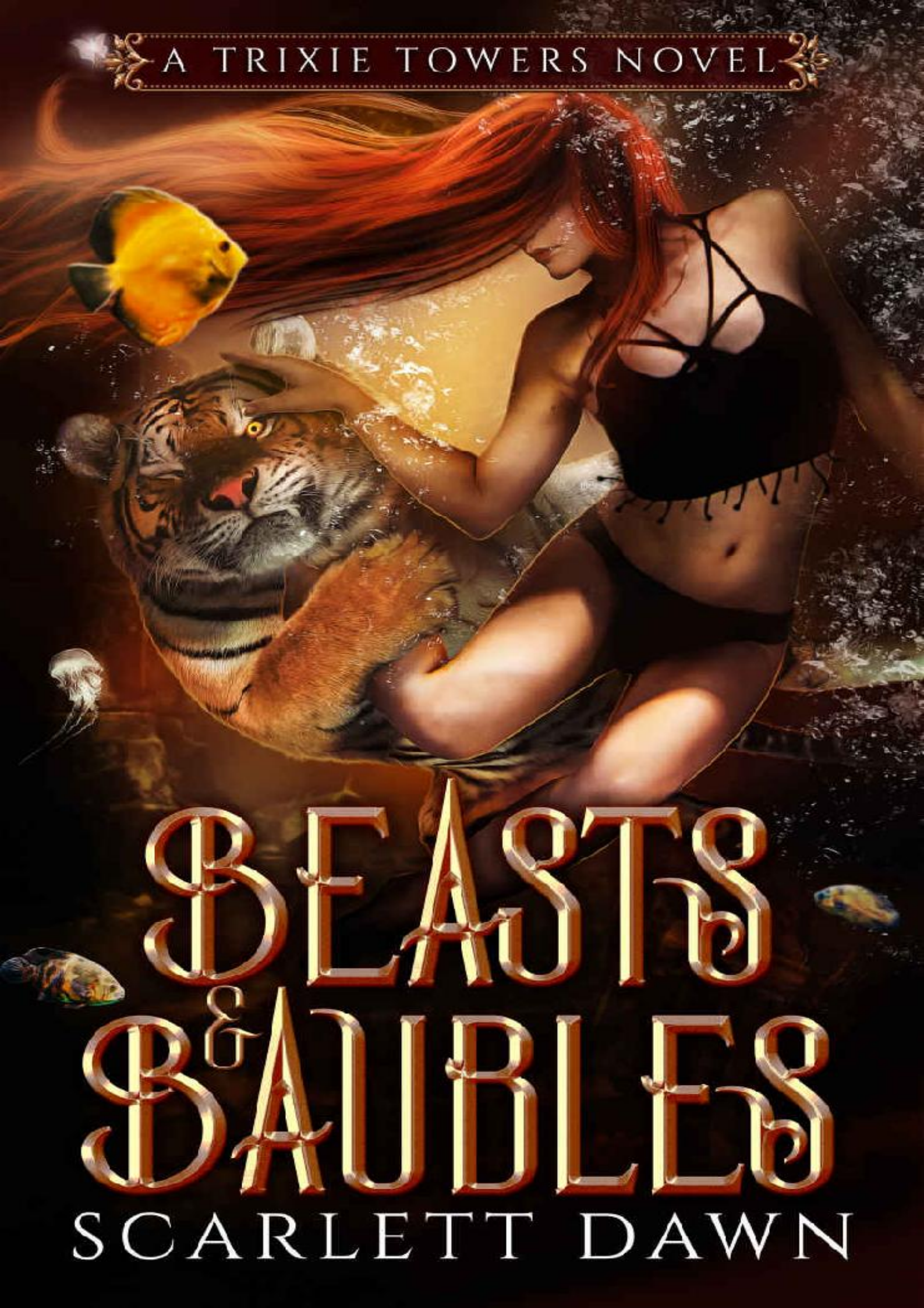


A TRIxie TOWERS NOVEL



BEASTS
&
BAUBLES

SCARLETT DAWN

BEASTS AND BAUBLES

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About the Author

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

SCALES AND SKELETONS

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PREFACE

*Seven tears, seven years.
Heave-ho, swelled fears.
Coaxing the abyss,
Not all is clear.
Where topside is down,
Hold tight to the crown.
Savage tides still hunt,
Round, round, round.*

I'm having feelings. For the King of Shifters.

How in the realm did that happen? He may be my soul mate, but he is still my enemy. Granted, he's a fine specimen of male flesh...but he's still my enemy.

With the five kingdoms in crisis and new visitors knocking on our door, the rulers and I are up to our Fae damned eyeballs in stress. And...did I mention the feelings already? It deserves repeating.

Our quest this time? The Merfolk Kingdom.

The stakes? Our lives. Our realm. Our people.

But, in the end, who is really playing whom?

My name is Trixie Towers. I'm the heir to the Elf Kingdom. My father is nosy and my soul mate is a beast. And I'm beginning to believe it should be that way.

Yes, I said that, Fae. King Athon is mine!

DEDICATION

To my grandmother,

You know that life was hell for a long time. I still miss you, but it's funny how things change as time passes. You never explained to me what it would be like losing the most important and kind person in your life, and I kinda just fumbled through. I gotta admit though, it would have been a saving grace to have you here the last few years.

But hey, I survived, right?

Love forever,

S.D.

P.S. Tell the Big Guy I finally got the message. Ask Him kindly to maybe give the blessing in a smaller package next time.

CHAPTER 1

Rage of a princess:

The day I always wondered about has arrived.

It waves its banner and shouts, "Come one, come all! It is the happiest day of your life! For I am here to make all your sweet dreams come true!"

But, nay...not for me.

Never for me.

This is my life. Part nightmare, part joke.

What a conundrum. What a mess.

From the bottom...and I mean the very, very bottom...of my cold, shriveled heart: Thanks, Fae. You're the best. We should discuss your love of me over tea sometime. I'll make sure

"yours has an extra dose of sugar.

"I've never been so broken. It's like the veil of night has descended and pulled me down into a stinking pile of shame." Caspian kicked at a pebble, sending the small rock skittering across the cobblestone street. "Nothing has been so humbling in my life, Trix. I don't know how this happened."

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and tried not to laugh. "I shall guess what has humbled you so." Then I tapped on my chin with a single finger, pretending to think hard. "Hmm. Performance issues?"

He whispered so quietly I almost didn't hear him. "Yes..."

A bubble of laughter burst free, unable to be suppressed any longer. I grabbed at my tender stomach and stopped walking so I could double over in my mirth.

“This is not funny!” Caspian’s deep blue eyes blazed down on me with enough heat and rage to rival the sun above us. “I had a bed full of women! And I couldn’t get it up!”

“Caspian...” I sputtered through my laughter and wiped a tear from my eye, ignoring the pain in my lower gut. “Did you eat those mushrooms again from the Caster Kingdom?”

Caspian froze in place with his hands raised in the air. “What... Oh...” His eyebrows pulled together so far that they were almost touching. “They brought treats with them. I wasn’t paying attention to what I ate beforehand. My mind was elsewhere.”

I snorted hard and stood up straight to rest my right hand on his shoulder. “There you go, my friend. The grand mystery of your manhood has been solved. You know how those mushrooms affect you.”

“Fucking Fae.” He breathed out a deep breath, and then his chest puffed out with vitality. “We will never speak of this again.”

“Of course not.” I lifted a red eyebrow, and a sly gleam entered my gaze. “If you will do me a favor.”

“No.”

I patted down my tattered clothing, making sure my disguise still hid my face well enough. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.” I pointed a finger straight at his nose. “It’s needed for our kingdom. It’s not up for debate.”

My cousin cursed under his breath. “What is it?”

I explained bluntly, “Watch our king. Make sure he doesn’t try to kill King Athon.”

His blink was slow. “Ah, fuck. What did you do this time?”

The glare I sent in his direction was fierce. “It wasn’t me. It was my blasted soul mate. I don’t know what he’s really doing, but he has caused issues. So I need you to spy for me.”

“On our king.” It wasn’t a question.

My order was absolute. “Yes.”

Caspian ran his fingers through his white hair, creating a more disheveled look. He stared off to the side, peering at the marketplace. “As you wish.”

I grunted and rubbed at my stomach, the ache there not lessening. Ever since I’d eaten the ovary of the flower last night, my stomach had been restless. I was hoping that wasn’t a bad omen.

“Come now. I want to get my purchase done, so I might lie down for a bit.” My stomach plagued me again...for perhaps the hundredth time today. “Mayhap, I need to use the facilities, too?”

Caspian snorted. “Don’t go into the bakery. That bathroom is horrendous.”

“Because of the baker.” I nodded in agreement.

That man was a filthy rat. Actually...rats were cleaner.

“That really doesn’t bode well for his goods, does it?”

“No, it does not.” I chuckled under my breath. “Do you want to tell him, or shall we leave it up to our king?”

My cousin’s snicker went well with mine. “It seems like a kingly issue to me.”

“Quite so.” I wagged my finger to the right, where the merchants from other kingdoms had set up their booths for the day. “That’s where we need to go.”

“What *are* we shopping for this time? And there, of all places. You know you should be spending your coin with our own people.”

I messed with my disguise again and mumbled softly, “A ring.”

Caspian was quiet for a long moment before he tripped over his own feet as we trekked down the grassy knoll, his groan long and heavy with understanding.

“Hush you.” My sigh was *profound*. “I understand how this looks. You don’t need to say anything.”

“He already has a bloody ring for that.”

“I know.” I cleared my throat. Then I spoke quickly to alleviate my embarrassment, “But-it’s-not-my-ring.”

My cousin cast a long look in my direction, his intelligent eyes not missing much. “Oh.”

A damnable blush stole across my cheeks, completing my utter humiliation on the matter.

He took his dark blue eyes off me and started rubbing his fingers deep into his forehead. “This is even worse than I thought.” *More* rubbing. “And believe me, what I was already thinking was bad before.”

There was no need to lie at this point. “Unfortunately, you are correct.”

Caspian dropped his hand from his forehead and hissed his accusation, “You *like* that beast.”

“Well...I wouldn’t go that far.” But my chest heaved with the acknowledgement of my detestable condition. This was a sad, sad day for the history of the Elf Kingdom. “Do I like what happens in the bedroom? Yes. But do I like the man? No. And still, am I possessive of him? Yes. And, most importantly, can he be trusted? Fuck no. It’s not an ideal circumstance any way you look at it.”

Understatement. *Death this way comes...*

“And yet, here we are. Buying a new caster-spelled ring for the bastard, so you may put your stamp all over his furry ass.”

I scratched at my chin. Then...I shrugged.

That was about the truth of it.

He moaned, “I don’t know if I can watch this.”

“Then go elsewhere. No one’s going to attack me here.” I shooed at him as we stopped at the edge of the booths. “I can handle myself.”

Caspian rolled his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere. Let us be done with this.”

Another weighty sigh escaped me, but I merely rubbed at my aching stomach before marching along to find the correct booth, enjoying the haggling and boisterous shouts of patrons and merchants alike. It was always a lively affair when the people of five kingdoms were in one place, just one step shy of catastrophe. The only reason they didn’t jump over that edge of complete civility was because of the narrow-eyed elf sentinels wearing red and keeping watch over the market, ready to detain the outsiders should this sectioned-off area become perilous to our people.

Weaving through the raucous crowd kept me and Caspian close, my cousin miraculously managing to keep anyone from touching me, and then, a caster jewelry booth came into view. I stopped and breathed for a long moment. I’d always wondered what this day would be like for me. To anyone else, it would have been full of elf joy and lovely dreams and sparkling rainbows.

And, somehow, this is what I’d ended up with.

Hidden in the shadows. Unable to tell my parents. My kingdom’s people in peril. Afraid for my life. When it should have been *so much more*.

Instead...I got this. This shit.

This was what happened when the Fae fucked up.

My burden. My curse. *My soul mate*.

I nibbled on my bottom lip. Because that conniving bastard was *mine*. I would burn this Fae fucking realm down to a black stain of cinder if anyone tried taking him away from me.

Oh. Wait. Wait...a moment.

I gulped down a heavy breath. That was deep.

My feelings would do well to step no further.

What I felt for him was quite enough already.

I needed to cage those emotions up...right along with my soul mate.

Now there was a thought! A nice sturdy cage for the tiger, if the bastard ever tried to pull a stunt like he had with the flower.

Another woman in bed with us. That shifter was out of his Fae fucking mind. Truly, how that asshole thought I'd agree to his asinine plan for an heir was beyond even the twinkling lights in a night sky.

Keep wishing on that star, motherfucker.

It. Was. Never. Happening.

Quite literally, since I'd taken control of the issue.

With one more pat on my stomach—happily, this time with that thought—I stepped forward to peruse the goods.

The caster merchant nodded in greeting. “Good day to you. What may I assist—”

“Shush, I'm looking,” I cut him off with a raised, stopping hand.

The caster jerked his head back and stared.

“Way to blend in, Trix,” Caspian whispered as he squeezed between me and another elf looking at the rings.

“You're here. I'm fine.” I hummed a little ditty as I searched for a ring that looked like the one my soul mate wore. Putting a ring on his finger was one thing. Arousing suspicion was a whole other battle I was not eager to accept.

Caspian shook his head and muttered under his breath, “I can't believe you're singing right now. Nothing about this is pleasing.”

“I'm thinking of building a cage.” I kept on humming.

My cousin's attention snapped down on my face. “What in the realm would you need a cage for?”

“For him,” I sang. “Should he ever act the fool again.”

Caspian's mouth opened and shut like a fish. He blinked more than a few times, clear shock radiating off him. "You know...I don't want to know what put that look in your eye."

I patted his chest twice. "It's all taken care of, dear cousin. He won't be trying that again." After a moment, I spied the perfect caster-spelled ring, snatching it off the table to examine closer. It was a simple golden band with no fanfare or flair, just like the band he now wore. "After all, two heads are better than one. That saying definitely holds true when his addled thoughts run amok."

He lifted an eyebrow. "So, a cage?"

"A very small one for a small brain." I waggled the ring at the caster, who was haggling with the other elf. "*Hello!* Hello, caster peasant! I'll take this one!"

Caspian cursed under his breath.

"What?" I glanced at him.

My cousin patted my head like a child. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Let us get you home. I have other duties to handle today."

I HEAVED into my bedchamber's toilet as the floor shook under my knees. There was no holding it in with this earthquake, not with the way my stomach was already aching. I groaned heavily once the shaking ceased and waved a hand above me, flushing the toilet.

I watched my sick disappear before stumbling to my feet to brush my teeth. My reflection showed a very pale elf staring back at me with white froth bubbling from her mouth as I brushed. It wasn't a good look for me. Might as well throw me into the royal stables and call it a day. I spat in the sink and wiped off my mouth, unable to look away from my reflection.

Fucking Fae, I really did look like shit.

I cast a nasty look at the mirror and then dragged my feet to my bed, flopping down onto it to hold onto my lower stomach. Curling into a ball sounded like a fine plan, so I did, yanking the covers over me in the process.

Something was not right. That much was obvious now.

But a whisper of cool air floated across my forehead.

My eyes shot open in a hurry. I blinked a few times at the apparition before me before I muttered, “Where in the Fairy have you been?”

Grandmother Isabella sat next to me on my bed and ran her transparent hand over my forehead again. “I’ve been busy.”

I glared. “I’m beginning to not believe that excuse anymore.”

My grandmother merely shrugged. “I wish to discuss what you’ve been up to.” She had her scolding face out in full force. “What was it you said today? Two heads are better than one?”

Sitting up took some effort, but I managed it. “You’re spying on me?”

“Of course.” She waved off my offended look. “Pay attention, my Trixie. Two heads are better than one.”

My nostrils flared in clear aggravation. “I’m in no mood for riddles. Speak plainly for once in your life. Or...your dead life.”

Grandmother Isabella just stared.

I huffed. “Fine. *Please.*” My face started to crumble. “I’m really not feeling very well.”

Her spectral face leaned closer, with her nose almost touching mine. “There were two books that were created together, my reckless granddaughter. *Two books.* Mayhap, they should have been read together, too?”

What? What was she...

Two books? Wait...

Oh, no. That... Oh...no.

As her full meaning started to take shape in my mind, the darkest dread began to filter through my veins. I brutally shivered where I sat and watched my grandmother with growing horror. A heavy breath didn't help my fear, either. Nothing would calm me down but for one answer.

I choked, "Tell me I didn't screw up our kingdom's salvation."

Her right palm rested against my cheek, chilling my skin where her hand laid. "If you don't fix this, not only will you have wrecked our future, you will also die soon." Grandmother Isabella shook her head softly. "Fae gifts are very specific to how they should be used, and you are missing a key element." Her thumb brushed back and forth over my cheekbone. "I don't want you to die, my dearheart. You must fix your mistake."

"Fucking Fae," I shouted and jerked away from her. I shoved out of bed and headed straight for my closet. "I knew something wasn't right!"

"And you would have done nothing out of stubbornness." She pointed a finger straight at me. "Get your shit together, young lady." Her scowl held steady on me. "And no cages!"

I snapped my mouth shut on my retort, seeing as she suddenly disappeared. But I still grumbled, "All right. All right. Mayhap, the cage idea was a bit much."

A soft snort floated on the air.

"Quit spying on me." I waved my hands at nothing in particular. "I'll get this mess cleaned up."

No response came, so I grabbed a bag from my closet, tossing the FLOWER OF FERTILITY book inside it, but I halted when her voice whispered a second later, right against my ear.

"You're protected now. Like he was when the gremlin came. The flower has done for you as the seed did for him. But remember, not all gifts from the Fae are what they seem. They do like their games. And trouble is coming."

I held still for a full minute, glancing at where she had to have been standing—except no other riddles of wisdom were given.

“Dammit, that was not what I wanted to hear.” I cracked my neck both ways and ignored the growing pain in my stomach; it was no longer a pinching but a steady throbbing instead.

My beast of a soul mate had better be willing to share.

Because I needed his book for this to work.

If he didn’t help...

Death this way comes had a whole new timeframe.

But I stared off to the side as another thought hit.

Fucking Fae, where did I put that ring?

Abruptly, Grandmother Isabella reappeared next to my writing desk, with a heavy dose of exasperation, and tapped it with a finger...then disappeared again.

I stared for a long moment and then stomped over to the desk and grabbed the ring off the top of it. “Spying soothsayer grandmothers aren’t so bad, I guess. This time.” I flicked a glance around my room and narrowed my eyes. “Remember that I said *this time!*”

CHAPTER 2

Troubles of a king:

My soul mate has once again gotten in over her head.

It shouldn't be a surprise by now, yet every time it happens, I have to stop and wonder what kind of fresh Fairy trouble I'm going to have to deal with this time.

Truly, there is nothing worse than a sheltered princess running amok with ideas of grandeur. Give her a few centuries, then maybe.

But now? Now it becomes my problem to fix.

My judgment: Thanks, Fae. You're fucking assholes. Come say hi next time you're in my kingdom. I'll let you leave in a casket.

I resituated my ass on my chair for the fifth time today and pulled at the crotch of my leather pants, giving my balls more room. “Is there anything else I need to sign, or will that be all?”

“That’s it for today.” Bishop closed his folder and eyed my person, his gaze traveling over my face from across my desk. “Are you going to tell me now why you’re acting like you have fire ants in your pants?”

My head thumped back on my chair as I released a long-suffering sigh. “Something is amiss.”

“Meaning?” Bishop lifted an eyebrow in question. “Did you eat spicy fare, and your asshole hurts?”

“No, dammit!” I damned near shouted and arched to lift my ass off my chair...only to sit it back down. *It didn't help.* Not one bit. “My fucking nuts are aching like a motherfucker.”

My best friend's expression was comical at best. Condescending at worst. “One would think at your age, you'd know how to relieve that issue, my king.” He crinkled his nose and grumbled in his deep voice, “And I can't believe I'm saying this, but why isn't your soul mate taking care of this?”

Oh, yes. As if that's a topic I want to discuss.

“Fuck off. I don't want to argue with you about her...and she's vexed with me, anyway.” I leaned forward, placed my elbows on the top of my desk, and rubbed at my face with harsh jerks. “I've gone longer without. This is different.”

Bishop's features scrunched until he let out a weighty sigh. “I'm almost afraid to ask...but what's different? Those are the crown jewels, and they are needed for the kingdom. Can't have them exploding or something.”

My eyes flew up to his, somewhat in dismay and shock. “*That* is exactly what it feels like they're going to do.” I shook my head quickly and *growled* at him. “How the Fairy did you know that?”

“I spoke in jest!” Bishop's eyes widened.

I *snarled* under my breath and shoved the writing pad I'd been studying before this meeting across the desk. “Well, this order isn't a jest. I want you to look into this Caspian more. *You*. Not someone you hire. Read over the information Malid gave me. There's an element we're missing. I want to know who he really is to Princess Trixie, and that requires your particular brand of investigation.”

Bishop placed the writing pad inside his folder, while casting me a sardonic look. “Is this about jealousy?”

“Not entirely.” I rubbed at my face again and resituated my ass once more on my chair. “He works for their crown, but they're too close. He treats her like...” I shook my head softly and stared over his shoulder, unable to articulate what was bothering me so about the elf. “I don't know. But I don't like

it. He's an unknown we should have identified a long time ago. Something's off there."

"Like your exploding balls?"

"Funny, real fucking funny." I *snarled* softly.

"I could have said—" Bishop's mouth shut quickly when a knocking sounded at the door—no one was supposed to disturb us. He turned in his chair to look at the door, muttering, "This can't be good."

My attention locked on the entrance when my office door opened, and one of my guards stepped inside the room, bowing low at the waist. "Your Royal Highness, please accept my apologies for disturbing you. Princess Trixie is here and requesting an audience with you. Her Highness says it is urgent and can't wait."

I slowly lifted my black eyebrows on my head in surprise—and dread. "It is fine. Please let her in." Bishop was right. This couldn't be good if she was knocking on my kingdom's front door during daylight instead of sneaking in at dark.

Princess Trixie walked into the room with her head held high and a satchel crossed over her finery, waiting to speak until the guard exited the room and closed the door. Her elven emerald eyes watched as Bishop and I both stood from our chairs, our confusion clear. Into the dead silence, it appeared an internal debate resounded in her head while she glanced back and forth between the two of us.

Again, something was awry. And not just the obvious.

"Princess Trixie, what are you doing here?" I asked quietly, moving around my desk slowly. Instinct kept my pace measured, as if she would startle easily. I pressed a hand to Bishop's chest, making him take a step back. "Did King Traevon send you on business?"

Done with whatever internal dilemma she was having with herself, her chest heaved worryingly. She jerked her cautious regard away from Bishop, her eyes catching mine as she slumped against the door behind her. My soul mate grabbed at

her lower stomach and slumped heavily to the floor, falling in a regal heap of finery and limbs.

Agony etched her petite features. “I need your help.”

“What the fuck?” I hissed in dismay and charged across the room to her side. I grabbed her hand and held it away from her body, using my other hand to examine her slumped form. “Elf, what is happening here? Who’s hurt you?”

The princess swallowed on a dry throat, with her tiny features pinched in pain. “No one hurt me. I made a small error.” Her emerald elf eyes lifted to mine in entreaty. “And I need your help. *Please.*”

Fucking Fae, she was begging. This was not good.

My forehead wrinkled in a fury, but I quickly scooped my dratted soul mate up into my arms. “What have you done?” I growled down at her as I marched us to my couch and sat on the soft cushions, keeping her safe on my lap. “If you’re here right now, it is not a *small* error you’ve made.”

Bishop grunted and plunked his ass down on the coffee table right in front of us. “More importantly, is there anyone coming after you?”

My soul mate threw a glare in his direction. “No. I’m not new to this, asshole. No one saw me.”

He probed forcefully, “I’m talking about Fae, Your Highness.”

“Oh.” She stared down her nose at him. “That, I don’t know.”

Bishop *snarled* softly.

“It is the truth. But I doubt any Fae are coming after me right now.” Then her lips thinned into a straight line, in obvious discomfort, and her gaze flew up to mine and rounded. “I almost forgot! I have a gift for you.”

I could only sit there, struck fucking dumb, as my illegal soul mate buried her hands inside her satchel. I stared at her face, though, seeing now that it was awfully pale, and

muttered, “A gift is not going to butter me up for whatever you have to say next, Princess.”

“*I can sure as Fairy try,*” she mumbled under her breath, barely loud enough to be heard, talking to herself as she searched in her bag. She continued to mumble curses until she—*finally*—found what she was looking for. In triumph, my soul mate held up a caster-spelled ring in the air. “This is for you.”

I stared at it in her small hand. I didn’t move.

I couldn’t. Air seemed to be in short supply.

She was gifting me...a caster-spelled ring.

Bishop snorted. “He already has one of those.”

“Shut up, Bishop,” I barked furiously, with my eyes flaying him in place. “Leave us for a moment.”

His mouth shut instantly, his shocked attention on me, reading me far too well. “Oh...fuck. Didn’t expect that.” My best friend jumped to his feet, and my arms tightened around my soul mate when she flinched at his movement. She may have the royal firepower, but she was still in pain right now, clearly frightened—and on edge. He stalked toward my balcony, mumbling, “I’ll just be over here not listening, Your Royal Highness.”

I *growled* softly at his back but quickly returned my attention to my soul mate, actual...*amazement*...filtering through my veins at this turn of events. I cleared my throat and flicked my gaze between her eyes and the ring, and asked gruffly, “You got that for me, elf?”

“Um, yes.” A bright blush bloomed across her pale cheeks, and her elven emerald eyes stayed locked on the ring in her grasp, not looking anywhere near my eyes. “It...um, well, mayhap, yes. I got it. For you. It looks just like the one you’re wearing, so no one will notice.”

“All right.” My lips twitched slightly at her stumbling words.

Not enough for her to notice, but this side of my soul mate was...*adorable*.

Yes, I could own up to that now.

I definitely thought she was adorable when she behaved like this. It was a vulnerability a royal should never show anyone. But she was allowing me to see her weakness right now.

It...

It was a part of her I would protect.

Then her eyes met mine, and her normal spirit flared to life again. She shoved the ring right in front of my face. Princess Trixie snarled darkly, "And you're going to wear it, shifter. I will hurt you, otherwise."

There she is. That was my bitch soul mate.

I lifted a black eyebrow. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you." I rested her tiny body back against the couch and moved out from underneath her, careful not to hurt her any more than she already was. Lifting the gifted ring from her hand, I swapped it with mine and watched silently as it molded perfectly to fit my finger, thanks to the caster's spell.

I cleared my throat...and then sent my old ring flying over the balcony with a hard toss, the golden ring soaring through the air never to be seen again. Then and there, I looked down at my soul mate again, rumbling quietly, "Thank you. I promise it will never leave my hand."

Princess Trixie peered down at her lap, mumbling bashfully, "You're welcome." Another blush rushed over her cheeks.

Yes, I would protect that to my dying breath.

And, I supposed, it was time I did this.

"I have something for you, too." I pushed up from the couch and walked toward the hidden access to my bedchamber, assuring her over my shoulder, "Bishop will stay right where he is until I'm back. Don't fret."

My soul mate chuckled—*evilly*. “I don’t fret. Not where your pet gorilla is concerned.”

I groaned under my breath and hurried my steps.

“What in the Fairy is your true problem with me, Your Highness?” Bishop whipped around and flared his nostrils. “Is it that I’m better with blades than you? Oh, that’s right. Remember that time when you almost died? Or is it that the Fae had to stretch your ears to hear even a smidgen of what I’m capable of? Because I can sure as fuck hear your little rabbit heart beating in fear right now.”

I sighed and stepped into the hidden access, running up the stairs so that they weren’t left alone too long. Bishop was my best friend, and I loved him, but my trust only went so far—with anyone.

And I knew what he was capable of.

I went straight to my closet and grabbed a box down from a top shelf. Tossing the top aside, I rifled through the contents until I found what I was searching for. Once I had it in hand, I dropped the box and raced back down the stairs.

The tiger inside *huffed* a relieved breath when there was no blood staining my personal office.

Bishop and Princess Trixie were glaring daggers at each other, but neither had moved from their locations. The elf was probably still seated because she looked as pale as parchment and Bishop’s position was obviously due to my order to stay put.

I relaxed back down on the couch and gently gripped the elf’s chin, and tilted her face away from him to me. *Much better*. That was how it should be—her attention on me.

I lifted the caster-spelled ring I had taken from the box, holding it up between us. My voice may have been quieter than I would have preferred, and with a bit of my tiger tingeing my tone, but there was nothing to do about that. It was emotion leaking from my person and couldn’t be changed, not with this. “This was my mother’s. I’d like for you to wear it.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bishop swiftly giving his back to us again, walking even further away.

While my soul mate went mute.

Completely silent, not even breathing as she stared at the caster-spelled ring in my hand, with her eyes as large as gems.

I licked over my bottom lip, stating roughly, “Elf?”

Princess Trixie jerked at the sound of my voice, and then her small hands lifted, shaking just slightly, as she took the caster-spelled ring from me. Her emerald elf eyes stared at the ring directly in front of her face, and she whispered, “This was your mother’s?”

“Yes,” I murmured briskly. “It’s yours now. If you’ll have it.”

Oddly enough, it felt like my heart was in my throat.

And it was official.

