

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EVA DELANEY



BEAVER





**Beaver: A Why Choose
Romantic Comedy**

Silver Springs: Pets

By Eva Delaney

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Chapter 1

I knew a prison break was underway because of the cum. Sighing, I stood under one of my two stolen umbrellas in the yard of Silver Springs Penitentiary and watched the cum rain down. Not in a porno orgy-type way, but literally. The cum fell from a sky the color of wet concrete, the sticky globs splattering on the bare pavement and the little weeds that had pushed their way through the cracks to find not the sunlight they needed, but streaks of falling spunk, which no one needed. Not ever.

But try convincing my old friend Juniper of that. The cum could only mean she was trying to bust me out of prison again. I wished she'd hurry the fuck up already; not for me—I wasn't leaving—but for the creature that stood under my second umbrella: a beaver.

Not in a vagina or a kid from a shitty old TV show way, but a literal beaver with a wide flat tail and buck teeth and little hands that held the only stick I could find in this shit hole that passed as an outdoor space.

She wore sunglasses shaped like hearts, a little yellow rain hat, and a brown collar dotted with colorful gems. Somehow that was enough to convince the guards and the entire legal system that, yes, she was a magical person who had been convicted of a crime and not a, you know, literal goddamn beaver. Who was apparently named Beverly according to her court records.

No wonder I had gotten away with crimes for so long.

I watched a strand of cum drop off the edge of my rainbow umbrella.

Stick your tongue out and taste it, my brain said. It's magical. It's safe.

I'd sooner eat gas station sushi.

Maybe it tastes like salty pineapple. We haven't had pineapple in a long time.

Oh, fuck off.

Over the sound of splattering cum, someone was whistling a tune I had never heard before. It rose and fell like sobs made of music. Normally, the whistling and other human noises of this place drove me as nuts as... Well, the nuts that could produce all this cum. But this tune sent goosebumps down my spine.

I glanced over my shoulder toward the prison building and saw a man strolling across the yard toward me and the beaver. He held a newspaper over his head, and it sagged over his ears, heavy with spunk. But he didn't rush, and he didn't turn back to the shelter of the building like everyone else had—clearing out the yard before a break-in was probably why Juniper had sent the cum rain in the first place.

He had light brown skin and curly dark hair a shade lighter than his neatly trimmed beard. Even in the gray, his dark eyes caught the light like pools of water caught the moon.

Ew, where had that poetic shit come from?

I didn't recognize him, and he wore the standard orange jumpsuit without any personal touches—he was new here. Though he was pleasant to look at, and though his deep whistle of a sad tune made my skin shiver, I narrowed my eyes. He was only trekking out here to see someone he had never met because he wanted something.

He stopped across from me. “Figures that the apocalypse came and I'm locked in here rather than strapping a chainsaw to my arm and outfitting a car with spears.” His voice was rich and musical like poured dark chocolate. “This is one of the signs of the apocalypse, isn't it? Pestilence, locusts, cum.”

I scoffed. “Every asshole thinks they'd be the fucking hero if forced by zombies or aliens or some shit. But none of them choose to be one now when it's relatively easy and when we still need them.”

Rather than insulting me like most men did when I called them out, he grinned, making his eyes crinkle.

Like a cutey, cute-cute, my brain said. Reach out and squish his face.

I ignored her.

“Maybe I'm already a badass,” he said. “After all, we just met. I could be anyone.” He waved to Beverly. “Just like your shifter friend here.”

Great, another idiot who thought this poor beaver had somehow bested the ward that blocked magic from the prison. “She's not a shifter.”

Beverly nibbled the stick in her hands. Poor thing shouldn't be here. I glanced to the sky for a sign of Juniper's break-in but saw only thinning cum. Where the fuck was she?

"Is she an illusion?" the man asked.

"She's a fucking beaver."

His grin widened, brightening up his entire face like a spotlight cast just on him. "She doesn't look like she's fucking a beaver."

I rolled my eyes. "Is that supposed to be charming?"

"It's supposed to be funny," he said as though he wasn't even offended. "Can I squeeze under your umbrellas until the cum passes?"

"No, go away," I said. My arms ached from holding the umbrellas, mainly because I was out of shape. Normally, I wouldn't need them at all—I'd wave my hand, speak a word, and a shield would arch over my head and dispel the rain, no matter what it was made of. Even though my magic was blocked by the prison's wards, I kept reaching for it. I was like someone dying of thirst who kept checking a water bottle they knew was empty.

Despite my words, the man stayed put like the fucking prison wall next to me. Why was he not leaving us alone? The last thing I needed was some asshole witnessing one of Juniper's attempts to lure me out of prison. He'd probably squeal to the guards about it, and she'd end up in trouble. Keeping her out of prison was the sole reason I was here in the first place.

“What do you want?” I said.

He gestured to the rain, and a splotch of sperm hit his palm. He didn’t even cringe, as though he was used to having a handful of jizz. “I did want to run around the yard.”

“From me. What do you want from me?”

He quirked a brow. “Maybe I don’t want anything except to stand here and enjoy the weather with you and your beaver.”

“Everyone in here wants something.”

He grinned, and the mischievous glint in his eyes turned to a shrewd look as though he had switched masks. “You’re right. As much as I enjoy the banter we have going, I’m here on business. They say you’re the one who can break people out.”

My stomach twisted like the orgy dudes who could produce this much spunk. No one knew about Juniper’s repeated break-ins to try to break me out. At least, I had thought no one did. If this guy knew, who else did? Was my best friend in legal trouble because of me—again?

He glanced from the beaver to me. “Since you’re standing in magical rain, which shouldn’t be possible with the ward over the prison, holding umbrellas, which are banned, with a beaver, which makes no sense, I’m thinking they’re right about you. You’re something different.”

I narrowed my eyes. I was something different but not in the way he thought. “Who are they?”

He shrugged. “They, them, people.”

“I need to know.”

“Why?”

“So I can shiv them with Q-tips from the commissary.”

He raised a brow. “Q-tips aren’t sharp.”

“Neither are you if you can’t think of a way to use them as weapons.”

He grinned, wide and bright. “I like you. I’m Jag, by the way. Short for Jagmeet. And you are Alyssa.”

I tensed, because there was only one other person in this place who called me by my first name and not by the last name the guards were required to use and the other inmates loved to joke about. That meant that Jag had been talking to the most dangerous person here. The one who would absolutely fuck over my best friend Juniper, me, and everyone close to us if he knew about the break-ins.

My ex, Ramrod Johnson.

Not just my ex. He was also a former wannabe-supervillain who had plotted to steal the world’s magic.

“Are you staging a breakout now?” Jag asked, peering closely at me as though he could read a map to the prison tattooed on my face.

I scoffed. “I’ve been here for two years. If I could break out, why would I be in this shit hole?”

“Maybe the guards and walls aren’t keeping you in but keeping someone else out.”

I sneered. “What kind of mafia movie bullshit do you think is going on?”

“Look,” Jag said, “I’ll level with you. Me and my two buddies, we don’t belong here.”

“Everyone in prison says that.” Well, except for me. I deserved to be here. The only one who didn’t deserve it was poor Beverly and maybe Ri, but he had already been let out on parole.

“But I mean it. We were wrongfully convicted!”

“You haven’t meant a thing you’ve said this entire conversation.”

Jag shifted the spunk-laden newspaper over his head. “Not true. My name is Jag, and I do want chainsaw arms.”

Before I could answer, Beverly strolled forward, and I cringed. “Stop, baby fuzzball! You’re going to get cum all over your fur.”

If she understood, she didn’t care, and kept walking along the cum-encrusted pavement.

“Beverly Beaver the Third, stop right now!” I said.

Using her full name seemed to work because she stopped and glanced up at me through those stupid sunglasses. Then she started to walk again, and I groaned in frustration.

I could pick her up and hold her until Juniper tried to break me out—and then give her the beaver to take instead. But then both the beaver and I would be cummed on from the rain. If I

let her walk, she'd just keep dragging cum into her belly fur. If only I had my magic.

"I can hold the umbrellas," Jag said.

I stared at his hands. I didn't trust him one fucking bit not to run off with them, but Beverly was determined to be as crusty as a teenage boy's sock. With a sigh, I handed him the umbrellas. He dropped his newspaper and took them as I bent to scoop up Beverly under her front legs. Fuck, she was heavier than she looked. The rough fur of her back pressed against my face, and she smelled of musk and vanilla.

I expected the feel of spunk coating my hair but didn't. Craning my neck to look over my shoulder, I saw Jag holding both umbrellas over Beverly and me as the rain splashed into his dark hair and on his bright orange jumpsuit.

The knot of rage in my chest since he had started talking to me eased like a fist relaxing. "Thank you."

He smiled through the white goo running down his face. "Unless you're about to do some witch shit and break down that wall or open a portal or something, let's get inside. Although I enjoy being covered in cum, I'm not used to being covered in this much cum."

I snorted. Juniper would probably get along with this guy. Speaking of which, where the fuck was she? I couldn't hold Beverly for long, but she was determined to cover herself with prison yard spunk.

I better get her inside. I could go back out and wait for Juniper once the beaver was safe... well, safe-ish, considering her situation.

With Beverly's tail heavy against my thighs, I half-walked, half-shuffled across the yard. When we reached the prison building, I leaned back and kicked open the door with a bang. Jag whistled as though impressed.

I shuffled in and placed Beverly on the floor, my aching arms sighing in relief.

Something clattered behind me, and I turned to see Jag had dropped the umbrellas outside before dashing in. "Shit. Are you ever going to tell me what caused that rain?"

I scowled at him because those weren't his umbrellas to abandon. I had taken a big risk in stealing them from the cell of a well-connected inmate.

"Do I look like a freak who likes to coat the world in jizz?" I slipped past him and reached through the door to grab one of the umbrellas. Even though its top was crusted with cum, I could use the metal parts as shivs. There was someone I had been planning to stab.

As I grabbed it, nothing splattered on my hand, and I glanced up.

The rain had stopped. Instead, a section of air rippled with rainbow colors like a stone dropped in water polluted with gasoline. It was low enough to be inside the prison's wards, level with the razor-wire-topped walls.

My heart froze in my chest. That wasn't Juniper's magic. While cum rain was her style, she didn't use portal magic. Ever. This was someone else.

I had only seen this type of magic in one place before, and it shouldn't be here in Silver Springs at all. It should be very far away from here.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Oh no, is it raining crap now?" Jag asked.

The rippling magic faded away, taking the yard's build-up of cum with it.

I picked up the now clean umbrellas and stepped back inside. Beverly Beaver was stripping the bark from her stick while Jag stared at his hands and body, now blissfully clean of... well, dude bliss.

He glanced at me, his dark eyebrows raising toward his hairline. "You do have magic in here."

"Indeed," drawled an all-too-familiar voice that sent the hairs on the back of my neck on end.

I glanced down the corridor. There, with a bunch of his fucking cronies, stood the most dangerous person I had ever known.

Ram, ex-supervillain, my ex-boss, and my ex-boyfriend.



Chapter 2

Ram smiled like he was happy to see me.
I knew better.

He stretched out a hand. “Still an expert thief. We need those umbrellas back.”

Four of his followers gathered behind him, glaring at me as though they were any threat at all. Surprisingly, they didn’t include Raicus and the other members of our old gang who were in the pen. Ram seemed to have had a falling out with them, as I had.

My hands tightened on the umbrella handles. Of course, I had stolen them from one of his cronies. Ram had charmed, bribed, and threatened the entire prison staff to get special treatment for his gang. I knew he wasn’t really here for the stupid umbrellas. He was here to show off to his followers that he could protect them and punish those who crossed them. He was here to demonstrate his worth to them.

“And I need cock that won’t give me a UTI, but life is a shit pile like that.”

Despite the jab, Ram’s smile didn’t even falter. During his stay in prison, he had let his black hair go long and wild, though he still shaved. With his dark hair and pale skin, he looked like the world’s laziest Loki cosplayer. It was strange to remember that the sight of him used to make my heart flutter and my lips ache for his kiss.

I wonder if he tastes like Tom Hiddleston? my brain said.

How in fuck would we even know what Tom Hiddleston tastes like?

Jag side-stepped so he was between Beverly and the gang.
“What’s going on?”

I eyed him. He’d already taken orders from Ram to seek me out, so he was probably waiting for his next command—when Ram said jerk it, his cronies said how many strokes.

Ram stepped closer, and I tensed but not out of fear. I just didn’t like people being in my personal space.

“You can’t keep stealing from us, Alyssa,” he said softly so the others wouldn’t hear.

“Why not?” I did not lower my voice.

Ram was full of shit, and the sooner his followers realized it, the better it would be for them.

For everyone.

When Ram got a hold of a bit of power, people suffered.

The same was true of me.

His smile finally faltered for just a moment before he wrestled it back into its friendly façade. “We have this conversation every week and—”

“You need me to stop stealing so you can look like you wield a magical sword to these goblins. But here’s the thing. I don’t give a fuck about what you need.”

He flinched as though I had pinched him.

“Then we’ll make you care,” Aquamarine said from behind Ram as she flicked a pink braid over her bare shoulder. She had cut the sleeves and collar off her jumpsuit and had sewn or pinned it to make a crop top.

I rolled my eyes. “You dumbasses think his dick is a foot long, and he’ll do anything to make sure you never realize it’s just average.” I met Ram’s gaze and said one of the most painful things I could to him. “Average like the rest of him.”

His friendly smile didn’t falter but his dark eyes narrowed just a touch.

“Quiet, you scraggly bush,” one of the other cronies snapped.

I hadn’t bothered to learn his name because I didn’t care what it was. He had a tattoo of glasses frames around his eyes for some reason. Did he think they made him look smart? Was his next tattoo going to be the letters P, H, and D on his forehead?

Jag stepped forward. “Hey, back off, you peasants! And scraggly bushes are awesome; that’s not even an insult.”

My brows shot up. He wasn’t siding with Ram? And he was declaring his pubic hair preferences for no reason?

“Calm down. I’ll handle...” Ram’s voice trailed off as his gaze drifted past Jag and me. “Is that a beaver?”

Everyone turned to Beverly. She stared back with her sunglasses in her paws as though she always had to hold something for comfort.

“Your powers of observation are outstanding,” I said. “Quick, what color is the wall or the sky or your piss?”

Ram ignored my snark. “What is a beaver doing in here?”

“She committed a crime,” I said as though it was obvious and made sense.

Ram gaped. “Even with our seriously flawed system, they wouldn’t imprison a normal animal. Is she a shifter? Did she beat the ward?”

I could hear the need in his voice, the never-ending thirst to feel magic’s touch heating your blood, goosebumping your skin, shaping your body and the world to your whims. The same need that ached in me.

Three cronies, including Ol’ Two-Eyes with the glasses tattoo, stepped toward Beverly as though drawn by a magnet. I shifted closer to her. So did Jag.

“Are you not enjoying the lack of magic?” I said to Ram. “This is the world you wanted.”

He had planned to strip paranormals of their magic using an ancient relic, which had apparently been made out of the nut of some old god. Juniper, her bed buddies, some ghost pirates, and I had destroyed it.

His followers gaped at him.

“Is that true?” Two-Eyes said.

Ram tensed. “I never planned to rob anyone of what makes them special, Alyssa.”

He was lying, and we both knew it. Those words were for his cronies, and they’d believe it because Ram wasn’t in here for

that particular set of crimes and because he was skilled at making the lost feel valued.

But the rage that lit up my chest was as sudden as dropping a match on dry grass, because I had fallen for his “oh, you’re special” ploy just like these self-hating bastards were.

“The only people you think are special are the ones you can use, Ram. They’ll realize that eventually, like we all did.”

Well, except for Azea, Brownhill, and a few others who kept attacking Juniper and sending me threatening letters. They were still bitter about us breaking up Ram’s gang and plans.

Sorrow crept into Ram’s dark eyes even though his smile remained. “I never believed that.”

“I bet you’ve never taken a shit either.”

Jag chuckled, but Ram’s cronies weren’t so amused.

“Enough of this. Get the shifter,” Two-Eyes said. “We’ll make her tell us how she beat the ward.”

Two-Eyes and the three other henchmen surged toward Beverly.

She smacked her tail on the floor with a bang and scurried down the hall. Jag leaped in front of Two-Eyes and Aquamarine with his arms outstretched to block their path. They hesitated as though not sure how to take down a single guy.

The thing with most magic users was that without magic, they didn’t know how to fight. At all. I had seen hardened criminals

in this place devolve into slap fights like little kids. But I was a dark magic user. My parents, teachers, and the world in general had told little Alyssa that her magic was wrong. Bad.

So for years, I had tried not to use it. But that didn't stop the other kids from bullying me for being a dark magic user whose existence would only cause war and ruin.

Grabbing one of the umbrellas by the pointy end, I swung it, hooking its curved handle around Two-Eyes' neck. I yanked with all my weight.

He crashed to the floor, coughing and holding his throat. Then, all hell broke free like a water balloon bursting if it was full of liquid shit.

"Everyone, calm down." Ram was shouting, but no one gave a fuck.

It would have been satisfying to watch his followers ignore his orders, except that one of them jumped me from behind, wrapping their arm around my throat and squeezing until I couldn't suck down air. If I had my magic, they'd already be dead, turned into a bug I could crush under my heel like a cigarette butt.

I made a fist and swung it backward at my assailant's crotch. My hand slammed into flat flesh. Great, my attacker was a woman, and she wasn't going down as easily as a salami swinger.

She grunted and jerked, and I slammed her pussy again. She cried out.

A dark-skinned man with a shaved head grabbed one of my dropped umbrellas and swung it at my face. I closed my eyes, but the strike didn't land. Instead, I heard a roar of rage and a thump.

I opened my eyes. Jag had tackled the man to the floor, and they rolled around as each tried to gain the upper hand.

Why in hell was he defending me?

I punched my attacker's clamshell again, and her hold on my throat slackened. I twisted free.

A hand gripped my shoulder, and I whirled, fist raised. It was Ram—and fuck, despite all that had happened between us, the betrayals, the battles—I hesitated.

“Enough,” Ram said softly. His eyes pleaded with me, which was as unsettling as a tiger who looks guilty for eating your arm. “You'll end up in solitary. We—”

“I got the magic beaver,” yelled a high-pitched voice.

I shoved Ram aside to see Aquamarine gripping Beverly's collar as the beaver struggled to run from her. Beverly made a short, sharp sound like a car alarm crossed with a click.

I ground my teeth. “Let her go.”

Jag stopped grappling with the Umbrella Fondler and jumped to his feet, fists clenched at his sides like he was ready to fight for Beverly. I still had no idea why he would care.

Two-Eyes and the woman I had slammed in her tuna sandwich stalked toward me. I stepped back with fists raised.

Aqua grinned, cruel as a kid who found a classmate with a difference. “We finally found your weakness, wood gobbler.”

It was a shot at my last name. Everyone from classmates to prison guards liked to make fun of it. “Have you tried having an original thought for once in your life?”

“Don’t hurt the beaver,” Ram ordered. “If she is a shifter, we need her to talk.”

Aqua glanced at Beverly and back to Ram. “She’s clearly not magical.”

Figures that one of the only people seeing reason in this prison was Aquamarine, who had been arrested for forcing people to party for hours on end to “The Safety Dance”—on more than one occasion.

“Then why are you harassing an animal?” I said.

“I might not be one of the special people with unique powers or big harems,” Aqua said, “but that doesn’t mean you get to steal from me.”

I stepped toward her. “You’re still going on about not landing a mate spell? Just buy a vibrator, for fuck’s sake.”

“Give me back my umbrellas now, or the beaver gets it!”

Why did she care so much about the stupid things? I knew why I cared. Pettiness.

Beverly shouted louder. I wished she would bite Aqua, but I guess she wasn’t a fighter.

“Only a fucking coward would threaten a literal animal in a cage. I’ve spent my whole life around cowards.” I shot a glare at Ram. “You’re easy to handle.”

It wasn’t true. Cowards were often the most dangerous people. I knew because I had been one. A coward would do anything to prove that they weren’t afraid. They were as bad as fatherfucking heroes who saved worlds to look noble while cowards destroyed them to look tough. Both wanted to be admired, and neither had a good reason for it.

Aqua glared at me. “You’re not going to shit on me anymore, merkin.”

Jag stepped between Aqua and me as though to shield me from her lazy-ass insults. “Say one more word or harm one hair on that beaver, and I’ll beat you until you have more bruises than a barrel of Macintoshes.”

I could bite him like a Macintosh, my brain said. I ignored her.

Ram picked up the dropped umbrellas. “We’ve got them back, Aqua. Now, let’s—”

Boots thumped on the floor as two guards stomped down the hall. I guess they got bored of watching us fight on the cameras.

“Break it up, you scumbags,” one of them shouted, his taser already sparking in his hand.



Chapter 3

Taser Guard shoved the first person he saw, who happened to be the woman who had jumped me. She stumbled against the wall.

“This isn’t fucking fight club. You should be in your ‘rehabilitation’ classes.” He made air quotes as he said rehabilitation, and his fingers were like dicks shriveled by too many steroids.

The other guard shot him a look. She was a regular here, a short woman named Vigga, whose eyes were constantly half-closed.

I crossed my arms. “What class should a wild animal take?” I sneered.

“Don’t care. Move it along, inmates.” He tore the umbrellas from Ram. “Get moving, all you miscreants. You! Hands off that other inmate.” He pointed to Aquamarine with his taser.

She flinched and let go of Beverly. At least Dick Fingers did one good thing.

As he shoved people down the corridor, I took the opportunity to slip behind him and face Vigga. “The beaver shouldn’t be here.”

“I couldn’t believe it when they dropped her off either.” She gazed at Beverly, who strolled down the hall with the other prisoners because Dick Fingers was fucking herding everyone like they were sheep. “I’d love to set her free, but unless the court overturns her conviction, I can’t release a prisoner. I’ll be fired and probably charged.”

I almost said, so what? The moral thing mattered more than a job. “Look at her. You know this isn’t right.”

Vigga sighed. “I’ll put in a request for her lawyer to visit.”

“They can’t be a good lawyer if they let a beaver get convicted!”

“If you want to contact a better lawyer to talk to her, I’ll let them in,” Vigga said.

Great, I didn’t have a lawyer to contact. I had confessed and pleaded guilty. Even if I did find a lawyer for Beverly, it could take months to appeal her case.

Vigga poked my shoulder. “You better get going before Taser McGee over there notices you. Free time is over.”

“You can stand up to him, you know.”

Vigga’s eyes narrowed... I think. They were always half closed, so it was hard to tell. “Unless he uses that taser, he’s not doing anything wrong. Get going.”

Except he was, and she knew it. She was a coward too, I decided. Sighing, I caught up to Beverly and crouched to pet her head. She stared at me with big black eyes, almost pleading.

“Come on, let’s go to group therapy.” I’d have to take her with me because what else could I do?

I could call Juniper and ask her to break Beverly out... except for one big-ass problem. I eyed Ram as Dick Fingers shoved him down the hall. He had told Jag that I could bust people out

of here, which meant he had somehow figured out that Juniper kept trying to free me. And Ram hated Juniper. She had betrayed him, robbed him, and gotten him arrested.

The moment a prisoner went missing, he'd narc on her—he might have already, and the authorities were just waiting for a sign to pounce.

I couldn't let them catch her doing illegal shit. The whole reason I had pleaded guilty was to protect her. I mean, I was guilty, but I didn't have to admit it to the cops. That was to save Juniper.

So, how in the hell was I going to get this poor beaver out of here?

Standing, I strolled slowly so Beverly could keep up as she followed me down the hall. At the crossroads, Dick Fingers turned left, following most of the prisoners as he shouted his insults. I turned right to the therapy rooms and was startled to find Jag leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

He winked. "Hello, lovely—"

"Don't say beavers."

His eyes widened in an innocent expression, and I couldn't tell if it was feigned or not. "I was going to say, apocalypse buddies."

"Are you ever sincere?" I said.

Beverly squeaked, and he crouched to pet her. "Why wouldn't I be? We survived a biblical plague together! I don't remember

cum rain mentioned anywhere, but I only saw the kids' movie, and I assume they cleaned it up for the littles.”

He would be cute if he weren't trying to play me—and doing a poor job of it. But he had stood up for Beverly when no one else had, and that counted for something.

“Hey, get moving, beaver assholes,” shouted Dick Fingers from the far end of the corridor.

“Beaver asshole?” Jag said as he stood. “Is that an asshole on a beaver or a vagina that looks or smells like an asshole? Or an asshole that looks or smells like a beaver—either type?”

He really did remind me of Juniper with the bad sex jokes and the sudden shift to rage and violence when pressed—though Juniper didn't roar when tackling someone like he had.

“You have more thoughts about this than Dick Fingers has had in his entire life.”

Jag chuckled. “Haha, dick.”

“Come on, before that asshole tases us.”

I led Jag and Beverly down the corridor and into my group therapy room. The beginning of every meeting was people grabbing coffee and hanging out because our therapist was always late. Plus, former alcoholics needed the fix that had replaced alcohol. In prison, that was coffee that tasted like it had sat under a radiator for a week.

As we entered the room, Lomao, who had removed one leg from her jumpsuit to “show off her calf” cooed at Beverly.

“Look at the handsome cute-cute!”

Beverly seemed to know when someone was being kind because she waddled over to Lomao, who kneeled to pet her. “You’re just too adorable for this place. Yes, you are.”

Beverly seemed safe for now, so I turned to Jag. “Why didn’t you side with Ram?”

He sniffed and stood straighter. “That asshole? He’s as dishonest as a boner on a corpse.”

So he was one of the few people who saw Ram for who he was right away... or he was getting better at playing me. I eyed him.

“Do you have a lot of experience with corpses?” AKA are you a murderer?

He eyed me back. “I have a lot of experience with boners, mostly my own.” He raised an eyebrow.

“That was the most awkward attempt at flirting I have ever heard,” I said, but I couldn’t help but smile. He acted smooth and confident while talking like a dork.

“Ah! You smiled,” Jag said, grinning. “Score!” He was so light now that it seemed a different person had coldly and calmly told Aquamarine that he was going to beat the shit out of her.

And that made my heart flutter because dangerous and nerdy were my jam.

We could give him our pussy jam, my brain said.

Ew, no, what the fuck?

Not only was that dumb, but I knew little about him, and he had dodged the corpse question. People who were in prison for theft and other minor crimes were happy to tell you so you wouldn't think they were something worse. People who were serial killers were happy to tell you because they were usually proud about what they had done.

That he wouldn't volunteer any info was worrying.

"Speaking of erections." Jag lowered his voice. "Sky cum."

"Is that supposed to be a secret codeword?"

He eyed me with a shrewd expression. "How'd you beat the ward to magic away the cum? Or create it in the first place?" He looked me over and winked. "You could inspire a lot of cum."

"Your lines are getting worse."

He grinned, slightly crooked and charming. It made my skin goosebump. "True enough, but about the cum—"

I changed the subject. "If you think Ram is dishonest, why did you listen when he said I could bust you out?"

Jag crossed his arms. "How did you know he told me that?"

"I have spies everywhere."

He eyed me as though trying to decide if I was serious or not. "I only followed Ram's lead because I had no other. Everyone said he was the one to talk to if you need anything around here. It looks like it's because he's smuggling contraband and bribing everyone with it."

“It’s worse than that.”

This was Ram. He wasn’t simply bribing people—though that was part of it—he was playing them. Using them for his own ends.

“Is he sucking cock for umbrellas?”

I snorted.

“Almost a laugh,” Jag said with a widening grin. “The way to Alyssa’s heart is through making fun of men.”

“Making fun of men is too easy, try something clever for a full laugh.”

“Speaking of men and easy... the cum rain. How did you create it?”

He was annoyingly persistent. “I didn’t,” I admitted.

He leaned in closer, and I caught a whiff of his scent, musky and warm. It reminded me of hot spiced tea on cold days.

“You had something to do with the cum,” he said. “If you didn’t make it, you know who did and why. You were standing in the spunk spray, waiting for something or someone.”

Fuck, he was smarter than his lame pick-up lines suggested.

“Standing in the rain is my hobby. The cum was unexpected.”

“You stole from dangerous people so you could stand in cum rain... that’s not something someone does for fun.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You underestimate how much I enjoy stealing.” And how much I enjoyed fucking over Ram and his poor deluded followers.

Jag smiled a little as though he couldn't help it. "Is that what you're in for?"

Surprisingly not, considering I had been a master thief for years. But I told him the truth because everyone knew it anyway.

"I'm in for dildo tampering."

He chuckled. "Yeah, sure, and I'm in for setting a Taco Bell on fire by lighting my post-meal farts."

Somehow, he hadn't heard about the sex toys that went mad and attacked people across the entire continent... Was he new to the world of paranormals then? Because everyone knew about the Great Dildo Calamity.

"Okay, you didn't create the cum," Jag said, "but you can still bust someone out, right?"

"If I could do that, why would poor Beverly still be here?" I nodded to the beaver who tilted her head to the side as Lomao scratched under her collar. The other five members of the therapy group watched Beverly and whispered in low tones. I eyed them as I spoke to Jag. "Why did Ram tell you I could break the ward?"

"The only thing he said was that you knew a way out."

I frowned. Jag was open about what he wanted, so Ram could have easily manipulated him and strung him along, at least for a few weeks. A new recruit for Ram's gang. So, why did he send Jag my way?

Jag interrupted my thoughts. "Do you know how to escape?"

I turned to him. “Why would I tell you? I barely know you. What are you even in here for?”

Jag met my eyes. His dark brown ones were sad and angry at the same time. “I’m not going to lie to you, Alyssa,” he whispered. “So, good-bye.” He turned and strolled from the room as though in no hurry at all.

I stared after him, wondering why he didn’t lie and who he killed by accident. That had to be it. He had done something bad enough to hide, but he felt guilty, so he wasn’t some serial killer or supervillain either.

Sighing, I turned to the room. Lomao had moved on from Beverly, and the beaver now groomed her fur in the middle of the room. No one was messing with her, so I turned to the table with its urn of coffee that tasted like it had been mixed with the ashes of a particularly bitter demon.

It was the one addiction I still had.

As I filled a mug from the canister’s spout, I gazed out the small window above the table. It was covered in bars, of course—everything fucking was—but I could at least see a section of the bright sunny sky... and a swirl of rainbow like a stone dropped in gasoline mixed with water.

A giant avocado with a human face frozen in horror burst through it and soared across the bit of sky I could see.

That was too normal to be Juniper’s doing. My heart sank into my gut like... well, a swallowed piece of avocado.

Portal magic was rare and complicated. I only knew of one way of casting the spell: by using the Astrosmos, a magical relic that made portal magic possible for anyone.

And if someone in Silver Springs had the Astrosmos, they had stolen it from my friends, who were completely fucked without it.



Chapter 4

I tilted my chair back in the prison library and waited for the man I was going to shiv.

In the meantime, I watched a portal swirling on the other side of the library's sole window as rage and worry grew inside me like the weeds in the prison yard: unbeatable, no matter how much you tried to stomp them out.

I couldn't shake the feeling that whoever was opening the portals was using the Astrosmos. The random shit that spilled from them was similar to my early attempts at learning how to use the relic.

Once I had figured it out, I used it to create Free Jinx, a bubble dimension for fellow magical outcasts. It was a refuge. A place where we wouldn't be chased out of town for using a form of magic others disliked.

A place where we belonged.

The lost souls and misfits who lived there had dubbed themselves the Eclipses because they were often viewed as portents of evil. But they had light inside them, even if many people only saw the shadow.

The problem was that the Astrosmos kept the bubble dimension open and stable. If someone had stolen it, Free Jinx would collapse like a dying star and take the ninety-three people who lived there with it.

Please, please don't be the Astrosmos, I thought as I watched a portal spit a bunch of random bullshit and the cow that had plopped it. I hoped she was okay.

A munching sound filled the library as Beverly chewed on the leg of the library's big wooden table. She had already chewed apart three chairs and stacked their pieces in a makeshift dam against the nearby bookshelf.

As the new librarian glanced at her, I eyed him for signs that he would intervene. He wasn't my shivving target, but if he took away that poor animal's one joy, I'd jump him too. I couldn't get Beverly out of here, but I could at least give her wood to chew.

The librarian—a fellow prisoner in bright orange—sat behind the library's check-out desk with a tome big enough to be some ancient spell book. He had rolled up the sleeves of his jumpsuit to reveal his ebony forearms, and my gaze kept straying back to his hands and wrists. His black hair was a halo of abundant curls, and his nose was wide. He kept glancing up to Beverly, and smiling small and sly like he held a secret.

That secret better not be that he had or was going to narc on poor Bev.

He had yet to say a thing about the beaver destroying the library's furniture, but that didn't mean anything. In prison, if you were smart, you didn't broadcast that you planned to tattle on someone, and you didn't pick fights with other prisoners and their beaver friends unless you knew you could win.

He smiled at Beverly, then turned back to his massive book. Through the window above him, a group of beards with no faces attached shot out of the portal and collided with a purple-

skinned pixie who was flying nearby. The pixie twisted in the air, arms flailing as they tried to detangle themselves from the beards before they dropped from the sky and out of sight.

I let my chair legs drop to the floor and pinched the bridge of my nose.

The librarian looked at me with wide eyes as though I had appeared out of nowhere like the flying beards and cum rain.

“Oh... do you and the beaver need anything?”

His voice was deep like a forest pool, but it trembled, and that made me tense. If he was expecting trouble, he meant to turn Beverly in. I shot him a glare. I was tired of all this waiting: waiting for the man I meant to shiv, waiting for this librarian to cause trouble, waiting to see what the fuck was going on with the portal, waiting for a chance to free Beverly.

“If you’re going to tattle on Beverly, just run off to a guard and get it over with already.”

“Tattle?” He leaned back as though trying to dodge the accusation. “But... why? She looks so happy! It must be hard being cut off from rivers and trees and... what else do beavers like? Maybe there’s a book on it.” The more he spoke, the more the tremble in his voice faded. Maybe he had just been nervous to start a conversation.

“You don’t think she’s a shifter?”

He gazed at Beverly with soft eyes, like he was looking at a kitten. “If she is, she should still get to be happy. Right?”

I raised my brows. No one was that nice; he must be lying. But then everyone who had looked at Beverly with puppy eyes had been sincere so far. We didn't get pets in here, and many people missed their fuzzy friends. The rest... looked at her like starving wolves eyeing rabbits. They were predators seeing a chance to fill the hole inside them left by being cut off from their magic. A hole that the beaver could never fill even if she wanted.

Beverly's chewing sounds grew louder, and the big wooden table next to me partially collapsed, one end slamming into the floor. I startled, and Beverly ran toward her dam, dragging a table leg.

I smiled at the happy baby despite feeling like I was living in a spin cycle full of shit.

"I'm Elliot, by the way," the librarian spoke in a rush as though he thought his throat would close off at any second. "You can call me Ellie or El, my friends do."

"Alyssa," I said. "Don't shorten it."

"Alyssa," he repeated the name as though tasting it, and the sound made my lips tingle.

Someone poked their head through the library door and I tensed, sitting up straighter. But it wasn't the person I was waiting to confront. Lomao waved to Beverly, then chuckled and left.

I turned back to Elliot. "Do you know if the other librarian is coming in today? The guy, not the young woman."

“Oh,” he said, his voice dropping in disappointment. He reached across his desk for a pad of sticky notes and a plastic pen. “I don’t know, but if you need something from him, I can leave a message.” He held the pen above the yellow pad and watched me as though focusing extra hard so as not to miss anything I’d say.

“No, I’d rather surprise him,” I said with a curl of my lips that was almost a smile.

“Oh... I can help you find something to read?” His voice was deep and soft like sinking into a soft bed at night. “We received a new box of donations, and some of the puzzle books haven’t been filled in yet.”

I glanced at the window behind him. The portal spat out a chicken with a rocket spewing fire as the bird shot out of view. I had enough puzzles already.

Elliot cleared his throat. “If you don’t like puzzles, we have a few fantasy series.”

I glanced at the massive tome on his desk. It looked like an omnibus of something with too much worldbuilding. I could use the escape. “What are you reading?”

He thumbed the page as though unsure he wanted to answer. “The Big Book of Wondrous Wordplay.” He met my gaze and smiled a little, soft and warm. “For example, this page has a blue hoodie.”

The fuck? I stared at him. He stared back, and as the silence stretched on, his smile started to melt like cum hitting the

pavement.

His cum could hit our pavement, my brain said, but I ignored her.

His meaning slowly dawned on me.

“You mean Paige like the person.”

Elliot’s smile widened and looked down at the book. “That wasn’t a very good joke, was it?”

I chuckled. “Is the book printed on parchment? Because that pun was baaaaa...d,” I said, imitating a sheep, and then cringed at my joke. If I wasn’t already in prison, I should be locked up for that.

Elliot laughed, a light sound despite his deep voice, like birds fluttering around. “I should write that one on my notepaaaad.”

“Why? So you can look at it and be saaaaad?”

He tapped the pen on the sticky notes. “No, because I think it’s raaaad.”

Why in fuck were we trading rhyming sheep noises? How had I been talked into this? What horror had I unleashed upon us?

“That’s enough of that,” I said.

“Oh.” Elliot stared at his book, then lifted it to show me the cover. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

Of course it was. One of Juniper’s men was convinced he was Shakespeare. “So, you’re reading puns and dick jokes.”

“Among other things,” Elliot said. “I regret not paying more attention in school, so I’m learning now, fifteen years too

late.” He shrugged. “What else am I going to do?”

I glanced at the door. Plot revenge like I am? “What are you in for?”

Elliot met my gaze with his dark eyes. “Theft,” he said flatly.

It was the first time he stared directly at me and the first time he spoke in a dull tone.

He was trying too hard, trying to appear normal and calm when he never did before. He was lying.

“You might want to look up a book about tells because you lie like a beaver flies,” I said.

Elliot’s eyes widened and he looked away, dragging a finger across the page of his book. The mask he had slipped on was now gone. Now I knew his tells, and that meant he had been telling the truth about wanting to give Beverly a break.

Before I could ask him what he was really in for, my shivving target stomped into the library.



Chapter 5

My victim marched into the library as though he owned the place. His white hair was cut short, and he wore his jumpsuit unzipped halfway down his chest as though he thought he was hot shit.

This was Volos, the person who had murdered one of Juniper's men. Oscar had been brought back to life, thankfully, but this guy had still slit his throat over a vat of ice cream.

To think, I had been in prison with him for almost two years before Juniper told me. Maybe she knew I'd do something to him and get into more trouble. But it would be worth it.

Volos's gray eyes shone with a rage that could not be quelled. The rage of someone who believed they were better than everyone else if only someone, anyone, would recognize it.

A type of rage I knew well.

His gaze fell on Beverly. She was stacking her pieces of wood like some HGTV snob trying to decorate a room just right.

"What the fuck is that beaver doing?" Volos roared as he plodded toward Beverly.

I leaped between him and the beaver. Behind him, Elliot jumped to his feet and rushed around his desk.

"Like the beavers of every woman you've ever spoken to, this one wants nothing to do with you," I said.

The thing with assholes who thought they were better than everyone else: they were actually cowards. Acting like they were the best was just a front to cover their fear.

Volos glowered at me but took a step back. “You’re all paying for this furniture!” He spun on his heel and snapped at Elliot, “Where are the new donations? I want the puzzle books.”

“Umm... aren’t those for everyone?” Elliot said.

“I’m the head librarian. They’re for who I say they’re for.” Volos marched down the row of shelves. “Where did you put them?”

Elliot gaped after him. “There isn’t a head librarian,” he whispered.

I crouched down and pulled up the leg of my jumpsuit to retrieve a tampon and applicator from my sock.

“Keep an eye on Beverly and a look out for guards,” I told Elliot.

“What are you doing?”

“Less than he deserves.” I spared a glance at the pieces of jagged wood Beverly had chewed. *No, I’m not murdering anyone*, I reminded myself. I was better than I once was.

So, clutching the tampon applicator, I followed Volos into the stacks.

I found him crouched by the back wall as he rummaged through a cardboard box. He didn’t even hear me coming. I had been a thief, and I knew how to move quietly, even in the clunky prison boots.

I wrapped an arm around his throat, putting him in a chokehold. As his mouth opened, gasping for breath, I jammed

the tampon applicator in as far as it would go and pushed down on the plunger.

“This is for Oscar, you fucking hemorrhoid on the ass of a tick.”

I let go of Volos, and he collapsed to all fours with a tampon string hanging past his lips. He opened and closed his mouth like a fish as he tried to gasp air past his tampon-blocked throat. He reached up, grabbed the string, and yanked.

As the tampon came out like a turd out of his anus of a mouth, he retched, puking on the library carpet.

I dropped the applicator before him, turned on my heel, and left him to finish vomiting up his lunch.

“Hello, Officer,” Elliot said very loudly from the other side of the library. “Thank you for visiting. Can I get you anything?”

He was stalling for me, I realized. I smiled to myself, then grabbed a random book off a shelf as a cover for why I was back here.

“What in fuck is happening here?” Dick Fingers shouted as I strolled out from between the shelves.

Figures that the worst fucking guard in this whole place was the one to show up. If he did anything to Beverly, I might have to rethink that no-murder rule.

“You, prisoner, get away from that wood,” he shouted as he pointed at Beverly. The beaver screamed, and my entire body tensed.

“Get away from that wood is what your mom’s Tinder date says before abandoning her in a Wendy’s parking lot.”

As Pinky Pricks rounded on me, I turned to Elliot and fake smiled as though nothing was amiss. “I’d like to check this book out, please. I can’t wait to read... *Dick Fight Island?* Huh, people write weird shit.”

Elliot was trembling as he glanced between me and the guard. “I did it!” he blurted.

“You wrote about dick fights?” I said.

“No, I broke the table and chairs. I did it, me.”

My breath caught. Elliot was so, so fucked.

Dick Fingers glanced from Beverly to Elliot. It was obvious the librarian was lying, but the guard cared more about having someone to punish than uncovering the truth.

“Come with me, you leech.”

“Wait.” I stepped between Pinky Pricks and Elliot, though I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.

Instinctively, I reached for my magic to defend us... but it didn’t answer. It couldn’t. The world remained cold and cruel and stubbornly fixed, refusing to change itself to save me.

Dicky pressed the comms on his shoulder. “I’m going to need backup in the library.”

“Tell them to send someone who isn’t a douchebag,” I said.

Before he could answer, Volos stumbled out from behind the bookshelves. “She tried to kill me!”

I rolled my eyes. “With what?”

“A tampon!” Volos roared.

I laughed. It was fake, but I was good at it. “How in fuck can a tampon hurt you?”

Dick Fingers frowned as his gaze darted around the room. He was in over his head, and he knew it.

“Do something!” Volos demanded.

“Are you sure you were attacked? You look healthy to me,” Elliot said, his voice quiet. He might be shy, but he was brave.

Volos gaped at us. “Why would I make this up? If I was lying, I’d pick a weapon that made sense!”

Dicky nodded. “Yeah... yeah, your claim is so strange, it must be true.” He grabbed my arm, hard enough to hurt. “Come on. You are going to the hole.”

I couldn’t believe he bought Volos’s story. I mean, it was true, but I had been careful to pick an attack method no one would buy. Next time, I should jam the tampon so far down Volos’s throat that he won’t be able to reach the string.

Dicky pointed to Elliot with his free hand. “You stay here until backup arrives to take you to solitary.”

Elliot nodded once, resigned. There wasn’t much else he could do with no magic and nowhere to hide.

The guard dragged me toward the library door like a child to their room.

“Fuck, you men are so terrified of anything related to vaginas, you think a tampon can kill you. It’s a wonder humanity ever reproduces,” I said.

“I was merciful to you yesterday,” he growled. “It was more than you deserved. Every time I run into you, there’s some kind of problem.”

“Because you’re looking for problems so you can feel like a big man. I bet you weep in the Dunkin’ Donuts bathroom when the cashier says she has a boyfriend.”

“Fuck you, Beaver,” he sneered. Someone must have told him my name between the fight yesterday and now. “Is your dad a pussy too?”

I rolled my eyes. Did he think I hadn’t heard that before? “Is your mom as disappointed in you as you are in yourself?”

His face went red with rage, and he yanked on my arm harder.

I stomped out of the library into the corridor. “When I get out of here, I’m taking your mom somewhere nice so she can feel pride for the first time in her life.”

“Shut your mouth!”

“That’s not what your dad says to me when I fuck him in your twin bed from high school.”

I was going to say more, but I heard Beverly scream again. I glanced over my shoulder to see her standing in the library door watching Dicky drag me away.

My heart dropped as I realized I had fucked up. Badly.

Who was going to protect Beverly when I was in the hole? Plenty of people seemed to like her, but plenty wanted to hurt her too. Would anyone else step up to look after her? Elliot might, but he was being locked up.

“It’s okay, Beverly,” I called. It was a lie. “It’s okay.”



Chapter 6

Dick Fingers shoved me into the solitary confinement cell and slammed the door. I pounded my fists on the metal and screamed—not at the shithead guard, though he deserved it—but at myself.

I had fucked up. I'd given Beverly wood to chew on, and now Elliot was going to be locked in the hole. I'd tried to avenge Oscar, and now Beverly was alone in a dangerous cage with no one to protect her.

Even locked in prison, I still somehow made things worse for everyone near me.

It was the story of my life. I had tried to save the world by taking magical artifacts out of the hands of randos. But really, I had been harming people while helping a maniac become more powerful. I'd tried to protect Juniper from Ram and stop his evil plans. While that was successful, I had broken a community of lonely, lost souls, and I'd hurt people who had been my friends for years. Some of them were still sending me angry letters and would probably try to kill me once I was out of prison.

I had tried to end my failures by turning my dark magic to light because maybe my parents and teachers had been right. Maybe using dark magic was why I kept hurting others.

But instead of changing my magic, I had ruined my best friend's life in a way she'd never fully recover from. I had given the Eclipses a safe home, but now they might be dead because that bubble dimension was never as safe as I had

promised. The moment the Astrosmos left it, everyone there was doomed.

“Fuck,” I screamed and punched the door, ignoring the pain it sent through my fist and up to my shoulder.

Beverly, that innocent little beaver, was now going to bear the brunt of my fuck-up. I should have thought ahead. I should have realized that getting into fights would harm her more than it would me.

But, of course, I hadn't thought of it until it was too late.

“Hey, are you okay?” said a soft, worried voice.

I startled and whirled. The tiny cell was empty but for a cot, toilet, sink, and the book I had dropped when Dicky pushed me in. Oh great, now I was losing my mind after three minutes in the hole. Most people lasted at least a day before hearing voices.

“Go away, hallucination,” I said. “I don't want you.”

“I'm a hallucination? I don't think I'm a hallucination. I mean, if I am, I'm a really good one because I'm pretty sure I was here before you arrived. I have memories and everything. Anyway, sorry for bothering you. I'll put the stone back in the wall.”

I frowned. Okay, maybe I wasn't losing my mind. “Where are you?”

“In the wall,” he said in a spooky, ghost voice. “Not really. Sorry if that was scary. I'm in the next cell. Hi!”

