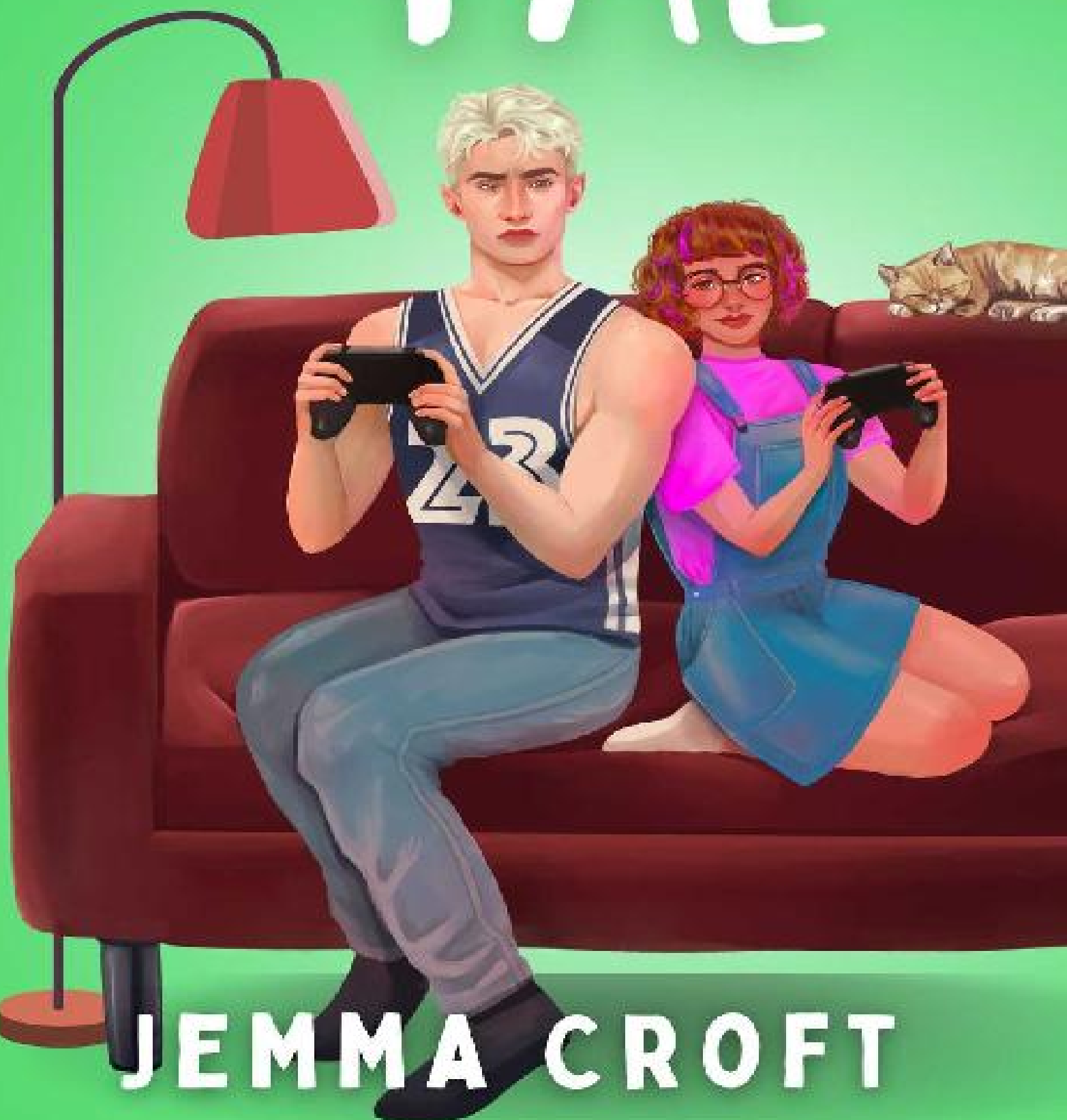


Fantasy Flatmates Book Two

BY THE FAE



JEMMA CROFT

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This is a work of fiction. Obviously. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

If you bear more than a striking resemblance to the MMC, I am going to need photographic evidence.

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For all the girl gamers who like to get it on

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Note from Author

As before, I have loved writing this book. It has meant a great deal to me, and I want you, the reader, to also enjoy the book, without worrying about stumbling on something you're not comfortable with.

With that in mind, here are a list of content notes.

Explicit scenes of a sexual nature

Profanity

Light BDSM

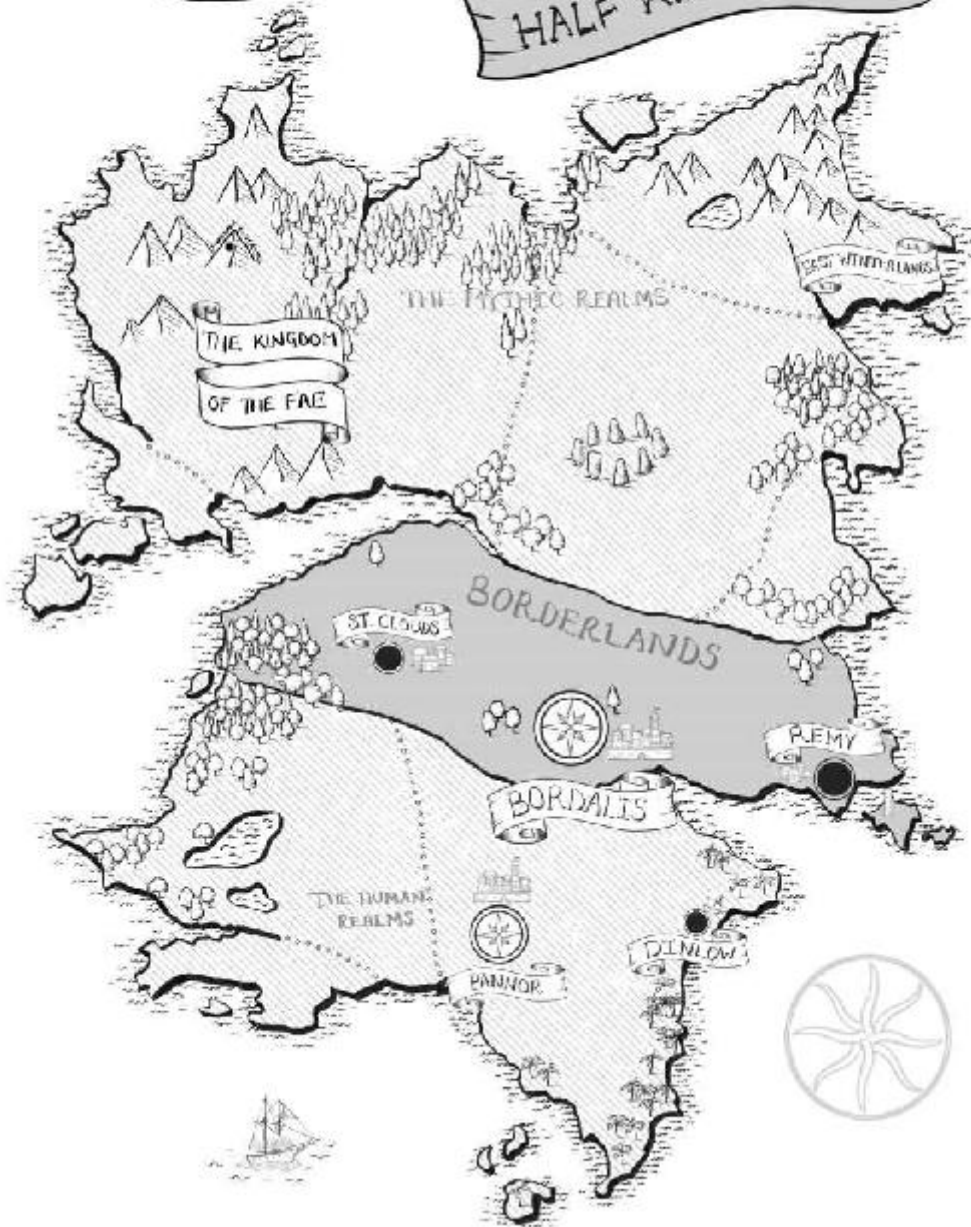
Themes of loss and grief (not directly related to MCs)

Casual drug use

Also, please note this book is written in **British English**, please do not give me a bad review because I'm generous with the U's.

Cheers, mate.

THE EIGHT AND A
HALF KINGDOMS



Chapter 1.

Goldie

I saw vulvas. Everywhere.

Most people would look at the clouds and see animals. *Oh, there's a dolphin. Oh, there's a slightly longer dolphin.* Or faces in the foliage. Eyes peeking out from leaves. Or a bear-shifter in the clothes hanging on the back of a bedroom door at night.

Not me.

I only saw vulvas.

In the bubbles of my morning Elvish chai latte. In the blue floral tile pattern of work's bathroom flooring. In the peeling paint patch above the microwaves of the twelfth-floor break room. In flowers, in the knots and grain of wood, in the shag of the living room carpet, in the folds of pastries.

Snort. Folds.

And right then, I was staring at one of the biggest vulvas I'd ever seen. On the back of my boss's head no less, which poked up from behind my two-seater leather sofa in my office, as she play-tested (read scrutinised) my latest project.

It had labia, and inner labia, and even a clit. I shouldn't touch it.

I should definitely not touch it.

It was only hair. Falling in such a naturally unnatural way. And it was on my boss's head. My boss who, based on my performance today, would decide my future within this company.

And when it came to work plus matters of sexual ... happenings, I was already skating on thin ice.

So, I definitely shouldn't poke the back of my boss's head, just because it looked like a giant minge. Even if it was only to ruffle her hair and disperse the imagery.

I wedged my hands between my chair and my butt cheeks for the added security.

She paused the game, and slowly, torturously, placed the controller on the table and turned to face me. Her expression too familiar. She didn't have to say anything. It was the firm set of her jaw, the slight downward tilt to the corners of her mouth, the poker straight line on her brow.

"Goldie," she said with a sigh.

Might as well start looking for new jobs now. I'd heard Glamour Games were seeking designers.

"It's wonderfully designed. Beautiful graphics."

Ah, the old shit sandwich. "But?"

She placed her spectacles back on and patted the couch next to her. "Come, sit. I'm getting neck ache turning around like this."

There was zero reason for August to wear glasses. All fae had perfect vision, and hearing, and sense of smell, and everything else while we were at it. Our eyesight didn't fade with age until we were into our second or third millennia, and despite August's silver hair, there was no way she was that old. Some of the guys at work reckoned our boss was gradually morphing into a human. Others had suggested she was simply trying to better appeal to them by appearing flawed.

In my mind, there wasn't much to speculate on. August was a humanophile. She was dripping for the humans. Loved them. Everything about them, and their pointlessly short lives.

She even — I shuddered — hired a human four months ago.

Three hundred fae and one human in our building. Fine, not exactly an invasion, yet. But if August got her way, mark my words, she'd have us all replaced with them. With

their spectacles, and hearing-aids, and their scars, and body-fat, and suntans, and pimples, and their fucking dungarees. Not that there was anything wrong with any of those things. Except the latter.

Seriously, what kind of invention was dungarees?

Okay, so maybe not all humans wore those jeans-cum-ye-olde-timey-blacksmith-aprons. Just that one contemptible human in particular.

I flopped down on the couch next to August.

“It’s not bad, Goldie. It’s well designed. As always. The graphics are spot on. The interface is clean. The assets are brilliant. Attention to detail, again, wonderful. You have a way of inserting your sense of humour into your work without it being in your face.”

Likely because I don’t have a sense of humour.

“So, what’s wrong with it, then?”

“It’s the same game. As your last one. And the one before that.”

“Yes, it’s *Magic Thief Seven*,” I said, attempting to rein in the *well, duh* edge to my voice.

She sighed and removed her glasses, letting them dangle from the glittering chain around her neck. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“*Magic Thief Six* was the best performing game of last year,” I said.

I saw the figures. Sat through almost every one of our accounts meetings. My game took more in revenues than anyone else’s. Made the company more money than any other designers’.

“The industry is changing. Our gamers are changing. It’s not only fae men playing these days. Our fastest growing demographical change is among”—*don’t say it*—“human women.”

I scrubbed my hands down my face.

“They make up fifteen percent of our users,” she said.

“That’s a minority.”

“A minority that is exploding in growth. A minority that we are completely ignoring. And if we ignore it, it simply becomes an opportunity for our competitors.”

“Is that why you hired ...” I couldn’t bring myself to say her name, “The human?”

“It’s part of the reason. The other part being that Holly is the very best at what she does. But we’ll get back to that in a second.”

Oh, let’s, please.

I was trying, really trying, not to huff like a petulant teenager.

“I’m going to let you in on a secret,” August said, leaning closer as though we weren’t the only two people in my office. “Glamour is merging with Human X. The number one fae games developer, and our biggest rival, is merging with the number one human games developer. It’s a multi-million silver deal. I planned to bring it up at this week’s team debrief, so consider this your heads up.

“We need a new game. Games. Something that can rival anything they can produce. They will have teething problems, of course. Fae and humans have a ...” She paused, apparently searching for the word. “Fraught history. We haven’t always been the best of bedfellows. It will take them a while to settle into their new routines, get used to their new business partners. It gives us a head-start.”

I blinked at my boss, my lips pursed tight just in case my fae mouth ruined everything once again.

“Goldie, I want a new game from you. Something completely different. One that taps into our growing market. I want something that will appeal to humans. And more than that, human women. These shoot ‘em in the face games are all fun and frolics, but we need something with more ... heart. Something with more feeling. More humanity.”

Maybe I could freelance.

“The Remy Games Expo is in two months. I want you to have a game ready to present then. The industry’s changing, and if we don’t adapt, we will get left behind.”

“And if I can’t do it?” I asked.

“Then it might be time to review your contract with us.”

She said it just like that. Don’t make the game, and you’re sacked. It was one of the things I liked best about August. Her honesty. Not that any fae could lie. But we could certainly dance around the truth. She never bothered with any of that. She served it as it was.

“Look, it’s not just you. I’ll be putting this to all the guys on Friday. And I know you can do it. You’re one of the best game designers I know. I’m not saying that because I’m your boss. I really mean it. But we all have to make changes.”

August grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me back down to the couch next to her. When exactly did I get to my feet?

“I’m going to forward you the results from the past six months of focus groups to get you started.”

I nodded dumbly. What were my options here? 1, get fired or 2, make a game designed to be played by feeble, argumentative, love-obsessed beings. A game designed to be played by ... her lot.

“And Goldie, don’t forget our secret weapon.”

Nope. Nuh-uh. Not happening. I shook my head. I already knew what August planned on saying and it was unequivocally, categorically, determinately not going to happen. Would it have been too childish to put my fingers in my ears and go lalalala?

“She still has two months left of her probation, and when that’s over, I plan to give her a team of her own and her own office. That’s how good she is. But until then she’s just sort of floating about—”

“I work alone. I never partner,” I cut in. Especially not with a human.

Especially not with *that* human.

“I’m not asking you to partner. I’m suggesting you use Holly as a sounding board. A consultant. Someone to bounce ideas off. She’s the target demographic. In every way. Use it. Before one of the other guys here does.”

“Wow, first dibs on the human, I’m honoured.”

“Suit yourself, Goldie.” August got to her feet and headed for the door. “Survival of the fittest. Adapt or die. If you think you can do it on your own, then be my guest. I’ll be asking each of you to pitch your games at AR.”

Remy’s annual games expo. It stood for Arcade Remy, not Augmented Reality, but I had heard every combination of those names. Arcade Reality. Augmented Remy. It had been a few years since I last presented an idea, and I guessed, would be the first time ever I’d pitch a non-Magic Thief game. I let out my resigned sigh.

August continued, “And whoever’s pitch is the most popular, shows the biggest revenue potential, will receive tenure.”

I stood again, almost tripped on the edge of my rug. “Tenure?!”

To a human, tenure meant twenty, thirty years of guaranteed work. To a fae like me, well, let’s just say I probably had another nine-hundred, one thousand years left in these realms. That was a fucking long time to promise employment.

“Yes, Goldie, tenure. Exactly what you’re thinking. The next millennia sorted. I want an exceptional game.” August lifted her spectacles, huffed on them, wiped the lenses on a special little cloth.

I jammed my thumbnail into my mouth and began frantically working on the cuticle. She reached her hand forward and gently eased mine from my ravages.

“Your manicurist will be furious with you.” She smiled, knowing full well that dropping the tenure bomb had landed precisely where she wanted it to.

“And, Goldie, if you decide to work with Holly ...” August continued. “There will be absolutely no ... intercourse. You know the rules.”

She meant rule.

Singular.

Not rules plural. It applied only to me and two other nymphs in the building. Dylan in accounts, a water-nymph, and the appropriately named Rake, a sun-nymph in rendering.

At this point, I had pretty much humped my way through the entire office block. There was almost no one at FaeGames I hadn't boinked.

What could I say? Nymph. This is what we did. Our very nature revolved around sex. Only my colleagues who joined FaeGames after August brought in the rule five years ago, had not, at some point, been dangling off the end of my dick.

It was hardly my fault if people, my boss included, couldn't separate sex from emotion.

But it was what it was. I'd made my peace with it. Remy was a big city after all, not like there wasn't anywhere else for me to get it.

So, no fucking any more of my workmates. If I did, I was fired. Not that I wanted to fuck Holly in any case, and not just because she was human, or because of her gods-awful fashion choices.

Seriously, dungarees, what the hell?

“Remember, sacking leads to sacking,” August said, and the door shut behind her.

Chapter 2.

Holly

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a woman in possession of her dream job and *almost* in possession of her dream waterside apartment with the mid-century style exposed brick fireplace and rooftop communal pool, must be in want of a super-hot fae boyfriend.

I had the career. I had the down payment on the flat. Now I just needed a love life to complete thirteen-year-old me's checklist of dreams.

Abby had found the note I'd written, tucked into the case of an ancient *Groovy Graham and Pals* cartridge when going through a box of my childhood stuff.

'*Thirty Things to Achieve Before I'm Thirty*', was the title. Perhaps a smidgen optimistic. But as I went through and checked each thing off, I realised it was only matters relating to men where I lacked that gratifying little tick.

Been skydiving? Why yes, I had.

Travelled to the Mythic Realms? Done that.

Met a celebrity? Several, in fact.

Got a first at uni? Check.

Got a master's? Double check.

Had an orgasm? Oh, thirteen-year-old me. Technically yes. If you counted all the orgasms I'd given myself, by myself, completely alone, with no one else even near me. Of course, this was before I moved back in with my parents. Because since then, there had been zero opportunity for any, erm, bean flicking. Not when I shared a bedroom with my sixteen-year-old sister and a bathroom with the rest of the apartment's occupants i.e., my mum and stepdad.

I ticked it off nonetheless.

Had sex? Again, technically yes, but the item (item number seventeen) clearly stated '*Have mind-blowing sex*', which sadly left a big fat empty box.

This brought me neatly to items numbered twenty-nine and thirty. '*Find a super-hot boyfriend (preferably fae)*' and '*have super-hot boyfriend propose in a super-romantic and super-public way*'. I really abused the word super in this document.

At age twenty-nine, I had until September to get the last few ticks. Twelve-ish weeks. Thankfully, I was in the right place. For the snagging-a-super-hot-fae-boyfriend part, that was. Though saying that, I'd been at FaeGames now for four months and I still hadn't gotten the courage to strike a conversation up with any of the guys.

It was almost as though I didn't exist to them. They'd pass me in the corridors, I'd say hello, and nothing. Hardly a stiff acknowledging nod. I'd see them in the break room. Nothing. One guy even moved my microwavable curry to the bins. While I was stood in front of it. The microwave door hit me in the chest as he opened it. He jumped out of his skin when I coughed and raised an accusatory eyebrow at him. It's like I was a ghost to most of them.

Well, they couldn't all ignore me forever. I worked here now. I had purpose, and could pull rank if I wanted, and and ...

There were about three hundred of them in this building. All fae. All ridiculously hot. Obviously. All fae men were. With their pointy ears and razor-sharp facial bones, and shiny hair, and do not even get me started on the whole shirtless thing.

FaeGames had a strict policy that all employees must wear clothes at all times, shirts included. That didn't stop them travelling to the office half naked, putting on the same old company branded t-shirt in the morning, and then whipping it off as soon as it was time to leave, hanging it up on the back of

their chairs for the next day. I doubted any of them ever took them home to wash.

I'd discovered my favourite place to be was the communal office space on the sixth floor at 16:55. In fact, it was my new unofficial tradition. I'd get an iced coffee from the canteen, then take a very slow stroll through the building, and simply gawk as a hundred super-ripped guys tore away their clothes. They never even noticed I was there, so I only felt a little guilty about objectifying them.

I knocked on the door of the twelfth-floor office. This would be my floor once I passed my probation. I was still dizzy with excitement. Still could hardly believe my luck. No, not luck, talent, and thousands of painstaking hours of study and practice and failure and improving my craft.

“Enter,” my boss called out.

I did, my breath stilling, as it always did, at the view from her windows. The city of Remy lay spread out before me like marmalade on toast.

“Holly, great.” She smiled at me, warm and genuine, and motioned to the chair across from her desk. I sat down.

Of the three hundred-ish FaeGames employees, August (my boss) and myself, were two of approximately thirty female staff. And rather upsettingly, my position as senior designer was the second highest ranking of those female members. August's being one of the top jobs. Most of the other women here occupied support roles. Accounts, admin, secretary, PA, that sort of thing. Not that there was anything wrong with those jobs, I just would've liked to have seen a little more balance in the distribution of power.

And of the three hundred-ish FaeGames employees, I was the only one, solitary, single, completely on my lonesome, human.

August handed me a wedge of papers. “Couple of things. Here's the last of your training schedule. There's some manual handling, fire safety, those types of bits you need to complete and then sign off in your logbook. And I've got Fee

from HR coming up at some point to discuss the different needs you, as a human, have. You two can draw up a few new policies. The most important thing for me is to provide you with an atmosphere that you feel safe and comfortable in, so that you can concentrate on what I hired you for. You'll find all the senior designers have their offices set up just as they like them, and you'll be no different. I know humans need things a little warmer than we do, but I'll be honest, I'm not sure what else you need, and I want to make sure you're in control of setting out your own requirements. It'd be all too easy for one of us to overlook something because it doesn't apply to us."

"Thank you," I said, my grin slowly taking over my face. I tried not to sing out loud. *I'm going to get my own office. With walls and windows. And an amazing view. Yay.*

"You'll also, in time, get your own team of worker-bees. And, of course, you'll be in full control of selecting or hiring them." She pushed her sheet of silver-grey hair over her shoulder.

Like with most fae, it was impossible to guess August's age. She sometimes wore glasses, but I had a feeling they were part of her ensemble, her look, rather than a requirement from terrible eyesight, like mine were. I got the impression she was older, yet there was not a wrinkle on her.

Most fae didn't reach adulthood until they were one or two hundred years old, and depending on their type, they could live anywhere from five centuries to three thousand years.

I knew all this because I'd been obsessed with fae since I could remember. I had a book. The Faecyclopaedia. A kids reference book really. It detailed each type of higher, or courtly fae and their idiosyncrasies. There were about four hundred and fifty different types. I had most of them memorised to heart, and most had the ability to cast some form of glamour. Their magical specialities were listed in an index at the back of the book. Along with magical aids, such as fertility stones, contraceptive stones, life stones etc. But it wasn't their magic that had enchanted me, it was them

themselves. Fascinating and so different from humans in every possible way.

August, I found through diligent research, was a mater fae. Her glamour speciality was diplomacy. Tact, negotiation, discretion, people skills. Perfect managerial qualities.

And no fae could lie. No matter their species. I often found they talked in never ending riddles to combat this. Though, August seemed to be the sole exception here. I wondered if it had something to do with her type. In an environment where everyone seemed determined to pretend I didn't exist, August went out of her way to make me feel safe, welcomed, valued.

“The other thing I wanted to talk to you about,” August said. I attempted to adjust my features into something less pathetically awestruck. “Now, you've two months left of your probation period, and for the rest of your time here, I want you to get some practical, hands-on experience. I want you to choose one of the senior designers ... and shadow him.”

I didn't need to think about who that would be. “Can I shadow S—”

“No, don't tell me just yet. I want you to spend a bit of time, an hour or so, with each of them before you decide. After all, you're going to be working intimately together for the next eight weeks. I want you to really think about who you can benefit from working with.” She cocked an eyebrow at me and flashed an expression I wasn't sure I understood. “And I'd also like you to consider who might benefit from working with you.”

Forget what I said about August speaking plainly. That was a no-lie-fae-riddle if ever I'd heard one.

There were seven other senior designers besides me. All had offices on the twelfth floor. All were dudes. All painfully attractive. All completely ignored me thus far.

But there was one in particular.

I may or may not have developed a mild crush on. Okay, mild to cripplingly severe.

Seth Calder, a summer fae. Identifiable by his dark skin, dark hair, brown irises ringed in gold, and backwards pointing ears. Glamour speciality: weather manipulation and appearances.

Yeah, they got that bit right.

He was devastating. Everything I'd ever daydreamed my super-hot fae boyfriend would be. Tall, broad, knife-edge cheek bones, chin dimple, devil-may-care week-old stubble. He had yet to acknowledge me, but eight weeks working with him ought to change that. Eight weeks working *intimately* with him. A shiver of excitement and nerves travelled up my spine.

"I've told the boys to expect you at some point this week." She made a funny *Ehh* sort of sound. "Some were more receptive than others, shall we say? Let me know your decision on Friday." She leant back in her chair.

I had so many questions, but I already recognised the dismissal. "Thank you. I'll be on my way, then."

"Before you go ... Some of the lads might not take too kindly to the idea of being shadowed. Especially," she lowered her voice infinitesimally, "by a human. But you must make sure that you're sticking your ground. They have a duty to help you. They've all been in your position before, all been the new guy. They tend to forget that. Don't let them get away with being little shits, okay? You give as good as you get. And if they're still being dicks, you let me know."

I nodded, already feeling the rising dread. I was no good at sticking my ground, or putting people in their places, or whatever else needed to be done to stop people walking all over me. I was a people pleaser. Categorically shy, conflict averse, introverted. Definitely not the type to stick my ground. Not even the type to ask for what I wanted. Or swear. I didn't even swear, for custard's sake. It just felt ... wrong. Bad. Naughty. I wasn't naughty. I was so fudging far from naughty.

The door to August's office closed behind me. I turned my head left and right, looking down the corridor. Seven highly talented and highly intimidating designers also lived on this floor. And I had a decision to pretend to make. I needed to

pay each a visit, spend an hour 'or so' with each. Learn about their games, learn about their methods, their ethics, about them. I swallowed the uneasiness building in my throat.

I would save Seth until last. For him, I needed to work up the courage.

There was one guy however ...

If I visited him first, I could get it over and done with. Rip off the plaster. File it away as an hour wasted and move on. Because I absolutely, determinately, unequivocally would not work with him.

No chance in heck.

Chapter 3.

Holly

‘Oread. Oros. Mountain-Nymph. Identifiable by their yellow-golden hair, pale skin, and upwards pointing ears. Lifespan: up to seventeen-hundred years. Glamour speciality: appearances, healing, sexuality. Strengths: generous lovers, highly attuned to natural beauty. Weaknesses: often single-minded, often prejudice against weaker beings.’

That was what my Faecyclopaedia had to say about the first senior designer I visited.

The nameplate outside his office read *‘Goldie’*. I didn’t know if it was a nickname or his actual name. It was a daft name. A daft name for a horrid man.

I knocked on his door, but the invitation to enter never came. August had forewarned everyone of my visits. They knew to expect me. I knocked again. Still nothing. I took a deep breath, straightened my dungarees, pushed open the door a fraction, and peered inside.

He was there, led on his leather sofa in the centre of the room. Golden-blond head on one armrest — the one closest to me — and trainer-clad feet propped up on the other. His eyes were closed, one arm behind his head and one hand almost suggestively tucked into the waistband of his retro, wide-legged jeans. The blinds were drawn, the room shrouded in an unnatural darkness. Stuffiness spilled out into the hall.

“Human,” he said by way of greeting, his tone flat, bored even. He didn’t move, didn’t bother to look at me.

Tentatively, I stepped inside and let the door shut behind me. Even though his eyes were closed, I could’ve sworn he rolled them.

“August asked me to spend some time with each of the designers,” I said, removing my cardigan. His office was even too stifling for me. Goldie didn’t respond, so I continued, “Because she wants me to shadow one of you for the next eight weeks.” Still nothing. “So, uh, is now a good time for you? Or should I come back?”

I found my feet carrying me closer to him, until I was standing directly behind his mop of shiny, yellow hair, looking at his upside-down, shuttered, frowning face. It really was unfair how naturally attractive fae were. He had all the typical features that, if they were on someone else, literally anyone else, would have my uterus pining. Cheekbones that could slice through glass. Ruler-straight nose and jaw. Flawless clean-shaven skin. Lips that redefined the word defined, and underneath those tightly locked eyelids, I knew there were the most intense emerald green eyes. He was tall too, though he was currently horizontal, I estimated his height at around six-three-or-four. A whole foot taller than me. And unlike most of the other guys at work, I’d never seen him shirtless. Odd, given what I now know about fae. Yet, I highly suspected that under his plain black, long-sleeved t-shirt was a cornucopia of mus—

“Why are you staring at me, human?”

I jumped. “I’m waiting for your answer,” I said, trying to force confidence into my voice.

Goldie still didn’t bother to open his eyes. “What do I need to say to get you to fuck off?”

I think the noise I made was, “Meep?”

He was a meanie. I already knew this about him. From personal experience, and from almost everyone else in the building as soon as they learned what department I worked in. Goldie had a reputation. For two things.

Being a rake, which was putting it mildly.

And being a jerk, which was putting it *super* charitably.

He laughed, evidently pleased with my reaction. And darn it if forcing his face into a smile didn’t make him ten

times more attractive.

Don't let them get away with being little s.h.i.t's. August's words floated around in my mind. Maybe I was throwing myself in at the deep end by visiting Goldie first, maybe I should have started with any of the other designers. All considerably less onerous than this guy. None of it mattered, though. The quicker I could get this 'meeting' over and done with, the quicker I could move onto the next one, and the quicker I could choose Seth. Even thinking about the summer fae seemed to calm my breathing.

"Actually," I said, silently stomping my foot down in a bid to project my voice. "I'm not going to fluff off. Not until you've given me an hour of your time." Or at least until I had enough to turn around to August and say, *'I tried, but I simply can't with him.'*

Goldie waited a few seconds, then pushed himself into a seated position and trained those mesmerizing eyes on me. So green. Like algae. Or toxic sludge.

He let his gaze travel from the top of my head, down to my boots. "Cute," he said, but in a way that let me know he was being condescending.

I put my hand on my hip and pulled a face which I hoped expressed my indignation. But the jerk smiled. One sided, then just as quickly, he pursed his lips as though performing a hard shutdown on his emotions.

Oh, he thought I was funny. Cool, cool. Another guy that wouldn't take me seriously. This was fun, and new.

I'd never considered myself a violent person before, but perhaps I'd be leaving Goldie's office with one tick I never expected to check off.

'Item 23: Land a perfect punch'

"August said I'm to spend a few hours with each designer so I can decide who I want to shadow." I was pretty sure I'd told him that.

Goldie waited before replying, "And yet, you've already decided on Seth,"—I jolted, how did he know?—"So

why are you wasting my time?”

I didn't address the Seth comment. Was my pining really that obvious? I thought I'd been fairly subtle in my stalking. Or was there something else Goldie knew that I didn't?

“I haven't made up my mind yet,” I lied.

He closed his eyes, as though praying for patience, then pointedly looked at his wrist. For the first time, I noticed his watch and tried not to let my features betray me as my heart tumbled over itself. Goldie wore a pristine, rare vintage, *Groovy Graham and Pals* digital face watch. I had that exact one as a kid. I still have it now, but I didn't dare wear it anymore, for fear of further damaging the strap.

Next to the perfect, amazing GG&P timepiece, a few corded bracelets were tied to his wrist. Each with a different roughewn gemstone threaded into the centre. A lot of the guys here wore similar accessories. A fae thing, no doubt. I made a mental note to work up the courage to ask one of them about their significance. Not Goldie, though. I wouldn't ask him anything if I could help it. The sooner I could get out of his office, the better.

But I didn't want to disappoint August by giving up so easily.

“Besides,” I said. “It looked to me like you don't really have a lot on at the moment.” I spotted the smile that briefly ticked the corner of his mouth again. “Looked like you were taking a nap.”

“I'm having a reflective day.” Goldie's voice was clipped, as though telling me he was inviting no further questions on the topic. Regardless, he moved a few inches over on the sofa, leaving space for me on the other cushion.

I sat down, wishing I had sewn spikes into the seat of my dungarees, and draped my cardigan over the arm where his head had recently been. My eyes must have adjusted to the darkness because I could make out the pictures on his walls. Huge, glossy adverts, like movie theatre promo posters in slick

frames. Most of them depicted the various editions of *Magic Thief*. His games. My heart flip-flopped inside my chest. When it came to those particular games, I had a very mixed set of emotions.

I grew up playing *Magic Thief*. An only child until Mum remarried when I was a teenager. Living in the overcrowded human-only tower blocks in Remy's Westside district, these games gave me my only friends. Granted, they weren't real. But the characters, Colin the human, and Spiritus the wizened fae, were there for me when no one else was. Mum and Phil were always busy at work, or with Abby. School was just one long stretch of being called dork, or nerd, or pancake-tits. The rest of our family, all my cousins and aunts and uncles, refused to leave the Human Realms.

In fact, *Magic Thief Two* was the reason I wanted to become a games designer in the first place. Sixteen-year-old me played it every single day, for an entire summer. I was obsessed. By September, I had enrolled on a foundational design course at the local college.

I'd met him once before. Goldie. It was the most disappointing day of my life. It almost completely derailed my career goals. Booth three-hundred-and-twelve at Bordalis InterRealm Games Convention. I had taken my A4 *Magic Thief Two* poster for him to autograph. He'd seemed bored the whole time, maybe even high, barely looking at the patrons. He'd signed, '*To Human, stop stealing my magic, Goldie*'. I still have the poster somewhere. Never threw it out despite the thousands of times I told myself to. Probably kept it as an instrument of self-torture.

I'd never tell him this, though. The meanie would no doubt relish learning he'd almost crushed my dreams.

There were other posters on his walls. Smaller ones. I could just about make out *Rune Dash*, one of the other designer's game, some retro platformers, and a few little figurines dotted about.

"So," I began. "What are you working on at the moment?"

He paused. “Maintaining my patience.”

Oh cool, this was going well. Surely, I’d been here two hours already. I looked at my own watch. Black and neon pink with a leopard print, analogue face. Great, only six minutes. Maybe the battery died.

Abruptly, Goldie stood. “I’m gonna take a piss. You ... do whatever.” And then he left the room, leaving me completely alone in his dark, stuffy office.

I puffed out a long sigh. I should have probably left right then. I mean, I definitely gave him a chance. Instead, I crossed the space and opened his blinds, sending the mid-morning sun belching into the room and igniting a cloud of dust motes. Now that I could properly see, I had a good look around.

On the wall opposite the couch was the biggest screen I’d ever seen outside of a movie theatre, *Magic Thief Six* currently on pause-screen. In the other corner, a drawing board and a swivel chair, a coffee machine, a mini fridge, a filing cabinet. But no desk, and no PC.

Huh. I cleaned my glasses on the hem of my t-shirt. How did he build the games? Unless ... he used another room for that, or perhaps he just gave sketches to ‘his team’ and they got on with the rest. Odd.

I walked the perimeter. Out the window, the same stunning view of the city as August’s office. I smiled to myself. *Soon Holly, very soon.*

I continued to assess his office. Not a square inch of empty space remained on his walls. I looked at each framed poster as though I were in my own private gallery heaven. Until my gaze landed on a small print, postcard size really, near the door.

A stylized 16-bit cartoon girl with curly brown hair and spectacles stood in front of a pixelated forest. Bunny rabbits, and toadstools and little blue birds surrounded her. The game was titled *1409*, and its concept was simple. You had to traverse the magical terrains, talk to the woodland creatures —

the elves, and wizards, and jewel-mining dwarves that were often drunk — solve the mini puzzles and collect ingredients. Ultimately, the goal was to make a potion to turn the main character into a fae before the eve of her birthday.

It was an obscure game. Consigned to the depths of video game history. Eclipsed by the deluge of major RPGs and open world games, with their crystal-clear rendering, and seamless gameplay, and their well-endowed female main characters. Despite this, *1409* had a loyal, albeit minuscule, online fan club.

I knew this. Because I built it as part of my master's final. I was pretty sure I forgot how to breathe.

Beyond the door's distorted glass panel, there was movement. I threw myself back towards the couch area and tried to steady my breaths.

Goldie had a postcard of my game on his wall.

"Amazing," he drawled, opening the door. "You're still here."

"Did you wash your hands?!" I accidentally shouted, my heartbeat skittering all over the place.

He didn't roll his eyes, not really, but he looked up to the sky as though he were sharing an in-joke with a celestial being.

"Can I get back to my nap yet, or are you going to continue holding me hostage in my own office?" He pushed past me, but instead of heading to the sofa, he walked up to the coffee machine, stuck a mug underneath the spout, and pressed a button on the panel.

'She has the patience of a saint.' That's what people used to say about me. I could complete chronically repetitive tasks without complaining, help the kids in my tower block with their maths homework, wait fifteen hours in line to be the first to buy a video game. Yet, in that moment, I realised I'd exhausted all my tolerance for this man, and my saint-like patience had well and truly snapped.

"What's your problem with me?" I said.

Goldie said nothing, just removed the mug, emptied four packets of sugar in it — four sugars! — and took a noisy sip.

“I don’t get it. None of you will give me the time of day. I graduated cum laude from Bordalis University. For three years in a row, I was the top earner at Human X. My games have won awards. People have written articles about me. And yet, apart from August, it’s like I don’t even exist.”

Wow, where did that come from?

He took another long slurping sip of his drink.

I was officially done here. I grabbed my cardigan from the sofa and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Goldie said, his tone still devoid of warmth. “Sit back down.”

I hesitated, hovered, dropped to the couch, and placed my cardigan on the arm once again.

“Coffee?”

I was so caught off guard I found myself spitting, “No, thanks.”

He shrugged and sat down next to me.

“So, what is it?” I said, deciding on the spot I wouldn’t leave without some answers. “Why does everyone treat me like I’m invisible? Why do you hate me so much?”

He didn’t refute my question, he simply held out his hand as though demonstrating towards the entirety of me.

“What are you pointing at? My dungarees? Or my humanness?”

The briefest smile crossed Goldie’s features. “Me personally? Both. Can’t stand either. All the other fae in the building? It’ll be the latter.”

“I like my dungarees,” I said into my lap, choosing to ignore the blatant speciesism. “They’re comfy and practical.”

He watched me for a moment. Probably deciding what fae ‘truth’ he could get away with stretching. “I can’t really speak for everyone, but I have no interest in working with ... a human. Even if it is only for two months.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve heard all about *your* interests,” I countered.

To my surprise, Goldie’s face split into a wide grin. He tucked his golden hair back over his pointed ears. “I’m sure you have.” He leaned closer to me, pushing his citrus-cologne scent down my throat. Oh no, it was a good scent. Oranges and neroli, but masculine. I tried not to breathe it in too deeply.

“You could learn a little from me,” he whispered.

I slid backwards on the sofa, putting as much distance between us as I could. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“All I’m saying,” he said, in that smoky, suggestive tone. “Is that maybe you could loosen up a little, let off some steam. You seem very tightly wound, and I am merely concerned that perhaps you’re not fulfilling your needs properly. Do you catch my drift? Maybe you ought to take a trip down to sixth and find a willing participant. Someone to help you work out some of that frustration.”

No. I mean, Goldie couldn’t have suggested what I thought he was suggesting. Right?

“I’m sorry—You can’t—What?”

“You know, the guys down there would probably fight each other for the novelty of finger banging a human in the stationary cupboard.”

“Gods!” I got to my feet, heat blazing up my neck and face.

I didn’t know what I was more affronted by. The finger-banging comment — which was undoubtedly sexual harassment, was it not? — or the novelty comment.

Had he actually called me a novelty? A novelty! I couldn’t stay there any longer.

“Aw no, are you leaving already?”

I realised in that moment, perhaps he had only said it to outrage me. Ensure I never wanted to speak with him again, let alone choose him to shadow. Well, if that was the case, it had worked.

I pointed to the *1409* print. “I built that game, by the way.”

“I know,” he whispered, possibly to himself, before hooking his feet up over the armrest once again, and closing his venomous eyes.

I yanked the door open and turned in just enough time to see Goldie’s blonde head hitting the arm of the sofa, right on top of my cardigan.

Oh no, my favourite cardigan.

I’d have to leave it, a casualty to the war. There was no way I was going back in there.

Ever.

Chapter 4.

Goldie

Gah. Technically, I wasn't allowed to nap at work, and now I couldn't even do that properly. I tossed around on that impossibly tiny sofa, realising my head was on top of her bloody fluffy pink jumper. It smelled like raspberries and those pill-sized purple sweets. I lobbed it across the room.

“Stupid soft human clothes!”

I got to my feet. Paced. Drank the rest of my coffee. Paced. Made another coffee.

“You,” I said, pointing accusatorially towards my *1409* print.

The cartoon girl put her thumbs on her temples, held her palms up like antlers and blew a raspberry at me.

Great, now I'm not even in control of my glamour.

It was Holly, the little girl. A self-insert. Curly brown hair, light brown skin, comically large glasses, rosy cheeks. She was even bloody wearing dungarees. Was there ever a time in that woman's life when she didn't consciously choose to wear plumbers' uniforms?

I couldn't bear to be taunted by her anymore. I lifted the frame from the wall, turned it backwards and rehung it so only the cardboard reverse was visible.

Better.

The only reason I hung the damn print was because I once thought the game quirky, cute, and fun, and unlike anything I'd choose to build myself. Now, I realised she'd used zero imagination when developing it. The game was an extension of her personality. Not quirky, cute, and fun, but annoying, annoying, and annoying.

I drank my second coffee, actually my fifth that day — might explain why relaxing was impossible — and sat at my drawing board. I pulled a sketchpad close.

Make a game that appealed to humans. Two months. I could do that. Sure, of course I could do that, I just needed ...

To get this gods-damned human out of my head.

What's your problem with me?

Why does everyone treat me like I'm invisible?

Why do you hate me so much?

Fuck's sake. I glanced down at my sketchpad and noticed I'd glamoured Holly onto the paper. There she was, smiling up at me from my desk. Purple streaks in her short curls, those infuriating rosebud lips, those fucking dungarees. She must have a body underneath all that fabric, but she might as well be walking around in a one-man-tent for all I could see of it.

I tore the page off, balled it up and threw it at the bin. Why was she taking up so much space in my thoughts?

I like my dungarees.

“Just chill out,” I told myself. Any minute now Holly would be bouncing into Seth's office for her ‘trial’ with him. He'd lay on the smarm. She'd choose him. Dilemma over.

I breathed a sigh of relief. She'd choose Seth. Of course she'd choose him. She was probably already halfway to falling in love with him.

Holly would choose him, whole-way fall in love with him, and then he'd break her heart. Destroy it like Taur in an Ichor.

Not my problem.

“Fucking hell!”

I jumped to my feet. I'd glamoured her again onto the next page of my sketchpad. I had to get out of there.

August was in her office when I passed by. I knocked and pushed the door open.

“I’m gonna work from home for the rest of the week —” I paused. *She* was there. Perched on the empty desk in the corner of August’s office, writing something into a ring-binder. Her purple curls bounced as she lifted her head, her face turned flame red when she saw me, and she immediately returned to her work.

“Okay, Goldie,” said August, apparently completely unaware of the awkwardness between Holly and I. “Make sure you file it properly on the system.”

Holly had obviously not said anything about the finger-banging comment. Not that I could picture those words coming out of her mouth. That’s why I’d said what I said. I knew she wouldn’t repeat it and get me in trouble. She was what I considered a ‘good girl’. A rule follower. A pacifist. Too afraid of upsetting the boat. A.k.a boring.

Desperation had made me say it. I regretted it as soon as the words left my lips, but I needed something that was A, true, and B, shocking enough for Holly to realise I was a straight up prick. We couldn’t work together. I couldn’t spend the next eight weeks with her on my sofa. Batting those lashes that barely fit behind her glasses. Leaving her fluffy, candy-land human clothes about the place.

She couldn’t choose me, and I made sure of that. I nodded to August and made to shut the door.

“Oh, Goldie, team meeting Friday at three. Your presence is mandatory.”

“Sure.” The word came out squeaky. What the hell was up with me?

It was Tuesday. I had two whole days ahead of me without the chance of accidentally bumping into *her*. A smile slowly eased itself across my face.



I threw my keys into the dish by the front door and headed into the living room. Dima hovered above one couch, his quilt spread out on his lap, the hoop in the centre as he worked on whichever identical section he was currently sewing. Sugar Paste knelt at the coffee table, her university coursework splayed over it, spilling onto the rug. *That* cat sprawled out amidst the chaos.

“Hey,” said Sugar Paste.

Her real name was Joey, but I’d only ever known her as Sugar Paste. The nickname came about when my flatmate, Taurin, her mate, husband, whatever, had done a cake decorating course. *“I’ve been fondling sugar paste all evening,”* he’d said. To which I responded, *“Sugar Paste, is that your new girlfriend?”* And it sort of stuck. For me, at least.

I grunted my response and threw myself next to Dima, my vampire flatmate.

“Uh-oh, someone’s having a bad day,” Sugar Paste said. She collected up her paperwork and crammed it haphazardly inside a clear plastic wallet.

Stay out! I told Dima.

I wasn’t going to pry, he replied. Fucking liar. He looked at Sugar Paste and lifted a shoulder. Dima was an unregistered telepath. Telekinetic too, but his ability to float objects around the room wasn’t the thing I was concerned with at that moment. It was his gift to cut straight through my thoughts, unpick, and unpack everything, and lay it bare before me. That scared the shit out of me.

I wasn’t ready to delve into my own thoughts, let alone have Dima, with his fucking sunshine and rainbows outlook on everything, rummage around in there.

Optimism and I had a rocky relationship at the best of times.

Leaning forward, I pulled a battered tin from under the sofa and took out a pre-rolled joint. “Anyone?”

“I’d love to, but I need to go to bed,” Dima said, with an affected yawn, flashing off his fangs.

“Can’t. I’ve got uni later,” said Sugar Paste.

I threw the joint back in the tin and puffed out a sigh. Fine, I would just wait until Taur got home. Smoking by myself always led me down a rabbit hole of paranoia. I’d end up questioning every decision I’d ever made since I learned to wipe my own ass.

“So, what’s up then?” Sugar Paste said, opening up all the blinds and curtains once Dima had floated off to his coffin for the day. She sat opposite me on the sofa, tucking her legs underneath herself. Immediately, Not Ludo, her ginger scruff-bag cat, hopped into her lap.

“Humans,” I said, letting my head fall back against one of Dima’s quilts.

“Humans in general, or one human in particular?”

Sugar Paste was human, the only one of my four flatmates. Yet she never seemed overly bothered whenever I launched into another anti-human tirade. For the most part, she tended to agree with whatever I’d said.

Humans were the only species that would ever get me this worked up. For one reason and one reason only.

To them, everything revolved around love.

Like love makes the world go round. Love is the medicine of all that ails. Love will conquer all.

Blah, blah, blah.

It was stupid. Love did not cure or save or help anyone.

All it ever did was destroy. Tear up lives. Consume you with pain.

I’d seen it firsthand, though never experienced it myself, thank Gods. Mal, my other flatmate, an incubus, fell in love once. They were fated mates. Nothing either of them

could do to stop it. But, and here was the biggest but, she was human. His lifespan: two-thousand years. Hers: eighty. Not eighty thousand. Obviously. Just eighty. Eighty fucking years. They were happy for thirty-ish. Blissfully ignorant of what was stampeding towards them.

Her hair greyed, her skin wrinkled, backache set in, bad knees, eyesight fading, hearing going too. Mal's jet skin remained as flawless as ever. His body, his joints, his reflexes, as perfect as the day they'd met.

Eventually, it became too much for her. For both of them. He couldn't save her, and it tore him apart.

Centuries, it took for him to move on. And I'd known him the entire time. I still occasionally found Mal staring off into the distance, his eyes wet, his breath shaking, his wings drooping down his back.

This was why fae did not fall in love. Or if they did, like my parents, it took them hundreds of years. Longer than any human's natural lifespan.

We don't lie, and we don't take risks with the heart.

"Both," I said, and then because Sugar Paste wasn't the type to tolerate not talking through our problems, I added, "The new girl at work."

"What about her?" She smiled, enjoying this way too much.

"She has to shadow a senior designer for the next few weeks."

"Oooh, you're worried she'll pick you?" Sugar Paste absentmindedly scratched the cat behind its ears, dislodging large clumps of orange fur, which then drifted to the sofa cushions like little tumbleweeds of anarchy.

I inched away from them. "Yes, no, I'm not sure." Why was it bothering me so much? Holly wouldn't pick me. That I'd already made sure of.

"Well, she's obviously smart, right?" Sugar Paste said. "Has a master's? Worked tirelessly to get where she is?" I

nodded. “Then there’s no way she’ll choose you.” She laughed, and despite the slight, I found my shoulders dropping in relief. “Why in the Eight and a half Kingdoms would she pick the most miserable fucker in the office, when she could just as easily work with the guy whose magical fae power is to change his appearance at will?”

I’d forgotten Sugar Paste had met Seth. “He doesn’t change it at will. He changes it to whatever, whoever, you find most desirable. Everyone will see something different when they look at him.”

She sighed. “Remember at your company barbeque, I thought there were two Horns?”—her nickname for her husband—“I thought all my birthdays had come at once.”

“You were well up for a bit of DP with Seth.”

She snorted out her laughter. “I can barely fit one of those things inside me.”

This was why I liked Sugar Paste. She wasn’t like all the other humans. She didn’t make everything about love, despite being absolutely head-over-heels for Taur. She was more than happy to chat shit for hours on end, and shit-talk humans for even longer.

“I’m fairly certain she’ll choose Seth to shadow,” I said. Holly had flinched when I mentioned his name. Of course, she’d choose the guy that appeared in the guise of her dream boyfriend, or girlfriend. If only she knew what he was like under all that glamour. It’d be such a shame if someone were to simply strip him of his Harness Stone.

“I wonder what she sees when she looks at him,” Sugar Paste mused.

I’d wondered the same, but I’d never voice this. Maybe I was reading too much into it. It really was none of my business, but there was this nagging sensation ...

What did Holly Briar, wearer of camping equipment, see when she looked at a being who automatically transformed into everyone’s individual fantasy?

I'd never considered how Seth appeared to August, or even Seth himself, so why should it concern me what Holly would see?

"What do you see when you look at him?" Sugar Paste asked.

"It changes," I said, using my old fae tricks of dancing around the truth. "There was a time for about six weeks I saw Taur as well."

She rolled her eyes, but her smile never faltered. She watched me for a few moments. "You want her to pick you?"

"No. Gods, no. I don't want to work with her. I can't stand to be near her." It must be true if I said it out loud. So, what was this sinking feeling in my chest? "She dresses like an old lady and, at the same time, a toddler."

Sugar Paste didn't say anything.

"She just makes me feel so irrationally annoyed, and I can't figure out why."

"Maybe you like her." Sugar Paste reached out her foot and pushed my knee with it, transferring a gallon of cat hairs onto my jeans.

"No chance. I already told you, I can't bear her. I wouldn't be able to say it if it weren't true. Fae can't lie."

The almost imperceptible shrug she gave didn't escape my notice. She lifted her hand to her chin. "You just need to get laid. You haven't brought anyone home in about four months. It's starting to feel awfully quiet at night without the constant squeak of your bedsprings."

I laughed, but maybe she was right. It had been four months. Maybe the lack of sex was addling my brain. I probably needed to take my frustrations out on someone else. Or in someone else. I was a nymph, after all.

"Taur more than makes up for the shortage in my nighttime lamentations."

Sugar Paste flashed me a toothy, dopey grin, not even remotely abashed.

I didn't want to work with Holly. That much was true. But there was also one factor I wasn't prepared to admit aloud.

Whoever she eventually chose to shadow, it couldn't be Seth.

Chapter 5.

Holly

Like I'd promised myself, I saved Seth until last.

The rest of the trial meetings with the other five designers were ... underwhelming. I mean, compared to Goldie, they were birthday picnics in the park with balloons and cupcakes and face painting. But there was something missing from all of them. The other senior designers were accommodating enough for fae, only the slightest bit patronising, only tried to trip me up with their words fewer than a dozen — two dozen? — times, and they were, of course, all inconceivably gorgeous.

And I know I technically wasn't boyfriend hunting with the other designers, but I didn't get those weird butterflies-at-a-rave feelings that I got when I was near Seth. And now, irritatingly, Goldie. As much as I loathed the guy, he gave me the same manic fluttering.

People say love and hate are two sides of the same coin. Maybe this was simply what undiluted hatred felt like.

I took a few steadying breaths, rubbed my sweaty palms onto the front of my pinafore dress, and knocked on the door.

“Yeah?” came the sexy drawl from within.

I pushed it open, stepped inside, and almost lost my very tenuous grasp on my composure.

“Ah, good morning, human. I've been wondering when you were going to visit me.” Seth stood from his small sofa, identical to Goldie's. He spoke with an affluent accent. Money, education, probably horses, maybe palaces.

“Good morning,” I eventually squeaked out through the driest mouth known to womankind.

I had either forgotten how beautiful he was, or else he'd gotten more beautiful. His brown skin was positively glowing, his week-old stubble looking as though I wanted it scratching my face and ... my thighs.

Don't think about things like that at work, Hols. Save it for later. When you can do ... absolutely nothing about it.

Unlike Goldie's office, Seth's had a large, almost conference style desk. He pointed to the chair next to it. A gamer style leather thing with a high back and speakers built into the headrest. An ancient-looking laptop blinked from the desk.

“How's your command of English?” he asked, in that abdomen-cramping timbre.

Weird question considering the language we were currently conversing in, but whatever. I'd let him read Mermish to me with that baritone. “Yeah, it's okay.”

“I thought I'd get you to look through these scripts. For grammatical errors.”

My stomach sank, the butterfly wings drooped.