It was not a feeling I particularly enjoyed.

“Okay.” She removed her own caster-spelled ring and placed my mother’s ring on her finger, smiling softly as it formed to her smaller hand, not taking her eyes off it. “It’s different than mine. I’ll need to say I lost my other one.”

And it had a tiny red diamond in the center.

It would actually fit for the Elf Kingdom.

“That will work,” I stated distractedly, my pulse quieting now that she had accepted it. My hands may have clenched in relief, but I was ignoring that.

“And it’s warm.” My soul mate chuckled abruptly and lifted her gaze to mine, a bit of a doe in her eye once more. “I shouldn’t be surprised since you were holding it, though.”

A slow grin etched my features. I spoke roughly, quietly, teasing my soul mate, “Are you saying you don’t mind my heat?”

“*Oh, for the love of all that’s Fae.*” Bishop groaned under his breath.

Thankfully, my soul mate couldn't hear him.

Princess Trixie lifted a red eyebrow, and her own lips curved slightly. "We both know I don't."

I *hummed* softly and tucked a strand of her red hair behind her pointed ear, careful not to touch the tip, watching my work closely.

She and I gazed at one another, coming to terms with what we had just done willingly, our quiet gazes locked while I ran my fingers through her hair, petting her gently.

Until Bishop pivoted back around and clapped his hands loudly, walking back toward us to plop his damned ass back down on the coffee table. "All right, now that that's done, how about we find out what you've fucked up this time, Your Highness?"

My soul mate threw a nasty look in his direction but quickly handed him her old caster-spelled ring, as if he were no different than a trash bin, and started searching through her satchel again. She stated offhandedly, "First, I should say that if this situation isn't rectified, I'm going to die. My uterus has been killing me all day, and it's only getting worse."

I froze in place with my hand on the back of her head where I'd still been threading my fingers through her hair. "Would you mind repeating that?"

"I'm going to die. Soon." Her emerald eyes snagged on my black gaze. "Because of this." And she lifted a tome out of her satchel that...looked a lot like my damned SEED OF CREATION book.

"Oh, fuck." Bishop jumped up and started pacing the room.

I removed my hand from her head and pointed a finger at what she held, asking slowly, "And what is that you're holding, *my precious fucking soul mate?*"

"This is the FLOWER OF FERTILITY tome. Apparently, it is the SEED OF CREATION companion book. I didn't figure out until too late that they needed to be read together." She cleared her dry throat and her pale face lifted to mine,

facing me fully. “I’ve already eaten the ovary from the flower, just as you’ve eaten the seed. This has been set in motion. But we’re missing something. And I’m going to die because of it.” She paused. “Are you going to help me, *my treasured fucking soul mate?*”

Bishop cursed again, marching straight for my desk.

Slowly, I tipped my head back and stared at my ceiling while my royal bloodpower ripped through me, wanting out. I chuckled horribly, the rush of blood grating in my ears. “You really like fucking up my plans, don’t you?”

“Your *plan* was selfish as shit from the beginning. I found a better way to fix our problem, which you will see, so are you going to help me or not?”

I laughed again and shook my head, keeping my attention on the ceiling, barely keeping from tearing her inside out. “What other damnable option do I have but to help? You can’t die or I’m fucked worse than I already am.”

“I was hoping you’d see it my way.” She dropped her book on my lap. “Start reading. Tell me what I’ve missed.”

“Bishop!” I barked and lowered my head to stare at the book in my lap. “Give it to her.”

My best friend *growled* and tossed the SEED OF CREATION tome at the princess, having dug it out of the drawer in my desk. “I really don’t like your soul mate, Your Royal Highness.”

“Duly noted.” I opened the FLOWER OF FERTILITY book to its first page and rubbed at my eyes. “Elf, my balls have been hurting me since this morning. So I’m guessing you’re not the only one who’s going to die soon if we don’t figure this out, *so start reading, too.*”

Princess Trixie sniffed down her nose at me, but, smartly, she did open the SEED OF CREATION book and start reading immediately. “How badly do they hurt?”

I *sarled* right against her pointed ear.

She snickered loudly. “Sounds like a real bitch.”

I inhaled heavily. “I fucking hate you.”

“As I hate you.” My soul mate flipped a page. “Read faster.”

I *snarled* again but turned my attention to the words on the pages...

Two hours later, halfway through the book, I griped, “How the Fairy do you know we’re going to die? That is nowhere in here.”

Princess Trixie waved her left hand absently. “*Shh*. I’m trying to concentrate past your breathing.”

“I don’t breathe heavily.”

“I didn’t say you did. Now...*shh*.” She flipped another page. “Reading time is quiet time.”

I *growled*. “I hate you. So much.”

“Yes, yes. I know.”

Ten minutes after that, I stared at a passage on my current page and pointed at it, asking in shock, “Holy Fae. Did you read this part clearly?”

Bishop perked up from where he now stood on the balcony, watching the sky out of boredom. “Did you find the missing piece?”

I ignored him, still staring at the page.

My soul mate tilted in my direction and read the portion I was pointing at, bringing her scent of jasmine with her. “Of course, I did. Interesting, yes?”

“Cracked, more like,” I mumbled and turned another page, shaking off my stupor for the task at hand. My tiger *huffed* softly, even as I resituated my ass on the couch—*again*. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Princess Trixie patted my right knee, then returned to her reading, using her finger on certain lines to keep her place.

Bishop grumbled to himself out on the balcony.

Another hour later, Princess Trixie shouted in victory, “I think I’ve found it!” She pointed decisively at the page. “Look, shifter! It is a puzzle, but it’s obvious.”

There was no reason for me to look. I’d known the last step before she’d even walked into my personal office. That was my book she was reading, after all, one I had read *many* times. “Let us finish the books first, and then we’ll discuss it.”

Instantly, my soul mate’s shoulders stiffened next to me.

Within thirty seconds, she was cursing profusely.

Another minute later, the elf had calmed herself.

“You already knew.” She flashed her wee fangs in my direction. “I hate you. To Fairy and back.”

I chuckled quietly and flipped a page. “Yes, as we’ve said.”

She sighed and grumbled, “You could have just told me you wanted to read my book instead of playing stupid.”

“And where’s the fun in that?” I murmured distractedly. “Keep reading. You never know. We could be wrong.”

As the sun began to set on the horizon, Princess Trixie closed the SEED OF CREATION book. I’d finished before her but had patiently waited for her to finish, seeing as I had tricked her. She shook her head and dropped the book on the floor in front of the couch. “I wasn’t wrong.”

I gently placed the FLOWER OF FERTILITY book on the coffee table and turned to face her. I stated simply, “A kiss.”

My soul mate recited a part of the passage, “...*from a soul kiss shall the lovers break free...*”

I nodded and reached for her hand, pulling her closer. “Are you ready, elf? This will be one of our problems solved.”

“Wait, wait.” Bishop prowled in from the balcony. “That’s it? You two snogging each other is going to save both of our kingdoms? That seems too...easy.”

Princess Trixie snorted. “The King of Shifters and the heir to the Elf Kingdom kissing is not so easy. It is a death wish.”

I bent my head and ran my lips over her jaw, and bit down softly. “You answered his question, but not mine.” I nuzzled at her neck, deeply inhaling her unique scent. “I do not like that.”

“Don’t like being ignored, do you, shifter?” My soul mate grabbed onto the back of my hair and deliberately lifted my face from her neck, her emerald eyes staring right into my piercing gaze.

There was no hesitation there.

She whispered, “Kiss me.”

With pleasure. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to the only mouth I would ever touch again, knowing this would never get old or boring, her taste like anarchy on my tongue. This woman was fire and chaos and rebellion...and she was my soul mate.

Then...

Then the realm agreed with me as uncontrollable power detonated from our embrace. The most prevailing force I had ever felt before took my mind and body with it down into the depths of the deep dark with my soul mate protected in my arms.

CHAPTER 3

Declaration of a father:

Parents boast how they will go to the ends of the realm to save their children. For over a thousand years, I didn't doubt them.

I always knew they were serious.

But, it was only when I became a father myself that I fully understand the severity of their vow.

It lived and breathed within me. It became part of me.

It is a beast inside me, waiting to be unleashed.

You will get no warning.

I am the monster coming for you.

The brilliant sun began to set behind me, out through the windows of my study, painting the room in a shade of harsh red. It was fitting for my kingdom, a fire glowing in the coming darkness. The remaining sunlight sparkled in a dark blue eye staring directly at me, the other hidden behind his tousled white hair, as he took a seat in a chair across from my desk.

I leaned back on my chair and took a long pull from my shifter-made cigar, watching my best assassin as he waited for me to speak. I took my time and ashed my cigar, never taking my eyes from him, evaluating any nuances I could find.

In the end, he wasn't the best because he was careless.

He gave nothing away nor acted nervous in the silence.

“I want you to tell me something, Caspian,” I stated quietly and pulled another puff of flavored smoke into my mouth. I tasted the delicious burn against my tongue and let it slowly sift from my parted lips. “Have you noticed Princess Trixie behaving oddly?”

Caspian relaxed in his chair and placed a booted ankle on his other knee. “That’s hard to say. The princess is a constant handful.” He flicked a piece of his white hair off his forehead, showing both of his eyes now. “But, as of late, she’s been no more odd than normal.”

The man before me was loyal to my heir.

Probably even before his king.

I took another deep pull from my cigar and absently ashed it while keeping my attention on the assassin.

Years ago, this was what I’d planned for.

That didn’t mean it wasn’t a pain in my ass now.

Our past, present, and future was coming to a head.

Fairy, I hate that old, Fae witch.

I lifted a red brow and asked sardonically, “You did cover for her recently, as you remember. Are you doing it again?”

“No, Your Royal Highness. There’s nothing to cover.”

I think I’d call him... a liar.

A marvelous one, at that.

“Hmm.” I stubbed out my cigar and pressed the man for more. “Has she spoken about King Athon recently?”

Instantly, his dark brow furrowed. “Not at all. Why would she speak of the shifter king? Is he causing issues again?”

Liar. Liar. I’ll set your toes on fire.

I sat in silence. And merely stared at the assassin.

The white-haired man gazed back, unblinking.

Enough of this. Playtime was done.

I used my right hand to rub across my mouth and griped, “Give me *something*, Caspian. You’re wasting my time with this Fae bullshit.”

My best assassin opened his mouth and inhaled a great breath, and then he detailed clearly, “Trust in your heir, Your Royal Highness. Everything she does is for our kingdom. *Everything.*”

Finally, we’re getting somewhere.

“So, she is confiding in you,” I remarked slowly, somewhat surprised. I leaned back and kicked my feet up onto my desk, relaxing into the cushion. Treading carefully in this discussion was necessary. “I’ll ask again. Has she spoken of King Athon?”

Caspian answered coolly, “And I’ve already answered that question.”

One step forward, two steps back.

“All right, let me ask you this.” I steepled my hands in front of my mouth and tapped my lips with my fingers in thought. “Do you believe her inexperience and youth are playing a part in her actions?”

This question took a long moment.

The man before me was quiet in thought.

I patiently waited for him to respond.

Eventually, a substantial sigh exited his lips. “I don’t believe anyone would be handling her duties better.” He rubbed his lips together. “It is...complicated.”

I’m sure it is. Wasn’t everything?

I asked a question I already knew the answer to, testing his own conclusion. “Is she in danger from King Athon?”

He answered evenly, “It would be foolish for the King of Shifters to harm your heir.” It was a pointed statement. “And he is not a foolish man.”

“No, he is not.” I tapped my fingers on my mouth again and then pushed a little further. “If I ordered you to kill King

Athon, would you do it?"

A small smirk lifted his lips. "I already killed his father. Are you sure killing this king would be the correct course of action? He has no heir, after all. That would be crossing a line the royals have never tripped over."

The assassin wouldn't kill him if ordered. *Interesting.*

"Of course, you're right." I went quiet...waiting.

It didn't take long, his tongue now loose.

Caspian uncrossed his legs and leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees, asking bluntly, "What is your plan for him?"

There it was. Right there.

Instead of answering, I simply smiled.

"Your Royal Highness, I hope I've been able to ease any worries you have," he weaseled easily, backtracking quickly. "If you want me to watch him, I will. Whatever you need."

I lowered my feet to the ground and mimicked his position, leaning forward to face him squarely. "What I want from you is your honesty, your trust that I can handle any situation to the best of my ability. Are you even capable of giving that when your loyalties lie outside of your king?" I cocked my head gradually, with my eyes never leaving his. "What is really happening with Princess Trixie and King Athon? I'm ordering you, as your sovereign, to tell me the plain truth on this matter. If you have forgotten, you are duty-bound to answer me."

Caspian's nostrils flared at the direct order.

My gaze didn't flinch as I waited to be obeyed.

The assassin stood from his seat and started pacing back and forth before my desk. He began rubbing at the back of his neck with harsh fingers as he mumbled, "Your Royal Highness..." His chest rose and fell, and he froze in place. He turned and faced me, standing at attention. "Princess Trixie is protecting the crown. *You.* I choose to do the same."

Fucking Fae. It was worse than I thought.

I waved a sharp hand and barked furiously, “Get the Fairy out of my study, Caspian. *Now*. Before I throw your ass into my dungeon.”

Briskly, Caspian bowed low and turned to leave.

Silently, I fumed and glowered at the back of his head.

My best assassin...was no longer mine.

And my heir was trying to protect *me*.

Fairy, did she not listen to anything I'd taught her?

Either way, this Fae shit stopped now.

But Caspian came to a dead stop three feet from the door.

A vibration started humming in the air, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up, curiously, the feeling almost tangible. It flittered across my skin like a lover's touch, examining and probing, caressing my skin.

His head turned in my direction, and his dark blue eyes widened slowly. He sucked in a harsh breath and choked, “Do you feel that?”

I stood swiftly from my chair and turned slowly to the window, staring out into the setting sun. “What the Fae fuck is that?”

Suddenly, the soft touch speared through my Fae-spark, knocking me back against my desk. It wasn't harmful. *No*. It was invading and warm...all-encompassing.

Except Caspian bellowed in agony behind me.

I turned and pulled my blades into my hands, watching as the best elf assassin slumped to the ground in a dead faint. *Screams* echoed through the castle as I rushed to his side. I put one blade away and shook his shoulder brutally, barking, “Caspian!”

His eyes didn't open.

But he was still breathing.

“What the Fairy is happening!” I shouted and threw open my study door.

I stared in horror as I stalked through the hallways, elves littering the ground everywhere, out cold to the realm. Only a few were still awake and coherent, with their eyes wide in fear as they checked on the other servants.

I opened my mouth and bellowed at the top of my lungs, “*Minnie! Where are you?*”

My soul mate’s head popped up over the banister in the main hall, her tumble of seafoam green hair flying through the air with the flip of her head. Her bright, golden eyes held mine in fury as she picked up one of the servant’s unconscious children from the ground. “King Traevon, now is not the time to fret over me. I am perfectly well.” She held the child closer to her chest protectively. “But, it appears you have some work to do.”

The royal firepower in my eyes flared at the sleeping child she held. “It does seem so. What did it feel like to you?”

“Truthfully?” She lifted one green brow. “It felt like your touch.”

I nodded and spun around, marching straight for the front door. “As it felt like yours.” I flung a look back at my soul mate before opening the door, spitting wrathfully, “And it smells like our Fae fucking daughter and enemy.”

Minnie sniffed at the air delicately. “I...don’t smell anything.”

I grunted hard. “My love, it may not have an actual stench, but this entire event reeks of their current subterfuge. I’ll be back once I find our willful daughter.”

As I stormed out of my castle, the rounded front door slammed behind me.

SNEAKING through my enemy’s castle should have been difficult. I knew this, as I had done it before many times. This time? This time it was no more than child’s play...since most

of the servants and guards were lying unconscious throughout the shifter royal grounds.

None were dead. They merely slept peacefully, not rousing even when another shifter would pick them up and carry them into a different room. I kept my hood low as I curved around a banister and quickly raced up the stone stairs.

With my heir nowhere on my own royal estate, there had only been one logical conclusion of where to look. In the end, Penelope munching on grass at King Athon's front door had also been a dead giveaway. My heir hadn't even tried to hide the fact that she was here.

I rounded the last corner to my destination and let loose my royal firepower, instantly slaying the two elite sentinels guarding King Athon's personal office. I waved a hand through the smoke, threw open the door, and charged inside.

My feet stopped directly inside the doorway.

I sucked in a harsh breath and quickly shut the door behind me, my narrowed gaze taking in the massive problem before me.

This... *Fuck.*

A groan emitted from the gorilla shifter lying directly in front of me on the floor, but I merely stepped over his waking body and focused on what needed to be done here.

I stared at my heir lying passed out on our enemy's couch—inside a kingdom where she shouldn't be alone. The King of Shifters was sprawled over her body, just as unconscious as my precious child, with a book dropped on the floor beside them and another tome on the coffee table. Fury built like an inferno rising inside my soul until heat waves lashed in pulsating flashes across the room.

My attention snapped to the gorilla shifter. I watched the man as he held his head and stood to his feet, swaying woozily.

I growled low and dangerously, "What in the Fae fuck is going on here, Bishop?"

He stumbled to the side and caught himself on the edge of the couch, fairly green in color as if he would vomit. “W-What?”

I snapped my fingers in front of his face. “Bishop! Focus!”

“Um...” His solid honey-brown eyes lifted to mine, stark confusion crossing his features. “King Traevon?”

“Yes, it is I, you fucking lout!” I snarled. “What is going on here?”

“That...uh.” The large shifter shook his head hard, and then he glanced down at his king where he lay prone. He blinked once. Twice. Then the gorilla shifter mumbled, “Slumber party?”

A silence made just for the idiotic filled the space after that had spewed from his mouth. And I was damned positive the Fae were having a nice laugh at my expense.

“Beloved Fae above and below! I cannot deal with any more bullshit today!” I shouted furiously into the night air rushing in through King Athon’s balcony. I jammed a pointed finger at my heir. “You see this? *I am not happy! This. Shit. Stops. Now.*”

Bishop blinked and wobbled on his feet, but he chuckled like he was a drunkard, mumbling, “I wish you the best of luck with that, Your Royal Highness.” The bastard even saluted me with two fingers while he swayed side-to-side.

My fangs bared at the shifter. “If I hadn’t promised your mother that I’d never kill you...” I leaned forward, directly into his space. “Your gorilla ass would be nothing but ash, just like your guards outside that door.”

His dark eyebrows puckered in confusion, clarity beginning to simmer in his shifter eyes. “When did you meet my mother, Your Royal Highness?”

“Fuck off.” I waved a dismissive hand at him, done with that eventful memory. My emerald eyes scanned over my child once more, but my attention stalled on the book lying on the floor next to them and the similar tome on the coffee table—as if they had been reading.

Silently, I tilted my head and read the spines.

My blink was slow, and my brows rose as I moved around the couch, eyeing the literature on the ground that was definitely Fae by the writing style.

Bishop miraculously came to full, coherent life and lunged at the book at the same time I did, both of us grabbing the soft leather binding simultaneously.

Together, we watched in shock as it instantly turned to white sand under our palms, the tiny granules sifting down between our fingers and scattering onto the rock floor between us. Sluggishly, our heads turned to the remaining book on the coffee table.

Bishop grabbed for it just as I shouted, “*No!*”

As before, the tome turned to white sand with a touch.

I groaned under my breath and rubbed at my forehead, muttering harshly, “Fucking imbecile.”

The gorilla shifter merely smirked. “Oops.”

My teeth ground together as I stared at the shifter, trying not to fry him from the balls up. *I will not break my vow.* I reminded myself of this for the millionth time about this shifter.

I demanded between my clenched teeth, “Move your king off my heir. *Now.* Or I will do it my way.”

Bishop snarled at me, but he did as ordered, maneuvering King Athon so that he could lift his king into his arms.

Swiftly, I lifted my child, holding her close to my chest inside my shielding arms. With both of us carrying valuable cargo in our hands, I marched straight to the door, yanking her satchel up at the same time with two fingers. Glancing over my shoulder, I barked harshly, “When King Athon awakes, tell him I expect him at my castle tomorrow for dinner. It’s not a damned request, either. Make it happen.”

CHAPTER 4

Frustration of a princess:

Parents are a pain in my elven ass.

They tell me to do one thing but mean another.

So when I do what they say, like protect our Fae damned kingdom, it becomes a problem.

I love my parents. I do.

But can they just trust me for once?

The most bizarre sound roused me from my slumber. It *squished* and *crunched* near my head. My red brows furrowed as I gradually opened my eyes and pulled my comforter down from over my face. I squinted into the evening light filtering in through the large windows and stared at the woman sitting on my bed next to me.

“Mother?” I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, drowsiness slowly filtering away. “What in the realm are you doing in my castle?”

With her back resting against my cracked headboard, my mother snorted softly under her breath. Her golden eyes didn’t leave mine as she used a sharp dagger to slice a sliver of a blue apple and plop it into her mouth. Then she chewed. *Loudly*. Very unlike her normal, perfect manners.

“Uh, what is happening here?” I mumbled in confusion.

“That, my daughter, is a fabulous question, indeed.” Her dagger flashed in the dying light, and her deft movements cut off another slice. Again, she chewed. *Loudly*. “You have been unconscious for almost twenty-four hours. Enough time for chaos to reign in the realm and every blasted person to wake before you.”

I narrowed my eyes in bewilderment...until my previous actions started to flood into my sleepy thoughts. The Shifter Kingdom. Two books. And a kiss that had a Fairy of a Fae punch behind it. I stared at my mother and swiftly closed my mouth, lest I spoke imprudently.

She snorted again while she twirled her dagger between her fingers—shockingly far better than I could. “Would you care to explain to me what happened? Why the majority of the realm suddenly shouted out in pain and fainted? Or even why you were in the Shifter Kingdom?”

Intelligently, I kept my mouth closed while processing that tidbit of information. What King Athon and I had done hadn’t affected only us. It had, apparently, smashed through the realm with its residual power.

A seed. And a flower.

Their sizes were a disguise.

Those small gifts did bring large, unexpected surprises.

My mother lifted a green eyebrow at my continued silence but swiftly jumped from my bed and tossed another blue apple next to me. “Your king wants to see you before dinner. And you *will* be eating dinner with us, so dress appropriately.” She softly sniggered as she strolled toward my bedchamber’s door. “King Traevon will have questions, especially since he’s the one who found you in the Shifter Kingdom. You should really think about what you want to say before you meet. Your silence will not work with him. Not with the mood he’s in.”

With one last pointed look at me, my bedchamber door clicked quietly behind her as she left.

I tossed my blanket over my head and groaned *hard*. “Fae, help me. This is dreadful.”

Amused, soft laughter echoed inside my room.

My shoulders instantly stiffened...

“Fae dammit, Grandmother!” I shouted under my covers.
“We talked about this! Quit spying on me.”

Grandmother Isabella’s laughter slowly faded away.

“Bloody family,” I cursed and yanked my comforter down. I glared around my empty room. “What am I supposed to tell my king?”

But no answer came. Not even when I waited five minutes. Only birds chirping sporadically outside my sliding windows could be heard.

I sighed and shoved my way out of my bed.

It was time to face the King of Elves.

This...would not be good.

“KING TRAEVON.” I nodded to him regally inside his study and ran my hands down the modest, red satin frock I had chosen to wear, its stitching inlaid with emeralds that matched the color of our eyes. “You asked to see me?”

My king and Uncle Marlon stared at me from behind the king’s desk. King Traevon was sitting on his chair while my uncle stood behind his right shoulder. Neither man appeared ready to open their arms and hug me, their expressions quietly watchful.

“Take a seat, Trixie,” King Traevon ordered softly.

It wasn’t his happy voice.

And it didn’t pass my notice that we were having this conversation at his desk, rather than the sofa and chairs opposite for a more intimate conversation.

I sat down on the blue chair, crossed my ankles, and tucked my feet back and to the side with my hands properly on

my lap. Mother had said my silence wouldn't work right now, but I would not be the first to begin this conversation. I wanted to see what he started with. It would determine how this meeting went.

King Traevon lifted one red eyebrow and asked, oh so slowly, "What in the Fae fuck have you gotten yourself into?"

Ah. This would be a grand conversation.

I had *not* expected him to be so blunt.

I opened my mouth to answer but quickly snapped it shut. My throat was dry, so I cleared it quietly. Then I nibbled on my bottom lip, unsure of what to say.

When my eyes met his again, I could only answer, "I can't say."

Instantly, he snapped, "Can't or won't?"

My nose crinkled with the truth. "Won't."

My king jerked forward and slammed his hand down onto his desk, seething where he sat. "Have you not learned anything from me? *We work together, Trixie*. I do *not* need your protection. Not from this kingdom. Not from this realm. And not from the Fae." He slammed his hand on the desk once more. "I need you to tell me exactly what kind of trouble you're in."

I scowled. "Why do you think I'm in trouble? Have I expressed that I need your help with something?" I shook my head quickly. "I'm handling the issue the best I can, and I'm doing Fae damned well with it."

King Traevon shouted furiously, "The fucking realm felt just how well you're doing with it. Your dealing knocked the majority of it out cold." His emerald eyes comically widened as he spouted, "Does that seem *safe* to you? With murderous Fae popping up everywhere? Mayhap, you need to reevaluate what you—*and only you*—perceive as *doing well*."

I ground my teeth together and glared over his shoulder—where my uncle was not standing like a silent sentinel. "While

what happened was unfortunate, what you're saying is not fair. I didn't know that would happen."

My king sat back on his chair hard and growled, "So it was you."

Fucking Fae. My mouth stayed shut.

King Traevon rubbed at his forehead and bluntly asked, "Why are you aligning yourself with the Shifter King instead of with me?"

I lowered my head and sighed heavily. My next words were quiet and honest. "Because I had no choice."

My king jerked up straight, softly demanding, "*What?*"

And...that was his killer voice.

I sighed once more and didn't bother looking up at him. "King Athon didn't have a choice, either. It just is. And we are working as well as we can together on the issue at hand, even with all the other royal duties you know about."

King Traevon stared at my bowed head. I could feel his penetrating evaluation of me, like the weight of the kingdom bore down on my shoulders, while his royal firepower fairly simmered in the air. It wasn't pointed at anything in particular. It simply hovered with his raging thoughts.

Eventually, he stated quietly, "You do have a choice, Trixie. And by your own volition, you've stated you will not tell me what is happening. I cannot help if you don't speak. If you leave me in the dark on any major issue regarding this realm, you are not only hurting yourself, but you are also putting my very existence in danger. *Our kingdom.*"

My nostrils flared as I looked up at him. With fire running in my veins, I detailed slowly, "I am doing the right thing. I am *keeping you safe*. I am doing *everything I can for this kingdom*. You need to listen to me when I say that."

"With me, you could do more," King Traevon stated just as slowly. "As I've said, I do not need your protection."

I glared hard at him. "Perhaps I am protecting someone from *you*."

My king went still. But his emerald eyes were sharp.

Fae dammit all!

Fuck him and the Fae-gifted pegasus he flew in on.

I'd said too much. My king: The Master Manipulator.

Into the silence, I inhaled heavily and turned my face away. "I think we are done here, Your Royal Highness."

His attention didn't leave my profile as he distractedly murmured, "Yes. Yes, I think we are. Quite so."

Uncle Marlon deigned to gift us with his voice then. He cleared his throat and stated loudly, "I imagine King Athon will be here soon for dinner, too. This meeting is done."

My head snapped around to my uncle. "*What?*"

Uncle Marlon's lips twitched. "You'll have to excuse me, Trixie. Between the two of you playing your games, I couldn't seem to find the appropriate time to interrupt and warn you."

I could only blink at the smartass.

"Close your mouth, my daughter," Father muttered and rubbed his forehead. "You'll catch flies."

I closed my hanging mouth. It looked like my father was back in that chair now. I sent a scathing glare at him. "Why didn't you tell me King Athon was coming here?"

"Well..." My father sat back on his chair and stared at the ceiling, his emerald gaze unmoving on the wooden slats above. He was quiet for so long that I truly did not believe he would answer. But eventually, he mumbled damned near silently, "I thought I was having him over for one thing. But now it's for another."

I quirked an eyebrow. "That...did not answer my question at all."

Father shrugged, shoved out of his chair, and walked around his desk. His movements were stiff and instinctive. He extended his right elbow toward me but still peered off at nothing, his mind fully occupied. "Allow me to escort you to the dining room?"

“Of course.” I peeked at my uncle, who was studying his brother, too, but I stood and looped my arm with my father’s. “I cannot say that I’m thrilled about this, Father.”

He chuckled like he wanted blood for dinner. “That, my daughter, we can completely agree on.”

My eyes found my uncle again. “Will you be dining with us, Uncle Marlon?”

Please say yes.

“I will not.” He rolled his shoulders and walked swiftly for the door. Busy patting at his long silver braids, he added, “I have other plans this eve. A blonde evening. But do have fun.”

And my evil uncle winked a violet eye at me over his shoulder before he disappeared out through the doorway.

I snorted softly. *Fun* wasn’t the right word for this.

CHAPTER 5

Confession of a princess:

In my heart of hearts, I will admit that having my mother, my father, and my soul mate sit at the same table for dinner has always been a dream of mine.

This...

This is not what I've dreamed about.