I eyed the cinder brick wall until I spotted a narrow gap where there should have been mortar. Closing one eye, I pressed the other to the crack. A bright blue iris stared back.

“Hi!” he said again, his voice now bright and cheery. “I’m Moe. Want to talk? What are you in for? The hole, I mean, not prison in general, but you can answer that too if you want. Talk about anything! I’ll listen. I’m good at that.”

He was desperately lonely, I decided.

“What’s your name?” he said. “I’m Moe. Did I already say that?”

“You did. I’m Alyssa,” I said.

I wasn’t desperate, but Dick Fingers, that walking sinus infection, was going to keep me in here as long as he legally could. Another human would stave off a mental breakdown, even if he might be one of Ram’s many ass-lickers. This prison was crawling with them like roaches.

“Hi, Alyssa,” Moe said in a tone that reminded me of a dog greeting a beloved human. Though I should have hated him being joyful over nothing, it eased some of the fury swirling within me, like a hurricane moving over land. “I’m in for counter bands.”

“You mean contraband?”

“Is that what it’s called? I had a bottle of beer; I only took it to be polite and because it had a moose on the label. I like meese.”

“Moose,” I corrected.

“No, I like all meese, not just one.”

“You know what, never mind.”

If he had alcohol that wasn't fermented in a toilet, then he could have only gotten it from Ram. It was one way he bribed other prisoners to do his bidding—or at least to look the other way. And I wasn't talking to one of Ram's bastards.

Especially not one who made my tongue itch for a taste of shitty beer.

I turned away from the gap and glanced around for something to block it with, but this place didn't even have toilet paper. I could rip a page from *Dick Fight Island*, though it seemed a shit move to damage a prison book when most of our books were already in bad shape.

“I don't even like beer or any alcohol,” Moe said, and I turned back to his crack. “But when I first arrived, this guy—Rod, I think—”

I snorted at his misremembering Ramrod's preferred nickname.

“He invited me into his cell and I thought, hey, prison is friendlier than TV led me to believe. Then Rod offered me a drink, and I don't drink even when it's legal, but my papa always said it was rude to turn down an offer from your host. Maybe that's why he ended up swinging with the neighbors. Anyway, I said thanks, and could I take the bottle to go? Rod was super nice, but when I was walking back to my cell, a

guard stopped me and said you can't have glass because I might stab someone, but I would never! So, now I'm here."

I gaped at the gap in the wall. Was this guy really that dense? Or that blindly trusting, which I guessed was the same thing as being dumb.

"Why didn't you tell them who gave you the beer?"

Moe gasped. "Narcs get knocked."

I frowned. "You mean snitches get stitches?"

"No. So, what are you in for?"

I gawked at the gap again. Either Ram had recruited the most disarming person ever who would snitch everything everyone said back to him... or Moe was truly clueless. I didn't know which.

"I attacked a guy with a tampon."

Moe was silent for a moment. "Wow... there's a lot I don't understand about pussy pushers. They're sharp? Why are they sharp?"

I was silent for a moment. "What did you call them?"

"Don't the sharp ends hurt?"

I shook my head. "Tampons are not sharp. I jammed it down his throat."

"Oooh... that's clever."

I eyed the wall, wishing I could see Moe to get a better read on him. How could someone as stupidly happy as a tummy-rub-starved dog admire unique ways of choking out a dude?

“What are you in prison for?”

“Playing my ass bongos in public.”

I snorted. He was a funny liar, at least.

“How about you?”

“Turning sex toys against their owners.”

I expected the usual responses: *that was you?* or *what the hell are you talking about?* depending on if the other person was living in the magical world when the Great Dildo Calamity took place.

Instead, Moe said, “Were you trying to start the robot uprising? I always tell robots thanks so that they’ll spare me. Maybe that’s why my vibes didn’t turn on me.”

“Who in the fuck are you?” I said, despite myself.

“I’m Moe. It can be hard to remember. I have a song...” He cleared his throat, and when he started to sing, his voice was warm and sonorous, sending goosebumps down my back.

“M for man and O for Oooohhhh.”

His lyrics needed work, though.

No, they don’t. He should moan more and louder and longer and harder.

Shut up, brain!

“E for everyone’s friend. That’s Moe!”

He had to be an over-the-top liar trying to get info from people. Or a top-notch troll. Or...

“How long have you been in here?”

“The hole? They keep the lights on all the time, so I don’t know. What day is it?”

“Monday the 20th.”

“A few hours then.”

“So, you lost your mind quickly.”

“Everyone asks me that, but no, this is just me. Maybe I’ll make up a song about you. A is for... hmmm... Always—you know, from the feminine aisle at the drugstore—can be a weapon tooooooo!” He stopped singing. “Is that too long?”

I burst into laughter. I couldn’t help it.

Moe laughed too, a truly happy sound.

“Always aren’t tampons,” I said.

“Hmm... I’ll think of something else. I just need to get to know you better.”

I tensed. There it was. He was fishing for intel for Ram or another one of the gangs.

“Your cock can get to know your asshole as you go fuck yourself,” I said.

“Wow... you’re mean,” Moe said as though he wasn’t offended at all. He continued in a softer voice. “Does being mean stop people from taking advantage of you as often?”

I glanced away from the crack as though he could see my gaze. “It doesn’t.”

“I wonder what does,” Moe said. “Are you mean because you’re sad? My friend, the one who’s going to get us out, he’s mean because he’s sad. Sometimes I think yelling would be easier than crying, but I don’t know how to yell loud enough to stop crying.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I was good at yelling, but I couldn’t do it loudly enough to stop the pain either. Not that I was going to tell all that to a stranger.

“You mentioned a friend who is going to get you out?”

“Yeah, he’s looking for an escape plan. Don’t tell the guards.”

I sighed. His friend was Jag. Moe probably wasn’t working for Ram, given that Jag seemed to hate my ex. But how could someone, anyone, just admit their illegal plans to a stranger?

“You shouldn’t tell people that.”

“I know, but you seem nice. I mean, not really, but you seem... I don’t know, trustworthy. The guards don’t like you either.”

I eyed the gap in the wall. “You know, they send in informants sometimes to act friendly and get you to confess to shit.”

Moe was silent for a moment. “That’s not just on TV?”

I groaned and ran a hand down my face. This guy was going to be eaten alive in here. No wonder Jag was desperate to find a way out if he wanted Moe free.

“If you’re not acting dumb to hustle me, you have a lot to learn.”

Moe was quiet again. “Dumb?” he said, his voice so soft I barely heard it.

My heart contracted like a cold cock.

“I see,” he said, his voice flat now. “You’re the cruel type of mean rather than the funny or helpful kind.”

I winced, but I fucking shouldn’t have. So what if this random guy thought I was cruel? People had been calling me bitchy and evil my whole life. Hell, my mother loved to remind me that I had a rotten soul and a nasty spirit. All because dark magic came naturally to me. It had stopped bothering me years ago when I realized fuck it, I should just hurt those people who hurt me. They were going to call me evil either way. At least if I was cruel, I wasn’t the only one who suffered.

But harming Moe felt like kicking a puppy. Too easy and too undeserved.

I waited for him to continue with his cheerful talk like he had after the first time I had insulted him, but he didn’t say anything. The only sound in the room was my breath and the clattering hum from the shitty air vent above the toilet. Now that Moe had stopped talking, I realized just how small the cell seemed without him.

“I have a book. Do you want me to read it out loud?” I offered.

I flipped through *Dick Fight Island* and its pages of black-and-white drawings of buff dudes getting it on. I nearly groaned, not in pleasure, but in annoyance. Figures I’d be stuck with smut as my only entertainment. I should have taken a puzzle

book. “And... ummm... describe the pictures of naked dudes wrestling and fucking?”

Moe didn't answer, and I only felt worse. If he was a troll or trying to hustle me, he would accept any attempt at an apology to keep me talking. Since he didn't, he was actually hurt.

He was the rarest and worst thing in the world: sincere.

“I don't know you well enough to judge your intelligence. Don't take it seriously,” I said.

The quiet remained like a bruise, silent and sore and suggesting something painful had happened. I clenched my teeth and did the difficult thing.

“I'm sorry, Moe.”

Something scraped on the wall like a stone on stone. Frowning, I stood and placed my eye to the gap but saw only darkness. Moe had blocked it off.



Chapter 7

I raced through the prison corridors, coming to a stop before Beverly's cell.

It was free time, so all the cell doors were open. Beverly's doorway was blocked with a pile of random shit: the mattress from her cot, the chair from her desk, a notepad, and dozens of random yellow pencils.

Inside the cell, someone was singing in a low, smooth voice as if thunder could talk. "Who's a good beaver? Who's the best beaver? You're as cute as a golden retriever."

Beverly grunted and whined as though she were singing along.

I peered over Beverly's makeshift dam. An inflatable kiddie pool filled most of her cell. It was too shallow for Beverly to swim in, but she crouched in the center as though trying to get as much of her body underwater as possible. Jag perched on her bed frame, singing to her.

I smiled as relief flooded my veins. "You took care of her."

Jag startled, but he grinned when he saw me. My stomach flipped over like a gymnast.

"I've been here every day from the moment they open the cells until they lock us up again. Beverly even goes with me to the woodworking class, don't you?" He leaned forward and petted the beaver's head. She leaned into his touch like a dog.

"Awww, hi, Beverly," I said.

She looked at me and whined. I waved since I couldn't get past her dam and into her room.

“She missed you,” Jag said. He smiled, sly and mischievous.
“I missed you.”

My stomach was going for gold on the uneven bars now. I ignored it. He barely knew me and was only being charming because he wanted me to bust him out of here.

We could bust his nuts first, my brain said. I bet he could bust our clit.

Urgh, no wonder I had started drinking. My brain never shut up.

“Did anyone try to hurt Beverly?” I asked Jag.

His smile vanished like water down a drain. “My cell is on the other side of the prison, so those bastards get to Beverly before I can in the morning.”

My heart dropped. “Oh, no.”

“So far, they’ve only threatened her like she’s a person who will understand. I nearly ended up in the hole for beating one of the bastards,” his voice turned cold. “But they didn’t snitch. Aquamarine entered her cell yesterday and Beverly bit her.”

I chuckled but it died quickly. If the wrong guard had been on duty, they would have stuck Beverly in the hole for biting Aquamarine.

“Yes, good girl for being bitey,” Jag cooed, scratching Beverly under her collar. “But it’s only a matter of time before someone tries to really hurt her.”

I clenched my jaw. If Jag, Elliot, and I ever had to fight a guard or prisoner to protect Beverly, we could all end up in solitary at the same time. Then who would look after her? Some of the other people were friendly to her, but would they be willing to fight both guards and prisoners for her sake?

I couldn't keep Beverly safe forever. Not to mention that a kiddie pool in a prison cell wasn't a healthy place for a beaver.

But Ram knew Juniper could break into the prison. If I called my friend for help, she'd end up in a whole lot of shit. I pinched the bridge of my nose. I was going to have to break Beverly out myself, but contrary to what Ram had told Jag, I had no idea how.

"You okay?" Jag said.

I dropped my arm to my side. "Who brought the pool?"

Jag shrugged. "It was on the floor outside her cell one morning along with a pump. I assume a guard bought it on the way to work, but who knows? This place is thick with contraband." His lip curled. "Yet they pick and choose who they punish for it."

Moe, I thought with a pang of guilt. He had refused to speak to me after my careless comment, so as far as I knew, he was still in solitary.

"It's because Ram bribes the guards. He has money from illegal activities the cops don't know about and friends on the outside willing to smuggle him shit."

Fuck, I might need to ask him to bribe them for Beverly's freedom, but what would that cost me? I had helped put him in prison in the first place.

Jag picked up a bowl of salad from the bed frame and fed a lettuce leaf to Beverly. "I would have never talked to him if I had known what he was like. His gang ransacked your room, by the way. And mine."

I had expected it. The cells were kept open during the day and only a guard could lock the doors. Theft was common. "I stole all my valuable possessions from them, anyway. I'll just steal it all back."

Jag grinned. "I knew I liked you."

My stomach fluttered again. I eyed Jag. He had the sort of admiration for stealing that other thieves often showed.

"Are you in for theft?"

"No." Like last time, he didn't elaborate.

"Hi, Jag," said a deep, soft voice. I whirled to find Elliot next to me.

His jumpsuit was wrinkled, his eyes bloodshot and baggy. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and he probably hadn't. They never turned off the lights in solitary; I hadn't slept much either, but I never did, so I was used to it. Elliot didn't seem to be. He almost wavered on his feet, and I reached out a hand to catch him if he fell.

"Thank you for helping Beverly."

Elliot smiled at me, tired and small like grinning through pain.
“Anything for an animal.”

Despite his exhaustion, he was handsome when he smiled, and it made me beam like an idiot.

“Ellie.” Jag jumped to his feet so quickly that he splashed into Beverly’s pool, and the beaver grunted in annoyance.

Jag reached over the dam to hug Elliot. Of course, these two were friends. Every guy I had met in the last few days was part of this little group.

“Solitary was worse than I thought it would be,” Elliot whispered.

I grimaced. I should have made him leave the library before letting Beverly chew on the wood. Or I should have confessed to save him from the hole.

Jag had told me that he and his friends didn’t belong in prison. Now I understood why. Soft-spoken, bookish Elliot and trusting, kind Moe were going to be eaten alive.

Jag broke off the hug. “Did you practice your fingering to pass the time? It always calms you down.”

“He can practice his fingering on us,” my brain said. Wait, did she say that out loud or just in my head?

Elliot blinked at me. “What?”

“What?” I said.

Jag and Elliot stared at me.

Change the subject! I made a loose fist and slid my index finger in and out. “You mean fingering... in your butt?”

Elliot gave me a what-the-fuck look while Jag grinned. “I meant fingering for a clarinet,” he said. “Elli is so skilled, he can play in the air and hear all the notes in his head.” Jag mimed playing an instrument.

“Oh, you’re a musician,” I said.

I’d reread *Dick Fight Island* with its copious ass play way too many times over the last few days. Stupid, boring solitary.

Elliot shook his head. “I don’t play anymore. I was never a real musician, anyway.”

Jag grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t you ever talk about yourself like that. You are—”

“Hey, guys,” said a cheery voice that could only be Moe.

As I laid eyes on him for the first time, a tingle went down my spine. His dark blond hair was disheveled like he had just woken up from a nap. His blue eyes were bright, as though fairy lights glowed within them. Despite his boyish hair and eyes, his jaw was strong, and he looked to be in his thirties like me, Jag, and Elliot.

We should kiss him, my brain said.

He hates us, I reminded her.

“Moe!” Elliot said, his voice raising an octave in happiness. He wrapped the other man in a big hug.

Moe chuckled and held Elliot with one arm. He stretched the other past Beverly's dam to pat Jag on the shoulder.

Jag squeezed his hand. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I counted sixty thousand sheep!" Moe said happily.

Apparently, nothing could get him down. Except for me.

I backed away from Moe. I wasn't sure why I wanted to dodge him. I insulted everyone all the time, and it never bothered me—at least, it hadn't since I had learned to stop giving a fuck. It was easier that way.

But I was ashamed for hurting Moe.

Before I could make my break, his cheerful blue gaze landed on me over Elliot's shoulder, and he smiled. He actually smiled. It was as warm as the sun coming out from behind thick clouds. And it only made the iron ball of guilt in my chest grow three sizes, like the Grinch's heart.

He stepped out of Elliot's hug. "Hi! I'm Moe. What's your name?"

I froze. Of course, he didn't recognize me. I considered lying about who I was, but as soon as I said something, he'd know my voice and think I was treating him like an idiot by telling an obvious lie.

"Alyssa."

Moe's smile faded, then returned, and then faded again as though he was trying to stay happy but couldn't quite do it.

We could suck Moe's cock as an apology, my brain said. He is very pretty.

Oh, for fuck's sake, shut up!

Elliot and Jag didn't seem to notice their friend's change in mood. Jag grabbed both of their shoulders.

"I'm going to get you two out of here. Beverly, too. I have a lead."

Oh, no, I thought.

Elliot frowned. "Not that snotty tissue who set up Moe?"

"Someone much better." Jag turned to me with his eyebrows raised.

Even though I barely knew him, I could read his expression: a silent, you see now why I need to get these guys out of here?

I glanced from Jag to Elliot with his tired eyes and to Moe, who wouldn't meet my gaze.

My heart dropped, though I didn't know why I should care about letting down Jag, Elliot, and Moe. I was looking for a way to free Beverly, but I wouldn't free them. Just because they were fucked didn't mean they weren't dangerous to the outside world. Sometimes, seemingly nice people were. Since they wouldn't admit what they were in for, it was something worse than simple shoplifting or drug possession.

Freeing Beverly was the right thing to do but freeing them wasn't. I would help them while we were all in prison because they needed it, but only Beverly was leaving this place.

If I ever figured out how.

I took a step back from them. “I don’t know how to break out.” It was true, at least.

Jag’s eyes narrowed as though he didn’t believe me. Elliot just looked resigned, while Moe lifted his gaze toward me, his eyes wide and startled as though he hadn’t expected me to be Jag’s lead.

Behind me, someone cleared his voice. “Au contraire, Alyssa. I know how you can escape,” Ram drawled.



Chapter 8

Ram leaned against the wall with that damn friendly smile on his face. I used to think it was charming, but now I knew it was a lie. He wore it when he told you were important, and he wore it when he ordered your friends killed.

“I’m surprised you haven’t figured out how to escape already,” he said. “Maybe you have and are lying about being clueless. Either way, I know how you—and only you—can beat the ward.”

He was trying to play me like he always had. My lip curled in disgust.

“You think you’re the genius playing 3D chess, but you’re the idiot in the corner chewing on a checker piece.”

“I like checkers,” Moe said behind me. “Are there board games in the rec room?”

“I’ll obtain a checkers set for you,” Ram said smoothly.

I inwardly groaned. No wonder he had targeted Moe. He was too trusting for this place.

Something thumped to the floor, and Beverly whined.

I whirled to see half of her dam collapse as Jag tried to climb over it.

“Help me out,” he said.

Elliot grabbed Jag’s arm to stop him from falling flat on his face as he struggled through the dam.

“I’m going to beat that bastard six shades of shit.”

“How poetic,” Ram drawled. “How is the beaver enjoying the pool I sent her?”

I sighed. Of course, it was from Ram.

“You stay away from her and from my friends,” Jag roared.

I turned back to Ram to tell him to fuck off, but he pointed into the open door of my cell, next to Beverly’s.

I stepped forward and glanced inside. The mattress was on the floor, the drawers had been ripped out of the desk, and the lone shelf stood empty. But ransacking happened often enough that I didn’t keep anything that mattered. I tore up and flushed all letters after reading them—the good ones alongside the threatening ones. I kept no journals. It was easier than losing personal information to my enemies.

The most worrying thing was on the other side of the cell window. Beyond the top of the prison’s outer wall, the air rippled like a stone dropped in water stained with gasoline.

It definitely wasn’t Juniper. She didn’t use portals, and if she ever decided to, she’d blow past the prison’s ward like it was nothing. Like she had done a dozen times already while trying to convince me to leave this place.

But then who in hell was casting these spells?

“Ah, you have noticed the portals,” Ram said, his voice low and dangerous.

I debated dragging him into my cell to question him about the portals, about breaking out, and about Juniper. But I decided, fuck it. I wasn’t playing his games anymore. I had promised

myself not to when I had joined up with Juniper to take him down years ago.

“Be careful when you beat up Ram,” I said to Jag as the man yanked his foot free of Beverly’s handiwork. “He aims for the dick and favors uppercuts.” I shot Ram a smug grin and pushed past him into my cell.

“Wait,” Ram said, his voice losing its careful calm. “I can help you free Beverly.”

It was all a scam. I had put Ram in prison in the first place; he wasn’t going to help me unless it was a trap or a way to help himself. And I wasn’t interested in assisting a man who had wanted to steal the world’s magic.

I wished I could slam the door in his face, but they were all locked to the walls during the day so we couldn’t close them and do questionable shit. Instead, I turned to glare at him just as Jag slammed Ram against the wall with a thud. Ram groaned.

“If you want to escape, you need me,” Ram said.

“You set up my friend,” Jag hissed.

I was happy to let them fight it out, but Beverly growled as though distressed. Tensing, I stepped back into the corridor. Elliot, Moe, and Beverly looked completely lost as they watched Jag pin Ram against the wall and pull back his arm, fist aimed at Ram’s nose.

“I know what you three are in for,” Ram said.

“You don’t know shit,” Jag snapped.

“I agree that you don’t belong here. It was a cruel miscarriage of justice.”

And just like that, he had Jag like he had everyone. The man’s fist dropped to his side, and his grip on Ram’s collar loosened.

I clenched my teeth. “He tells you what you want to hear so you think he cares.”

Ram looked at me with his eyes heavy as though with regret. “Sometimes, I mean what I say,” he whispered.

The vulnerable expression in his eyes and the soft whispered words took me back to another time, far from here and long ago. In a room lit by the cold moon of the North Atlantic. A time of soft hands with uneven nails and skin that smelled of cedar and sweat and reminded me of the forests of my home before I was shipped off to boarding school. The forests where I used to hide before I hid in the dark and in him, where not even my best friend knew about it.

Remembering cracked the solid earth of my heart like dry soil in a heatwave.

But it had all been a lie. Just another mask Ram had worn like a Scooby-Doo villain who refuses to give up when caught the first time.

So I turned to Jag instead. “Do you think he gives a fuck about your sentence?”

“Alyssa is right,” Ram said. “I don’t care if your conviction was fair. Keep in mind, I command half this prison’s guards and prisoners. I could have strolled up to your little beaver

party with enough people to kick your asses so hard they'd fly out of your mouths. Instead, I'm here alone because I want to make a deal." Ram stared right at me, ignoring Jag, who still had a hand on his collar. "I come in peace," he added in a robot-like voice. "Take me to your leader." He chuckled weakly.

When I didn't play along, his laugh died. He stared at me with an almost pleading look, and I walked right past him into my cell. I wasn't dealing with his bullshit anymore.

Through the window, the portal still swirled as though mocking my inability to do anything about it, to even find out if the Eclipses were in danger or not.

"The lady is not interested. Move along," Jag said to Ram, his voice cold.

"Yeah! The beaver doesn't like you either," Moe said. "Why is there a beaver, anyway?" he added, a bit softer as though he had meant to whisper it but didn't know how to lower his voice that far. "Everyone was acting like it's normal, and I didn't want to look..." his voice trailed off.

Dumb, I thought, stomach dropping. He didn't want anyone else to think he was dumb. But he seemed to trust Elliot enough to ask him. The librarian whispered something back, but I couldn't make out the words.

"I don't want to do this to you, Alyssa," Ram said, his voice desperate and a bit quieter as though he had been pushed farther down the corridor. "April is in danger."

I tensed. April was the fake name Juniper had used when hiding from Ram—and from me. Ram didn't give a shit if Juniper was in danger, so if he was using her nom du plume, that could only mean he was hiding something about her.

“Fuck.” I marched out of my cell, pausing to step over Beverly's tail.

Jag was shoving Ram down the hall. Three other prisoners stood at their cell doors, watching, listening. Someone was always listening in here.

Jag's eyes widened in shock as I stepped past him to grip Ram's arm, digging my nails in. I hated the feel of his warmth against my palm as I pulled him away from Jag.

“What did you say?” I growled close to his face so no one else would hear.

“Ah, this is much better, much more civilized,” Ram said.

I dug my nails in harder, and he flinched.

“Look, I'll be honest,” he whispered, turning his face toward me. Our noses almost touched, and I resisted the urge to headbutt him like in a movie. “I need to escape this shit hole here before I lose my fucking mind, and you're the only one who can break through the ward. In a couple of ways, actually. Let's make an exchange.”

More of his, “oh you're so special” manipulative crap. It was how he had gotten dozens of young witches, including Juniper and me, to steal for him.

“If I can escape, what the fuck do I need you for?”

“One, you haven’t figured out how to do it, which surprised me. You’ve always been very clever. Two, the guards can still tase you, cuff you, and lock you up. I can convince them to look the other way for the duration of the escape. I’ll help you, your beaver, and anyone else you want, then you help all of us walk out of here.”

“If you’re so fucking clever and have the guards licking your ass clean, why don’t you just command them to free you?”

He glanced away and spoke through clenched teeth. “Because they’re not corrupt enough for that.”

“Prison guards have morals. Shocking.”

“Even the guards don’t want to be here; I make life a bit easier for everyone with gifts and extra money. But they’re not going to risk being jailed for letting prisoners go. A bathroom break when they should be watching the cameras is the best I can get.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why now? You should be up for parole soon; your sentence is half over.”

He swallowed loud enough for me to hear. “Because they already denied me parole. I’m under investigation for... other things. They’re never going to let me out.”

I laughed. “The law finally caught up to you.”

Ram clenched his jaw. “They could catch up to you too, Alyssa.”

I shrugged. “I deserve to be here, and so do you. Let them discover my other illegal acts. Go on, snitch on me.”

“I never would,” he said, sounding dead serious.

I didn't believe him for a moment. He'd turn on me like he turned on everyone—like I had, too.

He heaved a sigh as though disappointed, and it reminded me of how he had talked down to me and the rest of our gang when we didn't follow his orders. It made me tense, made my anger flare like a Roman candle.

“I'm sorry, Alyssa, but I must do this. You're here to protect Juniper, right? To make up for fucking with her magic and tanking her sex toy business? To take the fall for the crimes you both committed? Well, if I'm not out of here by the time the donut chuggers take me in for questioning, I'm telling them about her involvement in our thefts. I'll take her down with me.”



Chapter 9

The panic surging through my blood made my heart palpitate and my breath shallow. Ram was going to land Juniper in prison. He was going to ruin her life.

“If she’s arrested, I’ll make sure everyone knows you talked,” I said to him in a rush. “Nobody in here takes kindly to snitches. You’ll lose all your support.”

“I don’t care. I need to get out of here,” Ram growled. “I can’t live without my magic anymore. I feel empty. Broken. Like my very bones are missing.”

I tightened my grip on his arm. “You were empty and broken before you got here.”

He ignored my insult. “Everything I’ve ever been has been reduced down like burning a sauce until it’s only crust on the bottom of a pot.”

“Everyone here feels like that. So the fuck what?”

He kept talking as though the floodgates inside him had opened. “My magic was all I ever had that was mine. When the human exorcists and cops took me screaming from my mother, when they...” He took a shaky breath. “When they tried to beat the evil from me, when they drove us out of every town we lived in, when I ran away to protect my mother, when I had nothing but my name and the shirt on my back, I still had my magic. It never failed me. Never left me. It was like a security blanket, best friend, and a shield against the world all in one. Even when it was limited by that fucking curse Juniper put on me, it was still there.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I knew how he felt all too well. When my family had cast me out, my magic and Juniper were all I had.

Ram stared past me as though I wasn't even here. "Now, there's nothing. Like I can no longer walk or hear or see. The one thing that was mine, that was me... is just out of reach, like I've been leashed to a post in the sun with a water bottle left just beyond my fingers." He blinked, coming out of his strange, poetic daze. "You must feel it too."

I understood his every word, as though he had read it off a stone tablet in my soul. I hated when I couldn't disagree with him.

"You understand why I have to get out of here," Ram whispered. "Even if it means betraying you by ratting on Juniper."

My hands shook. Fuck, fuck, fuck! I had promised myself to never play his games again, but he had me cornered, and I didn't know what to do. If I didn't help him, my best friend would be jailed after I had pleaded guilty to save her from legal troubles.

If I helped him, I'd be letting a very dangerous person walk free. "If you escape, you'll try to kill Juniper. And you'll target the Eclipses too. You already did once when you sent Azea to burn their homes a couple of years ago. And there will be nothing to stop you from snitching on Juniper or me." My words came out faster and faster as I realized I had no fucking way to stop him from harming people I care about.

“I didn’t send Azea and the others to burn your town, Alyssa. They did that on their own. As for snitching once free, you have my word—”

“Your word means shit.”

“And yours means less,” Ram snapped. There was his rage bursting out. Finally, something honest from him. “Help me escape. Bring the beaver and anyone else you want. I’ll stay quiet, and you can run back to this cage if you want.”

Like hell I could. He’d go after everyone I cared about once he had his magic back. Fuck, he’d probably attack me right away, and I wasn’t powerful enough to stop him on my own. For all his faults, Ram was one of the most skilled witches of our generation.

“Pathetic bastard. You wanted to take away the world’s magic, and you can’t even stand a few years without your own.”

Ram yanked his arm free of my hold. “I’m not interested in stealing magic anymore—”

“Because it’s not an option.”

The magical relic that stripped people of their magic was destroyed, no thanks to Ram.

“And I have no intentions of finding a new method,” Ram said smoothly, his rage tucked away again. “I don’t wish to control the world. I just want myself back.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

His brows turned down at the ends. “You walked away from our old life. So did Juniper. Why can’t I change too?”

I jerked, uncomfortably reminded of when I had said something similar to Juniper. She had thought I would side with Ram and his plans for world domination over her. And it had broken my heart to learn that the one person who had stood by my side thought I was a villain, just like everyone else in the world believed.

We had reconciled since then. But it was just like Ram to guess at my pain and parrot it back to manipulate me.

Jag, who had been watching our exchange, stepped closer. “Is everything okay?” He eyed Ram, then leaned toward me. “Do you need me to kick his ass?”

“I can kick his ass myself,” I said.

“I have no doubt. I was offering out of... you know...” He shrugged. “Niceness?”

Ram smirked. “Someone’s got a crush.”

I startled. Jag’s eyes widened as he looked at me. “What? No, I don’t like you. I mean, you’re cool, so yes, I like you. Obviously. But I don’t have a crush! It’s just... liking. But not in that way... not at all. In fact, you smell!” He cringed so hard I was surprised his balls didn’t fall off, drop out of his pant legs, and roll away.

Considering I had been in the hole for two days, I probably did smell. But I didn’t have time or patience for Jag’s weird

ramblings. I grabbed Ram's arm again, dragging him away from the other men.

"Why did you send Jag my way?" I demanded.

He lowered his voice. "I know you don't want to bust me out. So, I found someone more worthy of freedom to get you to launch an escape. I'm going with multiple angles because you really do hate me." He grimaced as though admitting it stung. "If I had known Beverly was here, I wouldn't have bothered with Jag, Elliot, and Moe, since she's way more convincing."

"The men will be fine," I growled. It wasn't true, but I wasn't going to let Ram manipulate me so easily.

He scoffed. "Jag might survive, but those two?" He nodded down the corridor, and I followed his gaze.

Moe was hopping around and waving his arms. Elliot watched with hand on his chin while Beverly groomed herself near his feet.

"Sesame Street," Elliot said.

Moe pointed at him. "Yes! Now you do one."

My heart dropped. Ram was using them and playing me. And even though I knew what he was doing, I was as trapped as a beaver in a cell.

Desperate, I tried a different approach. "Why would I give a shit about those men?"

"Because you went soft years ago and have been gathering up the incompetent ever since. Once you know why Jagmeet,

Elliot, and Moe are here, you'll break them out. I know you. Your hard outer crust doesn't go that deep."

"You don't know me."

Ram's gaze turned sad. "Perhaps not. I never thought you would betray me until you did."

"I thought the same about you."

Ram frowned and glanced away as though suddenly ashamed. Yanking his arm from my grasp, he crouched and pulled up the leg of his jumpsuit to retrieve a smartphone from his sock.

Phones were contraband, but there were dozens of them floating around the prison at any given time. I'd possessed a few I had stolen from Ram and his buddies until they had stolen them back.

He handed me the phone, and even though it was stanky, I took it because fuck, I missed the internet.

"Password is the first four digits of our island's latitude." That was the location of our old gang's secret base. "I left notes about all the ways you're able to beat the ward. The guards will look away tonight for fifteen minutes at 11:06 PM. If I'm not free by dawn, your bestie"—he curled his lip on the word, probably because I had betrayed him to protect Juniper—"is going down and that beaver is staying in prison because I won't help her or you again."

My fist tightened on the phone. "I don't need your help. Nobody has ever needed your help, because it's always been self-serving bullshit to prop up your fragile ego."

He wrapped his arms around himself. “No, it was an attempt to heal my trauma by exerting control over the world.”

My brows shot up. I had not expected him to admit that.

He shrugged one shoulder. “I’ve been in therapy for almost two years. It helps. Even before I started, I didn’t want to run the world anymore. I haven’t since...” He looked away and didn’t finish his thought.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. He hadn’t changed, not one bit. For starters, he was playing me right now and threatening my best friend again. Secondly, I knew him well, and he had wrapped up too much of his pride in his plans to steal magic. In the end, his very fragile ego and his very dangerous magic were all he had.

Ram heaved a sigh and turned back to me. “Juniper is on some redemption quest, right? Returning all the relics we stole and bringing happiness to the world. Well, when her life is upended and she ends up here, you can tell her why you let it happen.” Ram gazed at me with a strange look in his eyes that I couldn’t read, even though I knew him well. “I’m sorry, Alyssa. I really am.”

“Not sorry enough.”

He pressed his lips together. “I know. I’ll be waiting for you to break me out tonight when the guards look away.” He started to leave before turning back. “Oh, and look up the band JEM with a J. You’ll see why those three dumbasses are here, and you can decide what to do about it.”



Chapter 10

I sat on the bed in my cell with Beverly snoring softly next to me. The portal outside the barred window spat out some random guy in a rabbit costume who soared through the air and out of sight of my tiny window. Then the portal vanished. It had been coming and going for a while.

For once, I wished Juniper was trying to break me out of prison. At least I would have her help. At least I could ask her if the Eclipses were safe or... simply gone, which the existence of portal magic in Silver Springs suggested.

I fidgeted with Ram's phone in my lap, its screen smooth under my fingertips. I thought I had escaped his machinations. I had helped stop him from stealing magic, and even though I had been locked up with him for nearly two years, I hadn't fallen for any of his tricks.

More than that, I had escaped my tendencies to fuck everything up. I had been free—in a way—while in prison. On a path to being better. Someone who looked out for others and made things better rather than consistently worse.

But now I was in Ram's web, and I had no choice but to fuck up my best friend's life: either I let Ram snitch, or I set him free to enact his vengeance on her in another way.

At least she wouldn't be on the run from the entire legal system. She could keep her regular life—she'd just have to kill Ram if he didn't kill her first.

"You look like the alien invasion has started and you're waiting to be hit by a phaser," Jag said. He leaned in the cell

doorway and flashed me a small smile.

If I was going to stage a prison break, I would need backup. Ram might attack me the moment we were past the ward, so Beverly needed beaver guards to protect her while I handled him. But if I was about to let Jag, Elliot, and Moe out of prison, I needed to know what I was unleashing on the world.

And if I should unleash them at all. I knew a few prisoners who were in for minor crimes and who I would be okay with letting out if they were willing to risk a life on the run and a longer sentence if caught.

I unlocked Ram's phone and opened the internet browser. Of course, it was connected to the prison's Wi-Fi, which was only supposed to be for guards and the busted-up computers in the lab.

"Hey." Jag's hand rested on my shoulder gently, as though he was unsure if it was okay. It sent a pleasant tremor down my back. "You've been down since talking to Ram. What did that cheese fart say to you?" His voice turned hard as bedrock.

The hardness, and the rage under it, like the magma beneath the hard crust of the earth, was comforting.

"What's going on?" Elliot said in his soft voice. He and Moe crowded in my cell doorway.

Moe stared at his feet and tapped the doorframe with his toe, as though he didn't want to look at me.

I didn't blame him. Shrugging Jag's hand off my shoulder, I lied to them. "I'm fine."

Jag frowned, clearly not believing me, but he didn't argue. "You got the spoiler blogs on that phone? Fuck, I miss my morning spoilers."

"Nooooo," Elliot said softly.

"Spoilers make everything better," Jag said. "I get surprised first, then I get to watch everyone else be surprised when they watch it. Double surprises!"

As they argued, I searched for a band called JEM. "You won't believe this live performance," read the first link. I tapped on it, and it went to a video on Screech, the social network for supes.

It showed a small outdoor stage with a black room divider in the middle. The band must have been behind it because I didn't see anyone. But I heard the song.

A string and woodwind instrument weaved together like the yarn that makes a cozy sweater. Even though drums weren't usual for this type of music, the gentle, steady beat fit perfectly, like resting your head on a loved one's chest. A voice as deep as a cavern sang in a language I didn't know, sounding like something primordial, almost haunting, against the warm instruments.

It was as if fantasy elves and dwarves did a musical collab.

My skin goosebumped from my feet to my neck, and a shiver went through me. It was beautiful.

"Turn it off!" a voice roared.

Blinking, I looked up to see Elliot trying to push past Jag as he reached for the phone. He was so soft-spoken that it was startling to hear him shout.

If he didn't want me to see this video, then I definitely had to know what was in it. I jumped to my feet and out of his reach as Beverly lifted her head and grunted as though to ask what was going on.

I backed up to the end of the cell and faced Elliot, ready to fight him if I had to.

But he simply wilted and ducked behind Jag, whose face was turning red. From the cell door, Moe said, "Hey, it's our performance!"

In the video, someone threw a sparkling ball at the stage. Assholes at magical concerts loved to pull shit like that. While normies tossed beach balls, witches shot orbs that glowed and sparked like fire without the actual heat.

The ball hit the room divider, and it toppled backward. The music cut off. Someone from the band must have instinctively pushed the falling divider off themselves, because it crashed down onto the stage, revealing the people behind it.

I knew them instantly, despite the... strange circumstances.

Jag's jeans were around his ankles as he jumped to his feet. Why had he pulled down his pants? And what was that string instrument he held? It wasn't like any harp I had seen. It was brown and long with a mushroom-like head.

Oh.

Oh!

The instrument was his cock. Somehow, his dick had grown two feet long and sprouted strings that he had been plucking to make that beautiful music.

In the video, Elliot sat on a chair with a long black clarinet in his hands, and its wide tip in his mouth.

Shit, that was a cock too! His dick had gotten very long and sprouted buttons. And were those holes for the air?

Moe's back was to the audience, and his hands were on his bare ass. I nearly groaned. Don't tell me that the drums were his butt cheeks.

I remembered something he had said earlier when I asked why he was in prison: for playing my ass-bongos in public.

He hadn't been trolling me. Of course, he hadn't. Moe couldn't play anyone, except his own ass.

The crowd in the video laughed and hollered. I looked up from the phone to Jag, his face nearly red with rage or embarrassment or both. Elliot looked on the verge of tears as he turned his face away from me.

"Sooo..." Moe said from the door. "What do you think?"

Elliot elbowed him. "We don't need to hear more ridicule. We should have never played live."

I tapped to turn off the video, then laughed. I tried to choke it back for their sake, and it turned into a hacking cough. Beverly gazed at me and squeaked as though worried.

Elliot flinched. “Of course, she laughs.”

I waved away his comment. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing in shock that this is what got you sent to prison. In Silver Springs.”

Jag crossed his arms. “They called it indecent exposure. But we are not indecent, and neither is our art.”

“It’s not real art, Jag,” Elliot whispered.

I laughed again. “Indecent exposure? In this town? There are fucking giant dildos flying all over the place. It’s their local taxi service.”

Even Elliot looked up to gape at me.

“Why in the fuck would they arrest anyone for indecent exposure in Silver Springs? Hell, the entire town came together to defeat a limp dick curse. They are not shy people here.”

Moe grinned. “We should have played in Silver Springs and not Albany. We can do it when we get out.”

“Ohhh, Albany,” I said. Silver Springs Penitentiary served a big chunk of New York State’s paranormal community. “They’re not a dildo orgy town.”

Jag, Elliot, and Moe blinked at me.

“Wait. So... you’re really not laughing at us?” Jag said slowly. “You’re laughing because someone arrested us for this?”

I nodded. “You wouldn’t believe the shit I’ve seen. Your performance was practically a Disney movie in comparison.

Plus, your music is beautiful, like what Tolkien elves and dwarves would perform if they were friends.”

Jag and Elliot’s mouths dropped open. Moe bounced up and down. “That’s what we were going for!”

I leaned past Jag and Elliot to meet his gaze. “Your music is genius.”

He grinned ear to ear and clapped his hands. “I helped translate the lyrics to Dwarfian!”

I didn’t want to ruin his happiness by telling him that wasn’t the right word. “Well done. How’d you end up with abilities like that? I assume your cocks shift?” I pointed to Elliot and Jag.

Elliot ducked his head while Jag’s ears turned a reddish brown.

“I was a drummer for Toad Panic,” Moe said. “I mooned a witch from our tour bus, and now my butt is the only drum I can play. I’m good at it, though, right?”

I appreciated his confidence. Dude had no shame about playing ass cheeks in a band.

“The drums were like a heartbeat when cuddling.” I cringed. I couldn’t believe I just said something so fucking gooey, like a four-cheese pizza coming out of my mouth here.

I bet those giant musical cocks would be good going into our mouth, my brain said.

Moe placed a hand on his chest. “Thank you.” His voice was sincere and soft.

If I was embarrassingly cheesy, at least I didn't bruise his heart this time.

“What about you, Jag and Elliot? Did you whip it out at a witch?”

Elliot mumbled something that I didn't catch, then crouched to pet Beverly as though to change the subject. The beaver yawned, showing off her big orange teeth.

I shot Jag a questioning look. He frowned and shrugged. “I made a bad deal.” He didn't elaborate, and I figured I'd let it go for now. I had done plenty of shit I didn't want to talk about either.

Besides, I had a bigger problem related to these three. Mainly, that Ram was fucking right.

They shouldn't be in prison.

The law in Albany might look down on public nudity and giant cocks, but these three were in a prison surrounded by public nudity and giant cocks. It wasn't fair. They weren't hardened criminals or dangerous. They hadn't even shown off their dickstruments and ass drums on purpose. Some shart had outed them by throwing crap at the stage.

Despite Jag acting tough, all three of them were as harmless as Beverly. They had been cast out and punished for doing the best they could with what they had. And they had hurt no one in the process.

Fuck, that was dangerously close to how my parents and teachers had treated me when I was a kid with dark magic.

Ram knew what he was doing when he had sent these guys my way.

I chewed on my thumbnail. If I busted them out, I'd be consigning them to a life on the run unless they moved to Free Jinx—assuming it existed still. Jag, Elliot, and Moe were perfect examples of why I had found my community outside the rest of the world. Society was just not safe for the misfit magic users.

Of course, building my home for outcasts in a bubble dimension might have killed everyone living there. If someone had stolen the Astrosmos, the bubble dimension would have collapsed and taken everyone with it.

“Alyssa?” Jag said softly.

I stopped chewing my nail. “Why do you want to break out? Public indecency is a minor crime. With good behavior, you three will be out on parole in months. But if you escape, you'll be on the run for the rest of your lives.”

“We would be, anyway,” Jag said, his voice cold. “The moment we perform, they'll try to arrest us again. The world already decided we're criminals because of our abilities.”

I had an urge to hug Jag. Gross. He wasn't a puppy or even a beaver.

“We're not performing again,” Elliot whispered.

Jag crossed his arms. “We have rare talents and we're not hiding them!”

“You play beautifully,” I added, but Elliot just looked away. I eyed him. “Do you three want to spend the rest of your lives on the run?”

Jag nodded once, while Moe nodded a dozen times. “I want to keep playing my drums!”

Elliot still avoided my gaze. “I need to get out of here.”

I sighed. “All right, but there’s no turning back now. We’re breaking out tonight.”



Chapter 11

“Come on, Juniper, pick up,” I whispered in the dark of my cell. The cell phone against my ear rang and rang before going to voicemail.

Shit, where are you? She was probably in a fucking orgy for the past ten hours that I’d been texting and calling.

Once Beverly, Jag, Elliot, Moe, and I broke out, we’d need backup to handle Ram when he inevitably turned on us. And Juniper needed to know that her mortal enemy would soon be on the loose in her town. She probably had enough friends here that she could raise a small army to confront him.

But first, she had to know he was coming.

I texted for the thirty-seventh time and dialed again. *You’re in danger, Juniper, please, please answer.*

“You’ve reached Juniper of The Magical Rooster, North America’s—”

I hung up and nearly threw the phone against the concrete wall.

My stomach twisted. What if Ram had already sent his people after Juniper? After all, he must have known I’d call her with the cellphone he gave me. What if Juniper was hurt? Kidnapped?

Probably not dead. I doubted the remnants of our old gang had enough power to kill her unless they had gotten their hands on some of the magical relics she had been stupidly handing out all over the world.

Fuck!

Metal clinked on metal at my cell door. Ram had hidden a lockpick set behind a loose brick in the yard wall. He had assumed I knew how to pick locks without magic.

I didn't, but someone else possessed the skill...

The door was pulled open, and Moe grinned at me in the dim light from the corridor. His smile was wide and big, like this was the best moment of his life so far. He waved.

“Hi.”

“Huh, so your magician training paid off,” I whispered.

Somehow, he grinned even wider. “If I can pick three locks while chained underwater, I can pick anything.”

I was pretty sure magicians used fake, trick locks but apparently, Moe was too honest for that. I clapped his shoulder.

“That was very clever.”

He wiggled a little. “Aww, shucks.”

He patted my hand on his shoulder, and his touch sent a tremor up my arm. I couldn't help but smile.

I glanced past him to Jag and Elliot, who carried Beverly between them—beavers didn't walk fast enough for a prison escape. She didn't struggle or talk as though she knew what we were doing.

I checked my phone. Shit. We had five minutes until the guards started watching the cameras again.

“This way,” I whispered, and led them down the corridor to Ram’s cell. I gestured at Moe to unlock the door, and he dropped to one knee, unfurling his roll of picks on the floor next to him.

Beverly grunted softly as Jag shuffled close to me. “Who are we freeing?”

My heart clenched like an ass holding in a fart in public. “If I don’t break him out, he’s going to hurt my friend.” And he will probably hurt her even if I do free him.

Jag’s eyes narrowed. “Alyssa, no...”

The lock clicked, and Moe stuffed his lockpicks in his sock before standing and pulling the door open. Ram strolled out with a smug grin that made me want to wring his fucking neck. He had won, and he knew it.

He didn’t say a word but simply nodded as though to say *let’s go*.

“Moe,” Jag whispered. As the other man rushed to his side, Jag handed Beverly’s ass to him and then glared at Ram with a cold, simmering rage.

Good. I wasn’t the only one keeping tabs on Ram.

I led the way down a flight of metal steps to the main floor of the prison. With each step, my anxiety grew. I had broken into and out of strongholds across the world. I had stolen multiple magical relics from the backrooms of the British Museum and the Brits had yet to notice. I had robbed covens and werewolf packs and even a mermaid city at the bottom of the ocean.

But tonight, in this backwater, basic-ass prison, I had no fucking clue what I was doing.

My skin itched for the touch of my magic like an addict needing a hit. The throbbing gulf of anxiety in my chest ached to be filled with the familiar, comforting feel of magic. Without it, I might as well be a puppy whose teeth haven't come in yet.

Or a beaver out of water.

I pushed open the door to the prison library and waved everyone in. The furniture Beverly had chewed up had been removed, leaving an empty space in front of the stacks. The only light was a mix of moonlight and streetlight that shone through the sole window. It left almost everything in shadow, like unspoken secrets.

