instinctively where their territory ended. It was in the way the air shifted, and a whisper against his skin that said: *home*. Even if Brad had moved out to Wolf's Creek a more than two years ago, every inch of him had come alive as he loped toward the borders.

Including his beast—and their memories of what happened the last time he was here.

Since leaving, he'd worked hard to put a leash on his unpredictable other half. After all, if it wasn't for his hair-trigger temper and his jaguar's tendency to snap his fangs first and ask questions later, he would still be living in the same house he shared with his older brother since their grandfather's death back when they were teenage cubs. Nowadays he still lived with Travis—or, at least, he had until his older brother had up and disappeared while chasing his fated mate.

Virginia Stone was a psychic witch who moonlighted as a bounty hunter for the head of her coven. While she tracked down a dark witch, Travis had followed after her, hoping to claim her as his. Four months after his brother's hunt started, Travis finally returned—and he brought Gin with him.

Utah. Fucking Utah, Brad thought to himself, completely aware that he was stalling. Travis had only been back on the east coast for a week, and he still couldn't get past the image of his laidback brother buddying up with his new mate to corner a witch in Utah of all places.

Of course, they were too late. Gin's quarry—Priscilla Winters, a name that had Brad's jaguar chuffing angrily just to think it—was already dead. She'd lost a witch duel with Gin's employer, and damn near took the world with her when she went.

Maybe not the world. But she sure left a memento for the witch town of Woodbridge to remember her by: a tear in space that ended up turning into a glowing rift right in the middle of

an empty Woodbridge street. No one knew what it was, how to get rid of it, or what was on the other side...

...but there was something on the other side. Brad was one hundred percent convinced of that. Considering he was part of the small group of Paras assigned to live along the cursed street, moving into one of the houses abandoned by its occupant when Cilla's dark magic oozed over Woodbridge, Brad knew more about the rift than most.

Then there was the fact that, for weeks now, he's been the one to watch the rift's glow flare at precisely midnight, showing off the shadows lurking on the other side.

Shadows, he swore, that had pointy ears.

His reason for being in Woodbridge was two-fold. With Travis suddenly missing for months, the Alpha of the Eastern Pack decided it was a good idea to distract Brad from worrying about his brother by giving him a task. Second? With the Alpha leading the pack, he sent his brother—the pack's Beta—and his witchy mate to act in the pack's interests. Brad got the job of watching the Beta couple's backs.

Only one problem. He might've watched Shea's back a little too closely. As discreet as he thought he was, his feelings for the Beta's mate were more obvious than he thought. Didn't matter that he could never act on them, or that he never *would*. Now that Travis was back and he brought another witch with him, the newly bonded couple were joining the growing collective of Para's watching over the entirely too mysterious rift.

And Brad? Well, it looked like he was getting the boot.

Up until he took the job of watching out for the Beta and his mate, Brad was a brick mason for Wolfe Construction, the pack's business. Travis had the job first, then he insisted that his two-years younger brother follow in the trade.

He'd thought it might help work the aggression out of Brad's jaguar. In a way, it did. It also added muscles to his already brawny frame, increasing his shifter's strength, and

giving his mind time to wander during the repetitive motion of slathering concrete and laying brick.

It was a good job. As a mason, he earned a good wage and was a productive member of the pack. He got to keep it even after that fateful challenge with Griff—something Brad was grateful for—but he'd taken a leave while Travis was missing, and he was needed in Woodbridge.

But now Travis was back. Sporting a ring of scars around his throat, the tell-tale sign that he spent three of those months in the magic-free prison known as the Cage, wearing a silver collar to leash his own beast, Travis came back—and he brought his bonded mate with him.

As for being needed in Woodbridge... right after Travis returned, Colt decided it was time Brad headed back to Wolf's Creek.

It was time he rejoined the pack again.

He probably could. Since being banished off of pack territory, moving to the mixed suburb where the current Alpha had settled down with his mate and his new pup, Brad had done everything he could to control his other half. Nothing kickstarted a lesson in anger management than the idea he might force his older brother to put him down if he ever went feral.

It was a struggle, but he did it. For most of his hormonal youth, the lack of any outlet for release had made him dangerous. He was a dominant alpha jaguar, and without being able to fuck, he fought. A lot. Until he picked the wrong Alpha damn challenge and *lost*.

It was a well-learned lesson, though. If anything, Brad discovered that when he had someone he considered his, someone he could *protect*, his control over his jaguar was iron tight. First, with Evangeline Wolfe, the Alpha's mate and the target of Priscilla Winters's rage. Then, with Shea Moonshadow, Colt's witch—and the reason why he was heading for the Alpha's cabin in the heart of pack land for the first time since he was kicked off of it.

This would've been so much easier, he decided, if the Alpha had called this meeting at his house in Wolf's Creek. The Fenton brothers had a place in the same cul-de-sac. To Brad, that was *his* territory. While these woods might be *home*, they stopped being his territory a long time ago.

And, technically, it never was...

In the center of the land, tucked away like the beating heart on a body, protected by woods and mountains instead of muscles and ribs, was where a majority of the pack settled down together. He'd grown up there, and he'd lost his right to stay there when he foolishly challenged Griff and nearly had his throat ripped out for it.

He should've known better. Even though he was aware that Melissa wasn't his mate—as a male shifter, he would *know* when he found his female—he'd grown too attached to her. She was his best friend, and it bothered him that Griff—who was her mate—was pussyfooting around instead of claiming her for once and for all.

To Brad, it just made sense. If you met your mate, take her so that no one else would get the chance. So long as the female was willing, it didn't go against any of the laws outlined in the ridiculous *Claws Clause*. In his experience, every shifter female was willing. It was when you're mate was other—either a human or a witch or another type of Para who could create bonds but didn't sense that they were fated the same way shifters did—that there was usually a wait.

A mate gets to choose. He knew that. But Melissa had chosen Griff. Griff admitted she was his mate. There was no reason to put off claiming sex.

He tried to explain that to Griff. Male to male, right? And maybe he shouldn't have put his snout in where it didn't belong because he'd never seen the easygoing wolf lose it as much as he had when Brad off-handedly mentioned that, if he could get it up, he'd ease Melissa's heat if Griff didn't want to. Not because he was in love with his friend—he wasn't—but because jealousy and loneliness went paw in paw sometimes

and Brad was too mixed up to see straight a couple of years ago.

So, yeah. Turned out that Melissa and Griff had already bonded each other, and no matter how dominant his jaguar was, there was no way in fucking hell an unmated shifter could defeat a bonded male who felt like his mate was insulted.

Griff could've killed him. He would've been in the right; even Travis admitted that, and his brother was probably the one soul who would've mourned him. The part of the *Claws Clause* governing all Para unions made it clear: as a bonded mate, there was no limit to what Griff could do to protect Melissa. Plus, Brad challenged the other male. Griff very easily could've made the fight to the death.

He didn't. Brad wasn't sure it was mercy—or a punishment.

If it was a punishment, he deserved it. Two years later, he was still ashamed at how he let his own need to find a female screw up two friendships. Not only that, but the former Alpha—Maddox's father, Terrence—kicked his sorry tail out of the heart of pack land until he knew how to be a better packmate.

Colt seemed to think that was now. Up until the moment Brad finished the hours-long run in his fur from Woodbridge to Eastern Pack territory, he almost agreed with his Beta. But with the border pulsing against his skin, the memory of Griff's claws slashing the side of his neck as fresh as it was two years ago... Brad was having second thoughts.

He'd already shifted from his jaguar back to his man shape. Having borrowed Travis's charmed shifter duffel—a bag that was majicked to shift with him, matching either of his forms so that he could carry a spare change of clothes and his phone with him—he quickly got dressed before he walked to the edge of pack territory.

Another stalling tactic. As a member of the pack, he could've ran right onto the land as a jaguar and he would've been welcomed. There was no reason to change back until he

was actually meeting with the Alpha, but he did it anyway if only to give himself more time to think.

As if he hadn't been doing that since Colt told him this morning that Maddox expected his presence at the Alpha Cabin that afternoon...

When Colt told him he thought Brad was ready to return to the pack, Brad almost agreed. Happy as he was to see his brother with his mate, it brought back a lot of the same jealous feelings he'd long struggled with. Add that to the feelings for his Beta's mate he couldn't get past, and while he was looking for an excuse to get out of Woodbridge, he wasn't so sure he was ready to resume his old life.

So he requested another way to test himself. To *prove* himself. If having someone to protect was the trigger that kept his jaguar from going feral and lashing out, there had to be someone else who needed a devoted shifter at their back.

Right?

Huffing out a breath, his hand reached up to the side of his neck where he had his shifter tattoo. Using dark red ink and silver nitrate, he had a Para artist immortalize Griff's slash marks around the curve of his throat. It was a reminder of how close he came to losing his life because he lost his control. Sure, Travis—who had a matching tattoo on his biceps—thought he got the brand because it showed he was a shifter. And while that was also true, he picked that spot purposely. Not only did he want everyone, whether they were human or paranormal, to see it, but he needed that reminder.

He needed to know what was at stake if he let his jaguar take the lead.

And if that wasn't enough to leash his beast, the double-does of silver nitrate in the mark did. The Para artist must've thought he was nuts when he asked for extra. It was needed to keep his shifter's regenerative properties from healing the tattoo as soon as the ink was embedded in his skin. The silver nitrate cauterized the skin, making it more of a colorful scar than a traditional tattoo.

The second dose? Made even the gentlest brush of his claws against the mark *burn*.

Brad needed the pain. It turned him into the perfect submissive shifter, helping him keep his jaguar under lock and key. He worked hard not to give anything away with his emotions or his scent, and he'd thought he'd done a good job of it.

Spoiler alert: he hadn't.

When the jolt from the silver nitrate wasn't enough, Brad punched walls. He kicked curbs. He slashed his side with his claws, and dug the points into the muscles of his thighs. Anything to make him feel alive.

Anything to make him feel like he wasn't on the edge of going feral again like he had when Griff accepted his challenge...

But ever since Shea called him out on hurting himself purposely whenever he felt his grip slip, he'd tried to control himself. It never occurred to Brad that the empathic witch could sense all the minor aches and pains he used to keep himself in line. True, her root gift was healing, but she kept her shields up to protect her from being bombarded by those in need of her magic.

Not Brad. For longer than he wanted to admit, she'd been quietly using magic on him to heal his injuries for him. Because she was good, she was kind... because she cared for him, too, she was helping him.

And Brad could help her by putting some distance between himself and the happily mated couple.

But, first, he had to meet Maddox.

Dropping his hand to the strap crossing over his chest, Brad tossed back his head. His shaggy hair had fallen forward into his eyes as he scowled at the border. He couldn't remember the last time he had a hair cut. Too long since he usually preferred to keep the dark strands cut as short as Travis's style... and he was still fucking stalling.

He wasn't the only one who knew it, either.

CHAPTER 2

MADDOX AND EVANGELINE



As an alpha, he relied on his nose more than any other of his senses. When the sweet yet musky scent of a feline female filtered to him on the wintry breeze, he instinctively cataloged it. It had the tang of *pack*, and though he didn't know exactly who it belonged to, it was familiar.

Brad parted his lips, sampling the scent further.

It was definitely a cat, he decided, amending his guess to a firm lioness when the tawny-haired shifter female ducked out from behind a nearby tree.

Sloane Burrows was a recent addition to the Eastern Pack. A talented architect, she worked alongside Colt, sketching out and planning designs when the Beta wasn't being pulled away to handle his pack duties. Because Brad also worked for Wolfe Construction, he saw her at the office from time to time. Never more than a quick nod, and not even that after the first time she made a move on him.

No wonder he didn't recognize her scent. Once Brad put her in the pile of "not his mate", it only irked his jaguar when Sloane invited him out to get coffee. Despite his habit of falling for females he couldn't have, Brad was loyal. For a female like Sloane, there was no denying "coffee" was a euphemism for something else.

Just because a male shifter couldn't fuck anyone but his mate, that didn't mean he couldn't... "practice". And Sloane seemed to keen to try out any males she could, even though they obviously weren't her mate.

On the flip side, she wasn't offended when she got shut down. In fact, his curt rejection didn't seem to faze her one way or another, and whenever he crossed her path at the main offices, she always had a flirty smile for him anyway.

Like now.

“Bradley! When my lioness warned me that someone was prowling outside of pack territory, I thought it was one of those Nightwalkers sneaking around again. I didn't smell dead meat, though. Actually... I don't smell much of anything.” Her brow creased before she shrugged. “Anyway, it's you. I never would've guessed.”

That was the point. Thank you, silver.

Another side effect he hadn't counted on—but that he was grateful for—was how the silver nitrate in his shifter's tattoo somehow dulled his scent. It didn't quite hide it, and when he was marking his territory as his jaguar, there was no killing the acrid stink of his piss, but it gave him a buffer similar to Shea's shields.

So long as he kept his face stony and his posture non-threatening, no one had any clue what he was thinking. Well, Travis did, but that was only because his brother practically raised him. Other than that, the only one who would ever get to the core of him would be his mate.

If he ever found her, that was.

Brad gave his head a small jerk. His fingers itched to push against the brand on his neck, but he refused. In private was one thing. In front of a packmate and a colleague? Better not, unless he wanted rumors starting again that he was still halfway feral.

No, thanks.

“Sorry to disappoint, Sloane. It's just me.”

Her lips quirked upward, her pretty amber eyes gleaming as she took him in. Her gaze dipped, head to toe. “No disappointment on my end.”

Brad's grip on the duffel's trap tightened, claws scratching against the material.

He knew what she saw. A tall, strong male in his late twenties, with his shaggy hair, gold shifter's eyes, and a hard jaw. His bulk filled out his favored leather jacket, and his thighs were like fucking tree trunks.

He was built like an alpha, with the poor fucking luck of being born as the second son. Even if he ever lost his mind and thought about challenging Maddox for the pack, how could he do that when Travis was the older Fenton brother?

Cocking his head, in his slightly gruff voice he said, "Were you heading out? Or just on patrol duty?"

"PD." Patrol duty. "I didn't have any in-office work today so I offered to take a few rounds."

That was part of being in a pack. Everyone looked out for each other, and since becoming the largest gathering of shifters on the east coast, the Eastern Pack had a target on its back. Either dumbass shifters came to challenge Maddox for leadership—see, he wasn't a dumbass, because he would *never*—or they wanted to knock the pack down a peg.

Then there were the Anti-Para bigots who wanted nothing more than to run the shifters off and take their government-provided territory. The way they saw it, all paranormals belonged in Bumptowns, established settlements that were strictly-Para only. When he wasn't in Woodbridge, Colt lived in one with Shea, but that was his choice. He'd never do it to satisfy some nasty Ants.

And, of course, there was how Maddox developed a bit of a paranoia complex after spending three years believing his mate was dead. Instead, Evangeline Wolfe had been cursed by a dark witch to forget him—and that was only the beginning of all the trouble Priscilla started because she wanted to be the Alpha's mate.

But that's not how it worked. If anyone knew that, it was Brad. Shifters got one mate, and once you found them, you held onto them with your claws with all you fucking had.

If you found them. It used to be when...

Maddox insisted on patrol duty because he wanted all of his packmates to feel safe. The last thing he needed was for the pack gossips to get wind of Bradley Fenton's return—and how he was caught lurking on the edge of pack land during a routine patrol.

As though Sloane knew exactly what he was thinking, she said, “So, what has you coming back? Last I heard, you were third-wheeling with Colt and Shea on some kind of pack biz.”

Third-wheeling. Yeah. That was about right.

“Something like that. But I've got a meet with the Alpha.”

Sloane raised her eyebrows. “Then you should probably stop hiding out along the edge of our territory, no?”

Something about her undeniably flirtatious expression... it was a dare, Brad decided. Not quite a challenge, but it didn't matter. The dominant beast inside of him didn't differentiate between a dare, a challenge, even a tease.

Her slight smirk was all the push he needed to get him to take that step. “Yeah. You're right.”

Though he'd never been there himself, Brad had a rough idea where the Alpha cabin was. So when Sloane offered to lead him there, he pointedly turned her down, then started jogging in—hopefully—the right direction.

Luckily for him, it was settled on pack territory, but not in the heart of pack land. Seeing Sloane was bad enough, and Brad hoped he could cross the distance without running into any other packmates. Even though he'd changed a lot since leaving, he was sure his reputation as a troublemaker, as a loose cannon... as an almost feral... had stuck around.

For good reason, too. Sometimes he thought that he was closer to losing his sanity than he thought. His jaguar was almost driven mad with the need to find its female, and it

couldn't understand why Brad wasn't taking the search more seriously.

That was the problem with being an alpha who didn't have a pack to lead. His instincts prodded him to start his own, and he couldn't do that without the right female—his *only*—female at his side. But though his jaguar wanted to take control, he was still man enough to know that he'd make a shit Alpha. He didn't want the responsibility of hundreds of shifters relying on him, like Maddox had.

Honestly, he just wanted a mate.

What made it worse was how it seemed like, since the Alpha's return to the fold, nearly everyone around him was finding theirs. Maddox recovered his Evangeline, bonding her to him though they'd had a human wedding years ago. Then Colt found his witch, and the former cop who had a thing for Maddox's mate paired up with a slayer, for fuck's sake.

Colt's best friend, Dodge, was a ghost who spent a hundred years haunting the earth before he imprinted on Colt as a pup, making him his anchor. A *hundred years* he spent waiting for his mate—his key—and he found her in the famous human actress, Laurel, only last year.

And then there was Trav. So busy with raising his younger brother, watching him, making sure that Brad stayed out of trouble... he'd never even started his search for his other half when Gin was dropped in his fucking lap.

When was Brad's turn? He tried desperately not to be jealous, but when everyone's happiness was being waved in his face, it was hard. Tough. His jaguar was already poised to rise up to any challenge, and this one seemed like one shot at him straight from Fate herself.

Lately, he'd heard more and more rumors about shifters who were taking matters into their own paws. Instead of waiting for Fate to lead them to their mates, they were taking more drastic measures. Take Shea's former shop assistant, Harper. Before she came to work in the apothecary in Grayson that Shea owned, she used her life's savings to pay a witch to track down the male on the other end of her future bond. It

worked, too, though everyone knew that her mate rejected her when she followed him to Utah.

Fucking Utah.

Of course, that had everything to do with Priscilla mucking around with mate bonds. Proving that a witch could manipulate them as much as source them, she made the Flat Top Alpha believe she was his as a test to see if she could steal Maddox's attention next. Sure, it didn't work, and the magic she used to try to force the Alpha to be her fated mate ended up with her dead and the rift appearing in the middle of Woodbridge, but it made Brad wonder.

What if he paid a witch to find his mate?

It was an idea. He had the money, thanks to his job and an inheritance from his grandfather. Maybe if he didn't stumble upon his mate on his own, he might, but first he had to prove to himself that he was worthy of her. That he *deserved* a mate of his own.

Which was precisely why he was jogging up to the two-floor, rustic cabin tucked on the edge of the woods. A soft vanilla scent filtered out on the cool breeze, followed by the overwhelming musk that had even Brad's untameable jaguar dipping its head as he stumbled back on his heels.

Alpha. Too strong to deny, if there was one male he'd submit to, it was the Alpha of the pack.

The sensation didn't last, though the way the air grew heavier was a constant reminder that he only lived and breathed by the grace of the shifter who marked his immediate territory that surprised even Brad.

Of course, he had a good reason, too, and Brad remembered that when a third scent—a softer one, somehow combining that of the vanilla and the musk until she was a little older and grew into her own—tickled his nostrils.

Despite himself, he gave a small grin. No matter how hard-hearted and in control he was, even Brad Fenton found hope in the newest generation of the pack.

He approached the cabin carefully. Though he had an invitation—and he obviously did, or the Alpha would've intercepted long before he got so close to his family—he wanted to show his respect without just barging in.

It didn't always belong to the Alpha couple. When Terrence Wolfe was Alpha, he and Sarah had lived among their packmates. Maddox on the other paw? Before he became Alpha, he had already made his territory in Wolf's Creek instead.

Brad understood that. Even though everyone knew that Maddox was the Alpha-heir, it was never good when two dominant beasts claimed the same territory. The Alpha would never back down, and as his heir, Maddox would push and push until the eventual challenge.

That happened two Christmases ago. It was inevitable. The whole pack knew that Maddox would take over for his father one day, and even though Maddox spent three years of his own in a Cage after he thought his beloved mate died in a car crash, it was only a matter of *when* he'd become Alpha once he was let out again.

Since everything started with the rift, Maddox relocated his mate and his pup back to the cabin. The overprotective wolf shifter had a tendency to do that whenever he thought they might be in danger. Since no one knew for sure what exactly existed on the other side of the big, glowing, white rip in space, it was a safe bet it was dangerous.

That was why Maddox sent Colt to watch over it. Luciana and Azrael were there to serve the interests of the witches, while Colt made sure the local shifters would be alerted if anything happened.

It had been months, though. And while the shadows late at night had been growing more and more noticeable lately, it seemed as if having a huge rift in a witch town was just the new normal for the local Paras. Watching over it wasn't as urgent a task as it had been in the early weeks, and if Colt believed he didn't need backup, Brad was prepared to move on.

But he still wanted the opportunity to prove he was a helpful packmate without risking his jaguar openly challenging others, or his brother having to give up time with his new mate to keep him in line.

Brad was twenty-eight. A mature jaguar, and a grown ass adult. It was time he learned to keep himself in line.

Right before he folded his hand into a fist to knock, the front door swung inward.

He used to live down the street from the Alpha. It didn't matter how many times Maddox's aura brushed up against his, it was always a shock to get slammed with it.

Or maybe it was just the Alpha's size. Built like a linebacker with a chiseled face, thick hair a lighter shade than Brad's, and the ring of scars wrapping around his throat, Maddox Wolfe was the sort of male that people imagined when they thought of inmates at the Cage. Fair enough, since he was one of the rare shifters who earned his release; Travis was another. If Brad didn't know that Maddox was one hundred percent devoted to each of his packmates, even he might wonder what the Alpha was capable of.

Then again, that was probably because he *knew* what he was capable of.

It took a second to get past his reaction to coming face to face with the big Alpha with the fierce golden gaze. Careful to keep his gaze low so that he didn't inadvertently challenge Maddox, he looked over his shoulder as he greeted him.

And that's when his nose wrinkled. He couldn't help it. Though the Alpha's potent aura and scent were nearly enough to cover up anything else in the den, Brad's sensitive jaguar sniffer couldn't ignore the hint of bloody meat that lingered in the room.

It wasn't as revolting—and, okay, kinda tempting—as the rotten meat, corpse-y stink that belonged to Nightwalkers, but

there was no denying that it was a—

“Vampire?”

“Dayborn,” Maddox grated, a look of approval flashing across his face. “Good nose.”

“Thank you, Alpha.”

“So polite, too.”

Approval and a tease? The Alpha was in a good mood, which surprised Brad. Though Maddox had a fondness for humans, he wasn't the biggest fan of any of the bloodsuckers. To have one in his cabin and be smiling later, he had to wonder if he had challenged one earlier.

No, he decided. If he had, the room would smell even more like blood than it did...

“Come on in,” Maddox said, gesturing for Brad to enter the cabin. “You're just in time.”

Right. Because when the Alpha calls you for a meeting, you go, and even if you wimp out just outside the borders of pack territory, you only do so because you know you left an hour before you had to.

Brad had a rep, but he wasn't a fool. “Ralph”—the pack Omega and the shifter that Brad and his brother directly reported to at Wolfe Construction—“told me that you have a new assignment for me.”

“I do. And I hope you'll be better at hiding how much you think vampires stink, 'cause you're going to be working with them.”

Brad stopped short. He was?

Maddox kept walking, as though he didn't notice—or, more likely, didn't care—that Brad had frozen a few steps into the room. Picking up his pace, he hurried after his Alpha, joining him in the den.

Evangeline Wolfe—the source of the vanilla scent—was already in there, curled up on a stuffed couch, her daughter in her lap. Baby Kate was currently in her two legged form, a

pair of curious gold eyes peeking out of an adorable face. Like her mother, she had dark brown hair, though it wasn't anywhere near as long as Evangeline's. Her eyes, of course, she got from her wolf shifter father.

Brad took their presence in the den as a good sign. If he was in trouble—or considered a threat at all—no way would Maddox let him anywhere near his beloved mate and pup.

After saying hello to both Evangeline and Kate, receiving a friendly smile from Evangeline and a bubbling coo from the pup, he followed his Alpha's lead and took a seat across the den. Removing his shifter's duffel from over his head, he settled it by his boots, then waited for Maddox to begin their meet.

Nodding over at Brad, he asked, "What do you know about the Para collective?"

CHAPTER 3

AS HE SAID



Since he was one of the few allowed past the wards currently surrounding the rift in Woodbridge, Brad knew all about the growing Para collective. After Priscilla basically blew herself up during a challenge with Luciana la Sorcière, the former head witch, Luciana and her Fallen decided to guard the rift. Since Maddox was involved, too, he offered the services of the pack. Then, calling in a favor, a Nightwalker offered his help, along with his slayer mate.

Colt's best friend Dodge wasn't exactly a ghost any longer, but he still had ties to the community. Slowly but surely, a representative from nearly every race of Para had thrown their lot in with Maddox and Luciana, making sure that the truth of the rift never got out to the Ants.

Humans couldn't handle Paras as it was. How would they react if they knew a dark witch was responsible for nearly breaking the world? And if Azrael's insistence that something was on the other side, just waiting to cross over, was true, what then?

So, yeah. The Para collective was born, and Brad was proud to be a part of it. Perched on the edge of his seat, he told Maddox just that.

"You're right. Only... we've got one of everyone but a Dayborn. Me and Luce decided we needed one."

Dayborns were the more civilized race of vampires. Instead of Nightwalkers, who solely survived on tapping donor's necks for blood while skulking around in the dark, the

Dayborns drank their snooty blood wine as they strolled around in the sunlight.

They were also notoriously close-lipped around anyone who wasn't of their kind.

Well, except for a few notable exceptions, of course.

“What about Debbie?”

“Tried. Since Deb”—a boisterous female vampire who lived in the same Bumptown as Colt did—“is still enjoying her honeymoon with her new slayer mate, she didn't want to take the job, but she told us to get in contact with the Ryhills. You heard of them?”

He knew about the Para collective, but the Ryhills? No clue. “No.”

“Not many of us have. They're the royal vampires. Prissy, Deb said, but their queen is like the Alpha of the Daybrons. If we get an in with them, any one of the born vamps will bend over backward to help us with the rift.”

Once again, he thought of the vampire scent still lingering in the cabin. If he had to guess, the male Dayborn had been there earlier this afternoon. “So did we? Get an in with them?”

Another approving nod. “Not the queen... well, princess since she ain't got the crown yet... but her uncle—”

“Cousin, babe. Rhaine's her cousin,” interjected Evangeline.

“Whatever. He's her family, and he offered to join the collective if we do something for him. Well, you, since you're the shifter I got in mind for the job.”

Ah. It was about time the Alpha got to the point. “What do you need me to do?”

“Simple. Starting tonight, you work for the Ryhills. You're still a member of the Eastern Pack, but your territory will be in their manor, and you're responsible for being the princess's personal bodyguard.”

“Let me make sure I understand. You want me to babysit a vampire princess?”

“Rose Ryhill is thirty-four. Young for a Dayborn, but she ain’t a kid. Like I said, you’ll be her bodyguard. Protecting her. Keeping her safe.”

Against his better judgment, Brad’s jaguar perked up. That... that was exactly what it wanted. Maybe not a vampire princess, but someone who needed them.

Maybe... maybe this wasn’t as bad an idea as his initial instinct made him think.

He hesitated, then asked, “Is she mated?”

“Nah. If she was, she’d be queen already. That’s how it works with these royals. She can’t get her throne until she takes a mate.”

Made sense. No self-respecting Para would ever allow their mate to fall under any kind of danger. If she had one, he’d be her protector, no bodyguard needed—unless he was a human, of course. But she was unmated which meant that he could protect this Princess Rose, and he wouldn’t have to worry about pissing off an overprotective mate if he developed any feelings for her.

Ah, who was he fooling? Given his track record, it was inevitable...

“Is this an order? Do I have to go play nice with the vamps, or can I respectfully decline?”

Maddox opened his mouth. From the way the Alpha bristled at Brad’s plainly stated question, he figured that it was an order. However, before Maddox could tell him so, Evangeline cut in.

“Babe? Can I talk to Bradley alone for a second?”

Maddox’s mouth clamped shut, so quickly Brad could hear his teeth *click*.

An alpha wolf, his instincts to keep his mate close, his pup constantly protected were even harder to deny. But he was also hardwired to do anything to make his mate happy.

“Fine,” he growled. “Call me when I can come back.” He paused for a second, then said, “You want me to bring Kate for a diaper change?”

“She’s fine where she is, Mad. Take a second. Blow the vampire out of your nose, ‘kay? Then come back for us.”

His eyes flashed again, an amber sheen rolling over them, and Brad realized that the lingering vampire stink was keeping Maddox and his wolf on edge. He should’ve known. This was the Alpha’s territory, and it must’ve killed him to have to play nice with the vamps.

For the pack—for the rest of the nearby Paras—he did. What made Brad so fucking special that he wouldn’t?

That sealed it. He was just about to tell Maddox that he’d do it when the Alpha stalked over to Evangeline, kissing her quickly before nuzzling the top of his pup’s thatch of hair.

“Two minutes,” he promised, then disappeared out of the room.

Evangeline chuckled. She had a husky voice for a female, but her laugh was high-pitched and lovely. “If I know my mate, it’ll be one if we’re lucky so I might as well get right to it. I never got the chance to thank you for everything you did for me when I was pregnant with Kate.”

A lump lodged in Brad’s throat. “You’re my Alpha’s mate. Those fucking Nightwalkers tried to hurt you. You know I’d never let them.”

And he hadn’t. It was shortly after he was kicked out of pack land, moving into the house in Wolf’s Creek with Trav. He knew damn well that his former Alpha thought dropping him into Maddox’s neighborhood would teach him control. It had, but it also gave him his first taste of how his jaguar calmed down when he had someone to protect.

First Evangeline, and then—

“And now you watch over Shea.”

“I was responsible for the Beta couple,” he edged, suddenly not so sure he liked where this conversation was

going. But this was the Alpha female of the pack, and he gave her all the respect she was owed for putting up with Maddox. “The Alpha assigned me to be their backup in Woodbridge until the rift is gone.”

“I heard you did a great job,” she said warmly, her forest green eyes kind. “That’s why Colt offered you up for this position. Protecting others... that’s your calling.”

Perhaps.

Or perhaps the Beta had decided it was time to put some distance between Brad and his mate after he made it so obvious that he was sweet on the witch.

Evangeline bounced baby Kate on her knee. “You love her.”

Brad went still.

He could lie. The Alpha’s mate was a human, so no way could she know that he was full of shit.

He could lie—but he didn’t.

“Yes.”

“But you’re not in love with her.”

Perceptive female. At least she understood there was a difference.

“I’m not,” he agreed.

Shea wasn’t his mate and that was that. Even if his feelings for her were softer, yet stronger than he should have ever allowed to grow, Brad was loyal to a fault. The first female he ever loved would be his mate. His jaguar agreed. For them, it would be instant. He was absolutely sure of that.

“So there’s nothing holding you back from doing this for your pack, right?”

“I— no. And even if there was, that doesn’t change a thing. The Alpha wants me to do this? I’ll do it.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” rumbled Maddox, stalking back into the room. Barely even a minute, Brad thought, but he

wasn't surprised. If he had a mate, he would've had a hard time staying away even that long. "I knew you were the best jaguar for the job."

He hoped so. "I won't disappoint you, Alpha."

"I'm sure you won't. But I'll tell you this: be prepared. She's their Alpha damn princess. They won't like you, Brad."

So?

"Not everyone does."

And wasn't that the understatement of the year...

Maddox's golden gaze darkened slightly at Brad's flippant answer. Gulping, he was just about to apologize when Evangeline stood up from the couch, smoothing over the suddenly awkward tension as she moved into her mate.

With Kate on her hip, she rested her hand on Maddox's bicep. Immediately, the tension deflated.

Evangeline gave Brad an encouraging smile. "What my mate is trying to tell you is that the vampire court is very... insular."

He snorted. Is that all the Alpha couple was worried about?

"Please. Can't be any worse than living in a pack..."

As she waited for the door on the far side of the atrium to open, Rose worked to keep a bored and disinterested expression poised on her flawless features. A slight frown pulling on her pale pink lips couldn't quite hide her annoyance, but she covered it up with a quick sip from her golden goblet.

The small amount of blood wine she'd managed so far sat heavy in the pit of her stomach. Usually her favored beverage, there was something about drinking the chilled wine while watching an execution that had her concealing her expression

beneath the wide rim of the chalice, rather than actually swallowing more of her drink.

The atrium was the heart of Ryhill Manor, the wide, open center where the vampire court of the royal Dayborns gathered. Built like a bowl with the entrance before her and one at her back, there was no roof; both the sun and the moon shone down on the gilded room. As Dayborns, her people liked to revel in the fact that they could enjoy the sun bathing their pale skin unlike the uncouth Nightwalkers.

It was mid-afternoon. Clouds covered the sky, leaving a sliver of sunlight glancing off of the expensive ornaments decorating the space. Below the dais where Rose sat on full display, the floor was empty except for the black covering laid out for the execution. They might be vampires, but there was no reason to splash the condemned's blood all over the marble floor.

Only three nights ago, Rose was dancing with Adrian in the middle of the atrium. Now, she was waiting to watch him die.

And every other soul gathered along the walls, gossiping as they guzzled their own blood wine, was well aware why Adrian was sentenced to death...

Rose wanted to rise up from her seat, swish the skirt of her long, pale gown, and head back to her private quarters on the eastern wing of the manor. If she was still just the princess—Queen Colette's only child—she could have.

In the court, she was the youngest vampire by at least a century. The other royals would've blamed it on her youth and inexperience. Like their turned brethren, Dayborns were immortal; the only exception, of course, being decapitation. Fully mature by the time she reached twenty, at thirty-four, Rose was used to being treated like a child by every member of the vampire court. Coddled and protected, she was their Dayborn princess—and, following her mother's murder, the sole heir to the Blood Throne.

But that was the problem. Now that her beloved mother was gone, Rose's presence was expected at anything that

involved the vampire court. From balls to births, weddings and, yes, executions, Rose was always front and center. As the soon-to-be queen, she couldn't avoid situations like these.

Especially since the vampire being executed this afternoon had been charged with the crime of attempted regicide.

Again.

Her pale fingers crept up the column of her throat. Born vampires didn't drink from the flesh like turned vampires do, but so long as she drank her blood wine at least once every day, she could heal nearly any injury. The slice on her neck from last night was gone, without even a single hint that her latest lover had attempted to kill her after he finished fucking her. It didn't matter that she survived. An attempt on the future queen was enough to earn only one sentence.

Death.

As the black-hooded executioner marched a charmed Adrian out to the center of the floor, Rose's hand shook just enough to splash a drop of blood wine on her pale pink gown. Her human servant was a whizz when it came to getting out the rare bloodstain, so she didn't mind so much when it landed on the bodice. Just in case, she rested the bottom of her goblet on the armrest of her chair.

It wasn't the Blood Throne. The golden throne with the blood-red padding was kept in the aptly named throne room, on the southern side of Ryhill Manor. This was the queen's seat in the atrium, a place where her Dayborn subjects could visit their ruler and beg for her favors.

And when she didn't have any favors to give or a ball to throw for the court, it was where those who crossed her went to die.

During her mother's reign, Rose witnessed two executions: the hunter who was responsible for slaying her father, and a distant relative who attempted to stage a coup against Queen Colette. Since her mother's untimely murder five years ago, there had been seven executions done in Rose's name. Each condemned had decided that, in one way or another, Rose

shouldn't be allowed to reach her coronation. While most of her subjects adored her, there were a few who wanted to find a way to claim the Blood Throne for their own.

Rhaine insisted she make an example of anyone who opposed her claim to the throne. And, future queen or not, Rose listened to her uncle.

Technically, Rhaine was her cousin. More than four centuries old, he was raised alongside her mother. Colette thought of Rhaine as a brother, and Rose grew up thinking of him as her uncle.

These last five years, he had been more than that. Her advisor and the acting regent of the Dayborns until her coronation, he was the only soul who wanted her happiness more than his own.

No matter what. And she believed that earnestly.

That's why it was such a surprise to her that he was currently missing. Rhaine had been the one to convince Rose that the execution had to take place so soon after Adrian's offense, but she hadn't seen her uncle since supper last night when he mentioned he had a very important meeting in the morning.

Rose hadn't had to attend. Once he gave her a pass on the meeting, she didn't care what it was about. Of course, she thought it would be long over before the afternoon execution. Maybe it was, she mused, trying to avoid the curious stares from the rest of the court. Or maybe this was his way of leading Rose to act like the queen she would one day become.

She swallowed a sigh, resting her elbow in the cup of her palm, goblet dangling loosely from her grip.

"Delectable vintage," said a smooth male voice with a hint of an accent. "The Ryhills always supply the best wine."

Only a lifetime of experience as the Dayborn princess kept her from jolting at the unexpected voice. Shifting slowly in her seat, she pursed her lips, then smiled.

Valentine DiCarlo, a recent addition to the vampire court.

One of the European Dayborns, from an old family near Rome, Valentine petitioned to join the court shortly before Queen Colette was slain during one of her frequent tours to meet with her subjects. For two of her three hundred years as queen, Colette had reigned in England. Only in the last half-century did she move the court to the east coast of the United States.

It was due to the Bond Laws. Once the humans became aware that all different sorts of Paranormals lived alongside them, Rose's parents decided to relocate to America where, at the very least, their union was protected. They brought the monarchy and the court with them, and over the decades, many other Dayborns followed.

“Afternoon, Valentine.”

“Please, Princess Rose. Call me Val.”

“Val,” she agreed softly. “May I help you?”

If he expected her to give him permission to drop ‘princess’, he’d be waiting a while. Only her family—and her closest companion, Lyric, Rose’s lifelong servant—was allowed to address her without her title.

Rhaine insisted on that, too.

CHAPTER 4

PROPOSITIONS



Valentine cleared his throat, a devastating smile curving his lips as he bowed his head.