Father and I stepped into the grand foyer, with our arms still linked to greet our “guests,” while Mother walked down the staircase in her finery and watched over the proceedings with an intrigued mien.

King Traevon dipped his head respectfully. “King Athon, thank you for coming this evening.”

My soul mate arched a black brow but bowed his head as well, stating, “With such a warm invitation, it couldn’t be ignored, King Traevon.”

Standing slightly behind him, Bishop snorted under his breath—with a sour expression on his face.

Between the two of them, the gorilla shifter was looking a bit...rough. Admittedly, it would have been hard for him to arrive here on time since he wasn’t a royal with a Fae-gift to fly. Dust streaked his pants and boots, and a little was even on his right cheek. The slight stench emanating from him wasn’t pleasant, either, as if he had slept with pigs.

“I’m pleased you see it that way,” King Traevon remarked, ignoring the surly guard. Then he tacked on a bit of snark. “I

trust your travels were well met?”

King Athon’s lips twitched. “It was a wonderful flight. Thank you for asking.” His solid black shifter eyes turned in my direction. He lowered his head dutifully while scanning my person ever so subtly. “Princess Trixie.”

“Your Royal Highness.” I released my father to perform the perfect curtsy, keeping my nose low to the ground.

My soul mate touched my head gently and rumbled softly, “You may rise.”

I did so and watched as my mother welcomed him properly.

My king smiled then, his fangs flashing as he stated, “Let us eat and be merry. Our cooks have been working all day. I had them prepare that mutton pie you like so well...with a pinch of cinnamon.”

At the reminder of my soul mate’s previous lover, I had to work hard to contain my glower while I privately burned inside.

Thank you, Father. That was just what this evening needed.

The King of Shifters rubbed at his bare chest underneath the flowing, open white cloak he wore, his clothing matching his long white hair perfectly. He showed all of his teeth as he smiled. “That was so very kind of you. How fortunate for us that you have a perfect memory.”

Mother and Father led the way to the dining hall. My soul mate walked beside them, and my gaze wandered down his back. His choice of additional clothing had to be due to the chill in the air tonight. The damnable cloak flowed all the way to the ground, covering his beautiful ass that was clad in soft, white leather.

Bishop nudged me with his elbow, muttering too quietly for anyone else to hear, “Do *not* stare at his body like that, Your Highness.”

My attention instantly snapped away from where I had been ogling my soul mate’s large shoulders. Perchance...that

was why he wore more clothing.

Wise plan. Quite so.

I fanned my face with my hand. *Was it hot in here?*

Bishop muttered a quiet curse. “This is going to be a disaster.”

“Hush, you,” I whispered.

Then I held my head up high as we entered the dining hall.

Bishop stayed back against the wall, playing the guard.

And the four of us took our seats.

Do not ogle my soul mate. Do not look at his bloody marvelous, muscular body. Do not drool.

Fae, he smelled delicious tonight.

I fanned my face again and took a large drink of wine from the glass in front of me. “Will we be having dessert this eve... along with that legendary mutton pie, Father?” I even said it with a smile.

“We’re having syllabub for dessert, my daughter.” King Traevon waved his right hand in the air.

That was the signal for the servants.

I stared in dismay at the perfectly prepared mutton pie placed directly in front of me. Fierce annoyance flared within, so I lifted my knife and sliced down into my fare—with possibly a bit more relish than was acceptable.

Fairy, that felt good.

King Athon choked on his wine and quickly covered his mouth with his red napery.

I peeked up at him, stating demurely, “It’s to cool the inside, Your Royal Highness.”

“Yes, of course.” I was sure the bastard was hiding a smile behind his napery, but it didn’t show. However, his solid black eyes sparkled with restrained amusement. “Very astute of you, Your Highness.”

Mother sent a quiet look of warning in my direction before her smile reappeared on her pretty face. “Tell me, King Athon, do you enjoy syllabub? It’s one of my soul mate’s favorites.”

The King of Shifters lifted his knife and fork and delicately cut into his mutton pie. “I do, Minnie. I’ve had it many times and loved it.”

“Speaking of love...” King Traevon spoke. He waved his knife around to and fro before him, conveniently pointing it at my soul mate, asking, “With all of the chaos happening recently, did you find time to read the missive from Queen Mikko today?”

“I did.” My soul mate’s dusky pearl lips curled around his fork as he took a bite, chewing and swallowing quietly. “Though, I do not know why that reminded you of love.”

“Along with the Fae that she has managed to capture and wants us there for, it is also the day she’ll bury her dead.” King Traevon pointed his knife right at my soul mate’s heart. “She will not be in good spirits tomorrow for the interrogation.”

King Athon nodded solemnly. “You’re correct. I doubt she will be. Especially if she decides to burn her sister instead of giving her a proper burial.”

A traitor’s death in the Caster Kingdom.

That was horribly depressing, so I asked, “You said they’ve captured a Fae?”

My king sighed happily. “Yes. We’re flying there tomorrow to interrogate him.” He appeared downright bloodthirsty at the thought.

“Will I be going?”

My mother glanced at my father, waiting for his answer.

King Traevon swallowed his bite before responding. “You will. We leave at high noon.”

Mother softly sighed but didn’t argue with his verdict. “Please send Queen Mikko my condolences.”

“I will, love.” My king twirled his knife again. “And since so much love is in the air, I have a question for you, my daughter. I’ve waited especially for dinner to ask this.”

“Yes?” I took another drink of my wine.

My king’s mouth lifted at the corners into the smallest of smiles, an ominous baring of his teeth. He dropped his knife on the table, letting it clatter horribly, while heat began to simmer off him throughout the dining hall. King Traevon flicked his wrist at my right hand, just before he asked far too slowly, “When I found you in King Athon’s kingdom, why were you wearing his mother’s castor-spelled ring? Which, you still are. And, before you lie to me, I’d know that ring anywhere. My mother sold it to her.”

Instantly, I lowered my wine glass to the table.

Fae dammit, Grandmother!

The entire room went tomblike, silent.

No one moved. No one even breathed.

This...was spectacularly bad. Blood and fire bad.

This dinner was not going to have a pleasant ending.

With the greatest of care, I lowered my hand—out of sight—and placed it below the table. Cautiously, I whispered, “Father...let me try to explain.”

King Traevon’s livid attention jerked across the table to my soul mate, apparently, knowing I would lie once more. He shouted furiously, “*Why is she wearing that?*”

The King of Shifters slowly placed his utensils on the table and held my father’s stare. Hard-edged steel entered his solid black eyes in the quiet. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t waver. King Athon was about to make our lives messier; it was there in his stony resolve.

“*No, no, no,*” I whispered harshly.

My Fae damned soul mate did not listen to me.

The Shifter King’s accent was heavy as he answered unmistakably, “King Traevon, your daughter and I are soul

mates.”

“Ah...shit,” Bishop mumbled softly.

There was a terrible, silent moment...

My king roared in fury and shoved from his chair as flames leapt from his body, instantly turning the long table before us to ash within the blink of an eye—royal firepower used faster than I had ever seen before.

I stayed seated and breathed in shallow pants, clasp my shaking hands together in my lap. I blinked once. Twice.

Then, a smidge deliriously, I sputtered breathlessly, “Thank fuck. I did not want to eat that bitch’s food.”

“This is not the time for that,” King Athon snapped in my direction before he slowly rose to his feet. He stepped toward the king made of flames, watching as my father quickly backed away from him and started pacing before the windows, the Elf King barely holding onto his restraint. My soul mate growled, “We don’t know how this is possible, but it’s true. We’ve been dealing with this since she and I met at High Pointe.”

“Hiding it, more like,” King Traevon spat, and fire flew from his mouth with every word. “The Fae will kill you both for this. What in the Fae fuck were you thinking? Did it not occur to you what was happening to your shifter dick *when you were fucking my beloved, elven daughter?*”

I quietly groaned and cracked my neck both ways.

“I may have noticed that a little too late, and there was a small incident when I did, which I am not going to go into with you. It is private.” King Athon rubbed at his slightly whiskered chin, and then he ran his fingers over his mouth in thought, keeping his tiger in check admirably. “Even now, I don’t know of a way this could have been ultimately stopped. We are soul mates. There’s no changing that.”

“There is a way to stop this,” Father snarled.

“You won’t be killing me. You’re too intelligent for that.” My soul mate’s eyes suddenly churned with blood and met the

fire of my father's. "You should also know that I won't let you keep her from me. She is *mine*."

The flames leapt higher on my father's body.

Instantly, Mother stood to her feet. Her golden eyes flayed both men. "There are others in the room right now. What are you two thinking discussing this here?"

King Athon growled, "Bishop already knows."

And...the two servants in the room suddenly exploded from the inside out, sending blood and bits all over us.

Except for my soul mate. Miraculously, he was clean.

"Are you fucking jesting right now?" I shouted and jumped to my feet, shaking the gore from my hands. Then I wiped my palms down my face and shook my hands again. I was *covered* in carnage. "Fae dammit, shifter!"

"He killed two of mine yesterday. It's only fair." My soul mate scowled in irritation when I continued to glare at him. "Hold still, elf."

I did as he ordered while he used his royal bloodpower on me.

Blood and guts flew away from skin, hair, and outfit.

"Now, my mother. That was horribly rude." I pointed at her where she stood, looking rather annoyed. My father was fine. His flames had taken care of the mess. "She likes that dress."

"My apologies, Minnie," King Athon stated—in what sounded like an honest tone—while he worked to divest my mother of her servants' brains.

"You know, those were fine elves you just murdered. They had *families*," Mother hissed and crossed her arms when she was clean. "I'm fairly vexed with you, Your Royal Highness."

"The two guards that your soul mate killed were also fine shifters, who had families," King Athon returned and arched a black eyebrow, definitely no apology in his tone now. "Like I said. Two for two."

My mother still didn't look pleased.

Bishop cleared his throat. "My king, I already smell bad enough..."

"Fucking shit, this is utterly ridiculous." My soul mate waved his hand and his guard was clean. "I think we have veered away from what really needs to be discussed." His solid black eyes connected with the flaming eyes of his nemesis. "Do you not agree, King Traevon?"

"I'd rather not talk but instead throw you into my dungeon for the rest of your long life." The fire instantly went out, though, and my father stopped pacing the room. "That is still an option."

I grumbled a curse and hastily stepped between the two kings. "Father, do you remember in the Blood Forest when you said you wouldn't be a complete asshole if you ever met my soul mate? Here's your grand chance." I waved my hands wildly into the air. "Don't be an asshole."

His emerald eyes held mine, the fire still alive in his gaze. "I believe I warned you that I would be a *slight* asshole."

"You're not even close to that right now. Try harder."

"Her headboard!" Mother snapped her fingers and pointed at my soul mate, off in her own little realm of thoughts. "You owe her a new bed, Your Royal Highness. You cannot finagle yourself out of that one."

I moaned, then turned away from my parents and smashed my face against my dratted soul mate's chest. "Why are they like this?"

King Athon *chuffed* quietly and folded his massive arms around me, holding me close against his warm skin and honeysuckle scent. He dipped his head and whispered against the bottom of my ear, as if he were imparting a sweet secret, "You act just like them, Princess. Imagine the torture I must go through each time you open your mouth."

Keeping my eyes closed, I beat my fist against his chest once, grouching, "And why are you such a Fae fucking prick?"

With his lips still to my ear, he chuckled, his hot breath tickling my flesh. “I think we should move away from each other. Your parents are looking as stabby as you were earlier with that delicious mutton pie.”

“Fuck. You. Shifter. Asshole.” I shoved away from him and carefully put space between us while I continued to scowl at him. “I *hate you*. Just...what was that? *Why? Why* must you be such a beast *all* the time?” I pointed straight to the west. “I will fly back to that Fae-forsaken mountain and burn that bitch to the ground. Do you understand my level of hate right now? Do you truly? Because it’s right up there where that bitch lives.”

King Athon *huffed* in stutters and stops.

A bizarre noise sounded in his throat.

Then the bastard tipped his head back and laughed. And laughed. Because why would he not? He was that much of a prick.

I turned my head to the side and snarled, “Bishop, please remind your king later that I warned him.” I brushed my hands off, *done*.

Bishop ran his left palm over his haggard face. “My king...”

The King of Shifters finally shut the fuck up. “Right.” His lips trembled again, but he managed to contain it. His attention turned back to my parents, and his expression remained serious. “I suppose you two have questions?”

King Traevon flicked his emerald attention back and forth between us, his eyebrows almost touching. “First, I am curious. Why does my heir want to burn...a bitch?” His eyes narrowed further with wicked thoughts. He took two large steps toward my soul mate and slammed his chest against King Athon’s. “Have you been unfaithful to my daughter?” His smile was truly evil. “Is *mutton pie* still your favorite fare up there on that Fae-forsaken mountain?”

“No.” I ticked a finger in the air. “Not happening, Father. Some things are none of your business.”

King Traevon didn't move. He waited.

My soul mate and my father stared at one another, neither looking away from each other.

King Athon snarled softly, "No, I have not been unfaithful to your daughter. Don't ever ask me that again."

"You had better keep it that way," Mother mumbled absently, staring off toward the front of the castle, her green brows pulling together.

King Traevon clenched his jaws for a long moment, but, eventually, he took a—small—step back and asked, "Who else knows—"

An elven guard raced into the dining hall, cutting off my father's question. His eyes were wide in shock...and he hadn't even noticed the blood and ash all over the room. His words plummeted out of his mouth in a rush. "Your Royal Highness, there are Fae here."

King Traevon stiffened. "Pardon me?"

The guard sucked in a large breath. "There are Fae. On the castle's front lawn. *Many* Fae. They are demanding to speak to you and the King of Shifters."

I swallowed hard. Unwanted fear tumbled into my gut.

Instantly, King Athon moved to the side, placing himself between me and the doorway, barking, "Bishop, take Princess Trixie upstairs. Keep her safe until this is over."

"Love, stay with Trixie and Bishop," King Traevon ordered, already prowling toward the door. "King Athon, we are not at all done with this nightmare conversation, but let us see what games the Fae are playing now."

King Athon stalked after him, his tiger fangs baring. He *snarled* furiously. "After this fine dinner party you've thrown, it had better be the bloody sort."

CHAPTER 6

Thoughts of a princess:

In my life, nothing is as it seems anymore.

Innocence is changing.

And I must do the same.

For anything stagnant is eventually lost.

Butterflies...

Butterflies of all colors danced on the breeze above my king's castle's front lawn. Purple. Pink. Orange. Green. Magenta. All shades and variations of the rainbow painted the twilight sky.

I sat on my knees in front of my mother's legs, where she stood behind me, while we peeked out from the right side of a window on the second floor. The gorilla shifter stood on the left side of the glass pane doing the same. Our joint silence was absolute in order to hear what was said down on the lawn through the cracked-open window.

At least twenty Fae stood on the grass while the butterflies flew above their horned heads. The Fae had antlers like stags, and their skin was tinged chestnut brown. They looked wild in their dark brown leather garb, as if they belonged in the forest, their eyes too large and their arms as thick as a shifter's.

The swords on their backs looked plenty sharp, too.

King Traevon and King Athon walked toward them, standing side by side, showing a united front—even if they

didn't believe it themselves. They wore their own swords strapped to their backs, the steel glinting from lights coming from the open front doors.

One Fae stepped away from their group and moved forward. She stopped in front of the two kings and appraised them with her overlarge eyes...not seemingly impressed with what she saw. Her antlers tilted back as she looked up into their faces, a good foot shorter than the men before her.

The Fae stated, "King Traevon. King Athon. I am Mamue, a protector of the Ancient Archive. We have been granted permission to be, and stay, in this realm, as two of our baubles have gone missing from the archive—and we believe they're here." She crossed her arms over her ample chest and demanded, "We require hospitality while the search carries on."

King Traevon dipped his head to her regally. "However we may assist you, Mamue. All you need to do is ask, and it will be given." He smiled pleasantly and looked behind her, scanning the rest of her brethren. "How may we help with the search for these missing baubles?"

She waved her hand flippantly. "There is no need for your assistance on that matter. An oracle and a punisher will be here shortly."

King Athon lifted a black brow, asking, "But we are so happy to help. Mayhap, we know where these baubles have slithered off to. We do have a great many resources here."

Mamue snorted. "All right. I'll play along with this game. The two baubles in question that were stolen are a seed and a flower. Why is it, King Athon, that our findings so far have led us to the Elf and Shifter Kingdom? When Fae should not be crossing here? Particularly, with any ancient bauble."

I sucked in a silent breath and stayed mute while worry etched into my very soul. *Ruiuen fucking stole them?* This was not...what I had ever planned for.

Not only was I living a death wish with my soul mate, apparently, but we were also outstanding thieves of the Fae,

too—since they weren't getting those 'baubles' back. Truly, how many times can the Fae kill someone?

I stared absently at the butterflies in horror.

Uh...no.

I stopped that thought right there.

I was not thinking about our future demise.

My imagination was too grand.

King Athon sighed heavily and hunched his shoulders as if he were honestly upset. “Unfortunately, I haven't heard anything about a stolen seed or flower. And I most definitely don't know why Fae would want to hide in this realm, much less our kingdoms. We are extremely vigilant.” His solid black eyes turned to the side. “King Traevon? What say you?”

The Elf King shook his head and placed his hands on his hips. “I have not heard anything, either. But I will ask one and all if that would help, Mamue?”

“No, that will not. We don't want the thief to know we're looking for them.” Her antlers tilted as her head cocked. “Have you seen any Fae recently wandering this realm?”

Both kings shook their heads, their mouths shut.

Mamue eyed them a second longer. “Where may we lodge that is capable of holding our numbers?” She snapped her fingers into the air.

Instantly, the butterflies swarmed to the ground.

And abruptly...there were a hundred Fae now covering the front lawn of my king's castle, all just as odd as their neighbor, their antlers rising high off their foreheads as they stood tall.

My jaw dropped open in utter shock.

Fuck, that was *a lot* of Fae to house.

King Athon actually started snickering and looked to my king. “We are in your kingdom, King Traevon. Where might they all lodge?” He quite happily foisted that off onto my father.

King Traevon sent a scathing glance in his direction then focused back on the Fae and stated amenably, “Between my castle and my heir’s, there is plenty of room for all of you.”

Mamue nodded and relaxed her stance. “Your hospitality is appreciated, King Traevon.” A quick flick of her enormous eyes at my soul mate and back to my king. “King Athon will be showing the same hospitality when we enter his kingdom.”

My king grinned. “Wonderful.” He raised his hand grandly to his castle. “If you would? I’ll have my servants show you around so you may be familiar with the space.”

“Perfect.” Mamue agreed.

An army of Fae entered my parents’ home.

IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT. And I was not pleased.

I huffed and crossed my arms, and leaned back on the hard chair my royal ass sat upon. I growled, “Did the baker have nothing else to feed us?”

King Athon looked up from his fare of...mutton pie...and chewed happily. “King Traevon woke him from his home. Be grateful we have this.”

Bishop leaned back against the bakery wall and *growled* softly, playing the guard again and not eating.

I sniffed down my nose at the food before me.

Mother rolled her golden eyes. “Eat, my Trixie. Once we go back to the castle, we’ll be scavenging the scraps of whatever the Fae don’t eat. Our cooks were not prepared for this.”

King Traevon grumbled under his breath, “Our mutton pie was better, too.”

“*You* wanted to come here to talk privately.” I waved my arms around the small space. “And here we are. Eating shit,

Father.” That reminded me. “I hope no one needs to use the facilities here. They are...underwhelming.”

“*Shh.*” Mother admonished and glanced over her shoulder where the baker worked behind the counter. “Try to be a little more courteous, my daughter.”

“It is the truth.” I snorted and grabbed my plate and fork. Then I leaned back on my chair and handed them to Bishop. “Here, let us hope you choke on it.”

“Always with the sass, Your Highness.” Bishop grabbed my plate with greedy hands and, instantly, started stuffing his mouth. “You’ll be starving tonight. And I’ll sleep like a babe with a full belly.”

“We’ve had this discussion before, Princess. I don’t want to have it with you again.” King Athon *sarled* and shoved the bread in the middle of the small, circular table toward me. “There are Fae here. What are you thinking?”

I flashed my fangs at him...but grabbed a bread roll and bit into it hungrily. I spoke around my mouthful, “I hate you.”

“I hate you, too.” He leaned toward me and brushed his nose across my cheek, and then he grumbled, “No one else will touch those. Eat the whole basket.”

I narrowed my eyes at the order...and scooted the basket closer to myself and hovered over it protectively. The rolls were Fae damned delicious. I wouldn’t be telling any of them that, either.

King Traevon’s emerald eyes watched as his gaze flew back and forth between us, observing us closely while he ate. “I...don’t like this. You two are not a good fit.”

My soul mate and I laughed at the same time.

“Welcome to our realm, Father.” I waved my hand between my soul mate and me. “This is what we have been dealing with. It may not appear it, but we are doing much better than before.”

Mother’s nose crinkled. “I can only imagine.”

“What of an heir?” King Traevon’s red brows were pulled low together. “This, right here, is the worst possible outcome for a soul mate.”

I glanced at the Shifter King as I chewed. “I’ll leave that question in your capable hands, my cherished soul mate.” A sweet smile graced my features. “After all, I am eating as you *demand*ed of me.”

“That is so *kind* of you, my adored soul mate,” King Athon rumbled gruffly. He turned his solid black eyes to my parents and shoved his long white hair over his shoulder in a distracted manner. Then he began to speak quietly. The truth came from his parted, dusky pearl lips as he told the tale of our journey so far, scrutinizing my parents’ reactions while they sat completely still to listen to our story. When he was done, he rested on the chair that was far too small for his large body and draped his muscled arm over the back of mine, placing his big, warm palm on my shoulder. He ended simply, “That is it. You know as much as we do now.”

Father’s attention snapped to me. “Trixie?”

“King Athon didn’t lie. About any of it.” I sighed and rubbed my full belly, and pushed the empty basket away from me. “That is what has happened.”

Mother scowled at her soul mate, scolding, “That was a bit much, my love. How did you miss all that?”

King Traevon laughed quietly. “Really? Are you truly asking me that?”

My mother closed her mouth quickly, but she muttered through her clenched teeth, “We will talk in private later.” With a decisive nod, she turned her regard away from him and picked at the remains of her mutton pie.

“Speaking of privacy...” King Athon rubbed his fingers softly up and down my shoulder. “How will you have any with the Fae running amok?”

“Do as we’re doing now.” King Traevon rubbed at his forehead. “And Trixie will be sleeping in our room.”

Both of my eyebrows rose swiftly. “*When* I’m not in the Shifter Kingdom at night, that is fine. Thank you so much for asking for my input on my sleeping arrangements.”

Rapidly, King Traevon scowled. “No.”

“It wasn’t a request,” I stated simply.

Bishop chuckled behind me and set the empty plate in front of me, mumbling, “You are much like your king, Your Highness.”

My soul mate peeked at me from the corner of his eye.

“Hush. Both of you.” I sighed long and hard. “Father, it is late, and I am tired.”

“One more moment,” King Traevon griped and looked at my soul mate. “My daughter sleeps in your bed?”

“She does.” King Athon crinkled his forehead in dislike. “Well, she sleeps in my bed when she actually deigns to.”

“It is safe there?”

“As much as it can be.”

Eventually, Father nodded slowly. “All right. I will allow it.” His emerald eyes flayed mine. “But Trixie, you will tell me when you aren’t coming home. Now is not the time for your stubbornness.”

My lips thinned, but I agreed with him. It was too dangerous right now for my king not to know where his heir was. “Agreed.”

“And the Fae in your castle?” King Athon asked thoughtfully. “What is to be done with them?”

“I will have them watched,” King Traevon stated seriously. “We will know what they know.”

“Hopefully, they won’t be able to track it to us.” I shook my head in bewilderment. “Their baubles no longer exist.”

“One can hope,” Father stated softly.

King Athon grunted in agreement. Then he turned his attention to me...and pulled me closer against his heated side.

His solid black eyes held my gaze with worry. “What of your Fae-spark? Unless you completely avoid the Fae in your home, there is no way you can hide that from them.”

Father and Mother sat forward as one, and then Father barked, “What is wrong with her Fae-spark? You didn’t say anything about that!”

I held up a stopping hand in their direction and kept my eyes on my soul mate. “I believe I am protected now, just as you were before when you ate the seed. That’s why the gremlin who found us in bed together said nothing of you.”

“What?” Father blurted. “What gremlin? King Athon, you did *not* tell us the whole story.”

My soul mate sent the barest of glances at my father. “There are some things that are intimately private. That was.” He lifted a black eyebrow as my parents’ faces puckered in distaste. “Precisely so. And I have told the rulers about that instance, King Traevon. He was the one I killed before. I merely left out who was in bed with me at the time.” Solid black eyes peered back at me and a thoughtful look crossed his mien. “You truly believe that is why he took no notice of my Fae-spark?”

“Yes.” Thanks to a whispered warning from my grandmother. “I do not suspect it will be an issue any longer.”

Slowly, King Athon agreed. “All right. Though, might I suggest you test this theory with one of the Fae in your home? And with your king with you to assist should anything go awry?”

I chuckled quietly. “If one of them goes missing it will be suspicious. But I will humor you and say we will do that.”

My soul mate bent his head low and placed his face directly in front of mine. His rumbled words were simple. “Be careful with them, elf. If you die, I will be displeased.”

CHAPTER 7

Confession of a princess:

~~Alligators are fun. As long as they're bones.~~

~~Why did I never notice the sky shivered so?~~

~~The realm sounds marvelous when it sings to me.~~

~~My hand is pretty funny when it traces.~~

~~I love the Caster Kingdom.~~

Drugs are bad.

My Fae-gift's hooves frantically clip-clopped on the cobblestone street. She was thoroughly unable to calm herself. I couldn't particularly blame her, either. Casters raced by us, brushing against her flanks and jarring my legs, while they shouted at the top of their lungs at the billowing smoke in the sky. One word was all they said, repeatedly.

"Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!"

Again and again, they screamed it.

I ran my hand over my Fae-gift's neck and whispered, "*Shh*, precious girl. We are fine. All is well."

That was a grand lie.

All was *not* well.

The Caster Kingdom's capital city, Wickley Marsh, was pure pandemonium right now. There were looters right next to me and Father, who were breaking down the doors to shops

with only a few words whispered from adults. At the wink of a child's eye, glass shattered. Carriages floated in the air and crashed into each other raining debris down upon everyone. And my king was currently extinguishing four fires that blocked our way toward Queen Mikko's castle.

We shouldn't have landed here, but there had been no better option. Queen Mikko's gates were swamped with her people banging on the iron bars and throwing items on the swampy estate. Eventually, we would have to go through those same casters to reach the guards to allow us entrance.

"Trixie, hurry up!" Father shouted and twisted on his saddle to look back at me. "Do not get separated from me."

I ground my teeth together and kicked a caster in his face when he thought it was a wise choice to grab my leg. I called out over the chaos, "This is bloody absurd, Father! Where are Queen Mikko's guards?"

"I would guess the majority of them are guarding their queen right now," King Athon shouted from the air above me. "She is still at the pyre."

I jerked in my seat and looked up. "Where in the Fairy did you come from?"

"Let us take a guess..." he rumbled dryly. "Mayhap, from the direction of my kingdom?" He shook his head down at me. "You should take better care to watch your surroundings, Princess."

He landed his enormous Fae-gift, Axel, directly next to me. Right on top of the imbecile that kept trying to touch me, the caster's bones crunching under his Fae-gift's hooves. The caster's screams were barely heard over the disorder around us.

I blinked at the downed caster. "That is one way to take care of the issue."

Father snorted. "It is a little much, but it worked." He narrowed his eyes on my soul mate. "Make sure no one else touches her. I will try to lead the way." He turned back around

on his saddle and started shooting tiny flames in front of us, making casters scatter like cockroaches.

Quietly, I chuckled. "I don't believe I will tell my mother about that."

King Athon maneuvered his Fae-gift even closer to mine, so that Axel's and Penelope's wings were brushing. "I don't know, elf. Your mother always struck me as a very capable woman. She might surprise you."

The memory of her deftly twirling the dagger came to mind.

"You may be right, shifter." I flicked my eyes to him.

But...that one look wasn't enough.

So I stared under my lashes.

He wore no cloak today. The muscles on his massive, bared chest flexed with every step his Fae-gift took, my soul mate's warm, russet skin tone beautiful under the sun's rays. His long, white hair was windblown and his cheeks pinked from his flight. He was a veritable feast for the wandering eye. I licked over my lower lip and watched his thighs tighten under his black leather pants as he leaned to the side and shoved a caster away.

Despite our surroundings, I sighed happily.

"Are you enjoying the view, elf?" King Athon smirked.

My lips twitched. "*Shh*. Don't speak. You'll ruin my daydream."

My soul mate chuckled deeply. "And what, pray tell, are you daydreaming about with that look on your face?"

I lifted my eyes to his. "A handsome man. One who knows when to shut up." I grinned, flashing my fangs. "As I said, it is a dream."

King Athon kept chuckling and tilted in my direction. He whispered, "Why would you want me to be quiet? You like it when I talk dirty."

As his severe, shifter voice rolled over me, a shiver ran down my spine and gooseflesh lifted on my arms. My eyes caught on his solid black gaze, and my breath caught in my throat. I couldn't look away from my soul mate. I wanted to breathe him in right then.