Ram darted to a nearby shelf and scaled it, reaching up to grab the CCTV camera and turn it toward the wall. "That'll buy us a few more minutes," he whispered, and dropped to the floor.

"What happens now?" Elliot said as he and Moe placed Beverly on the carpet.

Fuck if I knew. I checked my phone to see if Juniper had texted or called back.

Nothing.

Something wasn't right.

My nerves felt like they were drawn tight as the strings on Jag's harp cock. Sitar cock? Whatever the fuck it was. But I

couldn't help Juniper or anyone while in prison, so I tucked the phone into my pocket.

Ram's notes had offered two ways out of prison, and they were both completely fucking stupid. If not for Ram's threats and poor Beverly, I wouldn't be attempting an escape at all. He had been right about one thing though, he always fucking was.

The portals were reacting to people inside the prison.

Mainly, to me and Ram.

I hadn't realized it at first, but the guards didn't notice the portals. They kept showing up where I was, and the only other prisoner who had spotted them was Ram.

If the portals were truly random, a whole bunch of people would have noticed them through the windows, and it would be the talk of the prison. With not much else to do, people loved to gossip, especially about anything that could be an attempted prison break.

For a portal—or whoever was creating it—to sense and respond to people inside the anti-magic ward, it must have a matching portal inside the prison. Someone had smuggled in a live portal. It stayed open because its other side was connected to a realm free of the ward and dripping with magic.

The portal was probably minuscule because it hadn't been found yet. I also had no idea how anyone got a portal inside the ward in the first place or if Ram's theory was correct. But if there was one here, maybe I could find it.

If I didn't, he'd send my oldest friend to jail.

"Alyssa," Jag hissed. "What should we do?"

"Keep an eye on Ram and be ready to move Beverly," I said, then wandered away from them through the stacks. I had seen a portal through the library's window and from my cell, which was above the library. So maybe it was somewhere nearby. It was a lead as thin as a rogue pube on a toilet seat, but it was all I had.

"Remember," Ram said behind me. "You're connected to the Astrosmos."

I grimaced. He thought someone had stolen the relic too.

"You're the only one here who knows how to cast any portal magic," Ram added. "If you follow your instincts, you'll find a way out."

"That Disney princess follow-your-heart bullshit isn't going to work when there's no magic." I paused among the rows of shelves. If there was a tiny portal somewhere in here, it would have to be where no one had seen it yet. "Hey, Elliot? What are the least popular books?"

I heard soft footsteps, then Elliot came around the corner.

"Umm... I was only a prison librarian for two days."

"That's enough. What section did nobody visit?"

He glanced around. "Well... crafts, self-help, and fantasy books went fast. We have a shelf of books in uncommon languages. I guess not many people read those."

I knew the section. The thing with uncommon and so-called dead languages was that they were very common for casting spells among dark witches. I jogged over to the row near the back wall, pausing to glance at the CCTV camera Ram had turned around. How much longer until his bribery no longer covered our asses? We had already surpassed the fifteen minutes the guards had promised him.

Grabbing the first book I saw, I flipped through its pages and examined the shelf behind it.

Just paper and wood.

“What are we looking for?” Elliot whispered.

I grabbed another book and shuffled through the pages. “Anything weird.”

“But everything in the world is weird,” he said.

I hesitated. He might have a point. “We need a tiny portal. You’ll know it when you see it. Check the back of the shelves too. Be quick, we’re almost out of—”

A bang like a door being slammed open echoed around the library.

“The guards are here!” Jag shouted.



Chapter 12

“Lie on the floor with your hands on your head!” Dick Fingers shouted, his voice booming around the empty library.

My heart leaped into my throat. I dropped the book I was searching through and grabbed another.

“Look faster.”

Beverly grunted as Jag and Moe rushed into the aisle with her in their arms.

“Please don’t bite me, pretty beaver,” Moe said.

Grunting in frustration too, I pulled two handfuls of books off a shelf and glanced over the wood behind them. Nothing.

Fuck!

If I was wrong, we’d be locked up in the hole, even poor Beverly with no pool, no wood, and no salad. Jag, Elliot, and Moe would end up with a much longer sentence than their current meager one.

Ram would snitch on Juniper. She’d have to give up the life she carefully built and go on the run, assuming Ram’s people hadn’t already harmed her.

And if the Eclipses were in trouble, I wouldn’t be able to help them.

I would have fucked up the lives of everyone around me.

“Vigga, hello,” Ram said from the far side of the shelves.

“How’s your—”

“Get on the floor and put your hands on your head,” yelled Dick Fingers, the biggest bastard who ever bastarded in this whole ass building full of bastardy bastards.

Ram ignored him and addressed the other guards. “Joel! Now, I know you’re not getting paid enough to be here all night. How’s your little boy? He wants a new dirt bike, correct?”

He was using his best friendly voice and despite being in prison for a while, he had endless money. This might work.

“You guys are taking bribes?” Dick Fingers said, aghast.

The library was silent for a moment, and then Joel shouted, “On the floor, inmate.”

My heart dropped. Cowards weren’t brave enough to refuse bribes or to admit that they accepted them. I kept grabbing books, flipping through them, and dropping them when I found nothing.

Footsteps echoed through the library, then Ram came around the corner of the shelf. “We need—”

He convulsed as a static sound filled the air. “Ahhh... shit,” he said and dropped to his knees.

Beverly growled and lumbered down the aisle to take cover behind my legs.

“Are you hurt? I know CPR,” Moe said, and ran to Ram’s side just as Dick Fingers yanked the taser barbs from Ram’s back and turned toward Moe.

Jag roared, a sound like a sudden crack of thunder, and threw himself on Dicky, slamming the guard into the wall. Vigga came into view, taser raised toward Jag. “Stop, or I’ll—”

I threw a book at her. It bonked into her head and she stumbled a step, cursing. I hurled another, but she ducked behind the shelf.

“We need backup in the library,” she shouted into her walkie-talkie.

Jag grabbed Dicky’s shoulders and heaved, putting the guard between him and Vigga. Meanwhile, Moe dragged a limp Ram toward Elliot and me.

“Can we go now, please?” Elliot said.

Beverly whimpered in agreement.

I wished we could, but I still hadn’t found the portal. It might not even exist.

Vigga stepped around the edge of the shelf and fired her taser. I raised a leather-bound volume like a shield, catching the electric barbs in its cover and hurling it back at the guard.

It slammed into her face, and red sprouted from her nose.

“Do you need help?” Moe called to her.

“Damn it, she’s trying to stun us,” I snapped. “Help Jag.” He grappled with Dicky, both grabbing at each other’s shoulders and kicking each other’s shins.

“Oh, he doesn’t like it when I do that,” Moe said.

“Joel, get over here,” Vigga shouted. Apparently, the third guard was even more cowardly than the rest of them.

Elliot thumped a book onto an empty shelf. “We checked all the books in this section. There’s nothing here.”

“I know! I know!”

I chewed my fingernail. If there was a portal in the prison, where the hell would it be? I glanced from the empty shelves to Jag throwing a punch at Vigga, and to Beverly as she huddled next to the box of newly donated books.

Volos had already dug through those and would have snitched had he found anything. I turned to the next shelf in desperation but a memory struck me. He had been searching for puzzle books. Maybe he hadn’t bothered to look at anything else.

Something thumped onto the floor with a grunt, and I whirled to see Dicky standing over Jag. The guard aimed his taser.

Elliot made a scared little sound and then started flinging books. “Sorry, books,” he said.

Dicky flinched as he was pelted with a hardcover. Jag rolled away and climbed to his feet with a groan.

Moe jumped up from where he was comforting Ram and grabbed a paperback, throwing it hard. It hit Dicky square in the forehead.

“Ha! Being a pitcher paid off.”

How many jobs had this guy had? No time to think about it now. While they distracted the guards, I crouched by the box

of donated books. A donation would be a way to smuggle something into a prison.

As I started flipping through books, my hands shook with worry. Ram was wrong about the portal, and we were all about to be locked in the hole. As I dropped a hardcover on the floor next to me, Beverly inched forward to munch on its corner.

I tossed another dead-end book aside. “There’s nothing fucking here. You were wrong, Ram, and you better not use this against me.” Or Juniper.

Elliot, Jag, Moe, and Dicky were shouting, and the library echoed with thuds of books and probably fists. The library door banged open, and boots pounded on the floor as more guards raced in.

I didn’t know what to do. I had nothing else I could do, so I tipped the box over, spilling out the last few books. One had a battered cover stamped with Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform. I frowned as I picked it up. Very, very few people could read the ancient Mesopotamian alphabet. But those old languages made for powerful spells, so I had learned some of them. Enough to read the title of this book.

Watership Down.

Sort of. The translation into Sumero-Akkadian was rough, but I was sure it was the sad rabbit book. *Watership Down* was Ram’s favorite. He used to read it over and over, back on our gang’s secret island hideout. Now, here it was translated into an ancient language and smuggled into prison. Ram and I might be the only ones in this building who could read it.

I opened it.

On the inside cover, a circle swirled like a disturbed puddle reflecting a rainbow. My breath caught in my throat. Fucking Ram was right. Somehow, someone had gotten a portal past the ward.

And they had been trying to get it to him.

The portal was too small for anyone to climb through, so I slipped a finger into it like sliding one into a butthole to look for a prostate.

A thrill went through my finger as though I had just pulled off thick gloves and felt air and grass and sun and a furry pet and a loved one's skin for the first time all at once.

I smiled. Magic.

"Alyssa!" Ram was yelling. "If you're going to do something, it needs to be three minutes ago."

"Hold your flying dick," I snapped.

But before I had even finished, a new voice was ordering everyone on the ground with our hands behind our heads. The guards' backup was here.

I tried to ignore the shouting and focused on the bit of magic sparking along my index finger. It wasn't much, but fuck, it felt like coming back to life after being buried six feet under. Taking a deep breath, I let my eyes drift closed and focused on that bit of power, on the sensation of the portal, warm and swirling and alien, and I muttered a portal spell.

The press of the portal against my finger lessened, and I opened my eyes to see it widening until it swallowed my hand, then my arm. I grinned. Even with only an inch of my power, I still kicked ass.

“Run for the portal,” Ram roared as though he was leading an army into battle.

Feet pounded on the floor and next to me, Beverly whimpered.

“Stop them,” a guard was shouting behind me.

I turned my head to see if I could direct a magic attack from the portal to the guards. But before I could even see what was happening, a skeleton arm shot out of the portal, wrapped around my face, and yanked me through.



Chapter 13

The cold, hard hand of death let go of me. My stomach launched into my throat as I tumbled through the air and landed on an orange shag carpet.

I rolled to get away from my attacker, but my back hit a wall and I glanced up at a poster of some kind of lizard alien holding its eight thumbs up. In big block letters, it read, “Human-ohs! They’re crunchy.”

Fucking figures, I’d end up in a bubble dimension that was a ’70s porno set for aliens who eat humans—not in a cunnilingus way but a literal human jerky way. At least the giant bone hand was gone.

As I pushed myself to my feet, I groaned. Fuck, doing dangerous shit like this didn’t even faze me before. Now every fucking muscle hurt.

“I’m getting too old for this,” I muttered. I couldn’t help but smile anyway. Because along with the pain, my skin tingled, my blood sang, and my senses felt like they were a hundred times stronger.

My magic was back.

At the far end of the orange room, the portal swirled like an alien asshole waiting for a plug. A skeleton hand unfolded from the edges of the portal as though reaching out from the space between worlds. It lifted Beverly through the portal, and unlike with me, it placed her gently on the shag.

It reached back through the portal and tossed Jag, Elliot, Moe, and Ram through in quick succession, then folded back into

the portal. The rainbow swirl vanished.

Well, that made no sense.

The three musicians screamed as they flew through the air and hit the ground, but Ram was silent. He waved a hand. His fingertips sparked dark purple, and his flight slowed until he landed nearly on his feet.

My every muscle tensed, and my magic flared in my blood like fever.

I had helped put him in prison, and Ram was one to hold a grudge. He had held one for years against his father and Juniper. He was going to strike at me, and I had no backup. No way for help to even get here. Dark purple energy sparked along my fingertips and made my small hairs stand on end.

He stared back at me across the orange shag, his hands flaming with dark fire. Even though I knew an attack was coming, my heart raced when I looked at him and my stomach fluttered as though filled with butterflies. Something flickered in the air between us, and I spared a glance down to see a stream of magic like a sunbeam stretch from my chest to his.

I frowned. Three more identical shimmering ribbons reached out of my body. My gaze followed them to Jag, Elliot, and Moe, where they groaned and climbed to their feet off the floor. My skin goosebumped as I looked at them, and my heart did backflips. Without thinking, I took a step toward them before I caught myself and whirled back to Ram.

He stared at the magic that connected us, his dark eyes wide and stunned. I wanted to trace the lines of his face.

With your tongue instead, my brain said. Then your labia.

Oh my god, that doesn't even make sense!

The dumbassery and the sight of Ram still made heat bloom between my legs, though.

My magic stilled in my blood and my stomach dropped as I realized what was going on. “Shit, shit, shit.” It was a fucking fated mate spell, binding me to Jag, Elliot, Moe, and worst of all, my ex. My enemy. My fated hate.

The man who had tried to kill my best friend, who had betrayed me, who I had tried to kill, and who I had put in prison.

Ram met my gaze. The flaming dark magic on his hands faded back into his skin as his lips parted. “Alyssa...”

I clenched my fists to stop myself from running to him like my legs wanted. These fucking shit-eating, piss-drinking mate spells! They were all over Silver Springs. The whole fucking town glowed with them like some kind of neon shimmering illness.

And now they had come for me.

How? How in the fuck did it get me? I hadn't drunk a magical coffee or read a magical book... unless *Dick Fight Island* was spelled? I mean... it was as full of dicks as my life now was. But the spells always hit someone whose name was connected

to the spelled item, and I didn't have a dick name. In fact, I had the opposite...

I turned my gaze to Beverly, who chirped as she walked across the carpet toward me. The gems on her collar flashed in the fluorescent lights above.

I sighed in defeat. My last name was Beaver. Beverly and her collar were the source of the spell; it just hadn't kicked in until we were past the prison's ward.

"You did it!" Jag yelled. He threw his arms around me, kissing the side of my head.

I couldn't help but giggle, even though I knew this feeling was a spell. But it was a fucking well-cast spell because my heart felt like it had grown four sizes while becoming extra squishy.

What the fuck? I didn't even get squishy inside when I had been in relationships before... just slightly less pointy.

"I knew you would save us!" Jag added against my right ear.

Elliot wrapped an arm around me from behind, and Moe hugged me on my left side. I chuckled and squeezed their arms. I knew it was a mate spell, but for a moment, I didn't care. They liked me. It had been so long since anyone cared about me in a simple, wholesome way without years of baggage attached. It had been so long since I had been hugged or touched in any gentle way.

"You're amazing," Moe said. "And you smell really good. Did you do your hair between the giant bone hand grabbing you and now? You look prettier."

Reality crashed into me like... well, hitting the ground after a giant, random skeleton hand throws you through the air. Jag, Elliot, and Moe weren't witches, so they didn't know this was a spell yet. They thought their feelings were natural. But Ram knew better.

He gazed at me with his dark eyes heavy and his arms wrapped around himself. Beverly stared up at him as though she was wondering what he would do now.

His shoulders rose and fell in a large sigh. "Alyssa..."

I shook my head. "Don't."

"I've always loved you," Ram said. "I know I struggled to admit it when we were together, and I know I shoved you aside after Juniper left our gang."

"What's he talking about?" Jag said.

I pushed out of the men's arms. It felt weird to cuddle them while my ex said love stuff I didn't want to hear.

"The spell... helps me talk about it," Ram said, hugging himself tighter. "But it doesn't change anything else. I loved you even though you helped send me to prison, even though you avoided talking to me for the two years we were locked up together. I tried not to love you. I really... really did." He ran a hand through his hair and chuckled bitterly.

"Focusing on your flaws just made me love you more, not less. I couldn't even stay angry over your betrayal, even though I stay angry at everyone else in the world. I don't know how to stop loving you any more than the sun knows how to stop

burning or magic knows how to stop destroying. I don't know why I can't stop. We were shitty to each other, and we still are."

I didn't know what to do with the feelings swirling inside me. It felt like a door to a tiny, dark cell had been thrown open to reveal wide open fields. And I felt like the skies had opened up above me, so some celestial being could take a big, steaming dump right on my head.

Even though the spell made me want to cuddle Ram, he was still the biggest dick I had ever met with an average actual dick.

"You blackmailed me. That's why we're standing in a porno set for human-eating aliens."

"Wait... what?" Jag said.

"Not now," I said.

Ram's eyes gleamed with unshed tears. "I know. Love doesn't stop me from making bad decisions. It didn't stop me from being cruel to you. I'm sorry."

Yeah, it never prevented me from fucking up either. I took a step toward him with my palms itching to stroke his face and hair.

And his ramrod, my brain said.

No, that was the spell talking. I tensed, forcing my body to be still. "You don't deserve forgiveness. You've done nothing to earn it."

Ram sighed. “I deserve that. I know you haven’t loved me for years. This mate spell will fight to change that, but you don’t want it.” Tears spilled from his eyes, though his voice remained calm and steady. “So I’ll spare you from the spell. You don’t have to deal with me ever again once we’re free of this bubble dimension.”

“This what?” Elliot said.

“Not now,” I muttered.

Finally, Ram broke off our stare and turned his gaze to the floor. “I reject the mate spell. I don’t want you.”

It was a lie. I knew it, and he knew it, but that was all it took to break the spell, anyway.

Pain exploded through my chest like my heart bursting. I screamed and doubled over. Dimly, under the sound of my shouts, I heard Ram screaming in agony too.

It felt like an alien was clawing its way out of my body, one of those fucking chest-buster things. I always wanted to be in a sci-fi world, but not like this.

“Alyssa!” Jag, Elliot, and Moe shouted, almost in unison. Hands grabbed my shoulders and my arms, holding me up as the pain turned my vision to stars.

Then, as quickly as it had started, it ended.

The shattering agony vanished like a calm after a storm. The ribbon of gold that had stretched between Ram and me was gone, though the three that connected me to the other men remained.

Ram had dropped to his knees with his hands gripping his chest. Beverly tugged on his jumpsuit with her little hands as though to check on him. But he kept his red-rimmed gaze on me, and I knew he had just broken his own heart.

It was the only thing he had ever done for me without an ulterior motive.

But when I looked at him, I felt only a dim anger. No racing heart or fluttering stomach. I saw the man who had fucked me over a dozen times and who I had fucked over in return.



Chapter 14

Jag, Elliot, and Moe wrapped their arms around me, overlapping with each other across my shoulders and waist. Jag's breath stirred my hair just above my left ear while Elliot kissed the back of my head and Moe nuzzled my neck.

I was flooded with a gentle sense of safety like dozing in your bed under thick blankets.

Ram, however, kneeled on the orange shag with his head down and face hidden. Beverly nosed at his hand as though to provide comfort, or maybe she wanted pets. The fated mates spell had handed him a powerful way to manipulate me, but he had thrown it away instead. For no gain.

I could hardly believe it. In all the years I had known Ram, he had never picked someone else's well-being over his own... except once before. The last time Juniper and I had fought him, he could have struck me, but he'd pulled back at the last second. That hesitation meant he'd lost the battle and ended up in prison.

A weird sensation churned in my chest, fizzing and violent, like a storm made of carbonated water.

Go away, I thought.

Noooo, my brain said and made the fizziness churn more. Fucking brain. Ram said he never stopped loving us. This is a big deal.

He fucking hid it well, I thought.

But he avoided hurting us in that fight, and he kept his prison gang from attacking us for stealing from them.

A shudder went through me, like someone had walked on my grave. In this case, on the grave of a love that should remain very, very dead but was trying to claw its way out of the wet dirt.

I'd have to beat it with a shovel until it went back down into the dark where it belonged. Everything Ram had said was the mate spell talking. Even if some part of him cared for me, it wasn't enough to stop him from threatening my best friend and blackmailing me into even deeper legal trouble to save his own pathetic ass.

Love didn't make him a good person. He had said so himself.

"Are you all right? What just happened?" Jag demanded.

"Do you need water? Food?" Elliot let go of me and dashed around the room, checking each gaudy table and behind the flashing jukebox as though he'd find a hidden fridge.

Moe rubbed my lower back, and I wanted to melt against him like butter in a frying pan.

"I'm okay," I said. "It's over."

Jag broke off our hug to glare at Ram as he cracked his knuckles. "Did he hurt you?"

Ram slouched on the carpet, and my heart contracted as though to flinch away from him.

"I told you I'm fine."

"Don't, Jag," Moe said. "Whatever happened hurt him too."

He untangled himself from me and jogged across the room to drop to his knees by Ram and Beverly. Ram gaped at him as though startled anyone would come to his aid.

“But what happened?” Jag demanded again. “You don’t scream in agony for no reason.”

I opened my mouth to answer but hesitated. If Jag, Elliot, and Moe knew a fated mate spell was in the works, they might suspect it was binding us together too. Then they’d want out. They hadn’t chosen this, and they hadn’t chosen me.

My rising panic at the prospect of losing the bond was more surprising than Ram’s selfless act. Why should I want to be bound to guys I barely knew, anyway? I hadn’t wanted anyone since Ram had asked me to kill Juniper. Plus, these emotions were from the magic. They weren’t real.

“Alyssa?” Jag said.

I took a deep breath. “Ram broke a spell that was... binding us. It’s painful to end, but it’s for the best. We have more fucked-up history than the Romans.”

Ram grimaced, but he didn’t deny it.

Jag ran a hand through his hair, and fuck, I wanted to do the same. His hair was curly and perfect and soft and—

Shut up, brain! There’s a situation here.

“Good,” Jag said. “I mean, it’s not good that you have a painful past, but it’s good that you’re free of him.”

Not yet, I wasn't. Not until we escaped this bubble dimension. Even then, I'd have to fight Ram when he inevitably tried to kill Juniper again.

Moe patted Ram's shoulder. "Are you feeling well, buddy?"

Ram's brows shot up, and he leaned away from Moe like the other guy had leprosy. "You don't need to pretend to care."

"I never pretend!" Moe said. "I'm so bad at it that the community theater fired me, even though it was a volunteer trope!"

"Troupe," I corrected.

"No, I wasn't in the army," Moe said. "I considered it, but I don't like shooting at targets. They never hurt anyone!"

I had shot magic at lots of real people. Why in the hell did the mate spell choose to bind Moe and me?

Elliot turned from the gleaming gold cabinet he had been trying to yank open. His eyes met mine and turned soft. "You mentioned magic binding people together... I understand this feeling now, even though I never thought I'd experience it." He stared at me in awe. "This is a mate bond."

They were going to figure it out sooner or later. Still, my heart dropped so low it fell out of my ass.

The best thing would be to break the spell and set Jag, Elliot, and Moe free. A part of me hoped to experience their love and tenderness for longer, though. But fuck, if Ram could do the right thing, I surely could. "It's a mate spell, probably from the

collar on Beverly. They're as common in Silver Springs as dog shit in a park."

Elliot went very still. "It's just a spell?"

"Oh, I know about those! The mate bonds, not the dog shit, though I know that too!" Moe said as he settled onto the carpet next to Ram and Beverly. "I was a counselor at a camp for teenage werewolves, and some of them found their mates. Also, some of them pooped while in wolf form."

Ram gave him a what-the-fuck look.

"How many jobs have you had?" I said. "Also, those wolves should be made to douche that shit back into their butts."

"I've had a lot of jobs!" Moe said. "The wolf shifters finding their mates was so cute! I never thought I'd get one because I'm human—or I was before becoming a butt drum shifter. But my stepdad was a tent from Shifter Bay, so I learned all the magical world stuff."

I'd never met anyone so willing to open up to others; it was endearing in a way that made me want to hug him like he was my favorite teddy bear.

Who the fuck was I? This spell had me thinking like a completely different person. The worst part was that I didn't want it to end.

"Also..." Moe's voice trailed off as his gaze slid past Jag to the wall. "Why is that lizard telling me to eat humans?"

Everyone turned to the Human-Ohs poster, even Beverly, as though she understood. But I kept watch on Ram. He didn't

look like his usual conniving self, with his eyes red and face tear-stained.

“Moe, you don’t have to do what every sign suggests,” Elliot said.

“I know that... now. Because this one is telling me to eat people. It says we’re crunchy. Are we? Wouldn’t we be soft?” He poked his arm. “Like gummy bears...awww. I hate that people eat gummy bears. Those little squishy faces!”

Holy shit, I was going to get diabetes hanging around this sweetheart. Time to make things less cringy. “Humans are too salty.”

Jag, Elliot, Moe, and Ram turned their gazes to me. Beverly licked her paws and cleaned her face as though, yeah, human eating was expected.

“Much too tough, like old jerky,” I added.

Ram’s mouth twitched into a smile.

“The only part of a human I ever ate was salty,” Moe said. “I mean the vagina.”

“It’s a pussy, not Wendy’s fries,” I said.

Moe winked one blue eye, and my stomach fluttered like I was dropping from a great height. “I like to fall face-first into both.”

I grinned. “You’re dirtier than I thought.”

Jag crossed his arms. “Ignore the human-eating lizard thing... I never thought I’d say that, but I’m glad I got to. What the

fuck does a mate spell mean? Is this some kind of love potion? Is that why..." His ears flushed red, and he looked away from me.

It gave me a little thrill to be able to make him flustered without even saying a word. That's just the spell talking, I reminded myself.

"Some supernaturals, like shifters, have fated mates: the person or people they're meant to be with. They're like soulmates."

"Awww," Moe said.

"Other supes, such as witches, don't have fated mates normally. But some random asshole in Silver Springs keeps casting mate spells. They're as common as wet on beaver—"

"Hehehe," Moe said.

At least he got my joke. I gave him the finger guns like some kind of loser 1980s stockbroker, but damn it, it felt good to mess around with him. Moe grabbed his chest as though he had been shot and rolled his eyes back into his head.

Next to him, Ram heaved a sigh. "Oh, for the love of cheese and crackers."

That was probably the most wholesome thing he had ever said.

Elliot inched toward me as though across thin ice that might break and drown him. "You're saying this spell forces people to be mates? And it's been cast on us?"

I winced. There it was: the completely fair and reasonable dislike of the spell... but still it stung.

“Not quite. It binds people who are well-suited to each other and who probably would have liked each other, anyway. It speeds things up. You go from meeting to love in a second. But... yeah, it happens without you agreeing to it. Without any of us choosing it.”

I stared at Beverly as she groomed her paws and face. I couldn't bring myself to see the disgust or disappointment on the men's faces, and fuck, why not? I had stared down vampires, dark witches, and entire packs of wolf shifters without flinching. I had even insulted them while doing it—telling the wolves they had PetSmart trainee haircuts and the vampires that wearing black didn't make them interesting.

But now?

Now, I couldn't face three dudes I barely knew, who had no dangerous abilities, and who...

Who loved me until they inevitably chose to break the bond.

“You can break the spell. By rejecting your mate like Ram did.”

“You rejected Alyssa?” Moe said, aghast, and I glanced up to see him gaping at Ram.

Ram ran a hand along his chin. “Well...”

“More Alyssa for us,” Jag said with a shrug.

My eyes widened. “Wait... what?”

Jag's eyes glinted with amusement. "The spell didn't work in the prison, did it? But I liked you then too. This just means I get to be with you."

I giggled. What the fuck? I had never giggled in my life.

Moe, still kneeling, scooted along the shag to take my hand. "I have a mate!" He kissed my fingers like some fantasy knight.

I smiled down at him like some stupid, spoiled princess. Damn it.

Ram groaned and dropped from his knees to his ass on the carpet next to Beverly. If he did love me, watching all this must sting, but he decided to handle that in the most dickish way possible.

"I'm surrounded by dollar store Casanovas."

I clenched my teeth, still pissed at him for the blackmail. "Better than the bargain basement Bond villain shit you had going on," I said. "Octodicky."

"Octo... oh, wait!" Moe scooted on his knees back to Ram's side and grasped the other man's shoulders. "I was here to check on you. I forgot because of the human-eating alien and because of love." He gazed at Ram so intently that the other man leaned back from him.

"What are you doing?" Ram said.

"Making sure I don't get distracted again." Moe put his face so close to Ram's that it looked like he was going to kiss him.

"How are you?"

Ram's eyes darted from side to side as though looking for an escape route.

Speaking of escape routes... Elliot was going to break the mate spell; I was sure of it. He had been silent since I told him his feelings were caused by magic. I glanced at him now, and he stared a hole into the jukebox like he was trying to pretend the rest of us didn't exist.

Jag and Moe being on board was more than I could hope for; it wasn't reasonable to expect anyone to love you because of a spell. But I was still going to miss Elliot's thoughtful dark eyes and dumb puns. I was going to miss getting to know him.

He cleared his throat. When he started to speak, I tensed, ready for the blow, even as my name spoken in his soft rumble of a voice made heat pool in my belly.

“Alyssa...”



Chapter 15

Elliot tapped his finger on the jukebox as he met my gaze. His dark eyes were heavy. “Alyssa, I...”

I held my breath, waiting for the blow. I shouldn’t care about breaking the bond. I shouldn’t care.

That didn’t stop my heart from aching and my hands from trembling.

Go kiss him. That’ll show him! my brain said.

That’s the last thing he wants!

Elliot cleared his throat and glanced away. “The guards and police will be searching for us. Can they find us here? Where is here?”

My eyes widened in surprise. He didn’t break the mate spell?

He wants us! Grab his ass to show him we feel the same, my brain said.

He didn’t say he likes us, I snapped. *In fact, he’s avoided us since learning about the spell.*

“You can stop now,” Ram said.

I turned to see Moe holding Ram’s shoulders and staring at him with unblinking eyes. He was taking this not getting distracted thing seriously.

“Buddy, tell me your feelings.”

Ram scooted away from Moe on his butt before pulling a cellphone from his sock. “Yes, yes, we all have deep emotional problems, but this isn’t group therapy and Beverly isn’t a psychologist.”

Beverly looked up from her grooming.

“I find beavers quite therapeutic,” Jag said, raising his eyebrows at me.

A little thrill went through me, and heat bloomed between my legs. I grinned. “My cooch is not board certified to handle whatever mental illness you have.”

Jag snorted. Just like when we first met, he didn’t get offended when I insulted him.

I liked it.

Ram held up his cell phone. “No reception and no Wi-Fi. Even in an apartment in the middle of nowhere, someone would have Wi-Fi nearby. We’re in a bubble dimension.”

Oh right, Elliot’s question.

“The lack of doors and windows made that obvious the moment we got here.”

Ram pouted a little at not being the smartest person in the room. I had always liked making the calm leader annoyed enough to do his little pouty face.

“What’s a bubble dimension?” Elliot said. “Can the police find us here?”

I shook my head, and his shoulders relaxed a little. “It’s a small, self-contained world outside of our normal reality. You can only access them with a portal.”

Elliot wandered around the very orange room, touching the walls and the table with a statue of a faceless beard. “All this

is an entire universe? There's nothing else beyond this room?"

His soft voice made my insides feel squishy. "Not a thing."

"We've got lots of things here," Jag said with a wink.

I laughed and squeezed his hand because I wanted to touch him. Needed to touch him.

Moe tapped his chin and nodded as though thinking very hard. "If it's a bubble, does it pop?" He popped his Ps to demonstrate.

Free Jinx might have. I let go of Jag as a shudder went down my back. "Yeah. It pops and kills everyone inside." Admitting what might have happened to my friends made me feel like throwing up.

Jag, Moe, and Elliot turned worried gazes to me.

"I was kidding," Moe said, voice flat.

"Lucky for us," Ram said, tucking his phone back into his sock and petting Beverly, "We have one of the few witches in the world who can cast portal magic." He stared at me with his eyes brightening. Was that pride? "Alyssa will get us back to Earth."

"About that... I can only open portals with the Astrosmos. And I don't fucking have it."

Elliot gulped loudly enough for me to hear while Jag watched me as though waiting for me to say more. Moe nodded and held his chin like some kind of middle-aged British scholar.

Ram climbed to his feet. “Alyssa, you have to know a way to open a portal. You opened the one in the prison.”

“It was already there. I just widened it. I’m sure whichever one of your lackeys smuggled the portal into the prison will swoop in to rescue you.” And I’d make sure the rest of us got out too, whether Ram’s cronies liked it or not.

Ram’s mouth fell open. “I thought one of your people smuggled a portal into the prison.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, right. Just admit you’ve got Azea and the rest of your ass lickens doing your bidding still.”

“I don’t!” Ram said, exasperated. “I pay the prison guards to smuggle things in.”

His dark eyes panicked in a way I had rarely seen before. It made anxiety bloom in my gut and spiral up into my chest like a tornado of shit.

“I thought Juniper was creating the portals. She’s always trying to break you out,” Ram said.

I felt cold, like when sweat freezes and dries on your skin in winter. “No one is coming for us.”

“What?” Elliot gasped.

Beverly squeaked and stared up at me with those trusting animal eyes. I couldn’t stand to meet her gaze, so I turned to Ram. “I don’t know why you think I would know how to cast portal spells without a relic. You can’t even do it.”

“Fuck it, Alyssa, I’m not the be-all and end-all of magic, though I am very good at it.” Even now, he had to stroke his ego. “You’ve always done amazing magic. Stop acting like you’re a weakling just because some things come easier to me and Juniper!”

It was a classic Ram ploy. Tell them they’re special, and they’ll do whatever you want.

“You have to try,” Ram said.

Beverly grunted as though in agreement. Moe finally got off his knees to wrap his arms around my waist and nuzzle my neck. I wiggled closer to him despite the shitshow we were in. Might as well get some before dying.

“I believe in you,” he said. “I know nothing about portals except that they sound like fast travel in video games. Also, I searched closets for a portal to Narnia as a kid, but that never panned out, so clearly, I don’t know how to portal. I still think you can do it, though, because you made a giant skeleton hand grab me out of a prison, and that’s pretty cool.”

I squeezed his arm. “I appreciate it, Moe, but... belief doesn’t make something possible.”

Jag grabbed my hair and kissed the side of my head. “I love that you don’t take any bullshit.”

My skin goosebumped, and my clit throbbed as his hand fisted in my hair.

“If opening a portal is possible, you’ll figure it out,” he said.

“Please try,” Elliot said softly behind me. “I don’t want to die next to a jukebox that only plays a single Toto song.”

Moe perked up. “Is it the ‘Africa’ one? I love that song.”

“Umm... no,” Elliot said. “It’s... something else.”

I chuckled. He was a terrible liar. “I’ll try, but you better hope that whoever sent the portal into the prison finds us before the dimension collapses.” I shot Ram a look.

“It wasn’t me! I don’t even talk to our old gang anymore.”

I wasn’t entirely convinced, but it was clear I had to do something to save us. I broke out of Moe and Jag’s hold so I could think.

“Maybe if I recreate the magic circle and symbols from the Astrosmos, I can make a sort of makeshift one... assuming I can remember the symbols.”

Ram smiled and his eyes lit up. “That’s clever.”

It was, but I disliked any compliments from him. He used them to manipulate people—it was how he had talked a younger me into committing questionable acts for him.

“Look for something I can write with. Salt, glitter, pens, anything.”

We searched the room but didn’t even find a pencil or a book. Maybe I could use one of the vinyl discs in the jukebox, but the music already engraved in it might fuck with the spell.

“You can burn the magic circle into the carpet,” Ram said. “I’ll dispel the smoke into...” He glanced around, then grabbed a

wooden box off a tie-dye colored coffee table. The box's top held a photograph of two awkward-looking lizard aliens in mortarboards and tassels on their chests. When Ram pried it open, it screamed like a car alarm being tortured.

I winced. Moe covered his ears, and Beverly ran across the room to huddle behind Jag's legs.

Ram snapped it shut. "It won't need to be open for long."

I hated to admit that Ram had a good idea, but... burning the magic circle into the carpet was smart. Because it was created with magic, it should hold some of it, which would help with the spell.

"Everyone stand back," I ordered.

They cleared some space in the middle of the room. I didn't like the idea of turning my back on Ram and focusing on a spell rather than any shit he was up to. But if the dimension popped, he'd die too, so he probably wouldn't try anything.

Probably.

I crouched, placing my palms against the shag. I muttered the spell for fire. It came to my lips easier than my own name.

My magic flared down my arms like wildfire across dry grass. A familiar and comforting thrill flooded me like the sensation of going down on a rollercoaster and a hug on a sleepy morning at the same time.

The purple fire of my magic touched the shag, shrinking and blackening the fibers. A smell like burning hair irritated my

nose. As a spot turned black, I pushed my magic onward, extinguishing the fire at one spot and moving it to the next.

I guided my magic along the carpet in a series of connected circles. With the outline complete, I tried to remember the symbols on the Astrosmos relic and burned those into the rug too.

The box screamed as Ram opened it to suck in the smoke, and the scream turned to a cough as though the thing was alive.

I blinked my eyes clear of the thin trails of smoke and pulled my magic back into my body like a snake into a den. The circles with their complex geometric symbols looked like a mess burnt into the orange shag. It didn't matter for use, but fuck, it was the ugliest damn magic circle I had ever created. I had learned calligraphy just to draw the cleanest, prettiest spells you've ever seen, and this one was a disaster.

The coughing and screaming from the box cut off.

I startled as a hand touched my shoulder. Moe dropped to his knees next to me.

“That was amazing! Your magic is pretty, all purple and flamey like if flowers had Super Saiyan hair but like purple, not gold. Do you know what Super Saiyans are?”

I chuckled and took his hand, interlacing our fingers. “It's when Goku and Vegeta power up.”

Moe's smile widened. “I bet you could take them both on!”

Might as well argue about Batman fighting Spider-Man, but I laughed at his enthusiasm, anyway.

Jag shot me a sly look. “What other tricks do you have?”

A pleasant tremor went through me. “I can turn my arm into a chainsaw.”

Jag chuckled. He stopped suddenly. “Wait, are you serious?”

I wasn’t, but I winked at him as though I could be.

Elliot circled the spell, staring down at the symbols. My heart soared to watch him, his slow, careful steps, his thoughtful eyes studying the floor, and the soft lines at the corner of his eyes as he thought.

“I don’t recognize any of these symbols.”

“Nobody does,” I said.

Beverly nosed at my free hand, and I petted her head.

Ram tossed the scream box onto a table with a clatter and planted himself at the edge of my circle. My muscles tensed at the way he eyed it, as though he was looking for something to criticize.

“It’s probably a langue secrète,” he said without any disapproval.

“A language that witches create for their secret spells. The first ones to accomplish it were from a French coven, thus the name.” He met my gaze with a look of pride that was strange to see in his face. He hadn’t looked at me like that since before Juniper had turned on him. “What now?” he said.

I swallowed a strange feeling in my throat. “This spell is incomplete. I’m drawing it from the memory of a relic I haven’t seen in two years.”

“I’m sure it’s as close as possible,” Ram said lightly.

I narrowed my eyes at him. What game was he playing?

“We’ll piece together whatever else we need to make it work,” he added. “Even a langue secrète follows patterns.”

This wasn’t going to work. Not a chance in hell would an incomplete spell do anything, but we had no other options until whoever had been opening portals found us. If they were even searching for us. So I sighed.

“I’ll try casting a portal spell. Stand back.”

As the men and Beverly moved away, I placed my hands over the spell circle and unleashed my magic, letting it roam free through my body and the world around me like dogs at a park. I spoke the incantation for a portal spell—it wasn’t in any language I recognized, but I had memorized it all the same. It came to me easily.

The purple flames of my magic ran along the interlocking circles of the spell, lit up the symbols, and... found it had nowhere to go when it hit the spots with missing runes. It swirled around and around like a sock in a washing machine, going nowhere, doing nothing.

I dropped my hands and pulled my magic back. “There are too many symbols missing.” If only I had bothered to memorize the relic as I had the spell. Stupid of me to think the device would always be there for me.

Or for my people in Free Jinx.

“You’ll figure it out,” Moe said behind me.

These men have been in love with me for an hour, and I was already going to disappoint them.

Ram crouched on the far side of the magic circle and pointed to a few spots, one at a time. “I can see where your magic is getting stuck. These five symbols are wrong, and something is missing in these three places. We can test different variations. It’ll take some time, but through trial and error—”

The whole room trembled and filled with a horrible creaking sound like wood breaking. The walls and ceiling of the bubble dimension rippled like water.

My heart leaped into my throat. “The world is about to pop.”



Chapter 16

The bubble dimension wavered like a bad signal on an old TV. It screamed and creaked and the ground kicked upward, tossing us and everything in the room into the air. My stomach rose into my throat.

“Wheee,” Moe said.

“Moe, no,” Elliot said, grasping Beverly to his chest to protect her as he landed on the ground.

Through it all, Ram and I guessed at symbols and replaced them in the circle by restoring the section of the burnt shag and reburning it. Every time I cast the portal spell, my magic spun and spun until I felt dizzy.

It might be the last thing I ever felt. The dimension was going to burst any moment and take us with it. If we had stayed in prison, we would have at least lived.

“This isn’t going to work!” I snapped at Ram. “I told you I couldn’t get us out of prison, but you only care about yourself.”

“So do you!” Ram snapped back. “Remember when we were still together? I didn’t even know there was a problem between us until you led an attack against me!”

Now that death was imminent, all the old bitterness was coming out. Well, if I was going to die, I was going to tell Ram what a jerkwad he was first.

“You should have noticed! I had stopped sleeping with you, but you were too up your own ass to care why.”

The world kicked us into the air as the floor undulated like a snake. I hit the ground with a painful jolt up my spine.

“I asked,” Ram growled as he rolled to his feet. “You lied to me. Some shit about no desire from antidepressants.”

I didn’t remember telling that lie, but I might have. “You would have turned on me if you knew I didn’t want you to murder my best friend!”

Ram winced, and I knew my words were true.

“So I turned on you first,” I said.

The floor heaved, and we flew into the air again. I threw my hands over my head to protect it from the ceiling. I landed with a thud.

“Stop arguing,” Jag ordered. “We’re going to die if you don’t figure something out!”

He was right. Ram and I were exactly what we were accusing each other of being: selfish bastards who didn’t think about those around them. Did I really want to die acting like the monster Ram thought I was?

So, even though it was futile, I placed my palms on the magic circle. “We’re out of time! I’ll cast the spell. Ram, you keep changing the symbols as quickly as you can think of them until something works or we figure out if bubble dimensions have afterlives.” We might be ghosts stuck in nothingness forever, which seemed worse than just straight-up death.

Ram grabbed my wrist. “Wait.”

I shot him a look, but he didn't let go. "I have an idea, but... I'll need to mix my magic with yours. Do you trust me?"

The ceiling groaned and blasted outward. Above us was nothing... literally nothing. Not the darkness of space—that still held matter, photons, and gravitational waves. Darkness was heavy, full of horror and promise and the chance of light. Darkness held a color—well, a shade technically—but still. It was something you could see.

This held no color I could see. My gaze slid across it as though nothing was there because nothing was. It held all the promise and horror as the eyes of a corpse.

It was pure nothingness.

And the next time the floor heaved, we'd be flung into it. I could hold us down with magic, but not while trying to open a portal out of here.

"I don't have much choice but to trust you," I said to Ram. "Do it." I didn't wait for him to answer. I spoke the spell in the strange language and let my magic fly.

Despite the danger and the panic in my chest, my magic sang, vibrating like plucked strings through my body. As it hit the busted parts of the circle, Ram's magic twined around it like a lasso.

I fought the urge to jerk away. His touch was both familiar and out-of-place, like visiting a McDonald's in China. Why was I going to this crap when there were better and more interesting

options across the street? Why was this even here when I should have left it far behind?

Ram's magic tightened around me, and I tensed before I lashed out at him. Next to me, he muttered a spell in ancient Babylonian. I knew the words, but the spell itself was strange.

He yanked on my magic, dragging it past the broken sections of the spell circle that I couldn't pass on my own. I expected it to hurt like jagged glass, but it only felt bumpy like riding a bike over gravel. Maybe because Ram's magic cushioned mine.

I understood his plan then. He was using his greater power to brute-force my portal spell to continue along the makeshift relic despite the missing sections. He was breaking all the rules of magic, but then... that was what Ram and Juniper had always been good at.

I repeated the portal spell and poured all the magic I had into it like tipping a bag of chips upside down to get every last crumb. Ram's magic wrapped around mine and pulled me further than I could go alone.

With our magic interlaced, I felt more powerful than I ever had. My heart raced, and my skin tingled with power. I shouted the portal spell again and again.

The men were screaming, and Beverly was grunting. I tried to open my eyes, not realizing I had closed them, but I couldn't. All my body and all my magic were fixed on the spell. My heart beat so fast and so hard, I thought it might explode like the ceiling of the bubble dimension.

Through it, Ram held my magic with his own, a steady, calm presence. He dragged my magic around the circle to complete the spell. I felt it click like a seatbelt, but it also felt wrong, like fire at my back rushing closer and closer.

Wrong, wrong, flashed through my mind. My stomach churned.

Something exploded, and the ground vanished from under me, leaving me floating in nothingness. I could no longer feel Ram's magic against my own, or the magical circle, or my spell. With the end of the universe, my magic had retreated into the cover of my body like a turtle into a shell.

I couldn't see anything because there was no light left in this world. My lungs could find no air; it had probably disappeared with the rest of the dimension. Oddly enough, I didn't feel panic, and I didn't try to gasp for oxygen. Maybe because I knew there was nothing left I could do. Instead, I wished I could tell Jag, Elliot, Moe, and Beverly that I was sorry for letting them down. Not that it would do them any good.

I should have known better than to listen to Ram.

I heard a whoosh, which was strange because there was no air to carry sound waves.

"Alyssa?" said a familiar voice.

Juniper? I tried to answer, but I had no breath. I couldn't see her, or anything else, for that matter. This must be my life flashing through my mind before my final death.

“Shit,” Juniper said, and chanted something in Gaelic. Something cool brushed against me, and I breathed in air that smelled of mildew. “Listen. Free Jinx crashed. We’re trapped —” Her voice cut off, and my back slammed into the hard ground.

I gasped in sweet, sweet air. I was alive! How was I alive?

Sitting up, I looked around. I was in a dark room lit by a sliver of orangey streetlights leaking through window curtains. It cast its sickly light across a lumpy queen bed and stained carpet.

Oh fuck, not another 1970s cum dumpster of a bubble dimension?

Ram groaned on the floor next to me. Jag rubbed the back of his head as he stood while Moe rolled over onto his back. “Ow,” he said. Elliot cradled Beverly against his chest as though he had broken her fall.

My heart soared. They were alive! They were safe. I could have laughed and cried and cuddled their faces all at once.

I hurried to Elliot and Beverly since they hadn’t moved yet. As I stroked Beverly’s head, she leaned into my touch and grunted softly. With my other hand, I pressed my fingers to Elliot’s throat to check his pulse. It was quick but strong.

His eyes slowly opened, and he smiled at me. “I saved someone.”