Rose could tell it was a practiced pose. It highlighted the sharp, masculine edge of his jaw, his soft lips, and his gleaming white fangs. Fledgling vamps—like Rose—often hid their fangs; less than half-an-inch long until they hit their first century, fangs were an obvious clue to a Dayborn’s age and power.

From his, Rose could see that Val was much stronger than Adrian was.

Or, she decided, he *thought* he was. Hardly. With one flash of her eyes, Rose could have him eating out of her hand.

From the way he watched her so closely, she was sure she could even without her power.

“I’ve been hoping to get a moment to speak to you alone,” he purred.

With her free hand, Rose gestured at the crowd of vampires. “Alone?”

“Without your chaperones.”

Ah. Of course. Without her uncle and her cousin, or even Lyric standing to watch over her, she was as alone as the princess could be. Alone in a crowd of nearly a hundred, with all eyes on her, yet Val was right.

“What did you want to speak about?”

“May I be blunt?”

That caught her attention. Rose... she *liked* blunt. She absolutely adored it when someone felt free to be bold, to keep from pussyfooting around her all because she was the princess.

It was slightly embarrassing to admit it if only to herself, but Rose had taken more than a few lovers because they were daring enough to proposition her. That didn't change the truth. She loved a male who took charge.

Forgetting for a moment that that was precisely why she was in this situation, Rose cocked her head, showing off the unbroken skin on her throat. Even though Dayborns refused to drink from the flesh, it was an instinct they all worked hard to suppress.

“You may,” she told him.

When Val's eyes silvered over, the green fading to a mirror-life shine, she knew exactly what he wanted from her.

Which was why she was almost stunned when Val said, “I want to be your king.”

There was bold. There was blunt. And there was not playing the game like every other noble vampire Rose had ever met.

“Oh? And why should I choose you as my blood-bonded husband?”

“Because then you'd be queen,” Val said, pointing out the obvious. “No other suitor would be able to get to your quarters if I shared them. You'd have someone else to watch over you, and, I swear to you, I'd make sure you enjoyed being my bride.”

He was offering her protection. He was offering her sex. It was nothing she hadn't heard before, especially after her mother's murder.

“Again, why should it be you? I don't love you. You don't love me.”

If he had told her that he did, she would've waved her hand, calling for one of the vampire guards positioned around

the atrium to escort Val out of it. But he didn't.

Instead, he smiled. "I don't. But that's what would make our bonding so beneficial. Love fades. A partnership where we both get something we want... that could last centuries."

"You want the Blood Throne," Rose countered. It was her turn to bring up the obvious. "What is it I want?"

His silverish eyes twinkled. "Someone else to be the ruler of our people who you got to do whatever it is you *do* want." He paused, then lowered his voice as he added, "And anyone. I'll be a good king, but not a jealous one. You can be my bride, but if you need other lovers to satisfy you... I can be very discreet."

She certainly agreed. Here he was, offering to be a cuckold if he had to in exchange for access to the Blood Throne. And while Rose was the first to agree that she hadn't been the choosiest when it came to her lovers, that didn't mean she planned on having affairs once she was blood-bonded.

If she had a love match, she never would.

But to have someone offer to take over her royal duties...

Val must've realized he'd piqued her interest. Why else would he say, "Well? What do you think, bella?"

She was saved from having to respond to his flirtatious and somewhat outrageous request when the door finally opened, immediately distracting Rose from Val's proposal.

Leading the way, standing tall and proud, his white-blond hair cut short, his pale silver eyes gleaming as he locked on Rose from across the atrium, Rhaine strode toward her. At his heels, a slight smirk on his handsome features, was Rhaine's only son—and Rose's cousin—Dreven.

She was grateful they were there, even if she had to listen to her cousin's teasing, "Told you so." From the moment Adrian propositioned her, Dreven warned Rose that he wanted more than to bed the princess. Like so many other of her suitors, they wanted to be her king, though Adrian seemed more determined than most to snag her.

Determined enough to go for her head when she rejected him.

At least now she understood why there was such a delay. Knowing how much Rose hated this part of her duties, at the very least, her family wouldn't make her go through it alone.

Her uncle raised his eyebrows when he saw how close Valentine was standing near Rose. Without breaking his stride, he said something to Dreven. His lips barely moved, but Rose knew what she saw.

Once again, Rhaine was riding to her rescue, wasn't he?

She decided to let him. For the moment, she'd keep Val's proposal to herself. She'd give him some credit. Suggesting she take him as her husband while they waited to watch Rose's last lover lose his head was quite ballsy and, in a way, that excited her. He knew she had a vacancy in her bed, and he wanted to be the next one to fill it.

She respected that. And, well, it was something to consider.

Later. Much later.

Within minutes, Rhaine and Dreven joined her on the dais. With a warning nod from her cousin—no doubt his father told him to handle the circling noble—Val quickly murmured his goodbyes, then slipped away, becoming part of the crowd still waiting for the execution to begin.

Dreven moved to stand behind her, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze. "Rosie. Smile. We made it."

"I'm glad you came," she murmured. A smile wouldn't be appropriate, not now, but that didn't mean she wasn't relieved to have her family nearby. She slanted a gaze over to her left where Rhaine was standing, hands folded primly behind his back. "Thank you."

"Of course," Rhaine said. "We would've been here sooner but I had something to take care of."

Rose frowned. She couldn't stop herself and quickly lifted her goblet to cover her lips as she asked, "More important than

this?”

“Yes.”

Oh.

She was the heir to the Blood Throne. Future queen to every Dayborn in the world. And, yet, when Rhaine said ‘yes’ in that clipped tone, she knew better than to question him. If her uncle wanted her to know, he would tell her.

Leaving it at that, she schooled her features into another bored expression right as the door opened a second time. As though the executioner had been told to wait until Rhaine had arrived, now that her uncle was in his place at her side as her guardian and adviser, there was no reason to prolong the delay.

It was time to get the execution under way.

With a sigh, she finally set aside her goblet on the glass table at her right side. It sloshed again, and Rose noticed that she’d barely touched her blood wine at all since her earlier arrival in the atrium. That wasn’t so surprising. Despite acting as though the recent slew of executions didn’t bother her one way or another, watching Adrian lose his head was rougher than most of the others.

As much as was possible, she trusted him. At the very least, she slept with him, and though she refused to take his blood into her, she’d accepted his cock. He was a decent lay with an impish smile. He always made sure she got off before he finished, and his pillow talk was more than just listening to him tell her how pretty she was.

For once, she thought she might find a suitor who looked at her and saw her as more than just the prized princess of the Dayborns. Rose wasn’t only her milky complexion, her silvery-blue eyes, and wavy hair the color of gold cascading down her back. She might have a willing pussy and a heart begging to be loved, but she was more than that.

Adrian agreed. Unfortunately, the *more* he saw was the Blood Throne she was meant for, and the crown she'd wear as soon as she accepted a husband.

Though Queen Colette sat on the throne for nearly three hundred years before her demise, she only earned her title after she took Rose's father, Winston, as her consort. The Ryhills were a matrilineal line, and the Dayborn race had been led by a queen for as long as their records told. Even so, tradition ran that all royal rulers had to be blood-bonded to their mate.

For a moment there, Rose thought Adrian might be the one. Just like Jasper before him, and possibly Philippe. Colin, too, and maybe Diego. All noble Dayborns who asked Rhaine for his permission to woo Rose before bowing out—or, in Adrian's case, losing his head when he realized that Rose would fuck him, but she wasn't ready to bind herself to him.

Her parents were a love match. Her mother left the throne empty for nearly three decades before she chose her father as her lifelong companion. And though a hunter slayed her father while her mother was still pregnant with Rose, as queen, Colette refused to except another mate. She was loyal to her consort to the day she lost her own head, and Rose refused to accept anything less.

Dayborns—like all vampires—were unique compared to other Paras. While there was a single male out there meant for her, one who would love her above all else, whose blood would make her heart sing, Rose could also select her mate. With the gift of three blood exchanges, she could take any male and make him her blood-bonded husband.

Rose didn't want any male. She wanted her fated mate, and if she had to meet every suitor that Rhaine set her up with to find him, she would.

Adrian wasn't the one. Obviously. Waking up to his naked body holding her down, pressing her back into her lush mattress, a silver knife digging into her skin as he threatened to take her head if she didn't take his blood... if she hadn't managed to compel him with her gaze long enough to climb

out from beneath him, then ring for Rhaine, she might have left him dangling on her hook a little longer.

Now both halves of him were being gathered and discarded by the royal executioner and his apprentice, and Rose was careful not to show any emotion other than boredom.

In the treacherous vampire court, it was safer that way. The last thing she wanted was for any of her future subjects to see her falter when ordering executions, especially when Adrian had gone for her own neck. As queen, she needed to be respected; as a vampire, she needed to be feared.

As Rose, she just wanted to be loved for who she was, and not what she looked like—or what she was destined to be.

But since that would only happen if she found a love match of her own, that was unlikely. All she had to look forward to was smooth-talking Dayborns like Val offering his blood and his body so that he would join her as king of their people.

He didn't love her. If he did, he wouldn't suggest a partnership that would be beneficial for both of them. At least Adrian seduced her first before he mentioned that he was interested in her crown. Of course, her desire to be loved meant it was easy for him to fool her.

Naive Rose. Coddled Rose.

Silly—

“Rose?”

She glanced behind her. “Mm?”

Dreven was gone. As soon as Adrian's head hit the floor, her cousin gave her shoulder another squeeze, then disappeared to try to convince one of the noble females to accompany him back to his quarters. He was the one who taught Rose that waiting for her bonding night was ridiculous when there were so much pleasure to find before settling down for good.

She envied him. Dreven could drown himself in blood and pussy and be content with his life as one of the royals. Rose had to worry about her lovers cutting her head off while she was dozing off her latest orgasm.

Then there was Rhaine. Her uncle's bride—Dreven's mother—was killed by a Welsh vampire hunter more than a hundred and sixty years ago. Still loyal to her memory, he'd been celibate since her death.

Sometimes Rose wondered if that's why he walked around like he had a stick up his ass. That her uncle needed desperately to be laid, and then he'd find the easy humor in life like Dreven did. But then she remembered how her mother continued to mourn her father long after his death and Rose kept her thoughts to herself.

Colette had told her she'd understand one day. Even though Dayborns could survive losing their blood-bonded mates—unlike some other paranormals—that didn't mean they ever stopped grieving over their loss.

Like most Dayborns, Rhaine stopped visibly aging when he was at his peak: around thirty years old for him. But when she met his steely eyes, Rose saw the passing of all his centuries in the weight of his gaze.

“Yes, uncle?”

“I won't let that happen again.”

She didn't have to ask what he meant. With Adrian's blood perfuming the air, leaving Rose feeling queasy and more than a little thirsty, she knew.

Just like she knew that her uncle meant what he said, too.

She only hoped that—if she accepted his offer—Val was up to the task. Adrian got past her uncle's overprotectiveness. If she was sure of anything at that moment, it was that Rhaine would hold to his solemn vow.

CHAPTER 5

BRUTAL, BEAST, BODYGUARD



Later that night, Lyric was unfastening the line of buttons running down the back of Rose's gown when a brisk knock sounded against her bedroom door.

It was after dinner. She'd sat down to eat with her uncle—her cousin gone, having a dinner date of his own—and excused herself to her quarters when she was done. With Adrian no longer an option and unsure if he wanted to entertain Val's proposal, Rose was looking forward to a quiet night in bed. She had a book that one of her courtiers brought back for her from their travels, and another that Rhaine had given her at dinner to cheer her up after today's execution.

Rose loved to read. Romance was her favorite. Stories about strong heroines and the men who loved them... she could sit by the fire for hours, imagining herself on the pages. She also enjoyed murder mysteries, putting herself in place of the detective. She was always proud when she spotted the murderer before the conclusion.

The only thing she refused to read? Vampire novels. Human authors never got it right, and Para writers exaggerated because that's what was expected. Maybe they were closer when it came to Nightwalkers, but Dayborns?

Her people keep too many secrets close to their chest. Of course outsiders got it wrong.

Tonight's book was a crime thriller that seemed interesting. She'd been looking forward to it as some way to get her mind off of Adrian. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel the

smooth way he fucked her. It was practiced, sure, and it lacked the passion she expected from her blood-bonded mate, but he made sure she got off every time—even before he planned to murder her.

He was a bastard, and he deserved what he got, but hell if Rose didn't need a little distraction tonight.

And, now, it looked like she was about to have one.

Lyric had lit the fire and turned down the covers for her. After brushing Rose's hair exactly one hundred strokes, she was just helping Rose out of her daygown when they were interrupted.

"Rose?" she asked. "Should I..."

Rose nodded. Lyric's fingers flew up her back, fastening the buttons again.

Glancing down, she made sure the bodice of her gown was perfectly in place, her breasts spilling ever so effortlessly out of the top while also giving the impression she was a gentle, innocent princess. Once she was satisfied with her appearance, she settled her golden waves over her shoulders, the wispy ends curving enticingly over her cleavage.

That down, she nodded again.

Lyric knew exactly what to do. After all, when it came to Rose's nighttime visitors, she'd done it plenty of times before.

Like Rose, she was in her early thirties. A habitually shy yet kind and gentle human woman, she'd come to work for the Ryhills when Rose was nearly twenty. Colette hired the human to be a companion, servant, and friend to her lonely daughter. Needing the money to finish college, she accepted the job and then never left. The money the Ryhills paid Lyric to tend to Rose's every need was more than she'd earn in her chosen field. It was more than she'd earn in a single human lifetime, to be fair. Rose wasn't the easiest ward as a child, and fourteen years later, she knew her pampered nature, her private affairs, and her desire to be loved made it a stressful job at times.

Still, Lyric stayed, and though Rose wasn't naive enough to think she did it out of pure affection rather than a ton of

money, it didn't matter. The Dayborn royal line had more than enough wealth to pay Lyric what she was worth, and Rose ensured she was well-taken care of.

In return, Lyric catered to her every whim.

Like now. At Roses's signal, Lyric moved across the floor, pulling the door open.

She should've been expecting these visitors. Though her uncle and her cousin rarely visited her in her private quarters, they were the only ones who did without ulterior motives; save for the servants, of course, but apart from Lyric, Rose supposed they didn't count. As princess, she had privacy. The entire east wing of the manor was hers, with the other royals sharing the west wing.

Then again, Dreven had slipped out before dinner. She'd eaten with Rhaine, and when she excused herself for the evening, he bid her a good night. But here they were, her uncle wearing a solemn expression, her cousin's usually styled hair slightly disheveled.

He, at least, had gotten what he'd went in search of earlier. Wearing the same button-down and slack as during Adrian's execution, the scent of blood and sex clung to him. Dinner and some entertainment, Rose mused, only a little bit jealous.

Her entertainment had been watching her last lover lose his head.

Waving Lyric away from the door, she nodded at the two vampires. "Uncle... cousin... a little late, don't you think?"

"Sorry, Rosie. Father said it couldn't wait 'til morning. And, well, you know how Father can be."

"Father can hear you," rumbled Rhaine. "Rose, darling. May we come in?"

"Of course."

Rhaine glided in through the open door. Dreven's walk was more of a strut, but before Lyric could close the door behind them, another male followed the vampires. He was

human, with chin-length, straw-colored hair, dark brown eyes, and a pair of lips thinned into a line.

Rhaine's personal servant, Harry had the same position as Lyric. The only difference was that Rose had known Lyric for nearly fifteen years while Harry was her uncle's night—tenth?—servant in that same time. As spoiled as the vampire court whispered Rose was, at least she managed to hold onto her servant, and her loyalty. Rhaine? Rumors ran that he was a strict taskmaster, a fact that Rose couldn't deny.

No wonder she didn't notice Harry at first. He usually stood two steps behind her uncle, silent as the grave until Rhaine addressed him. It bothered Rose that he left the door for Lyric despite her seniority, but Rose was too curious about her uncle's visit to point it out.

She'd remember it, though. Oh, yes. She'd remember it.

Her lips twitched in a welcome smile. "What's this about?"

Rhaine glanced over at Lyric who immediately bustled away and busied herself with Rose's walk-in closet, searching for the right nightgown to dress the princess in. Satisfied that the servant was at least pretending not to be a part of the conversation—while also completing disregarding his own valet—her uncle finally said, "Do you trust us?"

Well, that was quite the loaded question, wasn't it?

As heir, Rose should've known better than to trust anyone. Seven executions in five years proved that. Only two were because she made the wrong choices when it came to trusting others, but the five other attempts on her life were just as unexpected. It wasn't that they trusted them not to try to eliminate her before she sat on the Blood Throne as queen, but more like it never occurred to her that anyone would want to stop her.

Her mother reigned for three centuries. She was beloved by all her subjects, and she still lost her head. Why wouldn't they want to assassinate the last in the Ryhill line?

But Rhaine and Dreven were Ryhills, too. Did she trust them?

Another lesson she learned over the last five years, just because another Dayborn couldn't lie, that didn't mean they always told the truth. And if you didn't want your words to get twisted, it was safer all around to offer an answer that wasn't a concrete 'yes' or 'no'.

If anything, Adrian was a stark reminder that a male could smile to your face and be plotting your downfall if you disappointed them...

"You're family," she said after a moment.

That was close to agreeing as her uncle was going to get.

Rhaine accepted it with a slight tilt to his head. "Today's execution made me realize that you're in more danger than I wanted to admit. You'll have some protection once your queen, but since you haven't chosen any of your... suitors... to be your husband, I've decided to take matters into my hands."

For a moment, Rose thought that Valentine had gone to see her uncle. If he was so bold as to offer to bond himself to her, why wouldn't the newcomer ask Rhaine for her hand? Her uncle was old-fashioned to begin with. He told her since she was mature enough to bed males that he would never interfere in her choice for her husband, but ever since her mother's death...

It wasn't his fault. She knew he blamed himself for not being able to save her mother. He was on the trip that ended with Colette dead. He swore he would've done anything to protect Rose's mother; since he couldn't lie, she would've known he was telling the truth even if she didn't honestly trust her uncle as much as she did.

But trusting her uncle to keep her safe was one thing. Having her interfere with Rose's sex life—and her future marriage—was drawing the line.

"Uncle, I—"

Rhaine held up his hand. Rose might be the future queen, but everyone in the vampire court knew that Rhaine was the

acting regent until Rose's eventual coronation. When he held up his hand, even she listened.

"I've arranged for you to have a personal bodyguard. A male responsible for your safety when I can't be in the manor to watch over you."

"A bodyguard? Just for me? You've got to be joking."

Rhaine folded his hands behind his back. He wasn't.

Ridiculous. So she'd been in danger before. So she'd had multiple attempts on her head. The vampire court was full of guards to take Rhaine's place when he had royal duties to tend to, and it wasn't like she hadn't proven that she could take care of herself.

Of all the paranormals creatures, Dayborns were the rarest. Born vampires, they could eat real food, but they couldn't tell a lie. They could walk out beneath the sun, but they had to drink blood at least once a day or else they would weaken. They didn't have the impressive strength and speed that Nightwalkers have, but they had something the turned vampires didn't: the "thrall".

What Rose called her "daze", it referred to how a Dayborn could charm others with the power of their eyes alone. All it took was a weaker specimen looking straight into a Dayborn's crystal-clear gaze and, immediately, they were under their spell. Their targets would stand there willingly as a Dayborn took a nip, then forget the exchange once the thrall was done.

Rose, though, was a Ryhill. More specifically, she was a female Ryhill. There was a reason the females of her line were all destined to be queen. Dayborns could only use the thrall on those they fed from: human donors. In the case of stronger, older vampires, they could even break the will of some paranormals.

Rose's gift worked on *everyone*. More importantly, she didn't just break their will. She could take it over completely, making them do whatever she wanted.

With such a gift came heady responsibility. Heavy is the head that wears the crown and all that. From the time she was

a young princess, she was taught only to use her thralling ability when it was necessary.

Freezing Adrian so that she could pluck the knife from his grip, shimmy out of bed, and call the guards? That was necessary, and she'd use her ability again and again to save her life if she had to.

"I don't need a bodyguard," she said at last. "I have Lyric. I have my gift—"

"And you also have a too-trusting heart, my darling. More than you should, and I don't want to change it. I do, however, believe that an animal separated from his pack will be ruthless enough to watch over you. You'll have his loyalty, and anyone who wants to harm you will have to answer to his beast."

"Beast? I don't understand."

Dreven's eyes twinkled, as though he'd been waiting to drop the bomb on her: "Rosie, your new bodyguard? He's a *shifter*."

A... a shifter?

Dayborns were civilized; the royals even more than the civilians were. Shifters... weren't. They were wild and vicious, and whatever her uncle said, they only showed loyalty to their pack and their mate.

Shifters weren't mercenary and money-hungry the same way that witches and humans were. A stack of bills or a pile of gold wouldn't sway them. Anyone that might be wasn't anyone she wanted at her back, especially if he was a predatory shifter with claws and fangs.

Beast... oh, yeah. He would definitely be a predator.

"Why would he agree to watch me?"

Dreven smirked. "Because his Alpha told him he had to."

Oh. "Really?"

That changed things. If her new bodyguard was doing so on the orders of his Alpha, he would be more trustworthy than a lone shifter just looking to be paid.

Rhaine sighed. “Yes. The meeting I had last week? It was with the Alpha of the Eastern Pack and the former head witch of Coventry. They’re building a Para collective and they wanted a Dayborn representative to join. They have witches, shifters, a Nightwalker, a ghost... even a slayer. What they don’t have is one of our kind, darling. I offered to join their collective to protect our interests but only if they gave me a brutal bodyguard to watch over the future queen. I met with the Alpha again this morning. He told me to expect him at the manor this evening to start our arrangement.”

Rose thought she understood. So he was here... now... and that was the meaning behind this late visit, wasn’t it?

Still, she echoed one word Rhaine had said: “Brutal?”

“To your enemies,” her uncle clarified. “To you, he’ll be another servant. The Alpha assured me that the male he was sending has complete control over his beast. Unless you’re in danger, you can pretend he isn’t there.”

Dreven let out a snort. “Considering he’s an unmated shifter, Rosie won’t have a problem with that. Huh, cousin?”

Rose refused to answer. No reason to, since she did know exactly what Dreven was referring to.

Secluded in the manor, she had never met a shifter before, though she’d heard the rumors coming from the gossips in the court. Not only did it seem as if every one of her uncle’s descriptors seemed correct—brutal, wild, even fierce whether they were man or beast—but that had a unique situation when it came to fucking.

Well, the males at least. And that meant that no matter how bored or horny she got, she couldn’t complicate any relationship with her prospective bodyguard by sleeping with him.

Was that why her uncle chose a shifter to watch over him? True, she might’ve invited more than a few of her previous vampire guards to join her in her quarters, but it wasn’t like they were servants. They were part of the vampire court, and eager to please the princess.

But a shifter bodyguard her uncle hired? Who wouldn't be swayed by her beauty and her charms and, well, her *libido* since odds were billions-to-one that she would be the sole female he could mate with?

Hmm... maybe that's not such a bad idea at all. All she had as a close companion was Lyric. A neutered shifter who would make sure her next lover wasn't murderous when he inevitable rejected him?

She exhaled softly. "Very well. I guess we can give this a try."

Not even a flicker of surprise on her uncle's sculpted features. Instead, as though he expected Rose to give in as easily, Rhaine gestured for Harry.

"Yes, sir?"

"Retrieve the beast. Bring him in to meet the princess."

A solemn nod from the human. "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 6

BE CAREFUL



T here were humans here. Lots of them.

In the huge gothic castle that looked like half the damn pack could fit inside of it comfortably, he figured he'd be the only shifter among a crowd of vamps. The Ants milling around were kind of a surprise. They shouldn't have been. Ryhill Manor was the home of the Dayborn vampire court, where the royal family and their courtesans all lived.

Prissy, that's what Maddox had called the royals. They were prissy, so of course they had servant. Wasn't he one, after all? Hired by the regent, a cold Dayborn male named Rhaine, he might have come because his Alpha told him to, but make no mistake: he was hired help.

A shifter made an excellent bodyguard. And humans, it seemed, were the vamps' chosen servants.

Rhaine had one. A human male whose fear tickled Brad's nose when they first met in Rhaine's extravagant personal office. There, he was given his assignment, then told to wait until he would be introduced to Princess Rose herself.

Something told Brad that the princess wasn't expecting him.

Fun.

It was the same human who came to retrieve him about an hour after his arrival. Gesturing for Brad to grab his stuffed duffel bag full of everything he would need for the next few days, he told Brad to follow him.

Amused at how the fear stink had grown all the more acrid without the vampire to shield him, Brad did what the human requested.

His Alpha was right, too. When Maddox warned him that the vampires wouldn't be too happy to have a shifter in their midst... he was absolutely right. With the exception of the male who was in charge, any vamp he passed gave him a curious look that quickly turned to one of disgust.

The humans, he decided, weren't so bad. Maybe because, unlike the Paras they served, they had no clue a jaguar stalked freely in their midst. Especially one that looked like he did. The only one who did was Rhaine's servant, and that was because he was standing in the corner while listening to Rhaine ask about Brad's credentials.

He was a jaguar whose Alpha ordered him to keep the princess safe. That was good enough.

The downside to the humans thinking he wasn't a shifter? Was the lust that bloomed in the air when he caught more than a few of their attentions. He could feel it, too, like an oil slick on his skin. Some of the female servants—and, unless he was mistaken, a few males, too—were taking in his built frame, the dangerous tattoo on his neck, his leather jacket and overgrown hair, and thinking that he might be a perfect mate for them.

Yeah, right. He scented the lust, but none of the females he passed did anything to bring his body to life. Until that happened, until he caught a whiff of his fated mate and his cock responded to it... they could look all they wanted, but Brad was never going to look back.

He would know her instantly. That was something all shifters learned as pups and cubs. Males would get their first erection, and females would go into heat the first time they scented their fated mates. It was undeniable.

And, so far, it still hadn't happened for Brad.

It was a relief when he left the lusty humans behind him. The further they traveled in the manor, the less people they passed. The human leading him—he didn't catch his name—

explained it was because the regent was adamant that the princess have her own quarters in the manor. It had only one entrance, a vampire guard stationed every fifty feet for her protection, and no one allowed in her private quarters—her personal den, his jaguar thought—that she didn't invite in there.

As her bodyguard, Brad would be in charge of vetting her invitations.

Again. *Fun.*

Turning down one last hallway, the human male said, “This way, sir.”

Sir.

Huh.

He'd never been a 'sir' before. He was always 'you dickhead' and 'feral jaguar' and, if you asked his older brother, 'fucking really, Bradley'.

Fucking really, Bradley? Another scrap?

Fucking really, Bradley? What did you do to piss off the Alpha this time?

Fucking really, Bradley? You're lucky Griff didn't rip out your throat...

Breathing in deeply, all he could catch was the sterile scent of clean marble and the fear-stink that the human was trying desperately to pretend he wasn't feeling. Feeling bad for the guy, Brad kept as much distance as he thought fair. Didn't really work, though, since the servant seemed more nervous with a jaguar at his back.

Already he was growing used to the overlaying scent of blood that covered everything. When it refreshed, it was inevitably due to their passing another guard. Brad hoped he didn't go completely nose-blind to the rusty, coppery odor otherwise another Dayborn might be able to get the jump on him.

Not likely, but if he was supposed to act as a bodyguard, he should probably start thinking like one.

The hallway had a few random doors lining it. Each had a massive, thick door with an arc over it and these really tacky gold doorknobs. Better than silver, he decided, but if silver didn't affect Dayborns the same way it did most other Paras, he bet the vamps would've used it.

With a barely swallowed snort, he thought it would've fit their color scheme better.

Most of the manor so far was big, gleaming, and gilded. It shone everywhere, almost making Brad wish he'd grabbed a pair of shades when he packed up his meager belongings from the Woodbridge house. He hadn't. Besides the fact that he didn't want the Dayborns to think he was a Nightwalker in disguise, after he left pack territory, he'd slipped inside his house, grabbed his shit, then dashed out again before he had to face Shea.

Call him a coward if you want, but he couldn't do it. Besides, what was the point? Colt was the one who suggested him for babysitting duty—sorry, *bodyguard duty*—so no doubt he knew that Brad was starting his new job tonight.

It was late. He probably should have just waited to show up at the manor in the morning. Unlike Nightwalkers, who turned to ash in the sun, Dayborns kept diurnal hours: sleeping at night, existing during the day. Since he was being led to the princess's den, good chance she was getting ready for bed.

Hopefully he could just introduce himself, make sure she understood he was there for her protection, then let her turn in.

Seemed like a plan—until the servant opened the door and stood back, allowing Brad to enter first.

The first thing he noticed was that there were three vampires standing next to the oversized bed with the gauzy pink canopy. A fourth female, obviously human with her black sweater and pale blue jeans, was sitting on a small chair in the corner of the large space.

Of the three vampires, two were male. One was the blond male he met earlier. The other looked similar enough to be his relation. Considering Dayborns were an immortal race who

stopped aging when they were in their twenties or thirties, the two males could be brothers, father or son, even grandfather and grandson for all he knew.

The female standing between them was another Ryhill. No doubt about that. She had the same aristocratic features, the same sloped nose, the same pale eyes... the same haughty air. Her long wavy hair was a darker shade of blonde, more gold than the white-blond hair the males had, and she was at least half a head shorter than them.

She wore a soft pink gown that did little to hide her body. The skirt was molded to her curves, flaring out over her hips. There was a slight slit, revealing a hint of her pale leg. The bodice up top dipped quite low, showing off a pair of breasts that would've immediately caught his attention if something else hadn't first.

His gaze caught every detail in a heartbeat. But his nose...

As a shifter, Brad used his nose almost as much as his eyes to take in a situation. And while the bloody scent overlaid everything in the princess's den as it did the rest of the manor, there was something else.

Something unique.

Something that called to him.

A sugary sweet scent that made his heart rate pick up as, for the first time ever, it pumped blood to a very particular part of his body...

Brad Fenton was a pack animal. Always had been. When he lived on Eastern Pack territory, there weren't any vampires around. Nightwalkers were too unpredictable, a constant threat, and most Dayborns were too damn snooty and stuck-up to waste their time with shifters.

Wolf's Creek wasn't any better. It was a mixed neighborhood, sure, with Ants and shifters living side-by-side, but the only time Brad caught wind of the meaty, dead stink belonging to turned vampires was when Priscilla Winters sent Nightwalkers after the Alpha's mate and Brad chased them off.

Since arriving at Ryhill Manor, he'd become pretty familiar with what a Dayborn stunk like. Bloody, though not *dead*, it was still noticeable.

The sugary aroma completely blew out his nose. It was all he could breathe now, and within an instant, it was all he ever wanted to.

The second the scent hit him, Brad went immovably still. At least, most of him did. His legs locked right up, keeping him barely a step inside of the den. His arms slammed down at his side, the right one curving around his shifter duffel, holding it close. His breath caught, though his nose and his lungs worked double-time, trying to draw more of that fucking amazing aroma inside of his chest.

And his cock...

For twenty-eight years, it was as inconsequential as his earlobe or his pinky toe. Unless he was taking a piss, it was useless. Laying limp along his thigh, it was just *there*.

Not anymore.

He swallowed his gasp, biting down to keep it from escaping him. The way his dick twitched, starting to stir, hardening, growing thick, growing at all... he didn't know what stunned him more. The sensation of getting his first erection, or the realization that only one thing could have caused it.

One person.

One *princess*.

Like moths drawn to a flame, their heads turned as one to stare at him. Every single bloodsucker had their eerie gaze on him.

Did they know? Did they know that his mate was in this room?

Did they know that his body was priming itself to take her, claim her, make her his?

Did they know?

Brad resisted the urge to see if his cock stood out like a fucking tent or something. He figured his jeans would wrangle the bulge, but the damn thing seemed to keep hardening, growing bigger, thicker, and, Alpha, how did mated males deal with this all the time?

No one spoke until the haughty blond male who hired him cleared his throat. "I'd suggest you be careful."

For a split second, Brad had no idea what the vampire meant. He wasn't a threat. He was sent to this spooky ass palace because his Alpha signed him up for babysitting duty, and even if this wasn't his idea, Maddox had his loyalty. He refused to fuck this up even before he stumbled upon his mate.

His *vampire* mate.

It hit him then.

Be careful...

His Alpha had made the same warning. Be careful because the vampires won't like you.

But that's not what Rhaine meant, was it?

Be careful...

Unless Rhaine had an ability to pick up on the inner battle that Brad and his jaguar were fighting, it wasn't because he had a suddenly aroused shifter male in his company that made the vampire uncomfortable.

It was that he had a suddenly *bleeding* shifter male standing only a few feet away from him that did it.

The rusty tang of *his* blood now perfumed the air. Brad didn't even realize it at first. The sugary sweet aroma wafting from his mate overpowered nearly everything to him, including the cloying stink of what had to be their favored blood wine that clung to the others.

Brad was so used to pain as a leash for his jaguar. Whether it was the slight tingle from the shifter tattoo on his neck, a constant burn from the silver nitrate he used to keep the brand from healing over, or as simple as gouging the fleshy part of his palms with his claws to keep himself under control, it

worked for him. It was a distraction, and one he desperately needed as his jaguar roared inside of him, trying desperately to get to the female.

To the princess.

To his *mate*.

Like the other vamps, she was staring at him, too. Brad had torn his gaze away from her beauty the moment he jabbed the tips of his claws into his flesh, but now that he had her attention, his golden eyes locked her again.

Her nostrils flared, taking in the scent of his spilled blood. Her pretty pink lips parted softly, her pale eyes damn near twinkling as though she *liked* it.

Ignoring the other two, she took a step toward Brad.

And Brad—who always thought he was the type of male to say “fuck the *Claws Clause*” and run off with his mate if he ever found her—had the sudden urge to bolt out the door.

This time, it wasn't because he was a coward. Oh, no. It was because the stunning princess was his mate—and his assignment.

He already gave his word to his Alpha he wouldn't fuck this up. The Dayborns wanted their precious princess safe? He'd keep her safe.

But she wasn't just their princess. Rose Ryhill was the fated mate he'd spent his whole life searching for, and he knew in an instant that, to keep that pretty blonde hair safe on her head, he'd keep his cock to himself for as long as it took to eliminate every Alpha damned threat to her.

He had no choice. With the Alpha's warning in his ear, Brad knew one thing for sure: the vampires already didn't want him here. How would they react to finding out Princess Rose belonged to a shifter? They'd have him thrown out of the manor before he could blink, and while his mating instinct would have him challenging them all to get to her, could he really take on hundreds of vampires at once?

And if he did? The *Claws Clause* said he could use force to protect his mate. Until he bonded himself to her, there were limits to what a shifter could get away with without earning a stint in the Cage, or even a state-sanctioned execution.

If Brad was dead, his mate would be in danger. Simple as that. So he had to keep his head on his own shoulders, and his cock in his pants, no matter what.

CHAPTER 7

HIS MATE



It took more effort than it should have, but Brad moved forward, purposely looking anywhere but at his mate. He was determined, sure, but at the end of the day, he was still male.

An aroused, *possessive* male who had spent nearly fifteen years wondering what it would like to mate, and who was his very own cockblock.

“You wanted to see me?” His voice came out flat. Good. Hopefully none of the vampires knew that his inner battle was becoming a war with his jaguar.

“Yes. I wanted to introduce you to your charge. Princess Rose Ryhill, heir to the Blood Throne.”

A quick glimpse over her shoulder, careful not to catch her eye—and not only because he’d heard rumors of what Dayborns could do with a little eye contact. “Bradley Fenton. Guess I’ll be your new guard.”

Until I’m your mate.

“I...” She paused, suddenly frowning. He caught a peek out of the corner of his eye, jabbing his claws back into his palm when he sensed her confusion.

She covered it up quickly. He’d give her that. Still, he wasn’t the only one to notice.

“Rosie?” called the other male.

A gentle shake of her head before she turned to Rhaine. “Uncle. I’d like a word.”

Rhaine nodded. “Dreven, would you bring him to the servant’s quarters? Let him get settled in, then starting tomorrow he can start a routine with the princess.”

What?

Brad’s jaguar roared at the idea of already being separated from his mate. He’d only just gotten his first scent, his first glimpse, and though his initial reaction was to keep it to himself, that didn’t mean he was ready to walk away from her so soon.

Careful, Brad, he told himself. Don’t give up how badly you want to stay.

Acting as though it didn’t bother him one way or another, he said, “I’m supposed to be guarding her. Why would you already send me away?”

“Because we have plenty of our own ready to watch over the princess for tonight. Rest. I’m sure you’d like to eat. Our cook will feed you—”

She would not. Did the Dayborn know how insulting it was to offer? Maybe not, but Brad was quick to correct him.

“The only one who will ever feed me is family or my mate. Since your cook is not my brother, and I don’t have a mate, I’ll cook for myself. Unless you want me to stay near the princess.”

“That’s not necessary. As for our cook, she’s a human, but I’m sure, once we explain that you’re... not, that won’t be any trouble.”

Bradley nodded. Small victories. “And the princess?”

“The princess was getting ready for bed. We’ve intruded long enough. Rose, darling—”

“Oh?” Her voice had developed a hint of a hard edge that went straight to his aching cock. “So kind of you to remember I’m standing here.”

Beautiful and a hint of spunk? *Fuck*. It might be harder to hide his fated tie to her than he thought.

But he would. If only to take the opportunity to get closer to her and keep her protected, he would.

Even if his cock and his jaguar hated him for it.

As the Ant and Rose's cousin led Brad back down the hall and toward the stairs that would bring him where the servants all had their private rooms, all he could think about was tossing his duffel inside whatever den he was being given, then heading right back upstairs again.

Keeping his distance from Rose was going to be harder than he thought.

After a few minutes in awkward silence, Dreven bid the two males good night. Taking advantage of having the easily intimidated human all to himself, Brad waited until they'd started down a flight of stairs to break up the quiet.

"What can you tell me about her?"

Harry startled. Good thing he was gripping a railing or he might've fallen down the narrow flight.

"Who?" he asked once he recovered. "The princess?"

"Yeah. If I'm her new guard, I need to know what she's like. So, what can you tell me?"

"Oh. I... I don't know her very well. You should ask Lyric. She's the princess's personal servant. The only one of us who ever gets to spend time with Princess Rose."

Brad made a mental note of that. At first opportunity, he needed to track this Lyric down.

"That's not all that true. Our Rosie has plenty of visitors. But if you really want to know about my cousin, why not ask me? I've known her her entire life."