With his handsome face close to mine, he inhaled deeply, like he was savoring my scent, and rumbled quietly, "If you don't wish to sleep in your parents' room again tonight, you know of another bed that is always open to you." He bit his plump, bottom lip with his white teeth and slowly released it, his dark eyes never leaving mine. "I would like you there, elf."

Swiftly, a thin stream of fire shot right between our two faces in a straight line. It only took a blink to capture and extinguish the flames, fear for my soul mate charging my royal firepower to act fast.

I jerked my face forward and shouted, "King Traevon!"

Father sat twisted on his seat again and wore the fiercest scowl. He pointed a finger sharply at my soul mate. "*That* was not watching your Fae damned surroundings! Do try not to be a hypocrite *in the middle of a busy street!*" More finger slashing through the air. "Truly, where is your Fae damned head at, King Athon? Oh! I know. That is right. My own personal nightmare to welcome to the family is trying his best to remind me at every bloody turn where his head is at. *Stop. It.*"

King Athon slowly leaned back from my person to sit properly on his Fae-gift, and then he rumbled pleasantly, "I'm welcome to the family? I didn't know you cared so. Mayhap, we should knit hats together for the head we think the most with. I imagine yours would be very small, indeed."

I groaned and rubbed at the back of my neck.

King Traevon's nostrils flared. "Are you done yet?"

My soul mate lifted his black eyebrows ever so slightly. "Are you? We may do this all day, if you wish."

"Just...enough. Do not let that happen again." His emerald eyes turned to mine. "What was it you said last night? *Try*

harder? Take your own advice, my heir.”

I sniffed down my nose at him. But I sat a little straighter in my saddle and surveyed my surroundings. It hadn't gotten any better.

But as we started moving again, I stated clearly, “I'll be there tonight, shifter.”

“I thought you might.” King Athon kept his attention elsewhere, but he wore the grin of a satisfied man. “Do take care to eat properly beforehand. We will be up all night.”

I laughed quietly and punched a caster trying to steal my slipper. “As long as there are no uninvited guests in the morning, I shall be quite happy with your plans, shifter.”

“Let us hope there are not.” My soul mate glanced at me quickly. “Have you, perchance, been able to purchase more of those bath beads from the Merfolk Kingdom?”

I muttered wryly, “I'll bring two bottles. One for you, one for me. But don't you dare use mine.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.” King Athon sighed harshly and bent completely at the waist, leaning far down over the side of his Fae-gift where I couldn't see. When he popped back up... he had a caster toddler in his arms who was wide-eyed in terror, with tear streaks running down her chubby cheeks. He held the caster close against his chest and pressed his lips to her sweaty head, murmuring softly, “You are safe, little one. No one can hurt you up here.”

My jaws clenched as I stared at her clothing. It was ripped and bloodied in a few places and the poor child had no shoes on her tiny, dirty feet. I whipped my head to and fro, searching for the parents.

I hissed, “Where in the Fae fuck are they?”

“In this confusion, who is to know?” King Athon soothed his hands down the toddler's back when she whimpered. “I'll hand her off to the guards at the castle's gates. They'll be able to locate them.”

Over the next two hours, Father and I took over keeping the craziness away, while my soul mate continued to soothe the lost child. When we finally reached the castle's gates, she had found slumber somehow inside King Athon's arms and didn't wake when she was transferred to a caster royal guard. The three of us were fairly displeased by this point in time, tired and hungry and annoyed as all Fairy, as we dismounted in front of the castle's front doors.

King Traevon growled under his breath, "I would hope the next time there is a traitor to be burned that Queen Mikko has learned to properly handle crowd control."

"Let us hope that is true." King Athon *snarled*. He brushed at his arms, muttering, "I smell of filth. I could use a wash after that."

I tightened my ponytail and looked toward the gates. "We never saw Queen Alora or King Elon. Do you suppose they are already inside?"

"If they are, it will be the first time Queen Alora has arrived before me for anything." King Traevon handed the reins of his Fae-gift off to one of the stable hands.

I did the same, making sure Penelope ate a blue apple first after the mess she had just endured. My Fae-gift's chewing gave the Shifter King time to give specific instructions for Axel to the caster lad, who appeared frightened out of his mind to be standing between the three of us.

I snorted softly as I watched our Fae-gifts be led away. "I don't believe the stable hand liked us much."

Father began marching up the stairs of the castle, saying over his shoulder, "The issue probably wasn't helped by King Athon treating him like a moron and growling every other word."

My soul mate sniffed. "The boy stank of mead. I had to make sure he was sober." King Athon looked at me and tilted his head toward the stairs. "Are we going inside, or are we standing here until the mist comes for us tonight?"

I rolled my eyes and began trudging up the stairs that had bright green ivy coating them, surely spelled for those who should not be trespassing here. “I wonder if we may take a short nap. We have most assuredly earned it today.”

“Hear, hear.” Father grunted. “If the other rulers have not arrived yet, I shall ask.”

“And a bath.” King Athon *huffed* softly. “Do not forget to ask for baths. We all smell like we’ve rolled around in sewage.”

I sniffed at my shoulder at the castle’s front door—that had iron spikes inlaid into the dark wood—and cringed at my own scent. “That, is an unpleasant surprise I hadn’t noticed yet. Yes. We definitely need baths, too. Make sure to ask, Father.”

He patted the top of my head. “It will be done.”

I PEEKED my head out of the guest room I had been given to clean up in and rest for a few hours. My nap was delightful and much needed, my mind and my strength now returned to a healthy level. I gazed down the hallway and stepped outside my door, listening closely to all I could hear.

My lips twitched knowing full well which room my soul mate was sleeping in. And he was still slumbering. The sound of his *loud* snoring surely could be heard by one and all. It practically echoed down the hallway.

I chuckled as I shut my door and strolled in the opposite direction. I had never been inside Queen Mikko’s castle. It was time to do a bit of snooping while I could. Seeing as most of the guards were outside of the castle taking control of the streets again, it was impeccable timing.

Slipping through each hallway unseen, I gradually made my way down to the main floor where most of the action occurred. But it was far quieter than it should have been, the day’s events taking a toll on its people.

It was perfect for me.

I invaded each room I found. Looked in drawers. Spied under couches. Peeked behind portraits on walls. Danced around statues. Stole a cigar...

I puffed on the old smelling cigar on the back lawn of the estate and strolled the grounds, zigzagging between aspen trees and dodging the bogs. I let the smoke slide out of my mouth when I spied a caster servant who looked familiar.

I hid behind the trunk of a tree while I watched her work on the flowerbeds, and a smile gradually formed on my lips.

It *was* her. The caster from the Shifter Kingdom, who had saved my royal ass when I'd been lost in the streets.

Puckering my lips, I whistled softly.

Instantly, her head whipped around in my direction. Her black hair fanned around her pale face and her blue-mist eyes scanned the terrain. It only took her a moment to spot me. Her gaze narrowed as she marched right toward me, calling, "Do I need to call for the guards? You aren't supposed to be on the castle grounds."

I stepped out from behind the tree, allowing her to see my finery, and pointed the cigar at her. "I can assure you, I have been invited by your queen."

Her blue, swirling-mist eyes caught on the cigar as she stopped before me. "Where did you get that?"

"From the shed..." I wagged the cigar to the right. "Over there somewhere."

Her scrutiny ran up and down my clothing, and then snagged on my eyes and hair. Suddenly, she groaned quietly and rudely snatched the cigar out of my hand. "Your Highness, this is mine." She waved the cigar back and forth between us. "And you are going to wish in about five minutes that you had not stolen it. Nor decided to smoke it *after* stealing it."

"Why ever not?" I crossed my arms and sniffed down my nose at her. "My father smokes them all the time."

"Not these, I can promise you that. I make these myself. It's my own special blend." She sighed heavily, grabbed my

right arm, and started dragging me back to the castle. “Hurry up. You’ll want to be sitting down.”

“What...What in the realm are you doing?” I yanked at my arm in her grasp, but, Fairy, this woman was strong. I barely kept up with her brisk pace, either. “Unhand me!”

“Absolutely not. You’ll thank me here in a moment.” And she *shoved* me down onto a chair under the shade of a tree and pointed straight at my face. “Do not move from there.”

I snorted. “Or what? You do know who I am.”

The caster turned her head to the side and called out, “Babycakes, come here!”

Then...I *screamed* bloody murder.

Fucking Fae! An alligator made up of only bones glided across the grass faster than a snake. It snapped its jaws at me when it stopped right at my feet, not touching my body only because the caster grabbed it around its neck. It kept snapping at me, its sharp teeth ready for blood.

I scrambled to yank my feet up onto the chair and waggled a finger at the beast, shrieking, “*What in the Fae fuck is that?*”

“This is Babycakes.” She patted its skull like a Fae damned pet. “He watches the grounds here. You’re fortunate you found me before he found you.”

Holding my hands up in supplication, I stated quickly. “I’ll keep sitting here. You can tell...Babycakes...that I’m friendly. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Give me your word,” the cracked caster ordered.

I stared at the woman like she had lost her marbles. Truly, who the fuck did she think she was? *But*, she was keeping the walking dead from eating me right now.

“You have my word I will not leave this chair until you say it’s safe to do so.” I pointed at the alligator. “Now, tell it I’m not the enemy.”

She nodded happily. “Thank you.” Then she looked down at the creature made of bones and ordered, “Babycakes, do not

harm Princess Trixie. She is a friend of Queen Mikko's."

Instantly, *it* settled down.

And...

Babycakes started panting and wagging its bony tail.

The caster rubbed his skull again. "He's not so horrible now, is he, Your Highness?"

I snorted softly and gradually lowered my feet back to the ground. With careful movements, I leaned forward and placed my face in front of it, and studied this creature. "I have never seen anything like this before in my life. What *is* it?"

"As I said before, he guards the grounds. He was born here and died here. Babycakes' bones are spelled to guard his land."

"Huh." I lifted my right hand and cautiously patted his skull head. "All right. You're doing a fine job there, boy."

His tail wagged even faster.

"So odd," I murmured and sat back quickly when my head started to spin. I stared up at the setting sun, the sky rolling like the waves on the ocean. "Um...I think I understand now."

The caster snickered softly. "It will get better. Trust me."

I lifted my hand in front of my face and watched it shimmer and sparkle. My speech slurred as I spoke. "My father is not going to think this amusing when he finds me."

"And I will make sure I am gone at that point in time."

I waved my hand back and forth in front of my eyes. "What exactly did I smoke?"

"I call it a drug." Her voice wavered in and out of existence, almost matching the song the ground was chanting at me. "It is potent. But you didn't smoke much. You will be fine in an hour."

"Is that the air I feel?" I shivered at the sensation. "It is like puffy candy against my skin."

“I think that’s just your clothes.” She laughed loud and long. “I believe it is fine to now tell you that it is safe to leave that chair. Good day to you, Your Highness.”

The *crunch* of grass under her shoes and Babycakes’ bony feet tickled my nose as they strolled away from me.

“Okay. Farewell.” I waved grandly into the air at their wavering backs. “May you have a blessed day with your fine drugs.”

I sang a song to the setting sun, listening to it love me back.

It was grand. It was lovely.

It was...my soul mate staring down at my face and slapping my cheek, while shouting my name. “Trixie! Can you hear me?”

I raised my right hand and touched his cheek with a fingertip. “You snore so handsome, and your face is dreadful.”

Solid black shifter eyes stared down at my face. “Fucking Fae, are you *drunk*?”

“I hugged the sun and smoked the clouds.” I waved my hands like a bird. “Can you hear the fire and blood? It is our love song.”

Instantly, King Athon slapped his palm over my mouth and looked up, shouting furiously, “*King Traevon! Get over here!*”

Father rushed into view and stopped next to my soul mate. “What is happening, King Athon? Why are you covering her mouth?”

“Your heir is drunk.”

I licked his palm and smiled when he snatched his hand away. “You sound like forests and pain. And I hug it joyfully.” I grinned even wider. “The smoke filled my heart, but no rain poured down my throat.”

His hand instantly covered my mouth again. He lifted his black brows at my father. “What are we going to do? They are waiting on us.”

“I do not know, but Trixie can hold her liquor better than this.” King Traevon bent at the waist and started sniffing at my face, moving around the Shifter King’s hand. He jerked back up and rubbed at his jaw hard, muttering multiple curses. “My daughter’s not drunk! She smoked a caster-made cigar, and I don’t think she’s ever smoked one before.” Baffled, emerald eyes turned to my soul mate. “How in the Fairy can you not smell it?”

“I was snoring so hard I damaged my nostrils and my throat. I put some cream on my nose...” King Athon shook his head. “That is unimportant. What do we do with this mess?”

I nipped at his palm, digging my fangs in. Not enough to make his blood sing in my mouth, but enough to know I was still here.

Solid black eyes peered down into my gaze. “Elf, you *are* a mess. And I know you feel pretty damned fine at the moment, but when this is over you will hate yourself a little.”

Father rubbed at his forehead and stated, “Go on inside, King Athon. I will wait out here with my daughter until she is better. Tell the other rulers the truth. There is no better way around this.”

“Do you want us to start the interrogation without you?”

“That is acceptable. Between the four of you, I’m sure nothing will be missed.”

My soul mate moved his hand off my mouth to cup my cheek and brushed his thumb tenderly against my skin. He stated softly, “I think your drooling is beautiful and your face is annoying.” Then he winked at me and started walking backward.

I beamed at him and said, “My toe is a nose gremlin.”

King Athon burst into laughter, his white teeth flashing in the growing twilight. “I understand. But I’m guessing we’ll merely be sleeping this eve.” He pointed at me. “And drooling.” Then he pivoted on his booted feet and strolled out of my line of sight.

I sighed and looked up at my father. “The wind sings a sad song.”

Father blinked down upon me. “Daughter, I don’t have any words for this.” He shook his head in amusement, sat down in the grass next to my chair, and looked expectantly at me. “While I may not have any words, you seem to have many. I am listening.”

So I sang a small tale of apples and ashes.

And nothing about fire and blood.

Because my father *listened*. And laughed.

My Fae, did he laugh.

CHAPTER 8

Disgust of a princess:

Not a single ruler should have blades in a dungeon.

Or claws.

Are we all nothing but beasts?

“*Y*our Royal Highness, Queen Mikko is requesting your and Princess Trixie’s presence in the dungeon,” The caster guard said and stared at the ground from where he bowed deeply. “Her Royal Highness says it is urgent.”

King Traevon sighed and stood, brushing grass off his breeches. “Please inform her we’ll be there momentarily.” My king waited until the caster guard rushed away before looking at me. “I will help you down there. Do not speak until you are spoken to.”

“I am feeling marginally better.” I groaned and wiped at my face. “I’m not positive I can walk straight, though.”

Father snorted and helped me to stand, tossing my left arm over his shoulder. “Your speech returned to normal fifteen minutes ago. What you say is still subject to interpretation.”

“I am not that bad now.” I leaned heavily on my father, barely able to move my legs as we traipsed inside the castle and down a hall. “I merely said that you could stand to have your crown removed before it permanently becomes imbedded in your head like the original shifter’s was.”

King Traevon chuckled under his breath, leading me to a dark wooden door that looked fairly ominous with the caster guards standing on each side of it...*and it glowed purple.* “Precisely so, my heir. And to anyone else that would have been a death threat.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “I did not mean it as such. I am truly worried that your skull will have a lasting indentation if you wear the crown all the time, despite our healing capabilities. It seems like something the Fae would curse us with.”

My king nodded to the caster guard when he opened the door for us. And we started the long process of climbing down into the dark recesses of the dungeon, taking the steps slowly so I didn’t trip over my own feet. The iron sconces on the rock walls lit our way through the gloom. King Traevon murmured quietly, “Just try to keep your thoughts to yourself right now until your brain is fully functioning again.”

“Quite so.” I sniffed down my nose at him. “I shall endeavor not to threaten the other rulers. It is not the time for them to die right now.”

Father cursed. “*Trixie. Mouth shut.*”

Scowling at him, I snapped my fangs in his direction.

“Bloody Fairy, I’ll have so many apologies to give after this.” King Traevon tightened his arm around my waist when I wobbled at the bottom of the stairs. “I hope to Fae fuck what she needs is important.”

I hummed a ditty as we trekked down the musty hallways, nodding my head regally to one and all of the caster guards we passed that were watching over cell doors. The guards appeared mighty interested in us as we walked by, apparently not appreciating my fine singing voice, their expressions confounded.

“*Trixie, pick a different song.*” Father grunted.

I lifted a brow. “Why?”

“The one you are singing is not appropriate.” Emerald eyes just like mine flicked in my direction, humor and mortification alike lighting his gaze. “It is a bit too...carnal.”

My forehead crinkled in thought. “Oh! I know the perfect one.”

So I began anew with a lively ditty.

King Traevon choked on a laugh, but merely muttered, “Fae, help me.”

With no more complaints given, I continued on.

“Here we are,” Father grumbled and maneuvered us into a clean cell on the left. He ground his teeth together and stated with resignation, “Now, I see what the fuss was about.”

“Louies!” I shouted happily and threw my free arm out to the air. “It is so great to see you all.” I beamed at the four gremlins. “I have missed your unforgettable, green faces.”

The Misfits waved grandly. Except for one.

Queen Mikko’s brown-mist eyes stared at me in amusement. “Princess Trixie, I’m glad to see you’re...well.”

I pointed a finger at her. “My father told me I couldn’t threaten anyone right now. I’m trying to obey him. Do not try to trick me.”

The Caster Queen nodded her head sagely. “Wise advice. And I will strive not to trick you in your fine state.” Then she stared pointedly at me. “Mayhap, next time, don’t smoke anything if you do not know what it is. Especially, from my kingdom.”

Standing behind the other rulers, King Athon rubbed at his face briskly. He wore blood on his bare chest. In fact, most of the rulers had splatters of it on their persons. The Gorgon King’s white attire showed it the most. When solid black eyes met mine, he asked bluntly, “Princess Trixie, are you lucid enough to be here right now?”

“I believe so.” I nodded pertly. “Have you killed the Fae yet?” There was no tortured body lying on the rock floor, so it made me wonder where the captured Fae had been stowed away.

Father groaned quietly and slapped his free hand over my mouth, his attention snapping to the Misfits. “She knows not

what she talks about. Please excuse her.”

Red Louie chuckled softly. “If you say so.”

“It is someone’s death day.” Blue Louie smirked, with his deep, deep voice resounding in the quiet. “Would you like me to tell you whose it is?”

“Ah, Louie.” Gold Louie’s voice squeaked like a mouse. He dropped his head and rubbed at his overlarge, green head. “Don’t tease them. It isn’t nice.”

Which Louie he meant was up for debate.

Then Gold Louie’s head jerked up, and he skipped to me merrily. He tilted forward and pressed himself against my front, his tiny, bony body barely reaching the bottom of my chest. He pressed a huge, pointed ear to my stomach...and giggled.

King Athon stiffened and glanced at my father sharply, while my eyebrows puckered in confusion at the gremlin.

Father quickly yanked me away from the Misfit and barked, “Do not touch my heir, Louie. I will not stand for that.”

Unexpectedly, laughter burst out of Red Louie. He shook his head side to side in his humor. “I wish I could be there.”

King Elon’s serpentine eyes, molten green with a vertical red slit, danced back and forth between my father and me. “Has Princess Trixie found her soul mate at such a young age? Is your heir with child already?” He looked...*excited*.

I snorted. “No, I am not with child.” Then I looked at my father. “I wish I could kill him. When is *he* going to have an heir?”

Father sighed again. “My apologies, King Elon.”

The Gorgon King simply shrugged. “I know what she speaks of. It is quite all right.” He grinned and his long, shamrock green braids twitched just so.

Queen Alora’s high pitched voice instantly grated on my nerves. “May we stay on task for once?” She twirled her lush

ponytail of pink, purple, blue, yellow, and green locks around a pointed finger, and her solid sky blue eyes with white sparkles throughout gazed right at me. “Do try to keep up during this discussion, Princess Trixie. It is my kingdom we are going to this time. And even though I highly doubt I want to hear what you have to say, it may be required from your addled mind.”

I used my free hand to massage my right ear. “I am listening.” *Unfortunately.*

Father groaned hard. “My apologies, Queen Alora.”

My eyes rounded on my face. “Did I say that aloud?”

“Yes.” Queen Alora snickered meanly. “At least, we’ll know if you are lying.” After a tense moment, where she and I measured one another’s will, her merfolk eyes turned to the silent gremlin in black. “You may proceed, Louie. Everyone is here now.”

Fae, do not let her talk overmuch.

I would take King Elon’s hissing over her voice any day.

Fortunately, I didn’t say that audibly.

I smirked, quite pleased with myself.

King Athon eyed me warily, not taking his regard from my face, as he stated, “Yes, Louie. Please carry on.”

Black Louie stood from where he had been sitting cross-legged on the rock floor. The timeworn book he held was opened and lifted to his face. He stuffed the tome right up against his nose, smashing the stretched, green appendage down. The pages appeared blank like normal, but they were not. The Judge of Shadows had written that book in shadows, and Louie began reading aloud from it, “When the sun looks down upon the realm, you will begin your journey.”

Instantly, I barked, “High noon!”

King Elon peered at me and hissed drolly, “Yes, I believe we understood that, Princess Trixie.” His reptilian eyes tracked to Red Louie. “But which high noon, I wonder.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I continued to smile.

Red Louie snickered at me, but answered, “The day after the morrow.”

“I must keep reading,” Black Louie remarked in his monotone voice, unmoving where he stood examining the page. “The fourth artifact will be found in the Merfolk Kingdom. You have five days from the start of your journey to find this artifact, or it will not be bequeathed.” He yanked his head back to turn a page, and then he pushed the book flat against his face again. “Lovers be, lovers lie, all before they cry and die. By sink thy memories on their site, try, try, and watch them fly. Mercy be thy victor of tri.” The gremlin closed the book and lowered it.

All of us gawked in confusion at him.

His big, round brown eyes blinked. “Yes?”

Red Louie tilted in his direction and whispered, “Where’s the part where they touch the artifact to return safely?”

Without emotion on his face or in his voice, Black Louie returned, “It is a given.”

The other three Louies looked at him oddly.

In the stunned silence, I snorted and waved my hand at the fourth gremlin. “He is learning! Way to put forth the effort, Louie!”

Black Louie blinked. Nothing else.

“Well, it was...almost...perfect.” I winked at him. “You’ve *almost* got it. Keep going. I am so proud of you.”

King Athon groaned softly and stared at the ceiling.

King Traevon placed his mouth near my ear and stated quietly, “I do not know what is more worrisome: Louie as he was, or Louie changing.”

I chuckled delicately...

But it quickly fell away as royals slowly looked at me.

“Yes?” I lifted a red eyebrow.

Queen Alora waved her right hand in a circular motion, vastly annoyed. “Well, what is the dreadful news you need to tell me? Who has betrayed me? Or what did my original do in the past that was appalling? Or...whatever horrible thing you are about to say?”

I scrunched up my face as I thought hard and nibbled on my bottom lip in nervousness. How I had become the font of information was entirely grandmother’s fault. She could have easily told my father.

I did not enjoy the royals’ wrath.

But it did not matter what I liked or disliked.

Everyone...*waited*.

“Um.” I squinted at her. It seemed obvious to me, but, perhaps, it was not. And it was important that I kept my tone respectful as I asked this. “Your Royal Highness, do you know that the original merfolk and original gorgon were steadfast lovers in the beginning? They were in love, so even after their soul mates were given to them they continued their affair in secret?”

Queen Alora and King Elon jerked back a step.

The Merfolk Queen held a hand to her chest, and the Gorgon King *hissed* ever so quietly. Neither one appeared pleased. Honestly, both royals might faint if they became much paler.

I will take that as a no, they did not know that.

I cleared my throat harshly, uncomfortable now. “I do not know how they died, though. Grandmother Isabella never said. Only that one of them betrayed the other.” When everyone continued staring at me in the awful silence, I shook my head. “That is all I know.”

King Athon bit his lower lip and gradually let it slide free, while he closely watched the two royals who were close to hyperventilating. He reengaged them, “Queen Alora, all of the artifacts have been found with the originals. Do you know where your original’s remains are?”

The Merfolk Queen messed with her ponytail, flipping her multihued hair over her shoulder to her back. Her movements jerked as she massaged her forehead and shook her head. “No, I only know how he died. After that...no merfolk cared where his remains went.”

King Traevon gripped me harder around the waist when I tilted in the wrong direction. “Do you know where we should begin the journey, at least?”

Queen Alora sucked in a large breath and squared her shoulders, obviously trying to regain her composure. “Cosimian Trench. There is a wealth of information there in the library. With the amount of material to go through, it will take all of us.”

Cosimian Trench, the Merfolk capital city.

I had never been there before. This was excellent!

It was also a city a Fae-gifted pegasus would not fly to; it was too near the edge of the realm. Boats would be used by all.

The Merfolk Queen added, “You are all invited to stay at my castle, as well.” Her merfolk gaze snagged on mine, the white sparkles in her solid blue eyes combining into two large starbursts homed in right on me. “Do try not to get into too much trouble while you are there.”

I held my free hand up in assurance. “I will behave.”

King Elon raised his brows on his silver face, not saying a word. He didn’t need to. It was there in his skeptical expression.

King Traevon looked at the Misfits. “Is there anything else you need to say to us?” They had been waiting around, watching.

“Yes. Princess Trixie will need a bucket.” Red Louie snickered as he started walking toward the doorway. “That is your warning.”

The rest of the Misfits followed him out the door, disappearing from sight as they turned the corner toward the

stairs leading out of the dungeon.

My forehead wrinkled as I peered at my father. “Do you suppose a boat will have a leak on our journey?”

“Let us pray that is not correct,” King Traevon grumbled. “What a horrible way to start our task.”

King Elon scowled and hissed, “King Traevon, please make sure your boat stays far away from mine tomorrow.”

Queen Mikko cracked her neck and stated calmly, “If we are to meet in Cosimian Trench the day after the morrow, I will need to leave shortly.” The Caster Kingdom was the farthest south, and Cosimian Trench was north of the Gorgon Kingdom. She would need to travel halfway around the landmass to reach it, so she was correct. The Caster Queen would need to leave tonight. “We need to finish what we started earlier.”

King Athon’s lips slowly curved up on the sides. “He bleeds like a stuck pig. It has been the most enjoyable part of my day so far.” He nodded his head regally to the Caster Queen. “Thank you for capturing such a large specimen to play with, Queen Mikko.”

King Traevon grunted. “Other than making him bleed... what have you learned?”

“He’s a troll,” King Elon explained. “The caster guards found him in a swamp under a bridge. The bastard was far too big to hide there, but, apparently, he lives under bridges.” His lips lifted in a pleased smile. “And the Blood Forest *is* a bridge, his old home. He told us much that he has overheard.”

“Such as?” I asked instantly.

“That Fairy used to be one whole until the dark Fae and the light Fae started fighting so badly their own population dropped to critical numbers. That was when this realm was built, but splitting them apart has caused Fairy to have problems with the land.” King Athon lifted a black brow. “The bridge troll hasn’t been in Fairy for a long while, but from the rumors he’s heard? He believes Fairy is dying.”

My eyes widened. “*Fairy’s dying?*”

King Athon continued, “The Fae traveling here are doing so because they are starving. Literally.”

King Traevon held me closer—it felt like he needed the comfort—and gazed down at the rock floor below his feet. “Louie said that our realm wasn’t the one that had done anything wrong. And the Fae are searching for their own artifacts.” He gradually lifted his head and narrowed his eyes. “We...are in a fight against the Fae for our own damned land!”

Queen Alora nodded. “That is what we have decided, as well. But we don’t know if they want our land, or if they simply want to destroy us—the bridge—to bring Fairy back together.”

“The Judge of Shadows wrote that book.” I breathed heavily, thinking aloud. “I would say this *is* a trial, us versus them. But...the judge wrote that book a long time ago.” My forehead wrinkled deeply. “Someone knew this was going to happen for that book to be written by the courts. They knew the giants would awaken to destroy this realm and that Fairy would start to perish. I bet the Fae have their own book, too, for their own artifacts. That would be fair in a trial.”

Queen Mikko smiled softly. “Very well done, Princess Trixie. That does make sense.”

King Elon tapped on his chin. “Mayhap, they have an oracle on the court?”

The Shifter King asked too casually, “What is an oracle?”

“An oracle is a dark Fae. They are like our soothsayers, but a more morbid in nature. They work on the darker side of the prophecies whereas a soothsayer sees smaller visions of both light and dark.” King Elon smirked, quite proud of himself. “I managed to pry that out of a Fae a long time ago.”

King Traevon inhaled deeply. “If Fairy is dying...mayhap, that is why the giants are waking? The Misfits never told us why they were. Perhaps, the Fae aren’t strong enough right now to keep them sleeping.”

I blinked slowly. Weakened Fae would be perfect for King Athon and me right now. The weaker the better.

My soul mate grunted quietly, flicking a glance at me. It was clear he was having the same thoughts. His shoulders even relaxed and his eyes lit up with malicious glee.

King Elon stared at my father. “That...was a very good thought, King Traevon.”

The Elf King smirked. “I have my moments. Maybe I’ll start to grow on you.”

“Like a fungus,” King Elon muttered.