I smiled back. “You did well. Are you—”

The bed creaked, and I spotted two shadows leaping to their feet.

Flaming magic roared to life in one of their hands, illuminating a pair of women with yellow hair. Was that blush and lipstick even though they had been asleep? They looked like stereotypical sorority girls, but then, I had too when I was a bit younger. I knew looks could be deceiving.

I unleashed my magic, letting its purple fire flare in my hands. On the other side of the room, Ram did the same, the light of his purple-black magic dancing in his dark eyes like cruel mirth. He was damn attractive when his powers weren't aimed at me or someone I cared for.

“Who are you?” said one of the women in a calm tone. “Did Clio send you?”



Chapter 17

Elliot, with Beverly in his arms, scrambled away from the strange witch with magic flaming in her hands. Jag rushed forward to grab Elliot's shoulder and haul him to his feet.

With my magic flaring like purple flames in my palms, I stepped between my men and the witches. While one of the witches held her magic at the ready, the other reached for a lamp on the bedside table. I suspected she was also a witch because the two looked to be sisters and because she wore a gold medallion that was definitely a magical relic she probably shouldn't own. I wanted to snatch it from her—my old habit of stealing relics died hard, apparently.

Moe waved at the two witches whose motel room we had crashed. "Hi! You asked if Clio sent us. Who's Clio? Is that the alien who eats humans? Because they did not send us." He blinked. "Who did send us? I heard a voice in the portal."

"Quiet," Ram snapped, and he was right. Though Moe's friendliness was adorable, we shouldn't reveal anything to these strangers.

The woman with the medallion hoisted her lamp as though getting ready to throw it. "Would Clio send crazy convicts?"

Moe winced.

"He's not crazy," I said, more for his sake than the witches'. They wouldn't care... or believe that Moe had a perfectly sane reason to ask about aliens who eat humans.

"Yeah," Moe said. "I'm quirky, not crazy!"

I didn't dare take my eyes off the witches in case they attacked. "Jag, check the door. Is there a world outside?"

The blonde with swirling magic in her hand raised a brow. "World outside? We're not on another planet." She turned to the one with the medallion. "I don't think Clio sent these idiots, Delphy."

Delphy shook her head. "Me either. Who did? How did you get through our warded door?"

I spared a glance at Jag as he tugged on a door that wouldn't open. If they had warded a door, then there was a wider world beyond it.

"We're the fucking tooth fairies," I said. "No wards can stop our tooth-stealing powers."

The sisters exchanged a glance, and then the one with magic waved her hand. I tensed, my magic flaring into a purple shield between us and her.

But instead of an attack shooting at us, the door swung open.

"Success!" Jag said, as though he had managed to unlock the door.

Even though the witch hadn't attacked us, I didn't dare drop my shield as I took a step toward the door. Ram nudged Moe with his elbow, and the non-witch sidled toward the exit. Ram followed, eyeing the sisters as I did.

I let the men and Beverly leave first as I held the defensive shield. "We'll just be going. Enjoy your sad lives."

“Sad lives?” Delphy said, putting down the lamp to cross her arms over her chest. “We have great lives! We own our own company, and we travel and we have fun.”

“Nobody who is doing well ends up in a motel room with piss stains on the ceiling,” I said. “You look like vanilla low-fat lattes come to life.”

“At least we don’t look like clowns,” the other one said, pointing at the door. “Get out and don’t come back.”

I stood straighter. Nobody insulted my fashion sense—even if I was in a prison uniform. “I’ll have you know that these outfits mean we are very dangerous.”

“I’m not,” Moe chirped from the door. “And Ellie isn’t. We’re quite nice.”

“Moe, shut it,” I hissed.

Delphy smirked. “Is the beaver a fashion statement too? Or is she a tooth fairy as well?”

I backed out of the door, and before I could come up with a witty and mean answer, Not Delphy waved her hand and the door slammed shut.

I considered blasting it open to deliver a scathing remark, but... that was what the old Alyssa, which was ironically, the younger Alyssa, would have done. And it would have ended with the cops being called here even faster.

So I clenched my fists in annoyance, pulled my magic under my skin like reabsorbing sweat, and turned my back to the motel door. We stood in a perfectly normal parking lot lit by

an orangey streetlamp. Right in front of us was a large pickup truck stacked high with paint cans. Beyond, the motel sign flashed vacancy by a silent, dark road.

I sighed in relief. The real world.

But that was the only good news. We didn't know where we were, we looked like escaped convicts, the cops would be after us for the prison break, and Juniper...

Juniper had mentioned being trapped and Free Jinx collapsing. Ninety-three people living in the bubble dimension. I had found the first couple dozen myself: locked in dungeons for using dark magic, sleeping on the street after their families threw them out for who they were, and hiding in forests after other supes ran them out of town.

I had promised each of them they would be safe in Free Jinx and that they could be themselves. They believed me. Soon, they started to rescue other misfit supes and bring them to their new home.

Their new family.

Now, they might be all gone.

I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath. One of the men placed his hand on my lower back and I opened my eyes to see Moe's worried expression.

"I can tell you a joke to cheer you up."

I tried to smile to reassure him but couldn't. He rubbed my back, and I leaned against him like a cat.

Jag glanced around the motel parking lot. “We have to find less obvious clothes before those witches call the cops.”

“They won’t,” Ram and I said at the same time. I shot him a glare, but he ignored it and kept talking.

“They’re hiding too. They won’t want the attention the police will bring. If this Clio could reasonably send convicts into a room past defensive wards, she could buy off cops or pose as one.”

Know-it-all, I thought. I wanted to explain everything.

“Can you open another portal to teleport us to a fancy department store for new clothes?” Moe said.

“No,” Jag and Elliot cried at the same time.

“We barely survived the first trip,” Elliot said, still holding Beverly against his chest.

“But we did survive,” Moe pointed out. “Alyssa won’t let anything happen to us. Right?”

My insides went all squishy, like my heart had turned into a big ol’ teddy bear, all soft and cuddly.

Ew.

I bet Moe’s not soft, my brain said. Eh? Eh?

Yes, I get it, shut up.

I squeezed Moe’s hand. “You’re right that I’ll protect you, and that’s why we’re walking.”

For now. Juniper said she was trapped somewhere, and since she had appeared through a portal before vanishing, she was

probably in a bubble dimension. But Juniper could escape anything. If she was stuck, shit was very, very bad.

And I doubted I could fix it on my own.

My gaze fell on Ram, the only other witch as skilled and powerful as Juniper—and he was the only way I could open a portal, even a garbage one that would get us killed. As his gaze met mine with eyes the same color as my best friend's, I looked away. I hated that I needed this bastard.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll cast an invisibility spell, and we can look for a clothing shop.”

“Invisible? I can be a superhero,” Moe said. He placed his fists on his hips and stuck out his chest as though a cape should be fluttering behind him. “Just like when I worked at the Desney World amusement park.”

“You mean Disney,” I said.

Moe held his superhero pose. “No, it was definitely Desney. I was fired for stealing cotton candy and also because the park was shut down due to trademark infringement.”

“Which superhero were you?”

“Magnet-oh! With the power of magnets!”

I chuckled. “Good choice. You are magnetic.”

Moe beamed at me.

Elliot placed Beverly on the ground. “Why did they not see the lawsuit coming?” he mused.

“They lacked the power of Lawyer-oh! Who was bitten by a radioactive lawyer,” I said.

Elliot burst into laughter. The rich and deep sound made my skin feel warm and my insides even more fluffy.

I cast the invisibility spell around us, even around Ram, who surprisingly didn't run off to whatever post-prison scheme he had planned. We strolled along the dark streets. After a few blocks, I recognized some of the shops and the distant castle on a hilltop. We were in Silver Springs.

It was strange to walk these streets. I wasn't supposed to be out of prison yet, and it had been years since I had been anywhere with wide open skies and air that didn't hold the stink of too many people in too small a space. I turned my face to the night sky and the smattering of stars; I hadn't even been outside at night in almost two years.

“How long were you in for?” Elliot said softly as he watched me stare at the sky.

I sighed. “Too long and not long enough.”

When we came to a clothing store, I stopped and turned to Ram. “Do you have money on you?” He was paying off guards daily, so he must have some kind of credit card or bank card.

He furrowed his brow. “We'll be breaking in, anyway.”

I crossed my arms. “I'm not stealing anymore.”

“You were stealing the entire time you were in prison!”

“That doesn’t count. Nobody is losing their homes or missing meals because someone stole their prison contraband. Hell, I probably saved some of your dumb assholes from the hole by taking their banned shit. Plus, most of them stole back their stuff. None of it mattered in the end.”

Ram frowned, and I could almost hear his thought process. Sure, he could blast down the shop door with no problem. But the stores in Silver Springs were magically warded to protect them from paranormal thieves like us. Once someone crossed the ward, it would send an alarm to the cops, spring a trap, or both. Ram could handle any trap and the cops, but did he want to spend his first hours of freedom being chased out of town?

That was where I came in. I could get us past the ward without it ever knowing we were there. It was one skill I possessed that Ram didn’t, and the only leverage I had over him at the moment. Maybe I shouldn’t push my luck when I needed his help to find Juniper, but I also resented him a hell of a lot.

“Well?” I said. “Are you going to play by my rules?”



Chapter 18

Ram's face was pale in the light from the clothing store's neon sign: Polly Esther's. He nodded. "Fine, we'll do it your semi-legal way."

A thrill went through me because I had made Ram do what I wanted for once. I doubted anyone had gotten him to do anything since he was a little kid, and maybe not even then.

Ram crouched and pulled his cell phone from his sock. "I can pay through my phone."

"Let's see."

He might claim he had no money after we had changed into new clothes. He sighed but showed me the wallet on his phone with connected credit and debit cards.

Jag leaned over Ram's shoulder to peer at his screen. "Where do you get all this cash?"

"Illegal activities," I said. At the same time, Ram said, "That is confidential."

He shot me a look, but I ignored him. "He has a whole ass gang stealing shit and funneling him money. Sandra, Brownhill, Ver, Azea. All the ones who keep sending me threatening letters."

Ram huffed. "I told you, I don't communicate with them anymore."

"Yeah, sure you don't."

Jag clenched his fists. "They threatened you. Where do they live?" He cracked his knuckles.

“Hell if I know or care. They’re pissed Juniper and I dispersed our old gang.”

“Wait,” Elliot said as he adjusted Beverly in his arms. Her little paws hung limp like a cat who had given up. “Who’s Juniper?”

Telling them my entire history with her would take forever, so I gave them the short version. “My best friend... and sometimes enemy. If you heard a voice while we were in the realm of nothingness, that was her.”

Elliot’s eyes widened. “I thought I hallucinated that. She said some place called—”

“That’s the end of that chapter!” I said and whirled to face the store.

I didn’t want to talk about Free Jinx and the Eclipses. Admitting out loud that they might be gone would make it more real like speaking a spell to bring a physical item into existence.

Instead, I focused on the store’s ward: the way it shimmered in the air, the way it moved like grass in a lazy wind, the streaks of yellow magic from the witch who had cast it and left a piece of their magic behind.

Even after years of not using magic, mimicking the ward was as easy as walking. I wrapped its aura around myself, Beverly, and the men. The ward would think we were part of it and not intruders at all.

Ram whispered a word, causing the shop's door to swing open. I stepped inside, and the others followed. The store was fully lit, though none of the light had spilled onto the street. Ram's doing again. I glanced around, and as my gaze feasted on the racks of colorful clothes, I breathed deeply of the smell of new fabrics. Actual fashionable clothes for the first time in years!

Sploooosh.

"When you're ready to talk, we'll listen," Jag said softly before strolling deeper into the shop.

No more sploosh. I knew they would listen, and somehow that was harder to bear than if they would rather not hear about my troubles.

Elliot grunted as he bent to place Beverly on the floor. I crouched and scratched her neck, but my fingers didn't catch on her collar like usual. She still leaned into my scratches though. "When did you lose the collar?"

"Somewhere in the portal," Elliot answered for her, stretching his arms after carrying her for so long. "She had it in the bubble dimension but it was gone when we landed in the motel."

Hmm... the mate spell on the collar must have decided to move on to some other victim. "We'll get you to a nice river after we change clothes, I promise."

Beverly chattered happily. It was fall, though, and I wondered if she'd have enough time to build a lodge before winter's

freeze. I'd have to help her with it. Magic down some trees and make her a home that would be the envy of all the beavers in this watershed.

She'd be the only one of us who was safe and comfortable—assuming the cops were looking for a beaver shifter and not a happy beaver in a river. Jag, Elliot, Moe, and I would be on the run for the rest of our lives. Ram, too, not that I cared. Not one bit. Not ever.

“We'll find the perfect river for the perfect beaver,” Elliot said.

I glanced up to see him smiling fondly at Beverly. It made my stomach flutter and my heart feel like it was being squished in a big bear hug.

Fuck, I was a sap for these guys, and the most disgusting part was that I liked it.

When Elliot saw me looking, he turned away quickly. My heart dropped. He had started pulling away the moment he had learned about the mate spell, and I couldn't blame him. I should be doing the same, but I already loved Jag, Elliot, and Moe.

Wait, I loved them? Really? This fast? I mean, yes, because of the spell, but also what the fuck?

“This place is too expensive,” Moe said as he frowned at the tag on a winter jacket. “Can't we go to a garage sale instead?”

I patted Beverly and then stood. “It's three a.m. We're not wandering around looking for a vampire yard sale. They

always overprice things anyway. A jacket with an H&M label is not vintage, Heather!”

Moe’s bright blue eyes widened. “How dare Heather lie! Who’s Heather?”

One of the Eclipses from Free Jinx; a teenage vampire whose human family panicked and turned on her when they found out what she had become. She might be dead now, I remembered.

I glanced away from Moe and dodged his question. “Ram is paying, anyway. And expensive is good, very good.” I spotted something bright and pink across the store, and for a moment, I managed to forget my many problems as I was drawn to it like Magnet-Oh to a refrigerator.

It was a bright pink pantsuit but with a crop top instead of a stuffy button-down. It screamed, “I’m here to take over this board meeting” but also “I’m very hot” and “you’re not fucking ready for me.”

A smile spread across my face. “Perfect. Just... perfect.”

The fabric was thick enough for the cool weather but still soft against my fingers. I pulled it from the rack and headed to the changing rooms in the back of the store. It didn’t matter if it was my size or not. I could magic it so that it would fit as though it had been made for me.

A few minutes and a quick resizing spell later, I stepped out of the changing room to admire myself in the mirror on the door. With my magic singing in my blood and this bad-ass outfit, I felt more like myself than I had in years.

It probably helped that I was fully sober for the first time outside of prison since the falling out with Juniper and Ram. Drinking had been a way to drown trauma and beat insomnia, though it had stopped working on both a long time ago.

A changing room door creaked open. Ram strolled out in black slacks and a light green button-up patterned with dark green leaves. He had left the first two buttons open, revealing his collarbone and the top of his chest, just between his pecs.

I couldn't help but stare. Despite his many faults, he had always been hot.

He unbuttoned and rolled up the sleeves, freeing his forearms and making heat pool deep in my belly. Fucker was probably doing that on purpose, hoping he'd get me all turned on. Well, fuck him... not in that way. In a bad way.

In a good way too, my brain said.

No! I would not get horny for my treacherous ex, even if I could see the brushing of dark hair on his thick arms and a hint of pec when he leaned to the side.

Ram's gaze found mine, and I looked away quickly. Too quickly. I should have stared at him and scowled; that would cover my ass. Heat flushed up my neck. He knew how to read people and probably knew I had been checking him out.

"That's not your style," I said. "You look like a banker having a midlife crisis on a Caribbean island while he tries to hit on women the same age as his daughter." It wasn't true. He

looked as smoking hot as his dark magic when it flamed in his hands. But that didn't matter. He was still an asshole.

Ram glanced down at his shirt. "Is it that bad? I was going for something different. You know, I always tried to appear non-offensive with business casual clothes and a friendly smile. That way people might trust me despite my... my dark magic."

I knew what he meant. People mistrusted us the moment they spotted a hint of purple or black in our magic.

"I thought if I appeared kind of neutral, people might like me. That's so pathetic. I was like a politician who wears plain colors and tells everyone what they want to hear, even if it's contradictory."

"It worked," I said. "You got dozens of us to enact your vengeance on the world."

He frowned. "Weren't you all angry at the world too? Didn't you want to get back at it?"

I glanced away. "Yes. And there are people out there who deserved that vengeance."

People like the priests who had tortured Ram as a kid to "release the evil" they claimed was in him. People like my parents who threw me out when I was only a kid. People like the teachers who had tried to use obedience spells on Juniper and me to rob us of free will, so we would stop using dark magic—the only kind of magic we could use.

“But we weren’t targeting the cruel. We were targeting everyone.”

Ram ran a hand along his bare forearm. “I’ve realized that I didn’t make things better for my people or you. I was using all of you to protect myself from the world instead. I’m sorry.”

My heart contracted like it was trying to hide away from his words. A long time ago, I had desperately wanted him to realize he was hurting me. He had refused. So I had learned to hate him because it hurt less than loving him.

Now, years after I stopped caring, he was admitting he had harmed me.

Bastard.

“Why don’t you write your regret in a letter and mail it to seven years ago when I might have cared?” I said.

“I knew you’d say that.”

“You did not! No one could have predicted that clever line.”

Ram rubbed his arm again and then met my gaze with sorrow and worry in his eyes. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but we have to. Juniper mentioned that Free Jinx is in trouble.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you care? You don’t even know what it is.”

“Brinhilde wrote to me to say the community you started was better than the one I ran.” His mouth twitched as though he wasn’t sure if he should laugh or frown. “That she felt safe for once.”

I wanted to say aww and hug myself and cry all at once. The place I had built meant so much to the Eclipses, and yet, it might be the thing that killed them.

“And Azea wrote me to say... choice words that you don’t need to hear about,” Ram added.

I knew what she thought. She had moved into Free Jinx and then burned down half the buildings before fleeing. She was a true believer in Ram’s plan to control the world’s magic and was fucking pissed that I had helped stop it.

“You did well to start Free Jinx,” Ram said.

“You don’t give a shit about it,” I said. “If it’s collapsing and portals are opening in Silver Springs, someone stole the Astrosmos.”

“I swear on my mother’s grave that I had nothing to do with it!”

My eyes widened. “Did she die?”

He hesitated. “Okay, fine, she didn’t. But she bought a plot in a cemetery and that counts, right?”

I crossed my arms. “So you swear on some grass?”

“I swear on my magic that I had nothing to do with stealing the Astrosmos. May my magic vanish if I lied.”

I scoffed. “If only the world worked that way.”

Ram ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up at wild angles. “Look, I failed my group of outcasts, but if I can save

yours, I will. If any of them are alive in a bubble dimension, I'll help you rescue them.”

“I'll help you” were not words I had heard often in my life, and it made my heart feel sore and squishy like poking a bruise. But I wasn't going to show Ram any of that. I pulled myself up to my full height.

“What about Juniper?”

He spoke through clenched teeth. “I'll help save Juniper too.”

“Will you try to kill her when we find her?”

“She tried to kill me first!” Ram said, exasperated.

“No, she tried to stop you from stealing magic from every random supe you came across. She even let you go after kicking your ass.”

He fisted his hands at his sides and groaned. “Fine. I won't attack her unless she attacks me first.”

I wasn't sure I believed him. It wouldn't be the first time he lied about his intentions, but it was the best I could hope for to save Juniper and the Eclipses.

“To be clear,” he added. “I'm not doing this for Juniper. I'm doing it for you and only you.”



Chapter 19

It sounded like someone was hopping behind me, so I turned to see Moe skipping up to me. He wore a knit sweater covered in yellow duckies. It was so small on him that I wondered how he had managed to get it on. It only went to his elbows and halfway down his torso, turning it into a crop top.

Which worked on him. My gaze followed his trail of blond hair down his stomach to the waistband of a pair of new jeans. For a moment, I forgot about Ram and Juniper. I just wanted to follow that trail of hair with my tongue.

“Here are the price tags,” Moe said, handing them to Ram. “I’ll pay you back with interest.”

Ram frowned. “Do you mean interest?”

“It’s not very interesting, no. It’s just the money you give someone as thanks for lending you money. I’ll pay you once I find a job. I’m good at getting jobs. Not great at keeping at them.”

I wasn’t good at either, so he had me beat.

“Paying me back is not necessary,” Ram said. “Isn’t that sweater... a bit small?”

Moe looked down at himself. “It doesn’t come in my size, but I like the duckies. It’s yellow and happy and cute.”

“You’re yellow and happy and cute,” I said without thinking, and then cringed. Fuck, that was so stupid and sappy that I should crawl behind a clothing rack and die.

Moe smiled at me, bright and glad. “You look like cotton candy. Sexy cotton candy.”

I grinned at him as my heart swelled. Fucking gross.

Ram groaned and stomped away. I remembered being gross with him years ago—it was so embarrassing, I had lied to Juniper and said I had never been with Ram.

“Bye,” Moe said cheerfully and waved to the other man.

Stepping forward, I placed my hands on Moe’s sweater. “I can resize it for you.”

He pressed his hands to mine, holding my palms against his chest. I felt his heartbeat race under my touch. “You make my insides goosebump. Quack. Quack.”

“Honk,” I corrected. Geese honked.

Moe let go of my hands and stepped away from me.

I frowned. “What?”

“You honked at me, so I’m getting out of the way.”

I studied him for a moment, for signs of a grin or a stifled laugh. No, he was dead serious. I stepped close to him. “Vroom, vroom. I’m driving back.” What the fuck was this spell and this man doing to me?

Moe grinned and opened his arms wide as though for a hug. “I’m a parking spot.”

I chuckled and placed my hands on his chest as he wrapped his arms around me.

I wiggled closer and even though I liked the crop-top look, I muttered a spell to resize his very tiny sweater.

“Your magic tickles,” he said, dropping his head to rest his forehead against mine.

A tremor of pleasure went down my spine. I breathed in his scent, reveling in the feel of his breath on my lips, the sight of his blue eyes so close and so warm like the waters of a tropical beach.

My skin tingled just from being so close to him, and heat throbbled between my legs in a way I hadn’t felt in... well, since I lost the only vibe I ever liked.

“Can I kiss you?” Moe said softly.

My heart flipped over. “You sure? You don’t want to break the mate spell and get to know each other and maybe...” Fall in love the usual way. I couldn’t bring myself to admit out loud that we were in love out of nowhere because of a dumbass spell.

“I have never been more certain of anything... except maybe my childhood dog, Charlie Horse. I was equally sure of him as I am of you.” Moe squeezed me closer against his warm body. “I look forward to falling for you over and over again as I get to know you.”

My eyes prickled—probably dusty in this store; damn people needed to vacuum the floors better.

“You can’t kiss me,” I said, and his expression fell. “Because I’m going to kiss you first.”

He grinned, and I leaned in close, pressing my lips to his.

I had meant to go for a simple, quick kiss, but the moment my mouth touched Moe's, something broke free inside me like handcuffs being removed.

Heat trailed from my lips, down my neck, and along my spine. It blossomed in my chest and stomach, and its roots delved deep down into my pelvis. My clit gave a little throb, a call for attention.

Moe's hand pressed against the small of my back as though it was meant to be there. He parted his mouth and groaned as I stroked his tongue and the inside of his lips.

Oh fuck, my brain said. We haven't kissed anyone in like six or seven years. Do we even remember how to do it right?

I yanked my tongue back into my mouth and shut my mouth so quickly that I caught Moe's bottom lip in my teeth.

"Ow!" he yelped.

I opened my mouth and leaped back as his hand went to his swollen lip. "Fuck, I'm sorry!"

The heat in my torso turned to a hot roaring tornado of anxiety. Of course, I had fucked this up. I was doing fine until my brain butted in like a parent bursting into your bedroom while you're grinding on a broom handle.

What? It's the real reason witches used brooms.

"You like it rough," Moe said, his words a bit slurred from his lip.

“I didn’t mean to! Ah, fuck, I don’t know any healing magic.” It was often outside the ability of dark witches. I put my hand to my mouth and gnawed on my thumbnail.

Moe touched his lip and then looked at his fingertips to check for blood. I didn’t spot any red on his hand. “Are you a vampire witch?”

“No such thing, I’m sorry!”

Moe chuckled. “We’ll keep practicing kissing.”

With that, the tornado of hot anxiety in my gut died.

“We all make mistakes!” he continued. “Once, I hadn’t eaten in three days because I was a broke student. I was going down on my girlfriend at the time, and it took her a while, which I don’t mind,” he added quickly with a wink. “But my mind wandered to burgers, fries, and nice juicy pickles. Anyway, I lost focus and nipped her.”

My knees squeezed together. “Did she kick you in the nuts? She should have.”

“No, turns out she was into that but didn’t know! Anyway, the lesson is that we all make mistakes, and it’s okay because you learn from it and sometimes what you learn is that you have a new kink. I didn’t learn that today, but that’s okay!”

“I think the lesson is that a pussy isn’t lunch.”

Moe nodded. “A pussy isn’t lunch,” he said like an old wise man on a mount.

“What did you study in school?”

Moe pulled back his shoulders. “I have a Bachelor of Engineering in Binocular Maintenance and Repair.”

He looked so proud of himself that I swallowed the urge to ask if he was kidding. “I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“It is at MIT... Mr. Intelligent’s Teachery.”

I think I understood why the mate spell had decided Moe and I were meant for each other. He needed someone hard and mean to protect him from the world. I wondered if anyone had looked out for him before he had met Jag. In return, he was bringing out a silliness in me that I thought I had lost two decades ago.

“I want to go back to school—somewhere that doesn’t lose their accreditation like MIT did—so I can get a degree in music. Then, maybe I can be a real musician like Elliot wants us to be. I know you don’t need a degree for that, but a degree might convince him that we are good.”

I glanced across the store at Elliot as he flipped through items on a rack. I wanted to hug him and kiss him and tell him he was already a skilled musician. They all were.

“Did you go to college?” Moe said, taking my hand. His touch sent a tremor of pleasure through my skin.

It seemed weird that we were smitten when we didn’t even know basic life facts about each other—and weirder still that I wasn’t scrambling to break the spell.

“No, I was expelled from high school for using dark magic. I floated around New York with Juniper until we joined a gang

of thieves.”

I watched him, expecting sweet Moe to be horrified by my criminal past. Instead, he said, “Like heists? I always wanted to do heists! I have so many questions about everything you just said! First, why do people dislike some magic? No, wait! I know what I want to ask first. Did you ever want to go to school?”

It was a strange question because I was in my mid-thirties and hadn’t thought of school in years. “Not after they kicked me out. I figured no school would take me.”

Moe squeezed my hand. “But what did you dream of doing before then?”

I shrugged to cover the pinch in my chest. “A concert pianist or a fashion critic who insults people on the red carpet or president... but that was back when I was little and stupid and thought I could do anything. I gave up those childhood fantasies a long time ago.” Before I was even out of childhood.

“I don’t think we have to give them up,” Moe said. “Sure, not everything will come true even if you work hard, but that’s okay! You can still dream. You can still be and do all kinds of things and keep trying new stuff!”

I was stunned. I think the last people who said something like that to me were the muppets on Sesame Street. Moe, being Moe, was completely sincere. He really believed that we could dream and become anything. But he was an adult around my age! He should know better! Somehow, the world hadn’t crushed him despite its efforts to do so.

How?

“What do you want to be?” Moe asked.

I had to think about it. “What I always wanted to be, deep down, my whole life.”

He squeezed my hand. “What’s that?”

“The good guy.” I had thought stealing magical relics would make me one by saving the world from itself. But I was just lashing out because some supes had made life miserable for me, Juniper, Ram, and my other friends at the time.

“You saved us from prison, that weird dimension, and the empty nothingness after.” Moe pulled me into a hug. “You’re my good guy!”



Chapter 20

I sat on the shop's counter to make sure Ram rang up and paid for everything we were taking. Elliot chose a suit with green cuffs and lapels that reminded me of spring. The outfit hugged his shoulders and thighs, showing off his form better than the prison jumpsuit had. I hadn't realized how much muscle he had on his lean body.

My hands itched to feel him from knees to face to find out what else he might be hiding. But I knew he wouldn't want me to.

"You look good," I said, a bit lamely.

He handed over the price tags to Ram behind the counter. "Thanks." He half turned away from me and fiddled with his sleeve.

My heart dropped fast enough to hurt like slamming into the pavement. I couldn't blame him for disliking me and the spell, but I wished he would just break the bond already so I could get over him.

"Do... do you want me to break the mate spell for you?" I asked, my voice softer than I had meant it to be.

Elliot fidgeted with the button on his sleeve. "I don't know. When I was little, I believed in fairy tales. True love at first sight and all that. Then I got older and realized the best you can hope for is someone who accepts your quirks without hating you too much—at least for non-shifters like me. Then, this happened, like a fairy tale. But..."

"But maybe it's not real," I finished for him.

He pressed his lips together, and damn it, even now I wanted to taste them. “But it could be real if I believe in it,” Elliot said.

“Clap for Tinkerbell,” Ram said dryly.

I had forgotten he was listening in. “Go clap your dick between your hands until you learn manners.”

“That’s not your best insult,” Ram said. “Surely you can do better.”

“Your mom could have done better when she conceived you.” I inwardly cringed because that was a cruel thing to say to someone with parental issues.

Wait... why did I care if Ram was offended?

“Much better insult,” he said lightly. “B plus.”

I tried to ignore him and turned back to Elliot, but he was already walking away to the front of the shop. I sighed. “Fuck, Ram, you couldn’t mind your own business?”

He tapped his phone against the shop’s payment terminal. “I’m surprised you didn’t break the mate bond with all of them the moment it came into existence.”

I gazed after Elliot as he disappeared behind a rack of clothing, probably crouching down to see Beverly. “Me too.”

Jag strolled over from the changing rooms, his jumpsuit replaced with a black t-shirt and a bomber jacket printed in sky blue with white clouds. It was more cheerful than I expected from him. On his legs, he wore a tiny, tiny pair of white shorts.

They barely covered his balls, and I eyed the outline of his cock through the tight fabric.

“I can’t find any pants that aren’t itchy,” he said. As he turned to give his price tags to Ram, I leaned forward to check out his ass. The shorts hugged his round butt like I wanted to.

“Hoochie daddy shorts,” I muttered without thinking.

“What?” Jag said.

I sat up straight so I wasn’t staring at his ass anymore. “I said... ummm... coochie dewy shorts.” Great, now I had implied I wore musty-ass panties. “Which I dislike,” I added quickly.

“Oh, I heard hoochie daddy shorts,” Jag said with a smirk.

Heat flushed up my neck. “Bit full of yourself, aren’t you?”

Jag winked. “You could be full of me.”

Damn it, that line shouldn’t have worked, but my heart leaped and my pussy clenched.

Ram groaned. “Are you going to buy pants too before I ring this up? I don’t want to have to do another order.”

Jag ignored him and looked me over, making my skin tingle.

“What does the lady think?”

I couldn’t help but glance at his tiny shorts and the outline of his cock. I wondered what it tasted like—and if it turned into a harp when he was hard or if that was a separate thing. But I had already made an idiot of myself, so I said, “It’s chilly out. You’ll get cold.”

And your cock will shrink.

Stop it, brain!

Like always, Jag didn't miss a beat with me. "Maybe I was bitten by a radioactive flamethrower and don't get cold?"

"Then shouldn't you go entirely naked?"

"Yes, but I like this jacket."

I laughed.

"Dear goddess, just put on pants," Ram said.

"I have a hate-hate relationship with pants," Jag said. "They make me itchy. I can't stand fabrics rubbing against my legs."

I jumped off the counter. "Maybe you just need something with wide legs. I can resize whatever you like, so it's not tight-fitting." I regretted saying that, but his comfort was more important than my horniness.

I guess.

Jag's eyes brightened. "That might work." He gestured for me to follow, and I gladly did, eyeing his ass as it shook in his tight shorts.

"I'm still getting used to all the amazing magical things witches do," he said.

That got me to look at his head. "We literally traveled through portals to other worlds and resizing pants impresses you?"

He pulled a pair of black slacks off a shelf. "You underestimate how much I hate pants. That prison jumpsuit was driving me insane."

“You hid it well.”

“I learned to mask when I was a kid.”

If I had learned how to hide better, I might have had an easier time growing up.

“What is it?” Jag said. “Are you thinking of how to make me a chainsaw arm?”

I smiled a little at that. He placed a hand on my cheek and stroked it with his thumb. I nearly melted into his firm, kind touch; his fingers were rough and calloused from playing the dick-harp. Dick-sitar? Dick-lute? Whatever it was.

“How did you get your dickstrument?”

“Imagining my cock is what made you stare into the middle distance like an anime character on a long internal monologue?”

“No, but it’s what I’m asking about.”

Jag traced my bottom lip with his thumb, sending a shiver through me before he dropped his hand to his side. “I always wanted to make music.”

I was confused for a moment why he was talking about music now. Oh, right! I had asked about his dickstrument.

“My family couldn’t afford music lessons, so I taught myself what I could on a piano at the public library. I was never very good because I had no one to help me. Some people become very skilled when self-taught, but I didn’t. So in high school, I signed up for band and was excited to finally learn music for

real. I played the trumpet, but I hated it. I wanted to sing and play together, but my school only had brass and wind instruments.”

I took his hand for support. “For what it’s worth, lessons made me hate piano.”

He smiled, small and sad. “I just wanted to be able to make the music I heard in my mind. I could hear all the notes, all the lyrics, all the emotion, but I just didn’t know how to make it exist in the real world. Whatever I played or sang was a shadow of a turd of what I imagined. So, I went to school for pre-med because that’s what my family wanted, and I wasn’t good enough at music to get into college for it.

“But I didn’t care for biology and dropped out. I auditioned for bands and orchestras, but I never got hired. I got some gigs playing piano in restaurants, but they never lasted. It was just elevator music crap, not what I wanted. So, I gave up. Got a job in construction. Hummed my songs to myself but never tried to play them or sing them.”

I squeezed his hand. “That’s so sad.”

But it was also as common as the cold. Most everyone gave up their dreams so they could earn a living, but here I was feeling bad about it, like some kind of idealist who didn’t know better. Like Moe.

Jag squeezed my hand back. “Thirty came around, and I thought, what the fuck am I doing with my life? I hadn’t played music in years, though, so I was even worse than before. I tried and tried to get better, but I could never make

the music in my head exist in the real world. But I had heard of people who went to a crossroads and made a deal with the devil to play music.”

“Oh, no...”

Jag nodded. “I didn’t believe it. My family isn’t magical, and I didn’t know supes existed. But I was desperate and depressed, so I started stopping at random crossroads and asking for musical powers.”

“You found some jerkass, self-important demon, huh?”

“Worse. A djinn. She was long-lived and bored, and I was naïve about magic.”

I nearly gasped. “Even when my gang was robbing every type of supe in the world, we stayed away from the djinn.”

“Yeah, I know why! But I don’t regret it. My dickstrumment also removed the veil that blocks magic from humans. I got to enter an amazing realm I didn’t even know existed. And I got what I wanted, though not in the form I expected. I can put the songs in my head into the world now.”

I remembered the snippet of JEM’s music from the video.

“What I heard was beautiful.”

Jag smiled with his eyes going soft and tender. “That means everything. I’m going to keep playing, even if Elliot doesn’t want to anymore. I will not hide my talent.” His voice hardened. “I spent a lot of my life hiding what I wanted and who I was. I’m done.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me what you were in prison for?”

He sighed. “I had to appear tough to protect Moe and Elliot, so I didn’t want word to get around that we were arrested for cock exposure. But I hated it, and I’m not pretending to be someone else ever again.”

Though I barely knew Jag, I felt proud of him in a way I rarely felt toward anyone.

“I never hid being different, though I hid my intentions a lot. I didn’t know how to appear normal like people wanted from me, and it made life harder.”

Jag took both my hands, letting his pants flutter to the floor. “I’ve done both. Hiding is safer, but it rots the soul.”

The way the world treats you can rot you too, if you’re not careful. If you’re not strong enough. I was still trying to come back from that.

“You have that internal monologue look again,” Jag said.

I smiled a little. “It’s a long, long story. Too long for right now when I have a beaver to set loose, a friend to free from a bubble dimension, and ninety-three other friends who might need rescuing.” If they weren’t already dead.

Jag pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head. “We.”

“What?”

“You said you have people to save. We do. You’re not doing this alone, even if my only magical abilities involve growing strings on my cock.”

He didn't even ask who my friends were or what the danger was. He volunteered to help without hesitation. I hugged him tightly around the waist, pressing my hands to his back. I knew I should leave him, Elliot, and Moe somewhere safe before trying portal magic. But I didn't want to be away from them. I didn't want to work alone anymore. I didn't want to be alone anymore.

As Jag held me close, I felt like I never would be. I breathed in his musky scent. His bulge pressed against my pelvis, and I couldn't help but wiggle closer. I heard his heartbeat race under my ear. My skin goosebumped—quack, as Moe would say—and heat flowed through my veins to between my legs.

He was fierce, angry, and unapologetic, and he came by it the hard way. I loved it. And I wanted to show him that he would never have to hide who he was with me.

“Show me your instrument.”

“Here? Now?”

“You said you never hide anymore. So, show me. I want to hear your music.”

Jag nodded against the top of my head. “Absolutely.”



Chapter 21

I stepped out of Jag's hug and grabbed his hand, pulling him into the nearest changing room. "Do you need to be hard for your instrument to appear?"

Jag grinned as he slid his thumbs under the waistband of his hoochie daddy shorts. "Were you hoping for an erection?"

My heart rushed. "Pfft, I don't care for boners. Much too veiny."

"You'll like mine then," Jag said and winked, making my knees feel weak. "No, I don't need an erection for the dicktar."

So that's what it was.

"I've never tried to get hard or come when in dicktar mode. It's separate from everything else a cock does."

"How many things does a cock do?" I said.

"Well, there are erections and peeing and... ummm... sometimes they shrink, but I guess that's just an erection in reverse. Okay, so they do two things, but mine does a third," he added in a sultry voice. It was oddly hot and cheesy at the same time.

With another wink—he sure did love those—he pulled down his shorts. My gaze fixed on his thick cock, and I resisted the urge to lick my lips like I had just put on flavored balm.

Jag wiggled his fingers, shifted his stance, and his cock grew. Not in a familiar way but more like a plant stem growing in time-lapse. It kept going and going, growing longer and wider until its tip reached Jag's chest. As it grew, strings sprung from

his skin and took their place, stretching from below his dickhead to his dark brown pubes.

“Ta-da!” Jag said, and despite his declaration of no-hiding, his voice was a bit worried.

“Play me a song,” I said.

Jag let out a long sigh of relief. He cleared his throat, placed his hands on his cock, and started to thrum the strings as though tuning it. “Okay, this one is called ‘Moonlight on Water’.” He cleared his throat again and started to play.

The tune was light. It rippled up and down the scale just like moonlight reflected in a lake. He sang, deep and low, like something primordial and magical rising from the depths. The lyrics were poetic, which was never my strong suit, so I didn’t quite understand them, but the sound itself was enough to send a shiver through me. I wanted to cry from the emotions in it.

Jag closed his eyes and swayed with the music. His fingers pressed the strings against his cock and his hands moved up and down his beautiful length to hit different notes.

Somewhere in the middle of the song, a beat kicked up like your heart racing in the dark. It was joined by a hum like the sound of water lapping at a shore. It took me a minute to realize those sounds weren’t coming from Jag.

I turned to open the dressing room door. Moe, it could only be Moe, stood outside. His pants were pulled down to his knees and his hands were on his ass cheeks, tapping out the beat. But

it wasn't the sound of flesh hitting flesh. It was a catchy, light rhythm, like playful drums from a fae song.

It was the most beautiful sound that had ever come from an ass. Hell, it was better than most drum kits.

I glanced past him for Elliot, but the third member of JEM was nowhere in sight. My heart dropped.

Jag's voice and playing cut off mid-song. Moe kept slapping his own ass, keeping the beat going and humming lightly.

Would it make music if I slapped his ass too? Or did it only work when he did it?

I turned back to Jag, who clenched his dicktar tightly as though for comfort.

"That was beautiful," I said. "Like playfulness at night, but also kind of sad like something lost."

Jag let out his breath, then grinned as though he had never been worried at all. "It was about my first boyfriend and the time we spent at his parent's cottage before he... well, he said he outgrew me."

Moe stopped drumming his ass and spun around, his cock flopping against his thigh, drawing my gaze. Mmm, a show-er this one. He better be because if that got much bigger, I'd never be able to take it.

"Did you like my drumming?" he said.

I squeezed his hand and wished I was squeezing something else instead. "You're very skilled at slapping ass."

Moe's smile brightened. "I know, right?" He bent to pull up his pants, but I grabbed his hand and yanked him, shuffling with his jeans around his knees, into the changing room. I shut the door.

Moe's eyes widened. A flush climbed up his neck, and it gave me a thrill that I could make him blush when he played his own ass cheeks.

I turned to Jag and placed a hand on his face. His dickstrument pressed against my stomach and chest. "Can I kiss you in front of Moe?"

Jag's eyes half closed, and a shiver went through him. "Yes, please."

I glanced over my shoulder at Moe, who startled as though he hadn't expected me to ask his permission. "Oh, hell yeah," he said. "Go ahead."

Grinning, I pressed my lips to Jag's. Warmth spread through my body, and I jammed my hand into his hair.

Don't bite him, my brain said.

Shut up, brain.

Maybe you should bite him after all!

Jag swiped his tongue over my lips, and I parted them, careful to keep my teeth back. But as he explored my mouth, my brain went quiet.

It actually went quiet.

He placed his hands on my hips, pulling me against him. His dicktar nestled between us, the head pressed between my breasts. My clit throbbed at its touch.

Moe slid a hand along my ribcage, his other lifted my hair from my neck, and my heart fluttered like a group of pigeons taking off.

“Can I kiss your neck? Can I touch you?”

I broke off the kiss with Jag. “Absolutely.”

Moe pressed his mouth to my neck, kissing the sensitive skin. He paused against my pulse to feel it batter his lips.

Jag placed a hand against my jaw and turned my face back to him. “I’m not done with you.”

I smirked and shoved him back against the wall. Moe followed behind me like he was attached to my back. “You’re done when I say you are, hoochie daddy.”

Jag’s eyes widened, and his skin turned a dark reddish-brown. “I knew that’s what you said!”

I met his gaze, and he stared back as though with a silent challenge. “Can I take your cock in dicktar mode? I want the part that makes the beautiful music: the instrument and the man.”

Jag’s breath picked up, his chest heaving. “Yes, do what you want with me.”

My heart soared at the flustered look on his face, the challenge in his eyes, and the way his voice had turned needy.

“First, I’m going to cast a spell on us. It’s a sort of magical condom.”

Moe rested his chin on my shoulder and his hands crept up my waist. “Yeah, magic! Also, can I touch your breasts? They look so, so...” He paused as though trying to think of a word. “Good,” he settled on.

I chuckled. Even his lame attempt at dirty talk was making my skin tingle. Before answering, I let my magic flow, redirecting part of it from the spell that was keeping the shop’s security at bay to a ward around their cocks and my pussy. It would block any infections we might be carrying.

“Okay, Moe, go for it,” I said. “Boob away.”

Moe wiggled closer, pushing his now hard cock against my ass. He slid his hands upward along my waist to my breasts, finding the nipples through the fabric of my crop top.

Heat exploded between my legs, and I tilted my head back, letting out a small moan.

“Fuck, you look so hot when you do that,” Jag said.

With a grin, I lowered my gaze to his dicktar.

It had grown a bit thicker. I wrapped my fist around his head, and it throbbed against my palm. Well, he could get hard while in his dickstrament state after all.

Jag gripped my wrist and dropped his forehead to rest against mine. “It’s different like this.”

I quickly tasted his lips. “Different how?”

As he opened his mouth to answer, I squeezed his tip and his words turned to a moan.

I chuckled and, with my free hand, reached down to fondle his balls. He moaned again.

“Different how?” I asked innocently. I was surprised I could sound so chaste with Moe working my nipples.

Jag growled in annoyance. “Better, good,” he managed to say, any ability to conjure poetic words now gone.

He was coming undone already, but I wanted to turn him into a helpless pile of goo. “Can I taste you?”

He gasped. “Yes, please.”

“Wow, I didn’t even have to ask you to be polite.”

He growled again, annoyed but not enough to ask me to stop.

I took a step back, pushing against Moe. He grunted and his hips thrust forward, nestling his cock against my ass. I wiggled a little to make him even happier.

“Can I taste you too?” he said against my ear.

I let out a small gasp as my heart skipped a beat and my pussy clenched. “Yes.”

“I’m very good at this, and I won’t get distracted, I promise!”

Oh yeah, his clit biting story. At this point, I was so wet, I didn’t even care if Moe’s attention came with teeth.

Leaning forward, I slipped out of Moe’s hands and wrapped my lips around Jag’s tip.

Fuck, he was so thick, I had to nearly unhinge my jaw. He fit so tight that when I breathed out, it would probably create a vacuum in my throat. And damn it, if I didn't love it anyway.

I didn't take him in any deeper because of the strings along his length. I alternated sucking his tip and licking it with my tongue as I rubbed my hands up and down his length. I caught his strings by accident, sending clear notes through the room.

Jag moaned. His hand knotted in my hair, and a tingle ran down my spine.

Behind me, Moe slid my pants down. His fingers were rough against my skin, making me shiver. I wasn't wearing underwear because the shop didn't sell any, and I was fucking fed up with the granny panties from the prison. So once Moe had slid my pants down, I was bare and half bent over in front of him.

"Mmm, pretty," he said in his usual way with words.

His hands roamed over my ass and thighs. He must have dropped to his knees because his breath was hot against my aching pussy. I groaned around Jag's cock, desperate now for one of them to finger me, lick me, anything.

Moe was a sweetie, not one to make me wait. He grabbed my thighs and pressed his tongue to my opening. I gasped, and my hands clenched on Jag's cock. He moaned, and his grip tightened in my hair as though he was drowning.

As I sucked Jag, Moe slid his tongue between my folds and found my clit. A cry escaped me, muffled by Jag's enormous

dicktar in my mouth.

Heat spread through my body as my pleasure grew. Moe removed one hand from my thighs, and I felt him moan against my pussy, the vibration making my legs shake. He must be stroking himself as he ate me out, and that thought made my inner muscles clench.

Jag bumped his head against the changing room wall. “I’m coming,” he rasped. His moan was loud enough that I was sure the others must have heard him from across the shop. Like he said, he didn’t hide anymore.

His cock throbbed against my tongue and lips. I lifted my gaze to his face, watching his eyes roll back and his body shake. My own trembled under the skill of Moe’s tongue.

Jag called my name loud and clear as he came. Because of the spell, I didn’t get a mouthful of cum—pity. The magical condom destroyed all cum as it spilled from his tip.

Jag’s hands went soft and gentle in my hair where he had been gripping me for dear life, and his cock turned limp in my mouth. As I pulled back, his dick shrank and the strings vanished as it returned to its usual size.