Why not? Because he didn't want it getting back to her. He accepted the risk that Harry would run right to Rhaine and tell

him that Brad was curious, but Dreven? He didn't trust that smarmy male more than he could throw him.

And, somehow, he'd reappeared just in time to hear Brad's question.

Damn it. Just like he thought, he relied on his nose too much to tell him when someone was sneaking up on him. The male vamp didn't have a distinct scent over the blood, and too distracted with thoughts of his mate, his jaguar didn't warn him that there was a predator at his back.

Not that he thought Dreven Ryhill was much of one. Slender and tall, with a face almost as pretty as Colt's, Dreven had had a smirk tugging on his lips since the moment Brad first saw him. It had only widened in the time since.

Like now. If that wasn't a shit-eating grin, Brad didn't know what it was.

He must have backtracked or something, like he forgot where he was going—or because he expected Brad to do exactly what he did once the two employees were alone—and slipped right behind them once they started descending the stairs to the floor below.

Harry frowned. “Master Dreven? What are you doing in the servants hall?”

The vampire winked. “Have a little tête a tête of my own I'm running late to that I nearly forgot about. Be a good human and don't say anything to my father, would you, Harry?”

Smarmy bastard, Brad decided, but ultimately harmless.

Harry nodded. “As you say, Master Dreven.”

“Good man. Go on. I know you're dying to get back to him. I'll take Rosie's new pet downstairs for you.”

Brad tried not to bristle at Dreven's jovial use of “pet”. It was as derogatory to a shifter as calling a human an “Ant”, so it would be pretty hypocritical of him to get pissed off at the Dayborn. Didn't stop him, though he did manage to rein in his jaguar's temper.

Once Harry was gone, Dreven made a move to clap Brad on the shoulder. He paused at the last moment, his cool palm ghosting over Brad's broad back, almost as if he thought better of it.

Huh. Maybe he was smarter than he looked.

Then again, maybe not, because as soon as they were alone, he mentioned the absolute worst thing he could in Brad's current state.

"You were asking about Rosie? I'll give you a quick tip 'cause I know how difficult my cousin can be. Get her laid."

Brad nearly choked. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me. I mean, I know you can't. You're a shifter without a mate, right? So I know your pipe doesn't work. But as her bodyguard, you'll have to make sure her visitors are safe. Make sure you let her meet with some of her suitors and she'll be as docile as a lamb. Promise."

First of all, as a predatory shifter, Brad didn't necessarily want a docile princess. The hint of heat she flashed in her den had been almost enough to make him spontaneous combust in his jeans. Secondly, now that he knew Rose was his mate, over his fucking dead body would he let her mate another male.

Another reason for him to stick around. It also answered his question.

Did the vamps sense he recognized her as his mate? Obviously not, or well Dreven never would've talked about his mate's sex life—*former life*, amended Brad—so casually.

Even so, he lingered on his step. It took every ounce of effort he had not to give away the rush of jealousy coursing through him, but through some miracle, he managed.

"She gets a lot of male visitors?"

"Well, she did." Dreven shrugged. Brad had the irrational urge to deck him. "Everyone wants to try out the queen so they can get to be king. Hell, if she wasn't my blood cousin, I might've tried, too. Ah, well. Good thing I have my pick of the

vampire court waiting for me. And if I need a little nip, the servants are more than willing for a double poking.”

As though he thought his crude comment was the height of comedy, Dreven chuckled to himself. Then, risking his hand, he actually dared to pat Brad on the sleeve of his leather jacket. “Poor pet. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.”

He didn’t. But as soon as he could figure out a way to claim Rose and make her a lowly shifter’s mate, he sure the fuck was going to find out.

The moment Bradley strode out of her quarters with Dreven and Harry, she closed the door behind her and turned the lock. Only then did she let out the breath she hadn’t even been aware that she was holding.

It was an instinctive reaction. His blood smelled so delectable, so *tempting*, that Rose shut down her olfactory senses so that she could resist the urge to drop to her knees and lap at the blood welling up on the gorgeous shifter’s skin.

And wouldn’t that have been utterly humiliating? Despite being a princess, she had not trouble going to her knees for the right male, but everyone who saw her in such a submissive pose had wanted Rose there.

One glimpse at the shifter’s stony, disinterested face and she knew that he wasn’t one of them...

The turned vampires—Nightwalkers—they didn’t breathe. For all intents and purposes, they were dead. No heartbeat. No pulse. Their skin was clammy and cold to the touch.

Dayborns were different. They didn’t have to wear shades to protect their pale gazes from the light, and the sun didn’t burn their skin; at least, not more than it did a human. For all intents and purposes, she was alive. She would live forever, too, unless she was foolish enough to lose her head.

Still, from the moment the brawny, brooding shifter appeared in her doorway, her breath caught.

If only she knew why. She wanted to blame his blood. The allure of it... it would be so easy—but it would be false, and even to herself, Rose couldn't lie.

She wanted him at first glimpse. Something about his wide shoulders and thick thighs encased in his black jeans had Rose fantasizing about climbing him like a tree. His shaggy hair just screamed for her to thread her fingers through its strands.

And the red-inked claw mark tattoo on his neck... it might be considered uncouth for a Dayborn princess to drink blood from a vein instead of getting her daily allowance from her wine, but it called to her fangs in a way that worried her.

She'd never bitten a male before. Not for feeding, not for pleasure. It was too easy to initiate a blood exchange that way. Three exchanges and she could turn any male into her blood-bonded mate. When the result was being tied to one cock for eternity because she got a little thirsty during sex, Rose learned to control her fangs.

So why did she want to take more than a sip from her new bodyguard?

No. *No*. He was a shifter. A shifter whose initial impression made it obvious that—like her uncle sometimes thought—she was better as a fixture than a female with her own thoughts and opinions.

They were incompatible. Mainly because she wanted them to be extremely compatible... it didn't matter.

He had to go.

“Rhaine. Uncle. Find me another bodyguard if you must. I don't want him.”

Rhaine's sigh told Rose that he'd been expecting this reaction from her. “And what, pray tell, is your reason I should send him away?”

She wrapped her arms around her middle, hugging herself. Forced as always to tell the truth, Rose said, “He looked right

through me. Like I wasn't even there."

In her experience, males fell into two categories: those who were family, and those who wanted to fuck her.

She didn't know him at all, but something told her that the shifter was neither. Rose didn't know what to do about that.

Worse, she *hated* not knowing.

Rhaine thought it over for a moment. Then, as if it was all the response she needed, he told her, "He's from the Eastern Pack."

Rose shook her head. She tried not to sound as frustrated as she felt as she admitted, "I don't know what that is."

If it was anyone else, she never would've dared. In the vampire court, knowledge was power. There was a human phrase she was intimately familiar with: "fake it 'til you make it". Usually, if Rose didn't know something, she pretended she did until she could research it herself.

"I know, darling Rose." Rhaine exhaled softly. "But, believe me, no one will guard your safety better than a shifter. They're like a dog with a bone that way, even if your Fenton is a jaguar."

Her Fenton.

No, thought Rose. He was her Bradley.

She could see why her uncle used his surname. To make the point that, as her bodyguard, the shifter was hired help, calling him 'Fenton' seemed obvious. Growing up in the manor, the lines between Rose and those who were assigned to her—like Alice 'Lyric' Coleman—blurred until, when she used Lyric's chosen name instead of her last of her first.

Remembering his strong features, she thought he would be a 'Brad' instead of a 'Bradley'. A short name. A masculine name. As hard as he was sure his body would be beneath his informal clothes, so out of place in the vampire court, he just *looked* like everyone he knew referred to him as 'Brad'.

And because—as a princess who was raised to one day be queen and follow all the pomp and circumstance and traditions

that came along with that—Rose was used to clawing back a sense of contrariness when she could.

So because no amount of arguing, cajoling, or pouting would convince her overprotective relation otherwise, at least, for now, the shifter would be her Bradley.

CHAPTER 8

TAKE A CHANCE



By morning, Rose decided that she would give her new bodyguard a taste of his own medicine.

He wanted to pretend she wasn't there, instead addressing all of his questions, comments, and concerns to her uncle?

Then, fine. She'd ignore him, too.

Was it childish? Of course it was. Then again, to her people, she really was little more than a child. Dayborns reached their peak maturity in their early twenties, when their thirst for blood was only matched for their desire for pleasure, but until she was no longer a fledgling, she was used to being treated as a kid.

Sometimes, Rose wondered if that was why she wasn't so choosy when it came to bed partners. Her blood-bonded husband was one thing; she would accept a love match or a fate match, and no less. But a lover? At least they respected her enough as a grown female to want to get under her gown and into her pussy.

For most of the morning, it was easy to pretend Bradley wasn't her new tall, dark, handsome shadow. He followed about ten paces behind her as she joined Rhaine for breakfast, having a quiet conversation with Lyric while Rose was forced to listen to her uncle drone on and on in regards to other details about his meeting with the Eastern Pack Alpha.

Bradley's Alpha.

Her whole life, Rose had been keen on gathering both information and knowledge. The older she got, the more she recognized its worth. She soaked it up, keeping it to herself if she had. It was skill that helped her survive the vampire court after her mother was no longer around to shield her from its cattiness and treachery. Rhaine tried, bless his heart, but after Colette's death when Rose was a mere twenty-nine years of age, she realized she needed to do something to protect herself.

Her charming ability was key. Only thing was every Dayborn knew she had the gift and rarely met her gaze because of it. Instead, she dealt in information, knowing that the more she had, the better.

Rhaine was talking about the Eastern Pack. Bradley was a member of it.

Suddenly, she was very interested in everything he had to say.

Besides, she knew she had Lyric's loyalty. Whatever her maid was discussing with her new bodyguard, she was sure she'd know about it before long.

Only one problem. It seemed as though Bradley took his assignment as her personal guard extremely seriously. The only time he wasn't up her behind was when Rose excused herself to the bathroom. Lyric followed behind her, of course, in case Rose needed help with her gown, but her impression on the stoic, quiet shifter devoted to his task warned Rose that he wouldn't let her out of his sight long enough for her to ask Lyric.

She was right. She'd barely started washing her hands when she heard the *rap-tap-tap* of claws against the door.

It stayed like that the whole rest of the day. Through lunch, a stroll in the foggy gardens surrounding the manor, an evening in the newly scrubbed atrium as a few of her subjects wanted to speak with her... Bradley was a silent specter who watched her back intently, but glanced away whenever she looked at him.

At first, she thought it was because he'd heard about her ability and was wary of letting her try it out on him. Then, stubborn herself, she decided not to let it bother her.

It went on like that for the next two days. Bradley always there, Rose sticking her nose up in the air, acting as if he wasn't. It wasn't as easy as it was the first day. The only time Bradley left her alone was at night when he returned to the servants hall after dinner and Lyric escorted Rose back to her quarters to turn in for bed.

That first night, she asked Lyric what Bradley had talked to her about at breakfast.

Lyric was human. Technically, she *could* lie, though she never did to Rose. So when she simply said, "You," Rose accepted it.

She didn't read too much into it. He was tasked with watching over her; it made sense that he'd want to learn about his new charge. It also made sense that he'd ask Lyric about her. She was help, just like he was, and he didn't seem to have any trouble looking her in the eye.

Oh, no. That just Rose.

Something changed on the third night, though. It was Lyric's scheduled night off. As her maid, Lyric had one morning, two afternoons, an early evening, and all overnights to herself. If Rose needed someone while Lyric wasn't unavailable, she would flag down one of the guards out in the hall and another servant would tend to her.

She expected the same that night. Chelsea was her usual replacement for Lyric, but it wasn't Chelsea her uncle arranged to bring her back to her quarters.

It was Bradley.

For the first time since he came to the manor, he walked into her room. Taking his job as seriously as he had been, he searched the entire space. Once he satisfied himself that it was safe, he nodded at her, then wordlessly headed for the door.

Rose couldn't take it any longer.

“Stay with me,” she blurted out.

His broad back stiffened. Slowly, he turned to face her—and still managed to look at a point over her shoulder. “Princess?”

The only time he ever addressed her, he only ever called her ‘princess’, she noticed. Not ‘Rose’. Definitely not ‘Rosie’. Just ‘princess’.

And that was something else that was driving her mad.

He didn’t like her. Fine. That was fine. But Rose needed to be able to trust him. If he continued to treat her as little more than a nuisance, how could she?

So, feeling only the tiniest bit of guilt, she hurriedly ducked in front of him, purposely meeting his gaze so that she could enthrall him, and murmured, “Please. Stay a little longer.”

For a moment, Rose was sure she’d gotten him. Bradley froze, his golden eyes shining out of his face. There was no doubt there was eye contact going on—and then he blinked.

Shaking his head, a strand of dark hair falling forward to cover his right eye, he said in his gruff voice, “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Rose thought it would be an excellent idea. Mainly because she’d planned on using her charm to interrogate him and make sure she could trust him, but now that she’d just discovered that Bradley wasn’t dazed by her pale eyes?

She wanted him to stay for a whole other reason.

In her thirty-four years, she’d never found a single soul who could withstand her gaze. And though she hadn’t used it as much since she matured, as a fledgling princess, she turned it on nearly everyone in the court at one time or another. It even worked on Rhaine. Sure, her uncle made her swear she would never do it again once he asked her and she was forced to confess, but if it worked on Rhaine, Rose was convinced it would work on *everyone*.

That's what made the Ryhills queens, after all. Her mother had the same gift, and the only person she couldn't charm was her husband.

Was that why she was so drawn to Bradley? Was it possible that she couldn't use her magic on him because he was meant to be her mate?

No, she thought. It couldn't be. If he was hers, wouldn't that mean she was *his*? Fate wouldn't be so cruel to give her a shifter who could only ever be with his mate—and then make it so that Rose wasn't that female.

If she was, wouldn't she know? Shifters were infamous for how they responded to finding their mate. In fact, Ordinance 7304—the *Claws Clause*—was drafted in response to the humans' reaction when they discovered that Paras lived alongside them, and there was a chance they could be a fated mate to one. The Bond Laws made it clear that the government wouldn't tolerate the beastly Paras deciding to run off with their mates without that mate's full permission.

A mate got to choose. Just like how a Dayborn created their mate with the three blood exchanges, it only worked if there was a *choice*. If the two souls *wanted* to be bonded.

Still, in the fifty years since the *Claws Clause* came about, that didn't stop shifters from following their instincts. And, considering most shifter mates felt an instinctive pull back to the shifter and their beast, it wasn't as though there was much resistance when it came to completing that bond.

So she couldn't be his. It just... it didn't make any sense.

Or did it? She was his charge. He was her bodyguard. Could it be as simple as Bradley not wanting to disappoint his Alpha by crossing professional boundaries?

Rose, on the other hand, had no such problem with that. How many times had she invited one of the vampire guards into her room?

Why should Bradley be any different?

Unless he was...

There was only one way to find out.

“Stay with me,” she said again. “In my bed. You’re my bodyguard. Shouldn’t you be guarding my body?”

Bradley’s look would’ve quailed a lesser female than Rose. Not her. She’d been raised in the vampire court. He needed to do a little more than stare at her with his jaguar’s eyes to get her to back down.

And, to her surprise, he *did*.

In a tone she hadn’t heard from him before, in a rough voice that almost seemed like he was mocking her, Bradley said, “I don’t think you have to worry about someone attacking you in bed.”

Rose did everything she could to hide her wince. Because Bradley? He *was* mocking her.

She was Rose Ryhill. Princess—and future queen—of the Dayborns. So she was inexplicably attracted to him. So she was dying to know what his blood tasted like.

So she’d give her left fang to get a glimpse of the tanned, muscular shifter—so different from any of her previous Dayborn lovers—completely naked?

What she wasn’t going to do was stand there and let him talk to her like that.

She grinned, flashing a bit of that very same fang. In that moment, she realized that, despite his questioning Lyric about her, he didn’t know her at all. Otherwise? He would’ve known to back down the second he saw her grin.

But he didn’t, and she found delight in the way his handsome face went blank when she tossed back, “Are you sure about that? You do know why my uncle hired you to watch me, don’t you?”

It took a moment before Bradley returned her question with a solemn, jerking nod. “Because you recently had an attempt on your life. Don’t worry. That’s exactly why I’m here. It won’t happen again.”

“Like I said, I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Did the gossips in court tell you where he was when he tried to take my head? What about the servants? Did Rhaine tell you? Dreven? *Lyric*?” When Bradley stayed silent, hands folded behind his back, she lost more of her temper than she could afford to. That didn’t stop her from jutting her chin, and saying hotly, “He was exactly where you don’t want to be, Bradley: in my bed. So, please, tell me how you can protect me from a murderous lover when you’re tucked in the servants hall.”

He swallowed roughly. Rose watched his Adam’s apple bob, following the motion as he did.

She didn’t mean to admit that. Honestly, she thought Rhaine already had told the bodyguard everything he needed to know, but Bradley... she had no idea why she felt compelled to throw that in his face. To get a reaction? Possibly.

Well, Rose got on. Not the one she was after, but she got one.

“Where is he now?” demanded Bradley. His skin already a few shades darker than her pale complexion, it began to grow even dark in some spots as he added, “Your... *lover*.”

Rose scoffed. Something about the way he spat out the word from between gritted teeth called for it. “Dead, obviously. But that doesn’t change what happened, does it? If it did, *you* wouldn’t be here.”

What was it she said? She didn’t know, but whatever it was, she seemed to get through to her cold bodyguard.

He nodded. “You’re right. About that, and living in the basement. I won’t stay in here while you sleep, but have no fear, princess. If I have to camp out in front of your door, I will to protect you. As long as I’m here, no one will get to your bed.”

Bradley said “to your bed”. Rose heard “*in your bed*”.

Including him, obviously. But what about Valentine? Or any other suitor she might try to get over her irrational lust for the shifter with?

“Wait. That’s not what I meant—”

A muscle in his hard jaw ticked. “Good night, princess.”

“Don’t you walk away from me,” she said when Bradley did exactly that. “I wasn’t done!”

But, it seemed, *he* was.

“Good night,” he echoed before slipping out of her door.

He rejected her.

The big, brooding shifter male rejected *her*.

She put herself out there, giving in to the inexplicable lust she felt for him, and he refused. She followed her feminine instincts, hoping that there might be more to this pull, and he just walked away.

He didn’t even pretend to be interested in her, and that was all she needed to know that she couldn’t possibly be his.

And while she understood that, and she even understood why her attitude might have turned him off, she just couldn’t wrap her head around a healthy male not at least trying to take her up on her offer to join her in bed.

But he had, and Rose spent the next hour pacing around her quarters, dwelling on that.

She’d thought that the court gossips were exaggerating when they said that shifter males were only loyal to their females. Bonded mates, she could understand, but Bradley didn’t have one. She made sure to ask her uncle. There was no Mrs. Fenton waiting at home for him while he was responsible for Rose, so why wouldn’t he at least humor her a little by joining her in her room?

He couldn’t fuck her. Obviously. Not with his cock, at least. But Rose was nothing if not adventurous when it came to mating. He didn’t need his cock to give her pleasure, and

maybe if he did, she might be able to get over this unacceptable pull she felt toward him.

It was his fault. Slicing his palms with his claws, letting her scent his mouth-watering blood... it was all his fault.

And then he didn't even have the decency to fool around with her.

For a moment there, she actually thought he might. She thought that, while he might have caught him off guard with her bold proposition, he might agree after she threw Adrian in his face. After all, a gorgeous male like him, it could hardly have been the first time a female invited him into her bed.

If he was staying in Ryhill Manor, he should get used to it. Dayborns might come across as civilized and demure, but that was only compared to their Nightwalker counterparts.

He hadn't. Something else she couldn't stop thinking about was how his whole attitude seemed to change after she found out the truth about Adrian.

He'd snapped. Demanded to know where he was, only seeming to calm when she admitted he was dead.

And then, right before he stalked out her door, she could've sworn she saw something rising up just beneath his skin. Bradley was nowhere near as pale as she was, but the black marks stood out against his tanned complexion all the same.

Circles, she thought. They almost looked like circles.

He held true to his promise, too. When she couldn't take it any longer, she pulled open her door, and found him leaning against the wall opposite of her door. He had his long legs crossed in front of him, arms folded over his chest. His grey t-shirt—something else that was so very different than the males in the court—stretched beneath it, highlighting his muscles in his deceptively casual pose.

It wasn't practiced, like Valentine DiCarlo's was at the execution. It was a lazy predator waiting for a moment to ambush his prey.

He nodded at her, his golden eyes rolling over into a darker orange color. “Good night, princess,” he said again in his rough voice.

This time, as she closed the door again, she smiled to herself.

He’s stayed. Not in her quarters, not in her bed, but he said he’d stay, and he did.

Maybe she *could* trust him. Maybe she finally found a male that she couldn’t stick into one of her two classifications.

Maybe her new bodyguard deserved one of his own.

Maybe. Just... maybe.

CHAPTER 9

WHATEVER IT TAKES



Brad fought his jaguar for control the entire fucking night.

He should've expected it. Since arriving at the manor, he'd kept an iron tight hold on his other half. Refusing to let his beast out, he'd buried the fierce jaguar beneath the determined promise that this was the only way he could see to be allowed to stay close to his mate.

And that worked all the way up to the moment that, in the innocent way his vampiress mate had, he invited him into her bed.

His jaguar couldn't understand why the man half of Brad refused. If his mate was willing, he should have her on her back, beautiful blonde hair spread beneath her as he answered the call of the mate bond that sprang between them the moment Brad realized she was his.

It was whisper-thin at the moment. Barely a thread. He got a better read on his mate's thoughts and emotions by watching her as closely as he had these last few days than relying on such a weak bond. The more he got to know her, the stronger the bond would become until Rose began to notice is, too. Until then, he was careful to keep his distance.

If he didn't, he'd be balls deep inside of her before he knew it.

For three days, he told his jaguar—and himself—that it had to be her choice. Fate may have given him a stunning vampire princess with an admittedly petulant attitude as his

mate, but unless she wanted to bond to him in return, he had to put space between them.

And what did Rose do? Give him the chance to close it without having any idea what she was doing to taunt and rile up the beast inside of him.

To her, it was just sex. Not even mating, it would be *fucking*. Brad would be another in her line of suitors, a male she had fun with before discarding because they weren't worthy to be her king.

Fuck the crown. He only cared that she was royalty because it put a target on her back. The more digging he did, the more he understood exactly why Rhaine made the arrangements with Maddox to get Rose a bodyguard. Someone wanted the last of the female Ryhills dead, and Brad was willing to do whatever he had to to keep her safe.

At the expense of his poor cock and his confused jaguar, he did it. Knowing full well that his standoffish demeanor was attracting his mate at the same time it was frustrating her, he did it anyway.

Because he couldn't stand to be just another lover. For Brad, it could never be just sex. If he had her, he would take her, and when he released inside of her, he would bite her neck. Claiming sex. He wouldn't settle for just getting his dick wet. He would mate her, and their bond would be unbreakable if she accepted him.

His jaguar knew that. So did Brad.

But Rose didn't, and until he made her understand that sleeping with him amounted to about the same thing as a fucking life sentence, he had to put as much space between them as he could.

The servant halls were enough. Sleeping directly below Rose, knowing she was safe in her quarters above him, Brad could explore the changes in his body. He couldn't go to Rose—and he'd rather cut the fucker off than let another female touch his cock—but the den assigned to him was private

enough that Brad could rub his dick raw to the imaginings of actually getting to keep Rose.

Of having a mate. A family.

A forever.

It was enough. The releases he took at night made up for the constant hard-on he sported while he watched the swish of Rose's skirt as she traveled throughout the manor. He'd been looking toward another lonely night with his paw after he escorted Rose back to her personal den—until she invited him in, and when he had to refuse, she told him the truth about the last threat on her life.

And that's when Brad realized that his hold on his jaguar wasn't as iron tight as he thought it was.

Still, as much as his beast roared at him, chuffing and pacing and spurring him to fling open the door to Rose's den and take his mate up on her offer to stay inside with her, he point-blank refused. It was still an Alpha damned battle though, and the only way his human-shaped brain won out in the end was by crushing his fist in one hand, crunching the bones without actually breaking any of them—or his skin.

No blood. Without knowing if his vampire princess could scent a drop from out in the hallway, he couldn't risk it.

Just like he couldn't risk stepping more than a few feet away from her doorway.

Even if he hadn't told Rose he would stay, his jaguar refused. It had wanted to curl up, head on its paws, tail wrapped around its flank, sleeping outside of Rose's den right after it found its mate in her. Leashing his beast took more effort than he wanted to think about when watching the princess was an open-ended assignment from his Alpha, but Brad had managed to keep himself in the servant halls then.

No way in hell he was going to manage that *now*.

Her lover tried to murder her in that room. Her *lover*. He heard the words from Rose herself, and the brazen way she tossed it at home only set his jaguar off all the more.

Where is he, he'd asked, only for Rose to say he was dead.

Good.

Brad was glad. His dominant beast would've hunted down the threat to his mate and torn him to shreds if he wasn't—and he was trying his hardest not to admit to himself that his murderous rage toward her last lover was, in part, because the vampire *was* her lover.

As far back as he could remember, Brad yearned for his mate. Did he expect that, when he found her, she'd be a virgin as pure as undriven snow?

Of course not. He wasn't *that* naive.

The other night, Dreven made it a point to rub it in Brad's face that Rose was extremely welcoming to her male visitors. He told Brad to make sure she got laid. He might be a virgin himself, but wasn't clueless. He knew his mate had experience that he didn't.

Did that mean he liked hearing it straight from her pretty pink mouth.

No the fuck it did not.

Due to the quirk in a shifter's biology, and how shifters could only procreate with their mates, it was usual for a shifter whose mate was *other*—as in not a shifter—to have had previous lovers. It was mostly agreed that was a good thing. It didn't matter who his mate's first lover was, so long as he was the last.

During one of his chats with Trav, his older brother confessed that he was grateful that Gin had some experience when it came to mating. The way he put it, at least one of them went into their mating night knowing what they were doing.

He tried to think like that. Tried to think as positively as his laidback older brother did.

Gin had had a handful of lovers before Travis. She was even engaged to a worthless human who cheated on her. According to her cousin, Rose was trying out as many males as possible to find one to be her husband.

How would he even compare—

No. *No*. Reaching up, Brad traced the shifter brand curving around his neck, pushing just enough against the mark to really feel the silver burn.

There was his jaguar taking over again. Trying to convince him to forget about tomorrow and only think about tonight.

Too bad that wasn't his style.

Rose wasn't his mate. Not yet. Possibly not ever. For as long as the Alpha wanted him to be at the Dayborn's palace, the princess was his assignment. That was all she could be.

Still, Rose was his to protect. To guard. To keep safe.

She was *his*, and that better be enough to placate his jaguar for now...

What, thought Rose as she held out her hand to Lyric, was the point of having a bodyguard when the most dangerous thing she'd done in the last two weeks was accept her servant's offer of a fresh manicure?

It was Bradley's fault. Ever since she made the mistake of telling him about Adrian, it seemed as if the shifter started to take the threats to her head a little more seriously. After all, if she could be murdered in her bed by a male she'd slept with, what stopped one of the members of the vampire court from stalking her in the manor and taking her out there.

The gardens were too foggy, he pronounced. The atrium too open.

She supposed she should be grateful that he decided it was safe to allow her to sit for meals with her uncle and her cousin otherwise she'd starve.

Sometimes, she had half a mind to offer him a sip of her blood wine. Considering his overprotectiveness had surpassed even Rhaine's, she figured it was only a matter of time before he would insist himself. Not that she thought the shifter would

actually drink any; maybe in his beast form he'd drink blood, but not when he was masquerading as a man. But she was convinced, if she mentioned the idea that it might be poisoned, he'd insist on something ridiculous like getting her a food taster.

The only way a Para could be poisoned was with silver. Silver nitrate, quicksilver, or even the pure mineral, it was the only substance that had an effect on most paranormals, Dayborns and shifters included.

His refusal to spend time in her quarters was a distant memory. Though he always left after Rose prepared for bed—and, after being rejected once, she never offered him to stay with her again—when Rose gave up on leaving her private space after his hundredth excuse why some part of her routine was too dangerous to continue, he seemed to make himself at home in her rooms.

Like now.

Bradley stood over her shoulder, watching with the same stone-faced expression as Lyric used a file to shape Rose's nails. His golden eyes glittered viciously, his big body poised to strike as though he expected Lyric to get up and drive the nail file into Rose's chest like some kind of makeshift stake.

As though *that* would work. Maybe in the classic vampire stories, but Rose knew better.

Still, she almost wanted to grab the file herself and give it a try herself. Anything to get some kind of reaction out of Bradley. Anything other than his determined stare, and the way he watched her even closer when he thought she wasn't paying attention.

Yeah, right. Still fighting the draw to him she wished she could ignore, Rose was *always* paying attention to her shifter bodyguard.

Pity her gaze didn't work on him because she was getting to the point that she was willing to do anything just to get some kind of reaction out of him.

She had. Once. The night he basically decided to make the hall outside of her quarters his own personal territory, she got the only—and last—reaction from the controlled shifter. Since then, he'd gone to acting as though he was her shadow, watching her closely without ever saying more than a few words to her other than, "No princess, I don't think so..."

Over the last two weeks, she did manage one thing. After a lot of thinking it over, she'd convinced herself that she imagined the hungry look on his face she swore she saw when she almost pushed him to lose control. Rose hadn't been able to do it again, and even if she did stab someone with the file, she doubted it would work.

Bradley wasn't family. He obviously didn't want to fuck her.

But he didn't even seem to like her much, either, and that was worse when she admitted that, despite every reason why she should still be pushing Rhaine to get rid of him, she was actually glad that he was still there.

He made her feel safe. That was a plus. Though he didn't talk much, he listened to her.

More than that, he paid attention.

Clearing his throat, he said, "You're having an early supper with your family tomorrow. Rhaine said that two visiting nobles from Europe will be joining you. The light blue gown will go great with your eyes, princess. Maybe you have nail polish that matches."

As though each word cost money, Bradley rationed them like he was a pauper. And then, just when Rose was getting used to his silence, he came out with something like that that just about blew her mind.

It wasn't fair, she decided.

How did he do that? How did he make her go from daydreaming about a time when he wouldn't be her scowling shadow to hoping that, like Lyric, he decided to be part of her royal entourage for as long as he'd have her?

Was she so easy? And not just in bed. If her bodyguard offered her the use of his body that first night, she would've already slept with him. But having feelings for him? Caring for him?

Wanting him near?

That was different. It was new.

And it wasn't all that unpleasant, was it?

Mad, she decided, not for the first time. Bradley Fenton was driving her mad.

Even more inexplicable, Rose was looking forward to the ride far more than she should want to.

CHAPTER 10

THE HUG



Three weeks into his stay at Ryhill Manor and Brad was losing his grip on his jaguar's leash again.

It was his fault. When he first arrived and realized Rose was his fated mate, he decided her safety came before his own needs. He still believed that. If he died an unmated male, but he sacrificed himself to save her, he'd go to the great beyond a satisfied shifter.

Mates get to choose, yes, but no matter what, they always—*always*—come first. Brad was raised to believe that, every bonded couple in the pack acted the same way, and though he only spent a few days with Travis after he returned to Woodbridge with Gin, he was sure his brother treated his mating just so.

His body wanted her. His jaguar wanted her. At night, when he allowed himself a few hours rest while Rose slumbered sweetly, he dreamed of finally finding out what it would be like to make her his mate for real.

If it was only the physical part, he thought he could deal. After all, he went almost thirty years without having sex. Waiting a little longer sucked, yeah, but if it was a choice between having Rose once and possibly getting thrown out of the manor, or figuring out a way to claim her for a lifetime, impulsive Brad Fenton proved for once and for all to have grown up because he wasn't shooting for one night.

Hell if he wasn't going for forever. And since his mate was a Dayborn, when he said *forever*, he fucking meant it.

But that was the thing. The more he pushed the physical attraction and need he felt for Rose, the more he was forced to focus on the princess herself. He watched her, making sure she was safe, but by doing so, he already began to get to know the real Rose. Not the haughty, spoiled princess, or the put upon niece, but the clever, quick-tongued female who was equal parts ingenue and seductress.

It wasn't long that Brad discovered that, when she wasn't finding pleasure in other males, his mate found it in reading a good book instead.

That actually made perfect sense to him. There wasn't a single television in the entire manor, and the only entertainment came from sitting down to a meal, listening to the countless vampires gossip endlessly or, if you were a more carnal type—finding a willing mate for the evening.

That was all. Food. Gossip. Fucking.

He enjoyed watching Rose eat. Growing up in a pack, he'd had enough gossip to last a lifetime. And fucking... sorry, princess, but not while Brad was around.

His shifter's hearing was far more impressive than the Dayborns knew; that, or they *wanted* him to hear what they were saying. Like his mate, they couldn't lie. So many of them got around that disadvantage by making it clear their shit-talking was all hearsay, but that's what really set Brad's jaguar off. Whenever they made concrete statements—especially about their princess—he knew it was the truth.

And one thing all of the vamp gossips were in agreement on? Before his arrival in the manor, his mate was definitely of the carnal type. How could he forget Rose telling him herself that the asshole who tried to kill her had been in her bed when he pulled the silver knife.

He knew better than to be jealous.

He knew better—but it was almost impossible to stop himself from turning into the big green monster instead of a sleek South American jaguar.

Amazingly, though, despite the rumors of Rose's insatiable appetite, something changed after he signed on to be her bodyguard. Whether it was because he was constantly around and she wasn't the type of female who fucked with an audience, or—Alpha willing—she actually sensed the whisper-thin bond stretching between them, it didn't matter. Rose hadn't had a male since Brad moved into the manor all those weeks ago.

She could have. As much as it would've done something to his jaguar to know his mate was with another male, she really was a clever vampiress. If she really wanted to find a bed partner, he had no doubts in his mind that she would.

But she didn't. Instead, when her friend—Rose called Lyric her servant, but Brad refused to believe their relationship was anything less than a true friendship—was elsewhere in the manor, Rose read.

A lot.

The idea started kicking around in the back of his skull almost immediately after he noticed how often she went through books. It reminded him of something his brother told him on one of their phone calls before Travis seemingly disappeared during his time in the Cage.

While he was chasing after Gin, Travis had bought a diamond for her as a tangible sign that he was serious about her being his mate.

In a bid to regain his control on his jaguar for just a little longer, Brad left the manor and bought Rose a stack of as many books he could fit in his duffel. He didn't read so much himself, but he took a couple of hours while Rose was sitting down to a meeting with Rhaine and a pair of courtiers who needed the future queen to mediate something for them and jogged over to the nearest bookstore to the vamp compound.

He needed the opportunity to let his jaguar out, too. Since he recognized that Rose was his mate, he'd put such a stranglehold on his beast that he was afraid that, if he finally introduced his jaguar to his mate, it might frighten her in its ferocity and desire to get close to her.

Daily jerk-off sessions helped. Whenever he could risk stealing away long enough to rub one out and tame his wayward cock, he did. As the only shifter in the manor, he was less willing to change shapes for a run around the gilded halls.

But to the shopping mall? He killed two birds with one stone: he ran off some aggression, and came back with a small token for his mate.

He might not be able to claim her just yet. At that point in time, Brad wasn't only keeping her safe from any threats. He was keeping her safe from himself.

And despite how careful he was to keep his distance and make sure no one else knew how quickly he was falling for her, he fucked it all up.

Of course he did. He was Brad "Fucking, really" Fenton, after all.

Rose didn't know what she did wrong.

One second, she was rifling through her gowns, trying to decide what she wanted to change into for dinner. Bradley seemed to... purr almost when she wore the pastel colors, though she'd put money down he had no idea he was reacting at all.

Look at that. It only took another week or so, and Rose was finally picking up on the discreet reactions her bodyguard tried so desperately to conceal.

Why? She'd given up trying to understand him. Putting it down to just another difference between Dayborns and shifters, she simply devoted the afternoon's energy to picking out a dress that he might like.

So he'd already been living in the manor for a month and he'd given no outward sign that he was interested in her. The more he pulled away, the more Rose felt a tug toward him. He didn't seem to mind how, when she was in a teasing mood, she mentioned it. So long as she didn't proposition him again,

they'd seem to come to an uneasy truce about their relationship.

He was her bodyguard. She was Princess Rose. As much as she wanted it to be more, it wasn't, and she was pretty much okay with it.

Which was why she thought it would be okay to give Bradley an innocent hug when he surprised her after a very long, very tedious meeting with a stack of ten books deep.

He didn't retrieve them from the manor's library. Of course not. Not Bradley. As though he'd been taking mental notes on the author's she liked and the genres she read, he'd actually gone out of the manor to buy her more.

With his own money. On his own time. He did that for *her*.

Throwing her arms around his back in gratitude as he dropped off the bag of books, then purposely stalked away from her had seemed like the appropriate reaction for such a generous gesture... only it wasn't, and now Rose was standing a few feet from a visibly bristling Bradley. He'd shrugged of her hug instantly, whirling on her so quickly that, if she wasn't an inherently graceful Dayborn with fast reflexes, she would've ended up on her ass.

Well, she wanted a reaction from him. An obvious reaction.

She hadn't hoped it would be *anger*.

Bradley's eyes had turned the shade of burnt sugar. A darker shade of orange that she'd ever seen before, and since he was the only soul she knew that she couldn't accidentally charm with her gaze, she spent more time than she wanted to admit sneaking peeks into his eyes. She knew every nuance as his shifter's eyes changed colors with strong emotions, and this?

This was new.

"Bradley... what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" he snapped back. Even though it was winter, shifters ran hot and he was wearing another t-shirt

molded to fit his big body. With the force that he threw out his arms to make a point, she wouldn't have been surprised if his shirt tore right down in the middle. "What were you thinking? Did you do that on purpose?"

"It was just a hug—"

"Just a hug?"

Yeah. Just a hug.

The muscles on his forearms flexed. Rose didn't even have to look at his fingers to know that his claws would be out. And his arms...

"What's going on with your arms?" she asked.

Bradley glanced down. He didn't seem surprised to find the black shadows covering his skin. "Forget that. Answer my question, princess. What kind of game are you playing?"

"Game?" she echoed. "Bradley... I was just saying thank you."

"Then I suggest you use your words next time. I'm a shifter, princess. An alpha shifter. You can't just touch me when I'm not expecting it. Do you know how dangerous that was?"

She didn't—but she was beginning to.