My trial with Goldie had been a disaster. He hadn't expected me, hadn't prepared anything. He was the only one. The other guys were different. Each had “work” — in inverted commas — ready and waiting for me. Though their definitions of work could rewrite the dictionary. Each task, with each designer, was more tedious than the previous. Almost as though they were in competition with each other to see who could bore me the most. No doubt their tricky fae attempts to ensure I did not select them as my shadow partner.

One fae had me replying to his emails. Another had me signing his signature on promotional postcards of his latest driving game. I wasn't their fudging PA, but I shut up, did the tasks, and got the heck out of there because I knew at the end of it all, I would choose Seth anyway. I mean, I'd still choose

him, but I couldn't pretend that his participation in Bore Holly to Death version 1.0 wasn't a punch to the gut.

“Aren't there other departments that do that sort of thing? Story boarding? Quality control? Um, the actual script writers?”

His head cocked to the side like a puppy, one of his beautiful eyebrows shot up. “You're human.”

Right. It wasn't a question. I had no idea how to respond.

“You can't build games like we do. You have to do human tasks.” At my, perhaps, impatient expression, he added, “I'm going to do it with you.”

“W—You are?” The others had pretty much left me to my own devices until I'd completed whatever humdrum task they'd set, or else until I'd gotten so bored, I'd thrown in the towel.

“Of course.” He glided over to the desk, sat himself in the gamer chair, and from under the tabletop, produced a small, three-legged, and highly uncomfortable looking stool. “Come, take a seat.”

Okay, it was unfair of me to be disappointed by that. I had a terrible habit of expecting too much from people. Mentally placing unreasonable demands on them, and when they didn't live up to them, feeling unjustifiably dejected. He was going to do the task with me. It was already a gajillion times more involved than any other trial so far.

I sat on the stool. Seth smiled at me. My insides turned to jelly.

That smile, though. That smile could paste over any manner of sins. And I was okay with that.

He pointed to the laptop and shrugged a shoulder. Did he not know how to operate it? I turned it on, and he smiled again. Somewhat condescendingly, but I still melted a little further.

Actually, it was probably a good shout I hadn't sat on the leather gamer chair. Things were already starting to get a touch damp in *that* area. Wouldn't want to leave any evidence behind on a chair that probably cost the same as my car.

While the laptop booted itself into life, Seth took something from his pocket, a compact mirror. He opened it and peered at it as though he were looking at himself for the first time. Or like he'd just had a haircut, and the stylist had actually listened to what he'd wanted. He made a surprised "Hmm" sound, clicked the compact closed and flashed me another moisture-making smile.

I opened the document. Just a plain-text document with names and lines of speech and narration. Without context, it all seemed rather random. Ten minutes into the task, I still had not spotted any errors, giving way to a gnawing suspicion that this entire thing was another leg of their weird kill-me-with-boredom game.

I looked over to Seth and found him on his phone. Sitting forward, with his elbows on the desk, and on the screen, Facebook. His finger idly flicking upwards, occasionally pausing for a second or two on a photo of one of his female "friends".

My stomach dropped. Was it disappointment that he'd left me to complete the task without him? Irritation that he wasn't taking this seriously? Jealousy over the women on his screen?

Fae women, like fae men and fae nonbinary folk, were improbably flawless. Entirely unattainable for a human like me. Always tall, always perfect bone structure, zero percent body fat. Then, add on the ability to cast glamour, those coveted pointy ears, and none of them seemed to have a modicum of self-doubt. What did that equal? The opposite of me. That's what.

I should have pulled my focus back to the error-less document on the laptop, but my eyes stayed glued to his phone, Seth's own face somewhat hidden behind the inbuilt seat-speakers.

A blonde, a brunette, a redhead, seemingly wearing fewer clothes in each photo. I was nothing like these fae girls. I didn't have their perfect bone structure or their glossy hair or their curves. Unless you counted the singular curve that was my soft rounded tummy.

An icky feeling settled somewhere deep in my gut, and I found my mouth moving and words tumbling out before I had the sense to reel them back in. "I don't think you should be looking at—" I began, but that moment his phone rang.

Seth spun his chair, held up a finger, and gave me a pointed look. It said, *I'm going to take this call, you continue with my menial labour*. He got to his feet and crossed to the sofa.

"Hey, Luke." Seth raised his sexy as heck voice to approximately three-thousand decibels. The same volume my mum reserved for phone-calls to her sister.

Unluckily for me, Luke was on a video-call and also spoke like a boomer with a faulty hearing-aid. Weren't all fae senses supposed to be highly attuned?

"Yeah, alright mate? You coming on Saturday? Ky's got the stuff you asked for."

"Obviously. We meeting at yours?"

I tried to zone it out. Tried not to listen, but it was impossible to tune out completely. I caught snatches here and there. Heard the name Abysm. The super-hot fae men were all planning to go to Remy's most exclusive nightclub on Saturday. Pre-drinks at Luke's, somebody was bringing edibles, Luke would wear shorts. Okay, but who wore shorts to Abysm? I'd never been, but it definitely didn't seem like a shorts place to me. Though, who was I kidding? My best evening outfit comprised of my nicest cotton dungarees.

I pulled my eyes back to the laptop. It was none of my business. Even if part of my brain had begun conjuring a daydream in which I procured an elusive Abysm ticket, a magnificent, jaw-dropping, preferably designer dress, and an extra four inches to each of my femurs; and turning up

unannounced. Maybe Seth would spot me from across the dance floor. I would pull my glasses off and shake out my short brown curls with my purple highlights, and he'd fall in love with me on the spot.

"Anyway, how was your date last week?" said Luke, yanking me from my fantasy. My spine stiffened. "Human, right? Did you take her back to yours?"

My heartbeat kick started.

He dated humans?

Seth dated humans!

This was singularly the most exciting and terrifying piece of news I'd ever heard.

"Yeah, was fine. Went back to mine," Seth said, bored.

A moment ago, they had been talking through megaphones. Now, I was straining to listen over the pounding blood in my ears.

"And how was she?" Luke was laughing.

Seth paused. "Meh," he said.

"Inexperienced?"

My stomach flipped.

"That's the polite way of putting it." Both guys laughed.

"You gonna see her again?" Luke asked.

"Probs not," said Seth. "Anyway, what did Ally say when you told her about Saturday?"

They were talking again, and it was at this moment my brain decided to tune them out. It also tuned out my feet, as I found myself standing. And walking. *Oh, no, what was I doing?*

Seth looked at me, an eyebrow cocked, Luke still blah-blah-blahing on the screen.

"Finished!" I yelled. "I'm going now, bye." Was he getting smaller? Or was my vision tunnelling?

“Finished already?” Seth said, dropping his hand holding the phone. A smile spread across his face. “Well, see you around.” And then he went back to talking with Luke as though I had not interrupted him.

I needed sugar. I practically ran from his office to the twelfth-floor break room where my lunch awaited me. Microwaveable macaroni-cheese, and a fae-sized chocolate bar. I’d start with the candy.

I barrelled into the break room, smashing the door open, expecting it to be as empty as it always had been before, but there, at the table, sat two fae women. One dark-skinned with gold-threaded braids, and one light-skinned with flame-red hair.

I froze.

The redhead jumped to her feet. “Oh, the human!”

“We finally get to meet you,” said the fae with golden braids. “I’m Alina. I work in marketing. This is Shell. She’s Cerulean’s PA.”

“Hi,” I squeaked. I had no idea who Cerulean was. Unless ... Well, there was a guy with blue skin that worked in logistics, but that’d be a little too on the nose, wouldn’t it?

“I hope you don’t mind us using this break room? We both work on ninth, and that one is always teeming,” said Shell.

“And we didn’t fancy getting hit on in the canteen again.”

“Sure, of course. Not a problem to me,” I said, glad my voice was returning to normal. I still needed sugar, so I casually, as casually as I could muster, strode over to the cupboards, and pulled out my lunch. I took the seat opposite the women on the large central table and bit into my chocolate. The instant relief of the sugar-hit flooded my system. Out the corner of my eye, I noted the two salads sitting in front of the fae.

“So, how are you finding it here? You’re a designer, huh?” asked Shell.

“Senior designer,” corrected Alina.

“Oh wow, good for you. Give those boys a run for their money.”

“I’ll try,” I said with an affected laugh. I still had to do my shadowing. The chocolate bar churned in my stomach. I took another bite, regardless. I was still ninety-nine percent convinced I would choose Seth, but that whole encounter had left me feeling so many new emotions, I’m not even sure half of them had names.

If I was being honest with myself, he was a bit of a jerk. My fault for putting him on a pedestal he wasn’t aware of. Men were men. It didn’t matter about the species. I should know not to enforce unrealistic expectations onto others. Especially ones I was attracted to.

Because I will always, always, disappoint myself.

And I couldn’t deny that a tiny part of me was hopeful, too. He dated humans. So perhaps something — a date, a relationship, marriage and four adorable half-fae babies — wasn’t completely out of the realms of possibilities.

“You make sure you’re putting those lads in their places,” said Alina. “And if any of them try anything with you, tell them where to swivel.”

They both laughed. I chimed in with an unconvincing, “Hehe.”

“Especially Seth,” said Shell, causing my stomach to swoop dangerously again.

“You won’t have to worry about Goldie, though,” said Alina. “Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I found myself asking. Unjustified curiosity, and a little jolt of adrenaline, travelled up my spine.

“Well, you know, because of the rule.” I must have looked confused because Alina added, “Goldie’s a nymph, yeah?” I nodded. I’d read that in my big book already. “So, he has an affinity for, um, promiscuous activities.” I also already

knew this. “His boss, your boss, got so sick of him sleeping with everyone in the office that she forbade him from ever doing it again.”

“Oh,” I said, because my brain decided this was information which it needed to process later, not right now, as the conversation was happening.

“Basically, he’s fucked everyone — almost everyone — at work and if he does it again, August is going to fire him.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone,” they both said in unison.

“You too?” *But why did I ask that?*

They shared a look, knowing smiles on each of their faces, but didn’t answer the question.

“I heard he fucked a minotaur once,” offered Alina.

Her friend looked at her, “No way?”

She nodded, an *it’s true* expression on her face. She turned to me. “So, you’ll be safe from Goldie’s advances. He can’t touch you. Not that he would without your permission. He’s pretty big on consent, but he’ll be booted out of the company if he does.”

“Yep,” said Shell. “We call it the Golden rule.”

Chapter 6.

Goldie

It was a shame I had to pay the thirty-silver entrance fee.

The bouncers nodded to me like old friends as I made my way inside. Even the guy on coat check welcomed me back, despite me never usually bothering with a shirt, let alone a jacket. I took a seat at the main bar on the first level. I didn't buy a drink. Wouldn't be there long enough.

It was early. Still quite quiet. The dance floor was empty save for a group of overloud sirens, one of whom wore a veil and a sash that read, '*Same Cluck Forever*', and a satyr who, I was convinced should have been banned a long time ago. Pretty sure he had his hand down his pouch.

I may have been the easiest lay in all of Remy, but even I drew the line at public self-pleasure.

Okay, there was that one time. More than the once actually, but the main difference was everybody involved had consented. I'd never touch myself while watching a bunch of women in bandage dresses gyrate and drink themselves into the next realm. I'd wait until I got home. Like a normal person.

I checked my watch and puffed out a breath. Three minutes. I'd been there three minutes. It never normally took this long.

"Hey beautiful," the fae barman said, placing his hand on my forearm. "Can I get you a drink?"

I looked up and met his eyes. We'd fucked before, more than once, but I struggled to remember anything more than his gorgeous face. Did I come on it?

“What time do you get off?” I asked. I didn’t have the inclination or patience for subtlety.

“Six,” he said. “But I’ll go on break at two, if you can wait that long.”

I lifted a shoulder. I probably could wait the four hours. Physically, I meant. Usually the urgency to fuck — the itch — is too consuming and needs to be scratched right away. Often, I could barely wait until we got back to my place, or theirs. We’d end up fucking in my car, or theirs, or behind the dumpster, or in shop doorways. Not the main show, of course, just a quick blowey or finger bang. An appetiser. A precursor to what would await them at mine. Anything to scratch a bit of the itch. Relieve some of the gnawing discomfort.

But recently the itch had been absent. And the weirdest thing; I hadn’t missed it. I hadn’t had sex in four months. And I wasn’t gagging for it. I was a nymph. I should be desperate. I hadn’t even stroked myself that often, and when I did, none of my go-to bank images seemed to get me there anymore.

“Whiskey,” I said to the barman. If I was going to be there for a while, I might as well take the edge off.

Four months without sex. It was definitely a record.

He poured the drink and set it down in front of me. I took a sip, placing it back down, watching the way the ice clinked against the glass, feeling like every depressed action-movie hero.

I checked my watch again. Eleven minutes. Setting records left, right and centre today. Maybe I’d lost all my Oread charm. Could that happen? I resumed staring into my whiskey.

“Oh, sweetheart, rough day?” came a silky, feminine voice from beside me. A succubus. Perfect. She flattened her palm against my bare stomach and drove her fingers down my abdomen.

I’d fucked her before, too. Cara? Clara? Clarice? Flawless fuchsia skin, sleek purple hair, tits that defied gravity, legs that went on for centuries.

I grabbed her wrist, pinning her hand to me. “Rough few months.”

She moved into my body, pressing those tits against my arm, and whispered right into the shell of my ear, “Do you need to be nursed or punished?”

I didn’t know what was wrong with me. Ordinarily those words, from a creature that gorgeous, would have my cock leaping into action. But nothing. He just laid there against my thigh, useless, flaccid.

This had been a terrible idea. I should probably finish my whiskey, go home, and get high with Taur. Tell the beautiful succubus I wasn’t in the mood, that I’d made a mistake. Try again another night.

“Well, sweetheart?” she whispered, her hand inching closer to my waistband.

“Both,” I said, renewing my grip on her wrist. I pulled her to my side, got to my feet, pushed my mostly undrunk whiskey aside, and marched Cara/Clara/Clarice to my car.

“I’m Sophie,” she said, sitting in the passenger side. “You don’t remember me.”

“Of course I do. I could never forget that sweet little mouth of yours.” Technically the truth. “I’m going to defile it when we get back to mine.”

Nothing, not even a trouser twitch. *Come on, mate!*

Once I parked, we walked to my building’s elevator. “Nice ride, by the way,” she said, as I locked my vintage sports convertible over my shoulder.

Not a classic, but she was old. Three decades. Not that you’d know by looking at her. I paid a lot of money to keep her in line with all the brand-new cars rolling off the forecourt.

I loved everything from that era at the moment. An era when videogames were at peak awesomeness. Fashion, cars, even my watch was a vintage *Groovy Graham and Pals*. They sold for an absolute fortune on eFae these days.

I opened my front door. Everyone was home. I could smell all four of them. The succubus pushed me against the wall, wrapped her hand around the back of my head, and brought her lips to mine. I froze.

“Okay, not a mouth kisser,” she said, more to herself. “So many guys nowadays.”

“No, I am.” I mentally slapped myself and kissed her. Her tongue swept into my mouth, and I dug my fingers up under her vest-top thing, sinking them into her flawless flesh.

There was movement below my fly. My cock throbbed once. I think the sky opened, allowing angels to serenade me.

I gripped her ass and pulled her towards me. Her legs and tail wound themselves around my waist, and I carried her up the stairs. Outside my bedroom, I pinned her against the wall, squashing our bodies together, and trapping the tips of her fingers under my belt.

“Where do you want to fuck?” I asked.

I never tidied my room. Didn't need to. Nobody ever saw it in its natural state apart from me. Sugar Paste was always nagging me to clean, but what was the point when I could glamour straight over the mess? It took a lot of effort to keep up the illusion for so long, drained a lot of my energy, but I was one of the best at this type of glamour. One of the main reasons I climbed to senior designer so quickly.

“Huh?”

“Come on, baby, I thought you remembered me?” I thrust my non-existent erection against the succubus's pelvis. A twinge, good.

“Oh.” She cast her eyes over my pointed ears, and her face slid from confusion into something else. Distantly, I heard the soft slapping of bare feet, the quiet click of Taur's door opening, saw a flash of Sugar Paste's red hair, and the door closed again. “I want an audience.”

“Of course you do, dirty girl.” I kissed her again and opened my bedroom door, revealing, more or less, a dungeon. An overlarge birdcage sat on a raised dais in the middle of the

room. The only thing illuminated in the entire space. People, faceless shadows, surrounded the platform. Just enough out of sight that features wouldn't be necessary.

The succubus nodded, unzipped her top straight down the centre and walked backwards to the dais.

Time to end my four-month drought.



“Choke me,” she sputtered.

I already was. Fucking her from behind. My fingers clamped against her windpipe. Her hands braced on the metal bars of the cage that weren't really there, as I hammered into her. Her tail twisted twice around my thigh, the arrowhead tip just breached my asshole. We'd been at it for ages. So far, I'd sucked her clit and finger fucked her through three orgasms. But she was determined to sort me out, despite a niggling feeling somewhere deep in my gut that told me it might, for the first time in history, not actually happen.

Okay, not the first time in history. There had been plenty of times in the past when I couldn't reach completion. But never whilst sober, or in the presence of a succubus before.

I kept losing my momentum, my thrusts losing their rhythm, and my cock drooping, like a sadly neglected houseplant. We had switched positions more times than I could count, but my glamour kept slipping. Dropping away from me, exposing the definitely-a-bed-and-not-a-dais beneath us. And the mess. I almost told her to forget it. Leave me to wilt in my shame, but I couldn't let it best me. I was a nymph. This was what I did.

A fucking nymph, fucking a fucking succubus, for fuck's sake.

This should have been so much easier.

“Get on your knees,” I commanded. “I’m gonna fuck your mouth.”

She obliged without hesitation. “You want me to take all of it?”

“No.” I fisted the back of her hair, holding it tight, keeping her head exactly where I wanted it. Almost tight enough to rip it out at the roots, but she was a succubus, not a human. She could take it. I took my cock in my other hand and buried the head into her waiting mouth. She lapped at it with her tongue, her smiling eyes meeting mine, and I began to stroke myself.

All around us, the glamoured shadows of people undulated. I shut my eyes. Not that they bothered me. An audience had never bothered me before, and I knew they weren’t real. A figment of my magic. I’d put them there. I could just as easily remove them. Make them solid and touchable, or ethereal, and pass my hand through them. I could make them more distinct, give them features, make them talk, make them join us.

When I opened my eyes, it was to catch a glimpse of purple hair twisted around my knuckles. I received a jolt of ... something. Something new tightened my balls, surging me closer to finishing. Good. Never had I prayed release would happen sooner rather than later. Usually, I did everything I could to delay this moment. But there I was, wishing it over as I continued to fuck my hand into her mouth.

That was when I saw it. The shadow directly behind the succubus stepped into the light. Curly brown hair, spectacles, an on-brand indignant look on her face.

NO, screamed my brain, but my body reacted differently. My balls tightened again, and that same jolt as before shot straight down my cock.

The succubus made a strangled groan of encouragement, her nails digging into the sensitive flesh behind my knees.

I squeezed my eyes tight, blinking away the magic. I placed her there. Or my subconscious did. Just like when it glamoured her onto the page at work. I needed to make her go away. Dissipate into nothingness.

But, fuck, my body wanted her there.

The shadow vanished. And I felt my momentum faltering. The fuck was wrong with me?

The succubus renewed her supportive mews, picking up her pace.

I closed my eyes again, trying to picture all the hottest moments from the last few centuries of my life. And boy were there a lot. But they weren't working. Nothing was. At this rate, I was at risk of boring the poor succubus to death.

And I knew when I opened my eyes, *she'd* be there. I knew, with unwavering certainty, the only way I'd reach completion was if I allowed myself to look at *her*. I didn't want to contemplate what that meant. If it meant anything. Which it probably didn't because fucking never meant anything more than a release. A goal reached. An itch scratched.

She would help me scratch it and that would be all.

Yep, that's all it was.

I had no choice. If I wanted to finish this half of the century, I would have to let it happen.

I peeled open my eyelids. Sure enough, there she was. Gone were her dungarees. In their place, she wore a lacy bra and knickers set. Purple. Matching the streaks in her hair. The glamoured image of her stared straight into my eyes. I tried, and failed, to keep my breath steady. She bit her lip.

I'm just scratching an itch.

Her hand grazed over the soft mound of her human tummy, dipping into the top of those purple panties. Breath rushed out past parted lips.

"Goldie," she said, in that high-pitched whiny voice she had.

And in that moment, I lost it. I cried out, my back spasmed into a curve, and my release fired from my cock into the succubus's mouth, down her chin, onto those impossibly perky tits.

“Yes, sweetie. Yes, sweetie,” she said, spitting me out.

No, no, it was all wrong.

The glamoured Holly fizzled away, like a desert mirage evaporating because I'd gotten too close. Yet I was sure I saw a gloating smile on her lips before she disappeared.

I let the magic in my room drop away, revealing how horrifically messy it was. The succubus didn't react, didn't ask who our mystery guest was. I handed her a t-shirt, or whatever it was, from the floor to clean herself up with.

“Do you want me to see you out?” I said. Unable to find anything else to say, and realising I wanted nothing more than to be alone.

“Sure, sweetheart.”

I pulled sweatpants on while she dressed in her skirt and vest and shoes, and then, silently, I walked her down the stairs to the front door.

“You want me to drive you home?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I'm a big girl. 'Til next time?” The succubus pushed herself onto tiptoes and leaned in to kiss me on the lips, but at the last second, I turned my face, giving her a mouthful of cheek and ear. She gave my biceps a consoling squeeze. “We all have bad days. Try not to dwell on it.” And then she left.

When I got to the top of the stairs, it was to find Sugar Paste leaning against the jamb of her door, wearing one of Taur's ridiculously oversized grey t-shirts. Her legs were bare.

Their room was next to mine. She would have heard everything that happened this evening. Or rather, everything that didn't happen, especially when compared with my usual nighttime escapades. Pre four months ago, obviously.

“You okay?” she said.

Urgh, fuck this fae not being able to lie bullshit.

“I will be,” I said, because it was the only sliver of truth I was prepared to admit at that point. I barricaded myself in my room and flopped down onto the bed.

Chapter 7.

Holly

I tiptoed through the door and let it close as quietly as possible behind me. Goldie would be back this afternoon for the meeting. All senior designers were obligated to attend. I swallowed the lump building in my throat. I'd have to announce, in front of everyone, who I'd shadow for the next few months. Still ninety-eight percent sure I would choose Seth, but I'd been ruminating on his 'inexperienced' comment all night. Tossing about in bed, hardly getting a wink of sleep. On the top bunk, Abby was losing her mind.

"Every time you move, it shakes the whole bed. You're doing my head in. Please, just stay still."

That, coupled with what the two fae women had said to me about 'the Golden rule', had sent my thoughts churning over one another. Like they were on the spin cycle of the planet's most aggressive washing machine.

Like, I knew Goldie was promiscuous, I didn't realise he was *that* promiscuous. I don't know why my brain had decided to fixate on that.

Everyone. Even August?

He might come back this morning, so I had to be quick. It was my last chance to retrieve my cardigan myself, without having to use words like a grownup and ask him for it.

I headed straight to the arm of the sofa where I'd left it, but it wasn't there anymore.

Fudgesicles! Where would it be? I cast my eyes around Goldie's office. It shouldn't be too difficult to spot. The thing was bright pink, and super fluffy, like baby ostrich fluffy. He'd drawn the blinds again after I'd stormed out, the room so

much darker than it ought to be at ten o'clock on a Friday morning.

Come on, if I were a beautiful, feathery cardigan, where would I be?

Aha! There it was. One pink sleeve draped across the back of his filing cabinet, the rest of it hidden behind.

“How did you get over there?” I said, shaking off the dust and cradling it in my arms. He must have thrown it.

Really? Goldie threw my cardigan across his office? He hated me that much?

“Don't worry, Mummy's here. You don't have to be in that nasty man's office anymore.” I turned to leave, not wanting to spend a moment longer in here than I had to, but something stopped me in my tracks.

The cardigan slipped through my fingers. My eyes locked onto the drawing pad on his desk, and I found myself floating towards it.

“What the heck?!”

It was ... me.

He'd drawn me. In the style of an old-school, high-fantasy, video game character. I mean, it was definitely me. She had my hair, and glasses, and — I laughed out loud — even my dungarees. It was a sexy drawing, but not sexualised. I didn't know how there was a difference, but there was, and he had managed to capture it.

But why?

Why had he drawn me? Had Goldie drawn me before or after he tossed my cardigan across the room? Did it matter?

Part of me was desperate to stay and figure out this riddle, but I was suddenly overcome with the sensation that I'd been snooping and could be caught at any moment.

I wanted to take the drawing with me, study it in detail, but it would have to stay. Goldie would know I'd been prying about his things.

I scooped my cardigan up and exited the scene as quickly as my little dungaree-clad legs would carry me.



“But why is the human here?” said Lans, one of the Other Five, as I’d begun to refer to them. He made wingball games. Not something that had ever interested me.

“Because,” began August, putting on her *I’m your boss, and you will respect me* voice. Maybe she could give me lessons. “Holly is part of the team now, whether you like it or not, so you’ll just have to deal with it.”

A few of the designers gave ill-disguised eye-rolls, including, with a pang of hurt to my chest, Seth.

I sat to the left of August, Seth and the Other Five spread out in a huge U shape in front of us. No sign of Goldie. I had no idea where he was, and while part of me was thrilled he didn’t bother to show up, another, more uncomfortable part, was ... worried?

Don’t be daft Holly, you’re not concerned for that odious man, surely.

“Reverse that,” said August, erecting herself in her chair. “You’re going to need to do more than simply deal with it. You need to accept it and treat Holly with the same respect you would show any of the guys, or me. There will be no more of this childish eye-rolling, or heaven help me, if I hear another one of you has given her fucking admin work”—she wasn’t shouting but she might as well have been—“your ass will be out of this company faster than you can say ‘Groovy Graham was the golden age of video games’. Get a grip guys, the youngest of you is three-hundred-and-thirty. It’s time you all started acting your bloody age.”

The room fell silent and deathly still. Already the shortest person there by a good eight inches, I desperately tried not to sink lower in my chair. Involuntarily, my shoulders

curled in on themselves, my bum slipped forward on the seat pad.

“Have I made myself clear?”

There were stiff nods, a few murmured “hmmms,” and one “yes, miss,” which may or may not have been petty. I couldn’t tell. August seemed not to have picked up on it.

“Good, because Holly has an important announcement to make later—”

The door swung inwards, and in slunk Goldie. For some reason, my heart threw itself against my oesophagus. I righted my posture.

“Sorry I’m late,” he mumbled. He had dark rings under his eyes. I’d never seen a fae with such a human imperfection before.

“Not at all. We were just getting started.” August indicated to the last remaining seat, next to Seth, and directly opposite me. Great.

The meeting began with August running through what I imagined was the usual agenda. Sales and revenue figures. Increases/decreases from the previous month. Targets met, targets missed. Recent developments. New appointments within the company. By this point, the earlier telling off had largely been forgotten and some of the guys had relaxed enough to make quips about the new employees and the ‘Golden rule’.

Goldie smiled, though it dropped instantly, and all the way through the meeting, I realised he was avoiding my eye. Looking mostly at the blank notepad in front of him, but never at me. I thought of my cardigan hanging behind his filing cabinet.

This hatred for me went far beyond any fae’s normal humanophobia, but I’d be darned if I knew his reasoning.

Eventually my boss moved onto the Glamour Games and Human X merger. Shocked gasps were emitted from the designers and a low buzzing gossipy chatter broke out. Except for Goldie. His face remained stony. He permitted himself one

glance towards me, realised I was looking in his direction, and quickly cast his eyes downwards once again.

August explained about the changing demographics, and some guys threw me accusatory looks, as though I was personally responsible for the increase in human women gamers. Seth began gently elbowing Goldie in the ribs. August seemed not to notice.

“Anyway, that brings me to the final item,” she said. “As you all know, Holly is now part of FaeGames, and I’m sure you’ll agree, or at least by the end of today you will, that her presence in this company is invaluable.”

The guys were silent, no one daring to contradict the boss.

“You have each spent a few hours with her. And I must admit, I’ve been a little sneaky, and kept a few things from you,” August said. Goldie shifted in his seat, the only one not listening raptly. “Holly will now choose who she wants to shadow for the next two months. This is the remainder of her probation here. After that, I’ll give her her own office, and she’ll form her own team. It also happens to be more or less the time we have left until the AR Games Expo.”

A few of the guys shared sideways glances with each other.

“Each of you will design a brand-new game you think will appeal to our new target market.” She brandished a hand, as though demonstrating I was the target market. “So you can see now how having Holly working under you”—Goldie flinched—“would greatly benefit your endeavours.” She turned to me. “So, Holly, you’ve spent time with each of them. Learned about the types of games each designer makes, had a chance to get to know them. Who have you chosen?”

I swallowed and wiped my palms on my skirt. I cast my eyes around the room. And they met no one’s. Nobody wanted to make eye contact with me. Nobody wanted me working with them. All too keen for me to choose anyone but themselves. It was all well and good when they simply pretended I didn’t exist, but now that they were being forced

to accept I was a person, not one of them could bring themselves to even look at me. Seth side-eyed Goldie, and Goldie scowled out the window at an innocent bird. If looks could kill, that pigeon would already be pie.

Was it all a mistake? Leaving Human X? Sure, August offered me double my salary, and the kind of benefits humans only dreamed of, but if I was to be treated like some stray, flea-infested dog, what was the point?

I glanced down into my hands wringing themselves in my lap.

No. I was a senior designer. I earned this position as much as any of them. They were simply jealous that it only took me a decade, as opposed to their thirty-years-plus. It was only two months. They could lump me for two months. Then I'd get my own office. My own view of Remy. My own team to help me build my own games.

Seth looked up then and caught my eye. Those dreamy chocolate brown eyes sinking into mine like hot cocoa on a chilly afternoon. To heck with it. I had already chosen him. Maybe he disliked me now, but two months spent working closely with him might change that. Perhaps he would grow to like me. Love me even.

I cleared my throat. The room fell into a vacuum of silence.

"I have chosen," I began.

The guys were shooting each other glances, trying to avoid my gaze.

"Oh, before you announce who it is you've chosen to work with," said August, smirking. Heads whipped up everywhere. "I just wanted to add that the person who presents the game with the most revenue potential at AR ... will be offered tenure."

"Tenure! What?" said about four guys at once.

Edgy chatter broke out. The designers all talking over each other. All except Goldie, who'd now placed his head in his hand.

“Okay, settle down,” said August, in that not-quite-a-shout voice.

“If Holly doesn’t choose us,” said Greyson, a winter-fae that made puzzle games. I actually enjoyed his games, though he did have me “mark” his sketches and reports like I was his grade school teacher at our ‘meeting’. “Can we still utilise her in a consultancy role?”

So *now* they wanted to work with me. Now that tenure was on the line, of course. An icky feeling buried itself deep in my gut. Like an out of date microwavable ready meal.

“I’m not sharing her, if she chooses me,” Seth said, smothering the ick with raving butterflies.

“That entirely depends on Holly herself,” said August, shooting me a triumphant smile. “So, why don’t you put us out of our misery, Holly, who have you selected?”

“Uh ...”

Seth. I wanted Seth. I wanted not only to work under him, I wanted to *be* under him.

Fudging heck, Holly! August is sat right next to you.

Okay, I could spend two months with him. We could get to know one another. We would stay late in his office. Tell each other stories of our childhoods. Maybe reminisce while playing our favourite retro platformers. Inch closer on that squeaky leather sofa. Laughing, we’d bend our heads together, kiss. His hand would brush up my thigh under my denim skirt. He’d lay me down, his big fae body caging mine, and then ...

My fantasy stopped. Bile rushed up my throat.

Inexperienced? That’s the polite way of putting it.

Then what? We’d get so far, and he’d dismiss me as he’d done with his last human date.

“I have decided ...”

Suddenly, six of the seven guys seemed interested in capturing my attention. They were all so big. Sitting straight-backed and tall in their chairs.

Seth, you've decided on Seth. He's literally your dream boyfriend.

"... to shadow ..."

You gonna see her again? Probs not.

I closed my eyes, forced my breaths to steady.

They only wanted tenure. None of the guys actually wanted me near them, let alone to help me. But when it was something for them on the line ...

Was Seth thinking the same?

Of course he was. He only wanted tenure. A lifetime of guaranteed employment.

Not me.

He didn't care about me.

Yet.

...

We call it the Golden rule.

...

An idea popped, fully formed, into my head.

Oh, it was a desperate idea. A desperately bad idea, but I was already running with it.

"I'm going to work with Goldie."

Chapter 8.

Goldie

“What the hell was that? Me? You chose me?”

I pulled Holly, by her puny human arm, from the boardroom to my office and slammed the door behind us. Which was easier said than done. Damn infuriating soft close hinges.

“It’s always so dark in here,” she said, rubbing her bicep.

“You’ve been in my office a grand total of once before. How do you know it’s always dark in here?”

Her eyes went wide, and she shook those curls. “You’re right.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, annoyed at myself as soon as the apology slipped out. It still didn’t forgive this whole situation. “If I hurt your arm. I forget how flimsy humans are.”

“Hmmpff,” she said. I turned my back to hide my smirk.

I was still pissed at her. How dare she choose me? There I was doing everything in my possession to avoid her, and she goes and picks me to shadow. Eight weeks of being near each other. Eight weeks of talking to each other like adults. Of working towards the same goal. Of sharing ideas, staying late in the office, almost touching. Eight weeks of that violet-raspberry perfume, and those dungarees.

“I can’t work with you! You’re not shadowing me. So, you can just go right ahead and march back to August’s office and tell her you’ve chosen someone else. Lans or Greyson, or anyone.” *Anyone but Seth.*

I couldn't sleep after last night's succubus incident. As much as I tried to tell myself glamouring Holly and the reaction my body had to her image was only scratching an itch, I couldn't seem to stop thinking about it. Not about Holly. I wasn't thinking about Holly. Gods. But I had come to the very definite conclusion that I needed to forget she existed. By completely ignoring her at work. A plan, until ten minutes ago, I assumed would be easy to accomplish.

After all, weeks, months would go by with no interaction from the other senior designers, save for team meetings. It might sound like a long time to not see my colleagues, but time was relative. A fae and a human did not experience the same two months.

What's more, I was convinced she'd choose Seth.

I mean, why wouldn't she pick the guy that fulfilled every single one of her weird little tent-wearing fantasies in appearances alone?

"All the other guys want me to work with them now," she said. She wrapped a curl around her finger and looked at her feet. "Well, they want tenure."

No, I told myself. You are not allowed to feel guilty, or protective, or whatever the hell these new alien feelings swelling inside me were.

"So go work with one of them," I snapped. I started pacing. She had the absolute gall to sit down on my sofa.

"I don't want to work with them." The way she said it had me thinking she was trying to convince herself as well as me. "I want to work with you?"

Gods, did she just phrase that as a question? "Clearly."

She cleared her throat. "Um, my style is more closely aligned with yours than any of the Other Five."

"There are six other designers."

Two pops of colour appeared on her cheeks. "Yep, six, right. How silly of me."

I definitely did not think Holly was cute with her blotchy, pink cheeks. I continued to pace.

That's when I spotted the glamoured picture of her on the sketchpad. I tore the top sheet off, balled it up, and tossed it into the trash. Her eyes followed its trajectory, but from her position, there was no way she could have seen what was on it.

"So, what's the real reason?" I said. "Why have you chosen to ruin my life for the next two months?"

She winced. Good. Let her suffer. "You don't want tenure?"

Of course I wanted tenure. But this wasn't about tenure, it wasn't even about my job. This was about not leaping headfirst into the stupidest decision of my life.

"Flip it then. If you won't tell me why you chose me, at least tell me why I should work with you. Why can you help me get tenure?" I said.

Holly got to her feet, looking an odd combo of indignant and embarrassed. But definitely not cute. "Human X is the leading human owned games development company, and for three years in a row, I was their highest grossing designer." That was the second time she'd mentioned that. She jammed the toe of her purple boot against the edge of my rug, lifting it and letting it drop.

I fought back the smile threatening to overturn my stoic mask.

"I'm the best," her voice trailed off at the end. "I ... The best human at this ..." The doubt creeping across her features was almost tangible. She needed to be shaken by the shoulders.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out my breath slowly. "You are."

Her arms flopped to her sides. "Huh?"

"You are the best at this," I said. "The best human, that is. I couldn't say it if it wasn't true. Your games are great. You

shouldn't let your voice go quiet like that, as though you don't believe what you've said."

Her face flushed again, and the corner of her mouth ticked upwards. *Dammit.*

"Self-doubt is fucking annoying," I added, because I was at risk of being too nice otherwise.

If anything, this made her smile more. Great.

"So, what is it, then? What's the real reason you chose me? I know those other guys wouldn't have told you to go and fuck someone from sixth, even if they are all boring as shit."

Holly cocked her head to the side, an eyebrow raised, then buried her hands in the apron pocket of her dungaree dress. Wait. A dungaree dress? Come on! I didn't even know you could get such a ridiculous thing. She looked like a circus clown.

"Well?"

Once more, her boot found the edge of my rug and dug its way under, this time disappearing to her ankle. "Uh ..."

I walked over to the coffee machine, stuck a mug under the spout, a pod in the top, and pressed the button.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making myself comfortable. Whatever it is you're going to tell me, is gonna be good, otherwise you wouldn't be so nervous to say it."

She flopped down on the sofa. "Okay, I'll tell you, but you stay there. So I don't have to look at you."

I leant my back against the counter-top to show her I wasn't going anywhere.

She sighed, hid her face in her hands, sighed again. "I'm lonely," she said eventually.

I almost dropped my coffee. Whatever it was I had expected her to say, this hadn't been it. Or even close.

“I ... I have everything I want in life,” she continued, her ear pointed towards me, but her eyes still hidden in her palms. “I have my dream job. I have my dream apartment. Well, I will as soon as it’s built. I moved back in with my parents while they’re finishing the building work, but I’ll have it soon. I have family and friends, and hobbies, and things I enjoy, but ... I don’t have ... someone. You know? I’m lonely.” She laughed even though I could think of nothing less funny. “I want someone. A boyfriend.”

“And what’s that got to do with shadowing me?” I said, wondering why my heartbeat had just kicked up several gears.

“Well, I’m not interested in dating *you*, if that’s what you’re worried about.” She said it with an edge.

I grinned, thankful her head was still turned in the other direction. “That’s good to hear.”

“There’s a guy I like,” she said to her lap.

“Seth?”

“No! Yes, how did you know?”

I left my perch at the coffee bench and sat next to her on the couch. “You know what Seth is, right?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “He’s a summer fae? Brown skin, brown and gold eyes, no?”

Oh. She didn’t know. Should I tell her? Ruin her day, month, year? Or save that little nugget until she was really pissing me off and it would land a bigger blow?

“How do you expect me to help?” I said, sidestepping her question. I was probably going to hell for withholding that information. Ah, who was I kidding? I’d been on the road straight to hell for a long while now.

Holly began picking at a loose thread on the hem of her clown costume. “I’m ... I don’t have very much experience with men.”

The realisation came crashing down on me like a pile of retro games cartridges. I might be known as the office bike, the Rake of Remy, the reason August had to implement the

Golden Rule, but Seth had a reputation too. Though his rep wasn't derived from being a slut, like mine was. Seth notoriously despised virgins. Yet, he always seemed to attract them, much to his chagrin. A standing joke in our building. Virgins flocked to him like Sugar Paste to Elvish doughnuts. Anyone with an ounce of experience would be much more likely to find themselves at my door. And Seth hated me for it.

“You're a virgin?”

This time, the flush extended from Holly's face right down her neck and disappeared into the neckline of her t-shirt. Her hands balled into fists. “I am not!” I caught my smile between my teeth. “I'm not a virgin. It's just, I've only been with human men, and those encounters have always been ...”

I waited for her to continue. After it became clear she wouldn't, I offered, “Disappointing? Too brief?”

“Not too brief. The opposite of too brief. I've never had ... With them, I couldn't ... They couldn't ...”

Oh, it was too much fun. “The human men didn't make you come.”

She found the loose thread once again, and her gaze flicked to the window as though she was contemplating jumping out headfirst. “Yes. No, they couldn't. I've never ...” she said, not finishing her sentence.

“Have you ever had an orgasm?”

The flush returned. “Of course I have!”

Gods, Goldie, do not think about it. Do not let your mind wander there.

Fuck. Too late.

My dick jumped in my trousers as though being summoned into action. I shook my head to rid the thought. “Again, what does this have to do with me?”

She blew out a long stream of air and waited approximately an hour before saying, “I want you to teach me.”

My feet were burnt before I realised I'd dropped the coffee. I picked up the now empty cup and set it aside on the table.

"I want you to show me everything I need to know to ..." She trailed off, cleared her throat, and continued, "To, uh, please a fae man. So, uh, so that he'd want more than one dalliance with me."

Did she really just use the word 'dalliance'?

I started pacing.

"You want me to teach you how to fuck? For Seth's benefit?"

Holly flinched at the word fuck, confirming what I already knew. This was possibly the worst idea in Borderlands' history.

"Okay, let's skip over the most obvious flaw in the plan for a sec, yeah?" I said. "Even if I wanted to agree, I can't help you. You probably know this, but in case you don't, I'm going to spell it out for you. I'm not allowed to fuck you. That's it. If I sleep with another colleague, August will fire me. And since I don't want to be fired. He," I placed a hand either side of my cock, her eyes followed my movement, growing wide for a second, before she dragged them back to my face, "Needs to stay where he is, i.e. in my pants, i.e. not anywhere near whatever may be lurking under that circus performer costume you're wearing."

It took her a few moments to speak. Couldn't say I blamed her. Even in his slumbering state, he cut a fairly impressive silhouette. Or was she pissed about the circus comment?

"That's why I'm asking you. And not any of the other guys."

I frowned at her.

"Because if you agree to help me, you cannot tell a soul, or you'll be sacked on the spot."

“Damn, human,” I said, stopping my pacing to stare straight at her. “You might actually be a genius.”

Holly stood up, huffed on her knuckles, and rubbed them on her shoulder.

“Oh, no, don’t be cute with me.” This made her smile even more. “It’s still a very firm no.”

“What’s the other thing, then? The most “*obvious flaw*” in the plan?” she said, doing air quotes. She was still smiling as though she’d already won, but I was about to wipe that sucker off her face.

“You might as well sit down. You’re not going to like it.”

She did. I sat next to her.

“No fae, including Seth, will ever, and I mean *ever*, willingly fall in love with a human.”

There, I said it.

She faltered. Opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. “How do you know I want love, and not just a ... hook up?”

“Other than the fact you paused before you said hook up?”

She cocked a shoulder.

“Because you’re human,” I said with the energy of spitting on the ground next to her feet. “Not so fun fact: all humans, every single one of you, are obsessed with love. This grand notion that love will save the day, the planet, everything. It’s bullshit.”

The look on her face told me my arrow had hit its mark. The smile no longer there, but a white line where her lips had been, her brows creased beneath the top of her glasses.

I continued because that’s the kind of guy I was. And she needed to know. Needed to understand that what she was looking for could never happen. “Fae and humans are too

different. Sure, you can have friendships within the mix, but not love. Never love. It will never happen. So, if it's love you're looking for, go find a human. Or a minotaur, or satyr, or werewolf, or someone else with a stupidly short lifespan. Don't drag a fae into something like that."

She assessed me for a few moments, her chocolate brown eyes staring straight into my soul. "You don't believe in love?"

Of course I believed in love. I'd witnessed it firsthand. I saw the way Taur looked at Sugar Paste. I'd seen the way Mal looked at Nova. I knew love was real. But it simply was not something for me.

"I believe two humans could fall in love, and I believe two fae could fall in love. But that's where it ends. On average, it takes a human minus five seconds to fall in love. A fae could take years, decades even."

"But—"

"My parents took almost two centuries to fall in love. You're really going to trick Seth into falling in love with you ___"

"I don't want to trick anyone. I want something real—"

"You won't get it!" I yelled. "What happens if he takes two, three, four decades to fall in love with you? By that point, you'll be old, grey, broken. You still think he'd be interested in you? You think he'll want to care for you when human disease claims you? Wash you? Feed you like a baby? Hold your little human hand while you die? While nothing about him, physically or mentally, has changed? You think it's fair to subject him to centuries of mourning?"

Shit, I did not mean to say any of that. My heart felt like it had wedged itself between two of my ribs. My breaths came out hard and fast.

Her lips pursed together. Her chin wobbled. She swallowed.

"Hell no, you are not allowed to fucking cry right now."

Okay, I was officially the dickiest dick of all time. But it was better she knew.

Holly stared at me again for the longest time, her chest gently rising and falling, her eyes rimmed with tears, but her expression unreadable. “That happened to you, didn’t it?” she said in barely a whisper.

“Not me.” I found myself unable to hold her gaze. “My flatmate, Mal.” It had been three-centuries since he lost Nova. Three-hundred years of sorrow. With at least another millennia or two stretched out before him.

Oh, I believed in love all right. I believed in its ultimate powers of devastation.

Nothing could destroy as love did.

“I’m so sorry.” Her hand was on the back of mine, tiny electric fissures shot from the point of contact up my arm.

“You won’t get love. Okay? I didn’t mean it to come across so harshly. But those are the facts. The best you can ever hope for is a long-term boyfriend. Five, ten years, max. Especially with Seth.”

Seth was a-whole-nother topic, but I had bummed her out enough for one day. Discussion on Seth could wait. Or she would learn on her own at some point. Whatever.

“I could live with five, ten years.” She swallowed again. “I have nothing at the moment, and ...” She trailed off, not finishing her sentence.

“He wouldn’t hesitate to toss you aside when he finds a more interesting partner. That’s the kind of guy he is. That’s the kind of guys we all are. I hate to tarnish us all with the same brush, but fae are fae.”

Incredibly, Holly laughed. “And tell me, how exactly is that any different from human men?”

I shrugged. She had a point there. “And you’ll be competing against fae women for his affections. Fae women who are externally perfect. Women who look like they were designed on a computer by every horny tech-genius.”

“I know,” she whispered. She cleared her throat again. “This is why I need your help.”

I scrubbed my hand down my face.

“Please,” she said.

It was a good job I was already seated. It felt like the rug was being ripped from beneath us. Who knew outside of the bedroom begging would have this effect on me? I couldn't believe I was actually going to say this. “Okay, I'll help you.”

“You will?” Holly's face lit up again in that smile.

“Only because I can't stand to see your helpless, sad, little face looking like that.” And because getting tenure would mean an end to the Golden Rule. I'd be free to fuck whoever I wanted. Seth would be livid. I couldn't lose.

She squeezed my hand. An “Eeee” escaped her lips.

“On one condition. You won't be upset when Seth proves me right.”

Holly blew out a shaky breath. “I'll really try, I promise.”

I slapped my palms onto my lap. “Right, well, I'll teach you how to fuck, and you'll help get me tenure.”

Gods, I was an idiot for agreeing to this.

Though my dick was in complete disagreement with that last statement. It leapt in my pants, pushing against my fly. After last night's regrettable encounter with the succubus, I was beginning to worry he was broken.

“Deal.” She held out her hand, and I shook it. I tried not to notice the clammy softness of it. The little bumps of hard skin at the top of her palm. Tried not to suck in a lung full of raspberries and violets.

“First things first, you're going to have to learn to use the word ‘fuck’.”

Holly winced again, and I trapped my smile between my teeth.

“We’ll start tomorrow. Your place, or mine?” I said.

“Tomorrow?” Panic flashed across her face. Okay, so maybe the cat would have a little fun with the mouse first. “Uh.”

“Or not, whatever,” I said, putting my coffee-soaked feet onto the table and crossing them at the ankles.

“Yeah, cool. Tomorrow is totally cool.”

“Totally cool?”

A bubble of nervous laughter escaped her throat, and she pushed her hair behind her ears. “What’s your address, then?”

“Give me your phone.” She did, and I dropped a pin on my place. “Apartment 15A. Get there for four. Bring your overnight stuff.”

I handed the phone back, and she tucked it into the front pocket of her clown dress. I barely suppressed my eye-roll.

“Do you still hate me?” she asked, though smiling.

“Of course.”

“Good. I mean, because I still hate you.”

I laughed. “Good. Actually, keep it that way. I have another condition for our little deal.”

“Yeah?”

“Under no circumstances whatsoever are you allowed to,” I said, drawing out the last part so she understood I was being serious, “fall in love with me.”

Holly wrapped her arms around her stomach and burst into laughter. “No problem,” she said, wiping away tears. “And, uh, ditto.”

Chapter 9.

Goldie

I found Dima in his bedroom. Black shoulder length hair, moonlight-pale skin, blood-red eyes, and fangs. He'd been in his early twenties when he was turned so was eternally baby-faced. He stood next to his couch, an army of floating quilts hovered in front of him like a sports-team line-up of colourful, patchwork ghosts. Dima never sat down. A vampire thing, I think. I didn't know any other vampires, so I had no one to compare him with. But he only ever sat for three reasons. Either he was trying to make Sugar Paste feel more at ease, he was 'having dinner' with us, or he was high.

He fixed his definitely-not-creepy eyes on me. "Sure, I'll do it," he said, answering my unspoken question out loud.

I may not have known many vampires, but I was aware that Dima's twin gifts of telepathy and telekinesis were extremely rare. So rare in fact, no one, apart from his flatmates, knew about them. Telepathy, especially, came with many rules and regulations. Invited too many questions. Inspired too much jealousy. So much so, Dima had shunned his own kind in favour of us three. Now four if you included Sugar Paste.

"But you know what I want in return," he said, a smile slipping across his deathly white cheeks.

And I didn't need to be a mind reader to know what Dima would accept as payment. "Sure. But can you tidy it now? She's coming over tomorrow."

"Ooh, this is exciting." He let his quilts drift over to the couch and surged behind me out of his room, evidently forgetting to lift his legs and feet as he 'walked'.

“What makes this one different?” he said to me once we got to my bedroom. “Why don’t you simply glamour over the mess like you usually do?”

I shrugged, and waited for Dima’s minty mind-reading presence, but it never arrived. “I’m doing this for her, to help her.” Though, the truth was, I had no idea why I wanted the room tidy instead of using my magic. It was a different situation. Holly was different from the people I normally brought home.

His grin returned. A black bin-bag opened itself up, and all at once items rose from the floor, zooming about the room. Placing themselves back on shelves, throwing themselves into the trash bag. The bed clothes stripped themselves. The curtain pole righted itself. The windows flew open, letting the cool night air rush in. The rug shook decades of accumulated dust into the dark city. Cleaning products arrived from the kitchen cupboard and wiped down the surfaces and mirrors. A duster floated about, brushing things. Dima hummed to himself, tapping the top of his thigh with his fingers. My clothes, along with the bedsheets, hurtled past my hip out the door and down the stairs as though strung to an invisible thread.

“You might have to do two washes. And Taur’s got some of his work stuff in the machine at the moment. I’ve left your stuff in the baskets.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said, unable to take my eyes away from the actual living space emerging from the mess. “Wow.” I crossed the room and ran my finger along the shelf. It had maybe been a quarter of a century since I had a properly tidy bedroom. Since we all moved into this apartment when it was first built.

As a finishing flurry, Dima brought up a vase with some of Mal’s cut flowers, yellow and purple, not sure what they were but they smelled impressive, and placed them on my chest of drawers.

“You’re helping her?” Dima nodded at his job well done and floated himself out of the room. I followed behind

him. “How will you be helping her, exactly?”

He could have invaded my thoughts and gotten the answer straight away, but I appreciated the fact that he always tried with us.

“She likes a guy at work.” I sat myself on the sofa opposite the TV and pulled the dented tin out from underneath it. “But he’s fae, obviously, and she’s human, and she wants me to show her how fae men like to fuck.”

“Isn’t that the same as how human men like it?”

“Exactly the same.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “And what’s in it for you?”

“Other than no strings fucking? She’s going to help me with my game. There’s tenure on the line, and I’ll be fucked if Seth gets tenure before me.”

I rolled a joint, lit it, and took a drag. I rolled another two, one standard-sized, and one at least triple that, and tucked them both back inside the tin.

“Ready?” I said to Dima, taking another lungful and holding it inside. Vampires couldn’t smoke weed, not in the way people with functioning lungs usually did. So Dima’s repayment for any favours he did for us was always to get high by proxy.

He nodded, his fangs unsheathing themselves.



“Okay, I’ve got one for you. Drink a pint of Taur’s sweat, or eat a bowl of his hair?” Dima said, now laid out on the smaller couch. Though if I looked carefully, I could make out at least an inch of space between his body and the sofa cushions. He obviously couldn’t help himself from floating.

I watched the little bloody crescents on my wrist scab over, the scabs flake free, and the redness vanishing into

normal unblemished skin once again. Thank the Gods for my rapidly healing fae body.

“Drink a pint of his sweat. What about you?” I said.

“Both would make me violently ill, so whichever is easier to bring back up. Probably the sweat.”

“What are the choices?” said a shower-fresh Taurin, dropping himself down onto the other end of my sofa.

I leant forward, retrieved the tin, removed the two joints, and passed him the larger one. Not Ludo jumped into my lap and settled himself down. The cat had been there half a second, and he'd already shed an entire winter-coat onto my jeans. “Go to Daddy,” I said, ineffectively shoving the ginger puddle towards Taur.

Dima spoke. “Would you rather drink a pint of your own sweat, or eat a bowl of your hair? Goldie and I both went for the sweat.”

Taur's laugh rumbled through the whole building. He was massive, though apparently small for his kind. A minotaur shifter. The only known minotaur currently living in Borderlands. Seven-feet tall, with horns on top of that, and the man had muscles on muscles on muscles. It's a crying shame we'd never fucked, but I couldn't begrudge his newfound happiness with Sugar Paste.

He ran a hand through his wet, shoulder-length hair. “You guys are seriously underestimating the power of my sweat. I swear when it mixes with the sunshine, there's some sort of chemical reaction. It will bleach the colour straight out of my shirts. It's why I rarely wear any at work.”

“I'll still opt for the sweat. Maybe I'd enjoy the sensation of having my oesophagus melted,” Dima said.

“You ordered food?” Taur said, getting out his phone.

“Yeah, Carly's,” I replied.

He returned his phone to his pocket, smiled, and leaned his head back on his massive arm, knowing full well what that meant. Not only eating the best falafel known to man or

mythic, but also that he'd get to see his wife while she delivered our food. Which pretty much happened every Friday evening, but Taur always behaved as though Sugar Paste had been away for months on active duty.