Queen Alora rolled her eyes. “Let us stay on track. That is all the troll knows and we are all on the same page.” The Merfolk queen pointed at the doorway. “So if we are done with this discussion, we have a Fae to kill, and Queen Mikko looks restless to leave. She *will* be late, if she doesn’t depart soon.”

“Yes, I will.” Queen Mikko marched toward the door. “Let us get this done quickly.”

King Athon *snarled* softly. “You are taking away all my fun.”

“I do apologize, King Athon, but all of you are going to be out of my kingdom before I leave.” She waved a hand grandly at the door. “If you would, please?”

We filed out the doorway and turned left.

And when we entered a massive cell with the bridge troll...

I bent over immediately inside my father’s hold and threw up all over the floor. Choking, I growled, “There is something positively not right with you all.” The rest of my fare from earlier finished coming up at the...view...before me.

Queen Mikko snorted. “Bucket.”

There was torturing someone for information...

Or what I thought of as torture.

And then there was *this*.

Hunched over, I pointed right at my soul mate. “*Bad. Bad, shifter.*” Finger wagging all around. “All of you. *Bad.*”

Unbelievably, King Athon wrinkled his Fae fucking nose at my spit up on the floor. “*That* is disgusting, not peeling his skin off.”

“Please get me out of here,” I pled with my father as he helped me to stand straight. “I am not ready for this kind of training yet.”

Instantly, King Traevon turned us around and pulled me even closer to his body, walking us toward the doorway. One great part of having him as my king was he had always listened to his heir’s limits. I could appreciate that. He called over his shoulder, “We will take our leave now and see you next on Cosimian Trench at high noon. Safe travels to you all.”

King Athon quickly caught my eye.

I managed a small nod. I would still be seeing him tonight. Then I rested my head on my father’s shoulder and whispered, “Thank you, my king.”

King Traevon kissed my head. “You are welcome, my daughter.”

As we walked down the dank hallways, my brows began to pucker as I started to feel ill again. “Father...is it supposed to feel hot down here? That doesn’t seem right.”

His attention slammed onto me. He stated slowly, “No, my daughter, it is not hot down here.”

“Huh.” I swallowed on a dry throat, unable to feel any effects of the caster-made cigar anymore. All the pleasantness of before vanished. This was a different ailment. “I feel odd, Father.”

King Traevon started walking us faster toward the stairs, while sweat dotted my forehead. Ugly curses fell from his mouth all the way to the stables as my body trembled. When I tried to punch him, not wanting his hands on me, he dumped me over his shoulder.

My fangs bit brutally into his back as I kicked and hit.

His hands should not be on me!

He grunted hard at the attack, but held on.

Setting me down soundly on my Fae-gift, he quickly strapped me into my flying saddle, even as I fought him. Father ground his teeth together and ordered severely, “Fly straight to the Shifter Kingdom, Trixie. Do you understand?”

“I need to go back inside,” I snarled down at him and tried to wiggle out of his grip. “Unhand me.”

“You are in heat,” he snapped sternly. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I halted in place and looked down at my hands.

Red. My hands were red. “Oh, no.”

This was dreadful timing. The worst timing.

Then a ferocious *roar* vibrated inside the castle.

Father cursed again and smacked my Fae-gift’s rump, barking, “Fly, Penelope. Take her to King Athon’s castle. You are faster than Axel, but don’t veer from course.”

Astonishingly, my Fae-gift actually obeyed.

I grabbed onto her mane with my red hands and held on as she raced across the ground and took flight. From the air, I looked down upon my soul mate as he stormed out of the castle’s front doors. With one sniff of the air, he instantly found me. His massive body was painted in orange, black, and white stripes, and his solid black eyes stalked me through the sky.

It was a tiger evaluating its prey.

Then he prowled toward the stables to give chase.

CHAPTER 9

Blush of a princess:

Red is the night that brings about the beast.
“*P*enelope, fly faster!” I shouted over the night wind. My red ponytail whipped behind me, and my hands cramped where I held her mane. I was almost there. *Almost.* “You must hurry!”

My Fae-gift’s wings beat at the air even harder, obeying my frantic command. The air was chilled, but I was not. Penelope surely felt it radiating down on her, keeping her warm, while I was a Fae-damned heat box of needy flesh.

The very air hurt because it wasn’t *him*.

This realm would *burn* if I couldn’t touch him.

All I wanted to do was land and be *fucked*.

But I couldn’t. *It wasn’t safe.*

I peered behind me, squinting into the darkness.

King Athon wasn’t too far behind. My Fae-gift was smaller and faster than his, though. He needed to catch up to me quickly.

It felt like my body was going to burst into flames.

I wasn’t sure I could control it. Real fire lighting up the sky during nightfall wasn’t an intelligent move over the Shifter Kingdom. It would be a beacon for all to see.

A shiver drew its ugly claws down my spine. Sweat beaded and dried up, only to reappear on my body. My clothes were soaked and sticking to me in the wind. And my nether region throbbed in true pain, keeping me hunched over at all times.

So when King Athon's castle came into view, fat tears rolled down my heated cheeks.

I didn't bother wiping them away. They were cold.

Penelope landed on the balcony of King Athon's personal office in an effortless glide I could not have been more grateful for.

"Thank you, precious girl." I smoothed my hand down her neck, and then unstrapped myself. When I slumped down her body, barely holding myself up, I ordered swiftly, "Hide. Do not let anyone see you."

And...my Fae-gift trotted into the office and lay down behind my soul mate's desk.

I wiped off my sweaty forehead and stared. "Why do I get the feeling you've done that before?"

A soft *neigh* came from behind the desk.

With a careless wave of my hand, I indicated I couldn't be bothered with this right now. I trudged on shaking legs to the hidden access of King Athon's bedchamber. It was hard making my way up the stairs, but I did manage without falling down.

"I suppose I shall be nice," I muttered as I crested the other side of the spelled wall. I marched my way into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Thoroughly. My soul mate would not be complaining while this heat happened, because my lady bits would take him any way right now. That was embarrassing... but true. I spat the bubbles into the sink, wiped my mouth off, and inspected my red image in the mirror. "I look like blood. It is a good thing he is fond of that."

I stumbled back into the bedchamber and growled foul curses trying to take my clothing off, the finery sticking to my body.

Then I *shrieked* when I was lifted off my feet.

And honeysuckle suddenly invaded my senses.

“Oh, thank the Fae.” My head fell back onto my soul mate’s broad shoulder, with his muscled arm wrapped around my waist and holding me up off the floor. “You must fuck me now, shifter. I am so hot. It hurts.”

My soul mate embraced me close and walked toward his bed, while nuzzling at my throat. A soft *growl* reverberated against my back, and he opened his mouth wide and bit down softly onto my burning flesh.

“*Argh*,” I moaned, unable to stop myself. “Yes!”

King Athon licked a long line from my collarbone all the way to my ear, and he whispered, “I need you.”

“Yes,” I panted.

“You are mine.”

“*Yes*.”

He nipped at my throat once more before he placed me on the bed. I heaved up toward him, reaching for his pants, but he shoved me back down with a wicked grin.

King Athon unleashed his claws.

My clothing flew in every direction as he ripped my finery to shreds. Strips of satin and lace surrounded me on the bed... and he groaned in appreciation at my naked body.

I lifted my right bare foot, pressed it against his chest that was painted in blood, and quirked an eyebrow. My toes curled down into his skin. “I very much need you not to be wearing anything, too.”

King Athon chuckled deeply.

Slowly, he removed his clothing.

His eyes never left mine. And I panted.

I breathed in his scent and burned for his body.

“Mine,” I snarled. Fire flashed in my eyes.

“Yours.” His smile was white and brutal as he hoisted himself up onto his bed. “And I need you on your hands and knees, elf.”

“You are such a beast.” I rolled over and did as he’d suggested, arching my back to lift my ass into the air. I would not say no this time; *nothing* was stopping me from having him inside me. Glancing over my shoulder, I bared my fangs at him and used his own words. “Are you enjoying the view, shifter?”

King Athon *sarled* and released his tiger fangs. His muscles bunched under his orange, black, and white skin, and he walked closer on his knees. *Closer*. He knocked my legs apart and pressed his massive, hard cock against my soaking flesh that had been ready for him for hours.

I dropped my head forward and stared down at his bed, breathing in deeply and trembling. “*Please.*”

My soul mate did not torture me—or himself. He *growled* and placed his cockhead at my entrance then grabbed my hips.

With one swift, powerful thrust he breached my opening.

I *shouted* in pleasure and gripped the blanket beneath my body brutally, immediate relief flooding my veins. “More, shifter. I need more.”

King Athon pulled his hips back and slammed all the way inside me, his *snarl* rending the air. He swiftly lowered over me with one hand on the bed, keeping his other gripping my right hip tightly.

Then...he sank his long fangs deep into my shoulder.

I grunted in shock—and pain. I blinked once. Twice. Then I shouted furiously, “Unfucking believable, asshole! I cannot believe how much of a bastard you are!” I wiggled inside his brutal hold. “I *will* be biting you later!”

He chuckled darkly against my skin, his tongue playing along my bleeding flesh, the tiger toying with me.

I inhaled heavily, gradually—and grudgingly—accepting the pain into my body. “Make this bloody spectacular, or I will

cut off your fingers. Your toes. And your hair.”

King Athon groaned quietly and pulled his hips back. He plunged his long, thick cock back through my tight channel, and started a ruthless rhythm. His fangs bit harder and held me in place, and he thrust and thrust and thrust.

My soul mate punished the Fae fuck out of my cunt.

And I loved it.

I dug my fingers into the bed harder and lifted my ass higher. “Fae, yes.” I arched my head back, rubbing my cheek against his and holding my face there, opening my legs wider. Breathlessly, I panted, “Give everything to me, shifter. I need it.”

King Athon *growled* fiercely and pounded into me.

The sounds of our bodies meeting smacked the air.

Heat *burned* and *cooled* inside me.

I clawed at the bed and begged, “Please. Harder!”

King Athon *snarled* and slammed into me. Over...and over. His massive cock rubbed inside my channel. Hitting every perfect spot.

Our sweating bodies became one movement, and I screamed in fire and bliss, “Athon, yes!”

He released my hip and caressed my clit hard.

I sucked in a harsh breath and flew over the edge in a burning flame of sweet relief, shaking and crying in pure frenzy. He followed me over instantly, his massive frame pressing down on top of me, containing my body as his cock pulsed inside me and flooded me with his cum. Our bodies trembled against one another as we hovered in the mind-numbing bliss of ecstasy.

Between our heavy breaths, we both groaned long and hard.

Fucking...Fae. *Satisfaction.*

The heat was gone.

I sucked in a surprised breath when he pulled out and flipped me over. He filled my Fae-spark flush with his gifted power, healing my shoulder rapidly. My gaze caught his as he lowered his head...and kissed my lips so very softly. One kiss. That was all, before he lowered his head and started pressing single kisses on my neck. My shoulders. He lavished my chest with tiny, precious kisses. Down my stomach, with his long, white hair tickling my sides.

He blew a Fae damned raspberry against my belly button, and then continued on pressing his soft lips to each of my hips. My inner thighs. My knees. Each of my toes.

My soul mate grinned up at me from my feet and gently bit down on my big toe, teasing, “What did the wind sound like when it sang a sad song?”

“Oh, Fae. You heard that.” I dropped my head back to the mattress and groaned up at his ceiling, utterly mortified. “You will be impossible about my mad ramblings forever, won’t you?”

“Mayhap.” King Athon crawled back up my body and rested his hips—and hard cock—between my legs, his upper body balanced on his elbows on either side of my head. His white hair fanned down around my face while he gazed deeply into my eyes. He claimed softly, “I want you again.”

“Want, not need?” I chuckled. “I must admit, the heat is not pleasant.”

“No, it is not.” My soul mate brushed his plush lips against my mouth. “May I have you, elf?”

I wrapped my legs and arms around him, and ran my fingertips lightly against his back. “You may.”

He *chuffed*, a contented tiger.

I smiled softly up at him. “Will you allow me to bite you? And here is a hint, shifter. This is where you say ‘yes.’”

Do I have your trust yet?

King Athon laughed quietly. “It is a surprise.”

Nose crinkled, I muttered, “I may just flip you to your hands and knees and go beast-like.”

My soul mate choked on his mirth. “That would be an interesting sight, indeed.” His solid black eyes twinkled down at me. “But you have already been on my back and bitten my neck with your wee fangs.”

I licked over my right one. “They are *fine* fangs, not *wee* fangs.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” King Athon started rubbing his cock against my intimate flesh softly, back and forth. He lowered his head and whispered against my lips, “And you are exquisite, elf.”

A slight blush stole across my cheeks.

Instantly, he smiled against my lips.

So I kissed his grinning mouth, teeth and all.

King Athon groaned and opened his lips, devouring my mouth in the most intimate kiss I’d ever had in my life. He pulled his face back leisurely and stared into my eyes, as he moved his hips back and slowly entered me once more.

My soul mate peered into my eyes the entire time.

While he brushed his body against mine, rocking his hips between my thighs, and pressed himself into me, he never looked away.

With each meeting of our bodies we broke a little.

Our barriers cracked and splintered and creaked.

It should have been loud enough to hear, but this change hunted in the silence. Creeping in unannounced and hidden, waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting.

I panted against his mouth. And felt different.

This was different than any other time.

My brows puckered slightly.

And he gently kissed between them before looking back down at me, whispering, “It will be all right.”

I swallowed nervously. “Will it?”

“Eventually.” His smile was tender.

My eyes flicked back and forth over his solid black gaze. “Let us hope so.”

He brushed his nose against mine softly. “*Adorable.*”

Our bodies connected together in an entirely frightening and new, marvelous way. It wasn't merely the physical. Now the barriers were breaking down between us, and our minds were opening and breathing in fresh air.

My soul mate thrust his hips almost affectionately. He kissed the tip of my nose every so often. And when we came together again, it was so breathtaking it made me forget for a moment that, once more...he hadn't let me bite him.

CHAPTER 10

Honesty of a princess:

A soul mate is someone you are supposed to love.

I do not love mine. Thankfully.

I am not sure my mind could handle that presently. But he is sending my thoughts in a fragile spin. Once, he was my enemy.

And therein lies the problem. He still is.

I know who my soul mate is to his core.

He is a beast.

How is it possible that I feel affection for a shifter?

But I am strong. I will figure this out.

A brush of soft lips against my left cheek woke me from my slumber.

My mouth curved in a small smile, even as the gentle light of sunrise filtered behind my closed eyelids. “Mm. Whatever are you doing awake this early, shifter?”

King Athon chuckled quietly and nuzzled against the side of my face, rumbling in a sleep heavy voice, “I think we should talk before you leave this morning.”

I rolled onto my side and curled my body against his, reveling in his warmth. Placing my head on his shoulder, I opened my eyes and used my pointer finger to create designs on his chest. “What would you like to speak of?”

My soul mate pulled the comforter over us more fully with his free hand, tucking it around my naked body. “About us.”

I tilted my head back a smidgen and looked up at his face. “Is this about last night?”

“Somewhat.” He lifted his head and pressed his lips to my forehead for a small kiss before he lowered his head back to the bed. “You know I could feel your emotions. I know what was running amok inside your head.”

“As I knew yours.”

“I don’t want you to feel like I am treating you like a child when I say this, because I am not.” His solid black eyes captured my gaze, and he stated gently, “If we are going too fast emotionally, you need to tell me. I do not want you to be frightened of me when we are alone. What we did last night caught me off guard, too, but I should have seen it coming. As you should have.”

I sighed and looked back down as I began tracing my finger over his heated skin once more. “You don’t need to do that. I’m capable of handling my emotions, even if they sneak up on me. I must process them in the light of day, of course, but I can do that without running away.”

“Are you positive? Truly, I don’t want you scared of me when it’s just the two of us together being...soul mates. We have forever. This can slow down, if you require it.”

I snickered softly at a thought. “But we are perfectly fine with the other being terrified when we are acting as royals.”

My soul mate grunted quietly. “And there is a truth.” His fingers threaded through my hair and gently gripped the strands, pulling my head back to look into my eyes. He quirked a black eyebrow. “You didn’t answer my question, Trixie. I would like another truth to leave your delectable mouth.”

At the use of my given name in a quiet moment, I bit my lip and breathed deeply. These emotions...were a bother. Still uncomfortable, anxious and scared of the tenderness that I had

started to feel toward my enemy, I answered honestly, “You are my soul mate. I should be feeling this way toward you.”

King Athon’s eyes held steady on mine, unwavering in his questioning. “But is it too much for you right now?”

“Would you back away from me if it was?”

He licked over his bottom lip slowly. “I would try.”

My soul mate might even succeed at that, his willpower alone frightening when he set his mind to something. He *was* a patient predator. The man would get whatever he wanted in the end.

I ran my palm over his chest and held his body closer to mine, asserting clearly, “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. If it was too much, I would leave. You are fine, shifter. I merely need to think about everything with a calm mind, and all will be well.”

King Athon grunted and kissed my forehead again. “If that changes, you need to let me know.” His lips twitched slightly. “I never thought I’d be saying this to an elf, but honest communication between us will only strengthen our relationship. Many pretty and ugly truths will need to be said as time moves on. No malicious lies. They could be our downfall.”

I grinned full out. “So sweet lies are acceptable? *Hmm*. Like saying that your morning breath doesn’t stink?”

My soul mate’s chest bounced softly under my head as he chuckled. “I didn’t even think of my breath before I woke you. I should have brushed my teeth first.”

“I did brush mine before you arrived here.” I laughed along with him. “I wasn’t in the right frame of mind, either. I think I used your toothbrush by accident.”

King Athon stopped laughing instantly and started thumping his head back onto his pillow. “*Gross*. I shall have to get a new one. You threw up then used my toothbrush! Do you not realize what I can smell?”

I laughed harder, my laughter ringing throughout the room and over his private balcony. “I said it was an accident! I didn’t mean to.”

My soul mate groaned again. “You are big trouble in a very small package, elf.”

“I will take that as a compliment.” I leaned up on my elbow to stare down at his ruthlessly handsome face. Then I bent to brush my lips over his slowly, morning breath be Fae damned. His mouth was delicious. I said softly, “I need to go. With my flight back to Gatlin Grove, and then flying again to the ocean with my king, it will be cutting it close to travel to Cosimian Trench by midday tomorrow.”

“I know. I must do the same soon, too.” My soul mate caressed his lips against mine again. “I need you to be safe in your travels. And don’t upset any Fae when you’re home packing.”

“I will endeavor to avoid them.” I chuckled under my breath. “But what in the Fairy kind of Fae are they? I’ve never read about anything like them before.”

“I asked Mamue when we went inside. They are woodland sprites from the dark forest.”

“Huh. I knew they looked like they belonged in the woods.” I sighed and pushed the blanket down, uncovering our naked bodies. With one last long, lingering look at my soul mate, I climbed out of bed using the stool he had gifted me. I looked down at the blood that had smeared all over my body, transferred from King Athon’s to mine with our sweat. Now, *that* was gross. I headed straight for the bathroom as my soul mate rolled over and pulled the blanket back over himself. “I need to shower and get this Fae blood off me. I cannot go into my Fae infested castle like this.”

“If you use all of my hot water, I will be upset.” He yawned grandly. “And only use one towel. I think I only have two left.”

I waved away his worry. “I will behave.”

“The day that happens, I will kiss your father.”

“I will hold you to that.” A finger waggle in the air. “And, *please*, make sure I am there to see it.”

Confession of a princess:

Boats are outstanding! I want one of my own!

While the reason for these adventures is horrid, I am seeing so much of the realm and experiencing new things. There's light within the dark if you squint hard enough.

To sail the ocean is a dream come true.

I rubbed at my sore back and watched my Fae-gift fly back in the dying light of day to the elven royal estate, her sire next to her. With my caster-spelled waterproof satchel of traveling accoutrements hanging bulkily over my shoulder, I pressed my feet down into the white, sandy beach of Sugar Cove and grumbled, “Father, this journey hasn’t even begun yet, and I am exhausted.”

King Traevon wrinkled his nose in my direction. “There is a reason for that, my daughter, and I do not want to hear about it.”

He had been a bit...crabby...since I’d returned home.

Sighing grandly, I waved a hand in front of him. “What if you become a grandfather? What say you then? Or will you be upset every time I go into heat? There is a reason behind it, you well know. It can’t be helped.”

Father ground his teeth together and growled, “Trixie, I had to clean up his Fae damned mess after he flew away. He almost killed King Elon. The rulers were understandably

confused and upset. You should have seen the Gorgon King. He was bloody shredded. *Literally.*”

I snapped my gaping mouth shut and mumbled, “What did he do?”

“Which one?” King Traevon snorted. “Your soul mate took *offense* when King Elon pulled him back from the bridge troll—saving him from a deadly bite, I might add. When I arrived inside and found the chaos he’d caused, King Elon was lying in a puddle of his own blood, with his chest clawed open. And heir and trial be damned, he wanted King Athon’s head. It took much talking to calm him down, nothing that I enjoy doing with that self-centered gorgon.”

“How in the Fae did you possibly explain that away?” I shook my head and rubbed at my back again. “There is no feasible excuse for that behavior right now.”

“Other than the truth, there was one excuse I could use.” Emerald eyes narrowed. “And King Athon will not like what I said.”

I groaned in exasperation. “Dear Fae. What is it?”

Father straightened and cleared his throat. “I said it was rumored that he had lingering issues with his father’s past abuse. That it was said he’d harmed a few shifters who had touched him when he wasn’t aware.”

“Oh...fuck,” I mumbled. “That is awful, Father.”

“I know. But it was believable. His king was that awful, my daughter.” King Traevon sighed quietly. “And I also sent a messenger this morning to King Athon. To warn him of what I said.”

I squinted hard at my father. “You sent a *messenger*? You did that so you wouldn’t have to look him in the eye when you told him. That is not very kingly of you.”

“Quite so. It was moment of weakness. I was ashamed of what I had to do to fix the problem, and took the coward’s way out with the outcome.” King Traevon wiped sand off his hands and looked out over the deep, blue ocean. “I am not perfect,

my heir. No one is. You would do well to remember that. We all make mistakes, no matter our age or station in life.”

I sniffed down my nose at him. “You will apologize to him. Privately, of course.”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

As I stretched my tired arms, I asked thoughtfully, “What of the Fae in our home, Father? We will be gone for days.”

“It is worrisome. I have guards watching them, but that isn’t as reassuring as it should be when I can only be in one kingdom at one time.” Father instantly perked and wagged a finger in front of us. “There is my boat. It’s coming.”

My attention caught on the vessel under a quickly darkening sky. “Oh my. She is beautiful. Well done, my king.”

A large, red square sail hung by its rigging across the mast, puffing round with the wind and pushing the long, well built boat faster. There were seven massive oars each on larboard and starboard swooping and slicing through the ocean as strong, abled-bodied elves rowed. Another two elves stood at the starboard stern and steered the side oar, piloting properly in our direction.

King Traevon’s chest puffed proudly. “Thank you, my heir. I had it commissioned recently to add well-appointed seating on the bow. We will be quite comfortable on our voyage.”

“I do hope so. I am in need of a cozy place to lay my head tonight.” I pulled my large fur coat closer around me. “Will there be blankets, or will I need to use the one I packed for emergencies?”

“Fine blankets, my daughter. Very fine, indeed.”

We walked toward the pier where the boat would stop to grant us access, our shoes digging down into the soft, white sand until we landed on the wooden slats. When the boat docked, King Traevon nodded to the captain, who was standing at the bow, and helped me to board safely.

The wood seemed to sway beneath my feet, causing me to grin in excitement. This was a first for me. I was standing on

water!

“Oh, this is bloody marvelous, Father,” I exclaimed.

“Let us hope you do not become seasick.” King Traevon chuckled as he stepped next to me. His emerald eyes sparkled in the twilight. “I have never had a problem with it. Mayhap, you won’t either.”

My forehead wrinkled. “Yes, that would be rather dreadful for my first ocean voyage.”

Father nodded, guided us to the bow and smirked at the overlarge chairs that were more couches than not. They were bolted down into the boat and had many blankets and pillows to rest upon. He asked, “Is this up to your standards, my daughter?”

“It is wonderful.” I patted his shoulder twice and quickly threw my body onto the chair on the right. I smirked up at him from my position. “I am declaring this one forever mine. No one else may ever have it while I’m aboard.”

King Traevon laughed and quickly sat down on another chair when the boat started moving again toward our destination. “You may have it. It is now yours.”

I sighed in bliss and dropped my satchel over the side of the chair, quickly covering up with two blankets. I fluffed a pillow behind my head and closed my eyes, yawning large and wide. “Only wake me if there is trouble, Father. Otherwise, I will see you again at sunrise.”

King Traevon leaned across the small area separating the chairs and brushed a red lock off my forehead. “Good night, my daughter. Sleep well.”

CHAPTER 12

Confession of a princess:

Being so near where the realm drops off is intimidating. It isn't so close that I can feel it...but I know it's there.

The edge. The death.

Swim just a little farther and you would touch it.

It is nerve-wracking. I do not like it.

Merfolk are brave, indeed.

I crossed my arms and rubbed at my biceps. My attention was on the void, past where we were moored with a heavy anchor. “Father, why is Cosimian Trench the capital city of the Merfolk Kingdom? *Why* would they build it here of all places?”

The horizon over the ocean was truly a *void*.

There was nothing there but deep shadows.

King Traevon stood next to me in the bow, while the sun beat down on our faces, and stared with me—except he appeared thoughtful, while I wanted to hide. “The original merfolk chose this location. Cosimian Trench has essentially always been here. It has grown over time with its people. It's the largest city and affords many merfolk the opportunity to live together.”

I grunted and turned away from the view. “The original merfolk must have been insane to build here. I would never live so close to the edge as a first choice.”

Father looked down upon my face. “It is a conundrum. Although, you may be right. He could have been insane, and merfolk people have simply adapted themselves to this lifestyle.”

“Or, mayhap, he was just an asshole.” I snorted.

“That could be true, too.”

I lifted my right hand and shaded my eyes from the glare of the sun. “I believe I see purple and orange sails larboard side.”

“And King Elon is coming up fast on our starboard side.” King Traevon stretched his arms above his head and arched his back, groaning deeply. “I shall need to have new cushions bought. Those were alarmingly terrible on my back.”

I snickered. “I feel great, my king. You may wish to purchase more like the ones I had.”

Father grumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” I cupped my ear. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“*I said* that you are just like your mother. She steals the best pillow every night.”

I bit my fangs down onto my lower lip and tried not to laugh at his terribly annoyed expression. “Purchase new ones. Your problems will be solved.”

“I have.” He waved his hands about between us, smacking his hands together. “But she checks each one every night and pilfers her favorite.”

I arched a red brow. “Uh...hide one of your choosing. You take forever to fall asleep. She won’t notice when you creep out of bed to grab it.”

King Traevon blinked. “That is a bloody marvelous idea.”

I sighed in exasperation and turned to watch as my soul mate’s boat came to a gliding stop next to us. “I’m happy to help you, my king, anytime the obvious has escaped your thoughts.”

Father snorted. “I believe I deserved that.”

“Indeed you did.” Then I waved at the Shifter King and shouted eagerly, “Does your boat have chairs, King Athon? Ours does! Do you want to come and see them? And cushions and blankets! And wasn’t the voyage amazing? It’s because we are atop *water* right now! It’s spectacular! There is also a yellow fish that keeps circling that I think is very suspicious, but my king says its harmless.”

King Traevon flopped back down on his chosen chair and shook his head at me in amusement.

My soul mate fairly stared at me like I’d lost my mind. He shouted back furiously, “Have you been smoking again, Princess Trixie?”

I jerked my head back and pouted. My finger waggled at my soul mate and my gaze found my father’s. I asked grumpily, “Does he not understand this was my first time on the ocean?”

“I don’t believe he does, my daughter.”

My attention swung back to my soul mate. I shouted, “Don’t be an asshole!” Then I stomped back to my chair and sat my bottom down soundly, scowling at my father. “He is such a Fae damned asshole.”

Father’s lips twitched. “I won’t disagree with you.”

Suddenly, a heavy *thump* sounded right behind me. And my soul mate remarked with jealousy biting his tone, “You have better chairs than I do, King Traevon.”

“I won’t disagree with you, either.” King Traevon smirked.

I turned my head around and flashed my fangs. “This is my *first voyage* on a boat, shifter. Be nice to me.”

“So I heard you say,” King Athon replied softly and moved around my person to sit in the only remaining empty chair. As he placed his traveling satchel on the wooden boards, his solid black eyes found mine—and I tried very hard not to ogle his body in his swimwear. “I apologize for being rude before, elf. I did not know.”

I sniffed down my nose at him...but nodded. "It is all right. I know I am over excited right now." I tried not to...but I blurted excitedly, "Merfolk swam up to our boat! *Four* times. They are *so* bloody fast. Oh, we saw a blue whale, too! And the stars were so beautiful last night at sea. I fell asleep almost *instantly* to the rocking boat." I snapped my fingers for emphasis. "And then I saw dolphins! That was my favorite."

My soul mate rubbed his lips together in the silence and glanced at my father, before looking back at me. It took a moment for him to speak, but when he did his voice was choked and gruff. "That is nice, elf. I am pleased you've been entertained."