Like a switch being flipped, Rose went from her regular self to Princess Rose in a heartbeat. "I understand. I'll refrain from giving you hugs to show my gratitude. And maybe you don't bring me gifts that make me happy. How's that?"

He exhaled roughly. As though coming down from his unexpected anger, he wiped his hand over his face, shuddering out a breath. When he was done, the stony expression he wore those first few weeks in the manor was back in place.

He was back in control.

"Your uncle wanted a dangerous shifter to protect you. I can't help what I am, but... I'll try. I hope that's enough." He paused for a moment, a slight crack in his facade. "Please let it be enough."

So many emotions were whirring inside of her. Rose wasn't even sure which was hers which was wild when she thought about it. Only mates shared their feelings through their bonds, and if there was one thing Bradley's outburst just proved, it was that they couldn't be.

Even if he did buy her books.

It was the hug that did it. Unexpected as it was, the moment she touched him, Brad lost all control, and his mate paid the price for the frustrated anger he felt at himself for not managing to hold onto it.

For so long, he had wanted to feel her arms around him. To feel her cool skin pressed against his, to bury his nose in her hair and just breathe in her scent.

When he had the chance? His initial instinct was to turn around, lift her up in his arms, and carry her to the bed so that he could do all that—*naked*.

He didn't, but he wanted to. He wanted to so badly that the ache in his cock was only matched by the ache in his chest when Rose looked up at him with a fearful expression as his jaguar started riding him.

Her expression didn't last. Within seconds, defiant Rose had taken her place. She was daring and brave, but that didn't matter. In so many ways, she was still too innocent.

She had no idea what he wanted from her. The hug was a sweet gesture, but it wasn't enough. And since it wasn't, Brad couldn't trust himself with it all.

Leaving Rose with the books, he made his excuses and made his escape. He couldn't stand staying in the manor a moment longer, and now that he'd gone out onto the grounds earlier to take the run out to the mall, he knew the perfect spot for some privacy.

By the time he reached it, he already had the button on his jeans undone, the zipper down. Shoving his pants past his bare

ass, he took his cock in hand and started to stroke.

The friction was the pain he need to regain some control. He drew the line at slicing his cock with his claws, though he jabbed his free hand into his thigh. Five claws digging into his muscle helped further, spurring him to stroke harder.

Faster.

Rougher.

The pop of pleasure has he started coming was the perfect complement to the pain he needed to corral back into the cage behind his chest.

For a moment, he felt like he might be able to salvage tonight. But only for a moment.

Once he finished releasing on the ground, wiping the spit and come on his hand onto the grass once he'd tucked his dick back into his pants and fastened his jeans, Brad realized that he what he was doing was just slapping a bandage on a gaping wound.

The books should've made it obvious. He was in over his head. Just as he expected, lust for his vampiress had turned to love for his a mate he still hadn't told *was* his mate.

That was his problem. That was why his jaguar went damn near feral at a single touch from Rose. It wasn't her it was furious with. It was *him*.

His jaguar was tired of hiding behind his sense of duty. It wanted Brad to tell her Rose the truth, and if the male in charge didn't, then the jaguar would find some way to reach their mate.

Because, as a shifter, Rose was meant for both of them. And, lost in playing the part of her bodyguard, he'd forgotten that part.

Brad lost track of how long he stayed away before he realized that, if he was supposed to be Rose's bodyguard, he was

leaving her wide open for an attack while he hid outside like a coward.

He'd hoped she was sleeping. It would've been so much easier if, by the time he returned to his post, she was sleeping.

But when had Brad Fenton's life ever been easy.

The moment he took reached the hall outside her quarters, her door swung in. Still wearing the pretty pale green gown from earlier, her hands were perched on her hip, a daring expression making her as beautiful as ever.

He wanted to explain. He wanted to apologize.

He never got the chance because Rose?

She did first.

"I'm sorry."

"Princess, I—"

"No. Please. Listen. After what happened... I lost my temper. Servants usually don't dare speak to me the way you just did. But you're not a servant."

This was it. This was the perfect moment to tell her.

"No," he agreed readily. "I'm your—"

"Bodyguard. I know. And I've been taking my frustration at the situation out on you. That wasn't fair of me. Rhaine just wants to see me ascend the throne after my mother, and I can't do that until I have a husband." She let out a hollow laugh that she was always so careful to swallow back when she wasn't alone. "Remember? My last suitor tried to cut off my head when I refused to initiate the blood exchange with him."

"I wish I could've killed him. For even thinking of trying to harm a hair on your head, he deserved to be a dead male."

"Thanks for the offer, but my uncle saw to that for me. After I dazed him, of course."

This wasn't the way he thought this conversation should go.

Even so, he couldn't help but echo, "Dazed?"

“It’s this thing I can do.” Taking one hand from her hip, she gestured toward her eyes. “Look a Dayborn in the eye long enough, and most of us can compel you to do things you never would. But my gaze is a little different. It doesn’t just work on weak minds like Ants or Nightwalkers. I can even control other Dayborns. Stun them. See? Make them dazed. Adrian never knew what hit him, and by the time he came out of it, he was in shackles, waiting for the executioner.”

Brad was a shifter. The blasé way his mate talked of her attempted murderer being executed made his cock twitch; already stirring just from breathing in her sweet scent, thickening because she was so near, that damn thing nearly burst through his jeans when she talked of saving herself from a threat.

But that was his cock. The rest of him didn’t know how to react.

What a surprise.

The night she nearly died... Brad hadn’t been there. He didn’t know her. He had no clue she was his mate. And, yet, he couldn’t stop blaming himself for not being the one to rip off this Adrian’s head with his bare hands for even thinking about hurting Rose.

Add that to the undeniable fact that the dead vampire did so after he got to enjoy Brad’s mate’s delectable little body? It was un-fucking-forgivable.

He knew he was being irrationally jealous. Too possessive for his own good. There was always a chance that his mate would have sexual experience he, as a shifter, had lacked. He *knew* that.

When Brad pushed his brother, shamelessly asking question after question about Travis’s new mate, he was shocked when Travis told him that Gin had a handful of previous lovers—and that Travis could give a shit.

It took a while for Brad to admit that Trav was right. It didn’t matter who came before him, only that—as her mate—he was the last lover she’d ever have.

Not Brad, though. Not when it came to Rose.

Not when she had no clue at all that she was his mate...

“I’m sorry, too,” Brad grated. In more ways than one. “I have no excuse. I shouldn’t have reacted like that.”

Rose gave him a once-over, as though searching for some sign that he was blowing smoke up her skirts.

He tried to make his expression as earnest as sincere as possible. Not so easy when he was a scowling shifter, but he *tried*.

When Rose grinned without showing off her fangs, his heart knocked against his damn ribcage. Not only was she beautiful and intelligent, but she was forgiving, too.

“Apology accepted.”

How the hell did he get so fucking lucky?

CHAPTER 11

VALENTINE



The slight truce following their dual apologies lasted a grand total of four days. And when it was over?

It was one hundred percent Bradley's fault.

As a peace offering, he bought her another pile of books. She accepted them as easily as she accepted his apology, and when things slowly went back to the way they were—Bradley going silent as he stood close to her, Rose resisting the urge to find out if his body was as hard as it looked—she thought they'd put his burst of unexpected anger behind them.

He was a shifter, after all. As wild and untamable as their beasts, she'd been lulled into forgetting that because Bradley seemed to be in complete control around the clock. After a month watching over the bored life of a pampered princess, it was no wonder he needed to release a little aggression.

Bradley was hired because Rhaine was convinced Rose was in danger. And maybe it was because of her big, strong bodyguard standing within arm's reach most of the time, but she'd been perfectly safe since then. No whispers of an impending threat, no lover taking advantage of her vulnerability while asleep to attack.

Actually, there were no lovers at all...

This was the longest Rose had gone without another of the nobles wooing her, courting her, trying to get her to take them as her husband. At first, she thought it was because of Bradley. The gossips in the court missed nothing, and Rose figured it

had to be common knowledge that she was head over heels for him.

Not that he noticed. Bradley was careful to keep his distance—as much as he could while keeping her in his sight—but every time he made a gruff mention that proved he actually *saw* Rose... that he didn't just focus on her beauty and her title like everyone else, but he *saw* her... she fell even harder.

Plus the books. She'd been giving flowers—courtesy of her given name, she was always receiving flowers from her suitors—and bottles of blood wine, but no one save for her uncle had ever gifted her books.

For that reason alone, when Bradley returned from one of his mid-afternoon patrols to verify that the manor was secure, she purposely ignored the dark look on his face, and the way his boots stomped on her floor as he let himself into her quarters.

He was in a foul mood, clearly. It was the first hint of emotion she'd seen from him since their argument, but since she couldn't fathom how it was her fault, she continued to finish the page in her book she was reading before she closed it, then set it aside on her nightstand.

Once he had her attention, Bradley scowled. "I'm your bodyguard, not your messenger boy."

What?

Holding up his hand, she saw that he had a crumpled envelope in his fist.

Rose climbed off of her high bed. Padding bare feet over to him, she held out her palm.

Wordlessly, Bradley passed the envelope over.

She ripped it open, pulling out a single sheet. Her gaze flickered to the bold signature at the bottom, before murmuring, "It's from Val."

Bradley's jaw went tight. "Valentine DiCarlo?"

Rose wasn't surprised that her bodyguard knew his name. Since taking on the job, he'd made it his point to learn every single detail about Ryhill Manor's security, including the nobles that made up the vampire court, the Dayborns who were stationed as guards, and the human servants.

Absently, she nodded while reading the note.

It was an invitation for Rose to meet him in his private room. He had one just past Rose's wing, and he was looking forward to revisiting his proposal.

Oh.

She'd forgotten all about Valentine's proposition. Suddenly, it all made sense. Every Dayborn in the manor knew the proper protocol when it came to wooing the princess. Only one male at a time could be in her favor. Val had searched her out the afternoon of Adrian's execution. There were witnesses that he'd offered to be her husband.

No wonder she hadn't had another other suitors since. While she was mooning over her bodyguard, the rest of the vampire court was waiting to see if she would accept Val as her blood-bonded mate.

Whoops.

Bradley cleared his throat. "So. What does it say?"

Maybe it was because her relationship with Lyric was close enough that her servant never held back when they were alone together. Lately, with Bradley always there, she'd been giving Lyric extended breaks, but a question like that was what she was used to from her personal maid.

It never even occurred to her not to answer. "He's reminding me that he's my suitor."

"Suitor," bit out Bradley. "You're what? Dating this guy?"

"He proposed we try and see if we're compatible."

"Compatible. Right. I guess that's what you royals call it, huh?"

Rose stared at him. Was... was he jealous?

“It’s how things are done in the manor,” was all she said. “I assume he wants to see me now.”

Bradley shrugged. “You’re lucky I brought the envelope back with me. He didn’t say anything more than that.”

Interesting... His response seemed very, very interesting to her.

How far could she push, she wondered.

She was about to find out.

“Will you escort me?”

“To meet a male I haven’t had a chance to vet yet? No. You’re staying here.”

Rose raised her eyebrows. “I am? I don’t think so.”

“As your bodyguard—”

“Right,” she cut in. “My *bodyguard*. Not my father. Not my uncle. Not my mate. You don’t get to tell me who I can and can not see.”

His eyes flashed. “Princess... you don’t know what you’re doing.”

On the contrary, Rose was quite sure she did.

Put it simply, Her fascination with her shifter guard was unhealthy for the both of them. Whether he was attempting to conceal it or not, he was jealous. She didn’t understand why. Though Rose knew little when it came to the other races, if there was one thing that court gossip enjoyed discussing was the mating quirk unique to the beastly Paras.

Rose was used to males wanting to fuck her. If that’s what Bradley wanted, at least she would understand this pull between them. Only... he was a shifter. A stunning jaguar she couldn’t stop daydreaming over. Unless she was his mate, she could never fulfill her own fantasy of seeing just how wild he could be in bed with her.

Since he didn’t want to do anything else, why shouldn’t she see what it was that Valentine wanted?

And if that had the added bonus of making him even more jealous, well... that couldn't be helped, could it?

"I'm going," she said firmly.

"If I can't convince you otherwise, then fine. Go. But I'm not going with you. Take one of the guards. Maybe he'll have better luck getting you to see how dangerous this is. Me? I'm taking a break."

"A break?" Rose echoed. Apart from when he needed to disappear to the bathroom and or lay down and get some sleep, Bradley never asked for a break. "For what?"

"Not *for* anything," he said, and if that wasn't a barely masked snarl for her bodyguard, then she wasn't Queen Colette's only child. "*From* you."

Oh.

That male wasn't just driving her mad, thought Rose as she angrily stormed toward Valentine's room. Bradley had already managed to, and she was still the naive fool who desperately wanted to go back for more.

She almost did it. When he threw open the door, marching down the hall to take his "break", she very nearly chased after him.

But princesses had pride. They don't chase.

They walk away with their heads held high, and only let out a stream of unladylike curses when they're sure they're completely alone.

After that, she went to see Valentine if only because Bradley had told her not to. She had no intention of entertaining his pursuit of her; in fact, as she grabbed the gilded doorknob to his room and gave it a furious turn, she had to admit she went there with the intention to tell him he was wasting his time if he was still trying to be her suitor.

One way or another, she wasn't going to be looking for a husband until she could get these.. these *unacceptable* feelings for Bradley Fenton out of her system.

She threw the door open. As princess, she had the right to enter every space in the manor, manners be damned. Her presence was a gift, and knocking was for other people. She didn't often act the part of the spoiled princess unless she needed to hide behind it, but just then? She was too steamed following her exchange with Bradley to do the respectable thing, like knocking to announce her presence.

Besides, Valentine was expecting her, wasn't he?

He was—but he wasn't the only one.

The moment she threw open the door, she found Valentine's head bowed over another female, his arms wrapped around her in a lover's embrace. They were standing at the foot of the bed, completely clothed, but there was an intimacy in the pose that would've had her dropping her gaze and turning away if it wasn't for the identity of the woman he was holding onto.

Or the fact that it wasn't just an embrace. Val was drinking from Lyric, and from the soft gasping moans the human female was letting out as he fed from her neck, she was enjoying it.

Until Rose called her name and Lyric's eyes sprang open.

With a gasp, Lyric jumped away from Val, almost as though his skin against hers burned.

Then, turning toward Rose, she hurriedly said, "Rose, I can explain."

She didn't want an explanation from her servant. She wanted it from the noble looking at her in guilt-tinged defiance, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Rose wasn't so naive. Though she'd never bit a living soul, she knew the more... adventurous Dayborns in the manor did. She just never expected Lyric to be a donor, or for Valentine to secret her into his room while outwardly propositioning Rose.

She couldn't care less about that part. She'd come here to cut him off anyway, but she had a duty to protect Lyric.

"Did you put her under your thrall?" she demanded. "Did you trick her into giving you her blood."

"Princess Rose, I—"

Rose's eyes flashed. She wasn't in the mood for a noble's platitudes. "Yes or no. Did you charm Lyric?"

"No," Val said, Rose's magic ripping the answer out of him. "I would never. I love her too much to take her choice away."

Dropping the spell, she whirled on her servant. "Is that true?"

It had to be. Dayborns can't lie, and people under her spell can't refuse her questions. Still, she had to hear it from Lyric herself.

"I'm so sorry, Rose. But... yes. I love him, too." Her bottom lip wobbled. "This isn't the way I wanted you to find out about us. I was supposed to have left the room before you got here, but Val was thirsty and I just... I needed him."

Oh.

Oh.

Touching the column of her throat, she gave Lyric a discreet gesture that her own was still bleeding. It was another clue that she'd interrupted something she shouldn't have since most vampires sealed their kiss with their saliva, spurring their donors to heal.

Purposely avoiding Rose's gaze now, Val turned toward Lyric.

"Let me, my love."

He bent his head over Lyric's neck again. Rose watched him move. His hand dropped down to grab Lyric's, tethering her to him as his head bobbed. Her eyes closed, breath gone heavy, and Rose could feel the renewed lust in the air.

Having the distinct feeling she was interrupting something even more intimate than before, she was just about to tiptoe out of the room when Val straightened.

The bite was healed. Lyric was panting.

And Rose had a sudden urge to return to Bradley and renew their argument.

She started backing away toward the door, only stopping when Lyric slipped out of Val's hold, rushing toward her.

“Don't be angry. Please, don't be angry.”

Angry? “Why would I be angry? All I've ever wanted was a love match, too. If you two found it with each other, I'm happy for you. In fact, I came here to tell Val that I was refusing his offer to be my suitor. You're free to be together, Lyric. It's okay. Honestly, I don't even know why Valentine offered at all since it's obvious he's in love with you. Unless this something new...”

“We've been together since he first moved to the manor. When he stayed, it was because of me, but he thought you'd sent him back to Italy before long. So this was our plan,” Lyric admitted. “If Val got you to agree to bond to him, then he could be the new king of the Dayborns. He could stay here with me.”

Rose didn't understand. “You could've left with him at any time. Be his bride.”

“She is my bride,” murmured Valentine. “The first moment I saw her standing beside you, I knew she was mine. And if I had to take another mate in blood and name, at least Lyric would be the bride of my heart.”

“That's why I thought we could share him. He'd be your husband in front of the court, and mine in secrecy. That way I wouldn't have to go.” She hesitated, then said, “I didn't want to leave you, Rose. Not when you still needed me. But if I married Val... you might not want me as your companion anymore.”

Was that what she was so worried about? She'd always believed Lyric stayed for the money, and while that was surely

true, she really did stay for Rose?

“Lyric... I would never dismiss you. Not if you wanted to stay. But you don’t have to be my servant. Be Val’s bonded bride. Join the vampire court. Be my friend.”

Lyric threw her arms around Rose. “I’ve always been your friend.” And, she added in a whisper, “as your friend... a love match can cross species, you know. Just because you always thought your husband had to be like you, it doesn’t. It could be anyone.”

Lyric was right. Rose knew that. Her father had been a human, after all. Just like Lyric was, and she obviously fell for a vampire herself.

So why was she telling her that now?

And then it hit her.

Her blood-bonded husband could be anyone—including a sexy, jealous shifter.

Rose gave her servant... her *friend*... the tightest of squeezes before pulling back. “Thank you. Thank you, Lyric. You’ve always helped me, but never as much as now.” She pressed her lips against Lyric’s warm cheek. “Thank you!”

Lyric laughed, giddy with love for her male and affection for Rose. “Anytime, Rosie. Anytime.”

CHAPTER 12

PERSPECTIVE AND PASSION



How long did a mating take?

That was the question of the hour. Running on repeat through his mind, his legs pacing the stretch just out of Rose's quarters, Brad looked every inch of the wild jaguar he was as he kept asking himself that.

Five minutes?

Ten?

Sixty?

As much as his jaguar urged him to track Rose down through the hint of their bond, pick her up by the scruff, and drag her back to his den, he had to remind his other half that Rose wasn't a wayward cub. She was a mature female with needs, and since he'd made it clear from the beginning that he wasn't about to satisfy them, she went looking elsewhere.

It was only a matter of time. And if his stupid ass hadn't rejected her so coldly in the beginning, it might have been him he turned to instead of fucking *Valentine*.

What kind of name was that anyway.

Valentine... and then plain old Brad.

Valentine... and Brad.

He was a noble vampire. Brad was a rough-and-tumble shifter who was playing at being a bodyguard.

Rose must have been desperate—or in a pitying mood—when she first propositioned him. She'd never done it again,

and after that hug, he was sure she never would.

He knew that. It was the crux of his whole plan. To make sure her uncle didn't throw his spotted ass out of the manor because Brad wasn't good enough to be her mate, he kept their fated tie to himself. He thought being her bodyguard would satisfy him, and it did... until now.

Until she left him behind.

Brad could've followed her easily. Using his nose, their bond, the way his cock twitched whenever she was near... no matter how big and winding the manor was, she couldn't escape him.

But mate's get a choice, and Rose made hers. The most he could do was hope that his selfishness in letting her leave alone meant that she was safe, and that when she returned to her quarters, he could remember that—technically—they weren't mating yet. Until the bond was cemented, Rose would experience attraction to other males. It was only after he gave her his bite and his seed, finalizing their bond during claiming sex, that the idea of any other male would repulse her.

Only then would she truly be his, and he had to suck it the fuck up until then. He'd made his bed, and now he had to lie in it—and because of his own misguided ideas of how to keep by the princess, it definitely wasn't hers.

Thankfully, Rose didn't bring Valentine back to her quarters. When she returned less than twenty minutes after she stormed away from him, she was alone.

Brad knew better than to breathe in deep, sampling her scent. If he caught hint of another male's musk embedding in her creamy skin, he was tempting his jaguar to go rabid. He knew that, and he did it anyway.

The relief that flooded his veins when all he caught was Rose's sugary sweet scent clinging to her had his knees almost buckling. For whatever reason, she hadn't mated with Valentine.

Was it because of him? Did she sense their growing bond and, already, realize that she didn't want anyone else? Praying

to the Alpha that, somehow, Rose had an epiphany that he was the perfect male for her, the husband she'd waited her whole life for, and that, yes, she *did* want to be bonded to an unpredictable, loose cannon jaguar for the rest of her life.

And then her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of him lurking just outside of her doorway. Hefting the skirt of her gown up with her hands, her heels stabbing into the marble floor with the force of her steps, Brad had to accept that—oh, yeah—he was a delusional idiot.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “I thought you were heading to the servants hall for a break from me.”

He wanted to apologize. He wanted to find the words to explain the reasons behind his flip-flopping moods. She didn't deserve this hot-and-cold version of Brad, and he wanted to explain desperately.

Instead, with another of his trademark scowls, he said, “Aren't you supposed to be meeting with your *suitor*?”

Rose paused. About five feet away from Brad, she stopped short, a curious look twisting her features. “What? Valentine? He's not my suitor. Not anymore. He's a... a friend.”

Jealousy made him reckless. If he could jam his boot in his mouth to stop the vitriol from escaping, he would've. But since even shifters weren't that flexible, he jammed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and let the last thirty minutes of his obsessive imaginings about Rose's body intertwined with another pale Dayborn turn his tone nastier than she ever deserved.

“Friend, right,” he said, the bitterness obvious to even his own ears. “Because I sneak out at night to visit all my friends, too. If you wanted company so bad, princess, I would've gone down the hall and given you privacy.”

When the blood rose up on Rose's pale cheeks, staining them red, Brad knew he'd gone too far. But it was too late. He couldn't take it back.

No matter how badly he wanted to.

“Not that what I do is any of your business, but I thought we decided you weren’t going to talk to me like that, Bradley.”

He’d already dug his grave. He might as well jump into it.

It’s not like it could get any worse anyway.

“You said something like that,” he reminded her. “I didn’t agree to shit. I’m your bodyguard, and I have the authority to do what protects you best so, yeah, it *is* my business.”

He was *wrong*.

Scoffing at him, disgust at the way he was asking replacing the curiosity from before, Rose shook her head royally. “I disagree.”

“And that doesn’t change my perspective at all.”

“Perspective?” It wasn’t a shriek exactly, but the way her voice went so high-pitched had his jaguar nearly cross its eyes. “What you mean, perspective?” Dropping the princess act again, she actually looked... concerned? “Bradley... what has gotten into you?”

It was the concern that was his undoing. He was an alpha. Fighting was what he was made for.

But concern? He didn’t know how to fucking handle *that*.

It wasn’t what had gotten into *him* that was a problem. As a shifter, this was a perfectly reasonable response for a bonded male to have when he thought his mate was choosing another male over him. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t mated yet. There was a bond there, and Brad had spent weeks suffocating his possessive urges.

He’d relied on his protective instincts instead up until the moment Rose went to meet with Valentine, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to stop her without revealing the truth. She made it clear before. She was expected to bond herself to another Dayborn so that her people had a kind and queen.

He was a shifter. Just because she was his mate, that didn’t make him hers. And after tonight? He was beginning to believe she would never be.

Brad accused her once of playing a game. But it wasn't Rose playing, was it? It was a near-feral shifter playing the most dangerous game he could—and there were no winners allowed.

Cool it, Bradley, he told himself. Taking a deep breath, he decided to put an end to this—an end to his delusions that his princess would ever stoop to mating a male like him—the only way he knew how.

By being a colossal dick.

“You went off with a male I couldn't vet against my orders. You... we need to have boundaries.” Alpha, *he* needed boundaries. “So stop with the Bradley BS, princess. It's Fenton. Just Fenton.”

“You want to be Fenton? Then give up on calling me ‘princess’. I'll be queen soon enough, and until then, I'm just Rose.”

She was throwing his words in his face. His feisty little mate, who he got to drop her haughty princess act with no effort at all, was rising up on the tiptoes of her heels, going nose to nose with a jaguar shifter twice his size.

If he didn't fucking love her already, that would've done it.

But she didn't know. Like always, the big, bad jaguar whimpered out when it counted. He never admitted she was his mate. He never even told her that his feelings had crossed the bounds of what was professional—what was acceptable—almost from the first night he saw those pale pink lips of hers part as she sampled his blood on the air.

He'd wanted her then.

He wanted her now.

Brad didn't even realize he had moved. Closing the gap between them, so close her breasts nearly brushed the fabric of his shirt, he loomed over her. His hands were fisted at his side, claws digging into his flesh. When the blood started to run and Rose's eyes went heavy-lidded with need instead of almost firing lightning bolts in her rage, he wondered if he'd done it on purpose.

The pain wasn't doing shit to control his jaguar just then. Was he trying to control the one way he could be sure his mate was actually attracted to him?

He didn't want to. Manipulating his mate in any way was so fucked up, he could hardly believe what he was doing. But what about lying? Call it an omission of truth all he wanted, but a lie was a lie was a fucking lie.

She was his mate. He knew, and Rose didn't.

Should he tell her? In the middle of this charged moment, so desperate for just a touch, just taste of her, he'd do anything... should he tell her?

He opened his mouth—

“What... what are you doing?” Her voice was breathless, her chin tilted ever so invitingly.

What was he doing? Two seconds ago, he thought he knew. Now? He wasn't so sure.

“I don't know,” he grumbled. And then, because she still hadn't broken the stare, he said, “What are *you* doing?”

Up until right this very second, he never thought his mate would turn her vampire daze on him. Her thrall. Everything he learned about it said that Dayborns only used it to snare human meals for themselves. In Ryhill Manor, the royals were too “sophisticated” to drink from the vein, though during his patrols when he needed to ensure that his mate's territory was as safe as possible, he'd caught more than a few necking—and *more*—in the hidden shadows of the halls.

Did he crave being bitten by Rose? Abso-fucking-lutely. There was a reason why so many bloodjunkies gave up the goods. When they wanted to, vampires could make a bite feel orgasmic, and only cruel Nightwalkers took a little pain with their meals.

Not like Brad would mind. His jaguar thrived on pain. Still, the thought of Rose poking her dainty little fangs in his flesh turned him on almost as much as the idea of Brad getting to poke his cock inside of her.

As her bodyguard, he'd kill to protect her. As her mate, he'd *die* to serve her. She could drain him on the spot, and with his last breath, he'd still beg for more.

A male shifter was hardwired to provide. If all he could give her was his protection and his blood, he'd offer it in a heartbeat.

No thrall necessary.

But... she wasn't charming him, was she? As Rose let out an enticing little gasp, her gaze locked on his face, roving over his undoubtedly tight features, she didn't blink, but she didn't use her magic, either. He felt in complete control, ironically, as she reached out, fingers hovering over his chest.

In a flash, he thought back to the ill-fated hug. How he turned on her for daring to touch him all because one caress, one embrace could never be enough. Just then, his mate wanted to touch him.

She didn't catch him off guard. She approached him like the wild animal he was, giving him time to tighten his chain on his jaguar so that he could surge into her, pushing his chest against her palms.

She gasped again, louder this time. Brad did everything he could to swallow the wave of pleasure that crashed into him.

Just from a touch. If her hands through his t-shirt felt this fucking amazing, what would skin to skin contact feel like?

That thought running through his feverish mind, Brad's voice dropped another octave. Impressive, considering it was as deep as a funeral dirge already. "I said, what are you doing, princess?"

"Wondering what it would be like to kiss you," she blurted out.

Brad froze. He just... froze.

Wonder what it would be like to kiss you, she said—and Rose couldn't lie.

He gulped, coming back to himself. "There's only one way to find out," he said before dropping his mouth to hers.

This was his first kiss. Unlike some other male shifters who ‘practiced’ with their unmated packmates and other females, Brad decided long ago to save all of his firsts for his mate.

Did he know what he was doing? Not even a little. Did he try not to think about how many males she’d seduced into just this? Oh, definitely.

His mate obviously was an experienced kisser. As she took over, moving her mouth under his, prodding the seam of his lips with her tongue, then slipping into his mouth where she stroked it gently... Brad had one last thought before the sensations of having Rose in his arms took over: his brother was right. It was a hell of a lot better when one half of a mated couple knew what they were doing.

If Rose could tell that he was awkward and fumbling, she didn’t show it. Clutching to his t-shirt, she moved even closer to him, pressing her body against his. Through the hint of the bond stretching between them, he could feel just how much she wanted this—wanted *him*—and the shock of experiencing his mate’s emotions inside of him for the first time had him pulling away in surprise.

He had to go. He had to run.

He had to *think*.

And he couldn’t do that with Rose’s taste in his mouth, her scent on his skin, and her looking up at him with “mate me” eyes...

“Goodnight, princess,” he rumbled, sounding more jaguar than man.

Blinking slowly, as though coming out of the same daze that he was experiencing, she pointed out, “It’s not even sunset yet.”

It wasn’t—but that meant there was more than enough time for Brad to take a run out to Woodbridge. He needed advice desperately, and this was the kind of bomb he didn’t want to drop over the phone.

Oh, no. When he told Travis he was thinking about the Claws Clause—not to mention kidnapping the heir to the Dayborn’s Blood Throne—until Rose Ryhill was irrevocably his, it needed to be in person.

Maybe then, when his older brother slapped him upside the hide, it might knock some sense into him.

Firming his jaw, purposely looking at a point past Rose, he repeated, “Goodnight, princess.”

Rose’s adorable little fangs nibbled on her bottom lip. Brad caught the gesture out of the corner of his eye.

“Goodnight, Bradley.”

From down the hall, Brad watched Rose’s door from a shadowy corner.

She didn’t know he was there. He made a point of stalking away, then backtracking so that he could make sure that she went inside her room. Only once she had did he go searching for someone to keep an eye on her while he was gone.

He didn’t have to watch her around the clock. He couldn’t. Though shifters didn’t need as much sleep as Ants, they weren’t robots. They needed to rest, and his mate’s uncle obviously realized that.

There were guards assigned to the west wing, and while his jaguar had cleared them all of any ill intent toward Rose, when he saw a familiar, white-haired male whistling down the hall, heading toward the entrance to the servant’s hall, Brad poured on his speed to reach him first.

He grabbed him by the arm, stopping him.

Dreven swiveled his head, a warning look crossing his aristocratic features for a split second before he arranged them into a friendly grin. His having to tilt his head slightly to meet Brad’s gaze probably had something to do with his sudden change in mood.

“You’re Rose’s cousin.”

“I am. And you’re her brute,” he said pleasantly.

I’m her mate.

He nodded. “I have to leave the manor. I should be back before midnight, but I need someone to make sure she’s safe while I’m gone.”

“Isn’t that a job for one of the guards?”

“It’s a job for family,” Brad retorted. “You want to keep her safe, don’t you?”

“Rosie? She’s all that’s left except for my father.”

He took that as a ‘yes’. “So do it. She’s in bed, and I don’t think she’s coming back out again tonight. If she needs supper, eat it with her. Don’t let anyone in her den.”

“Den?”

Vampire, remembered Brad. Bloodsucker. Not a shifter. “Her bedroom,” he corrected. “Her private space.”

“Ah. In that case, I give you my word that no one else will visit my cousin except for me.”

Good.

That settled, he made a quick stop downstairs to grab his shifter duffel. Stuffed as always with a spare change of clothes, he looped it over his chest, then escaped to the outside of the manor. There, he stripped, adding the second outfit and his boots to the bag. Once he was naked and he didn’t have to worry about his shift destroying his clothes, he finally ceded control to his jaguar.

He’d run the entire way to Ryhill Manor the night he arrived. Without a car, he had to rely on his beast to get him back to Woodbridge as quickly as possible. Since a South American jaguar could top out at fifty miles per hour and his animal didn’t have to rely on roads or traffic laws, it was probably faster to run than drive anyway.

The wards surrounding Woodbridge crackled against his fur as his jaguar ran right through them. He was keyed to the

impressive magics that kept everyone but a select few members of the Para collective out. Even though he'd left for the manor a month ago, Brad was one of them if only because his brother now considered the neighborhood his home.

Heading right for the house that Travis and Gin claimed, he used his jaguar's shoulder to bang into the door. Used to Brad showing up at all hours during his rambunctious youth, Travis didn't say a word as he pulled open his door. With a knowing shake of his head, he just stood back to allow the sleek jaguar into his home.

If it was just his brother, Brad would've shrugged off the duffel and shifted on the spot. Nudity wasn't a big deal to shifters. You came into the world naked, and if you swapped between shapes, you spent a lot of your time either in your skin or your fur.

But it wasn't just his brother. Gin was there, too, and he didn't want to shift in front of her. He was sure the witch wouldn't care—she only had eyes for Travis—but mating made his brother as possessive as any other shifter. If he didn't want to waste time dealing with a bonded male, it was better for his jaguar to pad into another part of their house, shift there, get dressed, then join the other two back in the living room.

They were waiting for him on their couch, sitting side by side, Gin leaning casually up against Travis. It struck Brad how, for the first time since he started yearning for his own mate, he wasn't jealous watching a bonded couple together.

He was still yearning, but he had some hope—or, at least, he did before he... you guessed it... screwed it all up once again.

He could already hear his brother's exasperated, *Fucking really, Bradley*, in his head...

Dropping down on the seat opposite of the couch, he took one look at his brother's expectant expression and let his jaguar get a say by chuffing louder than he let out while stalking the halls of Ryhill Manor.

It wasn't English, but jaguar to jaguar, his brother understood something big was up.

CHAPTER 13

ROSE AND THE RIFT



“Hey, Brad? I’m glad you’re here and all,” began Travis, “but I know that sound. Alpha knows I made it enough when I was on the run a couple of months ago. What’s wrong, and it is something we can fix without involving the rest of the pack?”

It didn’t matter how much fought to get control of his dominant alpha beast. Didn’t matter that Travis found his mate and was still in the honeymoon stages following the completion of the mating dance.

Travis was his older brother. The male who took him under his wing, who raised him and watched his back, and who always sacrificed everything he had to to take care of his uncontrollable brother.

When Travis went missing during his hunt for his own mate, for the first time in his life, Brad was left without a buffer between his untamable beast and the rest of the world. He’d had to learn real quick how to slap a leash on his beast if he didn’t want to end up in a Cage—or worse. He thought he had, too, even when he started to have feelings for Shea. To keep the Beta from having to challenge him over his mate, Brad grasped control with both paws, dug in tight with his claws and refused to let go.

And he hadn’t faltered once—until a golden-haired, pale-eyed princess wiggled her way past all of his defenses, not only triggering his jealousy, but also the coward he still was deep down.

Afraid that he wasn't good enough. Afraid that he'd never make his brother proud.

Afraid that his mate would never want a damaged shifter as her husband...

He felt a pang in his chest. For once, the pain wasn't from anything physical he was doing to himself, but he felt it all the more because of it.

Exhaling roughly, he said, "Fucking hope so. Okay. So, here goes: got good news and bad news. Which one you want to hear first?"

The bonded couple exchanged a glance. Gin nodded encouragingly.

"Good news first," Travis said. "Soften the blow."

Of course.

"Good news, then. So... I found my mate."

Gin punched Travis in the upper arm. "I told you, Trav. Didn't I tell you?"

"You did. And, like always, I told you that you were right."

"That's because you'll say anything to get me back to bed," she said, rolling her purple witch eyes.

Travis laid his hand on her thigh, giving it a squeeze. "Guilty as charged."

He was yearning, but as the pang only deepened, feeling like someone was carving his heart up with their own claws, he needed to nip that shit in the bud before his jaguar started snarling at his brother and his brother's new mate.

"Right about what?"

It wasn't a snarl, but frustration colored every one of the three words he bit out.

Gin regarded him closely—probably deciding whether his tone was worthy of one of her infamous zaps—then said, "When we were first told you were heading to work for the

Dayborns, I got a gut feeling it was where you were supposed to be. No vision or anything, but I rolled my rune stones and they said the same thing. And I was right.”

“She was,” beamed Travis. “And I’m so glad to hear it was your mate. If anyone deserved to know what it’s like to find your heart in another person, it’s you, bro. Congratulations!”

He held up his hand. “Don’t congratulate me yet. There’s still the bad news.”

“Okay. ‘Cause there’s still bad news.” Taking a deep breath, leaning back into the couch, he slipped his arm around his mate, then waggled his fingers. “Okay,” he said again. “I’m ready. Break it to me.”

Here goes nothing.

“Remember how I told you that I was leaving Woodbridge because the Alpha had me on babysitting duty for some prissy vampire princess?”

Trav nodded. “I do. She must be quite a handful if she’s kept you from coming back to visit with your only brother this past month.”

He was teasing. Growing up, whenever Brad’s jaguar was rising too close to the surface, Travis—always the laidback Fenton—would try to calm his younger brother down with a good attitude, harmless teasing, and some gentle brotherly ribbing.

Brad was twenty-eight. His brother was pushing thirty.

It still fucking worked.

“You could say that. Turns out... Princess Rose isn’t a kid like I first thought. She’s thirty-four.”

Gin caught on first. Her eyes widened, her hand rising up to her mouth. “Oh.”

Oh was right.

He nodded, messy hair falling forward in his face. Unleashing his claws, he ran his fingers through his hair, trying to tame it.

His hair, like his beast, usually refused to be.

“Yeah. Surprise, right? She’s thirty-four—and she’s my mate.”

“An older woman,” joked Trav. “You’re the jaguar and she’s the cougar, huh? I’m still waiting for the bad news here.”

“It’s coming. See... Rose doesn’t have any idea that she’s my mate.”

“What?” Travis looked shocked. “But it’s been a month. Gin knew she was mine the second I first tracked her down. And, yeah, she had me running all over the country anyway —”

“Sorry, baby.”