We were quiet for a few moments. I figured Dima, whose tolerance to any kind of mind-altering substance was akin to that of a child's, had simply zoned out. I was wrong. I realised this when Taur replied out loud to a conversation he and Dima were apparently having telepathically.

“And she's human?”

I snapped my attention to him.

“Nothing,” he said, but Dima obviously spoke into his mind, because the minotaur laughed, shot the vampire a look, and hefted a huge shoulder.

“Tell me now, or I'll kill both of you.”

“That's a terrible threat. I'm already dead,” said Dima.

Taur narrowed his eyes, but his grin was more *aha*. “D told me you enlisted him to tidy up your room. For a girl ... A human girl.” He leaned forward and took a huge drag on his joint.

“Dima, can't you ever keep anything private?”

The vampire pulled his gaze to me, his eyes wider than headlamps, he opened his mouth to speak but what actually came out was a terrible case of the giggles. After that, he became unable to answer any more questions.

“So, who is she?” asked Taur. “Feels like only a few weeks ago we were sitting here having this exact chat about Peaches.”

“She's literally no—”

I wanted to say no one, but the last word wouldn't come out. Fuck. No, it didn't mean anything.

We were quiet for a while. Taur obviously realising it was something I didn't want to talk about, me not finding any alternative subject to deflect the conversation, and Dima still

giggling like a schoolboy looking at an anatomical illustration of a vulva in a biology book.

She's literally no one. Holly Briar was no one to me.

I could say it inside my head.

“Who ordered falafel?” came Sugar Paste’s voice from the hall, as she let herself in. Taur jumped to his feet and left the room.

Dima smiled at me. Dima was perpetually smiling, but this was a little different. It was a sickly, sleepy, stoned smile. “I’m so jealous of them,” he said.

“Of who? Taur and Sugar Paste?”

“I just want someone whose thoughts I can tolerate, or someone who knows how to put a barrier up in their mind, so I don’t have to listen to them all the time.”

Tiny feather-like cracks snaked across my heart. I didn’t know Dima was so lonely.

“Well, I am,” he said, obviously having heard my thought. “I don’t see my kind very often because I can’t stand the noise pollution, but I am lonely. Have been for a long time. I’m too fussy about who I penetrate. Mentally,” he added before my mind could make the quip. “Or physically. I haven’t had sex in three decades ... And you thought your four-month drought was a record.”

“Mate,” was all I managed to say.

“Do you ever think you’d want it? Love, I mean.” He still wore his smile, but it was a different kind now. I was sure Dima, man of extremely limited movement, had over a thousand smiles. His eyes were closed.

“I ...” I began, not sure where to go with my sentence.

I wasn’t lonely, that much I was sure of. I’d had too many lovers to be lonely. And why would I want anything more than a hook-up? If I found the person disagreeable — which I always did because bleurgh, people — I could discard them and move onto the next one. No harm done. No feelings

involved. Everyone knew what they were getting. Nobody expected more.

Get under me, or get away from me, was the general message.

But people. I just didn't do people. Dima, Mal, Taur, Sugar Paste. They were the only friends I had. Would let in to see the real me. I'd never even felt at home in the Kingdom of the Fae. How could I, with over forty siblings?

Did I want more? Did I want what my flatmate had? Did I want love?

...

I looked at Dima. "Are they fucking?"

He paused before nodding.

"Hey, Mal said no fucking in the communal living spaces!" I yelled.

"Mal's not here," said a breathless Sugar Paste, as Taur called out, "Go to hell!"

"You just need to get laid," I said to Dima, changing the subject. "Three decades is hellava long time to go without."

He shrugged. "If I could switch their mind off for an evening, I would." He manoeuvred himself into a seated position, though still hovering a good four inches from the couch, and fixed his burgundy eyes on me. "Do you think she could be that for you? Holly?"

My heart smashed itself against my stomach, flipping its contents dangerously. I hadn't told Dima her name. "No," I said, a little too quickly, but feeling relieved I could actually deny it. That my stupid fae mouth would let me. "I can hardly bear her. It's a mutual agreement. We're helping each other out."

Though, come to think of it, I was definitely getting the better end of the stick here. She'd help me get tenure, and all I needed to do in return was what I always did. Then at the end of our agreement, she'd get her own office down the hall from

mine, and I'd see her as often as I saw Seth, or one of the other guys.

That's all it was. A few weeks of sex. Nothing more.

Absolutely nothing more.

It would be easy for Dima. If he fell in love with a human, he could just bite them and turn them into a vampire, and they'd never die.

But if I ...

I couldn't even bring myself to think it. I'd have to watch them grow old and ...

"That's not true," said Dima, apparently unable to stay out of my mind. "You can't just turn someone into a vampire. It takes years. You've got to have all the right paperwork. Pay the fees, which are extortionate, by the way. It needs to be done in an official, sterile facility. The new vampire will be issued their Undeath Certificate. It's not as simple as biting someone and getting them to drink my blood. Besides, once a person is turned, they lose their previous identity, and all their non-vampire memories are wiped out. So really, if I fell in love with a human, and I turned them, once I turned them, they would no longer be them. You know?"

"Mate," I said, those feather-like cracks yawning open a little wider.

"So, I guess you and I are stuck in perpetual loneliness," he said.

"I'm not lo—" I faltered. Not for the first time tonight the words I'd intended to say wouldn't come out.

Well, fuck.

Dima opened his mouth to speak and closed it. If he could breathe, I'm sure he would have sighed. The look that came next was pure bewilderment. "I think ... You know, I think ... my legs are turning into baguettes." And then he dissolved into the giggles again.

Chapter 10.

Holly

There he was. Seth, or rather the Faecyclopaedia's illustration of a summer fae. Like the artist had used him for the drawing's inspiration. I thumbed over the picture in my textbook.

Choosing Goldie as my shadow partner had been a rash and slightly irrational decision. But if I wanted something to happen with Seth, something more than a single night, I needed coaching. That much was painfully obvious. Seth hated inexperience. And it'd been so long since I'd last been intimate with a man, I was beginning to wonder if I remembered where everything went.

Goldie had experience alright. He had enough experience for everyone in Remy. But perhaps the most splendid twist of fate was he wouldn't be able to utter a single word about it to anyone at work.

He'd called me a genius. I smiled a little at the memory.

At the time, this arrangement seemed like the only logical conclusion. Fae with heaps of knowledge shares that knowledge with eager-to-learn human. Then afterwards he could dust his hands of me. We disliked — okay, loathed — each other. There would be no feelings involved beyond what happened in his pants area. It would be transactional for both of us. I would brush up on my techniques, and then we could go back to ignoring each other.

Yes, admittedly Goldie was very easy on the eyes. Unfairly-bordering-unethically handsome, as all fae were. But it would only help make this ordeal less wretched on my part. For him though, he'd made it clear several times he found

humans repulsive. There was no way in heck he'd find me attractive. Even without my dungarees.

I was desperate. Beginning to believe I was a lost cause. Doomed to spend all eternity boyfriendless, orgasmless.

If I wanted a decent shot at being with Seth, it was just something I'd have to endure.

"Are you still mooning over that book?" said Abby. She threw her backpack down on the floor next to the desk.

"Hey," I said, sitting up on the bottom bunk, remembering not to smash my head on the slats this time. "I thought you had band practice?"

"Galmin quit the band. So, we're down a guitarist, and lead singer. And because he was half-fae, he was the 'look'. And now we won't get any of his hangers-on at the gigs. There'll be crickets."

"Oh, shoot," I said, already feeling awkward and uncool. Especially in the face of my sister's decidedly cooler problems.

"Yeah, it sucks, but the guy was a piece of shit, egotistical prick, anyhoo ... I'm sure we'll recover. As long as we can find someone new before the Tallywhacker's gig."

At sixteen, my baby sister — half-sister — was far cooler than I ever was. Or would be, for that matter. She played bass in her high school band, The Bus Stop Willies. And they were actually going places. A kind of pop-grunge revival group. They played gigs at bars and festivals, and a few weddings, and most of them weren't even old enough to drink. They'd probably take more bookings if it weren't for their name, but the teenage members were typically stubborn about changing it. Abby had been talking my ear off about this big Tallywhacker's gig in the student union bar for months on end.

"So, you not going out tonight?" I said, unsure how I could offer any help with the bandmate search, having been declared officially 'tragic' at least twenty-four years ago.

“No. Sorry. You’re stuck with me all weekend.” She peeled off her boots and threw them towards her bag. “Wanna binge-watch the new series of Youngbloods, and eat pizza until we pop?”

My heart gave a pang of longing. We weren’t close. As far as siblings went. I was thirteen when Abby arrived with only a few weeks’ notice. Mum hadn’t been showing. She’d gone to the doctor complaining of bloating and backache, and came home with a grainy black and white ultrasound print-off, and an attention-thievingly long shopping list.

I had resented the baby for the longest time. Having been the only child and sole recipient of Mum and Phil’s affections. And then, when Abby had started school, I went off to uni in Bordalis, only coming home for the summer and the Winter Fest holidays. By the time I returned to Remy, key to my very own little flat in hand, Abby was neck-deep in secondary school, and already too cool, (or OG, or GOAT, or yort, or whatever the heck kids said these days) to pay her older sister any mind.

For so long I’d wanted us to have a relationship, like proper sisters. Giggling, and face masks, and boy talk, the works. But since moving back home, we’d hardly been in the same room for longer than five minutes. No mean feat given we shared a bedroom. All totally down to her super hectic social life, nothing to do with me. I tended to watch tapir documentaries on my phone. Or played on my pocket console while stuffing my gob with Gnomies or Peanut Whizzos. All from the comfort of my fluffy *Groovy Graham and Pals* pyjamas and the bottom bunk.

“We can hang out tonight, but I’ve got plans for tomorrow night. I won’t be here,” I said.

“Oh?” She plopped herself next to me, her eyebrows disappearing into her hairline.

Abby was all Phil, blonde hair, tall, willowy thin. Whereas I was told I was more like my birth dad. Short, squishy round the middle, dark brown hair, and light brown

skin. He left when I was a baby, and nobody had heard from him since. I remembered nothing about him.

“I’m going to ... a sort of sleepover. With ... uh, a guy. From work.”

She scooted closer to me. “O. M. Gees! You’ve got a D appointment.”

“No! No, he’s just a friend.” None of that sentence was true. My cheeks heated.

“Yeah, a friend with benefits.”

“No. No. Yes. Sort of.”

“Holly!” Out of nowhere, she hugged me. “I’m so excited for you. Please tell me everything immediately. As soon as it happens, okay? Even whilst it’s happening.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for just a second. If this was what helped me to get closer to my sister, then so be it.

“Okay. I promise I’ll tell you ... not everything, but enough.”

She held out her baby finger, and I twisted mine around it. For all her cool girl imagery, I knew, or at least, I was almost certain, Abby was a virgin. But I remembered being her age and being just as intrigued-bordering-obsessed with learning everything I could about sex. It was only natural for her to be curious. And besides, surely it was my obligation as her older sister to help guide her through the minefield of adolescence.

“He’s fae?”

“Yeah, they all are at work.”

“Which one?” She pointed to the Faecyclopaedia on my pillow, still open to Seth’s kind. “Summer fae?”

I shook my head. A pang of longing shot through my stomach as I pulled the book onto my lap. I flicked backwards a few dozen pages until I landed on Oread. “This is what he is,” I said, smoothing down the paper.

“Shit, he’s fine.”

Each page showed a typical male and female from each type. Where Seth was textbook Summer Fae, Goldie was *all* Oread. Spun-gold hair, tall, lean body. Impossibly, the illustrator had even managed to accurately capture his scowl.

“Yes, he is sickeningly attractive,” I agreed. *He’s just not Seth.*

“What’s he like? As a person.”

“Uh,” I faltered, “He’s ... He can be ... He’s a bit of a, uh ...”

“Twat?”

“Abby!” I grabbed her arm and fell forward, giggling. “But yeah, actually he is.”

She pointed to a word under the heading *Strengths: Sexuality*. “Bet he’s got a big dick.”

Though the illustrations weren’t clothed, they’d been depicted with ‘fashion-doll’ anatomies. Meaning smooth, hairless mounds where their, erm, dangly bits should be.

“Oh my Gods, you’re too young for this.”

She laughed. “No, no. Don’t say that.” She took my hand in hers. “Do you think it will turn into more than friends with benefits? Like boyfriend, girlfriend?”

I thought of my ultimate goal in this arrangement, the whole reason for the arrangement; Seth. “No, definitely not. Neither of us wants that. It’s simply a ... skill-swap.”

“I’ll say.”

Chapter 11.

Holly

Flat 15A, Halcyon Sunrise building. This was the place. And wow! Seriously. All futuristic steel structure and dark mirrored exterior, and in one of the nicest parts of the predominantly mythic-inhabited Eastside district. The taxi pulled up right outside Goldie's apartment block. I'd left my car at home because I'd had a mild panic attack about the parking situation. Going by the cars heading in and out of the underground lot, it was the right move. My banger would have looked so out of place down there, nestled amongst vehicles that could only belong to famous actors, or professional sports stars, or men with beet-red faces and expensive suits that shouted down their phones all day.

I took the elevator to the top floor, noting how it smelled like eucalyptus and mint, not urine. "Ah, how the other half live," I said, smoothing down my pinafore, knocking on the sleek mahogany penthouse door, and letting out my shaky breath. I didn't know why I was so nervous. This was all my idea. And it was all win-win.

Video games, sex, learning, sex, working towards getting a super-hot fae boyfriend, orgasms. From an orgasm-expert, no less. An expert that couldn't utter a single word about it to anyone or he'd lose a job he'd had for at least thirty years.

So why were my palms so sweaty? Why was my heart trying to escape through my windpipe?

The door opened inwards, and there, framed in the jamb, stood Goldie. Shiny yellow hair pushed back over his pointed ears, a black Remy Rockets wingball jersey, retro wide-legged blue jeans, and socked feet.

“Human,” he said, giving me a once over.

“I have a name.”

He turned and walked into the house, leaving me to close the door behind us.

“Where shall I put my bag?” I said, following him through into what seemed to be the main living space, trying, and failing, to contain my awe.

Wow. The sheer size of this room. The high ceilings, the silver-screen-sized TV, the sound system, the amazing paintings, the view. Oh my Gods, the view. I dropped my overnight bag on the floor and ran over to the windows.

From there I could see way, way out east over the waters. Yachts, fishing boats, ferries, old-fashioned pirate-style ships that had been refurbished into restaurants, even cruise liners bobbed or were anchored, or whatever boats did when they were idle. Farther along the horizon, the twin piers jutted out into the ocean. On one, the ferris-wheel lazily spun, the reflective carriages sending out bursts of sunlight like a swirling glitterball. In that moment, I understood why the building had been named Halcyon Sunrise. This would be the perfect place to watch the day begin.

“Wait. Oh my Gods! You can probably see my apartment! Hey, have you got a little steppy thing? I think I can see my apartment!” I called out, spinning on the spot, and abruptly stopping, almost toppling forward.

On the enormous, squishy, super-comfy-looking sofas sat a gorgeous, curvy, human, woman. Her red hair tumbled down her back in mermaid-like waves, her bare feet were tucked up onto the couch, and beside her, a fluffy ginger cat with a smushed-in face was curled.

She smiled at me, waved and then yelled, “Horns, she’s here! Bring out another beer.”

Standing next to one of the sound stacks, Goldie rolled his eyes into a slow blink.

“I’m Joey. I’m Goldie’s favourite flatmate,” she said to me. “You must be Holly.” She turned her smile to the fae,

communicating something without words. No doubt about me, but it didn't seem unkind. They had probably been talking about me before I arrived.

I felt my cheeks getting warmer. "Hi, yes, I am," I squeaked.

So, this was the type of company he kept outside of work.

Don't be intimidated, Hols, I told myself. She's just an ordinary, beautiful, buxom goddess. No need to feel intimidated by his flatmates. Oh Gods—

That thought was firmly obliterated when another of his highly intimidating flatmates — I presumed another flatmate — entered the living room. A six-pack of beers held in one massive, hairy hand. Maybe seven feet tall, horned, muscles from here to kingdom-come, septum ring. Minotaur. Goldie was flatmates with a mother-fudging minotaur. Was the room spinning?

"Hey," the minotaur said, growled actually. "I'm Taurin. Beer?" He held a can out for me.

It took me a few moments to compose myself. I swallowed, stepped forward, and took the can, fighting the urge to retreat immediately like a kitten snatching a treat from the giant paws of a ... well, a minotaur. "Thanks." I stood at approximately nipple height to him.

"They're mated. Uh, married," Goldie said, motioning between Joey and Taurin as though that explained something, and accepted a beer for himself.

Joey grinned, ear to ear, her gaze flitting between me and the two men. I couldn't decipher what the grin meant. "You know, Holly, Goldie's wearing a shirt. I think that means he likes you." She raised an eyebrow at Goldie in, what I assumed, was a challenge.

"I won't be wearing it for long," he replied.

My response came out as a choked laugh.

With that, Taurin bent down, practically onto his knees, and whispered something into Joey's ear. Joey laughed.

"I heard that," said Goldie. I heard nothing. Darn these mythics and their incredibly heightened senses. "Right, now you've both got a decent look at her, you can fuck off up to your room and leave us in peace."

Though I might have thought that was a rude thing to say to his flatmates, Joey and Taurin didn't seem the slightest bit bothered.

"Fine, fine," said Joey, uncurling her legs and using her husband's arm to pull herself to her feet. The cat lifted its head at the disturbance and then promptly nestled it back on its paws. She turned to me. "I'm sure we'll get to see a lot more of one another this weekend. Our room is next door to Goldie's, so if being in a flat with four mythics ever feels too much, just give me a knock."

"Okay," I said, because I really didn't know what else to say. Suddenly I felt very small — Joey had to be about five-ten — and very awkward. It was clear that his flatmates knew exactly why I was there. But I guessed that was nothing new where Goldie was concerned. When the pair had left, I looked at the still scowling fae. "You have four flatmates, and three of them are mythics?"

His brow furrows didn't waver, but a smile appeared. "Taurin, he's a minotaur. Congrats on meeting your first ever minotaur, by the way. My other flatmates are Mal, an incubus, and Dima, a vampire."

I stumbled over my feet, dropping the can of beer to the floor. Luckily, I hadn't pulled the tab off it yet. I couldn't decide out of the minotaur, the incubus, or the vampire, which was the scariest.

Vampire. Definitely vampire.

"Mal's out. At work. And Dima's probably asleep," Goldie added, as though sensing I was looking around trying to spot them.

"Should I, uh, be worried?"

“Sugar Paste lives here. She’s very human,” he said matter-of-factly. “Plus, it’s against the law to harm a human. You lot have more rights than any other species put together.” He bent down, picked up my can of beer and pointed to the place where the red-haired human woman was sitting. “You gonna help me with this game, then?”

I took the seat next to the enormous ball of ginger fur. It lifted its head, mewed at me, and flumped onto its side.

“What’s the cat’s name?” I asked.

“Not Ludo,” was Goldie’s mightily confusing answer. He sat down on the opposite end of the couch and turned his whole body towards me. Gosh, he was so big. How had I never realised how big he was before?

“So, what is it? If it’s not Ludo. It could be anything. I mean, it literally leaves every single other name in existence.”

“No, that’s his name. Not Ludo. It’s actually Definitely Not Ludo, but we call him Not Ludo for short.”

I had so many questions. “Why don’t you just call him Ludo for short?”

“No! He’s Definitely Not Ludo, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I stole him. From Sugar Paste’s, uh, Joey’s old landlord.”

I faltered. Every time I thought I couldn’t dislike this fae any more than I already did, he proved me wrong. “You stole a cat?”

He smiled, as though he’d won a secret game only he was playing. “Yep.” He cracked open his beer.

He casually told his flatmates to eff off. He told me to eff off the first time in his office. He was a meanie to me at the convention. He lobbed my cardigan across the room, and now he steals, actually thieves, a person’s pet. It didn’t even brush on his philandering, not that that was necessarily a bad thing.

I would probably regret asking this, “Why did you steal someone’s cat? What happened with Joey’s old landlord?”

To my surprise, Goldie laughed, but it was a cold, humourless laugh. “Humans. If you’re not trying to make everything about love, you’re trying to find excuses for other species’ abhorrent actions. How about some of us are just assholes?” He handed me a FaeStation controller. “If you’re trying to justify my behaviour so that you can find some way to like me, don’t bother. I’m not a nice guy, I’m not interested in being a nice guy, and I’m definitely not interested in developing a friendship with another human.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but he didn’t give me a chance before he continued his oratory.

“What we have here is nothing more than an agreement of convenience. It will do you well to remember that beyond this agreement, I like you in a professional capacity. Only. I both enjoyed and admired your games, but that is it. As a person, I find you bothersome and ... monopolising.”

Monopolising?

“Oh. Okay,” I said after at least a full minute had passed under Goldie’s haughty stare. It really was so unfair that those beautiful green eyes belonged to such a resounding jerk. I cleared my throat. “What have you been working on, then? I assume you want me to test your game?”

“*Magic Thief Seven*,” he said, switching on the cinema-sized TV with a skinny silver remote.

“Ooh, yay!” The words were out before I could stop them. I slapped a hand over my mouth and chanced a peek at the miserable fae. I could’ve been mistaken, but I’m sure a smile ticked the corner of his lips.

For the next twenty minutes or thereabouts, Goldie watched me playing his game, his arms folded across his chest, those deep furrows carved between his brows. I tried to focus on the screen and pretend I wasn’t acutely aware of the

pissy, six-foot-three Oread sitting a metre away from me, huffing down my neck with aggressive intensity.

He smelled good, like his citrus cologne. My palms were sweating, making them slippery against the controller. I was also highly conscious of how much noise I made while breathing — definitely not a normal amount — and spent a considerable amount of energy trying to make it quieter. All while going through the motions on his game, or at least appearing to.

Out of nowhere, Goldie leant forward and seized the controller, his face inches from mine. Heat leapt from his body onto my cheeks. My breath stilled again.

“So?” he said.

“I love it,” I whispered.

He smiled. Actually smiled. Darn it, smiling looked good on him. “But?”

“It’s *Magic Thief Six*. But in industrial revolution times.”

He leaned back on the couch, puffing out a breath. “You sound like August.”

“She wants something different?” I didn’t know why I asked. She already told the designers she wanted a game that appealed to humans, and while I loved *Magic Thief*, and all its sequels, and prequels, and spinoffs, I couldn’t say the same for most of the guys at my old job. Not anymore.

By way of answer, he raised an eyebrow.

“Where are the missions?” I asked, motioning a hand to the screen.

“The missions are not important.”

“Of course they are. They’re the best bit. They give the game purpose, and heart.”

He groaned and jumped to his feet, scrubbing his hands backwards through his hair. “Fuck’s sake, next you’ll be telling me I need to make the game about love.”

I kept my mouth shut.

“You humans are so quick to stereotype every other species, but you lot are all the same. It’s so predictable it should be funny.”

I didn’t know if Goldie was aware of the complete hypocrisy of that statement. But, yeah, he was right. About the game, that is.

He should make it about love.

If he was looking for a way to make his game more universally appealing to humans, human women in particular, that was it.

“So,” I began, “if you know the answer ... what’s stopping you?”

He shook his head and just stared at me. The heels of his hands covered the points on his ears and his fingers interlocked around his nape. After what seemed like forever, he rubbed a palm over his face and blew out a breath.

“No. I can’t do it,” he said, perhaps more to himself, and crossed over to the window to gaze out at that magnificent view. I wanted to join him, to see if I could spot my apartment. If he lifted me up a little, I’m sure it’d be there, twinkling next to the waterfront. But I stayed where I was, giving him whatever space he needed to brood over absolutely nothing.

Another twenty minutes passed. Longer, perhaps. During that time, I’d replied to three emails, and shot a quick message to Abby.

Going terribly so far. Amazing apartment though. No D yet.

Suddenly, Goldie stood beside me, peering down at my phone. “Do you want to eat or fuck first?”

“What?”

“You hungry?”



Goldie cooked for me. Some fae dish, I think. It was a bit like a burrito, spicy and tomatoey, wrapped in soft doughy bread with grilled fish and lots of coriander and lime. We sat side by side at his dining table.

“This is lovely. Very tasty,” I said, conscious of coming across too friendly.

He nodded, and then we ate in silence while I tried not to dread what would come after dinner. Occasionally laughter floated down through the ceiling, either feminine, or so deep it felt as though the entire kitchen was rumbling.

It was my idea. This, for want of a better word, trade off. *My idea*, not the rake fae’s. I wanted this. Needed it, really. But it wasn’t too late to pull out. To put an end to it before it even began.

On the outside, Goldie was flawless, obviously. A perfect specimen of a male fae, in a thousand and one ways. Tall, impeccable hair, flawless face. And I was approximately an hour away — if I could drag this out — from seeing how flawless the rest of him was.

And letting him see just how human I was. Soft protruding belly, stretch-marks on my hips, cellulite, small boobs that were once perky, but are slowly letting me know they’re planning on migrating south for the rest of my life.

I was sure my swallow could have been heard from the Human Realms.

I cleared my throat. “Why are you so against the theme of love? For the game, I mean. I get why you don’t ever want to fall in love”—I didn’t, not really—“but if love means nothing to you, why not make the game about it? You know it makes sense to.”

Goldie looked sideways at me, took a mouthful of burrito, paused it halfway down to his plate, and speaking

around his food, he said, “So, nobody, besides yourself, has ever given you an orgasm?”

My hand clanged against the table, rattling the crockery. Goldie simply stared into my eyes, a smile ghosting his lips. I shook my head, the word “no” seemingly impossible to say aloud.

“Because your sexual partners were awful, or because you’re too uptight?”

Wow, this man sure made it easy to endear himself to me.

I sighed and cocked a shoulder. “Maybe both? I don’t know. It takes me a while to, you know, and I’m very conscious of ... boring them.”

And I can never seem to get out of my head. To stop thinking and analysing every tiny detail and ministration. Do I look okay? Are they getting close? Why is it taking them so long to get there? What if my sex faces are putting them off? Are my sex noises embarrassing? Are they loud enough? Did I forget to reply to that email? Are they disgusted by my squishy tummy? Am I doing it wrong? Should I just fake it so I can get dressed already?

Goldie assessed me for a moment. “You’ve only been with human men?” I nodded, and he was quiet again. I would have loved to know what he was thinking. He sucked at his teeth. “It’s not a *you* problem. It’s a *them* problem. You didn’t choose your sexual partners with enough care. I take it they always managed to finish?” He didn’t give me an opportunity to answer before ploughing on. “Don’t worry, I’ll have you coming so hard and so often you’ll end up pulling every one of your puny little human muscles.”

I had to thump myself in the chest to stop from choking on my burrito. How do you even respond to that?

“Uh ... Thanks?” I squeaked.

And that was when, for the first time in history (probably), Goldie threw back his head and genuinely laughed.

Chapter 12.

Goldie

Holly perched herself on the edge of my bed, bouncing up and down while taking in the rest of my room. I closed the door and sat next to her.

“Ready?” I asked, knowing full well she was a million miles from ready.

“Uh.” She brushed her curls behind her ears and blinked at me. “Should we, like, set up some ground rules or something?”

“Ground rules?”

Gods, she was so inexperienced. *Don't find it cute*, I told myself.

“Yeah, like, um, a safe word?”

She wouldn't need one. If she didn't like something, I'd know. I was a nymph after all. But we were here for her.

“Sure. What'll it be?”

“Uh,” she glanced around the room as if hoping to find inspiration. “Tapir.”

I snorted. “Tapir?”

“They're my favourite animal,” she said earnestly.

Oh my Gods. I closed my eyes and pinched my lips together to stop the laughter escaping.

“Okay, tapir it is. Anything else?”

“What about kissing?” she asked.

“What about it?”

“Should we?” Holly held her face in a way that suggested she was expecting something to slap her across the cheeks. “It’s very intimate, isn’t it?”

I closed the gap between our faces, stopping a few inches short of our mouths touching. Holly’s breath hitched. “I’m literally going to be inside you in a moment.”

She clamped her thighs together and squirmed on the mattress. A victorious jolt spread across my chest and my cock leapt upwards. Was I really getting a chub from that one tiny reaction? After months of almost nothing?

Actually, the months of almost nothing were surely to blame for my false-start reactions.

“Okay, but,” her voice was breathy, sexy as hell, and I decided in that moment, I would just let my body go with the flow. If it wanted to be attracted to this tiny weirdo in a circus dress, I shouldn’t fight it. My body and my mind were two completely separate entities. They weren’t even friends at the best of times. Holly gave a small cough, snapping my attention back. “Doesn’t kissing feel like something boyfriends and girlfriends should do? Not two people who have agreed to help each other out and don’t even like each other. We’re not in a relationship, we’re more like ... enemies with benefits.”

Yes. Thank you for the reminder. Not that I was at risk of liking her. “So, no kissing then. But can I suck your tits?” Holly’s mouth parted, her breath hissed out. “Or your clit?”

“Oh.” Red spots blossomed on her cheeks. “Okay.” She swallowed. “How about no mouth to mouth kissing?”

I couldn’t help my smile. “Any other rules?”

“No, I think that’s it. Do you have any?” she asked me.

“Just one.”

“Is it not to fall in love with you? Because you’ve made that abundantly clear, and I can assure you, that categorically will not be happening.”

“You learn fast, human. This is going to be fun.” And it would be. My cock was already straining against my fly. “First

things first. Let's get this fucking dress off you."

Holly gave a nervous laugh. "Can we turn the lights off?"

"No way. How are you going to learn anything in the dark?"

After months of her turning up uninvited to my fantasies, there was no way I was fucking her with the lights off. I needed to see everything.

She squirmed again on the bed and not in a good way.

"What is it?"

Her thumbnail pressed into her lips. "Can you not look though when I get undressed?"

"Listen, if you want to jump Seth's bones"—she flinched at the mention of that prick's name and I received an unwarranted stab of annoyance—"then you're gonna have to get used to everything. Fucking with the lights on is literally at the bottom of your worry pile, okay? He's going to want to see everything. Every part of your human body. He'll want to watch you as he breaks you. Watch you come apart under his touch. He'll want you to scream his name, and carve up his back, and see your mouth around his cock, and your pussy weeping for him."

Holly was shaking her head, eyes wide, as though finally realising she had bitten off more than she could chew. "Is that what you want?" she whispered after a few moments. "I mean, is that what all fae men want?"

I took her hand and placed her palm on my erection to show her just how much I wanted it.

The cutest little "Oh my" escaped her lips. *No, not cute. Stop it, you tit.*

"Do you want to stop now? We can just go back to how things were before. You can choose one of the other guys to pester about their game, and none of this," I motioned a hand between us, "has to go any further."

“No. I want to ... I do ... Okay.” She knocked the heel of her hand against her forehead. “Okay, yeah. I’m ready.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, I’m ready, I promise.”

I had an idea. I hooked my hands behind my head and pulled my jersey off, tossing it onto the floor.

“Wow, okay, you’re getting naked. Gees Louise,” she said, raking her eyes over my stomach and chest.

Gees Louise. I couldn’t decide if it was adorable or irritating as fuck. Irritating, definitely irritating. Though I wasn’t sure my fae mouth would let me utter those words.

I stood up and pulled my jeans and underpants down, scooping my socks off at the same time, and kicked those aside too.

“Oh my Gods. Oh my word,” Holly said, glancing at my hard cock, averting her eyes, and glancing back. “You’re huge.”

I didn’t even need to acknowledge it. I was big. Not Taur big, but big enough to turn thighs into jelly. Big enough to rob her of the ability to breathe with every inward thrust. Big enough for her to remember me whenever she took a piss for the next few days.

Kneeling on the bed next to her, naked except for my watch and my Harness Stones, I leant closer and kissed the throbbing pulse in her neck. Holly twitched at the contact and melted into me. Damn, she had no right to smell this good. Like the cardigan she left in my office. Like raspberries and Parma-Violets. Who knew that scent would be so sexy? My cock leapt forward, brushing against the stiff denim of her dress.

“If we don’t take this tent off you, it’s going to get all messed up with my pre-cum.”

She nodded, pupils dilated, breaths coming out ragged and hot against the bare skin of my chest. I tried to unbutton

one of the silver dungaree ... bits. But—What the fuck was this?

“No, you have to push it down and then up like this.” Holly took over, laughing at my inept jiggling. I didn’t think I could hate these bastard clown clothes more than I did. I was wrong. How should I know you needed a degree in fucking dungaree unbuckling to undo those bloody things? Eventually, both straps were freed, so I pulled the dress over her head, leaving her in a tight purple t-shirt and a pair of purple knickers. Just like the ones I’d accidentally glamourised her in. I swallowed my moan. There was already a wet patch developing at her crotch.

I forced my hands to stay in fairly neutral territory, against her upper arms, and not to reach down to feel the evidence of her arousal. I needed to keep it clinical. Emotionless. She wanted lessons. To be taught. How to please a fae man.

That’s what she asked me to do. That’s what she would get.

My cock twitched again, this time hitting the bare skin of her soft human stomach. I closed my eyes and fought against the sudden rush of desperation.

Do not come yet. Don’t you dare come yet.

Would Holly really learn anything if I shot my load before she could even touch me?

“Do you want my t-shirt off?” she asked.

“Yes, but you can keep it on for now if you feel more comfortable.” *Because I’ll pop off if you remove it now.*

“What about my glasses?”

“Can you see without them?”

“Not well.”

“Then leave them on. I want your eyes on me.”

She nodded, glancing over my entirely naked body once again.

“Let’s make a deal,” I said. “Another deal. I know this thing between us — not a thing, but you know what I mean — is only going to last for a few weeks, but when you’re here in my bedroom, you’ll be treated like a fucking goddess. Okay? Nothing less. You do what I tell you to, and I will worship you in return.”

Her tongue dipped out of her mouth to wet her lips. “And ... at work, will you still be a jerk to me?”

“Of course. And in my living room when you’re shit talking my game.”

Holly laughed. “Deal, then.”

“Shake on it?”

She held out a flattened palm, which I seized, brought to my mouth, spat on, then closed around my cock. She gasped, her mouth staying open long after the sound had stopped. The contact of our skin had me sucking my breath in through gritted teeth. Gods, I wouldn’t last long.

“Make me come, Holly. Stroke me until I’m spraying all over the bed. And watch me come.”

“But, I don’t—What if I—”

I took her other hand and placed it against my chest. “Listen to me. Watch me. Feel me.” I moved her hand, the one wrapped around my length, up, up, and down, stroking soft, languid pumps.

“That’s it, stroke me like this. Squeeze when you reach here. Fuck, baby girl, that already feels amazing. You done this before?”

“A little,” Holly said, not disrupting her rhythm. “Not often.”

I let my hand drop from hers and placed it on her shoulder as she continued to pump me by herself. I felt like I needed grounding. I wove my other hand into her hair and cradled the back of her head. Mostly because I wanted to hold it there, to force her to see the effect she had on me, to watch what she was doing to me.

“Fae, humans, incubi, vampires, satyrs, fuck, literally anyone with a dick, more or less works the same. It’s only the dragons and the werewolves, those types, that have different anatomies. But you can still get them where they need to be by doing what you’re doing now. Like, fuck, exactly like that.”

But how? How was it possible someone with so little experience could be doing everything just right? The right amount of pressure, the right pace. I couldn’t help the needy moans that escaped my throat.

Holly watched her hand bobbing up and down on my cock with slightly unfocused eyes. Her bottom lip, which had been trapped between her teeth, popped free, pink, and wet and begging for me to suck it. Damn, this no mouth kissing might be harder than I imagined.

“Does this feel good?” she said.

“It feels ... so good, baby girl. So ... fucking good,” I said between heavy breaths.

Two days ago, I was fucking the mouth of a succubus, and nothing. It hadn’t worked for me. And now, this infuriating human barely grazes me with her naive touch, and I was already about to explode. What was happening?

“Touch me,” Holly whimpered, sending my resolve into a tailspin. “I need you to touch me.” Her thighs were clamped so tightly together they were dimpling in the centre.

“If I touch you, I’ll go off.”

“Do it,” she said. “Please.”

I shook my head, closed my eyes for just a beat.

Note to self, Holly begging is a dangerous thing.

Fuck it, I was already near the peak. “I’m there. You’re gonna watch me as I come.”

“Okay,” she said.

“When I’m there, you’re going to hold me still, firmly.”

“Okay,” she said again, her tongue popping out to wet her lips, and I had to fight the urge to force mine into her mouth. “Where are you going to—Where’s it going to go?”

No, no, why was that cute?

“It’ll land where it lands. You ready? I can’t hold it back any longer.”

Holly nodded, and I moved the hand on her shoulder, down. To her soft, beautiful human stomach. Surprise registered behind her eyes before my climax ripped through me. I held her face exactly where it was, so that she could watch me, stare into my eyes, as I cried out with the release. Her eyes darkened, her brow furrowed and then rose, and her mouth opened, mirroring mine.

The first blow hit the hem of her t-shirt. I wasn’t sure where the others landed. She didn’t seem to notice any of it, too intent on drinking in my face.

“Oh my Gods,” she whispered, barely audible.

When the last tremor subsided, I pulled her head forward and let our foreheads meet. “Fuck, Holly, that was ...”

Forget the past four months. I could go back years and not remember a time I came as hard as that.

“I did it,” she said, relenting into laughter.

“Yeah, you did, baby girl.” Before I knew what I was doing, I dragged her to my body and wrapped my arms around her. The cool wet of my orgasm pressed against my stomach.

“That was probably the hottest thing that has ever happened to me,” she said.

I stopped myself before I said, *me too*. Because surely, with my five-hundred years of experience, that was not the case. But in that moment, the annoying human seemed to have wiped all other memories from my head. I couldn’t seem to recall any.

“Your turn now,” I said instead.

Concern crossed Holly's features. "I'm sorry. If it doesn't happen, or if it takes a long time to happen and you get bored—"

I laughed, and she jumped. "How long is a long time?"

She sat back on her heels. The wet end of my dick dragged along the front of her knickers. "Um, if it happens? Like thirty minutes."

"Let's place a bet, shall we? I can make you come within five minutes—"

"Five minutes?" she said, incredulously.

"I can do it in one, but I want you to enjoy it." She cocked her head to the side like a puppy dog. "Five minutes and I'll have you trembling and weeping in my arms, and I win. My prize: tomorrow night you'll let me come on that gorgeous human stomach of yours."

"Oh." Holly squirmed, the muscles in her thighs contracting again. This was going to be such an easy win for me. "And what if I win? What do I get?"

"Name your prize, baby girl."

Chapter 13.

Goldie

Holly brought a hand to her chin, her eyes lighting up. “Got it. If you take longer than five minutes to make me ... you know, which it absolutely will, then you, Goldie, have to listen to me and make the theme of your new game Love.”

A laugh escaped my throat. “She didn’t come to play! Good job I did, though, huh?”

She was smiling like she’d already won. I grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and pulled it up. Obliging, she lifted her arms for me, and I watched as her tits bobbed when the fabric dragged over them.

“Don’t start my time until I touch your pussy, okay? I just want to savour this bit.”

If I thought that was cheating, Holly evidently did not. Her brows rose into her hairline and any protestations she may have had, she kept to herself. Or perhaps I’d wiped rational thought from her head. She whimpered, hopefully in agreement. I brought my face to the valley between her breasts and ran the flat of my tongue against every available square inch of flesh. I palmed her tits over the lace of her bra, and—

Awesome, I was already hard again.

Why did this feel so exquisitely naughty? There were no chains, or paddles, or toys, or even onlookers, just an ordinary and highly bothersome human woman, in a very ordinary-looking bra and pantie set. I slipped my hand under the fabric, cupping her tit, trapping her already hard nipple in the gaps between my fingers. Her head fell backward, breath caught in her throat. I let my mouth follow the trail of my fingers. Pushing the lace aside and taking the bud between my teeth. Her whole body spasmed.

I slid the straps from her shoulders, reached a hand behind her, and popped her bra open. It fell to the bed, baring her to me.

And. Holy. Hell.

Holly's tits were perfection. As far as tits went, they were on the smaller side, but exactly the right size to nestle in my cupped palm. Round, and plump, like two fat, juicy apricots, ripe and ready to sink my teeth into. Her brown nipples were taut and puckered, and pointed directly at me, beckoning me over.

"Gods, woman," I said. "You've been hiding all this." I lowered my hand, grazing across Holly's stomach. I'd be coming all over that tomorrow night. An involuntary cry escaped my throat, and I palmed my erection, stroking myself in lazy grips.

Hey! The urgency was back. The itch.

"Be a doll, and lift those legs for me," I said, pulling her panties to her knees. She did. On my way back up, I gave the lightest kiss to her sex, teasing my tongue gently into the top of her slit. Tasting her. Before whipping my mouth away. I'd never wanted to be inside something more.

I moved to the side of Holly and pulled her backwards onto my lap so that her back was flush to my chest, her legs pointing primly forward. We were both facing off the bed towards a newly glamoured floor to ceiling mirror.

"Was that always there?" she said, breathlessly.

I couldn't help but touch her, palm her breasts again, my body no longer accepting any protestation from my brain.

"Look how fucking gorgeous you are."

Holly shook her head. My hands travelled lower, down over her ribs, waist, hips, stomach. My hips already bucking against her, rubbing my hard cock against the base of her spine.

Trailing my hands over her thighs, I pulled them apart, hard.

“Fuck, Holly, you’re a fucking queen,” I said, as she squeaked.

And she was, as much as At-Work-Me will try to deny it. She was beautiful. Her feminine curves melded perfectly into my planes. That pussy! I knew I’d be painting that pussy forever more. Glamouring it into existence, just so I could look at it again.

I may have just completely destroyed how I saw her at work. Though I probably destroyed that the first night I fucked my hand to Holly’s image. No point in denying it now. I wanted her. She made me so infuriatingly hard.

Unable to stop myself, I scooped her curls to one side and planted a kiss on the curve of her neck. “My time starts ...” Her breath hitched. “Now.”

The fingers on my left hand drifted down and dipped themselves into Holly’s slickness. I had to pull my lips in between my teeth and bear down on her shoulder with my forehead to stop myself exploding all over her back. So fucking deliciously wet for me. She was trembling, and I hadn’t even touched her clit yet. I trailed my middle finger down one side to her entrance and sunk it in. Only about an inch or two, up to the second knuckle, and curled it.

Holly bucked upwards, a moan escaping her lips, which she slapped a palm over. With my other hand, I removed hers from her face. “No, baby girl, I want to hear how good it is for you.” From the flash of panic in her eyes, I knew this was something that we’d have to work towards.

I pulled my finger out, moving to the sensitive bud of her sex, and began tracing lazy circles with my fingertips. It took me five seconds tops before I found that exact spot that would have her whole body twitching like a bug in a zapper. It was going to be too easy. I should have made the conditions a little more challenging, like perhaps I could only use my elbows. Or eyelashes.

Surprise briefly registered on Holly’s face before she lost herself again as I strummed soft circles onto her clit. “I told you I was good at this,” I whispered into her ear, my

forehead pressed into her temple. The little hairs on her neck erupted under my breath. I desperately tried to think of anything but the delicious, dripping opening an inch away from my cock.

In the mirror, she watched my movements, and I watched her watching them, as her body began pulsating to the rhythm of my strokes. Holly was already getting close. Little spasms of pleasure working their way up her body, and yet, still frustratingly quiet, save for the occasional whimper that worked its way out.

“It’s been about two minutes,” I said. “I’ve got three left. I can either rub your clit until you come, which will be any second now, or you can fuck my hand.”

Holly dragged heavy-lidded eyes towards mine.

“What will it be, baby girl?”

“Your hand,” she panted.

“Say the whole thing.”

“I want to ... f—I can’t do it. Swearing feels weird.”

That she could admit that at a time like this. I clearly wasn’t doing a good enough job.

“Whisper it then,” I said.

Holly closed her eyes. “I want to fu ... I want to fuck ... your hand.”

“Good girl.” My cock leapt forward. I rammed it onto her spine again, and drove two fingers into her pussy, the heel of my palm roughly pushing against her most sensitive part.

“Now move your hips,” I commanded.

She did. A whine burst free before she pursed her lips together. I curled my fingers and gently pumped my hand while she began working herself on top of me.

Five-hundred years I’d been fucking anything that would look at me long enough. Succubi, incubi, nymphs, satyrs, and I’d never seen anything hotter than this bloody human braced on her knees, stretched out before me. Holly’s

hands reached up and back, frantically gripping at my hair. Her tits bounced with each thrust. Her glorious wet cunt spilled its arousal down my wrist. Her ass and back were soaked in sweat and cum and pre-cum, and fuck, if she didn't hurry, I was going to go off right there.

She was trembling now, her orgasm building, her eyes rolling up to the ceiling. "Goldie, I think I'm gonna—Oh my Gods, I'm gonna—"

Too late. *I* was already coming. I buried my face into her neck and screamed out my release while I fired ribbons between our writhing bodies. Her shivering reached a crescendo, her pussy clenched my fingers, her thighs clamped around my hand, and her whole body shook with her climax. I lifted my head in just enough time to watch the tail end of it in the mirror.

Sweet fucking mercy. How? How had she done this to me?

I still hated her. She still annoyed the fuck out of me.

But, shit, Holly was glorious. It was a crime that nobody had bothered to spend the ten seconds it took to learn how she liked to be touched. That nobody had ever seen this before. The sight of her breaking. Breathtaking. I would definitely need to see that more than once this weekend.

I slowed my pumping and watched Holly float back down to me. She stared at me in the mirror for a few minutes, the smile on her lips growing wider before she turned to face me, sitting back on the mattress.

"Oh my Gods," she said, erupting into laughter. "Oh my Gods. I can't believe it."

"That was definitely under five minutes."

"You're a good teacher."

Something in my chest did a little flip. I didn't let it register on my features.

"I'll find some other way to convince you to make the game about love," she said.

I stood abruptly and retrieved a clean towel from a stack on my chair that I had already placed there for this weekend. I motioned for Holly to turn her back on me. She did, and I wiped the cum away.

“You’ll probably want a shower.” I felt like I should apologise for making such a mess on her, but there was no way in a million years I was sorry for what had just happened. Confused as fuck, but not sorry.

I wiped my stomach clean with the same towel and tossed it into the laundry basket, which for the first time in a decade was nearly empty. “There are fresh towels here. Bathroom is across the hall. I share a bathroom with Taur and Sugar Paste, just FYI. She said it’s okay for you to use her products.”

Holly nodded. “Thank you. For—I didn’t think it’d ever—” She gave a shy smile, looking down into her lap.

We were still. She was no longer frantically fucking my fingers. I was no longer slouched over her, humping the small of her back, so why was my heart beating like we were still in the midst of it all?

Holly pushed her hair behind her ears and reached for one of the larger bath towels, still naked except for her glasses.

“I’m going to make a cup of tea. Do you want one?” I said, surprising us both.

“Ooh, yes, please.” She wrapped the towel around her middle. “I won’t be long,” she said, dipping out of the room.

I sat on the bed for ten minutes before I worked up the mental strength to go downstairs and make the tea. What was happening to me? I was a nymph. We didn’t behave like this. Okay, this was exactly how we behaved. But my insides ... Why were they so wobbly?

I couldn’t let whatever we did in my bedroom affect the type of relationship we had at work. One based on mutual loathing. I couldn’t start to like Holly as a person. She was annoying, intrusive, demanding. Obsessed with love. Just like

every other damned human in existence. I cast my eyes down, to the pile of our clothing mixed together next to the bed.

Those gods-damned dungarees.

Discombobulated, that was how I felt.

Pulling grey sweatpants on, I stumbled downstairs. All was quiet, dark, and devoid of my flatmates. Good. I didn't feel like talking to anyone at that moment. I made tea, peppermint and liquorice, because maybe all the fluttering inside me was, in fact, just a stomach-ache. I could convince myself of that. So long as I didn't have to say it out loud.

When I eventually got back upstairs, it was to discover the human curled up on my side of the bed, wet hair on my pillow, fast asleep. She'd placed her glasses on my nightstand and had donned *Groovy Graham and Pals* pyjamas.

Still definitely not cute.

Chapter 14.

Holly

I awoke to something licking my palm. A cat?! Light gouged at my eyeballs. The dark underside of Abby's top bunk had mysteriously vanished. My sheets felt different. Stiffer. Clean, but not my washing powder. I reached across for my glasses and jammed them onto my face.

A blonde, unsmiling head stared down at me. "Morning, human."

I sat up. It took a few seconds before I could place everything, remember everything. The realisation of the previous night hitting me all at once. I'd had my first non-solo orgasm. And it had been good. Earth-shatteringly good. He'd done that. In under five minutes too. I clamped my thighs together at the memory.

Baby girl. That's what he'd called me.

The name made me feel like I'd eaten a whole bag of candy floss. Like I was coasting an intense sugar high, and also, a little sick.

"Where's Not Ludo?" I asked, looking around for the source of the licking.

Goldie cocked a shoulder. A bare shoulder. Shirtless. *Don't look directly at it. Don't look at those highly defined abdominal and pectoral muscles that were, last night, rubbing against my naked back.* I swallowed.

"With Sugar Paste I expect."

I definitely didn't dream the contact. "Were you— Were you licking my hand?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I wasn't licking your hand." He couldn't lie, I knew that, but it felt like a lie. Why

was that? “I couldn’t sleep. I’ve been working on the game. Get up, and you can play-test it for me.”

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stretched out my spine. “What, right now?”

“Yeah,” he said, an unspoken *Duh* hanging at the end.

“Can I at least get dressed first?”

“Why? You look cute in those PJs.” He slapped himself in the head and turned his back to me, as though he never meant to let that nugget escape.

So, Goldie thought I was cute? I was beginning to realise there was a lot more hiding behind those emerald eyes than he let on.

In the living room, he handed me the controller and shepherded me to the sofa.

“Coffee’s there, and breakfast.” He motioned his hand towards the table. The glorious smells hit me at once as though waiting for their names to be called before emitting their mouth-watering aromas. A cafetiere of fresh coffee, a little jug of milk, a huge pot of sugar, and next to that, a plateful of social-media worthy pastries. Swirls with cinnamon, flat ones with custard and fruit, puffy round ones with, I think, jam leaking from the centre.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a seat and expecting him to join me.

“Don’t eat that one in the bag there. It’s for Sugar Paste.” I nodded. Goldie switched on the TV.

“What changes have you made?” I said. His brow creased. “To the game?” It creased further.

He still didn’t sit. “I’ve started from scratch. New game. It’s nowhere near complete yet, but I just wanted to get your opinion on the dual characters.”

“You’ve programmed an entire new game overnight?” I looked around for any signs of a computer. “But, how?”

“Glamour. Obviously,” he said, as though that explained everything. “How did you think—We all use glamour. All the senior designers, and many others too. If you look at our lanyards, those with Appearance glamour will have a small blue pin.”

“Appearance glamour?” The words rang familiar through my mind.

Goldie’s eyes twitched, as though he were desperately refraining from rolling them. “It means we can conjure images from thin air. I can paint pictures, make them move, imbed them into the game.”

“Oh,” I said, trying not to feel jealous of this ability. How much easier would my job be if I could think something into reality? “The mirror last night? It wasn’t really there, was it? When I came back after my shower, it had gone.”

“But,” he said, ignoring my question and drawing out the word, “It wipes my energy. Like drains it. So ... I’m gonna have a nap now, and you’ll eat your breakfast and play on the game like a good girl, and then later, we can talk.”

He was really going to leave me alone in his living room? Where his flatmates might just turn up unannounced? And not even give me a demonstration of his magic?

“Don’t worry, it’s light out. Dima will be asleep, and Mal’s still out, and Taur’s actually very shy,” Goldie said, as though he read my thoughts. “Only Sugar Paste is likely to bother you, and she’s not dangerous unless you eat her doughnut. So, I’m heading to bed now.”

Suddenly he leant down, putting one hand on the seat beside my legs, and for a second, I thought he was going to kiss me. My heartbeat kick-started, my eyelids fluttered as though they were preparing to close. But he merely grabbed something from the cushion, tucked it into his jeans pocket, and sauntered out of the room.

I sat back against the couch, staring at the opening screen of the game, trying to regain my normal breathing

pattern. I didn't want Goldie to kiss me. Of course I didn't. Stupid body. Stupid knee-jerk reflexes.

I'd been the one to suggest the no kissing rule. It would be so unwise for us to kiss.

Sure, I stroked him *there* last night until he got his mess all over my favourite t-shirt. Sure, he had his fingers inside me. Sure, he broke me in under five minutes, called me gorgeous, a fudging queen, a goddess. But kissing somehow was so much more. Went so much deeper.

It was soul penetrating.

Or at least, it would be to me.

I poured myself a coffee, dumped half the milk into it, and took a fist-sized bite out of the nearest cinnamon swirl. Hopefully, the excessive sugar would calm the wild butterfly-rave inside me. It was delicious. Too good to be human made. Elvish maybe? The plain white paper bag containing Goldie's flatmate's pastry gave me no clues to the maker.

Within thirty seconds, I'd demolished the whole thing, and stared ruefully at the second one. I shouldn't eat two cinnamon swirls. They were larger than the minotaur's hands. It would be wrong to smash another one. What if one of his flatmates wanted it? I shook my head and took a sip of coffee. My insides tugged over the obscenely delicious smooth/bitter combo. Of course, if I'd been alive as long as Goldie had, I'd be a coffee snob too. I made a mental note to ask him his actual age.

I set the mug aside and turned to the game.

Press A to START

I did. And was taken to a screen with a heading reading, *CHOOSE CHARACTER*.

And my lungs stopped working.

There were two characters to select from. One a fae. I pressed the A button, bringing the character to the front of the screen, delaying the inevitable.

Pointed ears, retro baggy jeans, no shirt, shiny yellow hair. Goldie. A self-insert.

Perhaps this was always how he programmed prototypes. But he hadn't appeared in any of his games before. It felt strange. Voyeuristic, even. Like looking through his social media photos without his knowledge. Which I definitely didn't do. Much.

He'd given himself stat bars.

HP

STRENGTH

STAMINA

GLAMOUR

I blew out a breath before tapping the back button and selecting the other character. A human. Female. Curly brown hair with purple streaks, spectacles, dungarees.

Yep, it was me.

Was I meant to be flattered or annoyed? Because I was feeling both.