He might be done, but I wasn’t.

Moe circled my clit, firm and relentless. I gripped Jag’s hips for support as the orgasm crashed over me. My vision blurred, and my body shook. I probably cried out as loudly as Jag had.

Moe, for his part, didn’t stop. My orgasm stretched on and on, as though he would draw every last ounce of pleasure from my

body. As I clutched at Jag for support, he held my wrists, stroking the skin and grounding me, reminding me to breathe and not just scream.

Moe moaned against my clit, and the vibration was too much, as though that was all I could take.

“Enough,” I gasped.

With a grunt, he removed his mouth from my pussy, but the pleasure remained, an echo of it still trembling through my body. Moe gave a final groan, and I was sure he had come too. The sound of it made me want to turn around and ride him, even though I was still throbbing from the first go.

I nearly collapsed to the floor, but both Jag and Moe grabbed me and helped me to my knees instead. I laughed and moved my jaw from side to side to loosen up the cramp in it.

“That was—”

An alarm blared, cutting off my words. The changing room flashed red like a firetruck siren.

“Fuck! You let your anti-ward spell drop,” Ram shouted outside the door. His rage was loud enough to beat the sound of the alarm. “Now the store’s defenses know we’re here, and so does every cop in Silver Springs.”



Chapter 22

The store's ward was going bonkers. It screamed in two dozen voices and flashed like the lights at a rabid disco. I sensed its attacks slamming into Ram's defensive shield like bugs against a car window.

Of course, I had screwed up my protective spell and had to rely on Ram to save us. I should have known better than to fuck when I was supposed to be keeping us safe.

I raced after Ram with Jag and Moe on my heels.

Elliot was already waiting on the sidewalk with Beverly in his arms. As we fled the shop, Ram waved his hand. A flash of purple flames flared in his palm and surrounded us before turning to a transparent sheen. An invisibility spell.

"Come on," he snapped and led the way down the street. The men followed, with Beverly squeaking unhappily in Elliot's arms.

I started to follow, then stopped. Why the fuck was I taking orders from Ram? I had promised myself years ago not to do that ever again.

A movement caught my eye. I glanced across the road to the forest in the distance: a line of dark shadows swaying against the sky. "Wait."

Ram whirled on me. "You're not giving orders after screwing this up."

I flinched and my stomach clenched, remembering the rage and disappointment he had showered on me and other members of our gang when we messed up a mission.

But he had no control over me now. “No, you are doing exactly what I fucking tell you. I spent years following you, and all it did was give me a rap sheet long enough to drive to LA on. So, now you’re doing things my way. The right way.”

I didn’t wait for his answer. Ram’s invisibility shield wasn’t going to be enough to fool the supe cops who would be searching for nearby magical auras.

Every witch and most supes had a sort of sensation to them, a feeling that was uniquely them. Imitating these auras was my specialty and the way I had bested the shop’s ward—until I got distracted.

But I had a version of that skill that not even Ram knew about.

I let my magic free. Instead of copying an aura, I weaved a shield around us and tucked my aura underneath and inside like a drag queen with her cock and balls.

Nearby witches would sense nothing, as though we were normal, non-magical humans. Combined with Ram’s invisibility shield, we wouldn’t be noticed at all.

I spoke a word in Gaelic. We lifted into the air and zoomed across the street, over the roofs of the other shops, and towards the forest.

“Whooooo,” Moe cheered and pumped his arms over his head. “Rollercoaster! That only goes straight, but still. I’m Special Man! That was another hero at the amusement park I worked at. I wanted a promotion to Special, but they never gave me one.”

“You didn’t need a promotion, you were already special,” I said.

“N’awww.” Moe smiled at me.

Jag, in his tiny shorts, stared down at the ground. With the cool fall wind blowing past us, his legs must be freezing. We had fled the shop in such a hurry that he had forgotten to grab pants.

I was caught between worry and enjoying the view of his thighs and bulge.

He lifted a foot and groaned. I guessed he was afraid of heights, which was ironic because he made my heart soar.

Fuck, I was so gross.

“I won’t let you fall,” I told him.

He hugged himself but managed a smile. “Too late. I already fell for you.”

I giggled like a dumbass.

Elliot smiled and stared up at the dark sky. Unlike the others, he looked calm and peaceful, almost happy to be floating through the sky. I wondered what he was thinking.

In his arms, Beverly paddled her feet as though trying to swim through the air. Awww. I took her from Elliot to hug her. This flight toward the forest was for her, after all. She just didn’t know it yet.

And then, only then, I glanced at Ram.

“Good call getting us off the streets,” he said.

I raised a brow. Why was he being nice after I had put us in danger and told him off?

He seemed to guess my thoughts because he said, “What? I can admit when someone else is right.”

Was he sucking up? Why?

Because he loves you, my brain said, even though I didn’t want to think about his feelings for me.

I looked away and fixed my gaze on the forest ahead. I set us down on a stretch of grass at the edge of the woods and placed Beverly on the ground.

With a happy chittering sound, she ran for the nearest tree and started crunching on its base. She was finally going to be happy and free.

“You guys wait here,” I said. “I’m going to take Beverly down to the river, then we’ll talk about portals and rescue missions.”

Elliot’s eyes widened. “Why can’t we go with you and Beverly?”

“Because these woods are protected by a witch who hates men.”

Jag frowned. “Why does she hate men?”

I waved a hand. “Because of our entire fucking world.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. “Fair enough.”

“The upside is, I think I can convince Evanora to keep Beverly safe from any cops who come stomping through here. She seems like the anti-authority type.”

“But does that mean we can never enter the forest to visit Beverly?” Elliot said.

I hesitated. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I can always go into the woods and bring Beverly back out for a visit.”

Elliot kneeled next to Beverly, who stopped chewing bark off her tree to gaze up at him. “I’ll go to the hole for you any time, Beverly. You...” He sniffed. “You stay safe.” He hugged her, and she grunted happily.

My heart felt like one of those squishy stress balls.

Jag crouched next to Beverly and scratched her neck. She leaned into it like a dog. “If any of the other beavers or squirrels or fish or anyone gives you a hard time, you bite them. Hard. For me.”

Moe plopped onto the ground and rubbed Beverly’s lower back. “Beaver, beaver, beaver butt. Beeeever butt!”

Now my heart was one of those stress balls if it had been melted into a puddle of... whatever the hell they were made of. Silicon? Plastic?

As the men gave Beverly their final hugs and stepped away, Ram cleared his throat. “Umm... build the best beaver lodge on the river. I know you will.”

He sounded sincere. No fake friendly smiles or cheery voice, just sorrowful eyes and soft words.

Maybe he has changed.

Stop it, brain! This was Ram and it didn't matter if he changed, because we had a long, toxic history that was best buried and set on fire and buried again.

I patted Beverly's head. "Come on, the river isn't far."

I muttered the Gaelic word for light and held a purple fire in my palm as I picked our way through the woods. Beverly claimed a stick and chewed on its bark as we walked.

I kept my light turned low, just enough to illuminate the path ahead. I hadn't told the men this, but Evanora, the woods witch, disliked me as much as she disliked men.

The last time I was here, I had been searching for Juniper's stash of magical relics. Evanora had filled the forest with illusions to throw me off the trail.

She might try something like that again. I could be stuck wandering lost for days until the men came to search for me and she turned them into toadstools or some shit.

Better if she didn't know I was here. She might look out for Beverly—it was said she loved the creatures of the forest—but me? It would be a disaster.

"I'll visit," I promised Beverly as we walked. "Assuming..." Assuming that saving Juniper didn't get me killed or locked in a bubble dimension.

But I didn't want to say that because Beverly seemed to understand a hell of a lot of what we said, and I didn't want to worry her.

"What do you think happened to the people in Free Jinx?"

I glanced over my shoulder at her as she walked on her hind legs and nibbled a stick she held in her front paws. She didn't even grunt in response to my question.

"I figured you wouldn't know. I just... I just had to ask someone." Why I decided to ask the beaver and not a human, I didn't know.

The cool wind cut through my suit jacket, and I shivered, but fuck, it felt good to be outside again: to hear the crunch of dried leaves underfoot, to smell the crisp fall air, and to hear the rustle of animals in the darkness beyond my light.

I paused to stare through the shadows of tree branches and the few remaining leaves that clung to them like baby possums to their mother's back. And I realized with a deep ache that I didn't want to go back to prison.

I had intended to turn myself in after saving my friends. I'd finish my sentence, be rehabilitated, and all that.

But now that I was out in the forest with my magic flickering along my fingertips, I realized just how shrunken I had been. It was as though my limbs had been numbed and I hadn't even noticed until the blood had rushed back into them.

I could stay on the run. Why should I walk free when I had done so many things wrong and others had served their time? Like Ri, who had only stolen to support his kid.

I pushed the thoughts aside for now. I had to look after my current problems first.

As I walked, I crunched dry leaves underfoot just to hear the sound. “So...” I said to Beverly. “You like those guys, huh?”

She munched, peeling the bark from her twig and eating it.

“They like you,” I added. “But you’re very likable.”

It was easier to say things like this to an animal. They never judged you for it. Beverly, for her part, didn’t seem to give a fuck.

In the distance, I heard running water, and Beverly made an excited chirp. She pushed the back of my legs with her nose to get me to hurry up, but I was selfish. I kept my pace so I would have a bit longer with my beaver friend.

When we reached the riverbank, I stepped aside to give Beverly room. The Silver River wasn’t very big here, more like a creek. But it widened as it neared the ocean, so Beverly should be able to find a good spot somewhere.

She dropped her twig, glanced up at me as though to say bye, then slid down the short bank and splashed into the river. She did what she couldn’t in the wading pool in her cell. She sank under the water so that only the top of her head was above the inky blackness. Safe.

“I’ll miss you,” I called to her.

Fuck, I hoped I was doing the right thing and the cops wouldn’t catch her and drag her back to prison. I’d have to burn that whole place down if they locked up an animal again.

I turned to go and came face to face with an old woman. The purple of my magic flame danced in her dark eyes like a

coven's fire on Beltane.

My magic surged forward to protect me: a swirl of purple tendrils filled the narrow space between me and the woods witch.

She didn't flinch, didn't blink. Though her magic didn't appear in the world around her, I felt it. Tensed and ready to strike behind her skin, as vast as the nothingness outside a bubble dimension, as tall as the trees before humans cut them down. The air around her smelled of soil and rain. Her magic promised storms that could flatten forests.

She was something primordial, something ancient and unknowable, like the ocean.

Despite the power in her, she appeared as a hobbled old woman with a woven basket hanging from one arm.

"Your eyes are the color of water," she said, "but they burn like fire."

"I contain multitudes," I said dryly. "If you knew I was here, why didn't you create an illusion maze like last time?"

"Because this time, you bring not discord but a friend." She leaned to the side to look down at the river. "Nice beaver."

"Thanks, I just got her wet." Despite the danger Evanora posed to me, relief welled in my chest. She had called Beverly a friend. "They locked her in prison. They might come looking for her."

"Many look when in the forest, but few find what matters."

Oh great, she was a fucking riddle-speaker as though she was so fucking clever, like Yoda, who never said anything smart either. “I’ll just be going now.”

But Evanora didn’t move from my path. “Reality stretches, opens, and sometimes tears, like a hymen.”

“That’s the dumbest metaphor I have ever heard.”

“But it is a metaphor,” she said. “And those hold more truth than plain words.”

“No, they fucking don’t.” But still, my mind spun on her dumbass riddle. Reality opening and tearing. My heart sank. “Fuck, portals are opening up in Silver Springs, aren’t they? It wasn’t just someone trying to get my attention at the prison?”

Evanora handed me her basket, ignoring the magic I had weaved between us as though it could never harm her. Given the depth of magic behind her eyes, she was probably right.

“What is in the basket?”

She ignored my question. “Many have been pulled through portals—”

“You mean consumed by giant vaginas when their hymens stretch open?”

“Yes,” Evanora said. “No one who has entered a portal has been seen again.”

I realized that her stupid metaphor had softened the reality of her words. Portals were sucking people into bubble dimensions.

And they weren't coming back out.

My blood ran cold, and I dropped the defensive magic I was holding between Evanora and me. "Shit. Shit, fuck. Fuck, shit. What am I going to do?"

It was bad enough when I had to rescue Juniper and the Eclipses. But now random supes and humans? Who could be anywhere in an infinite multi-verse?

"I can barely open a portal! How do I even track where people ended up?" I looked at the old witch for help. "I'll just end up trapping myself in bubble dimensions."

Evanora simply turned and walked away. "I shall protect your beaver friend," she said over her shoulder.

My throat was as dry as the twigs in Evanora's hair. "But what happened to Free Jinx? Where are its people?"

Evanora hobbled out of the circle of my light. I darted after her, but she was already gone.



Chapter 23

By the time I stumbled out of the forest, I had wrangled my anxiety partly under control. Enough to stop gnawing on my nails, at least.

Ram had cast a small purple-black fire. The men sat around it like at camp, complete with Moe waving his fingers and going “oooh” as though he had just finished telling a spooky story. The sky behind them was starting to lighten to the deep navy right before dawn.

As I stepped into the strange, haunted disco club light, Elliot leaped to his feet. “You’re bleeding!”

I looked down at my hand. The skin around my very, very short nails was red on my thumb and index finger. “It’s nothing.”

But all four of the men jumped up and rushed to me. “What happened?” Jag demanded as though ready to fight someone over my damaged fingernail.

“I said it’s nothing.”

Ram gently took Evanora’s basket from my other arm, and I let him. He could deal with the woods witch’s sticks or mushrooms or whatever the fuck.

Elliot loosened his tie and slid it off. Taking my wrist, he dabbed at my bloody nails with the end of the tie. It was soft against my battered skin. Meanwhile, Moe rubbed my back as though to comfort me.

I could have laughed at them. It was barely worse than a paper cut, and they were doting on me like I was dying. At least Ram

had the sense not to act like I was a fragile little flower petal. Instead, he crouched by the fire and flipped open the basket.

But part of me did like Elliot gently wiping my cuts.

“How’s Beverly?” Jag asked.

“She was happy to swim in the river,” I said. “Evanora will look out for her.”

Jag’s shoulders relaxed. “I like a wet beaver.”

When I didn’t take his bait, he frowned. “What is it?”

How strange and wonderful that he was reading me like we had known each other for years, not days. I started to answer but hesitated.

The situation was much more dangerous than I had thought. I wasn’t dealing with one or two portals with Juniper and my friends’ help on the other side. I’d have to go through multiple portals with no idea where they led and no guaranteed way to get back to Earth.

If I lied and said everything was fine, Jag, Elliot, and Moe could stay here safely. Well, safeish, given the random portals and the cops.

I’d be alone, except for Ram, but they’d be out of harm’s way.

Ram, of all people, saved me from answering right away. He pulled jars from Evanora’s basket. “We’ve got waking potions to combat sleepiness, Eat Me potions to drink in place of food, and...” He held a glass jar up to the light. “Some kind of jam?”

“I can tell. I’m an expert on jams and jellies!” Moe skipped over to the basket. Ram handed him the jar, and he grunted as he tried to open it. He put the hem of his sweater over his hand and tried again.

As Moe struggled with the jam, Ram turned his gaze to me. The purple flame caught in his dark eyes like he was made of pure magic.

It sent a shiver down my back.

“Why did the notoriously unfriendly woods witch give you a basket of potions to keep you awake and full?” Ram said.

I tensed. Damn his attention to detail. “She was glad to have a new beaver friend.”

Ram eyed me, and I knew he knew I was lying.

“I already miss her,” Elliot said as he dabbed my finger. “There, I think the bleeding has stopped.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice softer than I had intended. “Your touch is very tender.”

Elliot stared at his tie as he folded it. “It was my pleasure.” His voice was as soft as my own. I wanted to stroke his cheek and put my arm around him.

Moe grunted as he struggled with the jar.

“Let me try,” Jag said, crossing over to him with a hand outstretched. He still wore his tiny shorts that clung to his ass. I forced my gaze away. I had more important things to deal

with. Like if I was going to ditch these guys for their safety or not.

“No, no, I got it,” Moe said. “I just need a better grip.”

“Just give it to me. I know a jar opening trick,” Jag said.

“I can do it!” Moe insisted.

Ram stood with a jar of potion in his hand and stalked over to me. I stared him down. Well, I tried to. He didn't back off. Elliot stepped sideways, putting himself partly between me and Ram, which I hadn't expected.

“What is going on?” Ram whispered, even though Elliot would still be able to hear him. “The woods witch wouldn't have given you enough waking and food potions to keep a legion of dragons flying unless she wanted you to do something. Quickly.”

I clenched a fist at my side. If only he hadn't asked in front of Elliot. I needed to tell Ram the truth because I couldn't open portals on my own, but I hadn't decided yet if I was going to drag the others into this.

“I don't know the thought processes of someone who probably turns mushrooms upside down and uses them as butt plugs.”

“They'd probably just turn to mush,” Elliot said. “Whatever the forest witch said... is it about the woman we saw in the portal? Your friend?”

Ram gave me a look that said, go on, tell him.

Elliot waited with those sweet, soft eyes. I glanced at Jag and Moe as they wrestled for control of the jam jar, each insisting he had a super-secret trick for opening them. The mate bond shimmered in the air from my chest to each of theirs, golden even in the dark of pre-dawn, like sunlight captured and made into ropes.

I knew the right thing to do was to lie and leave them behind. Keep them as far away from danger as I could.

They were brave, yes, but they weren't witches or even conventional shifters. And I was dealing with magic so advanced, even Ram, Juniper, and I struggled with it. My attempts to bend portals and bubble dimensions to my will had already landed the ninety-three people of Free Jinx... somewhere. Dead, maybe. Or just lost.

But I didn't want to go alone. Just yesterday, it would have been easy to ditch them and do everything on my own, like I was used to. Now, when I looked at Jag's fierce eyes and mischievous smirks, or Moe's bright blues and easy grins, or Elliot's soft brown eyes and shy smiles, I felt like my heart was being hugged.

All cozy and safe and warm.

I didn't want to feel cold again.

Apparently, even with all my power, strength, and bitterness, I was as defenseless to mate spells as a slug among salt.

"Alyssa?" Elliot said. "What's going on?"

I met his gaze. Despite his apprehension about the mate bond, he stared at me as though I was the best thing he had ever seen.

It made my insides melt. So, I did the selfish thing, the thing that I knew would end up with him hurt. I told him the truth.

And I asked for his help.

“My friends and a lot of locals are trapped in bubble dimensions. We need to save them.” I looked at Jag and Moe. “You need to hear this too.”

Jag yanked the jar from Moe. “Let me show how it’s done, Jam Boy.”

I reached out with my magic and unscrewed the jar lid, dropping it into the basket.

Jag and Moe gaped at me. Without breaking eye contact, Moe reached out his hand and stuck a finger into the jam, lifting it to his mouth. “Mmm... apple.”

Jag heaved a sigh. “Now no one else can eat it.”

Moe looked at me and wiggled his eyebrows. “I like eating witches’... jams.”

A flush crept up my neck while Jag grinned with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Ram crossed his arms. “Care to tell us what the woods witch said, or are we just going to fuck around like stoned teenagers?”

Among Jag and Moe's shenanigans, I had forgotten about my anxiety. It roared back now like a pride of lions. Still, that moment of comfort was why I couldn't let them go and why I was going to put the people I loved in danger.

"So, a lot of people are fucked," I admitted. I swallowed a lump in my throat. "You know that locals and my friend Juniper are trapped somewhere. But I also have—had—friends and people I had promised to protect living in a bubble dimension that has since collapsed. I don't know what happened to them."

"Oh, Alyssa, I'm so sorry," Elliot said and wrapped his arms around me.

I blinked at the gesture because I hadn't shown any sadness. I had been careful not to. "It's okay," I lied.

"You must be so worried for your friends," Elliot said against my neck.

I swallowed a lump rising in my throat and forced myself to shrug. "It's fine."

Jag gave me a doubtful look while Moe rubbed my arm. Memories of Free Jinx flashed through my mind as though it was safe to remember now.

The last time I was there, we had held a Beltane party with three bonfires, their flames licking the dark sky of our safe little world.

The witches and shifters leaped through the fire for good luck. The vampires had stayed back, except for young Heather and

Brutus. They held hands and leaped through the flames together.

Afterward, Pamarten, an elderly dark witch who had been forced to flee her home after her neighbors threatened to kill her, gathered up the ashes. She sprinkled them in our gardens to ensure a good bounty.

That fall had been the first decent harvest in Free Jinx.

I pushed the memories away and ignored the pricking in the back of my eyes.

“Alyssa?” Jag said with worry in his voice.

I shook my head clear. “I just need to find a way to track down dozens of people, including strangers who’ve been sucked into portals, even though they’re in other dimensions which are infinite in number and can only be accessed through portals I can barely open. And I have to do it because being barely able to open portals is more than most people can manage.”

Ram picked up one of the potion jars and snapped his fingers to unscrew the lid. “First, liquid cocaine, without the side effects, then thinking.” He took a sip and handed the jar to Jag.

The other man eyed it like it was full of spiders.

“Just one mouthful or you’ll be buzzing like a hummingbird and farting like a diesel truck,” Ram said.

I snorted softly. There was the playful Ram I had known in private—before he had ordered Juniper killed and things fell apart between us. Then, even in private, he was the friendly but formal self he presented to the public.

Jag looked at me and raised the jar. “Is it safe?”

If Ram had willingly drunk, it must be. He put self-preservation above everything else. But I studied the dark brown liquid, watching the magic sparking within like fireflies trapped in mud. I felt a touch of the deep, primordial magic of Evanora, and a jolt of energy just from watching it.

“It’s safe.”

Jag took a sip of the potion without question, fully trusting me. He handed the jar to Moe, who took a sip.

Moe stood straighter, his eyes going wide. “Oh... my brain, it’s quiet.” He looked around as though he had never seen the world before. “I can stare at one spot for longer than a second.” He lifted the jar to his mouth and chugged the potion.

I yanked it from his hands. “You could raise the dead with that stuff.”

Whatever calm a normal dose of wake potion gave Moe vanished. He jumped up and down on the spot. “Whoo! That is good. I feel like I could... Whhooooooooo,” he shouted, throwing his head back.

Ram studied him. “The amount you drank could have woken up a comatose dragon. You should be having a mental breakdown right now.”

“My thoughts are always fast. I’m used to it,” Moe said. “This makes me quiet inside like my brain is calm, but my body is fast somehow. Can I have more?”

I half turned so my body was between him and the potion. “You already look like your mom was a pogo stick who fucked a bouncy castle.”

Moe jumped up and down as he waved his arms. His hand flew out and slapped Ram in the face.

“Ah!”

“Oh! I’m sorry.” Moe said. He stopped jumping to reach for Ram, but the witch stepped back from him. “It was an accident,” Moe said as he skipped on one foot. “When did everyone start bouncing up and down?”

I normally hated people like him, but I couldn’t even find him annoying, not even a little. Instead, I found myself smiling at his antics. I took a sip of the potion, just a mouthful. It tasted like coffee, mushrooms, and something ineffable that was often in potions, like if starlight had a flavor.

It hit my stomach and shot through my veins like being struck by lightning. Every nerve, neuron, and muscle woke up. This must be what a full night’s sleep felt like. I hadn’t had one in years, and the prison always made you get up at 7 a.m. sharp, the bastards.

I offered the jar to Elliot, who took it gingerly and sniffed it but didn’t drink. If he would rather remain sleepy, that was fine.

“I’m going to pick berries!” Moe said and ran for the forest.

“Evanora will turn you into a berry bush,” I shouted.

Moe whirled and ran in a circle around us. “I would be so pretty if I was a berry bush!”

“You’re pretty now,” I said without thinking.

“Aww.” He threw his arms around me from behind and hoisted me off my feet.

I laughed and held his arms where they wrapped around me, not for support but because I wanted to touch him.

Elliot looked up from the potion he was sniffing. “So? The portals and your people?”

The worry that had dulled with Moe’s antics crashed over me like ice water. “Right. Put me down, Moe.”

He did. I looked from Elliot to Jag, then finally, Ram, and I hated that I needed his help most of all.

“To start: do we know who or what is the source of the portals?” Ram said. “Why is it happening now?”

“The Astrosmos and some jerry-rigged spells were the only things keeping Free Jinx stable. Someone must have stolen the relic, and they’re using it to open portals around the prison and Silver Springs. I don’t know why.”

Ram clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes. I knew what was coming next and tensed, my stomach dropping.



Chapter 24

“This is why people shouldn’t have access to powerful relics!” Ram said. “They cause chaos! They hurt others.”

My heart dropped. He was talking like old Ram, the wannabe supervillain who had tried to amass all the world’s magical items for himself. I shouldn’t have been disappointed. I knew he hadn’t changed, but apparently, some stupid-ass part of me had hoped he had.

“Who gets to decide who owns them? You?”

He answered with the last thing I expected him to say. “I don’t know.”

My brows went up higher than I thought they could. Ram? Saying he didn’t know something?

He paced as he ranted. “I’m sure you and your people tried to keep the Astrosmos safe, but somebody always finds a way to steal and misuse relics. Every fucking time!”

“And letting one asshole hoard them all totally prevents magical abuse, right?” I said in my most scathing tone.

Jag crossed his arms. He looked very serious until you glanced down and saw his tiny shorts. “It doesn’t matter who should control relics right now. We’re trying to rescue people, not be the fucking magic police.”

“You’re right,” I said and glared at Ram.

He sighed and stopped pacing.

Moe jumped as though celebrating. “Teamwork time! Start opening portals, and we’ll find everyone.” Even Elliot nodded in agreement.

The ease with which they agreed that my fight was theirs was touching—and worrying. They were following me blindly into danger, potentially into actual hell, depending on which portals we crossed. They never thought twice about it.

“There are infinite bubble dimensions,” I said. “Opening portals blindly won’t help anyone.”

Elliot took a small sip of the wake potion and pulled a face. “Why don’t we go to the library? This is a magical town, right? They should have magical books, and librarians are always helpful.”

Why the hell didn’t I think of that? Probably because I had spent so long lurking in the shadows at the edges of society that doing something so normal as going to the library was nearly alien. I squeezed his shoulder.

“Books are always the answer.”

Elliot perked up and smiled. “What’s your favorite? You know what, don’t tell me. I want to guess.” He studied me and leaned in closer as though to get a better look.

My heart fluttered. “If you get it right, I’ll give you a prize.” I winked, and Elliot’s eyes widened as he stepped away from me. Ah, fuck, I should have kept my mouth shut.

I cleared my throat and turned to Ram. “The library won’t open for hours. But we both know Juniper’s aura. Maybe if we

focus on it, we can open a portal to her location or get close enough that she can do the rest like when we left '70s porno land. If we find her, she'll help us rescue the others. Plus, she probably knows what's going on here." She usually did.

Ram's jaw twitched as though he wanted to protest—and no wonder, with his and Juniper's history. "If I end up back in prison because of you two, I'm ratting her out."

I sighed. "Yeah, yeah." I had already known as much.

Jag whirled on him, fists clenched. "Don't you ever threaten Alyssa."

"I can handle him, Jag, better than you can." I couldn't best Ram in a fight, but Jag, without any magic, stood even less of a chance than I did.

Ram rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, what are you going to do? Tap me with those hands you don't wash after you take a piss?"

Moe jumped around Ram, chanting, "No fighting, no fighting, no fighting!"

Both Jag and Ram ignored him.

Jag took a step toward Ram. "You look like you shave your pubes for hygiene but still end up with skid marks on your balls."

Ram scoffed. "At least my balls are big enough to reach my asshole."

"Because they're saggy like an old man's."

Ram gave Jag a what-the-fuck look. “Why are you looking at elderly balls?”

“I thought they were your mom’s face.”

I tensed. Ram was very sensitive about his mother—she had faced hard times after his father cream-pied her and then fucked off for twenty years.

Ram just stared at Jag and deadpanned, “You thought testicles covered in pubes with no eyes, no nose, no mouth, located between some guy’s legs, was a face?”

Jag fell quiet for a moment. “The point is, don’t threaten any of my people or their friends!”

Aww, he was so sweet and so out of his element, like a puppy barking at a wolf.

“Don’t make threats you can never carry out,” Ram said lightly.

Okay, this had gone from funny to worrying. “Both of you, shut up,” I snapped. “And stand back. I’m going to burn the magic circle into the grass and try to find Juniper. It’ll solve at least one problem if we pull this off.”

They all stepped out of the way—Moe skipped while moving his arms like he was jumping rope.

Crouching, I placed my hands on the grass, delighting in the feel of something fresh and wild after years of concrete. I let my magic flow, snuffing out the flames as soon as they started, so I didn’t burn down the park and forest.

Ram kneeled next to me. “For that symbol there, the one that we couldn’t figure out before, try this.” He showed me his phone. He had drawn a complex image that looked like ancient Mayan writing.

I show him a glare. “If you’re sabotaging this spell, I will help the cops haul you back to prison. No point in protecting Juniper from the law if she’s trapped in another universe or dead.”

Ram frowned. “I’m on your side. I’ve always been... even though I wasn’t always good at it.”

“A shark gnawing off my leg would have been better at it,” I said. But I slid my hand against the grass and burned Ram’s symbol into the circle. “When we open the portal, don’t go through it! If we’ve reached Juniper, she’ll come to us, and if we don’t... well, we don’t want to end up in another random shit pile.”

“Don’t enter magical holes, got it,” Jag said.

He can enter my magical hole, my brain said.

I ignored her and started to chant the portal spell. As I let my magic flow along the circle, I thought of Juniper and her aura: a mix of purple and green as quick and dangerous as wildfire and as precise and cutting as a scalpel.

My magic swam over Ram’s new symbol like water over a stone—not quite taking it into the spell but not getting stuck either. Like before, my magic caught on the other broken

sections of the circle. Ram weaved his magic through my mine like tangling limbs together, close and almost comforting.

With a burst of power and a tug, he forced my spell to continue past the missing symbols.

This time, I kept my eyes open. Tendrils of sickly green gas rose from the circle and swirled together to form a portal. But unlike the other ones, it wasn't rainbow-hued. It was green and brown like rotted flesh.

Ah, of course. Our spell was broken and sick, so the portals were too.

It stretched wider like a snake's mouth. Before I could react, it rushed forward and swallowed me whole.

Well, shit, I thought.

I heard the men shouting, and panic rushed through my blood. I twisted around to find them but saw only swirling green like murky swamp water. I tried to shout, but there was no air.

Ahead, the murk peeled apart like sliced skin to reveal dying brown grass. Houses built in the shapes of small castles, pirate ships, and treehouses clustered together like wild horses against the cold. They were so familiar and so long lost that it made my heart ache.

Juniper ran into view, looming large between me and the Free Jinx village. Her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear her. She blurred and vanished as though a dirty window had dropped down between us.

Fucking hell! Was Juniper sending me away? Why would she do that? Or was something else at work here?

The universe spun around me, up becoming down and down becoming up. I landed with a thud on my back, sending a jolt through my spine.

Four more thuds followed, the ground thumping gently under my back and hands.

“Wheee,” Moe said. “We made it!”

I sat up and gaped at the world around me. It looked like Van Gogh had vomited on an image from NASA.

A galaxy hung heavy in the sky above, each little star swirling its light in a halo around it like an Impressionist painting. I was sitting on a wooden pier. The grain in the wood was a rough brush stroke. The water shimmered with the twisting starlight reflected in it like a school of endless fish.

It was gorgeous and overwhelming all at once. I didn't know where to look. So, I looked at my men instead.

“Holy shit,” Jag said as he climbed to his feet. The Impressionist look of everything didn't touch us. He was still Jag in tiny shorts and a cloud-patterned jacket with a half grin on his face.

Elliot jumped up and offered me his hand. I didn't need the help but I took it, just to feel his touch. A jolt went through me like I'd stuck my finger into a socket, and Elliot blushed as though he felt it too.

Moe gazed at everything with his mouth hanging open and his body still, as though the sight was enough to slow him down. Ram just rested his elbows on his knees and sighed.

“Why the fuck did Juniper send us here when we were trying to save her ass?”

I sighed too and shrugged, letting my arms fall limp at my sides. “I don’t fucking know. Maybe it was someone else who —”

“Whoa, dudes! Please tell me you’re from the real world.” A man with shaggy purple hair ran across the dock toward us and stumbled to a stop nearby. “Please tell me you know how to get out of here. I’m losing my mind. I’m not made for this Mario Paint shit, I’m more of a Skyrim guy.”

Moe leaped up. “Hail, fellow Dragonborn!”

“I liked Mario Paint,” Elliot muttered. “It was relaxing.”

Purple Hair smiled and straightened his black shirt that read, *The reapers are coming, call your local Shepard*. “Well met, fellow adventurer! You may call me Dungeon Master Jase, a true Dragonborn.”

Juniper had redirected our portal; only she would be dumb enough to try to save this random dude over herself. I sighed and glanced at Ram.

“She sent us here so she could be a self-sacrificing hero.”

I could strangle her for it because it wasn’t just Juniper on the other side of that portal. She was in Free Jinx. She must be

holding the dimension together somehow, which meant the Eclipses were safe for now.

But it wouldn't last in a collapsing universe. So why the fuck hadn't she helped us get her and my people out? Why the shit did she worry about saving that random gamer instead?

"Really? Self-sacrificing hero is the angle your mage went with?" Jase said. "Doesn't she know that never works? Better hope she's not some side character and has some hardcore plot armor. Speaking of, before you portal hop again, any chance you could help me get out of here? Any longer and I may be at actual risk of losing my mind. I would be beyond ever so grateful, pretty please with sugar, sprinkles, and cherries on top?"

Moe was going to become best friends with this guy.

As though to prove me right, Moe threw his arm around Jase's shoulder. "Consider yourself part of the party."

Jase's eyes lit up. "Thank you so much, my brother." He tossed an arm around Moe's shoulder. "Whenever we get out of here, and you find yourself in a little town called Silver Springs, hit me up at the arcade. We have an amazing console room that I think you'll love. My friend also hosts a bimonthly edutainment class that you would like. He invited a real pirate to talk about sea shanties!"

Well, at least we'll get one person free of the bubble dimensions—assuming I could open a portal to Silver Springs and not another random world.

I glanced around for something I could use to draw a magic circle. The water wouldn't help. The dock hit the horizon a few meters away. Jag was already there with his hand against the starry sky like it was a painted wall.

Okay, I guess I was wood burning then, carefully, so as not to drop us into the lake.

Kneeling, I burned the magical circle into the dock, reveling in the smell of singed wood. As I finished, the dock creaked like an old ship on a rough ocean.

I thought it was the dock, but the sound grew louder and louder until the whole universe seemed to be groaning.

I glanced up to see the galaxy shudder as though cold. "Oh, shit."

The halos of stars peeled away and zoomed downward, smashing into the lake and throwing water into the air. The collision shook the dock so hard, I fell onto my ass.

"The universe is collapsing again!" Jag shouted.



Chapter 25

“‘S on of a bitch!” Jase cried. I looked up to see large purple wings had exploded from his back.

As the stars crashed down around us, Ram waved his arms, magic dancing on his fingertips. The purple sheen of a shield enveloped us. A star smashed into it and burst in a flash of light so bright, it seared my eyes.

“Why do the universes fall apart when we arrive?” Elliot shouted.

I scrambled to the edge of the magic circle. “Probably because our spells are fucked up. Every broken spell has a price... ours seems to be destroying entire bubble universes.”

“I don’t want to destroy universes!” Moe wailed. “What if people die? Or animals?”

Guilt stabbed at my chest, but I ignored it for now. I had to get us out of here. Glancing up, I met Ram’s eyes. I couldn’t cast the spell on my own, but one of us had to hold a shield to protect us from the storm of falling stars.

He nodded once. “I can do it.”

I bit my nail and hoped he was right. Placing my hands on the circle, I repeated the spell, imaging Silver Springs this time. When Ram tangled his magic with mine, it was strained, like muscles pulled on a rack. He was reaching the limit even of his powers.

The world exploded around us, lights flaring bright enough to blind me. I shouted the spell, thought of the forest outside

Silver Springs, the feel of the magic there wild, unclaimed, and—

A portal swirled open, sickly yellow this time. Long purple tentacles shot out of it toward us. I tensed, but I couldn't use my magic to fight them while I held the portal open.

“Watch out!” Jag roared and grabbed my shoulders as though to pull me aside.

“Stop! I need to—” Hold the portal, I was going to say. Before I could get the words out, a tentacle wrapped around us, pinning Jag to my back so tightly, it squeezed the air from my lungs. Tentacles grabbed Elliot, Moe, Ram, and Jase, then yanked us through the portal.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I touched each of the men with my magic, holding onto their auras, and thought of Silver Springs. Maybe I could guide the interdimensional tentacle monster to Earth and not another bubble dimension. My lungs burned with the need to breathe, but the crush of the monster wouldn't let my chest rise.

The tentacle squeezed harder, then let go or maybe vanished. And yet again, I dropped to the ground, pain shooting along my back. I was too fucking old for this shit.

Groaning, I sat up. Jag, Elliot, and Ram climbed to their feet while Moe stood on a circle of burnt grass with Jase, who was wingless again. The sky was streaked with the gold of dawn, and birds tweeted in the trees nearby.

I sighed in relief. We were back where we started.

“Holy shit. I know these woods,” Jase said. “Look, I’ll make a good NPC and dash off. Consider my part of your quest complete.” He leaned in to give Moe a bro hug. “Look me up when you finish here and we can hang.”

As Jase ran off, Moe waved wildly. “I’ll call you later to play Elder Scrolls!” He spun back to the rest of us, and his expression dropped faster than the stars in the last world. “Did... did we save everyone? What if we missed someone? What if endangered fish lived in the water? Or whales!”

I didn’t know if anything else had been alive in the Van Gogh world. Bubble dimensions could be any size from microscopic to lightyears across. While the dock had hit the horizon, I had no idea how far the water had stretched.

It wouldn’t be the first time I had gotten others killed. I was used to carrying that remorse, but Jag, Elliot, and Moe shouldn’t have to. I should have done the right thing and ditched them before they got hurt.

It was too late for that, but I could protect them in one way: I lied. “We couldn’t have missed anyone. Bubble dimensions are as small as a raccoon’s asshole at full expansion.” I hoped the dumb line would distract them and cheer them up.

Ram shot me a what-the-fuck look. Moe glanced around as though avoiding eye contact, and Jag snickered.

Elliot raised a brow. “I mean, we couldn’t fit in a dimension the size of a raccoon’s butt. I read that two raccoons could fit in a human’s ass, though I’m not sure why they would want to.”

I laughed while Ram dropped his face into his hands. Apparently, any silliness or playfulness he was rediscovering did not extend to conversations of raccoons and anuses.

“Y’all need better hobbies,” Jag said. “May I suggest chainsaw juggling?”

I stood and stretched my back. “What’s with you and chainsaws?”

“I’ve thought a lot about what to do if a raptor or a horde of zombies burst into a room. After many years of tactical planning, I’ve concluded that chainsaws are the answer. Or flamethrowers, but they don’t let you buy those at Home Depot.”

Moe rubbed his arms. “If no one else was there, who made the dock or the jukebox or the carpet or all the other stuff in ’70s porno land?”

Ram dropped his hand from his face. “They were created by the wild magic between the worlds. It shapes itself according to the first consciousness it meets.”

That was true at least, but I was going to add another lie. “No one lives in bubble dimensions unless they fall through a portal.”

Moe sighed in relief. “We didn’t hurt anyone!”

Jag patted Moe’s shoulder. “So whose consciousness was responsible for the orange orgy room? Moe? I know you like orange.”

“It is a tasty color,” he admitted. “And I do like fluffy carpets.”

“Who was thinking of ’70s pornos?” Jag said. “Elliot?”

The other man gaped. “What? No!”

As they bantered, Ram stepped closer to me. Just a day ago, I would have shoved him away. Now, I didn’t mind his presence.

He dropped his voice low. “You know that bubble dimensions can be any size and often have life forms of their own.”

“We’re used to hurting others. Those three don’t need the burden of it,” I whispered.

“Adding lies to a relationship isn’t a good idea,” Ram said.

I scoffed. “Who are you to criticize? All we did was lie to each other for the last five years of our relationship.”

“That’s why I know it’s a bad idea,” he said, regret creeping into his voice like a mouse through a wall.

A heaviness settled in my chest like an overweight raccoon.

“The world Juniper was in...” Ram trailed off as though to give me a chance to change the subject.

I didn’t. “It was Free Jinx, and it’s clearly dying.”

His fingertips brushed the back of my hand, so lightly it was almost like wind. “That means your people are alive and as safe as they can be. She will protect them.”

But it also meant Juniper and the Eclipses could die at any moment. “I know she’ll do her best.” My voice wavered.

He touched the back of my hand again, so softly it almost wasn’t there. He stood close enough that his breath grazed my

hair. It was almost enough to make me break down and cry.

Jag seemed to notice because he stopped teasing Moe and Elliot to shoulder his way between Ram and me. He placed a comforting hand on my back. “Hey.” When I looked up at him, he smiled. “You’re doing great.”

The weird thing was, I believed him. I smiled back at him, and he kissed the top of my head.

Elliot crouched by the basket Evanora had given us. The portal had missed it when it ate us. “Are we going to the library?” He fished a jar of wake potion out of the container. “I’m very good with the Dewey Decimal System.”

Jag, Elliot, and Moe were so sweet and helpful. I knew then that I couldn’t risk opening another portal with them nearby. It was harming them even when we physically survived—and the only thing keeping them from emotionally spiraling was my lies.

I’d keep them with me while we researched the spells in the library and would ditch them before trying portal magic again. I’d find them after, if I lived.

“Library?” Elliot said.

I nodded. “If I can find a way to fix my spell, maybe the universes will stop collapsing, plus portals are like doors. They aren’t supposed to have tentacles and skeleton hands. It’s only a matter of time before one of them fucking kills us.”

Hey, I didn’t only lie to them. Sometimes I was painfully honest and didn’t talk about the assholes of forest animals.

Jag tensed against my side, and Elliot gulped loud enough to hear.

“I thought you created the hands and squid arms,” Moe said. He had been standing still for a while. He had burned off his large dose of wake potion quickly.

“Wild magic again,” I said. “It does crazy shit when there’s too much of it and no one to harness it. It goes feral.”

“Oh, like my brain when I’m bored,” Moe said.

“Exactly. Our portal spell probably lures it toward us like a beaver to wood.”

Jag winked. “Or like my wood to your beaver.”

I giggled like an idiot.

Moe smiled at me. “Or like my tongue to your—”

Ram scowled. “Are we going to the library or not? Lives hang in the balance.”

I grinned because he was jealous and fucking deserved it. But he was right that we had to get a move on.

So Elliot grabbed the basket, and I cast an invisibility spell before flying us across town to the main library. It was a large stone building near the center of town. When the coast was clear, I placed us down on the front steps and removed the invisibility spell. Taking books off the shelves would give us away, anyway.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, the cops have probably put out wanted notices about us by now. Let’s hope nobody recognizes

us.”



Chapter 26

I led the way into the library's foyer. A large wooden desk stood on the left with a curly-haired brunette standing behind it. As she scanned a book, a beep echoed through the otherwise silent library.

Elliot nearly skipped up to her at the front desk. "Good day, keeper of the books! We require your knowledge."

I eyed him and leaned close to Jag. "Is he flirting with her?"

"Nah, he just gets very excited in libraries," Jag whispered back.

I smiled as my heart went all soft. Aww, I wanted to hug him.

"Like me in a department store," Moe added. "There's just so many things to look at!"

Elliot rested a hand on the librarian's desk. "We need access to magical books. Well, all books are magical. I mean the ones about magic. Well, not fantasy books. I mean real magic books. Well, fantasy books are real too. I mean the ones that are real and about real magic."

The librarian smiled. "Sure. It's right this way." She gestured for us to follow her across the library and down a flight of steps into the basement.

As we entered the supernatural section, she flicked a switch. Fluorescent lights sputtered to life along the ceiling. Some of the bulbs had stopped giving a fuck and were half-assing their job. Others had quit altogether.

Floor-to-ceiling shelves stretched in every direction as far as I could see. Tables of worn wood dotted the space and dust motes floated in the streaks of light. The place had obviously been untouched for a while.

“If you need help with anything, let me know,” the librarian said, then headed back upstairs.

Ram ran his fingertips along the spines of the nearest books. “I had no idea there was a hoard of magical books in this little town.”

“Thinking of robbing them?” I asked.

He gave me a sidelong grin. “Are you?”

I crossed my arms. “Not ever again.”

Elliot squeezed past us to gape at the shelves. “Why would you steal from a library? They let you use the books for free! Wow, look at all these magical tomes.” He grabbed one off the shelf and hugged it to his chest. “They never let me into the supernatural section back home.”

I tilted my head, realizing I knew nothing about his past. “You’re from a supe family?”

He frowned. I should have known better than to ask about anyone’s family. I didn’t know anyone who had a happy one. But I wanted to know everything about him, to trace the paths of his neurons and the lines of his body and go spelunking in his soul and maybe his butt.

What? Stop it, brain. This is serious.

Elliot stroked the book before putting it back on the shelf. “I didn’t inherit my dad’s magic like the rest of my siblings. Even Mom got a bit of it. After carrying four witch babies, some of their magic made its way into her blood. But I’m just me.”

I took a step toward him, wanting to hold him but not sure he’d want me to. “Just you is enough.”

“It never was. I wasn’t good enough to read the magical books or go to the coven events or the fae parties. They say the fae play music that no human could imagine, and I guess it’s true.”

Jag squeezed his shoulder. “You have us now, Ellie, and we think you’re enough.”

“We’ll be here as long as you want us,” I whispered.

“Maybe even longer!” Moe added.

Elliot shook his head as though to clear it. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t get all angsty, especially not when we have people to save. What do you need us to do?” He looked at me.

I wanted to offer comfort, but I let it go for his sake. “Magical books are rarely in English.”

Only fucking Ram would know how to read most of them. For him and Juniper, any language connected to magic came to them naturally without having to study. A perk of their father being a demon who was older than human civilization.

It was said that demons mating with humans was the source of all magic in mortals. Most people were so far removed from their demon forbearers that they were lost to history—but that

wasn't the case for Ram and Juniper. Undiluted ancient magic flowed in their blood.

"Does anyone know other languages?" I asked.

"A little bit of Punjabi from my grandmother," Jag said.

"I know Spanish," Elliot said, perking up.

"Let's see." Moe stared at the ceiling as though thinking. "I studied French, Scottish Gaelic, Greek, German, Hawaiian, and Klingon."

I raised my brows, impressed. "Which ones are you fluent in?"

"Not a single one," Moe said cheerfully. "I switched languages on the learning app when I got bored."

Too bad. "You'll read the English books then."

He punched the air. "I won't let you down."

I hugged him with one arm. "I know you won't."

Ram rolled his eyes, clearly not convinced. He strolled past us and down the row of shelves. "I'll just see what books call to me."

I was going to do the same. "Elliot, you're the librarian here —"

"Volunteer prison librarian, who was fired," he corrected.