He squeezed her thigh, wordlessly accepting her murmured apology. “She still knew. Just like I knew she wasn’t giving up on hunting down Cilla. We had a reason it took us so long to get together. How have you made it four weeks without her finding out?”

Being cold. Jerking off whenever he was alone. Doing everything he could to keep her away from the rest of the males in the vampire court...

...until today.

“I had to. I work for her. I’m responsible for her safety. If her uncle found out, no way he’d let me stay. Maybe if she told him to, yeah, but—”

But Brad wasn’t so damn sure Rose wanted him around.

He knew she was attracted to him. Even if she wasn’t so forward about taking males into her den, he was constantly tested by her flirtatious looks and how often he caught the whiff of her delectable arousal on the air; the only scent that called more to his beast than her innate sugary scent did. She’d mate him in a heartbeat, but Brad was too territorial for casual sex.

When he fucked her—if he ever did—he would claim her. No question about that.

The only question was if she would want him to, and how she would react to discovering she was meant to be tied to a territorial, possessive shifter for the rest of her immortal life.

“Anyway, forget that. That’s not the bad news.”

Travis braced himself even as he said, “I’m not sure it can get any worse.”

It can. “I kissed her. Earlier today, actually. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Oh, *Brad*—”

He appreciated Gin’s obvious sympathy. He really did. But... yeah. He still wasn’t done. Travis knew it, too, because he nodded in encouragement. “Okay. What else?”

With only the tiniest wince he was sure his brother no doubt picked up on, Brad muttered, “Right after the kiss... which Rose initiated, by the way, just want to make that clear... anyway, instead of taking the opportunity to tell her she’s mine, I... kinda ran here for advice instead.”

Travis threw back his head and groaned. “Fucking really, Bradley?”

There it was.

“I know.”

“Honestly, you’re my baby brother. I should’ve known better. Bad news first next time... but, you know what? It’s bad, but it’s not *so* bad. Like, this isn’t an ‘end up in the Cage’ kind of fuck-up like me and Gin had. Right?”

Gin shook her head, blonde hair swaying with the decisive motion. “That was bad. This is just... unfortunate. But correctable.”

“Exactly. Look... she’s your mate. She’s into you enough to kiss you, right? We can work with that. Just... start from the beginning. We’ve got time, don’t we, Gin? Come on, Brad, tell us everything that’s happened since you met your Rose.”

Travis was right. If Brad was the baby bro, Travis was the older brother he secretly hoped would be able to help him

make sense of what to do.

Tell him everything?

That's exactly what Brad did.

From the moment he met with the Alpha and his mate, to his journey to the hidden Ryhill Manor, and the realization that Rose was his mate, he told Travis everything with the devoted belief that his brother would help him.

That's what older brothers were for, right? Travis had always cleaned up Brad's messes for him before. He was a bonded male himself who had it way worse than Brad. At least Brad was able to see Rose whoever he wanted. During his chase, Travis would go days and, sometimes, even weeks between his sighting of his bounty hunting witch.

Travis got her in the end, though. Might have taken chasing her all over America, spending four months in a Cage, and then traveling all the way to Utah—fucking *Utah*—after Gin's target, but they were bonded mates—and, in Brad's opinion, stupidly in love.

He would fix this. Brad believed that with a fervor that his jaguar echoed with a whine.

And maybe he would have. Maybe Travis would have had a moment of brotherly brilliance and come up with the answer to all of Brad's problems, fears, and insecurities that he kept caged up along with his beast. Maybe... if only he'd had the chance to ask as soon as he finished detailing what led up to this afternoon's fateful kiss.

Right as he was about to detail how he grabbed Dreven, tasked the smarmy vampire with watching over his cousin, and slipped out of the manor unaware, Travis's mate went ramrod straight without a single word.

She didn't have to speak to have both males' immediate attention.

Now, Gin's eyes were purple. She was a witch who wore the unique color proudly instead of donning glamour to hide her notable feature. Even if she did, no way could she conceal

the way the purple lightened to the most startling shade of violet as she shuddered out a rattling breath.

Brad jumped to his feet, jaguar on alert in case Gin started zapping. She'd never shoot her mate but, mate-in-law or not, he was a pretty big fucking target.

“What the fuck is going on?” he demanded.

Travis, who seemed to be at least a little used to this strange behavior, said in a hushed voice, “She’s having a vision.” Then, raising it slightly, keeping it closer to a gentle coo, he said, “Gin, baby? You hear me? It’s okay.” Climbing to his feet, moving within inches of her, he said, “I’m right here. I’ve got you. You know I’ve always got you.”

She let out another gasp before collapsing into Travis’s side. With him so close, he reached out, grabbing her, encouraging her to wrap her arms around his lean torso.

Blinking rapidly, as though trying to regain her normal sight instead of whatever she saw in her psychic vision, she squeezed his chest tightly as she swiveled her head, clearly searching for Brad.

Even before she spoke a single word, his stomach sank down to his boots.

“Your mate,” she rasped out. “I can’t explain how I know it was her, but it was. Your Rose... she’s in danger, Brad. She needs you. And she needs you *now*.”

Rose was still running her kiss with Bradley through her mind when she heard a knock at her door.

Hoping he had decided to come back so they could discuss, she wasn’t able to hide her flash of disappointment when she found Dreven standing there. Especially when he cousin let himself in, then announced, “With your bodyguard gone for the night, I guess I’m the lucky one on duty, Rosie.”

Normally, she didn't really mind the way Dreven tried to put a teasing spin on everything he said. He always had, ever since she could remember; like how Rhaine was solemn and serious, his son was a jokester. That was normally, though. This afternoon?

"That's not necessary. I'm fine on my own. I made it thirty-four years without a bodyguard, after all. Just because Rhaine decided I needed one now, doesn't mean I do. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I know that. Deep down, Father does, too. We're Rhyhills, aren't we? There's no one strong enough to hurt us."

Exactly. "See? Where were you when I tried to convince Rhaine to send him away?"

Rose tried to matching his teasing tone. She couldn't. Even though she'd instinctively recognized from the beginning that nothing good would come of accepting Bradley Fenton as her bodyguard, she was a little bit wrong, wasn't she? For all the differences they had, she wouldn't trade any of the last few weeks she spent with him.

And that kiss...

Rose shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course not," soothed Dreven. Glancing around the room, he said, "It's early. You weren't thinking about turning in, were you? Your brute said something about supper. Are you hungry?"

"Not particularly. And don't call him a 'brute'. His name is Bradley." No. He was *her* Bradley. "Fenton. His name is Fenton."

"If you say so."

Dreven was normally flippant. That wasn't unusual. The way he was purposely looking anywhere but at Rose while exploring her room as thought making sure she was truly alone?

That *was*.

Why would he care if she had a companion? Dreven was known for fucking anything that moved—herself excepted, of course, because of their blood relation—and was no one to judge her. He also wasn't the type of male who would allow one of the help to give him orders. No matter how... forceful the shifter could be, if Dreven didn't want to come visit Rose, he wouldn't have. That was guard duty, and he was a royal.

“What are you doing?” she asked him. “Are you looking for something?”

“Not quite,” came his answer.

Something in his tone rubbed her the wrong way. “You know... I changed my mind. I think I am rather hungry. Is Rhaine waiting for us to dine with him?”

“Father? Oh, no. He's not at the manor tonight. He had another meeting scheduled with the beastly Alpha. He wanted a report on how your brute was doing.” Dreven *tsk*-ed. “I should let him know that he ran away from his duty. Not very bodyguard-like of him, is it?”

“Don't be silly,” Rose said, sharper than she intended. “He deserves a break.”

“I guess. But you know what? So do I?”

“Dreven?” When he didn't answer her, she said, “Why won't you look at me?”

“Why do you say that, cousin? Why does it matter? Most don't, do they?”

Bradley did. Even without knowing her abilities didn't work on him, he never shied away from making eye contact with her.

For as long as Rose could remember, rumors ran rampant through the court about the Ryhills unique ability. Her mother could do it, and the nobles all wondered if Rose could as well. The only two who knew for sure were the last two surviving members of her line: Rhaine and Dreven.

“Dreven. I'm done with this conversation. I think you should go.”

“And waste the perfect opportunity I was given when that beast finally left your side. I’m sorry, Rosie. I waited too long for this.”

“What are you talking about?”

In answer, Dreven reached inside of the jacket of his suit, pulling out...

A needle?

Vampires didn’t get vaccines. No need. Either they were Nightwalkers, so they were already dead, or they were Daybrons, and functionally immortal save for a sword to the head.

Her immortality might have been a crutch, she realized. Up until she saw the molten silver liquid sloshing thickly in the injector, she never really thought she could ever die. Even when she woke up to Adrian’s blade at her throat, it was more of an inconvenience than anything.

Hoping this was the same, she mustered up all of the bravado she could.

“Again, I must ask, what are you doing?”

“What I’ve been planning on since Colette lost her head. Five years, Rosie. I waited five years so that no one knew it was me, and now you’re the only thing standing between my family and the Blood Throne.”

“Your family,” gasped Rose. “But I’m your family!”

“I know. And you’re so young, too. You’d rule forever, and I’d never get the chance. But because you’re such a fledgling, I’m going to spare you.”

Spare her?

His lips twitched. “I won’t kill you myself. But depending on what’s on the other side, you might wish that I did.”

What?

By the time she realized that Dreven truly was a threat hidden in plain sight, he’d already zoomed toward her, jabbing the needle into her neck, pressing the plunger on the injector

before she could scream. Rose never got the chance to compel him to stop, or even beg him to reconsider what he was doing before the quicksilver flooded her veins, tainting her blood.

The instant the first drop of poison reached her heart, Rose collapsed. Dreven caught her, but she was too weak to shove away from his bruising hold.

Black shadows swirled on the edge of her vision. As she opened her mouth to call for help—to call for her uncle, to call for a guard, to call for *Bradley*—her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

After that, she remembered nothing.

Brad was halfway back toward the Ryhill Manor when he criss-crossed with a scent that stopped him dead in his tracks.

He was in his two-legged form for the only reason that, after Gin told him to go, he *went*. He could give a shit about his clothes. If it occurred to him to let his jaguar out, he would've. It was just... the seconds it would take to shift shapes and reorientate himself as his jaguar were seconds he didn't want to spare if Rose truly was in danger.

That might've been a good idea, too. He spent so much of his time as a man around Rose that even the whisper of her innate scent on the breeze snared his attention—especially since there was absolutely no way her scent should be this far outside of the manor... unless she left it.

She wouldn't have gone by herself. He was absolutely sure of that. She wouldn't have to have been dragged or carried. Someone would have been with her.

Another deep breath. That's all it took. Searching past Rose's scent, he found—

There.

He almost couldn't believe it, but he didn't doubt his nose. Following the trail, he spun around, using it as a guide to bring

him right back where he came from. Her scent grew stronger as he headed toward Woodbridge, infuriating his jaguar when he noticed the acrid stink of quicksilver mingling with Rose's sugar.

Well, at least that explained why she was this far from home. With quicksilver pumping through her, she wouldn't have had any choice.

That spurred him to go faster. Brad didn't stop until he raced right down the empty stretch of road leading up to the rift and he found Dreven Ryhill's silhouette illuminated by the white glow of the rift.

In his arms, Rose was held in a mockery of a bridal-style carry. Her eyes were closed, the ends of her blonde hair scraping against asphalt.

Sparing a hand from beneath her gown, Dreven waved. "Ah, Fenton. You're right on time."

Too stunned at the sight in front of him and how it juxtaposed with the Dayborn's friendly call, he swallowed back his pants as his mind raced.

On time? For what?

What was he doing here? Why did he have Rose?

What was going on?

That wasn't the only thing he didn't understand, either. The wards should have kept him out. Even if they didn't, Travis and Gin knew that Brad left in a rush. No way they wouldn't have left their house to see who the unfamiliar vampires were encroaching on their territory.

The street was empty. Eerie.

Something was wrong...

"How did you get in?" demanded Brad. "Where is everyone else who lives here?"

Because that, he decided, was exactly what was wrong. It didn't just *feel* empty. It *was* empty.

Luciana and Azrael. Colt and Shea. Travis and Gin... they were all gone.

Dreven snorted. "Please. I'm a Ryhill. Rosie never thought much of me, but I have the same gifts as my cousin."

Gifts.

No!

"Who the fuck did you compel?"

His eyes glittered wickedly. "Wouldn't you like to know? I'll just say this, my only quarrel is with my cousin. Once I leave, I'll drop the spell I have on the witch and everyone will come back, none the wiser. At least, that's what was supposed to happen until you showed up. Couldn't stay away from her, could you?"

Not even a little.

"Put the princess down." He was too close to the rift for Brad's liking. "Give her to me, then we can discuss this like males."

"Now, why would I do that? I went through a lot of trouble to arrange this. Planting the idea in my father's head that dear Rosie needed a guard. Preferably a shifter, you know. So unpredictable, but loyal, too, aren't you? Who better to watch over the princess? Except, oops. You left your post. Rose disappeared. Poof. No more princess, and the only one at fault is a shifter."

"Rose isn't going anywhere," growled Brad. "Now put her the fuck down."

"If you're afraid my father will blame you for leaving your post, pretend you weren't here, and I'm sure we can come to... an arrangement. She's nothing to you, just your charge. But she represents *everything* to me."

Nothing to him? Is that what this fucking worm thought?

"That's right. She's my charge." Hunching his shoulders, releasing his claws, he snarled, "I'll protect her to death if I have to."

“You know what? I tried to be civilized,” Dreven said with a put-upon sigh. “I forgot what I was dealing with. Ah, well. To death, you said? I guess that can be arranged.”

And, with that, he threw Rose into the rift.

The blinding light swallowed her up. One second, she was flying through the air. The next? It was as though she next existed.

She was gone, and in the next blink of his eye, so was Dreven.

That left Brad with one decision: hunt down the vampire and kill him or follow after his mate and hope that, wherever the mysterious rift led, he was able to find her again?

No contest. Without even a backward look, and only making sure he had his duffel strapped to his body, Brad dove right into the rift.

CHAPTER 14

LABYRINTH



The first thing he noticed when he landed was darkness. Probably because he'd instinctively shut his eyes in a bid to preserve his vision as he launched headfirst into the bright glow. Still fucking dark.

The second thing? Was that, despite landing on a patch of dirt that scraped the shirt out of his face, nothing smelled right.

Except for Rose. The sweet sugary scent that belonged to his mate made his heart sing and his jaguar roar. Snapping open his eyes, he found her sprawled out in the dirt a few feet away from him. Still completely out, he heard her slow breathing and knew she wasn't as dead as she appeared.

His instincts urging him to get to her, he scrambled to his feet, then crouched down, swooping her up in his arms. It happened so quickly, it took him until he had her unconscious body clutched to his chest before he realized that they'd survived the rift.

And that led him to the third thing: he wasn't in Kansas anymore. Not Woodbridge, either, or the United States. Shit. Considering the sky was a dark magenta shade burnished with gold clouds and two—*two*—distinct suns, he was pretty sure he wasn't on earth anymore, either.

True, he had no clue where the rift had spit them out, but at least they were together.

They were *alive*.

Now it was up to Brad to keep them that way.

He was standing in the middle of a narrow dirt path—which was brown, thankfully, even though it smelled vaguely like salted pistachios of all things—that stretched in front of him and behind. A towering hedge was on each side of him. Not just greenery, though. A thicket of huge brown thorns were gnarled and twisted and poking out from every inch of it, warning any wary travelers from getting too close.

It worked. Brad knew that, if he tried to push through the hedge, he'd rip himself to shreds. Worse, he wouldn't be able to protect Rose from their points.

Unless...

He glanced up.

In the wild, jaguars preferred the trees. Preferred the vantage point and the height, both which made it easier to hunt and protect its own hide. As a shifter, he was no different. Shielding his gaze from the blinding suns, he grunted in triumph the second he noticed a slender tree not too far behind him. It rose up out of the dirt in the same path they were trapped on, so at least he wouldn't have to risk challenging the fierce-looking thorns.

Thank Alpha for that.

The trees in this place were unlike any trees he had ever seen before. The bark was almost mirror-like in its color, though he got lucky. There was enough give to the tree that he could use one set of claws to clamber to the top where he immediately set Roe across his lap.

There were no leaves on these branches. Only fruit. But like the weirdo trees, Brad's jaguar immediately recoiled at the fruit. They looked like apples, only if apples were a crystal pink shade that *clinked* when he tapped them with the edge of one claw.

Well. Beggars can't be choosers, and while he refused to eat the apple, the height of the tree gave him a vantage point to look out at the world around them. Not that there was much to see. Even from this height, all he saw was a row of hedges just like the one they landed in the middle of.

Like it was some kind of maze, almost.

Since there was nothing he could do about that, he turned his attention to Rose.

He tucked her on his lap, wrapping his arms around her. His mate's head lolled, falling forward. Her golden waves hid her face from Brad.

Un-fucking-acceptable.

His claws were out. No surprise. He was more jaguar than man in the moment, and had been from the second Gin fell into her trance and warned him that Rose was in danger. Careful as ever around his delicate mate, he swiped it out of her face, then settled himself down to wait as long as it took for her to wake up again.

He'd hoped that it wouldn't take long. The longer it did, the more frantic both he and his jaguar became until the only thing he could do was holding onto Rose with one hand, and jab his claws into the fleshy part of his palm with the other.

Surprisingly, that did the trick.

Almost as soon as the blood started to spill, Rose stirred. Taking heart in that, he dug a little harder, releasing more blood. The pain meant nothing. Reviving his mate was all that mattered.

Her eyes fluttered open. "What..." Dazed over at first, she cleared quickly as Rose recognized him. "Bradley. It's you. I can't believe it's you."

She clutched him with one hand. Her grip was as weak as her voice.

Worry made his tone sharp. "It's me. Listen. You know about the rift, right? You've heard about it?"

"I... yes. I think so. But Dreven—"

Fuck Dreven. "He did something to you, right? Something bad. Well, it's worse than whatever you guessed, princess. He bundled you up and, he shoved you into the rift." When Rose just stared at him, as though unable to understand, he added, "I

saw it. I couldn't stop him... but I could come after you. I'm here. I've got you. You're safe."

For once, Rose didn't even attempt to argue with him. Accepting that easily—that, high up in the tree with a jaguar shifter, she was *safe*—she nodded as she swallowed, then grimaced.

"Princess? Are you okay?"

While he sat with her, Brad could pick up on how woozy she felt. How drained the quicksilver left her. It filtered down the echo of their growing mate bond. It wasn't usual for unbonded mates to pick up on how the other was feeling, but it wasn't unheard of, either. The closer a pair was, the easier it was to sense it.

Or, remembered Brad, how much pain the other one was in...

Her throat hurt. He felt the same stabbing sensation in his. He didn't understand why, though, until Rose admitted in a soft voice, "He poisoned my blood. I don't have any wine to fight the effects of the quicksilver."

Translation: his mate was suffering the effects of the poison *and* thirst.

That wasn't a sore throat. That was a Dayborn's powerful thirst for blood.

There wasn't much he could do. Trapped in this strange realm, unable to explain to her why her cousin betrayed her in such a way, he was at a loss how to make this shitty situation any better.

But providing for his mate? Giving her the one thing she needed as a vampire that he had plenty of?

Shifting her weight slightly, Brad cut along the length of his forearm, a two-inch long slash he was careful to keep away from an actual vein.

Her eyes lit up. Only for a moment before she tucked her chin down and murmured, "I can't."

Yes, she fucking could.

“Go ahead, princess.”

“Are you... are you sure?”

“Yes. Now drink.”

He didn't have to tell her a third time. For once, she listened to him without any argument, a testament to how shitty she had to be feeling to willingly drink from him. As soon as she latched on, he leaned back as he provided for his mate, so focused on not coming in his jeans as she sucked him arm.

It all happened so quickly, feeling like the most natural thing in the world, and neither one of them realized it was the first blood exchange until much, much later...

If blood wine tasted sweet, then Bradley's tasted like straight fire. It burned as she swallowed, heat slipping down her throat, warming her up from the inside out.

That, Rose thought later, still not over the delicious taste, was why other nobles skulked around the manor, searching for a throat to nip. She's only had straight blood once, and already she was addicted.

It also banished the last of the quicksilver poison her cousin had pumped through her. Within minutes of healing Bradley's slash with her tongue, turning off the tap before she drank every last drop he had to offer her, she felt more invigorated than she had in longer than she could remember.

Bradley was prepared to stay in the tree, observing a little longer. Not Rose. Call her soft if you wanted, but she wasn't made for the outdoors. Wherever they were—and she was pretty sure she had an inkling of an idea from the layout of the ground below them—she figured there had to be shelter.

Going home was her first priority. In a mixture of shame and frustration, he admitted that he'd had to choose between capturing Dreven and going after Rose. For him, it hadn't been

a choice at all. When Dreven tossed her away, her bodyguard jumped right after her.

Unfortunately, she couldn't see how to return. Though Rose had only half-listened when her uncle spoke of the Para collective he joined, and the "rift" that appeared in that witch town, she knew enough. Bradley had actually lived in Woodbridge before he took her on as his charge, so he knew even more.

And the one thing they agreed on? The rift had dropped them off in a whole other world. The magenta sky and crystal pink apples were a bit of a clue, and then there were the twists and turns of the narrow paths they found themselves on...

"Fuck," muttered Bradley under his breath when they reached another dead end. "This maze is pissing me off. If it wasn't for the thorns, I'd just rip my way through it."

It wasn't just the thorns, Rose knew. He'd push through it fine, disregarding the pain like he often did. But would he leave her behind after all he did to come after her?

He wouldn't, and that's why they were both stuck in a maze—

Wait, though Rose. It wasn't just a maze, was it? It was—

"A labyrinth," breathed out Rose. At Brad's curious look, she said, "I... I think that's what this is. A labyrinth."

"And what the hell is a labyrinth?"

"The labyrinth was a maze where they kept the minotaur. Half-man, half-bull," she explained. "My mother insisted on a classical education. I learned a lot about Greek mythology."

"And this minotaur in the maze... he was a shifter?"

Rose shook her head. "Um. No. He was both at the same time, actually, and he guarded the maze." Glancing around, as though she expected the mythical creature to appear out of thin air—after all, they had, hadn't they—she was relieved when she didn't see anyone else but Bradley. "I don't think this from the old legends, though."

"What do you think it is?"

Here goes nothing... “Faerie,” she confessed. “For some reason, I think that rift brought us to a whole other world.”

For a moment, Bradley was silent. Nothing unusual with him, but when his nostrils flared, Rose waited for him to call her a silly child. Despite the fact that she was—technically—older than him, she doubted he’d believe her fanciful suspicions as easily as that.

She was wrong.

“That makes a lot of sense. This place... it doesn’t look right. It doesn’t smell right. In the old myths, at least there were set in our world. Greece, yeah? I’ve never been out of America, but I don’t think this is Greece. Why can’t it be Faerie?”

Rose blinked. “You believe me?”

“Well, yeah. You’re the smartest person I know. You say it’s Faerie, it’s Faerie.”

Bradley had no idea, but that was the kindest thing anyone had ever said to her before. Usually, Rose was only complimented on her appearance and her magic. But her brains... *never*.

With a shy smile, she said, “I read a lot. It’s book smarts, that’s all. I don’t really have a lot of experience outside of the manor.”

“Then it’s a good thing you got me, princess.” Offering his elbow out to her, eyes darkening to orange as she looped her fingers over the bend, he said, “Come on. Let’s see if we can find out where this labyrinth leads.”

The answer to that was *nowhere*.

For the first hour or so, Rose was confident they’d find their way out. So long as they weren’t dropped in the exact center, they’d find either the beginning or the end sooner or

later. If not, maybe they would stumble upon some other poor, unfortunate souls who might be able to help them get out.

If not, at least they might prove her suspicions true.

Too bad none of that happened. As they walked together, side by side though the narrow path meant their hips were basically touching, they took endless turns—and plenty of dead ends—only to get nowhere.

The longer it went on, the more she could sense Bradley bristling. He was getting more and more frustrated, and she could tell that he was too far in his head right now.

So why not take him out of it?

“Have you ever been in love before?”

Bradley stopped short so suddenly, when he turned to face her, he nearly whacked her in the chest with his duffel bag. Between his reflexed and hers, she managed to avoid it, but that didn't stop him from staring down at her with a bewildered expression.

“And why exactly are you asking me that?”

Rose shrugged. Initially, she thought it would be a good distraction, but now that she asked... “I guess it's because I only really know you as Bradley the bodyguard. Despite all evidence to the contrary, there's got to be more to you than that. We've got the time, don't we? Why not ask each other questions? We'll be honest with each.”

“Honest,” he repeated slowly, almost as though he was tasting the word. “And that's the question you want to start with?”

Yes—but it wasn't the only one.

Glancing up at him through the fringe of her eyelashes, giving him the innocent look that had fooled her beloved mother and her overprotective uncle on more than one occasion, she said, “I could ask you about our kiss instead, if you prefer?”

Poor male. Thrown off his purposeful stride by her coy comment, he nearly tripped over his boots before, relying on

his Para instincts, he got his footing back. She saw his golden eyes turn the color of molten lave, the heights of his tanned cheeks going red—and she knew she had his attention.

It didn't last. Swallowing roughly, he purpose turned his head forward, facing the length of the well-traveled dirt path in front of him be he grumbled, "Princess, I—"

"You could say no," Rose purred. "Big shifter... if you're afraid to answer that question, I'm sure that's fine. Of course, I thought you were a jaguar, not a chicken."

With Bradley staring purposely ahead, he couldn't see her grin, though it wouldn't matter to her if he did. She adored teasing him. Everyone in the vampire court played along with her moods. He didn't, almost as though he saw *Rose*, despite his insistence to only ever use her title.

It was like he had this undeniable need to put some distance between them. Until their kiss, of course.

Shifters were known to be jealous, possessive, and easily provoked. They were also loyal to a fault, and devoted to whatever they considered theirs, including their fated mate. Before this afternoon—before Val's note, and Rose daring her bodyguard to kiss her—she had a hard time reconciling the gruff male with everything she'd learned about his type of paranormal.

That just made her realize: what did she really know about Bradley? He was so tight-lipped, it was a miracle when he let slip anything about himself. She knew that, like her, his parents were dead. He was raised by his grandfather, who died when he was a child, and he'd spent most of his life after that living with his older brother, Travis.

Travis had a mate, she learned. While Bradley didn't, Travis was bonded to a psychic witch. If it wasn't for her, Bradley wouldn't have known that something was wrong when Dreven poisoned her. His brother's mate sensed that Rose was in danger, that she *needed* him, and Bradley arrived just in time to watch Dreven toss the heir to the Blood Throne into this strange world.

Into Faerie.

And, for reasons she still couldn't fathom, his first instinct had been to jump in after her. Her protector to the end, he was now stuck in this other realm with her with no obvious way back.

Why shouldn't she take the time to learn about him?

Especially since she couldn't shake the felling that he was keeping something from her... and that it had everything to do with that kiss.

She wasn't his mate. She couldn't be. Shifters had a reputation for grabbing their mates, running off with them, then leading them to their den so that they can take their females as quickly as possible. Bradley had rejected Rose when she'd playfully invited her into his bed; if she *was* his mate, why would he have done that? But that kiss...

Shifters couldn't fuck anyone but their mate. She understood that. Most unmated males were loyal to the idea of their female, and she'd decided Bradley was one of those.

Until he kissed her. And if he could kiss her, what did he do with other females?

She shouldn't be so jealous. She had no reason to be. And, yet, on the rare occasion that Bradley discussed his life before he came to stay at Ryhill Manor, if he wasn't bringing up Travis and his mate, Gin, he was mentioning the Beta of his pack, and his witchy mate, Shea.

Shea Moonshadow. She owned some kind of magic shop, could heal with her touch, and was a sweet empath. The fact that she knew more about a witch she'd never met than the male she couldn't stay away from bothered her immensely.

Plus, there was a gentleness to his tone when he said her name. Rose didn't even *get* her name. She was always 'princess', while this witch was *Shea*.

So, yeah. That was her question. And when Bradley hesitated to answer, she was pretty sure she knew why.

Still, she felt like she was on the edge of something big with him. If she was going to take a leap, she sure as hell was going to give him a push, too.

After all, they were in this together.

“I can’t lie,” she said.

“I know. It’s a Dayborn thing.”

“Right. But, since I can’t, I think it’s only fair that, when it’s the two of us talking, you don’t lie to me.”

His brow furrowed. “Why would I lie to you?”

She shrugged, purposely looking straight into his eyes. “I don’t know. That’s why I mentioned it. But I still want to know. Have you ever loved someone? Really loved someone? Yes or no?”

“I’ll answer if you do.”

Oh, Bradley. He really thought he had her cornered, didn’t he?

“Agreed.”

“I... I thought I did. Once.”

Rose tried not to let the pang that hit her in the chest show. She’s asked for it. She got the answer. She should’ve let it go.

She didn’t.

“Let me guess. That witch. Shea.”

The look of surprise was all the answer she needed to that one. Brad knew it, too, because he didn’t say a word about Rose’s guess. Instead, he nodded at her. “Your turn. Have you been in love before?”

Turnabout was fairplay. Rose jutted her chin. “Yes.”

His jaw went tight. “One of your suitors?”

If only. “I can honestly say I never slept with the male I’m talking about.”

How could she? He was a shifter, she wasn’t his mate, and this was a terrible idea.

“Who—”

“Uh-uh,” she said, cutting him off. “My turn to ask a question now. Unless you’d rather walk in silence...”

“And let you end the conversation like that? Nice try, princess. Go on. Ask your question. Just remember, I get a turn next.”

CHAPTER 15

QUEEN TITANIA



He was waiting for Rose to ask her question so that he could answer it quickly, then get back to the topic at hand: as in, what male had her heart, and would it be a good idea for his jaguar to challenge him so that Brad could earn it instead.

However, after they took a few more turns through the thorny maze, when she finally spoke up again, it wasn't a question.

It was a statement.

“You're a shifter.”

This was quite possibly the worst moment to get a hard-on. They were in an unfamiliar world, stuck in a maze, and they didn't know if they would be able to return home. At her throaty comment, Brad immediately stiffened—and not just his cock, either; whenever Rose was around, that was a given. Where was his sly little vampiress going with this?

For weeks, he'd been watching her. Since taking the job—since recognizing who she was to him—that's all he had been doing. After all this time, he thought he was getting a bit of an idea of who Rose Ryhill was. Sometimes sweet, sometimes innocent, but also wary and guarded and, yup, pretty fucking sly.

She gathered information, tucking it away until she could use it, absorbing knowledge like a sponge.

Was that what she was doing now?

It didn't matter if it was. She was his mate, and whether she knew that or not, he'd deny her nothing.

"I am."

"A jaguar, right? That's what my uncle said."

He nodded.

"You know, if we're going to take the moment to get to know each other... I have a confession to make."

He swallowed roughly. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Nothing really. It's just... I keep thinking about those black shadows on your arms. I looked up a picture of a jaguar in the manor's library, you know. Jaguars have those markings."

"Rosettes," he supplied. He adored that she wanted to know more about him, and now that she'd dropped the subject of Shea and the love Brad hadn't stopped obsessing over since she mentioned him, he was more than willing to tell her whatever she wanted. "They're called 'rosettes'. When you see them, it's because my jaguar's more in control than the rest of me."

Rose's eyes lit up. "Like when your fangs and your claws are out."

The way she said that made Brad ask, "Do you notice that a lot?"

"Sometimes. I notice when you're bleeding a lot easier. Usually that's when I see the claws on the ends of your fingers." She paused, then said, "You don't like losing control."

The laugh Brad let out sounded like someone using a saw back and forth. His jaguar's laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

"Nah," Rose said. Then, with a teasing tilt to her lips, she said, "Maybe a little. But that's okay. You can lose control around me, if you want. As long as you don't yell again, I really don't mind." She paused, the point of her tongue dabbing her bottom lip. "You ready for another confession?"

“Always.”

“I think it’s kinda sexy when I see you off your leash.”

Oh, princess...

She wouldn’t say that if she knew exactly how beastly he could be if he let himself off his leash. And now that they were on the other side of the rift, he couldn’t.

But once they made it back home?

Brad was done pretending that she wasn’t his.

She wanted to see him off his leash? Her wish was his command.

Rose thought she hated being stuck in this maze.

She could tell how much it was bothering Bradley’s beastly half to be trapped in the narrow paths, and while she managed to distract him for awhile with the question game—and nearly had him choking when she boldly called him sexy—so she tried not to let him know how much it upset her, too. Someone had to suck it up, and since she was the reason they were stuck in this world, it might as well be her.

And she did, until they came across the first signs of life in the labyrinth that wasn’t them.

It wasn’t a minotaur. They were winged females about as tall as her hand from pointer fingertip to wrist that called themselves pixies in their screeching, high-pitched voices.

Within moments of meeting the fist, it was safe to say that Rose *hated* pixies.

They caught in her hair, tugging the strands, slapping the top of her ears, then laughing as they flew away, yanking her hair in the process.

Brownies, too. She’d read about them in her books on folklore. The small creatures were supposed to be kind

household fairies who did chores in exchange for a saucer of milk.

The one that scampered across their path came halfway up her shin, and was covered in shaggy dark brown hair that might possibly have been part of his clothing. At least, Rose thought it must be a male. It was hard to tell from its brown-skinned face and weathered features, but considering it whistled right before it ducked under her skirts and started climbing up her leg, it only seemed right.

The brownie's stubby fingers reached her upper thigh before Rose squealed and began to stomp around. She still had on her heels and her daygown. She had every intention of stabbing the perverted creature with her heel once she shook him loose.

She never got the chance. As soon as it landed on the dirt, Bradley swooped her skirts aside and punted the brownie with his boot.

As the creature soared high over the hedges before disappearing out of sight, she could've sworn she heard a low-throated, "Wooooorrrrtth iiittt."

So, yeah. The faerie creatures spoke English. And if it wasn't English? It was something they interpreted as such which made her head spin too much for her to continue thinking about.

After that, Bradley kept her close. For some reason, he took it as a personal insult that the whatever-it-was decided to sneak a peek at her underwear. He asked repeatedly if Rose was okay, making sure that the brownie didn't get more than a flash of thigh before they both reacted.

Then, when she assured him that that was all, he offered her another sip of blood.

He did that repeatedly. As though worried she might keel over from exertion, he wanted to make sure she had enough. Overprotective even in another world, she thought, always brushing him off.

She had, too. The last thing she needed was to get used to his taste. If there was one thing she was sure of, it was that she'd never get to keep him. Not as a bodyguard... or anything else. It didn't matter that Dreven was the traitor, or that Rose was certain that meant her blood relation killed her mother, too. Rhaine would tend to his son, but no way would he allow Rose to keep Bradley as her bodyguard.

Her uncle would think that the shifter failed. Rose was attacked and, though she didn't want to admit it, even Dreven boasted it was because Bradley had left the manor.

That was also assuming that he wanted to stay with her. Considering his devotion to his duty—to *her*—landed them in this trouble in the first place, she doubted he would.

But that was something to worry about after they made it home. As it was, she was beginning to think they were never going to get out of the maze.

Darkness fell; the strange magenta sky turned a rich violet shade that grew to a midnight purple the later it got. One plus side? Wherever they were, it was warm. Even when the shadows followed them, the heat never abandoned them. Rose had to resort to throwing her hair over her shoulder, dabbing the sweat building there with her sleeve.

Sweat had turned Bradley's hard even darker, too. Her shifter didn't bother dabbing. He lifted the hem of his t-shirt, using that to wipe at his brow, giving Rose her first peek at his magnificent chest.

Something about him had aroused her from the beginning. She wasn't ashamed to admit to herself that he made her wet, though he'd never given her any sign that his jaguar's nose noticed how hot she made him.

Until Faerie, that was. Until he started flaring his nostrils after every time he wiped his brow, as though using that as a gauge to see if she liked what she saw.

If only they hadn't given up on the question game. He couldn't outright asked her instead of sneaking sidelong glances their way as they walked.

Eventually, Rose had to call it quits. Bradley didn't fight her need to rest one bit. Instead, he invited her to hold on, then clambered up the next strange tree they found. There, he rested her on his lap again, and told her to get some sleep.

She wasn't sure if he did the same. He never seemed to need as much sleep as she did, even back at the manor. He was awake when she snuggled up next to him and passed out, and he was staring down at her when she reluctantly got up again.

This time, she couldn't come up with a good excuse to refuse his offer of breakfast. She needed her daily dose of blood, and he was more than happy to provide it. Once she was done, neither of them spoke of it again, though Rose couldn't stop thinking about it.

It had finally hit her that, whether she'd done it on purpose or not, she'd triggered the first blood exchange. It was the easier one of the three to do, and unless he had some of her blood in return, that was all it could be. Just one.

And she told herself that whenever Bradley suggested she might need another nip.

During their second day in the labyrinth, she found out what satyr shit looked like, what kind of *splat* a pixie made when Bradley slapped one out of the sky in frustration, and just how heavy he was to drag away when they stumbled upon a small pond. There was a kelpie—a creature that shape-shifted into a horse—standing along the edge, tossing its head and trying to invite riders to join them in the depths of the pond.

Rose saw right through it. Bradley, though? He headed right for it. No matter how she tugged, she couldn't get him to stop. Only when she let out a soft cry of frustration—that, okay, might've sounded a bit like a sob—did he seem to come back to her.

Shaking his head before tossing Rose over his shoulder and darting out of the sight of the kelpie, he muttered something about not even liking fucking horses.

They didn't talk about that, either.

It was growing darker again. Rose was beginning to think they would have to start looking for another tree in the distance to climb up in for the night when, all of a sudden, she caught sight of a golden light glimmering in the distance.

Obviously remembering the kelpie, Bradley grabbed her by the wrist. "I wouldn't do that if I was you, princess."

She shook him off. Just like how she could tell the kelpie was dangerous, she had a good idea about the light. "Come with me if you want, but I'm going."

It was a bluff. Both of them knew very well that, if Rose went, Bradley would follow.

And he did, matching her pace for pace as she jogged toward the light.

It was a lantern, she realized, and when it started bobbing toward them, it became clear that it was being carried by someone.

Bradley tried to warn her back again, but Rose surged forward.

For the first time since they ended up in the labyrinth, they found someone almost... human-ish. That was probably the best word for him. He had two arms, two legs, one head, a pair of pointed ears and, honestly, the most supernaturally lovely male face Rose had ever seen.