Instantly, I scowled at him. "Do not laugh at me."

His black brows lifted. "I am not laughing, am I?"

"I can feel it," I explained slowly and tapped my chest, right over my Fae-spark. Where a tiny piece of him resided. "You are laughing inside."

King Athon sat back suddenly on the chair and relaxed, while he chuckled softly in his deep timber. "It is not what you think. I'm laughing because I think you're charming right now in your excitement."

"Oh." I teetered my head side to side in thought. "Yes, I suppose that does make sense." My expression was sheepish. But I still sniffed down my nose at him. "Thank you for explaining."

"You are most welcome." King Athon gradually pulled his gaze from mine to appraise my father with careful consideration, taking his time in doing so. "I received your missive. I cannot say that I am pleased with it, but I do understand why you said what you did. So, thank you for covering for my actions."

Father inhaled heavily, his chest rising grandly with it, and stated clearly, "I apologize for sending a messenger with that information. I should have waited until we could speak face to face. It was wrong of me to hide behind a messenger, and I deeply regret it."

My attention flew back and forth between them.

Warily.

They were...actually being respectful.

I etched this moment in time into my brain.

It was doubtful this would happen often.

“Your apology is accepted.” King Athon dipped his head to my father, and then he returned his powerful gaze back to my person. “Are you ready to go into the ocean, Princess Trixie?”

Immediately, I wore a grand smile. “I have my swimwear on, do I not?” I pulled at the thin, black strap on my shoulder and allowed it to snap back on my skin. “I am as prepared as I’ll ever be.”

“That is a good thing, my heir.” King Traevon shouldered his water-proof satchel as he stood. “Because all of the rulers are now here, and it is almost high noon.”

King Athon and I stood as well.

I grabbed my satchel, as my soul mate lifted his.

“Put on your star, my daughter.” King Traevon lifted the small, star shaped, caster-spelled seashell he uncovered from his satchel and pressed it to his right temple. It would allow him to breathe underwater and not die from the pressure. “It is time.”

I found mine in my bag and did the same, shaking my head hard back and forth to make sure the caster-spelled seashell stuck to my skin properly. Only those invited into the Merfolk Kingdom were given these by the merfolk royal guards. One must return them when leaving the Merfolk Kingdom.

If one did not...

Well, it was best to obey the rule if you liked your head upon your neck. The Merfolk Kingdom took this very seriously, and acted immediately should someone disobey.

I looked up to see my soul mate grinning at me, with his tiny caster-spelled seashell on his right temple. “Elf, once you

apply it to your skin it won't come off until a merfolk touches it for removal."

My eyes widened. "I'd wondered how it would stay on in the ocean." I squinted at him. "I suppose I looked a little foolish shaking my head about. You may laugh."

King Athon simply shook his head at me, with eyes full of mirth. "I would not dream of it, Princess Trixie."

I waved him off and headed toward the stairs. "You are ridiculous. And a liar. A ridiculous liar, Your Royal Highness."

Once the three of us were standing larboard on the rim of the boat, we looked down upon the deep blue water that sparkled in the sunlight. Soft waves splashed against the side of the vessel and rocked it gently. And a Merfolk Queen crested the surface of the water, her face and shoulders sparkling from the droplets running down her soaking, multihued hair.

Queen Alora peered at each boat and remarked—screached, "What are you all waiting for? The water is fine."

CHAPTER 13

Confession of a princess:

I have sand in places where it should not be. I cannot seem to rid myself of it. And it is vastly annoying.

My toothbrush is even infested with the tiny granules.

Merfolk must have the patience of the Fae, because this is absurd. There is no getting rid of it!

I looked down at the water and jumped.

Truly, I will deny to my dying breath that I held my nose the first time I entered the ocean...when I had a caster-spelled starfish.

And the ocean enveloped me down, down, down.

The water is not fine! Not fine!

Not fine at all... That bitch!

I kicked hard back up to the surface and screeched, “*Why is it so cold?*”

Like the royal pricks they were, all the bloody rulers started laughing their asses off at me.

Even my Fae damned king.

Other than Queen Alora, they were still standing upon the sides of the vessels, watching me shriek and splash. Some bent at the waist and slapped a knee, while others fucking pointed at me.

And. They. *Laughed.*

“I hate you!” I shouted. “All of you! I hate you!”

One asshole after another, they gradually stopped snickering and jumped into the ocean, fully prepared for the chill—unlike me.

I lifted my right arm out of the water and pointed at my father, while I kept kicking my feet. “That was mean, my king!”

“It is a rite of passage that we have all suffered through.” King Traevon’s wide smile showed all his teeth. “Welcome to the Merfolk Kingdom, my heir. Remember how chilling it can be.”

I scowled at him.

That wasn’t ominous or anything.

With a huff, I started swimming toward the Merfolk Queen, following the other four rulers. I would trail behind them from now on. Because *that* embarrassment would not happen again.

When all six of us were together, we looked up at the sun, high in the noon sky, and back down at each other. This quest had officially begun.

“Follow me. I will go slow.” Queen Alora sank down into the water.

Unable to stop the action, I held my breath as I plunged beneath the surface. I blinked a few times until I could clearly see the other rulers around me. Then I swam after my king as he trailed Queen Alora down into the depths of the ocean.

Eventually, I had to breathe. And *possibly* panicked.

I stopped swimming and thrashed in the water, trying to not take that breath. Terror froze my thoughts and the will to live kicked in. I started swimming back up.

King Athon and King Elon each grabbed one of my arms and held me still, not allowing me to go anywhere.

Queen Mikko floated in front of me, cupped my face with her small hands, and stared right into my eyes. She opened her

mouth wide and took a deep breath in...and the Caster Queen didn't choke on water.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm my brain.

It was difficult. But I tried.

In the end, my lungs decided for me.

My mouth opened wide. I sucked in a huge breath.

Then my eyes snapped open. I blinked.

I took another breath.

And my body instantly relaxed. *I could breathe.*

“Why are you all holding on to the elven heir?” Queen Alora asked, swimming up fast behind the Caster Queen. Holy Fae...her voice sounded *normal*. “What is the issue?”

I opened my mouth and said, “It was my fault.”

And *shit*.

I sounded like a blubbering mess under the water.

Queen Alora laughed—and it didn't hurt my ears. “I did not doubt that for a second, Princess Trixie.”

The three rulers released me, seeing that I was fine.

And King Traevon appeared behind my soul mate, his expression frantic.

“I was afraid to breathe,” I admitted.

Queen Alora stared for a long moment, her eyes assessing, before she looked at my father. “Your heir was afraid to breathe underwater, King Traevon. You should have thought of that.”

His eyes snapped on mine, an apology in his gaze.

I smiled, letting him know it was all right.

“Let us try this again. Everyone follow me.” Queen Alora turned in the water with ease and started swimming down once more.

This time, there wasn't an issue.

We swam as a group. With the Merfolk Queen leading.

Just as it became too dark for me to see, yellow fish began to light the way. They *lit* the ocean in sporadic swarms of yellow like sconces. I stared in wonder as I swam, staying close to my king and my soul mate.

I supposed my father was right.

That yellow fish earlier wasn't wicked. Only curious.

This was all mesmerizing...until I spied a predator.

I screamed and pointed at the creature. "Shark!"

Rapidly, Queen Alora was a *blur*. Sling-shotting to the shark. A mere *trace* in the water as she attacked.

With my heartbeat slowing, I mumbled in awe, "Fuck."

The shark quickly left after that skirmish, which I did not blame it for one bit. I would have tucked tail, too. The Merfolk Queen was certainly the apex predator.

Down, down, down we swam. And I was *cold*.

My muscles started to cramp and my body shivered horribly, but I kept swimming with the rulers, not about to be left behind.

Cosimian Trench appeared like a mirage. The crevasse in the bottom of the ocean floor was long and deep. It teemed with activity and became brighter as we swam closer.

A dome of glass encased the middle, thin and just as long as the trench. Merfolk could be seen inside walking on streets and eating outside shops. In the very middle of the trench, a castle rose high, its peaks almost touching the top of the dome.

My teeth chattered, but I managed, "Oh, my Fae."

Queen Alora laughed softly and glanced over her shoulder at me, her hair wild and floating about her head. "I am pleased you approve, Princess Trixie."

I slowed down when we reached the very bottom of the ocean trench, our movements hampered by merfolk

zigzagging around us. They were obviously in a hurry since I could barely see them.

We stopped at one of the wide open, round entry points to the domed city. No water was flowing inside it. It was merely *there* for access, caster-spelled. Just as the inside was caster-spelled for oxygen. There didn't appear to be any merfolk nearby either, as if it were an alleyway, with black, stone buildings on each side.

Queen Alora flipped her body around, placed her bare feet on the sandy ground, and took a step inside the city.

I waited and watched, making sure I could do this right.

So when it was my turn it was flawless.

I grinned at my father and wrung my hair out. "That wasn't so bad."

It was a shame my teeth still chattered like crazy.

King Traevon laughed and pulled me against him, then started rubbing at my back briskly. "Eventually, you will get used to the cold swim." His skin was just as frozen as mine, but he handled it far better—like the other rulers, as usual. "And it is warm in here, my daughter. You will warm up quickly."

"Thank the Fae," I groaned and trembled against my father. I yanked my hands up between us and rubbed them together. "Because, honestly, that was dreadful."

King Elon chuckled darkly. "Now imagine how it is for a gorgon, Princess Trixie." His long, shamrock green braids twitched.

"Oh, that is a depressing thought." I shook my head and grumbled, "How are you still moving, King Elon?"

"With practice," he hissed. "Much practice."

Queen Alora already had her hair up in her normal ponytail high on her head, her hair dripping down her back. And she said—screeched, "We need to change into our disguises." She pointed to the stone building on the right, a

wooden door set within the black stones. “There are bathrooms just inside.”

I flinched and looked behind her, down the alleyway.

But no one was there, mercifully.

“The entrance is being guarded right now, Princess Trixie.” She rolled her eyes and opened the door, walking inside the building.

King Traevon released me as we filed indoors.

The women in one bathroom. The men in the other.

I pulled the hood of my knitted sweater over my wet bun, glanced at the two queens, and growled, “Your *crowns*. Take them off. How many times must I say that on these quests?”

With her brown-mist eyes swirling, Queen Mikko chuckled. “Mayhap, every time. It is a habit for us, as it will be one day for you.”

My red brows slammed together. “Let us not talk about my king’s demise.”

“Too true.” She dipped her head. “I do apologize.”

“That is all right.” I waved my hand at her and strolled back out to the alleyway with them. With one glance at the kings. I muttered curses. “This is simply untenable.”

Then I pointed sharply at their heads.

As they all divested themselves of their crowns, we walked down the alleyway, where there were, indeed, two merfolk guards in their yellow attire.

“I’ve had the librarians bring all the literature pertaining to the original merfolk to my castle. A room has been prepared for us. It should be to your comforts,” Queen Alora explained. “I do warn you, as I said before, the breadth of information is vast. There will be much reading to be done, but first I’ll show you to your rooms so you may unpack and freshen up. I’ve planned for lunch to be served with our studies in an hour.”

My gaze was bloody everywhere as we walked to the Merfolk Queen’s castle. The sand crunched beneath my boots

on the thin streets and the noise level was a new experience for me. There were so many merfolk talking in their high-pitched voices it would be impossible to listen in on any one conversation.

Seashells coated the storefronts like grapevines and coral dotted the windows in colorful quirks. Merchants displayed Fae figurines and fishbone knives, seashell jewelry, lotions, swimwear, and so much more in their windows. In the middle of a courtyard, a small park full of merfolk children on swings and slides had rainbow sandboxes, while dogs barked periodically next to their owners.

All the while, thousands of yellow fish swam above the glass dome lighting the entire area in an ethereal glow of relaxation and mysticism.

“My Fae,” I whispered, staring up at a section of poles hanging from the dome. There were beautiful merfolk swinging around them in the most complex of moves, using their arms or their legs to keep them twirling...and *twirling*. “That is incredible.”

“They are much sought after,” Queen Alora stated proudly. “The carnival troupe they work for is located in this city, but they do travel occasionally. I’ve heard the show is always exquisite.”

King Athon grunted and watched the aerialists. “I have seen them before, and you’re correct. They are a splendid group to watch.”

King Elon appraised them in appreciation. “They are *wonderful*. I shall have to hire them for a party I wish to have.”

“You’ll need to contact the carnival far in advance,” Queen Alora warned. “I’ve heard rumors they are extremely selective on what events they accept.”

The Gorgon King nodded. “I shall do that. I imagine they would love what I have in mind.” His lips curled into a secretive smile—which was entirely discomfiting.

King Traevon bent down to my height and captured my attention by pointing discreetly in front of us. “That is where I

purchase those bath beads from, my daughter. The ones you were asking about.”

I nibbled on my lower lip. I did not want to tell him I had stolen two bottles from his personal bathroom to take to the Shifter Kingdom. “Um...we will have to go there then and purchase more.”

An emerald gaze fell upon me from the corner of his eye. “Or, perhaps, you may simply return mine.”

Cringing, I tilted my face back from his. “I know not what you are referencing.”

“At least say that with a straight face.” King Traevon snorted and straightened to his full height. “That was pathetic.”

Queen Mikko snickered softly. And nodded.

“You’re supposed to be the nice one,” I grumbled at her.

She merely shrugged. “A toddler could have done better.”

I threw my hands up in the air and sighed heavily. “I am beginning to feel like my life is one grand jest.” I pointed a finger into the air sharply. “And, might I say, it could use more bath beads since they do not last long in large tubs when an imbecile does not know how to use them properly.”

Father blinked at me in confusion. Our tubs were not overlarge...because we were not built like shifters. Fortunately, he did not open his mouth to argue.

“Shall we move along?” King Athon glared straight at me. “Or would you like to go shopping during our quest to keep everyone from dying in this realm?”

“Fine point.” I motioned forward and smiled with fangs flashing. “Let us go, great leader. Keep us on track.”

The Shifter King *sarled*. “You are starting to aggravate me, elf.”

I reached a hand over my shoulder and patted my back.

“All right.” King Traevon coughed behind his fist deliberately, capturing all of our attention. “Mayhap, we

should move along, as King Athon suggested before we draw too much attention to ourselves.” He tilted his head slightly to the right.

As one, we all looked in that direction.

Discreet we were not at the moment.

Especially, as a table full of merfolk patrons had their faces planted against the window of the brasserie we stood next to, watching and eating, like we were the most captivating show.

And they waved. How sweet...

Fortunately, it did not appear that they knew who we were.

One could hope, anyway.

The Merfolk Queen cursed and quickly turned her back to the window, adjusting her hooded cloak as she did so. King Elon started laughing and waved back at them.

Queen Mikko groaned, “Oh my Fae. Now, that is humiliating.” The tiny Caster Queen herded us, quite forcefully, away from the window and toward the castle I could now see above the nearby buildings. “If we are not careful, everyone will know we are here.”

I rearranged my sweater she had managed to yank down too far on the left side, grumbling, “You’re much stronger than you look.”

“I know.” Her smile held the essence of the predators of the swamps she lived in. “Do try to remember that.”

A shiver worked down my spine, so I held my head up higher as we maneuvered through merfolk coming and going all around.

We entered the castle gates through a small back entrance for servants, and soon we were slipping into the Merfolk Queen’s colorful stone and coral castle through the servants’ living area.

Queen Alora lowered her hood with a contented sigh and marched straight up a thin stairwell, lit sconces chasing the shadows away. “I’ll show you to your rooms. There is

probably thirty minutes left now before lunch is served, so I'll have a trusted servant sent to your rooms in fifteen minutes to direct you to the reserved study."

I scratched the back of my neck as we followed her up the stairs in single file. I needed a bath. Badly. Studying my fingers, I had sand beneath my nails and embedded deep into the cuticles.

I hadn't even touched the ground!

My eyebrows furrowed in thought. "It is possible I will be a few minutes late, Your Royal Highness. I need to bathe away the sand."

Laughter fell from the Merfolk Queen's mouth.

King Elon snorted. "Princess Trixie, if you manage to find a way to get rid of it all, you must tell me your secret."

CHAPTER 14

Surprise of a princess:

I met the most interesting individual.

Would I want to meet him again? No.

But I did meet him.

And I can say I lived to tell the tale.

“*O*w!” I rubbed at my forehead where it had just slammed down onto the book I’d placed on the table. I blinked blurry eyes down at the page I’d read five times already...and fallen asleep. I slurred drowsily, “Shit.”

Father reached over from next to me from where he sat, grabbed the back of my shirt, and yanked me upright. He did not even stop reading his own book. “That makes three times, my daughter. Mayhap, it is time for you to take your leave for bed.”

“We’ve been reading for three days.” I used my fist to scrub at my eyes brutally. “There is barely any time left. I cannot sleep.”

Across the long, thin table from me, King Elon arched his back on his chair, his bones popping harshly. “We have to find something soon.”

“Let us go over what we know so far...once again.” Queen Mikko set her book down on the table, where she sat on the right side of the Gorgon King. “Queen Alora has told us that the original merfolk was killed because he would not use his

royal aurapower to heal his people. Their rage built up, and still he did not ease their emotions. So, in their fit of fury, they hired an assassin to kill him.”

“Which has nothing to do with lovers.” Queen Alora sighed and chucked the book she was reading across the room to the “pile” we had deemed worthless. She reached in front of the Gorgon King from where she sat on the left side of him and lifted another book from the center of the table. “This book has told us that his remains were buried. But we do not know where.” She dropped it heavily back to the table.

King Athon kicked his booted feet up onto the table in front of me, sitting close to my right. He wiggled the book in his hands. “We know that the assassination failed. His lover...” The Shifter King did not say the name aloud out of respect for the two across the table. The text hadn’t said it, either, but we had read between the lines. “She decided that she could not do it in the end. She loved him too much to murder him.”

I leaned on my elbows over my book and rubbed at my forehead harshly, rumbling, “The question is, who killed him then?”

King Traevon stopped reading and snapped his head up from the pages. “Here is a thought. The original merfolk was already having an affair. Who is to say that he didn’t have another lover?”

Queen Alora groaned. “Fae, help me. I hope it is not that. I could accept their true love. They loved each other before the Fae stepped in and meddled and added a mate. But, not *another* one.”

“I do not think it is that,” I grumbled. “I think it could be other lovers. Another couple. Because I agree with you. He was in love with her. The Fae shoving a mate on them, they could agree to. There was nothing to be done about it if they wanted children.”

And my own soul mate had proven that with his ruthless thoughts for an heir.

King Elon shook his head. “I don’t agree with any of those ideas.” He tipped his head back and let his long, shamrock green braids fall almost to the floor. “It feels like we are missing something.”

Queen Mikko’s brown-mist eyes widened. “Oh, you are right, King Elon. We are forgetting one important person.”

My tired gaze snapped to hers. “Who?”

Her chuckle was incredulous, her attention flicking to each of us quickly. “The mate! We’ve been paying so much attention to the original merfolk having a criminal affair, that he was the bad man in this, that we haven’t researched her at all. Who is to say that she wasn’t worse than him? Especially, if he didn’t love her.”

A deep silence permeated the room...before we all jumped up and raced toward the “pile.”

Books flew through the air. Few were saved.

In the end, we knocked every other book we hadn’t read yet off the table and plunked our new selection down.

We stood and stared at the two lonely tomes before us.

MARIA’S DITTY

MARIA’S COOKBOOK

I picked a piece of sand off my forehead and mumbled, “It is not looking too promising for us.”

King Athon sat back down on his chair and grabbed the cookbook. “You may be unaware of this, elf, but there are some women who cook for their loved ones. Foodstuff says a lot about the person—and who they are cooking for.”

A certain shifter baker came to mind. *Fury burned.*

I didn’t even try to stop it. I whapped the back of his head.

Then I snarled, “I am *well aware* that some women cook for their loved ones, believe me, shifter. You do not need to throw that in my face.”

The Gorgon King groaned and rubbed his head with both of his hands, while my father took a step closer to me.

King Athon's head slowly turned in my direction. "I am going to forgive you for that, since you are overwrought with worry and too exhausted to make sound decisions. But...do not ever hit me again when it is not warranted." Solid black eyes didn't blink as he watched my face crumble in mortification. "Take your king's advice, Princess Trixie. Sleep for a few hours."

Queen Alora took her seat and nodded in agreement. "A few hours will not hurt. Not with only these two books to read." She pulled the song tome in front of her. "Rest yourself."

I bit my fangs into my lower lip and mumbled, "My apologies, King Athon. That was entirely uncalled for." I sighed and turned to a couch in the study. I was too weary to walk to the room I had been assigned. "I will sleep here, though."

Stumbling to the couch, I fell face first onto it.

That was the last I remembered. Slumber stole me.

"OPEN YOUR EYES, MY DAUGHTER." Father poked the tip of my nose.

"Huh?" I slurred and peeked open my right eye. The left side of my face was smashed against the cushion of a couch in the study. I lifted my hand and clumsily swiped at the drool at the edge of my mouth. "What?"

"We have found something. It was in MARIA'S DITTY." King Traevon grinned smugly. "No one else could figure it out, but I did. She was a gambler."

Sluggishly, I pushed myself up on my arms and turned to plant my royal ass on the couch. I rubbed over my face in the silent room and asked, "Where is everyone else?"

“They are changing their attire.” Father’s lips twitched. “Yours will do just fine for where we are going.”

“And where is that?” I looked down at my rumpled sweater and black leather pants. “It cannot be any place too impressive, if this is acceptable.”

King Traevon chuckled. “You are right, my daughter. It is a gambling hall.” He wagged his red brows and crossed his arms over his chest. “Queen Alora found it this morning. It is at the utter most end of Cosimian Trench. And its name is... Maria’s.”

“Bloody Fairy, that is a shining clue right there.” I stood stiffly and cracked my neck both ways. “How long was I asleep for?”

“Nine hours. We are on day four now.” Father widened his eyes and cocked his head. “We’re in crunch time, so we’re hopeful this is the right place.”

“I do hope it is.” I picked between my front teeth with my fingernail. “I swear, I cannot get this sand out of my mouth. It is horrible.”

“Next time, keep your mouth closed in the ocean and breathe through your nose.” Father snorted and pressed his hand to my back, ushering us out of the room. “It took me three dreadful times here before I learned that trick.”

“*Hm.* I do not believe that Queen Mikko knows that yet. We should tell her, since she assisted me with breathing.” I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair, attempting to straighten it as much as possible. “I need to use the facilities before we leave.”

Father waited until I was done doing my business, and then we met the other royals at the entrance to the helps’ quarters.

I pulled the hood up on my sweater, adjusting it as best I could. It wasn’t as large as my others, but it covered my red hair well enough. I yanked on the front of it and tried to hide my eyes, though that was a losing battle.

None of us was particularly chatty today on the streets, our stress and anticipation too great. We kept our heads down and

followed Queen Alora closely, managing to evade any peddlers who tried to stop us. No one looked twice at us, since we were dressed like commoners, merfolk too busy with their own lives.

The farther we traveled, the darker the streets became.

Yellow fish were still above the glass dome, but they were scarcer than at the central location. It cast an ominous cloud over where we were traveling and the locality of where we were now. The sandy streets narrowed even further and fewer merfolk walked by.

Eventually, we began to stick out for simply traveling in such a large number. We stuck close together. There was no hiding that we were there, strangers walking down desolate streets with broken buildings.

I swallowed on a dry throat and glanced around. It was vaguely frightening, the darkness almost complete. But there were still merfolk peeking out a window occasionally, or smoking a caster-spelled cigar on a street corner.

It took two hours for us to arrive at our destination.

I blinked up at the pink sign that tilted slightly to the right.

Maria's.

Oddly enough, the sign wasn't faded or broken at all like the rest of the buildings' signs nearby. It was as if it were brand new. It positively shined as if someone scrubbed it daily.

"This is peculiar." I yanked on my hood again for the hundredth time since leaving the Merfolk Queen's castle. "Is there anyone even inside?" There were no lights on, the building abandoned and the stone with cracks like spider webs growing from the ground up.

"We go around back," Queen Alora answered. "I was confused at first sight, too." She started walking toward a pitch black alleyway. "Come along."

I walked directly behind Father. And my soul mate practically breathed down my neck from behind. I was

thoroughly protected by dominating men, and, right now, I was not going to complain.

I flinched when a dog started barking furiously at us from inside a half shattered window. It was inside Maria's, but there was no one else with it. At least, from what I could see—which was even more alarming a thought.

Queen Alora knocked on a door at the back of the decaying building, this doorway looking just as new as the sign on the front of the building. She pulled her hood down farther over her forehead right before the door opened.

A merfolk with muscles the size of my soul mate's held onto the door and lifted a blue eyebrow as he scanned our group. "Yes?"

"We are looking to speak to the owner of Maria's." Queen Alora enunciated clearly. "Is that individual available?"

"No." He started to close the door.

King Athon reached over swiftly and slammed his hand against the wood, holding it open. His lips curved at the edges in a cruel smile, and he stated, "I think you are going to let us inside, aren't you, my friend?"

The merfolk stared. "You don't want to do this. Trust me, walk away before you embarrass yourself."

"Oh, I think I really want to do this." King Athon shoved the door hard, breaking it straight off its hinges back into the merfolk. The man stumbled with the door wobbling in his quick grasp to catch it. The King of Shifters tilted his shoulders to squeeze past the Merfolk Queen, stalking right inside the doorway. He lifted a booted foot and slammed it against the door the merfolk was using as a shield, sending the man flying backward down a hallway in a heap of limbs and shattered wood pieces. King Athon grinned and rolled his shoulders, saying, "Yes, I definitely wanted to do that."

King Traevon moved forward, also, squeezing past a frozen Merfolk Queen, and patted my soul mate's shoulder as he maneuvered past him in the thin hallway. "Well done, King Athon."

And...Father stepped right on the unconscious merfolk as he stalked farther down the hallway. My soul mate did the same, following in Father's wake.

"Right," Queen Mikko murmured. "As that just happened, I suggest we follow King Traevon and King Athon."

"Correctly so." King Elon snorted. "Are you well, Queen Alora? You are blocking the doorway."

The Queen of Merfolk sighed heavily and pointed at the merfolk lying on the ground. "I will have to come back and fuck that man."

The three of us stared in shock at the back of her hooded head, while King Traevon and King Athon disappeared around a corner of the hallway.

"Pardon me?" I asked cautiously.

"The urge," she stated bluntly. Then she walked through the doorway and stepped over him, continuing down the hall. She didn't look back as she stated, "Let us go. We cannot keep those two waiting, lest they kill everyone."

I glanced at the other two royals where we stood. I asked, "She should probably fuck him now, correct? What if this takes longer than expected?"

King Elon snorted. "Queen Alora knows what she is doing. She is old enough to know her limits."

Queen Mikko sighed and walked inside.

I followed. And King Elon trailed behind me.

We did not step on the Merfolk Queen's future bedmate.

Respectfully so.

Turning the corner where the other three had disappeared to, we glanced around our surroundings. It was another long hallway, dimly lit but impeccably cleaned. At the stairs at the end of the hall, we trotted down into the basement of the building.

There, the other three rulers waited.

Because they were unconscious in an otherwise empty stone room with no exit.

“Shit,” I scurried backward. Right as a lead ball swung from the ceiling. It smacked the Caster Queen in the head and disappeared, knocking her back into me. I caught her dead weight, the Caster Queen now knocked out, and dipped low with her. “Get down, King Elon!”

Instead, he pivoted to the side, caught the lead ball that swung down, and yanked brutally. He ripped it from the ceiling and dropped it to the ground, his green, reptilian eyes scanning above.

He should have been looking at the ground.

A sledgehammer appeared behind him, swung up, and bashed the back of his head. The Gorgon King fell forward, falling on his face onto the ground, out cold.

“Oh...fuck.” I gently placed the Caster Queen on the ground and let my royal firepower flame in my eyes. I stayed squatted and didn’t move. I barely breathed. Whatever this was, it was tied to movement for each hit to be so well-placed. I yelled loudly through clenched teeth, “Wake up!”

I eyed their bodies for any flinch.

But...none moved.

“Fuck,” I growled. Then I shot my power down into my Fae-spark where my soul mate was. I pushed forcefully as fast as I could to heal his injury until I saw his eyes slowly peek open. Swiftly, I cut off the power. “Do not move, shifter. If you do, you will be hit again.”

He *snarled* softly, and his solid black eyes caught mine. “A sledgehammer came out of nowhere.”

“The same happened to King Elon. You are not special in that regard.” I ground my teeth together. “What do we do?”

“I would not argue if you wanted to burn this place down.” He *huffed* hard. “That was not a normal blow to the head. There was power behind it. It fucking hurt.”

“It was supposed to,” a smooth male voice echoed across the room. “How are you two awake?”

My attention slammed to...the caster leaning against the far wall. I bared my fangs in his direction. “This is your doing, caster?” My soul mate couldn’t turn his head to look at him, so any information I gave would be wise.

The caster wore a long, black robe, tied around the waist, as if he had stepped out of the bathtub to talk to us. He brushed his short, red twiggy hair out of his right eye, watching the flames burn in my gaze. “It is my handiwork, Your Highness. Though, I am not impressed with the outcome.”

“Neither am I,” I stated. “Release this spell.”