"That counts. You figure out the organizational system and find volumes for you, Jag, and Moe to look at."

We spent the entire day searching the library, living off wake and food potions from Evanora. When the librarian came

downstairs to tell us the library was closing, we hid with an invisibility spell until she decided we must have already left.

While taking breaks from struggling to remember bits of Ancient Egyptian, I checked social media on my phone. It had the Screech app linked to a burner account with the name Wile E. Witch, which Ram, or one of his cronies, had clearly made up. The local news was full of posts about a dozen missing people and the appearance of portals that spit crazy shit or sucked people in.

And among it, notices to watch out for six escaped criminals.

Among the missing were Juniper and her three boyfriends. On The Magical Rooster's page, someone named Sapphire, who I think was the vampire who had cussed me out at a diner years ago, had posted that the shop would reopen soon. After all, she wrote, Juniper wouldn't let her customers stop coming.

I squeezed the phone so tightly it hurt and blinked back the prickle at the back of my eyes. Then I put the phone down and got back to work.

At three in the morning, I found myself hunched over a parchment tome on a wooden table. Elliot sat at my side, reading a pamphlet that was browned with age.

Moe slept with his face on the desk, snoring softly. For some reason, normal doses of the wake potion didn't do much to give him energy. It only worked if he drank an amount that would have sent anyone else into a mental breakdown but only sent him bouncing off the walls.

Jag had gone to the bathroom, while Ram had wandered off somewhere, chasing the books that called to him.

I couldn't fucking believe I was counting on him—hell, trusting him—to rescue Juniper. He could so easily decide not to mention anything he found. No one would be the wiser unless the answer happened to be in a book in English, Spanish, Punjabi, or Babylonian. Internet translations were notoriously inaccurate for anything magic-based because of all the made-up terms and weird poetry old-timey witches loved.

I groaned and rubbed my hand down my face before biting my thumbnail. Ram was going to screw me over, wasn't he? I would never save Juniper, the Eclipses, and the other missing Silver Springies.

Paper rustled as Elliot placed his pamphlet on the table. “I think this is about the dangers of using portals for sex. Like standing really close to one and sticking your penis through and into someone on the other side.”

I laughed. “An interdimensional glory hole. The writer thinks cocks are longer than they are.”

“It does seem terribly unsafe. There's no mention of how to open the portal, though.” He carefully refolded the old paper. “I think it might be satirical, but I lack the context to know who they're making fun of.”

“You'd be surprised by the weird sex shit witches do,” I said and suddenly felt very sad because Juniper was an expert in that field. And now she was missing, maybe dead, if Free Jinx had imploded since I last caught a glimpse of her.

“I... ummm... oh,” Elliot sputtered.

I ignored the sting in my chest, like a little abyss slowly opening in my heart each time Elliot pulled away.

“I wasn’t hitting on you,” I said gently. “It’s just true.”

Elliot sighed, probably in relief. “I was thinking about your favorite book.”

My stomach felt like I had just entered zero-g. I leaned back in my chair so I could watch him from the corner of my eye. I grinned. “Is that so?”

“I think it’s a fantasy epic. Something with magic but magic that’s different from yours, otherwise it’s not escapism.”

“What makes you think I want escapism? Maybe I read to learn about the human condition.” I didn’t but I wanted to tease him.

“It can be both,” Elliot said. “Your favorite is probably something kind of dark and complex with a happy ending and...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You know... hotness.”

My skin tingled as a thrill went down my spine. “Let me guess your favorite. It’s probably something classic, very long, and dense.”

Elliot raised his brows. “Why do you think that?”

“You’re very smart and nerdy, someone who thinks a lot and enjoys the book club questions they put in the back.”

Elliot laughed, a sudden surprised sound that was bright and easy. I wanted to record it and listen to it over and over.

“I do like the book club questions.”

I chuckled. “Is your favorite book... *The Odyssey*?”

He shook his head.

I eyed him as though I could read the answer on his face. His mouth tugged into a smile. “*The Three Musketeers*?” I said. “Classic, long, and adventurous too. Sounds like your type of thing.” What was I saying? I barely knew him.

Elliot’s grin widened. “You give me too much credit.” He elbowed me gently, and I giggled. Fuck, I sounded like a little princess. “I mostly read fantasy and comics. I’ve been teaching myself to understand and appreciate Shakespeare, but maybe I’ll try Dumas next.”

He was just listing types of books, but somehow it made my chest feel like it was full of sparkling water, all fizzy and bubbly.

“What is your favorite book?” I said.

Elliot leaned toward me so our shoulders touched, and I wiggled closer to him. “It’s a four-way tie,” he said, “between the three Lord of the Rings books and *The Silmarillion*.”

I burst into laughter. Moe groaned in his sleep, and I covered my mouth before I woke him.

Elliot stared down at his hands and frowned. “Oh... too nerdy?”

I shook my head. “Those are my favorite books.”

His head shot up, eyes wide. “You’re just saying that.”

“Pfft, I never just say anything.” Okay, that wasn’t true. I lied, and I said a lot of dumb shit even though I wanted to be someone who only spoke when she had cutting remarks.

Elliot gazed at me with awe, like I was that dimension that looked like Starry Night had been tossed in a blender with a Hubble photograph.

“You know... I liked you before the mate spell kicked in. Like-liked, I mean. Maybe... maybe this is real.”

As I offered him my hand, my heart pounded in my ears like the footsteps of an approaching dinosaur. You’d think that was just from the movies, but I had encountered dinos, and they did make the ground thump.

Elliot stared at my palm, and then half turned away from me. With my heart sputtering like a dying engine, I tucked my hand under my thigh.

“I’m not normal,” he said. “In the penile sense.”

“I blew Jag’s dickstrumment,” I said.

Elliot startled hard enough to make his chair groan.

“And I let Moe eat me out after I watched him play his ass drums,” I added. “You can ask them.”

Elliot stared at me with his eyes wide enough to show all the whites.

“I thought everyone knew,” I said. “We weren’t exactly quiet, and it’s why I lost control of the disguise that was keeping the store’s security at bay.”

“You don’t mind our afflictions?”

I scoffed. “Afflictions? You make beautiful music; there’s nothing wrong with any of you. Well, there might be, everyone is fucked up, but your cocks and his ass are fine.” I nodded to Moe drooling on the tabletop.

Elliot still looked skeptical.

“Look, my best frenemy travels on a giant flying dildo. I’ve been hit by cum rain more than once in my life. I spent a month on a literal ghost ship with ghost pirates, and I’ve met talking, walking, floating penises, including one that wore glasses and tried to write a sitcom on a laptop. The supe world is fucking weird. That’s a good thing. I tried to be normal once —” I had used a relic to try to turn my dark magic into light magic, thinking it would solve all my problems. “And all I did was make the world even fucking weirder.”

I had miscast the spell, making my, Juniper’s, and Ram’s magical abilities go fucking haywire. “I hurt my friend in the process,” I admitted, my voice going quieter. “You can’t fight the strangeness, and why should we? People read books and watch movies because the human world is fucking boring.”

Elliot’s shoulders relaxed, just a little. “You’re saying weird is good.”

“I’m saying blow your cock and make music with it. You’re good at it.”

Elliot stared down at the table, then he took a deep, slow breath and offered me his hand.

My heart leaped like fucking Frogger. I placed my palm against his and interlaced our fingers. His touch sent a jolt up my arm, and the butterflies in my stomach danced like Lúthien among the hemlocks.



Chapter 27

With my fingers interlaced with Elliot's, I pulled him into the stacks so we could talk without waking Moe. I took his other hand and drew him in closer. His nose brushed against mine, making heat pool deep in my belly.

“Does...” I swallowed a lump in my throat. Fuck, I shouldn't be nervous about any man. “Does this mean you accept the mate bond?”

In response, Elliot let go of my hand and cupped my cheek. As his lips touched mine, warmth spread through my limbs. His kiss was tender, cautious, like sticking your foot in a pool to test the temperature before diving in.

I wanted to grab him and stick my tongue down his throat and his cock down mine—I wondered if I could make music with it—but I held back. I let him test my waters.

He should test the moisture by faceplanting in our pussy.

Shut up, brain! He's not sure about us yet.

Pussy will make him sure.

Stop it!

Elliot pulled on my bottom lip gently, making it ache for more. As our mouths parted, he sighed.

“What do you think?” I said, squeezing his hand.

He looked at me from under his dark lashes. “I think... maybe I do get a magical fairy tale after all.”

A smile split my face (*like he should split our pussy, my brain added*).

“It seems too good to be true, and those things usually are,” Elliot added, leaning against the bookshelf next to me. He placed his free hand on my hip, and I rubbed his biceps, delighting in the feel of solid muscle under his suit jacket.

“You’d think so,” I said. “But mates are common among supes, and the spell is more common in Silver Springs than blisters from cheap shoes.”

Elliot’s finger tapped on my hip. He must have a nervous tick too, like my nail biting. “Magic was never common for me, even though I lived my whole life around supes. It just bypassed me, mostly.”

I leaned my head to the side to rest it against his shoulder. “I won’t ever bypass you... if you’ll have me, that is.” Since when was I such a fucking romantic? I should have been grossed out, but damn, I was enjoying it.

Elliot stopped tapping his finger. “Was I hit on the head? Am I dreaming? Did I go insane in solitary?”

I pinched his arm.

“Ow!”

“Not a dream,” I pointed out.

Elliot chuckled.

“Solitary hallucinations usually aren’t pleasant,” I added. I had experienced a few but had been sane enough to recognize them for what they were. I also knew others who had experienced all-consuming ones.

“True,” Elliot said. “My brain wouldn’t make up something this nice.”

I squeezed his arm. After years of insomnia, depression, and alcoholism, I knew what he meant. One good thing about prison was that it had ended the alcoholism at least.

“Oh, so your brain is like a senator too. You never know when it has a point or when it’s bullshitting with unclear motivations?”

Elliot squeezed my hip. “More likely that it reflects a reality that was not always kind.”

“Who hurt you? I’ll burn them.”

Elliot startled against me and took half a step back. Shit, I should have realized this kind man wouldn’t like my darker side. Okay, violent side. But the warm fuzzies from the spell had drawn me into a false sense of security. A false belief that my usual desire to destroy shit would be welcomed.

Of course, they weren’t.

“Thank you,” Elliot said.

I raised a skeptical brow.

“I mean it. Nobody ever fought for me before Jag and you. I’m not good at fighting for myself.”

“Wait... you’re okay that I offered to burn people for you? You know I’m serious, right? It’s not a figure of speech; I can and would do that.”

He smiled a little. “I know you mean it, and I appreciate it, but I’d rather not hurt my family.”

“Ah, of course. The pile of shit you sprang from.”

He rose a brow.

I shrugged. “Everyone springs from crap. Apparently good, loving parents exist, but I’ve yet to meet someone who had any. Maybe I just know a lot of fucked-up people,” I added, staring at the books across from us.

“My parents weren’t terrible,” Elliot said. “But I was always a disappointment.” He cleared his throat. “I was born with my... umm... special clarinet.”

I turned to him in surprise. I had heard of supes being born with rare attributes. His dad was a witch, and the unlikely abilities usually hit witches. But I had never heard of someone being born with an object merged with a body part.

“They called it a birth defect. And my parents and the doctors... well, they tried to change mine. Reshape it.”

Anger hit me like a crossbow bolt to the chest. I had suffered one to the leg years ago when robbing a French coven who hid out in some old castle, so I knew how much they hurt.

“Who was the doctor? I’ll burn them.”

“Please, stop offering to burn people. Though the adults wanted to get rid of my clarinet, all anyone could do was hide it. It was... stubborn.”

“I’m glad they couldn’t destroy it,” I said.

Elliot ducked his head and looked away.

I hoped I could convince him that there was no shame in playing his own cock, but with all healing, it would take time. Acceptance. Love.

“I’m guessing they didn’t tell you about your gift?”

“Gift?” He scoffed. “You’re right, they didn’t tell me. It’s probably why they closeted me far away from the supe world, so I wouldn’t realize I possessed a measure of magic, as strange as it was. It was definitely why they banned me from music lessons. I wanted to play so badly.” He squeezed my hand tighter. “More than anything in the world.”

I stroked the back of his finger with my finger. “It was already part of you.”

Elliot’s mouth twisted. “Unfortunately.”

“I liked your performance.”

His lips quirked almost into a smile but not quite. “Everyone says my music sounds good until they see where it comes from. Only you, Jag, and Moe still think it’s beautiful.”

I gripped his hand where it rested on my hip. “Because it is. The three of you together sound like moonlight on water, like joy and heartbreak. How did you learn to play?”

Elliot took a deep breath. “I discovered my shifting ability when I was ten or eleven. I realized I could finally play music! The... potential sexual aspect of blowing into my dickhead never occurred to me until my brothers caught me practicing and ridiculed me. It doesn’t feel like a blow job, though. It

feels like creation and enchantment and flying all at once! I don't know how to describe it.”

I turned so I was fully facing him, our noses brushing. “Like how casting a spell feels.”

Elliot raised his brows. “Is it like magic? My family were all witches, but they didn't talk about it around me.”

“They sound snootier than me when I'm washed, done up, and in designer clothes. Fuck, I miss all that. But I'll tell you anything you want to know about witches. Magic feels like you are the world and the world is you and you can reshape it on a whim. Like electricity on your skin, but it cannot hurt you. Like flying through dark skies and breathing storm winds.”

His dark eyes glistened, and I worried I had said something wrong. “That's just like playing music.” He sniffed. “I had magic all along like my dad and siblings. I just didn't know.”

I let go of his hand to wrap my arms around him and hold him close. He buried his face against my neck and pressed his hands to my back.

“They should have been proud of your skill,” I said.

Okay, sure, his skill was weird. But there was no reason to reject or hobble your child just because it was hard to understand them.

Elliot sniffed. “They wanted to be proud, I think. My parents bought me a normal clarinet and signed me up for lessons so I could develop my skills in the usual way. A regular instrument

always felt clumsy, like attaching a prosthetic leg to an Olympic sprinter who still had two legs of their own. Why did I need a tool to do what I could already do myself?”

I stroked his curls. “You stood up to them?”

He shook his head. “That’s the thing, I didn’t for long. I got tired of the constant punishment and ridicule. Maybe it would have been different if I had support from friends or teachers, but everyone who discovered my ability only sneered and laughed. No one said it was good. So, I stopped fighting. I took the normal clarinet and the normal lessons. I went to university for music to be a real musician in an orchestra so my parents wouldn’t be ashamed anymore.”

I clenched a fist against his back. Anger bubbled in my chest for all that was stolen from him and for who he could have become had his parents protected him.

It was a rage as familiar as my own skin. It was the same I held for my parents and teachers, for Juniper, and for the families of many of my friends in Free Jinx.

“You deserved better, and if you want me in your life, I will make sure you have it.”

Elliot tensed against me. “How? Very few will ever accept my music. I know that.”

I grasped the back of his neck gently. “I started a whole town for people the world rejected... and they’re all trapped and maybe dead, but still. If I could give them a place to belong, I can do that for you. No hiding.”

I felt him smile against my neck. “You sound like Jag.”

“Because he’s right. I’ll fight for you and protect you until you get your fight back. Even after you do, I’ll still fight.”

Elliot didn’t say anything for a long time, but he didn’t pull away from my hug either.

Grab his butt, my brain said.

Fuck off, we’re having an emotional moment.

Keeping my hands on his neck and upper back, I said, “What changed to make you play your dickstrumment again?”

Elliot rested his chin on my shoulder and sighed. “I met Jag and Moe. Jag was actively searching for people with a similar ability to him. He figured others must have made a deal with his crossroads djinn too, and he wanted to start a band.” He snorted. “Somehow, getting a dicktar reawakened his desire to be a musician. He found Moe through posting a personal ad for musicians who played body parts.”

I laughed. “Moe would answer an ad that sounds like a creepy scam.”

“Yeeaahhh, he’s definitely answered worse ones.”

I stoked the back of his neck. “How’d they find you?”

Elliot shifted his hands from my back to my hips. “Well, my brother Jamie is a terrible gossip and told everyone he knew about my claridick. Somehow, the rumor made its way to someone in Moe’s band and to Moe. He and Jag tracked me down. I lied about my cock until they dropped their pants and

showed me what they could do. Right there in my apartment lobby. Thankfully, no one else was around.”

I burst into laughter. “Did you strip down too?”

“Not until later. I couldn’t believe there were others like me. I could play the way I preferred with others in a band! Performing with a traditional instrument never led to anything; I wasn’t skilled enough to be a professional that way. The three of us rehearsed and wrote songs... and then we got arrested at our first public performance.”

And his hope was stolen, along with his freedom. I kissed the side of his face. “Your woodwind is better than most people’s... well, woodwind.”

He shifted as though uncomfortable and then stepped out of my hug. “You only heard a few seconds of my playing.”

“I’d like to hear more.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think—”

Ram rushed around the corner of the shelves with his usually perfect hair sticking up at wild angles. He carried a large tome in his hands. A rusty lock held it shut. “I think I’ve got the answer to the portal spell! You”—He pointed at Elliot—“ need to drop your pants to open the book.”



Chapter 28

I grabbed Moe's shoulders and shook him. He groaned and sat up, yawning wide enough to swallow Jag's cock. His hair lay flat on one side from where it had rested on the table. He was so cute and disheveled that I just wanted to hug him and ruffle his hair.

You can, my brain reminded me.

Oh yeah, love and all that.

I wrapped my arms around Moe's shoulders, and my heart immediately felt cozy and warm.

Moe squeezed my arms. "Wow, that was a good nap. I told you a normal amount of wake potion would make me sleepy."

Ram leaned on the table with the locked book before him. "How? Why? I don't get it! Do you have some kind of nervous system condition?"

"No... oh, wait, I mean, yes. The school kept saying I might have ADHD—I think, like, ten teachers said it. But my parents didn't believe it was a real thing. They thought essential oils and hiking would fix my focus. The hiking helped. It's hard to be brain loud when there are trees. They must put out some kind of vibration that says, shhhhh. The oils only made me itchy. I probably should have been checked for allergies."

The wild thing was that not a single word of that was surprising. It was peak Moe—and strange that I knew that after only a couple of days.

Jag crossed his arms over his sky-blue jacket. "Fucking negligent bastards."

Moe shot him a look as though he didn't like anyone calling out his parents.

“Stimulants are used to treat ADHD,” Elliot said in his soft voice. “It has the opposite effect on their brains.”

“Unless I drink a crazy amount of potion,” Moe pointed out. “Enough to... what did you say? To wake a comatose dragon? Then I'm even faster.”

Ram sighed, almost as though he was disappointed.

“Did you hope for a more exciting answer?” I asked.

His mouth quirked as though he was trying not to smile. “I do enjoy a magical mystery. Speaking of which...” He tapped the book. “The title is *Portals and the Multiverse*, written in Ebuni, a magical language created by the Medieval witch, Wren Knotley.”

“And of course, you can read it.”

He shrugged. “I can read anything magical. The book is locked, though, and none of my spells will open it. According to the runes—these are in Norse for some reason—it will open with a live song that is played with magic and”—he made air quotes — “‘sings of battle’.”

Moe gasped and jumped to his feet, forcing me to let go of him. “Our Viking battle hymn!”

I grinned and glanced between the three members of JEM. “I need to hear this more than I need—” *to hear y'all moan my name.*

“Shut up, brain!”

The four of them turned to me, and heat flushed my neck. Jag smirked while Ram raised a brow and Elliot looked worried.

Moe squeezed my shoulder. “I say that a lot too.”

“Um...” I looked away. “Anyway, get to it. Drop your pants.”

“Alyssa,” Ram said in mock indignation and placed a hand on his chest as though clutching pearls. “Buy me flowers first.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. This was Ram’s better side: the playful part he had kept hidden except from me before our relationship died like every succulent I ever owned. Easy to care for, my fine ass.

Despite our history, I still loved to see him act like this.

Moe clapped his hands. “Viking music time!” He darted to the end of the table, next to Jag. The other man smiled, a sort of soft look coming into his eyes. All Jag wanted was to play music.

“Ellie, come on!” Moe said.

Elliot lingered near the bookshelves, tapping a finger on his thigh.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. We needed to open that book before any more bubble dimensions died and took their trapped people with them.

“No one here will hurt you,” I promised him.

He gulped. “I know.” He pulled his shoulders back and met my gaze. “I’m going to fight. For you.”

My insides felt as light and bouncy as Moe when he drank too much wake potion.

“And for those people stuck in the mini worlds,” Elliot added.

Jag grinned as though proud.

“Go, Ellie, it’s your birthday, get busy!” Moe sang. “Okay, it’s not actually your birthday...”

Ram made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “It is the birthday of your emergence into courageous herodom.”

I rolled my eyes. This was the same shit he pulled back in our gang. “Cut it out with your over-the-top encouragement. It was never genuine.”

He shrugged. “Hey, it made a lot of people feel good.”

Including me until I had learned better.

Ram nodded to Elliot. “You’re using your abilities for good. Well done.”

Elliot startled. The sincere words were more surprising than the bullshit ones, as though he expected to be humored but not appreciated.

“Thanks,” he whispered and joined Jag and Moe at the end of the table.

Moe didn’t hesitate to undo his fly and yank down his jeans and underwear.

Suck his cock, my brain said. Look how thick and juicy it is.

It’s limp. It’s neither thick nor juicy.

Moe shook his hands as though to loosen them up and placed them on his ass while Jag peeled his tiny shorts down. His cock grew and sprouted strings. I remembered the taste of him, the feel of its thickness in my mouth, and my heart fluttered.

Double sucking, my brain said.

I can't even physically do that!

Elliot opened his pants just enough to let his dick out while keeping the rest of him covered. Like Jag's, it grew until it reached his face. Unlike Jag's, it sprouted buttons and what looked uncomfortably like holes for wind.

I still wanted to taste it, though.

Ram's eyes went wide as he watched, and then he looked at me like, "This is who you want?"

Yes, yes, it fucking was.

Jag strummed his strings and nodded to the other two. " ' The Fight of the Shieldmaiden'?"

In response, Moe started drumming on his ass, a low steady rhythm like when your heartbeat echoes in your ears. He nodded along with it.

Jag strummed his dick strings and hummed. He played a tune that started slow and grew quicker and stronger, along with Moe's beat. It sounded like someone preparing for battle and banging their sword against their shield before charging into the fray.

Elliot squeezed his eyes shut, his lips moving as though talking silently to himself, then he took a deep breath and placed his tip in his mouth. His music weaved between Jag and Moe's like it was fighting with them.

I shivered, goosebumps breaking out over my body.

They were perfect.

Unlike their other songs, this one didn't have lyrics. The story was all Elliot's dickstrumment. His notes went from high to low and back up in quick succession to mimic parrying and dodging. He played faster and louder to show an attack.

I couldn't take my eyes off them, and not just because of the cocks. They were better than any movie, and all they had was sound.

When Moe's ass cracked loudly, I imagined the shieldmaiden's shield shattering. When Jag's strumming and Elliot's playing reached a crescendo, I imagined her final attack against her enemy. They dropped to a softer, slower tune, evoking the heartbreak after a fight, after killing, after loss.

I knew it well. I had never been to war, true, but I had fought, robbed, and killed. I knew the emptiness and regret that followed.

As they finished playing, Elliot opened his eyes, removed his mouth from his cock, and sighed as though a weight was lifting from him.

Jag gaped at me. "You're crying!"

I touched my cheek, and my fingers came away wet. Huh, I hadn't noticed.

Jag's cock shrank back to normal size, and he shuffled to me with his shorts still around his knees. Getting to me was more important than pulling up.

He pulled me against his chest and stroked my hair with one hand. Before I could tell him I was fine, it was just the song, Moe and Elliot were at my side, wrapping their arms around both me and Jag.

I had never felt so cozy, so safe, and... well, loved. I could have stayed there for hours, for days. I could have cried and confessed why their song had gotten to me.

But we had people to rescue. So I swallowed my pain and pushed out of their arms.

"I'm okay. Your song was beautiful."

"Enough to make a bad-ass witch cry?" Moe said. He had pulled up his pants before rushing over. "Yes! I mean, no. Sorry for making you sad but yes for rocking ass."

I laughed and squeezed his hand. "You're the best band I've ever heard."

Jag crossed his arms and grinned. "I know."

Elliot's eyes widened in surprise. I wanted to hug him and reassure him. But if I touched him, I wouldn't be able to let go, and we had people to save. So instead, I turned to Ram.

He unlocked the book and flipped it open on the table.

“Your song worked!” I said.

Jag and Moe cheered while Elliot nodded once.

I rounded the table to stand close enough to Ram that our arms brushed. It was just so I could gaze down at the strange symbols on the yellowed pages, no other reason. “Anything?”

“Give me a minute.” Ram flipped between pages. “I need to write down these translations.” He turned his face toward me, our noses nearly touching. “You know more about portal magic than I do. You might be able to make sense of this.”

“I’ll run upstairs and find printer paper and pens,” Elliot said, already turning and dashing between the bookshelves.

Ram and I spent the next six hours working on the book’s translations and spells. The writers had decided to be clever little fuckers and write everything in verse and riddle. We drew and redrew possible magical circles before settling on a version to test. Ram taped four sheets of printer paper together, and I drew the circle with its many complex symbols across it. Ram double-checked every line.

“You know,” he said, “we work well together.”

Maybe it was because I hadn’t slept or eaten in days and was living off energy potions, but it felt right to be working with Ram. Being with him was easy for the first time in seven years.

Had it been that long since we were friends?

Bone buddies, my brain said.

Stop it, brain, this is serious stuff.

Cock colleagues.

That one doesn't make sense because I don't have a cock—well, I did peg him, so I guess that name works.

Anal associate.

No.

Fuck fellows.

“Alyssa?” Ram said.

I shook my head clear. “I was just thinking of pegging... this magic circle, by which I mean getting it right. Go us!”

Jag looked up from the far side of the table, where he was reading a book. “Do you like pegging magical circles?” He raised a brow.

Heat pooled deep in my gut when he looked at me like that. “I’ve got you pegged as a cocky ass. No, wait, I mean arrogant jerk. Forget I said anything!”

“You’re right. I do have a cocky asshole.” Jag raised his brows up and down. “Okay, not really. I’ve never done that, but did you get excited?”

I laughed as a flush crawled up my neck. “Excited by you? Never.”

Ram groaned and dropped his face into his hands. “I should have stayed in prison.”

“Well, I told you to,” I said.

He groaned again.

“You’re just jealous,” Jag said.

Ram’s head shot up as he glared at the other man.

Jag ignored him and turned to me. “Is the spell ready?”

I stared at the taped together papers with their interlocking circles and scores of symbols. It was very different from the version we’d been using. But that version kept collapsing universes, so in theory, a fully working spell should look different.

Still, I had no idea if it would send us to our deaths until we stepped through its portal. The book mentioned being torn apart by “between the world monsters who are very hungry” if you got the spell wrong. I didn’t know if that was literal or poetic license to scare people away from a very complicated and dangerous type of magic.

Whatever came next, I couldn’t put Jag, Elliot, and Moe at risk, no matter how much I wanted them around. I had never been good at making unselfish choices, but if I wanted to hold on to people, I had to get better.

I glanced up at Jag. “It’s ready. Go find Elliot and Moe.” They had wandered off a while ago to find something more entertaining than watching Ram and me work.

Jag jumped up. “I’ll be back faster than that one nuts.” He nodded to Ram, then took off through the shelves.

“That was uncalled for,” Ram shouted after him.

I stood and pulled out my phone. “We don’t have much time.”

I opened Screech and pulled up the profile of one of the missing locals—a brown-haired cat shifter named Tanner. I had tracked it down during a break earlier. I would rather save Juniper and the Eclipses first. But fucking Juniper would redirect us to a random local again, so I had to rescue their asses first.

Leaving the phone open on his profile with photos of him as a cat lounging in sunbeams, I placed it in the center of the circle.

“This is who we’re trying to find.”

According to the book, if we placed an item belonging to the missing person in the circle and focused our magic on them, we should be able to open a portal to their location.

I hoped a bunch of online photos and cringe updates counted as something personal to an ancient spell. I mean, it was probably more personal than a clump of hair from a comb or a fork or some shit.

Not literal shit, but you know, general shit.

Ram stood and faced me. “You’re ditching your boyfriends,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper.

My heart wilted like an ignored flower. “For their safety.”

He tilted his head. “But not mine or yours.”

I tilted my head in the same way. “We can handle ourselves. Plus, it’s our spell; we should be the ones to test it and face the horrible dismembering death it might bring.”

“If I’m dismembered, my last thought will be of you,” Ram said.

I rolled my eyes. “I think your last thought will be ‘oh, god, it hurts,’ but sure.”

He smiled, that amused light in his eyes that I had once loved—not the amused mockery he was known for but the sincere one. “You never let me get away with anything, huh?”

“Never,” I said, unable to keep the smile from my face. “Let’s do this before they get back.”

Without waiting for Ram to agree, I placed my hands on the magical circle and unleashed my magic. This time, it ran free and fast along the lines of the spell. The incantation came to my lips easily without thought.

Ram placed a hand on the phone and raised his other one, chanting the part of the spell meant to target our missing person.

The air above the magical circle swirled and yawned open. The edges were rainbow-tinged rather than a sickly green. Even better, nothing shot out of the portal to grab us.

But holding it open was so much harder. I felt like my brain was trying to bench two hundred pounds and my magic was pulled taut, overstretching every muscle in a very bad yoga class.

“I can’t hold it for long.”

Ram didn’t hesitate but jumped onto the table and through the portal. My heartbeat sputtered as he vanished. If the spell was

bad, he was hurt—or dead or lost in the endless multiverse.

“Hey, the portal is open already,” Moe said as he, Elliot, and Jag ran up to me. Moe clambered onto the table.

“Wait, don’t—” I shouted, but he had already jumped through.

Jag’s eyes widened in horror as he realized why I had been telling Moe to stop. “Moe!” he screamed and threw himself through the portal after his friend. Elliot didn’t hesitate to follow.



Chapter 29

My mind was stretched almost to breaking from holding the portal open. But still, I jumped onto the table to follow my men into whatever doom awaited.

As I started to step through the portal, someone stumbled into me. The world tilted around me, and my stomach lurched into my throat as I fell backward. I reached out, grabbing onto the nearest thing to stop my fall.

It was solid and warm. I yanked myself upright to find that I had grabbed a strange man's shoulders and was now staring into his startled brown eyes.

It was Tanner, the missing cat shifter. I recognized him from the photos on his profile. I was nearly close enough to dry hump him, but I didn't care because if he was alive, that meant the portal worked. Jag, Elliot, Moe, and Ram must be safe too!

Tanner jerked as though pushed from behind.

"Is the portal broken now?" Moe called.

I laughed in relief and jumped off the table, gesturing for Tanner to do the same. He climbed down on shaky legs and leaned against a bookshelf for support. "That... let's never do that again, okay?"

Moe skipped through the portal and hopped to the floor. Jag, Elliot, and Ram followed. With everyone back in the library, I pulled my magic into my body and the portal vanished.

"We fucking did it!" I shouted, throwing my arms around Ram as a smile split my face.

He hugged me back, tightly as though clinging for dear life.

My eyes widened. Wait, I was hugging Ram. Ram? That bastard?

I jerked away from him, and he met my gaze with sorrow in his dark eyes.

Jag stepped between us, throwing his arms around me. Moe and Elliot did the same from either side.

“I knew you could do it!” Moe said.

At least someone did. I tried to free my arm to hug him back, but the three men had pinned my arms to my sides.

“That world didn’t fall apart,” Elliot said. “It was full of ceramic cats sleeping on ledges, each with its own little sun.”

“Oh, right, cats!” Moe said. He let go of me and turned to Tanner. “Welcome home!”

Tanner shook his head as he pushed off from the bookshelf and walked away. I guess he was too shaken up to deal with us.

“Bye,” Moe called.

Jag kissed my forehead and then whispered, “Did you try to leave us behind?”

“Of course,” I said. I hadn’t planned to tell them, but since he had figured it out, I might as well own it. “I didn’t know if the portal would work or murder you in a horrible, bone-crushing way.”

“As opposed to a relaxing murder,” Jag said.

“Not everything is chainsaw arms and flamethrowers.”

As Jag chuckled, Elliot hugged me tighter. “I would have gone through first to see if it was safe for you.”

My heart went soft as that apple jam Moe had contaminated. “I’d hug you, but my arms are trapped.”

Elliot let go and stepped back from me. “Oh! Sorry!”

The door to the rest of the library slammed, and I realized my mistake in letting Tanner leave. I gently shoved Jag off me. “We have to leave. Sooner or later, the cat man will call the cops to report that he’s not missing, and he’ll tell them he saw us.”

Moe blinked his big blue eyes. “But we saved him.”

I sighed. Sweet, naïve Moe. “That doesn’t mean he’ll protect us.”

Ram busied himself with tidying the papers on the table and refused to look our way even when he spoke. “He might not know we’re wanted before he talks to the police.”

Moe suddenly ran around the table and hugged Ram from behind. “I forgot to say: you’re so smart for figuring out the portal too!”

Ram’s eyes went so wide that I thought they were going to pop out and roll away. “Umm... thank you.” He patted Moe’s arm.

Moe, oblivious to the emotional turmoil he had just unleashed on Ram, grinned and squeezed him tighter before letting go.

Ram stared wide-eyed into the distance for a moment before returning to piling the notes into our basket.

Something in my chest twisted painfully as I realized he didn't have real friends. His cronies in our gang and the prison had always been demanding things from him, kissing his ass, and harming others on his behalf. He was so accustomed to using people as shields against the world, he didn't know what simple, sincere friendship was like.

And Moe was too sweet to know anything except friendship.

I had been the same way as Ram. Following his orders had been a way to lash out at other supes and blame him for it instead of myself. I had used him as a shield against my own desire to burn the world.

I could have groaned at the realization. But I didn't want to talk about it, and if Jag, Elliot, and Moe knew I was upset, they would not let it go.

So I let my insides twist as I packed up our stuff and picked up the basket, though I had no idea where we were going to hide out.

"The police will never find us in a bubble dimension," Elliot said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to risk getting trapped. Juniper is still stuck, so something is going on with this shit. Come on, I know a place." That was a lie, but I just wanted us to get moving. I'd think of something.

That something was the alley behind a line of shops. We rescued a young woman from a bubble dimension and moved before she could tell the police about us. We went from location to location, saving one or two locals before fleeing again.

Moe insisted on stopping to buy supplies. As people exited the portals, he greeted them with, “Welcome back to the real world!” and insisted they take a care package of Gatorade, granola bars, basic medications, and toiletries.

“I worked for the Red Cross in disaster response,” he explained as we set up on the roof of an apartment building.

I wasn’t surprised by his many jobs anymore. “Did you like it?”

He crouched, lining up his care packages on the asphalt. “Yeah, I like helping people! But I rescued a puppy from floodwaters—I called her Floody. I couldn’t travel the world anymore because I had to look after her.”

I smoothed out the pages of our magical circle. “Aww. Where is Floody now?”

“She’s in doggy heaven after a fight with cancer,” Moe said, staring at his tote bags of goods. “Do you think a portal can open there?”

I leaned over to hug him. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I doubted portals could go to animal heaven, so I lied. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It’s okay,” he said, as though he suspected I wasn’t telling the truth. “Floody is a good dog. She’ll wait for me no matter how I get there or how long it takes.”

I squeezed him tighter, as much for my sake as his.

“Look at this,” Elliot said, showing me my phone—he was in charge of tracking down the profiles of missing people.

On the screen was a blurry photo of a man with long, dark hair blowing around his shoulders. He stood before a portal with his hands outstretched and purple magic on his fingertips.

A dark witch.

“What’s he doing?”

“People claim he’s closing rogue portals before they can suck anyone in,” Elliot said.

Ram dashed to my side. “Who? How?”

He never could resist powerful or unique magic. And this witch was one of the rarest: someone who could cast portal magic without a relic or magical circle.

“Nobody knows who he is,” Elliot said, “or they aren’t posting his identity. There are no stories about him rescuing anyone from a bubble dimension. He’s just preventing more people from being grabbed.”

I nodded. “We’ll have to track him down and combine forces to stop the portals. See if you can find out who he is. Until then, let’s keep rescuing everyone we can find.”

Once I had saved the hapless locals, Juniper should stop redirecting our portal spell and I could finally free her and the Eclipses. I had no idea how she knew who was lost or where they were. But it wouldn't be the first time her abilities and decisions confounded me.

By the time the sun set, we had hidden in a dozen places and had recovered all the missing persons we could find mentioned on Screech.

We settled in a garden shed behind a massive house with no lights on. The residents of Mansion McRichFace were probably on vacation.

I sat on the floor with the others, and we passed around the last of the food potion. I felt grungy and stinky and bone-tired, like I could sleep for fourteen days straight. Fuck, I wanted a drink. It was like there was a section of my brain that could only light up and be happy once alcohol touched my tongue. Nothing else would do it.

I ignored it and sipped the food potion before handing it to Jag. "You helped save lives, and no chainsaw arms were needed."

"I'm surprised too," he said with a grin.

I sighed. "We have one portal left. Juniper and my friends in Free Jinx."

Ram pulled the magic circle from our basket. "Let's do this." His voice was more strained and colder than it had been all day.

I guess he wasn't too keen on seeing Juniper after he had tried to kill her and she had bested him in battle before leaving him in captivity—that he kept escaping from. I shot him a warning glare.

His shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. “You know, I cared about Juniper once too. Why did you think I let her go after our first fight?”

It was true that Juniper had been the first one to launch an attack, but only because Ram was planning to steal the world's magic and she wanted to stop him. If only she had trusted me to help her back then, instead of assuming I'd always pick a man over her.

“You let her go because she begged and it made your little ego feel good.”

After he had granted her mercy, she had stolen the relic that would give him the power to steal magic and went on the run.

He scoffed. “You really think I was dumb enough to believe that Juniper, of all people, would sincerely beg for mercy and forgiveness?”

I didn't hesitate. “Yeah.”

Ram's eyes widened. “Well, fuck, Alyssa. Whatever you think of me, I'm not that stupid. I let her go because I cared about her, not because I believed she was sorry. She was my friend too... until she wasn't.”

“That didn't stop you from ordering us to kill her.”

Ram stared at the floor. "I'm sorry, Alyssa. I am. I thought you were as angry with Juniper for her betrayal as I was. I thought you believed in my plan to... yes, to steal magic so people couldn't misuse it."

The awful thing was that he was right. I had believed in his plan for a while, and I had been angry with Juniper for leaving me. I gnawed on my fingernail for a moment before answering.

"I was angry. Juniper was like a sister, and... and it hurt when she ran away without me because we always ran away together. And I couldn't turn to you about it because you wanted me to go kill her and I just wanted her back. I wanted our trio back."

"So did I," Ram said. "But I was too angry to see it or to see you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry I made things worse. I'll do anything to make it better."

Something creaked open inside me, like a younger version of me was opening a closet door and peeking out to ask, "Is it safe now?"

I slammed the door shut. Ram might be sorry, but that didn't change anything. He was sorry when he blackmailed me to break him out of prison. It didn't stop him from doing it.

"You were too angry to see Alyssa?" Jag said, his voice dripping with disdain. He turned to me. "The only time I don't feel angry is with you."

My heart felt warm and pained at the same time, like how a good massage hurt but also made you feel better. “Really?”

Before Jag could answer, Moe shouted, “Group hug!” He jumped up and threw his arms around Ram and me. Ram leaned back as his eyes widened like a cat being picked up.

“Not Ram; he’s a dick,” Jag hissed.

“But they’re both hurting,” Moe said. He kissed my head. “You’re my new favorite person.”

I grabbed Moe’s arm where it wrapped around me. He must have chopped onions recently because my eyes burned.

Jag placed a hand on my back, and Elliot dropped to his knees before me, kissing my forehead. “You’ll always have us.”

Such small words with such big promises. It was the kind of reassurance little child Alyssa had wished for but never received. Now, these sweet bastards were dragging her in from the cold and throwing blankets over her—and like with warming up frostbitten limbs, it stung.

Even though I managed not to sob or sniffle or make any noise at all, I couldn’t stop the tears any more than I could stop cum rain from falling.



Chapter 30

Jag, Elliot, and Moe held me, whispered sweet words, and kissed my hair as I silently cried.

“I know what will cheer you up!” Moe stood and yanked down his pants. “Music!” Reaching behind himself, he slapped his ass, and instead of the sound of flesh on flesh, it was a fast drum beat.

Jag jumped up. In the light from a single bare bulb above, he grabbed his tiny shorts and ripped them right off like stripper pants. His cock grew and sprouted strings and he joined Moe in playing an upbeat rock song.

I chuckled. Moe grinned ear to ear. He started jigging, his dick flopping and his feet shuffling with his pants around his knees. Jag joined him, performing bhangra jumps and kicks as he strummed his cock.

I broke into full-on laughter.

Elliot glanced between me and his friends, then with a sigh, he unbuttoned his pants and pulled out his cock, elongating it into his dickstrament. He didn't join the dance or whip off his pants, but he played a bright, fast melody all the same.

That he was willing to whip it out for me made all the sorrow just bleed away, like when you stand up suddenly on your period.

I laughed until I got a stitch in my side. Moe and Jag leaped once more and landed with arms out. “Ta-da!” they both said.

Elliot played his final note, then laughed—he actually laughed—as he tucked his claridick away.

“Jag,” I said. “You tore your shorts.”

“My what?” he said with an eyebrow raised.

My face ached from smiling. “Your hoochie daddy shorts.”

“His what?” Ram exclaimed, but I ignored him.

“You’ve got nothing to wear,” I said.

Jag winked. “Worth it to hear you laugh.”

You should put his balls in your mouth, my brain said. They’re right there.

My gaze shot to Jag’s bushy pubes and perky nuts. I mean... I could.

Sighing, Elliot peeled off his suit jacket and handed it to Jag, who shrank his cock and tied the jacket around his waist. He took off his cloud coat to cover his ass.

Shame. I could have played it like Moe’s butt while sucking those balls.

Ew, Alyssa, stop it. This a serious situation, even with the dickstruments.

Ram cleared his throat. “Alyssa, you once said that I didn’t take responsibility for my actions and blamed everyone else for my choices. You were right. I’m going be better, I promise.”

I scoffed. If he could gain something by screwing over Juniper, my men, or me, he would do it. His kindness ended where his desires began. “We’ll see.”

A sorrow crept into his dark eyes. “You changed. Why can’t I?”

I had said something similar to Juniper years ago when she assumed I remained loyal to Ram and his schemes. It was jarring to hear my struggle echoed in his words, like staring into a funhouse mirror: a reflection that’s been warped and made unsettling.

“You were blackmailing me a couple of days ago. Have you become a different person since then?” I said in my best mocking tone.

Ram’s mouth quirked. “I understand better what you need from a partner.” He glanced at Jag, Elliot, and Moe. “I’m going to work on becoming someone who can make you happy.”

My stomach fluttered, but stomachs were stupid. “Yeah, right. Let’s just get this rescue mission over with.”

I unfolded the pages of the spell circle while Ram opened his phone to The Magical Rooster’s webpage. He placed it in the center of the circle.

“Do you want to handle the tracking since you’re closer to Juniper?” he asked.

I eyed him. “Can you manage the portal spell?”

He smiled, small and sad. “Let’s find out.”

As Ram cast the portal spell, I focused my mind on the auras of Juniper and a handful of friends from Free Jinx. Raising a

hand, I let my magic run free and spoke the words of the tracking incantation.

Ram's magic weaved around my own like a firm and familiar touch as it rose into the air and split the fabric of reality itself.

I saw a rush of emptiness, then a flash of light, and the dying world of Free Jinx came into view. The Eclipses gathered in the town square as their houses became dust around them. The sky was already gone, and the ground was crumbling to nothingness.

Juniper stood among them, her hands flaring with purple-green magic. She weaved it into a shield that pushed back against the destruction, slowing it but not stopping its march toward the remaining survivors.

Despite the oncoming death, my heart soared. We were here! My friends were all going to be safe in a matter of minutes. I just had to reach out and—

Something slammed down between me and Free Jinx like a garage door. It hit so hard and quickly that it jolted all thoughts from my mind.

Ram cursed. With a whoosh, I found myself sitting on the floor back in the garden shed. The portal was gone, and the room smelled vaguely acidic. Jag, Elliot, and Moe were at my sides, but I looked past them to Ram.

As usual with anything magic, he remained calm and business-like. "What happened?"

My chest tightened. "You don't know either?"

He ran a hand down his face. “The portal opened, but then it was like I lost the signal. Does Juniper not want to be found?”

“This wasn’t her. I saw her trying to hold Free Jinx together as it collapsed, but something—or someone—blocked my path.”

Ram met my gaze, and I saw the same realization hit him as it dawned on me as well. “Whoever is causing the portals to open up all over town doesn’t want us to reach Free Jinx,” he said.

I groaned and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Juniper was never blocking us from reaching her. Someone else was, and I didn’t even notice.” I punched my leg. “Fuck! I should have been trying to save her then Eclipses, not the random villagers.”

Elliot took my hand. “You were right to help all those people.”

“I could have done better if I had gone after the asshole causing this shitshow in the first place!”

“Who would do that?” Moe said. “This is all so mean.”

I sighed. “It’s probably a salty-ass bastard from our old gang trying to destroy Free Jinx and kill Juniper at the same time. They stole the Astrosmos, which caused Free Jinx to collapse. They’re using the relic to block us from saving her and the Eclipses on top of tormenting Silver Springs. For some reason.”

Ram groaned and crouched to rest his elbows on his knees. “If they’re doing this in my name, I’m going to turn them into toads.”

“Toads are cute,” Moe said.

“Have you ever seen one in a little hat?” Elliot added.

Moe grinned as he nodded. “Yes! A little cowboy hat. Yippee ki-yay, little guy! Do cowboys say that?”

Ram smiled a little, actually enjoying the silliness. “A toad’s turd, then.”

“Oh, those aren’t cute at all, good call,” Moe said.

I dropped my hands into my lap. “If you had called out your pissed-off followers sooner, maybe they would have stopped fighting an old-ass feud.”

Ram slouched. “When Sandra, Brownhill, Ver, and Azea wrote to me in prison, I wrote back and said to just stop the fight. We had lost... and truly I didn’t want them to end up dead or locked up.”

I groaned. “They probably thought you were being coerced or some shit.”

He heaved a sigh. “Let’s try the spell again. Maybe I can break through the block.”

This time, Ram cast the tracking incantation, and I cast the portal one. Just like before, someone shut down our portal within seconds.

I slapped the concrete floor despite the pain it sent up my arm. “Fuck!”

“Again,” Ram said. “I can break it, I know it.”

It was hours later and more failed attempts than I could count when Moe and Elliot insisted that we take a break.

I sat on the bare floor and massaged my temples while Jag settled in behind me and let me lean back against his chest. Moe handed me a water bottle.

“I’ve been searching for the portal witch,” Elliot said with my phone in his hand as he paced the small space. “But I can’t find him.”