And she was raised in a vampire court where being beautiful was basically a requirement.

His skin was a deep bronze, his shoulder-length hair a rich tawny color. He had vivid golden eyes, even brighter than her shifter's, and a disgusted expression that she had never seen him wear.

It did nothing to temper his beauty, either, but despite how good-looking he was, all Rose could think was: I'd rather wake up to Bradley's granite face and grumpy scowl any day of the week.

She knew what he was. If this was Faerie, he had to be one of the fae. A Seelie, she decided, since they belonged to the

Summer Court and the temperature had only seemed to climb today.

While Bradley fell back, almost as though stunned by the male, Rose continued forward.

Then again, considering the way he called her name softly, as though sure *she* was the one stunned, she wasn't so sure what he was thinking about the male. Remembering how he'd reacted when she went to see Valentine, that was probably for the best.

She didn't want to fuck this male, though she did want to use him.

Until she was less than a foot from him, he pretended as though he didn't see the vampire and the shifter coming toward him. Only when it was ridiculous to act as though they weren't there did he imperiously meet her gaze.

“Who are you? How did you find the queen's labyrinth?”

Rose gave herself a moment to be pleased that she was right that this was a labyrinth before she flashed her eyes, immediately casted her magic over the fae.

As annoyed as she was, she felt her charm catch immediately. His defenses shattered beneath the force of her stare, proving that Bradley Fenton still was the only male she couldn't daze.

And wasn't that something to think about?

“Do you know the way out of the labyrinth?”

“*Yes.*”

Finally.

With a royal shake of her head, she commanded, “Take us.”

She was tired. Thirsty. Dusty.

Her hair was a mess. Her dress needed to be burned.

And, to add to all of that, Princess Rose of the Dayborns was standing in front of another queen, in another castle, on another throne—and from the curious look the Fae Queen was giving her, she was found lacking. Worse, from the way the female's eyes lit up as she turned her attention on Brad next, despite him having traveled through the same labyrinth as Rose, the queen was obviously *very* interested in Rose's jaguar.

She'd introduced herself as Queen Titania, ruler of the Summer Court. As though the maze, the pixies, the brownie, and the fae male didn't all give it away, Rose's suspicion truly was correct: on the other side of the rift was the fabled fairy tale world known as Faerie.

To make matters worse? Her magic worked on the lesser fae male that they found in the labyrinth; he was one of the queen's guards, and he knew the maze so well, that he had them in front of the queen in barely half an hour. If she pushed, she was sure she could daze the four matching fae male guards standing behind the queen's throne.

But no matter what, she couldn't compel Titania to let them go.

Rose tried. As soon as the fae male did what he was enthralled to do, leading them out of the labyrinth and right into the Fae Queen's pristine throne room, she realized that she'd made a mistake. She wanted to leave the labyrinth, yes, but she had no idea that the nearest end was the backyard to a palace even more elaborate than Ryhill Manor.

Guards were milling around the end of the labyrinth. She could've compelled one, maybe two, and she was sure Bradley could've handled more... but there were at least two dozen, and each fae guard had a longsword that glittered and gleamed like a cut of diamond.

She was a princess. She knew a diamond when she saw one, and though nearly everything in the palace seemed made of crystal—or maybe even glass—she was pretty sure those were diamond-edged swords.

Completely outnumbered and not at her best, she had no choice but to be herded inside peacefully. And though she was sure that chafed her jaguar terribly, he proved once again that, where Rose went, he would follow.

She only wished that he hadn't had to meet the Fae Queen.

No surprise that she was gorgeous. Her hair was a darker shade than her guards, her skin a few tones lighter, and her eyes... unlike the golds and greens the fae male had, hers was a bright, shocking cerulean.

Her lips were ruby red, though she didn't have an ounce of make-up on her. A crystalline crown was perched on top of her head. In a foul mood, Rose wished it would fall and shatter into a million pieces.

It didn't.

The crown didn't break, she couldn't use her magic against the queen, and Titania was basically drooling over Bradley?

She should've stayed in the labyrinth.

Titania rested her pointed chin in her hand, her amazed expression somehow making her even more stunning.

"What is he?" she murmured, more to herself than to them. Or maybe she was addressing her guards. Rose had no idea. "Is he a pooka?" she asked. "A changeling? A shapeshifter? There's something... I just can't put my finger on it."

"I'm something like that," Brad said at last.

"And you... you're a bit easier to tell. We have some of your kind among my subjects. A blood-drinker. Fascinating."

Rose gave a tight-lipped smile. "I'm glad you think so. But now that you've met us, we were really hoping you would show us a way home."

Because there had been no other way around it, Bradley had to explain how exactly the both of them ended up in Faerie. Since Rose was unconscious for most of it, he took the lead, taking care to leave out anything that would incriminate them. When the queen wondered how they slept in the trees, he just said he was a good climber. When she asked how Rose

convinced one of her labyrinth patrollers to lead her out instead of the two of them finishing the trials on their own, Bradley just countered that that was how they chose to finish it.

Tricky jaguar. He told her she was smart, but he was a quick learner. His answer satisfied the queen—or maybe he did.

Whatever it was, she just wanted to grab Bradley by the hand and go home together.

If only it was as easy as that.

After mulling over Rose's request for a moment, Titania clapped her hands. "Guard!"

One of the four stepped around the edge of the throne. "Yes, my queen?"

"Arrange for the steward to bring these two to one of the finest rooms in my palace. They're guests of the Summer Court, and I wish for them to be treated as such."

"That won't be necessary," began Bradley before the queen silenced him with a grin.

Queen Titania's cerulean eyes gleamed. Unlike Bradley and Rose, she didn't have fangs, but that made her grin no less predatory when she said, "Oh, but I *insist*."

CHAPTER 16

BECAUSE



The guest den the Fae Queen offered them as theirs was as suspicious as everything else Brad had encountered in this strange fucking world.

While Rose was eager to remove her heels, wash up, and sleep somewhere that wasn't high up in the trees, Brad was more hesitant to accept Titania's hospitality. He'd much rather watch over his mate, nestling her on his lap for as many nights as it took for them to find a way back home, but she was a princess. Used to the finer things in life, he couldn't expect her to give up a night in the Fae Queen's palace.

Especially when this oversized den was too similar to Rose's at the manor for Brad to breath easy when the door slammed shut behind them.

In the center of the pristine white walls decorated with golden wall hangings, there stood had a massive wooden bed frame with a thick, padded mattress, and gauzy canopy; a soft yellow color instead of Rose's preferred pale pink, but just as... *floofy*. The floor was solid crystal, so thick it was impossible to see through, though Brad peered down at it with his jaguar's eyes long enough to make sure. It wasn't quite the marble in Ryhill Manor, but it had the same cool, slick texture beneath his boots. Tapping it a few times, satisfied it would hold his weight, he began to prowl around the rest of the den.

The accents were gold, he noticed, just like in Rose's den. Beyond a curtain, he found a large bathtub that was very similar of the one he spied in her bathroom.

Of course, back in the manor, his princess had a shower stall, electric lights, and running water. In Faerie, everything seemed to run on... magic, maybe? Brad decided it had to be magic because nothing else made sense to him, and the more he thought about it, the more his jaguar snarled and continued to tug on Bradley's leash, desperate to get out.

It was magic, but not *witch* magic. The air smelled of rich, dark honey, and something that he interpreted as *green*. Herbs, he decided on another sniff, kind of like the ones Shea sold in her shop. And while that scent was wrapped up in with witches in his mind, so was baby powder. There was no sign of that anywhere.

It was cooler in their new den, too. Thank Alpha. He must've sweated ten pounds off these last two days just from the heat of the Summer Court, and that wasn't counting how many calories he'd burned through just existing as a shifter without anything to eat or drink.

And he had Rose to thank for saving his fur.

If it wasn't for his clever vampires, he would still be wandering around the labyrinth, his stomach aching and empty and his jaguar itching to claw its way out of his chest if only to get some relief. Stuck among the high hedges, the sleek trees, and questionable ponds, he had to suck it up. It was all about surviving, and food had been out.

Well, no. *Brad* hadn't had anything to eat. Rose, on the other paw, had all the blood he could offer.

If she was willing to take it, he would've given her even *more*.

It wasn't even how fucking amazing it felt to feel her mouth on him, the sucking sensation going straight to his cock. Since getting erections, he'd had more than his fair share of orgasms; anything to keep control of the need he had for her. When she drank from him? It was a hundred times stronger than any of those other pops of releases.

So strong, in fact, that Brad came in his jeans the first time she tasted him. It just... it happened, and no amount of control

kept him from releasing as she moaned in pleasure, her dainty little fangs digging into his skin. Brad had to walk around with dry seed inside of his jeans for hours until he walked a few paces ahead of Rose to take a piss and, while she regally gave him her her back so that he could have privacy, he quickly pulled a change of jeans out of the shifter duffel he managed to hang onto during their trip through the rift.

No emergency supply of food or water in there, only a change of clothes and boots just in case, but if they made it home again? That would be changing, too.

At least there was one big plus to his mate being a Dayborn instead of a shifter. While her nose couldn't be beat when it came to scenting blood, she couldn't pick up on anything else. Not his need or his seed, though Brad couldn't say the same about himself.

He thought her sugar sweet scent was the most delicious thing he'd ever took into his lungs. After spending all that time in the labyrinth together, sweating his balls off and using his shirt as a rag, the hints of arousal he'd grown used to picking up in the manor just about slapped him in the face.

His mate really *was* attracted to him. And not just in a "let's fuck because you're here and why not" way like the first time she coyly invited him into her room. Just getting a glimpse at his regular old chest had her growing hot and wet for him. Sure, he could excuse the hot part—because, *fuck*, the Summer Court was brutal when it was winter on the East Coast when they left Woodbridge, not to mention his built-in fur coat—but *wet*?

She wanted him. Even more noticeable was how her sweet scent almost turned bitter as jealousy colored her aura. First, when she was boldly asking him questions about his previous loves—and surprising him by guessing Shea's name instead of her own—and later, when the Fae Queen was paying him close attention.

Jealous. Rose was jealous. Brad regarded Titania as any other adversary, any other enemy, and his adorable mate was

jealous at the close way the Fae Queen regarded him before she sent them to their guest room.

Guest.

Right.

At least they had shelter, some candlelight, and a spread of fruit waiting for them on a table in the middle of the space...

Rose was still fuming. Earlier, as they marched ahead of a trio of armed guards, she couldn't quite keep her jealous mumblings to herself.

He didn't grin. Keeping a stony expression on his granite face, Brad didn't grin. It would give the three guards the wrong idea, but damn if he didn't want to.

His mate was jealous. *His* mate—who still had no idea that she was his mate—was jealous. Nothing made a territorial shifter more aroused than watching his female act like he belonged to her and only her.

And considering he was hard around Rose constantly, it was like walking around with a third leg in his jeans, that was saying something.

He waited until the guards had locked the door behind them and Brad had finished his preliminary round of the space before he sidled up close to Rose. When he assured her that the only reason he was watching the queen so closely himself was because he was trying to figure out what game *she* was playing now, his princess scowled—*scowled*—at him and snapped that she just wanted a bath and a bed. If he wanted to talk about Titania, it could wait until after.

Later, Brad would admit that he shouldn't have released the grin he'd held back for so long. Rose's adorable scowl was a damn near twin to the ones he always saw in his mirror that he couldn't help himself. Whether she knew it or not, not only was she showing her possessive side, but she'd also picked up on some of his mannerisms.

Alpha, could he fucking love this female more?

Swanning away from him, acting as though his grin didn't bother her at all, she went in search of somewhere she could wash up. Probably piss, too, since his princess pointedly refused to squat in the labyrinth in case she got some on her skirts. She didn't have a change of clothes like he did, she'd complained, and if Brad went a little red when he realized that she'd noticed he swapped out his jeans after all, something about feeding his charge and sleeping with her in his lap kind of erased the last of professional border he'd clung to after their kiss.

When he directed her to the curtain that concealed the Faerie version of a bathroom, she headed that way. Brad decided to beeline right for the tray of fruit.

Once again, his mate saved his sorry hide.

Glancing over her shoulder, as though making sure he hadn't followed her toward the bathroom area, Rose stopped him before he could grab one of the unfamiliar piece of fruits.

“Bradley? What did I tell you? Don't eat that.”

He yanked his hand back.

Right.

According to his mate, legend said that, if you eat a piece of fruit grown in Faerie, you were a slave to it. Nothing you ate would ever fill you again unless it was also from Faerie. You'd waste away to nothingness if you tried to leave. It was a trick to get unsuspecting travelers to stay, but Rose knew all about it.

She'd read about it in a book.

He implicitly trusted her. The way Brad saw it, even if the stories weren't true, it wasn't worth the risk.

Could he love her more? Two seconds ago, he didn't think so, and then she did something like that. She showed him how smart she was, and how much she cared about him in her own way.

So maybe he *could* love her more.

Maybe there was no limit to how much he could grow to love Rose.

And if they managed to get out of Faerie in one piece, he would finally offer himself up as her suitor and find out if she maybe, kinda, *hopefully* felt the same way about him.

Brad wasn't sure exactly when it happened—in the labyrinth, most likely, though the kiss... even the hug... definitely change the trajectory of their relationship—but he'd stopped thinking about *if* he got to claim Rose as his mate. It became a *when*. She was his, and he couldn't wait to tell her.

He had to. As inviting as the fae bed appeared—and he knew that, if Rose allowed him to share it with her, he would—he couldn't use it the way he was dying to. Not while they were still in Faerie.

It smelled off. The queen gave him the creeps. The guards were too quick to prod at them with their shiny swords.

“Guests” his ass, he snorted.

He couldn't eat the tempting food unless he wanted to stick around a lot longer than he wanted to. Neither could Rose. At least, not the faerie food. And while their bellies would feel empty, as Paras, they could survive weeks without food before they were too weak to do anything about it.

But Rose needed blood every single day.

That thought in mind, Brad waited until she'd returned from behind the curtain about twenty minutes later. Her hair was fluffed, her dress straightened, and the dusty covering her hands and her cheeks was gone.

So was most of her foul mood.

Brad flexed his fingers, unsheathing his claws. Once they were at their full length, he dragged his pointer claw along the naked side of his thick throat. Because of the silver nitrate in his shifter brand, he refused to let Rose taste him there in case it affected her.

He already knew she could drink his clean blood. He also knew that the pleasure she got out of taking it straight from his

veins was only matched by how fucking good it felt for him to provide for his mate. It was like an echo that went back and forth between them, and even if he refused to let her go hungry while they were the queen's "guests", he would've offered to feed her regardless.

Brad had been itching to get her fangs back in him since he first offered out in the maze. So what if he won't been able to stick his cock inside of her anytime soon? This way, they had some kind of connection, and he was greedy enough when it came to his mate to take what he could get.

And now? He wanted to make sure she was fed.

Warm blood trickled down his neck. In his haste to get it flowing, he might've dug deeper with his claw than he meant to. Didn't matter. The second the scent of his blood hit the air, the delicious aroma of Rose's arousal joined it.

Drinking his blood didn't just sustain his vampiress, he realized with a jolt. It turned her on.

Brad was greedy. Of course he was. He was a dominant alpha shifter.

Which meant he was also *ruthless*.

And if he had to use her reaction to the taste of his blood against her once they returned home, he would...

Because, above all else, he loved his princess. He was *in* love with her, too. It didn't matter how came before her or him for either of them. They were *it*, they were endgame, and if Rose decided to humor him with her question game again, he would have a different answer for her.

Have you ever been in love before? she'd ask.

I have. Now. With you.

Only you.

Their self-imposed hunger strike only lasted until morning.

Once the queen realized that they knew better than to willingly eat the faerie food, she sent a meal suitable for a shifter. It was some kind of unidentifiable meat, but as it wasn't *grown* in Faerie, it didn't carry the charm that would keep them trapped on this side of the rift. He could eat it, keep up his strength, and build more blood for Rose without any consequence to his jaguar.

When it came to letting her drink from him, that was. It didn't take long for both of them to realize that his jaguar was suffering in other ways.

He was prowling. After polishing off three-quarters of the food provided for them, he started pacing around the room. When the pacing turned into a prowling, quick motions that had Rose's head whipping, her hair swaying back and forth as she watched how fast he could go, she finally asked him about it.

"It's my jaguar," he confessed when she made it clear she wasn't going to drop it until he did. "It wants out. It doesn't understand why I'm keeping him trapped."

"Okay. So why are you?"

Good question.

"They know you're a shapeshifter, right? Does it matter if they figure out you're a jaguar? I don't think so. And if your beast needs to get out, let it out."

He wanted to. He wanted to so badly that it felt like his jaguar was going to burst from his chest.

But that was the thing. Brad wasn't just hiding what kind of shifter he was from the fae. He was terrified of letting his wild side out and ruining any progress he had made with his mate.

"Go on," Rose said, her encouragement doing more to rile up his jaguar than she would ever be aware of.

"I don't know—"

"Don't if you'd rather not," she said, "but I... I've always wanted to see you in your animal form."

And... that did it. Shifters were designed to do anything to satisfy their mate. Providing food, giving pleasure, mating... that was only one part of it. At his core, his instincts told him that, if his mate asked for something he could prove, he better fucking give it to her.

She wanted to see his jaguar? She was going to get to see his jaguar.

Brad still had his duffel. After the guards searched through it, they decided there was no reason to take it away. Unfamiliar with magic from another world, they obviously thought it was just another bag full of clothes so different than the fashions in Faerie. They had no idea it would change shapes when Brad did otherwise he was sure they would've given it to their queen instead.

“I don't want to waste my clothes.” He'd go naked before he wore the prissy fae clothes, but he wasn't so sure Rose would like that idea. Just because she was willing to meet his jaguar, that didn't mean she wanted to ogle his cock. “I'll have to strip first.”

As he expected, she immediately whirled around, giving him her back. “This is as much privacy as I can give you,” she said. “But I won't peek.”

Damn. For the first time ever, he wished his mate *could* lie. He was more than happy to let her peek, but knowing that she wouldn't, he quickly shucked off his clothes, then shifted to his jaguar.

Before he did, he warned his beast that it had only one chance to prove himself worthy to Rose. If he lost control and frightened their mate, Brad would rather pass as a human than ever let his jaguar out again.

Turned out, the warning was unnecessary. At his jaguar's soft chuffing sound, Rose spun around. Her hands went right to her chest, a squeal of delight exploding out of her as she gave him the biggest smile he'd ever seen before.

One look. That was all it took. One look, and his jaguar went submissive on his belly, held low, inviting Rose to come

over and pet him, stroke him, *love* him... and she did.

He would've stayed in his jaguar form forever if it pleased her. But after a good ten minutes of her petting and cooing over his beast, when Rose asked him if he was ready to change back so that she could talk to him, he didn't even hesitate. Allowing his jaguar to nuzzle her palm one last time with his snout, promising his beast that he would get the chance to sit with her again, Brad backed away from where she was kneeling on the floor.

Taking that as the cue he meant, Rose rose up to her full height, then closed her eyes. She kept them shut while he shifted back, hurriedly yanking his jeans on.

In too much of a rush to bother with his shirt, his socks and his boots, he said, "I'm decent."

Her eyes snapped open. They widened when Rose noticed he was half-naked, but she didn't look away. In fact, she was... staring at him?

"Princess?"

"You're beautiful." She shook her head. "Your jaguar, I mean. I saw pictures in a book so I had an idea what you looked like in that form, but... oh, Bradley. I didn't think you'd be so *beautiful*."

"Thank you, princess."

Oof. His voice was thick with pleasure, lust, and unfulfilled need. Pleasure, too.

His mate thought his other half was *beautiful*. His jaguar preening deep inside of him, he knew that it was never going to let him live that down.

Taking a step closer to him, Rose lifted her hand. Almost hesitantly, she reached for his jaw. It struck him that she wasn't sure if her touch would be welcome. After the way she just had her fingers rifling through his fur, she still wasn't positive his two-legged form would accept her.

Fuck that. When she barely ghosted his jaw with her fingertips, he leaned into her caress.

She smiled. “I think you’re beautiful, too.”

That was the last thing he expected her to say. “You do?”

“Beauty is kinda my thing.” Her smile turned wry. “Obviously. I know it when I see it, but it’s not just your looks.”

To his regret, she pulled her hand away from the sharp edge of his jaw. He felt the loss of her touch like an ache in his chest... until, as though she could sense his pain the same way Shea had been able to, Rose laid the flat of her palm between his bare pecs, keeping the connection between them.

Amazingly, her cool fingertips healed something that had been broken inside of him so long ago, he just got used to the ache—and she did it more effectively than any witch magic could.

Because she was Rose.

She was his mate.

She was his—

“*Princess...*”

“I mean it,” she told him earnestly. “It’s what kind of male you are. You act like you’re cold and in control, but I’ve seen enough of the real Brad to know you’re almost as wild as your counterpart. Ferocious and loyal, too. You didn’t have to come after me.”

Yes. He did.

Because Rose was absolutely right. To retain his ironclad hold on his other half, he had to do everything he could to be as cold and in control as she accused him of being. It made his outbursts all the more noticeable, but she tolerated them, too.

Then, when she met his jaguar, she tamed his beast as easily as turning her smile on it.

And when she murmured, “But I’m glad you did,” he knew that it didn’t matter who one held Rose’s heart in their hand. She had his in her palm, and there was no better place for it than with her.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he vowed, holding her close. His heart was in her hands, but she fit perfectly in his arms. “Not because it’s my job. But because it’s you, princess. I’ll never let anything happen to you.”

Because you’re my mate, and I love you.

He couldn’t say that. Aware that he was running out of excuses to keep the truth from her, Brad couldn’t bring himself to tell her when they were in such a dangerous situation. But he sent his feelings down their mate bond anyway, letting her know the only way he could.

To his surprise, she rested her cheek against his chest. “I know, Bradley. I know.”

CHAPTER 17

BETWEEN QUEENS



○ n the third day, Queen Titania finally remembered she had “guests”.

Sending one of her fae guards to their room, she summoned them to the Seelie Court. Not together, though. Oh, no. Bradley was invited to meet with her first.

Alone.

Rose was expecting something like this. From the moment the queen decided that they would have a seemingly open-ended stay in her palace, she knew that Titania was working toward *something*. Call it female intuition if you will—or decades of experience as a Dayborn royal—but when Bradley seemed surprised that the guards insisted he go first, then Rose would join him, she only experienced vindication.

Seemed as though growing up in a treacherous vampire court where nobles smiled in your face while plotting how to stab you in the back served her well. As pretty as she was, Titania was a snake. Rose was sure of it.

She was right.

Bradley didn’t want to be separated. Honestly, neither did Rose. Even though he’d been her bodyguard in the manor for weeks, the handful of days in Faerie made her realize that she liked having him near. She’d grown used to the way he muttered under her breath, almost finding it charming. And, of course, the way he looked at her as if she was the only female who existed to him... that was one hell of an ego boost. But even if he didn’t, just knowing that he dared to look her

straight in the eye when so few had before him... it was another reason why she loved him.

And it was also probably why, when she was finally invited back into the Fae Queen's throne room, that she knew instantly that something was wrong.

Bradley didn't glance her way. Not once. Standing straight in the middle of the room, hands folded behind his back, eyes staring right in front of him, when Rose click-clacked into the space, he reacted as if she wasn't there at all.

He'd *never* done that. She'd spent those first few weeks with him sure he was attracted to her despite his being a shifter because, no matter what, he couldn't conceal that hungry expression of his long enough for her to really believe she was ever just the princess he was guarding.

She swore he was attracted to her. Ever since the kiss... she wanted to believe he might actually *love* her.

And now he was acting as if she didn't exist—and that wasn't anything like her jaguar.

Tilting her chin up, becoming Princess Rose despite her dirty dress and her messy hair, she said, "You summoned me, your majesty."

Her laugh was a tinkle that grated against Rose's nerves. "There's no need for that. We're both royalty here." Something must have flashed across her expression because Titania zeroed in on it like a shark. "Oh, yes. I had a very... interested talk with this strapping male here. You're Princess Rose of the Veil. Soon to be queen of the realm on the other side of the veil. Isn't that correct?"

Veil? Unless she was mistaken, she remembered that, in folklore, some referred to the divider between Faerie and Rose's world as the veil. Why would Bradley tell Titania that Rose was the future queen of *Earth*?

Oh. *Oh.*

Dayborns couldn't lie. The fae aren't supposed to be able to, either. But Bradley... he could. Not to her, of course, but

before the Fae Queen did something to him, he must have done whatever he could to protect her.

Now it was her turn to protect him.

“Yes,” she said honestly. “I am Princess Rose, heir to a throne.”

A throne. The Blood Throne, but Titania didn’t need to know that.

“It isn’t often that we get visitors from your world. The veil is designed to keep you out, but I’m quite glad that the two of you find your way to Faerie. I’ve been in need of a new consort. And my son,” she said, gesturing to a fae male who, somehow, was the spitting image of the female queen, “needs a new father figure to keep him on the right path. Don’t you, Zephyr?”

“Anything you say, Mother.”

Waving her hand in Bradley’s direction, Rose’s stomach was already sinking down to the strange crystal floor even before Titania went on to add, “From one queen to another, I thought I’d play a game. Your male is under my control. If you’re as strong as he boasts you are with your little human magic, I’ll let you keep him. Zephyr will bring you to a slit in the veil where you can return to your world. But if you can’t, then he’s mine and you... well, you can go home without him, I guess. I’m sure your people miss you.”

Considering she’d been wondering just how frantic things must be in the Rhyill Manor since her abduction since she awoke in Faerie, Titania was right about that.

The rest of it?

Not a chance.

“I’m not a human,” she began before Titania cut her off with another wave.

“Whatever you are doesn’t matter. I want the male. Will you play for him, or should I just keep him?”

“How do I know I can trust you? That if I break him out of this trance, you’ll let us both go?”

“Immortal life’s so boring without a little chance. You’re a stranger to this Court, but I assure you, my word is good. If the male chooses you, he’s yours. You can walk out of Faerie today and none will follow you. I vow it.”

Rose’s mind raced, searching for a loophole before she realized it didn’t matter if Titania built one in or not. The game wasn’t even about Bradley. It was about the Fae Queen trying to show another royal that *she* was the one in control. Either she forced Rose to acquiesce to her little game, or she took Bradley as her consort. She’d win regardless.

Only... how could she take an unmated shifter as her mate? Did Faerie have some kind of fae Viagra that made him able to fuck her? If Titania was his mate, Bradley wouldn’t told her right? So there was no way—

Rose looked over at Bradley. She really looked at him.

When they were together, Bradley had a tendency to hunch. To loom. She always figured it had something to do with his being a big shifter, as though he was trying to hide his size.

With his back straight and proud, she noticed something else she hadn’t before: a pretty noticeable bulge pushing against his jeans. And unless he was packing something even more impressive than most males she’d ever slept with, he wasn’t limp.

He was aroused which meant... he had a mate and, based on her knowledge of how male shifters work, she was in this room.

Rose. Titania. Zephyr. Four fae guards.

No other females.

She was still convinced Bradley would’ve told her if Titania somehow *was* his mate. But, as her hired bodyguard, would he have told Rose until he felt sure she would actually receive him?

Oh, she’d suspected it. She’d fantasized about it. She’d hoped she might be... was it possible?

And was it worth losing him to find out?

“How do I play?”

“You get one chance. Whatever you think will get his attention. Kiss him. Undress him. Go down on fours in front of him and see if the beast inside of him will rut.” Lowering her voice, she said, “I peeked. To make sure he was a worthwhile consort. No wonder you’re happy to let an animal touch you. I don’t know how he’s keeping his cock from bursting through his trousers... and he walked into this room like that, so *tsk tsk*. You didn’t pleasure your beast before he came to me. Maybe you deserve to lose.”

Titania looked innocent, but could be as crude as Rose when it came to the subject of mating. And while she wanted to go over there and claws out the Fae Queen’s eyes for looking at wasn’t hers—what was Rose’s—she was too consumed with the idea that Bradley was aroused *before* he entered the throne room to care.

She was right. She had to be his mate.

And if she was, then that meant he was hers.

“One chance?”

One chance to break Titania’s spell and save her mate.

She couldn’t be sure that sex would do it. If he’d managed to rein in his jaguar the entire time he’d known her, that might not be enough to get through to him.

Luckily, Rose thought she knew something that did.

Striding over to him, she tried not to let it worry her that he still didn’t *see* her. Glancing down, bowing her head so the queen couldn’t see what she was doing, Rose bit down on her inner wrist. Hard. Digging her fangs in deeply, she wasn’t drinking.

She was making a wound.

As soon as the blood began to flow, she glanced at him. Was it just her hopeful imagination, or did his nostrils flare? Even as her bodyguard, he wouldn’t stand by and let Rose feel pain. Blood? He’d go running for a bandage.

But just in case that wasn't enough, she rosed up on the tips of her toes and shoved the bloody bite against his mouth.

Please work... please... drink.

For a moment, she thought she failed. The queen must have, too, but then—

Bradley blinked. Hope turning to relief rushing through her, she moved aside so that the Fae Queen could watch what happened to next.

Stumbling forward, as though someone had slapped him on the back, he nearly went down on his knees. He caught himself in time, shaking his head, before he turned into his crouch and found Rose standing there, her bitten wrist hanging at her side.

“Princess... you're bleeding.”

She gave him a quick smile full of all the love and promise she could, then glanced over his bowed head and said, “I won.”

“Well played, Queen of the Veil. I look forward to our next round.”

Maybe Titania did. Rose? She just wanted to go home and make this male her blood-bonded husband.

Because that's what the second blood exchange did. It ensured there was a third.

True to her word, Titania made her son lead them to a clearing about two hours walk away from the palace. He moaned the entire time about why a guard couldn't have gone instead, then left them in front of a narrow, glowing space he said would enable them to leave Faerie.

Once he was gone, Bradley turned to Rose.

He still didn't quite understand what happened in the throne room. She shushed him when he tried to ask her, but

Rose thought it would be better to wait until they were home again to discuss their stay in Faerie.

Bradley seemed to agree, though he gave the portal a side-eye.

“Do you believe him?”

“It looks like our rift... just smaller, I guess.”

“Didn’t answer my question, princess.”

“The fae aren’t supposed to be able to lie,” she said.

“Dayborns can’t lie, either, but that doesn’t mean they can’t bend the truth to suit themselves. Fae are notoriously tricky. Do I believe him? Not really. Am I willing to jump through the veil and hope we make it home instead of a third realm? I... I think I am.”

Bradley nodded. “Okay. But I’ll go first. If it works, I’ll come back and get you.”

Rose was already shaking her head. “Nope. If you go, I go.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Implicitly,” was her quick answer. “With everything I am. And that’s why I’m going with you.” Firming her voice, she said, “We go together.”

“Princess—”

“Mates go together, husband.”

CHAPTER 18

TOGETHER FOREVER



The look on his face was so comical that if Rose wasn't dead serious, she might've laughed. Still, feeling a drop of pity that she knew something he didn't, she said, "Take a deep breath, Bradley. Which word spooked you more 'mates' or 'husband'? Because you're going to be both, but I should probably find out which one you prefer."

"I... how long have you known?"

"Just today. And I won't ask you because I know the answer to that."

Right. The day they met.

"I was going to tell you..." he started before he frowned. "Wait. *How* do you know?"

Good question. Since there was only one way she conceivably would without Bradley confessing to her, it was fair to ask her of that.

Rose could explain. She could take the time and tell him everything that happened.

She didn't. Princess or not, it just wasn't her style. So, instead, she grabbed the waistband of his jeans.

Using her thumb, she flicked the button open. Before Bradley could stop her, she plucked his zipper between two fingers and gave it a tug.

His golden gaze took on a rich amber sheen.

She stroked him. “Does this mean I’m your mate?” she asked.

Shuddering out a breath, Brad tucked his chin into his chest and said, “Yes.”

“Good. Because the two blood exchanges we had means that you’re my husband as soon as we have our third. And since you have to bite me and probably drink some of my blood in order to claim me as yours, you’ll be my mate *and* my husband in no time.” She paused. “Yeah. You’re a virgin so it’ll probably be no time. But that’s okay. You’re also a shifter. Stamina’s your friend.”

Turning around, she gave him his back. “Undo my buttons, please.”

“I don’t think—”

“No. Don’t think. Feel. I’m going to get this dress off one way or another. I’m planning on fucking you. *Mating* you. If you’d rather me find someone else...”

If Bradley didn’t want to be her husband, she’d hired him to be her maid. Not even Lyric stripped her out of her gowns that fast.

Then, because she could handle her underclothes, she tugged them off, gesturing with her pointer finger for Bradley to do the same.

Her threat obviously still ringing in his ears, he did.

She pushed him down on the ground. Then, already sopping wet, she grabbed him by the cock and eased him into her.

In for a penny, in for a pound. They probably shouldn’t be doing this out in the open, but if it meant she could return to the manor without having to worry about ever losing Bradley... it was worth it.

She rose up, then fell. Making sure she had a good rhythm going, she did everything she could to make him come as soon as possible.

He knew it, too.

“Princess,” he grated. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mating you. I know this is your first time, but try to keep up.”

“I... I don’t think I’m going to last. I want to make this good for you. I want—”

“Shh. I told you. Don’t think. *Feel*. And get ready to bite me because I’m going to make you come harder than you ever had before.”

“*Princess...*”

That was the beauty of the second blood exchange.

To make him her blood-bonded husband, she had to drink his blood. Brad then had to take hers into him. The third exchange could be between either of them, so long as it happened during sex.

“If I bite you,” he panted, rolling his hips in such a jerky motion, Rose might have fallen off his lap if she wasn’t clutching his broad shoulders tightly, “then you’re mine. Forever, princess. You thought I was a tenacious bastard before? That’s nothing to how possessive and stubborn a bonded shifter can be.”

Rose gasped as his motion sent a jolt of pleasure rocketing through her. Though his inexperience was obvious, it was also charming, and what her jaguar lacked in finesse, he more than made up for with a determination to make her feel fucked within an inch of her immortal life.

A lifespan they would share, once they were bonded. And maybe she was rushing things. She’d only just learned she was his fated mate—but Rose was also a Para. Fate gave her Bradley. She didn’t have to make him hers like she would’ve had to with any of her other suits, he just was, and once she realized that, what was the point of waiting?

All of her previous lovers wanted to woo her with blood wine, balls, and a luxurious bed. Bradley? Her wild jaguar was on his knees in the dirt, fucking her in the middle of an enchanted forest, fangs growing even longer than hers as he fantasized about biting her.

“Then what are you waiting for?” she dared, baring her throat to him.

Roaring out his released, Bradley Fenton finally stopped waiting.

Rose had heard rumors about male shifters. Not only could they only get it up for their mate, but once they found her, the female was just as likely to grab on tight and keep him.

She didn't want to let go of him. When his body bounced back mere minutes after he shot his seed inside of her, she thought about taking another ride. It was risky, since anyone who was as smart as Bradley thought she was should've already hopped through the portal rather than deciding the fuck out in the open. Then again, the best thing about her voluminous skirts was just how easy she could climb on top of a male and no one would see anything she didn't want to.

That might have a perfect excuse to continue their mating night if it wasn't for one small thing: how she'd shimmied off her dress when she propositioned Bradley. It was tossed about three feet away from where she was curled up next to his big, shifter body.

They were both covered in dirt, sweat, a little blood, and whole lot of bodily fluids. As much as she was interested in learning every inch of his body, it could wait. Preferably until they were safe, but definitely after she'd had a chance to freshen up.

Through the newly cemented bond stretching between them, so solid it was like a line of twine connected his soul to hers, she knew that Bradley was reluctantly coming to the same conclusion. Despite being hard and ready to go, his had a responsibility to protect her.

And not only because he used to be her bodyguard. She was his bonded mate.

Great, thought Rose, as Bradley eased her back to her feet before bounding off to find their clothes. As if he wasn't fiercely overprotective before, she could only imagine what it would be like now that her jaguar didn't have to hide who they were to each other.

She could only imagine—and, surprisingly, she was kinda looking forward to it. Especially since Bradley swore the first thing they were going to do is bunker down in his den—what he called his private room in the servants hall—and having a proper mating night.

Her uncle might not appreciate that. Rose found she didn't care.

Bradley came back with both of their clothing. As Rose tugged on her panties and her bra, he quickly threw on his. Now that the charmed shifter duffel bag was missing—kept by the Fae Queen most likely—he was stuck wearing the same clothes he'd had on before their mating.

Even knowing that wasn't enough to have Rose looking forward to putting her days' old dress back on.

“Lift up your arms, princess.”

“Do I have to?”

“Would you rather appear on our side of the rift wearing only your underwear?”

“Yes.”

Bradley chuckled. “I'm sure you would. But while I don't mind getting to look at your delectable body, I can't be held accountable for what happens if my jaguar notices other males checking you out. Fair warning, and if I invoke the Claws Clause, I'll get off. The Bond Laws says so.”

“You might want to give Ordinance 7304 another read if that's what you got out of it,” she quipped as she finally lifted up her arms.

He pulled the dusty gown over Rose's head, helping guide her arms into the torn and tattered sleeves.

His rough and callused yet deceptively gentle hands skimmed down her side, patting the material in place.

“You ready, princess?”

Still humming from the high that came with claiming sex, Rose smirked up at her new mate. “Are you still going to call me that?”

“Of course. You’re my mate now, but you’ll always be my princess.”

Looking back, she realized that there was a shift in the way he referred to her by her title. At first, Bradley used it solemnly, as though he was playing at being respectful. Later, it could be derisive, though she nipped that in the bud quickly. But sometime after that, when it started to sound more like a pet name would... or what you whispered in your lover’s ear at night... well, maybe she didn’t mind so much that he wanted to keep it as a nickname for her.

“Fair enough. But, just to set the record straight, I never called you a bastard.”

“No, but you were thinking it.”

She couldn’t argue that point. “I’m sure you were thinking some less than pleasant things about me when we first met.”

His tease from a moment ago disappeared in a flash. “Never.”

“Please. I know what I am. I know you bonded to me anyway, but don’t forget our agreement. I demand the truth from you, husband.”

“And you’ll always get it, princess. I don’t care what you thought about me then. If I looked pissed, it was because I was thinking all that and more. But you... I only ever thought of you as my mate.”

“Even when you thought I was meeting other suitors for sex?”

“Especially then,” growled Bradley. “But I wasn’t mad at you. I was just super fucking jealous.”