“I do not think so.” He waved his hand grandly around the empty room, like it was precious. “You do not see what I see. And we are not open yet. Not for another four hours.”

Instantly, his words held meaning. “Are you the owner of Maria’s?”

“I am.”

“What is your name?” I asked, since my soul mate was staying silent.

“Ruben, Your Highness.” He lifted a red brow. “Do I get to ask a question now?”

“No. You harmed my companions. You get to answer my questions. However many I want to ask.”

Ruben laughed, the echo *intense*. “I will humor you for now. Go right ahead with your queries.”

I licked over my lower lip and glanced at my soul mate, unsure how to interrogate this caster. “Why is this gambling hall called Maria’s?” I took my eyes off my soul mate and peered back across the room to the man who made this mess. “This *is* a gambling hall, correct?”

“Yes, it is a gambling hall. Which I have protected for a long time.” Ruben cocked his head while he watched me as intensely as I scrutinized him. “The name of my business is obvious. It was named after a woman.”

“Who was the woman you named it after?”

He *tsked*. “For that answer you will give me one.”

“One question,” I bartered.

Ruben nodded amicably. “It was my first question. How are you *both* awake? And yes, I know the silent one is now playing possum.”

I chuckled softly. “I didn’t move.”

Instantly, his eyes narrowed on me. “That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one I can give. And it is the truth.”

Ruben’s eyes flicked back and forth between myself and the back of my soul mate’s head—conveniently, unable to see that he was a shifter—until a look of realization entered his gaze. “Ah. I understand. Now, I feel better about my trap.” He waved his right hand in the air lazily. “To answer your question, I did not name this establishment. It was given to me by the man who did open it. Maria was his wife.”

Air suddenly stalled inside my lungs. “Pardon me?”

“Maria was Jeremiah’s wife. He named it after her.” Ruben shook his head in amusement. “That old bastard still loves her dead memory, too.”

“Jeremiah is still alive?” I asked cautiously.

“He is. You can find him downtown if that is who you are looking for. He owns the carnival troupe in Cosimian Trench. Simply ask around. Anyone can point you in the right direction.”

My head was spinning with this information. “Thank you for humoring me, Ruben. You have been a great help.” Then I lifted a red brow. “Now...might we leave peacefully?”

“I thought you would never ask.” He snapped his fingers.

I sucked in a harsh breath and looked around. We were in the alleyway behind Maria’s right in front of a perfectly fixed doorway, the royals prostrate as they had been. I mumbled, “Fucking Fairy, I do not ever want to meet that caster again.”

“I had control of his heartbeat the whole time. You were in no real danger.” King Athon rolled onto his back and stared up at the glass dome, rumbling in his brutal, gruff voice. “You were perfect down there, elf.”

“Why thank you.” I grinned, now feeling pleased with myself. I had done a fine job of extracting the information we needed, despite the circumstances.

Abruptly, the other royals started groaning and waking. They lifted their heads and squinted at their surroundings in confusion.

Until they were no longer confused, their memories rushing in fast. The Merfolk Queen was especially vexed, as this was her kingdom—and also she was battling an urge—but she managed to keep from tearing down the door. They all quieted when I told them what I had uncovered.

“So we are going to a carnival.” King Elon played with one of his long, shamrock green braids. “This could be amusing.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess, you also think what just happened was entertaining?”

“It was not boring.” His silver skin crinkled at the edges of his eyes when he smiled. “Why not add to our evening and make it a real party? These eyes of mine could use some inspiration.”

I wasn't looking anywhere near his eyes. “Let us make it a party then.”

CHAPTER 15

Confession of a princess:

I think it is high time that I start exercising more. After all, one cannot be too careful. If you must run, you must run.

And falling before your peers is never wise.

It leads to an embarrassing bout of ass-in-the-air.

“And a royal should never be subject to that humiliation.”

“We must hurry.” Queen Alora walked briskly on her long legs, leading us back through the sand streets of her kingdom. “The nightly carnival will start in less than three hours. We don’t have much time to arrive before they won’t allow us entry.”

I panted behind her, my chest pumping from exertion. “My legs are much shorter than yours, Your Royal Highness.”

“Then jog,” she growled. “Queen Mikko’s legs are even shorter than yours, and she is not complaining. So do be quiet before you annoy me further.”

Queen Mikko snickered softly beside me and cast a quick glance in my direction. She leaned toward my person and whispered, “Do not feel upset. She is merely experiencing the urge.”

“I know,” I grumbled. “Though, I am not that rude when it happens.”

Behind me, King Elon hissed, “Mayhap, he is her mate.”

“I can hear you!” Queen Alora snapped and looked over her shoulder, two white, large starbursts in her eyes. “*Please*, do not wish that man on me for a lifetime. I do not want an overgrown idiot for a mate.”

My lips trembled...until I burst out laughing on a breathless pant, thinking how the tides had turned. “One never knows. He *was* trying to warn us.”

Queen Alora blinked. The starbursts turned back into swirling sparkles in her solid blue eyes. “I did not think of it that way.” Then the Merfolk Queen returned her attention to where she was speed walking. “That was a very astute observation.”

“You are most welcome,” I panted heavily. My thighs burned and my stomach was beginning to cramp, but I glanced at my soul mate on the other side of me. “If you did not understand the conversation, the man you rendered unconscious has put the easy-going Merfolk Queen before us into an urge. I think you remember him. You stepped on his head.”

The corners of King Athon’s lips curved up into a wicked grin. “Yes, I think I do remember him.”

From the back of our group, King Traevon griped, “Queen Alora, will you be able to function properly without ridding yourself of your ailment first?”

“I will have to,” she replied resolutely...her Fae damned feet walking even faster. “There is no time to waste.”

Fairy take it all...I started to jog behind her.

Queen Mikko joined me.

And...the long-legged men fucking laughed.

“This must be the most despicable group of rulers ever,” I snapped and pumped my arms, keeping my boots thumping down on the sand. “Queen Mikko and I are short. You could, at least, try to be accommodating. This is how we were born.”

King Athon kept chuckling...while he walked. “Would you prefer for me to throw you over my shoulder, Princess?”

My eyebrows raised. Now, that was a thought.

It would give my legs a much needed respite.

“Do not even think about it, my heir,” King Traevon barked from behind. “Use some decorum.”

“And do try not to make a spectacle.” Queen Alora tipped her head discreetly at a few passersby who were giving our diverse group odd looks. We were fairly charging through the streets. It was being noticed. “Others are already looking at us.”

Queen Mikko asked—somewhat calmly, “How much further is it? Princess Trixie and I are taking two steps to your one.”

“Another two hours at this rate.” Queen Alora flat out shoved two merfolk from in front of us, the streets near her castle far busier than on the outskirts. “The carnival is clear on the other side of Cosimian Trench. In the newest section of the city.”

The Caster Queen and I groaned at the same time.

This was not going to be pleasant.

And it wasn't...

Because when all was said and done, my soul mate did have to carry me, the gawking merfolk be damned. He also had Queen Mikko flopped over his other shoulder, so it wasn't entirely too humiliating. Running for that long was simply not feasible when one had not trained for it. The Caster Queen and I had completely collapsed to the sand—more grit in my teeth—before we had waved the white flag and demanded assistance.

“Finally,” Queen Alora muttered irritably. “We are here.”

King Athon bent at the knees and slowly set the Caster Queen and me down on our feet. He held on to my elbow when I wobbled at first, steadying my swaying body. “Are you well, elf?”

I rubbed at the front of my hips with my free hand as that had taken most of the impact from his shoulder. “I am fine. At

least, we made it here on time.” I gently pulled my arm away from him and readjusted my hood. “I may need to start running more, though, in the future.”

“Hear, hear.” Queen Mikko stretched her body side to side. “If this is what we’ll have to achieve, I’ll need to be better prepared.”

King Traevon rested his hand on my shoulder, stating seriously, “You did well, my heir. Do not think you did not. I am not sure if I could have run as long as you did.”

I sighed and nodded, turning to face the carnival’s entrance. The building was an overlarge piece of yellow coral, with the inside hollowed out for the festivities. It was as tall as my own castle and half as wide. I breathed in an immense breath. “My Fae, that is a striking building. However did they get that in here?”

“The same way Queen Mikko transferred the bridge troll into her dungeon.” Queen Alora stalked toward the entrance, with King Elon on her heels. “A caster spell.”

I blinked and glanced at the Caster Queen. Father had once said that her kingdom’s coffers were sporadically low. How that could be possible with the amount of coin her people made on spells for the realm was highly confusing. I asked curiously, “How much would something like this cost?”

Queen Mikko snorted. “It was probably done in trade, just as most of our spells are. It is how my kingdom operates.” Her dark face stared up at me, and her smile turned feral. “Except for certain spells. Those, we charge much for, as you well know as a royal.”

I smiled just as bitingly. “Yes. My fireproof-spelled clothes thank you for your generosity.”

King Athon jerked his head toward the Merfolk Queen and Gorgon King, where they were speaking to merfolk securing the admissions booth. “Shall we? I believe that they are having issues gaining entry. They are saying the carnival is at full capacity already.”

I stared at his right ear. I would do well to remember his hearing was bloody frightening. Even with a merfolk's shrill voice, we were not close to where they conferred.

Hurrying our steps, we stopped behind the two rulers.

Queen Alora growled, "I do not care what you have to say or about the regulations. You will allow us entry. It is a matter of import."

The merfolk man stared down at her from his booth, where seashells and fish bones hung from the ceiling—the Merfolk Queen's shoulders barely clearing the stand. He tightened the purple jacket he wore with harsh, irritated jerks and stated adamantly, "You are not allowed inside. If you continue to argue, I will call the guards."

The Queen of Merfolk stared. Then...she snorted softly. "I commend you on your loyalty to guidelines and law." She lowered her hood and gazed at him with all the regal airs a ruler has. "I am your queen. You will do as I say. And you will tell no one that we are here."

His solid green eyes, with frantically swirling white sparkles, stared in horror at her. As she pulled her hood back over her multihued hair and forehead, he stumbled over his desperate words, "My apologies, Your Royal Highness. I didn't recognize you. Of course, you may enter any time you like."

Queen Alora nodded regally. "If you might assist me further, do you know where I might find the owner, Jeremiah, inside?"

The merfolk still stared in panic. "The show has started, so he'll be on stage right now."

"And what does he perform here? How shall I recognize him?"

That shocked the merfolk out of his distressed state. He stated incredulously, "He is the star of the show." He turned and pointed to the large sketch of a handsome merfolk behind him. "You cannot miss him."

I PRESSED my hand against a large, round glass enclosure that was filled with water and held a massive, purple glowing jellyfish in it. In the darkness where I stood, I peeked around the edge of the glass. There were twenty of these enclosures surrounding the back of the playhouse, with six royals all spying around one to watch the ten aerialists high on their poles as they twirled to a lively beat. The musicians stood or sat beneath the performers on the upraised stage, playing their instruments and stomping their feet, while the audience in front of us clapped along to the rhythm and cheered wildly to the amazing feats the merfolk were executing.

Ribbons of all colors whipped in circles in the air, hanging from the bottom of the poles. And merfolk performers sparkled with their attire fully gemmed in different shades. They flipped and contorted their bodies in marvelous feats of agility and strength to keep the pole spinning for them at swift speeds.

My eyes caught on the merfolk in the center.

He was the star.

Jeremiah.

His short hair was the shade of a golden sunset and his skin was as dark as a stunning, black diamond. When he smiled at the audience on each front twirl, his solid golden eyes with white sparkles danced in mirth and his lithe muscles bunched with power.

I tilted my head and evaluated him.

The merfolk certainly knew how to entertain and clearly enjoyed it, as if he were feeding off the audience's delight. It was curious, though, that as the owner of the establishment he continued to perform. It either meant that he simply loved what he did...or he was an egotistical bastard that needed the praise.

Or, mayhap, he was simply bored with life.

I leaned back and looked over at the Merfolk Queen to the right where she hid behind the jellyfish enclosure next to me. No one could hear us over the uproar, so I asked loudly, “What is your plan?”

Queen Alora didn’t speak. She pointed behind her in the darkness and started slipping back in that direction. The rest of us followed until we were in a yellow hallway that flickered with light seeping through the small holes of the coral. The Merfolk Queen turned around to face us, ordering decisively, “Let us find his office. We will wait and ambush him.”

As this was her kingdom, we would obey.

“This is a large space.” King Elon glanced back and forth, one way continuing on and the other returning back to the playhouse. “There were many of these hallways, too. How long do the aerialists perform for?”

The Merfolk Queen’s forehead wrinkled. “Mayhap, another fifteen minutes.”

King Traevon shook his head. “I like your plan, but that is not enough time for us to search.”

“We split up,” Queen Mikko suggested. “Once we have found and detained him, we bring him back here. This will be our meet spot.”

My father’s jaw clenched. “I do not want my heir by herself.”

“King Traevon, I can handle myself perfectly fine,” I reasoned. “There is not time for us to argue about this.”

Queen Alora smirked. “You are correct, Princess Trixie. We won’t be arguing. You *will* be coming with me, because I am in agreement with your king. I do not want you running amok.”

I glanced at my king in a silent plea.

King Traevon ignored me. “Very well, Queen Alora. It doesn’t make sense for two individuals with royal firepower to be together. She may be with you, but do watch over her.”

“Of course.” Queen Alora pulled her hood down farther over her forehead. “We will all meet back here in a half an hour, hopefully with Jeremiah.” Her merfolk eyes snagged on mine. “Follow me.”

I sighed and trailed behind her like the dutiful heir I was, while the rest split up in a flash. But I muttered under my breath, “This is silly. I *can* take care of myself.”

“It is for your own safety, Princess Trixie.” She shook her head at me. “We cannot have you perish in my kingdom.”

I snorted and stayed silent after that.

Every room we came upon, we quickly looked inside and hurried to the next one before anyone noticed us spying on them.

And there were *many* rooms.

Queen Alora snuck a peek into a chamber on the right, while I did the same on the left. Then I grunted as she grabbed my elbow and yanked me quickly into the room she’d accessed, hurrying us inside. The Merfolk Queen shut the door again and smiled, stating, “What say you, Princess Trixie? Is this the right room?”

My jaw dropped as I turned in a slow circle, staring at the parchment sketches plastered to the yellow coral walls. Then I started laughing and wagging a finger at all the sketches of *the star*, muttering, “He is an egotistical bastard. I knew it!”

CHAPTER 16

Regret of a princess:

I want to know what I am heading in to.

For if I do not, I am weak.

*But sometimes my perseverance bites me in my Fae damned
ass.*

I should have done nothing.

I rushed to the desk at the end of the room and started rifling through his drawers, my eyes devouring all that I could find. “Start snooping, Your Royal Highness. We do not have all day.”

Queen Alora snorted but walked to the open shelving behind me. “We are going to detain him for information, Princess Trixie. There is no real need to...snoop. He will tell us all he knows shortly.”

I waded through reams of paper, grumbling, “It doesn’t hurt to be prepared. It may help if he tries to lie to us.”

“I am sure you remember what the troll looked like.” She sighed long and hard. “Believe me, he will talk.”

Pausing in my search, I looked back at her over my shoulder. “So we are simply going to torture everyone?”

“Hopefully, he is intelligent enough not to resist.” The Queen of Merfolk picked up a small figurine off the top shelf and examined it. “He is a successful business entrepreneur. I

do not think he is unwise. There may be hope we will not have to.”

I sighed and dropped the ledgers I held and walked to the small closet. “You are all extremely vexing individuals.” I opened the closet door wide and scanned the contents. A black, fur coat hung in the corner, the newest and shiniest item inside the cramped space. I quickly checked its pockets and found coin but nothing else. I pushed it aside and inspected the back of the wall, only seeing more coral, before straightening back up and staring at that flashy coat once more. “This merfolk is extremely vain.”

“We already know that,” Queen Alora mumbled absently, while she...pocketed the figurine she had been looking at.

I pulled the coat off its hook and showed it to her. “Have you ever seen such a shiny, black coat before? He would look utterly silly in this.”

The Merfolk Queen snorted, eyeing the offending item. “Yes, I would have to agree. That is a bit much.”

“It is soft, though.” I petted the black fur gently. “At least, it would be comfortable.”

The door opened suddenly.

And the star entered his office, still in his show attire.

I quickly hid the coat behind my back, even though it was too late. The merfolk would know we had been going through his possessions considering where we were standing in his office.

Jeremiah stared at the two of us, his attention ticking back and forth. His lips thinned and his eyes narrowed. “What are you doing in here?”

Queen Alora stepped around his desk and stated evenly, “We have come to talk with you, Jeremiah. We have questions we would appreciate having answered.”

As unobtrusively as I could, I slid my foot back and kicked the closet door shut as best I could.

Of course, it *banged* closed.

I bit my lower lip with my fangs.

That did not work out as planned. Unfortunately so.

His gaze slammed onto mine. “Really? Who are you?”

Queen Alora moved in front of me, cutting off his gaze. “That is unimportant right now. But if you would, I’d like for us to take a walk together so we may discuss an issue we are having.”

I leaned back against the closet and waited.

This was not going to go well. She had to know that.

He shut his office door soundly. “You steal into my private office and think I am simply going to leave with you?” His laughter was positively ugly. “Who do you think you are? Sit down. We’ll talk in here. *That*, is me being generous.”

I sighed and tilted, looking around the Merfolk Queen’s tall body. “Jeremiah, I would advise you to do as she says. You will not like it, otherwise. *That*, is me saving your Fae damned ass.”

Something...flittered in his gaze.

A slight twitch of the eye.

The barely there narrowing of his attention at my words.

And...horribly...it clicked inside my mind.

Oh, fuck.

My own eyes widened. “Queen Alora, do you remember the gentlemen shifters we spoke to up on that mountain? How they looked just like our other shifter friends?” I sucked in a large breath. “I think...he has something in common with them.”

Instantly, Queen Alora’s back stiffened in front of me.

Jeremiah’s eyes intensified further, his ire growing. “What are you two talking about? You’ve come to talk to me about shifters?”

Queen Alora lowered her head and stared at him from under her hood, her stance hardening for a fight. She snarled

furiously, “What are you doing in my kingdom, Fae?”

Jeremiah blinked...and then the most bitter smile I’ve ever seen spread across his lips. He purred, “How did you know?”

I started to edge to the side, wanting a clear line of sight to fry his ass if need be. “You flinched at the curse.”

Queen Alora took a menacing step toward him. “Answer my question.”

But, Jeremiah’s attention snagged back on me. To the floor behind me. His back straightened and his eyes crashed to mine. “You have my coat.” It was a blunt statement.

I raised a red brow and pulled my hands in front of me, holding up the offending thing. “I do not believe this coat is worth your life. You should answer her question, Jeremiah, and quit stalling.” I truly was trying to save his arrogant ass.

The oddest look passed over his face.

It came...went...returned...and then stayed.

The Fae inhaled deeply and a beautiful grin crossed his lips. “A new wife has found me. Praise be.”

Queen Alora froze in place. Her head cocked to the side as she watched him. She snapped dubiously, “Pardon me?”

“Not you.” His eyes returned to me. “The beauty behind you.”

The Merfolk Queen and I glanced at one other.

“Huh?” I mumbled dumbly.

Jeremiah chuckled softly. “I love it when it’s a surprise.” He nodded his head of golden hair at me. “You are my wife now.”

Confusion took hold. I muttered, “What do you mean I’m your wife?”

The Fae sauntered across the room toward me and leaned into my personal space. A sensual smile curled his plump lips as he whispered, “What don’t you understand, little elf? You are exactly that. My wife. You will honor and obey—”

“Uh, no,” I growled and stepped away quickly, slamming my back against the coral wall. “I think you have me mistaken for someone else.” I pointed a finger to my right, not giving a Fae fuck I was throwing the Merfolk Queen to the Fae now. “Maybe her?”

He didn’t even look away from me, like he could only see me and nothing else. “My little elf, if you are worried about my prowess you have nothing to fear. I am more than capable of taking care of your sexual needs.”

I blinked in horror. “No. No, I am definitely not worried about that.”

But...a certain Shifter King might be.

Queen Alora caught my attention over his shoulder, and she mouthed, “*Give him the coat.*”

I blinked and jerked forward, grabbing his right hand. Then I shoved the blasted coat against his chest and pressed his hand to it. I quickly let go and stared wide-eyed as he held it in his arms.

Jeremiah laughed. “Oh, no. That tale is false.” He stepped forward and pressed his body against mine. The Fae was *excited*. There was no missing that against my stomach. He whispered, “I will make you happy, little elf. Do not fret.”

“Queen Alora?” I said frantically, the royal firepower inside starting to take hold. “Mayhap, you should get him away from me, before I kill him.”

Without warning, the office door opened.

“I...think I have found them,” King Elon called loudly. There was a quiet moment, before he shouted, “You may want to hurry! Your heir is causing problems again!”

The Fae pressed harder against me and he snarled, “Who are these people to you?”

Uncontrollably, my eyes became flames. I screamed, “Queen Alora! Get him the fuck off me!”

Instantly, two sets of hands were on him, yanking him away.

I sucked in a large breath and bent over, placing my hands on my knees and trying to calm my royal firepower.

Queen Alora struggled to keep ahold of the Fae, but Father had him tight in his grip and grabbed his throat, ripping the Fae from the Merfolk Queen.

Jeremiah grunted in pain as his back hit the ground, with my father kneeling beside him, keeping his right fist tight around the cracked Fae's neck.

Father bent low and shouted furiously, "You dare touch my daughter?" He squeezed tighter, causing the Fae to choke. "*No one* touches her without her permission."

King Athon and Queen Mikko raced into the room.

Staying bent over, I dropped my head and stared at the ground. I couldn't look at my soul mate right now. Not with that murderous look on his face. Not with my royal firepower so close to the surface that I would fry that Fae motherfucker.

King Athon snarled, "What did I just hear?"

"You missed all the excitement," King Elon hissed jovially. "This moronic individual King Traevon is welcoming to the party had our dear Princess Trixie pinned to the wall." He waved a hand flippantly. "And as you can see, the moron *liked* it."

King Athon *snarled* violently and stared pacing, before he veered off course and slammed his booted foot down onto the Fae's hard crotch. Pelvic bones...*snapped and cracked*...as the Fae screamed past the choking hold he was in. The King of Shifters growled down at him, "That is just the start."

I...definitely needed to leave this room before I exploded, as this was not at all relaxing.

Queen Alora rubbed at her forehead. "I should have stepped in faster." She groaned and shook her head. "That did not go well."

I grunted. That was an understatement.

"He is Fae." The Merfolk Queen sighed heavily. "I believe he is a selkie, since he now believes Princess Trixie is his wife

—after she stole his coat.”

King Athon slammed his booted foot down again.

At the sound of pain, I pushed up and marched right for the doorway. “I need a moment.”

“Daughter?” King Traevon asked, worry coloring his tone.

“I’m going to kill the Fae if I don’t leave.” I shook my head and kept moving. “I need to calm down. A few minutes should do.”

Queen Mikko followed me out the door.

And down the hallway so I couldn’t hear the screams.

She rested against the coral wall with me, staying silent.

I used every trick I could think of for peace. Lying in my own bedchambers. Listening to the wind whistle through the trees. Laughing at some of my mother’s antics. My cousin sitting on a beach with me. Flying on my Fae-gifted pegasus over Gatlin Grove.

And it was enough. The royal firepower within settled.

I grumbled, “How badly are they going to torture him?”

The Caster Queen hummed quietly. “If you did not like what we did before to the troll, this will be ten times worse.”

My head thumped back against the coral wall. “I’m not fond of that idea.” I rubbed at my chest over my Fae-spark, my soul mate’s fury and bloodlust burning hot. “We should go back.”

She lifted a brow. “Will you try to stop them?”

“It is a strong possibility.” I shook my head in frustration. “I do not like your brand of torture. And I think I know of a way to make him talk.”

CHAPTER 17

Mercy of a princess:

There are things I have done in my life that I am ashamed of.

And there are times I know I made the right choices.

This time I have done both.

I am mated to a brutal shifter with no mercy.

So I must be the one to grant it.

“**S**top!” I bellowed and threw my hands up. *Blood.*
So much blood already. “I know what to do!”

King Traevon and King Athon looked up from where they kneeled over the suffering Fae, with their hands painted crimson.

I stomped right toward them and shooed my hands. “Get away from him. He will talk to me without this.”

Father’s gaze ran over my features closely. “Are you positive you want to be near him?”

“It is not his fault for what he is.” I flicked my hands at them again. “Shove aside and let me handle this.”

When King Traevon next spoke, his words were stern and blunt. “I will kill him if he touches you again.”

“Move,” I simply said.

King Traevon gradually stood and walked two steps away, crossing his arms and keeping a close eye on me.

My soul mate... He didn’t move.

King Athon knelt on the ground with death in his eyes, but he did pull his claws away from the Fae's torn up chest.

I sighed and took my father's spot across from the Shifter King. Looking down upon Jeremiah's tear streaked face, I leaned forward and gently wiped them away. I stated softly, "I understand now. You can't help it."

The Fae swallowed heavily, with true love in his eyes. "You are mine. My wife. Mine to cherish."

"I know," I whispered. I continued to brush my fingers over his cheeks, petting his skin softly. "But you know nothing about me."

"I will learn," he promised. "We will have a lifetime to learn one another." He licked over his lips, tasting his own blood. "They will kill me, though. You know that."

I chuckled softly and shook my head. "Believe me, I know exactly what they are capable of." I bent my face directly over his. "There is one way to be on their lenient side. And that is to tell us what we need to know. What we came here for. That is all that truly matters to them right now. It is too important."

His shredded chest heaved as he took in a breath. "What is it, little elf?"

"Maria." My eyes flicked back and forth between his, watching his reaction to the name. A flash of pain deeper than the physical passed through his gaze...and another tear rolled down his cheek. I bit my lower lip and repeated gently, "We need to know about your wife, Maria."

"She is dead." More tears rolled down his hot skin.

I nodded slowly and used the back of my hand to wipe away his fresh tears. "Was Maria mated to the original merfolk?"

Instantly, he bared his teeth. "That fucking merfolk was a menace."

"Was he?" I asked and cocked my head. "Why do you say that?"

“He hurt his own people by not taking their pain away.” Jeremiah shook his head as much as he could. “A ruler should have compassion for his people. That merfolk had none. He was too angry to care.”

I blinked slowly. “He was angry at the Fae.”

“Yes,” he spat. “His mate, my precious Maria, was not enough for him. He hurt my wife again and again with his twisted love.”

“And that made you angry.” My eyes held his. “Did you kill him?”

Jeremiah’s chest shuddered as he sighed. “Maria asked me to.”

I rubbed my lips together, since that didn’t answer my question. “How did you meet Maria?”

“She liked to play cards late at night at my old gambling hall. We talked for a year before I asked her if she would like to wear my coat one night.” Blood soaked spit flew from his mouth as he chuckled. “Maria knew what I was and loved me. She accepted my coat.”

“*Hm.*” I pulled the sleeve of my sweater down in the silence and wiped the blood off his lips. “Did you know that if you killed her mate she would be in horrible pain?”

“I did.” His voice wobbled slightly. “I didn’t want to hurt her.”

“I understand.” I swallowed hard and asked, “Who killed him then?”

Jeremiah’s face scrunched in pain. “She did.” His body started to tremble and tears soaked his cheeks once more. “I tried to stop her, but she wouldn’t listen.”

I inhaled heavily and asked bluntly, “Where are his remains?”

“I hid them so no one would think less of her.” His eyes lifted to the ceiling. He stared there for long moments, lost in his memories. “Do you know that she killed herself afterward? The pain was too much.”

“I am sorry,” I stated honestly and took his hand to hold, curling my fingers around his. “That must have been hard for you.”

Barely above a whisper, he said, “You have no idea. I would not wish that kind of pain on my worst enemy.”

I sighed and squeezed his hand tight. “Jeremiah, where did you hide the body?”

“Beneath the kraken.” His gaze flitted to mine, and a sad smile ghosted his lips. “It is due south of here.” The Fae chuckled softly and more blood coated his mouth. “The artifact is there, too. That is what you are truly looking for, correct?”

I quirked up one side of my mouth. “How did you know?”

“Fae talk.” His steadfast gaze didn’t leave mine. “And you are almost believable, little elf. But I know what true love looks like when it stares me in the eye.” His brows lifted marginally. “Are you going to kill me now? Or will you give us a chance at happiness?”

I swallowed again on my dry throat and squeezed his hand harder. “I can’t.”

“Ah.” His attention returned to the ceiling. The Fae was quiet for a long moment. “That is curious. The anger makes sense now.”

I sighed and released his hand. “I am truly sorry. But there is no stopping this.” I glanced up at my father, not to my soul mate who was going to kill this Fae who had touched me no matter what. I inhaled heavily and gave the order, “Kill him.”

King Traevon didn’t waver.

He removed his wickedly curved blade and set it afire.

The Fae was beheaded instantly.

Confession of a princess:

The shifter is needy. It is almost charming. Almost.

When his fur is ruffled, he must be petted so that the beast doesn't pace its cage. For a worried tiger is dangerous to all.

Standing inside my room in the Merfolk Queen's castle and worrying about how we could move a kraken off a pile of bones, I halted in the midst of packing my satchel when I heard the smallest creak of wood behind me. I grunted hard as massive arms enveloped me and blinked repeatedly in surprise. "This is not what I expected."