I compared my stat bars to Goldie's and was very glad I had not chosen that moment to take another sip of coffee, lest I sprayed it all over the pastries. Well, I supposed that would've been one way to guarantee the last cinnamon swirl.

He'd made my stats the same as his, but ...

Okay. HP was at half the level of the fae's. Strength, at a third. Stamina, also at a third. And Glamour, Glamour was non-existent, currently resting at precisely zero. I mean, there was truth to it. Humans were inferior to fae in all the ways he'd listed, But I couldn't help but think Goldie was being too narrow-minded about what constituted a decent stat. That, or he was doing it simply to pee me off.

Which, after knowing Goldie intimately, I felt surprised by. Maybe even a little hurt—

Oh.

Then it hit me.

Why he'd chosen us to be the main characters.

Gods, he was smarter than I gave him credit for.

Because now, with him as the fae and me as the human, both of us in the game together, I would not pester him to make it about love.

Well, that was what he thought.

"Two can play this game," I said aloud, chuckling at my pun.

Reluctantly, I selected my character. My human character. Despite the stats being pants compared to his, I couldn't bring myself to stare at Goldie's bare, muscled back all morning. Even if it was a generated image.

The game itself was beautiful. The setting was somewhere north of Borderlands, in the Mythic Realms. Rolling hillsides, wild forests, glistening rivers fattened with silver fish meandering to breathtaking waterfalls and caves. There were no NPCs - non-playable characters yet, or any form of missions, so I simply explored the terrains and tried to avoid death. I was twice mauled by a preternaturally vicious moose-type animal. Drowned once. Plummeted from a cliff-top, from the roof of a chapel, from the crow's nest of an old frigate, and into an unexpected sinkhole in the middle of a footpath, which may or may not have been a glitch. Knowing Goldie, it was probably the latter. His idea of a joke.

Despite all the unnecessary and rather gory deaths, I was enjoying myself too much, giggling too hard, to notice the arrival of Goldie's flatmates, the minotaur, and the red-haired human woman. Why couldn't I remember their names?

"Morning," said the minotaur, his gravelly voice rumbling through the room. "Did Goldie go to The Witching Flour?" He swooped down and scooped up the last cinnamon swirl. A balloon deflated inside my chest. "Coffee? Oh, you've got coffee." And then, before I had collected myself enough to return his greeting, or weep over the pastry

bereavement, he marched straight into the kitchen. The ginger cat toddling along behind him.

“The one in the bag is for you,” I said to the human woman. She picked it up, peered inside, and did a happy little jig.

“Ooooh. Elvish doughnuts. My favourite.”

The Witching Flour was probably the bakery I’d seen on the corner of Goldie’s block during the taxi ride over.

“Mind if I sit with you?” she said.

“Of course.” It wasn’t as though I had much choice, it was her house after all. I shot a glance towards the kitchen, half-dreading the re-arrival of her seven-foot minotaur husband. She followed my gaze, yet her smile didn’t waver.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. My cheeks began to heat. “I’ve forgotten your names.”

Even in her pyjamas, which were almost scandalously low cut and short in the leg, and her flimsy, red, cotton robe, she was aggressively beautiful. She curled onto the other end of the sofa, tucking her legs underneath herself, still smiling. “I’m Joey. Goldie calls me Sugar Paste.” She whispered the next part, gesturing towards the kitchen. “That’s Taurin, my mate, husband. He’s just making me a coffee, then he’ll bugger off. His size is probably freaking you out a bit?”

My shoulders traitorously dropped in relief. I knew little about minotaurs. Only what my parents and grandparents had told me over the years. That they were savage beasts, prone to fits of rage and destroying buildings ...

Oh my Gods. That was him! I recognised him then from the newspaper photos. He’d demolished an Ichor coffee shop. I remember driving past the reconstruction job when I’d visited my apartment block for the first time.

“He’s actually a softie,” she said, no doubt reading my expression. “It’s not true, what they say about him, about his kind. Well, most of it isn’t true. But it takes a while for people to get used to. To overcome the things they think they know.” I realised she wasn’t being unkind or judgemental towards me.

“But like I said, he won’t be bothering us. He’ll probably go upstairs, take a dump for an hour, and then have a shower in the same room.”

I laughed. Taurin re-entered the living room, handing a steaming red mug with a picture of a peach on the front to his wife.

“Thanks, babe,” she said, accepting the coffee and a kiss. His horns almost scraped against the wall behind them. I was staring. I quickly averted my gaze.

“Right, I’m gonna take a shi—” He looked at me as though only just remembering I was there in my GG&P pyjamas. “Shower. See you both later.” And then he left again.

Not Ludo pounced up onto the couch, trailing a fishy-gravy-cat-food aroma with him, and snuggled against Joey’s legs.

“Goldie still in bed?” She was smiling again. I didn’t know her well enough to decipher it properly, but I’d hazard a guess she wanted the lowdown on last night.

Did the cool kids still say lowdown?

“Yeah. Apparently, he stayed up late to program the game and needs to sleep it off.”

She nodded, as though none of this was news to her. “I don’t normally care to know more about Goldie’s conquests, but this is different. It’s not very often he brings a human home, and he’s been very weird about you coming over, so forgive me if I ask inappropriate questions. I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut. If I’m bothering you, please just tell me to fuck off.”

“I could never do that.” Literally never. But then something struck me. “What do you mean, he’s been weird about me coming over?”

Something, fear of putting her foot in it perhaps, tightened her mouth. “Well,” she said after a moment, drawing out the word. “You can’t let on I said anything. He, uh, talks about you often. And, well, he doesn’t always say the nicest things about you.” She offered me an apologetic smile, and I

gave her one that hopefully said *it's mutual*. "But ... he tidied his room for you ... And I ... He told us about this deal. I mean, it sounds like he's getting the better end here, but it's just not like him to offer help. To anyone." She thought about what she'd said. "Except us lot really."

I wanted to ask her about the cat. Did he really steal it? Or had he found some way around the fae-no-lie thing and said it just to irritate me? Or did he do it with great reasoning? But surely there was no great reasoning to steal someone's pet. Unless it was simply to make Joey happy.

It was obvious he loved his flatmates, by the way he spoke about them, buying Joey her favourite doughnut from the bakery, stealing a cat for her. He *was* capable of love. Whether he saw it that way was another thing.

Instead, I said, "So, Elvish doughnuts? Are they really that good? I've never tried one."

"Ah mate, this'd be my death row supper, you know? I'm not sharing this one, but I'll get you your own tomorrow morning. You are staying tonight, aren't you?"

I thought about the bet Goldie and I had made last night, and heat swooped into my abdomen. "Yes, I guess I am."

"Awesome! We usually all have dinner together on Sunday nights. Well, breakfast for Dima, I suppose. It'll be so nice to have another woman there for once."

"Dinner? With, um, your husband, and the vampire, and ..."

"The incubus?" She started laughing. Proper belly shaking laughter. My face heated. "Oh my, okay, of all the guys, Goldie is by far, *by far*, the scariest. So, if you can handle him, you will have no problem with the others. You see these quilts?" She pointed to the back of the sofa draped in old-lady patchwork blankets. "Dima made them. He loves quilting. And Mal is literally the nicest man you'll ever meet. He gives the best hugs."

I nodded, not sure what to say to that. Not sure whether to apprehend dinner or look forward to it. A vampire that quilted and an incubus that gave great hugs ...

“And I’ll be there, so you’ll have a friend to help guide you through.”

A friend.

I liked the weight of it. It had been a long time since I had a friend. Or somebody refer to themselves as my friend.

“Do you want to play Goldie’s game?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said, reaching for the second controller. “He never lets me play them. Calls me a bot. Says I button-lash, and it spoils the fun. Boys.”

I laughed nervously, secretly agreeing with Goldie, while on screen she selected his character.

“Oh, there’s a surprise. He’s semi-naked again.” She frowned. “Wait, has he made you both into game-people?”

I nodded. “Does he normally do self-inserts?”

A snort escaped her nostrils. “Gods, he’d be all over that innuendo. But, no, I don’t think so. Like I said, he rarely lets me play his games. They’re not really my sort of thing. When I first started seeing Horns—Taur, Goldie made me shoot humans in the face. With a fucking crossbow. Come on! Apparently, my inability to do it more than once was, and I quote, ‘The most stressful thing he’d ever had to witness.’ To be fair, I did scream a lot. Like, a lot. Is there much murdering in this game?”

Oh no, I really liked her. Putting aside her button-lashing and screaming, I wondered if there was any way we could remain friends after this business with Goldie was through.

“No, there’s no murdering. Yet. Unless you count the homicidal moose. I’m going to convince him it doesn’t need all the killing.” It was never my favourite part of the Magic Thief games, anyway. For me it was always about the characters.

The unlikely pairing of Colin, the bumbling, slightly inept human, and Spiritus the wize-cracking, arrogant, yet extremely handsome fae. There were no explicit in-game mentions of their shipping, but that didn't stop the online fanfiction authors from writing detailed, blow by blow descriptions of their hypothetical shenanigans. And it certainly didn't stop me devouring every new paragraph on the pair. Even if I didn't always understand everything I'd read.

“So, how did you and Taurin meet?” I said before my face heated too much.

“Ah, well, I was supposed to go to speed class because, well, all the tickets, and Taur was going to cake decorating class because he smashed up an Ichor and needed to prove he could control his temper, and I got the wrong room, and wound up on Taur's desk, and he imprinted on me.”

My mouth was hanging open. I snapped it shut.

“That's the short story anyway.”

“Oh.”

“You want the long story?”

“Yes, please,” I said, realising I wanted nothing more than to snuggle on this ridiculously comfortable sofa, sip expensive coffee, and listen to Goldie's beautiful flatmate.

She scooped up Not Ludo and scooted onto the cushion next to me. “With pleasure. Do you want the clean version, or do you wanna hear all the filthy bits too?”

Even though I could feel the blush creeping up, I said, “The rude version, please?” before descending into a fit of very un-grown-up giggles.

So, she told me, and we spent all morning chatting, and most of the afternoon. I found out all sorts of things about her and her husband, and I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to look him in the eye at dinner. Eleven inches! It sounded painful.

I spoke about my life. About my parents and sister. My apartment on the waterfront that I was waiting to move into. I

told her about work, how the guys largely ignored me. She shrugged and said, “Fae for you.”

I neglected to mention anything about Seth. I wasn’t sure why. It didn’t feel like something I wanted to tell someone I’d only just met, even if she had referred to herself as my friend.

At around midday, Taurin came downstairs and made us all sandwiches. Cheese and pickle, though his were vegan, and then he left us in the living room again, giving his wife a big lovedrunk smile on the way.

We carried on our conversation from where it left off. She spoke about herself, her husband, and her flatmates, and whenever the conversation drifted onto Goldie, I felt a rush of ... something, in my gut. Something swoopy and a bit sickly. Not sure I could pinpoint the feeling yet, but when the talk moved away from the fae, I felt like something was missing. Like the moment between stepping out of a hot bath on a winter’s day and wrapping the towel around yourself.

“You know Goldie isn’t his real name?” she said.

“I didn’t think it was.”

Here comes the fluffy towel.

No, what am I thinking?

“He had it changed on his papers centuries ago. Now, I’m only going to tell you what it is because one day you might need some really good leverage against him.”

I nodded, leaning forward in my seat, trying to stop the desperation from reading on my face.

“His real name is—”

“Tell her and you’re dead to me.” Goldie stood at the doorframe, shirtless, one hand on his hip, one pant leg caught around his knee, and — oh my Gods — grey sweatpants.

Chapter 15.

Goldie

I arrived at just the right moment. Nobody needed to know my real name. If it weren't for Dima, nobody besides my family would. I didn't have much contact with my folks anymore. Hadn't seen them in over a century, which sounded a long time if you were a human. And humans generally thought of things only in human terms.

Holly and Sugar Paste were practically cuddling in the middle of the sofa. Not Ludo had adopted his usual imitation of a ginger puddle across both their laps. Holly got lumbered with the arse end, though there was so much fur, sometimes it was difficult to tell the ends apart. Their hands were on the cat, on each other's forearms, back on the cat.

She was still wearing those infuriating-not-at-all-cute GG&P pyjamas. Of course she was. I'd barricaded myself in the room with all her clothes.

"His real name is—"

"Tell her, and you're dead to me," I said, and both women jumped in shock. Holly's gaze took in my bare chest. Her eyes landed on the front of my sweatpants and widened before she dragged them up to my face. Hers bloomed into a deep pink.

"Well, look who finally hauled his ass out of bed," said Sugar Paste. She scooped up Not Ludo and left him in a jumble of fur on the sofa cushion. "I should see how my mate is getting on upstairs all by his lonesome." She winked at me, then turned to Holly. "It was so nice getting to know you, Hols. I can't wait for dinner later."

"You too, Joey," Holly said, a genuine smile on her face. My stomach dropped. What if I'd inadvertently created a

lasting friendship here? I didn't need to give the human an excuse to visit our apartment after the deal was over. I'd have to nip this in the bud.

Sugar Paste got to her feet and brushed past me. As she reached the hall, I grabbed her forearm and whispered so that only she could hear. "You invited her to dinner?"

"It's Sunday," she replied with a shrug.

"You know Sunday nights are Mal's Motley Meals." The words sounded silly coming from my mouth. Dima coined the term after Sugar Paste moved in. Every Sunday we'd get together around the table, eat, and chat like, well, like family. We'd take it in turns to cook for everyone. This week was Taur's turn.

No guest had ever been invited to join us for Mal's Motley Meals before.

She leaned in close to me, her body hidden from Holly by the door. "You've got yourself a really great girl there. Don't fuck things up." She peeled my hand from her arm and skipped up the stairs.

Feeling Holly's eyes on me, I stepped outside the living room, took a breath, and shook out my hand, which, for some fucking unknown reason, was trembling.

Upstairs, Sugar Paste's voice floated down from their bedroom. "I love her! I want to keep her!" she said to Taur.

Adrenaline spiked my bloodstream. Was I angry with Joey? For inviting Holly to our family time? It would explain the hand trembling.

When I re-entered the room, Holly was sitting cross-legged, smiling up at me. I had been an asshole to her, made sure I was an asshole, and she still smiled at me as though she were happy to see me. I didn't like the weird feeling in my chest it gave me.

"Good morning," she said, then corrected herself, "Afternoon."

“Human.” I made my way over to the couch and shoved the sleeping heap of cat closer to Holly so that there would be something, anything, maintaining the gap between us. “What did you think?” I gestured towards the screen, and helped myself to the last remaining pastry, some flat, custard topped wonder.

“It’s beautiful.” Her eyes travelled to the pastry as I took a bite, flakes dropping away. She licked her lips. “Uh, the game is beautiful. The terrain. Where—”

“Kingdom of the Fae.” I held my hand out, showing her the paintings I’d done for Mal.

When I first arrived in Borderlands, four-hundred years ago, with nowhere to go, no job, and no cash, Mal had accepted them in place of rent money.

“You made these too?” Her eyes lit up, and I tried my best not to preen at her awe. Why should I care what she thought of them?

I nodded, affecting calm, weariness even.

“Wow!” Abruptly, she got to her feet and turned to get a better look at the painting above the sofa. The midsection of her pyjamas twisted up, revealing two inches of smooth bare skin. I looked away. I had seen her naked last night, but this felt like I was peeping. She sat back down, the cotton on her top falling back over her tummy. Not Ludo rolled towards her as the cushion dipped under her weight.

“So, you can create images? “Render” them or “paint” them or “draw” them?” she said. I nodded. “Can everyone, I mean all fae, do that?”

“Not all fae. At work, only the ones with a blue dot pin on their lanyard.”

“Ah, yeah.” She smoothed out the legs of her PJs. “Can, uh—”

“Seth can.” My stomach lurched with irritation. “Though some people, like Seth, choose to use their powers for more nefarious reasons.”

“Nefarious?”

Not Ludo, apparently having not finished melting into the gap next to Holly, rolled just an inch too far, and tipped over the edge of the sofa. He landed on the rug on his back and emitted an awful, anus-clenching screech.

“Oh no, poor Not Ludo,” Holly called, her reflexes fractions too slow to rescue him. He sprawled out, legs freewheeling for a second, before righting himself and harrumphing upstairs. Probably to lick his wounded ego on Taur’s bed. His tail flicked high behind him.

“What did you think of the characters?” I said, before the topic could return to Seth.

“Yeah ...” was her response, which elicited an accidental snort from me. “I know why you’ve done it. Why you made us.”

“You do?” I raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“It won’t work. I’m still going to convince you to make the theme Love.”

My smug smile dropped in an instant. Fuck, she was smart. Like genius smart. And a little scary.

“But I’ll come back to that,” she said. “First though, we need to talk about me. Why did you make my character so weak compared to yours?” Her brow had stitched itself together, and she folded her arms over her chest, those two inches of skin peeking at the hem of her shirt again.

“Humans are weak.”

“In the ways fae are strong. Like health, and strength, and powers, but we have other strengths that fae do not.”

“Like?”

“You won’t want to hear it but love, for one. Compassion. Humanity. Empathy, problem solving, patience, community, listening skills...”

I waved her away.

“Change my—the human’s stats. Make her strong in ways that you—the fae are weak.”

I managed to contain my *pfft*.

“Otherwise, what’s the point of having a choice between the characters? No one is going to deliberately choose a pants character. One that will die too quickly.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I’ll think about it.” And I would. Just not right then when my mind was too muddled with GG&P pyjamas and violet-raspberry perfume.

She nodded her head once, a smile ticking the corner of her mouth, and I knew she thought she was winning.

“I got killed by a moose,” she said. “Twice.”

“Ah, you met Rusty.” And we both relented into laughter. I retrieved Sugar Paste’s abandoned controller, thankful she was no longer smashing the crap out of my game, and pressed the start button to bring my split-screen back.

Holly made an “Mm-mm” noise, took my controller, and passed me hers. “You can be the human.”

After twenty minutes of wandering around, I realised she was right. The human needed different strengths. She died too quickly, was too clunky, her events, movements, too jerky. I wasn’t about to admit that to Holly though, so I tried to contain my frustration with the character and pretend as though everything was working out exactly as planned.

“Have you decided what the purpose of the game is yet?” she asked. “Like in Magic Thief, you have to steal magic obviously, so, what’s the goal going to be here?”

I shrugged, not having thought that far ahead. My specialty was aesthetics. Terrain and asset design mostly. The concept of the original Magic Thief was a fluke. It came to me when I was interning at FaeGames thirty years ago. The underground train had broken down on my way into work and I was stuck next a particularly argumentative human who had insisted that all fae were cold-hearted, ruthless warmongers. Naturally, I countered with the only reasonable response I

knew. That humans only ever cared about two things: making everything about love and stealing all other species' magic.

When I finally got into work three hours later, my boss at the time, a male fae named Moddy, was about to yell at me. I pitched the idea there and then. He laughed so hard, slapped me on the back, congratulated my ingenuity, and told me if I could build a prototype, he'd offer me a full-time job.

Since then, I'd made my hatred for humans the driving force for my career. Sometimes, I think about the guy on the Underground, pot-bellied, bald, yellow-toothed. He was in his sixties back then. He was likely dead now.

Maybe I needed Holly's help there, too. But I wasn't prepared to admit that yet. Especially if all she could suggest was love love love.

Bloody humans.

We played silently for a while. Occasionally, Holly would point out assets she particularly liked. There were almost no negative crits.

"Are ... Are you wearing that to dinner later?" she asked, motioning to my sweatpants with her head, but refusing to look at them.

I pulled my lips between my teeth to stop the ensuing laughter. "Why? Do you find it distracting?"

She paused. "Not in the slightest."

Damn, I envied her ability to lie.

Chapter 16.

Goldie

Holly wore her dungaree-dress and a hideous, almost fluorescent pink, baggy t-shirt. Good. It was better she was in ugly clothing. That way, there was no chance I'd accidentally find her cute.

I donned my Rockets jersey, and since she couldn't keep her eyes off my dick outline in my grey sweatpants, I kept them on. To remind her why we were here. To work on my game and fuck — fix her confidence problems, whatever — and nothing else.

Taur cooked. He made everyone squash, coconut, and chickpea curry, served with rice and flatbreads. Most people expected minotaurs to be carnivorous, but Taur was vegan. A great cook too. Not as good as me, but definitely better than Mal, and infinitely better than Dima, who always ordered takeaway. Especially after what happened that one time the vampire tested whether the pasta was cooked by eating a single farfalle. He'd then promptly annihilated the kitchen. There had even been barf inside the smoke detector.

Sugar Paste laid the table with mismatched crockery, and I moved to my usual spot on Mal's right. The incubus sat at the head of the table. It started as a joke, since he was the unofficial head of the household, but now he accepted this arrangement without fuss.

Holly walked behind me into the kitchen and stilled. Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes met Mal's. In her defence, we made an intimidating bunch. The five flatmates of apartment 15A. Taur, the seven-foot minotaur, with his horns and surplus muscles. Sugar Paste, the voluptuous, motor-mouthed, flame-haired human. Dima the vampire with his paper-white skin, fangs, and blood-red eyes.

And Mal, the incubus, with his six-five frame, onyx skin, and enormous, leathery bat-like wings. He'd hefted them over the back of his chair but kept them tucked in close to his body.

"Mal, this is my colleague, Holly. Holly, Mal, my ... landlord," I said.

She gulped, and Mal gave a polite nod. "Nice to meet you," he said, his words stiff and over-enunciated, as though at a business meeting. I narrowed my eyes and in the corner of my peripherals, I clocked Sugar Paste and Taur exchanging a perplexed look. It was unlike Mal not to welcome every single person he ever met into his home. Something was off.

"You too," she squeaked, no longer meeting his gaze.

"Holly!" Sugar Paste said, rushing over and wrapping her in a hug. Holly's arms hung awkwardly by her sides. "Right, you sit here, between Goldie and me. Babe, you sit here." She motioned to the seat that was usually unoccupied.

Taur nodded, his huge white horns cutting swaths through the air. He positioned the chair near the corner of the table, most likely so that his elbows wouldn't keep smashing into Dima. Because of his size, the minotaur ordinarily sat on the opposite end to Mal, but this time he'd left it for his mate so that she could sit beside Holly. Taur offered Holly a friendly — possibly reassuring — smile and gave me a raised eyebrow. It said, *What's up with Mal?*

"Sit, human," I whispered, pulling out Holly's chair for her. She obliged. I sat next to her.

"This smells wonderful," Holly said, thankfully losing much of the jittering in her voice. Taur preened, and damn it if it didn't give me a rush of dopamine to see my flatmate proud.

"We're waiting on Dima," said Sugar Paste. "He's usually the last one here. He probably only just woke up."

Holly's eyes landed on Dima's dish. A pint glass filled with a viscous, almost black liquid, and a stainless-steel straw. She drew in short, shaky breaths. Part of me wanted to squeeze her knee under the table to reassure her, but our relationship

wasn't like that. Should never be like that. So instead, I settled on jamming my elbow into her bicep.

She knew. She got what I was trying to do. Her chest deflated on a sigh, and she tried to flash me a smile, but I wouldn't look directly at her.

With that, Dima waltzed into the kitchen, affecting a yawn, and rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm. He still sometimes liked to playact at being human. Despite this, he had dressed in his usual wine-coloured tunic, black chinos, gilt-embroidered cape, and novelty pink bunny slippers.

“Vampire!” Holly whispered, stating the obvious.

I started to introduce them, “Dima this is—”

“Holly. I know. I've heard so much about you,” he said in his irritatingly buoyant manner.

Don't. Don't you dare, I told him.

He made no indication he'd heard me. “I'm Dima, your friendly neighbourhood vampire. I'm in love with your pinafore, by the way. Beautiful fabric.” He took his seat opposite me and lifted his glass to his nose. “Ooh, B positive. My favourite. Thanks, guys.” He tipped his glass towards Sugar Paste and Taur, and flashed his red eyes at Holly. “It's what I drink *and* what I do.”

Holly turned in my direction and mouthed, “Be positive.” An incredulous smile spread across her lips, like she was at church and was stopping herself from laughing during a sermon.

Oh no, I needed to find even uglier clothes for her.

“Tuck in,” said Taur, and everyone scrambled to retrieve their cutlery.

I chanced a peek at Mal, who was pointedly staring down at his food.

We began our meal with general rounds of, “This is delicious” and “Very tasty, Taur, well done.” Holly's leg bobbed rapidly against my thigh. I doubted she knew she was doing it. I wanted to sellotape it to the chair.

“So, Hols,” said Sugar Paste, “How are you find—”

But I never got to hear the end of the question because Dima spoke into my mind.

She thinks I'm androgynously cute, he said. I like it. And she's terrified of Mal. He laughed out loud, causing Mal to lift his head and squint his eyes at Dima.

What's his problem? I asked.

It was the most un-Mal-like behaviour I'd ever seen from him. Usually, he embodied the role of outwardly-reluctant-but-secretly-super-proud parent to our little group. Like the father that got saddled driving his kids and their friends to wingball practice. But is actually the first one to dish out the high-fives and place all the trophies on his dashboard. He welcomed everyone he met with open arms. He always saw the good in someone. His hugs were legendary.

Seeing him behave with this new sullen, withdrawn demeanour was putting my nerves on edge.

She's human, Dima said, as though it explained everything.

So? Sugar Paste is human too. He never had a problem with her, I countered.

Because Taur will only live as long as a human. Taur is not an incubus, or a vampire, or a fae.

Oh, I said.

The weight of the implication crashed down around me. Mal was worried I'd fall in love with Holly. And then have to watch her grow old, and die, leaving me a grieving mess for the next nine-hundred-ish years of my life.

I'm not going to fall for her, I said. *Tell Mal that. I can't fall in love with a human.*

Dima was quiet for a moment. Obviously now talking into Mal's mind. The only outward sign was Mal's wings twitching. I scooped another forkful of curry into my mouth.

“And that’s when Russ turned up. You know Horus, God of Kings? ...” Sugar Paste was saying to Holly.

He’s not buying it, Dima said. He said you’re playing a dangerous game. You’re messing with two hearts, and you should end it now, before they both shatter.

Tell him that won’t hap—

He said to say that he’s an incubus, and you should listen to him for once, and to stop being a contrary little fuck
—

“Oh, come on, Mal!” I said. Everyone’s heads flicked up to gawk at me. “You know me. You know I’m incapable of that.”

I could *feel* Holly frowning next to me.

“Anyway,” said Taur, his voice rumbling through the kitchen, snapping Holly’s attention back to them. I mouthed a silent *Thank you*. “That’s when Russ said “*That’s not your room*” ...”

Mal pursed his lips together. His eyebrows raised.

Tell him I won’t let it happen, I said again.

He said he’ll talk later.

I closed my eyes for a second to gather my thoughts.

I don’t even like her. And she hates me. Outside of the bedroom, anyway. There’s ... No, it won’t happen. I won’t let it happen. She hates me. Right? Dima, go into her mind and see if she hates me.

He shook his head. *I’m not doing that. I’ll hear the things she projects. Not that I have a choice in that, but I’m not penetrating her mind—*

Please. Just do it this once. I need to know if there is—fuck—if there’s any risk of her falling in love with me. If there is, I’ll end this thing right now. I promise. Please.

The vampire got to his feet, running his hands through his shoulder length black hair. “Bathroom break,” he said, and left the room.

Dima, please—

Holly leaned close to me and whispered, “Do vampires even use the bathroom?”

I’ll do it, he said, returning after half a second and sitting down again, snapping Holly’s spine rigid. But you’ve got to promise me, and Mal, if she likes you, you’ll end this.

Fine, whatever, just check please.

He sighed, shared a quick glance with Mal, and then stared at Holly, who had either returned to deep conversation with Taur and Sugar Paste or else was feigning the level of concentration to avoid talking to Dima.

“It was the same cop!” said Sugar Paste. “How I didn’t put it all together sooner, I have no idea.”

You’re right, she hates you, he said.

Relief tugged at my insides. I scraped up my curry with my flatbread and shovelled it into my mouth.

She thinks you’re pompous, egotistical, selfish, stubborn, vain, callous, arrogant—

Okay, I get it.

That your looks are wasted on a jerk like you. That she wishes you’d listen to her advice for five seconds. That you don’t respect her, or her training, or skill—

I do respect her. It was never about respect. It was about—

That she can’t wait for this whole exercise to be over and done with so she can get on with dating the summer fae. That just looking at your stupid handsome face makes her want to kick something inanimate. That you look like a scruffy alley cat in your jersey and sweatpants. Though she is glad she can’t see your penis outline from her vantage point.

I snorted out loud. Dima smiled too and handed me my glass of water. We pretended we couldn’t sense the right side of the table staring at us.

Now she's wondering what in the hecking shellfish is he laughing at? That everything you do is such a mystery to her, and she wonders if you even know what you're doing half the time.

I hid my smile behind my palm. *Hecking shellfish? She thought that?* That was the most Holly thing ever.

Dima nodded. *And she still thinks I'm cute.*

Okay, that's enough for now, D.

You're welcome, by the way.

I let out my breath. So, she didn't think of me romantically. It was such an overwhelming relief. To know I wasn't at risk of a human falling in love with me. That we could continue with our deal as planned.

For the rest of the meal, I made more of an effort to join in with the conversation, and found myself laughing along with Sugar Paste's and Taur's stories, even though I'd heard them all a hundred times before.

"Have you ever seen the movie *Better the Sex Demon You Know?* That's what movie the dress was in. It's upstairs now, I'll show you after dinner," Sugar Paste was saying to Holly.

Going by the twitching of his wings, Mal and Dima were having a silent conversation, which I ignored. No doubt it was about Holly, or me, or us. But there would be no us. And it was as simple as that.

After dessert (vegan fudge cake) Joey took Holly upstairs to show her the outfit she was wearing when she fucked Taur for the first time, leaving the four men alone in the kitchen.

Mal's eyes patiently followed the women, waiting a good ten seconds before speaking. Based on the look on his face, he was pissed. None of us dared fill the silence.

"Goldie," he said, pleaded. "Please be careful. She's adorable, and things could so easily go wrong for you." If I didn't know the incubus better, I'd say there were tears in his

eyes. Okay, worse than pissed, Mal was upset. Maybe even disappointed.

Dima watched us quietly. Taur cleared the plates.

I had to choose my words carefully, because of course I did. “She’s in love with another man. She hates me. Dima can confirm.”

The vampire averted his eyes, bearing his lower teeth in a *don’t get me involved in this way*.

“Nothing will go wrong,” I added. *Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to drag you down, but maybe he will lay off us, uh, her.*

“So, you’re hate fucking her?” Mal said, not sparing Dima a look.

“We haven’t fucked. Yet.” But why did I add the *yet*?

He raised an eyebrow.

“Mal, come on, you know me. We’ve been friends for four centuries. How many hook-ups have I had during that time? And how many times have I fallen in love? Exactly. Zero. I’m romantically dead.”

Mal sighed, closed his eyes for a beat, opened them. There were definitely tears hovering along his lower lids. “Goldie, I love you, man. I can’t sit aside and watch you go through ... what I did. Mate, I still miss her. Every fucking day.”

“I know,” I said, placing my hand on the back of his. “This deal will last until the games expo, then she will be over her probation period, and off my hands. She’s not interested in me like that, anyway. She’s just using me. We’re using each other, and we’re both totally fine with it. And besides, she wants another guy from work. A fucking asshole, but that’s none of my business. There won’t be a repeat of you and Nova. I can promise you that. It has to be true. I couldn’t say it —”

“If it wasn’t true,” Mal said, finishing my sentence. “Listen, I can’t tell you what to do, you’re almost seven-fucking-hundred-years-old, but I can only say what I know.

Losing someone like that, someone fated, it's ... you haven't known pain like it."

Well, I did know, because I watched it happen. I watched Mal refuse meal after meal. Refuse to bathe, or dress, or even acknowledge Dima and me. I watched him lose so much weight I thought his body might simply give up on him.

"Just promise me as soon as this 'deal' is over, you cut her loose. Before you become fated. Let her go. Let her become this other guy's problem, this ..."

"Seth," I offered.

He quirked a shoulder as though it didn't matter. "Let Seth become fated with her and lose his mind when she's gone. Better him than you. I can't lose you too."

And I realised there were more layers to Mal's objection than I'd first thought. Sure, he was worried I'd fall in love with a human and have to suffer through the same bereavement as he did, but also perhaps he was worried that I wouldn't come through the other side. There were times near the beginning of Nova's death that I thought Mal might try to find her in the afterlife, instead of biding his time up here. Perhaps he was concerned I would be the same. It made his reasoning a little selfish, and I loved that more. He wanted me around. Needed me as a friend.

I didn't think Seth would suffer the same fate as Mal. I was pretty sure Seth was incapable of loving anyone besides himself. So really, the only person with anything to lose here was Holly. But after another seven weeks, she wouldn't be any of my business.

And I was certain Holly would be glad to see the back of me.

"She hates you?" Mal said, as though reading my thoughts. He managed a twitch of a smile.

"She thinks I'm an egotistical, scruffy ... What was it, D?"

"Alley cat," Dima clarified.

“Smart girl,” Mal said, finally relenting into a one-sided grin.

She's outside the kitchen, Dima said into all three of our minds at once.

Chapter 17.

Holly

I shouldn't have listened in. Shouldn't have hung around.

Joey wanted to lead me upstairs to show off the dress she wore to some big fancy cake awards that also happened to have been worn by a very famous, and very dead, movie star. But she'd needed to pee first. She'd nipped into the downstairs loo, leaving me hovering about like a kid waiting for the headteacher. I couldn't go up to her room by myself. That would've been all kinds of weird, so I'd waited by the kitchen door for her to escort me.

And then I heard their voices. I heard *his* voice, Goldie's, and I found myself unable to leave. Any second, Joey would return and catch me eavesdropping. But my feet had rooted me to the spot. My ears pricked. They were talking about me.

The incubus had been so quiet during dinner. Joey had said I'd never meet a nicer man than Mal, but the guy I met was miserable and taciturn, and I knew with one-hundred-percent certainty the reason was me. A few seconds of hanging about afterwards proved that.

Someone died, I think. By the sounds of it, a long time ago. Goldie had said, *We hadn't f-ed. Yet.* He'd said he was *romantically dead*. That he was nearly seven-hundred-years-old. And that when this deal was over, he would hand me over to Seth. He'd called him an asshole but didn't elaborate.

Instead of feeling relieved that the plan was plodding ahead as I'd, well, as I'd planned, a nauseating churning sensation blossomed in my stomach. What had Mal meant

when he said lose his mind when she's gone? Where would I go? Was he still talking about death?

And what did Goldie mean when he said Dima could confirm? And how did Dima know I thought Goldie looked like a scruffy alley-cat? Unless I'd told Joey, and he'd overheard with his super sensitive vampire hearing?

Suddenly it all went quiet in the kitchen. I froze. My brain told my feet to run before anyone came out and caught me. But since when did my body ever do what I'd asked it to?

"Human!" came Goldie's voice. My heart jumped into my mouth. "I know you're standing just outside the kitchen."

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back against the wall. *Sweaty sourpops!* How? How did they know? I'd stay quiet, and maybe they'd leave me alone, or I could run for it. Only I still couldn't seem to make my feet respond.

After a few seconds, Goldie said, "We're Mythics. You can't hide in the hallway. Go and wait for me in my room."

Still, I didn't move. I heard whispers, fast, raspy, almost like arguments, and then laughter.

"Go, human!" he shouted.

So I did. I ran up the stairs like a child who'd been caught with their hand in the biscuit tin. I threw myself onto his bed, breathing in the scent of his pillows before pushing myself into a more dignified seated position.

Twenty seconds later Goldie burst in through the door, slammed it shut behind himself, and immediately tore his jersey over his head, tossing it towards the wash basket.

He stormed over and stopped so that my head was level with the bulge in the front of his sweatpants. I covered my eyes with my palm as though I were shielding my face from the sun.

"Take your clothes off," he demanded.

"What?"

"We're going to resume your lessons."

“But I’m cold,” I lied.

A fire burst into life at the foot of his bed. It looked like a campfire, the type you hover marshmallows on sticks over. Its heat wrapped around me.

“Wow,” I said, unable to stop myself feeling entirely awestruck. “It works just like that?”

Goldie’s face softened, as though he meant to smile, but stopped himself. “It won’t hurt you, or burn my bed. Unless I want it to,” he said, as I crept towards it on my knees, an arm outstretched. “Now take off your gods-damned clothes.”

“Shouldn’t we, like, talk and stuff first?” I said.

“About what?”

“About everything I just overheard.”

There was no point in denying it. I needed more time to process what it all meant, but I also needed, wanted, to know more.

He chewed on the inside of his lip and paced the room once before saying, “There’s a reason we waited until you weren’t in the room to have that conversation. It’s because you weren’t meant to hear any of it.”

“But ... You were talking about me.”

“Yes,” he said, simple as that, not even trying to deny it. Well, of course he couldn’t deny it. He was fae. “So?”

“So, don’t I have the right to know what people are saying about me?”

To my surprise, Goldie laughed. He sat on the bed near my feet. “Are you sure you’re not part fae? You certainly have a way of phrasing things that makes it difficult to skirt around the truth. Yes, I guess you have a right to know what was being said. But no, I can’t tell you everything. Some of the secrets aren’t mine to tell. But I’ll make you a deal. We’ll swap, yeah?”

“You want my secrets? In exchange for yours? Good, because I have questions—”

“No! I don’t want ...” Goldie closed his eyes and let out a slow exhale through his nostrils. “The less I know about you, the better. Lest I actually begin to think of you as a real person and not a circus clown.”

“Oh, ha ha, very funny.”

“I’ll answer one question, for every item of clothing you remove. How’s that?”

“But I’m only wearing four things if you include my bra and knickers.”

“Then you get four questions. Start with that hideous dress.”

“Hey!”

This was a stupid game. But I had to remind myself this is what I actually wanted. It had been my idea. We didn’t have to do any of this. I knew that if I told Goldie I wanted to stop right then, he would. As easy as that. But I did want it. And if I could have another orgasm along the magnitude of last night’s, then sure, I would play his game.

I unbuckled my pinafore, lifted it over my head and dropped it to the ground next to the bed, thankful for the faux fire’s warmth.

“Why is Mal so against our deal?”

“He’s worried we’ll become mates,” was all Goldie said.

“Mates like friends?”

“Ah ah, take something else off first.” He waved his hand towards my t-shirt.

I pulled it off and his eyes followed the hem. “What does mates mean?”

“Fated-mates. Falling in love. More than love. Like bonded forever. The human equivalent of marriage, but without the pointless ceremonies, and cake, and all the other

nonsense humans typically need. But unlike marriage, it's irreversible. Nobody gets a choice when it comes to fated-mates, that's why it's called fated. A wedding is completely unnecessary. The cake is nice though."

But why would Mal be worried about that? I almost blurted this out until I realised I had only two questions left. Surely, he knew his friend. Knew Goldie's emotional deficits. And if he'd never worried about this before, why would he start now? With me?

If Mal was anxious I'd fall in love with Goldie he had nothing to worry about there. I might fancy the pants off the fae, quite literally, but that was where it ended. Goldie wasn't a nice person. He wasn't the guy I'd been dreaming of falling in love with since I was a teenager. He wasn't Seth.

I thought for a moment, then took my bra off, chucking it towards him. He caught it one-handed, without looking at it. Instead, his gaze raked over my naked breasts and stomach, his brow dipped, his eyes darkened.

"Damn, Holly," he said. "You'd better ask me your questions before I forget how to use speech."

And then he said things like that. My insides did a funny little somersault.

"Why is Seth an," I paused, "asshole?"

Goldie laughed, loud and hard. "Shit." He pushed his shining yellow hair back. "If I tell you, you might change your mind about him."

I raised an eyebrow, keen to show I was asking a question without actually speaking it.

"Holly, baby girl, there is so much about him. I'm still debating whether I want you to hate him as much as I do or whether I keep you in the dark, so that when our deal is over, you run to him like you always planned to."

It felt like I was at Bordalis InterRealm Games Convention circa thirteen years ago all over again. Like my dreams were being ripped away from beneath me. Same guy doing the ripping, too.

“Actually,” I said. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to know. I think.”

What if it was bad? What if it was really bad? Was it wrong to want to stay ignorant? Also, I was pretty sure it wasn’t for the reason I was trying to convince myself. There was far too much to unpack there. I’d need a bath, and oils, and candles, and a good few hours, and maybe I wanted to wait until this thing with Goldie was over.

Perhaps if I found myself hating Seth, this ‘deal’ would be over too.

And I wasn’t ready for it to be over. Because maybe, just maybe, I wanted a little more time with the grumpy blonde.

The thought both terrified and thrilled me.

I took my knickers off and threw those at him too. Goldie caught them, smiled, and tucked them into his sweatpants pocket.

“What’s your question?” he said. “Is it Goldie, will you please suck my clit until my screaming brings the plaster down from the ceiling? Because the answer is, I thought you’d never ask.”

My cheeks felt as though the fake flames had leapt from the corner of the bed onto my face.

“Uh, actually, I was going to say ... Do we have to have sex?”

He didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Of course we don’t. You don’t feel ready for that? We can build up to it if you want. Or not. I might be the one telling you what to do and how to do it, but you’re very much in control here.”

I felt my shoulders ease in relief. “I want to,” I said. “Eventually. Because ...” I couldn’t quite figure out how to finish my sentence. Because I definitely wanted that. Or, at least, my body wanted it. My mind wasn’t there yet. “Just, uh, not today. Let’s do what you said. Let’s work up to it.”

Goldie took my hand in his. “As you wish.” He brought my knuckles to his lips. “Besides, there’s a lot more to sex than filling holes.”

“Yeah?” I said, my voice coming out a little squeakier than I meant it to.

“Anything can be erotic with the right person.”

With the right person. Had he intended to say that? Did he even realise he did?

He turned my hand over, pressed my palm to his face, and laid a kiss directly in its centre, immediately chasing the kiss with his tongue. The action, comparatively tame compared with last night, should not have elicited the reaction it did from me. I melted, my brain dissolved to mush, feverish need cramped my abdomen, and all rational thought abandoned me.

I was in trouble.

He took my forefinger into his mouth and gently sucked, his tongue a soft, warm caress against my skin. Something between a whimper and a squeak left my throat. The corners of Goldie’s mouth ticked up in a smile, but he didn’t relent his ministrations. Taking his tongue up the seam of my finger, he flicked the fleshy pad in the middle and ran it down the next one.

If he’d have asked for sex right then, I would’ve handed it to him on a plate. Heck, I’d even have rushed to the kitchen in my birthday suit to find some kind of garnish to accompany his meal.

He moved his face close to mine and laid a gentle kiss at the juncture of my jaw, just below my ear.

“You’re going to make yourself come, and I’m going to watch,” Goldie whispered.

I didn’t argue, didn’t want to argue. It sounded hotter than any fantasy involving Seth I had conjured myself over the past few months. I nodded, because words were broken, and let him ease me down onto my back.

He settled on his knees between my open thighs and placed the hand that he'd just made love to with his mouth over my sex.

I was so wet. Wetter than I think I'd ever been. My body so ready to take his. Later, it was going to have serious words with my brain. Instinct must have taken over as my fingers began moving of their own accord, softly circling my clit. I hadn't masturbated in months, possibly years. What with sharing a room and a squeaky set of bunk beds with my sister. And I'd never done it in front of anyone before. But, Gods, it was so freaking hot.

Goldie's lips parted. The tiniest crease flexed his brow. But other than the rise and fall of his bare chest, he remained statuesque.

I tried to slow myself down. Tried to close my eyes and pretend I was at home or anywhere else and that I didn't have an audience. But every time I peeked through my lids, he gave me an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement. And every time, it sent a thrill right through my body. Like a bolt of lightning through my spine, cramping my stomach, and setting my clit alight. Teetering me on the edge of an orgasm.

Perhaps it was because he was watching. And from the need in his green eyes, the slight hiss to his breath, and the bulge straining against the front of his sweatpants, I'd say he liked what he saw.

Oh, maybe I was kinky after all! Practically a deviant. I'll be tying him up next.

Goldie leant on his side next to me, propping himself up on his elbow so that he was almost hovering over me. I didn't think about it, I just turned into him. Our mouths were centimetres apart. I had to remind myself I hated him.

He was so rude to me. *Is* so rude to me. And outside of his apartment, he treated me like some sort of wild animal that somehow found its way inside. But he wasn't rude like the other guys, who simply didn't respect me. I was sure Goldie respected me, he just—

“Stay present, baby girl,” he whispered, and I dragged my eyes open to look at him. Treacherously, my body sent another bolt of lightning to meet my fingers.

Darn it, he was undeniably beautiful. With his golden hair falling forward. A sheen of sweat across his forehead. His five o'clock shadow. The column of his throat, his Adam's apple quivering. His muscular shoulder flexing. Oh, those shoulders. It should be a criminal offense for someone as moody as him to possess those shoulders.

Hang about, his shoulder flexing? His arm bobbing up and down rapidly? Was he masturbating too?

The thought sent me from teetering, to sliding headfirst down the ravine, and I broke.

“I think I'm—” I started, but never quite finished. My thighs simply gave up, my eyes slammed themselves closed, my back lifted me from the bed, and waves of ecstasy dragged me under.

Goldie moved his mouth to the crook of my neck and whined into my hair. His hot, wet release hit my stomach over and over while I continued to ride through the bliss of my climax.

The muscles in my back stopped contracting, and I slumped down onto his bed. Goldie stood, and swiftly pushed himself inside his sweatpants. It didn't remotely conceal the swell at the front, which seemed to be making little effort to retreat. For a few moments, he stared at my prone, naked form. At the mess he'd left on me. A crease furrowed his brow, and something flashed behind his eyes. I wasn't sure what, but it didn't look like happiness. He scooped up a towel and carefully, like a genuine lover, wiped me down.

I watched him. Quiet, unable to figure out which Goldie I was currently sharing the room with. The fire was no longer there. I wasn't sure when it had vanished.

“Oh, Holly Briar, you aren't making this easy for me,” he said, breathy, resigned.

Two thoughts. One, Holly Briar, my full name, not baby girl or even human. I wasn't even aware he knew my surname.

And thought two, exactly what wasn't I making easy for him? What did he want to do that I was standing in the way of? I decided the latter was more pressing.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Goldie never answered me, he simply closed his eyes for two, three seconds and handed me my pyjamas.

I didn't push him. My instincts told me he'd shut down completely if I did. I wriggled into my PJs, and he got into bed, his head on the pillow, his arm outstretched in an invitation.

"Stay another night. I'll drive us to work tomorrow," he said.

For reasons, none of which I could explain in that moment, I knew cuddling up into his arm would be a huge mistake. That I would come to regret it, even if I didn't understand why.

And yet, darn it, I wanted to.

I hovered my weight, shifting it from one foot to another. Doubt laying heavy in my stomach.

Do I listen to my body or my mind?

Of course my body won. My mind only realised after I'd backed my bum up into his lap and pulled the covers over us. His other arm wrapped around my waist, and he sighed into my hair, like he had just dropped into a steaming bathtub. And I knew ...

It wasn't a huge mistake I'd made by snuggling up to him.

It was a colossal mistake.

"Oh, no," I mouthed to myself.

Chapter 18.

Holly

“Top up or down?” Goldie asked the next morning after breakfast.

His car was a retro masterpiece. A sporty number from around the year of my birth. Either painstakingly maintained or fully restored to her former glory. It looked new. It had a long, low sloping bonnet, with square headlamps that mechanically lifted. The interior was pristine black leather with white trim, and a sound system that could rival the ones at the local multiplex had been installed into the doors. The super-shiny, almost glittering exterior exactly matched the gold of his hair. I’d never had strong feelings about a car before, but I was besotted.

“I love her,” I said, as we got to the underground car park of his building. “Down, definitely.” I’d only ever travelled in a convertible once before, and that was a rental for Mum and Phil’s wedding.

Goldie didn’t smile, but a corner of his mouth briefly quirked. He’d been, for want of a better word, eggy with me that morning. Scowling as he brewed my coffee, and practically stewing as he buttered my toast. We then ate in abject silence. It was a nice breakfast, fresh bread, artisanal jam, but the fae beside me would not engage in any attempt I made at conversation. It left me with an icky feeling stirring in my stomach. I knew I’d made a mistake by cuddling into him last night. I just didn’t realise he might view it similarly. He’d been the one to invite me into his arms, not the other way round. So why was Goldie peed-off with me?

He was silent still as he opened the passenger door for me in some absurd taciturn chivalry, and he was silent as he pulled out of the car park into the bright morning sun. Silent as

he opened the glove box, where at least five pairs of designer sunglasses lay in a jumble. And silent as he grabbed the closest pair and slid them onto that impassive face of his.

“Help yourself,” Goldie said after a few minutes, motioning to the sea of shades.

“Thanks, but I can’t really wear them. There’s not enough room on my nose with my own glasses.”

“Right,” he said, and then I swear under his breath he muttered, “Humans.”

We agreed to pop over to my flat on the way so that I could get changed, having only brought one change of t-shirt and knickers. I gave him the address.

“You live in Westside?” he said, in that tone everyone adopted when they spoke about Westside, one of Remy’s poorer, mostly human, districts. “I thought you lived in Waterside?”

“My new place is in Waterside, but it’s still under construction. So, I’m living with my mum and stepdad and sister until it’s ready. I told you this, I’m sure,” I said, not sure why I was being so defensive.

He flicked down the indicator. “When’s it ready?”

“June, hopefully.”

“It is June.”

“Next June.”

“Hmm.”

We were quiet again then, and I found myself watching Goldie’s hands on the wheel. His square, blemish-free knuckles, short nails, and immaculate cuticles. My mind drifted back to Saturday night, and where those hands had been, and what those fingers had felt like. And despite the roof of the car having tucked itself up somewhere near the boot, I suddenly felt very overheated.

“Your face has gone all red,” he said, confirming everything I’d suspected about fae having incredible

peripheral vision. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I said, shifting on the leather, clenching my thighs together.

“Liar.” The word was sharp, accusatory, and perhaps betraying a little envy.

I let a few moments pass before I said, “Do you get manicures?”

“Ha!” Goldie said. He could have replaced the sound with *busted* and it would have rang the same. “Thinking about my expert touch between your thighs?” I splutter-coughed but didn’t deny it again. “Don’t worry, baby girl, there’s always next weekend.”

I pursed my lips together, unable to look at him, but I knew he was finally smiling. I could sense it.

“It’s just,”—*flipping heck, Hols, don’t say anything embarrassing*—“you have really pretty hands.” I looked around the dashboard, praying to find an ejector button.

Goldie extended his fingers against the wheel, glancing down at them. “Thanks.” That was a yes, then. He had someone look after his hands.

“Do you also get pedicures?” *Why Holly? Why?*

His tongue popped out of his mouth as though to hide his smile, and for some random reason, my heart cartwheeled in my chest. Probably palpitations. It had been nice, but violently strong coffee he’d brewed that morning.

“Why do your hands have bumps on them?” he said. “At the top of your palm? And on your fingers?”

Oh. The memory came rushing back. That wasn’t a cat licking my hand that morning. Goldie had been running a finger over my palm. “They’re callouses. It’s hard skin from holding a controller so much. Must be a human thing.”

“Do they hurt?” My heart flip-flopped in my chest again. Was Goldie concerned for me?

“At first, but not anymore.”

He didn't respond. It was as though I'd said nothing at all. I watched those deft fingers slip down and snap the indicator once again as he pulled into the complex which housed my block of flats.

"It's the second one on the left," I said.

He inched his shades down his nose and peered at the building over the top of them. "You live here? Oh, baby girl."

"No!" I shouted. Not because I didn't live there — I did, temporarily at least — but because I knew what he was thinking. The snob. "You don't have to feel sorry for me because my folks live in a tower block."

Okay, it didn't give a great first impression. A stack of soiled mattresses and a cushionless sofa were propped up next to the front doors. Strings of laundry already soaking up the morning rays stretched from window to window right up into the sky like a rainbow of fresh sails. A variety of sun-bleached plastic toys lay abandoned on the communal lawns. Later they'd be reclaimed, and toddlers and stay at home mums would crowd out the space. A handwritten, laminated sign that read, "*Pick Up Your Dog Shit You Lazy Bastards*" was taped to a bike-park post. The rain had found its way between the laminate sheets and had created a pretty watercolour effect with the permanent marker.

Yes, it looked 'rough' but I loved it here. I grew up here. Mum and Phil loved it here. They were happy. They had a community. And Goldie would have seen that if he bothered to look more closely.

Inside the building there was a notice board, displaying all manner of posters and events. Cards nights, karaoke nights, movie nights, sports screenings, items for sale, a lost cat poster, lessons in everything from swimming to ukulele, even a book club dedicated to dissecting the latest bestselling thrillers. It was Monday, that meant Mum had gardening in the community allotment in the afternoon, and Phil had yoga in the rec room in the evening.

Community. Something my folks told me I would lose by moving to Waterside. "*Rich people don't have real*

friends,” Phil had said. “The only people that hang out with rich people are folk that want something from them. And nobody wants money more than those who already have it.”

Goldie was rich. Going by his apartment, and car, and general everything. Yet nobody wanted to hang out with him for his wealth. Actually, it seemed nobody wanted to hang out with him full stop. Though that was most likely by his own design.

In any case, I didn’t need Goldie’s classicism.

“You can save your pity,” I told him.

He nodded once, his mouth still a firm line. “Don’t be too long, human.” He pulled out his phone and started scrolling through gamer groups on Faebook.

I jumped out of his car — wow, the doors were heavy — and headed inside.

We were back to ‘human’. Could be worse, I supposed. His Faebook could have been plastered with semi-naked fae girls like Seth’s was.

I tiptoed into my bedroom. Abby was flat out on her stomach on the top bunk, the duvet covering only one shoulder, the window open and the gauzy curtain flapping in the breeze. I snuck over to the dresser, avoided the weird clunk it made by lifting the drawer as I pulled it open, and selected some clean clothes. I would take them into the bathroom and change there, leaving my sister in peace.

“You dirty stop out,” she said, sitting up in bed, her neck bent to avoid smacking her head on the ceiling.

“Okay, Mum,” I teased. “I didn’t realise I had a curfew.”

She laughed. “You’ve been away all weekend!” She rubbed sleep from her wide, excited eyes. “So ... ?”

“So?”

“So, did you do it? How was it? What was he like? Is his dick as big as I said it would be?”

“Abby!” I unbuckled my pinafore, deciding I might as well change in my room since Abby was already awake. “No, we didn’t ... do it. But, erm, we did do stuff. And I’m not talking to you about his willy.”