“Don’t be. From the moment I met you, whether I realized it at first or not, you were it for me. Just like I was always meant for you. And now I’ve got the bite mark to prove it.”

“Yes, you do, princess. Because you’re right. You’re mine. You’ve always been mine and I can’t wait for everyone else to know it.”

Dipping his head, he nuzzled his nose along the mark left on her skin. Like all other Paras, Dayborns healed almost instantly, but this was the first—and only—scar Rose would ever wear.

Though, one day, she might decide to get a small tattoo that was as personal to her as Brad’s red claws marks were to him. And, before she did, she’d find out exactly why he got them—and why, when he watched her those first couple of weeks, he fiddled with it constantly.

There was so much she didn’t know about her new husband, but that was okay. She didn’t need to know everything to make her his; she just needed to know enough that he was the only male meant for her. After all, they pledged forever to each other when he bit her, finalizing the three blood exchanges. That was the first step.

Facing the small portal, she reached out her hand. Instinctively, Brad did the same.

“Then let’s go home. Okay?” Rose wove her fingers around his. “We go together.”

Brad nodded. “Fuck yeah, we do.”

And, closing their eyes, they took the second step through it.

CHAPTER 19

OFF THE LEASH



Body thrumming with the need to feel her husband's body bowed over her, his fangs nibbling on her throat, his heat warming her up from the inside out... eager to grab him by the hand, knowing she had the right to do so, that she was the only female he'd ever had or wanted... desperate to shove him back on her pile of pillows and ride him as wildly as she had out in the labyrinth... Rose just about dragged Bradley through the portal.

Wherever they ended up, they would be together. That's all that mattered to her. That they would be away from Faerie *and* together where they could continue their mating night festivities.

Later, she'd blame the lust clouding her newly bonded brain for how surprised she was to stumble onto a gravelly street so unlike the paths outside of the manor and the dirt road of the labyrinth.

The air crackled with magic, the perfume of baby powder so strong, she had to lift her free hand to cover her nose. Her senses were nowhere near as keen as her jaguar mate's—except, of course, when it came to the rusty, delicious tang of fresh blood—but even Rose coughed at how overpowering it was.

Brad... didn't.

He also didn't seem the least bit taken aback at their surroundings—or the small crowd of people milling about ten feet away from where the rift spat them back out.

Why would he? From the flash of recognition she experienced from his side of their mate bond, it was obvious that Bradley knew this place very well. It had to be Woodbridge, she figured, the site where the portal to Faerie had opened in their world. She'd been unconscious when Dreven brought her there so there was no way she would've recognized it, but Bradley certainly did.

He knew the people, too.

It was a petite blonde female who noticed them first. Her purple eyes marked her as a witch, and they widened in delight when she happened to glance over their way the instant Rose's heels hit the asphalt, followed by Brad's boots.

"Trav," she squealed, clutching the arm of the tall, slender brunet standing at her side, "oh my, Goddess, *Trav*. Your brother's back!"

Ah, thought Rose, tightening her grip on Bradley's hand so that he couldn't let her go. That must be Bradley's brother, Travis, and when he whipped his head around and she got her first look at his strong if more narrow features, she was sure she was right. There was more than enough resemblance for her to pinpoint the other male as her mate's family.

Under his breath, Bradley let out a rough curse.

Rose glanced up at him. "Husband?"

She *adored* calling him that. From the moment she completed the third blood exchange with her mate, that's exactly what he was: her husband. Nothing could change that now.

Besides, he was a shifter. Fate chose Rose for him. As his fated mate, she was the only one he could mate, the only one he could procreate with, and the single female he could give his heart to as easily as his cock. She had no doubt in her mind that he loved her already—despite their quick courtship—because she'd do anything for this male even before they had their second exchange.

She proved it, too.

Para bonds were instinctive. They were undeniable. They were also *real*, so why was she suddenly worried that Bradley might regret everything that passed between them in Faerie as if it wasn't?

His lips curved. "I fucking love it when you call me that."

Rose exhaled softly. "You are my husband, aren't you?"

"I gave you the chance to change your mind. You chose the jaguar, princess. Now you're stuck with him."

And then, as though to prove his point—and make to assuage any of her concerns that their mating didn't carry over to the other side of the veil—Bradley tugged her hand, pulling her into him. With his other hand, he laid it on the small of her back, tilting her head just enough so that he could kiss her as deeply as she needed to feel claimed by him.

Again.

Over the rush of blood pumping through her veins, someone cheered. As she reluctantly tore her gaze from the adoration turning him ridiculously more handsome than only a moment before, Rose saw that it was his brother.

Moving forward, he extended his hand.

Shifting her in his hold, Bradley kept one arm slung over Rose. After tucking her into his side, he offered his hand back to his brother.

As they shook, Travis said, "Congratulations, bro. Your mate is more beautiful than you said. And just as clever since she got you to pull your head out of your ass."

Turning toward Rose, he introduced himself, saying, "I'm your new mate-in-law. Travis. It's good to meet you, your majesty."

"Rose, please," she insisted.

Definitely not 'princess'. That title belonged to her mate—especially now that she was no longer one.

"Rose, then. Brad's told me all about you, but I look forward to getting to know you myself. If I can keep my

brother from mounting you long enough for us to chase, that is.”

“Trav,” growled Bradley.

“What? I’ve been there. You couldn’t drag me and Gin out of bed at first, so I get that’s what took you so long to come back. But, all congratulations aside, where the fuck have you two been?”

And... there it was. Any hope that she and Bradley could slip away quietly and consummate their mating in their world went up in smoke as she heard her mate sigh.

“Believe me. You’ll never guess.”

“Good thing we don’t have to,” he said, as two others finally came over to join them. “Because we’ve been waiting for you guys to make it back to tell us.”

As Brad launched into a quick explanation of how they found themselves in Faerie, Rose focused on the other couple. It was a male and a female, and while the male was extremely attractive—and, despite being mated, Rose considered herself a connoisseur when it came to good-looking males—something about the female caught her attention.

Was it the way her hand was resting on the arm of the too pretty, blue-eyed shifter accompanying her? Or how the witch’s rich purple gaze was drawn to Bradley as if Rose wasn’t standing there at all.

Almost at the same time, Bradley noticed their approach. Cutting off his conversation with his brother, he gave Rose’s shoulder a squeeze, almost as though making sure she was still there with him.

As soon as he introduced them, she understood exactly why.

“Princess, this is Colton Wolfe, Beta of the Eastern Pack. And his mate, Shea Moonshadow. Guys, this is my mate. Rose Ryhill.”

Only slightly mollified by the way he called her his mate, Rose had one thought crossing her mind: Of course that was

Shea. *Of course.*

She tapped the point of her fang with her tongue, taking the other female in with a guarded expression. Almost as though she was right back at Ryhill Manor again, she refused to give away anything she was thinking.

She was cute. Too cute. With a button nose, bright purple witch eyes, a head full of wild black curls that complemented her rich olive-colored skin, Rose would consider her absolutely adorable.

“Oh,” she said, attempting to keep her jealousy from reaching her voice, “this is Shea.”

The witch frowned. There and gone again, Rose remembered that Shea was also an empath. She would’ve known from her senses alone how Rose felt about meeting her.

Still, she worked up another welcoming smile. “It’s so nice to meet you. When we heard that Brad had gone after his mate, we hoped it would all work out for the two of you.”

Shea sounded so pleasant. So nice.

That didn’t stop the slight pang that hit Rose. It was one thing for him to have discussed her with his brother while keeping the truth from her. But Shea, too?

“I can promise you it did. Still, it does seem as though everyone else knew I was meant to be his mate before I did,” she said, forcing herself to keep her tone light. “Right, Bradley?”

When she felt him still at her back without a response to her comment, she glanced up at him to see how he’d reacted to her not quite tease—and gasped.

It was true that she hadn’t known him long. For Paras, that didn’t matter. Forming the bond was really only the beginning of forever. The important part was that it was there, and it was allowed to grow. Even so, she thought she had a good idea of what kind of male Brad was.

He was loyal. Protective. A little too hard on himself, and he concealed a generous heart with a scowl half the time.

The expression he was wearing right now? That wasn't a scowl.

That was *murder* etched in every hard line of his face.

He was glaring at something over her head. She could feel the points of his claws slicing through the material of her sleeve as he suddenly lost control. Not only that, but there were dark rosettes blooming beneath his skin as his inch-long jaguar fangs jutting out from between his curled lips.

She'd never seen such ferocity coming from him. Oh, Rose knew he was capable of it, but until she felt the rumble from his beast vibrating right through, she hadn't quite witnessed it.

Then again, he'd never come face to face with her attempted murderer before.

Call it what you will, but Rose had no doubt in her mind that when Dreven tossed her into the rift, he did so with every intention that she'd perish wherever she went. Now that she hadn't, her bastard of a cousin had the *audacity* to almost meet her gaze as he walked alongside his father.

Because that's where Travis's witch mate had disappeared off to before. Once Rose and Bradley had crossed back over, she'd retrieved Rhaine and Dreven from wherever they were.

Logically, it made sense that they would've been concerned for her. As her only blood family, if she disappeared as she had and Dreven—at least—*wasn't* involved, of course they'd be holding vigil like Bradley's friends and family seemed to have done.

Only Dreven *was* responsible, and though she wanted to believe Rhaine wasn't a part of his dastardly plan, how could she trust anything her cousin had said?

Well, now she could. With everyone there as witness, once she used her abilities on him, she'd get the little worm to confess that he was responsible. Then, regardless of what Rhaine decided, Dreven would be another in a line of executions.

She was queen now. No one could tell her what to do.

Except, perhaps, her mate.

“No,” rasped out Bradley. She felt his desperate need to avenge her like a fire down the line between them. “You were my charge. Now you’re my mate. I’ll handle this.”

Rose didn’t even hesitate. “If you need me, you know I’m here.”

“Always.”

Then, giving her one last squeeze, careful not to jab her with his claws, he moved so that he was standing in front of her.

“For trying to harm my mate, I invoke the *Claws Clause*,” he announced. “Call it a fucking challenge if you want, but this is payback. Dreven Ryhill, your fucking head is *mine*.”

Brad was damn proud of himself and his jaguar. Instead of shoving Rose behind him and letting his beast out so that he could rip him to ribbons with his claws, he made sure to cover his ass by invoking the *Claws Clause* first. In case he needed another layer of protection—since, technically, they hadn’t gotten a Bonding License first—he laid it out like a pack challenge.

Both Colt and Travis recognized it as such. Immediately falling back, each one herded their mate behind them. At a quick side-eye from Brad, Travis returned for Rose. He didn’t touch her, as though he could tell that that might push Brad’s jaguar a step too far, but he gestured for Rose to join him and the others.

Go with him, he sent through their bond. It wasn’t exactly a telegraphic message, more of a wordless plea. Either way, it worked, and he heard Rose’s heels clatter a few feet away from him.

Brad cracked his neck, rolling it around his shoulders.

Dreven's smarmy expression slid off of his face. "This is ridiculous. Rosie, leash your beast."

"I have to agree. Rose, darling... what is the meaning of this?"

"What part, Uncle? That I'm his mate, or that the bodyguard you hired to stop any attempts on my life managed to save me after all? From Dreven, Rhaine. From my own *cousin*. Unless you put him up to it."

The look of surprise on his normally carefully cultivated expression cemented Brad's belief that her uncle was innocent.

And then he said, "I would never do that you," and he knew that Rhaine was telling the truth. After all, Dayborns couldn't lie.

Rhaine turned on Dreven. "But, my son... you were the reason Rose went missing? You told me it was the jaguar who left his post and that's why she was taken."

Also true. Brad *did* leave the manor to meet with his brother, but all that did was give Dreven the opening to make off with Rose.

When Dreven didn't even deny it, turning defiant instead, Brad took one looming step forward, prepared to start the challenge.

The Dayborn went impossibly paler. "You can't do this. I'm a royal. You have no right."

"No, but I do," countered his father. "Dreven, why would you do this?"

"For you, Father! I did this for you. You deserve to be king. The Blood Throne should be ours!"

"It was never meant for us. Colette—"

"She didn't deserve it, either! Even she agreed before I lopped off her head!"

Behind him, he heard Rose gasp. It was one thing to suspect that he was the reason her mother was murdered, but

to hear her cousin say it out loud? The shock skittering down their bond only galvanized Brad.

He was already planning on eliminating this threat to Rose. For making his mate hurt like that, he'd *enjoy* it.

“Dreven,” Rhaine said softly. “How could you?”

“Easily. She was a Ryhill. If she didn't believe I would be a better king, she could've stopped me.”

Unless he used quicksilver on her the same way he poisoned Rose.

“Please, Father. You must understand—”

“Must nothing,” Rhaine interrupted. “I know my place. I always have, and I thought you did, too. I was wrong.” Taking a purposeful step away from Dreven, he repeated, “I know my place, my son. Now it's time you understand yours.”

He jerked his chin at Brad. “I hired you to eliminate any threat to the princess. You're still in my employ. Do your job.”

Gladly.

Pack challenges have one rule: whatever shape your opponent is in is the shape you stay in. That meant he couldn't use his jaguar form, though he could tap into his beast's claws, fangs, strength, and speed.

Which was precisely what he did.

Honestly, it probably wasn't fair. It didn't have to be. She was his mate, and if there was one message that Brad used this challenge to send, it was that anyone who threatened her had to deal with a feral jaguar. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Even before he claimed her as his mate, knowing she was his responsibility would have earned him as her champion. The only difference between being her bodyguard and her mate was that he fought the Dayborn for his own reasons rather than his employer's.

His jaguar wanted Dreven's throat, and it got it. To make sure the vampire couldn't come back and endanger Rose again, he used his shifter strength to twist his head right off of

his neck before dropping it to the asphalt. The other half of his body crumpled right next to it.

A look of surprise was immortalized on his features, as though he really thought he could get away with murdering his cousin.

Not if Brad Fenton had anything to say about it.

Then, spattered in blood, chest heaving as his jaguar conceded control back to him, he held out his crimson-stained hand.

Rose came rushing forward. Without even a moment's hesitation, she slipped her pristine, slender hand in his.

Rhaine's pale gaze locked on the way Brad closed his fingers over hers. "You might be the mate to this beast," he said after a moment, his voice entirely too calm for someone who'd just witness his son's brutal slaughter, "but we have traditions, Rose, darling. You must take him as your husband if you want the crown."

"It's never been about the crown for me, Rhaine." Shaking her head royally, she announced, "But Bradley is my blood-bonded husband."

Because, in her own way, his Dayborn princess was as possessive as any shifter. While he claimed her, she made sure as hell to claim him, too.

That was all her uncle needed to hear.

Purposely ignoring the mutilated body of his son, Rhaine Ryhill went down on his knee in front of his cousin.

"Here and now, I pledge my life and my service to you, my queen. It might not be about the crown for you, but yours is the only head that shall wear it."

CHAPTER 20

QUEEN ROSE



Q ueen Rose.

Queen Rose.

It didn't hit Brad just what completing the three blood exchanges really meant until Rhaine genuflected in front of Rose, calling her his queen. And, sure, she hadn't had a coronation yet. No frilly ceremony in Ryhill Manor where the entire vampire court watched her take her first seat on the Blood Throne. It didn't matter. From the moment she took him as her blood-bonded mate, she was technically the queen.

Rhaine recognized it, and though his traitorous son was dead, her uncle was as devoted to her as ever. She was his queen, and when she clicked her tongue and told him to rise, he did with no hesitation.

Turning to Brad, she then asked, "Which one of these houses is ours," and Brad was so pleased at the way she said 'ours' like that, he didn't even hesitate. Pointing with one of his claws, he showed her the house where he used to stay when he lived in Woodbridge.

"Come, uncle," she said. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Of course, my queen. Lead the way."

As though being a royal was a costume she could tug on at a whim, the Rose he'd gotten to know these last few weeks disappeared beneath the mantle of "queen". No longer just a coddled princess, she swanned away gracefully without a backward look.

Only the pulse of affection she sent down their new bond assured him that she wasn't walking away from him for long. Just like how he would always have pack business that popped up, she was a royal Dayborn. There were things his mate was responsible for. He understood that.

So Brad didn't follow. Well. No. He *did*—but he stopped when Travis loped over to him, slinging one arm over his shoulder, tugging him into a tight hug, half laughing, half choking as he said, "I'm sorry, bro. I'm so sorry."

Apart from Rose, there was only one soul in either realm who could come up on him from behind and he wouldn't take that as a threat or a challenge: his older brother. Instead of swinging on him, he gave him his own lopsided, one arm hug.

It took a second before he understood what Travis was saying. When he did, he shrugged him off. "Sorry? What the fuck for?"

Brad was the bigger of the Fenton brothers. He had a couple of inches on Trav, and a good twenty-thirty pounds of muscle. Travis had always been wiry, and he'd lost more weight during his stint in the Cage than he'd been able to put back on since he'd been out. Even so, his stubborn brother managed to cling to him long enough to give him a teasing noogie before finally releasing him.

"Sorry for making you think I died after they stuck me in the Cage. I was gone for four months without a word to you. You were gone for two weeks and Gin had to convince me that I'd only make a bigger mess of things if I tried to follow you through the rift. If you hadn't been back in a couple of more days, I might've."

"Really? Why? You know I can handle myself."

"Of course I do. And? You're my little brother. I didn't like not knowing where you were." He paused. "Hang on. Weren't you worried about me when I was in the Cage?"

More than he would ever confess to his brother. When Travis seemed to disappear off the face of the planet, he did everything he could to distract himself over his brother's

predicament. Only knowing that Gin was simply gone, too, and none of Coventry could track down the bounty hunter kept Brad sane. He knew instinctively that his brother was still alive, and that wherever he'd gone, it was because he'd chased Gin there.

Besides, it wasn't like Brad was gone anywhere near as long as Travis was. He was only gone for—

Hang on.

Two weeks? “Did you say two weeks?”

“Two weeks tomorrow, yeah.”

Brad blinked, stunned. “It was only five days in Faerie.”

“I don't know what to tell you. It was two fucking weeks out here. Gin was rolling every morning since her visions couldn't find you on the other side of the rift, and her runes finally told her you'd be back tonight.”

Well, that explained why Travis, Gin, Shea, and Colt were there when Brad and Rose stumbled through—as well as Rhaine and Dreven.

Speaking of...

Glancing around, he saw that Shea and Colt were standing together on their porch, and that was about all. Travis was standing beside him, Rose had gone inside with her uncle, and Gin was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey. Where is she anyway?”

“My mate ran inside to call Luciana. Something came up in Coventry so she's there with that angel mate of hers, but Gin promised to let her know the second you two came back. I've been waiting two weeks to see your ugly face again. And you're a bonded male. Got your mate a whole lot faster than I did,” Travis teased, teasingly punching his brother in the pec. “We got time. Tell me all about it.”

Talk about déjà vu. Barely a month ago—to Brad, at least, because he only lived five days in Faerie, not *two weeks*—he was sitting on a porch with Brad, sipping on a beer with his brother, wistfully asking about what being mated to Gin was

like. He never really thought he'd find his own mate, and now look at him.

He was mated to a *queen*.

A queen who was currently sitting down with her uncle, discussing all things Dayborn while Brad stood outside in the chilly air with Travis...

Well, if there was one way to warm himself up, it was by reliving the moment Rose bested the Fae Queen, fed him her blood, and then claimed him out in the labyrinth. And since there wasn't a damn thing he couldn't share with his brother, he told him as many details as he could while he waited for his mate to come back to him.

Travis hung on every word, and when Brad was done, rosettes were covering his skin.

"Shit. I thought my mandatory ninety sucked balls, and then that lion went after Gin. The silver collar wasn't fun, either," he added, fingers inching up his throat, casually rubbing the ruined skin wrapping around his neck, "but at least I didn't have some fairy princess messing around in my head."

"She was a queen. A Fae Queen. And she might have let us go, but I'm not so sure she won't decide to check out this side of the veil if she gets bored enough."

That's the impression Brad got of Titania. That she was bored, and she found pleasure in anything entertaining. For a minute there, she thought she found it in Brad—until Rose beat her at her own game. Would Titania accept defeat graciously?

Somehow, he doubted it.

"I still can't believe it was a fairy world on the other side of the rift. Az knew it wasn't the demon realms... angel, you know? But he was starting to think this was some kind of portal to another realm. Pixies... fairy queens. It's going to blow Gin's mind when I tell her. She was so worried after she saw the rift take you."

"How did she— Gin had a vision," Brad guessed, answering his own question. "That's how she figured out

where it was me and Rose went.”

Travis nodded. “She had another one later that night. We’d gone out to dinner and she saw the Dayborn princess falling inside of the rift, then a jaguar jumping in after her—”

“I was on two legs but I leapt after her,” Brad murmured, almost unaware he corrected Travis. “And she didn’t fall. That fucker threw her in.”

“The one you challenged?”

“Yup. Fucker. Dead fucker, but a fucker all the same.”

“Gin’s visions are sometimes more... vibes than anything. The jaguar was you, obviously, and I guess the vampire—”

“Fucker.”

“Right,” agreed Travis. “The fucker didn’t pop up for some reason. Believe me, Brad. If we knew he was responsible for putting you and your mate through that, we never would’ve let him hang around. Since the other one... Rhaine? Right. Yeah, since Rhaine’s part of the Para collective with the Alpha and Luciana, when Rose went missing, they looped him in. He brought Drev—the fucker with him. That’s why they were here tonight, too. I guess I should say sorry for that, too.”

“And like I said before, what the fuck for?” A smile tugging on his lips, Brad clapped Travis on the shoulder. “You saved me having to track him down. Instead, I got to challenge him and, for the first time in my damn life, use the *Claws Clause* to my advantage. I got to protect my mate, Trav. She claimed me as her husband. I’m home again. I’m doing just fine. See? You don’t have to take care of me anymore.”

Travis snorted. “Like I’ll ever not worry about you. But you’re right. That’s your mate’s problem now. Hey, if you get out of line, she can flash her high beams at you and make you listen.”

“Maybe on you, Trav. I’m the only one her powers don’t work on.”

The queen of Faerie, too, but Brad kept that to himself for the moment. He was sure that was only the first time he and

Rose were going to have to tell every detail about their time in Faerie; well, not *every* detail, but the ones that had to do with their journey into—and escape—from the fae world. He needed time to figure out what that could mean.

Travis nodded. “Makes sense. I’m the only one Gin doesn’t get visions of. If she rolls her runes while thinking about just me or me and her together, they come up blank every time. I think it’s a mate thing. Our future is tied too close together. And your mate... Fate knew she didn’t need magic to get you to do anything.”

“She’s my mate. I would regardless.”

“Exactly.” Travis bumped his shoulder against Brad’s bicep. “So, she’s really the queen now, huh?”

Queen Rose...

“Seems like it. I mean, always knew that she was only the princess until she took a mate.” A husband. Brad was her blood-bonded *husband*. “When she did, she would get the crown and the throne and be the queen of her people.”

“Does that mean you’re King Bradley?”

His first reaction was to toss a half-hearted ‘fuck you’ back at him, only the words caught in his throat.

Was he? Not necessarily the king, but as her husband, did that make him the queen’s consort?

“I... I don’t know.”

“Well,” Travis said, jerking his chin over Brad’s shoulder, “here comes someone you could ask.”

Brad whipped his head around. He didn’t even need Travis’s comment. As though the bond stretching between them had been tugged, he sensed her approach a moment before her sweet scent slammed into his back.

Rose was murmuring under her breath, saying something to Rhaine. Too low for even his shifter’s ears to hear, whatever it was, it had her uncle bowing his head before he stalked down the length of the street.

A single car was parked in front of another of the abandoned houses. Rhaine slipped into the backseat. Only then did Brad notice the male sitting in the driver's seat, waiting for the Dayborn royal to return. A moment later, the engine turned over and Rose's uncle was gone.

But Rose wasn't.

Graceful as ever, she glided over to him, a coy expression on her lovely face. She barely flickered a glance Travis's way, all of her attention on Brad.

She smiled. "Husband."

Husband. The single word purred in her soft voice went straight to his cock. All he had wanted to do was bring Rose back to the real world and get her flat on her back on the first horizontal surface he could find, and while using twenty-eight years of pent-up sexual frustration to tear Dreven to shreds had felt fucking amazing, that was nothing compared to how amazing it felt to fuck his mate.

He'd only taken her once, and already he was addicted. He wanted her again—needed her again—and he had to work hard to reach for her while he was still splattered in her cousin's blood.

His mate was a vampire, but even that seemed a little much.

"Princess. Or is it queen now?"

Her eyes lit up. "I'll always be your princess, Bradley."

Oh, thank Alpha.

Travis cleared his throat. "Hey, uh, bro? I'll see you two tomorrow, okay? 'Kay. Good talk."

His brother made a quick exit after that. Considering he locked himself and Gin the honeymoon suite of a Para hotel during their initial mating frenzy and the two of them didn't leave the bed for more than three days—and only because Gin insisted on finishing up on her latest bounty hunt—Travis knew exactly what Brad was going through. Claiming sex for a shifter took the one time, but that didn't do anything to the

instinctual need to mate again and again until the initial rush was out of their system.

With Rose, Brad was sure it was going to take even longer than his brother and his mate. The only question was where would they fall into bed together? In Woodbridge? In Wolf's Pack? Or in Rose's quarters back at the manor?

He still hadn't taken his gaze away from Rose. "Where to now, princess?"

Rose gave a royal shake of her head. The motion was enough to make her gown slip, showing off her fresh bite.

Brad nearly came in his dirty jeans to see her wear it so proudly.

He gulped, and she moved into him, laying her pristine hand on his heavy chest. "Wherever my husband wants to go."

Where did Brad want to go? Right to bed.

However, once he followed the swish of his mate's skirt into his house and scented her innate aroma mingled with that of her uncle's, that was enough to tamp down his need just enough to ask her about what she discussed with Rhaine.

"You know what the best thing about being queen is?" she said in answer. "No one can tell me 'no', and I don't even have to enthrall them to get what I want."

And that's how he found out that she made an arrangement with her uncle. Like Brad, she felt responsible for the rift now. The two of them were the only ones to cross through it and back, and if anything happened because of it, she wanted to be there.

Besides, Rhaine had done a great job as regent these last five years. He pledged his loyalty to her, and she had no reason to doubt his sincerity. Until she was ready to return to the manor and sit on the Blood Throne, Rhaine would lead the Dayborns.

Rose would stay in Woodbridge with Brad until the rift was gone.

And since there was nothing they could do about it that night, he finally got the chance to claim his mate in an actual bed.

The next morning, he looked forward to doing it again. Unfortunately, with his brother and his mate visited early for breakfast, that had to wait.

Rose seemed fascinated by Gin. She wanted to know everything about her abilities, and how the witch had been able to tell sense she was in danger. During their time in the labyrinth, Brad had told her about his visit to Woodbridge, Gin's vision, and how he started running right back to Ryhill Manor before realizing that Rose was being brought to Woodbridge.

Amazed at the psychic witch's skill—and pointing out that it might be handy to have a witch in her employ who could've warned of Dreven's betrayal before he injected her with quicksilver—Rose offered to hire

While the women were negotiating how big a diamond it would take to convince Gin to moonlight on her fellow witches with the queen of the Dayborns, Travis took Brad to the side. That's when his older brother admitted that there was a reason Luciana and Azrael were still in Coventry.

Luciana, the imposing, former head witch, was the one Dreven charmed into dropping the wards around Woodbridge so that he could reach the rift with the unconscious Rose. Hating that another Para got the jump on her and unsure what else the Dayborn had enthralled her to do, she was holing up in the Tower of Coventry—the head of all witchy operations in the United States—until she was certain that his hypnotizing spell had been completely reversed.

It didn't matter that Dreven was dead. Even Rose admitted that. If he didn't remove the charm himself when he was done with Luciana, it could still be lurking inside one of the most powerful witches alive.

Now that Brad was back, Gin and Travis were planning on visiting her there, leaving after breakfast. Even though Gin was currently out of the bounty hunting game, she was still technically Luciana's employee. She would use her psychic abilities and runes to help the other witches run tests on Luciana, and while Travis offered to stay behind with Brad, Brad told his brother to stay with his mate.

After all, that's what Brad was going to do.

He rarely let Rose out of his sight. Being her bodyguard was hard to turn off. In fact, since claiming her as his, his protective instincts were going into overdrive. He couldn't shake the sensation that their time in Faerie was going to bite them in the ass. Almost like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

On their third night home, it *did*.

The clock had just finished striking midnight when an ear-splitting roar cut through the night, ripping both of them out of a deep sleep.

They'd only turned in an hour before. With Travis and Gin leaving earlier that afternoon, and Rose purposely choosing to keep her distance from Shea, Brad and Rose stayed in for dinner. He roasted the vegetables and seared the steak, then offered up his throat for his mate's dessert. After a vigorous round of mating, she curled into his side, falling asleep immediately.

Loving how trustingly she slumbered in his embrace, Brad stayed awake a little longer just to enjoy the sensation. He'd probably only been asleep himself for half an hour or so when the roar jerked him awake.

Rose gasped. "What... what was that?"

He didn't know, but when the horrible sound came again, there was no pretending it was part of a dream they both had.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, hating that he couldn’t assure his mate that it was nothing. Throwing the covers away from him, he climbed out of bed. “But I’m going to find out.”

He fell asleep naked. Rooting around for his jeans, he found them. Brad stabbed one leg in, hopping around on it so that he can do the same with the other. Just as he was tucking his cock in, careful not to get any skin or pubic hair cut in the zipper, he noticed that Rose was shrugging her nightgown back on.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

“I’m going outside to check,” he told Rose. “I need you to stay here.”

“Bradley—”

“I mean it, princess. Whatever’s out there...”

“It’s from Faerie, isn’t it?”

He wanted to tell her that it wasn’t. He couldn’t. That sound wasn’t like anything he had ever heard on earth before, and absolutely refused to lie to his mate.

“I’ll find out.”

From the fear that traveled down their bond, he was sure that wasn’t the answer she was hoping for. But she didn’t try to stop him. Instead, Rose stumbled around the edge of the bed, heading right toward him.

The hem of her long nightgown got tangled around her ankles, but his vampiress was graceful enough to recover her poise instantly. Kicking the material, leaving it to float ethereally behind her, she nodded at him.

“Come back to me,” she whispered. “I finally found my heart. I can’t lose it.”

Digging his claws into his chest, Brad waited a beat, then yanked his hand free. Blood coated the jagged points, staining his fingertips red. He needed to go outside. Whatever that fucking roar was, he couldn’t avoid it. If it was one of the fae creatures that followed him and his mate out of Faerie, he couldn’t hide inside from it. He had to face it.

His pack needed him. Woodbridge needed him. If it was anything like the monsters they faced in the labyrinth, it would be more than just the night guard could handle. Especially considering that roar... to have a bellow that shook the whole Alpha damn house, it had to be huge.

But of everyone who needed him, there was one soul who mattered to him the most: his precious Rose. So, closing the gap between them, he gripped her shoulder with his clean hand, holding her in place as he took her mouth.

The sharp pain as her dainty fangs sliced his tongue invigorated him. His jaguar snarled, torn between wanting to curl its sleek body around Rose's form and tearing off into the night to hunt down whatever was causing his mate to tremble.

Through their bond, he could sense her concern for him. Except for Travis, no one had ever worried for him before.

He needed to go out there and see what was causing that nose. He had no doubt in his mind it had something to do with the rift, but first—

Brad swiped the side of his bloody claws along her pouty, parted lips. A streak of red ran across the tip one, the full bottom one, with two jagged lines coloring her pale chin.

“Bradley...” Her tongue darted out, lapping at the blood. Rose's eyes glimmered, shining brightly in the darkness. “Why?”

“A little taste, princess. Something to keep you satisfied while I take care of this.” Tapping his bare, clawed-up chest with his fist, he said, “You found your heart? You fucking *own* mine. My heart, my blood, every last shred of the male I am, and the male I want to be. For you. Don't ever doubt that I won't come back for you. Not even death can stop me.”

Rose threw her arms around Brad's middle, giving him a squeeze. “My mother had more than two hundred years with my dad. I'll never forgive you if we only had a handful of weeks.”

Brad dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I'm a greedy bastard, princess. I want forever. And I'm going to get it.”

She nodded, then pulled away from him right as the house rattled again courtesy of another roar. “I’ll wait for you by the window.”

“Do that, but stay inside. I need you safe.”

Her lips quirked slightly up. “Still my bodyguard?”

“Always, princess,” he said, trying to keep his tone light even as his jaguar let out a saw-like roar of its own.

With one last look at his mate, drinking in her beauty, Brad bolted down the stairs, racing for the door. Rose was on his heels, though she detoured, heading toward the window like she said she would.

She reached her post before he got the door open. Her shocked gasp followed him as he burst out onto the porch, coming to a sudden stop at the sight before him.

Less than a minute ago, he swore to his mate that not even death could stop him. He still believed that.

But the nine-foot tall, green-skinned monster with gleaming yellow eyes, a pair of serrated tusks, and a club made of solid wood just might.

CHAPTER 21

MONSTER



He—and considering the creature was nothing but bones in his tangled black hair, and fur pelts over his shoulders, Brad could see from the massive cock swinging below that it was a *he*—was standing in front of the rift. The faint glow silhouetted him, highlighting his bulk. Fuck if he knew what the monster was; he was nothing like the small pixies and the hairy brownies and the striking fae that they encountered in Faerie. It didn't matter. Whatever he was, he was a threat.

Brad was a protector. He eliminated threats, just like he eliminated Rose's cruel cousin.

When he challenged Dreven, he could only rely on tapping into his jaguar's claws and fangs.

Now? At least he wouldn't be fighting this monster alone.

With Travis and Gin heading out earlier that morning to meet with Luciana, and the former head witch in Coventry with her angel mate, that left only the four of them watching over the rift; two, really, since neither bonded shifter would ever risk his female by leaving her alone near the unpredictable portal to Faerie. So what if it didn't seem to work? Until it disappeared completely, the Para collective decided that it needed eyes on it at all times.

Last night was Brad's turn to stand guard. Tonight, the Beta was on duty.

Colt was still standing on two legs, though his shoulders were hunched, his arms at his side as he prepared to leap up

and attack the creature. Before Brad could warn him not to take anything about the Faerie monster for granted, Colt used his powerful shifter legs to launch at the beast.

And that's when the monster flung out his club, catching the Beta of the Eastern Pack dead in his side just as he lunged at him.

Crunch.

A howl from the Beta as he went flying, followed by Brad's snapped, "Fuck!"

He was already moving before Colt hit the ground again. The momentum of the monster's swing had sent the wolf shifter soaring a good fifteen feet away before Colt slammed into the asphalt of the empty street.

Thud.

When he saw that Colt wasn't popping back up right away, Brad bolted right toward him. With Rose safely inside of the house, his only goal was to get to the Beta before the monster did. With Colt down, he couldn't defend himself from that club.

One positive. As much as the monster roared, stamping his bare feet and swinging that club wildly, there was a limit to how far away he could get from the rift's glow. As though he was tethered to the portal to Faerie, the monster couldn't step where the glow didn't reach. If he could, no doubt he would've already been going after Colt again—or Brad.

The monster's roar rose in pitch when he realized there were two shifters outside now. Two much smaller nuisances to the fae creature. It lumbered forward, but just like Brad thought, he stopped short when he reached the edge of the glow, jerking back as though he was on a chain and he ran out of links.

Leaving the monster trapped along the edge of the rift, Brad made it to Colt right as the Beta slowly crawled his way back to his feet.

"I'm gonna fucking kill that thing," he rasped. His face—always too perfect, too *pretty*, thought Brad—was shredded on

one side. Road rash. As he slammed cheek-first into the asphalt, then skipped a few more feet, the gravel tore chunks out of his face.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

"You okay, Colt?"

"I'll be fine once I yank his horns off and gut him with it," was his response.

Brad blinked. He was used to such bloodthirstiness from Maddox, but he was the Alpha. Colt was the stubborn, anal-retentive, rule-abiding Beta who tempered Maddox's rage with his icy nature.

Except, it seemed, when a monster straight out of Faerie batted him around like a fucking baseball.

"I'll help," said Brad. He flexed his fingers, summoning his claws. "Between the two of us, we can take him down."

Colt nodded, eyes locked on the prowling beast. He took one purposeful step toward it, then froze.

His hand went right to his chest a split second before Brad heard a familiar voice shout out.

"Colton!"

Shea.

Her woodsy scent slammed into Brad a moment after her shout echoed, then died. Glancing behind him, he saw her come darting out of the house she shared with Colt. Her curls were bouncing wildly, panic and fear turning her purple eyes almost black, as she ran for her mate.

Colt did the last thing Brad ever expected. Instead of going to her, he backed away. His hand still on his chest, white fur covered his fingers, his knuckles gnarled into a paw. From the way his cheeks hollowed—the whole one, and the one that hadn't even started to regenerate—he was doing his damndest to keep his own control.

The Beta's icy blue eyes gleamed. Another sign his wolf was riding him, he turned on Brad. "Grab her," he snarled.

“Don’t let my mate come over here. Don’t let her touch me.”

“What?”

That made no sense. Shea was a healer. Her touch alone would speed up Colt’s regenerative properties so that he could recover faster. He was on his feet, though he was favoring his good side. The swipe from the club had already done some damage, and hitting the ground as hard as he had only aggravated his injuries. Colt should want a little magical healing from his mate.

“Fucking damn it, Brad, listen to me! I’m your Beta. You’re pack. Now do what I said!”

Colt was right. Everything he went through, everything he had done, was to prove to the rest of the Eastern Pack that he was a loyal member. That he could be trusted, and that he would never turn on them. Finding his mate was the best thing that could have ever happened to him, but whether he was the Dayborn queen’s consort or not, he *was* pack.

“On it, Colt.”

He had his orders and he was going to obey them—even if he had to upset Shea as he did.

Moving quickly, he intercepted Shea before she could reach Colt. Wrapping her gently up in his arms, he lifted her off of the ground. She was still running hard when he grabbed her, and the tips of her hastily thrown on sneakers slammed into his shins before he hefted her around, keeping her back to his chest.

It took Shea a second to realize that the wall she ran into wasn’t a wall but, instead, a solid jaguar shifter. Once she had, she squirmed.

Brad adjusted his hold on her, keeping her away from Colt.

“What are you doing?” She slapped at his bicep. “Let go of me!”