King Athon *chuffed* softly and smashed his body against my back, and stuffed his face against my neck. He inhaled me deeply, running his nose against my tender flesh. His lips moved against my skin as he whispered, "Are you all right, elf?"

I sighed and let my head fall back against him. "I am. Does that not make me a horrible person?"

"What you did was a kindness." King Athon pressed his lips behind my ear for a gentle kiss. "You know that."

"I suppose my king is pleased with his heir." I snorted and placed my arms over his. "There is that. I extracted the information we all needed and still managed to give the order to kill. He will know his heir is capable now."

My soul mate hummed low in his throat, a deep rumble. His teeth nipped at my earlobe sharply. "You smell different."

I lifted a red brow. “I showered. It has been awhile.”

King Athon chuckled. “Yes, I noticed. You no longer reek of sweat and the dust of books.” He nuzzled my throat again, taking a big whiff. “That isn’t what I’m referencing. The scent of jasmine is stronger.”

“Well, I did wash well.” I groaned. “I tried very hard to get every last bit of sand off.”

My soul mate *chuffed* again. He turned me in his arms and bent his head low, staring deeply into my eyes. He whispered, “Did...he touch you...”

I quickly shook my head. “Not in the way you’re thinking, shifter.” Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pulled his face even closer. “I am fine. I promise.”

My soul mate nodded slowly. “If you promise.”

“Honesty, remember? We are being honest with each other.” I smiled softly and pressed a quick kiss to his plush mouth. “Are *you* all right?”

He stood silent for a long moment, before he stated gruffly, “I am better now knowing you were not physically hurt.” My soul mate huffed. “I have been fairly worried since we left the carnival.”

“I felt that. I thought it was about the kraken.”

“It was not.” He brushed the tip of his nose softly against mine. “Kiss me again.”

“If I must.” My lips curved, and then I pressed my mouth to his.

King Athon groaned and pulled me tighter against his body, tilting his head to deepen our embrace. His tongue touched mine and rubbed gently, his lips soft and sure. He nipped at my bottom lip before diving back in for more, his mouth demanding on mine.

I moaned and pushed harder against him.

Abruptly, the door to my room opened.

King Athon and I jumped apart.

My heart beat heavily inside my chest as I snapped my attention to the door, my eyes wide in fear.

Father stood completely still with the door handle loosely gripped in his hand. His emerald eyes flew back and forth between me and my soul mate. He blinked for the longest moment.

Then his features contorted into fury and fire, and he slammed the door closed behind him and barked, “Are you bloody serious?” He marched on heavy feet straight at my soul mate, each boot slamming down onto the wooden floor. “What is wrong with you? The door wasn’t even locked!”

King Athon ran his fingers through his long, white hair, pulling it away from his face. His cheeks puffed with a large breath before he blew it out hard. “It wasn’t the smartest choice, I know. But I needed to see her after what happened at the carnival. I’m sure you understand that.”

“I do understand. But I cannot fathom the oversight of the door. You are far too old to be that careless.” His hands lifted into the air and he started pointing them repeatedly in my soul mate’s face. “We are in a Fae damned crisis on too many fronts right now, and this is not helping! Recklessness will get someone dead!”

My soul mate scowled deeply. “Do not scold me, King Traevon. You are overstepping your boundaries now.”

“I will not scold, when there is no reason to.” With his gaze steadfast on the Shifter King, he pointed hard in my direction. “That is my child. And I will yell at you anytime I wish if you are acting the fool with her.”

“Father.” I sighed heavily. “That is enough.”

“It is never enough.” He waved his right hand wildly in the air. “And one day, my daughter, you will fully understand what the bloody fuck I’m saying.” King Traevon’s eyes tracked back to my soul mate, and they narrowed ever so softly. “One more thing. You need to stop staring at her...womanly figure...when others are around. You are not subtle, so stop it.”

My eyes widened on my face.

I hadn't known he was doing that.

King Athon chuckled deeply—a bit meanly. “I *am* very subtle. You are only looking too closely now.”

“Well, she will be in her swimwear soon.” King Traevon flashed his fangs. “Keep your eyes elsewhere for everyone's well-being.”

“All right.” I cleared my throat harshly. “It is time for you both to leave, so that I may finish packing.”

“Quite so. That is the reason I came here. Queen Alora said we will be meeting in thirty minutes.” Father turned his body and lifted his hand grandly to the door. “After you, King Athon.”

My soul mate *sarled* at him and then stalked toward the door. As a parting shot, he glanced over his shoulder, stating, “Your soul-mated anniversary gift I got you? That was actually mine, given to you by mistake. Your daughter stole it back for me.” The door slammed shut behind him.

With his attention hard on the closed door, Father's chest rose with a deep breath. “I...am going to pretend I did not hear that last comment.” He walked on stiff legs out of my room.

I rubbed at my forehead and turned back to my work.

They were never going to play nice together.

I SAT on the couch I'd awoken on and placed my satchel on my lap. “What is the plan? *Do* we have a plan? Because I don't even know exactly what a kraken is, except for what Grandmother Isabella told me.”

As one, the rulers jerked their faces toward me.

King Traevon blinked and asked extremely slowly, “Trixie, what did my mother tell you about them?”

I scratched at my chin and grumbled, “They’re massive. They like to sleep a long time. They can look like a rock. And if they get angry they are deadly.”

King Elon started laughing in his slithering tone.

“This information would have eased many worries hours ago,” Queen Mikko stated softly and peered off to the side. “It is a good thing that Queen Alora is not like her original.”

I stared for a moment until it occurred to me what she meant. “Oh. Mayhap, I should have told you that. I thought you knew.”

Queen Alora would be able to use her royal auro-power to soothe the Fae. If the Fae wasn’t *angry*, he wasn’t *deadly*. That took care of one problem—hopefully.

King Athon rubbed his hands briskly over his face. “Princess Trixie, in the future, do not assume that we know what your grandmother told you...in private.”

“Yes, yes.” I waved absently. “I have seen the error of my ways.”

“This time.” Queen Alora sardonically lifted a brow—cheeks still flushed with the growing urge. Then she turned her regard to the other rulers. “I will use my power to keep the kraken contained. If it’s a massive Fae, then King Athon will be needed to relocate it. Queen Mikko, will you be able to move the sand to find the remains?”

The Caster Queen nodded soundly. “Of course.”

“All right.” Queen Alora clapped her hands. “I believe we do have a plan now.”

I cleared my throat. Loudly. “Other than a rock, what does a kraken look like so that we might be watchful for it?”

Every ruler glanced at one another.

And no answer came.

I snorted under my breath. “This is going to be great fun. We have no idea what to look for.”

“A vast looking...rock Fae?” Queen Mikko supplied hesitantly, with her forehead wrinkled in confusion. “Mayhap, what a statue looks like?”

“I highly doubt that,” King Elon hissed. “Merfolk would have noticed an enormous statue on the ocean floor by now.”

King Athon tossed his head back and stared at the ceiling, growling, “Are we to knock on every coral reef we see and hope it says hello?” He shook his head and looked back down. “That is absurd. We cannot do that. Even if we did, it may anger the kraken.”

Queen Alora sighed and rubbed at the back of her neck. “I can use my royal aurapower right from the start. I can seek anything that has emotions. But if it takes too long my reserves will run dry in the end. That could prove deadly.”

“You will need to be careful,” King Elon stated patiently. “If you feel drained, stop for a moment. Let it build again.”

“I know that,” she growled.

“I meant no offense,” the Gorgon King murmured instantly, knowing she was on edge. Then he scanned the rest of us. “If that is all, I do believe we know our plan. It is time to find the kraken.”

Fear of a princess:

When darkness comes from above, it is truly frightening.

It wants to consume you. It tries its hardest.

And if you are too slow, it bites.

I stared at the rounded, glass opening before me with the cold ocean but a touch away. Having changed into my swimwear in the same bathroom as before, I now waited for my father and King Athon to come outside. The other rulers stood beside me at the delay. And my anxiety reached new levels knowing I would be in that freezing cold water once more.

Glancing at the Gorgon King, I asked quietly, “Do you have any tricks that you use to keep yourself warm in the ocean?”

King Elon brushed his long, shamrock green braids over his right shoulder. “I keep my breathing as normal as possible. It’s not perfect but it does help.”

“*Hm.*” I nodded slowly and turned my stare back to the water, dropping my hand to the knife sheathed on my thigh to rest easy in its presence. “I shall endeavor to try that. Hopefully, this will not take too long.”

He snorted softly. “Plan for the worst, Princess Trixie.”

My sigh was heavy. “I suppose that is right.”

Finally, King Athon and King Traevon exited the building, shouldering their satchels. They weren't blood covered so that was good.

Queen Alora griped, "What took you so long?"

My soul mate patted his muscled stomach, looking nowhere near me. "Bowel issues."

"It must have been that salmon we ate last night." Queen Mikko crinkled her nose. "I thought it tasted off."

"My cook is superb. The salmon was perfect," the Merfolk Queen growled. Her eyes... They turned solid yellow as she used her royal aurapower. The color was like the most perfect lemon. The Queen of Merfolk turned to the opening into the ocean and muttered, "And if you couldn't see that they were lying, you need to pay better attention."

I blinked as she stepped out into the deep blue. "Well...I guess we should follow." Fisting my hands, I pushed through the water in her wake.

Instantly, my body clenched at the freeze.

I shook my limbs the best I could through the water, attempting to warm up my muscles. Only once all the rulers were floating in the ocean around me, did the pain settle into a sense of normalcy.

We followed the Merfolk Queen closely, swimming in a cluster behind her. We headed due south, away from Cosimian Trench. Fortunately, away from the edge of the realm, too.

As I swam, I watched as an eel slithered below us.

Quite honestly, it was disgusting. But it did slice through the water with an ease that I could appreciate right now. Swimming with a satchel strapped across my back was rather cumbersome.

King Traevon swam closer to me and poked me with a finger. Then he pointed to the right, signifying I should look there.

I squinted...and saw an old shipwreck. My eyes widened in wonder. There was a gigantic hole in the stern with the

wood around it in chunks. And the mast was broken in half, but still attached. The broken end waved slowly back and forth with the current. And the yellow fish seemed to love the wreck, the bulk of the vessel flooded with an ethereal light.

Another shark found us. Or, mayhap, the same one.

Either way, it swam away quickly.

Queen Alora was *not* in the mood for bullshit.

Chill bit at my fingers and toes. There was no helping it.

But, I did try to keep my breathing as regulated as possible, while I scoured the ocean floor with a greedy gaze.

After twenty minutes of swimming, the Queen of Merfolk stopped and twisted around to face us. She held a finger up to her mouth and whispered, “It is sleeping.”

I turned to and fro, trying to spy the kraken.

But there was...nothing there?

Nothing that looked like a rock.

There were only beautiful, glowing fish.

King Athon swam closer to her and shook his head, swooping his arm out in front of his body to show the vast nothingness.

Clearly, he didn't see anything, either.

Queen Alora smiled and pointed down.

As one, we all looked below us.

Instant fear gripped my throat and a shiver worked down my spine—and it had nothing to do with the freezing water. I swam closer to my father and grasped his right hand, unable to stop myself.

What I had originally thought of as dark sand for quite some time was not that. It truly did appear to be rock if you actually looked at it straight on like this. From where I swam, it looked like the size of one hundred full-grown shifter elephants combined.

The rounded center was stretched up. Not unlike a spider, it had eight arms that I could see that were spread out on the ocean floor in its slumber. There were two tentacles that also lay about carelessly.

I had to turn my head from far left to far right to even be able to see the entire beast, the Fae a colossal monster.

I sucked in a breath and realized I'd seen this before.

On the ceiling in the royals' main room at High Pointe.

I had not wanted to mess with it then, and I certainly did not want to play with it now.

Queen Alora pointed at King Athon, capturing his attention, and then pointed down. She whispered, "Go. I have it."

King Athon stared down at the beast for a long moment as he floated in the depths of the ocean, until he nodded slowly.

I sucked in a harsh breath, not wanting him to go near that creature. If the Merfolk Queen lost her control of it, he would be dead. I looked away as he swam down, not able to watch him go.

King Traevon squeezed my hand and pulled me closer, but he kept his eyes on the Shifter King's movements.

In the tense silence...*and it was silent down here*...I tried to keep breathing normally and not let my emotions run amok.

Otherwise, I would positively be a sniveling mess right now. I had never felt so weak. It was not a feeling that was entirely pleasant.

Father squeezed my hand again and tugged.

When I glanced at him, he pointed down with a quick finger and an eyebrow quirked up.

Not wanting to, I grudgingly looked below us.

And my jaw positively dropped, too late to remember to keep it closed off from sand.

My Fae damned soul mate held onto one tentacle...and was slowly rotating in a circle, swinging the kraken round...and round in the ocean. A burst of laughter wanted to escape my throat, but I stopped it abruptly, seeing as no one else found it as humorous as I did.

The other rulers were glaring daggers down on him.

As the water began to churn around us from his actions, the King of Shifters released the beast and let it float.

We watched as the kraken landed soundly again on the bottom of the ocean, with sand billowing up around it, far enough away that it was completely removed from its previous slumbering spot.

Queen Alora jerked in the water, her arms flying out. Her teeth bared and pain slashed over her beautiful features. She shook and thrashed, and it didn't stop. The Merfolk Queen convulsed in the water, her yellow eyes rolling back into her head.

Rapidly, Queen Mikko started swimming downward, her mouth moving in tiny whispers.

King Elon grabbed the Merfolk Queen's right hand and started dragging her down to the bottom of the ocean.

Father and I glanced at each other and swiftly followed.

The sand was already moving in great bursts outward, flying high in the water, creating a valley around us as the Caster Queen worked her spell.

And a great shadow suddenly loomed over us.

I looked back...and wished I hadn't.

Faster and faster, I swam toward the bottom of the ocean, my father right beside me, the water getting darker.

The shadow of the kraken above danced on my skin like the nightmare before you die.

King Athon reached down into the sand, ripping a golden trident from the skeletal hand that appeared out of the bottom

of the ocean. He lifted it high above him and started swimming up toward all of us.

Queen Mikko reached him first and swiftly turned, ascending with him.

A tentacle swept right above my head, the heaviness of the wave sending me off course. I *screamed* and rolled in the wake.

Fingers grabbed onto my left ankle in a bone breaking grip.

And my arms flew up as I was yanked back hard, the person not releasing me until I was in their strong arm.

I blinked blurrily at a silver face.

Then King Elon and I each grabbed onto an arm of a weak Merfolk Queen, who barely had her eyes open.

And we swam down again.

Father floated slightly below us, his eyes up on the kraken.

He waited. Not moving until I was next to him again.

We swam down, almost there. A few more strokes.

And suddenly...there was complete darkness.

It was pitch black. All I could do was keep swimming toward where I'd last seen my soul mate's frantic eyes staring up into mine.

And...I slammed right into him, our heads banging harshly together. I didn't allow that to stop me. I pressed my free hand on my soul mate's shoulder, while I felt a constant tug on the grasp I had on Queen Alora. My fingernails dug down into my soul mate's skin to keep from being pulled away, the Gorgon King still trying to swim down and trying to drag Queen Alora with him.

Swiftly, I wrapped my arm around my soul mate's neck and used him as an anchor to pull on the Merfolk Queen's arm.

Fortunately, the Gorgon King wasn't unintelligent.

The tug from before on the Merfolk Queen lessened as he swam back up. I felt another hand land on my arm that was around my soul mate's neck as we floated, and I didn't know whose it was. All I could do was hang onto a grand total of three rulers.

In the dark, I pulled the Merfolk Queen closer.

My head jerked back as metal tapped it.

I instantly grabbed the trident and shoved Queen Alora's arm on it, right before another immense wave shoved me brutally against my soul mate, with the bite of a hundred tiny, pointed teeth ripping against the back of my thighs.

I *screamed* in agony, even as we suddenly appeared in the too bright light of the pristine conference room at High Pointe.

Royals fell to the ground in a wet slap, limbs intertwined, heads banging and groans sounding.

I held still on my side and trembled where I lay, my thighs blazing with agony and my flesh frozen.

"Trixie!" Father shouted and crawled over to me. "Fuck! Hold still." Instantly, there were hands rolling me completely onto my stomach, and hovering over my flesh. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Get the Fae fuck off me, King Elon!" King Athon snarled, and then a *thump* sounded and my soul mate was on his knees next to my left hip. He inhaled deeply and *growled*. "All right. I will hold her down. You remove them."

"What is it?" I gasped. "It hurts so much."

"They appear to be very thin teeth," Father hissed.

My soul mate rested his large palm on the back of my left calf and the other on my rear, placing enough pressure to keep me from moving overmuch. Even as my Fae-spark flared with his power. "Do it, King Traevon. Make it fast."

Father whispered, "I am sorry, my daughter. This will hurt."

I clenched my jaw shut and squealed as each tooth was pulled from my body, my blood running down the sides of my legs. Each puncture healed instantly from the gifted power, but it *hurt*.

Then...it...didn't?

My body slumped against the floor, while my father worked. And there was only one explanation for that. I mumbled in awe, "Thank you ever so much, Queen Alora."

"Yes, well, you did help to save my life," Queen Alora croaked, apparently still lying on the floor from the low direction of her voice. "This is owed, Princess Trixie."

Hesitantly, King Athon lifted his hand from my person.

I blinked at the spotless floor in front of my face. "How did we all survive?"

King Athon *snarled* softly. "I was the tree and the trident was the fruit. Everyone was climbing me to grab it."

I chuckled under my breath.

"It was not humorous, elf. And I don't know which one of you bit my ear and almost ripped it off, but that was uncalled for."

Quickly, Queen Mikko cleared her throat somewhere down by my feet. "To be fair, I couldn't see anything and it was the only way to stay attached to you at the time. But I do apologize, King Athon."

King Elon groaned off to the left. "I will simply apologize right now for what I grabbed, King Athon. I was coming up from the *bottom*, and it merely happened by accident."

As he swiftly pulled more teeth from my thighs, Father muttered, "I think I must have been the only lucky royal to have found the trident on my own."

King Athon snapped, "I know it was you that pinched the Fae fuck out of my side. Do not pretend it was otherwise."

"I do not know what you are referring to," King Traevon hummed.

I snickered and whispered, “That is his lying voice.”

“Yes, elf,” King Athon muttered drolly. “I think I understand that. But thank you ever so much for pointing it out. *And* slamming your head against mine.”

“Actually, I believe it was *you* who slammed your head against mine.” I sniffed. “Quite so.”

With one last pluck of a tooth, my father patted my back. “There you go, my daughter. They are all gone.”

Carefully, I pushed up and made sure my head was not too woozy. As I rose slowly, I looked around at the early morning sunlight filtering in different hues from the stained glass ceiling.

I walked to where Queen Alora sprawled on the ground and bent over her face. “My caster-spelled seashell, Your Royal Highness.”

The Merfolk Queen groaned but lifted her hands and removed it with a singular tap. The rest of the royals followed suit, having her removed theirs. And, she stuffed them down the top of her swimwear, uncaring at the moment it was completely ill-mannered.

I squinted. “Um...where are the Misfits?”

The door to the conference room banged open.

Red Louie drawled, “Did someone call for us?”

Queen Alora rolled over faster than I would have thought her capable of and scrambled to where the trident lay. She picked it up and wielded it, pointing the three prongs at the royals. The Merfolk Queen snarled, “This one is mine.”

As one, we lifted our hands into the air in supplication. No one was going to argue with her. Not in the state she was currently in.

Black Louie moved between the other three gremlins and walked right up to her. He held out his green hand and stated, “I will take the Trident of Love and keep it safe until it is needed.”

Queen Alora glared at him. “That is what it is called?”

“Yes.”

She scoffed. “The others were more...prestigious. I believe it should be called the Trident of Destruction. That is more suitable for the Merfolk Kingdom.”

He blinked his large, round brown eyes. “No.”

She scowled and grumbled, “Where are we to be sent next?”

Black Louie blinked but didn’t open his mouth.

We all gazed at the tiny green gremlin.

Mayhap, he had not read that part yet?

King Traevon narrowed his attention on the gremlin. “Louie, Queen Alora asked where we will be sent next.”

Black Louie said nothing. He blinked.

“All right. It is a mystery.” The Queen of Merfolk grudgingly released the artifact to the gremlin. “You may take the Trident of Love for now, while I leave to procure my own loving. Good day.” She stomped out of the conference room with her head held high...and her feet walking fast.

The Misfits swiftly trailed behind her, almost at a run.

After a moment, I flicked a finger at their retreating backs. “Did that seem worrying to anyone else?” My red brows snapped together. “They would not harm Queen Alora, would they?”

King Elon marched toward the doorway. “I will take my leave and make sure all is well, too.”

“I will walk with you, King Elon.” Queen Mikko retrieved her satchel from where she had dropped it on the ground. “I am eager to be home.” As she walked, she dug into her bag, pulling out a sweater, and yanked it over her head to cover her swimwear.

I cracked my neck side to side and groaned. “I need a soak in a warm tub and a restorative nap. How long will it take for

our Fae-gifts to arrive, Father?”

“The royal stable had standing orders that if we were not back last night, they were to send Javon and Penelope here this morn. They are more than likely already here with the stable hand.”

“Perfect.” My gaze flicked to my quiet soul mate. “I shall see you tonight, shifter.”

He sniffed in my direction. And nodded silently.

I eyed him speculatively. “What is wrong? You are never silent.” I took a step toward him. “I cannot go there now. It is barely past daybreak.”

King Athon slowly rubbed at his chin. “I was merely thinking. And I would be pleased to see you tonight.”

“If that is done, let us take our leave, Trixie,” Father grumbled. “I have not seen my soul mate in five days. I wish to be home.”

King Athon stood and stretched. “I think I shall head home too. I am sure there is much paperwork to be had.”

I grunted and walked toward the door. “I say good luck to the ruler and happy slumber for the heir.”

“That was fairly cruel, my heir.” King Traevon chuckled softly. “I think I like it. Especially, seeing as I will also be in bed with my soul mate.”

I shuddered and glared at him as the three of us started down the stairs together. “Truly, Father? I do not want to know that.”

He hummed evilly. “Just as I did not want to hear you make plans for the night with the fucking Shifter King, of all people.” He quirked a red brow. “Are we understanding each other, daughter? *Please* do keep your business private. Far, far away from me.”

I sighed wearily and looked back over my shoulder, where my soul mate was trailing behind us. “I do not think he likes you, shifter.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual.” King Athon’s plush lips quirked up on one side in a wicked smirk. “Ask your father what took us so long in the bathroom at the Merfolk Kingdom.”

Curses flew fast and harsh from Father’s mouth.

I sighed once again and returned my attention to the stairs. “I do not believe I want to know.”

King Athon laughed harshly. “I believe you are correct. It was *foul*.”

As Father opened the door to the common area of High Pointe, he sent a scathing glare at my soul mate. “You have broken your word twice now that you would not say anything.”

King Athon’s lips twitched. “Queen Alora thought I was lying. And you just told your daughter what I said was true.”

“Pretty, manipulative words do not work with me.” He waved for us to precede him into the empty area, the space once again shut down for business when we were supposed to be here. “Let us just forget that incident ever happened. We will get along better for it.”

I shook my head in exasperation and walked through the doorway. They were ridiculous. “King Athon, do not humiliate my king. That salmon did taste sour.”

“Fine, deny me my entertainment.” King Athon followed me into the brightly lit space, the domed ceiling so tall one would have to tilt one’s head all the way back to view it. He peered back over his shoulder where King Traevon shut the door to the royal, private section and smirked at him, before casting his gaze on mine. “But I shall tell you one thing that occurred, elf. It is too humorous not to. King Traevon had just flushed—” His words instantly cut off at the sight before us now.

Butterflies.

Confession of a princess:

There are many different Fae I wish to meet.

And many I do not.

But I have always wondered what a pixie looks like.

Now that I've seen one, all I want to do is dream about it.

One dark blue butterfly fluttered in front of us, less than ten feet away, while an entire rainbow swarm hovered high, high above.

The three of us froze in place.

And a sense of foreboding sank deep inside my gut.

The dark blue butterfly fluttered closer, and, when it *transformed*, Mamue stood before us. The woodland sprite crossed her arms and ruthlessly gazed between the three of us, her attention landing on my father behind me. She stated simply, “You do not need to be here, King Traevon. You may leave.”

Father stepped forward to stand on the other side of me. He rocked back on his bare feet and shrugged casually. “I believe I will stay, Mamue. But thank you for the offer.”

“As you wish.” Mamue’s antlers tilted back as she raised her chin to stare up at my soul mate. “King Athon, our oracle has placed one of our stolen baubles on your person. What say you?”

His black solid eyes didn't look away from her. "I do not have your bauble." The King of Shifters opened his bare arms wide. "You are more than welcome to search me and my satchel, if it would please you. As you can see, there wouldn't be much clothing to remove in the process."

Mamue simply turned her overlarge eyes to me. "Princess Trixie, our oracle has placed one of our stolen baubles on your person. What say you?"

My nostrils flared at her wording. It was exactly the same phrase she had used with my soul mate. That did not bode well. I cleared my throat and stated clearly, "I do not have your bauble. You may search my bag and my clothing if you wish."

Mamue's lips curled up at the edges. "Currently, that will be unnecessary." Her eyes flicked back to my soul mate. "For either of you. This is merely a formality."

King Athon stiffened. He cocked his head slightly, asking, "I would appreciate it if you would explain exactly what is happening here, Mamue."

The woodland sprite nodded once. "This is where I tell you that you're both being taken to Fairy. To the Ancient Archive where your fate will be decided—because the oracle is never wrong. There will be no other explanations given."

Jolting with shock and dismay, I swallowed hard and declared forcefully, "We cannot go to Fairy. We are needed here for the safety of our realm."

"That is unimportant to my mission. Any argument you give does not hold up to my pact with the Ancient Archive." Her eyes flicked back and forth between my soul mate and me. "Are you going to go willingly?"

"Like fuck we are," King Athon snarled. "We do not have your baubles to give to you, and, as Princess Trixie stated, we are needed here in our realm. It is a matter of import that we stay here."

Mamue nodded. "From what we understand about the two of you, that is what I thought you would say." She twirled a

pointed finger into the air and two of the tiniest flying Fae abruptly appeared in front of ours faces. “I wish you sweet dreams.”

An aqua blue, sparkling dust smacked me in the face.

My eyes rolled back and my knees hit the ground, before I slumped to the floor right next to where my soul mate lay prone. I held his stunned gaze for a moment, before my eyes closed and there was nothing else but sweet sleep.

CHAPTER 21

Promise of a father:

When you can't fight, I will fight for you.

Swiftly moved and stepped to stand over my daughter. “What in the realm have you done, Mamue? We discussed this. You would not attack one of my own without informing me first.” I pointed down at my child. “And you picked my daughter to try this on? You know she cannot go to Fairy on her own. It was a Fae who stole your baubles.”

“We know that. And we know which Fae did it. The oracle has divined that much.” Mamue’s smile was lethal. “We want to know why that Fae stole it and gave it to them. If these two are so important, the Fae will come to us. And then we will have our thief.”

My nostrils flared in fury. “So they are to be bait?”

“Precisely.” The woodland sprite chuckled, her antlers tipping down to point at me as she lowered her chin. Peeking out from underneath her lashes, she winked. “Since you are ever so helpful, why do you believe the Fae gifted them?”

Fire flamed in my eyes. “Use your hunter to find the Fae.”

“He has tried. And failed.” Mamue straightened fully—and still looked up at me. “At least, he didn’t fail today.”

“I won’t let you take them, Mamue.” I lifted a red brow. “You must know this.”

“I know that is what you think. You love your daughter. It is what a good parent would do.” She waved her right hand into the air absently. “This is why I will never have children. Love like this reeks of desperation.”

My royal firepower kindled in my veins. “Desperation for a loved one’s plight is not a weakness. It means you care. That is powerful.”

“And I only care about the Ancient Archive.” Mamue yawned behind her fist. “Are we about done here?”

Instantly, flames burned bright on my body. “We are only beginning.”

“Oh, pretty.” Mamue clapped slowly. “I never saw that coming.”

“Go back to Fairy. Devise another plan,” I snarled. “This one will only get you killed.”

The woodland sprite’s laughter tinkled in the air. “Did you not happen to notice what type of pixie was used to render them unconscious? It was a water pixie. Your flames mean nothing to them.” She pointed her finger into the air and twirled. “Be grateful I’m only putting you to sleep for an hour, unlike your daughter. Sweet dreams.”

A tiny pixie appeared in front of my face and doused me in blue dust. “Fuck.” I shook my head hard, but I still landed on my knees—my flames slowly extinguishing. I stared up at the woodland sprite and slurred, “This was a mistake, Mamue. I will come for you.”

“I wish you the best of luck with that,” she sang merrily.

I tipped to the side and smacked my head on the ground. Sweet dreams flooded my existence.

THE ADVENTURES WILL CONTINUE...

TRIXIE TOWERS FANS

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New York Times bestselling author and award-winner, **SCARLETT DAWN**, is the mastermind behind the Forever Evermore fantasy series, the Origin paranormal dystopian stories, the Vampire Crown paranormal romance thrillers, the Mark science fantasy saga, and the Lion Security contemporary romance series.

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