“Spoilsport.” She pouted her bottom lip. “When are you seeing him next? You are going to see him again, right? It wasn’t like a one-night — two-night — stand?”

“I’m seeing him in a few minutes,” I said, deliberately misconstruing her question. “He’s waiting for me outside in his car now.”

She didn’t use the bunk bed ladder, she simply hopped, like a parkour dude, from the top to the window, and pressed herself against the lower pane.

“Oh my Gods, Hols, he’s so freaking hot. Is he naked?”

“No. He’s just, I don’t know, for some reason, fae men hardly ever wear shirts. He’ll probably put one on before getting into work, because they have to wear them there, but, yeah, I don’t fully get it.”

“Galmin is the same. He said it’s because fae blood runs much hotter than humans’. He’s back, in the band, by the way.”

“I guess that makes sense. About the blood, not the band. How do you feel about Galmin rejoining?”

“Hmmm,” she said, shrugging. “At least the Tallywhacker’s gig can go ahead now.”

I finished pulling on clean underwear and clean dungarees (my toucan print ones, one of my favourite pairs) and joined Abby at the window. At that moment, Goldie lifted his blonde head up.

“Shit, he’s looking at us,” she said, and she waved.

“Don’t wave, for crisp’s sake.”

“Hey daddy, I’m up here!” she yelled, and pulled away from the window, crumpling onto the singular desk-chair in a fit of giggles.

“Abby, you don’t even know what a daddy is,” I said, secretly hoping she wouldn’t ask. I knew it was a sex thing, probably, but beyond that, I was clueless.

“That car though,” she said longingly when her giggles had subsided.

“I know,” was all I said back.

We were quiet for a few moments. I cleaned my glasses on my special microfibre cloth.

“How old is he?” she asked.

“I think about seven hundred. Or, nearly seven hundred, I heard his flatmate say.”

Her eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. “Now that’s an age-gap romance.”

I laughed, shook my head. “You’d never believe he was nearly seven-hundred. He behaves like a teenager. And it’s an arrangement of convenience, not a romance.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Chapter 19.

Goldie

I pushed the coffee table against the wall so I could pace my office. Drew the blinds so that the people in the building opposite — a werewolf dating app named *Howl Ya Doin'*? — wouldn't see me argue with myself. Not that I would argue aloud. That would be far too risky. I'd probably end up saying something idiotic again.

Ooh, Holly Briar, you are not making this easy for me.

Why? Why would I say that? As soon as the words left my lips, I heard them bounce around in the empty chambers of my mind. Gods, what was I thinking? What did I even mean? Make what easy for me?

“Don't answer that, you utter, utter prick,” I said, breaking my no arguing out loud rule.

I had driven her home to get changed for work, and she had swapped out dungarees for more fucking dungarees. This time with tiny little birds all over. Like seriously, how many pairs of this offensive garment did the woman own?

When we'd eventually arrived at the office, Holly was whisked away to take part in some training course or another. I'd half wanted to make a joke about manual handling, but I pulled my defences up before it could slip out. Outside of my bedroom, I needed her to think of me as an adversary. Not making dick jokes and making her laugh. Dammit, even if a tiny — insignificant, really — part of me wanted to hear that laugh.

So, she had been in training all morning, and I had been wearing a tread in the grey polyester carpet. I was thankful for the respite from the infuriating human.

There was a knock at my door.

“Yeah,” I called out, and in walked ... Seth, with his subtle but tell-tale silver glow around his deceptive form. Like a dirty, smoking halo. “What do you want?”

He glanced around my unnaturally darkened office. “Just came to see Molly, actually. She not here?”

“It’s Holly, you fucker, and you know it, and she’s in training all day. All week I think.”

“No need to get defensive,” he said, smiling, and plopping, uninvited, onto my couch. He spread his arms, which in his current form did not reach either armrest. They fell, rather pathetically, back to his sides. I didn’t bother to hide my laugh.

“What do you want with her?”

Seth paused. His eyes locked onto mine. His tongue traced his top teeth. “Heard you had a cosy little slumber party this weekend.”

My heartbeat ramped up. How did he find that one out? I said nothing.

“A fuckboy like you should know the golden rule.” He inspected his fingernails.

“Yeah. So that we could discuss the game.”

“Mmhmm, discuss the game.” He did air quotes. “Is that what you kids call it these days?”

“Oh, eat shit, Seth. We never fucked. We haven’t even kissed. So, you can wipe that smug as shit smile from your face.”

He did. I secretly thanked Holly for making the No Kiss rule and handing me that perfect little truth bomb. As always, and Seth knew, if I said it, it had to be true. His face dropped. No doubt he was hoping to run straight to August with the sordid news and have me fired on the spot.

“You came, you didn’t get what you wanted, now you can get the fuck out of my office.”

“I have no idea where people get this antagonistic, misanthropic perception of you.” Seth stood, nonetheless, and pulled out that gods-awful pocket mirror of his. He snapped it open and smirked down at his reflection. “Oh, Goldie. It would be funny if it weren’t so tragic.”

“What do you want with Holly, anyway?” I asked as he made for the door.

He paused, his tongue cresting along his top lip. My stomach did a very confusing swoop. “I want everything you can’t have.” He took a step up to me. In this form, he only came up to my shoulder. “I want to take everything you desire, and parade it right in front of your stupid Oread face. I want to bend that human over the back of my couch and rail her until she’s crying out for her mummy. She won’t even remember your name by the time I’m finished with her.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ll leave that for Molly. Give her this, will you?” Seth slapped a business card into my palm. In biro he’d written, “*Miss Briar; let’s make some magic.*” So, he did know her name. It always baffled me how shadow fae were the only ones who seemed capable of outright lying. Or at least, bending the truth so wholly, it pretty much classified as a lie.

“Summer fae. That’s what she sees when she looks at me. Couldn’t be further from an Oread.” He gave a pitying tilt of his head. If it weren’t for the quirk in that mouth, a quirk he didn’t know how to control, I may have thought his emotions genuine. “And,” he added, yanking the door open, placing one foot in the corridor, “I want to snatch tenure right from under your nose.”

Seth left, and I slumped down onto my couch, tossing his business card into the wastepaper bin. Two weeks ago, I would have gladly handed her over to him. Not anymore. Things had changed. Though I still wasn’t sure which things had changed and in what way.

Perhaps I was just sexually frustrated. Sure, I’d come three times, jizzed all over that soft, human belly of hers — I allowed myself a hot minute to replay the moment. Fuck —

but I'd never entered her. Perhaps, if I fucked her, or rather, once I fucked her, I wouldn't be so on edge. Maybe I just needed to get it out of my system. And as soon as that happened, I could palm her off onto someone else.

She wants Seth, said a voice inside my head.

"But Seth is such a cunt!" I said it aloud, making sure I wasn't hyperbolising, and feeling unwarrantably gratified by the admission.

As much as I wanted rid of her, I couldn't foist Seth on her. She didn't deserve that. She deserved ...

Stop that thought right there.

Maybe Greyson. Or one of the other less horrific choices. Sure, he was about as interesting as an empty packet of rubbers, and the guy had a pretty substantial praise fetish, but compared with Seth, shit, I'd marry him.

Greyson it was.

I slapped my palms against my thighs and pushed myself up.

Seth knocked on the door again.

"What do you fucking want now?" I yelled, but when the door edged open, it wasn't Seth. It was August. "Sorry, I thought you were ... someone else."

She quirked a brow, stepped inside, and let the door close behind her. "Right-oh, let's see it then?"

I blinked at her.

"Your game. The one you've been cosyng up with Holly all weekend over."

Fuck, how did August find out?

"We didn't have sex!" I blurted out. I meant to say we didn't sleep together, but my fae mouth obviously decided to take it literally, and found it was something it couldn't produce.

“That’s ... great,” she said, deliberately slowly, like I was a toddler showing her my ode to rigatoni and finger paint. She sat herself on my couch and looked around for my coffee table, stopping when she spotted it in the corner. She gave a slightly confused, “Hm,” stood up, and picked up a controller.

I put the game on for her and took up my usual spot in the swivel chair behind the giant vulva on the back of her head.

“Well ...” She said, turning to face me after ten minutes. “That was cute. Adorable even. Whose idea was the self inserts?”

“Mine,” I replied. “Wholly inspired by Holly.” Though I didn’t tell August my motives for the self inserts. No doubt she would’ve seen straight through them, as Holly had done.

“It’s sweet. I love the symbolism.”

Symbolism?

“Does it have a theme yet? A purpose?”

“Uh ...”

“That’s okay, you’ll come up with something.” August got to her feet. “It’s a great start, Goldie. It has potential.” She paused before opening the door. “You need to change Holly’s stats, though. They’re terrible. Think about why a human and a fae might need to work together and adapt them accordingly.”



The next few days passed in a whirlwind. Holly was almost continuously in training, and I sat at my drawing board trying to think up stats for a human character, that were A, not shit, and B, nothing to do with love. I had nothing. I needed to ask Holly for advice, but every time I spotted her outside of training, she was being hounded by one of the other designers. So long as it wasn’t Seth, I decided I would let them try to charm her. Maybe she’d turn her affections from the shadow

fae onto one of them. I'd feel a lot less of a prick if, at the end of our deal, I'm handing her over to Greyson instead.

And when she wasn't being circled by a hungry pack of fae designers, she brushed off my question with the same repetitive answers.

“Love, Goldie. That's what humans are good at.”

“Try again.”

“Empathy.”

“No. What about resourcefulness?”

“Too many negative connotations.”

“Weaponry skills?”

“Why does there need to be weapons in a game about love?”

“Fuck you, Holly Briar.”

“What about kinship? Brotherhood? Community?”

“There has to be something.”

“Sensibility? Emotional awareness? Zeal?”

By Thursday I had decided I would get the answer from her, even if I had to rip it from those perky lips of hers. On my way into the office, I stopped at my favourite sex shop, Nymph-O-Mania.

“Hey, Goldie,” said the cashier, “Not seen you in a while. Everything okay?”

“Fine, yeah.” I placed the small item on the countertop and the cashier rang it through.

“Hey, do you want—” they began, but I was already making my way out of the shop, unwrapping my purchase. I pushed part of it into one jeans pocket and its remote controller into the other.

It wasn't until midday that I found her. In the twelfth-floor break room, alone, humming some weird tune as she shoved a plastic tray of luminous food inside the microwave.

“Human!”

Holly jumped out of her skin, stumbling backward, knocking into the bin, and brought a hand up to her chest.

“Gees, Goldie, you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m going to give you more than a heart attack.”

The smile dropped from her face in an instant as I approached her. In my pocket, I slipped my finger into the ring part of the small device I’d bought.

“Tell me. And don’t you dare say love.” I closed the gap between our bodies, brought my lips to her temple, my hand wrapping around the base of her neck. The fly of my jeans already digging uncomfortably into my flesh. *Seriously?*

Holly’s breath hitched. “It’s lo—”

“I’m warning you,” I whispered into the shell of her ear. I pulled away enough to look into her lust-clouded eyes. She knew I had something planned.

“Here, Goldie? In the twelfth-floor break room? We can’t. I can’t.” But her body was readying itself for me. Becoming pliant. Moulding to my whims.

Holly’s heavy breaths, the ticking of the clock overhead, and the whirring hum of the microwave were the only sounds to be heard. Her knickers were already soaked. I could scent them, scent her arousal. Blood rushed south, and my erection speared her in the stomach, eliciting a whimper from her.

“May I?” I said. My hand hovered at the side opening of her farmer-trousers. This time they were a khaki-green and made from a soft baggy cotton fabric.

Holly shot a nervous glance to the microwave, as though it displayed a countdown of the time we had left for this little game. Three minutes, thirty-eight seconds. Ages.

Then amazingly she nodded.

“Say it,” I said.

“Yes, Goldie. I ... want it.”

I plunged my hand straight down into her underwear, lining the suction cup of the device right over her clit. I dug my other hand into my pocket and pressed the on switch.

Holly stumbled backwards, her back flush against the wall, and I stepped into the gap again, doing everything in my possession not to grind myself against her.

“What—Goldie, what is that?” she gasped, grabbing the front of my shirt for purchase. Her eyes fluttered between open and closed as though she couldn’t decide if she wanted to yield control.

“Right, let’s start again, shall we?” I whispered into her violet-scented hair. “What useful attributes does a human have?”

“It’s ...” She slumped her forehead onto my shoulder and emitted a squeaky whine. “It’s love.”

I turned the device up. Holly cried out and dug her fingernails into my chest. I resisted the urge to add my own illicit groan.

“You want me to stop, baby girl?”

“No, no, please.”

“Tell me, then. Good human qualities.”

“It’s lo—”

I turned it up once more. She slapped a palm over her face, whether it was to stop herself from screaming or stop the pleasure from overwhelming her, and began bucking against me, squashing my fingers and the device to her sex.

“Oh, baby girl,” I said. My lips hovering above her temple. “There is nothing I like more than watching you fall apart beneath me.” She was already getting close. Balancing on the edge of an orgasm. Her fingers frantically rooting into my arms, my shoulders, my back. Her face contorted with agonised pleasure.

“Tell me one useful quality and I’ll let you come.”

Holly sucked in her bottom lip, bit down on it, and pushed it out again, wet, and shining and pink. Fuck this no kissing rule. I ground my cock against her and let out my frustrated growl. She folded into me more, as though it was exactly what she'd been waiting for.

“Tell me.”

I hated that I knew already, knew Holly's body so well, that I had approximately eight seconds before she broke.

“It's ... It's,” she whined, “It's love.”

I switched the thing off.

“Goldie! You fu—Switch that back on,” she panted. “Now! I was just about to—” She really almost swore at me. The thought brought the biggest grin to my face.

“I know,” I said, removing my hand from my pocket and grabbing her hair behind her head, holding her mouth millimetres from mine. “Give me one useful attribute and I'll let you finish.”

She seemed on the verge of tears, dragging lust filled eyes to mine. “Please.”

“Begging won't help your cause.” Though it did make my cock throb. “Do you want me to punish you?”

Panic shot through me. The words out before I could consider what Holly's reaction might be. Which was ... to grind herself onto my hand and the device. I had to turn my head, close my eyes, and bear down on my lower lip with my teeth for a few seconds.

“I don't know what to tell you,” she said, when I forced my gaze back to her. Her sweet breath came in pants, mixing with mine, doing something weird to my insides. Stirring them all up like a witch attending to her cauldron. “It is love. Love is a human's greatest strength. I'm sorry, you don't want to hear that but ... I have nothing else to tell you.”

“No,” I whispered, our noses touching, our lips barely a hairsbreadth apart.

“Just accept it, Goldie. Just make the game about love, and we can work on everything else that needs sorting for the expo.”

“Damn it, human!” I twisted my fingers in her hair, pulling her head to the side, and because I couldn’t kiss her lips, despite needing too, I sucked her earlobe into my mouth, and scraped my teeth down it. Her knees jerked forward, and she let out a whine like a drooling dog watching its master eat. I yanked the device away from her clit and scooped it into her palm, just as I switched it back on with the controller. She stared down at it, clearly debating running off to the bathroom or finishing there in front of me.

If she’d have chosen the latter, I would have let her finish. Silly girl.

I didn’t say anything to Holly as I left. Instead, I laid another kiss at the throbbing pulse in her neck, tilted her chin up with my finger, and walked out of the twelfth-floor break room. I didn’t go far. Didn’t need to. Two seconds later, she came striding out. A look of hazed determination on her face, and she slipped into the women’s bathroom. I hung around outside the door. Waiting. Listening. I knew her whimpers. I knew her body.

Not long now ...

I shut the device off a second before Holly could come.

A desperate cry emitted from the bathroom.
“Nooooooooo!”

As I walked back to my office, I couldn’t decide which was bigger. My grin or my boner.

Chapter 20.

Holly

“What about finding long-lost treasure?” I said, artfully sidestepping Rusty. Saw him coming a mile away. “The graphics are already set up for it. It’d be perfect.”

Goldie gave me a passive, flattened look. I couldn’t tell if he was letting me know it was a stupid idea, or if he felt cheated I didn’t get mauled by the giant moose for a third time that day. Or both.

We were playing as each other again, me as him, him as me, sitting rather cosily on his big, squishy, maroon sofa. Our bodies nearly, but not quite, touching. The on-screen Goldie almost as distractingly handsome as the real one.

Only one of his flatmates was currently in and awake, Taurin. The minotaur occasionally crossed in front of us on his way to and from the kitchen, but he didn’t speak much. Which suited me fine. I guessed the vampire was also in, but since it was still light outside, he was probably in bed. Coffin? Whatever he slept in.

Goldie’s jersey clad chest rhythmically rose and fell, his breathing silent, but his gaze almost audible. Every time he looked down at me, it felt as though he was announcing it. *“Hey human, I’m looking at you again. Why are your breaths so loud?”* And it seemed to happen a lot, but only when I was staring ahead, at the screen, pointedly not looking at him.

“Okaaay,” I said, drawing out the word, and mentally tossing the treasure-hunt idea aside. Even though I really, *really* liked it. “What about some kind of city builder type game? You could have us, them, found some kind of harmonious utopia.”

Wrong choice of words, Holly. You've made it sound too much like love.

I was still mad at him for the whole clit-blocking episode at work on Thursday, two days ago. It'd held all the promise of being the best orgasm of my life, and he shut the thing off right before the crunch point. Twice! I had to finish manually. It annoyed me for three reasons. The first being it was a disappointing climax. Fine, it was okay, but compared with what I'd imagined was headed my way, it paled. Second, I'd never masturbated at work before and it felt so weird, so wrong, and so naughty. I loved it. It threw all my sensibilities out of whack. And the last reason, no matter how much I tried, I couldn't stop picturing how smug his stupid face would've been as soon as he'd denied me those few glorious seconds of oblivion. Sat in his office, sipping his cavity-encouraging coffee, laughing at me.

And he was still mad at me for not relenting on the love thing. I wouldn't relent. Ordinarily, I had no problem admitting I was wrong, even if, all along I knew I'd been right. Even if only to shut the other person up so they'd leave me alone. But this time, I wouldn't cave. Couldn't. Perhaps because his game would hugely benefit from the added emotion, or perhaps because I simply didn't want him to shut up and leave me alone.

We were in a mutual stasis of irk.

I pressed on with my city builder idea. "Like, you know, Darren the Great and Todd the Enigmatic? The founders of Borderlands. One a fae, one a—"

"A human, yes, I know. You're human-splaining my own history to me. You forget I was alive when Borderlands was formed."

Of course he was. Him being nearly seven-hundred years old, and Borderlands coming up to its quinentennial anniversary. "Sure, sorry. Can I ask you a question?"

He said nothing, but his shoulders dropped in resignation.

“Which one was which? Was Darren the fae and Todd the human? Or was it the other way around?” I asked.

Goldie laughed and elbowed me in the ribs. It was a careful, gentle nudge, and it sent disproportionately numerous sparks skittering all over my body. “You know? I have no idea. So much for knowing Borderlands’ history.”

“How old are you, exactly?” I secretly congratulated myself for shoehorning that question in there.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you trying to get to know me? Because that’s against the rules, by the way.”

“Which rule? We never agreed to that.” On the screen I made Goldie leapfrog over the side of a short, chalky cliff, neatly landing on his feet, two fingers splayed on the ground in a sexy, butt-popping crouch.

“Nice,” he said, trying to do the same with computer-me and accidentally splatting me onto the limestone. “They’re my rules.”

“Why? So that you can keep people at arm’s length? So that you don’t develop any proper feelings for anyone?” I found a berry behind a bush and made my character eat it despite his HP already being full.

Beside me, the real Goldie had gone deathly still.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh no. That was it. I’d cut straight to the core. And he couldn’t deny it. He was still frozen, evidently trying to decide on his next move. Or perhaps I’d broken him. My brain scrambled with some way to fix the situation.

Goldie was right, I realised. We shouldn’t get to know one another. Once this deal was done, we’d go our separate ways, and maybe only see each other in passing. In the halls, in team meetings, in the break room. My belly cramped at the memory. No, it was better we didn’t grow to like each other. Better we stayed in this state of semi-aggression. It would make saying goodbye at the end that much easier.

“Once, when I was nine,” I began. “We went to visit my aunt and uncle in the Human Realms. My cousin, Marie, she had this amazing Wendy house. It had a little kitchen and everything, but she wouldn’t let me play in it. She called me a baby, even though she’s only eighteen months older than me. So that night while she was asleep, I wrote a note. From our gran, who died the year before. It said Marie was horrible and selfish, and that Granny was always watching and if she didn’t share her Wendy house, I would haunt her for all eternity. I left it on her pillow and opened the window to make it colder in the room. She never went back in that little house, and for a whole week I had the entire thing to myself.”

“What—What did you tell me that for?”

“Another time I stole fifty silvers from my college roommate’s purse to buy a game.” Goldie’s game, in fact, though, that part I left out. “When my baby sister was born and my mum and stepdad went on their first date night, I ignored her all evening, let her cry herself to sleep. I put headphones in.”

He was silent for a few moments. I stared into his emerald eyes. *Don’t start liking him, Holly.*

“What’re you doing?” A crease had formed between Goldie’s brows, or rather, it became more exaggerated, and I knew my plan was working.

“I’m telling you stories, horrible things I’ve done in the past. That way, you won’t run the risk of actually liking me.” Because as much as I wanted everyone to believe I was an exemplary model citizen/magna cum laude/incorruptible, it was far from the truth. I’d done bad things before. I just did a thorough job of hiding them.

Goldie sighed. Long and deep, every muscle in his body seeming to give up at the same time, and nodded once. “Before I left the Kingdom of the Fae, I never said goodbye to my folks.”

“Cold, bro.”

“Yep. Didn’t have any reason other than I didn’t want to at the time. Haven’t even been back in, like, one and a half centuries.”

“So, you stole a cat, you ghosted your parents ...”

“I know, I’m a straight up cunt.” Goldie momentarily went cross-eyed. “Hey, stupid fae mouth, you let me down again.”

I laughed. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I think it’s working.”

“You like me less?”

“Yes,” I lied.

Crap.



Goldie scooped the hair from the side of my face and wove his fingers behind my head. “Are you ready to let me inside you yet?”

Sex. Uh ...

We were in his bedroom, standing beside his unmade bed.

I’d thought about what we had already done. The amount of orgasms I’d had over the past week probably accounted for at least eighty percent of my combined yearly total. I was learning things about him. Things that couldn’t be recounted easily. Like when I touched a spot on his side, below his ribs, his body would go sort of floppy. Or if I said the word “please”, it would make him suck his breath in as though I’d given him a papercut. I wondered if Seth would like the same things. Or if not, would I be able to pick up on his signals like I did with Goldie? Would he make it easy for me like the Oread did?

I wanted to feel Goldie inside me. Almost *needed* to. He could give me cramps with a single look. I knew what was

coming when *that* crease appeared on his brow. But, no, I wasn't ready for sex just yet. And I had an inclination why, but I wouldn't let myself dwell on the reasons or analyse it too deeply.

“Can, uh, can I practice something else?”

He instantly understood what I meant. I didn't know how, but he did. Goldie vanished the gap between our bodies and pressed his lips to my temple, his fingers twisting circles in my curls. “Gods, baby girl, are you going to let me fuck your mouth?”

Those words, from his lips, whispered into my hair, almost knocked my knees out from underneath me. There were moments in his bedroom when I thought I absolutely, positively could not be any more turned on. And then he would go and prove me wrong. He palmed his erection with his other hand.

I'd given men oral before, sure, but I'd never done it well. I'd never brought a guy to completion. Probably doing something wrong. But Seth would expect this to be something I'd have experience with, right? Any future boyfriend would. So, I ought to get that experience.

That, and maybe, a little part of me just wanted to ... taste him.

“But can you not look at me? While I ...”

I may have wanted to ... do things to his ... appendage, but that didn't stop me from feeling shy about it.

With that, Goldie leapt over to his bed, opened the bottom drawer of his nightstand and, like a magician, produced a silk scarf and tie. He climbed onto the bed, and lay in the dead centre, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Then blindfold me, baby girl, and tie me to the headboard. Do whatever you want with my body. Use me. Break me. Fuck me with that pretty little mouth.”

Oh Gods, I liked that idea. Wow, yeah, okay. I *was* kinky.

“Can I just ask one favour before you cut off my vision? Can you take those farmhand trousers off? And your shirt?” he said, adding, “Slowly. Leave your underwear on.”

I did as he asked, teasingly peeling my clothes from my body, and tossing them towards a chair, revealing my pink bra and knickers. Not a particularly sexy set, but at least they matched. I didn't know why I felt that was important.

“Thank you,” he said, his politeness catching me off guard for a second.

I climbed onto the bed, knelt either side of Godie's hips, and wound the silky black fabric around his wrists, knotting it at the metal bar at the top of his headboard. My breath was already laboured, my knickers damp. My breasts and stomach brushed against his face, and he bit back his groan through gritted teeth, making my abdomen clench. A new Pavlovian response.

“Catch you on the other side,” he said to me as I placed the soft satin of the scarf around his eyes.

Gods, who was I? Extremely, ridiculously, almost overwhelmingly horny. That's who. I shimmied down his body, pushed his jersey up over those defined stomach muscles, just high enough to see a slither of each pec. And I took a second, or twenty, to appreciate how physically perfect Goldie was. His body, his face, what I could see of it and what I remembered, was like a love letter to ancient mythological sculpture. Like each line of his physique had been painstakingly carved with determined purpose from the rarest, most valuable marble.

I found a vein that started at his hip and disappeared into his waistband and trailed a finger down it. His mouth parted, air rushed in.

And then I found myself leaning down and laying a kiss on the vein. Goldie's skin, hot and firm, twitched under my touch. He smelled of his citrus cologne and of him. Like salty, sun-warmed skin and laundry detergent. A scent that was becoming unnervingly familiar and reassuring. I had no time to interpret the meaning behind those feelings as I unbuttoned

his jeans and pulled down the fly. My hands were shaking, though not from nerves.

I didn't feel nervous.

Goldie lifted his ass off the mattress so that I could tug his jeans down to his ankles. And there was his erection. Massive. At least, bigger than any human I'd been with. Still trapped inside his boxers. I trailed the same finger up the length of his shaft, eliciting another groan from his lips, causing his hips to buck upwards. A fresh rush of heat pooled in my belly.

I used this time to run my fingers over his thighs, to learn they were as perfect as the rest of him. Solid with muscle, coated in blonde hairs, feverishly warm.

"Are you going to tell me what to do?" I asked, the words barely escaping over the pounding in my chest.

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't know. I think ..." But my voice trailed off as I hooked a finger into each side of Goldie's boxers and peeled them down his legs, taking in the full glory of ... him.

Mother have mercy, I said in my head, possibly out loud.

"If you're worried, baby girl, just make it wet," he said between staccato breaths. His hips rolled themselves on the bed as though searching out my mouth. "Can't go wrong if it's really fucking wet."

I nodded, not that he could see me nodding, and wrapped both hands around the base. Now crouching between his legs, I brought my lips to the head, over the head. Spreading saliva around it with my tongue. Goldie reacted as though I'd punched him in the chest, crying out, his back curving inwards.

I watched his reactions as I took more and more of him. Until my throat was waving its little white flag. His stomach muscles twitched and tensed. Sometimes his knees would jut upwards, and his thighs would graze my shoulders and arms. He pulled against his silk restraints.

I began sucking, moving my head up and down, my tongue memorising the shape of him. My hands gripping and stroking anything that didn't quite fit in my mouth. Using his teachings. Listening to his hitching breaths, watching his muscles spasm, his jaw clench, his Adam's apple quaver. Responding to his actions. Learning everything I could.

“Fuck, Holly Briar, how are you fucking doing this to me?” he screamed at the ceiling.

When I flicked my tongue around the lip of the head, he growled. To know I was the one drawing out those sounds was ... well, I guess the phrase power-trip would have been appropriate.

“Are you—Are you touching yourself?” Goldie gasped.

“Mmm,” I replied, realising at that moment, my fingers had slipped under the elastic of my knickers and were gently rubbing away the stinging desperation.

Another groan. “Fuck, Holly. I'm about to go off. Can I come in your mouth?”

“Mmm,” I said again, not breaking the rhythm because I'd finally done it, and really, it didn't even take me that long. Which was more disappointing than I'd thought it would be. I could have watched him for hours. Twitching, and helpless, and completely under my command.

And then Goldie was lifting his ass off the bed and emptying himself into the back of my throat. I stopped circling my clit to gaze at his face as his mouth opened to release his cry. His muscles contracted all at once, the ties cutting into his wrists as he strained against them. He went boneless under me. I let him go and swallowed, surprised it had all felt so natural.

“Did you come?” he asked.

“No, I was too busy watch—”

Before I had finished my sentence, Goldie slipped his hands out of their — apparently inadequate — bindings, pushed the blindfold off and slid down the bed, so that his head rested where his belly button had been moments ago. He

grabbed my thighs and pulled them both towards himself, and apart. The crotch of my knickers hit him square in the mouth, and I was shunted forward at such a force I had to grab onto the headboard to stop my face from crashing into it.

“Be a dear, and scootch your gusset aside,” he said, somewhat muffled.

“Like this?” I pulled the middle of my pants over to one side, trapping the fabric between his flawless cheek and the hollow beside my sex.

“This fucking pussy.” The vibrations from his lips set fireworks skittering across my clit before he took the little ball of nerve endings into his mouth and sucked hard.

I screamed. Actually screamed. And took the headboard again with both hands to steady myself. I writhed against his face, partly worrying about suffocating him, and partly trying to remember my own name, because, Gods, he was good at this. Of course he was, he’d probably done it a crillion times. Yet, I couldn’t help but think, feel, all this was just for me. Like there he was, worshiping me, as though he’d been waiting to do so since the dawning of time. Like he’d been training for this exact moment.

Goldie’s hands pinned my thighs open to the precise position, his thumbs digging deep into the soft inner flesh. Straddling a pain-pleasure line I never knew existed within me. Even if I wanted to move away from him, it physically would not have been possible to overpower Goldie. That thought alone sent a very confusing zap to meet his tongue, shoving me closer to climax. My sex clenched, begging me to fill it with some, any, part of him.

He ate me. Was devouring me. And I was wrecked. How had I never experienced anything this good before? This intense? I was breaking already. My thighs trembling uncontrollably. My arm covered in my own bite marks. My knuckles white on the metal rail.

“Goldie. Goldie.” His name ripped from my lungs. My body overcome. My orgasm tore through me, wracking every muscle and every nerve. His muffled groans barely reaching

my ears over the sheer white-out pleasure. I hung my head, opened my eyes and there he was, looking up at me. The possessiveness in those emerald eyes had me curling up in another wave of release.

A second orgasm more powerful than the first. Blurring the lines between the mortal and immortal realms. Nothing mattered but this blazing intensity, almost too violent to be pleasurable. And him. The pleasure master. And those dominating green eyes staring at me, screaming *mine*.

After the last aftershock waned, I crumpled to the bed, replicating the position I'd been locked into moments ago, as though the orgasm was so powerful it had seized all my joints. I felt Goldie extricating himself, coming up to lie beside my smoking carcass.

He kicked his trousers and pants off. "It really is a shame you insisted on a no kissing rule."

I pulled my eyes up to his.

"I need you to understand how fucking sweet you taste." Goldie dragged his tongue around his lips, licking off the last traces of me.

I let my head drop back to the bed, my belly already cramping with renewed want.

Chapter 21.

Goldie

It was Mal's turn to cook. Mal's Motley Meals had come around again, but the main man was conspicuously absent. Dima stepped in and ordered pizza for everyone. Two vegan 14 inchers for Taur, margherita for Sugar Paste, quattro formaggi for me, and super-spicy chicken for Holly. A surprising choice, yet it somehow suited her. She seemed full of these little titbits, just waiting to be discovered.

No, stop it you numpity. Stop discovering things about her.

“Mal said, ‘*tell Goldie and that tiny bespectacled human of his, I have a new client*,’” said Sugar Paste, her eyebrows somewhere around her hairline. She blew on her margherita.

“Bullshit!” I said. “No offence, Taur.”

Taur shrugged a shoulder in a *none taken* way.

“Since when has Mal had any new clients? He's lying. He hasn't taken anyone new on in decades.”

“What does he do?” Holly asked, pizza slice poised at her lips.

“He's an incubus,” said Sugar Paste.

Holly looked at me for clarification. I whispered into her ear, though I knew Taur and Dima would have no trouble hearing. “He does what I do to you, baby girl, but he gets paid for it. A shit-ton. I do it for free because you're so fucking cute.”

Suddenly, Taur became fascinated by a spot on the radiator. Holly squeaked, her face going flame red. She

wriggled in her seat. I sat back in mine, feeling smug. For about a second.

Mal might be right, you know? Dima said into my mind. I realised he'd trained his blood-red gaze on me and hadn't relented.

Oh, D. Not you too?

You just thought she was adorable.

No, I didn't.

You fucking did, mate. I can hear all your thoughts. Even if I weren't a mind reader, I'd know you are falling for her. Don't do it. Just don't. Not unless you're prepared to go through what Mal did. Don't you remember it at all?

Of course I do.

It was awful. Really, truly awful. To watch your friend go through that. And Mal was more than a friend. He was like a brother, or an uncle you actually like. He was only two decades older than me, but he took me in when I was a broken, hormonal mess. When I had nothing. And when Dima self-excommunicated from the other vampires, Mal opened his arms, and his home. It wasn't this exact apartment; we had moved several times over the years, but we always moved together. He was family.

D, I promise you I won't fall in love with her.

He raised a brow. *Prove me wrong. Say that out loud.*

I ignored him. *What do Taur and Sugar Paste think?* Perhaps if all my flatmates agreed, there was something I was missing.

Taur thinks she's nice enough. He likes that she doesn't try to make conversation with him. He's still very conscious of scaring the shit out of her, Dima said. *But, he wants you to be happy, and ...* He puffed out a breath of exasperation. The fucker doesn't even breathe. *He thinks you've not been as snappy recently, and you're not making dick jokes all the time, or trying to grope him—*

Hey, I haven't done that in ages—

He thinks you're a nicer person when you're around Holly.

What about Sugar Paste? I said, sidestepping the last comment. That one needed to be dissected alone.

Dima rolled his blood-red eyes. *She's in love with her already. She wants you to get married, and she thinks you'll produce the most adorable brood, all golden blonde curls, and dungarees. She wants to double date. To go on holiday together. Your kids to marry each other.* I didn't miss the look of longing that passed over his face as he gazed down into his glass of B positive.

"So, Holly," Sugar Paste began, blissfully interrupting our conversation. She looped a string of mozzarella around her tongue. "Are there any other fit guys at work?"

"Babe, I'm right here," Taur said.

"Well," said Holly, and I determinately kept my thoughts from drifting anywhere near, *she's cute*. "They're all fae, so they're all very attractive. And large. And often shirtless."

Don't be pleased she didn't say Seth's name. Don't think that out loud in your head.

"Got your eye on anyone in particular?" Sugar Paste continued, well aware of the buttons she was prodding.

Dima's eyes were boring into mine, waiting, yet I didn't feel his minty invasion. He wasn't forcing himself in, and I was grateful for the sliver of privacy.

Holly flicked her gaze to me, and back to Sugar Paste. "Um ... " She picked up a bottle of ketchup, almost knocking it down in the process, and squeezed it over her pizza. She used too much force. The lid pinged off. A crimson geyser shot from the hole, drenching her pizza, one of Taur's, and the front of his white shirt.

"Shit, that'll stain," Sugar Paste said, already standing up and pulling the garment over her mate's head, revealing Taur's tattooed, shredded-to-fuck torso. Instead of letting my

thirsty eyes travel over him, as I ordinarily would, I found myself watching Holly.

Evidently, it was too much for her. She turned her head to me, cupped her hand around her eye like a horse's blinker, and mouthed, "Oh my Gods."

I swiped an errant splatter of ketchup from her cheek with my thumb.

Taur is half naked and you can't take your eyes off the human.

I held my breath. Cleared my head. *Just because I'm no longer sexually preying on my flatmate anymore does not mean I am in love with the human*, I said, though still forcing myself to look away from her. It was true. I did once, for a few years, desperately want to bed Taur. But he was mated now. He had a wife. That's why I was no longer interested in him. It had nothing to do with Holly.

Just be careful. You know, if it was me, I'd already be building her a shrine.

I laughed out loud. Heads turned to me. Sugar Paste and Taur each raised an eyebrow in synchronicity, obviously realising I'd been chatting with Dima.

I know you would, D. You are so fucking precious, it hurts my heart. You'll find love one day. And not with a human. I promise. Listen, if I start to ... fall in love with her. Holly. If I think I might be ... Any tiny inclination. I will pack my bags and I will go back to the Kingdom of the Fae for a couple of decades to forget about her. Okay?

He said nothing, just stared at me, his tongue tracing circles around his left fang.

Okay?

Fine! he shouted into my mind, and then out loud, at jet-engine decibels, he said. "Can someone please put a shirt on Taur? He's upsetting the human."

"I'm fine," said Holly, springing forward to grab who knew what, but consequently tipping over her glass of lager,

which then set off a chain reaction of shit falling into other shit.

The peppermill toppled over, knocking into an empty bottle of Sugar Paste's wine, which rolled onto Holly's legs. She winced and let out an injured animal cry disproportionate to the impact.

"What's wrong?" I was at her side in an instant. Plucking the bottle from her lap and inspecting it for stray shards of protruding glass. I set it down on the table when I found none. It hadn't even cracked.

She has twin bruises on her thighs from last night when you clamped them open and ate her p—

Okay, buddy, let's get you out of her thoughts.



"Take those hideous waders off," I demanded as soon as we were back in my room.

Holly sighed. "Can't I at least let my food go down first? I think I ate way too much, and that super-spicy chicken was very super-spicy, indeed."

Gods, who says indeed like that?

"I don't mean to fuck." Though I still had plans to eat her out again tonight. "Show me your bruises."

"How did you know about my bruises?"

"Why are you even trying to hide them from me?"

Holly unclipped her dungarees — a downward then upward motion, I'd learnt — and let them drop to the floor. I knelt down in the pool of denim before her. In the centre of her thigh, on either side, was a silver-coin sized, purple bruise.

I did that to her. I hurt her.

I touched my finger to it lightly. She flinched.

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget how delicate humans are.” I looked up at Holly, big brown eyes staring back at me. She brushed a lock of hair behind my ear.

No. The moment was too intimate. Even though we were in my bedroom, and I planned to make her scream again later, it felt too cosy, too coupley.

“I mean, I forget how gods-damned flimsy your lot are.”

She trapped her smile behind her palm.

“Please don’t think what I’m about to do next means that I like you,” I said, placing one hand over each of her bruises.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Holly said.

We were silent for a few seconds while I worked. Nothing outwardly happened when I cast healing glamour. My hands didn’t glow, or my eyes, or sparks didn’t dance around the room. Apart from the changes happening within me, there was no way to tell any magic was being performed. Or at least, I didn’t think there was. I’d never successfully cast healing glamour before, but I’d been told humans found the lack of showiness a touch disappointing.

“Okay, all done,” I said after a few moments. I removed my hands, revealing smooth, bruise-free skin.

“What?” Holly said, bending down so quickly she nearly smacked our heads together. “How did you do that?”

“Glamour, obviously.” I pushed myself to my feet.

“You disappeared my bruises? Just like that?”

“No, not entirely.”

“Huh?”

I unbuttoned my jeans and dropped them to the rug. Holly fell to her knees in front of me to examine the exact bruises in the exact place hers had been. “I transferred them to me,” I said.

She poked one, and pain radiated up my leg.

“Ow, you ding bat! Why are you poking my bruises that were just on your legs? You know how painful they are.”

She had the gall to smile. “Why would you do that? Why take my pain? ... I don’t get it.”

I kicked away my jeans and sat on the edge of the bed. Holly sat next to me.

“Because I was the one that hurt you. And because I”—damn my stupid fae mouth—“don’t like seeing you in pain.”

“But now you’re hurting,” she said, in a way that suggested the feeling was mutual.

“I’m fae. I’ll heal quickly. You can literally watch me heal.”

Holly put her face level with the bruises. I could have butted her in the head with my dick.

“Okay, but it’s not that quick. I mean, it is if I do the injury to myself, but if I transfer it, it takes much longer. A couple of hours at least, I think, so I don’t know, maybe you wanna grab some popcorn? Actually, I’ve got a better idea. Whilst you’re down there ...”

She jabbed a finger into one of the bruises, hard. I deserved it.

I pulled my shirt over my head and propped myself up on the headboard. She sat next to me, half snuggling me, tucking her bare legs and socked feet alongside mine.

“Did you want to do any sexy stuff tonight? Or are your ouchies to ouchy?”

Ouchies, damn her.

“Maybe,” I said, reaching an arm out and dragging Holly to my chest. “Or maybe you could tell me a few more stories about you being a detestable human being.”

Chapter 22.

Goldie

Over the next few weeks, we settled into a routine. Weekdays were spent either sitting at my drawing board (if Holly was in training or being harangued by one of the other designers) or else on my office couch, batting about the same handful of ideas. Holly still banging on about the treasure hunt concept.

“I think it could be really sweet if both the characters are working separately to find the same thing,” she would say.

I hadn't changed the character stats yet. I'd have to deal with it soon, but we, I, was having too much fun inventing stupid scenarios for the game. Ideas for side quests that had us both clutching our ribs from laughter. I'd never wanted to inject silliness into my games before. But dammit if it wasn't the most enjoyable way to spend the day.

“Come on, a whole paddock of Rusties? That's ... Even the fae is going down there,” Holly told me, wiping away the tears.

When I'd used my glamour too much, Holly would lay me down on the couch with my head on her legs, her fingers in my hair, while she told me regrettable stories from her youth.

“I always wanted to wipe these memories clean from my mind. Forget I ever did these things. Never thought they'd come in useful. But here we are. Okay, so one time I was at my friend Craig's barn dance thing, I needed to pee so badly ...”

The stories did the opposite of their purpose, I realised. But typically, not until week four or five. Sure, they were often revolting. Sure, Holly once picked her nose and wiped it on the man in front of her in the queue at the post office, but they

weren't making me hate her. If anything, I started to think of Holly as a friend. And maybe the man from the post office deserved to have a bogey on his back.

I started going to Holly first for things, before August, before Sugar Paste, before Dima. When I had a new idea for the game, yeah, but also when something amusing happened and I just needed to tell someone. When I saw a baby cerberus in the park at lunchtime, and I knew she'd think it was cute. It was. When something went wrong, and I needed to vent. And okay, I liked it when Holly finger-combed my hair.

At some point, she started coming to me, too. "Goldie, I met the cerberus. His name is Igor. Igor!" "Goldie, do you think forty-five silvers for vintage dungarees is a good deal?" "Goldie, my sister's band is playing on the weekend. Do you want to come and see them with me? It's not, like, a date. But if you don't want to, that's cool."

And then, heaven help me, she started sending me memes. Specifically, tapir memes. And made me take selfies of us on my phone.

Holly was proving exceedingly popular at work. All the other designers keen to bounce their ideas off the only human around. Keen to get Holly's opinion. Even if they were reluctant to admit that hers was an expert opinion. So far Greyson had proven himself to be a total numpty. I was hoping by this point she'd be coming back from her 'meetings' with him full of barf-inducing minutiae. Instead, she would flop onto my couch and wipe her brow with her sleeve as though she had been working on a construction site all day.

"You've only been in his office twenty minutes. Is it really that bad?"

"Urgh," was Holly's reply.

So much for plan A.

Luckily, I had managed to keep Seth's sooty little mitts away from her by intercepting any and every opportunity for them to be alone together. I'd pop up in the break room or push my chair between theirs at team meetings. One time,

when Holly was supposed to be visiting Seth for a ‘meeting’, I glamoured a kitten into my office, and she found herself entirely unable to leave.

Seth was starting to get desperate. I could tell. I had a feeling if he didn’t get her attention soon, he would conveniently faint at her feet during her next trip to the water cooler. He knew I was blocking him. I could see it in his narrowed gaze, and that set in his jaw. I knew that set. Even if he didn’t.

“All fae do is talk in riddles,” Holly had said one Friday afternoon after a gruelling week of one on one ‘meetings’ before the main team briefing. “It’s exhausting.”

“It’s so they can fuck around with the truth.”

“You and August are the plainest speaking fae. Thank you. Does Seth speak in r—Never mind.”

“You still like Seth?”

She’d shrugged. It was a subtle, involuntary gesture, but I caught it, nonetheless. “He’s just ... so beautiful.”

“We’re fae,” I said. “We’re all beautiful.”

“Aw, you’re pretty too. In your own special way.” Holly pinched my cheek like a grandmother, and I rolled my eyes. Inside me, a weird battle of emotions ensued. Preening, because I was a vain bastard, amusement and ... jealousy.

I was only jealous because it was Seth. If it had been Lans or Greyson that she’d latched onto, it wouldn’t have bothered me nearly half as much.

The weekends, though.

The weekends were my favourite.

Saturdays were spent playing video games. Sometimes mine, sometimes Holly’s, sometimes retro platformers that Holly brought over with her, including her original consoles.

“I can’t believe you still have all these cartridges,” I told her.

“I might be a hoarder. I just don’t seem to be able to throw anything away.”

We played on *Magic Thief One*. I winced at the basic graphics.

“It’s beautiful. Just like I remembered,” Holly said, eyelashes wet with tears.

On Sundays we’d hang around with Sugar Paste and Taur, and occasionally Dima. Annoyingly, Holly and Sugar Paste had developed some sort of girl-bond, which was just as confusing and impenetrable to Taur as it was to me. Sunday evenings were Mal’s Motley Meals, and Mal had found a new excuse to be absent each week.

I missed him. Or at least, I would have missed him if I hadn’t been so preoccupied.

Because the weekend nights ...

I had stopped pretending I was ‘teaching’ her a long time ago. Though Holly still diligently assumed the student role. It was so fucking hot, so I went along with it. Really, there was pretty much nothing she couldn’t do. Sure, she was inexperienced, but my body always responded to hers. Reacted as though she were the master of it. She could point at me and tell me to come, and I probably would.

We still hadn’t kissed. We still hadn’t had penetrative sex. I was desperate to be inside her, but I would wait. As long as she needed me to.

And in the meantime, we did everything else. Multiple times.

One thing that had been niggling in the back of my mind, and whirring up my stomach like bad eggs, was the rapidly approaching deadline for the games expo. Three weeks, and I would need the game nearly complete, or at least have something presentable, and there were many, many things to iron out before then.

And three weeks would also mean the end of my deal with Holly.

Three weeks.

I didn't let myself think about it.

Chapter 23.

Holly

August slammed her papers down onto the conference table. “Three weeks, people. And you’re all sleeping on the job. Wake up! There’s tenure on the line here. Or do I need to up the ante?”

The designers shared resigned frowns with each other. Under the table, Goldie knocked his knee against mine. Seth, who sat between August and Greyson, kept shooting me little glances, causing my heartbeat to continuously spike.

“Perhaps the thought of a guaranteed position for life isn’t enough for you guys,” August continued. “Come on, lads, some of you have millennia left on this planet, you’re really going to throw an opportunity like this away? Give me the same old crap I’ve seen a hundred times before?”

Unbidden, I reached my hand across for Goldie’s, and found it right next to his thigh, palm up, almost waiting for me. Without looking at me, he twisted his ring and baby fingers into mine. Electricity shot straight up my arm, into my chest. I wanted to pull my hand away from the shock, but I also wanted to never let go.

“So, if tenure doesn’t get you moving, then perhaps we ought to bring in the collies.”

“Huh?” Seth said, echoing my thoughts.

“Those dogs that bite the heels of cattle to herd them. Anyone?”

Heads were shaking, brows furrowed.

“Right-oh, let’s just say anybody found not meeting the brief by the time the games expo rolls around will find

themselves nipped in the heels,” August said. “Fired. I’ll fire your sorry asses, okay?”

Quiet chaos broke out. People talked over one another. Demanded my attention. Mine, Holly’s. Asking me to play-test their games or listen to their, no doubt endless, riddles.

“Oh good, that got your attention,” August said, calling everyone to silence. “Just so we’re clear, best game wins tenure, anyone not meeting expectations will be sacked. That’s it. Meetings over. Have a good weekend, guys.” And with a brilliant final flourish, she winked at me.

Okay, I wanted to be August when I grew up.

Goldie leaned over, taking me by surprise, and buried his lips into my curls. “I’ll do it. I’ll make the game about love,” he whispered.

“You just don’t want to be fired,” I said, trying to excuse the manic skittering of my heart.

“Obviously.” His breath tickled my cheek, wrapping me up in that familiar scent of him, and for a moment, I forgot we were in a room with seven other fae.

“Holly, can I steal you for a second?” Seth’s sexy baritone rolled through me, splitting Goldie and me apart. He loomed over us. We both stood. “Accompany me to the water cooler, would you?” Seth held a bent arm out for me, like a duke from a steamy period drama escorting a lady into a dance.

I glanced at Goldie, looking for ... I didn’t know, reassurance maybe. He said nothing. That too familiar brow crease made its reappearance.

“Sure,” I said, wrapping my hand around Seth’s elbow, because I was pretty sure that’s what he was going for there. If not, I probably looked like a right idiot.

He led me out of the boardroom and down the corridor. When I shot a look over my shoulder, it was to find Goldie following us, scowling, as per. Goldie stopped in his tracks and pretended he’d been reading the *Health and Safety in the Workplace* poster on the wall. I fought a smile.

“Holly, it really is a crime that I have not been able to spend more than a few seconds in your company outside of these Friday meetings,” Seth said.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I nodded. Was he going to ask me to help him with his game? Finally? I swallowed the building nerves.

He stopped in front of the cooler and manoeuvred in front of me.

His eyes! How had I never noticed before? Or maybe I did, but I hadn’t properly paid attention. They were the most beautiful shade of green. At once entirely alien and overly familiar. My stomach bubbled with something new, and I couldn’t decide if it was a pleasant bubbling, or a slimy one.

“... that’d be good with you?”

I pulled myself back to the moment, realising Seth had spoken, and I hadn’t caught a word. “Can you repeat the whole thing? Sorry, I drifted off for a second.”

From down the corridor, Goldie snorted.

“I was wondering,” Seth said, straightening his suit jacket, “If you wanted to come out to dinner with me?”

“Prah?!”

His face remained impassive as he spoke. “If you like, I thought I would take you to The Wild Phoenix.”

I laughed. Or coughed. Or did both simultaneously. The Wild Phoenix?! The most exclusive restaurant in Remy? I heard they had an eighteen-month wait list for bookings.

“You can get a reservation there?”

“I can pull a few strings,” he said.

Distantly Goldie called out, “His mummy owns the restaurant.”

Seth shot daggers towards Goldie’s approximate whereabouts.

“I thought you were going to ask me to help with your game,” I said.

Hello Holly, have you lost your mind? Seth Calder, the Seth Calder, is asking you on a date — a date! — why are you questioning him?

He flicked his hand as though to rid us of a bothersome fly. “We can, of course, discuss the game on our date. So, you and me, tomorrow night?”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a weight drop in my stomach. “I have plans tomorrow night. My sister’s band is playing a gig, and I’ve said I’d go.”

“Sunday?”

I thought of Mal’s Motley Meals. Of Joey, and Taurin, and Dima, the weird but curious vampire. I’d only have two, three Sundays left with them before the end of the deal.

“Can we make it next Saturday?” I said, realising I was giving over a date with my dream boyfriend to hang out with friends.

Something flashed across those startling green eyes, but then he fixed his expression back into its half-smile. “Of course. I’ll meet you at the restaurant at eight next Saturday.” Seth found my hand, lifted it to his lips, and brushed them across my knuckles.

But ...

No tiny fissures of electricity. No butterfly-rave. My heart was still beating at a mile a minute, but that zapping sensation that nearly took my arm off in the meeting when Goldie curled his fingers around mine was notably absent.

“See you then,” I said, swallowing the uneasiness.

No, not uneasiness. Nerves. And excitement.

It had to be.



It seemed fitting that a band called the Bus Stop Willies would play a gig at a bar named Tallywhacker's. The Remy University student union bar, in fact. When Joey and Taurin found out where it was, they'd asked if they could come too. The vampire would stay at home, which was fine by me. I liked him, sure, but I always felt so on edge around him. Strangely exposed. The same feeling you got when you knew someone was watching you. Only every time I turned to check, he was otherwise engaged.

Abby was so excited her big sister was finally coming to one of her gigs. She saved us all a booth near the front of the stage.

"I'll have management put your names on the guest list," she'd said, with an air of *check me out*.

Instead of meeting at Goldie's like I usually did on a Saturday, I got ready with Abby and drove her and her equipment to the bar. We stopped before heading inside to pose for selfies beside the bar's What's On bulletin board. An A1 poster showed a photograph of an old lady sitting at a bus stop somewhere in the Human Realms. To the right of her head, on scratched and dirty plexiglass, lay a spray painted, rather meaty-looking, ejaculating penis. Complete with balls and six thick, curly pubes.

"Travis, the drummer, took that picture just outside of Pannor. Great, isn't it?" Abby said, making a peace sign at my phone as I snapped the photo.

"My sister is such a weirdo. I love her."

Inside, the bar had a dark, medieval feel. There were weapons hanging up on the walls. Though, a closer, poking inspection revealed them to be made of moulded, 'aged' plastic. Stained glass barriers stood between the booths, and the bar staff wore corsets above their half-aprons, giving them all infinitely better cleavage than me.

The band wouldn't let me help with the setup, so I got a lemonade with a stripy paper straw and took up position in the booth. I watched everyone lug heavy amps and other enormous black boxes onto the stage. All the while, the lead

singer, Galmin, identifiable because he stood a whole foot taller than the other members, had pointed ears, and had absconded from wearing a shirt, chatted on his phone and fixed his hair.

The bar began filling up, and several times I had to tell eager patrons the rest of my booth was occupied. That I was simply waiting for my friends to turn up.

My friends.

Those words sounded foreign and so welcome.

I wanted more people to try to claim the space, so I had more excuses to utter them.

I found myself watching the door, checking my phone, watching the door again. Eventually, it became impossible to see beyond the wall of people, in their vast array of species. Humans and fae, yes, but also orcs, goblins, dwarfs, werewolves, sirens, even merpeople, who had their own tank to the left of the stage.

“One two, one two, one two,” Galmin drawled into the mic while looking at his phone.