Sighing, I glanced at Ram, who sat against the wall with his elbows on his knees. His fancy button-up shirt was sweat stained. His fingertips were singed from his own magic, which I had never seen happen to anyone before.

I had to admit that he had given everything he had, even though he had no reason to want Juniper and my friends back.

“Ram?”

He looked up, his eyes bloodshot and tired.

“Thank you for trying.”

He smiled a real sincere smile, not one of his fake manipulative ones. “Do or do not, there is no try.”

“Nerd.”

His smile widened. “We will get to Free Jinx. We just need to think of a new approach.”

If Ram couldn’t break through the blocking spell, who the hell could? Only Juniper was more powerful than him, and she wasn’t here.

But magic was full of loopholes—and dark magic doubly so. It was one reason why I loved it. Parents, teachers, bosses, and society in general had rules you were expected to follow, and they didn't even explain them to you. They just commanded you to obey.

I was always finding ways around the rules, even as a kid. Dark magic was all about bending, breaking, and ignoring them.

The problem was: we didn't have much time. "I hope we can think of something before the bubble dimension collapses and..." I swallowed a lump in my throat. "And takes everyone with it."

Jag wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me close to nestle against his chest. "From what you say about Juniper, she'll single-handedly protect them."

I shook my head, not because he was wrong but because she couldn't protect Free Jinx forever. The destruction was moving closer to her with each moment.

Ram ran a hand through his hair. "I need sleep. It'll help me think of a solution; I get my best ideas in dreams."

"You have good ideas?" Jag said.

"Yes, like fucking your mom on a Wendy's dining table."

I laughed because I was startled by Ram letting loose rather than using one of his more stuck-up responses. He smiled, his eyes lighting up as though glad he had made me laugh.

I patted Jag's knee. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He rested his chin on the top of my head. “You owe me for that one, Lis.”

“Do not ever call me Lis, Meety,” I said, referencing the second half of Jag’s full name.

Jag chuckled, then fixed his gaze on Ram. “I’ll fuck your dad on the changing table in a Starbucks bathroom while he begs me for more whipped cream in his venti ass.”

I laughed again. “Holy shit, dude.”

“What? He started it.”

Ram rolled his eyes. “My dad would probably let you do that.”

Jag startled against me, but if he knew anything about Ram’s father, he wouldn’t. The guy was like if PornHub were a person.

Ram lay down on the floor, tucking his arm under his head. I marveled that he could sleep like that. I could barely sleep in a comfortable bed.

Elliot packed up the magic circle and our supplies into the basket. “You can rest your head on me to sleep,” he whispered.

“No, on me,” Jag said, squeezing me closer.

“I’m not going to sleep. I’m going to think,” I said.

“You should still lie down,” Moe said softly as to not bother Ram. “I know! We’ll lie in a line, and you can use all of us as a bed!” He lay on his back on the floor and gestured for Elliot to do the same.

The other man shrugged before lying next to Moe.

“They’re all nuts,” Jag whispered in my ear, but he stood and stepped past me to join his friends.

I chuckled at them stretched out on the concrete, but what the hell—if it made them happy, I’d lie on them. Besides, I did want to be close to my big, comforting teddy bear dudes.

Sitting on Jag, I lay back across Moe and rested my head on Elliot’s stomach, feeling it rise and fall with his breaths. My legs had to stay on the floor since they were not a very long bed.

“Yay!” Moe said. I laughed, trying to keep it quiet.

They also weren’t comfortable at all, but I didn’t intend to sleep, and the floor wasn’t exactly easy on the ass either.

Ask them to be hard on your ass, my brain said, but I ignored her.

Elliot placed his free hand on my hair and stroked my forehead with his thumb. I sighed, reveling in the sensation of his warm, calloused hands on my skin.

Feeling the three men breathing under my back, I stared at the cobwebs on the ceiling and wondered how in fuck I was going to rescue my friends. And who in the fuck I was going to kill for causing this shitstorm in the first place.



Chapter 31

Despite my lumpy man bed, I slept like a computer that had been shut off.

I woke to light streaming through the shed's small window and the three men still under me. My back ached from sleeping on them, but I still slept better than I had in a long time.

They must be uncomfortable, lying on the concrete like that all night. I sat up on Jag.

“Careful,” Ram whispered.

My feet hung above the floor, and I realized Ram had magicked Jag, Elliot, and Moe into the air to save their backs from the hard floor. The thoughtfulness was touching, especially when he hadn't cast the same spell for himself.

It also means you can crawl underneath and slap their asses, my brain said. Slap slap, slappity, slap.

You know, I could... I glanced at their closed eyes and the line of drool on Elliot's face. No ass grabbing now. Plus, my friends needed my help, assuming they were still alive.

I slid off Jag onto the ground and stretched out my back. Ram sat cross-legged on the floor with the magic circle and our notes spread before him. The big, heavy portal book from the library was open on his lap.

“We left that behind,” I said.

“I went back and borrowed it,” he whispered, his head bent over the tome. “Well, stole it since I don't have a library card and the library was technically closed. But I'll return it.”

I snorted softly. Ram doing his own dirty work for once. I liked it.

“I don’t have an answer yet,” he said.

Anxiety exploded in my chest like a heart attack. I should have never let myself fall asleep when Juniper and the Eclipses needed me. Stupid!

I couldn’t stand the thought of a world without Juniper, so I shoved the thought away and stared at the magic circle with the notes scattered over it. Maybe it was because I was well-rested for once, but the sight gave me an idea.

“I know how to get to Free Jinx.”

Ram’s head shot up.

“I’m a fucking genius. We add an amplifier spell to the magic circle. It’ll strengthen the portal spell and our own magic. We should be able to batter down the block.”

Ram frowned. “The book cautions against combining spells with portal magic, and we know first-hand why. Portals become destructive when the spell is off.”

“So? Free Jinx is already collapsing. We just need to open a portal long enough for everyone to jump through; it doesn’t need to be clean.”

Ram tilted his head, thinking.

A jolt of anger hit me at his reluctance, so I grabbed a stack of notepapers and flipped them over to draw an amplifier spell.

“Where are the pens?”

He reached into the basket at his side and handed me one. “Combining amplifier and portal spells might be dangerous.”

“Everything we do is dangerous. We can’t leave Juniper and the others any longer. Hell, they might already be choking on nothingness.” I didn’t look up from the paper as I drew my spell.

“If Alyssa thinks it’ll work, it’ll work,” Jag said, and I startled. I hadn’t realized he was awake. He sat and swung his legs off Ram’s invisible platform, pausing to adjust the jackets around his waist.

Moe groaned and stretched his body its full length before nudging Elliot and rolling off the platform. Jag caught him so he didn’t land face-first on the concrete.

Elliot turned his back to us. “Fifteen more minutes.”

I couldn’t wait for him to wake up. So, I turned back to drawing my amplifiers: one for the center of the magical circle below my cell phone to boost the tracker spell. Another for the edge of the circle for Ram to place his hand on when he cast the portal spell.

It would be better if Jag, Elliot, and Moe weren’t here in case the spell went sideways. But they would refuse to leave, and I didn’t want to waste time fighting with them.

In truth, I didn’t want to fight with them at all. They were my safe, peaceful place.

I turned to Ram. “Ready?”

He frowned but nodded. “I’m dropping the hover spell,” he shouted to Elliot. The other man sat up with a groan, and Moe dragged him to his feet.

Ram planted one palm on the amplifier and the other on the magic circle. For the hundred-and-something-th time, I thought of Juniper, unleashed my magic, and spoke the tracker incantation.

As my magic flowed through the symbols of the amplifier spell, my power and mind expanded so quickly, it felt like I was the Big Bang itself. My body trembled with joy and energy, as though a thousand galaxies burned within me.

I think I laughed, but maybe the sensation was my magic thrumming like a million plucked strings.

Ram’s magic was even brighter than my own, throbbing with power thicker than the visible universe was wide. It weaved around my magic as my tracker spell and his portal spell combined.

Light burst before me, and I saw Free Jinx—or what had once been Free Jinx. The only thing left was a patch of dead grass surrounded by pure nothingness. Juniper and the other witches clustered together with magic flaring in their hands as they fought to hold the universe from total collapse.

The blocking spell tried to close around me like a collar around the throat, but I batted it away. The portal remained open. My heart soared, and I felt like a balloon bobbing happily and freely through the sky, as though a massive weight had finally vanished from my shoulders.

Juniper looked up and even though a portal still stood between us, her gaze locked on mine. She smiled—

Free Jinx shook and turned into one big blur like I was caught in the maracas on Elliot's grandma's clit. My stomach heaved even though I wasn't one for motion sickness, so I pried open my physical eyes to try to ground myself in one spot.

I gasped.

A portal yawned above me, swirling a sickly yellow and green like crap when you have food poisoning.

I yanked my magic back into my skin, ending the tracker spell. Ram's purple cloud of magic vanished into his body as he cut off the portal spell.

Still, the magic circle glowed green, somehow running without Ram's or my magic to power it. The puke-colored portal gaped like a mouth with rotted breath flowing out of it. It smelled of an open grave when exhumed. You don't want to know how I learn what that smells like. The wind beat against my body and rattled the walls of the garden shed. My throat closed off as panic rose in my chest. I met Ram's dark gaze.

"You were right." I don't think he heard me as the wind stole my words.

I had broken the spell. Fuck, by opening a sick portal, I had probably hastened the destruction of Free Jinx and the death of my friends like in the other bubble dimensions we had visited.

"What's happening?" Jag shouted, his usually loud voice quiet from the cornucopia of wind.

I jumped to my feet. “We have to get—”

Teeth shot out of the portal. Not individual ones like if a tooth fairy had exploded. That would have been fine. No, this was a set of teeth, long and pointed like a shark’s mouth, but there was no head, no lips, and no tongue attached to it. It was just the teeth in a bare jaw.

It reached for me. I called upon my magic, but before I could mutter the word for shield, Elliot grabbed my shoulders and spun us around, putting himself between me and the teeth. They grabbed the back of his shirt. For half a second, our gazes met. His was scared and resigned, as though he was ready to suffer any misfortune, any torture for me.

Then, the teeth yanked him through the portal.

I screamed a spell and let my magic fly to grab him, but he was already gone.

I had encouraged him to be brave, to fight, and now he would die for it.

Another set of teeth yanked Moe toward the portal. I grabbed his feet with a strand of my magic, but the teeth had already yanked his upper half through the portal. I wrapped all my magic around his legs and pulled. The portal demon didn’t let go, and we were in a tug-of-war with poor Moe as the rope. If I kept fighting, he’d be torn in two. He might die on the other side of the portal, but he might not.

With a feeling like my heart was being ripped out, I let him go.

“Moe, Ellie!” Jag roared and dove headfirst through the portal.

Heroic dumbass, I thought, and then followed him.

Just as I was about to cross the threshold, Ram leaped in front of me. One arm was raised, encased in purple magic as one of those teeth monsters gnawed on it, undeterred by his counterattack.

I raised my hands to push him out of the way, but he twirled a finger and suddenly, I couldn't move. He had fucking cast an immobilizing spell on me, the piece of shit. He met my gaze.

“I'll keep them safe. On my life, I promise you, Alyssa. My Sa-Sa.”

He hadn't called me that in seven years. Though I had always hated the pet name, this time, hearing it felt like being punched in the chest.

“You'll find a way to fix this. I know you will,” Ram added with a smile. He inclined his head and flicked a finger.

I flew backward out of the shed just as Ram let his defenses drop. His scream echoed in my head as the teeth clamped on his arm.

I landed on the grass hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs. The immobilizing spell now gone, I jumped up and ran for the shed. No wind slammed into me, and the smell of rot had vanished, as though it had never existed. Maybe Ram had fixed the portal. He always had a trick up his sleeve.

I dashed into the shed.

The portal was gone, and so were Ram, Jag, Elliot, and Moe.

Our supplies, which Moe had so carefully organized, were strewn around the floor. The basket was overturned, and the handle was broken. Strange the things that stick in your mind during a disaster.

I ran for the magic circle to reopen the portal, but I found only ash and the smashed remnants of my cell phone. I swept aside the debris, looking for the papers with the spell.

“It has to be here. It has to be.”

On my hands and knees, I searched the shed, through the ash, under Moe’s care packets, and in the basket. The library book had been bitten in half, not that I could read it even if it was complete.

“Where is it? Where is it?”

I needed that paper or my phone or Ram’s. Both held photos of the spell, and both were gone along with the circle. I remembered parts of it, but not enough to recreate the entire spell, and I couldn’t cast an incomplete portal spell without Ram.

With a scream, I sat back in the dusting of ash and broken cell phone parts. I had to accept what I already knew.

As he was pulled into some hellish world, Ram had burned the circle to close the portal behind him. My phone had been smashed in the chaos, and his was still in his pocket.

He had saved me, and he might have saved Jag, Elliot, and Moe, since he could fight off demons when they couldn’t. And the thing was, he didn’t have to. He could have simply fled or

let the flying teeth kill us. He had sacrificed himself to help men he didn't even like and was probably jealous of.

He had changed.

But now that he was gone, I had no way to open a portal to rescue him, my men, or my friends.



Chapter 32

“**A**lyssa Beaver, come out with your hands up and your magic sheathed,” a gruff cop shouted through a bullhorn.

I sighed and logged out of the library computer. When people stopped entering the library, I knew someone had tattled on me and the cops were on the way. Patrons had left, and no one else entered to replace them. Now it was just me at a computer and the librarian hiding under her desk.

“You have ten seconds before we come in there,” the cop added.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. I cast an invisibility spell and flipped my magic inside out like a sock, so my aura wouldn’t be noticed by any witches.

With my head throbbing and my mouth dry, I picked up my papers and headed downstairs to the magical section in the basement. The library door slammed open behind me, and boots pounded on the floor, but I ignored them.

Once in the basement, I crawled under one of the big wooden tables—the same one my men and I had worked at—and waited. My spells should hide me from even the cop’s witches, but they could still walk into me, so I needed to stay out of their way until they left.

Sitting under the table, I fiddled with my folded-up papers. I had found a memory spell in a dark magic shop, and the owner, Nelcar—or maybe it was Falcar, I didn’t remember—was kind enough to give it to me for free when I said I needed

it to end the reign of evil portals. With it, I had recovered the portal spell and redrew it on the pages I now held.

Portal spells used a shit pile of raw magical power, and alone, I was only able to open portals the size of my palm. It would be enough to see if anyone was alive and to get help from Ram or Juniper, except I couldn't get past the blocking spell. It kept me from both Juniper and Ram, Jag, Elliot, and Moe.

I had tried many times over the last couple of days, but I just couldn't break it. Without Ram, I couldn't read the tattered remnants of the portal book to find more info. Not that there was much left of it. Violet, the librarian, was searching for a translation guide but hadn't found one yet. It might not exist since witches and covens were super secretive about their made-up magical languages.

I had used Screech to find local witches willing to help. The first two didn't have any ideas and couldn't read the book either. The third, the owner of the magic shop, was very slowly working on a translation of a few torn pages on the promise that I pay him later. Another witch refused to try when he found out I had no money, and the last one... well, they had recognized me as a fugitive and snitched on me to the cops.

If anyone knew the witch who was closing rogue portals, they weren't telling a stranger on the internet.

So, I sat under the table, rubbing the pages of a spell I couldn't cast, and remembered Jag sitting at this very table with his chair tilted back and his bare legs on display as he winked at

me. Elliot bent over books, smiling to himself as he read. Moe ran and hopped around the table with a small volume in his hand, claiming that movement helped him focus. Ram scribbled on paper as we pieced together the spell that would save a dozen Silver Springies.

And doom my mates.

I stared at my chest. The golden ribbons that had connected me to Jag, Elliot, and Moe were gone. I don't think the spell had been broken since I hadn't experienced the same pain as when Ram had ended our mateship. It just had no one to attach to anymore, so it whipped around inside my chest, lashing and cutting my heart.

The spell didn't doom them, my brain said. You did.

I know.

I put my head on my knees to block out the world. If only I had listened to Ram, if only I hadn't insisted on the amplifier spells, they'd still be here. They'd still be safe.

Alive.

You had a good thing, Sa-Sa, my brain sneered. And you fucked it up.

We always do.

You should have kept Jag, Elliot, and Moe out of this. You should have left them behind somewhere, but noooo, you have to have cock.

I clenched my jaw. *It wasn't cock; you were the one who wouldn't shut up about their dicks and asses.*

Yeah, yeah, I know, if my brain was thinking of cock, then I was too. I wasn't insane. I knew I was arguing with myself, but most everyone had an internal monologue; mine just hated me half the time.

I waited under the table with my invisibility spells as the cops searched around the library. The bastards were taking their sweet time. While my friends and mates could die at any moment—if they were still alive—I had to waste time waiting for dumbass donut-guzzling assholes to stomp around a library as though they were working.

Fuck this.

Crawling out from under the table, I snuck past the cops on basement duty and slid past the ones on the stairway. The main floor was crawling with them, so I wouldn't be able to use the computers to search for help anymore today.

Fuck, I should just steal a cell phone and mind-trick a human into paying for the plan. I was trying to be a good guy who didn't do shit like that, but it was impossible to achieve anything with no money and no friends.

I lingered by the front door until one of the cops, a massive troll with big stomping feet, left. I darted out behind him. He whirled as though he sensed my presence or felt the air from my movements, but I sidestepped him and raced down the street.

Once clear of the police, I dropped to a walk but kept my invisibility and magic-hiding spells wrapped around me like blankets. My head ached from lack of sleep, food, and too much magic use. I was grimy. My pink suit was stained with the ash of the portal spell, and my hair was greasy and limp. But I couldn't take time out to care for myself. I had to find my mates and friends before I lost them for good. If I hadn't already.

On top of that, I didn't know where Juniper now lived to crash at her place and I had no money for a hotel room. Maybe I should just start robbing people again.

Since I couldn't look for help on Screech with the cops in the library, I did things the old-fashioned way. As I trekked through town, I let my magic linger in the air around me like sea sponges waiting for food to cross their path.

I was looking for the unsettling touch on the back of my neck that meant someone was using dark magic. It could lead me to the witch who was closing portals, the asshole who was casting the blocking spell, or maybe just a fellow dark witch who would be willing to help.

As I walked, I ignored the throb in my head and the ache in my bones from too much magic use. I slouched and stared at the ground. Keeping my head raised took more strength than I had right now.

When the pavement turned to grass under my clunky prison boots, I looked up. I stood at the edge of a park. In the distance, a patch of grass was burned black in the shape of a

circle. The kids chasing each other through the fall leaves gave it a wide breadth.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my lips together against the emotions rising up my throat. Everyone was gone. Everyone.

No, my brain said, you have one friend left. The only one you never fucked over.

Beverly.

Dropping my invisibility and aura-cloaking spells, I crossed the park and entered the forest. I stomped around loudly, hoping to catch Evanora's attention. She hadn't been that helpful last time, but who knew? The self-serving mysterious twig fucker might have changed her mind.

I reached the high riverbank. There was no sign of Beverly, but she might have swum downstream to the deeper waters. I trekked along the river until I spotted a pile of sticks and logs with a beaver perched on top. She adjusted a twig with her little paws.

Despite the heaviness in my chest, my heart fluttered. I crashed through the underbrush and down the bank to the river's edge. Beverly grunted happily before climbing from her lodge and waddling to my side.

Smiling, I crouched and scratched her neck just how she liked it. Her fur was warm and damp. She squeaked and purred like she was telling me about her day, even though I couldn't understand a word of it.

“I missed you, Beverly, but I’m glad you’re safe. Your lodge is looking cozy.”

Beverly glanced around, as though she was searching for someone.

My heart ached. “They’re not here, sweetie. They’re...” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “They’re gone. Because I fucked up.”

Beverly stared at me with her black eyes. The lock I’d been keeping around my feelings popped open at the sight of her sweet, innocent expression.

“I ruin everything good in my life. I always have, and nothing I ever try prevents it. I used to think it was because of my parents or my dark magic or Ram. But it’s not any of that. It’s me. It was always me. And now everyone is gone, and I don’t know how to get them back.”

Beverly tucked her head under my palm, and I scratched her neck again. “You’re the only friend I have left.”

She growled and then turned her back to me.

I couldn’t even blame her. “I deserve that.”

She walked a few steps before looking back at me.

“You want me to follow you?” I might as well. I didn’t want to lose the only person—well, beaver—I had left.

Standing, I followed Beverly along the river’s edge. Walking was not the easiest thing for beavers, so she slipped into the water and swam with her head above the surface. I hiked

through the mud and dry leaves on the bank. Each step made a crunchy sound, but I was too tired to enjoy it.

As I followed Beverly, my magic flowed in the air around me to pick up any signs of portal or dark magic—and to attract Evanora. But she didn't show, and I still couldn't find the asshole who was casting the blocking spell. They might not even be near Silver Springs since they had the Astrosmos relic and could use portals at will.

Eventually, Beverly climbed from the river and trudged into the forest. I walked after her until I heard the sound of a voice raised in anger.

I rushed in front of Beverly so I could protect her from danger. Hardening my magic into purple cannonballs, I stepped out of the forest.

In front of me was a stone patio with a massive Ferris wheel on one side and a low building on the other. The rest of the space was dotted with little tables and braziers flicking with fire to warm the space. No one else was there except for the source of the shouting.

A woman with frizzy red hair argued with a squirrel perched on a table. I was used to seeing her in a prison jumpsuit or designer dresses that showed off her assets, but this time she wore baggy sweatpants and a green jacket. I was also used to seeing her standing upright, but right now, she was on all fours and twitching her ass like she was working for tips.

“Bob already paid you to stop stealing food from his customers!” she said.

The squirrel chattered.

“What do you mean, you demand double nuts?”

I relaxed my magic, letting my attack flow away. “Minerva Montgomery,” I drawled.

She scrambled to her feet, her cheeks turning pink. “Alyssa...” she trailed off. “Um, I don’t actually know your last name.”

“Beaver.”

“Really? Beaver? That’s... pretty cool. Did you know they mate for life?”

“You’re the first person to respond with a beaver fact rather than a joke.”

Minnie and I had met when she visited her mate, Ri, in Silver Springs Penitentiary, and when she served a brief stint in the joint. Ri, who I had been protecting while in prison, was a friend of sorts. But I didn’t try to track him down because I didn’t want to risk getting him locked up for socializing with an escaped inmate while he was on parole.

Minnie looked confused. “Um... should you be out here? There’s a wanted poster with your face on it at the diner. At least there was for like five minutes. Sapphire put it up, but Bob took it down. Something about a negative atmosphere. He likes to keep things positive, which is why I’m currently negotiating with squirrels to keep them from stealing customers’ food.”

This must be Yes Now, Bob’s. I had come here years ago looking for Juniper, and a vampire who liked to pretend she

didn't give a fuck while clearly giving all the fucks had tried to chase me off. I never went back.

“Of course I should be out here. Those posters are just to make me look cool.”

Leaves crackled as Beverly ambled out of the woods. She lifted her head to stare at Minnie.

“This is—”

Before I could finish introducing her, Beverly hissed, bared her teeth, and charged at the other witch.



Chapter 33

Minnie scrambled onto the nearest table, forcing the squirrel she was arguing with to leap off it and run for a tree.

If Beverly was mad at Minnie, then Minnie must have done something to her. And nobody fucked with my beaver.

I dashed at Minnie. Her eyes widened, clearly not expecting me to join Beverly's attack.

I grabbed her arm, raising my fist. "What did you do to my beaver?"

At my feet, Beverly groaned and growled as though in an angry rant.

Minnie yanked her arm from my grasp and stomped her foot on the table repeatedly for some reason. "I'm sorry! I know I promised to help you, but there was nothing I could do!"

Beverly growled.

"I didn't set you up." Minnie bared her teeth at Beverly. "How was I supposed to know they'd lock you up?"

I nearly threw a punch. "You landed this poor animal in prison?"

Beverly squeaked and stood on her hind legs to reach for Minnie. The witch scrambled backward on the table and nearly tumbled off the other side.

Minnie glanced from me to Beverly, her eyes wide and worried. "It's not my fault! Ash told them that Beverly was a shifter who had broken into his lab. But he only did that to

save me. And it's not like he thought they'd put you in prison."

Beverly squealed, and my magic flared around my hands.

Minnie eyed me. "We didn't think they'd actually convict a beaver! We figured they'd take her to the station, realize she wasn't a shifter, and set her free! How was anyone to know that some jury would vote to convict a beaver?"

I clenched my jaw, not in rage at Minnie, but at the cops, lawyers, judge, and jurists who had decided to charge a fucking animal. I pulled my magic back into my skin and glanced down at Beverly.

"Is it true that she didn't tattle on you? It was this Ash guy?"

Beverly looked up at me and blinked. Of course, I shouldn't have asked. I didn't speak beaver.

"I'm sorry," Minnie said softly. She leaned forward so she was half hanging off the table and pressed her nose to Beverly's. "I wanted to break you out when I heard, but my last prison break ended up with me behind bars. I mean, intentionally. But still. I couldn't figure out how to actually free someone."

Beverly dropped back to all fours and stared up at Minnie, but she didn't try to bite her or yell at her.

"I'll make it up to you," Minnie said. "I promise. Anything you want."

Beverly grunted.

"What did she say?" I asked.

“She said she’ll think about it. Mainly because she needs me to translate.”

An idea hit me. “Minnie, you understand animal languages innately. Can you apply that to magical languages?”

She shook her head, a strand of red hair falling across her eyes. “Just animals. Why?”

I sighed, disappointed. “I need a book translated.”

“Is it about how to get arrested again?” Minnie teased. “It’s honestly not that hard.”

“And go back to wearing orange jumpsuits? I’d rather don those sweatpants.” It wasn’t exactly true. Her pants looked comfy, and I’d end up back in prison once this was all over since I had never really intended to leave until I had served my time. But Minnie and I often teased each other about clothes when we met in the prison’s visitation room, and I slid into the old habit like shrugging on a robe.

“What are you doing out of prison? What happened to ‘This is a chance to turn your life around’?” Minnie said.

I still believed it. Prison was the only place where I couldn’t harm the people I cared about because they weren’t there—until Beverly, Jag, Elliot, and Moe showed up. It was also the only place that got me to stop drinking.

“I had to free Beverly. Hey, do you know a dark-haired witch who’s been closing portals?”

She shook her head, and my heart dropped. “I hate the portals! They have everyone on edge: one almost took Bob!”

Beverly squeaked as she stared up at me. I crouched to scratch her, but she didn't lean into it like usual.

“She's telling me to help you,” Minnie said, then frowned as Beverly grunted some more. “Help you find... Pool Boy, Wood Boy, Talk Boy, and Grump Boy. Who's that?”

Pool Boy must be Jag for the inflatable pool he filled for Beverly in prison. Wood Boy would be Elliot for letting her chew up the furniture in the library, while Talk Boy was obviously Moe. Ram was always a grump.

Remembering them made my heart contract. I leaned down to push my face against Beverly's fur for comfort. It was damp, and she smelled musty and vaguely of vanilla.

Minnie touched her nose to Beverly's again and gasped as Beverly squeaked. “You have fated mates?”

I lifted my face from Beverly's fur. “I'm surprised too.”

“Congratulations?” Minnie said, though it came out as more of a question. “Beverly says you lost them? Alyssa, what's going on?”

I let go of Beverly and stood. “Unless you know portal magic, there's nothing you can do.”

Minnie didn't look convinced. “I know we're not friends, but Zach—” that was Zachariah, or Ri from prison—“says you looked after him, and if you hadn't... Well, I don't know what would have happened to him in prison. He says he wouldn't have survived without you. And then I wouldn't have him, and Natty wouldn't have his dad. You didn't have to look out for

him, but you were there for him when he needed a friend. So, let me help you now. He'd never forgive me if I didn't help you when I could have."

I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to ask for help, but Minnie and Ri were already on shaky grounds with the law. If anyone knew they were associating with a fugitive, they'd be fucked. And any good I had done in their lives would be destroyed.

Please, universe, just let me have two friends—Beverly and Ri—whose lives I didn't ruin.

"Alyssa?" Minnie said.

I opened my eyes. "You'll just get arrested for associating with me."

"You can always break me out if it goes wrong," she said, but when I didn't even smile, her tone turned serious. "Look, I saw what happened on the news. You, four guys, and Beverly got out of prison using magic, even though it shouldn't have been possible."

It only happened because someone had planted a portal for us, though I still didn't know who or why. But I could break someone out of prison if I wasn't locked up in the anti-magic ward too.

"True, I am very dangerous."

"You asked about a witch who's closing portals... you're trying to fix the portals that are kidnapping people, aren't you?"

I crossed my arms. “Maybe I’m creating them. After all, I am a dark witch with a shady-ass, though sometimes badass, past.”

“I don’t think you are. You’re a good person, Alyssa. I know that, and not just from everything Zach has said. All those times I visited him... I could just tell.” She wrung her hands together. “Just tell me what these missing men look like, and I’ll ask the animals to look for them. Obviously, you need to find them.”

I pressed my lips together to stop any grief from leaking out. “They’re not in Silver Springs. They’re in a bubble dimension. Everyone I love, except Beverly, is trapped in collapsing universes, and someone is casting a spell to prevent me from saving them. I can’t find the bastard who’s doing it.”

Beverly placed a paw on my foot, and fuck, that simple act and Minnie’s offer of kindness were enough to kick down my doors like a SWAT team busting in.

“Beverly’s convinced that animals can help,” Minnie said. “I can talk to them. Just tell me what you need.”

I needed my mates, I needed my friends, and I couldn’t save them alone. Even though I knew I’d regret bringing Minnie into this, I told her everything in a mad rush of words, as though I couldn’t stop them once I started to let them out.

Minnie listened without interrupting, then nodded. “I’ll ask every animal in town to look for portals and signs of suspicious magic. They’ve been worried about the portals too since a chicken on a rocket flew out of one and crashed into a

goose. It's the only thing the birds have been talking about. I'm sure they'll help, and the squirrels will too. They just like spying, and we could always bribe them with more nuts. And the raccoons are very clever and sneaky, so they might see something. And mice can go anywhere."

"Thank you," I said.

"Wait here." Minnie rushed into the building. She returned with coffee, water, a plate of waffles topped with fruit, and a side of green salad. My stomach growled loud enough for Beverly to startle next to me.

"I told Bob I'm still negotiating with the squirrels, and I'm trying coffee and waffles. He seemed to buy it. I also said they've started a strike out here so no one should come out. You've got time to eat in peace, and no one will tell the cops you're here—not that Bob would anyway, but one of the customers might."

I thanked her again. As I inhaled the food, Minnie strolled to the edge of the patio where it met the forest and flapped her arms while she talked to every bird she could find. Then she got on all fours and twitched her ass while she talked to the squirrels.

When I had finished eating, she said, "You smell like you need a shower. How about I book you a hotel room on Screech? Do you need some new clothes? I've got vials of spelled clothes I'll never use, but they're mostly ball gowns. Or we could stop by an ATM."

She was kinder than I deserved. “Thank you. I’ll pay you back later after all this, I promise.” I leaned in to hug her as thanks.

Minnie’s nose wrinkled and recoiled. “Umm... maybe later.”

“Fair enough. I smell like a dick that fucked a hole in a dumpster.”

Beverly headed back to her lodge on the river to tell her forest friends to look for portal magic, while I went to the hotel Minnie was kind enough to book. She promised to ask more animals for intel and report back. I showered for the first time since before leaving prison, and as I lay down on the bed in a towel, I spotted it.

The mini-bar.

My breath caught and my body tensed. Without even deciding to, I crossed to it and cracked it open. Nuts, chocolate, and yep, little bottles of alcohol.

Ah, shit.

I hadn’t had a drink since going to prison and entering therapy almost two years ago, but it was easier not to drink in the joint. Sure, people fermented juice in their toilets, and Ram’s contraband network brought in bottles. But I couldn’t just open a fridge and find alcohol. I had to search it out, and though I often wanted to, I had managed not to.

Now that I was faced with a selection of drinks, my mouth watered and my heart ached. I ran my fingers over the small bottles: beer, rum, wine, and pre-made cocktails.

Just drink it, my brain said. The craving will go away, and your grief will be less for a little while.

It's a lie, it was always a lie. I clenched my fist at my side. I couldn't save anyone if I was blackout drunk.

You don't need to get blackout drunk. Just a little buzzed. Bzz bzz, my brain said.

I pulled my trembling hand out of the fridge, away from the bottles. It's never just a little, though, and I needed to remain alert to keep trying my portal spells.

With my skin crawling, I took a deep breath and called up my magic, wrapping it around every bottle and whispering a spell on trembling lips.

The drinks exploded into dust.

Nooooo, something screamed and kicked within me like an angry toddler. I sat on the floor and put my face in my hands, counting my breaths. Stay dry for Jag, for Elliot, for Moe and Juniper, hell even for Ram. You have to save them.



Chapter 34

“Agent Tiptoe found something,” Minnie said, entering my hotel room as I opened the door a day later. A mouse was perched on her shoulder, their whiskers twitching. “There’s a building near the prison—”

I tensed. No wonder I hadn’t sensed any dark magic when searching Silver Springs. The prison was the one area of town I had steered clear of. I should have fucking known that anyone hiding from me would go there.

“Tiptoe says the building is big and empty,” Minnie continued. “Full of mice and rats. They call it the Kingdom because people don’t go there, and they can run free. Or at least, they used to. One person is living there now, and Tiptoe says they keep making puddles in the sky, but the mice can’t reach them or splash in them. They have a metal circle that makes balls in the air. They scare the mice and rats.”

My heart raced. “That’s the Astrosmos relic. Can Tiptoe show me which building they’re in?”

Minnie tilted her head as though listening to the mouse on her shoulder. She twitched her nose in the same way as the mouse. “He knows the smell of the Kingdom.”

I nodded and turned to unload the paper bag of clothes on the bed. I had slipped out to buy a few items with the money Minnie had lent me. “I’m going now.”

“Alone?”

A cold worry crept into my veins. I knew what she was thinking, and it was too dangerous. “You’ll get hurt.”

Everyone near me always did.

“I can ask my mates to help—”

“No,” I shouted loud enough to make Minnie jump. “Ri is on parole—he can’t be anywhere near me, the prison, or a battle. And there will be a battle because I’m going to tear apart whoever is keeping me from my friends and mates.”

Even though Minnie looked worried, she argued back. “You can’t talk to Tiptoe, and I can, so you need me to show you where the Kingdom is.”

I sighed. “You’ll show me where it is and then leave.”

Minnie nodded and petted Tiptoe with one finger.

“I’ll meet you there,” I told her. “Find the place and stand in the street. I’ll find you. Do not get close to it alone.”

Minnie scoffed. “Why would I ever do that?”

After Minnie and Tiptoe left, I changed from my battered pink suit into my new outfit: black leggings, a crop top, and a dark jacket over the top. I kept my clunky prison boots. They were heavy and good for kicking.

I wasn’t going in quiet. No, the rage bubbling in my blood was too much for that. I paused to glance at myself in the mirror, and whispered, “No more hiding.”

I needed backup who wouldn’t get hurt, and I knew where to find it.

Juniper’s store, The Magical Rooster, was locked with the lights off despite it being the middle of the day. It stung like a

dildo going in the ass dry to see her beloved shop dark and shuttered. I had gone to prison to save this business. Confessing to cursing her toys meant that everyone knew I had turned them bad, not her.

Since I had been here last, she had added a second level to the shop. Leafy plants crowded its glass walls, and I spotted some of her rogue dildos fluttering around inside like birds. I snorted. It was her rehabilitation unit for sex toys that turned bad. But I wasn't here for them.

I was here for her security system.

I weaved Juniper's aura around me like a cloak. When I touched the door, it unlocked and swung open. Her security dildos above the door roused themselves, shaking their butterfly wings and long bodies. Her flying ropes, cuffs, and whips uncoiled from the top shelves and weaved through the air like snakes through water. They were calm now, almost playful, because they thought I was their mistress.

I smiled. "Come on, boys, time to fuck an asshole."

With Juniper's aura as my own, her battle toys swooped out of the shop and followed me down the street like attack dogs excited for a fight. I took to the air. My magic hummed in my blood and along my skin, fueled by the rage burning through my heart like wildfire that kills the dying underbrush and makes way for new life. Juniper's attack toys followed.

I didn't care who spotted my fugitive ass and menagerie of sex toys as we soared over the town toward the prison. It rose like

a tumor at the edge of the quaint little town, as out of place as a beaver at an all-dude orgy.

From above, I spotted Minnie's autumn red hair on the street that connected to the prison's long driveway. The road was empty, its pavement cracked and potholed. Clearly, not many people or businesses wanted to set up within sight of a magical prison.

I landed with my attack toys fluttering around me.

"I see you've brought a vibrating army," Minnie said.

"Where's the building?" I said.

Minnie pointed to a low and long building down the street. Its brick walls had been overtaken by climbing plants, and the roof was gone—I could spot the top of a tree, orange and red in the fall, somewhere beyond the front wall. But it was the narrow windows that sent a shudder down my spine. The glass was shattered and gone, but the metal bars remained.

It had been an institution of some kind, a prison or asylum, now long abandoned.

Well, it was about to become even more abandoned when I killed whoever was in there.

I marched up the building with my attack toys. Minnie fell into step next to me.

Why did people keep putting their trust in me when I kept fucking up?

"Minnie, no."

Her eyes were wide, clearly verging on panic, but she took a deep breath and reached into the pocket of her sweatpants. She withdrew a glass vial.

“Once more, for old time’s sake.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. She popped open the vial and downed its contents. As she did, her clothes shifted, changing from sweatpants and a jacket to a flowing blue ball gown like Cinderella. I glanced down. Yep, she even had the glass slippers. She tossed the vial aside, smashing it on the pavement.

“Let’s do this!”

Fuck, I wasn’t going to talk her out of this, was I? I really fucking hoped this battle didn’t end with her getting hurt.

I turned to the abandoned building. I could sense the magic within, a beating aura, as once-loved and now-hated as a cold cocktail. Azea: a former friend, one of the assholes who had burned the homes in Free Jinx years ago and sent me threatening letters in prison.

Now, she was blocking me from saving my loved ones while she tormented a town.

I could have roared with fury. Instead, I funneled it into my magic. My mind and body and blood vibrated with the power, and I felt like I could smash the world at a whim.

I lashed out with my magic, grabbing the front wall of the building, tearing it off, and tossing it toward the prison. The wards and shields would take care of the debris.

Azea stood across from me at the foot of a decrepit, winding staircase. Her hair was still bright blue, and her eyes glinted with the same rage I felt. A purple sheen shimmered the air between us as she cast a shield around herself. The Astrosmos rested in her palm. An air bubble churned above it, and as she glared at me, her eyes swirled with the same rainbow-tinted ripples as a portal.

I needed that relic to save my people. I needed it more than air.

“You look like a substitute teacher who’s trying too hard,” Azea sneered. “Are you going to turn a chair backward and rap about fractions?”

“Wow, Azea, you look like an elephant’s ass, if that elephant is giving birth and shitting at the same time.”

Minnie glanced between us. “You know her?”

“Unfortunately,” I said, cutting off Azea. “She’s a coward with the personality of a teenager’s mustache, thin with no layers, and lots of spots where there is nothing of interest at all.”

Minnie nodded. “Reminds me of my mother.”

“That’s your problem, Alyssa,” Azea said, not even bothering with Minnie. “And Juniper’s too. You’re arrogant. Too arrogant to ask for leniency when I have everyone you care about locked away. I can destroy their dimensions at any moment, you know.”

She wanted me to beg. As my anger flared, so did my magic, filling the air before me and straining toward Azea like attack dogs on a leash.

Next to me, Minnie dropped to all fours and twitched her nose.
“Get the others.”

Agent Tiptoe hopped off her shoulder to run for the side of the building.

The mouse was getting help, so I kept talking to buy time.
“Did you send the portal into the prison?”

Azea glared. “That was for Ram. He wasn’t supposed to bring you out.”

I scoffed. “I brought him out.”

“You corrupted him and turned him against me like you did to everyone.” Her voice cracked. “When you and Juniper broke up our gang, I lost everyone. Half of them went running to you and your little world. The other half went their own ways. Even Sandra, who stuck with me for a while, eventually gave up because she was scared of you and Juniper. Now, even Ram hates me when I was the only one keeping his vision alive.”

I should have felt bad for her because she was right. We had broken up the gang that had been her whole life—and mine once, before I realized that our plan of taking over magic was bullshit. And I should have felt bad for her because I knew what it was to lose everyone; hell, this wasn’t even the first time I had lost my loved ones.

But I didn’t feel bad for her. Not a bit. My stint as a villain hadn’t come out of nowhere, and the part of me that had fueled it wasn’t entirely gone either.

“You bitch,” Azea growled with tears in her eyes. The air bubble above the Astrosmos started to spin, and I knew what was coming. “You’re a treacherous monster, and I’ll make you pay for all you stole from me.”

“You’re right. The bitch is back, and the thing is, I’m better at being a monster than you are.” I attacked.



Chapter 35

I shaped my magic into twin flaming whips, each an extension of my arm, and cracked them at Azea's shield. As I hit it, vibrations traveled from my magic up my arms and down my spine. But her shield shattered.

Easy.

With a nod, I sent the attack dildos and ropes flying at her.

Azea's mouth moved as she muttered a spell. The air bubble over the Astrosmos spun faster and faster, and half a dozen portals burst to life between me and her, including one an inch from my face.

I jumped back and raised my whips before me as a giant skeleton hand reached out of the portal. As it hit my magic, I was thrown backward and hit the pavement with pain shooting up my back.

I felt half the attack toys vanish, each like ripping out a hair from my head, as they tumbled into portals that had opened in their path. The rest collided with purple tentacles, flying skulls, and slugs wearing top hats—okay, that was weird—that soared out of the portals.

Oh no, Minnie! I thought.

I jumped to my feet and whirled to the other witch. Her arms bent like little mouse legs as she shook her butt.

“Hurry up, Tiptoe!” she shouted.

The giant skeleton hand stretched out of its portal and reached for her. My heart leaped into my throat.

No, not another friend lost. Not today.

I wrapped my whip around one of the bony fingers, closed my fist, and yanked the hand away from Minnie.

As it hurtled toward me, I let go of it, dropped to the ground, and rolled underneath. Movement caught my eye, and I glanced under the portals to the broken and overgrown tiles of the building.

Little furry bodies with long tails scurried along the floors, their butts shaking as quickly as Minnie's ass. They hid among grass and debris as they crept toward Azea.

Minnie must be commanding them, like some kind of Cinderella, but instead of making dresses, her mice were going into battle.

And I had to make sure the poor little things didn't get hurt.

I rolled to my feet and ducked under a flaming skull being chased by a dildo firing lasers. The giant skeleton hand yanked itself free from its portal, and with the sound of dry grinding bones, it flew at me.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled my magic in front of me, fueling it with the rage burning in my blood, and fired at the hand.

My magic hit it like a bomb, and it exploded. Bone fragments flew backward into one of the tentacles that was reaching out of a portal. It, too, dropped to the ground, limp and dead.

I spun and raced between two portals, ducked a tentacle from a third, and rounded a pitched battle between flaming skulls,

fancy slugs, and laser dildos.

Azea stood in the same spot as before. Her eyes swirled rainbow like the portals, and the Astrosmos vibrated in her hand. Her shield was gone. She probably couldn't keep it up while managing so many portals.

Perfect.

Smiling, I formed my magic into a cannonball and—

The ground vanished beneath me.

She had opened a portal under my feet, and I was falling straight down into an unknown world I wouldn't be able to escape.

My heart rose into my throat. I grabbed at the pavement and managed to get an arm onto it, stopping my fall. My lower half hung down into the portal while my upper half remained in this world.

As I started to pull myself up, Azea met my gaze, her eyes the color of oil on water, and a grin on her lips.

I knew what she meant to do.

She was going to close the portal. I could let go and plummet into a bubble dimension to wait until it collapsed and killed me. Or I could hang on and be sliced in half when the portal closed.

Her mouth started to move to speak the spell. I knew it. It was one word.

Mice leaped from the broken stairway behind her and landed on her head, shoulders, and arms. Azea yelped and tried to brush them off. “Ew, ew, ew!”

“Don’t you dare hurt my mouse friends,” Minnie shouted, baring her teeth at Azea, who was too busy trying to shake off her furry attackers to notice.

Grinning at my reprieve, I formed some of my magic into a whip and wrapped it around one of Juniper’s dildos as it flew past.

It pulled me from the portal, into the air, and right toward Azea. I let go of it and landed among the building’s rubble a few meters from the other witch. Reaching out with my magic, I yanked the Astrosmos from her hand to mine.

I could feel the ward she had cast on it like grease in my eyes blocking my view. Taking a deep breath, I formed my aura into an imitation of Azea’s: blue and purple as a bruise, as bitter as old coffee grinds on your tongue, and as sad as a senior with no visitors.

The Astrosmos locked onto me. I felt its spells turning in my mind like the gears of a clock. I felt the strange, awe-inspiring touch of portals like seeing twin rainbows as your pants rip right along your ass crack. I don’t know why I felt Astrosmos portals in that particular area.

“Dùin,” I whispered, the spell for close. The swirling ball of air on the relic whooshed and vanished. I felt each and every portal shut, felt it like closing my eyes after a long day, only a dozen times all at once.

I sighed, then reset the dials on the Astrosmos to open portals to specific locations.

Something knotted around my throat, and I was yanked backward. Instinctively, I tightened my grip on the Astrosmos as I crashed to the floor. Azea stood over me, a length of her magic running from her clenched fists to around my neck. Her hand tightened, and the magic pressed against my air pipe like someone standing on my neck. I gasped for breath but couldn't get any.

Mice ran up her legs and along her body and head, but she ignored them. I lashed at her with my magic, but a purple sheen of a shield rose between us, and my attack bounced off it like a tennis ball. Without the Astrosmos to draw her attention and power, she could unleash every bit of her magic on me.

“Bite! Bite!” Minnie yelled at the mice, snapping her own teeth repeatedly. If they were following her orders, Azea was determined to ignore them and kill me instead.

The Astrosmos buzzed against my palm. I let my eyes drift closed, and my magic flowed into the relic and back.

“Don't you dare!” Azea roared and her knot around my neck pulled so tight, I was sure she was going to slit my throat.

I imagined Juniper, remembered her sardonic smile, the feel of her aura—calm and tinged with darkness and the promise of danger like a pine forest at night, if the trees were shaped like giant cocks. I couldn't speak the spell, I had no air, but I mouthed the words and hoped that was enough.

The Astrosmos was warm under my fingers, but that was it. Nothing happened.

Darkness crept along the edges of my vision, and I let my eyes fall shut. This was it.

A whoosh filled the air, and Azea's hold on my throat vanished. I rolled to my side, coughing and gasping for air. I felt along my throat for blood, but thankfully my fingers came away dry.

As I looked up, I spotted Azea pinned against the wall with the mice scurrying away. Her face and arms were covered in bleeding bite marks.

Pamarten, the elderly witch from Free Jinx, Brinhilde, and two younger witches stood over her with their hands aflame. Five other Eclipses raced around the street alongside Juniper's remaining attack dildos to chase down the flying skulls, tentacles, and rocket hat-wearing slugs.