The flat of her hand hitting his skin was a slight sting, especially since her hand was glowing a mix between purple and magenta; she was manifesting witch magic and healing

magic at the same time. As if to prove it, the cloying scent of baby powder filled the air, so potent it managed to compete with the woody, swampy stink coming off of the fae creature.

“Can’t do that, Shea,” Brad said, his voice gruff. “Beta’s orders.”

The tang of salt added to the baby powder. Without looking down at her face, he knew he’d find panicked tears welling in her pretty purple eyes. She squeezed his forearm. “You don’t understand. He *needs* me. I have to heal him!”

“Go back inside, my mate.”

Colt’s voice was closer than Brad expected. He thought the wolf shifter would’ve run right at the monster again once he was sure that Brad was protecting his mate. He was wrong.

Standing a few feet away, icy blue eyes still shining brightly in the moonlight, he watched Shea as if he couldn’t look away—but he kept his distance.

Again, Brad had no fucking clue what was going on. The monster at their backs was smashing his club against the street, pissed off that he lost their attention.

Shea swiveled her head. She barely even glanced at the green-skinned creature. Nope. She only had eyes for her mate.

“I swear to the Goddess... tell Brad to release me.”

“No.”

“You’re hurt—”

“I’m fine.”

He wasn’t fine, though Brad, and the empathic witch knew it. Even without the bond she shared with Colt, her gift would be able to tell that Colt was hurting.

“Don’t you dare lie to me, Colton Wolfe!” snapped Shea. For a second, she stopped struggling with Brad, but once Colt firmed his jaw, obviously still refusing to reconsider, she swiveled in his hold again. “Brad... Brad, please. Put me down. I can help him. *Please.*”

His gut went tight, dueling instincts warring inside of him and his jaguar.

Colt was his Beta. He shouldn't refuse his order. But Shea...

Damn it, he loved Shea. He would always love her. The empathic witch was too good, too kind, too caring for him to ever lose his affection for her. Now that he had Rose, Brad understood what the Alpha's mate had tried to tell him gently once before: he wasn't in love with Shea. Not the way Colt was, or how he would slit his own throat for his vampire princess if she mentioned she was peckish. Rose was his mate. She was his *world*.

And, like Colt, he would do anything to keep her safe.

The monster couldn't get to them now. For whatever reason, he couldn't get past the reach of the rift's glow. Did that mean he wasn't a threat?

Not even a little.

Brad tightened his hold on her. "Colt will be fine," he said, hoping like hell he wasn't lying through his fangs. Colt had to be. He was an alpha wolf, despite being the Beta of the pack, and it would take a lot more than being smacked about by a fae creature to take him out. "I'm sorry, Shea. You should go back inside. We've got this."

Her frustrated cry damn near slashed his heart in two. There was anguish in it, and if he never heard another female make that sound again, it would be too soon.

"His ribs are broken. Two of them, on the left. One's smashed, the other fractured. If he's not careful, it could pierce an organ. Lung or... or his heart. I have to fix it."

"No."

"Colt—"

"I won't let you drain yourself for me."

"You're my mate," she began before Colt cut her off with a snapped, "And you're carrying our pup."

What?

How did Brad miss it? His nose had saved his ass on so many occasions, sampling the air for scents was an involuntary action. So how the fuck did he miss the fact that Shea was pregnant, and Colt was doing everything he could to swallow his pain to protect her?

How did he miss it? Easy. Due to her empathic nature and her gift of healing, Shea erected an iron-tight set of shields to protect her from being bombarded by pain that wasn't hers. Because of that, she was careful to keep anyone but her mate out.

Living in Woodbridge, she was able to drop them more frequently. Not completely, and probably not at all once she realized she was carrying a pup, but not that Brad was searching for it... it was there.

Faint, but undeniable.

It was the tiniest change to Shea's innate woodsy scent that made it a combination of the icy aura that belonged to Colt and his arctic wolf: their growing baby, a little bit shifter, a little bit witch.

"I know my limits," Shea pleaded. "Just let me use a little healing magic on you."

Colt swallowed roughly. "I won't risk it. I won't risk *you*. Fenton. Get her out of here. Now."

He didn't hesitate. This time, the order in Colt's voice wasn't what spurred him to react. Oh, no. It was remembering Colt telling him how Shea had a tendency to tap into her well of healing magic and give so much of herself, she nearly died. Not just once. Not just twice. Multiple times.

She did it for her brother. She'd do it for Colt.

If he let her, Colt would never forgive him. Brad would never forgive himself, either.

Shea shrieked as Brad tightened his hold on her. Tucking her slight body under his arm, her legs flailing as the witch did

anything to stop him, he bounded over the curb, up the walkway, right to his door.

Throwing it open, he wasn't surprised to find Rose standing there. His mate was perched in front of the window. He'd seen the curtain drawn back as he made for the house, and it was still fluttering now, as though she'd only just released it from her grip.

A look of relief flashed across Rose's gorgeous face when she saw him, though her dainty fangs bit down on her bottom lip when she recognized he wasn't alone.

"Brad, what's going on?"

That's what she said. What he heard was, "What are you doing with the witch?"

Through their bond, he felt jealousy mingled with the relief he noticed. She was glad he returned, though she wished he'd come back alone.

His fault. He thought he made it clear that he loved Shea as a friend while Rose... she was his mate. His fucking *world*. There was no reason to be jealous, especially not right now. And, sure, maybe this was a bit of a compromising position since no self-respecting shifter would ever get so close to a female who wasn't his mate, but this was pack business.

He respected her queenly duties, whether she passed them off onto her uncle or she wanted to take them all on herself.

Here's hoping that he understood that while Rose owned his heart *and* his loyalty, there was just some things he had to take care of as a member of the Eastern Pack...

"Did you see that thing out there?" Brad asked his mate.

"Well, yes, but—"

"It followed us from Faerie." No shit. "Beta's going after it. I got to help him. Can you do me a favor and watch Shea?"

Through his bond, he sent a plea: *Colt needs her safe the same way I need you away from that monster.*

Rose bit down on her bottom lip. She didn't say a word, though Brad was sure she got his message.

This was his fault. His dumb ass thought being honest with his mate meant telling her something that might hurt her. Before she even knew she was his—and while Brad *did*—he decided it was a good idea to admit that he loved Shea.

No wonder Rose wanted nothing to do with her. If a Dayborn was anywhere close to as jealous a Para as a shifter, he was lucky she'd been able to fake being pleasant at all.

And what did he do? Carry another female into the home he shared with his mate. It didn't matter that he did it because Colt ordered him to. He did it, and he only hoped Rose understood why.

Their mating was too new. He was already skating on thin ice. Rose might have forgiven him for keeping the fact that she was his mate from him, but to be woken up by a nightmare creature from Faerie and tasked with watching the female who had your husband's heart before you?

He'd fucked up a hundred times since meeting Rose. No matter what it took, he'd make it up to her—but, first, he had to help Colt before the Beta got himself killed by that green-skinned, freaky thing.

Brad wasn't the only one concerned with Colt's current state.

"I'll stay," Shea offered, her voice cracking. "If my stubborn mate won't let me heal him, then you have to be backup, Brad. You can't let him face that thing alone." She went limp, no longer fighting him. "He cut me off. Colton... he cut off our bond. I think he's more hurt than I thought."

Brad wanted to believe her. That she would stay in the house with Rose... he wanted to believe her. But then he thought about how he reacted when he watched Dreven throw an unconscious Rose into the rift. Nothing in heaven, earth, or the damn demon realms would've stopped him from going after her.

She already ran after Colt once. Given the chance, she abso-fucking-lutely would again.

But not if Rose didn't want to let her.

Finally setting Shea down on her heels, bracing the witch until he was sure she was steady, he peered over her head.

“Rose... princess. For me?”

His mate pursed her lips. The jealousy was there, zinging down their bond, but so was the pure love that he still couldn't believe she felt for him.

Her fingers tapped her chest, gesturing at her heart. Then, pursing her lips, Rose blew him a kiss. “Kick his ass, husband. Don't you worry about us. I got this.”

Brad fucked up more times than he could count—but if he got one thing right, it was claiming Rose the first chance she gave him. Their bond was new, but it was unbreakable, and if he died tonight at the hands of that monster, he'd go with a smile on his face because he'd known what it was like to be hers if only for a week.

But he was a greedy, greedy bastard, and there was no way in hell he was letting that fae creature take him out.

“Anything for you, princess,” he promised before disappearing through the door again, pausing only to slam it shut behind him.

Hopefully that would be enough to stop Shea—if Rose didn't already.

Then, tearing back off toward the Beta, Brad realized that must have missed something. Instead of waiting for Brad to return to help him, Colt had attacked the monster again.

Attacked—and, as Rose so eloquently put it, gotten his ass kicked.

CHAPTER 22

COMPULSION



He was on the ground again when Brad raced out to the street. The monster's club was little more than hunks of wood splintered all over the asphalt, but he had claws and fuck if he didn't use them. The air was filled with blood.

A lot of it.

Colt coughed, staggering to his feet again. He was clutching his side; his t-shirt was torn, blood turning the material dark, shimmering beneath the moonlight. One foot dragged as—even in his state—he took a few determined steps back toward the monster.

Broken ribs, Brad remembered. At least two, though it might be more now. His ankle was shot, too. Probably had it snapped while Brad was tucking Colt's mate safely with Rose, and while it would heal eventually with or without Shea's magic, they didn't have *eventually*.

"You've gotta back off, Colt," he called. "Leave it alone."

Colt shook his head. "Can't do that."

Stubborn. Why did the Beta have to be so damned stubborn?

"Then let me take over."

He could distract the monster, take a couple of licks from the fae creature, and give the battered, bloody wolf the chance to take him down.

At Brad's suggestion, white fur erupted along the length of Colt's bare arms. Showing off his fangs, his formerly pretty

boy face twisted, almost forming a muzzle as he glared at Brad. It was a partial shift, showing that Colt's wolf was almost entirely in control, and when he said, "Over my dead fucking body," Colt punctuated his statement with a wolfish snarl.

"Colt—"

"I don't know what that thing wants. Transport spells are too unpredictable to risk on my pregnant mate. I can't get Shea away from here, so that means I have to get rid of that fucker. Either he's dead or I am, but I'm not stopping until one of us doesn't have a pulse. It's my mate, Fenton. My *mate*. Wouldn't you do the same for yours?"

He was a shifter. Of course he would.

Okay. *Okay*. Ignoring the way his jaguar was throwing itself against his rib cage, Brad tried to figure out what to do next. The beast looked no worse for the wear while Colt was ready to drop.

And, yet, he wouldn't stop. Bred knew that. Why? Because he wouldn't, either.

Colt was right. Even if he trusted a transport spell with his mate and his pup, Shea was the only witch currently in Woodbridge with Luciana gone. When he served as backup to the Beta couple, Brad learned enough about Shea that her handle on actual witch magic was iffy at best. She could make a mean ward, and even Luciana admitted that there was no better individual healer than Shea Moonshadow, but the rest of her magic? It tended to come out twisted.

What if she tried to cast a transport spell and it didn't include the pup growing inside of her? No... *no*. Colt was right. It was way too fucking risky.

And what about Rose? If the creature somehow found a way to escape the pull of the portal, he could snap Brad's delicate mate like a damn toothpick if he got his hands on her. She didn't have a shifter's strength or a Nightwalker's viciousness.

No. All she had was—

Compulsion.

“Wait. Okay? Fucking wait a second. You don’t have to go over there.” You don’t have to kill yourself. “Just stop.”

Colt’s eyes flashed angrily. “Did you tell me what to do?”

This wasn’t the time for pissing contests and dominance games. What a fine fucking time to figure that out, but if they were both bonded males, both alpha shifters, both eager to keep their futures—their *forevers*—safe? What did it matter who was more dominant?

Purposely avoiding his furious stare so that Colt couldn’t take it as a challenge, Brad adopted as submissive a pose as his jaguar would allow. “No. But I have an idea. A way to finish that thing off and keep our mates from danger.”

Quickly, Brad explained what he was thinking. When Colt gave a jerky nod, his ruined face grimacing, he ran back to the house. For as long as he’d known of Colton Wolfe, he’d never seen the wolf shifter show any hint he was hurting. Even after he was tossed from a window after taking a bolt of dark magic straight to the chest, going into a coma for days, he shrugged it off once he was out of the hospital.

Now? He looked half-dead, and Brad needed to finish this night off before it finished the Beta instead.

Shea was right. He must’ve cut off their bond to keep her from experiencing his pain. By doing that, he stopped his shifter healing right in its tracks. A shifter’s catch-22, and Colt was too thick-headed enough to do anything about it.

Oh, no. All he wanted was to get rid of the unfamiliar threat on his territory.

He was thinking like a shifter. So was Brad. But this monster... maybe it couldn’t be beaten by two shifters.

Maybe it needed a Dayborn princess.

Bursting in through the door, he found Rose at the window. She was curled up on the living room sofa. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and steady. It was a dazed sleep,

and one glimpse at his mate's defiant expression told him she was responsible for it.

Alpha, how he loved this female.

She didn't ask about the monster. From her post at the window, Rose would've seen that it was still there, still roaring, still being a major pain in the ass. She would've also seen that Colt was even more injured than before.

Gesturing toward the witch, Rose asked, "Do you need Shea? I can bring her back around."

Brad held out his hand. His rosettes dotted his skin, a sign that his jaguar wasn't quite on board with his plan, but he refused to acknowledge them. Instead, he peered into Rose's crystalline gaze.

If his plan worked, she would save them all.

"No, princess. I need *you*."

I need you...

In that moment, as her mate explained just what he wanted her to do, Bradley could've asked her to be bait... to use her fangs on that creature... to sit down, wake the witch up, and braid her curly hair... he could've asked her to do anything and Rose wouldn't done it.

Because he was her mate. Her husband.

Her everything.

And he needed *her*.

Luckily, what Brad needed her to do was far simpler than that. Taking her by her hand, leading her back outside to where Colton Wolfe was half-limping, half-prowling a few feet from the edge of the right's glow, Brad brought her right in front of the beast from Faerie.

He couldn't reach her. Even with the length of his arms being nearly as tall as Rose herself, Brad was careful to keep

her far enough way that she was in no danger.

Of course, she couldn't say the same for the bellowing monster.

Rose tilted her head back.

The moment her pale gaze locked on the monster's yellow eyes, he immediately stilled. His roars died down, his head stopped thrashing. His hands fell to his sides, slapping into his naked bulk.

Phew. When Bradley looked at her with such absolute certainty that she could do this, she hadn't had the heart to tell him that while her abilities were impressive, so far she knew of two souls who were strong enough to withstand her power.

Brad she could understand. He was her fated mate, and even if he wasn't immune to her gaze, she never would charm her husband.

Queen Titania was the other, and though they believed they had left Faerie behind them, Rose worried about what that could mean. She proved that her powers worked on other fae; it was only their queen that she couldn't compel. She hoped Titania's immunity didn't extend to the oversized, tusked monster who had broken through from the other side of the veil, and she was pleased when it didn't.

The monster was putty in her hand. When she gave him the order to stay absolutely motionless no matter what happened, he froze like a statue.

That was exactly what her mate requested. Unable to fight back, between a wolf and a jaguar, the monster was as good as eliminated.

Swooping down, Brad wrapped her up in his arms. She wasn't so sure what it said about her husband that he was turned out watching her work her brand of magic on the beast, but when she felt his erection prod her in the back as he squeezed her tightly, she knew he was dying to get her back into bed.

But first, he and Colt had a creature to dispose of.

Another squeeze before he reluctantly let her go. Having Rose compel him to stand there as the shifters took him down was only the first stage of his plan. The second? Getting rid of the monster, one way or another.

He didn't seem to want to get rid of her, though. Unlike Colt, who let out a shaky exhale when Brad told him that Shea was safe and sound and sleeping like a baby, Brad not only trusted her to help him. He might have held her back at first, but now that she was with him again, he was hesitant to watch her walk away.

Good. Because Rose didn't want to go anywhere without him.

He could tell, too. Running his claws through her hair, he asked, "You want to stay, princess?"

Forever, she thought. And lucky Rose, forever was exactly what she would have with her blood-bonded husband.

She grinned as she leaned against her mate's broad chest. "Of course. I'm an old pro at watching executions."

Everything was going so well.

Because Brad wasn't so sure exactly what to expect when he and Colt went after the monster, he guided Rose a few feet away; out of the splash zone, basically. Everything he learned about her magic, it took direct eye contact to daze her target, though it didn't have to be prolonged. Once charmed, she could've walked away and the magic would've held until she decided to drop the spell.

He wanted her to see. The challenge with her traitorous cousin was over too fast. His jaguar wasn't satisfied that his mate saw enough of its prowess. So what if she already chose him? From mating—and claiming—him out in the woods of Faerie to making him her blood-bonded husband, Rose chose him and Brad was selfish enough to keep her, even knowing that he didn't deserve his proud princess.

His *queen*.

He didn't deserve her, but hell if he was going to let anyone take her away from him. Not the cousin who stole her once before, or the uncle who didn't realize what a threat his own blood was. Brad knew her people would need her, but whether she chose to sit on the Blood Throne or give permission to Rhaine to rule in her stead a little longer, for as long as she wanted to stay at his side, he would keep her there.

That included an empty street in an abandoned witch town, with the Beta of the Eastern Pack more than brutalized and the monster responsible for nearly killing the Alpha's younger brother.

Nearly...

Colt shifted first. With his human body as mangled as it was, he figured it would be easier to take the fae creature down as a wolf. Brad tried to ignore just how much of the Beta's white fur was matted, covered in red. Fresh blood was still pouring out of his many wounds, and his paws moved gingerly as he approached the frozen monster.

Brad knew better than to suggest that Colt sit this one out. Still running high on the adrenaline that the *thing* could have gotten to his mate, to his *pup*, Colt could've walked on four broken legs and still managed to drop his muzzle, bare his fangs, and leap on the creature.

His jaguar refused to be left out. Shifting on the spot, his destroyed clothes joining the tatters of Colt's bloody t-shirt and torn jeans on the asphalt, his jaguar chuffed, then went right for the monster's bare leg.

It lasted seconds. Under Rose's thrall, he would've felt nothing which Brad decided was a kindness. The monster didn't belong in this world, and though he never tried to go back through the rift to escape into Faerie, the damage he did to Colt made it so he was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

For a moment, Brad wondered if the unexpected creature *couldn't* go back through the rift. But when Colt started picking up big hunks of the fallen beast with his jaws, shaking

his head and tossing them into the rift, the portal accepted them easily.

In fact, with each piece the almost feral wolf got rid of, the brighter the rift glowed.

Following his lead, Brad instructed his jaguar to discard the rest of the monster. When all that was left were the remains of his club, some of the fur pelt he wore, and inky, black blood mixing with the red still spilling from Colt, Brad trotted back over to Rose.

He was filthy. The black blood stained his fur, and he smelled like he'd been rolling around a swamp, then hung a diseased fish around his neck for good measure. A shower was in desperate order before he could even think of caressing his mate again.

Rose, on the other paw, didn't seem to mind. Bending her knees slightly, she reached down, grabbing two handfuls of his jaguar's fur. She rubbed, stroking her fingers through it, showing his beast that she adored him on four legs as much as she did when he towered over her on two.

"I knew you could do it," Rose said, ruffling his fur. "My big strong jaguar. All mine."

Brad preened. He was a fucking disaster, but his mate call him hers. Hell yeah, he fucking preened. If he was standing in his male shape, his beautiful princess claiming him like this, he'd do the same exact thing.

Only... he didn't really get the chance. Because, at that very moment, two things happened in quick succession to do something he would've thought impossible a second ago: it distracted him from his mate's possessive touch.

The first thing? Colt collapsed. Like, four legs splayed, belly to the dirt *collapsed*. Worse, the Beta of the Eastern Pack—the second-most powerful shifter on the entire east coast—whimpered before his wolf's muzzle fell to the side, tongue lolling out of its mouth.

Rose gasped. Brad reared up, ready to go to his Beta when the second thing happened.

The air went heavy. As though a sudden thunderstorm was rolling through, the temperature dropped. Lightning flickered over their head, only it wasn't lightning. Lightning wasn't purple, and it didn't usually leave a dark, imposing figure silhouetted against the night's sky in its wake.

Brad moved in front of Rose, protecting her from the shadows over their head. Only when the wind started to rush, carrying the scent of baby powder on the wind, did he realize who it could be.

As the winged angel flapped closer—the source of the wind—the rift's glow was strong enough to light up the features on the male. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark clothes, and tanned skin... it was almost impossible to pick Azrael out from the shadows.

His mate, though? The light highlighted Luciana la Sorcière's pale skin, her ruby red hair, the trademark white streak in her mane, and those all-seeing, all-knowing purple eyes of hers. She was the source of the baby powder, and the last person he expected to see right now.

She was wrapped around her angel's strong body, head swiveled so that she could look down on the ground below. She said something, the wind swallowing up the words though Brad's shifter's hearing meant he at least heard the cadence of her command. A moment later, Az was touching down on the asphalt.

Luciana disentangled her body from his. After patting him on his chest, Az launched back into the sky. Her heels click-clacking against the asphalt, Luciana headed right for Brad and Rose.

His jaguar cocked its head, obviously puzzled.

"It was a trade," his mate murmured. "I let Shea contact another witch of her choosing, she let me put her under. I told her, for your sake... for that of her mate and her unborn child... I would wake her when it's over."

Oh, his clever, clever mate. Though Rose was used to snapping her fingers and getting her way back in Ryhill

Manor, it was even more amazing when she found a compromise.

Good thing, too, because it was far from fucking over.

Colt was barely breathing. Luciana had obviously traveled a far distance to reach them as fast as she had. A transport spell, Brad figured, since as fast as Az could fly, nothing could beat a diamond-powered transport spell.

She didn't seem too pleased to be summoned, either. With a royal shake of her head, sending her hair cascading down her back, she demanded, "Tell me everything."

Before his stay in Woodbridge, Brad was too low on the pack's hierarchy to have ever met Luciana. Since then, living in the same neighborhood, he'd gotten to know her pretty damn well.

And he knew that she had made a big display of giving control of Coventry—the billion-dollar witch enterprise—to her right hand witch, Robin, once she decided to settle down with her mate. Brad called bullshit from the moment he met her. She was too powerful to be content with a quiet retirement, and though Robin ran Coventry as the Chief Casting Officer, any Para in the know was well aware that Luciana was still head witch.

She didn't need to charm him, bespell him, or even give him a potion. To get what information she wanted from Brad, she just had to give the throaty command in a voice tinged with her slight French accent. With his next breath, he was back in his human form, breaking down the entire night for her.

Even Rose could sense the crackle of magic in the air. Though he could tell that his mate was less than pleased to have her male standing there stark-naked in front of another female, she hovered near his elbow and didn't say another word except to explain exactly what sort of compulsion she'd used on Shea.

The head witch didn't seem to mind that one of her covenmates was enthralled with Dayborn magic. Especially

when Brad told her in detail how much the creature battered Colt, and how he was still fucking bleeding.

Luciana took one look at Colt, her purple gaze flickering over to the house where She was still sleeping, then pursed her lips. Crooking one of her fingers, her nail shaped like a talon, she gestured for her mate to finally join her on the ground.

Azrael used to be Death; rather, an angel of death, but Brad knew that was the same thing. Before he settled down with Luciana in Woodbridge, it was his job to reap souls and ferry them up to the celestial cities. He might have handed in the flaming sword when his gig was over, but after spending weeks living near the former Fallen, Brad knew that Az still had a connection to death.

He nearly stopped breathing himself as Az stalked forward, folding his wings behind him as he approached Colt.

One glance. That's all it took. One glance, and he shook his head.

"He's not dead, Luce. Not yet. But he's been..." Az's dark features screwed up, as though he wasn't so sure what happened to Colt. And when he added, "Poisoned, I think," Brad had to agree.

"Poisoned?" he echoed. Shifter's couldn't be poisoned with anyone except for silver, and even then it would've had to have been ingested to do as much damage as it had. At least Brad understood the injuries consistent with the monster's strength and his impeccable aim with his club. But *poison*? "With what?"

"Something from the other side of the rift, I'd guess. It's definitely nothing I've seen before."

Az was one of the Fallen. He'd existed for millennia, and spent years as an angel of death. If he didn't know what they were dealing with, no one would.

"Can we do anything to help him?"

He thought that all Colt would need was some meat, a little rest, and time. His body would regenerate, his wolf would kickstart his healing, and he'd be good by morning.

But *poison*?

Luciana scoffed. “Colton belongs to a witch. His brother is an unstable alpha wolf and a powerful pack leader. I loathe the idea of telling either that we stood by and let the poison destroy him. Can we help him? We better hope so.”

EPILOGUE



Luciana's specialty was potions. Every witch had one, and that was hers.

Thank fucking Alpha, since, as she said before she click-clacked away from Colt's fallen wolf, "After all, what is a poison but a potion that is meant to harm?"

Brad wasn't so sure what that meant. He was a brute. Rose was the brains of their mating; he was the brawn. Give him something to fight and he'd ambush and hunt and attack if he had to. Like Colt, he'd wear himself down to the ground to satisfy his jaguar's prey drive. But to understand what was going on with Colt and help the Beta?

He was endlessly grateful that Shea thought to contact Luciana, and that Rose allowed it. Without the head witch and her ability to whip up a potion like that, Colt wouldn't have survived the night.

That was the good news.

The bad?

Colt was still unconscious. So was Shea. Once Luciana and Az stopped inside of their house so she could begin the potion, Brad carried Colt's broken body into the Beta couple's home. Then, because he was walking around with his dick out, he yanked on a pair of jeans, then lifted Shea's in his arms.

He made sure that Rose was okay with that. After everything that happened, it was as though her jealousy had simply disappeared. She even held the door open for Brad, and

when he eased the slumbering witch into the bed beside her mate, Rose tucked her in.

She took his hand. It was covered in dried blood—black from the monster, rusty brown from his Beta—and it looked savage next to her small pale one. Rose didn't care. She covered Brad's with both of hers, squeezing it tightly while sending a pulse of love down their bond.

"They'll be okay," she promised. Another squeeze. Another pulse. "This isn't your fault, husband."

He wasn't so sure of that.

It was ridiculous. Brad knew they couldn't be blamed for the creature finding his way through the rift. If it was anyone's fault, it was Priscilla Winters. Without her dark magic splitting a whole between worlds, creating a realm that opening up into Faerie, none of this would've happened. And Dreven... he was the one who threw his cousin inside of it.

As they waited for Luciana to come up with something that could combat the mysterious potion, he thought back to those lonely nights when he paced in front of the rift, watching the dark shadows come closer and closer. It happened every night at midnight, and considering how the first bellow from the beast didn't begin until midnight tonight, he was sure that meant something.

Could it be that, even if they never crossed into the Summer Realm, someone—*something*—from Faerie would've found its way through eventually? It was a thought, and it consumed him while they sat on the Beta couple's front porch.

It felt like hours that they sat there. In reality, the head witch cobbled together an antidote in less than twenty minutes. Between the four of them, they agreed that Shea should stay under Rose's compulsion until Colt was awake.

Only... he didn't wake up. Using his own abilities, Az assured his frustrated mate that her potion worked, that the poison was already nearly gone. She couldn't have done anything differently. Either he'd come out of it on his own or he wouldn't.

That was Death for you, Brad supposed. He'd seen enough of it that it didn't faze him.

Not Brad.

He hated not being able to do more. He felt like he owed Colt. In so many way, he owed him. If it wasn't for the Beta taking a chance on him, letting him be his backup, then giving him the chance to meet Rose... Colt had to be okay. Not the least because he couldn't even stand to think of waking Shea up and letting her know her mate—the father of her unborn pup—was gone, but because he deserved to see that pup be born.

He deserved everything, and only time would tell if he got it.

Whatever Luciana and Az were doing outside of Woodbridge, they decided to put it on hand while they waited to see if Colt would heal from the poison and the monster attack. Before they headed for their own home, Luciana asked Brad to tell her again about the fae creature. Just like with the poison, neither she or her mate had any idea what the green-skinned, bellowing monster could've been, though Az's dark eyes lit up with interest when he heard about the serrated tusks.

Could that have been the poison? With the monster's remains disposed of through the portal, there was no way to tell.

After Luciana and Az left them alone on the Beta couple's front stoop, Brad tucked his quiet mate under his arm. He still needed that shower, and then as many hours down as he thought he could stomach. On the heels of that night's disaster, mating was now the furthest thing from his mind.

Just then, all he wanted was to hold Rose close and cherish that he still had his mate with him.

As though she was thinking along the same lines as he was, Rose leaned into his chest. But before he could lead her out of Colt and Shea's house and back toward theirs, Rose ducked out of his embrace.

He watched her tiptoe back upstairs. Brad waited for about a minute, then followed right behind her. Not because he didn't trust Rose alone near the unconscious couple, but because he hated having her out of his sight for more than a few seconds.

When he found her, she had just finished laying Shea's olive-skinned hand right on top of Colt's bloody knuckles.

Brad frowned. The gesture was sweet, but ultimately useless.

"Bradley?" Rose kept her voice down. Again, it was useless, but thoughtful nonetheless. And to think he thought of her as spoiled and pampered even as his cock ached to bury itself deep inside of her. In so many ways, his mate was as perfect from the beginning as she was now... especially when her expression turned worrisome. "What's wrong?"

"It's just... Shea can't heal him without consciously calling the magic up." For the most part, Shea's hands took on a magenta glow when she was accessing her brand of healing magic. Brad was proof that she didn't always show outward signs she was using her powers. How often did she heal his self-inflicted injuries while he was unaware? More than he wanted to think about, and even more than he could ever thank her for. But she was out... "If she's charmed to sleep, it won't help."

Rose glanced up at home, hope filling her beautiful gaze. "Maybe. Maybe not. But if this was you and me, husband, I'd feel better holding your hand if nothing else."

A lump lodged in his throat. Then again, maybe that was his heart. So desperate for him to pluck it out of his damn chest and hand it to her, it almost seemed to find anyway to go where it truly belonged: with Rose Ryhill, queen of the Dayborns.

"Princess..."

He didn't have to finish his statement. Just the love poured into his nickname for her was enough.

She held out her hand.

Brad laid his palm against hers, closing his eyes in bliss when her slender fingers curved around his.

“Let’s go home,” Rose whispered. Not because the unconscious couple could hear her, but because her words were meant for Brad alone. “It’ll all look better in the morning.”

He’d hoped his clever mate was right. Though he slept fitfully, when he woke up with the sun the next morning, he’d hoped that the hours apart had been enough to bring Colt back around.

And maybe it was. Too bad Brad didn’t get to check right away.

He’d had his shower before falling into bed with Rose, holding her close the entire night. Her slender legs were tangled up in his when he finally gave up on sleeping. He had to work to disentangle them so that he could slip out of the bed without waking his precious mate.

Beneath the sun streaming in through their window, he could see the purple shadows beneath Rose’s lashes. His Dayborn princess enjoyed the sun, but she needed far more sleep than he did. Seeing no reason to disturb her, he figured he’d throw on some fresh clothes, check on Colt, and go from there.

It was a solid plan—until he stepped out onto his porch and found Luciana and Az standing across from the rift.

And they weren’t alone.

The instant Brad saw the white uniform standing out against the bronzed skin, he was thrown back to his time in Faerie. The pointy ears, hair the color of amber, and the long sword hanging off of his belt... he looked like nearly every one of the guards standing behind the Fae Queen’s throne.

It didn’t even occur to him to fall back, to think over what it was he should do next. Brad marched right over to the rift,

fangs lengthening, claws unsheathing, and rosettes blooming on his skin with every purposeful step.

“What’s going on here?” Glaring at the fae, Brad asked, “Who are you?”

Because *what* was unnecessary. Maybe the witch and her mate didn’t recognize what they were dealing with—and he only hoped they hadn’t let the fae use his glamour and his compulsion on them before he found them all standing there—but Brad definitely did.

On the plus side, the fae was standing in the dying glow from the rift, Luciana and Az a good ten feet away from him. Like the monster from last night, it seemed as if the fae could cross out Faerie but that was all he could do. Unless they were foolish enough to get too close, he couldn’t have touched them.

Didn’t mean that his presence there wasn’t a danger, or a threat. Especially since his long spindly fingers were laid along the hilt of his diamond-edged sword as he announced, “I am Leandor of the Seelie, favored guard of Queen Titania. I’ve come about the orc that was slain in your realm.” Green eyes shone out of his unnaturally handsome face. “On behalf of the Summer Court, we accept.”

Luciana’s attention had been drawn to the glittering sword hanging off of the fae’s belt. While Az was scowling at the fae’s beauty, and Brad was trying to remember if this was one he’d seen in Queen Titania’s room, she seemed captivated by the diamond.

Witches. When it came to diamonds, no matter how powerful a witch was, they just couldn’t help themselves, could they?

Wait—

“Orc?” Brad asked. Was that what the tusked monster was? An orc?

Ignoring him, Luciana erupted with her own question. “Accept? Quel? Accept what?”

Fair enough, thought Brad. That was a pretty good one. “Yeah? What do you think you’re accepting, pal?”

In one fluid motion, Leandor drew his blade. The early morning sun shone off the glittering edge as he lifted his chin—and his sword. “Your declaration of war, of course.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading [*Uptown Girl!*](#)

If you've read any of my other paranormal romance works, you'll know that I have a fascination with Faerie and the fae. I have three other series featuring the fae—**Touched by the Fae**, **Imprisoned by the Fae**, **Rejected by the Fae**—and I always wanted to bring that world into this one. With the rift revealing itself to be a portal into Faerie, I have!

Now, these universes are not connected. For example, in my fae series, the Summer Court is ruled by King Oberon, and I never featured orcs before now. Some of the rules are the same — because they're taken straight out of folklore — but if you enjoy fae, get ready for the next full-length book in the **Claws Clause** series: Here Kitty, Kitty featuring the fae guard, Leandor, and Sloane, the flirty lioness Brad ran into on the way to meet with Evangeline and Maddox at the beginning of this book.

That's not all. Coming next month, I'm releasing an expanded version of the **Claws Clause** novella, [*A Pack of Lies*](#). Telling the story of the male Cilla cursed into believing she was his mate and his real fated female, it was originally featured in an anthology. I've taken the story, added a little bit to it, and am re-releasing it as the next entry in the **Claws Clause** series, coming out on Valentine's Day.

Keep reading/scrolling/clicking to get a sneak peek of both of those titles and their covers!

xoxo,

Jessica

PRE-ORDER NOW

A PACK OF LIES



Shifters only get one mate. So why was Harper's convinced that he belonged to a witch?

I rage—

Erik Swift spent the last fifteen years cobbling together his wolf pack. Now, almost thirty-five, he decided it's time to find his mate. When a pack seer told him that she was on her way, he went searching for her.

He found Priscilla Winters instead.

Shifters know their mates at first sniff. With Cilla, she didn't affect him until their second meeting. In hindsight, he should've known better than to ignore his instincts...

After a year existing as her pet wolf—courtesy of a cruel spell—Erik is finally free. Furious that he was cursed, he is a raging wolf who can only be soothed by one female: the pretty wolf with the sunshine gaze he ruthlessly rejected.

I run—

The first time Harper Hunt met the Alpha of the Flat Top Pack, she knew she was looking at her forever. Shifters only get one mate, and she knew instinctively that he was hers.

But she wasn't his. And he made sure she knew that when he rejected her in front of his whole pack in favor of the statuesque beauty with the purple eyes and the coy smile.

Harper had no choice. Leaving him behind, she went back home and started a new life. Working alongside a sweet witch and her protective mate, Harper tried to forget all about Erik.

Until she discovered the truth about his witch mate, and had decide whether she wanted to give him a second chance—or spend forever alone...

**A Pack of Lies* is a rejected mates novella that tells the story of the Alpha who was Cilla's pawn, and the female shifter that was meant to be his. When Erik is free from Cilla's curse, he's willing to do anything to make Harper his—but he just might be too late.

** This title was previously published as part of the *Unwanted: Rejected Mates* anthology. It has been expanded and revised as its own novella.

[Releasing February 14, 2023](#)

PRE-ORDER NOW

HERE KITTY, KITTY



She almost gave up hope on finding her mate when it seemed impossible. But that's only because he's from a whole other world...

I build—

When a magic-fueled rift is revealed to be a portal to Faerie, a fantastical world full of fairy tale creatures, the local paranormal collective—made up of witches, shifters, and vampires—decide to take matters into their own hands. They decide to greet any of the Fae

Queen's possible emissaries with caution, willing to agree to a truce while keeping the humans from meddling in Para affairs.

That lasts just as long as it takes an orc to break through the portal instead, putting the whole world at risk, and injuring the Beta of the Eastern Pack.

With Colton out of commission, Sloane—the only other architect for Wolfe Construction—has to take over her boss's most recent project. It was for a home commissioned by the new queen of the Dayborns, and a mating present for a packmate.

So for the first time since she joined the Eastern Pack, she leaves pack land to visit Colt in Woodbridge—and immediately goes into heat when she catches scent of her mate...

I break—

Leandor is his queen's favored soldier. Where other advisors work to give her everything she wants, he's considered clean-up. He ties up any loose ends to keep his queen happy, and has done so for the last three centuries.

So when a prank by the Fae Queen's nephew goes awry, and his queen decides to cover it up as a declaration of war, it's Leandor who has to take a trip to the other side of the veil to see what his people are up against.

It was supposed to be just another mission—until he comes face to face with a lovely lioness and Leandor's instincts roar to life...

Seelie Leandor is one of the Fae Queen's most loyal guards. Sloane is a lioness shifter who is struggling to find her place in her new pack. Despite being from two different worlds, Fate has decided they were meant to be together—too bad Leandor's queen and Sloane's packmates have a thing or two to say about that.

**Here Kitty, Kitty* is the ninth book in the *Claws Clause* series. It's the introduction to a new realm, and introduces Faerie and fae—while also giving Sloane the mate she's been waiting for.

Releasing August 2023!

STAY IN TOUCH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica lives in New Jersey with her family, including enough pets to cement her status as the neighborhood's future Cat Lady. She is a full-time writer and an around-the-clock reader who loves all things fantastical and paranormal. After writing for fun for more than a decade, she finally decided to take some of the stories out of her head and put them out there for others who might also enjoy them! She loves Broadway musicals (especially *Newsies!*), supporting her beloved New York Mets, and collecting mugs, e-readers, and everything that comes in her favorite shade of light pink!

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