I heard the minotaur’s rumbling voice before I saw them. My shoulders dropped in relief as his thunder-crack laughter shook the entire bar. It felt like being back *there*. At Goldie’s apartment. My cheeks began aching. I couldn’t keep from smiling.

“Wow, Holly, what great seats,” said Joey, raising her voice as the noise in the bar grew. She and Taurin dropped onto the bench opposite me. She wore a beautiful red dress, strappy and low cut, her boobs envious and frankly, kind of distracting.

I glanced down at my evening outfit. Feeling, for the first time, embarrassed by my choice of clothing. I’d really worn dungarees to a gig. Sure, they were black, cotton, with little rainbow studs on the hips, and they were my only option when it came to evening attire, but they were still dungarees.

Holly, when will you grow up?

Even my sister, sixteen years old, looked more mature than I did. With her leather leggings, crocheted white crop top, messy blonde curtain bangs, and just-woke-up eyeliner.

Maybe I needed to go shopping.

“Where’s Goldie?” I said, thinking of the one person whose loathing for my favourite garment had taken on a near personification level.

Joey shared a smile with her husband. “Don’t panic, Hols. He’ll be here.”

She leaned over to Taurin and whispered something into his ear. He nodded, laughed, whispered something back. Her hand was on his chest, his arm over her shoulder. They both looked towards the stage. Shared a quiet kiss. She pulled a piece of fluff out of his hair. He tugged on the strap of her dress and whispered something else.

I watched them. From what felt like miles away. My heart stilled.

That.

That was what I wanted.

But ... with whom? With Seth?

At that moment, Goldie placed a tray bearing a disproportionately large number of drinks on the table. He fell to the bench next to me, immediately wrapped an arm around my neck and planted a kiss below my ear.

“You came,” I said, ignoring the wildfire spreading from my jaw down to my toes.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

Yes. Actually. Though I only realised it at that moment. He had no idea how utterly relieved I was to see him.

Him. Over everybody else.

He could never know that though. I could never tell him.

“What’s with all the drinks?” I shouted, trying to keep my thoughts on anything but Goldie. “I have to drive my sister back after this.”

“I’ll pay for her taxi,” he said. The noise in the bar had reached such tremendous volumes his mouth was practically connected to my ear. “I’m taking you home tonight.”

It was impossible not to melt a little at this.

He cupped my cheek with his palm and gazed at me for a few moments, his tongue lightly tracing the corner of his lips. He closed the gap again, burying his nose in my hair just above my ear. “You look beautiful.” And, as though he realised the statement was too un-Goldie, he added, “Fucking edible.”

“Even in my dungarees?”

I half expected him to make a *you won’t be in them for very long* joke, but he simply said, “Yes.”

Goldie stood, pulled me to my feet, and switched our places on the bench. He brought a leg up alongside the backrest of the seat and nestled me between his thighs, my back flush to his chest.

My mind was immediately wiped clean of every thought except, *Oh my Gods, oh my Gods, oh my Gods.*

I tried not to notice Joey and Taurin watching us.

On the stage, Galmin introduced the band. I heard none of it until he said my sister’s name. She pointed to me, waved, then gave me a thumbs-up.

Their music was a mix of classic grunge covers, and newer chart-toppers covered with a grungy flair. The energy in the bar was buzzing. A small mosh pit of sorts sprung up near the stage. Others were bopping their heads, shouting the lyrics, arms in the air.

Goldie’s fingers tapped out the beats on the table, while the fingers on his other hand slipped under my dungarees and my stretch tee, and absently thumbed little circles over my ribs. Occasionally I felt his breath against my

hair, or his tapping hand reach out for his pint. His chest rose and fell, his heart thumped away at my spine.

I wanted to look at him, needed to gaze into those emerald eyes, but I'd seized up. Every muscle resisted my urges. Something stopped me.

Fear, I realised. I was terrified. Of what, though? I had no idea.

When the Bus Stop Willies finished their set, Abby ran straight to me, streaming with sweat, a grin taking over her entire face.

I leapt up and pulled her into a hug. "Oh my Gods, Abby. You were brilliant."

"Thank you!" she yelled, kissing my cheek, slathering it in either perspiration or saliva, not sure which. "Introduce me to your friends already."

"Oh, right." I broke away. "This is Joey." Joey waved, making her boobs jiggle. "Taurin." He raised a brow and nodded. "And Goldie."

Goldie shot forward out of his seat and took Abby by the hand. I wasn't sure if he was going to shake it or kiss her knuckles, and I didn't think he knew either. He ended up just holding it there for a few seconds before releasing it.

"Great show, by the way," he said.

Abby beamed and looked at me. It was a look that said, *we need to gossip about this very attractive man you've brought with you to my show.*

Goldie took the hint. "Well, that's my cue to go take a p—go to the bathroom. Catch you on the flip side." He landed a soft punch on my bicep before heading off into the crowds.

"Hell, Hols, he's a total babe. Have you slept with him yet?" Abby asked the moment Goldie had turned his back.

"Slept, yes. Next to him, in his arms. Have we had sex? No, not yet. Done everything but."

"What are you waiting for? He's—"

“We’re gonna get some more drinks,” Taurin said, both he and Joey getting to their feet. He didn’t need to shout, his voice cut straight through the cacophony. “What’re you guys having?”

“Lemonade, please. For both of us,” I said, at the same time Abby said, “Beer.”

“Shandies then,” Taurin said with a shrug, and the pair disappeared before I could voice my protests about my sixteen-year-old sister drinking.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Abby said, watching the enormous retreating back of Taurin. “Is he a minotaur?”

“Yes. Goldie’s other flatmates are a vampire and an incubus.”

“What?! And what?! And don’t think you can change the subject.”

I sighed and flopped backwards against the leather of the bench. It still held some of Goldie’s body heat.

Sex. That subject again. I knew the answer this time. Knew why I couldn’t go that far with him. I wasn’t sure how I could articulate it out loud though. Especially to my sixteen-year-old sister.

“What’re you waiting for? You like him. He’s obviously in love with you—”

“Yeah, I like him—Wait!” I put my palm up, made a circular motion with my hand. “Backtrack.”

Abby watched me for a few seconds. It felt like minutes. “You don’t know he’s in love with you?”

I couldn’t move my head, couldn’t shake it, couldn’t even open my mouth to contradict.

“He literally didn’t take his eyes off you for the entire set.”

“I ... I ...” I didn’t have anything to say. My mind felt like it was in the baby basket of a shopping trolley being

pushed at the speed of light through a railway tunnel. “He hates me,” I eventually said, realising, as I said it, it was the most idiotic sounding thing ever.

Abby laughed. “Not from where I was standing, Hols.”

No. My sister had to be mistaken. Goldie was romantically dead. He didn’t fall in love full stop. Let alone with a human.

There is nothing I like more than watching you fall apart beneath me, he’d said.

At work, will you still be a jerk to me? I’d asked. *Of course.*

Please don’t think what I’m about to do next means that I like you.

Damn damn damn his infuriating fae mouth.

Great, and now he was making me swear.

“Hey, Abs?” said one of the guys from the band, appearing in front of our booth, interrupting my inner panic. I think it was Travis, the drummer. “Gal’s brother is having an after party at his place. You coming? We’re leaving now.”

Abby looked at me.

“Go,” I said. “Have fun, but don’t drink or do drugs.”

She smiled, wrapped her pinky around mine, and hugged me. Immediately, Travis had his arm over Abby’s shoulders and the pair were walking away, chatting and laughing like kids on a school trip.

On the other side of the booth, I caught a flash of shiny yellow hair. I straightened my back and raised my arm to wave, only to witness a succubus approaching Goldie. She wore pretty much nothing besides underwear and some sort of studded leather straps on her breasts. She placed a hand on his forearm. My heart dropped into my guts. Was I jealous?

“Hey sweetheart, fancy seeing you here,” she said, her voice carrying over the din. Either that or I’d zoned in on it.

I slumped further in my seat, hiding all but the top of my head from view.

“Oh, hi, Clara,” Goldie said.

No! He knew her?

“It’s Sophie. I was just wondering if you’d overcome your little problem since we last met, or if you are ... in need of assistance?”

The pounding of blood in my ears was so loud I had to strain to hear the rest.

“I’m here with someone,” he replied. And the pounding turned to angels singing. “But thanks.”

“The human in the dungarees?”

“Yes, the human. And before you ask for a three way, I’m not sharing her.”

“Pity,” she said, her fingers still infuriatingly walking along his chest. “Anything I can do to tempt you?”

“Sorry, Sophie,” Goldie said, forcibly removing her hand and dropping it back at her side. “She’s mine.”

If they said any words after this, I didn’t hear them.

She’s mine.

He literally didn’t take his eyes off you for the entire set.

He’s obviously in love with you.

She’s mine.

She’s mine.

“Hey,” Goldie said, dropping onto the bench next to me. “Did Taur and Sugar Paste go to get drinks or have they ‘gone to the bathroom’ together? What’s with your face? Why do you look so seri—”

I didn’t let him finish his question. I grabbed either side of his face and slammed his lips down onto mine.

Chapter 24.

Goldie

I didn't kiss her back. Not at first. My brain and body at secret war with each other. Everything screaming at me to put a stop to this madness right now or I'd regret it. Thoughts tumbling over one another like pebbles caught in a rising tide.

With every fibre of my being, I knew that kissing Holly was standing on that shore, thinking if I only submerged my feet, I'd be safe. But knowing full well how quickly the seas could change. Sooner or later, it would drag me out, or else I'd be slowly pummelled to death by tiny rocks, and maybe angry jellyfish.

I was also acutely aware that I'd been wanting to do this since I first saw her. No point in pretending anymore. It wasn't as though I could deny it out loud, so why try to deny it in my head?

I wanted to kiss Holly Briar.

Since the first day she walked into FaeGames, over five months ago. All bright eyes, and big round spectacles and purple swishes in her hair. After her induction, August turned to me and said, "Remember G, no playing hide the sausage," as she was wont to do.

I almost asked her then. I stopped myself, because how stupid would I have sounded? "What about kissing? Does that count?"

I didn't want to fuck Holly. I mean, I did, now. But back then, all I wanted was to tip her innocent face up to mine and plunder her mouth. Feel those perky lips on mine. Feel her fingers on my shoulders. Our bodies pressed together.

Me, Goldie. Two thousand plus notches on my bedpost, and I wanted to make out.

That should have been my first clue.

My brain put up a valiant fight. But eventually, down it went, white flag in hand, and my body responded automatically to hers. It pulled Holly onto my lap and sunk my fingers into her hair, and my tongue into her mouth.

She became pliant in my hands, moulding herself to me. Her arms around my head and neck, her breasts pressing into my collarbone. She moaned into my mouth, a sound borne of desperation and want and necessity, and kissed me as I had been wanting to kiss her for the past five months. Urgent, needy, hot, breathy, a little messy.

We had spent so long getting to know one another's bodies, it should have come as no shock that our mouths would also be totally in tune. I slipped my hands down to her waist. Where the fabric of her dungarees met the fabric of her little t-shirt, and buried my fingers in until they met with her flesh. I squeezed. Hard. Then glamourised the sting away. We groaned in synchronicity.

Holly placed her hands on either side of my head, her thumbs rubbing the points of my ears. I pulled apart, rested my forehead against hers. Kept one hand on her hip and the other I closed around the base of her throat, against her t-shirt collar.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What are you sorry for?" I whispered back.

"For breaking the no-kissing rule."

I kissed her again. On the mouth, the side of her mouth, her jaw. "I'm not. It was a cruel and merciless rule." I trailed the kisses back to her lips. "I've been wanting to do this for months."

But Holly had been right. Kissing *was* intimate. Maybe too intimate. It wasn't about grinding my cock into something, thrusting my hips, creating friction until I disappeared into my own bubble of blinding ecstasy. It wasn't about working towards something, the goal of climax. It wasn't about only me.

It was about the two of us simply living for the action. Enjoying each moment. And each other.

And she had been right to employ the rule in the first place. I realised this the second she bit down onto my bottom lip, and I felt the ocean sweep my feet out from beneath me.

“Holly,” I said, rather pointlessly.

“Goldie,” she replied. “Is this okay?”

“It’s more than okay. It’s fucking perfect. You’re perfect.”

She whimpered. I twisted my fingers into her curls.

“I could do this all night,” I said.

“Me too.”

“But ...”

“But?”

“We have an audience.” I leant to the left. Holly spun her head around at whiplash speed. Sugar Paste and Taur had returned, and were sitting opposite us, sipping drinks, and whispering to each other. They paused, and Sugar Paste waved.

“Don’t stop on our account,” she said, then immediately affected conversation with her mate, though peeking out the corner of her eye.

I turned back to Holly. “Do you want to come back to mine tonight? We can continue making out on my bed?”

She was already getting to her feet.

“Oh, are we leaving so soon?” Sugar Paste said, trying and failing to wipe the ridiculous smile from her face.



We walked the ten minutes back to my apartment. In reality, it took closer to forty-five. I kept pausing to push Holly

up against a shop window, a tram-stop, behind a dumpster, for another snogging sesh. Sugar Paste and Taur marched approximately a hundred feet ahead, huffing because we'd stopped, *again*, and neither of the idiots had brought their keys.

“Do you think you're ready for sex yet?” I asked, my tongue on her neck, her fingers digging into the hair at my navel. I'd sat her on the wall of the Central Eastside Bridge. The waters glittered beneath us, and the humid summer night had glued our clothing to our backs.

“Um,” she said.

That was a no in my books.

“I'll wait, baby girl.” I couldn't help myself from kissing her again. “Plus, there's something else I want to show you.”

“I hate to rush you guys,” Taur called out from somewhere ahead of us. “But Peaches is going to piss her pants if you don't hurry up.”

Back at the apartment, we didn't head straight to my bedroom. Well, I stopped off there, just to pick up my duvet, and then I took Holly up one more floor. To the roof garden of the Halcyon Sunrise building.

As far as roof gardens went, it was an underwhelming space. A few pots with some shrubby flowery things; a tiny, raised veg garden, which belonged to Treave in flat 11B though everybody helped themselves to; and a huge cannabis plant, which nobody took ownership of, and everybody still helped themselves to. In the centre were a few stolen pub benches, and pushed right up to the east ledge, were two sun-loungers. Slightly rusted springs and usually rain-logged cushions. But it had been dry for a few days. A chance worth taking.

So yes, a disappointing garden, but as far as green spaces in inner city Remy went, it was a tropical oasis.

I patted a lounge, testing it for dampness. Dry enough. I pushed them together and unfurled the duvet over them.

Holly walked up to the ledge. Eyes wide and glittering with the cityscape. Her mouth opened. I think she made to say “wow”, but no sound came out as she drank in everything from left to right. Everything East of our apartment was visible from up there. The docks, the piers, the ocean. Even the lighthouse out on Kelpie Island.

“Goldie!” She said it like she was telling me off. “I’ve been coming to yours every weekend for five weeks and this is the first time you’ve brought me up here?”

“I’m sorry.” I pulled back the duvet and patted the probably dry enough cushion. She sat down, kicked off her boots, and pushed her legs under. “I thought if I brought you up here, it might make you like me.”

She was quiet for a few moments, staring at me. For some reason, I couldn’t meet her eyes, so I gazed out into the sprawling, twinkling city.

“You don’t mind if I like you now?”

“No. I do mind. I need you to not like me. I’m a prick, Holly. You should know that already.”

“You’re not a ... prick.” Under the cover, she grabbed my hand in hers.

“Yuh-huh. Am too. Wouldn’t be able to say it if it wasn’t the truth.”

Holly laughed, and my heart tripped over itself. If I were a video game character, I would have just lost a life. I had two left before Game Over.

“I can see my new apartment.”

“I know. That’s why I brought you up here.”

She nestled her head against my arm.

“What’s it like, your new apartment?” I asked.

Holly looked up and assessed me again. Those warm brown eyes trained onto mine, and the night’s temperature rose to uncomfortable levels. I kicked my legs out from under the duvet and let go of her hand.

“First, you don’t mind if I like you. Now you want to get to know me. What’s changed?”

My fingers found a hole in the cushion and dug their way inside. Still a little damp in there.

“Goldie!” The word another reprimand.

“You have a date with Seth on Saturday.” Holly had the decency to look embarrassed, glancing down in her lap, and even in the dim light of the moons I could see her blush. I wanted to kiss those pink spots. “I guess that means our deal will be over in a week, seeing as you won’t need my help anymore, and I’m pretty sure Seth won’t be happy to share you.”

She said nothing. Silent for the longest time. We both cast our eyes out over the city, watching the ferris wheel on the pier go round and round.

Eventually, I broke the silence. “I’m not ready for our deal to be over.” I whispered it. It felt like something I shouldn’t admit to.

Holly pulled her lip into her mouth and continued staring at the waterfront. “Me neither,” she said, after the better part of a minute. “I’ll still help you with your game, though? We still have a week.”

I said nothing.

“You know, when I was sixteen, I went to the Bordalis InterRealm Games Convention and you were there. You signed my poster, *To Human, stop stealing my magic, Goldie*. I think you broke my heart that day. I cried for weeks.”

I remembered it. I remembered her. This little dungaree wearing goofball.

Why was I the way I was?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m an awful person.”

“Was,” she whispered, reaching for my hand again. She cleared her throat, and spoke in a normal volume, “So, one week left of our deal, yeah?”

I brushed the hair from Holly's face. I wanted to say, *I want longer*. What I actually said was, "Can I kiss you now?"

"We've been kissing all evening."

"And I'm going to kiss you until the sun comes up."

Chapter 25.

Goldie

“Wakey, wakey.” Holly shook me. “Goldie, look.” Her voice sounded like syrupy tea.

I snapped my eyes open, remembered where I was, realised my shoulder was wet.

“Oh, no, I’m drooling!”

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?” she said. “I can’t decide which is better, seeing you, a perfect fae, being perfect all over your own t-shirt,”—I laughed, and wiped my face—“or this ...”

She moved off from me to reveal the view, coming to rest at my armpit, her head dangerously close to the puddle of dribble.

And what a view. Orange everything. Orange sky, orange skyscrapers, orange ocean. Everything glowing, looking, if at all possible, peacefully aflame. The city birds warbled their cacophonous dawn songs from gutters, and ledges, and roof gardens, and every other little hidey-hole. After almost seven hundred years, I should be used to seeing the sunrise, but it still stole the air from my lungs.

We watched in silence. The duvet pulled up around her neck and my chest. The summer morning chill and damp. The kind of weather Mal would say, *It’ll burn off in a few hours*. And it would. It’d be boiling later, but in that moment, she had snuggled her soft human body into my unyielding one, her cold little fingers tucked into the waistband of my jeans.

“Are you purring?” I asked.

She lifted her head to me and smiled, a sleepy, stoner kind of smile. “I could do this every morning with you.”

My heart flipped over in my chest. If Holly would have been fae, she'd have heard it.

“Next time I'll bring a thermos of coffee, so it's waiting for us when we wake up,” I said.

“Next time?”

An idea blossomed. Probably the stupidest idea in the history of stupid ideas. Attempting to jump from the lounge into the harbour would have no doubt been smarter. My body waged another attack against my brain. But my brain and my body had never been the best of friends. More like frenemies. Outwardly appearing to get along, but consistently trying to undermine one another, in increasingly disastrous ways.

“How about I file a couple of Work From Home forms for us for the week? You stay here? We work on the game? I'll cook for you every night? We'll take my duvet to the roof and watch the sunrise? There are six more. Sunrises, that is, before I ... your date with Seth.”

I screwed up my face, and braced for the *don't be stupid, I still hate you*. Or worse, but no less true, *that will just make saying goodbye at the end of this deal even harder*.

“Goldie,” Holly whispered, her hand coming up to caress my cheek. Her eyes flashed across my face, flicking over my lips, then boring into my soul. “I would like that.”

Great, she was as stupid as I was.

I clamped my teeth together so she couldn't read the emotion on my face. I nodded, once, stiffly, and she curled back into my armpit.

“Are you expecting sex?” Holly said it like she was worried I'd say yes, and she'd feel obligated to go along with it. It made me nauseated.

“I never expect it. Just because we do ... stuff, doesn't mean I expect anything. Or that you owe me anything. And I'll stop asking you if you're ready. You let me know when—if you're ready. And if that's never, that's fine by me. You're in control, baby girl. You've always been in control.”

And if it was never, I hoped Seth realised how fucking lucky he was.

Holly sighed, obviously a weight lifted from her. It twisted my stomach even more.

“Okay, I’ll stay this week,” she said. “For the sake of the game.”

“Sure. The game.”

She shifted on the lounge a little. “Can you bring a toilet up here next time?” she asked, laughing.

“Best I can do is a bucket.”

“Ew.”

If I only had a week left of being able to touch Holly, a week before she became someone else’s ‘problem’ — *Gods, did I really use those words?* — then I was going to make the absolute most of it. I rolled her onto her back, covering her body with mine, tilted her chin up to me, and brought my lips down on top of hers.

She didn’t hesitate before returning my kiss.



“What about compassion?” Holly said, the vibrations travelling right through my neck and back.

We laid on the sofa in the living room. Her head on one armrest, my head nestled on her stomach between her thighs, my feet hanging off the other armrest. If we were upright, it would have looked as though I was carrying her on my shoulders. We had a controller each, and were for once, playing as ourselves.

“It’s practically the same thing as empathy,” I said, knowing that when I spoke, the timbre of my voice would be concentrated on her lower abdomen and pussy. I made sure to put extra resonance into my vowels.

We had been working on the game. Attempting to come up with a way to make Holly's character a little less shit. So far, for human stats, we had HP, empathy, and industry, we needed one more.

Holly thought for a second. "Yeah, I suppose."

I had agreed to make the theme of the game Love, but other than adding it as an attribute, I was at a loss. No biggy. We still had a few weeks yet, even if I wasn't allowed to spend all of them with my hands down Holly's dungarees.

After another epic snogging session on the rooftop, we retreated to the apartment. We were both hungry, and desperate for a coffee. I fed her bagels with cream cheese and fruit for breakfast. We had a shower together. I showed her the various super-jet streams the state-of-the-art shower head could perform. And she showed me how she could deftly stroke me to completion in approximately eighteen seconds flat.

"What about curiosity?" she said.

"That's ... not bad, actually."

Holly preened. I couldn't see her, of course, but I knew she was preening, could feel it. I was just about to roll over and press my face between her legs when Mal stormed into the room.

"Mate, a word," he said, marching straight past us into the kitchen.

"I'd rather not!" I called after him.

"My house, my rules. I need to speak with you."

I shared a look with Holly before pushing myself to my feet and following Mal. I felt like the kid that got caught stealing his brother's bike and was now readying himself for the severe telling off.

Mal shut the kitchen door behind us. I took a seat at the table, deciding I didn't have the strength to stand whilst being yelled at. His hands went to his hair. He began pacing. His wings twitched at his sides. Was he nervous?

Mal blew out a breath. Okay, definitely nervous.

“This thing you’re doing with Holly is stupid. You’re being stupid—”

“I know,” I said.

He paused, frowned at me, shook his head. “No, let me finish. I have things I need to say.”

I held out a hand in a *go on* gesture.

“You’re ... You mean too much to me, Goldie. I’m losing my fucking mind out here. Knowing you are willingly marching towards eternal despair. You ... Fuck man. The only thing this can possibly lead to is guaranteed heartbreak. A ripped into tiny shards, stomped to a bloody, pulverised mess kind of heartbreak. I can’t let you do this. I ...”

Mal’s wings flexed behind him. “I’ve known you longer than anyone. You’re my oldest friend. We’re brothers. I can’t ... you’re ... no. Just no. I can’t do it. I cannot watch you grieve like I did.”

“That won’t hap—”

“You’re not as strong as me!” Mal yelled. “You won’t survive it.”

“Cheers for that,” I said, my voice calm, though my insides were a dinghy battling through a storm. He was right. I wasn’t as strong as him, and I wouldn’t survive it. I already knew that much. I pushed ahead. “But you’re getting way ahead of yourself. Our ‘deal’ ends next Saturday. She has a date with the guy she’s been crushing on since she started at FaeGames. So, you don’t have to worry about my poor little heart. This,” I gestured a hand towards the hallway, to Holly waiting for me in the living room, “Is all temporary. It will end soon. And we can, all of us, move on.”

Mal’s charcoal eyes landed on mine. He sat in the chair opposite me, his chest heaved up and down. He said nothing for a good two minutes. It felt like eighty. “And you’re okay with that? With it ending just like that?”

No, no, I wasn’t. “What other choice do I have?”

He pursed his lips. "It's for the best."

I didn't respond, didn't have anything to say.

"So, what, you've only got a week left of this deal? And you're going to spend that with her?" He chewed the inside of his cheek as though spending another week with Holly would be the stupidest decision to have ever been made. He wouldn't be wrong.

I nodded. It may have been a terrible idea, but I wouldn't miss a second with her.

Mal assessed me for a few beats, nodded once, probably to himself, and pushed to his feet. "I'll see you in a week then. I can't hang around and witness this. It's like watching someone about to jump from the ledge of a skyscraper." And with that he left.

"Fuck," I said under my breath.

I had made a huge mistake.

Chapter 26.

Holly

Onions, garlic, spices, chicken sizzling on the griddle, the radio playing bassy clubbing tunes, the soft whir of the extractor fan. The smells filled my mouth with saliva and the everyday domesticity filled the rest of me with a homely, cosy belonging.

Goldie's apartment had begun to feel more welcoming than Mum and Phil's flat. There, I was always in someone's way, or holed up in my postage-stamp room, confined to the three-foot-by-six-foot bottom bunk. Watching videos on my phone with headphones on, trying not to creek the bed too much, or need the bathroom when someone else did.

Here, though there were technically more people, I never felt like I was tripping over someone just to make a cup of tea. I could pee whenever I wanted, and every room was huge. There was enough space to swing a tapir, but it still felt like a home.

I would really miss this place after next week.

Having declared myself officially useless at any form of cooking, I relegated myself to chopping duty. Not complaining, since I could sit at the kitchen table and casually ogle the highly attractive chef currently preparing a feast for a family of four. Five if you included Dima.

Goldie wore nothing but grey sweatpants. He stood at the oven. His bare feet tapped the white tiles along with the music. The muscles in his back flexed as he tended to two separate dishes at the same time.

Hot potato cakes! Those were some fantastic trapezius and latissimus muscles he possessed. So defined. And those deltoids. And triceps. I think my mouth was hanging open.

I should point out, I did not know the names of all the muscles before I started fooling around with a fae. But simply gawking at them felt criminal. As though I wasn't appreciating them enough. They needed to be acknowledged, revered. Captured in oil paint or carved into marble, or painstakingly mosaiced onto a chapel floor. And don't get me started on the way the marl fabric of his joggers hung just so over his glutes. I tried not to drool on the salad.

The view was even sexier from the front, but Goldie rarely indulged me with that while he was busy cheffing.

Was I ready for sex? Yes. And no. I wanted it, really wanted it. I'd done everything else with him except feel him inside me, and the need to have him inside me was almost anthropomorphic. It had taken over, developed its own personality, consumed my every waking thought, and all the sleeping ones I could recall the next day. It called out to me. Whispered my name. Played its own private movies on loop inside my mind.

I had loved our five weeks together. Was now a woman that knew the true meaning of multiple-orgasms. Not simply one orgasm and then another, but sliding straight from one spine-melting, sheet-ripping white-out into a second, and a third. An onslaught if you will. No respite. No time to catch your breath, or order your thoughts, or control your screaming. Turned out, I did scream.

He did that. The man had talent. I had to give it to him.

And Goldie had taught me all manner of new stuff, just like he'd bargained. I'd had my muffin buttered. I didn't even know that was a thing until he asked for it. I thought he was going to make me breakfast. Imagine my surprise. I'd put my finger inside his bumhole! He didn't last long when I did that. Told me it was a universal, interspecies thing, and that he was up for pegging if I worked on my stamina. I hadn't yet developed the nerve to look that one up on my computer.

But sex. Full penetrative sex. Something about it was too ... final. Like if we had sex, I'd never want the deal to end.

Like maybe, if we had sex, I wouldn't be able to give him up.

It had to end at some point. The longer we stretched it, the worse it would feel when we finally ended it.

Over the past five weeks, I had gone from loathe to ... like.

Nothing more than like, though.

Definitely nothing more.

A month ago, Goldie had been horrible, miserable, swore at me, threw my cardigan across the room. Then ... glamoured a picture of me. Two pictures. I found a second one balled up in his wastepaper bin when I snuck back in to swipe it. I kept both, smoothed them out, put them between the pages of my Faecyclopaedia to press them flat.

He gave me his *Groovy Graham and Pals* watch. Handed it over just like that. Pretended the gift meant nothing to him, but I watched him chewing on his cuticles, then relenting into a relieved smile when he gave it to me. I may have cried. It was a beautiful watch and there were just so many new emotions swilling around inside me.

Okay, yeah, Goldie was inconsistent. But it didn't mean he wanted anything beyond our current arrangement. Especially if his flatmate's experiences were anything to go by.

I was human. I would die. Eighty years was nothing to a fae. That was the crux of it. I finally understood.

Even if we remained as good friends, he'd still one day have to deal with the death of a friend. Joey was human, and Taurin's life expectancy was the same as a human's. One day, Goldie would have to go through the pain of losing them. He loved them so much.

Earlier we had gone to Goldie's favourite supermarket, AlaeMart. A megamart at the corner of his street. So different to anything we had in the human-dominant Westside. Aisles upon aisles of foods that I not only didn't recognise but

couldn't even read the packet text to garner any clue about its contents.

"Stroubs," Goldie had said, scooping a handful of small, orb-like, green vegetables into a bag and flinging them into the trolley. "They only grow in East Winterlands. Taur's favourite." He shuddered. "They're an acquired taste. Very bitter. You'd hate them."

You'd hate them. I tossed these words around in my mind. *You'd hate them.* Like he already knew me. Knew my preferences for things. Like he'd paid attention to me. It made my tummy feel squirmy and soupy.

"We need wine," he'd said, apparently not realising the sloshiness of my insides. He checked his list and pointed me in the general direction of the wines. When he observed my horrified face, he added, "Get the pink fae wine. Sugar Paste loves that one. You might like it too. So, yeah, get two bottles."

I wanted to ask him how to tell the difference between fae and elf wine, but I was too busy feeling all giddy and gooey inside. Goldie's adoration for his friends. His noticing of things I liked or didn't like. Just him.

Swooning. I was swooning, I realised. Great.

"There's no B positive in the blood fridge. What should I get for Dima?" I'd asked.

"Anything with the plus sign is fine. A or O positive. If you get him negative blood, he'll be a moody bastard all evening," Goldie said with a straight face.

And that was how I ended up snogging a fae in a supermarket.

He loved his friends.

I got it now. Why he wanted to push me away. Why he didn't want to get to know me. Why he didn't want to like me.

It wasn't fair of me to have ever expected a relationship with any fae. Goldie was right. I'd been so selfish and stupid. I should call this whole deal off and cancel my date

with Seth. Find a human man. One that could cook, and create beautiful art, and takes me up to the roof to watch the sunrise, and gives me multiple, internal-organ-erupting orgasms.

“Hey, chopper-girl, you’re up,” Goldie said, pulling me out of my musings. He held out a couple of plump tomatoes and gave me a wondrous flash of his delectable obliques. “Dice these, will you?”

The obliques were probably my favourite of all his muscles—

“Human!” he said, pushing the fat, red fruit into my palm. I shook my head, refocused, accepted the tomatoes. He turned back to the hob, and I began slicing.

I should end it. It was the sensible, responsible thing to do.

But ...

I mean, it was ending anyway. In under a week. It was ending because of my date with Seth. I couldn’t cancel the date now. I needed a proper reason to tear myself away from Goldie.

Because, I realised, I would be tearing myself away.

Months.

He’d said months, not weeks.

When we kissed. He’d said, *I’ve been wanting to do this for months.*

What did that mean—

I saw the blood before I felt the slice of the knife.

“Oh,” I said pathetically, as my hand erupted in red. Goldie spun to look at me, his eyes wide. He was beside me in an instant. Blood gushed from my finger onto the chopping board, into my lap, splashing against his sexy sweatpants. Even the severity of the situation didn’t stop me from noticing the little bounce to his junk as he ran over.

I didn’t get the chance to inspect my wound before he wrapped his hand around mine, closed his eyes, and I watched

in real time a split open on the finger of his other hand.

“Fuck, that stings,” he said, releasing me, and sucking on his wound.

I stared down at my finger. No sign of any damage. Not even a raw patch where it had been. Only smeared, magically congealed blood. Goldie’s hand started to bleed as mine had done. I stood and grabbed a kitchen towel to stem the flow.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I’ll be fine.” With his good hand, he pulled me back down into my chair. He opened the towel a little and peered inside. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. What were you thinking about?”

“Huh?” I replied. Did the radio switch itself off? All I could hear was a loud buzzing. “Uh, I was, uh ... Okay, I was looking at your sexy back muscles.” Sort of the truth.

But I could never tell him the full truth.

Goldie didn’t deserve that.

He quirked a brow. I knew he didn’t believe me, I just knew it, but he said, “Thirsty girl.” He hooked a finger from his undamaged hand under my chin and tilted my face until my lips met his.

“Why did you do that?” I said, when he broke away. “Not kiss me. I mean, why did you take my injury this time?”

He didn’t hesitate with his answer. “When we’re together, you do not experience pain. Only pleasure. Okay?” He lowered his voice, “Unless you want me to spank you again?”

I laughed. I did rather enjoy being spanked. Surprised myself there.

“Hey, it’s pretty cool you can share your magic like that,” I said.

Goldie froze.

Panic flooded my system. What had I said wrong?

His mouth silently formed the words, "Share my magic." He stood abruptly. The bloody paper towel tumbled to the ground. "Share my magic," Goldie said, this time aloud. "Oh my Gods, Holly, you're a genius." And he ran out of the kitchen.

I followed him, but the sensible grown up in my head had to turn the heat off the hob first.

I found him pacing the living room. The television screen switched on, rapidly flicking through images of his game. My brain barely recognised them, struggled to keep up with them. I saw a lake, a cave, Rusty, Goldie's character, a sunrise, a frigate, a rocky pathway, a clifftop, a copse of trees, a sheep, me, roof tiles, a fish. Every time it registered a new image, it would skip the next four or five, as if constantly playing catch up.

So, this is what it looked like when he built a game using his glamour. It was impressive. And mind boggling.

"What," Goldie said, unnaturally loud, "if they can share their magic? Their abilities, I mean." Tiny little droplets of blood fell to the rug. "What if you have to play as both characters? One at a time? Or two player mode? And the further you get into the game, the more sharing abilities you unlock?"

On the screen, the picture flashed dizzyingly fast between digital Goldie and digital me. Until we became one homogeneous blur of gold and purple hair, muscles and dungarees, feminine and masculine.

"What if to complete the goals, find the treasure, or whatever, they need to borrow, use, wield each other's abilities? For the human to survive, they'll need to learn the fae's magic. And for the fae to survive ..."

Goldie stopped pacing and rubbed a hand down his face. "Shit, you were right," he said, in barely a whisper. "The fae will need to learn love." He let his hand drop to his side, his other still slowly leaking at his feet. His gaze shot to the ceiling, where it stayed for a good few minutes. He rubbed his lips together and shook his head but did not speak.

“Goldie,” I said, with trepidation.

It was risky, the suggestion I was about to make. Given what he had said to me in the beginning. Given how reluctant he had been to make the game about love. How the two main characters were now irrevocably us. How in six days’ time we would have to put a stop to this thing and part ways.

He dragged his eyes to mine.

Perfect. I realised, in that moment, they were perfect eyes. Warm, comforting, desirable, familiar.

Mine.

Not mine, though.

Behind him, the screen stopped flashing.

I continued with my idea. My voice quiet. My heartbeat thunderous. “What if they *are* trying to find treasure? But what if, all along, they are trying to find ... each other?”

I had less than a second to process the emotion in those perfect eyes — sorrow, regret, want, I wasn’t sure — before he hooked his good hand around my neck, and pressed his forehead to my temple.

“The treasure is love,” Goldie whispered. “The fucking treasure is love. Fuck you Holly Briar, you fucking genius.”

And he kissed me, in a thousand ways I’d never been kissed before.

Chapter 27.

Goldie

The rest of our week together passed in a blur of sore lips, great food, and sunrises. We worked on the game; we snogged. We hung out with my flatmates; we snogged. We cooked, Holly strictly on supervisory roles only; we snogged. We gave each other lazy hand jobs on the loungers in the roof garden, watching the sun both rise and set.

Five weeks ago, I detested her. Couldn't stand to even look at her. Now, being with her felt normal. Like hanging out with Dima, or Taur. Only she tripped up the rhythm of my heartbeat, and I got to see her naked, and we ... cuddled.

I had started to forget what the rest of the designers at work looked like. Except for Seth, of course. And how could I forget Holly's impending date with the odious prick?

It was a good thing. The end of this deal was a good thing. We needed distance. I needed to extract myself from her. Unpick the threads of us that had become woven together.

She still hadn't said she was ready for sex, so we continued to do everything but. I had to repeat to myself that not having sex was also a smart move.

I would say no. If she told me she was ready now. I had to say no.

"You'd be a fool to fuck her," I said aloud to the bathroom mirror every time I went in for a piss. "It's a stupid fucking idea. Don't do it."

Because I knew, with unwavering certainty, that not having sex with her was the only thing keeping me somewhat balanced atop that knife edge.

And if we fucked, I would slip.

My last remaining life.

I already lost the second with the whole *the treasure is love* thing.

If I lost another ...

On Saturday morning, Holly began packing her bag. It was amazing how much of her stuff had spread over the apartment. Her toothbrush and special curly hair shampoo and conditioner in the bathroom. Her old games consoles and cartridges in the living room. Her favourite brand of cereal in the kitchen. An entire suitcase of dungarees in my bedroom. I would miss her oversized, fluffy, tapir keychain hung up next to mine in the hall; her spectacle lens cleaning stuff on my nightstand; her adorable way of cursing without swearing.

I would miss fixing her aches and bruises, and cooking for her, her fingers in my hair as we lay on the sofa, the gurgling sounds her stomach would make beneath my head. The way her eyelashes brushed the inside of her lenses. The way her waist felt in my hands. The way she called out my name as she broke underneath my fingertips.

Damn it, I was going to miss those fucking dungarees.

Holly hadn't kissed me that morning, and I could barely bring myself to look at her.

I stood across from her in the hallway, neither of us making eye contact.

"Well, I guess this is it," she said to her feet. "Uh, thank you. For, you know."

"Sure," I said. "See you at work then, I suppose."

"I suppose you will."

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you home?"

Holly paused. "My taxi's already here. Well, goodbye, Goldie." She pushed herself up onto tiptoes and planted a chaste kiss on my cheek.

I caught her face, my hand having almost fully healed. I wasn't letting this grandparent-style peck be our parting kiss,

and I kissed her like it was the last time I ever would. Because, shit, it was.

“Goodbye, Holly Briar,” I said, pulling away eventually. She smiled with her mouth only.

Human. Baby girl.

She stared into my eyes for a few seconds, or perhaps an hour. “See you Monday,” she said, hoisting her bag onto her shoulder and opening the door.

I caught Holly’s arm, and she spun round to me, her face lighting up with ... hope maybe?

Don’t go. That’s what I wanted to say. I wanted to kick the door closed, fling Holly over my shoulder like a caveman, and carry her up to my bedroom. Stay here, stay with me. We’ll figure something out. You’re worth the heartbreak.

What I actually said was, “Good luck tonight. On ... your date”

Holly nodded, her lips caught between her teeth, and she turned and walked down the corridor towards the elevators. She paused, looked over her shoulder at me, and stepped into the lift.

I slammed the door behind her. I needed a drink. Something strong. Strong enough to wipe the last five weeks from my memory. Sugar Paste stood at the bottom of the stairs, as though waiting for me.

“What’s going on?” she said, stepping into my path. “Where’s Holly?”

I ignored her and pushed past her into the kitchen. Opening, and slamming shut all the cupboard doors, looking for liquor. Nothing. Not even any beer or wine. No weed left in my tin, either.

“Goldie, talk to me,” she said, following me around.

“She’s gone,” was all I managed, before pulling on my trainers and barrelling out the door.

I pounded the city for hours, doing everything in my possession not to think about Holly, and at the same time, trying to excuse every interaction we ever had.

It was for a reason. All the things we did. All the moments spent together. Holly needed to improve her confidence (her techniques were never the issue), and I wanted her help with the game. Help which, although I was reluctant to accept, I was glad I did.

It was a good game, with a good concept, and we had worked so hard on it together. It was pretty much completed, save for a few teeny tiny niggly bits that I could work out on my own, in my office, alone. I had to make sure that after today there wouldn't be any cause for us to spend any more time together at work.

But ultimately, we had to end it at some point. I knew this moment was coming. I just didn't expect to feel so ... shit.

Mal lost Nova after decades of loving her. If it felt like this to say goodbye to someone after a few weeks, I couldn't even imagine the torment he went through. No wonder he was so keen for me to stay away.

I should have fucking listened to him.

It wasn't until my third lap of Downtown Remy that I realised I didn't need booze or drugs to help me through. What I needed was to fuck. I needed my dick in something hot and wet, and my hands full of someone else's flesh, someone else's hair wrapped around my wrists. Someone who looked nothing like Holly.

I needed the old Goldie back. The one who took women and men home without even bothering to learn their names. Let alone what kind of fucking cereal they liked best.

As if the universe had listened to my demands, I rounded the corner and there she was. Standing at the junction of South Street and Bordalis Road, chatting on her phone, glancing down at her hot pink talons. Wearing that handkerchief of a skirt and those flimsy straps over her nipples.

Cara? Clara? No, wait, Sophie.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she said to me, her eyes lighting up as I approached, her tongue dipping out to wet her lips. She spoke into her phone, “Babes, I’m gonna have to call you back. My ride for the evening has just turned up.”

Chapter 28.

Holly

The taxi took me back to the Tallywhacker's carpark where I'd left my car all week, and from there, I drove home. I didn't even know how. I felt numb. Like an NPC. Programmed to do only the most basic movements. There were things happening out there, others still playing the game, but all I could do was pulsate in circles and repeat the same simple sentences. My arms pointlessly held aloft, my mouth not moving.

"I feel sick," I said, standing in front of the mirror in my shared bedroom wearing only a towel and a pair of flesh-coloured, VPL-less knickers.

"It's because you're nervous," Abby said. She held up two dresses. A black silky thing with spaghetti straps and a cutout under the bra area, and a yellow long-sleeved number, high-necked with an even higher skirt. "What about either of these?"

"You'll be able to see my pants in the yellow one."

She gave me a look that said, *yeah, that's kinda the point.*

"Okay, the black one then," I said.

"Have you shaved your legs?" she asked, hanging the yellow dress back inside our closet.

"Goldie doesn't care if I shave my legs."

"Yes, but you're not going on a date with Goldie." Abby booped me on the nose with her forefinger. "Come on, this is Seth, right? This is the guy you told me about when you started at FaeGames? No? Remember when I asked you how your first day went? And the very first words to leave your

mouth were, “Oh, Abs, there’s this guy. He’s perfect, he’s a ten, he looks like a summer fae, I think he’s a summer fae. Abs, I’m in love already”.”

My cheeks heated at the memory. “Yes, that’s the same guy.”

“Well, then,” she said, sounding far too much like Mum. She peeled the towel from me and threw it onto my bed. “Try to look a little more enthused. This is what you wanted.” She took the black dress off its hanger and assessed me. “Isn’t it?”

I shook my head, rattling up my thoughts. Yes, it was what I wanted. Not just since I started at FaeGames, but since I was a teenager. Since I got my copy of the Faecyclopaedia. Which coincidentally, was the same time my sexuality had developed.

I forced a smile to my face. I should be feeling happier about this. So, Seth wasn’t Goldie. But that was a good thing. This thing with Goldie was never designed to last. He would teach me a few tricks, I would help him with his game, then we would both get on with our individual lives. Separately. That happened. Done and dusted. Both ends of the agreement fulfilled.

Plus, Goldie stole a cat. He told me to fuck off. He’d had sex with almost everyone at work. I can safely say all of those qualities emphatically do not appear on my boyfriend wishlist.

Seth was a chance to put all this ickiness behind me. To forget about *him*. To move on. Though move on from what? I wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like we even had a relationship to move on from. Not even a fling. Just a few weeks of very intense sexual activities and gradually hating each other less.

There was nothing to move on from.

“Yes, I want this.” Need this. “Let’s get me dressed. Will you do my makeup?”

Abby made a squealing noise.

After thirty minutes of sitting bent-backed on the bed while my sister sat in the swivel chair in front of me applying makeup, I looked, well, I looked like Abby. Like Abby, but older, and shorter, and much, much sadder. Having decided there wasn't a lot we could do with my hair — too curly to tame, and too short to tie up — she ran some expensive oils through it and congratulated herself on a job well done.

“Stunner,” she proclaimed, pulling me towards the mirror.

Okay, I would probably rub some of the makeup off in the bathroom before I left, but otherwise, I looked ... not bad. Nice, actually. Pretty? Sexy? *Hmm*. I wouldn't have gone that far.

“Seth's about to realise how lucky he is,” she said.

My sixteen-year-old sister, so socially aware already, so emotionally in tune. Abby had not brought up Goldie since I returned home in a miserable daze, and whenever I'd brought him up in conversation — which was far more frequently than I was consciously aiming for — she would change the subject. She spoke about her coursework, about the band, about Galmin, and Travis.

The conversation drifted onto Seth, and Abby turned to page 340 of the Faecyclopaedia so that we could ogle him. Or at least an illustrated version of him.

“Wow, yeah, he really is perfect,” she said.

I managed a weak, “Amiright?”

She slumped down on the bed next to the book and summarised from the page, “Glamour speciality: Weather, appearance. Identifiable by ears that point backwards, dark hair, dark skin, eyes: brown—”

“Wait, what? Brown eyes?” My heart began parkouring in my chest.

“Brown eyes, often bearing gold flakes, or rimmed in gold.”

“Always brown eyes?”

Abby shrugged. “I don’t know, Hols, it’s your book. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I had probably imagined it. Definitely imagined it. I shook the thought. “Do you think I should wear heels?”

Either Abby didn’t recognise my inner turmoil or chose not to focus on it. “Do you even own heels? No, I reckon boots. Much sexier. Are you gonna wear your glasses? Do you have contacts?”

“No contacts.” I couldn’t do with all that eye poking. “I can take my glasses off before I get to the restaurant, though. It’s fine, I can see. A little. It’s just a bit fuzzy around the edges.”

I sat beside her, taking care to make sure the silky fabric on the dress didn’t crease too much as I bent.

“I’ll be at the end of the phone all night,” Abby said. “So, if it turns out he’s just a gorgeous creeper, call me, and I’ll come get you. And if he’s boring as shit and you need an excuse to leave, text me the beacon emoji, just that, and I’ll call you back with an emergency. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“And text me when you get to the restaurant, so I know you’ve got there safe.”

“Yes, Mum,” I said.

She smiled. “What restaurant is he taking you to?”

“The Wild Phoenix,” I said. “I’m told his mother owns it.”

“Woah!” Abby stood up so fast she whacked her head on the underside of the bunk.



The taxi pulled up beside the restaurant. A red carpet; a tux-clad maître d; fenced off areas with parasolled tables.

Busy. Teeming, in fact. With people wearing fine evening clothes, and jewels, and expensive perfumes that I could smell as I opened the car door.

Seth wasn't sitting outside with the other diners. I kept walking around the block. Building up my courage.

It's a good thing, it's a good thing, I told myself on repeat, as I made one full circle around the building before heading into the restaurant.

I smoothed down my frock and approached the maître d. An androgynous and, obviously, gorgeous fae. They looked me up and down, and panic flooded my veins. Next to the dripping rich patrons, I felt like a child playing dress up. This wasn't somewhere I belonged.

Their eyes caught my boots, and I held my breath. A warm smile lit up their face. "Good evening, Ma'am."

"Hi, uh, I have a date. I mean, I'm meeting someone here," I said, trying to discreetly tug down the hem of my dress.

"Certainly. What name is the reservation under?" They looked down at their podium, as though preparing to search me out on a guest list.

"My name is Holly Briar. My date is Seth. Uh, Seth Calder."

They snapped their attention back to me immediately. The playfulness of their smile vanished, and something new took its place. "Of course, right this way, Ma'am."

I followed behind the maître d, thankful that their body shielded me from view as I tried once again to steady my breath, my rapid heartbeat, my sweaty palms.

"Here you are, Ma'am," they said when we reached what looked like a private-ish area at the back of the restaurant. The lighting here was much darker, more ambient than the main dining space, and there were far fewer diners. They pulled out a chair for me at an empty table. "I'll let Mr Calder know this evening's date has arrived."

Wait, did they mean to say that? *This evening's?*

They bent closer to me, spreading a napkin on my lap, but making a big show of it. “Get the lobster frittata, and the La Rouge Ridicule Cher wine. Mummy takes it out of his pocket money.” They stood, fixed their smile, and I gawked at them, unsure what to say.

“I love your boots, by the way,” they said, and then left.

I smiled over at the other diners on neighbouring tables, who all rather congenially ignored me. Cool.

Tinkly, harp-like fae music played in the background. A low din of chatter and cutlery jangling filled the space. The air-conditioning unit blasted an icy breeze straight through the fabric of my dress, as though I were wearing nothing but a crocheted blanket. My skin goose-pimpled, and my nipples pulled into taut peaks.

Don't think about him. Don't think about him.

I took a sip of water, picked up a leather-bound menu, and opened to a random page. I squinted down at the tiny cursive text and nearly choked. My Gods, these prices. Three-hundred silvers for a steak? I glanced around at the other tables in a *have you seen this joke?* sort of way. Yet again, I was universally ignored.

Nearby, a door creaked open, and a shadow dropped into the seat opposite me. I lowered the menu and looked up at my visitor, and my heart simply exploded in my chest. The air left my lungs in a whoosh of excited laughter, my smile already hurting my cheeks.

“Goldie?”

Chapter 29.

Holly

“Goldie?!” Goldie said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out an oddly familiar, tiny compact mirror. He clicked it open and peered at his reflection, his face falling. “Figures,” he said, snapping it shut. “Fucking typical.”

“What’s going on?”

Goldie looked at me with pure hatred. Even when he’d ‘hated’ me at the very beginning, I never saw this look on his face. One of utter contempt. His brow knotted in an unfamiliar way, his jaw jutted like a petulant child, his eyes narrowed to slits.

“You’re rather slow,” he said. Something was off with his accent.

That’s when I saw it, the faint, flickering shadow around his head. Not just his head, his whole body. Like water poured onto glowing embers. Not enough to smoke, just enough so that the edges appeared hazy. I’d seen it on him before, but it was so subtle I never paid it any mind until now.

I jammed my glasses back onto my face. Now, in the crystal clarity, I knew it wasn’t Goldie. I mean, he looked exactly like him, in every detail, even down to the healing scar on his finger. But it wasn’t him. It was the way he held himself, the angle of his mouth, that posh accent. This wasn’t my Goldie.

My Goldie.

“Seth?”

He blew out a breath. “Nobody told you about me, did they?”

I had so many questions. Churning in my stomach, climbing my throat. I swallowed them down.

Green eyes. Green eyes!

You know what Seth is, right? Goldie had said that to me.

He's a summer fae? I'd said back.

He was no summer fae.

“Can you change back? To how you looked before?” I couldn't bear to look at Goldie and know it wasn't really him.

Seth actually laughed. So loud, I thought people might stare, but nobody turned. “Darling, it's not something I can change. Only you can do that.”

What the heck did that mean?

“So, you guys fucking, or what?” he said, bringing a fingernail to his mouth and scraping it between his teeth.

“What?!” I said, blindsided by the question, and just all round, extremely confused.

“Stop playing dumb. So, when did it happen?”

“What are you? If you're not summer fae, what are you?” I said, the questions working their way up like vomit.

“Summer fae. Fuck me, that's ... bless your heart. So, what went wrong? With you and the golden one. You wouldn't be here with me tonight if something hadn't split you apart. What did he do? Run off with someone else? The succubus I saw him lurking on South Street with this afternoon?”

“What? No, nothing,” I started to say, but stopped myself. I didn't want to talk about Goldie. I didn't want to talk about us, or the lack of us. And above all, I really, really didn't want to talk to Seth. About anything.

If Goldie had been hanging about on South Street with a succubus, that was his business. Even if it did crack my heart open like an egg thrown from the fiftieth floor.

We're not a thing. We were never a thing. He had every right to see whomever he wanted. Date people. Have sex.

Gods, was I crying in front of Seth?

"I have to go, I have to ..." I got to my feet, placing the napkin on my dish.

"Aw, don't be like that. Come on, sit, eat. Whatever you want, it's on me, and then later tonight," he stood too, leaned over the table, and placed his mouth next to my ear. Seth smelled of whisky and spiced cologne. Not citrus and salty, sun-soaked skin. "How about you open those pretty little legs for your golden lover boy once more?"

I recoiled as though he had slapped my face.

"Holly, come on! Don't be pathetic," he said, but my feet were already carrying me out of the restaurant. My hands searching my bag for my phone. I rang Abby as soon as I felt the warm evening air blanket my shoulders.

I'd figured it out. Seth. Who he was, or rather, what.

I just needed confirmation.

She answered on the second ring. "You okay? Say 'seagulls' if you need me to call the police."

"Abby, I'm fine. Well, no, I'm literally the furthest from fine I could possibly be." She made to interrupt, so I talked louder. "I need you to do something for me. Are you home?"

"Yes," she said, drawing out the word. "What do you need?" I heard the kitchen cupboard door close, the squeaky one, and a spoon or something drop onto the metal of the sink.

"Can you go to our room and find the Faecyclopaedia?"

There was a soft slurping sound, tea being drunk probably. "Is this really urgent?"

"Utmost."

She sighed. Our bedroom door opened and closed. "Okay, it's still open to summer fae. What do you want to

know?”

My heart turned itself inside out. “Go back in the book, about ten or twelve pages.”

“Mmkay.”

“Until you find the page on shadow fae.”

The line crackled a little. Abby took another sip.

“Oh, urgh, they look ... weird,” she said.

I knew exactly what *they* looked like, could see the illustration so clearly in my mind, having memorised every image of that book. What Abby was looking at in that moment bore a sort of resemblance to a human form. If a human form were simply a collection of dark storm clouds. There were no eyes, nose, mouth. It had arms and legs, but no discernible appendages.