Behind me stood a new portal. My portal. Familiar faces leaped out of it, bleary-eyed, dirt-steaked, and stinky enough to smell them from here.

But alive. And here! Back in the real world.

Two more of the witches from Free Jinx joined Pamarten in holding Azea at bay. The witch, Beackon, kneeled by my side, a hand on my back, and I felt the cooling touch of her healing magic spread down my aching neck.

I sighed. "Thank you."

She smiled and nodded once, always the shy one. As I climbed to my feet, she jumped up to help me.

Dozens of familiar faces surrounded me like a dream where you're back in some long-lost childhood place. I must be dying, and this was a hallucination. I knew it wasn't, but it felt like it.

I had never saved this many people before. Usually, I was pissing off this many people.

Questions came like bullets.

"Hold on," I said and pushed through them to the portal.

Juniper's mates, Oscar and Shakes, leaped through, followed by Sammy the pirate, carrying Juniper in his arms. I had never seen my friend, so strong and powerful, like this before.

I rushed to her side, Beackon along with me. "Juniper!"

She looked up at me with her dark eyes glazed and half closed.

"You saved me again."

"When did I do it the first time?" I said.

She snorted, and her eyes drifted closed.

"She's been holding the dimension together for over a week,"

Oscar said. "No sleep at all."

Beackon placed a hand on Juniper's forehead and nodded.

"She's not injured, just very tired."

I sighed in relief.

As Minnie shouted that she was calling ambulances for any who needed it, I wandered away from the crowd. With a word,

I closed the portal to Free Jinx: the home I had built for myself and other lost souls where we could hide from the world that hated us, and that we were at risk of hating back.

“No more hiding,” I muttered and turned to an empty spot on the road. I had one more set of people to rescue.



Chapter 36

It was the smells that did it.

I remembered Jag's scent, sweet and warm like hot cider on a fall day. Moe's was musky with a touch of saltiness that reminded me of the beach in summer, while Elliot's was fragrant and fresh like a forest after spring rain. Ram's smell I knew from years ago. It was rich and piney.

I remembered them all.

My magic flowed into the Astrosmos, and a ball of wind whooshed about it, spinning like a spherical tornado. The air before me tore like tissue paper. Without hesitation, I stepped through.

I landed on sand that was blue and glittery like some shit from a stupid gender reveal party. Nothingness hung heavy above, as claustrophobic as being in a coffin underground. Across from me, a giant snail snored.

Well, snail was the closest word I had for it. It was slug-shaped, but its body gleamed like stained glass in a hundred colors, and where a shell should be, a spiral galaxy swirled instead. Its snores made the ground rumble, but they couldn't block out the sound of music. Sweet, calming music that made my skin tingle.

Jag, Elliot, and Moe's backs were to me as they played in unison. The gold ribbons were back, connecting me to them, and something settled inside me like a restless cat curling up in bed. I paused to eye their bare asses—well, Jag and Elliot's.

Moe's was mostly covered by his hands playing a slow beat. His pale skin was red from all his drumming, poor guy.

To their left, Ram slumped on the sand with one arm bandaged in a strip of fabric torn from his shirt. It was caked with dry blood, which made my stomach twist. Not from the sight of blood—I saw plenty of that monthly—but from worry. Actual worry. For Ram.

His other hand was raised. Purple magic sparked on fingers while matching ones danced along the edge of the nothingness like fireworks. He was keeping what little was left of this world from fully collapsing like Juniper had in Free Jinx.

And apparently, JEM was keeping that giant galactic snail asleep so it wouldn't cause them trouble.

Though I was worried about Ram, he was holding the dimension together. He couldn't leave until Jag, Elliot, and Moe were safely back in the real world, so I ran to my musicians first.

As I dashed in front of them, the music jerked to a stop. Their eyes were bloodshot and baggy. Clearly, they hadn't slept much, if at all.

"Alyssa!" Jag, Elliot, and Moe shouted.

As they threw their arms around me, I laughed and clutched at their arms, their backs, and any part of them I could reach with my free hand. Jag and Elliot's dickstruments pressed against my chest and side.

Elliot nuzzled my neck. "I missed you!" he said.

Jag squeezed me tight. “I knew you’d save us.”

“I love you,” Moe declared.

I didn’t even feel panicked or confused by his affection. I just kissed his nose because it was the closest part of him to my mouth.

Behind me, the snail groaned, and the world shook.

With his eyes widening, Elliot stepped out of my reach and started playing his dickstrumment again. The dimension stilled as his lullaby-like tune calmed the creature.

I turned to the snail. It blinked eyes that were larger than I was tall.

“I’ll handle it. You three get to the portal.”

Jag shrunk his cock to normal and grabbed the discarded jackets to tie around his waist again. Moe buttoned his jeans and said, “Are you going to kill my friend?”

I raised a brow. “You like this thing?”

“I’ve been playing music for it for days, and our music makes it happy. Plus, it’s probably the only one of its kind.”

I should have been annoyed, but I smiled at his kindness. I lifted my free hand—the other still held the Astrosmos—and let my magic flow around the snail. “Micsorare.”

It shrank, smaller and smaller until I couldn’t even see it from here.

That Ram hadn’t been able to cast a similar spell meant he had been holding this world together from the moment they got

here. Or he had to fight off a lot more giant creatures, such as the teeth that had grabbed the men in the first place.

With a sigh, Elliot stopped playing. “That was more practice than I ever needed.” His voice was rough, and his lips were cracked. He hadn’t had enough to drink for all the blowing he was doing. He de-clarineted his dick and pulled up his pants.

Moe stumbled through the blue sand with his head down. “Found it!” He bent to pick up his galactic snail.

“Get to the portal,” I told them. Finally, I turned to Ram and kneeled next to him.

He lifted his head and smiled weakly. His eyes were so baggy, he looked like he had been punched in the face. “I knew you’d find a way to save us.”

“At least one of us did. Come on.” I grabbed his arm above his injury and helped him up. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders to help walk his exhausted ass to the portal.

Of course, Jag, Elliot, and Moe hadn’t left. They waited by the portal.

“Ram and I have to go last,” I told them.

Moe pouted and Jag grumbled, but they finally listened and stepped through. Elliot met my gaze. I expected him to say something profound.

“That was the longest I didn’t wear pants,” he said.

I almost laughed, then realized Elliot was saying something deep after all; he had gone a long time without hiding.

He smiled and then jumped through the portal. I followed, helping an exhausted Ram back to Silver Springs. The road by the abandoned asylum was busy with lingering supes and flashing sirens. Squeezing the Astrosmos in my hand, I whispered a single-word spell and closed the portal behind us.

Sleep, I told the Astrosmos. Its air bubble whooshed back into the relic, and I slid it into the pocket of my leggings.

“We need a healer!” I shouted.

Beackon rushed out of the crowd, and I handed Ram over to her care. The moment I let go of him, Jag, Elliot, and Moe threw their arms around me and planted kisses all over my head and face. I laughed and kissed each of them back.

Sirens shrieked, people talked, and someone was calling for me. I knew that my people needed answers, and I had to decide what to do with Azea, but at the moment, I didn’t care. I just wanted to stay in Jag, Elliot, and Moe’s arms forever. Let the people from Free Jinx handle the rest.

“I’m never letting go of you,” I whispered to Jag, Elliot, and Moe.

“Good, because I can’t take my hands off you,” Jag said.

“Yay, hugs forever!” Moe said.

Elliot kissed my hair. “This is real,” he whispered, his breath warm on my skin. “I missed you so much. I felt as empty as the void.”

The strangest thing was that his words didn’t make me feel excited or touched or even horny. I just felt like I had come

home. I kissed his ear, and Moe kissed mine on the other side.

Someone tapped me on the back, and with a sigh, I extracted myself from the men.

Minnie stood behind me, looking flustered in her blue ball gown. “Did you do it? Did you save everyone?”

I smiled. “Thanks to you and the mice! I’m going to bring them their favorite foods. And I’ll fix up their kingdom. And I owe you... well, everything.”

“You took care of my Zachariah while he was locked up, so now we’re even.” She pulled me in for a quick hug. “They took Juniper to the hospital just in case and...” She dropped her voice. “The police are here too. They took the bad witch away and everyone is standing between them and you guys.”

I looked around at the Eclipses lingering on either side of us like human walls. Someone must be chopping onions nearby because my sight went a little watery.

“Are you okay?” Minnie said.

“I’m just... not used to so many people caring.”

Elliot rubbed my back, and Moe said, “Awww, we care!”

I smiled. “Minnie, this is Elliot, Moe, and Jag. The guy being healed is Ram.”

Beackon had unwound the fabric from his arm and placed her palms on the very red gashes. They were slowly knitting together under her magical touch. But his eyes were so bleary, I wasn’t sure he even knew I was introducing him to someone.

“Guys, this is Minnie, my...” I hesitated, not sure if it was presumptuous to call her a friend.

“Her very good friend, I hope.” Minnie smiled. “A few months ago, I didn’t think I had any friends, but now... I’m lucky to have people like you in my life, Alyssa.” She flushed slightly.

“I’m lucky to have you too, Minnie.”

“Ooh, can we be friends?” Moe said, offering his hand.

She shook his hand and grinned. “I’d love that.”

“Nice to meet you,” Elliot said.

Jag took her hand, and I realized belatedly that their hands had just been on their dickstruments and ass, and I should have warned poor Minnie.

“Does your dress have pockets?” he said with a grin.

“No, it’s highly impractical. I can’t wait for the spell to wear off so I can go back to normal clothes. But it did look badass on the battlefield, don’t you think?”

Ram groaned and tried to lift his uninjured arm to shake Minnie’s hand but couldn’t quite do it.

He needed more than a healer. He needed a hospital.

Minnie shot me a questioning look.

“I’ll get him to an ambulance,” I said.

Best if I did it in case the cops tried to arrest us when we stepped out from behind the Eclipses’ human wall. I didn’t want to drag Minnie into any trouble with the law.

She pointed behind me. “The paramedics are over there. What do we do with everyone else? There’s like a hundred people, and I can’t afford that many hotel rooms. I don’t know if Silver Springs has that many hotel rooms!”

They had nowhere else to go. Their home had been mine in Free Jinx. “I don’t know either. Maybe there’s a school gym or something we can use as an emergency shelter?”

Minnie nodded. “I’ll talk to Liam. He’s that cop over there.” She gestured somewhere at the edge of the crowd. “He’s my friend Violet’s mate, but he’s nice and can do things like force a gym to house people.” She pushed through the crowd.

I turned to Ram and Beackon. “We have to get him to an ambulance.”

The shy witch nodded, her brown hair falling over her eyes. “I stitched it.”

Ram’s gashes were half-closed now rather than gaping wounds.

“You did fantastic.”

She smiled behind her hair, ducking her head.

I weaved a spell, lifting Ram off his feet. He didn’t even protest, which showed how fucked over he was.

As I carried him toward an ambulance, a dozen of my people followed alongside, blocking us from the view of the cops who were questioning other Eclipses and tagging evidence—mostly dildos and tentacles.

I handed Ram over to the paramedics and turned to Jag, Elliot, and Moe. “Go with him. You might need treatment for dehydration too, and he’ll need somebody with him. I’m going to find a place for everyone else to stay, then I’ll meet you at the hospital.”

Elliot nodded and climbed into the ambulance. Jag opened his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. “Get your fine, bare ass in that ambulance now.”

Moe glanced between us and jumped into the EMS. Jag sauntered up to me and leaned close. “Lucky for you, I’m very turned on right now.”

I burst into laughter. He winked and stepped up into the now-crowded wagon after the others. A paramedic pulled the door shut, and the ambulance pulled away.

I watched them go and watched the golden ribbons that bound us—well, four of us—stretch but never break.

I wondered if there was something between Ram and me that didn’t break either, though I couldn’t see it. It was then that I realized I wasn’t worried about him attacking Juniper at the hospital. I didn’t think he’d do it.

While Minnie and her mates—who all showed up to help—and Liam got an emergency shelter open at a school gym, I checked on the Eclipses who didn’t need to go to the hospital. They filled me in on their miserable week watching their home crumble. It had started when Juniper and her mates visited Free Jinx. Minutes after their arrival, Azea had made off with the Astrosmos. Nobody had even seen her coming.

Fuck, that meant she had another relic somewhere. Azea was sneaky and a skilled thief, but not skilled enough to best Juniper and dozens of other witches on her own. It also meant she had been watching Free Jinx and had planned her attack to coincide with Juniper's visit to take out Juniper and all the Eclipses at the same time.

She was lucky the cops had hauled her ass to the pen before I could kill her. Actually, why hadn't I killed her? Weird that I had turned my attention from my rage and murderous desires to opening portals and saving people instead. Maybe Ram wasn't the only one who had changed recently.

Soon, the cop's witches were flying groups of my people to the shelter. They still had no homes to go back to, but they were safe for the moment.

With the crowd thinning, I started to weave an invisibility spell, but hands clamped around both my wrists and jerked my arms behind my back.

I sighed. Of fucking course.

A gruff, angry voice said, "Alyssa Woodrow Beaver, you're under arrest. Any spell you cast can and absolutely will be used against you in a court of law."



Chapter 37

“I thought you broke out,” Volos sneered as he sauntered up to me in the prison yard.

I flicked my wrist to slide the tampon applicator out of my sleeve. “I came back for you.”

His eyes widened, and I jumped. Throwing my weight against him, I forced him to the ground, landing on top of him. He squirmed and squealed, but I grabbed his chin and jammed the applicator into his mouth, squeezing the plunger until his screams turned to gags.

“That one wasn’t even for Oscar,” I growled in his face. “I enjoyed it.”

None of that was true. It was for Oscar, and I wasn’t here for Volos. I was here to serve my time so that I wouldn’t have to live on the run.

I stood, stepped over Volos, and strolled away. When I heard him start coughing again, I knew he had pulled the tampon out of his throat.

Even though the yard was busy, nobody even glanced my way as I jumped Volos. They all thought I could use magic within the ward, and I was happy to let them think that so none of them would bother me.

There was one exception.

“Hello, monster,” Azea drawled behind me.

I turned. The mice’s bite marks were still healing on her face. “Clearly, they don’t care about prisoner safety if they locked

you in here with me.”

She ignored my threat. “I can’t believe you let them arrest you again.”

“Admittedly, me neither,” I said.

This time, I had plenty of reasons not to go to prison, but I still wanted the new start of a clean record—well, sort of a clean record. I had committed a hell of a lot of crimes that the authorities had not linked to me yet. But I didn’t want to be on the run anymore. I didn’t want to hide.

I was just glad that Jag, Elliot, and Moe weren’t here. They had the sense to go on the run rather than to get arrested to see me. I wasn’t sure how to feel about Ram being free. He should still be behind bars like me, but maybe he was happy or, at least, at peace wherever he was now.

Azea stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Some of our old friends are here.” I knew that. We had been avoiding each other for years, and even Ram had largely stayed away from them. “Me and them are going to make your life a living hell.”

I rolled my eyes. “That is the most generic threat I ever heard.”

“Oh, really? How about this? I’ll stick your head in my cell’s toilet until you choke on my piss.”

That was much better: specific, graphic, grammatically correct, and within her ability to carry out. But I didn’t tell her that. “I’ve heard that one a thousand times.”

“No you haven’t. No one has!”

She wasn't very good at being intimidating. I crossed my arms. "Did you send the cum rain?"

Azea narrowed her eyes but answered anyway. "I was trying to open a portal to free Ram because the bastard hadn't found the one in the book yet. Portals do random cum."

That's what I figured when it became obvious Juniper hadn't sent it. "Why were you tormenting the town?"

She shrugged. "Why not? It's where everything went wrong."

Years ago, when Azea had tracked down Juniper in Silver Springs, Juniper had accidentally stolen her magic. Azea got it back when Juniper destroyed the magic-stealing Scourge Stone, but living without magic was difficult. Ironic that she was trapped in an anti-magic ward now.

Silver Springs was also where I reconnected with Juniper to take down Ram and our old gang that still meant so much to Azea.

"Next time, face people directly rather than attacking them from afar like a pathetic coward," I said.

Azea rolled her eyes. "Only idiots get into fights and risk their asses when there's an easier way."

I took a deep breath. I wasn't going to get drawn into her bullshit anymore. "I hope you learn to move on and find peace." I meant it. Yay me for being kind and taking the high road.

"Go fuck yourself!"

I gestured to the bite marks on Azea's skin. "They have some foundation in the commissary; it's the cheap stuff but even that will do wonders for your face." Okay, I was still a petty bitch.

Before Azea could strike back, Vigga, the guard, shouted, "Inmate Beaver, time for your hearing."

As I turned to her, she glared at me by the door into the main prison building. The usually friendly guard was not so friendly since I had fought her to break out.

"What hearing?" I said. I had already pleaded guilty to the prison break and been sentenced to an additional two years. Fuck, being all good and truthful sucked.

"The schedule says you have a hearing," she said.

I followed her into the building and fell into step next to her. "This has to be a mistake. I was already sentenced."

Vigga shrugged. "I just take prisoners where they tell me."

I sighed. Well, they'd figure out the error when I reached the courtroom.

Vigga led me through the corridors to a courtroom near the front of the prison. Hearings were often held within the prison itself so that the inmates would remain safely in the ward. There were too many escapes when they used to transport supes to a courthouse.

When I walked into the courtroom, it erupted into cheers.

I startled and gaped at the far end of the room. Spectators were always allowed at hearings, but no one ever came because of

the ward. But now, the benches were packed.

I spotted most of the Eclipses, Juniper with her men, Minnie with Ri, Jace, Tanner, and all the others we had rescued from the portals.

And right in the front row sat Jag, Elliot, and Moe.

My throat closed. No, no, they can't be here. They're supposed to be on the run. Oh fuck, if they're sitting in a hearing without cops jumping them, they must be out on bail and will face trial soon. Oh shit, what if they're on trial now, and I'm here to testify?

Elliot held up a sheet of paper and pointed at it with a smile, but I couldn't see what it said from across the room. Moe hoisted a tank with his snail in it, though it looked much less spacey inside the ward.

I was glad his pet was safe, but why was it here? Why was he here? I clenched a fist, wishing I had my magic so I could save Jag, Elliot, and Moe from prison.

Vigga grabbed my arm and led me to a chair behind a desk next to my public defender. She went to stand by the wall, watching.

My lawyer—a woman named Arna with thick glasses and a tight ponytail—leaned toward me. “For once, do not say you deserve to be in prison. That’s all I ask.”

“What’s going on?” I said. “This—”

“Silence, please,” shouted a high-pitched voice.

I shot an annoyed look at the judge and realized there wasn't a single judge behind the other desk. It was three people instead, and none of them wore black robes.

I glanced behind me at the crowd. Was I on some TV show? What was happening? There were no cameras, though.

The person with the high voice said, "We will now begin the parole hearing for Alyssa Beaver."

I whipped back to the front. "Wait, what?"

"Shhh," Arna said, then leaned in close again. "Half the town has been protesting at city hall for this hearing. Don't mess it up."

My brows shot up like furry rockets. This had to be a dream. Did the guards tase me into unconsciousness after I choked out Volos?

"Ms. Beaver," the parole board person continued. "We have reviewed testimony submitted by dozens of citizens who say you saved their lives. Many more have written letters expressing their gratitude for you having stopped the portal attacks that had them living in fear. Your therapist says you have made great progress and have overcome alcoholism while in prison. Is that correct?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "Yes, Your Highness. I mean, your judginess. I mean, your—"

"Just say yes," Arna muttered, and I closed my mouth.

"All but one of the prison guards say that you were an exemplary inmate until the portal attacks."

Really, only one disliked me still? Why? But I took my lawyer's advice and stayed quiet.

“Ramrod Johnson, who is still at large, sent a video saying he orchestrated the prison break and forced you to join him under threat of violence.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. He had sacrificed himself for me again.

“Therefore, in light of your bravery and your service to Silver Springs and its citizens, this board grants you early parole. You will serve the remainder of your sentence in the community; you are not to leave the state, and you will check in with a parole officer and therapist weekly. Congratulations.”

The crowd erupted into cheers. Someone was shaking my shoulder, but I just gaped at the parole board.

“What was that?” I said, but no one heard me over the shouting.

Jag wrapped his arms around my shoulders and kissed my hair.

“You have to run now,” I told him.

He laughed and shook his head. “We all got parole!” He pointed, and I followed his finger to Elliot, who held up a paper and smiled.

Ah, it was his parole conditions.

“We turned ourselves in after you were arrested,” Jag explained.

“Dumbasses,” I said.

He chuckled. “We were held in the town jail because we were deemed not dangerous. They let us out last week. Everyone in town has been demanding your release too!”

How? Why? “Huh?” I said.

Arna poked my arm, and I turned to her. “We have to fill in some paperwork before you’re free.”

I nodded and stood. Thanks to all the magic in the world the lawyer was there, because I was too dazed to understand the paperwork. I felt like I was moving through a dream or walking underwater, like when I snuck onto yachts to rob them.

Oh yeah, don't mention that, I reminded myself.

The prison guards returned my belongings—the black clothes I had been wearing when re-arrested, and the Astrosmos. Thankfully, they didn’t seem to realize it was a magical relic or they probably wouldn’t have given it back. After I changed from the orange jumpsuit, Vigga walked me to the prison’s front gate.

“Don’t ever come back here,” she said.

“Thank you for being the least shitty guard,” I said.

She practically shoved me past the gate. I stepped forward, out of the prison’s ward, and felt my magic flood my blood like a wonderful drug.

The same crowd waited for me on the road outside the prison. Juniper ran to me and threw her arms around my neck. I hugged her back. Fuck, it had been so long since we had been

close enough to actually hug. Neither of us was the most affectionate person, and we had years of bad blood between us to make it worse.

But now... Now, we hugged like we were back in high school and comforting one another after the school had expelled us for using dark magic.

“The protests were your doing,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

“Of course, but I didn’t force anyone to show up, though I could have.”

I chuckled. “Don’t say that outside the prison, they might hear you.”

We broke off the hug and I met her eyes, now bright and a little sly, like normal. “You came for me again.”

“Always,” Juniper said. “I figured you didn’t want to break out, so...” She shrugged. “I went the legal route. Mostly. I maaaay have forced their hand to allow a hearing in the first place.”

“We never do anything fully legal.”

“Don’t say that outside the prison, they might hear you,” Juniper said with a wink. Then her expression turned serious. “Thank you for finding me. You always seem to when I vanish.”

“Always,” I promised.

“You were the hero you always wanted to be.”

My heart expanded like a cock turning into clarinet. “Pfft, I never wanted that.”

“Yeah, right.” Juniper glanced away. “I should have stopped Azea when I had the chance. She has been after me for years, but I never had the heart to kill her, curse her, or lock her up. I’m sorry I let her destroy your home.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault. You were trying to give her a chance. You always said redemption didn’t come from sitting in prison but from doing good in the world instead.”

“You’re proof of that... though maybe Azea needs time in the ward to cool down.” She nodded to the waiting crowd.

My gaze went straight to Jag, Elliot, and Moe, still carrying his glass tank with his snail climbing up the side.

“Come on,” Juniper said. “We have a surprise.”



Chapter 38

Rock music blared through the speakers in Club Vee. Candles that flickered through different colors floated in the air, lighting the space in a way that was half cozy and half disco ball.

All the Eclipses were here, and I had spent hours catching up with as many of them as I could in between dancing with Jag, Elliot, and Moe—who could break dance, because, apparently, he had been in one of those dance troupes who compete on street corners. The most I could do was sway sexily like a drunk stripper.

I leaned on the bar and the bartender, a vampire named Rose, handed me a mocktail that smelled of orange and pineapple.

“Everything is non-alcoholic tonight,” she reassured me for the tenth time. I kept asking.

A woman with blonde hair leaned on the bar next to me. She wasn’t dressed for a party, just a tee shirt and jeans.

“Fuzzy navel, please.”

“It’s non-alcoholic,” Rose repeated.

The woman shrugged.

I eyed her sidelong because she wasn’t one of the Eclipses, but she looked vaguely familiar. She met my gaze, and I didn’t jerk away even though she had caught me staring.

“You look good,” she said. “Orange wasn’t your color.”

As she shifted, the light caught a heavy gold medallion around her neck. Oh, I knew who she was. “You still staying in that

shitty motel room?”

“It’s a perfectly respectable motel room,” Delphy grumbled.

“Besides, my sister and I are only in town for a few weeks.”

“Then you should pick a better hotel. What are you doing here?” It was a private party, so I wasn’t sure how she had gotten in or why she would want to hang with strangers.

“Painting Peppermint’s house,” she said. “You know, the one with the sexy Viking boyfriends?”

I rolled my eyes. “That doesn’t narrow it down. Everyone in this town has sexy Vikings or pirates or demi-gods or some shit. I meant, what are you doing at this party?”

Delphy shrugged again and took the drink Rose handed her.

“Oh, Rhae knows someone, I guess.”

“Your sister?”

“Yep.” She took a sip of her fruity cocktail. “Older and terribly bossy.”

“Aren’t they always?” I only had a younger sibling, but I had been the bossy sister before my parents had thrown me out. I hadn’t seen my brother in almost twenty years, thanks to them.

As Delphy took another sip, I eyed the necklace. “What’s with the medallion?”

Redness rose in her pale cheeks. Definitely a magic item then, and probably one she wasn’t supposed to have.

Not that I was one to talk with the Astrosmos still in my pocket.

Delphy turned from the bar. “Is that guy breakdancing?”

That would be Moe, and she was dodging my question about her medallion.

Steal it from her. Rip it from her neck, my brain said.

You know what? Let this one go. I didn’t need to police every magical relic in town.

Delphy offered me her hand. “Hey, I’m Delphine, by the way.”

I shook it. “Not Delphy then, like your sister called you?”

She smiled. “I prefer my whole name, but either is fine.”

“I’m Alyssa. Don’t ever shorten it to something else.”

A tall man with long, dark hair sauntered up to the bar on the other side of Delphine. He looked familiar too. I squinted at him as I tried to place him. He didn’t notice because his sea-blue gaze lingered on Delphine.

“Are you the guy who was closing the portals?” I asked.

Picking up his non-alcoholic beer, he made a noncommittal sound.

“Where the hell have you been?” I snapped.

He blinked and leaned away from me.

“I was looking all over for you! Posting all over Screech, and no one knew who the fuck you were. Now you show up? After it’s all fixed?!”

“Hey! I was running all around town, closing portals. I didn’t have time to check social media.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Fine,” I admitted grudgingly. “I guess.”

He nodded and walked away without another word. Not very friendly, that one.

Delphine’s gaze trailed after him.

“You like them dark and brooding and hard to find.”

She went red again. Way too easy with her skin tone. Smirking, I raised my glass to my lips.

Then I felt him, and the world seemed to slow down.

His aura was familiar and deadly, like a beloved sword in your hand. Calm in a way that could shatter at any time like a damaged crystal.

Putting the mocktail down on the bar, I shouldered my way through the revelers.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to my men as I passed them.

I pushed through Vee’s door. After the heat of so many bodies, the cold fall air hit me like an ice cream headache. Burying my hands in my jacket pockets, I strolled down to the corner and leaned against the club’s wall next to Ram.

His hands were tucked in the pockets of a long gray coat. He wore it open, revealing what looked like a Hawaiian shirt, except it was patterned with skulls and leaves. A far cry from his previous carefully neutral looks. It suited him.

“They let you out,” he said as a greeting.

I shifted a bit closer, so our shoulders were touching. “Thanks, in part, to you. How’s your arm?”

“Magical healers are the best, which is good, because I may have injured a cop when fleeing the hospital.”

Of course he did. “You going to stay on the run?”

Ram nodded, a strand of dark hair falling over his eye. Old Ram would never have let that happen unless by accident in a battle. “They’ve got too much dirt on me.”

I’d like to get dirty on him, my brain said. “One day, they’ll probably figure out I did a bunch more illegal shit too.”

He shifted as though uncomfortable. “I won’t let them.”

While I liked the idea of him protecting my ass for once, it was a terrible plan. “Don’t dig your grave deeper, Ram.”

He smiled, sly and slow. “What does it matter if my grave is six feet or twelve? I’m still in the ground.”

I wanted to protest because it was Ram talking and I liked to annoy him. But he was right.

“Be careful.”

“I never am.”

Neither were Juniper or I, for that matter. “Then don’t be a supervillain. I don’t want to take you down again.”

“I’m going to be decent... but not entirely legal. Civilian life is hard. Do you know people work at desks for forty hours a week and still can’t pay rent? Fuck that. I won’t snitch on Juniper, though,” he added.

I nodded and took my hand from my pocket, letting it hang between us. He dropped his hand to his side so our fingers brushed.

“I know you won’t. I don’t know how or why or if it’s stupid of me, but I didn’t think you’d snitch anymore.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ll try to forgive Juniper for your sake, Alyssa.” He took my hand, squeezing hard.

I laced my fingers through his.

“I’ll try to be the best person possible for you,” he added.

My heart fluttered like the wings of Juniper’s attack dildos. “Thank you for protecting Jag, Elliot, and Moe. And yeah, yeah, ‘it was all for you, Alyssa, etcetera.’ But... thanks.”

Ram smiled. “I’m glad you found people who can make you happy.”

I shifted uncomfortably because he wasn’t one of those people, even though he wanted to be. We had spent our younger days as broken people lashing out at the world and each other. The pain we caused didn’t vanish because we had worked together for a few days, and he had protected JEM. On top of that, he and my best friend were still enemies.

“What are your plans now that you’re free and legal?” Ram said.

I sighed. “I started Free Jinx to create a safe place for outcasts, and now they’re all living in a school gym. Maybe...” I glanced around the street.

A yeti and mermaid were making out in front of the club. A zombie rode a bike along the cobblestones until his arm fell off and he had to stop to retrieve it. Finally, the club behind me was full of dark magic users partying in the open after the town had campaigned to release me from prison.

“What are you thinking?” Ram said.

I didn’t dare hope. Hope was a seagull: you watched it soaring majestically on angel wings through blue skies, then it shat on you and stole your French fries.

“Maybe we can make a safe home here.”

Ram chuckled. “The local coven will hate it.”

“Even better.” I laughed. Covens tended to spit on dark magic users, so I liked pissing them off. “I’ll need to find a way to earn some money. We’d need homes, food—”

“You’ll have money,” Ram said.

I eyed him. “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing you’ll have to put a stop to.” He shifted his feet. “Beyond that... I don’t know. When I was a kid and the pastors would perform exorcisms on me, I thought, I want to make sure this doesn’t happen anymore. At least, I did when they were just chanting Bible verses and not... you know.”

Torturing him. I clasped his arm to give extra comfort.

“I wanted to make the world safe for little lonely magic kids trapped in the normal world. But clearly, I shouldn’t be in

charge of lost souls and traumatized kids. I encouraged the worst in everyone I was looking after,” he said.

“You shouldn’t be anyone’s mentor or therapist,” I agreed. “But Juniper always says redemption comes from action. So, maybe you can find those little lonely magic kids trapped in the normal world and guide them to people who can help. Schools, covens, even Screech so they can see there are others like them.”

“The dark magic users can’t go to covens for help. Maybe they can come here? To your reborn Free Jinx.”

“They’d need a sort of Xavier’s School for Gifted Children,” I said. “I’m not looking after kids, but maybe some of the others would want to run it. A place where kids can be loved and supported so they don’t end in crime and supervillainy like we did.”

“If you’re sticking around, maybe you can set it up. You don’t have to teach the kids.”

I looked at the brightest star twinkling above. “Maybe...”

Ram stroked my hand with one finger and I stroked him with my thumb, reveling in the sensation of his warmth and his touch on my skin. It made what I had to say hurt all the more in a complex mess of pain, like when someone beats the shit out of you.

“We can’t be together right now.”

Ram stared at the dark street. “I know. We have seven years of baggage between us, and we’ll only fuck this up if we don’t

work it out first. I don't want to ever hurt you again, so if we do this, we're going to do it right."

I pressed my lips together to stop any sobs clawing up my throat. "Maybe we can try after we figure out who we are now that we aren't villains... or at least, now that we're lesser villains."

After all, Ram clearly meant to do illegal shit. It would be smart to wait and see what crimes he ended up committing. I figured he'd stick to stealing money, but if he fell back to his taking-over-the-world schemes, I'd have to get a group together to throw him in prison again.

"And I can't be with you until you work things out with Juniper. She's been my friend for fifteen years."

Ram frowned. "I know."

We held hands in silence and tilted our heads to watch the few stars that could be seen from town. I don't think we had ever watched the sky together before.

When the door to Vee slammed open and Delphine and her sister stumbled out, laughing, I shook off the warm reprieve.

"I better get back before someone looks for me and finds you."

We pulled our hands apart, and Ram stood up straight.

"You'll come visit?" I said.

He smiled, wide and happy despite the sorrow in his eyes.

"Always, Sa-Sa."

“Fuck you, Ro-Ro,” I said, shortening the second half of his full name, Ramrod.

He laughed, then turned serious. “I’ll find a way to win Juniper’s trust and forgiveness so that I can have yours.”

My eyes pricked. “I’ll see you around then. Hopefully, not on the news,” I added as a warning.

“Same to you.” Ram dug his hands into his jacket pockets, turned on his heel, and walked into the dark.



Chapter 39

As I danced in a circle with Jag, Elliot, and Moe, the DJ leaned over his booth and shouted, “Hey, what’s your favorite song?”

With a grin, I glanced at Jag who smirked, and then at Moe who waved even though we were right next to each other. I craned my neck to lock gazes with Elliot behind me. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped.

I turned to the DJ. “You wouldn’t know it,” I shouted. “They haven’t released an album yet.”

“But they can play live,” Jag said as he exchanged looks with Moe and Elliot.

My stomach fluttered and my skin goosebumped. Were they really going to do this?

“Come on up,” the DJ said. “I’ll get you a couple of mics.”

Jag and Moe rushed around the booth to its steps. I turned to Elliot. “You don’t have to.”

He took a deep breath, then smiled at me, warm and sweet with his eyes sparkling in the shifting rainbow candlelight. “I’m not scared anymore. Not if you’re here.”

I squeezed his hand as my heart turned to a giant stuffed bear, all squishy and essentially useless.

Elliot followed Jag and Moe up to the DJ booth. I watched from below as the DJ helped them set up mics, then faded out the rock music.

“Who’s ready for live music?” he said over the speakers, and the crowd cheered. “Introducing JEM with a J, the band you’ll never forget!”

I chuckled.

The DJ stepped aside, gesturing to my men. They nodded to each other, and then as one, they pulled down their pants.

I grinned like an idiot. The crowd gasped, cheered, and hollered at them. My men gazed down at me and smiled as though no one else was here.

As Jag and Elliot’s cocks grew into their dickstruments, the club hooted even louder. Then, the three of them began to play.

As their song filled the club, the crowd fell silent, spellbound by the catchy melody. This song was new to me. It was like a chorus of birds if all the birds started to sing in unison and in key. Moe kept a beat like a dozen wings flapping at the same time while Jag sang about the world coming to life in spring. But it was a thinly veiled metaphor for fucking.

They finished and bowed in unison. I clapped and cheered the loudest of anyone in the club.

They pulled up their pants and descended from the DJ booth. “Give it up for JEM with a J,” the DJ shouted, and the club hollered even louder.

I ran up to my guys. I threw my arms around Moe and Elliot and kissed Jag because I was out of hands. “My new favorite song!”

“Awww, you’re our favorite audience,” Moe said.

“I can’t believe I did that,” Elliot said, trembling.

I kissed him, long and hard, until he stopped shaking. “Let’s find a room in the back.”

“Took you long enough to offer,” Jag said and slid a hand along my hip to grab my ass.

My pussy throbbed. *Suck him off here*, my brain said, *who needs a room?*

I ignored her. Holding onto Elliot and Moe while I kissed Jag, I stumbled backward toward the private rooms. I broke off from them to find an unlocked door to a room with a round bed under black and red drapes hanging from the ceiling. Definitely a fuck den.

Moe kissed my neck even before we had shut the door. Elliot ran a hand down my back and under my shirt to my bare skin, making me shiver with anticipa—

Jag slammed the door and locked it before turning to me with a predatory grin. I matched his expression. Letting my magic swirl free, I snapped my fingers and turned his clothes to smoke that drifted away.

Jag’s grin turned to a look of surprise. I looked over his thick thighs, which I wanted to lick, and his torso covered in dark hair that I wanted to jam my hands through.

As I eyed him, his cock grew hard and thick. He smirked at me and closed the distance between us, devouring my mouth without hesitation. Moe sucked on my neck while Elliot kissed

my ear and rubbed a hand along my spine as though counting my vertebrae.

I trembled as my skin tingled under their touch, then I snapped my fingers, disappearing Moe's and Elliot's clothes too.

Elliot startled against my side. He groaned and slid his hand under the waistband of my leggings. Moe chuckled and slipped his hand between my legs. My pussy clenched.

You're going to soak the floor, my brain said, cause a flood to the floor below.

Good.

I hope you have insurance.

Elliot's hand slid past my waistband to my bare ass and squeezed. And for once, my brain shut up and just enjoyed the moment.

Jag grabbed the edge of my shirt, and I lifted my arms so he could pull it over my head. At the same time, Moe and Elliot peeled my leggings down to my feet. A little moan escaped me, making Jag chuckle as he reached behind me to unhook my bra and bare my nipples. They hardened under his gaze, and I bit back the desire to beg him to touch them.

Instead, I kicked off my shoes. Moe and Elliot helped yank my pants and underwear over my feet. I glanced down at their bare skin and their hard cocks. My stomach tumbled with excitement, and my heart raced.

Jag kissed me again as he thumbed my nipples with warm, calloused hands. I shuddered in pleasure. Moe and Elliot's

hands roamed over my ass, thighs, hips, and back as they explored my body. Their mouths planted kisses on my neck, shoulders, and ears. The three of them touched and squeezed and licked and bit every part of me—except my aching pussy—until I didn't even know whose hands were where.

I grabbed at all three of them, dragging my hands along their arms and torsos, slapping their asses, and stroking their cocks until they moaned against my skin when they kissed me. My clit throbbed, and my thighs felt slick. But I was not going to beg for release, not even with them.

Finally, Jag dropped to his knees, lifting my leg and slinging it over his shoulder so that I was spread open for him. I gasped and grabbed his shoulder for support. Behind me, Elliot dropped to his knees, grabbed my cheeks, and spread them wide.

As though they had planned it with some secret signal, Jag and Elliot dove in at the same time. Jag pressed his tongue to my clit while Elliot did the same to my asshole.

My heart raced and my pussy throbbed. I had never been so spread open, so vulnerable before, and fuck, it felt good. Jag made my pleasure build, while the strange and amazing sensation of Elliot working my ass sent a shiver up my spine to the back of my neck. He made me feel like I was floating while Jag's tongue made me feel very, very grounded in my very, very needy body.

At my side, Moe wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me upright. He kissed my shoulder, slid a hand up to my

breast, and thumbed the nipple.

“That’s it, you’re doing so well,” he growled in my ear, his voice gone husky from desire.

Holy shitsnackers, was he complimenting me for being eaten out? Ate out? Aten out? Whatever! Don’t expect me to conjugate while three dudes are fucking me.

“You got this,” Moe said.

I gasped, removing one hand from Jag to grasp Moe’s arm.

Jag and Elliot circled their tongues faster, and I moaned as my pleasure built and built.

“Breathe, you’re being such a good girl,” Moe said.

I moaned as the orgasm rushed through me like magic. My inner muscles rippled and clenched and my body shook, but Moe, with his strong arms, held me up. And Jag and Elliot... they kept licking, forcing my orgasm to keep going like a fucking perpetual motion machine. Fuck thermodynamics.

“You’re so good at this,” Moe said in my ear. “You moan like music.”

I cried out as they wrung the last bit of pleasure from me. “No more,” I gasped.

Jag and Elliot’s clever tongues finally stopped. They stood, and the three of them helped me to the bed, where I collapsed into a puddle of trembling goo.

Moe and Elliot lay on either side of me while Jag straddled my thighs and grinned down at me. I grasped Moe and Elliot’s

throbbing cocks and eyed Jag's.

“Do you three want condoms or—”

“I trust you,” Moe said. Elliot nodded and Jag winked.

Grinning, I reached between my legs, rubbing my wetness onto my fingers before grabbing Moe and Elliot's cocks again. With my hands now slick, I stroked their lengths in unison and worked their tips. They both moaned like they were singing a song together.

Jag fondled my breasts and pushed them together before giving me a questioning look. I gasped and nodded. Rocking his hips forward, he slid his cock between my breasts. As he titty-fucked me, I reveled in the sensation of his cock along my skin and the sight of him. The lines of abs under his stomach hair, the curve of his neck as he tilted his head back to moan, the way he bit his lip, and the way his dark eyes dilated and went hazy with need. I wanted to commit every moment of it to memory.

At the same time, I kept stroking Moe and Elliot. Their hands grasped at my wrists and arms. They kissed my neck, and Elliot bit my shoulder as he trembled and spilled his cum over my hand.

Moe moaned as loudly as a rock song as he came over my hip. I grinned, happy and oddly peaceful at being able to give the men this joy.

The sound of his friends' orgasms seemed to drive Jag's pleasure. He threw his head back, crying my name as he

spilled his spunk on my chest. With a chuckle, he collapsed onto the bed over my and Elliot's legs.

Moe cuddled close against my side, his hand on my stomach. "I love you," he said against my ear.

My heart fluttered. "I love you too, Moe, and you, Elliot, and you, Jag." There was no non-awkward way to say I love you three times in a row, I realized.

Elliot nuzzled my neck. "I love you."

Jag stroked my thigh. "And I love you."

Hearing it three times in a row didn't feel awkward, though. I smiled and let my eyes drift closed. "Rest up, because I'm not done with you three. It's going to rain cum tonight, more than it already has."



Epilogue

*O*ne year later

I sat on the riverbank, stroking Beverly's fur. She squeaked like she was telling me about her day, even though I didn't understand a word. Below us, her mate stood in the shallows next to their lodge as he chewed on a branch.

Leaves crunched behind me, and Ram stepped into view, settling on the riverbank next to me. Beverly gazed up at me and blinked with a little squeak as though to say goodbye before scurrying down the bank to join her mate. She munched on the end of his branch and he let her, like letting your date steal fries from your plate.

"I'm glad she's doing well," Ram said as he handed me a black wallet. Taking it, I opened it to find a new debit card and a silver coin stamped with a giant rubber duck.

"Another one for your collection," he said.

I smiled at the ducky coin. Ram always brought something for my growing collection. I wasn't used to living in one place for long, but until my parole was up, I couldn't leave the state. So, until then, I had my coins from around the world.

I could open a portal to somewhere else and the law wouldn't know, but if I never saw a portal again, it would be too soon.

"The money is already laundered," he added. "A 'donation' from a certain church in the Midwest that performs exorcisms on children."

He had been targeting and bankrupting the places that had made his childhood—and the childhoods of other supe kids—a

living hell. I closed the wallet and tucked it into my jacket pocket.

“Thank you,” I said and looked him over.

Ram was going through his goth phase and had abandoned his colorful shirts for pure black with eyeliner, which made me hotter than the time I fell asleep with a laptop on my cooch.

Make his face be the laptop on your cooch, my brain said.

Maybe...

“I heard the new JEM track online,” he said. “Is that you playing the piano?”

I watched Beverly and her mate abandon their branch and dive underwater. “It took hundreds of takes before I got it right.”

“Genius isn’t about being perfect; it’s about never giving up.”

I laughed. “I’m nowhere near genius.”

Ram picked up a twig, turning it over in his hands. “I don’t know music, admittedly, but it was the best piano playing I ever heard.”

He only thought that because it was me playing. I wasn’t the best; not even close. But Ram had recently learned how to express affection like so many of us abused kids had to learn as adults. Now, he nearly flooded me with it.

If only he—and I—had known how to do that years ago.

“Did Jess and Marley ever come to Silver Springs?” he asked.

They were the teenagers he had found in Salt Lake running a counterfeit medication scam after their parents had abandoned

them for being dark witches.

“They settled into the dorms and are attending school.”

Ram nodded and smiled to himself as he watched the river. And I watched him. He seemed calmer since he had started sending lost souls our way, almost happy.

Almost.

His smile widened, and he eyed me sidelong. “You staring at me, Sa-Sa?”

“Call me that again and I’ll toss you in the river, Ro-Ro.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” As he turned to face me and offered his hand, I noticed a plain yellow amulet around his neck.

I didn’t take his hand. “That’s a relic.”

He held it up for me to see, though there was no writing or symbols on it. Maybe it wasn’t magical after all. “I found a way to win Juniper’s trust.”

My eyes widened. “You visited her?”

“I told her to take this and make a magic dampener, but not just any kind. One that she could turn on and off on a whim. So, if I ever posed a threat to her, she could snap her fingers and turn my magic from a torrent to a trickle.”

I touched the amulet, turning it over. It was blank. “She didn’t do it.”

“She said she’s not scared of me anymore. I don’t know if I should be offended.”

I laughed and dropped the pendant. My heart raced and with each beat, it grew larger and larger. If Juniper was comfortable with Ram after their battles and blood feud, then...

Then I wouldn't be betraying my best friend by being close to him.

Ram offered his hand again, and this time, I took it, lacing our fingers together. I smiled at him, staring into his eyes that were as dark as when you cuddle under a blanket for safety. He stared back, not with pain or rage or careful neutrality, but something soft and warm.

It had taken a hell of a lot of therapy and work on his end to be someone who could put others first. And it took a hell of a lot of therapy and work on my end to stop resenting him and to recognize the good in him again.

But maybe, just maybe, we were at a point where we wouldn't fuck each other up.

"Your eyes are so beautiful," he whispered. "I could stare at them all day."

My smile widened until my face hurt.

Eat him, my brain said. Eat his whole head.

What?

He's being cute, so eat him. Just bite his head. Bite it off and chew it into a squishy paste because he's squishy and makes you squishy.

Instead, I leaned forward and kissed him for the first time in eight years.

It wasn't a passionate, deep kiss like with Jag, Elliot, and Moe. It was gentle, like testing rough waters, seeing if they would sweep me away and drown me or welcome me and help me float.

My stomach fluttered and my heart nearly burst from my chest. For a moment, I did feel like I was floating away.

As I ended the kiss, Ram smiled like a drunk idiot. "Will you go to couples' therapy with me?"

It was not the question I had expected from him, but it was the one I needed to hear. The one that meant we had a chance of making this work and not breaking each other again.

"Absolutely. Will you go to a JEM gig with me tonight?"

"Our second first date," he said with his eyes sparkling. "I will go anywhere with you."

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About Eva Delaney

USA Today bestselling author, Eva Delaney, is 98% coffee. Her hobbies include writing, procrastinating writing, and feeling bad for not writing. The rest of the time, she makes up songs about her cat and dog and sings to them. They don't care for it.

Join her newsletter for regular stories about being socially awkward and horny. You'll also get a free novella set in the Star Pilot universe: <http://evadelaney.com/>