In short, it looked like a shadow.

“Can you read me what it says?” I asked.

“Sure. So, shadow fae, native to the Midwest Kingdoms. Glamour speciality: appearances, deception. Typically difficult to identify due to the fae’s unique ability to adopt the unfaltering guise of each viewer’s deepest desires ... Oh. Oh!”

I was glad Abby had understood it straight away, and I wouldn’t have to explain. Such a smart teenager.

“So, Seth’s not summer fae? He’s a ... He’s a shadow fae? But how did you find out?”

I couldn’t tell her. I couldn’t admit out loud that the person I desired more than anyone in the world was Goldie. I couldn’t even admit that to myself. Could I?

I needed to see him.

Goldie, not Seth.

The succubus I saw him lurking about on South Street with this afternoon?

Gods, what if he wasn’t at home? What if he was ...

No, Holly, do not let yourself picture him with another woman. Especially a sex demon. The same sex demon that approached him at The Bus Stop Willies' gig?

"Abby, I've gotta go. I'll call you later." I hung up the phone before I'd finished my sentence.

Goldie's apartment was a ten-minute walk from Seth's mum's restaurant. I made it there in five. All the while trying to plot what I would say to him. I needed to be honest. Probably. He'd forbidden me from getting emotion involved, but there I was, desiring him more than anyone else. Wanting him, needing him. I couldn't tell him that. But he'd know, surely. Goldie knew what Seth was, and he'd know what it meant that I saw him when I looked at the shadow fae.

I probably should have gotten the tram back to Westside. Curled up on the lower bunk with Abby and had a good old cry about everything.

I definitely should not have come to Goldie's.

...

I pressed the bell and stared at my reflection in the darkened door window. My curls blown out from the wind I had created, my face red and ... damp. Oh Gods, I *had* been crying. My pits were sweaty, my feet sweaty in my boots, my dress riding up over my thighs, my glasses steaming in the centre from the exertion. All in all, I looked a mess—

But then I heard *his* voice, and my heart leapt into my throat.

"Taur, did you order food?" Goldie yelled.

Had I made a mistake?

The door wrenched open.

Goldie saw me and froze.

"Holly," he said. A whisper. His arms lifelessly hung by his sides. He was shirtless.

"Hi," I managed. Not quite the grand speech I'd been preparing in my head on the way over, but it was a start.

Okay, here goes, tell him the truth.

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you with—”

“He was you. Uh, Seth. I got to the restaurant, and he was you. He looked just like y—”

But I couldn’t say anymore because Goldie pulled me inside, slammed my body into the wall beside him and brought his mouth down on top of mine.

Chapter 30.

Goldie

She saw me. Me! Not some fucking random Summer Fae. Not another guy from work. Some dipshit from the sixth floor.

Me.

Fuck the consequences. I could ruminate on those another time.

There was no tomorrow. No next week. No games expo.

There was no Seth, no Sophie, no August.

No nine-hundred years of heartbreak and mourning.

Only Holly. And me. And right now.

My fingers were in her hair, my tongue already seeking her perfect familiarity. I ground my pelvis into her hips. Unable to wrestle even an ounce of control from my urges.

“You wore this for him?” I tugged at the strap of her dress. Fuck, she looked hot. “I hate it.”

I missed her dungarees.

“Goldie?” she said, breathless.

“Baby girl?”

“Are you ... Seth said he saw you with a succubus today. I mean, it’s none of my business, but ...”

My hand shot into my hair. I had to be honest with her. I wanted to be honest with her. No point in hiding any of the truth any longer. “Yes, I was. I met up with her. We went back to her place. To fuck.”

A sad little mewl escaped Holly's mouth. I grabbed her hand and placed it like a bandage over my heart to stop it from breaking.

After Sophie hung up the phone, she drove me to her apartment. On the back of her bad-girl motorbike, obviously. But the moment I walked through her front door, I knew I'd made a mistake.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" she'd said, her fingertips already working the tie on my sweatpants.

"I ... I don't think I can keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Casual hook ups. One-night stands. Fucking strangers. No feelings."

Sophie's hands moved to my shoulders. After a while, she said, "She must be some girl. Would you like a cup of earl grey?" and patted my arm.

I hadn't answered her. I just stared into her kitchen. At the postcards stuck to her fridge with souvenir magnets. The crayon drawings of balloon people with limbs coming out the sides of their heads. The leopard print dog bed, with a wholly unfazed, slightly dribbly, dogue de bordeaux, stretched across it.

Sophie made the tea regardless, and we sat at her breakfast bar while she told me about her nieces and nephews, her job as a travel agent, and her plans for the rest of the summer. She liked festivals, it turned out, and live music in general.

"Do you ever think you might give up casual hook-ups? Like for a relationship?" I said from nowhere. The words had slipped out.

Sophie shrugged. "Not at the moment, at least. I'm happy as I am. Enjoying the fruits of life, as they say. You know, we're very similar. Me being a succubus, you being a nymph. We were designed primarily for one thing. But that doesn't mean that someday I won't want a relationship. One

thing I do know is that it'll take an incredibly special person, or persons, to make either of us settle down."

Settle down. The words sat in my stomach like a bullion of gold. At once scarce and precious, and so fucking heavy it hurt.

"We went to her place, but we didn't do anything," I told Holly. "We chatted, and drank tea, and I met her dog, Vixen. She was disgusting and slobbery and you'd have loved her."

Holly laughed, the relief obvious.

"I couldn't bring myself to do anything with the succubus. Holly, she ... she's not you."

The breath left her in a whoosh. "Hey, Goldie?"

"Holly?"

"I'm ready."

She was ready.

Holly's ready!

My knees threatened to give way.

I had to confirm. Make sure I wasn't taking advantage of her. "Say it, baby girl. Say the whole thing."

"I want you to fuck me, Goldie."

I cried out, buried my face in the juncture of her jaw, ground myself against her.

That was why Holly never swore. So that when she did, it would have this kind of reaction. I yanked the skirt of her dress right up her thighs and pulled her into a seated position on my hips. The perfect kissing height. The perfect rub-my-cock-against-the-underside-of-her-knickers height. She wound her legs around me.

I carried Holly up the stairs and pinned her to the wall next to my bedroom. Dragged my tongue down her throat, digging it into the hollow at the base, covering it with my mouth, sucking, biting. Devouring her soft, salty, sweaty skin.

She whined, that beautiful whine I knew was only for me, and scraped her fingernails up the back of my neck into my hair. Her head fell back against the wall, her greedy pussy already bucking against me, already frantically searching for that friction.

I could barely pull my focus enough to ask her the question.

Her hand slid down my bare chest, leaving a trail of goose-pimples and quivering muscles, and she slipped the tips of her fingers into the waistband of my sweatpants.

“Holly, wait, baby girl. I need to ask you ... Where?”

She swung blown-out pupils to me.

“Where do you want me to take you? Where ...” Gods, I might’ve been able to concentrate if my dick wasn’t so painfully hard. “I’m going to fuck you now. It’s our first time. It needs to be special. If you could choose anywhere in the Eight and a Half Kingdoms to let me inside you, where would that be?”

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere. I’ll glamour it for you.”

Holly pulled my head down, paused, and whispered against my neck, “Where would you choose?”

My heart stilled. Of all the people I’d brought home with me, no one had ever flipped the question. No one ever cared to find out where I’d choose.

“The Kingdom,” I said eventually.

I wanted to fuck Holly. Desperate to. But also, I wanted to show her another piece of me. Where I grew up. Where I spent the first two and a half centuries of my life. Not the game version of the Kingdom. Or the version hanging on the living room walls.

It felt like opening another little trapdoor in my heart to Holly. One I already knew I’d have trouble closing.

My last remaining life.

“Take me there,” she said, her breath erupting every single nerve ending in my body.

I wrapped my hands around her backside, kicked the door open, stepped inside, and fought back a sob.

Where the walls of my room had been, lush undergrowth now filled the space. Leaves as big as cars. Tropical flowers in pinks, and purples, and whites. Feathery ferns, and humongous spiky gunneras, and delicate jewel-toned acers. In the centre, a shallow, glistening pool. A hot spring. Bird song, foreign, exotic. The soft ribbit of frogs nearby. The distant roar of a waterfall.

“Goldie, it’s beautiful,” she said. “It looks so real.”

“It’s all real, baby girl,” I said into her hair, realising we were probably talking about different things.

“It’s better than the game.”

I carried Holly up to the pool, climbed up the smooth rocks, and dropped to my knees on the other side. I placed her down on her back, the lower half of her body submerged up to her waist, her top half on the sandy bank.

“It’s warm,” she said, spreading her arms out and stroking the water. “How? How do you do this? It’s ... magic.”

Really, we were on my bed. Usually, I saw straight through this temporary glamour, so used to it being overlaid onto my bedroom. But this time I wanted to give myself fully to the moment. To experience everything as she did. To share this adventure with her.

Climbing over Holly’s body, I kissed her waiting, wanting mouth, and brought my lips down, over her jaw, down the column of her throat, between her breasts. I tugged the straps of her dress down from her shoulders, one at a time, wanting to rip the fucking thing from her, but this had to be her sister’s. It was so un-Holly.

I took my kisses lower. Peeled the dress down over her chest, freeing those perfect tits.

“So fucking beautiful.”

I had seen her tits a hundred times over the past six weeks, and every time still felt like the first. Leaving me feeling like an awkward teenager with a raging hard on.

Helpfully, Holly lifted her ass as I dragged the dress down farther still. Through the springs, tossing it into the general oblivion of the room. Instantly it transformed into a fern. Her knickers were next, then her boots, until she was spread naked before me, the water lapping around her stomach. Her whole body trembled.

“Are you cold?” I asked, lifting her leg by her ankle, and kissing the underside of her knee. I dragged my mouth up her inner thigh. Tongue, teeth, heat, sweat.

Holly sucked her breath in. “I’m ... I just really want you inside me.”

Nope, didn’t need to hear anymore. My sweatpants were off, and I was on top of her again, only partly aware of my surroundings. Of my ass sticking out of the water, the sand underneath my hands, the jungle sounds echoing around us.

There was only Holly. Shaking beneath me. Lips parted. Eyes boring into mine.

She was the magic.

She wrapped her arms around me, bringing all of my weight down on top of her. And I kissed her as I had done that first time. Soft, but desperate. Testing, but urgent.

She snaked her hand between our bodies and gripped my cock. I crumbled a little more at the contact and ground against her fist.

“Question for you,” Holly whispered. “Where does one find condoms in the jungle?”

I couldn’t help but smile. I showed her my wrist. “These stones. They’re Harness Stones. Ancient fae magic. This one,” I said, touching the charcoal-coloured stone, “protects me, us both, from sexually transmitted diseases. This one,” I pointed to the grey-pink stone, “protects us from unwanted pregnancy.”

“Well, that’s rather neat,” she said.

“But if you want to use a condom too, I know that the jungle master keeps some in the top drawer—I mean, inside that boulder over there.”

She laughed and pulled me down for another kiss. “If we’re safe, I want only you.”

It was all I could do to stop from grabbing her knees and spearing her right then.

“Wait.” Holly pushed me up. “What’s this one for?” She fingered the indigo stone.

“Oh, that one,” I said, shaking the bracelet down my arm out of her view and feeling the points of my ears heat. “That one stops me from getting nauseated if I eat too much.”

She slapped a palm over her mouth. “Oh my. That’s ... Has anyone ever told you how cute you are?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

“I think you’re freaking adorable.” Holly cupped my face and smoothed a thumb over my brow. “Hypothetically, if I wanted one of these anti-barf bracelets, would it work? Like, is that magic that could be shared with a human?”

“Baby girl, I would share all my magic with you. I mean it, take it all.”

She shivered, arched her back, and I found myself nestled right at her entrance.

“Goldie. I need you now.”

I ignored every molecule of doubt in my mind telling me there would be no way back from this and drove forward. Soft, wet, heat. Blistering intensity. At once, dulling my other senses, and setting every nerve ending in my body aflame.

Holly brought her knees up, inviting me in deeper, and I realised I was trembling as much as she was. I buried my face in the curls above her ear. That sweet fruity, floral scent filling every cavity in my being.

“Holly, you are ... This is the perfect ...”

Goodbye.

Because if I didn't say goodbye soon, I'd never be able to say it.

It simply did not bear thinking about. It was better to cast her off the line, set her free, let her find a human man to fall in love with. They could live a full life, make babies, grow old together.

Grow old. Together.

Something between a growl and a sob escaped my throat.

Holly dug her fingers into my ass cheeks, urging me to move. I didn't realise time hadn't frozen with me. I would let myself have this one weekend with her.

And after that, there could be no more Holly and Goldie.

I obeyed her commanding touch. Slow, savouring thrusts. That sweet, biting drag. The blissful hiss of her breath as I bore in further and further. Her supple, warm, human body, pliant beneath me. She cradled my neck, and gazed unfocused eyes into unfocused eyes, and I lost everything to the moment. Myself, my senses, my sensibilities.

Holly's hands raked over my ass, my hips, up my back, my shoulders, my arms. Fingernails dug in. Trying to stop myself from exploding too soon became my new favourite brand of torture. My fingers interlocked with hers, and I brought her hands above her head. I needed to watch her as she came undone. She panted into my mouth, frantic staccato breaths. I drank them down. More, I wanted more. I wanted it all.

I wasn't sure when my pace had reached piston levels. I only knew I was no longer in control, not this time.

Had I ever had control when it came to Holly?

Tremors began. In her pussy, snaking up my cock, into my muscles, into my very bones. Her sex clung to me, tighter and tighter, as though, it too, knew this was goodbye.

Holly's words became a choppy mess. "Goldie. This is —Gods—I'm gonna—Are you ..."

"Holly," I said, pulling apart just enough to look into her eyes. I really could not go any longer. "Can I come inside you?"

She nodded, seemingly finding it difficult to speak.

"Is that okay?" I said on an inward breath.

"Yes, Goldie. Fu—Fuck, yes. Do it. I need you."

I slipped my hand between our bodies, my thumb against her clit, and I ground over it furiously. In an instant, she broke. Her back arching, inhumanly lifting us both out of the water. Her head fell back. Eyes closed. My name screamed like a benediction.

"Holly, baby girl," I said as I followed her over the peak. My forehead dropped to hers, our open mouths grazing each other's. Our moans mixed. Hot, damp, sweaty. My muscles seized, and I emptied myself inside her, hitting her walls over and over with my hot release.

Afterwards, I tried to move off her, lie beside her, but she held me firm. Firmer than I would ever have thought possible.

"Goldie?" She trailed her fingers up my jawline and scissored them through my hair.

My breath stilled.

It was like everything had been a race until this point, and now time had stopped.

We laid heartbeat against heartbeat. The same rhythm. So in sync.

And I froze.

She was going to say it. Those three words. Words I dreaded with every fibre of my being. I could feel them hanging in the air all around us. I shut my eyes, braced for the impact.

"I ..." she began.

I squeezed them tighter.

“Goldie, I ...”

Don't say them. I can't handle it. I'm not strong enough.

She paused. Her breaths quivering. “Thank you,” she said finally.

I peeled open my eyes to see tears rolling into her hair.

“I'm so sorry.” I thumbed away the tracks. “It has to be this way.”

“I understand,” she said, immediately closing her eyes and letting her head fall backwards onto the pillow.

The pillow. At some point, the glamour in my room had faded. I climbed off her and fetched a clean towel to wipe her thighs. She watched me, a hollowness to her expression. I knew she was thinking the same.

We hadn't fucked. We'd made love.

No lives remaining.

Game over.

Chapter 31.

Holly

It happened. Not the sex. Though that was mind-blowing, so I could check that off my list now. But the thing I was convinced would never happen. The thing that he'd explicitly forbidden me from doing.

I fell in love with him.

I was in love with Goldie.

Like arse over tit, soul-crushingly in love.

Love!

I didn't even know his real name, but I loved him.

All I knew is that I wanted to wake up every day in his sheets. Have him cook for me every night. Play videogames, chat until we fell asleep, watch the sunrise, drive around in his car with the top down, hang out with his flatmates.

I wanted to watch him present his game at the expo. Sit on the sidelines and say, "*that's my boyfriend.*" That beautiful man, who at first appears frowny and miserable but is one of the softest, most selfless, considerate people I've ever met.

Gods, I wanted that.

I wanted him to get tenure. After three decades at the same company, he deserved it. I wanted an office next to his. We could sneak into each other's in between meetings and make out. I pictured us both moving into my new apartment. Running barefoot across the wooden floors. Him cooking in my open-plan kitchen, with the exposed brick wall; me in the nook, overlooking the harbour, reading a gaming magazine, spying on his flexing obliques.

To take him home. Introduce him to Mum and Phil.
Show him my community.

I was too far gone. I wanted everything.

Perhaps I had known for a while, and I'd simply been lying to myself. Tallywhacker's, the rooftop, Seth-not-Goldie. These should all have been major clues. Should have been the point in which I untangled myself from his long, muscular fae limbs, and fled.

He loved me too.

I was ninety-nine percent sure.

It was in the way he fixed every one of my ailments without me even asking. I just had to absentmindedly rub my knee, and he'd be on top of me, hands closing around the pain. Only for it to vanish within a heartbeat, and for him to walk around with a limp for the next few hours.

One time, he took my menstrual cramps. "What in the fresh hell is this?" he'd whimpered, while *I* fetched him a hot water bottle and a sharer-sized bag of chocolate Gnomies.

If it wasn't love that made him do that, then I guessed the only other explanation was masochism.

It was in the way he held me, and kissed me, and watched me. I caught him staring often. And when I caught him, he would always smile. Sometimes he flipped me the birdie, or blew me a kiss, and sometimes he made a vagina shape with his hand and rubbed his finger-dick inside while wiggling his eyebrows.

They were perfect eyebrows.

I loved him.

I almost told him. Right after we'd made love. The words were there, on the very tip of my tongue. The anguish on his face had me reeling them back in.

The trouble was, the bottom line, the thing I knew with one-hundred percent unwavering certainty; if I told him, if I said the words *I love you*, he would break this off. End things for good. Find a way to never share the same space as me

again. My new office would be mysteriously relocated to the sixth-floor, or perhaps in the *Howl Ya Doin'?* block across the street. He'd work from home, so I couldn't see him around the building. He'd ignore me at team briefings.

And he'd be right to.

I overstepped the boundaries. I got feelings involved. Just like he said I would.

How do you know I want love, and not just a hook up? I'd said that the first time in his office when we made the deal.

Because you're human, he'd replied, and he'd said it so matter-of-factly, like it was a given. *All humans, every single one of you, are obsessed with love.*

If I thought not walking away from him before I fell would be the worst decision of my life, I was wrong. Not walking away now was. But I found myself unable to.

It was impossible. To leave the comfort of his arms, his citrus scent, his whispered '*good girl's*.

We had spent the entirety of Sunday as one. Connected body and soul. We'd had sex so many times, in so many places over his apartment, I'd lost count. Against the kitchen counter, in Mal's private ensuite whirlpool bath — which he did not know about, and we'd be keeping it that way — on the rooftop, on the loungers, in the warm summer rain.

And after each time, I'd find myself scrambling to cram those three words back in.

It would be over soon. He'd end it soon. I could feel it. Like when you knew the credits were about to roll in a movie. But perhaps if I didn't tell him I loved him, if I kept my stupid human mouth shut, I could keep him for a bit longer.

I was already too far gone. Already in line for heartbreak. Why shouldn't I try to delay that? Get a few more minutes, days, weeks hopefully, of Goldie?

On Sunday night, we'd fallen asleep cuddling. Naked, because I had taken all my belongings back to my house, and only had my—Abby's evening dress. And because, I'd

learned, Goldie always slept naked. Usually on his back, with two pillows, and one or both arms under his head, and even though he had a duvet, he almost never slept under it.

On Monday morning, I woke before him. Tucked into the hairy, sweaty crevasse below his armpit. I pushed myself away slightly so that I could enjoy the view. Letting my eyes travel over the exact lines of his nose and jaw. His day-old stubble. The swell of those gorgeous lips. The glorious peaks and furrows of his abdomen. The valleys filled with golden-blond hair. His, erm, morning situation.

I'd never wanted anything to end less.

"Why are you staring at me, human?" he said, not opening his eyes, but letting his arms drop to his stomach.

My insides flipped with excitement. It was what he'd said to me in his office at the start of all this.

"Because you're so beautiful," I replied.

"Duh." Suddenly, he lunged for me. I squealed and tried to wriggle in the other direction, but he grabbed me and pulled me into his big spoon. "What's the time?" He kissed my shoulder and below my ear.

"I have no idea, but we have work today, and we probably should go into the office this week because there's only two weeks left until the expo."

He sighed. I couldn't tell if it was a resigned sigh, or a contented one. "I'll drive you back to your flat so you can get ready for work, then we can go in together."

My heart gave a jolt. I loved it when he used the words 'we' and 'together'.

He kissed my neck again, and his hand took a firm grip on my hip. "Can I take you again before work?" he whispered.

"Yes," I said, adding, "please," because I only just realised how much I wanted that too. Plus, he really liked it when I begged.

Goldie groaned. "I love it when you beg." And then, without wasting any more time, and still cradling me in his

curled body, he slipped inside me. Slowly at first. Then all at once, as though he were a rubber band that had been stretched and snapped, and he could no longer hold himself back.

I braced the flat of my palm against the headboard and pushed myself harder into his planes, trying to squeeze out any gaps there might be between our bodies. Trying to push him deeper inside me. That familiar feeling of overwhelm as my sex stretched around his. It always felt too much, in the beginning at least. I found it difficult to breathe, like he had squeezed all the air out of me.

Until he began moving, of course. And it went from too much, to alleviation, to more more more.

“Fuck, Holly, you feel so fucking good.” Goldie was already trembling, running a shaking hand up my waist and cupping my breast, and exhaling shaking breaths into my hair. “Gods, you have no right to feel this exquisite. You make me feel like a virgin, about to pop off any second. I can’t even fucking look at you. You look so incredible.”

Eventually, his frenzied rhythm slowed. He reached a hand between my thighs and began languidly rubbing my clit. Our moans combined to make one song. We knew the chorus and the verses, and the choreography. It was so easy with him. I’d gone from No Orgasms Holly to a nymph’s lover.

He wove his other hand, the one he’d been propping his head up on, into my hair, and gripped it tight, pulling my head back. This hair grabbing, I realised, was something he did when he was reaching the promise land. The point of no return. When there were only minutes — if we were lucky — left.

He pressed his mouth next to my ear. “Come for me, baby girl. Shatter for me.”

And I did. As simple as that. He bit down on my shoulder. Hard. My sex squeezed his. His swelled inside me, erupting with his hot release as he cried out. My thighs clenched, my stomach muscles went taut, and my orgasm tore through my entire body.

Afterwards, we stayed in the same position. Like two soldiers shot down on the battlefield.

Goldie kissed my shoulder, passed his hand over the bite, and removed the sting with his glamour.

It was brewing. The thing I had tried to stop myself from doing all weekend.

The words. Capable of destroying everything we had built up. Because whether he knew or liked it, we had built something pretty darn amazing. It would all come crashing down.

Don't do it Holly.

"I don't want to go to work," he said. "I'd rather stay here inside you all day."

Don't ruin everything.

My emotions bypassed my brain altogether. The words spewed from my throat like dragon fire.

"I love you," I said.

No, no, no, no. Take it back. Suck them back in.

Goldie was silent for the longest time. Had he even heard?

I prayed to the Gods he didn't.

I couldn't bear to turn and look at him.

"No," he said eventually, barely audible. "No. Don't say that. Please say you don't love me."

Shit, what have I done?

"Say you don't love me Holly."

"I ... I can't. I can't say it."

Goldie grabbed me by the shoulder and forced me onto my back. "Then lie!" he yelled. "You can lie, you're human. Tell me you don't love me." He sat upright, the warmth from his body ripped from mine. "Say it, Holly."

"I ..."

“Fuck!” He was on his feet. “FUCK!” He placed his forehead against the wall, his arms came up to cradle the back of his head.

“Goldie,” I whispered, scooting towards the end of the bed, but not daring to leave its safety.

“I’m sorry, Holly. I’m so fucking sorry.” He paced to his wardrobe, pulled out another pair of grey sweatpants and yanked them on. “I never wanted it to be like this. I never should have ...” He scrubbed a hand down his face and cried out.

I wanted to go to him, wrap my arms around his waist, push his head onto my shoulder. But I caused this. This was my fault. This was all my fault. Everything.

I forced Goldie into the deal. I learned things about him. Made him learn things about me. I didn’t walk away when I should have. When I realised I was developing feelings for him. I kept coming back, week after week, so I could press my body against his, and breathe in the smell of him, and watch his face as he came undone. I didn’t fuck off when he told me to. I’d become addicted to him.

My fault.

So I sat on the edge of the mattress, and watched him like a helpless child watching a parent have a breakdown.

From under the bed, almost right under my feet, Goldie dragged out a dusty navy holdall and began stuffing clothes into it. His clothes. T-shirts, more sweatpants, socks.

“What are you doing?” I asked him, the words barely escaping over the tremor in my voice.

He didn’t answer, just kept shoving things inside his bag.

“Goldie, please, what’re you packing for?”

He shook his head, his lips pursed so tightly they turned white. There were tear tracks on his cheeks. He was crying. Goldie, crying.

What had I done?

A sob burst from my chest. I was on my feet. Panicking now. My heart smashing against my ribcage. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I take it back. I don’t love you. I don’t love you! Please, whatever you’re thinking about doing, don’t.”

He knelt. Zipped up his bag. Pointedly did not look at me. Stood. Hoisted it onto his shoulder.

“Please, Goldie. I’m sorry. Please don’t leave.” I pulled at the strap, but of course, fae strength held it firm. “Goldie. Don’t go. I don’t love you. I hate you even. You’re a fucking jerk. I hate you. Please stay.”

He laughed then. It was a laugh through a sob. He faced me and cradled my cheek with his hand, thumbed a tear away. “I can’t do this. Not like this. This isn’t what I wanted. It’s not fair. On either of us. I’m sorry.” And that was all he said before he turned and headed out of his bedroom.

I grabbed the closest piece of cloth, one of his vampire flatmate’s quilts, and wrapped it around myself.

“Goldie, at least tell me where you’re going?” I ran after him, down the stairs into the corridor.

He didn’t spare me another word or even a cursory over-the-shoulder glance before he yanked the front door open, and disappeared down through the steps of the fire escape.

Chapter 32.

Holly

My head fell back against the door frame.

He'd used the emergency exit. The emergency exit!

He ran away.

I told him I loved him, and he ran. Just like I knew he would.

Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Why did I have to ruin everything? Why did he let me come over so often?

I had no idea how long I sat wilted against the wall. The front door still gaping. Praying I'd see the elevators ping open and his blonde head stride through, laughing like it was all a cruel trick. Knowing, instinctively, that would never happen.

Eventually, the anger and sadness ebbed from me. In its place an all-consuming emptiness. A numbness. Hollow. Blank.

Weird.

I had to go to work soon. I should eat breakfast. Did I even like food, anyway?

"Holly? Everything okay?"

The words were distant, deep but tinny as though spoken through an old telephone. A man's voice. I turned my head, momentarily fooling myself that it was him.

It wasn't. The voice belonged to the minotaur.

"Oh my Gods, Holly," said Joey, pushing her husband out of the way and rushing over to me. "What happened?"

I shrugged.

“Where’s Goldie?”

I didn’t have the energy to shrug again, so I looked towards the open front door.

Joey spoke as though in another room. “Shit, Horns, he’s fucking run away. I knew he’d do that.”

“Let’s get you inside,” Taurin said to me, in a voice so gentle I would not have believed a man of his size capable.

He wrapped an arm around my middle and lifted me to my feet as easily as if I were made of pillow stuffing. Joey held the front of the patchwork blanket closed, and together, they guided me, not into the living room like I’d been expecting, but upstairs to their room.

Joey sat me on the end of her bed. The pair of them disappeared. I think Taurin said something like, “I’ll make coffee,” but I couldn’t be sure.

“Do you have any clothes here? Gold—Um, I thought you kept some in his wardrobe,” Joey said when she returned moments later.

“I took them all home,” I replied. The words felt hollow, my mouth numb. Like dental surgery numb. “Our deal ended. I took all my clothes home. I came over on Saturday night with only the dress I was wearing.”

“It’s fine,” she said, rubbing my arms in the same way you might warm a shivering child. “I’ve got something you can wear.” She kissed the top of my head and walked over to her wardrobe.

It was only then I noticed how big their bed was. I looked around the room, trying to distract my thoughts. His bedside table neat and ordered. Hers heaped with stuff. Empty glasses, paperbacks, jewellery, pills.

“You might have to go commando,” she said, opening and closing her drawers. “I don’t think any of my underwear will fit you.”

What I meant to say was, “That’s okay.” What I actually said was, “Will he come back?”

“Oh, honey.” She was at my feet, crouched down in front of me, her hands on my knees, which poked free from the blanket. She had a dress draped over her lap. Red. “I ...” She began, but never made it past that one syllable.

That was a no then.

He wasn't coming back.

She knew him as well as I did. Better, in some ways.

A fresh wave of sobbing burst from me.

Joey abandoned the dress and wrapped herself around me, pulling my head down to her motherly chest.

After what could have been five minutes, or it could have been an hour, I heard Taurin's rumbling voice in the hallway. He was talking to someone. I couldn't tell who, but I didn't let myself feel even a tiny ray of hope that it might be Goldie.

“It's Dima,” Joey said, answering my unspoken question, not removing her stroking hand from my hair for a second. “He might be able to help.”

Taurin walked into the room. He presented me with a milky coffee. “I didn't know how you take it, so I put four sugars in.”

“Four sugars? Babe, come on, she's not Goldie.”

He pulled an *'eek'* face and mouthed, “I didn't know,” to his wife.

How is it possible that there was so much love in that one look between them? A look that conveyed reprimand, an apology, and a promise to hold each other a little tighter when they next had a moment alone.

I would never have that with Goldie. Or anyone, probably.

Would I ever get to that point in a relationship where I could tell my partner off with a glance? And why did I want that so badly? It didn't make sense.

It makes sense. I want that too, someone said. I looked around for the source. Joey and Taurin had shown no sign they heard the mystery voice. *Sometimes they don't realise how saccharine they can be. Especially when you've been chronically lonely for centuries.*

“What?” I said. Was I hearing things now too?

No, I'm right here. From the doorway, the vampire waved at me.

“You're telepathic?” I said, probably louder than the moment called for. Joey's and Taurin's heads shot towards the open door.

“D, did you hear anything before he left?” Joey said, ignoring my outburst, and getting to her feet.

Dima walked into the room. No, walked wasn't quite the right word, more like surged. “Nothing. I was asleep,” he said, out loud. Did I imagine him talking into my mind?

Also no, he said, and I heard the words as clear as though he had spoken them, but his lips didn't move.

So, you can read my thoughts? All my thoughts? I said, in my head.

Yes. Everything.

I didn't have enough spare energy to think about the meaning, or consequences, or even care about them.

Will Goldie be back? I asked, at the same time Joey said, “Where's he gone?”

Dima looked between the pair of us, his brow creasing in the centre. He floated over to the desk chair in the corner, pulled it out, and not sat on it exactly, more like hovered two inches above it.

He was quiet for the longest time. I realised he must have been conversing with Joey and Taurin telepathically when Joey said, “She has a right to know.”

Dima shook his head. It was subtle, but unmistakable. Whatever he knew, whatever they were talking about, was

bad. Terrible.

You tell her then! he shouted — shouted? — into my mind — our minds? I was so confused.

I felt as small as a child.

Joey's hands went to her hair. "I can't tell her. I can't believe he would do that."

"Do what?" I said, or at least, I think I said.

She pinched her lips between her teeth and shrugged in Dima's general direction.

Taurin knelt in front of me. He cleared his throat. "About a month ago, Goldie told Dima if he ever developed true feelings for you, if he thought he might be falling in love, he was going to leave Borderlands. To, uh, forget about you. He's gone to the Kingdom."

The room seemed to darken around me. "The Kingdom of the Fae," I said. It wasn't a question, but Taurin nodded. "For how long? When will he be back?"

He looked over his shoulder at the vampire, swallowed loud enough for me to hear over the blood pounding in my ears, and said to his trainers, "A couple of decades."

I said nothing.

A couple of decades.

Twenty years.

Two zero.

I'd be nearly fifty when he returned.

"Okay." The word came out of my mouth, but I didn't feel it leaving.

The others were silent for the longest time. Either having some internal conversation I was not privy to, or else they were waiting for me to say something.

But there were no words left. No tears, either. Nothing.

Just inescapable emptiness.

A couple of decades.

He didn't really mean twenty years. He couldn't have. Surely he was exaggerating.

I wish I could say he was, the vampire said.

Eventually, Joey ran her fingers through my hair. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you need to. When you're ready, I'll drive you home."

"Don't you have work today?" I said, wondering how long I could get away with sitting naked, wrapped in a blanket, on Joey and Taurin's marital bed. How long before I could even pretend to function?

"Not until six this evening. If it's later than that, Taur can drive you home." She looked at her husband. "Babe, you're gonna be late for work."

"Shit!" He snatched his phone from his pocket, glanced at the screen, and shoved it back in. "Love you." He kissed his wife, and my stomach gave an envious stab. "Call you in a bit, okay?" He turned to me and sighed. "I hope I see you around, Holly."

I couldn't muster a response.

He left the room, Dima on his heels. The vampire paused in the doorway.

I'm sorry, he said. *I really wish there were some way we could bring him back.*

I said nothing. Didn't even have the strength to reply mentally.

We've lost our friend today, too, he said.



I sat on Goldie's bed, staring at the indent on his pillow, resisting the urge to suck in the scent of him through his stupid wingball jersey he'd left on his chair. Did he really

up and leave, just like that? Without saying goodbye to his friends?

He couldn't have ... He wasn't that heartless ... He loved his friends ...

I couldn't wrap my brain around it.

And Goldie loved me. I knew that. I think I'd known it for a while, but his flatmate had provided the evidence. Taurin's words echoed in my mind.

If he thought he might be falling in love. If he developed true feelings.

I put Joey's dress on. A red bodycon type thing that, I guessed on her, was knee length, but on me ended somewhere mid-calf. It gaped at the breasts and hung off my hips, but still managed to be uncomfortably snug around the tummy.

I texted August to let her know I'd be working from home today, and most likely tomorrow, too. She messaged back, told me to get Goldie to show me how to input the WFH request on the system.

The centimetre-squared thumbnail of his golden blonde head stared up at me from my phone screen. Even in that, he was scowling, and despite everything, I smiled. This was the picture he'd chosen to represent himself to every person who called or texted him. It was so Goldie.

I wrote out a text to him. Deleted it. Wrote another one. Deleted that. The third message I'd written I hit send before I could overthink my way out of it.

Goldie, I'm so sorry. I never meant for this to happen. You were right. Of course you were right. Humans are selfish, love-obsessed idiots. I was stupid, and I've been selfish. I thought I had more control over my emotions. Please come back. I will leave you alone if that's what you need. Just, please, don't take this out on your friends.

Immediately, his phone buzzed on the bedside table.

"Fuck!" I said out loud. I swore. He made me swear. "Fucking fae!"

I needed to get out of there. I grabbed Abby's sweat ruined black dress and stuffed it inside my handbag, along with Goldie's wingball jersey. Because if I was going to pine, I needed something to wipe my tears away with. Then, I don't know what possessed me, but I swiped his phone from the nightstand and tucked that inside my bag, too.

I carried my boots and tried to quietly, or as quietly as a human could, sneak out of his apartment. When I got to the elevators, I'd pull them on. I didn't want Joey to drive me home. I didn't want to burden any of them any more than I already had. I'd driven their friend away. Their family. And for Joey and Taurin, that time he was gone would be the same for them as it would be for me.

A couple of decades.

An inhuman amount of time to wait, I realised.

If the circumstances were reversed, I'd never have forgiven me for doing that. Especially after having been warned so many times.

I'd reached the entrance hall when I heard a deep male voice and saw the shadows of a pair of wings disappear into the living room.

"His car is gone," Mal said. I froze to the spot. My heart leapt at the mention of *him*. "I've tried to call him, but it went straight to voicemail."

I hugged my bag closer to my chest.

"Can you try his parents?" Joey said. Her voice was breaking. She'd been crying.

"It takes a day and a half to reach the Kingdom. I'll call them tomorrow."

"I just want him back, Mal. He didn't even say goodbye. Two fucking decades. I'll probably be a grandmother by then. Selfish fucking asshole." Her words were muffled, as though spoken into Mal's shoulder. There was no sign of Dima.

Gently, I twisted the front door handle, eased it open, and slipped out before I could hear anymore. Before I could feel anymore guilt.

Chapter 33.

Holly

The work from home request was easy enough to figure out myself. I filled it out for Monday and Tuesday, and spent the entirety of both days on my bottom bunk with the curtains drawn staring at the lock-screen of his phone.

His flatmates had called him. Several times. And left even more text messages. Which I could only read in the preview pane, because despite my efforts, I couldn't figure out his passcode.

Joey (saved as Sugar Paste) had texted:

If I find out you've actually run away and left that poor girl pining, I'm going to fucking kill you.

I'll be like sixty when you get back, but I'll still kick your ass.

Are you really leaving without saying goodbye?

I hate you.

Please, just let us know you're okay.

I'm going to tell her your real name.

Taurin's texts read:

Mate, where are you?

We all miss you. Come home.

Whatever is going on, we can work it out.

I love you man. Can you stop ignoring us?

Dima's read:

Are you missing my face yet? It included what I assumed was a selfie, but in fact, showed only the velvety

lining of a coffin.

Alright then, how about a dick pic? The attached picture showed the same coffin interior but, I'd guessed, taken a little lower down.

I'm gonna make a move on your girl. If you don't text me back, I know you're on board with that.

I'm in your room. Can I have your signed Mike Ryder poster?

I let Not Ludo sleep on your bed. I know how much you love cat hairs on your things.

Mal sent only one message. It was the only one I read and reread over and over. The only one that gave me any semblance of hope.

Don't make me come and get you.

Please do.

Please go get him.

By Wednesday, I couldn't ignore August and work any longer, so I dragged myself in. I was meant to be shadowing Goldie, but how could I shadow a ghost?

"You don't know where he is?" asked August, leaning forward on her desk.

"I think," I said, hesitating, unsure how much I wanted to reveal in case she figured out it was all my fault. How I'd not only destroyed my chances with the only man I'd ever loved, but also torn apart his family. "He might have gone home to his parents. For a while."

"How long's a while? The expo is the weekend after next." She took her glasses off, evidently giving up the pretence of needing them.

I simply shrugged, while redirecting all my energy into not turning into the sobbing, snotty mess I'd been for the past two days.

"He's done this before," August said. "Several times. Just up and left without filling out any holiday requests. The

last time he was gone an entire year! The return paperwork was a nightmare.”

“A year?” I asked, feeling a tiny bubble of hope rise inside me. A year I could handle. I could wait a year for him. If he’d let me. “Only a year? Not two decades?”

“Two decades?! Crikey, why would he be gone that long? Do you know something you’re not telling me?”

“No,” I said. The word falling somewhere between a shout and a squeak. August nodded, either forgetting that humans had the capability to lie, or else forgetting I was human.

“Very well. In that case, if he’s not back by the expo, I’m gonna need you to present the game to the association.”

“Uh—”

“And for the rest of your probation, or until Goldie returns, whichever one comes first, you can shadow Seth.”



Seth was Goldie.

Walking into his office felt like cutting my chest open, placing my heart on his desk, and smashing it into a bloody pulp with the metal drip tray of his coffee machine.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. And yet, I wanted nothing more than to gaze into those green eyes and have him tell me everything would be okay. That I didn’t screw it up. That he’d been joking all this time. That he’d forgiven me for doing the one thing he’d expressly forbidden me from doing.

But he wasn’t my Goldie. And it wasn’t just his smoky grey aura. It was the way he spoke to me, the looks he gave me, the menial jobs he had me do.

I figured I only needed to put up with everything for another week and a bit. Then I would get my own office, my

own game to work on. Perhaps if Goldie didn't come back, I could finish our game.

He'd probably like that. Wouldn't he?

That way, I could moon over an animated version of him instead of the thumbnail of his miserable face.

I kept Goldie's phone in my bag, charged it up every night in case he called himself. Every spare moment I got to myself, I tried to hack into it. Putting in passcode after passcode until it flashed up an error message and locked my attempts for another half an hour.

A desperate idiot, that's what I felt like, but I'd convinced myself that if only I could access his phone, I could tether myself to him a little longer.

His flatmates hadn't attempted to contact me, and neither had I with them. Guilt and embarrassment weighed heavy on me. By Friday, I'd caved and texted Joey.

Hi Joey, it's Holly. Have you heard anything from him?

I wanted to apologise, beg for her, and their, forgiveness, but I didn't even know where to begin with that clusterfudge.

Hi Holly, nothing yet, she replied. Not Screw you bitch, how dare you tear up my family like that? I breathed a sigh of unearned relief.

She followed the message with more.

Hang in there. Things might seem shit at the moment, but you'll get through.

I'm always here if you need to cry.

Or vent.

I'm mad at him too.

His real name is Blankets, by the way.

Blankets Golden.

I laughed out loud at that. The laughter immediately mutated into a fresh round of sobbing. I finally knew his real

name, and it was everything pre-Monday-Holly could have ever wished it to be, but it was too late. Too late to tease him about it. To push those exact buttons I knew would have him smiling and scowling at the same time.

For the rest of my probation, I play-tested the game we had built. Always playing as Goldie. Watching the rendered version of that perfect back, knowing I'd scratched it up, and he loved it. I wrote a speech for the games expo, trying to keep it as passable to something a person not internally crumbling to dust might say.

I tried to remember to eat and go to bed at a reasonable time. Even if I spent the entire night either staring at the slats above my head, or else typing more failed passcodes into his phone. I drank coffee with Abby and listened to her chats about the band and her finals. Galmin quit again. Travis was ecstatic. The latter of the boys had found another 'blinder' of a spray-painted penis on a bus stop outside of Pannor, the capital city of the Human Realms.

And I dragged myself into work. Where I spent the day sitting on the sofa of a man who looked exactly like the man I loved.



The auditorium was bigger than I'd thought it'd be. Darker too. With more people. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, more. Leather-upholstered seats fanned out from the stage, seating, whom I assumed, were the bigwigs. The men, and few women, we were tasked with impressing. They were a mix of humans and fae, and squinting through the crowds, I also spotted a gorgon, a centaur, and a small group of werewolves. At the back of the cavernous room, others stood in clusters, or rows, their faces obscured by the fading lights.

Among them, Goldie. But not really Goldie. Stupid, taunting Seth-Goldie. He'd already given his presentation to rapturous applause. Because of course everyone enjoyed watching their own personal dream date give their speech.

Even if his game was just another bog-standard woman-with-oversized-knockers-searches-for-the-root-cause-of-the-zombie-apocalypse RPG. Afterwards, he elected to hover in the gangway near the front, his arms folded across his chest and a mocking, challenging smile on his lips.

Abby had dressed me again, this time in my comfy evening dungarees, the ones I had worn to Tallywhacker's. She did my hair and makeup and tried to depuff my eyes as much as possible. I'd snuck her into the expo but hadn't been able to spot her from the side of the stage yet.

August flitted about between the remaining designers. Asking us questions. Trying to prepare us, calm us down, but only riling up the nerves of the guys left to speak.

For once, I felt thankful to Goldie for bailing seconds after I confessed my love to him. I had used up my emotional quota for the entire year, and consequently had no room left for nerves. Only sheer, unending numbness.

"It'll be ten minutes, that's all. Use plenty of graphics. There'll be a Q and A after that. Just answer them as best as you can. I understand Goldie did most of the build, but those are your ideas as well. You had a lot of sway over him. Don't forget that," August said to me, before flitting off to chat with Greyson, who looked on the edge of vomiting.

I took out Goldie's phone once more. I'd already tried his birthday. I typed it again. *Error*. I tried the release date for *Magic Thief One*. *Error*.

"Come on, you stupid thing," I whispered to it. I had one more try before another thirty minutes of shut down. Without expecting anything, I typed my passcode in. Fourteen oh nine.

It unlocked.

I almost dropped the thing.

Fourteen oh nine. My passcode worked. My birthday. And the name of my first game.

"Okay, Holly, you're up," said August distantly.

I scrambled through his apps. Opened his photos. There we were, right at the top. The selfies that I took from his phone one Sunday afternoon while lounging on his sofa. My heartbeat spiked dangerously to see he'd saved them all to his favourites. I zoomed in on his face. In eight out of the ten pictures, he wasn't even looking at the camera. He was looking at me, a smile ghosting his lips.

“Holly, you ready?”

“Yeah,” I replied, selecting his recently opened apps, heart smashing against my windpipe. The browser was still open on the last platform he'd used. A networking forum.

I stopped breathing. He'd asked a question. There was his user icon, with his perfect scowling face. Seemingly, dozens of people had chipped in with answers. His question read:

Is there any way to keep a human alive as long as a fae?

The top answer, upvoted by several thumbs up emotes, and downvoted by none, was the longest of the answers by far. A literal essay. Skimming, I caught the words *undead*, *risky*, and *potentially fatal*. I scrolled to the top again. Helpfully the original answerer had added:

TL;DR In short, no, there are no modern ways for a human to extend their lifespan without causing terrible and irreversible consequences.

I dropped the phone.

“Come on, Holly, they're waiting for you,” August said, picking up the phone, glancing at the screen with a frown, then tucking it into the front pocket of my dungarees. She pushed a microphone and a small remote controller into my hand and ushered me towards the spotlight.

“Oh, and Holly?”

I turned back to August.

“Welcome, officially, to the FaeGames team, senior designer.”

Chapter 34.

Holly

Faces, blurred by the super trooper, stared at me. Dust motes floated in striped clouds in front of the stage. Behind me, a cinema size screen displayed our game. My knees weakened at the bobbing image of a giant shirtless Goldie. I dug my hands into my pockets and pulled out my speech notes.

Someone waved. Abby. I wasn't sure if I should wave back, but I did anyway.

He'd been researching ways to keep me alive as long as him. And he'd come away empty handed. No wonder he ran.

No modern ways ...

... without causing terrible and irreversible consequences.

But

Did this mean he loved me as I loved him?

Off to the side, Seth-Goldie gave a 'hurry-it-up' hand rolling gesture.

I cleared my throat.

If he found a way, would I want that? To live as long as him?

Centuries more?

My family would get old and die and I would stay the same. For years. And years.

Years and years with Goldie.

A lifetime with him.

Ten lifetimes.

With him.

Was that what I wanted?

I opened my mouth to speak, to introduce the game, and fought back a sob.

Yes. I wanted that.

More than anything.

One lifetime with him wouldn't be enough.

I needed to find him. Maybe I could help.

“Hi, everyone,” I said into the microphone. Feedback rang through the hall. I pulled the mic away from my mouth. “Hi, um, my name is Holly, and for those of you with human eyesight and are unsure if you're seeing things, I can confirm I am, in fact, also human.”

The audience laughed in that polite, nervous way they often do.

“And I'd like to introduce you to our game. Working title is The Yield Key.”

Murmurs broke out, the tone excited.

My speech went well. It was difficult to tell for sure, but all my one-liners landed, nobody spoke over me, and nobody got up and walked out midway through. Already it had gone better than any of the versions I'd envisaged.

I opened the floor to questions. Several people in the front raised their arms. I pointed to one guy in a purple shirt and tie, and a runner handed him a microphone.

“Hi, Holly,” he said. “First off, I just wanted to say I love the concept.” There were rumbles of agreement. “It's clever and quirky, and the graphics are beautiful. I heard you designed the game with a fae. Is that correct?”

“Well, sort of,” I said. “It was both our ideas, both our input, but he built everything you see here with his,” — I

wiggled the fingers on my free hand in front of me — “fae magic.”

The audience laughed again.

“I love that,” purple shirt guy said. “It’s incredibly poignant, what you’ve created here. Such a great overarching metaphor for the game, and in the wider scheme of things, in terms of fae, human relations. It definitely has potential. I think you’re one to watch here.”

“Thank you.” I said, feeling like a fraud and a thief for accepting the praise for Goldie’s game. I pointed to a man in a green shirt next.

“I agree with the gentleman over there. The sentiment that a fae and a human can work together to produce a game about a fae and a human working together, well, it just blows my tiny mind.” More laughter. “My question is about the interface ...”

He trailed off. Or I stopped listening. Because at that moment I saw him. Goldie, standing near the back. But surely, it had to be Seth. I checked to my left and there was the real Seth-Goldie, affecting a dramatic yawn. His mouth gaping, his hand patting the space between his lips.

My heart threw itself against my windpipe. So, it was ...

No.

Not *him*.

Someone that looked a lot like him. Too young to be him. Same blonde hair, same grey sweatpants, but a teenager really.

My stomach dropped. The mic became slippery in my palm.

“... Therefore, I was just wondering how the front end of this would work?” the man in the green shirt said.

“Um ...”

Gods, I wished Goldie was there.

“Could you repeat the question—” I began, but stopped, when a smoky, hazy blonde head leaned forward and snatched the microphone from green-shirt guy.

“I have a question,” said Seth-Goldie. His voice cut through the hall like ice plunged down a spine. Collectively, the audience turned to him. “It has recently come to my knowledge that you and Goldie, the fae that built this entire game for you, are having an illicit affair.”

I froze. “What?” I didn’t know what Seth’s aim was, but he marched towards the stage. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Whispers started spreading throughout the crowd.

“Isn’t it true,” Seth continued, “That you knew Goldie would get fired if you slept with him? And yet, you still fucked him?”

Why was he bringing this up now? In front of all these people. Bile rushed up my throat.

“But—Wait—No,” I stuttered, looking around at the rest of the audience. For what? Help? An intervention?

“I think that all along, this had been your plan. You knew he would get fired. You plotted to make him fall in love with you. Tricked him. You wanted him fired. That way, you could take all the credit for the game.”

Tricked him.

You’re really going to trick Seth into falling in love with you? Goldie’s words rang through my mind.

Did I trick Goldie? Is that why he ran? I tricked him into loving me?

Unless ... Seth’s only aim had been to get Goldie fired. Get me to admit we had slept together in front of August. Leaving the shadow fae to claim tenure for himself.

“That’s absurd. I never wanted to get him fired, I only ever—”

But the rest of the sentence was robbed from my mouth as a flash of golden blonde hair caught my eye.

He was there.

Not Seth-Goldie.

Not Fake Teenager-Goldie.

But *my* Goldie.

My Goldie was there. And he was holding his arm up above his head.

“I have a question,” he said.

Chapter 35.

Goldie

2 Weeks earlier

It was the fifth triple-shot caramel macchiato that did it. Driving up the main highway from Borderlands to the Kingdom of the Fae, my eyes clouding with tears and snot streaming down my face, had not only been dangerous, but downright hideous. But the third, sixth, ninth—fifteenth shot of caffeine was the one. I went from hyper mess to hyper focus.

It was the right thing to do. I made the right decision.

Holly loved me. And I did what I knew I'd always do. I ran for the hills.

I wanted to say it back. Tell her I loved her too.

Ha! How was that for a turnabout?

I wanted so badly to say it back. To hold her face, whisper those words to her, and stay all day. Cocooned in my covers. Making out. Slow fucking. Declaring our love. Forever.

Except there would be no forever.

Not for us.

There could never be anything more than what we had these past six weeks.

We shouldn't have even had that. I should have fucked Holly the moment she first walked into the Faegames' building, let August fire me there and then, and never had to look into her big brown eyes again.

Fate was a cruel fucking bitch, and I wouldn't let her take anything more.

Two decades in the Kingdom of the Fae. Three if necessary, or more, whatever.

I'd left without saying goodbye. I took the building's emergency exit. If my fae mouth would have let me, I'd have told her I didn't love her. That I never did, or never could. That I was leaving, and I didn't care that she'd hate me back because I'd never even think about her again. I may have broken both our hearts, but Holly would get over me. Find another human to pair off with. Forget about me.

Humans could love and lose and love again. It just came so easily to them. Another reminder of how different our species were.

It is love. Love is a human's greatest strength. I'm sorry, you don't want to hear that but I have nothing else to tell you.

I'd been such a fucking fool.

All too soon, the highways tapered out into smaller, winding lanes that corkscrewed around the rocky cliff faces. Perilous at times, and so tedious. I swapped service station restaurants with their array of human and mythic foods for whatever sugar laden supplies I'd snatched at the last stop. Not that I felt like eating any of it. And service station toilets for bushes and ravines next to my car and crossing my fingers I didn't get flattened by barrelling artics that shouldn't have been on those tiny roads in the first place.

Long after the sun went down, I found a place to pull over for the night. An opening in the forests, a little camping ground, overlooking the southern regions of the Kingdom. Beyond that, if you squinted, you could just about spot the homogenous lights of Borderlands. Most likely St. Clouds, it was the most neon of the cities. Remy was East, way too East to make out.

I left the top down on my car, because even though Holly wouldn't see any stars from where she was, and even though she was probably half-way to hating me again, I needed to know we were both under the same blanket. I pictured her on the rooftop lounge, drinking my beers. Sugar

Paste was with her. Maybe — hopefully — she was launching my clothes off the side of the building into the street below.

Two other vehicles shared the little campsite with me. A motorcycle, whose owner had erected an impossibly large tent next to it, clearly glamoured, and an RV, which housed a young family. The father, an orc, the mother, I suspected was human, and three mixed-species kids of ... indeterminate small ages. I didn't know child ages, they were like three feet tall, and they had bubble wands.

It pulled at something in my heart. Something hidden deep. Bottom of the well stuff. Suddenly I was imagining Holly and me in a motorhome, travelling through the realms. Maybe there were kids. Maybe. There was definitely a nice little kitchenette on board, though. And a flushing toilet.

My chest seared with renewed agony, like my heart had broken so thoroughly, my chest had buckled under the immense pain, and was pulling down each rib in turn.

I didn't sleep. I simply watched the skies lighten, thankful my view didn't extend eastwards. If I never saw another fucking sunrise again it would be too soon.

Every day apart was a chance for Holly to detach herself more from me. I had to remind myself that she would get over me. She would. Human emotions were short lived.

Just like their lives.

In the morning, the orc, who told me to call him Rhomon, brought me a mug of coffee, perfectly sugared. When I gave him a questioning look, he shrugged and pointed to my ears.

Rhomon leaned against the hood of my car, staring out over the rolling hills. "What's the deal with the whole, moody sleep-under-the-stars fae vibe?"

I said nothing, unsure whether my mouth would let me utter anything even slightly resembling my truth.

"Ah," he grumbled. "A girl." And then, when I didn't refute it, he laughed, the resonance rumbling through the leather of my backrest. "I work with a lot of fae. Your lot sure

love to pigeonhole every other species, but I'll tell you what, I'm yet to meet a fae that isn't a moody, brooding asshole."

A minute passed under his self-satisfied grin.

"She's human," I said eventually.

"And you're of the mind that loss is too big a risk for love?" He didn't give me a chance to deny it. Not that I could have out loud. "My wife's part human. Her family cut us off when we chose each other. Just pretended as though she never existed. My folks didn't take too kindly to it either. They're only just starting to come around now. Rhomson is ten. A decade it has taken for them to see our love is authentic, and that we weren't abandoning orcish culture entirely. But you know, I would do it. Give up my roots. Everything. If that's what my Leena wanted. I wouldn't even think twice about it. Because, to me, there is no risk too great for love."

He leaned forward and seized my nearly empty mug. Tossing the dregs into a nearby bush he said, "Have a safe rest of your journey. Whichever direction you're travelling in." And then walked back to his stupid homely RV, and his dressing-gown clad, smiling wife, like his little speech had any impact on me.



"Blankets!" said the fae princess, uncrossing her legs with a flair worthy of a drag queen. Technically, not a princess, more a self-appointed noblewoman. She gracefully rose from her throne — again not a real throne — and sauntered down the marble steps, her arms held wide. "My son!"

"Hi, Mum," I said, burying my hands in my pockets.

She wore a gown made of the sheerest, most iridescent fabric. Hiding absolutely nothing. A typical Mum ensemble. She pulled me into a hug, kissed both my cheeks twice, then leaned back and slapped me across the face. Hard.

“What in the bloody hell do you call this?” she spat. “One hundred and fifty years since your last visit. One and a half centuries! You hardly call. You never write—”

“I call,” I countered.

“Pah!”

I did ring them. Once a year. Usually on the morning of Winter Fest if Dima reminded me.

“This is not how I expect my twenty-third son to behave. Your siblings have all but forgotten what you look like.”

I cast my eyes around the cavernous palace hall. A reception chamber hewn straight into the mountainside. Partly covered by the intricately carved marble walls and ceilings, and partly exposed to the elements. I gave a little wave to the battalion of gold-haired fae draped over every surface. Most of them naked. They could never forget what I looked like. I looked exactly the same as them.

“I’ve just been on the phone to your minotaur friend,” Mum said, seemingly already over the upset. “He’s worried about you. A love match, perhaps?”

“Not with Taurin,” I answered. I could feel my cheeks heating and a lead ball forming in my stomach. How is it possible that I didn’t see my mother in over a century, and she still managed to cut straight to the heart?

She grabbed my jaw with a solid, painful grip, her long fingernails digging into my days-old stubble, and gazed into my eyes. She brought her nose close to mine and breathed me in.

“You’re in love!” She sniffed again. “With a human! How romantic.”

“Yes, yes, I’m in love,” I said, pulling my face out of her grasp, and wondering if there would be any part of it that didn’t sting by the end of our encounter. “And yes, with a human. If it’s okay with you, I’ll be going to go to my room now.”

“Blankets, darling, that’s your brother’s room now. You’ll have to share it with him I’m afraid.” Mum patted my bicep, ignoring my confirmation that I was in love with Holly, because we all, as fae, knew that couldn’t end well. “And good luck to you, he’s been doing my head in. I’ll get Dad to dig out the old camping bed. How long are you planning on staying this time?”

I shuddered at the thought of spending the next twenty years sleeping on a camping bed, my back already aching in protest. No fuck that, my brother could sleep on the fold out cot, I would take my original four-poster.

“I was thinking however long it took for the human to get over me. Two decades minimum,” I said. *It was the right decision. I made the right choice.* “Which brother am I kicking out of my bed?”



Hay Bale. That was the brother. Almost two-hundred years old, and just about emerging the other side of puberty.

“What the hell are you wearing on your legs?” he’d said, not a minute after I reached my room—our room.

Another space carved straight into the bedrock. But instead of opening to the heavens like the main hall, the remaining walls and half of the ceiling were made from domed glass. Tall arched panes, covered by the sheerest, most ineffective gauzy curtains. My old four-poster bed in the centre. My armoire, my nightstands, my chest of drawers, all painted navy featuring elaborate mother of pearl inlays. My mirror and lamp, with their spiralling metalwork twisted around the frames and base. My rug. The tapestries. Everything so over-the-top fae.

“Is that human clothes?” I’d forced Hay Bale to don a forest green kilt of some variety because, of course, he’d been butt naked. I couldn’t bear to see his dick flapping about in my peripherals all night.

“My sweatpants?” I asked.

“They’re ... nasty.”

I shrugged. “Women love them. Especially human women. They can’t keep their eyes, or their hands, off you. They’re like flashing beacons to them.”

“Human women are weird. I can’t wait to meet one.”

Hay Bale took the cot with enthusiasm, as though he were embarking on an epic adventure. “This looks like so much fun!” he said, bouncing the flimsy hammock style base under his palm. “It’s so thin! How long are you staying again?”

“Two decades.” I stripped the sheets from the four-poster and replaced them with identically embroidered ones.

“Neat-oh, a roomie for two decades!” He climbed into the cot, and I switched off the lamp. “Oh, it’s cold too. Fun.”

I tossed him the extra duvet from my bed.

“Hey, Blankets?” Hay Bale said, his eyes closed, his face lit from the glow of the stars above us.

“It’s Goldie now.”

“Goldie. Have you ever fucked a centaur?”

“Yes, I have. Good night, Hay Bale.”

“What about a mermaid?”

“Of course. Night.”

“Kraken?”

“Yes. Look, you’ll be hard pushed to find a creature that I haven’t taken to the timber yard.”

“Minotaur?”

“Ah. No, actually. But everyone at work thinks I have, so ...”

The conversation followed this path for almost every waking minute. Part of me wanted to take my sweatpants off and shove them down his throat just to halt the incessant word

vomiting, but another was thankful for it. It left little room to think. Because when my brother fell asleep, I did everything in my power not to think of Holly.

I didn't sleep. Couldn't. I simply lied on my back and watched the galaxies rotating above me, my tears silently tracking into my hair.

I loved her.

No use denying it. I loved her and my heart had already splintered inside my chest at the thought of not spending forever with her.

"I love Holly Briar," I whispered, just to make sure, feeling it shatter further.

I'd found the treasure. Where it wasn't supposed to be. Right where she said it would be. And I ran away from it.

"I'm doing the—"

Right thing. Those were the words that I'd tried to say. The words that would not reach my fae mouth.

It *was* the right thing, though. Even if I couldn't admit it out loud. Over the next few nights, I tried to picture her old, broken, nearing the end. Her body small, and frail, and bent. Her skin papery, her pupils opaque. Her senses abandoning her one by one, until she could no longer hear or see or touch me, or even know I was beside her.

Beside her.

When all those things happened could I be at her side? Holding her tiny, dying hand. Could I endure those moments of utter anguish? It would only get worse. The more time I spent with her, the more I realised I never wanted to be apart from her. How would I feel after fifty, sixty years? How could I give her up then?

No, it was the right thing.

I didn't bathe, or shave, or change out of my stained and smelly sweatpants. Hay Bale brought me breakfast and supper from the banqueting hall. Which I nibbled, then fed to the side of the mountain out the window when he left the

room. And he never relented on his indefatigable conversation skills.

“Falling in love looks well shit. I hope it never happens to me. You’re so miserable,” he said on the fifth or sixth evening. I dragged my eyes to him. “You glamour her, you know? Your human girlfriend. At night. Well, early in the mornings actually. It’s how I know when you’ve really fallen asleep. She sits on the end of the bed or stands and watches you.”

I bolted up. I’d been glamouring Holly in my sleep. It didn’t surprise me. I never did seem to have any control of my magic when she was on my mind.

“Was she clothed?” I prayed to Gods I did not let my brother see Holly naked. I couldn’t bear the thought of sharing her like that.

You’ll have to get used to it, said a tiny voice inside my brain. *If you want her to find a human man and forget about you.* My stomach churned. I shook the thought.

“Often,” he said, a smile slipping across his face, betraying his fae half-truth. “Your human girlfriend, is she a farmer?”

A noise burst from my chest. Half sob and half laughter.

Those dungarees.

On the seventh morning, or possibly the ninth, I decided to join Hay Bale in the banqueting chambers for breakfast. I plated up some toast and poached egg, and my brother and I took our food to the courtyard.

“A winged man approaches,” he said ominously, taking a fist sized bite from his toast. Gods he was so weird. “No, really. A winged man is walking up the garden path. He’s Black, and very tall, and has horns and—”

“Mal!” I jumped to my feet, my plate shattering against the stone. My empty plate. I’d eaten all my breakfast without even realising. “What are you doing here?!”

“I’ve come to drag your sorry ass back to Remy,” he said, stopping two feet in front of me, stretching his wings out behind him. Had he flown there? “Honestly, if I have to listen to one more minute of Joey telling me all the ways she’s going to *“kill you to death”* when she sees you next, I would’ve torn my horns off. Much easier to take you to her and let her murder you quietly at home. If only to shut her up.”

Hay Bale gazed up at my flatmate with obvious awe. “An incubus!”

“Mal this is my brother ... Hay Bale,” I said, wondering why simple words felt so difficult to summon.

I didn’t know how I felt about Mal turning up unannounced. Annoyed that he’d ignored my wish to be alone? Relieved to learn that people were actually missing me? Anxious to hear any minute detail about *her*? Excited?

“Hay Bale, nice. I see the Golden family naming tradition still holds up well. It’s like stepping back in time four-hundred-years, you look so much like Goldie. I’m Mal. I’ve come to take your brother back to his mate.”

“Wait—” I said, stumbling forward over nothing.

My mate.

My mate?!

If I hadn’t already smashed my plate, it would have been in that moment.

“Holly Briar is my mate,” I whispered. Barely audible, but the words still came out of my mouth. “We’re fated. Oh my Gods.”

Of course we were.

Of course!

If I was being honest with myself, I’d known since the day she walked into FaeGames. I felt it in my chest. In her scent. In the way that Seth instantly took on her form.

We were fated.

We were fated.

I didn't know how long those words bounced around in my head. Minutes, hours, maybe. We were fated. Holly was my mate, and we were destined. The thought was instant balm.

It shouldn't have been. Knowing that I'd bonded with a super-mortal human. Knowing that I would outlive her by centuries. But I could no longer be apart from her while she lived. I simply couldn't do it.

She would get old and die, but she would have me to see her through that.

I would be there for her.

I would endure it all.

Help her endure it.

She was worth it.

Worth everything.

The eventual heartbreak, the pain, the grief.

Mal watched me through narrowed eyes.

“Holly Briar is my mate!” I said again, this time loud enough for the entire palace to hear. Faces belonging to my siblings emerged at the doorway and in windows.

Holly was where I belonged. And whatever the price was to be with her I was willing to pay it. A thousand times over.

Mal smiled. A smile filled with sorrow and pain and love. “I'm so sorry, Goldie,” he said. “It wasn't ... it wasn't fair for me to have projected my fears onto you. You're not me. I mean, I know you. We've lived together for four hundred years. But we're not the same. It wasn't fair of me to impose limits on who you love. You're an adult. You'll get your heart broken. That's guaranteed now, and fuck, it'll be the worst thing you've ever experienced. But those were your decisions to make.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a flattened palm.

“But who was I to try to stop you from the few decades, possibly more, of pure happiness? Sure, the centuries following Nova’s death were terrible. The worst. The absolute fucking worst. But the time I had with her ... it totally eclipsed that. And why shouldn’t you get that? Those few perfect decades.”

He scrubbed his hands down his face and grabbed me by the shoulders like he was either trying to brace me or shake some sense into me. “It will be awful when she ... leaves this realm. But when she does, when that happens, know I will be here for you.” His hand moved to cradle my nape. “Mate, what I’m trying to say is you shouldn’t let the fear of loss stop you from finding love. And I’m sorry I bailed.”

“I should have listened to you,” I said. “I’ve been so selfish. And stupid. I thought I could take what my body wanted from her and return to how things were before she turned up. You were right, of course.”

“Nobody ever listens to the seven-hundred-year-old incubus,” Mal said with a resigned laugh.

“We’re fated. On some level, I think I knew from the very beginning,” I said. I’d buried the thoughts deep inside my mind, where even Dima would struggle to access them. I didn’t think I could have done anything to stop us falling in love. “We’re meant to be together. Even if I’d have legged it six months ago when I first saw her, we’d find each other again. I know it.”

Hay Bale’s eyes bounced between me and Mal like he was watching a pixie fight.

Mal sighed, “I knew it too. And I’m sorry I tried to stop it.”

“We all did, mate,” I said. I pushed all thoughts of the distant future out of my mind. The same way humans did. There was only Holly, and me, and the next fifty years. And I would be damned if I let anyone, myself included, stand in the way.

“So, you gonna drive me home? My wings are bloody killing me. I’ve been flying for three days straight.”

I laughed, rubbing my hand across my face, and only then realising how long my stubble had grown in the past week or so. “Wait, what day is it?” The expo was on the Saturday.

“Monday. Why?” Mal asked.

“Monday, plenty of time.” Plenty of time to get home, get cleaned up, figure out what I would say to Holly. And make sure I’d never lose her through my own dickishness ever again.

“I’m coming too,” Hay Bale said, suddenly jumping to his feet. “I want to come back to Borderlands with you.”

“What?! You are not,” I said. I glanced over to the palace doorway to find it crowded with my family members that had come out to watch the show, and to Mum, giving me a double thumbs up, almost as though she had planned the whole thing. “You can’t. There’s nowhere for you to stay. You’ll need to get a job, find a way to earn a few silvers.”

“Mal, the incubus, can help me. Can’t you, Mal?”

Mal sighed and looked to me. “I can’t not help him, he’s you four centuries ago.”

“I was never that chipper,” I said, indignant at the thought. “Fine, okay. But there are some things you need to learn before we get there. Like, no touching people unless they say it’s okay. Okay?”

Hay Bale nodded in earnest. His eyes wide, as though he couldn’t believe his luck, but was affecting all the cool of an action-movie secret agent.

“And you’ll have to wear clothes. At the bare minimum, trousers. There are laws. You can’t let it all hang free. In public, at least.”

“I’ll get some of those magic sweatpants.”

Mal pinched his smile between his teeth.

“And listen, bro. I can’t call you Hay Bale around other people. I just can’t do it. You’re going to have to think of a new name.”

“How about Bailey?” Mal said.

“Bailey, I like it,” we both said in unison.

“Right, Bailey, go pack your bags. I’ve got a girl to win back.”

He squealed in delight and scampered up the marble stairs into the palace, low-fiving Mum on the way past.

Mal wasted no time pulling me into one of his legendary hugs. “I’ll be here for you, you know, when *it* happens. You’ll have me to lean on, to help you through. I’m sorry you’ll have to go through it but know that the few decades you have in front of you now will be the best of your life.”

I nodded, swallowing the lumps building in my throat.

“Sorry to interrupt this intimate little moment,” Mum said, grinning from ear to ear, apparently not sorry in the slightest. “But, son, you *have* heard of Life Stones, right?”

Both Mal’s and my arms dropped to our sides.

“Life Stones?” Mal said, as I said, “I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh, you know ...” She waved a hand airy-fairily. “Arcane fae magic. Our ancestors used them a long, *long* time ago to keep their humans alive much longer than was naturally possible. Mind you, back in those days they considered humans pets. Wouldn’t be able to get away with that now, would you—”

“Keep humans alive longer than naturally possible?” I could feel her about to go off on one of her ‘good-old-times’ tangents, but I didn’t have the time nor energy for that. “How much longer? Do these stones still exist? How can I get one?”

“I’m certain they exist. I’ve never seen one, but your great grampy used to tell me about them. You could always ask the Court. If anyone knows where to get one, it’ll be the Elders. Now, let’s see ... they all tend to hang out at the Stone

Circle these days. It's a fair old trek, but worth it I'd say," she said, as though she were discussing which of her identical transparent gowns to wear to dinner.

"The Stone Circle?" I asked.

"It lies at the very summit of Elderhill. A two day climb from here," Mum said, her brow rising conspiratorially, and her hand lifting to the craggy mountainside behind the Golden Court palace.

Could the answer to my worst fear lie at the top of a cliff? Had this been an option all along? In all my desperate internet searches, I had never once encountered the term Life Stone. Not once. It all seemed too good to be true.

I quickly did the mental calculation. If we started our ascent now, we could get to the top, ask for a Life Stone, get back down, and hopefully be back in time for the expo.

My brother appeared at the doorway, a half-empty holdall and a backpack slung over his shoulders, his smile lighting up his entire face.

"Change of plan, Bailey," I said. "We're going on a side quest."

Chapter 36.

Goldie

Present Day

Holly was already on the stage when I walked in. The crowd eating from the palm of her hand. They were laughing and writing things on notepads and nodding like dashboard bobble-heads on cobblestone streets. She wore those dungarees again. Her ‘evening’ dungarees. My heart leapt into my throat. She looked better than I remembered.

“Oh my Gods!” squealed Bailey, looking around the conference centre hall like he’d never seen anything more interesting. “There are so many humans! Oh my Gods, there’s a werewolf. Two werewolves! Can I go say hi?”

“Yes, but remember what we talked about? No touching, unless invited to do so,” I said.

And then he was gone. Swallowed by the crowds. Occasionally, I made out an overenthusiastic “Hi” or “Wow, I really like your shoes” or “Is that your real hair?”.

We still had some work to do.

When we’d gotten back to Borderlands, we briefly stopped off at the flat. I had the quickest shower and shave of my life.

“Oh, you got rid of the beard. I liked that. You looked very debonair,” Bailey had said before donning some of my ‘magic’ grey sweatpants and standing in front of the mirror to admire his dick outline. “These are great!”

I put on my smart jeans — i.e. dark denim, slim-fit — and a black button down. After receiving a hug from both Taur and Dima, and a dead arm from Sugar Paste, we were out the

door again, heading to the Remy Games Expo. This time in Mal's mint-green, vintage convertible.

"Sick ride, bro," Bailey told him. "Bagsy the front!" he yelled.

So, I had to sit in the back, like a chump. Churning over what I would say to Holly when I saw her. Not that I didn't have the entire twenty-hour drive back from the Kingdom to contemplate it. I still hadn't figured it out when August appeared at my side in the standing area next to the back bar.

"Goldie, you're here!" Her expression was pinched, her glasses conspicuously absent, she seemed out of breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked, one eye still trained on Holly.

"You've been AWOL for a fortnight. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Actually, never mind. I've got something I need to discuss with you." August searched my face, as though readying herself for more fae truth manipulation. "It's not good news, I'm afraid. I've heard a rumour ... Seth mentioned something. Uh, that you and Holly have been sleeping together?"

I shot another look at Holly. She pointed to a man in the front row with his arm raised.

"Because you know," August continued. "If you are, I'm gonna have to let you go."

"I ..."

Distantly, the guy said, "I heard you designed the game with a fae, is that correct?"

Holly was smiling again. Gods, I missed that smile.

"Goldie?" August said, gripping my arm, snapping my attention back to her.

It took a few seconds for my brain to catch up. She'd asked if Holly and I were fucking. I guessed there was no point in dancing around the truth, not anymore. No point

denying it since I was about to make Holly mine forever. I'd found a way.

Forever.

Not just fifty years. But five hundred.

If she'd have me.

August was about to fire me. Three decades with the same company.

Well, it had been a blast.

“Yes. We were. Sleeping together, that is. And I hope to the Gods that she lets it happen again.”

“Oh, Goldie.” August put one hand on my shoulder, ironing the creases from her forehead with the other.

I smiled. “It's been great working for FaeGames. You've been a fantastic boss, really, you've been the best.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “My strongest fae designer. Fucking hell, this is not how I thought this day would go.”

“I'm so sorry.” I put my hand on August's shoulder, faintly aware that I was now the one comforting her after she'd fired me. But she'd be fine without me. She had Holly now. Holly, whose design instincts far outweighed my ability to manipulate images. I should have listened to her at the very beginning. She always knew what was best for the game—

My thoughts were interrupted as smoky Holly-esque Seth walked towards the stage. “I have a question,” he said, in that pompous, supercilious tone of his.

At once, every nerve ending in my body tightened. Synapses detonated like fireworks, deciding whether to send me into fight-or-flight mode.

Fight obviously. There was no way I was giving up on her now.

“... the fae that built this entire game for you, are having an illicit affair.”

Holly was panicking. I could see it in her face. Looking about the audience as though looking for help. Or looking for me?

I couldn't get to the stage quick enough.

Someone in the crowd next to me leaned towards their neighbour and whispered, "I heard the fae is a nymph. Of course she's having an illicit affair with him."

My feet were carrying me forward, but not fast enough. I was running, sort of. Pushing people out of the way. Ploughing through them.

"You plotted to make him fall in love with you," Seth continued. "Tricked him. You wanted him to be fired. That way, you could take all the credit for the game."

Oh, that cunt would pay for this.

Holly wiped her free hand on her dungarees, transferred the mic over, and wiped the other hand. "That's absurd. I never wanted to get him fired, I only ever—"

"I have a question!" I half-yelled, almost tripping over my feet in my haste to reach her.

The entire audience issued a low gasp.

"That's him," someone said. "The nymph."

Someone handed me a microphone.

Chapter 37.

Goldie

“Uh, hi, Holly,” I said into the microphone. She sob-laughed. Didn’t take her eyes off me for a second. Seth, beside me, completely forgotten about. “It’s more of an observation than a question. Is that okay?”

She nodded. Clutching the mic to her face as though it were an oxygen mask.

“I never envisioned doing this in front of a hundred people, but—”

“There are three-hundred-and-twenty attendees,” a small older human man near the aisle pointed out to me.

“Right, thanks,” I said, faintly aware of the laughter that echoed around the hall. Seth glared at me.

Holly’s eyes locked onto mine, her breath heavy on the microphone. I walked up to the stage. She climbed down the few steps to meet me at the bottom.

It had been two weeks since I last saw her. Held her. Felt her breath against my collarbone. Heard my name on her lips. Gods, I loved it when she said my name. I loved the way she formed the word. The importance she gave to those two syllables. The way her mouth and tongue worked over it. Like a benediction.

Her eyelashes were already waterlogged, dragging against the inside of her lenses. Her cheeks were reddened. Her lips were parted, enough to reveal only the tiniest flash of teeth. I needed those lips against mine. I loved those lips.

I loved her.

“Holly?”

“Goldie?” she said, voice high and breathy, turning my insides to warm, syrupy liquid.

“I don’t want to take up too much of these people’s time—”

“We don’t mind!” came a yell, followed by more laughter.

“I just wanted to let you know I’ve found a way for us to be ... us. To be together as long as you’ll have me.”

She reached out a palm and flattened it against my chest, as though she was making sure I really was there. Not a mirage from a desperate desert hallucination. “You came back,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I cradled her chin, tilting her face towards me.

“I have just one thing I need to say,” I said into the microphone. My words bounced around the hall.

“Yes?” she huffed, closing her fist into the fabric of my shirt.

“I told you so!”

“Huh?”

“I was right about humans. All along. They are all obsessed with love,” I said. Her brow creased, but a smile ghosted her lips. I brushed my thumb against them. “But that’s okay. Because now, so am I. You did that to me. You took my stubborn fae mind, and you showed me a better way. And now I’m obsessed too. I’m obsessed with *you*. I love you, Holly Briar, you fucking genius. I think I loved you even when I hated you. Except, I’ve never really hated you. I hated myself for not seeing the truth. The truth that you are worth it. Everything. There’s a way for us to be together. For as long as you’ll have me. Fifty years, or five hundred. You choose.”

Gasps were emitted amidst the crowd. Soundlessly, Holly mouthed my name.

I lowered my voice to a whisper, not that it mattered, I had forgotten about the microphones. “You’ve stolen my heart, my every waking thought, and every single one of my dreams.

And anything you haven't stolen," I trailed my finger down her cheek. "I will gift wrap for you. My glamour included."

I took the mic from her and held them both in one hand.

She pulled it back to her mouth. "I stole your Rockets jersey, too."

Laughter rang out. I hardly registered it.

"I love you, Holly," I whispered, threading my fingers into her hair. "Please tell me you're mine. Forever."

"Forever?"

"Well, five-hundred-ish years."

"Yes. Forever yours." Her hand came up to caress my jaw. To trace my lips, nose, brows, the points of my ears.

"Marry me?"

Surprise flitted behind her eyes before another flood of tears. "Well, duh," she said through cry-laughter.

I brought my mouth down to hers and kissed her like I hadn't seen her in a fortnight.

Like I had been gone a thousand years.

Like I'd never left.

People were cheering. Neither of us paid them any attention.

Eventually, we broke apart. Her eyes stayed glued to mine. I lifted both microphones to my face. "My apologies for that interruption. The presentation on Holly's game is now over. If you have any more questions, I'm sure she'll be happy to answer them another time." I thrust the mics towards a very bewildered looking Greyson, who stepped out onto the stage as though he were stepping into a gladiator ring. His eyes like saucers, his mouth pinched into a soundless 'W'.

I draped my arm over her shoulder. She braced a palm against my ribs, and I led Holly down the gangway to the back of the hall.

As I passed an open-mouthed Seth, I grabbed the cord of his Harness Stone and snapped it from his wrist. Immediately he shifted from a slightly smoky Holly to his true form. A mass of black wispy tendrils.

The audience gasped, and Seth's arm went up to pointlessly cover his face.

“How?” she asked once we were near the bar at the back. “You said you found a way for us to be together forever. Five hundred years, but, what—How? I saw your search history. It said there was no way for me to extend my life beyond my normal human years.”

“You stole my phone?” I said.

“And hacked it.”

I had no words for my little thief, so I kissed her, twisting my fingers into her hair, letting her violet raspberry scent envelop me.

“Well ... it's kind of a long story. Should we get a drink?”



So Mal, Bailey and I set off up the mountainside. The climb almost vertical. Occasionally steps and staircases had been carved into the cliff face which made things only marginally less arduous. Like the Eight and a Half Kingdom's most preposterous Jacob's Ladder. Mal trumped us both by simply flying.

“No, I can't carry either of you, I don't have the energy. But I will hover at your level to keep you company and spot you in case you fall.”

Bailey sang to us — turned out he had a pretty decent singing voice — and we set up camp on a dusty outcrop. Mal hunted (a goat), Bailey foraged (mushrooms, nuts, and wild rosemary — truly my brother), and I glamoured a fire and cooked for us.

When we finally ascended the mountain the next day, we were met by the Stone Circle. The headquarters of the High Court of all fae. Fae royalty if you will.

The Elders.

The Stone Circle was, in fact, not a genuine ring of stones, but a coffee shop. An Ichor to be precise. Even in the darkest depths of the Mythic Realms, it was impossible to escape capitalism.

“Nope. Not a chance. We don’t have any Life Stones left,” said one Elder, as we entered the building and confessed our plight. Garth, I think his name was. “Brenda used them all on her bloody dobermanns.” He sucked in a breath. “Ooh, centuries ago now. Didn’t you, Bren?”

An older fae woman looked up from her newspaper, her hair pinned atop her head with what looked like the entire contents of a full box of pencils. “Sorry about that, Hun. Did you need one for any particular reason?”

“Oh, just that the woman I love is human, and I’d like to keep her alive as long as me.”

“Yeah, that’s a doozy,” she said, immediately turning back to her newspaper. “Have you tried not loving her?”

Urgh, fae! I got it now. We were an infuriating, cold-hearted, standoffish bunch. Why Holly ever wanted a fae boyfriend, I had no idea.

“I have, believe it or not, already tried that. It didn’t work. We’re fated.”

She looked up again. “Oh, poppet, what a shame.” Then turned to the fae man. “Seen my pencil, Gar?”

“So, there aren’t any Life Stones? None at all?” I said, torn between laughing hysterically until I broke down into tears, or skipping the laughter entirely and simply crying myself into a coma.

“Yep, they’re all gone. Do you want a coffee?” said Garth, getting shakily to his feet.

I scrubbed a hand down my face.

“Yeah, I’d like a coffee,” said Bailey. He looked at me. “What? We’ve walked for a million days to get here. Least we can do is get an iced mochachino.”

“Ice machine’s broken,” Garth said, tying a green apron around his waist.

“Fuck my life!” Bailey cried out dramatically.

“What kind of mushrooms did you feed me last night?” I asked him. “What the heck is going on?” I looked at the room at large. Half a dozen elderly fae blinked up at me with varying degrees of alertness.

“Come on, surely there must be something we can do about his mate?” Mal said, spreading his wings out behind him. A far more intimidating looking gesture than I knew Mal capable of.

“Human, you say?” This came from a weather-beaten man in the back. If memory served me correctly, his name was Denver.

I nodded. A bubble of hope blossoming in my stomach. Whining, he pushed himself to his feet and doddered over to me.

“Here you go, son.” He deposited a rough purple stone into my hand. It was wrapped in a leather cord. Not the leather used to tie our contraceptive Harness Stones to our wrists, but Fae Leather. Unbreakable. Once it was on, that was it. It had to be cut free with a silver dagger.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Amethyst,” Denver said.

“Just an amethyst?”

He laughed. “Just an amethyst,” he said, igniting a chorus of croaky old-people laughter. “Just an amethyst. Son, you don’t need a Life Stone. You’re Courtly Fae. You’ve already shared your magic with her, no?” I stared at him. When I didn’t answer, he continued. “How long have you known her?”

“About six months,” I said to my filthy trainers. It sounded like an obscenely short amount of time. Especially to a fae. But it hadn’t been six months, I met her thirteen years ago. Did I know back then that we were fated? No. How could I? I only remembered this dorky little human, and her dungarees, and feeling irritated with myself for thinking she was adorable. I then promptly forgot about her. Until the moment she stepped into our Friday team debrief. August introduced us all, and Holly shook each of the designers’ hands in turn. I couldn’t account for the way my heart crashed against my ribs, or the electricity that shot straight up my arm, or the way from that moment on, I could not extricate her from my thoughts.

Denver nodded, as though he expected to hear nothing else. “And I presume during this time you’ve shared your magic with her?” I must have been frowning because he repeated himself. Louder and slower, as though I was new to the language. “You’ve shared your magic with her, no?”

Shared my magic.

Shared. My magic.

It hit me then. “I’ve healed her if that’s what you mean. I’ve glamoured things for her.”

“Obviously, that’s what I mean, child.” He let out a sigh. “And when you healed her, did you take away her pain, or did you transfer it to yourself?”

My mouth fell open, but I’d lost the ability to speak. Mal’s hand closed around my tricep. “Of course,” he whispered.

“Every time you’re with her, physically, you share part of your magic,” Denver said. “Whether or not you mean to, she takes it from you. Like a sponge. Or a leech. But only a true mate has this ability.”

I shot a sceptical look at Bailey, who at that moment was encouraging Garth to add even more whipped cream to the top of his drink. “Don’t be stingy with the marshmallows now,” he whined.

“Take this stone,” said Denver. “Place it on her wrist, and she will ... how best to say ... steal your glamour. You will halve your remaining lifespan, and she will take it. Just like that. Just like you take her bruises or broken bones. You will both live as long as each other. So long as there are no more great wars, obviously.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage, my mind struggling to catch up to the gravity of it all. We didn’t need a Life Stone. I should have realised. I’d been sharing my magic with her all along, not paying a single bit of attention to what it could have meant in the grand scheme of things. I’d never healed anyone before Holly. Could I even heal anyone besides Holly? Or was that a part of my magic that was reserved only for my mate?

And her image had appeared so many times without my brain instructing my glamour to do so. On the pages of my sketchpad, in my fantasies when I was alone, while I slept in the room beside my brother. She had literally stolen my magic and she hadn’t even realised. Neither of us did.

If Holly would have me, we could be together. Half my lifespan. I had maybe a thousand years left. I would get five more centuries with her.

Five hundred years with Holly. Not fifty.

I wanted to kiss Denver. And slap myself for not realising sooner. “Um, thank you.”

“The power to share your magic has always been inside you,” he said, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling. “This is simply another Harness Stone. But this one is for her. You should try reading a book sometime.”

I laughed. For a solid minute. A cheat code. That’s what it felt like. Unlimited lives.

“Okay, I have to go now. I need to get back to my mate.”

My mate.

My little magic thief.

Mal's arm came across my shoulder and dragged me to him. "Come on, Bailey!" he yelled. "Let's go get your brother's girl back."

"Coming!" Bailey said, loading his arms up with bagels and cookies.

The trek back to my parents was much less burdensome, since it was all downhill and we had enough Ichor branded snacks to keep an army marching. And I was headed back to Holly. Heading towards my future.

Our future.



"So, I put this on and what happens?" Holly asked, holding the cord in one hand. The fingers of her other hand snaking up my shirt to rub soft circles on my hip. Under her touch, it was almost impossible to concentrate on what I was trying to tell her.

"I share the rest of my lifespan with you. We get half each."

"What the heck, Goldie? But you'll only have like five-hundred years left?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. A human saying things like *only five-hundred years*.

"I'd rather have five hundred years with you than a thousand miserable ones without you. But it's your choice. If you decide not to wear the bracelet, then I will have the next sixty, seventy years with you. And I will be better off having known and loved you than if I'd let you go."

Tears popped out of her eyes. I brushed them away with my thumb.

"You have to understand, if you choose to wear the Harness Stone, you will outlive your parents, and sister, and nieces and nephews, and great nieces and nephews, and so on. A life of loss."

Holly swallowed, and after a few moments she whispered, “But I’ll have you. Loss is easier if there is someone to share it with.” She sounded so much like Mal.

“You don’t have to decide now. Whether you want to wear the bracelet. I want you to sleep on it. For however long it takes to make the decision that is right by you. It’s a fucking big decision. And know, I will love you no matter what you choose. It must be true. I couldn’t say it if—”

“If it wasn’t true,” she said, finishing my sentence.

I tucked the stone in the front pocket of her dungarees. “Hey, my phone!”

Holly pulled me down into another kiss, her face salty and damp. “I really love you, Goldie.” Her grip on my hip tightened, her fingernails scratched down my bare flesh, igniting small fires under my skin and sending blood south.

“I should also tell you that every time we’re intimate, you absorb a little more of my magic,” I whispered to her temple. “So, if you don’t want to live another five-hundred-years with me, you’d better keep your hands out of my pants.”

“Absorb?”

“Leech.”

“Leech?”

“Steal. You steal my glamour. My little magic thief.”

“I thought you were gift wrapping it for me?”

“I’ll give you anything, baby girl. Just name it and it’s yours. You want the moons? Which ones and how many? I am yours. I exist for you.”

“I only want you,” Holly said. Her face contorted into a frown. “No, wait, that’s not true. I also want your cooking, and I want to hang around in your apartment playing video games, and I want Mal’s Motley Meals, and sunrises, and unobscured views of your obliques, and ... can you glamour a tapir into your room one day? I really want to meet a tapir.”

“Anything, baby girl.” My face was aching from smiling so much. I was half-tempted to glamour the big mammal right there into the conference hall, but there were more important things I needed to tell her first. I pulled her closer into my body, pressing my lips against her temple. “When you first started working for FaeGames, that was when I knew I was in serious trouble. I couldn’t get you out of my head, but I couldn’t bring myself to start a conversation with you. I was too afraid of what it could lead to. When I looked at Seth, I saw you. And bit by bit, I realised if I didn’t push you away, I was headed for catastrophe. So, I tried everything I could to show you what a miserable bastard I was. To make you see I wasn’t a person you should ever be involved with. You still found a way. Still wormed yourself into my life, and I hated that about you. I hated myself more because I couldn’t seem to just let you go. I panicked because of what Mal had been through.”

She shot a quick look over to Mal, leaning against the bar chatting to the very eager looking Alina and Shell. He seemed to sense we were looking in his direction, paused and gave us both a short salute before returning his attention to my colleagues.

“But I realised I needed you. To function. To live. Life is not life if you are not part of it. So, if you decide you want to live only your human years, then I will spend every single one of them by your side.”

“Goldie ...”

“But we are fated. Fated mates. I know that now. We are meant to be together. And now that I’ve found you, I won’t let you go.”

A bubble of laughter escaped her throat. “The treasure is love,” she said.

“The fucking treasure is love,” I said, laughing too.

“Bro!” shouted Bailey, knocking into me and interrupting our moment. Probably for the best, since I was getting increasingly desperate to lay Holly down and mount her. “I’m in love.”

“Already?” I said.

“And I’ve joined a band!”

“What the hell?” I turned around and there stood Holly’s sister, Abby, wearing a tiny little black dress and executioner-style platform boots. She gave me a sheepish wave.

Bailey handed her a plastic cup of rust-coloured liquid. “Here’s your drink, my angel of darkness. Is it okay if I ...” He paused and gingerly draped his arm over her shoulders. “Touch you like this?”

She nodded. I flashed him a thumbs up. He gaped at Abby, then turned to me and mouthed, “Holy crap.”

“Holly, this is my baby brother, Bailey,” I said.

“Oh, goodness, it’s so good to meet you.” Holly extended her hand for him to shake but found both his hands occupied with either a drink or her sister, so she also gave him a thumbs up.

“My real name is Hay Bale,” he said, apparently not seeing my head shaking from side to side.

“Hay Bale, okay.” Holly looked at me like she needed help.

“Hey, I have a question,” Bailey said. “Is it dobermanns or dobermenn?”

“There’s no booze in that, is there?” Holly asked, pointing at the plastic cups.

Bailey eyeballed the drink in Abby’s hand. “Just cherry cola. Have you ever seen a werewolf before?” he asked Abby. “Because I just met two and one is called Jackson with a C.K.S and the other is called Jaxon with an X! It’s wild! You have to meet them!”

Abby gave Holly a helpless little shrug. “Hols, you were great, by the way.” And together, our siblings disappeared into the crowd once more.

I immediately pulled Holly into a kiss, but she swerved out of it at the last second.

“So ... Blankets Golden?”

“Fucking hell, Sugar Paste told you?”

She nodded. “What’s the deal with that?”

I breathed in a huge sigh, scratched the back of my neck. “Golden is my family name. But yeah, my folks named their kids — all forty-four of us — after the place in which we were conceived. Since I already have a brother called Picnic, Blankets was the next best thing, I suppose.”

She snort-laughed and slapped a palm over her mouth. “Oh. Gods. Wait, *no*, Hay Bale?”

“Fraid so. We got off lightly. You should meet my sisters, Abandoned Manor and Haunted Attic. They’re twins.”

After she finally reined in her mirth, she wound her fingers under my shirt again, digging down past my waistband. “So, I guess we’ll be naming our first-born Women’s Bathroom at Remy Municipal Conference Centre?”

I knotted my fingers into her hair and kissed her fiercely. “What about,” I said, somewhat breathless, “Back of Mal’s Car?”

“He’ll kill us!” she said, but she was already seizing my hand and marching toward the exit.

Chapter 38.

Holly

Two months later

Mal was cooking. Well, perhaps cooking might have been overstretching the definition a tad. Mal was placing luxury AlaeMart frozen meals onto baking trays and sliding them into the oven. Fish pie for us, vegan beetroot wellingtons for Taurin, and a case of B positive for Dima.

“Put me down for five minutes,” Mal said, chucking some veg into the microwave.

“No way,” said Joey and Taurin at the same time. “I reckon fifteen,” he said, as she added, “Half an hour, easily.”

I’d finally tied the amethyst bracelet to my wrist. Goldie had been right. It was on there for forever. Not that I’d made any serious effort to remove it, but I’d given the cord a few tugs. Despite it feeling soft as kitten fur, the thing was actually tougher than an old ethernet cable.

His flatmates— now my flatmates, plus Abby and Bailey, were taking bets on how long it would take Goldie — my super-hot fae boyfriend, Goldie — to notice.

I’d wanted to put it on the first night at the conference centre. As soon as I’d found out what it did, but Goldie had told me to wait. To think it over. It was an effing big decision, he’d said. He was right, of course. Though, I’d already decided I would do whatever it took to spend just one extra minute with him.

Even if we didn’t have the bracelet, or the magic share, our eventual loss would have been worth it, would have been bearable because he would be beside me.

I couldn't imagine life without him now. Couldn't go back to a time before him.

I mean, I could. Go back to life on the bottom bunk. To my tapir documentaries and my Faecyclopaedia and my Peanut Whizzos. But he'd ruined me. For everything and everyone else. To know Goldie — the way I knew Goldie — was to want only him.

Seth was nothing. Looking back, it should have been obvious he was always nothing. A fleeting crush, that was all. I had read that Faecyclopaedia thousands of times. Memorised every line. I should have recognised his aura and what it meant, but I'd never met a shadow fae before. I knew now. For future reference. Though I doubted if I ever saw another shadow fae, I'd see anyone besides my grumpy Oread.

After Seth's outburst at the conference centre, August placed him on sabbatical to "*Adjust his professional outlook.*" I think mainly she was upset that Seth had come to her and told her about Goldie and me, instead of keeping his darned fae mouth shut. It left her no choice but to fire Goldie.

On Monday following the expo, August was waiting for me in my brand new — empty — twelfth floor office.

"I've been thinking all weekend," she'd said before I'd even had the chance to gaze out the window and take in my new view. "I'd hate to lose my most talented fae programmer — What I mean is on a company level, it would be a shame if we couldn't find some way to keep Goldie on in some capacity."

"Say more things like this," I'd responded. It had only been two days since Goldie had been fired, and he and I hadn't yet had a chance to discuss it. Despite spending every available second in each other's arms.

"Well, all I'm saying is, it's now time to start thinking about building your own team." August gave me a pointed look. "I've left the blank contracts on your new desk, and a few guides on hiring staff. And ... rehiring staff."

“Oh,” I’d said, comprehension dawning. “Will the Golden Rule still apply?”

She’d shrugged a shoulder. “You get to decide that one. You’ll be his new boss.”

And in the end Greyson got tenure. Right after he went backstage and puked his guts up. Humans loved puzzle games it seemed.

“I say one minute,” Dima said, pulling me from the memory and cracking open a can of B positive. He dropped a straw into the hole.

“No, uh-uh. You can’t tell him. That’s cheating,” said Joey.

Dima rolled his blood-red eyes up to the ceiling. “Fine, then. An hour.”

An hour. My stomach churned. Surely it wouldn’t take Goldie an entire hour to notice the bracelet, would it?

“What’s your guess, Holly?” Mal asked. “By the way, you’ve forgotten to wear your glasses.”

I slapped a hand to my face. Mal was right. I’d left them on the nightstand again.

“You won’t need them at all soon,” said Joey. “You’ll have to get ones with clear lenses.”

Like August.

Goldie had said that every time we were intimate, I’d steal — absorb — a bit of his magic, and since we were frequently intimate — very frequently — I’d already begun to feel the effects of it. This magic transfer, or whatever it was.

Was I stealing his magic? Was he sharing? I had no idea.

Either way, I was stronger than before. My hearing more acute. Sense of smell improved. Bruises lasted hours rather than days. And lately I found myself not needing to wear my glasses as much. I’d wake up in the morning and

forget to put them on, and it wouldn't be until the evening with the waning light that I'd remember.

It was kind of a shame. I liked my glasses. Goldie did too. He said they made me "adorkable".

I paused. "Uh ..."

My boyfriend. He was my boyfriend. I should know him. Should be able to guess how quickly, or not, he'd notice the purple Harness Stone tied to my wrist. The one that meant we would share the next five hundred years of our lives together. I wanted to say I'd know he'd spot it straight away. But a tiny part of me was terrified he wouldn't. Dima's guess had me gnawing at my fingernails.

Five hundred years. It sounded so long, and yet days with him flew past at the speed of dragon-fire.

Mum and Phil had been unsurprisingly okay about it all. As humans, and great believers in true love, they were happy for me. And I think no small part of them was relieved to have me gone from their flat. To not witness my constant moping and snack-cupboard draining.

I had moved in with Goldie into flat 15A Halcyon Sunrise. Temporarily. While we waited for the building work on my apartment to be completed. Then Goldie would move in with me by the harbour.

It was a decision we'd made together. He would miss his flatmates of course, we both would, but the new apartment wouldn't be ready for at least another eight months, and his friends had all been so incredibly welcoming in the meantime. Especially Mal. Who, I discovered, did in fact, give the best hugs.

"Our apartment will be only ten minutes' walk from here," Goldie had said one time after I'd had a mild panic attack that, once again, I'd be tearing him away from his friends. "We'll still see Sugar Paste and Taur and Dima and Mal all the time. We'll still have Mal's Motley Meals every Sunday. Promise."

We'd only be ten minutes away. We'd see everyone often. I wasn't tearing his family up by asking him to move into my apartment.

Our apartment.

Mal's Motley Meals.

Friends.

I was so sickeningly happy.

Abby was happy for me too and didn't seem remotely worried that I'd outlive her and her kids and grandkids. "Perhaps I'll meet a handsome fae as well. Who knows?" she'd said.

She and Bailey had become good friends, though as far as I was aware, nothing more, despite having reportedly *almost* kissed several times. He'd joined the band as the new lead singer, and although Goldie had vouched for his brother's singing voice, I did not expect it to be as hauntingly beautiful as it was. Consequently, The Bus Stop Willies' gig schedule was filling up faster than Greyson's sick bucket, and I saw my sister even less often these days.

"We won't take any bookings on Sundays," Bailey had said. "Will we, my angel of the underworld? Those are for family."

"So, what's your guess then, Abs?" asked Joey, when it became clear I didn't have an answer ready.

Abby shrugged. "Eleven minutes, thirty-five seconds."

"Wow, super specific," Joey said. "Bailey?"

"Two days," Bailey said, scooping all the cutlery from the drawer, and carefully laying a knife and fork beside each person. Mal had bought a larger dining table to accommodate the extra heads, and Joey had thrifted a few more chairs from a charity shop. It gave everything a cosy, eclectic, family-life feel.

"If it takes him two days, I think I'll kill him," I said, leaning to one side so Bailey could reach forward and lay my place setting for me.

“Human!” Goldie yelled from somewhere outside the kitchen. “Where the fuck have you got—” He stopped dead in the doorway, his eyes bulging and then narrowing as he took in everyone. “Why are you all in here?”

“Dinner’s nearly ready,” said Mal, flashing Goldie a smile and donning his rainbow oven mitts.

“Okaaaay,” Goldie said. He walked over to the place between Mal’s vacant chair and me. Everyone’s eyes followed him.

I very pointedly did not look at him or my wrist in case I gave the entire game away.

He leant in front of me, deliberately trying to make eye contact but I wouldn’t let him. I jerked my head to the side and focused my gaze on the baking trays Mal was juggling in front of the oven.

“What’s going on?” Goldie asked, giving up on me and looking to Dima for help.

“Nothing!” everyone said at once, giving the indisputable impression we were all lying.

Goldie took my hand in his and lowered his voice to a whisper, “Baby girl, why—”

He paused.

His eyes dropped to mine and widened. Then they fell to our interconnected hands, to his own fingers lightly tracing the cord of the bracelet.

“Wait ...” he said.

We quietly watched him while his fingertips found the amethyst stone, all breaths held.

“Oh my Gods!” he yelled. “Oh my Gods!” He shot to his feet, pulling me up with him, sending my chair flying backwards towards the oven. “Oh my Gods!”

Before I knew what was happening, and before I had a chance to straighten my dungarees, he lifted me up, my legs wrapped around his waist, and he ran around the table and out

of the kitchen. Goldie held me in his big fae arms and spun me in circles in the living room.

“Oh my Gods, Holly. I am so happy right now. I love you so much,” he said to the crook of my neck. When he pulled back his head, there were tears tracking down his cheeks. Happy tears, I assumed, but his scowl was still firmly fixed in place.

“Did you ever doubt that I would put it on?”

“Not for a second, but I wanted you—needed to know that it was entirely your choice.” Goldie walked me to the window and pushed me against it, freeing his hands from my backside. He brought them up to my face. “Five hundred years,” he whispered, running his tongue along my top lip and laying butterfly kisses in its tingling wake. “Five hundred beautiful fucking years with you. My mate.”

I thumbed the points of his ears and kissed him back as though trying to prove my love was fiercer than his.

Eventually Dima *ahemed* into our minds. *Food’s getting cold guys. Mal’s spent a long time reading the instructions on the back of the packets and placing things on the right shelves in the oven.*

We pulled apart.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too.” He brought my wrist to his mouth and kissed the purple stone. “So.” Kiss. “Fucking.” Kiss. “Much.”

Goldie set me on my feet, and we walked back to the kitchen. He did not remove his hand from the bracelet.

“Sorry, everyone,” I said, when we finally returned to our seats. But nobody seemed even the teeniest bit put out. Grinning faces watched me, us, from each corner of the room.

“I called it!” Dima said, and then took a noisy slurp of his blood.

“You said an hour,” Mal said. “I was the closest.”

“I think you’ll find, originally, I said one minute.”

“Did Dima tell you?” Joey asked Goldie, bypassing the vampire entirely because whatever Goldie said had to be the truth.

“About the bracelet? No, Dima didn’t tell me. So ... You were all taking bets on how long it’d take me to spot this?” Goldie said, lifting my arm up to show everyone the amethyst stone.

Abby and Joey gasped. Mal and Taurin shared a smirk. I mean, it was a pretty stone, but their reaction seemed out of proportion. It wasn’t exactly the first time they were seeing it. Abby had only just helped me to tie it on, and we all watched in awe as the enchanted fae leather magically sealed itself shut.

“Holly!” Bailey exclaimed with a twitchy laugh. He caught eye contact with his brother and hastily rearranged his face from rabbit-in-the-headlights to ... an exaggerated wink.

Okay. I was missing something.

“So, Goldie,” Joey began in that attention-commanding way she spoke, and I got the distinct impression she was changing the subject. “What’s it like working under Holly?”

Taurin snorted.

“Well, I have the best boss, and the perks are great,” Goldie said, shooting me a wink. “I’m still in my probation period, so obviously I’m on my best behaviour. There’s been no office shag—”

“Grubs up!” said Mal, dropping a loaded plate in front of me, then proceeding to hand out everyone else’s food.

As we ate our food, we chatted about anything and everything. Our game, which was nearing its alpha-testing stage. Abby and Bailey’s band; “We’ve got a major festival booked in the spring.” Joey’s university coursework; “Who knew there would be so much theory for a driving course?” Taurin’s cake decorating business ideas; “Name wise, something along the lines of Sugar Paste Stampede, I don’t know.” Mal’s retirement plans; “Honestly, I think watching

Joey go after her dream has really got me thinking about what I want to do with the next millennium, you know?” And Dima’s general everything; “I’ve been writing a book. It’s a book of quilting patterns. Oh, and I’m keynotes speaker at next year’s Bloodsuckers in Business Conference.”

I smiled at my boyfriend. He smiled back.

“Another beer, human?” Goldie said, already cracking the cap off of a bottle. He handed it to me. Something clinked against the glass as I wrapped my fingers around the middle. Not the bracelet. That wasn’t anywhere near the bottle—

“Oh!” I jumped to my feet. “Oh! Oh my Gods!”

A ring. Already on my finger, but not placed there by me, or with my conscious knowledge.

An engagement ring.

A massive purple stone, on a twisting yellow gold band, with white stones spreading out like leaves from the centre. It glittered under the overhead kitchen lights. The most fae-looking piece of jewellery I’d ever seen. A ring thirteen-year-old me could have only dreamed of.

Beside me, Goldie pushed his chair back with an echoing scrape and dropped onto one knee.

“When? How?” I asked. He had slipped it on. In the living room? In the hall? I couldn’t work it out, but also ... at that moment, I didn’t really care.

He didn’t answer my questions. “Holly,” he said, taking my hand in his. “I love you. More than it’s possible for any species to love another. And I want you to know your human traditions are important to me. I want everything to be perfect for you. Will you human mar—”

“Yes!” I screamed. “A thousand yeses! A crillion yeses!”

Laughter ignited throughout the kitchen, but I couldn’t take my eyes away from Goldie.

My super-hot fae fiancé.

“Right,” said Dima, “Who had Holly down to notice at thirty-seven minutes?”

The end

Acknowledgements

I didn't do this in my last/first book because imposter syndrome told me I didn't deserve it. But I figured even if this one turns out to be a huge pile of crap, it was not me alone that shaped that crap. Many others contributed, and they should be thanked or blamed accordingly.

Firstly, I'd like to thank my mum, who I lost to a seven-year long cancer battle while I was writing this book. You were my biggest cheerleader, even though I wouldn't let you read what I wrote. I miss going into your room in the mornings and telling you how many books I'd sold overnight, and how you'd celebrate every individual sale as though I'd won some kind of international best seller award. I miss the bonkers things you would say. Baskets! IYKYK. Though, I have volumes and volumes of notes. You told me to use them for my characters, and I absolutely will.

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Jemma is a regular human author living in Bristol, UK, with her husband, daughters and an anxiety-ridden Brussels Griffon.

She writes funny, smutty, very British stories about humans falling in love with non humans.

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She would love to hear from you.

Other Books by Jemma Croft

Fantasy Flatmates Series

By the Horns – Out now
(Taurin and Joey's story)

By the Fae – Out now
(Goldie and Holly's story)

By the Pint – Coming end of 2023
(Dima and Casey's Story)

Title TBC – Coming 2024
(Mal and Saffy's Story)

Books By This Author

[By the Horns](#)

When Joey Silver stumbled into the wrong classroom at night school, she never expected to find love. Especially not with a minotaur.

Joey likes things fast. Life, relationships, driving. But when she mixes up the room and walks into Cake Decorating 101 instead of the speed correctional course she's been ordered to do, she finds herself in uncharted territory. He's there. He's big, and surly. So surly. And he's definitely not human. How can Joey save her car and career, and at the same time, grab the bull by the horns?

Taurin might be the only minotaur left in Borderlands. So it's up to him to dispel the harmful stereotypes and prove that not all minotaurs are savage beasts hell bent on destruction. Unfortunately for Taurin, he's Seen Red one too many times and smashed up one too many china shops. Now he's on his last chance. Make amends, go to night school, and show the courts he can control his temper, or face gaol time. And it was all going pretty well, actually. That was until she fell into his life.

Fantasy Flatmates Book One

BY THE HORNS

